



# F E R A L P R I D E



from *New York Times* best-selling author

CYNTHIA LEITCH SMITH



# FERAL PRIDE

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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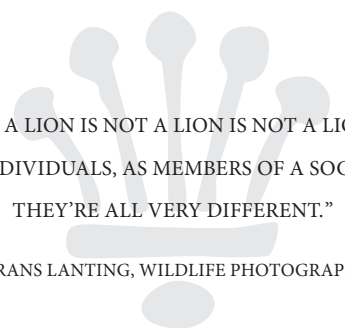
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*For Aunt Linda,  
whose encouragement and pride in my efforts  
inspires me to roar*





“... A LION IS NOT A LION IS NOT A LION.  
AS INDIVIDUALS, AS MEMBERS OF A SOCIETY,  
THEY'RE ALL VERY DIFFERENT.”

—FRANS LANTING, WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER



## Austin News Channel

Transcript: April 21

**Anchor:** This just in! The following video was taken with a night-vision camera in Pine Ridge, Texas (population 7,394), located about an hour southeast of Austin.

That figure contorting on your screen is believed to be an actual werecat, caught in mid-shift at Town Park—a public park located in the shadow of the historic downtown, along the Colorado River. She has been identified as Kayla Morgan, a senior at Pine Ridge High, a National Merit semifinalist, a track and cross-country state champion, and the adopted daughter of Mayor Franklin Morgan.

The structure in the background is an antique Western-themed carousel, which was the site of the death of PRHS quarterback Benjamin Bloom—from a lightning strike—back in February. We have confirmed that Kayla and Benjamin were dating at the time.

If you look closely, you can see other, as yet unidentified, individuals in the background. It appears as though at least one of them is a werecat, too. While shifters have been caught on video before, it's extremely rare and unprecedented in small-town Texas.

The Bastrop County Sheriff's Office has just issued a statement saying—quote—“Kayla Morgan and



her companions are suspected of no known crimes.  
Nor are they suspected of having any connection  
whatsoever to the kidnapping of Texas governor Linnie  
Lawson.

Kayla's species has not been verified."

# CLYDE

I WON'T BE CAGED. Not again. I tense at the crackle of the police radio. I check the side mirror. Not yet. I rub my eyelids, look again. I'm not the only one who's freaking out. The stink of shock and fear is weighty. I can hear my girlfriend Aimee's heart thudding in her chest.

"None of this makes sense," Kayla says from the backseat of the squad car. "It's not illegal to be what we are. Why would federal agents be gunning for us?"

"Why wouldn't they?" answers Yoshi, who's beside her.

They're both right. It's not illegal to be what we are. But whenever anything goes wrong, anything bloody and brutal, shape-shifters are presumed guilty. So, what went wrong this time?

Behind the wheel, Jess says, “Sure, there’s the footage. Werepeople in small-town America, cue the hysteria. But the feds were already after y’all before it went live.”

Earlier tonight Kayla’s shift to Cat form (and possibly Yoshi’s, too) was caught on video. It was uploaded to the International News Network and beyond. She’s become the latest poster child for shifters as beastly boogeymen. Meanwhile, shoot-first feds descended on Town Park. I’d already swept up Aimee. We’d taken refuge in a heavily wooded area nearby. But Kayla and Yoshi were momentarily arrested. A Coyote named Peter and a wereotter named Evan managed to escape. Darby, a Deer, was knocked unconscious and left behind with Tanya, a Bear. An elder werecat, Lula Stubblefield, ran into the line of fire to distract the armed SOBs. We’ve all been doing a bang-up job of avoiding the topic of her death.

The Cats had just transformed back to human form when the Federal Humanity Protection Unit (FHPU) started shooting. There was no time for them to waste getting dressed, and we’ve been on the run since. That’s why they’re both buck naked and handcuffed.

Fortunately, shifters have human allies like Aimee and Kayla’s friend Jess, who came to our rescue in her father’s squad car. Her dad, the local sheriff, helped finagle our escape.

That was about an hour ago. Now, it’s nearly one in the

morning. Traffic on the interstate is light. Aimee flicks a downward glance. “You okay?”

