

SANGUINARY  
SEDUCTIONS  
HUNTED

LAURA TOLOMEI

A vicious predator brings bloody death to a peaceful village. On his hunt to stop the brutal killings, Kendryck will uncover truths best left hidden.

Why is this vicious predator terrorizing the village? Who is Therry, and why does he live deep inside the forest, away from mankind? But mostly, why can't Kendryck get him out of his mind? As the hunt progresses, so does his fascination with the most intriguing young man the hunter has ever met, until things don't add up, and Therry's dark secrets will have to be revealed...eventually.

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By

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The body lay in a pool of blood, its sticky, bittersweet smell piercing his nostrils.

"Poor Derrynt." Leaning against one of the many trees enclosing the tragic scenery, a stocky man next to him shook his head dejectedly. "Look how that beast left him." Evidently mangled by a predator, judging by the visible traces all over the chewed flesh, ripped skin and torn muscles were strewn around like a naughty child's forgotten toys. "It's disgusting! And I don't know how you can stand to look at it so closely, Kendryck." The man's gaze veiled in aversion.

"Just checking for clues, Skivet." For one thing, the victim was young, hence a better prey for any carnivore looking for an easy kill. "For any kind of evidence." Kendryck narrowed his gaze on the death scene, annoyed with the man's useless chatter and with the scarce light that didn't allow a thorough examination. "Anything, actually." Bending on his knees, he canvassed the ground around the body, detecting bloody paw prints leaving the scene. "Which can help us identify the predator." Not that he needed to confirm what his guts had already told him.

"Ha! You mean it's possible to track down the beast simply by the..." Another man of slimmer built gestured revolted at the mess on the ground. "The tooth marks on our teammate?"

"Absolutely, Bryce, and if you want to know, it's the same predator."

"The same that struck Calhoun?" As though realizing he had a job to do, Skivet crouched on his heels, finally daring to observe Derrynt's remains.

"And Frydan, too." Yep, the third killing in just over a month, and so much for the Chief's *team effort!*

"The Chief isn't gonna be happy about it." Since when had Bryce started reading his mind? "He turned to us when the first bloodshed started, then became desperate with Calhoun's death." A grim snarl curved his thin lips. "Remember what he told us?"

"Hard to forget his speech about efficient team work defeating these killers." At Skivet's words, Kendryck remembered the Chief glaring at them, an assorted group of makeshift hunters with the exception of himself. "And how our common efforts would catch them in the end."

"Lucky for us it's just one." *'Cause you could've never handled anything more.* Not to belittle the Chief's efforts at assembling a patrol group, but it was far from getting any positive results.

"How can you tell?" A flash of curiosity lit Bryce's eyes.

"Cause each predator leaves a unique signature." *One I've learned to decipher.* "See these lacerations?" He indicated the large gashes at the base of the neck and on the chest. "That's the signature I'm talking about." And he had seen far too many similar corpses to be wrong about the solitary perpetrator that had snuck up behind the young man and brought a swift death. An avoidable one, if only the man had been trained, which unfortunately he hadn't.

"No, Kendryck, it can't be the same that has been slaughtering cows, horses and sheep for the last two months." Obviously having concluded his perusal, Skivet straightened up.

"It is." Unwilling to pick a fight, still bent on making his point, Kendryck kept his tone even. "Trust me." Point of fact—of the whole damn team, Kendryck was the only one with field experience. "And after consuming your precious resources, it's now acquired a taste for human flesh, which is only going to make it more vicious."

"Yeah, right. That's why we're on its tracks." The meek note told Kendryck something in his words must have hit Skivet deep inside. "Our village can't take it anymore."

"Doesn't even seem to be the same place I grew up in." Bryce nodded in agreement, a concerned expression clouding his dark eyes. "Everybody's so afraid now. They hardly leave their homes, and the animals we used to leave free are now chained down, kept inside locked stables." He shook his head probably at the grim picture he was painting. "I don't know if you can understand me, Kendryck, being that you're not a native and just recently moved in."

"Oh, I understand all right." He had known countless such villages, all set in peaceful farming areas that relied on their crops and livestock, all well-adjusted communities growing steadily until their overpowering needs had upset the natural order of things. And that was the real problem. "I've seen plenty other places just like this." So what if animals and vegetation tried to hang on? Their number was dwindling fast everywhere, along with the available space.

"Never settled down uh?" Skivet retreated until his back rested against a tree trunk like before Kendryck had begun his investigation.

"I'm not the type." No, definitely not. "It's not...hem...what do you call it?" Restlessly roaming the countryside, he had changed one town after another in an attempt to find...actually, he had no idea himself. "Not my cup of tea." Nothing seemed to satisfy him except perhaps life

in the wild. "I like being more in the open." He inhaled the heavy scent he loved so much. "And I've seen too many villages already." His gaze dropped to the blotchy ground below. "And too many predators." Which was the reason he was a hunter and they were not.

