



*Werewolf*

# HUNTER

A PARANORMAL SHIFTER ROMANCE

LAUREN ESKER

# WEREWOLF HUNTER



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# DECKER



THE PAINTED wooden sign was nestled beside the road in a stand of wildflowers framed by firs and pines. As it blew past, Decker read: *Welcome to Quartz Lake, Washington. Friendliest little city in the mountains!*

“Someone’s got a high opinion of themselves, huh, Tarzan?” Decker remarked, glancing toward the passenger side of the truck. “Think they’ll welcome *us* with open arms?”

The black cat sprawled lazily over the back of the bench seat. Claws kept her firmly in place as the truck jolted over potholes in the mountain road. She looked up with half-lidded yellow eyes before settling her chin on the seat back once again.

“Good point, partner. I guess we’ll find out.”

The road descended steeply in a series of switchbacks. Through gaps in the pines, Decker glimpsed the brilliant turquoise waters of the lake that must have given the town its name, nestled between mountains like a gemstone in its setting. Above Quartz Lake, the sun was setting, with the first streaks of color painting the sky and shimmering across the water.

Decker stopped at a trucker pullout to do a quick inventory check, make sure all the guns were in the lockbox in the pickup bed and nothing was loaded, that kind of thing. No sense getting into any trouble with the local authorities.

Tarzan jumped down onto the fuzzy blanket on the passenger seat that Decker kept there for her, and curled up in

the sun. The truck door was half open to give her a breeze, and as it blew into the cab, it brought fresh scents of pine and the coolness of early evening.

This was a nice place, Decker thought as he rummaged behind the seat, pushing aside the bundle of his tent and the duffle with spare clothes, to make sure he hadn't forgotten a gun or two. When he was actively on the hunt, he tended to stash guns all around in the truck. There was a loaded pistol under the seat, strapped into a hidden holster, that he'd forgotten about. He popped out the magazine and put it in the lockbox with the others. He'd restore it to its place if Ty Kilgore did turn out to be in town, once he made sure this town didn't have a bored sheriff or twitchy deputy aching to look through his stuff.

Housekeeping chores accomplished, he drove down the mountainside into Quartz Lake, pop. 621, according to another sign just outside the tiny downtown. It looked like it catered mainly to tourists. There was a gas station with a sign advertising bait and cold beer, a boat rental place, a feed and garden store, a small brightly painted building which advertised itself as both a used bookstore and library (closed), a couple of churches, and a motel in a narrow wooden building with bright baskets of flowers hanging off the gallery on its second floor.

With dusk creeping over the town, most activity seemed to be centered around what was, as far as he could tell, the only bar in town. It had some pickup trucks, a Harley touring bike, and a battered sedan in its small gravel parking lot, and a neon Budweiser sign flickering in the window. A painted sign read THE HOWLING MOON.

Decker parked under that sign, and sat in the truck for a few minutes, looking up at it. The words were stenciled beneath a stylized wolf's head against a yellow moon. Could be total coincidence, he thought. There were a lot of businesses that played with wolf imagery without having actual werewolves involved.

Still, just in case, and especially given the reason he was in town, he geared up. Avoiding trouble with the law was one

thing, but if this was a shifter town, he wasn't gonna walk into a shifter bar without being able to defend himself.

The pistol from the lockbox was first, going into a pocket in its tidy little holster. He felt it was worth the potential hassle and risk to have it with him, in case he had to fight a wolf on its own territory.

A medium-sized knife went into the hidden sheath in his boot, tucked cold against his ankle. A folding knife balanced the gun in his opposite pocket, and he strapped a hunting knife in a leather sheath on the back of his belt. In this type of rural area, most people accepted that sort of thing.

The last part of his gear-up was the special stuff. He tucked a cross on a silver chain down the front of his black tank top, even though he wasn't a particularly religious guy; his childhood Catholicism had been abandoned years ago except for brief resurgences at Christmas, Easter, and the anniversary of his dad's death. He wrapped silver beads on a leather thong around his wrist and pinned a dreamcatcher and a rabbit's foot to the silver clasps on his jacket's zipper pulls, the way Dad had taught him to do.

He'd yet to see evidence that any of this stuff helped against werewolves and other shifters, but just in case it did work, he wasn't walking into a werewolf's home territory without it.

He cracked a window in the truck an inch or two for Tarzan, and unscrewed the tops of the plastic travel dishes of water and dry food he kept for her, placing them on the floor. After a casual stroke of his gun-callused palm over her head, he locked up the truck. After one more look at the sign, he took a deep breath and strolled into what he was pretty sure was a shifter bar as if he hadn't a care in the world except his next beer.

The place was mostly empty. There was rock music playing on an honest-to-God old-fashioned jukebox, a few couples and scruffy old guys scattered around. The bouncer sitting on a stool by the door, who stood up when Decker walked in, was an old biker type, one part Hell's Angel and

one part Willie Nelson. His long gray hair hung in a braid down his back, and a black leather vest displayed a bewildering variety of iron-on patches (military unit insignia, a skull, death metal band logos, a peace sign, a rainbow flag) and gapped open to show a scruff of gray chest hair.

Decker was pretty sure he could take the dude if he had to, but then he took a look at those massive arms—despite the beer gut, it definitely wasn't all fat—and, more importantly, the shotgun leaning against the wall beside the door.

The bouncer didn't ask to see an ID, so Decker nodded to him, got a grim nod back, and went on in.

Which was when he caught his first sight of the bartender, and something about her arrested him in mid-step.

She was short and curved, but nothing about her was *soft*. Waves of blonde hair framed a pretty face with high cheekbones and a deep bronze tan. She was casually dressed in a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a long denim skirt over practical boots, and when he walked in, she was just swiping a pair of empty beer bottles off the table of some lumberjack types in a table on the corner.

She laughed at something they said and then looked over at Decker. Startling green eyes swept over him in professional assessment, and she went briskly back to the bar, skirt belling out behind her, with another glance at Decker over her shoulder.

All of a sudden, he really wanted a beer. He went up to the bar.

“What'll you have?” the bartender asked. She looked intrigued, but her voice was cool. Most small towns were a little bit unfriendly to outsiders, especially those who walked in radiating an air of danger the way Decker did. He'd felt that subtle sense of outsider status in too many small towns to count, throughout his career. And yet there was still some part of him that felt stung, though he'd never show it...some part of him that hadn't quite reconciled himself to always being the foreigner, never the local.



But if he ever found a place to belong, this town sure wasn't going to be it, even if it did have its charms. He leaned casually on the bar top. "Got any Redhook?"

"Sure do," the bartender said, wiping down the bar with a bleach-soaked rag. "ESB or Pilsner?"

"ESB'll do me."

She popped the top off a cold beer and passed it across the bar top to him. Her fingers brushed his, a quick touch of warmth against the water-beaded chill of the glass bottle, and the forest-colored eyes flicked up to meet his for a second.

There was a decent chance she was a werewolf or some other kind of shifter, he reminded himself. He had no specific proof that this was a shifter bar; it wasn't like they advertised. But he trusted his instinct for this kind of thing. It'd saved his butt plenty of times. The woman, the guy at the door, and at least a couple of the people in here were werewolves or something similar. He'd bet his bottom dollar on it.

And the woman he was especially sure of. She had a grounded, physical quality to her. Centered in her body, aware of her movements in space the way most people weren't.

He recognized it because he was that way himself, having spent a lot of time training to fight. Martial artists and pro athletes had that kind of look too; it wasn't just shifters. But in her case, he was sure. He didn't know how. He just was.

He reminded himself that even if she *was* a werewolf, it didn't mean she was a killer, only that she could be. It was like knowing one of your buddies had done hard time for murder one. You might have a casual beer, might even get close. Might trust the guy like a brother for some things. But you'd always have to wonder what would bring out that side of him again.

The beer was smooth going down. Smooth as the leaf-shadows-on-water glimmer of her eyes. Decker didn't think the heat in those eyes was his imagination, even though she hadn't smiled once. There was an electricity between them, a current of attraction in the air. They both felt it.

“Pay up front?” she asked. “Or run a tab?”

“You’d let me run a tab? You don’t even know me.”

She shrugged. “If Keith says it’s okay.”

Her eyes flicked toward the door and Decker looked over his shoulder to find the bouncer’s unfriendly stare resting on him.

“Pay up front,” he decided, and slid a twenty across the bar top. “Keep the change.”

She raised her eyebrows and took the bill. “Well, aren’t you friendly. Got a name?”

“Decker.”

“First or last?”

“It’s just my name,” he said with a quick flash of a smile.

She smiled back, the tiniest tug of lips over teeth. “Like Madonna. Or Prince.”

“Can’t carry a tune in a bucket, though.”

“Too bad,” she said. “If you’re still here on Thursday, we have karaoke nights.”

There was a hint of an invitation there—inviting like the way her breasts pushed against her plaid shirt, the curve of her hips under the denim skirt. For a moment he wished like hell that he *was* going to be in town on Thursday, but he’d be gone by then, off to another town and another job.

“Actually, I’m looking for information—”

He didn’t get any further. The door slammed open and a kid came running in.

Decker jerked back in surprise. He knew small towns could be informal, with everyone knowing everyone else. But it was still startling to see a little kid run into a kinda-seedy roadside bar. The bouncer didn’t try to stop her, and the locals barely glanced up, like this was a common occurrence.

The child was a tomboyish girl with short-cut hair, maybe ten or twelve. Holding her grubby hands cupped against the

front of her overalls, she leaned on the bar beside Decker, using her elbows so she could keep hold of whatever she had.

“Mel, Mel! Look what I found!”

For the first time, the bartender gave a genuine, wide smile, and it took Decker’s breath away. It softened her whole face, lighting up her forest eyes. She had dimples, an incongruous hint of cuteness at odds with her tough-girl image. “What have you got there, Jessie?” she asked.

The girl held out her hands and unfolded them slightly, keeping the fingers curled around whatever she held like the bars of a cage. Decker, leaning forward despite himself, caught a glimpse of brown fur tufting out between her fingers.

“Is that a rabbit?” Mel asked.

“It’s a hare,” Jessie corrected her. “A baby hare. Mrs. Cooper’s dog had it cornered back of the gas station. I figured you’d be able to tell me what I should do.”

Mel cupped her hands around the girl’s. “May I see?”

There was a little bit of juggling as they traded custody of Jessie’s acquisition. Decker was able to see it better once it was caged in Mel’s larger and more expert hands, a ball of gray-brown fur with gleaming dark eyes.

“Is it hurt?” Jessie asked.

“I don’t think so.” Mel gripped the young hare gently but firmly in one hand and turned it upside down. It gave a few desperate kicks as she pulled out its legs to look at them, and then it subsided into tense, quivering stillness. Mel bent over as if to look at it closely, but Decker, from his position at the bar, could see her inhale deeply. Any uncertainty about her shifter nature faded and died in that instant, and he steeled himself against the attraction he could feel dancing between them.

But it was hard to be too intimidated by a woman holding a bunny.

Was the kid a shifter too? he wondered. Her niece?

Mel turned the bunny right side up, holding it cupped in one hand while she smoothed down the fur between its small ears. “It’s only frightened. It was good of you to rescue it, but now you should find a nice patch of woods near the gas station and put it back. I’m sure its mother must miss it.” A twinge of profound sadness crossed her face at the last words. She didn’t seem to be aware of it.

“Billy Wozniacki says if baby animals smell like people, their mamas won’t take them back,” Jessie said. She accepted the baby hare from Mel’s hands and cuddled it to her chest.

“Don’t listen to Billy Wozniacki. This is true of some animals, but not most. And at this age, it should be all right even if it has trouble finding its mom. They’re born with fur, and already know how to take care of themselves.”

“I *knew* you’d know.”

“Don’t run with it!” Mel called after her. “Put it down somewhere the dog can’t get it! And say hi to your mom for me and tell her I’ll do the Wednesday volunteer shift at the library!”

Jessie nodded and dashed past the amused-looking bouncer, who winked at Mel. She rolled her eyes and turned back to wiping down the bar, but she was still smiling.

“So that’s a myth about animals and their babies?” Decker asked, and she glanced up as if she’d forgotten he was there, the smile faltering. Her guarded look returned, sweeping away the quiet happiness like her wet rag on the bar top.

After gazing at him for a moment, as if she was trying to decide why he wanted the information, Mel said, “Like I told her, it depends, but for the most part with rabbits and hares, that’s not true. And anyway, it really is big enough to be on its own, and it’ll be better off in the woods than if Jessie takes it home and puts it in a shoebox in her room. Which,” she added with a returning trace of that warm smile, “is what I could see her gearing up to ask if she could do.”

“Does Jessie rescue a lot of baby animals?”

“She helped me raise a nest of orphaned baby birds last spring. We were able to release them all in the fall, and I think now she keeps hoping for a new baby animal friend.”

Tough, fierce werewolf...raises baby birds and cuddles bunnies. She kept throwing Decker’s expectations out of kilter. Now he was back to wondering if he was wrong about her being a werewolf after all.

“So, Mel,” he said. “Is that like Madonna? Or Prince?”

“It’s short for Melanie. And you have to earn the right to use it. How are you about people calling you Deck?”

“That one’s earned, too.” And there was nobody he was friendly enough with anymore. It seemed that Melanie could sense the tensing of the atmosphere, because she moved away a little and started wiping the bar top again. Decker held up his nearly empty beer bottle.

“Refill?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the bouncer eyeing him again. That wary look said *You better watch it, buddy*. Decker wondered if the guy was Melanie’s dad or uncle. They didn’t look anything alike, but he seemed protective enough of her that Decker wouldn’t be surprised to find out they were related.

Melanie slid another beer down the counter. Decker handed her another twenty. She hesitated before taking it.

“I don’t know how expensive you think our beers are, stranger, but you’ve still got plenty from the last one to cover this.”

“I know,” he said. Melanie shrugged and the twenty vanished into a pocket in her skirt. “I wanted to ask you about someone you might have seen around here.”

Instant wariness in the leaf-shadow eyes. “I don’t pay a lot of attention to who comes and goes,” she said.

A blatant lie. There was no way she wasn’t an absolute catalogue of information on people in this town. Decker reached into his jacket pocket. Melanie tensed, and Decker

glimpsed the bouncer resting a hand lightly on the shotgun. Man, these people *really* didn't trust outsiders in their town. Another tick in the shifter column.

"I'm getting a photo," he said. He laid it on the bar. "I'm looking for a guy called Ty Kilgore."

The picture was the best he'd been able to find, but it was fifteen years out of date and blurry from being printed out on a library printer. Decker had found it online in an old newspaper story about Kilgore's conviction for assault and battery in a bar fight in Missoula.

They'd never arrested the guy for the biggest crimes he'd committed. They never would, because no one would ever believe it.

No one except Decker.

And maybe the woman in front of him, judging by the quick flash on her face when she saw the photo: a slight widening of her eyes, a tightening of her lips.

She did know the guy.

He was almost sorry. He wouldn't have minded an excuse to talk longer, and now there was the problem of how well she knew Kilgore, and from where.

# MELANIE



WHY'D he have to go and ruin it? Melanie had been enjoying a little no-strings-attached flirting. As a single woman in a small town, she had few opportunities for hookups that wouldn't lead to awkward small talk in the hardware store the next day. That, and the fact that it had been so long since she'd had anything between her legs that wasn't battery powered, probably had a lot to do with the way she had to tear her eyes away when he sauntered in.

He was human. She would have known right away if he was a shifter; all shifters recognized each other on sight. Mel had heard that it was different for different shifters, but for her it was a cold fizzing between her eyebrows, like an ice cream headache but tickly, not painful.

But, human though he was, Decker moved as her own kind did. It was a casual, confident toughness that didn't speak of macho posturing, but rather a certainty that he could handle whatever came his way.

Not a guy to pick a fight, but a guy to end one.

In her years of tending bar, she'd gotten good at recognizing that sort of thing.

His face was all clefts and angles, high cheekbones and sharp clean jawline. He had clear, wide-set brown eyes, looking at her with an intensity that seemed to pierce her to her core. His nose was slightly out of kilter, as if it might have been broken in a fight long ago, lending a pleasing air of

asymmetry to his already interesting face. His hair was dark and just long enough to cover his ears.

He wore a battered black jacket, giving his spicy male scent overtones of leather and oil. Beneath that, his blue denim shirt was open at the collar, revealing a glimpse of the dark frizz between his collarbones. At the first sight of him, she'd had a brief, intense urge to feel its roughness under her fingertips.

*Griselda, it's been much too long since we got laid.*

She had called the wolf side of herself Griselda ever since she was a little girl. It wasn't a separate entity, as such. She couldn't talk to it—or at least it didn't answer back. But it did feel like something a little bit outside herself, a source of instincts and tensions that her rational human mind didn't always understand.

Although *this* instinct had no mystery to it at all. It was only that she hadn't often had someone provoke such a powerful response in her when she'd just met them. Was this what they meant by chemistry? Whatever it was, this guy was like pure distilled sex appeal. Sex on a very appealing stick.

And then he brought out this photo.

The blurred mug shot was old, the man in it younger than he had been when Mel first met him, but she still recognized him.

Ty Kilgore. Local grizzly shifter.

So Ty had gone and gotten himself an outstanding warrant for something or other. Somehow she wasn't surprised. If there ever was a guy who probably had the law on his tail, it was Ty Kilgore.

“What do you want him for?” she asked, pretending to study the photo. “You a bounty hunter? Skip tracer?”

“Something like that. He's bad news. Real mean bruiser. Not the kind of guy you want to protect.”

“What'd he do?”

“Bad things,” Decker said. “He's a bad man.”



Melanie snorted. “Do I look like a fragile flower to you? Whatever he did, you can just say it.”

“Trust me,” Decker said. “You’re better off not knowing. Save yourself the nightmares and let me tell you that he’s not the kind of guy you want hanging around your town. Seen him?”

Yeah, but she wasn’t sure if she wanted to say so to a human bounty hunter. Ty Kilgore had just showed up in town one day, a surly bastard who had a cabin up in the mountains somewhere. He came to Quartz Lake occasionally for supplies, but in general preferred to live on his own, hunting his own food. Some shifters were like that. He also had a habit of running off other bears, regular or otherwise, who showed up in the neighborhood. Unlike wolves, with their pack instincts, bears were solitary, and bear shifters no less so. Some of them got along fine with others, their human instinct for companionship outweighing their ursine desire to be alone. Others, like Kilgore, treated the presence of other bears *and* other people as an affront to their territorial instincts. Melanie wasn’t sure if Kilgore would attack a werewolf, but just to be on the safe side, she kept her nocturnal, four-footed explorations to parts of the mountains well away from his cabin.

On the bright side, Quartz Lake used to have a persistent problem with black bears getting into the town dump, but not since Kilgore showed up.

Not that she could or would tell Decker any of this.

“Hard to say,” she said, and picked up the photo between two fingers. “Can I hang onto this? I could ask around.”

“Sure. Wait a minute.” Decker retrieved the photo and flipped it over. There was a ballpoint pen beside the cash register for customers to sign their credit card slips. He scribbled a number on the back.

“In case you see him,” he explained. He handed the photo to her, and she was intensely aware of the warm glide of his fingers sliding over hers.

Movement out of the corner of her eye drew her attention to Keith. Not just a bouncer, as most out-of-towners assumed, but also the bar's owner, he straightened up from his stool beside the door and sauntered her way. He wasn't a tall guy, but there was no mistaking the solid muscle under the beer gut. He carried the shotgun pointed at the floor.

"This guy bothering you, Mel?"

Melanie's wolfish instincts bristled. "I'm capable of deciding that for myself, thanks."

"Hey, man, seriously, I'm not making trouble." Decker raised his hands with a brief smile. "I'm just having a friendly beer."

"Looks like you gave the lady something. What'd you give her?" Keith's sharp eyes tracked to Melanie, and with an inward sigh, she held up the photo.

"He's a bounty hunter looking for this guy," she said. "Like he said, he's not making trouble."

Keith looked at the photo for a moment without expression. Then he turned his head and said to one of the regulars at a table in the corner, "Pat, can you watch the bar for a minute?"

Pat looked up in surprise from the after-work beer he was sharing with a buddy, pushing back his greasy trucker cap. "Uh, yeah, I guess so."

"Good." Keith circled around the bar, and thrust Melanie toward the back. "We gotta have a quick word."

Melanie glimpsed Decker's sharp look of curiosity before Keith closed the door, shutting them into the bar's tiny back office. He leaned the shotgun against the wall.

"What was that all about?" Melanie demanded in a fierce undertone with a hint of a snarl lurking beneath it. The Griselda part of her wanted to fling him to the floor and set her teeth on his throat. "If this is your misguided protective instincts again, I'm a big girl and I can take care of myself. We work together six nights a week at the bar. I don't need you getting involved in my love life too."

Keith's lip curled, his wolf instincts responding to her challenge; she could see him fight it down. Keith wasn't the only other shifter in town, but he was the only wolf shifter. Wolves instinctively wanted to be in a pack, and Keith and Melanie had inadvertently pack-bonded as soon as she'd showed up in town. It was like a marriage of convenience except with two emotionally damaged werewolves who had no interest in having sex with each other, both of them used to being on their own and therefore constantly vying for pack alpha and never really making any headway against each other. As the owner of the bar, he was her boss, and her wolf half—which didn't understand "job" and "paycheck"—resented having to defer to him even to that extent.

Still, while Melanie would rather have her fingernails pulled out than admit it, she did genuinely like and care about Keith. As much as they got on each other's nerves sometimes, he was a good guy, and she couldn't imagine how lonely she'd be without another person in her life who could relate to her darker edges.

However, there were times, like now, that Keith seemed to forget he wasn't her dad. As if her sex life wasn't going through a drought anyway, having a burly werewolf biker with a shotgun looking like he was one step away from giving any potential partners the "shovel talk" really didn't help.

But when Keith spoke, what he said wasn't at all what she was expecting. "He's a hunter."

"Deer season isn't until—"

"Not that kind of hunter," Keith interrupted. He kept his voice to a low growl, with a tense urgency in it. "There are humans who hunt our kind. Pretty sure he's one of them."

"What?" Melanie glanced reflexively at the door, as if Decker could be listening on the other side. Pat would keep him away, she was fairly sure; Keith's buddies were loyal unto death (or at least the sort who'd back you in a bar fight) and generally pretty tough in their own right. Still, she took a step closer, dropping her voice until only shifter hearing could pick

it up. “There are people who hunt us and you never thought you should mention this?”

“They’re rare. Didn’t think we’d ever see one here.”

She let her breath out between her teeth in a frustrated hiss. This was one of the things that made dealing with Keith so frustrating. He was her window to werewolf culture; before that, the only werewolf she’d known was her mom, who had abandoned her to foster care. Keith was the one person in her life who could teach her about the shifter world. And getting information out of Keith could be like trying to squeeze beer from a stone sometimes.

“How do you know that’s what he is?”

“The gear, mostly,” Keith said quietly. “All that silver. Guy’s straight, you and I can both tell from the way he responded to you, and straight guys don’t tend to walk around draped in jewelry. And he’s packing a gun. I smelled it the minute he walked in. You gotta be more alert for that.”

Melanie bristled, even though Keith was right. She hadn’t noticed. Keith was better than she was at picking out details of the smells of human things. She’d lived in the wilderness with her mom, and then had spent the next part of her life—most of it, actually—just trying to pretend she wasn’t a werewolf. She still found the strong scents of the human world somewhat overwhelming, and dealt with it mainly by tuning it out. She needed to work on that.

“Silver?” she said. “Really? Does he actually think that’ll make any difference?”

“Hunters are superstitious. They know about us, but they don’t know how much of the mythology is true.” Keith smiled grimly. “And it’s not like they ever ask *us*.”

Melanie rubbed her hand over her mouth. “He’s after Ty Kilgore. What do we do? If we don’t tell him where Kilgore is, he’s not just going to go away, is he?”

Keith shook his head. “I doubt it. The way I see it, we have a couple of options. None of ‘em are good. Some packs kill

any hunter they can catch. We could lure him out to a secluded spot—”

Melanie huffed out a disbelieving half-laugh. “Murder? *Seriously?*”

Keith lifted a pointing finger from the hand resting on the shotgun, indicating the door. “You understand he hunts our kind for a living, right?”

“*If* that’s what he is. You’re only guessing.”

He acknowledged the point with a tight nod. “The other option is, just don’t do anything. Let him do what he’s gonna do. There are a lot of people I’d fight to protect, but Ty Kilgore ain’t one of ‘em. The man’s a piece of trash. Whatever reason this guy is looking for him, he probably did it.”

On their most fundamental level, wolves were defenders, and a spark of angry protectiveness kindled in Melanie’s chest. She hardly knew Ty Kilgore, couldn’t help agreeing with Keith’s assessment of him, and yet he was part of the local shifter community—by extension, her pack. She’d lost her first pack, her mom, a long time ago.

Letting a bounty hunter turn Kilgore in to the authorities was one thing. She might step aside for that. But if this man was here to hunt him, to *kill* him—

A growl bubbled up in her throat, making Keith take an instinctive step backward before his own wolf got involved and he stood his ground.

“How *dare* you—” she began.

“Calm down,” Keith snarled. “We don’t have to point him out. Just stand back and let things happen.”

“I refuse,” Melanie retorted. “Doing nothing is still a decision.”

“What’s your alternative? We have to either get rid of this hunter, or let him take out Kilgore. Those are the options.”

“Those aren’t the only options,” Melanie shot back. “I’ll talk to him. Find out what Kilgore did. At least that way we’ll know what the situation is.”

“What are you gonna do, seduce him and have him whisper it to you in pillow talk?”

Keith was really pissing her off. “Maybe I will,” she snarled, and spun around, the skirt lifting out around her legs.

“Mel, get back here!”

She ignored him and opened the door, letting herself back out into the bar. The music was cranked loud on the old-fashioned jukebox, which suggested Pat had taken the initiative to cover up any sounds they’d been making. Decker, unfortunately, was still at the bar, nursing his beer.

Keith stomped back to his corner and Melanie found some makework behind the bar. Decker looked at her for a moment before he said, “Want me to leave?”

God, she was still responding to his magnetic, dangerous quality, even now, even as furious as she was. She tucked her shirt in and buttoned it up, hiding any hint of cleavage. Every time she thought of Keith’s accusation, it made her hot and cold all over with a combination of fury and a wild yearning to do exactly what he’d accused her of.

Firmly, defiantly, ignoring Keith glaring at her, she told Decker, “This Kilgore guy? I want to talk more about that. My shift ends when the bar closes at one in the morning. If you’re still here, meet me then.”

# DECKER



ALTHOUGH HE HADN'T BEEN EXPLICITLY THROWN out, Decker had no desire to sit around drinking while the old dude with the shotgun glared at him. The bar also didn't seem to have a full kitchen; he hadn't seen anyone eating anything except chips and beer nuts. So he went down the street to find somewhere to eat.

It was a cute little town, scattered along the hillside along the lake. In the gathering dusk, lights glimmered up the hill and dotted the dark hillside on the far shore, where there were probably summer homes and cabins. All the boats had gathered in for the night, flocking to the docks along the shoreline.

The motel with the hanging flowers had a café, so Decker went in, checked out the menu and got a burger and a shake to tamp down the slight beer buzz.

He couldn't figure Melanie out. She was warm one minute, cold and hostile the next. That bouncer guy had definitely said something to her. He wondered whether her offer to meet him was an excuse to go off alone for some personal time—or did she plan to knife him in the back and dump his body in the lake?

“Do you want a box for that?” the young, freckle-faced waitress asked him.

He glanced down at the piece of burger on the edge of his plate that he'd put aside for Tarzan. “Actually...do you have any scraps in the kitchen? I was going to take this to my cat.”

Her cautious smile relaxed into something friendlier. He could almost see the change happening behind her blue eyes: *This guy looks like trouble, but a guy who has a cat can't be all bad.* "Let me see what I can find for you."

Decker definitely didn't get any sense of werewolf off *her*. But he thought, watching her walk away, he also didn't yearn after her the way he did after the blonde bartender, with her hot-and-cold moods and her gleaming eyes.

He went back to the truck with a small box of meaty odds and ends for Tarzan and a Thermos of coffee for himself. It was much too early for Melanie to be off, but he had nowhere to be and didn't think he wanted to get a room for the night. Those twenties he was throwing around at the bar, plus the burger, had been most of his spending money for the week, and he wondered all over again what he thought he was doing. It was going to be hot dogs and sleeping in the truck bed for the next few days. But it had been worth it to get Melanie to smile at him.

He drove around the town a little, getting a feel for it, but there wasn't much to it other than what he'd already seen. A road ran along the lakeshore and, as far as he could tell, just kept going, probably all the way around the end to the summer houses on the other side. Once he'd driven along it far enough to be reasonably sure of where it was going, Decker turned around and drove back.

Parked once again at the edge of the bar's gravel parking lot, he settled in to wait for Melanie and fed Tarzan bits of hamburger while she purred in his lap.

The activity in the bar grew raucous and then began to die down for the night. One by one, vehicles emptied out of the parking lot. Decker caught himself straining to see past the neon sign in the bar's window, trying to catch glimpses of Melanie as she went about the evening's work.

Like a kid with a crush, he thought, amused and a little annoyed at himself.

When a gleaming black Hummer with a rumbling engine pulled up beside his old Dodge Ram, its chrome trim winking



at him in the glow of the bar's neon sign, he assumed at first that it was another customer. Then he looked out and recognized the driver.

Great. Just what he needed.

Giving Tarzan a last scratch between the ears, he opened the truck door and climbed down as the Hummer's engine rumbled to silence.

"Congratulations, Brent," Decker said when the driver of the Hummer opened the door. "I see you now own a vehicle that makes you look like an even bigger douche than you actually are, and that's saying something."

Brent swung his long legs out and stepped down. He looked like life was treating him well. Crisp black shirt, black jeans. The couple of years since Decker had last seen him had been enough time to develop new lines around his mouth, but his eyes were hidden behind lightly tinted lenses. His dark hair was slicked back.

"You're like a bad penny, aren't you, Decker?" Brent said. "Always turning up where you're not wanted."

Decker couldn't help laughing. "Look who's talking. And, seriously? Sunglasses at night? That's pretentious even for you, isn't it? Those are designer, aren't they?"

"It's for oncoming headlights—you know, why am I explaining this to you?" Brent tilted the aviator frames on top of his head.

"Now you look like a beach bum."

"At least I don't look like a vagrant," Brent snapped, his gaze scanning Decker's well-worn jacket and oil-stained blue jeans. "Looking like you're living on the street doesn't open doors. You have to earn respect to get people to talk to you."

"Really? I thought you did it by shoving fistfuls of money at people." This reminded him of how he'd been doing pretty much that in Melanie's bar. At least it was too dark for Brent to see him flush.

Brent's lip curled. "You could be making good money working for Steelhawk too, if you'd get off that high horse a little. Since you're here, I'm guessing you're after Kilgore, which means..." He snapped his fingers. "Missed out on the contract again. Hard luck."

Decker's stomach clenched. Once, they'd been partners; they'd been friends. This was one of the reasons why they weren't anymore. "There's a word for people who kill for money. Assassin. I'm not one, even if you are."

Brent's mocking trace of a smile faded. "Right, you're a regular boy scout. That's some life you live, doing the one thing you're good at for free, and scraping by on odd jobs to keep you in beer and gas money. Floating from one construction job to another must be a rough thing in this economy."

"What we do is supposed to be about protecting people, not about lining our pockets and—" Decker slapped the hood of the Hummer. "Buying asshole cars."

Brent shook his head and clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth. "If all you wanted was to protect people, you coulda been a firefighter, a cop. Coulda gone into the military. You *know* under the skin we're the same."

"I'm nothing like you."

"You can lie to yourself, but you never could lie worth a damn to me, Deck. Anyway, I'm just going to ask flat out. Are you here for Ty Kilgore?" Decker didn't answer, but he had a feeling silence was answer enough. Brent said, "Yeah, well, in that case, you'd better stay out of my way."

"I don't work for you, and I don't work for Steelhawk, so guess what? That means I don't take orders from you."

"Just stay away. I don't want to have to hurt you."

Decker snorted. "As if you could."

Brent turned on the heel of his shiny cowboy boot and strode toward the door of the bar, an angry tension in his shoulders. Decker twitched with the urge to go after him. He

didn't like the idea of Brent and Melanie in the same room together, for any number of reasons.

