

A woman with black and white hair and yellow eyes looking at a black cat with yellow eyes.

HOTEL PARANORMAL

*Capturing her prey
proves difficult
once he steals her heart.*

BOUNTY HUNTRESS
Sheri Queen

BOUNTY
HUNTRESS

SLEEPY HOLLOW HUNTER:
BOOK ONE

Sheri Queen

Copyright © 2017 Sheri Queen

All rights reserved. Published by Wilda Press.

This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Any names, characters, businesses, places, events and/or incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover design by X-Potion Designs

Editing by Carrie Gessner

ISBN-10: 0692803378

ISBN-13: 978-0692803370

CHAPTER ONE

Mutther's

Whoever said "happiness is an inside job" sure as hell didn't know me. I preferred happiness that came from external sources, like bringing criminals to justice. Not that I cared for the justice part, but I sure derived a sense of satisfaction from the paycheck. Bounty hunters had a reputation for being self-serving, and I was no different than the rest. It was all about the money—not making friends—and this job would buy me *a lot* of happiness.

I repeated it several times, because fun was not something I was having at the moment. Pushing a Harley 1200 for half a mile on an old country road—hitting potholes in the middle of the night—to get the drop on some werewolves had seemed like a good idea at one point, but I was having second thoughts as sweat beaded across my forehead. I tucked Miss Kitty into the shelter of a side alley and threw the tarp I'd brought over the sleek motorcycle. It'd either be here when I returned—*if* I returned—or it wouldn't. I gave my ride a final pat and slipped into the nighttime shadows near the alley entrance, staying downwind and praying the whiskey I'd splashed over myself would mask my scent. A

woman—and worse, a Lykoi—didn't just walk into a place frequented by Dominant bikers. It was especially true in a small town where everyone knew one another.

There were protocols to follow and introductions to be made before approaching a one-percenter, and I doubted anyone would step forward to sponsor someone like me. I was half wolf and had been raised by a prominent pack in the area just outside the town of Sleepy Hollow, New York. I existed on the fringes of my pack, shunned for being part werecat. Most of the time I didn't mind going solo. It was how I lived. It also meant I wouldn't have to share the bounty reward that would give me the freedom I sought. Once I lured my target from the Hotel Paranormal and turned him over to my client, I'd have everything I'd ever wanted—a one-way ticket away from pack prejudices and a new life as a financially secure recluse. I flicked my tongue along my lips, tasting the freedom this deal would bring.

Half a block stood between me and my future happiness, but it might as well have been a mile for all the good it would do me. From the alley to the bar there was no cover, no shadows to absorb my presence. I'd scoured the surrounding area for another entry point to no avail. Barred windows and a padlocked backdoor thwarted me. I had one shot at getting inside before anyone could stop me, and that meant waiting until the barkeep kicked the last of his patrons out at closing time. While they were busy getting on their bikes, I'd make a mad dash to the front door. I was grateful the street was deserted at this hour, but it was almost too quiet. One stupid

move on my part could mean disaster.

I calculated the distance from where I stood, hidden in the alley, to the bar's entrance and figured I'd probably be fast enough to make it as long as the wolves were so drunk they wouldn't notice me until it was too late. It was a long shot, but the only one I had. Wolves were quick, even inebriated ones. Their metabolism burned off alcohol within minutes of downing it, which meant my window of opportunity was about the size of a mouse hole. In my Lykoi state I was faster than a wolf—I'd honed that particular skill long ago with all the times I'd been chased—but I couldn't go Lykoi. Paws didn't lend themselves to turning doorknobs, so I'd have to do this the hard way. Nothing new there.

I leaned against the brick wall and let the cool autumn air soothe my restless body. My calf muscles twitched, and my stomach rumbled. It was tempting to give in to the urge to transform and run through the woods I'd passed on the way into town. Maybe even hunt a bit of rabbit. I let out a slow breath and resisted my primal desires.

I counted four bikes outside the bar. Mutther's might be a neutral, no-colors establishment, but I still had to get past the owners of those bikes. Four big-ass obstacles between me and the portal to the Hotel Paranormal. I knew portals existed in most major cities—definitely in Manhattan—but, of course, my only way into the hotel would be through a wolf biker bar. My luck ranged from bad to stinking bad. I was long overdue for a bit of good luck, but I didn't look for that to happen tonight. My usual mode of blending into the background to avoid attracting

attention wasn't going to work here. There were no crowds to lose myself in, and the glaring neon sign covering three quarters of the bar's facade was a beacon spreading a swath of red across the sidewalk. Anyone wishing to enter the bar would be doused in light. This had to be the hotel's idea of a joke—or a test.

