

The background of the cover is a vibrant, high-angle photograph of a forest waterfall. The water is white and frothy as it tumbles over dark, moss-covered rocks. Sunlight filters through the dense green foliage, creating a dappled light effect on the rocks and water. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

# CHASING BIGFOOT

A *SHIFTER AGENTS* STANDALONE STORY

LAUREN ESKER

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## A *Shifter Agents* standalone story

Lauren Esker

This takes place shortly after *Guard Wolf* and features characters from *Handcuffed to the Bear*.

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Casey McClaren stepped down from the driver's side of the truck and took a deep breath of the pine-scented air. The trees pressed close around the clearing, a forest like a dark wall, draped with moss and gray with rain. Her hiking boots sank into mud, and she pulled the hood of her slicker over her head.

It was quiet here on the Olympic Peninsula, even with vehicles crowding the tiny parking lot at the trailhead. Disembodied voices floated to them from among the fog-draped trees, but here in the parking lot, the only sounds were the rain's soft patter and the pops and pings of the truck's cooling engine. When she concentrated, she could hear the distant drone of an engine, perhaps a jet or a vehicle elsewhere on the park road. But they were deep in the mountains here.

Except for the road, this place could belong to a different, much earlier time.

This morning they'd left their downtown Seattle condo, picking up Starbucks on their way through town, just like any other day. Now, three hours later, they seemed to have not only left the city behind, but the entire century.

The passenger door slammed, and Agent Jack Ross grinned a winning, white-toothed smile at her over the roof as he snugged a Mariners cap down over his short dark hair, keeping the rain off his glasses. "You're lead on this one, Trainee McClaren."

Casey stuck her hands in the pockets of her slicker. "I still can't believe you gave me Bigfoot for my first field case. That's just not right."

"Hey, Bigfoot sightings are up this year, and we're the agency that deals with weird stuff. It can't all be secret mad science labs and rogue lion shifters, you know."

"Thank God," Casey muttered.

"Are you the federal agents?"

The speaker hurried down the gravel path to meet them at the edge of the parking lot. She was a small, dark woman, bundled in a yellow slicker over a beige uniform. "Shirley Bedeker, Park Service," she said, shaking first Jack's hand and then Casey's. "Thank you for coming out. I know this is a little irregular."

"This barely registers on the scale of irregular stuff we've seen, believe me," Jack said. He glanced at Casey, his expression encouraging.

*You're lead on this one.* Apparently that meant she'd be asking the questions too. Casey straightened her back and tried to project an air of confidence and self-assuredness, though she suspected it only looked like she'd had a little too much coffee. "Can you show us the damaged structure, please?"

"Of course." Shirley Bedeker led the way with a rapid, ground-eating stride. "I really hate to bother you, because I'm sure it's a hoax. We get a few of them every year. But rarely with this level of vandalism, or, er ... persistence."

Jack gave Casey another encouraging look. She fumbled in her pocket and pulled out a notebook, on the general principle that a proper investigator ought to have a notebook, only realizing as she flipped it open that a completely blank notebook, fresh from Staples, wasn't going to make the hoped-for impression. Still, she pushed onward. "On the phone, you said this was the fourth incident this year, correct?"

"Yes, although it's hard to say if they're all the same people. Unfortunately, we always have some vandalism, as well as occasional bear damage. But this time, there are—wait, stop." She paused at a pair of traffic cones, blocking off part of the path. "Look here."

A set of footprints were clearly impressed where the gravel turned to mud at the path's edge. They were bare, human-looking, and each was at least eighteen inches long.

"Fake?" Jack asked.

"Of course they're fake. It's not the first time someone's come up here with rubber feet and made Sasquatch footprints. But combined with the vandalism, it's really too much."

She pointed up the trail, where the massive pines and cedars thinned out in a clearing at the trailhead, and Jack and Casey got a look at what had been a set of bathroom facilities.

Now, there was nothing but wreckage. The roofs of the two small buildings had been pulled off, the walls dragged down. The rubble was spread over several dozen square yards, looking forlorn in the rain. About a dozen people in slickers or ponchos wandered about the wreckage, taking pictures, pouring plaster to make casts of whatever they found on the ground, and murmuring to each other in low voices.

"Investigators?" Casey asked Bedeker.

Bedeker's face assumed a long-suffering expression. "Squatchers."

"What?" Casey asked blankly.

"Sasquatch hunters," Jack put in. "The Bigfoot brigade. They're all over around here."

"Honestly, most of them are good people," Bedeker said. "They contribute to the local economy and don't leave the place a mess. At times like this, though, I wish they didn't have quite such a well-organized grapevine. They even managed to beat the police out here."

Casey prodded at a downed piece of the wall with the muddy toe of her hiking boot, lifting it to reveal another partial Bigfoot print. "This just happened last night, right?"

"Yes. We reported it to the police, of course, but it's not a high priority for—Oh, excuse me!" She headed off across the clearing toward a cluster of people leaning over a strand of yellow CAUTION tape. "Excuse me, that area is off limits."

"What do you think?" Casey asked Jack in an undertone. He'd squatted down to examine a shattered chunk of the roof. "This was vandals, right? A bear couldn't have done this."

"Well, I definitely know bears don't make rubber Bigfoot tracks. At least, the non-shifting kind don't." He touched the splintered edges. "A bear would have the strength. But the damage would look different. There should be claw marks and signs of biting. Bears don't tear things up for fun. They're looking for food. And this looks more like human-caused destruction."

"Using what?" Casey asked, looking around at the scattered pieces of the buildings. "A bulldozer?"

"You could do a remarkable amount of damage simply by hooking a rope to the tow hitch of a pickup truck. Sometimes people can be—"

A camera went off in their direction with a flash of light.

Casey spun around. The photographer, a punk-styled young woman, was squinting through the viewfinder of a cheap digital camera at them, holding a plastic bag over it with her other hand. Half her head was shaved and the hair on the other half was teased up into a tousled white-blond perm, with pink and blue streaks in the front, now wilting in the drizzle. She wore an oversized WSU hoodie, hiking boots, and—despite the chilly weather—a pair of tan cargo shorts that left her legs bare. Or ... her leg. The right was flesh and blood; the left was a high-tech black and chrome prosthetic with a rubber cover wrapped around the knee to keep the rain off. The cover had a skull spray-painted on it in Day-Glo pink.

"Miss Moreland," Jack said. "I take it this is Bigfoot week?"

"Every week is Bigfoot week in the Pacific Northwest, Agent Ross." She gave him a cheery smile.

"Casey, meet Peri Moreland, Seattle's number one conspiracy theorist."

"Oh, that's flattering, but you should know I'm number four or five at best." Moreland continued to photograph the shattered remains of the rest area as she spoke. "Any comment on the reports of werewolf activity in downtown Seattle, Agent Ross?"

"Rumors," Jack said. "*Rumors* of werewolf activity. Halloween was a week ago, Miss Moreland. As one professional to another, I shouldn't have to tell you that the supernatural rumor mill goes nuts at this time of year."

"As one professional to another, what *does* your agency do all day, Agent Ross?" Peri Moreland inquired. "Can it be we're out here for the same reason?"

"Obviously we are, but I think the two of us are expecting different outcomes."

The look of irritation that crossed Moreland's face appeared to be genuine. "I never said I believed in Bigfoot, Agent. I'm here for the truth, that's all." She gave him a long, searching look.

"Something I believe your agency knows a little more of than they'd like to admit."

She strode off. The prosthesis didn't seem to slow her down.

"I sincerely hope she didn't lose that leg in a tragic encounter with a shifter or anything like that," Casey murmured. "Er, she's not a shifter herself, is she?" It still annoyed Casey that, unlike most shifters, she couldn't identify others of her kind by sight. She and Jack guessed it was something to do with Casey having grown up away from other shifters, raised by her non-shifting grandmother. Or maybe it was simply a minor disability; Jack said the shifters' ability to sense each other varied from person to person, and some didn't have it at all, like color-blindness in humans.

"No to both of those questions. Well, as far as I know. She's just a persistent thorn in our side."

