

Raven Virtue stormed out of the courtroom. Too mad to think straight, she stalked into the federal building's back secure section, which led to the parking garage. The personnel manning the metal detectors watched her warily. Court officers, they were armed and ready for trouble. It didn't matter that Raven wore her Park Service ranger uniform. She was obviously in a temper as well as being in a federal building, and she was no more immune to their jurisdiction than any citizen who stepped into the court's environs.

She snapped a nod to them, affording them the respect they deserved even though she was so mad she could have put her fists through the blank white walls that surrounded them.

*Deep breath, Raven. It's done and over with, and you can't change anything. It's time to pick up the pieces and move on.*

So much easier said than done, especially when a grave injustice had occurred for no good reason at all. Still, she tried. Raven blew out a huff of air, squared her shoulders, and headed for the exit.

Andy Wolford's voice stopped her in her tracks. "Yo, Virtue, slow down. I got the car keys, remember? Stop being such a grouch. We'll get the putz on re-trial."

Raven whirled around to confront her fellow ranger. Tied back in a ponytail, her long, black spiral curls lashed her cheek as she whipped about. She hardly noticed in her rage.

Tall, muscled Andy loomed over her petite five-foot-three-inch frame, but she wasn't the least bit intimidated. In fact, it took all she had to not fly at him with swinging fists.

Between clenched teeth, Raven ground out, "Re-trial? We didn't get Wills to trial to start with, thanks to you." Her southern twang was obvious, as it always was when she got mad. Here in Arizona, her Carolina accent coupled with her short stature prompted people to call her 'cute'. They too often underestimated her. It usually suited her just fine.

Andy shrugged, as oblivious to her fury as he'd been to the judge's scathing reprimand minutes before. He took his cap out of his back pocket and covered his reddish-blond crewcut beneath it. "I goofed, or so the judge says. So the confession got tossed. There's still plenty physical evidence to get another warrant to arrest Wills."

Raven flung her hands in the air, wishing she could wrap them around Andy's throat. She might have if not for the officers watching. "What evidence? All that stuff has been suppressed because we found it under a bad confession!"

Andy rolled his eyes and smirked at the men watching them carefully, as if to say 'hysterical female'. Typical Asshole Andy Wolford. "You know the D.A. will appeal."

"It won't matter. You knowingly questioned him without giving Miranda rights. Then you tried to fix it afterward by giving Wills Miranda and re-questioning him. Any ranger fresh out of the academy knows you can't do that!"

Another shrug. "We'll get him on appeals or he'll screw up again."

Raven stared at him. How could he be so clueless? "So you're fine with another woman disappearing, never to be seen again? He said he'd abducted twenty of them, Wolford. He sent them away to be sold into slavery. Daughters. Mothers with young children. Now he's out there again because you bent the fucking rules!"

Andy's mouth dropped open. His slightly sunburned face reddened more. "Watch your mouth."

Raven was astonished. The man who had just set a serial abductor and human slave trafficker free was affronted by foul language.

She had reached her limit. "I'll watch my mouth. Meanwhile, you can watch my fists."

Before she could take one step towards Andy Wolford and possibly wreck her entire law enforcement career, Douglas Bringer suddenly inserted himself between them. Raven hadn't even seen him come into the room, and Bringer wasn't easy to miss.

The auditor from the U.S. Government's General Accounting Office managed to be imposing despite not bulging with gym muscle like Wolford. His well-cut suit accentuated his streamlined, powerful frame. Bringer had an air about him – almost a visible aura – of pure strength. His neatly cropped hair was dark brown with red and golden highlights. Chameleon hair, Raven's friend and fellow ranger Kimi Furio had dubbed it.

Even more fascinating than his hair were Bringer's eyes. Raven had never seen golden eyes before. Not golden brown, no nothing so pedestrian as that. The man's eyes were actually a yellow-gold color, ringed with long lashes.

One almost failed to catch the perfect bone structure of Bringer's face with such astounding coloration. Raven had noticed. In the past six weeks since he'd descended on Petrified Forest National Park where she worked, she'd noticed plenty about Douglas Bringer. It was a good thing he was so interesting to look at, considering that auditors as a rule were a major pain in the ass.

