

Wolf's Claim

Primal Bond, Book 1

by Vesper Cross

Free Sample Chapters

Chapters 1 - 3

Chapter 1: The Ridge Line

The call came in at half past two, and by three I was climbing into a whiteout with a pack full of other people's mistakes.

Dispatch said sixteen-year-old male, last seen at the overlook trailhead at noon, phone pinged once off the tower at the county line and then nothing. His parents were already at the staging lot when I pulled in, the mother crying without making noise and the father standing too still. I have seen that stillness before. It is what a man does when his body runs out of ways to help.

"North face loop," the coordinator said. "Probably cut the switchbacks to make time. Visibility is going to nothing by four."

Tommy Beck found me at the truck while I was loading my pack. Three years as my SAR partner, which in rescue time is a marriage. He tossed me a second radio and read my face the way he always did.

"You got the feeling," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Since the call."

"Loop or service road?"

"Loop."

"Grid says the overlook. Overlook's two miles east of the loop."

"The feeling says the loop."

He grinned, but it didn't reach his eyes. "The feeling's never been wrong. Yet. Radio check at the top of every hour. You go dark, I come looking."

"Copy that."

Twenty-nine years of that feeling had made me the best tracker on the Elk Ridge SAR roster, and it had never once explained itself. It sat me down hard on a road outside Kandahar ten seconds before the IED took the truck ahead of us, back when I was a private. Three years ago it pulled me off a mapped grid to a scree field where a climber with a shattered pelvis had been lying for nine hours, invisible from the trail. You don't argue with the thing that keeps people alive. You just climb.

The mother grabbed my sleeve when she saw the SAR patch. Her fingers were bare and shaking, and her hands looked like my mother's, which is a thing I remember from when I was six: small and warm and always moving. The kind of hands that held things together.

"Please," she said. "He's only sixteen. He went up with two friends and they lost him at the overlook, please, they said the storm..."

"We're going up now," I said, and put my hand over hers. "That's what matters."

The father stood behind her watching me the way men watch the doctor coming out of surgery. I told them both the truth I could afford: we had his last ping, we had daylight left, we had a full team. I didn't tell them the storm was outrunning us or that a sixteen-year-old in a red shell jacket was a bright flag in a white country that ate flags. And I didn't think about my father, because I tried never to on rescues. Garrett Rourke had been a big man gone soft who taught me to track deer and then forgot to teach me anything else, and the drinking started after my mother died and never really stopped, just changed speed. By the time I was sixteen I was signing my own permission slips with a signature I'd practiced until it looked like a man's. I had told myself for thirteen years that I climbed mountains to be the opposite of him. A man who goes up instead of down. A man who shows up.

The north face took its toll honestly. Knee-deep gave way to thigh-deep past the second switchback, and the wind came at me sideways, driving snow into the seams of my shell. The cold wasn't weather. Weather was something you dressed for. This was an animal of its own, patient and personal, working its way into every seam the wind opened for it. It found the gap between my glove and my cuff and went straight for the bone. It bit the skin at my collar raw. I kept my head down and my pace steady and let my legs do the thinking. That is the trick of mountain work. The body knows the rhythm. The mind just has to stay out of the way.

By the time I reached the service cut, visibility was down to thirty yards, and the snow was falling so hard it erased my own tracks behind me. I stopped and swept my headlamp across the drainage below, left to right, near to far.

The whiteout did not fall so much as close around me. One minute the ridge had edges, rock and sky and a line to follow. The next it was all breath and snow, the world narrowed to the next boot placement and the next. My shell iced at the cuffs. Snow packed into the zippers. Every inhale burned cold and came back out as fog that the wind tore away before it could clear. I counted switchbacks by feel, by the change in slope under my boots, by the way the wind hit harder on the exposed turns. My pack rode heavy and wrong, shifting with each step, and I stopped twice to tighten straps I had tightened an hour before. That was mountain work: small corrections, made early, before they became problems.

The feeling sat behind my eyes through all of it, not a voice, not a picture. A pressure. It had been there since dispatch, quiet at the staging lot, louder on the loop. I had learned to treat it like weather. You did not argue with weather. You read it and adjusted. The grid said the overlook. The feeling said the loop, then the service cut, then the ravine. I trusted the feeling because the feeling had a record. Kandahar. The scree field. The nights it had put me in the right place when the map was wrong.

Off the mapped trail, the feeling said. Check the ravine.

Not words. A tug. A certainty with no evidence behind it, sitting behind my eyes like a splinter. I had followed it off grids before, and it had never been wrong. Not once.

I went down into the ravine. The slope dropped hard off the service cut, snow packing around my boots and stealing my balance one step at a time. The ravine was not on the search grid. The mapped loop ran the ridge crest, and the kid's phone ping had put him near the overlook, two miles east. Nobody was looking here because there was no reason to look here. It was a dead drainage, steep and brush-choked, a place where a hiker would only go if he was lost enough to be walking downhill on instinct.

I went anyway. The feeling had earned that much.

I smelled him before I saw him. Not exactly. That came later, after everything changed. That day I would have said I just knew. The beam caught a shape forty yards down, half buried against a fallen lodgepole, and my chest went tight in a way that had nothing to do with the climb.

He was sixteen if he was a day. Red shell jacket, one glove, a daypack with a busted strap. His face was white in a way that wasn't snow. I was on my knees beside him before my brain caught up with my legs.

"Kid. Hey. Open your eyes for me."

His eyelids fluttered. His lips were blue-gray, and his breathing was shallow and too fast, and when I got my hands on his left leg he made a sound that was more animal than human.

The leg was broken below the knee. Tibia, by the angle, and the boot was holding it in rough alignment, which was the only lucky thing about the whole afternoon. No tenting. No break in the surface. The bone pressed up from underneath like a fist under a blanket, but the skin held.

I did the math out loud the way they teach you, because saying it keeps your hands steady. "Airway's fine. Breathing fast but moving air. Circulation. You're cold, kid, but you're here."

I worked through him the way the Army taught me, hands before hope. Airway first: no snow packed in the mouth, no vomit, tongue not blocking. Breathing: fast and shallow, thirty plus, moving air but working too hard for it. I watched his chest rise and fall and counted against my own pulse. Circulation: carotid thready, radial faint, skin pale and waxy with delayed capillary refill. Hypothermia had him in its early grip, not the deep cold yet, but the quiet shaking told me his body was losing the argument. I talked to keep his brain tethered. "Jesse. Stay with me. Wiggle your toes if you can hear me."

