

## Miss Congeniality

### Chapter One

"Where do you get those stockings from, doc?" Niles Van Holtz, Van to his friends and family, growled. Those stockings were like something out of a 1940s movie with that one sexy line up the back of each leg. He bet she wore garters too. Man, the woman drove him absolutely crazy and she didn't even notice.

Cold, brutally pale blue eyes turned and locked on Van. "Ah, yes," she sighed out. "Niles Van Holtz. My night at these charity functions wouldn't be complete without your biting wit and continual obsession over my underclothes."

"Why else do you think I'd drag myself to the science building, of all places, except to see you?"

Van had known a lot of mean women in his time. Coming from a wealthy background filled with lethal predators, he was more surprised to find a nice female than a mean one. But Dr. Irene Conridge, PhD several times over and Rhode Scholar by the time she was fifteen, made mincemeat of them all.

Irene Conridge was what one would call a child prodigy. At least she was. But at a luscious twenty-five she'd left her "child" anything long behind.

From the time Irene had walked onto the university campus, Van had locked onto her scent and had hunted her relentlessly ever since. She'd been eighteen at the time and Van twenty. He thought she was just another freshman. Or, as his buds liked to call them, fresh meat. But he found out quick enough -- when she'd coldly laid in to him, leaving him standing speechless in the middle of the Square -- that she was actually a guest professor. And a big deal. Ivy League universities all over the country and Europe had fought for her. But, for some unknown reason, she'd taken the job at this small but elite university on the border of Seattle, Washington. She'd turned down Harvard, Yale, M.I.T., Berkley, Oxford...all of them.

No one understood it, but Van did. Why go to a big university with a bunch of other former prodigies, when you can go to a smaller one and be Head Shit in Charge? Because Irene went "small", she ruled. They denied her

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nothing, gave her whatever she needed, and strove hard to keep her happy. In return, Irene kept the university's name alive in academic circles, had students begging to get into the school so they could enroll in her class -- until they actually had to get through one of her classes-and kept the money flowing in. The woman wasn't charming but somehow she dragged money from some of the richest families in the Northwest. His included.

"Besides, I'm only obsessed with your underclothes, doc." He knew she hated when he called her that. "Tell me, do you wear garters under those clothes?"

"Yes," she replied plainly. "I don't like pantyhose. I find them too binding."

Van couldn't help himself, he growled again. Enough so that she turned and looked at him directly. "Did you just growl at me?"

"It was much more of a purr."

"Fascinating."

"Am I?"

"No. You're not. But the fact that a grown man would growl over garter belts is fascinating. I'm sure the psychology department would find you a fascinating test study."

"Sweet talker."

She frowned and it wasn't a frown of annoyance or concern, but one of deep thought. "Am I? I've been told I'm cold and quite removed."

Van had to try really hard not to laugh. To be honest, he didn't know a colder woman on the planet. Female cavewomen who had been frozen in blocks of ice for millions of years were warmer than Irene. And yet...he simply couldn't leave her alone.

His sister, who currently floated around the party avoiding anyone who annoyed her, didn't understand his obsession over that "plain girl" as she often called Irene. He'd heard it before. Irene called "plain" or, his personal favorite, "not hideous." But Van didn't know what they were talking about.

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The woman was absolutely adorable. Black, shoulder-length hair which had an out-of-control curl thing going that made him, for some unknown reason, think constantly of sweaty rough sex. Full lips he'd seen in more than one wet dream over the years and a regal nose. A long, curvy body she constantly hid behind boring prim and proper power suits in the duller colors but she always wore those sexy stockings and killer shoes. But it was the eyes that did him in. He saw eyes like hers on arctic wolves. So pale blue he didn't really even think of them as blue at all. He'd heard more than a few people call her eyes freakish or disturbing, but he could stare into those eyes forever.

"I bet you're not really cold, doc. Not underneath it all."

"Actually, I am. Oh. And Jackie and I have a bet going." She motioned to her roommate, Jaqueline Jean-Louis and former child music prodigy. The two women had known each other for years and Jean-Louis taught in the prestigious music department of the university. What Van found fascinating about the whole relationship was the fact that Jean-Louis was a shifter. A jackal, specifically. He always wondered if Irene knew. If she did, she absolutely never showed it. But it wouldn't be unusual for her not to know. Many shifters went through their entire lives successfully hiding who they really were from the full-humans close to them. It was important to their kind to hide who they were. In fact, hard choices were sometimes made in order to keep their secret.

"Is that right?" he asked, taking a glass of champagne from the tray passing by.

"Yes. I'm convinced you believe I'm a virgin and all this time you've been hoping to defile me."

No matter what he did, he couldn't stop from choking that champagne right back up.

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She simply didn't understand. For nearly seven years now, the man had sought her out. At every charity event. Every university function. Anything she had to go to in order to fulfill her responsibilities to the university, Niles Van Holtz was there. He wouldn't pounce right away. He'd wait until she'd

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finally entertained the thought he'd decided not to attend and then boom. He'd be there. Usually easing up behind her and asking her something rather inappropriate in her ear. You could almost say she'd come to expect it.

Irene looked up into Van Holtz's handsome face. And he was handsome. Gorgeous, in fact, if you followed the normal societal standards. Dark brown hair that had streaks of white, black, and grey nearly covered those oddly colored eyes of his. Kind of a gold amber or something. She wasn't really a color person, she left those sorts of decisions to Jackie. Even now the gown Irene wore -- a pale silver...thing -- her friend had picked out for her.

Van Holtz also had a rather square jaw and a nose she bet once had a deviated septum based on the way it went crooked right below his brows and a rather abnormally large neck.

Yes, a very handsome man. And, perhaps, one of the most arrogant beings she'd ever come across. Truly, if she had any emotional investment in this man, she'd be forced to have him wiped from the planet. But, Irene had very little emotional investment in anyone. Jackie and Jackie's boyfriend, Paul, pretty much covered her emotional investment. And she was quite okay with that.

More than okay.

Van Holtz cleared his throat. "Um...and why do you think it would matter to me you're a virgin?"

Irene shrugged. "You have that demeanor. I imagine you probably like it when the virgin tells you, 'Ow! You're too big. Please, we have to stop!' And you say," she lowered her voice several octaves to match Van Holtz's, "'Don't worry. I'll make it good for you, sweet little virgin girl.'"

Van Holtz stared her for at least a full minute and Irene began to wonder where Jackie had wandered off to. She brought the woman with her to stop Irene from doing things like this. Saying something that would cause huge repercussions financially. The Van Holtz family gave the university a lot of money and with a stupid attempt at honesty, Irene may have caused that money supply to dry up.

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But then Van Holtz threw his head back and laughed, shocking Irene and causing everyone in the room to turn around and stare at them. Not surprisingly, Jackie suddenly appeared at her side.

"What's going on?" she immediately asked, a lovely fake smile on her face.

"I'm unclear as to whether I'm being laughed at or laughed with," Irene told her friend.

"Laughed with, doc," he finally managed. "I promise. You just never fail to amuse me."

"Knowing that, my life is now complete."

Jackie tugged a lock of her hair. A signal that she needed to shut up now.

As it happened any time Irene found herself in a conversation with Niles Van Holtz two people always showed up if they were around. His older sister, the less than pleasant Carrie Van Holtz. And Farica Bader. A woman clearly interested in Van Holtz for herself. The two women surrounded them all while eyeing each other cautiously.

"Did I miss something?" Carrie asked her brother.

"Yeah. But I'll tell you later." Those amber colored eyes glanced at Irene. "I was just spending some time with my favorite biophysicist."

"Why?" his sister asked, and Irene had to appreciate her honesty. Of course, Jackie didn't. And she gave a little warning snarl that almost made Irene smile. Except Irene didn't smile. When she did it felt weird and uncomfortable. So she never bothered unless caught off-guard.

"Van," Farica breathed huskily, going up on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. "I missed you at last week's get together."

"Sorry, Farica." Van Holtz swiped a quick kiss across the back of her knuckles, but his eyes stayed focused on Irene. "I had to go to San Francisco to check on the new restaurant."

"I thought your father handled that sort of thing."

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"Normally he does," he murmured, his eyes traveling down Irene's dress and back up again. "But lately he's become quite the demanding prick."

"Perhaps he's considering retirement." And even Irene could hear the hopefulness in that cold, cultured voice. The Baders were a small family but clearly had hopes of becoming more powerful among the Seattle elite. Connections with the Van Holtzs would ensure that. Especially marriage. Although from what Irene had heard these last seven years, getting Niles Van Holtz down the aisle would take a team of oxen and many chains. The man never stayed with one woman for any length of time, although he may go back and forth between his favorites.

Sex. It all had to do with sexual intercourse. Something Irene actively avoided if at all possible. As she'd told Van Holtz, she wasn't a virgin. Two years at M.I.T. ensured that. But she'd never enjoyed it and she'd tried it with several different partners. She found the whole process rather revolting. She had the distinct feeling she'd one day have to explain that to Niles Van Holtz, so he could stop looking at her like his next conquest. As handsome as he was, the idea of getting naked with him and writhing around did nothing but make her feel slightly ill. It wasn't him per se. It was the physical act itself.

Irene shuddered a bit merely thinking about it.

Van Holtz stepped closer, invading her personal space. "Are you cold?"

"No," she answered plainly. "Just disgusted."

"Why? Did you look in a mirror recently?" Farica commented.

Irene didn't even blink. She'd been insulted by Farica before and she never worried about it. The woman had her own painful insecurities to deal with, lashing out at Irene gave her little satisfaction and Irene refused to be bated. But Van Holtz turned on Farica Bader so fast, the woman took several steps back away from him only to crash into his sister. The unholy smile on that woman's face made it clear Carrie Van Holtz would happily throw Farica into a pool of sharks if the opportunity presented itself.

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But Jaqueline, Irene's self-appointed protector moved forward, her hands curled into ready-to-fight fists.

With a sigh, Irene grabbed her friend's arm and dragged her back. "Come on, Jack. I want to show you my new computer. In my office." Irene walked off, Jackie stomping behind her.

She didn't bother to turn around and look at Van Holtz or his sister. As with most human beings, she'd already forgotten about them as soon as she stepped out into the hallway and headed up the stairs to her office.

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"Don't ever speak to her that way again," Van snarled. If they were on a hunt, he'd have Farica Bader on her back, belly exposed with his jaw wrapped around her throat.

If she thought knocking down Irene would somehow endear her and her tiny Pack to Van she was sadly mistaken.

"I didn't realize you were so attached, Van."

"I'm not attached. It was mean. Unnecessarily so. Do you beat up kittens, too?"

"How dare -- "

Carrie stepped between the two of them. "Go away, Farica. My brother is not interested in you. And I'd hate for us to have to wipe out your Pack for, ya know, amusement."

With a last glare, Farica turned on her overly priced shoes and stormed away to lick her wounds.

"Tell me you never slept with her."

"Are you high?" Van slammed his now empty champagne glass on another tray moving by. The fact those trays were attached to actual human beings he rarely noticed. "That woman wants one thing. And that's to be marked and mated to a Van Holtz. I'd rather chew off my own arm."



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"I'm glad to hear that. But," and Van knew he was about to have one of those painful conversations with his big sister, "I want to see you mated and happy one day to someone. Like I am. But preferably not to Irene Conridge."

Van snorted. "Mated? With Irene? Wait. Let me rephrase that. Mated? With anyone? Not going to happen, big sister."

"You have no intention of marking anyone as your own?"

"Christ, what a load of shit Mom and Dad handed you. And you've bought into it. I thought you were smarter than that." The idea that biting a female made her yours forever to the exclusion of every other pussy available seemed beyond ridiculous. Van didn't believe any of those old She-wolves' tales. He simply had too much sense. Not only that, but he'd never give up having access to an array of females. Why should he? If they were there, wet and ready, he would fuck them. He kind of saw it as his civic duty...yes, he was that good.

"To answer your question, no. I don't plan to mark anyone," and he used air quotes here, " 'as my own.' I have way too much sense to do that to myself."

"Okay. But you'd get Dad off your back if you mated with somebody."

Both siblings had noticed their father had been much less pleasant in the last year. Grouchy didn't do his recent temperament a lick of justice. Constantly the man pushed Van and Van didn't know why. Maybe the old wolf wanted to retire. And that would be fine. Just hand over the business and the Pack and Van would be more than happy to take over. But life was too short and insane to start playing these barbarian games of the young wolf taking down the old. They were Van Holtz's goddamnit. They were civilized, cultured, and damn good looking. If the old man wanted a fight, go hang with the Magnus Pack or, even better, the Smiths. That Pack only bred Alpha Males and, not surprisingly, in-fighting went on constantly.

Van, however, liked his life just as it was. A wonderful business, the ability to shift into wolf whenever the mood struck him, the opportunity to travel whenever he wanted, and a plethora of available females at his disposal. Why would he change that for anything or anyone?



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Actually, he wouldn't change it.

"Well whatever you do, maybe you should stay away from Conridge. She doesn't exactly seem interested."

"True, she's resisting me. But I'll wear her down. Like the time we ran down that elk in Canada. Took us two days but we did it."

His sister sighed. "I'm starting to become concerned about your taste, little brother. She's...odd."

"She's odd because she's brilliant." He motioned to the exit where the female had disappeared. "At this moment, she's discussing things you and I could never even comprehend."

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"I absolutely could create a lightsaber."

"You could not create a lightsaber."

"I could too. It's all a science."

"I thought being a Jedi was mystical?"

Irene snorted. "Mystical, my butt. It's all about science."

Unlocking the door to her office, Irene walked inside with Jackie following. She walked around her desk and threw herself into her office chair, feet up on the wood. Her friend sat in the chair opposite.

"Sorry about that, sweets," Jackie sighed.

Irene blinked. "Sorry about what?"

"About what went on with Farica Bader."

Frowning, Irene stared at her friend.

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"You know," Jackie went on, "Farica Bader? Who only moments ago insulted you?"

"Oh, yes. Her."

"How do you do that?" Jackie asked with a smile.

"Do what?"

"Not let stuff get to you? I mean, I hate that woman."

Irene shrugged. "Why hate her? It requires emotion that takes time out of my schedule. The Farica Baders of the world can say what they want. But in the end, they go back to their small, petty lives while people like us, go on to perform for the kings and queens of Europe or produce life-changing creations. She is meaningless to us. They all are."

Jackie gazed at her for several moments and Irene marveled at how truly beautiful Jackie was. Stunning, in fact, with almond-shaped brown eyes from her mother's side of the family and naturally blond-brown hair from her father's.

"I love you, Irene," Jack finally said.

Surprised, Irene asked, "You do?"

"Of course I do. You're my best friend and you're amazing. I don't know what I would have done without you these last few years."

"That makes two of us, my friend. But now you have Paul."

"Yeah. I guess. But he's been acting weird lately."

"He's madly in love with you and trying to figure out how to handle it. Give him a week or two."

Jackie laughed. "That sure are you, Dr. Conridge?"

"Of course. When am I ever wrong?"

Still laughing, Jackie stood up and headed out the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Bathroom."

"Use the one down the other hallway. The one right here is blocked off by the construction."

Jackie stood in the doorway, staring at the near-destroyed hallway. "When are they getting that done anyway?"

"Not soon enough," Irene said while booting up her computer. The chances of her returning to the cocktail party became distinctly remote as soon as her new machine powered up. "I've had six fights with the foreman about noise. How they expect me to get any work done with all that banging, I'll never know."

Jackie stepped back into the office. "Hey. This was in your inbox." She handed Irene an envelope from the dean's office.

"Great," Irene muttered, afraid of another student complaint about being made to cry. Weakness. She detested weakness.

Tearing the envelope open, Irene took a quick look at the letter, took it all in, and processed it. She felt the color -- what color there was -- drain from her face. "Uh-oh."

Again Jackie came back into the office. Poor thing, she couldn't quite make it to the ladies room. "What's wrong?"

"They need access to the labs next week."

"So?" Then Jackie's eyes narrowed. "Irene, tell me you took care of that little issue we discussed."

"Um..." Irene let out a breath. "Not quite."

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She held her hand up. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it tomorrow. It's perfect. It's Saturday. Very few students will be here and I can get them to go away if necessary." When Jackie only glared harder, Irene continued. "I promise. All of it will be gone by tomorrow."

"It better be." Jackie stormed out and this time wasn't suddenly forced to come back in.

Irene turned back to her computer went to her C prompt and called up all her files on the Terminate Project. She'd foolishly kept these files, concerned she may need them later. It was hard to get rid of something one had worked so long and hard on. But now that she knew what it could do...Jackie was right. It all had to go. She typed in "delete c:/Terminate Project" and hit Enter.

Letting out a sigh that at least that much was now gone, Irene sat back in her chair but the creak outside her door had her sitting up again. Okay. Now she was being paranoid...wasn't she?

She heard another sound and Irene stood up, walking to her door. She glanced both ways, but didn't see anything. Another sound from the end of the hall that led out had Irene's entire body tensing. She glanced around and realized she had nothing to defend herself with should it become necessary. Moving quickly, she went over to the construction supplies lying on the floor and grabbed the first thing she saw.

Slowly, she stepped closer to the construction area, trying her best to make no sound. It could be her imagination, but she sensed someone there. Behind a pack of piling. Ridiculous, of course. It had been several years since her government or any government for that matter had followed her. They'd begun to lose interest in her as soon as she went into teaching rather than working for some government-funded bioweapons company. Still, if someone had found out about her little creation, Irene had no doubt they'd go through their usual measures to get just a sample of it.

Irene stopped. Government agents always had guns. She had a two-by-four...exactly when had her legendary logic escaped her? True, she had her own homemade weapon in her backpack but she still wouldn't use that against a gun. No, she needed to get Jackie and go. Although it was most likely all her imagination anyway, better safe than sorry.

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As it was, no one knew about her project and no one would either. She'd make sure of that.

"You okay, doc?"

Without thinking, only instinct, Irene turned and swung, slamming the two-by-four right into Niles Van Holtz's head. She hit him so hard, his head hit the other wall and then he hit the floor.

"Oh...oh that can't be good." She'd killed a Van Holtz. Crouching beside him, Irene's mind quickly zipped through all the law books she'd read over the years looking for any way she could prove this was self-defense.

"What the hell...Irene, what did you do?"

Irene looked up at her friend. "He snuck up on me," she replied calmly.

Jackie crouched beside Van Holtz's prone body. "You split his head open."

"A few stitches. Perhaps some slight brain damage, but none that we'd notice." She put her fingers to his throat. "He's got a pulse. Chances are high he'll live."

Sighing, Jackie glared at her. "The emotions you should be currently experiencing are regret, tempered with a little guilt."

Since they'd met so many years ago, Jackie remained the "emotional one" and Irene the "logical one." Jackie had artist-like sensibilities. She had no control over her spending habits or her tendency toward rage. Irene didn't understand human emotion and had long given up trying. When most little girls fell in the park and scraped their knee, they cried. Irene analyzed what made her fall and why, exactly, her knees should hurt so much. Then she'd analyze the momentum it took for her to actually do the level of damage she'd done.

"Guilt?" she asked. "For what? It was self-defense."

"That'll never play to a jury."

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"Damn." She'd really hoped it would.

"Tell me what happened?"

"I thought I heard something."

"You did hear something. I heard it too."

The two friends stared at each other, then Jackie took Van Holtz's arm and pulled it around her neck. "This is what we're going to do. I'll take him back to his family. You get that shit out of here tonight."

"Yes, but-"

"No buts, Irene. Take it out of here tonight. Okay?"

Irene nodded, realizing she had to put her ego aside when it came to this. "All right." She didn't need to help her friend lift the still unconscious Van Holtz.

"Do you know what to do with it?"

"Leave it to me." Irene headed back to her office. "I have my backpack in the car and extra clothes here. I'll change and then I'll move that stuff out."

Jackie headed down the hall. "See you at home in about an hour?"

"Yes. Perfect."

Irene closed her office door and pulled out a bag she kept for emergencies or seriously late nights. Nothing fancy, just a T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. But the perfect ensemble for what she needed to do.

Still, the question remained...did she get rid of all of it? Could it really hurt just to keep a smidge? Just for testing purposes only, of course.

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Before Van opened his eyes he realized two things. First, he was sitting against a car. Second, his sister was pissed off.

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Hand to his poor abused forehead, Van forced his eyes open and looked around. As he'd guessed, his back rested against the family limo while his sister ripped the head off the She-jackal.

"Where is the little bitch? I'll kill her myself!"

The jackal seemed unimpressed by his sister's tirade. "You go near my friend, I'll rip your throat out myself."

"Oh, really?" Carrie stepped into the jackal's space and Van knew he had to say something before things went from bad to worse.

"Carrie. Cut it out."

Immediately his sister was by his side. "Are you okay?"

"I think you should get me home. I think Dr. Vasquez may need to sew up my head for the night." Leave the stitches in longer than twenty-four hours, though, and the skin would heal right over it. The dilemma of having a seriously amped up metabolism.

"Okay." Carrie grabbed his arm and helped him stand.

"How long have I been out?"

The she-jackal shrugged. "I'm not sure. But I've been arguing with her for at least fifteen minutes."

"Her?" his sister snarled.

"Need stitches," he reminded Carrie, before she could blow something else out of proportion.

With a grunt of annoyance, Carrie helped him into the limo and got in after him. She slammed the door shut, glaring out at the jackal's retreating form.

"Where's Irene?" he asked.



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"That bitch wouldn't tell me. But trust me when I say I tried to find out." His sister turned in the seat and looked at him. "You're not mad, are you?"

How could he be mad at a woman with such great instincts? "I scared her and she reacted. Don't blow this out of proportion."

His sister gave an annoyed sigh and leaned back into the seat. "Fine. I won't. You want to let this go, that's on you."

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Irene pulled her car over to the side of the road and got out. She grabbed hold of her backpack and slung it over her shoulders. She'd headed out to one of the richest neighborhoods in town, about fifteen minutes from the university. It made the most sense because of all open property and, thankfully, she didn't have to worry about the flora and fauna. What she created only did damage to one thing...the human body. For everything else -- animals, plants, trees, insects -- it remained a nourishment. How her good intentions went so horribly wrong, Irene still didn't know.

Setting off, Irene walked straight into the woods and she kept walking. She knew the area a bit but only from maps. The three families who lived in this area, including the Van Holtzs, didn't have any events that involved the university staff. Irene had never been inside any of their homes, but she never really cared.

Irene walked until she neared the ocean by the Van Holtz property. A perfect location. Kind of that midway point between the Van Holtz property, the Löwes', and the Dupris'. One of the creepiest families Irene had ever met. But their money was green and beneficial, so she schmoozed when necessary, even while her skin crawled.

Deciding she'd walked enough, Irene stopped by a big sturdy tree. She pulled on rubber gloves and carefully removed her concoction from her backpack. She had it in a special titanium container and took great care in unscrewing the cap and dumping the liquid on the tree. Irene waited and she couldn't help but smile when she saw the blooms burst to life on the branches. Out of season no less.

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She screwed the cap back on the container and returned it to her backpack. Then she took out a thermos of tap water and dumped that on the spot and on her rubber gloves. That would wash away any additional remnants. Irene shook her head. The government couldn't ask for a better weapon.

Ignoring the bit of guilt lurking in the back of her mind about the two ounces she had safely hidden in her office, Irene tossed the thermos back in her backpack along with the rubber gloves.

Zippering up her backpack and placing it back on her shoulders, Irene stood but she froze in her tracks when she heard the crack of a tree branch.

Squinting, she stared into the darkness, but couldn't see anything. She could, however, feel something. Something had cut off her way back to her car. Scanning her memory, she pulled up the map she'd looked at about seven years ago when she first moved out here. About a mile away was the Löwe house. She couldn't risk going to the Van Holtzs with her being the potential murder suspect of their first born son.

Controlling her fear and desire to run like a girl, Irene took a slow step back and then another. Moving purely on instincts, Irene knew she had to make a run for it...from what, she really didn't know. But she knew she had to.

So she spun on her heel and ran into the clearing, but came to a sliding halt as her feet touched the wet dirt.

Irene watched as it lifted its head from the elk carcass before it, face covered in blood. It stared at her and she quickly searched her brain to identify it.

Hyena. Irene swallowed and took a careful step to the left. She would be heading into Van Holtz territory, but she'd face Niles Van Holtz's family and manslaughter charges over this any day.

Irene took another step and another, carefully moving. She gripped the straps of her backpack, ready to yank it off. There was only one of them. She could fight off one. There's only one, she said to herself again.

At least that's what she thought until the second one slammed into her from her right, taking hold of her backpack and swinging her around like a doll. Then it tossed her, and that tree it aimed for came up excruciatingly fast...

Chapter Two

"Pull over," Van muttered.

His sister patted his back. "You going to be sick?"

"No." The limo pulled over and Van stepped out.

"Van, what's wrong?"

Wiping the still oozing blood from his eyes, Van stared at the very old Pinto.

"Well?" his sister demanded.

"This is Irene's car." He remembered it clearly. She almost ran him down with it once. At the time, she said it was an accident but he never appreciated her smirk when she said it.

Van looked around, sniffed the air.

Carrie shrugged. "And? So it's her car. What? You want to set it on fire?"

Ignoring his sister's question, Van glanced at her. "Look where we are."

Carrie glanced around and then she looked off into the woods. "Oh, God. The Rubicon."

He was already moving, parts of him shifting as he crossed the road. "Call to the Pack."

"But Van -- "

"Do it!" was the last thing he could tell her before he'd shifted completely and charged into the woods after Irene. If she'd already crossed the Rubicon, he might already be too late. But he couldn't think about that. He had to get to her. He, at the very least, had to try.

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Irene hit the tree hard, but she turned in time so it was her side that slammed into it as opposed to her face. She landed on the hard, unforgiving ground and jaws, stronger than any other like-predator on earth, tore the backpack off her, flinging it aside. Then it came for her.

Short, blunt claws slapped against her back, tearing past her T-shirt and ripping into soft human flesh. Focusing on one goal, Irene tried to pull herself out from under but its fangs grabbed firm hold of the remaining bit of her T-shirt and yanked her back, tossing her into the middle of the feeding ground.

More of them came out of the woods toward her. They made a strange laughing sound, calling to each other. They didn't run toward her. They didn't have to. They all knew she'd never outrun them.

Irene crawled backward and pressed up against the remains of the elk they'd been feeding on, her mind racing with a way out of this that would leave her face and most of her limbs intact.

Quickly scanning the ground, Irene saw her backpack. If she could only get to it...

But the hyenas must have seen what she was looking at. One of them ran toward her, jaws wide open. But before it could get to her, a blur of gold tackled it from the side. The hyena rolled away and scrambled up, trying to avoid the charging male lion. The male wasn't having it, though. He slapped at the hyena, casually, seeming to enjoy the little chase around the clearing. Another male joined in and Irene saw her chance. But before she could move, nine lionesses came out of the other side of the woods and ran straight for her.

