



A Prelude to *Foxy Lady*

Cougar Falls, Montana

Sheriff Ty Roderick had seen better days. Hell, he'd seen warmer days. The snow had melted in spots, but the wind still whipped his face raw. Tucked into his thick wool-lined jacket, he huddled and clenched his fists inside warm gloves, praying the idiots in front of him kept the noise to a minimum. He really didn't want to deal with the mayor after what he'd already been through.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, wishing he could redo his morning. Another raptor fight, more vandalism at the grocery store, and a domestic disturbance between two bears who'd do better to kill each other and put Ty out of his misery. He dealt with the "happy" couple at least once a week. Hell, the wife had claws twice the size of her mate's and a mouth that wouldn't quit. It was no wonder Hal drank.

Two hours later, after finally putting Hal and Linda back on the path to peaceful coexistence, he had to deal with *this* mess, and not a block from the mayor's reelection campaign. God, he needed an aspirin, a beer, a day off...

He needed to see Julia again.

Frowning at the thought, he stared at the scene behind the hardware store—thankfully away from the public eye-- and sighed. "Like a goddamn zoo." Next to mounds of scattered shoes and clothing, six animals circled each other as they readied to

brawl. Four gray wolves snarled at two sleek mountain lions. The six of them growled, spat and hissed amidst swipes and grumbles of warning.

“I really don’t need this shit, not today.” Ty tipped his hat back and waited them out. He’d give the combatants another few minutes to work it out of their systems. Then he’d get mean.

The cats nodded at him in greeting but didn’t take their gazes from the wolves baring sharp fangs. The wolves, as usual, ignored him. Fucking canines. He had better things to do than deal with Ac-taw who couldn’t keep their fists from flying.

Of all the shapeshifting clans in town, only the wolves had real problems with authority. The time was coming when the town would have to deal with them. *But not today. One fire at a time, Ty.*

The wolves nipped and darted close, but the cats easily dodged their attempts to maim. The pair worked in tandem to distract and swipe at the wolves. After a particularly daring bite at the smaller of the two catamount’s hind leg, the cats stopped playing with their prey. The larger of the cats leapt at the smaller one’s assailant and bit hard into his neck. The tangy scent of copper that filled the air was too strong for a slight wound.

Glaring at the pooling blood beneath the wolf, Ty snarled at the miscreants taking up his valuable time. “That’s it. *Turn* back and break it up, right the fuck now.” He had better things to do—like track down one troublemaking fox and force her to acknowledge his existence. Where was she?

Julia hadn’t been at work, nor was her car at home. Come to think of it, Ty hadn’t seen her sister, Gabby, either.

At least the men in front of him knew better than to screw with him in his current frame of mind. They quickly changed back into their human forms and dressed. The four wolves smelled drunk and looked as if they’d been through the wringer. The cats stared smugly at the wolves, stone-cold sober, victorious, and looking nowhere near through with the beating the wolves probably deserved.

“Grady and Dean Chastell, involved in a catfight. What a surprise,” Ty said flatly. He ignored Dean’s shit-eating grin and Grady’s look of innocence. “Get your asses back to the Catamount Ranch before I haul you both in for disorderly conduct. And all of you, finish getting dressed. Shit, you don’t want the mayor seeing your bare asses, do you?”

She's just around the corner."

The group hurriedly finished. Mayor Adkins had a thing for younger men. The woman should have been born a cougar, not a bear.

Grady chuckled as he finished buttoning his jeans and shrugged into his coat. "You're kidding, right? The whole town is in an uproar, what with the raptors' mutiny to overthrow their current leadership. You ask me, birds are good for two things. Deep fried or grilled."

Next to him, Dean laughed. The pair of cats were a pain in the ass, and the younger brothers of his good friend Burke. Which was the only reason he didn't take them in, well, aside from the jail being totally overcrowded at present with rival birds of prey.

"Get lost you two. And don't think Burke won't hear about this."

Dean muttered under his breath but did the smart thing and left. Grady lingered behind. "Sorry, Ty. Didn't mean to make a hash of things, but these four ran into our newest primate the other day and gave him some trouble. Just wanted to explain how it is with the pride."

Unlike the other clans in town, the Catamount Pride accepted anyone who met Burke Chastell's standards. Cat, wolf, fox, bear, or raptor didn't matter. To Burke, character meant more than the type of one's animal spirit.

"I should have known that somehow Monty Grayclaw would be involved. He's always got his finger in trouble around here, doesn't he?" Monty Grayclaw, once Ty's good friend, was a wolf who'd left Cougar Falls years ago and had recently returned. Monty still had a way with the ladies, and trouble still followed him like his own shadow.

The wolves snickered before Ty shot them a look warning them to behave. "The rest of you need to get gone. Back to your Order, and let your alpha know I'm making a formal complaint." A charge against the Wolf Order would put the group once again at risk of getting kicked out of town.

The wolves stopped smiling. One of them said, "Uh, Ty, that ain't necessary. A misunderstanding. We're just leaving."

