

## 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

dead body being dragged out of the Jeep and into the back of one of Huritt's white vans. The kilo of heroin that Jerome 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, 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 clicked it off, took the five gallon bottle of water that Jerome had sitting in the corner, and washed the blood off her skin as best she could.

She waited in the shack, in the dark, listening for a sound, any sound, to announce the arrival of her assassin. Huritt would not hesitate to kill her. She was sure he ordered Jerome's murder. But his men didn't touch her with hand or bullet. She didn't know exactly why.

All she 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 seat. 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 money-bought policemen 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 her meager savings, still alive ten months later, sitting in her grandfather's nursing home room, listening to his fading memories. Still, she wondered why Huritt didn't kill her.

That evening back at her grandfather's empty 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."

"Be careful Evie. Keep your gun with you."

"I will."

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

“I won’t.”

Huritt showed up that evening. A little heavier, but still handsome. Driving a rented Cadillac. Longer hair, shorter sideburns. Alone. He came with gifts of Applejack and bakery bought cookies. He parked on the gravel driveway and walked slowly to the farmhouse.

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

Evie grabbed her new Glock19. Grandfather gave her permission to use his shotgun if the tweakers ever decided to bother her but Evie still preferred a Glock. The shotgun had a serious kick.

She met him at the door, gun in hand.

Huritt said, “You look so pretty.”

Evie stood there, behind the screen door, not moving. Watching him closely.

“No surprises,” he repeated. “Just want to talk.”

“About what?”

He held up the bottle of Applejack.

“Let’s have a drink first, Evangeline.”

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 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 sat the cookies 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 slid her gun in a belly-band holster she wore under her shirt and pointed him to her grandfather's wicker chairs. The sky was the pale blue of early summer and the clouds floated wispy and slow like ghosts. Across the road, in her neighbor's field, half grown corn stalks stood in rows like little green soldiers.

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

She went into the house, closed and locked the door behind her, walked quickly to her kitchen and grabbed two shot glasses. She came back outside, watched while Huritt opened the bottle and poured the Applejack into the shot glasses. He passed one to her.

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

"Why are you here?"

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

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

"I want to show you something."

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.

He watched her face as she examined the photograph.

“This picture was taken about three miles from here,” Huritt said.

Evie handed the phone back.

“Well I guess I shouldn’t be going 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 remind Huritt about 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.”

“No, I was gone way before Jerome. Just my body was with you.”

“I want you home. Back with me. Body and all.”

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

Huritt emptied his shot glass.

Evie watched his face and saw that he was trying to form his answer in soft words. Not

easy for him to do sometimes.

“I hoped you would come back on your own free will,” he said. “I hoped that you would find out that you needed me and that you still loved me.”

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

“Leave me alone.”

He smiled once more. A warm, radiant smile.

“Goodbye then Evangeline. Take care.”

“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 searched for her for months 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 she 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 opening of the 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 Jerome. He knew nothing of her past life in New Orleans. She never told him about 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.

Huritt kept her like a stolen Princess in his mansion facing Lake Pontchartrain. Evie never mentioned Jerome, the man who haunted her dreams, who vowed to release her from Huritt's stranglehold. The man who she loved. Who truly 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 in his voice.

*I'm here.*

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

*Evangeline, I'm 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 him.

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 took a step 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.

It took another step.

She fired the gun toward it but the bullet missed. The wolf didn't flinch, 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 ruthless 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.