But that was stupid. Melanie and her shotgun-toting dad, or whatever he was, could handle the likes of Brent. And no matter how many fifty-dollar bills Brent waved in her face, Decker was confident that Melanie could see what he was really like—an egotistical douche driving an overpowered truck.

In fact, Decker wished he'd made a bet with himself. Brent wasn't in the Howling Moon for more than a few minutes before he came out, walking fast. Decker caught a glimpse of Shotgun Dude behind him in the doorway before it closed, and had a feeling Brent hadn't chosen to leave so much as he'd been thrown out.

“How'd waving that money around work out for you?” Decker asked, grinning.

“You tell me. I'm sure you've been in there. That witch of a bartender wouldn't give me the time of—urk!”

Decker slammed him against the side of the Hummer, pinning him against it. Through gritted teeth, he growled, “Don't talk about her like that.”

Brent was still for an instant before hooking one booted foot behind Decker's ankle.

They'd done their share of sparring back when they still worked together, but this was no half-drunken play-fight, and there was nothing fun about it; it was deadly serious. For a minute or two, they struggled in silence: punches blocked before they could be delivered, attempted throws countered before either of them hit the ground. They knew each others' moves too well.

Brent finally broke loose, with an effort that sent him stumbling into Decker's truck hard enough to rock it on its springs.

They stood a few feet apart, panting. Decker's forearm ached where Brent had hit him hard enough to bruise. He'd bitten his tongue; his mouth held the coppery tang of blood.

Brent dusted off the knee of his black jeans where he'd grazed gravel while they struggled. "Are you sweet on that bartender, Deck? I figured you were here for information. Didn't realize you were here for—"

"I swear to God, if you say one more disrespectful thing about her—"

"Calm down, I'm not going to insult your crush again." Brent flexed his hand and examined the scraped knuckles. "Good luck with that," he said finally. "I don't think butter would melt in her mouth, let alone anywhere else. And she seems like the kind who really bites hard during sex, know what I mean? You couldn't pay me to sleep with that."

Decker ground his teeth. The problem with Brent was—he might be a jerk, but he wasn't stupid. And he was very good at what he did. He'd clocked the Howling Moon as a shifter bar the minute he walked in, same as Decker had.

"So while you're chasing tail, I'll be doing *our* job," Brent went on. "I don't need your help, or hers, to find Kilgore and take care of him."

He got back in the Hummer and slammed the door. The engine revved. Decker gave Brent the finger and got a rude gesture out the window as Brent fishtailed out of the parking lot and swung onto the lake road.

Decker dropped his hand, feeling stupid. He licked the corner of his mouth and wiped it on the back of his hand. Brent shouldn't be able to still get a rise out of him, but that was the problem with ex-friends. They knew exactly what to say to wind you up.

The door of the bar opened. Shotgun Dude stalked out. Decker, who had just reached for the truck door, turned around with a sigh.

"I'm not bothering anybody," Decker said as Shotgun Dude marched his way. The gun was pointed at the ground, not at him, but it looked like it could be up in a heartbeat. He held up his hands to demonstrate his lack of threat. "You want me to leave, I can leave."

“Was that guy a friend of yours?” Shotgun Dude demanded.

“If you were watching, did it look like we were friends?” Decker rubbed his aching jaw again. “What’d he do in there? If he threatened Melanie, I hope she decked him.”

“He didn’t *do* anything, not as such, but I’ve been doing this job a long time and I know trouble when I see it. He’s trouble and so are you.” Shotgun Dude’s sharp eyes scanned him and didn’t seem to like what they saw. “Especially since he’s flashing around the same picture you are. I don’t give a rat’s ass about Ty Kilgore, and Mel’s a big girl, so I can’t stop her from talking to you if that’s what she wants to do. Let me tell you this, though. If you get her hurt, you can’t run far enough and fast enough, got it?”

“Got it,” Decker said, and in a fit of honesty he added, “And I don’t want to get her hurt. Trust me, that’s the last thing I want.”

“You better mean that,” Shotgun Dude said softly. Shouldering the gun, he marched back to the bar with a rolling, cowboy-like gait.

After that, the rest of the evening was quiet. Decker catnapped in the truck and watched the patrons trickle out of the bar until the lot was empty except for his truck, Shotgun Dude’s bike, and an all-wheel-drive Subaru which he guessed was Melanie’s.

The way things were going so far, he half expected Melanie would duck out the back of the bar after her shift to avoid him. Instead, on the dot of one a.m., the neon sign in the window went out and she appeared at the door, turned and locked it behind her.

She was wearing an old army jacket against the chill of a mountain night. That and the long denim skirt looked nice on her, a pretty country picture.

The biker dude came around from the back. Decker decided to stay in the truck until the old guy cleared out. From the rolled-down window of the truck, he watched them have a

quiet conversation that quickly escalated into a fight. Decker could only catch snatches of what they were saying, as they were keeping it pretty low, but from the finger that the old guy stabbed in his direction, he had no doubt what the topic was.

Finally Melanie threw her hands in the air. “I don’t have to account for every decision to you, Keith. Leave me alone.”

“It’s your funeral,” Biker Keith shot back. “I just hope it isn’t anyone else’s.”

He stomped off to his motorcycle and scowled at Decker’s truck the whole time he was stowing the shotgun, then roared off into the night.

Decker waited until he was gone to step down from the truck; no sense getting in the middle of *that*. Melanie blew out a breath and gave him a brief nod.

“Not to be nosy, but who *is* that guy? Your dad? Boyfriend?”

“Boss,” Melanie said. “Who thinks he’s my dad. But he’s not.” She shoved her hands in the pockets of the army jacket. “He’s right about a lot of things, though.” She looked up at him. She was about five-three or five-four, eight or nine inches shorter than he was. “If you make any dumb moves in this town, Keith will find you, and you don’t want him to.”

“He already kinda told me that himself.”

The look that crossed her face was hilarious to Decker because in spite of all her insistence to the contrary, it did look *exactly* like a teenager angry at their dad. “Are you kidding me? I’ve barely even talked to you and he’s giving you the shovel talk?”

“More like shotgun talk, but yeah.” Decker had to smile. “You seem like you can take care of yourself, though.”

“Not to hear Keith talk about it,” Melanie grumbled. But she did return his smile, just a little. She was standing so close to him that he could smell her light, warm, floral scent. It made him want to run his hands through her hair.

Her next words wiped the smile off his face. “Who was that other guy, Mr. Cowboy Boots? Do you know him?”

“Yeah,” Decker said. “I know him. He used to be my friend.”

“Used to be?”

“You met him. What do you think?”

He saw her lips twitch as she suppressed a smile. “He’s looking for Ty Kilgore, too.”

“Looks like it’s gonna be a race, then.”

“You could just let him win.” Her summer-forest eyes continued to search his face, for what, he didn’t know. “Step away and let this old friend of yours do what he’s going to do.”

Decker shook his head. “No, I can’t.”

Melanie took in a deep breath through her nose and let it out. “All right.” She turned away from him. The night felt a little colder, all of a sudden. But she didn’t leave; she went around to the passenger side of the truck. “Do you mind being a chauffeur for a little while?”

“Not at all. You going to leave your car here?”

“I’ll get it tomorrow.”

Melanie opened the passenger door, causing Tarzan to uncoil from where she was curled up on the seat. Melanie jumped back in surprise, then reached out a hesitant hand. Tarzan sniffed it before arching her back and allowing herself to be petted. That was interesting. Usually she was standoffish with strangers, and Decker would have expected a werewolf stranger to have her hiding behind the seat like there was a stray dog in the cab of the truck with her.

But he remembered Melanie’s gentleness with the bunny. Truly, she seemed to have a way with animals.

“That’s Tarzan,” he said. “Here, I’ll just move her blanket. Usually the only passenger I have is her.”

Melanie smiled and climbed into the seat that had been vacated for her. “She seems like a nice lady.”

“Keeps me out of trouble on the road.”

Melanie’s look as she buckled her seat belt was coy and a little flirty. “Do you often get in trouble on the road?”

“I don’t know, Tarzan keeps me out of it.”

Melanie didn’t quite laugh at this, but he got a little flash of her teeth this time.

As he started the truck, he wondered if this was recklessness, a death wish, or what. Brent would have told him he was out of his mind to go for a drive at night with a strange woman who was almost certainly a werewolf.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“I’ll give you directions as we go,” Melanie said. “For starters, turn left and take the lake road.”



# DECKER



WHEN THE TRUCK STARTED MOVING, Tarzan bolted off the seat and scrambled up to the seat back, digging in her claws. Melanie looked startled. Decker was far too used to it to even react.

“Will she be okay there?” Melanie asked dubiously.

“Sure. She rides up there all the time.”

Tarzan swayed as the truck jolted into motion, gracefully riding out the bumps as they left the parking lot. “So I see,” Melanie said. “Lots of people go for long drives with their dogs, but I never met a cat that liked to travel in cars. Tarzan, huh?”

“Yeah, I didn’t realize she was a girl cat at first, and by the time I found out, it had already stuck. She loves to climb anything. Car seats, trees. Me. If you give her a chance and she really likes you, she might sit on your shoulders.”

Another flash of teeth. “I’ll see I can make friends enough to get her to do that. How long have you had her?”

“About three years, I guess. You want to hear the story?”

“Sure.”

They left the small downtown behind. There were no traffic lights out here, just the vast darkness of the trees with an occasional glimmer of lights from a house or cabin tucked up a long driveway. *Last chance to turn around, Deck. Go back where it’s safe, away from the things that go bump in the night.*

Some of those things-that-go-bump he'd invited inside the truck with him.

But he felt no menace from Melanie. She was looking at him with interest, her eyes glimmering in reflected light from the truck's headlights.

"It's not much of a story, really. I ducked into a truck stop, little ways outside Nashville, to get a bite to eat. Started pouring rain while I was inside. I came back out to find I'd left one of the windows half rolled down, and there was a black kitten curled up on the seat. I don't know how old she was, maybe about half grown. I gave her a piece of leftover truck-stop cheeseburger and—" He shrugged. "She's been following me ever since."

"Aren't you worried she's going to get out and run away?"

"Nah. Not anymore. She goes exploring, but she always comes back, and she seems to have a sixth sense for when I'm about to leave."

The road had been descending steeply, but now it leveled out. Through the trees to their left, Decker caught glimpses of the lake, a silver shimmer in the moonlight.

"What's your friend's name?" Melanie asked. "Ex-friend, I mean."

"Brent. I don't want to talk about him."

"All right," she agreed easily. "Let's talk about something else. Where are you from?"

"All over. You?"

"Alaska."

"Interesting," he said, eyebrows going up.

"Less than you'd think."

"You got family back in Alaska?"

"No," she said, and there was a whole world of wistful longing in the way she said it.

Foster kid? he wondered. Or did she have a family that she had severed ties with—a situation not too different from his own, in some ways? He couldn't bring himself to ask her about it. If she wanted to tell him, she'd tell him, and her silence spoke for her.

It wasn't like he could tell her a lot about his past, either. The conversation stalled out, their secrets and private griefs hanging in the air between them. He checked the rear-view mirror, frowned at the distant wink of headlights. It wasn't the first time he'd seen them back there.

“So what did Kilgore do?” Melanie asked. “You wouldn't tell me at the bar, but if you and your old buddy Brent are both looking for him, I'm going to guess it's one hell of a bounty.”

*By all rights it should be, except no judge or jury in the world would believe he did what he did.* “Murder,” Decker said. “He's killed eight people, at least those are the ones I know about, and...ate them.” He hesitated only briefly before saying it. She was right, she deserved to know.

She looked a little disgusted but not entirely surprised. “He's a serial killer, then?” she said. “Our very own Quartz Lake version of Hannibal Lector.”

“I guess so, yeah.” That was one way of putting it. “You don't sound shocked.”

“I don't know. I guess it's not a shock, not really. He...seemed like a guy who would do that.”

He glanced at her. “Why'd you tell me you didn't know him?”

“If a stranger came into *your* town flashing a picture around and asking about one of the locals, would you?”

“Most people do,” he said. “Sooner or later. Loyalty doesn't go very far, not for most of the people I come around looking for.”

One of her hands clenched, gathering a handful of her skirt. “Well, maybe Quartz Lake isn't like most places.”

*Full of werewolves, you mean?* He'd heard rumors of towns in which the population was nothing but shifters. So far, he had yet to encounter one...that he knew of.

Maybe he had now.

But he wasn't going to find out anything if he pushed her away just as she was starting to open up to him. And the closed-off look on her face bothered him, not because he'd shut off an information source, but because he didn't want to hurt her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It makes sense that you'd protect your own against an outsider. I respect that." He smiled briefly. "Even if it does make my job harder."

A hesitant smile crept out. Decker smiled back before checking his rear-view mirror again.

"Something wrong?" Melanie asked.

She was too perceptive. The headlights were too far back for him to tell anything about the vehicle, or even if they were the same set. It could just be a local heading home. But Decker knew he was driving slowly compared to how fast a resident would drive on roads they knew well. And those headlights had been hanging back too. Anyone who lived in the area would most likely have overtaken him by now.

"Your friend?" Melanie asked quietly.

"No way to know for sure."

"But you think so."

"Maybe," he admitted. "Brent probably thinks I'm leading him to Kilgore." He gave her a sharp look. Her face was impossible to read in the dim light of the truck's cab. "Am I?"

Instead of answering, Melanie was silent for a moment and then said, "There's a turn coming up that you should take. It'll be a right. I'll tell you when."

"Where are we going?"

"A place I know about." Her smile was sudden sunshine. "Do you want Brent to catch up to us, Decker?"

“Heck no.”

“So take the turn when I tell you. There’s going to be a curve and then a right.”

He decided to roll with it. They went around the curve, and Decker glimpsed the turn just as Melanie said, “There!” He had to slam on his brakes and all but skid into it.

There was a thump and an annoyed feline yowl from behind the seat. “Sorry,” he muttered to Tarzan as she scabbled around in the back.

The headlights in his rear-view mirror were gone, hidden by trees. They were on a narrow dirt track, barely wide enough for the truck. Branches scraped across his mirrors.

“Kill the lights,” Melanie murmured, but he was already doing it. This wouldn’t be the first time he’d shaken a tail.

One moment passed, another—and the other vehicle blew past in the roar of a powerful engine and the rush of headlights. In the dark, he couldn’t tell if it had been Brent’s Hummer, but he thought so.

They sat in the dark as the growl of the engine receded in the distance. “Won’t take him long to figure out he’s lost us and backtrack,” Decker said.

“I know.” Melanie’s face was bottom-lit in the glow of the instrument panel. She looked excited, and when she turned to him, he thought for an instant that she was going to lean over and kiss him. Instead, she said, “Drive forward.”

“Not back?”

Melanie shook her head. “Forward. I know where this road goes.”

He turned on his parking lights only, shifted into four wheel drive, and crept up the dirt road. The branches continued to rake at the sides of the truck, but he eased to a higher speed when it turned out to be solid under his tires and wide enough that he wasn’t in danger of damaging anything except his paint job.

He kept checking his rear-view mirror for headlights. If Brent realized which side road they'd taken, the gig was up. They couldn't outrun him on a road this rough and narrow. The Hummer would be at a disadvantage, though, with its width and unwieldy frame. Hummers were flashy but impractical for this kind of offroad driving.

Decker glanced at Melanie. Sensing his eyes on her, she met his gaze and flashed him one of her quick smiles. There was a conspiratorial feeling to this midnight excursion, as if they were sharing a private adventure.

Something brushed his leg. He didn't look down, needing to concentrate on the road, but he felt her small, strong hand settle on his thigh.

"Turn here," she murmured.

He took a side road, little more than two rutted tracks overgrown with weeds.

Brent used to say that naivety was going to kill him one of these days. Decker didn't think he was naïve so much as curious, but there was still that saying about curiosity and cats.

Or curiosity plus libido, which was even worse.

Melanie's hand on his thigh felt entirely human, and made his breath quicken.

His headlights showed a break in the trees, which turned out to be a better road than the one they'd been driving on. It was still a dirt road, but it was almost straight, at right angles to their rutted track. Decker had a pretty good sense of direction, but with all these twists and turns in the featureless, dark woods, he wasn't sure if they were heading back toward the lake or away from it.

"You gonna tell me where we're going yet?"

"Left turn up here," she said.

He took it. They were back on the main road along the lake.

"And a right here," Melanie said.

They turned at a rusty mailbox nailed to a post and drove through a band of trees on what he thought at first was another narrow dirt road, but turned out to be a driveway. His headlights swept across tall weeds, dotted with wildflowers, and a farmhouse nestled in the middle of a small meadow. Trees loomed close around it, and beyond it, the lake glimmered in the starlight.

“Your place?” he asked, surprised.

“My place,” she agreed. “Drive around the side. There’s a place to park and your truck won’t be immediately visible if someone else pulls in.”

He followed her instructions and parked under a prefab metal carport, between her outdoor heating oil tank and a shed with its tin roof growing moss.

When he shut off the truck’s engine, the silence was sudden and absolute, enough to make his ears ring. He opened the truck door. Cool night air breathed into the cab. The breeze smelled fresh and clean. He could hear water lapping softly along the lakeshore, amid the rustling of the pines.

From behind the seat came a tiny “Yowm?”

“Oh God,” Melanie burst out, clutching at the dashboard, then Decker caught the quick flash of her grin in the dim light. “I forgot about the cat.”

Tarzan’s black ears and gleaming eyes appeared over the back of the seat. She clawed her way up to the top of the seat back, looking disgruntled.

“Any dogs around?” Decker asked, angling his arm to block Tarzan from leaping out of the open door.

“The neighbors don’t let theirs roam around, but we do get strays in the neighborhood sometimes. And I’m sure there’ll be owls and foxes in the forest. It’s okay if she’s outside, I don’t mind, I’m just saying it might not be safe for her.”

“Tarzan’s used to looking out for herself.” *Like me.* “I guess I’ll let her choose.”

Decker reached over the cat to open the sliding rear window above the pickup bed so she could come and go as she liked. She sprang out immediately, a black ribbon of darkness unspooling in the night, and vanished.

They got out into the night. Melanie had no porch lights, but a half moon rode the star-studded sky above the dark, glimmering lake. Melanie stretched, popping her spine, and swept her gaze around swiftly, as if looking for—what? For an instant Decker was reminded of a wild animal surveying its territory.

It astonished him that she had brought him here. He didn't know how to feel about that. The gesture was obvious: *I trust you enough to do this, now you'll trust me to tell me the truth.* If it was manipulation, it was too obvious to deserve the title.

Maybe this was what being offered a hand of friendship, of hospitality, looked like, and he had been on his own too long to be able to accept it.

Decker closed the truck door, and now it was his turn to almost jump out of his skin at a raucous bleating noise from somewhere in the dark.

“What the heck was that?” He couldn't think of a wild animal that made a noise like that.

At this, Melanie actually laughed. She had a wonderful laugh, light and delighted. “That'd be the goats.”

“Goats?” Decker asked. For hunting, maybe? Werewolves must need to hunt.

“They're rescues,” Melanie explained. “I didn't exactly plan to get into the goat rescue business, but I just seem to collect strays.” There was another whinnying bleat from out of the dark, followed by a noise that sounded to Decker like nothing so much as a bicycle horn. “And...that would be the donkey.”

“How many animals do you have?” he asked, staring at her. The werewolf hypothesis had just taken a silver bullet through the heart. Feral monsters didn't own goat rescues.



“Right now, just the goats and the donkey...and some chickens,” she added, skirt brushing through the long grass as she went toward the house. “But they’re asleep at this time of night. And it’s a predator-proof pen, so you don’t have to worry about Tarzan bothering them. The goats will settle back down soon. I fed them before I went to work.”

She opened the door without bothering with a key. This town must be so small that people didn’t even lock their doors here. He felt another instant of dislocation, a moment’s passing awareness of his outsider status. He was all too aware of the weight of the hidden weapons he carried.

Melanie turned on a lamp. The inside of her house was as pleasant and cozy as the outside suggested. It was slightly cluttered, but in a comfortable sort of way, full of overstuffed secondhand furniture and books on every surface. There didn’t seem to be any overhead lights, just a few lamps here and there.

A small gray cat came to greet them, and then skittered away as soon as it noticed that Melanie wasn’t alone.

“That’s Shadow,” Melanie said. “Don’t mind her. Uh, how does your cat get along with other cats?”

“Not too well,” Decker admitted.

“Shadow’s mostly an inside cat, but is Tarzan going to be okay if she has to sleep in the truck?”

“She tends to prefer it. She’ll be fine.”

“If you’re sure. I’m just going to grab a few things. You can use the bathroom if you need to. It’s through the kitchen.”

“Uh...yeah. That’d be good.” After sitting in the truck for hours drinking coffee, it was actually becoming a bit of a necessity.

Both the bathroom and kitchen were bigger than the rest of the place suggested. Definitely a converted farmhouse, Decker thought. Or maybe it was more accurate to think of it as an actively-in-use farmhouse, since she had some farm animals.

The bathroom was clean but, like the living room, cluttered with cute items that had struck Melanie's fancy. Her toothbrush holder and the nightlight plugged into the wall were both shaped like frogs. There was a pottery incense burner on the back of the sink.

Decker washed his face and hands in the sink and ran a wet hand through his hair. The mirror showed him a punishing reality: Melanie wasn't the dangerous one here. *He* was. He could see it in his face. *He* was what didn't belong in this cozy farmhouse, not her.

And yet, she wasn't afraid of him. Not even a little bit. He could hear her clinking around in the kitchen behind the wall.

Decker swiped at his hair again and opened the door.

"Oh good, there you are." She shoved a blanket into his arms. "Carry this, would you?"

"What's this for?" he asked, confused. His first thought was that something needed to be done with the animals, but he wasn't sure how a blanket figured into that.

Melanie picked up a small bundle of items from the kitchen counter, wrapped in a checkered napkin. It clinked, and he could see a blackened and well-used barbecue fork sticking out one end.

"There's a fire pit on the beach. I sometimes like to make a bonfire when I come home from work." She reached into the fridge and retrieved a couple of cold bottles. "I thought you might like a late supper. Want to join me?"

"Uh...yeah, sure. That sounds great."

Rather than going back out through the cluttered living room, Melanie opened the kitchen door. It opened on the lake side of the house, and the sound of lapping water was suddenly loud. The lake was almost at her door.

"There's a flashlight on the counter if you need it," she said. "I know the way well." With that, she vanished out the door. Decker draped the blanket over his arm and snapped on the light. Melanie was already halfway down a well-worn path to the lake, her skirt and hair flashing in the moonlight.

Decker followed her down to the moon-glossed lake. The path grew soft underfoot, and then his boots were sinking in sand. Melanie paused to slip off her shoes and went along the shore barefoot. Decker tried to stride faster to catch up to her, but sand and pebbles rolling under his feet slowed him down, and he didn't reach Melanie until she stopped at a blackened fire ring made of stones.

"Is this your beach?" Decker asked, catching up slightly out of breath.

"Technically no. It's public. But the tourists mostly stay down where the boat launches are, or they pull in at the park area across the lake. You don't really see people out here except at peak times, around Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. I doubt we'll be disturbed."

The fire pit had been well used. There were a couple of water-smoothed tree trunks to serve as seats, charred ends of wood, beer caps, blackened and burned cans. The sand around it was churned up by feet. Melanie kicked a few pieces of trash into the ring of stones, while Decker laid the blanket on one of the sitting logs.

"There's plenty of driftwood and dead branches for firewood under the pine trees." Her teeth flashed white in the glare of his flashlight. "Want to make it a competition? Twice the wood in half the time? Unless you're afraid of the dark."

"Are you kidding? We've got Tarzan to keep the bears away."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the reminder of why he was here sent a cold chill up his spine, but Melanie didn't seem to notice. "Let's get this party started, then," she said.

"You want to borrow the light? We can take turns."

She shook her head. "I'm familiar with the area. You can keep it."

By the time he'd collected an armful of wood, she was already back at the pit, building a fire. Decker came back with arms full of prickly deadfall to find her on her knees, hands

cupped around a tiny pyramid of pine twigs, its fragile orange spark lighting her face. She blew softly on it until the orange glow of her match leaped suddenly brighter, greedy flames licking at the dry twigs. Melanie fed it one twig at a time, until the fire was large enough to twine effortlessly around the larger pieces of wood she had brought.

When she sat back on her heels, Decker jerked as if coming awake. He'd been mesmerized, watching the subtle play of firelight on her face, the intensity of her concentration as she nursed the flame to life. He let his armload of firewood fall beside the pile of wood she'd already made, which was, he noticed, more than he'd found even with the assistance of a flashlight.

Melanie glanced around without visible surprise; she'd been aware of him all along. "I don't know how hungry you are, but I was thinking we could perhaps catch a few fish."

"With our bare hands?" he asked, amused.

He caught a quick flash of—something, on her face. Worry and alarm, like she'd forgotten something and just remembered. Then she smiled and the moment was gone. "They come pretty close to the shore here," she said. "It might not be too hard."

"Or we could use the fishing pole I have in the truck."

"Yes," she said, laughing. "Yes, that would also work." She patted the bottles she'd placed in the sand. "I have a couple of beers here."

"Sounds good, but if we're making a picnic out of it, let me throw in a few things. I've got some bottles of water in the truck, and granola bars and cookies. Road food. Want me to bring dessert?"

Melanie laughed that delightful laugh again. "Yes, please."

Decker walked off to get the things he'd promised, but he kept looking back at the tiny spark of light on the lakeshore, a lantern in the great dark emptiness. He wasn't sure what he expected her to do—turn into a wolf, maybe? All she did was reach for sticks from the firewood pile. The sharp snapping

sounds carried to him in the night as she broke them into pieces.

He didn't know if he was being too paranoid, or not enough.

It was chilly away from the fire. This high in the mountains, the air carried a taint of snow even in the middle of summer. Decker was glad of his jacket as he rummaged through the truck for supplies under the harsh glare of the dome light.

"Tarzan?" he called softly into the dark as he closed the truck door, but there was no answer, which meant she was off doing her own cat things in the night.

A vehicle passed on the lake road, a distant flash of headlights between the trees and quick burr of an engine. Decker tensed, but it sped past without slowing.

Running into Brent on a hunt wasn't an uncommon occurrence. For a while, even after they quit working together, they sometimes teamed up if they happened to be in the same place at the same time, but that had stopped happening after everything that went down in Wisconsin.

*He didn't do anything—Brent, stop—*

Decker shook his head to clear the ring of a gunshot from his ears, trying to shake off the remembered rush of adrenaline and fury.

Maybe Brent was right. Maybe they were the same. But at least he still had the ability to recognize when some things were over the line.

# MELANIE



IT WAS easy for Melanie to forget herself when she was around humans. On her own, she would drink from the lake (it wouldn't hurt her as a wolf, though she didn't want to try it in human form) and catch fish by swimming in the shallows, snapping them out of the water with her jaws. The need to remember human necessities such as fishing poles and bottled water was something she rarely had to worry about.

*The more time I spend around him, the more I'm going to give away.*

If she hadn't already.

Melanie blew out a breath and looked up at the stars. Distantly, she heard Decker rummaging in the truck and quietly calling his cat. She suspected that normal human ears wouldn't have picked up the subtle sounds.

*What am I doing?*

She wasn't sure if she had brought him here for a booty call, to quiz him about his dangerous friend and his reasons for being in Quartz Lake, or both. Probably both, if she was going to be entirely honest with herself. Bringing him to the beach had felt less intimate than having him in her house, but now it seemed somehow more so.

Alone with each other, in the dark.

But she didn't have a bad feeling about him. Nothing about him felt unsafe. She would never have brought him here if she thought he posed a danger to her.

At least she hoped she wouldn't have. *Griselda, don't lead me astray.*

There was no obvious answer from her wolf, but she felt a sense of warmth and assurance. Griselda wasn't afraid.

Soft rustling and the clatter of pebbles alerted her to Decker coming back. He carried a fishing pole tucked under his arm, and a small cooler swung from his hand. When he smiled at her, the tingling warmth inside her spread outward.

"Know any good fishing holes around here?" he asked.

"There's a nice one nearby, a deep place by the shore where the big trout and pike hang out." Melanie scrambled to her feet, brushing sand off her skirt. She fed the fire some of the bigger pieces of wood from their pile. The heavier pieces would burn down slowly, leaving a nice bed of coals for roasting the fish when they got back.

Decker left the cooler in the sand. They walked up the beach, close but not touching, Decker lighting the way with the flashlight. Occasionally his feet slipped and slid in the loose mix of sand and water-smoothed pebbles that made up the beach.

"You might be more comfortable with your boots off," Melanie said.

The flashlight glinted off some bits of broken glass higher on the beach, washed up from the lake. "I'll leave 'em on for now, thanks."

The flashlight beam's white glare flickered in front of their feet. Melanie found it more of an irritant than a help, since she could see better without it; her eyes weren't as night-sharp in human form as when she was a wolf, but they were perfectly adequate in the moonlight. The flashlight did little more than wash out her night vision and make her squint.

But Decker needed it to avoid stumbling. And also, came a thought from the most wary part of her, if he tried to attack, she could steal the flashlight and leave him blind. His eyes would adapt, but he'd be completely night-blind for those few precious seconds she needed to get away.

Two sides of her, the trusting one that had brought him to her safest place of refuge, and the wary wild animal that was still thinking about how to fight him if she had to. She couldn't help thinking, *There are two wolves inside of you...* and smiled to herself.

"Do we keep going?" Decker asked. The beach was ending, the trees coming right down to the edge of the lake.

"Yes. It's not far."

They had to clamber over twisted roots, Decker's light dancing across ragged bark and wind-gnarled conifer branches. Pine needles prickled her callused bare feet.

"Nearby, huh?" Decker murmured, trying to extricate himself from a tangle of thorn bushes growing up around the pines where enough sunlight had penetrated their dense canopy to allow other things to grow. With the fishing pole in one hand and the flashlight in the other, he was at a disadvantage, though Melanie found that she was also regretting the long skirt and her bare legs under it. Going wolf-shaped was so much easier. She didn't often come this way as a human.

"It's right here. Look down. Careful."

Decker pointed his flashlight down, and the beam penetrated lake water almost under their feet, blue shading brown shading black. Over the years, the action of wind-driven waves and ice had hollowed out the bank, and now the pines hung precariously over a hole deep enough to swallow light. It was cold too, Melanie knew, and over her head even as a human.

Decker flicked the light away from the water and shone it around the thicket. "If you've come here before, I hope you weren't planning to sit in sticker bushes all night."

In truth, she hadn't realized the pine-covered bank was quite so unstable and precarious, or so full of thorns. Normally she would already be swimming down there in the water, protected from the cold by a coat of heavy, water-shedding fur. However, she knew that this fishing hole was also popular



among humans from town; they had left beaten paths through the briars, and worn shiny patches on the pine roots where they liked to sit.

“If I knew you liked to complain so much, I’d have done it myself in half the time.” She smoothed down her skirt before sitting on the knuckle of a bent pine root. “Just pick a root to sit on and cast your line. And don’t talk too much. Fish are even more sensitive to sound at night.”

“I’ve been night fishing before.” But this time he whispered. There was some rustling next to her as he got settled, probably quiet by human standards though it seemed loud to her, and tied a fly on the hook with the flashlight resting in his lap and half shielded by his thigh.

“You want first cast?” he asked, offering her the pole once the hook was prepared.

“No thanks. I’ll give you a head start.”

Decker chuckled. He had a nice laugh, warm and deep; she found herself wanting to hear it again. “Is everything a competition with you?”

“I just figured after the firewood, it was only fair to give you a chance to get your own back.”

The fly plopped on the dark surface of the water, spreading gleaming ripples around it. Decker took a moment to examine the pool for snags and obstacles before turning the light off. Darkness blotted the world; Melanie squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again. Detail began to slowly emerge from the gloom: Decker’s face and hands, the gleam of moonlight on the silver charms on his jacket, a quick flash of the fishing pole as he cast again.

The lack of light, as always, made her more aware of her other senses. The night was alive with sounds, tiny rustles in the forest and the soft rhythmic lapping of the lake as its wind-driven wavelets rolled ashore. An owl hooted not far away. She could hear an occasional car on the lake road, and the drone of a jet somewhere far off.

