Black Gold

Vivian Arend

# Part I

“The Men That Don’t Fit In”

There’s a race of men that don’t fit in,

A race that can’t stay still;

So they break the hearts of kith and kin,

And they roam the world at will.

They range the field and they roam the flood,

And they climb the mountain’s crest;

Theirs is the curse of the gypsy blood,

And they don’t know how to rest.

—Robert Service

# Chapter 1

“Excuse me, ladies.”

Shaun ducked in front of a table of laughing women and caught the flying beer mug in mid-air before it could slam into the center of their party. Unfortunately, there was no time to respond with more than a wink to their admiring feminine responses. He twirled to grab the nearest bear-shifter by the scruff of the neck, hauled him away from the innocent bystanders and thumped him face-first into the rustic wood-paneled wall. Another glass shattered inches to Shaun’s right, and he sighed.

Bloody den buddies. Wolves might drive him crazy, but after a few too many drinks bears were even worse. Should have cut them off hours ago and sent them all packing.

“Let me know if you need a hand,” Evan called from behind the bar, amusement tingeing his voice.

“Fuck off,” Shaun tossed back easily. Just what he needed—an Alpha with an attitude. *Not*.

Evan laughed as he reached over the counter and nabbed the nearest two troublemakers by the hair. He knocked their heads together and grinned with satisfaction as the shifters tumbled to the floor.

Shaun pulled his current object of attention off the wall a foot or so, examined the man’s eyes carefully, then slammed him back harder than the time before. The bear-shifter went limp and puddled downward without a sound. Shaun turned to the remaining crew of shaggy-headed rabble-rousers currently making Tuesday afternoon in Whitehorse a little too exciting for the locals.

Of course, at this time of day the only occupants of the Moonshine Pub were shifters, and for the most part, they weren’t as picky about how wild the party got.

“Hey, watch it, buddy. You’re shaking the dartboard.”

Shaun flipped the visiting wolves the finger. Figured they’d sit and observe the chaos instead of offering to help. This wasn’t their territory, so he couldn’t blame them for staying out of it. And with Whitehorse in the strange position of having two packs sharing territory—sometimes not getting mixed up in local werewolf politics was the safest way to keep your fur intact.

He took a swift survey of the bar, noting only four grizzly-shifters remained standing. Well, three standing, one swaying violently as he attempted to chug the remaining half-pint of beer in his mug and keep an eye on Shaun.

Talk about not taking matters seriously. For some reason the big brute’s lack of concentration pissed Shaun off. He shook his hands at the man like an irate Italian. “Hey, you. Put the glass down and let’s see some effort here. *Sheesh*, what kind of barroom brawl is this?”

His opponents exchanged glances, and Shaun cracked his knuckles in anticipation. Finally he’d get to inflict a little bodily damage. Not that he had anything against bears personally—it had simply been too long since he’d let off some steam.

One bear rushed him. Shaun sidestepped, turning with his elbow raised high and hard, connecting with a satisfying *thunk* to the idiot’s head. The second swung at him as the third lunged forward. Shaun seized the ham-sized fist on his right as it approached, pulled the man off balance and into the direct line of the dive-bombing attack of his buddy. The two connected with grunts of pain, tangling together to land in a twisted mess on the floor.

Too damn easy. Shaun shook his head in disgust and stepped over their prone bodies before they could scramble to their feet. A quick one-two kick to each of their stomachs ensured that the only thing they would be concentrating on for the next few minutes was their next breath.

“I don’t know, Evan. Maybe you should reconsider the whole public-bar idea. I mean…” The grizzly-shifter sneaking up on Shaun was reflected in the mirror behind the counter. Shaun waited one more second then raised his clenched fist as if he were doing a strongman muscle pose. The back of his hand connected with the man’s face, and the bear teetered on shaky legs, the stars he must be seeing almost visible in the air.

*Shit, that one hurt*. Shaun shook out his fingers and concentrated. Where was he? Oh, right.

“What if you made the place private? This dealing with tourists is bullshit.”

Evan rinsed a glass. “It’s the tourists passing through who make life interesting. Winter season gets too quiet and cozy with only locals dropping in.”

That was true enough. Watching water freeze was right up there on the list of entertaining things to do during December in the Yukon, and didn’t keep the blood stirring. Still…

“I didn’t think returning to the Takhini pack would involve so much fighting.”

“Are you serious? Shaun, what the hell else do you know that is so universally acceptable amongst every wolf pack? Huh?”

