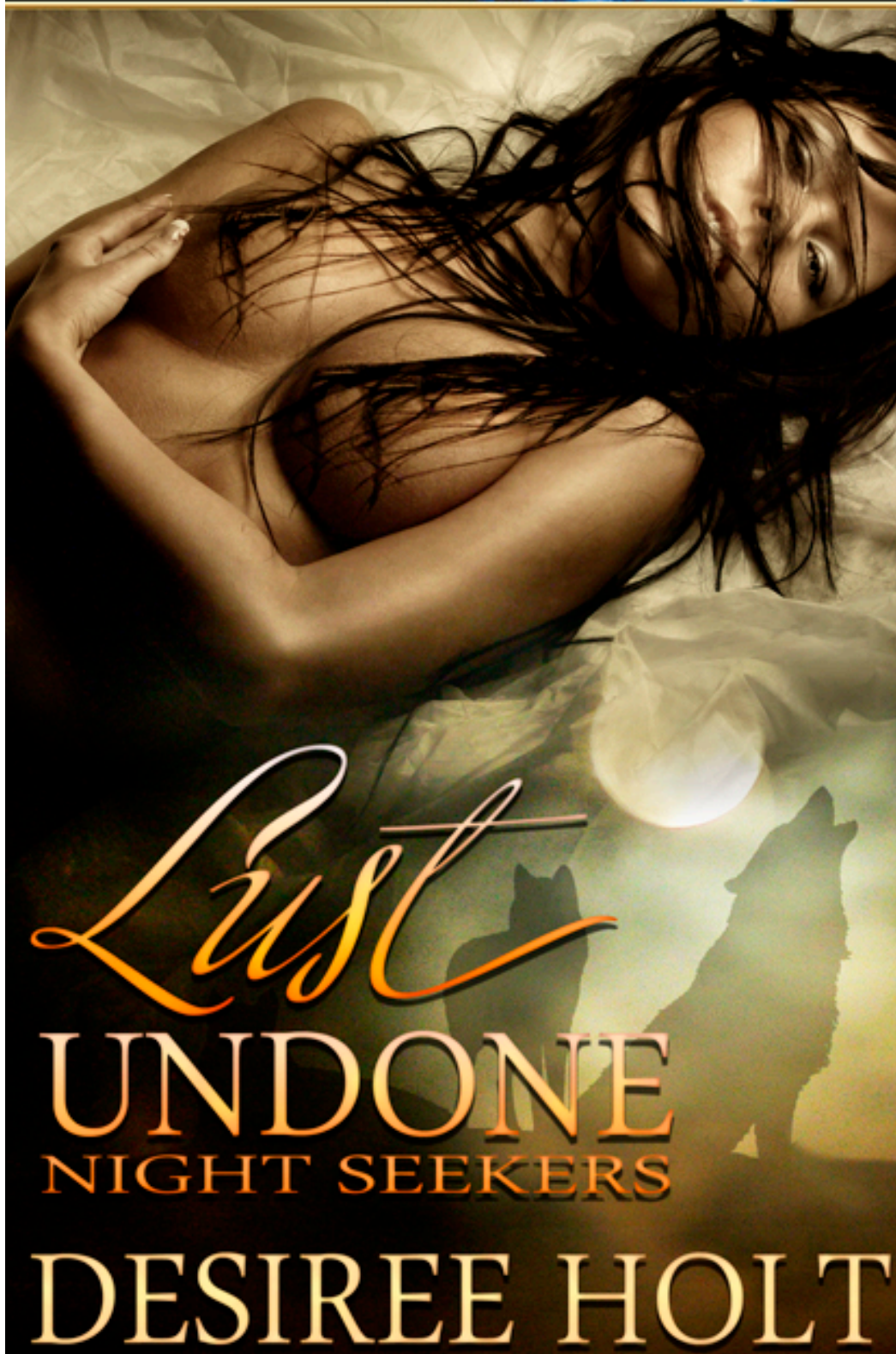


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Lust Undone

Desiree Holt

Book 3 in the Night Seekers series.

Returning to her home state of Maine to investigate a possible Chupacabra killing, Sophia Black meets Clint Beaudine, lean, dark and sexy. The heat between them is incendiary, the sex erotic and the pleasure beyond her imagination. Clint fulfills all her fantasies and teaches her ways to please him. The Maine air might be cold but in Sophia's motel room, it's beyond boiling.

Clint helps her with the case, using his knowledge of the area in which he lived. As they learn each other's secrets, it's obvious to both of them they're meant to be together. Mated. But the Chupacabra is out in the snow, hunting human prey.

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Night Seekers

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LUST UNDONE

Desiree Holt

Dedication

To my very own personal hero, who dared me to be myself. And to Suzanne, my wonderful daughter, who gave me the idea that sparked this series.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Stephen McCausland, Public Information Office, Maine State Police, who so very patiently answered my many, many questions.

Author Note

Like other creatures in the cryptozoologist's barnyard, the Chupacabra has been variously described. Some witnesses have seen a small half-alien, half-dinosaur tailless vampire with quills running down its back, others have seen a panther like creature with a long snake-like tongue, still others have seen a hopping animal that leaves a trail of sulfuric stench. Some think it may be a type of dinosaur heretofore unknown. Some are convinced that the wounds on animals whose deaths have been attributed to the Chupacabra indicate an alien presence. However, they do not attribute the "mutilations" to the aliens themselves, but to one of their pets or experiments gone awry. Such creatures are known as Anomalous Biological Entities (ABEs) in UFO circles.

—Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

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Prologue

"I'd like to propose a toast."

Craig Stafford raised his champagne flute and looked at the people gathered around him.

"We look entirely too somber for a wedding party."

"You're right," Logan Tanner, a former Montana deputy sheriff, chimed in. "This is an important occasion and we should be celebrating it."

"To Chloe and Mark." Craig smiled at the couple standing near him. "Sunshine in darkness. May you have a long and happy life together."

The others echoed him and then lifted their glasses to drink to Mark Guitron and Chloe Hansen. Mark's arm was tight around the shoulders of his very new bride, the gesture both loving and protective.

This very specialized group of people called Night Seekers was all standing on the patio of Desolation Ranch. Set up as their headquarters, the ranch had been purchased by Stafford, the reclusive billionaire who was dedicating his life to the eradication of the Chupacabra. The devil beast.

El Chupacabra!

The name of the creature inspired a combination of rage and frustration in every one of the eight members of the Night Seekers. Each of them had lost at least one person close to them to the beast that killed in a horrendous way. Victims' throats were punctured, blood drained and internal organs ripped from their bodies.

Twice now, in two different locations in Texas, the members of the team had thought they'd killed the Chupacabra, only to have a report of new killings pop up not long after that.

Each time the team was sure it had killed the murderous creation, Stafford maneuvered to get the body whisked away to his secret lab. There his scientists did their best to identify where this abomination had derived from. For years, before Stafford became involved, other scientists had operated on the theory that it was the result of two distinct species mating. Now they were slowly coming to the realization that, while that may have been the origin, it was much more than that. Possibly even the result of human genetic engineering.

There was no readily identifiable DNA. And circumstance had led them to also believe the creature was some sort of shifter, able to assume other forms, not just human.

The legend of the Chupacabra was one that had been handed down for decades, the stories stretching from South America to North America. Sightings were recorded in

many places and it had been written about and speculated over extensively. Sophia Black, a former detective with the Maine State Police, had read all about the ranchers who swore they'd killed it only to have it turn out to be a mutated goat or coyote.

But the killing spree continued – animals and humans alike. Was it a wild animal of some sort because of the way the bodies were mutilated, sliced open with the entrails pulled out? Or a vampire, as some thought, because each body had puncture wounds at the neck and was drained of blood? Talk about your way-out-there theories. And each time someone was sure the beast had been killed it turned out to be a false alarm, just as it had for the Night Seekers in Maverick and Zapata Counties in Texas. Because the killings continued and the bodies piled up.

And the legend continued to grow.

Every member of the team was frustrated by the inability to track the beast to its actual lair. Since the Night Seekers had been formed there had been nine more killings—three in Georgia and six in Texas. A depressing thought for everyone. Twice now they'd thought they'd had it, only to learn it was still loose. Or another one like it. And that was an even scarier thought. That someone, somewhere, was breeding these creatures which could assume different shapes at will.

If there was a bright spot in all the pain, it was the knowledge that on the first Night Seekers mission, in Maverick County, former FBI agent Jonah Grey had found Dakota Furcal, now Dakota Grey. An herbalist, among the things she grew were the special herbs that six members of the group needed to maintain their genetic balance. The six who themselves were shapeshifters. Wolves.

The most recent mission had brought Chloe and Mark together and she had returned to the ranch with him when he finished in Zapata County.

The event tonight should have been a joyous one. Weddings were supposed to be a time of festivity and filled with merriment. But an underlying sense of anguish gripped everyone and unfortunately took the edge off the celebration. Subdued the happiness.

Mark Guitron and Chloe Hansen stood in the fading sunlight, accepting the good wishes of their teammates.

It wasn't difficult, however, to read the sadness in Chloe's eyes. Despite the best efforts of the team her friend Melinda was still missing. Her disappearance in Zapata County in Southwest Texas on the Mexican border had been too coincidentally close to new Chupacabra killings not to tie them together.

While no one except Chloe wanted to say it out loud, they all suspected that if humans were behind the latest evolution of the devil beast they had captured Melinda for their own devious purposes. That her fate might be worse than death.

Stafford, standing to one side of the patio, put down his empty champagne flute. Everyone knew the story of his wife and child, killed by the Chupacabra when they were all vacationing in Mexico. Now he dedicated his life and his billions to wiping the beast off the face of the earth. Night Seekers had been his idea. All the members, from

various states and various law enforcement agencies, had been specifically chosen by him.

"I hate to bring this up at a wedding party," he began, "but I think we need to put something on the table that everyone's thinking and no one wants to say."

"I'll say it." Chloe removed her hand from her husband's arm and stepped forward. "It's my wedding – well, Mark's and mine – and my friend everyone's thinking about." She glanced over her shoulder at Mark who smiled and stepped up beside her. He put his arm around her and pulled her into his side.

"Everyone's thinking it," she repeated, "and so am I. It's obvious there are more of these creatures out there than anyone ever suspected. So either they're crossbreeding with other species or someone's screwing around with genetics. And Melinda's been taken to wherever this hellhole is."

"I think we're all aware," Craig agreed, "that we're seeking something far beyond what we originally thought when we started this project. It's not only impossible for one creature to be in so many far-flung places, but we've killed two and yet the destruction still continues."

"I can't imagine what kind of deranged human being would breed creatures like this." Logan Tanner, the former Montana deputy sheriff, had seen more of the Chupacabra death trail when Craig sent him to check out bodies in Georgia. The horrific pictures he'd brought back were now scanned into the main file on the computer. "And to what purpose?"

"To kill," Craig said. "To destroy. Think of the power someone would have if they had an army of these devil beasts."

Jonah Grey swallowed the last of his champagne. Next to him stood his wife Dakota. Now he linked his fingers with hers.

"Those of us who are shifters know that around the world there are others like us who live only for power and control, and are driven by a bloodlust. It's obvious one of them has decided to harness that power and enhance it."

"Are you sure it's a shifter?" Chloe asked.

Jonah nodded. "I'd say that odds are weighted in that direction. A shifter who knows the power he or she controls would want to crossbreed and enhance it. With an army of shifter killers at his or her disposal that person could wreak havoc on society."

"You'd be amazed at what some people will do," Logan agreed. "Or maybe not. In Montana we had a bunch of what you'd call mountain men. Guys who lived at the back of beyond and thought civilization was a dirty word. Three brothers, for example, used to kidnap people and take them up on the mountain they owned and chase them for sport. With rifles. And kill them."

Ric Garza, the de facto leader of Night Seekers, refilled his champagne flute. "So it seems someone's decided to create their own wild animals. Shifters, maybe with human DNA if they can achieve it. And what? Turn them loose?"

Craig shook his head. "Sell them. Look at any of your Third-World countries with vicious dictators. Think what they could do with a pack of these devil beasts to exert control over the people. And if they can assume not just human form but that of domestic animals, people would never know when there was one in their midst."

Everyone stood quietly absorbing the enormity of that statement. The silence was broken only when a cell phone played *The Maine Stein Song*. Sophia Black's phone. A former investigator with the Maine State Police, she used the state song as her ringtone. Everyone looked at her as she pulled it from the pocket of her slacks and pressed talk.

"This is Sophia."

They all watched as she listened, the color slowly leeching from her face. Her twin nephews had been killed by El Chupacabra and she was viciously dedicated to its eradication. She'd been one of the first to be convinced that, rather than migrating to other states from Texas and the South American countries, there were indeed more than one of the creatures. Now, with the increased number of killings all over the country, the entire team was convinced.

"All right. I'll get back to you shortly." She disconnected the call and shoved the phone back in her pocket. She looked around at everyone. "That was my sister Rebecca. Sorry to break up the party but there's been another killing. Up in the woods in northern Maine. And as before, no one there seems to have a clue what they're dealing with."

"There'll be plenty of time to celebrate when we bring this to an end," Mark said.

"And when we find Melinda," Chloe added. "I'm for anything that brings us a step closer."

"Then let's go into the command center," Craig said, "and see what we have."

Chapter One

"I have to say, Maine is probably the only place I've ever been that's colder than Montana. And maybe more desolate."

Logan Tanner looked at Sophia, turned up the fleece-lined collar of his rancher's coat and pulled his Stetson down lower on his head against the light snow falling. A Stafford jet had just delivered them to the general aviation terminal at Northern Maine Regional Airport in Presque Isle, Maine. At the counter inside the terminal a man had greeted them with the keys to a four-wheel-drive SUV.

Sophia laughed. "I thought you Montana natives were from hardy stock."

"We like to think so, but I think you've got us beat."

"Welcome to Aroostook County," she told him. "It's nicknamed the Crown of Maine because it sits at the top of the state. Houlton, the county seat, is only three miles from the border with Quebec and New Brunswick in Canada. Can't get much more north than that unless you go to Alaska."

"That close?" Logan stared north, as if he could actually see the line of demarcation. "With the area as wide open as it is, as unpopulated as it seems to be, sneaking over the border shouldn't be a problem."

"Not as much as you think, even though we're only three miles from the boundary line. The border police up here are pretty sharp, Homeland Security has an office, and the hunters and potato farmers keep a sharp eye out for strangers."

"But didn't you tell me your friends on the Maine State Police tried to sell the story that this murder is the work of an illegal?"

Sophia gave an unladylike snort. "That's because they're grasping at straws. For all I know they're still holding on to it."

Logan shaded his eyes and looked at the land beyond the airport. Past the boundaries there was nothing but snow-covered fields and tall pines draped with winter's overcoat. "I'd think the terrain alone would discourage people from trying to sneak over here. It's a lot less friendly than the southern borders."

"You'd be amazed what determination can do for some people." She laughed. "Until they run into the natives, that is. Or a black bear or a moose."

The light snow was slowly thickening, the wind blowing it into swirls and drifts, the sharp edge of it cutting into the skin on their faces. A massive snowplow was in constant motion, keeping the two runways clear.

"I'm surprised your sister didn't meet us," Logan said as they climbed into their vehicle.

"I told Rebecca we'd have our own transportation. She's waiting for us at the barracks in Houlton." Sophia clicked the seat belt into place. "The airport's in Presque Isle but the barracks are in Houlton because it's the county seat. The drive usually takes about an hour although it could be longer with this snow."

"Not a problem. I've driven in worse before. And I noticed this vehicle has brand-new heavy-duty snow tires on it so no worries there."

"Okay. Just head out through the gate and it's a straight shot down Route 1."

Logan grunted and punched the destination address into the GPS, then followed Airport Road onto Route 1 and headed south. "The text from Ric said our motel's in Houlton, too."

"Yes. It's a fairly new one and has about everything we'll need. And it's located right where Route 1 and I-95 intersect, at the absolute north end of 95. Plus it's at the head of the snowmobile trails, if we need to use them, so it'll be very convenient."

"Even though the killing took place near Presque Isle?"

"Areas kind of blend into each other out here." She gave his arm a light punch. "Kind of like in Montana, right?"

"Point taken," he agreed as they headed toward Houlton. "It is a pretty wide-open place."

Sophia nodded. "Aroostook is so big folks who live here just call it The County. It's as big as Connecticut and Rhode Island combined, but the population only tops out at about seven thousand."

"Lots of isolated places for the devil beast to hunt. A perfect feeding ground for it."

"You bet. There are scattered hunting and fishing camps, of course the potato farmers and logging camps, and just plain isolated homes of people who don't want society crowding around them. We'll have a lot of territory to cover." She glanced over at him. "That's where you come in."

"What about the presence of wolves?" he asked, maneuvering his way carefully around a huge truck hauling logs. "I don't want anyone out here getting trigger happy if they happen to see me in my wolven form."

"The wolf population might be sparse but the people in The County are used to seeing one now and then. There used to be a fair-sized population of gray wolves here but now they're pretty scarce," she went on. "There was a strong movement a few years ago to reintroduce a protection program but the federal government said they were already protected under the Endangered Species Act. Mostly what's here now are the gray wolves which migrate down from Canada."

"I wonder if the beast is using its wolf form to hunt."

"We don't know and no one's reported spotting one. Besides," she pointed out, "we know we can't assume that this is the only form it shifts into. If in fact that's what it's doing."

"We're lucky we found the report on this kill as quickly as we did."

She nodded. "Before it feels compelled to complete its pattern. I wish we knew more." She pulled a slim folder from the briefcase she'd stashed at her feet. "The man they found owns—owned—a fish camp west of Presque Isle. It's private property but he opens it to people who stay at the nearby campground in season. Even has a few cabins for folks who come back year after year just for the fishing."

"Not much of that going on right now." Logan bumped up the speed of the windshield wipers.

"No. And apparently he lived alone so it was a couple of days before anyone missed him. The owner of the campground was trying to call him, got no answer after several tries and headed over there on a snowmobile. Found him on the front porch. Same condition as all the others. What we got off the internet is pretty thin but Craig said they'd have more information for us at the barracks."

"I can't believe they're actually letting us hook up with them."

Sophia made a rude sound. "They're not, really. If Craig hadn't worked his contacts and Rebecca hadn't pushed we'd be here but on the outside looking in, fighting them as well as the devil beast. And be prepared for some animosity. When my nephews were killed and I did all that research on the internet they called me everything but a crazy person. They won't be welcoming us."

Logan pounded a fist on the steering wheel. "Why is it always so damn hard to make people believe what we're telling them?"

"You know the answer to that. The majority of the population refuses to accept anything paranormal, especially something as bizarre as this. Anything they can't see, can't find a logical explanation for. But with no clues at all and no explanation they're grudgingly willing to listen to what we have to say. Only because we've had experience with similar killings and our input might be valuable. But I'm pretty sure they're thinking serial killer, not the devil beast."

"Even though there were no traces of anyone being there except the dead man?"

"Uh-huh. Prejudices die hard."

"Is your sister the primary on this?"

"No. She wanted to be but the sergeant gave the lead position to a detective named Robert Lacroix. Bobby. He's in the Criminal Investigation Division with Bec."

"French?"

"Half. Lot of people ended up in northern Maine when the English kicked the French out of Acadia in Canada."

"Is he someone you used to work with?" Logan's curiosity was mild but evident.

"Yes. But not that often. I actually worked more out of Bangor." She sighed. Bobby had made personal overtures the few times they'd worked together indicating that he'd like to take things a little further, but for Sophia the chemistry had not been there. And she hadn't been interested in just sweating the sheets with a coworker.

Logan couldn't keep the curiosity out of his voice. "Sounds like there was more to it than that."

"For him, not for me. And it really didn't go anywhere. Besides, Bobby's a professional. He won't let the past interfere with this investigation." She remembered the first time she'd learned about the Chupacabra, when her twin nephews had been brutally slain and mauled. "I'm hoping Rebecca will pull up the old file about my nephews. Once we get the specifics of this case on the record I plan to convince everyone up the food chain that the cases are related."

"The death of your nephews must have been really hard for you." Logan's voice was edged with sympathy. "Especially with everyone thinking your theory was crazy and you not being allowed to even work the case."

When her twin nephews had been found dead, their bodies in a mutilated condition, she'd had a suspicion based on some things she'd read. She'd gone online to do some heavy research about similar incidents and discovered the Chupacabra. But she seemed to be the only person on the force who believed in the creature. At the time no one had given her theory any credence or was even willing to assign resources to follow it up. Now she was back where it all had started, only with the addition of Night Seekers resources.

Sophia swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. This was the first time she'd been back to Maine since the call from Craig Stafford asking her to join the Night Seekers and her stomach suddenly knotted as the memory of the scene swept over her. Those two beautiful little boys, ripped open, blood drained, a scene etched in acid in her memory. She'd need every bit of control to keep from falling apart here. Craig Stafford hadn't hired her to crack wide open. He'd hired her to track a devil beast and that's what she was going to do.

She was sure when she and Logan were getting ready for this trip that she'd be fine, that she could deal with returning to the scene of devastation. But hell. It was going to be damn hard not to let her emotions break loose.

Plus she knew this would be an uphill battle to convince the detective that they were dealing with something beyond human comprehension.

"Yes, well." She turned her head and stared out the window. "I know you can relate to that. I mean, I know you were the one who found your family members."

"How are your brother and sister-in-law?" Logan asked.

Sad. Devastated. But infused with a new ray of hope.

"Shelley's pregnant," she told him. "And they're very excited about it. It's helping them deal with the loss."

"Good. That's good. I hope I get to meet them." He paused, then asked as if almost reading her thoughts, "Are you sure you should have taken this gig? That coming back here isn't too hard for you?"

"My state, my territory, my nephews to avenge. And don't worry. I won't lose it. I'm a disciplined operative, Logan. I can handle this. Just as much as you can. You lost someone, too."

His brother and sister-in-law had been destroyed by the act of the devil beast. And like Sophia with her nephews, he'd been the one to find them.

"Yes, I did." His voice was taut with sudden emotion. "And I actually dread the moment when I'll have to return to Montana, even though I know it's coming sooner or later. Too many painful memories. So I think I know where you're at."

"Thanks, but I'll be okay. I have to be. Anyway, this is my territory so it's only logical that I'd be part of this new case. And my sister's on the CID team that's handling it."

"I'm surprised we're not getting together with everyone in Presque Isle," he commented.

"The barracks for this area is in Houlton. That's the county seat and that facility is the heart of the operation in Aroostook County. There are places we meet in Presque Isle when we need to but for this session the barracks was the most logical choice. Since the killing was around here, they'll work out of the Houlton barracks."

"Any word yet on the hunt for Melinda?"

Every Night Seeker was focused in some way on the hunt for Chloe Guitron's close friend who had been taken by the Chupacabra.

"Nothing. But everyone's on it in some way."

"I hate to say it out loud, but I don't even want to think of the shape she'll be in if and when we find her."

"I agree."

Conversation lagged after that as the snowflakes continued to thicken and Logan concentrated on his driving. Sophia stared out the side window at the familiar landscape, every bit of it stamped into her memory. Empty land rolled away on either side of them, now covered in heavy drifts of snow. Trees reached stark limbs skyward and the lights of oncoming cars were like haloes in the windblown snowfall. She could just imagine the Chupacabra slinking through the cover of winter, seeking its prey. And people, used to the roaming of gray wolves, not shrinking away from it. Ignoring it until it was too late.

Sophia would never forget the sight of the bodies of her nephews, or the grief her brother Damien and his wife Shelley suffered. She'd promised herself to find this devil beast and kill it one way or another. If the Night Seekers couldn't do it, no one could. But convincing a bunch of no-nonsense Maine cops that they were dealing with the paranormal would definitely be a struggle.

In Houlton, where Route 1 intersected with I-95, they passed Skye's Motel where Craig had reserved rooms for them. Rebecca had offered them a place to stay at her house in Presque Isle but they wanted to be close to the state police barracks, and the

crime laboratory. Besides, Sophia knew Logan wanted to have the opportunity to shift and run when he needed to without someone's curious eyes watching him.

She and Dante Martello, the former Chicago cop, were the only non-shifters on the team and sometimes she found herself a little jealous of the others.

"We're here."

Lost in her own thoughts she was startled to discover they'd turned onto Darcie Street and pulled into a parking lot she'd used many times in her life before leaving for the Night Seekers. Like everywhere else, the acreage around it was covered with huge drifts of snow, but the driveway and parking lot had obviously been plowed. The flags at the top of the poles on either side of the front door snapped in the sharp wind.

They had barely stepped through the door when Sophia felt a small warm body slam into her and slender arms tighten around her.

"Oh my god. I'm so glad you're here."

Sophia managed to disentangle herself enough to take a step back and look at her sister. Rebecca was as light as Sophia was dark. Blonde where Sophia had raven hair. Startling green eyes where Sophia's were a green-gray-hazel mixture. But the faces were so similar it was impossible to take them for anything but sisters.

"How are Shelley and Damien?" she wanted to know.

"Good. They're good." A tiny smiled quirked her lips. "Her pregnancy's coming along nicely."

"They must be thrilled to death. At least," Sophia added, "it sounded like it the last time I spoke to them."

"Absolutely," Rebecca agreed. "And it's just such a blessing."

Sophia sobered. "How are they reacting to this latest...situation? It's been all over the newspaper and television. It can't be an easy thing for them."

Bec shook her head. "Not easy at all, although they seem to be handling it okay. I made sure to tell them about it before the story went viral." She sighed. "At first it just brought everything back about the twins' deaths but then Damien reminded Shelley they had a new growing life to take care of and she should try not to stress herself out. It's been hard but they're handling it."

"And your sergeant was okay with you giving them a heads-up?"

Rebecca shrugged. "He's a hardass but he still has feelings. He didn't want them to get slammed in the face with it out of the blue. Although it's a dicey situation. He's far from convinced the killings are connected, and he's certainly not ready to buy into my theory."

"But there were two other kills at the same time the boys died," Sophia pointed out. "That's the pattern of the beast. Three at a time. What did he say about that?"

Rebecca made a face. "Deranged serial killer. Using some kind of weird tools."

"If that's the case I can't believe you got permission to bring us in," Sophia said. "Usually we have to sneak around back doors and alleys and cook up some strange

cover stories. When Cary and Timmy were killed they announced it was a wild animal and that was that."

"It wasn't easy, believe me." Bec lowered her voice. "But your big boss did some powerful arm twisting."

"If anyone can do it, he's the one," Sophia agreed. "So what's the climate here?"

Rebecca shrugged. "Skeptical. Territorial. Irritated. But there was one thing no one could get around."

"What's that?"

"When Paul Maquire who owns Crown of the State Sporting Camp went to check on the victim it had stopped snowing. We had to make a guesstimate on time of death but we think it snowed after the kill but stopped before the body was found."

"So they had no clue how anyone or anything had gotten to the house to make the kill," Sophia guessed.

"You got it. And trust me. These guys don't like to be confused. Or think they've been tricked."

Sophia heard a throat being cleared next to her and a voice asking, "Think maybe I could get an introduction?"

She grinned. "Rebecca, meet Logan Tanner. Logan, this is my sister, Bec."

She watched the two of them shake hands and was stunned at the electricity arcing between them that was almost visible. She saw Rebecca's eyes widen fractionally and Logan's narrow just a bit. It was at least thirty seconds before they broke eye contact.

Well, well! Very interesting. But what happens when Bec finds out Logan's a shifter?

Dakota had adapted very well as a human mating with a shifter, but Dakota had her own mystical background. Not everyone was as accepting. Sophia might have to do a little groundwork here if things between her sister and her teammate went beyond the incendiary handshake situation.

"I hate to interrupt, but isn't everyone waiting for us?" she asked.

Hands dropped as if burned by fire and both people did their best to act as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Of course." Rebecca smoothed a stray hair back toward her ponytail. "Down this hall. By the way," she glanced at Sophia, "you know your old friend Bobby Lacroix is the lead on the case, right? That a problem for you?"

"Not as long as he doesn't make it one. There was never anything between us. My choice, though, not his, so I hope he doesn't hold grudges."

"It won't be for that," she laughed. "He's a newlywed and damn happy about it." Then she sobered. "But he was the detective who made such an issue of how absurd your claims of the cause of death were when the twins were...slaughtered."

"Maybe he's had a change of heart," she muttered as they entered a conference room.

Several people sitting at the table looked up expectantly as they entered. Some of the faces were familiar to Sophia, some of them not. But the man belonging to the most familiar one stood up and held out his hand. He wasn't smiling.

"I can't say it isn't good to see you, Sophia," Bobby Lacroix said, "but not under these circumstances."

"I understand."

They shook hands and introduced Logan to the man who rose beside him.

"Greg Flannery. Our sergeant."

The big blond man with wide shoulders and gray threaded into his hair shook hands with them, his face expressionless.

"Your boss...or whatever he is...certainly threw his weight around, making sure we had everything together for you," he told them. "I hope you'll be some damn help here but I doubt it. You know how I feel about this insane theory of yours, Sophia."

Sophia bit back her irritation. "Craig Stafford doesn't throw his weight around, as you so bluntly put it. He just has a lot of influence. And I might say, a lot of resources at his disposal. We're not here to get in your way. We're here to help and share information. And it isn't a theory. We have proof. Pictures. Other things."

"You have to admit, this whole thing sounds like something out of a horror movie."

"You said the same thing when my nephews were victims of the last killing spree," she pointed out. "You ignored everything I told you yet never found a human being to pin those murders on and now the creature is back again."

"The same mythical creature you tried to sell us before."

Sophia sighed. "Greg, the Chupacabra is very real. A mutated animal of some sort that kills in a very specific way. It's not a legend, it's a fact. Believe me. When you look at the pictures you won't think that." She handed the folder to Bobby. "I'll let you give this out to your folks."

"And help you promote this crazy theory of yours again." His words were clipped. Taut.

"You won't know whether it's crazy or not until you hear what we have to say and look at the evidence," she pointed out. "We've brought all this information with us to share."

"Let me ask you a question." He studied her face. "The other killings we were told about took place in Texas. Why would an animal migrate all the way to Maine and start killing again?"

Sophia chewed her bottom lip. She'd been wondering if someone would ask that. How to answer it without giving away the real theory, the stuff science fiction nightmares were made of.

"We've only recently come to the conclusion there might be more than one of them. Twice in the last few months we thought we'd killed it only to have it turn up again in

another state. It's possible," she said slowly, "that it's a hybrid of some type that over time has spread out to different areas of the country."

"You really believe that?"

"It killed my nephews two years ago. And two other people." She swallowed back the rising anger.

"You don't know that. Nothing was ever proved. We never found whatever animal it was. If it even was an animal."

"You never found a human either. One who had a reason to kill those people, including two little boys. And we just worked cases in Texas that were exactly the same. So our theory isn't any more farfetched than yours."

"Maybe it's just some mutated strain of coyote," Greg suggested. "They're everywhere."

"We've brought things to distribute to everyone, too, on the cases we've worked on. Photographic proof the creature exists." She pulled a thick folder from her briefcase. "And believe me, it looks nothing like a coyote."

He stared hard at her for a long time. "All right. I won't make waves. For now. But there were no tracks around the body, no indication that any animal had been there. A human being could figure out how to erase his tracks but not an animal. So we're still looking for who might want to kill Darrell. And we haven't given up on the illegal alien angle, either. Someone who snuck over the border and was desperate for food and shelter. Maybe Darrell caught him and the illegal killed him."

"Greg," Sophia began.

He cut her off. "That's how it is, Sophia. We're going to continue conducting this as a normal murder investigation."

Of course they were. She wouldn't have expected anything less. She and Logan were there only to offer a possibility they couldn't afford not to explore.

"As requested," Greg went on, "I made folders for each of you with crime scene reports and the autopsy." He gave one to Sophia and to Logan then turned to Bobby. "Your show."

Sophia dropped into a vacant chair and noticed that Logan had managed to seat himself next to Rebecca. In the midst of such despair she actually swallowed a smile. The big Montana native and her petite sister would make an interesting couple.

"Why don't you let us take a look at the pictures from the recent killing?" Logan asked, his voice calm and steady. He and Sophia had already seen them, thanks to the strings Craig had pulled but Sophia knew he was trying to set a tone for this meeting. "I understood you'd have copies for us."

Bobby stared from Logan to Sophia then back again. Finally he sighed. "All right. Take a look."

He picked up a stack of eight-by-ten prints and dealt them out in a row like cards. The two Night Seekers were prepared for the shock of them, but still, one never quite

got used to this kind of horror. A man who appeared to be in his sixties was lying on his back on the wide porch of a long, low house set in a sea of snow. He was dressed in thermal underwear and jeans, barefoot, a rifle still clutched in one hand. His face was set in a rictus of horror and his body had been ripped open from throat to waist, the entrails pulled out and draped over him.

Like all the other scenes the Night Seekers had seen, there was no evidence of blood.

Sophia looked at Logan. "You know it's our devil beast."

He nodded.

"Tell me what makes you say that?" one of the detectives demanded.

"How about you look at what we brought and see for yourself." Sophia pulled the pictures from her briefcase and began laying them out. "I think these speak for themselves."

There was dead silence while everyone studied the shots. Finally Bobby stood up at the head of the table, his folder open in front of him. "Sophia, why don't you walk us through the information you've brought. Then we'll give you the full briefing on Darrell Franklin's death."

She nodded and rose. "Let me begin," she started, "by explaining exactly what you're looking at."

Chapter Two

Sophia was exhausted, all her energy gone. They were all in the same state of utter fatigue. The meeting had been intense, the pictures and details gruesome. They had talked it to death for two hours. Back and forth, up and down. Every detail of every gruesome crime scene had been rolled out on the table, both by the detectives and the Night Seekers. But the worst part had been the icy politeness and the blatant distrust.

Sophia kept coming back to the fact that the victim had been found on his porch wearing nothing but long johns and jeans, not an outfit one wore outdoors in Maine's freezing winter temperatures. The CID people wanted to insist he'd gone to the door to let someone in but there had been no trace of anyone approaching the house. And none of the detectives had a plausible explanation for why every bit of blood had been drained from his body.

"He must have heard something," one of the men said over and over. "We found his shotgun lying close to him."

Patiently Rebecca and Logan had detailed the scenes the Night Seekers had pictures of, exactly like this.

About all they'd agreed on was that it was too late tonight to do anything. Dark came early in winter and anyway, snow had covered practically everything at the scene.

Finally, with no conclusion reached except they needed to visit the scene and start over again, most everyone from the CID had filed out of the room with orders to gather again at eight in the morning. Only Bobby, Rebecca, Logan and Sophia were left.

"Nobody believes us," Rebecca said in a flat voice. "They didn't before and they don't now."

"You have to admit," Bobby pointed out, "it's a pretty farfetched scenario."

"No one else had a better explanation," Rebecca reminded him. "And the serial killer theory won't wash unless you believe someone's running all over the world killing randomly in this inhuman way. With some kind of bizarre instrument. Come on, Bobby. Give me a break."

"Why don't we give it a rest for tonight." He looked at the other three. "I'm sure no one has much of an appetite after all that, but I'm pretty sure you guys haven't eaten in a while. We need fuel for the body if we're going to get through this."

"You're right," Sophia agreed. "Those photos are a quick appetite killer, but my body is telling me it wants something."

"Bobby, why don't you go on home?" Rebecca said. "You've had enough late nights on this already with more to come. Take advantage of some time with that new wife of yours when you can. I'll see that my sister and Logan get fed and watered."

The man gave her a grateful smile. "I'll take you up on that, if you're sure. Jan's a good cop's wife and very understanding, but—"

"But you're still on your honeymoon," she grinned. "Go on. I'll take them over to The Crown. They can kick back before we dig into all this tomorrow."

"Thanks. I owe you one." He nodded at Sophia and Logan. "See you here at eight a.m."

"Hopefully with a more open mind," Sophia called after him.

"The Crown?" Logan raised his eyebrows. "Is that high class or low class?"

Sophia laughed. "Neither. Remember how I told you the county is called the Crown of Maine? The bar takes its name from that. It's a great place to just hang out. It's been here forever." She looked at her sister. "I'd have thought old Frenchy would have retired or sold out by now. But it'll be nice to see him again."

"Actually you'd probably have to go to his house to do that. He took a bad tumble and broke his hip."

"Oh, no." Sophia's face sobered. "How's he getting along all by himself?"

"Remember that nephew that lived with him for a while? Back when we were in high school?"

"Vaguely. If I recall Frenchy homeschooled him and he stuck pretty close to home. We always wondered if there was something wrong with him. Then he sort of just disappeared."

"Went into the Army. Special Forces, I think. He's been gone for years. Apparently he's not actually a blood relative to Frenchy. Just someone he took in for whatever reason. Apparently has no family of his own and just showed up after his discharge, looking for a place to decompress. Frenchy needed a bartender/manager for a few months, so it worked out well."

"Really. What's he like now?"

A corner of Rebecca's mouth twitched with the beginning of a grin. "You'll see for yourself in a little bit." She stood up. "Come on. His hot sandwiches are better than Frenchy's and the place is a lot cleaner." Now she laughed. "Almost drove out the regulars."

Logan made a face. "I can hardly wait."

Sophia linked her arm through his. "We'll protect you. We Blacks are made of strong stuff. And maybe it will be just the diversion we need at this point."

Right now she desperately wanted a change of scene, something to ease the tension gripping her. Night Seekers was used to dealing with suspicion and outright disbelief when they presented their theory, but they'd seldom seen such open hostility. They might have been "invited" to participate in the investigation but it was going to be like knocking down a brick wall every step of the way. They silently shared their frustration as they headed to their cars in the parking lot.

The snow had finally stopped while they were inside and the plows were out doing their best to clear the streets. Apparently Frenchy's nephew had also made sure the parking lot was scraped because the area was clear, although ringed by mountains of the cold white stuff.

The inside of The Crown was just as dim as she remembered, the aged wood on the walls still as mellow, the floor still littered with peanut shells. Half the stools at the bar were filled, and a fair number of the booths and tables. The clacking of balls echoed from the pool table where the room made an L-shape around the end of the bar. At the moment the ancient jukebox was silent. The crowd was about what Sophia expected, a lot of singles and a few couples, letting their hair down after work. Nearly ninety percent of the people in the town of six thousand plus worked for corporations or the government.

She found a corner booth and slid in and a waitress materialized next to them almost at once.

"You guys planning to eat?" she asked.

When they nodded she dealt plastic menus around the table, took their drink orders and headed toward the bar. Sophia watched her, eyes tracking to the man behind the bar. And unexpectedly her pulse kicked up and heat flashed through her.

What the hell is this?

But the man seemed to carry an electric charge around him. He wasn't that tall, not even six feet, she guessed. But inside the plaid shirt with the rolled-up sleeves she could see the outline of a compact, muscular body. Thick, dark hair touched the collar of the shirt and she could see it sprinkled on his arms where they were visible. His face was rugged rather than handsome, at least as much as she could tell from that distance. A good case of five o'clock shadow gave him an intriguingly dangerous look. Then he raised his eyes to scan the booth and she felt their impact clear to her toes.

Sophia wriggled in her seat, trying to still the sudden ramped-up beat of her pulse in her cunt. Why on earth in the midst of this crisis did her hormones suddenly decide to take a walk on the wild side?

"He and Frenchy sure don't look anything alike," she told her sister.

"I know. Hot, isn't he? Every woman in the county's been trying to get his attention." Bec looked up from studying the menus. "And this seems to work out for both of them." She gave her sister a knowing look and her mouth curved in a tiny smile. "Go on and introduce yourself to him, Soph. You know Frenchy always had a soft spot for you. You can ask him to pass along your greetings."

"No." Sophia shook her head. "No need to."

"Chicken. Don't tell me you're afraid of a good-looking man."

"Of course not." She buried herself in the menu.

"Come on." Rebecca set her menu down and pushed against Logan to slide out of the booth. "Let's go say hello. It will take your mind off the meeting we just had." She

made a face. "And the one tomorrow morning. Besides, I want to ask about his almost-uncle."

"I don't think —"

"Right. Don't think." She grabbed her sister's hand and practically dragged her out of the booth. "He doesn't bite. I promise."

Sophia reluctantly let herself be towed across the room by her sister. Her instincts were telling her she was stepping into a danger zone.