Then the leg. Left tibia, mid-shaft, angulated but contained. Boot on, which was good. The boot was a splint the mountain had already provided. No arterial bleed, no open wound, no tenting. I checked distal pulse twice because the cold lied. Faint, but there. Sensation? He flinched when I squeezed the foot. Pain was information. Pain meant nerves still talking. I splinted in position, no straightening beyond what the boot already held, because a medic who chased perfect alignment in a whiteout traded a good leg for a dead patient. Warmth next. Heat packs to the armpits and groin, not the extremities. Core first. Always core first.

In the Army they taught us that a medic's voice is a tool. Steady voice, steady patient, steady hands, in that order. I had talked men through worse than this in worse places than this, and the script was the same. Name the problem. Name the plan. Keep them with you.

"Jesse. I'm Kade. You're going to be fine, Jesse. Your parents are at the lot with hot chocolate and a lecture."

His eyes tracked toward my voice. Good. Responsive to voice, not just pain. That mattered.

I keyed my radio at the top of the hour the way Tommy and I had agreed, out of discipline more than hope. Static answered, shaped like wind. I tried the emergency channel. Same. The storm was sitting on the towers, and a dead radio is information too. It tells you you're on your own, and it tells you to stop spending hope on the radio and start spending it on the patient.

The splint work took eleven minutes. I know because I counted my own breaths, the way I used to count tourniquet time. My kit is the one thing I keep better organized than my truck: SAM splint, elastic wrap, trauma shears, gauze, tape, two chemical heat packs, a spare base layer vacuum-sealed flat, all of it in the same pockets every time, because a medic who has to look for his tools is a medic who's already late.

SAM splint molded along the lateral leg, boot left on because the boot was doing half the splint's job, elastic wrap from ankle to knee, snug but not tight. I checked the foot twice. Dorsalis pedis pulse, faint but present. Toes pink-ish under the gray. Capillary refill sluggish but there. Good enough to move on.

Hypothermia was the clock I was really racing. The shaking had gone quiet, and quiet shaking is the body giving up the fight it can't win. I got my spare base layer on him, then my puffy, then the bivvy sack, then my own body heat on top of the sack where I could manage it without jarring the leg. Two chemical heat packs, cracked and worked into his armpits. I kept one glove and gave him the other. It seemed important that we split things even.

"You ever been in a real storm, Jesse?" I asked him, because silence lets the cold in faster. "This one's got opinions. Wind's been arguing with this mountain all afternoon."

He mumbled something. It might have been his mother's name. It might have been nothing. I kept talking anyway. About the Broncos. About the price of gas. About the time Tommy got his truck stuck in a drainage exactly like this one and had to winch it out with a come-along and prayer. Normal things. Human things. The small talk that says: we are still people, this is still a Tuesday, you are going home.

The wind dropped for half a breath, and the whole mountain went still, the way a room goes still before somebody starts yelling. Then the slope above us made a sound I will remember for the rest of my life.

It was not a crack. A crack is honest. This was a deep, long groan, like the mountain clearing its throat, and then a low whumpf that I felt in my molars before I heard it. I felt it in the soles of

my boots first, a shiver traveling up through the packed snow into my shins, and then in my teeth, and then nowhere else mattered. Every SAR man in Montana knows that sound. It is the sound of a snowpack deciding.

"Avalanche," I said, out loud, to no one, because Jesse was past hearing me.

The slope let go above us in a slow white wall, and there was no time to run and nowhere to run to. I threw myself over the kid and wrapped the bivvy tight around both of us and tucked my head down and thought, stupidly, clearly, of my mother, who died when I was six, and my father, who drank himself to death by the time I was sixteen, and how neither of them would have been surprised to hear I died on a mountain trying to save a stranger's kid.

The snow hit like a truck made of pillows and stone.

Darkness. Pressure. Cold that wasn't cold yet, just weight, tons of it, pressing the air out of me in a slow crush. I couldn't move my legs. I couldn't feel my hands. Snow was in my mouth and up my nose and packed into my ears, and the world had gone down to the size of my own skull. I spat, and it packed back between my teeth, gritty and tasteless, melting into water too cold to swallow. I breathed through it because there was nothing else to breathe through.

Jesse was under me. Still. Too still.

Panic came up then, clean and professional panic, the kind that runs a checklist while it screams. Airway. Mine was full of snow. I spat and sucked a thin ribbon of air through the pack around my face. Breathing. Okay. Circulation. My heart was hammering against my ribs like it wanted out.

Then I felt it. Under my chest, faint as a moth's wing.

His heartbeat.

And his breathing, thin shallow pulls, one after the other, barely stirring the air against my chest. I counted them without meaning to, the way I'd count respirations on a patient. Fast. Shallow. There. Each one a small argument against the dark.

Alive. He was alive under there, and the slide had buried us both, and nobody knew where we were because I'd followed a feeling off the mapped trail into a drainage nobody was searching, and Tommy would come up the loop and find nothing.

The heat came up out of me like a detonation.

It started in my gut, a furnace door swinging open, and it was not adrenaline. I knew adrenaline. I had lived on adrenaline in Afghanistan, had ridden it through firefights and field hospitals, had felt it go sour in my veins on the bad days. This was something else. This was older than me. It rose up through my chest like a tide and it was angry, it was furious, it had been waiting twenty-nine years in the dark of my blood, and the avalanche had kicked the door in and it was done waiting.

My back arched against the weight of the snow. Something in my spine unzipped, vertebra by vertebra, and re-knit itself longer, heavier. My shoulders rolled forward and kept going, broadening, and I felt my hands change, felt the fingers shorten and thicken, felt claws punch out where my nails had been. My ribs spread like fingers opening. The joints of my hips rolled out of their sockets and seated themselves wrong and then right again, bigger, built for four legs instead of two. The heat ran through it all like blood from a wound, cauterizing as it went. My jaw cracked. I heard it crack, a wet green-stick sound, and then my face was pushing forward into a muzzle and my teeth were too many and too long for my mouth.

Pain like I had never known, clean and total, laid me open from the inside and rebuilt me in the same motion. It did not hurt the way a wound hurts. It hurt the way birth must hurt. Necessary. Unstoppable. Final.

The darkness under the snow went red behind my eyes, and then white, and then it went wide.

Scent hit me first, a wall of it. The kid's blood and fear and the sour milk smell of shock. The iron in the snow. The pine resin three hundred yards up the slope, sharp as turpentine. The storm coming down the valley like a freight train, ozone and ice. My own blood, hot and copper, from a dozen small tears where the change had been roughest. And underneath it all, threaded through everything, something I recognized the way you recognize your own name spoken in a crowd: me. The animal smell of me.

