

# YOSHI

A STEEL-TIPPED COWBOY BOOT jabs my shin. The half-naked girl in my arms gasps, and I blink at the double-barreled shotgun pointed at my nose. Sloppy. I've been having so much fun that I didn't hear Grams coming. And I've got damn good ears.

"Get up and get out!" my grandmother yells, gripping the stock. "I've had enough of you tom-cattin' around while I'm workin' day and night to keep your belly fed."

"Yoshi?" whispers the drowsy girl draped across me in the barn loft. "Who —?"

"Stay calm," I reply. "No sudden moves. It'll be okay."

Wide-eyed, she sits up, grabs her sweater, and holds it over her bra like a shield.

What's her name again? Zora? Zelda? No, Zoë. That's it.

Zoë's visiting town from Topeka over winter break. Last night, we hit it off, standing in line for chili cheese dogs at Dairy Queen. I'm not sure what time it is, but we headed back to the farm at around midnight.

Now Grams is standing with her boots shoulder-width apart between us and the loft's one-story drop-off. She gestures with her weapon toward the wooden ladder.

Zoë doesn't have to be told twice. She hurries out from beneath the Mexican blanket and across the straw-littered floor. Then she scrambles down to the ground level and sprints out the open barn door without looking back. Not that we bonded emotionally or anything.

Zoë will be all right. Her cousins' property is just down the road.

Meanwhile, my grandmother returns her attention to me. "What'd I tell you about picking up strange girls?"

"Well," I begin, "you don't like me hooking up with local girls, either, and I only have so much willpower. After all, they're usually the ones hitting on me and —"

"You know better than to bring anyone home!" Grams fires a warning shot, knocking a hole in the roof that she'll be cussing later. She isn't the type to kid. The way I figure it, this effectively terminates her role as my legal guardian.

"What?" I ask. "No good-bye hug?"

As Grams lowers the barrel, I push up into a tight crouch and launch myself over her head. It's a glorious,

ninja-looking move, one I've nailed a hundred times. But not with a gun pointed at me or after slamming a six-pack of Bud Light.

Instead of landing neatly behind Grams on the plank floor, I overshoot the edge of the loft and, waving my arms for balance, fall another story down to hit the ground near the hogpen. Contrary to superstition, I don't always land on my feet.

Off-balance, I turn my ankle and, wincing, dart into the early-morning light.

I didn't feel the winter chill in the barn. Not half buried in straw with a warm, enthusiastic girl draped over me and alcohol heating my belly.

Outside, the wind bites my skin, and I yank together my unsnapped Western-style shirt. Glancing at Grams's old farmhouse, I hesitate. I don't have much in the way of belongings, but a change of clothes would be nice. Besides, it's the only home I've ever known.

*Bam.* Grams gets another round off. So much for that idea.

On the upside, she's a great shot. Grams must have more familial affection for me than she realizes, or I'd be dead by now. Still, it'd be idiotic to push my luck.

What the hell. It's time I moved on. Because of my grandmother, I've got no friends, and I wasn't getting much out of my senior year of high school anyway.

Within seconds, my semi-restored 1972 Mercury

Cougar roars to life. I make a U-turn and hit the accelerator, peeling out on the long gravel drive.

Farewell, Kansas!

I've got a few hundred bucks on my cash card. Enough to hightail it to the only family I have left — my big sister, Ruby, in Austin.

Could be the adrenaline, could be my metabolism, but I feel sober enough to drive. I stop for gas and munchies (four bacon cheeseburgers, six packs of beef jerky, and a two-liter bottle of Coke) outside Wichita, and just over an hour later, pull over in Tonkawa, Oklahoma, for a nap. I don't, strictly speaking, need the sleep, but I relish it.

Continuing on my way, I sing along to country music and the pain in my ankle fades to a dull ache. By the time I hit OK City, it's gone and the bruise has vanished, too.

Being what I am has its advantages.