Bringer was more than a pain in the ass right now. He was an obstacle to her pounding Wolford into a pulp.

He put steadying hands on her shoulders. "Hold on, Ranger Virtue. Wolford is enough of a douchebag to bring you up on assault charges."

As Raven tried to wrap her head around those perfectly shaped lips uttering the word 'douchebag', Andy spluttered behind Bringer. "Hey, number cruncher, I've got fists too."

Bringer let Raven go and turned to face the man who probably outweighed him by fifty pounds. The auditor fixed his stare on Andy. Raven wished she could have seen Bringer's face at that moment, because Wolford's muddy brown eyes widened and he took a step back.

Though his words betrayed no rancor, Bringer's tone dripped with menace. "I'll give Virtue a ride back to the office, Wolford. Your supervisor wants to see you right away. I suggest you get moving."

Andy at least had enough sense to not challenge Bringer. With only a bad-tempered huffing sound, he walked a wide route around the auditor and stormed out to the garage.

Raven looked at Douglas Bringer with newfound respect. She wished she could get rid of assholes with just a glare. It would make life a lot easier. Maybe it had something to do with those golden eyes. All Raven's large, heavy-lidded blue eyes seemed to do was make men think about sex.

Bedroom eyes, they called them. Raven had an urge to punch someone in the mouth every time the phrase was uttered.

Bringer gave her a half-smile. "At least there's a little good news on this shit day. Wolford's out of a job, Ranger Virtue. Jackson's waiting for him to get back to the office to lower the boom. Your former partner will be lucky to get a college dorm security gig after this."

Raven tried to be cheered by that tidbit, but she couldn't find any happiness. "That doesn't change the fact that a very dangerous, evil man is free right now. Joshua Wills is probably bragging on the front steps of the courthouse to the press at this very moment about how the Park Service can't find bear shit in the woods."

The auditor's half-smile grew into the real thing. "Around here, he'd be right. Unless you've got petrified bear shit in the Petrified Forest National Park?"

This time, Raven did manage to find some humor. She snorted a brief laugh. “Okay, bad example.”

Bringer jerked his head towards the door. “Let’s get out of here.”

She followed him out. With his back to her, she could admire how his broad shoulders filled out his well-cut suit jacket. What the hell; leering at Bringer sure beat thinking about Wills being free.

They ended up at the auditor’s rental car, a nice indigo-blue Lincoln with all the bells and whistles. Bringer opened the door for her like an actual gentleman. The gesture made Raven blink in surprise. Most men didn’t bother with such niceties these days, not even in the still somewhat-genteel South. Certainly not in Arizona and not for a uniformed ranger.

As Raven moved past Bringer to get into the car, she got a whiff of his cologne; a spicy, exotic, and masculine fragrance that made her insides warm. She nearly choked on her own spit at her body’s primitive response to the man’s scent.

*I hope Todd’s in the mood tonight, because I obviously need to get laid*, she thought as she settled on the leather passenger seat. She was perversely glad she’d spent the day in the air-conditioned courthouse, leaving her smelling clean and fresh. At this time of day after being on patrol in the burning desert, she usually smelled of sweat.

Raven deliberately pointed her face at the window when Bringer got behind the steering wheel. Too bad it was so damned hot; she would have preferred to open her window so as not to be overcome by Bringer’s delicious scent. Heavens, she needed to find out what that cologne was and buy Todd a gallon of it. It almost made her dizzy with want.

The auditor immediately put the air conditioning on its highest setting, blasting cool air to ruffle the curls that had escaped Raven’s ponytail. She slid her sunglasses on as they pulled out of the comfortably dim environs of the parking garage into the blinding white glare of the Arizona sun.

Heat shimmered over the blacktop as Bringer headed out of the small downtown area and pointed them towards the park, which lay twenty miles away through desert scrub. Outside the Petrified Forest lands, the rare fallen crystallized trees dotted the ground here and there, waiting for local gift shop owners to cut away pieces to be sold to tourists. It was a federal offense to do such things to the vestiges of the once great forest that lay within park lands. It didn’t stop many from trying anyway, since these were the most pristine examples of the fossils.

