



WARGS CURSE OF
MISTY HOLLOW

D . ALLEN . RUTHERFORD

. ILLUSTRATED BY COLLETTE JELLIS .

Wargs: Curse of Misty Hollow

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Dedication

To my lovely wife Nahid. They say that behind every successful man there is a woman urging him forward. (What the saying fails to say is that there was a cattle prod involved in the picture ~smile~.) For thirty plus years, Ms. Nahid has not wavered in her encouragement for me to realize my goals and dreams, in spite of the many challenges life has put in our path. She has been a loyal wife and good mother to our wonderful daughters and grandmother to our precious grandchildren. I dedicate this debut novel of the Wargs Trilogy to Ms. Nahid. H&Ks x 1,000

Chapter 1

By mid-day, the sun had melted away the mist which, normally shrouded Misty Hollow most days from the late afternoon, through the night, into the morning hours. Ranger Holmes slowed his truck as he crested the narrow pass that led into Misty Hollow, to admire the picturesque view of the isolated valley below. For the past five years, Misty Hollow has been part of his assigned patrol area. A ranger for the U.S. Forest Service, Adam Holmes normally looked forward to his monthly visits to Misty Hollow where he checked the condition of the roads, fire trails, and watering holes, maintained by the forest service. He particularly enjoyed stopping into the village of Graymere to visit with Dr. Bertram, have lunch at the Wolf's Lair, and occasionally talk with Simon Jarvis who ran the mercantile.

The service road that ringed the valley was still damp from the late spring rain from the day before, making it easy for Ranger Holmes to spot any fresh animal tracks. He would drive slowly along the road with his window down, scanning the edge of the road and ditches for signs of wildlife, stopping to inspect the fire trails and watering holes along the way. As he was nearing Lupine Rock, he caught a glimpse of what appeared to be an animal carcass on one side of the road, across the drainage ditch. He slowed to a stop, stepped out of the truck and scanned the area to make sure he was not walking up on a fresh predator kill. Satisfied that there were no hungry, feeding, bears, wolves, or mountain lions nearby, he hopped across the ditch to investigate.

Making his way up the slippery slope on the far side of the drainage ditch, Ranger Holmes saw that it was, in fact, an animal lying on the ground, but couldn't make out what it was. From where he stood, he could see it was an animal with coarse fur and at first, thought it was a bear, but the color of the fur was not that of a black bear which inhabited the region. Cautiously, he crept forward to examine the carcass. "Shit!" he said aloud to himself as he got his first clear look at the animal. "This sucker is huge! But, what on earth..." He paused and nervously scanned the area. Slowly, he circled around the carcass, moving closer, trying to figure out what it was. It appeared to be canine, most likely a wolf, but it was much larger than any wolf he had ever seen. It had to be at least fifty percent larger than any gray wolf, weighing at least a hundred and fifty pounds, if not more. Its features were unlike any wolf species he knew of.

Finally, he was close enough to kneel down next to the animal to examine it and discovered that the animal had been shot. The blood pooled near the carcass and the blood trail leading away from it indicated that the animal had recently been killed. He stood and turned to go back to his truck to retrieve his notepad and camera to document the scene when he suddenly became aware of movement in the brush behind him. At first, he couldn't see anything and thought maybe the poachers he presumed to have killed the animal, were still in the area. Then he heard a deep snarling sound coming from different directions. Realizing that the sounds must be pack mates of the dead animal laying at his feet, anxiety quickly gave way to fear. Glancing over his shoulder he saw that his truck was more than thirty yards away. He knew if he tried to make a run for the truck the wolves would be on him before he got across the ditch. He was frozen in his own tracks, no weapon on him, and at least two more of these huge predators now stalking him. He could hear his heart pounding in his chest and he felt flush as his blood pressure spiked. Slowly, he regained his wits and began to step backward, away from the carcass, toward his truck, being careful not to turn his back on wolf creatures stalking him from the brush nearby. When he reached the edge of the ditch he paused, took a deep breath, then turned, bounded across the ditch, and made a mad-dash for his truck. The wolf creatures were quicker than he had imagined and they caught up to him before he got safely inside his truck.

It's was Friday, the semester over, and Matt was looking forward to getting out of the office and spending the summer trekking into the wilderness in search of a cryptid that he hoped would turn out to be a new species of wolf.