I whisper, “It’s nothing.” Well, not *nothing*, but . . . She’s perched on my lap in the bucket seat. It’s not just that I’m a teenage guy. Or just that she’s my girlfriend. I briefly bulked up my muscle mass and fur back in Pine Ridge. A bigger package is part of the deal. That’s not discussed in mixed company. Again, Aimee’s not only female. She’s a *Homo sapiens*.

Normally, Yoshi would be listening in and mouthing off about my predicament. But Kayla’s Chihuahua won’t shut up. “Peso can’t help it,” she insists. “Be nice to him. He gets carsick sometimes.”

“He’s going to ralph all over my lap!” Yoshi exclaims. All Cats are fastidious. Yoshi’s a metrosexual. “That’s it!” he says. “Jess, pull over. Nobody’s chasing us right this second. We’ve got to get these cuffs off. Clyde, you give Kayla your shirt.”

“We should’ve thought of that,” Aimee mutters, which is her nice way of saying that *I* should’ve thought of that. Kayla was adopted by the human mayor of Pine Ridge and his missus. She’s less comfortable au naturel than any shifter I’ve met before.

Yoshi’s after her, which is a relief. For a while, he’d set his sights on Aimee.

“Next exit,” Jess promises, hitting the wiper fluid. “I’ll

find a secluded spot.”

Aimee begins squirming, which doesn't help my situation. I ask, “What're you doing?”

She checks her pockets. “Looking for the keys to the handcuffs.”

“You *lost* the keys?” Kayla exclaims.

They slipped, unnoticed, through Aimee's fingers as she positioned herself on my lap. With my werelion-wereopossum reflexes, I snatched them in midair.

“Check the floorboard,” Jess says to Aimee. “You probably dropped them.”

Yoshi kicks the back of my seat. “What the hell, Clyde!”

The Cats' wrists are restrained behind them. We've had a long night. There's no way Yoshi's comfortable like that. He might be suffering from a little awkwardness of his own, with no jeans to hide it. But notice how he goes straight for blaming me.

Because why? Yoshi's a senior. I'm a sophomore. He's been all Cat his whole life. After being raised by Possums as a Possum, I've only recently discovered my inner Lion.

Yoshi is Mr. Smooth with the ladies. Me? Not so much. He's become Aimee's closest guy friend, like I need that in my life.

I'm not ashamed to be half wereopossum. It's the animal form I've exclusively identified myself with for most of



my life. But Possums aren't considered the sexiest. Or even sexy-ish.

I'm a Wild Card, dual species. Based on grocery-store paperbacks, it seems like werecurious human girls fantasize about lean predators like Wolves and Cats. Bears, if they're into the husky type. Aimee and I clicked back when I thought of myself as strictly weremarsupial. We didn't go from friends to more until after I learned how to roar.

Yoshi kicks the back of my seat again. I squeeze the keys in my palm. Aimee rushes to apologize. As Jess accelerates past the next exit, my girlfriend insists she's at fault.

I'm pissed enough at Yoshi to let her.

# YOSHI

HOURS BEFORE SUNRISE, fleeing Texas in an ungodly crowded police car, the only thing my friends can talk about is Wonder Woman. “Diana represents one-third of the DCU Trinity, and who’s her archenemy?” Kayla asks. “Cheetah. Not only a werecat, but a spotted werecat.”

At least she’s speaking up. A spotted werecat herself, Kayla’s a lot quieter when she’s naked. Self-conscious, I guess. Religious. Not me. I’m a dashing, cougar-like Cat myself with jet-black fur in animal form. I love my body.

“This is significant . . . why?” Jess asks from behind the wheel. Like everybody else up front, she has her clothes

on. “Shifters are people. There are terrific people, terrible people. Most fall in between. Why can’t a wereperson be a villain? Because the hero is Wonder Woman?”

“Wereperson” is a sometimes preferred term for “shifter.” (I don’t mind either one, so long as nobody’s calling me a “freak of nature” or a “monster” . . . or insulting my hair.) We’re in no way supernatural, even if our bodies can perform a few tricks that are beyond our human cousins. We’re no recent mutation either. We trace our evolutionary line back to at least the Ice Age.