Disappearing trees and artifacts from long-vanished native tribes were Raven’s usual concern in her job. However, the disappearance of three women from the park in the last six months had become her number one priority. Now the man who had admitted to making that happen to more than twenty women was on the loose once more. Anger spiked anew in Raven’s head, hotter and more brutal than the sun bleaching the landscape. If she ever caught Andy Wolford alone ... well, the next time she was in court, it would be as a defendant on assault charges.

That was tame compared to what she’d do to Joshua Wills if she found him. Raven actually felt capable of murder where that waste of skin was concerned. All those poor women’s faces had been burned in her memory, and in her head they screamed for justice. Over and over, she saw the lost and tearful faces of the children and loved ones left behind with no idea if they’d ever see those women again.

Bringer’s voice was pure sympathy. “I can’t imagine how disheartening it must be to build that case only to find out your partner willfully undermined it.”

Raven's fists clenched in her lap. "Disheartened doesn't begin to describe how I feel." She laughed humorlessly. "You know, I was thrilled when we had enough rangers to allow for partners on patrol. Now I'm glad I'll be on my own again. No one else around to fu – uh, to screw up my work."

Bringer quirked a smile at her near F-bomb. "You two didn't get along even before this?"

Raven snorted. "Not really. Wolford never seemed to take me seriously. I'm not sure if it's because I'm a woman or because I'm so damned short."

She was surprised at her own frankness with the auditor. Not that people from the General Accounting Office were supposed to be the enemy, but Bringer's official function naturally put him at odds with the rangers. Endless accounting for every single minute of on-duty hours wore on the most patient of them. Not to mention the niggling interviews when the GAO wanted to question some of those activities, insisting on minute detail.

Bringer chuckled over her gripe about her height. "What is the saying? Big things come in small packages. I would hesitate to confront you as an adversary."

Raven cocked an eyebrow at him. She liked to think she was tough enough all right, even against the muscle of Andy Wolford. However, something about the more streamlined Douglas Bringer gave her pause, something that had nothing to do with the near full foot he stood over her. She wasn't in a big hurry to try his abilities, number-cruncher or not.

He sighed, as if as demoralized by the court proceedings as Raven was. "The laws here have so many technical aspects that can destroy cases."

"You're telling me. Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it." Her sigh was as heavy as his. "What got you into this field?"

"A couple of things. My dad was a park ranger. I wanted to make a difference like he did." She didn't try to disguise the pride in her voice. When it came to heroes, Raven didn't point out sports stars or even military icons. Her father Al Virtue was it for her. No one else came close.

Bringer gave her a sidelong glance. "You don't feel like you make a difference?"

Raven scowled while staring at the glove box as if it was her worst enemy. "Not when somebody else's stupid mistake puts a sick bastard like Wills back on the street."

"You prefer the spirit of the law over the letter." It wasn't a question, but he didn't sound put off by the thought.

Raven picked at the crease in her pants. "We have to have protections in place to keep the truly innocent from being convicted of crimes they didn't do. When those same protections keep dangerous people free to harm others ... it's not right." The helpless fury was rising again, making her stomach churn. "We had the evidence. DNA evidence. The victims' clothing. It was all right there in Wills' home. But because the search occurred because of Wolford's illegal questioning tactics, it's all thrown out. We can't use one damned piece of it!"

She punched her own thigh in a burst of rage. The pain was dull, but it helped her calm somehow. She drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bringer. For the profanity and yelling."

His tone was kind. Almost comforting. "Not at all. You're passionate about protecting those in danger. I find nothing offensive about that." He shot her a smile. "I do dislike the formality, however. Please, call me Douglas."

The invitation made her warm all over. First name basis with the riveting auditor; well, well. Wouldn't Kimi be so jealous. With some difficulty, Raven turned her gaze to the well-baked Arizona landscape instead of looking over the eye candy that was Douglas Bringer.