"Leaving town?" Ty asked, conscious of Grady taking his sweet ass time departing the scene.

"Right. Yeah. Leaving town. Right now."

The wolves hurried away and out of sight.

Ty watched them leave, knowing he wouldn't file a complaint. He had too much to do to worry about the wolves right now. Especially since Gerald had informed him that the Silver Fox Clan had come up with more nonsense aimed at intimidating the younger foxes to fall in with idiotic shifter bureaucracy.

"You still here?" he barked at Grady.

The cat had the nerve to grin. A few years younger than Ty, Grady had a charming personality the ladies loved, and a sense of humor that could get a laugh out of just about anyone. "Just wanted to hang around in case you needed backup." He looked overly hopeful, and Ty couldn't contain a smile.

"Gee, thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"Hey, have you seen Julia lately?"

Grady shook his head. "No, but you should ask Sarah. You know the two are thicker than thieves. I saw her earlier at the Fox's Henhouse."

The popular diner would also be sure to have several other folks he didn't want to run into. Namely, his parents.

Ty sighed for what felt like the fiftieth time that morning. "Right. Thanks."

Grady left, and Ty headed for the diner. Fortunately, he ran into Sarah at the front door, just as she was leaving. He nodded to several folks who greeted him as they walked by, and he pulled Sarah aside, away from prying eyes and ears.

"Oh, Ty, I'm glad I caught you." The worry in her voice surprised him.

"Sarah?"

"I think Julia's in trouble."

Every hair on Ty's neck stood on end. "Say that again?"

Sarah twisted her hands together. "With all that's been going on in the raptor clan, I've been distracted. But I Julia's visiting that town in Washington again, where Megan's been staying."

At that moment, Sean Whitefeather, Sarah's mate's brother, joined her side. The tall raptor had a presence that seemed to fascinate several female passersby, who gave him more attention than his ego deserved. He winked at one of them and made her blush before she scurried into the diner.

Ty wondered if Julia had ever looked at Sean with stars in her eyes and immediately

stopped that train of thought. As if he needed more worry about the fool woman.

Sean shook his head. “Outsider troubles, Ty. You’d best see to that quick, before the town council takes notice.”

“You think?” Ty snapped.

Sean raised a brow but said nothing else. Know-it-all bird.

Sara continued. “Julia called me the other day, but I couldn’t hear her that well. When I tried to call her back, I couldn’t get through.”

Ty grew impatient. “What did she say that you did hear?”

Sarah swallowed. “Something about hunters, I think.” When his and Sean’s eyes widened, she quickly amended, “But she said not to worry. She had it all under control. You know Julia.”

Julia Easton was cool, calm, and efficient. She never needed help, filed Gerald’s legal papers like a pro, and had never been late for work a day in her life. She used to hand Ty a cup of coffee each day, along with a smile and some small talk, when he’d stop in to see Gerald.

Now he was lucky not to get frostbite if they crossed paths. And his parents had the nerve to tease him about it.

Annoyed all over again, and now worried, Ty had to force himself to sound calm. “Hunters? Sara, Julia’s one hell of a paralegal, but she can’t handle Hunters.” Though the town maintained secrecy from the human populace at large, there were factions of people who knew the Ac-taw existed... and wanted them dead. Hunters.

Hunters lived to kill Ac-taw. A group of them always seemed prepared to annihilate any and all Shifters they could find. The scourge of Ty’s kind. And Julia might be mixed up with them. *Shit.*

Sean scowled. “Sarah, why didn’t you say something before?”

Sarah poked him in the shoulder, the once hesitant golden eagle no longer intimidated by anyone, apparently. “If I thought she was in danger, I would have. I told you, the connection was bad. She didn’t say anything about being in danger. Julia loves her sisters. She’s not so proud she wouldn’t ask for help if Hunters were after her family. She’d come to you for help, Ty.”

Sarah looked so earnest. He didn’t have the heart to tell her that Julia would do anything but ask Ty for help.

At that moment, Laura, one of his deputies, yelled out his name. “Ty, we need you right away. The mayor’s kid just crashed his car into Stovall’s truck, and to say Stovall’s not taking it well is putting it mildly.”

Hell, the grizzly might very well eat the mayor’s kid for touching his brand new pride and joy, let alone ramming into it.

Ty swore under his breath and wanted to pull his hair out by the roots. To Sarah, he said, “I’ll deal with this, then I’ll take care of Julia. Where can I find the stubborn woman?”

“Nowhere, Washington.”

“Nowhere. Now doesn’t that just fit?”

“Ty, Stovall just ripped the door off Jimmy’s car!” Laura shouted.

Sean tried to mask a grin, the smart ass. “Sure am glad I’m not the sheriff. Angry bears, crazy kids, and the mayor’s politics make for one miserable day.”

“And all before noon.” Ty exhaled a long breath and turned to deal with an angry bear and a no doubt nervous cub. *Julia Easton, you are on next on my list. Come hell or high water, we’ve got some talking to do. And God help you if you’ve run into real trouble, because after I deal with it, I’m dealing with you.*