Shaun shrugged. Yeah, pack hierarchy games came with the territory. “Not every pack spends *all* their time jostling for position.”

Evan paused in the middle of wiping the counter. “It’s not a bad source of entertainment.” He twirled, slamming a fist between the eyes of the grizzly standing behind him with a chair lifted in his hands. The huge man fell like a tree trunk, chair crashing to the floor. Shaun rolled his eyes as Evan did a celebratory dance behind the bar.

His Alpha completed his gyrating and tilted his head toward the unconscious shifter. “You want to clean that up, or should I call the cops?”

Shaun grabbed his beer from where he’d hidden it and snuck a swig. “Nah, don’t bother the RCMP. They’re busy enough with spring fever hitting everyone in town. I’ll pour the bears into a cab and get them dumped in the bush.”

“Shaun…”

“Fine, fine. I’ll send them to their hotel. Damn, you’re no fun at all.” Shaun winked at his Alpha.

There was no doubt Evan was the strongest wolf in the area, but the dude was nuttier than a fruitcake at times. Newcomers didn’t seem to understand why the Takhini pack put up with such an oddball for a leader, but even in the short time Shaun had been back in Whitehorse, he’d come to appreciate Evan’s style. The man didn’t give a damn about being the most powerful. He simply was, no gesturing, no chest beating.

Evan’s sense of the ridiculous appealed to Shaun in a thumb-your-nose-at-authority kind of way.

Shaun levered one of the groaning bodies upright off the floor. “Okay, big guy. Time to pay the bills and take your little party elsewhere.”

The shifter made a pathetic attempt to bat away Shaun’s hands. “Piss off.”

“Tsk, tsk, that’s not how to talk to the guy who’s still deciding if you go in a cab or the river.” By the time Shaun had poured the bears into cabs, he was ready for another drink. Just one last body to deal with. He grabbed the dead weight of the biggest guy by the ankles and tugged, attempting to slide him over the rough wooden boards of the bar toward the door. It was after five, and action around the place had increased in a slow trickle. More of the pack wandered in. Servers rushed in, carrying orders of wings and plates of appetizers. The live band tuned up, the drummer beating out a heavy pulse that throbbed below the murmuring voices. The evening was warm enough Evan had cracked open the windows, and an early June breeze fluttered in carrying the smell of spring and the promise of a great outdoor adventure season.

*Yada, yada, yada*. Shaun yanked harder on his burden, managing to drag the heavy weight a measly two inches. Only a couple days left before his temporary break in bookings was over and he’d be flying tourists again. This hanging-out-with-the-pack thing wasn’t as bad as he had expected.

It was worse.

“You know, you could ask for help.” Evan motioned toward the pack members crowding the pub.

“When pigs fly.”

Evan laughed out loud, pausing to call a few of the guys from their beers. The nearest three leapt to their feet in response. They grabbed the griz under the arms and manhandled him out the door.

Shaun slid back onto his barstool. “Is there nothing I can say that will piss you off?”

Evan considered for a minute. He shook his head as he reached under the bar and brought up a dusty bottle of liquor, lowering the pale blue decanter to the counter with reverence. “See, I understand where you’re coming from. You want me to get mad and tell you to take a hike. Therefore, the most fun I can have is to force you to stick around until you get your head out of your ass.” He grabbed two glasses and motioned to one of the pack who took over serving. “Come on, we’re going to my office.”

*Fuck*. This kind of summons was as bad as getting called to the principal’s. “Ah, gee thanks, Evan, but I should get home. I’ve got a big flight planned in a couple days. I need to get my beauty sleep. There’s this really good movie on APN.”

“You forgot the excuse about needing to wash your hair.” Evan pushed open the solid wood door leading to his office and gestured Shaun in first. “Forget it. I’m not ordering you around, but if you know what’s good for you, you’ll get your butt in there.”

\* \* \*

Landing in Whitehorse was unadventurous, just like Gemmita had promised her father at least a dozen times it would be. The place was even smaller than she’d calculated when she’d insisted he had no need to worry, or provide an escort. The teeny airport had one luggage carousel, and the teeming crowd of greeters meeting the plane numbered twenty at the most. So far, her trip had been perfect. A chance for her to spread her wings and prove she had more going for her than the family name.

Two wolves loitered by the coffee shop. Considering how well wolves aged, she figured they must be somewhere between twenty and fifty years old. Black hair and eyes, smoky-colored skin. Not as dark as hers, but not white either. They waggled their brows in her direction, but Gem pointedly ignored them, at least until they approached, interest gleaming in their eyes.

