

## Sleight of Hand

*You can't step into the same river twice...*

Lots of people know that quote. Fewer that it goes on: *...it's not the same river, and you're not the same person.*

My name's Amber Farrell. I tried stepping back into my life, but it wasn't the same life, and I wasn't the same person.

I'm a private investigator now, in my old hometown of Denver, Colorado. But I haven't shed my history.

*Former policewoman.*

*Former black ops Special Forces sergeant.*

*Former human.*

I'm an Arapaho/Irish mix, five-ten, auburn hair, green eyes. I'm OCD on physical fitness and it shows. And courtesy of my army training, I know a dozen ways to kill you silently with my bare hands. Less silent and fatal, you might be wounded by sharp edged words from what I think of as the demon in my throat. You've been warned.

It seems a long time, but it was only a few weeks ago I was working on a couple of cases and the river that is my life changed again.

One case was putting a stop to everyday corporate pilfering for Campbell Carter, CEO of Centennial State Crate & Freight. The other was investigating who was trying to bring down the Kingslund Group, owned by the beautiful, notorious businesswoman and socialite Jennifer Kingslund.

But I was also working covertly for the army, searching for evidence of vampires in Denver.

Why vampires? And why me?

Because just two years back, I was commanding a recon mission in a South American jungle for Ops 4-10, a top-secret, plausible-deniability army unit, when things went seriously, crazily wrong. I had my throat nearly torn out by something that looked human but wasn't. I was the only one of my command found alive. The army dragged me back to the Observation Unit (Obs), strapped me down, and experimented on me, probably hoping I'd die so they could dissect my remains.

But I lived. I changed. I became stronger. Faster. Harder to hurt and quicker to heal. I was finally sprung from my Obs nightmare and sent home to Denver by my old commanding officer, Colonel Laine, who remained my army contact and my keeper. Every now and then he'd come by with a nifty device that strapped to my arm, sucked out some blood and went looking for microscopic protein strings called prions, which gave me an "Am I a vampire yet?" readout. And he'd ask a lot of questions about my mental state, which I answered with lies.

After a failed attempt to settle me into a nice, safe accounting job, I managed to persuade the colonel to fast-track me into the Denver police force. But when I found out that rogue vampires were behind a series of murders, I broke PD protocol to investigate. The rogues killed a couple of police officers and took a young girl, Emily Schumacher, hostage. I managed to track them down and rescue Emily. By the end of it, all three vampires were very dead, however you care to define that state for vampires.

The news reported a story that suited Colonel Laine and Lieutenant Morales of the PD, without any mention of me or vampires. The bodies disappeared into the laboratories at Obs. Morales made captain and took over the Major Case Squad. Emily went home to her parents. And her father, Werner Schumacher, made me the most beautiful custom boots in the world, as a token of gratitude from him and his wife, Klara.

I parted ways with the police and became a PI.

A year later, working on that routine job for Crate & Freight, I found Carter had a major drug trafficking ring operating right under his nose. I bust that up with the help of Captain Morales and his SWAT team.

Neat. That is, until I tracked down one of the escaped drug traffickers at an abandoned house. He had tattoos that linked him to Zeklesh (ZK), one of Denver's most dangerous biker gangs. More disturbing, his heart had been ripped right out of his chest, and the place stunk of vampires. Yeah, I could sense them and smell them, one of a tiny minority of people that could.

Kingslund's case seemed more mundane. Financial irregularities, a missing employee, construction sabotage. Then I got a glimpse of the security footage from the construction site: wolves too big to be real, with human friends. Given what I knew about the paranormal, my mind couldn't help but shout *werewolf* at me.

I got Jen to take me out to Silver Hills, the resort construction site, to check it out and gather wolf scat for analysis. We were attacked by three men targeting Jen—one of them had the same ZK tattoos as the dead smuggler. Suddenly, my cases and my worlds collided. I got the drop on the attackers, but, trying to send a back-off message to their bosses, I let them go.