Get it together, Black. He's just some bartender you'll never see again after this gig.

The man was polishing a small area of the bar with a cloth when Rebecca rapped on the heavy wood to get his attention.

"Saw you come in, Bec." His voice had a low, smoky sound to it. "You surely do bring this place some class."

Rebecca laughed. "Well, now you can double it. This is my sister. Sophia Black, meet Clint Beaudine."

He dropped the rag, swiped his hand on the leg of his jeans and held it across the bar. "The pleasure is all mine."

Sophia put her small hand in his large one and nearly jumped at the electric shock that ran through her arm and into her body. She looked at Clint and saw the same reaction reflected in his eyes, an amber-flecked hazel. He squeezed her hand lightly before releasing it.

"A real pleasure." His words were like a caress skating over her skin.

Sophia couldn't take her eyes from him. She couldn't remember a time, ever, that a man had affected her this way.

"Soph?" Rebecca gave her a gentle nudge. "You still with us?"

Had she just spaced out over this man? In front of her sister? Great. Just great. She gave herself a mental shake.

"Yes. I'm sorry. Nice to meet you. I was sorry to hear about your uncle. Frenchy's lucky you're here to stay with him," she said. "Give him a hand."

Clint shrugged, the powerful muscles flexing beneath his shirt. "I'm just glad I needed a place to hang out while he needed help."

"How is he coming along?" Rebecca asked.

He grinned, and Sophie nearly melted at the dimple that flashed. "Getting cranky, so I know he's better. I'd say it won't be too long before he'll be pushing me to let him come in here. At least for a couple hours a day."

"But you'll be here with him, right?" Rebecca asked.

"Probably. I'll stay until he doesn't need me anymore."

He picked up the bar rag again and went back to polishing the same spot, but his heated gaze was still on Sophia. She had the distinct feeling he was mentally stripping

away her clothing, his amber-flecked eyes devouring her as if he hadn't eaten for a week and she was a gourmet meal.

"Well, that's very nice of you." God, how dull could she sound? "Frenchy always took good care of all of us from the barracks whenever we came in here."

"If I can interrupt the social circle, I need some refills." The waitress had come back up to the bar, nodding to Rebecca and looking at Sophia with open curiosity then plunked her tray down on the bar.

"Sure thing, Diane." But his eyes held Sophia's for a long time before he began to fill the orders.

She and Bec started to walk back to the booth when he spoke again.

"Who's the guy?" he asked as he efficiently drew beer from the tap and poured shots over ice.

"You mean with us?" Rebecca asked. "Logan Tanner. He and Sophia are here to help with a case."

"That right?" He set the drinks on Diane's tray and she flounced off, obviously not happy to be shut out of the conversation. "You talking about Darrell Franklin?"

Rebecca looked at her sister as if to say no use denying it.

"Yes. That's the one."

"Damn shame about him. Can't imagine what kind of animal got him. Did that to him." He leaned on the bar and locked his gaze with Sophia's. "You a cop, too?"

"Not anymore." She hitched herself onto the empty barstool next to her, aware that her legs were suddenly like rubber. "I used to be in the state CID like Bec."

"So what do you do?"

"I...work with a specialized group based in Texas."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Specialized? That why they called you in?"

Called us in. Right.

"We have experience with unusual killings. Listen, it's been very nice meeting you but I really think I'm ready for some food."

"Hot roast beef and fries," he told her. "Best on the menu tonight."

"Oh. Well. Fine." She managed to move off the stool and get her feet under her. The air between them was alive with sexual awareness. "I'll ask Logan what he wants."

"To eat," Clint said.

"What?" She frowned. "Of course to eat."

Clint finished fixing the drinks and leaned on the bar to watch Sophia. She looked just as good going away as she did coming toward him. Maybe five four, he figured, with that mass of hair nearly as dark as his own. Not skinny but with curves that even her jacket and sweater didn't quite disguise. Sexy, in a well-toned package. An earthiness that radiated from beneath the very utilitarian clothing.

And those eyes! Jesus! Like molten emeralds. They could pierce directly to a man's soul.

He was glad he was standing behind the bar and was wearing heavy jeans. Otherwise everyone in the place would see his sudden erection poking to get loose. He worked hard to keep his overactive libido under control, a byproduct of his genetic structure. Most of the time it worked.

He'd kept his sexual liaisons to a minimum since he'd been back in Houlton, usually venturing as far away as Bangor and Portland for what he could only call his shack-ups. Scratching an itch. Couldn't let himself become the topic of conversation around here. Or raise anyone's expectations. So far it was working.

But Sophia Black looked at him and the heat blasted straight to his groin. He wanted her naked and under him, his cock buried deep inside her. And not just for one night.

And that scared him more than anything else.

Gritting his teeth, he picked up the bar rag and began polishing the spot that already shone from his efforts. When Diane passed new drink orders to him he was glad for the distraction.

"That's some impression you made." Rebecca's voice was pitched low and filled with amusement.

"I think it's just part of his bartender charm," Sophia protested.

Bec laughed aloud. "Trust me. Charm is the last word anyone would use to describe Clint Beaudine."

"I thought maybe you'd forgotten all about me," Logan grinned, standing up so Sophia could slide back into the booth.

"Not a chance."

"Don't jab me with your elbow but that bartender looked as if he wanted to drag you away to his cave."

Sophia felt her face heat. Had it been that obvious to anyone but her? "I think you're reading too much into a civil conversation."

He laughed out loud. "I'm a man, remember? I know the signs. Anyway, are we going to eat? My stomach's crawling up my backbone."

The waitress had delivered her drinks and now stood expectantly by their booth, her eyes frankly studying Sophia.

Rebecca grabbed everyone's menu. "We'll all have the hot roast beef on a French roll and fries." She grinned at the others. "Specialty of the house."

Surprisingly, the food was just as delicious as Clint had promised. They ate in ravenous silence, enjoying the juicy beef and the crisp fries. When Diane came to clear away their plates she set a fresh round of drinks in front of them.

"Compliments of the charmer behind the bar." She studied Sophia again. "You must have something going for you because he never says two words to anyone else."

"I know his uncle," Sophia explained.

Diane snorted. "Yeah, right. Anyway, he asked if you'd stop at the bar for a minute before you leave."

Me?" Sophia was stunned. "What for?"

The waitress gave her a sarcastic smirk. "I can think of at least ten things."

"No. Please. Tell him I'm leaving with my sister and my coworker."

"Not me, honey. I never deliver unwanted news." She sashayed away.

Sophia looked at her sister. "He's your friend. You got me into this, now get me out of it."

But Rebecca's mouth was fighting a grin. "Actually I think you could use a little diversion. You look as if you're wound tighter than a coiled spring."

"Please. We're digging into another of the devil beast's killings. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Logan?" She turned to her partner.

He held up his hands. "The man bought us a drink. The least you can do is thank him. And from what I saw it wasn't Rebecca or me that inspired his hospitality."

And it would have been hard not to take a minute to say goodbye when they left with both Rebecca and Logan practically shoving her toward the bar. Clint looked up as she approached.

"Lot of enthusiasm there, *chere*." Again the hot, smoky voice rolled over her and made her body throb.

Stop this! There's no time for hanky-panky. Besides, you just met the man.

"Thank you for the drink." She made her tone as formal as possible. "That was very kind of you."

"You staying at the Skye?"

She blinked. "What? Why?"

"It's a weeknight. I close at midnight. See you then."

"What?" she asked again. "Wait, I—"

But he had already moved toward the end of the bar where a customer tapped an empty glass on the polished wood.

"Come on."

Logan had stepped up and tugged on her arm. "I don't know about you but I'm about ready to pass out."

I'll keep my door locked. He'll have to make a racket to get in and the motel will make him leave.

Yeah, right.

"See you in the morning." Rebecca hugged her in the parking lot. "You can get back to that internal conversation I watched you having. Oh, and try to get at least a little sleep." She winked.

"I'm going to get plenty of sleep," she told her sister. "You'll see."

Sophia grumpily buckled herself into the SUV and left Rebecca laughing beside her car. If Clint Beaudine had the nerve to show up at her motel room she'd send him on his way in a big hurry. She had work to do and needed a clear head.

Of course, it had been longer than she could remember since she'd tangled the sheets with any man, and even longer—if ever—since a man had turned her on so fast and so hard.

Well, damn. Now what did she do?

Chapter Three

"What's the word?" Dante Martello dropped into the chair next to the comm center where Ric Garza had just completed a call with Sophia and Logan.

"Same old, same old." Ric rubbed the late-day stubble on his jaw. "Craig got us into the investigation but no one's really buying our theory. Crazy idea. Yada yada yada. You know. The usual shit."

"We're all wigged-out freaks, right?"

"You got it."

Ric picked up the coffee mug from the keyboard tray and took a sip of the now-tepid liquid. He'd been monitoring the system all evening, waiting for the call from Maine and searching for any other reported deaths. The team was still trying to determine if they were tracking one fast son of a bitch devil beast or if, as they'd hesitantly begun to wonder, someone was breeding the damn things.

"I'd think," Dante said, "that if any of the state detectives had seen the bodies from the last spate of killings up there they'd be a lot more open-minded about what they were looking for."

Rich shrugged. "I think people are frightened about things beyond their comfort zone. Things they don't feel they have any control over. Their first reaction is to deny its existence."

The other man laughed. "I might have said the same thing about shapeshifters until I became a part of the Night Seekers."

Ric looked at him with curiosity. "You never have said what happened when Craig first contacted you. How you reacted to the whole thing."

Dante leaned back in the chair and stretched out his legs, his face somber. "I was a fucking mess, I'll tell you that. I hadn't been sober since I'd found my wife's body and I was on an extended leave from Chicago PD with orders to get my act together."

"I have to say, I know how you were feeling." Ric had been the one to find his mother's body destroyed by the Chupacabra. "So I guess he dropped in on you like he did with the rest of us."

"Yeah, but with one difference. I'm not a shifter. First he had to convince me I wasn't in somebody's weird movie gone bad."

"But you seem okay with it."

Dante laughed. "I gotta tell you, shifters are actually a lot less strange than half the people I busted in Chicago. I'll take you guys anytime. Anyway, back to the call from Maine."

"Not much else to tell." Ric shuffled through his notes. "Sophia's sister Rebecca, also with the state police like Sophia was, is working with them and they're getting whatever help they can from the others. Logan said he just hopes they'll get folks to see the light before the next killing."

"That means they'll have to start watching at night, and from what I understand it's vast and dark out there."

"Uh-huh." Ric nodded. "They'll do their best to warn people, then figure out how to cover the most likely targets."

"Well, let me know if they need more of the team up there." He grinned. "I've never been to Maine."

* * * * *

The parking lot at the Skye Motel was nearly filled when Sophia and Logan pulled in, a testament to the many tourists in the area for skiing and other winter sports so readily available. The place was a fairly recent addition to northern Maine hospitality. She still remembered its grand opening only a few years earlier, on a very cold day in winter. Almost at once skiers and snowmobilers had begun filling it, followed in the spring and summer by fishermen and hunters and just plain vacationers.

Ric had reserved an efficiency unit there for each of them—"More space and better to make yourselves comfortable," he'd said. It would definitely do for however long they were there. Sophia appreciated its hominess and amenities as she closed and locked the door. She was definitely ready to put aside the tension of the day.

They'd made a quick grocery run to stock some basic provisions for themselves. Now Sophia took the time to unpack her suitcase and put away the groceries. She convinced herself the reason she took such a long shower with scented gel was to get rid of the grime and grit collected on her body throughout the day.

Yeah right. That's why I'm spraying on cologne, too, right?

He's not coming and if he does I'm not letting him in.

Oh, another big fat lie.

She brushed her hair vigorously, angry with herself for even entertaining stray thoughts and deliberately pulled on her old extra-large University of Maine t-shirt, one that hung down to her knees. Not glamorous but worn and soft for sleeping, besides, who the hell did she have to impress? She couldn't remember the last time she'd had any kind of relationship.

Before the twins were killed.

Sighing, she turned out the light, crawled between the covers, closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep.

Ten minutes later, despite the strain and fatigue of the day, she was more wide awake than ever. And staring at the lighted numerals on the bedside clock.

Ten thirty.

This is ridiculous. I will not think about that man.

I don't do this. I don't do this. I don't do this.

Maybe if she repeated it to herself enough times she might actually believe it.

She flopped onto her side, punched the pillow and slammed her eyes shut.

But instead of sleep she was visited by a dream starring the cocky Clint Beaudine. He wore only jeans that clung to his lean hips, his flat, muscled chest above the waist heavily dusted with hair as richly dark as that on his head. His eyes smoldered and heat shimmered around him. He walked toward her lazily, confidently.

"I'm going to fuck you, *chere*." That voice reached way down deep inside her.

"No!"

Sophia shouted it so loud she startled herself into full wakefulness. She only hoped the walls were thick enough so Logan hadn't heard her. Waiting to see if the phone rang or a knock sounded on the door, she finally eased back down onto the pillows.

Well, that didn't work out too well.

No matter what she did, her body wouldn't relax nor would her mind. When the light tap sounded at her door at twenty after twelve she was through arguing with herself, through finding excuses.

Trembling slightly with anticipation she undid the deadbolt and security lock and pulled the door open. Clint Beaudine was leaning into the frame looking like the world's original bad boy. He was just as she'd seen him in her mind earlier, except that he was wearing a t-shirt and a sheepskin-lined jacket. His eyes were just as smoldering, his face just as strong-featured and one lock of his thick hair fell over his forehead. His mouth curved in a hungry smile.

"You gonna let me in, *chere*? I'm freezing my ass off out here."

As if it was the most natural thing in the world she opened the door wide and stepped aside to let him cross the threshold. He bolted the door, only half turning to do it so he could keep his gaze locked with hers. Sophia backed up two steps, three, and bumped into one of the chairs at the round dinette table. Clint discarded his jacket, still advancing toward her. Then, before she could get a word out, he had his arms around her, his mouth hot and hungry on hers.

His tongue was like a flame in her mouth, scorching her everywhere it touched, sweeping, gliding, tasting. Her head swam and her bones turned to liquid as he drank and drank and drank from her. His body against her was just as hard as it looked, all steel muscle. And hardest of all was the thick ridge of his cock pressing against her through the worn denim of his jeans, like a brand burning through the layers of cloth.

Her fingers threaded through the heavy silk of his hair, holding his head to hers. She forgot to breathe, forgot anything except this man and the fusion of their mouths. When he finally lifted his mouth a fraction she could see the amber in his eyes gleaming like tiny dancing flames. His licked the outline of her lips then trailed kisses along the line of her jaw and down the column of her neck.

"I'm going to fuck you, *chere*."

It wasn't the lust in his voice that shocked as much as his use of the exact words she'd heard in her almost-dream. Desiree skated along her spine and burst into the throbbing walls of her pussy. She wasn't sure how much longer she could remain upright even within the iron circle of his arms.

Finally he loosened his grip and took a step back.

"We have too many clothes on."

He turned her around, sat her on the edge of the bed and pressed the switch on the bedside lamp. With the amber glow smoothing over his body he stripped efficiently out of his jeans and t-shirt. No underwear. She should have known he'd go commando. His body as just as magnificent as in her dream only now she could see it all – the sculpted muscles, the same dusting of dark hair on his legs, the lean hips and broad shoulders. And his cock, so utterly magnificent, rising from a very thick nest of curls, the head dark and flared, his sac lying heavy against his thighs.

"Like what you see, *chere*?" There was no mistaking the slight arrogance in his voice. Clint Beaudine knew what he had to offer a woman. No doubt about it.

Sophia had never in her life desired a man so much, felt such powerful chemistry with another human being. Without thinking she stretched out her arm to reach for his erection. He stepped closer to her and her hand closed around the wide shaft, the skin like soft velvet over the core of steel. Hard didn't begin to describe its condition.

She rubbed her thumb over the head, spreading the small bead of liquid seeping from the slit. Then stroked up and down, just once, before his fingers clamped around her wrist.

"Later. Right now I have to be inside you." He bent lower to her. "But trust me, we'll have time for whatever we want."

Then he was gently pushing her back onto the pillows, arranging her so her legs were spread wide. Two fingers probed her cunt and he smiled at the wet heat he found there. His head dipped and he captured one hard nipple as he knelt between her thighs. Fire jolted through her breast and sizzled through her body at the warmth and pull of his mouth. She arched herself up to him, widening her legs even more.

She hadn't even noticed the condom in his hand until she heard the crinkle of foil and he shifted his body to sheathe himself. Lifting her legs, he draped them over his shoulder, placed the head of his cock at her opening and drove into her with one strong hip-rolling push.

Oh god!

He was so thick and so long for a moment she feared she'd split in two, but her body, eager for him, adjusted and accepted him. And demanded more. She locked her ankles behind his neck, lifting her hips to him.

Bracing himself on his hands, he searched her eyes, asking for answers to silent questions. She couldn't tear her gaze away from his. As if finding what he was looking

for he exhaled a slow breath and began to pump steadily in and out of her. With every thrust he deliciously scraped the walls of her pussy, nerve endings flaming into life. He moved slowly at first, then harder and faster, more and more, building the rush inside them both.

Sophia felt that thick coil of need wrapped so tightly inside her begin to tighten more and more, a heated snake rising up through her veins and pulsing through her body. She reached for that erotic peak, needing it, her body demanding it. Every muscle was wound tight as the climax shimmered just out of reach.

“Look at me.” The words were a guttural demand. “Open your eyes, Sophia, and look at me. Now.”

She did and saw such animal need in his that it pushed her over the edge. She was catapulted into black velvet space, spinning and whirling, shuddering, her entire body pulsing with an orgasm that consumed every bit of her. Clint stiffened a second later, a harsh groan rolling from his mouth as his cock throbbed inside the wet clasp of her pussy. There was nothing except this man and this incredible moment of a release that scorched her from the inside out.

It could have been a minute or an hour, Sophia had no concept of time, before her body finally began to unclench and ease. Her heart pounded furiously and her lungs begged for air. Clint wasn’t in much better shape. He collapsed forward, balancing on his arms, breath seesawing raggedly, pulse beating at the hollow of his throat.

“Damn.” The word slid from his mouth. “Not even my imagination could have dreamed up something that powerful.”

Taking another moment to catch his breath, he slid from her body and went to dispose of the condom. Then he was back, sliding into bed beside her.

“I have to be at a meeting at eight in the morning,” she managed to get out as one large warm hand closed over a breast.

“Then I’d better make sure you get at least a little sleep.”

She could hear the grin in his smoky voice before he lowered his head to her nipple again. This time he did more than pass over it. He sucked, pulled, grazed lightly with his teeth, tormented it until it was diamond hard. Then he moved to the other one. And all the while his fingers, danced over the softness of her public curls, stroking her swollen labia, sliding into the wet clasp of her greedy cunt. His mouth, his fingers, were magic, setting fire to every inch of her body. It astounded her that after such a violent release she could be aroused again so easily.

His movements were slow, unhurried, coaxing every bit of pleasure from her. She heard moans drifting on the air and realized they were coming from her. Clint was busy everywhere with his hands and his mouth, rousing her, then calming her, then driving her up again until she wasn’t even sure she remembered her own name. His thumb was a pendulum stroking over her clit until she could barely stand the sensations rocketing through her body, his mouth hot and greedy everywhere on her skin.

He shifted his lean frame to lie between her thighs, spread the lips of her pussy and lapped at her like a cat licking cream. His tongue swirled her clit before diving inside her wet channel then trailed up and down the length of her labia. His thumbs opened her wide, his eyes greedy as they stared at her pink flesh before he bent his head and drew his tongue the length of her slit. Then he plundered her, drinking her liquid, nipping lightly at the sensitive skin.

She was a seething mass of sensation, heat chasing after cold through her veins and along her spine, and her blood racing. Need clawed inside her, demanding to be satisfied and still Clint worked her and worked her. She almost sobbed with relief when he moved and she heard the familiar crinkle of foil again. In an instant he rolled on the condom and plunged deep inside her.

This time her body was more than ready for him, anticipating his size and the way he filled up every bit of her. His strokes were smooth and slow, even though when she opened her eyes to look at his face she saw the strain of control, the tension of the effort.

"Now," she urged. "Come now. I want to come right now."

"So impatient," he rasped, his breath jerky, his hips moving in a steady rhythm. "I wish I had hours to eat and taste you, fuck you every way possible." He thrust harder and faster now. "Next time, *chere*. That's a promise."

His words barely registered as the orgasm slammed into her, shaking her with the violence of a storm. Clint was right with her, body jerking, muscles straining. She dug her heels into the mattress to lift herself higher to him, taking him as deep as she could. They shuddered through it together, like figures in a hurricane battered by fierce winds.

When at last the shudders began to subside she let her legs go lax, her limbs more wilted than a wet handkerchief. When his breathing slowed Clint pulled himself from her tight clasp, disposed of the condom and sat down on the edge of the bed. His hand sensuously caressed her cheek, the length of her neck and the upper swell of her breasts.

"I think I did some damage to your soft skin with my beard," he apologized.

"It's okay." She caressed the stubble on his cheek. "Makeup hides a ton of sins."

He leaned closer. "Was this a sin, Sophia? A good one or a bad one?"

"Oh, definitely good."

He sat up and sighed. "Damn. I have to go, Sophia. I'd like nothing better than to crawl in next to you, pull you tight up against me and fall asleep with you in my arms." His thumb rubbed her lower lip. "But I won't compromise you in front of your partner. You're here to do a job and I don't want to get in the way." He leaned down and kissed her. "But this isn't the end, *ma petite*. Just the beginning." He stood up and began to dress.

Sophia forced her limp body to a sitting position and reached in the nightstand drawer for pen and paper. She scribbled something on the top sheet of the pad, tore it off and handed it to Clint.

"You can call me," she told him. "I mean, if...you want to."

His mouth curved in a slow grin. "Oh, I want, all right." The grin disappeared. "But I don't want to screw up whatever you're doing."

"If I can't talk I'll tell you." She paused. "Listen, Clint, I don't usually...I mean..."

Damn, Sophia. Too late to pull the shy virgin act.

He bent over her until his mouth was barely an inch from hers. "It's okay. I didn't think so. I knew this was special the minute you walked into The Crown." He brushed a kiss over her lips. "I want to see where it goes. How about you?"

She could only nod.

"All right, then. I'll call you tomorrow." At the door he turned. "Lock up after me, hear? And if you come by The Crown tomorrow night I'll fix you something special."

"To eat?" she teased.

"That too," he laughed.

"Okay. I'll let you know how my day goes."

He pulled her in for one last, scorching kiss before he opened the door. "Lock up, now."

She closed the door after him and put all the locks and bolts in place. She'd be sore tomorrow in places she hadn't even remembered she had, and she didn't give one damn.

Crawling back under the covers, she closed her eyes and immediately saw Clint's face with his amber-flecked eyes and his rugged planes.

Oh, Sophia, what have you gotten yourself into?

* * * * *

The devil beast raced easily over the snowy landscape. The snowfall had finally stopped and a crescent moon hung in the sky. The air was crisp and cold, its favorite kind of night. Others preferred the warmth of the southern states but this creature thrived in a frigid north.

The kill had been more than satisfactory. Sometimes with older people the blood had a stale taste, the body ripped too easily. But this one had been in prime condition and the kill had temporarily slaked the raging bloodlust.

It had almost been too easy, the prey more isolated than usual, danger almost too absent. Part of the thrill was evading capture, hiding from hunters. And it was getting very good at doing just that. On the other hand, having the freedom to destroy in uninterrupted isolation was a violent thrill in and of itself.

Today the beast had caught two raccoons, destroying them and feeding on them just to satisfy a lingering urge. Now it was ready to return to the snow cave it had made for itself and sleep.

And tomorrow, it would begin the hunt for its next victim.

* * * * *

Clint Beaudine pulled his truck into the garage next to Frenchy's cabin, climbed out and walked to the edge of the driveway. The snow had passed, for the moment, and stars glittered in the sky. The night air had a sharp coldness to it, a freshness that teased at his sensitive nostrils. By all rights he should be ready for bed, after a long day at The Crown and making hot, erotic love with Sophia Black. Instead he felt restless, energized, his blood singing.

Frenchy would be long asleep by now, he was sure, but just the same he would check on the old man. He was getting around pretty good these days. Another couple of weeks and he'd be able to manage on his own. Then Clint had to make some decisions about his own life.

He'd never be able to tell the old man how grateful he was since the day Frenchy had found him. He had no idea what his life might have been like if not for that. He might not even still be alive today. Plus, Frenchy had been able to keep Clint's secret, and that counted for a lot.

But he couldn't hang around here forever, although Frenchy would never ask him to leave. Still, he had to make a place for himself somewhere in the world.

And now there was Sophia, blindsiding him out of nowhere. Not a woman to walk away from. Not that he'd even want to. No, he wanted more of her. Much more.

What would she think of his secret? Would she expose him? Reject him? Run away from him? He wished he had someone to ask about this, but as an orphan he had no one. And in all the years since Frenchy found him no one had come into his life who he could trust. Or who he recognized as a kindred soul.

Damn.

He'd wanted to ask more questions about Darrell Franklin. Whatever had killed him was no ordinary animal. He wondered if Sophia Black knew that. If she and her partner were aware they might be dealing with something very much out of the ordinary. Clint had seen a couple of the pictures when two of the CID detectives had been in having a drink and had a folder open at the bar.

He didn't think those detectives had any clue as to what they might be dealing with. But Clint had heard stories when he lived in the Louisiana bayou. Legends. Mysterious tales. At the moment he didn't even want to take a guess as to what had killed the man but he knew—sensed—it wasn't something anyone around here had seen before.

For the moment he needed to brush all that from his mind. He needed to be out in the night, running in the chilled air. Tiptoeing through the house, he checked to make sure Frenchy was sound asleep. Then he stripped off his clothes, and stepped onto the back porch. The frigid air hit him at once but he only felt the chill for a moment. Concentrating, he felt his bones shift and his skin stretch. In seconds, he was racing across the landscape, face lifted to the moon.

He was deep in the woods and had just rounded a fallen tree when he suddenly braked to a stop, lifting his head and sniffing. The night wind had picked up the thread of a scent, carrying it to his nose.

Wolf!

But not the usual wolf scent. This one had another essence mixed in with it, not the usual spoor. If he didn't know better he'd think... No. If there was another shifter around here he'd know about it. It wasn't as if they were exactly plentiful. The pull was always there.

Then what... But as quickly as it came it was gone. He looked around warily. Nothing. Not as far as he could see. Except white snow and black trees and bushes. Still, something had been there. And he knew he'd damn well better figure out what.

* * * * *

Logan, in wolf form, had stopped in a thicket of trees to rest. Running on a cold night like this infused him with energy. He knew how tough the days and nights ahead were going to be. Shifting and running always recharged his batteries. He was grateful Ric had found a motel that backed right up to the woods so he could slip out unnoticed.

He'd been keeping a sharp eye out just in case the Chupacabra was out having a night stroll, too, but he'd only seen some deer and raccoons. He was also on the alert for other wildlife, knowing this was an area where a number of Maine black bears made their home. However, it was winter and he was sure they wouldn't be out roaming the countryside.

He was about to start back to the motel when he heard a faint sound in the distance. Swiveling his head, he was stunned to see another wolf, black, running through the trees, tail high. Sophia had told him there was a sparse population of gray wolves, which was good for him because he could blend in. But black? She hadn't mentioned that.

What the hell?

He watched, stock-still, for a long moment until the other animal disappeared. Then, still puzzled, he loped back toward the motel. He'd have to find a way to ask Sophia if she'd heard of any black wolves ever inhabiting the area. And try to find out where the creature had come from.

Chapter Four

Sophia let the hot water of the shower pound her body, easing aches in places she didn't know she even had muscles or nerves. She felt a fulfillment totally foreign to her, a satisfaction she'd never felt before with any other man. Fire flashed over her as she remembered the hours with Clint last night. Her pussy throbbed with the memory of his wonderful, long, thick cock filling it. She could still feel the imprint of his calloused hands on her breasts, his mouth on her everywhere.

He must have bewitched her in some way, she thought, because this was so very, very unlike her. All her life she'd been so careful in her relationships. Never rushing into anything. Taking her time. Getting to know the other person before accepting intimacy. Of course, look where that had gotten her. Still alone at thirty-five without a prospect in sight.

Right now she figured that was probably for the best, though. Her entire focus had to be on finding and killing the Chupacabra. Avenging the deaths of her sweet, adorable nephews. Finally giving some peace to Damien and Shelley.

But Clint Beaudine had smacked into her with all the subtlety of a freight train. She didn't know if she'd ever recover from the force of the collision. What she did know was it was the first time in her life she'd ever had such wild monkey sex. And after barely five minutes of conversation.

She also knew deep inside her it would take more willpower than she possessed to walk away from him. There was something at once both roughly masculine and innately tender about him. Such a contradiction of facets. Predatory and giving. Feral but controlled. Her reaction to him was like a visceral punch.

No, there was no backing away from this. That was for damn sure.

She stood there so long the water began to turn cold and she pulled herself together, quickly stepping out. By the time Logan rapped on her door she was dressed and ready. Hair clipped back at the nape to keep it out of her way. Woolen coat buttoned up. Feet encased in sturdy fleece-lined boots.

"You look damn good after the long day we had yesterday," he commented, holding the car door open for her. "Must have gotten a really good night's sleep."

Was that a smile teasing at his mouth?

She deliberately arranged her face in what she hoped was an expression of innocence. "Why yes, thank you. I slept like a log."

He turned his head to check for cars before turning out of the parking lot and said, almost too casually, "We planning to eat at The Crown again tonight?"

Sophia went instantly still, a flush racing through her. Had he heard Clint knock the night before? Heard their...nocturnal activities? She was sure they'd been as quiet as possible. She'd even bitten her lip until it nearly bled to keep from shouting out each time she climaxed. Were the walls so thin it hadn't mattered?

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Tsk. Touchy, touchy." She could hear the grin in his voice. "Just remembering how good the food was and I like to stick with what I know." The traffic cleared and he turned onto the highway. "Besides, the guy running the place probably wants to make a good impression on you, if the looks he kept giving you are any indication. And you can bet we didn't get the free drinks because of me or Rebecca. If you recall, she commented at the time it was the first time she'd gotten a round on the house since Frenchy got hurt."

"Logan," she began, her tone of voice edgy.

But he smoothly changed the subject. "So I guess this morning we'll finally get to take a look at the crime scene."

"Yes." She blew out a breath. "Not that there'll be much to see after all the snowfall."

"At least we'll get a sense of the scene. Of the environment around it. Maybe how the beast got away so cleanly."

"Ha." Her tone was derisive. "As if. You know we've never been able to do that."

"One can hope," he said, his own voice edged with irony. "You said last night there are still a few gray wolves around here, right?"

"Yes. One of the things on my to-do list is to talk to someone from Maine Fish and Wildlife about the current state of the population. See how many have been spotted recently."

She glanced over at him. "Why? Did you run last night? Catch sight of any?"

"What about black wolves?"

"Black?" She was startled. "I don't think I've ever seen any around here. I know their color is a variant of gray and that there's a significant number in Canada."

"Think any might have migrated to northern Maine?"

"Are you going to tell me what this is about or not?" she demanded.

"Just...curious is all."

"You're never just curious about anything. Logan, if you ran last night and saw something that might be pertinent to this case, spit it out. You know better than to hold back." Then excitement flashed through her. "Do you think—"

"No." His voice was firm. "Not the Chupacabra. I caught a scent and it didn't have even a trace of turpentine in it."

Every kill scene they'd visited had been tainted with that particular odor.

"But," he went on, "I'm pretty sure I saw a black wolf. Not dark gray. Black. And—this is going to sound very weird—but I sensed some kind of presence. Not exactly animal but not really human, either. I was deep in the woods and looked around and thought I caught a glimpse of...whatever it was. But then it was gone." He pulled into the lane of a drive-through. "Sophia, you've never said but have you ever heard of any shifters around here?"

Stunned, she stared at his profile. "Shapeshifters? I suppose it's possible. And doesn't that put an interesting spin on things."

They gave their orders to the mechanical voice and pulled ahead to take their place at the window.

"I'm going to run again tonight," he told her, handing over coffee and a breakfast sandwich. "See if he...she...it turns up again."

"I'll make some discreet inquiries today. Let you know what I find out." She sipped the hot coffee. "How interesting that there's a possibility of shifters around here. And I wonder how that will impact on this case and the devil beast."

"We definitely need some answer."

Bobby and Rebecca were waiting in the conference room when they got to the barracks.

"The others will be along any minute," Bobby told them. "The coffee's not the best but I promise it won't poison you."

"Bobby, you worked on the case when Cary and Timmy Black were killed, right?"

"Your nephews?" He nodded over the rim of his cup. "Nasty business, Soph. My heart went out to your whole family."

"Wouldn't you have worked on them as well?" Logan asked.

Sophia noticed he had deliberately taken the seat next to her sister, and Bec hadn't moved away. She hoped Rebecca wasn't setting herself up to be hurt. When this was over Logan would be returning to Desolation Ranch. It was the commitment he'd made. And Rebecca's home was here, much more even than Sophia's had been.

"I...took a step back." More than one step, she remembered. And not all of her choosing.

Logan frowned. "What exactly does that mean?"

"Sophia took the time to be with her family," Bobby answered for her. "It was a very traumatic time for all of them."

Sophia smacked her hand on the table, causing the coffee cup to jump and the black liquid to splash onto the table. "That's a load of horseshit. Doug Sevier was my sergeant at the time and he thought I'd popped my brain cells. He pushed me into taking what he called compassionate leave. It was either that or get fired or stuck in some loony bin."

"You have to admit," Bobby went on in a calm voice, "your theory pushed the bounds of believability."

"Oh, and all of you had a better answer? I didn't see you catching anyone." She pushed away from the table and paced the room. "I want all the photos and crime scene details from those three cases, Bobby. They belong in the mix here."

"Sophia," he began.

"No. Don't placate me. I'll take the heat but we brought you evidence of kills just like that all over the country." She threw up her hands. "The world, even. You want hard evidence I'll give it to you. But let's get everything on the table first."

"Children, children, children."

Without fanfare the rest of the team had arrived and was filing into the room. Scott Mooney, one of the CIDs, looked around at everyone. "Play nice in the sandbox. What's the problem?"

No one spoke for a long moment. Sophia stood with her hands on her hips while Logan and Rebecca waited to see what would happen next.

"I didn't blame you for finally leaving when you did," Bobby said at last. "Hell, I'm surprised the whole family stuck around."

"Blacks aren't quitters," Rebecca said in a harsh voice. "You know that, Bobby. And Sophia left because she had a great job offer. Period."

Bobby held up one hand, palm out. "No offense. Didn't mean to pick a scab on a sore."

"It's an old sore and that's not why I asked the question." Sophia stared across the table at Bobby.

"Hell. Sorry, sorry. Ask away."

Sophia took a swallow of the bitter coffee. "And on the other two that occurred around the same time?"

Bobby slid his chair back and rose from the table. "I'll get those files," he said in his Maine twang. "You're right, Soph. Let's lay it all out on the table. We may not be right but you might not, either. The answer might lie somewhere in between."

"Fine," she shot back at him. "And we'll all have our say."

The previous night had been tedious but not more than with any normal case. Logan thought the states had been pretty accepting of the theories and material he and Sophia had brought with them. But as Bobby carried in a storage box filled with case files, set it on the table and opened it, he definitely got the message through body language if nothing else that they all thought he and Soph were nuts. That they were going to humor them until the two of them gave up and went back to Texas and let them get on with their business.

"You know," he drawled, "it doesn't seem to me that any of you have made any headway in this at all. Even if it's a serial killer, as you all seem to think, you haven't got a clue as to whether it's a man or woman, where he or she came from or went to, or why these particular victims are chosen. So." He sat forward and leaned his arms on the

table. "I say, crazy as it sounds, let's all keep an open mind here. We'll look at your theories, you look at ours." He looked directly at Bobby. The signals would come from him. "What do you say?"

He watched Bobby look at his people one at a time, then at Rebecca, and finally at him and Sophia.

"Fine," he sighed. "I'll listen. How's that."

"Fair enough." Logan looked at Sophia now. "Okay with you, Soph?"

She shoved her hands in the pockets of her jeans. "Fine. Let's just get to work."

As if daring anyone on the team to argue with him, Bobby dug the folders out of the box and opened each one, spread its contents out for them all to see. The first set of pictures was of a man in his thirties. He'd been found lying outside his barn, still in jeans and heavy jacket but with a gaping hole where his stomach should be. Logan blinked and swallowed hard. It reminded him instantly of the way his brother Evan had been found. The body of his sister-in-law Valerie had been discovered on the back porch of their house in the same condition. Even now he had to tamp down the nausea as the memories flood him. He had no idea how Sophia managed to handle it being back in the old environment. Especially when they got to the pictures of her nephews.

When he saw the color leech from her face he quietly got up, refilled her coffee mug and put the hot liquid into her hands. She looked up at him with haunted eyes.

"Thank you."

"No sweat." He pitched his voice low. "You okay with this?"

She swallowed hard. "I can do it. Don't worry."

Bobby and the others were looking at the old photos and comparing them with those of Darrell Franklin. Scott Mooney leaned back in his chair and rubbed his jaw.

"I have to agree on a couple of points," he said almost reluctantly. "These are all the same work of one creature human or otherwise. And it's not like anything we've seen before or since."

"Don't tell me you're buying into the idea that this is some mythical beast on a bloodlust hunt," one of the other CIDs snorted. "That makes as much sense as believing that old Indian chief came back from the grave and keeps killing the white man to avenge the death of his infant."

"If you wanted to go that route," Bobby put in, "you could almost imagine these wounds cause by a very sharp tomahawk. Only..."

"Only what?" Scott demanded.

"Only it's been a few hundred years since that episode. Even if we agree that the vendetta was handed down from generation to generation, why wait until now? And why these particular people? It's almost as if they were chosen at random."

"They were," Sophia insisted. "Animals don't choose their prey with a plan in mind except to kill. Either for food, revenge or protection. And you can be sure whatever we're dealing with is part animal. Whoever or whatever did this drained the blood from

the bodies but left the entrails lying there. Anyway, I thought we went over all this last night? That you all at least agreed to look at this with an open mind."

There was a very long moment of silence, which Bobby finally broke.

"I'll be real honest with you, Soph. Last night we were all on our best behavior and everyone was trying to be careful of your feelings. But you have to admit the story is really out there."

Logan set his mug down and leaned forward. "I saw what the creature did to my brother and sister-in-law." His voice was edged with a mixture of pain and anger. "And the destruction it left in Alabama. Whatever this is, it's left bodies all over the country and no one's been able to identify a known breed of animal that kills this way."

"A couple of people have even trapped what they think is the creature but it got away. They did, however, get pictures of it. I'm going to call back to our home base and have them emailed up here to me." She looked around the table at each of the faces one at a time. "I know you all thought I was crazy when the twins were killed but I spent hours on the internet researching similar killings. I didn't just pull this out of thin air."

"Okay, okay, okay." Bobby held up his hands. "Let's focus on what we need to do here. We have a dead body and that's what we need to get on top of. Let's do what we said last night. Be open to what Sophia and Logan have to say. Hell, I guess anything is possible."

Rebecca, who had been silent through the exchange, looked at Logan then cleared her throat. "Why don't we follow our usual routine, something we should have done last night. Only this time let Logan or Sophia do the white board. Then we'll troop out to Darrell Franklin's and see what we can figure out."

"Logan will do it."

He was surprised, sure that Sophia would want to do this herself after the tense conversation. On the other hand, he was a stranger, coming here without history as far as they were concerned. Neutral, so to speak. He pushed himself up from his chair, walked over to the board on the wall and picked up a marker.

"Okay, let's start with the patterns as we know them," he began.

* * * * *

The beast poked its nosed out of the warmth of the snow cave and looked around, blinking at the bright sunlight reflected off the pristine blanket on the ground. Its belly was still full, its lust still sated from the fresh kill three days ago. But the warning signs were there. The signals in its brain were telling it that the time was approaching for the next prey to be selected.