I don't feel that guilty about disappointing Grams. Wind blows. Seasons change. And I hook up with nearly every smokin' girl who catches my eye. Since puberty, I've worked my way through a sizable percentage of the decent *Homo sapiens* females (and a couple of the gloriously indecent ones) near my age residing in Butler County.

So, no regrets, or at least few regrets, even if Zoë did cost me room and board.

I don't blame Grams, either. She's got a no-tolerance policy when it comes to friends, babes, or showing so

much as a whisker in public — like I'd be stupid enough to tell anyone that we're werecats. I understand that it's a dangerous world, that our keys to survival are secrets, lies, and loneliness. My whole life, I've never known any different.

Cruising down I-35 South, I'm ready for something new.

# CLYDE

SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE I'm the one haunting this little neighborhood park, but no. That's the literal domain of my best bud, Travis. The big question is why.

Why is he still here? Why isn't he resting in peace?

I start off with a safer subject, our friend Aimee. "She hasn't been to the paintball range since . . . you know," I say. We don't usually talk about the night he was murdered. "She claims nobody wants to go with her."

"Why don't you go?" Travis asks.

Maybe talking about Aimee isn't so safe after all. She's attractive enough in a friend sort of way, and her

comic-book collection rivals mine. But paintball seems more like a date than just hanging out, and no way can I cross that line.

I'd never do that to Travis, especially now that he's dead.

Seated by the chain-link fence that's become a shrine to his memory, I peel a blade of dry brown grass in two. "You know I'm a lousy shot."

Partly to distract him, I display the most recent cards in a row on the paved walk, and Travis floats down for a closer look. At first, people from all over Austin — including a few ass-wipes from Waterloo High who never spoke to him when he was alive — brought not only cards ("Forever in Our Hearts") but also homemade signs ("We Love You, Travis!"), flowers, and candles. Now it's just those of us who knew him.

With the holidays came red bows, candy canes, and a beaded snowflake ornament, not that we get a lot of snow. I spot a new contribution, a four-inch-long Oaxacan wood carving of an armadillo. Like the plush dillos, it obviously was left by someone in the loose network of local shifters who knows that Travis was a werearmadillo.

"Do ghosts make New Year's resolutions?" I ask, tossing the grass aside.

"Like what?" Travis replies. "You think I should lose weight?"

"Very funny, Mr. Incorporeal." He appears vaguely

translucent, but otherwise looks like he always has — barrel body, bowl haircut, Longhorns jersey, and blue jeans.

Travis is the first friend I've lost . . . or sort of lost, given that his spirit is still here. As the wind picks up, blowing empty swings, it's hard to know how to feel about that.

I've been doing my homework, trying to figure out why he became a ghost in the first place. At first, I figured he was too upset to move on — pissed off at having been murdered, wanting his life back, and freaked out by the grieving of the family he left behind. But Travis doesn't seem stuck or angry. He doesn't seem lost or afraid or confused. He's not haunting his own home, where he could watch over his loved ones, and his remains were properly buried with full honors.

"Clyde," he begins, "what're you trying to get at?"

"Like . . ." I return the cards to the fence, use the links to raise myself, and maneuver into my wheelchair. "Maybe you should think about, you know, going into the Light."

Travis's grin is good-natured. "What would you do without me?"

"I'm just saying," I reply. "It's been a while since . . . it happened." Travis was slaughtered near this very spot — closer to the tennis courts — over three months ago by a skanky werecat named Ruby Kitahara, who hasn't been seen or heard from since.

When he doesn't reply, I add, "Do you want to talk about it?"

It has to be painful, discussing your own murder. Travis didn't even reveal his ghostly self to me until the twenty-first of December (I swallowed my gum), and other than during one disastrous road trip, I'd been coming here at least twice a week since he died back in September.

"I've told you," Travis replies. "It was Friday the thirteenth. Ruby said she needed to talk. She invited me out for a walk in the park, and so I went."