Again, Irene scrambled back, panic trying to set in. She wouldn't let it, though. She needed her mind clear to get out of this. To survive. Her only goal was to survive.

More hyenas came and they charged the female lions, keeping them away from Irene and, apparently, their food source for the evening.

## Miss Congeniality

She knew she had only one chance and she either took it now or end up finding out if so many religious belief systems were correct about there being an afterlife.

On hands and knees, Irene made a mad dash for her backpack. She'd just gotten hold of it when fangs gripped her side and flung her back into the midst of the fight. She landed hard, rolling to keep any of her bones from being broken in the process while maintaining a death grip on her pack.

They were still toying with her. She knew that because the lioness that grabbed her could have broken her spine but strategically dug into her side. They didn't want to kill her too soon. Where would the fun be in that?

Focusing on her task, Irene tore the zipper on the bag open, spraying her papers, files, and computer printouts everywhere. She ignored all that and took hold of what she still had buried inside. Her fingers wrapped around the metal as sharp teeth sank into her thigh and dragged her back.

Somehow knowing this would be her last chance, Irene waited until it dragged her off into a corner, away from the current battle between life-long enemies, and then it released her. Before it could get another grip on her or tear into something vital like an artery or her brain, Irene turned and slammed her homemade weapon against its throat.

Amazing the things one could come up with when bored and reading an electronics magazine. At the time she'd figured if someone named Jack Cover could make it, why not her? So she'd created three non-lethal ones exactly like his. The one some police stations around the country were using. But she found the devices boring. So she'd increased the voltage on the last three as much as she could. She'd always kept one in her bag for those long, late-night walks to her car across campus, but she'd never used it before. Until now.

Irene pressed the side buttons she'd added to the device and squeezed. When she'd made this model, she'd tripled the voltage. And those increased volts now tore through her attacker.

The hyena's entire body jerked in surprise-until it began to smoke. The smell of burning fur didn't deter Irene from keeping her weapon against its throat.

## Miss Congeniality

She sat up when it started to stumble back and fall over, never stopping the charge or allowing the device to move away from the hyena's neck.

After sixty seconds, she figured enough had been done and she stood and stumbled away. The hyena remains nothing more than a charred and bloody mess.

Irene quickly remembered there were more, and she spun around with the weapon held up in front of her. Rough breaths came out of her and she could feel blood trickling down her back and thigh, coating the inside of her jeans. As one, they all looked at the dead hyena's remains and back at her.

Trying to control her shaking but knowing that with any animal a show of weakness would be her undoing, she yelled, "Well? Come on!"

At first, they didn't move at all. Staring at her with those cold eyes. She thought for sure they'd seen through her. That they could see and smell her fear. But she never looked away and slowly they stepped back. All of them.

They kept their eyes on her like they thought she was as dangerous as them and they took another step back. And another. And another. When they had a healthy distance between them, both lions and hyenas turned and trotted off back into the woods, heading back to their own territories.

Irene waited until she could no longer see or hear them, then she turned and froze again, briefly wondering how much more she could take. They watched her with eyes much less cold but no less frightening.

It had to be an entire pack of wolves. She lifted her weapon, unable to stop her shaking this time, and waited. The one in front trotted forward and she watched it, waiting for it to make its move.

It did, shifting from wolf to human. And suddenly Niles Van Holtz walked toward her. Irene raised the weapon higher, where his big neck would be if he stepped any closer.

Van Holtz stopped and stared at her. "It's all right, Irene."

Miss Congeniality

"I have to go." Irene ignored the fact that her entire body now shook with fear and panic and pain. "I have to work. I need to go back to my lab. I can't stay. You can't make me stay."

"Irene, I won't let anyone hurt you. I promise. But you've gotta trust me and come with me, baby."

"No. I'm going back to my car. Stay away from me, Van Holtz." She kind of jerked the homemade stun gun and a few of the wolves stepped back. But not him. "I'll do to you what I did to him," she warned, motioning to the charred hyena. "So stay away from me."

"They won't let this go, Irene. They'll come back for you. You'll never make it to your car. You have to come with me."

He sounded so reasonable. He sounded like he cared. But no one cared about her. They cared about her brain and what she could do for them or what she could create. But no one -- except maybe Jackie -- cared about her at all. Especially Van Holtz.

She had to give it to the man, though. He was persistent.

"Irene, I know you're scared, baby, and I can explain everything to you. But I need you to come with me."

"Explain? Explain what?"

"About what you just saw. About me."

She shook her head. "You don't have to explain anything. I know all about you, Van Holtz."

He looked kind of amused by that. "You do, huh?"

She nodded and dived into what made her feel safe and would calm her. Knowledge. "The Van Holtzs Pack are descendents of the Holtzs from Gaul. Barbarians used by the villagers to stop the advancement of Caesar's armies across the Rhine River. They used pagan rituals to force this," she motioned to the Pack, "on you. Use your kin as war dogs of a sort. But once it was over, they couldn't control the Holtzs. No one could. You finished with the



## Miss Congeniality

Romans and turned on the locals. Using them as cattle to feed on until the Christian church took power and went after anything remotely pagan. That's when the now Van Holtz Pack due to a marriage involving Dutch wolves broke apart. Some left Germany altogether and went to other parts of Europe. Eventually, they ended up on the shores of North America and briefly settled in a small town called Smithville."

By now, almost half the Pack had shifted to human and they stared at her in fascination. She wondered how many of them didn't even know this background information about their own Pack? Probably all of them.

Finally, Van spoke up, "How...how did you know all that?"

Irene shrugged, uncomfortable with bringing up her friend's name to strangers. Even to other Shifters.

"We already know," his now human sister snipped. "Jacqueline Jean-Louis. We can smell it on her."

Lovely. "Yes, well, we went to the same summer camp for gifted children -- prodigies -- when we were about thirteen. We were roommates. She cut her foot, didn't have it looked at, and it became infected. The fever hit her that night but she wouldn't let me go get the nurse. She just asked me to watch out for her. She must have shifted six, seven times. The next morning she told me everything."

"But how do you know about us?" Van Holtz's sister demanded. It was somewhat disturbing seeing them all naked, but Irene didn't really care. Naked, clothed...whatever.

"I'm one of those rare beings who actually read books," she said simply. Her control coming back. "I found a book in the library of an old German monastery. Buried in the back and under a ton of other books. It was all in Latin, Greek, and some old German."

"And you understood it?"

"Latin and Greek I already knew. I had to do a little deciphering to figure out the rhythm and structure of the older German. It was quite fascinating," she added.

## Miss Congeniality

Irene realized she'd lowered her arm to her side and her body no longer shook. She took another deep breath and it no longer went in or came out shaky. That's when she finally realized Van Holtz was right. She had to trust him because the hyenas would want her dead for killing one of their own and the lions, the more pragmatic of the shifters, would want her dead for seeing too much.

"I'll come home with you," she told him. "I can call Jackie from your house, she'll be worried."

Appearing relieved, Van Holtz nodded and held his hand out.

Irene took a step -- with absolutely no intention of taking the man's hand -- when she found herself face down on the ground. Before everything went black, she thought, Ah, yes. Blood loss. I should have accounted for that.

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Her wounds worried him. A meaningless scrape on her forehead, but deeper gouges in her torso and thigh. A lovely still-bleeding gash on one side of her face, a black eye. Her fingers were torn up from dragging on the ground when she was trying to get away. You put up quite a fight, didn't ya, my little PhD?

"Are you sure about this?" Carrie asked close to his ear.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

"The hyenas are going to want her blood and the bitches will just want her dead," Carrie needlessly reminded him.

"Call a meeting with the Pride and the Clan. We'll figure this out, but I'm not letting them kill her."

Carrie nodded as Van stood with Irene tucked safe in his arms.

## Miss Congeniality

"And get the doc for me," he ordered while they walked back into the woods and onto Van Holtz territory. "I'd prefer she not bleed to death in the middle of the night."

\*\*\*\*\*

It was that brutal snoring that woke her. How could any human being sleep through all that noise? As it was, Irene wasn't much of a big sleeper anyway. So any additional noises she simply found annoying.

Irene lay in a wonderful bed on her left side, naked, and she immediately knew why. The slightest movement sent a shockwave of pain through her system. Turning her head slowly, she looked down the length of her body barely covered with a single white sheet. Some parts were bandaged up and she guessed that was to protect the stitches she could feel every time she moved. The rest that hadn't been bandaged had lovely black and blue marks. Good thing she didn't have an ego about her looks, otherwise she'd probably be sobbing right now.

Irene turned her head toward the snoring. Damn. Van Holtz. Had he really stayed by her side the whole night? She wouldn't put it past him to sleep in his own room and then stroll back here around five a.m. trying to give that impression.

Still, he'd saved her life last night and she couldn't ignore that. He'd taken a risk by bringing her to his home and not letting the others kill her. As Jackie would say, "This is one of those times where your emotion should be one of gratitude." And Irene was grateful. Few people ever helped her and she was quite loyal to the ones who did. Although the thought of being loyal to Van Holtz made her butt itch. She knew the man well enough to know he'd take any advantage he could get. So, she'd be loyal, but she didn't need to announce it. Quiet loyalty had its benefits as well.

She stared at him, asleep in that chair. In sleep, he almost looked innocent. Yet he wasn't innocent. Far from it. Because even in sleep he still had a smirk. Who smirked in their sleep?

He wore only a pair of jeans and nothing else. Since he'd graduated the university seven years ago, Irene normally only saw the man in a tuxedo.

## Miss Congeniality

Sometimes a casual dinner jacket. But half-naked except for jeans...yes, this was quite new.

And, if she were to be brutally honest -- and when was she not brutally honest? -- she'd have to admit the experience was not entirely unpleasant. He had an exceptional body. Perhaps a tad unnecessarily big but his muscles were lean and extremely well defined.

His body was quite perfect, even by her standards. Long and powerful.

Glancing around the room and seeing they were alone, Irene allowed her eyes to stray lower, wondering if he were big all over. Clearly he was. And, even more fascinating, it seemingly had a mind of its own. She watched as it grew before her eyes. Then it hit her, he hadn't been erect in the first place. Well exactly how big did that thing get anyway? Was that normal, even by shifter standards? And why did she suddenly care?

"Uh...doc?"

Horrified but not willing to show it, Irene looked into Van Holtz's face. And yes, the smirk was decidedly worse now.

"Looking for anything in particular there?"

"No," she answered honestly, "just fascinated by the size. It seems inordinately large."

Van Holtz shut his eyes. "By sheer will, I'm going to ignore you said that because...well...it's killing me. And, instead," he leaned forward in his chair, his eyes examining her body closely. "ask, how are you feeling?"

"Like I've been mauled by a wild animal."

"You're gonna be bragging about that for years, aren't you?"

"Pardon?"

"How often does a full-human get to say they not only survived an attack by lions and hyenas but that they actually took out one of the hyenas?"

Miss Congeniality

Irene grimaced. "I'd prefer not to..." She shook her head, slowly rolling onto her back, pulling the sheet with her to continue keeping her naked body somewhat covered. "Killing something or someone who was human at least part of the time is not a situation I'd run around bragging about, Van Holtz."

"You're right. Sorry."

"No need to apologize. Based on what the staff and students say about me, I'm sure you thought I'd happily kill another being and mount them on my wall."

"Haven't you?"

"Only the students who dare cross me."

The bed dipped and Irene slowly turned her head to focus on the man stretching out on the bed beside her. "What are you doing?"

"Getting comfortable."

She glanced at him, took in the way he laid on his side with his head propped up with one hand, and she frowned. "Why?"

"Because I can." He lifted the lone white sheet and peeked down the length of her naked body. "You don't mind, do you?"

Irene frowned while he stared under that sheet. "Am I now supposed to have sexual intercourse with you?"

The sheet dropped back into place and Van Holtz's eyes slowly looked up to focus on her face. "Sorry?"

"Am I supposed to have sexual intercourse with you because you saved my life? Like a form of medieval payment for services rendered?"

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It was something in her voice that stopped him from trying to snag another peek under that sheet and had him looking directly into her face. She wasn't

joking. Nor was she being insulting. She really was asking him if she had to have sex with him as a form of payment.

"Of course I don't expect that."

"Oh."

He waited for more but more, apparently, was not forthcoming.

"Perhaps we should understand each other, Irene. I want you. I have for a long time. But I want to have sex with you because we'll both enjoy it. Not because you owe me anything."

"Oh. I see." She looked up at him with those intense blue eyes and spoke as plain as any woman ever had before. "The problem is, Van Holtz, I detest sexual intercourse. I don't mean I don't enjoy it. Or I've had bad experiences and the thought of it makes me uncomfortable. I mean, I detest it. I find the whole passing back and forth of bodily fluids repulsive. And I'm not talking merely semen. I mean sweat and saliva." She grimaced and it clearly wasn't forced. "The number of germs passing between two people during those moments would boggle your mind. Besides, I really hate sweating. And I hate being distracted. Because, one should pay attention when involved in intercourse because I've found past partners noticed when I wasn't and they were always so offended. Anyway, depending on who I'm with at the time, that could be anywhere from ten minutes to an hour where I'm forced to focus on the needs of one person and, to be quite honest, there are much more important things I should be doing."

Van stared at the naked woman lying in his bed. "Do you like living like that?" he had to ask.

"Yes. I do. Personally, I don't understand why people involve themselves in relationships. They're complicated and often very unsatisfying. Then the only way to get rid of the person is through legal means."

"Relationships are one thing. I kind of agree with you there. But I'm talking about sex. Don't you have...uh...needs?"

"Yes. But I take care of those by myself. I have a very handy vibrator."

Miss Congeniality

Van laughed. He'd never met a woman who openly admitted, in general conversation, she liked to get herself off.

"Look, I'm a feminist, Van Holtz. I feel there's absolutely nothing wrong with a woman physically taking care of herself."

"I see."

She glanced at her bandaged side. "I can feel so many stitches. You know I saw an open heart surgery once and let me tell you -- "

"Irene," he cut in, before she could run off on some tangent. "I'm still back on the detesting sex conversation."

"Oh. All right."

"Is this conversation bothering you?"

"No."

"Okay." Van got comfortable next to Irene Conridge. Normally, a woman told him she had no interest in sex and he had no interest in her. And although his sexual interest in Irene had gone far, far away, he still found talking to her kind of...well...to quote her, "fascinating."

"Do you ever miss sex?"

"No."

"Do you ever miss being around people?"

"I am around people. I live with Jackie."

"True, but I mean, someone in your bed. Holding you. Or do you and Jackie...uh..."

She stared at him blankly and he realized that no. He could get rid of those kinky fantasies, too. Apparently Dr. Conridge didn't like "sexual intercourse" with anyone. Male or female.



Miss Congeniality

"If you mean lesbianism, then no. I have no interest in women either. But you shouldn't feel bad for me," she calmly insisted. "I like the way my life is. Except for being mauled, it's relatively simple and calm. And that's just how I like it."

"Then that's all that matters, doc."

"That's how I feel." She gazed up at him. "What you did tonight...last night, I mean. I do really appreciate it. I know enough of Shifter politics to know you didn't make any fans by protecting me."

"I'll handle them. You just get better. And any chance you'll tell me why you were out there in the first place?"

"No. And you know I don't have to stay."

"Yes. You do. Irene, I've got to work something out with the Löwes and the Dupris to ensure they don't come after you. Until I have that, you can't leave."

"Jackie -- "

"Is completely safe. She's spending the night and she's more than welcome. She just went to bed about an hour ago after watching every move our doctor made."

Without thinking, he carefully tucked the sheet around her body. "I'll make sure you're safe, doc. I promise."

"I'm sorry," she said after several moments.

"For what?"

Irene shrugged, then grimaced, probably regretting the move considering the pain it most likely caused. "For always thinking you were an asshole."

Van grinned. "I am an asshole. And you're a cold bitch. But that doesn't mean we can't be friends, doc."

"Friends?" She nodded. "I don't mind being friends. I have so few of them."

Miss Congeniality

"Really? With your natural charm?"

"Ha, ha, Van Holtz." And she gave what looked to almost be a smile.

Van slipped out of bed and headed toward the door. "I'll send one of the She-wolves in to get you to the bathroom and I'll make you some breakfast."

"You? Make me breakfast?"

"Of course. Just wait until you taste my waffles, doc. You'll see God."

"Considering my personal belief system, I somehow doubt that."

Van stepped into the hallway and closed the door. As he made his way past his family's rooms, he caught sight of one of the She-wolves and motioned for her to take care of Conridge. The look on the girl's face was how he'd imagine she'd look if he'd ordered her to stand in front of a firing squad.

As he walked down the stairs, he saw his sister sitting at the bottom reading the newspaper. He sat next to her and shook his head in disbelief.

"You're right."

"I'm right about what?"

"About Conridge. I don't think anything will be happening between us anytime soon."

Carrie patted his shoulder. "Shut you down, did she?"

"You could say that."

"She reminds me of the computer from 'Alien.'"

"Huh?"

"You know, 'This ship detonates in T-minus five minutes and counting.' That's her."

Miss Congeniality

Van chuckled. "She's not that bad. She's just different. I like her. We'll probably be friends. Which means I'll never have sex with her."

"You're pathetic."

"Yeah. Yeah," he said, standing up to head to the kitchen to make breakfast for the entire Pack and Irene. "I love you too, sis."

"Oh, and Dad's looking for you."

Van stopped but immediately shook his head. "I'll talk to him later. I can't deal with him right now." He again headed toward the kitchen, his sister following right behind him. "And get on the phone. I want that meeting with the Löwes and the Dupris set up as soon as possible."

He went to the industrial-sized refrigerator and began pulling out eggs and flour for the batter. "I mean, if I'm not going to fuck her, why have her in my house?"

Carrie sighed. "That's lovely, little brother. You make us all so proud."

"Well, ya know..." Van grinned. "I try."

Chapter Three

Irene looked up from the book in her lap and out the giant windows leading to the big lawn on the Van Holtz estate. For nearly seven days she'd enjoyed the luxury of the wealthy. And, to be quite honest, she could see herself easily getting used to it. Although no one was exactly friendly -- besides Van Holtz himself -- they were polite.

For the first time Irene could actually remember, she felt relaxed. She couldn't really afford to go on vacations so usually if she traveled, she often had work to do once she arrived at her destination. But due to her injuries, Irene didn't do much of anything. And, to be honest, Van Holtz wouldn't let her. When he found her on the phone with her Teaching Assistant during her second day at the house, she thought his head would explode. "Is this you resting?" he'd demanded while pulling the phone from her hand. They'd even had a minor scuffle over it, but when he started to pull up the T-shirt she wore -- with nothing underneath due to all the stitches -- she released the phone. Then he'd had the nerve to look triumphant as he hung up the receiver.

She would have been extremely angry if she didn't find the man so humorous.

Irene watched a squirrel creep down from one of the big trees littering Van Holtz's property. She'd always found squirrels quite fascinating. The way they moved always kept her quite entertained. It picked up something from the ground and quickly moved back to his tree. But, unfortunately, he simply wasn't quick enough.

Irene grimaced when the first wolf pounced, tossing the squirrel in the air. Another wolf leaped over the first's head, snatching the squirrel from mid-air and took off running. The other wolf right on its heels.

"Hey, doc." Van Holtz squeezed in next to her on the oversized chair. The man simply had no concept of personal space. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, merely sitting around being horrified."

"Horrified? Why?"

Miss Congeniality

The two wolves came back into view, now playing tug with what was left of the squirrel.

Van Holtz laughed until she stared at him and then he choked it back. "Sorry." He leaned forward. "Hey, guys." The two wolves stopped and stared. "Go play somewhere else."

They trotted off and Van Holtz leaned back, comfortably resting against her. Since he always did this to her unwounded side, Irene didn't bother arguing. She knew he'd only ignore her.

"Sorry about that. Those two just hit puberty and figured out how to shift."

"I see."

Grabbing the book out of her hands, he glanced at the cover. "So I'm off to meet with Löwe and Dupris. I can't believe they made me wait this long for this meeting, but I'll argue that point once I'm assured of your safety. I'm thinking you'll be heading home today."

"That's fine." She took the book back, relatively confident he couldn't read ancient Arabic. "The doctor should be here soon to take out the stitches. And Jack will pick me up to take me home."

"I can have our driver take you home."

"No, thank you."

"Fine," he teased, "be difficult."

"I will."

Van pushed himself out of the chair and scratched Irene's head affectionately. "Talk to you later, doc."

"Good luck," she said while opening her book. "You'll most likely need it."

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Miss Congeniality

Van had the front door open when his father's voice stopped him and his sister.

"Where are you going?"

Van motioned his sister out and turned to face his father. "Meeting with the Löwes and Dupris."

"Over the full-human?"

"She actually has a name, you know. And yes."

His father stepped toward him, staring him straight in the eye. "Do you think that's a wise thing to do, son?"

"It's the only thing to do."

"Are you attached to her?"

"No. I'm not." Van grinned. "She's a friend."

His father raised one eyebrow. "A friend? Since when are women, not blood relations, your friends?"

"Since her."

"Well, hurry up. When you get back we need to meet about the business."

"I've actually got to -- "

"Was there anything I said that actually led you to believe that was an option?"

Van gritted his teeth, his hackles on the back of his neck rising. Lately he couldn't shake the feeling his father was goading him, but he couldn't figure out why. "No, sir."

"Then I'll see you when you get back."

Nodding, Van took a step out onto the porch.

Miss Congeniality

"And don't do anything stupid."

Van made a fist, but decided to keep walking before he did something he'd regret for the rest of his life.

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Irene felt those eyes on her long before she lifted her head. When she did, she briefly wondered if all Van Holtz males had that smirk. Did the women, too?

"Dr. Conridge."

Tamping down her sudden nervousness at having the head of the Van Holtz family and the Pack's Alpha Male speaking directly to her, she answered, "Mr. Van Holtz."

"Please, call me Dieter." He sat down in a chair across from her. "So how are you feeling?"

"Much better, thank you. I get my stitches out today."

"Good. Good. I hope my family has treated you right."

"Yes. They're quite polite."

He grinned. "Polite?"

She shrugged. "Polite is satisfactory for me. I really don't expect or want much more than that."

"I see. And my son? Was he...polite?"

"I wouldn't call him polite...but he was definitely pleasant."

"Do you like my son, Dr. Conridge?"

Miss Congeniality

Irene closed her book and stared at the older Van Holtz. "I don't dislike him. But that was recent. I used to not like him but he's been very kind since I've been here. So now I like him. I'd almost say we are friendly...but perhaps that's too big a leap at this stage."

He gave a soft laugh. "I see. Are you always this...uh..."

"Brutally honest?"

"I was going to say direct, but brutally honest works as well."

"Yes. I am. And I know -- it's a character flaw."

"Not at all. I love honest people."

"Everyone says that...until I say something they don't like. Then I'm a bitch."

"Perhaps you haven't realized it yet, Dr. Conridge," Van Holtz said, that big grin still firmly in place, "but this is the one place in town where being a bitch is not only accepted but expected. So...it seems to me that you fit right in here."

Dieter Van Holtz stood. "I'll let you get back to your book. And I truly hope this isn't the last we see of you, Dr. Conridge."

"Not at all. There's a charity holiday gala in December, I expect you to be there with checkbook in hand."

"Of course." And there went that smirk again. "But we both know that's not what I meant."

"Uh...we do?" But the strange man was already long gone.

"Genetics," Irene muttered while opening her book. "Clearly the insanity flaw is in their genetics."

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Van rubbed his forehead and tried to rein in his temper. It wasn't easy when all he really wanted to do was pop one bitch lioness right in the mouth.

"So what are you saying?" he snarled at Melinda Löwe.

"I'm saying she can't be trusted."

"Melinda, she's been living with a jackal since she was thirteen. She's kept her secret all this time, do you really think Irene Conridge is suddenly going to snap and tell the world?"

"Friends are one thing. But she has no real stake in protecting us. And you know my feelings on jackals. They're like the African Wild Dogs. I don't really even count them as one of us."

"That's nice."

"Don't give me your bullshit, Van. Like you're so above it all. You only took the woman cause you were hoping to fuck her."

"I took her because I didn't think it was right you wanted to kill her because the hyenas decided to have some fun with a full-human."

Clarice Dupris glanced up from her cup of tea. "Why are you all looking at me?" she asked innocently.

"This is your fault," Melinda accused. "But that doesn't change the fact that Irene Conridge can't be allowed to live. She knows too much and she has no reason to protect any of us."

Nibbling on a piece of Scottish shortbread, Clarice said softly, "What if she were marked? As a mate?"

Once a shifter marked and mated with a full-human, the human was considered "one of us." They were protected the same as all shifters, but they had to be ready to take on any challengers to their territory or to protect their pups or cubs.

Melinda frowned. "Who'd mark her?"

Miss Congeniality

It took Van a minute to realize they were all staring at him. He grinned. "What? Is that a challenge, Clarice? You don't think I would?"

"Uh...Van?" He waved at his sister to keep her quiet.

"Well?" he pushed.

Clarice shrugged rugged shoulders. "All I said was maybe someone could mark her. I didn't say it had to be you."

"Marking anyone is bullshit and you all know it."

"I wouldn't know if it was bullshit or not," Melinda admitted. "It just seems like something you wolves like to do. Personally, I like keeping the males at a distance until I'm actually in the mood to breed."

"We mock ours relentlessly," Clarice added, "until they cry or turn on each other. It brings us joy."

"But," Melinda added, "if it keeps your precious full-human alive --"

"-- and you don't believe in marking anyway --"

"-- then who could it hurt?"

They didn't think he'd do it. And, if he believed even a modicum of the crap his parents tried to shove down his throat for the last twenty-seven years, he wouldn't do it. But Van didn't believe. If they wanted Irene Conridge marked, he'd mark her all right. And then he'd walk away.

"Done." He stood up. "Always nice to see you two," he lied.

As soon as they stepped outside the tea shop his sister latched on to his arm. "Have you lost your mind?"

He pried her fingers off. "Stop panicking. This is nothing. I bite her and send her away."

"You are such a...why do you...oh!"

Miss Congeniality

He put his arms around Carrie's shoulders. "Stop. It's okay. I know what I'm doing."

"No, Van. For once you don't know shit." She glanced back at him. "And what, exactly, makes you think Irene Conridge will let you mark her?"

"Because the woman could care less. If the means to an end keeps her breathing, she'll agree."

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"Not on your life, Van Holtz."

Irene stormed into the kitchen Van Holtz right on her heels.

"You're being unreasonable. If this is all I have to do to keep you alive, what does it matter?"

Normally she'd agree with him. Normally, she'd turn around, pull her hair out of the way, and let the man have at it. Then she'd go on about her life and hopefully never see him again. But something, she didn't know what, kept telling her that would be a mistake. A mistake she would never recover from.

"No."

"I thought we were friends now."

"We are. That's why I can be clear and concise without fear of reprisal. And the answer is definitely no."