In as casual a tone as she could manage, she said, "I guess you should call me Raven then."

"Raven Virtue." The way he said it made her hair stand on end. It was like he rolled her name over his tongue, tasting it. "I'm guessing you got that from your black hair?"

Raven gave her barely visible reflection in the window a grimace. "It was between that and Sapphire, for my eyes. Since Mom and Dad didn't know if my eye color would change like many newborns, they went with the sure thing."

Douglas grinned. "Your name has a heroic ring to it."

She snorted. "If I was a comic book heroine, maybe. A friend once did a drawing of me with a cape and mask. It ended up in our high school yearbook. I was so embarrassed."

That earned a chuckle. Then Douglas sobered and went back to their original conversation. "The justice system shouldn't be one size fits all. If a man is without a doubt guilty, he shouldn't be allowed to walk free because of an officer's mistake."

"You'll get no argument from me. Though I'll admit we can't go around making willful 'mistakes' like Wolford did."

"There should be allowances for such things, especially when it's obvious the suspect did what he's accused of doing. Keep Joshua Wills behind bars while relieving Wolford of his duty. Perhaps even fining the soon-to-be former ranger for the offense or a jail term of his own. Give the guilty officer punishment that fits his crime without letting the perp off," the auditor mused.

Raven considered. "Holding the screw-up responsible while keeping the case alive. I like that. In a perfect world, maybe."

"No world is perfect. Some could be a little less shortsighted."

Raven finally allowed herself to openly look over her companion. Now she could admire his looks and his views. "You know, you're not so bad for an accountant-type."

The grin that spread over his face wasn't the most pleasant she'd ever seen. There was something dark, almost dangerous in the expression. Douglas turned those amazing golden eyes on her for a moment, and once again her stomach churned in a mixture of nervous excitement.

He said, "Raven, I can assure you there is more to me than meets the eye. Much like yourself."

She couldn't help but wonder ... and half-hope ... that Douglas Bringer was flirting with her. She caught herself comparing him to her boyfriend Todd and felt an immediate wash of guilt for doing so. Todd was a nice guy. A steady guy. Trustworthy and decent to the core.

Besides, Bringer was only around for the short term. It was probably just as well; Raven was attracted a bit too much to his aura of power. She had a feeling he wasn't quite as nice and steady as Todd. Still, she felt a pang of disappointment that the auditor wouldn't be sticking around for long. There was something about Douglas Bringer that made her want to get to know him better despite that warning vibe of danger. Or maybe it was because of it that she had too many crude thoughts, thoughts of lying beneath him while he fucked her until she screamed.

Half an hour after leaving the courthouse, Douglas pulled the car up to the front of the rangers station of the Petrified Forest National Park. He gave Raven a smile.

"End of my workday, Raven Virtue, heroine of the school year book. I'll see you around tomorrow."

"I hope not." She laughed at his surprised look. "What I mean is, I hope I'm back on patrol first thing in the morning. I hate working behind the desk."

The auditor grinned. "Good luck on that. If you do end up back on patrol, don't forget your time log."

Raven scowled at him. Accounting for every minute of the entire workday had gotten old the first day. Knowing there were weeks more to go of the nonsense made her feel tired in her head. “You auditors know how to take the fun out of everything.” She softened then. “Thanks for listening to my many woes.”

Bringer nodded, his strange and beautiful golden eyes never leaving her face. “No problem. Enjoy your evening, Raven.”

She got out of the car. Quelling the urge to watch Douglas drive away, she mounted the half dozen steps that took her into the office.

This was the heartbeat of the Park Service’s presence at the site, a place the public never got to see unless they were filing a complaint, answering questions, or under arrest. The rangers’ desks ran the length of the room. There was a break room from which the scent of years of coffee wafted forth, as well as Superintendent Jackson’s office to Raven’s right. On the left was Dispatch, and Raven smiled a little to see her friend Kimi Furio manning the lines tonight. At the back wall a hallway led to Booking, Evidence Impound, and holding cells.