The attacks on Jen's company had escalated to attacks on her. But why? And what did it have to do with ZK and vampires?

Jen talked me into temporarily putting up at her mansion, Manassah. She felt more secure, she said. For extra manpower, I called in Victor Gayle, a good friend and owner of a PI and security company. Big man, deep, smooth, gravelly Southern voice—ex-army helicopter pilot, and one of the best security guys in the business.

While looking for signs of Jen's missing restaurant chef, Troy Huber, I had a little encounter with four guys from the local Fang Gang. After I refused their invitation to meet their leader, it got physical. Big mistake. Since they started out polite, I didn't kill them, but they were pretty beat up by the time I was done.

I knew that wouldn't be the end of it, and a friend, David Thaler, confirmed that.

When I'd first met David, his scent told me he was halfway to being a vampire. Turned out he was an Aspirant—a vampire-in-training. The process of turning—called *crusis*—was long, rigorous and tightly supervised. Mostly because if it wasn't, the Aspirant would likely go nuts and turn into a rogue—a killing machine. So, David and I had a deal: he told me what he could about the Denver vampire community, without giving me away to them. In return, I kept his secret and helped him with the physical side of his training. He knew about my being bitten and he wanted me to come meet his pals.

And rather than vampires, these people called themselves *Athanate*.

Which all left me in a helluva cleft stick. The army wanted me to hunt them down. I wanted to know more about them, mainly to see if I could stop becoming one. They wanted to know more about me for whatever reason. And now it seemed they were involved with my latest cases, somehow linked to ZK and werewolves at Silver Hills.

As if that weren't enough, I discovered that there was a *third* set of paranormals who'd crept up behind me—the Adepts; magic users.

My assistant at my PI business, Tullah, who was also the daughter of my martial arts master, turned out to be an Adept, along with both her parents, Liu Leung and Mary Autplumes. Apparently, I was also a potential Adept—I had my own spirit guide, a wolf, who had been helping me fight the change to Athanate.

Mary warned me that all Athanate become evil in the end, but she was optimistic enough about my case to give me a magical bracelet which was supposed to warn me if someone nearby meant me harm.

Harm me? Even the non-paranormals were out to get me. There was an army Lieutenant, Krantz, who thought I was involved in disability payment fraud because my records were too secret for him to access. And Campbell Carter, rather than being grateful that I helped shut down a smuggling ring being run by his drivers, was suing me because the police had to freeze his company while they investigated.

And the icing on the cake? My sister Kath, a lawyer, refused to help me out with the court case.

None of which meant the army let up. The colonel wanted me to check out a rave. Yeah, the army paid me to trawl the edgy, alternative club scene in Denver, looking for vampires. Go me.

This one was being run by ZK, but I left without finding any sure sign of Athanate.

When I caught the train back from the rave, I paid little attention to the extrovert Vietnamese girl with the leopard tattoos making out with the blonde Goth girl, and even less to the respectable couple in the next carriage.

Mistake. And this group weren't pushovers. I ended up blindfolded and driven in my own car to a mansion called Haven, the secret headquarters of House Altau, the Athanate group in Denver.

Upstairs seemed ordinary, but I was sent down into an underground stone room, decorated with a row of larger-than-life statues, including one of the Egyptian god Anubis—a huge man with a jackal's head. The statues had the look and consistency of stone, but were strangely warm, like flesh. Creepy.

My host was the Master of House Altau, Skylur, and he invited me to join House Altau, warning me that to try to handle crisis on my own was to court madness. Oh, joy. No.

In some kind of a test, Skylur demonstrated an Athanate mental ability to take over another person's mind. He used me for this demonstration, but seemed happier than I'd have thought when I managed to fight him off.

Then he had the nerve to ask for a favor. He wanted me to go to the upcoming McIntire-Harriman Foundation Charity Ball, because he needed a neutral party to receive a message from another Athanate House. His payment was to warn me that Jen Kingslund's problems were connected to a rival Athanate House.

Since he was holding me captive in his underground lair, I agreed to be his messenger.

