

**A TENSE SCENE FROM
DON LEWIS WIREMAN'S
333: A *SUSPENSE THRILLER***

A dog barked outside the window, woke Wanda. She was about to roll over, go back to sleep—when she noticed that they were *not alone* in the room. A man was sitting in a chair in the corner, his outline barely visible in the dimness. He had a sawed-off rifle with a silencer—pointed at them.

"Who *are* you—what do you *want*—?" she cried.

The constable cracked an eyelid, but didn't let on he was awake, as he carefully slid his hand down the side of his mattress to where he'd laid his .44.

"Wake him *up*!" the man demanded.

Wanda shook the constable.

"Okay—I'm awake—what's going on?" the constable said as he sat up, bringing his .44 up under the blankets.

"A *man*—with a *gun*!" Wanda cried.

333: A SUSPENSE THRILLER

Don Lewis Wireman, Sr.

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This book is a novel. The characters and places are imaginary and are based on no real person or location.

INTRODUCTION

Do you believe there is such a thing as a part *human*—part *animal*?

We are living in a time of numerous scientific discoveries in the field of *genetic engineering*.

Did you know that scientists are artificially producing hybrid animals right now?

Hybrid animals are creatures that are part-*human*, part-animal, or part one animal and part another. They've been known throughout the centuries of our world's mythological history. Many countries have legends about them, legends based purely on creations of the imagination, for example: the hybridization of a human and a male lion—the *Great Sphinx*—is a famous example, another is *Pan* the part goat—part man Greek god.

But hybrid animals are no longer just *imaginary* creatures. Today, *real* ones are being produced in laboratories throughout the world—some from *human* flesh and blood just like yours and mine.

In 2003, Chinese scientists at the Shanghai Second Medical University successfully fused human cells with rabbit eggs; the first successful genetic human-animal hybrids ever created.

In 2004, the Mayo Clinic created pigs with human blood flowing through their bodies.

Mice have already been created with brains that are about one percent human, and plans are in the works to create mice with 100 percent human brains. Stanford University in California is allegedly among those planning to create mice with human brains.

Another possible experiment planned is to genetically engineer mice that will produce a human child whose parents are mice.

And on it goes.

The question is: What *violent* hybrid animals could some *black-market* genetic engineering laboratory create right now *without the rest of the world knowing about it until it was too late?*

This book is about such a violent genetic hybrid animal. She's known as 333. She's viciously killed a villager. The residents of Bear Skin village hope Constable Alexander Mizzen can stop her before she kills *again*.

Chapter 1

On Christmas morning there was three feet of snow on the ground. A heavy fog covered the distant, snow-covered mountains and blanketed the remote village of Bear Skin, Washington.

Gertrude Rhinemann and her nineteen-year-old daughter, Ingrid, were on their way to Gertrude's mother's large, log house located in a dark, hardwood grove near the edge of the village.

Gertrude accidentally kicked a fist-sized ice ball lying on the snow-covered path; bent down, picked it up, pitched it into the muggy fog ahead of them. "Ya can't even see a stone's throw on up the trail," she complained in her London Cockney accent as it vanished in the soupy vapor.

They walked on, eventually came upon it again laying in front of them on the icy path. "There it is, ya *see*! Do ya see the ball o' ice, Ingrid? Ya see 'ow far we've been walkin' ta finally come up to it *again*?"

"I see it mama," Ingrid said, dispassionately, wishing they were already at her grandmother's house having breakfast, then she suddenly cried out, "My *God*—!" the words caught in her throat. "Look at *that*, mama!" She involuntarily drew a mitten-covered hand to her mouth. Terrified, she pointed to a place on the ground ahead of them.

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Gertrude strained her weary eyes trying to make out what Ingrid was seeing through the gloom—trying to understand why she was so *horrified*—then Gertrude saw it, too, let out a sharp, terrified shriek.

They couldn't believe what they were looking at—the bloody arm of the remains of a badly mutilated man, an axe in his blood-soaked, mangled hand lay stretched out before them on the ice path.

They saw he was naked, except for his boots and the large ring with a red stone in it on his finger.

In the faint, mellow light of the breaking dawn, they saw that dark crimson blood was splattered on the path and surrounding snow.

Their faces convulsed with fear, panic. They held each other closely, began screaming hysterically.

A window opened in a nearby cottage. A man stuck his head out, shouted in a husky voice, "Who *is* it? Who's *screaming* out there?"

Gertrude finally regained some of her composure. The muscles in her chin still quivering, she managed to yell back to the man silhouetted in the window. She'd recognized his voice, but all that she knew about him was that his name was Max. "Max—I'm Gertrude *Rhinemann*—call the *constable*—bring *lanterns*—somethin' 'orrible 'as 'appened—a man's been murdered or attacked by a wild *animal*!"

"I don't have a *telephone*! I'll go *fetch* him!" the man called back.

"*Hurry!*" Gertrude cried.

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Huddling against the bitter cold, fearfully trembling in the dim mist, they waited for the constable to arrive.

"We can't just *stay* here! What if *whatever* it was or *whoever* it was that *killed* this poor man is still *around*?" Ingrid murmured, shivering. "What if that man you were *talking* to did it! Maybe he'll come and kill *us*, too—we found the *body*," Ingrid whispered, with a quiver in her voice. Every murder mystery and horror story she'd ever read or seen on TV flashed through her mind like a bad omen including the hideous axe murder that had taken place in the nearby city of Etherington the previous year.

"Well, if Max did it—" Gertrude started to say: *if he did it, there's no way we can escape from him*, then, she decided to put up a brave front; said, without much conviction, "Oh, don't worry, child, the *constable* will be 'ere any *minute*!" Then, trying to reassure them both, she continued, "'E 'as a big *rifle*!" She tried to hide it, but she was trembling and frightened so badly that her heart was pounding. She felt ill. Her palms were sweating inside her mittens.

They were relieved to see the dark silhouette of the man called Max running from the house towards the constable's office, instead of towards them. He obviously wasn't the killer.

Ingrid's heart was beating rapidly. She thought if the constable didn't arrive quickly, she might faint. She'd never seen a naked man before and that the first one was disfigured in such a savage, bloody fashion had come as a terrible shock to her. She felt tiny, cold bumps rising on her skin. She closed her eyes tightly, clung firmly to her mama's arm.

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Gertrude's curiosity overcame her fear. She broke away from Ingrid's frightened grasp, tried to get a better look at the face of the mutilated man to see if she could recognize him, but the rising sun was not yet up and there wasn't enough light to make out much detail. As she inched her way towards him, his mutilated nakedness both alarmed and embarrassed her. In the weak light, she could only see that disheveled, blood-spattered snow was covering much of his body and that whoever the unfortunate man was, he was frozen as stiff as a coal poker.

Unnerved by the corpse, shaking with fear, she left it; hurried back to Ingrid who was still standing alone, still trembling.

They frantically clutched each other for moral support.

Then—from north of them, opposite the direction of the village—they heard disquieting noises in the distance that broke the deathlike silence of the frosty morning: cracking sounds in the far-off, frigid trees—small twigs snapping—staccato echoes from the edge of the cold, dark forest where snow-covered woods swept down out of the high, ragged mountains to meet the quiet village below. Then, they heard a high-pitched, blood-curdling *shriek*, somewhat like the cry of a tiny baby in terrible agony, except that *no child on earth could make such a violent, mournful wail*, Gertrude realized as an icy shiver raced up her spine.

In the wintry, lonely dimness of the morning Ingrid suddenly felt cold, completely vulnerable, as if she were naked—surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves. "*Listen!*" she whis-

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pered, panic in her voice. "Did you hear *that*? Let's get *out* of here!"

The sounds coming from the forest were the final straw for Gertrude. She became incapacitated—frozen with fear, incapable of immediately dispensing with it. She finally burst into uncontrollable sobs.

Almost overcome with emotion herself, Ingrid—realizing she must do *something*—seized her mama's sturdy arm, shook her out of her hysteria—hurriedly started ushering her back down the obscure path towards the village, frequently glancing over her shoulder to see if anything was following.

Then Gertrude saw something ahead. "*Look—!*" she cried. "*Lanterns!* It must be the *constable!*" She felt somewhat relieved. The taut muscles in her face relaxed. She wanted to *run* on down the path to meet the others, to be enfolded in their camaraderie—to be able to share her fear, like a lost puppy that had finally found its home.

"*Yes,*" Ingrid cried, clutching her mother's arm more firmly, "*—and my dear Rolf!*"

Gertrude gasped, audibly. She stared at her young, charming, beloved, blonde-headed Ingrid. Gertrude hadn't known until then that Ingrid had affectionate feelings for Rolf. *Why did I not know? 'Ow serious is she?* she wondered.

As the lanterns grew closer, brighter, Gertrude and Ingrid could see people making their way up the narrow trail towards them, their swinging lanterns intermittently lighting up the glistening snow along the trail's sides; revealing yapping dogs

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darting in and out of the changing shadows—bustling shapes of heavy coats, hats, guns against the snow.

In their compelling need for safety, Gertrude and Ingrid broke into a run. It seemed like an eternity that they scurried through the dimness, down, down the path, trying to reach the security of the constable and the others.

Very soon, the flickering lantern light shining on the middle-aged constable's mature, concerned, thin face defined his serious, dark-bearded countenance, prominent Roman nose.

He looked into Gertrude's frightened, watery eyes as she stood trembling before him bundled from head to foot against the biting cold.

"Where *is* the man?" he asked, his jaw twitching with emotion.

"Up *there*," she shrieked, pointing back up the path with her shaking mitten.

A shudder of apprehension ran through the villagers as they huddled around their constable.

He held his glass-covered, coal oil lantern out ahead of him by its wire handle then guardedly moved in the direction Gertrude had pointed, the metal of his rifle barrel glinting in the lantern light.

Everyone slowly, nervously followed along behind him; soon came upon the grisly scene.

The constable saw the body of an older man, or what was left of him lying on his back in the snow completely naked, except for unlaced, heavy leather boots. A portion of the man's

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red whiskered, leathery face and his massive, hairy, bloody right arm—had been partially eaten away. The hand of it still gripped a bloody axe. The rest of his body had been mutilated almost beyond recognition. Long, bloody striations, like cuts from a sharp blade ran the length of his left leg.

The constable's steady voice cracked the chilly morning air, "Does anyone *recognize* him?"

"It's Wilhelm *Streiker*!" an elderly woman, bundled from head to foot in black woolen clothing uneasily volunteered. "See the ring on his left hand? I recall him saying he won it in a poker game." Cold, little puffs of white condensation pulsed from her quivering lips with each word. "He lived in a cabin in the birch grove at the edge of the forest," she cried, diverted her glistening eyes from the corpse's bloody nakedness then tremulously wiped away a tear with her leather glove.

"Does he have family?" the constable asked.

"I didn't know him well. I only spoke to him a time or two. He *may* have," the woman said, sadly.

The constable, the Honorable Alexander Mizzen by title and name carefully passed his lantern over the almost nude body from top to bottom then ambled out and shined light here and there over the surrounding snow. He nudged his twenty-year-old assistant, Rolf. "Look at *those*?" the constable said, pointing.

Young Rolf shuddered off an emotional chill, stared down at the place the constable was examining. "Two sets of footprints!" he replied.

The constable, leaning on his rifle for support, knelt down in the soft snow, began carefully examining the footprints.

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"Now, *these*," he said, pointing, "are obviously those of the dead man, Herr Streiker. They're his boot tracks." Then he directed his lantern and attention to the other set of tracks. "Take a close look, Rolf. *These* tracks come from out across the snow there somewhere just as Herr Streiker's do. Do you agree?"

"Yes," Rolf said, "from what I can see in this light."

"Therefore, they have to be the tracks of the *killer*."

"Yes. They have to be," Rolf agreed.

"Now, if you look carefully at this one, you'll notice that its shape is very human-like. The heel of the footprint is definitely human. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"The middle of the footprint is elongated like a human's foot?"

"Yes."

"But, take a close look at the *front* of the footprint."

"That *couldn't* have been made by a *human*," Rolf volunteered.

"That's correct. It could *not* have been," the constable said, getting to his feet. "From the look of it, one might think the *toe* part of the footprint must have been made by a *cougar*. I know how crazy that sounds, but am I right—or not?"

"You're right, it looks like a cougar's claw marks," Rolf said, rubbing his cheek to warm it a bit. "Maybe the killer's a weird *man*. A woman probably wouldn't have been *strong* enough to kill Herr Streiker. Streiker was obviously a brute of a man."

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"Okay, let's say it was some creepy man who killed Herr Streiker. How does he go about leaving barefoot footprints in the snow that look like *these*?" the constable asked.

"He would have to wear something on his feet—like some kind of padded socks with cougar toes attached to them, I guess," Rolf suggested.

"I can't picture that. They'd have to be really unusual."

"Why?"

"Look how *small* the killer's footprints are—the size that a little *kid* would make, a six-year-old maybe," the constable said. "I'm trying to picture it—a large man walking on something so small that it makes those little footprints, and yet allows him enough agility to fight with and kill a large man. I can't understand how that's possible," the constable said.

"I see what you mean—and *whatever* or *whoever* killed Herr Streiker—certainly *amused* itself while it was *mutilitating* him," Rolf added. "Like the killer was playing a game of cat and *mouse*."

"Yes. Whatever it was went out of its way to run what looks like a knife—or it could have been the sharp claws of an animal—here and there—willy-nilly—across and down the body—as if playing some kind of fiendish *game*," the constable said, shuddering. "And notice, Rolf—Herr Streiker's body—and even his face—what hasn't been eaten away—is covered with a thin layer of *ice*—see how shiny it is—as if his skin had been coated with *water* just before it froze."

"I wonder why no one in the village *heard* anything?" Rolf speculated.

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"It was Christmas Eve. I suppose everyone was busy with Christmas presents, and carols and such," the constable suggested.

"Yes, I know *I* was," Rolf agreed.

"Well, there's nothing more we can do at the moment," Constable Mizzen said.

They rejoined the crowd.

Amidst the sea of emotions, Ingrid had somehow regained her composure. She glanced affectionately at Rolf to see if he was looking at her. He was. She felt a warm, passionate glow come over her. She felt secure in his presence. For her, the cold air had suddenly lost its sting. Even her frost-reddened face felt warm. Her terrible fears rapidly faded away.

A Husky dog darted about, sniffed one of the barefoot footprints, let out an appalling yelp, tucked its frosty tail between its legs; made a mad dash back towards the village.

"A lot of good these goddamned dogs are going to be—scared to death at the very *scent* of whatever it was that *did* this," the constable said, then asked, "Did anyone see or *hear* anything—anything at *all*?"

"We couldn't see anythin' much in the darkness, but we 'eard a terrible, 'igh-pitched, screamin' cry come from the edge o' the forest—over *there*!" Gertrude cried, pointing. "It gave me a terrible chill up ma spine. It was enough ta curdle yer *blood*."

"Are you sure it wasn't the *train* whistle?" the constable asked.

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"Oh—Constable Mizzen—I've lived 'ere most o' ma life—I know the train whistle when I 'ear it," Gertrude assured him. "No—it wasn't the train—*was* it, Ingrid?"

"*No*, mama."

"Anyone else *see* or *hear* anything?" the constable asked. No one spoke. "Well, take pictures of everything," the constable said, to Rolf.

Rolf felt in his pockets. "In all the excitement—I *forgot* to bring the *camera*," he said, obviously embarrassed.

"Well, be about *getting* it," the constable urged, sternly. "We must have *photographs*. It's difficult enough to make anyone believe that someone or something that left these small tracks could have killed Herr Streiker. We'll need the photographic evidence to show to the coroner."

Rolf immediately borrowed a lantern, took Ingrid's mitten-covered hand in his, hastily escaped the crowd, and he and Ingrid made their way down the path towards the stretched-out village. Gertrude's surprised, tired eyes followed them with concern; amazement.

"It's starting to snow—and the wind's coming up. We'd all best be getting *home*!" the constable ordered. "I'll ring up the coroner, and we'll see what can be done about this horrible business."

Before the cold, terrified villagers could reach their cozy homes, snow began falling. The wind quickly whipped the snow into a violent storm. Rolf could take no photographs of the death scene. The tracks, all potential evidence, as well as the victim's

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bloody, almost nude corpse were soon laying under a foot of newly fallen snow.

Later in the day the wind died, the weather cleared. The coroner's SUV churned its way through the drifts to where the constable had informed the driver that Herr Streiker's body was located. The constable followed in his jeep. The two-vehicle convoy eventually stopped, everyone opened their doors, got out.

"That's where Herr *Streiker* is," the constable said, pointing towards a mound of snow, wrapping his red woolen scarf tighter about his neck to ward off the chilly air.

"Okay, let's get him dug *up*," rotund Coroner Brett Öffner said to his two assistants, then added, "He should stay frozen alright 'till we can get him into a freezer drawer downtown."

"Yes," the constable agreed.

The assistants laid a plastic sheet in the back of the SUV; soon had Herr Streiker's frozen corpse wrapped up in it.

"A *horrible* thing, this!" the coroner said. "What are you going to *do* about it?" he asked as he produced a pipe and matches from his parka pocket, lit up.

The constable rather enjoyed the aromatic smell of the drifting smoke. "*Do?* Well, it's too late today, but tomorrow morning, weather permitting, I'm going to get some men and horses together—try to find the killer's tracks in the forest," the constable replied. "The blizzard wiped everything clean today, but the goddamned thing has to make tracks *sometime*! It must have to *eat*!"

"What about *snowmobiles*, instead of horses?"

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"Horses can go among the trees—between rocks—over brush. With snowmobiles, we'd have to go part of the way on foot. If we had a pack of good dogs and some rifles—and knew where we were going—snowmobiles would work okay I suppose, but I don't have a budget to support that kind of venture—so horses—our spooky village dogs—and men with rifles—are all I can come up with at the moment."

"Why the *forest*? What makes you think it wasn't somebody who lives *nearby*?"

"Gertrude Rhinemann and her daughter, Ingrid, heard a high-pitched cry come from the edge of the forest, right after they discovered the body. That's about the only lead I have."

"Could have been the *train*."

"I asked if that could be what they heard. They both said no."

"Did you see any tracks around here before the blizzard covered everything?" the coroner asked.

"Yes. Rolf and I saw Herr Streiker's boot tracks in the snow—and another set of tracks. There'd clearly been a struggle—blood everywhere. The body was mutilated—partly eaten, especially Herr Streiker's face."

"I'll be very interested to see the photographs of the death scene—especially the tracks," the coroner said.

"Well—" the constable hesitated.

"Yes, what?"

"We didn't actually *get* any photographs."

"No photographs of the death scene and tracks? Why ever *not*?"

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"In the excitement of the moment Rolf forgot to bring his camera—then it began snowing—a blizzard, actually," the constable explained, then added, "And, like I say, there was a set of strange-looking tracks in the snow that were not Herr Streiker's. And another thing—*whatever* or whoever did him in *amused* itself while it was mutilating him. Like it was playing a game of cat and *mouse*."

"Perhaps we'll know more after I do the autopsy on Herr Streiker's corpse. A most interesting case," the coroner said, taking another slow drag on his pipe.

"And there's something you should know about Herr Streiker," the constable added.

"Yes?"

"You can't tell for all the snow and ice, but, except for his *boots*, he's as *naked* as a jaybird. Well, no joke intended, but he has so much body hair—you could almost say he *isn't* naked—like an ape—if you know what I mean."

"Hmm. Thanks for the warning. Well, I think I left the heater on—my assistants and I'd better be going before Herr Streiker begins to *thaw*," the coroner said, starting towards his SUV.

Coroner Öffner knocked a few small icicles from his graying beard, climbed in the vehicle.

He would soon have Herr Streiker's corpse stretched out on a slab in his morgue in the small town of Prescott sixteen miles away.

Chapter 2

The next morning, from her mountain retreat, 333 looked out into the mist. Her facial muscles twitched with anticipation. Her quick, intelligent, large, brown eyes, with long eyelashes, carefully surveyed the snow-covered trees and underbrush for movement. She nervously flicked a furry, golden ear, then, like a raptor, intently listened for the slightest sound.

She'd been awakened by a loud, sharp cracking noise, perhaps from the sky, she thought. She'd continued to listen attentively for a long time, but had heard nothing else of interest.

The longer she listened, the keener her hearing became and the fainter the sounds she was able to hear. Eventually, the cry of a far-off bird, or the chirp of a distant squirrel sounded as if nearby.

The open gash on her left shoulder still stung. She licked it for some time. It began to feel better.

Then she sniffed the dried blood caked on her front paw, began licking it off with her rough tongue. As she licked, she remembered where the blood had come from.

She raised herself up onto her hind legs, gracefully walked to the entrance of the cave—playfully *danced* around for a few moments on her hind feet, like a six-year-old child might do.

She eventually stopped dancing, deeply inhaled the frigid air, but could smell no scent of coyote, rabbit, or even a dog.

She must go in search of something to kill and eat, but she instinctively, cognitively, knew that before dark, it would not be safe to return to near the *place of lights* where Mother Nature had so fortuitously provided many of the upright-walking creatures 333 had found to be so delicious—but that she *hated* with such brutal fervor. She knew that eventually darkness would come, conceal her nocturnal trek across the bright snow, towards the *place of lights*.

333 decided to go find her cougar mother. She'd last seen her in the adjacent cave. Perhaps her mother would have an extra bloody bone to gnaw on.

As 333 stepped out of the mouth of her cave to go to her mother's, the footprints she left in the snow were *human-shaped*—like those of a six-year-old child—except, unlike those of a *human* child, 333's showed *claw* prints instead of human *toe* prints. 333's claws—like those of her cougar mother—and the soles of her feet were also as tough and weather resistant as her mother's.

333's form was sleek—mostly human-shaped from the waist down. Her body was covered with short, golden fur from head to toe, except for her face and neck, which were black and white. She had no tail.

Chapter 3

What had woken 333 had not been thunder, but rather the accidental discharge of a rifle held by a man on horseback.

The formidable-looking Constable Mizzen sat tall in his saddle with stately comportsment as the powerful, black horse he was riding pranced about through the smoke of the large bonfire. His spirited mount continually circled the fire pit.

With disbelief, the constable glanced at the horseman who had accidentally discharged his rifle; didn't say anything to him.

Seven men sat their restless steeds in a semi-circle, awaiting his instructions

"First—we'll ride to Wilhelm Streiker's cabin and see what we can learn—then we'll spread out—comb the forest looking for *tracks*! We'll be looking for tracks that resemble those of a child, but with *claws* instead of human *toes*!" the constable said, loudly.

"You mean we're looking for a *child*?" one of the men on horseback asked, incredulously.

"We don't know exactly *what* we're looking for, but the kind of tracks the thing leaves are about the same as those of a six-year-old child—except for what I just told you—the *feet*

have *claws* instead of human *toes*!" the constable reiterated. "You all know what happened to Herr Streiker! It could happen to any one of *us*—so be *careful*! If the damned thing won't surrender—*shoot*—ask questions later!" then he asked Rolf, "Did you bring your camera?"

"Yes, sir," Rolf answered from astride his pinto mare ducking his head in embarrassment as he recalled his forgetfulness of the previous day.

Pastor Energisch's tall, broad frame was the most prominent among the few villagers who had gotten up early; were standing around the circle near the restless horses and riders to give them a fitting send-off to the hunt.

The old pastor's wrinkled face was grim, lighted by the occasional flicker of firelight. His flowing white beard and long, pure-white hair contrasted with the early morning shadows. His kindly presence was an inspiration to all. "The power of the Lord is with you! The safety of *all* of us depends on you!" he said, in a compassionate tone.

The constable adjusted his high-powered rifle in its saddle-scabbard, flicked his horse's reins. The horse broke the circle, pranced away from the fire, out into the dimness. Its nostrils expelled large volumes of condensation into the cold, early-morning air.

The constable's huge, black overcoat flowed down over his horse's sides. His black, broad-brimmed felt hat fluttered in the light breeze, cast a flickering shadow over his face. His dark beard extended from under the brim, giving him an undeserved, menacing appearance.

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As the rest of the men began to urge their horses away from the fire, they were preceded by a pack of unruly, yapping dogs, reminiscent of the start of a foxhunt.

As they approached Herr Streiker's cabin, a yellowish-gray glow from the rising sun began to penetrate the haze.

One of the dogs dashed forward, began sniffing a bulge of snow on the side of the cabin's stoop; began unburying it. Other dogs quickly joined in.

The constable and Rolf dismounted, walked over to them, saw part of something furry being dug from under the snow.

"*Christ!*" Rolf exclaimed. "It's the ear of a little, black dog! It's all *bloody!* Whatever killed Herr Streiker—killed his dog, *too!*"

Alarmed, the others quickly dismounted, rifles in hand, to take a look.

"Yeah. It looks like the killer slammed the dog against the cabin wall—and *killed* it," one of the men suggested.

"There's some blood and dog hair *here*," the constable said, pointing to a reddish-brown spot on the wall.

One of the men turned the dead dog over with his foot. "Whatever killed it didn't *eat* any of it. The killer must have just killed it because it was trying to protect Herr Streiker," the man concluded.

"Maybe the killer thing's still inside the *cabin*," Rolf cautioned.

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"*You go in first,*" one of the men suggested, in a joking tone.

The other men laughed.

"*I'll go in first! Keep your rifles handy! If it gets me—shoot the damned thing—!*" the constable ordered. "*It has to be stopped!*"

The door to Wilhelm Streiker's cabin was partly open. Constable Mizzen walked over, stood on the icy stoop; looked inside. He saw snow had drifted onto the stone floor, saw no tracks in the snow.

It was dark inside.

The others gathered around as the constable testily pushed the door the rest of the way open with the tip of his rifle, carefully stepped inside, rifle ready.

He looked around, didn't see any sign of man or beast. Then, by the weak sunlight coming in through a small window, he noticed a coal oil lamp sitting on a table, found a match, lit the lamp, held it up; looked around in the cabin.

A stray *cat* yowled, flashed between the constable's boots—disquieting him considerably. It dashed on outside.

A sound of clicking metal, in unison, from outside the cabin made the constable aware that the men out there, seeing the cat, had instantly slammed bullets into the chambers of their rifles. *Why the hell didn't they already have them loaded? "Don't shoot—! It's just a little cat!"* the constable shouted. *I didn't see that goddamn cat—maybe the killer is in here, too,* he thought. He knew he couldn't hold the lamp and shoot at the same time. "*Rolf—come in here!*"

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Rolf eased his way inside. The constable handed him the lamp.

"The goddamned killer might still be *in* here somewhere—follow me!" the constable warned.

Rolf shuddered, followed.

All that the men outside could see was the flickering lamplight coming from the cabin window.

Rifle in hand, Rolf followed closely behind the constable with the lamp. The constable carefully worked his way through the dimly lit corners and looked under shadowy furniture, until he was satisfied the killer was not laying in wait in the cabin. "No killer in here!" Rolf proclaimed, with a sigh of relief.

"Have you noticed, it's not really *cold* in here, even though the door was left open?" the constable commented.

"Herr Streiker must have had a hot fire going, there's still some glowing embers in the fireplace, " Rolf observed, setting the lamp on a small table. He leaned his rifle against it, warmed his hands over the embers. "And look at *this*—a *bath*tub—right in front of it!"

"That explains why his body was covered with a layer of thin ice—he was taking a *bath*—he must have been soaking wet when he hopped out of the tub and went outside," the constable reasoned.

"Maybe his dog started barking—or he heard something at the *door*," Rolf suggested, "and he jumped out of the tub, grabbed his axe, quickly pulled his boots on—they were unlaced when we found him—and went to see what was at the door."

"Even so, I find it strange that a man would go to the door *naked*!" the constable said.

"Ah—*this* explains *that*!" Rolf said, picking up a large, brown crockery jug that had been sitting by the bathtub, held it up by the finger handle. "He was *drunk*!"

The constable took the jug from Rolf, sniffed the opening. "Yes—and he didn't drink cheap whiskey either! This is good Canadian stuff!" The constable looked around. "There's no sign of a *struggle* in here!"

"No. Everything seems to be in order," Rolf agreed, picking up his rifle.

"Whatever got him must have attacked just as he opened the door," the constable suggested.

"His little dog must have tried to protect him. Herr Streiker had a bloody axe in his hand when we found him. He must have tried to fight off his attacker with it. He must have fought—then ran—tried to make it to the *village*," Rolf added. "Obviously, he didn't quite make it!"

Seeing that the constable and Rolf had not met with disaster, one of the men felt safe enough to stick his head inside the door. "Herr Streiker made a damned good *fight* of it. *I* never knew the man personally, but we can all be proud as hell of him for the way he handled himself! He was a tall, strong man. If whatever it was could outwit and kill *him*, it could happen to *any* of us!"

"The new snow has covered all the evidence outdoors, and we didn't find anything of interest in the cabin—aside from a

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jug of whiskey!" the constable said, blowing out the flame of the lamp.

The constable led them back outside.

"We'll have to find its *trail*," he continued. "If it's *human*—we'll try to wound it and bring it in alive. Let's get on our *horses*!"

"What if it *isn't* human?" one of the men asked.

The constable didn't reply.

By mid-morning, the hunt for the killer was well underway. The mist had risen and the snow glistened in the sunlight that had finally broken through the slowly-moving clouds, making it possible for them to easily see tracks.

"Spread *out*! We'll cover as much area as we can! You all know what you're *looking* for—small tracks!" the constable reiterated.

In all my years as constable, I've been in a lot of situations: chased a wounded bear, even apprehended a crazy man once—but never had to look for a goddamn, man-killer with tiny feet, he thought.

"Constable—how do ya know the killer came *this* way?" one of the riders piped. "Maybe we're just wastin' time! I got some *rabbits* back at my place that need skinnin'!"

Another rider challenged the rabbit skinner. "You *chicken* shit! You're just looking for an excuse to climb back in bed with your chubby *girlfriend*! Well—*go*! Get the hell *out* of here! The rest of us have *work* to do! We're going to *find* that

goddamn animal—or whatever the hell it is that ripped open Herr Streiker! We want to *sleep* good at night!"

Frustration was beginning to take its toll on the men.

"All right—knock it *off*!" the constable barked. "We need every man we have! Nobody is going anywhere, except after that goddamned thing!" and then, by way of explanation, he added, "Gertrude Rhinemann and her daughter heard a screech from this side of the village—right after they discovered Herr Streiker's body! *That's* why we're going to search the *forest*!"

The rabbit skinner ducked his head, said nothing more; continued to ride on with the rest of the hunters.

The riders had spaced themselves far enough apart so they could see any of the killer's tracks that might show up between horses.

Visibility was good. The mist had risen from the valley floors, up the ridges of the forest-covered mountains, to near the mountaintops.

The constable kept his eyes to the snow looking for tracks. All he had seen so far had been their own dogs' tracks.

He saw the dogs as a mixed blessing. They might turn tail and run for home at the first sniff of the thing's scent, as the one had done when it had smelled the killer's scent the day they'd found Herr Streiker's body; but that would at least alert him they were onto something.

And, he reasoned, the dogs might slow down an attack from whatever it was they were looking for, if it suddenly came upon them.

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After an hour of searching, one of the men yelled, "*Here* are some *tracks*—not a *dog's*!"

The constable hastily rode over to where the man was pointing, dismounted, walked over to the tracks; examined them carefully. "*Cougar* tracks," he said. "Not what we're looking for—*damn* the luck!"

Constable Mizzen got back on his horse.

One of the dogs, curious about the constable's actions, came over, sniffed the snow then started following the cougar tracks. The constable's horse began following the dog. The constable, distracted by looking for more tracks, didn't pay attention to where his horse was going.

The trees were becoming closer together. The snow-covered boughs seemed to strike out at the riders, slap them in the face with ice and snow as they rode past.

Then, just ahead, the constable saw the dog that had followed the cougar tracks; jumping up and down against the trunk of a giant pine, barking wildly.

The constable urged his reluctant mount towards the tree.

Suddenly, a heart-stopping hiss came from up in the snowy branches.

The constable felt a surge of excitement; quickly pointed his rifle at it.

Rolf and the others, hearing the eerie sound, spurred their horses; gathered around the tree, rifles ready.

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The constable tried to get his horse to go under the tree. It reared up—almost dumped him. "Whoa—*easy* boy!" he consoled, patting its neck.

Then he saw the cougar standing on a couple of branches, hissing—stubby ears laid back, eyes filled with yellow fire, hate—sharp fangs.

The constable's horse suddenly caught the cougar's scent; reacted wildly. The constable reined his horse in, spurred its flanks; shot out from under the tree. "*Don't* shoot—it's just a *cougar*!" he shouted to the men.

He left the dog barking under the tree, went on with the hunt. The yapping dog, realizing it was alone with a cougar bearing down on it, quickly dashed off after the horses, tail tucked between its legs.

The exhausted riders continued to look for the killer's tracks. They saw tracks of deer, rabbit and moose, but as the sun became low on the horizon, extremely frustrated, having found no human-like tracks, no trace of the killer, they gave up in disgust; turned their mounts homeward.

Chapter 4

The village of Bear Skin was nestled in the foothills of the rugged Pondanus Mountains that extend down out of Canada into Washington State.

It had only one street with a name, Beaver Street, which ran almost north and south, right through the village center. Every building that had anything to do with business was located along it, on one side or the other. These included the red brick, steep-roofed village hall where Mayor Thorndike presided; Constable Alexander Mizzen's granite-faced office across the street from city hall; further on, the only gas station in the village and the Moose Head Bar were next to each other; and on the opposite side of the street was the tall, white, stone church with a spire where Pastor Energisch preached dynamic sermons every Sunday. Also, there were a few shops, like the mom and pop market where Trendy worked; and Pierre Corbèt's leather shop.

The latest census had found the number of Bear Skin residents to be three hundred and seven.

A few of the inhabitants lived in the steep-roofed, blue-trimmed, whitewashed apartments that bordered the street, however most lived in unique cottages and log houses scattered among the surrounding pines and cedars.

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The village was originally settled in the late nineteen hundreds by German immigrant trappers and most of its current residents were descendants.

Although in recent years a few folks of English, French and other origins had settled in Bear Skin, the village still retained most of its German old-country flavor and some of its German descendents still addressed each other as 'Herr' and 'Frau', in the style of their native tongue. Favorite Bear Skin cuisine included sauerkraut and sausage. However, most of the folks were thoroughly Americanized.

Bear Skin's annual festivals, when such luxuries could be afforded, were delightfully enhanced by old-country style German costumes; the *oom pah* of a German tuba; and occasionally, even by a visitor or two from the old country.

By most standards, it was a poor village. The residents typically lived off of the naturally productive land, surviving on wild meat, locally grown garden produce, a few chickens, the sale of lumber and leather goods. A few of the more industrious trapped small animals for their fur, which they sold to the occasional fur trader who happened to venture through.

Although remote, Bear Skin had some modern conveniences, such as electricity, telephones and automobiles. A few of its residents, several for economic reasons; others for traditional ones, remained without these luxuries; preferring coal oil lamps to electric lights; saddle horses to cars. Whether or not a resident had electricity, they always kept a coal oil lamp of some kind handy for when the power went out, which frequently happened during the severe winters.

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By contrast, the closest large city, Etherington, thirty miles away, population about half a million, was a very modern, wealthy metropolis.

Prescott, a small town sixteen miles from Bear Skin, like Etherington, was modern and prosperous from the rich farmland surrounding it. And, although the coroner of Prescott, Coroner Brett Öffner, lived in Prescott, liked the lifestyle of Bear Skin much better, frequented it whenever he got the slightest excuse.

It was a typical Bear Skin winter: subzero temperatures, lots of snow on the ground. Hind and front quarters of deer, elk and moose meat, frozen solid, covered with white cheesecloth, eerily hung from limbs of the bleak trees, like white ghosts in the gloom. Gradually, as needed, they would be sawed into convenient-sized pieces, cooked, carved, eaten by the hunter's families and friends during the winter months, or sold for a little pocket money to the Bear Skin mom and pop market.

Coroner Öffner's white SUV braked to a stop on the slick, packed ice in front of Constable Mizzen's office. The coroner quickly got out, put his hands over his ears; hurried inside.

Constable Mizzen, in front of the fireplace, turned, greeted the coroner, cordially, "*Brett*—come over to the fire and get warm! Do you have news about Herr Streiker?" he asked, continuing to warm his large, slender hands in front of the glowing fireplace.

"You were out when I called earlier. Rolf told me you found no tracks of the killer in the forest," the coroner said, as he

warmed his chubby hands before the flames, located his tobacco, tamped some into the bowl, lit his pipe. Smoke lingered around his plump face, graying mustache and beard.

"Yeah. The blizzard had covered everything with new snow. I was hoping to find some fresh tracks of the killer. We searched until sunset—nothing!"