Smells were heightened as well, even without her fully lupine senses. Out here in the woods, she was able more easily to pick out individual scents than she could when overwhelmed by the human world's choking miasma of gasoline, perfume, and chemicals. The forest's smells were infinitely more subtle and rich to her delicately refined nose, including the sharp scent of the pines and the muddy smell of the lake. Needles crunched under her hips and hands whenever she moved, prickling the skin of her palms and bringing a renewed waft of turpentine.

But even through the pine tickling her nostrils, she could smell the spicy and alluring scent she'd come to associate with Decker. She had thought at first it was cologne, but now she believed it was the individual musk of his skin, faintly tinged with shaving lotion and shampoo. She could also smell the gun-oil-and-metal scent that Keith had mentioned. Decker was a man who habitually went about armed.

*Careful, Griselda*, she warned herself, as she realized that with the darkness to cloak her, she'd begun to lean toward him.

*All the better to smell you, my dear...*

She could see him in greater detail now, a handsome study in shades of gray. Her night vision was sharp, but didn't pick up color well.

It would be nice to separate him from his weapons, so they could talk more freely and easily, just the two of them without the looming specter of his past and Keith's suspicions. An idea occurred to her. It made her grin.

*How brave are you, werewolf hunter? How willing are you to walk into dark places?*

"Seems like nothing's biting tonight," Decker murmured, casting again.

"Patience. The amount of noise we were making will have driven them into the deepest holes. They'll be out again."

"Do you go night fishing much?"

“I do,” she said, and unzipped her jacket before she could change her mind. “But not like this.”

It took Decker a moment to figure out what was happening. She hadn’t realized his night vision was that much poorer than hers, but she had taken off her jacket and shirt and was unclasping her bra by the time he caught on.

“What are you doing?” His voice was strangled.

“You don’t seem to be having much luck with that pole. Now it’s my turn.”

She took off her bra. Her skin tingled all over with the awareness of Decker right beside her, almost within touching distance of her nudity in the dark. Literal flirting with danger; she had never entirely been able to resist it.

His breath was coming fast, his face turned toward her, eyes wide. She wondered how much *he* could see, if to him she was only a blurry, paler flash in the blackness, if he could make out the dots of her nipples...

“If you’re going swimming, you’ve still got a lot of clothes on, buddy,” she said as she shimmied out of her skirt.

“I...uh...” He shook his head like a man coming out of a trance. “It’s dark down there!”

“It’s dark up here, too. And once we get out from under the trees, there’s a bright moon.” Melanie stripped off her panties and breathed easier now that her skin was bare to the night. The chilly breeze raised the fine hairs on her arms, and she wished briefly that she was going to shift, rather than staying in this hairless and cold-susceptible form all night. Well, she knew she’d warm up once she got in the water and started moving, though her toes were already curling at the anticipation of the initial chill.

Decker took a deep breath and unzipped his jacket. Melanie grinned. She hadn’t been sure if he would rise to the challenge.

On some deeper level, she knew exactly what she was doing. This was the wolf way of courting. *Come chase me, you beautiful thing...*

*And take off all your knives and guns while you're at it. Nothing between us but our bare skin.*

She watched Decker strip off his shirt, and caught her breath at the smooth planes of his body, the dark curls on his chest. But it didn't seem entirely fair—he couldn't see her, while she could see him—so she decided to save the rest like a present to be unwrapped out on the moonlit water, where he wouldn't be at quite so much of a disadvantage. Melanie loved a good race, but only if all the contestants had a fair start.

She edged down over the roots, pine needles prickling her bare bottom. Stretching her leg down, she dipped her toes in the water and flinched at the cold. She'd swum in the lake much later in the season than this, but it never made that first chill any less of a shock to the system.

“Hey, be careful,” Decker protested. “You can't see what's down there.”

“It's deep enough to be safe,” she said. “Don't worry, I've been swimming here plenty of times.” And with that, she released her hold on the root and slipped into the deep, dark water with barely a splash.

It *was* cold, oh *hell*, so cold. She came up gasping, gripping the dangling roots for a minute while her legs found the rhythm to tread water beneath the surface.

“Melanie!”

Light stabbed her eyes when she looked up. “Hey!” she protested. She couldn't see anything now except the flashlight beam, which thankfully swept out of her face a minute later, leaving her blinking blue and purple blotches out of her vision.

“Thank goodness,” Decker said. “You didn't say anything. I thought you might've hit your head.”

With her night vision still largely washed out by the flashlight, she could only dimly see him standing up on the bank and looking down, holding onto the tree trunk with one hand. He had one leg out of his jeans, and looked like he was in danger of falling in himself.

“Awww, it’s sweet of you to worry about me.” The cold water was growing easier to bear, but she knew she needed to get moving, get the blood flowing in her limbs. She let go of the root and backstroked slowly out of the little cove. “Don’t dive head-first. Just do what I did, climb down the bank and go in with your feet. The roots are like a ladder.”

“Ow!” he yelped.

“Oh, and look out for the thorns.”

“Now she tells me,” Decker grumbled. She caught a flash of his mostly-bare backside as he turned around to climb down the bank. It looked like he was still wearing his underwear. Well, if he wanted to sit around in wet boxers all night, he had no one but himself to blame.

But he was brave, she thought, as he gamely clambered down to the water. In his place, armed only with ordinary human strength and talents, she wasn’t sure if she would have had the courage to strip down to her bare human skin and climb into the lake, where she would be at even more of a disadvantage against someone who had the ability to shift into an animal with teeth and claws.

And she reminded herself that he couldn’t see, either. Not like she could. He was willing to do this in what was, to him, near-total darkness.

Brave man. Very brave man.

“Yaugh!”

“The water’s a little chilly,” Melanie said, idly paddling with slow strokes to keep herself in place.

“Yeah, like the Arctic Ocean is a little frozen.” He had only dipped his foot in; now he pulled it out again.

“It won’t feel as cold once you’ve been in it for a while.”

“That’s a symptom of hypothermia.”

Melanie laughed. “If you get hypothermia, I’ll pull you out.”

“Because you’re magically immune?” But while he was speaking, Decker had hand-over-handed down the bank until he was submerged up to the thighs. Taking a deep breath, he let go and plunged in.

Melanie tilted herself forward in the water, ready to give a powerful kick and race to his rescue if he actually got in trouble, but he splashed to the surface an instant later with a bellow.

“Whoa, that’s cold! Jeez!”

“Give yourself a minute to get used to it,” she counseled, swimming closer. “Just hang onto the bank until you can breathe normally again.”

“Fuck *me*,” he muttered, clutching at the roots growing down the bank into the water, and Melanie tried not to think *Yes, I was hoping to*. “What are you planning for an encore? Maybe we’ll walk on hot coals, or eat a live scorpion or two?”

“Don’t you enjoy a moonlight swim?”

“In water that’s not thirty-five degrees, maybe? Holy moly.” He shook his head, splattering water droplets from his dark hair. It looked longer when it was wet, plastered down to his forehead and neck. Melanie had the urge to reach out and touch it; she was almost close enough. Stopping herself, she instead twisted around in the water with a splash, making Decker flinch as the spray of droplets struck him.

“Come on, you need to get your blood moving. Race you.”

“I can’t even see!” But he let go of the root and kicked off anyway.

He was a strong swimmer. As they paddled out from under the overhanging trees into the molten silver lake, he became more confident and caught up with her more easily than she was expecting. His longer limbs gave him a greater reach and consequently more powerful strokes, even though she had a strength advantage because of her shifter heritage.

She had expected the water to equalize them; she just hadn’t realized how thoroughly it would do so. If they were to genuinely race, she wasn’t sure which of them would win.

His hand glanced off her shoulder, a startling touch of skin on skin. “Caught you,” he panted.

“I wasn’t really trying,” she protested, kicking herself away from him in the water. Long silver trails of moonlight glistened behind her hands.

His teeth flashed in a broad grin. “Sounds like the justification of a loser.”

“Loser, is it?” she retorted, and kicked around in a flash of feet. Diving below the water, she swam for the beach.

She drove herself as hard as she could, heart pumping and pulse singing in her ears. When she surfaced to gulp a breath of air, she glimpsed Decker doing the same, just a few feet away and abreast of her, in a shower of quicksilver droplets under the moon.

Melanie dove again, pushing herself harder yet, swimming for all she was worth. Even without being able to see Decker, she was still aware of him in some way she couldn’t define. She knew he was there with her under the water, keeping up with her, sometimes pulling slightly ahead, sometimes falling behind.

The rising slope of the lake bottom came up to meet them and they stumbled out onto the beach on rubbery legs, gasping for air. A referee might have been able to determine which one was ahead, but as far as Melanie could tell, they’d gotten there at the exact same time. She collapsed on her bare ass and then lay flat on her back, heedless of the sand sticking to her wet skin. Decker hunched over, resting his hands on his knees as he fought for air. Their fire was just a few yards up the beach, trailing sweet woodsmoke into the night.

“You trying to give me a heart attack?” Decker wheezed.

“Bet you’re not cold now,” she panted.

He mumbled something incomprehensible, though she could tell profanity was involved, and sat down beside her. Melanie propped herself up on her elbows. The light breeze raised goosebumps on her bare, wet skin.

“How clean is this lake water, exactly?” Decker asked, wiping his hand across the back of his mouth.

“Nice and clean. I swim in the lake all the time. There aren’t enough people up here to dirty it too much.”

She was expecting another sarcastic remark, but instead Decker draped his long bare arms over his knees—she couldn’t help noticing the flex of his shoulders, the play of the muscles in his back—and looked out across the lake. Under the sinking moon, it was faintly luminescent. Far out in the water, a circle of ripples glistened as a fish surfaced and went under again.

“This is a nice place,” Decker said softly. “Quiet. Peaceful. I can see why you like it here.”

“It’s got its problems, same as any other place. But yeah, I like it.”

She looked up at him. His face was pensive, lips parted slightly. To her wolf-shifter eyes, the vivid moonlight was almost as bright as daylight; she could see the crisp little hairs that fuzzed his jaw with a day’s worth of stubble, the long lashes half-lowered over his eyes.

“It’s a good place to live,” she finished and sat up, reaching out to touch his face, turning it toward hers.



# MELANIE



HE LOOKED STARTED when she kissed him. His lips were cool and wet, parting responsively. In contrast to the cool night air, his mouth felt hot, a jolt of startling warmth. After the initial moment of surprise, he kissed back fiercely, tangling a hand in her wet hair to draw her mouth closer to his.

When she pulled away he gasped and gave her a crooked grin. “You know, I’m not used to getting naked and sweaty and out of breath, and *then* getting kissed. Usually it goes the other way around.”

“Maybe we’re a little backwards here in Quartz Lake,” Melanie teased and leaned forward for another kiss. This time one of his hands found her bare torso, strong fingers curving around her ribs. He was hesitant to touch her breasts until she reached down to guide his hand up and let him know it was all right; then he ran his thumb across the nipple, making her gasp into his mouth. She stroked her hands over his chest, felt the roughness of the coarse, curling hair.

“I’m just gonna guess,” he murmured against her lips, “that you didn’t bring me out here just to go night fishing.”

“Mmmm.” She nipped at his lips and pulled away, feeling the night’s chill more acutely where his hands had touched her skin. “Fish. That’s right. I’m hungry, aren’t you?”

Decker snorted, but gave in without a fuss, standing when she did and brushing sand off his wet boxers and bare legs. “In case you’ve forgotten, our fishing pole is back there in the thorn bushes.”

“That’s okay. I wasn’t going to use it anyway.”

“What are you going to do, catch fish with your bare hands?”

“Come on,” she said over her shoulder, “and learn how.”

She waded back into the moon-silvered water. The impromptu race had temporarily scared away the fish, but they were already coming back. Melanie bent her knees and let one of the lake’s low, slow waves wash over her and pick up her feet from the bottom, sliding into it without a ripple. Beside her, Decker caught the next wave with a bit more splashing, but not much.

“The trick to this is to be very quiet and still,” she murmured, letting her arms and legs move with the current, her natural buoyancy keeping her afloat. Decker was having a little more trouble with that; he tended to sink rather than float when he stopped swimming.

“Yeah, but how can you *see* them?”

She wasn’t quite sure how to answer that. She didn’t know how much he could see in the moonlight. “Wait until they come to the surface,” she ventured, though she had no intention of waiting that long. “It works better in the evening, when they’re jumping all over the lake to eat the clouds of midges that hover over the water at sunset. But if you keep your eyes open, you can see—look,” she interrupted herself quietly, and raised a finger out of the water to point to the glistening rings spreading across the water near them. “That was one just now.”

“They’re fast little devils.”

His teeth were starting to chatter. Now that they weren’t moving, the cold was bothering him more than her. And hypothermia wasn’t in her plans for tonight. Best to get this over quickly, then.

He had proven himself brave, and game for a challenge; he’d let her strip him of his weapons and came to her as an equal. She didn’t want to hurt him. She had only wanted to

find out what he was made of, who he really was, and she liked everything she had seen so far.

Melanie ducked beneath the surface of the water. She briefly entertained the idea of shifting—this would be easier as a wolf—but she wasn't *that* confident in the darkness of the lake bottom to hide her. Maybe humans could see better in the dark than she thought.

With her eyes open, the water was murky but not impenetrable. Silvery, elusive shapes darted about her. They avoided the area where Decker's arms and legs churned the water as he kept himself afloat, but Melanie knew how to make her body flow with the water so they didn't realize there was a hunter in their midst. On a night that was less chilly, she would have liked to teach Decker how to do it properly.

Maybe there would be other chances, other moonlit nights in their future.

With that hopeful thought, she picked her prey and kicked into sudden motion, lunging to bring her hand up from behind and below the fish. The key was to get her fingers into the gills, or else it would slip right out of her hands. She'd done this so much by now that her aim was perfect; her fingers locked into place, and she kicked herself to the surface with the fish struggling against her hand.

"Phew," she said, blowing out spray from her lips before sucking in a breath of clean air. She held her catch out of the water—a fat lake trout. "How does this one look?"

"What the heck?" He sounded deeply impressed. "I thought you were joking."

"I said I would, didn't I?" Her teeth were starting to chatter a little, too. "Let's get this on the coals and get ourselves warmed up. How does that sound?"

"Took the words right out of my mouth."

By the time they reached the beach, she was warm from swimming, but she noticed Decker shivering as they climbed out of the water. The night air felt chilly, raising goosebumps

on her skin. Night swimming was more complicated when she couldn't warm up in a heavy wolf pelt.

She smacked the fish on a rock, ending its struggles. "Come on, let's get the fire stirred up before we freeze."

"You don't even look cold," he said.

"Looks can be deceiving. I'm just used to it." A little fake shiver turned into a real one as the breeze came back, prickling the hairs on her arms. It was very nice to have a bonfire to look forward to.

"You know, our clothes are back there in the sticker bushes."

"Let's get dinner on the grill and then we can worry about it."

The fire had burned down to a glowing bed of coals. Decker prodded it with a stick and fed dry pine branches to the embers until they flared up in twisting ropes of flame. Watching him in the firelight was a glorious experience. Melanie enjoyed the way the golden light painted his skin in shadow and fire. His wet boxers clung to him so he might as well not have been wearing anything at all.

Tearing herself away, she picked up a blanket. "Go ahead and get your wet underwear off and get wrapped up."

"What about you?" His gaze was frankly admiring, not even attempting to hide that he was checking out her wet body in the moonlight.

"I'll go get our clothes. A little jog will warm me right up."

As she took off trotting down the beach, he called after her, "Woman, you are *nuts!*"

*I just might be at that.* But nothing she had done tonight was more reckless, or more dangerous, than bringing him here tonight. She still had no good explanation for why it had made so much sense to her. All she knew was that she and her wolf were of one mind about it.

The run helped settle her a little, though fatigue and cold weighed her down as she picked her way back to where they had left their clothes. Scraped and scratched, she decided it would be better to get dressed here than to try to scramble back to the beach naked.

Furless human skin was such a nuisance.

She squeezed the water out of her hair and got dressed, though she didn't bother with her panties or bra, stuffing them into a pocket. When she picked up Decker's clothes, the weight in his jacket pocket reminded her of something she should probably take measures to fix. She took all the rounds out of his gun, double-checked for a round in the chamber (she didn't use guns much, but Keith had made sure she knew everything he could teach her about them) and buried the ammo under some leaf litter before returning the gun to its hiding place.

While she was at it, she snooped in his wallet a little bit. Using the flashlight, with frequent glances over her shoulder to make sure Decker wasn't coming along to find out what was taking so long, she checked his driver's license. It was a Montana license. Decker Nathaniel Kenney. She smiled slightly; it *was* his first name. She hadn't expected that.

He had concealed carry permits for a couple of different Western states, gas station punch cards...and not much else. The address on the license was in Bozeman, but she was willing to bet he hadn't been there in a while.

There was also something else, a business card with a stylized hawk embossed on the front. The hawk was sharp and angular; its wings looked like blades. Bold lettering underneath read STEELHAWK SECURITY. When she turned it over, there was nothing on the back except a phone number. She didn't recognize the prefix.



When Melanie got back to the fire, the fire was throwing off heat and Decker had laid his wet boxers on a log to dry. He

looked a little more comfortable and less frozen with the blanket tucked around him. When she handed him his bundle of clothing, he snaked a hand from under the blanket to take it.

“I would’ve cleaned the fish,” he said, shedding the blanket to pull his jeans up over his narrow hips, “but my knife was with our clothes, and I didn’t want to poke around in your things. Also, we’re going to need more wood soon.”

“I’ll do that, if you’ll make sure dinner doesn’t burn.”

She fetched another armload of wood, returning to find the fish cleaned and spitted it over the fire, and Decker huddled close to the flames with the blanket draped loosely over his shoulders. He was still bare to the waist, and he looked up and smiled at her as she deposited the armful of wood by the fire.

Her heart flipped over. Stupid betraying heart.

Melanie cracked open one of the beers and offered him the other. His fingers were ice cold when he took it from her.

“Are you having trouble warming up?” she asked. “I could go in the house and make some coffee if you’d prefer.”

“I’ll be fine in a minute. Just didn’t realize it would be this cold,” he admitted. He set the beer in the sand next to him and held his hands out to the fire. His feet were shoved sockless into his shoes, his chest hair dark and curly under the blanket. Funny to think she’d seen just about all of him already, and kissed him too. He was right, they were doing this entire thing backwards. She had a vivid sense-memory of what his bare skin felt like.

“You can build the fire up higher. It can’t be seen from the road, if you’re worried about that.” The dry pine branches were perfect for building a high, hot fire. She moved the sizzling fish out of the danger zone as she fed more branches into the flames.

“I don’t think we’re hiding,” Decker said. “Are we?”

“You tell me,” Melanie said. “What happens if your friend Brent finds us?”

“I—he’s not—” Decker shook his head. “Brent’s not an axe murderer. He’s just—driven. I think this is a sort of a race between me and him, to see which one finds Ty Kilgore first.”

A thread of ice trickled down her back. “Why? Money?”

“No, it’s...” Decker’s mouth twisted. “Okay, maybe it’s that, a little. For him, at least. But—Brent’s dangerous, and the people he works for are even more so. When they get involved, people get hurt. The wrong people, I mean. And I don’t want that to hap—*Save the fish!*”

It was such an abrupt swerve of subject that only shifter reflexes allowed her to spring forward as soon as she got what he meant. The fish, turning flaky in the heat, was about to fall off its spit. Melanie rescued it, using a fold of her skirt to hold it, and Decker smoothly flipped over the cooler lid and held it out just as the fish started to let go. It flopped on the plastic surface, charred and flaky and smelling delicious.

“Dinner,” Melanie said, “is served. Dig in.”

# DECKER



HAVING FAILED TO BRING PLATES, they ate with plastic forks and their fingers, the cooler lid sitting on the log between them. The fish was burnt on the outside, with a strong smoke flavor, but after working up an appetite with the swim, Decker thought it was the best trout he'd ever had. The company certainly didn't hurt.

He still couldn't believe he'd done—well, anything that he had done tonight. Couldn't believe he'd stepped trustingly into the black water after her, stripped off his clothes and left his gun behind and let the cold dark water close over his head without knowing what lurked underneath, all on Melanie's say-so. Couldn't believe he'd started to tell her about Brent.

Couldn't believe he'd kissed her.

*She* was the biggest threat to him here.

But she didn't feel like a threat. Especially not like this, sitting next to him in the firelight, her hair a tangled, half-dried mass on her shoulders, her lips and fingers glistening with fish oil. All he wanted to do was kiss her again.

They were both watching each other; their eyes kept half-meeting, then they ducked each other's gaze. Sometimes he startled a smile out of her, a lovely flash of warmth and light in the dark. He wanted to make her smile more, wanted to watch those dimples appear and know that he'd put them there. Wanted to kiss the smile off her lips and then kiss farther down

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*Don't, he warned himself. Don't do it. Don't fall for this girl, not with the things you suspect about her.*

“If I take you to Ty Kilgore,” Melanie said, and he looked up quickly. Her eyes were focused on him, glimmering in the firelight almost as if they reflected it in a way human eyes normally didn't. “If I take you there...what are you going to do? You say you're not like Brent, but how different are you, really?”

How different? According to Brent, not different at all.

“I—don't know.” The truth was wrenched out of him, feeling stranger than a lie would have. “I need to stop him from committing more crimes. The man is a murderer.”

“So you're going to turn him in for a reward?”

“I don't know,” Decker said again. “The things he's wanted for aren't most of the things he's done. If he's sent to prison, it won't be for long enough. I just—don't know.”

There was no way to explain to the authorities that the worst of Kilgore's crimes had been committed as a bear. This wasn't something that the human world's justice could deal with. Which was why men like him existed.

*There's no choice, he wanted to say.*

But looking into Melanie's eyes, what he saw was curiosity, openness, and a wary hope. Hope that he *was* something more than Brent was. Not just a killer. A good man.

“We need more wood,” Decker said, and got up abruptly, leaving behind those eyes that invited him to bask in a warmth he'd done nothing to earn. He grabbed his jacket and the flashlight, and strode toward the woods.

As he gathered dead branches in the edge of the woods, he glanced back toward the fire every once in a while—back to its cozy, inviting glow, and the woman beside it.

*Maybe I don't have to kill him. I could take him in—*

*And do what with him then?*

In his travels, he'd heard rumors of a federal agency that dealt with shifter-related crimes. Maybe it was possible to find them and turn Kilgore over to them.

Of course, he'd have to not only find them, but first catch Kilgore. Find a way to restrain a man who could turn into a one-ton grizzly bear...

What was the matter with him? Thinking about risking his life because of a woman he'd only just met.

But if it really had been only Melanie, he wouldn't be feeling like this. He had felt this way for a long time, ever since the rock-solid certainties he'd built his life on had turned out to be unstable sand, crumbling under his feet.

*So what's the alternative?* he asked himself fiercely as he broke off rough-barked branches beneath the shaggy pines and gathered them into his arms. *Let men like Kilgore get away with murder and worse? Turn them in to woefully unprepared sheriff's departments and police stations, when they're capable of ripping their way out of a cell and killing unprepared guards with teeth and claws that they'll never see coming?*

He could tell the truth.

*Yeah, and they'll look at you like you're nuts. Werewolves and werebears—what's next, dragons and unicorns?*

He'd sold his soul long ago, given up any hope of a normal life and family, so that ordinary human men and women would be safe from people like Ty Kilgore.

His gaze kept slipping back toward the beach and the glint of firelight through the trees.

So where did Melanie fit into all of that? He was still positive she was a shifter. Not a monster, but an ordinary person living an ordinary life. Rescuing goats and taking midnight swims. This was what she had brought him here to show him, he thought—whether or not she knew exactly what he was. That she had a life here too.

Her warmth, her charm, her allure of danger were all as compelling for him as a siren song.

And that was what made him instinctively distrust it.

Especially since something didn't feel quite right about the familiar weight of the pistol in his pocket. Hadn't felt right since she brought his clothes back.

Decker took another quick glance at the fire before stepping around the bole of a large tree to check the load in his pistol. It was good sense, mostly. If he was going to be out here in the dark, he wanted to make sure it was ready to go.

As soon as he had it in his hand, he could tell it wasn't loaded.

He checked the magazine and cleared the slide just to make sure. Not a single shell. She'd emptied his gun.

He wasn't angry at her so much as himself. He knew better than this. She'd brought *him* out here. So far, he had been playing the game by her rules, but it seemed like the height of stupidity. Go for a swim—why? So she could go through his pockets? Lure him out in the woods so her werewolf pack could hunt him down?

Suddenly the night seemed full of strange, dangerous sounds. Decker flinched and put his back against the trunk of the tree. He wasn't quite done checking things yet. He flipped open his wallet and went through that. Everything was still there, but he was pretty sure it had been rifled.

Trusting as a kid walking up to a candy van. She had taken one look at him in the bar and thought, *There goes a guy who thinks with his dick*. And what had he done but prove her right?

Abandoning the wood in a heap on the ground, he headed for the truck, staying in the edge of the woods with a screen of trees between himself and the beach. His skin crawled with the real or imagined sense of invisible watchers in the flat darkness under the forest canopy. The night seemed to be full of noises, and he winced at the noise he was making, crashing through the brush.

Moonlight shone between the trees. He came out in her yard, and circled around the corner of the house—where he

nearly walked into a long, low outbuilding that smelled like hay and manure.

The barn. This was where her goats were.

He stopped, one hand resting on the rough boards of the building's side. The warm farm smells calmed him down. From inside, he heard the soft sounds of animals moving around, little murmurs from half-asleep chickens, a goat making some kind of low rumbling sound.

This was who Melanie really was. She was a person who petted baby bunnies and rescued goats and donkeys. *I just seem to collect strays*, she had said. And she had picked him up just the same.

Not a con artist who saw a man led by his dick and decided to lead him to the beach to shake him down for information and the contents of his wallet and maybe worse. She was a kind woman who had seen a lonely man, a man she was attracted to—that part wasn't in doubt; he knew they could both feel the charged atmosphere between them—and took him back to her house for a hot meal and maybe more.

She was a woman living alone, who had brought a strange man back to her place—a man who had turned out to be carrying weapons. Of *course* she'd unloaded his gun and gone through his things.

He could breathe easier now, even if he was no less conflicted.

He knew that he should round up Tarzan, get back in his truck and drive away. Whatever help she could be with the hunt for Kilgore wasn't worth the risk. He wasn't afraid she might hurt him, not physically, at least. What he was in danger of losing here was worse.

His heart, and whatever was left of his certainty about the things he had once believed true of the world.

He should get in the truck and go. He wasn't sure why he couldn't.

# MELANIE



MELANIE STARED AFTER DECKER. She could glimpse his flashlight beam flickering in and out of sight in the edge of the woods, and then even that was lost to view.

She finished eating, wrapped up the leftovers, and threw the fish bones and skin scraps into the fire. Carrying the cooler lid, she went down to the lake edge, where she crouched beside the water to wash it and her hands and face. Decker was still gone when she got back to the fire.

Her first thought was that maybe he'd left. But she hadn't heard the truck engine. She didn't think she could have missed it; everything was so quiet out here.

The back of her neck crawled. How much of what he'd told her was true, and how much a lie? She imagined Decker meeting with his friend Brent on the side road leading to her house...imagined a sniper rifle even now trained on her, with her head in the cross-hairs...

She'd trusted him enough to bring him home with her.

*They hunt our kind.*

But he hadn't seemed deceptive or cruel. He didn't seem like a killer.

Taking a deep breath, she rose from the fire and went after him.

She checked the truck first, to make sure it was still there, and that was where she found him. He was leaning against the side of the vehicle, staring off into the woods. At her

approach, he turned on the flashlight and raised it to point into her face. Melanie squinted, shielding her eyes with her hand.

“You unloaded my gun,” he said accusingly.

“Yes.” She shoved her hands in her pockets, not bothering to explain or apologize.

“What’d you do with the rounds?”

“Buried them. If I wanted to hurt you,” she added, “I could have kept the gun.”

Decker shook his head and lowered the flashlight. “I don’t know if you’re crazy or I am.”

Melanie approached him cautiously and stopped just out of reach. “Maybe we both are.” Because right now, all she could think about was having him bend her over the truck and push inside her. She hadn’t realized until seeing him, until smelling him, how much she wanted him. It had been building all evening, through their naked swim and making out on the beach, and now it was growing to a desperate hunger inside her.

But she held back. “Did you come here to kill Ty Kilgore?”

“Maybe,” Decker said. He raised his eyes and held her gaze, though she wasn’t sure how well he could see her in the moonlight. “Yes. At least that was my original plan. But I can’t know what’ll happen until I’m standing in front of him.”

“What’s Steelhawk Security?”

She saw him tense, smelled his sharp surge of alarm, but then he relaxed and gave a low, rueful laugh. “Guess I should’ve known keeping that card around was going to bite me.”

“They do what you do?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I used to work for them. Brent still does.” He hesitated, his entire body tense; she smelled arousal and excitement and fear. “Melanie, are you—”

She crashed into him and kissed him.

Their kiss by the lake had been tentative, exploratory. This was hot and hungry, a clash of mouths and tongues. She pushed him back against the truck, slamming her body into his. He was hard for her; she could feel the pressure against her hip. She was moaning softly, small animal noises as she hungrily took his mouth with hers.

One part shutting him up, one part shutting up her own brain for a while.

And in that moment, she didn't care what came after. If he'd be gone in the morning, or even later tonight; if her wolf half would bond with him or wouldn't. She just wanted the hard, muscular length of him between her legs, and wanted it *now*.

She ground her hips against him, and he groaned into her mouth. Melanie felt her lips pull back in a fierce smile, and she mouthed at his stubbled jaw and nipped at his neck.

The truck propped them up, kissing and biting at each other, stumbling as the heat between them grew into a towering flame. He flicked his tongue behind her ear, sending a bolt of shivering heat through her. When he dipped his head to bite at her neck, it brought a primal rush of almost instinctive need, the urge to dip her head and let him mount her, pounding into her as he pushed her against the truck—

She was turning around before she even knew what she was doing, pushing her ass into his groin. Decker gasped and buried his face in her damp hair. Now his arms were wrapped around her from behind, his hands finding the round swell of each breast, brushing across her nipples as they stood up against her shirt. There was no bra to get in the way.

He kissed and licked at the back of her neck, pushing her hair aside. She moaned softly with need, pressing her buttocks into his crotch.

“Melanie...”

“Decker,” she panted, “I want you to bend me over this truck bed and take me *right now*.”

“You don't...have to ask twice...”

She turned again, twisting around in his grasp to help him unbutton his pants and pull them down over his narrow hips. The moonlight was almost daylight-bright to her dark-adapted wolf eyes; it gave her a glorious view of his cock as he pushed the boxers down. Thick, long, and uncut, it rose from a nest of dark curls.

“Condom,” she said, fumbling in her pocket as need made her fingers shaky.

He gave a startled laugh. “You carry around condoms all the time?”

Melanie’s teeth bared in a fierce grin. “Just when I might need one. Told you I needed to get supplies...in the house...”

She tore open the packet with her teeth and pulled it over his length. When she turned around, Decker lifted her skirt and she heard him make a small noise as he realized she hadn’t put her underwear back on.

She was wet already, quivering with need. His body covered hers, and her aching nipples brushed the side of the truck, sending cool little electric zings through her body.

This. Yes. He was big enough to cover her completely, and when he pushed into her from behind, the skirt rucked up between them, she arched her back and ground her ass against him.

The first stroke shoved her into the truck. It took a moment but they found their rhythm, with one of Decker’s arms around her, holding her tight with her breasts bouncing on top of his strong forearm, and the other braced against the truck. He pounded into her, and she gasped with each stroke. The smell of metal and leather and motor oil, of Decker’s arousal and her own, filled her nostrils.

He slid his hand down the waistband of her skirt to finger her as he pounded her. Her breathing was coming in heavy gasps, her knees turning to water as the first rising waves of her climax began to mount in her.

“Bite my neck,” she panted.



“Like this?” His breath ghosted across the back of her neck, raising the small hairs. His teeth ran lightly across her skin, sending shivers down her spine directly to the heat building between her legs.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Decker, please...”