I zip my jacket. My wereopossum metabolism usually keeps me warm enough, but Travis's spiritual presence has a chilling effect. Like a ghostly mini air conditioner.

Resisting the temptation to come right out and call him a dumbass, I say, "A badly lit, secluded park on Friday the thirteenth, and you knew she was a werepredator, and you went anyway?"

He hangs his head, hunches his shoulders, and suddenly I feel lousy for picking on the dead guy. "Yeah." I wave my hand dismissively. "I know. Ruby is hot, hotty, hotness personified — evil of course, but abso-freaking-lutely four-alarm, red smokin' hot." I may have overstated my point. "I would've gone, too."

You have to watch out for Cat people. They use sex like a weapon.

"Ruby was saying something about the local cops when she suddenly froze and her claws came out. She hissed at me to beat it, and I did. I hauled butt."

It goes without saying that Dillos aren't particularly speedy.

"When I looked back," Travis concludes, "she'd forced a quick shift — it had to have hurt — and then sprang off in animal form. I'd just made it to the parking lot when paws slammed me to the ground." He shudders. "The last thing I remember is saber teeth sliding into the back of my neck." Travis rubs the area as if it still hurts.

Despite werecats' typical BS about their being distantly related to sabertooth tigers (or at least sabertooth were-tigers), no known modern species of Cat have teeth that extend past their jaws. However, they insist on referring to their canines as "saber teeth" because the word *canine* has such a strong Coyote/Wolf connotation.

"Ruby lured you out and let you have a head start so she could chase you," I realize out loud. "I guess it's true what they say. Cats love to play with their food."

"Why me?" Travis asks. "I wasn't a fast runner. If she was looking for sport . . ."

"She's a Cat," I remind him. "They think with their stomachs and genitals. Logic doesn't apply." Shifter-on-shifter violent crime is rare, though, except between certain longtime warring groups like Lions and Hyenas or Orcas and Seals.

"Has there been any progress with the police investigation?" he wants to know.

I've hounded Detectives Zaleski and Wertheimer for details, but they've as much as admitted that the case is getting colder every day. They insist they're not giving up, and I guess it's possible there's stuff they're not telling me.

After all, I'm not only a sixteen-year-old civilian. I'm also a poster child for everyone who's ever gotten their booty kicked. My parents, my friends, the cops — everyone's overprotective of me.

Realizing Travis is still waiting for an answer, I say, "They're trying, but —"

"I know," he replies. "They've got a lot of other things to worry about." And it's not like any case, even a murder, is as important to them as this one is to us.

Travis dematerializes without saying good-bye, and who can blame him? My own best friend was mauled to death, partly eaten, and what have I done about it?

Come to think about it, *that* must be why my Dillo pal is haunting this park — the scene of the crime — and why I'm the only one he's shown himself to.

Travis's killer — Ruby Kitahara — is living free and easy and without regrets. If he's to have any hope of resting in peace, he needs me to find her.

He needs me to make her pay for what she's done.

The babies are screaming. Clara is screaming in the nursery down the hall. Claudette is screaming in the kitchen

sink. Cleatus is screaming in the bouncer chair in front of the TV, and Clint is screaming in the playpen while pointing at Scooby on-screen.

“Clyde,” Dad calls, “do something!” He’s supposedly bathing Claudette.

If the kits were quints instead of quads, I might be a reality-TV star by now, bitching about the paparazzi, accompanied by nubile twenty-something personal assistants/au pairs, but alas, a grand total of five kids doesn’t cut it.

Still, if more humans were shifter-friendly, the Possum angle might’ve sold the show. I could’ve launched an improv career with off-color jokes about my prehensile tail.

“Pick one!” my father yells. “Cleatus! He’s closest.”

Cleatus just took a dump, and it’s his squalling that set off the others.

Holding my breath, I maneuver the chair to scoop up the stinky baby in one arm and roll down the hall to the changing table in the nursery.