The coroner's pipe had gone out prematurely. He relit it. "I've completed a thorough autopsy on Herr Streiker. You couldn't see it, because of the position he was lying in when you observed his corpse, but the lower back of his head was gone—and so was most of his *brain*," the coroner said, solemnly, taking a puff on his pipe. He waited for the constable's reaction.

It took a second for the constable's mind to absorb what the coroner had just said. "His *brain*?"

"Yes. The base of the skull had been excised and much of the brain tissue apparently eaten. From what I could tell from the lacerations and blood, it looked like whatever did it must have used claws and fangs to dislodge the tissue—a wild animal, I'd say."

"But you're not sure?"

The coroner's eyes dimmed. "No, but there was some yellow-orange hair left in wounds."

Astounded, the constable, turned away from the brisk fire, looked Herr Öffner in the eyes. "You couldn't tell from the examination of the hair—what the creature *was*?"

A concerned look came over the coroner's face. "No. As a matter of fact, the results of the hair DNA test came out very bizarre."

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"Bizarre—?"

The coroner tried to mask the tension he felt, but a slight tremor in his voice revealed it. "Yes, bizarre is the word for it. The DNA of the hair doesn't *exactly* match *any* known species of animal—not *any*—of *any* kind—including *humans*."

The constable gestured with his broad hand for the coroner, who he had known for many years, to sit down in one of the comfortable chairs in front of the cozy fire. The coroner obliged him and the constable sat down in the one next to it.

A wrinkle came to the constable's brow. "Level with me Brett—what the hell are we *up* against?"

"At this point, your guess is as good as mine. The lab boys are fascinated. Like I said, they've never seen or heard of anything like it. The DNA we're seeing could be a crossbreed of some kind, I suppose," the coroner said, taking a puff on his pipe.

"What do you mean?"

"Living in Bear Skin, a person doesn't get a lot of news, but there's a lot going on nowadays in the field of genetic engineering. Scientists are trying to crossbreed every animal with every other animal—and humans with animals, as well."

"My God, what's this world coming to?"

"Yes, they're able to fuse the cells of one animal with those of another—or with a human's," the coroner said.

"You think that's why the killer's DNA is so odd?"

"It's just a wild idea, but it's possible."

At that moment, Rolf came in from an adjacent room. "Would you like coffee?" he asked.

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"Yes, please, Rolf," the constable mumbled, still deep in thought about what the coroner had said about the DNA.

"Yes. Coffee would be excellent," the coroner echoed, rubbing his hands together to increase blood circulation.

"Coming up!"

"You're positive about the DNA test?" the constable asked.

"Yes—after I saw the initial finding, I couldn't believe it either, so I had them do it again to make sure it wasn't some kind of mix-up in the lab—and furthermore," the coroner continued, "the axe that Herr Streiker was holding?"

"Yes."

"There was blood on it—*not* Herr Streiker's."

"Had to be the killer's."

"Yes, and, like the hair—the blood was of a type that has never been identified before—there isn't even a code that fits it—you know—AB—O-positive, that sort of thing."

"Could it be an *alien* from another world?"

"I doubt it. I've never seen anything like its DNA and blood type results before, but my gut feeling is it's an earthly crossbreed of some kind," the coroner said, taking his pipe from his mouth. "And another thing—as you already know, Herr Streiker's corpse was extremely lacerated—like it was done by something or someone who was psychologically striking out—maybe revenging some terrible thing that had been done to it. That's the impression I got from looking at the lacerations."

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Rolf returned and handed them each a cup of steaming coffee. "I know the constable only takes sugar in his. Do you take cream, Herr Öffner?"

"Yes, cream would be splendid, thanks, Rolf."

Rolf left momentarily, returned with a pitcher of cream and a bowl of sugar, set them and some spoons on the low table in front of them and went back into the next room.

The information about Herr Streiker had put the constable's mind in a quandary. He stared at the dying embers in the fireplace for a moment, got up, tossed a damp log on the fire. A storm of sparks flew up the chimney. He sat back down.

They watched the new log as it hissed and steamed.

"Also—Herr Streiker had enough alcohol in him to make me wonder why he was still able to function at all," the coroner eventually said.

"Yes, I'm not surprised. We found—that is *Rolf* found—a jug half full of good Canadian whiskey sitting by Herr Streiker's bathtub. Herr Streiker must have been a tough old bird. My guess is he was one of those guys who worked hard—and drank harder," the constable said.

"I take it, you think he'd been taking a bath just before he was killed?"

"Yes, the tub was still almost full of water."

"That explains the thin layer of ice on his skin—it must have frozen almost instantly when he was forced to stay out in the cold," the coroner reasoned.

"I agree."

"The other thing that I came to tell you is that the newspapers have somehow gotten hold of the mystery killer story and have spread it far and wide. Their version says Bear Skin is just trying to put itself on the map. They say the bit about a six-year-old human child's footprints in the snow is ridiculous. They say the next thing you know, folks in Bear Skin will be seeing *Big-foot*."

"Do *you* think it's ridiculous?" the constable asked, sipping his coffee.

"Well, I have no photographs to show anyone that it *isn't* ridiculous, now *do* I?"

They heard Rolf's nervous cough.

"But I do have blood type and DNA hair evidence that show we're dealing with something very extraordinary," the coroner added.

The constable ran his thin fingers through his brown hair. "Yes, very extraordinary indeed—something that's not any known animal or human—something that eats human brains—something that viciously plays with its victim—something that probably has claws—and fangs—and has *human-like feet*," the constable summarized. He bent over and poked the fire with the fire iron, made sparks explode up the flue. "What the hell could it be?"

"I think you'll have more to worry about than just the killer."

"Why?"

"My guess is that you'll soon have *visitors*."

The constable glanced at him. "What *kind* of visitors?"

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"I'd guess—reporters—curiosity seekers—people like that. Maybe even law enforcement people."

"Well, I can't do anything about that," the constable said, taking a sip of his coffee.

"You can do what *I'm* going to do," the coroner said, sipping his.

"What's that?"

"Invest in Mayor Thorndike's Bed and Breakfast. He's going to call it the *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast*."

"Mayor Thorndike is going to build a *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast*?"

"That's the word on the street. He thinks this weird killer is somehow going to turn Bear Skin into a *tourist* village."

"*That's* all I need," the constable said. "*Tourists* with their *brains* eaten out. But what the hell—count me in—I'll invest what I can in it. If curiosity seekers come, they'll have to stay *somewhere*, and Bear Skin doesn't have any hotels or motels."

Chapter 5

It was a typical Saturday night in the Moose Head Bar. Everyone was drinking, slow dancing to the music of a small band, enjoying each other.

Clyde Breuger was sitting by himself in a booth in a secluded corner. He'd been drinking heavily all evening. He sat with his elbows resting on the table; hands on his head, fingers laced through his sun-bleached blond hair. He had a broad nose, his face was ruddy from spending a lot of time in the sun and the local ladies thought his countenance quite handsome.

A blonde named Sally, sitting on a high stool at the maple wood bar sipping a cold beer, had been watching Clyde's reflection in the behind-the-bar mirror. She decided to give him some company, left her stool, picked up her beer and sculpted leather purse, ambled over to where he sat.

"Hi Clyde! Wanna *dance*?"

"Leave me alone!" he said, in a sour tone, not looking up. "Just leave me alone."

She slid her shapely tush onto the soft seat opposite him. "I know you've had it rough lately. I heard about your wife leaving you—running off with that rancher from the coast."

"Just go away."

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"I like you Clyde. You need someone at a time like this—let's dance."

"I just want another drink—*bartender*—another Lion's Tail." He hesitated and then added, "and a beer for the lady!"

"Tell me what's bothering you," she coaxed, lighting up a cigarette.

"I want to die. Do you know what it's like ta live with someone a long time and then come home one day from a hard day's work—and they're *gone*?"

"No. I've never been married."

"Well, it's pure hell—that's what—pure *hell*." He drank the rest of his drink, stuck the end of a cigarette between his lips. He was shaky. She lit it for him.

"I'm just a thirty-two year old slut. I *like* being a slut. I don't get all tied up—well I mean I don't get all tied up in *relationships*. There are plenty of men who just want to poke and run, so I let them—for a few bucks. I figure if I keep myself clean and don't get pregnant—that's the best I can ask for. I get some fun out of it, too—sometimes."

The pudgy barkeep brought the drinks to their table. Clyde fumbled with his thin wallet, paid the barkeep, gave him a little tip.

"To you and a better life," Sally said, raising her beer glass.

"Yeah—ta me and a better *life*—what a laugh *that* is," he said, sarcastically, unenthusiastically clicking her glass with his, gulping down some of his exotic drink.

"You'll pull out of this," she said, consolingly.

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"Naw—I won't. I've tried for three months. I can't pull out."

"Maybe you need some *nooky*."

"Maybe...but I'm too drunk to do you any good tonight. Thanks Sally, I really do appreciate what you're trying ta do—but, I'm goin' ta shoot some pool now."

"You couldn't hit the broad side of Kelly's *barn*, tonight," she quipped, taking a sip of beer.

Her words depressed him even more. He got up, took his drink, left her sitting at the table, went into the poolroom, laid a quarter on the edge of the pool table and selected a pool stick from a rack on the wall.

A young man got up from his chair, laid a quarter down alongside Clyde's.

"Toss for the break?" the other man asked.

"Yeah, sure," Clyde said.

"Call it."

"Heads."

The other man flipped a half-dollar into the air. It came down and bounced on the new green felt of the pool table. "*Tails*—I break," he said, picking up his half-dollar.

The young man chalked his cue, took careful aim, shot the white cue ball forward with great force. Balls scattered every which way. Two went into pockets. He continued to shoot two more times and then missed getting a ball into a pocket.

Clyde set his drink on the edge of the pool table, took up his pool stick in unsteady hands, then with the full force of all the pent-up anger and depression in him—recklessly, powerfully

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thrust it forward at the cue ball. *Snap—!* The first couple of inches of his stick splintered away; leaving a sharp, jagged point, which plowed underneath the nice new, green felt of the pool table—ruining it. "Damn!" he cried.

The barkeep saw what had happened and was on him in a flash. "Get out! Get the hell out of my *bar—!*"

"I can explain," Clyde began.

"No. This is the third time this week you've caused trouble in here—*out!*"

Clyde made the mistake of drunkenly swinging at the hefty barkeep. The barkeep grabbed Clyde's arm, forced it behind him. Someone opened the outside door and the bartender tossed Clyde straight out into the freezing night air.

Sally ran after him and caught up with him. "Let me take you *home!*" she pleaded, tugging on his denim jacket.

His anger and frustration was beyond words. He swung on her. The back of his hand caught her lightly on the side of her face. "Get away! Leave me *alone—!*" he cried.

She had finally had enough. She left him standing in the light of the full moon, went back inside.

Clyde Breuger didn't know how far he'd stumbled through the snow. He finally stopped and looked around through drunken, blurry eyes. He could barely focus on the dark outline of the distant church steeple. It seemed several miles away. It was. He eventually got it through his sluggish mind that he'd been trudging through the snow, in the wrong direction, for a long time.

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He turned himself around. His thought was to start back towards the village—and then he *heard* it—a blood-curdling *hiss* coming from a few feet in front of him. Fear and panic gripped him. At first, he thought it was a cougar, but then he saw its dark silhouette in the moonlight. *Whatever it is—it's walking on its hind legs*, he thought, frantically. He saw that whatever it was was large and a little taller than he. He screamed. His voice carried over the snow towards the village, but the village was too far away and deep in slumber. No one heard his heart-rending cry for help.

He saw four sharp fangs coming at him. In the final instant, he saw that the horrible fiend, whatever it was—was *smiling*. He suddenly felt searing pain slicing through his face and neck—something sharp was ripping his flesh wide open. He saw his own blood spurting out onto the moonlit snow. He tried, uselessly, to fight off the attacker—and then he fainted away.

Chapter 6

The constable remained on the welcome mat a few moments, stomping the snow off his boots, pushed the fogged-up glass door open, entered the café.

He shook the chill off, hung up his damp overcoat and hat, warmed his frost-reddened hands at the potbelly stove a moment; sat down on a stool at the counter.

"Well, if it isn't the handsome constable. I've *always* admired your rugged mug. You're up *early* this morning," Wanda, the middle-aged, bleached-blond waitress said, with jolly humor.

She picked up a plate and looked at her reflection in it. She put a few strands of hair in place. Her brown roots had begun to show a little again. She would have to remember to get Molly at the beauty shop to touch them up. She put the plate down. "Coffee?"

"Good morning Wanda—yes—coffee and lots of *sugar*."

She wondered why he had said 'sugar' like that, as she knew that he knew that she knew that he always took lots of sugar in his coffee. He had eaten most of his meals in the café; during the many years he had been constable of Bear Skin. Maybe it was a Freudian slip. Maybe he meant a different *kind* of sugar. *Maybe he's sweet on me*, she thought. *Naw*. Then she

said, "That's such a terrible thing that happened to Herr Streiker. Whatever do you suppose *did* that?" she asked, as she brought him a cup and poured hot coffee into it.

"I wish I knew," he said. He poured sugar into his coffee from a glass container with a chrome top. "I wish I knew."

"I can't imagine what it could be—*baby* feet and yet able to do all that—*horrible*—mutilation. Do you want breakfast?"

Horrible mutilation and breakfast somehow didn't go together, but he'd seen lots of blood in his day. "Yes. Eggs, sausage—and toast. I could eat a *bear*."

"No need to tell me how you want your eggs, but we got in some sourdough—want sourdough toast—or *regular*?"

"Sourdough."

"You don't think it might have *been* a bear, do you? A bear has a footprint somewhat like a human," she said.

"No. It wasn't a bear. I've seen a lot of bear tracks. It wasn't a bear," he said, picking up a newspaper, which had been lying on the counter close to him. He read the date on it. "The new edition hasn't gotten here yet?" he asked, opening up the paper.

"Nope—the mailman doesn't get here for another hour."

Wanda yelled the constable's breakfast order to Hans, the cook, went on about her waitress duties.

The constable had just gotten interested in a story on page two, when the café door swung open. The coroner came in, followed by a blast of cold air.

The constable looked up, "Brett, what brings you all the way from Prescott this early in the morning?"

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"I hoped to find you here," the coroner said, hanging up his overcoat and hat on the coat rack. He sat down on a stool next to the constable. "Put away that old newspaper. I brought you this morning's edition. Bear Skin is spread all over the front page!" He tapped a photo with his finger, passed the paper to the constable.

"Coffee?" Wanda asked.

"Yes, please, Wanda."

Wanda brought the coroner a cup and poured in the dark, rich, steaming liquid.

She refilled the constable's cup.

"Cream?" she asked the coroner.

"You *know* I take cream," the coroner said, cordially, almost cracking a smile.

The constable began reading the newspaper aloud. "The constable of Bear Skin has been exercising his dogs and horses in the pursuit of an imaginary beast that has terrorized the secluded village. This imaginary beastie leaves human baby footprints in the snow and has viciously mutilated and killed a man. Where are the photos to back up the constable's claim? Maybe he'll come up with some imaginary photographs, too."

The constable's face had reddened considerably. "That goddamned *Etherington Tribune*!"

"They had the nerve to put your picture on the front page—next to a drawing of *Bigfoot*," the coroner said, warming his hands with his cup of hot coffee. "I *thought* you might just be interested."

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"I'm *more* than *interested*. What the paper says is *libel*, pure and simple," the constable grumbled, sipping his coffee.

"Want some breakfast?" Wanda asked.

"No—just hot coffee, thanks Wanda. I had breakfast in town before I came out," the coroner explained, pouring cream into his coffee.

Suddenly, the café door burst open, a breathless, lanky, teenage boy came running up to the constable. "Come *quick*—there's been another *killin'*! Maw sent me ta *tell* ya—!"

The constable jumped to his feet. "Come with *us*!" he said, to the boy.

The constable tossed a bill on the counter, grabbed his overcoat, hat, rifle, dashed out the door.

The coroner grabbed his overcoat and hat, quickly followed the constable out; the boy at his heels.

"Let's take *my* rig," the coroner said.

The three piled into the coroner's SUV, the constable in the passenger's seat, the boy behind him.

The coroner started the engine.

"What's your name, son?" the coroner asked.

"I'm *Billy*, sir."

"Billy, you'll have to tell us how to *get* there," the constable said.

"Just go down Beaver Street—then on out towards the lake!"

The coroner began driving in that direction.

"Who found the—body?" the coroner asked.

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"I did. I wuz huntin' with my .22. I was followin' a rabbit track—I just came up ta the body—all of a sudden. There it were in the snow in front o' me! Maw says not ta swear—but just in between us men—it scared the *hell* out of me! I swooshed up a bunch o' real black, big crows off it, then I got ta thinkin' 'bout what must 'ave *killed* 'im. I got scared and ran towards here. I kept lookin' back over ma shoulder when I wuz still runnin'. I thought I'd shoot at it if it came after me—but then I thought my .22 wouldn't stop somethin' that could kill a grown *man* like that. He's a real red, bloody mess. I guess Herr Streiker was, too. I never got ta see Herr Streiker, but I sure got ta see thisun. Anyhow, I never stopped runnin' 'till I found maw."

"You're sure it was a *man*?" the constable asked.

"Oh, it wuz a man alright."

"And you didn't see the thing that killed him—or hear anything?"

"No—!" The boy shuddered at the thought.

The coroner needed no further instructions about how to get to the dead man. He could already see the gathering of people and vehicles a couple of miles away, like a bunch of ants at a picnic.

As they got closer, the constable saw the occasional burst of a flashbulb. "It's Rolf! He remembered his camera this time!" the constable said, with obvious pleasure.

The coroner pulled up near the crowd, parked the vehicle. The three got out.

Someone yelled, "It's the *constable*!"

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The crowd opened their circle and made way for the constable and his rifle to pass through, like a bunch of sheep accommodating a sheepdog.

Rolf was still snapping photographs as the constable came up to him, then the constable looked down at the bloody body. "Does anyone know who it *is*?" he asked, without looking around.

A weeping blonde lady, covered from head to foot in white rabbit's fur, quickly came to his side. It was Sally from the bar. "His name is Clyde *Breuger*. He was such a *nice* man," she said, blowing her nose into a dainty hanky. "He got a little drunk sometimes—but he was a very nice man, really."

"Okay—everybody go *home*!" the constable said, loudly. "This is a *crime* scene—not a *picnic*!"

"When are you going to *kill* the thing?" someone yelled.

"Yeah—*when*?" another yelled.

"We're doing everything we can!" the constable retorted.

"It's not *enough*!" a woman cried. "I have *kids*! Are ya goin' ta wait 'til one o' ma kids gets eaten *alive*?"

The constable didn't reply, but he gave the woman a quick glance.

The coroner noticed. "You can't blame people for being scared," the coroner said.

As if to emphasize his point, they heard the traumatized villagers loudly commiserating among themselves, as they grudgingly followed the constable's directive and moved towards their vehicles.

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The coroner saw that Billy had joined his mother. The coroner waved at him, as if to say thanks. Billy waved back, then left with her.

"No—but with all those folks tramping around—it will be a miracle if we find any *tracks*," the constable finally said.

Rolf had been quietly going about his work, taking photos. "Don't worry—I was one of the first to get here. I have good photos of everything."

"You got pictures of any child-like *tracks*?" the constable asked, hopefully.

"Yes—close-ups—most of the tracks are still untouched. They're over *here*," Rolf said, leading the way. "Here—and here. You can see for yourself."

The rotund coroner bent down and looked with amazement at the child-like, pointed-toe tracks in the snow where Rolf was indicating. He examined one closely. "They *are* like those of a six-year-old human child!" he exclaimed, with surprise.

"You mean—after everything I've *told* you—you still thought they *weren't*?" the constable countered.

"Well, it *was* a little hard to believe."

The coroner began examining the stiff corpse. The frozen body was lying almost face down. "It's the same MO as with Herr Streiker. The face has been eaten so badly that it is almost unrecognizable—and the brain—eaten out from the back of the head. That's so creepy—even to a coroner."

"One thigh has been mostly eaten away," the constable added.

"Yes—and see the playful lacerations across his back—just like with Herr Streiker," the coroner said.

"Well, one thing about it—we won't be trying to track it into the forest," Rolf said.

"Why not?" the coroner asked.

"Because," the constable interjected, "the ice crust over the snow is so thick, the only place the thing, whatever it is—and Herr Breuger—broke through the crusted snow and made tracks was around *here*—where the struggle took place."

"Can't your dogs get onto the *scent* and follow it?" the coroner asked.

The constable chuckled. "Not a chance. One of those stupid dogs we have got a whiff of the thing's scent—the night we found Herr Streiker's corpse. You know what that dumb dog did?" the constable asked.

"What?"

"It turned tail and ran back to the safety of the village, like a turpentine cat," the constable said.

"The Canine Corps in Prescott has specially-trained dogs. *They* won't turn and run. This snow crust won't stop them. They'll get on the scent and take you right to the—whatever it is," the coroner said, pulling his collar up around his ears. "What do you think about *that* idea?" he asked. He saw the constable's furrowed brow. "Do you want to get the Prescott law enforcement involved?"

The constable thought about the proposition a moment, said, "I don't think I have much *choice*. If the newspapers get

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wind of the specially-trained dogs—and if I refuse to *use* them—I might be looking for *work* right *soon*."

"You have a point. Okay, I'll make the arrangements. Do you think the three of us can get Herr Breuger's body into the SUV?"

"I don't see why not," the constable replied. "Rolf—can you lend us a hand?"

"Sure."

The coroner opened the back of the vehicle and laid down a sheet of plastic, stiff from the cold. The three loaded Clyde Breuger's corpse, wrapped it up in the plastic as best they could, climbed in the SUV, started back towards Bear Skin; where the coroner would drop off the constable and Rolf, then continue on to Prescott, with his mutilated, frozen passenger.

Chapter 7

Herr William Streiker's ashes, collected in a decorative urn, rested on a polished wooden table at the head of the aisle. The urn was covered with a white pall with a cross on it. The light of the nearby paschal candle flickered.

The church pianist filled the little church with uplifting music.

Following Communion, everyone rose and sang *Christ Has Risen! Alleluia!* and two other hymns, then sat down.

Pastor Energisch stood behind the altar, occasionally glancing down at the huge, ornate Bible spread out before him.

He nodded to the pianist to end the music, then read several biblical passages, located his sermon notes and adjusted the glasses on his nose.

The pastor's sermon would touch on the nature of the constable's duties, so he glanced through the congregation to make sure the constable was present, was pleased to see him sitting in a pew.

The pastor's capacious, white eyebrows almost covered his eyes as he began his sermon. "We are here today to lay to rest one of our own—Herr Wilhelm Streiker. Ours is not to reason why his life was taken in such a horrible, disgusting way. We do not yet even know which of the Creator's creatures

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stopped this man's breath—that will be the constable's job to ascertain. We can only hope that Herr Streiker's soul has found peace in the great beyond," the pastor said, the tips of his long white whiskers occasionally touching the outstretched Bible as he spoke. "Another of our folk—Herr Clyde Breuger—who, as I speak, lies in the morgue in Prescott—a second victim of the creature's bloody mouth. We, therefore, ask for divine guidance for our constable—Herr Mizzen—and for his helpers. We ask that he and they be given the power to put an end to this creature that frightens us and threatens the life of every man, woman and child in Bear Skin."

Music once again enveloped the church.

The pastor invited anyone in the congregation, who wished to do so, to say a few words in Herr Streiker's behalf.

Several did.

Many wept, for themselves as much as for Herr Streiker, as his urn was placed in a cradle. Two pallbearers slowly and carefully carried it out of the church; followed by the congregation, then the pastor.

Short yellow grass of the memorial garden poked up through the gray ice here and there; through the mottled snow that surrounded the small, freshly shoveled hole in the frozen ground in the bleak cemetery.

The pastor took his place on one side of the sacred opening, read from a small, black Bible and then sanctified the site where Herr Streiker's remains were to meet with eternity.

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Herr Streiker's urn was gracefully lowered into the earth. Everyone prayed, stood in place a few moments, dispersed.

"I thought the pastor gave a fine sermon" the coroner said, dispassionately, as they walked down the sidewalk outside the church.

"Yes, I just hope the power he was talking about shows up soon—me and my helpers as he calls them could sure as hell use it," the constable quipped.

"Now, imagine what it would be like if the poor old pastor were to go after the killer himself. I can just picture his pre-historic frame on an old nag charging off across the snow after it, like Don *Quixote*," the coroner joked.

The image brought a rare smile to the constable's thin lips. "I *do* have a plan."

"What is it?"

"A *helicopter*."

"A chopper?"

"Yes. Considering all the publicity Bear Skin has gotten, I think the Air Force base commander will be sympathetic. I want one of his pilots to fly us over the area where we think the whatever it is, might be—maybe we can *spot* it."

"Did you say *we*?" the coroner said, lighting his pipe.

"I *did*."

"I can't fly in a *helicopter*—I'd be scared to *death*."

"I doubt you would. I'm sure you've had more profound hair-raising experiences as a coroner than a little ride on a chopper will provide."

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"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you—I finished the autopsy on Herr Breuger."

"And?"

"Everything looks the same as the one on Herr Streiker. I've sent samples out for testing, just in case there's something different, but I doubt there will be," the coroner said, pounding ashes from the bowl of his pipe.

Chapter 8

The rhythmic *soosh—soosh* of ice-skates and romantic chatter of young voices filled the air, as gracefully skating couples, delighting in each others companionship glided effortlessly over the frozen lake in the serene moonlight. Occasionally, one would tell a joke and there would be laughter.

They had built a booming bonfire along the lake's edge. Rolf and Ingrid rested on thick, wool blankets near it.

Rolf's rifle leaned against a nearby spruce tree; its barrel reflected the fire's dancing light.

"Do you want to skate some more?" he asked.

"The fire feels good—I just want to lay here with you!" She removed his glove; took his firm hand in hers.

"Someday, I want to be rich and famous. Then, you and I can go away to a far-off island and make love all day on a sunny beach—without anyone bothering us," he whispered.

Her rosy cheeks became even more flushed. "I like that idea a lot," she said, giving him a kiss.

They covered themselves with blankets, watched the full moon slip through wispy clouds for a few minutes—drifted off to sleep.

They found themselves alone by the dying fire.

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Rolf looked around. "We're all by *ourselves*!" He could hardly believe his good luck. He jumped up, found some dry branches under a tree, heaped them on the fire and got back under the blankets with her.

He tenderly explored her face with his hands.

"You have to take it easy," she murmured. "This will be my first time."

He kissed her. "I will—I promise," he said, helping her remove her clothing under the blankets.

She helped him out of his.

He felt badly that he couldn't think of any fancy words to make her sexually excited—but then he felt the firmness of her nipples pressing against his bare chest—realized she already was. Her eyes told him this was the special moment. His fingers met the warm wetness between her soft thighs.

Then, he sat up—began fumbling around in his bag.

"What *is* it?" she whispered.

"*Protection*—we don't want you to have a baby, yet."

After her initial discomfort, they made love for a long, long time, then drifted into marvelous dreams.

They were awakened by a distant, high-pitched cry—like that of a tiny baby in terrible agony.

Naked, Rolf jumped up—grabbed his rifle from where it rested against the tree.

Ingrid sat up.

"Don't worry—I'll protect you!" he cried.

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They looked around. The fire had died down, but they saw light from the dying flames reflecting in the eyes of several animals that had been stealthily moving closer and closer as the blaze the animals had feared had gradually diminished.

Ingrid jumped out of her blankets nude, fearfully embraced Rolf. "*Wolves?*"

"I *think* so!" He actually thought they were *coyotes*, but didn't bother to say so.

"I'm *freezing*," she cried, "let's get our clothes on and get the hell *out* of here!"

They hustled—finally got into them.

"We might be in *trouble*," he said, pulling on a boot.

"*Why?*" she cried.

"We still have to get from *here*—to my *truck*!"

They glanced in the direction of his ancient truck. It was a ways off, but they could still vaguely see the reflection of the fire off its windshield.

He found some loose wood—heaped it on the dying fire.

As the fire brightened, the intense, crafty eyes around them receded back into the darkness.

They heard another high-pitched cry—closer than before.

"It's the *killer*!" she cried, clinging to his neck. "I heard it after mama and I found Herr Streiker's bloody body—it's going to *kill* us and *eat* us—"

"My *rifle* will stop it," he said, trying to keep his voice calm.

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"What if it *doesn't* stop it? We don't know what it *is*. It may be from another *world*!"

"I don't think so."

Beside herself with fear, she cried, "What are we going to do?"

He got an idea. He gently pried her arms from around his neck, found two large, pine-needle-covered branches—handed one to her. "We'll light these on *fire*—use them as *torches*! That will hold the wolves back while we run to my truck! They *hate* fire!"

"You *sure*—?"

He quickly stuck the end of his branch into the fire. Its pitch-covered cones burst into brilliant flames.

She did the same.

They grabbed their belongings—held their burning torches high—started running for the truck.

Chapter 9

The café door burst open. Gertrude Rhinemann rushed in.

The constable could see she was highly agitated.

"Have you seen my *Ingrid*—?" she cried, tears streaming down her face.

"Take it easy, Frau Rhinemann," the constable consoled, getting up from his stool at the counter to greet her. "What *happened*?"

"It's *morning*! My Ingrid didn't come *home* last night! It's that *Rolf*! I *know* it! He's stolen my *Ingrid*!"

"Or *worse*—!" Wanda carelessly piped. "It could be the—" then caught herself, didn't finish.

Gertrude became more hysterical.

Wanda hurried around the counter, put her slender arm around her undulating shoulders. "Sorry—it just slipped *out*! I didn't *mean* it! I didn't mean the *killer* might have gotten her!"

"Where did she *go* last night?" the constable asked.

"She went ice skating with friends," Gertrude managed to say. "They always go skating on the frozen lake this time of year! But I think *Rolf*—!"

"You just take it easy, Frau Rhinemann—I'm sure it'll be all right," he soothed, put on his hat and overcoat, laid a bill on the counter for his breakfast. "I'll see what I can do."

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"Please *find* her, Herr Mizzen—she's all I've *got*!"

The constable opened the café door, stepped out into the chilly air. The sun had not yet lifted the cool mist blanket off of the village.

He looked in the direction of Lake Cristal, couldn't see far. *I'll take my jeep...go to the lake...see what I can see*, he thought. He took one step with that in mind, then heard the unmistakable sound of Rolf's ancient truck rumbling down Beaver Street. It broke through the mist, roared to a stop in front of him.

Rolf banged his fist against the inside of the truck's door, finally got it unstuck. He and Ingrid climbed down.

"Where have you *been* all night—Frau Rhinemann's hysterical! She's in the *café*—worried about Ingrid," the constable scolded. Then, in a more moderate tone, "Let's go in—before we all freeze."

They went inside.

Gertrude ran to Ingrid. "My *baby*—what 'as he *done* ta ya?" she cried, giving her an embrace.

"We dozed off by the fire, mama—it just *happened*. The *killer* thing's cry woke us up. Everybody else had gone home. "There were *wolves*, mama! It was *terrible*! Rolf *saved* me from the *wolves*—and from that *killer* thing!"

The constable was skeptical about the wolf story, as he knew wolves usually try to stay away from people, but decided not to mention that fact—*probably coyotes*, he thought—*hard to tell the difference in the dark*. "You say you heard the cry of the killer thing?" he asked, gravely.

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"Yes—the first time it cried out, it sounded far away—but the next time—much closer," Rolf volunteered.

"Rolf got the idea to light some branches on fire and use them as torches—so we could keep the wolves back—and make it to his truck! We were able to keep them away long enough to get in it," Ingrid cried.

"Did you get a look at the killer?" the constable asked.

"No—we didn't *want* to either—especially up *close*," Ingrid cried.

"Ya poor *child*—ya must be scared half ta *death*—and *starved*! Sit down over here at the table," Gertrude said, nudging her.

"What about *Rolf*?" Ingrid asked. "He's hungry, *too*!"

"What *about* 'im?" Gertrude quipped, not looking up at Rolf.

"I *love* him, mama—we're going to get *married*!" Ingrid piped, looking lovingly at Rolf. "Come sit here!" she said, tapping fingers on the seat next to her.

He sat down.

The constable decided it was time to bow out. "I have to make some calls—be in my office if anybody *needs* me," he said, laying a twenty-dollar bill on the counter. "Give them all a good breakfast, Wanda!" he added, starting towards the door.

"Ya could 'ave been eaten *alive*—whatever were ya *thinkin*?" Gertrude wailed.

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"We were thinking of how *nice* it was—lying there by the warm fire—looking up at the big moon. Have you ever been in *love*, mama?"

Gertrude's moon-like face reddened beneath her unruly gray hair. "Of *course* I was in love—with yer *father*. But that was *different*—we didn't go layin' 'round no fire with a *killer* beast thing lurchin' 'bout. Ya saw what it did ta Herr *Streiker*! Ya saw what it did ta Herr *Breuger*—and *still* ya went out an did a crazy thing like *that*!"

"Then you *do* understand!" Ingrid cried.

"I understand *what*?" Gertrude asked, indignantly.

"That we're *crazy* in *love*—and are going to get *married*."

Gertrude scowled. "You're only *nineteen*!"

"How old were *you*, when you married father?"

"Nineteen—but that was *different*—we *had* to get married." It had just slipped out.

Rolf and Ingrid gave each other meaningful looks, then he reached for her hand.

"*No*—you *didn't*!" Gertrude gasped.

"*Yes*, mama," Ingrid said, almost in a whisper, "we did."

Chapter 10

The powerful beating of the double propellers of the huge military helicopter brought every able resident of Bear Skin out to see what was happening. Within a short time, some three hundred people stood gazing up at the enormous, noisy beast, as it settled down on Beaver Street in front of the constable's office.

"Your *ride's* here!" Rolf called to the constable, who was having coffee at his desk.

"What do you mean—*my* ride—you're coming along *too*!"

Smiling, Rolf, already fully dressed for the trip, entered the room the constable was in. "Just in case you *asked* me," he said, gesturing at his clothes.

"Let's go!" the constable said, putting on his parka. "It's going to be cold as hell in that chopper. They don't have heaters, you know."

"I've heard," Rolf said.

"Got your binoculars?" the constable asked, picking up his rifle.

"Got mine—brought yours along, too!"

"Let's not keep the Air Force waiting!"

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They held down their parka hoods to keep the propeller downdraft from blowing them off, dashed out the office door, across the veranda, to the waiting chopper.

As the constable and Rolf climbed aboard the deafening, shaking machine, they were surprised to hear a familiar voice. "Great morning for a *chopper* ride!" It was the coroner cheerfully yelling against the roar.

He helped them scramble into seats, put headphones on.

The coroner got back into his.

They heard the military pilot's voice over the intercom, "I'm Captain Farnsworth. Please fasten your seat belts. It'll be a long drop to the ground, if anyone should fall out once we're airborne."

Taking his advice, they hastily fastened themselves down to their seats with harness-like seatbelts.

The copilot came back and checked the belt latches, returned to his seat in the cockpit.

As the enormous bird slowly lifted off the ground they saw the excited crowd waving and yelling. The constable, coroner and Rolf waved back.

Soon, they were high above the ant-sized onlookers. Captain Farnsworth tilted the chopper forward.

The constable enjoyed the spectacular panoramic view of the snow-covered village, frosted evergreen trees, majestic, rugged mountains in the distance. He had always gotten great pleasure from living in that part of the country.

After they had been in the air a few minutes, the captain's voice came over the intercom again. "I understand we'll be looking for *Bigfoot*. Is that right, constable?"

At that remark, the hair stood up on the back of the constable's neck. "The *newspapers* started that damn, false rumor. We're going to sue them for *libel*," he corrected.

"Sorry!" the captain apologized. "Are we looking for an alien from outer *space*, then? All I know about the killer is what I've read in the newspapers, and seen on TV."

"TV?" the constable asked, incredulously. He hadn't thought about TV coverage.

"Oh, didn't I *mention* that it was all on TV yesterday?" the coroner asked through the intercom.

"No. I don't remember you saying anything about it," the constable choked out, almost losing his voice from the sudden knowledge about all the publicity. He hated publicity.

The coroner put in, "Believe it or not—we don't know exactly *what* we're looking for—except that it has yellow-orange hair, is powerful, has fangs, walks upright, leaves footprints that look somewhat like those of a six-year-old human child—and oh, yes—did I mention—it likes to eat human brains."

"Good *God*! I wouldn't want to meet up with it in the *dark*," the co-pilot quipped. "Or even in the *daylight*!"

"You won't be able to tell anything about footprints from the height we'll be flying," Captain Farnsworth said.