That’s not breaking news. Werecats and, for that matter, werewolves and weredeer and Raccoons and Vultures (among others) have been common knowledge among *Homo sapiens* since the mid-1800s. Some humans, like Jess and Aimee, are cool with us, but the rest . . . not so much. The not-so-much crowd, they’re the majority. Or at least they’re louder.

The great thing about being in a cop car is that other vehicles give us wide berth. I don’t like it, though, Aimee sitting on Clyde’s lap with the seat belt stretched across them. We’re doing seventy-five miles per hour, and I’ve only got one best friend. She’d be safer back here. It’s cramped but she’s tiny, and it’s not like she has to touch my naked bod—not that I’d blame Clyde for objecting. (I am irresistible.) She could sit on the other side of Kayla. That would press the Cat girl tight against me. Nudity before and after shifts isn’t a big deal among werepeople. But this

is *Kayla*. I should be getting more credit for not staring at her rack. Like a ticker-tape parade.

“Clyde, what did I tell you?” Jess moves to the far right lane to let a camper trailer pass.

“Don’t touch the center console,” he replies with a sigh. He’s such a baby. He keeps playing with the radio, camera, and light-bar controls. Which, granted, are pretty cool.

We debated taking back roads (or at least avoiding tolls), but ultimately decided that I-35 North, the fastest route to Oklahoma, was worth the risks. Not for the first time, I strain against the cuffs and feel the metal give a bit. If I had the strength of a werebear, I’d be free by now.

Kayla and I discussed trying to shift ourselves free, but trapped in this position, my head bent from the low ceiling, our arms restrained behind our backs — no way. That’s not superficial, stage-one stuff — like fur, eyes, claws, teeth. We could throw a joint out of socket or puncture a lung with a rib bone. We’ve got it made over humans when it comes to healing (when our forms shift, we largely reboot ourselves), but bone and organ injuries are tougher to repair than flesh.

“Werepeople are portrayed as archvillains a lot,” Aimee points out. “Cheetah isn’t supposed to be an *Acinonyx jubatus sapiens* like Kayla, but I doubt most Wonder Woman fans put much thought into the difference.” Are we *still* talking about this?

The squad car has been pro cleaned, but somebody threw up in this backseat within the past couple of weeks. I'm getting a headache, and it's not helping that Kayla's Chihuahua won't shut up. Most small animals panic in the presence of werepredators. It's novel that, because he's Kayla's, Peso is so comfortable around us. Still, we should've left him in Pine Ridge. If he scrambles over my junk one more time, I swear . . .

"Better an archvillain than a sorry-ass villain," Clyde chimes in, scratching his freshly grown beard. He's a Wild Card shifter, half Lion, half Possum (he can choose between forms).

Staying clean-shaven is key to passing as human, at least until we're out of high school. Passing—hiding in plain sight in human form—is the way most of us survive. Especially urban shifters, but even country boys (like I used to be) do their best to act average. There are species-only communities like Wolf packs, but Cats are too independent for that sort of BS.

"Besides," Clyde goes on, "Cheetah started out as a pathetic *Homo sapiens* woman in a cat suit. It helped enormously to reinvent her like that. Think about it: How could some random society babe with a personality disorder pose a serious challenge to Diana?"

They do that all the time—or at least Aimee and Clyde do—they talk about superheroes and sci-fi characters like they're on a first-name basis. For hours . . . this has been



going on *for hours*. I'm finally bored enough to join in. "You'd sign off on a random society dude with a personality disorder challenging her."

"Would not!" Clyde exclaims. "I bow to the awesomeness that is the Amazon princess."

"What if it was Bruce Wayne?" I counter as a trio of motorcycle riders cruises by. "Society dude. Major issues. If he's Superman's fail-safe, shouldn't he be able to take down Wonder Woman, too?" That shuts him up. I'm not a geek, but I hear them jabber about this stuff all the time. It seemed like the thing to say to score points with the girls.