The beast loved the openness of the landscape and the isolation of the inhabitants. It made hunting so much easier. Today it would find a small inhabitant of the wooded area to take the edge off its appetite. They were so easy to kill there was almost no

pleasure in it. But for the devil beast it was as much about amusement as it was about eating, and drinking the blood so essential to existence.

It lifted its misshapen snout into the wind, sniffing. A scent drifted on the air.

Human!

Here? Now?

No. Far away. And more than one. Not a target for hunting.

A sharp pain stabbed through the creature's head at the blend of smells and it slunk back into the cave, curling in on itself on the ground. Later, when the breath-stealing pain was gone, it would scout the area for its next victim.

Later.

Nearly blinded by the pain, it closed its eyes and reached for the relief of sleep.

* * * * *

They split up outside the barracks. Bobby sent the other four members of the team off in pairs to begin questioning people within a ten-mile radius of the crime scene.

"They'll bring you back reports," he said as Sophia opened her mouth to object. "But you know how much snow we got and how hard it's going to be to get around. Annie and Ray are taking the big pickup and hauling snowmobiles with them to get to some of the folks who aren't plowed yet." He took off his hat, rubbed his head, put it back on again. "This snow has fucked everything up."

"You know I'm going to want to do some scouting myself," she told him.

Bobby made a sound of frustration. "Sophia, that's a lot of miles to cover. That could take days."

"I need to see for myself where the creature could dig in and hide. Where it could hunt for its next victim." She planted her hands on her hips. "Bobby, don't get in my way on this. Please. You'll be damn upset if someone gets killed because you do. This creature kills in a pattern of three. You want to wait for the next two bodies?"

"Fine, fine." He shook his head, exasperated. "Whatever you want, okay? But you said the first thing you wanted was to see the crime scene so that's where we're going."

"Fine," she snapped back. "Good. Then let's get going."

Sophia was happy to note that the plows had obviously been busy after the snowfall of the previous night. The streets of Houlton were pretty clear as was Route 1. She hoped the same could be said of the driveway at Darrell Franklin's fish camp which, according to the map, was off Highway 227 west of Presque Isle.

She needn't have worried. Someone—Bobby or Rebecca—had apparently been on top of it. Three state police vehicles formed a line in the freshly cleared narrow path that left just enough room for someone to walk by them. Bobby Lacroix was waiting for them in front of the lead car, the others in the team gathered around him. Everyone's face was carefully blank.

The fish camp sat in an ocean of snow punctuated by the stark skeletons of trees. Next to the house itself was a huge barn and beyond that a row of cabins stretched down to Alder Pond. The pond was frozen over now and the cabins closed until spring.

"This place is really at the ass end of nowhere," Logan commented as he looked around.

"Like I said yesterday," Sophia said as she and Rebecca exited the SUV right behind him, "I'm guessing it's not much different from a lot of Montana."

He gave a mirthless chuckle. "Yeah, you got that right."

Rebecca led the way to where the others waited. "Thanks to whoever remembered to shovel a path to the doorway," she told him.

"Paul Maquire, the campground owner who found him, took care of all this for us," Bobby told her. "In fact, he should be along any minute. I figured your sister and her friend would want to talk to him."

Sophia stepped up next to her sister. "Thank you, Bobby. We appreciate anything you can do to facilitate this."

"Yeah, well, that still doesn't mean I'm buying into your theory. But what you put up on the board back at the barracks at least makes me want to take a look at all the possibilities."

She opened the folder she'd brought with her and pulled out eight-by-ten pictures of the crime scene. "I know it was impossible to preserve any of the scene with the snow and all," she said, "but can one of you just walk us around it?"

"Scott and I will," Rebecca said and led the way toward the house.

The porch ran full length across the front of the building. Two benches flanked the front door and a large wooden chair filled a corner. Sophia stood on the top step, Logan next to her, and watched as her sister paced out the crime scene diagram.

"He was found here," Bec said as she drew an outline with her feet in front of one of the benches. "He only had his long johns on and a pair of jeans."

"Not what you'd step outside in when the temp hovers near zero," Logan commented.

"Right. He was still holding his shotgun. Actually, as cold as it was, by the time Paul Maquire found him it was frozen in his hand." She took the pictures from Sophia and shuffled through them. "He was stretched out like this," she pointed to the top photo, "as if he'd just stepped out of the front door and was dead in seconds."

"If it was the Chupacabra," Logan said, "that's most likely the way it happened."

"His body was drained of blood," Bobby said from behind them. "But if he was killed while it was still snowing we figured the snow had washed away whatever blood there was."

"There wasn't any blood when my nephews were killed," Sophia reminded him. "Or at the other bodies back at that time."

"Or at the ones Night Seekers have looked into since then," Logan added.

"Okay, okay, okay." Bobby shook his head. "I'm just saying there are a lot of explanations for this."

Sophia got right in his face, her temper on a short leash. "Yes. You're right. Remember that. Yours isn't the only one."

"Kids," Rebecca said, stepping up to them. "We've got business to take care of, remember?"

Sophia stepped off the porch and took a long look around the area. Not much different from all the other kill scenes they had pictures of—or had seen personally. Isolated. Distant. A person living alone. Except in the case of her nephews who'd been caught sneaking off on a forbidden trail. This time, however, acres of snow covered the landscape, permanently eradicating even the tiniest possibility of a trace. And the cold effectively killing the remnants of any odor, such as turpentine. Well, hell.

"It would be really impossible for a human being to sneak up on this place," she commented. "It's so exposed, even with the trees. And when did this most recent snowfall start?"

"Four days before the body was found," Bobby answered. "That's one of the reasons the campground owner was concerned. He wanted to make sure Darrell was weathered in properly."

"Then tell me, Bobby." Sophia looked up at him, unsmiling. "How would a human being get in here to attack the man? And why would he? Or she? If the killer is human and looking for prey, there are a lot easier places to hunt than out here in the middle of nowhere. Places where someone could get in and out without detection."

Bobby glared back at her. "He could have come in before the storm really got up a head of steam. Driven up the driveway while it was still clear. Taken care of business and gotten away before the weather settled in."

"And that doesn't seem like a lot of trouble to go to for one kill?"

"Less chance of being disturbed," he said stubbornly.

"You don't think Darrell Franklin would have been suspicious of someone showing up out of the blue?" Sophia asked. "I get the impression he wasn't a person to let his guard down easily." She rubbed her forehead. "Or it could be a creature that hunts for isolated prey so there's no chance of detection," she insisted. "One that doesn't fit anything you're familiar with."

"You're giving whatever you think that creature is a lot of brain credit." He was obviously trying to hang on to his theory.

"Maybe it has more than we think." Night Seekers was beginning to think more and more that the devil beast had reasoning powers far beyond those of normal creatures. "Bobby, you can't rule out anything at this point. Think back to when my nephews were killed." She swallowed back the sudden surge of nausea. "And the two others around the same time. You never found any trace of a human being. Not one. Those killings were never solved. And now we have another one just like those."

"So you're saying that this—whatever it is—is back again? That maybe it's even been around here all this time?"

"I'm saying that you can't just toss the possibility aside because it doesn't compute in your brain. Logan and I are here because Night Seekers has been dealing with a lot of killings just like this. Why not at least accept the possibility our theory might be right?"

Before Bobby could say anything else they heard the whining sound of a snowmobile and everyone turned. A man wrapped in a fur-lined parka, waterproof winter pants and heavy boots climbed off a massive Sno-Cat snowmobile and trudged up to where they stood. He pulled up the ski mask he wore beneath his hood and held out a hand to Bobby.

"Detective Lacroix," he acknowledged.

Bobby nodded at him. "Thanks for coming." He introduced everyone around, then turned back to the much older man. "If you could walk us through it again I'd really appreciate it. I hope this will be the last time."

"Me, too." The man shook his head. "Not a sight that's easily wiped from your mind." He climbed up onto the porch. "Okay. Darrell and I see each other almost daily when the weather's nice but he closes up in the winter. He's pretty isolated out here so I have him call me every day, let me know if he needs anything. Sometimes I come over on the Cat and we play cards. Have a couple of drinks. You know."

He paused and took a long breath.

"I hadn't heard from him in three days. When he didn't answer the phone I got worried and came on over. The snow had stopped by then but it was pretty deep and I had a little trouble getting in even with the Cat. But holy hell. There he was, on the porch. Guts ripped out, big puncture wounds in the neck. Shotgun frozen in his hand. And I'll tell you, a look of fright on his face like I've never seen before. And Darrell wasn't afraid of anyone or anything."

"I know I asked you this before," Bobby said, "but do you think a bear could have done this? Could he have heard the animal outside and come to shoot it?"

Maquire snorted. "And I'll tell you again. A bear would have ripped him to shreds, not left him like this. Besides, don't you wonder what happened to all his blood?"

"My point exactly," Sophia put in. "Besides, what on earth would persuade any human being to drive to a closed fish camp in the middle of a raging blizzard?" She shook her head. "No, this isn't the work of anything human." She looked at Bobby. "No matter what you say."

"So then, some animal besides a bear. There's a lot of other options."

Logan touched her elbow. "Let's get Mr. Maquire to walk us around the place and point out any other opportunities for someone to get here. Skis, whatever, and make a chart."

"Yes, okay, but you know it isn't—"

"We can go over this ourselves later. With Rebecca, if you want. Meanwhile, let's just get the lay of the land so we have a starting point."

"You're right." She sighed and turned to Paul Maquire. "If you can walk us around here and answer some questions we'd appreciate it. I know you've done this with Detective Lacroix and his team but if I can persuade you to go through it one more time?"

"Sure. Whatever will help find Darrell's killer."

Sophia was glad she and Logan had heavy winter boots on as they walked the scene with Maquire. They went over everything again with him, Bobby and Rebecca prompting now and then, until they figured they'd wrung all the information from him he had to give them. They nodded politely as he pointed out where a snowmobile could have gotten through and where someone would have needed either cross-country skis or snowshoes.

"I just think if it was a machine Darrell would have heard it coming," Maquire said. "Maybe that's why he had the gun in his hands. But if someone wanted to kill him, why show up on something that noisy?"

"Good point," Logan nodded.

Sophia exchanged glances with him. They'd been trying to tell Bobby the same thing.

"And if they came on skis or snowshoes that shows they'd really planned this out. And I can't think of a damn person who wanted to kill Darrell who'd be that premeditated."

"Well, if anything does come to you, please let us know." Sophia pulled off a glove and dug a business card out of her pocket. "My cell number's on here. Call me anytime."

"Thanks for your help," Logan told him, shaking the man's hand.

"Wish I could tell you more." He rubbed his gloved hand over his chin. "Maybe if I hadn't waited so long to call him..."

"I don't think there's anything you could have done," Sophia told him. "Whatever we're dealing with here would have gotten him anyway."

Maquire narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean, whatever we're dealing with? It can only be one of two things—a crazy human or a wild animal. Right?"

"That's right," Bobby said smoothly, breaking into the conversation and stalling any answer Sophia might have given. "We're all just glad nothing happened to you. But don't beat yourself up. Please. None of this was your fault."

"If you say so." But guilt still shadowed his eyes.

He pulled on his ski mask, shook hands with everyone else and climbed back on the big Sno-Cat. They watched him disappear over the landscape, snow spraying behind him like a rooster tail.

"Well," Bobby said, looking at Sophia and Logan, "what next?"

"Next I want to drive the area, get a sense for where this creature, any creature," she amended as Bobby scowled at her, "could be hiding. And I'd also like to find out if anyone's found any small animals mutilated this way in the past few days. I'll get someone on it." He nodded at them as he left the room.

"Can we get some snowmobiles tomorrow?" Logan asked.

Rebecca nodded. "I can sign out three of the state police machines. You want to check out the areas where there aren't any roads, right?"

"I do. But Sophia and I can handle it. She still knows the area well enough, I'm sure."

She gave him a smile. "Sorry, guys. Where the two of you go, I go. I have just as much invested in this, remember? Anyway, that's a vast area out there. If you're looking for some indication of this devil beast, three pairs of eyes are better than two."

"I just don't want to get you in trouble with Lacroix."

"Don't you worry about Bobby. I can handle him."

"Be sure to bring your rifle," Logan told her. "I'd loved to flush this creature out but you need to be ready to shoot on sight."

"No problem." She grinned. "And I'm a crack shot. Our dad took all three of us kids hunting from the time we were big enough to hold a gun steady."

Logan smiled back. "Good. I might need you to protect *me*."

"Meanwhile," Sophia said, "how about some lunch. Then I'd like to see some topographical and aerial maps of the county. We have to try to predict where the beast will pick its next victim." She grimaced. "Although as isolated as many people are out here, that may be hard to do."

Chapter Five

The day was long and filled with the kind of drudgery that took up the majority of time in any investigation. Rebecca made copies of the new scene diagram Logan had drawn and they identified any even remote possibilities that gave access to a stranger.

"I still say it's too much trouble for one kill, even for a serial killer," Sophia insisted stubbornly. "There's a million other opportunities. And why pick this particular man who basically had no enemies?"

"That we know of," Bobby said.

"Whatever."

Someone brought in pizza and they spent the afternoon pouring over maps of the county, section by section, and looking for likely spots the devil beast would strike. Even though Bobby kept trying to downplay that possibility, despite all the evidence they'd thrown at him, Sophia and Logan, with Rebecca supporting them, insisted they had to at least plan for the possibility.

"Even if it's a rabid wild animal," Rebecca told the lead detective, "we need to identify easy places for it to strike."

When the rest of the detectives rolled in they shared the results of their interviews, but no one had anything constructive to add. Everyone was frustrated and the detectives couldn't conceal their heavy skepticism when Sophia insisted they all go over the maps together.

"What makes you so sure there'll be another killing?" Scott asked, leaning back wearily in his chair and running his fingers through his hair. "If it's a wild animal someone will spot it and shoot it. If it's a human, they won't do anything with all this activity going on."

"I'm done arguing with you," Sophia said. "Let's just look at it this way. If there's no other killing within the next week I'll admit I might be wrong. If there is, we look at all options."

"Bobby, that's fair enough," one of the other detectives said. "Let's put this to bed for the day. We got nothing and we're getting nowhere. Maybe tomorrow something will pop up."

"Fine." He closed the folder in front of him. "I called WAGM, the television station in Presque Isle, and asked them to put out a wild animal warning. Something we'd routinely do, anyway," he pointed out to Logan. "The radio station as well. And just about everyone who's got a computer checks for daily news bulletins so I had one of the administrative aides put something out."

"And that's all we can do for the moment," Sophia told him. But the uneasy feeling wouldn't let go of her.

Eventually she, Logan and Rebecca found their way to The Crown again.

"Clint's eyes sure zeroed in on you the minute we walked in," Rebecca teased her sister.

Sophia ducked her head as she felt the heat creeping up her cheeks. "I'm sure you must be mistaken. He was just checking to see who his customers were."

"Uh-huh. Like he does that for everyone."

"I don't know about you, but I need a drink." Sophia deliberately changed the subject. She had no idea if she and Clint would even get together again. For all she knew they were once and done, despite what he'd said when he left.

"Good idea," Logan said, following her lead.

"Okay, okay, I get the message." Rebecca's lips twitched with a barely concealed grin. "But we'll just see. He sure hasn't hit on any of the women around here since he's been back."

"Maybe he's gay," Logan joked.

Bec laughed aloud. "Oh, no. There's not one single gay thing about this man."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me. A woman can tell these things."

Diane, the waitress, arrived at their table at that moment with menus and a tray of drinks.

"Mr. Sociable," she jerked her head toward the bar, "said the first round's on him." She stared at them with open curiosity. "Did one of you put some kind of spell on him?"

"See?" Bec winked at her sister. "I told you." She looked at Diane. "Tell Clint we appreciate his hospitality and my sister will be over to thank him personally in a minute."

"Sure thing. And the barbecue sandwich is the best thing on the list tonight." She looked at each of them. "Will that be three?"

Logan handed her his menu. "I'll go with the recommendation. Ladies?"

They nodded and Diane hip-swayed back toward the kitchen.

"You should go thank our host," Rebecca prodded, looking at her sister. "I'd hate for him to think we don't have any manners."

Sophia took a sip of her drink, hoping it would still the butterfly wings beating furiously inside her. When she glanced at the bar, Clint was watching her with his hot gaze. Setting her glass back down on the table, she slid out of the booth and headed toward him. One corner of his mouth tilted in a semblance of a smile when she got closer.

"Thank you for the drink," she told him. "That was very nice of you."

His gaze traveled slowly the length of her body, igniting fire everywhere on her skin.

"You're welcome, *chere*." His voice was pitched low so only the two of them could hear, even with the normal bar noise. "It'll have to do instead of what I really want to give you right now."

"Listen, Clint." She wet her lips. "I'm not sure—"

"Are you saying you didn't enjoy what we did? Because remember, I was there, too."

"No," she answered quickly. "Of course not. I mean, yes, I enjoyed it. I just..."

"Listen." He leaned closer over the bar. "I don't even know what this is between us but it's something. It's come up fast but that doesn't make it any less real. Let's find out if it's a fire that'll burn itself out before we talk it to death, okay?"

Desire surged through her and images of the previous night slammed into her, hardening her nipples into diamond-like points and soaking her cunt. "If my brain was working I'd say no. But it seems to have temporarily disappeared."

His gaze simmered over her again. "Then you're welcome for the drink. How did things go today?"

"Frustrating," she told him. "This isn't your ordinary type of case."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Oh? What's different?"

Sophia shook her head. She'd already said too much. If the state police detectives were reluctant to believe what she and Logan were telling them, Clint would probably think she was crazy. Anyway, they'd all agreed not to let word of their speculation get out.

"Well, enjoy your drink and I'll see you after closing." He paused. "Get some rest. You'll need it." Then he walked away to take care of a customer waving at him from the end of the bar.

When Sophia slid into the booth again she hoped she didn't look as dazed as she felt.

"That was short and sweet," her sister commented.

"Beaudine looks like he's a man of a few words," Logan said.

"I thanked him and that was that." Sophia picked up her drink and sipped it. She stared at Rebecca over the rim of her glass. "And that was all."

The knowing look in Bec's eyes made her drop her own gaze and she deliberately changed the subject. "I think we should go over everything from today. Maybe we missed something."

"You know we didn't," Logan told her. "But okay. Let's haul it out one more time. Then tomorrow I want to get some snowmobiles and hit the places where there are no roads. This is just like back home. Lots of places and spaces and not too many ways to get there."

"And keep an eye peeled for places where the beast might be hiding," Sophia added. "Problem is, there's just too much damn space for it to hide in."

"I agree." Rebecca nodded. "I think it would be best if the three of us went and left the others to do what they're most comfortable with. They don't buy into the theory, anyway, and I don't want to have to waste time arguing about things."

"Look for a nonexistent serial killer." Sophia couldn't keep the edge from her voice.

Bec leaned across the table and put her hand on her sister's. "Let them do their thing. They'll only get in the way. As long as Bobby lets us use whatever resources we need it doesn't matter."

"It will when there's a second killing," Logan pointed out.

"And we'll deal with that when the time comes. Meanwhile Bobby's got warnings out to watch for wild animals and that's as much as we can do."

"Except the Chupacabra takes many forms. If it's really a shifter, it can appear as a human and people will be thrown off guard."

"You forget how suspicious Maineiacs are," Bec reminded her. "A stranger alone, not part of a tourist group or a hunting or fishing party will call attention to himself."

"We can only do what we can do," Logan pointed out. "Meanwhile, here's our food. I suggest we eat and call it a night."

* * * * *

Sophia wished she'd brought some bath salts with her, although who knew in the wilds of Maine on an investigation she'd even need them, much less be thinking about them. She settled for a long, hot shower and washing her hair with the scented shampoo she always used. She took as long as she could pampering herself but she was still left with almost two hours before Clint could show up.

For a while she tried making notes on the case but her mind was wandering in ten different directions. Same thing when she tried to read the book she'd stuck in her suitcase. Finally she turned the television on, the volume muted, and watched the silent action on the screen as she tried to figure out exactly how this had happened. She wasn't sexually inexperienced by any means, but she also didn't sleep around indiscriminately. Yet she'd opened her door to Clint Beaudine last night and was in bed with him within two seconds. Not only that, she'd convinced Logan to stop at Walmart before dinner so she could run in and buy something a little sexier than her familiar University of Maine t-shirt.

She was still trying to puzzle it out in her mind when she heard the light tap at the door. The moment she opened it he was inside, pulling her against his hard body, the cold night air still surrounding him like a cloud. His mouth on hers was cold and hot at the same time, hard yet soft, but insistent and demanding. The feel of it was pure sin. Fire erupted everywhere inside her, singeing every nerve. One hand splayed across her

buttocks, pulling her to him more tightly. The other threaded through her hair, holding her head in place while he plundered her mouth.

His tongue was a live wire, burning her even as she welcomed it. She finally understood what it meant to be kissed senseless. If Clint's strong arms hadn't been holding her she'd have collapsed to the floor, her body incapable of doing her bidding. When he finally lifted his head her brain was spinning and her body was humming.

"We have too many clothes on again." His crooked smile destroyed any last doubts she might have had. "I purely love that sexy nightgown, *chere*. It promises sinful pleasures. But I have to get you naked. Right now."

He barely took time to shuck his jacket and boots and shed his own clothes before he slid her brand-new nightgown over her head. He held her at arm's length and let his gaze travel slowly over her. With the light from the bedside lamp spilling over her she was suddenly conscious of every flaw her body possessed.

"Let's get under the covers," she urged.

"*Non, chere*." He shook his head. "Tonight I want to look at every inch of you. Take my time with you. Taste and feel you."

He urged her backward until she felt the edge of the bed hit her and he pushed her down onto it, spreading her legs. She was splayed wide open for him as he contemplated her with open desire. He traced the line of her jaw, her neck, the swell of her breasts, his hands moving in an unhurried pace down the length of her, mapping every dip and swell. Every curve.

Her body was humming by the time he reached her ankles, his thumbs gently rubbing the inside of them. Whoever thought ankles could be an erogenous zone? He knelt between her outspread legs and delicately licked the tender skin, sending shivers skating over her. His mouth moved up her legs, paying careful attention to her knees and the inner flesh of her thighs. By the time he reached her pussy she was ready to launch herself at him, the need for his tongue to lap everywhere ratcheting through her like a wild thing.

But Clint seemed determined to take his time, tasting her, petting her, his lean hands holding her thighs apart to give him full access to her.

"Yesss," she hissed, when he leaned over her and used his thumbs to spread the lips of her cunt. "God, yes."

"I can't wait to taste you," he murmured, his breath a warm breeze fanning over her drenched folds.

At the first stroke of his tongue over her throbbing clit she arched off the bed, pushing herself against his mouth. Clint used his forearms to hold her down, keep her in place while he lapped at her bundle of nerves with excruciating slowness. Electricity shot through her, sizzling her nerve endings and striking sparks into the coil of lust low in her belly. He held her helpless as a pinned butterfly while he tormented that hard little knot, pulling at it with lips and teeth while frustration pounded through her.

When finally he thrust his tongue inside her, a long, slow glide, an orgasm broke over her, her inner muscles clamping down on his tongue. She clutched the covers in her fists while the spasms shuddered through her. Clint never stopped the thrust of his tongue, in and out, as she poured into his mouth, over and over.

She had barely recovered when he rose enough to push her farther back on the bed and climb up to stretch out next to her. In a moment his fingers were playing at her very sensitive clit, teasing it lightly, while his mouth took hers in a predatory kiss. She tasted herself on his lips and tongue, her own musky flavor blending with his.

She was still so sensitive from her climax that just the touch of Clint's fingers stroking the lips of her pussy and whispering over her clit fired every nerve dancing beneath the surface of her skin.

"Mmm," she moaned, trying to twist away from him. Catch her breath. Give her body a moment to recover.

Apparently that wasn't even close to what Clint had in mind.

His clever fingers pinched her clit and thrust into the hot swell of her cunt, urging her up the spiral again. Her body responded to his silent coaxing, the muscles of her lower tummy clenching and tensing. Another orgasm was building slowly inside her, like the flame of a newly built fire as it catches on kindling and dry tinder.

But just as she began to ride his hand he stopped, sliding his fingers from her body. They glistened with her juices. He carefully painted her nipples then her lips with her cream.

"Taste yourself," he growled, eyes heating as he watched her slowly run her tongue over her lower lip. Then he pressed his mouth to hers. "I love kissing this sweet mouth of yours," he whispered against her lips, "but I want to feel it on my cock, too."

With an efficiency of movement he rearranged them so they were lying on their sides, her mouth at his shaft, his at her cunt.

"Now, Sophia." His voice was hoarse. "Let me feel you now."

She wrapped the fingers of one hand around his throbbing cock, licking the velvety head, dragging the tip of her tongue through the slit. At the same moment his fingers slid into her pussy again, curling to reach that sweet spot, the hot button that kicked her into overdrive.

When she slid her mouth down the length of him, feeling the hot steel beneath the velvet skin, she reached between his thighs and cupped the heavy sac with his balls. Clint groaned in response, rasping his thumb over her clit then setting up a slick movement of his fingers in and out of her clutching pussy.

She was so aroused she could hardly focus on what she was doing, moving her mouth and hand in rhythm up and down his erection. He filled her mouth, stretching it to capacity, just as he'd filled her cunt the night before. Gently she squeezed his balls, extracting another groan from him. His lips closed over her clit as his fingers pumped in and out of her.

She was startled when, without warning, he shifted his hips and jerked his shaft from her mouth.

"Savin' it," he gasped.

But he wasn't saving her. Shifting his body again, he closed his mouth over one stiff nipple and sucked on it hard, as his fingers stroked her to another orgasm. She cried out, the release shattering her, his fingers relentless in their plunging and stroking, scraping that very hot spot again and again.

She was limp and gasping for breath, eyes closed, her body covered with a fine sheen of perspiration, when she felt him leave the bed. Before she could ask him where he was going she heard the familiar crinkle of foil over his rough breathing. Then he was back, poised between her thighs, legs bent back to open her wide to him. The head of his cock pressed against her opening, thick and hard and hot.

And then with one swift movement of his hips he pumped into her, filling every space. He paused for a moment, his breath a harsh rasp in the still air.

"Look at me, *chere*," he commanded. "I want to look into your eyes when I take you."

She opened her eyes and looked into his, seeing them hot and hungry. "I think you've already taken me," she gasped.

"Not even by half," he told her. "Wrap your legs around me."

As soon as she did he moved, driving in and out of her cunt, slow then fast, hard then pulling all the way out only to drive into her again. Unbelievably she felt an orgasm gathering power inside her drained body again. Somehow this man had the power to arouse her over and over.

And then she couldn't think anymore, only feel. Feel the power of him inside her, the strength around her. Plunging into her again and again.

"So hot. So wet. So tight. Hell, *chere*. You might burn me alive."

No, he was burning her. From the inside out. He rode her and rode her, his eyes like hot coals mesmerizing her.

When the orgasm came it shattered them both. One minute he was driving into her, the next he stiffened and as he did her body convulsed, her pussy clutching as his cock, dragging every drop of semen from him into the latex sheath. She wrapped her legs around his waist and dug her heels into the small of his back, pulling him into her as tightly as she could. Riding that hot, hard shaft as it throbbed inside her.

She had no idea how much time had passed before she finally felt her muscles go lax and she let her legs fall to the mattress. Her heart was beating like a trip hammer and she couldn't seem to get enough air in her lungs. Clint rolled to the side, taking her with him, his cock still inside her, his hands stroking her back even as he struggled to get his own breathing under control.

Sophia was completely undone. No man in her life had ever taken her on such a sexual roller-coaster ride, ever given her so many orgasms, or devoted himself to her

pleasure the way Clint was doing. But what happened when she left here? Or was she getting ahead of herself? Was this just a few hot nights in sweaty sheets for him and then she'd be a faint memory? What did she really know about him, anyway?

"I hear your brain clicking," he murmured against her ear. "I must not be doing my job if you can lie here thinking."

"Oh," she breathed. "You're doing your job very well. I just..."

"Just what, *chere*?" He licked the outer shell of her ear.

"This all just happened so...fast. So quickly." She wound her fingers into the thick softness of his hair.

"Life's quick," he told her. "When something like this comes along you have to grab onto it. You never know when you might get another chance. Or when it might fall apart."

She stilled in the circle of his arms. "Are you trying to send me a message, Clint? That I'm just some temporary amusement for you?"

She tried to pull free of him but his arms just tightened around her. And his cock still rested inside her, locking them together.

He tensed. "Not even close." He bit the lobe of her ear. "Just...sometimes life gets in the way."

"Like how? I'm just trying to tell you I don't fall into bed for wild sex with every man who comes along and you're trying to tell me the meaning of life."

His hand slid up her spine in a slow caress until his fingers were at her nape, his mouth coasting over her face. "Forget I said anything. For however long you're here I want us to be together. Beyond that? There are some things you'd have to know that I'm not sure how to tell you."

She studied his face, so close his breath warmed her cheeks. "Are you married? Have a string of women hidden away somewhere? On the run from the law?"

He gave a short laugh. "No, nothing like that. I promise you."

"Then what could be so terrible?"

He brushed his mouth lightly over hers. "Nothing we need to think about now. We've got something very strong here, Sophia. If it takes us where I hope it will, then we'll talk. Okay?"

He slid from her body very carefully and padded into the bathroom to dispose of the condom. Sophia lay there still limp, unable to move, her brain whirling but her body telling it to shut up. In seconds he slipped under the covers beside her and lifted her so she was straddling his chest.

"Hold on to the headboard, Sophia." His voice was deep with a dark tinge to it. "You're gonna need it."

He shifted her so her pussy was poised right over his mouth, his tongue snaking out to lick slowly over her swollen lips, and she fell right back into the raging heat of

erotic haze. By the time he was finished with her she didn't have a thought left in her head except about this sensuous man and what he could do to her.

Finally he rolled her to her back, his mouth whispering kisses over her face, the swell of her breasts, her tummy.

"I have to go, Sophia. You have no idea how much I'd love to curl up around you and sleep with you in my arms, but you have a team member right next door to you. I don't think you want to start answering his questions."

"You don't think he noticed you pull up or heard you knock on my door?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I was careful. And I parked farther down in the lot." He kissed her again, just a touch to her forehead. "Maybe tomorrow night you can tell me more about the details of this killing and why two investigators from Texas came all the way to Maine to look into it."

She stared up at him. "Why? You think you can help?" After all, he was trained military. He might have a different perspective on things. And he was French in ancestry. Cajun, maybe, judging from his soft drawl. They believed in things like the devil beast.

"Think about it," he said, and rose to pull on his clothes. "Be careful, Sophia. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Before she could respond he opened the door and slipped quietly into the night.

* * * * *

In less than twenty minutes Clint was home. Frenchy was sound asleep, thank the lord. He didn't want to have to think up answers as to why he was so late getting home two nights in a row. The old man was far too smart to see through any flimsy story.

Clint stood in the darkened kitchen, ran a glass of water from the tap and drained it completely, then filled it again. Sex always depleted him, and sex with Sophia Black just about destroyed him. It took every bit of discipline he could muster in the heat of orgasm to keep the wolf at bay. The animal growled constantly inside him, aroused by Sophia's sensuous heat.

He could just imagine her reaction if he laid it all out for her. In Louisiana it might not matter, a place where secret creatures and legends of all kinds lurked. Especially in the bayous and swamps around New Orleans and Acadiana. The rougarou—half man, half wolf—was a legend told and retold. The generations of his family, tracing all the way back to when the English had chased the French out of Acadia in Canada, had wrapped themselves in the legend, using it to conceal their particular heritage. The Beaudines were shifters, a condition Clint had grown up with and learned from his parents how to manage and control.

But when a bunch of drunks had burned down their fish camp and most of his family with it he'd set out to get as far away from the people who constantly tormented

the swamp dwellers as he could. His thumb had taken him all the way to Maine, close enough to where his family had come from to give him a feeling of connection.

But outside Presque Isle he'd run into trouble hanging out at the back door of The Crown. Frenchy had caught him trying to lift someone's wallet and for whatever reason taken him inside, fed him and taken him home to sleep. Steeped himself in the legend of the rougarou, Frenchy hadn't been the least dismayed to discover Clint's true nature. Instead he'd homeschooled him, taught him how to survive in the wilderness, and when the time came helped him enroll in the Army.

Frenchy'd also looked up what herbs Clint would need to keep the wolf under control since he couldn't necessarily rip off his uniform when the urge hit him and go racing around in wolf form. Clint had handled it for four tours of duty but at the age of thirty-six decided he wanted something else out of life. He just didn't know what, except maybe a place to belong once and for all.

He had a sense he could find that with Sophia but after only two nights he wasn't nearly ready to broach the subject. No, he couldn't chance it. Not yet. And he also wanted to find out more about this killing she and her partner had stuck their noses into. A lot of the detectives from CID ate at The Crown and he'd heard enough gossip to know they hadn't exactly been invited in.

What he really needed to do right now was go for a run and clear his head. Leaving his clothes folded on a chair in the kitchen, he opened the back door and stepped out onto the porch, closing his eyes as he allowed the change to come over him. Dropping to all fours, his thick pelt covering his skin and shielding it from the chill air, he leaped from the porch and headed for the trees.

These woods blended into the forest that ran all the way to the rear of Skye Motel. Clint liked to make the circle, hidden by the woods but still close enough to Frenchy to scent trouble if there was any. He was partway through the circle when his nostrils caught a different scent and he stopped dead still.

Wolf!

But not quite. Different, just like the night before.

He waited, and finally through the trees he saw a magnificent gray wolf racing along with smooth, even strides. He knew gray wolves showed up now and then in the area, but this one was bigger than the others he'd seen, and there was something different about it. Something he couldn't quite assess.

Surely not a shifter. He liked to think if there were any others in the area he'd have connected with them by now. Still...

For a moment the animal stopped and turned in Clint's direction, as if seeking him out. Clint moved behind two thick trees, carefully concealing himself.

And then it was gone, almost as if it had never been there.

Well, shit. He'd have to find a way to dig into this and get some answers. He didn't like mysteries like this. Not when they might affect him and Frenchy. Abruptly he turned and headed for home. Time to get some sleep.

* * * * *

Logan found his clothes where he'd left them in a waterproof sack up in the crotch of two limbs in a tree. Not that he expected anyone to be out wandering in the woods at this time of night, which was why his body usually woke him and told him it was time for a run. But he didn't want to take a chance of leaving them where they could be found and having to walk back to the motel room buck naked. That would definitely be hard to explain.

Harder to explain was the giant black wolf he'd glimpsed again tonight. Tonight in his room he'd used his laptop to do an internet search for black wolves in Maine, but he couldn't find a mention of them anywhere. Besides, the scent he'd caught had a different tinge to it than pure wolf.

The thought that there could be another shifter around here puzzled him. Usually his internal radar was very good at sensing that but he hadn't gotten any signals. Was it related in any way to the Chupacabra? Farfetched but not impossible. But if not that then who or what could it be? And why here? Tomorrow night he'd wait for the wolf to appear again and track it to its lair.

It was time for some answers.

Chapter Six

Morning came much too early as far as Sophia was concerned. It wasn't that she hadn't survived many times on very little sleep. But usually it was because she was out chasing clues or criminals. By the time she fell into bed she usually fell into a deep, dreamless sleep and woke at least mildly refreshed. But last night had been a whole lot different. She'd been drained all right, from the most exhausting sex she'd ever had in her life. Whatever energy might have been left in her body was completely wiped away by Clint and his educated tongue and fingers and that last shattering orgasm.

And when she *had* fallen asleep her dreams had been anything but restful. Instead they'd been filled with images of Clint Beaudine and herself in every kind of erotic scene imaginable. Standing beneath the shower spray, she willed the hot water to pound energy into her sore and aching muscles and rinse the haze from her brain.

While she dried herself and brushed her teeth she replayed over and over in her mind that short snippet of conversation where he'd hinted at something she might not like. Or understand. Or both. He swore he wasn't married or involved, that he wasn't looking for meaningless sex, and he didn't look as if he had a fatal disease. Maybe after they quit for the day she could beg an hour for herself and pay a visit to Frenchy. See if she could tease some information out of him.

A heavy pounding on the door shook her out of her daydreaming.

"Hey, Soph," Logan called. "You decent? Can I come in?"

Sophia hastily wrapped a big towel around herself and pulled the door open just the length of the security chain. "Not yet. Give me five and I will be."

He grinned at her through the narrow opening and held up two Styrofoam cups with lids. "I made fresh coffee. Will that help?"

"You have no idea," she laughed, reaching out a hand to snag one of the cups. "But it does bribe me to hurry. Warm up the SUV and by the time it's heated I'll be out there."

The liquid was hot and strong, just the way she liked it. She blessed Logan for his excellent taste in coffee as she sipped it. Yanking on her clothes, she pulled her hair back into a tail, stuffed her feet into fleece-lined boots and shrugged into her jacket. A scarf around her neck, a wool cap stuffed into her pocket, her tote and she was ready.

"I think you're the only woman I've ever met who actually can get ready in three minutes," Logan teased as he backed out of the parking space.

"No makeup," she pointed out. "I'm not on a date. *Then* I take little more prep time."

Like last night when I spent an hour getting myself ready for Clint.

"Soph?" he asked as he turned onto the highway.

"Yeah, Logan?" She turned her head to look at him. His voice sounded strange.

"When we got the rundown on animals in this part of Maine, especially wolves, there was no mention in the file of black wolves."

She frowned. "Black wolves? You brought that up before. I gave it a lot of thought, even tried thinking back to my childhood but I don't ever remember seeing them or hearing about them here. Just the grays. Why?"

"Last night and the night before, when I went for my run, I could swear I caught sight of one in the woods."

"Last night?" Sophia chewed her lower lip. "Are you sure it wasn't just some other animal you mistook for a wolf?"

Logan grunted. "I think I'm in a good position to know what a wolf looks like, don't you think?"

She exhaled slowly. "I guess you're right. But it's such an anomaly. Oh. Wait. Do you think there's a shifter living up here somewhere? And that's what you saw?"

"I think it's a good possibility. But if that's the case, it would be nice to find him."

"Or her," Sophia added.

"I think it might be too big for a female." He scratched his chin. "But then again we've come across some mighty good-sized she-wolves."

"It also could be the Chupacabra," she pointed out. "All signs point to it being a shifter of some kind."

"No, I don't think so. The very faint scent I caught wasn't like that detected at past crime scenes. I could swear it had a human essence."

Sophia stared at him. "If it is a shifter we need to find out who it is and which side of the line it stands on. We don't need to be doing battles on yet another front."

"Agreed. He's got to be from around here. He wouldn't be traveling all the way up from Penobscot County. I'm going to do my best to make sure my radar is on full alert."

They drove in silence for a few more moment. They were almost at the barracks when Logan spoke again.

"Soph, you okay with us splitting off from the detectives today? Going out on the Sno-Cats, letting them focus on looking for some deranged individual with some kind of bizarre instrument. That's what they really want to believe, anyway."

"I know, I know." She sighed. "It's always so friggin' hard, you know? When my nephews were killed they spent months trying to track down pedophiles, even though there wasn't any sexual molestation. And despite the fact there were two other killings exactly like it."

"So you're okay with this?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" She gave a short laugh. "I think they'll be damn glad to be shut of us. Let the 'real' detectives get on with their work."

He waited a second before adding, "But I think Rebecca should stick with us. You know, since she knows the area so well."

Sophia laughed. "And of course, the others don't."

"She buys into our theory," he said defensively.

"It's okay, Logan. I'm sure we couldn't beat her off with a stick." Then she sobered. "Are you, you know, feeling..."

"Anything for her?" he finished. "I like her. A lot. But there are a lot of things she'd have to accept about me if we moved forward at all, assuming she felt the same way. Besides, she has a job here and I'd never play fast and loose with your sister."

"Of course not," she said with confidence. "You know I'd roast your balls."

The scenario with the detectives played out even better than they hoped. Bobby was waiting for them alone when they walked into the barracks.

"I hope you don't mind," he began, "but no meeting this morning. I thought it might be more productive if I sent the team out to canvass again today. Try again to see if they can find someone who might have had a grudge against Franklin."