"True," the constable agreed. "I don't expect to identify its footprints from up here—just spot it—maybe get a shot at it."

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"Where do you want to look?" Captain Farnsworth asked.

"Fly low and sweep back and forth above the snow—all the way, including the trees, the foothills and the mountains. I'm especially interested in *caves*," the constable said. He nudged Rolf, "Have your camera ready?"

"Ready!"

The constable and Rolf pulled out their binoculars. "Sorry, Brett, we didn't think to bring you any," the constable said, apologetically.

"Thanks, but I brought my own," the coroner said, removing his from his pack.

"There's something *moving*—just up ahead," the captain said. "Want to take a *look*?"

"Yes," the constable quickly answered.

"Okay, I'll bring the ship around so you can see it out of your left side window."

The constable saw what the captain was talking about, focused his binoculars. Then, with obvious disappointment, declared, "It's just a *moose*!"

Captain Farnsworth leveled the chopper out.

They saw two deer, four coyotes; lots of large tracks in the snow. Then the coroner spotted a patch of yellow-orange. "There's an *orange*-colored animal over here," he said excitedly, lifting his binoculars.

The constable's heart skipped a beat—*could we be so damn lucky?*

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Captain Farnsworth tilted the chopper so the coroner would have optimum viewing out of his right side window, began moving the chopper closer to the target.

"Yeah—it's yellow-orange alright," the coroner reaffirmed.

"Yes—yes—what *else*—?" the constable asked, excitedly, gripping his rifle; frustrated at not being able to see the animal.

The coroner finally got a better look. "It's a *cougar*—running on all fours."

"*Damn!*" the constable cried. "For a moment, I thought we'd found the *killer*—but as far as we know, the damned thing walks upright on two legs."

"Well, this animal is definitely running on all fours," the coroner verified.

"Does it have a pug nose?" the constable queried.

"Come on, Alexander—for God's sake—you don't really expect anybody to tell from up here if the damned thing has a pug *nose* or not!" the coroner cried, disgusted with the question.

"Yeah," the constable said, settling down. "You're right! I guess that's too much to ask."

"Seen enough?" the captain eventually asked.

"Yeah. That's just a regular *cougar*," the constable said, obviously disappointed.

Captain Farnsworth leveled the chopper out again.

"About how far are we away from Bear Skin?" the coroner asked.

"Seven miles," the captain answered.

"And from Etherington?" the constable inquired.

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"Etherington is thirty—maybe thirty-one miles to the west," Captain Farnsworth said, bringing the chopper to a higher elevation. "If you look carefully, you can just make out the Etherington River Bridge through the haze."

"I see it," Rolf said.

"I'm sure we're all enjoying the nice *ride*," the constable commented, "but we'd better get back to the *search*."

Captain Farnsworth lowered the chopper to just above the trees.

"Do you fly over this area often, captain?" the coroner asked.

"Yes. During the summer we fly over this region for the forest service—checking for campfires, or fires caused by lightning."

"It could be that the thing you're looking for spends a lot of time in one of the *caves*," the co-pilot suggested.

"*Caves*?" Rolf asked.

"Yes, there must be thousands of them in these mountains," the co-pilot added. "After the snow melts, it looks like a *honeycomb* around here—but as you can see, there's just enough fog still hanging around the mountains so we can't even spot a single cave opening."

"Have you tried using *dogs*?" Captain Farnsworth suggested.

"We *have*—*Huskies*," the constable said. "But they just turn and *run* as soon as they get a whiff of the killer's scent."

"Wow—*that's* strange!" the captain remarked. "It must be something really unusual. I hope you kill it *soon*!" Then

added, "Just a suggestion—the Canine Corps in Prescott has specially trained dogs."

"Yes. I'm working on that angle," the coroner said. "The Corps commander told me we could try them out—maybe as early as tomorrow."

"That killer must be *some* creature—if a Husky's afraid of its tracks. Huskies aren't afraid of much of anything," the copilot commented. "Kind of sounds like it could be an *alien* from another *world*."

The constable cringed at the preposterous thought. "I seriously *doubt* it—we have no evidence of it wearing a *space* suit—and not even *one* flying *saucer* has been sighted around here so far," he quipped.

They all chuckled.

They searched the area for another hour, but no upright-walking creature was seen.

"Okay—it's getting late—let's go back to the village," the constable said.

Sensing the constable's disappointment, the captain replied, "It was a good idea, constable. If we'd spotted it out in the open—you'd know where it hangs out."

"Yeah—and maybe I'd have gotten off a shot or two at it," the constable said. "I appreciate your thought."

"Sorry we didn't locate it this trip, but if we can be of help in the future—let us know," the captain offered.

"Thanks. We'll *do* that," the constable replied. "You guys have been really *great*!"

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A crowd, in high anticipation, gathered as the noisy chopper touched down.

The constable stepped off first, followed by the coroner, then Rolf.

Rolf saw Ingrid at the edge of the crowd, went to her.

In a couple of minutes the chopper lifted off, leaving the constable and coroner standing between the constable's office—and the crowd.

"Did you find the *killer*—?" somebody yelled.

A camera's flash momentarily blinded the constable. "Who the hell invited the *press*?" he asked, obviously irritated.

The pastor ambled up to him. "*I* did! I thought it would be a good idea to share your news."

The constable hadn't planned on giving a speech. He clutched his rifle barrel, looked out over the crowd. "I'm sorry to say—we didn't see any signs of the *killer* thing. I wanted to search cave openings, but the fog hasn't lifted enough."

"Do you think it could be an *alien* from outer *space*?" a newspaperman asked.

The constable gritted his teeth. "No—I *don't* believe it's from outer space!"

"What's your next move, constable?" a newswoman asked.

"We're going to try to track it with specially-trained dogs," the constable said.

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"Are you going to use the dogs *before* it kills and eats someone else—or *after*—?" someone cried.

The constable ignored the remark. "That's all for today!" he said, then he gestured for the coroner to follow him into his office. They went in. The constable locked the door.

The half-frozen crowd grumbled awhile, then disappointedly dispersed.

Chapter 11

333's large, fuzzy head rested on her supple paws as she lay comfortably sprawled out in the entrance to her damp cave. The sun was up; its warmth felt pleasant on her back. Her mind was somewhere between asleep and awake.

She was not exactly dreaming, yet rambling, nightmarish images, sounds, feelings, and even smells were running through her young mind: images of vile, white creatures that walked on hind legs like she did; images of unnatural lines that were always before her face; images of raw meat being brought to her; cold, unrefined images; images of restraint; images of a fuzzy, brown creature that moved rapidly about in the space before her; unnatural cries from alien throats; images of creatures much like herself—almost edible creatures; acrid smells; unsettling sounds; fierce hatred; a playful urge to kill for killing's sake; upright creatures on other fast-moving dark creatures among the trees, killing her food with noise—taking it away to the place of lights where there were many, edible, upright creatures for her to make a meal of. These recollections were percolating through her mind.

A series of strange noises woke her completely. She sat upon her tailless rump, listened carefully. She had never heard anything similar before, but she instinctively sensed the sounds

were malevolent. She rose up onto her hind feet—anxiously began dancing around at the cave's entrance.

The lead Prescott Canine Corps snowmobile that the constable was riding on the back seat of hit a bump, tossed him a couple of inches into the air, then his rump slammed back down onto the frigid seat. He gripped the driver's waist more tightly.

The excited hound, riding in the skid cage being pulled behind the constable's snowmobile, bayed, another echoed its mournful howl. Then others joined in the chorus.

"How far do you want to go, constable?" the constable's driver yelled, above the scream of the four snowmobile engines.

"Until you can't go any *farther*—"

Within an hour, snow-covered fallen trees, underbrush and huge rocks blocked their way. The snowmobiles could go no further. Their drivers shut the engines off. Everyone dismounted.

As they maneuvered about the snowmobiles, their parkas and storm pants made them resemble seven puffy doughboys about to take a hike.

"It'll be *snowshoes*, *rifles* and *hounds* from here on!" the constable exclaimed.

Each hound tender got his snowshoes and rifle down from the top of a dog cage; put on his snowshoes, slung his rifle strap onto his shoulder.

Each gave his hound a whiff of the mystery killer's scent from a vial the coroner had provided, opened his bloodhound's cage, let it out.

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The hounds immediately began dashing about in great circles, sniffing the snow.

Almost instantly, one of them bayed. Its deep, throaty resonance caused the hair to stand up on the back of every man's neck. They knew it had found the killer thing's scent.

The constable retained his quiet outward demeanor, but his heart was pounding violently. *The hound must be on the right scent—specially trained—didn't turn-tail and run—must know its business*, he thought. He gripped his rifle with one gloved hand, ski pole with the other.

The same thrill that has electrified young hunters since the first hunt in history, electrified Rolf. He excitedly snapped the second snowshoe to his foot, grabbed his rifle, then he and the coroner snow-shoed over to where the constable was adjusting the strap on his ski pole.

"What's the plan?" Rolf asked.

"Let's be *after* that damned *killer!*" the constable said, surprised at the question.

The hound that had picked up the killer's scent continued to bay as it followed the scent trail on the snow. It was soon well out ahead of the other three hounds—rapidly heading into harms way.

The hound tenders controlled their hounds by piping code signals with special whistles; inaudible to the human ear, but very easily heard over a long distance by the hounds—and by 333.

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The constable, coroner and Rolf were not used to the rigorous pace, could not keep up with the hounds and hound tenders.

It was a blustery day, threatened to snow, but the constable hoped it wouldn't snow hard. A gentle breeze was blowing from the south. He decided to push on; the killer's scent would be lost if it snowed. Not even a specially trained hound would be able to smell it through a thick layer of fresh snow.

They had snow-shoed for half an hour over snow-covered, fallen trees, around frozen underbrush, huge, snow-capped, gray boulders. The farther they went, the steeper the climb became.

The chief of the hound tenders dropped back to where the constable was trudging through the foot-deep snow. The chief pointed his gloved hand to a rocky, bare place near the top of the tree-covered mountain up ahead. "The hounds are headed directly for that cave up there—I think they've found where the damned thing lives—"

The constable's keen, dark blue eyes sized up the distance to the cave. "About half a mile from here, I'd judge!"

"Yeah—looks like!" the coroner agreed.

Excitement shot through the constable's veins like electricity. He clenched his ski pole and rifle tighter, increased his pace. He could feel success within his grasp.

The chief of the hound tenders increased his stride and was soon again far ahead of the constable, coroner and Rolf; and, in a short while, had caught up with the other tenders.

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The constable realized his face was stinging. For a time, in his elation to kill the thing, he hadn't realized the wind had kicked up considerably; it was snowing. He pulled his wool bandana on up from around his neck, covered his frozen beard, billowing mustache, very cold, prominent, Roman nose. *That's better*, he thought, as the heat from his breath began to warm his face.

He strained against his ski pole, pulling himself on up the mountainside towards the cave. The climb became very steep and he finally had to sling his rifle onto his shoulder, grip his ski pole with both hands and force himself up—foot by foot.

The intensity of the wind and snow increased. He began having trouble seeing the cave opening, still far above him.

Then he stumbled over something. He gripped his ski pole with one hand, reached down, felt the object at his feet with the other, felt something soft, like cloth he thought—slick. He quickly brought his glove up close to his face, looked at it. "My *God—blood—*" he cried, shaken.

He looked around, but the wind had picked up more and he could only see a few feet into the beating snow ruthlessly hitting him in the face. "*Rolf—Brett—*" No one answered, and even if they had, he may not have heard them through the blizzard, he thought.

He squatted down, got a look at the body at his feet—a bloody mess. Parts of it were already frozen. *Freshly killed*, he thought. Then he saw its head—its *brain* was gone. *The killer thing*, he thought, with a mixture of apprehension and hope that

maybe he was at last close enough to kill the damned thing—or perhaps *it* would kill *him*.

He looked more closely at the corpse, saw it was dressed in heavy deerskin-covered pants, heavy leather-covered parka. Empty metal animal traps, attached by a chain from the corpse's waist, were scattered about. He turned the corpse's head so he could see its face. *A man in his thirties*, he judged. *A trapper*. He saw the victim's black bear hat laying nearby, covered with blood and snow.

He pulled himself to his feet with his ski pole. "*Rolf! Brett—! Chief—*" he yelled. Only the whistling wind answered.

Then he heard a long, terrible, high-pitched cry from just above him. It sent cold chills up his spine. It was a sound like nothing he'd ever heard in his long years as constable. *Like a baby in terrible agony—like Frau Rhinemann said*.

Where his strength came from, he didn't know. He didn't question it, just felt it, threw away his ski pole, jerked the rifle from his shoulder, terrible rage, heart pounding. "I'll climb up to that damned cave—kill the goddamn thing—*whatever* it is!" he shouted into the storm.

He had laboriously climbed up several more feet, when over the shriek of the wind, from above he heard the unmistakable yelps of a wounded hound.

Without further warning, the bloody, mangled body of a hound came flying through the air, slid down over a snowdrift just above the constable's head—slammed into his shoulder, almost knocked him down.

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He looked at the dead dog at his feet. Blood was still oozing from it, coloring the snow red. The constable realized it must have been the first hound to reach the killer thing. *It must be the chief's hound*, he thought. "*Chief—you all right—? Answer me—! For God's sake—answer me!*" he yelled against the blizzard. No reply.

The constable's furor was now great; adrenaline was steadily pumping into his blood, strength almost superhuman. He shoved the bloody hound aside—forced his way on up through the snow towards where he thought the entrance of the cave must be.

Then, through the shifting snowfall—he glimpsed the killer beast, saw its frosted whiskers, black and white face. Looks almost like a cougar's face—something different though—the eyes—not exactly cougar eyes—something unusual about them—large, brown—pupils round, not flat—nose human-like, he thought. It was snarling, hissing. He saw its long, sharp fangs—raised his rifle—*fired*. It disappeared.

A moment later, he heard the helpless yelps of a second hound, then it too came careening through the air, bounced off the snowy slope above the constable; rolled a few times, then its lifeless, blood-soaked body lay motionless on the nearby snow.

The constable was so incensed, the skin around his eyes, already tense and reddened by the driving blizzard, became even more so and in spite of the bitter cold, he felt perspiration coming to his brow.

"Rolf! Brett! Chief—!" he called again. No answer except howling wind.

Then he grasped the gravity of his situation—realized he was only a few yards from the most vicious creature he had ever encountered. The glimpse he had gotten of it hadn't shown him if it had human-like feet, *but the hounds had located it*. That, and the way its face looked, was proof enough. *It's the killer—if it comes for me—my rifle jams—if I shoot—don't kill it...* Doubts raced through his mind. *Am I lost? Where the hell did the others go?*

He collected his nerve, started his final approach to the cave opening above him. With each step, his snowshoes slid back half a step, but he still pressed on.

Suddenly, he heard a sound he had heard somewhere before—then—quick as lightning his legs were whipped out from under him, rifle went flying. He discovered he was buried in snow from his chest down, tried to free himself, couldn't, *trapped—helpless. I'm bait—waiting to be sliced and eaten by that damn thing!* The thought came crashing down on him like the small avalanche that had trapped him. He imagined his brain being eaten out.

The avalanche had been caused by the impact of the second dead hound as it had hit and bounced off the overhanging snowdrift.

As far as the constable's partially constrained arms would permit, he felt in the pockets of his parka—frantically searched for his mobile phone—realized he had left it back in the compartment of the snowmobile.

Soon, he felt mind-numbness—well known to arctic adventurers throughout history—muting his mind. He knew it was

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the precursor to *eternal* sleep. He fought hard to keep his eyes open, but his efforts were of no avail.

Gradually, the fierce, howling wind became but a whimper in his psyche—and then even that slipped away.

The remaining two hounds—having seen their companions killed—had quickly given up the fight against the killer thing, escaped, found their way back through the storm to their tenders.

The hounds, the four tenders, Rolf and the coroner arrived at the snowmobiles about the same time.

"What happened to the *other* two hounds?" Rolf asked.

"They were *killed*—by that goddamn thing! I heard it all!" the tender chief lamented. "I couldn't see anything through the blizzard! I couldn't see to *shoot* the damned thing!"

"Has anyone seen the *constable*?" the coroner asked. Then glanced skyward to check the weather. The wind had died down, but it was still snowing heavily. "We got separated in the storm."

"The last time I saw him was when I told him the hounds had found the thing's cave," the chief said. "I heard a rifle shot sometime after that. I never saw the constable again."

Rolf dug in his parka pockets and brought out his mobile phone. "I'll try to call him!" He punched in a code, waited for an answer; received none.

"What's that *buzzing* noise?" the coroner asked, walking towards a snowmobile. "What machine was the constable riding on?"

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"*That* one!" the chief said, pointing to the one the coroner was moving toward.

The coroner knocked the ice from a compartment door in the snowmobile's dash, opened it and revealed a buzzing mobile phone. "You won't be getting an answer from the constable!"

Rolf punched the off button on his phone, slipped it back into his parka pocket.

The coroner was about to reach into the compartment and pull out the constable's phone.

"Wait! Don't *touch* it!" Rolf cried.

"Why not?" the coroner asked.

The chief realized the reason immediately, yelled to the tenders, "Bring your *hounds* over *here*. Let them get the constable's *scent* from the *phone*!"

Rolf didn't wait for the sniffing procedure to be completed. He made sure his rifle was loaded, started snowshoeing back up the steep mountain towards the cave.

The hounds, coroner and tenders soon caught up with him. The coroner was amazed at his own sudden strength in the face of such adversity.

The tenders turned the two remaining hounds loose. They soon began baying.

"They've found the *constable*!" the chief cried, obviously delighted.

Urgency gripped everyone. They felt a strong desire to move quickly—to run—to get to the constable—help him back to *safety*; only the awkwardness of their snowshoes slowed them down.

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When they arrived at the constable's side, the coroner was deeply saddened by the constable's lack of motion.

Hounds were standing on either side of him, still baying; their mournful sounds like the grief-stricken tones of a funeral dirge.

While the chief and coroner went right to work on the constable, the hounds caught a *different* scent, went to investigate. It was coming from the bodies of their two dead companions.

The hounds caught another scent—located the dead trapper sprawled out in the snow, changed the pitch of their baying.

Rolf went to see what they had found. "It's a *dead* man—a *trapper*!" he said.

Two tenders went to him, stared down at the corpse.

"It's the work of that *killer* thing!" one said, glancing apprehensively around at the shadowy woods, then he looked back down at the body. "Look at all that *blood*! And *look*—its *brain*—my *God*—its *brain*—it's been—" he cried, turned away sick.

The chief, trained in emergency medicine, had immediately knelt down by the constable.

He removed the constable's glove, checked for a pulse. "He's *alive*!" he said, replacing the glove.

The coroner gave a sigh of relief.

"But—he's in very bad shape. I wouldn't hold out much hope for him. He's suffering from *hypothermia*," the chief said, somberly.

Rolf shuffled his snowshoes to where the chief was. "What's *hypothermia*?" he asked, hoping it wasn't anything serious.

"He means—the constable is almost *frozen* to death. We need to get him to Bear Skin—fast," the coroner said, beginning to dig in the snow around the constable with his gloved hands. "I'll notify Doctor Quincy in Prescott by phone—get him to meet us at the constable's office. We can't risk taking Alexander all the way to *Prescott*—he'd never *make* it!"

It had finally stopped snowing. Everyone pitched in, helped dig. They soon had the constable out of the snow bank.

The chief produced a hammock net from his emergency pack, laid it out on the snow. With a tender at each end, they soon had the unconscious constable stretched out on the net between their waists, then began the arduous task of carrying him down the mountainside.

"Grab his *rifle*—it's laying by you in the snow," the coroner called to Rolf.

Rolf picked up the constable's rifle, knocked the snow off, slung it across his back, turned to the coroner, "What about the *trapper*?"

"What *trapper*?" the coroner asked. He had been so absorbed in tending to the constable he had missed the commotion concerning the dead man nearby.

"Over *here*," a tender said.

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The coroner shuffled as fast as he could over to where two tenders were standing, with hounds about them, looking down at the trapper. "Well, for God's sake we can't just *leave* him *here*—bring *him* along!" the coroner cried.

The tenders loaded the trapper's body into a hammock net, quickly joined the first two tenders in their steep descent through the snow down towards the snowmobiles.

After her encounter with the bloodhounds—the violent explosion of the rifle, the whizzing bullet that had scarcely missed her head—333 had comprehended the need for her and her mother to find a new place to live. She had found her mother in the adjacent cave, had gone to her, licked her ear, and with a communication only they understood, had convinced her to leave the safety of her cave.

They gradually made their way through snow-covered boulders, down the side of a steep canyon, up the other, on up to the highest reaches of another rocky slope.

They eventually found two small caves next to each other, which 333 thought suitable for habitation. The new, clammy caves were similar to the ones they had just left.

Wanda had been the first to hear the snowmobiles coming down Beaver Street. She had dashed out from the café, had watched as the procession of the four snowmobiles, each with cages being pulled behind, had past her. She had noticed that two of the cages had hounds in them. The last two cages to pass had contained no dogs, but she had seen what looked like bodies

strapped to their tops. She had recognized the constable's hat—had involuntarily sucked in her breath.

Now, she sat quietly on a couch in the constable's office, waiting for Doctor Quincy, who had been called in from Prescott, to come out of the room into which they had taken the constable.

For a while, she dreamily stared into the crackling fire that flickered in the great, slate stone fireplace. It was her first visit to the constable's office and everything about it fascinated her. She shifted her gaze from the fire to the low-lying, arching, slate front piece that curved around, creating a façade for the fireplace. She admired how the different colored, polished stones of the floor were so beautifully oriented. She liked the huge, wooden waterwheel that jutted out of one wall. She knew it was only for decoration, but it gave the room a tasteful, bohemian style, she thought, as did the wrought iron fire poker, wrought iron firedogs and wrought iron railings.

All the time, a nagging anxiety about the constable's well-being rested heavily on her mind.

She was so engrossed in her distraction that she hardly noticed the coroner and Rolf sitting nearby.

Finally, the door to the constable's room opened.

It was actually his bedroom, situated in the back part of his office building. It, a kitchen and a bathroom comprised his living quarters. He mostly used his office, which made up the entire front part of the ancient red-laced granite, shingle-roofed building, for chatting with people.

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The elderly doctor finally came out, his heavy, black, medical bag in hand.

The coroner and Rolf got to their feet.

Wanda jumped up. "How *is* he, doctor?"

"He almost died." The doctor's voice was soft. "He was suffering from hypothermia. He's going to be okay—thanks to the excellent emergency care he was given out there where he was caught in that avalanche. The credit goes to the Canine Corps people—and the coroner, and Rolf. After all the bad press, I'm glad to see the constable still has friends. His speech is still a little slurred from the ordeal. He doesn't remember much about anything. That will pass—common symptoms of hypothermia. I can't say when—it may take quite some time before he's up and around. I gave him a sedative. He's quite drowsy. The main thing right now is that he get plenty of sleep."

"Can we go in and see him?" the coroner asked.

"Yes, but don't tax him too much. Like I said, he needs lots of rest."

Then, as the doctor opened the door to leave the building, the coroner glanced outside—saw a TV news crew, cameras rolling. Greatly unnerved, he charged past the doctor—right out into the street.

"Haven't you given us *enough* trouble?" he shouted at the nearest newsman. "You've accused that poor man in there—almost *dead* from trying to *kill* that damned *thing* for us—of everything from lying—saying it's *Bigfoot*—to saying it's a space *alien*? You don't *know* what the hell it is! *We* don't know *what* the hell it is—or *where* the hell it came from—but we do know

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it's not *Bigfoot*! Now—get *out* of here—let the constable get some *rest*!"

The newsman ignored the coroner's plea. "Is he going to be okay?"

The doctor stepped forward. His dark blue topcoat and gray tie contrasted with the newsman's informal attire. "He'll be okay—if you eager beavers will get out of here and leave him alone!"

"Did the killer thing *attack* him?" a TV man asked.

"No—the constable got one shot off at the damned thing—it obviously didn't *attack* him—he's still in one *piece*!" the coroner shouted, infuriated.

Some *oo-ing* and *aa-ing* echoed through the small crowd that had gathered to be part of the strange Bear Skin occurrence.

"You can't just let that wild killer thing run *loose*—and allow it to keep on *mutilating* folks!" the TV man said.

"If you can do any *better*—apply for the goddamned *job*!" the coroner rebuffed. Then in a calmer voice, "There *is* one thing you *could* do!"

"What's that?" the TV man asked.

"That—whatever it is out there—killed a trapper up near its cave. We brought the trapper's body back, but we don't know who he is. He had a photo of himself and someone else—maybe his wife—in his pocket. If you could put that on the news—maybe someone will recognize him and claim him!" the coroner said, calming down a bit.

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"Yes—of course—glad to," the TV man said, giving the coroner a business card. "Give me a call. I'll swing by and pick up the photo."

"Fine—now—all of you clear *out*—let the constable have some *rest*!"

"Just one more question?" the TV man asked.

"Make it quick," the coroner growled.

"You say the constable got a shot off—that must mean he got a *look* at the creature. What does it look like?"

"The constable hasn't been able to speak. When he's able, he may make a statement for the press—but knowing him—he may *not*!" the coroner concluded.

The crowd began to disperse. The doctor climbed into his crew cab truck, departed for Prescott.

The coroner went back into the constable's office.

The doctor had left the door to the constable's room open. Wanda went in first, followed by the coroner, Rolf—and Ingrid, who had gotten the news late and had dashed over.

Wanda went to the constable's bedside.

He had an IV stuck in the back of his hand.

Surprising herself, she was all aflutter, filled with emotion. "How do you *feel*?" she asked, gently.

His eyes moved, looked up at her. "*Trapper*..." he said, his voice almost incoherent.

Wanda was puzzled, didn't know what to reply. She wanted to tell him something endearing, something to make him

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feel better, to let him know his friends had gathered around to comfort him.

"*Trapper...*" the constable repeated, weakly.

"We *found* the trapper," the coroner interceded. "We brought him back with us."

The constable's facial muscles relaxed somewhat.

"The constable's worried that the trapper—the one the killer thing ripped up—is still lying out there in the snow," the coroner explained.

"Don't worry, Herr Mizzen, we're all here with you," Wanda tenderly assured him, not knowing how much of what she had said he had understood.

The constable slowly turned his eyes towards her. She put her hand on his forehead. "Trapper okay..." he muttered.

"Trapper okay," she repeated softly, not knowing what else to say.

Chapter 12

Inside the old stone church, the pianist was playing a hymn long ago dedicated to the resurrection of Christ.

The little church was completely filled. In addition to every able-bodied villager, there were many news people and curiosity seekers from as far away as Etherington. They had packed into all the pews. Many, including the coroner, who had arrived late, were standing behind the last pew. Others were standing in the doorway, others outside in the parking area waiting for the service to conclude so they could take part in the burial ceremony.

The old pastor was conducting simultaneous funeral services for Clyde Breuger and the trapper. His heavy brows undulated now and then to emphasize his spiritual thoughts.

"The untimely deaths of these two fine souls weigh heavily on us all..." he lamented.

Eventually he completed his sermon, invited anyone who wished to eulogize the deceased.

Sally, the blonde who had befriended Clyde Breuger the night he was killed, stood up. "I have something to say," she began, her long blonde hair trailing down over her inexpensive white rabbit's fur coat.

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Audible whispers spread like wildfire through the congregation.

One lady nudged the one next to her. "It's Sally, the *hooker*," she whispered.

"I've known Clyde for many years. He was never one to turn down a drink," Sally said, tears coming to her eyes, "but he was a sad—lonely man. He was a good man, really. He never did no harm to nobody but himself. He busted up the Moose Head a few times, but nobody got hurt bad—may he rest in peace," she said, sat back down.

The pastor had been resting his eyes. He got up, returned to the podium. "Like an Unknown Soldier who has fallen in war—this man we know of only as the *trapper*—died a violent, violent death. We know neither from whence he came, nor to where he was going when he was slain. All we know is that he was destroyed by the killer!"

He was about to continue, when a little old lady raised her hand. He motioned for her to come forward.

She worked her way through legs, feet, to the aisle, then up front.

Complete silence fell over the gathering at the sight of the strange lady who must know something about the trapper.

As she turned, everyone saw that her unruly hair was completely gray. A stiff black hat with black lace around the crown set off the gray. A black shawl was wrapped around her slumped shoulders. The bottom of her long, black woolen coat almost touched the floor. The lines in her leathery face were deep, eyes sad.

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"I'm Tom's *mother*," she began, in a kindly tone.

Whispers of amazement swirled about the flock, like gusted leaves of autumn.

"I live in Prescott. I saw Tom's picture on TV—learned what had happened to him that way. It was a hard way to hear about it, but I'm grateful to the TV people for giving me this chance to be here and let me put him down for his final rest, and I'm grateful to all of you for coming to his funeral. His name is Tom Hammond. He is—was—twenty-three years old. He's been a trapper since he was eight. That's what we lived on—what he got for his furs. Now, I don't have much money—and I'll have to leave my home that I've lived in for forty-seven years, and go live with my sister in Etherington." She paused to wipe her eyes with a dainty handkerchief. "Tom was such a good boy—and such a *fine* man," she went on sorrowfully. "He had a sweetheart, Sarah, who he loved dearly. They are—were—to be married in the spring."

Ingrid squeezed Rolf's hand.

The little old lady patted her eyes again with her hanky, took two steps up the aisle towards where she'd been sitting—faltered: almost dropped to the floor.

Aahs of shock, surprise ran throughout the church.

Two men sitting on the front pew jumped up, grabbed the poor lady and assisted her on up the aisle, out of the church.

As the pastor was about to complete the ceremony, the coroner discerned subtle rumblings of discontent among some of the young men.

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Pallbearers slowly and carefully carried the cradled urns out of the church. The congregation followed to the memorial gardens, then the pastor.

As the pastor stood near the open graves saying his final words, committing the souls of the departed to Christ and the universe, the coroner became aware of a lot of whispering among the young men.

As soon as the pastor finished speaking, the young men's pent-up emotions exploded—shattered the solemnity of the final part of the burial service.

One of them turned. "We're not going to just stand *around*—bury everybody in Bear Skin—and Prescott! We're going to get our *rifles* and *trucks* and *kill* that goddamned *thing* out there! If the constable can't do it—we *will*!" he cried.

"*Kill it! Kill it!*" other young men began to chant.

One ran to his truck, started it up.

"*Wait!*" the coroner yelled. "*Think*, men—*think* about what you're *doing*! Your trucks won't make it—not even to the *mountains*—much less to the *killer*! I've *been* there—you haven't! I was young once—I know how you feel! You think you *have* to *do* something—even if it's *wrong*! Well, you *don't*! All you'll get done—is get your trucks *stuck* in the *snow*! If you're lucky—somebody will rescue you before the *killer* gets to you!"

"Listen to the *coroner*—he's *right*—don't go out there and get yourselves killed for my son's sake," the little old lady begged.

"I'm young—like you guys—I know how you feel—but don't *do* it!" Rolf shouted.

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"*Yeah—you* went after it—you didn't bring back no killer trophy to hang over your fireplace!" one of the young men yelled. "*We will!*"

The angry young men's emotions were running too high to be deterred, ignored the warnings, started chanting again, "Kill it *Kill it—!*"

They scrambled for their trucks. Those who always kept a rifle in theirs wasted no time—yelling and hooting, they headed straight out Beaver Street towards the ominous mountains.

Others went home to get their rifles—to do the same.

The coroner shook his head, left the memorial gardens, walked towards the café for a cup of hot coffee.

Watching the trucks depart, the pastor said a prayer.

News people made notes—took photos of it all.

Chapter 13

The coroner looked up from where he stood on the veranda outside the constable's office, saw two helicopters beating their way through the gray dawn sky. They were flying high, coming from the direction of the rugged mountains. He watched their fast-moving silhouettes cutting through the air, like giant insects, as they flew overhead.

Rolf came up to him. "I just got off the phone with the Air Force base commander. The crazy guys we tried to talk out of going after the thing...?"

"Yeah," the coroner said, lighting his pipe.

"One came back last night. He came to me all shook up, said he was the only one who made it back, said the others were stuck out there somewhere, didn't even have sense enough to take *phones* with them. Nobody knew exactly where they were. I woke the constable and ask him what to do. He said to call the air base—I did. The commander said those choppers up there are rescuing the guys. They're taking them to the hospital in Etherington."

"Well—we tried to warn them," the coroner said, taking a puff on his pipe.

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The coroner opened the door to the constable's office. They went in, warmed their hands over the cozy fire in the fireplace.

The door to the room the constable was in was standing open. They went in. Wanda was sitting in a chair by the constable's bedside. The constable was sitting up. He and Wanda were having breakfast together.

"Well—it looks like the patient is feeling much better this morning!" the coroner chirped.

"It pays to know a good *waitress*," the constable said, taking a bite of bacon.

"I'll take all the compliments I can get," Wanda replied. "Besides—I kind of *like* this old bird!"

The coroner chuckled. He directed his attention to the constable. "Do you hear the choppers?"

"Yeah."

"They're rescuing a bunch of crazy guys who thought they could just run their trucks up to the mountains and kill the thing—just like that," Rolf said.

"Wanda told me you both tried to stop them from going. It's a good thing I wasn't there—I might have had to shoot a couple of the idiots to slow them down."

"Well, you can't really blame them. Even I got choked up a bit when that little old lady—the trapper's mother—told the sad story about how her son was a good boy and how he had supported her by trapping and selling furs since he was eight, and how she's broke and has to go live with her sister in Etherington—all because of that goddamned killer—if you'll pardon

my not using a euphemism, Wanda. Which reminds me—" he said, stealing a piece of the constable's bacon. "You must have gotten a good look at it when you got your shot off."

"Yes," the constable began. "I did get a good look at its head. To tell you the truth—it gave me the willies. I guess you could say it looks mostly like a cougar, but there's something *human* about its face—that sounds ridiculous, I know, but I swear there is. Its eyes were large, like a cougar's—but *brown*, not yellow like a cougar has—they had large round pupils—like a human—not slits like a cougar. A cougar has round pupils at night, but *not* in the daytime. This thing had round pupils in the broad daylight. There was something about the shape of its nose, too—pug, I guess you could say."

"If it's part human and part cougar, that could explain how the DNA tests turned out," the coroner suggested. "And it could explain the human-like footprints in the snow."

"Where could it have come from?" Rolf had just tossed out the question.

"Well, I never met a man in my life who was brave enough to mate with a *cougar*!" Wanda quipped.

Everyone laughed.

"If you give that information to the press—the next paper will have something in it about aliens from space abducting animals and humans, interbreeding them, creating monsters—turning them loose on earth," the coroner retorted.

"Let's keep it our secret for now," the constable said. "Bear Skin has *too* much publicity, as it is."

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"In any case—the cougar-human hasn't attacked anybody since it killed the trapper," the coroner noted, optimistically.

"Maybe it left this part of the country—went somewhere else," Rolf suggested.

"Maybe," the constable said, "but if so, we still have the responsibility of letting the higher authorities know what's going on."

"Maybe so—but the thing for you to do right now is rest up, so you can get back on your feet," the coroner advised.

"Oh—I don't know about the getting up part—I like it just fine right *here*," the constable quipped, glancing at Wanda.

Chapter 14

Scott Tamerlane had moved to Bear Skin the previous summer because of the beautiful landscapes, rugged mountains, large, beautiful lake, magnificent forests and quaintness of the village.

He was a thin, longhaired, good-natured, Scottish chap, an artist—did illustrations mostly, liked to wear colorful, heavy wool turtleneck sweaters, denim pants.

He stood beside the constable's bed, sketchbook in one hand; pen in the other.

"You say, you got a good look at the killer thing," he reiterated.

"Not a really good look, but a *look*," the constable replied.

"I'm sure you said 'good' look."

"Maybe I did—it was snowing, but actually I did get a fairly good look at it."

"What did its head look like?"

"Well—quite odd—mostly like that of a cougar, but, I swear, it had *human* characteristics. Its eyes were large and *brown*—pupils *round*. You know what a cat's pupils look like in the daytime—slits. Its weren't slits. They were *round*."

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"Yes, of course," the artist said, beginning to make a drawing with his pen.

"Yes," the constable continued, "it had long cat's whiskers and all that—and its mouth was white with black around it, like a cougar's."

Scott Tamerlane continued to draw. The coroner edged up behind him, got a peek at what he was doing.

"Other than its pupils—its head looked just like a cougar?" the artist asked.

"No—not its nose—its nose was almost *human*—black, like a cougar's, but almost human to look at, if I remember correctly—yes, the shape of it was very human—*almost* human—something like that."

Scott moved his pen rapidly over the paper. "What about the *rest* of its body?"