The other two Athanate who'd abducted me took me home. They were Diana Ionache, powerful and mysterious, who gave every sign of wanting to be my friend, and the leopard girl, Bian Hwa Trang, who didn't.

From Diana, I learned that the Athanate were an ancient and complex society who followed the Hidden Path, symbolized by a blindfolded eagle—a way of life so secret that even the eagle couldn't see it. Unlike mythical vampires, Athanate were alive, and although they didn't die of natural causes, they could be killed. Now that was useful information.

Diana also explained that there were basically two groups of Athanate I needed to know about. The Basilikos, who looked on humans as cattle, and drank their blood without their consent. And Panethus, the group Altau belonged to, who believed that humans and Athanate should live symbiotically. Panethus Athanate also needed Blood to live, but the Blood was given voluntarily by their *kin*, humans bound to them by love. I took that love thing with a grain of salt, seeing as both Diana and Bian kept telling me how tasty my Blood smelled. Ever thoughtful, Skylur had put a ban on me so none of his people were allowed to bite me. Yet.

Over the weekend, I tried to get back to a normal life with Sunday lunch at my Mom's, and she shamed Kath into agreeing to help me with the court case.

The normal stuff was back out the window when the results of the analysis on the wolf scat came back from the army labs. Oh, yes, werewolves. But the weird thing? I felt reluctant to hand details on the werewolves across to the army. I'd borrowed the colonel's handy device and it was telling me I was edging closer to Athanate all the time. The thought that I might be a paranormal soon, whatever I tried to do to stop it...well, that put a different perspective on the army's attitude. The river had changed, and I hadn't even stepped out of it.

After the weekend, Tullah went to check on Mykayla, the blonde Goth Bian had been making out with after the rave. Bian had had to leave Mykayla on her own late at night while she escorted me to Haven,

and I was worried for her. With good reason, as it turned out. I ended up rescuing both Tullah and Mykayla from ZK, but not before Mykayla had been severely beaten.

Bian healed Mykayla with aniatropics—Athanate bio-agents that they secrete in saliva—and as a thank you for saving Mykayla, Diana gave me a new car to replace the one I'd trashed in the rescue. She also revealed much more about the Athanate. I learned that the combination of scent and mental sensation that warned me when Athanate were close was called their *marque*. Each House had a distinctive one, and it formed part of their identity, part of what held them together in secrecy.

I also learned that Athanate could not have children. They made new Athanate by infusing successful Aspirants with bio-agents when they bite. Aspirants who didn't make the grade to become Athanate had two choices—either they became kin, or they had their memories erased. The Hidden Path allowed no humans not bound to the Athanate as kin to know of their existence.

Diana also took the opportunity to brief me more fully on my upcoming mission for Skylur. Many of the attendees at the charity ball were going to be Athanate—Basilikos and Panethus—using the occasion as a cover to come to town for an Athanate Assembly. The Altau were hosts and Skylur the president of the Assembly, and protocols forbade contact between House Altau and other members immediately before the Assembly. All I would need to do was pick up a secret message and report back. How hard could that be?

To boost my confidence, she taught me a little about resisting Athanate mind control.

Then she shocked the hell out of me. She also wanted me to become a liaison for Emergence, the process of the Athanate “coming out” to humanity as a whole. She was banking on Colonel Laine having reliable contacts high in the government through the Ops 4-10 structure.

While this was breaking, I'd also been going through Kingslund Group's financials and realized that her CFO, Bernard Verdoon, had been manipulating the cash flow. It was a short term scheme, seemingly designed to prevent her from a buyout of Tucker Beacon, a company owned by local businessman Jack Tucker.

Jen lent me one of her company's computer geniuses, a Harley-riding surfer dude named Matt Bierbach, and I put him to work digging out more information for me—when I could get Tullah to stop flirting with him. I also learned that a charmer named Frank Hoben, who was in charge of the drug smuggling operation I busted, had put out a hit on me. And the Feds wanted to have a chat whenever I was free. Get in line, boys, get in line.