"Someone really crazy?" Sophia cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Okay," he agreed, "crazy. Or not. And Scott's running down people who popped up when we ran Franklin's name through the database. They'll also meet with Fish and Game and see what the latest wild animals reports are for around here. You know. Things like that." He paused. "You guys okay with that? I figured you had plans when Rebecca signed out the snowmobiles."

"We're good, Bobby," Sophia told him. "We'll do our thing today and get out of your hair. Hope you don't mind us stealing Bec."

"As if I could keep her away from you." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Look, I don't want us to be enemies on this. You just have to understand —"

"That our theory sounds absurd," Sophia finished for him. "Despite the evidence we've shown you."

"What can I say? I'm just a hardheaded Yankee. Show me real proof and we'll have something to talk about."

"Everyone ready?" Rebecca came down the hall toward them, dressed for the outdoors as they were, a deliberate smile on her face. "We're all hooked up and ready to go."

"Yes, we're set," Sophia said. "Let me get the maps we put together out of the SUV and we can get going."

"Hey, Sophia." Bobby's voice stopped her. "Why don't the three of you come back here at the end of the day? We can all pool our info. You never know what might pop up."

He was holding out an olive branch and she couldn't find it in her to refuse.

"That'll be fine. Say four o'clock? It'll just be starting to get dark about then and we'll be ready to pull in." She paused. "And thank you."

He dipped his head. "I'll tell the others. Happy hunting."

* * * * *

The devil beast had crawled out of its snow cave just after sunrise, stretching its ugly body in the sharp cold of the new day. It sniffed the air, taking in its crisp, knife-like edge before lowering its head to track for spoor. Sometimes it hunted just for the fun of it, like a child with a game. If it caught something, so much the better. When the bloodlust was not raging it was a way to be amused. Entertained. Or as much as the devil beast could be.

But not right now. Hunger was topmost on its list of necessities. Not the lust that ran through it like a high-speed freight train, satisfied only with the human kills. No, this was just normal hunger, satisfied with small animals.

This area he'd come back to was filled with them—raccoons, squirrels, rabbit, even larger animals like bobcats and coyote. Plenty to feast on. The creature might have to shift into a more formidable shape to attack some of them but the little ones were easy. A mouthful, maybe two. Something to tide it over.

It made its way through the incredibly white snow, moving as it did in a form that left no traces. Soon it would be time to find the next prey. Out here where humans lived in solitude like the beast they were easy to attack. But the beast's radar was working and it, like other predators, had a sense of caution and self-protection.

The growingly familiar pain shot through its head without warning and the beast dropped to the ground, its shape morphing as it did so, rolling in the snow, using the cold to dull the pain. It'd begun to realize the pain was a preliminary to the raging lust that drove it to kill the human prey. But it wasn't time yet. The rest of the signals weren't there.

It wanted to return to its home. Its primary lair. But its responses were specifically programmed so that wasn't an option. Food. That would help.

Eventually the pain subsided enough for the devil beast to rise and head off to search for quarry. Before long a rabbit had the misfortune to dart out of a thicket into its path. The beast snared it and in seconds the rabbit was history.

* * * * *

Despite the late hour he'd gone to sleep the night before, Clint was up early. He listened for Frenchy. Heard the old man in the kitchen and knew he'd be brewing coffee. Or the sludge that passed for it. But this morning it was probably just what Clint needed to wake up his brain.

He made his way into the kitchen where Frenchy was taking clean mugs out of the cupboard. At sixty-seven Frenchy Roland was still fit. The hair on his head was still

thick although now it was liberally threaded with gray. The lines on his face were indicators of the hard life he'd lived but his gray eyes still held traces of the sparkle of his youth. The old man was doing well now, Clint thought, a lot better since he'd finished his physical therapy. Now he was doing the prescribed exercises at home under Clint's nagging and watchful eye. Amazing how a man of that age could recover from a broken hip like that.

What do I do when he doesn't need me anymore? When I don't have any excuse for hanging around? Where will I go then?

He brushed the thoughts out of his mind and dragged out a smile. "That filthy poison ready yet?"

Frenchy smiled. "Say all you want but it keeps the blood flowing."

"I forgot to tell you, but Sophia Black's in town. She said hello."

"I always liked that girl." Frenchy filled both mugs and carried one to the table, lowering himself into a chair. "Terrible thing about her nephews that time." He sipped the coffee. "About all of them."

"They never found whoever did it?"

Frenchy shook his head. "Sophia had a theory that whatever it was, it wasn't quite human, but you know the no-nonsense Yankee mentality. They blew her out of the water."

"That why she left?" Clint lifted his own mug, took a swallow of the dark brew.

"Maybe part of it. But I heard she got a job offer with some private outfit for a lot of money. Someplace in Texas."

"Well, she's definitely back. And I don't think Bobby Lacroix and the rest of the detectives are any too happy about it."

Frenchy cut him a quick glance. "People saying stuff? You hear it at The Crown?"

Clint shrugged. "This and that. Just some low-level grumbling."

The two men looked at each other. "They might do well to listen to her," Frenchy said at last.

"So what's her theory, anyway?"

Frenchy leaned back in his chair and stretched out his legs. "Ever heard of the Chupacabra?"

Clint grunted. "Yeah. Plenty of stories running around the swamps and bayous when I was a kid. Some thought it was a genetic hybrid. Maybe some kind of shifter."

"You might try getting a little friendly with Sophia. Enough so she'll tell you the how and why of it. She did a lot of research when those boys were killed."

"We'll see." Oh, he was getting real friendly with Sophia Black, all right, but conversation wasn't at the top of his activity list with her. "I think I'll cut some more wood. We're running pretty low and there's a chance another storm might blow in."

"Good, good." He shifted in his chair. "You know I've been real glad to have you here these past months, don't you?"

Clint nodded. "And I'm happy to be here."

"You can't hide out here forever, boy. You need to find a way to make a life for yourself."

Clint's laugh had little humor to it. "Easier said than done." He drained the coffee and rinsed the mug. "I'll cut the wood, then shower and get into town."

"I think tomorrow I might like to come in for a little while. Believe it or not I've really missed that place."

"We'll work it out."

There was another reason Clint wanted the physical exertion of splitting logs. He'd awakened with thoughts of Sophia on his brain and an incredible hard-on tenting his sweats. He'd been forced to throw on a heavy flannel shirt before he left the bedroom, one that hid the thrust of his cock against fabric. He hoped the physical exercise would be enough to diminish it but when his whole body was still ramped up he decided to go for a short run.

Checking first on Frenchy, he folded his clothes on the kitchen chair, walked back onto the porch and allowed his body to stretch and elongate, let the fur sprout to cover his skin. Then he was off, racing through the sunshine, darting through trees. He had to be careful. No telling who would be out during the daylight, even though he ran through a deserted area.

He was startled when he heard the heavy whine of a snowmobile, moving to the shelter of some thick trees as it went past about a hundred yards away. Clint held himself perfectly still when it stopped unexpectedly and the driver looked around.

Sophia!

Shit. Just what he didn't need.

He lowered himself to the ground, using the snow for as much cover as he could, hardly daring to breathe until she kicked the engine to life and roared off again. When he was sure she was out of the area he headed for home, fast. That had been far too close for comfort.

Back in the house he stepped into the shower, realizing as he soaped his body that he was still as rigid as when he woke up. The log splitting and the run had done nothing to diminish the swelling of his cock. In fact, seeing Sophia had just the opposite effect.

Standing under the hot stream, he closed his eyes and called up the image of her naked in her bed, legs spread wide, pussy lips swollen and glistening. Eyes glowing with the heat of her desire. Felt again her burning flesh hugging him. God, he wanted to fuck her right now more than he wanted his next breath.

He groaned and wrapped his fingers around his aching cock. He really wanted it buried to the hilt inside Sophia's wet, hot sheath, not in his hand which had served him

far too many times. But as he remembered the feel of her tightly clasped around him, the taste of her, the pressure of her diamond-hard pebbles against his chest, his hand automatically fell into the familiar rhythm.

He slid his other hand between his thighs to cup his balls, squeezing them as he stroked himself, imagining instead Sophia's touch. Up and down, from the root to the tip, calling up the feel of her slim fingers as she grasped him. Of her hot, wet mouth as she'd sucked him in. Felt himself swell even more in his grasp.

His breathing quickened and his heart rate increased as the pressure built inside his body, uncoiling from low in his belly to spring through him. More quickly than he expected the orgasm broke over him and he erupted, the semen spilling over his fingers, his cock jumping in his hand.

He gritted his teeth as the spasms rocked him, leaning against the wall of the shower for support, his body limp and drained. When it was over he drew in a deep, shuddering breath and used the techniques he'd learned in the military to pull himself together. Quickly soaping himself again, he rinsed off, turned off the water and stepped out to dry himself off.

He'd had erotic fantasies before. Who hadn't? But usually the woman was either faceless or someone from an X-rated movie. Never before about a person he'd actually met in real life. Someone he actually knew. In forty-eight hours Sophia Black was entrenched in his blood and he didn't see any way to get her out. There was, however, the little matter of his dual nature. How did you say to a woman, "Hold tight here while I change into a wolf?"

Of course if she was predisposed to believe in creatures other than fully human it might not be so bad. The question was, would she still want him? Want to be with him?

Forget it, asshole. When she's done here she'll go back to Texas or wherever she'd moved to and he'd be little more than a blip on her radar screen.

But Clint had a lot of reasons to believe life could change in the blink of an eye. Maybe it would this time, too.

* * * * *

They decided to begin just outside Presque Isle, not far from Darrell Franklin's fish camp. So much of northern Aroostook County was raw, undeveloped land, dotted with tiny hamlets of very few people and precise squares of uninhabited tax parcels.

One of the snowmobile trails began about a half mile from Franklin's place, at an open parking area that thankfully had been recently plowed. They unloaded the snowmobiles then looked at the map Sophia opened and spread out on the hood of one of the machines.

"We'll have to crisscross," she said, tracing red lines with her fingers. "And there's only so much area we can cover today." She slid a glance at Logan. "Unless we split up."

"Not even an option." His tone of voice was firm. "Let's cross off the most unlikely places first and then start with the others. Remember, we're looking for two things—evidence that the beast is in the area and likely targets for the next attack. Based on previous experience I'd say we've probably got another forty-eight hours at most."

Rebecca pulled on her gloves. "Then we'd best get busy."

It didn't take long to get the snowmobiles unloaded and ready to roll. Rebecca handed out radios to each of them.

"Long range," she explained. "Top of the line. Good for more than sixty miles."

"We definitely don't need that distance," Logan reminded her.

"I know, but we need to split up a little bit or we won't get any territory covered. Let's take a look at the population map and each of us can take a sector. And check in with each other every ten minutes." She looked up at him. "Will that work?"

Sophia could tell Logan didn't like it but he couldn't argue with Rebecca's logic.

"Fine. But we keep to the designated areas. Let's set these all to the same channel."

Ten minutes later their radios were synced, rifles were strapped to the snowmobiles and everyone had taken extra ammo for their handguns.

"We'll meet back here in two hours," Logan said. "Get some lunch, regroup and head for the next area."

The two women nodded, they all mounted up and soon the air was filled with the whine and growl of the big Sno-Cats as they headed across the landscape, snow flying behind them like rooster tails.

* * * * *

Bobby had given them each maps of the area with the potato farms and other isolated residences marked. Although Aroostook County was only two percent of the total area of the State of Maine, it was still comprised of two thousand square miles. A lot of area to cover. Of course, there was a significant amount they'd discounted. Areas where no one lived at all, not even reclusive hermits. That at least narrowed down the field to an almost manageable size.

Logan was not happy about the three of them splitting up, something he'd specifically said he wanted to avoid. But the women had overruled him, reminding him they were both police officers, expert with firearms and far more alert for the Chupacabra than anyone else around here. He couldn't argue with Rebecca's logic.

"We know what we're looking for," Sophia reminded him. "We're not going to take any chances. And we've got these." She held up the long-range radios Rebecca had signed out for them.

"We won't take any chances," Rebecca repeated.

So he'd allowed himself to be persuaded and now was riding the big machine through the pristine cover of snow broken only by animal tracks. He tensed every time

he caught the flash of a deer or raccoon among the trees. The beast was out here somewhere, he knew it, and every sense in his body was on high alert. At least a dozen times he slowed and reached for the rifle, only to discover it was native wildlife spooking him.

But he sensed it, out there somewhere. It could be yards away or miles, but he felt its evil presence. And he wasn't about to let himself suffer the same fate as his brother and sister-in-law.

He rode for more than fifteen minutes before he saw the first house, a white frame building with a peaked roof sitting next to a huge matching barn. The surrounding land according to Logan's map was potato farm, now hibernating beneath the heavy weight of the snow. He knew potatoes were planted two to three weeks before the last anticipated freeze of the season and harvested from August through October. Then the land was plowed under and allowed to sleep during the winter.

He wondered what the potato farmers did to pass the time in the winter. For himself he knew he'd go absolutely nuts with nothing to do.

There appeared to be a path shoveled from the house to the barn, and inside the barn itself he spotted a man in protective winter gear working on some kind of heavy machinery. He turned as Logan pulled up to the open door, casually reaching for the shotgun he had propped against the machine.

"No need for that," Logan called, holding his hands out. "My name's Logan Tanner and I'm working with the Maine State Police. If you'll allow me, I'll show you my identification."

"Just move real slow," the man said, holding the shotgun at the ready. "My finger might get nervous on the trigger here."

Logan made a show of unbuttoning his shearling-lined jacket, reaching into the inside pocket and pulling out his ID folder. He climbed slowly off the snowmobile and walked toward the man, holding it open."

"That's far enough," the man said when Logan was about three feet from him. "Toss it over here."

Logan had to hand it to the man. He never took his eyes off Logan or his finger off the trigger as he stooped to retrieve the wallet then scan it briefly.

"Sorry about that." He walked up and handed it back. "Since Darrell Franklin got killed you can't be too careful."

"I'm glad to see that. As a matter of fact, that's one of the reasons I'm out today. Warning people off the beaten path to take extra precautions."

The man held out his hand. "George Duffield. Thanks for coming by." He hefted the rifle. "As you can see, I'm prepared."

Logan tried to figure out how to frame his next words. "We're really not sure at this point if the killer is human or wild animal. Don't open your doors to anyone and don't take anything for granted, even if it seems familiar."

Duffield frowned. "I thought the word out had it was some kind of crazed killer with a weird tool of some kind."

"We don't know exactly yet. That's why we're all out trying to make sure everyone has their guard up."

"I'll pass it along to the folks I talk to, also. Thanks for coming all this way." He chuckled. "Pretty isolated out here."

Logan grinned back at him. "I'm from Montana originally. We've got a lot of open spaces out there, too!"

Logan headed out again, sparing a moment to hope the women were okay. He was struck by the vivid image of Rebecca as she'd mounted the Sno-Cat, eyes sparkling, energy radiating from her body. Every time he looked at her his cock stood up at attention and want coursed through his body. He had to keep reminding himself that she was off-limits. Besides being Sophia's sister she had a job and a life here. And he was a shifter. Just because Sophia accepted all of them didn't mean Rebecca felt the same way. Or would accept one as a lover.

No. He'd better get control of his body and concentrate on the job at hand.

* * * * *

Sophia stopped at three places to warn the residents and made notes on two more where no one was home. It felt good to be out in the vastness of northern Aroostook County, where the animals outnumbered the residents. She'd always been a child of nature, more than a social human being. Maybe that's why the idea of shifters hadn't been so foreign to her. Not just the shocking theories about the Chupacabra. More than that, it was the total acceptance of the team members who were wolf shapeshifters.

Was there something wrong with her that she not only didn't find it strange that someone could change shapes like that but that they also could live undetected among humans? And mate with humans as well. She marveled at the success of the pairings of Jonah and Dakota, and Mark and Chloe. The more she learned about their ability to adapt in human society, about the ability to mate with humans and how those relationships worked, the more fascinated by it she became.

She knew all about the special herbs they needed to take on a regular basis. Dakota had packed a special small case for Logan before they left Texas for Maine, enough to last him for a month if necessary. Sophia sent up silent prayers that they wouldn't have to be here that long.

She'd been on high alert ever since she'd split off from Logan and Rebecca. The devil beast was out here, somewhere, hiding and waiting. From everything they'd learned she was sure it had a higher level of intelligence than most animals. If someone was breeding these abominations that person would make sure of it. So it wasn't just a matter of avoiding native predators. She wasn't about to get caught by the Chupacabra. By the time she stopped again she was stiff from tension and a dull headache was building behind her eyes.

Glancing at her watch, she saw that it was already twelve thirty. They'd agreed to meet back at the parking lot, have lunch and thaw out and then hit three more sections after this. She had planned to go by and see Frenchy today while Clint was at work, maybe find out a little more about this man who told her nothing about himself but totally rocked her world. At the moment, however, that didn't seem a likely possibility.

Tomorrow Shelley and Damien would be home. She knew from Rebecca that they'd left right after Darrell Franklin's body was found. Damien was concerned that the shock of the animal's possible return might affect Shelley's pregnancy so he'd left his open cases with his law partners and gone to Boston for a week. Sophia hadn't talked to either of them yet but Rebecca said the change had done Shelley a world of good. They'd be back in the morning and then Sophia would go to see them. Tell them what she could. Assure them that Night Seekers was pulling out all the stops to find the devil beast and destroy it.

Preoccupied with her own thoughts she almost missed the flash of an animal in the distant trees. Something black. A bear? No, much too small. Too big for a fox. And foxes weren't black.

She stopped the snowmobile and shut off the engine, waiting and listening. She strained her eyes in the direction she'd seen the...whatever it was, but nothing was moving. Anywhere. There wasn't even a bird flying overhead. She lifted the rifle from where it was attached at the side of the machine and held it ready. Waiting. Hoping whatever it was would show itself again. When nothing moved she finally placed it back in its clamps, fired up the engine and roared off, but her mind was spinning in a dozen directions.

Logan had mentioned seeing a black wolf, but black wolves were rarely seen in Maine. Sophia knew the coloring was actually a melanin accident in the pigment of gray wolves, but other factors entered into it and the scarce population of Maine gray wolves tended to be just that. Gray. So what on earth had Logan seen? What had *she* seen?

Was it possible there was a shifter living in the area around here? Maybe isolated from its pack or his immediate friends? But if that was so, wouldn't Logan have sensed it in some way? She'd learned that shifters had some kind of built-in radar that allowed them to connect with others.

Later she'd be sure to ask him. And tell him she'd spotted something, too.

* * * * *

Rebecca looked at her watch. Nearly one o'clock. The time they'd agreed to meet up again and stop for lunch. She turned the snowmobile around and yanked the lever into high gear.

People had been home at only one place where she stopped but she marked the locations on her map for later notification. It was very cold although thankfully the

wind had died down. Still, searching out locations in this area on the snowmobile was exhausting.

It wasn't just covering so much territory and checking on people whose access to the highways was temporarily impassable. She had to be alert at all times not just for wild animals but also for the possible appearance of the devil beast. The only time it had ever killed during daylight hours was when it attacked the twins. Just remembering that made bile rise in Rebecca's throat and a pain lance through her heart.

She couldn't believe some of the detectives actually thought it was a coyote. In the first place, coyotes were not new to the area. Except for the rare moments when someone stumbled into a pack away from civilization and disturbed the animals they had pretty much left humans alone. They certainly didn't come right up to the houses and attack. And when coyotes killed there was less damage to the underlying tissue.

Others on the team were willing to entertain the thought that it might be some other kind of animal that maybe they'd never seen before. And then there was the sergeant with his theory of a killer wielding some kind of bizarre weapon.

But Rebecca knew. She still had nightmares about the killings when her nephews were destroyed, remembering what the bodies looked like.

To distract herself from the gruesome direction her brain was taking she thought instead of Logan Tanner. What a hunk of man he was. From the moment they'd shaken hands he'd set all her nerve endings tingling. She could tell just by the look in his eyes that he'd had a similar reaction. And he always managed to sit next to her, whether in a meeting or having a meal.

She had no idea if he wanted to take it any further. Or if she did. Sooner or later he'd be going back to Texas and she had a job and a life in Maine. But at least it made for pleasant daydreams.

Chapter Seven

The end-of-the-day meeting proved less than productive. The other members of the team had questioned everyone who had any contact with Darrell Franklin in the past six months and searched the records of the fish camp for the past three years. But despite digging as deeply as they could no one had been able to find no one who had a grudge against Franklin who'd kill him in the atrocious way he'd been slaughtered.

Jody Kuyper, their computer expert, had done a thorough internet search for any type of weapon that could have left a body the way Franklin's was and came up empty. The atmosphere in the conference room was one of dejection and depression.

Sophia cleared her throat. "I know that no one's really interested in revisiting my theory," she said, "but do you really want to add to the list of unsolved killings because you're unwilling to at least accept that this is possible? You've got four dead bodies exactly like Darrell's still on the books and it doesn't seem anyone's any closer to solving this one."

Bobby took a sip of his coffee, the end-of-the-day sludge from the pot, made a face and set it down.

"You have to admit, Soph, that it sounds really farfetched. Like something from a horror movie."

She leaned forward in her chair. "That's because it *is* something from a horror movie. I've shown you pictures of the carcasses Craig Stafford had taken back to his private lab. And of the other pictures I've taken off the web, shots that were taken when others thought they'd captured El Chupacabra. Tell me *those* don't look like something from a living nightmare."

"Maybe Sophia's right." Unexpected support from Scott Mooney. "I'm not saying this...*thing* actually exists. But maybe something close to it with a more logical explanation."

"We need to look at it before the next body shows up," Logan put in. "Because there *will* be another one, I promise you."

"It kills in a sequence of threes," Sophia added, "just like I told you in the beginning. Then it moves on."

"But when the twins were killed there were four bodies, not three," someone pointed out.

"Because they were together we're counting that as one kill," she answered. "It's the only time so far that the victim wasn't alone and isolated. We're convinced it stalks its prey, looking for the best place for an uninterrupted kill. That's why the three of us

spent all day running around like ice cubes on those snowmobiles, trying to warn people to be on the alert."

"I made copies of the combined map," Bobby said. "The least I can do is follow up on those places where no one was home. Regardless of who or what the killer is, I'd never forgive myself if someone else ended up like Franklin because I blew this off. I'll have someone make the phone calls tonight. If no one answers I'll check and see if they've gone off somewhere."

"Thanks, Bobby." Rebecca gave him a tired smile. "We appreciate that. I just wish we'd been able to cover the whole northern area today."

He looked uncomfortable. "Maybe tomorrow I'll assign some of the team to split up the rest of the area with you."

"Jesus, Bobby," someone said. "It's colder than a witch's tit out there."

"And you've lived here all your life," Bobby shot back. "It hasn't gotten any colder."

"I'll go, Bobby." Deb Roland, the other woman in the team of detectives, raised her hand. She looked at the man beside her, the one who'd spoken. "I'm not afraid of a little weather."

"See there, Gary?" Bobby dredged up a tired smile. "You want me to tell everyone that three women had more stamina than you big strong men?"

"Okay, okay," Gary grumbled. "I get it."

"I know this is hard, slogging work," Bobby went on. "We have support from the sheriff's deputies when we need it and maybe tomorrow we'll utilize some of them. Meanwhile let's all go home and get a good night's sleep. Everyone back here at eight again."

In the parking lot Sophia turned to her sister. "They just don't get it. And I'm afraid while we're chowing down and sleeping in our comfortable beds the devil beast will find another victim."

"Honey, there's only so much you can do. And we can't go running around in the dark in places with no lights. We can't put ourselves at risk that way. The three of us are the only ones who really believe in the idea of the Chupacabra."

"I know, I know. I just have this awful feeling that we won't be quick enough. Thorough enough. I wanted to have something concrete for Damien and Shelley when they get back tomorrow."

Rebecca hugged her sister. "They know you're doing your best. That's what counts."

Sophia tried to talk Rebecca into riding to The Crown with them, their unspoken destination for dinner. But Bec wanted to have her own car.

"That way I can leave whenever I want to, in case you two aren't ready."

But that gave Sophia a chance to talk to Logan about what she'd seen that morning. She hadn't wanted to mention it in front of Rebecca, especially if what she had seen was

a shifter on a daylight run. She and Bec hadn't really gotten into a discussion of the whole shifter thing, except where the devil beast was concerned. She knew her sister had an open mind about almost everything but still...

"I spotted something today," she began, "and it may have been the same thing you saw the other night."

Logan gave her a quick glance. "A black wolf?"

"Uh-huh. I can't be sure, but it was too small for a bear and too big for a fox. And coyotes don't turn black."

"Where did you see it?"

"On a parcel that connects with the one where you took your run." She paused. "Logan, do you think there could be a shifter in the area?"

"Well, shifters do take on the coloring of their particular genes."

"But wouldn't you be able to tell if there was one around here? I thought you all had some particular kind of built-in radar for that."

"It's not flawless. And if the other shifter wants to mask his or her scent there are ways to do it. He or she may not want to take the chance that a shifter passing through the area could scent them. For any number of reasons."

"Well, would you try to sharpen up that detector?" she asked. "Starting tonight?"

"I'll do my best. I agree that would be the most logical explanation. And if he or she happens to be one of the good guys maybe they could help us with this."

The Crown was a little more crowded tonight but they still managed to find a booth and settle themselves in. Sophia noticed that Logan slid in next to Rebecca rather than her and she swallowed a smile. They'd barely shucked their jackets before Diane appeared with a tray holding three drinks.

"You guys are either slipping Clint big bucks when no one's looking or he's been taking secret classes in social behavior," she said, setting their drinks down in front of them.

Sophia raised her eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Yeah. You're the only people he's bought drinks for since he's been filling in for Frenchy." Her smile was sly and knowing as she looked at Sophia. "Maybe someone's ringing his chimes. Although we were all beginning to think he didn't have any."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sophia asked.

"It means every female over the age of eighteen around here, including me, has sent out the strongest signals we could and the man's just not buying. We were beginning think he was, you know, gay."

Sophia had to bite her lip to keep from laughing out loud. Clint might be a lot of things but not gay. There was absolutely no doubt about his sexual orientation.

"You should go thank him," Rebecca said when Diane walked away. She was barely concealing her grin.

Sophia looked at the bar and saw Clint watching her. She waved at him.

"He doesn't look like a wave is going to do it," Bec told her. "I think an in-person visit would be more appropriate."

"Go on." Logan was smiling at her. "I think it's cute."

"Remind me to smack you," she muttered, sliding out of the booth. She hated conducting any phase of her personal life in front of other people, especially the Night Seekers and even more especially her sister.

"You don't look too happy to see me." Clint's voice was pitched low but she could still hear him over the usual babble of voices.

"You know, my sister will never shut up about it. Besides, I didn't think you wanted anyone to know about us. I thought that was the point of sneaking into my room at night."

He surprised her by reaching across the bar and taking her hand. "Maybe I just don't want anyone else poaching on my territory."

She couldn't help the laugh that bubbled up. "First of all, I didn't realize that I was your territory. Secondly, I'm here to do a job. Have you forgotten?"

His face sobered at once. "That isn't something I'd be likely to forget. And I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. You may not have noticed my social skills leave a lot to be desired."

She grinned at him. "Then it's a good thing they aren't what attracts me to you. Thanks for the drinks, by the way."

"My pleasure, *chere*." He gave her an uncharacteristic wink. "You might want to get a little rest when you get back to your room."

Heat rushed through her body and a surge of moisture dampened her panties. "Are you telling me I'll need it?"

The look in his eyes was pure lust. "But *certainment*, *chere*. And the steak sandwich is the special tonight."

"Get any good tips on the food?" Logan asked when she came back to the booth.

"The steak sandwich. And quit grinning like an idiot."

* * * * *

"I didn't sense anything tonight in The Crown," Logan said as he parked the car at the motel. "I tried, Sophia, but like I said earlier. If there is a shifter and he or she doesn't want to be detected there are many ways to mask the scent."

"I'd think the combination of grease and alcohol filling the air at that place would be enough to hide anyone. Or *anything*." She caught herself. "Sorry, Logan. I didn't mean that to come out the way it sounded. No offense intended."

"And none taken." He locked the SUV and leaned against the front bumper. "In fact, I'm amazed at the way you and Dante have simply accepted the rest of us as nothing out of the ordinary."

Sophia shrugged. "Craig explained it carefully to us when we were recruited. And my guess is he didn't approach anyone to whom he thought it would be a problem."

"Still, most humans would have run for the hills as fast as they could."

She tilted her head up at him. "I actually find it kind of fascinating. I think Dante does, too."

He dropped his eyes to the ground where the toe of one boot was rubbing at a tiny clump of snow. "I know we've seen it already with two members of Night Seekers, but do you think another human would react, well, weirdly if they found out someone they were dating was, you know, a shifter?"

She cocked an eyebrow. "Are you seeing someone, Logan? I don't know when you'd have the time." Then her brain kicked in. "You're talking about Rebecca, aren't you? You want to ask her out."

"Ask her out is a little complicated, especially since we're in the middle of this situation and don't exactly have time for a social life. But yeah, I'd like to spend a little time with her."

Sophia laughed. "I'd say my sister is pretty open-minded about everything. I can't predict her reaction but I have discussed the team with her. And she accepts the existence of shifters."

"But would she—"

She held up her hand. "No details, please. You're on your own. I'll remind you that she has a job and a life here so keep that in mind. But if you found the opportunity to spend any time with her before we leave, I'd be straight with her. She's not like your average run-of-the-mill human." She laughed. "Not at all."

"And you, Sophia? What if you met someone you connected with and found out he was a shifter?"

"I've learned enough since the team was put together. I see how a relationship like that can work. All I have to do is look at Jonah and Dakota. So for me, I think it would depend on the individual and whether we had the right chemistry together. And whether I would want him if he wasn't a shifter."

"Well. Okay. Thanks."

She punched him affectionately on the arm. "Let's get this beast out of the way. Then you can see what happens, okay?"

He grinned. "Okay. Better get your beauty sleep while you can. You might be busy later on."

Heat crept up her cheeks. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh. I 'accidentally' peeked out my window when I heard the knock on your door last night." He held up his hands when she opened her mouth to answer him.

"Whatever you do and who you do it with is your business. But at least it makes me realize I might not have to wait before spending some time with your sister. There's always the nighttime."

"Whatever I have going with Clint is a momentary thing," she told him. "He knows I'll be leaving here when we're done. It's just...call it relaxation therapy."

"Call it whatever you want. Just enjoy it. You work hard and you deserve it." He touched the brim of his hat. "'Night. See you bright and early."

Inside Sophia locked the door and leaned against it, reaching for her composure. Of course she should have known Logan would figure out what was going on. Even though it was late when Clint arrived Logan was a light sleeper and of course he had his wolf sense to alert him to everything going on around him. Well, nothing for it now. The cat was out of the bag, so to speak. She'd just have to let Clint know that her teammate was aware there was a little more than a flirtation going on here.

Like the two previous nights she took a long, hot shower, then smoothed lotion into every area of her body. Finally she pulled her brand-new nightgown out of the drawer and slid it over her head, climbed into bed and turned the television on low. She had a long time to wait.

* * * * *

The beast stood on its hind legs and rubbed its belly, its claw-like nails scratching the scaly skin. The small animals it killed earlier had satisfied both its need for food and its lust for blood. But the real lust still simmered low in its belly, satisfied for now until it was time for the next prey to be identified.

The beast had spent some time outside after its fresh kills, stalking the territory, but there really had been nothing to see but tall trees and empty spaces. And other animals that knew enough to run when the strange creature invaded their space. No matter. The beast would find them when hunger rose again.

The carcasses of today's meal had frozen in the snow immediately, as cold as the air was. Perhaps other predators would finish off the leavings. The beast had taken what it wanted. Needed.

Soon it would be time for the real prey again. The need simmered low in its belly but before too long it would be coursing through its veins, driving it to a level of madness that only the kill could satisfy. Hunting was difficult in this pristine wilderness. The places the prey resided were few and far between and there was little cover near the buildings. The beast always approached at night and with stealth, but still, crossing open spaces was always a danger.

Still, the next prey would need to be identified soon, and then the final one. The pattern of three needed to be completed, the program built into the beast's genetic code. And the need could not be denied. Scratching itself once more, the beast loped off into the lowering darkness of the night.

* * * * *

The Crown was full earlier in the evening but thinned out enough by eleven that Clint didn't feel the least bit guilty about closing up before midnight. He was still jacked up from his erotic shower that morning and seeing Sophia earlier had only ramped up the lust curling tight inside him.

He hadn't been able to keep away from her since the first time he'd laid eyes on her two nights ago. All he'd been able to think about from the minute she walked into The Crown was getting her naked and being inside her. The reality had far surpassed his imagination, and now he wondered if he'd ever get enough of her.

He realized she was only around for a limited amount of time. On the one hand he wanted whoever or whatever had killed Darrell Franklin to be caught before another body turned up. On the other hand he didn't want Sophia to leave any time soon. He was sure he'd never get her out of his blood but he wanted to store up enough memories to last after she was gone.

He'd pulled up all the stories about the killing on his laptop and read every word about the crazy theory her Night Seekers had postulated. The problem was, by the time he'd finished reading all the other stories about similar killings he didn't think it was so absurd. The idea that the creature was some kind of shifter who could assume different forms wasn't farfetched to people like himself. He could still remember stories from his boyhood before his family was destroyed, about rogue bands of shifters from centuries ago who mated with other animals and became enraged killers.

Was it possible descendants of those legends still roamed this country? Or that some maniac was actually trying to create them?

There was a possibility he could help Sophia and her friend in the hunt for this beast. He could prowl at night as a wolf, covering places humans couldn't go. But to do that he'd have to reveal himself to her and that was a risk he wasn't sure he wanted to take. At least not yet.

Still, his worry was that despite his tight control he was afraid the wolf would surface during the explosive sex he enjoyed with this woman. Would he be better off to prepare her? If she was convinced creatures like the Chupacabra existed then surely a shapeshifter wouldn't throw her. This was the first woman he'd ever had the desire to share himself with that way. He didn't want to screw it up.

He was still arguing with himself with he drove into the motel lot and found a place to park. Still muttering under his breath when he tapped lightly at Sophia's door. She opened it almost at once, looking unbelievably tempting in that definitely sexy nightgown that he'd had her out of in two seconds last night.

"Hi." Her voice was soft, a little on the shy side even after the past two nights.

He closed the door behind him, locked it and pulled her into his arms. He was so hungry for her taste that took her mouth with an edge of roughness, thrusting his tongue deep inside. Sophia grasped his wrists with her slim fingers to hang on and met his tongue with her own, answering heat with heat.

Clint had been semi-hard all night since the moment this woman had walked into the bar. Now his cock swelled and thickened almost to the point of pain, pushing against his fly, demanding release.

Without moving his mouth from hers, he shucked his jacket and tossed it aside. Then his hands were sliding up beneath the gown, caressing all that sweet, warm flesh until he found the firm mounds of her breasts. He palmed her breasts, brushing his thumbs over the hard peaks of her nipples. Jesus, she felt so good to touch. Just so damn good.

He squeezed and rubbed and molded, all the while tasting every inch of her mouth, his tongue sweeping over every surface. Delicious little moans vibrated from her throat and she pressed herself into him, rubbing her body against his hot erection. He moved his hands lower, separating her legs with his thigh and trailing his fingers through her damp curls. He nearly bit his tongue when he slipped his fingers between the folds of her pussy and discovered that hot flesh covered with her sweet cream.

He stroked her clit, rasping a finger across the very tip then rubbing it between two fingers. She cried out into his mouth, her nails digging into his wrists. His wolf was awakening deep inside his body, rising with a fierce hunger. Desperately he forced it back, reached into a pocket and pulled out a condom, dragged down his zipper and pulled out his cock to sheathe it. He finally lifted his mouth from hers and turned her around, placing her hands flat against the wall.

"Spread your legs," he rumbled in her ear. "Hurry."

She widened her stance, her breathing a rough sound against the low drone from the television. Clint slid his hands up the inside of her thighs until he reached the wet heat of her cunt. Opening her with the fingers of one hand, he bent slightly at the knees and used his other hand to guide himself to the opening of her pussy. He tried to tell himself to be at least a little gentle with her but his body had other ideas. He slammed into her with the force of a cyclone, hard enough that he nearly lifted her off the floor.

Steadying her with his hands, he held her in place as he rammed into her again and again. Moving one hand around to her front, he insinuated one long finger between her cunt lips to stroke her clit, rubbing it in tempo with the cadence of his hip movements. Sophia moaned, her hands flat against the wall, her own hips thrusting back at him.

They exploded together, the climax so forceful he was afraid the top of his head was going to come off. He leaned his forehead onto her shoulder as he struggled to even out his breathing and settle his heart rate. When he felt steady enough he pulled himself from her body and smoothed the nightgown back over her.

When he turned her around he cupped her face and brushed his mouth over hers.

"I took you like an animal."

And oh, Sophia, if you only knew.

"It's okay." Her voice was still soft, sweet sounding like a music box. She deserved gentle hands and slow seduction.

I'm lucky I didn't hurt her, taking her that way.

But then he remembered she'd been right there with him. Riding him every inch of the way. Just as she had for the past two nights.

He kissed her lightly again. "I was so hungry for you I didn't even stop to take off my clothes. Sorry, *chere*."

"It's okay." She was still trying to catch her breath. "I was in a hurry, too."

He stroked his knuckles lightly down her cheek. "Give me a minute here to get naked, okay? And I need to get rid of the condom."

When he came back into the bedroom he pulled off his boots and tossed his clothes on the chair. Sophia was already under the covers but they were turned back and she patted the mattress next to her body.

"I've been keeping your place warm for you."

Her smile went right through him and unbelievably he felt his cock trying to spring to life.

"That's good, *chere*." He smiled as he crawled in next to her and spooned her against him. "Very good." He pulled her body next to his and idly stroked her skin. "I keep telling myself to take it slow with you, Sophia. To take every possible minute to give you every pleasure. But the instant I see you I'm wild with need and I can't seem to help myself. Taking you against the wall like that..."

She laughed, a throaty sound. "I don't think you were the only one there, Clint. And you didn't hear me complaining, did you?"

"No." He brushed her hair from her face and traced the line of her jaw. "I don't know what I would have done if you had."

"Well, then. It's a good thing we didn't have to find out." She wriggled her bottom against him, his already hardening shaft surging to full erection. "Anyway, unless you're in a tearing hurry we've got plenty of time."

"I don't know how this happened," he said slowly, "but I'm damn glad it did. But you're not getting very much sleep."

"Haven't you heard?" she teased. "Sleep is highly overrated."

"I don't usually leap on women this way, *ma petite*." He wanted to give voice to his thoughts without giving too much away. "I'm pretty much a loner, as anyone can tell you if you ask."

"Then why me?" she wanted to know.

"There's something here. Something...electric. I know you feel it, too. Felt it the minute we met."

"I can't deny it," she agreed. "I don't usually just fall into bed with a man barely hours after I've met him." Her face heated. "Not the way I did with you."

"I didn't think so. It's in your aura." He kissed her shoulder. "Like I said, there's some kind of magic here. I know you're only here for the short time," he added as he sensed her ready to say just that. "And I'm still here for a while taking care of Frenchy."

"How long do you think he'll need you?"

"Don't know. He's getting better every day. But let's wait until he can be on his own again and you wrap up this case. Then we'll talk. Meanwhile let's enjoy each other."

"Oh, yeah," she said, pressing back against him.

Maybe tomorrow night he'd figure out how to tell her about himself. Volunteer to help her with her case. But right now both he and his cock were interested in other things.

Sliding one hand between her thighs, he found the slickness of her cunt, still wet for him. He licked the curve of her shoulder as he stroked the folds of her pussy, nibbled on the skin lightly, the taste of her making his blood heat even more.

Sophia moaned as his fingers kept up a steady motion, rubbing her clit, rimming her opening, pinching her labia. The heat coming off his body surrounded her, blending with her own until they were wrapped in an erotic cloud. His fingers were like magic, caressing and fondling her, electricity sizzling through her. His mouth moved to the nape of her neck then slid up the column, licking and kissing. She moaned and pushed herself back against him, squeezing her thighs, silently begging him to slide his fingers inside her.