Matthew Kershaw, known as Matt to his friends, came across as an unassuming sort of fellow, so focused on his work that he paid little attention to the petty routines of others around him. At six-foot tall and slender build, his colleagues considered him moderately handsome, a mix between a nerdy and outdoorsy type. Following the 9/11 attacks, Matt served a tour of duty in Afghanistan as an officer in the U.S. Army. Severely wounded during a mortar attack, Matt received a purple heart and a medical discharge after spending several weeks in the hospital and months in rehab. Returning to college, he obtained his Ph.D. and began teaching at the University of Idaho, where he established somewhat of a reputation among wildlife biologists and cryptozoologists, as an authority on wolves in the wilderness areas of the American Northwest.

Matt was sorting through his maps and packing his research files when the telephone rang. "Hello, Matt Kershaw speaking."

"Matt, this is Harvey. How are you doing, old buddy?"

"I'm doing well. How's it going with you these days?" Matt replied. "How are Carroll and the kids?"

"The family is doing well thanks, and things around the office are the same old boring routines," Harvey said. *"I hope I didn't catch you at a busy time? I know this is the end of the semester and you are busy trying to grade papers and get grades posted."*

"Actually, I just finished posting the last of the grades and I'm packing up my stuff from the office trying to get out of here for the summer. I haven't heard from you in quite some time. You must be really busy counting trees, sorting pinecones, stacking acorns and chasing chipmunks."

Harvey laughed. *"Not exactly, but I think sometimes stacking acorns would be a welcome change of pace. Matt, I'm sorry to call you out of the blue like this, but I was hoping to catch you before you left for the summer."*

"No problem. What's up?"

“I have a problem on my hands and I was hoping I could persuade you to help me out. I realize that you already have your summer planned out, but I truly need your help on this.” Harvey pleaded with Matt.

“I hope you’re not going to ask me to dog-sit that ugly mutt of yours again. That little monster crapped all over my cabin.” Matt laughed.

“No, nothing like that,” Harvey replied. *“One of my forest rangers was attacked and badly mauled by a wolf yesterday. He was patrolling an area in Misty Hollow, the valley where I grew up when the incident occurred.”*

“Sorry to hear that. But, what do you need from me?” Matt asked.

“I was hoping I could persuade you to take a couple of weeks out of your schedule and go up to the valley and investigate the incident for me.”

“Harvey you know I wouldn’t turn you down if you called on me for a favor, but why are you asking *me* to look into this attack? Why don’t you call the Idaho Fish and Game Commission? They are the ones who handle this sort of thing.”

“Yes, normally that’s what I’d do. However, I thought this investigation might serve both our interest.”

“How so?” Matt queried.

“For my part, this incident occurred in the small isolated valley where I grew up and there have been other close encounters reported in the area. If I call the Fish & Game, they will send in a hunter to do a controlled removal of the animal responsible for the attack. Then, when they have the time and the resources, they will do a management study. My concern is that a pack from the neighboring wilderness area is migrating into the valley.”

“Again, why are you asking me to do this?” Matt insisted.

“The ranger who was attacked and mauled said the wolves that attacked him were very large and strange looking. His detailed description of the animals he encountered doesn’t remotely resemble any known species of wolf any of us recognize. I thought this may be a hot lead you might want to check out while you are doing the survey of the valley for me.”

After a brief pause to consider Harvey’s request, Matt summarized. “So, what you’re asking me to do is drive up to the

valley, survey the area and see if there is a possible threat of encroachment from the neighboring wilderness area. If I find the problem child, call Fish and Game to affect a controlled removal. Then submit a summary report with a recommendation for further study and control management, if I deem it warranted.”

“That’s it in a nutshell. Matt, I hate to ask this of you on such short notice, but I have family and friends in that valley with children who run and play in those woods. The livestock they rely on for their livelihood is threatened. I would feel better about the situation there if someone I knew and trusted were to go in right away and investigate the matter.”

Matt and Harvey Langston were roommates at the university when they were working on their undergraduate degrees. After Harvey began working for the forest service, he would call Matt anytime something strange or unexplained came across his desk. So when Harvey called out of the blue asking him to conduct this investigation Matt knew this was important to his old friend and was reluctant to tell him no. Besides, the prospect of following up a hot lead on a cryptid from a reliable source was too tempting to ignore. This could be the possible discovery he has been hoping for.

“When would you like this survey done?” Matt asked.

“As soon as possible,” Harvey replied. *“Why don’t you stop by the office Monday and I will give you a copy of the report and any additional details I can get between now and then,”* Harvey suggested, assuming that Matt had agreed to do the investigation for him.

“I will need a few days to get things settled around the cabin before I can head up there, but I will see you Monday. We can discuss this a bit more then.”

“Ok, see you Monday. Thanks, buddy, I owe you one.”