"Who happens to be right," Casey pointed out.

"Yeah, I know. But we can't exactly tell her that."

Jack pulled a camera from his pocket and began snapping photos of the wreckage. The two of them worked their way over to where Shirley Bedeker was scolding a not-very-chastised-looking pair of college-age kids about staying on trails. A large section of the woods at the edge of the clearing was cordoned off with the CAUTION tape.

"What's behind there?" Casey asked, peering over it herself. All she saw was forest floor. "Tracks?"

"No, this is one of the few places in the park where we have an established patch of Pacific white arnica." Bedeker pointed proudly to a scraggly weed that looked, to Casey, indistinguishable from the other half-dead weeds around it. "It's very rare. The park is the only place in the state where it can still be found, and it doesn't transplant well."

Jack looked like he was suppressing a grin. "Okay if we ask you some questions about the other vandalized buildings? You said there were several other incidents."

"Come here and I'll show you on the map."

Where the trail left the clearing and entered the woods, there was a large map on a signboard. Bedeker pointed to the "You Are Here" button and then traced her finger up the trail, to a location seven or eight miles away. "The most recent one was the Cross Creek warmup shelter, two weeks ago."

"Was it the same thing?" Casey asked. "A destroyed building with Bigfoot tracks around it?"

Bedeker nodded. "Unlike the trailhead here, the Cross Creek cabin is accessible only by an ATV road, and there was no sign of recent vehicle activity. We assumed a bear had done it, and that the tracks were added later by someone else playing a hoax. Before that ..." Her finger moved along the trail. "Some of the interpretive signs on the canyon loop trail were damaged this summer, and a boardwalk through the wetlands was torn up around the same time. A little damage during peak season isn't unusual, and it wasn't until the most recent incidents that we started to think they might be related."

"They're escalating," Jack said thoughtfully.

"I'm afraid it looks that way. The damage to the Cross Creek cabin wasn't so extensive. We'll be able to repair it before the start of the spring tourist season. This, though ..." She spread her hands helplessly at the devastation in the clearing. "The rest area will have to be completely rebuilt, and we haven't got the money for it."

Thinking about the destruction as the result of human agency, not a curious animal, gave Casey an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. "They must have been very angry," she said.

Jack gave her a look that was a little curious and, she thought, approving.

"More likely drunk," Bedeker said. "Kids get wasted, come out and cause trouble. This isn't the first time it's happened, though this is the worst I've seen since I've been working here."

"I suppose so," Casey said, but she was thinking that the thoroughness of the destruction around her spoke of fury, not boredom.

"Okay if we walk back on the trails, take a look around?" Jack asked.

"Of course. Let me know if you have any more questions." Bedeker looked ruefully at the downed pieces of the buildings. "I'll be here for a while yet, keeping an eye on this bunch. Do you need this left in place, or is it all right if we start cleaning up the site?"

Casey looked at Jack, who said, "Can you wait until tomorrow to start cleaning up?"

"I guess an extra day is hardly going to make a difference." Bedeker sighed heavily, and turned around. "*No*, you can't be over there—"

Jack flashed Casey a quick grin and jerked his head at the woods. The two of them started into the woods on the trail that led to the other vandalized cabin. Casey put away her notebook, empty except for a couple of scribbled notations on the other incidents and a doodle of a stick-figure Bigfoot with a question mark above its head.

"That's a good point about the culprit being angry," Jack said, as they left the commotion of the clearing behind. "I was thinking something along those lines, too."

Casey tried not to preen. "Maybe someone who's trying to make a protest statement? Like, about government waste or something."

"But that doesn't go along with a Bigfoot hoax," Jack pointed out. "Though it's possible they were right the first time, and the Bigfoot tracks were left by different people than the vandals."

The wet weather and the heavy coating of moss on every tree and boulder dampened sound, lending an eerie hush to the forest. In her two-legged shape, Casey's sense of smell wasn't much keener than a normal human's, but the damp weather held scents that even her blunt human nose could detect, and her lynx instincts stirred. As an urban shifter, she didn't often get a chance to experience the deep woods.

"Are we hiking all the way up to the other cabin today?" With the clammy chill in the air, she sincerely hoped not.

"What, the vandalized one? No, not right now. I was thinking we'll find out more if we're able to sniff around, literally."

"Ah," she said. "Find somewhere to shift."

Jack nodded.

By now, twists and turns of the trail had taken them far enough from the trailhead that Casey could no longer hear human voices, except when a trick of wind or distance carried a snatch of conversation to her ears. It might not be truly private back here, but it felt like it.

She brought her hand near Jack's, but couldn't quite decide if it was unprofessional and inappropriate to hold hands or not, even if no one was watching. They were still figuring out the balance between having a relationship and working together in the field. The SCB had no policy against dating co-workers, and Jack wasn't her official superior, although much of her training thus far had been with him. Casey only knew that she didn't want to screw up either of these things: her relationship with Jack, which was still new and tentative—they'd only known each other for four months—but at the same time the best thing she'd ever known; and her job with the SCB, which had given her new purpose and direction after she had lost virtually everything.

Jack smiled down at her and brushed the backs of his fingers against the backs of hers.

Then he stepped off the trail into the damp foliage, fading behind the thick bole of an evergreen festooned with moss. "Keep lookout for me, and then I'll cover you."

"What do we do with our clothes?" she asked, taking up a station in front of the tree.

Jack took a trash bag from his jacket pocket and shook it out. "Way ahead of you."

"Wow, you thought of everything."

"I hate wearing wet pants."

Casey tilted her head to keep an eye out down the path while also, from the corner of her eye, watching Jack sliding his jeans over narrow hips. "Gotta say, I heard the view was nice in this park, but I had no idea."

Jack laughed. He folded his glasses and tucked them into a pocket of his jacket before packing it in the bag. "Before you shift, make sure this is well hidden behind the tree. Hate to have some hiker walk off with our wallets and car keys."

"Will do."

He stood naked now, hip-deep in ferns. Before Casey could properly soak in the image, he leaned forward and shifted. The enormous grizzly bear erupted from Jack's muscular, tattooed body. Casey caught her breath; she never tired of watching his smooth, effortless shifts.

Jack raised his head, pricking his round, furry ears. His muzzle wrinkled as he scented the wind. Muscles rippled under blond-tipped brown fur as he waded through the ferns onto the trail.

"We're going to scare the hell out of any hikers who spot us," Casey said, taking his place behind the tree.

Jack made a huffing sound.

"Same to you, buddy." One of the problems with shifting was that they couldn't talk; the throats and vocal cords of their animal forms were unable to accommodate human speech. A shifter got good at using body language to convey meaning, though, and right now she was reading Jack's impatience loud and clear. She didn't blame him. There weren't many opportunities for a giant grizzly to shift in the middle of downtown Seattle. It had been awhile since Jack got to stretch his grizzly's legs.

Gooseflesh prickled on her bare skin as she folded one item after another into the big black trash bag. She shook mud and water off her hiking boots before putting them on top of her slicker, standing with her bare feet sunk deep in cool moss. November wasn't yet cold enough to snow, at least not this low in the mountains, but she could feel the wintry chill in the air. Shivering, she stuffed the bag among the tree's gnarled roots, rearranging the ferns to cover it. Then she let her lynx side take over.

The world remapped itself from a place built primarily of visual input to a multi-dimensional world of sound, smell, and sight. Damp air held scent marvelously well. Casey pricked her tufted lynx ears and opened her jaws, inhaling the wet air and sifting through a richness of forest smells, telling her the tale of all the tiny rustling lives of the small creatures in the rainforest understory around her.

Jack gave another impatient snort. Casey yowled back and trotted out of the ferns, shedding water easily from the long guard hairs of her heavy gray-and-yellow spotted coat. She was no longer cold in the slightest. The moist November afternoon felt perfectly comfortable, the damp forest floor pleasantly cool on her footpads.