Besides, this whole conversation is whistling in the dark—talking about anything except what's really wrong. We're retreating to safety. Wolves would stand their ground and fight, but Wolves are idiots. There's a reason werewolves are the first shifters that humans name among monsters—often in the same breath as Count Dracula and Frankenstein.

"It makes you think, doesn't it?" Aimee asks, glancing over at the semi in the next lane.

She's still fretting about whether people assume some comic-book feline fatale is a shifter and what that means for the media or society or both. She's like that. We've only known each other for a few months, and she's already dragged me to three political rallies (textbooks, immigration, gay marriage). I don't mind. The women are cute, and snacks are plentiful.

Aimee and I, we're platonic, but she might've been my girl if it weren't for Clyde.

Then again, if Aimee and I had gotten together, I wouldn't be in this what-might-happen place with Kayla. No, that's crazy — the Aimee part, not the Kayla part. It's not like I was madly in love with Aimee. I like her — a lot. She can be flaky and exhausting (in a Goth/New Age/hippie way), but she has this incredible faith in the universe. It's contagious.

You could say I love her as a friend. I do. I love her as a friend. So what's my damage? Aimee was the first girl I cared about as more than booty and, of all the other guys in the world, she chose Clyde Gilbert instead of me. *Clyde Gilbert.*

What can I say? This Cat man has his pride.

"Bruce Wayne isn't some random society dude with a personality disorder," Clyde insists. "He's the *ultimate* society dude with a personality disorder. There's a difference."

"Tell that to Tony Stark," I reply, hoping I remember right that he's Iron Man.

"You *wish* you were Tony Stark," the Wild Card informs me.

Aimee yawns. We're coming up on Denton, Texas, en route to Jess's aunt's house in Pawhuska, Oklahoma (otherwise known, I've been told, as Osage Nation). We left Pine Ridge not long after midnight, and it's around 4 A.M. now. Werepeople have more endurance than humans. Of course

Cats relish naps and I sure could use one, but Aimee and Jess must be exhausted.

Peso barks, scratching the tops of my thighs—again. It's all I can do not to hiss him into quivering submission, but Kayla would have a fit.

In the rearview mirror, I glimpse flashing lights coming up fast from behind.

“Should I floor it?” Jess asks, and suddenly we're all wide awake.

# YOSHI

WE'RE FIVE TEENAGERS, two of whom are naked and cuffed, in a borrowed police vehicle with a small, highly vocal, constantly-in-motion dog. Plus, Kayla is hugely recognizable.

Aimee cranes her neck to look. "I doubt a high-speed chase is the way to go."

I have a mental image of helicopters and live TV. "That would be bad."

Clyde snorts. "What? You don't think we're getting enough media coverage?"

I ask, "Other suggestions?"

"We split up," Kayla begins. "Shifters, jump out. Humans, say we kidnapped you and forced Jess to drive.

Play dumb. Claim you don't know anything, and take Peso home."

At least she agrees that we shouldn't have brought the dog.

"Bad idea." Jess turns down the radio. "Sweetie, this is a police car. The back doors don't open from the inside, and in case you didn't notice, your windows are barred."

Humans tend to underestimate shifter strength. I bet we could kick the doors open, but leverage is an issue. Again, I struggle against the metal binding.

No use, not that I'm down with leaping onto the highway. The fact that shifters heal fast doesn't mean a semi couldn't flatten us for good.

Clyde pitches in. "If the cop makes us get out of the car, we can take him."

"In cuffs?" Kayla asks.

He flashes me a grin and holds the keys up for us to see.

Asshole! Leaning toward the open cage window, I snarl, "You said Aimee lost them!"

Aimee swats the Wild Card. "Not funny. I felt terrible!"

The cop isn't messing around. He's pulled up alongside us. Sensing the heightened tension, Peso starts shaking and drooling. He'd better not throw up.

"Pull over," I say. "Clyde, can you knock out that separator thing?"

"Do not disturb the cage," Jess orders him. "You'll hurt yourself and my dad's car, too." She hits the turn signal.



“Panicking won’t solve anything. We don’t need to give him another reason to be suspicious, and you can bet he’s got a dash cam.”

