

FORBIDDEN

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Chapter 1

Fear wasn't something Claire Evans thought she'd ever feel again, but an all-too-familiar buzzing filled her ears while bile rose into her throat. Adrenaline raced through her veins, and her muscles flexed involuntarily, as though striking at an invisible foe. The sensations were hardwired into her from that time, long ago. But now she was just a passenger in a car in rural Washington, with no enemy that she could feel or smell. Yet she was alert and wary.

"You feel it too, don't you? The dark tightens around your throat like a hand." Danielle's tremulous whisper beside Claire made her start and turn her head to look at the lovely African-American woman driving the car.

She tried to shrug it off. "I'm a Sazi . . . a wolf. The dark doesn't scare me." So why is my heart pounding like it's going to leap out of my chest? She stared out the windshield where the bright headlights barely held the night at bay, looking for something . . . anything that would explain what she was feeling. Analyze the fear, Claire. Force it to reveal itself.

Danielle Williams's laugh held just a touch of hysteria. "It's not the dark, girlfriend. It's what's in the dark. Strange things live in the forest here. Stuff that even scares those that hunt at night. It's why I'm the one driving you tonight."

Claire turned in her seat to face Danielle more squarely. "Come again?" Before the other woman could open her mouth to respond, Claire took a deep breath through her nose and knew abruptly why fear had been tightening her throat. It wasn't her own fear filling the air . . . it was Danielle's. Underneath the thick scent of feathers that she expected to smell from an owl-shifter was the unmistakable sour scent of near-panic. An owl scared of the dark? That was wrong on so many levels. There had to be something deeper at work. "What's wrong, Danielle?"

A long pause followed. Claire let it grow until the other woman couldn't stand the pressure anymore. "It's my . . . little sister and . . . brother." The words were choked out with

long gulps of air between. Claire didn't have to ask their names; though she'd just met Danielle tonight, she'd done her homework on her host family. Nineteen year old Danielle was the oldest biological child of John and Asylin Williams. Ten year old Kristy was the youngest and fourteen year old Darrell was in the middle. But the Williamses weren't content to raise only their own children. They'd opened their home to more than a dozen orphans from the plague and raised them as their own. Many "after plague siblings" of various races, families and shifter species had come and gone through their massive, hand-built home during the last decade, making it the perfect place for Claire to stay and to gather information. Danielle snuffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve. "Kristy and Darrell have been missing for three days now. Nobody knows where they are. I left college to come home and help search."

"Oh, man! What happened?" Three days? Why hadn't she been told yet? Or did Wolven not know about the disappearances?

"Kristy was supposed to spend the day at a friend's house. When dinnertime rolled around and she hadn't come home, Mom sent Darrell to get her. When neither one made it back after another hour, Mom called Isabelle's family. They hadn't seen Kristy all day. Hadn't seen Darrell either." Danielle drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. Claire felt the speed of the car increase and began to push magical energy out in a wave in front of the car to hopefully warn any prey animals to avoid the roadway. The last thing they needed was to hit a deer and wreck the car.

Danielle kept talking, the words tumbling over themselves in a rush. "Mama should have called me that day. I would have come to help look for them. But she didn't want to bother me. Damn it! Kristy's only ten and Darrell's not much older. They haven't even shifted for the first time." Tears glistened in the orange light from the dash. Danielle wiped them away with an angry hand before clutching the wheel again, wrapping fingers around it like talons around a snake.

Claire reached out to touch the other woman's shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Danielle. I understand just how you feel." In fact, she understood more than Danielle could imagine. She had once been one of the missing. Worse, to many in her hometown, she still was. It's why she was the perfect person to send here to investigate.

I wonder if there have been other disappearances. Is that why nobody is talking to Wolven?. She was young to be part of the Sazi law enforcement branch, and only a few people even knew she was active. But the agent on duty in Luna Lake wasn't didn't seem to be sending in reports of anything abnormal . . . or at least, nobody admitted to getting them. She was being planted in the town by the Sazi Council to find out what was happening. Her primary task was to find out why people were missing from the official reports, even though the town leaders claimed everyone was accounted for. While it was likely just a clerical error, it could be dangerous if someone was hiding something. Thankfully, because she was bound to the Texas wolfpack, she could mentally contact her pack leaders, Adam and Cara Mueller—Wolven agents

and police officers both—in a crisis. She had to work hard to make the connection work and it gave her a bad headache, but it was better than nothing. . “Is there anything I can do? Once we arrive, I mean.”

Danielle put up a helpless hand. The wet scent of sorrow filled the car, smothering the sour panic. “I don’t know. Maybe. We can use every set of eyes. Maybe, as an outsider, you’ll see something the rest of us are missing.”

An outsider. It seemed strange to be considered an outsider in a town that was all Sazi. No shifter should ever be considered an outsider. That was the whole point of the encampments that had been formed after the plague: to welcome and protect Sazi of all species. Claire tried hard to project confidence into the car. The gift of empathy was still new to her and she wasn’t very good at projecting emotions yet. But the healer back in Texas had told her it could be a valuable tool for investigating once she was more skilled. She only knew she was succeeding when the hot metal scent of determination rode up over the musty damp smell of fear.