Jack bumped her with his shoulder and leaned his head down to sniff at the ground. Bears didn't look it, but they had an incredibly sensitive sense of smell, as acute as a bloodhound's. Casey was no slouch in that department herself, however. She sniffed too, getting mingled human and animal scents, new and old. There had been any number of humans over this path, as

well as the tantalizing tickle of squirrels and mice, the mouth-watering fragrance of deer.

Old bear scent, but nothing recent. If a Bigfoot had been around, she couldn't tell, though she wasn't sure what it might smell like. There were always going to be scents that couldn't be pinned down; it was like standing on a city streetcorner and trying to identify the exact source of every sound. Rotting fungus could be indistinguishable from a corpse—and indeed, in this wet Pacific rainforest, she smelled a lot of decay, the heavy earthy scents of leaf-mold and mushrooms and probably some carrion off in the forest somewhere. Human scents were equally diverse. People came to the forest wearing Axe, wearing Chanel, wearing patchouli. They came in brand-new sneakers and in old, broken-down ones; they came wearing new vinyl rain gear, and they came wearing old rain boots that had been used to tramp around a farm, still bearing traces of manure and tobacco.

After they'd both had some time to sniff around, Jack raised his head and jerked his muzzle toward the trailhead, then dipped it to her. Another eloquent jerk of his head angled in the other direction.

Split up? She wished they'd discussed the plan when they could still *talk*. Damn it, Avery had warned her about this. Jack worked best as a loner. Even as many years as he'd been working with the SCB, and with his usual partner Avery, he'd never quite gained the habit of *telling other people what the hell he was up to*.

And now he was shuffling off into the forest. *Thanks, lover*, Casey tried to project in his direct, in disdainful lynx-speak. *I appreciate all the detailed instructions*.

Nevertheless, she was fairly sure what he wanted her to do. She was smaller and less conspicuous, and therefore more useful at the trailhead. A huge boar grizzly would have all the locals either running for their cars or grabbing cameras, while a lynx could lurk unnoticed in the undergrowth ... and sniff around for anything unusual while she was at it.

She trotted up the path, back in the direction she'd come, sniffing the air alertly for anything out of place. A cigarette butt, long since drowned in the rain—*thanks for smoking in a national park, dumbass*. A used condom—*ewwww, seriously?* A fast-moving squirrel bent on business elsewhere—*no, do not chase; we are well fed on bagels and Starbucks coffee right now*.

She stepped off the path into the ferns as the trailhead neared. Allowing instinct to take over, she crept forward on soundless furry paws, letting her lynx hindbrain set each foot in the track of the one before. Many was the time that a human could pass within feet of a wild predator in heavy undergrowth and never even realize it was there. The noisy comings and goings of domestic animals, or the humans who owned them, were anathema to a wild creature such as Casey now was.

From the edge of the woods, with ears flat, Casey watched the humans in the clearing bustle about, taking video and pictures. She saw it on two levels: her human mind still remembered and understood what they were doing and why, but her lynx instincts registered a hive of incomprehensible human activity. She had to concentrate to keep her mind on why she was there.

She began to prowl cautiously through the trees just beyond the edges of the clearing, scenting the leaves and ground as she went. There was little chance of picking up the vandal's trail. If they'd gotten here before Park Service employees, police, and Bigfoot hunters had traipsed all over the area, the odds would have been better. It would still have been hard to pick out the vandal's scent from that of the other people who had used the trailhead recently, though.

She wished she could go into the clearing and sniff around properly. She made a mental note to suggest to Jack that they come back at night, after everyone was gone. It was still

unlikely that they could pick up the vandal's trail at this point, but maybe they could find something ...

... interesting.

Her ears pricked up and her whiskers twitched. *That* wasn't a human smell. In fact, it was a smell she'd become very familiar with, after months of dating Jack.

Bear. Recent.

Not a big surprise—the park was probably full of them—but the timing was interesting. Maybe the damage really had been done by a bear, after all.

Or a bear shifter? It wasn't possible to tell by smell, at least according to Jack; you had to be physically close to another shifter to identify them as such. Not that she could have anyway.

Casey focused on trying to follow that elusive scent to its source. The bear hadn't been on the trail, or she would have smelled it there, but it must have entered and left the clearing at some point. If she could pick up its trail through the ferny undergrowth, she could find where it had gone.

The smell was much stronger here ... and, huh. She was now looking at more Bigfoot tracks under the ferns. A Bigfoot that smelled like a bear? She snuffled at the tracks, her nose almost touching the indentation of the bare foot. The strongest smell here was a plasticky smell. This track *was* artificial, then. It had been made with some kind of plastic object. But it appeared to have been made right on top of the bear tracks, which was curious—

A twig snapped.

Casey's fur bristled. She looked up, and found herself staring into the eyes of a human. It was the punk girl, Moreland.

From the look of things, Moreland had followed the Bigfoot tracks into the edge of the woods, snapping pictures of them. And Casey had been so caught up in her own scent-trailing that she'd allowed herself to be snuck up on. No wild lynx would ever have been caught off guard like this. How embarrassing.

"Oh," Moreland said softly. "Hello."

Casey wasn't quite sure what to do. What did a wild lynx do, when confronted by a human? She settled for a baffled stare, with ears at half-mast. It wasn't too different from what her human side wanted to do under those circumstances.

Moreland brought up her camera carefully. Casey experienced a blank moment of terror before remembering that her shifter nature wasn't visible to normal humans, let alone detectible on a photograph. Still, she turned her head to the side, so Moreland caught her profile instead of getting her face from the front. Even as a lynx, she couldn't bring herself to stare directly into a camera flash without squinting.

"Oh, *nice*," Moreland whispered, reviewing the photo on the camera's viewfinder. She looked up and snapped another.

Casey realized that she could easily be stuck here all day, playing artist's model. She shook her damp fur and walked off into the woods, following the scent of bear. Moreland took a few more pictures until Casey managed to put some ferns and the trunk of a tree between herself and the camera.

Were there naturally occurring lynx in the park? Well, if not, maybe a lynx sighting would be a nice change from Bigfoot.

She couldn't pick up the bear trail again. All the scent seemed to be concentrated around the clearing. Had it left the other way, and walked down the road?

Or shifted, got in a car and drove away ...

She made a broad loop through the woods and came back to the trail near the place where they had left their clothes. Jack was already dressed and waiting for her. She was a little disappointed; she'd been hoping to have a chance to hunt in the woods with him. They hardly ever got to do that. Maybe before they headed back to civilization ...

She shifted behind the tree. Jack handed her clothes back to her, with an appreciative smile. "You look like a wood nymph back there."

"Yeah, well, I feel like a human-sized goose bump." The dank chill had settled on her immediately as soon as she shifted out of her lynx form, made worse by the fact that her fur had been damp, so now her skin was equally damp. The lynx's underfur had remained dry, but Casey's bare skin had no such protection. She stamped clammy feet into her boots and huddled in her slicker.

"Find anything?" Jack asked, and Casey wondered if he'd given her the clearing not just because a grizzly was more conspicuous, but also to give her a chance to examine the crime scene without having a more experienced agent looking over her shoulder. The level of trust made her feel a little tingly.

"I did, actually." She told him about the bear scent as they started walking back toward the trailhead.

"Interesting. I did get a few whiffs of bear all along the trail, but it wasn't recent. Just regular bears wandering around the park, I thought. But if there are *our* kind of bear in the area, could be that too."

"Do you know if there are any?" Casey asked. Their werewolf coworker Avery Hollen kept track of all the werewolf packs in the state, but wolf shifters were a little unusual that way.

"I don't know. Most bear shifters are loners by nature, so this is a likely place for one of us to live. You'd think the last thing a bear shifter would want to do is trash the place and attract attention, though."

"They're individuals, like any people are," Casey pointed out. "Maybe it's someone who's got a grudge against the Park Service for reasons having nothing to do with being a bear. Or maybe *because* they're a bear, they resent the government's bear-related policies ... oh, I don't know. *Are* there any federal bear policies? Anyway, the point is, just knowing they're a shifter doesn't really help."

"True."

They were in sight of the clearing again, and Jack slowed to a stop. Casey looked down and found that she'd taken his hand without meaning to as they walked, her fingers curling into his as if they were made to fit there.