“You already owe me for sitting that ugly mutt of yours during Christmas last year. I’ll see you Monday.”

Before Matt could finish packing his files and maps, Sarah stepped into his office. “Dr. Kershaw, when do you want me to come to your place to begin house-sitting this summer?”

Sarah Henderson had just graduated with her Master of Science degree and would be starting the Ph.D. program in the fall. During the summer breaks, Sarah house sat for Matt while he was away, trekking through the wilderness. He liked Sarah; she was a young

Army Veteran with a strong work ethic. ‘You reminded me of a short version of Halle Berry’, he would tell her with a chuckle.

“You can come anytime if you have to be out of the dorm. I’ll be leaving by next weekend, so before then, I should think.”

“Alright, if you don’t mind I’ll bring a few things from the dorm out to the cabin this afternoon and then I’ll go visit my family for a few days. I’ll be back a week from tomorrow if that’s cool with you.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Matt said, handing Sarah a key to the house.

Matt resumed packing when Sarah interrupted again. “So, Dr. Kershaw, where are you going this summer? Are you going to be doing anything exciting?”

“Sorry to disappoint, but a last minute request by an old friend just interrupted my plans. It looks like this summer may be a bit mundane. I have to conduct a wolf population survey of a small valley.

“Bummer sounds like your summer may be a bust.”

“I’m going to investigate a wolf attack on a forest ranger. While I’m up in that area, I’m going to take the opportunity to scout around a different area of the wilderness looking for evidence of a cryptid wolf species. With any luck, I hope to find something that will make the trip worthwhile.”

“Well, researching cryptids sounds interesting. How did you get interested in investigating cryptids?”

“Ever since I was a little boy, my great uncle would tell me tales of Native American folklore. Many of those stories involved some association with animal totems, animal spirits, skin-walkers, waheela, shunka warak’ins and such. Over the years, I developed a belief that the origin of these stories were based on species of animals that once actually lived.”

“That sounds cool! But, what makes you think that there’s a new species of wolf out there?” Sarah asked.

“I guess you could say it is just a hunch. However, many of the old Native American legends and myths give similar descriptions of animal spirits as those contained in reports of modern day encounters with strange or unusual animals. I believe that there’s a thread of fact behind both of this phenomenon that could be

explained by an elusive species of wolf that has remained undiscovered deep in the wilderness regions.”

“I hope you find one. That would be cool to discover a new species. Well, I will leave you to do your packing. I have to finish moving my stuff out of the dorm. See you this afternoon.”

* * *

On Monday, Matt arrived at Harvey’s office around mid-morning. He was anxious to get more details of the incident involving the ranger’s attack and background on the valley where the attack occurred.

“I thought this might be of interest. I had Janice make a copy of the follow-up report on the incident involving the ranger.” Harvey said handing a file to Matt.

Matt flipped through the folder and was somewhat surprised that the report provided a detailed description of unusually large and strange looking wolves. ‘Appearing taller at the shoulder than the hips, with a heavy mane over the neck and shoulder area, the animal was estimated to be at least fifty percent larger than an average gray wolf. The head was larger in proportion to the body which was dominated by a shorter snout and beefier jaws. The teeth and fangs appeared to be abnormally large for the size of the jaw and head.’ Pictures included in the report depicted graphic evidence of the ranger’s wounds and the wounds themselves reinforced the description of the size of the wolves’ head and fangs.

After allowing Matt a few minutes to review the report, Harvey proceeded to give Matt some basic background information. “The ranger, Adam Holmes, regularly visits Misty as part of his patrol assignment. The valley is situated in a pocket that extends up into the wilderness area.”

“Do you mind if I contact ranger Holmes. I would like to interview him about the valley and maybe gather any additional details of the attack?”

“Ranger Holmes is in the hospital and the doctors plan to keep him there for a few days,” Harvey replied.

“In the hospital? I thought he would have been sewn up and sent home by now.” Matt queried.

“The wounds were complicated by a crushed bone in his forearm. In addition to treating him for the bite wounds, they had to

operate to deal with the crushed bone. Shortly thereafter, it seems he began to exhibit symptoms of some viral infection. They began treatment for rabies but typically, rabies does not cause such severe symptoms so soon after a bite. I called this morning, and Ranger Holmes is in the ICU battling a very high fever and delirium, which the doctors are having difficulty controlling. They are trying to determine if the viral infection is something that resulted from the wolf bite or maybe a viral infection he may have contracted earlier. They are a bit puzzled at this point.”

