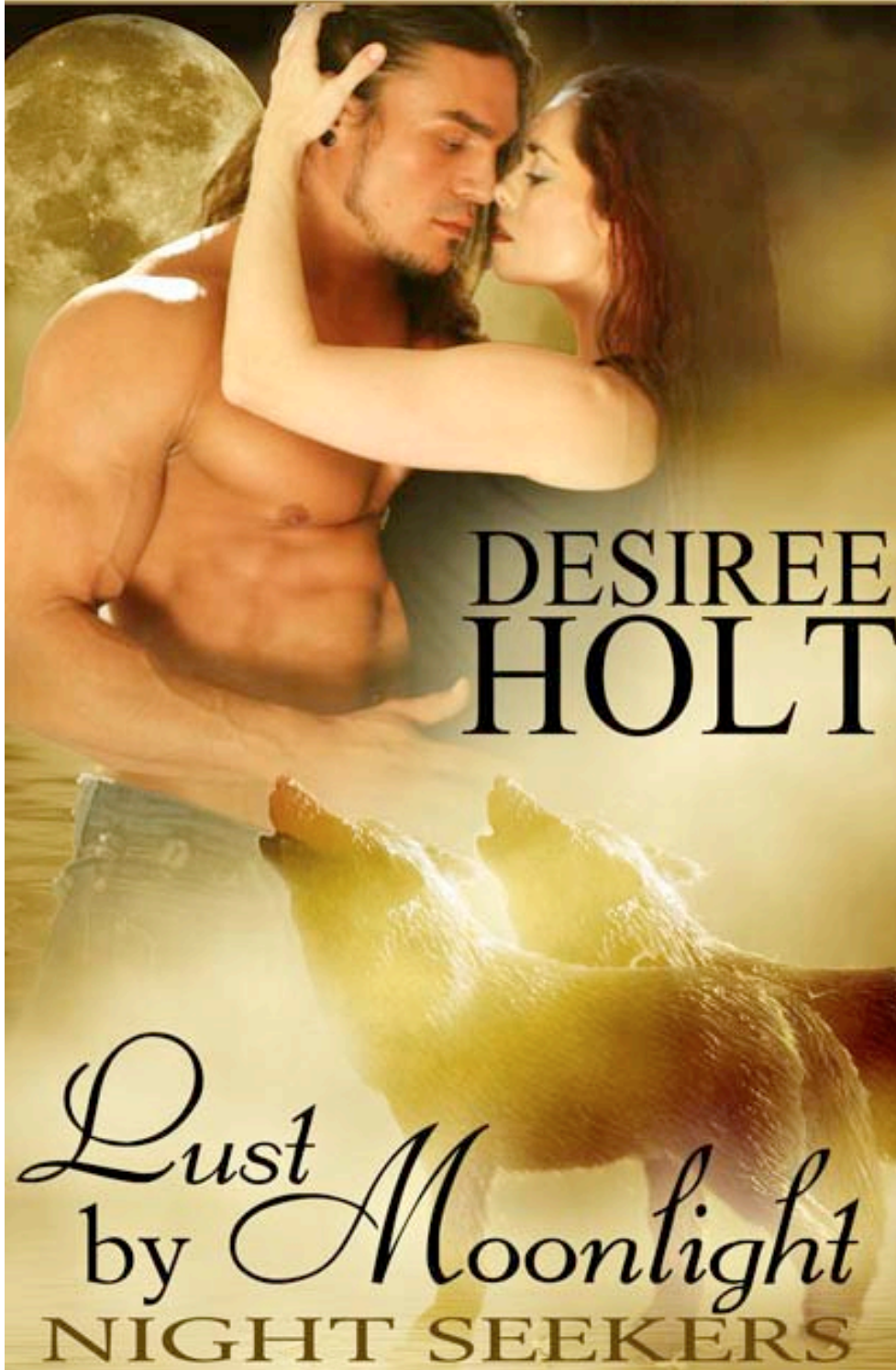


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



DESIREE  
HOLT

*Lust  
by Moonlight*  
NIGHT SEEKERS

## **Lust by Moonlight**

Desiree Holt

*Book 2 in the Night Seekers series.*

As a shifter, Mark Guitron is uniquely equipped to search for the devil beast, El Chupacabra, and stop the horrible killings. Hunting one night by moonlight, he spots another wolf whose aura tells him she is also a shifter. When he's visited by an erotic vision of her in human form, he knows he must find her and make her his own.

Chloe Hanson is searching for a friend she's convinced is a victim of the devil beast. When she meets Mark, she feels a primal tug that tells her they are meant to be together. As they join forces in the hunt, they soon learn that sex between them feeds a need, rather than slaking it. The multiple orgasms barely satisfy their lust for each other, and as they draw closer to their prey, their fiercest coupling is yet to come.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Lust by Moonlight

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# *LUST BY MOONLIGHT*

Desiree Holt

## Dedication

To my own late hero who is still always with me, and to Kate Douglas, who taught me how sexy shifters could be.

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## **Prologue**

Morning sunlight flowed in through the wide windows warming the huge kitchen. Six Night Seekers plus Dakota Furcal, the newest addition, sat around the table enjoying a relaxing breakfast. Formed as a group by billionaire Craig Stafford, drawn from various areas of law enforcement, and many of them shapeshifters, they were bound by a common thread – each had lost someone to the Chupacabra. For Craig, who founded the group, it had been his wife and daughter. For former FBI agent Jonah Grey, who'd tracked the animal that had been killed, it was his mate, Jenna. Finding Dakota when he'd gone to Maverick County in south Texas to investigate, had given the others hope that they could move forward with their lives.

This was the first really easy meal the group had enjoyed in days. Even the wedding dinner Craig Stafford had hosted for Dakota and Jonah had been tinged with anxiety as they waited for the final results of the Chupacabra's autopsy. They'd all been flown to the remote lab where the beast that Jonah and former border deputy Mark Guitron had killed had been taken. When they'd had the chance to see it in the flesh, all of them turned away, revolted by the sight. But at least they could now move on.

Dakota had thought she and Jonah should wait to marry until everything was wrapped up, but he was like a maniac, as if waiting one minute longer would cause her to change her mind.

"Fat chance," she'd told him, but he was insistent.

And so everything had been taken care of—the judge to marry them, flowers, dinner in a private dining room at a five-star restaurant in San Antonio. Just the other Night Seekers and Neil Washington, the closest thing to family she had. And they'd moved into what had once been the master wing of the huge ranch house, currently used by Craig when he dropped in. Dakota had been uncomfortable about usurping it.

"I don't need all that room," Craig had smiled. "And newlyweds need their privacy. When it was built it was set up to be closed off from the rest of the house, so hopefully it will be almost like having your own place."

No honeymoon, though. That would come after they met with Craig to learn the autopsy results and find out if there was still a mission of any kind for Night Seekers.

Dakota added a new dimension to the group. A cultivator of herbs, many of which the shifters needed to maintain their genetic balance, she would establish an herb garden in back of the ranch house, selling on the internet as well as providing for the group. She would also help with communications when needed.

Now the group was enjoying a rare moment of peace, hoping against hope that they had finally put the devil beast to death. But their quiet conversation was disrupted

by the sound of helicopter rotors splitting the air outside. All eyes turned to the window and saw the Stafford helicopter descending to the pad near the house.

Mark looked at Ric Garza, former Texas Ranger and the de facto leader of their team. "Were we expecting Stafford today?"

"He didn't tell me he was coming," Garza said. "Maybe he's got the autopsy results already and is ready to discuss what's next for us."

The back door opened and Craig walked into the kitchen, carrying a briefcase. He was dressed casually in slacks and polo shirt, although everyone at the table knew the outfit cost more than their combined wardrobes.

"Morning." His voice sounded tired. "Any coffee left here?"

"Yes, sir." Ric jumped up and pushed his chair out for Stafford, then went to fill a mug for him.

The man lowered himself heavily into the chair, accepted the coffee with thanks and sipped at the hot liquid.

"Thanks." He set the mug down. "If it weren't so early in the day I'd have asked for something a little stronger."

"There's something wrong." Chelsea Roland, a former private investigator, made it a statement, not a question. "You look very upset."

"Is it the autopsy?" Mark wanted to know. "Was there something disturbing about it?"

"Yes, but that's only a part of it." He ran his fingers through his hair and then lifted his briefcase to the table, opening it. "My biologists are still trying to separate the different strands of DNA from the creature's remains. It's a hybrid animal of some kind, a mutant, but they're beginning to think it wasn't the result of any strange mating. Although that could have been the beginning. But now they think it was created in someone's lab. Somewhere."

"Oh, my god." Sophia Black clapped her hand over her mouth. Once a detective with the Maine State Police, she'd lost twin nephews to the devil beast. "You mean someone's actually breeding these creatures deliberately?"

"So it appears. We're still not positive. There's an outside chance it could be some freak of nature. I've got the lab working on it 24/7. But that's not the problem."

"Then what is?" Ric had pulled another chair up to the table.

"This is." Stafford opened his briefcase, pulled out several folders from his briefcase and passed them around the table. They were copies of newspaper articles and the dates were within the past week. "Read them carefully."

The room was completely silent as each person read through the articles, one by one.

"Holy shit." Logan Tanner, former Montana Sheriff, stared at one of the sheets in front of him. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Yes." Stafford's answer was clipped. "And I had the same reaction."

"I feel sick." Sophia dropped the paper in her hand, pushed away from the table and ran for the bathroom.

Jonah stared hard at what he was reading. "These articles say three bodies were found in Florida just last week. All mangled and with the blood emptied from their veins."

"We got the wrong one." Sam Brody's voice was flat and dead-sounding. Sam, a shifter, had come to them from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. "Son of a bitch."

Stafford nodded. "So it seems."

"Either that," Sam went on, "or there's more than one out there."

"Which would explain why it appears in so many far-flung places," Chelsea added.

"Yeah, it would. Holy fucking shit."

"So." Craig Stafford closed his briefcase. "Jonah, Dakota, I think you'll have to postpone that honeymoon for a while yet, if you don't mind."

Dakota cleared her throat and reached for Jonah's hand. "Mr. Stafford? I'd like to help with this as much as I can. If someone can till the soil and help me get it ready, I can plant the herbs most of the team needs to...control their shifting. And I'm good with a lot of other things. I'll do whatever it takes."

He gave her a tired smile. "I appreciate that. And I'll take your offer. Especially about the garden. We'll need to get started on that right away." He looked at the others. "We're in a pickle here, almost starting from square one. We need to find a way to track this beast. And, to see if we can find out how many more there are out there."

"And where they came from," Mark added.

Stafford nodded. "Yes. Most importantly, where they came from. So." He drained the last of his coffee and set the mug down carefully. "Let's see what we can brainstorm here and find a starting place. The mission is still the same. Find and kill El Chupacabra. However many there are."



## Chapter One

"Hey, I've only been here for two nights." Mark chuckled into the sat phone. "Give me a break, okay?"

"Just checking." Ric Garza's voice held just a trace of humor. "So how did you find things there? About the same?"

"Nothing ever changes down here," Mark told him. "Still a lot of 'coyotes' bringing illegals across the Rio Grande and the *narcotraficantes* are still running drugs. Otherwise, what else could be going on in a county that has a total population of less than fourteen thousand?"

"You tell me? You're the one who lived there all those years."

Mark sighed. "I know. I just enjoyed the peace and quiet. Don't get many gangbangers or drive-bys down this way."

"So, tell me. Any talk in town about the beast? And hint of an appearance?"

"No." Mark sighed. "But you and I both know that doesn't mean anything. By the time we hear about it, the first killing has already taken place."

"You going out again tonight?" Ric wanted to know.

"In just a little while. I'll let you know if I find anything. Pick up any trace."

"All right. I'll talk to you in the morning."

Mark Guitron clicked off and placed the phone on the kitchen counter. Glancing out the window over the sink, he saw that twilight had already morphed into night. Another hour and it would be full dark, time for him to prowl. He busied himself at his laptop while he waited, pulling up again the latest news stories on El Chupacabra and trying to find some hint of the beast's path of destruction. Finally, by ten o'clock he was ready. Stripping off his clothes and leaving them folded on his bed, he opened the back door, walked onto the tiny porch and willed his body to shift.

As always he felt the bones elongate, the muscles stretch, his nose morph into the classic snout of the wolf. The fine smattering of dark hair on his body thickened and turned into a rich pelt and his canine teeth became biting tools with sharpened points. In seconds he was wolf, lifting his head to scent the air. Quietly he padded down the stairs, inhaled the night air again, and took off across the rocky ground and down into the first of many arroyos.

The moon had just cleared the tops of the trees and hung like a silver ball in the sky. The air was clear tonight, not a hint of a cloud, and stars hung like brilliants around the lunar globe. The loamy soil over its base of natural caliche lay like a carpet on the ground, populated by thorny shrubs that thrived in the arid environment. Zapata County, located in the Balcones Escarpment, was in the area that divided East and West

Texas. It nestled along the Mexican border seeking invisibility in the ongoing border drug wars.

Mark had grown up here, in this sparsely populated area, his parents scratching out a living in the natural gas industry, the county's main economic product. A football scholarship took him through four years at Texas A&M University and a degree in criminal justice. He'd been a decorated deputy in the Zapata County Sheriff's Office until the call had come from Craig Stafford. He'd been reeling from the death of his closest friend, killed by the Chupacabra, a beast that many refused to acknowledge, that others denigrated, but that all feared.

Now he was back in the area he knew so well, roaming it as the wolf.

The devil beast had gone from Texas to Florida but deep in his belly Mark sensed it was headed back here. To finish things. Finish the cycle.

Its pattern was always three kills before moving on, but in Maverick County it had been held to two because Mark and Jonah had chased it away by zeroing in on another predator. Similar, but not the same. Not only had the autopsy proven that, but there had been more killings.

Mark was the one who had suggested returning to the Texas border area because the devil beast hadn't completed its pattern there. Three kills, then move on. But it had been interrupted before the third one. Its rage would be great and its bloodlust high. It would want to leave its stamp on that area.

The Night Seekers had all debated whether it would return to Maverick County or move on. Both Mark and Jonah had insisted it wouldn't go back to the place where it had nearly been killed but would find someplace close by. Zapata County, with its vast stretches of land and sparse population was an ideal spot for the Chupacabra killing ground.

Mark had kept his little house outside the town of Zapata. What the hell, it was all paid for. And so he'd opened it up, laid in some provisions and each night shifted to go hunting. Now in his wolf form he padded along in the moonlight, listening to the calls of the night birds. He used his highly developed sense of smell to search for traces of the Chupacabra, especially any lingering hint of the aroma of turpentine that he and Jonah had found at the killing site in Maverick County, but he only caught the scent of the wild animals.

Still, his plan was to keep searching every night, widening the area each time he went out. In his gut he knew the devil beast would come here to finish his task. Knew it with a certainty. And he would be here, waiting for it.

It was a night just like this one when he'd found the body of his closest friend, Rob Greico. He'd just come off patrol as a Deputy Sheriff and was swinging by Rob's house for a late beer. Like Mark, Rob lived in a fairly isolated area of the county. He'd driven down the long caliche drive from the two-lane highway, ready to kick back and suck on a brew. All the lights had been on at Rob's house, but when Mark knocked no one

answered. Nor did he find anyone when he walked through the house. The television was blaring but no Rob. Nothing.

Until he reached the barn. What he'd thought was a pile of rags turned out to be Rob's mutilated body. Mark had walked away from the site and vomited before finally going back to take a closer look. He'd never get the horror of that night out of his mind. Fang marks on his throat. His body drained of blood. His stomach ripped open and his intestines hanging out.

No one should have to die like that. And he'd vowed that moment not to stop until he'd hunted and killed the devil beast.

The problem with hunting El Chupacabra was people were so scared of the legend they wouldn't acknowledge it. Or else they discounted it as an old wives' tale. His boss had finally demanded that he take some leave time and right about then Craig Stafford had contacted him about Night Seekers.

He truly hoped this wasn't going to be a waste of time on his part. The animal—or whatever it was—needed to be caught and killed before it wreaked any more havoc. The most disturbing thought was the indication that someone might be crossbreeding and trying to reproduce this evil hybrid of nature. Whoever that was had to be found and stopped.

Mark paused at the top of a rocky knoll, lifting his snout. A strange scent caught at his nostrils, and he turned his head.

Wolf!

Every muscle in his body went rigid. Wolves were not endemic to Zapata County. Indeed, wolves were all but extinct everywhere in Texas, disappearing slowly over the years. While neighboring states had reintroduced the gray wolf to the wild, Texas still lagged behind. Which was why Mark was always careful when running to do it at night and pick a spot without human habitation.

So where did this other wolf come from? Was it one of the rare red wolves he'd read about inhabiting the area? He didn't even know if their existence here was a fact, or just a legend like El Chupacabra. And why would it be here, anyway, since its habitat was the marshland between Houston and Beaumont?

Moving rapidly into a small cluster of trees, he shifted and used the thickest tree to conceal himself. Peering around the trunk, he spotted the other wolf still standing in the same place. It turned its head in Mark's direction and he could have sworn that even at this distance the animal saw him. He held his breath. If it was truly a wolf in the wild, it would smell him and possibly attack.

But the strangest thing happened. The air around the animal shimmered and in seconds where the wolf had stood was a woman whose amazing body was outlined by the moonlight. He could tell she was tall, with long hair of some dark color that streamed down her back, and as she lifted her arms she brought magnificent breasts into relief.

His cock stood immediately at attention, hardening and swelling. He started to move out of his hiding place, then thought better of it. She turned her head in his direction for the briefest of moments, then the air shimmered again and the wolf was back.

He stood unmoving, watching, until the other animal loped of into a stand of trees and disappeared from sight. This was not good. If there was another shifter in the area, Night Seekers really needed to know about it. He'd have to do some real digging to find out about the wolf, and do it without raising any suspicions.

Taking one last look, he turned and trotted off to his house.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shifter!

If she hadn't seen it herself she wouldn't have believed it. This was the last place she'd ever expected to encounter one. Chloe Hanson stood for a moment when she was wolf again, took one look back toward the trees and loped down from the rocky outcropping. Then she stopped, holding herself still while she scented the air. The aroma of the other wolf was fading, drifting away on the breeze. Then it was gone. The very last thing she'd expected, practically in her own backyard, was another wolf. And a shifter at that. Not only were wolves not indigenous to Texas, they'd been extinct for a long while and Texas Parks and Wildlife had yet to join New Mexico and Arizona in reintroducing the wolf into the area.

That meant she had to be very careful when and where she ran. Of course, the same applied to the other shifter. He couldn't be from anywhere around here. She was sure she'd have known about him by now. Shifters were rare around South Texas, but they all had an uncanny ability to sense each other.

Of course Zapata County was so sparsely populated there were vast stretches of land where you saw nothing but animals like the white tail deer, feral hogs and javelinas. No wolves, so if one was spotted there would be talk. And there hadn't been any. The emptiness of the landscape gave her a sense of privacy and security. Just one of the reasons she'd chosen to move here after...after Melinda.

The other was that this was where Melinda, her best friend since childhood, had disappeared. Just *snap!* like that. One minute she was taking a late-night swim in the pool at their motel. The next she was gone. Chloe had heard a scream and raced outside but in that few seconds her friend had disappeared completely.

For three days people had searched for Melinda. The sheriff, his deputy and volunteers had combed every inch of Zapata County. The sheriff had personally contacted his counterparts in the neighboring counties and sent out notices throughout Texas.

"It's possible that for whatever reason she just decided to hightail it out of here," Sheriff Torres had pointed out.

Chloe hadn't been able to make him understand that Melinda would never do anything like that. She knew something they didn't. Like herself, Melinda was a shifter. It was one of the things that bound them together so strongly and a major reason why Melinda would never be that irresponsible. And deep down, where she didn't even want to think about it, was the possibility her friend had been taken by El Chupacabra. Maybe—the thought gave her shivers—to try to mate with her. Chloe had heard and read all the frightening, disgusting legends about the devil beast, but unlike many others, she was convinced it was true. And like some, she harbored the suspicion that it was also a type of shifter, part human and possibly looking for a mate. Killing its prey if mating was impossible.

If she couldn't find Melinda alive, at the very least she wanted to find her body and put her soul to rest.

But this wasn't exactly something she could share with humans.

After a week the police finally wrote the whole thing off as an unexplained disappearance. Chloe closed up her photography studio in San Antonio, packed up her things and rented a house in bare, isolated Zapata County, the place she and Melinda had come to do their photographic project.

She was still going to complete it. They had a contract for a book of photographs on Texas and Chloe planned to make it a tribute to Melinda. While she continued to hunt for her friend. She was just afraid she was running out of time.

Another twenty minutes and she was back at the small house she was renting, just north of the town of Zapata on narrow road that meandered away from Highway 83. She had the vastness of the land at one hand and the narrow gorge of the Rio Grande on the other, the once proud river now a dribble of water that led into Falcon Lake reservoir. There were no neighbors to irritate her and no one to bother her. On her rare trips into town to buy supplies and pick up her mail at the post office, people nodded to her as if she was someone vaguely familiar and that was all. She hadn't bothered to try to make friends with the locals. She needed her privacy.

At the steps of her porch she paused, exhaled slowly and shifted back to human form. In seconds she was inside her house and digging her sleepshirt out of a drawer in her bedroom. While she brewed a cup of tea she allowed her mind to wander back to the other wolf, so alpha-looking silhouetted against the night sky in both wolf and human form.

Who was he? Where had he come from? And more importantly, what was he doing here, in a land barren of wolves?

Turning on her DVD player, she slipped a favorite disc into it and sank down into the big armchair, sipping her tea and letting her eyes close as she inhaled the fragrant steam. The image of the shifter slammed into her brain, first the massive wolf, then the man. She hadn't been able to see him all that clearly but his outline showed him to be definitely big and very muscular. Broad and thick. No wonder his wolf was so massive.

She set the mug on the table beside the chair and let the image solidify in her mind. His face was still in shadow but she could see every muscle and sinew in his body, the dusting of hair along his arms and legs and the thick patch on his chest. Not to mention the nest at his groin surrounding his very big, very swollen cock.

Now he moved forward just a little and the sexual heat of his bad-boy image slammed into her. Tall and lean, with broad shoulders and narrow hips, he had a sensual arrogance in his stance. Day-old stubble shaded his face and his thick black hair hung like silk almost to his shoulders. His mouth was full, the kind that placed kisses everywhere on your body.

Oh, yeah, he was definitely the quintessential bad boy with the “I want to eat your pussy” gleam in his eyes.

She blinked, and a giant wolf stood there in his place. Another blink and he was replaced again by the man. Now she saw the rich black of his hair and the hint of stubble at his jaw. His eyes were like tarnished gold, burnished by the heat radiating from them. Looking at him she knew what was meant by the expression “eating me up with his eyes”.

He moved forward, closer to her, and when she reached out she found she could actually touch him. Her fingers brushed his thigh, taut skin over rock-hard muscle, but it was that glorious cock that drew her. Tentatively she stretched out her hand and let her fingers circle it. Skin like velvet over all that rock-hard steel. The moment she tightened her fingers a tiny bead of fluid appeared at the head, resting right on the slit. Winking at her temptingly. And her own body responded, the flesh of her cunt swelling, moistened by her juices which had suddenly flooded her.

That tiny pulse beat thrumming inside her, the one she ignored as much as possible now that she was out here in the middle of nowhere, intensified and vibrated throughout every nerve. Her body felt like one big pounding sensation. But everything centered on the pounding in the very center of her pussy. She felt totally detached from the scene yet burning at its center at the same time.

Without thinking she opened her legs, exposing herself to him. Throbbing as his heated gaze dropped to her mound and the lips she knew were shiny with fluid by now. He gently removed her hand from his erection, knelt before her and placed a hot, open-mouthed kiss on her labia. She jumped, as if a live wire had touched her. The tip of his tongue flicked her tender clit, just the barest touch like a butterfly, but it was enough to ignite the fire in her blood. Her liquid flowed and her inner muscles throbbed.

*Ohmigod!*

Strong thumbs caressed the insides of her thighs, brushing the soft flesh and sending shivers skittering over her skin. He stroked her with his slightly roughened tongue, waking up the tiny bundles of nerves in her inner lips. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart began to hammer against her ribs.

When he raised his eyes to look at her she saw heat dancing in the rich amber of his irises, and lust so intense it made her entire body tremble with anticipation.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

But he didn’t answer her. Was he even real? She could touch him, feel him, but...

When he bent his mouth to her cunt again her head dropped back against the chair and she closed her eyes, giving herself over to the sensations washing through her.

He paid careful attention to every inch of the soft flesh, nibbling and then lapping, soothing his tiny bites with his tongue. When he thrust his tongue deep into her hot, waiting channel, she bucked up to him, hands reaching out to thread her fingers through the rich thickness of his hair. But when she tried to pull him more tightly against her he simply braced his big hands on her knees and held his head in the same position. So much, yet not quite enough.

The tremors were building inside her now as his tongue continued to thrust and stroke and arouse. She felt them deep inside her womb, rumbling up like a volcano about to erupt. She tried to wrap her legs around his neck but she couldn’t seem to move them from their fixed position. All she could do was dig her fingers into the arm of the chair and hang on the edge of the cliff until her climax burst forth like an explosion of rockets.

She shattered, her cunt spasming, her pulse pounding, her breath sawing in and out of her throat. Thick clouds of cotton settled over her as her orgasm racked her, over and over. Eyes closed tightly against the fireworks bursting around her. When she felt herself settling again, she loosened her grip on the chair and opened her eyes, desperate to touch him again, to hold him, kiss him.

But when she looked he was gone. The room was empty except for her. And her well-sated body.

What had just happened here? Had he been here or had she just imagined it? Had she masturbated herself in the throes of a dream? She realized with a start that her hand cupped her pussy and she wondered if she’d just...done this herself.

It was a long time before she could actually force herself to leave her chair. On legs that felt like lead she walked to the kitchen, rinsed out her cup and set it in the sink. She could have sworn that somewhere in the distance she heard the howl of a wolf. Stumbling into the bedroom, she fell into bed, pulling the covers around her like a shield. And feeling more unsettled than she ever had in her entire life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark climbed up onto his back porch and looked carefully in both directions. There was no one, animal or human, within any line of sight, and hadn’t been for miles, but still he was always cautious. Satisfied he was still alone, he shifted back to human form, and let himself into his house. He was thirsty from his hours running in the arid landscape, craving fluid. Standing at the sink he ran a glass of water from the tap, drank

it down and followed it with a second one. His thirst slaked, he headed to his bedroom to shower and put on a pair of boxers. Sometimes he slept just as a wolf but he felt safer in his human form.

He had just pushed the door open when he stopped, frozen in place. Sitting on the edge of the bed was a naked woman, so striking she took his breath away. Almond-shaped eyes of a coffee brown, accentuated by high cheekbones, looked out at him from beneath thick lashes. A full, sensuous mouth was slightly curved in a half-smile. Dark red hair hung over one shoulder in lustrous curls, calling attention to full breasts tipped with dusky nipples. At the apex of her thighs he could just see a triangle of hair that matched the mane on her head.

He blinked, wondering if he was hallucinating, and when he opened his eyes he found himself looking at a small, perfectly formed wolf with a rich, dark red coat. Her small pink tongue reached out to lick her lips and her eyes glowed with a sensual heat.

A red wolf! It was real!

Mark blinked again, and when he looked the wolf was gone, replaced by the naked woman. She crooked a finger at him, urging him forward. His feet moved of their own volition, until he was standing directly in front of her. He reached out to touch her but she shook her head. Instead she reached out and closed her slim fingers around his now painfully hard cock. Locking her eyes on his she moved her thumb over the broad head, rubbing the bead of fluid on the slit into the soft skin.

His balls tightened at once, heat suffusing his entire groin. His blood raced and his heartbeat kicked into overdrive. Her touch was almost magical, so sensuous that he felt it in every nerve of his body. He clenched the muscles of his buttocks and pushed his hips forward, silently urging her to do more than just hold him in her hand.

Without warning she bent forward and licked the surface of the head of his shaft, letting the tip of her tongue explore the slit. His entire body jerked in reaction and a low moan rolled from his throat. She licked again, that small pink tongue working its magic over the plum-colored skin of the head before moving lower to trace the line of the pulsing vein.

When she had tasted every surface of the skin covering his steel-like erection, she opened her full lips and took him into her mouth, moving so slowly Mark was sure he'd lose his mind before she finally closed around the root. Her other hand slipped between his thighs to cup his balls, rolling them with her fingers until he could think of nothing but her touch and the feeling of voracious lust that swept through him and gripped him with iron force.

*More*, he wanted to shout, but he couldn't make himself utter any sound except guttural moans. Finally, when he was sure he would lose his mind with the anticipation, when she'd drawn him exquisitely to the brink of fulfillment, she sucked hard enough that her cheeks hollowed and took him over the edge.



Spasms rocked his body as he spurted again and again into the sweet heat of her mouth, her lips providing just the right amount of friction to draw every drop of fluid from his cock.

He was limp, exhausted, and reached to balance himself on her shoulders. He wanted to kiss that talented mouth and taste himself on her lips. But when he reached for her he found only empty space.

He blinked to clear his vision and when he looked again she was gone. Slowly he let his gaze travel around the room but he was definitely alone. There was no one else there. Jesus, had he just imagined her? Had he jerked off by himself without realizing it?

Shaking his head, he walked to the window and opened it, hoping a blast of fresh air would clear his head. But in the far off distance he heard what he thought was the wailing cry of a wolf.

## **Chapter Two**

Mark awoke in the morning still feeling unsettled. His dreams had been restless, filled with images of the wolf and the woman, the one blending into the other. He also faced a morning hard-on more rigid and painful than his usual one, made worse by the sensation of her full lips still circling him. He wondered if he'd have to masturbate to relieve it, but an ice cold shower managed to take care of it enough to be manageable.

He pulled on a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt, and the rough work boots he usually wore that protected his feet from the many insects that populated Zapata County, including the pesky but venomous scorpions. He'd been home for three days and had yet to put in an appearance in town, especially at the office of his former boss, Sheriff Leon Torres. His body was already itching for that first cup of coffee but he decided to wait until he got to Selena's.

Selena Guerrero ran a breakfast and lunch restaurant that served the best home-cooked food Mark had ever eaten. Even in people's homes. She was always packed from six o'clock opening to three o'clock closing. No dinner hour. She went home to her four children and her husband who worked at the natural gas company. At some point during those hours, however, almost everyone in Zapata and the surrounding area stopped in for a hot or cold drink if not for a meal.

In the sparsely populated counties of South Texas, with very few population centers, the local diner or its counterpart was the center of social activity. A good place to take the pulse of the area and get a feed on what was happening. If there was any talk at all of El Chupacabra, he'd hear it there.

The gravel parking lot was jammed when he pulled in at eight o'clock. He angled his truck in near the back, then inched through the mass of vehicles to the front door. As soon as he opened it he was assaulted by the sound of multiple voices and the mouthwatering smells of bacon frying, pancakes, hot syrup and the hot salsa for huevos rancheros—the eggs with salsa that were almost a staple in the breakfast diet of most Texans.

Every booth, table and counter stool was taken, but in the far corner booth sitting with one of his deputies he spotted exactly the man he was looking for, Leon Torres. His former boss spotted him at the same time, a pleased smile lighting his face, and he signaled Mark to join him.

It had been six months since Mark had last seen the man, the day he'd handed in his resignation. Torres had tried to talk him out of it but had finally shaken his hand and wished him luck. Mark had not been able to tell him what he was moving on to except to work for a private organization. Now he hoped he could still evade too many prying questions.

"If you weren't so ugly I might give you a hug," Torres said as Mark approached the booth.

"If you weren't so ugly yourself I'd hug you back," Mark joked.

He looked at the man across from Torres, Enzo Izquierdo. Enzo had joined the staff a year before Mark left and they'd often worked together. He nodded at the man now and received an answering smile.

"Looking for breakfast?" the sheriff asked. "Come on and join us if you are. It's crowded in here as usual."

"Thanks. Appreciate it." Enzo slid over to make room and Mark sat down next to him. He smiled at the waitress who appeared at once with coffee for him. He recognized her as a longtime employee.

"Good to see you back here," she told him. "You need a menu or you want your usual? I still remember, you know."

"I always said your mind was better than a computer," he teased. "The usual will be fine." He sipped at the hot coffee, his nerves easing as it coursed through his body.

"Back here visiting?" Torres asked, curiosity lighting his eyes.

Mark set his mug back down on the table. "For a few days. Thought I'd open up the house, air it out. You know."

The sheriff studied his face. "How are you doing really, Mark?"

Torres himself had come to the scene when Mark had found Rob's body.

Mark shrugged. "Okay. You know. Some things stay with you forever."

Torres shifted in his seat. "You know, even after you left we had hunters out for a long time tracking to see what kind of animal did that. We kept careful watch to see if it attacked anything else."

Mark had to bite back his first response. *I told you what I thought it was and you said I was an idiot if I thought the Chupacabra legend was anything more than that...a legend. And now we know it kills in a cycle of three, so where were the other two bodies? Too far away from civilization to be discovered? Loners who were never missed.*

Mark took a healthy sip of his coffee, letting the hot brew slide down his throat and wash away the bitter taste he could never quite seem to lose.

"I'm just glad there weren't any more attacks like that."

"Yeah," Torres said. "Me, too. So how's that private organization working out? You like the gig?"

Torres was watching him carefully. He'd been a little miffed that Mark hadn't given him any but the most cursory information at the time. This conversation would take some careful navigating, especially if he wanted to get information.

"Yeah, it's good," he answered. "All good. Working with some great people."

"And I suppose you still can't tell me any more about it than you did when you left?" Torres lifted an eyebrow.

Mark shrugged. "There's not all that much to tell. Everyone on the team is from some area of law enforcement and each one has what you might call special skills." He struggled with how to give the man an explanation that wouldn't offend him. "The person who funds it set it up for us to take certain kinds of cases that...go nowhere."

"So people come to you for help?" Enzo asked.

"Sort of." Mark was happy when the waitress set his platter of huevos rancheros and bacon in front of him, along with a hot container of tortillas. He smiled at her. "Thanks."

"And you're not here on any particular assignment?" Torres pushed.

"Just hanging out for a while." Mark focused on buttering and rolling a tortilla, then taking a bite of it. When he spoke again he tried to make his voice as casual as possible. "Why? Is there something going on around here?"

Enzo snorted. "In this place? How much excitement did you have when *you* were still here? No, just the usual mischief-makers and domestic call-outs."

The conversation took a break as people stopped by the booth to say hello to Mark, ask him how long he'd be around. Invite him to stop by. He fielded all invitations politely. He'd probably have to see some of these people soon enough and ask them questions that would make them suspicious. He'd just as soon they got used to him being in the area first without having to avoid discussions of his business with everyone.

Finished with his meal, he pushed his plate away and picked up his coffee mug again.

"Good to see you again, Mark," Torres said, finishing his own coffee. "Come by the office, will you? The other guys would like to see you, too, I'm sure. You know, our staff is small enough we've always been kind of like a family, right?"

Mark nodded. Yes, they had been. "I'll make it my business to drop in," he said. As they stood in line to pay their checks, other people said quick hellos on their way in or out, surprised to see him but not unpleasantly. Mark knew he'd been well liked and it had been a tug for him to leave. But the chance to catch the devil beast was just too tempting.

After breakfast he drove through the town, such as it was, cataloguing the familiar places. Most of Zapata County was undeveloped, but a few towns like this one provided people with places to purchase supplies, gather to socialize. The town of Zapata had less than five thousand people but twice that many lived scattered over the county. Fodder for the devil beast, he reminded himself. It searched out remote locations, prey that wasn't likely to be able to summon help. Almost as if it had a human brain.

That thought made him shudder and he shook his head.

Not much had changed in the year since he'd left. He drove slowly, and some of the people on the sidewalk spotted him recognized his truck and waved to him. Maybe

he'd go by and visit a couple of those he'd been particularly friendly with. See if there was any gossip. Any talk of El Chupacabra being in the area.

He took some time to shop for supplies, picked up a copy of the local newspaper, poked his head into the sheriff's office to say hello before finally heading back to his house.

As he neared the edge of town he turned pulled down a side street and parked in the lot next to the small buildings with the sign in front that said Family and Urgent Care Clinic. With the closest hospital in neighboring Webb County, this clinic and the one like it at Falcon Lake provided the most accessible health care for people.

There were only two other cars in the parking lot and three trucks. Not a busy day, he mused. When he walked inside there was an older couple sitting in an otherwise empty lobby. At the glass window with the notice that said Sign In Here, please, he tapped on the glass. The blonde working at the desk looked up. When she recognized him her blue eyes widened and she broke into a wide smile.

"Mark! Oh my god, Mark! Is it really you?" She jumped up from her desk and motioned for him to go through a door to the hallway. She was waiting for him, laughing, and threw her arms around him. "I can't believe you're really here!"

She put her hands on either side of his face and pulled him down for a kiss.

Mark laughed and gently backed away. "Hi, Sherry. I thought I'd stop and see how you were, but I can see you're doing fine."

Not too long before he'd left he and Sherry Barton had broken off a long-term relationship. After three years of being stuck in neutral they'd finally figured it wasn't going much of anyplace. Sherry had been much more reluctant that he was to let it go, but he sometimes wondered if it had more to do with the lack of available men than it did with his appeal to her.

And while he'd enjoyed being with her, one thing had always stood like an invisible barrier to progress—his wolf. He'd never felt comfortable enough with Sherry to even hint at it, and without it there would be no future for them. The invitation to join Night Seekers had come at a good time for him. But he still had special feelings for her, still considered her a friend. And a worry, with the devil beast on the prowl. She'd been at the clinic with her father since graduating from Laredo Community College, working as a medical assistant and keeping the business records straight.

Once he'd asked her why she'd never left and she'd just shrugged and said, "Never thought about it."

Today he'd stopped by not just to say hello to a friend but to check on her situation. When their relationship had ended she'd decided if she wasn't going to be living with him she'd at least move out of her parents' house.

"I'm too old to keep living with Mom and Dad," she said one day when they'd had an accidental lunch. "The Bracken place is for sale. They've gone to Laredo to an assisted living facility and it's just about the right size for me."

"You sure you want to live out there all by yourself?" he'd asked.

“What’s to bother me?” she’d wanted to know. “All that’s out there are white tail deer and feral hogs. Maybe a javelina or two. It’s a two-bedroom with a nice kitchen and a barn where I can park my car.” She’d grinned. “Maybe some handsome stranger will come along and decide to light in my front yard.”

At that time they’d joked about it, but now Mark was worried. Sherry’s place was just the setup the devil beast looked for, the kind of place where it could attack its prey without interruption. Because she would always be someone special to him, concern for her was at the top of his list.

Looking at her now, he flashed a quick look at her left hand. Still no ring. With her clear skin, warm blue eyes and glossy blonde hair tied back in a utilitarian tail, and wondered why someone hadn’t come along and swept her up by now.

“Still single, I see,” he grinned.

“You could change that if you wanted to, deputy,” she joked.

He lifted one hand and kissed her fingers. “That horse left the barn long ago,” he reminded her. “You still living out in the middle of nowhere in that little house?”

“Sure am. Maybe you could come by for dinner. Just a friendly meal,” she said quickly, as he started to make excuses. “I’ll bet you haven’t had any chili as good as mine since you left here.”

“I’d have to agree to that. Maybe I’ll have a chance to taste it before I leave.”

“How long are you here for?” she wanted to know.

“Don’t know exactly. Got some things to take care of.”

“For that super secret job you took when you left?” she teased.

“Just some stuff to do,” he told her evasively. “Anything exciting happen since I’ve been gone?”