“Hello, sweets. You need a ride?”

She examined the mural on the wall behind the luggage carousel as if it were a Picasso, figuring silence was the best response.

The second wolf stepped to the right, neatly caging her between them before she could protest. They weren’t crowding her or looming over her, or anything that seemed like an attempt to freak her out. They were just being, well, wolves.

“If you have someone coming to greet you, they’re late. We’ll make sure you get where you want to go.”

Well, shoot. Here she hoped she’d be able to avoid the whole hierarchy and sniffing-for-importance obsession. Guess it didn’t matter if you were in the Deep South or the Far North.

It was a public place with humans near at hand, so she wasn’t afraid. Not really—or not enough for her to order them to stand down. In fact, this was a perfect time for her to test-drive her new “assume control of her own life” skills and get them to listen without playing on her family background.

She lifted her chin resolutely. “Thank you, boys, but I’ll hail a cab and find my own way. Understand?”

Along with her words she let the tiniest touch of her power sneak out—enough to prove she wasn’t a weak wolf. That bit of power was all her own, nothing to do with her name or money. The sensation thrilled her as always, the rare moments she used that other side of herself, and she fully expected both her annoyances to stage a rapid retreat.

Their response was not as respectful as the average wolf back home. In fact, they barely moved, the older of the two raising one brow as if he was more interested than before. A momentary flash of dismay shot through her, and she stomped her reaction into submission before her frustration showed.

Personal pep-talk time.

*Press forward, Gem, you can do this. Don’t wait for someone to rescue you*.

She reached for her bag, but the wolf on her left snatched it up first. With all the humans around, she didn’t want to make a loud scene, instead stepping forward to block his path. “Do you have a hearing problem?”

He smiled, his teeth flashing white against his skin. “Nah. You said you needed a cab.” The Bobbsey Twins whipped out matching caps and slapped them on their heads. Solid black graphics declared *Whitehorse Wolves Transport*, accompanied by the imprint of a wolf in hot pursuit of a terrified horse, and she sniffed to refrain from smiling.

Her second suitcase cruised past on the carousel, and she resigned herself to accepting their help. If they stepped out of line, she had more strength she could whammy them with. “Fine. One of you grab that blue bag as well. I’m staying at the Moonshine Inn.”

“Then that’s where we’ll take you.” The younger wolf offered his elbow and Gem adjusted her thinking. Maybe they weren’t all roughnecks and lowbrow here in the north. She got to embrace that charitable thought for a full minute before he helped her into the cab and managed to pinch her butt in the process. He waited until his buddy got behind the wheel, then waved at the retreating cab like a little girl, fingers fluttering innocently as they left him behind in the parking area.

Wolves. She peeked in the mirror and checked her lipstick.

“You in town for long?” The name posted on the cabby’s ID was David.

“Just passing through. I’m heading to the northern part of the territory to do some research, and my pilot is supposed to meet me here.”

He whistled softly. “Research, hey? What’s your specialty? Let me guess—botany. I heard they were doing a study on the microsomes of the aspidiaceae ferns. Sounded fascinating.”

The steep incline of the road as they descended into the river valley was forgotten as she again fine-tuned her attitude. A cabbie wolf who knew botany? Gem’s enthusiasm burst out unchecked.

“I’m conducting an environmental assessment on the Porcupine Caribou herd birthing grounds. With the oil and gas development, it’s of vital importance to maintain up-to-date statistics on any changes.”

“Really? That’s fabulous as well.” He grinned at her, the leer fading, replaced with a touch of something else.

Was he…? Was that…? My goodness, he was *laughing* at her.

Gem stiffened her spine. She wasn’t used to being made fun of to her face. In fact, no one in her pack would dream of doing anything but treat her with respect in public. She stifled a sigh. If only being shown respect meant they actually respected her. That was part of the point of this journey—to prove she could stand on her own without Daddy interfering.

There was no reason for her to be impolite in return. “You’re well educated for a cab driver.”

He shrugged, slowing for a crosswalk. “People come north for many reasons. When a soul gets tired of the big city and the whole rat race, the Yukon offers a different pace of life.”

Gem considered his words as she watched the city drift past her window. A bookstore, tiny eclectic coffee shops, intricate carved wooden signs offering native crafts and moccasins. None of the buildings were over two stories high, and many of them sported false fronts, their doors opening onto an elaborate boardwalk that ran the length of Main Street. The restoration of Whitehorse into a gold rush settlement gave her glimpses of the rough town she’d been warned, repeatedly, would be too much for her to handle.