“That is disappointing news. It would be helpful to pick his brain for information regarding the wildlife and habitat within the valley,” Matt said.

“I’m sure he would be happy to share any knowledge or information with you. Give him a day or two and then call the hospital to see if he is well enough to have visitors.”

“For sure,” Matt said before turning their attention to discussing the scope of the investigation plan for Misty Hollow.

* * *

Matt spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon obtaining maps and data related to the valley. Studying the map of the area, Matt noted that Misty Hollow was a pocket of National Forest land nestled deep within the River of no Return Wilderness area. The only way to reach the valley was by a single road that ran several miles through a narrow corridor into the wilderness area before opening up into the valley. Matt thought it odd that the government had established a pocket of National Forest lands so deep within the wilderness area. He was further mystified as to how or why the village of Graymere became established in such an isolated spot. On the topographic map Matt was studying, the village of Graymere appeared as a tiny dot and the name in text so small that Matt had to look at it through a magnifying glass to read it. Matt found it interesting that he was not able to locate Graymere or any reference to the village on the roadmap. The roadmap did not even depict the road leading into the valley. “This is truly odd,” Matt thought to himself.

Seeking to learn more about the community, he was surprised that virtually no information was available. Matt couldn’t find any population data, no history, or even a directory of the village

administrative offices. It was as if the village was just sitting out there, lost in time and space.

* * *

Harvey met Matt at the door of the office as Matt was preparing to leave. “When you get to Graymere go to the ‘*Wolf’s Lair*’; it’s a small inn. I arranged for you to stay there while you are working in the valley. A woman named Freya owns the inn. Tell her that Harvey sent you there.”

“Ok, thanks. I will call you if anything interesting turns up. Otherwise, I’ll see you in a couple of weeks.” Matt replied as he shook hands with Harvey on his way out the door.

Chapter 2

Matt spent a few days studying the topographic maps of Misty Hollow and the surrounding wilderness, making a plan for scouting the wilderness area once he concluded the survey of the valley for Harvey. By the time Sarah arrived to take over the house for the summer, Matt was packed and ready to leave. After going over his itinerary and last minute instructions, he was on the road at last.

Matt's first stop on his trip to Misty Hollow was a detour to the hospital to visit the Forest Ranger, Adam Holmes. After reading over the ranger's report several times, Matt was eager to obtain further details from Ranger Holmes of his encounter. Of all the sightings and reports Matt had investigated over the years, this one was a recent encounter involving an experienced and credible witness, who knew the difference from a wolf and Aunt Sally's poodle.

When Matt arrived at the hospital, the nurse instructed him to keep this visit short. "Mr. Holmes is still very weak, and he has just awakened after several days of high fever and delirium." The nurse informed Matt that although the doctors were not certain of the exact nature of the viral infection, they determined that Mr. Holmes was not contagious.

* * *

Entering the room, Matt noticed that the ranger appeared gaunt and weak. He was obviously extremely ill. More so than what someone would reasonably expect from an animal bite, even a severe one. "Adam, I'm Matt Kershaw a wildlife biologist from the

University of Idaho. I'm on my way up to Misty Hollow to survey the wolf population in that area. Harvey Langston gave me a copy of a report detailing your encounter. If you feel up to it, I was hoping that I might visit with you a few moments about the incident."

The ranger nodded his head slightly and blinked his eyes to indicate an affirmative response to Matt's request. Then he motioned with his head and eyes as he tried to lift his arm indicating for Matt to sit down in the chair next to his bed.

"The nurse tells me that your physical injury was serious but that you also contracted a virus that has taken a toll on you," Matt said with a sense of compassion.

"Yes, I didn't think I was going to be in here for more than a day or two," Adam replied. "I was brought in for a few stitches and a broken arm. They admitted me into the hospital to do surgery on my arm and I don't remember much after that. I'm not sure how long I've been here. What day is it?"

"Today is Saturday; you have been in here for a week."

"Jeez, I must have been out of it," Adam sighed.

"I understand from Harvey that you patrol Misty Hollow frequently. I was hoping you could tell me about the residents of the valley and the wildlife in that area. And, if you are up to it, some details of your encounter with the wolf that attacked you."

"I'm not sure what I can tell you that would be of any help, but I'm happy to answer any questions you have."

Matt began his line of questioning, "Do you go into the valley on a regular basis?"

"I don't go there on a *regular* schedule. Maybe once a month I'll drive the roads, checking the condition of the fire lanes, water holes, food plots, and make note of any wildlife that I observe and where I sighted them."

"From the map, it appears that the village of Graymere is the only settlement in the valley; do you know much about the residents in the valley?"