If any animals had been killed or there had been any strange incidents, Sherry would know about it.

She shook her head. “Not a blessed thing. But you know? I actually think I like it that way.”

“Sherry?” Her father’s voice boomed out from one of the examining rooms. “Can you come give me a hand?”

“I gotta go. Listen, try to come by if you can.”

“You be careful,” he told her. “Just...watch out for any strangers.”

“Here? In Zapata? Fat chance.”

He wanted to say something more but she was already hurrying away. Mark slammed his hat back on his head and walked out of the clinic. Tonight when he ran he’d go by her place and scope it out for himself.

Darkness couldn’t seem to come quickly enough for him. All day he felt something tugging at him, pulling him in different directions. He definitely wanted to check out

Sherry's situation but he also had to admit to himself he wondered if the red wolf would appear again.

When at last it was full dark, he stripped and opened his front door. Centering himself, he shifted, body changing until he was wolf again. Stretching out into the night, he did what he'd promised himself he'd do first, and followed a circuitous route to Sherry's place. He met nothing along the way except the usual wild animals scampering through the brush and the night birds singing to each other.

The lights were on at Sherry's house and the blinds were open. He could see her moving around, wiping the kitchen counter, putting dishes away. He wanted to drop by again and tell her to close her blinds at night but that might set off too many questions. He wasn't ready to sound the alarm yet.

He scouted every area of her property, looking for unfamiliar tracks or any sign that the devil beast had been there, but he found nothing. She was a prime target though, isolated as she was, which made him uneasy. Telling himself that he'd check on her regularly, he set off on another path, looking for other targets.

He'd just cleared a narrow gully and dashed up the side of a small hill when he saw her. She stood there with the bright moonlight shining on her red pelt, her face lifted toward him. The tempo of his heart picked up as he watched her, silently urging her to come closer to him.

Chloe had been itchy all day long. Restless. She needed some food supplies but hadn't been in the mood to deal with people. The wind had come up about noon but it was a hot, dry wind that blew dust everywhere and did nothing to soothe her restlessness.

She finally decided to channel her energy into something useful and pulled out the big map of the area that she'd downloaded from Google maps. Using her red pen she divided the county into squares, then each square into smaller ones. Zapata County wasn't that big, didn't have all that much area to cover. She wasn't even sure what she was looking for anymore. If she didn't find any trace of Melinda soon she might have to widen her search.

Despite a lack of appetite, she managed to eat a sandwich for dinner and drink a glass of milk. At last the sun sank completely out of sight, the moon took its place in the sky and it was time to hunt. Dropping her clothes on a wooden ladder-back chair in the bedroom, she opened the back door, stepped out onto the tiny porch and changed.

It always gave her such a feeling of power to feel the stretch and shift of bone and muscle, to sense the blood of the wolf racing through her veins. She lifted her head and allowed herself one tiny howl at the moon before loping off to her targeted area. Tonight she ran through sparse stands of live oaks and sycamore, the occasional clumps of mesquite dotting the landscape here and there, until she came to the Rio Grande.

Slowing her pace, she followed the meandering river, looking for hiding places and sniffing for scents. If Melinda had been taken this way the river would wash away any traces but still, she had to try.

She had just followed the land as it bent back on itself when the wind carried a scent to her nose and she stopped stock-still. *He stood there*, beyond a huge live oak on a little outcropping of rock. The magnificent black wolf from the night before. He was facing in her direction, eyes glinting in the bright moonlight, standing there as if waiting for her to join him.

Cautiously she moved away from the water, toward where he stood. As she drew closer he made a slight chuffing sound and she realized there was no hostility in it. He was welcoming her. Did she dare approach? Instinct told her this was a shifter, not a pure wolf, and her imagination ran wild wondering what he was doing here in this desolate area of Texas.

Inch by inch she moved closer to him until they were standing barely a foot apart. She felt no fear of him, no aggression radiating from him. He moved until his snout was nearly touching hers.

*Who are you?*

She blinked. *Who are you?*

He nuzzled her snout with his. *I mean you no harm.*

*I know.*

*Where did you come from?*

*Where did you?*

They stood there like that for a long moment, two animals scenting each other, exchanging thoughts. Finally, as if deciding conversation was over for the moment, he dipped his head at her, then turned and began to run. When she didn't follow he stopped, his wonderful tail erect and waving.

*Come on. Let's run together.*

Tentatively she moved toward him again until they were nearly side by side.

*Follow me.*

And she did, heart thundering with excitement. They raced across the moonlit landscape, in and out of the scattered stands of trees, up the tiny hills and down. Chloe was exhilarated. She hadn't had anyone to run with in forever except Melinda, and she'd missed this so terribly.

Finally they came to a stop near a tiny grove of sycamores and dropped to the ground, panting, tongues lolling. The black wolf laid his head on his paws and stared at her with his amber eyes. When she crawled closer to him, he swiped at her nose with his tongue, and for a moment she almost thought he was grinning at her.

They rolled on the ground, playfully swatting at each other. He licked her snout and rubbed his head against hers. She worried that he might try to mount her, the two



of them out here alone as they were, but he simply teased and played. Gaining her confidence, she thought. But to what end?

When they had rested, he rose to his full height. Something invisible sizzled between them that reached deep inside her before he dipped his head again.

*Goodbye.*

And then he was gone. Speeding away to wherever he'd come from.

When Chloe finally made it back to the house and shifted again, she stumbled inside and leaned breathlessly against the kitchen counter. Where had the wolf come from? What was he doing here? And most of all, what was that connection they'd made tonight.

With trembling hands she brewed herself a cup of tea and drank it, standing naked in the kitchen, wondering if she'd see him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The beast plopped down in the sparse shade of a mesquite tree not far from the banks of the muddy stream called the Rio Grande. Flowing widely from its headwaters in Colorado, after its curve at Big Bend in Texas it narrowed more and more. Because the water of the Rio Grande has more users for it than there is water available, the river often resembles little more than a wide stream, only water from the Rio Conchos in Mexico, right across the border, sustains its journey to the Gulf.

But the beast didn't care. It was a place to drink from and immerse its heat-scorched body in something wet. El Chupacabra had covered many miles on its long trip from Florida, crossing the southern borders of Mississippi and Louisiana and then the lower but still wide hook of Southern Texas to reach this place. Sometimes it traveled in human form, stealing clothes when it was necessary, shredding them when it was done. But human prey was always easier to hunt that way. To get close to.

And it'd found likely objects to momentarily satisfy the need. Its hunger had been slaked with the killing of small animals, both domestic and wild. It had a purpose that drove it beyond all reason.

The terrible bloodlust had been eased in Florida, settling it for a while, until the next unbearable surge. The human portion of its brain was well aware of how it had been manipulated in creation, how the craving for blood, for the kill, was so uncontrollable. But the reasoning part of the brain didn't function so there was no ability to shut down that urge. The devil beast was a deliberate creation of nature and man, a killing machine that only knew how to destroy.

It pulled at some of the mesquite pods that had fallen to the ground, shoving them into its mouth with the long claws extending from oddly shaped paws. In an arid area like Southwest Texas, the beast knew mesquite pods and beans were a good source of nutrition for feral animals. And food was a priority to keep up its strength.

As it chewed on the pods it thought about the prospect of a new kill. Ever since the pattern for its last stay in Texas had been disrupted its nerves had been raw, its need unsatisfied. It had made that one attempt, but then the prey had been wrested from it, hauled away screaming like a wild thing and the beast had been left to hunt again.

There had been a near-kill just a few days ago. An almost. But *he* had had other ideas and so the beast was deprived, ramping up its need to kill. It's need for human blood.

At that moment a jackrabbit scampered across its field of vision and paused, staring at the beast with curiosity. In barely a second's time the beast grabbed it and sank sharpened fangs into the neck. When it finished eating it tossed what was left of the carcass against the tree.

It really wanted to return to its last hunting ground in Texas but the human portion of the brain cried out warning signals. Hunters would be waiting. This was as close as it could get and still be in such a lonesome landscape. It curled up beneath an ancient mesquite tree and closed its eyes. Yes, this would be a good place to complete the pattern.

And maybe begin another one. After all. Texas was a very big state.

## Chapter Three

Since he still hadn't laid in a full supply of groceries, Mark decided to catch breakfast at Selena's again in the morning. Deep down he really hoped he'd see a female who didn't belong here, one with red hair who might just be the wolf he'd run with the night before. He'd been shocked to see her again, more shocked when she actually approached him, and stunned when she actually ran with him.

But what really had him restless and edgy was the connection that had zapped between them. And his ability to send her a message. What the hell? He'd lived in Zapata County for ten years and never come across either a pure wolf or a shifter. So what was with this female who'd popped up out of nowhere?

The crowd had thinned out a little by the time he arrived so he managed a booth all to himself. A couple of people stopped by again to say hello, but as politely as possible he made it plain he was eating alone. And watching the door.

When he couldn't dawdle over any more coffee, he pushed himself out of the booth and walked up to the cash register to pay his check. He was just putting his wallet back in his hip pocket when the door opened and a woman stepped into the restaurant. Mark froze in place, every muscle completely still. He recognized her at once. It was *her!* *The face he'd seen in his dream—or whatever the hell it had been—the slightly exotic features and the rich cascade of dark red hair.*

But more than that, he knew she was the wolf. His playmate from the previous night. Again he wondered where she'd come from and what she was doing here. She had to have arrived in the area during the past year. Before that he'd known just about everyone in the county.

She was so close to him he could inhale her scent, something elusive that mingled with the musk of the wolf. Instantly a bolt of lust speared through him, fire seared his groin and his cocked hardened to the tensile strength of mahogany. He turned as she moved to brush past him, their gazes locked and the electricity that arced between them was so powerful he wondered for a moment why it wasn't visible.

Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth as if to say something but then appeared to change her mind. Hitching the strap of her purse higher on her shoulder she started to walk away.

Without thinking Mark reached out and clamped a hand on her arm, and there it was again. In her eyes he saw the flare of a similar reaction, and he wondered if the heat shimmering around them was visible to everyone else in the restaurant.

"I know you," he said. He was aware that he should release her arm but he couldn't seem to make himself move his hand.

She tried to pull away from him. "No. I don't think so. We've never met."

"You're wrong." His grip tightened reflexively on her. "You're not from around here, are you?"

She looked at his hand on her arm, then up at his face. "You're taking a big chance here. If I scream everyone in here will jump up to see what's happening."

He leaned his head closer to hers. "Is that what you really want? For me to walk away?"

She stared at him again, the connection between them still sizzling and snapping. Everything else faded away except for this contact, the two of them.

"No." Her voice was so low he could barely hear her. "No, it isn't."

"I'd like to buy you breakfast," he told her, finally dropping his hand.

She looked at the line of booths, then back to him. "Didn't you just eat?"

"I'm good with having more coffee. All right?"

There was just the barest of pauses before she nodded. Mark led her to the booth he'd just been sitting in, now being cleared by the waitress, who frowned at him.

"I know you just ate. You can't still be hungry."

"Just coffee for me, but how about bringing the lady a menu."

"Sure thing.

"I don't even know your name," his redhead said, trying not to look uncomfortable.

He loved her voice. It had a soft, musical quality to it, almost like the feel of a lullaby.

"Mark. Mark Guitron."

"Chloe Hanson"

They looked at each other for a long moment. She was just as beautiful in person as she'd been in his dream, or whatever the hell that had been the other night. His dick was pressing so hard against his jeans he was afraid he'd do himself damage but he seemed to have no control where this woman was concerned. Last night, as wolf, he'd had to forcibly restrain himself from trying to mount her, but the last thing he'd wanted was to scare her away. No female had ever affected him so suddenly or so intensely.

He drew in a long breath, catching again the tantalizing scent of cinnamon and lavender. And something else.

Wolf.

Chloe thanked the waitress for the coffee set in front of her and took the menu the woman handed her but her eyes were still on the man across from her. Tall and lean, with weather-darkened skin and a thick head of black hair, unusual amber eyes looked out at her from beneath heavy brows and thick lashes. A faint stubble shadowed a square jaw. His lips curved in a polite smile that didn't quite reach eyes that gave nothing away. At first glance they looked cold, like chips from a glacier, but then, for

just a moment, she thought she saw heat flare in them and they took on the cast of old burnished brass.

*Oh, god!*

She'd known the moment she saw him that it was him, the man from her vision. Or image. Or whatever it had been. He had that same bad-boy air about him, that same aura of dark sensuality. But how was that possible? She was sure she'd never met Mark Guitron before, so how had he been a part of her erotic...episode? That's the only thing she could think of to call it.

Her cheeks flushed with heat as she remembered what she'd done in front of him... Of course it hadn't *exactly* been in front of him, because he hadn't been there, right? Had he? But oh, god, there was that traitorous pulse throbbing in her womb, vibrating through her cunt. Surging all the way to her breasts and her suddenly very sensitive nipples. She inhaled, trying to gather her scattered senses, but that in itself was a mistake. His scent drifted on the air, some mixture of earth and musk that made her want to rub herself back and forth on the seat, seeking the friction that would give her relief.

But more than that, when she looked into those amber eyes she realized with a shock she was sitting across from the wolf. Her playmate from the previous night.

A shifter! Here!

But how was that possible? She'd been a lot of places in the sparse county the past few days looking for some clue to Melinda's whereabouts. If there had been a shifter anywhere her senses would have picked it up.

Right now all her senses were on high alert. Her skin felt too tight and everything around her was too sharp. Too clear. She'd never had this reaction around any other male shifters. Last night had been both incredible and frightening. She had no benchmarks, nothing to tell her how to proceed. She was at once hugely attracted and terrified, swimming in water over her head. Probably she should just get up and walk out of here, but she had the feeling he'd only look for her and find her.

She bent her head and took a swallow of her coffee to hide her eyes and what she was sure was a deep red blush on her face. But she took in too big a swallow and the next thing she knew she was choking on the liquid, the mug on its side on the table. Mark next to her pounding her back and the waitress quietly mopping the table. If wishes came true the floor would open up right now and let her drop through.

"Are you okay?" His voice was a deep rumble and thick with a Texas drawl.

"Yes, thank you." She dabbed at her face and eyes with the paper napkin. "Just very embarrassed."

"Selena's coffee can do that to you." Was that humor in his voice? "And there's nothing to be embarrassed about. Done it myself."

Chloe didn't think so but it was nice of him to try to put her at ease. Except with him sitting next to her, his presence surrounding and overwhelming her, being at ease was almost impossible to do.

"I-I'm okay now. Thank you again."

He hesitated a moment before sliding back into the seat opposite her again. After the waitress had brought her a fresh mug of coffee and refilled his, he leaned forward across the table.

"So. Like I said before, I don't think you're from around here. Right?"

Chloe frowned. "How would you know that? I've been here a while and this is the first time I've seen you. It's not like this county is overpopulated or anything."

"I used to live here," he told her. "Grew up here, as a matter of fact."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Really. And you left this paradise? I can't imagine why?" She could have bitten her tongue when she heard the sarcasm in her voice.

*Nice, Chloe. Piss him off before you even know what's going on here. And after he offered to buy you breakfast.*

And why had she even agreed to this? He unsettled her, put her off balance, yet she was drawn to him as if they were tied to each other by an invisible thread. Which, if he was a shifter, made perfectly logical sense.

He studied her face for a long time, his own an unreadable mask, before answering her. "If you think it's such a bad place, what are *you* doing here?"

She sighed. "I guess I asked for that. Okay, I'm a photographer. I have a contract for a book of photos of South Texas, one of those coffee table things. You know, an inside look at nature and the people." She tried on a little smile. "I understand lots of people are fascinated with Texas."

"So I hear." He sipped at his coffee.

Chloe couldn't help noticing how long and lean his fingers were. And graceful. Unusual for such a big man. "So I rented a house. Seemed the thing to do since I'll be here for a while."

"Are you only doing Zapata County? I wouldn't think there was enough here to fill up a book."

"No. I'll be covering five counties. But there are things about this area that, um, suit my needs." Before he could ask what needs, she got her own question in. "You still didn't tell me what you did here and why you left?"

Again a heartbeat passed before he answered. "I was a Deputy Sheriff. I left because an opportunity came along that was too good to pass up."

"And it found you here?" She stopped while the waitress brought her breakfast and set it in front of her. "Pardon my skepticism, but this doesn't seem like prime recruiting territory for anything."

He shrugged. "Guess he came across my name."

"He?" God, it was like pulling teeth.

"Man who owns the...private security firm I work for now."

Private security firm? So what was he doing back here in godforsaken Zapata? She couldn't imagine anything here that would draw the interest of a private agency. Not Melinda. Who would have hired them? Both Melinda's parents were dead and there wasn't anyone else. So what, then? She bit off a piece of toast and chewed it thoughtfully.

"Are you here on a case?"

"Just taking a few days off." Again his smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

If she had an ounce of sense she'd leave the rest of her breakfast, get up and walk out of this place. Forget about this man who was so mysterious and closed in. But the electric charge in the air around them was like an invisible shield holding her in place. An image of him naked as she'd seen him last night popped into her head and her heart raced. Her panties were suddenly damp and the soft fabric of her t-shirt too abrasive even through the satin of her bra.

Oh, god, she was going to embarrass herself again if she didn't get her reaction to him under control.

He waited in silence while she finished the piece of toast. She tried to think of what to say next, something innocuous.

"I'd like to have dinner with you tonight."

Chloe had picked up her fork but at his words it dropped from her fingers and clattered onto her plate. Of all the things she'd expected him to say this wasn't even on the list.

"What?" She thought he looked as startled at saying the words as she did at hearing them.

His watched her, unblinking. "Dinner. A meal." One corner of his mouth tilted up. "You know, with food."

"But I don't even know you. You don't know *me*."

His grinned widened a fraction. "We're having breakfast, right? So now we know each other."

She shook her head, hoping the cobwebs suddenly clogging her brain would disappear. "This is absurd."

He reached across the table and captured one of her hands. His was warm, slightly roughened, and that same spear of electricity shot through her arm.

"I'll cook for you. Steaks." His hand tightened. "Rare."

Chloe could hardly keep up with the silent messages that were abruptly zinging back and forth between them. In her right mind she'd get up from this booth, walk out of this place and never give Mark Guitron another thought. In her right mind she'd never even have accepted his invitation to breakfast. In her right mind she wouldn't even be remotely considering his invitation.

But two things made the difference. If he worked for a private security agency, maybe he could help her look for Melinda. If, that is, she could get him to believe her story. A very big if.

And she definitely wasn't in her right mind. Hadn't been since last night.

She looked up at him. "All right."

His eyes widened fractionally. "All right? Just like that?"

Now it was her turn to grin. "Change your mind already?"

His hand on hers tightened even more, then relaxed. "Not a chance."

"But at a restaurant," she added.

His smile turned feral. "Afraid of me, Chloe?"

Yes!

"No. It's just that..."

"We hardly know each other. I'm hoping tonight will remedy that."

"Why me?" she asked. "I mean, I know the pickings around here might be pretty slim, but I've seen other pretty women on the streets."

He waited for an elastic minute before answering her. "I think you know why."

And she did.

Wolf!

\* \* \* \* \*

Addresses didn't mean much in this part of Texas, but Mark had given Chloe what passed for one for his house and she programmed it into her GPS and despite the absence of street signs and lights found her way to the small house that Mark owned. Set in a thick grove of trees, it was little more than an adobe bungalow with a porch running across the front and a wide carport to the side. Of course, she mused, how much space did a single man need? And if he was wolf indeed, he was situated in the perfect place to shift and run without spying eyes or interference. Much as she had chosen the place she was renting.

When she pulled her SUV into the circle in front of the house, her headlights lit up the carport and caught a barbecue grill with smoke coming from it. Apparently he'd been serious about feeding her steak. Rare, as he'd promised, she hoped. She got out of her SUV taking her purse with her and the bottle of wine she'd picked up at the Easy Mart. The front door opened before she even had her foot on the bottom step.

"I heard you drive up."

That deep voice with the slow Texas drawl sent shivers skimming the surface of her skin. She handed him the bottle of wine. "I thought this might go with those steaks you promised me."

"Good choice." He reached to take the bottle from her and when their fingers touched the air around them became electrically charged.



Mark's eyes narrowed but not before Chloe saw the heat flare in them. Her pulse kicked up and cream soaked her panties. Mark's nostrils flared and she knew he'd caught her scent. He stepped back to let her move into the house but he was still so close she felt surrounded by him. She pushed past him to give herself some breathing space.

"It's not much," he said behind her, "but it's all mine."

Chloe looked around. "Are you kidding? It's really nice."

And it was. Rustic, but exactly suited to him. Polished wood floors, a huge stone fireplace against one wall with a watercolor of an appaloosa hanging over it. Comfortable wood and leather furniture. One end of the room held the kitchen, separated by a long counter, and a short hallway led past it. Bedrooms, she thought. Her eyes were drawn back to the painting. It was primitive in execution but had a rawness to it that drew emotion from the viewer.

"You painted this." She didn't know why the idea hit her, but it did, with startling clarity.

"I did." His voice was flat, as if waiting for criticism.

"It's very good." She studied it. "It has a raw power that makes the horse leap out at you."

"Thanks. I'm no Frederick Russell, for sure, but it's turned out to be a good outlet for energy I couldn't always...find a release for.

If she was right, he meant shifting. And he had indeed poured all that pent-up energy into the painting. The horse's nostrils were flared, his mane whipped by a wind, his hooves lifted as if he was about to fly off the canvas. Something stirred deep inside her, unlocking the response to this man that had simmered since she first spotted him out on the moonlit landscape. It surged through her, almost like a hurricane, and she had to turn away to gather herself together.

"It's beautiful." When she turned he was right behind her, almost touching, his presence almost as strong as the energy from the painting. She drew in a steadying breath.

"I'm glad you like it." He moved away, toward the kitchen. "I'll open the wine. Let it breathe a little."

Her laugh sounded nervous even to herself. "I always wondered what people meant when they said that. I usually just pour the wine and drink it."

He grinned. "Me, too. But it sounds impressive, like you really know what you're talking about."

She smiled back, and the immediate tension was broken.

"I've got the grill heated just right," he told her. "How about if I go ahead and put on the steaks? You hungry enough to eat now?"

*I'm hungry for you.*

Holy hell. Where had that come from? She hoped she hadn't said it out loud. But he didn't react and she tried to clamp down on the thought in her head.

"That would be great."

"Since neither of us is into breathing wine," he joked, "how about if I pour us some and you come on outside with me while I cook."

Chloe leaned against one of the supports of the carport as she watched Mark turn the steaks, sipping at her wine and hoping it would take the edge off a sudden case of nerves. The familiar heat of the Texas day had waned and a soft breeze carrying the scent of mesquite and black persimmon played with the strands of her hair. It would have been a relaxed, casual atmosphere if not for the sexual tension between the two of them that was so strong it was almost visible. The elephant in the room they both seemed to be working hard to avoid.

Had he had a dream last night—or whatever it was—the way she had? Had the stage been set already, even though they'd just actually met that morning? Something had made him issue this invitation, the same thing that had urged her to accept. So here she was, drinking wine, watching him turn steaks, and suddenly her clothes were too tight for her, her *skin* was too tight for her, and she had an overwhelming need for him to forget the steaks and throw her to the ground. Take her right here.

Somehow they got through dinner making polite conversation, although Chloe couldn't have said what the steak tasted like or what they talked about. Draining the last of the wine from her glass, she rose to carry her plate to the counter, but Mark's hand gripped her arm.

"Leave it." He stood also, took the plate from her hand and put it back on the table. "I think we both know what's been on our minds since the minute you walked in the door. Maybe since...whenever."

"I don't..."

"Yes. You do."

He pulled her against him, his muscular body like a wall of granite, but one with flames leaping from it. His hand cupped her neck, fingers threading through her hair and when his mouth took hers the kiss was so predatory the hunger inside her burst into life. He licked her lips, tasting every bit of the surface before forcing them open and sweeping his tongue inside.

Heat! It was everywhere. Inside her. Around her.

He touched everywhere inside her mouth, the inside of her cheeks, her teeth, the line of her gums, as if each place had a special taste. His other hand gripped her buttocks, pulling her firmly against him until she felt the thick ridge of his cock even through the denim of his jeans. When he clamped his lips around her tongue and sucked on it she moaned and tried to press herself even more tightly against him. Every nerve in her body felt as if it was sparking individually, igniting her skin tiny space by tiny space.

When he'd explored every inch of her mouth he slid his slips to her jawline, nipping it lightly then soothing the nips with his tongue. One long finger slid into the crevice of her buttocks, pushing the material between her taut cheeks and stroking the hot flesh.

Her legs trembled so much Chloe didn't think she could stand up much longer, but she couldn't make herself break away to sit down. Nor did she want to. All she wanted was to stay connected to this man.

His mouth was at her ear now, hot breath fanning the surface, the tip of his tongue licking the sensitive inner area. Over and over he traced circles on the delicate skin, the hot wetness of his tongue sending shivers dancing over her. He moved his lips to the underside of her jaw, then to the tender skin of her neck and that spot where her pulse pounded so violently at the base of her throat. He pressed his tongue against it, licking in tiny strokes that heated rather than cooled.

By the time he lifted his head and stared into her eyes, Chloe wasn't even sure she knew her own name. She had worn a tailored shirt open over a tank top. Now Mark moved his hands to her shoulders and pushed the shirt down her arms, the fabric whispering over her until it dropped to the floor. His eyes lowered to the swell of her breasts just seconds before his tongue danced over the upper slope. When his mouth found one nipple, closing his lips over it and pulling it fabric and all into his mouth, the fire shot straight to her cunt and the heavy folds already swollen and wet.

She wound her arms around his neck, pulling his head in closer and arching her body up to his mouth. By the time he'd teased and tormented the one nipple she was hanging on the bare edge of sanity, gasping when he moved his mouth to the other one. High tension vibrated everywhere in her body, the intensity of the deep throbbing rising as he continued to suck and pull on her nipples.

The orgasm rushed through her without warning. Just. Like. That. She clung to Mark, her stranglehold on his neck the only thing keeping her upright as he tugged and pulled with his mouth and held her while she shook and shook. At last she lay limp against him, drained but still unsatisfied. The orgasm had done nothing for her but take the edge off her desperate need. She wanted to touch this man everywhere, put her lips and hands on him. Feel every inch of him. And have him do the same to her.

When he raised his head she saw such desire in his eyes it made her even weaker.

"Let's take this to someplace more comfortable." His voiced was husky, rich with desire.

"Yes, please," she breathed.

He lifted her in his arms and carried her down the little hallway, nudging open the bedroom door with his foot. He elbowed the light switch which turned on the lamp beside the bed. Then he set Chloe on her feet next to the bed, his eyes drinking her in as he roamed her body from head to toe.

His hands shook as he oh so slowly tugged the tank top over her head, then unclipped her bra to free her breasts. A tight breath escaped his mouth as he looked at her, taking her in. Admiring her. The hunger in his eyes made her own climb higher.

“I want you so much.” His voice was little more than a growl. “Since I first saw you.” He swiped a tongue across each turgid nipple, the surface slightly rough. “You want this, too. I see it in your eyes. Feel it in your body. We’re connected, Chloe. Admit it.”

Hungrier than ever for him, all she could do was nod.

Mark allowed himself one small breath of relief. He’d been sure—almost. But her nod of agreement settled him. He hadn’t wanted to make a mistake. Yet ever since the coffee shop that morning, since he’d first laid eyes on her, he’d known it was *her*. The wolf in the moonlight. The woman in his dream. Or whatever the fucking hell it had been.

God, she was even better in the flesh. Her skin, as he carefully revealed it inch by inch, was a warm golden color that looked like sunlight in the late afternoon. Her breasts were so sweet, so tempting, nice and round with nipples the color of ripe plums. Impulsively he bent his head and took one in his mouth, his cock flexing as she gasped and arched. With the flat of his tongue he pressed the bud against the roof of his mouth and a tiny sound vibrated in her throat.

He took his time, pleasuring first one nipple then the other, but it was really himself he was pleasing. The scent of her cream surrounded him, calling to his wolf. She was his. He knew it with a certainty. He didn’t need to do the human mating dance. He just needed to convince Chloe.

His mouth drew a line of kisses between her breasts and down to her navel, a tiny indentation of whorled flesh that he couldn’t resist tracing with the tip of his tongue. Jesus, she tasted good. Like a forbidden treat that he’d finally be given permission to sample.

He unsnapped her jeans and lowered the zipper with torturous slowness, the rasping of the metal teeth sounding unusually loud in the room. His hands grasped the waistband and slipped the fabric beneath her nicely rounded ass down as far as her knees. He had to force himself to a slow pace when what he really wanted to do was rip the fabric away, spread her legs and plunge himself into her. But there would only be one first time with this woman and he wanted to savor it.

His fingertips caressed the soft skin of her inner thighs, making her tremble and moan. She shifted back and forth on the bed beneath his hands, her breathing already choppy. Slipping off her sandals and tossing them to the side, he discarded her jeans and dropped to his knees. With his teeth he tugged at the delicate lace band at the top of her panties, inch by inch revealing the lustrous nest of dark red curls. He was pleased to see she didn’t wax or shave. For a wolf the thickness of the public hair was as much a turn on as the sight of the sex itself.

Burying his nose at the top of her cunt, he drew in a long breath, filling his nostrils with the enticing scent of her. He tortured himself dragging the flimsy fabric down past her thighs one inch at a time until his patience finally snapped. Grasping the material in

both hands he ripped it apart and discarded it. His big hands spread her thighs wide and his eyes took in the glistening pink folds of her pussy now exposed to him.

*Gorgeous!*

Even that word wasn't adequate enough for the sight in front of him. He bent Chloe's knees backward and out to expose her even more, his eyes taking in every glistening pink detail. His tongue lapped a slow glide from the top of her slit to the bottom, delving through the soft curls to find the tasty flesh hidden beneath. She was wet, so set, and her sweet cream coated his tongue.

She was making delicious little noises now that excited him even more. He deliberately kept his jeans on, because if he was naked he'd have a hard time restraining himself from just taking her. Just fucking her. And he wanted to enjoy every inch of her.

He dragged his tongue across the sensitive skin of her inner thighs, licking every inch before returning to that oh-so-tempting cunt. Spreading her lips wide, he licked and nipped at the entire surface of her pussy lips, finally tugging her clit between his teeth.

She convulsed at once, a small orgasm that had her shivering and shaking, flooding his face with her juicy liquid. He rode her through it, and when the spasms slowed, thrust his tongue and moved it in and out, her clit now a captive of his thumb and forefinger. He fucked with his tongue, timing it with the rubbing motion of thumb and forefinger.

Chloe panted, the little sounds she made now more guttural, vibrating in her throat. Her fingers gripped his head, pulling him closer as she bucked up to meet him. When he felt the walls of her channel clutching at his tongue he increased its speed, pinching her clit hard and driving her to yet another climax.

He eagerly drew every bit of her liquid into his mouth that he could capture with his tongue, then placed soft kisses on her swollen flesh, easing her down. Soothing her.

"You still have all your clothes on." Her voice was soft and tremulous.

"I wanted to get my fill of tasting you first," he told her.

"And did you?"

"Not by half." He rose, letting his eyes roam over every inch of her, loving the sheen of perspiration on that golden skin and the way her breasts moved as she drew in breath. "Keep your legs spread while I undress. I want to look at that sweet, gorgeous pussy."

She let her legs flop wide, watching him from where she lay on the bed even as she still struggled for some kind of control. He never took his gaze from her, his body so ready for her he was almost in pain. When he slipped off his jeans and boxers and his cock sprang free, he saw her eyes widen.

"Don't worry. I can feel how ready you are. You can take me."

He rearranged her on the bed so her head was on the pillows before he climbed up over her and knelt between her thighs. Taking her hands he pulled them over her head and wrapped her fingers around two of the spindles on his oak headboard.

“Keep your hands there. Don’t move them.”

She watched him with heat blazing in her eyes. Her small tongue slipped out and wet her full lips. Mark thought he’d lose it right then. He took a moment to reach into the nightstand drawer for a condom, ripping the foil open with his teeth and rolling on the latex with one hand. Then, positioning the head of his now aching cock at the entrance to her cunt, he pressed slowly into her. Little by little, inch by inch he filled her, the tension of her muscles around him so exquisite he felt it in every nerve of his body.

She was wet for him, and soft, the two orgasms doing their work to prepare her for him. When he was fully inside her, his balls slapping against the curve of her ass, he took a deep breath, let it out slowly and began to piston in and out of her. His hands reached for her breasts, cupping them, squeezing them, as he increased his pace and rhythm.

“Ooh.” The sound drifted into the air around them as Chloe wound her legs around him and pulled him in even tighter.

That was all it took. He was at the limit of his control. He rode her at a jackhammer pace, driving into her again and again, watching her through slitted eyes and hoping he could last until she was ready again.

He didn’t have long to wait. He saw her body tense, heard her cries of pleasure, felt the tightening of her legs around him. And then they were there. Together. Flying and crashing and shattering as he pumped into her and she gripped him like a wet fist. Every muscle in his body tightened as he spurted again and again, shouting her name.

And then they were done, and she was whispering his name as breath sawed in and out of her lungs and her breasts rose and fell. Mark leaned forward, catching his weight on his arms until he felt strong enough to slide from her body and roll off the bed. No woman had ever drained him the way Chloe Hanson did.

Was it possible that circumstance had sent him his mate, when he hadn’t even been looking? Why else, then, the appearance of a red wolf in a place where there were none. Not even a scarce few to blend in with.

He disposed of the condom and returned to the bedroom, lying down on the bed and pulling Chloe into his arms. She was limp and spent, warm with sexual heat but pliable in his arms. He pulled her against his body, loving the way his cock rested in the crevice of her ass and her breast fit so neatly into his hand.

“Rest,” he told her. “Then we’ll have some wine. And talk.”

“Talk?” She tried to turn and face him but he held her so it was impossible.

“You’ll tell me exactly what you’re doing here and I’ll let you know if I can help you.”

“What do you mean? I told you already.”

She tensed in his arms, so he used his hand to soothe and ease her, stroking her arm, her shoulder, her hip, her thigh, then resting his hand on her stomach.

“Chloe, you and I both know that’s a good story for everyone else. But not for me. I know there’s more to it, little wolf.”

Now she pushed back at him and made him let her turn so she could see him, a stunned look on her face. “Wolf? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t deny it. You know what we both are. I saw you. And you saw me.”

She chewed on her bottom lip, her inner turmoil obvious in her eyes as she struggled with her dilemma—deny the whole thing or admit it and go from there. “Are you talking about last night? Out on the little hill?”

He nodded. “And in my vision.”

She trembled in his arms. “You had one, too?” she whispered. “A vision?”

He nodded. “And a damn arousing one.” He gave her a slow grin. “I’ll tell you about mine if you tell me about yours. Who would have thought we’d find each other in this godforsaken place? There’s something here, Chloe. Something we both know is hotter than fire.”

“Okay.” Her voice was defiant. “So the sex is hot. I can’t deny that.” She looked away from him. “Hell, it didn’t take much for me to fall into bed with you.”

The grin disappeared and his arms tightened around her. “This is more than sex and you damn well know it. Sure it happened fast. Maybe for a reason.”

“Yeah?” She still wouldn’t look at him. “What reason would that be?”

“Something’s eating at you. Something bad. I can sense it. That’s why we put all the cards on the table. I can help you and protect you in whatever it is you’re doing. And while we’re doing that we’ll figure out what’s happening between us.”

“I don’t trust easily,” she told him.

“Then it’s up to me to change that. At least where I’m concerned. So let’s talk.”

## Chapter Four

When Craig Stafford bought Desolation Ranch he'd done some things to make it more suitable for the work Night Seekers would be doing. His first requirement was a command center large enough to hold all the electronic equipment they'd need. A wall that separated the living and dining rooms was taken down creating one massive work space. Along one wall a communications center had been set up, with a base station that the team members were sure could contact Mars if necessary. It was set up, however, on a system called low earth orbit, which provided for uninterrupted global coverage. Craig had chosen this because the geostationary sat phones were bothered by a delay in signal as it went up to the satellite and back, and often ran into gaps in connection bouncing from one satellite to another.

On the opposite wall a bank of different types of computers worked even when no one sat at them, programmed to constantly search data bases for anything remotely related to the Chupacabra. Central to it was the large area of a surface computer, where users could actually "grab" information with their hands without the use of a mouse or keyboard, and whisk it up for viewing on a large screen. What with one thing and another, a small army could be run from this room. Craig Stafford had spared no expense in outfitting Night Seekers.

Chelsea Roland, a self-proclaimed electronics junkie, had become the acknowledged expert at this advanced type of computing. Now she was using her fingers to slide several articles up to the big screen for everyone to see. The rest of the Night Seekers plus Craig Stafford and Jonah's wife, Dakota, sat at a long table watching carefully.

"It took us a longer time to find these than usual," Chelsea explained, "because we were looking for more articles about human slayings. These are animal deaths." She swept another article onto the big screen. "The first report came from the Florida panhandle, just south of the Alabama border. A couple of dogs, just like you heard about in Maverick County, Jonah."

"Dogs seem to be on his snack menu," Jonah told them, his tone bitter. He'd seen pictures of the animals destroyed near Eagle Pass and the others knew the images still hung around his brain.

"Not just them," Chelsea told him. "After the dogs it went after human prey. Three bodies. Then it moved on." She pointed to a new article on the screen. "In Alabama some poor farmer's goats were attacked."

"Well," Dante Martello said, an edge to his voice, "the beast is called 'the goat sucker'."



"He sucked plenty on these," Chelsea said. "Four dead goats. And the farmer never heard a thing. Not a sound."

"Not even from the goats?" Dante wanted to know.

"They're used to hearing animal noises during the night so unless it's a scream it doesn't register. And apparently the devil beast kills its prey so quickly there isn't time for a cry of any kind."

Another article appeared.

"One more stop in Louisiana." She pointed to a map she brought up. "And that brings it edging its way into Texas again."

"Looking to complete its interrupted pattern," Sam Brody commented.

"How's Mark doing?" Jonah asked. He and the other Night Seeker had developed a special relationship after the hunt in Maverick County.

"He's only been there a few days," Sophia pointed out. "And this isn't exactly something people gossip about."

"He's tracking at night, though," Sam added. "When he called in this morning he said he hadn't found anything yet, but..." He shook his head. "I don't know. There was a sound in his voice like he was keeping something back."

"If he was, it's just because he's letting it simmer in his brain," Jonah said. "Mark's a very deliberate kind of guy. When he thinks it's worth bringing up to us, he will."

"Can we be sure the kills in Florida are the devil beast?" Jonah wanted to know. "I mean, not some feral animal that kills in a similar way?"

Sam turned his head to look at where Craig was sitting. "Do you think one of us should head out there and check it out in person?"

Stafford nodded. "I think it's worth it. We won't get much over the phone and the articles only give us so much. But if someone shows up with a good cover asking questions we can probably find out what we need to know." He looked at Logan. "Think you'd like to take a little trip?"

Logan grinned, hoping to inject a little levity into an otherwise serious situation. "Well, Florida will certainly be a change from Montana. Even more than Texas is."

"Good. You'll be a magazine writer. That worked okay for Jonah. Only you'll be writing an article on the deaths of domestic animals in the country and how to keep them safe from wild animals. Marauders."

"That's getting to be a pretty big thing," Sam put in. "As development encroaches more and more into the wild, animals are pushed out of their habitat and things like this happen even without the Chupacabra."

"I won't be asking about the human bodies?" Logan asked.