Van Holtz let out one of his dramatic "look what I have to put up with" sighs and leaned against the kitchen counter. "Irene, don't you want to go home?"

"Of course I do."

"Then you give me two minutes and you can be out of here."

"Or I can just leave."

"And not live through the night."

"And that affects you how?"

"I made a commitment."

"Yes. You did. And I do truly appreciate it. But I'm not going to do this. Nor am I letting you do this. I'll just go."

Irene stepped away from him and that's when his fingers closed around her wrist, halting her. She tried to pull her arm away, but he wouldn't let her go.

"I'm not joking, Van Holtz. Get off me."

"I'm not joking either. I won't be responsible for you dying."

"You aren't. I am. I absolve you of all wrongdoing in this matter. Now get the hell off me!"

She yanked her arm again and, with a growl, the presumptuous bastard yanked her back against his chest. Slamming her foot into his instep and her elbow into his face, she distracted him enough to release her and she tried to scramble away.

But he was fast. His big arms wrapped around her waist and dragged her toward him. Irene gripped the sink and held on.

Van Holtz wasn't giving up, though. He pulled her back and her fingers slipped. Spotting a frying pan in the drying bin, Irene reached for it. He'd already taken a two-by-four to the head, a frying pan would probably cause just enough damage to get her free and away. Her fingers slid across a metal handle and she grabbed blindly for it. Van Holtz swung her around and Irene lashed out, but only hit him in the leg.

Then they both stared at each other in shock before they looked down at his leg...and the lovely chef's knife protruding from his denim-covered thigh.

## Miss Congeniality

Horrified, Irene stepped back. "Oh, my...I mean..." She looked up to what had to be the angriest face she'd ever seen. "I swear, Van Holtz. I swear that was an accident."

Van Holtz didn't say anything, but he didn't have to. The expression on his face called her a liar and the way his eyes shifted from human to wolf in a heartbeat told her she needed to run -- now!

Irene made a wild leap for the door but she didn't even get near the opposite counter before she heard that snarl and the loud clang of the knife hitting the kitchen floor, then those big arms wrapped around her one more time. He slammed her against the wall with her back to him, using his body weight to hold her in place.

She tried to push herself away from the wall but his knee pressed between her thighs, throwing her off balance and he used his chest to force her back against the wall.

Irene knew she could have begged him to stop. Pleaded with him. Or, simply asked him nicely. But, for some unknown reason that until the end of time she'd never understand, she decided fighting would be a better route.

Growling, she slammed her hand down onto his open wound and dug her fingers in. She'd apparently shoved that knife in far, because her fingers sunk in deep and Van Holtz roared in pain. He didn't let her go, though. Instead he grabbed her by the hair and yanked her head to the side.

She made one last ditch effort to get him off her by pushing back, but the big bastard wouldn't budge. And then those fangs sank deep into her shoulder and Irene cried out in pain.

In retaliation, she dug her fingers in deeper but those damn fangs locked into her flesh even harder.

After several agonizing and rather physically painful moments, Van Holtz unhinged his jaw and released her while she unhooked her fingers from his wound.

Both of them panting, Irene rested her forehead against the wall and Van Holtz rested his against her shoulder.

## Miss Congeniality

For two people who prided themselves on always being in control, she considered this a rather tragic moment.

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At what point had he lost control? When she stabbed him with that knife? Yeah. He did get a little angry there. Or when she tried to run? Yeah. That annoyed him a bit.

Yet none of that pushed him over the edge. Niles Van Holtz lost control when she told him "no."

It wasn't ego either. It was something else. He could almost say he was kind of hurt when she said no with so much finality and a wee bit of vehemence. As if he'd suggested something so horrendous.

And then when she stabbed him...accident or not, it snapped his remaining bit of control. The wolf in him took over and all Van could think about was marking her. And he did.

Christ, he hoped she didn't suddenly think this changed anything. Like suddenly they were dating.

But clearly Van momentarily forgot who he was dealing with.

"Are you done?"

The coldness in that voice hit him like thirty below zero weather when he'd just shifted from wolf to human.

He stepped away from her. "Yeah. I'm done."

"Good." She stepped away from the wall and walked to the sink. She rinsed his blood off her hand, calmly dried them with a paper towel, and adjusted her clothes. "I assume now I'm safe."

"As safe as you can be as long as you don't step on their territory or talk."

"No. I won't talk. I've kept the secret to myself all these years, I'm not going to change now."

"I tried to explain that to Melinda Löwe but she refused to listen."

"Not surprising. She's never liked me anyway." She looked up at him and those ice-cold eyes told him absolutely nothing. "Well...thank you for everything. I appreciate all your help in this matter."

Van's eyes narrowed. He felt a growing rage in his gut he didn't much like. He especially didn't like that a woman put that rage there. "You're welcome," he said as lightly as possible.

She took a step away but stopped and looked at him. "Do you mind if I borrow your sweatshirt? I'll make sure it's returned to you in the next day or two. At the moment, I'm simply not in the mood to discuss this with Jackie and the scent from your sweatshirt should keep her off my back for at least a little while.

"Yeah. Sure." Van reached back and gathered up some of the shirt, before pulling it over his head. He shook the hair out of his face and handed it to her. She stared at him for a moment but, once again, he couldn't read anything from her.

"Thank you."

She pulled the way-too-big red sweatshirt over her head but for a few seconds she seemed to lose her way and he stepped forward, helping her get her arms and head through all the appropriate holes.

"Thank you," she said again. And it was something in her voice and the way she suddenly wouldn't meet his eyes that caught Van off guard. Putting his fingers under her chin, he lifted her face so she had to look at him.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

"It's definitely something. Tell me."

She frowned in confusion. "Why...why did you do it?"

"Do what? Mark you?"

"Yes."

Van shrugged. "Because it'll keep you alive."

"Is that the only reason?" Uh-oh. Just as Van feared, Irene seemed to be thinking this had more meaning than it really did. Time to dissuade her of that immediately.

"It's the only reason." He cleared his throat. "Irene, you know a lot about our people but all that stuff about marking mates and making them yours forever is all folklore. Fairy tales. I didn't believe it when I was a kid and I don't believe it now."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Really." God, he felt like shit. Maybe he could beat up on some puppies later, too. Maybe kick a kitten. He had to be breaking this poor woman's heart...

"Whew!" She let out a gasp and, for the first time ever, smiled. "Thank the DOS gods for that."

"What?"

"I thought you'd start hanging around my house like some stray dog I'd accidentally fed. But now I don't have to worry. Correct?"

Van nodded, that rage he'd only experienced a few minutes before roaring back to life. "Yeah. That's correct."

"Good. Now I can relax." She let out another deep, relieved breath.

"Well...again, thank you for everything. Although I think I've been mauled enough to last me a lifetime." She kind of, sort of chuckled. "Oh. And give your parents my best."



Miss Congeniality

Then she was walking away from him. Not even doing that backward glance move. Without thinking, he followed behind her. She already had her backpack sitting beside the front door, ready to go.

"Are you leaving now?"

"Jackie's waiting outside. Didn't you see her car when you came in?"

"Must have missed it."

"I told her to come in but you know you guys and territory." She opened the front door and Van wondered how he could have missed that two-door, cherry-red Mercedes and the pretty woman sitting on top of the hood reading a book.

The She-jackal looked up and smiled. "Ready to go?"

"Yes." Irene picked up her backpack and swung it onto one shoulder, wincing as the weight of it landed on her newest fang marks.

She looked at him over her shoulder and shrugged. "Well...goodbye."

Van stood at his front door and watched Irene Conridge get into her friend's car, placing her backpack in her lap like a small child, and then drive off.

He didn't know how long he stood there before his sister came to his side.

"That was...really...odd," she said softly.

"I know."

"Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. I'm fine. It's over."

"This is true, but --"

"No, Carrie. No buts. No nothing. Even if I did care, which I don't, that woman is like a polar ice cap. Thank you but I like a little more heat in my bed."

Miss Congeniality

"Okay."

"So let's just forget it."

"Okay."

"It's over."

"Um...okay. And Conridge --"

"Could care less. Trust me when I say, Irene Conridge feels absolutely nothing for no one."

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"I hate him."

Jackie glanced at Irene in surprise. "What?"

"I. Hate. Him."

"But you don't hate anybody. You said it required emotion that took time out of your schedule."

"That was before I met the biggest..." she struggled for the right word and her friend helpfully provided one.

"Asshole?"

"Yes! He is the biggest asshole. And I hate him."

"Did something happen I should know about, sweets?"

"I don't want to talk about it or him ever again. I just want to put this whole horrible time behind me and get back to work."

"Okay." Jackie stopped at a red light. "How about we get you home and changed and then we catch a movie?"

Miss Congeniality

She definitely needed to change. The bright red sweatshirt she wore stunk of the man's scent. And although it wasn't a horrible smell -- in fact it was quite nice -- she was clearly too angry to not let it annoy her. In fact, she regretted promising to return the sweatshirt to him. She'd rather burn it in effigy.

"Irene?"

"What movie?" she asked.

"'The Terminator' is supposed to be good. And there's lots of killing."

Irene crossed her arms in front of her chest and felt as if she was possibly pouting...a truly horrifying thought. "You sure there's lots of killing?"

"Vicious cyborg from the future goes on killing rampage searching for one woman to destroy. At least that's how Paul described it to me. So, yeah, I think there's lots of killing."

"Fine." Because she refused to sit around thinking about Niles Van Holtz...the asshole. "I'll go."

"Good." Jackie started driving again and her hand reached out and patted Irene's leg. "And don't worry. As soon as you get back to work, you'll feel like your old self again."

"I better," she growled. Because if she had to keep "feeling" things for much longer, she may have to kill that man on principle.

The asshole.

Chapter Four

When her thirty-three-year-old masters student burst into tears, Irene felt like maybe she'd crossed the line a tad with "Pass you? You're lucky I haven't killed you."

Annoyed more with herself than anything else but unwilling to show it, Irene reached her hand back and her teaching assistant handed her a box of Kleenex. She slammed it down in front of the student, ignoring the man's increased sobs, and stalked back to her desk.

"I expect all lab work completed by the end of next week." With her back to the students, Irene quickly shuffled the recently handed in bluebooks into an orderly alphabetical pile for her TA. "I won't accept any excuses because, mostly, I really don't care. Short of ending up in a casket, any student with unfinished work will automatically fail the course. And please don't test me on this."

She handed the stack of books to her TA and turned to face her class. "Why are you still here? Get out." They ran like she unleashed live poisonous snakes on the floor.

"Is it my imagination or are you a little...uh...terser than usual?"

Irene glanced back at her TA, Mark. She'd gotten over seventy submissions to be her TA last year but Mark was the only one she felt qualified for the position. She wasn't an easy teacher to work for, but she made it worth the trouble. Almost all students who survived one of her internships went on to super hot jobs at some of the most important labs or installations in the country. For top dollar. So she had no regrets putting them through the Conridge Gauntlet as many called it. Only Mark didn't seem remotely intimidated by her. She kind of respected him for it, but on days like today, she really was only looking for a victim to take out her recent bout of anger on.

"If you really want to see how terse I am, keep annoying me, Marcus."

"Gotcha." He picked up all her papers and headed off to her office. She grabbed her briefcase and followed.

Why she ended up crashing into his back she didn't know until she looked around him and saw the two men sitting in her office.

Perfect, she thought.

Stepping around Mark, she leveled her gaze on the first male she saw. "And what brings you here, Agent Harris?"

"Just came to check on you, Professor Conridge."

Irene moved into her office, dropping her briefcase on the floor beside her desk. "Is there a particular reason you can't call me Dr. Conridge? Or is it just your general insecurities as a man speaking for you?"

Mark grabbed his backpack from a corner and nodded at Irene. "Uh...Dr. Conridge, I'm going to head off to the library and get through these papers for you tonight." Then he practically ran.

"Another pussy-whipped male, I see," Harris murmured.

Irene sat down at her desk. "Is there any other kind?" She placed her feet up on the worn wood and relaxed back into her chair. She'd learned a long time ago how to fake a relaxed posture when that was the last thing she might be feeling. But Agent Phillip Harris wouldn't be here unless he had a reason. The FBI rarely wasted time with fishing expeditions.

"So, Agent Harris, what brings you to my humble little office?"

"You do, Professor."

"Really? And why is that?"

"There's been a lot of talk about you lately."

"I'm very well-known among the biochemical and computer technologies communities. You know that."

"These aren't articles about your work, Professor. I'm talking about intercepted conversations between known Soviet agents."

Irene blinked in surprise. Russians? Why the hell would Russians be chattering away about her?

"I would ask you what they've been saying but I'm sure if you knew, you'd have moved on it by now. So you're here hoping I tell you something fascinating."

"Perhaps this is a game you shouldn't play, Professor. Treason --"

"Is not the issue here and we both know it. I'm the wrong person to play chess with, Agent Harris. You can't scare me into thinking you're worried I'm a Russian agent." She chuckled. "Although with my complexion I'm sure I'd fit in quite nicely in that country. But sorry to disappoint. I have no idea what they or you think I have and I'm not about to start worrying about it now."

"I could take you in for your own safety." And she knew it was a threat.

Irene smiled and the agent standing behind Harris looked like he might make a run for the door. "Do you really want to do that, Agent Harris? Do you really want a repeat of what happened when that was tried before?" Irene put her hands behind her head, interlacing her fingers. "Tell me, did they ever repair that city block? Or is it still a sunken hole?"

Harris didn't answer, but he glared awfully well. Irene rolled her eyes and swung her legs off her desk. "I'm done talking to you, Agent Harris. I have work to do and, to be quite blunt, you simply aren't that interesting."

Turning to her computer, Irene flipped on her monitor.

She could hear Harris standing and his partner moved quickly to the door.

"I'm sure we'll talk again, Professor."

"I live for the day, Agent."

Irene waited until the door closed and she'd given them a minute or two to walk away before she let out a sigh. Okay, so she did have a rough idea of what the Russians wanted. And what her government would love to get their

## Miss Congeniality

hands on. But no one, absolutely no one, would ever touch it. She'd never unleash that stuff on the world. But sitting around obsessing over it wasn't going to help either. So Irene called up her latest work and thought about other things.

Unfortunately those other things turned out to be Van Holtz. Three days had gone by and she still thought about him. Why? Most people she could stop thinking about in minutes if not seconds. But every time she allowed herself a moment to think about something other than equations and formulas, her poor belabored mind always went back to that idiot.

She glanced across the room at the poster of Einstein one of her students had put up to, in her words, "Make this office a little more...friendly." But she wasn't seeing brilliant Albert. No. Instead, she kept wondering how many women the bastard had slept with by now. Probably hundreds. She'd bet cash he was a sexual glutton. An any-hole-will-do sort of man.

And here she sat...thinking about it. Putting portions of her million-dollar mind toward that boneheaded idiot. How pathetic. How ridiculous. How...human. Jackie promised it wouldn't last. This sudden surge of emotion. And Irene had begun to count the days when these "feelings" would go away. Far away. How normal-IQ people lived with this sort of thing from day to day, she'd never understand.

Irene Conridge using her extraordinary brain power thinking about a man. Absolutely tragic.

"Someone shoot me now."

Except for a few students, she didn't think many would take her up on the offer.

"And the bastard has probably slept with thousands," she griped before sending one of her favorite pens flying across the room.

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Van paced restlessly behind the boutique shop owned by Athana Löwe of the Löwe Pride. While Van found Athana's older sister Melinda a real pain

in the ass, he liked Athana a lot more. Plus the lionesses were great for the occasional "get together." Lions mostly only bred with their own kind, which meant they were great for no-strings-attached sex. Exactly what Van needed at the moment. Simply so he could prove his parents horribly, horribly wrong.

For three days he'd been going to work and back to either his apartment or the Van Holtz estates and not once, in all that time, had he brought a female with him. Only this morning he'd been standing in the kitchen, chatting with his sister, when one of the newest She-wolves walked in. She had on shorts and a T-shirt and nothing else. From what he'd heard, she hadn't shown much interest in anyone so far. But she'd looked at him with avid interest. She was adorable and surprisingly petite for a She-wolf. But what did he do? Smiled, nodded at her, and went back to talking to his sister.

To quote one of his cousins, "What the fuck was that?"

When he'd realized what he'd done, Van had been absolutely horrified at himself. Where had the old Van gone? The "if she's cute and stops long enough, I'll fuck her" wolf that had such a reputation? Had that evil woman, with her cold eyes and cute curvy body given him one of her experimental drugs to see if she could rid men of a sex drive? He wouldn't put it past her.

Hell, even his sister noticed. Mainly because more than once he'd walked away from her in the middle of one of their conversations to chat up a girl. But this morning...nothing.

When he complained to his parents, they only snorted and gave each other that look. The one every parental unit had down to a fine art. The "let him suffer until he learns a lesson" look.

In the end, though, Van refused to believe it. Irene Conridge, PhD, had absolutely no hold over him whatsoever. And she never would. If he wanted to sleep with a cold fish, he'd have the mob cut his throat and toss him into the Pacific Ocean.

The back door to the shop finally opened and Van turned around to see the lovely lioness poke her head out. When she saw him, her expression went from welcome to sultry.



"Hey, handsome."

See? Now that was warm and friendly. From a cat, no less. Christ, Irene Conridge was colder than a cat? Was that even possible?

"Hey yourself," he replied gruffly. "Now come here."

She smirked and sashayed over to him. Athana pretty much sashayed everywhere. He'd always liked that about her.

Gold eyes looked up at him from beneath pitch-black lashes. "Yes?"

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a strange feeling of guilt washed over him simply because he stood alone with a female in a back alley. He'd never felt it before and to say he wasn't happy about it would be a drastic understatement.

Snarling, he grabbed Athana's arms and yanked her close. Startled, her lips parted and he swooped in, kissing her hard.

After almost a minute, he finally pulled back and Athana stared up at him.

"Wow," she finally said. "Kind of like kissing my Aunt Gertrude when she comes over for Thanksgiving."

Van held her at arm's length. "What?"

She actually pouted, but didn't seem really upset. "Damn. And you are so good too. The hyenas were running around saying you'd mated with a full-human but I kept hoping the rumors weren't true."

"It doesn't mean anything."

Athana giggled. "Come on, Van. You're a wolf. You might as well accept your fate."

He shoved her away and paced over to a Dumpster. "No. I refuse to be trapped by this."

"Sweetie, it's too --"

Miss Congeniality

Before the word "late" could come out of her mouth, Van spun around and said, "Let's get a hotel room and fuck."

Rolling her eyes, Athana headed back to her store. "Forget it, Van. I've never fucked around with another female's mate and I'm not about to start now. Even if she is full-human."

"But I'm not interested in her." Oh, God! Did he just whine that?

She pulled the door open. "If you're that convinced it's a mistake go to her and find out."

Go to her? His healed but scarred thigh automatically tensed at the thought...then other parts of him tensed for an entirely different reason.

"Trust me," Athana sighed. "If you kiss her the way you just kissed me, you are definitely not interested."

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"How do I look?"

Irene looked up and nodded at her friend. "You look amazing."

"Thanks, sweetie." A car horn blew and Jackie grabbed her wrap. "Sure I can't talk you into coming? These university events are so much more tolerable when you're there to mock with me."

"I can't face it. Not tonight."

"Agent Harris freak you out?"

"Well he didn't make me feel at ease."

"Should we stay?"

## Miss Congeniality

"No. You and Paul go. Have a good time." Irene tossed her lopsided ponytail off her face for the eighteenth time. "I'm going to work on these papers and watch some television."

"Okay." Jackie started to walk out but stopped. "Do not, Irene, take apart my Macintosh."

Irene looked over at the newest "thing" in computing. A three-thousand dollar Steve Jobs joke if you asked her. An overpriced toy. Still, Irene wanted to take it apart to see what Jobs had done. Damn Jackie for knowing her so well.

"I mean it."

"Yes. Yes. Isn't Paul waiting?"

Jackie narrowed her eyes in warning one more time before swooping out.

Irene glanced at the off-white box sitting on her friend's desk and forced herself to focus on the student papers before her.

A few minutes later the doorbell rang and Irene didn't move. She wasn't expecting anyone so she wouldn't answer the door. She dealt with enough people during the day, she'd be damned if her nights were filled with the idiots as well.

The doorbell went off again, followed by knocking. Irene didn't even flinch. In a few more minutes she would shut everything out but the work in front of her. A skill she'd developed over the years. Sometimes Jackie would literally have to shake her or punch her in the head to get her attention.

But Irene hadn't slipped into that "zone" yet and she could easily hear someone sniffing at her door. She looked up from her paperwork as Van Holtz snarled from the other side, "I know you're in there, Conridge. I can smell you."

Eew.

"Go away," she called back. "I'm busy."

Miss Congeniality

The knocking turned to outright banging. "Open this goddamn door!"

Annoyed but resigned the man wouldn't leave, Irene put her paperwork on the couch and walked across the room. She pulled open the door and ignored the strange feeling in the pit of her stomach at seeing the man standing there in a dark grey sweater, jeans, and sneakers. She knew few men who made casual wear look anything but.

"What?"

She watched as his eyes moved over her, from the droopy sweat socks on her feet, past the worn cotton shorts and the paint-splattered T-shirt that spoke of a horrid experience trying to paint the hallway the previous year, straight up to her hastily created ponytail. He swallowed and muttered, "Goddamnit," before pushing his way into her house.

"We need to talk," he said by way of greeting.

"Why?"

He frowned. "What?"

"I said why do we need to talk? As far as I'm concerned there's nothing that needs to be said."

"I need to kiss you."

Now Irene frowned. "Why?"

"Must you always ask why?"

"When people come to me with things that don't make sense...yes."

"Just let me kiss you and then I'll leave."

"Do you know how many germs are in the human mouth? I'd be better off kissing an open sewer grate."

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Miss Congeniality

Why did she have to make this so difficult? He hated being here. Hated having to come here at all. Yet he had something to prove and goddamnit, he'd prove it or die trying.

But how dare she look so goddamn cute! He'd never known this Irene Conridge existed. He'd only seen her in those boxy business suits or a gown that he'd bet money she never picked out for herself. On occasion he'd even seen her in jeans yet, even then, she'd always looked pulled together and professional.

Now she looked goddamn adorable and he almost hated her for it.

"Twenty seconds of your time and I'm out of here for good. Twenty seconds and I won't bother you ever again."

"Why?"

Christ, again with the why.

"I need to prove to the universe that my marking you means absolutely nothing."

"Oh, well isn't that nice," she said with obvious sarcasm. "It's nice to know you're checking to make sure kissing me is as revolting as necessary."

"I'm not...I didn't..." He growled. "Can we just do this please?"

"Twenty seconds and you'll go away?"

"Yes."

"Forever?"

"Absolutely."

"Fine. Just get it over with quickly. I have a lot of work to do. And the fact you're breathing my air annoys me beyond reason."

Wanting this over as badly as she did, Van marched up to her, slipped his arm around her waist and yanked her close against him. They stared at each

## Miss Congeniality

other for a long moment and then he kissed her. Just like he did Athana earlier. Only Athana had been warm and willing in his arms. Not brittle and cold like a block of ice. Irene didn't even open her mouth.

Nope. Nothing, he thought with overwhelming relief. This had all been a horrible mistake. He could -- and would -- walk away from the honorable and brilliant Irene Conridge, PhD, and never look back. Van almost smiled.

Until she moved slightly in his arms and her head tilted barely a centimeter to the left. Like a raging wind, lust swept through him. Overwhelming, all-consuming. He'd never felt anything like it. Suddenly he needed to taste her more than he needed to take his next breath. He dragged his tongue against her lips, coaxing her to open to him. To his eternal surprise she did and he plunged deep inside. Her body jerked, her hand reaching up and clutching his shoulder. Probably moments from pushing him away. But he wouldn't let her. Not if she felt even a modicum of what he was feeling. So he held her tighter, kissed her deeper, let her feel his steel-hard erection held back by his jeans against her stomach.

The hand clutching his shoulder loosened a bit and then slid into his hair. Her other hand grabbed the back of his neck. And suddenly the cold, brittle block of ice in his arms turned into a raging inferno of lust. Her tongue tangled with his and she groaned into his mouth.

Before Van realized it, he was walking her back toward her stairs. He didn't stop kissing her, he wouldn't. The last thing he wanted was for her to change her mind. He managed to get her to the upstairs hallway before she pulled her mouth away.

"What are you doing?" she panted out.

"Taking you to your bed."

"Forget it." And Van, if he were a crying man, would be sobbing. Until uptight Irene Conridge added, "The wall. Use the wall."

Chapter Five

Van slammed her against the wall. He'd been trying to be gentle and patient, but fuck, he was losing control fast. Losing it to this woman who didn't, according to her, like sex. Of course, this same woman reached down and took firm hold of his cock through his jeans. She squeezed and more of his control slipped. He wanted to reach for her bedroom door, but he couldn't bring himself to let her go. The wolf in him wanted to claim this woman before she did something stupid like change her mind. She'd be his because she was meant to be. As annoying as the whole thing was -- and Christ, was it annoying -- he wouldn't let her go now. He couldn't. Hell, he couldn't even bring himself to release her body so he could get her to a bed.

With surprising skill, she unzipped his jeans and wrapped her hand around his cock. Van shuddered. Who was this woman trying to fool? Detest sex? There was no way this woman could detest sex. More like she simply hadn't met her match...until now.

Her long fingers ran along his cock, causing a pretty devastating affect on a man who rarely had those anymore while she kissed him with as much passion as he'd ever felt with anyone.

Forget it. He'd never make it to the bed. Not until they got this first one out of the way.

"Back pocket," he gasped against her mouth.

"What?"

"Back pocket."

Her arm slipped around his waist and her hand dug into the back pocket of his jeans. She pulled out the strip of condoms he'd put there before leaving his apartment. Of course, that had been for Athana but no reason to ruin the moment with ugly little truths that didn't mean anything anymore.

"Little sure of yourself, are we?" she asked, holding the condoms in her hand.

"Damn right." And he knew she'd have him no other way. "You're not on anything, right?"

"On anything?"

"Birth control. The Van Holtz men could impregnate a tree stump. So unless you're ready to get knocked up --"

Apparently she wasn't, because she had that condom on him in seconds. Which was good because Van wasn't certain how much longer he could hold on. The wolf in him wouldn't be satisfied until his mate had been taken, their claiming final. At least by wolf standards. He knew Irene would take more convincing than that. Not only because she was full-human but because she was a pain in the ass and didn't do anything easily or simply. But no problem. He could concentrate on that once the beast in him had been satisfied.

Van hitched her up higher, pushing her hard against the wall to hold her steady.

"This one's gonna be fast, doc," he warned her. "But I'll make it up to you."

"Do me a favor, Van Holtz. Stop talking. You keep reminding me you're in the room."

His head snapped up from the heady sight of his cock about to enter her to glare into those strange blue eyes. But he quickly realized she was teasing...well...for Irene it was teasing.

