

## Rougarou

*Wolves were extirpated from Indiana around 1908*

After Evie read the newspaper story to her grandfather and showed him the picture of the wolf that took up a quarter of the front page, he said, “If the wolves are back, they’re bringing the Rougarou with them.”

Evie had to smile.

“But isn’t that just a legend?”

“No, they’re real. Brought to this country by the French, centuries ago. I’ve seen them. Shapeshifters. Human and beast residing in one body.”

Evie’s grandfather was born and raised in Louisiana, a Cane River Creole, now dying in an Indiana nursing home. Came here with Evie’s German-American grandmother many years ago, when her grandmother inherited a twenty-nine acre farm nestled in the hills of southern Indiana. He hadn’t mentioned the Rougarou for years. But with his dementia came bits of information floating like algae on his watery memory. Right now, Evie’s grandfather was remembering the stories told to him back on the Bayou.

Evie listened and nodded as her grandfather rambled on. But her thoughts drifted elsewhere. She became lost for a moment in her own memories.

Of Jerome.

Even months later, the memory of Jerome’s death came to her at unnecessary times. Watching a game show on television, grilling a steak, walking into the hardware store, listening to her grandfather’s dementia tinted histories. Seeing for the thousandth time, the tremors, and

contractions of Jerome's thin torso being torn open by jacketed hollow point bullets. Jerome's body being dragged out of the Jeep and into the back of one of Huritt's white vans. The kilo of heroin they planned to sell to fund their getaway, hauled out of the secret compartment, thrown on top of Jerome's broken chest, and driven out of the Bayou.

Evie didn't call for the police, didn't scream for help. She knew better. Evie just scooted over to the driver's seat, started the Jeep's engine, turned it around and headed back to the fishing shack. All the while bathed in Jerome's blood and terror; trying to blink the fear out of her eyes.

It was night and there was no electricity in the shack, so she drew her Glock, pushed open the front door, and threw a shoe in to see if anyone were there to react. Nothing. She went in, aimed her cellphone light around the room.

No one.

She lit the kerosene lantern and clicked off her cellphone. She took the five gallon bottle of water that Jerome had sitting in the corner, and washed his blood off her skin as best she could. When she was done, she snuffed the lantern and waited in the dark, listening for a sound, any sound, to announce the arrival of her assassin. Huritt would not hesitate to kill her. She knew he ordered Jerome's murder. But his men didn't touch her with hand or bullet. She didn't know exactly why.

All Evie heard on that long night was the quiet sounds of the Bayou; crickets, nocturnal birds and every now and then, the soft splash of a gator breaking the water.

At the first light of morning, she cleaned the Jeep seats. There were drops and smears of Jerome's blood, but the seats were made of leather and easy to wipe clean. She knocked out the shards of safety glass from the edges of the driver's side window, changed her clothes, slung her

bag over her shoulder, got back into the Jeep and left.

The Glock laid next to her on the passenger side. In case they showed up again. In case she saw them before their bullets found her.

Right before she hit the edge of New Orleans, Evie threw the gun out the window into the waters of Lake Pontchartrain. Couldn't chance having it with her in case Huritt had sicced one of his drug-money cops on her.

She drove past New Orleans and on to Indiana, all the while checking her rear view mirror to see if anyone was following. She didn't allow herself to cry until she got near Bowling Green.

Now here she was, living off the money her mother gave her, still alive after ten months, sitting in her grandfather's nursing home room listening to his fading memories. Still, she wondered why Huritt hadn't found her and killed her.

That evening back at her grandfather's lonely farmhouse, she called her mother in Louisville.

"When are you coming to visit?"

"Soon Evie. Soon. We have a trade show coming up and after that, I'll come see him."

"He asks about you Mom. He needs to see you."

"I know. I'll be there soon, I promise."

"Did he tell you, there's been a wolf prowling around here? It was in the paper, spotted on a trail cam just last week," Evie said.

"Oh my goodness."

"Grandfather said if the wolves come back, they'll bring the Rougarou with them."

"He's on that kick again? Last time I talked with him, he was at the movies with your

grandmother. I tried to tell him that she passed away nine years ago and he attended the funeral, and that he was actually lying in a bed at Sweetwater Nursing Home. But he insisted so I let it go.”

“He’s in a better time. Living in his memories. It’s all he has left,” Evie said.

“Be careful Evie. Keep your gun with you.”

“I will.”

“Don’t walk up in the woods by yourself.”

“I won’t.”