Sound came next. Jesse's heart, thin and fast and failing, and my own, huge and slow and steady, beating in a chest twice as broad as the one I'd been born with. The snow settling above us in small hisses. Wind, far away, like a rumor.

I understood, in the last human corner of my brain, that I was dying and being born in the same minute, under a mountain of snow, on top of a sixteen-year-old boy I had promised to bring home.

Then the animal took the wheel, and the dark took me, and I knew nothing for a while.

What I remember of the dark is not memory. It is something older than memory, something that lives in the blood and doesn't need the brain's permission. I remember heat. I remember the press of snow above us like a hand, and the small cold shape of the boy tucked against my belly, and a need so deep it wasn't a thought at all: keep him warm. Keep him breathing. Don't let go.

I remember digging. Not with hands. With paws, with a shoulder, with the flat of a massive head, shoving snow up and back, carving a pocket out of the slide one body-length at a time. The animal knew what it was doing. The animal had done this before, in some den in some winter long before I was born, curled around something small and breathing and refusing to let the cold have it.

I remember the boy's hand finding its way into my jaws. I don't know if he reached for me or if I took it. It doesn't matter. In the dark under the snow, with the storm raging itself out above us, the animal held that small hand the way you hold a promise.

Keep him warm. Keep him breathing. Don't let go.

Somewhere in the long dark, the furnace in my gut banked itself down to coals, and the great black shape I had become curled tighter around the boy, and the snow settled, and the world went quiet, and I slept the deep unthinking sleep of an animal that has done its work.

Cold. Quiet. The roar was gone. The weight was gone, or most of it, and my breath steamed in a pocket of air I had somehow made for myself, a hollow melted or dug or dreamed into the snow around us. The walls of it were packed hard and smooth, curved like the inside of a den. Snow sifted down through a crack somewhere above in a thin bright thread, and I could see it. See it. In the dark under an avalanche, with eyes that were not the eyes I'd been born with.

I didn't know how long I'd been out. The dark under the slide had no clocks in it. Time had come undone somewhere between the man's last breath and the animal's first.

My head was too low to the ground. My shoulders were too wide. When I tried to lift my hand to wipe the snow from my face, a foreleg moved instead, black-furred and massive, and the paw at the end of it was the size of a dinner plate, and it knocked snow sideways with a casual strength that terrified me.

I froze. Every instinct I had left, human and otherwise, went still as stone.

There was something in my jaws. Warm. I could feel a pulse in it, thready but there, beating against my teeth in a rhythm I knew better than my own name. A human pulse. Small.

Slowly, with a care I did not know I possessed, with a gentleness that lived in the animal the way the violence did, I opened my mouth and looked down.

Jesse's hand. Small and white and human, resting in my jaws like I had been holding it. Like something in me, the thing with teeth and claws and a furnace for a heart, had curled around this boy in the dark under the snow and held his hand in its mouth the way you hold something precious. The way you hold something you refuse to let go of.

His chest rose. Fell. Rose again.

He was warm. That was the thing my reeling brain kept circling back to. He was warm, warmer than he had any right to be under an avalanche in a Montana whiteout, and I understood with a lurch that the furnace in my gut had done that. The animal had wrapped itself around him and burned like a stove all night, or all hour, or however long the dark had lasted, and kept him alive the way a mother wolf keeps her pups alive.

I had four legs. The boy was still breathing.

And I understood, with a clarity colder than the snow around us, that whatever I was now, I had not chosen it, and there was no going back to the man who climbed up the ridge that afternoon.

Somewhere above the snow, muffled to almost nothing, I heard it. Voices. A dog barking, high and frantic. The crunch of boots and the clank of a sled runner.

They were coming. The living world was coming down into the ravine with lights and ropes and questions I had no answers for.

I looked down at the boy's hand in my jaws, at the black paws the size of dinner plates, at the pocket of warm air I had carved out of a mountain with teeth and instinct. And I thought, with the last clear thought I might ever have as anything resembling myself: whatever happens when they dig us out, Jesse lives. That's the job. That's the only part that matters.

Chapter 2: Blood on the Snow

The voices got closer, and the animal in me did the math before the man could catch up.

Strangers. Lights. Dogs. The boy's pulse thready under my teeth. And me, a thing with four legs and a mouth full of someone's child, buried in a pocket under an avalanche in a drainage no one was supposed to search.

I let go of his hand. Gently. The way you'd set down something made of glass.

The change came back over me like a tide reversing, and it was worse going back. What had taken a heartbeat in the dark took long minutes in the cold air of the pocket, bones grinding, skin knitting wrong and then right, the furnace in my gut banking down to embers and then to nothing. I bit through my own lip to keep from screaming and tasted blood that was only blood, human blood, mine.

When it was done I was a man again, naked and shaking, curled in a snow pocket with a sixteen-year-old boy and the shredded remains of my clothes scattered around us like confetti. My hands were my hands. My feet were my feet. Everything hurt in the particular way of muscles that have been somewhere they were never meant to go.

Jesse's eyes were open. Open, and fixed on me, and glazed with the particular vacancy of a kid in deep shock.

"Hey," I said. My voice came out wrecked. "Hey, Jesse. You're okay. You're going to be okay."

He said, "Dog."

"What?"

"Big dog." His voice was a thread. "Kept me warm. Big black dog."

My chest did something complicated. "Yeah," I said. "Something like that."

The voices were right on top of us now. I could hear Tommy shouting my name, and a dog going crazy, and the scrape of shovels. I did the only thing I could do. I started digging.

It took four minutes to break through the last of the pocket wall, four minutes of clawing with hands that shook so bad I could barely make fists, and then a headlamp beam hit me square in the face and somebody shouted, and hands grabbed my arms, and the white world came pouring back in.

"Kade! Jesus Christ, Kade!"

Tommy Beck's face loomed over me, snow in his beard, eyes wide. Behind him, two more SAR guys with a sled, and a deputy with a light rig, and the avalanche dog straining at its lead and barking itself hoarse.

"He's alive," I said. It was the only sentence I had. "The kid's alive. Broken left tibia, splinted, hypothermic. He's in the pocket. Careful with the leg."

They got Jesse out on a backboard, and I watched them work with a medic's eye even through the shock, and everything they did was right. Jesse mumbled about the big black dog all the way onto the sled, and one of the SAR guys laughed, the relieved laugh of a man who just found a live kid instead of a body, and said, "Shock'll do that to you, son."

Then Tommy turned and looked at me. Really looked at me.

