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Jace Morgan leaned over Sam's shoulder and peered at the screen. The legends under the two slides read, "Homo Sapiens" and "Canis Lupus Lupus." Morgan couldn't speak for several long seconds, and when he finally did, his voice sounded strangled.

"Sam -- you sayin' whatever did this was part Human and part wolf?"

"I'm not saying anything!" D'Amato exploded. "Assuming it's working correctly, the computer is saying that Miss Lang's sample has characteristics of both Human and wolf semen."

"Yeah -- part Human and part wolf!" Morgan gritted.

Tomlinson laughed nervously.

"That sounds like a werewolf!"

"Bullshit!" D'Amato roared. "That's more conjectural than Brianna's mastiff! Hell, why not blame it on Bigfoot?"

Brianna Lang, meanwhile, had pricked her finger and smeared a droplet of blood on a slide.

"What're you doing?" Moran queried.

"Introducing a control sample."

She focused her microscope and fed the image to her computer. Almost immediately, the laptop identified the slide as a human blood sample.

"Damn!" Brianna said softly. "I was hoping we had an equipment glitch. Still, we should feed this into our computers back at the office to make sure."

"Over here!" a voice called. "I've got something!"

The group rushed over to Ranger Lieutenant Tom Stewart, who was squatting on the grass near one of the parking bumpers. He shook his head. "It's a track," he said. "But look at the size of it!"

He pointed at the impression in the soft mud.

"My God!" Morgan whispered. "It's a... a wolf track!"

Tomlinson swallowed hard.

"A wolf that wears a size sixteen! I take a size 11 medium, and that track's a good five inches longer than my foot."

He put his foot next to the gigantic pug mark for comparison. The huge print dwarfed his shoe.

"The tracks lead off into the woods -- that way," Stewart said, pointing.

Sam D'Amato was sweating even more profusely than before.

"This can't be real," he muttered. "It's a nightmare. That's it -- it's a nightmare! I'm gonna wake up and none of this will have happened."

"Could it be a fake?" Brianna asked.

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"Somebody wearing boots or something?" Morgan mused. "Could be, I guess -- but these look real."

"Hey, you guys -- I've got the dash cam fixed!"

Steve Dante was the forensics department's techno-geek. He was a wizard with anything mechanical. Dante resembled a tall, skinny mulberry bush with a curly black beard and Coke-bottle glasses.

And he adored Brianna Lang, much to Sam D'Amato's chagrin.

"Stevie -- can you hook up the dash cam to my laptop?" asked the object of Dante's affection. "We'll be able to see things a lot better on my screen."

"Sure -- piece of cake, Bree. This is one of the new ones with a USB port."

He hooked up a cable to her laptop and set the computer on the passenger seat of the Explorer. He wound the dash cam back to the beginning of its last sequence and hit "play."

Fifteen minutes later they stared at the image frozen on the screen, numb and sickened by what they had seen. They were all decidedly green around the gills. Sam D'Amato had gone into the bushes to throw up. He staggered back to rejoin the group, his face chalky.

"My.... God!" Brianna quavered. "It... It raped her... then it tore her apart and ate her!"

"It's got to be some sick psycho in a Halloween costume!" D'Amato bleated, near hysteria. "It's got to be!"

He turned to Morgan, a note of desperate pleading in his voice.

"Jace!" he whimpered, pointing at the screen. "Jace! Please tell me that can't be real!"

Morgan stared at the image of the beast, at the unholy face that was some kind of obscene cross between a man and a demonhound from Hell. Its eyes glowed like burning coals, and blood dripped from razor-sharp fangs. Icy sweat trickled down his back as he remembered Megan Foster's piercing, agonized shrieks as the creature raped and slaughtered her.

He would hear those screams for the rest of his life.

"Jace!"

"That's no Halloween costume, Sam," Morgan drawled. "Whatever that son of a bitch is, it's real."

"Everything was fully functional," Brianna said. "The fangs and claws....."

She shuddered.

"They were real. The penis was fully functional, sheathed like a... like a... wolf's. It looked like it was a foot and a half long."

Brianna closed her eyes, wondering what Megan experienced in those last, painful moments of her life. The violation of her body by that obscene organ...

Sam D'Amato lurched away and ran to the edge of the woods, where he promptly vomited.

With a snarl, Jace Morgan charged after him. He spun D'Amato around and grabbed him by the shirt front.

"Jesus Christ, man, get hold of yourself!" Morgan raged. "You're the chief of forensics! What the Hell's the matter with you? You've seen mauled bodies before!"

D'Amato wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He was trembling in terror.

"It's not the bodies, Jace, and you know it." He pointed to the image of the beast on Brianna's laptop. "I defy you to tell me that you weren't absolutely scared shitless when you watched that thing tear Megan apart. Did you see it? It enjoyed raping her! It enjoyed slashing her to death and eating her! It's supposed to be an animal of some kind. Animals don't rape young women, and animals don't enjoy killing! It's a killing machine, a monster, and it's around here loose somewhere. What the Hell is it?"

Morgan closed his eyes.

"I... I don't know, Sam."

"It's a werewolf."

Morgan whirled on Tomlinson and glared daggers at him. The sheriff shrugged.

"If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it's a duck. I'd call it a werewolf."

He paused. "There was a full moon last night, too."

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" D'Amato cried.

Morgan backhanded him across the face.

"You're in charge of the forensics investigation!" he hissed. "Take charge of it -- or turn it over to Brianna!"

Sam D'Amato held his hand against his red, stinging cheek. He looked like someone awakening from a nightmare. He nodded, and set his jaw resolutely.

"Bag the bodies and get 'em down to the lab," he said in a shaky voice. "Hopefully the autopsies will give us something we can work with."

Morgan held up a hand.

"Nobody breathes a word about this," he said. "For now it's classified as an animal attack -- nothing more. We're going to close the park. It's off limits to everyone -- including all of you -- until we track down this... thing."

"But we've still got a lot to do here!" Brianna protested. "Can't we...."

Morgan shook his head.

"Too dangerous. Off limits for everybody. We know what we're looking for; we can pick up the pieces later. Let the rangers and the sheriff's department handle it."

As the bodies were loaded onto the ambulances, Brianna turned to Steve Dante.

"I work until five," she said. "The Parker's Woods trail comes up out of town and passes within 30 yards of here; I won't need a car. I'm hiking back up here to continue the investigation. Want to come along?"

Dante shook his head, a mournful expression on his face.

"God, I'd love to. Bree. Alone in the woods -- with you? That's a dream come true! But I'm pulling a double shift. I don't get off until ten."

"Can't wait for you, babe!" she said. "I want to be out of here long before dark."

"Jesus, Bree, Sam'll have a cow if he finds out."

"He won't find out -- right, Stevie?"

"I won't tell him," Dante answered. "Just be careful!"

"Always am." She kissed him on the cheek. "Come on, we've got work to do back at the lab."

They got in her car and followed the ambulances out of the park.

As he watched the caravan leave the pull-off area, Tomlinson shook his head.

"So what's the official line, Jace? We tell people there's a rogue bear or what? Might cause a panic."

Morgan chuckled. W(w)@.noveLw@.R@.com

"And telling them there's a werewolf on the loose won't?"

"I see your point," he frowned. "I'll put the whole department on emergency duty -- every able-bodied man and woman."

"I'll do the same with the rangers," Morgan said. "We've got to get the park blocked off. And we're going to need guns -- lots of guns, folks. We're going to have to bring in some contract hunters to augment our forces."

"I'm not joking," he said.

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