I pinned my hopes for survival on Mutther's neutrality. As long as I got in the bar and stayed in, I'd be safe. I wasn't stupid enough to think the wolves would make it easy if they saw me. They'd follow—to hell with whether the bar was closing. I had to find the portal as soon as I slipped inside, or I might accidentally-on-purpose get shoved back outside where it'd be open season for a certain female bounty hunter. It's a good thing I could transform on the run.

On my ride north, I had lots of time to think of a decent plan, but this was the best I could come up with. I tried to ignore the fact that most of my plans blew up in my face—sometimes literally. I rubbed at the patch of hair that was still growing in from one of my last bounty hunter adventures. I'd had to improvise by styling a ragged, one-sided cut, which brought out the white streak in my black hair, but I liked the new shorter version, so silver lining, make lemonade when life hands you lemons, whatever. I did okay then, and I'd make do now, unless I couldn't get through the inter-dimensional portal. There was no guarantee the damn thing would open for me, even with the business card I had stowed in the back pocket of my jeans. To most people, the little card with *the Hotel* printed on it wouldn't garner a

passing thought. To those who possessed one, it was the way into the Hotel Paranormal. I did a quick check to be sure it was still there and wondered what it had cost my client to obtain my admittance. It couldn't have been cheap. Money or favors seemed to be the only way to access the exclusive hotel. Yeah, the case had high-risk factors like death or maiming –neither of which I wanted to experience—but I couldn't pass on the reward.

I perked up at the sound of the front door banging open. The red neon beacon flashed alarmingly close as if daring me to make my move. I balanced my weight on the balls of my feet anticipating the exact moment the little mouse hole of opportunity would show itself. I cleared my head of any thoughts of failure. I had this.

But Fate hated me. She truly did. I placed one foot into the red zone, waiting for the club leader to finish struggling into his vest so he'd turn away from my alley and towards his bike, when my mouse hole of an entrance was blocked by a rather large guy. From the heavy flavor of his scent reaching me, it was another wolf. Not one of the bikers. *Shit!*

I flattened against the wall, hissing my disgruntlement in a slurry of curses, and stared up at the half-moon slowly being consumed by clouds.

"One break. I just need one."

If any greater powers existed, I hoped they were listening, because I didn't stand a chance otherwise. I inched closer to the edge of the building so I could keep an eye on the group gathered in front of the bar.

"Hey, Mutther," slurred the club leader.

"Yeah?" Mutther stepped out from the doorway,

but not far enough to widen the mouse hole.

"You're a good sport, man. Damn good sport."

The leader had gotten into his vest and had managed to find purchase on his seat. The booze buzz must have started fading, and with it, my plan. There was that bad luck again. The other three revved their bikes, waiting for the word to take off, but their leader was too talkative. I ground my teeth at the inane conversation.

The lead biker pointed a finger at Mutther and shouted over the engine noise. "Next time the last drinks are on me, even if you lose again. You don't have much of a poker face. Easy win."

"Sure was," Mutther said, grinning from ear to ear, "and I hate to break it to you, but you lost. The drinks are on your tab."

"What the fuck?"

Deep billows of laughter filled the street. I would have laughed too, if my current situation weren't so bleak. Instead, I recalculated my chances of making it past the bar owner. Slim to none. Not good odds, but I never paid attention to odds.

"Later, Nick." Mutther waved the bikers off and started back inside.

Nick huffed a couple of times as if he had more to say on the matter, but the words stuck in his throat until he gave up on the effort and kick-started his bike. It roared to life and the four men took off down the street, spraying a fine trail of grit behind them. I didn't wait to see if they'd glance back my way. I ran for the door that was almost shut, not caring about being in the red zone. Stealth didn't matter anymore. Mutther placed his hand on the edge of the door

right when I blasted through the entryway. My momentum hurtled me forward, straight into him, knocking him backward. If I hadn't built up speed on my dash, and if he hadn't been caught by surprise, I never would have been able to unbalance him. He was big, strong, and as solid as a mountain. He stared down at me, eyes wide and mouth slightly open, but within a nanosecond he had a tight hold on my wrist.