"You gonna keep testing me, doc? You gonna keep trying to push me over the edge?"

"I thought I'd already done that. If you were any more out of control, your hair would be on fire."

"Speak for yourself, baby." He pushed his cock against her, but still didn't enter her. "You and I both know that, at the moment, I own this beautiful ass."



## Miss Congeniality

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Damn him! He was right. She'd give anything -- absolutely anything -- to have this man inside her.

Irene had never felt this way before. She'd never wanted anyone the way she wanted one of the most obnoxious men in the world. Hell, she'd even consider begging if it meant he would fuck her. And she knew that's what they were about to do. He would fuck her. Not sexual intercourse -- except in the most technical terms. No making love. There'd be no soft sighs or moans. No entreaties of love or promises of tomorrow. He'd fuck her and that's exactly what she wanted.

Clearly she'd taken too many intellectuals to bed. Men who thought they knew what a woman like Irene would want sexually. Everyone had missed the mark.

But it wasn't until Niles Van Holtz shoved himself deep inside her, brutally slamming her back into the wall, that she realized he would give her exactly what she'd always wanted. Needed.

He pressed his still dressed body against hers. He'd torn her shorts and panties off on their way up the stairs. But she still had on her T-shirt and bra. He didn't even try any basic foreplay. He didn't touch her breasts or caress her body. And he didn't need to.

Leaning in, he whispered hoarsely into her ear, "I do own this ass, don't I, Irene? Just admit it."

Irene had no doubt other women would scream "yes" and keep screaming. Unfortunately, Irene had never been like other women. If she'd been like other women, she wouldn't have suddenly dug her teeth into his neck and bit down hard. She tasted blood and Van Holtz yelped in pain seconds before he began to viciously pound into her.

For the first time ever, Irene couldn't think. She couldn't reason. Logic and theorems flew out of her head like water from a fallen drinking glass. All she could focus on, think about, was the way Van Holtz fucked her. He wasn't a tender lover and she didn't want him to be. Even though there was

## Miss Congeniality

definite pain -- her last sexual experience being almost three years before and Van Holtz being unnaturally large in her estimation -- there was even more pleasure. She lost herself in that pleasure. Lost herself to the man who did -- at the moment -- own her ass.

He growled and she pulled handfuls of his hair trying to make him move faster, harder. They were beyond words now. Beyond playful or even vicious banter. For once, all Irene could do was feel...and she loved it.

The tingling came first. Low in her belly, deep inside her womb. Then it burst out, spreading through her limbs, exploding through her system. She'd never felt anything like it and the small part of her brain still functioning told her she was coming. Hard, based on the way her muscles became rigid and how she completely lost the ability to speak.

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Irene held Van tight as he groaned against her neck, his body draining completely as he came like a freight train.

His knees almost buckled and he held them both up by sheer willpower. The woman had nearly killed him.

They clung to each other for several minutes, harsh breaths the only sound in the hallway.

"Which..." Van swallowed, his throat dry and raw, "which room is yours?"

"That one." One hand finally released the deathgrip she had on his hair to point out the door with the biohazard emblem painted on it. No kidding? Van thought, wanting to chuckle but unable to. The woman was a lethal toxin. Deadly. No wonder none of the men she'd been with had ever done it for her before. They were full-humans. Women like Irene needed more than a normal DNA strain.

Hands still gripping her ass, Van walked them both to her bedroom and laid her out on the full bed that didn't look like she slept in it much.

## Miss Congeniality

Pulling out of her slowly, gritting his teeth when she moaned, Van ran his hand down her bare legs.

"Bathroom?"

"Next door over."

"Don't move. I'll be right back."

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Don't move? Irene felt pretty confident that wouldn't be a problem. She couldn't move. It was called paralysis and she seemed to have it at the moment.

For the first time in her life, Irene understood why people insisted on having sexual intercourse. And why women insisted on having sexual intercourse with Van Holtz.

Good thing she hadn't discovered this much earlier in life. She'd never have become a Rhode Scholar or gotten her third PhD. Instead she'd spend more time "boning like a mad woman," to quote Jackie.

Perhaps it was a shifter thing. Something built into their genetics. She'd always wondered exactly what antics went on over in Jackie's room anytime Paul spent the night. Irene loved her friend because she didn't try and make a lot of noise, she didn't flaunt her relationship with Paul. But there were nights when things seemed to get seriously out of hand. On those nights, Irene went back to her office or labs to get work done. But in the back of her mind, she always wondered what Paul did exactly to her friend to make Jackie so...happy.

Well, now she knew.

Irene sighed, her eyes drifting closed. Finally. It was done. They were done. Van Holtz got what he wanted and so had she. Now she could focus on her work and forget about him.

Miss Congeniality

Her bedroom door opened and Irene didn't bother to open her eyes. She didn't need to for him to give her excuses why he needed to leave.

But he didn't leave. Instead a warm cloth wiped across her vagina, carefully cleaning it. She forced herself not to frown, not to even acknowledge what he was doing.

"Sorry about that," she heard him mutter. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Irene began to respond to that when Van Holtz suddenly buried his face between her thighs.

She gasped, her eyes flying open, and her hands grabbing the back of his head.

"What...what are you doing?"

He looked up at her from between her legs. "I'm eating you out. No one's ever done that for you?"

All she could do was shake her head while watching him, her eyes wide.

Van Holtz grinned. "Cool. I'm your first." Then he dived back in.

Irene leaned back, her hands still dug into his hair, and stared up at the ceiling. The man licked and sucked, taking his time. Irene kept hearing whimpering and finally realized it was her.

"God, Irene. You taste so damn good," he groaned.

Irene frowned. "In what sense?"

Van looked up at her again, one eyebrow raised.

"What's that look for? I'm just asking. Seems an odd thing to say."

"You think too much."

"Yes, well --"

Miss Congeniality

"We need to put a stop to that." Van grabbed hold of her ankles and bent her legs back to her chest, then pushed them wide open, and went back to what he was doing. Another orgasm, more powerful than the last, tore through her and Irene cried out, incoherent words and some ancient Greek spilling from her lips. She didn't pass out but there were definitely some nonsensical moments there.

When she could think again, she realized Van Holtz had taken off all her clothes and had removed his as well. Now he lay next to her, his head resting in the palm of his hand, while he stared down at her.

"You okay?" he asked, his free hand idly tracing circles across her stomach and chest.

"You need to go."

Van Holtz tensed but he didn't leave. "Why?"

"I've got so much work to do," she admitted honestly, even if it still was an excuse to outright panic. Now that the passion had died, Irene didn't feel comfortable with the whorish creature she'd become only minutes before. She had responsibilities. Commitments. She couldn't shirk them simply to have mindless, useless intercourse with this man and his perfect body.

"I see," he said simply. "How about we do this." He reached down and pulled the comforter over their bodies. "Let's take a quick nap."

"And what will that do exactly?"

"You look burned out, doc. A few minutes sleep will do you good. And I'm still a little too wound to drive. Okay?"

Irene turned on her side, away from him. "Fine. Although your twenty seconds were up ages ago."

"Duly noted, doc." Van Holtz chuckled as he settled in behind her.

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Miss Congeniality

Irene woke up and immediately glanced at her clock. Not even eleven o'clock yet. Perfect. She could get a ton of work done now. She stretched and Van Holtz moved beside her. Although she might be tempted, she wouldn't rush him out into the night. Instead she'd leave him to get some sleep while she went back downstairs and...

Grabbing hold of the big hand slipping between her legs, she turned and faced a wide-awake Van Holtz.

"What are you doing?"

He didn't bother answering her as he latched onto her nipple and sucked while a probing forefinger slipped inside her and began to stroke in and out.

"Wait --"

Two fingers were enthusiastically pushed inside her and Irene's back arched, her hips desperately rocking against his hand. Then his thumb pressed against her clitoris and she exploded, her entire body shaking and heaving against his.

By the time her head fell back on the pillow, she'd fallen fast asleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

Irene opened her eyes and realized that Van Holtz had turned off the lights. No matter, she often moved around in the dark. Moving slowly so as to not wake him up again, Irene carefully threw her legs over the side of the bed but she froze when her foot slid over a warm, and standing, moving surface.

"Uh..."

"Going somewhere, doc?"

"Wait," she begged. But he already had her flat on her back and was inside her, fucking her while he kissed her neck and licked and stroked her nipples.

"Van Holtz, you bastard! You're doing this on purp...on...oh! That feels very nice. Do that again."

## Miss Congeniality

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She'd just come out of the bathroom and was about to sneak downstairs when he caught her around the waist and carried her back to the bedroom. Setting her at the foot of the bed, facing her away from him, he used his legs to push her thighs apart. Then he took her from behind, his teeth gripping her shoulder while his hands played with her breasts. His weight kept her pinned in place against the mattress and she wished she could say she didn't like it. But she kind of did.

He released her shoulder, pulled her head back by her hair and kissed her while he continued pounding away inside her. But the way he kissed her always seemed so tender. Even when things went out of control, his kisses never seemed brutal or vicious. Just...determined.

The bastard.

\*\*\*\*\*

Irene yawned and turned over, snuggling back under the covers. Big hands pushed her onto her back and she groaned. "No, no. I'm not awake. I swear! I was just getting comfortable!"

"So am I," he gasped, embedding himself deep inside her yet again. And dammit, but it felt wonderful.

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Van pushed her hair off her face and Irene groaned in defeat. "No. Not again. I can't."

He grinned, almost ashamed of himself -- but not really. She'd tried to throw him out. Like he'd ever let that happen.

"Not again. I have to go," he whispered and she finally opened one eye. And who knew a person could glare out of one eye.

"Good."

He'd be angry if she didn't sound so cute...and worn out.

"I'll be back tonight. We'll go to dinner."

"I can't," she said simply, closing her eye. "I have a previous engagement."

Overwhelming jealousy washed over him. "Previous engagement? With who?"

"It's whom and that's none of your business. I had these plans weeks ago, I'm not changing it for a wild romp in the hay." She pulled the comforter up to her chin. "You got what you wanted Van Holtz, now you can go back to your regular life and I'll go back to mine. After last night, you must have gotten what you needed." She turned on her side, shutting him out. "So go back to your supermodels and your country club elite. And I'll go back to men who actually know what the Algorithmic Information Theory is."

Van gritted his teeth and stared at the back of Irene's head. Fuck if he knew what goddamn Algorithmic whatever whatever was. And fuck if he cared. Because in the long run it didn't matter. Not to him. And it shouldn't matter to her. But did she really think she could make him walk away that easily? Did she really think it would be that easy to get rid of a Van Holtz? Yeah, the Romans thought that too in 52 B.C. And although, Irene Conridge was hell of a lot tougher than a battalion of well-trained Roman soldiers, he was a descendant of barbarians...he'd get what he wanted.

And he wanted her. So he'd have her -- and she better be goddamn glad about it, too.



Chapter Six

"What?" Irene asked again, turning her office chair around to glare at her TA. He'd been getting on her nerves all day.

"I said do you need anything else from me before I leave?"

"No."

Irene started to turn back around but stopped and asked, "Where you on my computer earlier?"

Mark nodded while pulling his backpack together. "I had to pull your latest draft on Sharkovsky's theorem for your publisher."

"Well be careful when you use it. I keep finding all my files mixed up."

"I was trying to organize --"

"Well don't. Don't organize. Don't move. Don't touch my files, Marcus. Understand?"

Mark stood up and for the first time Irene noticed how tall he was. Not in a skinny, awkward way either, but in a well-developed, "I've played football all my life" way. "Sorry, Dr. Conridge. I didn't mean to cause any problems."

Irene shook her head. "Forget it, Mark. Go. I'll see you on Monday."

It was one thing when she picked on her students for her own amusement, but picking on them because of one man simply disgusted her beyond all reason.

How did she allow this to happen? How did she allow for one man to eat his way into her brain like a vicious virus? All day she'd thought of nothing else and it horrified her. She'd always prided herself on being able to block out nearly everything so she could focus on a problem or a task. Jackie actually had access to Irene's bank accounts because she made sure to pay all the

## Miss Congeniality

bills. When Jack went on her European tour two years ago, they'd almost lost the house and poor Jackie came back to a dark apartment because Irene forgot all about the electric bill. Now if Jackie wasn't around, Paul took care of it.

But, for the first time in her life, Irene wasn't completely focused on one theory or mathematical problem. For once she wasn't focused completely on inanimate objects or thoughts. Instead, all she could think about was having sex with Niles Van Holtz.

Her weakness disgusted her. Irene's flesh and bones had never been more than a device to haul her brain around in. Now it was alive with needs and feelings.

Bastard.

A knock on her door jolted her and she had to calm her breathing before she said, "Yes?"

The door pushed open and one of her grad students stuck her head in. Jenny Fairgrove. Or, as she privately called her, the Perfect Jenny Fairgrove. Long blonde hair and warm blue eyes, Jenny was everything Irene was not. And, unlike Irene, she'd never have to fight for a damn thing. Because pretty people never had to.

"Hi, Dr. Conridge."

"Miss Fairgrove."

"I just wanted to drop off my paperwork for the TA position for next year. I wanted to get it in early."

Irene was one of only eight teachers in the university who handled their own TA program. Students submitted for the position directly to her and she chose however many students she wanted or needed. The other professors who had to share TAs or couldn't choose their own hated her for it, too.

"Put it in the bin over there."

## Miss Congeniality

Jenny walked in and dropped the forms in the basket. Irene watched the girl from the corner of her eye. Jenny had on a short denim skirt with leather boots and a tight T-shirt and short denim jacket. She actually looked her age of about twenty-three. Irene always felt like she looked forty. Hell, she felt like forty. Until last night. Last night she felt like her age for the first time in her life.

"Wow. Is that the new IBM PC AT?"

Irene glanced at her computer. She practically had to put a gun to the dean's head for him to authorize the damn thing. "Yes."

"Wow," Jenny said again, with annoying enthusiasm. "I heard it had a color screen but that looks great, huh?"

Perky and blonde. Any more annoying a combination, Irene didn't know of.

"Yes."

The girl stood in front of her desk. "Um...Dr. Conridge, I just wanted to say that I would love the opportunity to work for you. I've really kept up with your career and I think you're just amazing."

Irene turned back to her computer and started to run her programs. "You all say that...in the beginning."

"Wow, Dr. Conridge!" If the woman said "wow" one more time... "Is this your boyfriend?"

Irene's head snapped around. "What?"

Jenny handed her a picture frame and Irene gazed into the smugly grinning face of Niles Van Holtz.

"Where did you get this?"

"Right here on your desk." Jenny wiped her brow. "He's gorgeous, Dr. Conridge. How lucky are you?"

Miss Congeniality

When did the man even get into her office? Then it suddenly occurred to her that he'd put a framed picture of himself on her desk. Like somehow his big, gorgeous, worthless face belonged on her desk.

Irene gripped the sterling silver frame in both hands and snarled, "Bastard!"

By the time she looked up again, Jenny Fairgrove was long gone.

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"Is that the best you could do, Reeny?"

Irene smirked and stared after the retreating form of her date, Bradley St. James of the Boston St. Jameses. "He's quite knowledgeable on art history and has tenure."

"Oh. Well there you go," Paul snorted. Irene had cared for Paul since Jackie brought his drunk hide home after a Devo concert one night. Jack said she couldn't just leave a shifter lying in the middle of the road like that. The next morning, Irene found them huddled up on the couch having one of those painfully long personal discussions over coffee that people liked to have. Irene knew then they'd be together forever. Because he was so good for her friend, Irene actually allowed him to refer to her as "Reeny." He was like the big brother she never had or even wanted. But if she'd been forced to have a brother, she'd have wanted Paul.

"You know what I just realized, Reeny, my love?"

"What, my sweetness?"

Paul motioned around the enormous room packed with people in their finest clothes and jewels, waiting for the lights to signal the concert was about to begin. "All these people are here to see my woman."

"Yes they are." Irene glanced at him. The man had been in an awfully good mood all night. "Your woman, eh?"

Paul shrugged, but he couldn't stop the grin. "She is now." He leaned in and whispered, "I marked her last night."

Miss Congeniality

Irene clapped her hands together before throwing her arms around Paul's neck. "I'm so happy for you!"

"Thanks, Reeny. I was so nervous she'd say no."

"Are you insane?" Irene leaned back to look into his face. "She loves you. Of course she said yes." She kissed his cheek. "I'm very happy for you both. And I'm glad you asked her first."

"Of course I did. I've gotta make it right for m'lady."

Irene stepped back and readjusted her dress. She hated it but Jackie picked it out for her and insisted it looked good on her. She felt...exposed.

"How much do you hate that dress?"

"A lot."

Bradley returned from the men's room just as the lights flickered twice, letting them know the concert would begin soon. Together, they all walked into the hall and took their seats. Because of their connections, Irene and Paul got to sit in the ridiculously overpriced box seats.

As the accompanying orchestra tuned up a page stepped into their box and whispered into Bradley's ear.

"I'll be right back," he said and squeezed her hand. Eew. Sweaty palms. She hated that.

Once he'd left and she'd wiped her hands on her dress, she turned back to Paul. "Okay. So just tell me straight. When are you two moving out? I need to know so I can set up some overly elaborate system to remind myself to pay my bills and eat."

"Perhaps you failed to remember that I live in a house with four other guys." He stuck his hand out. "Say hello to your new roommate."

Irene grinned. "I have to say I'm relieved! I thought you two were going to leave me alone." She teasingly slapped his hand away.

## Miss Congeniality

"No way. You're her best friend. And one of the few people she actually tolerates...besides me, of course."

The lights dimmed and the conductor stepped out on the stage. The audience applauded loudly since he was quite famous, but it wasn't until Jackie walked out onto the stage holding her Stradivarius violin that the entire theater erupted into applause, including Irene and Paul.

Jackie grinned and nodded, waiting for the applause to stop. As it did, Bradley came back to his seat.

"Where did you --" Irene stopped speaking when she realized it wasn't Bradley sitting next to her but Van Holtz -- in a full tux no less.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Sssh." He pointed at Jackie. "She's about to start," he whispered.

She leaned in and whispered, "Where's Bradley?"

"I had my driver take him home."

Irene blinked. "Alive?"

Van Holtz shook his head, apparently refusing to be goaded.

Jackie began to play and Irene forced herself to listen and enjoy the incredible talents of her friend, rather than notice the idiot sitting next to her. And five minutes in, when he took her hand and then wouldn't let it go, she didn't even throttle him.

Although she really wanted to. Especially when she noticed that his hands were dry and damn comfortable.

\*\*\*\*\*

Van almost felt guilty for scaring off Irene's date but pudgy, middle-age men named Bradley were not for her. Besides, it really didn't take much to

## Miss Congeniality

buy the man off. If he were worthy of her he'd have never let anyone buy him off. But Bradley took that cash and followed Van's driver out the front door. Prick.

And, more importantly, could she be any cuter than when she silently seethed? He thought for sure she'd tell him off during intermission, but she didn't. She just drank her scotch on the rocks and silently seethed. But Van took the time to learn he didn't have to worry about the jackal hanging around her. He belonged to her friend Jackie and that was all that mattered to Van. He'd been a little worried when he saw the two of them hugging before the concert started. Van's eyes had narrowed and he wondered how hard it would be to twist a jackal into a pretzel.

Pushing through the mob of people hanging around backstage, the trio made their way to Jackie's dressing room. Another mob of people stood there as well and they decided not to push their way through until Jackie had finished greeting her fans and well wishers.

"Fuck," Paul muttered, turning toward them.

Irene glanced up. "What's wrong?"

"That old professor of Jack's is here. And his flowers are bigger than mine."

Both she and Van leaned around Paul to see an older man kissing Jackie's cheeks and holding onto a dozen roses.

Irene snorted. "I don't know why you worry about that. It happened a long time ago and that prick doesn't hold a candle to you."

"He was her first love."

"Not even. Besides, she was only eighteen at the time, which is creepy and disgusting all on its own. He took advantage of her. Trust me when I say she's definitely over it."

Paul glanced at his little half-dozen bouquet of roses. He acted like he'd grabbed weeds from outside the building.

Miss Congeniality

Eventually Van couldn't take that pitiful jackal look anymore. "Don't worry about it." He motioned to his driver who walked forward with the two dozen roses he'd told him to pick up after dropping off Bradley. Van plucked off the card from his bouquet and put the one from Paul's on it instead. "Give her these."

Shocked, Paul took the heavy display from Van's driver. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Go ahead." Van grabbed the half-dozen roses Paul had and put his card on top. He had a feeling Jackie wouldn't care either way, but he knew men well enough to know Paul would be obsessing all night.

Paul shrugged. "Thanks, man. I owe ya."

"No problem. Besides," Van added, "I don't like the look of that guy."

"Yeah. Me either."

Irene sighed and rolled her eyes. "Just give her the flowers so we can be gone." She glanced at Van. "I grow tired of the company."

Paul walked away and Van leaned against the wall, staring down Irene's cleavage. "You know, Irene," he said low so only she could hear, "when you're mean to me like that..."

"Yes?"

"It makes me so horny."

\*\*\*\*\*

Well did she really think she'd get rid of him that easily? He had to be the most determined man she'd ever known. Why he felt so determined regarding her, Irene had no idea. He'd gotten what he wanted, so why the rest of this was necessary, Irene didn't know.

"Mind telling me what you did with my date?"



Miss Congeniality

"I told him he wasn't right for you and if he left quietly with no fuss, I wouldn't snap his neck like a twig."

Irene looked up at Van Holtz. "Are you serious?"

"Very."

"I don't understand," she said, shaking her head.

"Don't understand what?"

"Why you're here." She leaned in closer and so did he. It almost felt as if they stood completely alone rather than boxed up with a room full of people. "I'm very honest with myself, Van Holtz. I'm not beautiful. I'm not nice. Most people go out of their way to actively avoid me. I don't have much of a sense of humor, I'm not charming and if people suddenly disappeared off the planet, I probably wouldn't even notice. You, however, are cultured, wealthy, and blindingly arrogant. You have more than enough beautiful women who are convinced you are as amazing as you believe yourself to be and would have no problem telling you how amazing you are every day until the end of time. Plus you never have to worry they'll say something inappropriate or rude. Or that they'll ever be smarter than you. We have nothing between us except surprisingly good sex, but based on what I've been told the allure of that won't last very long. So, then...what is it? What are you expecting from these little romantic displays?"

Irene stared at him, waiting for his response. And she kept staring. Finally, she snapped, "Well? Aren't you going to answer me?"

"Answer you about what?"

"About everything I just said to you."

"Oh. That. I stopped listening and just stared at your lips instead, which are quite beautiful, by the way. But I could tell you weren't going to say anything I wanted to hear, so I just ignored you."

She had absolutely no idea what to say to the man. For once, someone had left her speechless and...slightly amused.

Miss Congeniality

"Is ignoring me supposed to endear me to you somehow?"

"No. That's the job of my thighs and my get-lost-in-them-forever brown eyes." He leaned in even closer and blinked his eyes several times.

"Mesmerizing, aren't they?"

Irene couldn't hold it back anymore. It flooded out of her and she couldn't stop it. Even when everyone turned and stared at her, including Jackie and Paul, she couldn't stop. And she tried.

Because laughing this much really was only going to exacerbate his ego even more.

\*\*\*\*\*

He knew he wasn't playing fair but he didn't have a choice. If he'd asked her to go to dinner with him, she would have automatically said no. So he invited her friends and just assumed she'd come along. Which...she did.

If he'd asked her to come home with him, she would have said no. So he used the fact Paul and Jackie were just mated by arranging for them to get a night in the honeymoon suite at his cousin's five-star hotel downtown before they took off for a few days in Mexico. Then he had his limo driver take them to said hotel. Which kinda, sorta left Irene stranded.

Van waved at the limo one more time before turning around. She stood there in that scintillating red, full-length gown, one foot tapping, arms crossed over her chest, not looking nearly as annoyed as she probably wanted to be.

"Well?" she snapped.

"Well what?"

"How am I getting home?" She held up her tiny purse. "I have all of five bucks in this bag because Paul was going to pay for the taxi."

"You should always carry more money on you than that." Her eyes narrowed and Van held his hands up. "Sorry, sorry." He shrugged. "I thought maybe you'd want to see my apartment. It's just down the street."

Miss Congeniality

"Why would I want to see your apartment? Are there zoo animals there?"

She asked the strangest questions. "No. No zoo animals." He grinned. "Except me, of course."

"Would I have to pretend I like it even if I don't?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"Because my first response is usually my most honest but I've actually lost the university charity money because my first response insulted someone important. Your family gives a lot of money to the university, I need to know if I should plaster on that fake smile that makes my face ache."

"No. I always want you to be honest with me, Irene. Even when the honesty sucks."

"Will we have sex again?" she asked the same way someone might ask if the IRS was about to give them an audit.

"If you want to."

"Do you want to?"

He groaned. "You have no idea."

She glanced around the empty street. "I have work to do."

"You always have work to do. It can't be healthy, Irene. You have to take some time for yourself."

"Well...I would like to have sex with you again." She looked at him with that brutally honest face and said, "It was much more enjoyable than I thought it would be."

Knowing she wasn't, in anyway, joking, Van replied, "Yes. I enjoyed it a lot, too. Maybe you could spend the weekend with me."

"I should work."

Miss Congeniality

That definitely wasn't a "no."

"You can work in the afternoon."

"And the rest of the time we'll have sex?"

Van cleared his throat. "Yes, Irene. The rest of the time we'll have sex."

After several long moments, she nodded. "All right then. Which way is your apartment?"

"That way."

Irene started walking west and Van called after her, "Irene?" She turned around and looked at him. He held his hand out and she stared at it for another several long minutes. He could almost see her brain sifting through the appropriate responses. Finally, she reached out and placed her hand in his.

Van interlaced their fingers together and headed home with Irene right next to him.

And he'd never been happier.

Chapter Seven

"Do you actually need all this room or is this the only place you could find where you could fit your head?"

Irene accepted the glass of wine Van handed her.

"My, my, we certainly are rolling with the jokes this evening."

She shrugged. "I guess. I find myself surprisingly comfortable around you. Well...as comfortable as I can be with anyone remotely human. And you are somewhat remotely human."

"Such compliments." He took her hand and it felt strange to not automatically want to pull it away again.

Van led her through the apartment. Apparently he owned it and the entire building. The furniture tasteful but useful. She actually felt like she could sit on the couch. Each room tidy and well kept. But his kitchen...she'd never seen such a sparkling kitchen outside of a cleaning fluid ad.

"This is very...clean."

"It's the kitchen. Of course it's clean. Would you prefer to think your food is coming from some place with roaches?"

"No. But this does seem to be above and beyond the standard clean."

"Not at all." Van turned to take a beer from the refrigerator.

With him facing away from her, Irene shifted the big knife block on the counter slightly to the left.