Wednesday and Thursday were filled with bad news. My former training sergeant and mentor, Master Sergeant Gabriel Luther Wells (aka Top), was dying of cancer in a military hospital. Colonel Laine managed to get me a ride on a military flight to visit him. Instead of me comforting him, I ended up burdening him with everything that was happening to me. He cleared up my misconceptions about my old unit and warned me about a Major Petersen who was making a play to take over the unit. He took all my news, from confusing financial plots to crazy paranormal stuff and helped me get it in perspective. I left, comforted by his parting advice: *Do what you can while you can. None of us can do any more.*

Back in Denver, Hoben's hitman booby-trapped my apartment and nearly killed my landlady. And I met Tullah's spirit guide, which Mary believed had not yet manifested. She turned out to be a big honkin' dragon named Kaothos. Tullah had somehow failed to mention this to her mother, mainly because dragons weren't on some “approved” spirit guide list. Great, I got to hold some more secrets with the potential to piss powerful people off.

Friday night, I went to the McIntyre-Harriman charity ball, in a drop-dead gorgeous green dress I couldn't afford. Luckily, it was made for me gratis by Lisa Macy, a dressmaker friend of Werner Schumaker's, in return for me passing on her name to all the wealthy socialites at the ball.

It turned out Kath was at the ball with her fiancé, Taylor. She begged me not to “embarrass” her, since she was being considered for a partnership in her firm. She also warned me about the Jen's

notoriety. Jen spent the evening dancing happily with men and women alike, including me. My emerging Athanate side found her disturbingly intriguing. I met Jack Tucker of Tucker Beacon—and learned that his fiancée, Inez Vega Martine, was a close Athanate associate of Luc Matlal of House Matlal in Mexico. Matlal was the leader of Basilikos; handsome enough, but a nasty, slimy customer, who came on to me.

The evening wasn't all bad; I also met a couple of much more charming men: Alex Deauville, whose company handled Tucker's trucking, and who was totally, completely hot; and Arvinder Singh, head of the group of Basilikos Houses called Theokos, and based in India. He turned out to be the secret contact, and used some kind of Athanate mental power to place an encrypted message for Diana in my head. Not quite what I was expecting.

Halfway through the ball I got a warning of danger from Mary's bracelet and spirited Jen out, with a little diversionary help from Alex and a few of his friends. Jen and I barely escaped. Belatedly, I realized that if Jen had died, Bernard Verdoon would have had the authority to sell out Jen's company. Some more digging revealed that Verdoon's daughter had been terminally ill, but experienced a sudden and miraculous recovery after being sent to a clinic in New Mexico. The same area from which Hoben and ZK were getting their drugs. Could Verdoon's daughter have been healed by Matlal Athanate, and was sabotaging Jen's company the price?

Next day, when Jen and I got a glimpse of Tucker and Hoben in conference, we realized that it was Tucker behind the attacks. Instead of selling his company to Jen—which would have revealed his involvement in the drug ring—he was trying to kill her and buy out the Kingslund Group under the guise of a merger he'd been talking about to Jen. But we had no solid proof yet.

I got out to Haven so Diana could remove Singh's message from my head. That job done, she and Skylur informed me that it was too dangerous for me to remain an unaffiliated Athanate; I must be formally recognized by Altau at the Assembly. I was offered a choice: to join House Altau, which would provide support but hamper my independence, or to form an affiliated subsidiary House of one: House Farrell. I went for Option Two.

There was no doubt at Haven that I was becoming Athanate and they warned me that until I passed crisis and learned control, I was a danger to humans and myself. I'd already banned myself from getting intimate with anyone in case I was contagious, so that wasn't news. Diana offered to be my Mentor, guiding me through crisis and the labyrinth of Athanate customs, skills and politics.

It was a marker for how far I'd come that I considered it.