"The top of its head was a golden cougar color. I couldn't see anything except its head—but we already know that its feet are like those of a six-year-old human child from its footprints. We've seen its footprints in the snow—same as a human child's, except that *its* come to a *point*."

"The feet come to a point, you say?" Scott repeated.

"He means, the *toes* come to a point," the coroner corrected. "On its *hind* feet, anyway. It walks upright—on its hind feet."

Scott glanced back at the coroner. "Oh—hello, coroner. I didn't hear you come in," the artist said, continuing to draw. He took a colored chalk from his paint box, dabbed here and there on the paper, did the same with several other colors then

held up the illustration he'd drawn for the constable to see.
"Does this look like what you saw?"

The constable studied the drawing a moment. "Yes," he said. "Yes it *does*—a strange looking creature, isn't it?"

"Well—turn it so *I* can see!" the coroner urged.

Scott turned his illustration for the coroner.

"No wonder its DNA doesn't match any know creature on earth," the coroner piped.

Rolf stuck his head in the room, addressed the constable. "There's a *TV* newsman—he's been waiting in your office—has a TV crew. There's some other news people outside—cameras and all that. Do you want them to come in?"

"I say it's time we got the *Bigfoot* business cleared up. This drawing should do it!" the constable exclaimed. "What's your thought about letting them in, Brett?"

"I say, if you feel up to it—let them in," the coroner said, lighting up his pipe.

The coroner nodded to Rolf. Rolf beckoned to the TV newsman, and the constable's room was quickly filled with the coroner's pipe smoke and news people. Cameras began to roll.

"Who's *this* gentleman?" the TV newsman who had broadcast the photo of the trapper asked, indicating the artist.

"I'm Scott Tamerlane. I'm an artist—do illustrations mostly."

"Do you live here in Bear Skin?"

"I came here this last summer—nice place for landscapes. I'm from Philadelphia."

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"He just finished drawing a picture of the creature that's been doing the *killing*," the constable explained.

"And how was he able to do *that*?" a newsman asked.
"Did you see the creature yourself, Mr. Tamerlane?"

"*Scott*. No—actually—"

"*I did!*" the constable interjected.

"You *saw* the thing, constable?"

"Yes—I got a good look at it—just before I shot at it."

"Just before you *shot* your *rifle* at it?"

"Yes."

"Did you hit it?"

"I don't think so. It killed two hounds after I shot at it. That's why I'm laid up, one of the hounds it killed bounced and knocked loose a bunch of snow—that trapped me."

"Well then I suppose you can tell us what it *looked* like!" an unbelieving newsman said, with a smirk.

"*Show* them," the constable said, glancing at Scott.

Scott held up his drawing for the news people to see. There were gasps of amazement at its strange appearance.

Cameras flashed.

"It looks kind of *human*," one of them said, amazed.
"You actually *saw* the thing—and this is what it *looks* like?"

"Yes. That's what we've been saying all along. It stands on its hind feet—like a human. It leaves footprints in the snow that almost look like they're human—about like a six-year-old human, I'd say, except that *its* toes come to a *point*," the constable continued.

"Where did it *come* from?" a newswoman asked.

"I have no idea," the constable replied. "But it's definitely not *Bigfoot*—and whoever is publishing stuff that says we've said we've seen *Bigfoot*—or that we've said we've seen some *alien* from outer space—and that we're just trying pull the wool over people's eyes to put Bear Skin on the map—is headed for *big* trouble. The last thing I want in Bear Skin is a *flood* of *people*—and a bunch of *lying* newspapers."

"Also," the coroner added, "I've examined its blood from Herr Streiker's axe, and the DNA doesn't match anything that has ever been tested for DNA."

Cameras flashed photos of the coroner.

The door swung open. "What's going *on* in here?" Doctor Quincy cried, making his way into the crowded room. "Everybody *out*—except the coroner! Can't you see, the constable's still on IV's? He came close to losing his legs. He still has a long way to go before he'll be up and around. Now—all of you *leave*!"

Cameras flashed at the doctor.

The news people made a few quick notes, then begrudgingly filed out of the room.

Chapter 15

Rolf felt his skis chatter a bit under his feet as he dashed down the snowy slope. He did a christie, sprayed powdered snow all over Ingrid, came to a stop a mere foot above where she had stopped to wait for him among some evergreens on down the hill.

"Hey—!" she cried. "Now I owe *you* one!"

He leaned over, kissed her. "Sorry—I just wanted to catch up with you—as fast as I could."

She smiled. "Like you haven't seen me since we were at the top of this hill five minutes ago," she joked.

He kissed her again.

She looked out over the alpine expanse of snow and evergreen-covered hills, valleys that swept down, out before them. Part of the sky was blue, part puffy white clouds. The sun was reflecting off distant, frozen Lake Cristal. Songbirds flittered by. "I wonder where *it* is?"

"The *cougar*-human?"

"Yeah," she answered, a daze in her eyes, like she was in a fairy story with a handsome hero prince beside her—and down in the valley below somewhere lived a brain-eating cougar-human for her prince to kill.

"Are you worried it might attack *us*?" he asked.

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"The thought crossed my mind."

"Well, I brought my rifle. If it shows up—I'll *shoot* the damned thing!" Rolf said, adjusting his goggles.

"Its *human* part bothers me. Herr Mizzen said it looks like it's—part six-year-old child. That's just a *baby*, really. You wouldn't shoot a six-year-old *baby*, would you?"

"No."

"So—if it jumps out of the trees and comes at us—you might *hesitate* to shoot—until it's right on *top* of us?"

"No—yes—*no*—I'd *have* to shoot it then—if it *attacked*," he muttered, still thinking the idea through.

"Do you think that's why Herr Mizzen didn't hit it when he shot at it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—maybe he had a sixth sense about it. Maybe he sensed its *human* part and subconsciously raised his rifle at the last second. Maybe he didn't really *want* to kill it. He's an expert shot. It's not likely he'd miss if he was really *trying* to hit it."

"It acts weird. If it were *all* cougar it wouldn't go around killing people in the first place. There must be a thousand cougars in these mountains and not even one has ever been seen near Bear Skin," he said.

"And if it was a six-year-old *human* child, it wouldn't go around *killing* people, either. Being part human, it's probably much more intelligent than a cougar, but even so, it would have to be kind of *crazy* to do what it does."

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"I wonder how it *got* that way?" he asked, not expecting a reply.

Ingrid took her binoculars out of her backpack, slipped her goggles up onto her forehead and began panning the countryside. "I can see the *church* steeple. It's such a beautiful day—but then maybe I just *think* it's a beautiful day—because I'm in *love*."

"That makes *two* of us," he said, smiling, gave her a peck on the cheek. He got his binoculars out, slipped up his goggles, focused in on the steeple. "Yes—I see the church. There's a bird sitting right on the tip of the spire."

Then suddenly, she cried, "*Look over here—! Quick—! Look over here—! It's the cougar-human—!*"

"Right! You're *joking* with me, right?" he asked, continuing to focus on the bird. "*Where?*" he asked, still unconcerned.

"I'm not *joking*! *Here*—where I'm *looking*! It's across that valley—up the other side a little—*see* it?" she said, pointing excitedly.

Finally convinced she might not be joking, he directed his binoculars to where she was pointing. "*My God—it is it—it's dancing* in front of that cave opening. See it *dancing*?"

"Yeah—like a little kid dances. You remember Willy—Kristine Chamber's five-year-old? It reminds me of him. That's how *he* dances sometimes—just dances around—like to music. Sometimes he really *does* dance to music," Ingrid commented, excitedly.

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Mesmerized by its oddity, they watched the thing for several minutes, had never seen anything like it.

"It's really quite *pretty*—in a way," she commented.

"In a *deadly* way!"

"*Oh, oh—!*"

"What?"

"It's seen *us—!* Look! It's *looking* directly *at* us!" A cold chill shot up her spine.

"Yeah—it stopped *dancing*. Now it's just standing there—*looking* at us!"

"*Oh, oh—!* It's starting down from the cave into the snow. It's coming this *way!*" Ingrid cried. "What do we *do—?*"

"It's still a long way off—doesn't look like it in the binoculars, but it's a long way from us."

"You *sure?*"

"I'm sure. Besides—we're on *skis*. How fast can it travel in the *snow?*"

"It can travel really *fast—look* at it!"

Rolf took another quick sighting. "Yeah—I see what you mean! Okay—lets get *out* of here—back to the village—we'll let the constable know it's out here," he said, pulling his goggles down over his eyes.

She did the same, then started skiing after him down the slope.

Skiing down the foothills, going was effortless, but when they reached the valley floor it became tougher; they had to pull themselves along the level valleys with their ski poles.

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Finally, they could see the village clearly.

Still apprehensive about the cougar-human, they frequently glanced back to see if it was on their trail.

Just before they reached Beaver Street, they heard it's high-pitched, agonized cry coming from the edge of the woods behind them, making cold shivers shoot up their spines.

"If one of us had gotten *hurt* on the way back—" she began.

He cut her words off. "—I would have *shot* the damned thing," he said.

"You *sure*?"

"Yeah—quite sure," he said, giving her a kiss.

Chapter 16

333 quietly crouched in the evening shadows, partially hidden behind the lower branches of a small pine tree. She'd been there for over an hour, carefully listening, watching for anything that made a sound, a motion. She knew she was taking a chance coming to the *place of lights*, but being *hungry*, waited for an upright walking creature to show itself.

Her wild, strange scent had drifted onto the air. Dogs all over Bear Skin had gotten a whiff, were crazily barking everywhere. Their complacent owners paid no attention, as the village dogs usually created their own chorus every evening. Sensing the thing, some dogs had decided not to hang around outside, were frantically scratching on doors trying to get their masters to let them in, or had crawled under a house or porch somewhere to hide.

The evening shadows were quickly darkening; lights of Bear Skin had already begun to be turned on.

A little, yapping dog scratched desperately on the door of a log house, urgently trying to get in—just a few yards from where 333 crouched. 333 tensely watched it, decided it'd only be a snack; would wait for something larger.

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The door opened and someone let the little fur ball in. It shot into the house like a flash, quickly disappeared under a bed.

"Was that *Trixie*?" Paul Chambers asked, from where he sat at the kitchen table.

"Yes. I've never seen him act so strangely. I think he ran and *hid*," his wife, Kristine said, closing the door.

Their five-year-old son, Willy, had been playing with his toy horse on the living room rug. He jumped up. "*Trixie—Trixie*," he cried, joyfully. He ran about the house looking for his fluffy, little brown dog. "Where *Trixie* go, mama?"

"I think he went into the big bedroom," Kristine Chambers answered.

Paul, her husband, turned a page of the newspaper he was reading. "What you cooking?"

"A pot of beans and pork back," she said.

"You've got the fire too hot. Open the living room *door* awhile!"

"It wouldn't *be* so hot, if you'd bring home the right kind of wood for the cook stove. You always bring stuff with pitch in it. It burns too hot."

"I'm a timber man. I bring home what I can get my hands on."

Mrs. Chambers went to the door where she had let *Trixie* in, opened it, left it open to let out heat so the house would cool down, went back into the kitchen, began stirring her beans. "If you don't want to keep eating pork back and beans every day, you better make a trip out to the tree one of these days and saw off a chunk of *moose*."

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"Tomorrow. I'll do it tomorrow," he said, continuing to read.

"I hear the mayor is going to build a Thorndike Bed and Breakfast for the tourists," she said.

"That'll be a flop."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because—as soon as they kill that cougar-thing, there ain't going to be no more *tourists*."

They became totally engrossed in conversation.

Willy was still trying to find his little dog. "Trixie—Trixie," he called, looking around. "Trixie go outside?" Then he spied the open door—began running across the length of the living room towards it. "Trixie outside? Trixie outside?"

As he dashed on through the doorway to the out-of-doors, his little body cast a long, bouncy shadow across the snow—almost reaching to where 333 was crouching—*waiting*.

As she scrutinized tender little Willy, all of her senses became alert. Her intensely hungry mouth began to salivate. Her ears swept back beside her head—attack position. Every muscle became as taut as an archer's flexed bow; extended her razor-sharp claws, fanged, wide open mouth—ready to spring on him.

Willy was warmly dressed in his little jumper and sweater. His little leather boots covered his tiny feet, but even so the snow under his tootsies felt cold, but he was not about to give up trying to find his doggy. "Trixie," he called, running about this way and that over the snow. "Trixie—!"

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333 watched him warily—but didn't make a move towards him—like a cat waiting for just the right moment to pounce on an unwary mouse.

"Trixie," Willy called again, in his gentle five-year-old tone—and then he noticed 333 lying under the tree.

He was used to seeing the neighbor's cat, thought he was looking at just a larger version. He immediately forgot about his doggy. "Kitty? Kitty—kitty," he chirped, in a coaxing voice.

333 began to carefully creep on all fours towards her meal.

At the last *second*—just before she was about to *lunge*—her human-like nostrils caught his scent. Instead of springing on him—instantly satisfying her terrible appetite—she hesitated, suddenly brought her violent frame of mind under control—began *watching* him again; observing his features, his walk—sound of his voice. Something had triggered within her—and it wouldn't let her pounce, tear him apart—eat out his brain. She had sensed something about him very much like *herself*—as if—as if—he were her little *brother*.

Willy ran towards her. "Kitty—pet kitty?" he asked, holding out his little hand to her.

By then her human side had completely taken over her mind—and like a docile housecat, she laid her head down on her paws—let him pet her head. And then something happened that had usually only happened when she was with her mother—she began to *purr*.

Willy gently stroked the fur on her head. "Nice kitty—nice kitty."

She smiled. Her big brown eyes grew soft, tender. Her hunger had subsided for the moment.

And then, as little boys will—he *jumped* up, flailed his arms—began to *dance* around.

To Willy's great surprise, and joy, the cat smiled, got up on her hind legs, began to *dance* in front of him, towering above him.

333 began to feel a pleasant, social sensation, like she did when with her mother.

"Nice Kitty," Willy said.

"Did I hear Willy say 'nice kitty'?" Mrs. Chambers asked. "Go see what that child's up to."

Paul Chambers put down his newspaper, got up, went looking for Willy, but couldn't find him anywhere. Then he glanced out through the open doorway. His heart stopped. He almost fainted. He saw Willy dancing in front of the horrible, upright, cougar-looking monster.

Paul Chambers froze in place, horrified, terrified, paralyzed, couldn't move a muscle.

"Well—where *is* he?" his wife yelled.

Her blasting, staccato voice shook him back to action, saw his shotgun hanging over the fireplace—only three steps away, instantly estimated it would take him two seconds to grab it, cock it, turn—shoot. *But, if I move, will the cougar thing attack Willy?* The thought flashed like lightening through his mind, decided to chance it. *What else can I do?* He leaped the three steps to the shotgun, cocked it as he whirled back around—

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leaped into the doorway—fired one barrel into the air so as to not hit the boy.

He need not have bothered—333 was gone.

Willy started crying. "Daddy—you scare kitty away."

Paul Chambers' heart was still pounding as he laid his gun down, grabbed up Willy in his arms and gave him a great hug.

Kristine Chambers came running out of the house, almost tripped over the stoop. "What *happened?* Willy, you all *right?*" she cried, taking him from his father.

"He's okay," Paul Chambers said, picking up his shotgun.

Neighbors came running. "What was the *shooting* about?" someone cried.

"It was the *cougar*-killer—almost got *Willy!*" Paul Chambers cried.

"Somebody call the *constable!*" a woman yelled. "That thing's getting *bolder*—coming *right* into the *village* like that!"

"Nice kitty," Willy said. "Nice kitty."

The constable was still laid up when the call came.

Rolf got in his dilapidated truck; soon pulled up in front of the Chamber's house, heard people's loud voices in back, went around through the picket gate, joined them.

"The constable is still recuperating. He sent *me!*" Rolf explained to Mrs. Chambers, half apologetically. "What happened?"

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"That *thing* attacked my *baby*!" Kristine Chambers cried, tightly hugging Willy to her.

"Nice kitty," Willy said.

"Where did it happen?" Rolf asked.

"Right over there—by that pine tree," Paul Chambers said, pointing.

Rolf took his long flashlight out of his jacket pocket, shined it around on the snow, saw tracks. "This where it happened?" he asked Paul Chambers.

"Yes."

"Hold the light," Rolf said, handing his flashlight to Mr. Chambers.

Rolf took his camera out, began systematically taking photographs of the snowy ground. "I wish the *constable* could have come," he said, apologetically.

"I shot at it—well not *at* it—in the air—I was afraid I'd hit Willy," Paul Chambers explained.

"Get a good look at it?"

"Not really—just its shape, mostly. It was up on its hind legs—much taller than little Willy."

Rolf put his camera away.

Paul Chambers returned the flashlight.

"What was Willy doing when you saw them together?" Rolf asked, examining some tracks with his flashlight.

"The thing really shook me up—standing over Willy like that—but I think Willy was *dancing*."

"Dancing? How close to Willy do you think the cougar-human was?"

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"Very close—maybe only a *foot* away!"

"Could you tell what the *cougar*-human was doing?"

"No—and I wasn't trying to—I was trying to protect Willy!" Paul chambers stammered.

"Of course," Rolf said. "Could *it* have been *dancing*, too?"

"That monster—*dancing*? A killer-monster, *dancing*? I said *Willy* was dancing!"

"I heard you," Rolf said.

Then Paul Chambers confessed. "Please don't tell anybody—they'll think I'm crazy—yes—the damned thing was *dancing*," he whispered.

A small crowd had gathered. Suddenly, someone cried, "What's *burning*—?"

Mrs. Chambers smelled the air. "My *God*—my *beans*!" she cried—quickly handed Willy to her husband, dashed into the house.

Rolf looked at little Willy in the light coming through the open doorway, tickled his little cheek with his finger.

Willy smiled. "Nice kitty," he said. "Nice kitty."

Under the safelight, Rolf gently moved the photo paper back and forth in the chemical bath with his fingers until an image appeared to his satisfaction, took it out, moved it to the water bath. When he had washed off all excess chemicals, he removed the finished photo, hung it on a line in the photo dryer alongside others. "There—the last one," he said to Ingrid.

She put her arms around his neck, kissed him.

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In a few minutes, the photos were dry. He put them in a large envelope, turned off the safelight and closed the photo development closet door.

They went to the constable's room. Rolf knocked.

"Come *in*!" the constable said.

The constable was sitting up in bed.

The coroner was sitting on a chair close by.

"Brett was just telling me he heard about the cougar-human visiting little Willy Chambers," the constable said.

"We brought you photos of the tracks it left in the snow," Rolf said, handing the envelope.

The constable removed the large photographs, spread them out on the sheet covering his legs, picked one up.

Everyone gathered around to get a better look.

"Was Willy wearing boots?" the constable asked.

"Yes," Rolf said. "You can see his little boot tracks in the photo. His father told me Willy was dancing in front of the cougar-human."

"And not more than a foot or so away, here are the cougar-human's tracks," the constable said, shaking his head. "I don't understand it! Why didn't the cougar-human tear *into* the boy?"

"I have an idea about that," Ingrid said.

"What is it?" the coroner asked.

"When Rolf and I were out skiing a couple of weeks ago, we saw the cougar-human *dancing* in front of a cave opening."

"Rolf told me about your *seeing* the cougar-human, but not about it *dancing*," the constable said.

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"Yes, it was. We watched it through our binoculars for a few minutes. It was definitely *dancing*," Rolf added. "Like a little kid might."

The constable picked up another photo. "Yes," he said.

"Yes what?" the coroner asked.

"Look closely at this one," the constable said, handing the photo to the coroner. "See the patterns the cougar-human tracks make in the snow? The damned thing *was* dancing with little Willy!"

Chapter 17

Wanda stood in front of the café's large plate glass window looking out over Beaver Street, waiting for her first breakfast customer. She didn't have to wait long.

The coroner pulled up in his SUV, parked in front of the café, got out.

She watched the street another second or two, then returned to behind the counter.

The coroner came in, hung up his overcoat and hat, eased onto a stool, plunked his newspaper down on the counter. "Have you ever heard of such trash as the *Etherington Tribune* puts out? Just *look* at this stuff, Wanda!"

"Good morning to you, too!" she said, cryptically.

"Sorry—good *morning*! I'm just so damned upset over what this newspaper prints I could eat nails—*look* at this," he repeated, turning the paper around for her to see the photos on page one.

There was a photograph of little Willy Chambers and next to it, a photo of Scott Tamerlane's sketch of the cougar-human. The headline read: MONSTER KILLER STRIKES AGAIN – ATTACKS LITTLE BOY.

"That *does* it! I'm going to file a lawsuit against that damned newspaper!" the coroner railed.

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"Coffee?" Wanda calmly asked.

"Yes—*please!*" His voice came out much more gruffly than he had intended. "Sorry I barked." He picked up the paper, turned it around and began to read to himself.

"That's okay—we get crotchety—bad-tempered—and snippety customers in here on a regular basis. *Cream?* Oh, yes, now I remember, you take cream. I'll get your coffee."

She sashayed away in her white apron to the coffee pot, returned with his coffee, cream, found a container of sugar, put that in front of him, too. "I don't blame you for wanting to sue the Tribune, I guess, but *wasn't* Willy attacked? I heard he *was*."

The coroner glanced up at her, eyebrows raised. "No—the cougar-human didn't even *touch* the boy," he said, pouring cream, then sugar into his coffee. I don't know why the hell it *didn't* touch him—but the fact is it *didn't*—and the damned *Tribune* said it *did*! It's stuff like that that infuriates me! They make stories *up*—just to sell more *papers!*" he railed, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Do you want breakfast?"

"Yeah—the usual, please, Wanda."

She yelled to the cook, "*Hans*—the number *three* for the coroner!"

"*Sofort!*" they heard Hans reply.

The coroner gave him a quick glance.

"Hans didn't say what you *think* he said," Wanda explained. "You probably think he said 'so fart'. He said 'sofort'. *So-fort* is German for *right away*," she explained, giggling. "He's a recent German immigrant."

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Herr Öffner laughed. "I haven't spoken German for years. Of course—sofort—now I remember."

Wanda was glad the coroner had cheered up a bit—then she happened to glance past him; out the window. "My *God—look—!*"

The coroner looked, quickly got to his feet.

They hurried to the window, saw a long line of cars, SUVs, campers, RV's and busses making their way up Beaver Street, parking wherever there was a spot.

"They're coming by the *hundreds*—to see what's going on in *Bear Skin!*" the coroner cried.

"Get all your *frying* pans out, Hans! We're going to have more customers than we've ever *seen* before!" Wanda cried.

The coroner immediately grasped the gravity of the situation. "Where's your *phone!*"

"Under the *counter!*"

He hurried around the counter, located it, sat it on the countertop; dialed a number. "*Rolf?* This is Brett Öffner—put the constable on—this is an *emergency!*"

A minute later, Herr Öffner heard the constable's sleepy voice come on the phone. "Brett?"

"Alexander—sorry to wake you—but we have an *emergency!* *News* people—TV crews—RV's—busses—you name it—they're pouring into Bear Skin by the *hundreds!* They're coming right down Beaver Street, as we speak!"

"*What?*" the coroner heard the constable exclaim loudly.

"Yes—by the *hundreds*. What should we *do?*"

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The coroner heard the constable groan, then say, "It's those goddamned TV people—and newspapers—stirring everybody in the country up with their cockamamie stories about the cougar-human—and *aliens*—and Bigfoot..."

The coroner interrupted him. "Wait—something *else*—" "What?"

The coroner had gotten out from behind the counter and was stretching the phone cord as far as it would reach towards the window. "It's the *mayor*?"

"What *about* him?"

"He's standing in the bed of a truck—in the middle of the invasion—waving a *sign*!"

"What does it *say*?"

"It says *Thorndike's Bed & Breakfast*—and he has a lengthy string of large mobile homes following him—signs on their sides that say the same thing!"

"*Good* for old Thorny! He knows an opportunity when he sees one. I'm glad you talked me into investing in his *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast*! You *did* invest our *money* in it, right?"

The coroner hesitated long enough to make the constable wonder if he had, then said, "If a pig's ass is made out of *pork*!"

Herr Öffner heard the constable laugh.

"The traffic problem..." the constable continued. "I'll call the illustrious Emerald County Sheriff—tell him to send us some *help*. He'll hate to do it—but he probably will."

"Sorry to have to wake you so early," Herr Öffner apologized again.

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"I hate being laid up like this, Brett. I'd rather be having breakfast at the café with you all—or out trying to find that damned cougar-human."

"I know you would. Just get your rest. Let that jackass sheriff take care of things for a while. Talk to you later."

"Yeah—later," he heard the constable say.

Herr Öffner hung up the phone, put it on the counter, sat down and took a sip of coffee.

All of a sudden a newsman burst through the café door—a TV cameraman on his heels.

"Close that goddamned *door!*" the coroner yelled. "Were you raised in a *barn?*"

His yelling was as effective as a straw in a windstorm.

The smell of Han's cooking had ignited the appetites of perhaps a hundred standing in line outside. They kept the café door open. Freezing air rushed in. Some of the more famished elbowed each other, tried to break into the front of the line.

The newsman plopped himself down on a stool next to the coroner. His mouth watered as Wanda set a plate of steaming eggs and sausage in front of the coroner, then a side of buttered toast, refilled the coroner's coffee cup.

"You're not going to eat all that by *yourself*, are you?" the newsman demanded.

"Are you from the *Etherington Tribune?*" the coroner snapped back.

"Yes. I see you've *heard* of it. I didn't think this little dump of a village even *got* the *Tribune*," the newsman said, obnoxiously.

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Instantly furious, the coroner felt hot blood surge up his neck. Defiantly, he grabbed up his copy of the *Tribune* from the counter. "Look at *this*! This is the kind of irresponsible *lies* your goddamned *newspaper* prints!" he railed, slapping the back of his hand against a front-page photo to emphasize his point, held up the page so the newsman could see.

A TV cameraman had taken up a position nearby, was getting everything recorded for later telecasting.

People gathered around them.

"That's what we heard," the newsman went on, a sarcastic ring to his voice. "We heard the little boy was *attacked* by the *cougar*-thing—*great* headline copy—anyway, we can't hurt this dumpy village no matter *what* we print."

The newspaperman's cynical smile made the coroner blow his top. "You *heard*—! *Heard*?" the coroner cried. "Is that how you get that *flotsam* crap for your rag to print? No wonder it publishes libelous *trash*!"

The legal term caught the newsman off guard.

"Libelous?"

"Yes, *libelous*—you did it again—just then—you ran down *Bear Skin*! 'Dumpy village', is it?" the coroner cried, then took a bite of sausage, right in the newsman's face, washed it down with coffee. "You damned right—*libelous*—and don't think the *Tribune* is going to get *away* with it! I've already filed a lawsuit as big as the whole *outdoors*!"

The last part of the coroner's statement wasn't exactly true, as he knew he wasn't actually going to file the lawsuit until he returned to Prescott.

Wanda was busily taking breakfast orders, but she took a minute to cut in. "I heard what you just *said*, young newsman—and I'm going to be a witness for the *prosecution*!" Then, turning to the coroner, she said, "Herr Öffner—please do me a *giant* favor—call the operator. Tell her to call anybody she can think of who can cook or wait tables—and tell them to hurry their fannies down here and help out. *I'd* do it but as you can *see*—" she said, dashing off to take another order from a complaining customer.

The coroner got on the phone, quickly completed the task.

The newsman hadn't given up. "But it *is* true—like I've seen printed in the *Tribune*—that you-all up here think the thing *is* probably an *alien* from outer space—or maybe, *Bigfoot*—am I *right*?"

Completely disgusted, the coroner didn't say another word, didn't bother to finish his breakfast, got up, worked his way through the crowded café, finally found his overcoat and hat among the jumble on the rack, put them on, elbowed his way out of the café into the freezing morning air.

When he got outside, he glanced back through the window, saw the newsman eating the cold eggs Herr Öffner had left on his plate. "I'll find out the name of that—! That young man—and file a *separate* lawsuit against *him* personally," he said aloud, then calmed down a bit, lit up his pipe.

He paused a moment to watch Rolf, who was out in the middle of Beaver Street directing traffic; saw Mayor Thorndike

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stuck in the jumble of vehicles—still holding up his sign, waved. The mayor waved back.

The coroner heard several wailing sirens from the direction of far off Etherington. *Must be that idiot sheriff and some police cars on their way here to help with traffic*, he thought. Then his thoughts turned to his immediate concern. *The snarled traffic will eventually clear itself—but right now I can't drive my SUV through it—unless I turn on the red lights—fire up my siren. No—that'd just add to the confusion. I'll walk over to the constable's office—see how he's doing—then start back for Prescott later on—file some lawsuits. Yes, by damned—I'll really file lawsuits against those ignoramuses this time.*

Chapter 18

The fiery-haired Emerald County Sheriff, Maxwell Atridge, stood on one side of the constable's huge bed. The coroner sat in a wooden chair on the other.

A week earlier, the Governor, wanting to keep the constable aware of what was going on in the world with respect to the cougar-human dilemma, had had a large satellite TV installed in the constable's office next to the fireplace, and another one in the constable's room near the ceiling.

Sheriff Atridge was a boisterous, egotistic, unbearable, sinewy, redheaded, green eyed, little pig of a man. The constable didn't dislike many people, but he made an exception in the sheriff's case. He disliked the him immensely.

The constable was sitting up in bed. A young, brunette female nurse, whom Doctor Quincy had sent to help, was massaging one of his legs.

A program from England about the cougar-human was being aired on TV: "The Yanks are having their own problems, it seems. It's been reported that there is *something*—some kind of *animal*—or *human*—or a *combination* thereof, if you can imagine that—terrorizing a small village called Bear Skin, in the northeastern part of the state of Washington. There has been

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widespread speculation as to what it is. Rumors range from the Abominable *Snowman*, to *Bigfoot*, to an *alien* from outer space. All jokes aside—whatever it is—fear of it is spreading. It has reportedly killed several people the village—including a five-year-old child we're told, although that report has not yet been substantiated. The local constable has become incapacitated, having suffered hypothermia from being caught in an avalanche while pursuing the killer. It's been reported that he's under a doctor's care. The press and hundreds of curious strangers have inundated the small village, many are no doubt trying to find out what is being done by the local constable to stop the killings..."

The constable pressed a button on the remote. The TV went silent.

"Well—are you *happy*—now that you've put Bear Skin on the *map*?" the surly sheriff charged, pacing back and forth.

"Sit *down*, Sheriff—can't you see I'm *bedridden*?" the constable countered. "We've been doing everything possible to find that goddamned cougar-human."

The sheriff ignored him. "That's obviously not *enough*! It was bad enough *before*—but *now*—after the thing *attacked* a five-year-old child—"

"Stop right *there*, mister—the cougar-human didn't actually *attack* the child," the coroner interjected.

"Of *course* it did—I just heard it on *TV*!" the sheriff cried, continuing to pace.

The nurse was taking the constable's blood pressure. "Please *control* yourself, sheriff, you're causing my patient to experience undue *stress*!"

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"Undue *stress*? He needs to experience more than undue *stress*! He's responsible for that *nightmare* out there in the street—people and *news* people *everywhere*! *All* that has to be taken care of—the cougar-thing has to be *found*—and *shot*!" the sheriff railed.

"I'm not sure it needs to be shot. Something tells me that it may be more *human* than *cougar*," the constable said. "What would you be like, if you were a six-year-old human child—but part *cougar*? How would *you* react? Would you act like a *cougar*, or would you act like a six-year-old *child*? If you had the killer instincts of a cougar—"

The phone by the constable's bed rang, cutting him off in mid-sentence. He answered it. "Constable Mizzen here."

It was the Governor.

"Alexander—how's the TV working out?" the constable heard the Governor say.

"*Too* well. I just saw a program from *England*. They have a screwed-up version of the cougar-human story over there, too."

"And in China, and all of Europe—and Asia—to say nothing of the United States. That's what I called about—this widespread publicity—something has to be done. I know you can't try to stop the thing again until you're up and around. I was thinking that maybe someone—"

"Governor—the man you're looking for is right here in my *room*—Emerald County Sheriff—Maxwell *Atridge*," the constable said, exaggerating his voice, glancing at the sheriff.

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The constable had waited a long time for an opportunity to help the sheriff get into a situation where he could really make an ass of himself and was more than happy to recommend the sheriff to the Governor.

The haughty sheriff, delighted to have his name associated with a call from the Governor, puffed up like a toad, paced the floor, impatiently curled and uncurled the brim of his official, black felt sheriff hat.

"Well, Alexander, I wish *you* could do it, but under the *circumstances*—okay we'll let that jackass give it a try."

"Oh, I didn't know you *knew* Sheriff Atridge, Governor."

The sheriff expanded his chest in anticipation of speaking to the Governor.

"Oh, yes, I'm aware of some of the disasters he's been responsible for. Come on Alex, you can't fool me. You and I went to high school together—played basketball and all that. I know it won't hurt your feelings if the Atridge trips and falls on this one. You don't like him any better than I do, but give him the best support you can. Somebody has to stop the killings and with his ego, I think he'll give it a serious try. What kind of manpower and equipment can I provide?"

"Okay, I'll supply him with a map showing the last location where I saw the cougar-human. As far as manpower and equipment go—it would be best if you talked directly to *him* about that, Governor."

"Thanks Alexander, put him on."

The constable handed the phone to the sheriff. "It's the *Governor*. He wants to *talk* to you."

Chapter 19

The stubby, redheaded sheriff stood on the veranda in front of the constable's office, watched the train pull into the Bear Skin train platform at the edge of the village.

At first, the morning silence was only broken by the laboring sound of the train's mighty diesel engine. Suddenly, pandemonium broke out—an unruly, chanting mob began streaming down out of the four passenger cars. *Protesters*—many with backpacks. A few with suitcases. Most carried signs that read: 'APPLY HERE – NEW CONSTABLE NEEDED!' and the like.

Sheriff Atridge saw the rising storm of humanity coming his way, smiled.

The protesters lost no time making it through the mish-mash of parked campers, RVs, motor homes, on down Beaver Street to where the sheriff was. "*Kill the killer! Kill the killer—!*" they chanted.

After most were in front of him, Atridge held up his arms. The chanting stopped.

A young man, apparently the spokesman for the protesters, came to the front. "Why hasn't the constable *killed* the cougar thing yet?" he yelled into the sheriff's face.

"Calm *down!*" the sheriff cried. "As you've probably seen on the news, Constable Mizzen has been unable to do it!"

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"Why not?" someone cried.

"The cougar thing is too *much* for him! He's not up to the task!" the sheriff wheezed.

A chant began: "*Replace the constable! Replace the constable!*"

The sheriff smiled. "Like I said, Constable Mizzen is not up to the job—but I—Sheriff Maxwell *Atridge* will bring the killer in—*dead* or *alive*! The Governor has given the job of killing it—to *me*!"

A cheer rose from the mob.

"How are you planning to *do* it?" the spokesman asked.

"I have hand-picked deputies. They're *crack* troops!" the sheriff said.

"You mean they're *women*?" a young man yelled.

The other protesters laughed.

The macho sheriff ignored the remark. "I'm an *academy* graduate myself. My deputies are mostly ex-marine paratrooper military police!" he bragged. "We *know* what *we're* doing. The constable *doesn't*! It's just that simple!"

"I've seen a photograph of the cougar-human on the news," a Chinese woman said. "Have you seen the cougar-human *yourself*, sheriff?"

"No—but it's just a damned big cat that's gone loco. There's nothing *human* about it," the sheriff countered.

"What about the *illustration* of it?" a protester asked. "It doesn't look like anything *I've* ever seen!"

"Well—just think about it a minute! Where did the illustration *come* from? It came from the constable's *mind*. It came

from the brain of a man who got caught up in a blizzard and was almost frozen to death and was quite *mad* by the time he saw the big cat—if he actually saw it at *all*!" the sheriff railed. The sheriff had lost what little cool demeanor he had possessed and his egotism was raging out of control.

"Where is the constable *now*?" someone yelled.

"He's taking a *nap*!" the sheriff snapped.

"Was the constable wounded by the cougar-human?" the spokesman asked.

Before the sheriff could answer, a new voice set the record straight. "The constable was trapped in an avalanche. He almost died of hypothermia. He's recuperating in his office here. The doctor says he'll be okay, but it'll take time. He can't travel yet!" Rolf responded loud and clear as he stood by the constable's office door, his rifle resting on his arm.

"So, sheriff—you haven't told us how *you're* going to get the cougar-human," a young man from England said.

"*Airborne!*" the sheriff cried out. "My men and I are all *paratroopers*! We're going to drop in on that cat and give it a little *surprise!*"

"Do you know where it *is*?" a young blonde woman from Switzerland asked.

"Yes—I have a *map* showing where it is!"

"Where did you get the *map*?" someone asked.

The sheriff ignored the question.