"I grew up around chefs," he continued, turning back around and immediately shifting the knife block back to its original position. He probably didn't even realize he'd done it. "You always keep your kitchen clean or you'd hear about it. And my uncles can be mean. Usually fangs are involved."

Miss Congeniality

Irene nodded, surprisingly enthused to find a little obsessive compulsive behavior in the always-controlled, but perpetually laid back wolf.

He stared at her and Irene didn't know what to make of it. To get things moving she said, "So, are we going to do this or what?"

She already had the straps of her gown halfway off her shoulders when he left his un-open beer on the pristine counter and grabbed her hands.

"Hey, hey. What's the rush?"

Irene sighed in annoyance. "Look, I've got responsibilities. Things to do. I'm not some rich kid who can do whatever I want. In other words, I need to get this done and then get back to work."

"Are lives being lost because you're spending some time in my kitchen?"

"Lives? Of course not, but -- "

"Then relax, Irene."

Irene realized he had a point and frowned in concentration as she tried to force herself to relax.

Van Holtz released her. "Is that you relaxing?"

She growled. "If you keep talking I won't be able to. I need to focus to get myself to relax. Focusing is the key."

"All right. That's it." Van Holtz grabbed her hand and dragged her out of the room.

"Where are we going?"

He didn't answer her but dragged her into a bedroom. She briefly thought, Oh, good. But then he kept walking into a bathroom that could have housed the entire foreign legion. He released her and closed the bathroom door.

Irene shrugged. "A shower? Do I not smell fresh?"

Van Holtz snorted a laugh. "Doc, you smell wonderful."

"Then why are we in your bathroom?"

He went over to the obscenely large tub that looked more like a pool and turned on the water. It began to fill up quickly. "I thought we'd take a bath."

"A bath? What am I? Eight? Will there be bubbles, too?"

He snapped his fingers. "Good call, doc." He walked over to one of the cabinets and popped open the doors. "One of my cousins from Germany stayed here about six months ago and she has three daughters. I think they left...yes!" He turned around, holding a plastic bottle. "Pink bubbles."

"I don't understand. Is this a prelude to sex?"

"Everything with me is a prelude to sex," he muttered, checking the temperature of the water before pouring in the entire contents of the bottle. "But this isn't only about sex. I've decided."

She didn't like the sound of that. "Decided what?"

"That you're staying the weekend."

"I haven't agreed to that and why would I?"

Van Holtz stood and walked over to her. "Because, you and I are going to hang out. We're going to watch TV, eat delicious food that I make, maybe go shopping for shit we don't need, and neither one of us is going to do any work of any kind."

"Again...why would I do that?"

"Because we're going to spend the weekend getting to know each other."

"I thought we did know each other. And we'd come to the conclusion that we were friends...only."

"We are friends. And friends hang out doing nothing."

## Miss Congeniality

"Forget it." Irene headed toward the door. "I've got a ton of lab work waiting for me and --"

"There'll be lots of sex, too."

Irene stopped, her hand on the doorknob. "Sex?"

"Lots of sex."

"Truly? Or is this some kind of Van Holtz torture?"

He stepped up behind her and she could feel his body heat, the touch of his hands on her shoulder, fingers sliding under the straps of her gown. "Oh, there'll be a little torture," he promised. "But only the good kind."

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Van never realized until this moment how much of his childhood he'd taken for granted. Going to school, playing with the other pups in the Pack, dating human girls and debating with his friends the best way to keep their fangs in during sex. Hell, even going hunting every Christmas in Connecticut with his parents and sister. Things he did for enjoyment, not because he'd been born into money, but because he hadn't been born any more or less special than any other Shifter. He hadn't been any different from some pup from the Magnus Pack or the Smiths. All his parents ever asked of him was to not bare his fangs in public, not let his junior-high buddies pay to see his sister naked when she was getting out of the shower, and not to lick his balls when he thought the Pack wasn't looking...because they usually were.

He simply couldn't imagine people expecting any more from him than that at the age of five, ten, even twenty. But they'd expected it of Irene. At a charity event, he heard two older professors discussing how they once saw Irene give a speech at the U.N. nearly fifteen years ago. Why a ten year old needed to give a speech, in several languages no less, to U.N. delegates for any other reason than a dog and pony show, Van had no idea. Of course, it completely explained why she was the prickliest woman he'd ever known. How could she be anything but prickly and a tad uptight?



## Miss Congeniality

Yet as Irene stood in his kitchen, desperately trying to force herself to relax, he suddenly knew what he had to do. What he wanted to do. He wanted to show her what it was like to be brutally, painfully, wonderfully average. Not all the time, he knew she'd never allow that, but enough so she could learn to enjoy all the amazing things she could do. And so she wouldn't die of an ulcer and high blood pressure by the time she was forty-five. Like taking a bath, he thought as he tossed her naked body into his bathtub. She squealed like an actual girl until she hit the water and then she came up sputtering and pretty pissed off. But by then he was naked and in the water with her, so he easily grabbed her waist and dragged her back in before she could stomp off mad.

"You do things just to irritate me, don't you?"

Smiling, enjoying himself immensely and determined to give her a wonderful and relaxing weekend, Van pushed Irene's wet hair from her face. "Don't be silly, doc." He kissed her lips, nuzzled her chin. "Of course I do things just to irritate you."

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How annoying. She actually found him cute. And charming. When did that happen? She'd always thought of Van Holtz as a spoiled rich boy from a one-time barbarian Pack of ravening wolves. But, when so motivated, he could be cute and -- damn him -- charming. Even when tossing her into water. Something Irene had always hated. But she did like feeling him press his body against hers as the bath water lapped around them and the bubbles sneaked up her nose.

She also liked the way he looked at her. Most men looked right through her. Women, too. Everyone looked through her unless they wanted something from her. And what they usually wanted involved academia. At the moment, Van Holtz looked like he cared less about her mind than those in the English department. Most women would be insulted. And, as a rather proud feminist, she would be too...if she actually wanted a discourse on the Chaos Theory. She didn't. She wanted him. She wanted to have sexual intercourse with him. Wait. That was wrong. No she didn't. She had sexual intercourse with men like Bradley. She didn't want that with Van Holtz.

## Miss Congeniality

She wanted to fuck him. She wanted to be fucked by him. She wanted to get sweaty and transfer fluids and forget her name. She wanted everything that a night with Niles Van Holtz promised, but she refused to want more. She refused to get so caught up in her sexual urges that she would believe, for a second, that this thing they were indulging in would ever lead to anything more. When this was done -- and it would be done sooner rather than later -- she'd find another Bradley who'd make a great fourth at dinner with the Dean.

Irene knew it was a very cold way of looking at relationships, even for her, but she had no delusions she'd ever get more. She was too strange, too off-key-and not in a cute, adorable way either -- to ever hope someone could love her as she was and she was smart enough to know she'd never change. Not inherently. Not where it counted. Even if she curbed her tongue and stopped scaring her students, she'd still be Irene Conridge, freak. Nothing she did would ever change that.

But she'd indulge herself this time. She deserved it. For at least twenty years she'd always done what people expected and wanted. Now she'd do what she wanted, even if it was only for the weekend. Only for this brief time in her life.

Big thumbs brushed her nipples and all Irene's important thoughts floated away, leaving nothing but deep-seated lust.

She wrapped her arms around Van Holtz's neck and her legs around his waist, pulling him close to her. She marveled at the heat of him. His body always warm or sometimes, like now, hot. She wondered if that was normal for Shifters. If their body temperatures were hotter than other, normal humans. She wondered if he'd let her take a sample of his blood. Then he lifted her up and laid her out on the tile floor and she quickly stopped caring about his DNA strain.

Before she realized what was happening, Van Holtz slid his tongue inside her and Irene gripped his wet hair, keeping his mouth against her. Her body rocked against his face, her hips and pelvis pushing into him. Leaving the warm water made her thoroughly aware of the chill in the air, her nipples hardening almost painfully, goosebumps racing across her skin. But the sudden cold also made her more thoroughly aware of Van Holtz's big hands

Miss Congeniality

tightly gripping her thighs, his mouth and tongue stroking her to orgasm as she shook and moaned beneath his mouth and hands.

Little else held her interest as he ate at her. Devoured her with a single-minded intensity that took her breath away.

Irene groaned as she came. She groaned and moaned and begged him not to stop. He didn't. He took her over again and again, until she lay exhausted on his tile floor, her breathing ragged, her body trembling.

He pulled her back into the warm water, the bubbles much less than when she first got in. He held her against his body, stroking her back and arms until her trembling stopped.

"Sorry about that," he ridiculously apologized. "But all I could think about was going down on you."

She rested her head in the crook of his neck and sighed. "Anytime. And no apology necessary."

He tried nothing else, even though she could feel his own unfulfilled lust resting hard and hot against her inside thigh.

Combing her fingers through his hair she let out a satisfied sigh -- and decided to have some fun of her own.

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"You know, I read so many books," he heard her say softly in his ear. Books? She wanted to talk about books now? But he didn't have the heart to tell her to shut up. He quickly realized talking about books and what she knew gave her a sense of control she probably had in few other areas of her life.

"And," she went on, "I read this book once written by a homosexual young writer."

Van frowned, wondering where this particular conversation might be going. With Irene you really never knew.

Miss Congeniality

"It was informational. About how to perform oral sex on men. You know one man teaching another. It was really fascinating and I've always wondered about the techniques he discussed -- ow. Ow! You're squeezing a little hard, Van Holtz."

Forcing himself to loosen the grip he had on her, Van leaned back a bit and looked at Irene. "Sorry."

"It's all right. Just remember I bruise easily. Now...where was I?"

"You always wondered about the techniques he discussed."

"Oh. Yes. That's right." She glanced at him under eyelashes he'd never noticed were ridiculously long. Dark brown and long, which contrasted with those ice-blue eyes of hers. But it was the look she gave him and Van knew, in that moment, she was teasing him. Not teasing him in the sense she'd leave him and his poor cock to fend for themselves, but playfully teasing him like a lover would. "Anyway, I found some of the techniques he suggested fascinating, but I didn't know if any of them could truly produce the response he promised."

Van gritted his teeth. "And?"

"Well, if you're willing to be my test subject -- ack!"

He didn't mean to toss her out of the bathtub like that and when she went sliding across the tiles he'd made wet and slippery from tossing her in and out of the water in the first place, he did feel a twinge of guilt. But it didn't last as his cock took complete control of his brain. Slapping his hands against the edge of the tub, he gave one push and landed nearly five feet away. He grabbed a towel, wrapped it around Irene and carried her to the bedroom.

He placed her carefully on the floor and walked away, giving them a little distance. He was terrified he'd pounce on her like some unsuspecting rabbit he found in his backyard.

Miss Congeniality

Van closed the bedroom door-strictly because he needed something to do with his hands -- and leaned against it. Letting out a breath, he looked at her. Let her take the lead, he warned himself.

"So...how do you want to do this?" he asked, and was damn proud of himself for managing that.

But Irene frowned in confusion.

"What? What's wrong?" Christ, how did he get it wrong so damn fast?

"Aren't you going to order me?"

"Huh?"

"You know. Tell me what you want."

Suddenly Van was confused. "I thought you hated it when I bossed you around?"

"I do. Normally. Out there." She pointed at the door he stood in front of. "But I've noticed that my sexual response is heightened when you order me around during intercourse."

Van stared at her. He didn't know what to say but he noticed she'd suddenly started to glow...and are those angel wings?

"Oh. Was that rude? I --"

"Quiet, Irene."

She immediately fell silent and Van had to lock his knees so they wouldn't buckle.

"Drop the towel."

She did, slowly letting it slip off her body.

"Come here."

## Miss Congeniality

She hesitated a moment, then slowly walked over to him.

He leaned over a bit, his nose nuzzling her chin and cheek. He breathed in the scent of her. God, she smells good. Irene responded to him, brushing her cheek against his. Her fingers, hesitant at first, slid up his biceps.

Van pressed his lips against her ear and softly ordered, "Now get on your knees, doc."

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Hands on her shoulders, Van eased Irene to her knees. Her breathing increased as she kneeled in front of him, her hands sliding down his thighs.

Van Holtz braced his legs apart and waited. She had the feeling he was letting her make the first move, which she appreciated since she was still evaluating.

Irene stared intently at his penis, analyzing it. It was abnormally big, in her opinion. But not unmanageable. She simply needed to find the best approach.

"You're thinking too much, doc. You're not splitting the atom. It's just my cock."

"Yes. But even I will admit it's quite formidable. I only want to ensure the highest level of enjoyment."

He gave her a slow, easy grin and his eyes seemed to warm while he watched her. "The fact you care enough to care at all ensures my highest level of enjoyment."

Irene smiled back, finding it easier to do each time she bothered, and then looked back at Van Holtz's...well...cock. Because, to be honest, "penis" simply wasn't doing it any justice.

Giving a mental shrug, Irene leaned forward, swiping her tongue across the head of his cock. His entire body jerked and Irene gave a little hum of surprise. She didn't expect his response to be so...intense. Her confidence

## Miss Congeniality

boosted a bit, Irene brought her hands up, smoothing them against the inside of his thighs her fingers teasing the scar left behind from the knife she'd impaled him with while she dragged her tongue from base to tip.

Van moaned, his eyes closed, and braced his feet farther apart. His fingers dug deep into her hair, silently urging her on. And, with another mental shrug, Irene wrapped her mouth around the tip and swallowed him whole.

She took him to the root on her first pass and Van let out a shuddering laugh. She pulled back, sucking hard while the tip of her tongue swirled around the head, before swallowing him again. Van let out another moan, this one loud and long. Talk about encouragement. Irene swallowed him again and she could feel him in the back of her throat.

"God, Irene," he gasped out. "You learned this from a book?"

Uh...actually, she hadn't really thought about the book since she'd started. She'd been too busy thinking about him. So, at the moment, she ran purely on instinct.

Which seemed to be quite effective.

Sliding her hands up his thighs, she took hold of his balls. She squeezed while she sucked and the hands in her hair gripped the strands tighter.

Irene continued to deep throat him on every pass until Van tugged on her hair, forcing her to look up at him without releasing his cock.

"Stop, baby," he panted desperately. "I'm about to come."

Frowning, Irene debated whether to release him. For some ungodly reason, she wanted to see this through. All the way through.

"Irene?" One hand released her hair and touched her cheek. She pushed it away and deep throated him again.

Van shook his head, staring at her in shock. "Jesus, Irene..."

Miss Congeniality

She squeezed his balls again and sucked hard. He shouted a curse seconds before he exploded in her mouth. Irene swallowed, continuing to suck until he begged her to stop.

She did, pulling back slowly.

Van's head fell back against the door, appearing exhausted, and Irene looked up at him, curious. "Did that work for you?"

His eyes snapped open and he stared down at her, still panting. "Huh?"

"I asked if that -- "

"Shut up, Irene." He closed his eyes and gave a short laugh. "Just...shut up."

Normally she'd be quite insulted someone had told her to shut up, but for some reason, she wasn't. Maybe because he looked so...satisfied.

"Fine. I'll assume from your abrupt response and the panting that it worked."

One eye opened and he glared down at her. When he growled, she tried to move away, but he grabbed her shoulders and dragged her to her feet. He kissed her hard, one hand gripping her breast while the other gripped her ass and pulled her tight against his body. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. He didn't seem put off by tasting himself on her tongue, which was good because that would have insulted her.

Van walked her back until the back of her knees hit the bed, then he tossed her onto the mattress. She bounced once before he crawled on top of her. Pushing his knee between her thighs, pinning her arms over her head with one hand and playing with her breast with the other, and the entire time he kept kissing her.

"You do know, Dr. Conridge, that you're not getting out of this bed anytime soon?"

"Oh. Well..."



## Miss Congeniality

"If you're going to drive a man crazy," he warned while alternately sucking on her breasts and sliding his fingers deep inside her, "you'll just have to pay for it."

And she had absolutely no argument for that.

Chapter Eight

Irene woke up and found Niles Van Holtz wrapped around her like a python. He had his head buried between her breasts, his arms around her waist, his legs entangled with hers. They rested on their side, so she didn't have to take his full weight. Still, she had no idea what to do with the man. Did she grab his shoulders and shove? Hhhhm. That seemed a tad cold. And a bit reckless. With her luck he'd slam his head on something and die of an aneurism. She could tap him lightly on the shoulder and tell him to move, but he didn't wake up easily. She'd probably be better off hitting him repeatedly. Wait. No. Hitting him would also be considered rude.

Sighing, she relaxed back against the pillows. Perhaps she should simply wait until he woke on his own. A man his size was most likely ruled by his hunger. He'd need to feed soon.

Irene glanced down at the pair of them and she realized her arms were flung out at her side. On a whim, she brought her arms up and folded them around Van Holtz. He growled in his sleep and she wondered if she should make a run for it. But before she could, soft lips brushed against her breast while big hands slid across her back.

Definitely not an unpleasant response. Wondering how far this sort of thing would go, Irene gently stroked her hands through Van Holtz's hair. He sighed in his sleep, his grip on her tightening, his mouth searching until it found a nipple and sucked.

She gasped in surprise and delight, enjoying the feel of his mouth on her body. He still slept on, his eyes tightly shut and the soft sleep-growl sounds he made while asleep coming from the back of his throat.

He pushed his leg between her thighs, his knee pressing hard against her groin and his lips and tongue worked on her nipple. Before Irene knew it, an orgasm took hold of her and she cried out, her body writhing under his until the last shudder passed.

Miss Congeniality

As she lay panting underneath him, he rested his head back between her breasts and commenced to snoring. But five minutes later, his eyes opened and he glanced around, finally focusing on her. He smiled, a soft sleepy smile with his hair falling in front of his eyes. “Morning, doc.”

“Morning.”

“I’m hungry.” She liked how he stated that so simply.

“Uh...”

“I’ll make us some breakfast and then we’ll go to the mall.”

“Mall?”

“Don’t worry. You’ll enjoy it.” He yawned and released her, rolling onto his back.

“I’m horny.” He stated that like he stated, “I’m hungry.”

“Uh...”

Van Holtz grabbed a condom off the nightstand. “You don’t mind, do you? Before we get up?”

“Uh...”

Miss Congeniality

“Good.” Fingers gently probed, then he was inside her before she could even think what to say. As he thrust, and she arched to meet it, he let out a deep groan. “Christ, Irene. You’re already so wet.” Staring down at her, he gave her that smirk. “What have you been doing this morning?”

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“Why are there so many people? Have they nothing better to do?”

“You keep asking me that and...goddamnit. Where did you go?”

She didn’t say anything, but the bastard found her anyway. Damn canine senses.

“Have you no shame?”

Irene stepped out from behind the clothes rack she’d been hiding behind. “I’m not good with crowds.”

“It’s a mall, doc. Nothing to be afraid of.” He grabbed her hand and yanked her mover to where he was. “There will be no more hiding. I swear, it’s like dealing with a ten year old.”

This time he kept a tight grip on her hand as he moved through the racks of the sporting goods store. “How do you go shopping during the holidays if you can’t stand the mall?”

“I hand Jackie several hundred dollars and an itemized list.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

## Miss Congeniality

“She likes to shop. I, however, do not. If she wants to spend time fighting those holiday crowds, I’m more than happy to give her money to do it.”

“Well I’m telling you right now...” He held up a track suit in front of her then shook his head. “Wrong color. Anyway, I expect you to buy my gifts yourself. Not send some lackey to do it.”

When it came to one-on-one relationships with actual living and breathing human beings, Irene was the first to admit she wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed. But she’d noticed that as the day progressed, after what even the Marquis de Sade might consider a torrid night of sex, Van Holtz kept making statements that a more romantically inclined woman might believe suggested he wanted something much more permanent.

Good thing she knew better.

“The only thing I plan to get you is a restraining order.”

“Ha ha.” He held up another track suit. “This is it. The color’s perfect with your eyes.”

“My eyes?”

“Yeah. They’re a gorgeous blue. You just need colors that will bring them out.”

“I was told my eyes were freakish and disturbing. One of the professors in the theology department referred to them as unholy.”

“I think they’re hot.” He held up the suit. “Wanna try this on?”

Miss Congeniality

The expression on her face must have made clear how she felt on that, because he shrugged and dragged her to the front counter. After a few more purchases they wandered through the mall debating about getting something to eat when Van Holtz suddenly pulled her into a comic bookstore.

“I need to check something out for my cousin.”

“Exactly how many cousins do you have?”

“A lot. I told you that the Van Holtz men are breeders by nature. My dad quit after two, but my uncles—all eight of them—just kept going.” He stopped and turned to face her. “How many children do you want?”

She shrugged. “I hadn’t really thought...wait. Why are you asking?”

He suddenly looked as uncomfortable as she felt. “No reason. Merely asking for politeness sake.”

“Okay.”

Irene didn’t say anything else and he began to skim through the racks. Five minutes later he suddenly said, “But you do want kids, right?”

“If artificial insemination is becoming as reliable as I’ve been reading lately...perhaps.”

“Artificial insemination?”

“Yes. That’s when the egg—”

“I know what it is, Irene. I’m just wondering why that’s your big breeding plan.”

“Do you really think I’d allow the swapping of fluids between me and Bradley?”

Van Holtz’s eyebrows lowered and she watched him go from relatively normal human to a male about to shift to his animal form.

“What? What did I say?”

“What does Bradley have to do with anything?”

“I didn’t mean him specifically. I’m talking about the Bradleys of the world.” She shuddered. “The thought makes my skin crawl. So, artificial insemination seems the safest and least repulsive route.”

Van Holtz let out a sigh. “True, that’s one option. Or you could simply have sex with someone you want to have sex with.”

She shrugged and picked up a Superman comic. “True. But that happens so rarely. You’re the first. Not my first sexual encounter, as I told you, but the first one where having sex wasn’t a chore.”

Laying the shopping bags he carried at his feet, Van Holtz ran his hands through his hair. “I swear, you are trying to drive me insane.”

“Now what did I say?”

“Forget it. This discussion is over.”

She shrugged. “Okay.”

He went back to searching through the comics and Irene began to read one. To be honest, she found them hard to follow. Her eyes never knew which bubble to go to first.

“So,” Van Holtz said, “whether it’s artificial insemination or the good old fashioned way...how many kids?”

Why he wouldn’t let it go, she’d never know. But she didn’t want to argue with him. She was actually having quite a nice time with the Neanderthal. “I was thinking a minimum of two. Jackie has siblings and seems to enjoy them. I had none and it would have been nice to have an older brother or even a sister as long as she wasn’t as smart as me. Too competitive,” she added when he glanced at her. “Yes. So at least two.”

Van Holtz grunted. “Good.”

“Why is that good?” But he ignored her and kept searching the stacks. “Van Holtz?”

“Uh...excuse me?”

Irene glanced over shoulder at the three young boys standing behind her. She’d place them at about thirteen or fourteen. She’d never been very good with guessing ages, though.

“Yes?”



## Miss Congeniality

The boys glanced at each other and then back at her. “Are you Dr. Irene Conridge?”

Irene’s eyes narrowed the tiniest bit and one of the boys looked away from her.

“Yes. Why?”

The boys suddenly turned away and began whispering to each other, then they pushed one of them back over to the table they’d come from. Irene studied the table and saw maps, many-sided dice, books, and enough junk food to destroy an army. One of the books had a dragon on the cover in all his flamey glory. She stifled a smile. She recalled quite a few late nights as a powerful mage.

The one sent back to the table searched through his oversized backpack and returned with a magazine. She immediately recognized her face on the cover and remembered that she’d written a piece on the Chaos Theory for a science magazine several months back. She’d forgotten all about it.

“Could you sign this for us?”

Irene took the magazine. “Of course.” Before she could ask for a pen, Van Holtz pushed one into her hand. She didn’t even bother to look at him to see his expression. She could imagine the smugness all on her own, thank you.

She got the boys’ names and signed the magazine, not daring to ask them how they would share this particular item. While signing, she asked, “So what campaign are you gentlemen running?”

Their eyes widened in surprise. “You play D&D?” one of them asked in awe. He had an unfortunate case of acne she prayed he’d grow out of sooner rather than later.

## Miss Congeniality

“Played, actually. It’s been a few years. Did you buy your models or make them yourselves?” Before she knew it, they’d dragged her over to the table and several other science and math geeks joined them. The discussion zigged between gaming to the Chaos Theory to science in general to math and back to gaming. She did her best to answer all their questions and glanced around several times, looking for Van Holtz. She didn’t see him and she put the moment of cynicism out of her mind that he’d left her there in disgust. He could be an ass, but she didn’t see him being that big an ass. So she continued answering questions and pretended not to worry.

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Van sat on a bench outside the comic book store. He’d stopped by the local booksellers and picked up a book called Science Made Easy. One chapter in and he was already lost.

“Well, hello Mr. Van Holtz.”

Van immediately recognized that forced sultry voice and barely stopped his wince in time. He looked up and made himself smile. “Farica. Hi.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for my date.”

She blinked a few times before she caught herself, managing to keep that bright smile. “Date, eh? And who’s the lucky girl?”

As if on cue, Irene walked out of the comic book store, her geeky fan club right behind her.

## Miss Congeniality

“Yes,” she was saying. “I have the program every summer, open to students between thirteen and sixteen years old.” The boys followed behind her and couldn’t see as she desperately mouthed, “Help. Me.”

Van grinned, feeling his heart squeezed from both sides by this incredibly odd woman. He’d fallen hard for her, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it except go along for the ride.

“What about grades?” one of them asked Irene.

“It’s more about potential.”

She had the most adorable expression on her face. Like he’d trapped her in a room with rabid chipmunks. He could tell she wouldn’t be able to keep the “nice” thing going for much longer so Van decided to give her a reprieve from hero worship.

He didn’t have to do much, just stand up. The boys stopped speaking and stared at him in mute horror while he towered over them.

“It’s time to go,” he stated simply, staring at the young men to make it clear that meant “go away.” They did, but only after shaking Irene’s hand more times than seemed necessary.

“You okay?” he asked when they’d finally walked away.

“I’m exhausted and now I’m starving.”

“Then let’s get you fed. Oh. Wait. I got you this.” He reached into one of the bags and pulled out a T-shirt he’d picked up at a fun novelty shop a few doors down while she’d handled her fans.

Irene opened the shirt and read the words out loud, “I DOS, therefore I am.”

“I thought that sounded appropriately nerd-like.” He grinned but Irene had such a strange expression on her face he became worried he’d made some sort of geek faux pas. “What’s wrong? You don’t like it?”

Irene swallowed and shook her head. “No. I...” She took a deep breath. “I love it. Thank you.”

“You sure? I can take it back.”

She held the shirt to her chest like he’d tried to rip it from her. “I said I love it,” she practically snarled. His mother sounded like that once when she thought a hyena came a little too close to her pups. “Back off, Van Holtz.”

He lifted his hands up, palms showing. “Okay. Okay. Calm down.”

“I’m hungry,” she said while keeping a tight grip on her shirt.

“Now, Dr. Conridge, don’t you think a proper thank you is in order for my lovely gift?”