She wasn't sure if it was that he'd found exactly the right angle, or just that it'd been so goddamn long since the last time she'd been properly *taken*, but everything between her legs felt molten. His quick nips and kisses to the back of her neck were pushing her higher and higher. She could feel him quivering as he held himself back, pounding toward his own climax as well.

There was a moment when the rhythm slowed, when they both seemed to hang on the edge for a long golden moment—and he thrust into her hard and fast, and she came with a cry. White heat filled her, coursing through her veins. Decker shuddered through his own climax, holding her to him, as for a moment they became one in the unity of orgasm.

Melanie settled down slowly, shaking with reaction. Decker kissed her neck, and they stayed that way for a few moments until his slackening, collapsing cock slipped out of her.

He pulled away, and the night was suddenly too cold without him. Her skirt, no longer held up by his body, dropped down around her bare legs. Melanie turned around and leaned her back against the side of the pickup, watching him roll up the used condom and drop it into the truck's trash bag.

“That was *exactly* what I needed,” she breathed. She was weak in the knees and sticky between the legs, and she'd just been given a glorious fuck by a handsome, dangerous stranger. Nothing had ever felt so right.

“Mmmm,” Decker agreed, leaning on the side of the truck. He reached out a hand to brush the side of her mouth before bending forward and giving her another long, slow kiss. When he pulled away, he looked down at her and his eyes danced. “Want to try that again, slower?”

Her insides gave a warm flutter. “Don’t tell me *you’re* ready to go again.” Unless she was very wrong about the physical capabilities of human males.

“I’m not.” His hand slipped under her skirt and cupped over the heat of her damp, furry mound. When one finger slid between her engorged folds, she gasped aloud. “But I think you are.”

“Oh,” she breathed as he manipulated her. She’d expected a good fucking. She hadn’t expected this. She leaned back against the side of the truck. Decker dropped to his knees in front of her. He lifted her skirt and buried his face between her legs.

“You smell so good.” His tongue flicked at her folds and she gasped again. Tipping his head back, he grinned up at her. “I like tasting myself on you.”

“Ngghhh,” was the only answer she could manage.

He licked along her outer folds and dipped his tongue inside. Melanie tilted her head back and closed her eyes, luxuriating in the sensations. His big hands cupped her buttocks, pulling her forward so he could drink of her.

She opened her eyes and gazed up at the stars, a million tiny points of light in an infinitely vast darkness, while Decker licked her off and she curled her fingers against the truck’s metal skin.

Her second orgasm built slowly, rising to a crescendo with the increasing tempo of the flicks of his tongue. She’d never come twice so quickly before, and this one was longer and deeper, shuddering through her while Decker continued to lick at her through the spasms. When she finally relaxed, she gave him a small push, signaling she’d had enough; she was so sensitive now that the merest touch made her jerk. Decker sat back on his heels and grinned up at her.

“Guess you *were* ready to go again.”

“Guess so,” she breathed. She felt light-headed and dazed. She rested a hand on his shoulder, stroking her thumb across

the side of his neck, and they stayed that way for a little while, until Decker shifted on the ground.

“Don’t know about you, but my knees aren’t as young as they used to be.”

“Yeah, I’m getting a draft up this skirt,” she admitted.

Decker stood up and pulled up his jeans. Melanie smoothed the skirt down. Her hair was falling in her face. She pushed it back over her shoulders in a damp, tangled mass.

“I like your hair.” Decker put out a hand to finger one of the curls forming loosely as it dried. Her hair was only slightly wavy, but sometimes she got temporary ringlets when the air was just humid enough. “Crowning glory, I’ve heard it called. Yours sure is.”

“Crowning pain in the ass is more like it.” She’d often thought about cutting it off, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to. It was almost down to her waist, dense and luxurious. As a wolf, she had a thick light-colored coat, brindled pale tan and gray.

Decker opened the truck door and got another blanket from behind the seat. She was still resting her hips against the side of the truck, and when he slammed the door, a little shiver went through her.

“Planning on sleeping out here?” she asked him.

He shrugged, in the moonlight. “I figure if a lady wants you in her bed, she’ll say so.”

He had a point: fucking against the truck, with a perfectly good bed right inside the cabin, sent a message. And he wasn’t wrong. She didn’t want him in the house, in her space. Not quite yet.

“The fire hasn’t burned down all the way yet,” Melanie said. “I could stand to get warmer.”

He smiled at her and started down the path to the beach. She took the time to lock the cabin doors, front and back, which she rarely did, and then followed him to the beach. Her entire body felt lazy and loose.

It was a strange dance they were performing between trust and uneasiness. She trusted him enough to show him where she slept, but not to sleep with him there.

When she got to the fire pit, Decker had spread the blanket on the sand and was stirring up the fire. Melanie shook the sand out of the other blanket and sat on the one that was spread out and awaiting her.

“Come over here. You aren’t going to get warm there.”

He smiled again, an easy smile that she liked, and sat on the edge of the blanket to take off his shoes.

“Since you looked in my wallet, you know my full name.” This time, it wasn’t accusing, more like gently teasing.

“Not Decker like Madonna or Prince.”

“Well, I did tell you I can’t sing.”

This got a soft laugh out of her. Decker smiled.

“So that we’re even,” he said, “what’s *your* last name?”

“Hackett. Melanie Hackett. I could show you my driver’s license if you want. It’s only fair.”

He rolled over, propping himself on his elbow on the blanket. “I’d rather know if I can call you Mel yet.”

“Not quite yet,” she said. “Maybe in the morning.”

She waited, tense and a little nervous, to see if he was going to resume asking the question she had interrupted back at the truck. Instead, he ran a hand up her side, under the loose tail of her shirt.

“You know, there’s one question I could answer with your driver’s license.”

“What’s that?” she asked, tensing a little.

“How tall are you?”

Melanie relaxed. “Five three and a half.”

“The half is important?”

“It is when you’re five three,” she said. “What about you? I’d guess about...six feet?”

“Didn’t you look while you were there?”

“I was checking out other things,” she said.

“Were you now?”

The hand caressing her side hooked a finger under the waistband of her skirt.

“Is this a transparent seduction attempt, sir?”

“Could be,” he said, and leaned in to nibble at her lips. “Is it working?”

“Could be.”

A few minutes later, as he lapped at her sensitive nipples, she said, “You know, I’d have to go back in the house to get another condom. So don’t start something you can’t finish.”

He slipped a hand down the front of her skirt. “You oughta know after earlier, there’s more than one way to finish something.”

Beside the lake, while the moon rode high in the sky, they carefully undressed each other, baring themselves to the moonlight for the second time that night. In a nest made of blankets and their shared jackets, they explored each other’s bodies gently—no hurry, this time. He teased her to a slowly building climax, and she used hands and tongue to take him over the edge again.

No more questions were asked, and none were answered.

They fell asleep at last, tangled together beside the embers of the dying fire.

# MELANIE



THE MORNING SUN was stabbing Melanie in the eyes, and she had to twist her hip to shift away from a rock that had been poking her long enough to leave a sore place. *I must have been out hunting, and fell asleep outside...*

But she wasn't alone. There was a warm body tucked against hers.

Decker.

He was fast asleep, one arm thrown over her. They were wrapped up in their jackets and the blankets from last night, a careless mess of makeshift covers that left bare limbs sprawling out in all directions into the sand. With no pillow, she'd propped her head on Decker's shoulder, and now some of her hair was stuck to the side of her face and to his skin. She had a bad feeling she'd been drooling.

Carefully she peeled herself loose from his shoulder and relocated his limp arm so she could sit up. Decker grunted, stirred, and then sank back into sleep again. He looked as if he was sleeping deeply, lips parted and eyelids jerking as he dreamed. A surge of unexpected tenderness washed through her as she watched him sleep.

To her small store of knowledge about Decker, she could add one more thing: that he slept deeply, without a trace of subconscious fear in her presence.

She brushed sand off her arm, where it had begun to itch, and pushed her tangled hair behind her ear. The sun rose early in the summer, so they couldn't have been asleep for more

than a couple of hours. She still felt groggy and tired. The ashes of the fire were still smoking faintly.

And something had awakened her. She didn't think it was the sun.

Melanie scented the air. She let her inner wolf rise to the surface. Had anyone seen her face just then, they might have noticed her eyes lighten and develop an amber tint.

Wolf. She smelled wolf.

There was only one other wolf around here besides herself, that she knew about.

She had to look around carefully until she saw him, but finally she did. Keith was standing at the edge of the woods, a big, grizzled gray wolf with a black saddle-like marking on his back. When he saw that she had seen him, he turned and trotted into the woods. A glance over his shoulder made clear his wish to be followed.

Melanie sighed. *Damn it, Keith. Can't you let me enjoy my afterglow in peace?*

She was tempted to just let him go. But she doubted if he would make it that easy. Carefully she slipped out of their makeshift bed. She didn't bother getting dressed. Instead she walked naked into the edge of the woods. After one final glance back to make sure Decker was still sleeping (and he was; all she could see of him was a lump with some tufts of dark hair and an outflung pale leg), she shifted.

The morning air, a little too chilly for her human form, was already verging on too warm for her wolf. Keith's scent was so clear that his trail might as well be marked in scarlet paint. She trotted after him on tireless wolf legs. He'd gone toward her yard.

When she came around the corner of the house, she found that rather than riding his motorcycle, Keith had driven her Subaru back for her. It was parked behind Decker's truck, not incidentally blocking the truck in.

Keith was sitting on his haunches in the long pine shadows behind the carport. As soon as he saw her, he stood up and

shifted.

Melanie promptly shifted too. Shifters in general weren't overly concerned with nudity between themselves, especially when they knew each other as well as she and Keith did. Also, she knew that she wasn't his type.

"Checking up on me?" she asked.

Keith folded his arms. Over the years he'd developed a gut and a layer of fat over the heavy muscles in his shoulders and chest, but he was still an intimidating guy. He didn't need to rely on his wolf side to scare troublemakers out of the bar. "You took him home with you? Really, Mel?"

"So what? I don't need your permission to have a personal life."

"You're putting us all at risk with this reckless behavior. Every shifter in Quartz Lake."

She started to answer, but was interrupted by a loud cacophony of bleating from the barn. All three of the goats were out in the corral, standing up with their feet on the long crossbars of the gate. The fence was tall enough to keep them in...barely. A moment later, the chickens added their own chorus of clucking and squawking.

Her momentary surge of panic faded. This wasn't alarm. This was "Oh, hi, Mom! Time for breakfast!"

In spite of herself, Melanie felt a laugh bubble up in her throat. Keith looked like he was struggling with a smile himself. The absurdity of the scene—arguing stark naked in front of a bunch of farm animals—wasn't lost on him.

"If you're going to have this discussion, let's have it while I feed the kiddos," she said. "Unless you can keep a straight face through a soundtrack of goat and chicken noises." The donkey let out a long, drawn-out *Hee-haw!* from the barn. "And that."

She walked to the barn naked, with Keith following her. There were a pair of old boots that she kept just inside the door for dirty jobs like mucking out stalls, so she shoved her feet



into them to avoid stepping in anything unpleasant. Keith, she figured, could go get his clothes from the car or deal with it.

“You really don’t see why this is a problem?” he demanded as she stooped in the hay-scented shadows to fill a can of grain from the goat-proof feed bin.

“What, you being here to get the lowdown on my one-night stand? Yeah, it’s a problem. I’m glad you realize that.”

“So you did have sex with him.”

A growl bubbled up in her throat. “So what? I’m a big girl. And anyway, how many boyfriends have *you* hooked up with at the bar?”

“None who were hunters.”

“That you know of!” she snapped.

This rocked him back. She hadn’t realized ‘til the words left her mouth how true it was. If humans like Decker and Brent existed—humans who knew about shifters and hunted them—then there must be ones who were better at camouflaging themselves, who didn’t wear their hunter’s nature like a second skin, their charms and weapons displayed to give them away. They could be anywhere, be anyone. The knife would remain unseen until it was plunged into an unsuspecting shifter’s back.

And here she’d almost gotten over thinking of humans as the enemy.

With that thought, some of her anger at Keith drained away, enough that her lupine fighting instincts were no longer clouding her ability to think. Merely dealing with the human world put shifters at risk. But they couldn’t sever all ties to the humans; they’d only leave themselves vulnerable. Her family had tried to withdraw completely from the human world. So had Ty Kilgore. And look how that had turned out.

“Have you heard of Steelhawk Security?” she asked more calmly, tossing handfuls of grain into the chicken pen.

Keith shook his head. “No. What is it?”

“Decker mentioned it. Listen, Keith,” she said quickly before he could wedge in a question. “You and I both know Kilgore isn’t exactly the kind of person who makes a good poster child for human-shifter relations. Decker says Kilgore has killed people, and I believe him. This is the place where people like Decker fit, between our world and the human world. Human authorities can’t do anything about monsters like Kilgore. Men like Decker can.”

“So let them fight it out. Maybe humans have a right to seek justice when they’ve been wronged, same as we do. It’s what you’re doing that I can’t stomach, helping one of *his* kind get to one of our kind.”

“I haven’t told him anything yet, but while we’re on that topic, do you think it’s more moral somehow to stand back and refuse to get involved at all? Just wash your hands and say it’s none of your business? If we shifters took care of our own criminals better, the humans wouldn’t have any reason to get involved.”

“They say there’s that shifter crimes agency out in Seattle,” Keith began. He looked uncomfortable.

“Do *you* want to call in the feds?”

“Well, no—”

Keith broke off as a rumbling engine slowed on the lake road, sounding like it was making the turn. There were no other nearby houses. It had to be coming here.

Melanie touched Keith’s bare arm. They both withdrew into the shadows of the barn.

From their vantage point, the vehicle coming up her driveway was visible only as flashes of morning sun through the trees, winking off its gleaming paint. Then she got a clear look as it appeared in the narrow window of view between the cabin and the trees. It was definitely the Hummer that had been in the bar’s parking lot yesterday.

It paused for a moment behind the other vehicles in front of the cabin, big engine grumbling, but then it revved again. The driveway, though slightly overgrown continued through a

clear space in the trees and on down to the beach, where there was an old boat launch. The Hummer grumbled down to the edge of the water and the engine faded to a low throb.

“Good job,” Melanie said under her breath. “You were followed from the bar.”

“Son of a—” Keith muttered, disgusted. “I’ve really lost my touch if *that* asshole could get the drop on me.”

“Maybe that’ll teach you not to meddle in my sex life.”

“Maybe it’ll teach *you* not to take strange hunters home for a roll in the hay.”

They glared at each other. Out of sight behind the trees, the Hummer’s engine died.

“I’d better go sort this out before they either team up or kill each other,” Melanie said. “I don’t need your help.”

“I’m not leaving you alone with those two.”

“Okay, do what you want, but stay out of sight, would you? I don’t think your presence will improve things. Especially your naked presence.” She shoved the old coffee can she was using as a feed scoop into his hands. “Here, make yourself useful and collect eggs. And be careful where you step; *I* wouldn’t want to be walking around in there with bare feet.”

She dashed to the house to grab some clean clothes to throw on. At the very least she didn’t want to have to deal with Decker’s ex-friend while stark naked.

# DECKER



THE ROAR of an engine jolted Decker out of a deep sleep and a vaguely recalled dream that left him with a lingering sense of tingling warmth and a morning hard-on as he struggled to wakefulness.

He quickly realized two things.

First of all, he was alone; Melanie's side of the bed (such as it was) had been empty long enough to cool. Second, Brent's Hummer had just driven onto the beach.

Despite the Hummer fishtailing on gravel and driftwood, Brent drove to within a few feet of the fire pit. He stopped there, giving Decker a view of the bumper and not much else. The engine thrummed for a moment and then died.

Decker sat up, yawning and scratching at his sand-covered hair. "What's the matter, trying to keep the sand off your shiny new boots?"

"Do you always sleep naked in public, or is public indecency your new fetish?" was Brent's retort as he stepped down from the driver's side. "You hit that last night, didn't you—the bartender?"

"She's a woman, not a target at the shooting range," Decker said testily, without bothering to get up. "As you can see, if you're following me around hoping that I'll lead you to Kilgore, I'm no closer than you are. So go bother the locals or something."

Brent hooked his thumbs through his belt loops and leaned against the side of the truck. He looked tired, the lines in his

face carved deeper than they used to be. In the morning sun, Decker could see the first few gray hairs starting to show at his temples. For both of them, their thirties had hit, and hit hard.

“The old man’s on his way,” Brent said.

There was a long pause. Decker stared at him, and then got to his feet slowly, heedless of his nakedness. “Did you call him? You son of a bitch—”

“I didn’t call him.” A quick flash of bitterness, just as quickly suppressed. “I guess he figured out you were here. You always were the old asshole’s favorite protégé.”

“What, you think he’s trying to get me to come back to the fold?”

Brent shrugged. “I have no idea why he’s here, but you and I both know that when Mercer gets involved in a situation, there tends to be collateral damage.”

“And I know that your level of caring about that kind of thing amounts to exactly jack and shit, which means you’re here, what, to warn me?”

“No.” Brent was perfectly serious now, his mouth so tight a muscle in his jaw jumped. “I came here to suggest we team up.”

Decker barked a laugh. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am totally serious. Between the two of us, we have a better shot at finding Kilgore before Mercer does.”

“So you can get your payout?”

Brent started to punch the side of the Hummer, pulling it at the last minute, probably worried about dinging the gleaming front panel. “Fine, if you’re that squeamish about it, I’ll take the kill shot and give you a cut anyway. Say a finder’s fee of twenty percent.”

“I never had any trouble with the kill shot,” Decker lied. “But I’m not doing it for money.”

“Great, I’ll keep the money then—” He broke off suddenly, looking past Decker.

Decker looked around too, just in time to see Melanie come down the path from the house in a sweater and jeans. Her dark gold hair was a tangled mass cascading over her shoulders,.

“I get up to take a pee and it turns into Grand Central Station around here,” she said, her face and voice cool. She stopped in front of Brent and folded her arms, shoulders back, having to look up at him but not seeming intimidated in the slightest.

Decker was suddenly, intensely impressed by her.

“You’re on my land,” she told Brent.

“I’m on a public beach.”

“That you got to by driving across my land.”

Decker reached for his pants. “Brent was just leaving, weren’t you, Brent?”

The corners of Brent’s mouth twisted down. He looked, for an instant, strangely hurt. “So no team-up, then? You and me, like old times?”

“No,” Decker said. “That’s over. I don’t work with you anymore. Or ever again.”

The unhappy twist of Brent’s mouth flattened out into a thin line. “Fair enough, but I want you to think about something. If Mercer is heading for Quartz Lake, looking for Kilgore, the trail’s going to lead him to you, and the bar, and *her*. So think about that.”

Melanie’s angry certainty faltered. She looked at Decker. “What’s he talking about? Who’s Mercer?”

Decker zipped up his jeans and reached for his shirt. “You know how you said Keith is *your* asshole boss? Well, Mercer is Brent’s. If Brent is bad news, then Mercer is bad news times ten. Armed and dangerous, tends to get people killed, and not necessarily the people he came to kill.”

He risked a glance at Melanie. There was a tense calm about her that made him think of the waiting hush before a storm broke.

“Is he here now?” she asked. “This Mercer guy?”

“He will be soon,” Brent said. He jerked a thumb at Decker. “Came here to ask *this* guy if he wanted to team up before Mercer hits town. If we work together, we have a shot at getting to Kilgore before Mercer does.”

Melanie’s clear green gaze swiveled to Decker. “Why does that matter?”

“Because...” Decker took a slow breath. “The less Mercer gets involved, the better off we all are, and the safer everyone in your town will be.”

“And you used to work for this guy?”

“I was—” *A kid*, he was going to say, but that excuse didn’t hold water anymore. He hadn’t been a kid when he’d finally parted ways with Mercer and Steelhawk for good. “Wrong,” he finished. “Honestly, I hate to say it, but I think Brent might have some small fraction of a point.”

“Gosh, thanks,” Brent said.

“About what?” Melanie asked.

“Finding Kilgore just became a much bigger priority. The more people we have working on it, the better our chances. Me, Brent—and you.”

“Now wait a minute,” Brent began.

“You wanted to team up. Don’t complain about the terms.”

Melanie stared at both of them. “All right,” she said abruptly. “I’ll show you where Kilgore lives.”

“That easy?” Decker asked.

“I’ve been thinking about it. I want him gone from our town. I want you gone too,” she said to Brent.

“What about him?” Brent asked, jerking a thumb at Decker.

“I haven’t decided about him yet. But it’s obvious that neither one of you are going to simply leave until this Kilgore business is settled.” Melanie crossed her arms defensively.

“And now there’s *another* one involved. So let’s get this over with.”

Brent slapped a hand on the Hummer’s hood. “Hot damn. Let’s do this.”

While Brent waited impatiently, Decker gathered up the cooler and blankets and walked them up to the house. Melanie followed, with a warning glance at Brent to make sure he was staying put. She paused to retrieve her shoes where they still lay at the edge of the beach, dew-damp from the night before. Decker slowed in puzzlement at the sight of a Subaru parked behind his truck.

“Who’s that?”

“Keith stopped by this morning to drop off my car,” Melanie said, hopping on one foot as she pulled on her shoes. “Don’t worry about it.”

As if to emphasize how much he shouldn’t be worrying about it, there was a loud clunk, like something being knocked over, and an explosion of chickens squawking from the barn.

“Keith’s still here, isn’t he?” Decker asked.

“I said, don’t worry about it.” She glanced at the barn and shoved a strand of hair behind her ear. “You have your backup, I have mine.”

“Brent’s hardly that anymore.” Decker opened the door of the truck and looked for Tarzan. “You sure about this?”

Melanie shook sand out of the blankets and folded them one by one. “Not at all. But what choice do we have? Kilgore lives way out of town, up in the mountains. This’ll get Brent away from my town, and this Mercer guy if he follows us.”

“And me?” Decker asked quietly. He yearned to reach out to brush at another stray clump of tangled hair that had fallen over her cheek, but held his hand back.

She gave him an inscrutable look from her leaf-shadow eyes. “I already said I haven’t decided about you yet.”

“What if I buy you breakfast? It’s only fair since you caught dinner.” He reached into the truck and got a handful of



protein bars from a box behind the seat. Holding them up in a spray like a magician doing a card trick, he asked, “Chocolate or peanut butter?”

“Breakfast of champions,” Melanie said wryly and selected one at random. “Looks like chocolate is the flavor of the day.”

“Good choice.”

Her smile was brief but warm, and then faltered when Brent’s Hummer pulled up beside them with a rumble of its powerful engine. Melanie spun around. “Stay off my grass!” she snapped, pointing.

Brent leaned an elbow in the open window. He didn’t seem to know quite how to deal with her, and Decker found himself enjoying Brent’s discomfort. “I drove out the same way I drove in, swear to God.”

“You drove *in* right past my No Trespassing signs,” she said flatly, and peeled the wrapper back from her energy bar.

Brent blew out a breath. “Anyway,” he said, “I was going to offer you two a ride. No sense taking two or three separate vehicles when we’re going to the same place.”

“Right, because being dependent on *you* for a ride sounds like a great idea,” Decker said.

“You won’t be able to drive all the way anyway,” Melanie said. “The road doesn’t go all the way in. You’ll have to park. So I don’t think it matters much.”

She ate the energy bar while Decker whistled and looked under the truck for Tarzan. Brent’s douchemobile had probably scared her away.

“Don’t tell me you still have that cat,” Brent said.

“They hate each other,” Decker confided in Melanie. He checked under the truck seat. No Tarzan.

He looked up just in time to see Melanie inhale. The slight flare of her nostrils wouldn’t have been noticeable if he hadn’t happened to be looking directly at her. Then she said, “Your

cat's probably in the barn. Lots of mice there, and places to sleep. She'll be fine."

Decker blew out a breath. Tarzan would be safe enough. He'd left her alone with the truck window rolled down before.

"Fine. We'll go together. Brent, you can beat *your* truck to shit on the roads around here. Gimme a minute and I'll be ready to go."

He left the back window of the truck open, and dug behind the seat for Tarzan's bag of cat food, filled a bowl and put it on the seat before tucking it away. That'd keep her for awhile. She was good at hunting for herself, and only needed the dry food to supplement her own kills. And if he didn't come back...well...he wouldn't be around to worry about it, he supposed. Maybe Melanie's not-friend Keith would take care of her.

Melanie sat in the Hummer's shotgun seat and licked off her sticky fingers. She and Brent studiously ignored each other. There was another outbreak of squawking from the barn, which Melanie also ignored; Decker could sense her exerting willpower not to look over.

"Cat's gonna get your chickens," Brent said.

"They're in a sturdy, fox-proof pen. They'll be fine."

Keith, Decker thought. Oh well, maybe it was a good thing that at least one person knew where they were going, even if he hated Decker's guts. Decker locked the truck and then jumped up in the bed and got out the key for the lockbox that he kept back there.

"Come *on*," Brent groaned. "If you're after guns, I have plenty."

"I prefer mine." Decker opened the lockbox. Melanie, curious, hopped down from Brent's passenger seat and stretched on tiptoe to look into the truck bed.

"How many guns do you have in there?"

Decker set aside a large-gauge shotgun and a revolver in a rugged plastic case before he got out the one he wanted, a

hunting rifle with a scope. It was a bolt-action .30-06 with a scarred wooden stock, old but reliable, gleaming with gun oil.

“It’s a dangerous job.” He glanced at her as he checked the rifle’s action and chambered a round. “You know your way around a gun?”

Melanie shook her head sharply. “I don’t like them.”

“I’d feel better if you had one.”

Her voice stayed calm, but very firm. “No.”

“That’s your dad’s rifle, isn’t it?” Brent asked, leaning out of the Hummer’s rolled-down window.

“No reason to buy the newest, shiniest thing when the classics still work fine,” Decker said, with a brief glance at the Hummer. He stuffed a box of ammo and a couple more energy bars into the pockets of his jacket, and added the revolver to his belt for backup in case he ended up fighting in close quarters.

“If you’re finished primping, I’d like to get up to Kilgore’s place before dark,” Brent said. “I’d rather not fight a killer on his home ground at night.”

“All done.” Decker locked up the gun box and climbed down with the rifle slung over his shoulder. “Like you said, let’s do this.”

*And may God have mercy on my soul if I’m making a mistake.*

# MELANIE



MELANIE HAD NEVER BEEN to Ty Kilgore's cabin, but she knew how to get there thanks to the Quartz Lake shifter community grapevine. *Up the old road to the mine, take a left before the big turn at the canyon. Can't drive all the way in; you'll have to walk.*

She didn't relay the full instructions, keeping those to herself and doling them out piece by piece to direct Brent to the mine road turnoff. The mine had been closed in the 1970s, put out of business by safety and environmental regulations, but the road was still used by hunters and hikers, enough to keep it from being completely overgrown. Still, the sides of the Hummer scraped on overhanging branches and saplings, making Brent wince at every shriek of wood on metal.

"What's the point of having an offroad vehicle you can't even use offroad?" Decker inquired in a biting tone. He was in the backseat, Melanie having firmly secured the front passenger seat due to her navigator status and also having absolutely no interest in sitting in the backseat while these two took verbal potshots at each other. It didn't really help.

Brent raised his eyes to the rear-view mirror to glare at Decker. "You want me to drive a beat-up piece of shit like yours? Sounds like something an idiot would do. At least if the cat pisses on your seats, it won't make much difference."

"The cat's better housebroken than you are."

Melanie disliked Brent, and she *did* like Decker, but she was about to smack both of them if they didn't knock it off.

“How did you two ever work together without killing each other?” she asked.

“It’s a mystery to me too,” Brent said. “But believe it or not, we used to get along pretty well back in the day.”

“It’s no mystery,” Decker said. “It’s the fact that I hadn’t figured out what an asshole you were. Or maybe it bothered me less, who the hell knows.”

“So you two have known each other for awhile?” Melanie asked, making another attempt to redirect the arguing into some sort of vaguely useful conversation.

“Since we were teenagers,” Brent said. “We grew up together, like brothers in a way.”

“And you both worked for this Mercer guy?”

“Taught us everything we know.” Brent paused to concentrate on driving as the Hummer labored up a steep grade.

“Is that anything to do with Steelhawk Security?” she asked innocently, and Brent nearly veered off the road into the trees. For a moment the Hummer balanced on two wheels before slamming back down.

“How do you know about that?” he demanded. His accusing gaze went to Decker in the rear-view mirror. “What did you tell her?”

“I didn’t tell her. She’s not stupid, that’s all.”

“You literally have business cards,” Melanie said. “How much of a secret can it be?”

“It’s not secret,” Decker said from the backseat.

“We don’t go around sharing it with everyone we bang, either,” Brent said pointedly.

“Did you bring me along for the sole purpose of insulting me?”

Melanie was about to tell them to stuff it when she recognized a sudden deterioration in the road ahead, combined

with flattened-down brush to the side, probably meant they had reached the turnoff to the cabin.

“There,” she said, pointing.

Brent braked and stared dubiously at the flattened-down bushes in the vague shape of a trail. This was no road; it was an ATV track at best, so steep it was nearly vertical. “No way I can drive up there. Even your truck couldn’t handle that, Decker.”

“Guess we go on foot from here,” Decker said.

“Guess so.”

Brent pulled on forward, the Hummer crawling up the steep grade and scraping over brush, until he found a wide enough place that he could turn around with a lot of awkward back-and-forth maneuvering. He jolted over the ruts and weeds back to the trail, pulled off as far as he could get into the undergrowth, and parked.

Melanie stepped down, scenting the air while trying not to be too obvious about it. She wished she could shift so she’d have all her sharp wolf senses at her disposal. All she could smell was the lingering taint of exhaust and hot engine, along with the clean scent of the pines.

It was very quiet up here. The pings of the cooling engine and small noises as Decker and Brent got their gear out of the Hummer seemed very loud.

The warm sunshine on her neck cooled abruptly as a cloud crossed the sun. Melanie looked thoughtfully up at the sky. The weather had been gorgeous that morning, but now clouds were beginning to roll in. The tops of the mountains across the valley were already hidden in mist. It looked like they might have to deal with rain on top of everything else.

Worse than that, navigating the mountains in dense clouds could be hazardous. It was all too easy to lose the trail and end up on the wrong side of a mountain peak.

Melanie opened her mouth to say something. Then she closed it. *She* wasn’t likely to get lost; even in heavy rain, her sharp sense of smell and lupine sense of direction would get

her back to Quartz Lake. And getting wet didn't bother her. Decker and Brent could handle themselves. They had chosen to be here, after all.

“You sure you don't want a gun?”

Decker had come up behind her while she was distracted. Now she became aware of his proximity, the masculine scent of leather and gun oil and the spicy smell of his skin. She could still smell sex on him from last night, making her tingle with the memory of pleasure.

“No, thank you,” she said. “I'm fine.”

Brent jumped down from the backseat of the Hummer carrying an assault rifle, rugged and black and brand new. “Don't worry. We'll keep you safe.”

Decker started to say something—Melanie could smell the changes in his skin and sweat as his temper flared—but she spoke before he could start to defend her. “I don't need your protection.”

Brent raised his eyebrows. “She's a tough one, Deck. I can see you've got your hands full.” He settled in ahead of them, setting a brisk pace up the hill with long, easy strides.

“What a jerk,” Decker muttered. He glanced at Melanie, wordlessly gesturing her ahead of him. She took him up on it, settling into a steady hiking pace between them. Decker, looking around at the woods with a predator's alertness, took up the rear.

As they walked, Melanie made up her mind. She said to Decker, “There's heavy weather moving in.”

“How bad?” he asked.

Melanie appreciated that he was willing to accept and defer to her knowledge of local conditions. “I don't know. These storms can sock in and shut down visibility to zero. If it gets too rough, we might need to take shelter until it blows through.”

“Brent!” Decker called. The figure ahead of them turned back. “Melanie says there's bad weather coming. Want to stop

for a—”

Brent turned his back and kept walking.

Decker shrugged a little. “You think it’s dangerous to continue?” he asked Melanie as they resumed climbing.

“Not right now. I’ll keep an eye on things.”

Decker nodded.

He really *did* trust her for this. It flattered and surprised her.

They climbed through pine forests dotted with fields full of midsummer wildflowers. It was beautiful country. Melanie rarely went hiking as a human, and it was interesting and different to experience the forest through her non-lupine senses. She couldn’t smell as much, but wolves were unsuited to enjoying long-distance vistas or colorful wildflowers. There were so *many* colors in the world when she was used to viewing it with the limited vision of a wolf.