I was standing in the snow in my skin. Naked. In subzero air, in a whiteout, steam rising off my shoulders in thick white curls like I was a pot coming off a burner. My own blood was crusted around the tears on my hands, hot copper in the cold, and under it my own fear-sweat, sour and sharp. I'd smelled fear on other men. Never on myself. My clothes were in rags in the pocket behind me. And the cuts on my hands and arms, the tears where the change had been roughest, were closing as he watched. I saw him see it. I saw his eyes track a split across my knuckles sealing itself into a pink line while snow melted where it touched my skin.

The dog stopped barking. It whined instead, and backed up against its handler's legs.

The cold never touched me. That was the worst part. The headlamp beams cut through the whiteout and I could see the air shimmering off my shoulders, heat pouring off me into twenty-below air, and the men were staring the way you stare at a wound. My clothes were rags behind me in the pocket. My boots were gone, torn off somewhere in the change. I stood there in front of men I had worked beside for three years with snow melting where it landed on my skin, and I felt like a billboard advertising everything I couldn't say, and Tommy was just standing there taking it in, filing it away. I could see the exact moment his brain stopped arguing with his eyes.

"Tommy," I said.

"Kade." His voice was very careful. "What happened out here?"

Around us, in the churned snow of the dig site, the headlamps picked out the tracks. Paw prints the size of dinner plates, circling the pocket where we'd been buried. Circling. Deliberate. Guarding.

I opened my mouth, and the lie came out of me fully formed, which scared me more than anything else that night. "Mountain lion," I said. "Big one. Must have been denning in the drainage. It took my pack. My coat. I don't know. I think it dragged off with my gear and I was too out of it to stop it."

Tommy stared at me.

"A mountain lion," he repeated.

"In the whiteout. I barely saw it."

"Kade." Tommy's voice dropped. "Those tracks aren't a mountain lion."

"I know what I saw."

"Do you? Because what I'm seeing is you standing buck naked in a blizzard steaming like a sauna with your hands healing in front of my eyes, and dinner-plate wolf tracks all around the hole you crawled out of, and a kid talking about a big black dog that kept him warm under an avalanche." He took a breath. "So I'm going to ask you once more. What happened out here?"

I looked at my partner of three years. I looked at the sled team loading Jesse, at the deputy on the radio calling in the good news, at the dog still whining against its handler's legs. And I understood, with total clarity, that there was no version of the truth I could give him that wouldn't end with me in a lab or a cage or a headline.

"I don't know," I said. It was the truest thing I'd said all night. "Tommy, I swear to you, I don't know."

He held my eyes for a long moment. Then he stripped off his own heavy parka and threw it around my shoulders, and the look on his face was the look of a man filing something away to be dealt with later.

"Borrowed coat," he said flatly. "That's your story. You borrowed my coat."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Get on the sled."

They'd wrapped me in blankets and strapped me to the second sled, and every bump of the trail sent a fresh wave of that deep-body ache through me, the ache of a frame that had been unmade and remade in the dark. But underneath the ache, something else was waking up. My nose wouldn't stop working. I could smell the pine sap in the sled runners, the diesel from the deputy's rig a hundred yards ahead, the iron tang of my own blood dried on the blankets. I could smell Jesse, three sled-lengths in front of me: fear-sweat and hospital-warmth and the particular sweet-rot smell of a kid coming down off shock.

And I could smell Tommy, walking beside my sled, and what I smelled off him stopped my breath.

Adrenaline. Old fear, going stale. And underneath it, grief. Not for anyone dead. For something he was afraid he'd lost.

He'd trusted me. Three years of ropes and ledges and bad nights, and more than once he'd put his life in my hands, and now he was walking beside my sled with his hand near his radio and I could smell him grieving the man he'd thought I was. That smell was worse than the blood. It got into my chest and sat there. I wanted to tell him something true. But there was nothing true I could give him that wouldn't make it worse, so I lay there under the blankets and let him do his math in silence, and the silence between us was the heaviest thing on that sled.

"Kid's in shock," Tommy said loudly, for the benefit of the team, after Jesse told the whole trail about the dog the size of a horse that had breathed on him and kept him warm. But Tommy looked down at me, and his eyes were doing the math I didn't want done.

At the trailhead, Jesse's parents were waiting behind the tape line, and what happened next is burned into me permanent. The mother saw the sled and made a sound like air leaving a tire, and then she was running, deputies be damned, and she hit her knees in the snow beside her son and put both hands on his face and just breathed him in. The father stood back with his hands over his mouth, crying without shame, and when the SAR leader told him the boy would keep the leg and keep his life, the man folded like a tent and sat down hard in the snow.

I watched from my sled, wrapped in blankets, steaming faintly in the floodlights. The mother looked up, found me, and mouthed two words across the chaos: thank you.

I nodded. It was all I had.

Then the deputy came over with his notebook, and I gave him the mountain lion story, and he wrote it down with the expression of a man who has heard worse lies from better liars.

"Big cat took your coat," he said.

"Took my pack. Coat was in the pack."

"In a whiteout."

"Yes, sir."

He looked at the rags the team had bagged from the pocket. He looked at the tracks the floodlights were picking out, big as serving platters, circling the dig site. He looked at me, steaming gently in the cold, wrapped in Tommy's parka over bare skin.

"Huh," he said, and wrote something down, and moved on to the sled team. Cops in mountain counties learn early which questions get answers and which ones get avalanches.

I'd given better statements than that on a sprained ankle. The words had come out too fast and in the wrong order, and even my own voice had sounded like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Tommy heard it. I could see him hearing it, standing over by the sled with his arms crossed, his eyes saying liar long before we ever got to the truck. "Took my pack. Coat was in the pack. In a whiteout." Every sentence thinner than the last. The deputy wrote it all down anyway.

I didn't argue, because my legs had started shaking in a way that wasn't cold. As the sled team started down the drainage, I looked back at the pocket, at the black rags of my clothes in the snow, at the dinner-plate tracks circling the dig site like a guard patrol.

Something had curled around that boy in the dark and kept him breathing. Something with teeth and a furnace for a heart.

Something that was me.

* * *

The ER doc at the county hospital wanted to admit me for observation. I signed out against medical advice, which made her sigh the sigh of a woman who deals with mountain men for a living.

"Your core temp was ninety-four when you came in," she said. "You should be dead or stupid. You're walking around making jokes."

"Good genes," I said.

"Mm." She looked at my hands. The cuts were pink lines now, barely visible. "Those were deep lacerations six hours ago, per the SAR report."

"Good genes," I said again.

She let me go, because there was nothing left to treat. That was the thing nobody said out loud. I had been buried under an avalanche, naked, in a whiteout, and I was walking out of the hospital under my own power while the kid I'd dug out was upstairs in a warm bed with a properly set tibia and a story about a big black dog that the nurses were writing off as shock.