She stared at him for a moment before glancing around the mall, her face turning red. “Here?”

He closed his eyes and forced himself not to laugh. “Not that, doc. That’s for later. When we’re alone or we find a bathroom. A kiss will do.”

Miss Congeniality

“Oh!” Her face turned redder. “Oh.” She went up on her toes and kissed him on the lips. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I really do love it.”

“Good. Now let’s feed.”

Van grabbed the shopping bags and tried to lead her off, but she stared behind him. “What?” he asked.

“Um...” She nodded to a spot over his shoulder.

He turned around expecting to see some kind of trouble, but all he saw was the shocked and very red face of Farica Bader. “Oh. See ya, Farica. Tell your mom I said hi.”

Van took Irene’s hand and headed off to a restaurant he thought she might like. Of course, the fact the woman mostly ate peanut butter and crackers suggested she wouldn’t be too finicky about her meal.

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Irene didn’t know what shocked her more. The gift Van Holtz gave her—the most thoughtful gift she’d ever received from a man...any man? Or the way he ignored long-legged, man-eater Farica Bader? Hard to decide since both were so exceptionally amazing.

Van Holtz took her to a restaurant inside the mall and they were quickly seated by a window. Lovely, more mall visuals.

“You know Farica Bader isn’t going to be happy that you dismissed her so easily.”

Miss Congeniality

He glanced up from the menu. “Who?”

“Farica Bader. You were just talking to her two seconds ago.”

“Oh. Her. Yeah. She’ll get over it, I’m sure.”

Irene stared at the lemonade put in front of her by the waiter. “She seems to like you.”

“She likes the Van Holtz name more. The Baders are a small Pack. They’d love to be connected to us so they wouldn’t have to lose anymore territory to the Magnus or Smith Packs. Now what are you thinking about getting to eat?”

Irene realized she still had her wonderful T-shirt gripped in her hands, so she made herself put it down on the seat beside her. Then she worried she’d forget it, so she laid it on top of her leg, folding half of it under her thigh.

“What are you doing?”

Her head snapped up. “Nothing. I was thinking burger,” she spit out in a rush.

“A burger works. But don’t eat too much. I’m cooking us dinner tonight.”

“Van Holtz you don’t have to—”

“Why don’t you call me Van like everybody else?”

“You want me to call you ‘of’?”

Van Holtz blinked. “What?”

“Van is Dutch for ‘of.’ So you’re asking me to call you ‘of’ which I have issues with. Although Holtz means timber or wood. So your name, literally translated, is ‘of wood.’” She covered her mouth when she suddenly giggled, shocking them both. “Sorry.” She coughed to stop the laughter. “Just, after last night, I find that name quite fitting.”

“You know, Irene, you’re the only person I know who can insult me and praise me all at the same time.”

“It’s a teacher thing.” Her hand automatically reached for her T-shirt, stroking it lightly with her fingertips. “How about I call you Holtz? I’d much rather call you wood than of.”

“You’ll be the only one.” He put down his menu. “It’ll be your own little pet name for me.”

Irene cleared her throat. “I guess.”

“I like you having your own name for me.”

“I’ve always had pet names for you, but you always told me they were rude.”

He laughed and shook his head. “Brat.”

The waiter arrived and Irene ordered her food first. While Holtz ordered his, Irene looked out the window. After several seconds, she sighed, “He must be new.”

“Who must be new?”

Irene motioned to the man on the other side of the mall floor. “Him. He must be new.”

“New what?”

“Agent. An American based on that tacky haircut. You know hair gel is a privilege not a right. Anyway, the good ones I don’t spot for hours. I spotted his sophomoric butt about ten minutes after we left your apartment.” The waiter returned with salads and Irene tore her eyes away from the bright red sweatshirt the man had the nerve to wear to eat Russian dressing–covered lettuce. That’s when she realized Holtz was staring at her.

“What?”

“Why are agents following you?”

“There are always agents following me.” She shrugged and sipped her drink. “When I was younger, about twelve, they actually took me into custody for my own safety.” She snorted. “They really just wanted to keep me out of the hands of the Soviets. They brought teachers to the compound they were keeping me at. And I had to stay there all day with no friends, no family—not that they would have been much help, but still.”

“What happened?”

“They let me go.”



Miss Congeniality

“Why would they do that?”

“I blew up half the compound and leveled a city street about thirty miles away. It was an accident. Sort of.”

“You mean like you hitting me with a two-by-four and stabbing me in the leg?”

“Those were accidents. If I really wanted to stab you, I’d at least aim for the face.”

“That’s lovely, Irene.”

“Sorry. Knowing they’re still following me, annoys me.”

“They don’t do it all the time?”

“No.”

“Then why are they doing it now?”

Irene didn’t answer him and Holtz leaned over the table a bit.

“What have you done?”

“What makes you think I did anything?”

“Because you’re not looking me in the eye.”

Miss Congeniality

When she had to look at him to see his face, she knew she really hadn't been looking him in the eye.

"I won't discuss this with you."

"Why? Because I won't understand it or because you did something you know is wrong?"

"That's not fair." She lowered her voice to a whisper and leaned over the table so they couldn't be heard. "It's not like any of us go into this looking for something...troublesome. I had the best intentions."

"Then what happened?"

She sighed. "Side effects. Very bad side effects." Side effects screwed the best experiments.

"And these people want it for the bad side effects?"

"Most likely." She doubted they wanted it for its nature-nourishing powers.

"Then destroy it...or was that why you were out in the woods that night?"

"Yes. That's why I was out there. And I did destroy it...mostly."

"Mostly?"

Miss Congeniality

“Don’t snarl at me,” she snarled back. “You have no concept of how many hours I put into that. All the work I did. You expect me to just toss it all away?”

Holtz took a deep breath. “First I need to ask you is there any danger to the stuff you dumped out there?”

“No. Not at all. I give you my word.”

“Good.” Then he stared at her for the longest time, before saying, “And second...don’t you understand you have nothing to prove?”

Irene flinched. “What does that mean?”

“It means you don’t have anything to prove to anyone but yourself.”

“That’s bullshit, Holtz. In this business, you’re constantly proving yourself. Constantly striving for better. Otherwise—”

“Otherwise what? Otherwise you can enjoy a weekend out with your boyfriend? Otherwise the government stops following you around? Otherwise you can allow yourself to relax and simply enjoy your existence on this planet? Would that be such a bad thing?”

She specifically chose to ignore the boyfriend comment and instead said, “When all you’re recognized for is your vast intelligence, you’re loathed to lose it.”

“You won’t lose that. You’ve already made your mark, Irene. Now you can relax and do whatever the hell you want.”

## Miss Congeniality

“No. I can’t. Every day more come along wanting to unseat me from my hard-won throne. Wanting to take what is mine. Think of it in territorial terms, Holtz. Something you can understand. This is my domain. I have no intention of giving it up to anyone.”

“So you risk yourself and others by keeping something you know is dangerous?”

Irene dropped back in her seat. She rested her elbows on the table, laced her fingers, and rested her forehead against her knuckles. She absolutely detested the man for being right.

“Look, Irene, I’m not saying you need to take care of it this minute. I know you have it some place safe. But think about it, baby. Remember how you felt over the hyena? Imagine that on a global scale.”

Irene shut her eyes against the image but said, “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I’m asking.” He placed his napkin on the table. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be back in a minute.” Then he was up and gone. She really hoped he would come back because she only had five dollars in her pocket. Not enough to cover the bill. Of course, she could accost the agent outside. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d used the fact she’d spotted them to her advantage. She didn’t necessarily think it was the right thing to do, but it was fun.

The food arrived by the time Holtz slid back in the booth and Irene had successfully wrangled her emotions so that she once again had herself in complete control.

Holtz took the ketchup from her and poured an obscene amount on his burger and over his fries.

Miss Congeniality

“Everything okay?” she asked, picking up a fry and forcing herself to eat.

“It is now.” He put the ketchup back in the middle of the table and picked up his burger. “But, Irene, from now on you have to tell me this stuff.” When her eyes narrowed, he shook his head. “No. Not about that. I mean about when you’ve got people following you.”

“Why?”

His mouth full of burger, he mumbled, “How else can I ensure your safety if I don’t know what’s going on?”

“Ensure my safety? Why would you need to ensure my safety?”

“Don’t piss me off, Irene. I’m already irritated because you didn’t tell me about this before. Protection is not something the Van Holtzs play around with.” He took another enormous bite and she realized he’d most likely devour that humongous burger in the next sixty seconds. “But you’re covered. Starting Monday. Until then you’re with me anyway.”

Irene didn’t like the sound of that. “Starting Monday what?”

“You’ll have protection.”

“Protection? I don’t want protection.”

“But you’re getting it.”

“But—”

Miss Congeniality

“There’s no arguing this, doc. If the government feels it’s necessary to have you watched, then you need protection and I’ll make sure you have it.”

Irene dug her hands into her hair and stared at the Formica table. “I don’t understand.”

“What’s there to understand?”

“Everything. I mean why are you doing this? What do you care if I have protection or not?”

“Don’t you know?”

“Do I look like I know?”

He grinned. “Nah. Ya look kind of pissed. You’re cute when you get like that.”

“Thank you,” she said flatly. “So explain to me why you feel the need to protect me?”

His sigh was long and exasperated. “Because as my life-long mate and eventual wife, I need to make sure you’re protected.”

“Your...your wife?”

“Of course. The Van Holtz wolves marry, baby. Unlike the Magnus and Smith wolves, my children will not be bastards.”

“Children?”

## Miss Congeniality

“Yup. Remember? Two minimum. Although I’m leaning toward three or four total. But we can figure that out later.”

Irene stared at Van Holtz with her mouth open and her mind suddenly, blissfully blank. Years later she’d call it that “Brief catatonic thing I had in the eighties.”

Holtz grinned at her, ketchup in the corner of his mouth, and glanced down at her food. “Hey, you gonna eat those fries, baby?”

Chapter Nine

“Explain to me how you get yourself into these situations.”

“Don’t start.” Irene stopped in front of her office door, pulling her keys out and maneuvering her backpack so it didn’t suddenly swing down and hit her in the face—as it had done many times before.

She’d finally finished her classes and, to quote one student, “Yay! She’s released us from our bondage of despair!” Damn, smart-ass physicists. She’d been worse than usual, she knew. But she blamed one man for her recent less-than-pleasant attitude lately.

“I just don’t understand, Irene. Paul and I take off for three days to Mexico and we come back to you engaged.”

“I am not engaged,” she snarled. “The man is delusional.”

Irene stormed into her office, Jackie right behind her. She dropped her backpack on the floor before moving over to her desk.

“I swear the man is on me like an isotope. I literally can not remove him.”

“I warned you about wolves.” Jackie threw herself into the chair across from Irene’s desk, planting her feet on the worn wood. “They’re certifiable.”

Irene practically fell into her desk chair. “He’s driving me insane, Jackie. I mean...really. He suddenly decided that I’m...what are you staring at?”



“What’s that behind your head? On your cork board?”

She didn’t even have to turn around to look. Instead Irene simply sighed.  
“That’s a picture of him, isn’t it?”

“Paul and I were wondering why we found them all over the house.”

“How does he keep getting into the house? And my office?”

“There’s no self-respecting wolf who can’t pick a lock.”

Irene put her head on her desk. “I don’t understand, Jackie. This wasn’t supposed to happen. We were never...he and I...he can’t seriously think we—”

“Oh, sweetie, he can. He does. I warned you, wolves aren’t hit often but when they are...bam! Then they hold on for dear life. Especially the males.”

“The worst part is, he’s so damn nice. I mean,” Irene leaned up, resting her elbows and hands on her desk, “if he were a total butthead, I could rip him to shreds without even a thought. Slash, slash, slash and I’d leave him like so many men and students before him. But he’s nice. Really nice. I’ve never had anyone be so nice to me.”

“He’s always liked you, Irene.”

“Great. You’re delusional too.”

“He has. You’ve always been oblivious but I see all, sweets, and that doggie has had it bad for you from the beginning.”

Miss Congeniality

“I thought he only wanted sexual intercourse.”

“Stop calling it that. And maybe that’s all he wanted in the beginning. To start. But apparently that’s changed. Personally, I knew it was a done deal soon as he got you to laugh.”

With an annoyed growl, Irene laid her head back on the desk. As soon as she did, the phone rang. She didn’t even have to answer it to know who was on the other end.

Snatching the phone off the receiver, “Yes?”

“Hey, doc.”

She viciously tamped down that burst of nervous excitement his voice elicited from her every damn time she heard it. “Van Holtz.”

“I want to see you tonight.”

“I’ve got work to do.”

“How about seven? Meet me at the restaurant, we’ll go from there.”

“I’ve got work to do.”

“Don’t worry about dressing up. Just casual. Jeans, T-shirt.”

“I’ve got work to do.”

“See ya then.”

“I’ve got work—” But he’d already hung up.

Irene returned the phone to the receiver. “I talk and talk and it’s like I’m saying nothing.”

“It’s a wolf thing, sweetie.”

“What is? Rudeness?”

“The ignoring. All canines do it. You say ‘no don’t eat the food from the table’ and they go right on eating the food from the table giving you that innocent look the whole time.”

“So what do I do? Hit him with a rolled up newspaper?”

“Well that depends on you.”

“How?”

“The question you need to ask yourself is whether you really want him to stop?”

“I don’t under—”

“Do you love him, Irene?”

Miss Congeniality

“What? No! Don’t be ridiculous! Why are you even asking me? Shut up.”

“Okay. I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.”

“Don’t you dare. I don’t love him. I don’t love you for that matter.”

“Liar,” Irene mocked with a smile.

“I don’t love anyone. I’m cold and calculating and a vicious, heartless bitch.”

She’d been repeating that to herself for three days. Even when he showed up on her doorstep every night and she let him in. Even when he took her to bed and made sure she didn’t get a bit of sleep. Even as he fucked her so hard and long that she could barely remember her name, much less theorems and lab results. Even then, she kept reminding herself what a cold, calculating, vicious, heartless bitch she still was. “And when I see that rich idiot, that’s exactly what I’m going to tell him.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You don’t think I will?”

“I don’t think you’ll have the chance.”

“I’ll make the chance,” Irene vowed.

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“And these are my uncles Geert and Volker.”

## Miss Congeniality

Even as Irene said her polite “hellos” and shook the hands of his many uncles, Van could hear those teeth grinding. He started wondering if dental work would be necessary at this rate.

“So, you’ve met everyone...who resides in North America.”

“You can meet the rest of the brood at Christmas,” his Uncle Ulbrecht promised and Van saw Irene clench her fist even while she nodded. To his family Irene probably appeared the most polite woman any of them had ever brought home. But Van knew better. She wouldn’t embarrass herself in front of them, but once he got her alone...eesh.

Irene looked at him over her shoulder and before she could speak he said, “Dinner’s ready.”

The family moved toward the dining room. He took Irene’s hand and, to his surprise, she didn’t pull it away. Instead, she turned and faced him. Leaning in close as if to whisper something to him, she grabbed his cock with her free hand and twisted. Van grunted and closed his eyes. He wanted to do more than that, but Irene knew he wouldn’t show the weakness to his family.

“What I’m currently doing, I can assure you, is not an accident,” she spit out between clenched teeth and then tugged to make her point. “Understand?” He nodded and she released him, heading off to the dining room.

Thankfully the dinner itself went quickly and as planned. Van could see Irene’s years of experience coming to the fore as she deftly handled each of his uncles and aunts, never once betraying how angry she really was. Which, to be quite honest, he appreciated. He hadn’t planned to ambush her like this but his father had put together this little event and made it clear he wanted Irene to attend. Since she’d kept Van at an emotional distance since he dropped her off at her house Monday morning—and told the wolves

Miss Congeniality

waiting for them to guard her like their lives depended on it—he knew she'd never willingly agree. So, yeah, he kidnapped her, in theory. Sitting down next to her on one of the couches littering the family room while the rest of his cousins pulled out board games and cards, he whispered against her ear, “You still mad at me?”

She rewarded him with a slight shiver.

“Yes. I don't like to be blindsided.”

“I know, but it was the only way to get you here.”

“And I needed to be here why?”

“My father wanted to see us together.”

“Next time tell him no.”

“He's the Alpha Male, baby. I can't say 'no' without a fight.” Van shook his head. “Besides, the way he's been acting lately? No way. I'm trying to placate the old man. And come on, this hasn't been that bad, has it?”

She shrugged, her elbow resting on the couch arm, her chin resting on the palm of her hand. “The prime rib was quite satisfactory, I suppose.”

He swallowed a chuckle. “Thanks. I made that.”

“At least you have some talents besides being attractive and a pain in my ass.”

Miss Congeniality

Van took gentle hold of her free hand. The same hand that she'd twisted his nuts with. He must love her...he hadn't killed her yet.

"Don't be mad at me, doc."

"This wasn't supposed to go this far," she whispered fiercely. "Sexual intercourse and nothing else."

"I never agreed to that."

"No. You said you just wanted to kiss me once and then you'd leave. Twenty seconds tops, I believe, was your statement." She looked at him and those eyes of hers still knocked the breath from his lungs. "Your twenty seconds are up, Van Holtz."

"Twenty seconds? Are you sure I didn't say twenty years?"

Growling, she tried to pull her hand away. "Don't even try it. I know exactly what was said."

"Maybe. Still, when one is lost in the arms of passion, maybe you misheard me."

She stopped struggling and looked at him. "'Lost in the arms of passion'?"

"Yeah. What's wrong with that?"

She snorted a laugh and looked away from him. "Jack's right. You're all certifiable."

Miss Congeniality

“This comment from jackals. And I’ve been meaning to ask, did her parents purposely name her Jackie the jackal?”

“Stop.” Irene dropped her head, but he could see her struggling not to laugh. “You just stop right now.”

“It’s like the name of a cartoon character.”

“She was named after her great grandmother and cut it out.”

Van leaned in, nuzzling the nape of her neck. “Come on, doc. Let’s go for a walk. I’ve missed you.”

Irene swallowed and stared at him. He smiled and the way her body sort of melted in the seat told him he had her...until...

“Would you like to join us, my dear?”

Uncle Verner stared down at them with a damn annoying smirk on his face. Christ, is that the look Irene always accuses me of having? No wonder she’s so pissed off when I do it.

“Join you?” Irene asked, pulling her hand away from Van’s.

“In a friendly game of Risk.” He motioned to the table two of his other uncles had set up.

Irene shook her head. “I don’t think you want to do that, sir.” It was the way she said it that had most of the family turning around to look at them.



Miss Congeniality

“I don’t?” Verner questioned, his smirk never leaving.

“You don’t. Perhaps Monopoly or Life.”

“Are you afraid?” Volker questioned while sitting at the table and getting comfortable.

“No. But I have incredible luck with dice and I am ruthless. You will lose, gentlemen. I will destroy your lands, take your women, ravish your men, and make your children my slave labor. I will own every castle, house, and farm that is within my reach. I won’t be satisfied until I own all of it and you. I will destroy you all, gentlemen and, to be quite blunt, I don’t think you can handle it.”

Van covered his mouth to keep from laughing out loud and he didn’t dare look at his sister. Verner stepped back, motioning to the table. “Now I must insist.”

“As you wish.” Irene sighed and stood. She glanced at Van and gave him a quick wink before turning back to his uncle. “I do hope you’re a ‘sobber,’ Mr. Van Holtz. Nothing I love more than the lamenting of the men I annihilate.”

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“I can’t believe you made him cry.”

“I did not. He just teared up a little.”

“Yeah. I think it was when you told him, ‘I now control your ports and own your manhood.’”

“His wife laughed.”

Van pushed the bedroom door open and Irene stepped in. “This is nice.”

“Yup. This is my room. Nice, big bed.”

“Yes. It is a nice big bed. I’ll enjoy experiencing it all by myself.”

“Irene…”

“Don’t whine, Holtz. It’s not attractive.”

“Okay, okay.”

Holtz stood behind her and suddenly the gigantic room seemed so small.

“Irene, I did want to thank you.”

She glanced up at him. “For what?”

“For playing along with whatever my crazy family is up to.”

“Up to?”

“Yeah. They’ve all been acting weird lately. Especially my father. I don’t know what’s going on but I know I don’t like it.”

Miss Congeniality

“Maybe he’s afraid you’re ready to step in as Alpha Male.”

“I am. But I’m not going to fight my own father for it.”

“But based on my readings—”

“Your readings?”

“Yes. I stopped by the library yesterday during lunch and read up on wolves and their social structure.” Holtz grinned and she hoped he wasn’t laughing at her. “Don’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not. Really. I think it’s...adorable.”

She rolled her eyes. “You do seem to like that word. Either that or your vocabulary is quite limited.” She shook her head. “Anyway, based on how wolf culture is structured, you may have to fight your father for leadership.”

He laughed. “If this were the 1200s, I’d agree with you, doc. But the Van Holtzs are civilized. I’m not about to maul my father to prove I’m ready to take over whenever he wants to hand me the leash. The old man will just have to suck it up.”

Holtz let out a breath and his eyes focused on her lips. “Now that we’ve got that squared away—”

“Oh, no you don’t. Out.” Irene pushed him—well, he let her push him, Irene guessed—to the door and out into the hallway.

“Come on, Irene.” Resting his hands on the doorframe, Holtz leaned in. “Let me stay. I promise you won’t regret it.”

Miss Congeniality

“Your mother and father are six doors down and have heightened senses. There is no way I’m letting you spend the night.”

“You worried about the screaming thing you do?”

“Holtz—”

“If you ask me nice I can gag you.”

Done with the conversation, Irene slammed the door in Holtz’s face. “Go away. Do not return until breakfast is ready.”

“Tease.”

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Van stared into the refrigerator and debated what he wanted to eat. True, he’d had a full meal with desserts, but he wanted more. Actually, he wanted Irene but, as usual, she decided to be difficult. Still, he finally had to admit, he liked being in love. He never thought he would. Always thought of it as another trap. But Irene wouldn’t trap anyone. She really didn’t want to be bothered. Actually, she looked as freaked out as he used to feel. He knew he’d convince her, though. Convince her that for some unknown reason, they were perfect for each other. Besides, he had to do something. He hated not having her in his bed. Only one night apart and he’d never been so lonely before in his life.

Van caught his father’s scent behind him and didn’t bother to turn around. “Hey, Dad.” He grabbed an apple to control his hunger and thought about

## Miss Congeniality

hunting something down. But before he could move, his father's growl had the hairs on the back of Van's neck snapping to attention.

Slowly, Van turned and faced the Alpha Male of the Van Holtz Pack. His father. Standing on the kitchen table, already shifted, Dieter Van Holtz stared coldly at his only son. He bared his fangs.

Still holding the apple, Van raised his hands, palms out. "Dad. Please. Don't do this." But he already knew it was too late. Knew what his father would do. Knew that the Pack stood outside the back door waiting for the old to challenge the new.

His father's paws slammed into him as he leaped from the table, knocking Van through the back door and out onto the porch. By the time Van hit the hard wood, he'd already shifted to wolf.

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Irene sat in the big comfy chair in her room, her naked legs tucked up under her. She wore one of Van's T-shirts as a sleep shirt. Since she hadn't planned on spending the night, she hadn't brought any clothes.

She turned the page on the hardback pot boiler she found in the room's bookshelf. This was the kind of book Irene rarely allowed herself the luxury of reading, but with nothing else to do and still too wound up to sleep, she felt no guilt for taking the time out now.

Nearly an hour before, she'd heard all sorts of snarling and growling coming from the back of the house. She'd ignored it even as she briefly worried what might be going on. They were probably taking down some poor deer and she'd rather not know about it. Kind of like how she didn't need to know where her beef came from.

Miss Congeniality

The glass doors leading to her balcony opened.

“I thought we had this discussion, Holtz—”

Irene watched the dark brown wolf limp into her room. How he cleared the balcony she had no idea. A rather disturbing amount of blood followed him in but she didn't know if that was his or another's.

“Holtz?”

He walked up to her and rested his head in her lap. By the time she stroked his hair, he'd turned back to human. He had bite and claw marks over most of his torso, but the bleeding wasn't as bad as she first thought.

His long arms wrapped around her and he held on. Carefully placing the book beside her chair, she used both hands to stroke his head and shoulders. “What happened?” she asked softly.

He let out a soul-deep sigh. “I just tore my father apart so I could be the next Alpha Male of the Van Holtz Pack. I left him bloody and lying there, so I could take the Pack hunting in the woods.”

“To prove what you'd done didn't bother you.”

“Right.” He burrowed his head deeper into her body, like he wanted to crawl inside her. “To prove that I was stronger than any of them.”

“He challenged you, didn't he?”

“You knew this was coming.” It wasn't a question.

Miss Congeniality

“Yes. I knew. Not when, but I guessed it would be soon. Your father watched you all night.”

“If he wanted me to be Alpha Male now, he should have just handed it to me.”

“That wouldn’t have worked and you know it. We both know he had to do this or risk one of his brothers or their sons challenging you.”

Holtz finally looked up, giving her a sad smile. “Is that also from your reading expedition yesterday?”

“Pretty much.”

Holtz nodded and pulled his arms away from her body. “Well, thank you. There was absolutely no one else I could talk to about this.”

“I’m glad...” Irene swallowed past her nervousness, knowing instinctually what the next step had to be. “I’m glad you came to me. But you’re not done yet.” She’d read about this in one of her books, knew what he had to do to secure his position of Alpha Male. Knew what she had to do.

Holtz turned serious amber eyes toward her. “What do you mean?”

“They insisted I be here for a reason, Holtz. And you know why. You have to finish it.”

He stared at her in confusion for several seconds, then he shook his head. Adamant. “No. Absolutely not, Irene.”

## Miss Congeniality

She pushed the chair back and stood, pulling the T-shirt up and over her head, she tossed it to the floor. “You need to finish this. Now.” Finish it before she lost her nerve.

“No, Irene. I won’t...” He cleared his throat. “What we have is ours. No one else’s. I won’t involve you just to...forget it.”

Irene walked to the balcony doors and pushed them open all the way, then went to the top drawer of Holtz’s chest of drawers and grabbed the box of condoms she’d found earlier when looking for something to wear to bed. She walked back to him and stared down into that handsome face. She had this weird feeling in her chest. For several moments she worried it was something that would need immediate medical attention. Then Van Holtz looked up at her and the feeling doubled, tripled.

She loved him.

And she’d protect what was hers.

Kneeling in front of him, Irene reached out and wrapped her hand around his cock. It had started to get erect as soon as she took the T-shirt off. But once she put her hand on it, she suddenly held a steel pipe.

“God, Irene,” he groaned. “Stop.”

“There’s no option here, Holtz. I’m not giving you one.” To prove it, she leaned over and took the tip of his cock into her mouth. His breath hissed out and his hand slid into her hair, grasping the back of her head. Relaxing her throat, she swallowed all of him and sucked hard.