She just wished she wasn’t doing it under these circumstances. Having Decker at her back didn’t make her nervous—her instinctive trust in him surprised her—but being in close proximity to so many guns made her tense. She wasn’t afraid of them exactly, but the smell made her jumpy.

The sun vanished behind thickening clouds. Distant thunder rumbled across the lake far below them.

“Looks like the promised rain’s on its way,” Decker said when they stopped to pass a water bottle around.

“You afraid of a little rain?” Brent said.

“I’m concerned that our local guide says it’s easy to get turned around up here in the fog.”

This made Brent look at her. “Sure she’s not just saying that, give us an excuse to turn back?”

“If the fog does roll in, I’m happy to leave you up there,” Melanie said.

They went on walking. The trail looped back and forth across ridges and switchbacks. From time to time, they caught



glimpses of the lake, nearly invisible under a curtain of rain that could now be seen marching inexorably toward them.

Melanie's nervous tension deepened as they climbed higher. Normally the wilderness would have soothed her, making her feel at home in a way she never could in the human world. But not this time. It wasn't just the presence of the armed humans around her.

With a wild animal's instincts, she had a feeling they were being watched.

She wished that she could shift and scout around. With Griselda's senses, she would easily be able to tell if there was a grizzly nearby. Her weaker human sense of smell was unable to detect bear, but there were times when she thought she got a sniff of some kind of rank predator scent that might easily be associated with a hunting grizzly.

They stopped for a drink of water and a brief look around on a treeless, windswept ridge with excellent visibility in all directions. This looked like the highest point of their climb. Here, the path turned downhill, crossing more open country before entering the pine forest a short way below them.

These humans did have good hunting skills, Melanie had to admit. Whether it would be enough to take on a grizzly shifter who might even now be stalking *them*, she wasn't sure.

She didn't really think there was much risk for her, personally. If worst came to worst, she could duck off into the woods, shift, and be gone before anyone knew where she went.

All she'd risk losing was Decker, and, if he saw her shift, the life she'd built for herself here...

She hadn't realized that she even had a life, not really. She'd tried to hold herself apart from the townspeople as much as possible. And yet, somehow they had slipped in when she wasn't looking. People like that little girl, Jessie, the daughter of the local librarian. The kids in town liked Melanie; they brought hurt animals to her and asked her questions about the

woods. Jessie's mom had even invited Melanie to give some talks at the library for the local kids about wild animals.

This was her home.

She'd be damned if she let herself be driven out of it—by Steelhawk Security, Ty Kilgore, or anyone else.

# DECKER



DECKER HAD NOTICED Melanie was jumpy, and getting jumpier. Now that they were stopped, he took the opportunity to sit next to her, offering his water bottle. Brent sat on a rock nearby, checking over his guns and sending impatient glances at them.

“Everything okay?” Decker murmured. “Is it the weather?”

“No, it’s not that.” Although this made her glance in the direction of the oncoming rain. “I think Kilgore knows we’re here. It’s possible he might be following us.”

A cold chill raced up Decker’s spine. It didn’t come as a complete shock; he’d been haunted by a sense of unease for most of the hike, and he trusted his instincts when it came to that kind of thing.

“Have you seen him?”

Melanie shook her head. “It’s just a feeling.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised. I’ve been feeling something similar,” Decker said, and she gave him a quick look that was startled at first, then impressed. “How close is his cabin?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never been here before. I’d guess it can’t be too much further, though.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I smell woodsmoke. Can’t you?”

“No.”

A quick flicker went across her face, not quite fear. “Perhaps I’m wrong.”

As if she’d been caught using senses just a little sharper than those of a human.

He was so close, almost touching her. If she turned her head, he could have brushed those inviting lips with his own. But instead she looked down the hillside as the grasses bent beneath a gust of wind that carried the first drops of the oncoming rain.

“You two gonna sit over there canoodling all day, or can we get a move on?” Brent called.

Decker gritted his teeth. He got up and offered Melanie a hand. She took it, strong fingers curling around his.

*I think I’m falling in love with you*, he wanted to say. But that was just one of the things he couldn’t say, not here, not now.

Melanie leaned closer to him as rain pattered around them, not a hard rain yet, just a light pattering of drops, barely enough to darken her hair. Her lips brushed his ear tantalizingly as she whispered, “What would Brent do if we ditched him here?”

“Huh.” He gave her an impressed look. “You think you can?”

She smiled. “I know these mountains well.” The smile dropped away. “How much of a loose cannon is he? Would you be in danger?”

He couldn’t help noticing she didn’t seem to be worried that *she’d* be in danger. “I don’t think he’d try to shoot us or anything, if that’s what you mean. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking, if we split up, Kilgore will have to choose who to follow. Then we can circle around and get behind him.”

“Use Brent for bait, you mean?”

Her gaze was challenging. “Do you have a better idea?”

Decker didn't answer, because her suggestion had reminded him that he and Brent used to do things like that, back when they hunted as a team. In fact, if they still were able to work in sync as they used to, one of them would probably have suggested something like that already.

He glanced over at Brent, looking uncomfortable on the mountainside in his new black jeans, sunglasses, and shiny new rifle which was currently getting wet.

"Hey," Decker said. "Brent. You still remember how to do the wounded bird maneuver?"

A slight smile flickered at the edge of Brent's mouth. "Let me guess who you're nominating as the wounded bird."

"You're better at it."

Brent huffed out a breath. He adjusted the rifle on his shoulder. "Why not. Let's try it. What about her?"

"I can speak for myself," Melanie said. "I'll be with Decker."

Brent looked at Decker, raised his brows.

"Sounds good to me," Decker said. He took a step toward Melanie. "I want someone I can trust at my side."

Melanie gave him a quick, startled glance filled with quiet gratitude.

The words were meant mainly for Melanie, but Decker would be lying if he didn't admit it was also a barb aimed at Brent. To Decker's surprise, however, it actually landed. Brent's shoulders slumped slightly, and Decker was unprepared for his own brief surge of guilt.

It used to feel like the two of them against the world, just him and Brent.

But that was past, and Brent seemed to realize it too. His shoulders firmed up, and he looked away from Decker. He took off his sunglasses and tucked them into a pocket. "Right. Let's do this."

He started down the sloping trail in a loose, fast stride, rapidly outdistancing them. Melanie glanced at Decker, and without needing to discuss it, they left the trail at an oblique angle, traveling over rough ground down the hillside to a copse of scraggly trees. Once they were back in the forest, they angled toward the path. It wasn't hard to figure out where Brent was; he was intentionally making noise, stepping on every twig.

“He wasn't doing that earlier,” Melanie said softly as they slipped in and out among the trees. She was amazingly quiet in the woods; she made almost no noise. “Is that what you mean by wounded bird?”

“Yeah, we used to do it sometimes, as a team. One of us would play dumb tourist or out-of-his-depth city hunter up in the woods for a weekend, while the other kept tabs from the woods.” He grinned. “You gotta admit Brent looks the part.”

“I'm going to assume he's more competent than he looks.” They kept their voices low, a quiet conversation for just the two of them.

“Yes. He's good.”

“Do you miss working with him?” Melanie asked.

“If you'd asked me yesterday, I would have said no.”

“And now?”

“I don't know,” Decker admitted. “It was good to know someone had my back, you know? And it's hard not having that.”

He broke off before he could say any more, but she said quietly, “Yes, I understand.”

Decker glanced at her, but she took a few quick strides, moving ahead of him, so all he could see between the dark trunks of the pines and cedars was her straight back and the flash of her golden hair, darkening now with rain.

The sun emerged from the clouds as they worked their way deeper into the forest, although the rain was still lightly falling, so the sun shone through a sparkling haze of water

droplets. It was a very Pacific Northwest kind of look. When Decker glanced back, there was a dark, nearly black line of clouds sitting on top of the ridge. Fog wreathed the pass they'd just gone over.

"That's coming in fast," he said.

"It does that, around here. Don't worry," she said. "We won't get lost. I can get us back. And I know places to go to ground, if we need to."

Decker noticed that she was scanning the ground. He guessed she was looking for tracks, and found himself doing it too, though he wasn't sure that they were looking for the same thing until Melanie took a soft inhale.

Decker stepped forward and looked over her shoulder. Most of the ground here was hard and rocky, or covered with pine needles, not the kind of surface that took a track. But in a soft patch of mud where a spring seeped out of the hillside, there was the clear impression of an enormous bear track. He had to stop himself from measuring it with his fingers. That was one of the biggest bear tracks he'd ever seen.

Melanie said quietly, "There's a bear around. We'd better be careful."

"No, there's not," Decker said, low. They were going to have to get this out in the open sooner or later. What she knew. What he knew. If it came down to fighting Kilgore, they weren't going to be able to do this if both of them were pretending about the thing they both knew was true.

"That's a bear track," Melanie said.

"That's Kilgore. You're right, he's hunting us."

Melanie moved so swiftly that before he knew it, she was out of reach and a few paces away. It was astonishing, inhuman speed—the first truly nonhuman thing he had seen her do.

She realized it, too; he saw it in the utter dismay on her face when she turned around before she got herself under control, her face locked down.

Decker wondered if she knew what a picture she made like that, the trees behind her, the lightly falling rain glazed with sun, haloing her in golden light. It made her look ethereal and at the same time firmly grounded in the earth beneath her feet, like a nature spirit. Or a creature poised between two worlds, which he supposed was exactly what she was.

“What do you know, Decker?” she asked.

“Ty Kilgore can turn into a grizzly bear,” he said evenly.

The words sounded crazy, even to him, but there was no surprise in her face, and only the slightest flicker of pain.

“Keith’s right,” she said. “You’re not a bounty hunter, you’re a *shifter hunter*.”

Keith, huh? He’d have to worry about that later. “We call ourselves werhunters. At least,” he qualified, “some of us do. Never really liked the term myself.”

Melanie gave her head a quick shake, as if to clear it. She looked at his rifle. “So you really are here to execute Ty Kilgore.”

“I don’t have a choice.” In spite of the fraught circumstances, he couldn’t help being relieved to finally talk about it with her, not having to dress up his dilemma in falsehoods. “He’s killed eight people, Melanie, and those are just the ones I know about. Who’s going to stop him? The police? As far as anyone knows, those people were killed by a rogue bear, or I should say, a number of different bears in different states. Nobody’s looking for a man, and they’re sure not looking here.”

“Why did he do it?” Melanie asked.

*Because he’s*—The answer that hovered on the tip of his tongue was the Brent answer, that it was just how Kilgore was: dangerous and feral and *wrong*, because of his animal nature.

But if Decker was right about Melanie, and he was more sure than ever now, then she had the same animal nature, and there was nothing at all wrong with her.



Decker unslung the rifle from his shoulder. Melanie went tense all over; he could see her poised to flee. Instead, he leaned it against a small outcrop of rocks and sat on a fallen log beside it. Brent was getting further ahead, Kilgore was around here somewhere, but Melanie mattered more than any of the rest of it. Decker needed to explain to her. It was partly practicality, because they couldn't go into a fight with this amount of uncertainty between them. But also, he didn't want her to look at him with that scathing distrust in her eyes.

"From what I've been able to put together, he grew up alone, as a bear," Decker said. He rested his elbows on his knees, looking up at her. "I don't think he knows how to deal with people, and I don't think he thinks of humans as anything other than prey. He's drifted around from place to place; for all I know, there are a lot more victims than the ones I've been able to find out anything about. He tended to live around the outskirts of urban areas and occasionally stalk and kill people because they annoyed him and sometimes because he was... well, hungry."

"And how'd you get involved?" Melanie asked. But she seemed intrigued more than angry. "How do you find out about this sort of thing in the first place?"

"There's a werhunter underground. Message boards, the computer kind as well as the old-fashioned kind. I still have a few contacts in Steelhawk, and they send me leads now and then."

"Contacts like Brent?"

"Not anymore. You might have noticed a little tension there."

Melanie's tight mouth quirked briefly sideways before flattening out again. "What is Steelhawk exactly, Decker?"

"As far as the rest of the world is concerned, Steelhawk is a private security company. And that is really *some* of what they do, providing security for businesses and doing military contracting and the like. It's how they make most of their money, and they do actually make quite a lot of money. But it's really just a cover for their sideline, which is...this."

“Hunting people,” Melanie murmured.

“Tracking down rogue shifters. Those who consider themselves above the laws of the human world. I used to believe in it once.” Decker let out a long, shivering sigh, remembering what it felt like to have that certainty in his own rightness, that black-and-white confidence about how the world worked.

“What happened?”

He owed her the truth. In fact, the truth was the only thing he could give her that might save whatever was growing between them.

“I told you that when Mercer and the rest of Steelhawk shows up, people get hurt. But that’s only part of it. I found out that...” He took a breath. The betrayal still cut deep. “Not all of their—of *our* contracts are on shifters who actually...are people like Kilgore. People who *did* anything. Sometimes it’s just a regular hit, for money.”

Melanie had gone very still. “Have you—done that?”

“I don’t know,” Decker said. His voice was barely above a whisper. “I don’t... *think* so. Not personally. But then there was this job in Wisconsin...with Brent...”

He closed his eyes, then opened them again, looking up at her.

“By that point I was mostly freelance, but I still worked with Brent from time to time. We got the information packet, and it was just kind of—hinky from the start. Something was off. The closer we got, the more doubts we both started to have. Both of us, not just me. But Brent argued that it didn’t matter, it wasn’t our job to decide. Steelhawk did the legwork. We were just supposed to follow through.”

“And you did.” Melanie’s voice was tight, her jaw locked.

The memory of a gunshot rang in his ears. The sickening intensity of the rage choking him. The way Brent had looked at him.

“What I did,” Decker said as calmly as he could, “and what I didn’t do will eat at me for the rest of my life. There’s nothing I can change about it now. But I have the skill set that I have, and these days I try to use it to protect people, as best I can.”

“Is that what you’re doing here?”

She was completely closed off, arms crossed, looking at him as if from a distance of a million miles away.

“What else am I supposed to do? Knowing there are creatures—men—*people* like Ty Kilgore out there, how can I not?”

“There’s got to be a better way. Most shifter communities police their own.”

“Yeah? They’re doing a great job, if there’s monsters like Kilgore running around.”

“We didn’t know!” she flared, and he realized that her anger wasn’t directed at him alone. “Maybe if you told us why you were here—”

“Yeah? Who’s ‘us’? You and Keith? That’d go over well, I’m sure.”

“I’ve heard there’s—” Melanie broke off; her jaw clenched before she spoke again. “There’s some kind of shifter police, people say. Federal, like the shifter FBI. We could call them. I don’t know how, but maybe someone in town does.”

“I’ve heard rumors,” Decker said slowly. “But I don’t know how effective they can possibly be. They’re hampered by having to work within the actual law.”

“Which you’re not,” she said, challenging. But she had moved closer and seemed to have softened a little.

“To the shifter police, I’m as much of a criminal as Kilgore,” Decker pointed out. “Calling the cops might not be a bad idea. But if you do, I’m out of here.”

To his surprise, she nearly smiled. “Too late now, anyway. No phone reception up here in the mountains.”

Decker blew out a breath. He leaned his elbows heavily on his knees. After a moment, Melanie closed the rest of the distance between them and sat down on the log beside him.

“Are you here to help me, or try to stop me?” he asked quietly.

Melanie’s smile was faint but genuine. “I don’t know. You were telling the truth last night when you said you weren’t sure what you were going to do about Ty, weren’t you?”

“Yeah.” It felt like a confession.

After a long moment, her shoulder touched his lightly. At the same time, the sun vanished behind a curtain of cloud, and the sky opened up in a heavier rain.

They were both wet already, but in moments they were absolutely soaked. They shared a look of mutual misery.

“Come on.” Decker stood up and gave her a hand. “Brent’s going to be far ahead by now, and let’s face it, in this weather Kilgore could be ten feet away and we’d hardly see him.”

They started down the mountain again, scrambling over rocks and slipping on wet patches. After a few near falls, they left the forest and went on the path again. They were simply making too much noise and taking too long in the woods.

They made better time on the trail, but they had clearly fallen a long way behind. Their descent was steep now as they passed out of the scrubby forest of the high slopes into tall pines where rain pattered down around them in waves as it tipped off long needle-covered branches. The ground under the big trees was almost dry.

Decker checked the load in the rifle, and noticed Melanie looking at him. “Listen, I’m not going to shoot first and ask questions later, I promise. But if it comes down to him or us, or even him or Brent—”

“I won’t argue,” Melanie said. “But I don’t know if your friend Brent sees it the same way.”

It was true. He didn’t push any further.

The sky continued to darken. Wind shook the trees, and a renewed wave of rain swept over them. It added an eerie element to the forest; with water dripping off every branch, it was harder to identify sounds coming from around them. It was also harder to navigate, with a gray mist covering the trail in front of them.

Great weather for an ambush, Decker thought grimly.

He began to smell the woodsmoke that Melanie had mentioned, an almost pleasant campfire tang drifting on the damp air.

“We must be close,” Melanie whispered.

Just then, there was a sudden yell from up ahead, followed by the boom of a gunshot.

“Looks like we might not get a choice,” Decker said. He broke into a run.

He honestly wasn't sure whether he wanted to save Brent from Kilgore, or Kilgore from Brent.

# MELANIE



THEY REACHED the edge of the woods, looking out into an overgrown clearing with a ramshackle cabin in the middle. Rain continued to fall, blurring the far trees and making it difficult to see movement. Melanie looked around wildly. Without daring to shift into her wolf form, she couldn't pinpoint any of the combatants by smell. It made her feel half blind.

There was another sharp pop of gunfire, and this time she saw a flash of light brown fur moving among the trees. She touched Decker's arm and pointed. He nodded and raised the rifle to his shoulder.

"Ty Kilgore!" he shouted. "We're here to take you in!"

"We're here to nail your hide to the wall, is what we're going to do!" Brent shouted from somewhere in the woods.

Melanie had been quietly hoping that the Brent and Kilgore problem would have resolved itself without them, one way or another. Kilgore was a murderous asshole who deserved to go down. Brent was, from the sound of things, also a murderous asshole where shifters were concerned. Having them take each other out would neatly solve the problem as far as she was concerned.

But instead she was right in the middle of it.

"Is that you, Decker?" Brent shouted. "Great backup! Thanks for all the help!"

Melanie smelled blood now, a heavy metal tang on the back of her tongue that brought her wolfish instincts to the

fore. Someone had been injured. As a wolf, she could probably have told by smell if it was human or grizzly blood, but her human senses weren't nearly that acute.

“So did you shoot him or not?” Decker yelled back.

Something in the woods rustled. Melanie turned. She was beginning to regret turning down the offer of a gun.

But at the same time, she was intensely aware of Decker's presence beside her, the tang of his sweat and the sureness in the way he held the rifle. Under other, less dire circumstances, she would have truly enjoyed hunting with him. He was nearly wolf-silent in the woods, his alert hunter's instincts almost a match for those of her kind.

Brent abruptly stumbled out of the woods near them. He was clutching his arm, blood running down it and dripping off his fingers. He no longer had his fancy rifle.

“Jeez, man,” Decker said. He lowered the gun. “He really got you.”

“He came out of nowhere.” Brent leaned against a tree. His chest heaved with deep breaths. “Slapped me with a paw—lucky I saw him an instant before he did it, or he would've taken my head off.”

“You okay?” Decker asked. He kept the gun moving, sweeping it in a circle that took in the clearing and the skirting edge of the dark pine forest. The rain was falling more heavily now.

“What does it look like?” Brent shot back.

He looked nothing like the collected, neatly tailored big-game hunter from earlier. His hair was slicked down with rainwater, hanging in his eyes. He looked haggard and scared, clutching his bleeding arm.

They were all three soaking wet from the rain. Melanie tended to forget how uncomfortable human clothes were when they got wet. Her shirt was clinging to her in a way that was both clammy and revealing. She was a little surprised to notice Brent trying to avoid staring at the all-too-visible line of her bra under the sodden fabric.

“Look, there’s three of us and we have guns,” Decker said. “We can hole up in his cabin if we have to. He’s probably got first-aid supplies there.”

They all three turned and looked toward the cabin, through the rain.

“He’s not in the cabin, right?” Decker asked Brent. “You didn’t see him shift and go in.”

“No,” Brent said. “If we can get in there, we’ll be—well, safer, anyway.”

“A bear’s going to be able to tear its way in,” Melanie said.

“Yeah,” Decker said, “but we can hold him off with the rifle if we have somewhere to stand our ground. We just need to get there.”

A wave of predator musk came to Melanie, strong enough to smell even in her human form. She didn’t have hackles in this shape, but her skin prickled as she swung around, looking into the woods.

“What is it?” Decker asked quietly.

“He’s coming.” She could hear him moving through the woods now, the soft rustles audible over the rain. Grizzlies were stealthy, but they were too huge to be entirely silent.

“Brent?” Decker said. “You good to run?”

“Like I have a choice.” He stepped away from the tree and swayed. Melanie, reluctantly, moved forward to take some of his weight.

“Go!” Decker said. “I’ll cover you!”

They went, Brent leaning on Melanie’s shoulder, Decker behind them with his gun covering the woods.

Melanie was sure the grizzly was behind them. She had heard him clearly in the woods. But when she looked ahead, she caught a glint from an open window in the cabin, and her heart skipped a beat. It looked like the gleam of light off a gun barrel.



“Down!” she screamed, and flung herself into the long, wet grass, dragging Brent with her.

There was the deep boom of a hunting rifle. Melanie raised her head just in time to see that Decker had started to dodge, but not fast enough. His body jerked and he went down into the weeds, and something in her brain shorted out; for an instant the whole world turned red.

And that was when the bear galloped out of the edge of the pine forest.

Ty Kilgore—if it *was* Ty Kilgore—was the biggest grizzly Melanie had ever seen. He was a vast mound of wet, shaggy fur over rippling muscle, one of nature’s most finely honed killing machines. Deep scars on his face and creases in his matted fur spoke of old fights of years past.

The air smelled of blood: Brent’s, Decker’s, perhaps Ty’s as well.

Ty Kilgore wrinkled his muzzle in a snarl and came for them.

Decker, behind them and wounded—*only wounded, please let him be only wounded*—was the most obvious target. Melanie’s conscious thought fled and pure instinct took over.

*Pack. Mine. No!*

She shed her shirt (to the sound of a startled gasp from Brent) and let go of her inhibitions, her fears. She let the wolf take over.

Whatever Kilgore was expecting, it could not possibly have been a furious wolf erupting from the grass and going straight for his throat.

He was literally knocked onto his ass, even though Melanie was barely a fifth of his size. She didn’t think she could bite through the heavy fur around his throat, so she went for his face instead, savaging at his muzzle and eyes.

Kilgore roared and batted at her with his huge paws, trying to tear off the tiny nuisance raging in his face. The air was full of the smell of blood.

He finally managed to land a blow, and Melanie went tumbling head over tail. She picked herself up, panting, and the first thing she saw was Decker, propped up on his elbows with blood running down the side of his face, staring at her through the long grass and the rain.

Her emotions were a tangled mess, but the dominant feeling was relief. Relief that Decker was more or less okay, and relief that all her hiding and obfuscation was finally over. He saw her at last for her true self.

But what really shocked her was that he looked at her not with disgust or doubt, but with concern. He knew exactly what she was. And he only looked concerned for her.

The sudden boom of a rifle shot startled her. It just missed her in the rain, creasing the grass beside her. Flattening herself in the grass, Melanie turned to see the shooter on the porch of the cabin. It was a big guy in a plaid shirt—wait, no, she knew that guy—

It was Ty Kilgore. And he was aiming the rifle at her.

“Go!” Decker yelled at her, fumbling for his own gun.

Melanie’s mind was whirling with confusion. If *that* was Ty Kilgore, who was the grizzly? Not like it mattered; the important thing was getting away.

Getting all of them away.

With that in mind, rather than sprinting off into the woods, she charged for the porch.

Kilgore was clearly expecting her to run away, like a normal wolf would have. He got off a wild shot as she raced toward him, but if it hit her, she didn’t feel it. She launched herself into his face, and he went down, yelling. She hadn’t been able to take on a grizzly, but her wolf form was definitely a match for a human if she could separate him from his gun.

She felt him start to shift beneath her. His body writhed, a great shaggy bulk rising like a lumpy, rapidly growing furry mountain. And then she found herself facing not a mere human, but a second grizzly, if possible even larger than the first one.

But grizzlies, at least, couldn't use rifles. Brent and Decker had *better* be taking advantage of her distraction to regroup and escape, or at least get to better ground for taking out the two grizzlies. She couldn't see what the other was doing; she had all her attention on the one that was trying to claw and bite her.

The main thing working to her advantage was the close confines of the cabin porch. The bear could hardly move, and when Melanie darted under his hindquarters, he thrashed and struggled, trying to turn around and get a good angle to attack her. In this confined space, her speed and small size could at least temporarily keep him from landing a blow on her.

Heart beating fast, she realized that she might be able to get hold of his rifle, if she could shift long enough to get her hands on it. But she would be naked and human, exposed to his claws without even so much as a jacket in the way.

But she couldn't see another option. If she ran away, he could just shift back, grab the rifle, and shoot Decker. She had to get it away from him.

She got her chance with an unexpected distraction: someone yelling out in the clearing. That was Decker or Brent, having to deal with the other grizzly. But it made her attacker twist around and turn his head, and that was the opening she needed.

She darted under his massive paws, each claw the size of a butcher knife and just as capable of dealing damage. She shifted on the run, and suddenly instead of paws, her bare hands and feet were smacking the rough boards of the porch. There was a stumbling moment when she had to adjust to the different balance of two legs rather than four, and then she snatched up the rifle. She knew she couldn't outrun a grizzly in the open, so instead she darted through the door into the cabin and slammed it behind her.

There was no lock, but instead there was something better, a bar that dropped over the door to prevent it from opening. The door was massively heavy, and so was the bar. Melanie dropped it into place.

There was a thump that shook the entire house as Kilgore slammed against the door. It shuddered, but held.

Melanie looked around. The cabin wasn't big, and everything was an awful mess. Kilgore was the world's worst housekeeper. Beer cans and dirty dishes and boxes and empty junk-food wrappers were scattered everywhere. The stench of decayed food and mold made her gag. There were even claw gouges in the walls, as if Kilgore and his other grizzly buddy regularly got drunk and clawed up the place—which, based on the way some normal people behaved on Friday nights at the bar, was probably exactly what they did.

Critically, though, there was nowhere to hide. The cabin had one large room and a ladder leading up to some kind of loft.

The door shuddered again. Melanie wished she knew what was happening with Decker and Brent outside. Holding the rifle, she climbed the ladder one-handed.

It looked like Ty and his buddy (lover? girlfriend? dad? hunting partner?) slept up here. There were two beds, neither of which looked like it had been fixed or had the sheets washed in...well...forever. There was also a window. Melanie went over and opened it.

Clean air and rain washed into the stifling, stinking air. She gulped deep breaths in relief as she leaned out, trying to see what was happening in the clearing.

She couldn't see Decker and Brent anywhere.

# DECKER



DECKER WAS ALREADY confident that Melanie was a werewolf. But knowing in theory was one thing. Seeing her in action took his breath away.

She was beauty and power and grace. When she lunged for the guy on the porch, Decker's heart seized with sheer admiration for her.

"Decker!" Brent yelled. "Look out!"

Decker reacted on pure instinct, rolling out of the way a second before enormous jaws snapped shut where he'd been. The movement made the world spin dizzily around him.

He was pretty sure he had a concussion. The bullet that had narrowly missed killing him had creased the side of his head, painful but not fatal. It had felt like being kicked, a sharp pain exploding in his head, and then he'd found himself lying in the grass with the mother of all headaches, watching Melanie turn into a wolf.

Now he was down again, lying on his back with a giant grizzly looming over him. It looked as big as a semi truck. There was more than just rain matting down its shaggy head; blood mixed with the rainwater dripping off its muzzle, and one of its eyes was twisted shut, one ear savaged. Melanie had done some impressive damage despite their size difference. Unfortunately it wasn't really enough damage to slow Kilgore down.

Bears were almost unstoppable.

Almost.

Where had his damn rifle gone? He had dropped it when he got shot, and now he fumbled around in the grass. He had trouble getting his thoughts together. There was mixed rainwater and blood running into his eyes, blinding him.

He hadn't come this far to die like this, bleeding in the rain.

The bear roared and its great paws crashed down. Decker rolled out of the way, but something caught at his leg, tugging him backward. The pain kicked in a moment later, grinding agony in his thigh. He yelled involuntarily and clawed for the smaller gun on the belt around his waist, but the belt had twisted somehow and it was out of reach, under his back. Instead he got his hand around the hilt of his hunting knife and drew that.

The bear was dragging him by the leg. Killing a bear with a knife was pretty much impossible, but right now all he wanted to do was make it let him go. He gripped the hilt and drove the knife blade into the bear's ear. It twisted in his hand, glancing off the impenetrable skull instead. The bear—Kilgore—screwed its eyes shut and shook him by the leg.

The crack of a rifle seemed to shatter his aching head.

The bear jerked and swayed. Its bloody jaws opened, and it took a step back and sat down on its haunches, shaking its head. Slowly it began to collapse.

“Get up, damn it!” Brent's good hand scrabbled at Decker's sodden shirt, trying to pull him up. Decker grabbed at Brent and managed to pull himself to his feet, tottering on his undamaged leg.

Brent had Decker's rifle slung over his shoulder, his bad arm dangling. He couldn't manage the rifle and also support Decker with only one arm. Decker couldn't imagine how he had managed to shoot the bear one-handed with a hunting rifle.

“Can you walk?” Brent demanded, giving Decker a shake.

Decker nodded. His thoughts were starting to clear a little. He looked around but couldn't see Melanie anywhere. His leg

was a single throbbing mass of pain.

“Where’d Melanie go?”

“She just saved our asses, at least if she was trying to hit the bear and not us; now let’s get out of the open and not stand around staring like idiots until the other one gets us. C’mon!”

Supporting each other like runners in the world’s worst three-legged race, they staggered into the cover of the trees. The rain was pouring down in buckets, soaking Decker to the skin. It seemed to cool the throbbing in his head and leg at first, but now the strength was starting to go out of him, as if it was running down his body along with the rainwater. He swayed and nearly fell. Brent stopped and leaned Decker against a tree. Fumbling one-handed, he managed to rest the rifle against his hip in a more-or-less usable position.

“Melanie shot the bear?” Decker panted.

“Sure did. At least I assume it was her, unless we have a guardian angel with a hunting rifle somewhere around.” Brent blew out a breath and looked back toward the cabin, hidden now by trees and rain. “Did you know what she was?”

“I guessed.” Decker looked down at his leg, at his own blood-streaked hand gripping his thigh. It was hard to see how bad the damage was. His jeans leg was torn to ribbons, bloody water streaming down his leg and pooling in his boot.

“And you just brought us up here without saying anything, knowing that—”

“She’s the reason we’re still alive, Brent.”

Brent opened his mouth and then closed it. There was no arguing with that. She had saved them several times over, in fact, throwing her own body between them and danger.

“We have to help her,” Decker said.

Brent gave a short, humorless laugh. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’re not exactly in shape to help anybody right now.”

“I’m not running away.”

“You’re not even capable of running,” Brent said, and there was something about the way he said it, the flat deadpan delivery, that made Decker look up and meet his eyes, and then, against all odds, they both grinned. It felt almost like old times.

Decker shook his head and leaned against the tree. Rain pattered around them in the forest, a hissing white noise, covering the sound of anyone sneaking up on them. He was starting to shiver. All he wanted to do was lie down and close his eyes, but that was the last thing he dared to do right now.

He looked back the way they’d come. Even in the rain, his blood was laying down a trail that any grizzly could follow blindfolded.

“I’m going back,” Decker said.

“Yeah,” Brent sighed. “I figured.”

“You don’t have to.” He held out a hand. “I’ll take the rifle. Better with two hands anyway. There’s a revolver at my belt; we can trade for it.”

They swapped guns. It did work better this way; Decker could barely walk, but he could handle a two-handed weapon. Brent held the smaller gun confidently in his good hand.

