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He knelt in the shallow water and grabbed her ankles; then he spread her legs wide and pulled her to him. There was no mistaking what he intended to do to her.

"Ohhh.... God, no... please d-don't"

He thrust brutally into her; Brenna arched her back, and her raw, elemental shriek of pure agony shivered across the lake....

The forensics department's phone rang just as Sam D'Amato was leaving for the night. Against his better judgment, he picked it up.

He quickly wished he hadn't.

Steve Dante watched curiously as the forensic chief's face drained of all color. He swayed, and almost dropped the receiver, looking for a moment as if he might faint. Then he straightened resolutely.

"I'll get a team up there right away, Jace."

"What is it?" asked Gord Matthews, the assistant director. He was a wiry, middle-aged man with receding, curly blond hair and a neatly-trimmed silver-streaked beard.**V@w.r0vElw0rM.coM**

D'Amato plopped in a chair, trembling.

"Th-the sheriff and his wife were torn to pieces," he said, his voice barely audible. "Probably by the same thing that killed those kids and Megan last night. So I guess it can hunt during the day, too. Jace says you can't tell which body parts belong to whom."

"My God!" Dante exclaimed. "We've had one murder here in the last eight years. Now we've had five in less than twenty-four hours." He shuddered. He was thankful that Brenna had decided not to go up to the wilderness area.

Matthews clapped D'Amato on the shoulder. "Sam -- go on home. I can handle this. You've been at it all day."

D'Amato wearily shook his head. "Thanks, Gord, but I'd better go, too. We're a little short handed." He stood up. "Let's go, people -- all hands on deck. We've got a job to do."

He saw Steve Dante grab a shoulder mounted mobile radio out of his drawer. "I suppose you're going to ride your dirt bike up there, Steve, since your sweetie Brenna's not here to drive you up this time? Be careful you don't take a spill on that thing." There was a note of resignation in his voice.

Dante chuckled. "I will, 'Dad' -- and it's not a dirt bike. It's a Husqvarna TE-510, made for Enduro racing. It's a finely-tuned machine. You can take it off-road, but it's DOT street legal, too."

"Whatever," D'Amato retorted. "Just don't bust your ass."

Dante grabbed his kit and headed out the door. He had a very un-geek like fascination with motorcycles, and was a fair to middling rider. He loved his Huskie; it was a powerful machine, the top of Husqvarna's Enduro line. He started it up. Then he popped a wheelie for Sam's benefit as he streaked out of the parking lot past the director's car.

He hadn't ridden far when he saw something that made his blood run cold. He skidded the bike to a stop and slewed sideways.

Brianna's car -- parked right by the head of the Parker's Woods Trail. She had lied to him! She was up there in those woods, and that thing might be running around up there, too! A thrill of fear shot through him as he slapped his radio.

"Sheriff's Department, Clay Palmer here."

"Clay, this is Steve Dante in Forensics. Brianna Lang is hiking up the Chilhowie Falls Trail. She's going up to do a more thorough investigation of the parking area!"

"Christ! That area's off limits! I'll send a couple of cars up there right away!"**wW.NOvElw0rm.coM**

"Thanks, Sheriff," Dante said. "I'm on my bike heading up that way. I can take the trails."

"Dante -- no! It's off limits to you too! Don't you...."

Dante turned off the radio and gunned the Huskie. He went roaring up the trail, driving his bike faster than he ever had in his life. Branches whipped his face as streaked over the path, but he paid them no mind. His thoughts were focused on the beautiful young woman he had made love to this afternoon.

'Come on, Bri, please be all right!' he thought. 'Please be all right!'

The pain had become her constant companion, the only reality left in a world that was swiftly tilting toward oblivion. Brianna Lang couldn't believe that she was still alive.

Blood filled her mouth. Its metallic taste choked her. Internal injuries. She didn't have long. Never had she felt agony like this; it was almost beyond the ability of her nervous system to process. She tried to move, but her torn, mutilated body no longer listened to her. She thought of Stevie, sorry that she had lied to him, sorry that they would never get the chance to grow together as a couple. She thought of her mom and dad. They would be heartbroken. She had planned to visit them in Seattle this coming weekend. If only she could have seen them one last time, told them she loved them.....

