

Chapter 1

When Surrounded by Wolves ... Never Turn Your Back

Charlene Sullivan, forest name Feather, strode up the brick path to the imposing home of Brad and Kristin Ganborena, tonight's objectives her only focus. First, find Brad, then find Jared. She walked through the open door, and ran smack into Kristin, the woman who despised Feather above all others.

Kristin waited to greet those invited to her party. Fortunately, the melee in the street distracted Kristin's attention long enough for Feather to pass. Thank heaven for Roadkill, aka Cliff Mustard, and his merry band of miscreants. Cries of "Come in out of the wind," "Not in my bat yard," and "Money for causes, not parties," accounted for Kristin's pained rather than welcoming expression. No doubt she and Brad had hoped to avoid the activists' picketing when they planned their party as a fundraiser for local conservation groups. As Feather eased into the mélange of costumed party guests, she heard Roadkill's unmistakable baritone shouting, "Turbines kill, oil spills."

Huh? Sometimes even Feather, now a semi-retired activist, wondered if Roadkill wished the world to live as lightly as he did, something not possible for most. Perish the thought of enough road kill to clothe the populace of Hancock, Idaho, let alone the world. She wondered if Roadkill's brother Ed picketed beside him, or if he, and possibly their dear friend Gina Cosentino were invited guests because of Ed's background as a screenwriter and his Hollywood connections.

Neither an invited guest nor a welcome one, Feather was grateful for the protesters and for her costume, which included a large, far too warm but effective face mask that covered nearly everything except her mouth. With the food the Ganborenas offered, an unrestricted mouth was essential. She sent Kristin a vague nod of her striped, furred head and walked into the throng of festively costumed partiers.

She edged near a wall and pulled her costume down from where it threatened to give her a wedgie. Essentially a one piece swimming suit with fur and a tail, it was a tad short for her longish torso. Dark gray tights covered her legs. She surveyed the gathering, hoping to find her sister and elude her mother. Her mother, Jeanette Sullivan, had invested, along with Brad, in Windfall Works, the new wind farm that spurred the activists' protest.

Arguments sparked by the protesters competed with discussions of the party's menu. Go figure. Some folks got more excited by Basque food than by wind energy. Too bad no one could harness all of tonight's hot air.

Near her a tall guest, dressed as a pine tree, waved his branches with too much vigor for the conditions. "We have to find some way to decrease our dependence on coal-fired energy. You'd think those freaks outside would love wind energy." His voice rose in mockery. "But no, it hurts the little bats and the raptors."

His companion nodded. "There's hydro-electric. Idaho has plenty of water."

"But not plenty of salmon," his companion opined.

Feather wanted to argue the importance of locating wind turbines where they did the least harm to the wildlife. But she had to remain silent and inconspicuous, out of Kristin's radar.

She edged toward the food, looking for her sister but also for anyone who might recognize her and finger her to Kristin.

Before she reached her target, she was surrounded by wolves, alert but distracted by their surroundings and sluggish after their recent feast.

The badger, Feather, chose not to back away. She would stand and fight the wolf pack, if necessary.

“Bad choice of costumes, hon,” said one of the nearest wolves. “Badgers have short legs and yours go on for friggin’ ever.” The man in the wolf costume leaned close and patted her fanny.

Feather curled her lip, a gesture she hoped conveyed contempt and disgust in both worlds—badger and human. She'd chosen her costume for the environmental fund-raising party to discourage friendly chit-chat. Also because it was the only one in her favorite thrift store that came close to fitting her and her budget.

The men who circled her were, alas, appropriately costumed. Fanny patting, leering and drooling at the sight of a halfway comely female came easily to them.

“Badgers have been known to scare off grizzlies,” she growled, disguising her voice. “No touching the badger’s butt.”

“But such a lovely butt,” said a different wolf. “May I get you a drink?”

The man’s voice seemed familiar, but Feather had met many of the guests in other settings. Her mission tonight demanded that no one recognize her. The mask covered her face, but voices? All too easy to recognize. She shook her head and meandered off as if she simply chose to mingle elsewhere.