Instead he moved them down into the crevice of her ass, finding the puckered ring of her anus and circling it with a fingertip. A bolt of lust shot through her so strong it contracted her body. She drew up her knees, leaving herself more open to his touch and he didn't disappoint her. Slowly he pressed one finger inside the dark tunnel of her ass, easing it in a little at a time, pulling out then back in again.

Clint nipped her earlobe. "I'm going to take you here, *chere*. I'm going to fill you up with my big cock and give you more pleasure than you've ever known."

"Please, please, please." She tried to push herself back onto his finger, take it deeper inside herself.

"I wish I had two cocks," he murmured in her ear, his voice a low, sensuous rumble. "That way I could fill every bit of you and fuck you until you lost your mind with the pleasure."

"You already do," she whispered, rocking against his hand. "Oh god, Clint. More. Please more."

"Like this?" He wiggled his finger in a little deeper, his other hand moving beneath her to find a breast and cup it.

"Yes. Just like that." Her mouth was dry and every nerve in her body was focused on the sensations his finger was igniting.

"How about this?" Two fingers grasped a nipple and pinched it while he worked a second finger into her ass. "Am I hurting you? We don't have any lube. I don't want to damage your sensitive tissues."

"You're not." By now she could barely speak, her whole being in the grasp of sensual heat, everything focused on those clever fingers. But she had the answer to his problem tucked into her cosmetics case along with the secret pleasure that went everywhere with her. "But...I have something."

His fingers stilled. "You do? With you?"

Sophia was glad she was turned away from him because she was sure she was blushing. "Let me up and I'll get it."

"Uh-uh." He licked the column of her neck. "I'm not letting you out of this bed. Tell me where it is."

Oh god, he'll see it.

Then the shreds of her brain said, *Now* you're worried about being embarrassed?

"My cosmetic case is on the vanity in the bathroom. It's in there."

He eased his fingers from her and slipped from the bed. She heard him in the bathroom running water. Heard the zipper rasping open on the case, a sound unusually loud in the stillness. Heard the sound of pleased surprise. Then he was back, pulling her against him again, his thick, rock-hard cock branding her skin where it touched her. And she knew he had more than just the lube with him.

"I'm much better than this, *chere*." He rubbed the dildo along her arm. "But I'm so glad you have it. The possibilities boggle the mind."

Tiny convulsions rippled in her pussy as images flashed through her mind. She pressed back against him, silently urging him to stop talking. To get on with it. She was so aroused she was sure she could come just from the things she was imagining. Things he was hinting at.

His laugh was low and deep, a rich sound as he lifted one leg and pressed the tip of the dildo into the opening of her cunt. As he slid it inside her body her womb contracted and her pulse beat thrummed.

"Now I can really fill you up," he rumbled, his words electrifying her.

She waited, holding her breath, for him to touch her there again, but instead he turned the little dial at the base of the dildo and a familiar hum vibrated through her. She clenched her thighs together again, squeezing the toy with her internal muscles.

Clint shifted position and in the next moment he was rubbing the lube into her sphincter muscle then into the hot channel of her rectum. As the dildo buzzed away in her pussy Clint's well-greased finger insinuated itself into her ass, rubbing the lube into her tissues. The movement was a caress, a carnal stroking of the hot, tight tissues. He added a second finger, scissoring to stretch her even more and prepare her for his thick shaft.

And all the while the dildo was buzzing away, stimulating her, driving her crazy.

Sophia heard the ripping of foil and in seconds Clint's fingers were replaced by his latex-covered cock, moving inexorably and steadily into her with a slow, steady glide.

"Deep breaths, sugar," he murmured in his low sexy voice. "Easy, easy, easy."

He kept up a low, erotic murmur as he filled her more and more. When he was completely inside her, his balls slapping against the backs of her thighs, he held himself still. Giving her a chance to adjust. Between his shaft and the vibrator she felt completely filled, every nerve snapping in response beneath the surface of her skin. She was hot, so hot, she was sure she was going to incinerate.

And then he moved, slowly at first, his arm around her waist, his hand pressed firmly against her tummy. The dildo hummed inside her and Clint's thick erection drove into her again and again. Sophia began to shake from the inside out, every part of her trembling. She gripped Clint's arm to steady herself as the wave of sensation built and built and built inside her.

"Now, Sophia," he growled, his fingers pressing hard on her clit, his voice tight. "Come for me now."

His big body tensed, he drove into her one final time and took her over the edge with him. Every muscle in her body spasmed, shaking her like a leaf in the wind. Colors exploded behind her eyelids and she felt rootless, anchored only by the dildo still humming away and Clint's thick cock pulsing in her ass. The contractions went on and on until Sophia was sure her body would break apart.

And then they were still, panting, heartbeats so loud they were like drumbeats in her ears. Skin so sweat-slicked they were stuck together.

They lay like that for a long, long time. At some point Clint reached between her thighs to turn off the vibrator and tug it from its wet grasp. And long after that he slid himself from the clutch of her muscles and headed into the bathroom. When he came back she held herself still, waiting for him to dress and give her a kiss before he left. But instead he lay down beside her and pulled her into his body, his arms strong around her.

"You know I'd stay the night with you if you just said the word." His voice slid over her like warm honey. "I think it's important, though, not to put you in an awkward position with Logan."

She laughed. "I think that ship has sailed. He made a cute comment or two earlier."

He hugged her. "Want me to beat him up for you?"

She smiled, even though he couldn't see her. "I don't think that would help." She sighed. "But you're probably right. It isn't just Logan. People would see us together in the morning, people who come to The Crown and might make remarks to you and—"

"Hush." He turned her so she was looking at him. "It has nothing to do with me. But you're here to do a job and we don't need to make you the object of gossip in town." He kissed her cheek. "And you know how Yankees love their gossip."

"You're right," she admitted with reluctance.

"So get this taken care of fast so we can figure out where we're going with this, okay? You know, once I get Frenchy on his feet again, literally, I can go anywhere." He paused. "If I want to."

Sophia wanted badly to ask him what he meant by that but she sensed he wasn't ready to answer her yet. Not until she had taken care of business and they both had a better perspective on things.

"I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Count on it." He seemed to be searching for something to say. Something on his mind. "Tomorrow night, *chere*, let's see if we can spend a few minutes talking. I want to know more about this killing and the story goin' 'round."

Sophia tensed. "Story? What kind of story?" Oh, hell, was someone blabbing? They were trying so hard to keep a lid on the Chupacabra theory maybe until they actually killed the beast.

He stroked her cheek. "Tomorrow night. We'll talk then. I have some things to run by you. And Sophia?"

"Yes?"

"Be very careful tomorrow."

The kiss he left her with was more powerful than his usual goodbye kisses, scorching her with its intensity. But he also left her with a very unsettled feeling.

Chapter Eight

The beast crawled out of its snow cave and stretched. Its belly was still full from yesterday's meal and it was well rested. But deep inside, where it simmered endlessly, was the lust for human blood that drove it. The hunger that subsided with a fresh kill but never went away.

It licked its lips, almost tasting fresh blood. It was almost time. Now came the challenge of selecting the appropriate prey in the right location and getting down to business. It wanted to find its target before dark so it could prepare for the delicious moment of the kill.

It had to be somewhere close to the previous one. And also a place where a third prey could be identified. The indicator implanted deep in its brain signaled that the kills should be close together and always in a group of three.

The beast flinched for a moment as a sharp pain stabbed through its head. An elongated claw came up to press against the throbbing, rubbing it until the worst of it had eased. It had waited too long since the first one, and the little mechanism that controlled its lust was sending signals raging through its body.

Finally it reached a point where the pain was tolerable. Inhaling deeply and blinking its eyes, it called up the internal resources it would need and took off in the direction of civilization.

But not too much civilization.

* * * * *

Elaine Warren hurried into her house and closed the door, leaning against it to catch her breath.

It has to be my imagination. That's all it is. No one is following me.

Today was her day off from the hospital where she worked in the pharmacy. Her husband usually tried to take his days off when she did, but the last couple of weeks he said it hadn't worked out. He was part of the private security team for Xeniplex, a manufacturing complex halfway between Houlton and Presque Isle, so hours weren't always static. His shifts rotated and he could be called out for extra shifts at any time. And that was what had been happening.

It was good and bad. On the one hand it left her free to do the things she needed to, as well as extra time for those she *wanted* to. But the past two weeks she'd had the distinct feeling someone was following her and it made her nervous.

The story about Darrell Franklin being killed by some crazed stranger was all over the news. Darrell lived off the main roads, the way Elaine and Harland did. The ten

acres had looked wonderful when they'd bought them. Close to town but plenty of space for privacy. As time wore on the privacy had its drawbacks and now she wondered if it made her a sitting duck for a killer.

She hadn't actually *seen* anyone. It had been more like a feeling. The tension you get when you know something was not quite right. Of course, it could be her guilty conscience, too. Elaine pushed that thought out of her mind as soon as it popped in.

Don't go there. Don't even think about it.

She waited until her heart stopped racing then opened the door, peered around outside to see if indeed anyone was there. But all she saw was the stark trees and the frozen white snow. She looked nervously around as she hurried back to the car, gathered the grocery bags and rushed back inside with them. She wished the garage was attached to the house but Harland said the one they had was good enough and there was no sense wasting one when they didn't need to. Today it would have given her a greater sense of security. The entire time she put the food away she kept looking nervously over her shoulder and out the window, as if she expected someone to be lurking there.

Maybe it was the image of the strange man she'd seen in the parking lot at the grocery store, wandering from vehicle to vehicle as if looking for a ride. Or maybe something to steal.

When the last item had been stored she took down a glass and pulled a bottle of wine from the fridge. Leaning against the counter, she sipped it steadily, waiting for the warmth to course through her system and settle her nerves.

I have to get out of this mess. I'm driving myself crazy. I'll get myself killed if I'm not careful.

* * * * *

Bradley Howard plucked the mail from his mailbox and slogged back to his house. He'd pulled a double shift at the hospital at the last minute and he was more than ready to be home. Although it was only late afternoon the winter dark was already stealing in. He wanted to get inside, build a fire in the fireplace, pour himself a drink.

One that he badly needed.

He'd been jumpy all day, chalking it up to lack of sleep. But when he got out of his car he had the distinct feeling someone was watching him. A feeling he'd had off and on for the past few days. And when he pulled into his driveway out in the middle of nowhere the feeling had gotten stronger.

Ridiculous! If anyone was out here you'd see them.

He tried to tell himself it was the news of Darrell Franklin's death that was affecting him. That he was seeing skulking killers behind every tree and bush. If he hadn't been keeping a secret he might have settled for that.

But his secret gnawed at him. Unsettled him. Made him anxious.

He knew he couldn't go on like this much longer. He'd have to bring things to a head. Probably sooner rather than later.

And how that was going to turn out he had no way of knowing.

Closing his front door, he locked it securely. Then, telling himself he was being paranoid, he checked all the other doors and windows before finally pouring himself that drink and lighting the fire he'd already laid in the fireplace. A couple of shots of whiskey and a good night's sleep were all he needed to chase away the nerves.

At least that's what he kept telling himself.

* * * * *

Chuck Whittaker loved the winters. Which was a good thing because living in Maine the winters were damn long. But he had his camp, which he ran for fishermen in the summer and hunters from September through November. He made good money, enough that he could just tend to himself from January until April when he worked to get the camp ready to open again. Where else could he take that kind of time off each year and just goof off?

Those were the months he and Loraine could just hang out and do what they wanted to. Sometimes all they did was sit in front of the fire and read or watch television. As long as the weather didn't screw up the satellite.

But at the moment Loraine was in Boston. Their oldest daughter had just had her third child and of course Loraine had gone to help. She'd been there about a week and Chuck was getting damn lonely. He didn't begrudge her what she was doing. What kind of father would he be if he did? But he'd sure be glad when she came back.

He'd planned to get some work done around the cabins but it had been so damn cold, and he wasn't as young as he used to be. And not many hands were looking for work in the cold months. Any able-bodied ones worked the ski resorts or in the towns, picking up part-time stuff. Well, maybe if the temperature climbed a little and they didn't get any more snow for a few days he'd get out and do what maintenance he could.

He was glad to see the roads were not only plowed but staying that way. One thing he could say about Maine—the road crews knew how to handle weather. Living out by the bend in the river it made it a lot easier to get to town. Oh, he could always take the snowmobile in a pinch, get to the convenience store on Route 1 for emergencies. But with Loraine gone, a trip to town occupied a good bit of the day. Filled the hours.

He was glad he'd stopped in at The Crown for a late lunch. That old dog Frenchy had finally put in an appearance and Chuck was damn glad to see his friend up and around. Not that Clint hadn't held down the fort. Done a good job keeping things going. Still, Frenchy and Chuck were almost the same age and Frenchy's broken hip and extended rehab period had made Chuck feel every one of his years.

He wished Loraine would get home soon. He knew it was selfish of him, but the house was so empty without her in it. Maybe if he didn't feel so lonely he wouldn't have stopped for the man trudging along on the shoulder of the road just outside town. Not that many people would call Left Branch a town. Named for the spur of road that veered off Route 1, it had little to recommend it beyond the convenience store/gas station, a bar and a dry-goods/drug store. Everyone did their shopping in Presque Isle.

It wasn't usual to see someone on the side of the road. Especially in winter. No vehicle, not even a snowmobile.

How the hell did he get here?

Chuck had been home the day before when Rebecca Black stopped by on her snowmobile to ask him if he'd seen any strangers in the areas. Warn him about strangers and stray wild animals. Chuck had been hunting wild animals when Rebecca was still in diapers so he was sure he could handle anything that came along. And strangers? They got a lot in season, hardly any otherwise. And this guy who looked like he was freezing to death in his jeans and parka sure didn't look dangerous.

Chuck slowed the truck, reached into the console and took out the Glock he had a permit for and put it on his lap. He stopped on the plowed shoulder and pressed the button to lower the window on the passenger side.

"Hey!" he called out.

The man, who'd been walking in the narrow space between the road and the piled-up drifts of snow, kept walking.

"I said hey," Chuck hollered again. "Didn't you hear me?"

The man finally stopped and turned to him. "What do you want?"

He was tall and thin, the old parka wrapped tightly around him to ward off the cold and his collar turned up to protect his ears. His worn jeans flapped against his legs in the wind and beneath them he wore an old pair of work boots. His eyes had a sunken look to them, his cheekbones slashes beneath them. To Chuck he hardly looked dangerous.

"What are you doing out here walking?" Chuck asked.

The guy shrugged. "Had a ride to Caribou. Guy got mad at me for some reason. Made me get out."

"In this weather?" Chuck's eyebrows raised. "Not very nice of him."

"Not a nice guy. Listen, I gotta get going here."

I'm probably being stupid but what the hell.

"Unzip your jacket," he told the guy.

The man looked at him like he was crazy. "What?"

"Just unzip your jacket."

The guy shrugged and unzipped it. Okay, no visible weapons. Chuck balanced his Glock on his thighs and waved to the guy.

"Get in. I'll give you a ride."

The man stared at him. "To Caribou?"

Chuck nodded. "If that's where you're going."

The man yanked open the door to the truck and climbed in. His eyes widened when he spotted the Glock. "You planning to shoot me?"

"Not unless I have to." He rolled up the window, put the truck in gear and pulled out onto the highway. He slid a glance at the man. "Name's Chuck. Chuck Whittaker."

"I answer to Fred."

"Well, Fred, what's got you heading to Caribou?"

Fred shrugged. "Looking for work. What else?"

Chuck thought for a minute. "Not much work in Caribou that I heard of lately."

"Well, nothing in Houlton or Presque Isle, either. And the potato farms are all shut down for the winter. Need to get work somewhere. And a place to stay for a while."

Chuck was curious. "How did you end up here?"

"You know. Shit happens. Worked my way up the coast from job to job. This economy jobs peter out fast. Need to earn enough to get back to where it's warm."

"And your last ride?" Chuck asked. "Why'd he toss you out in the snow?"

"He was drinking. Told him he was about to kill us both."

Chuck could hear Loraine's voice in his brain.

Charles Whittaker, you old fool. You don't pick up strangers and hire them to work. Not without knowing something about them.

But this guy looked harmless. Half-frozen and half-starved was more like it. And the cabins were all empty during these months.

"Well," he said, hoping he wouldn't live to regret his words, "it just so happens that I have some work that needs doing. If you're handy with your hands, that is."

"Yeah? I can do just about anything."

"Got a fishing and hunting camp a couple miles from here. Need some repair work. You could stay in one of the cabins."

Fred was silent for long moment. "You don't know anything about me."

Chuck shrugged. "You don't know anything about me, either. I could be a homicidal maniac."

He felt Fred's eyes on him. "Naw, I don't think so."

More silence.

"So, what do you think? Because I'm about to turn off to my place, but if you'd rather I'll just take you on to Caribou. Not much farther."

"Okay. If you can take a chance on me, I can take a chance on you."

Chuck wondered if he should suggest his new temporary handyman ought to take a bath. Hopefully get rid of the faint odor of turpentine clinging to him.

* * * * *

At lunchtime Sophia asked Logan if he'd mind a solitary meal while she and Rebecca went to visit her brother and sister-in-law.

"I haven't seen Damien and Shelley since...it happened and I left for Texas," she reminded him. "They just got back from Boston and I'd really like to see them."

"No problem." He smiled. "I'll call back to the ranch and talk to the team there. See if they have anything new for us."

"Thank you." She smiled back at him. "I won't be more than an hour and a half."

"Take your time."

"No. I don't want to waste daylight."

"I'll see you when you get back to the motel."

In his room Logan booted up his laptop and opened the webcam. A few clicks of the keys and he was connected with Desolation Ranch.

"Any word yet on the search for Melinda?" was his first question.

"Nada." Ric looked grim.

"How's Chloe holding up?"

"She's a trooper but it's really taking its toll on her. Mark's got her working on her big coffee table book of photographs but I can tell how much pain she's in."

"Tell her we're thinking of her."

"Will do. Any trace of the beast?" Ric asked.

Most of the Night Seekers were gathered at the comm center in the big room, crowded together behind him. Watching the screen on their end.

"Not one single trace," Logan said, irritated. "I know that damn thing is around here. I can almost feel it. But not one single trace anywhere."

"But no more killings," Ric said.

"No. Not so far. We've been trying to warn people, too. But I'm not sure anyone takes me seriously enough."

"The media has gotten the word out about the Franklin killing, though, right?" This was Sam Brody, sitting just to Ric's right.

"Yes." Logan sighed with frustration. "But everyone's thinking some kind of crazed human killer. We know the devil beast can take more than one form and we aren't even sure in what form it appears."

"It's got to be something that keeps people off their guard," Sam pointed out. "Otherwise the folks who've been killed that we know about never would have let it get that close."

"True. That means we don't even have a clue what we're looking for."

"What about the state detectives?" Ric wanted to know. "Help? Hindrance? How's that coming along?"

"About the same. I think Bobby Lacroix, the lead detective, is willing to entertain other possibilities. The others? Not so much. They listen but I don't think they believe anything we tell them."

"I'd hoped for more," Ric told him.

"But at least they aren't getting in our way," Logan added.

"Based on past history," Sam broke in, "we haven't got much more time before another body shows up."

"We're doing the best we can."

"Hey! I know, I know. I'm not giving you any shit. Just stating as fact."

"I think we all know that," Logan told him. "I'm going for another run tonight. I'll see if anything turns up in the dark." He ran his questions around in his mind for a minute. "Listen. There's something else. We—Sophia and I—think there may be another shifter up here."

"Where you guys are?" Ric's surprise was evident. "We did research and didn't find evidence of a pack anywhere near where you are."

"I think it's an orphan," Logan said. An orphan was a shifter who for whatever reason had lost his pack. "It's a black wolf. I've spotted it and Sophia thinks she may have seen it yesterday morning when we were out on the snowmobiles."

"All right. We'll do some more checking and get back to you. Desolation out."

The screen went blank.

* * * * *

"I've missed you guys."

Sophia threw an arm around her brother Damien and his wife Shelley, squeezing both of them.

"Missed you, too, sprite," Damien told her, using a nickname left over from their childhood. "Never thought we'd lose you to Texas."

Sophia stepped back and gave him a rueful look. "You know I would never have done it except for the chance to catch this devil beast. To have unlimited funds and work with experienced people who also believe in its existence."

"I know. I know." He kissed her cheek. "We just wish you weren't so far away."

"Come on into the kitchen." Shelley tugged on her hand. "I've got homemade vegetable soup for lunch and your favorite coffee cake."

"I'd say you went to too much trouble, except you know I'd never turn down either of those."

Sophia studied her sister-in-law as they walked into the large, airy room filled with wonderful smells. Shelley was a fiery redhead with the requisite green eyes and freckles. The last time Sophia had seen her she had been thin almost to the point of

emaciation. Stress and grief over the deaths of the twins had robbed her of her appetite and for a while Damien had even considered putting her in a private clinic.

But she had pulled herself out of it, with his love and help, and now she was round with the child they were expecting. Although her face still held a trace of sadness, one Sophia was afraid might always be there, the sparkle was back in her eyes and she was actually smiling.

"Sit, sit," she said, indicating the places already set at the table. "You have no idea how much I've looked forward to seeing you." She looked at Rebecca and grinned. "You I get to see all the time."

"It's okay." Rebecca hugged her. "My nose is only a little out of joint."

"Soph, how is the case going?" Damien was always direct and to the point. "Any clues of any kind?"

"Are the detectives cooperating with you?" Shelley asked, ladling out soup at the stove.

"As much as you'd expect."

"I think Bobby's doing the best he can," Rebecca added, "but you know there's a strong thread of skepticism. He's trying to be professional and polite, while at the same time telling us he thinks we're nuts."

"Maybe he'd feel differently if it was his wife who had been killed." Damien couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"Honey." Shelley's voice was soft. "I wouldn't wish that on anyone and neither would you."

"I know, I know." He raked his fingers through his hair. "I just wish I could shake a dose of reality into these people."

Sophia snorted. "The problem is there's a big difference between their reality and ours."

Shelley served the soup and they ate in silence for a few moments.

"So," Sophia said, "you guys look like impending parenthood agrees with you."

Damien reached over and rested his hand on Shelley's tummy. "We're really looking forward to this. For a lot of reasons."

"My overprotective husband wanted to stash me in Boston until this whole episode up here was over and you'd caught and killed the beast. I told him I didn't think it would attack in the exact same places again." Shelley looked at her sisters-in-law. "Am I right?"

Sophia shrugged. "I can't say that with any certainty but what I can tell you is it's never happened before."

"I'm surprised that it's back in this area," Damien remarked. "I've been researching the Chupacabra and read about the killings in other states. I'd think it would have had its fill here."

"Sophia's explained that there's no rhyme or reason to its behavior," Rebecca answered him. "It hit two counties next to each other in Texas but we think that's because its kill pattern was interrupted the first time before it could be completed. That wasn't the case here."

"Back at our team headquarters we're always researching patterns and activities," Sophia added. "Trying to learn as much about it as we can to help us find it before it kills again."

"So how close are you to tracking it?" Damien persisted.

"We're doing the best we can, Damien. You have an advantage over nearly everyone else. You know what to expect. I don't think it will attack here again, but keep your rifle loaded and be careful when you go outside."

Shelley put her spoon down and reached over to touch her sister-in-law's arm. "Find it soon, Soph. Please."

Sophia just nodded. She didn't want to tell either Damien or Shelley about the new theory that there was more than the one creature. Or that it was possible they were breeding somewhere and spreading out across the country. It was bad enough she had to live with that nightmare. She didn't want them to have to deal with it. Not now.

* * * * *

They were back at it after lunch, more time on the snowmobiles, scouring the white wilderness. More fruitless searching in the vast barely populated spaces. More hunting for the Chupacabra with no results. They spoke to people who were at home, mentally taking note of the likeliest spots for attack.

Sophia's heart nearly stopped when she came to two tiny carcasses frozen in the snow. Two ravaged animals. Holding back the fear that suddenly rose up within her, she took her rifle and dismounted from the snowmobile to take a closer look. Just like the ones Mark had found in Texas. A snack for the devil beast, not enough to slake the lust but to take the edge off. But if it ran true to form the next kill wasn't far off.

"Bobby, I know the signs," she told him urgently when she, Logan and Sophia returned to the barracks. "And this wasn't done by any crazed killer."

"But it could have been a wild animal foraging for food," he persisted.

"Why do you keep fighting us on this? I know the story is farfetched but so were a lot of other things until scientists or investigators proved otherwise." She bit back her frustration. "Anyway, your detectives haven't come up with any other answers, right?"

He didn't answer her but she knew. So far the detectives hadn't been able to find anyone who had a reason to kill Darrell. No one had reported a stranger lurking suspiciously in the area so they had redoubled their efforts to find someone with a grudge against the slain man.

"Never mind." She blew out a breath. "Can we at least get the sheriff's deputies to help us by patrolling the outlying areas? If they see anything they can radio it in or shoot first and ask questions later."

In Maine all murder cases fell under the jurisdiction of the Maine State Police Criminal Investigation Division. But the various sheriffs' offices provided support as needed.

When Bobby hesitated she added, "Tell him you're still on the lookout for a stranger." She snorted. "A homicidal maniac who decided to hunt his prey in two thousand frozen square miles where hardly anyone lives."

"I still haven't given up my original theory," he told her. "We get so many illegals sneaking over here because we're so close to the border. Who knows what kind of deranged person is wandering around here."

"Wouldn't someone like that have shown up somewhere by now? He'd need shelter. Food. All that good stuff. I'm not saying it's impossible but it certainly seems to be reaching for it."

"Okay, okay." He threw up his hands. "I'll call the sheriff and work out a plan with him."

"Thank you. And I don't think we need an end-of-the-day debriefing. Nothing new to report except those frozen carcasses. Everyone's anxious to get home, I'm sure."

"Listen, Sophia—" Bobby began.

She waved a hand at him. "It's okay, Bobby. You keep doing your thing and we'll do ours. I'd hoped we could work together but this will probably shake down just as well. Go on. Tell everyone we'll see them tomorrow."

Logan and Sophia returned to the motel early, telling Rebecca they'd meet her at six at The Crown.

"I want to grab a bite early," Logan told Sophia, "and then catch a nap. I'd like to take a longer run tonight."

She raised her eyebrows. "Looking to see if that black wolf—or whatever it was—will be out there again?"

"Uh-huh."

"All right. But whoever or whatever it is we're seeing, I just hope it's on our side."

"Me, too. Ready in an hour?"

"You got it."

She really wanted to use the time to ease the tension running through her body, maybe do some of the yoga breathing exercises she'd learned. She frowned in annoyance when a knock sounded on the door.

"Damn it, Logan," she began, jerking the door open. Her jaw dropped when she saw Clint standing there. "Why aren't you at the bar?"

His mouth curved in his crooked grin. "Does that mean you aren't glad to see me?"

Sophia stared. "I'm just puzzled as to what you're doing here during the busiest part of your day."

"Frenchy's at the bar holding court. He was bugging the shit out of me and I think he's okay for a few hours. Besides, I've got the kid from the kitchen helping him out." He tilted his head. "Do you think I could come in? I came here to talk to you."

"Oh! Um, sure." She stepped back to let him enter, closing the door after him.

Did he also want to have sex now? It seemed the two of them couldn't spend five minutes together without a combustion that rivaled a volcanic eruption. But right now he seemed to be filled with a restless energy. He took off his jacket, tossed it over one of the chairs and began pacing, his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans.

"Clint? Is something the matter?"

He shook his head. "Yes. No. I mean, I don't know."

"I don't have anything strong to drink in the room but I've got sodas or I could make you some coffee."

"No. Jesus. No coffee. That's all I'd need."

"Then will you please tell me what's wrong? What's bothering you?"

He sat down on the bed and motioned to her. "Come sit beside me. I'm not here for sex," he said hastily, "but I'd like you next to me when we talk."

Hesitantly she sat down next to him, let him take one of her hands.

"First of all I want you to give me every detail about this murder. Every single thing. Don't leave anything out."

Sophia stared at him. "What? Why do you want to know?"

"Listen." She saw a muscle twitch in his jaw. "Do you trust me? I know we haven't known each other long at all but we've got a connection here. So I'll ask you again. Do you trust me?"

She bit her lip, hesitating. But then she looked hard at him, saw the earnest expression on his face and nodded.

"I do."

"Okay then. Tell me about Darrell Franklin's murder. Everything, including the condition of the body."

"I have no idea why you want to know, but it's not a big secret. We just didn't want to traumatize the general population. Okay, here it is."

Clint listened very carefully as she spun out everything she knew, even going back two years to when her nephews and two others had been killed. She told him about her research on the internet that led her to the Chupacabra theory and how she'd learned about the killings at other spots in the United States. She watched carefully for his reaction, ready to argue with him if he tried to tell her she was being ridiculous.

"Does this have anything to do with the job you left the Maine State Police for?" he wanted to know.

"Yes. It does." Clint was taking it all in with a focused interest. Should she go into detail about the Night Seekers?

"Can you tell me about it?"

Sophia frowned. "Not until you tell me what this is all about. Why this unusual interest? Do you know something?"

"Maybe. Yes. I don't know." He rubbed his thumb over the knuckles of the hand he was holding. "I grew up in the bayous of Louisiana, *chere*. We had our own legends, our own monsters."

He told her about the rougarou—half man, half wolf—and the legends about it that continued to grow.

"It's what got my family killed."

Sophia was shocked. "The creature killed them?"

He shook his head. "*Non*. It was...what they were. What I am."

"Excuse me?"

"People thought we—" He broke off. "Sophia, I'm going to show you something. I'm taking a chance here but I hope you won't freak out."

"About what? Clint, you have to tell me what's going on here."

"Like I said, I'm going to show you, *chere*. Just sit there and don't move." He rose from the bed and undressed slowly, his eyes on her glowing hotly.

"Listen. If this is just some new kinky way to have sex with me—"

"*Non!* Please. Listen to me. This is very important. Just...watch and listen, okay?"

But when he was standing in front of her magnificently naked, with his glorious cock pointing straight at her, thinking was nearly impossible.

"Close your eyes," he told her.

"What?"

He clenched his fists at his side, obviously reaching for control. "Just. Close. Your. Eyes. Count to ten then open them again."

"Okay, okay."

Obediently she closed her eyes and counted. When she opened them again she almost had a heart attack. In the place where Clint had been standing was a huge wolf, its black coat shining in the last of the sunlight pouring in through the window.

Chapter Nine

Sophia was stunned. If not for the fact she lived and worked with shifters she might have been more shocked than she was. Or frozen with fear. But she knew exactly what had happened. The only thing surprising her was that the wolf was Clint. That he obviously was a shifter.

He looked at her with those amber-flecked hazel eyes and there was no mistaking who was staring back out at her. Sophia reached out a hand to stroke the thick black pelt and the animal rubbed its head against her hand.

"I know it's you," she said in a soft voice. "And it's okay. I know all about who and what you are."

The wolf backed away from her to the center of the room. The air around it seemed to move in an accelerated current until it was nothing but swirling dust. Sophia blinked. Clint was in front of her again, still naked.

"You don't look frightened," he observed, pulling his clothes back on. "You have no idea how difficult it was for me to decide to do this. I was afraid you'd have a seizure or scream down the house." He fastened his jeans. "So what am I missing here?"

Sophia wet her lips. "Now it's your turn to sit down."

"Okay." He grinned. "But I'm going to sit in the chair over here, because I only have so much control over myself when I see you and a bed together. So what's the deal?"

"You asked me about the group I work with now. The team. Night Seekers."

He nodded.

She cleared her throat. "Everyone on the team, including the billionaire who funds it, has lost someone close to them to the Chupacabra. Each of us has researched it, discovered the method of killing and realized that was what happened."

"And no one wanted to believe you," he guessed.

"You are so right." She twisted her fingers together in her lap as she remembered again the bodies of her twin nephews and the stink her supervisor made when she tried to insist she knew what had happened. "The sole purpose of the Night Seekers is to find this creature and destroy it. Which, by the way, is becoming increasingly more difficult to do. We know it migrates but the amount of territory it covers, especially within the last two years, is mindboggling."

"That still doesn't tell me why a black wolf suddenly appearing next to you didn't scare the shit out of you."

"Okay, so here's the reason. Six of our team members plus the man who put it together, are shifters. And we all work and live together at our headquarters in Texas. Desolation Ranch." When he didn't say anything she frowned. "Clint?"

He rubbed his hand over his face. "You live with them? You've seen them change?"

"Yes to all of that."

"But... Didn't it freak you out at first?"

Sophia shrugged. "By that time I'd done so much research on the Chupacabra that I think I was ready to accept anything. And Craig Stafford, the man funding all of this, chose us carefully and was very explicit about what we two humans would be dealing with. He suggested Dante Martello—the only other nonshifter—and I do a lot of research on it before we made the commitment to join the Night Seekers."

"And how did that go?"

"Fine. We talked to each other a lot, also. The two of us. Then we met each member of the team. It was a lot easier than anyone thought it would be."

Clint stood up and resumed his pacing. "But you slept with a...a..."

"A wolf?" She laughed. "We've had two weddings recently at Desolation Ranch. Team members who married humans. Mated with them. They seem to be working out just fine."

"We've never had good luck with humans," he told her. "That's the reason my entire family was killed. Men in the bayous who discovered we were shifters thought we were descended from the bloodthirsty rougarou and burned down the fish camp we owned. With everyone in it but me. I was fourteen when it happened."

"Oh, Clint." She could feel the pain of the young teenage boy devastated at what happened, consumed by grief.

"So how did you get up here? You're about as far from Louisiana as you can get."

"My folks were descended from the original Acadians. I thought if I got to where they came from in Canada I could find some of my relatives." He gave a rough laugh. "I was hitchhiking and after my last ride dropped me off, I nearly froze to death. Frenchy found me."

"And didn't freak out when he discovered your true nature?"

"No. Strange, isn't it? So." He stopped his pacing in front of her. "Three things." He held up one finger. "I believe your theory. Completely." Another finger. "Second. I want to help you. I can run as wolf and get places humans can't. And in the dark of night."

Sophia snapped her fingers. "It's you that Logan saw the past couple of nights, right?"

"Guilty as charged. I usually run when I get home from the bar. Works off excess energy and helps me sleep."

"I saw you yesterday morning, too. Shocked me, because I lived in Maine all my life until I moved to Texas and I never remembered seeing or hearing of any black wolves in this state."

"Yeah, I've had to be real careful when I run."

"So what's the third thing?" she asked. "You said there were three."

He put his hands beneath her elbows and lifted her so she was standing, barely an inch of space between them. "It means I don't have to force myself to stop seeing you. I hope. Which I knew I'd have to do. Because of...things."

"You being a shifter."

He nodded. "And that's the last thing in the world I wanted."

"I told you, we have two couples back at Desolation Ranch where the male is a shifter and the female is human. It works very well for them. In fact, Dakota Grey is an herbalist, among other things, who grows the special herbs shifters need to maintain control over their body." She cocked her head. "By the way, where do you get yours?"

"On the internet. There's a place I order them from." His eyes were heated as they studied her. "Sophia, there's something very electric between us. Something a lot more than just fantastic sex. I want to keep seeing you. And help you with this case."

"And when the case is over?" she wanted to know.

"I have no ties. I can look at all kinds of options."

She studied his face for a long time, seeing the emotion in his eyes. Feeling the tension in his body as he waited for her to answer him.

"Let's find this devil beast first, before more people are killed. And hope like hell it's the last of its kind." She stood on tiptoe to brush her mouth against his. "Then we'll have a lot to talk about."

He cradled her face in his big palms. "But we can still keep seeing each other."

"We do a lot less seeing and a lot more doing but yes. I'll still answer your knock every night."

"What about your partner? Are you going to say anything to him?"

"Logan?" She waved her hand in the air. "He already suspects and it doesn't bother him. Besides, I think he's trying to figure out how to get to first base with my sister. A much bigger challenge."

He slid his fingers into her hair and held her head in place as his mouth moved over hers, gently at first then harder until the pressure of his tongue made her open for him. Sophia pressed herself against him, feeling the hard length of his erection and the heat of his body through his clothes.

Abruptly he broke away. "If I don't go now I never will. You're coming to The Crown, right?"

"Oh, right. The Crown. I think we won't have to worry about keeping secrets."

"I don't understand."

She laughed breathlessly. "Well, Logan had planned for us to eat early so he could catch a quick nap and then go for a run. He figured he'd run late at night again and try to catch the black wolf we were sure we saw."

Clint chuckled. "Plan to tell him he can get his beauty sleep?"

She sobered. "I think I should tell him everything, Clint. Otherwise he'll be chasing a black phantom. And I'd rather he agree to let you help us. We could really use one more wolf running out there at night."

"Okay. When you come to The Crown we'll go into the office and talk. Away from other ears. Okay?"

"Won't people ask about it?" she wanted to know.

"I'll tell them it's all about the case. That you want to know if I've seen any suspicious people hanging out at the bar."

"Okay," she agreed. "We'll make it work."

* * * * *

The beast was restless. It had stalked and chosen its prey but now it wondered if it had made the right choice. There had been so many to choose from that the creature was actually confused. It had selected one target but now, as the light faded from the day, it wondered if maybe one of the others would be better.

It huddled in the barn, battling the pain in its head that seemed to come more and more frequently. The time for the kill was getting closer but the confusion with its selection was causing it great agony.

Maybe when it got darker it would check the others out one more time. With its great speed it could do so quickly and still return to this place if the first choice was the right one.

But first it had to will away the piercing pain.

* * * * *

Elaine Warren peered out the kitchen window, about to jump out of her skin. She didn't know what the noise was she'd heard outside—wasn't sure she even wanted to know. It was getting dark now, making it harder to see. She flipped the switch for the outside lights, feeling somehow more protected with the area around the house illuminated.

Ssssh!

There it was again. Taking another timid look through the window, she realized she hadn't latched the double doors on the garage. The wind had caught the edge of one side and was pushing it against the snow.

Damn!

Harland would see that when he came home and pitch ten kinds of a holy fit. Of course, he pitched a fit about almost anything these days. Elaine just tried to keep her head down and out of the way.

But she'd better fix this right away. Sighing, she went into the mudroom, jammed her feet into her boots, dragged on her jacket and scarf and opened the back door. She had barely made it to the first step off the porch when something roared up behind her. Elaine turned her head and barely had time for a terrified scream before something sharp jabbed into her throat.

She was already dead when her body was torn open and her insides yanked out.

* * * * *

Sophia was very pleased with the way the conversation at The Crown had gone. Rebecca had been more surprised at Clint's admission than Logan.

"I was about to zero in on you, as it happens," Logan told him. "When I stopped to think about where a black wolf would have come from around here and realized it was a shifter, I began to narrow the options."

"You didn't think it was one of the locals?" Clint asked.

"I would have been surprised. Only because Sophia would have had some inkling of it, having lived here as long as she did."

Although Sophia had indoctrinated her sister on the shifter breed, information which Bec had absorbed without much questioning, still it stunned her to realize that Clint turned out to be one. But like everything else with her, it was information she absorbed and processed and went on with things.

"You masked your scent," Sophia said.

Clint nodded. "A few tricks I've learned. I'm always worried a stray shifter will wander into the area and turn out to be hostile."

They had talked at length about the area that had already been covered and Clint had offered to run at night to search for traces and identify targets.

"That would be a big help," Logan told him. "We can only warn people so much plus there are so many isolated residences here that pinpointing the next target will be difficult."

"But maybe not too far from where we found the animal carcasses," Sophia put in. "We could start with that section."

"Why don't you meet me behind the motel?" Logan suggested. "Call me when you're, uh, ready." He winked at Sophia.

Heat crept up her cheeks but Clint just winked at her and said, "Sure thing."

They ate and spent some time visiting with Frenchy before one of his friends drove him home. Back at the motel Sophia waited impatiently until she heard the familiar knock.

"Anxious, *bebe*?" Clint grinned at her as he closed the door and pulled her into his arms.

"Scaringly so," she admitted just before his mouth cut off any more words.

His lips were warm against hers, his tongue even hotter as it snaked into her mouth and licked every surface. She thrust her own tongue against his, dancing with it, sucking on it, making him groan. One large hand held her body to his while the other gripped her head, angling it to give him better access.