The hand massaging her scalp suddenly had claws, and Holtz pulled her off him. He gave her just enough time to put the condom on him before he



## Miss Congeniality

slammed her flat on her back. He shoved his cock inside her before she could think of what to say.

Irene slapped her hands against his hips and gripped them tight, pulling him closer. Letting him know without words that she wanted this. Wanted him. And she didn't want him to hold back.

He stared down at her with the eyes of a wolf. But even through the cold eyes of a predator she saw more love and caring than she'd seen from any man.

Holtz placed his hands flat on the floor right above her shoulders, bracing his forearms against her body. They held her in place when he slammed into her that first time. And the next time. And the next.

And she didn't hold back how good it felt. So good she never wanted him to stop.

He powered into her again and again, never letting his eyes stray from her face. Never letting her look anywhere else but at him. It should have hurt, the way he slammed into her. She should have begged him to stop. But instead she raised her knees up so he could get deeper inside her.

It didn't take long for that orgasm to rush up on her. To slam into her with such force that the scream he tore out of her was real and probably heard as far away as Löwe Pride territory.

She didn't know when the tears started, but she sobbed through that orgasm and right into the next. By the third, he ordered her to mark him. To make him her own. She found a spot already opened from his father's claw. Setting her teeth on the wound, she bit down hard.

His grunt told her it hurt him, but then his entire body went stiff and he was

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coming. The two of them joined in a way so primal, they moved on instinct alone.

Holtz dropped on top of her, their sweat and all sorts of other juices comingling. And, Irene simply didn't care. In fact, she'd at least admit to herself, she loved it.

"God, Irene. Are you okay?" His hands moved over her, soothing her.

She nodded, still unsure of her voice. And she really didn't want to start crying again.

He leaned back and stared at her. His eyes were human again, his incisors gone. "Are you sure? Did I hurt you?"

Irene reached up with one hand and ran her fingers down his cheek, across his lips. She stared hard at his face, taking a snapshot with her mind of every line, every scar.

"I love you."

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She said it simply, plainly. The way she said most things. And like that Van's whole world changed. It became perfect.

He laid on his back, pulling her with him, not letting her go. His condom-covered cock still buried inside her, already itching to go again. "I love you, Irene. God, I love you so much."

## Miss Congeniality

She wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head against his shoulder. Nothing in his life had ever felt so right before. Van gripped both sides of her face with his hands and forced her to look at him. He kissed her nose, her cheeks, her lips. He kissed her and loved her. “This time, Irene,” he said softly while pushing her on her back once again. “This time is just for us.”

He took her slow and easy after that, Irene’s cheek braced against his chest, her arms holding him tight.

And when the Pack howled to them outside the window, his mother and father included, he felt her smile.

Chapter Ten

Van reached out for Irene but his hand touched an empty bed. Opening his eyes, he looked around the room and found Irene standing by the terrace doors, staring out at the nearby ocean. She had a sheet wrapped around her and her hair looked wild and completely untamed in the early morning light. She looked well fucked and he wanted her to look like that as often as he could manage.

“What’s wrong?”

She glanced at him over her shoulder. “What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“You’re not reading, complaining you have to get back to work, or working. You’re just standing and staring, which means you’re thinking...which means something’s wrong.”

“You figured me out rather quickly.”

“Actually I’ve had seven years to figure you out. So what’s wrong, doc?”

She leaned against the doorframe. “Thinking about last night.”

“You regret it?”

“No.” She turned those amazing blue eyes toward him. “But I’m hoping you don’t.”

“Why would I?”

“Because this isn’t changing.”

He didn’t understand her. “What isn’t?”

“Me. This is it. Based on genetics, the only changes I see happening is the widening of my butt and the occasional mole if I don’t avoid the sun. My brain, especially, will not change barring Alzheimer’s, dementia, or a tragic head injury.”

Laughing, Van laid back in the bed. “Irene, what the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m never going to be suave or delicate or polite. I’ll never look any better than I do at the moment and I’m severely average.” She held up her hand before he could say anything. “I’m not blind and I’m always honest with myself. And it’s never concerned me before. I’m very happy with who I am. I’ve got bigger issues on my mind than whether I’m wearing the latest Gucci outfit or if I look fat in photos.”

“Okay.”

“That being said, I am not going to spend my life worrying that I’m not pretty enough for you or disappointing you when we go out to some god-awful dinner that I’d rather chew nails than go to. You wanted this and now you’re stuck with it.”

Van raised his eyebrows. “You done?”

“Yes. I’ve said all that needed to be said.”

“Good. Now come here.”

She turned from the door and walked back over to the bed. He lifted the comforter and she dropped the sheet and slid inside. He pulled her close, locking his hands behind her back and pushing his knee between her thighs. He rested his forehead against her shoulder.

He’d just begun to fall asleep when she tapped his shoulder.

“What?” he sighed.

“Don’t you have anything to say?”

“No.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Your concerns are groundless and you’re looking for an excuse to run. I’m not giving it to you, nor am I going to bore myself with bullshit platitudes. If you wanted that you should have stuck with Bradley.”

“You scared him away,” she reminded him.

“And he ran like a girl. I didn’t. So shut up and go to sleep.”

“Well if you’re going to be rude—”

Miss Congeniality

“You know I’m cranky in the mornings.”

“Currently you’re downright satanic.”

“Whine, whine, whine.”

She punched his shoulder and he rolled her over to her back, using his body to hold her down.

“Clearly I need to teach you the proper way to respect the Alpha Male. Or, as you’ll call me from now on, your lord and master.”

Irene stared up at him, her face—as always during moments like these—expressionless.

“What? Would you prefer my savior?”

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For Irene, the strangest part of her recent life changes came when she finished her work. Normally, she didn’t really finish her work until well into the next morning. Getting three or four hours of sleep pretty standard for her. But, for the first time in her steel-trap memory, Irene actually had a desire to leave at night. She had something to look forward to.

Van shared management of the main Van Holtz restaurant with his sister—requirements for all young Van Holtzs. The nights he worked late, so did Irene. The nights he didn’t, she usually made it home no later than seven. He always had a meal waiting for her, constantly worrying she didn’t get enough to eat. Or the proper things to eat. He flatly refused to buy her any peanut butter and crackers.

## Miss Congeniality

After she'd eaten and he chatted with her over his wine, he'd shift and go hunting with some of his Pack and Irene would grade papers or review lab work. They never spoke of her returning to her and Jackie's house and last Irene heard Paul had successfully moved in.

Strange how shifters did things. No big discussions or informing people of plans. One day you were living with a friend and enjoying your life as the town genius, the next thing you knew, you'd been moved into a mansion and were the average one among the populace.

A few times, due to her work, Irene did have to stay late and either Van or one of the wolves came to pick her up. Van hated her staying late, constantly concerned about her safety. But it couldn't be helped, she simply didn't have what she needed at the house.

Then, three days ago, she arrived home and as she opened the door to the room she and Van shared, she noticed a pile of boxes in front of the room across the hall. As all boxes were addressed to her, Irene proceeded to cut open the first one. She couldn't hide her shock when she found a brand new IBM PC AT Model 2 in one of the boxes. The rest were filled with the necessary wires and equipment, including a monitor with a color screen. He'd even gotten her an actual Trailblazer modem, which was so new she hadn't even gotten the dean to sign off on her request yet. She'd found a note between the boxes from Van. In his surprisingly clear handwriting—for a man—he stated, “Now you can get that cute ass home on time. You know I don't like to wait. Use this room as your office—it's so conveniently close to the bedroom—and be naked when I get home. Love you.—Van.”

The overgrown baby had made it nearly impossible for her to stay at work when she wasn't actually teaching or focused on something specific. It used to be when she didn't have anything specific to do, she could find something. She'd come up with some of her most...uh...unstable but interesting ideas that way. Now she only wanted to finish up her day at the university, go home, work for a few hours there, and then spend the rest of the night rolling around her bed with Niles Van Holtz.



Miss Congeniality

“How do normal people live like this?” she asked her computer that suddenly didn’t seem nearly as cool as the one she had at home.

Her phone rang and she stared at it. She knew it was him. The one she blamed for making her a slut. Or, at the very least, bringing the latent sluttiness out in her.

When the phone rang for the sixth time, she finally picked it up.

“Yes?”

“I knew you were there. How long were you going to make me wait?”

“Until the end of time,” she sniped back.

“What’s wrong?”

“I...it simply appalls me to say it, but I want to come home.”

He didn’t say anything at first, but she imagined she could actually hear his smile. “Then come home,” he finally said.

“I was afraid this would happen.”

“What?”

“You distracting me. I’ll never get the Nobel Prize at this rate.”

Miss Congeniality

“Isn’t that a peace prize? You won’t get that because you’re a—”

“Shut up.”

He laughed. “Come home, doc. I want to see you. And my cock is dying to get in you.”

“It was just in my last night. And this morning. And I thought you were at the restaurant tonight.”

“That was the original plan but Carrie asked me to switch with her. She and the brain trust are going away for the weekend and she wanted Friday off.”

“That was nice of you.”

“I made her beg for it first. And then she had to promise to get me a Ferrari.”

Irene sighed.

“What’s the sigh for?”

“Nothing. It’s too stupid to comment on.”

“So you coming home soon?”

She glanced at the clock on her desk and noticed another framed picture of Holtz she’d never seen before sitting in front of it. With an annoyed growl, she moved it aside. Nearly nine o’clock and she’d gotten absolutely no work

Miss Congeniality

done. Now she'd go home and get no work done because Holtz would practically tackle her in the hallway...and she'd let him.

"Might as well, I guess."

"Man, could you sound more put upon?"

"I could actually."

"I'll come by to pick you up."

"Don't bother. Jackie will be here any minute and she'll drive me home."

"You sure?"

"Do I not sound sure?"

"You know if you're cranky when you get home, I'm going to have to fuck it out of you again."

She closed her eyes, her body heating at the memory of that.

"Irene?"

"Shut up," she snapped as Jackie walked through the door and then looked like she was ready to walk back out. Or run. Irene stopped Jackie's retreat with one raised finger. "Jack's here. I'm leaving now, you pompous, overbearing, self-obsessed, mentally challenged prick."

Miss Congeniality

“Why don’t you just admit it,” he said on a sigh. “Admit you love me and my perfectly proportioned cock. And there’s nothing you love more than its life-giving elixir.”

Irene leaned back in her chair and stared at Jackie with her mouth open. “Life-giving elixir?”

“Well what would you call it?”

“That over-salted fluid I can’t get the taste of out of my mouth but that you keep insisting I swallow.”

Jackie walked to the other side of Irene’s tiny office and buried her face in the corner.

“Insist? We both know you beg for it.” His voice lowered. “I want you home. Now. And naked within ten minutes of you entering the house. Am I clear?”

She stood. “We’re leaving and the only thing you’ve been clear about is that you’re clinically insane.”

“This is true.”

Irene hung up and grabbed her backpack. Turning her back on her friend, she opened one of her desk drawers and removed the small titanium case she had hidden in a secret compartment. Inside the case she had a syringe filled with the last two ounces of her creation. Everyday that she held on to it, the more guilty she felt. Not only that, but she realized she truly didn’t need it. Holtz, the smug bastard, had been quite right. She no longer had anything to prove to anyone but herself. Besides, anything this dangerous needed to go. And this time she’d make sure to avoid the Rubicon.

## Miss Congeniality

Slipping the case into her backpack, she zipped it up, and put it on her back, the straps over her shoulders.

She walked around the desk and Jackie frowned, stopping her in her tracks. If she found out Irene still had some of that stuff remaining, Jackie would nail her butt to the wall.

“What?” Irene asked, trying not to sound panicked.

“When did you start wearing jeans and T-shirts to work?”

Irene barely stopped herself from letting out that relieved sigh. “When I keep waking up too late to do more than shower and toss on these clothes. Funny, my students appear much less threatened by my attire, so I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

Together, the females walked out of the building and down the steps while Jackie told Irene about how Paul accidentally set the kitchen on fire.

“I swear, sometimes I don’t know what he’s thinking,” Jackie said again.

“He’s probably so wrapped up in your pussy, he can’t think straight.”

It took Irene a good minute to realize she walked alone.

Turning around, she found her friend sitting on the stairs. “What?”

“I was just wondering where my best friend went.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Making jokes is one thing, but using the word ‘pussy’ is something else. For you, anyway.”

“Oh. That. Well vagina seemed a tad clinical when discussing why your mate is currently so dysfunctional.”

Shaking her head, Jackie deftly got to her feet. “I didn’t see it coming.”

“Didn’t see what?”

Jackie walked down the remaining stairs. “I mean, I knew you’d fall for him. You two are so perfectly mismatched, how could you not fall for each other?” She stopped in front of Irene. “But I never thought he’d make you happy. Not like this anyway. And he does, doesn’t he, Irene? Make you happy?”

Irene shrugged. “I hadn’t really thought about it, but I guess he does. He isn’t...uncomfortable with me. Even when he doesn’t understand a word I may have said, he never looks uncomfortable.” She gripped the straps to her backpack. “I have to say I’m enjoying that.”

Jack linked her arm with Irene’s. “Good. You deserve to be happy, sweetie. Now what about his Pack?”

“They look frightened and I have absolutely no idea why. I’m nothing but appropriately pleasant.”

“Price you pay as the new Alpha Female.”

Miss Congeniality

“I understand all that, but running from the room every time I walk in seems a tad harsh, wouldn’t you say?”

“You do have a point.”

Irene spotted Jack’s bright red Mercedes Benz but held her friend back before she could head toward it, her eyes locking on the black four-door with dark windows parked right in front of it.

Jackie sniffed the air. “Irene, I smell ti—”

“Hi, Doctor Conridge.”

Irene glanced over her shoulder and carefully pulled her arm from Jackie’s. “Oh. Hello, Jenny.” She turned to face the woman completely. “Do you need help with something?”

The corn-fed Iowan gave that bright smile Irene hated. “You know what I need, don’t ya, professor?”

Irene nodded. “Of course, I do.” She stepped toward the woman and let her take firm hold of her arm while three men, trained killers by the look of them, stepped out of the car and walked toward them. “I have to admit, though, I always thought it was Mark.”

Jenny laughed. “Not nearly smart enough that one. I’ve got her,” Jenny said in Russian and motioned behind Irene with her head. “Kill her friend.”

Reaching for his gun, one of the men turned but immediately froze. “Where is she?”

## Miss Congeniality

Irene didn't dare show any emotion. She simply stared straight ahead.

"Forget her." Jenny pushed Irene toward the car. "You're not going to give us any trouble, are you, Professor?"

Resting her hand against the car door, Irene turned back to Jenny Fairgrove, all-American girl. "Why would I do that?" she flatly asked. "We both know my only emotional investment is in my creations." She smirked. "For the right price, anyone can have me."

With a smile, Jenny followed Irene into the car. "Good to know, professor. Because I think you'll find our people quite accommodating."

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Van went out on the back porch and stared out at the woods. He felt unsettled and had no idea why, but he did know he didn't like it. His fangs slid out of his gums and his vision changed from that of a human's to a wolf's. He watched restless wolves roam Van Holtz territory and he knew the rest of the Pack felt it too. Something wasn't right. In fact, something was horribly wrong. They just didn't know what yet.

His sister walked out on the porch and stood next to him.

"Any word from Irene?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Jackie?"

"No."



Van stepped down the stairs, Carrie right beside him.

“What do you need us to do?”

He glanced down at her and said, “I need—”

The distinct, high-pitched howl stopped every wolf in a ten mile vicinity. It wasn't a wolf howl. It was jackal.

He didn't even realize he'd shifted until he looked down and saw his four paws tearing through the darkness, heading for that howl. His Pack right behind him.

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The large men in the car jumped and looked out the windows.

“What the hell was that?” one of them asked.

“Jackal,” Irene stated quietly while watching city streets turn to suburb. They weren't taking her to a main airport but a small airstrip. One built exclusively for private planes.

“Did she just call us jackals?” one of them joked.

Irene grinned which wiped the smile off the man's face. “No. I said the howl you heard was jackal.” She looked at Jenny. “They'll be coming for you.”

Miss Congeniality

Jenny glanced at the men and back at her. She looked terribly concerned she had a lunatic in the car with her. “The jackals will be coming for me?”

“No. The wolves.”

Jenny sighed. “Why oh why do I always get the nutcases?”

“Oh!” Irene pointed excitedly. “See that spot up there?”

“What about it?”

“That’s where it all started. Where I crossed the Rubicon.”

Exasperated, Jenny snarled, “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“It’s feeding time,” Irene whispered.

“That’s it.” Jenny threw up her hands. “We’re so medicating her.”

Irene heard the high-pitched howl again and she moved, bringing her elbow back and into Jenny’s nose. The crunch of cartilage never sounded so beautiful before.

Jenny screamed and covered her face, blood flowing from between her fingers. Irene slammed her fist into the balls of the man sitting next to her. He grunted in pain but didn’t pass out as she’d hoped. Instead, his hands cupped his groin but she used the opportunity to reach across the man and fling the door open.

The ground flew by and she quickly calculated the speed at which they were

## Miss Congeniality

moving, the height of the car, her current weight, the weight of her backpack, and the potential car-to-ground impact.

Adjusting her body twenty-six-point-eight degrees, Irene took a deep breath, hoped for the best, and threw herself out of a moving vehicle.

Chapter Eleven

Irene's body flipped forward several times before landing against unforgiving road. Gasping, her entire body aching, Irene lifted her head. It took her a second to realize the fingers of her right hand were numb. Okay, so her calculations were off a smidge. Good thing she was left-handed.

The sound of squealing brakes forced Irene to turn her head. The car had spun around and she knew it would be heading back toward her at any second.

Forcing herself to her feet, Irene stumbled into the woods. She ignored the blistering pain emanating from her wrist and the sticky feel of blood sliding down her face. What concerned her more was the way her vision seemed to be dimming. The last thing she needed now was to blackout.

Shaking her head and pushing herself for each step, Irene kept going, knowing exactly where she needed to be. Exactly where she needed to lead them. It was her only chance and may get her killed in the process. Better to die in her own country, though, than some place she'd never been before.

They were behind her, closing in fast, although she could hear one of the men telling them not to follow. Irene still had the backpack on and it had become a dead weight. But to take it off now would lose her even more time, so she kept pushing forward.

Her memory steered her, told her where to go. A gift and a curse her memory. Without it right now, she'd be dead. With it, she may end up slave labor in the Soviet Union. Nice choices.

## Miss Congeniality

Irene saw the clearing through the trees, focused her will on making it through those trees to the clearing. She had to.

Big hands grabbed her hair and backpack, yanking her back. Irene swung her arms and slammed her foot into his instep, causing a healthy grunt of pain before he threw her face first into a tree.

Stunned, Irene used the tree for leverage and maneuvered around it. She stumbled forward, tripped, and hit the ground. But she'd made it to the clearing. She'd crossed the Rubicon.

“You fucking bitch!” Jenny Fairgrove spit at her as she dragged Irene up by her hair. “Where were you running, professor? Where did you think you'd go? You'll never get away from us.”

Male hands yanked her from Jenny and Irene waited for it. A slap, a punch. The reminder that they controlled the situation, not her.

Unable to put up much more of a fight, Irene waited for it. But she knew, knew if they didn't knock her out, she'd still fight. She'd fight until they killed her.

Unfortunately that was in her nature too.

Yet the big hands in her hair were the only thing keeping her from falling to the ground.

She looked at the other angry male striding toward her, spitting curses at her in Russian. He was only about five feet from her when they all heard that laugh and he stopped.

Irene grinned. “Welcome to my country, comrade.”

## Miss Congeniality

Quickly wiping the blood from her eyes, Irene watched the agent turn toward the sound as one of the Dupris Clan slammed into him, jaws wrapping around his head.

The big Russian screamed, going for his weapon, but he never counted on how large the Dupris family and its Clan were. “They breed like rabbits,” Van would always complain. And she’d never been so grateful.

They grabbed hold of parts of that agent he probably didn’t even know he had and an ugly tug of war started. The whole time, as they ripped the flesh from his bones and the limbs from his torso, they laughed. The sound they made when excited.

Clearly they were quite excited.

The other agent raised his gun and tried to pull Irene back into the woods even as he watched the carnage in front of him. But by then the wolves were there, tackling him from behind.

Pushed by the momentum and the fact he still had her hair, she went with them all, right into the middle of the battlefield. He got off a shot, but a giant gold paw slammed the man’s hand down, crushing it under its weight. The agent’s high-pitched scream so loud it could be heard above the growls, roars, and howling.

Irene untangled the man’s fingers from her hair and pulled herself away. But before she could make a run for it, the barrel of a gun pressed hard against her throat.

“Get up.”

## Miss Congeniality

She almost groaned. The third male agent. The driver. She'd forgotten all about him. He dragged her to her feet, spun her around, and wrapped his hand around her throat.

He snarled, his fingers tightening against her neck, his gold eyes reflecting in the dark. "I should kill you now." And she thought he just might, but he stopped when that angry male face leaned up close to his and growled low and long.

The agent looked over at a very naked Niles Van Holtz. But it was most likely not the naked that concerned him, but those fangs.

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Van didn't even have to tell the motherfucker to let his female go, he simply knew it was the smart thing to do. Irene stumbled back and Van focused all his attention on the male who didn't belong in his territory.

"And what are you going to do about it, little doggie?" the male sneered.

Christ, he hated Siberian tigers. Always had. They could be worse than the lions.

But he didn't have to make the first move. His sister did. Carrie used to date a tiger and she still hated the bastards. She slammed into the back of him as he shifted from human to tiger and Van followed them down. A few more of the Pack joined in. The big bastard had to be topping at least seven hundred pounds and ten feet long once shifted. But then two of the Löwe breeding males grabbed hold.

The fight didn't last long once the hyena pulled one of the tiger's legs off. But Van heard the slide of a gun yanked back. He turned and saw the barrel

## Miss Congeniality

of a .45 aiming right for him, held by a blond piece of ass with what looked to be a shattered nose.

He bared his fangs, ready to go for her throat but then there was Irene, who he'd ridiculously believed had run home like a frightened girl. Instead, she came up behind the blond and wrapped her right arm around her the woman's neck, her forearm hard against that slim throat. Her left arm slipped under the blonde's, lifting it and the gun up while she raised her left hand, showing the other woman the syringe Irene held.

"You want to know what I'm working on, Jenny?" Irene demanded. "Well here it is!" She slammed the needle into the woman's jugular and compressed the plunger with a vicious growl worthy of any She-wolf.

Gasping for breath, Irene stumbled back and the blonde female dropped to her knees. She yanked the plunger out of her neck and stared at it. But within seconds, whatever Irene had used on her went to work, eating through her neck and ravaging her face.

The woman's screams became choked sobs, her skin festering and dissolving right in front of them. Blood no longer kept in by human flesh, poured to the ground. And by the time Jenny's rotting bones hit the dirt...she was long gone.

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"What...what did you do?"

Irene opened her eyes. She didn't know she'd closed them until she opened them. That's when she realized they were all staring at her.

"Don't worry," she said to one of the Pride females. "That was the last of it." Irene didn't bother to mention she could easily make it again with a few



basic household products and a wad of gum. Nope. Not a good idea to mention that.

Holtz walked up to her, his sister and Jackie right behind him. He stared at her face. “What is it?” he asked softly.

“Broken wrist, I think.”

He winced for her and motioned to a few of the Pack who charged off into the woods. “We’re going to have to take you to the hospital, baby. Our doctor can’t fix this here.”

Irene shrugged, then wished she hadn’t. She again closed her eyes until the nausea brought on by pain passed. “That’s fine.”

“And what about her remains?” Another Pride female demanded. “Our children play here. We hunt here and—”

“What remains?” Irene asked

She watched them all stare at the spot where Jamie Fairgrove died such an agonizing death. Not a piece of bone or speck of blood remained.

Which was exactly the reason the Russians wanted it. A nice, clean, efficient way to kill.

“Don’t worry. It leaves no residue, nothing unsafe. Tomorrow there will be flowers on that spot.”

Van grinned as he pushed stray sweaty hairs off her face. “Flowers?”

“Don’t judge.”

“I’m not. It just seems such an ‘Irene’ kind of thing to do.”

Irene glanced at her arm. “I really think I should get this taken care of. The pain is becoming quite unbearable.”

“You’re in unbearable pain right now?” one of the She-wolves asked. Irene hadn’t bothered to learn the Pack members’ names yet.

“Yes,” Irene answered simply. “I’m just not much of a screamer...shut up, Holtz.”

“I didn’t say a thing,” he laughed.

Holtz took hold of her uninjured hand. “Come on, baby. Let’s get you to the hospital.” He easily lifted her into his arms, careful not to jostle her wounded limb.

Never before had Irene felt so safe or cared for. And his body heat soothed her like nothing ever had...

“Irene!”

Irene opened her eyes. “What?”

“Don’t pass out on me, baby. I need you to stay awake.”

Miss Congeniality

Irene didn't know what he meant until she looked around and realized they were almost back to the house.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Just keep those pretty blue eyes open."

She chuckled. "You are the only person I've ever met who likes my eyes."

"I think they're gorgeous. And what I say is all that matters. Haven't you learned that yet?"

"Yes, I have. I've also caught you chasing your own tail, so excuse me if I'm not ready to sign you up for a think tank just yet."

He growled when a few of the wolves looked back at them and started laughing. "Is nothing sacred between us?" he demanded. Then added against her ear, "Besides, it was harassing me again."

She laughed and felt his smile against her cheek. Yeah, that was definitely one of the things she loved about Holtz...that, in his own way, he was as weird as she was.

Of course, that also meant their children would be absolute freaks.

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Van paced the hospital hallway while the doctors worked on her. Since the hospital had a Van Holtz pediatric wing, he had no doubt they'd give Irene only the best care. Still, he wouldn't feel settled until he saw her. Until he knew she was okay.

“You’re making me nauseous.”

Van ignored his sister and walked back toward the double doors leading to the emergency room.

“Niles Van Holtz, don’t you dare.”

Swinging around, Van stalked back over to his sister.

Irene had passed out on the ride over. Nothing he did could wake her, which really worried him. He knew he couldn’t lose her now. She meant everything to him. Absolutely everything.

Which was why he’d never wanted to fall in love in the first place! And, to be quite honest, he blamed her for his current bout of unhappiness. How dare she make him fall in love with her! How dare she be so damn cute and adorable and absolutely clueless on anything remotely normal and human so that he had no option but to fall in love with her.

“Stop panting or I’m getting you a dog bowl,” his sister snarled.

The doctors walked out into the hallway and if his sister hadn’t gotten to the men first, he would have tackled the first one he could get his hands on.

“How is she, Dr. Bennet?” she asked while holding Van off.

“She’s actually doing quite well. She informed us of the proper way to put on a cast and we had a nice long debate about whether medication of any kind was necessary for her particular problem.”

Miss Congeniality

At that point, Van stopped fighting his sister and stared at the doctor. “She didn’t.”