Before I left, I went upstairs. I told myself it was a medic checking his patient. It wasn't. It was a man who needed to see the boy breathing with his own eyes, in the light, where the dark couldn't lie to him.

Jesse was asleep, which was a mercy. His leg was in a proper cast now, elevated on pillows. His color was back. His mother was asleep in the chair beside the bed with her hand on his arm, and his father stood at the window with his forehead against the glass. When he saw me in the doorway, he crossed the room in three strides and grabbed my hand in both of his.

"They said you went off the mapped trail," he said. His voice was raw. "They said nobody else checked the ravine."

"The feeling said check the ravine," I said.

He held my hand tighter. "Then God bless the feeling."

I didn't know what to do with that, so I nodded, and I left them there, the three of them in the warm room, whole. It was the one clean thing in the whole night. I carried it out of the hospital with me like a coal in my pocket.

Tommy was waiting at the curb. Neither of us talked on the way home. He pulled into my driveway in Elk Ridge, killed the engine, and sat there with his hands on the wheel.

"You want to tell me now?" he asked.

"There's nothing to tell."

"Bullshit." He turned to look at me. "Kade, I've known you three years. I've seen you pull people out of crevasses and talk a jumper off a bridge abutment. You don't rattle. Tonight you were

rattled down to the bone, and you were standing in the snow steaming like you'd just come out of a sauna, and those tracks..."

"I don't know what those tracks were."

"They were wolf tracks, Kade. Wolf tracks the size of serving platters. There is no wolf that big in Montana. There is no wolf that big anywhere." His voice cracked on the last word. "So either you tell me what happened, or I start coming up with my own answers, and you won't like mine."

I sat in his truck in my driveway, in Tommy's borrowed coat and hospital scrubs, and I felt the exhaustion hit me like a second avalanche. Under it, something else. A restlessness. A heat behind my sternum that flared when I thought about the pocket, about the dark, about the feeling of the change rolling through me like weather.

"I need sleep," I said. "That's all I know right now, Tommy. I need sleep, and in the morning I'll figure out what I can tell you."

He stared at me for a long moment. Then he nodded, once, sharp.

"Morning," he said. "You owe me the truth in the morning."

"I know."

I watched his taillights go down the road, and I stood in my driveway in the cold, and I realized I wasn't cold. The air was twenty below with the wind chill, and I was standing in scrubs and a borrowed coat, and I wasn't cold. My breath steamed. My skin was warm to my own touch.

That scared me worse than the tracks had.

Inside, I got the stove going with hands that wouldn't stop shaking and stood over it until the heat bit through the scrubs. The shaking wasn't cold. I knew cold shaking. This was something else. This was my body trying to throw off something it couldn't name, a deep rolling tremor that started in my shoulders and worked down.

I needed to see. I needed to look at myself and take inventory, the way I'd take inventory of a patient. So I went into the bathroom, and I stood in the dark for a long time with my hand on the light switch, because some part of me already knew what I was going to see.

I flipped the switch.

My hands were a mess of pink lines, every cut from the change sealed into thin scars. There was blood under my nails that wasn't all mine. I scrubbed until the water ran clear and then kept scrubbing, because the blood wasn't the problem. It had gotten out from under my nails and stayed in my nose, copper and iron and something older. Twenty-nine years I had bled like every other man. The problem was that I could smell it. Old blood. My blood. And under it, something else, something wild and musky that my hindbrain recognized the way you recognize a language you spoke as a child.

It wasn't a smell I knew. It was a smell I remembered. My hindbrain stood up when it hit my nose and said, yes, that is yours, that has been there the whole time, the way a house settling sounds like a voice if you've lived in it long enough. Twenty-nine years I'd been walking around with that in my skin and never smelled it once. It was like finding out I'd been carrying someone else's heart in my chest my whole life.

I stripped off the scrubs and stood under the shower until the hot water ran out, and it didn't touch the shake. The water hit my shoulders and steamed off skin that was already hot, and ran down in sheets. I stood there not shivering while it went from hot to lukewarm to cold down my back, because the cold couldn't find me anymore. That was when I started being truly afraid. When I got out, I was hungry with a hunger I had never felt, a hollow gnawing that sat behind my ribs and demanded. I ate half a loaf of bread standing at the counter. I ate a block of cheese. I ate leftover stew cold from the pot, standing in my kitchen in a towel, and the hunger barely dented.

Shifting burns calories like a furnace, a voice said in the back of my head. It wasn't my voice. Or it was my voice, saying something I had never learned.

I put the pot down very carefully and went back to the mirror.

My eyes flashed pale.

It was there and gone in a blink, a wash of silver-pale across my irises like moonlight on water, and then my normal eyes were back, dark and bloodshot and terrified. I stumbled back from the sink and caught myself on the towel rack and stood there breathing hard, staring at my own reflection like it was a stranger.

"What are you?" I whispered.

The man in the mirror didn't answer. But something behind his eyes did, something old and patient, and it said: you know.

I didn't sleep that night. I sat on the edge of my bed with Tommy's coat around my shoulders and my hands shaking in my lap, and I watched the window go from black to gray to the pale gold of a Montana morning. My mother died when I was six. My father drank himself to death by the time I was sixteen. I had spent thirteen years building a life out of competence and showing up, out of being the man who goes up the mountain. And in one night, under one avalanche, the foundation had cracked open and something had crawled out of it with teeth.

Around dawn, I finally understood what I had to do. I had to go back up there. I had to see the dig site in daylight. I had to look at those tracks with clear eyes and figure out what had circled that pocket all night, because if I didn't, the not-knowing was going to eat me alive.

I stepped onto the porch before I laced my boots, just to breathe, and the morning hit me like a door opening.

Scent. Layers of it, stacked and sorted the way my eyes sorted distance. Woodsmoke from the Miller place half a mile down, and under it the creosote of their fence posts. A doe and two fawns in the draw behind the cabin, fear-sweat sharp even at rest. Bacon from somebody's kitchen, and coffee, and the particular oil-and-metal smell of Tommy's truck, still hanging in my driveway from last night. Snow coming. I could smell snow coming, a clean iron edge on the back of the wind, six hours out at least.

I stood on my porch in Elk Ridge, Montana, and read the whole valley like a page.

My hands started shaking again. I gripped the porch rail until the wood creaked, and I breathed through my mouth to shut it off, and it didn't shut off. Breathing through my mouth just traded the smells for the taste of cold iron air on my tongue. The world had too many smells in it. The world had always had this many smells in it, and I had been walking through it deaf for twenty-nine years.