Too primitive and coarse.

Yet, there was more to a place than just its buildings. Maybe a different pace of life was a good thing?

She was sure her father hadn’t considered that possibility.

“So you came north—and now you drive a cab for a living?”

David chuckled. “No, I drive a cab because I like to talk to people. I don’t need the money, but our Alpha insists everyone work. Being busy is the only way to keep your average wolf out of trouble.”

Blast, with everything else she had to accomplish before hopping on the plane, that important detail had slipped her agenda. She was in another pack’s territory. “I suppose I should stop in and say hello, shouldn’t I?”

“That’s where I was taking you, to our Alpha, whether you wanted me to or not.” They paused at an intersection before he turned into the hotel entrance. “I get heads-up of all official visitors. If they’re short-termers, Evan lets them pass without a hassle since they’ve gone through the decency of contacting him. You weren’t on the list.”

Fudge. “I’m only in town for a few days…”

He clicked his tongue, and Gem felt about twelve years old at the disapproval clear in his reproachful tone. “There’s no excuse for poor manners, now, is there?”

David pulled up to the front of the hotel. She fidgeted the entire time as she waited for him to come around and open her door. Oh dear, this was not a good start to her Yukon excursion. “I really did intend to make my presence known.”

“I’m sure you did. No harm done. Now let’s get you settled.” He patted her hand kindly, and a sudden wave of homesickness flooded her system. His patience reminded her of her father, even more so when he waved off her credit card. “Complimentary shuttle service, since you’re staying at the pack hotel.”

The cab ride had only taken ten minutes, airport to hotel, but the freebie was unexpected. “The pack? I didn’t know that.”

David lifted her bags and nodded toward the front doors. “The Takhini pack owns the hotel, and Evan owns the bar.”

“Your Alpha?”

“Yup.” He shook her cases. “We can drop these at the registration desk, then I’ll take you to see him.” The double doors slid open with a soft sigh, and Gem glanced around with curiosity as they entered.

The welcoming foyer was as tidy as any resort she’d visited with her father down south. Swarms of plants filled the perimeter of the reception area, accompanied by the flash of modern chrome and leather.

“No fake boardwalks or gold rush decorating?”

David snorted. “The bar is more rustic, but no. Visitors get enough history walking downtown. We decided to make the place a bit of a refuge from the turn-of-the-century overload you can get otherwise.” Smart move. She certainly felt more comfortable in this setting than if there had been rough-hewn boards or spittoons on the floor.

Not that she knew up close and in person what a spittoon looked like.

“Caroline, can you get our new arrival fixed up?” David placed her bags by the desk. The very efficient blond human behind the counter gave him a wink before taking Gem through the check-in process. She seemed unconcerned she was surrounded by werewolves.

Gem watched Caroline with unashamed interest. At home, everyone was a wolf—from her extended family down to the servants in the familial mansion. When it came right down to it, she hadn’t been close to that many humans.

Taking another glance at the receptionist, Gem sized her up. Pretty creature. Smelled faintly like a wolf, probably because she was around them so often. Decent clothing, although with her blond hair and lighter skin—

Gem jerked upright. Oh shoot, this train of thought wasn’t acceptable. She was being a snob. Just because Whitehorse was above the sixtieth parallel didn’t mean all the residents were uncultured rednecks.

If she was tired of being unfairly judged, she’d better not do it herself.

“Is Evan working?” David asked, leaning on the counter.

Caroline glanced at a monitor. “He’s not serving, and I see a ‘do not disturb’ notification on his office line. Do you want me to send through a message that you need to see him?”

David put the question to Gem. “You want to wait in the bar for a few minutes?”

“Could I go to my room first?” From traveling all day to heading straight to see an Alpha? One whom she might have inadvertently upset by breaking protocol? No way. She needed to be fresh and dressed for success, not wearing wrinkled and travel-worn clothes.

“Sure. I’ll give you some time. We can have a drink until Evan is free. Caroline, send him a note, and I’ll take it from there.”

The young woman nodded, then handed Gem a key card. “Your room is down the hall. I’ve kept you on the main floor, but put you on the far side of the hotel away from the bar. The rooms should be quieter over there.”

Gem smiled her thanks and turned to grab her bags. David already had them hoisted, waiting for her to lead the way.