"He got it from the *constable*! It shows where the constable met up with the cougar-human—in front of a cave up in the mountains!" Rolf cut in.

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"Well—we can't heckle a *sick* man!" the spokesman cried to the other protesters. He jumped up and down, pounded his arms against his sides to ward off the cold. To Rolf he asked, "Is there a *café* in this burg?"

"Up Beaver Street—on the left—you can't miss it!" Rolf said, pointing his rifle towards the café. Then Rolf thought about giving his investment a little help. "*Also*—you passed a long line of mobile *homes* parked alongside the street as you came here—those are part of the *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast*—there's food there, too—and *lodging*!"

Chapter 20

The Governor had made a call to the head of the Emerald County Forest District Office, Bartholomew Danderfield, asked if he would provide Sheriff Atridge with a pilot, co-pilot and a specific airplane Atridge had requested—a certain Forest District plane Atridge and his crew had trained with and had jumped from when they had done a short stint as, soon-to-be-fired, smokejumpers for the Forest District years earlier. Danderfield told the Governor he thought that experience had somehow made Atridge a little wacky. The Governor told Danderfield that if that was what caused Atridge to be fanatical, then that was an understatement. Danderfield agree to provide a pilot, co-pilot—and the plane Atridge wanted. Danderfield understood that locating and stopping the human-cougar was of paramount importance, so was willing to bend a little, even though it was Atridge making the request.

The wind whistled through the open doorway past Sheriff Atridge as he clung to a handhold inside the, shaky, fifteen-year old, airborne DC-3 aircraft.

The roar from the giant prop engines was deafening.

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The sheriff, acting as jumpmaster, stomped his foot on the floor, yelled, "We'll be over the *drop zone* in *ten* fucking minutes! Get *ready*!"

Twelve macho deputized paratroopers, in surplus military, camouflaged parka uniforms, six seated against each side of the aircraft, adjusted their goggles, helmets, and .357 Magnums, waited for the sheriff to issue the next command.

The pilot reduced the aircraft's speed to 112 knots to lessen the amount of impact on the paratroopers when they exited the plane.

"*Port* side—stand *up*!" the sheriff yelled.

The odd-numbered paratroopers, those on the left side of the airplane, jumped to their feet, secured their seats in the down position, faced the rear of the aircraft.

"*Starboard* side—stand up!"

The even-numbered paratroopers, those on the right side of the aircraft, lurched to their feet.

"Hook *up*!"

Each even-numbered jumper hooked his static line onto the cable between two odd-numbered jumpers' static lines.

"Check *static* lines!"

Each jumper checked the static line of the man in front of him to be sure his static line hook was secured.

"Check *equipment*!"

Each man checked the man in front to see that the man's elbow was close to his body, and that the static line extension hung below and behind his arm.

"Sound off for *equipment* check!"

"One, two, three..." the men each called out their number with drill-sergeant-like voices.

"Stand in the *door*!" the sheriff yelled, hurling his static snap fastener towards the end of the cable. He followed his own command, took his position in the door, crouched somewhat and placed his right boot slightly over the edge of the plane's door-frame.

"Go!" he shouted—as he jumped out.

He immediately pulled his feet and knees together as he entered the powerful slipstream, waited; pulled his ripcord. His parachute popped open with a sudden snapping *swoosh*—like a strong wind suddenly filling a sail. He began guiding the chute lines with his hands.

He studied the ground far below. *I wonder if that damned constable drew me the right map?* The sullen thought had suspiciously flashed through his mind. He had memorized the constable's map and had carefully noted mountains and valleys that were now just below him, as shown on it.

Then Atridge saw the cave opening that the constable had marked on the map where the constable had last seen the cougar-human. "*There!*" he yelled aloud, guiding his chute towards the location.

The rest of the parachutists, trying to imitate him, tried to guide their chutes in the same direction. In their heavy attire, they looked like bunches of enormous, upside-down pears as they plunged. The wind was gusting. The closer they got to the snowy ground, the more disorganized their descents became.

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Atridge managed to direct his chute to a spot just a few yards below the cave opening he was aiming for, but ignominiously crash-landed in a pine tree, only minor scratches to his face.

He looked down, saw two of his deputies—who had landed on their feet in a clearing—looking up at him, smiling. "Get me the hell *down* out of this tree!" he yelled.

He wiggled out of his chute harness. They helped him to the ground.

"Where are the *others*?" he asked.

"Who *knows*!" one of the deputies answered. "A breeze caught us—they're scattered all over the place!"

"Oh, what the *hell*," the sheriff said, patting the .357 Magnum pistol on his side, "we each have one of *these*—and there's only *one* goddamned cat—let's go *kill* the son of a bitch!"

The mid-morning sun had put a crust on the snow, not enough to hold a man's weight, just enough to make walking on it miserable. The crust almost supported them, but when they stepped on it, it broke through and their feet plummeted down to the snow base. It was hard work to even gain a yard.

"I'm going to *kill* that goddamn cat—and become an instant—*worldwide hero*—!" Atridge cried. "That cat has gotten the attention of people all over the *world*. I'm going to take over its goddamned *limelight*!" he bragged, shaking his fist as he vigorously worked his way through the snow towards the cave opening.

The two deputies glanced at each other. One shrugged his shoulders. The other nodded his head in recognition.

They tried to keep up with the sheriff, but he had something they didn't—*greed* for recognition. He forged ahead and was soon standing at the opening to the cave waving his pistol about. "Okay, you vicious *bastard*—come the hell *out* of there—! See if you can tear a *real* man apart!"

All was quiet in the cave—because, weeks before, 333 and her mother had *left*, moved to new caves far across the canyon.

The two deputies finally caught up with Atridge.

"Come *out*!" the sheriff yelled at the dark opening. All remained silent. He suddenly felt the desperation of defeat slice through him. Impulsively, he began to wildly shoot into the cave opening. The explosions from his powerful pistol echoed throughout the mountains. Two bats flew out of the cave. "*Damn!*" he cried.

"I don't think the cougar thing's *in* there," one of the deputies said, mildly.

"But you did do *something*—look up *there*—!" the other deputy cried, pointing.

They looked up. Far above, an avalanche of snow was tearing down the mountain towards them.

"Oh, *Christ*—I've caused an *avalanche*—follow me—run for your *lives*!" Atridge cried.

They just made it to the edge of the avalanche's path, as tons of snow roared past—covering the cave opening completely.

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One of the deputies had fallen down during his narrow escape, got to his feet. "That was *close*! It damned near *got* me!" he cried.

The other deputy knocked some snow off the deputy's parka, then said, "Well, there's *one* thing about it."

"What's *that*?" the shaken deputy asked.

"If that cougar thing's in *that* cave—nobody'll *ever* be bothered by *it* again! No way it can dig its way out from under *that* much white stuff!"

Sheriff Atridge sat down on the snow, wept.

Chapter 21

Constable Mizzen sat in a wheelchair on the large veranda that extended out towards the street from the front of his office. The Roman hump and tip of his massive nose were red from the cold morning air.

His—usually dark blue—eyes were blue-gray crystals in the mellow light. The stress he had suffered from being bedridden so long revealed itself as deep folds under them. His black eyebrows, wild and wiry, stretched out above his lashes like thatched roofs. His untrimmed black mustache roamed under his large nose, out under his leathery, reddish brown cheeks, then meshed with his massive, red and black beard.

His bright red, knit cap was pulled down over his large ears and he was bundled in blankets against the cold.

Wanda stood behind him, hands on the wheelchair's handles. Her long, dyed blonde hair stirred in the trifling breeze. Her slight, sturdy build held her shape well for her thirty-six years. Her dark hazel eyes were still bright and the lines in her cosmetic face were not as deep as one might expect for a woman who had been a waitress so long.

That morning she had brightened her lips with a shade of crimson lipstick she liked especially well, and secretly hoped the constable would like it, too. She knew the artificial fox fur

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jacket she was wearing over her thin dress was too stylish for everyday, but what the hell, maybe he'd dig it.

It was very early in the morning, but a few industrious protesters were already out on Beaver Street—saw the constable in the wheelchair; sympathetically kept their distance.

Everyone turned, watched as the silhouettes of four military helicopters eased their way against the gray sky, until their eggbeater blades disappeared over the far horizon towards Etherington.

The constable laughed.

"What are you *laughing* about?" she asked.

"About that jackass of a *sheriff*. You remember—I was on the phone, before you brought me *out* here?"

"Uh huh."

"That was the Governor I was talking to. He told me—in the sheriff's so-called military-styled egotistical rush to kill the *cougar-human*—Atridge had forgotten a very important *thing*."

"What was that?"

"He executed a parachute jump of himself and a dozen deputized paratroopers—landed near the cave where I last saw the cougar-human—I had marked it on the map that I gave him."

"That sounds okay so far."

"Yes, but he forgot to make arrangements for his idiots to return to *Bear Skin*. He and his men were *stranded* out there—in serious condition—frostbitten and dehydrated by the time that jackass finally got his ego under control enough to phone for helicopter support so a rescue team could go pick up him and his pack of parachute rats."

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"He didn't kill the cougar-human?"

"Oh, I'm sure he *didn't*. If he had, he'd have bragged about it to *somebody*."

"Where are the *choppers* taking them?"

"To the hospital in Etherington."

Wanda shook her body to ward off the cold. "It's chilly out here—better get you inside."

"Okay."

She wheeled him into his spacious office, locked the door in case some of the protesters decided to pay a visit.

The booming fire in the fireplace felt good. She helped him from the wheelchair to his favorite easy chair in front of the fire, put the wheelchair away.

"Looks like we're all alone. Where do you keep your booze?" she asked.

"You mean like *beer*?"

"No—a day like today calls for *brandy*!"

"Hmm...look in the wooden cabinet with the glass doors—by the waterwheel—there may be some there."

She did, found two petite glasses, poured each a brandy, went back to the fire, handed him one, took off her furry jacket, hung it on the back of a wooden chair—revealing her curvaceous body in her tight, Lincoln Green velvet dress. Then with graceful, cat-like movements, sat down by him in the other large, luxurious chair in front of the fire, kicked off her shoes, leaned back, bare legs showing to advantage.

"This is the most beautiful room I've ever seen. Did you design it yourself?"

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The constable took a sip of brandy. "Yes. Before the cougar-human showed up, I had time to do things like that."

"You did a great job. It's like a dream come true."

"It's similar to a room I remember in my grandfather's house in the Black Forest in Germany."

"When were you in Germany?" she asked, taking a sip of brandy.

"Oh, not since we lived there when I was eight. My father took my mother and sister and I, immigrated to America. We settled here in Bear Skin. He became the constable and when he died of pneumonia, I was in my twenties. I took over the job."

"Where's your mother?"

"She's a *city* girl—born in Berlin. She didn't like Bear Skin. After father died, she moved to New York City."

"I can't imagine anyone not loving Bear Skin—*before* the cougar-human came, of course. The cougar-human changed everything. I wonder where it *came* from." She sipped her brandy, began to get very comfortable.

"Yes. Where *did* it come from? What *is* it—and *why*? All good questions—and here's *another* good question—is there any more *brandy*?"

She giggled, then jumped up, got the bottle, hurried back, filled their glasses, crawled back into the soft chair.

"You're *sure* it's not just a cougar that's gone *crazy*, or has *rabies* or something."

He was beginning to get a buzz on from the brandy. His speech had loosened up. He gestured with his free hand. "Oh,

hell *no*! I *saw* it—just a quick glance, really—but I could tell it wasn't just an ordinary *cougar*. There's something *human* about its face—and it *dances*—leaves human-like tracks in the snow."

"*Dances?*"

"Yes—we have photographic proof that it danced with little Willy Chambers."

"Really?" She took another sip of her brandy.

"Yes—and Rolf and Ingrid were out skiing and saw it dancing in front of a cave opening—through their binoculars. Dancing like a little kid, they said."

"Not to change the subject—but do you have any *popcorn*?"

"In the kitchen—the popper is over there—leaning against the wall by the fireplace."

"I see it. I'll go find the popcorn," she said, getting up. She dashed into the kitchen, quickly returned with a bottle of popcorn, poured some into the popper, held it to the fire by its long metal handle, shook it occasionally. "Is this how you *do* it?"

"I've never *made* popcorn—I wouldn't know."

"You've never made *popcorn*?"

"Never."

The kernels began to pop. Soon the popper was filled with yellow fluff. She emptied it into a large bowl, salted it; returned to his side.

"You were saying—the cougar-human was dancing like a little kid," she said, kneeling down on the thick rug by his

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chair. She popped a gossamer piece into his mouth. He didn't object.

"Yes. That's what Rolf and Ingrid both said they saw it do."

She refreshed their brandy glasses.

"So—this cougar-like *thing*—it shows up from nowhere and starts killing people," she said, flipping popcorn into her mouth. Her voice had begun to slur slightly from the brandy. She popped some popcorn into his mouth, carefully studied his lips. "You have great lips," she said, softly; running her ruby fingernail along his lower one. He didn't resist.

"*Have* I?" he asked timidly. The brandy had begun to affect his thinking.

"Yes," she whispered—then she could no longer control her pent-up desire for him—she bent over, wet-kissed his mouth.

He put down his glass, entangled his fingers in her hair; pulled her close.

After an enduring embrace, she pulled away. As she did, he saw the hard impressions of her excited breasts tighten her clinging dress. He became aroused.

"Where are you *going*?" he asked, anxiously, so excited he was hardly able to catch his breath.

"We can't ignore the doctor's *orders*, now *can* we?" she cried, with delight.

She removed his slippers, put his feet up on a downy stool, took off all her clothes—began to sensuously massage his bare legs.

Chapter 22

The Moose Head Bar was jumping.

A dynamic country band with a German *oom pah-pah* tuba was providing a lively tempo for the dancers.

The constable and Wanda sat at the edge of the dance floor having drinks.

Thanks to Wanda, the constable had graduated from the wheelchair to just needing a cane.

Rolf and Ingrid were dancing out on the dance floor.

"Ingrid has such a *lovely* complexion," Wanda commented.

"Yes, she's a most striking young lady," the constable agreed. "But you're no *slouch* yourself."

She smiled. "She has *naturally* blonde hair. I have *Molly*."

"The *beautician*?"

"Yeah."

They laughed.

"Rolf and Ingrid look good together—both have blond hair. It's the *German* genes. Both of their father's were German. She's a little shorter than him—a nice couple," the constable said.

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"Yes. We're not a bad looking couple ourselves, if I do say so," she said.

He smiled, squeezed her hand, took a sip of his drink, sat back and watched the dancers.

He had not watched long when he noticed one of the young male dancers falter—and then *fall* to the dance floor.

A lady screamed.

The constable grabbed his cane, jumped to his feet.

"What *is* it?" Wanda cried, trying to see through the mass of dancers.

"One of the *dancers*—he fell to the *floor*," he said, caning his way onto the dance floor, Wanda at his elbow. "Stop the *music*!" he cried.

The music died.

He went to the collapsed man. A distraught young lady was standing near the man. "We were *dancing*! He just *stopped* all of a sudden—and fell *down*!" she cried.

Wanda knelt down by the man. The young man's eyes were closed. He was barely breathing. "Someone call the *medics*!" she cried.

"I'll call Doctor *Quincy*!" Rolf volunteered.

Two medics, who, because of the sudden population increase had been assigned by Doctor Quincy to live in Bear Skin, soon arrived with a stretcher. One of them felt the young man's forehead, took his pulse. "He has a fever—pulse is normal—skin's clammy."

The medics lifted the young man onto the stretcher.

"Where are you *taking* him?" the constable asked.

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"We have a new aid station over by the church—compliments of Mayor *Thorndike*. We'll take him there and wait for Doctor Quincy," one of the medics said, then hastened to help the other medic lift the stretcher.

The medics had put the young man on an examination table and Doctor Quincy had begun his examination.

The young man was conscious, sweating profusely.

"What's your name?" Doctor Quincy asked, in a quiet voice.

"Raymond...Raymond Stillwell," the patient answered, feebly.

"How do you feel?" Doctor Quincy asked.

"Chest hurts—headache—chills," Raymond Stillwell said, voice very weak.

The nurse pulled a blanket up over the young man's chest.

Doctor Quincy took his temperature. "A hundred and three," he said. "Quite a fever."

Then Doctor Quincy noticed the red spot on Raymond Stillwell's neck, examined it closely, looked puzzled; concluded his examination. To the nurse, he quietly said, "Three MU penicillin by IV plus ten MU every twelve hours—and *quarantine* the patient."

"What's the matter with me doc?" Raymond Stillwell asked, faintly.

"You have pneumonia. You'll be up and around in *no* time," the doctor said, but didn't really think so.

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"Why the quarantine...?" Raymond Stillwell asked, weakly.

"Just a precaution," Doctor Quincy said. He picked up his medical bag, left the treatment room; closed the door behind him.

The constable, Wanda, Rolf, the coroner, members of the press had been waiting for Doctor Quincy to come out.

The doctor entered the waiting room.

"How *is* he?" a newswoman asked.

"He has pneumonia, but I'm having him quarantined just as a precaution."

"A precaution from *what*?" a newsman demanded.

The doctor didn't answer; instead, made his way over to the coroner, whispered something in his ear and then left the building.

Doctor Quincy had told the coroner he wanted to meet privately with him, the constable, and the mayor, in the constable's office.

"Sit down, gentlemen," Doctor Quincy said.

They all sat down around the fireplace.

"We may have a *serious* problem," Doctor Quincy began, "Mr. Stillwell has what looks like a *fleabite* on his neck."

"What's the significance of that?" Herr Öffner asked.

"He might have the Bubonic *Plague*," Doctor Quincy answered, solemnly.

The three men stared at the doctor in astonishment.

"The Black *Death*?" Constable Mizzen finally got the words out. "That's why you *quarantined* him."

"Yes. I won't know for *sure*—until I see how he responds to the penicillin."

"You mean everyone at the dance might have been exposed to the *plague*?" Mayor Thorndike cried. "My—our Bed and *Breakfast* business will be *ruined*! It's all the *cougar*-thing's fault. If it weren't for *it*, those hundreds of people wouldn't be here *milling* around. See what I mean? That sick young man *isn't* from Bear Skin. We wouldn't have this problem—if that *cougar*-thing hadn't started *killing* people!"

"But, don't you see, if all those people hadn't of shown up—there wouldn't *be* any *need* for a Bed and Breakfast," the coroner observed.

"Gentlemen—if that young man has the *plague*—we have a lot more to worry about than the Bed and *Breakfast*—an *epidemic*," the constable said. "Doctor Quincy—is there anything we can *do*?"

"The only thing I can suggest is that you keep your eyes open for anyone with symptoms—anyone who collapses or develops a high fever. Call me immediately if you see or hear of a case like that. Also—we don't want to start a *panic*—so keep all this under you hats. The press is *too* curious, already."

Chapter 23

The leather shop always had a pleasant smell about it. Splendidly tooled bridles and saddles of black, red and tan hung along its walls. Exquisite leather boots, wallets, belts, purses, bracelets and the like were proudly displayed in a large, glass case. These leather goods had professionally worked, hand-tooled, highly polished, raised designs of stylized flowers, trees, snakes, birds, and whatever the mind of their creator, Pierre Corbèt, had conceived of.

Pierre was a midget, only a little over three feet tall. He was packed with energy, more than would be expected from a man twice his size. No one knew how old he was, or exactly where he came from, although rumor had it he was from Normandy in France. His head of curly, black hair was disproportionately large for his body. His arms were stubby. He had a violent side—and he was in a violent mood.

He was pounding tacks into a photo—of the cougar-human—he had just cut out of the *Etherington Tribune*. He fastened it to the wall. "Zer," he said, with satisfaction. "Zer—zat weel do eet!"

He backed away from the photo, to where he had an ample supply of metal-tipped darts. He grabbed one—violently hurled it at the cougar-human's head, striking it on the nose.

"Take zat—and zat—and *zat!*" he cried, throwing one dart after another at the photo as fast as he could.

Rolf, who had been watching, asked, "Does that make you *feel* any better?"

"When I get my hands on zee *cougar-zing*—I weel *pounce* on eet—and *trounce* eet—I'll *slap* eet around—I weel—" Pierre said, jumping up and down clinching his fists.

"Ah—you don't want to do *that!* You're a fine leather craftsman. The cougar-human would eat you up in *one* bite—and then who would do all this fine work?" Ingrid asked, jovially.

"Mademoiselle—I tell you zat where I come from—nobody would put up with all zees keeling of people. No—a knight in full armor would come riding—riding out of the trees—with a long *lance* and stab zat zing in zee *geezard!* Eet would be *dead* in a *fortnight!*"

"Wow!" Rolf said.

"Monsieur—I never learned your *name*—" Pierre said, addressing Rolf.

"Rolf *Arbeiter*," Rolf said.

"Monsieur Arbeiter—tell me—I am zee *curious* man—what was eet like to be so close to zee *cougar-zing?*"

"I felt danger. A blizzard was blowing. I couldn't see well. The cougar-human could have attacked me at any second—I would have had little warning. When I heard it killing the *hounds*—that made the *hair* stand up on the back of my neck. Their yelping was very distressing. It wasn't a pleasant feeling. Does that answer your question?"

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"You are zee *brave* man, monsieur—I won't eenseest on any more of your stories. What breengs zee two of you into my shop?"

"The constable is in much better health now. He doesn't need the wheelchair anymore. We want to get him a *gift*," Ingrid said.

"Like zee get-well geeft—after he has already *gotten* well, no?"

"*Yes!* That's *exactly* what we're looking for!" Ingrid cried.

"Oh—when zee constable gets completely well—woe to zat damned—*damned*—zat's how you say eet, yes?"

"Yes," Rolf said.

"Woe to zat damned creature. Zee constable weel *pounce* on eet—*trounce* eet—and *slap* eet around—and zen *keel* eet!" Pierre cried, jumping up and down happily clinching his fists. "Sorry—I get carried away—you were saying you were looking for zee *geeft*."

"Yes—something very nice," Ingrid said, with her sweetest smile.

"Zee decorated *belt*, perhaps?"

"What do you *think*, Rolf?" Ingrid asked, gently.

"Something *larger*," Rolf said.

"A *saddle*—I could make heem zee special *saddle*—weeth zee rifle design—and zee pine trees—and hees official insignia—and zee likeness of zee cougar-zing—right een zee seat, so he can sit on eet whenever he rides hees horse—and an

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avalanche!" Pierre was obviously very excited by the avalanche idea.

"No *avalanche*," Rolf said.

"No?"

"No—no avalanche. He will not want to be reminded of the avalanche," Ingrid said.

"Okay—no avalanche."

"When can you have it finished?" Ingrid asked.

"Oh, zee saddle eet is zee beeg job—a month, I think. You must bring me zee photograph of zee official insignia."

"A month it is," Rolf said. "Do you want some money now?"

"No—no money now—later—eef you like zee saddle. I guarantee zee work. Zat's how you say eet, no—*guarantee?*"

"Yes—perfect—that's how you say eet—*it*," Ingrid said.

Chapter 24

Tiny rivulets of water quickly dripped from the snow-covered branch of a pine tree near 333. The rivulets formed a tiny pool at the base of the tree, and that pool drained down the slope of the hill into a larger pool, and so forth, into larger and larger pools and streams, and finally, into cascading waterfalls that dumped their immense treasures into Lake Cristal far, far below, like a pirate might pour glittering diamonds into a huge chest.

Spring had arrived at long last. Birds that had flown all the way to South America for the winter, were returning to the Pondanus Mountains, bringing their songs and the promise of new life.

333 rolled onto her back and kicked her hind feet up in the air. Her belly was full of wild goat meat from a mountain goat her mother had recently killed and had dragged back to the large cave where they were living in the highest part of the Pondanus Mountains. No deer, elk, or even a rabbit survived that high up, only hardy mountain goats, very few of them.

She had observed from afar the intrusion by upright creatures coming from the sky and all the excitement they had created around her old cave site. It had unnerved her. She had watched it all from the cave they had last been living in, across the deep canyon from their first cave, and it had made her decide

to move even higher into the mountains. The upright creatures were coming too close, but she felt safe in the large cave, where she, her mother, and a male cougar that had taken up with her mother were now living.

She rolled luxuriously in the cave opening, but was not content; the, mature, cougar side of her felt a need she had never experienced before. As with all animal life forms, spring brought with it the need to mate. Her human side was still young and innocent, but her cougar side was full of wild yearnings. The male cougar had sniffed her a couple of times. Half of her wanted to accept his advances, her other half didn't.

The new need was frustrating, maddening. It somehow exacerbated her hatred for the upright creatures. If she had been completely human, she would have understood why the upright creatures were to blame for her condition, but as it was, it only radically increased her cougar-side desire to *kill* them—to *eat* them—more so than ever before.

Chapter 25

The constable sat with his official, shiny, black leather boots comfortably propped up on the cedar veranda railing in front of him, near his wooden cane and high-powered rifle that were leaning against it. His official, light gray felt hat rested on the hardwood floor near the rocking chair he was sitting in. The silver constable insignia on the front of his hat glinted in the gray early morning light. He was wearing his official constable uniform: dark gray jacket; heavy weave light gray pants.

Streaks of soft gray clouds graced the western horizon, like strands of cotton candy.

It was the first time he had had all to himself since his trying ordeal with the cougar-human, the avalanche, his hectic convalescence—and it was *spring*.

He was feeling much better. Love was in the air, snow was melting. Things were turning green. Tiny spring flowers were beginning to dot the landscape.

Best of all, the cougar-human had not shown itself for a long, long, time.

He knew that Scott Tamerlane, the artist, was probably already out somewhere, sketching and painting. Scott had only been in Bear Skin a year: not long enough to understand the dangers of the primitive Pondanus Mountains, the constable thought.

The constable liked the young man, hoped he didn't get cross-wise with a bear or other big, wild animal during his searches for natural beauty.

The constable wondered what Wanda was doing. He'd become very attached to her, a wonderful lady.

He knew Rolf and Ingrid were hitting it off and that her mother, Gertrude, had an Old World temperament and wanted their courtship—if it had to be at all—to be conducted in the Old World tradition—no sex until after marriage.

The constable's mind drifted back to when his father was still living. He wondered how his father would have handled the cougar-human situation, probably would have died in the pursuit, the constable concluded.

It was unbelievable that such a thing as the cougar-human could exist. Sometimes he woke in the middle of the night thinking it was just a nightmare, then the next morning, knew it clearly wasn't.

How could such a thing be so violent, yet so gentle at the same time? What was going through its mind? What caused it to act the way it did? If it were just a six-year-old cougar, it would be mature—act completely different. For one thing, it wouldn't attack humans unless it was starving or sick. If it were a six-year old human baby, it would still need its mother. What a horrible experience it must be, if indeed it was a six-year-old human child—somehow trapped in a cougar's body. It would have to eat raw meat for one thing. That would be repulsive for a human child to do, and it would have to catch it, for another. But why, when it killed, and it didn't always kill, not Willy

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Chambers at least, but when it did, why did it apparently amuse itself by eating away the face and making slashes with its claws and teeth in such a bizarre way? And for God's sake, why did it always eat their brain? Then there was its dancing, like a little child. The self-control it must have had to exert upon itself to keep from devouring little Willy Chambers, or was there something to that very fact? The fact that Willy Chambers was a human child of about the same age as the cougar-human?

A wise man once said there was nothing in the universe that couldn't be understood, if by nothing else, by the universe itself, but the cougar-human's fantastic characteristics taxed all of the constable's logic—even his imagination.

His musing was short lived. He heard noises, fully opened his eyes, saw a sign bobbing towards him that read 'APPLY HERE—NEW CONSTABLE NEEDED!'

Soon, a group of protesters and news people had gathered out in front of the veranda.

The spokesman for the protesters, obviously cold, was swathed in a colorful Mexican poncho draped over his heavy navy blue jacket. He walked near to the railing, noticed the constable's rifle laying up against it. "What's *happening* man?" he asked, in a tone like he didn't expect a reply.

The constable just nodded.

"How are you feeling?" a newswoman asked.

The gathered assemblage flinched as the constable reached down, picked up his hat, slowly put it on. "I got lucky. The doctor says I'll be fully recovered in a few more weeks," he said, slowly.

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"What are you doing about finding the *cougar*-thing?" the spokesman asked.

The constable looked at the spokesman from under the brim of his hat. "As I'm sure you've all heard, Sheriff *Atridge* and his deputies parachuted down to the area where I encountered the cougar-human. It had either moved, or the avalanche that the sheriff caused by firing his pistol sealed it in its cave forever. There have been no new reports of seeing it for months now."

"Maybe it left the area where it was," a newsman commented. "Have you notified the proper authorities—just in case it's still out there somewhere? Maybe it'll start attacking folks in *Prescott* next!"

"The Governor is fully aware of the situation. I'm sure he'll take the necessary steps to find it—if it's still out there—while I'm recovering."

"I heard that you think the cougar-human is more *human* than *cougar*," a newswoman said. "Do you really think that?"

"It has exhibited human characteristics."

"Like what?" a newsman asked.

"Like its eyes."

"You saw its *eyes*?" the spokesman asked.

"The pupils in its eyes were like *human* pupils—round," the constable continued. "It was daytime—a regular cougar's pupils would have been *slits* in that much light—and its nose—"

"You saw its *nose*?" a newsman interrupted.

"It was snowing hard—a *blizzard* actually—but what I saw of its nose looked more *human* than *cougar*. I guess it's

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what you'd call a *pug* nose. There was another witness who saw the cougar-human from closer range than I did. The witness described its face. He described it the same way *I* just did."

"Who is the *witness*?" a newswoman asked, ready to make a note in the notebook she was holding.

"I won't reveal the name of the witness. If the witness wants to meet with you folks—I'm sure the witness knows where to *find* you."

Someone chuckled.

"Another human characteristic is its *footprints*," the constable continued. "They look like human footprints, except that the toes are *pointed*."

A camera flashed.

"And another interesting thing—it *dances*," the constable said.

"*Dances*?" the spokesman asked, amazed.

"Yes. We have photographic evidence that it danced with the little Chambers boy."

"Before it *killed* him?" a reporter asked.

That question got the constable up off his chair; grabbed his cane, stood up. The crowd retreated a step. "If you newspaper folks would read your own goddamn *newspapers*," he began loudly, "you'd know that we haven't held a *funeral* for any five-year-old *kids* lately! You folks need to get your *stories* straight—*before* you report them. That nonsense about the cougar-human attacking the Chambers boy has gone all the way to *China*—but the boy was never *attacked*! I don't know *why* he wasn't attacked—but the fact is—he *wasn't*! The reason he was-

n't—might be—and I emphasize *might* be—that the cougar-human is more *human* than *cougar*. That's where I got that idea. Not only wasn't little Willy Chambers attacked—but also little Willy actually *liked* the cougar-human! He called it 'nice *kitty*' after it had gone away."

"Are you planning to take up the search for the cougar-human after you're completely well?" a female reporter asked.

"I'll keep in touch with the Governor. If the cougar-human makes itself known again—I'll go *after* it—whether the doctor releases me first—or *not*!"

"You mentioned *China*—so you're aware of the international interest this thing has caused!" a reporter said.

"Yes. I can understand why there's international interest. There's an animal-human of some kind in our midst that has obviously never been on this planet before. Exactly what *is* it? Where did it *come* from? Why does it *act* the way it does? Are there *more* of them? Are they only in the United States? Yes. Thanks to the Governor, we have satellite TV in my office. I do know about the international interest."

"From what you've said—I take it you've completely ruled out the thing being an *extraterrestrial*," a newswoman said.

"I'd say that's a safe bet," the constable superficially drawled. "Although I have no proof—just a gut feeling—I know it exhibits *human* characteristics, that's why I say that. Who knows—maybe somewhere out there in space there's a planet *populated* with these things? But I'd guess it's more likely some accident of nature right here on *earth*."

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"Do you mean you think a cougar *female* mated with a human *male*?" a newswoman asked.

"I was thinking more along the lines of a *mutation*, ma'am," the constable answered.

"Is the young man still under *quarantine*?" a reporter asked.

"Yes."

The constable reached for his rifle. The crowd recoiled.

"Oh, don't *worry*—I'm not going to *shoot* you—it's time for my *leg* massage—I've got to go in now."

Chapter 26

Scott Tamerlane opened the soft, black leather saddlebag that hung over one side of the rear fender of his shiny, burgundy motorcycle, removed his easel and the cloth sack containing his tubes of paints, brushes and assorted art tools.

He carried his equipment out onto a stone promontory that overlooked spectacular Lake Cristal. He could hear waves gently lapping the rocks below.

He looked out over the beautiful lake and along its tantalizing shoreline for quite some time, until he had framed the section of scenery in his mind he felt to be the most desirable to sketch; set up his portable easel with that orientation in mind. He erected his portable aluminum-tube seat, put on his long, white artist's smock that had smears of color here and there on the front from past ventures, sat down, found a charcoal pencil, taped a sheet of heavy paper to his art board; began sketching a composition.

Several miles away, along the same lakeshore, on a huge rock that jutted out over the lake, 333 lay on her stomach watching for edible wild game. She hadn't eaten for quite some time and was feeling hunger pangs. She had been watching a porcupine amble along the lakeshore near the waterfront, but, even as hungry as

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she was, she hesitated to chance being stuck in her sensitive nose with its sharp needles. She would wait.

Scott carefully sketched in each curve and twist of the mountainous horizon that jutted up behind the magnificent lake. Then he began the tedious task of shading in the ridges and ravines. He casually worked his pencil back and forth and laid in a few clouds and a couple of distant flying birds.

As 333 lay waiting for a more edible animal than the porcupine to come along, the warmth of the sun felt comforting on her head and body and she laid her head on her paws and partially closed her large, brown eyes. When a bird would chirp, or a squirrel would sound off, she would open her eyes a little, perk up her ears, then, realizing what it was, would lower them again, almost close her eyes, almost dream. She was so comfortable—she began to purr like a kitten.

Scott eyed a nearby mountain and, eying it near its top, sketched in trees all the way down to the lakeshore. Then he made some vertical strokes with his pencil along the shoreline to simulate cattails growing along the bank. Finally, he sketched in two nearby spruce trees to give his composition depth.

That was the end of the sketching part, color was to be added next, but first he would take a break, stretch a bit, he decided.

He got up, stretched, walked out to the edge of the stone promontory, began admiring the scenery, saw a couple of birds

that had taken flight, began watching a far distant moose meandering along the lakeshore.

333 was so contented that her mind slipped into the state of between being fully awake and being completely asleep. Then she began having very disturbing visions: flashes of white, upright walking creatures *taunting*—teasing her—terribly confining space—cries of strange, living things.

A crow landed a few feet away from her. It began its *caw—caw—caw*. 333 opened her eyes a little, saw what was causing the racket, started to drift back into her nightmarish world. But as she almost closed her eyes again, something *white* caught her attention. In her dreamy state, it blended with her horrible visions—she saw a terrible, *white*, upright walking creature taunting her—teasing her. She hated it immediately—she felt the urge to viciously kill it—to gleefully slash it one way, slice it another—to dance around it, joyfully gash it again and again—then to tear through the layer of thick bone with her fangs and claws, eat out that tender part—the part she had been taught by *white*, upright creatures, to enjoy.

A fly landed on her nose. She swatted it away with her paw. That brought her to full awareness of her surroundings. She still saw the *whiteness*, realized it really *was* a white, upright creature in the distance, jumped to her feet—instantly began *running* in its direction.

Fully revitalized, Scott casually walked back to his easel, sat down on his little seat, spread open his paint sack. He selected a

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tube of cobalt blue, squeezed some of it into a dip on his mixing cup, got out a tube of titanium white, squeezed some into another dip, found his bottle of water, poured his metal, brush-dipping container half full, found a suitable flat pig-bristle brush and was ready to paint in the sky.

333 dashed down to the lakeshore, from where she had been laying on the huge rock. She ran fully upright, on her hind legs, for a while, but soon learned she could travel faster on all fours.

She ran along the lakeshore for quite some time, cut inland a ways and began darting between the small boulders and shrubs.

Scott mixed his blue and white into various shades on his palette and then painted the sky and clouds. Next, he mixed Paynes grey, white and raw umber; carefully painted in the distant mountains; then the lake water, with blues, grays, greens and white; then the foreground trees; got out his lemon yellow and yellow ochre, lightened the foreground, then the middle ground of his composition. Finally, with strokes of light yellow, represented the glints of the sun.

His composition was finished, but he would have to let the sun dry it before he could stow it in his bag. It was a water-color rendering. He would create an oil painting from it when he got back to Bear Skin.

He cleaned his brushes, paints, some of his equipment, put them into his motorcycle bag, took a deep breath, walked

back out onto the stone promontory in his white artist smock to admire the wonders of nature.