Evie was sweeping the porch when she saw the cream colored Cadillac cruising down the blacktop, slowing at her driveway and turning in. She dropped her broom and bolted for the door. She went directly to her bedroom, grabbed up her new Glock 19 and ran back. She locked the screen and turned the deadbolt on the wooden door. She peaked out a window from behind the curtains.

Huritt. A little heavier, but still handsome. Longer hair, shorter sideburns. Alone. He removed himself from the car and walked slowly to the farmhouse, holding a bottle of Applejack brandy. He went to her Jeep and touched the taped plastic that Evie had put up to replace the missing glass at the driver’s side.

“No surprises,” he yelled at the house as he made his way through the front yard.

Evie eyed the shotgun that leaned against the wall in the living room corner. Grandfather gave her permission to use the twelve gauge that he called his Elephant Killer, if the tweakers ever decided to bother her but Evie still preferred a Glock. The shotgun had a serious kick.

She moved to the side of the front door. Not directly in front of the door or the window, she didn’t want to be a target.

There she stood, tense, eyes shining with fear, waiting until he knocked.

“What do you want?”

“Just to talk. No surprises.”

“About what?”

“Us.”

“There is no us.”

“You, then. Let’s talk about you. And me. Marriage maybe.”

Evie inched over to the front door, peered out the glass.

“No surprises,” he repeated. “I just want to talk.”

He held up the bottle of Applejack brandy.

“If you don’t want to talk at least let’s have a drink.”

She didn’t answer.

“Evangeline. Please.”

Huritt was the only one who ever called her by her proper name.

“Lift your arms,” Evie ordered.

He lifted his arms. She opened the door, unlocked the screen door, and patted him down with one hand while holding the gun on him with the other.

“Lift your pants legs.”

Evie knew he had a habit of carrying a pistol in an ankle holster.

He placed the brandy on a small square table that was situated between two wicker chairs on the porch and lifted the hem of one pant leg, then the other. No concealed weapons.

Evie looked past Huritt and past the half-grown corn stalks that stood in the field across the road from her house. She scanned the line of trees that grew behind the corn field. Evie saw

no movement of weeds or the hooded head of a sniper or the glint of gun metal shining in the sunlight. She pointed to one of her grandfather's wicker chairs, for him to sit.

The sky was the pale blue of early summer and the clouds floated wispy and slow like ghosts. Quiet except for the faint hum of an airplane flying high above. A perfect day, almost.

"I'll be right back," Evie said.

She went into the house, closed and locked the door behind her. She ran to her bedroom found the belly band holster that was on top of her dresser, strapped it on and placed the Glock in the holster. She walked quickly to the kitchen and grabbed two shot glasses.

She came back outside, watched suspiciously as Huritt opened the bottle and poured the Applejack into the shot glasses. He passed one to her.

Evie sat down beside him, slugged hers back and coughed just once. She felt it burn down her throat and welcomed the heat of it.

Huritt sipped and cherished his brandy as if it was an expensive single malt scotch.

"How'd you find me?"

Huritt ignored the question, smiling in silence while sipping his brandy.

"I'm not worth killing," she said.

"I want to show you something," Huritt said.

He pulled out his cellphone, opened a photo and handed off the phone. She'd already seen the picture. It accompanied the newspaper story she showed to her grandfather.

*If the wolves are here, they're bringing the Rougarou with them.*

The photo was a little blurry but there was no mistake. A wolf. Gray and tan fur, white around its muzzle, long tail, and paws as big as human hands. Eyes looking straight into the camera with an intense gaze.

Huritt watched Evie's face as she examined the photograph.

"This picture was taken about two miles from here," Huritt said.

Evie handed the phone back.

"Well I guess I shouldn't go up in the woods these days," she said.

"I would advise not to."

He took another sip.

"You look good, Evangeline. I like your new hair color. Blonde goes well with that olive skin of yours. It suits you."

She pulled up the edge of her baggy tee shirt to show Huritt that she still had her Glock.

He laughed, stood up quickly and turned to her.

Evie flinched.

"I want you back."

"You killed Jerome," Evie said.

"He stole from me."

"He was your cousin."

"No one steals from me."

"A fucking kilo, Huritt? You killed him for taking a kilo of your shitty heroin?"

"And you. He took you."

"I was not his to take. I was not yours to possess."

"I want you back home. With me. All will be forgiven."

Huritt's voice was calm. Like a pediatrician talking to a child before he brings out the needle.

"You're a fool if you think I'll come back to you," Evie said.

“I’m a fool then.”