I hadn’t thought of that. “You speak cop,” I reply. “You take point.”

Jess pulls over, muttering, “No pressure.”

Grateful I’m the one behind the driver, I angle myself to conceal Kayla as much as possible. I release my fur over my lower half to mimic a pair of pants. A long shot, but it’s dark. I’ve got more control than most shifters, even most Cats. I hope the cop doesn’t look too closely. He’s getting out on the side of the highway behind us. “Jess, what’re we dealing with?”

“Trooper,” she replies, glancing at the rearview mirror. “Young guy; his gun’s out.”

“His gun’s out?” Aimee echoes. “Is that normal? That’s not normal, is it?”

“Hush,” Jess whispers, lowering her window. “Evenin’, Officer, is there a problem?”

He’s short, stocky in his crisp tan uniform. It’s not clear if we, as shifters, have any legal rights. He might shoot us all, not realizing until too late that Jess and Aimee are humans.

I tilt my head, trying to study the cop, not sure what to make of his silence. Then the breeze slips in. I open my mouth to sample it and exhale. “He’s a wereperson.” That doesn’t guarantee he’s on our side, but it improves the odds.

“A Tasmanian weredevil,” Clyde adds, like species matters at the moment.

“Damn, damn, damn, damn.” The weredevil spits and kicks at the gravel. “You’re them, aren’t you? The Cats everyone’s talking about.” Glowering, he holsters his gun. “We need to talk. Meet me at the next McDonald’s, and don’t even think about making a run for it.”

# AIMEE

THE MOST AMAZING THING about shifters isn't their transformations or their animal-trait superpowers or, at least with certain species, their radiating sex appeal. All of that pales next to their appetites. They have sky-high metabolisms, and they eat more meals than hobbits.

Jess and I stroll into the twenty-four-hour McDonald's. The dining area is nearly deserted except for a husband-wife trucker team nursing cups of coffee, a guy with a soul patch plucking at a bass guitar, and a pregnant woman with a sad face eating apple slices.

After a quick trip to the restrooms, we check out the menu options. It's Monday. Back in Austin, the morning bell rings at Waterloo High in another five hours.

I somehow doubt I'm going to make it. "We'll take eight Bacon Habanero Ranch Quarter Pounders with large fries." That's two each for the werepeople, including the state trooper. They'd probably be happier with three, but I only have so much cash and I'm not sure how long it has to last. "Plus four vanilla shakes, four apple pies, a bottle of water . . ." I glance at Jess. "How 'bout you?"

"Diet Coke." If she's taken aback by the size of my order, she doesn't show it. "Want to split Chicken McNuggets?"

I do. Addressing the clerk, I add, "We'll also have an order of McNuggets—"

"Oh, and a chocolate cone," Jess puts in, stifling a yawn.

"Make that two." I like her. We met earlier tonight when she appeared out of nowhere at Town Park behind the wheel of our getaway car. Jess is calm, easygoing, with a good sense of humor . . . and human. It's nice for a change, not being the only *Homo sapiens* in the group.

The Cats have settled at a bright yellow metal picnic table alongside the colorful outdoor play area to wait for the state trooper. They're free of the cuffs and wrapped in blankets from the trunk. After a potty break, we left Peso in the backseat with the window cracked.

Clyde is across the street at the mega truck stop, picking up clothes for Yoshi and Kayla.

Male shifters usually shave twice a day, but Cats (their Lion cousins included) tend to be noticeably less hirsute in human form than, say, Wolves or Bears. I hardly ever see

the boys this furry. It's amazing how fast they can pass for grown men.

Of course, Yoshi's almost a grown man. He'll graduate high school in six weeks or so, assuming he can yank up his grades. Tonight's drama aside, I'm not worried about him. Yoshi has style and swagger. He uses his lean, muscled swimmer's build to full advantage. He used to be that guy your mom warned you about, but lately he's gravitating toward something real.

"Here goes nothing," Jess muses aloud as we exit carrying plastic trays loaded with food and drinks.