333's mouth was salivating. Running was making her hungrier by the minute and it had put her into a *violent* rage.

Openings between shrubs and rocks led her back out onto the lakeshore—from where she clearly saw Scott in the distance, as a very *edible*, *white*, upright creature. She ran faster.

After a few minutes Scott walked back to his composition; scrutinized it from close up. Most of it was dry, but he decided it needed a few more minutes, so he walked back out onto the promontory.

333 could almost taste the white, upright creature, as she lengthened her stride towards it.

Scott walked back to his painting, examined it; decided it was dry, covered it with paper to protect it, slipped it into his motorcycle bag, stowed his easel and portable seat, climbed on his motorcycle, tried to start it—couldn't get it started.

333 bounded up the lake side of the stone promontory, saw Scott—headed for him.

Scott didn't see her. He tried the starter again. It caught hold. He casually put his motorcycle in gear, took off down the dirt road, back towards the village—then, in the rear-view mirror, he

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was shocked to see the cougar-human—*chasing* him! He panicked. He increased his accelerator control as far as it would go. That gave him more speed, but he saw that the cougar-human was still gaining on him. He broke out in a cold sweat, instantly recalled what it had done to the others, saw its sharp fangs coming up behind him, visualized his flesh being torn—and *blood*—his! He felt his motorcycle jerk as if it had been struck from behind.

Then—he felt exultant *relief* as he saw in the mirror that the cougar-human was dropping back.

The long run had taken its toll on 333. She was winded. She stopped her pursuit, watched the white, upright creature escape her ready claws, fangs, hungry stomach.

Scott Tamerlane was still a nervous wreck when he pulled up in front of the café. He quickly parked his motorcycle, shot through the door. "That damned *cougar*-human—it almost *got* me!" he cried.

The coroner was sitting at the counter. "Come here—sit down," he said. "What *happened*?"

Scott hastily sat down on a stool at the counter next to the coroner.

"I need a *drink*!" Scott cried. "It almost *had* me!"

"Wanda—do you still have that bottle of Scotch that shoe salesman left here the other day?" the coroner asked.

"Yeah—I'll get it."

"So—calm *down*—tell me what *happened*," the coroner said.

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"It was a sunny day—so I went to the lake to sketch—and I did," Scott said, almost overcome by emotion.

Wanda poured a water glass half full of Scotch and handed it to him. He eagerly took a gulp, coughed.

"You were *sketching*—*then* what happened?" the coroner asked.

"I had just finished—I put my stuff back on my motorcycle. I finally got it started—I took off—and I saw that damned thing in my rear view mirror—*chasing* me—I felt something hit my motorcycle—I thought I was a *goner*—I thought it *had* me!"

"You're sure it was the *cougar*-human?" the coroner asked.

"Oh *yes*—it was *it* all right—I saw it plainly in the mirror—but, the funny thing is—if I hadn't been so *scared*—I think it would have looked *attractive*!"

"Attractive?" Wanda asked, astonished.

"Yes. It had big—brown—eyes—big pupils—and it's nose was like the pug nose of a—*girl*!" He took another gulp of Scotch.

"Where's your *motorcycle*?" the coroner asked.

"Out front."

"Mind if I take a look at it?"

"I'll show you," he said, taking another gulp of whiskey.

The three went out to the motorcycle.

"You said you felt something hit the *back* of it?" the coroner asked.

"Yeah."

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The coroner went to the rear of the motorcycle. "*Well—*would you look at *this!*"

Scott and Wanda went to see what the coroner was looking at.

"My *God*—look at those *claw* marks—*four* of them—all the way down to *metal!* They took the *paint* off!" Wanda cried.

The coroner saw that Scott was about to faint. He grabbed him and shored him up, then helped him back into the café, sat him down. "Are you all *right?*"

"Yeah—I'm okay, now."

Wanda poured him more whiskey. He drank it down.

"Well—we know the cougar-thing is still in *business*. It obviously wasn't in the cave Atridge's avalanche covered over," the coroner said.

"Unless there are *two* cougar-humans!" Wanda suggested.

"Now, cut that *out!* No more of that kind of talk!" the coroner admonished, not seriously. "Next, you'll have me thinking a bunch of *aliens* have landed."

"Whatever it is—promise me *one* thing, you two!" Wanda said, emphatically.

"What's that?" Scott asked.

"That you *won't* tell *Alexander* about it!"

"*Alexander*, is it now?" the coroner joked. "But—yeah—seriously—you're right. Herr Mizzen would take off after it—*before* Doc Quincy says he's fully recovered," the coroner agreed.

Chapter 27

The afternoon sunlight coming through the shades in Patrick O'Finn's barbershop was shining in the constable's eyes.

"Would you mind closing the *blinds* a little?" the constable asked.

"By gory, I'd be right *glad* to," Patrick O'Finn said. He stopped cutting the constable's hair a moment, adjusted the blinds, began clipping away again with his scissors. "Tip your head *forward* just a bit."

The constable complied.

"That was a cloos call aboot the Bubonic *Plague*," the barber said, with a slight Irish accent.

"Yes. Doctor Quincy had me going for a while. It would have been a *disaster* if that young man had really *had* the plague," the constable said.

"You would have had to quarantine the whole *village*. Speaking of quarantine—have you read the mornings paper, Constable Mizzen?"

"No."

"It says Doctor Quincy knew all along that Raymond Stillwell didn't really *have* the plague," Patrick O'Finn said, running a comb through the constable's hair to remove some loose hair he had just cut.

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"Was that in the *Etherington Tribune*?"

"Yes, this mornin' s paper."

"What cockamamie reason did that bunch of *Tribune* idiots give *this* time?"

"They said there's a '*click*' in Bear Skin that aims to make a killin' off the tourists. They say the Thorndike Bed and Breakfast and the cougar-human stories are part of a *scam* to rip off tourists and curiosity seekers, and that Doctor Quincy has a part in it."

"Do you think he has a part in it?" the constable asked.

"From what I hear, he doesn't. He's quite wealthy, you know. So far, the rumors say Mayor Thorndike—and the corner from Prescott—Herr *Öffner* I think his name is—German names are hard for me to pronounce—and *you*, Constable Mizzen, are *investors* in it."

"Well, I can tell you one thing—the Doctor didn't *fake* the plague to get publicity for Bear Skin, or for any *other* reason. In the first place, Doctor Quincy is an honorable man. He would never do anything *like* that. In the second place, *plague* publicity would keep everybody who *wasn't* quarantined—the hell *out* of Bear Skin—not *into* it. The Thorndike Bed and Breakfast would go flat *broke* over night. Those news morons can never get their facts straight. That's why we've filed *lawsuits* against the *Etherington Tribune*."

"Who filed the *lawsuits*?" the barber asked, sharpening his razor.

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"The coroner filed them on behalf of the mayor, myself, my assistant, Rolf Arbeiter—you know Rolf—and the citizens of Bear Skin."

"What are they about?" the barber asked, soaping the constable's neck with a barber brush.

"One suit is for libel, the another's for slander against the *Etherington Tribune* for damages as a result of their false *news* reporting about the cougar-human. They're giving us all a bad *name*—because they're *idiots*."

"You mentioned Rolf."

"What *about* him?"

"The newspaper says he *faked* some photos of tracks that look like a six-year-old child would make. Somethin' about dancin' in the snow?"

The constable's face turned crimson. He threw off the barber apron that had been keeping hair cuttings off his chest. "Where's that goddamned *newspaper*?"

"Kindly sit back down, Constable Mizzen—I didn't mean to get you *upset*—I'll *get* it for you," the barber quickly interjected, hurriedly grabbed up a copy of the *Tribune* from the little table in the waiting area, quickly handed it to the constable, fastened the apron back around his neck; began working on his hair again.

The constable read the headline. 'BREUGER SCENE PHOTOS FAKED', and then he began to read aloud the first article under it. "Constable Mizzen of Bear Skin is at it again. This time he has also implicated his assistant, Rolf Arbeiter, who supposedly took photographs of the so-called cougar-human's

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tracks in the snow—and get this—the word on the street is that the so-called tracks show that the cougar-human was *dancing* with the little Chambers boy. One thing we can say for the constable—he has a great imagination—*dancing* indeed! He will say anything to get more money coming in for the Thorndike Bed & Breakfast scam. Rumor has it the constable is one of the investors. The folks of Bear Skin are clever, you have to give them that. First they come up with this cougar-thing to cover up Wilhelm Streiker's murder, and then have nerve enough to use the same excuse again to cover up the Clyde Breuger murder. Who is the *real* murderer? Why the cover-up? Well, folks, the stories about the cougar-thing are getting international coverage. Who makes money from all the publicity? Our pipeline has it that the constable, the mayor of Bear Skin, and the Prescott coroner do—and that's not all. Their latest story is about a young man who was *quarantined* with the—get this—Bubonic *Plague*. How much farther will they go to deceive the public...?"

The constable chucked the newspaper onto the floor. "Their *Pipeline*? More like news rat *garbage* collectors!"

"So, maybe the *Tribune* got *some*thin' right. You *have* invested in Mayor Thorndike's Bed and Breakfast, right?" the barber asked.

"Yes, the coroner and I have invested in it—and between you and me—it's making money hand over fist. Of course, the permanent building for it is yet to be put up, but the mayor's idea of bringing in mobile homes in the meantime was brilliant."

"You don't think an old leprechaun, like meself for example, could get a little o' that pot o' gold, do ya?"

"As a matter of fact, the mayor was saying the other day he was looking for new investors. I'll tell him you're interested. What would you do with a lot of money, Pat?"

"I'd buy me a castle in Ireland. I'd stock it with the prettiest lasses I could find. I'd have one—make that two—rooms filled to the ceiling with Irish *whiskey*. I'd go wild boar huntin'—ridin' on a mule. I'd live like a *king*!"

"Wild boar hunting—riding on a *mule*?"

"That makes it more sportin'—gives the boar a chance to maybe knock ya off the mule and gore ya a little, before ya shoot 'im."

"Hmm. What kind of a gun do you use to hunt wild boar?"

"Ya use a shotgun—with lead shot as big as yer eyeball."

"Come on, Pat—a shotgun's *barrel* isn't even *that* big."

"Well, maybe as big as the pupil in yer eye. If ya get a chance—ya might try a shotgun full o' buckshot on that cougar-human-thing," the barber suggested, wiping barber soap off the constable's neck with a white towel.

"Nobody has seen the cougar-human for months."

"When does the doc say you'll be fully recovered?"

"In a few more weeks—but if anybody spots it—I'll go out after it, regardless of what the doctor says. I've got to prevent any more killings."

"Even if *you* get killed tryin'?"

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"Even if I get killed trying. I'm the constable. It's my job. But to tell you the truth, Pat—I think the cougar-human has gone somewhere else."

Patrick O'Finn ran a comb through the constable's hair. He recalled the rumor he'd heard in the Moose Head Bar. The rumor had it that someone had recently seen the cougar-human, had almost gotten killed by it, but that nobody was to tell the constable, until the doctor said he had fully recovered.

"Mum's the word," Patrick O'Finn mumbled under his breath.

"What did you say?"

"Oh, nothin'—that'll be ten dollars," the barber said, as he removed the barber apron, brushed away the loose hair from the constable's shoulders.

The constable gave him a ten-dollar bill; and two silver half dollars as a tip.

The constable got his hat from the rack, put it on.

"Don't forget to tell Mayor Thorndike that I'm interested in investin' in the Thorndike Bed and Breakfast."

"I'll *tell* him," the constable said.

He pushed the barbershop door open, stepped out into the warm, balmy afternoon.

Chapter 28

Rolf, Ingrid, and Gertrude watched the 6:45 come around the bend. They heard its horns sound again and again, like trumpets heralding the arrival of a king. The throbbing of its powerful diesel engine became louder and louder. Shortly, it sat in front of the Bear Skin train platform like a huge caterpillar grumbling to itself.

Rolf picked up Gertrude's suitcase. They started for the train gate. When they reached it, Gertrude took her suitcase from him, sat it down beside her feet; gave Ingrid a fierce hug. "Be a *good* girl!" Gertrude cried, tears in her eyes. "Be a *good* girl!"

Gertrude straightened her gray scarf out over her tan fabric hat, tied the ends under her chin, opened the heavy, brown leather purse that hung from a shoulder strap over her black topcoat, got out a powder box, opened it, powdered her nose with the puff.

"Don't worry about *me*—I'll be fine—enjoy your holiday with Aunt Bee in Chicago," Ingrid said. "Have fun!"

"Ow can I 'ave *fun*—Bee's *sick*—otherwise I wouldn't spend the precious money ta go see 'er."

"How long will you *be* there?" Rolf asked.

Gertrude darted a glance at him, didn't answer.

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"Mama's going to be in Chicago two weeks—oh, I almost forgot," Ingrid cried, handing her mother a small box wrapped in decorative paper. "Here's something for Aunt Bee."

"What *is* it?" Gertrude asked.

"It's a box of crocheted doilies."

"So, that's what ya've been makin'," Gertrude cried, wiping away a tear with her hanky.

"Yes, mama."

"I thought ya might be makin'—never mind—you're such a *good* girl."

The conductor called, "All *aboard*—!"

A porter took Gertrude's suitcase onto the train.

Rolf and Ingrid held hands, watched Gertrude get settled in a window seat, waved to her. She tearfully waved back. The mighty diesel engine revved. The train slowly pulled away from the platform.

As soon as it had faded into the distance, Rolf and Ingrid jumped up and down, crazily embraced like a couple of excited high school kids.

Rolf took Ingrid's soft, golden face into his hands, kissed her a long time.

"Did I hear you say your mother was going to be gone two *weeks*?"

Ingrid's face flushed. "That's what I said—two marvelous *weeks*! We'll have two whole *weeks* together—*alone*! Nobody to *bother* us! Nobody to *spy* on us!" She gave him a quick kiss on the nose.

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He saw the happiness in her sparkling eyes. He took her hand. They began running up Beaver Street, barely saw the cars, busses, recreation vehicles and campers parked along the sides of the street, or the clusters of two-story buildings with steep roofs that lined it on either side, or the large, white weatherboard-enclosed windows that seemed to look out, as if watching the lovers run by.

When they reached the two-story building Ingrid and her mother lived in, Ingrid took a key from her jacket pocket, opened the front door; hurried inside.

Rolf wasted no time, hastened in behind her, closed the door; grabbed her, kissed her. Their warm, moist tongues intertwined. She quickly began peeling his clothes off. He hungrily stripped away her jacket, blouse—the rest. They embraced nude.

She tried to break away. "I have an idea," she said.

"Yes?" he mumbled between kisses.

"Let's go upstairs—take a *shower* together!"

"Yes!" he thought.

They hit the stairs running, were soon standing under warm water spray in the large, colorful, flower-tiled shower.

He found a bar of soap, lovingly caressed her well-formed, firm breasts, her back, her thighs as rivulets of warm water cascaded over her exquisite skin. She gracefully took the soap from him, gently washed his genitals, all over his body. He became sexually aroused.

Her eyes became glassy. She was intoxicated with passion, on the verge of orgasm.

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They let the spray wash away the soap, then he picked up her beautiful, naked, dripping body, carried her into her bedroom, kissing her all the while, tossed her onto the bed. Laughing, she bounced, took a position on her back, pulled her knees up, teasingly. Her damp, golden-blond hair spread over the pillow highlighting her beautiful, smooth face, crystal-clear blue eyes.

He gently parted her knees with his hands, wrapped his strong arms around her thighs; thrust his tongue into paradise.

They awoke, were lying on the bed quietly looking at the plaster ceiling.

"What happened to your father?" Rolf asked.

Ingrid's mind was still floating in amorous repose. "What?"

"Your father—what happened to him? Is he still alive?"

"Oh, my father was working for a large automobile parts-manufacturing company back East—Pittsburgh, I think. Mother met him at a dance. Anyway—soon after they were married, he ran off with another woman—one of the secretaries at the plant where he worked, mother said. Then mother came to Bear Skin and I was born here. She never saw him again. I grew up without a father. That's why mother is so possessive, and it's why I have so much fear of being rejected. *You* won't reject me—*will* you, Rolf?"

He took her hand. "I'll *never* reject you. I *love* you. I want to *marry* you. Will you marry me?"

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"Oh, Rolf—yes! *Yes!*" She rolled over, kissed him for a long time, then rolled back, looked up at the ceiling again. "I can't wait for Oktoberfest. We'll dance—and sing German songs. There'll be musicians from all over the country—and from *Germany*. It'll be *glorious* fun!"

"And the *procession*," Rolf said, giving her a peck on the cheek.

"Yes. We'll dress up in costumes and stand on a float and wave to everybody—and be in love *forever*."

"Yes, it'll be fun."

"Oh, not to change the subject from *love*—I *love, love*—but did you hear the rumor about the *cougar*-human?"

"No—what *about* it?"

"You know the artist?"

"Scott Tamerlane?"

"Uh huh. The rumor is he was sketching out by the lake. He'd just finished, and had gotten on his motorcycle, and had started to come back to Bear Skin when he looked in his rear-view mirror—and saw the *cougar*-human *chasing* him! Well—the rumor goes that everybody promised not to tell the *constable*. You of all people know how Constable Mizzen is—if somebody were to tell him before he's completely well—he'd go out *after* it, I'm sure."

Rolf sat straight up in the bed. "Now that I *do* know—I *have* to go *after* it—before it *kills* again!"

She instantly knew she shouldn't have told him. "*No!*"

"Yes—I *have* to," he insisted, putting his legs over the edge of the bed.

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"No—! I *know* how *brave* you are, honey—you don't have to prove anything to *me*!"

"It's not *that*! Now that I know it's still *out* there—I just *have* to go *do* it!"

Her brain thrashed about, thinking of a way to change his mind. "No you *don't*—don't you see, sweetheart—if you go *after* it—and *find* it—and *kill* it—the constable will learn that you knew it was still *out* there—and that you didn't *tell* him Scott Tamerlane had *seen* it! Herr Mizzen will *hate* you *forever*, because there's nothing more that he wants in the world than to go after that thing—*himself*! Don't you *see* that?"

Rolf thought a minute about what she'd said. He knew she was right; he couldn't betray the constable.

She gently wrapped her loving arms around his neck, pulled him back down on the bed—climbed on top of him.

Chapter 29

It was a pleasant afternoon. The usual customers were sitting around in the Moose Head Bar; most were having a beer, playing cards.

Sally was perched on a barstool. She'd been working on a middle-aged potential customer, but he'd decided not to take advantage of her charms; had gotten up and left.

An old drunk called Bull sat at a table in the corner of the poolroom. His bright-red floppy hat was torn and dirty in places from his being tossed out on his ear from time to time. His gray beard was streaked with brown tobacco juice stains. His skin was dark brown and leathery from spending a lot of time outside. No one knew where he got his money to stay drunk most of the time. Some suspected he had found a gold mine.

He took another drink of whiskey, almost passed out, but was still just able to watch the pool game through blurry eyes. "Get him, Pierre," he mumbled.

Pierre Corbèt, the leather craftsman, was playing pool with a guy called Fred. Pierre was so short he had to stand on a wooden box to shoot.

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"Okay! Okay—monsieur!" Pierre said, to Fred. "So you sunk zee *eight* ball. Where I came from—zat is no big deal, as zee Americans say—I challenge you to another game!"

"If you weren't so short—since I won *that* game—you'd have to rack the balls. It's customary for the loser to rack the balls, you know!" Fred said, beginning to rack them with the wooden triangle.

"Ah—but I *am* short! That's why I weel keel zee *cou-gar*-human zing!"

There was laughter.

"*You?*" Fred asked.

"*Oui!* I can get under eets belly. I'll flip eet upside down. I'll *pounce* on eet—*trounce* on eet—*slap* eet around—and then *keel* eet!"

There was more laughter.

"So—where *did* you come from?" Sally asked.

Fred smashed the tip of his stick into the racked balls. They violently scattered out across the new pool table. A few dropped into holes.

Pierre watched Fred sink one after another, then finally miss. Pierre moved his wooden box around the table to an advantageous position, confidently stepped up onto it. "I came from zee place een France—where zee knights een shining armor ride down out of zee hazy, blue mountains and slay zee *dragons*—just for fun," he said, taking careful aim. He knocked a ball into a side pocket.

"And I suppose these knights save *ladies* in *distress*," Sally said.

More laughter.

"*Oui*, mademoiselle," Pierre said, pushing his box around the table a ways with his foot. He climbed back up on it, aimed his stick; was about to take another shot—when—suddenly, all of the billiard balls ran to one side of the pool table—crashed *into* each other!

Sally screamed.

Bottles of liquor and glasses violently rattled together, some fell off shelves behind the bar, smashed onto the floor. The huge mirror behind the bar cracked. The bartender leaped the bar to get away from breaking glass. The new brass lamps he'd recently hung up over the new pool table swung wildly on their chains from the heavy wooden beams.

Pierre's wooden box was jolted out from under him. He hit the floor with a thud.

The lights went out. It instantly became pitch black.

The church's bells were ringing crazily.

"*Earthquake—!* We're all going to *die—!*" someone yelled.

Pierre leaped to his feet, began jumping up and down in the dark. "*Outside—everybody—get outside—!* Zee roof she might come down—!" he cried. No one could see he was excitedly flailing his fists.

People began running for the door, knocking over beer bottles, tripping over furniture, each other.

Before Pierre could get outside, the trembling abruptly stopped. Sally grabbed his arm; they scrambled on out the door together.

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There was pandemonium out on Beaver Street. Children were running around screaming for their parents, dogs barking. Chickens, which the earthquake had freed from captivity, were darting about, clucking wildly. Tourists, news people and protesters alike were scurrying about.

Pierre saw the constable out in front of his office stolidly leaning on his cane, like a portrait of Moses. Pierre grabbed Sally's hand, led her in the constable's direction.

Someone brought the constable a bullhorn.

"Okay—calm *down* everybody!" the constable boomed. His voice, greatly amplified by the bullhorn, made him sound like a giant. "The *worst* of it is probably *over*! Is anybody *hurt*?"

No one said they were.

An aftershock shook the ground. Children screamed until it stopped.

"*Don't worry, it isn't a bad quake!*" the constable blared through the bullhorn. "We're going to be all *right*!"

Pierre thought a moment, politely excused himself, dropped Sally's hand, disappeared into the nearby two-story mom and pop grocery store.

Just down the street from the constable, Ingrid's bed had rocked.

She had thought it was because of their lovemaking.

"Oh—oh—*oh*—you're *wonderful*!" she cried, clutching Rolf's neck.

The bartender stood out in front of the Moose Head Bar in his white apron, hands on his stout hips. "I'm *ruined*!" he cried.

The constable saw his dilemma, caned his way to him. "I'll get the Governor to come out here and take a look," the constable said. "I'm sure he'll declare Bear Skin eligible for state emergency funds. I'll see what I can do about getting you enough money to fix the Moose Head back up."

"Thanks Herr Mizzen—I never thought of that—I'm going to be *okay*!" the barkeep cried, with obvious relief.

"Have you been *inside* since the quake?"

"No—but it's black as a coalminer's ass in there—we'll need a *lantern*," the barkeep said.

"I'm sure Rolf would get one, but he hasn't been around lately. I wonder what he's been up to," the constable asked, mostly to himself.

Just then Pierre came running across the street, frantically waving a flashlight. His short legs seemed to be traveling faster than he was. He ran up to the constable. "Herr *Mizzen*—my favorite *hero—honorable* constable, monsieur—I haven't seen *Bull*. I don't know if he got out *alive*—can we go take zee look inside?"

"Yes, Pierre, let's look inside," the constable agreed.

The door to the Moose Head Bar was standing open. Pierre flashed his light around inside. It was in shambles. Light reflected off of pieces of broken mirror that still hung on the wall behind the bar. Then Pierre directed the beam around the pool-room. He saw something move in the corner, kept the light pointing in that direction.

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It was *Bull*, still in the same place he'd been before the quake. Bull raised his head up off his cocktail table, looked into the light. "I'm glad you showed up, constable—the service here is terrible! Maybe you can do something," he mumbled.

Far away, in front of a large cave entrance, high up on the side of a rugged, snow-crowned mountain, the quake had excited 333. She'd begun dancing on her hind legs.

Her mother and her mother's male cougar mate were leisurely stretched out in the cave entrance, curiously watching her dance.

Chapter 30

In his private office, Professor Tyrone Kervello sat in his lavish, electronic marvel of a chair, like a wealthy king; feet resting on a footstool handcrafted in Africa covered with outrageously expensive, rare African forest buffalo hide.

His private office, one of many offices in his Kervello Building in Etherington, covered the entire top floor of the twelve-story building, like a Vegas penthouse.

Five of the building's twelve stories were underground.

The huge, curved, plate glass windows in the professor's office provided a splendid, panoramic, picture postcard view of the Etherington River Bridge, most of the city of Etherington—population nearly half a million; the university campus; and part of magnificent Lake Cristal.

All of the doorknobs and metal fixtures in the professor's office were gold-plated. The furnishings were of the latest modern design, selected and artfully arranged by a world-famous Italian interior decorator.

The entire office was an electronic wonder; even the windows could be tinted by voice command. Animal-skin carpets covered the entire floor—not *ordinary* animal-skin carpets. They were carpets made from skins of animals that were so rare

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that not even the Creator of the Universe had intentionally created them.

Professor Kervello was watching his ten-foot-wide, high definition, plasma TV. "*Camera seven!*" he called out, in a commanding voice.

The computerized electronic communications system instantly switched the view on the TV to what was happening in front of camera seven, located on one of the below-ground floors of the building—in one of many of the professor's underground laboratories.

The TV began showing images of a cage containing a bear-hog. The professor marveled to himself as he observed his handiwork. He'd personally performed the highly difficult techniques required to combine genes from a male grisly bear and a large, healthy sow hog. He was proud of the result—a ferocious bear-hog, a monster of the first order, its brain so deranged that it defied psychiatric description. He watched the TV image with sadistic pleasure as the bear-hog violently rammed its head into the bars of its cage. It had the dubious qualities one might expect from such a combination of genes—vicious, powerful and crazy.

The professor got up, walked to a window, his tall, thin, well-dressed frame weakly reflecting in the glass. He stroked his thin brown mustache as he looked out over the city.

When his dark, beady eyes eventually panned over to the university campus, he began thinking of the old days when he'd been a professor of genetic engineering, had taught there. Those

had been *poverty*-stricken days by comparison to the way he was living now, he thought, then he turned, walked back to his chair and sat down.

"*News!*" he commanded in a booming voice. The TV responded, switched to the news. He watched a few moments, then something caught his attention. "*Record digital!*" he commanded. The TV instantly began digitally recording the news program, adding it to news programs he had previously watched, recorded.

"Doctor Rossiter—come *in* here!" he demanded. The computerized electronic communication system instantly transmitted his message to Doctor Rossiter's office.

"*Coming*, Professor Kervello," a female voice responded over the system speakers.

Soon, Doctor Rossiter, a beautiful, pale-faced female with flaming red hair, wearing a Parisian-fashioned, navy blue business suit, strode into his office, a black leather case in her hand. Her appealing blue eyes looked blue-gray in the reflected light. She was tall, slender, well proportioned, a knockout. "Yes, Professor Kervello?"

"*Secure room!*" he commanded of the computer, then impatiently tapped on the arms of his chair with his fingers, eyes glued to the TV. "Sit down—*quickly*—*watch* this!" he said, in a rapid, staccato voice.

She immediately slipped into the nearby chair.

A TV news anchor was showing some of the photos Rolf had taken of 333's tracks in the snow while she had been dancing with the Chambers boy.

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"Look carefully—! What do you make of those *tracks*?" Professor Kervello asked, crisply.

For a second, Doctor Rossiter studied the photo being displayed on the TV, then cried, "It's 333—!"

"Yes," the professor said, "that's where she's ended *up*—in that little hick village of *Bear Skin*." He turned his head, looked at Rossiter. "We won't tell *anyone* that we know anything *about* her—do you *hear* me? Not *anybody*—!"

"I told you she'd show up somewhere. When the chimp turned her loose—I said you should tell the *authorities* about her. You knew she was dangerous. I said—go to the police and tell them about her! Isn't that exactly what I *said*?"

"Yes—for Christ's sake—that's what you *said*—but the reason I kept quiet—is the same reason *we* have *now* for keeping quiet. If we tell the authorities—we *both* go to *jail*!"

"Whether we tell or not—she'll kill *again*—more innocent *men* will die," she countered. "333's angry—very, very angry at *adult* men—because of the way the *associates* treated her in the lab cage down below; she has a *right* to be angry. If they hadn't abused her, it's my professional opinion she wouldn't have killed *anybody*. I think she'd had eating habits just like a *regular* cougar—she would *never* have attacked a human—unless, like a regular cougar, she couldn't find another edible *animal* to prey on. Look! They're showing photographs of the mutilated bodies of her victims—she *mutilated* them because of her pent-up *rage*—her terrible rage at those *imbeciles*—yes, I'll say the G word—those *goddamned* associates in the *basement*!"

"She wasn't treated differently from any of the *others*."

"Oh, I think she *was*," Doctor Rossiter countered. "She's the only *hybrid* you've created with *human* genes. From a psychiatric point of view, it was a potential *disaster* to treat her the way the associates did—after all, she was—is—part *human*. That fact never has sunk into your brain. You think that because she's part *you*—that you *own* her somehow—you thought you could *experiment* with her any way you wanted—and—most despicable—you let *them* experiment with her—while you *watched* it all on TV. She was only five years *old*, for God sake!"

"I, personally, don't treat the hybrids one way or the other. I would be perfectly satisfied to just watch their images on TV—and never even go down into the labs."

"That's a *lie*! Those laboratories are what you *live* for! You invented 333 with your *own* hands! You combined the genes of the female cougar with your very own genes—you created a *monster*—part *human*—part *cougar*—and she got *away*! That chimpanzee probably thought it was great fun opening 333's and her mother's cages—along with a few *others*—and when they'd left their cages—when 333 was *free* for the first time in her *life*—she and her mother made it all the way out of this maze of a building without being *stopped*. 333's a highly intelligent hybrid. She means a great deal more to me than just a *laboratory* number—*cat-hybrid* number 333—that's all she ever meant to you—a goddamned number hanging on a laboratory *cage*—but she's really your own *daughter*—in a way."

"Yes—a *hell* of a loss—some fifty-four million dollars worth—if you add all of them together that we lost that day. I

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had Hybrid 333 sold to that sheik in Monaco for twenty-four million, and the porcupine-rhinoceros that the damned chimp also set loose—I had that sold to that exiled king living in the Philippines—for fourteen million—the other hybrids were of insignificant value by comparison."

"Yes—the associates had to *shoot* the porcupine-rhino—didn't get the job done until it'd torn up one of the laboratories. I liked that porcu-rhino. It was *cute*."

"And goddamn *ferocious*," the professor added, dryly.

"Well, the associates were able to recapture the peacock-rat."

"Yes—that damned peacock-rat!" The professor's voice cracked into a rare, dry, rattle-like laugh as he thought about it. "I can't imagine what that billionaire in Sri Lanka wanted with it. Whatever it was—he paid three million for it as I recall."

"He probably wanted it for his private *collection*—just like most of the other collectors. I suppose some collectors *eat* what they buy from you as a very expensive, gourmet delicacy. But I'm surprised, with all of the hybrids you've sold, there hasn't been a single *leak* in the news about them—until *now*," Doctor Rossiter said.

"Well, it's no damned surprise to *me*—that's why I put the clause in their contract. Having a *Kervello* is like having a stolen *Rembrandt*—you keep it in your private collection and only show it to people you know you can trust—or as you said—make one hell of an expensive *meal* of it."

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The anchorman on TV was saying, "the constable of Bear Skin still thinks he can pull the cougar-wool over everybody's eyes..."

The image showing on the TV was of the sketch Scott Tamerlane had made of the cougar-human.

"Look at *that*—someone's made a good likeness of 333!" Doctor Rossiter exclaimed.

The TV newsman was saying, "...this is just an attempt by the constable of Bear Skin and others to provide cover for the person really responsible for the murders that have taken place there—and to put Bear Skin on the map for *commercial* reasons!"

"That's *it*!" the professor said.

"What's it?"

"The *news*! The media has everybody believing that 333's a figment of the constable of Bear Skin's *imagination*. That's *wonderful*! Don't you *see*? If we *recapture* 333—she'll simply *disappear*—vanish off the face of the earth."

"And—let me guess—you'll complete your sale of her to the sheik in Monaco, after all."

"*Exactly*! The killings will stop—nobody will be the wiser. We have to go to Bear Skin right away—dart 333 with a tranquilizer gun—and voila!"

"We?"

"Yes. We'll pretend we're a tourist couple, not a CEO and a psychiatrist—just a *tourist* couple. No one will suspect who we *really* are. You can take a few bikinis and tight dresses—drive the local boys crazy. Take some roughing-it

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clothes, too—my guess is that 333 is hanging out in the mountains somewhere. We may be required to do some *hiking*."

"What about witnesses?"

"What do you mean?"

"Several people have actually *seen* 333—what about *them*? They'll never stop saying 333 is real. They'll finally convince *somebody* she's real."

"Ah—yes—*witnesses*," the professor said, stroking his mustache. "I've been watching some of their stories on TV. You're right—the witnesses will have to be taken care of. We'll have to take some *associates* with us. I'll supervise the quieting of the witnesses *myself*."

"That associate, Hawk, will slit *anybody's* throat for a thousand dollars—even *yours*."

"No—he won't try to kill *me*—I pay the associates *very* well. Very well indeed—not as much as I pay *you*, of course, but very *well* none the less."

Chapter 31

Wanda stood behind the café counter watching the constable eat a pancake.

"More *coffee*?" she asked, with a smile.

"Please!" he said, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin.

She was glad to see he had a twinkle in his eye and was in such a good mood. She got the pot, refilled his cup.

There was a mischievous tone to her voice as she said, "I guess you found out where *Rolf's* been *keeping* himself these days."

"No—as a matter of fact, I haven't. He's apparently taken a summer vacation. I haven't had the pleasure of his assistance for almost two weeks now. Hope he isn't sick."

"Oh, I hear he's *sick*, all right."

"Really?"

"Trendy, the clerk at the market knows about everything that happens in Bear Skin. She said Rolf and Ingrid were in the market buying *groceries* yesterday—like they were an old married couple," she said. "Rolf's sick all right—*lovesick*! Seems that Gertrude had to go to Chicago to see her ill sister—for two weeks, I hear," she chuckled. "She should be coming back any day now. I guess Rolf and Ingrid are making hay while the cat's away."

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"Good for them," the constable said, taking a sip of coffee. "I was beginning to think—well—Rolf's getting up in age—and he hasn't—well as far as I know—he hasn't—you know."

"He's only *twenty*—give him a break," Wanda said. "Besides—when they went skating at the lake—and stayed out all night, remember? Well—I think they did the—you know," she tittered, then gave the constable the—you know—*like you and I did the other night*, look.

A middle-aged newsman in a sharp business suit came in, sat on a stool at the counter beside the constable.

The spokesman for the protesters wandered in soon afterwards, sat on the constable's other side.

Wanda couldn't help noticing that the newsman was very handsome. She liked the way his shiny black hair curled tightly against his head. She couldn't put her finger on the kind of impression it and his olive skin made on her, *maybe Corinthian*, she thought. She'd seen a picture of a Corinthian man somewhere once. *Yes, Corinthian—or Italian*. "Coffee?" she asked.

"What's a gorgeous lady like you doing waiting on customers in a place like this? Let me whisk you away to Rome and *Paris*."

"I've been breathlessly waiting all day for a knight like you—to come in—sweep me off my feet!" she joked. "Coffee?" she repeated.

"Why, yes—I'll have a spot of coffee," he said, in the manner of an old English Colonel just back from a war in India.

She got the pot, poured him a cup.

"It matches your eyes," he said.

"The *coffee*?" she asked.

"Yes. It's reflection has a certain softness—a *mauve*-ness to it—that matches your eyes," he said, stirring his coffee.

A mauve-ness? the constable thought, with repulsion.

"It matches my *roots*—not my *eyes*," she said.

"How interesting—the roots of your *hair*? Your lovely hair *fascinates* me."

"What you *see* is what you *get*," she said, in her usual, harmless, waitress flirting way. She was actually trying to see if she could get a little rise out of the constable.

"On your *head*, you mean," he said, suggestively, sipping his coffee, rolling his dark eyes at her.

"Where *else*?" she asked, jokingly.

"Where else, *indeed*," he said, eyeing her body.

The constable was surprised at the sudden feeling of jealousy that seethed through him like a slimy snake. "That'll be quite *enough*!" he barked. His voice had come out fiercer than he'd intended.

"Enough of *what*?" the newsman asked.