Stafford shook his head. "If we go at it from that direction I'm afraid they'll just shut us down. Jonah made it work in Maverick County but we might not be that lucky again. The local sheriff could very easily want it buttoned up tight. Remember, nobody actually wants to admit that the Chupacabra exists."

Logan nodded. "But if I'm working on the animal angle, they might open up about the other."

"That's what I'm hoping. All right, then." Craig stood up. "Ric, you'll make the necessary arrangements? I have to fly out to Denver tonight, but I'll always have my phone on."

"No problem," Ric Garza assured him.

Stafford shook hands with everyone, giving Logan an extra second of his time. "Get every detail you can. And be sure to keep in touch with Mark. The animal may already be in Texas."

"I'll keep on top of it, sir."

For a long moment after Stafford left the room, the men and women around the table looked at each other. Ric broke the silence first.

"All right, folks. Logan, I'll get on your travel arrangements. Sam, you hop on a computer and get all the information you can about the areas where the killing took place. Sophia, see if you can raise Mark. We haven't heard from him since this morning. And Logan, get your gear together. You'll need to be at the airport for the first flight we can get you on."

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe found Mark's t-shirt and pulled it on, inhaling his scent on the soft fabric. Mark lay back on the pillows, completely unselfconscious in his nudity, watching her with a slight smile on his face.

"It's a little late to close the window, sugar, don't you think?"

She frowned at him. "Excuse me?"

"I've already seen and touched every inch of that delicious body. Nothing to hide anymore."

"I know. I just feel..."

"It's okay." He was off the bed in a quick, graceful movement and was in front of her almost before she could blink. "I'll let you get away with it this time. But just this once. Otherwise I want you naked as much as possible. Don't hide that body."

His lips were soft on hers, rubbing gently back and forth, the friction giving rise to that consuming heat again. Despite being thoroughly sated, she found herself melting into him again. His hands tightened on her shoulders briefly, then he lifted his head, taking a last swipe at her lips with his very talented tongue.

"Why don't you make yourself comfortable and I'll get us some more wine."

She looked up at him from beneath her eyelashes. "Are you trying to get me drunk?"

He kissed the tip of her nose. "Just relaxed. I was serious. We do need to talk."

She climbed back onto the bed, fluffing the pillows behind her, and waited with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. He knew she was wolf. Did that mean her vision last night had been a message? That he, too, was a shifter? And were they really mated? She'd struggled for so long to find the right relationship, a man with whom she could connect. She'd met other shifters who'd married humans and made it work very well. Yet somehow she'd never met one that she felt comfortable enough with to reveal both sides of herself.

And connecting with another shifter had seemed an almost impossible task. Orphaned from her pack, she'd had no contacts. And it wasn't exactly the kind of thing you could walk up to someone and ask them about. She didn't usually believe in fate, but maybe that was what was at work here.

Certainly the sex had been more powerful than anything she'd ever experienced before. And yes, she'd felt a strong link between them, more than just the blending of their bodies. But if she was wrong...

"Heavy thoughts."

Mark's deep voice broke into her conversation with herself. She looked up and saw him standing there gloriously naked, a bottle of wine in one hand, two glasses in the other.

"Sort of."

He poured the ruby liquid into the two glasses, handed one to her and arranged his long rangy body on the bed next to her. She could feel his heat surrounding her and his scent invading her nostrils.

Wolf!

Hands trembling slightly, she sipped at her wine, waiting for him to take the lead in the conversation.

"I want to ask you some questions," he began, his warm voice rolling over her like thick honey, "and I don't want you to freak. All right?"

Chloe tensed immediately. Freak? She sensed where he was going and her immediate reaction was to avoid this at all costs.

"I guess that depends on what you plan to ask me." She kept her voice as cool as she could, even as her insides quaked.

"I want to talk to you first of all about the wolf." He eased one arm around her and the solid mass of his body soothing her.

"The wolf." She took another sip of her wine.

"Chloe, we both know what's going on. Denying it doesn't change the situation. We saw each other last night. I know it was you. The wind carried your scent to me. So let's quit dancing around it, okay?"

She wanted to chug the entire glass of wine. Maybe the whole bottle. She'd never discussed this with anyone except her mother, who'd died when Chloe was in her

teens. Her wonderful mother had explained what she was. After Chloe had recovered from the shock her mother had eased Chloe through her first shift.

All questions regarding other shifters had been carefully avoided. Chloe eventually got the feeling that she and her mother were somehow outcasts and that if there were other shifters in the area, for whatever reason they weren't about to embrace the two females. It made for a lonely life, but it also brought the two of them very close together.

And then her mother had been killed one night when she was out running and poachers were wandering in the woods. Chloe had shifted by herself for the first time and managed to scare the poachers away. In the morning she'd taken her mother's human form home, crying so hard she could hardly see, and had her cremated. The ashes resided in a bronze statue of a wolf that went everywhere with her.

She'd been careful of personal relationships. How did you tell a man he might be going to bed with a woman and wake up with a wolf? And close girlfriends? How could she share? But Melinda, a wildlife photographer, had come by to visit unexpectedly one night and seen her as wolf. And shared her own secret. That had cemented their friendship.

And now here was this man—shifter—the first she'd been with and she felt an unbreakable connection with him. But how was she supposed to react? What would he expect of her? And could she really trust him? She'd built a wall around herself for so long she wasn't sure she knew how to take it down.

"It might help if you knocked some of those heavy thoughts into a closet and listened to what I have to say before you conjure up all kinds of things." Mark's voice held a faint trace of humor.

She sighed, a soft whisper of resignation. "I know. It's just... I don't know what you expect of me."

Mark took her glass from her very carefully and set it down on the nightstand along with his. Then he lifted her so she was sitting on his thighs, one large hand at her back, the other cupping her chin.

"You've never been with another shifter, have you." It wasn't a question.

Chloe shook her head mutely.

"Tell me about yourself, Chloe. How did you find out who and what you are? Who helped you? Did you have a pack?"

Keeping her eyes averted, she told him about her life and what little she knew about herself. The entire time she talked his hand moved up and down her spine in tiny soothing strokes. Little by little, they eased her anxiety. When she'd finished telling the very sparse tale, he pulled her against his chest and traced kisses over her cheeks and forehead.

"Loneliness is a killer." He brushed his lips. "But you won't be alone anymore. I can connect you with other shifters. And Chloe? I sense you've been hurt by others many times. You don't have to worry that you'll be adding me to the list. We're connected here. Let's give ourselves a chance to find out how, okay?"

Something tight inside her eased, like a knot untying itself. For the first time since her mother had been killed, she had a sense of belonging. It astounded her that it had all happened so fast. Was Mark right? Was this meant to be? Were the two of them supposed to be in this place at this time together? One part of her screamed *Caution!* while the other said *Take a chance.*

"All right," she whispered, pressing closer to his chest. "And thank you."

"So now how about telling me the real reason you're here. The book sounds great but I sense a lot more behind it."

She let out a slow breath. She had no reason to trust him, but this unexpected bond, as much as it frightened her, gave her every reason. She couldn't be any worse off than she was now. If he thought she was crazy she'd just figure out how to get away from him. If not, maybe he could help her. "You're right."

She twined her fingers through the curls on his chest and tried to ignore the growing erection pressing into her buttocks as she told him the story of Melinda. And El Chupacabra. When his hands tightened their hold on her she tensed, wondering if he'd change his mind now. Think she was crazy.

"I know everyone says it's just a legend," she began.

"Stop," he interrupted. "If anyone believes it's not a legend it's me."

She'd expected him to hustle her into her clothes and shove her out the door as quickly as he could. "And exactly why would that be?"

"Because I have my own story that's just as unbelievable. And it's not one I tell to everyone."

"But you're willing to tell me," she said, "even though we just met. Why?"

"Because even if you try to fight it, there's a special bond between us that formed last night when I saw you as wolf. And when I had my vision. We are two of a kind, Chloe. And my pain is the same as yours."

Chloe listened quietly as Mark told the story of his friend's death, his struggle to come to terms with it, the desire to chase the Chupacabra and the unexpected invitation to join Night Seekers.

"How awful for you," she said when he finished. "Oh, Mark, you must have been devastated."

"I was. But Night Seekers has given me a chance to hunt down the devil beast and kill it. And I don't have to do it alone." He kissed her temple. "And neither do you. Can't you see something definitely is pulling us here together? Don't push that away, Chloe."

She bit her lower lip. "It's just all so new to me. I never expected to find someone..." Her voice trailed away.

"Who is also a shifter?" he finished for her.

She nodded.

"Another sign that this is supposed to be. We need to talk more about all of this, but that's not going to happen with you sitting on my lap this way." He grinned and lifted her, setting her down beside him. "It's a good thing you put on my t-shirt or we never would have gotten through this conversation. But I think I need a little cover-up, too."

He yanked on his boxers, stretched out on the bed again and handed her the goblet of wine.

"So let me tell you more about Night Seekers."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mark's on the horn."

Sam stuck his head into what Craig had outfitted as a media room, a place for Night Seekers to relax during downtime. Logan had already left for Florida but four of the remaining members of the team were watching a movie.

"I'll get Jonah," Sophia told him. "He and Dakota are in their wing of the house."

Within five minutes everyone still at the ranch was gathering in the big command center, Mark's Skype call ready to go. The team had discovered that of all the forms of communication, for some reason Skype was the most secure, and worked the best when they wanted visuals. Sam had put the picture of him up on the big screen.

"We're all here," he told Mark. "What have you got?"

"I want you to meet someone," he began. "And to hear her story." He reached out one arm to whoever was with him. In a moment the image of a woman joined his on the screen. "This is Chloe Hanson. We met under some rather unusual circumstances last night." They could all see his lips twitch with some secret joke.

"What does that mean?" Chelsea demanded. "You're supposed to be hunting...your prey, Mark. Not women."

"We were both out hunting," he told them. "Chloe is a shifter, and she has a very interesting story to tell." He hugged her, a gesture of reassurance. "Go on, darlin'. Tell them."

They listened while she explained what happened to her friend, Melinda, and the frustration she felt at not getting any results from anyone.

"I rented a house here," she told them. "I still have the contract for the coffee table book and that gives me a good excuse not just to be around here but to travel all over the area."

No one said anything for a long moment.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Sam said at last, "but do you have any proof of this?"

Chloe frowned at them. "Why would I make up something like this?"

“For a story? It wouldn’t be the first time someone heard something and thought they could make a good buck from a tabloid. Maybe to cash in on the Chupacabra legend somehow?”

Sam was implacable. “That’s a possibility. Or maybe you’re just nosy about the rumor of shape shifters.”

Anger flashed on Mark’s face. “I understand we all have to be cautious, but do y’all think I have no common sense?”

“Wait.” Chloe pushed at him. “Move out of the way so they see only me.”

Reluctantly Mark stood and pulled his chair to the side. Now only Chloe filled the screen. As they watched she pulled off the long t-shirt she was wearing, leaving herself naked and vulnerable to them. Then the air around her sparked and sizzled and in seconds where she’d been standing in her place was a wolf, small in stature with a rich auburn coat. She turned her face so her eyes looked directly into the computer camera and blinked, once. In another second the wolf was gone and the woman was back, pulling the t-shirt on again.

No one in the room at the ranch said a word. Then they all seemed to talk at once.

“Where did you come from?”

“Do you have a pack?”

“Have you always known you could shift?”

“How long has your friend been missing?”

“Hold it.” Sam held up a hand. “Everyone just take a breath and let the woman talk.”

“I’ll answer.” Mark was back in the screen again. “And one at a time.”

It took another fifteen minutes of back and forth before everyone was at least partially satisfied.

“That’s enough for now,” Mark told them. “But this changes the parameters. You know what this means.”

“That what we’ve been afraid of all along is true,” Sam answered. “That there’s more than one.”

“And that someone could be pulling their strings.”

“That would take someone either very brilliant or crazy or both,” Sophia pointed out.

“That’s Craig’s theory, but we’re a long way from proving it. Right now our goal is to catch this devil beast and kill it.”

“And hope we got the right one,” Dante reminded him.

“While we’re at it,” Mark said, “I want to help Chloe look for her friend.”

“If she’s still alive,” Dante added. “Sorry, Chloe,” he added, when he saw the distressed look on her face. “But you have to realize that’s a good possibility.”

"I know." It would have been hard to miss the sadness in her voice. "But at least I'll know what happened to her."

"All right, then." Ric had moved up to stand beside Sam's chair. "Chloe, give Mark every bit of information you can. He'll send it to us and we'll put it in the system. There's a lot we can do from here, too."

She leaned toward the screen. "Thank you very much. For offering to help. And...for trusting me."

"Just please don't make us regret it," Ric told her. "Mark? Get us everything as quickly as you can."

Mark nodded. "Give me about an hour. Then I think we're going hunting. I have a feeling... I don't know. I can't put my finger on it, but if the devil beast isn't here yet it's damn close."

No one disagreed. They'd all learned to respect their wolf senses.

"Catch you then." Sam tapped the keyboard and the link closed.

Ric looked around at everyone. "So? What's the general opinion?"

"I believe her," Sophia said. "I can't tell you exactly why," she added, when everyone turned to look at her. "It's just...something about her."

"I agree," Sam chimed in. "I'm usually the hard-ass here, but I get the same gut reaction Sophia did."

"Well, then." Ric tapped a pen against his thigh. "Perhaps our two missions can overlap. By helping her we might just find the devil beast a lot quicker."

Sam grunted. "Let's hope we find him before he kills again, although that's probably too much to ask."

"For the moment, let's hope we find Chloe's friend alive, although I have to tell you, I don't think that's happening. And if it does, it may be worse than finding her body."



## Chapter Five

"How do you think it went?" Chloe was sitting on the bed cross-legged, nervously twisting her fingers together.

"I think it went just fine." Mark was having a hard time not staring at the wet curls covering her pussy that just peeped out beneath the hem of the shirt. Not to mention the fact that his cock was growing longer and thicker again. He tried to focus on the video meeting they'd just had to distract himself. "You made a good impression on them. They agreed we should help you look for Melinda, didn't they?"

"I'm sure they think you're crazy for buying my story and dragging them into this." She looked down at her hands. "You have your own mission to take care of."

"Hey, hey, hey." He sat down so he could look at her and rubbed her arms, trying to ease her. "Relax. They could easily have told me they'd have to think about it, then called me and told me it was a no-go." He took one of her hands and lifted it his mouth, kissing her knuckles. "Instead they said to send them everything I could about Melinda and the day she disappeared. And I think the two things are part and parcel of my assignment. So before I give in to temptation and ravish you, let's go over it all in detail again so I can email the ranch and they can all put their heads together on it."

"You know," she said slowly, "I've been alone for so long it seems to strange to find all of you together, all shifters like this. I didn't think that was possible. I figured I was lucky to find Melinda."

"Not all of us shift," he reminded her. "Sophia Black and Dante Martello are humans."

She looked up at him, her eyes full with curiosity. "And they don't feel uncomfortable there with all of you? Or frightened when you, you know, shift?"

Mark laughed. "Just the opposite. They ask so many questions sometimes we wonder if they're writing a book. And Jonah's new wife, Dakota, isn't a shifter, either."

"You know, I never really got to ask my mother a lot of questions. I knew my father was human, that he didn't know she was a shifter when they met. That she was already pregnant when she told him."

"What happened?" But Mark and the unpleasant feeling he already knew.

"He never said a word." Incredible sadness washed over her face. "Just looked at her as if she had three heads, packed his things and left."

"I'm sure that was a very difficult time for her," he told her softly, pulling her onto his lap.

"You have no idea. She told me that the small pack her parents were part of had been partially destroyed, that the remaining members scattered. When they died she was left alone. As you know, making friends isn't all that easy."

"She never tried to find the remnants of the pack?" he asked.

"I think maybe, but after a while she just gave up." She leaned into him. "She was very good to me, though. She's the one who taught me about photography. That's how she earned a living and raised a child alone. And she also taught me about the special herbs and grasses I needed to keep the wolf under control."

"Interesting that you mention that." He stroked her hair. "Jonah's wife is an herbalist and they've planted a garden for her at the ranch. Among other things, she grows those herbs in a large enough supply for all of us."

She tilted her head to look at him. "You all are very lucky to have her."

"When this is over, I'll take you back there and you can meet her for yourself."

*And keep you there, if I have anything to say about it.*

She frowned. "You say that as if it's a foregone conclusion."

*Oh-oh.*

"Chloe..." She was his mate. He knew it even more than he knew his own name. But getting her to accept that was apparently going to be more of a struggle than he'd expected. If she'd had no contact with shifters since her mother died she had good reason to be wary. Still, he wasn't about to let her get away. The mating connection was instant and irrevocable. He just had to make her understand that.

"Right now I can't think of anything except Melinda." Her body tensed. "And finding the devil beast and killing him."

"Well, then. Let's start putting down every detail you can think of about that day and what you've found – or not found – and I'll send it on up to the team."

"But what can they do?" she asked, frustration evident in her voice. "They're so far away."

"A team is always better than one or two people alone. And this team can send us satellite imagery of the area and zero in on likely places she might have been taken. They can continue to search for incidents that might give us a clue of the Chupacabra's whereabouts. And they can help us focus better." He stood up, lifting her from his lap and setting her on her feet. "So let me get my laptop and we'll get started."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ferry Pass, Florida, still held some of the heat of the midday sun, even though it was long past sunset. But the air was so still and close the heat had little chance to escape. Logan Tanner pulled into the convenience store, got out of his rental car and stretched. With no direct flight to either Pensacola or Tallahassee from San Antonio, he'd had to fly into Memphis and hang out until his connecting flight. He'd chosen the longer flight into Pensacola because he thought that's what his writer cover identity

would do. But his big body wasn't really meant to spend much time crammed into an airplane seat and he was glad for the opportunity to loosen up. It also meant he arrived at night rather than during the day. He knew he could have asked Craig to fly him in on one of the Stafford jets, but they both agreed the lower the profile the better.

They'd decided he should start with the Escambia County Sheriff's Office, using the magazine credentials Craig had provided him with. The bodies—humans and animals—had all been found in the Ferry Pass-Myrtle Grove area, towns on an inlet of the Gulf of Mexico with tight clusters of population separated by stretches of empty land. Pines, sycamore and oak stood guard over the acres of fern, wiregrass, and sea oats. The perfect geography for the devil beast to operate in.

In the convenience store he fished a bottle of cold soda from the cooler and plucked two small bags of peanuts from a display rack. At the counter he donned his "I'm just one of the guys" personality while the man behind the register rang up his purchases.

"Hear y'all had a little excitement around here last month," he opened with, counting out his cash.

The man, somewhere north of fifty, cocked an eyebrow at him. "You one of those thrill-seeker folks who wants all the gory details?" The tone of his voice couldn't have been plainer—everyone and his brother had been avidly asking about this.

Logan shook his head. "Not me. I don't even like looking at bodies. But my boss sent me along to get a story. On the animals that were killed, if you can believe that."

The man frowned as he bagged the soda and peanuts. "The dogs? Why would you want to write about them when there's people got killed?"

*Because I'm much more likely to get information this way.*

"My boss is big on people doing better to protect animals," he said in the same aw-shucks voice. "He's got me running all over Hell's Half Acre chasing stories like this about how folks don't keep a careful eye out for pets and wild animals get them."

"That's for damn sure." The man leaned on the counter and looked directly at Logan. "One of those dogs belonged to a good friend of mine. He called me when he found him in the morning. I tell you, I've never seen anything that bad." He shook his head. "Poor animal was ripped to shreds. And drained of every drop of blood."

"Yeah?" Logan didn't have any trouble looking upset. He'd seen what the devil beast did to a *human*. "That is bad."

"I told Gene he shoulda taken that dog inside with him at night. Living way out of town the way he does, no telling what's roaming around when it's dark."

"Think he'd talk to me about it?"

"Hmm. Don't know. You got a card or something? A cell I can call you on?"

Logan handed over one of the business cards Craig had given him. "Thought I'd get myself a place to stay. Maybe check with the Animal Control people and see if I could look at their reports."

"Need to go through the sheriff for that," the man told him. "Don't think he's too concerned with the dogs since he got those human bodies dumped on him."

"I didn't read too much about the humans," Logan said. "What happened to them?"

The man leaned even closer and dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Tore up just like the dogs. Big fang marks in their necks. And no blood in their bodies. Looks like the same wild animal got them all. I'll tell you, no one's going out at night anymore and they're all carrying."

"Carrying?" Logan asked, but he knew what the man meant.

"Guns," he answered in a low voice. "Be careful you don't get shot."

\* \* \* \* \*

The beast was getting edgy. It had been too long since the last kill and the bloodlust was rising swiftly. This area was rife with possibilities, as spread out as people were. Lots of isolated homes. Sometimes the thrill of hunting in a more populated area, like the Florida Panhandle, added excitement to the kill but usually it was much easier to isolate the prey.

Although snatching that one from the motel had really gotten its juices flowing, even if it had been a deviation from the pattern. Too bad a kill hadn't been the primary object. But the devil beast had still enjoyed the episode. It wished for more opportunities like that. And was pretty sure they'd be forthcoming.

The itch driving it at the moment was the urge to complete its pattern of three kills to an area. Rage roared through the twisted body as it remembered again how that pattern had been disrupted by humans on the hunt. Thought they'd cleared the area, did they? Well, the beast was back to complete the cycle. And add three more just for good measure.

Feasting on the small animal it had just destroyed, the beast lay down to rest. Tonight it would hunt again, and stalk its next prey.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sheriff John Devol of Escambia County offered a cautious greeted when Logan was shown to his office. Having been a sheriff himself, Logan knew the automatic reaction was to be wary of a stranger poking around in a situation you were trying to keep under wraps anyway.

"You told my deputy you were writing a magazine article?" Devol eyed him carefully.

"I am." Logan handed over his business card. "My boss is a nut on animal rights and animal protection. Every time something happens that he thinks he can lay at the feet of an owner we hop on it."

Still standing, the sheriff scrutinized the card. "I don't think I've heard of this magazine."

Logan shrugged as casually as he could. "We have a fairly specific clientele. And the publication is only sold by subscription."

Devol tapped the card against a finger for a moment, then nodded, lowered himself into his chair and indicated Logan should sit also.

"A little late for you to be making calls, isn't it?" the sheriff asked.

Logan shrugged. "I only got in a while ago. Drove by here on my way to the motel and took a chance you might be here."

Devol ran his hand across his closely cut hair. "Too much going on lately to keep regular hours." His face showed the strain he'd obviously been operating under. Logan could certainly relate. "So, as long as you caught me, what can I tell you about the dogs?"

"I'm sure the, uh, bodies aren't still around. Do you have pictures I can look at? And would it be possible to speak to the owners? Not tonight, obviously."

"I can let you see the pictures," Devol told him. "I'll have to get permission from the owners. They might be a little touchy since your focus is owner responsibility. They're both pretty distraught over the whole thing and publicly blaming them won't help any of us."

"I'm not jumping on that bandwagon just yet," Logan told him. "What I do is find out exactly what happened. Then try to point out things to owners they might not have thought of doing. Things that could prevent it happening again."

Devol looked at him thoughtfully. "I'm surprised you aren't here about the human remains. God knows every other jackleg has been sniffing around."

Logan chose his words carefully. "If you think the incidents are connected, then yes, it would help to know about them. But only if you think the same animal is responsible."

The sheriff sat for a long time studying Logan's face. Then, as if he'd come to a decision, he nodded and pressed a button on his telephone.

"Sheriff?" a voice said.

"Nessa, would you get me the files on those animal attacks, please? The dogs and the human victims both."

There was a long moment of silence, then the woman said, "Sure thing. Just give me a minute."

"Everyone's just a little jumpy about the whole thing," Devol explained. "I'm sure you can understand that."

*Oh, yeah. More than you know.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark wanted to run. The moon was still full, giving him plenty of good light, and he wanted to check out Sherry's house. But he couldn't figure out how to do it without Chloe. He could hint that she leave, as tactfully as possible, but he really didn't want her to. He wanted her in his bed when he came back. Waiting for him. Hot and hungry.

But he was also aware that if he tried to run by himself he'd have holy hell to pay. And he wasn't about to put in jeopardy this relationship that had exploded out of nowhere, this situation where one whiff of her scent and he knew they were meant to be mated. His only option was to tell her what he had in mind without specifically mentioning Sherry. And hope that she didn't get any bad vibes from him.

"You want to run, don't you?" Her voice broke into his thoughts. "I can see it in your eyes."

He grinned. "I thought a run in the moonlight would be nice for both of us."

She leaned over and ran her tongue over his lips. Immediately his cock jerked and he wished she'd move her tongue a little farther south. When she raised her eyes to his her lips curved in a wicked smile.

"It would be nice to run together again." When he didn't say anything, the smile disappeared. "You're hunting, aren't you? For likely targets. You want to get a picture of where the beast can strike."

"Chloe, I just don't want—"

"If you say you don't want anything to happen to me I'll smack you. I'm still looking for likely places Melinda could have been taken." Her eyes took on a sudden sadness. "Or where her body might be. So if you go off by yourself, I'll just do the solo thing, too."

Mark pulled her close to him and kissed her forehead. He'd figured it would be a losing battle.

"All right. But we stay together. No risky chances. No wandering off. Promise?"

"As long as I can signal you if I think there's something we should check out."

"Agreed. Let's do it." He was already thinking of the hot sex they'd have when they returned. Running ramped up his level of testosterone and he was sure Chloe experienced a similar reaction.

He opened the door and they stepped out onto the front porch. He gave her another quick kiss, then they both shifted, watching each other as muscles and bones elongated and faces reshaped. Then, in perfect symmetry, they leaped from the porch out into the moonlit night.

Mark was pretty sure that Chloe had not had that much time to learn the landscape, even though she said she'd been studying it carefully. But she'd been here barely more than a week and he'd lived here for years. Plotting in his brain where he wanted to go, he led her through the scrub brush and trees in what he hoped looked like a general route toward Zapata without any specific destination.

More than ninety percent of the town was clustered around a few square blocks, with a federal highway and a state highway bisecting it. About two dozen houses were scattered alone beyond the town's perimeter. One was his, another was the one Chloe was renting. He assumed she took the remote location so she could have the freedom to shift and run when she needed to. He just hoped she hadn't become too familiar with the outlying residences. He wasn't ready to explain Sherry to her yet.

They stopped once or twice along the way, resting beneath the bright light of the moon. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Chloe appeared to be in a playful mood tonight, rolling on the ground and teasing him with her scent. He wanted desperately to mount her, to stake the final claim as his mate, but that would have to wait until they'd completed their missions, and had the time to focus on it. And until he'd wiped away all her reservations and anxiety.

As they ran, Mark made sure to take note of any places where a body might be hidden. They'd do better coming back in daylight. If somehow something even more evil was at work and Melinda had been taken out of the area, all the searching in the world wouldn't do them any good. But he held his tongue. At least for now. Hope was all Chloe had at this moment, and Mark hesitated to crush it before he had to.

They'd been running and playing for an hour, following a path that might have seemed aimless but also gave him a chance to check out the area, before he finally led the way to Sherry's house. Yesterday he'd noted how it sat all by itself at the end of a gravel driveway, worrying about its isolated location. Although it had a small garage attached to it, Sherry's car was parked outside. Probably too much stuff in the garage itself, he thought. She always had been a pack rat. Or maybe that was where she had her workshop set up. He remembered she liked to refinish wood pieces and furniture.

He circled the house as nonchalantly as possible, looking for places the Chupacabra could lie in wait for her. Chloe followed him, tail waving, obviously wondering why he'd chosen this house to check out. He loped off to a stand of sycamore and stopped until she caught up with him.

*Is this house special? Her tail stood straight up.*

*Just one of the more isolated ones. We'll be checking all of them.*

*When do we look for Melinda?*

If a wolf could grind its teeth, Mark would have done so. He was trying every way possible to avoid telling Chloe that her friend was most likely already dead. Of course they'd keep looking for her, but protecting the living had to take precedence at the moment.

*We are looking for her. I've been checking places as we ran. There are some we can come back to during daylight.*

*Chloe growled softly. I want to look right now.*

*You can't see anything at night. Trust me. We'll get at it first thing in the morning.*

He could tell she wasn't happy but reluctantly she fell in beside him as he headed away from Sherry's house. He'd have to find a way to tell his friend to be alert without

giving anything away. The people who lived in Zapata, just like in many areas of Texas, were extremely superstitious. They spoke about El Chupacabra in hushed whispers when they spoke at all. Sherry, on the other hand, had heard the legend and wrote it off as exactly that. If he told her what he was worried about, she'd just blow it off.

Swallowing back his frustration, he led Chloe through the moonlight back to his house. There'd been no sign of the beast tonight, and the hidey holes he'd mentally marked were best searched in daylight. He had other ideas for the rest of tonight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Logan looked at the pictures spread out on Sheriff Devol's desk. It was late, he was travel weary and his eyes were fatigued. Maybe that's why this particular group of shots looked particularly harsh. The dogs had been torn to shreds, the human bodies faring not much better.

"Were both dogs owned by the same person?" he asked.

Devol shook his head. "Chad Leighton owned the older Lab. The younger one belonged to his daughter. She'd gone away for a couple of days and left it with her dad. Hell of a thing for her to come home to."

"Were they in a fenced yard?" Logan wanted to know.

The sheriff nodded. "Chad didn't let them run loose. And he didn't leave them out at night. He'd just let both of them out to take care of business before locking up for the night. Went to do something at the other end of the house. Heard them bark a little but didn't think anything of it."

"No growling? Shrieking? Like some animal had gotten into the yard?"

Devol snorted. "It had to be some damn kind of animal, I'll tell you, because Chad's fence is six feet high. And no, just that little barking, then nothing. I'll tell you, when he went to let them back in he was shocked at what he found."

"Did he call Animal Control?"

"Right away. My guys were there in ten minutes. What they saw made them damn sick."

Logan picked up one of the pictures. "Did they search the neighborhood? Ask people if they'd seen some kind of strange animal?"

"Of course." Devol banged his fist on the desk. "I'll tell you. We're used to dealing with animals around here pushed out of their habitat with people building our more and more. But most of the animals are small. We don't get wild boar this close to town and deer don't attack like this."

"I agree." Logan looked up at the sheriff. "Anyone have any idea what it might be?"

Devol ran his hand over his head again, a gesture indicative of his frustration. "Someone said they'd seen a black panther around one of the hunting leases, but no



one's been able to verify it. Anyway, panthers are very vocal when they kill. It would have been heard, for sure."

Logan switched to the pictures of the human remains. "And what about these?"

It was the same story. Each person had lived outside of town, in a somewhat isolated situation. Two of them lived alone and the third was married but her husband was in town playing poker.

"I swear," Devol said, "it's almost as if whatever kind of animal this is has a human brain and scopes these things out."

If what Night Seekers were beginning to suspect was true, the sheriff might not be so far from wrong, Logan thought to himself.

"Did you happen to notice any kind of peculiar odor where any of the bodies were found?" he asked.

"Odor?" The sheriff stared at him. "What kind of odor?"

"Just...anything that seemed out of the ordinary." He didn't want to get too specific and lead the discussion in the wrong direction. As it was he could see he'd teased the sheriff's curiosity. "Maybe, oh, I don't know, a strange animal smell?"

"I don't think so. I'll check with my Animal Control people, though. And the deputies who were with me when the bodies were processed." He looked pointedly at his watch. "Anything else?"

Logan took his cue and rose from his chair. "I've kept you long enough. If you could tell me what time's good in the morning, I'll check back to see if you've talked to—Chad Leighton, is it?—about my asking him some questions. Maybe he'll even have some suggestions for other pet owners to keep their animals safe."

"Give it until around ten, okay? I'll have to call him at work. He owns a hardware store and they're usually pretty busy when they first open up."

"Ten o'clock it is. And thanks." He shook hands with Devol before making his way out.

*It's the beast. I know it. I can almost taste it. I hope Mark's having good luck tracking where it is.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"In the morning," Mark told Chloe before she even had a chance to ask him. "I marked some places mentally and I know just where to go."

"But—"

"But we won't find a thing at night. Not even with a moon as bright as this one." He threaded his fingers in her hair and held her so he could brush his lips over hers. "Trust me on this, okay? I know this place better than you do."

Her bottom lip quivered. "You think she's dead, don't you?"

He licked at her mouth. "I think it's a possibility we have to consider. I'm sorry."

"She was my best friend," Chloe cried. "My only real friend."

"Honey, we're going to do our best to find her. Let's just put it aside for tonight, okay?" He ran his hands down her back. "I think we could both use a shower. What do you say?"

She gave him a weak grin. "Does that mean I'm having a sleepover?"

He really wanted her to just move in with him. He wasn't all that thrilled about her spending any nights at all in that isolated little house she'd rented. But he knew he'd have to work into it. One night at a time.

"Sure thing, sugar. And I've got some ideas for games we can play."

"I'll just bet you do."

But she didn't protest when he led her to the small bathroom and turned on the shower. The enclosed stall was just about big enough for the two of them with only a little room to maneuver.

"Tight fit," Chloe commented.

"Just the kind I like." Mark grinned at her.

Sexual energy surrounded both of them, the aftereffects of the run in the night air, the charge of adrenaline through the system that always accompanied a change. The air around them vibrated with it. Mark always found himself very aroused, a situation he sometimes took care of himself, and sometimes managed to control mentally. It was obvious Chloe was affected equally. Her nipples had swollen and hardened into mouthwatering buds and the scent of her female musk was redolent in the air. Despite her concern for Melinda, her eyes flamed with barely controlled heat.

He wanted to stretch her out on the bed and taste every delicious inch of her, take his time with all her delightful dips and curves and secret places. But he knew the adrenaline surging through them from the run would soon dissipate and they would be ready to sleep. So this wouldn't be slow and drawn out, but he'd make sure he drove her to a strong climax just the same.

Mark took two large towels from the cupboard built into one wall and set them on the small vanity. Then, winking at her, he pulled a box of condoms from under the sink and placed them next to the towels, taking one out and placing it on top.

Chloe's eyes widened. "You don't expect to use them all tonight, do you?"

He brushed his mouth over hers. "I don't think even I'm that ambitious. But of course, for you I'd make a stab at it."

She smacked his arm playfully.

He tested the water, adjusting it to the right temperature, then took her hand and pulled her into the shower with him. With the water beating down on them, he cradled her head with his hands and pressed his mouth to hers.

*Mine!*

It seemed that all he had to do was kiss this woman, caress her, and the sensation inside him that called to his mate went into overdrive.

He licked the drops of water from her mouth and traced the soft outline of her lips before plunging his tongue inside her welcome heat. His cock, already hard from the exhilaration of the run, swelled almost to the point of pain. He circled the inside of her mouth with his tongue, touching and tasting every inner surface, her naked body pressed to his, her hands clutching his wrists for support. He licked the soft skin of her inner lip and dragged his tongue over her teeth before twisting it around her own and sucking it into his mouth.

He swallowed her soft moan, his tongue dancing with hers, his hands holding her head tightly. Only when breathing became an imperative did he ease back, looking at her from beneath eyes heavy with desire. Her skin sparkled with the drops of water, the blush of passion coloring her skin a soft rose. Very carefully he licked the drops from her face, swiping his tongue at the new ones that continued to fall.

The pulse at the hollow of her throat beat furiously, signaling the need spiraling through her body. Mark lowered his head to capture one beaded nipple in his mouth, pulling it into his mouth and sucking hard. As he released it he let his teeth scrape easily over the pebbled surface. A soft sigh of pleasure rushed from deep inside her.

He turned his attention to the other nipple, giving it the same treatment. As he sucked and nipped at her breasts his hands slid down the slick wetness of her back to cup the cheeks of her ass, squeezing them gently. Just thinking of sliding his cock into that crevice and pushing deep into that hot, dark tunnel made his balls ache. He'd have her that way. Not tonight, but soon.

He slid one of his muscular thighs between her soft ones and rubbed against the lips of her cunt. Her fingers dug into his upper arms where she clutched him now for balance and she rocked against him, rubbing herself like a cat. Or a wolf! He moved his thigh, creating more friction, feeling the vibrations thrumming in her body.

Turning her so she faced the wall, he lifted her hands and flattened them against the tile.

"Don't move," he whispered, moving his hands around to meet at the lips of her pussy.

Nipping the soft spot where her shoulder joined her neck, he rubbed her clit with one hand while the fingers of the other probed her hot channel. When he slid two fingers deep inside her she set up a slow rocking movement, delicious little sounds of pleasure bursting from her. Mark wished he had more than two hands, so he could fondle her breasts, stimulate her pussy and probe the hot depths of her ass at the same time. She was such a tasty morsel he wanted to feel and touch her every place at once.

Chloe continued to rock against his hands as they teased her clit and moved in and out of her cunt.

"Don't move, sugar," he whispered, drawing back from her. "Stay right where you are."

Sliding open the shower door, he reached out for the condom, ripped the foil open with his teeth and slid the latex onto his pulsing shaft. Moving back into position

behind Chloe, he bent his knees, took his cock in his hand and guided it to the opening of her pussy. One sharp thrust and he was inside her, gritting his teeth against the surge of pleasure that ripped through him.

He moved his hands up to grip her wrists, bit down on her shoulder again and set up a fast tempo pounding in and out of her. The tight walls of her sheath gripped him, dragging against him as he drove into her. He wasn't going to last long, despite his good intentions.

Dropping one hand between her thighs he found her clit again, rubbing it and pinching it until he felt the first flutters of her vaginal walls. His teeth tightened on her soft flesh, his hips jackhammered, his fingers pinched the swollen knob of her clit and in an instant they exploded together. As he spurted into the condom her walls spasmed around him. He pressed his hand against her hard, holding her tightly against them as their bodies shuddered.

The change in temperature of the water from hot to warm to cold drove them out of their lethargy. Mark withdrew from her body, disposed of the condom and poured a generous amount of liquid soap into his hands.

"We need to wash fast, sugar," he chuckled, "before we freeze to death."

He soaped Chloe first, then himself before rinsing their bodies and shutting off the water. Lifting her out of the shower stall he wrapped one of the towels around her before drying himself. At last, dropping the towels on the floor, he lifted her in his arms, carried her to the bed and pulled her beneath the covers with him. He spooned her against him, wrapping one arm around her so he could cup her breast, fingers gently plying the nipple.

"We have a lot to talk about, Chloe," he murmured in her ear. "But it will all wait until morning." When she didn't answer, he repeated, "Chloe?"

But his only answer was a soft, ladylike snore.

Grinning to himself, Mark fell asleep. Despite the situation, he was more contented than he'd been in a long time.

## Chapter Six

The command center hummed with activity. Chelsea was busy at the surface computer, pulling up more articles on the killings in the Florida Panhandle. Sam and Sophia sat at the long table cleaning the rifles yet another time. It was important to have them in positively the best shape. No one could predict when they might need them. The precision and accuracy of the instruments had been what they needed to kill the beast in Maverick County. Too bad, they were all thinking, it turned out to be the wrong beast.

The others sat with coffee or cold drinks, watching Ric at the main computer. Only Dakota was missing, having excused herself to work in her garden. Logan had called early that morning, said he was going to meet someone about the attack on the dogs. He also mentioned the sheriff had asked him if he wanted to talk to the coroner about the condition of the human bodies, also.

"An unexpected gift," he'd told Ric Garza. "I'll call in around noon with my report."

He was due to call in again right about now and Ric was setting up to switch his image to the big screen as soon as he did. Now they waited for the special phone to ring and for Ric to log onto the incoming image.

The clock had just ticked past noon when the phone hooked to the computer rang and the incoming message notice appeared in a corner of the screen. Ric pressed a key on the keyboard and at once Logan's face appeared on the huge central screen.

"Hey, guys," he said. He was sitting at a round table in what looked to be his motel room. The lines of distress were evident on his face, definitely not a good sign.