"Yes, Graymere is a small isolated village. The only road leading into the valley is the Forest Service road. And, as far as I'm aware, the only utility supplied to the valley is telephone service. The valley itself is about seventeen miles long and maybe three miles wide at the widest point. The main road connecting the series of fire trails and service roads crisscrossing the valley intersect at the

village of Graymere. Rarely does anyone go into the valley except for maintenance crews to patch the roads or to clear the fire lanes, every few years.”

“When you’re patrolling the valley, do you often see predators in or around the valley?”

“Not really,” Adam paused, “Occasionally I’ll see a mule deer, or ram up on the ridge, down in the valley a few squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks, and such. I would say the wildlife population is consistent with other areas that I patrol outside the valley.”

Matt probed further. “Have you observed wolves in the valley before the incident the other day?”

Adam stared into the distance for a moment pondering his answer, “I can’t say that I’ve seen a single wolf over the last five-plus years I’ve been patrolling that area; until the other day when I was attacked that is.”

“The day you were bitten; can you tell me what happened?”

“I drove to the valley patrolling the service roads as usual. As I neared one of the watering holes situated just off the side of the road, I scanned the ditch and shoulder of the road for animal tracks. That’s when I spotted, what appeared to be, an animal carcass just off the road, across the ditch. I stopped to investigate...” Adam paused to relax his head and catch his breath.

“I’m sorry if this is too tiring for you, I can come back later if you prefer.” Matt offered.

“No, I’m ok,” responded Adam continuing with his story. “I stopped to investigate and as I approached the animal carcass, it appeared to be a wolf. But, when I got close enough to examine its strange appearance and features, it did not resemble any wolf I had ever seen before. Although the animal appeared to be a wolf, it was maybe fifty percent larger than any wolf I’ve ever seen and it had an unusual body profile.”

“Is this the description you included in your report?” Matt pressed for clarification.

“Yes, it was huge, and when I placed my hand against the animal’s front paw, it was larger than my palm with my fingers extended, about the size of a large bear track. I searched the area and found multiple sets of similar tracks. One set I surmised to be that of the dead wolf and the other overlapping tracks I assumed to be of

other wolves circling the carcass.” Adam paused as if debating in his mind whether to share additional information or not.

Matt looked up from the notepad which he was taking notes. “And?”

“I’m not sure if I should tell you,” Adam said hesitantly.

“Tell me what? Is it something not included in your report? If so, I would really like to hear whatever you can to tell me about the incident.”

Adam looked at Matt’s face trying to judge whether or not to trust him before he continued. “Yes, there is something I didn’t put in my report.”

“What was it?” Matt inquired with peaked interest.

“I did not include every detail because I was not sure what it was I actually saw. I did not want anyone to think I was nuts,” Adam explained.

“I’m interested to hear *anything* you have to tell me. Everything is important to my survey. Please continue.”

“What I didn’t put in the report was that a short distance away from the carcass I saw another set of tracks from an animal that I didn’t recognize. Those tracks were somewhat similar to the other wolf track but huge in comparison. They had strange features...”

“Such as?” Matt pressed for details.

“Well, the tracks indicated a bit longer toe and heel impression – almost like a cross between a wolf paw and human footprint. It’s hard to describe, it was like nothing I have ever seen before. I can sketch it for you if you like.” Adam offered, gesturing for Matt’s notepad and pen.

Matt passed the notepad and his pen to Adam. “Were you able to determine the cause of death of the wolf?” He continued while Adam was sketching.

“The wolf had been shot, apparently running some distance before collapsing and dying from the gunshot wound. It had been dead for only a short time because the carcass wasn’t stiff and the blood wasn’t completely dried.”

“Were you able to take any pictures?”

Adam passed the notepad back to Matt then took a deep breath collecting his thoughts, “I was in the process of examining the dead wolf. When I noticed it was a fresh kill I started to scan the area thinking that poachers might be close by. I was about to go back to

my truck to get my camera and notebook to document the scene when suddenly, out of nowhere, I heard a distinctive snarling sound coming from the brush nearby. I guessed that it must have been a wolf pack stalking me. After a few seconds, I slowly and carefully started backing up toward my truck. Just as I was opening the truck door, two of the creatures leaped toward me from the brush across the ditch. I hit one with the truck door, but the other one caught me on my left arm and sunk its teeth in deep. I could feel the teeth tearing the muscle in my arm, and I felt the bone snap, as it tried to pull me to the ground. I had ahold of the steering wheel and was somehow able to wrestle my arm from the wolf's mouth when I kicked it in the throat. Then I managed to climb into my truck and close the door. All of this was in my report." Adam paused to catch his breath.

