



FANG CHRONICLES

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Chapter One

Talya

Getting away was easier than I thought, though I was far from safe. I'd gingerly climbed from the trunk of the car and escaped the back parking lot behind Dmitri's club. My broken leg slowed my progress, but I wasn't letting it stop me. Physical pain was nothing compared to the sizzling burn of desperation darkening my soul.

I placed one shaky foot in front of the other. I could do this. I had no choice.

I did my best to walk normally without drawing attention. The stretch-bandage secured beneath my loose sweatpants didn't help, but I was determined. Choosing my direction was easy because it didn't matter which way I went as long as it was away from Dmitri and the bear clan, who would quickly track me down once they discovered my absence.

The city smelled different; car fumes, garbage, people. Human people. They went about their day—walking, talking on cell phones, and ignoring the sights and sounds around them. They didn't feel hunted.

I did.

Maybe it was my imagination. Maybe Dmitri and his clan wouldn't care that I disappeared. I knew Nicolas and Zenya wouldn't. And that was why I could no longer live with my kind. Not that bear shifters were my kind. I was cat. When all was said and done—the enemy. It didn't matter that a mixed clan of wolves and cats adopted me or that I was under the protection of the bear clan. Loving their vampire leader, Dmitri, made me the enemy. I tried to kill his chosen mate. I wanted to simply lie down and die, but I was a coward. Maybe running was the way to end it. I knew little about humans or their world. Humans were weak, and even with a missing left forearm, I was strong.

I kept my head down and walked as unobtrusively as possible through every puddle in my path. It had rained the day before and the stagnant water was as foul as the smells around me, maybe worse. My clan, with the help of the bears, would track my scent, and I was hoping the diluted, putrid smell of the water would throw them off.

Thirst and hunger set in. Ignoring my growling stomach and dry mouth, I continued my journey to nowhere. Even with my body's discomfort, the noise unsettled me. People talked, laughed, yelled, and even whispered. My sensitive ears magnified each sound until my head pounded.

Everything hurt now.

Nikka had broken my leg during our fight for Dmitri. It would be a week before it healed completely without a vampire's bite. They denied me the quicker healing option because of the rules of challenge. The animal half of me could compartmentalize the pain. My human side cursed every step.

I traveled from street to street the entire day, sometimes circling an area because it interested me. I passed a large park and decided to return when full night haunted the sky. I would rest in the trees, but not now. Right now I needed to stay on the move.

The sun was going down when I hit an area that was darker, smellier, and thankfully quieter than where I'd come from. I noticed two male humans ahead—standing in the shadows at the entrance of an opening between two buildings. They wore black jackets, jeans, and drilled me with unfriendly eyes as I approached.

“Other way, bitch.” The larger one nodded his head to the other side of the street.

I heard him and at the same time heard the thud of flesh meeting flesh, heavy breathing, and low groans. Not my problem. I had enough to worry about. I turned away and stepped off the curb.

“You'll need to fucking kill me because I won't give you what you douchebags want.”

The words came out between painful gasps. The male voice sounded young. Too young. I walked halfway across the street as I moved even with the two men. I stopped and turned. They no longer watched me; their attention was inside the alley.

Now I could see. Deeper in the recessed darkness, two men held a scrawny kid between them while a third systematically beat him. Counting the two guards, it was five against one—not good odds if you were human and especially if you were a child.

Not my problem, not my problem.

I took another step without looking and crunched something beneath my foot. The two guys standing guard immediately turned my way.

“Fucking bitch. I told you to get out of here.” The one who spoke took a step in my direction.

I smiled, showing my human teeth. Now it was my problem.

Standing my ground, the guy came at me fast. His partner didn't seem concerned; he'd immediately turned his attention back to the inner alley. My guy had his hand raised in a classic backhand even before he was close enough to strike. I stepped into him and grabbed his arm. Too quick to see, my knee met his groin. I jerked the arm I held downward and gave his face a re-modification with the same knee. In two seconds he was out cold. I'd been trained to pull my punches and kicks when fighting humans, so I did. Kinda. I didn't worry about the loud thunk he made when he hit the cement because I bound toward the other guy before he had time to peer over his shoulder.