"We're all here," Ric told him. "What did you find out?"

"It's our beast all right." He ran his hand over his hair. "God, I'll never get used to seeing this stuff."

Everyone in the room knew Logan still retained the gruesome memory of the bodies of his brother and sister-in-law. He'd been the one to find them, a shock he'd never really recovered from. The same could be said for everyone on the team. They all waited tensely for Logan to continue.

"The bodies had all been cremated," he told them. "The dogs too. But the sheriff's Animal Control officer took pictures as did the coroner. It's the devil beast. No doubt about it. I know you expect what I'm going to show you but it's still not pleasant."

They watched Logan tap his keyboard and in a moment a slide show of photos began to move across the screen. As prepared as everyone was, still the graphic horror

of what they were seeing stunned everyone into silence. When the last picture had displayed the screen went dark, then Logan's face appeared again.

"I asked as casually as I could about the presence of wild animals," he told them. "You know. Did anyone spot anything strange? Had any wild animals been prowling? Everything we look for. I got zip. Nada. Nothing."

"What about a strange scent?" Chelsea asked. "You know, the turpentine thing."

"Chad Leighton, the poor man with the dogs—and by the way, one of them belonged to his daughter—was so distraught he didn't notice much of anything. Sheriff Devol checked with the deputies who covered the scenes where the people were killed. Two of them weren't sure, but one of them says he thinks he remembers it because it was such a strange odor to find at the scene."

"Logan's right. It's our beast." Ric's voice was flat. "Just looking at the pictures there's no doubt about it."

"But is it the same one or a different one?" Sophia voiced the question that no one else wanted to ask.

They all looked at each other, no one answering her.

"Logan?" Ric turned back to the screen. "What do you think?"

"I don't want to think. Imagining a whole family of these things out there is the stuff of nightmares. And if that's the situation, where did they come from and how do they reproduce? And why is it so hard to find traces of them until after they kill?"

"All right," Ric said at last. "Let's go with the theory for now that there's just one, that it's the one we're tracking, and I'll let Mark know what you've found."

"Fine. So what's next?"

"Back home unless you want me to track the kills in Alabama. The goats."

Ric snorted. "I think we can safely say the devil beast got them on its way back here. Come on back to the ranch. Bring all the pictures, everything you've got. Mark ran last night, but he's got something else going on there, too. We'll tell you all about it when you get back. Craig offered to send a plane for you after you'd done your thing. Want me to call him?"

"Please. I think the best thing would be for me to drive to Mobile and hitch a ride from there. Call me when you know where my ride will be waiting."

The screen went dark. For a long moment everyone in the room was silent. Finally Ric swiveled in his chair to face everyone.

"We need to get Mark's next report," he told the team. "See what he's managed to scout."

"If he's identified a target," Sam put in, "maybe one of us should go down there and give him a hand."

Ric nodded. "Maybe. Especially if he's caught up in helping this woman find her friend."

Another long silence. Finally Chelsea spoke.

"I think we all know the chances of her finding her friend alive are next to none. It would be a miracle if that happened."

"The alternative's even worse," Sam added. Everyone turned to look at him. "What if there really is more than one of these things? What if someone human is pulling the strings? And what if he—or she—has something even more evil in mind?"

This time no one said a word. The possibilities flowing through their minds were almost too horrific to contemplate.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I hope you didn't mind that we went through the drive-through."

They were about two miles out of town, parked off the road in the midst of some scrub and stunted mesquite trees. Mark took the bag with their breakfast in it and began dividing up the food.

"No. Not at all." Chloe blew on her coffee through the slit in the lid and took a slow, careful sip. "As a matter of fact, this is a lot better. No people around to stare."

"Have they been doing that?" he asked. "Staring at you? I didn't notice it so much yesterday."

She shrugged. "I think they might be getting used to me. But I'm still the crazy idiot who doesn't realize her friend just took off. 'After all,' she mimicked, 'who would kidnap someone out here? And where would they take them?'" She paused. "You believe me, right?"

Mark held her gaze, his eyes locked with hers. "I told you I did. And you know why I do. I don't think for a minute that you're making something out of nothing here."

She carefully unwrapped the sausage and egg sandwich, using the paper to hold it as she took a small bite. "I guess I'm just so frustrated that the sheriff and everyone was so quick to write it off the way they did." She took another sip of coffee. "And yes, I know she's probably dead by this time. Which might be preferable to the other things I've imagined."

Mark paused with his breakfast sandwich halfway to his mouth. "Like what?"

Chloe squirmed a little in her seat. She'd been open and honest with Mark about Melinda and the situation, about why she was still hanging around. And he'd been good enough to offer to help her. The fact that he, too, was a shifter and believed in the Chupacabra legend had helped her to get past the natural barriers she always kept raised, but even he might think she was out of her mind with this idea.

"Chloe?" he prompted. "I thought we were past the point of holding things back from each other."

She set her sandwich down on the console and took another sip of coffee. "You'll probably think I've lost it altogether when I tell you."

He reached out a hand and drifted his knuckles slowly down her cheek. "I promise to keep an open mind."

Sensations skittered over her. "Okay. But don't say I didn't warn you. What if—and I'm just saying *if*—the Chupacabra is a shifter? Sort of like us, but a mutant. An abomination. And what if it's...looking for a mate?"

Mark was silent for so long Chloe wished she could take back every word. Of course he'd think she was out of her gourd. She should have known.

"Never mind. Pretend I didn't say a word, okay?"

"The reason I didn't answer you right away is because this is something Night Seekers have been thinking about, too."

She was stunned. "Really?"

He nodded. "We thought we'd killed the devil beast in Maverick County. Then Craig Stafford, our benefactor, told us the autopsy was inconclusive. And right after that we heard about another string of killings that could only be the work of El Chupacabra."

"Is it possible you just killed the wrong...thing and the real one got away?"

"Yes. Of course. That's the first thing we thought of when we read about the next group of killings. But it also got us to thinking that maybe there's more than one of them. And that opens a Pandora's box that no one really has the guts to look into yet."

"B-But are you going to?"

"Not my call. Not yet, anyway. That phone call earlier was from Ric Garza. He's sort of our team leader. Logan Tanner went to Florida to check on reported kills. He's supposed to report back around noon and Ric will let me know what he's found out. It could be the same animal making its way back here, or..."

He let his voice trail off.

"Or it could be a different one altogether," she finished for him.

"Let's just keep that in the back of our mind for now. But I understand what you mean about Melinda. And what might have happened if indeed there's a mating ritual involved somehow." He stared through the windshield. "I really think you need to be prepared for the fact that she's dead, honey. I wish I felt differently about it, but it's been a couple of weeks. And the best thing we can hope for is that it was a quick kill."

"I know, I know." She blinked against the burn of unshed tears. No time to cry now. There'd unfortunately be plenty of opportunity for that if and when they found her body. "So where have you picked for us to go back to?"

Mark set his coffee cup in the holder in the console, reached into his shirt pocket and took out a piece of paper. He unfolded it on the console so they could both look at it. Chloe saw that it was a crude map of the area.

"I did this early this morning while you were still sleeping." His mouth curved in that slow, sexy grin that even in the most intense situations could send a flood of heat through her. "Someone was worn out from last night."



Chloe actually felt herself blush. "Yeah. Must have been the run."

Mark laughed, then pointed to the paper again. "I marked the spots from last night that looked the most likely places someone could be hidden. The truck has four-wheel drive so getting to them shouldn't be a problem. Eat up and we'll get moving."

They collected the trash from breakfast in the paper bag and Mark stashed it for later disposal. In minutes they were well out into the deserted landscape surrounding the town of Zapata, weaving through the trees and vegetation, crossing one rocky hill after another. They stopped at each place Mark had indicated on the map, searching the area thoroughly. In a couple of places Mark even got down on his stomach and wiggled partway into a tiny cave. By noon they had nothing to show for their efforts except dirt streaks on their clothing and a layer of sweat covering their skin.

They sat in the cab of the pickup, drinking bottled water from the cooler Mark had brought, the silence so loud it could actually be heard.

"We aren't finished looking," Mark said at last. "Don't get discouraged yet."

She knew he was trying to be as encouraging as possible but they seemed to be reaching the unspoken agreement that Melinda was already dead. That depressed her even more.

Chloe sighed and finished the last of her water. "All right. It's just past noon. How many more spots did you mark on the map?"

"Just two more. Let's check them out and regroup."

But it was just more of the same until Mark drove a path along one point of an inlet of the Rio Grande. At that he almost missed the tiny carcass lying beneath a mesquite tree. Braking to a stop, he jumped out of the truck and crouched down to look at the remains of what he assumed had been a jackrabbit.

"Can we be certain this was the beast?" Chloe had left the truck and come to stand beside him. "Any feral animal could have made this kill."

"There's enough left here to see the fang marks." He pointed to them. "You can tell the neck was crushed. The animal is so tiny, one bite was all it took."

She shoved her hands in her pockets so Mark couldn't see how they were trembling. "So it's been here. And recently. That means it's in this area." The thought made her shiver.

"When did you say Melinda disappeared?"

"It's almost two weeks now," she told him.

Mark stood up and brushed his hands against his jeans. "Chloe," he began.

"I know." Tears burned her eyelids. "But at least if can find her...remains..."

Mark pulled her tightly against his chest, wrapping his strong arms around her. "We'll keep looking. But I think we're done for today. I want to report back to the team and get ready to do some more scouting tonight."

She looked up at him. "You think it's getting ready to kill a human again?"

“Unless it decides to find its way back to Maverick County again, I’d say it’s scouting its next victim. Come on.” He took her hand and led her back to the truck. “Let’s go home and make some plans. We can stop by your house and pick up some of your things.”

Chloe buckled her seat belt then looked at him, frowning. “My things?”

Mark reached across to where she sat to take one of her hands in his and lifted it to his lips. “Chloe, I want you to stay with me, if that’s okay. And if it’s what you want, too.”

Everything was happening so fast she tried to catch her breath. Was she just clinging to Mark because she was so devastated about Melinda? Did she need to set up some boundaries? And what about the house she was renting?

“Hey.” He put her hand back in her lap. “If I’m presuming—”

“No.” The word rushed out quickly.

*Don’t be stupid, Chloe. This thing with Mark might be quick but he is wolf like you are. Maybe he’s right and it was fated. And you do not want to be alone right now.*

“Not at all,” she said more calmly. “You’re right. I need to pick up a few things. And I want to get my camera and supplies.”

Mark turned sideways in his seat and studied her with those dark amber eyes. “I don’t want to rush you into something you aren’t ready for. I just thought...”

She touched his lips with her fingers. “You’re not rushing me. But I don’t know what I’m ready for. And probably won’t be until I find out what happened to Melinda. But I do want to stay with you. Let’s see how it goes, okay?”

“I’ll settle for that.” He leaned over and brushed a quick kiss on her lips before reaching for the keys and starting the truck.

Mark wanted to stop by and see Sherry again, figure out a way to warn her about being alone. But he saws two problems with that, the first being the necessity to explain her to Chloe. The second was finding a way to convey urgency without getting into details she probably wouldn’t believe.

“How about a late lunch?” he asked Chloe as they bumped over the rocky ground back to the two lane highway. “You must be starved.”

“Not so much.”

He was sure the situation with Melinda was robbing her of hunger. He knew exactly how she felt. “Still, you have to eat. How about just a quick stop at the Dairy Queen?”

“Okay.” Her smile was forced but at least she found one.

Tonight when they ran again he’d search new areas for them to look at tomorrow.

When they walked into the Dairy Queen the first person he spotted was Sherry, standing at the counter. As he walked up she turned, takeout bags in her hands, her

face breaking into a wide grin when she saw him. All he could think was, *Uh-oh. Trouble.*

He wanted to talk to Sherry but not like this. And certainly not with Chloe hanging onto his every word.

"Hi! I see I'm not the only one eating late today." Sherry laughed. "Too bad I didn't know. We could have had lunch together." Then, as if realizing for the first time that Chloe was with him, red stained her cheeks. "Oh, sorry. Color me rude." She shifted her bags to one hand and held out the other. "Hi! Sherry Barton."

Chloe shook hands with her. "Chloe Hanson. Nice to meet you."

"Mark and I are old friends," Sherry went on.

Mark stood there, his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth, wishing he could somehow disappear.

"Is that so?"

Mark heard the edge to Chloe's voice.

"Oh, yeah." She waved a hand in the air. "We knew each other pretty well when he lived here." Another laugh. "Of course, there are so few people in this county it's hard not to know everyone."

Mark finally got himself moving. "We're just going to sit down. Good seeing you."

Her eyes flitted from one to the other. "Oh, sure. Don't let me keep you. We're swamped at the clinic today so I ran out to pick up food for everyone." She headed toward the door. "Don't be a stranger, Mark." Then, as if it was an afterthought, "Nice meeting you, Chloe. Have Mark bring you around sometime."

"Sure. Thanks."

Chloe was already heading toward an empty table. Mark waited until she was seated before saying, "Can you hang tight for just a minute? There's something I need to tell Sherry."

He could almost see the doors slam shut and his stomach knotted. If he was so damn smart how come he couldn't handle this situation better?

"Sure." Chloe had already turned to study the menu above the counter. "No problem. Go ahead. Take your time."

*Shit.*

But he hurried out the door, catching Sherry just as she closed the driver side door to her car. He knocked on the window and made a motion with his hand for her to lower it.

"Mark, you didn't have to race after me." The smile on her face was forced. "I see you're with someone. And when we broke up you were very specific that it wasn't going anywhere. I'm good with it." Her eyes shifted to the Dairy Queen and back to him. "Anyway, it's obvious you're with someone else."

"Listen, I just wanted to make sure you're careful when you go home at night."

Her eyes widened. "Why? Is there something I should be afraid of? I can't believe there's anything in Zapata you'd have to warn me about."

He searched for something plausible to tell her. "Maybe the news hasn't gotten here yet, but there are a couple of escaped prisoners from Oklahoma who are assumed to be heading this way. Really bad guys, Sherry."

"And you know this how? Because I haven't heard anything and I don't think anyone else has, either."

"I'm...doing some special consulting work for a task force. Just pay extra attention, okay? We'll always be friends. I hope. And I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Friends." A strange look whispered across her face. "Yes. Friends. Okay, Mark. I'll pay careful attention. You'd better get back inside before...what was her name? Chloe?...starts to wonder where you are."

She backed out in a spray of gravel and pulled out onto the highway. Mark cursed under his breath as he walked back into the restaurant. Chloe was sitting exactly where he'd left her, hands folded in front of her, body stiff.

"I'm sorry." He bent down to kiss her but she turned her head away. He sighed heavily. "Chloe, I did have a life when I lived here. But whatever I had with Sherry ended a long time ago. She's moved into a little house by herself, way out on the edge of town—"

"The one we scouted last night?" she interrupted.

"Yes. I wanted to tell her to be extra cautious. Just because we aren't together anymore doesn't mean I'm not worried about her."

"Did she know about your friend who...was killed?"

Mark nodded. "But like almost everyone else, she thought it was a feral hog or a javelina. No one—including the sheriff—wanted to admit that El Chupacabra had been in the area. Or even existed for that matter." He touched her elbow. "Come on, Chloe. I know you don't have an appetite but you need to get something into your stomach." He winked. "Tonight I'll make chili for us."

Her smile was a little better this time. "Okay. Thanks. And Mark? I'm sorry if I was a bitch about your friend."

"And that's all she is," he stressed again.

"I don't blame you for being worried about her. We can check out her house again tonight if you want."

"Let's talk about it later. There are some other folks I need to check on, too."

They ordered their food and ate without much conversation. And the entire time Mark was thinking that words of warning weren't going to be enough for Sherry. The devil beast might have killed the jackrabbit as it passed through on its way back to Maverick County. On the other hand, it might have decided to finish its killing here and start a new pattern in Zapata County. His wolf sense was sending him bad signals that he couldn't ignore.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sherry Barton tried to roll her shoulders as she drove her little car out of town toward her house. It had been one bitch of a day, jam-packed with patients from the minute they opened their doors. Then, at four o'clock, mysteriously, the traffic had slowed to nothing until finally there was no one left. At five they were all happy to close up and head home, praying the next day would be a little easier.

She thought about the little episode with Mark and that brought to mind the image of the woman who'd been with him. Exotic-looking. That was the word for her, with her rich, dark red hair, those slightly tilted dark brown eyes and high cheekbones. Not skinny, either, like she was, but with nicely rounded curves. Mark had always teased her about never gaining a pound. Now she wondered if her thin body had turned him off.

*Stop it!*

That was all water under the bridge now. Mark had moved on and she needed to as well.

Then she remembered his words of warning and shivered. Escaped convicts? Here? There hadn't been a squeak about them on the news but Mark wasn't one to make things up. She just didn't think they'd show up in empty Zapata County. There was no place to hide here. No place to blend in. Unless they were trying to follow the river into Mexico.

*Stop scaring yourself.*

She sighed as she turned into her driveway. She wished the garage was big enough to hold her car and her workshop, too. Maybe she could get enough money together when she sold a couple of pieces to buy one of those outdoor sheds that looked almost like a little house. She could move her refinishing into that.

*Too much to do,* she thought, as she climbed out of her car.

Right now what she wanted was a hot shower and a glass of wine. And to put her feet up. She had just walked into the kitchen and put her purse on the counter when she heard a noise outside. Peering through the kitchen window, she tried to see if there was an animal out there, but her view was too obstructed. Stomach fluttering, and Mark's words ringing in her ears, she checked to make sure the doors were locked and checked the windows just to be sure.

Not that they were much protection. The house was old and the window locks were just the old-fashioned latch kind. Maybe she'd get her father to put new ones on for her. Telling herself she was just being a nervous old maid, she fetched the shotgun from her closet where she kept it and jacked two shells into it. Then, leaning it against the bathroom door, she stripped and stepped under a spray of hot water, letting it sluice over her tired body.

The beast kept close to the house, staying well below window level. The woman would make a tasty morsel. It hoped *he* wouldn't want to take her away like he did the last one. Already it could feel the blood racing through its body and its heart beat accelerating.

There was a huge ancient oak tree close to the house. The beast settled down to wait in the shade, concealed from the house by the angle of the tree. The sun was still bright, although at any moment it would probably begin to dip toward the horizon.

The part of its brain that could think knew it would have to wait until dark to make its move. That was okay. It could be patient. It was a hunter, and hunters were born with the ability to wait for long periods of time.

## Chapter Seven

“Could I interest you in a cold beer?” Mark stood in front of his refrigerator, but his eyes were on Chloe.

It was just after sundown. Leaving the Dairy Queen they’d driven a wide perimeter around Zapata, setting a diameter of five miles with downtown as the center, searching out more places where the Chupacabra might be hiding or where a body might lie hidden from foragers. Then they’d made a stop at her house so she could throw some things into a suitcase. She took more time packing her camera and equipment than she did her clothes. Mark had teased her about it, telling her he knew what was important to her but that was okay because he liked her best without clothes anyway. He’d hauled her suitcase into his room, giving her the second smaller bedroom for her equipment.

Neither of them wanted much for dinner, making do with sandwiches. And they were both too edgy to sit still, anticipating the run ahead of them as soon as it was dark enough.

“Yes.” She was standing in the kitchen, hands shoved in the pockets of her jeans as if she didn’t know what to do with them.

Mark pulled two bottles of beer from the fridge, shut the door and turned to her. “Look. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. If something’s bothering you let’s get it out in the open, okay?”

“I think it’s just everything, Mark. Just...all piling up. We haven’t found one clue that tells us anything about Melinda.”

One tear rolled slowly down a soft cheek.

Mark set the bottles on the counter and pulled her into his arms. “We will, Chloe. I promise you. No matter what, we’ll get answers.” He tilted her chin up with two fingers. “And here are two things for you to keep in mind. One. Sherry Barton is nothing more than a friend. Two. In my mind we are meant to be together forever. The visions were a foreshadowing of that and when we make love, there’s no mistake in my mind. But,” he went on when she stiffened in his arms, “I will give you all the room you need to come to the same place of understanding as long as you don’t shut me out. Good enough?”

“Oh, Mark.” She pressed her face to his chest. “I’m just so confused and so... I don’t know.” She sniffled. “How about that beer?”

“Coming right up.”

He opened both bottles and handed one to her. On their way back into the living room he flipped the switch that turned on his CD player, hoping there was something

mellow and soothing in the disk changer. Immediately Carrie Underwood's soothing voice drifted out on the air in a plaintive ballad.

He sat down in the big armchair and pulled Chloe onto his lap.

"Sit here with me," he told her. "Let me work out the knot you've tied yourself into."

"We're going to run again tonight, right?" she asked.

"Count on it."

"And we'll check on your *friend*." Her smile was a tiny one but it was a smile just the same. "I agree that her location makes her obvious prey."

"Thank you." He smoothed the hair back from her forehead with his free hand. "I'll identify new places for us to check tomorrow for Melinda, also. And maybe you could bring your camera. Kill two birds with one stone, so to speak."

"You mean capture photos for my book while we're hunting?"

"That's what I had in mind. That work for you?"

"Absolutely. Thanks for thinking of it."

"Good. This is what works for me."

He set her bottle on the chair-side table beside his, tilted her face toward him and took her mouth in a deep kiss. No little teasing touches this time. No soft brushes of his lips against hers. With a desperation that surprised him he thrust his tongue boldly into her mouth, drinking from her, licking every surface, holding her head in place while his tongue swept across her palate, her gums, the soft inner flesh of her lips.

She moaned softly the sound reverberating in his own mouth and he tightened his hold on her head. His tongue danced with hers, thrust and retreat, mimicking what he'd like to do with his cock. Trying to tell her without words what she meant to him.

At first her body was tense, but as he probed with his tongue, his fingers threading through her hair to rub her scalp she relaxed in his arms. When her tongue met his and twirled around it, heat shot through him and his cock flexed beneath the restraining fabric of his jeans. He slipped one hand beneath her t-shirt, stroking the soft skin as he walked his fingers up to the swell of her breast. When he cupped it in his palm Chloe leaned into him and her tongue swept through his mouth.

He dragged his mouth away from hers. "Naked," he rasped. "I want you naked. This minute."

She pushed herself up from his lap, and for a moment he thought she was going to change her mind. Tell him she didn't want this right now. Instead she turned up the volume on the CD player, where Carrie Underwood was now still singing to something with a heavy pounding beat. When Mark started to rise she shook her head at him. Swaying to the music she slowly drew her t-shirt over her head, let it dangle for a moment from her fingers, then tossed it toward the couch.

A striptease! She was doing a goddamn striptease for him! Well, maybe she needed to feel in charge for the moment, since everything else in her life had spiraled out of



control. At least the way it seemed to her. Lifting his beer to his mouth he took a slow sip from the bottle, settled back in the chair and glued his eyes to her body.

As she moved her hips to the heavy thump of the bass and drums, she reached behind her to unclasp her bra, then bent forward to shimmy the straps down her arms. Her breasts swayed tantalizingly, and Mark wanted to reach out and close his hands around them. But this was Chloe's show and he forced himself to watch, and wait.

The bra hung by one strap from the tips of two fingers before she let it simply drop to the floor. Her hands moved to cup her breasts, holding them out to him. Offering them. Her eyes half closed, she hummed along to the music, her thumbs rubbing across nipples now darkened and beaded.

The jeans seemed to take forever to come off. He heard the snap pop and the zipper rasp, but Chloe lowered them inch by torturous inch, her heavy-lidded eyes never leaving his face. When she was clad only in the merest scrap of silk that passed for a thong, she threw her head back, her long hair falling in a tumbled mass, and did a slow, seductive dance in place.

Mark couldn't help himself. The pain was getting to him. Setting his beer aside, he unfastened his jeans, lowered the zipper and released his thick cock with a sigh of relief.

Chloe stopped in mid-sway. "Take off your shirt, too." Her voice was so low and rich with passion it resonated through him.

Mark obliged, nearly ripping the shirt in his haste to remove it.

"Now the jeans," she told him, her hands still cradling her breasts, her hips still moving.

"Chloe..."

"The jeans," she insisted, dancing away from him. "You can't touch me until the jeans are gone."

"And *will* I get to touch you?" He almost didn't recognize his own voice.

"Soon," she promised. "Get rid of those jeans."

He toed off his boots, taking the socks with them, and stood to yank off the jeans. Then he stood there, waiting. This was her show all the way. He wasn't going to take that away from her. He had a feeling the reward would be more than worth it.

She hooked her thumbs into the narrow band of lace just above her pubic curls.

"Now the shorts," she told him. "We'll do this together."

Her eyes were locked on his as she slowly pushed the thong past her hips and wriggled it down to her ankles. Mark kicked his boxers to the side and stood there, waiting.

"Sit down again," she instructed. "You can touch yourself if you want to."

*Thank god!*

He wrapped his fingers around his throbbing cock and slowly stroked himself as Chloe resumed her erotic dance. Her feet moved with the rhythm of the song, her hands

lifted her hair from her neck and rose gracefully. She danced away from him, watching him fondle himself. Moving closer, she bent forward, touched the tip of one finger to the head of his shaft and spread the drop of fluid that had seeped from the slit over the sensitive flesh of the head. Mark sucked in his breath, wanting to grab her and lower her onto him with one hard push. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to sit still.

Standing between his widespread feet, Chloe slowly rotated until her naked ass was directly in front of his face. With a slow, graceful movement she bent forward from the waist and widened her stance.

"Touch me," she whispered.

*Touch her? Where? What place did she want touched first?*

"Touch me, Mark," she repeated.

He reached out with his other hand and circled her opening with his index finger. God! She was soaking wet. It excited him that the curls surrounding it were as deeply red as the thick silken fall of hair on her head. They glistened now with her juices and his erection jumped in response. Slowly he inserted his finger into her waiting channel, pausing to see if she'd stop him, have some other instruction, but instead she moved slightly closer to him, silently urging him to probe deeper.

He added a second finger to the first and thrust them in to the bottom knuckle. He heard her suck in her breath and almost automatically she rocked her hips back and forth, riding his penetration. He saw her reach for her breasts again, hands moving rhythmically as she squeezed them.

His blood raced, boiling in his veins, ramping up the desire brewing inside him to the point of explosion. Slipping his fingers slowly from the grasp of the walls of her cunt, he scooped her liquid and painted the sensitive flesh between her pussy and her anus. That tight brown hole was staring at him, tempting him. He didn't know if she'd ever been fucked there before and this didn't seem to be the moment for asking questions.

Deftly he spread her lube around the tight opening, again waiting to seek if she'd stop him, or tell him to do something else. She simply thrust herself back at him even more, a silent invitation he had no intention of refusing. With infinite care, he pushed one slicked finger into the dark channel and sucked in an involuntary breath. Jesus, she was so damn tight in there. The thought of his cock inside her ass almost made him come just sitting there.

"Okay, darlin'?" He didn't know what he'd do if she said she wasn't.

"It...makes me feel wild." Her voice sounded strangled.

"Am I hurting you?" *Please don't say yes.*

"N-No. It feels...really good." She inched farther back toward him and one hand dropped from a breast to touch her pussy.

"I want to fuck you here tonight, Chloe," he rasped. "Is that okay? Will you let me?"

“Y-Yes. I want you to.”

“Play with yourself for me,” he told her. “Finger your clit. Rub it. I want you to bring yourself to orgasm first. It will make it a lot easier on you.”

The music changed again, the beat even louder and wilder now, and Chloe stroked herself in time to the rhythm. As she rubbed herself faster and faster, her feet moved wider apart and she pushed her hips harder against his intruding fingers. He watched her carefully, barely able to restrain his own surging desire, as she moved closer and closer to her climax.

When it came he lifted his hand from his cock and used the fingers to spread the lips of her pussy. The sight of her slick walls convulsing and her cream pouring from her was almost more than he could bear.

“Mark!” she cried, her body shaking, her fingers moving desperately.

But he was mesmerized by the sight of her quaking flesh, the spasms rocketing through her body. And as she climaxed her dark, rear tunnel clenched around his invading fingers.

He was so aroused he could barely move, but he forced himself to withdraw his fingers, push himself up from the chair and sweep her up into his arms. In a few quick strides he was in his bedroom, the light on and Chloe arranged on his bed on her hands and knees.

“Don’t move,” he ordered, striding into his bathroom.

In seconds he was back, his aching cock sheathed in thin latex. Reaching in the drawer of his nightstand he fished for a tube of gel that had been there for longer than he could remember. Since the last time he’d had a woman in this house. He hoped it was still usable. When he squeezed an inch of out onto his fingers he was pleased to see that it was still in good condition. He wanted Chloe as prepared as possible for this.

When he touched her body he realized she was still quaking. He took a moment to stroke her spine with his free hand and to lean forward, pressing a kiss at the small of her back.

“Easy, easy, darlin’. I’m going to take care of you right now.”

Spreading the cheeks of her ass with one hand, he inserted the fingers with the gel and carefully worked it into the hot tissues. Chloe moaned and rocked on her hands and knees.

Mark stopped, forcing a control he didn’t feel. “You okay, sugar? Shall I stop?”

“No!” She nearly shouted the word at him. “Do. Not. Stop.”

He continued to spread the gel until he felt she was prepared. Then, holding his cock in one trembling hand, he pressed the head against her opening and slowly pushed forward.

“Take a deep breath, Chloe. Deep, deep breath.”

Her body tensed as she did what he said.

“Good. Now let it out slowly.”

As she did so he pushed forward again, slowly and steadily, until his balls slapped the cheeks of her ass.

"Oh, god," she cried out.

Mark paused. "Too much? Tell me if it is."

"No, no, no." She shook her head. "It feels...unbelievable."

*Good, good. All good.*

Taking a firm hold on her hips, he moved slowly in and out of her tight hot grasp. He wasn't going to last long. He was already teetering on the edge of his orgasm. He just needed to make sure he took Chloe over the edge with him. Reaching one hand around her, he found her clit and tugged it between his thumb and forefinger, rubbing it and pulling on it, drawing her up the spiral with him.

The movement of her body increased, the pace faster and faster as she not only took him inside her but worked to impale herself on him. His balls slapped against her harder and harder. Sweat covered him as the climax rose within him like a giant earthquake or volcanic eruption, bursting forth and splintering both of them.

"Mark!" Chloe threw her head back and screamed his name.

He pumped and pumped and emptied himself into the condom, his body jerking and shuddering with the force of it.

Still trembling and shaking, Chloe collapsed forward, taking him with her, his cock still embedded deep inside her. He barely managed to catch his weight on his forearms, determined not to crush her with his body. Their sweat-slicked skin bonded together, their breath sawing in and out of their lungs an irregular cadence.

He had no idea how long they lay that way, their bodies connected. Finally he roused himself, feathering kisses across her cheek.

"I'm not sure I have the energy," he said, "but we need to shower and eat something if we're going to run tonight."

"I know," she mumbled. "Mark?"

"Yeah, sugar?"

"That was amazing."

Warmth coursed through him. "For me, too. When you're ready I can make it even more incredible." When she started to say something he said, "Ssh. It's okay. That's for much later." He kissed her cheek and slowly withdrew from the clasp of her body. It had been unbelievable for him, too. He couldn't wait until things were settled and he could mate with her as wolf. Inspiration enough to get him up and moving.

\* \* \* \* \*

Travel weary, Logan Tanner was grateful to be back at Desolation Ranch. Stafford's helicopter had picked him up at the airport and deposited him at the ranch about an

hour earlier. Now, showered and shaved and fueled with food and coffee, he sat at the big table with the team to debrief.

"It's definitely the devil beast," he told them, running his fingers through his still damp hair. "No doubt about it." He pointed to the big screen where Chelsea was putting up scans of the photos he'd brought back.

These were photos he hadn't emailed ahead. Logan had managed to get the coroner to give him the crime scene shots of the bodies of the humans and there was no mistaking their cause of death. Seeing the bodies with the huge puncture wounds in the neck, abdomens ripped open and entrails dragged out, viewing them on the large screen, enhanced so many times, brought the horror back again to everyone who'd lost someone to the devil beast.

"Did you ask if there was any strange scent hanging around any of the crime scenes?" Dante wanted to know.

"Yes. I got a 'no' answer for two of them but the young deputy who was first at the third scene said he thought he smelled turpentine."

"Then we can be sure it's our beast," Ric pointed out. "Did they offer any explanation for the odor?"

Logan shook his head. "He was really puzzled by it. Said there wasn't even any paint or painting supplies around, or anything else that could be mistaken for it." He looked at their team leader. "What's the latest from Mark?"

"So far not much. Except for one interesting twist." He filled Logan in on Chloe and her missing friend, startling him with the information that Chloe was also a shifter.

His mouth crooked in a half-grin. "Some people have all the luck."

"Yeah, well, I don't think luck is what they're thinking about right now. Chloe's desperate to find her friend, she and Mark have some depressing ideas about what might have happened, and she's running with him at night to identify the most likely places for the Chupacabra to begin its next series of attacks." He looked up at the pictures on the screen again. "He's supposed to report back tonight after they finish their run. I'll take the late shift manning the comm center."

"I'll hang with you," Sam told him. "I'm too restless to sleep, anyway."

The other team members dispersed and Ric went to put on a new pot of coffee.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sherry hadn't been much in the mood for dinner. Instead she'd made herself a huge bowl of popcorn and settled down on her bed to watch one of her favorite movies that happened to be showing on television. She had just popped a piece into her mouth when she thought she heard a noise on the back porch. Putting the television on Pause she scrambled off the bed and pulled back the curtain on one of the windows to peer out into the dark but nothing seemed to be moving.

She shrugged and climbed back onto the bed. Maybe a stray dog running through her yard had taken a shortcut across her porch. Her father had been after her to fence the yard, at least directly around the house, but it hadn't been a priority with her. Maybe if she sold the dresser she was refinishing.

Chewing on the popcorn, she went back to watching the movie but five minutes later she heard the same sound again.

Kids, she thought. Making mischief. They used to throw water balls at the people who'd lived there before her. One of the reasons her father had been such a pest about the fence. Setting the popcorn aside, she put the television on Pause again and headed down the stairs. She supposed she should put something on over her pajamas but there was nothing readily available.

Oh, well. Maybe the horny teenage boys would get an eyeful and that would satisfy them for the night. She had just reached the front hall and flipped on the switches that turned on the lights in the hall and the kitchen when the back door flew open with incredible force, slamming back against the wall. But it wasn't the noise that shocked her, or paralyzed her with fear. It was the incredibly large, incredibly ugly animal that stood in her kitchen with the full force of the light shining on it. Its red eyes were like hot, glowing coals.

*Move, Sherry. Open the front door and run like hell.*

But before she could move the beast was on her. The piercing scream died in her throat as ugly pointed teeth pierced her soft skin and the world around her disappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I want to take a run by Sherry's again, if you don't mind," Mark said, slightly hesitant.

They had stripped off their clothes and left them folded on a chair inside. Now they stood on the front porch, preparing to shift.

Chloe nodded. "It's all right. I know you and she were close...before. And she does live in an isolated location. Maybe after we check out her house we can follow that circle we drove today and check out a few more isolated spots."

Mark bent his head to give her a quick kiss. "Thank you. I just feel uneasy about her, that's all."

"I understand. No problem." Because she knew whatever he had felt for Sherry was long gone, or he'd still be with her.

They looked at each other, nodded in unison, and slowly began the change that would turn them from human to wolf. Bones elongated, muscles stretched and limbs changed gracefully from one shape to the other. Smooth skin was quickly covered with rich, smooth pelts and they both dropped to all fours as the change was completed. In

perfect rhythm they padded down the porch steps into the moonlight and as if a silent signal had been given took off running across the rocky terrain.

The night was so crystal clear that each star seemed individually outlined against the blackness of the sky. The same soft breeze took the edge off the heat that still lingered from the daytime. Mark and Chloe ran side by side, noses into the breeze as they reached for any stray scent. Tonight they ran a definite path, a destination clear in their minds. Chloe could almost have fooled herself that they were running for recreation except for the disturbing purpose of the trip.

Sooner than she expected they saw the outline of Sherry's house, the tall trees in the yard casting ominous shadows. They were still at least a hundred yards from the house when Mark stopped so suddenly she barely caught herself from running into him. She pushed her face against his fur.

*What?*

*Do you smell that?*

She lifted her snout and inhaled. The faint scent of turpentine sent a chill coursing through her, icing her blood.

*Hurry, Mark.*

*He's gone. I just hope he sensed us and we scared him off.*

They raced to the back of the house and up the porch steps but the shattered back door was an indicator of what they'd find. Mark padded inside ahead of her and stopped next to Sherry's mutilated body. Like the others she'd seen pictures of, there was no blood although there were two large puncture wounds at her throat. Her abdomen had been ripped open and her entrails pulled from the gaping hole. Tension radiated from his body and anger rolled off him in waves.

Chloe prodded him with her snout, wondering if it was possible for a wolf to throw up.

*Mark, we need to check. It may still be here.*

*No. This is a fresh kill but it got what it wanted. It's gone.*

*What shall we do?*

*We need to look around, see if we can find anything else, then get the hell out of here.*

*But...*

*We can't help her anymore. We need to see if we can pinpoint some other likely locations. Then I'll place an anonymous call to the sheriff. I've got a burn phone I use for things like this.*

Chloe stood motionless while Mark trotted around the body, then followed him out as he checked the ground for any telltale marks. But it was as if the wind had just brushed everything away. There was nothing, except the faint odor of turpentine still lingering in the air.

*Please, Mark. Can we go now?*

What an ass he was. Of course she wanted to go. The first thing that came to her mind had to be Melinda, imagining finding her this way.

*Right now, little wolf. Let's get out of here.*

They ran for two hours, resting now and then. It was well after midnight by the time they returned to Mark's house, tired and panting. They shifted from their wolveren forms and Chloe followed Mark back into the house. Since he seemed disinclined to put any clothes back on she pulled his t-shirt over her head, keeping his scent close to her. He took two more beers from the fridge, handing her one. He leaned against the counter and drained nearly half of his before lowering the bottle and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Mark, I am so very sorry." She kept her distance from him, not knowing exactly what to say or do. She could see the pain in his eyes like shards of ice stabbing at him. At the same time she saw the body but with Melinda's face, and shuddered.

Instantly he was beside her, holding her chin up, looking in her eyes. "You okay? That was rough back there."

"I-I'm fine. Really." She let out a great, shuddering sigh. "That was your friend back there. I can't imagine how you feel."

*About like I'd feel if it had been Melinda.*

"I just had a feeling about this. Damn it." He smacked his fist against the counter. "I should have done a better job of warning her."

"It wouldn't have mattered," she told him. "No one wants to believe the legend. She would have thought you were crazy and not listened anyway."

He took another long pull of his beer. "You're right. I know that. But it doesn't make it any easier."

Still naked, he walked down the short hallway to his bedroom and pulled a duffel bag from his closet. Chloe stayed with him, afraid to leave him alone in his current state of mind. Yanking open the zipper, he pulled out a cell phone, turned it on and punched in 9-1-1.

"Yeah," he said when apparently someone answered. "Someone should check out the old Bracken place. I think there's been a break-in." He snapped the phone shut and tossed it back into the bag. "Maybe Torres will believe me now that it wasn't just some stray feral animal. Especially not with the door smashed in the way it was."

He headed back toward the kitchen, Chloe silently following him.

"Are you saying he didn't believe it was El Chupacabra when Rob was killed?"

Mark's lips twisted in a bitter parody of a grin. "Not hardly. Told me I was an idiot to believe that old legend. What I really should do was get out my hunting rifle and find the animal that really did it."

He drained the rest of his beer and tossed the bottle in the trash. Then, before Chloe realized what he was doing, he grabbed her, pulling her against his body and pressing his lips roughly to hers.