Jack brought her hand to his lips and kissed it, then let it go, switching back to "serious agent" demeanor. "What next? You're lead on this one, remember."

"I was thinking we could come back at night, when we can look around without anyone seeing us. Maybe we can figure out if our mystery bear really *is* a bear shifter, and if so, where they went."

"Good plan. How do you feel about a campout?"

"I'd feel better about it if our camping equipment wasn't on the other side of Puget Sound." She rubbed her arms; she still hadn't completely warmed up.

"We don't need camping equipment. We have our own, built in."

"Fine, *you* can eat raw rabbit for dinner. I'm planning to find a restaurant."

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They had a late lunch at a diner in Port Angeles and checked in with SCB HQ to let them know about the plan to stay overnight, then drove back into the park. Jack had taken over the driving duties this time, and he drove slowly along the park road in the vicinity of the trailhead until he spotted a small, overgrown logging road vanishing into the trees. He pulled the truck off the road, and Casey helped him drag a couple of deadfalls to help disguise the truck's presence. It was now late afternoon. The rain had stopped, but a load of water hung on every leaf, ready to ambush unwary passersby.

"I hope the truck doesn't get stuck in all this mud," Casey said. "Okay, what are you grinning about? I don't trust that grin!"

"I've been wanting to check out its mud-bogging capabilities anyway."

"Not in a national park, Yogi." She playfully kicked him in the shin.

Jack's Ford Explorer had been recently totaled when they'd driven it through the door of an underground parking garage in the process of rescuing a captured fellow agent. The F-150 truck was its replacement, and they'd only had it for a week. Neither of them had really talked about it, but it had felt like a milestone: the first major purchase they'd made together.

Casey had insisted on contributing as much as she could to the down payment, even though it wiped out her minimal savings. She had also been paying her share of the rent on their condo. She knew Jack wouldn't mind, in either case, paying her way. But it had been important to her from the beginning to come into their relationship as a full partner, not someone who would rely on him for everything.

And now they owned a truck together. Now the condo, which had been Jack's, had both their names on the lease. And this incredibly sexy man, currently getting undressed beside the truck, was *hers*. Sometimes she had to stop and wonder that this was really her life.

Jack looked up as he unbuckled his belt, sensing the intensity of her gaze on him. He was already stripped to the waist, revealing flat abs, a muscular chest with a dusting of dark hair, and an assortment of tattoos on his right arm: an assault rifle and the word *Defend* on his forearm, and an elaborate tattoo of a snarling grizzly bear wrapping around his shoulder. Pink scars laced his chest and marred the tattoos, fully healed but still an enduring legacy of his and Casey's near-death at the claws of lion shifters a few months earlier.

"What's the matter, is my fly undone?" he asked, grinning at her as he unzipped it.

"Like there isn't enough to stare at already." She took a step closer and ran a hand down his chest, over the slight ridging of the scars. Accelerated shifter healing had been able to heal injuries that would have killed a normal human, but even shifters could scar.

It should have bothered her, perhaps—not the scars themselves, but the fact that he'd almost died. And yet it didn't. She liked seeing his battle scars. She had a few of her own now, too.

Jack leaned down to kiss her, soft nibbles at her lips turning hot and heavy; her knees were weak by the end. He slipped a hand under her shirt and rested it against her waist. "Come on, clothes off. Don't leave me standing here bare-ass naked by myself."

"You romantic," she said with a snort, unbuttoning her shirt.

The sound of engines on the road, coming up fast, interrupted the playful moment. Jack ducked down behind the truck, pulling Casey with him, as headlights strobed through the tree trunks. There were two cars, driving fast, and it was unlikely they would have even noticed the truck concealed among the trees, let alone the two people beside it. However, Jack was clearly taking no chances.

The two of them straightened up, watching the taillights wink through the trees. The cars were heading in the direction of the trailhead parking lot, and as Casey listened to the engines, she thought they had slowed down. She was sure of it when the engine noise cut out a moment later, and distant voices carried through the trees.

"Hikers?" Casey asked quietly. "At night?"

"Let's go find out."

All business now, Casey stripped quickly—though she noticed an appreciative glimmer in Jack's eyes as she took off her bra and stepped out of her panties. They left their clothing inside the truck, along with their wallets and phones. Jack locked the doors and knelt to tuck the key into a wheel well.

Casey wasted no time shifting. It was even colder out here than it had been in the middle of the day. She rippled her thick lynx fur with a twitch of her shoulders, and looked up at the massive bear beside her.

Time for recon.

They ghosted through the mossy undergrowth in the growing darkness. Jack was able to move with surprising stealth for such an enormous animal, but it was impossible for him to be perfectly quiet; there was simply too much of him. Casey, meanwhile, made no noise at all, floating through the wet ferns like a wisp of smoke. She liked teasing Jack about being big and clumsy, though in actual fact he was much more quiet than a human could have managed to be in the same circumstances.

They both slowed as they approached the trailhead parking lot. Jack flattened himself as much as he was able, crawling through the forest. Casey went on ahead and peeked out.

A group of people—four men and three women—were unloading equipment from the cars. One of them was Peri Moreland; all were young and athletic-looking. They were handling around loaded backpacks, and some of them were carrying tripods. It was plain they intended to stay awhile.

Casey retreated, and Jack joined her a minute later. Deeper in the woods, he shifted human, and Casey followed suit.

"Bigfoot hunters," Casey said.

"Squatchers," Jack corrected, with a grin.

"Whatever. Do we abort the plan?" She shifted from foot to foot in the cold moss, wrapping her arms around herself and already regretting the loss of her heavy fur.

"I don't think we need to. They probably aren't planning to camp at the trailhead. We'll just wait for them to move on, and then sniff around like we were planning."

Casey nodded and shifted, ruffling up her fur. Jack stayed human-shaped a moment longer.

"Keep an eye out for anything they may have left behind," he said. "I've run into them before—not this exact group, but Bigfoot trackers in general. They may have set up game cameras. So don't shift unless you're sure you're unobserved."

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They had to wait for a half hour or so until the group left the trailhead. From the woods, they watched as two of the Bigfoot hunters strapped a camo-patterned device about the size of a walkie-talkie to a tree facing the clearing. Probably a game camera, Casey thought, as Jack had surmised.

After that, an animated discussion at the map board ensued, with a certain amount of

arguing. Casey couldn't hear all of it, but she caught enough to get the basics: they were trying to decide which of the various routes on the trail system was more likely to lead to Bigfoot habitat. Eventually they picked a direction, shouldered their packs, and headed out. Moreland's artificial leg seemed to give her little trouble, even with a pack on her back.

Jack waited a few minutes before standing up and shaking the water and twigs off his coat. He padded into the clearing. Casey followed behind.

She started out trying to avoid the camera, but noticed Jack was making no effort to do so. *Of course, we're indistinguishable from normal animals.* And a lynx and a bear prowling around at dusk wasn't going to raise eyebrows. Maybe they'd even become an Internet sensation, Casey thought, amused: the bear and the lynx who were "buddies".

Even after so many humans tramping around the wreckage, the bear smell was still strong. Casey thought it seemed like more than one bear by the smell, though she'd have to check with Jack later. She circled the clearing, looking for where they'd gone into the woods. There was bear scent in the edges of the undergrowth, often accompanied by Bigfoot tracks, but no trails leading away that she could find.

Jack headed down the path to the parking lot, nose to the ground. Casey caught some bear scent at the start of the path, but it was completely gone by the time they reached the parked cars.

To Casey's interest, Jack kept walking along the edge of the parking lot, out to the main road. Casey followed, sniffing occasionally. A number of different people had walked along the edge of the road, many of them recently. She couldn't pick out any specific ones.

Jack walked very slowly, nose almost touching the ground. It was almost dark now. About fifteen yards from the parking lot, he stopped, looked around, and shifted.

After a paranoid glance up and down the road—she felt very exposed—Casey shifted too. "Did you find something?"

"I think so. Wish we'd brought a flashlight. My eyes aren't so great anyway, without my glasses. What does that look like to you?"