Sophia wound her arms around his neck, pressing herself to him so her breasts flattened against his chest. His skin was cold even from the short walk from his truck and the contrast of temperatures between the lingering chill and the heat they were generating almost steamed up the air around him.

They were both breathless when Clint lifted his head and smiled into her eyes. "I wonder if we'll ever get enough of each other."

"Not any time soon, I think."

He tossed his jacket onto a chair and reached down to untie his work boots. "I think I have every bit of grease from The Crown plastered to my skin. What are the chances of a shower?"

"Depends on whether or not you want to do it solo."

He cupped her chin. "Definitely not solo."

"Then I think your chances are pretty good. Make that very good."

Clint stripped out of the rest of his clothes while Sophia pulled off the gown she was wearing. He took her hand and led her gently toward the bathroom. When he had the shower water the right temperature he stepped in and tugged her in with him.

Even before he touched her body there was something so erotic to her about showering with Clint. So intimate. Her pulse heightened in intensity and her pussy throbbed. She wanted his hands all over her, slick with soap, touching all of her secret places.

The first thing he did was pull her under the hot stream with him, tilt her face up and give her another hot, deep, hungry kiss, using his tongue to scrape every inner surface of her mouth. He ate at her, fusing his mouth to hers, sending jolts of heat spearing through her body. Sophia had never been kissed like this, a kiss that demanded everything from her, took everything, and gave it back.

At last, oxygen-starved, he lifted his head and smiled that very sexy crooked smile.

"Kissing you is addictive, *chere*."

"Same goes," she breathed.

Clint took the squeeze bottle of shower gel she'd left on the built-in soap dish, poured some into his palm and worked it into a rich lather. Then his hands began a slow journey over her body, first caressing her shoulders and arms, kneading gently, rubbing slowly.

His hands slid easily to her neck, down to the hollow where her pulse was beating rapidly then across the upper slope of her breasts. When he took her nipples between thumbs and forefingers and squeezed and rubbed them the throbbing accelerated, her vaginal muscles clenching.

Then down so slowly across her tummy, pausing to trace the indentation of her navel and the crease where hip and thigh joined. When his fingers tangled in her soft pubic curls and probed between her folds sensations rippled through her and she had to clutch at his arms to hold herself upright.

"I think this little button needs a lot of attention," he crooned, finding her clit and massaging it slowly, slowly, slowly.

"Yes. Please." She could barely get the words out.

He insinuated one of his legs between both of hers and pressed a foot against one ankle.

"Spread your legs for me, *bebe*." His voice was guttural. Hungry.

Still holding on to him for support she widened her stance and immediately one long finger slid into her pussy. Then two. Then he was stroking her slick walls, curving his fingers just enough to reach her sweet spot. His thumb paid busy attention to her clit as he continued to fuck her with his fingers. Sophia shook with sensation, her head spinning as Clint rubbed and stroked and squeezed. She was glad he was using his other hand to support her.

When he pulled his fingers out she cried out, demanding he fill her again but Clint had other ideas. He turned her around, placing her hands flat against the tile wall, and went to work on her back. Down the sweep of muscle, dancing along her spine, rubbing the rounded globes of her ass. She heard the hiss of the squeeze bottle then those talented fingers were sliding into the crevice of her buttocks, up and down, massaging, rubbing.

Instantly she remembered the feel of his cock in her ass and a surge of lust shot through her so strong she actually shook from its intensity.

"You like that, *non*?"

"Yesss," she hissed, barely able to get a word out.

"You loved my cock in your ass last night." He bit her shoulder lightly then kissed the spot. "And I will do it again. Because it makes you mine. Remember that."

As he murmured the words against her skin he pressed one finger into her hot, dark tunnel, sliding it in and out. Sophia's pussy clenched, spasms rippling through it. She felt completely empty when he withdrew the fingers, soaped his hands again and smoothed the lather up and down her legs.

When he reached the lips of her cunt he stroked through the slit then found the nub of her clit.

"Don't move," he ordered.

The next moment he felt a finger sliding into her ass again while with his other hand he continued to rub and pinch her clit. Everything inside her body was roiling with need, the coil of orgasm unsnapping deep inside her and spinning through her until it exploded with the force of a rocket.

Clint drove her through it, fucking her ass with his finger and rasping her clit over and over until the last tremor subsided and she sank weakly to her knees. Brushing her wet hair aside, he kissed her nape and stroked his hands over her body then pulled her back against him so she was resting on his thighs.

"You're so beautiful when you come," he murmured.

"You're going to kill me," she said in an uneven voice.

"*Non!* That would definitely defeat the purpose."

Sophia rose shakily to her feet. "My turn," she told him and reached for the shower gel with hands that still trembled slightly.

She looked up at him and he was grinning lecherously at her.

"I can't wait to feel your hands all over me."

She lathered and soaped him the same way he'd done her, taking her time, scraping her fingernails over his nipples and smiling as he sucked in a breath. His body was well toned, his muscles solid and sculpted, his abs as hard as concrete and his stomach firm and flat. She could feel the firm definition of those muscles, the flex of them beneath his skin as her hands roamed over him. She teased him with her hands up and down his legs before finally reaching for his cock and squeezing it gently.

Hands slick with lather, she caressed him from root to tip, slowly up and down before cupping his balls and squeezing them gently. When she pushed at his shoulder to signal him to turn around he lifted an eyebrow at her.

"You like to play hard, *chere*."

"What's good for me is good for you," she said, nudging him again.

She made him stay in the position he'd arranged her in, hands flat against the wall, legs spread as she worked lather into his broad back, his strong arms and legs and finally reaching his very fine ass. Working her finger into him the way he'd pressed his into her, she pushed until it was all the way in. Clint sucked in a deep breath and his whole body tightened.

And when she reached around to take his cock in her other hand a low groan rumbled from his throat. She worked his shaft and his ass, setting up a tempo, in and out, in and out.

"You keep that up, *chere*, and I'm gonna come right now."

"Do it. I want you to."

"But I want to be inside you," he pointed out.

She laughed softly. "No problem, big man. Remember, I know just how many times you can come."

She loved the sounds of his guttural moans as she worked him, slowly at first then faster and faster.

"Oh, hell," he ground out. "Here it comes."

His entire body tensed and in seconds his cock was pulsing in her hand, thick semen pouring over her fingers in hot spurts. Sophia squeezed his shaft rhythmically until the last drop had pumped from it before sliding her finger from his ass. Then, very deliberately, nudging him to turn so he could watch, she licked the cum from her fingers.

"Jesus, Sophia," he breathed, still trying to catch his breath. "Give a guy a break. Watching you do that makes me want to fuck you right now but my poor dick needs time to recover."

She laughed softly. "Not all that much time."

They soaped each other completely one more time then rinsed off and stepped out of the shower. Clint dried himself quickly before blotting the water drops from Sophia, lifting her up and carrying her to the bed.

"Let's see how much time we really need, okay?"

"Don't forget Logan's expecting to run with you tonight," she reminded him.

"Logan can wait his turn," he growled, leaning over her to take a nipple into his mouth.

* * * * *

"I don't think either of us got much rest last night," Logan joked, slightly bleary-eyed as he drank the hot coffee Sophia handed him.

She'd decided to brew coffee in the little kitchenette area instead of waiting to get to a restaurant, knowing they could both use the jolt of caffeine.

"Did you guys find anything while you were out?" She blew on her coffee then took a slow sip.

He shook his head. "No. We split up and each took a different section. You know how fast we can run as wolves so we covered a lot of territory. We each mentally marked some possible sites but we hardly even saw a deer. Or anything else."

"Damn." She nibbled her lower lip. "I just have a really bad feeling that we're too far behind the curve here."

Logan opened his mouth to answer but before he could get any words out Sophia's cell phone rang. She looked at the readout and flipped it open.

"Morning, Bec. We're about to finish our coffee and get out of here."

"You better not stop for breakfast this morning," her sister said.

Sophia's stomach knotted. "Why? What's happened?" But even as she asked the question she was sure she knew the answer.

"Another body. Husband found her just after first light." Her voice was strained and sharp. "Get here as fast as you can." She rattled off the address. "Can you find it?"

"I think I remember the location but we'll just plug it into the GPS."

"Get your ass moving. Bobby's already headed over there with the team and the crime scene techs."

"On our way." She clicked off and looked at Logan. "Another dead body. Early this morning. Let's move."

"Damn it." He tossed back the rest of his coffee and pitched the cup into the trash. "Just damn it."

When they pulled into the driveway they could see activity everywhere. Yellow crime scene tape was strung all around the detached garage, the crime scene techs were photographing everything and placing orange markers on certain spots and Bobby Lacroix was talking to a tall, disheveled-looking man.

Rebecca trudged up to them, lines of strain marking her face. "It's awful. Just awful."

"Who is it?" Sophia asked.

"Her name is Elaine Warren. She's a pharmacy tech at the hospital. Her husband works security for Xeniplex, the big manufacturing complex outside Houlton. He came home from a night shift and when he pulled into the driveway he saw something on the snow in front of the garage. He really freaked when he discovered it was his wife. Dead." Pain shadowed her eyes for a brief moment. "Body ripped open, blood drained."

"Shit." Logan clenched his jaw. "Just shit."

"He looks like he's taking it pretty hard," Sophia commented.

Rebecca nodded. "He's still in shock. They've been married ten years."

"Any kids?" Logan wanted to know.

Rebecca shook her head. "Just the two of them. Now it's just him." She held up her hand when Logan started forward. "Before you talk to Bobby I want you both to take a close look at the body," she said. "A *very* close look. And tell me what you see."

Sophia frowned. "Why?" She studied her sister's face. "There's something wrong, isn't there? What is it?"

"Just...pay careful attention. Then come talk to me before you say much to Bobby."

Bobby and Scott Mooney were still talking to the tall man when Sophia and Rebecca reached them.

"This is Harland Warren," Bobby said. "It's his wife Elaine who's been killed."

"I'm very sorry for your loss," Logan said.

The man just nodded, his face expressionless.

"Okay if we take a look?" Sophia asked Bobby.

"Of course." He walked her to the side, away from the grieving widower. "But Sophia, I think it's clear now we've clearly got a nut running around loose. I'll need to contact the sheriff and get support from him on this. We need all the manpower we can get to canvass and dig around."

"Sounds like a plan."

Logan and Sophia moved carefully over to the body, stepping around the marked areas. The minute she saw Elaine Warren's lifeless form she knew what Rebecca was talking about. When she looked up at Logan she saw the same thing in his expression. He took her elbow and steered her to the side of the garage, away from the activity.

"It's not the Chupacabra," she said the minute they were out of eavesdropping range.

"No," Logan agreed. "It's not."

"For one thing the woman's got a huge bump on the side of her head. It looks like she was knocked out before she was killed."

"Or else the hit killed her."

"And look at the cut right down her body from neck to crotch. Too clean. It looks like it was made with a knife or something equally sharp. The devil beast uses its claws and the incision is much more ragged."

Logan rubbed his jaw. "Two puncture wounds in the neck that look like they were made with some kind of instrument. And most importantly, not all the blood has been drained."

"If this was a deliberate kill," Sophia commented, "whoever drained the blood wasn't able to get it all. I pointed it out to Bobby and he shrugged it off. Said maybe the killer saw Harland's car coming down the highway and had to leave in a hurry."

Logan snorted. "Yeah, right. Leave in what? There's no evidence of another vehicle here."

Rebecca had walked up to join them. "I tried to tell that to the team but it's almost as if they don't want to hear me." Her voice was edged with frustration.

"They're good detectives," Sophia protested. "Why are they being so stubborn about this?"

"Because they think our theory is nuts," Logan told her, "and they're determined to prove us wrong. I'll admit it's pretty farfetched but you'd think they'd pay attention to all the proof we've got."

"It's almost as if they're afraid to admit we're right," Sophia said. "They've been very polite about listening to us and looking at everything but you can tell they just wish we'd go away."

"I'm sure Bobby's convinced he's got a homicidal maniac running around but I think this was more personal," Logan told her. "I don't believe it has any connection to Darrell Franklin."

"If you tell him that," Bec pointed out, "he'll just get his back up. He thinks he's back on familiar ground and he can start looking for a crazed homicidal maniac."

"He needs to look into who would want to kill this woman," Sophia said. "That's his starting point."

Logan blew out a breath of frustration and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Maybe if I mention to him that I don't think this is the work of a creature he doesn't even believe in we can go from there."

Bobby listened as Logan explained his theory although he didn't seem particularly open to it. "What are the chances we have two killings exactly alike, as horrendous as this, in a county like this?" he asked. "There has to be a connection."

"But they aren't exactly alike," Sophia protested. "For one thing, Elaine Warren's got a bump on her head the size of an orange. Darrell Franklin didn't have one. Nor have any of the other Chupacabra victims."

Bobby rubbed his gloved hand over his face, tension in every line of his body. "Forgetting about your crazy theory, what are you suggesting? Any *other* alternatives?"

Sophia shrugged. "Isn't the spouse the first person you look at in every killing?"

"You mean Harland?" He glanced over at the man, now standing with Scott and another detective. "No, I can't see that. Besides, what connection does he have to Darrell Franklin?"

"My point exactly," she told him. "There's *no* connection between those two killings."

"Because Franklin wasn't killed by a human predator," Rebecca added, "and Elaine Warren was. Bobby, don't be so stubborn. At least consider the possibility."

"You're driving me nuts, you know that." He rubbed his face again, the lines of tension cutting deep grooves into his cold-roughened skin. "I've got to get back to my sergeant with all of this, and he's going to have to confer with the public relations office in Augusta."

Logan frowned. "Why Augusta?"

"Because it's the state capital and that's where his office is located. All statements – and I mean *all* – come from his office. But he'll want Greg to sign off on everything first. Shit, shit, shit. What a fucking mess."

"Will you at least look into her life, okay?" Sophia asked. "What can you lose?"

"All right, all right." He stared at Sophia. "I know you don't agree that this is probably some illegal who snuck over the border, but holy shit, Sophia. I can't see anyone around here doing something this bizarre."

She started to say something but he cut her off with a sharp movement of his hand.

"We're also borrowing deputies from the sheriff to help with this. I'll give them assignments to question people. Including friends and neighbors of the Warrens," he added before she could say something. "Make sure we aren't tripping over each other."

When he walked away Logan turned to Sophia. "I'm surprised the sheriff isn't handling this anyway."

"In Maine the state police have jurisdiction over all murder cases. The county sheriff and his staff assist but that's it."

"I'd say we can do a little nosing around ourselves," he said, "but agreeing that this isn't the work of the Chupacabra, it's still out there and we have to find it." He looked at Sophia. "Clint's going out with me again tonight. He's got some ideas of other places to look."

"I can make some phone calls," Rebecca told him. "There are people I know who I can ask about the Warrens. People who might know if there was trouble in their marriage." She looked from Logan to Sophia and back again. "People who might tell me personally things they wouldn't tell any of the guys or the sheriff's deputies."

"Then do it," Sophia told her. "I'll make some, also, to people I remember. We can tell Bobby we're going to do everything we can to help him out."

She nodded. "We should still take the snowmobiles out again, too. Not waste one minute."

"Agreed."

Logan pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. "Meanwhile I'm going to take some pictures and send them back to the ranch. Dante Martello, one of our team," he told Rebecca, "is very good with photographic comparisons. He can tell us for sure if this is the devil beast or not."

"Good idea. And I'll go let Bobby know what we're up to. He'll just tell me we're wasting our time with the snowmobiles, but as long as he sees we're also working with his theory I don't think he'll object. Certainly not as far as you two are concerned."

"I don't want him to pull you away from us," Logan told her.

She grinned at him. "Don't worry. I'll work my charm on him."

* * * * *

Logan was beginning to think the beast had vaporized or disappeared in some other way. On the way to get the snowmobiles he and Sophia had stopped at the motel so they could check in at Desolation Ranch via webcam. Logan had already sent the pictures directly from his cell and he hoped Dante had looked at them already. And maybe had some other information for them.

"The time period between kills is running out," he told Ric, "and we're getting damn frustrated."

"I understand," Ric said. "Believe me."

"Did Dante get a chance to compare the photos I shot with the ones we sent of Darrell Franklin? And also those you have of the kills in South Texas?"

"He did. And he agrees with you. Take a look. I'm putting them up on the screen. And here's Dante to give you his opinion."

Logan and Sophia watched while Ric's face disappeared from the computer to be replaced by the images on the large screen in the ranch's comm room. Five photos were up there side by side, all the bodies of Chupacabra victims.

"You're looking at four different bodies." Now it was Dante Martello's voice coming over the microphone. "You can see the difference immediately in the cut down the length. Those from the confirmed Chupacabra kills have slightly ragged edges while the one on this latest body is clean, almost like an incision. I'd say it was done with some kind of very sharp instrument."

"That's what I thought," Logan agreed.

"Also," Dante went on, "the puncture wounds at the neck look as if they were made by a tool of some kind rather than fangs or sharp teeth."

"There was an attempt to drain the blood," Sophia told him, "but it was a half-assed job. And the detective team just thinks it's because the killer was frightened away."

"Frightened away where?" Dante asked. "From the photos you've sent back and the info I pulled up from Google, there's no place for someone to run to without leaving traces in all that snow. And unless there are a lot of trees close to the house, anyone running away would be seen. If indeed Bobby's theory is correct and whoever did the killing was interrupted by the husband's arrival."

"You aren't saying anything we haven't already said ourselves," Sophia sighed.

"Another thing." This from Logan. "There were no lingering traces of the odor of turpentine. The medical examiner said she'd only been dead about three hours when we got there. It may be bitter cold up here but there still should have been a trace of the scent."

"I know you would have said something if you'd heard, but any news about Melinda?"

Dante just shook his head. "I don't say this when Chloe can hear me but at this rate I think we'll be lucky if we ever find her body."

"We need to find this devil beast," Logan said savagely. "Track it to its lair."

"I can't give you any sage advice you haven't already given yourselves," Dante told them. "Just keep in touch."

"Will do." Logan killed the webcam and looked at Sophia. "We'd better go meet Rebecca and get out on the snowmobiles again. I have a feeling we're about out of time."

Chapter Ten

As soon as they hit The Crown after a long, hard day Clint motioned to a helper he had behind the bar that night and came to sit in the booth with them, bringing drinks with him.

"None of you look like you've been having much fun today," he said, sliding in next to Sophia.

Logan took a swallow of his beer. "That's an understatement. Besides freezing our asses off I don't think we accomplished a damn thing."

"We did mark off a few more places as likely targets for the beast," Sophia told him. "But there's just so many of them."

Clint nodded. "I can see that. When Logan and I did our recon last night we thought the same thing." He frowned. "But I have to say, the Warren place isn't one either of us marked last night as a possibility. Too open. Too far from the cover of trees. That's what you look for, right?"

Sophia nodded. "With all the others, even if the houses are isolated, there were always lots of trees right around the dwelling so the beast had cover."

"The problem," Logan said, rolling the beer bottle between his palms, "is we're convinced the beast can shift and assume other forms, so it may actually be in a form that doesn't immediately cause alarm. It's how it gets close to its victims."

"But it still needs cover to approach the prey in Chupacabra form and to complete the kill without interruption. Every single other site has had that kind of cover."

"Has there been much gossip in here today about Elaine Warren's murder?" Rebecca wanted to know.

Clint nodded. "*Certainment*. And since the Maine State Police issued a formal statement it's seems to be all anyone wants to talk about."

"Maybe at least people will start to be a little more cautious. More careful."

"God, I hope so." Sophia took a big swallow of her drink, the hot liquor coursing through her chilled veins.

"Anyone know of any trouble in the Warren marriage?" Logan asked. "Anything that could throw suspicion on the husband? Or maybe someone Elaine Warren had an argument with? Some other kind of trouble?"

Clint shrugged. "Every marriage has its trouble spots, but nothing that anyone seemed to think was a major problem."

"There has to be something," Rebecca insisted.

"Why?" He looked at each of them. "What aren't you saying?"

They were all speaking in low tones, pitching their voices just loud enough to be heard over the rising crescendo of sound that marked Friday night at The Crown.

Sophia took a sip from her glass, set it down carefully. "We don't believe this is a Chupacabra kill. The cut opening the body is too clean, like it was made with a sharp instrument. The puncture wounds differ. And, most of all, not all the blood was drained."

Clint's body tensed. "So you really think this is a human kill?"

Rebecca nodded. "And we always look at the immediate family and friends first."

"The problem," Sophia said, "is that Bobby doesn't think the two kill scenes are different enough to matter and he's back on his homicidal maniac theory again. He's a very good detective but I don't think he'll look at these kills as being separate."

"I'm going to try talking to him again tomorrow," Rebecca said. "No offense, guys, but he might listen to me a little more than outsiders."

"But that still means we're waiting for the second kill from the devil beast," Logan added. "One good thing. With two killings in the area people are starting to get nervous. At least maybe they'll be a lot more alert."

Clint looked at him. "When we go out again tonight we'll try to narrow the likely spots a little more, and be extra alert for any indication the beast is back on the prowl. Meanwhile let me put in a dinner order for you." He winked at Sophia. "You want the barbecue beef sandwich with home fries tonight."

* * * * *

Bradley Howard finished his shift as an X-ray technician at the hospital, clocked out and pulled on his heavy parka and boots. He hoped there hadn't been any more snow. He was damn sick and tired of shoveling his driveway every five minutes. Next paycheck he was getting the snow blower fixed.

Presque Isle was dark and deserted as he drove through the streets to his little place just outside town. After dealing with people all day he enjoyed the isolation of the place. It also provided the best spot to conduct his extracurricular activities.

Outside influences were beginning to cut into his time and it pissed him off. What he really wanted was to quit his dead-end job, take his extracurricular activities and blow this place.

He pulled up to the garage door and shoved the gearshift into park. He kept meaning to install an automatic opener but it was one of those things that just kept getting pushed lower on the to-do list. Bending down to reach the door handle, he never saw the figure move out from the trees at the side of the garage until it was on him. His scream was choked off as something heavy bashed against the side of his head and he crumpled into the packed snow.

* * * * *

Sophia was startled when she heard the knock on her door at barely after ten.

"You decide to throw everyone out and close early?" she asked Clint as he came in. "I'm flattered that I'm worth giving up all that business for."

He cupped her head and kissed her, hot, wet and deep before stepping back to take off his clothes.

"Not that I wouldn't do it in a heartbeat, *chere*," he grinned. "But Frayne Beaufort's been working The Crown weekends for Frenchy since he got laid off. We know him and trust him. He'll close up." His gaze was hot as it traveled the length of her body. "Take the nightshirt off, Sophia, and let me see your body. I've been fantasizin' about it all day and I'm harder than an oak tree."

She pulled the nightshirt off and tossed it onto one of the chairs then stood there bathed in the lamplight. Clint removed his boxers and then he was naked, too. Her eyes went immediately to the glorious hard-on he was sporting.

"Told you," he grinned. "Been like that all day. Now come here."

She stepped into his arms. He bit her ear before murmuring, "Logan and I are going to head out earlier tonight and I didn't want to miss my time with my *bebe*."

This kiss was much longer than the first one, and hotter yet. His tongue plunged and probed, gliding across her own small one. He drank from her, ate at her, heating her from the inside out. Her body automatically softened for him and she melted against him. The thick length of his cock pressed against her, imprinting its heat against her skin.

Clint's hands moved up and down her back, caressing her spine, sending shivers skittering over the surface of her skin. His mouth slid away from hers and trailed across her cheek to her ear where he licked the shell and nibbled on the lobe. Then a line of wet kisses down the column of her neck, down, down until he reached a breast and pulled a stiff nipple into his mouth.

Sophia clutched at his arms, trying to hold herself steady, but the riot of sensations rushing through her, ratcheting up her pulse, releasing more cream in her pussy made it nearly impossible for her to stand.

Clint slid his hands down to cup her ass and lifted her, pulling her body into his. She wound her legs around his waist, locking them at the ankles. Her head fell back and she arched herself, giving him greater access to her nipples and breasts. He took full advantage, working one nipple until it was hot and swollen before turning his attention to the other. His tongue was a live wire, licking and tasting her, his lips hot as they closed around her flesh.

Still clasping her to him with his hand beneath her buttocks, he moved the few steps to the bed and lowered her to the mattress, following her down. His body was hard and strong against hers, his touch demanding and gentle at the same time. Kneeling between her outspread thighs, he moved his mouth down the soft skin of her tummy through the nest of curls to unerringly home in on the hot bud of her clit.

His big hands held her thighs apart as he pulled and sucked on the bundle of nerves, the pulse in her womb pounding like a jungle drum, her nipples aching for the feel of his hot mouth again. She writhed beneath the onslaught of the multiple erotic feelings he loosed within her, firing her blood and ratcheting up the beat of her heart.

Clint lifted his mouth fractionally and blew on her heated flesh, the whisper of air stimulating every single nerve.

"Please," she cried out. "I want you."

"I want you, too, *chere*. Right now. Are you ready for me?" He slid two fingers into her throbbing cunt and his low chuckle vibrated against her body. "Oh, *mon dieu*. You are so very wet. I'm going to fill this sweet cunt with my cock and fuck you blind."

He bit lightly on the tip of her clit before sliding off the bed to find a condom. Then he was back, sheathed and ready. He lifted her legs, bent them back at the knee, positioned himself at the entrance to her body and drove in with one swift thrust.

His thick shaft stretched her to the limit. Even after three nights of incredible sex, her body still needed to adjust to him each time. Lowering her legs, she pressed her heels into the mattress and lifted herself, tilting her body to take him even deeper. The head of his cock bumped against her womb, triggering a shower of electricity sizzling through her.

"Gotta do it now, *bebe*," he growled.

He drew back once, thrust forward and pumped into her, hard and fast. Balancing himself with one hand, he insinuated the other between their bodies, found her clit and stroked it. Rubbed it. Massaged it. Lust surged in hot waves as her climax spiraled through her. Clint pumped harder, rubbed faster, and in an explosion of blazing heat they climaxed together, spinning out, all else ceasing to exist except the shattering spasms gripping their bodies. His cock pulsed inside her again and again, her pussy clamped around it, milking him. Everything in her focused on the intensity of the tremors ripping through their bodies.

Finally, spent, Clint let himself fall forward, catching himself on his arms so Sophia didn't have to bear the full brunt of his weight. Her cunt continued to throb around him with the aftershocks rippling through her. It seemed forever to her that they lay like that, hearts crashing against each other, lungs savagely dragging in air. The sweat of incredible sex gluing their bodies together.

Clint rolled to the side, taking Sophia with him, his cock softened but still inside her.

"I think you've bewitched me," he murmured, his breathing still uneven.

She gave a breathy little laugh. "I hope so, because I definitely think you've cast a spell on me. This—us—what's happening between us is so much more intense than anything I've ever felt before in my life."

"Me too, *chere*. Me too." He kissed her mouth, her cheeks, her eyelids. "When this is all over we got some serious talkin' to do."

"You realize we hardly know anything about each other," she pointed out.

"We know most of the important things. We have something very special going here. A connection. It's either there or it's not, and with us, it is. You know I'm a shifter. I know you work with a super-secret organization hunting a killer devil beast most people think is only a legend. You like hot sex. *I* like hot sex. And we fit together like two halves of a puzzle. All the rest is just details."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It can be, if we don't muck it up. And I don't intend to."

Her smile was shaky but real. "Me, either."

"Okay then. Now. I've got to get with Logan so we can head out and see what's what. I've got the same feeling you do about time running out."

He slid very carefully from her body and padded to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. When he came back into the room he began putting his clothes back on. Sophia knew the two men would find a place once they got to the trees to stash everything so they weren't walking around outside the motel naked.

"I don't know what time we'll get back, but I'd sure like it if you'd let me wake you up and come on back in."

Sophia lay back on the rumpled pillows, feeling well satisfied, and smiled at him. "Just knock on the door. I'll be waiting for you. But what about Frenchy? Don't you have to get home for him?"

He shook his head. "He's doing a lot better. Coming into the bar really helped hm. I told him I might not be back until morning and he was good with that."

"Did he ask you where you were going?"

Clint laughed. "No, just gave me a shit-eating grin and told me to enjoy myself." That hot look came into his eyes again. "And I damn sure am."

He came over to the bed, knelt on the edge and gave her a hot, open-mouthed kiss. "You keep these sheets warm for me, okay, *chere*?"

"You come back in one piece."

As soon as he was gone she jumped out of bed, turned the deadbolt and threw the chain then crawled back under the covers. Pulling one of the pillows to her face, she inhaled Clint's musky scent. He was right. They *did* have something very special, something that had come at them like a thunderbolt. She just hoped they could hang on to it.

And she hoped he and Logan found the devil beast before another body turned up.

* * * * *

The three of them were having coffee in Sophia's room at eight thirty, reading the stories in the local paper Logan had picked up in the motel lobby, when her cell phone rang.

"It's Bobby," she said, looking at the caller ID. "What's up?" she asked.

"We've got another one." His voice sounded tired. "You want to come take a look? Rebecca's already on her way."

"Give me the address and we're on our way."

"What is it?" Logan asked.

"Another body. I didn't ask Bobby for details, since his opinion of the bodies and ours are slightly different. But we need to get out there."

"Shit. The states will have to issue another statement and the media frenzy will explode."

Sophia grimaced. "Don't remind me."

Clint drained his coffee cup and threw the empty in the wastebasket. "I'll let you guys get going." He wrote something on the top sheet of the pad of paper on the nightstand, tore it off and handed it to Sophia. "My cell number. You call me when you know what's going on. Please."

"I will."

Then, deliberately ignoring Logan's presence, he wrapped her in his arms and kissed her until the soles of her feet were hot. "You take good care of yourself out there, *chere*. Talk to you in a while."

His truck was just pulling out of the lot when Logan and Sophia walked out of her room.

"Thanks for not commenting on...well...you know."

"Your business is your own," he told her, cranking the engine. "And you never let personal stuff interfere in business. Besides, I like the guy. And he's in a position to help us out."

"Yes. He is."

"And it doesn't bother you that he's...well..."

"A shifter?" she finished. "Not a bit. Not after living with all of you for so long." She managed a tiny smile. "It practically seems normal to me by now."

Logan chuckled. "Good to know."

"I'm not sure if I want this latest kill to be an attack by the devil beast or not," Sophia mused. "If it isn't, that means Bobby really does have a killer running around. If it is, that means it's still eluding us and there's still an unsuspecting victim out there. From what he said and the way he sounded, I have a sick feeling this is a Chupacabra victim. And we're running way behind the curve."

"There's just so damn much area to cover." His voice was laced with frustration. "It's like trying to bail the ocean with a teaspoon."

Just like at the Warrens, the driveway at Bradley Howard's was lined with Maine State Police cars. Crime scene tape had been strung in a wide area surrounding the garage. Inside the tape they saw Bobby standing with Scott Mooney and Rebecca.

Orange markers ringed the body and the crime scene techs were photographing and measuring. The medical examiner was kneeling beside the body and two other detectives were standing outside the tape.

Rebecca looked up as their car doors slammed and motioned them forward. One of the troopers on post outside the tape lifted a section for them to duck beneath.

The moment Sophia saw the corpse she knew it was another copycat. Someone was being very clever in their kills but it was impossible for a human to absolutely duplicate the Chupacabra kill. At least, not without a lot of time and the proper equipment. The cut down the length of the body was once again too clean, the puncture marks too precise. And most of all, not all of the blood had been drained. There were still small pools of it in the cavity. As well, there were traces of it in the snow around the corpse.

"It's not our beast." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop herself.

Bobby had been watching the medical examiner at work on the body. His head jerked up. "What are you talking about?"

"I told you the same thing at Elaine Warren's. The cut is too precise." She pointed. "It looks like it was made with a sharp instrument rather than a claw. And look at that blood? The Chupacabra never leaves any of the blood." She looked up at him. "Remember Darrell Franklin's body? Not a drop of blood around."

"I think you're making too much of that," he told her. "I'd say with these last two bodies the killer was in too much of a hurry. Or maybe something interrupted him. Remember, we speculated Harland Warren had come home and frightened off whoever it was only too late to save his wife."

"Bobby, if we go back to the barracks and you let me put pictures up on the big screen to compare, you'll see the difference."

He shoved his gloved hands in the pockets of his jacket. "We'll see. I just think you're on the wrong trail here. That's why I wanted you to see the body."

"No." She tamped down her anger. "I think *you* are, tying these last two killings to the Franklin one."

"Sophia." His face was set in stubborn line. "I've got three dead bodies in less than a week. That tells me I have a homicidal maniac on my hands and he seems to be escalating."

"Have you checked into the Warrens?" she asked. "To see if anyone could suggest something might be wrong in their marriage? He could be taking advantage of this situation to get rid of his wife."

"And what about this body? What does Bradley Howard have to do with Elaine Warren?"

"I don't know, but you might want to find out."

"We talked to people at the hospital after Elaine was murdered," he pointed out. "There was nothing anyone could tell us. Her coworkers said she seemed a lot more

subdued lately but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. No one was stalking her. She hadn't had a problem with anyone at the hospital."

"And yet two hospital technicians are murdered with twenty-four hours. You don't think that's odd?"

"I think this maniac is choosing his victims at random. These two don't appear to have any connection to Franklin."

"My point exactly." She clenched her fists. "Why are you being so stubborn about this? You're a good detective. You usually look at every angle."

"But I don't usually have killings this vicious," he snapped. "I just don't believe anyone around here would do this. I know these people."

"Do you mind if I do a little digging myself?" She wasn't about to let this go. Her gut instinct was telling her there was more to be found here.

"You aren't on the force anymore," he pointed out. "You have no official status."

"Then let me have Rebecca. We always worked well together. Please, Bobby. Half a day. That's all I ask. Have someone pull the background on Warren and Howard for me so I can review everything and Bec and I will go ask some questions. What can you lose except half a day? And what if we're right?"

"Jesus." He blew out a breath. "You're as much of a pain in the ass as you always were. All right. I'm sure you'll give me no peace otherwise. I'll call the barracks and have someone get the info together for you. And I'll send Bec to you as soon as we're done here."

"Thank you."

"Does this mean no snowmobiles?" he asked.

"Not at the moment. But Logan and I still need to do what's necessary before the devil beast attacks someone else. If it follows its usual pattern we can expect two more kills in a short period of time."

"We could use your help in that area, too, Bobby," Logan interjected.

"Yeah?" Bobby cocked an eyebrow. "Like how?"

"It would be a really big help if you ask the sheriff to have his deputies patrol some of the areas I'll show you on the map. We could use eyes at night."

"And what am I supposed to tell them? To look for some mythical evil creature?"

"Just tell them to report anything unusual they see. If you're right and we're wrong, then it gives you extra eyes looking for a raving maniac who's hacking up the population of Aroostook County."

"Logan and I always have our cell phones on," Sophia added. "If they find anything we can be there very quickly."

Maybe Clint will run at night with Logan again. We'll use the little radios the guys hang around their necks when they run as wolves, so we can communicate with them.

Bobby turned up his jacket collar. "That's not a bad idea. I'd already planned to talk to the sheriff about this, anyway. He ought to be able to help us out. Except for our sudden spate of dead bodies the crime rate here is pretty low."

"Thank you." Sophia dredged up a smile. "I'll have Logan take me back to the barracks. If you could have someone get me the background information on the Warrens and Bradley Howard I'd appreciate it. Friends, relatives, all that stuff. We'll start at the hospital with their coworkers." She paused. "And at the end of the day when everyone's back, you let me put up the comparison pictures on the big screen in the conference room."

"Shit. Anything else? Want me to assign the whole team to you?"

Sophia bit back her retort. "I truly appreciate everything you've done, Bobby."

Rebecca walked back to the car with them.

"I don't know why Bobby's being so stubborn," she said. "Except I think he's having a hard time with the fact that someone he knows might be killing in this fashion."

"If he can get the deputies to patrol at night for us it will be a big help. Cut down the territory we have to cover."

Rebecca looked at Logan. "Will you be helping with the questioning, too?"

He looked at Sophia. "I think I have some other things to do."

Bec frowned. "Like what? Are you going out on the snowmobile by yourself?"

"Not exactly." He looked at Sophia again.

"I'll tell you what, Bec," she told her sister. "Bobby said you could meet me back at the barracks when you're through here."

"To work on this with you."

"Then come find me wherever I am. Before I get out and start talking to people, we'll go catch a cup of coffee somewhere and have a little discussion."

"About what?" She looked from one to the other with a puzzled expression.

"About...stuff. Okay? But right now I want to get going."

She hugged her sister deliberately to end the conversation and climbed into the SUV with Logan.

"You planning to tell her about me?" he asked as soon as they pulled out onto the highway.

"I think it's best. Don't you?" When he didn't answer, she added, "Don't worry. She won't freak."

He snorted. "Yeah, right."

"I didn't, did I? Plus, she totally believes in the Chupacabra and that's an even bigger stretch." When he was silent she added, "Logan, I see the way you look at her. If you ever plan to move further with her she has to know all about you."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Just...do it carefully. Okay?"

Sophia laughed. "Trust me on this, okay? I know my sister."

Logan dropped her at the barracks. "I'm going back to the motel."

"You going to shift and scout the territory?"

He nodded. "We're missing something but I'm damned if I know what. I'm also going to call Ric and ask him to send the helicopter up here. We've needed it the last couple of times and I'm sure this will be no exception. I'd like to have it here by tonight."

"Wear your radio when you run, in case I need to contact you."

"Will do."

"Good luck."

Greg Flannery was waiting for her in the lobby.

"Bobby called and told me what's going on. And that he's loaning Rebecca to you."

"You're good with that, right?"

He looked at her carefully. "I usually don't get involved with my lead detectives unless I think it's necessary, but your instincts always made you a top investigator when you were in the CID. So I'm good with this. Maybe you'll pick up on something that will help us. Come on, I've got you set up in the conference room." He walked her down the hall. "I saw your partner drop you off. If you need a vehicle just holler."

"Actually, I'm hoping to steal Rebecca when she gets back here, if that's all right with you. We sort of share the same abilities and can blend with each other."

"No problem. Remember, she's assigned to you as long as you're here." He paused. "I guess your partner's off working on your particular dog and pony show. And we're going to ask the deputies to keep an eye out for whatever it is you think you're looking for?"

They were at the conference room now. Sophia hung her jacket over the back of a chair and dropped her purse on the table.

"I know you think it's a bunch of woo-woo stuff, but I have a lot of stuff to back it up. Plus, I think if I can show your detectives the comparisons of the bodies they'll understand what I mean about the differences."

"As long as we catch whoever this is, you can bring in witch-hunters for all I care." When she opened her mouth to argue he held up a hand. "The room's yours. There's a folder with all the information you asked for and a phone if you don't want to use your cell. I'll leave you to it."

For the next hour Sophia poured over the printouts in the folder in front of her. Whoever had put it together had been very thorough. There were pages of information on the Warrens and Bradley Howard—families, friends, jobs. There was also information on Darrell Franklin which gave Sophia a small chuckle. Bobby wasn't giving up so easily. Twice someone came by to bring her fresh coffee and she smiled at them gratefully.

By the time Rebecca arrived she'd read everything twice and made notes. An idea was forming in the back of her head but she wanted to interview some people before she spouted it to anyone but her sister.

"Ready for some coffee besides that foul stuff they brew here?"

Sophia closed the folder. "Actually I think I'd like a nice sticky bun with it, too. We missed breakfast this morning."

"And I have just the place. There's a new coffee shop that opened up last year. Cool Beans. They have all kinds of imported coffees as well as pastries to die for."

Sophia lifted an eyebrow. "And the owners are making a go of it here?"

Bec laughed. "We're actually not as backwoods as we used to be," she told her sister. "We even use silverware and napkins sometimes."

Sophia gave her a light pinch on the arm, slid her arms into her jacket and picked up her purse and the folder. "Then let's go."

Cool Beans was a stand-alone building at the corner of the parking lot in a big shopping mall. It was built like a log cabin but with wide picture windows on three sides. Inside Sophia inhaled the heady fragrance of freshly ground coffee beans and pastries right out of the oven. She ordered her favorite, a mocha latte, but when she saw the huge chocolate-chip, banana-nut muffins she ditched the sticky bun for one of those.

The booths were arranged along the window walls and they were lucky enough to find one in a corner. When they were settled with their drinks and food, Rebecca look across the table and said, "Okay. Give."