Caught off guard, she fought for breath, pushing back at him.

"Wait," she gasped, wrenching her mouth away. "Slow down a minute."



“No,” he growled. “Can’t slow down. We need this, Chloe. Both of us.”

“Okay, okay. Let me just—”

But he was a man on a rampage. He lifted her to the counter, spread her thighs and placed his open mouth over her cunt. His fingers pressed into her flesh as his tongue rooted deep, lapping at her swollen flesh already wet and waiting for him. She had never realized until now how shifting could ramp up the need for sex. With Mark it seemed to rage hotter and higher each time. Fueled by the adrenaline from the run and the rage at their discovery, he was almost out of control. Chloe could do nothing but hold on with both hands and go along for the ride.

His tongue probed and lapped, his thumbs holding her lips open to his assault. Chloe fisted her hands in his hair as the desire erupted from her and spread through her body. She tried to lift herself to his mouth but he held her firm, his greedy tongue licking and thrusting. The touch of it on the throbbing knot of her clit set off a tiny ripple of spasms that Mark pushed higher and higher by sliding his stiffened tongue in and out of her wet channel.

She climaxed quickly, her body shaking, her hands holding onto him to anchor herself. His mouth never left her as the shudders raced through her. And her climax only seemed to inflame him more. Pulling one of her nipples into his mouth he clamped down lightly with his teeth as he slid two fingers into her pussy, his thumb resting on her clit.

“Mark!” she cried, almost frightened by the intensity of the desire rising within her again.

He lifted his head, his mouth wet with her cream. “Pinch my nipples. Do it, Chloe.”

She took his nipples between thumbs and forefingers and squeezed, hoping she wasn’t hurting him.

“Harder,” he urged, and returned his mouth to her breast, rasping the hard bud with his tongue as he scraped it with his teeth.

His fingers were busy thrusting in and out of her now soaking pussy, his thumb rubbing back and forth against her clit so swiftly that another orgasm rose within her before she had barely caught her breath from the first. He seemed intent on wringing every drop of response from her, demanding she shatter for him again and again.

Her thumbs and fingers pinched his nipples so hard in reflexive motion she wondered he didn’t cry out in pain, but it only seemed to inflame his desire more. His fingers moved harder and faster, her cries urging him on.

But at the moment when she would have climaxed he withdrew his hand, leaving her empty and hungry. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her to the bedroom, dropping her onto the bed and spreading her legs. His eyes never left her throbbing cunt while he stripped off his jeans and reached in the drawer for a condom.

Then he was inside her, rooting hard and deep, his hands cupping her ass and lifting her to him as his hips jackhammered in an impatient rhythm. Chloe was simply

swept along on the sensual tide, cunt muscles gripping the thick, hard cock and squeezing him as he pounded into her over and over.

The orgasm was like the explosion of a bomb, a violent eruption of emotion and release that left them both stunned and shaken. Mark's body was dripping sweat, his breathing so ragged its sound chopped the air in the room. He collapsed forward, his weight bearing down on her, but she simply wrapped her arms and legs around him and held him. Discovering Sherry's body had obviously unleashed painful memories that were still raw and this was his way of dealing with them. She could just lock her own feelings in a closet somewhere, for the moment. Whatever he wanted, whatever he needed, she'd give him. At least for now.

## Chapter Eight

A bell was ringing somewhere and Mark wished it would just shut the hell up. His head throbbed and his body felt like one big ache. But the damn bell kept ringing. He felt a body move beside him, lean over him, the ringing stopped and a soft voice said, "Hello?"

The soft body pressed against him and the fragments of his brain began to come together.

"Just one moment, okay?" Delicate fingers brushed the hair back from his forehead and warm, lips brushed a kiss over his. "Mark? Can you open your eyes? You've got a call."

Prying his eyelids open was almost painful. He felt as if he'd been on a two-day drunk but he only recalled drinking one beer the night before. So what was going on?

"Gimme a minute," he muttered.

"He'll be right with you," the soft voice said.

He opened his eyes fully and looked directly into Chloe's sleep-flushed face. "Is that my cell phone?"

"Yes. It's for you. Can you talk yet?"

He shifted in bed, pulling her down next to him and taking the phone from her. He had to clear his throat twice before could speak again.

"Yeah?"

"Mark?" a deep voice said. "It's Leon Torres. I guess I woke you. Sorry."

"What time is it?" Morning sunlight was trying to make its way in past the curtains.

"Just a little past eight. I'm sorry but I really need to talk to you."

"Okay. Just give me a minute." He struggled to sit up and scrubbed his hand over his face. Shit. What was wrong with him? Beside him Chloe slipped out of the bed and pulled his t-shirt over her head. "Okay. I think I'm awake. What's up?"

"I'm not sure exactly how to say this, but I think I need your help. We've had a...killing."

And then it all came back to him. Last night. Sherry. The Chupacabra. Reality shot through him like a spear, and brought him fully awake.

"Okay. I'm with you. What happened? And why are you calling me about it?"

There was a long moment of silence. "I may owe you a huge apology, Mark. I don't mind admitting it, although my stupidity and prejudice embarrasses me."

"Leon, what the hell is going on?" he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. The room was still redolent with the scent of sex, and when he rubbed his face again he detected the faint bouquet of spring flowers that Chloe wore.

"I hate like hell to tell you this," the sheriff said slowly, "because I know you and Sherry Barton were...close. But Mark, she was killed last night and if other reports are to be believed, it has to be that devil beast."

Mark closed his eyes briefly, the image of Sherry's mutilated body flashing vividly across his brain. "Who found her this early? I thought she lived alone."

"She does. Did. Apparently her father was supposed to go to an early meeting in Laredo today. He called her to remind her she had to open the clinic. When she didn't answer he got worried and took a run out to her house."

"God. That must have been awful for him." A sick feeling rumbled through Mark's stomach.

"You can't even imagine."

"So what do you need from me?"

"I know you have every right to say no to me, but I'd sure appreciate it if you could meet me out at her house. Take a look at the scene." Another pause. "See if anything is similar to when you found Rob."

"Of course. No problem. Just give me a few minutes to get myself together."

"And Mark?"

"Yeah?"

Torres cleared his throat. "Is that Chloe Hanson who answered the phone?"

Mark's fingers tightened around the phone. "I didn't realize my personal life was up for discussion."

"Please," Torres said. "Don't get the wrong idea. You've been around town with her and Zapata isn't San Antonio. People don't have much to talk about."

"What's your point?"

"I'd hate to think we were too hasty in writing off what happened to her friend. If the beast somehow got her—although I'm still not convinced of that—you might think twice about bringing her with you. You know how gruesome the scene will be."

"I think I'd have a tough time keeping her away." He said, refraining from mentioning that he and Chloe had actually been to Sherry's last night. *That* would take more explaining than he wanted to do. "But I'll leave it up to her."

He disconnected the call and pushed himself off the bed. Shower. Clothes. Coffee. He needed to get himself together in a hurry. As he padded to the bathroom the memories of the night before flashed back at him. God! He'd used Chloe shamelessly to blunt his rage and his pain. And she'd let him do it! He was surprised she was still hanging around him this morning.

He was even more surprised when the shower door opened and she slipped in next to him, holding a mug of steaming coffee just out of the spray of water. He took a sip gratefully.

"And she waits on me, too," he murmured.

"Only on certain occasions," she told him, sharing the coffee. "How are you today?"

He raked his fingers through his wet hair. "Chloe, I can't believe I attacked you like an animal last night..."

"You *are* an animal," she teased. "At least part of the time."

But his eyes were dead serious when he looked at her. "I used you and that was very wrong of me. How can you even stand to look at me this morning, much less bring me coffee and climb into the shower with me."

She rubbed her fingers against his wet cheek. "You were in a lot of pain last night, Mark. I understand. If I could help you get through it, that means a lot to me."

He shook his head. "But I was —"

"Upset. Angry. Heartsick. It's all right. Listen, I don't know where this thing with us is going. I can't even think about that until I know what happened to Melinda. But just the same, I want to be here for you. So don't apologize. Okay?"

He kissed her, just a soft touching of lips. "Someone was watching over me when they sent you my way. And just so you know, I'm not taking no for an answer from you. On anything." He took another swallow of coffee, then reached outside the shower to set the mug on the vanity. "You have no idea what being naked with you in the shower does to me, but right now we need to get going."

"I'm coming with you." It was a statement, not a question.

He nodded. "I didn't figure I could keep you away. Just remember, you can wait in the truck if you need to."

Chloe found two travel mugs in a cabinet and filled them with the rest of the coffee before they headed out away from the house. They made the trip to Sherry Barton's house in silence, both of them very aware of what they'd find when they got there.

The area around Sherry's house was filled with activity. Three police vehicles, a van with Crime Scene Unit painted on it and a black panel van marked Coroner were parked haphazardly in the driveway. Yellow crime scene tape had been strung in a wide perimeter around the house itself and a photographer was moving slowly through the area taking shots with the crime scene camera. Four deputies huddled near the back steps, all of them with a sickly look on their faces.

Sheriff Leon Torres walked down from the back porch to Mark's truck and waited for him and Chloe to climb out. He shook hands with Mark and nodded to Chloe, his expression both strained and somber.

"It's a mess, Mark," he said in a tight voice. "It might be more than Miss Hanson wants to see."

Chloe shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans. "I could tell you I told you so," she said in a bitter voice, "but that wouldn't accomplish anything. And I want to see for myself what this...this...whatever it is can do. If Melinda's dead I want to know how it killed her." But her face was pale and her hands, before she'd concealed them, had a fine tremor.

"I'm very sorry about all that," Torres began in a low voice.

Chloe shrugged. "Forget it. I'm not looking for apologies, I'm looking for answers."

The sheriff turned back to Mark. "And you? Are you going to hold my refusal to listen to you against me?"

"What would I gain from it? The important thing, like Chloe says, is to find answers. So. Want to show me the scene?"

Torres led them up the back steps, nodding to the group of deputies as he passed them.

"Whatever this damn beast is," he said, pointing to the battered back door, "it's got plenty of strength. It bashed the fucking door right in." He lifted a sack from the porch, handed Mark and Chloe each a pair of paper booties and slipped some on his own boots. "Not that I expect there's anything to disturb. Dr. Barton tramped all over it before he called us. But we'll preserve what we can."

Mark felt Chloe slip her hand into his as they moved inside the house, as if drawing strength from his touch. Even though they'd seen Sherry the night before and thought they were prepared for what they'd find, the blatant horror was just as shocking as it had been the first time. Sherry's body was exactly as they'd last seen it. Even her intestines were still lying outside her body. The only difference was the chalk outline that had been drawn around it.

Mark sniffed the air, but the faint trace of turpentine had dissipated. Gone. Only the smell of death remained. What in the hell made that turpentine odor anyway? The people at Craig Stafford's lab were baffled by the lack of any identifiable DNA in the creature they'd autopsied, and Night Seekers weren't even sure now it was related to El Chupacabra. The thing that made them more than a little nervous was the idea that there might be more than one. That whatever kind of creature this was it had somehow managed to reproduce. Or worse, that someone was creating them in a lab.

Mark pushed the thought out of his mind. He had the here and now to deal with and that's what he needed to focus on.

"Well?" Torres prodded. "This is just the way you found Rob, isn't it?"

Mark nodded. The image of his friend had returned so vividly that it nearly brought him to his knees. He cleared his throat.

"Yes. Exactly."

Torres looked away. "I'll say it again, I owe you a big apology. Even though my family has lived here for generations, I always discarded the whisperings about El

Chupacabra as illiterate imaginings." He shook his head. "I guess I have to change my way of thinking."

"So you're not writing this off as a wild animal attack?" Mark wanted to know. He was very conscious of Chloe right next to him, looking at Sherry but in her mind seeing her friend.

*Damn it! I should have insisted she stay home.*

But in the next instant he thought, *Yeah, sure. Fat chance.*

He wished he could spare her everything she was thinking. Everything that had happened.

"Can't quite do that." The sheriff inclined his head toward the back door. "For one thing, no feral animal around here that I've ever heard of would actually come up on a porch and bash in a door that way. Maybe a bear could do it, but we sure don't have any of those around here."

"Anyway, he'd have to be damn hungry and actually smell food," Mark pointed out.

The sheriff turned his attention to Chloe. "Miss Hanson, I need to apologize to you, too. I'm damn sorry we blew you off the way we did."

"I tried to tell you something was wrong." She clung to Mark's hand.

"Yes, you did. But this is such a wide-open area, not the place where you'd expect a kidnapping without someone noticing. I let myself be persuaded your friend had just decided to ditch you."

"We can stand around all day saying how sorry we are," Mark put in, "but that doesn't accomplish a single thing."

"I was hoping you might have some ideas about where to go from here," Torres said. "We're doing all the usual things but obviously that's not going to be half enough." He paused. "I don't suppose that fancy new group you joined might give us a hand here."

Mark kept his face deliberately blank. He was wrestling with exactly how much to tell his former boss, anyway. He realized he couldn't keep too much to himself or he was putting the people of Zapata County in danger. They had to at least have some warning.

"Here's the thing," he told him. "If we need them I'll bring it to the team. But I've been doing some research on my own so let me fill you in on what I've learned first."

*That's the best way to play it right now.*

*I agree.*

Startled, his hand tightened on Chloe's and he glanced at her. She was looking at the sheriff but she gave his hand an answering squeeze. So. She could hear his thoughts. They could communicate mentally even in human form. Interesting. Another indication of their fate together. It also meant they could shut everyone else out when they needed to and prevent eavesdropping. He'd have to mention that to Craig and the team.

"Go ahead."

He dragged his mind back to the subject at hand. As briefly as he could, he told Torres about the killings in Maverick County, the slaying of the beast that turned out not to be the one they were hunting, and the pattern of three kills that his research had uncovered. He deliberately left out Logan's trip to the Florida Panhandle although he did mention the reports of the kills in Florida.

Torres frowned. "Then are you saying it's *not* the Chupacabra?"

"No. I'm, saying it...and I hope to god there's only one of these things...seems to roam the states at will. I have no idea how fast it travels, but apparently it's pretty speedy. We...I think it's back here to complete the pattern that we interrupted last month near Eagle Pass."

"Why not go back to Eagle Pass, then?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"Maybe it can reason enough to think we—or someone—would be waiting for it, so it took the nearest location. Webb County is closer but it's more highly populated."

"Should we take it that this kill completes the pattern, or do you think it will start a new trio of slaughter?"

Mark shrugged. "I'd like to say it will move on from here but I have a funny itch about it on the back of my neck."

"How did you decide you might have killed the wrong creature?" Torres wanted to know.

"When we read about three new killings in Florida."

Torres looked as if he was about to say something else when a voiced interrupted him.

"Sheriff?" One of the deputies walked into the house.

Mark noticed that he carefully avoided looking at the body.

"What is it?"

"Sorry, but the medical examiner wants to know if he can get to the body yet."

Torres sighed. "I've been holding everyone off," he told Mark, "until you got here and verified for me what I knew all along." He turned to the deputy. "Sure. Tell him to come ahead. I hope to god he hasn't had his breakfast yet."

"Andy Milburn still doing that?" Mark asked.

"Sure is. Even if he wanted to quit we don't exactly have candidates beating down the door." His chuckle had little humor to it. "I keep telling him he'll probably have to do his own autopsy when we get to it."

Mark urged Chloe back away from the body as Milburn made his way into the house. He nodded briefly at Mark, glanced at Chloe, then set his bag down and opened it. He was clad, as usual, in black jeans and t-shirt, and his feet were covered with paper booties and he pulled out a pair of latex gloves that he snapped into place on his hands.



Mark wrapped his arm around Chloe and kept her pulled tightly against him as they watched Milburn go about his job. He decided to try the silent communication thing again.

*You shouldn't have to watch this.*

*Yes, I should. Even if this is what happened to Melinda, it's better to have it in my mind than not know anything at all.*

*I'm so sorry about this.*

*Not your fault. I'm sorry about your friend.*

Mark tightened his arm around her, trying to infuse her with some kind of comfort.

"You need to have a town meeting," he told Torres.

The sheriff scowled. "All that will do is get everyone riled up and scared out of their minds."

"They need to be scared," Mark insisted. "Too many people here live in isolated situations. Hell, most of the county's an isolated situation. They need to be on the alert."

"Maybe, but what I don't need is for people to get trigger happy and start shooting at everything that moves."

"I'll help you talk to them," he promised. "I can bring a different perspective to things. But too many of them live out in nowhere like Sherry did. And Rob. That makes them prime pickings. They need to be prepared, Leon."

"What about your new job? Won't your boss object?"

"Not when I explain the situation to him," Mark assured him. "He knows this is my home territory. And if we need outside reinforcements I'd rather have him already briefed on the situation."

Andy Milburn rose from where he'd been kneeling beside the body. "Best guess is she died sometime between seven and midnight last night," he said. He glanced at what was left of Sherry. "Bastard didn't leave us much to work with."

"That means she came home right after work," Torres said. "And we didn't find any signs of company." He looked at the body again. "Anyway, she was dressed in pajamas, and not the kind you entertain anyone in."

"I'm taking her back to Cowan's," the medical examiner told them.

A small county like Zapata couldn't afford the facilities for a coroner, so they used space in Cowan's Funeral home.

Torres nodded. "All right. I'll come by after a while. Can you get to this right away?"

Milburn nodded. "As soon as we get there." He left to get his gurney to transport the body to his van.

"What about her father?" Mark asked. "It must have been a shock to him to find the body this way."

A somber look crawled over the sheriff's face. "Damn lucky he didn't have a heart attack. One of my deputies drove him to the hospital in Laredo along with his wife. She wasn't much better than he was, although thank god she didn't have to see the body."

"Are you going to call that meeting? Like I suggested?"

Torres let his breath out in a heavy sigh. "I guess you're right about that. When I get back to the office I'll get with the county commissioner and a couple of other people and set it up. As sparse as the population is in the county we shouldn't have much trouble notifying people. I'll get a couple of volunteers to help."

"You'll let us know when?"

"Yes. And anything else you can tell me would be a great help." He paused. "I sure could use your help with this."

"I'll check in with my team when I get back to the house and let you know what I can give you. Okay?"

The sheriff nodded. "That's doable."

Mark pulled out his cell phone. "I'm going to take a few pictures before Andy takes the body out of here. That all right?"

"Whatever you need to do."

Mark snapped photos from every angle while Chloe stood to the side, waiting quietly. Finally he reached for her hand again.

"Let's go," he said in a quiet voice. "I need to check in with the team."

She nodded and followed him out to the truck.

"We're going to reopen the case on your friend," Torres told them as they walked out onto the porch.

"Thank you, Sheriff." They were the first words she had spoken in several long minutes. "But I think by this time I'll just be happy if we can find her body." Mark opened the door of the truck cab for her and she climbed up inside.

"You okay?" Mark asked as they pulled out onto the road. "You've been very quiet." Then he made a sound of disgust. "Am I an idiot or what? Of course you're not all right. How could you possibly be?"

"I'm really good." But actually she wasn't. Since she'd looked at the body in the daylight she'd been invaded by an icy feeling that gripped her and refused to melt.

"I know you're not," he contradicted her. "But it's okay. I understand. I know what it was like when I found Rob, and at least there I had..." His voice trailed off.

"A body," she finished for him. "I know. And just like I told the sheriff. At this point I'll be happy if that's what we find. Anything else is too horrible to contemplate."

"When we get back to the house I'll put in a video call to the ranch, bring them up to speed. Then we'll plan out where we're going hunting today. Oh, and bring that fancy camera of yours."

"My camera?"

"Yeah. I want pictures of likely places the beast might hide or hunt." He squeezed her thigh. "Maybe you'll even get some good shots for that book of yours."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mark's on the horn."

Chelsea was manning the comm center when the call came in. She put him up, on the big screen and hollered for everyone to join her. They gathered behind her, standing, watching the screen.

Ric pulled up a chair to sit down next to her. "Let's hear him," he said.

"Go ahead," Chelsea told Mark. "What have you got?"

"Another kill." Mark was sitting at his laptop at his table. They could just see Chloe sitting off to his left.

"When?" Ric asked.

"Last night. Chloe and I discovered the body when we ran. I..." He stopped, cleared his throat, started again. "The...victim was a friend of mine. We went to check on her."

"Why didn't you call us then?"

They could all see the pain on Mark's face. "Last night we couldn't do anything anyway. And the devil beast was gone from the area. I...we...I'm sorry. You're right. I should have contacted you right away."

Ric made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Okay, let's get past that. How did you get to it this morning?"

"Leon Torres, the sheriff and my old boss, called me." They could see Mark swallow. Hard. "Sorry. Besides having been close to...the latest victim, this all just brought back the memories of the night I found Rob. Hold on."

Mark rose from his seat and moved out of their field of vision. Chloe took his place.

"Give him a minute, okay? He was pretty much a mess last night and it's all hitting him again right now."

"Hello, Chloe." Ric forced a smile, knowing she could see him. "You doing okay?"

"Hanging in there. Okay. Here's Mark again."

She moved and Mark took her place, a mug of coffee in one hand. He took a quick swallow and set it down.

"Sorry about that. So. Same thing. Puncture marks at the neck. No blood. Body ripped open and the intestines pulled out. Oh, and when Chloe and I were there last night it must have been right after it happened because I could still smell turpentine in the air. This morning there wasn't any."

"I think finding out what causes that odor could be key to learning where these creatures come from," Sam put in. "And maybe how they're created."

"Yeah, well, we have to catch one to find out," Mark pointed out. "And pray it's the right one."

"So what plans does the sheriff have?" Ric wanted to know.

"I insisted he call a meeting of at least the key people in the county to get the word out. Not that I think too many people will believe him."

"They need to take precautions," Sophia put in. "The beast strikes without warning. And I looked at the Google maps for Zapata County. There are a lot of isolated residences out there."

Mark shrugged. "I'll do what I can. A lot of people think the Chupacabra is just a superstition and won't take it seriously. Some will hide in their homes, which is good. Chloe and I are going out again this afternoon in the truck. We're still trying to find some trace of her friend. I'll make a note of the houses we want to check at night."

"Any word on her friend at all?" Ric asked.

Mark shook his head. "I'll let you know if there is. At least the sheriff realizes he screwed up before so he's hot to jump on it again."

"Chloe? You still there?" Ric asked.

She leaned into the field of vision. "I'm here."

"I hate to be blunt, but you know your friend is probably dead by now."

"Yes." They all heard the sadness and pain in her voice. "Actually I'm hoping that's the case. Anything else..."

Her voice trailed off but everyone in the room knew what she was thinking. If there was something human behind the devil beast and Melinda had been kidnapped, death would be preferable.

"Okay." Mark finished his coffee. "Leon asked me if my 'new' boss would be willing to lend a hand if he needed it. What do you want me to tell him?"

"Tell him you reported in and it's being discussed. But we need to know specifically what he wants before we make a commitment. Right now we're still chasing shadows. And you and Chloe hunting at night can do as much as we can until we get something more concrete."

"I'm going to try to pinpoint just a handful of the most likely places for attack," Mark said. "I have a good idea now, especially with the pictures Logan got, what the beast will be looking for. Then we'll see where we are."

"Okay. Stay in touch, you know we're here for you."

"Thanks."

The screen went dark.

No one said anything for a long moment. Finally Sophia spoke up.

"I don't even want to think about the possibility of some demented human being having a hand in this."

"Let's not jump to conclusions right now," Ric told her. "The first thing we need to find out is if there's more than one of the creatures. Who's on research duty today?"

“Me.” Dante held up his hand. “I’ll be looking for any other reports anywhere of similar killings and trying to put a timeline together. That will give us a better idea if there’s one or many.”

“All right.” Ric stood up. “Let’s get to work, folks.”

## Chapter Nine

Neither of them had much appetite for breakfast, although the both headed for the coffeepot as soon as they were in the house. Knowing they'd need it, Mark had taken the time to set it up on a timer before they'd left. He knew Chloe wasn't nearly as together as she pretended. The scene at Sherry's had shaken her up more than she allowed herself to show. But he saw how the color leached from her face, lines of strain bracketing her mouth and hollowing her cheeks. She was thinking of Melinda. Imagining her in that situation. And doing her best to clamp a lid on her imagination. He figured the best thing he could for her right now was distract her and keep her occupied. While she showered he made sandwiches and filled a cooler with them and bottles of water.

By the time he was finished Chloe was out of the bathroom, dressed again in jeans and t-shirt and towel drying her hair. She looked marginally better although was still pale and he noticed a faint trembling in her hands.

She stared at the cooler. "Where are you going?"

"We," he corrected. "Remember what I said earlier? We are going for a long drive to hit some of the places we haven't seen yet."

"Looking for likely targets?"

He took the towel from her and turned her to face him, keeping his hands on her shoulders. "And for Melinda," he said in a soft voice. "We'll find her, Chloe. I promise you that."

Tears clouded her eyes and she leaned her face against his solid chest. "I'm just so afraid of what we'll really find," she told him, her voice muffled by his body.

"I know, sugar. And I'm not going to try to bullshit you about what that might be. But at least we'd have an answer, and that's better than not knowing. Right?"

"Right." She looked up at him. "Thank you."

"For what? I haven't done anything yet."

"For taking me seriously. Not trying to shut me out this morning. And just..." She waved a hand in the air... "everything."

His kiss was tender, one he meant it to be merely a sign of affection, a touch that said *I'm here for you*, but the heat between them was so intense that in seconds his tongue was searching her mouth and his hands tightened on her shoulders. It took tremendous effort to tear his mouth away from hers.

"You're welcome for everything." One corner of his mouth turned up in a grin. "But we'd better cut this out or we'll never get out of the house today."

"Yes, sir." She gave him a mock salute. "Give me ten minutes and I'll be ready."

“And don’t forget to bring your camera gear,” he called after her as she headed toward the bedroom.

By the time he’d loaded the cooler in the truck and gathered what else he thought he’d need, Chloe was ready. She dropped her camera bag in the well beneath the dashboard but kept the camera itself in her hands. Her eyes widened when she watched him drop three extra clips for his gun into the console along with a small box of shells for his rifle.

“What exactly are we looking for out there?” she wanted to know.

“I like to be prepared for anything,” he told her.

“I guess.”

Yesterday they’d begun at the motel and worked outward and found nothing. Today they headed to the area north of Zapata, a vast, empty stretch of land dotted with rocky outcroppings, miniscule streams, clusters of trees and not much else. Mark had patrolled almost every area of the county as a Sheriff’s Deputy. There were places in some of the rocky rises that he wanted to check, places where a body could be hidden. At this point he’d be happy with a skeleton he could order DNA tests on.

Periodically they stopped for Chloe to take pictures. He could tell she was trying hard to focus on her work and keep her mind off the real reason for their exploration.

About noon he found a patch of shade under a cluster of three trees, pulled the truck off the so-called road and parked beneath the huge limbs. Taking the cooler from the backseat, he carried it to the rear of the truck, let the tailgate down and set the cooler in the middle.

He gave Chloe a soft grin when she jogged around to see what he was doing. “Bet you haven’t had a lot of truck picnics.”

“Not too many,” she agreed.

He lifted her up onto the tailgate on one side of the cooler, then hoisted himself up to the other.

“Kind of slim pickin’s for sandwich stuff,” he apologized. “I haven’t done as much grocery shopping as I could.”

“And you didn’t expect to have a house guest,” she reminded him.

He reached across the cooler to cup her chin. “I’d gladly give up my share of the food to have you as a roommate,” he said in a soft voice.

“Thank you.” Her voice was so low he wouldn’t have known what she was saying if he hadn’t been looking at her.

“Chloe, I know this is hard on you. I’ve been there, remember? So I’m definitely not minimizing it. But I’m going to get you through it and help you find answers. Okay?”

She nodded, then forced a smile. “So what did you *really* pack for lunch?”

“Let’s see.” He shifted the sandwiches. “There’s ham or turkey, or turkey or ham. What’s your choice?”

"Turkey. Thank you."

They unwrapped their sandwiches and he took out two bottles of water, handing her one. After he'd swallowed almost half of his along with a huge bite of his sandwich, he put everything down and pulled his phone from the clip on his belt.

"I'm going to call the sheriff and see if by any slim chance he has anything to tell me," he said, punching in the number. "Although I know it won't be much."

"You said the Chupacabra doesn't leave any trace that it's been there. No fingerprints, not even footprints. So how does it get there and get away?"

"That's something Night Seekers is still trying to figure out."

The phone call yielded as little as he'd expected.

"I wish I had answers," Leon Torres told him. "More for Sherry's parents than anything else."

"How are they doing?"

"Not good. Her father had a heart attack and may need surgery. Her mother's in a state of almost total collapse. I called Sherry's brother in Laredo and he and his wife drove right over. Poor guy is having to hold it together for everyone."

"Ray Barton is a heads-up man," Mark said. "Someone you can count on in a crisis. He'll do what he has to and fall apart when everyone else is back on their feet. So. Nothing to tell?"

"No, damn it." The sheriff's anger came through the phone. "Of course no one saw anything. No feral animals roaming around where they shouldn't be. And there's nothing to track. Not one fucking thing. How the hell does this beast do it, Mark?"

"That's the question of the year. How are you doing getting a meeting together?"

Torres snorted. "About like you'd expect. Part of the county commissioners laughed in my face. Told me if that's the best I can come up with for a killer maybe they need a new sheriff."

"I see they haven't changed much. What about the rest of them?"

"They're afraid to spook people with this damn legend. Only I'm beginning to agree with you, it's a lot more than a legend. Half the county is whispering about it again and reciting incantations to keep it away."

"So is there a meeting or isn't there?" Mark pushed.

Torres sighed heavily. "I scheduled one at the high school auditorium for eight o'clock tonight. I have no idea how many will show up. How long do you figure we've got until the next attack?"

"I wish I could tell you. Again, it depends if the beast decides to move someplace else for the next series of kills or scouts Zapata." He rubbed his hand over his face as if he could rub away the unseen presence of the Chupacabra.

"Are you coming to the meeting?"



"Yes. And I'll see if I can get more information to share. Are you checking all the people living in an isolated situation like Sherry?"

"Trying to." He sighed again. "See you tonight. And Mark?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for your help. Again, I'm sorry..." His voice trailed off.

"It's okay, Leon. I understand. See you later." He snapped the phone shut and stuck it back in its clip.

Chloe had been nibbling at her sandwich, watching him. "Nothing?"

He shook his head. "I would have asked him about the autopsy, if there was any foreign matter on the body but that will take a couple of days." He took another bite of his lunch.

"I'm going to the meeting with you."

He knew she wasn't asking so he simply nodded his head. "I'd expected you would. Besides, I'm not too anxious to leave you alone right now."

What little color she had leached from her face. "You think the devil beast will come after me?"

He shrugged. "I live pretty far out of the mainstream, too. I just don't want to take any chances." He reached over the cooler and stroked her cheek. "You're very...important to me, Chloe."

"I-I know. I just want to...get things settled about Melinda before I can think of anything else." She wet her lips, her tongue licking away a stray crumb.

A bolt of lust shot through him so strong he had to force it under control. "It's all right, Chloe. I just don't want you to close your mind to the fact that I know we are fated to be mates."

Chloe swallowed some water before looking at him again. "I know something's going on with us, Mark. Just give me some time to adjust to it, okay?"

"I'll give you all the time you need to adjust to it. And to being with others like us. Just as long as you don't run away from me."

Her smile was weak but at least it was there. "I can promise I'll do my best not to."

And he knew he'd have to be satisfied with that.

"Okay, I'm going to call the ranch and tell them what I need for tonight's meeting. And hope Ric gives the okay. Then I want to check out as many isolated residences as I can." He hopped off the tailgate, stood in front of Chloe and bracketed her body with his hands. "Whatever happens, Chloe, I'll be right here with you. Always."

He reached his hands up to capture her face and pull it down for his kiss. He'd meant for it to be just a light symbol of his feelings, but the moment his lips touched hers heat consumed him, surging through his body. He licked Chloe's lips, tracing their shape with the tip of his tongue before thrusting it hard into her mouth. When she circled his wrists with her fingers he was afraid she was going to pull them away, but

she simply clung tightly to him and met his tongue with her own small one. When he broke the kiss they were both breathless.

“We’d better get moving,” she said, her gaze locked with his.

“Yes. We should. Just remember I’m not giving up. It’s more than just sex, Chloe, and I’m going to convince you of that.”

Besides the earthscape shots she took during the afternoon, she also shot pictures of the houses they checked out.

“I’ll download them to my computer and print them out,” Mark said as they headed home. “One good thing about this county being so sparsely populated. There might be a lot of houses way out in noplacel, but there’s a lot of noplacel between them. Let’s go home so I can check with Ric and see if he’s sending me what I want.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The devil beast hunkered down in the cave formed by the outcropping of rock, its blood thirst slaked, its stomach full. It hadn’t even had to assume a different form this time, something that sapped its strength. It had just been able to stake out its prey and go in for the kill. If it could have done so it would have stood up and beaten its chest in satisfaction.

Night was coming, a time to sleep and regenerate. It knew its thirst would only be satisfied for a short while and it needed to find its next victim. Not finishing its cycle of kills the last time in this area had short-circuited its brain somehow, driving it back here, like a child completing a hopscotch pattern. But it had been only temporarily satisfying. Its body demanded the start of a new cycle. This time it would have to finish the rhythm of triple kills before taking off for another area. Last time it had left with an unfinished, unsatisfied feeling, and even the kills in other parts of the land hadn’t fulfilled the need.

Letting the “other one” have that last kill had been a mistake. It hadn’t been able to return and finish its pattern. This time it would be more clever, much more careful. This time it knew what to watch for.

Closing its eyes, it curled up in a fetal position and drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dakota Gray had spent the afternoon working in her herb garden. She’d staked out one section where she grew the special plants the shifters needed, harvesting them when they were ready and pulverizing them to sprinkle on their food or mix in with their drinks. Jonah had given her an explicit formula to follow and she was scrupulous about. It made her feel she was really contributing something.

The rest of the garden was divided into two areas—one where she planted the herbs she packaged to sell on the internet and a much larger section where she was growing vegetables for them to eat. Using organic pesticides she didn’t have to worry

about what was on the produce she used for salads or steamed to serve with whatever meat or fish completed the meal.

Jonah had tried to insist it was too much work for her, but she argued that she was used to doing hard work. So instead he'd somehow lined up everyone to take a turn digging and doing whatever else was needed. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry when she had to explain to city boy Dante Martello what was a weed and what wasn't.

Now she stripped off her clothes, tossed them in the hamper in their closet and stepped into a steaming shower to wash away the dirt. She was standing there letting the hot spray wash over her when the shower door slid open and Jonah stepped in beside her.

"If you shower with your wife you save money," he joked, taking the bottle of shower gel from her hand.

"Well. I'm all for saving a penny here and there," she teased.

He began working the lather into her neck and shoulders with his strong hands, his touch both soothing and arousing. "Mark just called again. Ric okayed us sending everything we've got to him as long as he uses it carefully. We want people to understand what they're dealing with and to take it seriously, but we don't want them to blow it off as something out of someone's imagination."

"I only wish that's what it was," she told him. "How's Chloe holding up?"

His hands were moving down her arms now, gently kneading her muscles. "I think she's doing okay, but it really shook her up to see the handiwork of the devil beast up close and personal."

"I know just how she feels. I remember when we found the bodies near Eagle Pass." She leaned back against him, turning her head just enough to keep the water out of her face. His hands slid around to cup her breasts, his fingers gently chafing her nipples. She could feel them harden instantly beneath his touch and wondered if the incredible heat between her and Jonah would ever diminish in its intensity. She hoped not.

"I think Mark's fallen for her." Jonah's lips were close to her ear, his breath drifting across the sensitive shell.

A shiver skittered lightly over her skin. When he lightly nipped the soft flesh of the lobe she moaned softly. "Fallen for her?" When he touched her she had trouble making her brain work.

"Uh-huh. Must be something about the air in South Texas," he teased, and she knew he was remembering the instant incendiary reaction between the two of them.

"We only got to see her for a few minutes on the screen but she looks very nice." She was babbling and she knew it. But Jonah was kneading her breasts, squeezing them, molding and shaping them with his hands until they were as much his as hers. With infinite slowness he rubbed lather into the swollen tips, then pinched them gently. Instant heat blossomed in the hot well of her pussy and she had to clamp her thighs together to control the throbbing his touch always incited.

"Mmm," she hummed, pressing herself harder against him. The long, hard thickness of his cock bobbed against the cheeks of her ass, nestling into the crevice with a delicious sense of familiarity.

"Like that, do you?" he murmured, moving his hands down her rib cage.

"You know I do."

"You like to feel that thick cock against you, don't you?" He nipped her ear again. "And inside you."

"Mmm hmm." She could hardly form coherent words now. Lightning zinged her nerve endings, waking up any part of her body that might still have been sleeping.

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?" his voice was low and thick. "And how much I love to fuck you?"

"I...don't think so."

"I do. I love to play with these beautiful breasts and pinch and suck your gorgeous nipples. I purely enjoy running my hands down your stomach like this..." He moved his hands as he spoke... "Until I reach your pussy. When I slide my fingers through your curls into those slick walls it's all I can do to hold on until I can drive my dick into you."

Dakota loved it when erotic words and phrases tumbled from his mouth. It aroused her as much as his touch, making her weak with need and hot with desire. Two fingers slid over her clit, taking a moment to squeeze it lightly before venturing farther into the slickness of her labia and finally to the opening of her greedy channel.

"When I find this sweet opening and push my fingers into it like this." Two fingers drove into her, moving back and forth against her clutching walls. "It makes me so hot I could come just from touching you. Damn, Dakota. You have the best pussy in the world." He licked the shell of her ear. "And it's all mine."

"Yessss," she hissed, pushing down on his fingers. When he withdrew them she whimpered her need.

"Don't worry," he chuckled. "I'll be back there."

He urged her gently forward until she was pressed to the wet tiles. Circling her wrists with his fingers he placed her hands flat against the wall, using one foot to separate hers and widen her stance.

"Stay just like that." His voice had deepened with lust. "Don't move. I want to be sure I get every single area."

She heard the soft *squish* as he squeezed the bottle of gel, then his hands were caressing her ass, cupping the swell of them, tracing their shape. When his soap-slicked fingers traced the crevice between the cheeks from top to bottom Dakota sucked in her breath, the muscles in her cunt clenching in response to Jonah's touch.

"You have the hottest ass in the world, darlin'." His mouth was at her ear again, his body close enough that his thick cock was prodding her. She moaned again, softly.

"You are so responsive," he crooned, pressing the tips of two fingers against the ring of her anus. "I barely touch you and you go up in flames. God, you don't know how I love that about you."

She arched her hips back at him and he pushed the two fingers inside her hot, dark rear tunnel, scissoring them and stretching the tissues. Last night he had fucked her there and as it always was, the experience took her beyond the bounds of any pleasure she'd ever known. She clenched herself around his fingers, trying to draw him deeper.

He chuckled again, a low, erotic sound. "Don't rush me, darlin'. I'm enjoying myself too much."

He pulled his fingers out with excruciating slowness. She heard the crinkle of the wet wipes he'd placed on the nightstand, then sound of the plastic bottle again and his fingers slipped between her thighs to penetrate her cunt from behind. The moment she felt his fingers inside her she compressed her inner walls, trying to hold him inside her. But again, just as she began to ride his hands, he pulled it away and moved his attention to her clit.

*Oh, god!*

She was so aroused that just that barest ghost of a touch nearly made her come.

"Jonaaaaah!" she wailed, rocking back and forth on his wandering hand.

"Oh, yeah," he breathed. "You're ready."