Things went downhill. Keith Alverson, a member of my old Ops 4-10 unit and an old flame, called to let me know Top had died. We met, and he told me Top had sent me some mementos that he'd hidden in a storage facility. That turned out to be equipment and weapons, including my old parachuting gear, assorted firearms and grenades, and my very own BFG, a sort of grossly oversized shotgun.

Plus a letter from Top that I couldn't bear to read.

It got worse: Kath came by Jen's to berate me for "causing a scene" at the charity ball, because of course it was supposed to be all about her. She'd also been contacted by Krantz, and now believed I was never in the army, that I'd supported myself as a whore and was now a drug addict, that last because the Colonel's prion reader had left needle marks in my arm. When shaming Kath into agreeing to help me with the court case, Mom had revealed that I'd helped fund Kath's education. Kath went back to refusing to help me and trying to pay me back the money.

It was pretty sad that the only member of my family I could talk to openly was my dead identical twin sister, Tara, who'd been stillborn. I had a small, blank slab of black polished granite with her name inscribed, on my desk with my family photos. When I looked at it, I saw in my reflection what she would have looked like if she'd lived. Once Kath had gone, I talked to Tara, pouring out all the crap that was happening. Was I crazy to think I heard her in my mind, answering me? Was it any crazier than turning into an immortal bloodsucker?

I'd asked at Haven about a contact with the Were and I'd been given one. Trying to get over Kath's betrayal, I decided to look up the contact. I was surprised but not disappointed at all to learn that the Were's contact person was Alex Deauville. There'd definitely been something untamed about him at the ball.

From Alex, I learned that Tucker, as a favor, had asked Alex to get some of his wolf buddies and scare people off Silver Hills. That was the activity that Jen's security camera had caught. Preventing Jen's resort being built would have kept Tucker's own resort value high and would have damaged Kingslund Group's credibility.

When Alex had realized how things were going down at the ball, and that Tucker meant real harm, he'd switched allegiances and helped us escape.

And, oh yes, I found out that Athanate and Were couldn't cross-infuse. Mmmm. My self-imposed celibacy might just be under threat.

Worried about David, I visited and found him on the brink of death; his Mentor, Pia, had almost sucked him dry. The only way to save him was to let him drink my Blood. The way these things worked, as far as I understood it, doing that could tip me over into being Athanate, but there were no other options.

Both worked. My Blood pulled David back and his bite seemed to be the final step in my path to being Athanate. That freaked me out and I ran, finally ending up in the park, on the verge of passing out when I called Alex.

He took me to his home and while recovering I had a dream vision where my Arapaho great-grandmother, Speaks to Wolves, appeared to me in wolf form. She introduced me to my spirit guide, a wolf named Hana, and confirmed Mary's theory; it was Hana that had been helping me fight turning Athanate. But she added that there was more to me and my situation: *You are none of the things they will say you are.*

Come morning, things got a little steamy with Alex—okay, well, a lot steamy. (And just for the record: Alex's railing—very, *very* sturdy.) Unfortunately, we were interrupted by a call from Jen. Verdoon and Captain Morales had been abducted by Tucker's men. Victor's guys tracked them to Tucker's business center in Meridian. I called in Morales' SWAT team, and headed down there.

With the help of Victor and his guys, I got into the building disguised as a delivery courier. Tucker's hitman was waiting with Troy, Jen's missing employee, Morales and Verdoon—apparently, they were bait for me. I took out the hitman, and got the prisoners to the roof for extraction by Victor using Jen's helicopter. Covering their escape involved lots of ZKs and other hostiles, a grenade exploding in the stairwell, and a showdown with Jack Tucker. He ended up shooting himself, convinced by Inez Vega Martine's lies that he'd be resurrected as an Athanate. Idiot.

Victor came back for me with the helicopter, and I ended up executing an embarrassingly public and cinematic dive off the roof, while under fire, to be borne away dangling from the skid bar.

Morales, Troy and Verdoon were okay, but I was forced to flee the scene before we even had time to celebrate, to avoid awkward questions from the FBI.

Jen's case was closed, but my personal life? Oh Lord, what a mess.