“Anything I can do,” she said firmly.

They went back to watching the dark landscape slip by in a blur while Claire struggled to keep Danielle’s fear from overwhelming her. She couldn’t afford to become an amplifier of someone else’s negativity. She tried to concentrate on the bits of roadside that was highlighted in the headlamps for brief seconds: A speed limit sign which they were presently exceeding by at least ten, then red and yellow leaves that whisked into the air, swirling around the hood and over the roof, even a bright bit of metal in the grass, shining silver before disappearing. But it was no use—the more silence that passed, the more time she had to dwell on possibilities, and the greater the fear grew. Claire needed to take Danielle’s mind off the situation. “Tell me a little about Luna Lake. Where might the kids have spent the day if they didn’t go to their friend’s?”

Danielle shrugged. “I’ve been wondering the same thing. There’s not much to the town. There’s no arcade or anything and no mall. The nearest town is Republic, but it’s too far to walk. There’s an ice cream store but that’s the first place Mama checked. S.Q.’s a sucker for little kids with wide eyes. Gives them so many free samples that they wind up sick in the morning. Of course, that means every kid in town hangs out there.” She must have realized Claire didn’t know the people in town, because she explained. “S.Q. Wrill . . . with a ‘W’ . . . owns Polar Pops on Main Street. She’s a nice lady but you’d think a falcon would have more brains. I swear she’d forget her head if it wasn’t attached.”

“S.Q.? That’s her real name? Just initials?”

“It’s sure what I’d call myself if I had her given name. Everyone blends the letters and calls her Skew. Her mama should have been ashamed.” Danielle shook her head as the road slipped by. She didn’t continue until Claire prompted.

“Which is?”

“I’ll have to spell it. S-e-n-s-a-b-i-l-e. Her middle name is Quille, with an ‘e’ at the end. I mean . . . really? Her mama must have been high as a kite when that poor girl was born.” She tsked, clucking her tongue like a chicken, and then sighed.

Claire struggled not to laugh out loud. Wow. Sensibille . . . Quille . . . Wrill. No kidding, poor girl. But this was all great stuff. Learning about the people in Luna Lake would not only keep Danielle occupied, Claire would learn a ton about the town. Already the scents in the car were lightening. “Interesting. What else is there to keep kids occupied? Is there a playground?”

“Oh, sure. Back behind the school. The whole town pitched in to build it. Monkey bars, teeter-totter, swings . . . even a climbing wall. But they keep it fenced off so nobody uses it after school.”

Claire let out a small laugh. “Fences never kept me out when I was a kid. I’d climb over, slip under. Nothing could keep me from the swings. Made me feel like I was flying.”

The owl shifter flicked a glance her way. “Oh, swings feel nothing like flying. Trust me.”

There wasn’t anything to say to that, and Claire was grateful beyond measure she would never know. Her life would have been totally different if she’d gotten wings instead of fur. Totally, frighteningly different. She fought to keep from shuddering. “But the kids had never shifted, right? So they couldn’t just hop over the fence?”

“Puleeze,” Danielle’s voice held scorn. “Sazi designed the fence. We have birds of all sorts, cats that can jump two stories high, wolves that can dig through near solid stone. You can’t just hop over. It’s no ordinary fence. You’ll have to see it to understand.”

Danielle slowed the car, flipped on the blinker and made a turn onto a much narrower paved road. There were no shoulders and no striping. But there was a sign, the only indication of where they were. They would arrive in Luna Lake in ten miles.

Claire asked, “Why bother to block off the playground? It’s not like the kids will get hurt. They’ll heal.” It was the long standing saying among their kind. Nearly anything would heal. No wound was too bad. Head and heart both had to be damaged to kill.

Danielle’s voice was surprised, but the underlying scent that rode the air to Claire was haunted, filled with sorrow, fear, and pain. “Nobody heals since the plague. Where have you been? Hardly anyone heals better than full humans. We’re really cautious because we lost our healer last winter. We don’t know why she died.”

Wow. Claire struggled to wrap her mind around that. What would it take to kill a healer short of major injuries? “In Texas, the kids run around like wild animals. It’s a rare day someone isn’t digging cactus spines from their legs and arms, or getting treated for snake bites.” Like

Luna Lake, the Tedford Compound was remote, but they had the luxury of several healers nearby and most of the pack was healthy. “Have you applied to the Council for a new healer?”

Danielle let out a snort as she turned on the wipers to knock a layer of dead bugs from the windshield. “You must have some sort of magic potion down there then. That’s not how it works up here. We’ve applied for a new healer dozens of times. I don’t think the Council even remembers we exist. We haven’t had a councilman visit or call in years.”

Again Claire felt a moment of shock. A member of the Sazi high council was through her town every few months. Was it really that different up here, or were the townsfolk in Luna Lake being fed a line? She couldn’t smell or sense any deception from Danielle. On first impression, it appeared she really believed that they had been sent adrift by the Sazi hierarchy.