As we approach the table, the cop jogs over from the parking lot, the soles of his polished black combat boots hitting concrete. I envy Jess's light jacket. It's in the mid-sixties, not that the werepeople, who run warmer, seem to notice the cold. Seconds later she tosses a boxed Quarter Pounder at the trooper. It's a gesture that says (human or not) she isn't intimidated.

The stocky weredevil grunts, catching the box. He sniffs before he opens it. We're hoping the beef improves his mood.

By the time I've unscrewed the cap from my water bottle, the shifters have each inhaled half a burger. Yoshi breaks the silence. "What's on your mind, Officer?"

The weredevil turns to gesture with a fry at Kayla. "I'm wondering how you could be so stupid as to get caught on video, and this weekend to boot. Your image is everywhere.

There are already websites selling tote bags and Frisbees with your face on them.”

At the risk of stereotyping, this isn’t the first Tasmanian weredevil I’ve met, and they skew cranky. Yoshi, apparently thinking the same thing, laughs. “You don’t happen to have a vicious little sister? Eighth-grader named Teghan?”

“Yoshi Kitahara?” The cop is frowning so deeply it looks like his forehead might split.

Yoshi spreads his arms in self-congratulation. “Guilty as charged.”

“You got the brat home safe!” The trooper offers his hand across the table. “Call me Oliver.” The two shake. The lingering mistrust evaporates. It turns out Oliver is Teghan’s cousin. Central Texas werepeople are tightly networked. Everybody seems to know one another within two or three degrees of separation.

This winter Yoshi and Teghan were among werepeople who were captured and brought to a remote tropical island in the South Pacific to be hunted for sport by billionaires — including magic users and the undead. Yoshi not only saw to it that Teghan survived their hunt. He played big brother to her through the whole ordeal, and they catch up now and then over donuts.

I got snatched, too, but since I’m human, my captors decided I’d be more useful as kitchen help, and Clyde was caged — he was on crutches at the time. This was before he

discovered that he was half Lion. But afterward he found himself among the hunted as well.

Clyde returns at a brisk pace from his shopping errand and hands Kayla the bag. With his Lossum (Lion + Possum) hearing, he didn't miss any of the exchange.

"She's dead now," Oliver says. "Teghan. Murdered."

Kayla, who retrieved a plain gray T-shirt and black sweatpants from the bag, pauses in her effort to slip them on under the blanket. Clyde sinks onto the yellow metal bench.

Yoshi's the first to respond. "What?" He covers his eyes. "*Who?*"

"Don't know," Oliver replies. "It looked like a professional hit — execution style, which makes no sense. There're a couple of shifters from the Austin Police Department investigating, but it seems like the only case that matters right now is the governor's kidnapping."

"The governor was kidnapped?" I exclaim. "The governor of Texas?"

Oliver glances from one of us to the next. "You haven't heard about the weresnake?"

# AIMEE

“I’LL SHOW YOU.” Oliver boots his phone, fiddles a moment.

With Jess maneuvering the blanket to protect Kayla’s modesty, the Cat girl finishes getting dressed. Then they join Yoshi in coming around the table so that they can see.

It’s a clip from an Austin TV news station. The screen fills with the Serpent’s head. It’s a mottled beige color with darker brown triangle patterns flaring from the eyes and two short horns rising from the nose. Orange eyes. I’ve met weremammals and werebirds, but werereptiles?

Clyde slips his arm around me, and I snuggle in.

“Herpetologists are saying it resembles the Gaboon viper from sub-Saharan Africa,” Oliver informs us. “No



word yet on whether this *Vipera sapiens* is literally venomous, but it might as well be.”

The Snake opens its jaws. Assuming its head is roughly on scale with a human’s, its fangs are over three inches long. “I am Seth.” The voice is raspy, lingering on the S.

Believe it or not, that’s not the weirdest part. It’s that he’s talking comfortably as a full-on Snake. A wereperson in animal form has to partly retract the shift to speak at all.

Seth says, “I’m sure you recognize my distinguished guest.” The video cuts to show the forty-something governor. Her light brown curls are a mess, her mascara is smeared, and her red suit is rumpled. She stares into the camera like she’s challenging us somehow.