"So you must've seen your fair share of brutal attacks and ugly deaths in your time." As if impressed, Bryce's eyes widened.

"A few..." Truth was—a bloody trail seemed to follow and eventually catch up with Kendryck, no matter where he went. "Nothing quite like this though." Apparently peaceful before his arrival, villages experienced violent deaths, usually blamed on a predator of some kind that had suddenly awakened its taste for human flesh. "But I guess it's a natural escalation given the situation." This last village was no exception. Settling in a couple of months before had coincided with the first bloodshed, a coincidence that hadn't escaped his notice. If it meant something, he had no idea what it could be, clueless as to the possible connection with the other occurrences or to him in particular.

"So, based on your experience, why are these beasts leaving the forest and preying on our animals?" Skivet's tone was vaguely ironic.

"When not on our humans." While Bryce's held no trace of challenge.

*It's our fault 'cause we're too greedy.* "It's obvious nature's balance has been upset." *So she's striking back.* Knowing how little people liked to hear certain things, he usually kept his deep-rooted opinions to himself. "And when it does, lives are caught in the middle." Undeniably, the carnivore had tried its luck on the humans' farms, or rather, one particularly vicious killer. "Like Derrynt's here." Still, the mauled body at his feet didn't seem to fit inside the balance and neither did the indiscriminate cattle slaughter that had been plaguing the village lately. No, something wasn't right, at least here, inside the thick woodland now smelling of blood mixed with the murky odor of decaying leaves, stale water, darkly humid spots. Unlike the other places he had lived in, the men's space here wasn't as extended, not as far-reaching to cramp wild life into leaving the safety of the backwoods. So why would any beast, one of prey no less, dare attack humans and their belongings?

"Sure would help if somebody had actually seen what this predator looks like." Careful to avoid looking down, Bryce's gaze wandered around, as if he might see it right now.

"It must be a feline." The image of a sleek and powerful panther popped in his mind. "A very large one." Not to mention elegant and sensual, which was a matter of speculation that certainly didn't help the dead body in front of him.

"What business does a feline have in living in the forest?" Evidently perplexed, Bryce's eyebrows rose to a point. "Doesn't it usually prefer open terrains?"

"It does." Yeah, another odd thing that didn't fit the meat-eaters' usual pattern, at least not the one Kendryck had come to know so well. "But something must've driven it here." At this particular time and place, which was another coincidence he found hard to fathom. "And for the life of me, I can't understand why Derrynt would be here, in the depths of the forest, alone."

Skivet shrugged, as though the question didn't strike him as important. "Maybe he saw the predator."

"Too bad he didn't live to tell about it." Bryce's sarcasm emphasized how little he, like Kendryck, could stand Skivet.

"He still should've had better sense than to come so far out without any backup." Kendryck's gaze focused on the paw prints once again. "Maybe if we follow them, we might discover where it hides."

"You go right ahead." With an elaborate gesture, Skivet indicated toward a group of trees, where the feline seemed to have headed. "I'll go tell the Chief we found Derrynt in not so good a shape as we left him." The irony seemed unnecessary until Kendryck realized Skivet was

scared to his bones, so used it to keep a semblance of sanity.

"I'll come with you," Bryce offered, already heading in the village's direction.

"Hey, we can't leave Derrynt here like this." All right, he got it they were no hunters nor used to unsavory slayings. "At the mercy of any other animal deciding to make a feast out of him." Still, it was no reason to abandon their ex team member, even if stiff and cold.

"We can't carry him." By the stubborn line of the jaw, Kendryck knew Skivet had no wish to touch the body, much less take the responsibilities of bringing it back to his family. "We need more people." He looked to Bryce, asking silent confirmation.

"Yeah, it's a long way back, and we should watch out in case the predator returns." Nervously, Bryce glanced over his shoulder, like the beast was waiting for him, fangs ready to sink in his flesh, claws ready to rip him apart.

"Then let's at least protect him." Bending, Kendryck gathered a few rocks, disposing them around what remained of their once young man. "So you can return with a *large* group of people that'll have no trouble disposing of him." He made it sound sarcastic on purpose, having had enough by now of them.

At least they helped. Once the victim lay buried beneath a substantial rock pile, Kendryck walked in the presumable direction the feline had taken, humidity enveloping him with the cool air condensing on his warm skin. Accelerating away, he said nothing to the two men heading the opposite way. There was no need. He had lost his taste for talking. He had lost his taste for being in their company, in any man's company for that matter. This always happened whenever he was forced in close proximity with humans for too long.