Where was her sister?

Roxanne's choice to come as a fluffy, innocent, pampered Persian cat to a party where most came dressed as wild animals suited her little sister. A wish fulfillment fantasy to be coddled and spoiled? And yet, still a predator, so beware, pine siskins, robins, and mini-fauna. The striking costume Roxanne wore should stand out, but other women had chosen to come as snow leopards—in Idaho? Why?—and Feather caught sight of several patches of white.

Feather accepted a glass of white wine from a member of the catering staff. She had to find Brad before she was recognized, but she might as well fortify herself first. She had to speak with Brad before she undertook the second half of her mission, despite her desire to simply dash up the stairs.

Without warning someone grabbed Feather's shoulders in a powerful grip. Her wine splashed on the hardwood floor. "Ah hah. Found you again."

She twisted her neck to see who held her. Her captor chuckled. "Not so fast, wee badger." His Scots accent rankled. "I claim my victor's prize." The man was muscular but not exceptionally tall, standing even with Feather's five feet, nine inches.

Keeping her firmly captive, to the point where Feather figured she'd have bruises to remind her, the man moved in front of her and leaned toward her. He flipped back the expensive wolf mask he wore. Jonathan Flynn. Another investor in the wind farm, who managed its day to day business. If he recognized Feather, he might tell Brad or Kristin and then where would she be? Out the door of the luxurious Ganborena home, quite possibly joined by her sister.

"Such a pretty badger," he crooned.

Feather's reaction came almost without thought. Old instincts rose to guide her. A man spurned would remember his prey. A man who felt he'd won would forget this conquest and move on to the next. Particularly a competitive, financial risk-taker like Jonathan. He counted coup.

Relying on her mask to conceal her identity, Feather stood on tiptoe and planted a vigorous kiss on Jonathan's lips. Startled, he released her arms. She grasped his face between her hands—paws tonight—and continued the kiss until she sensed his surprise morphing to arousal. She backed away and smiled.

"You are without a doubt the alpha wolf," she crooned, hoping throatiness masked her voice. With a mysterious, badger-like smile, she strutted away. Although she had little experience of smiling badgers.

Two men, one she recognized as Roxanne's boyfriend Teddy, the other well-disguised in a bear costume that she imagined rivaled her own for discomfort, gave her thumbs-up gestures for her handling of Jon.

She smiled and as she moved away, she heard Teddy talking to his companion. "Jon can be a dillrod, Peter. You should take over the management of the wind farm. More brains, more savvy, more people skills in your pinky—or should I say, paw—than Jon Flynn." Typical Teddy, charming the folks with money. She gathered the bear was Peter Brewer, another investor, and someone who put his extensive money into conservation and advised others to do the same. Peter threw a big arm around Teddy's shoulders and laughed.

She lost herself among the guests stalking the table where the caterers had provided, not only Basque snacks, but offerings suited to less adventurous palates. Feather loaded a plate with various pintxos, the Basque equivalent of tapas.

A voice came from her right. A too-familiar voice. "If I hadn't seen your plate, I might have thought I mistook that sexy voice."

Too soon. She wasn't ready. Feather gasped and looked into the eyes of her former lover Brad Ganborena. She switched her focus back to the food.

“I’m not going to ask why the hell you’re here, or even how you got in without Kristin noticing, but it might be a good idea to eat and run. We don’t need a scene tonight. Enough of that outside.”

“God forbid I scare away potential investors.”

“Of course. Rules of the game.” Brad added a generous slice of Basque tortilla, similar to a frittata, to Feather’s plate. “Tuna. Yellowfin’s not endangered. With local eggs, even. You’ll love it. Now eat up and scoot that gorgeous badger body out of here as fast as you can.”

Feather looked up at Brad. Her pulse increased. To hide any expression she might reveal, she popped a pepper into her mouth. Chewing, good. Speaking, bad. Choosing one of the hottest peppers on the table, exceedingly bad. Her face flushed. She wished the mask covered her ears, which by now blazed bright red with heat.