The Snake takes center screen again. “On behalf of shape-shifters everywhere, we have taken the governor of Texas as a declaration of war against the human race. Rest assured there will be no peace until *Homo sapiens* accepts its rightful role as our subordinate.”

With a flick of his finger, Oliver shuts his phone down. “Hit the air early this evening, but on the down low, the governor went missing on Friday. People are wiggling out. There was talk going around that state and local police would be sent door-to-door, looking to arrest any shifter they could find. A bunch of cops resigned in protest or threatened to.” We heard something about that back in Pine Ridge. Now it makes more sense. Oliver adds, “Anyway, the whole operation turned out to be a BS rumor,

and it's just a matter of paperwork before everybody's back on the job."

"Is there any proof the Snake isn't acting alone?" Jess wants to know.

"Bear DNA was found in the governor's mansion," Oliver says. "For what that's worth."

"No demands?" Jess asks, her ice cream melting. "No list of grievances?"

"Did I miss something?" Kayla adds. "Did we *elect* a Snake as our spokesperson?"

Yoshi shakes his head and takes a T-shirt out of the bag. It's a V-neck pink women's XL with sparkly angel kittens on front. He pulls it on.

"Hang on," Clyde says. "I thought there was no such thing as a werereptile."

"That would make Seth a Cryptid," I reply. They're apparently more common than I thought. That Pacific island — Daemon Island — that served as the stage for the shifter hunt? It was run by a different kind of Cryptid, members of an intelligent, secretive, largely unknown species. Furry snowpeople devoted to technology (especially air-conditioning) and eco devo, prone to family drama and bad hairstyles, self-described environmentalists, who're fond of eating yak.

Yoshi slams his fist into the center of the metal table, denting it. The noise is too big. We all brace for someone

to come running out of the restaurant and scold us. No one does.

“Sorry about that,” he says. “I’m okay.” He takes a breath. “The symbolism of a weresnake sucks. A lot of humans already believe shifters are demonic. There’s that ridiculous story floating around the Internet that the snake in the Garden of Eden was a shape-shifter.”

“It’s not only on the Internet,” Clyde adds. “And it’s been floating around since before forever.” He picks up his apple pie and addresses Oliver. “How bad is the fallout?”

Oliver draws his gun and looks at it like he’s aching to shoot somebody. “The Snake and the governor could be anywhere. The whole state’s on lockdown.”

“Lockdown?” Kayla asks, stealing the last of Yoshi’s fries.

Oliver puts the weapon away. “They’re mostly symbolic, but there’s a roadblock on every highway heading out of Texas, at the Mexican border, the docks. TSA is on the lookout. Human bigots are nothing new, but the Snake has given regular people a reason to be afraid. And you . . .” He toasts Kayla with his vanilla shake. “You’ve become the most recognizable shape-shifter in Texas.”

***The Texas Talker, April 21***

**Op-Ed by Hailey Haluska**

The high-profile kidnapping of Governor “Laughin’ Linnie” Lawson by a weresnake named Seth may well boost her viability as a potential candidate for the U.S. presidency.

That’s assuming, of course, she’s rescued alive.

“I have the best job in the world,” Lawson was quoted as saying last month. “My heart is here, in the heart of Texas, serving the fine citizens who sent me to the governor’s office.”

Despite a flurry of recent gaffes, few doubt Lawson will run. Presidential hopefuls often deny plans to seek the nation’s highest office until they’ve fully gauged their resources, weighed the opposition, and can capitalize on an opportune news cycle.

The question has always been: How can she hope to overshadow the dynasties that have dominated presidential politics for the past several administrations? Supporters admired her brass and boots, but outside the state, her reputation dwindled. Or in other words, pundits have asked, why take Laughin’ Lawson seriously?

The kidnapping is a game-changer. Although the native Dallasite was elected with a more moderate stance on shape-shifters, she’s taken a much harder line in recent weeks.

Lawson has become a household name, an international media sensation in her own right. In the short term, she may come off as a victim, but as the living symbol of threatened humanity, leaders from both major political parties are rallying behind her.

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