Sophia took her time organizing her thoughts, stirring her coffee with the plastic stick they'd stuck in it. Trying to find the right words. The right opening.

"What can be so bad you can't just blurt it out?" Bec asked. "We're sisters. We've always told each other everything."

"Well." Sophia took a small sip of the hot liquid. "There are actually a few things I haven't been quite up front about."

"Like what? Come on. Give."

"I know you're a very accepting person," she began. "You didn't even balk when I discovered the information about the Chupacabra, which surprised me. You can't imagine how difficult it is to convince people there's actually a creature out there that's a hybrid of many animals and who knows what. And that it might be breeding and reproducing."

"If you're not from the southwestern part of the country and haven't had firsthand experience with it, it's a stretch. I agree. But you know I've always had a fascination with the supernatural, anyway."

Sophia took another sip. "And a good thing. Because that's part of what I have to tell you." She looked at her sister. "I've told you a lot about this group I'm part of, the Night Seekers, whose only purpose is to hunt and destroy this devil beast."

Rebecca nodded.

Sophia bit off a piece of muffin and chewed it slowly. "What I didn't tell you is that all of them except for Dante Martello and me are shapeshifters. They're part wolf."

Bec's eyes widened. "Are you shitting me? For real?" She laughed. "Ohmigod! I must own half the books written about them."

"Get out of here. You do?"

"Uh-huh." Rebecca leaned across the table. "When the twins were killed I began studying all the legends I could find about people and animals who could assume other forms. I actually took a couple of courses online about that particular paranormal aspect."

Sophia laughed. "I told Logan you wouldn't freak. I didn't realize how excited you'd actually be. Wait until I tell him. He'll never believe it."

"If you accepted it why would it bother me? We think a lot alike. Look at the world in very similar fashions."

"I know, I know. It's just..." Sophia spread out her hands. "It's not something that comes up in everyday conversation. But I should have just trusted my instincts."

She stared at Sophia. "So, you discussed this with Logan? Wait. You said only you and Dante were pure human. So this means that Logan is a shifter."

"Yes. It does. Like I said, he was very uneasy about me telling you."

"I can imagine." She bit into the flaky pastry on her plate and chewed slowly. "Mmm. They do make the very best goodies in here. Okay. So what color is he?"

"Color?"

"As a wolf. Everything I read said the genetic code for the human part of the shifter determines the color of his or her coat."

"Oh." Sophia was still trying to assimilate the fact that Rebecca was taking this all so calmly. "Dark brown. Almost a sable color."

"Have you ever, you know, seen any of them actually shift?"

"Yes. But the men are actually a little reticent about it because they have to get naked to do it."

Rebecca's eyes sparkled. "You think Logan would let me see him get naked and shift?"

"Maybe after we're finished here. I see the way the two of you look at each other."

Bec's face sobered. "Not that it could go anywhere. I'm here and he's going back to Texas."

"Let's worry about that when the time comes. The reason I told you now is because he's going to head for the woods behind the motel and shift so he can try to track the devil beast. He can cover a lot of territory when he runs as wolf. Shifters have incredible speed."

"I still want to see him, but okay. Let's get down to the business at hand." She pointed to the folder. "What did you come up with?"

"If Bobby and the others hadn't been so fixated on the serial killer angle they'd have locked onto it themselves." She opened the folder. "Elaine Warren and Bradley Howard both work at the hospital. She's in the pharmacy, he works in X-ray. How farfetched is it to think the two of them hooked up and Harland Warren discovered it?"

"And killed them?"

"What better place than to bury two murders than in the rumors of a homicidal maniac? I want to know a little more about him. His personality. And I want to talk to Elaine's and Bradley's coworkers at the hospital."

"Then let's get going. If you're right and these are human kills, it means the Chupacabra still has to feed its lust and is about to hit prey number two."

Chapter Eleven

Logan carefully made his way from the back of the motel to the edge of the woods behind it, watching to make sure he wasn't attracting anyone's attention. The sun was exceptionally bright today, reflecting off the stark whiteness of the snow and making everything stand out more vividly. But no one seemed to notice him as he followed his usual path and was finally swallowed up by the trees.

About twenty feet into the woods he stopped by the tree he'd marked that first night, a thick, majestic black spruce with a wide crotch where one of the limbs met the trunk. A place he could easily stash his clothing. Taking the waterproof pouch from his pocket, he shook it out and loosened the drawstring. He undressed, very carefully folding his clothes and stuffing them into the pouch. From one pocket of the jacket he pulled a radio receiver on a cord that he hung around his neck, stuffed the jacket in with the other clothes and tightened the drawstring. He tucked the bag and his boots into his usual hiding place in the tree, hopping from foot to foot as the cold snow seeped into his human feet.

Then he took a deep breath and allowed his body to change. Bones elongated, fur sprouted on his skin and his face morphed into that of a wolf. At last he was ready, down on all fours, scanning the area one last time to make sure he wasn't seen. Then he was off, racing across the frozen landscape, his wolf vision searching, searching for any sign of the devil beast.

He had run for perhaps an hour, scouting around the isolated houses, when something teased at his nose. He stopped, snout raised as he sniffed the air. Was that turpentine? He knew that the odor of that liquid lingered briefly in the air after a Chupacabra kill, but dissipated quickly. Did it also remain for a time after the beast had been in an area? What held it and what made it disperse? There was just so damn much they still didn't know.

Moving forward more slowly, he scoured the area, moving in ever-widening circles. He nearly missed the icy snow cave, it was so well hidden, but the very faint lingering odor of turpentine dragged at him. The opening was barely large enough for an animal to crawl in and out. Logan got down on his belly and wriggled inside the enclosure.

He found himself in a depression in the snow obviously made by some creature which had been spending time here. Sniffing the icy ground, Logan again detected turpentine although the essence was elusive. Since it dissipated so quickly at the scene of Chupacabra kills he assumed the only reason it lingered here was because the beast had spent sufficient time in this space.

Logan rooted around in the space, large enough for a body at least six feet in length, but other than the faint odor he found nothing else. Maneuvering very carefully in the tight space, he crawled out slowly, rose up on all fours and shook himself. Looking around to orient himself, he realized the cave was not more than a mile or two from where the tiny animal carcasses had been found. He closed his eyes and tried to call up the maps he'd been working with, to identify a target area that would narrow the search down.

The beast was around here somewhere. All his wolf senses told him that. It was just a matter of where. Orienting himself, he drew a mental circle to follow and took off, racing over the frozen landscape and through the stark, snow-covered trees. Maybe they were finally going to catch a break.

* * * * *

Rebecca checked the schedule and learned that the two pharmacy techs currently on duty were Joy Blanchard and Larry Marshall. Human Resources told her they had both shared shifts with Elaine Warren on a regular basis. She and Sophia decided the workplace was the best place to begin to question people. If they found nothing there, they'd go onto the list of friends and acquaintances.

The pharmacy itself was decent size, with a space for customers to turn in and wait for prescriptions. A slightly plump blonde woman stood behind the counter, in back of her a second, raised counter where two men were busy working and behind them rows of shelves and cabinets that held medications.

The woman looked up expectantly when Sophia and Rebecca walked in, her lips curving in a practiced, professional smile.

"May I help you?"

When Rebecca pulled out her CID shield the smile disappeared.

"We'd like to talk to you for a few minutes," she told the woman, glancing at her name badge. "Joy, right?"

"Yes. What's this about?"

"We just wanted to ask you some questions about Elaine Warren," Sophia told her. "I'm assuming you must have worked with her."

"We already talked to the police," she said, her face tightening. "I told them everything I know."

Sophia studied the woman. Her body language was contradictory to what she was saying and Sophia got that little kick to the gut that always told her they were onto something.

"I know." Rebecca's voice was pleasant. Well modulated. "I'm just going over some of the material again to make sure we didn't miss anything. You and Elaine worked the same shifts, right?"

Joy fiddled with the pads of paper and processing equipment on the counter. "Sometimes."

A tall, dark-haired man in a white lab coat came down from the elevated counter to stand next to her. "Problem, Joy? Do you need Allen?"

Sophia saw the other man was still working away but glancing down at them every few seconds.

"No, no, no." Joy looked at the two women. "It's okay."

The man, however, didn't walk away. He narrowed his eyes at Sophia and Rebecca. "I'm Larry Marshall, the other tech on duty today. What's the problem here?"

"Just a few follow-up questions about Elaine Warren," Rebecca told him. "Did you work any shifts with her?"

"Is this about her murder?" he asked.

Rebecca nodded.

"We already talked to the police and answered questions. Why are you back?"

"Just tying up a few loose ends," Rebecca said smoothly.

Sophia noticed that the longer they stayed, the more Joy Blanchard fidgeted. She'd been doing this long enough to know the woman was hiding something. Her nerves were about more than just additional police questioning.

"Rumor has it that there's some kind of homicidal maniac running around," Larry commented. He stood with his hands in his slacks pockets, obviously trying for a casual pose. Yet he, too, exuded an air of tension.

"Where did you hear that?" Rebecca asked.

He shrugged. "You know. Just the usual gossip."

"We're all just so upset about Elaine," Joy said, twisting her fingers together. "She was such a sweet person."

Larry made a rude noise. "A doormat, if you ask me."

Rebecca looked at him quizzically. "Why do you say that?"

"Don't you say a word," Joy snapped, sudden anger splashing across her face. "Elaine was a good person. No one is interested in your opinions."

"On the contrary." Sophia leaned on the counter, studying the two people behind it. "We're extremely interested." She looked from one to the other. "Didn't the police come and talk to you about her?"

Joy twisted her fingers together. "Just about the hours she worked, how often she worked the night shift. Things like that."

Sophia wanted to shake both of them, but she could tell that they were each hiding something. Maybe the same something. And she had the feeling that Larry was the one with the key. She was about to see if they could separate the two of them when the other man behind the elevated counter came down to join them.

"Can I help you with something?" he asked. "I'm Allen Borden, the pharmacist on duty. We're a little busy at the moment and I need my techs to get back to work."

Rebecca showed him her badge. "We just had some questions about Elaine Warren. We'll try not to take up too much time."

"I thought we'd told the police everything. Elaine worked a third of the time at night, no one bothered her that any of us could recall and she wasn't getting any threats. And she also barely knew Darrell Franklin, so I can't imagine a connection there."

"Did she know Bradley Howard?" Sophia studied all three faces in turn. "He worked here in the X-ray department, I believe."

The tension in the air snapped and crackled. Sophia would bet money the police hadn't asked about a connection between the two. Why would they? Howard's body had just been discovered and she was sure no one had yet come to the hospital to follow up.

Allen frowned. "Why are you asking about him? The two departments don't really interact. Is he involved in this somehow?"

"He's dead." Sophia dropped the words bluntly, wanting to see the reaction she got.

Joy turned pale and Larry's eyebrows lifted nearly to his hairline. Allen just looked objectively distressed.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

"You don't think it's a strange coincidence that two hospital employees have been killed within forty-eight hours?"

"Not really."

"Maybe someone has a grudge against the hospital," Sophia interjected.

Allen frowned. "I'd think we've had heard something if that was the case. No, I don't think we can tell you anything."

"I do," Joy blurted out. "I wasn't going to say anything because..."

"Because?" Rebecca prompted.

"Because the police told us Elaine was killed by some stranger. They were trying to find some connection between her and Darrell Franklin, so I didn't think anything of it."

"But this puts a different light on it," Larry butted in.

"Wait a minute." The pharmacist moved closer to the two techs. "What's going on here? What don't I know?"

"That Bradley's been humping Elaine for the past six months."

The expression on Larry's face was one of vicious satisfaction.

"Only because she was married to a man who mistreated her," Joy protested. "Bradley was nice to her."

"Yeah." Larry snorted. "Nice in bed."

"I think both of you need to come down to the barracks," Rebecca said. "We need to go into this in greater detail. It's not a good thing that you held back information."

"Wait a minute." Allen looked at Rebecca and Sophia. "The pharmacy can't be left without any staff. Can't this wait until shift change?"

Rebecca shook her head. "Not with a fresh murder to consider."

He sighed. "All right. Can you give me a few minutes to get other staff in here? I'll call the HR office and see who they can pull to at least work the counter."

"Of course."

"I just want to be sure you know that whatever these two tell you, I had no knowledge of anything."

"I understand," Rebecca told him.

Sophia looked at Joy and Larry standing uneasily behind the counter, watching. "Both of you wait right here until your replacements arrive," she said. "Then we'll go down to the barracks together."

"Wait a minute," Larry protested.

"You withheld information important to this investigation," Rebecca pointed out. "If we'd known there was a connection right away, maybe Bradley Howard would still be alive. You're both going to have to come in for questioning." She pulled out her cell phone and called Bobby. "We're bringing two very interesting witnesses down to the barracks," she told him.

She gave him a very concise version of the conversations that had just taken place. Rebecca saw her sister's hand tighten on her cell phone and her mouth flatten in a thin line.

"Bobby, there's a connection between Warren and Howard. It's time to take a look at Harland Warren, just like Sophia said. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Okay, then you'll have someone pick up the husband right away? Because if what my two witnesses say is true we're not looking at a homicidal maniac. Just a husband with some major anger management issues. Okay, okay. We'll be along in a few."

"Problem?" Rebecca asked as Sophia clicked her phone shut.

"No. Bobby's stubborn but not stupid. He's had men sitting on Warren, anyway. They'll just stuff him in a state car and bring him in."

"He certainly seemed broken up about his wife," Sophia pointed out.

For the moment they'd forgotten the two techs standing there.

"Harland Warren puts on a good act," Joy told them. "But I saw Elaine come to work many times with bruises she tried to hide. And if I said anything she always made excuses. No wonder she was susceptible to a man who was nice to her."

"Bradley Howard's a nerd," Larry said nastily.

"He's a nice man," Joy snapped, finally angry. "A lot nicer than you."

Allen walked back up to them. "I have replacements on the way. Intake has agreed to lend me someone until then. Just to handle the counter." He looked up when the pharmacy door opened and a tall redhead walked in. "And here she is."

"Then we'd better get moving," Rebecca told them.

* * * * *

Sophia had still not heard from Logan by the time she and Rebecca finished questioning the two pharmacy techs. The story, unfortunately, was an all-too-familiar one. Rebecca wrote up the formal statements and had Joy and Larry sign them. Their lunch break disappeared because Bobby and two of the other detectives brought Harland Warren in and everyone was interested in that interview.

"I guess I should have paid more attention to what you said," Bobby told Sophia grudgingly.

"Don't beat yourself up about it. If I didn't have the background on the devil beast killings I'd have followed the same path."

"Maybe. Maybe not." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "I ignored the bump on the head. On both Warren and Howard. Figured they got it from falling. But shit, Sophia. As bad as it sounds, it made more sense to think we had a homicidal maniac running around, a bloodthirsty serial killer, than to even consider what you believe."

"You didn't believe it when we had the last spate of killings, either." She swallowed hard. "I remember what the twins looked like. And the others. I did all the research on the internet for similar kills. I found all the information and you and everyone else told me *I* was crazy."

He looked at her helplessly. "You have to admit it sounds insane."

She looked at him sadly. "Sometimes insanity is the only answer." She turned away. "Let's go see what you can get out of Harland Warren."

But Warren was a tough nut to crack. For a while Sophia was almost ready to think either the man really hadn't done it or he was a convincing liar. But Bobby knew just how much to push him to make his temper flare. It took two detectives to restrain him, even handcuffed as he was, when he reared up in anger and shouted, "Hell, yes, I killed the cheating whore and her asshole lover. And I'd do it again. Woman's place is with her husband, not in another man's bed."

When they got him back in the chair they manacled his ankles and fastened a chain from the handcuffs to the ankle cuffs. He was still raging when Bobby assigned one of the two detectives in the room to take his statement.

"Looks like you were right," he told Sophia grudgingly. "I'm getting a crew back out to his house to search for weapons right now. God only knows what he used to kill them the way he did. It turns my stomach just to think about it. But that leaves me right back where I started. With an unknown killer or your crazy theory."

"Logan will be back here around five o'clock," she told him. "If you can get all of your team into the conference room I'll do my show and tell with the pictures and you tell me what you think."

"I called the sheriff," he said, running his hand over his face. "He'll send out the night shift to patrol. Why don't you go over the maps with me and tell me where you think they'd best spend their time. It's a hellacious big county, after all."

"All right. Logan will be back before then and he might have something to add."

* * * * *

The show and tell with the pictures got mixed reactions. Some of the detectives were beginning to buy into the theory that they were dealing with some kind of bloodthirsty creature but they still balked at completely accepting the Chupacabra story.

"At least we got Bobby to get night patrols from the sheriff," Sophia told Logan when he reached the barracks at the end of the day. She'd just finished the frustrating meeting with some of the detectives and her nerves were frayed. "I wish we had someplace for it to look. Besides the whole damn county, I mean."

"We may be able to narrow it down." He told her about finding the snow cave. "I'd say the beast has spent a good amount of time in there or I never would have been able to track its scent."

"Can you mark that area on a map for Bobby?"

"Sure. If he'll pay attention to me."

"Pay attention to what?" Bobby had just come out of the conference room, looking harried.

Logan looked at Sophia, then back at Bobby. "I did some more scouting today," he began.

"Without the snowmobiles?" Bobby stared at him. "How did you get around?"

"That doesn't matter. What is important is that I think I can identify an area where the sheriff should concentrate the night patrols."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"Look." Logan huffed his frustration. "I'm not about to waste manpower here. I was in law enforcement myself for a number of years so I know you can't just send people chasing after nothing."

"The deputies will be out anyway," Sophia pointed out. "Whoever or whatever is doing this we're looking for isolated dwellings with protection close to the house for concealment. I was right about the Warren and Howard killings, so can you cut me a little slack here?"

Bobby heaved a sigh. "Yeah, sure. Sorry. I know you guys are trying to help and I appreciate it."

"How are things going with Harland Warren?" she asked.

"That sick bastard." A weary expression settled on Bobby's face. "He's lawyered up but I sent Scott and another detective out to the house, as I said I would. Got the judge to sign a warrant immediately so there's no question about the legality." He shook his head. "They found a box cutter in the garage and a pail with a rubber hose coiled in it. The lab's testing them all for blood right now."

"He used the hose to siphon the blood," Logan guessed. "That's how he managed to drain it from the body."

"That's my assumption. We're also questioning more of the Warrens' friends to get a better handle on what was going on with the marriage. I'd say we've got him nailed." He looked at Logan. "Why don't you come into my office and show me your target area on one of the maps I've got in there. I'll call the sheriff and tell him covering them is a priority."

"Thank you, Bobby," Sophia told him. "I really appreciate this. I have this bad feeling we're running out of time."

"Ric's sending the helo up," Logan said when they finally headed out of the barracks. "He's bringing it himself. He'll call when he gets here."

"Good. I just hope he gets here in time."

Chapter Twelve

Sophia, Logan and Rebecca took their usual booth at The Crown, Sophia frustrated after a long and unproductive meeting with the other detectives.

"I was so sure they'd at least consider the possibility." She sipped on the hot tea she ordered instead of a drink.

"When I spoke to Ric he mentioned that Craig's not very happy with the reaction we're getting from the state cops," Logan said, salting his fries.

"But he understands, right? I know his influence got us into this to begin with but you can't make a horse drink if he's not thirsty."

Rebecca laughed. "I think you've got your metaphors mixed, but I understand what you're saying."

When Clint managed to join them for a few minutes they brought him up to speed. Sophia caught her sister looking at the man strangely and she was sure Bec was wondering about Clint's heritage, too. She'd have to tell her sooner or later, no getting around it. But right now she was pretty sure her sister could only deal with one shifter.

Clint was back behind the bar when they left for the motel but he motioned for her to come over.

"Logan called this afternoon to tell me what you've found. I'm gonna hunt with him tonight, *chere*. I think two of us working together can spot more things. Frayne will close up again."

Did that mean he wouldn't be by to see her first? She tried to conceal her disappointment.

"But I plan on a quick stop with my favorite woman first," he grinned. "Be ready. Now I gotta get back to work."

At eight o'clock Logan knocked on her door to tell her Ric was at the Northern Maine Regional Airport with the helicopter.

"He's getting something to eat in the coffee shop there. He'll hang out for a while then spend some time flying over the area. I emailed him copies of the maps we're working with. This way he'll get a feel for the spots we're focusing on."

"Are you getting him a room here? He can't sleep at the airport."

"Already taken care of. Tell Clint I'll be ready when he is."

"Tell Clint?"

"No secrets in our little family," he chuckled as he left.

Apparently not.

At eight thirty Clint was the one knocking on her door.

"I have to meet Logan pretty soon," he told her, "but I can't go out in the night air without tastin' my sweet Sophia."

"People will start asking you where you're going so early on weekend nights," she said, sinking into his tight embrace.

"It's none of their damn business," he told her, his voice muffled against her hair. "They'll keep their questions to themselves if they know what's good for them."

Sophia tilted her head back. "If you're worried about me, don't be. I don't mind if the world knows."

"I just don't want to do anything to compromise the job you came here to do," he told her.

Sophia snorted. "I think the CID is doing that without any help from you." Then she shook her head. "That's not fair. Our boss got us inserted into this investigation by using his considerable influence. I should have known, however, the attitude about the Chupacabra wouldn't be any different than it was when my nephews were killed."

Clint rubbed his hands up and down her back then stepped away. "Let me get out of my clothes, *chere*. I brought the cold in with me." He grinned. "Besides. I want to be naked with you as quick as possible."

In seconds they were both under the covers, on their sides skin to skin, Clint's hands touching her here, there, everywhere.

"I like it better when I can take my time with you," he told her, desire edging his voice. "But this is better than nothing at all."

"I agree." She slid a hand between them and reached for his cock, finding it hot, hard and ready. "Maybe I can help speed things up."

Clint gave a guttural laugh. "If you speed it up any more, it'll be over before it starts." He gently moved her hand away. "Let me help you catch up."

He had learned the map of her body over the past few nights so he knew exactly where and how to touch her. His mouth was hard against hers, his tongue probing and arousing as it danced with her own. His kisses were powerful, lighting up the nerves in her body, kicking open the gates of desire as his hands wandered everywhere.

His lean fingers, still slightly chilled from the night air, woke up the nerves in her breasts as he cupped each in turn, thumbs brushing the stiffened nipples, fingers pinching and tugging. Every pull on the taut peaks sent arrows of shimmering heat straight to her pussy, releasing a fresh spate of cream.

His mouth never left hers as his hand continued down the curves and swells of her body. Lightly brushing the soft skin of her tummy, drifting past the curls on her mound to stroke her inner thighs. She parted her legs for him, so hot for him she wanted him inside her at once. But even with limited time available tonight it seemed Clint was determined to go at his own pace.

His tongue continued to probe her mouth as his fingers drifted lightly and teasingly up and down her inner thighs. A voluptuous heat suffused her, like an erotic mist

settling on her skin, and every pulse point thrummed insistently. Sophia ran her fingers through the silk of his hair, clasping his head to her, stroking his tongue with hers voraciously, as if she'd never get enough of the taste of him.

Fingers probed at her wet folds and when Clint's thumb scraped over her clit she moaned into his mouth. He lifted one of her legs and draped it over his, opening her to him. Strong fingers massaged her labia, circling her opening but never...quite...there.

She pulled her mouth away from his, gasping with need.

"Please. I need...I need..."

"Need what, *bebe*?" His voice was rough with hunger.

"I need...*you*!"

Two fingers slid inside her. "Like this?" He wiggled them, scraping her sensitive vaginal walls. "And this?" He moved his head to capture one taut nipple in his mouth, gently biting down on it.

"Yes," she whimpered. "Yes. More."

He slipped his fingers from her cunt and stroked back on the sensitive skin from her pussy to the puckered opening of her anus. "And this?" One finger thrust slowly inside her ass.

"Want...to touch you," she begged. "Please. Let...me touch you. Your cock."

Clint rolled her to her back. "How about if you touch me with your pussy."

He shifted enough to reach the condom he'd dropped on the nightstand, expertly rolled it on with one hand and spread Sophia's thighs wide. His eyes were hot lights boring into her own. The message completely clear. *I am going to fuck you like mad. Get ready.*

"Take me," she whispered.

One strong push with his hips and he was completely inside her, tight pussy walls clasp him and pulling at him. It was easier for her to take him now, her body more accustomed to his size and girth. He filled every inch of her, sensation like molten lava flowing through her veins.

"Here we go," he growled.

And he began to move. Slow, slow. Then faster and faster until he was pounding into her, his cock filling every inch of her, his eyes never leaving her. She couldn't tell anymore where she stopped and he began.

The climax unspooled from deep inside her, rushing through her like a locomotive.

"Now, *bebe*." His voice was harsh. "Come for me now."

The tremors began and as soon as they did his body tensed, he threw his head back and howled her name. They hit the edge of the cliff together and dropped over, clutched in the fist of an orgasm more powerful than a tidal wave.

Once, as a child, Sophia had ridden the parachute drop at the county fair. Now she had that same feeling, a whooshing through her body as she dropped in free fall and smacked into an unstoppable force.

Clint lowered himself onto her, dragging air into his lungs, his body still hot and shaking.

"You're gonna kill me," he chuckled when he could speak.

"Same goes," she breathed. Running her hands over his sweat-slicked back, feeling the bunch and release of muscles beneath the taut skin.

A good five minutes ticked by on the clock before Clint roused himself and slid from her body. Sophia lay exhausted on the pillows, the covers pulled up to her chin, eyes closed so she could recapture those last moments one more time. She heard Clint in the bathroom, the running of water, then he was back in the room. The soft whisper of fabric told her he was putting on his clothes so she opened her eyes.

"Be careful out there, Clint. Please."

He came to the bed and bent down to brush a kiss over her lips. "Always, *chere*. Look what I have to come back to."

"Are you..." She wet her lips. "Are you going to come by...afterward?"

"If you want me to."

"Take my key card." She pointed. "It's on the dresser."

"Okay. And you keep your gun beside you. Just in case."

She stared at him. "Surely you don't think the beast will show up here. It sticks to isolated locations."

"There's more than one kind of beast out there. I just want you safe." He kissed her again. "Later." He grinned. "Keep the bed warm for me, okay?"

Then he was gone. Sophia climbed out of the bed long enough to get her Glock from the dresser and put it on the nightstand. Then she huddled under the covers again, pulling them close to her so she could inhale Clint's lingering scent.

* * * * *

Why do I feel that I've covered the entire state of Maine?

Logan's wolf lips were pulled back in a replica of a grin.

They had stopped in a small clearing among a towering stand of blue spruce to regroup and reorient. They had been running for close to six hours, working their way out and then back toward the motel. Logan had shown Clint the snow cave, which showed no signs of being used in the past twenty-four hours, and they scoped out some likely spots for the beast to hide and attack.

They had not seen any sign of the devil beast or any indication it was out hunting tonight. Silently they shared an uneasy feeling, as if they were missing something.

Wimp! Clint gave a silent laugh. You should ask the CID to warn these particular folks again, and be sure the sheriff's patrols pay careful attention to these areas.

I just have the feeling we're missing something.

Clint stared at him through his wolf eyes. *I think we've done all we can for tonight. Let's get back to the motel.*

All right. We can talk about this in the morning. See if we can narrow the area even more.

They rose to all fours, scoped out the area around them once more and took off. They used trees to conceal themselves as much as possible until they finally reached the place where they'd stashed their clothes.

"I have a bad feeling I can't get rid of," Logan said, zipping up his parka.

"I hate to say it, but I share the feeling," Clint agreed.

"Are you going home?" Logan asked carefully.

Clint shrugged. "Not much use, as close to morning as it is."

"Clint?"

"Yeah?" He turned to face the other man, his stance slightly belligerent.

"I just wanted to say that I'm glad you and Sophia have something going. She's..." he searched for words, "a tightly contained person. Her entire focus is the job. It's good to see her let down a little."

Clint studied him for a moment. "You should know I have strong feelings for her."

"And *you* should know that I think you're very good for her. I hope the two of you can work things out between you."

"Thanks." He held out his hand and Logan shook it.

"All right. Let's go before someone sees us and wonders what two men are doing wandering around out here at this hour."

* * * * *

Chuck Whittaker thought long and hard before making the offer to the stranger he'd picked up. The man had spent what little light remained working on one of the cabins before coming in to wash up and share a simple meal. The man—Fred—was certainly weird looking and Chuck was irritated by that strange odor of turpentine that clung to him. Still, he was quiet and didn't seem like a troublemaker. And he'd cut and stacked the wood that Chuck hadn't gotten to and was working his way through a list of minor repairs.

And there was still a lot of work to do. Chuck and his wife had kicked around the idea of hiring someone laid off work for the winter months but Fred had popped up and he took it as an omen.

They ate supper without much conversation then Fred prepared to bed down in one of the cabins. But the outbuildings weren't heated and all the space heaters used during hunting season had been serviced and were packed away until spring. He could

almost hear Loraine's voice telling him he was talking a foolish chance but he liked to think he was a fair judge of people, so he made the man an offer.

"You'll probably freeze to death in one of those cabins," he said. "We've got a room off the kitchen over there that the wife uses for sewing and stuff. It's got a couch in it she says isn't too bad, if you'd like to bed down there."

"Are you sure?" Fred asked in his weird voice.

"Absolutely." Chuck pulled out a grin. "Can't have you freeze to death before the work gets finished, right?"

"Thanks. Appreciate it."

Chuck found a pillow and blankets for the man and showed him the downstairs washroom.

"Hope you don't mind but I'll be getting you up pretty early in the morning so we can get at it."

Fred just nodded and headed into the room.

Chuck climbed the stairs to his bedroom and dug out his flannel pajamas. Once in bed, the covers pulled up, he turned on the television he and Loraine kept in there and flipped through the channels to see if there was anything he wanted to watch. But today had been a long one for him so he turned it off along with the lamp and burrowed beneath the covers. Sleep came easily to him.

When the noise woke him he blinked his eyes, startled out of sleep. Looked at the clock on the nightstand and saw it was four in the morning. What had awakened him? Then he heard it again, a loud thump from downstairs, as if something large had bumped into the wall.

Jesus! Had Fred gotten up in the middle of the night? What could he possibly be doing down there?

Chuck climbed out of bed, stuck his feet into his slippers and reached for the robe he kept at the foot of the bed. He was just fastening the tie at the waist when his bedroom door flew open, slamming against the wall with a loud *crack!* Chuck's eyes widened and his heart almost stopped beating at the apparition standing in his bedroom doorway.

He stumbled backward then tried to get to his closet to get his shotgun. He only made it two steps before the creature was upon him. A searing pain as he was ripped open from neck to groin was the last thing he ever felt.

* * * * *

Once again Logan, Clint and Sophia were having coffee in her room but this morning they were joined by Ric Garza. Sophia had swallowed a smile when she introduced Ric and Clint and they circled each other momentarily like two junkyard dogs. But as soon as Ric realized Clint was on board with what they were doing and

was helping, and Clint realized Ric wasn't poaching on what he considered his territory, they settled down to hash out details.

Logan made an early trip to the drive-through fast-food place for breakfast sandwiches and they ate them while going over what he and Clint had learned—or not—on their run the night before. Sophia was making notes on a small pad of paper when her cell phone rang. She recognized the readout as Bobby's cell.

"What's up?"

"You'd better get your partner and come on out to where I am." His voice sounded tired and strained as he rattled off an address.

"What's going on, Bobby?"

"We've got another body."

Sweet Jesus, was all she could think. "Who is it?"

"Man named Chuck Whittaker. Owns a hunting and fishing camp. His wife's in Boston with the daughter and her new baby. Tried to call him at seven this morning on the landline and his cell. No answer either place. Says if he's not home he's always got that cell with him." Bobby sighed heavily. "She called the sheriff who sent someone out on a welfare call. Deputies found the body and the sheriff called me."

"I'm guessing since you called me that it's like the others?"

"Yes." He sounded tired and stressed. "I think we really need your input on this, Soph. Much as I hate to admit it, there's some aspects to these kills that indicate something not quite human. And not like any of the animals we're used to around here."

"We're on our way." She clicked off and repeated everything to the men.

"I'll get going, then." Clint drained his coffee cup and rose from the chair.

"I'm going to take the helo up," Ric told them. "Scope out the area in daylight. You don't need to be dragging yet another person along to this."

"I'll call you when we know more about what's happening," Sophia told him as they exited the room.

She and Logan were quiet with their own thoughts until they finally reached the Whittaker place. Just as at the Warrens, the driveway was lined with Maine State Police vehicles. This time, however, the activity seemed to be inside. Two troopers stood guard on the front porch but the door was open.

When they showed their identification one of the troopers jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Upstairs. Detective Lacroix's waiting for you." The man looked a little pale.

"Have you been up there?" Sophia asked.

He swallowed. "Yes ma'am. It's, uh, pretty bad."

They followed the sounds of activity to an upstairs bedroom. Scott Mooney was standing in the doorway, his face drawn.

"This is the worst one," he told them. "It's...like something out of a nightmare."

He stepped aside to let them enter. Bobby turned when he heard them.

"Whatever or whoever this is, things are getting worse. Escalating." He moved to the side so they could get closer to the body.

Even Sophia paled when she saw it. The beast must have been enraged or at the height of its lust, because instead of one slice from neck to groin the body was actually ripped open, the organs torn out and ravaged. And the two puncture wounds looked as if they'd been made by repeated stabbings.

And like Darrell Franklin every bit of the blood had been drained.

"Even removing Elaine Warren and Bradley Howard from the equation," Bobby went on, "we're still dealing with someone not quite right in the head. I've contacted the border patrol but if someone's already here there's not much they can do until we catch him."

Logan walked carefully around the body. "It's angry," he observed. "I'd have to say its lust is boiling over. Maybe because there's been almost a week since its last kill."

"Okay," Bobby said, barely hiding his irritation, "if this is some creature I'm not familiar with, as you keep saying, how did it get into the house? Tell me that. Chuck Whittaker wouldn't just open his door and let a feral animal in."

Sophia and Rebecca looked at each other.

Sophia cleared her throat. "We believe—have some evidence—that this...beast...can assume different shapes."

Bobby stared at them as if they'd gone crazy. "You've got to be shitting me. Tell me you don't believe something as wacko as that."

Sophia held out her hands helplessly. "Night Seekers has reams of research on this, Bobby. Evidence to back it up. Even some eyewitness reports."

He shook his head in disgust. "You think what you want. I'm going after a killer I can rationally accept. Anyway, I'm still thinking someone who snuck over the border. Maybe he's done this somewhere before. If we have a true serial killer here I'll probably have to call in the FBI."

"No." Sophia didn't realize she'd shouted the word until Rebecca put a hand on her arm. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Please. I see where you're coming from, but will you just give us forty-eight hours?"

"For what? I can't just sit on this."

"Of course not. Do your investigating. All the things you usually do. But my gut tells me there'll be another attempt within this time frame. We've brought up extra help from the team."

"What can you lose?" Rebecca asked. "It's not as if you'll just be sitting on your hands. Let Sophia and the other Night Seekers do their thing."

"All right." He threw up his hands. "Do whatever you have to do. I'm not even sure what that is anymore. But if another body turns up it's on your heads."

* * * * *

They were eating lunch at The Crown. Frenchy was behind the bar, holding court so Clint was able to join them and Rebecca had ridden back from the crime scene with them. They'd taken the big round table in the far corner so they had room to spread things out. They were past the lunch rush so there really wasn't anyone seated close enough to see or hear what they were doing.

"We're running out of time," Ric said in a low voice. He reached into the thin leather folder he was carrying and pulled out a map, which he opened on the table. "After you gave me the location of this morning's body, I marked it here." He pointed to an X he'd made. "I brought with me the maps showing the kills in Maverick and Zapata Counties as well as the one from Alabama where you were last." He looked at Logan when he said this. "I wanted you all to see the pattern. I think it will help narrow our target area a great deal."

He opened the other maps, each of which had a red circle drawn around three marked locations. Then he put the Aroostook County map beside them, folding it to show where he'd drawn the newest circle.

"That definitely cuts out a lot of territory," Clint remarked, looking at all the maps carefully.

"Plus the snow cave we found is within the circle," Logan added. "The beast's base of operations."

Ric nodded. "Apparently it marks out its territory, finds a place to dig in and hunts from there. So let's see what we've got."

They compared each of the maps to the latest one, Logan and Clint both making notes on paper napkins.

"Darrell Franklin was here," Rebecca pointed, "and Chuck Whittaker here." She stabbed her finger at a point on the map. "So following the pattern, its next attack would occur...somewhere in this area. I know that landscape. There are hardly any homes there and it's filled with black spruce."

"This is part of the territory I flew over today," Ric told them. "You're right. Not a hell of a lot out there."

"As soon as I can get to a computer I can pull up the tax rolls and see who lives there."

"If we go back to the motel from here," Logan told her, "you can use mine."

"Then let's eat up and go." Ric refolded all the maps, then studied Rebecca. "Sophia, how much does your sister know about the Night Seekers?"

"Everything. I told her everything, so you don't have to hide anything. We can all speak freely."

Ric gave a brief nod. "Good. That helps. Clint, Logan and Sophia tell me you you've been running at night to help with the hunt. Will you be available again tonight?"

"Absolutely. I can get Frayne Beaufort to handle the evening shift. He'll be glad of the extra dough. What time?"

"Why don't we meet at the motel about nine," Logan suggested. "It will be dark then so we'll have plenty of cover."

"I'm coming, too," Rebecca told them. "I can wait with Sophia, maybe kick some ideas around."

"All right." Ric folded everything up and placed it back in the slim folder. "Next order of business is to identify who lives in the area that we need to warn and keep an eye on."

Chapter Thirteen

Rebecca pulled three names off the county tax rolls of property owners in the area that Ric had marked. They agreed that calling these people might not do much good. They needed to be warned in person. Plus they actually needed to lay eyes on the physical layout of each location. She called Bobby to request the use of the snowmobiles again.

"He says okay." She snapped her phone shut. "I know he thinks we're all crazy but at least he'd not putting any roadblocks in our way."

"It was a lot easier in Texas where people are used to the legend," Ric pointed out.

Sophia made a rude noise. "That's for damn sure." She looked at her sister. "Any word on where things stand with Harland Warren?"

"Arraignment's tomorrow morning. Bobby says the guy's really flipped out. But he's sure they've got a solid case. Scott Mooney did some digging and found that a couple of times Elaine had gone all the way to Millinocket to get her injuries treated after Harland knocked her around. And at Xeniplex he apparently was on a short leash because of his temper."

"How did he happen to find out about the affair?" Sophia wanted to know.

"He works irregular shifts, sometimes pulling extra hours if they need him," Bec answered. "One day he got off early and drove another security guard home. It took him past Bradley Howard's house and he saw Elaine's car there. Instead of storming the door he checked to see who lived there and started following the two of them."

"I guess with the kind of schedule he worked he didn't have to explain if he was late coming home," Logan put in.

"Poor Elaine." Sophia shook her head. "Too bad she didn't have the courage to leave him before this."

Bec sighed. "According to Joy Blanchard she and Bradley were planning to leave town but never got the chance. All right." She pushed back from the little table. "Let's go get the machines. Ric, you want to follow us in the air and mark the coordinates?"

He nodded. "That'll work."

* * * * *

The beast had retreated to its snow cave as soon as it finished with its most recent kill. The lust was boiling inside its body, racing through its bloodstream with the force of a hurricane. All the senses in its body were working overtime, exploding at the last kill so the prey's body was nearly destroyed. And now the same senses were still hot,

still actively volatile. There would be no rest before the final kill this time, not with the uncontrollable urgency.

But as it approached the snow cave its sense of smell went into overdrive. Intruders! The hiding place had been found. Enraged, the beast sniffed the area surrounding the cave, nostrils quivering at the foreign scent. An animal but yet not an animal. A wolf but not a wolf. Not another creature like itself but similar, in some ways.

Maddened at the violation of its space, the creature rose on its hind legs and let loose a roar that echoed off the trees and bounced back, sound waves piling on sound waves like ripples in a stream.

Get away!

That was its first reaction. Run. Hide. Find a new place of safety.

The beast spun around in circling, scenting the air again. It had marked its three target victims, within the proscribed circle it had been programmed for. It tracked by scent as well as location. Now it needed to finish off the cycle. Destroy the third target.