Matt was sitting on the edge of his seat. "Then what happened?"

"While I was scrambling around trying to get my keys out to start the truck both of the wolves were clawing at the doors and windows on both sides of the truck trying to get at me. Just as I got the truck started I looked up and saw another strange animal leap from the woods, across the ditch, landing in the middle of the road in front of me."

Matt looked up from the sketch of the paw print he was studying. "What kind of *strange* animal?"

"I don't really know, but it was huge; standing upright on its hind legs it appeared to be an oversized version of the wolf creatures I described in my report. By all appearances, it had the appearance of a wolf, but its body mass was almost twice that of a normal gray wolf. I couldn't help but notice the animal's front paws appearing a bit elongated with its toes resembling stubby fingers with thick claws. Its hind feet were huge and a bit elongated more like a foot than a paw. I estimate that it stood about six or seven foot tall. The only way I can describe it is to compare it to what you might expect a large gray wolf to look like if it were standing upright, maybe a bit taller."

"What happened next?" Matt asked, hanging onto every word Adam was saying.

"Well, not much after that, I wanted to get the hell out of there, so I put the truck in gear and stepped on the gas pedal. The animal in front of me dropped to all fours and leaped out of the way. Before I

passed out I managed to drive myself to the clinic in Graymere where Dr. Bertram cleaned me up, bandaged me and gave some pain pills then had someone drive me back to the Ranger Station. From there, my supervisor drove me to the hospital.”

“The animal you mentioned that leaped in front of your truck, could it have been a bear? They stand on their hind legs like you described.”

“I’m sure it was a wolf of some nature, of that I have no doubt, but it was unusually large and the other physical features were distinctive. There is no mistaking what I saw, it was a bright sunny day, the middle of the afternoon, before the mist, and the animal was standing not twenty feet in front of my truck. It was for a brief few seconds, but long enough for me to distinguish that this was no ordinary wolf.” Adam was becoming visibly excited describing the animal and events.

“Adam, why did you not put all of these additional details in your report?”

“I was afraid that my boss would think I was crazy. I am very protective of my credibility and I never fudge the data or information in my reports. If it can’t be verified, I don’t include it.”

“I can see you are getting tired and I have just one last thing to ask.” Matt got up, leaned over Adam’s bed, and spread a map across his lap. “I plotted the location of your encounter on this map based on the information in your report. Can you take a look and see if I’ve marked the location correctly?”

“I believe that’s the correct spot,” Adam said pointing at a location on the map. “You will know the exact spot by the distinctive overhanging rock formation up on the ridgeline. The locals call the rock formation ‘Lupine Rock’. What a coincidence wouldn’t you agree?”

Matt decided that he had pressed Adam enough for the time being. He had gotten a clearer description of the events and of the animals involved. From the details provided by Adam, he believed the animals might truly be the new species he has long been searching for.

“Adam I appreciate your help. I know you’re tired and weak from your ordeal and I apologize for coming here without prior notice. The information you provided will be very helpful in conducting my investigation.”

“I wrote my phone number on the pad for you. If you have any other questions you can call me.”

Matt shook Adam’s hand and wished him well before turning to leave the room. Just before Matt walked out the door, Adam called out. Matt paused and turned to hear what he was saying.

“I’m not sure if I should tell you this, and you probably already think I’m crazy...” Adam said with hesitation.

“What is it? Anything you can tell me is helpful. And rest assured I don’t think you are crazy.”

“Well, when I saw the animal in the road in front of my truck, I couldn’t help but feel that there was some intelligence about it.” Adam paused a moment to collect his thoughts. “It stood there staring at me with an almost human-like gaze that resembled what you would observe from a human whose angry and squaring off with you ready to fight. It was more than just an aggressive posture you would expect from a wild animal. The look in its eyes was very unusual. Even though it was a very brief encounter, I could distinguish the expression on the animal’s face and it keeps popping into my head, almost haunting me. These are no ordinary wolves; there is something evil about those animals, so be careful out there.”

“Thank you,” Matt responded sincerely before he turned and left the room.

* * *

As Matt made the long drive to Misty Hollow, he couldn’t stop thinking about the conversation with the Ranger Holmes. He was both encouraged but cautiously concerned about the prospects of identifying a new wolf species. As he drove along, he replayed the conversation with Ranger Holmes, mentally comparing his description of the mystery animal with the descriptions provided in the other reports of encounters and sightings Harvey had given him. If the mystery animals did turn out to be a new species of wolf, and the descriptions were somewhat accurate, this species of wolf could prove to be exceptionally dangerous.