Casey got down on her hands and knees. Gravel prickled her bare skin painfully. She shifted briefly, to use her much keener lynx night vision, and immediately saw what he was talking about. There were bare human footprints in the wet shoulder, with water pooling in them. Unlike the Bigfoot tracks, which were clear and precise, these were scuffed and hard to make out—accidental, not deliberate.

She went human again, and waited out a brief head rush. Rapid shifts were tiring and a little disorienting. "That's certainly no Bigfoot, unless it's a baby."

"Shifters," Jack said. "I got two different bear scents back at the trailhead. You too?" She nodded. "And no bear scent leaving the clearing. Lots of human, though. It had been walked on, and rained on, so it wasn't the best conditions for it, but I thought I picked up a human scent that was clear enough they probably weren't wearing shoes."

Casey envied his keen nose; she hadn't been able to tell, though perhaps more practice would help. He had, after all, been doing this much longer than she had. "Both shifters, do you think?"

"Yeah, which means at least two shifters, and maybe more, if some of them shifted into animals other than bears. I smelled squirrels, foxes, and a bunch of different birds from the last day or two. Definitely two bear shifters, though. They tore the restrooms apart as bears, and used a cast of a Bigfoot print to cover up the tracks. Then they left on the road."

"But why?" Casey asked. "There are plenty of ordinary bears in these woods. If it was obvious bears had done it, the police would never have been called, and neither would we."

"And if the Park Service got the idea there was a problem bear wrecking government property and threatening the tourists, they might have gone hunting," Jack pointed out. "Or trapped and relocated the local bears. Either way, not something that would be good for resident bear shifters."

"If they wanted to be left alone, not destroying things in the first place would be a better strategy."

"True. Oh, hey." He looked back in the direction of the trailhead parking lot, and shifted.

Casey shifted hastily, unsure what he'd seen. He started back toward the parking lot at a good clip. When she caught up to him at the trailhead, he had shifted human again, standing beside the game camera where he wouldn't trip its sensors.

Casey made sure she was well out of its field of view before shifting. "What are you doing?"

"Sabotaging the camera," Jack said. He opened the top and pulled out an SD card. "If our mystery shifters come back, they might not notice it. We don't want to risk these guys getting pictures of something more sensational than Bigfoot."

Casey opened her mouth to reply, when a weird, screaming cry echoed through the woods.

It rose and fell, then died away, leaving a hush behind. Casey realized her mouth was still open and closed it. She also took an involuntary step closer to Jack.

"What the hell was *that*?"

It hadn't been close, at least she didn't think so. It had come from deeper in the woods.

"Could have been a fox, maybe?" But he didn't sound sure.

"Or someone in trouble."

The cry came again, prickling any parts of Casey's body that weren't already prickled with chill-induced goosebumps. It didn't sound like a human cry for help, or like anything she'd ever heard before. It was an ululation, an eerie *wah-wah-wah-wah* that echoed off the mountains as it died away.

"That way." Jack pointed. He was still holding the SD card from the camera. He threw it as hard as he could into the undergrowth, then shifted.

"Oh good, let's go *toward* the weird screaming thing." But she shifted and fell into step with him.

Full darkness was upon them now. The park was still and cold and quiet, except for the ululating cry. It repeated at intervals, after pauses of anywhere from ten seconds to a couple of minutes.

They'd left the trail and were going straight overland through a damp and mossy wilderness. Casey hoped it wasn't too hard to find the road again. If nothing else, she supposed they could follow their own scent back to the parking lot.

Whatever it was didn't seem to be moving around. They were able to zero in on its location easily. As they got closer, Jack went slower, and finally stopped at the top of a low hill.

Hidden by ferns and boulders, they looked down at a campsite between the boles of several large pines. An LED lantern sat on the ground between two tents, illuminating the area. The group from the parking lot were scattered around in the light, chewing on granola bars or watching the edge of the campsite where a young man with a blond ponytail was sitting on a fallen cedar trunk. As Casey and Jack watched, he threw his head back and let out the blood-curdling cry they'd heard.

A few feet away, Peri Moreland was filming him. Casey wanted to laugh at the look on Moreland's face, which was clearly telegraphing: *How has my life come to this?*

"Dude, that is the worst Sasquatch mating call I ever heard," one of the other men said.  
"Let Brixon try. She's better at it."

Jack gave a soft, huffing grunt, and lumbered off down the hill.

Casey stared after him. She yowled softly, but Jack took no notice of her. Bushes cracked and ferns swished around his bulk.

"Hey, I think I heard something in the woods!" one of the campers said.

"Keep your voice down," someone else snapped. The LED lantern went out, and Casey blinked as her eyes adapted to the darkness. With keen feline night vision, she saw the group of Bigfoot hunters clustered close together. Moreland had her camera pointed at the woods, in the general direction of the rustling commotion Jack was making.

She wished she was close enough to make out their expressions when, instead of a hot-to-trot Bigfoot, an enormous grizzly bear stepped out of the bushes. Jack swung his massive head their way and let out a deep, loud grunt.

After a frozen moment of shock and horror, the group erupted in a panicked explosion of diverse bear-survival strategies. Moreland whipped out pepper spray while keeping her camera pointed at him. One of the women collapsed to the ground and curled into a ball to protect vulnerable areas, while one of the other men took off running, with the other woman yelling after him, "You don't run from bears, Zach, you *idiot!*" The guy who'd been making the fake Bigfoot call was trying to climb a tree, without a lot of success since most of the trees around the clearing were pines or firs with few low branches.

But one of the male Bigfoot hunters had drawn a gun, and Casey's stomach curdled in fear. She'd forgotten firearms were legal now in national parks. *Jack, don't be stupid and get yourself shot. Just back off.*

Fortunately, Jack seemed to have had the same thought. He grunted again, and strolled past the edge of their campsite without bothering anything, vanishing into the dark. In a moment he reappeared at Casey's side, having circled around.

She cuffed him with her paw and then shifted to yell at him properly. "What were you thinking?" she demanded in a fierce whisper. "They could have shot you!"

Jack shifted too. In the darkness, she could just make out the white flash of his teeth as he grinned. "I figured it would be a good object lesson in making a target of yourself in the woods at night. There are scarier things than Bigfoot running around out here."

"Sure. You just wanted to play a juvenile prank on them."

"And it was *so* worth it. You were watching, right?"

"You're going to feel very bad if one of them runs off a cliff in the dark," Casey muttered, and shifted back to her lynx form before she lost feeling in her toes.

Below them, the panicked frenzy slowly died down in the campsite. Someone had turned the lantern back on. People began sheepishly coming down from their trees or picking themselves up off the ground. Casey did a quick head count to make sure everyone was accounted for, and came up one short.

"Where's Zach?" one of the women asked.

"Probably halfway to the trailhead by now," Moreland said.

"Oh God, what if the bear eats him?"

"I'll go find him," the member of the group with the gun announced. He had the sort of overdone upper-body muscles that come from working out for looks more than any other reason, plus a tank top to show them off, in spite of the cold. Casey mentally dubbed him Mr. Macho.

"I think we should stay together," one of the other men said.

Casey gave Jack the most reproving expression that her lynx face could manage, and together they set off quietly into the forest. From the look of things, it would take the campers half an hour to finally decide to send a rescue party.

They came upon Zach's trail easily, and Zach himself a minute or two later; he hadn't managed to get far. They could still hear the voices of the campers raised in argument. Zach had climbed about fifteen feet up the moss-covered trunk of a tree, and he was now clinging to a branch as if his life depended on it.

Jack and Casey looked at each other, keeping enough of a distance from Zach's tree that he probably wouldn't notice them in the dark. Casey attempted to make clear, with just her eyes and her feline eyebrows, that it was *highly* unlikely Zach would appreciate help from an enormous grizzly bear in getting down from the tree. Jack shrugged.

And then a sudden scream split the night air.

This was definitely not a Bigfoot call, fake or otherwise; this was a human shrieking for help. Two gunshots sounded in rapid succession, and as Casey whipped around in shock, the smell of bear hit her.