The room was bright, clean and much smaller than anything she’d ever stayed in before while traveling with her father. Gem flicked on the light in the bathroom and wrinkled her nose at the missing features. Hmmm, no bidet or heated towel bars.

“How long should I give you?”

She jerked from her observations to spot David standing beside the dresser, next to her suitcase. Gem considered for a moment before responding. “Half an hour?”

He left without another word. She closed the door, wondering at the diversity of people she’d met since leaving home that morning. The whole experience was rather thrilling.

A hotel room, all to herself. Another first in her books. She was determined to make this trip overflow with new adventures.

Gem took one more slow revolution to examine her surroundings. A queen-sized bed, a couch against the wall. Small television, generic curtains and artwork. Surely there was more—there had to be. Her maid’s room was larger than this.

There—across from the bathroom—another wooden door with a deadbolt. Gem twirled the lock and tugged the door inward, waiting with anxious anticipation to see…

Another door. This one with no doorknob. Gem pushed on the wood, but nothing budged. What kind of strange world was the Yukon that they had doors that led nowhere? She closed the door on her side of the room, suddenly aware she was wasting time. She pressed the latch shut and jumped as her cell phone rang.

“Poop.” Daddy’s ring tone. Her cheeks flashed hot at being caught swearing, kind of, as she dug in her purse for her phone. She simultaneously snapped on the answer button and reached for the zipper on her suitcase. She had less than twenty-five minutes before David returned.

“Gemmita? Everything okay, little girl? You were supposed to phone as soon as you arrived.” She bit back the retort she wanted to voice. My, she must be a lot more tired than she expected. Either that, or there was something in the northern air that had erased all her manners. “I was about to ring. I haven’t been here long. As a matter of fact, I’ve just checked into my room.”

“You can change your mind about this. You don’t have to prove anything to me, sweetie.” *Arghhh*, fathers. Was she ever going to be more than a child to him?

“I’m fine, Daddy. And I want to do this. The trip is an exciting part of my education, and a real opportunity to put my training into action.” His silence on the other end of the line did nothing to increase her happiness. Gem shucked her shoes and stockings, digging one-handed into her suitcase to find fresh underclothes while placating her parent. “I have some sightseeing planned, the northern flight is already booked. I’ve got all my equipment arranged—everything is in place. You knew a field excursion was a part of my schooling when I signed up.”

“I expected you would conduct your research somewhere in Georgia, not in the middle of nowhere, hundreds of miles from home.”

Gem tucked her phone into the crook of her neck and awkwardly held it in place. She’d even surprised herself with the radical idea. Finding a research topic that forced her to go to the Yukon? She’d anticipated he’d be upset.

“I know you’ll miss me, but everything will be fine. It’s three weeks, four at the tops, and I’ll have the information needed to finish my paper. Plus, this project should give me a good shot at getting that job with the company you approved of.”

“You don’t need to work.” His change of tack was a resumption of the oldest argument they’d ever had, starting well before her mother had passed away.

Gem hopped on one foot as she pulled on new silk stockings. “I’m not having that discussion, Daddy, so stop. I’ll be home within the month. If you want to contact me, use email. Otherwise, please, let me do this? I am capable, of this and more.”

The alternative was to admit she was nothing but a piece of spoiled fluff like she’d overheard her fellow students declare. It wasn’t true—there was so much they didn’t know about her, things that she chose to go along with simply to keep the peace. But now? She had to see this project through to the end.

Her father sighed, long-suffering in his tone. “Yes, Gemmita, I’ll let you go. I want you to phone me the instant you need anything, you understand? Anything. What the hell good is having money if I can’t use it to make sure you’re comfortable and happy?”

She forced a laugh. “I love you. I’m going to enjoy every minute of the adventure, okay? And I’ll tell you all about it when I get home.”

She blew him a kiss then scrambled to tuck the phone away and finish getting dressed. Only, what should she wear? At home, meeting an Alpha was a formal event, with all the highest-level pack in attendance. Not to mention she had broken protocol—groveling could be a messy business if she didn’t set the right tone from the start.

Gem eyed the clothes she’d purchased for her upcoming fieldwork and wrinkled her nose. Nope.

Sturdy canvas and baggy cotton would not do. She dug deeper into the suitcase and went for the high-powered artillery, fingers crossed the Alpha was single and at least remotely interested in females.

Wrapping dazzled males around her little finger and making sure they weren’t aware of it was one area in which she had some experience.