It isn’t usually only Dad and me versus the bellowing horde, but Mom ducked out to pick up diapers fifteen minutes ago, which is apparently two minutes longer than we can handle the kits without the house falling into chaos. It’s not our fault. Possum babies are biologically hardwired to cling to their mothers.

It takes some doing to get Cleatus wiped, powdered, and relocated to his crib, but fortunately, my parents found a wheelchair-accessible changing table. Then I roll across

the room to cheer up Clara by shaking a rattle and making monkey noises.

Back in the family room, Clint's wailing comes to a hiccupping halt as my soaking-wet dad slips a freshly towel-dried Claudette into the bouncer chair. "Let's wait until your mother comes home to bathe the rest."

Multiple births are over fifty percent more common among werepeople than humans. But Dad spent much of the past several years working at an oil rig in the Gulf, so I was an only child until the kits were born.

I love the little poopers, and I like having my father around again.

It's hard on a family, being apart.

My parents even separated for a while, but after I was born, they fell back into a rhythm together. When the quads came, Dad had to commit more face time to the family. Now he's studying to get certified as a science teacher and overparenting me out of guilt because he wasn't around much when I was growing up.

Turning down the TV, he says, "I've been meaning to have a talk with you."

"Again?" At his expression, I add, "I aced Driver's Ed. I know how to tie a tie, and I learned everything I need to know about sex from the Internet."

He plops into the sofa chair. "About that monstrosity of an SUV . . ."

The car was a gift from my friend Quincie, who sort of

inherited it. Other than this afternoon's child-care break, Dad and I have spent the day sprucing it up. I can't wait to show Aimee. "I can afford the gas. Or at least I'll be able to once I get that raise —"

"I'd feel better about your working if your grades were better." Dad stands and navigates around the toys on the floor to the Christmas tree. "But it's more than that." He unravels a strand of popcorn from the branches. "You've had a lot to deal with lately—the babies, your physical therapy, my moving back in, and what happened to Travis."

Dad missed the funeral. Up to this point, only Mom has brought up Travis's death. I can't tell them about my newfound mission to find his killer. They worry enough as it is.

"You're in a growth spurt, too," Dad adds. "You're tall for a Possum, filling out."

"Hadn't noticed," I reply, though I did get new clothes for solstice and Christmas. Stuck in this chair, constantly looking up at other people, it's hard to feel tall.

"I bet Aimee has noticed," Dad says.

Now we're getting down to it. Nice man, my father. Not known for his subtlety.

"We're just friends," I reply, plucking a sticky discarded pacifier from between the couch cushions. I set it on the coffee table to be washed. "You don't like Aimee?"

She isn't one of us, so to speak. My father has always seemed open-minded about others—humans and non-

Possum shifters. But parents tend to be more conservative when romance (and/or the possibility of sex) is involved, and Mom and Dad were “taken aback,” as they put it, by the matching half-inch-tall crosses that Aimee and I had inked around our necks.

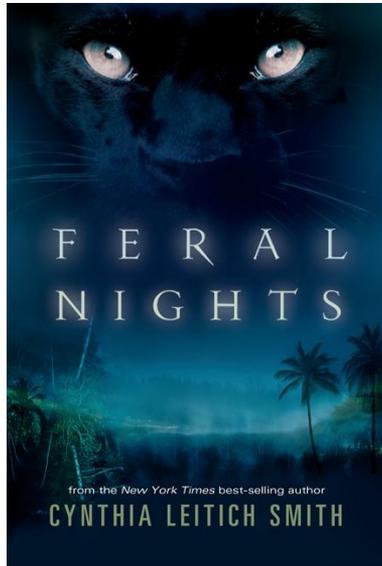
“Aimee was Travis’s girl,” I explain. “I’m keeping an eye on her for him. You know, to honor his memory.” It’s a phrase I picked up at the funeral.

Dad drops the string of popcorn into a trash bag. “I didn’t realize.”

I shrug. “Now you do.”

# Feral Nights

Cynthia Leitich Smith



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