Then Decker took a step away from the tree and his leg tried to buckle.

“Yeah.” Brent moved in and propped him up. “Looks like we’re a team whether we want to be or not.”



# MELANIE



MELANIE LOWERED THE RIFLE. She had seen Decker and Brent get away into the woods, and she was pretty sure Kilgore was dead. Or—whoever that was out there.

The cabin shook under her as the other bear slammed into the door again. Then there was a brief silence, followed by a rattling sound.

Her skin prickled with a cold sweat of fear. This was a bear with human hands. Brute force wasn't his only means of getting in.

She scrambled down the ladder just in time to throw shut the one opening downstairs window and lock it. On the other side, a naked Ty Kilgore sneered at her, and then erupted into a bear again. One swat from his powerful paw smashed the glass out of the window.

But Melanie was busy. There wasn't a lot of furniture in the cabin, but what furniture they had was massive and heavy, as befitted the home of bear shifters. A large free-standing cabinet held a collection of tools and other metal junk, as well as the by-now-expected collection of beer cans, snack food wrappers, and overflowing ash trays. She hastily dragged it in front of the window, shedding tools every which way. The cabinet rocked dangerously as Kilgore thrust at it from the other side, but among the clutter Melanie found a couple of ratchet straps, the sort used to secure heavy loads on pickup trucks. She lashed the cabinet in place, securing it to anything she could find—kitchen shelves, the cookstove, even a ceiling beam that she managed to wriggle the strap around.

There was a roar of frustration from outside. Then silence, followed by a bellow of “Ty!”

Melanie scrambled back upstairs and looked out.

The rain had slackened somewhat. In the clearing, Ty (or was it Ty?) had shifted and crouched, naked, beside the great, shaggy mound of fur that had been the other bear. His head was bowed, his shoulders shaking.

“Ty?” she called down. “Ty, do you remember me? It’s Melanie, from the bar.”

He looked up at her, his face twisted with grief and rage. “*That’s* Ty. I’m Trevor. You bitch! You and your friends killed my brother!”

“Oh,” she said to herself. Brothers. Of course. Twin brothers.

She would certainly have noticed by smell if she’d ever encountered them at, or near, the same time. But she’d only had the briefest, passing encounters with Ty on his infrequent visits to town.

Or...*their* visits.

“We didn’t have a choice, Trevor,” she called down. “You and your brother were trying to kill them.”

“Isn’t that what you and your hunter friends came up here to do to us, wolf-bitch?”

Melanie shivered. The worst part was, he wasn’t completely wrong. And yet...

“You and your twin have been hunting people, Trevor.”

“Humans!” he sneered. “Not *our* kind.”

“That’s how we ended up with hunters coming to our town!” she shouted. “You put every shifter in town at risk! Not to mention the humans—they’re our friends, our neighbors.”

“They’re the enemy!” he roared back. “And so are you!”

He laid a hand on Ty’s unmoving fur, and then got up with a resolute look. Oblivious to his nakedness, he marched over

to a shed near the cabin.

Melanie leaned out of the window, twisting to see. When he got a red can out of the shed, her jaw dropped.

“Is that *gasoline*?”

Ty didn't answer, but the eye-watering smell hit her a moment later as he began splashing it around the cabin's foundations.

“You're going to burn down your own house to kill me?” Melanie yelled down in disbelief.

“I can build another cabin,” Kilgore snarled back. “It's worth it to kill you!”

“It's pouring rain out here! It's never going to light!”

“Anything lights if you pour enough gasoline on it,” he snarled.

That...sounded like possibly the voice of experience there. She decided not to feel *too* sorry for Trevor Kilgore.

“Get away from there,” she ordered, pointing the rifle out the window at him. “Stop it right now.”

He responded by vanishing under the porch roof. There was more splashing. The stench of gasoline grew intense, burning her nose and making her eyes water.

“I'm not kidding!” she yelled. When there was no response, she pointed the rifle at the porch roof and pulled the trigger.

She didn't like guns, but she knew how to use them. Keith had made sure of that. She felt as if the impact of all of this would sink in sooner or later, but right now she just felt numb. The butt of the rifle slammed into her already bruised shoulder from the recoil, and a fist-sized hole appeared in the porch roof.

She heard no yelling or other sounds of distress, so she assumed she had missed. A moment later he reappeared, heading for the shed again.

“Trevor, please, I don’t want to kill you, but I’ll do it if I have to!”

She had a clear shot at him, but she couldn’t bring herself to pull the trigger. Not like this. Killing his brother had been a defensive act, protecting Decker; it was almost as if something outside herself had taken over. Or—something *inside* herself. Griselda would have torn Ty Kilgore apart with her teeth to stop him from hurting Decker.

But shooting an unarmed, naked man in the back was beyond her. Even if she could see that he was trying to kill her.

Trevor Kilgore vanished into the shed and came out a moment later carrying a small blowtorch.

“Trevor, don’t do this,” Melanie shouted.

He didn’t answer. She squeezed the trigger and the bullet hit where she intended, a few feet in front of him; she saw the grass ripple. It was a warning shot.

“I don’t want to do this, but if it’s you or me I will, I swear.”

Revor ignored her and made a dash for the cabin. Swallowing hard, she squeezed the trigger, but nothing happened. The hammer fell on an empty chamber. She had wasted her last chance on a warning shot.

Melanie didn’t waste time cursing or complaining. She had no chance of finding rifle ammo in this mess, so she dropped the useless gun and tried to think of options.

There was no way she could get out the door. Trevor would expect that; he’d be on her in seconds. As tendrils of smoke began to curl up from under the porch roof, Melanie measured the distance between herself and the ground. Jumping from here wasn’t going to be *fun*, exactly, but it was better than burning to death.

In a flat-out sprint, a wolf might be able to beat a bear. But that was only if she didn’t land badly. And Trevor Kilgore would be watching for her.

She shifted with her paws on the windowsill. The powerful smell of gasoline was even more potent to her lupine senses, making it almost impossible to smell anything else aside from the acrid stink of smoke.

Even on this rainy day, the dry wood of the cabin seemed to be catching quickly.

Melanie tensed and got ready to jump.

“Kilgore!” a voice shouted across the clearing.

Melanie looked up. Her ears pricked. Decker!

She could just glimpse him, with Brent, at the edge of the woods. Best of all was the rifle in his hands.

“Melanie!” Decker shouted. “I’ll cover you. Run for it!”

The crackle of the flames was audible now.

*I trust you*, she thought, and it was shocking how strong the feeling was.

She tensed herself and leaped.

The impact with the ground was jarring; it knocked the breath out of her as she tumbled through the grass. But there was no searing agony, and when she scrambled to her feet, all her legs still worked, although there was a hot pain in her shoulder that she knew she’d be feeling later.

Behind her, there was a roar and a crash. Melanie didn’t dare look back. She sprinted for the woods.

Decker’s gun boomed: once, twice. Melanie skidded into the edge of the trees, tongue lolling out of her mouth as she panted for breath. She shifted and almost fell as her center of balance changed, catching herself on her hands and knees. Pine needles prickled her bare skin, and the rain was suddenly, shockingly cold.

“Did you get him?” she gasped, looking over her shoulder. Flames were twining up the log sides of the cabin. She had a wistful moment’s thought that it looked awfully warm over there.

“No,” Decker said breathlessly. When she looked up, he was fumbling to reload with shaking hands. The side of his face was covered with blood. “He went behind the cabin. Someone tell me if you see him. Is the other one dead?”

“Yes.” Melanie managed to get her breath back. “They were brothers. Did you know Kilgore had a twin?”

Decker shook his head. “Believe me, I came up here loaded for bear, but not for *two* bears.”

Brent was trying to look anywhere but Melanie. Soaking wet, covered with blood, and visibly terrified, he was almost unrecognizable. But he was trying to wrestle off his jacket over his bloody arm. “Here, you can wear this.”

Melanie shook her head. “No, keep it. I’m better off as a wolf in the woods.” Better than being shoeless and mostly naked, by far. “I need to shift back before I get hypothermia. What’s our plan?”

“Plan?” Brent said, and laughed wildly. “Who’s got a plan? You got a plan, Decker?”

“We need to go to ground somewhere,” Decker said. His alert gaze roamed the forest around them, returning over and over to the flaming cabin, but she could see how hard he was struggling to stay upright and keep his grip steady on the rifle. “You know any places?”

“I might,” Melanie said. “There are some old mine buildings not too far from here. The problem is, Kilgore will probably know about them too.”

“He can follow us anyway if he’s going to,” Decker said. “We need to get out of the rain. Lead on.”

She had to steel herself to shift in front of them. It was so deeply ingrained not to do it in front of humans. And she still didn’t trust Brent, especially with that revolver in his hand.

But it was a relief to feel the fur cover her body, her senses sharpening, her blunt human teeth growing to lupine fangs. As a wolf, she was fully in her element here in the woods. She could hunt for her dinner, and her fur was warm enough for

even the coldest day. She could outrun almost anything. She feared very little, as a wolf.

And then she looked up at the two men, who were both staring at her. Brent wore a look of baffled shock. But Decker's expression went straight to her core. She had never seen his face that open, and it was filled with admiration and wonder.

"You're beautiful," he said.

Before she could stop herself, driven by her wolf instincts, she nuzzled against his hand. Decker dug his fingers into her heavy ruff, and she had to remind herself not to lean against his injured leg. She could have just collapsed into him and let him pet her for hours.

Maybe later. If there was a later.

She turned and started into the woods, leading them to what she hoped was safety.

# DECKER



BY THE TIME they got to the old mine cabin Melanie had found, Decker was using every bit of willpower he had to keep moving forward, even with Brent's shoulder propping him up.

It took him a moment to realize they were no longer being rained on. Weakly he raised his head and looked around. They were inside some kind of shack, so poorly built and badly maintained that daylight showed through cracks in the walls. It was a single tiny room with an old bunk bed and a small tin stove. The roof was dripping steadily.

"This makes Kilgore's place look like the Hilton, I know," Melanie said. She had shifted human again, her gorgeous body distracting even in his present condition. "And he'll tear right through these walls. No way this can stop a grizzly."

Brent fumbled his phone out of his pocket with clumsy fingers and held it up to the ceiling, then shook his head. "No reception." He put it away.

"Are there old mine shafts around here?" Decker asked. His voice sounded weak and hoarse even to himself. "Mine entrances, maybe. We could hole up in one of those, if we could get some supplies from here."

Melanie looked thoughtful. "I can scout around and see if there are any good options."

"Do it," Decker said. "Just don't go far."

Melanie shifted, and he was captivated all over again by the loose, flowing nature of the transformation. Brent looked unnerved every time she did it, but to Decker it seemed



smooth and natural. It was like she was *made* to be a wolf—which, of course, she was. She was equally Melanie in either form.

Melanie nuzzled Decker's hand and then bounded out the open door into the rain.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Brent said, "You're really gone on that girl, aren't you?"

Decker grunted, not really an answer, and sank down on the bunk. He was shaking with cold and shock. The old mattress was long gone, but there were still some ratty blankets, musty and squirrel-nibbled. He fingered the one he was sitting on.

"Bandages?" Brent suggested.

"Probably not the worst idea," Decker said. He cautiously stretched his leg out in front of him. It had stopped bleeding, for the most part, but it still hurt like it was on fire. "These blankets aren't exactly clean."

"Pack it with moss," Brent said. "Natural antiseptic. Better than nothing, anyway."

Decker gave him a surprised look.

"What? I'm a pro too, you know."

Of moss, at least, they had no shortage. Brent collected handfuls outside the cabin—he seemed to be able to use his bad arm again, at least a little. Using cut-up pieces of old blankets, Decker bandaged Brent's arm first, packing the cool, damp moss around it and binding it with straps of musty wool. Brent endured it pale-faced and grim. Then it was Decker's turn.

The pressure on his leg nearly made him pass out. His vision went white; the cabin swam around him.

What brought him back to himself was a sudden yell from Brent. He opened his eyes, adrenaline jolting him back to full consciousness, and started to reach for the rifle, only to see Brent flat on the floor with Melanie on top of him. She was growling softly.

“Whoa, hey, settle down.” Decker reached out for her, sank his hand into her damp fur. It was very warm and soft underneath the wet outer layer. It never even occurred to him to be afraid of her. “He’s not hurting me. He’s trying to help.”

Melanie sat on her haunches and then shifted back to her lean, naked human form. “Sorry,” she said to Brent.

“Uh...yeah.” Brent sat up and fingered his throat with his good hand. He edged back, farther away from her.

“Did you find a place?” Decker asked. The brief burst of energy drained away, leaving him chilly and hurting. He propped himself up with his hands on the bunk.

“Sort of.” Melanie crouched beside his half-bandaged leg. Her look was a question. Decker nodded, and she picked up the end of the bandage Brent had been wrapping.

Her touch was firm but gentle. It hurt less than it had when Brent was doing it, not that Brent had been trying to hurt him, but it was clear that Melanie had done this kind of thing before. It made him think of the little girl with the baby rabbit in the bar, the way Melanie’s hands had cupped the tiny scrap of fur with gentle, careful strength.

Wolves were the ancestors of all dogs, he thought dazedly, watching those same sure hands carefully and firmly wrapping up his leg. All the gentleness and protectiveness of domestic dogs came from wolves originally.

“What do you mean, ‘sort of?’” Brent asked, and Decker wrenched himself out of his own head, back to the present situation.

“It’s an old mine entrance on the far side of this valley we’re in,” Melanie said. “It’ll be easy to defend. We can climb up there, make a fire, warm up. But first we have to get there.”

“I can climb,” Decker said impatiently. He refused to be the weak link.

“It’s not that,” Melanie said. “There’s a river at the bottom of the valley. Not a big one, but it’s deep, swollen with all this rain. I had to leap from rock to rock to get across as a wolf. You two are going to have more trouble.”

Decker opened his mouth to suggest staying here, but closed it again. She was right about these flimsy walls. They couldn't defend themselves here; they wouldn't be able to let their guard down for a minute.

"We'll also be vulnerable crossing a river," Brent said. "If Kilgore's going to attack, he'll do it there."

Melanie nodded.

"We could try heading back to the truck," Decker suggested. Although just thinking about trying to climb back up that mountain in his present condition was agonizing. They'd hiked for hours to get to Kilgore's cabin.

"We'll be exposed to attack the entire way," Melanie said. "The mine is more of a sure thing. Once you two are settled there, I can go for help—"

"No way," Decker and Brent said together. They met each other's eyes briefly. Brent looked away.

"Look," Brent said. "It makes more sense to do it the other way. You two go to the mine, I'll go back to the truck—"

"The hell you will," Decker said. "Split up and he'll be on us in a minute. I'm going to guess the only reason he hasn't attacked yet is because he's not sure if he can take two armed men and Melanie all together."

"*She* just went out scouting," Brent said, sounding offended. He pointed to Melanie.

Melanie looked up from tucking in the ends of Decker's bandages. "I can avoid him as a wolf. I can smell him from a long ways away. You can't."

Decker pulled his leg back and cautiously tested it. Still hurt like a mother, but he was pretty sure he could put weight on it. "Look, the longer we spend arguing, the more time he'll have to work himself up to attacking us. We could debate this all day, but what it comes down to is, we have more firepower and more options as long as we stay together. The mine's closest. I say we go there, make a fire, and *then* figure out what to do."

There was a brief silence before Brent got up. “Fine,” he said. “At least let’s find a stick or something so *I* can stop being your crutch.”

# MELANIE



THE RAIN HAD SLACKENED to a drizzle by the time they left the mine cabin. Melanie shifted back into a wolf, the better to use her heightened senses to tell when Kilgore got close. Also, she was freezing being out in the woods naked and she didn't plan to cross a river wrapped in a blanket. Both of the guys were shivering, though it was clear that neither of them planned to admit to being cold.

Decker found a thick length of slightly mossy deadfall to act as a crutch, a small tree recently blown over and not yet rotten. Brent, meanwhile, rolled the remains of the ratty blankets into a tight ball to help keep them as dry as possible. There was nothing else in the cabin worth bringing.

Melanie kept watch, wolf-shaped, her thick fur shedding the damp and cold, her senses alert.

Now that the rain had almost stopped, the wet air carried scent well. The blood smell from both Decker and Brent was distractingly strong, and she was very aware of the musky male smell of Decker's skin. But what she was most alert for was grizzly.

The grizzly smell was all around, as it had been when she scouted out the old mine. Kilgore had been here before, and he had to be around somewhere. But she couldn't narrow it down to a specific direction.

The wind didn't help, changing direction constantly. As they set out down the gently sloping forest that lead to the valley bottom, sometimes the breeze brought her a whiff of

grizzly smell so strong that her hackles went up, expecting Kilgore to be on them at any moment. And then the wind changed again and the smell grew so faint she could barely detect it.

Faint. But never gone.

“You trust her?” Brent murmured to Decker, quiet enough that he might think she couldn’t hear.

“Yes,” Decker said. Just that, simple and true.

“Is it possible she’s working with Kilgore? This entire thing could be some kind of staged—”

“You know it’s not.” There was absolutely no doubt in his tone.

Wolves didn’t wag their tails like dogs, but all her wolfish-doggish instincts wanted to express her delight by rubbing all over him. She felt her mouth open in pleasure, tongue lolling out.

The hillside grew steeper, thick with tangled, wet foliage. As a wolf she’d navigated it easily, but the humans had to slow down, especially Decker with his makeshift crutch.

Melanie looked back up the hill. She began to worry about Kilgore coming on them from above, crashing out of the dense brush and trees. But for now he must be hanging back. She could almost sense him, just out of sight.

*He’s waiting until we’re most vulnerable.*

Kilgore had, after all, done this before. He and his brother were skilled hunters of human quarry. They knew all the nearby hiding places. Kilgore probably knew she’d been sniffing around the mine; he would be able to smell her there, just as she’d smelled him.

Decker let out a hiss of pain as his foot skidded on the wet leaves. He nearly lost his balance. Brent caught him.

Melanie smelled the river before they came in sight of it, a raw muddy smell. The noise was next, a deep thunder that she felt through her paws. And then they came out on the bank.

Decker cursed softly under his breath.

It had grown deeper just in the half hour or so since she last crossed it, a muddy expanse of churning water stretching between here and the opposite bank. The boulders she'd leaped across were now, for the most part, under water. All the rain up in the mountains was being channeled down here into what was probably a fairly calm mountain creek in ordinary times, churned up to a rushing muddy cataract by the storm.

"You think we can navigate *that*?" Brent said.

Melanie picked her way along the bank, looking for somewhere, anywhere, that might be shallow enough to cross. Her heart sank at the depth and the speed of the racing current. Given more time, they could perhaps find something among the old mine buildings to use for a rope, or a standing dead tree they could push down and roll into place for a bridge. But if they had that kind of time, they could hike uphill to the truck instead.

"I don't know if we can do this," Brent said, glancing at Decker.

"You mean you don't know if *I* can do this," Decker retorted. "I won't slow you two down."

"If we have to fish you out of the river, you sure as hell will!"

Melanie shifted. As usual, the sight of a naked woman seemed to short-circuit their brains enough that she could get a few words in. "Can you two stop bickering for one hot second? There's a shallower place in the river here, with the boulders. The water is over the boulders now, but you can use them for support while you cross."

"What about you?" Decker asked.

"Don't worry about me. I'm a wolf."

In truth, she *was* kind of worried. The water was much deeper than it had been earlier, and the boulders looked considerably more treacherous with water purling across their tops. She might have to try to cross as a human, which she really didn't want to do. She was shorter than the men, with no

clothing or shoes to protect her feet from sharp rocks and the rest of her from the water's punishing cold.

Still, if Decker wasn't complaining, she wouldn't either. "I'll go over first," she suggested. "That way I can make sure the far bank is safe. Then you two follow."

"You sure it's not a better idea to try for the truck?" Brent asked.

"Be my guest," Decker said. "I'm going with Melanie."

Melanie rolled her eyes and shifted. As a wolf, it was easier to tune out their arguing. She scanned the river ahead of her, picking out the boulder tops where they stuck up here and there above the raging flood. Once she was underway, she would need to keep moving; if she stopped for a minute, the current might sweep her off.

She tensed her muscles and leaped.

"Be careful!" Decker called behind her.

She had no attention to spare for any sort of response. As soon as her paws splashed into the water roiling over the top of the first boulder, she realized how hard this was going to be. She couldn't see her footing clearly, or do more than guess where the boulder tops were.

When she leaped from the first boulder to the second, her back legs nearly slid out from under her on the wet rock, and she didn't get nearly as much momentum with the leap as she was expecting. She landed successfully on the next boulder but started to slide off. Panicking, Melanie scrabbled wildly, digging in her claws, and managed to recover. She crouched, shivering, as the cold water swirled around her feet and tugged at her legs.

She looked back at Decker and was horrified to see him starting into the water after her. Melanie barked at him sharply, trying to tell him to stay back.

"You need my help!" he yelled back at her.

She wanted to tell him he was being an idiot, but somehow, spurred onward by worry and supported by the



walking stick, he managed to stumble from boulder to boulder, and staggered against the one she was crouching on. The water was above his waist, nearly up to his chest. He had the rifle balanced across his shoulders to keep it out of the river.

Melanie gave his hair a rough swipe with her tongue.

“Are you both out of your minds?” Brent yelled. He started into the water after Decker, but nearly lost his footing and retreated to the bank.

“I think it’s easier with a stick,” Decker called back. “See if you can find yourself one.”

Melanie looked ahead. The ruffled brown surface of the raging river seemed to stretch on forever. If any of them lost their footing and fell, she didn’t think they could swim against the current. They would be swept downstream and most likely drowned unless they managed to wash up somewhere.

Out in the middle of the water, the roar of the flood was a deep rumble that she felt through her chest. Sticks and branches, tossed on the waves, spun past her boulder.

Brent reappeared out of the woods with a branch and started wading in. Over the river’s roar, Melanie heard him cursing loudly and vigorously. The word “Idiot” could be heard once or twice.

“Ready to go?” Decker asked Melanie.

*Not really*, she thought, but she felt buoyed up by his optimism. Decker clearly didn’t know the meaning of the word “quit.”

She stood up on the boulder, tensed to jump again, and just then a sudden, booming *Crack!* echoed across the water.

Melanie staggered.

*A log on the flood? No...that was a gunshot...*

The booming crack echoed again.

“Gunshots!” Brent yelled. “It’s Kilgore! Get back on shore!”

To her shock and dismay, Melanie realized that in all of this, somehow she'd forgotten—they'd all forgotten—that he wasn't a grizzly all of the time. He was also a human-shaped adversary, with weapons.

And now he was shooting at them from the opposite bank.

She turned to retreat, and her leg buckled under her. The pain came an instant later, burning and fierce, flaring up to her shoulder.

In that off-balance instant, she was swept off the boulder into the flood.

# DECKER



“MELANIE!”

As the flood claimed Melanie, Decker forgot everything, from the pain in his leg to the extreme likelihood of being swept away and drowned if he lost his footing. The fear he’d felt on seeing her nearly miss her leap between boulders was nothing compared to his all-consuming panic as she went head over tail into the raging brown water.

He lunged for her.

He lost the rifle, lost his stick, and the churning floodwater closed over his head. But his fingers closed on wet fur. And then he realized his feet had left the bottom, and he had an instant to think that they were both going to drown—and it might be worth it—when something knocked the breath out of him and dragged him backward.

His head broke the surface and he blinked water out of his eyes. He was clinging to Melanie by her leg, and Brent was holding onto him by the belt.

Brent had his own weight thrown backward, gripping the stick with his bad hand, legs braced on the bottom of the river. His face was white and set as he was slowly but inexorably dragged downstream by Decker and Melanie’s combined weight.

Decker floundered wildly until he managed to find some traction on the river bottom, getting his legs under him, most of his weight on his good leg. He staggered against Brent and

shifted his grip on Melanie until he had a more secure hold around her furry waist.

“Shore!” Brent gasped out. There was another crack of a rifle shot, but it skimmed off the surface of the water next to them. They were moving around too much for Kilgore to get a good aim at them.

There was no hope of getting to the other side now, and no reason to try. They floundered back through the water, staggering and stumbling. Kilgore tried shooting at them a couple more times, but the way they were bobbing and weaving in the water, stumbling and staggering as the current pulled them first one way and then another, it would have been pure chance if he'd hit them.

They stumbled out and collapsed on the bank. Brent gasped, “Get to cover!” He dragged at Decker, and Decker pulled on Melanie's waterlogged, furry body, and they managed to go to ground in a dense alder thicket on the shore. Brown water flowed just below them.

“Melanie,” Decker groaned. He blinked water out of his eyes. He didn't think he'd ever been this wet or this cold in his life. He was going on pure adrenaline; he no longer even felt the pain of his injuries. But all his attention was on Melanie as he dragged her into his lap. He was only vaguely aware of Brent crouching next to him with the revolver out, peering through the slender trunks of the trees.

“Melanie!” Decker begged her. “Please wake up.”

She was a limp, heavy mass of water-soaked fur, flopping in his lap. He had no idea what to do for her. Could you give CPR to a wolf?

Even as he was trying to work out the logistics of that, Melanie jerked and coughed up a small amount of water. A moment later she'd shrunk to a naked, pale, very cold-looking woman sprawled across his lap. Her shoulder was a mass of purple bruises and bullet burn, and her hair was a tangled mess in her eyes.

She was still the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen. He kissed her on her muddy-tasting lips.

"Mmmm..." She stirred, kissing back vigorously, and opened her eyes, pale lashes fluttering. "Decker," she whispered, and then began struggling, trying to get up. "Kilgore—"

"Don't try to sit up yet," Decker told her. He was dizzy himself, his exhaustion and pain beginning to reassert itself along with shivering weakness from the cold. Melanie was shaking in his arms. He tried to curl forward to keep the rain off her, then had a better idea and wrapped her in his jacket, wet and caked with mud as it was.

Melanie was struggling to sit up, so Decker helped her do that. He turned to look the way she was looking, through the dense young trees of the thicket and across the surging water.

"Kilgore?" Melanie whispered. Her voice was ragged.

Decker started to ask if that was a question or if she'd actually seen him, but the question answered itself. Kilgore stepped out into view on the opposite bank, completely naked, with nothing but the rifle in his hands. If the cold bothered him, he showed no sign of it.

They all flattened themselves behind the trees. From the way Kilgore was holding the rifle, swinging it slowly back and forth, he didn't know where they were. But he knew they were over here somewhere.

He squeezed the trigger anyway. The shot came alarmingly close; Decker heard a twig snap somewhere in the thicket.

"Can you...?" he whispered to Brent, indicating the revolver. Brent shook his head.

"Too far," he whispered back. "Not much chance of hitting him, and I'd just give away our position."

Seeming to realize that he wasn't getting anywhere with the rifle, Kilgore dropped it and shifted. This time Decker had a ringside seat to watch the human body twist and deform into the massive grizzly bear.

“Still can’t believe you people are real sometimes,” Brent muttered.

“Shhh!” Melanie hissed.

On the far side of the river, Kilgore rotated his head, his small, furry ears swiveling.

“He can’t possibly hear us across the river, can he?” Decker whispered. The water was if anything even louder now, a deep bass roar.

“I don’t know,” Melanie whispered back. “He can surely smell us, though.”

Then Kilgore waded into the water, his shaggy flanks rippling.

“No way,” Brent whispered.

But there was no doubt about it. The river was slowing the great bear down, but not stopping him. As the water grew deeper, Decker tensed, expecting to see him lose his footing and go tumbling downstream at any moment.

But it didn’t happen. The bear’s great bulk was a match even for the mighty river. The water churned around his sides and sometimes a wave rolled over his back, but he raised his head and kept his muzzle out of the water. He swayed and occasionally went a step or two off course, but his progress remained steady and inevitable. One great plodding step at a time, he forged onward—now a third of the way across, now at the midpoint...

“He’ll smell us in a moment as soon as he’s on this side,” Melanie whispered. She struggled awkwardly to her knees.

“Guess we don’t have anything to lose,” Brent said.

He stood up, braced the gun awkwardly with his bad arm, and fired. There might have been a single kicked-up splash a few feet from the bear, or maybe it was a twig surfacing in the river. Either way, there was no reaction from Kilgore, who continued to wade onward.

“Still too far,” Decker said. “You’re right. Save the bullets for when he’s here.”

“And then what?” Brent demanded. “Shove the gun right up in his face? He’ll be tearing us apart by that point.”

“We can go up the hill—”

“And then what? She’s right, he’ll smell us out. You know a bear can smell a dead animal from *twenty miles away*? Their noses are sharper than bloodhounds.”

Leaning against Decker, Melanie jerked suddenly and turned, looking up the hill into the wet trees. Decker, alarmed, followed her gaze. He thought at first that the other bear had followed them, Kilgore’s brother, not as dead as they’d thought.

Then Decker heard what she had heard, a low, rising note carried on the wind. He had one confused moment when he had no idea what it was, and thought it must be music, incongruous and strangely dissonant as it was. Organ music, perhaps.

Then he recognized it, as Melanie had. It was a wolf’s howl.

# MELANIE



“KEITH!” Melanie gasped. She *knew* that howl.

She scrambled to her feet and stood on wobbly legs, with Decker’s jacket draped around her shoulders. Her entire right arm was a throbbing mass of pain, the hand useless, and her throat felt sore from the river water she’d swallowed. But then Keith’s howl came again, rising mournfully across the hills.

Her pack, such as it was, had come for her.

“It’s a friend,” she told Decker and Brent, who were staring at her with expressions of mutual confusion.

“A friend? Wait—” Decker’s face cleared. “The old guy at the bar?”

Melanie nodded. She glanced over her shoulder at the river and Kilgore’s inevitable approach. “Don’t shoot any wolves you see,” she ordered, and shifted again.

She thumped to all fours, and instantly jerked up her leg in pain. Kilgore’s shot hadn’t torn open any blood vessels, but the impact had bruised her badly and possibly broken her shoulder, already sore from her fall out the window. No time to worry about that right now. She tilted back her head and let a howl rise in her chest and roll out of her aching throat, the wolf’s song carried on the damp pine-scented air.

Keith howled back. Wolf song wasn’t a highly information-dense kind of communication. It was mostly just “Hi, it’s me, I’m here.” But right now, that was enough; it was more than enough.



And a moment later, she found out it wasn't just Keith.

From the low gray sky and wreathing mist, a narrow, fast shape dropped on the bear in the river, slashing at his eyes before darting away. It was a cliff swallow, and Melanie had to assume it was one of the Jankowski twins. Their parents were bird shifters, a merlin hawk and an eider duck, who ran a garden supply store in Quartz Lake.

The other twin, whichever it was, followed close on the wings of the first, dropping from the sky to peck at the bear's ears and then swooping away as he reared up in the water, roaring.

Keith must have recruited the Jankowskis as scouts. But even as she was thinking this, a fox darted out of the woods to the water's edge. It was gray around the muzzle and had a slight hitch in its gait, which an observer might guess was because of a trap or a fight, but Melanie knew it was due to a bad knee. That was old man McMurphy, the retired game warden who was also part of Keith's weekend biker club.

There were more rustles in the trees around them. Melanie's sharp nose brought other scents, hares and deer and even a snake, as well as a smell that could not have been more wildly out of place in these northern woods: elephant.

Keith must have recruited the entire shifter population of Quartz Lake, as well as the shifters among his biker buddies.

Brent spun around with the gun out. Melanie hastily shifted human again. "No!" she cried, holding out a hand. "Don't shoot *anything*! These are friends—they're here to help us!"

More animals came out of the woods, and Brent and Decker stared around in open bafflement.

"I feel like I'm auditioning for the role of a Disney princess," Decker murmured as a rabbit hopped over his bad leg. "Are these all shifters?"

Melanie nodded. "Do not shoot anything. Anyone."

Brent turned to check on Kilgore's progress. Although harassed by the swallows, the bear was ignoring them, his eyes

screwed up against their attacks, hurling himself through the raging water toward them. “Look, I appreciate the thought here, it’s really, uh—decent of them, but an army of rabbits and birds isn’t going to do much against a grizzly.”

“You haven’t seen all of them yet,” Melanie said, and that was when Kashvi came out of the woods.