It was not brand new. Nothing was new. Everything had changed.

* * *

Meanwhile, on the far side of the valley, someone else was reading the same morning.

On a ridge above Stone Creek, a scout lay prone behind a deadfall with a spotting scope trained on the dig site from the night before. Her name was Wren, and she had run scout for the Stone Creek pack for eleven years, and she had seen rogue shifts, feral turns, and one Veil breach that ended with a body in a river. She had never seen anything like this.

She had been watching since first light, and what she had seen had turned her stomach to ice.

The tracks were still there, preserved in the morning freeze. She had climbed down at dawn, quiet as breath, and measured one against her own spread hand. Dinner plate. Bigger. The stride between them was longer than her body. Whatever had made them massed more than any wolf had a right to.

No wolf in these mountains made tracks like that. No wolf in any mountains made tracks like that.

She had circled the site the way she'd been trained, reading it. The pocket. The blood on the snow where the big thing had torn itself open changing, dark spots in the white. The place where it had lain curled around the smaller shape, the melted hollow, the kid's handprint in the refrozen snow where its jaws had held him. Guarding. It had guarded the human child through the night.

And the blood smelled wrong even from downwind. It smelled like a shifter. It smelled like a shifter who had never learned to hide what he was, blood running hot and undisciplined and unafraid.

A first shift. Uncontrolled. In front of human witnesses. SAR team, deputies, a hospital. The Veil wasn't cracked. The Veil was in pieces on the snow.

She lowered the scope and took out the burner phone, and her hands were steady, because this was the job, and the job was the only thing that mattered.

It rang twice. Then the alpha's voice, rough with sleep and authority.

"Report."

She looked at the tracks one more time, at the blood on the snow, at the place where something impossible had curled around a human child and kept him alive through the night.

"Veil breach," she said.

Chapter 3: The Law's Blade

I didn't make it back to the ridge that morning.

I got as far as the truck, and then my phone buzzed again, and this time it wasn't Tommy. It was the SAR coordinator, asking me to come by the station to walk through the incident report. I spent two hours at the station drinking bad coffee and telling the mountain lion story to three different people, and each time it sounded thinner. The coordinator, a good man named Ellis who'd run the roster for a decade, kept looking at the photos of the tracks on his desk.

"Big cat," he said.

"Big cat," I agreed.

"Those are the biggest cat tracks I've ever seen, Kade."

"Whiteout does things to scale."

He let it go, because the kid was alive and that was the only metric that mattered. But he filed the photos, and I watched him file them, and I understood that the lie had a half-life now. It was decaying even as I told it.

Tommy wasn't at the station. He'd left a note on my locker: CALL ME. I didn't call him. I owed him the truth in the morning, and the morning had come, and I had nothing true to give him. Every honest sentence I owned ended with teeth.

By the time the obligations were done, the light was going flat and gray, and the snow I had smelled coming that morning was starting to fall. I drove home instead of up, telling myself the dig site would keep until tomorrow.

That was the first lie I told that day. It would not be the last.

The cabin sits at the end of a dirt track off the county road, backed up against the national forest, which is a polite way of saying backed up against ten thousand acres of nobody. I bought it eight years ago with Army savings and a VA loan. New roof. Woodstove. A porch that doesn't lean anymore. It's small and it's quiet and it's the first place that ever felt like it belonged to me instead of the other way around.

I was halfway from the truck to the porch with a bag of groceries when the feeling came back.

Not the rescue feeling. Not the splinter behind the eyes. This was different. This was the animal, awake and alert under my skin, hackles up, every new sense I owned snapping to attention at once.

Danger. Close. Watching.

I stopped in the middle of my own yard, grocery bag in my hand, and I did what the Army taught me before the animal ever got its say. I went still. I breathed shallow. I listened.

The woods were too quiet. That was the first wrong thing. No jays. No squirrels. The small wildlife had gone silent the way it goes silent when something with teeth walks through. The second wrong thing was the wind. It was coming out of the west, steady, and it should have been bringing me the whole forest, but there was a hole in it, a blank place in the tree line northwest of the cabin where the scent just stopped, the way sound stops in a dead room.

Somebody over there knew how to hide from a nose. Somebody over there was doing it on purpose.

But the smell. God, the smell.

It came off the wind in a thin ribbon around the edges of the blank place, and my new nose unspooled it without asking my permission. Woman. Human-shaped, but not human underneath. Musk and pine sap and gun oil, and under that, something that made the animal in me sit up and take notice with an interest that was not entirely about danger.

Pine smoke and winter apples. I didn't have words for it yet, just a pull low in my gut, like hunger but aimed at a person. My mouth went dry. My hands started shaking for a reason that had nothing to do with fear, and I hated that my body was doing arithmetic my brain hadn't been told about.

My hands started shaking. Not fear. The heat behind my sternum was fanning up toward flame, and the shake was the change crowding my spine, wanting out.

I set the grocery bag down very slowly.

Every instinct I owned was screaming two things at once. The man said: get inside, lock the door, call Tommy. The animal said: she is already inside your perimeter, the door means nothing, and running from a predator is how you get run down.

I listened to the animal. It had kept a boy alive under an avalanche. It had earned a vote.

"I know you're there," I said to the trees. My voice came out steadier than I felt. "Come out where I can see you. I don't like being watched in my own yard."

She stepped out of the tree line like she'd been poured from it.

She was maybe five-eight, lean in the way of people who work for their muscle, dark hair pulled back tight, a scar through one eyebrow that said she'd earned it. She wore winter camo and a chest rig, and she moved like she knew exactly how many steps it would take to reach me. The tracker in me catalogued her without asking: balanced stance, weight forward, hands empty but ready, eyes doing the same threat assessment I was doing. This was not a civilian. This was a professional.

In her hands, held low and ready, was a collar.

Not a dog collar. I knew collars. This one was a band of dark iron, hinged, with a lock mechanism the size of my fist. It looked old. It looked like it had been used, and used, and used

again. Cold came off it in waves, a dead metal cold that had nothing to do with the weather. I could feel it on my face from six feet away, like standing too close to an open freezer. My throat closed just looking at it. Some old part of me, the part that had been a wolf for all of two days, knew exactly what that cold meant. The animal under my skin recoiled from it before my brain caught up, a full-body flinch I couldn't suppress.

"Don't run," she said. Her voice was clipped, professional. The voice of someone giving orders she's given before. "Running makes this worse."

"Does it." My heart was hammering against my ribs. The heat was rising behind my sternum, coals fanning toward flame, and my hands had started that deep rolling shake. "Who are you?"

