

1035

A warm breeze rippled through the golden grass of the clearing, rolling like the surf at the seashore until it spent itself at the edge of the trail. The dull orange disc of the sun hung low in a cloudless blue sky; the trees cast long shadows in sharp relief. The day teetered on the brink between late afternoon and early evening.

On the other side of the path, to her right, the green waters of Lake Winslow lapped serenely at an earthen bank.

Brianna Lang wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. It was a gorgeous day, except for the heat and the humidity. The light wind offered a little relief, but she had worked up quite a sweat climbing the hilly trail to the wilderness area. She'd made her trek in about forty-five minutes -- just about what she had estimated. No sheriff's deputies or park rangers had impeded her progress. The forest was almost eerily silent, save for the insects and a few birds. She slid her backpack off her shoulders and opened the flap so she could get to her instruments -- and her gun, if need be.

She could see the parking area on the other side of the glen through a break in the trees. She shivered. As a little girl, she had spent many happy hours in this park, picnicking with her family, taking walks on this very trail with her father.

Now these once friendly woods seemed somehow menacing, foreboding.

Last night, an unholy beast had stalked and killed two young kids in a convertible, and then slaughtered a female ranger in that lot. In all likelihood, the thing had probably been somewhere in this area. In fact...

About twenty feet ahead on the trail she saw an area where the grass had been trampled. She rushed to the depression and bent down, scrutinizing the turf.

There -- on a bare patch of ground. They were unmistakable -- huge, wolf like paw prints, leading away from the parking area back into the woods. Some of the stalks of grass were stained a rusty brown.

Dried blood, most likely.

The creature had passed right through here last night.

Brianna suddenly felt very cold, even in the blast furnace heat of the late August afternoon. She hugged herself and apprehensively glanced around. Well, this was something, anyway. If they could backtrack these paw prints, maybe they could find the creature's den -- if it had one. Maybe bring in some bloodhounds. She wasn't about to do it herself! She realized how alone she was up here -- and how vulnerable.

And then, suddenly, the forest grew deathly still. A robin cut off its freeform song in mid-warble, and even the insects ceased their buzzing. Brianna felt gooseflesh pucker all over her body.

"It gets dark a lot quicker up here than it does down below. Must be all these trees."

She screamed and whirled around.

He stood on the path about ten feet away from her -- and he was naked. He smiled ingenuously at her, leaning against a tree with his arms folded. He was a handsome young man, with wavy chestnut hair and piercing blue eyes; he looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties, well-toned and well-hung. Ordinarily she would be gawking in open-mouthed appreciation.

She screamed and whirled around.

But this was very, very wrong. How could she not have heard him coming?

"Sorry if I startled you, Brianna, but I'm here to help you find what you're looking for."

She felt an icy fist clench in the pit of her stomach.

"How d-do you know my name?" she quavered. "And what do you think I'm looking for?"

He chuckled.

"I have excellent hearing. I was up on a ridge over there this morning when you were doing your preliminary investigation, and I heard them call you by name, Brenna -- Brianna Lang. Pretty name, Brianna. And as for what you're looking for -- well, you're looking for the werewolf."

Brianna's palms were wet, and her mouth was desert dry. "Th-there's n-no such thing as..."

"Oh, but there is!" He closed his eyes and raised his head, and appeared to be meditating. When he opened his eyes again, they were no longer blue.

They were amber -- almost yellow. It had to be a trick of the light! Brianna swallowed hard.

"The thing is, people think that werewolves can only change during the full moon. That's just not true; the most powerful ones can change any time they want to -- but they can't help but change when the moon is full."

Now there was no mistaking it. He was changing! His skin had darkened to a shade of mocha and was thickening, like animal hide. His fingernails and toenails had grown into long, razor-sharp talons, and patches of chestnut fur sprouted all over his body. His penis had almost tripled in size and was sheathed -- like a wolf's. Brianna stood rooted in place by sheer terror.

When he spoke again, his voice was a guttural snarl.

"Don't you feel stupid, bitch? Haven't you ever watched a horror movie? You're the airhead bimbo who goes off in the woods all by herself and gets butchered by Freddy or Jason -- or eaten by a werewolf." He bared his teeth, which were now long, bristling fangs. "In the movies, the werewolf always goes for the throat. Not me -- I go for the tits! Especially when I nail a hot babe with a nice rack like yours. And the thing is -- you'll still be alive and watching while I eat them!"

"No!" Brianna quavered, terrified. "Oh, God - no! Wh-why me?" She took a halting step backward, wondering if she should run or go for her pistol.

He shrugged, and flashed a fearsome grin. "No reason, really. You have a very pleasant musk - I like the way your pussy smells. It's imprinted in my mind and marks you as my prey.... and you do look good enough to eat!"

His muscles began to ripple and bulge, and he was growing taller.