Kashvi was a 17-year-old high school student, the only shifter in her family. Her parents owned a hotel up the highway a ways. They had been, to say the least, slightly confused when it turned out that their toddler could shift into several hundred pounds of baby elephant. It was a big part of why they’d moved from the city to a rural mountain town where Kashvi could shift and run around in the woods. The elephant toddler was now a few tons of nearly adult elephant, a wall of wrinkled gray flesh looming on the misty riverbank.

“I stand corrected,” Brent said faintly. The hand holding his gun dropped loosely to his side.

Kilgore may have been prepared for a lot of things, but an angry elephant was not one of them. Kashvi waded into the edge of the water, trumpeting fiercely. Kilgore veered off, snarling as he thrashed through the water. Getting himself together, he reared up on his hind legs and roared.

Kashvi took a step back. She might be an elephant, but she was also a teenager who had never been in a serious fight before. And the enormous bear was one of the few creatures big enough to do her serious damage.

Kilgore seemed to realize this and waded forward, swiping at her with his claws.

“Be careful!” Melanie shouted. She tensed to shift. She wasn’t sure how much she could help, but she couldn’t just stand here while Kilgore attacked a kid, even a really enormous kid.

There was a gray flash in the woods. Keith had arrived at last, having been outdistanced by most of his ragtag army while he was howling to alert Melanie to their presence.

Pursuing the retreating elephant, Kilgore reached the riverbank only to be kicked in the face by a deer, followed by a snarling, snapping Keith lunging at him. When he turned, it was to be confronted by Kashvi, who reared up on her hind legs and then plunged forward. She missed him, but a tremendous wave went up when she hit the water, drenching the bank's defenders and sending Kilgore stumbling backwards.

A sharp gunshot cracked at Melanie's shoulder. She turned on Brent, prepared to yell at him for endangering her friends, but it wasn't Brent. It was Decker, having recovered the revolver from his former hunting partner and holding it now in a shaky but determined grip.

His aim was excellent. Kilgore stumbled. It was impossible to tell if he'd been hit in a vital place, but he was certainly off balance.

And at that point, chance intervened.

The raging floodwaters were awash in driftwood: branches, clumps of brush, and even whole trees, whirling along on the current.

One of these spun into Kilgore.

If he hadn't been shot and retreating, he would probably have been able to ride it out. But it caught him right in the back of the head. He jerked and went under the floodwaters.

He didn't come back up.

Melanie strained her eyes. The rain was growing heavier again. She glimpsed, after a moment, a flash of dark fur, tumbled by the raging flood. And then even that was gone, vanishing into faster whitewater as the river exited the valley.

There was a silence. No one moved, even Kashvi standing with her front legs in the edge of the river. Then an advancing gray wall of rain swept over them, and suddenly, for a few minutes, there was nothing but the downpour. Melanie leaned down absently to pick up Decker's discarded jacket and pull it around her bare shoulders.

Cold water slopped at her feet. She looked down in surprise. The river was coming up fast with the renewed rain. It had already swallowed half the alder thicket.

“Up the hill!” she shouted through the rain. “We’re going to have flash flooding down here! Get to higher ground!”

The retreat was as ragged and disorganized as their charge had been. Decker put an arm around Melanie, and she decided to go along with the fiction he clearly seemed to be determined to put forth that he was helping her rather than leaning on her. Brent straggled behind them, one hand pressed to his bloody arm, where the blanket-and-moss bandages were working their way loose. He kept looking around him as the wet undergrowth rippled with animals: deer, wolf, snake, rabbit, elephant. It was clear that he couldn’t quite believe this was really happening to him.

A little higher, where the hill leveled off, they stopped and looked back. The river had risen shockingly fast; of the alder thicket, only the tops were visible now, jerking on the brown water. There wasn’t the slightest chance of anyone crossing it now. The flood’s rumble shivered through Melanie’s sore, bare feet.

Keith appeared out of the underbrush and shifted in mid-stride to a naked, potbellied, middle-aged man. “Is everyone all right?” he demanded. The question was clearly directed to the animals around him and not to the humans. He gave the two hunters an unfriendly stare and held out his hand. “Let’s have the gun, son.”

“He’s on our side,” Melanie said, but Decker relinquished the gun without complaint. Keith took it, took out the ammo and tossed it away, and handed it back. “Oh, come on,” she said. “That’s not necessary.”

“I’m not having a damn *hunter* at my back with a gun,” Keith said.

Brent opened his mouth as if to argue and then glanced at the elephant looming behind Keith and shut his mouth.

Keith turned his sharp gaze toward Melanie, and his face softened. “You okay, Mel?”

She burst into a laugh that cracked in the middle. “Oh, fine. Don’t I look fine?”



The climb back through the trees and over the pass was agonizingly long. Melanie only struggled along as a human for a short while before she shifted to a wolf. Even having to limp on her front leg, four legs was better than two. Decker, with his injured leg, ended up riding on Kashvi, who had silently bent a knee to encourage him to climb up. (And a difficult process it had been, getting him up there.) Brent stumbled along beside the elephant, occasionally resting his good hand on her great, rising and falling gray flank when he needed the support.

They got back to the Hummer to find it surrounded by a small traffic jam of motorcycles, farm trucks, and SUVs. The shifters began shifting back, grabbed their clothes out of truck cabs and motorcycle saddlebags, and hastily got dressed. Keith handed Melanie a spare sweater and pair of jeans, miles too big for her, but it was better than driving back to town naked.

Decker and Brent, true to form, started arguing over who was going to drive. Decker had only one functional leg; Brent had one good arm. Melanie nabbed the keys while they were arguing and tossed them to Keith.

“It’s literally my car,” Brent complained.

“You get shotgun, then.” Melanie crawled into the backseat and pulled Decker in after her.

“If you two have sex in the back of my—”

“We’ll keep the noise down,” Decker said, and Melanie giggled.

As it turned out, she mostly rested, with her head leaning on Decker’s shoulder. Keith drove, leaving his motorcycle to one of his pack to return. The vehicle wallowed and slid on

muddy roads through a brilliant green, wet forest draped in mist. Then the clouds parted just in time to reveal a blazing sunset shining across the lake.

It was hard to believe that just a few hours earlier, they had all been fighting for their lives and nearly died.

“So I guess we need to figure out where we’re going to take you boys,” Keith said over his shoulder as they reached the main road, with an entourage of motorcycles and farm trucks sputtering up behind them. This sounded vaguely ominous and Melanie was gathering for an argument when he went on, “Are either of you bad enough off to need a hospital?”

“Melanie—” Decker began.

“Shifters heal fast,” Melanie said. Her arm had already stopped aching so much, so it probably wasn’t broken. “I just need to get some food in me.”

“Yeah, well, humans don’t,” Brent said from the shotgun seat. “It doesn’t look like either of us is bleeding out, but we both got mauled by a bear. We’re going to need antibiotics at the very least, and probably stitches. Moss isn’t going to cut it for long, you know what I mean?”

“Take them back to my place,” Melanie said. “I’ve got a ton of medical stuff. We can take a look at you there.”

“You sure about that, Mel?” Keith asked quietly.

“I’m sure,” she said, and Keith shook his head, but turned down the road toward town.

# DECKER



IT WAS ALMOST DARK, and Decker was pretty sure Melanie had fallen asleep on his shoulder, when Keith slowed the Hummer and turned off the main road, past Melanie's mailbox and into her yard. Seeing her Subaru and his truck gave him a weird sense of dislocation; it was hard to believe it was only this morning when they'd last been here.

Some of their entourage had peeled off on the way, but there were still about a half-dozen motorcycles and other vehicles trailing them into Melanie's driveway. Keith pulled up beside the Subaru, and the rest of the gang pulled in around them, filling up the yard and spilling down to the beach.

Decker's leg had stiffened up on the drive. He staggered and nearly fell when he tried to climb down. He ended up leaning on Melanie.

For the first moment, there was no hearing anything else over the roar of motorcycles and other vehicles pulling into Melanie's yard. As the engines died one by one, a ringing silence was left behind—broken by the sudden, loud bleat of a goat.

"I'll take care of the animals," Keith said. "You go on inside. Anita's on her way."

"Anita?" Decker asked as Melanie helped him to the house. Brent trailed after them, looking lost.

"She's a nurse at the clinic in the next town over who handles shifter-related medical emergencies," Melanie explained. "We can't just go to the doctor; aside from the risk

of shifting under stress, we also don't heal like normal humans do. There's a place in Seattle, the—" She looked up at Brent, and smoothly skipped over the name."—that can take real emergencies, but if it's not that bad, Anita handles it for us."

"There's no need to call someone out for us," Decker said. Melanie turned on some lamps and eased him down onto the couch. "You said there's a clinic? Brent and I can go there. *We're* not shifters."

"I need to have Anita come out to look at my arm anyway," Melanie said, flexing her fingers. "She can take a look at you two while you're here, and then we'll drive you to the clinic if she feels you need to go." She looked up at Brent, who was standing at the end of the couch, looking awkward. "Sit. I'll get someone to make coffee for us. There are lots of folks around here who don't look like they have enough to do."

The living room was starting to fill up with people trickling in from the yard. Most of them showed signs of having hastily dressed back at the trailhead—crookedly buttoned shirts, bare feet shoved into sneakers, jackets tossed over naked torsos. The variety was startling; every age group from teenagers to old people was represented. It took Decker a few minutes to figure out that the shy, dark-skinned teenage girl with a waterfall of dark hair cascading around her shoulders must be the elephant. She was curled up on a chair in the corner with her bare feet tucked under her, giggling when any of the adults spoke to her. It was incredibly difficult to wrap his mind around the idea that just a few hours ago, she had been fighting a bear—and winning.

In fact, it was impossibly weird to wrap his head around the idea that every last one of these people was a shifter. For his entire life, he had learned to think of shifters as brutal, scary, and dangerous. And most of the ones that he'd met were that way. Even Melanie and Keith had an air of danger about them. He had thought that all shifters were like that.

Now he was seeing the other side of them. A middle-aged lady had brought out her knitting. There was a skinny old man with a limp in Melanie's kitchen making coffee. A pair of



giggling, freckled teenagers came in from helping Keith take care of the animals.

It was starting to dawn on Decker that he could have walked past any of these people on the street, in any town he'd ever been in, and he never would have guessed that most of them were shifters. So much for his trusty shifter detection abilities.

Keith came in from outside, scraping his boots at the door. He crossed his arms over his barrel chest and looked at the two bleeding hunters sitting meekly in Melanie's living room. Brent had an embroidered quilt wrapped around him, and Decker was under a couple of afghans.

"What *are* we going to do with these two?" Keith asked.

Melanie came back from the bathroom with a large first-aid kit. "Stopping them from bleeding out in my living room is probably the first thing," she said with a bite in her tone, and knelt in front of Decker.

"You're hurt too," Keith pointed out.

"I'm all right. It's just bullet burns and bruising, and it's healing already." She jerked her chin at Brent, and handed up a wad of gauze packets to Keith. "You can start working on him. And see if anyone's done anything about putting water on to boil."

She carefully began peeling back the bloody rags of bandages from Decker's leg. He clenched his teeth. It hadn't exactly *stopped* hurting, but the pain had receded to a throb. Now it flared up again, agonizingly.

"Is this moss?" Melanie asked, picking fragments from the wound.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Decker admitted, forcing a grin. "Wasn't like we had iodine around."

One of the freckled teens came in from the kitchen with a large pan of steaming water held carefully in both oven-mitted hands. "Mr. McMurphy said to bring you this."

“Thanks, Jake,” she said absently. “Someone get me some hand towels, please?” She whistled softly as she examined the puncture wounds on Decker’s leg. “You’re definitely going to need antibiotics for this. I hope Anita’s bringing the heavy-duty stuff.”

There were small pained noises from Brent’s direction. It sounded like Keith wasn’t being nearly as gentle as Melanie.

“Oh, man up, kid,” Keith said, dipping a wet cloth in the pan of red-tinted water.

“You wanna trade?” Brent said between his teeth to Decker.

“Hell no.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Decker looked down at Melanie, who had her head bowed over his leg. Her hair had dried into a thick golden tangle with sticks and leaves embedded in it. He couldn’t resist the urge to lightly pick at a couple of them while she worked on his leg. She shivered when he first touched her hair, and he asked quietly, “Do you mind?”

“No.” She glanced up, a flicker of green eyes through the curtain of hair. “I like being...groomed.”

“Is that a dog joke?”

Her lips pressed together and the dimples flashed before she lowered her head to swipe gently around the oozing fang marks on his thigh.

The next ten minutes or so passed in a haze of weariness and pain. Decker worked on cleaning and smoothing Melanie’s hair to give himself something to focus on other than his leg. Most of the other shifters were in the kitchen; cheerful voices drifted out along with a pleasant baking smell. From the general direction of the overstuffed chair where Keith was doctoring Brent, there was an occasional yelp of pain or a curse.

“Be careful, old man!”

“Be careful pissing me off,” Keith muttered, dunking the bloody cloth again.

One of the kids came in to bring fresh hot water. None of them seemed bothered by the bloody scene taking place in the living room; in fact, they all looked fascinated. They were rural kids, Decker reminded himself; even apart from the shifter thing, most of them probably had experience with hunting or caring for farm animals.

There was a commotion at the door, and a small, round, cheerful woman bustled in, carrying a medical bag. Decker didn't need to be told that this was Anita, the nurse, even if several people hadn't greeted her by name. Once again, she looked like a person he would never in a million years have suspected of being a shifter. She gently but firmly moved Melanie out of the way, and then snapped on a pair of gloves and knelt to examine his leg.

“What do you turn into?” he asked, partly to distract himself as she poked and prodded, and partly just because he wanted to make an earnest effort to be friendly. “Or is it rude to ask?”

“It's not rude...well, as long as you don't go saying it in front of people who don't know about us. And to answer your question,” she went on, firmly but gently turning his leg to the side, “I'm a porcupine.”

“I wouldn't have guessed that.” He could only blame fatigue and lightheadedness for his next question: “Do you ever accidentally poke yourself?”

He blushed as soon as he'd said it. Anita smiled and glanced at Melanie. She had stayed beside Decker, crouched with a hand resting warm and reassuring on his good leg.

“Your boyfriend is adorable, Melanie. I like him.”

Melanie's eyes widened at the boyfriend comment, but all she said was, “I know. I like him too.”



Anita irrigated and stitched up his leg and put him on an IV drip with antibiotics, fluids, and painkillers before moving on to Brent. Decker lay flat and waited for the IV to run out. He could happily just have slept here on the couch. But he woke from a half-doze at the tug of Anita's brisk, sure hands removing the IV. Nearby, Brent was reclining in a similar dozing state with an IV of his own.

"You're taken care of for now, and I'm leaving some oral antibiotics," Anita said. "But I suggest you boys come in to the clinic in the next day or two and get it looked at properly. Animal bites are nothing to mess around with—for humans, at least. Otherwise, get some sleep."

"I thought you weren't supposed to sleep with a concussion," Melanie said. She had been up and down to see to the others, but she kept coming back to sit beside him.

"Myth," Anita said briskly. "The time to get worried is if he's seriously nauseated or if you can't wake him up, but it looks like rest is what he needs most of all."

Decker wondered what the odds were that he could just stay here on the couch, but Melanie nudged him until he reluctantly let her help him up.

"Come on, grizzly hunter," she said. "There's a more comfortable bed upstairs, if you can manage the stairs."

"Where *are* the stairs?"

The stairs weren't hidden, just hard to notice; they went up the side of the room behind some of the furniture and vanished upstairs. They were wooden and handmade, a set of wooden steps with no spacers between them, just a view into the room below that was dizzying in his present condition. At the small landing, Melanie opened a closed door and he found himself in a cozy bedroom with a low ceiling and an enormous bed piled high with quilts and pillows. The window was half open, letting in the cool, damp night air.

"This looks amazing," Decker groaned as she eased him down on the soft mattress. "I, uh...I'm not the cleanest right now. I'm probably gonna get mud on your nice clean bed."

“I’m not exactly a model of cleanliness myself right now, in case you hadn’t noticed.” She patted his arm and then went to the door and leaned out. Decker heard her talking quietly; he couldn’t hear what was said, but he glimpsed Keith on the stairs, and then she pulled the door shut.

“Mind if I ask what that was all about?” he asked as she came back and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Brent,” she said. “Keith and some of the kids will be sticking around downstairs.” She yawned and began to stiffly and carefully strip off her top.

“I think he’s scared spitless of Keith,” Decker said with a sleepy grin. He looked up appreciatively as she peeled out of her shirt, and then whistled softly when he saw the bruising on her shoulder. “Jeez. That looks painful. Shouldn’t you have Anita look at it?”

“It’s healing fine.” She flexed her arm carefully. There was a mass of bruising all over her shoulder and down her arm, but now that Decker got a better look, he could see that the bruises were the brown and yellow of older bruises rather than as fresh as they really ought to be. There were still faint traces of healing bullet burn, looking a little bit like road rash, but it might have happened a week ago rather than earlier today.

“Wow, you guys really do heal fast.”

“Obviously this isn’t something we want to get out, either.” She yawned again. “Mind if I leave the window open? I like to sleep where I can smell the night.”

“Yeah, sure, go ahead.” He thought briefly of Tarzan, out there in the night. But she would be okay; she was used to having him gone overnight, and she had the truck to be safe in. He hoped all of these strangers hadn’t frightened her too badly.

All these strangers. Something was nagging at the back of his mind, but he didn’t remember what it was until they’d both undressed as much as they were going to, and Melanie had crawled into bed with him and reached over to turn out the light. Then abruptly it clicked, and he sat bolt upright, some of his weariness fading.

“What?” Melanie asked sleepily. She paused with her hand on the bedside lamp.

“What time is it?”

“The middle of the night. I’m not even sure. Why?”

“Mercer’s coming. With everything else, I almost forgot.”

Melanie propped herself up on her elbow. “Mercer and Steelhawk. You aren’t the only one. It’s my town, and I forgot too.” There was a hint of a growl in her voice. “When will he be here?”

“I don’t think he’ll show up in the middle of the night.” He sank back down into the pillows. “I’ll get rid of him, Melanie, don’t worry. No matter what Brent decides to do. I won’t let him hurt anyone here.”

Melanie hesitated, then snapped off the light. It was suddenly very dark, with the only light in a stripe under the bedroom door. Soft voices and creaking footsteps could be heard downstairs.

“Do you need to sleep right away?” she asked. Her voice was quiet in the dark. “Or do you think we could talk about Steelhawk a little bit?”

“I can stay awake a little while.”

He rolled over in the wide, soft bed, careful of his leg. Melanie hesitated when he first touched her, and he prepared to pull back, but then she made the next move, turning to nestle in the crook of his arm.

“I should warn you ahead of time,” she said with a soft huff of laughter. “I’m not used to sleeping with another person, and wolves can be jumpy sleepers. I wake up at the slightest sound.”

“That’s okay. I do too.” He yawned. “Uh, normally. I think tonight I’m going to sleep like a log.”

“You seemed pretty deeply asleep when I left your bed this morning,” she murmured, playing lightly with his chest hair.

“Yeah, that’s new. I don’t usually sleep like that with someone else.” Like he’d instinctively known he was safe with her.

“Me neither,” she murmured. “Okay, Steelhawk and Mercer.”

“Yeah. All right.”

Decker let out a long sigh, trying to decide where to start explaining his entire life...a life he’d never really talked about to someone who wasn’t already in it.

“Mercer Hawke is his full name. He’s about the closest thing I have left to a dad. My actual dad died when I was fifteen. He and Mercer worked together. They built that whole rotten institution of a company.”

Melanie’s fingers swept lightly back and forth on his chest, grounding him. “I can see why you didn’t want to believe that they were what they really are,” she said softly.

“There are times when I still don’t. But yeah. I don’t know if the—the rot in Steelhawk is all Mercer, or if part of it was my dad too. Maybe if he’d lived, we would’ve had a chance to talk about it later. Or maybe I’d have turned out more like Brent.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

Decker snorted a quiet laugh. “Maybe. But it’s not like I’m special. Brent’s an orphan. He grew up as Mercer’s ward, and if Mercer is something like a dad to me, he really is Brent’s dad in most of the ways that count. I fell for Mercer’s crap for a long time, but Brent was even deeper than I was. He and I grew up together, along with Mercer’s daughter Deva. We were all friends, good friends. Really more like siblings.”

“Deva, huh?” Her voice was a soft huff of amusement, chasing away some of the sorrow. “Is she a hunter too?”

“No. Mercer wouldn’t let her. Not because she was a girl, or at least, I guess, not just because of that. There are women in the organization. But she was *his* little girl. He didn’t even want her hanging around the kinds of people he employs, who are mostly, as you might guess, a pretty rough crowd. He has

this big old house in the country, really more of a compound, with security on the place that's just completely nuts. She lives there with him. She hardly ever goes out. At least...that's how it was when we were kids. Brent and I grew up there too. It's like a whole other world, Mercer's place. Like his own little country."

He hadn't thought of those days in a long time. Now he remembered the long summer afternoons, alternating between lessons with Mercer's private tutors, and lessons in other things: target practice, swimming, running the obstacle course. Deva's long limbs flashing as she outdistanced him and Brent, laughing over her shoulder: *Catch me if you can, silly!*

"You and Deva...?" Melanie let the question hang in the air.

"No. Laying a hand on Mercer's daughter was simply impossible. It never would have happened, at least when we were living there, and by the time we all grew up we'd moved on to other lives."

Decker wondered if Brent had remained friends with Deva. She was always so lonely. She used to send him long, chatty emails full of pictures of her garden. He'd let the communication lapse after he broke ties with Mercer, and he found himself regretting it now. He had fought so hard to distance himself from Steelhawk that he didn't want to admit there were aspects of it that he missed.

"Do you think she's a shifter?" Melanie asked, breaking into his thoughts.

"What?" The question startled him. He'd never even wondered about it.

"Well...keeping her out in the middle of nowhere like that. Not wanting her to talk to other people. What if she's a shifter and he's trying to hide it?"

"How could she possibly be? We lived with her all that time. She couldn't have kept it from us. We told each other everything. And Mercer, the way he talked about shifters, like they were..." He broke off; he didn't want to say it to her face.



Like they were animals, dumb and feral and ruled by instinct. “I don’t think so,” he went on.

“Well, it was a thought, anyway.” He could hear Melanie’s smile in her voice. “Don’t worry, I’m not jealous of your very *human* adopted sister.”

“There’s nothing to be jealous about, trust me.”

“I do,” she said quietly, into the dark. “Trust you, that is.”

The shiver that ran through him this time had nothing to do with shock, or fear, or pain. It was the furthest thing from it.

“Decker.” Her fingers continued to move lightly over his chest. “What really happened in Wisconsin? How did it end?”

Decker looked up at the ceiling in the dark. Somehow it was easier to talk about it when he couldn’t see her.

“What happened in Wisconsin is that I knocked the gun out of Brent’s hands.” He felt her sigh, a previously unsensed tension going out of her, and all of a sudden he wished he’d told her the rest of it on the mountain, all the way back at the beginning of this.

“And the person you were after?” Melanie’s voice was a whisper.

“He was wounded, not killed. And at that point...” He was too far in to stop now. “We both looked up and saw his kid. A teenage kid, not too much younger than I was when my dad died. Watching the whole thing.”

Melanie swallowed audibly. “Did Brent—”

“No! God no. We got out of there. Mercer has—rules—about witnesses, but in this case, in that moment, we just hit the road. We had a knock-down, drag-out fight about it later. Brent wanted to go back and finish the job. I told him if he did, I’d kill him myself. He backed down and never forgave me for it. We reported back that we had finished it, and that was when a lot of my suspicions started to crystalize into certainty. I started poking around, asking questions and looking into what was really going on. It was the last job I

ever did for Mercer and Steelhawk, and the last time I ever worked with Brent.”

He gazed up into the darkness, seeing it all again.

“I don’t know if Brent went back later,” he said quietly. “I checked a while later, and they were gone from that town, with no forwarding address, no signs of them. I think they just left. I *hope* they just left. There was nothing in the paper, and...I couldn’t do anything about it, anyway. Not with the resources I had.”

“Do you know why Mercer might’ve wanted him dead?”

“Who knows?” Decker said wearily. “It probably comes down to money. He got on someone’s bad side and they hired Mercer to take him out. There was a time when I might not have asked questions either.”

“But not anymore,” Melanie said softly. “What changed?”

“Me,” he said. “I changed.”

“People do.” She had nestled in with her face against his neck. Her breath tickled his skin, distracting enough that it was hard to concentrate on her words. “I used to fear and hate all humans. So I can understand Brent, and the rest of Steelhawk, hating my kind.”

“It’s not hate. Not exactly. He just doesn’t know about you. Like I didn’t know. It’s hard to explain what it’s like, when you grew up only ever hearing one thing, and everything you know about shifters was the worst they could possibly be... I’m not trying to excuse it, just explain it.”

“No, I understand.” Her voice was a quiet whisper against his neck. “Humans killed my pack.”

Decker tensed all over. Shock prickled down his spine. “Melanie. I—I’m so sorry. I don’t know what to say. How can you even stand to look at us?”

Melanie shook her head, her hair brushing his shoulder. “They didn’t know, either. They just thought we were wolves. We lived way out in the middle of nowhere, and our neighbors didn’t know about us. It was...it was bad, but it was also no

one's fault. I wish we'd been able to trust them enough to tell them about us. Maybe my pack would still be alive if we had."

Decker stroked her hair, his fingers lightly smoothing through the tangled strands. "I don't know what to say. No wonder you reacted the way you did to a werhunter showing up in your town. I mean, even beyond all the other good reasons you had to react that way."

"I wish it wasn't the way it is," she whispered, brushing her hand across her chest. "Everyone fearing and hating each other, and having to hide what they really are."

"Do the humans in this town know about shifters?"

"Some do. There are a few human-shifter couples, and some people have told their friends. Keith has a lot of human friends. I...I can't stop thinking how dangerous it is to trust others with our secret. But it's also dangerous if you don't. There just is no good way."

"Maybe the way is just to get to know each other." Decker found that he was smiling a little. "It seems to have worked for you and me."

He turned his head and found her there, her mouth on his, ready and waiting in the dark. They kissed quietly and gently. There was no urgency to it. Neither of them had energy for more.

And then there was a soft thump in the dark, something moving on the bed.

They were both sitting up and moving even before the pain had time to register, Decker going over one side of the bed, reaching for a knife, and Melanie in motion on the other side. Then Melanie burst into laughter, and Decker paused.

"What? What is it?"

"It's your cat," Melanie said. She laughed again. "She's in here somewhere. I think she just went under the bed."

"Tarzan?" He stopped feeling around for a knife in the dark and rolled back onto the bed. "Are you sure it's not *your* cat?"

“I don’t know, I guess it could be, but Shadow doesn’t usually sleep with me. Her litter box and everything are downstairs. I might be able to tell the difference by smell if I shifted, but as a human it’s all just cat.”

“By smell— Okay, you know what, let’s deal with that in the morning.”

He pulled up the covers again. Melanie nestled against his side. He had just begun to drift when there was an abrupt thump and hiss from under the bed, followed by a clatter.

“So I hate to break it to you,” Decker said sleepily, “but I think your cat is in here too.”

“I noticed,” Melanie sighed. “She must’ve gotten out when someone opened the door, and then come in the window. Well, I can deal with it if you can.”

“As long as it’s not a 24/7 catfight under the bed.”

Matters soon subsided into a tense and wary silence, broken by occasional stealthy noises from elsewhere in the room. Decker tried softly calling Tarzan, and Melanie called Shadow, but none of it helped in the slightest.

Just as Decker was drifting off, he felt something land with a thump on the bed by his hip. He reached down and felt soft fur that immediately began vibrating with a purr. Running his hand over its head, he found the one ragged ear that meant it was Tarzan.

“Hey girl,” he murmured. Melanie’s breathing was deep and steady beside him. “Looks like we found a soft place to land, huh?”

There was no response except more purring. It occurred to him to wonder if there were house cat shifters. Could Tarzan have been a shifter all this time? No...that was ridiculous. It was only Melanie’s suggestion about Deva that had made him think of it.

He drifted off to sleep thinking of all of them so long ago, himself and Deva and Brent—back when things were simple, before the world got in the way.

# MELANIE



IT WAS an engine that woke her up, but not one of the usual ones. Melanie lay awake with her hand on Decker's chest. He was deeply asleep beside her. The morning sun through the window fell across his bruised and tired face. There was a cat on either side of the bed, one lump of black fur and one gray, with the bulwark of two people between them like a national border.

There was absolutely no doubt in her mind this time about what had awakened her. The deep chop of a helicopter vibrated in her chest. It was flying right over the house.

They got them sometimes around the lake. People liked to go flightseeing, and every once in a while there was a search and rescue for a lost hiker. But she'd never heard one so low.

The tone of the rotors changed, growing deeper, and her suspicions were confirmed.

It was landing in her yard.

"Wha," Decker mumbled as Melanie slipped out of bed.

"Stay there." She wished she'd taken a shower last night; her skin was itchy with dried mud. She was also ravenous. Her body had repaired most of the damage while she slept, but it had left her with a desperate craving for protein. A healing shifter was a starving shifter.

But right now there was a more pressing concern. A helicopter was landing in her front yard. She heard some crashing around downstairs and the slam of a door, and stopped in the act of reaching for her own bedroom door.

There were still a number of guests downstairs, from the sound of it. Perhaps it would be better to stay up here and observe to get a feel for what was happening before she tried to interfere.

She grabbed a robe off the back of a chair and pulled it over her T-shirt and panties as she went to the half-open window.

The helicopter had landed in the pasture, since it was the only place large enough after the cleared area in front of the house had been turned into a haphazard parking lot last night. Melanie scowled. If they scared her livestock badly enough to hurt them, she was making them pay—in both the financial sense and otherwise.

There was a man getting out of the helicopter, as the slowing chopper blades spun in the air above him, drifting to a standstill.

Decker arrived at her shoulder, bare-chested and blinking. “Mercer,” he murmured.

He didn’t have to tell her. Mercer Hawke looked a lot like Melanie would have imagined just from the name and general job description. He was straight-backed and tall, his silver hair swept away from a high forehead. Despite the age that the gray hair implied, he moved with swift, sure grace; he carried himself of a man who was used to physical exercise and confident in his own strength. He was dressed like a commando in black gear with straps across the chest.

He wasn’t a shifter. She almost, somehow, expected him to be. But shifters could recognize each other, even at a distance. You just *knew*. And he wasn’t; he was only human.

But dangerous, she reminded himself, as a couple of armed bodyguards followed Mercer out of the helicopter. Very, very dangerous.

He started to stride across the pasture, but slowed as several people came out from the house to meet him. Brent was in the lead, with his arm in a sling and a jacket thrown hastily over his shoulders. Keith was behind him, hanging back a few paces, carrying the shotgun.

“Brent!” Mercer called across the distance between them. Melanie could hear them easily through the open window, though she noticed Decker leaning forward, straining to pick out words. “How’s the bear hunt going, son?”

Mercer didn’t know Keith was a shifter, she realized. He didn’t know he could speak openly about Ty Kilgore’s true nature. And Brent seemed in no hurry to enlighten him.

“Got me a trophy grizzly,” Brent said. He swiped a hand to indicate his arm. “He got me too. These folks helped me.” He paused. His back was to Melanie, so she couldn’t see his face, but she could see the tense set of his shoulders. “Listen, sir... Decker was here.”

“Where is he now?” Mercer interrupted.

“He’s gone, sir.”

Mercer hesitated. It was clear that his script had been thrown into disarray. “Gone where?”

“Gone. Dead.”

At Melanie’s shoulder, Decker sucked in a breath.

Melanie carefully reached out and twitched the gingham curtain slightly, so anyone looking up at the window would only see her. She had no idea how necessary it was; she wasn’t sure how keen human vision was at this distance. But just in case.

It took Mercer a moment to respond. “Bear get him?”

“He was hurt, yes. But it was actually a flash flood. We were in one of the valleys up in the mountains, and the water rose much faster than we were expecting in yesterday’s storm. I saw him go under, and I searched, but...” Brent shook his head. His shoulders slumped.

He was a pretty good actor. Melanie watched Mercer carefully. He looked startled at first, then wary—and then she saw a flash of what could only be pleasure or satisfaction, before his face carefully rearranged itself into an expression of grief.

If she had been in wolf form, her hackles would have bristled. It was all she could do not to growl.