Reflecting on the ranger’s narrative of the events related to his encounter, in comparison to details from the other reports he had studied, Matt could not help but recall the stories his great uncle had told him about skin-walkers and wolf-men in Native American

folklore. He began to ponder the idea of how these stories may have originated from similar encounters rather than purely myth.

Chapter 3

While making the drive to Misty Hollow, Matt zoned out thinking about his conversation with Ranger Holmes. So much so, that he didn't remember driving the last one hundred and fifty miles. Almost missing his turnoff, he finally regained his senses in time to realize where he was. Checking his map, Matt decided to stop for fuel at a convenience store and gas station not far from the turn off that would take him into Misty Hollow. After fueling his jeep, he went into the store to get something cold to drink and a snack.

"Good afternoon," The clerk greeted Matt with a smile.

"Good afternoon," Matt replied.

"Where are you headed today?" The clerk asked in a friendly tone.

"I'm on my way to Graymere. The turn off is not far from here I believe."

The clerk's demeanor immediately changed from bright and friendly to one of cautious and guarded. "About a mile up the highway, you will see a side road to your right. There are no signs, but you can't miss it, it's the only turn off within the next few miles."

"How far would you say it is to Graymere from here?"

"I take it you've never been there," The clerk stated inquisitively.

"No this is my first time to the valley and never heard of Graymere until recently."

“Graymere is another twenty or so miles once you turn off the main highway. Do you mind me asking why you are going, Misty Hollow?”

Matt couldn't help but detect the change in the clerk's tone and demeanor from when he first walked into the store but didn't see any reason not to answer the clerk's question. Besides, Matt was a bit curious as to why the clerk felt the need to ask his business; was it idle chit chat, simple curiosity or something more. He decided to answer and see where the conversation would lead.

“I'm a wildlife biologist with the University of Idaho; I'm going there to survey the wolf population and habitat in Misty Hollow and the surrounding wilderness area. Why do you ask?” Matt was probing to ascertain the source of the clerk's curiosity.

The clerk did not respond. Instead, he remained quiet while scanning the items Matt had placed on the counter.

Matt could sense the clerk wanted to say more but was cautiously reserved in his conversation regarding Graymere. Matt decided not to press the matter, thanked him for the information, and said goodbye as he exited the store.

* * *

Matt found the road into Misty Hollow, to be a single lane, paved, service road that transitioned into a single lane gravel road within a mile or two off the main highway. He thought it somewhat strange there were no signs to identify the valley or even to direct you to Graymere. *If you were not familiar with the area, did not know where you were going, or not able to read a map you might never know that the village of Graymere ever existed.* Matt thought to himself. Once off the main highway, the drive was hauntingly scenic with trees from both sides of the road creating a canopy over the road. The shading made it a cool, comfortable drive on an otherwise hot summer day. Occasionally, a break in the shady coverage would provide a broader view of the countryside as well as the stream flowing parallel to the road. With the windows rolled down, Matt was savoring the freshness of the air and the stillness of the forest as he drove along the road toward Graymere.

Matt noticed that once he drove through the pass leading into the valley, it appeared unseasonably dark for early afternoon. It didn't usually start getting dark until after eight o'clock in the evening that

time of the year and it was just a little after three in the afternoon. He surmised that the dim light level was due, at least in part, to the high mountain ridges surrounding the valley casting a shadow over the valley floor as the sun started to dip behind the ridgeline in the afternoon. He also noticed that a misty haze seemed to be forming in the valley though there was no sign of rain. This he attributed to the geography of the valley and the temperature differential of the cooler valley floor versus the warmer ambient temperature higher up where the sun was still shining and creating warmer temperatures. Although he welcomed the cooler temperature, the hazy dim light of the valley created a bit of eerie feeling as he drove deeper into the valley. By the time Matt arrived in Graymere, it was almost four in the afternoon but appeared to be near dusk due to the dim light and misty haze.