In the main office, most of the desks were empty. The day shift had already gone, and the much smaller night shift had come in and gone out on patrol. Raven noted the Superintendent’s usually open door was closed, and the window that allowed him to look out at the main office area was covered by blinds. The muted sounds of shouting blatted from that direction. Raven smirked. She thought the voice might be Andy Wolford’s.

A soft, purring phone sex-ready voice rubbed Raven’s ear. “Someone’s getting fired.”

Raven turned to see fellow ranger Kimi Furio standing behind her. At complete odds with her Japanese first and Italian last names, she was blond, blue-eyed and fair-skinned. Like Raven, Kimi was an orphan. Unlike Raven, she’d been adopted, and her name reflected her parents’ ancestries.

“Bringer said Wolford would be getting the sack. He’s got a lot of service years in, though. I’m still kind of surprised that it’s happening,” Raven said. She tried not to do a victory dance, not when getting rid of the bastard had come at such a high price.

Kimi snorted from her superior height of six feet. She looked like a Norse goddess, long and slim and mighty in her dark green uniform. “After that major Miranda fuck up? Nothing is going to save his job, especially considering the asshole that was just sprung because of it. I’m sorry about your case.”

Raven sighed heavily. Anger had drained away, leaving only a sense of despondence. “Yeah, it sucks. I wonder who the poor sap is that will have to pick up the pieces of the investigation?”

Kimi shrugged. “Not much left to work with, is there? It’ll probably be closed within the week. Wills won’t be stupid enough to come back to park grounds to do his hunting. I bet he leaves the state altogether.”

“Probably.” Raven couldn’t keep the glumness out of her voice. Wills would go somewhere else, making sure authorities lost track of him. Then people would begin disappearing again.

Kimi gave her a hug. “Before he got into it with Wolford, Jackson left a message for you to go on home. He’ll let you know what’s happening in the morning.”

“Damn it. I was hoping to find out I’d be out on site patrolling.”

“Can’t see why not. We’re dying for patrol officers since the summer help went back to school.” Kimi stretched, and Raven looked at her long, tall frame with envy. She was always begging Kimi to let her borrow four inches.

Her friend forced brightness into her voice. “Hey, I’m off tomorrow night. What do you say when you get off shift we blow it out? You deserve it after these last few weeks.”

Raven grimaced. “I’d have to watch you drink, girlfriend. I’m not off for three more days.”

“That works too.”

Raven laughed and shook her head. “Yeah, why not? I need a night out, even if I am the designated driver. But you get to buy me dinner first.”

Kimi grinned, her heart-shaped face definitely happy now that she had a date. “Done.” The phone in the dispatch office rang, and she gave Raven a wave goodbye as she trotted in to answer it.

Yelling in Jackson’s office had continued on unabated while they had conversed. Raven rolled her eyes at the closed door and went to her desk. As always, her gaze went to the pictures on her bulletin board. Smiling from candid and studio portraits were the women Wills had taken from their lives. He’d been bold enough to give out their names, so Raven knew about all twenty, solving the who and why of all those missing persons cases in a 100-mile radius. Everything but the where.

Human slave trafficking. Had there ever been an uglier crime?

Twenty women smiled at her. Wherever they were now, Raven had no doubt they weren’t smiling anymore.

*“Where did you take them? Where are they, Wills?”*

*“Gone.”*

*“Gone where?”*

*His grin made him look like the human equivalent of a shark. “Just ... gone. It doesn’t matter, because you’ll never find them.”*

Yes, Raven thought she could commit torture and murder when it came to that bastard. God knows, she’d planned it enough times since arresting Wills.

She gathered her gun and other belongings she hadn’t been allowed to take into court. Ready to go home and have a beer or two – and maybe that soul-cleansing fuck she’d decided Todd needed to grant her – she went out to her personal car, a Ford SUV. Minutes later, she was driving through the petrified tree-littered desert on her way home to park housing.

She felt better and better the closer she got to home. There would be no more Wolford, no more partner at all, and she might even be back out patrolling tomorrow. She decided she might as well put aside her angst and embrace the potential good ahead of her.