The pain shot through its brain again and it pressed its claw-like appendages to its head, desperate for some relief. After a moment it eased and the creature took off. It would find another hiding place to recuperate, gather its strength then let the lust lead it to finish the cycle.

* * * * *

Logan pulled his snowmobile to a stop near where he'd found the snow cave. The smell of turpentine was so strong his nostrils pinched.

It's been back. It's been here and not so long ago.

Biting back the combination of fear and anticipation rushing through him, he unhooked his rifle and climbed off the machine. Cautiously he circled the area, his eyes darting everywhere, hyper-alert for the physical presence of the devil beast.

It came back here! It returned to its temporary lair!

Excitement rose within him as he worked his way from spot to spot. Pulling the folded map from his inside pocket, he opened it and checked the location of the last two kills. Ric had been dead on. The two spots were equidistant from the snow cave and formed two points of the circle he'd drawn.

There were three logical places the beast would hit next.

Unhooking his satellite phone from his belt, he punched the number for Sophia.

"It's been back at its snow cave," he said as soon as she answered. "The turpentine smell is so strong the creature had to have been here just recently."

"You watch yourself," Sophia warned. "Be very, very careful."

"Got my rifle locked and loaded and in my hand. But Ric was dead on with the map. There are three houses that are potential target areas. You and Rebecca can each

take one and I'll take the third. We need to warn these people to be very careful of any and all strangers."

"And strange animals," she added. "Remember, we've figured out it assumes other forms."

"All right. Let's do it. Then tonight between Clint and me and the sheriff's patrols we should have the houses covered."

He rattled off the locations of two of the houses.

"Let's meet again at five o'clock. We'll return the snowmobiles and head for The Crown. I'll call Ric in the helo and let him know what's happening."

"Okay. See you at five."

Logan looked up, searching the sky, and finally sighted a tiny black spot moving far above him. He punched Ric's number into the phone.

"You were dead on, *amigo*. Here's the skinny."

* * * * *

It was a subdued group that gathered at The Crown for an early dinner. Now that they had almost physical proof of the beast's presence, and three very logical targets, protecting them was at the top of everyone's list. Along with killing El Chupacabra. Frenchy was again behind the bar so Clint was able to join them.

"I spoke to everyone at the ranch," Ric told them. "If we need more people Craig is ready to load them in a plane and send them up here."

"What do you think?" Rebecca asked.

"I think we can handle this. More is not necessarily better. At least right now."

"Any word yet on Melinda?" Sophia had told her sister about Chloe Hansen Guitron's friend and the circumstances of her disappearance.

Ric shook his head. "Nada. Mark says Chloe's doing her best to handle it but I know it's got to be tough for her. I think Craig's about ready to assign two Night Seekers to the hunt full time."

"And maybe that's what we need to do," Sophia told him, "if we don't find out anything soon."

"Meanwhile," Ric pulled some sheets of paper from his folder, "let's talk about tonight."

"We hit all three sites this afternoon," Logan told him, "and warned everyone as best we could. But we don't know what form the devil beast will take when it approaches and we can't exactly tell people, 'Hey, look out for anything strange that comes around and might turn into something else right in front of you.'"

"No kidding," Clint snorted.

"So, Clint, let's you and me figure out how to split the area into two parts, with Ric giving us air cover. As fast as we run, we should be able to keep a pretty good eye on things."

"Isn't there something Sophia and I can do?" Rebecca asked. "It's dumb for us to just keep sitting here."

"You can cover as much ground as possible with the SUV." Ric took out a pen and inked the roads on the map that were the most likely for them to drive. "Here, here and here. I've got sat radios for everyone so we can communicate. Logan, you and Clint wear your radios again so you're linked with me. And I'll monitor again from the air."

"Did Frayne agree to work again tonight?" Sophia asked Clint.

"Yes. Believe me, he's happy for the extra work."

"Okay then. Nine o'clock at the motel." Ric folded everything back up. "Let's eat. We'll all need our energy."

* * * * *

The devil beast had shifted into a less detectible form, aware that strange eyes could be tracking it. In its newest form it moved swiftly over the marked territory, heading for the final prey of this cycle. The pain shooting through its head had returned with a vengeance, a pain only satisfying the boiling lust could ease.

It took note of the fact that there was more movement on the roads tonight, more things with bright lights driving the area.

Hunting for the beast!

As it neared the perimeter of its target a dark shape flashed across the landscape about a half mile away. The Chupacabra's eyesight was extraordinary, allowing it to see things at a great distance. And permitting it to evade danger when necessary. Now it strained to see the definition of the form. Identify it.

An enemy for sure.

The beast watched for a long moment as something black streaked through the night, first heading away but then reversing direction and heading directly for the target area.

Stifling the rage surging through it, the creature turned and headed away from its objective. The kill would have to wait one more night. But that was all. Then, if danger still persisted, it would take out that danger, too.

Regardless of the consequences.

* * * * *

"Well, that was a big waste of time." Ric tossed his gloves onto the table.

They were all gathered again in Sophia's motel room, disgusted and irritated at the lack of success.

"Maybe we've scared it away," Rebecca suggested, sipping on a cup of strong coffee. Sophia had brewed a pot as soon as they'd returned.

"Fat chance," Logan grunted. "I think it has something programmed into it that forces it to complete its cycle."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Programmed into it? You sound as if someone is breeding these things."

"We think that's a real possibility."

She shuddered. "There's a scary thought."

"We've thwarted it a couple of times," Sophia put in, "and it's always returned and started the cycle again."

"So what now?" Clint asked.

"Now," Ric answered, "we try to get some sleep because tomorrow night we have to do it again."

"I have a gut feeling for some reason tomorrow night is its last opportunity," Logan said. "We need to be prepared."

Ric looked at Sophia. "I want you up in the helo with me tomorrow night. The last couple of times we've had to shoot it from the air. I want to be prepared and you're one of our best shots."

Rebecca grinned at her. "Way to go, big sister."

Sophia just nodded and told Ric, "Whatever you need me to do."

Logan finished his coffee and stood up. "Meanwhile, let's get whatever sleep we can. Rebecca, you know Bobby will expect you at the barracks tomorrow. Are you awake enough to drive home and can you catch enough sleep?"

"I'm good. But let's meet for lunch and I can report everything from the morning briefing."

In a moment everyone was gone except Clint. He turned the deadbolt on the door and engaged the safety chain. Then he began to slowly remove his clothes.

"Bed, *chere*," he said in a tired voice. "I think tonight we need our sleep more than anything else."

"I agree." Sophia stood on tiptoe to brush a kiss over his lips. "I'm glad we're doing it together."

In seconds they were under the covers, their naked bodies spooned together, Clint's strong arms holding her, his breath soft against her ear.

This is so right. How will I ever leave this?

She was still pondering the question when she fell asleep.

* * * * *

She woke to the feeling of a hand lightly stroking the length of her body—her shoulder, her arm, her hip, her thigh. Then teeth nibbled on her earlobe and scraped a path along the column of her neck. She turned and found herself looking into Clint's heated eyes, his lips curved in a sexy smile.

"Mornin', *chere*."

"I like the way you wake me up."

One hand pulled her leg over his and his hand trailed lightly over her ass to the hot crevice separating the globes.

"I could get used to it myself," he told her.

She sobered. "Clint?"

"Mm-hmm."

Sophia was doing her best to concentrate, a near impossibility with the erotic things Clint was doing to her. "If things work out the way we expect, by tomorrow or the next day we could be out of here, Logan, Ric and me."

His fingers probed between her ass cheeks, finding the tiny puckered hole and rimming it with a fingertip. "And your point is?"

"I don't know how I'm going to leave you," she cried. "And I can't stay here once we're finished."

He bit her lower lip. "I might have some ideas in that direction. Meanwhile let's turn off our brains and enjoy this nice start to the day."

His tongue glided over her lower lip, licking it like an ice-cream cone, while his busy finger continued to push against her rear entrance. Heat boiled and erupted deep inside her, spreading through her veins like a slow-burning fire. She tried to push back against him but he chuckled against her mouth.

"Don't be in such a hurry. I want to take my time."

She whimpered, a soft sound that expressed her displeasure when he took his finger away. But in the next moment his tongue slid into her mouth and his hand slipped around to cup one of her breasts. Thumb and forefinger pinched the nipple, hard, and the streak of pleasure-pain shot right to her womb. His tongue glided over hers, coaxing it to dance with his, licking at her soft flesh. Already the muscles of her pussy were fluttering in anticipation.

Wriggling in his grasp, she insinuated one of her own hands between their bodies and found the hot, hard length of his cock. Breath hissed through his teeth and the muscles of his stomach contracted.

"You have wonderful hands, *bebe*," he whispered. "My cock loves to feel your fingers around it."

"And I love to touch it. Here." She rubbed her thumb over the velvety head. "And here." She slipped lower, past the root to cup and squeeze his balls. "And to do this to you." Her fingers wrapped around him again and began the slow glide up and down, from root to tip and back again.

But Clint wasn't letting her have all the fun. He licked the tender spot behind her ear before drawing a wet path along the column of her neck. In a moment his lips closed over one already taut nipple, pulling it into his mouth and grazing it with his teeth. Her cunt was liquid with her cream and hungry for him to fill it. She thrust her hips at him but he wasn't about to be hurried any more than she was.

As she continued to stroke his shaft he worked his hand past her tummy, fingers sifting through the curls covering her mound to find the wet, swollen folds of her labia. When one fingertip brushed over her already throbbing clit she tightened her grip on his erection and pushed her hips at him.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she wondered if they'd ever get to the slow and easy Clint was always talking about. It seemed all they had to do was touch one another and they went up like fresh dynamite, so hot they almost burned each other alive.

Clint moved his head to her other nipple and at the same time thrust two fingers inside her slick pussy. She moved, trying to ride those fingers, to rub her clit against his hand. But the moment she did he pulled them free and lightly stroked her clit again.

"You're killing me," she moaned.

"Ah, but it's a good death, right?"

Against her breast she felt his lips curve in a smile. But his breathing was raspy and she knew he wasn't as controlled as he wanted her to think. She tightened her grip on his cock, feeling it swell even more in her fingers.

"Okay," he rasped. "You win."

He jerked himself from her grasp and reached into the nightstand where he'd dropped a stash of condoms. In seconds he had one open and rolled onto his cock. With startling swiftness he flipped her over and drew her up onto her hands and knees.

Was he going to take her ass? He hadn't prepared her at all and she trusted him not to hurt her, except in a most pleasurable way. In the next moment she realized that wasn't his intention at all. His thumbs opened the lips of her cunt, the head of his cock probed the opening and with one forceful thrust of his hips he drove into her deep, burying himself in her slick flesh.

He shifted slightly so his balls tickled her cunt and then his lips were kissing the small of her back, his tongue drawing tiny wet circles that sent shivers skating over her spine. His hands slid over the curve of her ass, gently separating the cheeks, his thumbs pressing against her tightly clenched anus.

"Relax, *chere*." His voice was deep and husky, rich with need and hunger. "This is good, *non*?"

"This is good, yes," she gasped, rocking back against him.

"Here we go," he ground out and began a slow, steady in-and-out movement.

Sophia wanted to hurry him but as always he was determined to set the pace. She moved with him, riding his hot erection that filled every inch of her. His thumbs continued to press against her rear opening until they breached the tight muscle,

pushing just inside. As he increased the tempo of his thrusts his thumbs penetrated her deeper and deeper.

"Touch yourself," he growled, his voice nearly unrecognizable with lust. "Rub your clit for me, Sophia."

She balanced herself on one hand and reached between her thighs to find that throbbing button. The flesh around it was dripping with her juices, the nub itself swollen and tender.

"Go on," he urged. "Do it now."

She stroked herself with two fingers, her flesh almost too sensitive to touch, but the moment she did lightning bolts of lust shot straight to her womb and her nipples, and her cunt clamped down hard on Clint's pulsing cock.

"More, *chere*. Harder."

She moved her fingers faster and as she did Clint's thumbs pushed all the way into her ass.

"Now," he roared.

And as if her body had just been waiting for his command it began to convulse in hard, wringing spasms, her cunt milking him as he thrust once, twice, again. His entire body tightened and he exploded into the latex. Even through the thin layer of the condom she could feel the hot pulses of semen and she pushed back onto him as hard as she could.

Everything ceased to exist except their two bodies, linked together, exploding together, and she fell into space. Her heart pounded and she gasped for breath as she spun and whirled. Clint's thumbs pressed deeper as his hips bucked one more time and were still.

Sophia collapsed forward, Clint falling with her and rolling them both to the side. After what seemed an eternity her heart rate finally settled and her lungs stopped protesting the deprivation of air. Clint feathered kisses across her shoulders, licking each spot then pressing his lips to it. At last he eased himself slowly from the tight, hot clasp of her.

"I could stay here like this forever," he told her, "but I think we need to start our day. And Logan or Ric is sure to come pounding on the door any second."

She groaned. "I think you're right." She laughed wickedly. "But we still have time to shower together, right?"

He laughed, a lusty sound, and nibbled her shoulder. "Of course."

* * * * *

They spent the day in busywork. Sophia really wanted to take out the snowmobiles but agreed with Logan that with the devil beast ready to strike again the noise would probably scare it off. However it left them all feeling anxious and frustrated.

Rebecca spent the morning at the barracks and filled them in on what was happening when they gathered for lunch. Again they chose a time past the usual lunch hour so The Crown would be fairly empty.

"Harland Warren was arraigned today," Bec reported. "They brought him into court in shackles because apparently he can't seem to control his temper."

"Not the best attitude when you're accused of murder," Logan commented.

"No kidding." She looked at Ric. "Bobby asked me if I knew anything about the helicopter that flew up from Texas. Apparently because of the proximity to the border we get reports of all private traffic into the airport."

Ric's face was carefully expressionless. "What did you tell him?"

"The truth. That it's part of the company that Sophia works for and that you're providing air support for the search."

"I'll bet that went over well," Logan muttered.

She shrugged. "It is what it is. He doesn't have to like it or even have anything to do with it. As long as no one's breaking any laws there's nothing he can do."

"And he still thinks we're all crazy," Sophia guessed.

"You know Bobby. Mr. Practical Common Sense. He never even liked story hour at the library."

The sisters looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"At least he's not getting in our way," Bec pointed out. "And believe it or not, a couple of the detectives stopped by my desk—quietly, of course—to tell me they'd been doing research on the Chupacabra and they were beginning to think we weren't so nuts after all. They even offered to help us off shift."

Ric's smile was humorless. "They'd all be willing to help if they got a firsthand look at this thing or lost someone to it personally."

"Hey." Sophia put her hand on his arm. "We're good, okay? And tonight we'll get the job done."

"I'd like to give Damien and Shelley some closure before the baby's born," Rebecca added.

"Amen to that."

But the tension in the air was almost palpable. Restless with nothing to do, all of them except Clint piled into the SUV and drove the roads in the target area again and again until every route was burned into their brains.

And finally daylight began to fade and darkness descended.

And the hunt began.

* * * * *

Marie Arquette stood on her back porch, a lined wool jacket wrapped around her, while she waited for Ike, the collie, to take care of his business.

"Come on, Ikey," she urged him. "I'm freezing my ass off."

But despite the dropping temperature the dog didn't seem to be in any hurry. Rather, he was sniffing frantically around the yard as if looking for something. It occurred to her he'd been doing that since the day before. Something was making him edgy but she couldn't for the life of her think what it might be.

They lived out here in the middle of all this acreage, their closest neighbor a good mile away. Just the way she wanted it. After spending her life in a low-rent part of Boston, crowded into a home with ten other people, she loved the isolation. When she'd found the discarded newspaper on her lunch table with the ad for a nurse at the hospital in the godforsaken wilderness she'd believed it was fate.

The day she'd been hired she went immediately to a realtor and used her meager savings as a down payment on this place.

"Far away from people," she'd told him.

He'd laughed. "Out here, everyone's far away from people."

She hadn't regretted it for a minute. She'd made a few friends at the hospital but for the most part she kept to herself. The terrible killings of two hospital employees had shaken her but when she discovered they were connected she brushed away any anxiety.

"Ike." She snapped her fingers. "Come here. Now."

As if sensing her impatience the dog gave up his search, took care of his business and trotted up to the porch.

"It's freezing out here, pal," she told him, rubbing his head and leading him into the house.

Before he crossed the threshold he paused and looked back out over the frozen landscape. When Marie touched him she could feel the tension running through his body. Uneasily she followed his gaze but all she saw was the piles of snow around the house and the heavily forested land surrounding her.

A shiver danced along her spine and an old saying of her Granny's popped into her mind.

Someone's dancing over your grave.

She closed the door and fastened all the locks securely. Then for good measure she went to the pantry closet and took out the rifle she'd learned to shoot when she moved up here. After all, a woman alone couldn't be too careful.

* * * * *

It was full dark now and the beast had emerged from its new hiding place. Too bad there wasn't enough time to assume an acceptable form and insinuate itself into the prey's territory. But time was running out and the headache was getting worse. It would be tonight. Period. And then the beast would be satisfied and could disappear.

Using the thick forest of trees as cover it made its way slowly to where its prey lived, eyes darting everywhere to search for the black streak it had seen the night before. Whatever it was, the devil beast knew it spelled danger and was to be avoided.

When it neared the house, standing in the small clearing within the trees, it pressed itself up against one of the trees. All the lights were on right now but soon...soon it would be dark inside and the creature could make its move.

* * * * *

"See anything yet?" Ric asked.

It was the fourth time he'd asked Sophia, unusual for such a controlled, taciturn man. But everyone's nerves were stretched taut, knowing zero hour could crop up at any minute. She was riding in the copilot's seat in the helo, connecting with the others via the satellite radio.

"No. Nothing. Let me check with Bec." She had one channel for Clint and Logan that went directly to the tiny devices around their necks and another for Rebecca.

"Negative," Rebecca answered her. "Except for two deputy sheriff cars crisscrossing the area."

"Well, at least Bobby kept that much of his word. Whatever the reason."

"Making the turn and doubling back," Bec reported. "Damn, Soph. I've been up and down this area five times already but I still feel like I'm missing something."

"It's always like that when we get close to the end in one of these situations."

"What if we're wrong and just wasting our time?"

"Nope. Tonight's the night. I just feel it. Keep looking." She pressed a second button on the radio. "Clint? Logan? Come in."

One growl. Then a second one. Signals that carried through the radios the two men wore around their necks. Radios they'd put on before shifting. It still amazed her that she could differentiate between the two, but Clint's was much deeper. The sound of it was reassuring in some way.

"Remember," she told them. "If you see anything at all you'll have to shift long enough to give me the location."

More growls.

Sophia looked down from where the helo flew high in the air. They'd come to the conclusion that using the chopper was the only way to trap and kill the beast. Shifters in wolf form could track and corral it but the kill shots had to come from the helicopter. Always. It was far too dangerous for someone to get close to the beast on the ground. Using special night vision binoculars she could see two dark forms streaking in and out among the trees, heading for the house they'd agreed—hoped—was the Chupacabra's target.

"Can you see them?" Ric wanted to know.

"They're down there," she told him. She was also hooked into the bird's comm system, the only way she and Ric could speak to each other over the noise of the rotors. "I see them running. Oh. Look." She tapped him on the arm. "Now they're heading directly for that particular house, the one Rebecca's closest to. They must have seen or sensed something in that direction."

While she watched one of the wolves spun in a circle, the black one, and Clint stood in the snow buck naked. He lifted the small radio to his mouth. "We see it, Sophia. Just a flash of it but we're after it."

Then the black wolf was back and the two of them were streaking across the frozen landscape, in and out among the trees, at a speed much greater than normal wolves.

"How far are they from their target area now?" Ric asked.

"Not far at all. I'd say maybe half a mile away."

Putting the binoculars to her eyes, she focused on the glare of the white landscape, seeking any sign of what had set off the shifters. And then she saw it, just a glimpse but a sight that nearly made her heart stop. A beast so horrific it stole her breath and shocked her senses. It was the appalling stuff of nightmares, a creature whose ugly, misshapen head alone could scare someone to death. Closing in on the house sheltering its unsuspecting prey.

"Oh, my god." With an enormous effort she pulled herself together. "I've got eyes on it," she finally made herself say.

"Better let them know," Ric told her.

She pressed the talk button on the radio, forcing a calm to her voice that she didn't feel. "Logan? Clint? I see the devil beast. Oh sweet baby Jesus." She swallowed hard. "Put on some speed, Ric. Don't let it get away."

The two wolves moved as if shot from a cannon, running so fast their images were blurred.

Sophia shifted her gaze. "Lights still on in the house." She pressed the talk button for her sister's channel. "Bec? I spotted it. It's down there not far from you. Holy shit. Holy shit. You won't believe this." She drew in a calming breath. "Anyway, it's stalking the house you're heading toward. Better speed it up. But Bec? Don't get out of your vehicle unless I tell you to."

"But—"

"Do. Not. Get. Out." Sophia ground out each word. "Wait for my signal."

"Okay, okay."

"Still got eyes on it?" Ric asked.

"Yes." She stared harder through the binoculars. "No. Dammit, I've lost it in the trees."

"Watch for two things," Ric told her. "Movement at the perimeter of the clearing around it and the lights in the house to go out."

"Bec's almost at the entrance to the driveway," she reported. "And there's a patrol car coming from the opposite direction. Let's hope we're timing this right, that we're trapping the devil beast and not running it off."

"Just keep your eyes peeled on that area."

"I am. I am." Her body hummed with the tension.

Rebecca's voice crackled in her ear. "Pulling into the driveway now. Soph, I can handle this. Really. I'll get out with my rifle and get ready to shoot the damn thing."

"No," Sophia screamed as fear for her sister slammed into her. Too many people had already died still clutching their weapons. She made herself take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "No, damn it. Do *not* get out of that vehicle, do you hear me? Stay in the truck."

"Okay, okay, okay." Bec's voice sounded impatient. "But is anyone in position to take a shot at it?"

"Yes." Sophia reached for the rifle lying next to her. "I am. And I can get low enough to do it. That's how we handled it the other times. You stay in your vehicle but have your rifle ready just in case."

"Copy that," Rebecca came back.

Sophia held her own rifle with one hand and the glasses with the other, still concentrating on the scene below. Then she spotted something and her heartbeat accelerated.

"Ric? Ric, I think I've got it again." She forced herself to breathe calmly and slowly. This was not the time to lose control. "I see something moving just at the edge of the clearing around the house. Can you go in a little lower?"

"I don't want to scare it away," he pointed out. "Just trap it and kill it."

"Clint and Logan are there now." Sophia watched the wolves continue to circle the area and picked up the radio, pressing both channel buttons at the same time. "Everyone, I see something. Just a faint shadow but it's right where the tree line ends. Clint and Logan, pour it on. Chase it into the clearing. Rebecca, call that deputy near you and tell him to stay in his car, too. We're on this."

Her heart was banging against her ribs now with a mixture of fear and anticipation.

We've got it! We've got the damn devil beast.

* * * * *

Marie clicked off the television set. Nine o'clock. Maybe she'd turn on the television in her bedroom for a little while, but she started her shift at seven in the morning so she needed to get into bed.

"Want to go out once more, Ike?" She looked at the big dog pacing circles in the kitchen. "Come on. One last trip."

But when she went to open the door he hurled himself against her, nearly knocking her to the floor.

"Ike? What's the matter with you? Come on. One last potty break tonight."

But the moment she approached the door against the dog braced itself on all fours and snarled at her. It was the first sign of aggressive behavior she'd seen in the two years she'd had Ike. Now she frowned at him.

"What is wrong? You never act like this." She threw up her hands. "All right, all right. But be warned. I'm not getting up in the middle of the night."

The dog pressed close to her as she moved through the house, turning off lights, locking doors, and made her way into the bedroom.

But still the dog didn't relax. Finally Marie went into her bathroom, carrying her pajamas. Maybe if she left the dog alone he'd quiet down.

* * * * *

"There it is," Sophia shouted again, pointing. "See it, Ric? It's moving out into the clearing now. Clint and Logan aren't far behind it."

"I've got it." He banked the helo to swoop in lower. "Put down the binocs and get ready with your rifle. I'm going in."

Sophia jacked the round into the chamber and the sound of it was loud even over the noise of the rotors. Making sure her safety belt was securely latched, she pulled the cabin door back and inched to the edge of her seat. Below her she could see two cars—Rebecca already parked next to the house and the deputy just turning into the driveway. And the devil beast now in the clearing midway between the trees and the house, head lifted as if suddenly aware of the helo above it.

"Hit the lights," she told Ric as he leveled off at a lower altitude, hovering over the clearing.

In an instant the spotlight located at the bottom of the helicopter flooded the yard and Sophia stared. In the stark glare of the spotlight every feature of the beast was vividly illuminated. Even the photos she'd seen of the previous beasts they'd killed hadn't prepared her for the hideous, frightening creature rearing up now on its hind legs. And circling in from the woods, two aggressive wolves, snapping and snarling.

"Can you take the shot?"

She heard Ric's voice in her headphones, thrusting her into awareness.

"Yes."

"Well, do it, damn it, before the thing attacks. Or gets away from us."

She braced the rifle against her shoulder and pulled the trigger once, twice, three times. Each shot was dead on, the creature flinching as the bullets pierced its strange-looking hide. At the sound of the shots Rebecca and the deputy left their vehicles and

raced toward the lighted area, holding their own rifles. They stopped just beyond the light and fired at the devil beast, now lying on the ground.

Just for good measure Sophia pumped three more shots into it and watched until she was sure it was still. And watched even longer as Rebecca emptied the rest of her clip into the creature.

"Well, that definitely should do it." She sighed wearily. "Okay, Ric. Take us down. And get on the horn to Craig." She pressed the radio talk button. "Logan? Clint? Get your asses back to the motel, pick up a vehicle and hurry on back here."

She watched the two wolves circle the area once more before they sped off through the trees.

Even before they landed Ric radioed Desolation Ranch. Sophia heard him tell Mark, who was manning the comm center, to get hold of Craig and tell him to start pulling his strings. By the time they were on the ground Mark had radioed back that the special helicopter Craig used for retrieval was already in the air with the project scientists on board. And Craig himself was calling both the head of the Maine State Police and the governor.

By the time they set down near the house there were a number of people in the yard. Marie Arquette, drawn by the noises in her yard, had ventured out onto her back porch, a large collie leaning against her, trying to push her back into the house. She took one look at what was lying in her yard and passed out. Rebecca managed to revive her and had to half carry her back into the house herself. The deputy who'd arrived with Rebecca had taken a look and vomited everything in his stomach before pulling himself together to radio in what had happened.

Another patrol car had arrived and shortly after that a van with the crime scene techs and the SUV with Clint and Logan. Rebecca was talking in low tones with both of the deputies, while Sophia stood to the side with her team members. The shock on the faces of the sheriff's men was plainly evident.

Sophia could relate to that. It wasn't easy seeing a nightmare come to life.

Well, the devil beast was dead. Again. They'd made sure of that.

But we haven't found Melinda. So this means it isn't the end of it. The hunt is still on.

Deliberately Sophia pushed the thought away. There'd be time enough to haul it out when she returned to Desolation Ranch.

This Chupacabra's appearance was even more horrific than the others they'd seen. The human-looking arms and legs had elongated hands with long, razor-sharp claws. The body looked as if constructed of layers of armor. And the head. Sophia couldn't even find words to describe the awful apparition. This one was more bizarre than the ones the Night Seekers had killed previously. The ones Craig Stafford had flown back to his secure lab where his scientists still worked to determine the genetic origins. And the odor of turpentine was so strong it stung her nostrils.

This was the first one Sophia had seen outside a photograph and she was sure she'd have nightmares for a very long time.

Bobby and the other detectives on the team arrived, stunned at what greeted them, barely able to accept what they saw.

"I owe you an apology," he told Sophia in a shaky voice. "I swear to god, I'll never doubt anything again no matter how farfetched or absurd it seems." He took a last horrified look and walked with her to the edge of the clearing, leaving the shaky crime scene techs to take pictures.

"It's all right," she told him. "I understand how difficult it is for someone to accept something this bizarre." She pulled up the collar of her jacket to protect her ears from the cold. "I'm just happy I can tell my brother and sister-in-law that their nightmare is over."

"You think it is?"

She nodded. "I think this area is no longer in danger. This is the second time the devil beast has hunted here. I think it's done with this region for a long time." *I hope.*

"So what now?" he asked. "No way are we equipped or capable to handle something like this."

"Our boss is calling *your* boss as well as the governor to tell them Night Seekers will be taking care of everything."

"The governor's already up to speed, right?" Bobby asked. "Otherwise how do you explain something like this?"

"Craig Stafford gave him all the details when he requested permission for us to come up here and stick our noses into your investigation."

Bobby shoved his hands into his pockets. "I'm sure the man was more than happy that someone else will be dealing with this."

Sophia nodded. "Besides, Stafford's been doing the lab research on these creatures and has a helicopter specially fitted out for transporting the carcass," she told him. "It's already on its way."

They all stood silently while the crime scene photographers, tiptoeing gingerly around the body of the beast, took pictures of everything.

Sophia looked up at Bobby, standing beside her, still pale and shaken. "When your guys are through just throw a canvas over the, uh, remains. Ric, Rebecca, Clint, Logan and I will stand guard until the scientists arrive to retrieve it."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "We need to get something to our public relations officer. Jesus, if the media gets hold of this..." He shook his head disbelievingly. "I saw it and I still can't accept it."

Ric, who had been standing by the chopper with his cell phone clapped to his ear, snapped the phone shut and walked over to them in time to catch the tail end of the conversation. "Stafford worked all that out with the governor. But what about the sheriff?"

"I already called him," Bobby said. "When I got here I sent him photos from my phone. He doesn't want to touch this at all, believe me. I don't think he'll sleep very well after seeing what I sent him. So just do your thing."

"And get out of here, right?" Sophia grinned weakly.

He shifted uncomfortably. "You know, under other circumstances —"

"It's okay, Bobby. We're good here."

I just hope this puts an end to it.

But she didn't give voice to her thoughts.

* * * * *

What with one thing and another it was almost nine o'clock in the morning by the time the three Night Seekers and Clint dragged themselves back to the motel. The night had played out like the remnants of some horror movie. Rebecca and Logan left to get breakfast, Ric crashed in his room to get some shuteye before flying them home in the helo. That left Sophia and Clint standing in her motel room, looking at each other.

"I have to go," she said bleakly. "Back to Texas. Today."

"I know." He pulled her into his arms. "So let me ask you something. That's a pretty big helicopter you guys have. Think it's got room for one more passenger?"

"What?" She tilted her head back and looked up at him in astonishment. "Are you saying you want to ride back with us to Texas? Like, for a visit?"

"Maybe for more than that." He ran his hands up and down her back, his touch soothing after so many hours of stress. "Maybe to stay there. What do you think? Would I fit in with the team? Your friends?"

"Absolutely. Especially since most of them are also shifters."

"Good, because I have a little plan to discuss with you later."

"A plan? But...what about your life here? What about Frenchy?"

"Frenchy's back to normal. He doesn't really need me anymore. There's nothing to hold me here except him and we've already talked about this." He cupped her chin in his palm. "We've both waited a long time for me to find my mate. Surely you didn't think I'd let you get away that easily, did you?"

"Oh, Clint!" The emotional enormity of what he was saying swamped her. She wrapped her arms tightly around him as if he might suddenly disappear.

"B-but your home," she stammered. "Here. What about —"

He touched his finger to her lips. "Home for me is where you are, *chere*. Things have a way of working out, you know."

A warm rush of happiness engulfed her. "Do you know that you suddenly made me happier than I've been in a long time?"

"Good. Let's keep it that way."

Before she could say anything else his mouth found hers in a scorching kiss and she sank into the warmth of him. He was right. This was home.

Epilogue

Sophia opened her eyes slowly, awakened by the sun streaming in through the window. Her body felt fully sated after a night of incredible lovemaking with Clint and she smiled as she remembered the erotic hours in his arms. They'd made love in ways she hadn't even dreamed possible. She reached out her hand now to touch him but he wasn't next to her. The bed was empty.

"Clint?"

A soft growl answered her. She looked down to see a huge black wolf curled comfortably on the rug next to the bed and she laughed.

"Have you already been out playing with your new friends?"

Another growl and the wolverine lips curved in what she was sure was a smile. She was so grateful at the ease with which the Night Seekers had accepted Clint and taken him in as one of their own. The night after they arrived he'd run with the others and she knew some kind of bonding had occurred.

"Well, playtime's over," she told him. "We're all having breakfast together this morning and Craig Stafford's going to call so get your act together."

The air around the wolf shimmered and in an instant Clint stood before her gloriously naked.

"Are you sure playtime's over?" He sat on the edge of the bed, pulled the sheet down and cupped her breasts.

"Yes." She batted at him. "Business first, buddy."

He frowned. "Am I already losing my appeal?"

Sophia laughed. "After fucking my brains out last night you can ask that? Come on. Maybe I'll let you frolic in the shower a little but we've got to get dressed."

"If we frolic we'll never make it to breakfast," he told her. "But tonight..." He let his voice trail off and winked at her.

Heat crept over her body. "Tonight," she nodded.

It was a rare moment when all the Night Seekers and their mates were eating breakfast together at the huge table in the sunny kitchen. But Logan, Sophia and Clint had arrived in the middle of the night and the past forty-eight hours had been fractured what with wrapping up details of the situation in Maine and pulling together the report for Craig.

"I think a meal together would be good," Ric said and set the alarm in the comm center to notify them if a message came through from Craig Stafford. Anything else could wait.

Sophia looked around the table. Victory had been a brief celebration. Every person sitting here was well aware that this wasn't finished. Twice before they thought they'd killed the devil beast only to have another one appear. Silently they agreed that there had to be a breeding ground somewhere and they'd never be able to rest until they found it. And destroyed it.

And found Melinda.

No one said it aloud but Sophia knew everyone was thinking it.

But in the meantime life continued as normally as possible, under the circumstances. With two Night Seekers now married and the possibility of more of them mating in the future, Craig Stafford was continuing to build individual housing for the couples. Originally Jonah and Dakota Grey had lived in an expanded wing but as Craig had pointed out, "You can only enlarge a house so much."

So they ate to the sound of hammers and power tools in the area beyond the main building. Clint had been welcomed as easily as Dakota and Chloe, especially since it meant adding another shifter to the ranks.

The big surprise for Sophia was Clint's announcement to her the night before about his plans. Just moments ago he'd shared it with everyone else.

"The military was good to me," he told everyone then looked at Sophia. "I earned damn good pay and hardly spent any of it. When I knew Sophia was my mate and that I had to be wherever she was, I started surfing the internet. There's a bar for sale in the little town near the ranch. And the bar business is what I know."

"You telling us you plan to buy it?" Ric asked.

Clint nodded. "Maybe your boss could help me through all the paperwork and licensing?"

"No problem. I'll get on it with him as soon as we finish breakfast."

He reached for Sophia's hand and smiled down at her. "And one more announcement. Sophia and I plan to be married just as soon as we can get *that* paperwork taken care of."

Both pieces of news were greeted with cheers and jubilation. Everyone pushed back from the table and began hugging Sophia and shaking Clint's hand. But then a sharp warning bell cut through the noise of the celebration.

"That's a call coming in," Ric said. "Probably from the boss."

They hurried into the comm center and gathered around the big screen while Ric answered the video call. In a moment Craig Stafford's face filled the screen.

"Good morning, everyone. I understand we have a new addition to our growing family." He smiled. "Sophia, congratulations. And Clint, welcome to the team."

"Thank you, sir," Clint said into the mic Ric indicated. "We plan to be married as soon as possible."

"Excellent. Let me know when you have a date and I'll be there."

"Clint's going to need your assistance with a little project, too." Ric went into detail about the proposed purchase of the bar.

Craig nodded. "No problem. Get all the information together, Clint, and Ric will hook us up with a video call. Happy to do it."

"Thank you," Clint repeated. "I really appreciate it."

"My pleasure. It will be nice for the team to have a place to hang out and relax and not feel uncomfortable."

"Thank you again." This from Sophia.

"Good job in Maine, all of you. My scientists are working on the body as we speak and I'm hoping to have new information before too long. But you all realize the truth of the situation, right?"

"That there are more of them and they're breeding somewhere," Jonah said finally. "Or someone's breeding them."

Sophia nodded. "I'd say that's apparent. There has to be a pack of them, and what an unholy thought that is. But we've had all these kills and we're still not finished."

"Any idea how and where these creature might be reproducing?" Sam Brody asked.

"Unfortunately, no. There's still so much we don't know about it. Like what different forms it can assume and how it leaves a scene with no tracks or trace of it having been there except for a body."

"You know, I'm sure what I'm about to say will sound pretty farfetched," Jonah broke in.

"Are you kidding?" Logan snorted. "With this creature nothing is farfetched. Bring it on."

"We've already discussed the fact that it's probably a shifter of some kind, some evil hybrid that a madman is breeding somewhere."

"And?"

"If someone's experimenting with crossing genetic boundaries, what if he's found a way for this creature to also shift into a bird? A hawk or an eagle."

"That doesn't sound any more absurd to me than anything else," Sam told him. "And it would explain why there are never any traces left at the scene of a killing."

"A-anything about Melinda?" Chloe asked in a tremulous voice.

"I wish I could say yes, honey," Craig told her in a voice filled with compassion, "but no, nothing yet. That's why I think it's time to assign two Night Seekers to the hunt full time. While others follow up each new report, that's all these Night Seekers will focus on." His face looked grim. "Especially since I have new information that just came in an hour ago. And you won't like it."

Tension zinged through the room like the vibration of a live wire.

"Another killing?" Ric asked at last.

Craig nodded. "This time in your territory, Logan. Montana. It seems that once again, we kill one monster only to have another one pop up someplace else."

"It's like the Hydra," Dante Martello muttered. "You cut off one head and more grow."

Logan clenched his fists, obviously working to get himself under control. "I'd like that assignment, sir. And the opportunity to search the state to see if there are others up there, too."

"The first priority is getting up there and doing what you just did in Maine," Craig reminded him.

"I hope the cops up there will be a little more receptive to our presence," Sophia grumbled.

"I'm doing my best to pave the way for you," Craig told them. "But it seems the farther north we go the more resistant people are to understanding the Chupacabra."

"Will someone be going with me?" Logan wanted to know. "The first two situations we ended up sending a second team member and this time it worked really well having two of us there."

A slight smile crossed Stafford's face. "As a matter of fact, yes. I've had a request from someone to join the team. That person will partner with you."

"Join the team?"

The Night Seekers had each been carefully selected by Craig Stafford. There wasn't exactly open enrollment.

"I didn't think we were looking," Sam Brody said.

"We aren't. But this person is very familiar with us and has my complete endorsement." He glanced at his watch. "In about three hours one of my planes will deliver Rebecca Black to Desolation Ranch. I expect you all to welcome her."

Shock and excitement raced through Sophia. "My sister? She asked if she could join the team?"

Craig nodded. "I figured you'd be pleased. She has every qualification we need as well as knowledge of both those of us with...special...abilities and of the Chupacabra. Ric, hook up a video call as soon as she gets here so we can begin making plans. Meanwhile, all of you get on the computers and pull up everything you can find about this recent killing. And Logan? I assume you're good with this partnership?"

"Yes sir. Thank you very much."

"Okay, I'll be talking with all of you again in a few hours. As soon as Rebecca is up to speed the two of you need to get ready to leave. I'm sending you all the information I have right now."

The screen went dark and one of the computers dinged to signal emails coming through.

Logan turned to Sophia. "Are you okay with this? With Rebecca being here?"

"Of course. Having my sister here will be the best."

"And teaming up with me? Are you good with that?"

She hugged him, ignoring the curious glances of the other team members. "I have a feeling the two of you will be pairing up for more than a trip to Montana."

He kissed her cheek, chuckling when Clint moved possessively to her side. "I hope so."

"And Logan? I couldn't have picked out anyone better for her than you. As Clint said yesterday things have a way of working out."

"All right, everyone." Ric's voice broke in. "Let's clean up from breakfast and get busy. We've got work to do."

His unspoken words hovered in the air.

We have to destroy this beast before it destroys us.

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.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

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