Brad leaned across her and grabbed a napkin. He held it in front of her mouth and she spat the remains of the pepper into it. Then he scooped some yogurt from a bowl artfully displayed on a bed of greens onto her plate. He picked up a spoon and offered her a large bite of the cooling balm.

She realized that this man, the adulterer she had tried hard to hate—and yes, she knew she was the woman whom he’d strayed with, making her, in olden terms, a fornicatress—did indeed possess a few virtues. Like kindness and consideration and the grace to allow her to leave without being exposed to his jealous, spiteful—albeit beautiful and talented and highly educated—wife.

“Actually, I came to talk to you. I need to talk to you.”

“Tonight? Couldn’t you make an appointment?”

“Are you kidding? If I’m seen with you, Kristin will blow a gasket.”

“No reason she should.” Brad sighed. “But you’re right. Come on. I can spare a few minutes.”

He led her through the kitchen to the back porch, but switched directions when he saw the numerous smokers huddled in the cool evening. Back through the kitchen and down the stairs to the wine cellar.

“Okay.” Brad waited, arms crossed in front of his chest, expression guarded.

Feather removed her mask. No pretense. No stalling. “I need a loan. Charlie West offered his time and his construction crew before the snow flies to get the B&B started. But I don’t have enough cash for the supplies, and ... Mom won’t loan it to me. She calls the idea feather-brained.” Jeanette Sullivan despised her daughter’s choice of forest names. “I don’t have time to apply for a bank loan.” Sweat dripped down the back of her neck. Her chest tightened.

“Not sure your credit report would get you much, anyway. Activist, waitress, unwed mother.”

Feather’s jaw clenched. “College graduate holding down two jobs. Already have the land, free and clear.” Thanks to her good friend Gina.

Brad took a few steps to the left, then right. Dancing or a mini-pace for the crowded space? “I sunk a lot of money into Windfall Works. The wind farm is taking longer to get going than we expected.”

“Feather’s Beds is a good investment. It will be a great place for potential investors, inspectors, whoever, to stay. Hancock has only one B&B, and if you don’t count The Tidy Scot—and no one in his or her right mind would—nowhere else for investors or tourists to stay. Spokane’s too far; Sandpoint’s too pricey. If we can start immediately, I’ll be open in the spring.”

Brad raised his eyebrows. “Ambitious schedule.”

“Exactly why I can’t take time to find other loans.” Begging was awful, worse than biting into that pepper. Why couldn’t her mother have cooperated? Feather regretted her naïve refusal of financial support when she gave up Jared for adoption by Brad and Kristin, a decision that came after months of painful internal debate. But Brad was the father and Jared would be adored and coddled, his life stable and comfortable with the Ganborenas as his parents.

Not to mention the guilt Feather felt about her affair with Brad. She had asked for and received nothing from Brad and Kristin. Nothing, she thought with bitter regret, but a promise to comply with the terms of the open adoption. She’d not even received that.

She said nothing, only gazed at her former lover.

Moments passed. Feather held her breath.

Brad fiddled with a bottle in the wine rack. “How much do you need?”

Feather released her breath. “Thirty thousand. I’ll pay interest, of course.”

“I don’t have that much to spare, Feather. Windfall’s a cash drain.”

Feather tried to keep her face from revealing her despair, but Brad could read it. “I’ll talk to Kristin.”

Oh, sure, Kristin would jump for joy at loaning Feather fifty cents, much less thirty thousand dollars. Since it was the best she could hope for from Brad, there was no point getting snotty. “Thank you. You know I wouldn’t ask if I weren’t desperate.”

“I wish I could just give you the money. In a few years....”

“I need it now, Brad. Please talk to Kristin soon. Winter could arrive sooner than usual.”

“Promise.”

Feather knew he would keep that promise, just as she knew what Kristin’s response would be.

Her shoulders sagged as she headed for the door.

“Now you really ought to leave before Kristin sees you. Even in that costume, you’re distinctive.”

“Uh huh.” But despite her disappointment and the fear of exposure, as soon as she got back inside, she would make her way upstairs. Nothing could stop her, not when she was so close to her objective.