He moved behind her, opening then closing the shower door, and she knew he was rolling on a condom. His hands smoothed over her ass again.

"I want to fuck you here again," he growled, letting his fingers rub slowly through the crevice. "Hard."

She could only nod.

Dakota pressed herself to the water-streaked tiles as fingers separated the cheeks of her buttocks. Then Jonah's soap-slicked erection pushed against the opening, more, more, more, until with a last heavy roll of his hips he was deep inside her. Hot breath caressed her neck as he lowered his mouth to where it joined her shoulder and bit down gently. Instantly tiny spasms raced through her, incited by her knowledge of him as a wolf and his habit of claiming her with his teeth whenever they made love. She hadn't known how much just that simple thing could arouse her.

Giving her a moment to adjust to him, he held her in place with strong fingers as he began the pistoning motion that pulled at the dark lust inside her and forced it to swell throughout her body. She whimpered in satisfaction as he pounded into her with rhythmic strokes. Everything fell away, including the water streaming down on them as need rose up within her, firing her nerves and sending shards of heat everywhere inside her.

As his strokes increased in intensity and speed his fingers tightened on her hips until the increase in pressure told her he was almost at his peak. She moaned and cried out in her need and Jonah, tuned into her body, shifted one hand around to take her clit

between two fingers. That was all it took for a fierce orgasm to rip through her, Jonah answering with his own release, pouring into the thin latex again and again.

And then, knowing what she needed to finish her off, as his own convulsions began to fade, he lifted one leg high, reached beneath her and drove two fingers into the hungry walls of her pussy. She clenched around him and pushed down, her body shaking and shuddering as she peaked, and then slowly came down from that edge he'd pushed her to. When at last he lowered her leg, she leaned back against him limp and spent, letting herself rest in the circle of his arms.

Jonah kissed the top of her head. "I don't know about you, but I'm waterlogged and wiped out. You do take it out of me, woman."

She turned in his arms and grinned. "Good. I can keep you in line that way."

When they were dry and pulling on their clothes again, Dakota glanced over at him. "Do you think it would help Chloe to speak to another woman about all this? Someone who's not a Night Seeker?"

"You mean because you've been up close and personal outside the circle?"

She nodded. "So to speak. She just... I don't know...looks so lost."

"I think the reality of what could have happened to her friend is just beginning to hit her." He pulled a t-shirt over his head and shoved his feet into his work boots. "Let me sound out Mark about it. He can let Chloe know the connection's here if she wants to reach out. That's a nice thing for you to offer." He pulled his wife close, giving her a tight hug and kissing the top of her head. "I don't know how I got so lucky as to find you, but you'd better believe I'm not about to let you get away."

"Good." She grinned up at him impishly. "Same goes."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark hadn't been sure what to expect as far as the meeting with the community went but when he and Chloe arrived at the high school parking lot there was almost no place to park.

"Big turnout," she noted.

Mark grunted. "You'll have three different groups here—those who are scared out of their minds, those who are filled with avid curiosity and those who think this is the brainchild of some whackjob."

"You called Sheriff Torres with the list of places we identified as possible targets, right?"

He nodded. "He pointed out, however, that he still has a limited staff and can't cover every place and still do his job in other areas."

"He must be very frustrated."

"No kidding." He glanced over at her. "I told him we'd give him a hand."

"I'm sure he thinks we're going driving around in the truck, right?"

“Yes. Despite how long I lived here no one ever knew I’m a shifter.” He grimaced. “Not exactly something you advertise to people.”

“But you ran at night like you do now, right?” She was watching him with open curiosity. “Didn’t people see you?”

He gave her a lopsided grin. “I was always very careful. Just like now. Come on. We’d better get inside.”

In the auditorium there was standing room only. The buzz of conversation that filled the room was a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Chloe and Mark couldn’t help but eavesdrop on some of it as they made their way to the front of the room and propped themselves against the wall.

“You’re right,” she said. “These people are all over the place in what they’re thinking.”

“Let’s hope Leon can get through to them. Whatever they think, they all need to be alert and extra watchful.”

But it was obviously an uphill battle for the sheriff, as he made a valiant attempt to warn the residents of his county and still keep things under control. It was very obvious that at least half the people didn’t believe the Chupacabra was anything but an old wives’ tale, a legend born generations ago and fed by people’s imagination.

Finally, in desperation, Torres glanced over at Mark and raised his eyebrows, a pleading expression on his face.

“Don’t move from here,” Mark whispered to Chloe as he disengaged himself from her and moved toward the stage. He jogged easily up the steps at the side and went to join his former boss at the microphone.

“I think a lot of you will remember me,” he began. “Right?”

Heads nodding and murmuring sounds of assent rolled over the crowd.

“Then you should also remember how my friend, Rob, was killed.”

“That could have just been a feral hog,” someone shouted. “Sheriff thought so at the time.”

“I was wrong,” Torres said quickly. “What happened last night made me see that. Whatever did that to Rob and to Sherry is like nothing we’ve ever seen before.”

“I have some connections,” Mark went on, “people who have also lost someone to this beast and who have been doing research on it. They’ll all tell you that, whatever this is, it isn’t a figment of someone’s imagination.” He glanced over at Torres. “I’m going to ask the sheriff to get the newspaper to print the pictures of Sherry Barton’s body. I hate to do it and invade on her family’s grief, but I think if you get a good look at what happened to her you’ll take this whole thing seriously.”

“Take some legend seriously?” someone else scoffed. “Get real.”

“Whether you believe the legend or not,” he told the crowd, “something is out there wreaking havoc. Those of you not living in one of the very few towns in this county need to be on the alert.” He looked at the sheriff then back at the crowd again. “I don’t

know if Sheriff Torres will agree with me, but you need your guns loaded and ready. This beast broke down Sherry's back door, so don't think locking yourself up will do the trick."

There were a lot more question and he and his former boss did their best to answer them. The best result they got from the meeting was the sense that, whether people agreed with them or not, they'd be taking extra precautions. At least he hoped so.

When everyone had finally filed out of the building, he handed Torres the folder he'd carried into the meeting with him.

"What's this?"

"Some information the group I'm with now has pulled together. It shows the travel patterns of the devil beast and the locations of its three-kill cycles."

All the muscles in the sheriff's face tightened as he looked at the pictures and skimmed the report.

"Maybe it'll be lucky and decide it's had enough of Texas for a while."

"We can only hope. Okay, Chloe and I are going to do some nighttime reconnaissance. What area do you want us to take?"

"North of Zapata and east. That work for you?"

"No problem."

"You and Chloe come in for coffee in the morning. We'll see what all we've come up with tonight, if anything."

Mark nodded. "See you then. Pray for a quiet night."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark and Chloe wasted no time once they got home. They stripped out of their clothes and walked out onto the front porch.

Chloe shivered as the breeze rippled over her skin.

"Cold?" Mark pulled her against him.

"I won't be in a minute." She looked up at him. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." He hugged her tightly. "What's up?"

"We've been changing a lot the last couple of days. Is that okay? Will we hurt ourselves?"

His laugh was low and soft. "If we kept up the pace it might, but our bodies demand that we shift as often as we can. Sometimes that's not possible. Did you find you had problems if you weren't able to shift when you wanted to?"

She shrugged. "Sort of. It's hard when you live in a city. You have to find places to go on weekends and things. And I didn't know nearly as much about it as you do."

"Dakota Furcal who's married now to Jonah Grey raises herbs, among other things. Cultivates them. Mixes them from special formulas that help us deal with this."



“Oh? I didn’t know about any herbs or anything.”

“When this is all over I’ll take you back to Desolation Ranch, you can meet her and she can show you her herb garden.”

He felt her withdraw just the tiniest bit.

“Mark, I don’t know.”

“I’m not giving up, so forget that. I think once you know what happened to Melinda we can move forward from there.”

“You understand that my feelings are all over the place until then, right?”

“Of course I do.” He dropped a kiss on her hair. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t pursue you with everything I’ve got.”

She grinned. “Okay. I have to say, the sex is great.”

He swatted her on the rear end. “Hussy. Okay, we need to get going. There’s a bright moon tonight which will help us see but also won’t give us much cover. Be careful and follow me. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

The air around them swirled momentarily, as if a sudden gust of wind had swept across the porch, disturbing the currents. When it calmed, two wolves stood poised to leap, a large black one and a smaller, daintier red one. The black one nuzzled the other with his snout, gave her mouth one long, slow glide of his tongue, then jumped from the porch, the smaller wolf right on his tail.

Mark was careful to set a measured stride, not pace himself so swiftly that Chloe could not keep up. But he was right in what he told her – they did have a lot of ground to cover.

The moon lit up the night as if it was a spotlight hanging from the sky, casting its brilliant light everywhere. Mark set a path away from highways and road, even the narrow two-lane ones. Instead he led them across the loamy, rocky ground, using trees here and there as cover, stopping to catch their breath and get their bearings. Twice they saw the headlights and heard the roar of an all-terrain vehicle racing across the landscape. Each time Mark managed to find a place for them to hide.

The trek was long and arduous. During the afternoon they had identified the houses where the people would be the most likely targets. Now they had to survey them at night, looking for those that had trees to provide cover for the beast. Those with outbuildings were scouted even more thoroughly. Mark remembered the barn in Eagle Pass next to the house where a woman had been killed. The thing that had made him itchy was the faint aroma of turpentine that had clung to that place. He had no idea what the connection was yet but he wasn’t missing any bets.

It was well past midnight by the time they had scoped out the places on their list and headed home. As they cleared one rocky rise Mark stopped, so suddenly that Chloe almost crashed into him. He lifted his snout to the night breeze, scenting for the faint trace of something he’d thought...there...no...for a minute...

Damn!

For a moment there he thought he'd caught the scent of the devil beast.

Chloe pushed at him with her snout until he turned to look at her, saw the question in his eyes. Slowly he shook his big head.

Nothing.

By the time they reached Mark's house they were both exhausted. There had been no playful interludes tonight, only the hunt. The strain had taken its toll on both of them. They shifted on his porch and he opened the door, motioning for Chloe to go in ahead of him.

"You thought you scented something, didn't you." It wasn't a question.

"Yes. But it was so faint like... I don't know... Like it almost wasn't there." He rubbed his face. "Maybe I just imagined it. Did you smell anything?"

"No, but then I'm really not attuned to is the way you are."

Mark padded into the kitchen to fill a glass with water from the tap. The run had been tense and exhausting and they should both be ready to sleep. But he wanted to make notes on the places they'd seen tonight before he forgot details. Besides, shifting always ramped up his testosterone level. He wondered if Chloe realized they were both still naked. He looked down the length of his body and swallowed a grin. Yup. Just as he thought. He was swollen and as hard as a hammer.

He stole a glance at Chloe, who had been pretty quiet since they'd gotten back. She was curled up on a corner of the couch, ignoring her nudity, her face a study in sadness.

*I'm such an ass. She's imagining what might have happened to her friend and I'm thinking of how quickly I can get her into bed because I want to fuck her brains out. Class, Mark. Real class.*

He walked over to her, stooped and cupped her chin, lifting her face to him.

"I have to send a message to the ranch, and an email to the sheriff. Then how about if I pour us each a drink?"

The weak smile she gave him almost tore his heart out. "You take such good care of me. I know I'm being a real drag."

"Not at all, sugar. I lost my good friend to El Chupacabra so I know how you feel about Melinda. Especially since we don't even know for sure what happened and you're being dumped into this latest killing situation." He brushed a kiss over her lips. "My fault. I should have insisted you stay out of it."

"No." She shook her head emphatically. "You couldn't have kept me away. Can't. I have to know what happened to my friend." One tear formed in each eye. "I know you understand that."

"I do. And that's why I'm not pushing you away. Let me take care of business, then get us a drink."

She grabbed his hand. "Take me to bed, Mark. Please."

*With pleasure. But only if you know what you're doing.*

He kissed her again. "Business first, then drink, then good hot sex to wipe away the outside world. Okay?"

One corner of her mouth turned up again. "Sounds good to me."

\* \* \* \* \*

The beast stirred in its little cave, restless with the disturbances of the night. Something had come by the cave before, an animal of some kind, but the scent wasn't one it associated with this geographic area. For a brief moment it thought it caught the faint, lingering aroma of... No, not possible. He'd lain there, listening carefully. Pressing against the interior wall of the hollow in the stones.

After that the silence of the night settled in again, a thickness broken only by the songs of night birds, the rustle of small animals moving through the brush. The whisper of leaves as the breeze stirred them. The little cave felt secure, hidden as it was by the growth of wild shrubs at its mouth and the overhang of rock. It blended into the landscape, offering a sense of security.

The beast opened one eye, its vision piercing the darkness as it waited for any activity. Its belly full, its thirst momentarily slaked, it drifted off to sleep, gathering itself for the next attack.

Soon.

But first it needed to stalk its prey.

Finally it curled around itself in a fetal position and slept again.

## Chapter Ten

Chloe was having a dream. Make that nightmare. Melinda was calling to her from someplace. She could hear her but she couldn't see her. She kept saying "Chloe" over and over. Her voice rose in intensity until the word turned into a scream. She tried to find her but something was holding her down, pressing into her. She tried to push it away but it was too big and strong.

"Chloe? Chloe. Chloe, wake up."

Hands gripped her shoulders and shook her, and the voice suddenly wasn't Melinda's anymore but someone else's. It was deeper. Huskier.

"Chloe, come on."

Then hard masculine lips were on hers, kissing her as if someone's life depended on it. She broke away and her eyes flew open. Jonah was holding her, one strong arm wrapped around her, his face barely an inch from hers. His eyes were filled with concern.

"You're awake." He blew out a breath. "Good. You scared me to death there for a minute."

He held her against his body, one hand stroking her arm and her back in slow, soothing sweeps. She tried to crawl inside his body, away from the voice, away from...

"I had a nightmare." Her voice was muffled against his chest, but she couldn't look at him yet.

"I'd say it was a pretty bad one." He kissed the top of her head as his hand continued to caress her. "Can you tell me about it?"

"Someone was calling me. Maybe Melinda. Only I couldn't find her. And then it-it turned into a scream."

He hugged her tightly against him. "Finding Sherry's body, seeing what the devil beast can do. I knew it wouldn't be good for you."

Now she raised her eyes to his. "Don't shut me out, Mark. Please. It was just the shock today..."

"I know, I know," he soothed, but she could feel the tension in his body. "I just hate that it's giving you nightmares like this. Short of trying to forbid you to be involved in this whole thing, I don't know what to do."

She pressed a kiss to his chest. "Make love to me," she whispered.

He pushed her slightly away from him so he could see her face. "What?"

"You heard me. Make love to me. I need to feel alive. I need to feel life."

One corner of his mouth kicked up in a grin. "You trying to wear me out, sugar?"

Her laugh was a breathy little sound. "I think I need *you* to wear *me* out."

"In that case, with pleasure."

His hands slipped around to cup her breasts, squeezing and caressing them, molding them until he had claimed ownership of them. With deliberate slowness he lowered his mouth to one nipple and drew it into his mouth, his cock hardening against her thigh in reaction. Chloe loved that she could draw such an instant response from him and gave a little moan of satisfaction.

He slicked the hard bud of one nipple with his tongue, brushing it lightly with his teeth before pulling on it with his lips. Little sounds of pleasure echoed in her throat. When her breast ached unbearably and her nipple was so hard it burned he turned his attention to the other one, giving it the same treatment.

Liquid gathered in her cunt and every pulse point in her body throbbed in answer to his touch. Intense desire swam in her veins.

"Let's try something," he murmured in her ear, his voice rich and dark.

"Try what?" she asked.

"You'll see."

He lifted her from the bed and carried her to the closet, swinging open the door to reveal a full-length mirror.

"I want you to watch us," he breathed, his voice rolling over her like warm honey.

He stood behind her, his arms around her, his chin resting on her head.

"Look at us, Chloe. See how we fit together?"

He was holding her against his body, the thick hardness of his cock probing the warm cleft of her buttocks. His long, muscular legs bracketed her slender ones, a large hand splayed across her stomach, the other skimming over her skin in a downward slide from her collarbone.

"Watch me hold your breasts, sugar. See how this one fills my hand?"

When she raised her eyes to the mirror and saw one large hand cupping her breast her breath got trapped in her throat. His fingers played with the mound of flesh, dimpling it, lifting it, brushing his thumb back and forth across the nipple. She watched her nipple darken and felt it swell beneath his touch.

"I love it when it gets that nice deep pink color." He pinched it lightly. "Look. I can turn it even darker."

The hand splayed across her stomach dropped lower. She could see his fingers work their way into her pubic curls, lightly tugging on the soft hair. His tanned skin stood out against her paler body, a sensual contrast that sent a gush of arousal into the hot walls of her cunt. Mark's middle finger slid deeper until the tip of it barely touched her clit. She couldn't breathe, everything in her body focused on that one spot.

"See me touch you, Chloe? That hard little knot is just begging for me to play with it. Rub it, make it swell even more. Take your hands, darlin', and spread those pussy lips so we can both watch me do it."

Like someone in a dream she slid her hands down her sides, over her hipbones, to the flesh covering her clitoris. Almost timidly she took the folds between her fingers and pulled them back, gasping at the sight of Mark's finger pressing right at the top of that knot of sexual nerves. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears and what little breath she had left felt trapped in her lungs.

Now slide your finger under mine," he commanded. "Real easy. Do it, sugar."

As if watching someone else doing it, she shifted her hand to tentatively push one finger beneath his. The moment the tip of her finger connected with her clit she jerked, sparks flaming from the contact.

"Easy, sugar. Easy, easy. You've touched yourself before, haven't you?" When she didn't answer, he repeated, "Haven't you?"

She swallowed hard and nodded.

"Tell me about it, Chloe. Tell me how you touch yourself."

"Y-Yes. I touch myself. Sometimes." Oh, god. Heat flashed over her skin.

"Details, sugar. Do you spread your legs wide? Pull those pouty lips open and pinch this little knot?"

She nodded.

"Say it," he prompted, and all the while his fingers was pressing on hers, moving it around and around. The walls of her cunt quaked in response and ribbons of sensation shot straight from her womb.

"Y-Yes. I...lie down on my bed. Naked. Spread out my legs and...pull open the lips of my...of my..."

"Say it!" he hissed, his mouth close to her ear.

"My...cunt."

"Is it wet when you do it? Like it is for me?"

She nodded again. "Yes. Wet."

"What do you do first?" He pressed harder with his finger and moved it a little faster.

"I...rub my clit, back and forth, right...oh, god, right there," she gasped, as his finger moved hers just a fraction of an inch.

"Do you crave something inside that gorgeous pussy of yours? What do you do when no one's around, Chloe?" His voice was lower, deeper, and thick with his desire. "I'll bet you have one of those lifelike cocks, right?"

Oh, god, how could she be telling him all this? But the movement on her clit was insistent and the image of the two of them in the mirror was so erotic, so consuming, she'd do anything he asked of her if only he wouldn't stop.

"Uh-huh."

"Do you stick it inside yourself first, or wait until you can't stand it anymore?"

"I...um...I rub myself a lot first, until I...until I need it."

“Do you lube it up first?” he asked in what was almost a whisper? “Or do you wait until you’re so wet you don’t need anything?”

Chloe ran her tongue over her bottom lip. “S-Sometimes I need it, sometimes I don’t.”

“Tell me about when you don’t need it.” His hand was contracting rhythmically on her breasts, her nipple caught between two fingers. Her breast ached and throbbed.

“I-I get so wet I can just slide it right in.” God. Never in her life did she think she’d be telling a man such intimate details. But she was so mesmerized watching them in the mirror, so turned on by it, she’d tell him anything he wanted if only he didn’t stop what he was doing.”

“How do you know?” He bent his head slightly and nipped at the soft flesh of her earlobe. A shiver raced along her spine. “Do you stick your fingers inside yourself to check?”

She nodded, but when he nipped at her ear again the bite was harder. “Words, Chloe. Remember?”

“Y-Yes. Two fingers. To see how wet I am.”

“After you’ve worked that little clit into a frenzy, right? Just like we’re doing now.”

“J-Just like that.”

“And when you’re wet? What then?” He pushed on her finger that was trapped beneath his, moving it down the wet flesh of her cunt lips, sliding up and down before returning to rasp against her clit.

“Then...I take the...um...dildo and put it inside myself.”

“And then what, Chloe? Do you rub your clit some more while you fuck yourself with that fake dick?”

“Yes. Yessss.” Her breath hissed out when he pressed hard on her clit again and pinched her nipple at the same time.

“Do you rub that little bundle of nerves until you come? Do you grip the dildo with that sweet pussy and come all around it?”

“Yes. Oh, god, Mark.”

“Only one problem with that, sugar.”

She frowned. “What? That’s what I do.”

“But then you can’t see yourself come.” His chuckle was low and throaty, edged with something dark and forbidden. “Wouldn’t you like that? Wouldn’t you like to see that sweet pink flesh convulse and clench while that delicious juice pours out of you?”

Would she? If she bothered to admit it to herself, she’d always had a hidden curiosity about it. Once she’d even tried propping a mirror in front of her but when she came she’d closed her eyes and missed everything.

“I think you should watch yourself now, don’t you?”

Desire raw and fierce rose up within her and she nodded.

Mark moved his hand away from her cunt, startling her, but in the next moment he reached beneath her left leg and pulled it up, way up, so her entire cunt was exposed. It left her off balance and she had to lean against Mark for support.

"That's it, sugar. I've got you. Look," he commanded. "See how pretty you are? Put your finger back on your clit. You can do it. I won't let you fall."

Breathing heavily, she placed her finger back on that hot bundle of nerves again and Mark covered it like he had before. His other hand was still molding squeezing, shaping her breast, his fingers tugging at the engorged nipple.

"Now watch," he whispered.

Slowly he moved her finger under his in circles, round and round, then faster and faster. Her orgasm was rising within her, up, up, up. Almost there. Ecstasy shimmered just beyond her reach. Then Mark pressed hard and bit down on her earlobe again and she exploded.

"Open your eyes," he demanded when her lids drifted closed. "Look, Chloe. Look at yourself. See how beautiful."

She forced herself to focus. And as she did she tipped over the edge, plunging in a wild free fall, the muscles of her vagina clasp and clenching like a fist. Over and over while her body shook with the force of it. That slick pink flesh spasming and convulsing.

When she couldn't stand any more, so weak from the force of her release that if Mark hadn't been holding her she'd have collapsed on the floor.

"I've got you," he murmured in her ear, lowering her leg.

Strong hands slid down her arms and moved her body until she was in front of him on her hands and knees. He stepped away briefly but when he returned his cock was sheathed in latex and he knelt behind her.

"Watch us," he told her again.

He maneuvered himself so he was positioned directly behind her, one hand on her hip, the other guiding the head of his penis to her cunt. Shifting his hand back to her other hip, holding her in place, he drove forward into her in one slow, hard push. The moment he filled her, the walls of her vagina gripped him, still quaking with the spasms of her orgasm.

His pace was slow but fierce, rocking in and out of her, murmuring words to her in a deep, raspy voice.

"That's it, Chloe, ride with me. Go with it. Oh, Jesus, sugar, you are so goddamn tight, you're squeezing me to death. I can feel your hot juices burning me. Love it, sugar. God, I love it. You make my balls hurt. Watch us, Chloe. Look in the mirror. Oh, Jesus, Chloe."

And on and on as he pounded her, his cock filling her and retreating, filling and retreating. Her eyes were fastened on their figures reflected in the mirror, unable to tear her gaze away. Their bodies were locked in an erotic dance, his darker skin against her



lighter shade. His face was taut with tension, the muscles on his neck corded. In his eyes, heat dancing in the irises, she could see the wolf inside him, fierce and possessive.

When his fingers tightened on her she knew he was fast approaching his climax and she was right there with him. Arching her back and pushing hard against him she rode his thick erection even as he drove into her again and again.

Just like before, the climax came out of nowhere, stealing her breath, everything around her fading away until there was nothing but her and this man and the hot connection between them. As her vaginal walls clenched around him, milking him, he jetted his semen into the condom. She could feel the hot gush of his liquid behind the thin barrier, welcoming it, clenching down on it.

Mark's fingers dug hard into her hips and he shouted her name as he came in powerful spurts.

At last she closed her eyes and fell forward, Mark moving with her, caging her with his arms to keep his weight from crushing her.

"Mine," he whispered in her ear. "Mine."

Chloe couldn't speak, couldn't say her response out loud, but in her head the word whispered – *Yes*.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe was better in the morning, a little more settled.

*Amazing what good sex can do.*

He smiled to himself.

Still, there were traces of shadows beneath her eyes and lines of strain defining her face. She was quiet while they drank coffee and dressed. On the one hand he really wanted her to take a break from this, let him talk to Torres. On the other, he knew keeping her out of it would be like trying to hold back a flood with a piece of paper.

He touched base with Desolation Ranch while he finished his second cup of coffee, filling Ric and the others in on the run he and Chloe had taken and the places they'd identified as possible sites. He promised to call back after meeting with the sheriff.

He'd chosen a truck stop between Lopeno and Falcon to meet with the sheriff. The people of Zapata were already worked up enough after the meeting last night. He didn't need people bombarding them with questions that had no answers at the moment. He had no doubt that rumors would blossom in the vacuum which was why he needed to meet with his old boss away from prying eyes.

Torres was already waiting in a booth with one of his deputies when Mark and Chloe arrived and slid in opposite them. Neither man looked as if he'd gotten much sleep.

"If you're right about this devil beast," the sheriff began, "I need a whole lot more manpower to cover this county. On the one hand it's a damn good thing the population's not any bigger. On the other hand, we've got too many people living in an

ideal situation for attack." He raked his fingers through his straight black hair, tinged now with strands of gray. "Tell me what you found last night."

They took a minute to place their orders before Mark answered.

"About the same things you did. But we did identify the five most likely spots for attack." He pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket and unfolded it on the table. He'd scribbled it out the night before, right after the run. "You need more than just an isolated house. There have to be trees for the beast to use as cover while it stalks the house. And preferably an outbuilding—garage, barn, whatever, where it can hide if it needs to."

"Sherry Barton's garage was filled with her refinishing stuff," Torres pointed out. "And the garage door hadn't been opened."

Mark nodded. "But there are plenty of old trees around that house. The land around it might be wide open but however this beast moves, it manages to conceal itself in the dark and then blend into trees and buildings when it reaches its destination."

The deputy, introduced by the sheriff as Clete Noonan, cleared his throat. "I mentioned this to the sheriff while we were driving over here." He looked at his boss, then back at Mark. "You can tell me I'm crazy, and I'm not even sure I believe this myself, but my family's been telling stories about the Chupacabra for generations. My great-grandmother came from Mexico and brought the tales with her. I just never gave it much credence."

Mark leaned forward. "You can imagine the wild stories I've picked up since...well, since I've been chasing this animal. I promise you I've heard just about everything."

Clete fiddle with his coffee cup. "Not this. It's so farfetched..."

His voice trailed off.

"Go ahead and tell them," Torres said. "I'm getting to the point where I'm ready to believe anything, even if it does sound like something from *The Twilight Zone*."

Noonan drained his cup, then looked straight at Mark. "According to the old tales, the devil beast is not only some kind of mutant, it..." He shook his head. "It has the ability to shift into human form."

Every muscle in Mark's body tightened. The reports that Craig had shared with them whirled through his mind. Night Seekers had wildly speculated that this mutant could be some type of shifter. That its ability to assume human form was what allowed it to move undetected. And also to wipe out traces wherever it was. But it was still all speculation.

Should he say anything now?

The waitress busied herself delivering their orders and refilling coffee cups, giving him a chance to gather his thoughts. He sipped on the hot liquid while he turned over his alternatives in his mind.

"Clete, I'm going to share something with you but I'd prefer you not discuss it with anyone." He looked at the sheriff. "That okay with you, Leon?"

Torres shifted uncomfortably. "Depends on what it is, Mark. I have a responsibility to the people of this county."

"And you don't want to scare them without having all the facts, right?"

Torres nodded reluctantly.

"Okay, then. I'm part of a team called Night Seekers. There are eight of us. Well, nine now." He allowed himself a tiny grin. "Jonah Grey just got married. Anyway, we're funded by a man with a lot of money and we have one purpose. To hunt down and kill the Chupacabra."

The sheriff glowered at him. "And you didn't feel it necessary to tell me this before?"

"We hoped we were wrong about the devil beast coming back to this area. I didn't want to alarm anyone if I didn't have to. And Night Seekers isn't exactly a group that looks for publicity."

"Besides," Chloe put in, "you yourself know that most people don't even want to believe this...thing exists. Look what happened when my friend Melinda disappeared."

Torres scrubbed his hand over his face. "Like I told you. I'm real sorry about that. And we are looking for her now."

"Pardon me for saying so." The bitterness in her voice was evident. "We'll be lucky now if we find her body."

"All right, all right." Mark slid his arm around behind her and gave her a quick squeeze. "Chloe, I promise you the sheriff is having nightmares over how he handled things, so let's move forward."

"You're right." But she leaned into him a little closer.

"Everyone in this group, including the man funding us, has lost someone to El Chupacabra. We've been able to obtain the remains of some animals that people have sworn was the devil beast and autopsies have been done. The craziest thing is there's no real identifiable DNA."

The sheriff's eyebrows nearly disappeared into his hairline. "What? How is that possible?"

"The scientists aren't saying too much because, frankly, I don't think they have too much to tell us. First we're trying to get all the lab results from other sources, places where bodies thought to be of the Chupacabra were autopsied, collected in one place. Then they'll test to see if there's a DNA match across the board." He tried to phrase his next words carefully. "But they believe it means we're dealing with something that hasn't been classified before. And three of the people who performed the tests swear it's possible to create the thing in a lab. Combining different DNA strands. Possibly even using some human DNA."

Torres stared at him. "I heard you say it, I heard Clete's old tales, but I still say that's bizarre. How is that possible?"

Mark shrugged. "We don't know. And the man heading this project is spending a lot of money to find out. So Clete? What you're saying may not be so crazy after all."

"We can't let this get out." The sheriff took a bite of toast, chewed it as if it had no taste. Washed it down with coffee. "For one thing, everyone will think we've lost our collective minds. For another, we'll be bombarded by every whackjob tabloid in the country."

Mark nodded. "But we need to find a way to make them be alert and on guard. We don't really know what form the devil beast will take when it initially shows up."

"And that's the problem," Clete pointed out. "We'd have to give them a real reason."

For a few silent moments everyone concentrated on their food, although no one looked very much as if they were enjoying it. Finally Chloe spoke up.

"I have a suggestion, but you might not like it, Sheriff."

He frowned. "If you want me to do something squirrely..."

She shook her head. "Not at all. But it might mean eating your words."

He stared at her over the rim of his coffee cup. "Let's hear what you have to say."

"What if you made an announcement that you're reopening Melinda's case. That you now believe she was abducted from the area, so you're warning everyone to be very careful of strangers."

He stared at her. "And what reason would I give for doing that?"

She spread out her hands, palms up. "You're the sheriff. You don't have to give a concrete reason. You can always say you can't release information and tip off whoever did this, can't you?"

"She's right, Sheriff." Clete set his fork down. "It's logical that we wouldn't want to leak any information. Give the criminal a heads-up, so to speak."

Torres stared at his plate, then raised his eyes. "Okay. I agree that seems like the best way. But I need to have a better line to what you and your people are doing, Mark. If you find anything at all that will help with this..."

"You'll know at once. You have my word. In fact, I'm going to call my team leader as soon as we're done here and bring him up to speed on this meeting."

"Meanwhile," the sheriff said, "we still have the original problem. Too much territory to cover and not enough manpower."

"What if we do this," Mark suggested. "Divide the county up like we did last night. You can set up the patrols for your half, Chloe and I will take the northern part again."

Torres looked at him skeptically. "You think the two of you can cover that much area in one vehicle? And Miss Hanson, don't even think of suggesting you go out yourself."

"Don't worry. I'm not. I have no intention of running into the...animal by myself."

"You'll have to notify the people on this list," Mark pointed out to his old boss. "I don't have any official standing anymore so they might not listen to me."

"I can change that in less than a minute. It won't take me that long to temporarily deputize you."

Mark shook his head. "I'm better off under the radar. You'll just need to make sure the people in my sector get the word to be on alert."

"I can do that," Clete said. "No sweat. That okay with you, Sheriff?"

"I'd say that's the best answer. I need to let the others on my staff know this legendary animal – whatever it is – might possibly be in the area but no one else needs to have whatever information the four of us share."

Mark nodded. "Agreed. Chloe and I will go back to my house so I can contact my team. If I get anything at all from them I'll call you. Meanwhile, we can do a lot of scouting during daylight. Chloe's still got a book to put together so if anyone sees us in strange places taking pictures, you can just tell them she's working and I'm driving her around because I know the county so well."

"Okay. But let's keep in touch during the day."

"You have my word. Oh, and breakfast is on me."

They all slid out from the booth leaving most of their food untouched. No one seemed to have any appetite to speak of. Mark dropped some money on the table for a tip, then stopped at the cash register to pay the check.

"What now?" Chloe asked when they were back on the highway.

"Home, just like I said. I want a conference call with Night Seekers. Then we'll pack the cooler again, you can grab your camera and we'll go back to hunting."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ramon Escobedo had driven his wife to spend a few days with her sister in Laredo. She had wanted him to come with her, take a few days off from his job as a county worker and go with her, but he'd made some excuse to her. His sister-in-law was a bitch on wheels. Five minutes in her company and he was ready to strangle her. How was it possible, he wondered, for the two women to be so completely different? Brenda, his wife, was a sweet-natured woman who loved with her whole heart and volunteered everywhere in their small community. Nelda Rodine, on the other hand, was a virago with the disposition of a wasp and a voice that reminded Ramon of a saw on metal.

But Nelda was all the family that was left to Brenda and so Ramon made it his business to see that the two women got to visit as long as he didn't have to be involved. Now he had four days of unwanted solitude to look forward to. Oh, well. He had the weekend free and could get to work painting the kitchen like Brenda wanted. It was hard to do with her there, busy cooking and all. Yup, that's what he'd do. He'd head to the hardware store in Zapata, get the paint in the color she'd said she wanted and surprise her when she got home.

He'd just rounded a curve in the road when something dashed across in front of his truck. Ramon slammed on the brakes, barely stopping in time to avoid hitting a dog that now stood on the shoulder, wagging its tail. It was a mutt of some kind, brown and tan and black, with short ears and tail and a ratty-looking shorthair coat.

Ramon pulled over and put the truck in park, got out and approached the animal.

*If it bites me, I'm shooting its mangy ass.*

"Hey boy," he said in a soft voice. "Are you lost? Did you run away from home and can't find your way back?"

He crouched down and waited to see what the animal would do. It stood in the same place, tail still wagging, tongue lolling. Ramon realized that it did not have a collar around its neck. A stray? Most likely. Foraging for its existence wherever it could.

He held out a hand.

"Come here, boy. Are you looking for someone to feed you?"

Brenda might kill him if he brought home a stray dog but it sure would be good company for them. They didn't have any kids yet and it would fill up some of the empty space in their lives.

He waited patiently until at last the dog approached, sniffed cautiously at his hand, then licked it with a slow sweep of its tongue.

"Good, good." He kept his voice soft. "Want to come home with me, boy? I gotta go into town anyway, so I can pick up some food for you. Maybe a couple of bowls for kibble and water. What do you say?"

The dog cocked its head then licked Ramon's hand again, a sign of acquiescence. Ramon stood up and opened the passenger door of the truck. He probably should give the dog a bath before letting it ride in the cab but it didn't seem all that dirty. The only thing he really noticed was a faint peculiar odor. If he didn't know better he'd have thought it was turpentine.

The animal leaped agilely into the truck and sat looking out the windshield, ready for whatever came next.

"Okay, then." Ramon got in behind the wheel. "Boy, will Brenda ever be surprised."

## Chapter Eleven

Mark leaned back in the chair at the kitchen table, his laptop open in front of him, looking at Ric Garza's image on his screen. They were about two minutes into the video call and both men were showing frustration in their voices.

"I wish I could tell you more," Mark said. "Sheriff Torres is being more than cooperative. He made a public announcement he was reopening the Melinda Leblanc case. Even gave an interview to the newspaper that serves the whole county. And he's posted flyers everywhere warning people to be on the lookout for stray or strange animals."

Ric worried his neatly trimmed mustache with his thumbnail. "Did he also tell them to be careful of any strange humans?"

Mark snorted. "Wouldn't he like to. But we don't really know for sure if there's a human factor involved so we can't really go there."

"Have you discussed the possibility that the human factor could be as simple as someone transporting this animal or animals to different places and dropping it off?"

"Not really, but I guess I should mention it." He scribbled a note on the pad in front of him. "You guys finding anything out?"

Ric shook his head. "We comb all the news outlets every day, even blogs, to see if there's been a killing anywhere else in the country but so far I guess no news is good news."

"Which means either we're back to dealing with one creature or, if there are more, for whatever reason they are all lying low at this particular time."

"Chelsea still believes a human is controlling the whole situation but we don't have one shred of proof to support her theory." Ric sighed, a sound of exasperation. "There's so much we still don't know. Damn it, anyway."

Chelsea's face appeared next to Ric's. "I hate the fact that we're having to wait for another killing to try to capture this devil beast."

"It's for damn sure it's managed to keep itself hidden," Mark growled. "Chloe and I have run the last three nights and all we managed to scare up was a feral hog, some white tail deer and a stray dog that took off running when it saw us. Slim pickin's."

"How's Chloe holding up?" Chelsea wanted to know.

"I'm okay, Chelsea." Chloe came to stand behind Mark. "Thanks for asking. I just wish we could find out something—anything—about Melinda. But even with all the publicity there hasn't been a whisper of anything." Her hands on Mark's shoulders tightened. "I think I've already come to terms with the fact that she's dead. I'd just like to...to lay her to rest properly."

"We all share your pain," Ric told her. "I wish we could find better answers for you."

"I know. Thank you for everything. I want you to know I appreciate it."

"I wish we were doing something you could thank us for," Ric said with a trace of bitterness in his voice.

"You've accepted me into your group," she told him in a soft voice. "That means a lot to me."

Ric gave her a crooked smile. "You have two things going for you. Mark has made you a part of his life and you're a shifter. That gives you an automatic entry into the group."

"I'll add my thanks to that, too," Mark said. "All right. Tonight we're going to run again. Not that I'm anxious to run into it, but it would sure help if the devil beast decides to come out of hiding while we're out there."

"Okay. Keep me posted."

They both signed off. Mark reached around behind him and pulled Chloe down into his lap. "You heard what Ric said, right?"

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "Which part? I heard a lot of things, including that nobody has any information right now about anything."

"I meant the part about you being in my life."

She stirred restively, sitting up and trying to pull herself away. "Mark, we've talked about this..."

"Chloe." He cupped her chin and turned her face to his. "I know you think you can't commit to anything until we find out what happened to Melinda. We've talked about that. I realize it's painful unfinished business for you. But I don't understand why you think we can't look at a future together."

She nibbled on her lower lip, a nervous gesture that nevertheless made his groin tighten and his cock push against the fabric of his jeans.

"I just have this feeling that if I accept that there's more between us than what we've got right now I'm somehow being disloyal to Melinda. Sort of wiping her out of my life. Like I don't care anymore about what happens to her."

"I hear what you're saying, but we are so much more together than we are separately. Don't you think Melinda would be glad, if she knew, that you'd found someone to belong to? Someone who can help with the hunt and give you strength if and when the worst happens? Would she want you to deny yourself the chance to be a mate to another shifter?"