This would be so much fun if I could shift and relieve some added aggression. My broken leg screamed in agony, but I wasn't stopping now. The guy in my sights had just started to turn when I grabbed his hair and jerked him backward. He grunted in surprise. As he spun, I released him and punched his throat. He was down and, oops, the strike was too hard. My attention went to the back of the alley.

The three guys didn't look my way. Their focus was the kid they were

steadily beating to death. I couldn't tell his exact age; somewhere between ten and thirteen... maybe. Too young for this. His swollen eyes met mine. Blood rolled down his chin, but his lip tipped up at the corner in what I think was a grin. A solid punch to his stomach followed by another to his head ended the smile. I slipped out of my shoes before sliding my pants down my legs.

I was hungry.

I shifted, tearing my t-shirt in my haste. With only one front leg and a broken back one, you might think I was weak. No such luck for the three humans in the alley. A growl left my throat at the same time I attacked.

The final word from the man landing the punches was a short burst from his lips, "Fuck."

I was bigger than an average mountain lion and a hell of a lot more powerful. With my jaw pressure and body size, they didn't have a chance, but Goddess my leg hurt. I tore a large chunk of flesh and muscle out of the side of one of the two guys holding the boy up and pushed him away. The third man tried to run, but I leapt on his back and crushed his spinal column between my teeth, snapping his neck before turning back to the injured man. He tried crawling, but it did no good. I sank my teeth into the side of his neck ripping out his throat.

Warm, thick blood coated my muzzle and I dropped the sinewy strings of flesh and muscle from my jaws. Yes, I was hungry, but in truth, human meat tasted nasty, and the pain in my broken leg was torturous. I'd fed my hunger for violence and now I needed to get away. I gazed at the boy lying passed out on the ground and turned my eyes to the unconscious man in the street. He'd kill the kid.

Decisions.

I shifted to human and hopped on one leg to my clothes. Yeah, I know I looked ridiculous, but even the slight jarring from the ungainly movement hurt like hell. My leg was swollen, but the sweatpants were loose. I hopped

around to get them on. When I left the clan territory, I wasn't wearing underwear or a bra, so the torn t-shirt showed lots of skin. I kept an eye on the guy in the street as I dressed. A soft groan from the alley had me turning back to the boy. He'd risen to his hands and knees before slumping back down.

I was covered in blood. Even at night, it would be hard to go unnoticed when humans saw me walking through the city. I needed water and food in that order and then a place to rest while my body healed itself.

The boy pushed up slightly and rolled over. With one eye, the other swollen closed, he watched me wearily. There was no longer a smile on his face. He breathed slowly and I made a wild guess that he had a few bruised or cracked ribs. Mine hurt too, but it was the excruciating pain in my leg that made me want to tear out someone else's throat.

"Are you going to finish what they started?" He didn't smell like fear and his words didn't show it either.

I walked forward and stood over him. "You want me to?"

He slowly moved his head back and forth. "No, but your friends might not care what I want."

Who the hell was he talking about? "My friends?"

"The ones who did this," the boy said as he waved his hand at the bodies and gave another low groan of pain.

I gazed into his half-open eye. "I killed them." I could tell he didn't believe me, but when I reached down to take his hand he flinched and scooted sideways. I kept my voice steady and my hand out when I said, "I need your help." Slowly he lifted his trembling hand and I pulled him to his feet. He remained hunched over slightly, obviously suffering great discomfort from the beating. "You need to wrap my leg."

He looked me up and down. "What's wrong with your leg?"

"It's broken."

He hunched over a little farther. "Yeah, right."

I picked up the stretch-bandage that had fallen off after my shift to cat. It needed to go back on, but I wanted it over my sweats. “Yes or no?” I had no time for his shit.

“You’re serious. You think it’s broken?”

Were all humans this stupid? “I know it’s broken.” I growled in vexation unable to help myself.

“Okay, okay, hold onto your panties.”

Yes, humans were stupid. “I don’t have panties, just the sweats.” I held out the bandage.

He gave me a strange look then gazed around. “We need to get out of here.”