“Of course,” Danielle continued, “It’s not that different from the human government. The area struggles. So we have to be pretty self-sufficient. We’re on the only road close to town that doesn’t need repairs. You need a jeep for some of the back roads. We do the best we can on the money we have.” She paused and then sighed. “But it would be nice if we could get a doctor. We can’t take the kids to the hospital in Republic. What if they did a blood test?”

We’ll check into it. Count on it.

Claire faintly heard the voice of her pack leader, Adam Mueller, in her mind and it made her feel better to know they were there and could still hear through her ears, even though the contact made her temples throb sharply.

She knew both Adam and Cara would take action on what she observed. But Danielle . . . in fact, none of the people in Luna Lake could know it was being worked on. She steeled herself for the pain that made nerves scream through her skull and replied to her pack leaders the same way. Please be discreet. Otherwise, it did no good to send me here.

One word rang through her mind, bearing the distinctive Tejano accent she’d come to know from her surrogate mother. Duh.

It nearly made her laugh and Claire had to struggle not to let her amusement show in her face or scent. So she immediately concentrated on what it would feel like to have a child in the house who was injured where they couldn’t go to a human doctor, and a Sazi one was days or weeks away. “Sorry to hear about your healer. Are there a lot of elderly in town? How many kids?”

Danielle nodded. “A fair number. We just have one school in town, K through twelve. There’s about fifty students. There’s probably two hundred total Sazi in and around Luna Lake, scattered around. About half of the adults are over 40. It was bigger right after the first attack, but not everybody’s suited to life up here. The people who came from big cities wound up moving to other compounds, closer to sewer systems and grocery stores.

Claire nodded in agreement. “Yeah, same problem at the Tedford Compound. Not everybody is up for the heat and cactus, or boiling well water to drink and wash in, or using outhouses where we can’t even put in septic.”

A flash of light outside the car caught Claire’s eye and she pointed out the windshield. “What in the world is that?” The green glow seemed to pulse with a life of its own. It swooped and danced in the black sky like dragon dancers at Chinese New Year. It disappeared and reappeared through the towering treetops along the road.

“Ooo!” Danielle slowed the car and moved to the side at a spot where there were fewer trees and they could see the sky. “It’s the Northern Lights. We don’t see them often, and they always seem to be green when they appear this far south.”

Claire had seen videos of the Northern Lights, but had never seen them in person. It was surreal. Once the car was fully stopped, she opened her car door, which made Danielle nervous. “We can’t stay more than a second. We really need to get to town soon.”

“A second is all I need. I just want to see it without the glass.” The image drew her, pulled her to stand up, one foot still on the floorboards of the car. The scents of the night hit her nose in a rush, adding to the frozen moment. The air was so incredibly clean. Crisp, powerful, filled with pine and apples, and with a hint of far distant snow on the wind. A variety of animal scents made her turn her head this way and that, but she never took her eyes off the dancing lights. Deer in the deep brush, birds in the trees, along with musky plant eaters she had no name for yet. Possibly elk or moose. Or maybe even bear. She’d never smelled them before.

After a few moments, she was satisfied and started to get back in the car. But movement in the darkness caught her eye. Whatever was pushing against her senses was large—as big as the car, at least. But though she tried, flaring her nostrils and inhaling deeply, she couldn’t smell a thing. It was as though the rest of her senses were lying to her. Claire hadn’t been born a Sazi; she’d become one after she’d learned to rely on senses other than her nose. And what her eyes and the prickling hairs on her neck told her was she needed to leave. Now. She slid back inside the car, grabbing her seatbelt on the way down. “We need to go. Hurry!”

“Wha—” But apparently the look on Claire’s face, her scent, or maybe she’d accidentally pressed onto the owl shifter a bit of her own urgency . . . something was enough to silence Danielle. She slammed the gearshift down and hit the gas, hard enough that it threw Claire back against her headrest.

The car lurched sideways when something impacted the back door on the driver’s side. Danielle let out a small screech and tightened her grip on the steering wheel until her knuckles were white. The car leapt forward. Claire felt her own fingers tighten on the arm rest. She kept checking the rear view mirror, but there was nothing to see in the darkness behind them. That didn’t stop her heart from racing or a low growl from building in her chest. The wolf part of her

wanted to turn and fight. The human side knew that anything capable of making a moving car swerve was nothing to mess with. She glanced at the instrument panel. Their speed was sixty and increasing. The little car's engine wasn't very powerful and eighty was the best they could hope for. That should have been plenty fast enough to outrun any animal on the planet, and any Sazi short of a council member.

It wasn't.

The tires squealed against the pavement when an unseen something hit the back bumper, pushing them forward and then sideways. Danielle turned into the skid as though on an icy road and they shot forward again. They were only a few miles from town now. Most predators, human or otherwise, wouldn't risk continuing an attack where it could be seen. "C'mon, c'mon. Move, you piece of junk." Danielle was whispering but the words seemed loud to Claire.

The landscape whizzed by as seconds passed. The sour, bitter scent of panic burned her nose every time Claire inhaled.

Just when the lights of the town appeared around a bend, an unearthly howl filled the car and the world upended in a rush of metal, glass . . . and pain.