The werewolf crouched over her. His huge, powerful jaws engulfed her left breast; he bit down slowly, shearing away the tender flesh until his fangs snapped together in the middle. He chewed up his gory prize and swallowed it. She had thought the pain could get no worse, but she'd been wrong. Brenna tried to scream; she managed only a horrible, wet gurgling noise. She was in shock, weakening from the loss of blood.

The creature's massive head darted between her spread legs. His bristling fangs tore out her cunt by the roots, and he gobbled it down right before her eyes.

Brianna's eyes closed and the tears flowed down the slashed ruins of her face.

Gradually a lethargy calmed her tormented mind; the physical pain became sublime, almost blissful. Bright lights danced before her eyes, growing more and more intense until her entire universe was a swell of incandescent flame.

And then she was no longer lying in agony at the edge of the lake.

She was in.... her Grandpa Sam's backyard?

It had been one of her favorite places when she had been a little girl. Only this backyard was transformed by an ethereal, golden-white glow. It was like the most beautiful spring day you could possibly imagine, multiplied by a factor of a thousand. It was just as she remembered it, just the way it had been before he had... gone away. The two-tiered yard, bisected in the middle by a neat flagstone retaining wall with steps at the far end, was filled with hanging baskets and planters bursting with all manner of beautiful flowers. The grassy areas were cross-hatched with mulched flower beds. Gorgeous climbing roses in all colors of the rainbow covered the high stone walls that bordered the property, and pine trees whispered in the gentle breeze. Flowering vines twisted in among the roses. She raced up the stone steps to the upper level of the yard, where his potting shed was.

Sure enough, he was inside, filling clay pots with topsoil and plants. He was healthy, trim and tanned. His well-barbered mane of wavy white hair was neatly combed, and his brown eyes sparkled kindly behind those goofy photo-grey glasses. As usual, he wore a short-sleeved white knit shirt and pressed gray slacks, as neat as a pin. He was the way she remembered him in happier times, before the disease wasted and ravaged him.....

"Grandpa?" Brianna quavered, an arm reaching out to the old man. "Grandpa Sam, is that you?"

"Kitten?" He looked surprised, but enfolded her in a warm embrace. "Lord, let me look at you! My, my, you've really blossomed into a young beauty. You were knee high to a grasshopper last time I saw you."**Ww.NOvElw0rm.coM**

She squeezed him tightly. "Oh, Grandpa, I've missed you! I love you!"

He kissed the top of her head. "I love you, too, honey. I must say, though, I wasn't expecting to see you just yet. Sort of figured Grandma Rose and your Mom and Dad would be along first."

"Is this.... is this real?" she asked in wonder. "Is this heaven?"

He chuckled. "You can call it whatever you like, I guess. It's whatever makes you happiest. Favorite people, favorite places, favorite things -- it can be anything you want."

Brianna glanced down at herself. Her slender body was whole, unscarred by the werewolf's lethal attack. She was wearing her favorite jeans and a comfortable, loose-fitting denim shirt.

She heard a familiar 'meow' behind her.

"T-Tiger?!" Her eyes filled with joyful tears as the big, beautiful gray-striped tabby cat leaped into her arms. He purred and nuzzled her face, a comforting, warm bundle of fur. He had been dead for almost ten years.

"Oh, baby, I've missed you, too!" she exclaimed.

"Why don't you stay here with me, Kitten?" her grandfather urged, waving his arm invitingly. "You always did like my backyard."

"Oh yes," she sighed contentedly as she stroked behind the cat's ears. "Oh yes! I'd love that!"**Www.(n)oVel@©rm.c0m**

A tug in her stomach brought her back to the reality of the bloodsoaked lakeside as a red curtain of pain occluded the comforting vision. So it had been just a pain-induced hallucination, then? Brianna sobbed softly. She desperately wanted to go back, to go where she would find an end to her suffering.