“Put the damn bandage on my leg and I’ll drag the men back here.”

He rolled his eye. “Just sit on it and I’ll move them in here before someone sees and calls the cops.”

I had no idea what he meant. What was I supposed to sit on? I watched him stumble past the man at the entrance to the alley and go to the guy in the street. He grunted and groaned, but managed to drag him into the alley. Using my one arm, I half lifted the other man and tossed him about ten feet.

“Fuck me.”

I looked the boy up and down—skinny and way too young. “No, thank you. Bandage?” I held it out to him, though I figured he’d take off running.

He surprised me and grabbed it from my hand. “You really did fucking kill them.”

Crap, hero worship. That’s all I needed. “Just wrap it tight, but not so tight it cuts off the circulation.”

He squatted down while looking up. “Does only having one arm make the other one super strong?”

This kid had quite the imagination. He just didn’t know he was looking at his worst nightmare. “Something like that.”

He began wrapping. It didn’t help the pain, but I knew it would give my leg

stability. I'd pushed my endurance further than I should have.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"I don't."

"You don't live anywhere?" I don't think he believed me.

"No."

He looked around before bringing his gaze back to mine. "You can stay with me. It's not the greatest, but you can get cleaned up and use some of my mom's clothes."

He was such a stupid kid. "What about your mom?"

"She hasn't come home for a week. She's tweaked out somewhere and won't be back until the money runs out or the guy kicks her out."

"How old are you?"

He didn't blink his one good eye. "Eighteen."

I stepped on his toes and put unhuman pressure downward. "How old are you?"

"Oww. I'll be seventeen in a few weeks, but don't say anything. I don't need the bitches from CPS knowing my mom isn't home again."

I saw the panic he tried to hide with toughness. "I won't. How far is it?"

"The apartment's about a mile. Can you hoof it?"

The term "hoof" made me hungry. "Yes. What's your name?"

"Rondy. What's yours?"

"Talya."

Chapter Two

Talya

We held each other up and managed a slow hobble. My cat didn't like it—never show weakness, but I'd used up my reserves saving the kid and I had no choice.

The kid, Rondy, didn't look sixteen, but I believed him. He was taller than me by a couple of inches. He was just too skinny, or maybe gangly was a better word, and it made him appear much younger. He also smelled of human blood and unwashed body. It wasn't pleasant. I knew his ribs hurt, but his legs were fine. My leg hurt so bad it was hard to breathe much less walk. We passed a few people and thankfully the ones in this neighborhood minded their own business.

Rondy kept up a running commentary the entire way, and I noticed his eyes scan our surroundings constantly. "So are you a ninja warrior or something?"

Pain made my breathing erratic, but he didn't seem to care. "I don't know what that is."

"Humph. Who taught you to fight?"

His question made me sad. "Just some people I knew."

"What you did by tossing that guy so far, that was the fucking shit."

I didn't want to talk about it, so I changed the subject to Rondy. "Why were those guys beating on you?"

He didn't look at me. "That's my shit and not yours."

He might change his mind about telling me "his shit" if I went furry. I'd worry about it later. Right now, I wasn't sure if I'd make it to his apartment. "How much farther?"

"Around this corner and then up a bunch of stairs. That's the hard part. We can rest before we start climbing."

I was screwed. We made it around the corner, and half a block later Rondy led me into an old, rundown building. He took me to a side door, which led to the stairwell.

"I'm on the fourth floor. Can you make it?" he asked while holding his ribs, making his own pain obvious.

There were maybe fifteen steps and then the stairs curved and I couldn't see the rest. If I sat down now there wasn't a chance I would make it up. "Let's

go,” I grunted.

I gave Rondy credit. His breathing was raspy like mine, but he never stopped and by the sixth turn of stairs, I was leaning heavily on him. My vision went blurry and my arms and legs shook so badly I questioned my sanity in attempting the climb.

“This is it. Second door on the left,” he said after the eighth turn.

I practically fell inside.

“Lay on the couch.” He helped me to an old sagging piece of furniture.

I fell back against the corner and brought my good leg up.