The streets of Graymere were of crude cobblestone just wide enough for two autos to pass much like you would expect in residential neighborhoods in the city. More striking was the rustic architecture straight out of the eighteenth century pioneer period. Entering the village from the west, the main street ran for two blocks before intersecting at a large traffic circle branching off to the north and south. Directly in front was, what he took to be the city hall. To the north, the street ran for a couple of blocks then curved back to the northeast, running parallel to a fairly wide stream, past a small water mill of some sort, exiting the village to the northeast. Turning to the south at the traffic circle, the street curved slightly for about three blocks to exit the village to the southeast. On either side of the main street, Matt saw a few buildings such as a jailhouse, a mercantile, the inn Harvey mentioned, trade shops and a medical clinic. Branching off from both sides of the main street were a few smaller streets, more like alleys not wide enough for an automobile, reaching back a block or two, connecting an array small residences behind the main shops. Gas lamps at each corner lighted the streets and wooden plank walkways ran along the store fronts, connecting the shops on each block.

Matt pulled into a small parking area near the inn and got out of his jeep. Looking around, he noted that he didn't see any people as he drove through the village. There were dim lights from the various buildings and he could see movement within the buildings, providing the only signs of life. Otherwise, the village appeared to

be deserted. Outside the inn, over the entrance, hung a sign, reminiscent of the type you would see hanging over an old English pub. The sign had the head of a wolf and ‘*Wolf’s Lair*’ neatly painted on both sides.

* * *

“Good afternoon,” Matt greeted the woman behind the counter.

“Good afternoon,” she replied with a bit of an accent that hinted at a mix of French and Native American. “How may I help you?”

“I’m Matthew Kershaw. I was hoping to get a room if you have one available; Harvey Langston told me to stop in and ask for Freya.”

“Ah, Dr. Kershaw,” The woman said, recognizing the name. “Harvey called and told me to expect you; I’m Freya Fasset,” she said. She offered a hint of a smile while brushing the hair from in front of her eyes. “How long will you be staying with us?”

Matt couldn’t help but notice the woman’s natural beauty; she appeared to wear no makeup, but he found her strikingly beautiful. She was in her early to mid-thirties with black hair flowing over her shoulders and down her back, about five and a half feet tall, lean, petite figure with a hint of Native American skin tone and features accented with beautiful dark brown eyes.

“I’m not sure, to be honest,” Matt stammered, distracted by Freya’s beauty. “Do you have weekly rates? I plan to be in the area for maybe two weeks and then I hope to spend two or three weeks up into the wilderness area, doing some field research.”

“Well, I’ve prepared a room for you I hope you’ll find comfortable. And, you are welcome to stay with us for as long as you like. Will it just be you staying with us or will there be others joining you?”

“Just me, I usually work alone.”

Freya laid down her polish cloth and stepped out from behind the counter. Leading Matt across the dining area and through the lounge area, she summarized the amenities. “We don’t offer much in the way of internet, or cable TV. The utility companies feel that we don’t have a sufficient customer base to justify the expense of running lines into the valley. We rely on electrical power for the essentials since our electricity is somewhat limited by the capacity of the water mill, which drives a small generator. You might’ve seen

it when you drove into the village. We don't get satellite or cellular connection due to the mountains and ridges circling the valley. We have well water fed from underground springs that's cool and refreshing. Our lights are gas as well as our hot water, heating, and cooking. At least we can get the gas company to run a truck up here every couple of weeks to top off our propane tanks."

"Sounds fine, far better than sleeping on the ground in the wilderness, which is where I usually spend my summers. I rarely find accommodations near the remote areas I'm accustomed working in."

Freya motioned toward the staircase. "Let me show you to your room."

"Where do I register?"

Freya paused at the base of the stairs and smile. "We're not much on such formalities around here."

"What are the room rates and where can I buy my meals?"

"Harvey has made arrangements to cover your room and board for as long as you are here." She turned and began walking up the stairs. "The accommodations include three meals per day if you like. We serve breakfast at six-thirty each morning, lunch at twelve, and dinner at seven in the evening. If you are going to be out in the field during the day, I can pack a sack lunch for you. Fruit is usually on the tables if you prefer a snack between meals and I keep fresh coffee in the carafes on the counter in the dining room." Freya rattled off as she led Matt to a room upstairs.

Freya opened the door to one of the rooms and ushered Matt inside. Following him into the room, she showed him how to operate the gas lamps and where the linens were stored. She pointed out that the water heater was set up for each room and was an on-demand gas unit so that he could have a hot shower at his leisure.

"Here is the key to your room, make yourself at home, dinner will be served at seven. If there's anything you need, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you Ms. Freya, you have made me feel at home already," Matt said graciously.

"Just Freya," She said with a slight smile as she stepped out and closed the door behind her.

Matt unloaded his jeep and moved his luggage and gear up to his room. As he was making the trips back and forth, he found it odd there was very little activity around the village.

After getting his bags unpacked and his clothes put away, he sat down to relax for a moment and update his field journal, before going down for dinner.