Jack grunted and took off back the way they'd come at a gallop. Casey ran in his wake, stretching out her long lynx legs. More shots rang out ahead of them.

Breaking out of the trees, they found the camp in total chaos, and two bears in the middle of it. The lantern had been knocked over and kicked across the ground, and by its crazily dancing light as it rolled, Casey glimpsed ragged tent canvas fluttering in the wind and Mr. Macho frantically reloading. One bear was down on all fours with blood matting its fur, while another was rearing back and raising its paw to claw a screaming, cowering woman.

Jack plowed into it from the side, dealing it a powerful blow with one of his huge front paws. Both the new bears were black bears, half the size of Jack's massive grizzly, and the blow sent it sprawling. Jack roared in the shaken bear's face and swatted it furiously in the head.

Mr. Macho was taking aim at both of them, not seeming to care which one he hit. Casey dashed in and collided with his shins, bowling him over. He went down hard, and the gun discharged in a random direction, chipping bark from a pine.

Jack used his superior size, backed up with fury and a few more blows, to harry both of the smaller bears out of the clearing. The one that had been shot was limping heavily, and as it tottered into the brush, the other hastened to help prop it up, giving last, defiant snarl over one furry shoulder at the campers.

Jack swatted him or her hard in the rear end, and with that, they were gone into the woods.

As Casey hastened after them, she heard Mr. Macho say, "That was a mama bear and her cubs. We're lucky to be alive."

*Yeah, you're luckier than you know. Some of you would be dead right now if we hadn't been in the area.* It hadn't looked to Casey like any of them were hurt, though, just scared.

Jack herded the cowering black bears deeper into the woods and down into a small, mossy ravine. Here, he shifted human, and bellowed at them, "Shift! Shift now!"

Every line of their bodies exhibited meekness as the bears did so.

With her enhanced feline night vision, Casey was surprised to see they were both young, no older than eighteen or nineteen. The one who had been shot was male; the other was a young woman. Both had dark blond hair, matted and unbrushed, and dense freckles on their faces and bodies. They were so similar-looking that they had to be siblings.

The young man slumped beside the trickle of water running at the bottom of the moss-covered ravine, clutching his bleeding arm. The woman crouched next to him and looked up at

Jack with a hint of belligerence.

"What are you doing!" Jack roared. He wasn't merely shouting; a hint of a bear's deep rumble boosted his natural voice. "If you attack humans, they'll attack *you*! If you kill a human, they'll hunt us all! Not to mention you'll be a murderer! What were you *thinking*?"

"We-we're defending our territory," the woman protested. "We got a right!"

"No, you're attacking humans, and that's going to get you shot as a problem bear!"

The young man groaned, holding his arm. His fingers were dark and slick with blood.

"Bobby's hurt. Please let us go. If this is your territory, we're gonna stay out, we're gonna leave—"

"What are you going on about territories for?" Jack demanded. "We're people, not animals!"

Casey was starting to feel sorry for them. They were clearly terrified of him. She shifted and caught Jack's arm. "Jack, let's take them back to the truck. Miss, we can help your friend. We have first-aid supplies there—"

"No!" the woman said, but her defiance collapsed when Bobby slumped on her, passing out. She let out a small sob and clutched at him.

"Please. Just lemme take him home."

"We'll help you," Casey offered. "Jack can carry him. He's big enough. Do you live very far away?"

The woman scowled and put her arms around Bobby. "I can take him. Nobody is allowed in our house."

"Listen, you tried to commit a felony in front of us," Jack said sharply. "We're federal agents as well as shifters, and you're lucky I'm not cuffing you both. Now, before your brother there ends up with hypothermia as well as blood loss, we need to get him somewhere warm. Can you get him to shift back?"

She shook him. "Bobby?"

"I'll take that as a no," Jack sighed. "Casey, after I shift, help her get him on my back."

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Fortunately for the naked and unconscious Bobby, it wasn't a long trip through the woods. His sister, who introduced herself as Brenda, insisted on staying human-shaped to support him on Jack's back, even though she was blue-lipped and shivering by the time they emerged from the trees at the bottom of a steep, rocky hillside.

To Casey, it didn't look possible to climb it without shifting to a form that had hands, and preferably rock-climbing equipment. But Brenda vanished into a thick clump of ferns, and when Casey put her head through, she saw a narrow path going up the cliff face.

Bears, at least small bears, were good climbers, but Casey wasn't sure if Jack could navigate a path that narrow without shifting. Jack apparently felt likewise; after taking a look, he shifted, and staggered a little as Bobby's unconscious body slithered off into Brenda's arms.

"I can carry him, but I might need a little guidance," Jack said.

Right: he was nearsighted, and as a human, he wouldn't be able to see even as well as a bear could see in the dark. Casey shifted, and said, "One of us can go in front, and one behind. Would that work?"

Bobby stirred, raising his head, which had drooped onto Brenda's shoulder. "I c'n walk," he mumbled.

"No, you can't," Brenda protested, but he struggled to his feet and stood swaying. "C'mon, Bob, don't be stupid. Shift back, why don'cha?"

"He'll probably pass out if he does," Jack said. He had more experience than most people at the difficulties of shifting while injured. "And then we'll have a bear to carry instead. Come on." He took Bobby's uninjured arm, but not roughly.

They went up the path single file, with Brenda helping Bobby, Jack just below him in case he fell, and Casey bringing up the rear. It wasn't a fun climb. The path was wet, slippery, and overgrown with scruffy weeds. Halfway up, Casey gave up on climbing human-shaped and shifted to her warmer and more surefooted lynx shape. This was better: she felt almost fresh by the time they got to the top, while the other three were shaking and stiff-limbed with cold.

Like the path, the siblings' "house" was well hidden from passing observers. In the dark, even with lynx eyes, all Casey could see was brush and ferns, though her nose brought her an odd mix of smells: plastic, badly cured hides, spoiled food. Brenda pulled a heavy piece of water-soaked deadwood aside, and drew back a dark-colored tarp. "In here," she said, with visible reluctance.

It was almost completely pitch-dark inside, which Casey thought might be a mercy, from the pungent smells. Dry leaves rustled underfoot, and she sat down on a pile of them. Rough fur pressed against her suddenly. Jack had shifted, and now he almost completely filled their end of the cave, blocking the way out. Casey had to control a surge of claustrophobia, which she knew was ridiculous; they could both get out easily if he shifted back. Still, she hated the idea of being trapped in this dark, stinking place.

Light flared at the other end of the cave. Brenda had used a cheap Bic lighter to light a Coleman lantern. She set it on a rock, and now Casey got a better look at what was around her.

They were inside a narrow, tall cleft in the rocks. A crude ceiling had been improvised out of wood; the cleft had probably been open to the sky before the siblings got done with improvements. The floor was piled deep in leaves, and at Brenda's end of the cave, other stuff was heaped carelessly: clothing, empty tin cans, random mismatched shoes, plastic bags, and various other trash. One of the items, Casey couldn't help noticing, was a larger-than-life-size and bright blue plastic cast of a human foot. No mystery where those Bigfoot tracks came from ...

Bobby, still human-shaped, was lying in the leaves at Brenda's feet. Brenda rummaged in the mess, found a tattered blanket, and covered him with it. "Can you help him?" she asked anxiously.

Jack shifted. He swayed a little when he tried to stand up. The frequent shifts were starting to wear him down. He also had to duck, unable to stand up straight with the low ceiling. "I could help him better if you'd let me take him back to my truck," he said. "We're all going to end up hypothermic if you don't have some way of getting it warm in here. Don't you have a stove or a fireplace, anything like that?"

Brenda shook her head. Her hair, like her brother's, was chopped off crudely at shoulder length, and hung in matted hanks around her face. "We don't make fires in the cave, not since we almost burned everything down."

"Do you have anything we could wear?" Casey asked, shifting so she could speak. The idea of putting on anything in that squalid pile was unpleasant; even her less sensitive human nose was assaulted by the stench of mold and decay. However, she could feel Jack shivering against her, and knew she would be too in a minute, if she didn't shift back.