“I’m lifting your sore leg, so don’t growl at me again. It needs to be propped up.”

He hefted and I really had to fight back the growl—damn leg. But I couldn’t help the smartass in my voice, “You’re a doctor at sixteen?”

“I had a broken leg last year and my mom stuck around long enough to get me to the doctor. He slapped on a cast, gave me some crutches, sent me home, and she took off. Hurt like a motherfucker. If she filled my pain scrips, she took ’em ’cus I didn’t see them or her for the next two weeks.”

I was sorry I said anything. If I had stayed with my clan, they may not have helped speed my healing, but they’d have cared for me.

Rondy left the room and came back with a pillow, which he propped under my leg while speaking. “There’s some vodka hidden in the back of the cupboard if you want some of that. I keep it around for emergencies.”

I might try some alcohol later, but with my metabolism I had to drink large quantities quickly to feel any results, so it was a last resort. “What I really need is water, food, and a shower.”

“We get charity food boxes with lots of canned food and stuff. There’s chili, if that works?”

“How much chili?”

“Plenty, at least five or six cans.”

I looked at his skinny, gangly body. “How many can you eat?”

His chest puffed out a bit, but he winced. “A whole can.”

“I’ll eat the others, if you don’t mind. I need lots of food because the one arm I have is hollow.” Wasn’t I hysterical? I’d just used gimp cat humor I didn’t know I had.

He smiled with swollen lips. “Ha ha. I’ll cook them all, but we can always refrigerate what we don’t eat.”

“How about ice?”

“Ice is free, so we have lots and I can make more.”

Now that he was all business, he looked more his age. “We both need it. My leg and your face, but water first please.”

He turned toward the small kitchen and came back with a huge plastic cup of water. I downed it while he watched. I handed it back. “More please.”

He stared at the cup for a few seconds before walking away. This time I heard him make an ice bag before returning with the water. He put the bag on my leg and handed me the cup. Without a word, he headed back to the kitchen. After finishing it off, I lay my head back and closed my eyes. Rondy made small noises as he moved around the kitchen. I let out a pain-filled sigh. The ice was helping a little and weariness crept in. I needed sleep, but it would be awhile.

Pots and pans rattled, and after about five minutes, I smelled the chili. Protein would help me heal. Without the special saliva from a vampire, I healed slowly, but still faster than a human. I knew the kid was in pain too, but I was beyond caring right now.

Ten minutes later, he brought me a bowl of chili, refilled my water, and sat down in the chair beside me with his own bowl. I moved slightly, propping myself up. Methodically, I began devouring the warm food. After I scraped it clean, the kid refilled my bowl without a word. He said nothing until he got up a fourth time.

He gave my body a slow once-over. “I think your legs are hollow too. How do you stay so skinny?”

“Me? Have you looked in a mirror?”

He continued appraising me with a quizzical expression. “I’m a growing man, you’re... well you’re... I don’t know what you are.”

To him he was a man just like I was a woman at his age. We had more in common than he would ever guess—he barely had a mother and I never knew mine. I couldn’t tell him what I was because I couldn’t trust him. “I’m just like you.” I gazed directly into his eye. “Desperate.”

He looked away first and I continued eating. Five bowls was my limit because sleep knocked heavily at my door. “Can I use your bathroom and take a shower?”

His exhaustion showed too and he kicked back farther into the chair next to the couch, a long sigh escaping. “Sure, there should be a towel or two under the sink. You can grab something of my mom’s to wear out of her closet.” He gave a little wave of his hand in the general direction of the back of the apartment and closed his eye.

I stared at his relaxed face for a few minutes. Without the swelling and blood some might consider him cute. It was his unwashed smell that made him unattractive to me. Looking away, I concentrated on the amount of steps it would take me to get to the bathroom. I couldn’t help the small moans that escaped on the way, but Rondy was asleep and the noises didn’t seem to bother him.

He perplexed me. I had a feeling he hadn’t seen the last of anyone associated with the thugs in the ally, but he kept a level head and took care of us both. It was sad that I wouldn’t be around to help him out of whatever predicament he’d gotten himself into. The sooner I said goodbye to the city the better.