“Why didn’t you tell your men to bring me back when they killed Jerome or why didn’t they kill me? I’ve been wondering that for months.”

“Jerome wasn’t dead when they brought him to me,” Huritt said. “The bullets didn’t kill him, but he died. Another way.”

Evie felt tears form in her eyes.

“What did you do to him/?”

“Nothing you need to know about,” Huritt said plainly. “He would’ve died from his bullet wounds anyway. Eventually.”

Huritt emptied his shot glass.

“But you spared me,” Evie said. “Why?”

“I hoped you would come back to me on your own free will,” he said. “I hoped that you would find, after some time, that you needed me and that you still loved me. I was waiting for a phone call, a text, something. But I got tired of waiting, so…”

Evie stood up, moved away from him, lifted her tee shirt again, took out the Glock and aimed the barrel at Huritt’s chest.

“Time for you to leave,” Evie said.

He smiled once more. A warm, radiant smile.

“Goodbye then Evangeline. Take care.”

He placed his empty shot glass on the metal table.

“Safe travels,” Evie said.

Huritt walked back to the Cadillac, started the engine, and drove away.

That night she couldn’t sleep. Huritt was planning something. He’d waited months for



Evie to come back, then hunted for her and after he found her he just drove away? He never gives up. Ever.

She finally fell asleep and woke up with a jerk. She was dreaming of Jerome. He was covered in blood but still alive. His eyes suddenly opened and looked at her.

She thought she heard Jerome's voice calling. From far away. She went to the bedroom window, opened the curtains, looked out, saw no one but heard it again. Was she still dreaming? She unlocked the window and inched it up.

*I am here.*

She heard it plainly now, coming from the direction of the woods, high on the hill.

*I am here. I am here.*

A cool rush of wind blew through the open window and his voice seemed to fly in with it.

*Beware.*

She slammed the window closed and locked it.

The next morning she went to visit her grandfather. Evie wanted to tell him about the dream and the voice she heard but she didn't want him to know about her past life in New Orleans. He didn't know about her flunking out of Tulane and ending up staying, only to take her clothes off for money in a seedy strip club in New Orleans. That is until she caught the eye of Huritt Cloutier who kept her like a bird in a golden cage, in his mansion facing Lake Pontchartrain. Evie never mentioned Jerome to her grandfather, the man who haunted her dreams, who vowed to release her from Huritt's stranglehold. The man who she loved. Who genuinely loved her.

Her grandfather complained that his feet hurt and she lifted one foot and removed his sock. The foot was swollen, the skin dry and flaking, the toenails crusted with yellow fungus.

She notified the hall nurse and went to the social worker's office to file a complaint.

She didn't speak to her grandfather of her dream or the voice calling to her or her hidden life in Louisiana that day. Instead, she went home weeping with fear for herself and worry about her grandfather.

At dusk she heard it again. Jerome's voice coming from the wildage that grew on top of the hill behind the farmhouse. Calling to her with sadness.

*I am here.*

She walked outside, her Glock in hand. She walked around the house and reluctantly started up the hill.

*Evangeline, I am here.*

Then she saw it. Not ten yards away, covered by brush and weeds except for its almond shaped eyes that were the color of dead leaves. Hackles at point, contemplating what to do with the human that stood before it.

Evie froze for a few moments, then slowly lifted her gun. She held her breath and steadied her hand. The wolf's eyes remained locked on to her face. She held the gun straight out like a television Annie Oakley.

She watched wide-eyed as it stood perfectly still, deciding when to attack. Or was it just her brain trying to imprint human thoughts on a wild animal?

The wolf moved toward her.

"No," she shouted. "No."

She waved her arms, made herself appear as big as she could. Did what she knew to do in case something like this happened.

The wolf took another step.

She fired the gun but the bullet missed. The wolf didn't recoil, but instead turned away momentarily, looked back at her one last time, then melted into the wheat colored weeds behind him.

She lowered her gun and ran back down the hill toward the farmhouse. He caught her halfway, pouncing onto her back and pushing her, headfirst, into the earth.

His jaws opened and he sunk his teeth into her neck. Evie's eyes rolled back and in a flash, she was inside him, under his skin. She felt encapsulated and compressed. Smothered by his need to possess and bite and tear. She felt Jerome there too. Trapped even deeper in bone and marrow. She felt the pounding of the wolf's legs sprinting back up the hill with her blood flying from his mouth.

Huritt never gave up. Ever.

He ate her heart and when he opened his mouth to howl, it was Evie's scream that echoed through the hills.