The constable had about as much respect for a newsman as a cat for a mouse. "Enough *flirting* with my *lady*."

"*Your* lady? I don't see any *sparkler* on her finger," the newsman countered, in a defiant tone. "Is that how you yokels *do* things out here in the *sticks*?"

Wanda could see what she'd intended as a little joke was about to mushroom into something uglier—but she was delighted to see that the constable *had* reacted. "I take my ring off when I'm waiting on people," she lied.

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"You don't owe this moron an explanation," the constable said.

"*Moron?* Did you just call me a *moron*?"

"I *did*! You work for the *Etherington Tribune*, don't you? There's not a single one of you staff idiots at that newspaper who has the sense given to a *piss ant*!"

"Hey, *babe*—can a man get some *chow* down here?" the spokesman for the protesters asked.

Wanda was happy for the interruption. "Coffee?"

"Yeah."

"I have a mind to arrest you right *now*!" the constable said to the newsman.

"*Arrest* me? For *what*?"

"For disturbing the peace!"

"Whose *peace*?"

"*My* peace—and you can take that any way you *like*!"

"Hey, man—disturbing the peace is *my* job," the spokesman piped in. "Shouldn't a lawman like yerself—be out chasin' down that *cougar*-thing? Oh, *excuse* me—now I see your *cane*," he said, sarcastically, glancing at the cane the constable had leaned against the counter.

The constable's eyes flared. It was all he could do to keep from driving his fist into the protester's jaw.

"As you protesters—and news people—have perhaps noticed—the *cougar*-thing, as you call it, hasn't been sited in Bear Skin for many months now. Isn't it about time you saddled up and went back *home*?" the constable asked, taking a sip of coffee.

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"We're not goin' ta split 'til that cougar-thing's put out of *action—dead or alive*," the protester spokesman said.

While the spokesman was ranting at him, the constable was half-listening to what the newsman was saying to Wanda, obviously trying to get her into the sack. The constable had had enough. He drew his pistol, pointed it at the newsman and then waved it at the spokesman. "Don't you two let the door hit you in the ass on your way *out*!" he demanded.

The faint-hearted newsman immediately took the constable's advice, but was not at all happy about it.

"I'll be *back*! You can't push *me* around— You just gave me a great *headline* though—CONSTABLE RUNS NEWS PEOPLE OUT OF BEAR SKIN! You'll *regret* pulling a gun on *me*!" he squeaked, as he hastened out, the protester spokesman right on his heels—availing himself of a possible opportunity to agitate.

"Wow! You really *are* worked up!" Wanda quipped. "Are you going to be jealous *every* time I talk to another *man*?"

"No—I just can't stand newspapermen—they're so—you know what I mean," he said. He popped open the cylinder of his pistol, showed her that there were no bullets in it, slipped it back into its holster.

"They're so *aggressive*—but, he *was* kind of cute, too—no?" she joked, smiling.

"No!"

She reheated his coffee from the pot. "I like the way your eyes flare up when you're *mad*," she teased.

The coroner came moseying into the café.

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"I just saw a newspaperman stomping down the street—that spokesman for the protesters was trying to ask him questions. The newsman ignored him—got into his car—and headed *out*. He looked mad as hell," the coroner said. "You didn't have anything to do with it, did you?" he asked the constable, giving Wanda a knowing wink at the same time.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," the constable said, taking a sip of coffee.

"Is that all you're going to do—drink coffee—I'm as starved as a Rebel slave freed by *Lincoln*," the coroner quipped.

"I've had breakfast already," the constable said. "Go ahead—order up!"

"The usual?" Wanda asked the coroner.

"The usual," the coroner said.

"Number *three* for the coroner—!" Wanda called to Hans.

"That spokesman fellow looked like somebody had set his tail afire," the coroner quipped.

"He expressed the opinion that Alexander should be out after the cougar-human. Alexander set him straight—told him there'd been no sign of the cougar-human for months—and asked him why the protesters were still sticking around Bear Skin," Wanda explained.

Wanda's eyes and Herr Öffner's instantly met, both were thinking the same thing. They'd both heard Scott Tamerlane tell his story about the cougar-human chasing his motorcycle. They'd both seen the place on its fender where powerful claws had ripped off the paint. Both were pondering if they should tell

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the constable. They simultaneously glanced at his cane—
decided against it.

Chapter 32

As Gertrude Rhinemann stepped off the 6:45 onto the Bear Skin train platform, she heard someone behind her say something. She turned to see who had spoken. It was Trendy, the store clerk who worked at the mom and pop grocery.

"Hi, Gertrude," Trendy said, cheerfully. "I saw you in a seat up ahead of me on the train, but I didn't want to disturb you. You look so pretty in that new dress and hat. I like the pink and lavender flowers over white—it's gorgeous—and the hat *matches*—aren't *you* spiffy?"

Gertrude blushed. "Oh—yeah—ma sister in Chicago insisted on buying me some new clothes. She said mine were drab and lifeless—maybe okay in the dead o' winter, she said. She said I needed somethin' new and bright fer spring—ta cheer me up."

"Oh—you went to *Chicago*! Really? That's a long way. Did you take a *vacation*?"

"No—ma poor, dear sister was *sick*—turned out ta be jes *kidney* stones. She 'ad an operation while I was there—she's all right now.

"It's good to have you back."

"Where did *you* go?" Gertrude asked, sitting her suitcase down on the platform.

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"Oh, I just went to visit my brother in Etherington. It's just a short ride on the train—nothing like the trip *you* took. Yeah, we visit each other occasionally."

"That's nice that he lives so close by."

"Yes. Oh, since you've been away for some time—"

"Two weeks."

"Then you probably haven't heard about the artist boy—Scott something."

"Scott *Tamerlane*—wat *about* 'im?"

"My husband called me when I was at my brother's and told me about it. It's just a rumor my husband heard at the Moose Head Bar, but he says he thinks it's reliable since the guy who told it was Scott himself. Anyway, Scott was out sketching the lake one day. He finished his sketching, stowed his stuff on his motorcycle and started back home. He looked in his rear-view mirror—and be danged if that cougar-human-thing wasn't *chasing* after him, snarling and snapping its fangs. So, anyway, Scott feels this *thump* on the back of his motorcycle—and thinks he's a goner—he thinks the cougar-human is going to slash him up and eat him right there and then for *sure*!"

"*No!*" Gertrude gasped.

"Yes—and after he got back to the village, he found the coroner in the café. Well, Scott was so shook up he drank half a bottle of whiskey right there—and then the coroner asks if he can see Scott's motorcycle. Scott takes him and Wanda—you know *Wanda*, right?"

"Sure."

"So Scott takes them out to his bike and guess what?"

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"What—?"

"There's four deep *scratch* marks—right down to the metal they were—on the back *fender*."

"Oh, mein *Gott*—! The cougar-'uman almost *did* 'im in, then!"

"Sure almost *did*," Trendy agreed. Then she glanced down at Gertrude's heavy-looking suitcase. "Is someone coming to pick you *up*?"

"Well, I 'ope so. I wrote Ingrid a letter a week ago. I'm sure she's *got* it by now. I told 'er I'd be on the 6:45 today. I thought she'd be 'ere by now—I thought they'd probably come in that old rickety truck of Rolf's. I'm sure she didn't get so busy she didn't read my *letter*. I don't know what she *sees* in him."

"*Rolf*?"

"Yeah."

Trendy knew firsthand that Ingrid and Rolf had been keeping house together all the time Gertrude had been away, but she kept it to herself, she just said, "I think they make a nice couple."

Gertrude grimaced.

"Oh—my *husband* just pulled up. Got to go—do you want us to drop you off?"

"No, but thanks for the offer—Ingrid'll be here any minute now, I'm sure."

Trendy doubted that, but only remarked, "Well, then—it was nice *talking* to you!" She adjusted the shoulder strap of the small bag she was carrying, walked to the car, got in; gave her husband a kiss. They drove away.

Gertrude sat down on her suitcase, waited half an hour.

What could that girl be doing that she can't come and pick up her own mama, she wondered.

Finally, she gave up waiting, stood up, picked up her suitcase; began the arduous walk to her house.

Meanwhile, back in Ingrid's bedroom, she and Rolf had been playing strip poker. They'd started downstairs, and then played their way up the stairs, into her bedroom. Various items of clothing were scattered on the downstairs living room floor and on the staircase.

He had finally won—she was naked as a jaybird.

Wild with excitement, she tossed the cards into the air. They fluttered to the floor.

"You *won!*" she cried, excitedly, removing his only remaining sock from his foot.

"What did I *win?*" Rolf asked, already knowing the answer.

"*Me!* You won *me!*"

He picked up her lovely, nude body; tossed her onto her bed.

Gertrude was becoming angrier and angrier, the more she thought about Ingrid not picking her up. Angrier still, because of the weight of her heavy suitcase as she trudged it up Beaver Street towards her house. She was beginning to perspire.

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As she came nearer the house, she became even more furious when she saw Rolf's antique truck parked out front—her heart skipped a beat. She increased her pace, almost ran. She *wanted* to run, but the suitcase was too heavy. She thought about tossing it so she could go faster. Sweat dotted her brow, eyes were livid, cheeks glowing.

She finally got to her front door. As she sat her suitcase down on the stoop, noticed that the mailbox that hung on the wall next to the door was full. Mail was even sticking out its top. She hastily grabbed a handful of letters, shuffled through them with her fingers. *There's my letter! Why 'as Ingrid not opened ma letter to 'er?* she thought, panicking. *Maybe she's sick—no—it's that damned Rolf!* "Mein Gott—! No—! I'll kill him—!" she said half aloud.

She left her suitcase on the stoop, quietly tried the door. Locked. She opened it with her key, silently tiptoed into the living room, saw their clothes scattered about the floor. She blushed scarlet with hate for Rolf. Her mind burned with rage, like a boiler ready to explode. Then she remembered the old rifle that hung over the fireplace. She quietly reached up, got it down, silently stormed up the staircase—tripping over clothes as she went.

Ingrid was on her back, Rolf on top of her. They were having a great romp.

"Oh...oh...oh," Ingrid sighed, with each thrust. "Oh...oh...oh—*ma—ma—!*"

Rolf felt her muscles stiffen. "You're *liking* it," he muttered through his passion, then glanced at her face. She was staring past him. He tried to turn his head to see what she was looking at, couldn't see; rolled off onto the bed.

The rifle in Gertrude's hands was pointed directly at his head.

"You son o' a *bitch*!" Gertrude cried.

Ingrid was shocked. She'd never heard her mother speak such words. She didn't even think her mother *knew* words like that.

"Get yer clothes—and get the 'ell *out* o' ma 'ouse!" Gertrude cried, wielding the rifle. "*Ingrid*—get yer *clothes* on, girl!"

"Take your time, sweetheart. That old rifle—it's so old there aren't even any bullets made for it anymore," Ingrid said, pulling a sheet up over her bare breasts. "*Now* mama—do us the decency of leaving the room while we get dressed! We *love* each other—we're going to get *married*—and there's nothing you—or anyone else can do to *stop* us!"

The sight of the two naked in the bed brought back memories of when she and her husband had done the same thing. Her fervor cooled. She lowered the useless rifle. "Okay—but 'e can't live '*ere*—not 'til yer good an *married*. He can go back ta the constable—make 'imself *useful*—go out after that god-damned *cougar*-thing. Trendy tol' me the story of 'ow it tried ta kill Scott Tamerlane."

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"Did she *also* tell you that nobody is supposed to tell Constable *Mizzen* about it—until Doctor Quincy says he's completely *well*?" Ingrid asked.

"No," Gertrude said, sullenly. "No—she didn't." Hesitated. "That's why Rolf isn't out after the cougar-thing, isn't it? If 'e goes after it, the constable will find oot. Yeah—I see. That'd be bad." Her face took on a sad expression. "I'm sorry—I 'ad no business breakin' in on ya two like this!"

"Oh, *mama*, everything will be okay—you'll see," Ingrid said, hopefully. "Mama?"

"Yeah."

"Love your dress and hat."

Gertrude didn't reply, but felt good about the remark, turned; left the room.

Chapter 33

"It scares me half to death," Ingrid said, putting a loaf of bread in her shopping basket.

"Oh, I know what you mean—my husband is well endowed, *too*," Trendy agreed, rearranging sweet rolls on a nearby shelf. "When we were first engaged—"

Ingrid blushed, "I didn't mean *Rolf's*—"

Trendy laughed. "*Oh*," she said, doubling over in stitches. "I thought you were talking about his—"

"*No*—I was talking about the *cougar-human*!"

"Oh, yes, the cougar-human scares me, too. Sometimes, when my husband is visiting his cousin, I have to work late and walk home after dark. That's when it gets to me. I imagine it coming at me and slashing me to death," Trendy confessed. "I know the constable's not completely well yet, and we all heard about what a mess that sheriff made of trying to kill it, but it looks to me like the governor or somebody would send the *army* after it. After all, nobody knows where the thing *came* from, or when it'll strike *again*."

"I'm sure the constable will go out after it as soon as he can," Ingrid said. "Of course, that'll have to be after someone tells him it's still *out* there."

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"*Rolf's* a law enforcement officer, isn't he?" Trendy asked, and then realized she may have over spoken.

"Yes, my dear Rolf *is*—he's *brave*, too—and I had a hard time talking him out of—or maybe I should say of *persuading* him not to go after it."

"It's really none of my business—but why *shouldn't* Rolf—you know—take some men and go after it, since he's a law enforcement officer?"

Ingrid related the rumor about how the artist, Scott Tamerlane, got the gashes on the back of his motorcycle. Trendy had already heard the story from her husband.

"That's all the more reason why Rolf should want to go after the *cougar-human*," Trendy said, "before it kills *again*."

"Yes—Rolf *did* want to—it was all I could do to talk him *out* of it."

"Why talk him out of it—that thing will kill somebody *else*—maybe *me*—maybe *you*—if Rolf could put an *end* to it?"

"The dear wants to, but if he kills the cougar-human, that will be like slapping the constable in the face. The constable would know that everybody knew that the cougar-human had been seen again—and that everybody in the entire village kept it from him. Then all of a sudden—*bam*—Rolf brings the cougar-human's body back to the village. The constable would be completely *humiliated*. As they were getting on the train to go back to their home towns—the protesters would be chanting for Rolf to replace Herr Mizzen as constable. It'd be just a terrible mess. Constable Mizzen wants nothing more than to get back out there and get that cougar-human. It'd just kill him if his own assis-

tant—that he's trusted for years—*did* that to him—don't you *see*, Trendy? It'd just *kill* him."

"Yeah...I see what you mean," Trendy said, rearranging cans on a shelf. "Sorry I brought it up—so, how are you and Rolf getting on?"

"We're getting on and off," Ingrid laughed, with the sly laugh only two young ladies of their age of sexual maturity actually understood.

Trendy giggled.

"Actually—when mother came back from Chicago—"

"Oh, yes, I was on the same train—only just from Etherington, of course—I went to visit my brother—I had a little chat with your mother on the train platform when we arrived in Bear Skin. I really like your mom—and that new dress—anyway, you were saying..."

"Rolf and I kind of lost track of time. Anyway, she caught us in *bed* together doing you know what."

"*No—!*"

"Yes, she did. But it was a funny thing, actually—she'd gotten the gun down from the fireplace and was pointing it at Rolf."

"*No—! A rifle?*"

"Yes. That got his attention."

"I'll bet!"

"I knew the gun was so old you couldn't even buy *bullets* for it anymore."

"So, *you* knew your mother couldn't *really* shoot Rolf—but *Rolf* didn't know that."

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"Mama was *angry* enough to *shoot* Rolf all right—she ran him off—said he couldn't live with us."

"Where did he go?"

"Back to the constable's office. He has it nice there. He sleeps on the couch—but I can't cook for the dear. I love cooking for him. I try to sneak out and see him, but mother—"

"That makes it difficult for you to—ah—make love," Trendy said, actually blushing.

"Impossible, so far," Ingrid said, putting a bag of beans into her basket. Then she asked, "Do you have anymore *moose* meat?"

"We still have *some* left from last winter. I don't recommend it though. We got in some *beef* this morning from Etherington. You know, with all the strangers in the village, we had to do *something*. It's quite a lot more expensive than moose."

"I'll take moose. We really can't afford the beef, I'm sure."

"Tell you what. I'll sell you four pounds of high-quality beefsteak for the price you would have to pay for the same amount of moose—a kind of *engagement* present."

"Oh, I can't let you do *that*—besides—Rolf hasn't given me a *ring* yet. We're not *exactly* engaged."

"Yes, please take the beef—the store won't lose any money—you'd be surprised how much those city dudes are willing to pay for beef. Besides, we *Bear* Skinners have to stick together. After all, we didn't *ask* for the *cougar*-human to show up—or the news people—or the protesters—or the tourists."

"No. But now that they're here—they're good for business, yes?"

"Business is booming. Just between you and I—we're making a small *fortune*," Trendy confessed, in a subdued tone.

Just then the little bell on the front door tinkled. Pierre Corbèt came lilting in.

"Good *morning* mademoiselles! I am zee Frenchman, Pierre Corbèt—zee famous designer of zee fine leather—and zee lover of famous *women*!"

Ingrid and Trendy laughed.

"And just which famous women were you the lover *of*?" Trendy asked.

"Well—there was *Josephine* —"

"You made love to Napoleon's *mistress*? You must be a very old *man*!" Ingrid exclaimed, then she and Trendy laughed.

"*Oui*, mademoiselle—I assure you she and I were—how do you say—an *item*—and Elizabeth zee First—"

"You made love to the queen of *England*?" Trendy asked, jokingly.

"*Oui*—but—zee petticoats—so *many* petticoats, you know!"

The ladies laughed.

"So what can I *do* for you?" Trendy asked.

"We can leave zat question for zee other time, mademoiselle—but I need—how do you say—zee beeg *butcher* knife!"

"What do you want with a big *butcher* knife," Ingrid asked.

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"When Constable Mizzen gets all well—he and I are going to team up and go after zat keeler zing together!"

"You're going after the *cougar*-human with the *constable*?" Trendy asked.

"*Oui!* We weel make zee team of two knights. I weel slice eet and dice eet and slash eet up with my butcher knife and he weel pounce on eet and trounce on eet and tie eet up with zee rope!" Pierre said, thrusting his fists into the air.

"Have you told the constable you and he are going to do all that?" Ingrid asked.

"No—eet eez not zee time yet to tell heem—but I weel tell heem later on!"

"I hate to disappoint you, Pierre, but we don't have any *butcher* knives," Trendy said. "How about a nice little *paring* knife?"

She and Ingrid laughed until their faces were red at the thought of Pierre wielding a paring knife at the cougar-thing.

"You are laughing *now*—but when zee constable and I come down zee Beaver Street dragging zee dead keeler behind us on zee rope—your faces weel be of zee different color, no?"

"*Oui?*" Ingrid cried.

The three burst into laughter.

Chapter 34

In Bear Skin, the Butterfly Festival was in full swing.

There were little booths where village ladies—wearing delightfully-colored Bavarian costumes with dangles and brightly-colored beaded strings hanging from their red velvet hats—were selling the tourists handmade doilies and handkerchiefs designed with intricate butterfly patterns. Others were selling butterfly kites, butterfly ashtrays, butterfly miniatures. Children were peddling butterfly balloons. A large, WELCOME TO THE BEAR SKIN ANNUAL BUTTERFLY FESTIVAL, banner stretched across Beaver Street. Butterfly signage was displayed in shops along the street.

Musicians, some from as far away as Etherington, had formed little musical bands here and there along Beaver Street. Local folks, tourists, protesters and news people alike were dancing, enjoying the music, many dancing out in the street. Others sat at round tables with red and white checkered tablecloths sipping drinks.

Everyone was in a festive mood. Spirits were flowing, not spooky spirits of the ghost variety, but rather, copious quantities of the dark German beer; wine spirits, imported Canadian whiskey spirits and the like. It was rumored that some of the

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whiskey had come from illegal stills up in the mountains, but that was just hearsay, of course.

Ingrid and Rolf were dancing. They'd been tippling and were even more happy than usual.

Gertrude sat at a nearby table sipping a German beer, talking to one of the older ladies of the village. Gertrude would glance at the dancing couple from time to time, glower, take a sip of her beer, as if to wash away the image, then start talking to the woman again.

"Now *that's* the way to travel," Ingrid said.

Rolf danced her around so he could see what she was looking at. She loosened her romantic clinch on him a little, turned her head so she could still see.

"Am I seeing things or does that shiny, maroon vehicle that just parked down the street have *gold* door handles?" he asked, then said, "It must have cost a couple hundred thousand dollars. It looks like it could go anywhere. What so you think it is?"

"Well, unless we're *both* going blind, I'd say, yes—it *does* have gold door handles—and it probably *did* cost that much. It looks like one of those military HUMVEEs I saw in a magazine," she said. "It has Florida license plates—I guess folks in Florida must be very rich."

As they watched, Doctor Patricia Rossiter, disguised as a tourist by the name of Margo, oozed her delightfully shaped bare

legs out of the HUMVEE, revealing gold, very high-heeled, open-toed shoes.

As she and Professor Tyrone Kervello—also disguised as a tourist by the name of Doctor Paul—came towards the dancers, Rolf noticed the woman had the most brilliant flaming red hair he'd ever seen. It swept behind her ears, down onto her bare shoulders. Her two-piece, flower-pattern sun suit barely covered her obvious charms, stunning shape. Her diamond-studded, gold-rimmed sunglasses hid the beauty of her sapphire-blue eyes.

As Ingrid could plainly see, the lady's beauty was dazzling her Rolf. He couldn't take his eyes off the woman.

"Let's dance, sweetheart," Ingrid purred.

"Oh—yes, of course," Rolf stammered, forcing his attention back on Ingrid.

"She's gorgeous, isn't she, honey?" Ingrid said, beginning to move to the music, hoping for a mild response.

"Yeah—" was all he answered, but Ingrid sensed, as women do, that the hot redhead was a rival for Rolf's affections.

Rolf kept his attention focused on Ingrid, held her close as they danced.

They'd only danced a couple of moments longer when Ingrid felt a hand touch her shoulder.

"Mind if I cut *in*?" Margo asked.

Courtesy demanded that Ingrid let it happen. She gracefully bowed her head slightly; let the redhead dance with Rolf.

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Ingrid was not without a dance partner more than a couple of seconds when the man who had accompanied the redhead stepped in front of her, took her hand. They began to dance.

"I'm Doctor Paul," he lied, holding her closer than she wanted to be held.

She quickly learned that he was an excellent dancer, glided her around the floor with the ease of a magician. She saw he was tall, almost a head taller than her and handsome in a diabolical way, probably his mustache, she thought. People with mustaches like his were usually devils in disguise, in the movies, anyway. She had no reason to think him evil, but she did nevertheless; a sixth sense, perhaps.

"So, Doctor Paul, you must be very rich—I couldn't help but see your expensive-looking HUMVEE when you parked—from Florida, I believe," Ingrid said.

"Yes—well you know—brain surgeons do make a lot of money—I made mine from good investments mostly. The HUMVEE—ah, yes, it's a beauty, isn't it? It's custom made—automatically controlled air conditioning—the works. What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't—but it's Ingrid."

"*Ingrid*—what a beautiful *name*—so delighted to make your acquaintance—yes, we're from Florida."

"What brings you to Bear Skin?"

"The same thing as tourists the world over—curiosity!"

"Let me guess—the *cougar*-human!"

"Exactly, my dear."

DON LEWIS WIREMAN, SR.

"Please don't call me 'my dear'—I'm engaged to be married."

"Oh, I'm sorry—I didn't feel a ring on your finger."

"That's because there *isn't* one—yet—Rolf will buy me one soon."

"Oh, I didn't mean to pry. Rolf—that's the fellow you were *dancing* with?"

"Yes," Ingrid said, nervously glancing across the dance floor at Rolf. "He's the constable's assistant—he makes good money—he'll buy me a ring one of these days."

"As pretty as you are—I'll bet he'll buy you a *diamond* as large as your beautiful *eyes*."

Ingrid blushed. "I don't compare with the redhead *you* came with—for beauty. Is she your wife?"

"No—she's my—secretary," he had to think a fraction of a second to remember what occupation they'd decided to assign to her. "I thought she might enjoy a little vacation—sunny Florida beaches all the time—gets boring, you know."

"I suppose—I've never had the luxury."

"A beautiful woman like you should have *every* luxury. So, what's this constable—what's his name—*Misery*—?"

"*Mizzen*—Constable Alexander *Mizzen*," she gently interjected.

"I just heard his name *once*—on the news," he lied. "What's he like?"

"Well, he's strong, wiry, no-nonsense, takes his work seriously."

"No nightlife?"

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Ingrid began to feel he was asking her questions about the constable for a *reason*. "Let's just dance," she said.

Rolf's olfactory nerves were humming from the redhead's seductive perfume. He noticed that she had parked her high-heals on the edge of the dance floor, was dancing bare-foot.

"I'm *Margo*," she purred, in a most feminine voice.

"I'm Rolf," he said, suppressing his intense subconscious desire to wrestle her sexy body to the floor, seduce her right there and then. He felt extremely flattered that—with all the other guys who were dancing—she'd chosen him. He was so thrilled he momentarily let his relationship with Ingrid slip his mind—and it didn't help any that the bare skin of Margo's midriff felt so enticing beneath his hand as they danced.

"You must be a very *important* man," she cooed.

"What makes you say that?"

"Oh, I don't know—the way you hold your chin—your demeanor I guess—there's just something *about* you." She knew she was stretching her praise rather thin, but it might get him talking.

It did.

"I'm the constable's assistant," he said.

"That *is* an important position."

"Well, I suppose you *could* say that."

"Of course, you can say that. It's true," she sighed. "The constable—what does *he* do?"

"Constable Mizzen is the one who keeps *law* and *order* around here."

DON LEWIS WIREMAN, SR.

"I saw something on the news about a cougar-something killing people here in Bear Skin. Is that really *true*?"

"Yes—it's killed Wilhelm Streiker, Clyde Breuger—and a trapper—and two blood hounds—and it *almost* killed the *constable*."

"No!"

"Yes—and I shouldn't really be telling you this, but just recently it scared—if you'll pardon the expression—it scared the hell out of our local artist, Scott Tamerlane."

"So it's been seen nearby, recently."

"Yes."

"So, why shouldn't you tell me?"

"It's a secret we're keeping from the constable. He was caught in a small avalanche when a bunch of us went out and tried to kill the cougar-human."

"You know that it's part human?" she divulged, then caught herself. "It's part *human*?" she asked.

"Yes—it's tracks show it's part human. Its footprints are human, except it's toes—they come to a *point*."

"Sounds like a fairy story," she said.

"No—no fairy story—I took the photos myself."

"So, you've seen this cougar-human-thing."

"Yes, Ingrid—that's the girl I was dancing with—she and I saw it one day when we were out skiing."

"So you actually know what she *looks* like."

"Why did you say 'she'?"

"Sorry—I meant *it*—you actually know what *it* looks like, then."

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"Yes."

"Are you the only ones who've seen it?"

"Oh, no. The constable's seen it. Scott Tamerlane's seen it. Paul Chambers' seen it—and little Willy Chambers—he's the cutest little guy—he *danced* with it."

"Now, I *know* you're telling me a fairy story—you probably tell it to *all* the tourists."

"He really *did* dance with it. I have photographic proof."

That verified her theory about 333—that 333's hybridization had caused her to be born with a mostly-human brain, which would *not* allow her to attack human *women* or *children*. Her theory went on to conclude that 333 would never have even attacked a *male* human if she hadn't been mistreated at the laboratory.

"Is *that* the *constable* dancing with that blonde?" Margo asked.

Rolf reluctantly removed his cheek from Margo's neck long enough to get a peek. The constable was dancing with Wanda to the music of a different band some distance away.

"Yes, that's him," Rolf said, quickly nestling up to Margo again.

"What's her name?"

"Wanda. She's a waitress at the café. She's been taking care of him. He almost froze to death when the avalanche caught him. She's been nursing him back to health."

"Looks like she's doing a good job of it. He looks like he could take on a bear—or a cougar-human," she laughed.

DON LEWIS WIREMAN, SR.

"Yes—I think he's completely well—I heard him say they're going sailing tomorrow—out by Catherine's Point."

"Oh, just he and Wanda?"

"Yes."

"Where's Catherine's Point?"

"It's really just a bunch of rocks that hang out over the lake. It's named after a woman who died there when the boat she was in wrecked during a storm."

"It overlooks Lake Cristal?" she asked, as if only slightly familiar with the area.

"Yes—it's a beautiful lake—you'd like it—it can be a bit hazardous at times."

"Maybe someday you'll take *me* there," she cooed.

Chapter 35

A Kervello associate known as Hawk sat cross-legged on an enormous, smooth, gray boulder atop Catherine's Point, from which he had an excellent panoramic view of Lake Cristal below him.

Opening a black case, he began carefully assembling the various parts of a precision, Finnish-made Model 300 sniper rifle.

When he'd completed the assembly, he stretched out on his stomach in prone position on the huge, warm boulder, firmly held the rifle's pistol-grip stock against his cheek and shoulder, sighted its powerful telescope in on a far-off tree, then in on a rock and finally in on a squirrel, to adjust its exact range and focus.

He worked its lever, which silently brought a bullet from the ammunition magazine up into the chamber.

Then he waited.

The constable's sloop was still in good condition despite years of use. He'd taken good care of it and it of him.

There was a light breeze—just enough to fill the sails.

DON LEWIS WIREMAN, SR.

Wanda had never been on a sailboat before. The constable was teaching her a few tricks about sailing, but doing most of it himself.

She stood up, looked over the side.

"Whoa—" he yelled, swinging his weight to the opposite side. "Sit down—you'll *capsize* us—and don't sit on my *rifle*!"

"If it capsizes *that* easily—how do people make *love* on one of these things? I've heard they *do*!" she quipped, carefully sitting down.

"It's just that the *boom's* out—usually it's okay to stand up—I'll tell you when—"

"How did you get this boat, anyway? A constable can't make *that* much money!"

"I won it in a poker game in *Etherington* a few years ago."

"It's a beautiful boat. I'm glad you decided to take us out. I made fried chicken for lunch—I put it in a nice woven picnic basket."

"You're already talking about *food*—we just had *breakfast*—already you're talking about *lunch*!"

"Sailing makes me hungry—say—did I ever tell you the one about the *skeleton*?"

"Guess not," the constable said, adjusting a rope.

"Well, ya see, it goes like this: a waitress finally got around to waiting on this table that was kind of set back in a corner of this restaurant. When she got to it, there was a skeleton sitting there—reading a book."

"Reading a *book*?"

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"Yeah—you know—it still had a book in its bony fingers it'd been reading while waiting for the waitress—"

"Okay. Got it."

"So she went up to it and asked: 'Been waiting *long*'?"

The constable chuckled.

333 had seen Hawk from quite some distance away.

As she got closer to him, the breeze brought his vile scent to her sensitive nose. She became incensed with anger. As she dashed through the underbrush at full speed in his direction—a flood of memories of what he'd done to her while she'd been caged up at the Kervello laboratory came rushing back to her.

Hawk saw the constable's sloop slowly making its way around a little peninsula that jutted out into the lake. He saw that only the constable and Wanda were onboard. *Perfect—I'll kill them both easy—first the constable—then the blonde will go into hysterics—I'll shoot her next*, he thought. He looked through the rifle-scope, finally got the constable's head into clear view, put the crosshairs right on his temple.

Steady. *Goodbye constable*, he thought.

A noise on his right distracted him slightly, but he squeezed off the shot, anyway. *B-A-M—!*

The explosion echoed. He liked the sound.

He heard the noise again from his right. Louder than before—a deep-throated growl, he realized.

333 was on his back in an instant—her fangs victoriously tearing through his flesh. She relished the blood that gushed from the back of his neck. He screamed, tried to roll over—get a shot at the thing on his back, but her weight and rapid movements were too much for him. She kept sinking her fangs into him, joyfully clawing him, chewing his neck. He was horrified as he saw his own blood pooling red. He thrashed his head from side to side—her on his back, no way to fight her off. His screams gradually died out—as she blissfully ate out his brain through the base of his skull with her fangs, tongue, claws—enjoying every mouthful.

Hearing the rifle's report, Constable Mizzen had grabbed *his* rifle. The sniper bullet had pierced the sloop's sail, just above his head.

They had heard Hawk scream.

"Some SOB took a *shot* at us!" Wanda cried.

"The bastard almost *got* me, too—from the *looks* of it," he said, looking up at the hole it had made in the sail.

He kept his rifle ready, grabbed his binoculars; began panning the shoreline, then out of the corner of his eye saw a commotion on the top of Catherine's Point, focused in on it. "You're not going to believe *this*!"

"What *is* it?"

"The *cougar*-human—it's on *top* of something—probably whoever *shot* at us! I see it ripping with its fangs—face is bloody! I can't tell what it's *eating*," he said, handing Wanda the binoculars. "See what you make of it!"

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She looked through them. "Oh—my *God*—yeah—it's *feeding* on something or *somebody*!"

The constable adjusted the sail; directed the sloop towards the base of Catherine's Point.

The climb up through the boulders to the top had been strenuous. Wanda was out of breath.

"You know," she puffed, "you're in damned good shape. Maybe I did *too* good of a job on you," she joked.

The muscles in his rugged cheek flexed. "After *that* climb—I'm glad you still have a sense of humor."

As they made their way out onto the boulder, it became immediately obvious to the constable what had happened. The cougar-human was nowhere in sight, but the constable kept his rifle ready just in case.

He walked over to Hawk's body, looked down at it—mutilated beyond description—much worse than any of the others the cougar-human had killed, he decided.

"A damn *sniper*," he said, seeing the sniper rifle. "You were right—he *was* trying to kill us! The cougar-human *saved* us—can you beat *that*?"

"Well, yes—maybe not on purpose, but it sure did," Wanda agreed.

"See how the sniper's brains have been eaten out?"

Wanda grimaced. "Yeah—I see."

"That's the trademark of the cougar-human. It always eats out the brain."

"I wonder why."

"Good question," the constable said, putting the toe of his boot under Hawk's dead shoulder; flipping him over onto his back. "Do you *recognize* him?"

"Never saw him before in my life," Wanda quipped, "but he looks like he was a *mean* SOB!"

The constable unfastened his cell phone from his belt, tapped a few numbers; heard Rolf answer.

"Rolf?" the constable asked.

"Where *are* you?" he heard Rolf answer.

"Wanda and I are standing on top of Catherine's Point. There's been another cougar-human killing. A sniper tried to shoot us while we were out on the sloop—"

"While you were on the *lake*—?" he heard Rolf gasp.

"Yes, while we were on the lake—now *listen*—the cougar-human attacked the sniper bastard—did him in, but *good*—the worse bloody mess I've ever seen—it apparently got to him just as he was shooting—the sniper only got one shot off at us before the cougar-human nailed him."

"Did the sniper *hit* either of you?" The constable thought Rolf sounded overly concerned.

"No—we're okay—his bullet went through the sail—just above my head—"

The constable heard Rolf's profound sigh of relief.

"Now listen—," the constable continued, "I need you to call the *Governor*—get him to authorize a chopper to come out here and pick up this damn turkey sniper—yeah—have them drop what's left of the bastard off at the *coroner's* office in Prescott—tell them to tell Brett Öffner it's a present from *me*! Also

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have them bring the coroner with them to the scene so he can take photos for evidence—and make sure they all *arm* themselves—the cougar-human may still be hanging around. Wanda and I'll climb down—we'll wait at the shoreline until we see the chopper, then take the sloop—and finish our goddamn *picnic*! I want you to drive out here and see if you can find any evidence. The sniper must have gotten up here *somehow*—look for a vehicle—see if you can find any identification—we have no idea who this joker is."

"I'm on it!" the constable heard Rolf say.

"And Rolf—!"

"Yeah?"

"Bring your camera."

Hidden in nearby underbrush, 333 lay licking her bloody paw, watching them, caught Wanda's scent, wondered about it a few minutes, decided not to attack, got up—disappeared into the deep woods.

Chapter 36

The village was not yet warmed by the morning sun, which made the fire in the constable's office fireplace feel very pleasant.

Herr Öffner absentmindedly ran his hand over his graying beard. "I did a preliminary autopsy on the sniper. He didn't have any identification on him—looks like a very professional hit man—Finnish Model 300 sniper rifle—developed for the American military—excellent choice."

"Whether it was an excellent choice or not depends on which end of its barrel you're on," Constable Mizzen suggested, then turned to Rolf. "Did you find out how the sniper got to the top of Catherine's Point?"

"I found an old car—in worse shape than my truck. I guess he didn't want to attract attention by driving a fancy one. There was nothing in it to ID him with."