Brenda found mismatched items in the pile, shirts and ponchos for the most part, along

with some blankets. "I didn't steal," she said defensively. "I found 'em."

Casey had her doubts about that, especially considering items like the relatively new-looking Coleman lantern. Still, she wasn't about to accuse a bear shifter of being a thief while trapped in a cave with them.

Jack drew a musty blanket around his shoulders and knelt beside Bobby. "I'm going to need water to clean his wounds. Can you bring me some?"

Brenda stood up and pushed up a loose board in the ceiling. Cool air blew into the cave. Stretching on tiptoe, she brought down a tin can half full of water, then another, that had been sitting on the roof and collecting rainwater. "This gonna be okay?"

"It'll do." Jack found a ragged T-shirt in the mess. "For the last time, are you absolutely sure you don't want to take him somewhere he can get better medical care than I can give him? None of this is even remotely sterile. Shifters heal well, but—"

"No hospitals," Brenda said flatly. "No doctors."

"Doesn't even have to be that. I have a first-aid kit in the truck, with antibiotic ointment and sterile bandages. If these get infected, your brother could die."

Brenda's belligerent facade collapsed, and she just looked young and scared. "Maybe later?" she said cautiously. "Can't you just ... fix him?"

"I can't fix him, but I can at least see how bad it is."

Casey held the lantern while Jack used the wet T-shirt to wipe away blood around the bullet wounds. Bobby had been hit solidly in the arm—there was no exit wound—and winged twice, once across the ribs and again on the hip. All of his injuries were already starting to heal as his shifter healing kicked in.

"Arm's broken, I think," Jack said. "I'll straighten it so it doesn't heal crooked. Casey, Brenda, hold him down in case he wakes up in the middle of this."

Casey obeyed, taking his legs. Brenda hesitated, then put her hands on her brother's shoulders. In the lantern light, Casey could see that both siblings had scars all over their bodies—not bad ones, but small mementoes of cuts, gouges, and animal claw marks. One of Brenda's fingers was slightly twisted, as if it had broken and not healed straight.

"How long have you two been out here?" Jack asked, gripping Bobby's arm above and below the bullet entry wound.

"Since forever," Brenda said. Rather than averting her eyes, she stared fixedly at what Jack was doing, with a fierce intensity. *Hurt him and die*, that look seemed to say.

The muscles in Jack's arms and shoulders bunched as he applied pressure to Bobby's arm. Casey felt a spasm go through Bobby's body. His eyelids flickered and he let out a choked cry, then went limp. Brenda cried out too, as if his pain had hurt her.

"He's all right," Jack said, pressing his fingers to the pulse point in Bobby's throat. "As all right as he can be after taking three bullets and ending up naked in a cave. Just get him warm for now, and find me a couple sturdy sticks to use as splints."

Casey was pretty sure she saw something small and furry skitter out of the pile of clothes as Brenda shook out items and piled blankets, rabbit hides, and random pieces of clothing around Bobby. Like the floor of the cave, the pile probably should not be examined too closely or she'd run screaming out of the cave and never come back.

"You made those tracks around the trailhead, right?" she asked, reaching out to finger the blue plastic of the Bigfoot print cast.

"I didn't steal it," Brenda said with knee-jerk defensiveness. "I found it. Somebody threw it away beside a trail."

"Campers drop all kinds of things, I bet," Jack said. Having finished splinting Bobby's arm, he was sitting with his back against the wall of the cave, knees drawn up under the blanket. Casey, wearing a musty shirt and nothing else, nestled in beside him and pulled the blanket over both of them. She was pretty sure she was going to be cold for *days*.

Something small and skittery brushed her foot. She resisted an instinctive urge to pounce, and instead pulled her toes under the blanket.

She was also going to take a lot of showers.

Hot showers.

Very hot.

"We pick up stuff, just what we gotta have to live," Brenda said.

"What about destroying Park Service cabins?" Jack asked. "Was that necessary to live?"

"Yes," Brenda said sharply. "Too many people comin' in. Tourists." She brushed Bobby's cheek with the back of her hand. "It's too crowded now. Our houses keep getting found, and the rangers clean them up, so we have to go somewhere else. We just wanted 'em to know to stay away."

"I hate to break it to you," Casey said, "but you really couldn't have picked a better way to make sure you have even more people walking around in your part of the woods."

Brenda looked baffled. "They shoulda been afraid. We wanted 'em to think the woods guardians were angry."

"They're not afraid of Bigfoot. They're curious."

"People don't make sense," Brenda moaned. She tucked up her knees and rested her head on them.

Jack and Casey glanced at each other. "Is it just the two of you out here?" Jack asked gently. "You and Bobby."

Brenda nodded.

"What about your parents?" Casey asked.

"They're dead. Hunters shot 'em. Long time ago."

"And you raised yourselves," Jack said.

"We took care of each other," Brenda corrected. "I'm the older one. Four minutes old. So he's mine to take care of." She growled, with a hint of bear quivering underneath. "I'll make 'em pay for hurting my brother."

"No, you *won't*," Jack said sharply. "Those were a bunch of kids you attacked out there, hardly older than you. They were defending themselves. You have teeth and claws; they don't."

"They shouldn't'a been in our woods at all!"

"They're not *your*—" Casey began, but Jack hushed her with a touch.

"The human world doesn't understand your kind of ownership," he said. "They thought they had every right to be here."

"Well, now they know better," Brenda said belligerently.

"No, that's what I'm trying to explain. Now they know there are bears in these woods that attack humans, and that's going to make more people come back, with bigger guns. They will either shoot and kill you, or they'll trap you and drug you and put you somewhere else in these mountains, very far away from your familiar caves."

Brenda bared her teeth. "Then we'll kill 'em if they try."

"You might kill one or two, maybe a dozen. Brenda, the world is bigger than you can imagine, and full of more humans than you can comprehend." He touched his chest. "My job is protecting people. Sometimes that means protecting shifters. Sometimes it means protecting

humans *from* shifters. I can't let you attack and kill humans, or break their things. If you keep doing it, and if the humans don't get you first, I'm going to have to take you out of these mountains and put you in jail."

"Jail?" Brenda repeated, aghast.

Jack began ticking off on his fingers. "You destroyed things belonging to other people. You attacked people. You—"

Brenda scrambled to her feet. A growl rumbled out of her throat, and suddenly the narrow end of the cave was filled with angry, frightened black bear. The burning lantern tilted. Casey yelped and dove to rescue it, under the claws of the rearing bear.

Jack growled too. He hadn't shifted yet, but from the way his shoulders were hunched, he was preparing for it.

"Whoa. Hey. Guys." Casey backed toward the door, lantern in hand. The last thing she wanted was to get in the middle of a bear fight.

"Casey," Jack said without looking at her, "go outside."

"No," she shot back.

"That's an order, *trainee*."

"You're scaring her!" Casey said. The words came up from inside her, from the frightened and lonely orphan she'd once been. She had never been as alone as Brenda and Bobby, but if not for her grandmother and her now-dead best friend Wendy, maybe she would have been. "She's not stupid, Jack. You can't keep threatening her with jail and taking her away from the only home she knows."

"You got a better idea?" Jack wanted to know.

It was a serious question, not a rhetorical one. He was asking her opinion. As Brenda continued to growl at both of them, backed as far into the corner as she could get, Casey struggled to find a solution. Something kept nagging at the edge of her mind, something she'd seen earlier that had brought a hint of familiarity.

"I ... I might," she said cautiously. Taking the lantern with her, she stepped outside the cave.

It was raining again, a light drizzle misting her hair. She shielded the lantern with her hand and crouched on the path, shining the light over the scraggly weeds they'd walked on to get into the cave.

Jack stepped out of the cave with the blanket hanging off his shoulders. Brenda's querulous growling had stopped, and Casey hoped being given a brief respite from their presence in her haven would help a little.

"I can't tell if you actually decided to follow my order or if you thought of something," Jack said.

"I may have thought of something. Jack, do you remember the plant the park ranger showed us at the trailhead, the one behind the yellow tape? Isn't this the same plant?"