Mercer reached out and laid a hand on Brent's shoulder. His face was all fatherly sympathy now. "You've been through a lot. You did good, son. You just have to remember, Decker left *us*, though his own choice. Without the backing of Steelhawk, something like this was going to happen to him sooner or later. We lost him a long time ago, not just yesterday."

"Sonuvabitch," Decker muttered, echoing Melanie's thoughts.

It was impossible to tell from here if Brent was actually taken in or just playacting along, but he swayed forward, leaning into the strong fatherly grip on his shoulder. "I can take you to see the bod—to the grizzly, sir. It's at a cabin up in the mountains. There's probably room for the helicopter to land in the clearing."

They walked back toward the helicopter, Mercer with his arm around Brent's shoulders. Melanie found herself leaning forward; she didn't even *like* Brent, but she wanted to call out and stop him.

The presence of Mercer's armed guards was what held her back. They looked like they meant business, and with Keith waiting by the fence, tense and aggressive and equally well armed, it would be all too easy for this situation to devolve into violence.

"We have to..." Decker murmured.

"We have to do nothing. He's giving you a chance to get away, to live your life free of Mercer." Her hand slipped down and wrapped around his. "Let him do that."

They both watched Brent get into the helicopter, along with Mercer and the goons. The blades spun up again, and it rose, flattening the pasture grass in concentric circles.

Melanie didn't relax enough to start breathing deeply again until it had flown over the house and the sound had begun to fade in the distance.



“All right,” she said, shaking off a lingering sense of melancholy. “We can talk more about this later, but right now I need to go see about my animals, and then I think we both need a shower and a good, old-fashioned farmer breakfast. What do you say?”

# DECKER



DECKER EXPECTED it to be much more awkward having breakfast in a house full of shifters, among whom he was (as far as he'd gathered, anyway) the only human.

And yet, it wasn't. It was impossible not to relax with the teenagers bickering as they cooked eggs in the kitchen, and sweet Anita had stuck around to mix up pancakes while she cheerfully argued with Keith over the relative merits of real maple syrup over storebought sugar syrup, with Anita accusing Keith of being a snob and Keith telling her that her taste buds had been ruined by high fructose corn syrup. Melanie vanished while Decker was taking a shower—after carefully wrapping his leg in plastic bags to keep the water off the stitches, as per Anita's instructions—and then came back in with a basket full of fresh raspberries and strawberries for the pancakes.

Anything would probably have tasted good since he'd traipsed all over a mountain yesterday, but he was pretty sure this was the actual best breakfast he'd had in his life. There were fluffy pancakes heaped with fresh berries, fat sausages that Melanie said were made from locally grown pork, eggs freshly gathered from Melanie's hens, and slabs of toast slathered in butter. Melanie ate more than Decker would have believed possible for someone her size; she kept going back to the kitchen to reload her plate. But he made a pretty good effort at keeping her up with her.

The entire time, the house was filled with happy chaos, with people running in and out all the time, and both of the

cats getting underfoot until Melanie gave them each half a sausage to keep them happy.

“That’s only going to make them worse next time,” said the old guy with the limp, McCarthy or McMurphy or something like that, who seemed to have an opinion on everything, including feeding table scraps to pets.

“Accurate,” Melanie said around a mouthful of pancake, “but you’re overlooking the fact that I don’t care.”

People began trickling out of the house as the food ran out, until it was eventually down to just Decker, Melanie, and Keith. The two werewolves had a quiet conversation by the door, too soft for Decker to make out the words, but the frequent meaningful looks in his direction let him know that he was the main topic of conversation. Eventually Keith shrugged and left, and Melanie came back to start gathering up the plates.

“So are you absolutely *sure* he isn’t your dad?” Decker asked.

“*Keith?*” Melanie clamped her lips together for a moment, but the laugh was visible in her sparkling eyes. “No. No, he is not. He’s also not the alpha of me, no matter what he claims. Here, give me a hand with these.”

Some of the dishes had been done on the fly while breakfast was in progress, but there was still enough to keep them both busy for a while. Decker’s leg ached, but he could stand on it as long as he didn’t move around too much.

“Do you have an alpha?” Decker asked as they worked on the dishes, companionable and comfortable, side by side. He washed, while Melanie dried and put things away. “I mean, is that a thing? Let me know if it bothers you to talk about this, by the way.”

“No, it doesn’t bother me. It’s interesting to be able to talk about it with someone who knows about shifters but not how we work. And...it’s complicated.” She gestured with a dish towel. “Grisel—that is, there is a part of me that always wants to know how I fit in the pack social hierarchy, which keeps, I

don't even know how to describe it, gnawing at the back of my brain wanting to *know*. Being around Keith is always weird because he's got his wolf side in his head doing the same thing. But neither of us really is the alpha of the other, so we just fight a lot. If we had a real alpha, I think we'd settle down, but neither of us actually *wants* to be the alpha, I think. Or maybe we both do, I dunno. But it's not like...an uncontrollable fixation or anything. Humans have biological urges too, but you don't have to act on them." Decker bumped her hip with his, and grinned. Melanie grinned back. "See? That's what I mean. You could tear my clothes off right here, dish soap and all—"

"Sounds tempting."

"But you don't have to. The one in control is you." She sobered. "And anyway...I don't really have a pack. Not anymore."

Decker glanced around the kitchen, at the cheerful wreckage left behind by the horde of guests, along with their clumsy but well-intentioned attempts to clean up. "You know, not to argue with you, but from everything I've seen over the last day or so...I think you do. A big one."



Brent was going to come back sooner or later for the Hummer. Melanie insisted on going down to sweep up her tracks on the beach, vanishing for a half hour or so. After that, the afternoon had been quiet, Decker resting in the house and making occasional half-hearted offers to help with chores as Melanie vanished off on various farm-related tasks and then curled up in a chair to read.

And that was what they were doing when the clatter of the helicopter overhead disturbed their quiet afternoon. Melanie sprang to her feet, locked the doors and closed all the windows, but it landed on the beach and they didn't see Mercer at all. There was a much-too-long pause during which

she cracked the window open and looked like she was straining her ears to listen.

“Anything?” Decker asked quietly.

Melanie shook her head. “I’m just trying to think whether I left tracks on the beach. If anyone sees them, I hope they think they’re big dog tracks. With most people I wouldn’t even worry about it, but these guys are experts.”

Was this the kind of uncertainty she lived with all the time? And he’d added to it by showing up in her town. Decker made a promise to himself then and there that from here on out, he didn’t want her to ever be afraid like this again. He was going to do everything in his power to make sure she never was.

But the helicopter lifted off after ten minutes or so, and Brent appeared on the path from the beach, walking slowly and looking tired. He went straight to the Hummer.

“Hey, whoa there,” Decker called from the door. He limped over, cursing his bad leg. Brent could have been long gone by the time he got there, but instead he stopped with the door open, leaning on it.

“Yeah? You need something?”

“So you’re just taking off,” Decker said, leaning against the side of his truck in a way that he hoped looked casual instead of needing support. He had a feeling Brent was doing something similar.

Brent’s gaze flicked up to Melanie, approaching behind Decker with her hands shoved in her pockets. “I didn’t think I’d be welcome to stick around.”

Melanie huffed out a breath and leaned her shoulder against Decker’s, as if to suggest a united front. “If you get on the road in that state, you’re bound to end up in a ditch.”

“And that’s a problem for you?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Not for me personally,” she said with a shrug. “But Decker told me last night about you and him growing up

together. And who knows when the next time is that you'll be down this way. Come in and have a cup of coffee. There are a million leftovers from breakfast, so you'd better grab some pancakes before I feed them to the goats."

Brent looked at Decker, who shrugged. "Don't argue with her, man. I've found it's better not to." Melanie jabbed him in the ribs.

So they all trooped into the house. Brent dished up a plate of pancakes, and Decker got coffee, and they took it outside on the porch. Melanie wandered away to do Melanie things, which mostly seemed to involved working in the yard, nearby where she could keep an eye on him.

"You trust her?" Brent asked quietly, gesturing with his fork as if Decker might have any doubts about which "her" he meant.

"Yes," Decker said promptly. "And you'd better too, because she saved both our asses and she didn't have to let you come here, let alone have her friends help you. You know a lot of things about the shifters here that could ruin them. They're putting a lot of trust in you. Don't repay it by proving them wrong."

"I..." Brent began. He didn't finish; his breath escaped him instead in a long, gusty sigh. "I didn't know they were like this," he said after a little while, watching Melanie pattering around in the yard with a pair of long-handled clippers. "All those people yesterday. Those kids. That nice little nurse lady who bandaged us up. I wouldn't have guessed they're like this."

"We only ever see the worst ones. Mostly, I think they're just people." Decker hovered on the edge of mentioning Melanie's question about Deva being a shifter, because now that it had gotten into his head, he kept thinking about it. But then he veered off. Instead he asked, "How are things back at the organization?"

"Bad," Brent said flatly. "It's a good move you made, getting out when you did. The old man's worse than he ever was. There are two kinds of people, the ones who do

everything he tells them and the other kind, and the other kind tend not to last long.”

“Do you mean they leave, or...”

“Both. I mean, it’s not to the point where he’s going to have anyone who talks back to him shot. It’s not like that. But there’s a tendency for anyone he suspects of working against him, including anyone who might turn out to be a whistleblower or an undercover cop, to have an accident, know what I mean?”

“Crap,” Decker muttered. “You should get out too.”

“Not really an option for me. Or for you either; that’s why I figured you were better off if he thought you were dead. He was going to keep trying to get you back one way or another.”

“It’s a free country, and he’s not in charge anyway,” Decker said. “You can walk away.”

“And look over my shoulder for the rest of my life? No thanks. If an opportunity like this comes along for me, I might take it. In the meantime, I guess I’ll just go on doing what I do and keep my eyes open.” He set his plate aside, on top of a large block of wood, a section cut from an old tree of enormous girth, that Melanie had on the porch in lieu of a table. “You know, I *do* believe in what we do—that we’re a necessary balance. Who else is going to deal with the Ty Kilgores of the world?”

“There might be another way,” Decker said. He’d been spinning this around and around in his head, ever since yesterday. “Maybe Melanie and I could start something. Some kind of alternative. I’ve heard rumors, and Melanie knows about this—there’s some kind of secret federal agency that deals with shifters—” Brent was already shaking his head. “Yeah, I know, but maybe we could...I don’t know. Figure out some way of turning them over to the authorities that doesn’t mean appointing ourselves judge, jury, and executioner. Whether it means working as a liaison with the feds, or doing it on our own.”

“Good luck with that,” Brent said. “That’s not a joke. I mean it. I hope you can find some way to work it out. If you need help, I guess—call me? I’d like to do something other than this. I just don’t know if I can figure out how. I guess I’d better get on the road.”

“You can stay for dinner if you want to,” Melanie said, coming up to the porch through long grass. She had been far enough away that Decker would have assumed she was out of earshot, but she’d showed up awfully fast when Brent announced his intention to leave. “There’s a pork roast out to thaw.”

“Appreciate it, but I really do need to head out.”

“A rambling man,” Melanie said, with a slight twist of her mouth that was almost a smile.

“Decker used to be,” Brent said.

“I was,” Decker said quietly. “I don’t think I am anymore.”

They saw him off, giving him a couple of sandwiches and a Thermos of coffee. “Thanks,” Decker said after he was gone, putting an arm around her. “For making him welcome. I know it probably wasn’t easy.”

“He’s your friend,” Melanie said, leaning against him. “And there’s no way to know when, or if, you’ll see him again.” She looked up at him, this time with a full smile, dimples and all. “Did you mean that, about ending your rambling ways?”

“Well, I don’t know if I’ll get restless again,” Decker hedged. He looked around him at the little farm, the cabin, the lake glistening through the trees—a place that looked more like home than any place had looked since he was a kid. “But I’m sure not feeling it right now.” Pulling her close, he added, “You know, there’s a question you haven’t answered yet, and I’d really like to know.”

Her smiling face turned up to him. “What’s that?”

“Do I get to call you Mel yet?”



She silenced him with willing lips on his, kissing him until they were both breathless and he was grinning too.

When they came up for air, Melanie said, “You know, I think I like you calling me Melanie. Everyone in town calls me Mel. I think you ought to be special.”

# EPILOGUE



## MELANIE

“HOLD THAT UP HIGH,” Melanie called. “No, higher. Little bit more. Oh, come on, it’s not *that* heavy.”

Decker snorted, holding the fence pole into place. Melanie, with her shifter strength, could have lifted it herself, but someone had to pick up the pole and someone else had to nail it into place...and frankly she was enjoying the view too much to trade places, Decker shirtless in the early autumn sun, muscles flexing under a sheen of sweat.

“Okay, that’s got it,” Melanie said, stepping back. Decker blew out a breath and pulled off his heavy leather work gloves to swipe a hand across his sweaty hair.

“You know,” he said, “a guy could start feeling a little bit insecure when his girlfriend can lift bigger logs than he can.”

Melanie grinned and tested the fence rail with firm pressure. “Lucky you’re not that type, then.”

“Lucky me.” He gave her a quick kiss on the sweaty forehead, just to prove it.

The trees were starting to turn colors up on the mountainside, splashes of gold and red among the dark pines. Down here in the valley alongside the lake, there was a crispness in the air that spoke of coming winter.

“What’s the winter like here?” Decker asked. “Do you ever get snowed in?”

“Sometimes. There’s only the one road in or out, and if anything closes the road...well, here we are.” Melanie smiled.

“But it doesn’t generally last too long. They just have to plow it out again.”

“Too bad.” Decker picked her up, and she laughed and wrapped her legs around his waist. “I wouldn’t mind being snowed in with you.”

Melanie kissed him, bumping noses. “You say that now. See how you feel when it’s January and the truck bringing fresh produce to the Quartz Lake general store hasn’t showed up in a week.”

Decker lifted her with a hand under her ass, but then let her down quickly when high-pitched kids’ voices from the beach called, “Mel! Miss Melanie!”

“That sounds like old man McMurphy’s grandkids,” Melanie remarked. She could hear crunching footsteps on the beach now, and the scrape of a boat being pulled up. The local kids went everywhere in boats until ice locked down the lake.

The kids knew better than to come up the path to the house without permission, but they were waiting on the beach, waving when Melanie and Decker came down the path. Melanie couldn’t remember their names; there were at least a half-dozen of them, who showed up in various combinations to visit their grandfather for summers and weekends. Most of them shifted into foxes and otters.

These kids were probably otters. Neither of them was wearing a life jacket, and their swim trunks were dry even though their hair was wet. And there, in the boat, was a soaking wet and baffled-looking sheep.

“Where did this poor baby come from?” Melanie asked. She picked it up and lifted it out of the boat. It was half-grown, probably one of this spring’s lambs—if it was a normal lamb. “Do you know if this is, er—someone we know?”

“We don’t know,” one of the kids said. “We found it in that deep place with the undertow, just down the lake from the Harris house.”

“We knew you’d know what to do,” the other kid said.

“Don’t worry, we’ll find where this baby belongs,” Melanie told them. “Why don’t you two come up to the house and have some cookies? I’ll call around and find her owners, or possibly parents—here, Deck—” Decker looked very surprised when he suddenly found himself with an armload of wet sheep.

The sheep was soon warming up in the barn, cozied up in a big pile of straw with the friendly donkey. Melanie saw the kids back to their boat with a bag of cookies, and then wandered back to the barn, where Decker was rubbing the sheep with handfuls of straw to get its circulation moving, as she’d shown him. The goats watched jealously through the fence separating the sick-pen from their corral, and bleated their complaints.

“I’m pretty sure it’s just a normal sheep,” Decker said.

“It is.” Melanie sat down beside him. “I think. Shifters have a recognition sense for each other, but it can be a little unreliable with kids. I definitely would be able to tell by now, though. It’s probably one of the sheep from that farm the new people have behind the old mill. They’re always wandering off—are you laughing?”

“I’m just wondering how long it’s going to be before you decide we need sheep as well as goats.”

*We.* She glowed inwardly. To her delight, Decker had turned out to be as gentle and careful with injured and baby animals as Melanie herself was.

“Well, we *are* fencing in that new pasture,” she pointed out.

She had been surprised at how readily Decker had adapted to small-town life. In some deep-down part of her, she’d been worried—in fact, was still worried—that he’d get bored. Tired of the town. Tired of her.

But instead, it was as if he’d been waiting his entire life for this. He had embraced it. He *loved* working on the barn and fences; he was already coming up with ideas for new expansions to the garden and the barn next spring. In fact...

“Are you just saying that because *you* want sheep?”

Decker grinned. “Oh, come on. Are you saying you *don't*?”

She was suddenly overwhelmed by a surge of feelings that made her knees want to buckle. “You’re an idiot,” she said, trying to recover her footing, both physical and emotional. “I’ve gone and fallen in love with an idiot.”

The teasing grin dropped away from his face, washed away by a look of wonder, and she realized she’d never said it before. Not even once.

Now was the time when her human side urged her to throw her walls back into place, to deny, to defend...

But Griselda had no doubts, so Melanie pushed her way past that. “Yes, I love you,” she said, almost angrily. “Don’t you know that?”

Decker dropped a handful of straw and stood up. “I love you too,” he said. “You don’t even know how much.”

He leaned over the fence and kissed her.

She relaxed into his kiss. When she came up for air, she managed, “You smell like sheep.”

“Really? Maybe I need a shower.”

“Yes, you do.”

He pulled her against him, grinning against her mouth. “Are you going to make me take it alone?”

Her reply was wordless, but unmistakable.



Later, they lay tangled together on the bed. The window was open, the breeze fluttering the gingham curtains and drying the sweat on their bodies.

“I have to get dressed,” Melanie mumbled into his chest. “I’m working at the bar tonight.”

“I can drive you to work, if Keith won’t chase me away with that shotgun of his.”

“I think Keith is changing his mind about you.”

“Yes, he only looks at me like he wants to murder me half the time instead of all the time.”

Melanie laughed. “He was almost friendly to you at the Labor Day potluck.”

“That was friendly? I’d hate to see his version of being unfriendly.”

Melanie rolled off the bed and reached for her clothes. “I wonder if I have time for another shower? Stop looking at me like that. If we both get in the shower this time, there’s no way I won’t be late.”

“Want me to keep looking around for the sheep’s owner?”

“Oh no,” she sighed. “I forgot about the sheep.” As if to remind her, there was a loud bleat from the barn, coming in through the open window. “Can you feed the livestock tonight? The sheep can eat the goats’ feed. Just don’t put them in the same pen yet.”

“We’re totally keeping that sheep, aren’t we?”

“We’re making an earnest attempt to find its owners first,” she said firmly. “I’ll ask around at the bar. Maybe someone knows the names of the new people with the farm—Hudson, I think? Henderson? Something like that. Anyway, it’s probably theirs.”

“Five bucks says you offer to buy it on the spot.”

“Oh please.” But privately she thought that it did look very bedraggled and sad. And it had seemed to be getting along well with the goats...

One very quick shower later, she was out the door, hand in hand with Decker. They went to his truck, and Melanie got in, only to nearly jump out again.

“Mrow!”

“Hi, Tarzan,” she sighed, moving the cat out of her seat so she could get to her seat belt. “She still loves sleeping out here, doesn’t she?”

“I think she still thinks of the truck as her home. I leave the windows down for her if it’s not raining.”

There was an old blanket folded on the seat between them. The cat curled up there, and seemed content as Decker backed up and turned around in front of the cabin. Melanie laid a hand on the cat’s soft fur.

“Do you?” she asked quietly.

“Do I what?”

“Think of the truck as your home.”

Decker gave her a too-acute look, and shook his head. “It never really was. I’ve been wanting to settle down for a long time. You gave me a place to do that.”

Her heart too full to speak, Melanie distracted herself by stroking Tarzan’s head, carefully petting around the cat’s ragged ear.

As they drove into town on the lake road, she said, “You know, we haven’t really talked much about what you suggested...that we might do something about rogue shifters ourselves. Or provide a safe place for their victims, maybe.”

“I *knew* you were listening to me and Brent on the porch.”

She blushed. “I couldn’t help it. Have you heard from him at all?”

Decker shook his head. “Not lately. I don’t expect to anytime soon.”

“Mmm.” They drove in silence for a while. Then she said, “I have been thinking about it. I would like to help, if we can.”

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me,” Decker said. “As far as I can tell, you’ve adopted this whole town.”

“Oh, come on now.”

“It’s true, and you know it.”



She laughed and blushed again and didn't know how to respond.

"I don't see anything happening before next spring," he said at last. "We've got a lot to keep us busy."

"Like sheep, for example."

"I *knew* you were going to keep that sheep."

Melanie huffed. "Only if its owners don't want it back."

"Uh-huh. But yeah...we'll have a good long winter to figure out where we want to go from here. How much land do you—do we have out there by the lake? It's ten acres, didn't you tell me that?"

"Give or take a little," Melanie said. "Most of it's just woods." But her mind was already turning over the possibilities. They could hide people out there, if they needed to. They could provide a safe place for kids like the kid she used to be, people on the run, people who had only seen the human world as a source of danger and uncertainty, who didn't know there could be a better future...

"I can see you thinking over there."

She reached across the truck seat and took his hand. "You're right, we've got an entire winter for talking about it. Right now, let's just drive."

They came around a bend and the town was visible ahead of them, a cluster of roofs, glorious in the afternoon sun. Glancing at Decker's face, Melanie saw the relaxed look she'd seen on him more often lately. Contented. Happy.

Home.



If you enjoyed this book, I invite you to [join my mailing list](#) for new releases, free stories, and sneak preview chapters! Get a free story just for signing up.

## A NOTE FROM LAUREN

Hello, and thank you for reading! If you would like to leave a review or rating for [Werewolf Hunter](#), it's always a big help for me! I appreciate all reviews, positive or negative.

*Werewolf Hunter* takes place in the Shifter Agents universe. If you haven't read those, you can get the first three in [Shifter Agents Collection #1](#) and get caught up!

This is a special book for me. Most of this book was written during April 2020. Perfectly normal month, right? Nothing at all going on! \*hollow laughter\*

So yeah, *Werewolf Hunter* was my weird little pandemic project "keeping me sane" book. I started it thinking that it would be the second book of Ladies of the Pack, the human men/shifter women series that began with [Keeping Her Pride](#). But it ended up so drastically different that I couldn't quite consider it part of the same series. I stuffed it with things that I like - tough but wounded heroine, lonely hero, cozy small town, redeemable antagonist, hurt/comfort ... check, check, check. I was never really sure exactly what to do with it, thought about making it a new series, and in the end just decided to put it out there and see what people think.

If you're interested in more books about other characters introduced or mentioned in this book - Brent, Deva, or Quartz Lake in general - stop by [my Facebook group](#) or [email me](#) and let me know!



If you'd like to keep up with my books, I invite you to [join my mailing list](#) for new releases, free stories, and sneak preview chapters! Get a free story just for signing up.

I'm a writer, artist, and lifelong Alaskan, and I write my books in a cabin on the highway, surrounded by fireweed and birch trees. I also write as Layla Lawlor (urban fantasy and mystery), Julie Ecker (cozy mystery) and Zoe Chant (a shared paranormal romance pen name with several other authors; see my list of books in the back).

Contact Lauren:

[Mailing list](#) • [Email](#) • [Website](#) • [FB page](#) • [FB group](#)

# WRITING AS LAUREN ESKER

## **Shifter Agents**

*Handcuffed to the Bear*

*Guard Wolf*

*Dragon's Luck*

*Tiger in the Hot Zone*

*Shadow Dragon*

*Shifter Agents Collection #1*

(Collecting *Handcuffed to the Bear*, *Guard Wolf*, and *Dragon's Luck*)

## **Standalone Paranormal Romance**

*Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*

*Keeping Her Pride*

*Hearts of Stone*

*Werewolf Hunter*

## **Warriors of Galatea**

*Metal Wolf*

*Metal Dragon*

*Metal Pirate*

*Metal Gladiator*

*Thorn & Rose* (bonus novella)

## WRITING AS ZOE CHANT

### **Bodyguard Shifters**

*Bearista*

*Pet Rescue Panther*

*Bear in a Bookshop*

*Day Care Dragon*

*Bull in a Tea Shop*

*Dancer Dragon*

*Babysitter Bear*

*Bodyguard Shifters Collection 1* (#1-4)

*Bodyguard Shifters Collection 2* (#5-7)

### **Stone Shifters**

*Stoneskin Dragon*

*Stonewing Guardian*

*Stoneheart Lion*

### **Westerly Cove**

*Tor*

*Eren*

*Dane*

### **Bears of Pinerock County**

*Sheriff Bear*

*Bad Boy Bear*

*Alpha Rancher Bear*

*Mountain Guardian Bear*

*Hired Bear*

*A Pinerock Christmas*

*Boxed Set #1* (collects Books 1-3)

*Boxed Set #2* (collects Books 4-6)

# PREVIEW: SHIFTER AGENTS

**If you enjoyed this book, explore the world SHIFTER AGENTS by Lauren Esker!**

Full-length HEA shifter romantic suspense! The men and women of the Shifter Crimes Bureau fight to protect their mates and the other shifters in the Pacific Northwest.

1. [Handcuffed to the Bear](#)
2. [Guard Wolf](#)
3. [Dragon's Luck](#)
4. [Tiger in the Hot Zone](#)
5. [Shadow Dragon](#) (*coming in 2024*)

## **Boxed set: Books 1-3**

Keep reading for a preview of the first book in the series, [\*Handcuffed to the Bear\*](#):

*A bear shifter ex-mercenary and a curvy lynx shifter searching for her best friend's killer are handcuffed together and hunted in the wilderness. Can they learn to rely on each other before their pasts, and their pursuers, catch up with them?*

### **Chapter One**

Casey's first thought was, *How did rocks get in my bed?*

Her second thought was that maybe the rocks were actually in her *head*.

*Okay, I'm never drinking anything Billy mixes for me again.* Her boss's favorite bartender had a heavy hand with the alcohol.

Although ... she'd only had one drink. That she remembered.

The annual company mixer for Lion's Share Software, the tech firm she worked for, was held each year on a cruise ship

off the coast of Washington. This was the first time Casey had been invited, after working her way up from a lowly mailroom employee to nothing less than the administrative assistant for Roger Fallon, the head of the company himself, in just two years.

All the high-level employees were shifters of one kind or another. It should have been an opportunity for Casey to spend two days among her own kind, making professional connections and sipping expensive drinks. They would be sailing up Puget Sound, around the scenic San Juan Islands, and then back to Seattle by lunchtime the following day.

At this point, though, all she remembered clearly was sailing out of Seattle. Billy had opened up the bar, and everyone was mingling out on the deck. She'd had a drink ... or possibly two ...

*Shit, did I get roofied? What the hell happened to me?*

She was slowly becoming aware that not all of her physical misery was because of a hangover. She was nauseated and trembling, but some of the shivering was because it was actually quite cold and damp. Those really *were* rocks pressing into her backside.

Her .... very *naked* backside.

Startled, and even more worried, Casey peeled her eyes open. It was dim, but not the flat darkness of a room with the doors and windows closed. She was outside somewhere. As her senses came slowly back online, she began to register the myriad little smells and sounds of a forest at night. Leaves rustled overhead; tiny things skittered in the darkness. She could smell wet leaf mold and the acrid tang where a fox had marked its territory. Since she was in her human form, her senses weren't much sharper than a non-shifter's, but she could feel the lynx instincts inside her stirring lazily at the proximity of small prey. Her awareness of her lynx side was fuzzy, though, muffled by the lingering vestiges of whatever the hell had happened to her.

And she really *was* naked. Rocks and wet leaves pressed into uncomfortable parts of her anatomy. Had she been—? Her

mind shied away from even asking the question. She didn't feel terribly uncomfortable in the way that a person might if they were—if they'd been—

*Raped*, she thought. *Don't dance around it. You're naked in the woods and the last thing you remember is having a drink at a party. The implications are obvious.*

But she really didn't feel like she'd had sex anytime recently, forcible or otherwise. Mostly she just felt achy and miserable and like she might throw up if she sat up too suddenly.

And also naked. Very naked.

Casey started to raise a hand to investigate her physical condition, and was brought up short by a sharp jingling, like a heavy bracelet, and a tug on her wrist.

Wow, okay, *that* was twelve shades of not good. She was chained to something. It was too dark to see what it was. A log?

Casey gritted her teeth and sat up. Her stomach heaved, but once the initial wave of dizziness passed, she felt better now that she was vertical. At least, it made her feel a little more in control of the situation.

The in-control feeling went away fast when she discovered that she wasn't chained to a log, she was handcuffed to a dead guy.

“Oh Jesus,” she whispered.

She gave the cuffs an experimental little tug. They were locked around her left wrist and Dead Guy's right one. He was a very large man, lying facedown in the damp dead leaves of the forest floor with his head twisted to the side, away from her. And he was naked too.

What. How. *Why?*

Then an even worse thought occurred to her: maybe she was supposed to be dead, too. Shifters were generally more resilient than non-shifters, and it was possible that she'd been drugged—or, rather, poisoned—with something that was



supposed to kill her, and then left in the woods with the other victim.

If only her memories weren't such a blur. If only she could *think*.

*How did they catch me? What did I do?*

There was a small, soft sigh from the body next to her. Casey nearly jumped out of her skin, and then laughed softly at herself. He wasn't dead either. Oh, thank God.

Which still left her handcuffed to a naked stranger in the woods.

Not the best day she'd ever had.

The naked guy stirred a little, and then subsided back into sleep or unconsciousness. Casey decided not to bother him quite yet—if he felt anything like she did, it was probably merciful to let him sleep a bit longer—and instead took stock of herself.

She didn't seem to be hurt, other than the headache. Her body was just like it had always been: wide hips, round thighs, a little more padding than she really wanted, and ample breasts that she was currently more aware of than usual, since normally they were contained in an industrial-strength bra to keep them from jiggling all over the place when she moved.

Her headache was mercifully going away, but she was starting to shiver in the night's damp chill. It might be summer, but she was still in the Pacific Northwest—at least, she *hoped* she was still in the Pacific Northwest—and the nights were cool.

*Better get up and get moving. Which means waking up Sleeping Beauty here.*

Casey rose to her knees and bent over her unexpected companion.

By now her eyes had fully adjusted to the darkness, as much as they were going to. Her new handcuff buddy was a white guy with dark hair and broad, powerfully muscled

shoulders. Even lying down, he was big. She didn't really want to think about how tall he'd be standing up.

She started to reach for his shoulder, then pulled her hand back when she noticed a long scar across the shoulder blade, going down his back. What was that from, a knife? Now that she was looking more closely, scars marked his skin like a constellation of past violence. There was a long set of parallel stripes over his ribs that looked like claw marks, and a little puckered scar above his left hip where she was pretty sure a bullet had gone through.

*Great, she thought. So not only am I stuck in the woods with an enormous naked stranger, but he's the kind who gets into fights a lot. Really violent fights. Better and better.*

Casey sat back on her naked haunches and studied him. She wished her head would stop hurting, and that she had even the faintest clue who he was, or whether he was in league with the people who'd put her here.

There were tattoos on his right arm, the one she was handcuffed to. Casey had a little ink on her ankle, a small rose, but this guy had quite a bit more. She gave the cuffs a tug, shifting his limp arm so she could see it better.

The one on his forearm was a dark blur, and she had to tilt her head to make it out: an assault rifle and the word *Defend*.

Army, maybe?

Much more dramatic was the big, elaborate tattoo that covered his upper arm, wrapping around his shoulder. It was a snarling bear, standing rampant on its back legs. Grizzly, she thought.

Between the grizzly tat and the claw scars, odds were pretty good he was a shifter like her. Wendy used to be able to say she could tell by the way people smelled, but Casey couldn't. Maybe she just hadn't spent enough time around her own kind to be able to.

Thinking of Wendy made a little ripple travel across her skin, a shiver like the fur rising along the spine of her lynx form.

*What do I tell him about me?*

Play dumb, she decided. Play innocent victim until she figured out more about who he was and what he was doing here. Maybe someone who got into fights with people who had knives and guns would be a good ally ... if he didn't turn out to be an even more effective enemy.

She laid her hand on his shoulder. The skin was cool to the touch. Casey gave him a hesitant shake and called, "Hey? Mister?"



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