"My name doesn't matter. What matters is that you shifted on that ridge two nights ago in front of human witnesses, and that makes you my problem." She took a step closer, out of the trees and into my yard, and she didn't hurry. She had all the time in the world. "I'm going to put this on you. If you hold still, it won't burn any more than it has to."

Two nights ago. The ridge. She knew. Somebody had seen the dig site, the tracks, the blood on the snow, and sent her.

It clicked then, all at once. The smell under the gun oil. The way the avalanche dog had whined and backed away at the dig site. The way my own blood had smelled wrong to me in the bathroom mirror, wild and musky, a language I'd spoken as a child.

"You're like me," I said.

Her eyes narrowed. "I am nothing like you. I am trained. I am controlled. You are a breach walking around in a borrowed coat, and my alpha's orders are to bring you in dead or collared." She lifted the collar an inch. The iron looked darker than iron should, pitted with age. "Choose collared."

"Your alpha." I kept my voice level. The heat was climbing, and I was afraid if I raised my voice the change would take me mid-sentence. "You have an alpha. Like a pack."

"Stone Creek pack. Bitterroot Valley. We've held this territory for a hundred years, and we hold it by keeping the Veil." Her eyes flicked to my hands, to the shake I couldn't hide. "You broke it on that ridge. Do you understand what that means? Exposure brings the humans with their drones and their labs. The ones who hunt us. Every shifter child learns it before they can read: you do not break the Veil."

"I was saving a kid."

"I know." Something moved in her face, there and gone. "That's the worst part. You did a good thing, and it doesn't matter. The law doesn't grade on intention."

"The law sounds like hell."

"The law keeps us alive." She took another step. We were ten feet apart now. "Last chance. Hold still. The collar blocks the shift while it touches skin. It'll burn, but you'll live, and the alpha will judge whether you keep living. That's more mercy than most breaches get."

I thought about Tommy's face at the dig site. I thought about Jesse's mother on her knees in the snow. I thought about the hospital, the deputy's notebook, the photos of the tracks filed at the SAR station. The Veil was already in pieces. This woman was here to sweep up the biggest piece, which was me.

"I didn't ask for this," I said. "Two days ago I was a man. Whatever I am now, I didn't choose it."

"Nobody chooses the first shift. You still broke the Veil." She was circling, slow, professional, cutting off my angle to the cabin. "Hold still."

"Or what?"

"Or I do it the hard way, and the hard way ends with you bleeding."

I laughed. It wasn't a good laugh. "Lady, I got buried under an avalanche two days ago. The hard way and I are old friends."

She moved.

She was fast. Faster than anyone had a right to be, a blur of winter camo closing ten feet before I could blink. The iron collar came up toward my throat, and the animal in me made the decision before I could, the way it had made every decision since the avalanche.

The shift took me mid-step.

It was nothing like the first time. The first time had been drowning, slow and dark and buried. This was a detonation. Heat blew out from my gut in every direction at once, and my spine unzipped and re-knit, and my shoulders rolled forward and kept going, broadening into something massive. I felt my hands go, fingers thickening, claws punching out. My jaw cracked and pushed forward into a muzzle. My skin split along my back and sealed over black fur in the same motion.

One heartbeat I was a man backing away from a woman with an iron collar. The next I was huge, I was massive, I was four legs and teeth and fury, and the snow exploded around me where my paws hit, and the world went wide and sharp and red with scent.

Pine smoke. Winter apples. Gun oil. Iron. Her fear, bright as a struck match.

She didn't flinch. That was the thing I would remember later, when I had time to be impressed. She had the collar half-shut around my neck before I finished changing, and the iron touched my skin, and the shift died like a snuffed candle.

Pain. White, total, unreasonable pain. The iron burned where it touched, a cold fire that ate into the half-formed shape of me, and I was caught between, man and wolf at once, screaming out of a throat that was both. My foreleg was a paw and a hand. My spine was wrong in three places. The

change crowded against the iron like water against a dam, and the iron held, and I understood with perfect clarity why she had been so confident. This was not her first collar. She knew exactly what iron did to a shifter mid-change.

It unmade you. It held you in the worst place, between shapes, and burned.

I thrashed. The collar held, half-latched, searing. She had one knee on my shoulder, her whole weight driving the iron down, and her face was inches from mine, and her eyes were gold. Not human gold. Animal gold, bright with the effort of holding me.

And then I smelled her. Really smelled her, with the wolf's nose, past the gun oil and the pine sap and the iron.

Pine smoke. Winter apples. A match struck in a dark room.

The scent hit me like a physical blow, and the animal in me, the furious terrified animal caught in iron, did something I did not expect.

It went still.

Not submission. Recognition. The same recognition I'd felt in the drainage when the feeling said check the ravine, the same certainty with no evidence behind it. Twenty-nine years of following that certainty had made me who I was. Now it had a smell. Now it had a face, inches from mine, with gold animal eyes going wide.

My whole body wanted to go to her. Not to fight her. To go to her. The animal leaned toward her the way a compass needle leans north, and I had to lock every muscle I owned to hold still, because she had iron on my throat and a knee on my shoulder and this was the worst possible moment to discover that some part of me had been waiting for her.

She felt it too. I know she did, because her hands faltered on the collar, just for a second, and her breath caught, and the gold in her eyes went wide and dark, and her own scent spiked with that warm confused want my nose wouldn't stop reading.

"What are you," she breathed.

It wasn't a tactical question. It was the sound of a professional watching her certainties come apart. I almost felt sorry for her. Almost. She had iron burning into my neck.

Then training took over, hers and mine both. She bore down on the collar, trying to force the latch, and the iron bit deeper, and the pain was a white wall I couldn't think past.

The animal didn't think. It moved.

I threw myself sideways with everything I had, half wolf and screaming, and took her with me. We hit the pine trunk together, her back against the bark and my shoulder driving her into it, and the iron collar caught between my neck and the tree and shattered. The hinge burst with a crack that ran up the trunk ahead of us, a sound like a rifle shot wrapped in splintering wood, and the pine groaned overhead, shedding snow in a white avalanche of its own. Bark tore under my shoulder,

sharp with resin. For a second the whole tree swayed. Then it stood, wounded, dripping sap into the snow. The band sprang apart in two pieces and fell into the snow, dead metal, and the burn cut off like a switch.

The shift completed all at once, a full-body convulsion that left me wolf, fully wolf, huge and black and shaking off the last of the iron's bite. She slid down the trunk and rolled, and came up with a knife in her hand that hadn't been there a second before, and there was a red mark across her shoulder where the bark had torn her camo.