"Hey," I said, attempting to catch my breath. I didn't try to twist away from his grip, because while my uncle often said I was a glutton for punishment, it wasn't true. I didn't like pain any more than the next sane person and I'd already gotten hurt when I banged into Mutther. I was pretty certain I'd have a few bruises by morning. Mutther continued to stare. I didn't know quite what to say, so I laid it out for him. "Sorry about intruding, but I have to get through the Hotel Paranormal portal as soon as possible." I managed to pull the business card from my pocket with my other hand. My knuckles stung. I'd scraped them when I catapulted through the entrance, but didn't recall exactly how—probably grazed myself on the door plate, which was a typical move for me.

While Mutther appeared to be mulling over his response, I took a moment to get a better look at him. He had an earthy quality about him and not just because he reminded me of a rugged mountain. He didn't seem older than maybe his late thirties, but it was like he belonged to an older time, when nature held reign over men. This was a guy who in another era would have been a worthy king. He noticed me watching, raised an eyebrow, but said nothing, still

holding my wrist. I held the card out to him, keeping my bloodied fist from contaminating my ticket into the hotel.

He kicked the door shut and released me to take the card in a blur of motion. If he meant to intimidate me, he had much to learn. I'd grown up with a pack of wolves who took pleasure in taunting me. I knew how to keep my feelings inside—well, most of them. Anger *did* tend to get away from me. I held my ground, never flinching at his movement. At least he hadn't tossed me outside, but the distant rumble of the bikers didn't mean I'd be safe if Mutther changed his mind, so I had to play this right. Although he didn't belong to the gang that had just left, his wolf howl would alert them and they'd be back in a flash, sober—not good for me.

Mutther, however, didn't raise the alarm, and I relaxed a fraction, keeping my mouth shut, which was not an easy task for me. I bit the inside of my lip hard enough to draw blood.

"You sure the hotel will let you in?"

The familiar heat of anger crept up my neck. I wasn't sure about getting into the hotel, and he could see it on my face. I had no idea if the hotel would let half-breeds like me pass the threshold, but my employer hadn't seemed to think it a problem, so why should Mutther? "I have a valid reservation."

He laughed and walked towards the bar. I followed him—fists firmly at my sides—taking in my surroundings. It was a standard bar—dark wood paneling, flat screen centrally located for easy viewing, several smaller screens hung along the back of the bar tuned to different sports channels, round

tables that seated four spread haphazardly around the room as if they were constantly being shoved out of place and Mutther had stopped trying to arrange them. A pool table sat in a far corner and a well-used dart board hung on the wall a short distance from a cue rack. Despite its disorderly appearance, the place was spotless. Mutther cared about his establishment. He snagged remotes and turned everything off.

“Newbies,” he said.

I had no idea what he meant, but the tone irked me. I might be in my late twenties, but I wasn't a young upstart. I was a seasoned bounty hunter and I was about to remind him of it when he moved off to clear away the last of the drinks.

He grabbed a cleaning rag and rubbed the mahogany bar top until my reflection stared back at me, revealing the frustration and resentment I felt boiling just beneath my skin.

“Reservations don't mean shit. Your admittance card can be wiped clean,” he continued. “The *hotel* decides who gets in.”

He emphasized *hotel* as if the place had a mind of its own. I sat on a stool directly in front of Mutther and ignored my reflection. “Suppose you tell me how you know all this. I have it on good authority that I shouldn't have any problems with my reservation.” It was a white lie, and I had an inkling he knew it. “The problem I have is the entry point.” I swept my arm in an arc to encompass the bar. “Not exactly the most convenient location for a portal, if you're someone like me.”

Mutther actually frowned at that. I hid my surprise but wished I knew what he was thinking for

him to have such a reaction. I'd expected him to be judgmental or at the least indifferent. Both reactions I'd grown accustomed to when meeting people for the first time. My kind tended to elicit such responses.

"I suppose you have a point."

He carefully folded the rag and stowed it behind the counter. He poured two shots of whiskey and handed me one, meeting my gaze. "What I meant was the hotel is a safe harbor. It won't allow harm to come to its guests." He eyed me a long moment over the brim of his glass before downing his drink.