"Oh, Mark, I don't know." Tears clouded her eyes. "I guess she'd be happy for me. We talked a lot about the difficulty of finding a mate. Jonah's wife is one of the rare humans who don't run in horror when they find out what we are. It's just that..."



"I love you, Chloe." He stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. "I won't stop telling you that. And I won't stop hunting until we have the answers you need. But know this. I have no intention of letting you go. Ever. No matter what happens."

"How did I get so lucky as to meet you?"

"I think I'm the lucky one." He carefully licked the tears from her cheeks and her eyelids, then traced the seam of her lips with the tip of his tongue. "We have a little downtime right now, sugar. Let me make you feel better. Take away some of that anxiety that's eating you up."

His hand slid up beneath her t-shirt cupping her breast and chafing the nipple through the satin of her bra.

"You always make me feel good," she told him. "What I'd like right now—what would really help me—is to make *you* feel better."

"But—"

She touched two fingers to his mouth. "Hush. You said you wanted to make me feel good. Well, *this will.*" She slid from his lap and knelt on the floor between his legs. "Put your hands behind your head and lock your fingers together," she instructed.

"What?"

"Just do it, okay?"

He did as she asked, all the time watching her, studying her, knowing what was coming and trying to gather himself for it. He was used to doing things for her, for her, putting her pleasure first. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been the sole recipient of sexual pleasure with anyone. But then he looked into her eyes and realized that the satisfaction she would get from this would keep her aroused all afternoon while they scouted and she took pictures. And if she held out long enough, tonight when they ran. Afterward he would fuck her senseless until she had no thought except to stay with him forever.

With fingers that trembled only slightly, she undid the buckle on his belt, opened the top snap on his jeans and pulled out his shirt, pushing it up on the hard washboard of his abdomen. Her soft lips pressed against his hot skin, feathering kisses across a line from hip to hip. She nipped lightly at the skin just below his navel, sending a shot of lust surging through him. He had to tighten his fingers behind his neck to keep himself from reaching for her.

The room was so quiet that the lowering of his zipper sounded like a loud rasp. Her slim fingers reached into the fly of his boxers and tugged out his already hard and throbbing cock, a bead of liquid seeping from the slit. She leaned forward and swiped her tongue delicately across the surface of the head, swallowing the semen and licking her lips.

*Jesus!*

He didn't know if he was going to be able to sit still through this. Her touch alone was enough to bring him to the edge. He had slept with humans and twice with female

shifters, but none had aroused the level of lust in desire in him that Chloe Hanson did. No matter what, when this was over he was taking her back to Desolation Ranch with him. Somehow he'd make her realize they belonged together.

That was the last rational thought he had, as she swept her tongue back and forth over the head of his shaft, soft touches like a butterfly's wings. His balls tightened and heat stabbed at his groin. Holy sweet Jesus! This woman had a mouth like magic.

When she closed her lips over just the head of his cock, stopped at the furled skin of the crown, and probed the slit with the tip of her tongue, he almost came off the chair. Chloe pulled back and looked up at him, her lips curved in an impish smile.

"No moving," she reminded him. "This is my show."

Her slim fingers stroked up and down his shaft, agonizingly slowly, as she took the head in her mouth again, teasing it with swirls of her tongue. He was already so hard he was afraid he'd climax before she finished doing...whatever she had in mind.

God, his balls ached, begging for her touch. As if she read his mind, she slid the fingers of her other hand inside his boxers to cup his sac, rolling his testicles with her fingers then squeezing them oh so lightly.

More, he wanted to shout. Faster. Harder.

Now he knew exactly how she felt when he teased her and she begged him to hurry, hurry, hurry.

The tempo she set up with her mouth and hands was deliciously painful, promising him release but taking him just so far. Up and down, each time her mouth sliding a little farther onto his shaft, the sweet silky wetness of it wrapping around him. When she raked her teeth lightly over the surface he couldn't swallow the groan that rumbled up from his throat.

"Chloe, you're killing me." He ground his teeth, reaching for some kind of control.

She slid her mouth free of his cock and looked up at him. "But a pleasant way to go, right?" she teased.

"You know I'll make you pay for this later," he growled.

She lowered her eyes but not quickly enough to hide the mischief gleaming in them. "Oh, I hope so. I really do."

All the while she'd been talking, her clever fingers continued to manipulate his balls, rolling and squeezing them. He caged her with his thighs, pressing them against her shoulder, silently urging her to do more. More. But the damn minx was determined to do it her way. Painfully, excruciatingly, arousingly slow.

Now her fingers wrapped securely around the root, the entire length of his cock inside her hot, wet mouth. And oh, sweet Jesus, she was pressing his balls upward at the same time. Then one finger slid down toward the crevice between the cheeks of his ass, probing and scraping, and he knew he wasn't going to last much longer.

"I'm close, sugar," he rasped, not even recognizing the sound of his own voice.

She tightened her grip on him and increased the tempo of the glide of her lips up and down on his erection. He swelled and throbbed in her mouth, the familiar tingling racing down his spine and into his balls. She pressed one fingertip against the tight ring of his anus, dragged her teeth once up and down his cock and he erupted. His cock was like a geyser, spurting with uncontrolled force into her mouth, his thighs pressing so hard against her shoulders he was afraid he'd hurt her.

But he had no control. It was all he could do to keep his fingers locked behind his neck when he wanted to thread them through the silky thickness of her hair and grip her head. He closed his eyes, riding the wave of pleasure that rushed through him, pushed into an explosion of rockets by Chloe's unrelenting mouth and hands.

And then, with a final shudder, he was finished, his body so weak he wondered if he'd be able to get up from the chair. She'd swallowed every bit of his semen. Now she looked up at him, grinned, and licked her lips.

"I feel so much better."

Snarling, he unlocked his fingers and reached for her, gripping her cheeks. "Well, I'm sure glad of that. Because I'm not sure I'll be worth a damn for the rest of the day."

She bent forward slightly and kissed the head of his cock. "Oh, I think you'll be up to the task." She smiled. "Or any other that comes along."

He pulled her up from the floor onto his lap, kissing her with an open mouth, tasting himself on her tongue. "You drive me crazy, Chloe. I've never been like this with a woman before."

She tilted her head, looking at him in surprise. "Now I find that hard to believe."

"Believe, damn it. You're the only one who's ever made me feel like this. I'll tell you again. I'm not letting you go." He licked her lips, then teased the inside of them. "Just keep that in mind." He smacked her lightly on her ass. "Now. Help me up off this chair so I don't fall down. We'll pack the cooler and do some more searching this afternoon. And you can take some more pictures." He smiled at her, a slow curve of his mouth. "Just remember. Paybacks are hell."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ramon had put the dog's bowls in the laundry room, between the kitchen and the back porch. As soon as he'd filled both of them the animal dug in as if he hadn't eaten in far too long. Yet he didn't look undernourished, no ribs were showing, and he didn't appear to be sick in any way.

He leaned against the washer and watched until all the food was gone and most of the water. He refilled the water bowl, then opened the back door.

"Come see the backyard, boy," he told the dog, walking down the porch steps.

The dog followed, padding along on its slightly large paws.

Ramon wondered how many different breeds were mixed in the animal's heritage. He didn't resemble any dog he'd ever seen before and he'd seen plenty. He thought

about calling Brenda to give her a heads-up, then decided he'd wait until he went to pick her up. By that time the animal would have settled in and he was sure she'd just accept him. Especially if he turned out to be well behaved.

The dog walked around the yard, sniffing here and there, stopping once to relieve himself. Ramon hadn't bothered putting up a fence. The house had come with the five acres closest to it. The rest belonged to... He didn't know and didn't care. It was just open space to him. But without children or animals he hadn't seen the need for a fence. If he kept the dog he might have to see about enclosing at least a small portion of it. Keep the dog from running off somewhere and getting lost again.

The animal seemed well behaved and Ramon wondered where he had come from. Would someone just dump an animal like that on the side of the road?

He shook his head. People were extremely irresponsible. He saw that all the time in his job working for the county electric company. They overloaded circuits, ignored bad outlets, all kinds of things that brought danger and subsequent damage to them and their families. Not to mention his coworkers who often were careless with their tools.

But not Ramon. He was meticulous both at work and at home. He felt blessed that he and Brenda had been able to buy this house when they got married four years ago and that he had a good job to support them. He took good care of them both, just as he did his wife.

"You like this yard, boy?" he asked the dog, still talking to him in the same, soft voice. "Like the house? Think you'd like to stay here?"

If only he could figure out what made the dog smell so bad. Maybe by tomorrow the animal would be comfortable enough with him that Ramon could give him a bath. Yeah, he'd make him smell real good. Maybe even get a collar for him. And if Brenda said okay, keep him, then he'd take him to the vet for his shots and get him a tag.

And a name. He'd have to give him a name.

Maybe he'd call him Chaco, after the Gran Chaco region in Bolivia where Ramon's ancestors had lived.

"Hey Chaco," he called.

The dog, who had been chasing a bug, stopped and cocked his head, looking at Ramon.

"You like that name? Chaco? Okay, Chaco. That's good, then."

When he went back inside the house the dog followed him obediently, curling up in a corner of the kitchen and watching him. He turned on the little radio on the counter to a station that played the kind of music he liked. Unfolding the old canvas drop cloths he'd borrowed he covered everything and began the laborious job of painting. He stopped once for a quick lunch before quitting for the day. He'd finished the two blank walls, including the trim. He had to admit it was easy to paint without interruptions.

He carefully sealed the lids on the paint cans and carried everything out to the yard. With the dog watching him he rinsed off the roller and pan with the hose, then stuck the brush in a little turpentine.

The smell of it reminded him he wanted to bathe Chaco the next day. Where in the hell would a dog pick up the smell of turpentine that would cling to him like that, anyway?

Chaco sat and watched him patiently until he was finished. Then followed him back into the house.

"You're a damn fine dog, you know that?" Ramon said as he washed up. "Maybe I'll give you a treat for supper. Can't cook with everything covered over and half painted like this. Do you happen to like barbecue?"

Chaco's tail wagged as if he understood and was saying yes.

"Okay, barbecue it is. Let's go take a ride."

When he climbed into bed that night, having spoken to Brenda on the phone for half an hour, he left Chaco in the laundry room with a bed made of old rags. He supposed tomorrow he'd have to think of something better for the animal to sleep in. Yes, Brenda would have a lot of surprises when she came home. A new dog and a freshly painted kitchen.

Ramon fell asleep wrapped in a pleasant cloud of self-satisfaction.

The roar woke him, an unearthly sound that seemed to rise up straight from hell. But no more so than the abomination standing in the bedroom doorway. He couldn't breathe and his heart was beating so hard he was sure he'd break a rib. For the first time in his life he was truly frightened. Closing his eyes he began to recite every prayer he'd ever learned.

\* \* \* \* \*

The moonlight had been as bright as a spotlight for the past few nights, serving as an aid to their journey but also exposing them when they ran in the open. Still, they'd managed to find enough places to conceal themselves when they sensed or saw another presence nearby. The run was uneventful, yielding nothing more exciting than the same dog they'd seen running loose the night before. Just a few minutes ago it had passed them, running full out like a hound in the chase.

Mark halted to watch it, then turned his head toward Chloe.

*Probably after a jackrabbit.*

She dipped her head.

*Definitely hot on the trail of something.*

*Okay, let's keep moving.*

She thought about earlier, before their run, when she'd made him sit still while she brought him to orgasm with her mouth. She'd wanted desperately to do something for

him, give back to him, for as much as he did for her. To let him know that the walls she'd erected were really pretty flimsy ones. The problem was he wanted things from her that she couldn't be ready for yet. With so much of her focused on Melinda's disappearance the thought of a relationship like Mark was proposing overwhelmed her.

She couldn't get past the idea that if she acknowledged her feelings for him, took that final step to mate with him fully, the chance to save Melinda would be lost. That her disloyalty would cause Melinda's death. Or prevent them from finding her body. Stupid, she knew that, but it seemed like her brain was stuck in that particular spot. Pleasuring him had been her way of saying, *I want you. Just give me a little time.*

At the moment it was all she could give him.

And so as they ran, despite being hypervigilant, she also took the opportunity to invite a little play. Sometimes she ran ahead of him, her tail waving in a tantalizing movement. Other times she lagged behind, then came up behind and nipped at his heels. Twice when they reached a copse of trees she ran into the middle, flopped down and rolled over onto her back, tempting him to jump on top of her.

He nuzzled her with his snout and licked her face, playfully rolling with her on the loamy ground. For a moment she wondered if he was going to try to mount her but the thought disappeared quickly. He'd never force that particular situation. It was the final step in the mating process and she'd have to come to it willingly. Still, the more time she spent with him, the more she wondered if she was being foolish to keep putting him off. Her feelings for him were growing stronger every day. Whatever happened with Melinda, she knew her life was going to have some major changes, all of them relating to Mark. She just had to decide how and what those changes were.

It was nearly midnight by the time they reached Mark's house. Standing on the porch they shifted, bones changing and shrinking, the thick pelts becoming nothing more than baby-fine hair on their skin. Snouts became noses, in Mark's case with the tiny bump that showed where it had once been broken, in Chloe's case straight with a classic line.

They stood for a moment in the darkness, the only light that which slivered down from the moon.

Mark rubbed his hand across his face. "Nothing. We checked all those places and didn't see a thing."

Chloe moved close to him. "Maybe the Chupacabra really decided to move on. It got its final kill in Texas and is looking for new hunting ground."

"I might agree except for Melinda's disappearance, which I think the devil beast is part of, and this itchy feeling on the back of my neck that tells me it's still around here somewhere."

"Tomorrow we'll check more places by daylight," she told him, "and then check them out at night when the beast usually comes out." She chewed her lip. "Mark, what do we do if we actually see it? What if it comes after us?"

"It rarely goes after animals. The rabbit carcass we found is an exception. Plus, we can make enough noise while I call Sheriff Torres. When they ran Mark always carried his satellite phone on a chain around his neck. If necessary he could shift quickly and call for help. "I've been thinking of asking for reinforcements from Night Seekers but I want to make sure we have something concrete first."

"B-But what if that 'something concrete' is another body?"

"I'm praying that's not the case. That if we spot the devil beast we can distract and divert it until the sheriff can get there."

He locked the door and turned on a small lamp. The amber glow reflected on his skin, accenting the hard erection jutting from his body. Chloe stared at him. She'd begun to realize just how much shifting aroused the body, but for Mark it seemed to keep him in overdrive.

He saw where she was looking and grinned. "Want to make me feel good again, sugar?"

"You're tireless," she told him. "Don't you ever wear out?"

He stood in front of her, his hands on her shoulders, the grin still tilting the corners of his mouth but his eyes burning with lust and need. "With you I don't think that will ever happen." His face turned serious. "All I have to do is look at you, Chloe, and I want you. And not just for the moment."

"Mark..." She swallowed hard. There it was again, whatever it was inside her that made her mentally and emotionally take a step back.

"I know, I know." He brushed his lips across her forehead. "Don't rush you. Not with everything else so unsettled. But I can't do much about this." He took one of her hands and wrapped her fingers around his cock. "I'll take what I can get for now, But I want as much as you can give me."

Chloe tightened her fingers around his pulsing erection, feeling it swell even more in her grip. "I love how hard you get for me," she whispered.

"Just about every time I look at you." His face was so close she could feel his warm breath on her cheek. "I want you, Chloe. I need you."

The kiss began as just a soft caress of mouth against mouth, but Chloe could almost feel the explosion of lust surging up through Mark's body, his blood pounding through his veins, his skin as hot as a furnace. He pushed his tongue boldly past her lips, sweeping across hers and licking every inch of the inner surface. Her own tongue played with his, thrusting and retreating as he did, pressing forward to lick his lips.

God, he tasted like ten kinds of heaven, the maleness of him flavored with the remnants of the night they'd just run through. Her own body responded instantly, nipples hardening to painful points and liquid flooding her cunt. The familiar throbbing began deep inside her pussy, radiating throughout her body, igniting the flame of desire smoldering in her belly.

Mark's hands moved up to grip her head, fingers tunneled in her hair, holding her as he plundered her mouth, eating at it, drinking from her. His cock swelled in her hand, the thick vein that roped around it pulsing with the increased beat of his heart and rush of blood.

They were both dragging air into their lungs when the kiss broke. Mark's eyes were dark, almost like ancient gold as he looked hard into hers.

"I need you," he repeated.

"Yes." She whispered the word.

He lifted her and carried her down the short hallway to his bedroom, flicking the light switch with his elbow before laying her on the bed. He arranged her with her ass right at the edge of the mattress, lifting her dangling legs and spreading them wide to give him an unimpeded view of her cunt. The eroticism of her position sent a fresh release of liquid to coat her lips. Heat flared in Mark's eyes as he saw it and he licked his lips. One hand dropped between her thighs, a finger probed her vagina and he raised it to lick the cream from it.

A flush of desire darkened his cheeks and his eyes became almost opaque. Without warning he flipped her over and dragged her up to her hands and knees. Was he going to fuck her in the ass again? A dark thrill chased through. She reminded herself that shifting always ramped up Mark's testosterone level to way off the charts, his need for her almost out of control.

And she welcomed that, a chance for brief moments to connect on this most elemental level. To forget the nightmare they were chasing.

One of his hands rested on her hip while the other probed her wetness, stroking the slick flesh of her plump lips and lightly pinching her clit.

"So wet," he growled. "I love the way you're always wet for me, sugar. All I have to do is think about it and I get hard."

Two fingers worked into her quivering channel, curving to scoop out the liquid of her arousal. He dragged her cream up the sensitive area to the clenched ring of her anus, painting the opening with her own fluid. When one finger slid into the hot grasp of her rectum she sucked in a breath, heat flashing everywhere through her body.

"So tight," he murmured, his voice low and gravelly. "I can't wait to get my cock in here again."

He added a second finger, working them in and out, scissoring them to stretch the tissues and prepare them for his invasion. Little spasms racked her pussy as Mark thrust his fingers in and out in a slow, steady rhythm. When the flat of his hand landed on one cheek of her buttocks with a *crack!* she jerked, startled. Her hips thrust back in involuntary response, pulling Mark's fingers deeper inside her hot, dark tunnel.

"You like that, sugar?" His voice was heavy with ramped up desire. "I've wanted to do that from the first time we were together. Feel my hand on your ass, watch that skin turn a pretty shade of pink. See those heat marks streak down to your cunt. Watch your



juices flow in response.” He blew out a breath. “Jesus, Chloe, you just do it to me. More than any other woman I’ve ever been with. And that’s the damn fucking truth.”

His fingers still deep inside her, he pressed a kiss to the spot where he’d spanked her. Chloe couldn’t believe how arousing the whole thing was.

“Want me to do it again?” he asked.

Breathing heavily, she wriggled her hips in response.

*Crack!*

This time on the other cheek. Then he rained a steady series of slaps on her ass, alternating cheeks, his fingers still working her asshole. Chloe couldn’t ever remember being this aroused. This hungry. This needy. Her whole body clenched with desire. Lust. Her entire buttocks and thighs were suffused with a warmth that spread steadily to her hungry cunt.

With his other hand Mark probed her pussy as he smoothed kisses over her stinging buttocks. God, she was so aroused she was sure she could come just from...

Mark pushed three fingers into her vagina, dragging his thumb over her clit and she exploded. Hunching backwards she rode both hands hard, pushing desperately against him as she shuddered with her release, clenching her muscles around his fingers. When at last she fell forward, resting her forehead on her hands, Mark withdrew his fingers from her body and gave her ass one last slap.

“Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

She heard the sounds of him moving around in the bathroom, then the tearing of foil as he unwrapped a condom. In seconds he was spreading cooling gel on her anus and working it inside, preparing her for his cock. Then he was there, the broad head pushing, pushing, pushing as he slowly worked it inside her. As soon as she felt the thick shaft probing her she rocked back, impaling herself, urging him to thrust deeper. The orgasm, rather than satisfying her, had only ramped up the desire spiraling inside her. She wanted more. Harder. Deeper. Faster.

One last roll of his hips and he was deep inside her ass, the thickness of his shaft stretching her tissues, icy hot streaks skittering over her skin. His large hands anchored themselves on her hips and the steady pounding rhythm began.

“That’s it,” he gasped. “Ride with me, Chloe. Take me deep like that.”

She wanted it to last. She wanted it to end and take her over the edge. She wanted it to go on forever. Moving in cadence with him she pushed back against him again and again. The coil of desire that had only partially unwound spiraled up through her, grabbing her until she craved the explosion she knew was coming.

“Pinch you clit, sugar. Do it. Shit, Chloe, do it now. I can’t hold on any longer.”

She reached between her thighs to find the throbbing bundle of nerves, took it between thumb and forefinger and pinched. Hard.

And they exploded together. The heat of his semen scorched her rectum as it pumped into the latex sheath while her pussy clenched and spasmed and her entire

body shook. Everything around her disappeared until it was just her, and Mark and his cock buried so deep inside her. And her body convulsing again and again.

Mark rode her through the aftershocks, his hands still holding her hips. When she collapsed forward he fell with her, taking most of his weight on his forearms and then rolling them both to their side. The air was filled with the scent of musk and sex and the sweat drying on their bodies. Every muscle in her body felt as if it had been stretched and released and now hung limply on her bones.

Chloe wasn't sure exactly how long they lay there like that, still connected. Mark stroked her arm and he whispered erotic words in her ear. Finally he eased himself from the grasp of her tissues and off the bed. Chloe waited for him to move toward the bathroom. Instead he reached beneath her and lifted her in his arms.

"We need a shower, darlin'."

"No shower." She shook her head weakly. How on earth would she stand up that long?

"Yes." He pressed a soft kiss on her mouth. "Then sleep. I have a feeling we're going to need it."

He was right. When his cell phone woke them at six o'clock it shattered every vestige of good feeling they'd taken to bed with them.

## Chapter Twelve

"We found him like this when we got here a little before six."

Sheriff Leon Torres stood in Ramon Escobedo's bedroom, his eyes carefully averted from the body on the bed. It was obvious to Mark even the tough sheriff was strongly affected by what was happening.

"How'd you happen to show up here?"

He held tightly to Chloe's hand, trying to infuse her with his strength. Again he'd wanted her to stay home and again she'd refused, just as he'd known she would. But he didn't like the lack of color to her skin or the slight tremble in her body. He knew that once again she was imagining Melinda lying there and trying to push the picture out of her mind.

"His wife, Brenda's visiting her sister in Laredo. She tried to call Ramon last night and didn't get any answer. At first she thought he'd gone out to eat so she waited and tried again an hour later. Apparently she kept calling until she fell asleep about two, then tried again at five and finally called my office."

"Just like all the others," Mark commented, taking in the familiar details of the killing. Puncture wounds at the neck, absence of any blood and the body ripped open. Ramon Escobedo didn't look to be older than thirty. He took out his cell phone and snapped a series of photos. He'd need to send them back to Desolation Ranch. "Were they married long?"

"Four years." Torres shook his head, a sad expression on his face. "Nice young couple."

"Where's the wife now?"

"I sent one of my deputies to get her. The sister was going to bring her back but I thought it would be better for her to have someone...uninvolved...with her. Anyway, when I spoke to her she was hysterical and I wasn't sure the sister would be much help. Rumor has it she's a real bitch and hated Ramon."

"I don't guess she'll be too much comfort." He tugged on Chloe's hand. "Come on, sugar. Let's go downstairs."

They walked around the photographer still shooting pictures of the body and the entire scene, pulled the paper booties off their feet and dropped them in the sack the deputy at the door was holding, and tramped downstairs and out onto the back porch. One of the deputies walked up to Chloe and held out a paper cup with steam rising from it.

"You look like you could use something hot and strong, Miss Hanson," he told her, and dredged up a smile for her. "My wife made this. It's not that sludge the sheriff makes us drink."

"Thank you." Her voice was soft, her hand still trembling as she took the cup from him and sipped at the liquid.

"I see your coffee hasn't improved since I left, Leon," Mark said. "You could probably etch glass with it."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." He lifted his hat, scratched his head and resettled the hat on his head. "Damn, Mark. A fat lot of good our patrols did."

"We never saw a thing," Mark told him. "Some deer, some jackrabbits, a stray dog. And we checked all around the likely places."

"Us, too." Torres sighed. "I don't even want to think about what might be coming next."

"I'm calling my team, Leon. We're a lot more familiar with this creature than you are." He paused. "I don't want to overstep my bounds here but I think you could use some help."

"Hey. No one knows that better than I do. Believe me." He walked out into the yard. "Can I get you to look around here and see if you pick up anything we didn't?"

"Sure." He turned to Chloe, unhappy with how pale she still was. "Sugar, I'd really like it if you sat here on the step and drank that coffee. You look like you're about to pass out."

"I... Yes, you're right. Go ahead."

It was an unhappy commentary on her state of mind that she didn't argue with him. Bitterness and rage welled up inside Mark. He'd get this creature and find her friend if it was the last thing he did.

He checked all around the house with the sheriff, noting the clusters of trees that had offered a good hiding place for the devil beast. But again, unlike the scenes in Maverick County, there was no evidence that a stranger had been here. Or any other animal. Nor any sign that even an animal had disturbed the direct around the house.

Then, as they headed back toward the porch, Mark stopped suddenly, crouched down and swirled his fingers in the dirt, lifting them to his nose.

"What is it?" the sheriff asked.

"I thought I smelled this when we walked past here the first time." He held his hand out. "Here. Take a sniff."

Torres wrinkled his nose. "I'll be damned. Turpentine." He heaved a sigh. "If your theory is correct, we can expect two more of these killings before the beast finally leaves this area."

Mark nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. We all have to be extra vigilant. Leon, you've got to put the entire county on alert to be careful of any strangers or strange animals. Anything. We...can't be sure what other forms the devil beast can assume."

"You're right." The sheriff lifted his hat again, raked his fingers through his hair. Mark noted the lines of strain in the man's face. "Okay, okay. I'll sit down with my staff as soon as we're finished here and see what we can do. I think it's time for me to get the county commission in on this, too."

"I've got to get back to my house and conference with my team," Mark told him. "I need them to recheck the autopsies that were done on the beast we killed. The first report we had said there wasn't a hint of this scent, but I'd like them to find out if there's some combination of chemicals in the body that can cause this."

"All right." Torres stuck out his hand. "Thanks, Mark. I really appreciate this. Especially after..."

Mark held up his hand. "Water under the bridge. You couldn't have done anything, anyway."

"I could have believed you."

"You believe me now. That's what's important."

"You'll call me?"

"As soon as I have something to tell you. But I'm still planning to check out the landscape tonight. Now more than ever."

"Me, too." He looked up as a car with the sheriff's department logo on the side pulled into the driveway. "There's Brenda Escobedo now. If you'll excuse me, I'd better take care of her."

Chloe looked up at Mark, tears clouding her eyes. "That poor man. My god, Mark. What a horrible way to die. This just keeps getting worse and worse."

He pulled her into his arms, ignoring the glances from the deputies and the crime scene unit.

"You may be right. The more we get into this, the more bizarre it becomes. And the more theories that explode." He kissed her forehead. "But we'll never stop looking, okay?"

"Thank you." Her voice was muffled against his chest. "Thank you so much."

"Let's go back to the house. I want to put in a call to the team. I think we'll need more than the two of us here."

Chloe was disturbingly silent on the drive back home. Mark left her to her thoughts until they were inside the house. Then he turned her to face him, his hands solidly on her shoulders.

"Chloe, this is killing you. I can't let you see any more of this."

She shook her head. "I think I'm past being horrified, Mark. That's not it. I just know Melinda's dead, and I'm beginning to think we'll never find her body."

"We have a lot of places to look yet, sugar."

“No. We can keep looking, but it’s been too long since she disappeared. I’m convinced she was taken someplace, and wherever that is, that’s where she was killed. There’s a lot more to this Chupacabra thing than even you and I know. Than even Night Seekers know, I think. But I promise you we won’t stop until we get some answers.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The devil beast had found its hideaway again, a place to conceal itself from marauding animals and any humans that might pass in that direction. Its belly was full, its thirst slaked. That should have been enough to sate it for a while. But the evil in what passed for its brain was blossoming again. The earlier kill had completed the unfinished cycle in this area. It could have—probably should have—left to look for a fresh hunting ground. That’s the way it was programmed.

But searching for the latest victim the devil beast had found so much prey just begging for the attack it couldn’t make itself move on. It knew the pain shooting through its head was a direct reaction to the fact it hadn’t left. It wasn’t supposed to think for itself, not in its evil form. It wasn’t supposed to reject its programming, give in to temptation.

But some of its genetic makeup still carried the rebellious gene, the innate hunger to do its own thing and satisfy its own cravings. But enough of its brain worked to know it had to wait. Not too long but just enough for the hunters to let down their guard.

Then it could strike again.

\* \* \* \* \*

“So that’s the situation.” Mark’s image was up on the big screen.

The entire Night Seekers team was gathered in the command center again, watching and listening to their team member who had anything but good news for them.

“That’s two kills, close together,” Sam pointed out. “Completing a pattern and starting a new one?”

“That’s the way I see it,” Mark agreed. “But why did it hang around? Why not look for a fresh hunting ground?”

“That’s the big question,” Ric answered. “From all the past information we’ve gathered, three kills and it moves on.”

“So what happens next?” Chelsea wanted to know. “Just looking at the map of Zapata County it’s apparent there’s a hell of a lot of territory to cover.”

“And not thickly populated, either,” Dante said. His grin held little humor. “Don’t people down there like each other enough to live together?”

Mark snorted. "Not a lot. The town of Zapata's the biggest population center. Falcon Lake's next but it's just a designated population area. Any place else is just a few houses or farms and nothing else. I sent you the photos I shot this morning but you won't find anything new. The scene looks like all the others. Same manner of kill. Same absence of blood. Oh, and can you ask Craig to talk to his lab guys? Ask them if there's any combination of chemicals in the bodies they autopsy that would create the impression of the scent of turpentine?"

"Will do. It might help to know what causes it. Maybe help us track the beast." He paused. "And give us evidence that there are several of them. Which as you know is the current working theory."

"Good. That might help."

"How are you and Chloe doing with the night runs?" Ric asked. "And how many men does the sheriff have on this?"

"As many as he can and as much as we can do," Mark told him. "And that still leaves a lot of wide-open space. And last night, when we should have seen something, all we saw was the usual wildlife and a stray dog."

"That's what I figured. What do you need from us?"

"Whatever you can give me. I'd appreciate it if two members of the team could come on down here." He paused a moment, phrasing his next words. "Chloe's...uh...staying with me, so she said they could use the house she rented. It's got two bedrooms."

Ric chuckled. "Like you're telling us something we don't know? Tell Chloe thanks for the use of the house. I'll call you back when we figure out who's going."

The screen went dark and he turned to the group gathered at the big table. "Okay. Let's figure out who are the best resources to send." He looked at each person individually. "I'd like to send someone who's already a little familiar with that area of South Texas. Chelsea, you've already had a taste of it. You ready for another?"

"Absolutely. I want to get this beast as badly as anyone."

Ric's eyes continued to move from face to face. "Logan, you went last time but you're just back from Florida and I still have details to go over with you. So Sam, you get the nod this time."

"I'm ready," the former Georgia resident said.

Finally Ric turned to Dante Martello. "How about you, city boy? You ready for the wide-open spaces of South Texas?"

Dante shrugged. "I'm good with whatever. But remember, I don't shift."

"But that doesn't mean you don't contribute. I need someone on the ground to monitor things, to patrol with weapons, to be ready with backup at a moment's notice."

"I can do that," he agreed.

"All right, then. Let's make some plans and I'll call Mark back."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thanks for letting them use your house." Mark wrapped his arms behind Chloe from behind, his hands automatically going to cup her breasts. Instantly his cock hardened. He wondered if he'd ever be able to touch her without wanting her this way.

"No problem." She turned her head to kiss his chin. "I'm not using it, anyway."

"You said you didn't mind them knowing you're staying here," he reminded her.

"That's right." Even as she pressed back against him she continued putting sandwiches together and sliding them into plastic sandwich bags. They were going on photo safari again this afternoon. She didn't have much appetite but she couldn't afford to let herself get sick, either.

"It makes it pretty difficult for them to ignore the fact that there's something between us," he pointed out.

She wiped her hands on a paper towel and turned in his arms. "There *is* something going on between us," she acknowledged. "I never denied that, Mark. It's just hard for me to go where you want to with this when I still don't know about Melinda." She tugged at her lower lip with her teeth. "But..." Her voice trailed off.

"But?" he prompted.

"But I'm beginning to realize finding her isn't going to be as simple as I thought. Even with the flyer Sheriff Torres sent out to everyone and the extra muscle he's putting into it."

"So exactly what does that mean?" He dropped his hands to her hips and pressed her against him, his thick erection fitting into the notch between her thighs. The heat of her cunt penetrated both layers of clothing.

"It means that if we can just get past what's happening now and catch this beast, I'm ready to talk about...you know...what you want to talk about." She rested her head against his shoulder.

His fingers tightened on her hips and he rocked gently against her. "You mean about coming back to Desolation Ranch with me? Living with me there?" He paused, looking down at her. "Mating with me? For life?"

"Y-Yes. If... If you'll just be patient with me."

He moved a hand to cup her chin, lifting her face to him. "I'll be as patient as you need me to be, sugar. You're more than worth it." He moved his lips over hers in a soft kiss. "You know, you can do your photography from there as well as anyplace else. If I know Craig Stafford, he'll build you your own studio and darkroom that will outdo anything you've ever thought of."

She started to pull away from him. "Oh, Mark, no. I don't want to be an obligation to him. I don't want him to feel he has to—"

He touched his fingers to her mouth. "That's not how he looks at things. You should see what he did for Dakota." He grinned. "She was ready to dig her own garden, with a little help from the guys. Craig brought in equipment, tilled and turned



the earth, set frames around each area and had more seeds and seedlings delivered than one person can plant." He kissed her again. "That's just his way of trying to keep us happy so we'll stay focused. So don't argue, okay?"

"Okay, but it will take a lot of getting used to."

"We'll be together. That's the important thing." He stroked his hand up and down her spine. "And I will always be there for you. Always." He dipped his head and nibbled her earlobe. "If we don't get out of here right now I'll have to strip these clothes off you and have my way with you."

She laughed softly. "Is that a fact?"

He took one of her hands and put it directly over his cock, straining at the denim of his jeans. "Try that for a fact, sugar."

When she squeezed her fingers gently he sucked in his breath.

"Be prepared, Chloe. When we get home I'm going to fuck you until neither of us can breathe."

She looked up at him, her fingers still molded around his length. "What about your friends? When are they coming?"

"Oh, shit." He lifted her hand away from him. "Late this afternoon. Damn, damn, damn." He sighed. "We have to feed them, too, which means a stop at the store while we're out. But after we run tonight I'm sending them the hell over to your place. That's about as long as I can wait."

\* \* \* \* \*

The early evening air was warm so they ate out on the picnic table in Mark's backyard. The afternoon trip had taken them longer than he and Chloe expected. They'd found some unexpected, nearly hidden shallow caves that Mark had taken the time to search for remains. Fruitlessly, as it turned out. Then Chloe had stopped several times to shoot photos for her book. By the time they'd finished they had barely enough time to stop by the barbecue place and get takeout ribs and salads.

It didn't seem to make any difference to the people sitting at the table. There was nothing left except for bare ribs and empty dishes.

Chloe had liked them all at once. They'd gone out of their way to make her feel comfortable with them. And she was really glad to have another female shifter in the group. Chelsea Roland was smart and funny and obviously dedicated to the Night Seekers cause.

"Coffee or beer?" Chloe asked, as she cleared the table.

Dante Martello smiled at her. "Beer would be good for me. Thanks."

"Coffee for the rest of us," Mark told her. "No alcohol before we shift and run tonight. We need to be extra alert." He clapped Dante on the shoulder. "This guy just has to drive around in the truck and wait for the chance to show off his marksman skills."

“And save your collective asses,” he joked.

Mark took the folder that was sitting on the bench next to him, opened it and took out the crude map he and Chloe had put together. Next to it he spread out the aerial maps of the county he’d pulled off his computer.

“We need to figure out how we’re going to divide this up,” he told the men. “We all need to wear the radios around our necks. If you spot anything, find a place to shift and call Dante.”

“What do we do with the devil beast until he gets there?” Sam wanted to know.

“Nothing unless you see it trying to get into a house. Then you need to create a diversion.”

“Should we have had Craig send the helo, too?” Chelsea asked.

“I thought about that,” Mark answered. “I know we used it effectively in Maverick County. But I’m hoping we can take the creature down without drawing that much attention to it. There are fewer people in Zapata and more superstition. I’d like to do this as quickly and smoothly as we can.”

“One can only hope,” Sam said. “Okay, let’s put together some kind of plan that makes sense.”

Chloe brought out mugs and the coffee carafe and they spent more than an hour going over the places she and Mark had noted, figuring out who should go where and what paths they should follow. Mark called Leon Torres to bring him up to speed and let him know that other members of Night Seekers had arrived and would be on patrol tonight, too. When it got too dark to see outside, they moved into the house, turning on the lights and arranging themselves on the furniture and floor, wherever they each found a place to be comfortable.

“There’s something else we need to talk about.” Sam fiddled with his coffee mug. “I’ve been digging through all the old reports of everything people even remotely attributed to the Chupacabra.”

“We talked about this on the drive down,” Chelsea added. “It’s pretty bizarre but it’s a possibility we can’t afford to ignore.”

“Now you’re making me nervous,” Mark said. “What else could there be that we haven’t charted?”

“In a couple of rare instances the Chupacabra has killed two at one time. A single kill and a double, then it’s gone.” He looked around the table at everyone. “I’m wondering if we might not be on the cusp of that here. Especially since it completed the unfinished pattern from Maverick County. What do you think?”

“I’d say with this devil beast anything is possible,” Mark agreed. “Interrupting its pattern the way we did before may have thrown off whatever internal mechanism drives it.”

Chloe shuddered. “God. One killing is bad enough. I’d hate to think it would attack two people at once.”

"Amen. So, I repeat, we need to be extra alert." He rose from his chair. "Okay, let's go over this one more time. Then the three of you need to get going."

They decided that Chloe and Mark would leave from the house first. Dante would drive Chelsea and Sam to the areas assigned to them and they would start their tracking from there. That accomplished two things. They would get to their starting points sooner and Chloe would have a chance to get more comfortable with them before seeing them naked and watching them shift.

Dante hauled out the special long-range radios he'd brought with him.

"Ric decided these would be better than cell phone with so many of us needing to be in touch at the same time," he explained. "Craig had these boosted for an extended range. They're all tuned to the same frequency and work with a simple one-button push." He handed them around. "Let's make sure they're all in working order. Be sure yours is turned to Channel Two."

Satisfied they were good to go, he shook hands with Mark, winked at Chloe in an effort to ease her obvious tension and then the three of them were gone.

"You doing okay, sugar?" Mark asked after the door closed behind them.

"As good as I can." She smiled at him. "I like your friends."

"That works out well because they like you, too."

"I hope we have some success tonight, Mark." She shivered. "This waiting is as bad as the nightmare itself."

"I know, sugar." He pulled her close. "It usually is. Listen." He looked down at her face. "Tonight I want you to stay very close to me. No wandering off by yourself, okay?"

"Don't worry. I don't plan to be stupid about this. I've seen the bodies, remember?"

By nine thirty they were ready. Mark turned on the two radios Dante had left with him. Like the others, they each had a clip through which a chain was threaded for the shifters to be able to wear around their necks like they did the cell phones. He and Chloe slipped theirs on over their heads and he pressed the button on each of them to make sure they were all on the same channel and good to go.

"We're ready," Dante's voice came back.

"What about the others?"

"Dropped off as assigned."