Yes, he was and always had been a loner. His mother's fault perhaps for having grown him away from people. His mother's fault he had developed morbid tastes, which definitely set him apart now. His mother's fault he had become a hunter. He had spent way too many hours alone, fantasizing about violent deaths and truculent massacres. Shivers of pleasure still ran down his spine just imagining blood gushing out from torn flesh, something he replicated in childhood by cutting his arms and sucking the red streaks avidly. So what if he loved the taste, the smell and even the feel of the slippery liquid? As a hunter, it turned out to be an asset, particularly in the close kills. In fact, using a sharp knife to drain his victim still gave him a thrill as life ebbed out from the blood he spilled.

Kendryck sighed, shaking off useless musings that only distracted his attention from the task of catching a killer. The tracks ran up a hill before descending into a small-secluded valley. No problem. He was just about to reach it when he heard a cry.

"Help!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Kendryck ran in the direction of the voice, a part of his brain registering that the forest had gone very quiet all of a sudden. No bird chirped. No animal moved a muscle. Not even a leaf rustled despite the soft breeze blowing, which seemed to have stopped, too. Even if he could guess the cause, he could do nothing about it, speeding as he was through tall thick trees that didn't allow any sort of clear view.

"Help." The cry rang out again from a clearing just a short distance away.

Coming from behind, Kendryck saw the back of a slender man, all dressed in black. As his shoulders moved back, the hunter caught the flick of a black tail disappearing inside the vegetation.

*So the panther really exists.*

"Hey!" Kendryck glimpsed the last of the long trail vanishing in front of the standing figure. "Are you all right?"

The man turned and flashed a pair of luminous green eyes on the hunter. If he looked young, something of his expression didn't quite match the

apparent age. Dark haired, he was tall and very slim, with an interestingly triangular face more similar to a feline's than a human's.

"Thank you." The young man moved toward him, elegantly swaying from side to side in a seductive way Kendryck found intriguing. "Without your intervention, the beast would've eaten me." Upon reaching the hunter, he beamed a bright smile. "How can I thank you?"

Kendryck was taken aback. "Weren't you scared?" Usually, people surviving close range contact with a predator didn't react like casual tourist on a relaxing visit at the forest grounds.

"Not at all." The young man shrugged. "I live in the forest, so it wasn't the first encounter of the kind." Nearer now, Kendryck noticed there was real beauty in his features, however unconventional they seemed. "I've learned to dominate my fear, 'cause it never helps in times of crisis."

"Yeah, you're right." Again, the man struck him as much older than he looked. "And you have nothing to thank me for. The beast was already gone by the time I got here."

"She left because she heard you coming." Before Kendryck could deny any further responsibilities, he extended a hand. "By the way, I'm Therry."

"Nice to meet you." And he really meant it. "I'm Kendryck, one of the village hunters who should catch the beast."

"Oh, she won't let you."

"How do you know it's a female?"

"She looks female." Therry lifted a shoulder while heading inside a clump of trees.

"So you got a good look at her, didn't you?" Disappointed to see him leave so soon, Kendryck scrambled to follow. "If you could describe her, it would help us tremendously. Our problem is that we don't even know what it looks like."

"Neither do I, really." Accelerating, Therry picked his way without the slightest hesitation. "She's like a big black cat. That's all I saw." Evidently, he knew the place even better than Kendryck. "As I said, when she heard you come, she left in a hurry." Which struck the hunter as odd. Few had the terrain as down pat as he had. None he knew of, at least from the village.

"Hey, where are you going?" Hence Kendryck's question was only logical.

"Home." Instead, Therry made it sound as if the hunter were a stupid for not having figured it out sooner.

"Then you really do live in the forest." So maybe he was. Since the village lay behind them.

"Of course, I do." Therry grinned, hardly breaking his fast pace. "And I'm perfectly capable of getting there on my own."

Was it a veiled challenge? "I'm sure you can." Too bad it perked up his curiosity and hastened his steps. "But maybe I should escort you...just in case the beast returns."

"As you like."

Walking in silence, Therry continued, seemingly unafraid and uncaring whether Kendryck was in fact accompanying him. Piqued by the lack of interest, the hunter made a show of checking the bushes for signs he already knew weren't there. With the panther's escape, the place was back to normal. Not a surprise. Gone the strange stillness, returned the birds' songs, there was nothing to be found now except for Therry's dwelling, which turned out to be a deserted little hut in a small clearing. "So this is where you live." Kendryck's lips let the words out before he realized how idiotic they sounded.

"Yep." Two strides and Therry reached the shabby-looking door. "This is my home." On opening it, he gestured for Kendryck to go inside, fully expecting he would.

So Kendryck did. "Do you live alone?" Stepping inside, he glanced at the confined and cluttered space, with one small window at the opposite side from the door.