"My intentions are harmless." I said it with conviction, but a tiny part of me buried in the recesses of my conscience called me a liar. I didn't have malevolent motives, but my actions could hardly be called harmless. I was after Alexander Holden, who was accused of murdering his betrothed. His future, and possibly his life, was at stake. I knew it, but did the hotel?

"Then I guess it's time you used the bathroom." He pointed down the dimly lit hall to a nondescript wooden door.

"Excuse me?"

A wry smile spread across Mutther's face. "It's the only bathroom I have, and it happens to double as the portal, but only to those able to see it."

The realization of his words hit me hard. My pulse quickened as doubt crept up my throat, making my response barely more than a whisper. "So I might not see it?"

Mutther nodded.

"Fantastic." I hopped off the stool and headed

down the hall. Mutther hadn't budged, but I could feel his gaze on my back. I hesitated for the briefest moment with one hand against the wooden surface and my other on the handle. I cast a look back at Mutther. "Wish me luck."

"Luck."

He hadn't said 'good luck,' just 'luck,' but I'd take it just the same.

I turned the knob and opened the door a few inches. "Wait," Mutther said, catching up with me. He handed me the business card I'd given him. "You'll need this to enter the hotel. The portal is simply the first step."

As soon as I took it, light emanated from the partially open door. I prayed it was a good omen.

I had no idea how many steps I'd climb to reach my destination or if the steps he mentioned were true steps, but he knew more than I did. "By the way, I'm Janda. Thanks for your help."

"The name's Matthias. And you're welcome."

I cocked my head, as if that would clear everything up. "If your name isn't Mutther, then why did the bikers call you that? And why does your neon sign say it? Isn't this your bar?" My curiosity made my usual tactlessness worse. I hurried to retract the questions before I annoyed him too much. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. Thanks for letting me use the . . . bathroom." I gave him a smile I hoped would make up for any blundering on my part.

He grinned. "It's cool. Yes, this is my bar. No, my name isn't Mutther. It's a nickname that kind of stuck."

"Oh. I see." I didn't really but refused to keep

putting my foot in my mouth. I felt warmth coming from the light seeping through and wanted nothing more than to continue onward.

Matthias moved close enough for me to feel his breath on my shoulders, then my neck. It was the slow stalking of a predator and it put my senses on high alert. I applied more pressure against the door. It creaked open.

"Thanks again," I said.

"Matthias Utther at your service." He did a mock bow and stepped back, giving me free access to the portal.

I stepped forward, paused as the knowledge of what he said sunk in, and spun back to him. "Ah. I get it. First initial and last name." I chuckled.

"Fast learner," he said. "You'll need it where you're going."

My smile faded.

"Just watch your back. That's all I'm saying."

"Sure thing," I said, dreading pushing the door all the way open. Fear finally rose to the surface. Why did he have to go and say that? I understood why he'd gone all predator on me. I needed to be on my guard and he'd just played on my survival instincts to get me ready for what would come.

Before I could go any farther, Mutther grabbed me for the second time that night, held my arm, forced me to slow down and not rush through the portal the way I'd rushed through his front door.

"I'm serious about being careful. Unless the hotel allows you to use a different portal on your return, you'll have to come back through here. Your best bet is to aim for when the bar is closed, otherwise you

could end up smack in the middle of a full house. That wouldn't be in your best interest."

I swallowed some of my fear. "No, it wouldn't."

His hold on me tightened. "The hotel can play tricks on you, taunt you, goad you into doing things, but it always does what it thinks is best for its guests. It also wouldn't hesitate to throw you out to the wolves – if it felt you deserved it – get my drift."

Unfortunately, I did. "Thanks for the warning."

He released me and I crossed over the threshold.

PURCHASE LOCATIONS

Bounty Huntress is available in print at Amazon and in digital format at the following major platforms:

Amazon: <https://goo.gl/8tHjoj>

Nook: <https://goo.gl/G00qdz>

iBooks: <https://goo.gl/Bjub59>

Kobo: <https://goo.gl/GweSII>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sheri Queen received her MFA in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University. She grew up in the Hudson Valley region of New York—an area she loves to depict as a backdrop for her stories—and enjoys traveling to new places where she is constantly discovering inspirations for her writing.

Follow Sheri online and sign up for notifications:
www.sheriqueen.com