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Brianna checked her pistol. It was loaded with the safety on, ready for her if she needed it. Didn't hurt to take precautions. They hadn't been given the chance to check the woods around the parking area where the bodies had been found this morning. If nothing else, she wanted to satisfy her own curiosity, and make sure they hadn't missed an important piece of evidence.

The sun was sinking lower as she climbed out of the Saturn. It was getting dark earlier now in late August, but it was still light until around 8:30. Brianna was confident she could hike up and back well before then.

She locked the car and headed up the trail into the woods.

Chief Deputy Sheriff Clay Palmer was royally ticked off.

Nobody had heard from Sheriff Tomlinson all afternoon. He had dropped off a couple of boxes of ammunition at the sheriff's office and said he was going to take a long lunch. Everyone knew what that meant; he was going home to screw his bimbo wife Susie. Granted, one of the perks of being sheriff was that he could set his own hours, and God knew that Jeff Tomlinson put in a good 60 to 70 hours a week and had earned the down time. But every once in a while these "afternoon delights" dragged on a little too long. And today of all days, when they were trying to hunt down the whatever-the-hell-it-was that had raped and slaughtered two young women, and gutted and killed a boy. It wasn't like the sheriff to so blithely kiss off his duty.

Palmer glanced at his watch as he pulled onto the private drive that would take him to Tomlinson's house. Christ -- it was 5:15! Tomlinson had left for lunch at 11:30! Palmer knew better than to disturb the sheriff when he was "out to lunch," but he needed to check with him about some adjustments to the night shift. He had been unable to reach Tomlinson on his radio. Gravel crunched under his tires as he drove up the winding wooded driveway to the house.

Suddenly he slammed on the brakes.

"Hol-ee shit!"

Sheriff Jeff Tomlinson's police cruiser was scattered all over the driveway. It had been violently dismantled, almost down to chassis level. What was left of the body of the car was upside down on the gravel. The doors, trunk, and hood had been torn off. The engine had been ripped from its moorings; puddles of fluid leaked all over the ground, and there was shattered glass everywhere. The wheels had been yanked off their axles, the tires shredded. The mangled steering wheel hung from the branch of a tree. It looked as if the frame of the vehicle had been twisted and bent!

There were deep gashes in the fenders, claw marks, which had slashed completely through the metal.

Clay Palmer's stomach churned. What kind of strength could have torn apart an automobile as easily as if it were a few pieces of paper? How sharp were those claws that they could slice through metal as if it were swiss cheese? He thought of the victims whose bodies had been discovered at the parking pulloff this morning. What incredible agony they must have suffered in the last few moments of their lives!

He hoped they had died quickly.

He willed his hand to move and grabbed his radio microphone.

"All units -- officer requires assistance. I'm at Jeff's house -- and I'm afraid our critter has been here. The sheriff's cruiser has been destroyed!" He cursed the quaver in his voice. He was a police officer, for crying out loud!

"Sheriff's Department -- Ranger Commander here. Clay, would you like us to help out, too?"

"I'll take whoever I can get, Jace. I'd take the frickin' National Guard if I could! If you could see what this car looks like...." He repressed a shudder.

"What about.... Jeff and Susie?"

"Don't know," Palmer replied. "I'm not going in there without backup."

"Understood. All units -- use silent approach," Jace Morgan commanded. "Let's not stir things up until we see what's going on. If it's still there, we don't want to scare it off."

Palmer grabbed a short-barreled 12-gauge semiautomatic shotgun and cocked a shell into the chamber. Icy sweat trickled down his back. He couldn't have been waiting more than five or six minutes, but to Palmer it seemed like a lifetime before the squad cars pulled up the driveway, with lights flashing, but no sirens blaring. Twenty-four assorted deputies and rangers assembled in the driveway, staring goggle-eyed at the remains of Tomlinson's cruiser. Jace Morgan squinted at the claw marks.

"Jesus Christ -- think what those would do to a human body! No wonder those poor kids we found this morning looked the way they did." He turned to Palmer. "It's your show, Clay. What do you want to do?"

"Surround the house," Palmer snapped. "Everybody be careful. You saw what it did to the car."

The sound of ratcheting shotguns shattered the drowsy, late-afternoon stillness. The officers moved out, surrounding the ominously silent house. Palmer and Morgan went around back, and halted abruptly when they turned the corner of the house.

The back door stood open. Palmer's heart sank; there were splashes of blood on the ground, more inside on the floor.

And there was a trail of the huge, wolf-like tracks they had seen this morning, leading back into the woods.

Palmer and Morgan eased inside, weapons at the ready. The staircase was splashed with blood as well. Palmer slapped his shoulder radio. "All units - converge on second floor staircase at the rear of the house," he ordered.

When they were all together, the officers cautiously climbed the stairs two abreast, in a solid assault wave, led by Palmer and Morgan. They made their way to the master bedroom, and Clay Palmer's stomach lurched. Someone vomited behind him.

"Ah, Jeff...." Palmer groaned, his voice cracking.

He had never seen so much blood in one place in his life; there were dismembered body parts strewn all over the room, and it was difficult to tell which belonged to Tomlinson, and which belonged to his wife. The sheriff's severed head was barely recognizable.

"Jesus Christ!" Morgan muttered. "Somebody call Sam D'Amato!"

Meryl Shuman had wandered much deeper into the woods than she had intended. She could barely hear the noise and commotion coming from the Hotel Royale's swimming pool, and it was dark and a little creepy up here. She sniffed and stifled a sob.

Well, her freshman year at U of W/Blanton had started with a resounding 'thud!' She had so looked forward to the start of the school year; she had made the cheerleading squad, and had been invited to join the 'Bikini Babes.' Her older sister Kim had been a cheerleader and a 'Babe,' and last year, Meryl had come along to watch the team in action in its annual pilgrimage to the swimming pool. The expressions of frustrated lust on the faces of the boys and dirty old men had been hilarious. Meryl loved to tease boys with her sexy body, and she had eagerly awaited this week all summer.

But she hadn't counted on the jealousy of Janice Curtiss, the captain of the cheerleading squad.

Now she was certain she no longer wanted to be a 'Bikini Babe,' and she wasn't even sure she wanted to be a cheerleader any more, either. Why was Janice being such a bitch?

Suddenly she heard the bushes rustle about ten feet off the trail, and her heart leaped into her throat.

Something was back there -- something big! 'A deer?' she hoped.

"Meryl!"

She turned and looked back down the trail. Janice was coming! The last thing in the world she wanted to do right now was talk to Janice Curtiss!

"Meryl, honey, it's me -- Janice. I'm sorry I embarrassed you. Please come back down to the pool!"