“Oh, but she did.”

“So I can assume she’ll be just fine?”

“Oh, that you can. We’ve checked her from top to bottom and performed an MRI.”

“An MRI? Why?”

“Because she had concerns about blood clots.”

“Does she have a blood clot?”

“No.”

“Then why—”

The doctor held his hand up while his colleagues kept their heads down and their laughter in. “Please, Mr. Van Holtz. I believe I’ve had all the questions and unasked-for information that any man can tolerate. We’re going to keep her overnight for observation. Strictly a precaution. Tomorrow—preferably in the morning—you can take her home. Or simply far, far away.”

There were more snorts from aborted laughter as the other doctors began to move away and Van nodded his head. “I understand.”

## Miss Congeniality

“Good. Now give them a few minutes to get her into a room and then you can see her. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to go far, far away.”

The doctor walked off and Van looked down at his sister. She gave him what he now knew to be the Van Holtz smirk. “And you were worried.”

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Irene stared down at her cast. Thankfully a clean break, the doctor only had to set her arm and put a cast on. No surgery necessary. Although she did debate with the man whether that was the correct way to go. Her past research had shown...ahhhh, morphine. What a lovely drug.

Smiling for absolutely no reason, Irene let her eyelids droop down. She was tired and she wanted to go home.

Home. Her home. With Van.

But the doctors were making her stay the night. With her insurance, they usually kicked her out within hours but apparently she was a Van Holtz now. And that meant a single room and the utmost care. Oh, yes, she could easily get used to this kind of treatment.

The hospital room door opened and Irene didn’t bother opening her eyes. Another nurse or doctor to hover. They all hovered, it seemed.

“How are you feeling, professor?”

Irene frowned. She knew that voice. Opening her eyes, she looked up into the face of her teaching assistant.

Miss Congeniality

“Mark? What are you doing here?” She looked him over. He wore hospital scrubs. Why?

“I wanted to check up on you. You need to know I tried my best to protect you from her, Professor Conridge. I really did.”

Irene didn't wait for him to say anything else; she simply swung her broken arm at his face, hoping the cast would smash his nose. At the same time, she tried screaming but Mark's hand slapped over her mouth and the needle he shoved into her arm turned everything black.

\*\*\*\*\*

Half-dozen roses in hand, Van pushed opened the hospital door. He frowned when he saw the room empty.

“Irene?” He checked out the bathroom but found that empty, too. He walked out of the room and crashed into his sister.

“What's wrong?”

“She's not in there.”

Van walked over to the nurses' station. “I'm looking for Irene Conridge.”

The nurse frowned. “She isn't in her room?”

“Would I be here if she were?”

Miss Congeniality

“Calm down, Mr. Van Holtz. I’m sure she’s around somewhere.” She stood and leaned over the counter, focusing on a nurse walking out of one of the other rooms. “Josie, did you check on Conridge?”

The nurse nodded. “They took her down to X-ray.”

Van felt the growl in the back of his throat. “Why? She’s already had X-rays.”

His sister put a hand on his arm. “Who took her to X-ray?”

The nurse shrugged, not seeming remotely concerned. “Must be a new orderly. I’ve never seen him before.

The only thing that kept Van from going for both nurses’ throats was his sister’s hand on his shoulder, her cool voice in his ear.

“Not here. Not now.”

Van turned on his heel and stalked out. As soon as he made it outside, the flowers he’d bought for Irene were slammed against the wall.

“I shouldn’t have left her.”

“You went to get flowers,” his sister argued. “How long were we gone? Ten minutes?”

“I shouldn’t have left her,” he said again. “We have to find her.”

“You don’t think they’ll try and take her out of the country again, do you?”



“That’s it.” Van walked over to a payphone outside the hospital. “I’m sick of this shit.”

“Wait. What are you doing?”

“We’re Van Holtzs, goddamnit,” he snarled, shoving coins into the payphone. “Grandfather always said we stick together in the worst of times. Even when we despise each other.”

His sister’s eyes grew wide. “You can’t be calling him? Have you lost your mind? Dad will skin you alive.”

“Dad’s still licking his wounds. This is my mate we’re talking about. We both know I’ll do whatever I have to to get her back...and I will get her back.”

Chapter Twelve

Irene stared up at the ceiling. She'd spotted the vent as soon as they dragged her into this room, kicking and screaming. But with her arm in a cast—and itching like Satan—she'd never be able to get up and out of it. So she'd had to come up with other options. And she had.

They'd brought her to a top-secret Air Force Base. Somewhere in Texas.

She would say that they'd treated her well. Good food, wine, TV with cable and some ridiculous amount of channels. Perhaps twenty? Who, in their right mind, would spend time flipping through twenty channels?

But with all the good food and everything else, came questions. Lots of questions. They wanted to know what the Soviets wanted and whatever it was they wanted it for themselves. As if she would ever trust human males with anything so dangerous. Oppenheimer never got over what he unleashed on the world, she wouldn't go down the same road.

Not only that...but she missed Van. To her horror. She missed another human being. What next? She'd start crying over cat commercials and buying cookies from those little fascists Girl Scouts? Who, to this day, she never forgave for not letting her into the local troop. Bitches.

Even worse, she wondered if he missed her. No one ever had before. Irene was not the kind of woman people missed when she wasn't around. Instead they mostly felt relief. Her students this semester must be in absolute heaven with all the times she'd been out of the office the past few weeks.

Well, no bother. Everything was set. And they'd regret the day they ever set eyes on her.

Miss Congeniality

Agent Harris walked into the room with two cans of ice-cold soda and smiled at her. She hated that smile. She hadn't seen anything that fake since Jackie and Paul had talked her into going to dinner with them at the Playboy Club.

"Here you go, Professor Conridge." He placed the can in front of her.

"Thank you."

"You know, Niles Van Holtz is quite determined."

"Yes. I've learned that."

"He's actually contacted the President about you."

Irene snorted. "Regan? He won't help. He still hasn't gotten over me doing a comparison between him and Hitler that time I was invited to the White House."

Harris cleared his throat and sat down catty-corner from her. "Why don't we talk a little about Jenny Fairgrove?"

"Jenny Fairgrove?" Irene blinked. "Oh, yes. She wants to be my teaching assistant. Although I doubt I'd give her the honor."

"And why's that?"

"She's perky. For that alone I won't give her the job."

“That seems pretty harsh.”

“Albert Einstein could apply to be my TA, and if he were perky...I wouldn't give him the job either. Of course after finding out that Mark worked for you the entire time, I'm not sure I'd trust anyone. And how is his face doing?”

Harris' jaw clenched. “You fractured his right cheekbone with your cast.”

Irene stared at Harris but didn't respond. Finally, the agent snapped, “Well? How do you feel about that?”

Blinking slowly five times, she flatly replied, “I feel nothing.” She shrugged. “It's a gift and a curse.”

Irene glanced at the never-speaking agent, Marshal. “Do you think you could get me something for a headache? Aspirin is all that I require.”

The stalwart agent glanced at Harris who gave him an affirming nod. He walked out, closing the door behind him, and Irene returned her attention to Harris, Mark's shattered face already forgotten.

“So why are you asking me about Jenny Fairgrove?”

“We have Intel she's not quite who she says she is.”

Irene stared at Harris until he shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“Something wrong, Professor?”

“You’re of Scandinavian descent.”

“Uh...yes. I am.”

“Yes. I can tell from your bone structure.” Then she slammed her cast against his nose, angling it so she knocked him out but didn’t kill him.

Irene knelt beside his prone body and dug into his pants until she found his set of keys.

“Gotcha.”

“He said you were determined.”

With a sigh, Irene gripped the keys in her hand and glanced over her shoulder.

She didn’t know who this man was, but he didn’t seem friendly.

“Dr. Conridge?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He motioned to her. “Come on.” He held his hands out to her. “Let’s get you up.”

Really big hands took surprisingly gentle hold of her arms and pulled her to her feet.

“And you are?”

“All you need to know is I’m family.” He patted her on the head and she had the overwhelming desire to punch him in the testes. Which meant only one thing...

“You must be a Van Holtz.”

He grinned. “You can call me Uncle Edgar.” He pushed her toward the door. “I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner. I was in Bogotá.”

“Why?”

“Aren’t you cute,” seemed to be his only answer. “Now, let’s get you back before that nephew of mine turns the whole Pack and the United States government against him.”

Irene sighed. “I really wish I’d known you were coming.”

Uncle Edgar, who was an inhumanely large man, stared down at her, his eyes narrowing. He looks exactly like Holtz. “Why?” Although he looked like he didn’t want to know the answer.

Unfortunately he received that answer anyway thirty seconds later when the east side of the base blew.

Before he could say anything, Irene explained, “Don’t worry. I took out the part of the base they’d closed down. But it’ll still wipe out the—” The lights flickered and went off, leaving them in complete darkness. “Electricity.”

Miss Congeniality

“Good thing I can see in the dark then, huh?” He took hold of her arm.  
“Let’s go.”

“What about Harris?”

“Don’t worry about him. He won’t be bothering you again.”

“Oh?” She didn’t need light to make herself crystal clear.

“No. No. I won’t kill him. Although I could. And your mate probably wants me to.” He led her into the pitch black hall and she let him because she really had no choice.

“You’re C.I.A., aren’t you?”

“Aren’t you cute,” he said again.

“Yes. I’m painfully adorable.” He led her outside, the airmen scrambling to put out the strategic fire she’d planned. “Is there ever a time that the Van Holtz men don’t sound pompous?” she asked, unable to stop herself from smiling.

“Not since before Christ.”

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Van stormed into the Van Holtz house and he watched every Pack member but his parents disappear. Even his sister grabbed her mate’s arm and pulled him from the room.

“Well?” he snarled. “Any word from Edgar?”

“Nope,” his father replied calmly, turning the page of his Wall Street Journal. The old man’s wounds had completely healed, a six-month trip around Europe for him and his mate booked, and the disturbing noises coming from behind their bedroom door, suggested Old Man Holtz was thoroughly enjoying his retirement.

“Then I’m done waiting.”

“And what will you do, my son?” his mother asked as she worked on her needlepoint.

“Something!” he roared. “Which is more than any of you are doing. My mate is gone and no one cares!”

“Of course we care,” his mother chastised gently.

Afraid he’d say something that would irrevocably damage his loving relationship with his parents, Van turned and walked up the stairs toward his room. Throwing open his door, he tore off his jacket and tossed it across the room, moving over to the phone. He picked up the receiver but stopped when he heard sounds he found annoying and exhilarating all at the same time.

Tapping and beeping.

Dropping the phone back in its cradle, Van walked out of his room and across the hall. He pushed the door open, ignoring how it snagged on the multitude of wires and cords.



## Miss Congeniality

And there she sat. At her computer, plugging away at something he never would, or wanted to, understand.

He heard her give a little curse, annoyed that the fingers of her right hand weren't moving as fast as she'd like them to. And he sensed that they hurt a bit too, since she kept bending them and wincing.

Van gave himself a moment to enjoy seeing her there...safe. And where she belonged.

She cursed again and turned sideways in her chair, bending her fingers and frowning down at her defenseless cast.

“Don't even think about taking that cast off, doc.”

Irene's head snapped up and she gave a relieved smile...seconds before she jumped out of the chair and charged into his arms.

Van held Irene tight against him, his relief at having her back in his arms, nearly dropping him to his knees.

“I didn't think you'd ever get home,” she said into his neck.

“Me?” he laughed. “You had me worried sick.”

“Blame the government. They wanted my formula.”

“Did they break you?”

Miss Congeniality

Her sniff was arrogance personified. “Not in this lifetime. Although...”

“Although?”

“I wish I’d known your uncle was coming. They were really quite upset about the damage.”

Unwilling to release her, Van pulled back enough to see her face.  
“Damage?”

“From the explosion,” she answered simply.

“I don’t want to hear this, do I?”

“Probably not. Besides, your uncle said he’d take care of it.”

“Good enough.” Van lifted her and carried her back into their bedroom, slamming the door with his foot.

He laid her on the bed, stretching out beside her. “I missed you, doc.”

“I missed you, too.”

They stared at each other for several seconds, then they both sighed sadly.

“What have we done to ourselves?” Van asked.

Miss Congeniality

“I don’t know. I was so happy not caring about anyone. Now I have all these...these...emotions. And it’s all your fault!”

“My fault?” Van began pulling off her clothes. “I’m Alpha Male of the Van Holtz Pack. That’s a female magnet, doc. I should be knee-deep in pussy. Instead I’m madly in love with you. Can’t imagine my life without you.”

“What about me?” she demanded, leaning up to let him get her T-shirt off her before she took hold of his sweatshirt and lifted it up. “My life was organized and controlled. I was controlled. Now all I can think about is having sex with you. The most irritating human being I’ve ever known.”

“Like you’re a ray of frikin’ sunshine? Uncle Verner is still trying to recover from that game of Risk.”

“If you can’t handle world domination, don’t pick up the die.”

Van stood at the end of the bed and dragged her jeans off. “Oh, that’s a very nice way of talking about your own family.”

“Family? When did they become family?”

“As soon as you agreed to marry me.”

“I never agreed to marry you.”

“Yes you did. You just don’t remember.”

Irene got on her knees and undid his jeans. “Holtz, I have a memory computers dream about.”

Miss Congeniality

“Don’t brag, baby. It’s tacky.” The fingers on her right hand wouldn’t cooperate, so he helped her get his jeans unzipped and pushed them down, kicking them, his shoes, and socks away. He shoved her back on the bed, pushing her into the mattress with his weight. “We’re getting married. Just deal with it.”

“Fine. But I’m not changing my name.”

“That’s fine. But we’re having a wedding.”

She made a clear sound of disgust.

“I don’t want to hear it, doc. I’ve got a lot of family. We’re having the wedding. A year from now, I’ve decided.”

“Well I don’t have time to sit around worrying about napkins with our names on it and flowers or whatever.”

“I’ll handle all that.”

“Yes. You will.” She lifted her right arm with its cast above her head and wrapped her left around his neck. “Now. I’ve gone without sexual intercourse—”

“Fucking.”

“—fucking, for four days. Get to work. You have much to make up for.”

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## Miss Congeniality

Since she had the printer going non-stop for forty minutes, she never heard a thing. Then Jackie slapped her shoulder.

Startled, she spun around in the chair. “What?” She stared thoughtfully at her friend. “What’s with the dress?”

Jackie looked at the white dress she held in her hand and back at Irene. “It’s for you.”

“Forget it. I’m not going to any dinners tonight.” She faced her computer. “Holtz will understand.”

“Not this time, he won’t.”

“Besides,” Irene added, “I would never wear white to a charity dinner.”

“Irene Danielle Conridge!”

Glancing over her shoulder, “What? What did I do?”

“Apparently you forgot your wedding.”

Irene rolled her eyes. “No way. That’s not for a year.”

“It has been a year.”

“Don’t even try it. The wedding isn’t until October.”

Miss Congeniality

“It is October.”

“October 1985.”

“It is 1985.”

Irene’s fingers froze over the keyboard. “Not the nineteenth, though.”

“Yes, Irene. It’s Saturday, October nineteenth, 1985.”

“But it’s not eight o’clock.”

“No. It’s not.”

Irene let out a breath.

“It’s seven-forty-five...p.m.”

“Damn!” Irene stood up, rounding on her friend. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“We’ve been telling you. Didn’t you notice the decorations, the people coming in and out...the dress fittings? Or how about when I walked in an hour ago and told you that you needed to get dressed for the wedding?”

She shrugged. “Not really.”

Jackie's eyes closed. "Tell me you at least showered."

"Uh...yesterday."

"Oh!" Jackie stormed out into the hallway. "I need She-wolves! We have an emergency."

"Aren't you blowing this out of—"

"Shut up!"

She glanced at Jackie's already protruding stomach and grouched, "I'm so glad you and Paul decided to breed."

"Don't make me kill you. Because I will kill you."

For the next thirty minutes, the She-wolves and one jackal subjected Irene to a litany of physical abuse including a shower, forcing her unruly hair into a lethally tight bun, slapping what she considered useless makeup on her face, and forcing her into a white sheathe dress she'd never buy for herself.

Standing outside the closed doors leading to the ballroom and the waiting groom and guests, Irene glanced down at the bracelet Carrie placed on her wrist while Jackie put a matching necklace around her neck.

"This is nice."

"Van got this for you," Carrie stated on an exasperated sigh. "Don't you remember?"

Miss Congeniality

“Was that the day he got me the Zenith Z-171 PC?”

Jackie laughed and said, “You owe me twenty bucks, Van Holtz. I told you she liked that computer more than the forty thousand dollars worth of jewelry your brother got her.”

“What can jewelry do? Do you realize that PC is portable? And it’s battery powered with backlighting!”

“I don’t know why he bothers,” Carrie muttered before stepping away and looking Irene over. She shrugged. “I guess it’s the best we can do.”

“Gee thanks.”

“Don’t listen to her.” Jackie slapped a small bouquet of red roses and baby’s breath in her hands. “You look wonderful.”

A string quartet began to play and the She-wolves started walking into the ballroom single file.

“This is such a waste of time.”

“Irene, suck it up.”

“I have things to do!”

“What? And I don’t? Now stop whining and in ten seconds follow me down that aisle or so help me God, I will kick your lily white ass!”



## Miss Congeniality

Jackie turned around and the pair paused, realizing they had the attention of all the guests.

Forcing a smile, Jackie whispered, "I'm so getting you for this later."

Then she was off, slowly walking down the aisle, while Irene impatiently and quickly counted to ten. She followed after her friend and several times almost passed her. The third time, Jackie slammed her elbow into her gut, which effectively slowed Irene down.

When she finally reached Holtz's side, he had tears streaming down his face, but she knew it wasn't from the beauty of the moment.

"Stop laughing at me," she whispered.

"Could you look more annoyed?" He laughed, keeping his head down while the priest or reverend or whatever droned about why the hell they were there.

"There are a myriad of things I could be doing at this moment. Useful, life-changing things. This is a waste of time."

"Excuse me?" The priest/reverend/whatever snapped. "Do you mind?"

"Sorry," Irene said and then added, "But feel free to pick up the pace."

Which got a snort out of Holtz.

She lasted a good five minutes before her foot started tapping.

“Cut it out,” Holtz growled, although she had the feeling he was still laughing.

“I’m bored,” she whispered back. “Too much longer and I’m going to start taking things apart. And you know how you hate when I do that.”

“Speaking of which, what happened to my Mercedes?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I came home yesterday and it was nothing but burnt metal.”

“Oh. That. Yes, I wanted to see how engines worked. I walked away for a few minutes to get a glass of orange juice and when I came back...boom.”

“Boom?”

The priest/reverend/whatever cleared his throat.

“Sorry,” Holtz mumbled.

A few more lines about commitment and love and Holtz snarled under his breath, “What do you mean ‘boom’?”

“I was merely trying to see if I could get more speed out of it.”

“How much speed?”

Miss Congeniality

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve been toying with this idea of being able to travel from one country to the next in a car. I figure if you make it fast enough, it might hydroplane.”

“All right, that’s it. Stay away from my cars.”

“But you have so many.”

“That’s not the point!”

“Excuse me!” the priest/reverend/whatever snapped. “This is a sacred and time-honored ceremony, so do you think you two could act like it and shut the holy hell up?”

Annoyed, Irene tapped at the spot on her wrist where her watch should be if those vicious She-wolves hadn’t taken it off her. “Or, you could speed it up. I’ve got things to do and your rambling is boring me!”

“Fine!” the priest/reverend/whatever yelled. “Do you?” he asked Holtz.

“Yup!”

“And you?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Ring?”

“Here.” Holtz placed the white gold band next to the sizable diamond he’d

insisted on getting her.

“Good. You’re married.”

“See?” Irene asked sweetly, just to annoy. “That wasn’t so hard now was it?”

For a second there, she really thought the man might hit her.

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Van watched Irene work the room. For someone enormously bad with normal human relations, she really amazed him when it came to trying to get donations for the university. He didn’t want her to work, but he knew he had to do something. During the toast portion of the evening, he realized she’d taken his watch off and had the back pried off. A twenty thousand dollar watch and she takes it apart.

Well, at least giving her a task had calmed her down. And she looked absolutely beautiful. Especially once she took her hair out of that bun. Stray hairs kept slipping out and she finally went to the bathroom and tore out all the pins. But he made a good choice with the dress since she couldn’t be bothered choosing her own beyond stating, “Nothing puffy like Princess Di wore.”

He should be annoyed. But he wasn’t. He loved that Irene could give a shit about their wedding. Because in the end it didn’t matter. With or without some piece of paper, they were together for life. No one else was as perfect for him as this one, blindingly brilliant woman.

Irene walked back over to him but before she could drop into one of the chairs, he pulled her into his lap.

Miss Congeniality

“You doing okay?”

“Yes. Mikolev Thornapple—an actual name, mind you—just promised ten thousand to the science department.” She looked down at him. “Are we going on a honeymoon?”

“Yep. Right after we’re done here.”

“Where?”

“Aruba.”

He had to bite his tongue when she frowned.

“Because my pasty butt does so well in the sun?”

Laughing, Van nipped her shoulder. “Switzerland, Germany, Norway, Scotland. We’ll be staying at lovely castles and B&Bs. All of them near very old, very interesting libraries.”

“You don’t mind me spending tons of time in a stuffy old library for hours?”

“Not if you promise to tell me anything interesting you learn...and you give me regular sex.”

“That is a promise I can commit to.”

“Figured.”

Suddenly Irene gently clasped his face between both her hands and kissed him. “As you may or may not know,” she said against his lips, “nearly forty-one percent of all marriages end in divorce in this country. But I feel we’ll beat those odds simply because we’re so freakishly unusual and unstable enough to make this work. Especially with your unique DNA strain and my less than enthusiastic interest in legal actions of any kind.”

“Irene, you sweet talker, is that your way of saying we’re perfect for each other?”

“Yes. Wasn’t I clear? Also, we love each other and that’s most important. Because, really what is perfect? What does that—”

And Van kissed her before she could head down that long-winded road, happily wondering to himself how he ever got so lucky.

Miss Congeniality

Epilogue

Twenty years later...

Irene waved and forced a smile until the last SUV disappeared down the road. Then she stormed into her house, slamming the door behind her.

Holtz reached for her. “Doc—”

“Not a word!” she snarled before heading up the stairs and going straight to her daughter’s room. She practically kicked the door open and the little viper didn’t even look away from her PC. No, that wasn’t right. Her Apple Computer. Oh, the shame!

“How dare you!”

Finally startled away from whatever she was working on, Ulva Van Holtz turned in her chair to face her mother. “How dare I what?”

“Why did you tell her she was pregnant?”

Ulva blinked in confusion. “Because she is pregnant.”

“That’s not the point.”

“I’m not sure what the issue is.”

“You simply can’t say whatever comes to your mind. And stop telling my students you found flaws in their thesis.”

“But you say whatever comes to your mind.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then I believe I am unclear on what your point is. And I did find flaws. In fact, she should re-think those last ten chapters altogether.”

Irene stepped closer to her daughter, with the possible intent of wringing her neck, but the two females stopped arguing when the Van Holtz men stumbled into view. Holtz held both his sons in his arms—upside down.

“What are you three doing?”

“Nothing,” they replied in unison, which meant “something.”

“Papa says we can go over to Aunt Jack and Uncle Paul’s.” This said with her son’s sweetest smile. Not even twelve and already a heart-breaker.

“Oh, he did, did he?”

“I’ve already called,” Holtz admitted. “They said they’d love to have them over.”

“Well with their other ten thousand children, what’s three more?”

“I’m not going,” Ulva said with a haughtiness that annoyed Irene no end.



Miss Congeniality

“Yes. You will. Or you won’t play Warcraft again until the second coming. Do you understand?”

“Fine. I prefer Aunt Jackie’s company to anything I find around here anyway.” And then Ulva turned back to her computer, effectively dismissing her.

Irene went to choke her, but Holtz grabbed her hands and dragged her out of the room.

“Pack your backpacks for a couple of days. The driver will be waiting in ten minutes.”

“That girl is driving me insane!” Irene snarled after slamming the bedroom door.

“She didn’t mean to make things difficult for your student.”

Irene gave a dismissive wave and began pulling out the laundry. “I mean did you see that poor boy? He’s like nine feet tall, two thousand pounds, and he looked absolutely terrified.”

Holtz stretched out on the bed. “He wasn’t terrified. He just knew it would be a painfully long drive home.”

“You can get that smirk off your face, Van Holtz.” She dropped the laundry basket by the bed and crouched next to it to retrieve his socks. “I saw the looks passing between you two. And how do you get your socks so far under here?” She knelt down and reached under the bed.

“Sorry, baby.”

“You’re so anal retentive about the mess in your precious kitchen, but you and your damn socks...”

“I know. It’s so sloppy. I don’t know what I’m thinking.”

Socks in hand, Irene sat up, blinking when she came face to face with Holtz. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“I still think you put these socks under here just so you can stare at my butt.”

“Doctor Conridge! What a horrible thing to say.” Then he gave her that grin. The same grin that, even after all these years, still knocked her on her proverbial ass.

Of course, the fact he still wanted to watch her butt amazed her like the discovery of uranium. And it was one of the reasons she didn’t let the cleaning staff touch their laundry.

“And stop telling people I set your car on fire and stabbed you. Did you see that poor boy’s face?”

“But you did do those things.”

“They were accidents,” she growled.

Miss Congeniality

“So you say. And Conall Vígá-Feilan is not a boy. Although why he’d involve himself with a midget, I’ll never know.”

“Miki Kendrick is not a midget. And he’s with her because she’s brilliant and dangerously unstable.”

“Like you?”

“I am not dangerously unstable. Those tests proved it,” she grouched.

Laughing, Van grabbed Irene’s arm, and dragged her onto the bed. He pinned her to the mattress, arms above her head. “I’ve got an idea, doc.”

“What?”

“That once we get the kids off, we spend the next forty-eight hours completely naked.”

“You act like only the kids live in this house.”

“Trust me. The Pack will find other places on the territory to stay this weekend.”

“Ogre.”

“When it comes to this pussy, you’re damn right.”

She sighed thoughtfully. “It amazes me how that kind of talk sexually arouses me.”

Miss Congeniality

Holtz leaned down and nipped her breasts. “It amazes me that I find you saying that so goddamn hot.”

Irene’s back arched as he sucked on a nipple through her T-shirt and the lace of her bra.

“Perhaps you’re delusional,” she groaned.

“No. I just love knowing this pussy belongs to me and no one else. Doesn’t it, doc?”

“It seems so. I find all other men repulsive.”

“And it better stay that way,” he teased, grinning up at her, his chin resting against her breast bone. “I don’t share what’s mine.”

Digging her hands in his hair, Irene pulled him up until they were face to face. “Wolves.” And she gave him that smile no one ever saw but him. “So damn demanding.”

“Geniuses,” he sighed back. “So damn hot.”

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