We circled. Snow spraying. Both of us breathing hard. Her knife low, circling right, keeping the shattered pine between us and the cabin. Me circling left, staying on her knife side, reading her weight shifts the way the animal read everything: all the way down.

The snow under my paws was churned to sugar, each step punching through crust and finding no purchase. My breath came in white bursts. Hers did too, fogging between us, and every exhale carried her scent straight into my lungs. Pine smoke. Winter apples. Blood where the bark had torn her shoulder. The animal read her the way it read terrain: the hitch in her left stride, the way she favored the knife side, the micro-shift of her weight before she committed. My body answered before thought, paws adjusting, shoulders dropping, spine coiling.

It was not just combat. It was recognition running underneath combat. When she fainted left, some older sense told me the real attack would come right, not from her eyes or her shoulders but from the spike in her scent, sharp and hot, the instant before she moved. My head turned into the rush before my brain gave permission. Later I would understand what had happened. The scent-match was not only heat and want. It was information. Her body telegraphed intent through scent the way a soldier telegraphed it through stance. The animal knew how to read it. The man was still catching up.

Snow sprayed off my shoulders as I pivoted. Her blade kissed fur and missed meat. The impact jarred up through my foreleg into my chest. I felt her surprise in the beat before she recovered, the professional recalibrating, and I knew she had felt it too: the strange synchrony of two bodies reading each other faster than thought.

She was good. I could see it in the way she moved, the economy of it, no wasted motion, every step placed. This was a woman who had put that iron collar on things that fought back, who had walked away from fights that should have killed her. But she was rattled. I could smell it on her, sharp under the pine smoke and winter apples. Adrenaline spike. Fear. And something else, something warm and confused that my new nose read without asking: want. Not the tactical kind. The other kind.

Her eyes kept dropping to my size, to the black bulk of me, like she was measuring me against something she'd been told about and never believed.

She came at me again, feinting left and coming in right, knife low, going for the soft meat behind my foreleg. I was already moving. Snow exploded under my paws as I pivoted, crust breaking, cold spraying across my muzzle. The knife kissed fur and missed meat by a finger's width. I felt the wind of it. I sidestepped the feint and met the real rush with my shoulder, and we went down together in a spray of snow, a tangle of limbs and fur. She got the knife up between us, and I got my jaws around her throat.

We froze that way. Her knife at my ribs. My teeth at her throat.

Snow hissed where it touched our heated skin. Her pulse hammered against my teeth. My claws dug shallow furrows in the snow. Neither of us moved.

I could have killed her. It would have been easy. One bite, one shake, the way the animal knew how. She had come into my yard with iron and orders. Nobody would have blamed the wolf.

Her pulse hammered against my teeth, fast and furious. Her breath came in short gasps that fogged in the cold. I could smell everything she was: the fear, sharp and clean, and the fury underneath it, and the pine smoke and winter apples, stronger now, close enough to drown in. And under all of it, the thing that stopped me cold.

She smelled like the feeling. The splinter behind my eyes. Twenty-nine years of certainty with no evidence. She smelled like the thing that had kept people alive.

I didn't understand it. I didn't need to. The animal understood it the way the animal understood everything: all the way down, past thought, in the blood.

And then, under my jaws, with my teeth at her throat and her life in my mouth, I heard it.

A whine. Low. Submissive. Heartbroken.

It came out of her, out of the woman pinned under a wolf the size of a small horse, and it was not a human sound. It was her wolf, surfacing past all her training and discipline, and it was whining at me the way a dog whines at the fence line, wanting and afraid in the same breath.

I knew that sound. I had made a version of it myself, two nights ago, curled around a boy in the dark.

It did something to my chest I didn't have a name for. All the fight went out of the air between us, and for a heartbeat I wasn't the thing with teeth. I was just something listening, the way you listen to a person crying in the next room, knowing you can't fix it and can't walk away either.

The iron collar lay in the snow where it had fallen, sprung and broken, the hinge shattered where my shoulder had hit the pine. She had gotten it half-shut. Half hadn't been enough.

My neck was burned where the iron had touched. I could feel it now that the adrenaline was fading, a band of cold fire around my throat, and when I nosed at it, the skin came away wrong, blistered in the shape of the band. It wasn't closing. Everything else the change had done to me had knit itself shut in minutes. This stayed open, weeping, angry.

Iron blocks the shift while it touches skin, she'd said. She hadn't said it keeps burning after. I filed that away with all the other things nobody had explained to me.

Slowly, with a care I was learning lived in the animal alongside the violence, I opened my jaws.

I stepped back. The shift rolled off me like water, and I was a man again, naked in the snow in my own front yard, shaking with cold and adrenaline and something I didn't have a name for. My clothes lay in rags where I'd been standing. Again. I was getting tired of losing clothes to this.

I grabbed the grocery bag and held it in front of myself, which was ridiculous, and she stared at me, and I stared at her, and the snow fell straight down between us.

For a long moment, neither of us moved. Her knife was still in her hand. I watched her weigh it, watched the professional try to reassert herself, and I could smell the war going on inside her: duty like gun oil, and under it the pine smoke and winter apples, and under that something raw and bewildered that had no training at all.

She didn't raise the knife. She let it drop into the snow.

She was sitting in the snow where she'd landed, her chest heaving. The professional was gone. What was left was a woman trying to put her training back on like a coat that didn't fit anymore. Her eyes kept going to the broken collar in the snow, the two halves of dark iron lying where they'd fallen, and every time she looked at it, her jaw tightened.

Her wolf had whined. I kept coming back to that. Under my teeth, with death a twitch away, her wolf had whined like a pup at a fence line. Whatever that meant, it had cost her something to let me hear it.

"You let me go," she said. Her voice was raw. The clipped professional was gone.

"You whined," I said.

Her face did something complicated. Shame and defiance and something else I couldn't read. "Feral shifters don't let go. When the animal takes over, it doesn't stop. That's the rule."

"I'm not feral." I shifted the grocery bag. This was the most undignified conversation of my life. "I'm barely house-trained. Two days ago I was a search-and-rescue tracker with a mortgage. I don't know the rules here. Nobody's explained a single damn rule to me. So let me ask the only question that matters."

I looked at her. Really looked at her. The woman who had come out of my tree line with iron in her hands and orders I didn't understand. Who smelled like pine smoke and winter apples and a match struck in a dark room. Whose wolf had whined under my teeth, wanting and afraid in the same breath, and who was sitting in my yard looking at me like I was the most dangerous thing she'd ever failed to kill.

"What's your name?"

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