With a shriek of terror, Brianna yanked her .45 out of the back pack, flipped off the safety and squeezed the trigger. The pistol roared and bucked in her hand; the slug caught the changeling in the center of his chest with an explosion of blood, flesh and bone, and knocked him backward. He howled in agony.

Brianna pulled again and again, emptying the clip into his chest with deadly accuracy. The impact of the bullets lifted him in the air and dropped him into the lake with a great splash. He floated face down in the water, streaming blood from eight tightly-spaced exit wounds in his back. The fur faded away; his skin returned to its normal hue.

He was changing back into his human form.

She sobbed with relief. She had done it; she had killed the werewolf! Now they could identify the son of a bitch, and.....

He had stopped bleeding, and the wounds were closing up! 'God, no!' she thought. 'No way he could still be alive!' Every shot had hit its mark.

He rolled over and sat up. His chest wounds were healing rapidly; then they totally disappeared, leaving behind smooth, unmarked skin. He shook his head as if to clear it, and fixed her with a venomous, yellow-eyed scowl.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" he raged. "That really stung! You'll pay for that, bitch -- big time! Your death will be as slow and agonizing as I can possibly make it!"

He was changing again, only much faster now, looking more like the horrifying creature Brianna had seen on the dash cam video. She backed slowly down the trail as she prayed for the first time in ten years.

His muscles swelled to immensely thick proportions. Bones began to elongate and forcibly stretch with a horrible crackling noise, thrusting forward and rupturing through his bleeding skin, and then quickly covering over with new flesh and fur. He was down on his knees in the water, loosing unearthly shrieks of pain. He was growing even taller now, and his chest and shoulders broadened. He was now covered with thick, bristly fur. Then a great shudder rippled through his shaggy body. His eyes snapped open. They were a glowing red now; wild, malevolent -- insane.

The werewolf glared at Brianna and grinned.

She felt a trickle of urine slip from her bladder and stream down her thigh. She screamed in terror, then broke and ran for her life.

"GO AHEAD, BITCH!" he roared. His voice was thick, almost unintelligible. "YOU CAN'T HIDE FROM ME! I'LL FIND YOU -- I CAN SMELL YOUR CUNT A MILE AWAY!"

Brianna careened down the path, running faster than she had ever run in her life, sobbing in terror. She reached into the pocket of her shorts for her cell phone, and her heart sank when she realized she'd left it in her backpack. A deep, resonant howl filled the forest, an otherworldly, terrifying sound. A chill ran down Brianna's spine. The werewolf!

He was coming!

Brianna kept on running, even though her lungs were on fire. She could hear leaves rustling and branches snapping behind her.

She could hear his paws now, pounding over the ground as he bounded down the path. He was going to run right over the top of her!

'Oh, nononononono! Oh, Jesus -- please don't let this happen!'

The creature leaped on Brianna's back with an ear-splitting roar, driving her to the ground and knocking the wind out of her. She felt ribs crack as his thickly-muscled body crushed her. He sank his long fangs into her shoulder; he picked her up and shook her viciously as she shrieked. Then he flung her across the clearing, ripping away a chunk of flesh and exposing muscle and bone. She landed hard by the edge of the lake and lay there, stunned and moaning.

And then Brianna Lang's world erupted into a paroxysm of unbelievable agony as the werewolf clawed open her back from the nape of her neck to her tailbone with the long talons of his right foot. Her piercing screams shattered the early evening calm. Birds exploded from their roosting places in the nearby trees.

The beast bent down and tore off the pieces of her bloodsoaked shirt and cutoffs, then discarded them. His claws had severed her bra strap and cut through her panty briefs, so he stripped them off as well.

Then he slowly dragged the long claw of his index finger over the bridge of flesh between her cunt and asshole, cutting deeply, slicing it open. Brianna managed only a gasp of agony this time, and fresh blood gushed out onto the mud and quickly formed into a puddle.

The werewolf rolled her over onto her back. He stood above her, flexing his lethal claws. He drew his lips back over his fangs in a toothy snarl.

He attacked then in a raging fury, falling on her, his claws and fangs a deadly blur of motion. Brianna found her voice again, shrieking at the top of her lungs as blood and dollops of flesh sprayed into the air. Talons raked over her face, ripping skin and tearing flesh. His fangs grated against the bones of her skull. He tore at her face and neck, jerking and tugging violently, gnawing away tendons and muscle. His claws dug deeply into her cheeks. They carved downward, cutting her face into bloody ribbons. His huge maw closed over the top of her head, and there was a terrible, ripping pain.

Her scalp hung from his gore-clotted jaws like a bloody, copper-colored wig. He dropped it on her slashed belly.

Brianna moaned, her body wracked with spasms of intolerable torment. She wanted to die, but she knew he wasn't finished with her yet. He was grinning that horrific, bloody grin at her again. His penis was gorged with blood and fully erect, extended to its monstrous length.