There was a series of clicks, then, "Here," came Chelsea's voice, and Sam's echoed hers.

"Okay," Mark acknowledged. "We're good to go. Everyone get ready. And look sharp. I'm beginning to realize we have no idea what form this creature can take."

"Got it," came the reply from the others.

Mark looked at Chloe. "Let's do it, sugar."

They left their clothes in Mark's bedroom, stepped out on the porch and shifted. Nervous energy zipped between them, heightening their already sharp wolf senses. Mark dipped his head at Chloe, his amber eyes assessing her, and then they were off.

The full phase of the moon had passed and was now a waning gibbous moon, one fourth of it obscured by clouds. But there was still enough light for them to see where they were going. There was nothing playful about this run.

There was an electricity in the air tonight sizzling around them that both wolves sensed. Chloe made sure to stay close to Mark as they ran, never straying more than a few inches away from him. Every stray feral animal, every sound or scent, was carefully scrutinized and tested.

They knew their route by now, homing in on the most isolated places they'd marked. Checking those especially with trees and thick foliage offering places of concealment, and paying careful attention to barns, garages and other outbuildings. They had just checked the fifth location on their run when the radio around Mark's neck crackled with sound. Moving far enough away from the house they'd scouted, finding a fortunate copse of trees, they shifted quickly and Mark pressed the button on his radio.

"Go," he said, holding the tiny instrument close to his mouth.

Dante's voice answered him at once. "Chelsea spotted something and signaled me. I'm heading in her direction right now."

Chelsea's sector was right next to theirs.

"What's she got?" he asked.

"She's not sure," Dante said, "except she spotted something weird-looking heading toward the back of a house. She did her fierce wolf thing and got its attention."

"Shit!" Mark cursed. "She'll put herself in danger."

"Nah. She's smarter than that. But she's got it chasing her and she wants more diversion. You good to go?"

"Right now."

Immediately he and Chloe shifted back to their wolvern forms and raced off toward Chelsea's sector. She could feel her heart racing, half in fear and half in desperation, hoping they were after the right creature, fearing they weren't. And wondering if it could somehow lead her closer to Melinda.

They ran flat out, Mark setting the pace and Chloe managing to keep up, the surge of adrenaline giving her speed an added boost. And as they ran Dante's voice kept them up to date through the little radios around their necks.

And then they saw it, the creature from hell, heading straight for them, chasing Chelsea. A creature unlike anything they'd ever seen before. Splitting to the right and left of it they growled ferociously, each tempting it to come after them. Chelsea continued in yet another direction and for a split second the beast stopped, its monstrous red eyes glowing in the moonlight, looking at first one than another of them.

Mark stopped where he was and a growl more ferocious than anything Chloe had ever heard roared up from his body.

*Run, Mark. Don't make yourself such an easy target. And where the hell is Dante?*

Chloe stopped, too, adding her own growl, and Chelsea followed suit. The beast looked at all of them, then the air around it shimmered so violently it became a thick cloud of swirling, multicolored dust. When the cloud settled and dissipated the creature was gone. The three wolves stared, unbelieving.

*What the fuck?* Mark's words were as loud as if he'd actually spoken.

*I don't believe it,* said Chelsea.

*What did we just see?* Chloe turned her elegant head toward him.

*Damned if I know.*

At that moment Dante pulled off the road in the SUV, headlights off.

"Get in," he called. "Come on. We have to get away from here before the homeowners see us and start investigating. Let's go," he urged when none of the animals moved. "We can talk about this back at your house, Mark. Sam's already on his way there."

He leaned over and opened the passenger door and the three wolves piled in, two of them leaping into the backseat. They took off without lights, bumping across uneven ground and dodging clumps of trees until they reached the two lane highway. The Dante hit the lights and in a moment they were racing along the blacktop.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Chelsea and Sam had shifted outside Mark's house, donning the clothes they'd left in the SUV and sparing Chloe the intrusion of their nudity, at least for the moment. Now they sat around the kitchen table, trying to make sense out of the episode. They were all shocked by what they'd seen, their brains trying to assimilate it all.

Mark called the sheriff as soon as he was in the house to tell him they'd chased a creature away and where it had been, urging him to warn the homeowners.

"I don't know if this...thing will come back there, Leon," he said. "We may have frightened it off. But let's not take any chances. See if they have someone they can stay with at least for a few nights."

"I'll handle it," Torres told him, his voice sounding tired.

"It's a shifter of some kind," Chelsea said, accepting the coffee Chloe handed her. "It has to be. Did you see how the air around it shimmered and spun?"

"Yes." Sam pushed his chair away from the table and paced the small room. "We've all had that in the back of our minds since we got together and started tracking this thing. I wish there was a way to prove it. But to do that we'd have to capture one live and I don't know if that's feasible or possible."

"Craig's lab still has all the frozen tissue from the creature y'all killed in Maverick County," Dante put in. "What if he asked them to find some new genetic testing methods?"

Sam snapped his fingers. "What if each of us who can shift—including Craig—gave tissue samples so the guys in the lab had some comparisons to make? Would that at least give them a start?"

"We need to ask." Mark rose from the table and went to get his laptop. "We need to contact Ric and the others, anyway, and tell them what happened tonight. And he needs to get the info to Craig immediately."

"And then we need to figure out what we're going to do next." Chelsea shoved her hair back from her face. "I have a very, very bad feeling about the next twenty-four hours."

Mark nodded agreement. "We disturbed the devil beast's pattern again. It won't take kindly to that."

"What's the sheriff doing about it?" Sam wanted to know.

"Besides doubling the patrols, he also got the television station in Laredo to run a bulletin once every hour that rabid animals are on the loose, that strangers might even be infected and to be extra cautious. And to keep some kind of weapon with them at all time."

Mark grunted. "We're liable to have a full-blown panic on our hands."

"Better that than more dead bodies," Chelsea pointed out.

"All right, here we go." Mark had booted up the laptop and opened the Skype program. In a moment Ric's face appeared on the screen.

"We've been waiting to hear from you," he said. Behind him they could see the others crowded close. "What's the report?"

Mark reported the night's events in as much detail as possible. When he got to the part about the shimmering cloud of air the alarm was evident on the faces of all the other team members.

"Shocked the shit out of us," Mark went on. "But it also gave us a couple of ideas." He went on to relate the possibilities they'd just been discussing. "What do you think?"

"I think I'll get Craig on the horn, even at this hour. He'll probably want to talk to you."

"We'll be here. And Ric?"

"Yeah?"

"We may need more reinforcements. We're all agreed the beast is probably angered by our interruption and will be anxious to retaliate."

Chelsea leaned over his shoulder. "And remember what we discovered about the double kills, even though they were rare?"

Ric raised an eyebrow. "You think that might be what we'll be looking at here?"

"We do. We just hope it won't be tonight."

"I think we chased it off for tonight," Sam added. "But by tomorrow night we'll need all the help we can get."

"I'm on it. Stay connected and I'll get hold of Craig." His face disappeared as the screen went blank.

Mark looked around at everyone. "I don't know how long this will take. You guys want to hang out here until Ric gets back to us? Or go get some rest and I'll call you. Tomorrow night's liable to be a long one."

Dante looked at Chelsea and Sam. "I'm good either way. You guys are the ones who got all the exercise."

"Personally," Chelsea answered, "I'd like to get some rest and have Mark call us when he knows something."

"Same here," Sam agreed. "Mark, is there someplace around here where everyone eats breakfast? You know, the local morning hot spot where we can get a feel for the general atmosphere?"

"Serena's. It's better than the newspaper."

"Then I vote for as much sleep as we can get and an early breakfast to scope things out. See if anyone is gossiping about a strange animals roaming around."

“Okay. Mark? Give us a call as soon as you hear back. And tell Ric again we could use more people before tomorrow night.”

“We should get some rest, too,” Mark pointed out, locking the door after everyone had left.

Chloe stuck the last of the mugs in the dishwasher and turned to face him. “If that’s what you think.”

He moved to stand in front of her, his arms caging her. The swollen thickness of his cock pressing against her was unmistakable.

“That would be the sensible thing to do.” Lust burned in his eyes. “But I’m not sure I can be sensible right now.”

Chloe gave a soft laugh. “Me, neither.”

His mouth on hers was hot and urgent, his tongue as it thrust into her mouth almost desperate. She molded her body to his, winding her arms around his neck to pull him as close as possible. The erotic dance of his tongue in her mouth woke up every nerve ending and sent fire racing through her blood. How was it possible that just a touch from this man stirred her senses so frantically, hardening her nipples at once and flooding her cunt with the liquid of her arousal? And each time the sensations rocketing through her were faster and more intense.

“I’ll never get enough of you,” Mark murmured against her lips, echoing her thoughts. “Enough touch, enough taste. Enough of having my tongue or my fingers or my cock inside you.”

“I hope not.”

Her breathing was shaky, her body responding so intensely to him. Already the pulse in her womb was beating with a demanding insistence. She rubbed her sex against his wide shaft, frustrated by the clothing that separated them. With an impatience she’d never had with anyone else, she yanked at his t-shirt, pulling it over his head and tossing it to the floor. Then her fingers reached for the snap on his jeans, popping it open, and yanking down the zipper.

Her eyes widened when she realized he was commando, nothing but skin between him and the faded denim. His heavy cock sprang free, her fingers instantly wrapping around it. Mark drew in a sharp breath at her touch and his cock flexed in her grip. She brushed her finger across the broad head and found a thick drop of fluid that she spread over the velvet skin.

With an urgency apparent in the swiftness of his movements, Mark unfastened her jeans and yanked both them and her bikini panties down to her ankles. Shaking hands lifted first one foot, then the other before kicking her clothing to the side. His skin was hot beneath her touch, as if he’d just walked through fire. His breath washed over her like a strong summer wind as he lifted her to the kitchen counter.

“Don’t move.” His voice was hoarse and deep.



He opened a kitchen drawer, fished around in it and pulled out a condom. Chloe's eyes widened in astonishment.

"You keep those in your kitchen?"

His laugh was unsteady. "With you in my life I figured I'd better be prepared for anything, anywhere."

As soon as he sheathed himself he slipped two fingers between her thighs and pushed through the lips of her pussy. Electricity zapped every one of her nerve endings.

"Wet." His voice was smug with satisfaction. "You're as aroused as I am."

Chloe felt heat creep up her cheeks. How was it possible she could still be shy with this man, after everything they'd done together?

"It's all good, sugar." He slid his hands beneath the cheeks of her ass. "Because I can't wait another second. No foreplay tonight."

Bracing his feet apart, he lifted Chloe in his strong grasp and lowered her onto his throbbing cock. Her legs wrapped around him and immediately the muscles in her pussy convulsed, tiny shivers that gripped and milked him.

"Jesus." The muscles in his jaw tightened as he gritted his teeth. "You're gonna burn me alive, Chloe. I don't know how long I can last."

Balancing her on one strong arm, he moved his other hand until his fingers found the swollen knot of her clit and began rubbing it. Her orgasm rose slowly from deep inside her, rushing headlong as he rubbed harder right *there*.

"I can't last, sugar," he gasped.

"Me, neither."

The words had barely left her mouth before the climax crashed through her, spasms gripping her muscles, her hot cream bathing Mark's cock that was erupting in the thin latex covering. She clenched on him again and again, her fingernails digging into his shoulders, her entire body pulsing with their joint release.

When she leaned forward against him, arms right around his neck, their bodies were slick with sweat, their breathing desperate as their lungs cried for air. Chloe wasn't sure whose heartbeat she felt, hers or his.

They stayed that way for long, long moments until she managed to unwind her legs from around his waist. He eased himself from her body and lowered her feet to the floor. His arms circled her tightly and they stood that way, wrapped in the pleasure of their intense shared climax, until she finally lifted her head to look at him.

"I can't believe how we are with each other," she whispered.

"You're mine," he told her. "I keep telling you that. And I'm never letting you go."

Her smile was tremulous. "You know, I'm beginning to believe it."

\* \* \* \* \*

The beast was also restless, its hunger rising to a new peak. Where had the animals come from and how had they found it? Its brain couldn't make sense of any of it. All it knew was that its prey, so carefully, staked out, would now be out of its reach.

In one of its many forms it loped through the night, seeking the cover of trees and thick shrubs as it sought to avoid the glare of the gibbous moon. Nothing stirred except night birds and small animals. Nothing that would in any way replace the succulent flesh and blood that sustained it.

That meant more hunting, but now the devil beast had to be more careful. All its natural predator instincts came to the fore, raised to a new level of sensitivity. It would run and seek, searching out the perfect quarry. It licked its lips. Maybe it would be lucky and hit a real jackpot. Then it could leave for new hunting ground. Follow the message programmed into its scrambled brain.

On it raced, seeking, searching, determined to be satisfied before much more time had passed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark's deliberately casual glance took in the crowd at Selena's. The customers were obviously trying their best not to stare at him and the others as they made their way to the big booth in the corner of the restaurant. Those who recognized Mark greeted him, some even acknowledged Chloe. But all of them stared at the three strangers, eyes filled with questions.

Dante grinned as he slid into the booth. "I'm guessing you don't get too many strangers here."

Mark smiled. "You got that right. This isn't like Chicago, where I'd have to say there are probably more strangers than familiar faces."

"You know it."

They sat in silence while the waitress poured coffee and took their orders. She gave the three newcomers a searching glance before turning away. As soon as she was out of earshot and the conversation around them had resumed, Dante looked at Mark.

"Let's go over again what Craig had to say."

Mark took a swallow of his hot coffee. "Exactly what I told you when I called. He's going to have his scientists go back over all the tissue samples of the creatures they've been working on, this time looking for different things. And when we call get back to the ranch, he'll fly someone in to take blood and tissue samples from those of us who shift. Then they'll see if they can find a common thread."

"And what about getting more help today." Chelsea stirred sweetener into her cup. "I'm just afraid, even with the sheriff covering part of the county by car, that we're going to miss something."

Mark looked at his watch. "Sophia and Logan should be on their way right now. I gave them my address so they could punch it into their GPS."

“Mark didn’t want them to have to stop in town and ask directions,” Chloe added. “I think there’s enough unrest as it is without even more strangers showing up.”

“We certainly are the object of a lot of curiosity,” Sam remarked, looking casually around the restaurant.

People were talking to each other softly, casting glances at the booth where Mark and the others sat.

“I see some people from the clinic about four booths from us,” Mark told them. “Let me out so I can go say hello and offer my sympathy. They know Sherry and I were...friends.” He looked at Chloe.

“It’s okay.” She gave him a tiny smile. “I know the two of you used to be close. Go on. Maybe they can clue you into what everyone’s huddled up about.”

The women in the booth in question looked up as Mark approached.

“Ladies.” He nodded at them. “I just wanted to see how y’all are doing.”

“Oh, Mark.” Winnie Leshman blinked at the tears filling her eyes again. “It’s just awful. About Sherry. I can hardly believe it myself.”

“I was talking to her just before she left the clinic,” Angie Roman added, her eyes also filling. “I can’t believe it’s the last time I’ll ever see her.”

“Did you hear about Ramon Escobedo?” Winnie asked. “Brenda’s just destroyed.”

“Yes, I know about Ramon.” He looked carefully at each one in turn. “I hope y’all have been listening to what Sheriff Torres has been saying. We’re dealing with some kind of rabid creature here. If any of you live any place that’s isolated, you might want to stay in town with someone until we catch this thing.”

“We’re all staying with Winnie,” Angie told him. “All of us here. And I’ve got my daddy’s old shotgun.”

“Some of the men are talking about getting up a hunting party,” Winnie said.

Mark tensed. He’d been afraid of something like this. He almost preferred people cowering in fear behind closed doors than out hunting a creature they knew nothing about.

“Winnie, I think folks ought to leave that to Sheriff Torres and his deputies. They know what they’re doing.”

“That’s what I said,” one of the other women piped up. “They have no idea what they’re even looking for.”

“You saying we can’t take care of things?”

The deep voice came from behind Mark and he turned to see two men standing there. Although he couldn’t place their names he vaguely recognized them.

“I think they’re just worried for your safety,” Mark told him. “This creature isn’t like anything you’ve ever hunted before.”

“I can shoot anything that moves,” the taller of the two men bragged.

"Not if it gets you first," Mark told him. He held out his hand. "Mark Guitron. I used to be a deputy here. Right now I'm working with the sheriff to track this creature. And I assure you, this is not slur on your masculinity. I don't think your women would appreciate you getting killed for them."

The men introduced themselves, the taller one still slightly belligerent. "You saying you've got a better handle on this than the rest of us? Folks in this county are pretty damn scared right now."

"A lot of us aren't buying the theory that it's some kind of supernatural creature," his friend added. "We've hunted some pretty dangerous animals ourselves."

"I know you have." Mark nodded. "But I'll tell you what I just told these ladies here. Round up everyone living in an isolated situation and find them places to stay in town until we capture or kill this thing. Whatever it is. Trust me. That's the smartest thing you can do."

"You looked like you were doing some hard talking," Dante commented when Mark slid into the booth again.

"I found out what you wanted to know." He repeated his conversation. "We need to get to Leon's office and find out where we can help him with this. Otherwise I'm afraid we might have a riot on our hands."

"How about if we finish breakfast and do that?" Sam asked. "Everyone in this place looks just as edgy as those people you were talking to. I'm with you. We need to figure out how to stave off a full-blown riot."

"I also want to introduce you and Chelsea to Leon," Mark told him. "I think he'll feel a lot better knowing there are more people on this who know what we're dealing with."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I hope your friends don't mind the cramped quarters at my place," Chloe said, finishing a last cup of coffee. As wired as she was, she'd made a pot of decaf, not needing anything else to ramp up her adrenaline.

Mark chuckled. "They'll be fine. Sam brought air mattresses with him and Chelsea can bunk in with Sophia."

"Dante's dropping everyone at their assigned sectors again?"

He nodded. "I think everyone's good to go."

"Sheriff Torres didn't seem to resist your suggestion that he have all the patrols out tonight with rifles. Or that he have his deputies drag people from isolated areas into town if that's what it took."

"That's because he just wants to get this over with and not have any more dead bodies. He's not going to ask questions if he doesn't want to know the answer."

Chloe wound her arms around his waist and pressed her face against his chest. "I wish this could end before anyone else gets killed."

“Me too, sugar.” His warm hand stroked her back. “I’m sorry we haven’t found a trace of Melinda.”

“I know.” She swallowed hard against the lump in her throat. “I’m just beginning to realize all the outrageous possibilities if indeed she fell victim to El Chupacabra.”

“Night Seekers is expanding its operation since it looks like there’s more than one of these creatures.” His voice sounded harsh. “We have to find out if there’s a central breeding place for them and how that works. If it’s a shifter then it could take more than one form, which doesn’t help us track it. And the thought of a whole pack of them scares me shitless.”

“No kidding. It gives me nightmares.” She tightened her arms around him. “I realize now that even if Sheriff Torres had kept open the investigation into Melinda’s disappearance there’s nothing he could have done. But I’m not giving up. I want you to know that.”

Mark tilted her face up to his. “And I’ll be right in there with you. So will Night Seekers. We’ll get this situation taken care of, regroup at the ranch and figure out where to go from there.”

She stood on tiptoe to brush her mouth against hers. “Thank you for that. You don’t know how much that means to me.”

He stared hard into her eyes, his own lit with heat and need. “So, just so I’m straight on this, you *are* coming back to the ranch with me. And staying with me.”

She nodded. “Yes. You’re right. Melinda wouldn’t want me to just put my life on hold the way I thought. Besides, it will be nice to have a whole team to help me.”

“In that case,” he drawled, his voice thick as syrup, “I have something special planned after we catch the devil beast tonight.”

“You really think we’ll get him?” She tried hard to tamp down her anxiety.

“Yes, I do. We’re all running in different sectors and each sector has at least one car patrolling with a shooter.” He glanced out the window, then at his watch. “That said, I think it’s time we get going.”

As always, they undressed in the living room, stepped out onto the porch and shifted. By now Chloe was used to the routine but tonight there was an edge that hadn’t been there before. Finding Ramon Escobedo’s body had shaken them all. She prayed silently that tonight they would spot the devil beast and be done with it.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

The beast crawled from the little cave that had become a comfortable temporary home for the past few days. Its blood heated and its hunger was strung razor sharp after the fiasco of the night before. It had almost been able to taste the blood of the next victim. Feel the flesh tearing in its teeth.

Who were these creatures? Where had they come from and what were they after? The beast felt anger roar up hot and fierce from within itself, an uncontrollable desire to kill anything that impeded its hunt. The rage fueled its hunger, its natural instinct to kill. Maybe tonight there would be more than one prey destroyed.

It stood in the moonlight, scanning the landscape for intruders but nothing seemed out of place. One last glance around and it took off with incredible speed, racing toward its first kill of the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Night Seekers were everywhere, homing in on their assigned sectors. Everyone was aware that tonight held a special urgency and all senses were on high alert. Leon Torres had bullied and threatened but had finally managed to get the most at risk residents into Zapata at least for the night. But lights were left burning to give the appearance of occupation. No one knew exactly what attracted the devil beast but they were all determined that everything look as normal as possible.

Chloe and Mark ran together. He wasn't about to take a chance on leaving her alone. She didn't have the skills to defend herself that the others had acquired and he worried what would happen if she came on the devil beast by herself. But everyone else was roaming the night, backed up by sheriff's deputies in patrol cars and Dante crisscrossing the county.

Mark chuckled to himself, wondering if the deputies spotted any of the wolves and what they would think. He'd cautioned everyone to be careful and be prepared to conceal themselves whenever necessary.

They were an hour into the hunt when the radio around Mark's neck emitted a signal. He dashed for the covering of nearby trees, Chloe on his heels, and shifted.

"What?" he barked into the tiny instrument.

"Sam has something," came back Dante's voice. "He's only two miles from you and he needs help. I'm calling everyone in."

"Just make sure it's not a false alarm," Mark warned.

"You know Sam would be sure of what he saw. Get going. I'm headed in that direction. About five minutes behind him. Should I call the sheriff?"

Mark took only a second to decide. "Yeah. If he sees us we'll just make ourselves scarce and tomorrow pretend he doesn't know what the hell he's talking about. Okay. On our way. Oh, and Dante?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember, we think this creature can shift, so if you get a shot, take it."

He quickly shifted back again and he and Chloe were off. At the speed at which they raced, only a few minutes passed before they saw Sam, now joined by two of the other wolves, growling at the creature on the back porch of Hank and Enid Samuels' house, bathed in moonlight.

*Don't shift, don't shift, don't shift.* Mark was sending silent signals to the devil beast. It truly was the most frightening creature he'd ever seen, with its two sharp fangs, red eyes, and a body that looked like a cross between coyote and an alligator. It was standing upright, its red eyes glaring at the wolves around it.

*Come on, Dante. We need you now.*

He and Chloe pulled up with the other three wolves and stood there, menacing, teeth bared, growls rolling from their throats. And finally, at last, came Dante. The SUV stopped in the driveway and he saw Dante running low to the ground gripping one of the special rifles they used.

*Now. Shoot now.*

The beast stood up slightly straighter, preparing to gather the air around it like it had the other night, when the *crack!* of the rifle split the air. The beast spun slightly and the red in its eyes seemed to light up the night and a terrifying sound screeched from its throat. Three more shots and it dropped to the porch. Headlights split the night as more cars arrived, deputies, answering Dante's call.

Mark looked at the other wolves around him.

*We need to get the hell out of here. Right now.*

They ran low to the ground, finding shadows to conceal themselves as more deputies filled the yard. And then they were into the stand of trees and shrubs, then back out in the open landscape.

*We need to shift and get back here as soon as we can.*

Mark sent out the message, then nudged Chloe to follow him home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chloe and Mark arrived in his truck almost simultaneously with Sam, Chelsea and Logan in their vehicle. Portable floodlights had been set up in the Samuels' yard and what looked like the entire sheriff's staff was milling around. As soon as Mark stopped out of his truck, Leon Torres hurried over to him.

"It's a good thing we made Hank and Enid go stay with their daughter tonight. It looks like they were going to be the creature's next meal."

"We were afraid it would try for a double this time," Mark told him.

Torres shoved his hands in his pockets, clearly uncomfortable. "Listen. We don't know exactly what to do with this thing. I could send it to the state lab in Austin but I'm sure there's no one there equipped to do a proper autopsy and even know what to look for."

"Not a problem." Dante had come up to where they were standing, the other Night Seekers with him. He looked at Mark. "I called Ric and he got hold of Craig. He's sending the helicopter with some folks from the lab. They should be here in about half an hour."

Mark cleared his throat. "Leon, how about if you have your people take all the pictures you need, gather whatever you think is important, then leave the body and the scene to us."

Sam, Logan and Chelsea were already moving toward the porch to guard the creature's body.

Relief washed over Torres' face. "I was hoping you'd say this. I'm way in over my head here, and my staff knows it. Thanks, Mark. And to your friends, too."

"No sweat."

The sheriff started to walk away then turned back, a puzzled look on his face. "Say, I know this will sound crazy, but did any of you happen to see any wolves while you were out searching tonight?"

Mark kept his face totally expressionless. "Wolves? I thought they were extinct in Texas. Hadn't yet been reintroduced to the animal population."

"Yeah, me too." He lifted his hat, scratched his head, set the hat back in place. "But damn, I could swear I saw a couple running in the moonlight. Some of my deputies thought so, too."

Mark shook his head. "Maybe it was coyotes. There were a bunch of them out tonight."

Torres shrugged. "That must be it. Okay, thanks again. Could I ask all of you to meet with me in the morning? Just to make sure everything's wrapped up nice and tight. I want to get the word out in the county as soon as possible that the danger's passed."

"No problem. Eight o'clock good?"

"Yeah. See you then."

It was obvious to the Night Seekers that the sheriff and his deputies couldn't get away from the scene fast enough. Whatever the devil beast was, they definitely wanted nothing to do with it. Twenty minutes after the last car pulled away the unmarked helicopter descended from the sky and landed in the open yard behind the house. Mark and the others watched silently as four men in white hazardous material suits wrapped the body of the creature in a huge white cloth of some kind, strapped it to a gurney and rolled it to the waiting helo.



In less than fifteen minutes from touchdown the aircraft lifted off, carrying its strange cargo.

"Coffee at my place at seven," Mark told the others. "We need to get all our ducks in a row before meeting with Leon."

The others nodded and headed for their vehicles.

Mark turned to Chloe, who hadn't uttered a word since they'd arrived back at the Samuels'.

"You okay, sugar?" He wrapped an arm around her and tugged her close.

"I need a good hot shower," she told him.

He bent his head and nipped at her ear. "How about some good hot sex? That work, too?"

Her smile was shaky but determined. "How about both?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The air in the small house sizzled with adrenaline overload and electric sexual tension. Chloe watched Mark carefully as he finished his report to Ric Garza, his body vibrating with barely leashed tension. She'd already learned just how ramped up his testosterone level was after a run. Her own hormones were doing the same kind of jittery dance. But tonight, with the hunt, the chase, and the kill, everything seemed to be stronger. She noticed he was careful to show only that part of his body above the waist, concealing the enormous hard-on jutting out from his groin.

Her own senses were as acute as they'd ever been. She shivered as again the frightening image of the devil beast flashed across her mind, but she deliberately tamped it down. As she did with thoughts of Melinda's fate. She was coming to terms with the fact that the hunt for her friend would take much longer than she expected and might turn out far worse than she feared.

Right now a desperate need for Mark was overriding everything else. Her breasts were already heavy with need, her nipples painfully sensitive, her pussy slick with her sexual juices. She forced herself to wait patiently until he completed his call. But when he signed off and turned to her, the intense hunger in his eyes drove her own need even higher.

"I want you," he said, his voice low and raspy.

"I want you, too." Her own voice sounded strange to her. Tonight would be different. Tonight would be...forever, if she chose that. And despite what Mark had been saying, she knew the choice was up to her.

"Not just for right now." His words echoed her thoughts.

"I know," she whispered.

"You're mine, Chloe. My mate. For always. Can you finally accept that? Even though we haven't found Melinda yet?"

She nodded, trying to still her racing heartbeat. "Yes. Now I can. I...want the same thing."

"You'll come back to Desolation Ranch with me? Marry me? Be my mate was well as my wife?"

"Yes." She cleared her throat, and repeated the word louder, more forcefully. "Yes, I will. I love you, Mark. I realize now that I don't want to put my life on hold anymore. I trust you to help me in my search and to always take care of me."

In seconds he was in front of her, his hands warm on her shoulders. "I love you, too, Chloe. And I will always keep you safe."

His mouth was soft on hers at first, a gentle touching, his hands sliding up and down her arms. Then his tongue reached out to trace the outline of her lips, licking the bottom one with sensuous strokes. He nibbled at the corner, then grazed the edge of his teeth over the smoothness of her mouth. She was shaking with the need for him to do more, do it faster but for the moment it seemed he was determined to take his time.

His hands moved to the front of her body and up to where he captured the fullness of her breasts in his palms. His thumbs moved across her nipples as softly and slowly as his lips were caressing hers, testing, teasing. More moisture flooded her cunt, her inner walls quivering with hunger. A flame curled low in her belly, rising upward in a spiral of heat.

When Mark pushed his tongue against her lips, urging her to open, she welcomed him inside with a craving that was barely restrained. He licked the hot well of her mouth with such slow strokes she wanted to scream. In frustration she bit down on his tongue and a hard moan rumbled up from his chest.

Unable to help herself, she lowered one hand to wrap her fingers around his cock, feeling its pulsing heat, the smoothness of skin over hard steel. Mark sucked in a breath at her touch, drawing her tongue into his mouth as he did so.

"Jesus, Chloe," he breathed. "I'm trying to go slow here."

"I don't want slow tonight." She squeezed his shaft for emphasis, sliding her fingers up to the flared crest of the head.

"Well, you won't get slow if you keep doing that."

"Good."

His mouth traveled over her lips again, trailed to her cheek, down her neck, and nibbled her ear. A slow sweep of his tongue found the sensitive spot behind her ear as his fingers pinched and plucked and pulled at her nipples. She whimpered in response, tightening her hold on his erection.

His tongue moved along the soft skin beneath her jawline then down to the valley between her breasts. When he finally closed his mouth over one stiff nipple and drew it deeply into his mouth she cried out at the pleasure that rushed through her. She clamped onto his forearm with her free hand to steady herself, not sure how much longer she'd be able to stand on her shaking legs.

She stood in an agony of expectation as he moved his mouth to her other nipple and gave it the same treatment, pulling and sucking and just barely grazing it with the edge of his teeth. When he finally cupped the cheeks of her ass with his palms and lifted her she almost cried out with relief. Turning, he sat her on the table, reaching out a hand to brush things aside and lifting her legs to his shoulders.

The moment he placed his open mouth over her pussy in a deep, intimate kiss she climaxed, the walls of her vagina clenching and quaking, her body shuddering. His tongue drove deeply, pushing her higher, lapping at the cream that poured from her. His hands flexed beneath her ass, separating the cheeks and pressing the tips of two fingers against the tight ring of her anus. When the tip of one finger pushed past the opening she screamed her pleasure, shaking in his grasp.

She was still quaking, the walls of her pussy still flexing, when he lifted her from the table and set her on the floor.

“Shift, Chloe,” he ordered in a voice that was deep and husky with rampant hunger.

Unsure if she could in her scattered condition, still she drew in a deep breath and willed her body to change. In seconds she was her wolverine self, on all fours, staring now at the huge black wolf beside her. Her belly clenched as she realized what was coming, the anticipation almost more than she could bear.

Mark moved behind her, growling softly, bending his head to lap at her cunt with long, arousing strokes. Whimpering with the pleasure of it, she moved back toward him, wriggling her haunches to urge him to be bolder.

When he rose on his hind legs to mount her she was shaking with excitement, her pussy so wet she was sure she was dripping. The head of his shaft pressed against the opening of her vagina, gently at first, then harder until the head popped inside her. Then, with a sharp thrust of his body, he was deep inside her. His front paws gripped her shoulders and his mouth bit the flesh near her neck.

Not in her wildest dreams had she imagined that mating as a wolf would drive her so high up the spiral of pleasure. Every nerve in her body fired, every muscle spasmed, and the blood in her veins raced through her in a heated flood. He rode her, hard, harder, driving so deep she could feel his balls slapping against her hind legs.

Oh god, she could feel it, the wild pleasure, the burning heat, as her body responded. His teeth bit just a little harder as he quickened his pace. His claws dug into her as the shared orgasm exploded through them, his semen spilling hotly into her clenching pussy. On and on it went, while her body threatened to shake apart as she was swept up in the force of it.

At last he released his hold on her and slowly withdrew, dropping to the floor next to her. The only sound in the room was their heavy panting as they lay side by side, his nose pressed to hers. Chloe had no idea how long they lay there like that before Mark finally rolled over, exhaled sharply and shifted. Gathering her remaining energy she did the same.

She opened her eyes to see Mark smiling at her.

“We are mated, Chloe. Forever.”

She smiled back at him. “Forever.”

“We’ll get married at the ranch, the way Jonah and Dakota did. Is that okay?” He frowned slightly. “Are there people you want to invite?”

She shook her head. “No one I’m close enough to. No relatives or anything. Just...your friends. That will be good.”

“It will all be good,” he assured her.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, little wolf.”

Somehow they managed to stagger to the bedroom and crawl into bed. The last thing Chloe remembered was falling asleep wrapped in Mark’s arms, his hard body warm against her.

For the first time in a long while she dreamed of the future.

## Epilogue

"I have the final reports on Zapata County here," Ric Garza said from his seat at the head of the table. They were all there, all the Night Seekers plus Dakota and Chloe, all anxious for news. "They include copies of the statement issued by Sheriff Torres and the articles that appeared in the local paper."

"I'm surprised there hasn't been more national coverage," Sam commented.

"Torres did a good job of keeping a lid on things," Ric told him. "Nobody, especially the people living in Zapata County, wanted national headlines about something most people don't even believe exists. They'd have had every tabloid in the world camped out there."

"So what do Craig's lab guys have to say?" Chelsea asked.

"They're still doing tests." Ric opened the folder in front of him. "He's hired two more specialists from labs in Maryland and Brazil, and an animal geneticist from Texas A&M University. He's pulling out all stops on this."

"What do the preliminary tests show?" Logan wanted to know. "Can they tell us anything yet?"

A muscle twitched in Ric's cheek. "Still inconclusive. No DNA strain that they can tie to anything else. Any other known form of life." He pointed a remote at the big screen and a picture of the devil beast filled the area. "Just to refresh everyone's memory, this is what it looks like."

"Did you tell them about the creature 'changing'?" Mark asked. "Pulling the molecules of air around it in a way none of us who shift has ever been able to?"

Ric nodded. "I did. That's why they're being so very slow and so careful with all the testing. They want to find any genetic trace that's a clue to the creature's abilities."

"I can tell you, it's a damn good thing Dante got there when he did that last night." Mark shook his head. "I was afraid it would shift again before he could shoot it and we'd have more death and destruction to deal with."

Chloe reached for Mark's hand, squeezing it, remembering that horrific final night in South Texas. The two of them had stayed in Zapata for a week to pack up her things and close up his house. They'd made a brief overnight stop in San Antonio to rent a trailer and load up everything she wanted to take with her from her apartment. Craig would handle getting her out of her lease and storing everything she left behind until she was ready for it.

They were married in a quiet ceremony a week after arriving at Desolation Ranch. Even now, sitting in this meeting, they could hear construction noises as a new wing

was being added to the ranch. It would contain both their living quarters and a studio for Chloe outfitted beyond anything she'd ever thought to have.

"We take care of our own," Craig Stafford told her when he welcomed her to the Night Seeker family.

She was amazed at how easily the others had helped her blend in. Especially Dakota, who spent extra time with her. The two wives sat just as tensely now as the others, anxious for answers to put an end to the nightmare they all found themselves in.

"What's the best estimate coming from the lab on when they'll have something?" This from Sophia.

Ric appeared to choose his words carefully. "They aren't saying a lot, but the opinion seems to be growing that there are more of these creatures than we at first believed. The question no one can answer yet is, are they breeding somewhere spontaneously or is someone propagating them in a lab?"

And that was a thought so horrible no one else wanted to give voice to it.

Their silence was broken by the ringing of the special telephone, which Ric answered. After a brief conversation he pointed his remote at the screen and Craig Stafford's face filled the space which just before had contained the picture of El Chupacabra.

"I assume you've shared the reports with everyone, Ric?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. As much as you gave me."

"The scientists are still running a battery of tests, looking for answers. Also, thanks to all of you who agreed to give blood and tissue samples for them to work with."

The shifters. To see if there was a genetic pattern.

"No problem," Jonah said. "We all want answers as soon as possible."

Craig ran his hand over his expensively cut hair. "Well, unfortunately I have more bad news to share."

The level of tension in the room rose almost visibly. Finally Ric said, "Go on."

"There's been another Chupacabra killing."

Chelsea leaned forward. "Where? When? Because I've been doing a search several times a day using key words."

"I came across it by accident," he told her. "It happened to be on the same page of a newspaper as another article I was researching. Don't feel bad. If I hadn't known what to look for, the way it was written I'd have missed it altogether."

"Where did it happen?" Ric asked.

"Montana. And Logan? You'd probably be the best one to take the lead on this."

Logan Tanner leaned forward. "Anywhere near the last killing?"

Mark leaned over so his mouth was close to Chloe's ear. "Logan's sister and brother-in-law were Chupacabra victims. Logan was the one who found them."

"How awful," she whispered. "Oh, Mark."

He put his arm around her and tugged her close to him. She tried to concentrate on what was being said.

"Practically in your former backyard," Craig was saying. "I'm emailing everything I've found right now. How soon can you leave?"

"When do you want me to leave?" Logan had already risen from his chair, his body vibrating with tension.

"The helicopter will pick you up in two hours and ferry you to the plane. Can you be ready that fast?"

"I'm always ready," he answered, his face twisted with rage.

"Good, good. Sophia, can you be ready to leave, also? I think, considering the way things keep turning out, I'd prefer to start off with a team on the job rather than someone solo."

"Absolutely," she assured him.

"All right, folks. You all have your support assignments when we send out a team so let's get to it. Dakota, Chloe? Sorry you haven't had a better start to your married lives."

Chloe wet her lips. "All that matters is catching this creature," she said firmly.

"I agree," Dakota chimed in. "I know I can speak for both of us when I say we want to do whatever we can to help."

"Thank you very much. Both of you. We'll need every bit of support. This killing was particularly nasty." He paused. "It's almost as if we've raised a level of rage in these devil beasts and they're somehow communicating it."

"And that," Ric said, "is what really scares the hell out of all of us."

The screen went blank and everyone rose from the table.

"All right, guys," Ric said, picking up his folder. "Let's get to work."

## About the Author

I always wonder what readers really want to know when I write one of these things. Getting to this point in my career has been an interesting journey. I've managed rock and roll bands and organized concerts. Been the only female on the sports staff of a university newspaper. Immersed myself in Nashville peddling a country singer. Lived in five different states. Married two very interesting but totally different men.

I think I must have lived in Texas in another life, because the minute I set foot on Texas soil I knew I was home. Living in Texas Hill Country gives me inspiration for more stories than I'll probably ever be able to tell, what with all the sexy cowboys who surround me and the gorgeous scenery that provides a great setting.

Each day is a new adventure for me, as my characters come to life on the pages of my current work in progress. I'm absolutely compulsive about it when I'm writing and thank all the gods and goddesses that I have such a terrific husband who encourages my writing and puts up with my obsession. As a multi-published author, I love to hear from my readers. Their input keeps my mind fresh and always hunting for new ideas.

Desiree welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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