Jack knelt and examined it in the lantern light. "I guess it could be. I'm no expert on plants."

"Me neither, but it sure looks like it to me." Casey held up the lantern, surveying the cliffside. "It's all over the place. Brenda? Come out here a minute, please."

There was a long hesitation before Brenda, still looking frightened and belligerent, put her head out of the cave's makeshift doorway. At least she was human-shaped again, though she looked as if she was prepared to shift at any moment.

"Brenda, does a lot of this plant grow around here?"

"I guess," Brenda said, and then offered, with a little more animation, "It's got pretty flowers in summer."

"If this is what I think it is, it's also very rare. Maybe we could get your part of the park declared off limits to visitors because there's so much of this plant here. Jack, do you think the SCB would be able to help with that?"

She looked up to see Jack's eyes sparkling at her in the lantern light. "Trainee, I think you have the makings of a damn fine agent."

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## ***TELL ME MORE!***

### **Squatching for fun and profit**

*Posted Nov. 9 by Peri Moreland*

More like squatching for bugs, hypothermia and ... bear attacks?!!!

Squatching (that's looking for Sasquatch, for the uninitiated) is not for the faint of heart. On a gray November evening, I find myself in the parking lot at an Olympic National Forest trailhead, helping unload camping supplies and infrared cameras while wading through ankle-deep mud. Bigfoot comes out at night, I've been told, so we'll travel in darkness and sleep during the day. I'm already starting to have regrets, as rainwater trickles down the back of my neck and I drop my lens cap in the mud for the second time. *This evening can't get worse*, I think.

Those words will come back to haunt me later.

My companions and guides for my novice squatching adventure include several regulars in the Seattle Bigfoot scene. I first met Zachary Sorenson and Brixon Koutsopolis in August on a Bigfoot-sighting message board. Sorenson goes by bighairyfeet92 and runs a Youtube channel devoted to—

"This blog is a joke," Casey called into the condo's bathroom. She was sprawled on the couch with a laptop on her chest. "She's got a page showing UFO landing sites around the Seattle area. There's also a resource page on ... chemtrails? Have you ever heard of that?"

"Jet contrails containing chemical agents, allegedly," Jack called back. He came out of the bathroom with a towel around his waist and steamed-up glasses; they'd just come in from a game of pickup basketball. "Useful for weather control, mind control, you name it."

"Of course it is." Casey paged through the menu. "If she's going to post this junk, I can't believe she didn't even put a photo of me-lynx in her blog post. So unfair. I feel cheated. Ooh, dare I click on the alien autopsy page?"

"It's your funeral. Or I guess I should say your autopsy."

"Har har. That doesn't even make sense." Unable to resist, she clicked. "Wow, I was

expecting disgusting, but that is so *obviously* rubber and Photoshop."

Jack kissed the nape of her neck as he hung over the couch back. Resting a hand on her shoulder, he leaned down and picked up a section of the Seattle Times, folded open to a small article headlined *Campers uninjured after bear attack*. "I see that I'm now officially a mother grizzly defending her cubs."

"Congratulations on your parenthood, dear," Casey said solemnly.

Jack snorted, skimming the article. "Like any fool couldn't see those were black bears."

Casey laughed. "Not everyone is a bear expert. Anyway, it worked out in the bears' favor, I guess. The Park Service isn't going to treat them as problem bears and try to remove them, since bears with cubs are known to be aggressive. They've just closed the trail in that area for a couple of weeks."

"How are things going with the Park Service and rare plant habitat?"

"Slowly." She'd found out that Jack was serious about this being her case, including the fiddly details. For the last two days she'd been working her way through Park Service bureaucracy, while also making daily trips to the park and back. She and Jack had done a quick shopping trip and brought them clean clothing and food, since Bobby was unable to hunt while recuperating. Casey wished she could talk them into moving out of the cold, damp, trash-strewn cave, but they were having none of it. She had picked up some forms to get them in touch with local social service organizations, only to find that neither of them could read beyond a first-grade level. Neither had been to school; neither had a social security number. They'd spent their entire lives in the park. Most of their knowledge of social behavior came from observing tourists from afar. She was working on talking Brenda into helping with the volunteer cleanup crew at the vandalized rest area; if the twins wouldn't *leave* the park, maybe getting them involved in its maintenance was a step in the right direction.

It was well outside the scope of the SCB to mainstream them back into society. But Casey felt that it wouldn't hurt to start teaching them how the world outside the park actually *worked*. She had spoken to shifter social worker Nicole Yates, and Nicole was helping with the social-services end of things, as well as having some good suggestions for people Casey could talk to in the Seattle shifter community who might be able to offer the twins a place to stay if they wanted to see a little more of the world.

It was possible that they would never be able to leave the park, or want to. But at least they should have the option of meeting other shifters like themselves and learning about the world that was available to them.

There was still no guarantee things would turn out well. They might yet have a fatal clash with tourists, or end up living on the street somewhere.

But Casey couldn't forget her epiphany in the woods: how close she'd come to being where the twins were. Unlike the twins, she hadn't been alone; she had been raised by her human grandmother. Still, she could easily imagine herself in their place if her life had been just a little different. If her mother's death had happened in the woods, rather than in the city ... would she have ended up foraging for herself like a wild lynx, instead of having the foster care system and her father's family to fall back on?

She was glad she'd never had to find out. But she hoped to stay in touch with the twins and see if she could ease their introduction to shifter and human society.

The job was supposed to be about helping people, after all.

"Someone's serious today," Jack said, settling on the end of the couch. "Penny for your thoughts." He picked up one of her bare feet and started rubbing it.

Casey set the laptop on the coffee table. "Ooh. My main thought right now is *don't stop*."  
"The lady's wish is my command." He settled her foot on his towel-clad thigh and picked up the other one.

"Ahhhh." She lay back and luxuriated in the feeling. "Hey ... Jack," she said after a moment, as her mind continued to wander in lazy circles. "Do you think there really is such a thing as Bigfoot? As something other than teenagers putting on a hoax, I mean. The kids talk about the 'guardians of the woods' like they're something real, but when I ask them if they've ever seen these guardians, they clam up on me. I can't tell if it's a religious thing, or something they actually experienced firsthand."

He gave it a moment's thought, while continuing to work the muscles in her feet with his strong hands. "I don't know. There might be a lot of things out there we haven't found yet. Most people in human society don't know about us, after all. Maybe if we do meet a Bigfoot someday, it'll turn out that they've done what shifters have done, and learned how to pretend to be human. Maybe they're living among us right now, and we don't even know."

Casey let out a small, indelicate snorting noise. "That's pretty much how Peri Moreland's blog post ends. Almost word for word, in fact."

"Even a stopped clock is right twice a day."

"You know that doesn't apply to digital clocks, right?"

"I'm an analog guy in a digital world," Jack said cheerfully. "Say, I'm running out of feet down here; does anything else need massage?"

"Well, if you're asking ..." She propped herself up on her elbows. "Actually, no, I need to get in the shower myself. You're all clean and I'm sweaty and stinky."

Jack leaned over, planted a knee beside her hip, and put on a show of sniffing her, making her giggle. "You smell pretty good to me."

"Mmmm. I didn't say I wanted to take a shower *alone*. If you don't mind having another one."

"I'm a bear. We like water."

"Pffft, you're not a *polar* bear." Delicately, she lifted his glasses off his face and set them on top of the computer. "These are going to get smudged, if things go the way I'm hoping."

"Tell me more about these things," Jack said, leaning down to kiss her. With all the twisting around, the towel seemed to be slithering off his hips. She didn't have a problem with that.

"I'd rather show you," she murmured into his lips.

It wasn't always a perfect life, this life she was building here. But, as he kissed her again and she twined her arms around his neck, she wouldn't have changed a thing for the world.



This is a standalone story in the *Shifter Agents* universe. The books so far are:

**[#1 - Handcuffed to the Bear](#)**

**[#2 - Guard Wolf](#)**

**#3 - Dragon's Luck** (*coming soon!*)

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