"Yeah, sounds very professional," the constable reiterated. "The only thing we know for sure is that the sniper fired at my sailboat—damned near hit me. Why the hell would he *do* that? Oh, yeah—and one other thing—the cougar-human must have interfered with his shot—did you see the way that cougar-human tore up that sniper? Got him while he was on his stomach—must have been a hell of a surprise for the sniper."

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"Tell me about it," the coroner quipped. "I did his autopsy. He was ripped open—brains eaten."

"Rolf—show Ingrid the photos Brett took of the scene," the constable said.

"No—I've seen *too* many bloody corpses around here—somebody just stop the *killing—please!*" Ingrid cried, obviously more emotionally upset than the prospect of seeing a few grisly photos would likely have caused.

The outside door flew open. Pierre Corbèt came rushing in. "Constable *Mizzen!* I'm glad you're *here!* I'm glad you're feeling so *well!* I have to *talk* to you! I have zee *news* you maybe need to *know!*"

"What is it?" the constable asked.

"I was in the *auberge* the other evening," Pierre cried, rubbing his stubby hands together.

"Calm down," the constable said. "Tell me—slowly—first—what's an *auberge?*"

"It's French for tavern," Ingrid said. "He means the Moose Head Bar."

"Oh—go on."

"I was sitting in zee booth having zee cognac when I heard people talking in zee next booth. I'm zee very quite, shy person, you know! Nobody ever notices *me.*"

"Yes—yes—we know—go on," the constable urged.

"I knew one of zee people who was een zee booth—I saw her come een and go sit zer."

"Who was it?" Rolf asked.

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"Zee oo la *la* babe! La la—la *la-a*!" Pierre cried. "Zee redhead knockout *bombshell*, as I believe zee Americans say."

"Was she wearing gold high-healed shoes?" Rolf asked.

"You *would* remember *them*!" Ingrid cried.

"*Oui*! Zee gold shoes—and not much *else*," Pierre cried, pursing his lips.

"So, *then* what happened?" the constable asked.

"She was talking to a man in zee booth. I didn't see zee man come een. He must have been zer from zee earlier time. So, she says to zee man—'Hawk'."

"She called the man *Hawk*?" the coroner asked.

"*Oui*! She said to heem—Hawk—Doctor Paul wants you to make zee hit tomorrow—zay weel be in zee sailboat out on zee lake—near Catherine's Point," Pierre cried.

Rolf sucked in his breath.

"What's the matter," the constable asked Rolf.

"Damn—damn—*damn*—what an *idiot* I was!" Rolf cried, slapping himself on the forehead. "When we were dancing at the Butterfly Festival—I told that redhead you two were going sailing at the lake the next day," he confessed.

"You're in *love* with that slut! That's what you *are*! You said you'd *never* reject *me*—the first bimbo that comes your way—what do you do—*reject* me! If you'd given me an *engagement* ring—which you *haven't*—I'd *throw* it at you right *now*, Rolf Arbeiter—you *never* loved *me*—you just *used* me—until *that* oozy—sleazy *dame* came along!" Ingrid cried, grabbing her wrap, starting for the door.

"No, honey—I *do* love *you*—"

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Rolf just got the last word out as the door slammed in his face. He opened it; ran after her.

"Ah—*amour!*" Pierre chimed. "Oui—I was saying—"

The constable cut him off. "Is this the man you saw in the booth?" the constable asked, showing Pierre a photo the coroner had taken of the sniper."

"*Oui!* I saw hees face when he left. Zee redhead went out of zee Moose Head first, zen zee man she called Hawk."

Ingrid dashed back through the door. "I'm sorry, Constable Mizzen—I'm *so* upset about *Rolf*—I forgot to tell you—when I was dancing with Doctor Paul at the Butterfly Festival—that's the guy that came with the redhead—the one with the crimson HUMVEE with gold door handles!"

"*Gold*—really?" the coroner asked.

"Really—I saw them, too," the constable confirmed. "Ingrid—you were saying."

"Yes—well when I was dancing with him he started asking me a lot of questions about you. I got wise to him right away—didn't tell him anything—but that damned redhead seduced it out of that silly *Rolf*—," Ingrid cried, then dashed back out the door.

"So—the sniper's name was Hawk—and he was a *hit* man for this Doctor Paul—if that's his real name. This Doctor Paul sent Hawk to *kill* me."

"And maybe to kill *Wanda*, too," the coroner added.

"Your excellence," Pierre cried, addressing the constable, "—zee time she has come for you and I to go after zee *cougar*-human!"

"Not yet. I think the cougar-human saved my life. It somehow interrupted the sniper when he was about to shoot. At that range—I—wouldn't even have missed with my *own* rifle—a professional sniper would never have missed a shot like that unless something disturbed his concentration when he was about to shoot. No—I don't know what this Doctor Paul's motive was for having the sniper try to do us in. I need to have a little *chat* with him—we'll take care of the cougar-human later—I'll let you know when we can go after it, Pierre."

"You mean you'll take me *weez* you?" Pierre cried, slapping his hands together.

"You can *count* on it," the constable said.

Pierre jumped up and down. "Wait until I tell *Bull*—," Pierre cried, dancing out the door.

"Let's step back and look at the *big* picture a minute," the coroner said.

"What do you mean?" the constable asked.

"Well, let's look at it this way—before the cougar-human showed up, no hit man ever tried to wipe you out, right?"

"Right!"

"No redhead ever went to all the trouble to get information out of Rolf, right?"

"Right!"

"Well—do you see where I'm going with my thinking?"

"You're thinking there's a connection between my being *shot* at and the *cougar*-human?"

"*Exactly*—and maybe not just *you*—maybe the sniper was going to do *Wanda* in, too!"

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"*Both* of us, you think!"

"Yes. That's *exactly* what I think."

"Why?"

"How the hell do *I* know? It's just a what I *think*—that's all!"

Chapter 37

Another of Doctor Paul's associates who they called Jake leisurely sat on a cushy couch drinking whiskey on the rocks, his dirty boots perched on the glass coffee table in front of him in the luxurious living room of Doctor Paul's million-dollar mobile home base of operations in Bear Skin.

From the outside, the mobile home didn't look any more impressive than many others around it, thus camouflaging it.

Jake had a scar on his forehead from when he'd gotten too close to a hybrid cage in a laboratory. A hyena-lioness had clawed him through the bars.

Jake was as sinewy as jerky meat: tough as nails, coal black eyes, nightmare ground-even, stained teeth.

He'd once hired himself out as a mercenary guard to the dictator of Iraq.

He hated everybody, every thing.

"Get your *feet* off the *table*! Don't you have *any* couth?" Doctor Paul railed.

Jake slowly brought them down onto the floor.

"We have *work* to do—*people* to kill!" Doctor Paul railed. "Margo told me what happened to *Hawk*. It won't be long now before that hick constable puts two and two together and figures out what we're up to. We have to act fast," he la-

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mented. "Hawk was killed by 333 before he got to finish his task—*Jake—you'll* have to *find* and *kill* all the goddamned *witnesses*—take as many associates as you need with you—but I want everybody who has *ever* seen 333—*dead*! Do you *understand* me, Jake—*dead*? *Dead* people don't *testify*!"

"Yeah, boss—does that include the little *Chambers* kid?" Jake asked, stirring the ice in his drink with his finger.

"*Yes—anybody* who could spill their guts before a judge—and actually know from their own experience what the hell they were talking about that might convince somebody," Doctor Paul demanded.

"What could that little *kid* say—*da da*?" Margo interrupted, sarcastically.

Doctor Paul glared at her then dropped his eyebrows in recognition of defeat. "Maybe Margo's *right* for a change—okay—*not* the kid," he reneged. "Kill that goddamned *constable* first—the others will be easy!"

"*Easy*, the man says," Jake commented, downed what was left of his whiskey, got to his feet; adjusted his purple beret. "I'm going to the Moose Head Bar for a *drink*."

"Don't get *drunk* and screw everything *up*!" Doctor Paul cried. "I pay you a fortune—*all* of you—but you can all be *replaced*, you know!"

"Somebody said they saw Doctor Paul in the Moose Head earlier. Maybe he's still there," the coroner said, as he and the constable stood along the edge of Beaver Street looking towards the bar.

"Okay. If he isn't, I'll buy us a cold beer, anyway," the constable said. "If he is—I'll arrest him for attempted murder." The constable un-holstered his .44, checked to make sure it was loaded, holstered it, checked the bullets in his rifle that rested on one arm.

"Oh, you can't make an attempted murder charge stick!"

"Why not—it was *his* thug who almost wiped me out!"

"Could be he was just hunting *ducks*," the coroner suggested.

"Hunting *ducks*—with a *sniper* rifle?"

"Could be. That's how a jury might see it."

"*Sitting ducks*, is more *like* it!" the constable retorted as they reached the Moose Head Bar's front door.

The coroner swung open the door. They went in.

Instantly—the barkeep cried, "Oh, *hell*—!" ducked down behind the bar.

The constable's eyes were still trying to adjust to the darkness inside the barroom—when Jake's pistol began spitting lead from where he and three other associates were sitting at a table.

The constable's .44, in his hand in a fraction of a second, began belching fire.

His vision not yet clear, his bullets hit wild of their marks. A couple blew away most of the Moose Head's back door behind Jake. Jake and the associates made a run for it through a hail of .44 bullets—pushed out through what was left of the door, jumped into a car—sped away.

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"So what are you *waiting* for—use this damned *rifle*—they're getting *away*!" the constable yelled at the coroner, thrusting his rifle at him then ran to the back door; got a glimpse of the escaping blue car.

"Don't yell at *me*! *I'm* not a deputy!" the coroner retorted.

"*Sam*—," the constable yelled. "Come over here—make it *snappy*!"

Sam, the barkeep, hustled to his feet, around the end of the bar as fast as he could to where the constable and coroner were standing next to the demolished back door.

"Sam—you're the *witness*—Brett Öffner—you're *deputized*!" the constable said, then dashed out into the street.

"What direction did they go?" the coroner asked.

"*That way*!" the constable yelled, pointing. "We'll take my jeep—you drive—I'll shoot!"

They ran across Beaver Street, got into the constable's jeep. The coroner quickly handed the constable's rifle to him, turned on the red light, siren, headed out after the escaping car.

"They're headed for Beach Tree *Grove*!" the constable said. "*Step* on it!"

"I've got it *floored*, already! When are you going to get a *real* vehicle—perhaps something that could catch a speeding *car* for example!" the coroner quipped.

"I heard you. Okay—we're catching *up* with them a little," the constable said, leaning out the window, rifle butt against his cheek—*fired*! The bullet spider-webbed the back window of the speeding car; didn't slow it down.

Jake returned fire. Bullets shattered the jeep's windshield.

"You *okay*?" the constable asked.

"Yeah!" the coroner said, sticking his head out the jeep's window so he could see where he was driving.

As they approached Beach Tree Grove, a hail of bullets peppered the jeep. The constable returned fire. The blue car crashed into a tree, occupants scrambled out, ran into the woods—firing!

The coroner pulled up behind the car, stopped. He and the constable piled out—running!

"Here—take my *rifle*," the constable cried, handing it to the coroner—then they quickly took cover behind a large rock.

"Stay low as we approach the trees," the constable cautioned.

"Stay low—what the hell does *that* mean?"

"It means—bend at the *waist*! Make a smaller *target*! Let's *go*!"

They moved out together—immediately met with a flurry of bullets.

"It's a good thing they can't *shoot* worth a damn!" the coroner quipped, returning fire with the rifle.

One of the associates stuck his head out from behind a tree—fired—his bullets barely missed the constable. Fire blazed from the constable's .44. The associate fell dead; most of his head missing.

"You *got* one!" the coroner cried. "*Three* to go!"

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They used trees for cover as they advanced towards the remaining associates.

The sun was beginning to dip; shadows beginning to form.

The constable jumped out into the open, began running between trees—shooting as he ran.

The chubby coroner left the safety of the trees, tried to keep up with the constable.

Another associate shot at the constable.

The constable's .44 found its mark again. The associate slumped to the ground.

"Only *two* left!" the coroner cried, firing, puffing.

Another associate delivered a hail of bullets at the constable from behind a rock.

The constable and coroner took cover behind trees.

The constable reloaded his pistol from his bullet belt.

The associate kept them pinned down for half an hour.

Twilight began kneading the sky into a forerunner of darkness. It was beginning to be difficult to tell man from tree; man from rock. Only the tell-tell fiery spits of guns made clear marks in the dimness.

The associate who'd been firing at the constable got courageous, climbed up on the rock he'd been using for cover—commenced firing. Bullets zinged.

A loud report from the constable's .44 rang true again—the associate fell forward off the rock—hit the ground with a dull thud, didn't make another sound.

"*One* to go!" the coroner cried.

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Then—from far down the hill below them—they heard the constable's jeep engine start up—then whine away—off somewhere into the evening shadows.

Jake had circled back.

"*Damn!* Didn't you take out the *key*?" the constable cried.

"Yeah—like somebody had time to think of taking out the damn *key*—a hailstorm of *bullets* coming at us!"

The constable remained quiet for a moment then said, "You're *right—sorry!* I'm really damn sorry! I just wanted to get every last one of those bastards!"

"Listen—*sirens*—someone's finally coming to join the gun battle!" the coroner said, delighted. Then sarcastically he added, "A little after the fact, but on their way sure enough!"

They climbed up on a nearby rock to get a better view.

They saw four sets of twirling red lights flailing the surrounding black forest like dragon tongues, sirens blasting, careering up Beach Tree Grove Road.

"Doesn't the illustrious Sheriff Maxwell Atridge know it's not the Fourth of *July*?" the constable quipped.

They laughed, climbed down from the rock to meet the sheriff. They'd have to put up with Atridge's arrogance for the moment—they badly needed a ride back to Bear Skin.

Dangerous Jake had taken a different road from the one Atridge had come up, one of many forestry roads in the area; had doused the jeep's lights; disappeared into the dark woods.

Chapter 38

Wanda suddenly sat up in bed, *screaming*!

The constable rolled over, looked at her. "What *is* it?"

"I had a terrible nightmare! I dreamed one of those bastards *killed* you!"

"One of Doctor Paul's thugs?"

"Yeah. I dreamed you were in a ditch in the forest and you were shooting at each other...and you fell into the water—your blood turned the water *red*—it was *horrible*!"

"Well, here I am—and here you are—I say we take a shower—wash away the nightmare—make love—take another shower—and go have breakfast at the café—what say you?"

"I didn't know you read *minds*," she giggled, giving him a peck on the cheek. "The last one to get the soap is a *bean* bag!" she cried, jumping out of bed naked.

By the time they got to the café, it was buzzing with customers.

The constable noticed Sheriff Atridge and his troopers having breakfast at a large corner table. The constable tried to ignore them as he and Wanda sat down at the counter.

Sheriff Atridge started in on the constable, immediately. "That was some *shootout* you staged yesterday, constable—too bad you didn't get *Jake*!" the sheriff jeered.

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A waitress came up to Wanda, "Coffee?"

"Two coffees, please, Rachel—and the usual breakfasts," Wanda said, beaming.

"You look like you just won an apple bobbing contest," Rachel said, pouring coffee.

Wanda's face reddened a little as she added cream and sugar to the coffees. "Well—you're *close*!"

Rachel smiled a mischievous smile. Tittered.

"Well—?" Sheriff Atridge cried in his high, squeaky voice.

The constable spun around on his stool, faced the sheriff. "Well, *what*?"

"Why *didn't* you get *Jake*?"

"Who the hell's *Jake*?" the constable asked, casually taking a sip of coffee.

"He's just Doctor Paul's main *man*—*that's* all—you know—the one you let get *away*!" the sheriff sneered.

"How did you find *that* out—about this Jake joker being Doctor Paul's main man?" the constable asked, taking another sip of coffee.

"Benny here heard about it in the Moose Head last night—didn't you Benny?"

"Yes, *sir*!"

"So—where's this *Jake* holed *up*?" the constable asked.

"They say Jake is like a *snake*—strikes you when you least expect it!" the sheriff retorted.

"Heard anything about Doctor Paul—and the redhead?" the constable asked.

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"They've disappeared—fancy HUMVEE and all—of course, you've been occupied with *other* matters—you wouldn't know about what's been going on!" the sheriff squeaked.

His troopers laughed.

Wanda gave the sheriff a hard glance. "Looks to me like *you*-all have got yourselves a gay men's *society* started!" she quipped, making a circle in the air with her forefinger indicating Atridge and his men.

The constable suppressed a smile.

The sheriff fumed.

Rachel brought food.

The constable swung back around on his stool, began eating his breakfast.

"So—what *are* you going to do about Jake?" the sheriff demanded.

The constable continued eating.

"Maybe you didn't *hear* me—I said, what are you going to do about *Jake*?"

"I *heard* you all right! Just shut up and let me eat breakfast!"

The sheriff jumped up from his chair, strode up to the constable. "When I ask you a *question*—I expect an *answer*, mister! You seem to forget who's *running* this investigation!" the sheriff squeaked, his thin voice on the verge of hysteria.

The constable dropped his toast, turned and faced the sheriff. "*I* am. If you don't *believe* it—call the Governor and ask him *yourself*."

"Since *when*?"

"Since I got out of that goddamned wheelchair and back on my feet—that's since when!"

"The Governor put *me* in charge of killing the cougar-human—and *that's* what it's all about! That means *I'm* in charge of the *entire* investigation!" the sheriff whined.

"So—where *did* you hide the *cougar*-human? Do you have it tied *up* somewhere—just waiting for the opportune moment to *tell* everybody?"

The sheriff's neck was brilliant red, like a branding iron hot out of the fire. He began pacing the floor, repeatedly bending the brim of his felt hat up and down with his fingers. "We made a damned good airborne assault. You deliberately marked the *wrong* cave on that damned map you gave me—*that's* what happened!" he ranted. "We made a damned good landing—didn't we boys?"

The troopers, still sitting at the table having breakfast, all went along with the lie. "Yes, *sir*," they yelled in unison.

"You just *sit* here and eat your poached eggs, constable. The boys and I are going out after Jake. We're going to show you up *so* bad—!"

"*Badly*," the constable corrected.

"What?"

"You're going to show me up *so badly*," the constable said, taking a bite of bacon.

"Yeah—badly," the sheriff said, signaling to the troopers to follow him out the door.

"What *are* you going to do about the Jake joker?" Wanda asked, after the sheriff and troopers had left.

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"Oh, not *you*, too?" the constable said, smiling.

"Sorry—just curious."

"I have some inside information. I got a call from the Air Force pilot who flew us in the chopper. He told me he spotted my jeep up in the foothills—on the west side of Bald Ridge. Looks like Jake ran it out of gas and took out on foot."

"That's dangerous territory—grizzlies—snakes—," Wanda said.

"Yeah—maybe he'll get bitten by one of his *relatives*," the constable quipped.

"I still don't understand," Wanda said.

"What don't you understand?" the constable asked, sipping his coffee.

"Why would someone go to so much trouble trying to kill *us*—*you* especially—and will they try to kill *others*?"

"All I have to go on right now is the coroner's theory."

"What's that?"

"He thinks the attack by this Doctor Paul and his henchmen has something to do with the cougar-human."

"How did he come by that idea?"

"He says—why did they wait until the cougar-human started killing people, to show up? Why not before?" the constable said.

"Herr Öffner has a point there. I got the impression this Doctor Paul—if that's his real name—and the redhead—were tourists—just curious about the cougar-human."

"If that's what they are—they have a *violent* way of expressing their interest."

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"They're obviously not tourists!" Wanda said.

"No—and—not to change the subject—but is there anymore hot coffee?"

"Rachel!" Wanda cried, cheerfully.

"Coming!"

Chapter 39

A brilliant flash of lightning lit up the western sky, followed by a powerful thunderclap.

Soon rain poured down in heavy sheets. Water puddles began to blanket Beaver Street in front of the café.

The constable pulled the plastic hood of his slick raincoat up over his head, adjusted the .44 on his hip, picked up his rifle; mentally prepared himself for a mad dash out of the café to the coroner's parked SUV.

Rolf held his own rifle under his raincoat.

The coroner covered his sidearm, pulled his hood up.

"You sure picked one hell of a day to go after that Jake character," Wanda quipped.

"We can't let the sheriff and his macho men have all the fun—besides—I didn't sleep all that well last night thinking about Jake coming after me," the constable said.

"We might not find *Jake*, but we have a good idea where he left Alexander's jeep," the coroner said.

"Yeah, the chopper pilot told me he spotted it on the west side of Bald Ridge," the constable said. "Well, we better get *on* with it."

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Wanda went to him, gave him a peck on the lips. "Be *careful*—I want you all to come back in *one* piece!"

"Do you have the *gas* can, Rolf?" the constable asked.

"Right here!" Rolf said.

The constable pushed open the café door. They made for the coroner's SUV. All were soaked in the few seconds it took them to get in it.

They saw a fierce flash of lightning set a tree afire some distance from Bear Skin.

The constable pulled a huge red handkerchief out of his pocket, dried his face. "It's really coming *down*—did you see that *lightning* strike?"

The coroner started the SUV.

They were soon alongside a gas pump at the only gas station in Bear Skin.

Ted, the attendant, covered in wet plastic from head to toe, looked like a blue phantom as he came to the coroner's window, "What'll it be?"

"Fill her up—and Rolf has a gas can—need it full, too," the coroner said.

"Ted!" the constable called.

Ted looked in, past the coroner, at the constable, "Oh, hi Constable Mizzen!"

"Did the sheriff come by here this morning?" the constable asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact he *did*. He and the *paratroopers* I call 'em! Yeah, a whole convoy of vehicles—I filled 'em all up!"

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"Which way did they go?" the constable asked.

"They took the east road. I asked that stuffy sheriff—I don't mean no harm by insultin' a sheriff—but I think he's stuffy! I asked him if he was on an important mission, but he didn't answer—that's why I say he's stuffy!"

"Okay—gas us up," the constable said.

"You need new windshield wipers," the constable said, as they traveled west, out of Bear Skin.

"With the money I get as coroner—I'm lucky to have *any* windshield wipers," the coroner quipped. "Besides—the rain's letting up a little."

"You have to be doing pretty good from Thorndike Bed and Breakfast dividends," the constable said.

"I keep my budgets separated," the coroner said.

Rolf watched with fascination as he saw the tree again that they'd seen lightning strike and set on fire earlier, still burning.

"That's Bald *Ridge* off to our right," the constable said.

"And there's your *jeep*!" Rolf said, with enthusiasm.

"Yeah—Jake must have run it out of gas—then took off *walking*," the coroner said.

"He might be still hanging around," Rolf suggested.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle.

The coroner pulled his SUV up behind the jeep, stopped.

They all got out.

Rolf, rifle in one hand, carried the can of gas to the jeep, set it down.

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His rifle at the ready, the constable looked inside the jeep. Nobody.

"What's that over by that *chaparral* brush?" the coroner asked, wiping water off his face.

"Looks like *cloth* of some kind," the constable said, moving in that direction. "Let's take a look!"

They'd walked only a short distance from the jeep. "Oh—my *God*!" The words caught in Rolf's throat.

At their feet, lying in the drizzling rain was the remains of a man.

"Something sure made *mincemeat* out of *him*!" the coroner said.

"Yeah—and since his head's missing—there's really no way of knowing if he's *Jake*," the constable said.

"Did Jake wear a purple *beret*?" Rolf asked.

"Yeah—I got a glimpse of it during the shootout in the Moose Head," the coroner said.

"If you hadn't been so damned worried about not being *deputized*—and been *shooting* instead of *watching*—you might not have noticed that Jake was wearing a beret," the constable suggested.

"Well, then it's a good thing I *was*, *isn't* it—otherwise we wouldn't be sure this is Jake's corpse, now *would* we?" the coroner quipped.

"His beret's over here," Rolf said, picking it up with the end of a stick.

"The way the body's mutilated—looks like the work of a *grizzly*," the coroner said.

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"Or the *cougar*-human," the constable suggested.

"In either case, there's not much *left* of him," Rolf said.

"From the looks of Jake—and what was the name of the *other* one?" the constable asked.

"*Hawk*," Rolf said.

"I know it sounds silly, but from the looks of them—and we know for sure the cougar-human got *Hawk*—I'd say the cougar-human had a *grudge* against them—that is if it *was* the cougar-human that killed *this* one, too," the constable said.

"You think it *might* have been a *grizzly* that got this Jake, then," the coroner said.

"If it was the cougar-human—it's changed its method of killing. It never carried the *head* off before," the constable said.

"True—before—it's just eaten out their brains and left the rest of the head," the coroner agreed.

"It *was* the cougar-human that did Jake," Rolf said, looking down at a mud puddle. "Here are its *tracks* in the mud."

The constable walked over to where Rolf stood. "Yeah—it was the cougar-human. It carried off his head, all right! Must have hated Jake a *lot*!"

"Got your camera?" the constable asked.

"Right here," Rolf said, taking it from his raincoat pocket. He shot several photos of the scene.

"Well—I'll get a *body* bag and we can sack up what's left of Mr. Jake."

The coroner shortly returned with the bag and gloves. The constable and Rolf put their rifles aside. All three put on the latex gloves, slid Jake's gruesome remains into the bag. Rolf

tossed in the beret. They each tossed in their soiled gloves. Rolf tied the bag off. They hoisted it into the SUV.

The rain had stopped. The sun lit up the landscape.

"Would you look over yonder?" the coroner said, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand.

The constable and Rolf looked.

Crawling slowly over a far-off ridge, a convoy of vehicles was meandering, like a string of lost ants.

"Sheriff *Atridge* and his troopers! We'd best be off—before they *spot* us," the constable said, picking up his rifle.

"It'll be interesting to hear what story the sheriff comes up with *this* time," the coroner retorted.

Rolf picked up his rifle, gassed up the jeep, got in, started the engine; began the journey back down the road they'd come up.

The coroner and constable followed in the SUV.

Chapter 40

The little, yellow school bus came roaring around a corner onto Beaver Street, stop sign popped out, stop lights began flashing. It screeched to a stop in front of the café to pick up children to take them to school in Prescott as it did every weekday.

Ten-year-old Cathy—Kristine Chambers' daughter—and her little friend Bobbie climbed aboard, lunch pails in hand, found a seat, sat together. Eight other children climbed on, raucously took seats around them. The bus driver, Mrs. Hatchet, worked the door-latching device, closed the school bus door and they were off.

Cathy, dainty in her bright-yellow dress as she sat near the window, looked out, then at Bobbie. "What did your mom give you for lunch?" she asked.

"Moose sandwiches as usual," Bobbie answered. "What did your mom give you?"

"An apple and two peanut and jelly sandwiches."

"I'll trade you a moose for a peanut butter and jelly," Bobbie said.

"Okay."

They enthusiastically popped open their lunchboxes, traded.

"Did the cougar-monster *really* try to eat your little brother *Willy*?" Bobbie asked.

"Oh, yes—it started to gobble him all *up*—," Cathy said.

"*Then* what happened?"

"Daddy got a really big *gun* and shot the cougar-monster—"

"Shot 'im *dead*?"

"Not *dead*, exactly, silly—monsters like the cougar-monster don't *die*, exactly!"

"That's a big fat *fib*," a girl behind them cried. "My mom said the cougar-monster didn't even *bite* Willy!"

"My *daddy* is bigger than your *mom*!" Cathy cried.

"Did you see your dad shoot the monster?" the girl behind them persisted.

"No. I was staying at my aunt's," Cathy said.

"My dad said the cougar-monster killed a guy out by the lake that was fixin' ta kill the *constable*!" an older boy said, from across the aisle.

"What if the school bus breaks *down*—the cougar-monster will eat us all *up*!" a girl cried.

All the younger kids in the bus began screaming.

"*Okay*—that's *enough*—" Mrs. Hatchet, bellowed. "The cougar-thing's not going to eat *anybody* on *my* bus—now shut *up* before I stop this thing and come *back* there!"

Chapter 41

In the cave opening, 333 batted Jake's grotesque head back and forth between her paws with delight, playing with it like a cloth ball, stopping occasionally to gnaw.

Her nightmares had diminished somewhat following her dispatch of Hawk and Jake.

She'd not yet caught the scent of Professor Tyrone Kervello, also known as Doctor Paul. Had she, she'd be out searching for him, to do him in with even greater indignity than she had Hawk and Jake, if that was possible.

A new problem had become apparent to her. Her muscles were becoming weaker. She sometimes wobbled a little when she walked, but her overall strength was still powerful. She was still strong enough to do what she needed to do.

In spite of the delight she'd taken in eating large amounts of Jake's flesh, her overall appetite had decreased. She knew something was really wrong with her.

Her mother came up to her, licked her ear, but 333 was in no mood to return the affectionate gesture.

Chapter 42

The moon cast soft light against the window shade and around the constable's bedroom.

The clock on the wall showed seven minutes to two in the morning.

He and Wanda were comfortably snoozing side by side.

A dog barked outside the window, woke Wanda. She was about to roll over, go back to sleep—when she noticed that they were *not alone* in the room. A man was sitting in a chair in the corner, his outline barely visible in the dimness. He had a sawed-off rifle with a silencer—pointed at them.

"Who *are* you—what do you *want*—?" she cried.

The constable cracked an eyelid, but didn't let on he was awake, as he carefully slid his hand down the side of his mattress to where he'd laid his .44.

"Wake him *up*!" the man demanded.

Wanda shook the constable.

"Okay—I'm awake—what's going on?" the constable said as he sat up, bringing his .44 up under the blankets.

"A *man*—with a *gun*!" Wanda cried.

"Who *are* you—what do you want—?" the constable demanded.

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"It doesn't matter who I am. Are you the only two who have ever seen the cougar-human?"

"Yes!" the constable said.

"You're *lying*!"

"If you know I'm lying—you must know someone else who has seen the cougar-human," the constable said.

"I'm going to kill you both, anyway, so it's not like you'll be *squealing* on anybody. Nobody will ever know you told me."

"And if we *don't*?" the constable asked.

"I'll do certain things to your lady that you won't care much for."

"What do *we* have to do with the cougar-human?" Wanda asked.

"You've *seen* it—that's all. That's all you had to do."

"Are you one of Doctor *Paul's* assassins?" the constable asked.

"*Assassin* am I? Doctor Paul calls us *associates*. He pays us well fer the privilege."

"Are you going to kill everyone who has seen the cougar-human?" the constable asked.

"Yes—starting with *you*—and your little lady friend here."

"So, you knew the ones they called Hawk and Jake," the constable said.

"Yeah—I knew 'em—now give me some names before I start working your lady over!"

"You want to know everybody who I think ever saw the cougar-human?"

"You catch on real fast—fer a constable."

"So you can hunt them down and *kill* them," the constable added.

"You got it."

"*Why?*" Wanda cried.

"Well—since you're going ta die anyway, I might as well tell ya. Ya see, Doctor Paul and Margo really ain't just curious tourists—just here ta get in on some excitement. Doctor Paul is really Professor Tyrone Kervello—and Margo is really Doctor Patricia Rossiter. He used to be a professor of genetic engineering at the university in Etherington. She's a psychiatrist—specializes in hybrid animals."

"Let me make a wild guess," the constable said, "the professor *created* the cougar-human."

"You *are* a smart constable after all," the man said, sarcastically, leaning forward in the chair, his gun pointed at the constable's head. "Yeah—he did alright. He's created a lot o' stuff, but Hybrid 333—the one you call the cougar-human—got *away* when she was five-years-old."

"So—she really is part human and part cougar," Wanda cried.

"Yeah."

"And she's *female*," Wanda said.

"Yeah—I said that."

"The poor thing—a little girl—five years old—just a baby really—trapped in a cougar's body," Wanda cried.

"Yeah—that's about it—but she was the most fun of all of them—when she was in the cage in our lab—we used to do

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whatever we wanted to her. We did *everything*—just like I'm going to do to you, lady—if ya don't start giving me *names*!"

"You *bastards*!" Wanda cried. "You *abused* her—! Did you *rape* her, *too*?"

"Yeah—I guess—if fuckin' a *cougar* is rape."

"That would explain why she took such great pleasure in mutilating Hawk and Jake," the constable said. "She'd probably like to get her fangs into *you*, too."

"The professor told me *you* killed Jake."

"No—I went after him, but he was already dead—very dead. He was so mutilated it would be almost impossible for anyone to recognize his body," the constable said. "Except for his purple beret."

"Try looking at his face?"

"Yes, but his *head* was gone. She must have taken it with her—we know it was the cougar-human who did Jake in, because we found her tracks in a mud puddle," the constable said.

The constable saw the man cringe in the dim moonlight. "She took Jake's *head*?"

"Something else could have taken it," the constable said. "But it was probably her. She likes to eat the brains of her victims. I never have figured out why."

"Delicacy—the professor called it. When another hybrid died—like when the rat-python died—the professor scraped out its brains and *fed* them to 333!"

"Yuck!" Wanda gagged.

"So—how did the professor get so *rich*?" the constable asked.

"From selling hybrids—he got *millions* for each one. That's why he pays us so good."

"Who did he sell them to?" Wanda asked.

"Collectors—all over the world—he's made billions."

"That's all *illegal*," the constable said.

"Well—maybe it is—maybe it isn't—and since nobody's ever going ta find out about it—now are you going to give me the names o' all the witnesses, or *not*?"

"Oh, so that's it. The professor thinks that if he has everybody killed who ever saw this 333—there will be no *witnesses* to testify *against* him," the constable said.

"Like I said, you're a smart man, for a constable. I don't think—I just do what the professor tells me—and since you're obviously not going ta talk—without some *persuasion*," the man said, getting up from the chair, "I guess I'll just have to have some fun with your *lady*—and see if *that* changes your mind."

The man walked to Wanda's side of the bed, reached down, grabbed the edge of the thin blanket covering her, ripped it away revealing her naked, seductive body—but also—the business end of the constable's .44! The constable pulled the trigger. The man crumpled to the floor.

Rolf crashed through the bedroom door, pistol in hand. "What *happened*—?"

"Professor Tyrone Kervello sent another assassin to do us in," the constable said.

"*Who* sent him?" Rolf asked.

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"You know him as Doctor *Paul*," the constable said.

"And the redhead who wrapped herself around you when you were dancing—that wasn't Margo—her name is Doctor Patricia *Rossiter*. She's a psychiatrist—specializes in hybrid animals," Wanda said.

"So the cougar-human is a hybrid *animal*," Rolf said.

"Yes—she's a six-year-old baby girl—trapped in a *cougar's* body—poor thing," Wanda said, "and her name is Hybrid 333."

"If you'll pardon us, Rolf, while we get dressed," the constable said.

"Oh—of course," Rolf said, immediately retreating and closing the door behind him.

The constable and Wanda got dressed, went into the constable's office where Rolf had a fire booming in the fireplace.

"I'll give the coroner a call and tell him we have another *body* for him," the constable said, picking up the phone.

"I'll fix us all some coffee and breakfast while he's on his way from Prescott," Wanda said.

Chapter 43

Gustav Thorndike, mayor of Bear Skin, stood over six feet tall, a robust man, prone to wearing flashy clothes. Not flashy in a stylish way, just flashy: like the light tan suit he now had on with four-inch, thin, black squares running throughout it.

He had a most remarkable, huge, full, gray beard that shaped his face into a massive fan that covered the top part of his chest.

His full head of massive, gray strands of hair ran wild about his head, except for a spot on the very top that was shiny. His eyes were jolly, as were his thoughts.

He had a mellow timber to his voice that somehow mesmerized his audience.

The constable's office was filled with people.

Thorndike towered in front of the fireplace. "I brought all of you investors together to show you the plans for the permanent *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast*," he said, with a hand gesture directed at an easel with a plan layout on it, then introducing the gentleman sitting in the front row, he said, "This is Mr. Manor. He's a builder from Etherington. I've enlisted his kind services in designing and supervising the construction of our new establishment of hospitality—the permanent *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast*! I'll let him take over now—Mr. Manor..."

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Mr. Manor was a short, thin man in a light brown suit. There was a typical salesman look about him. He got up, took his place beside an easel on which a sheath of drawings hung, pointed to the first drawing with a thin baton as he spoke. "This is the overall layout of the proposed *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast*. It will have three levels—forty rooms with baths—four maids rooms—a large, modern kitchen—a splendid recreation room with indoor swimming pool, goldfish ponds, a large aquarium—gardens—"

"And 'ow much will that be *costin'* us ta *build*?" Patrick O'Finn piped.

"Yeah—I'd like to know the answer to *that*," Sam, the barkeep said.

"Gentlemen—I'll be getting to that in a moment," Mr. Manor said.

"You'll be gettin' to it right *now*," Patrick O'Finn insisted.

There was a round of applause.

"Very well—the estimated cost of construction is one point three million," Mr. Manor said.

There was an audible sucking in of breath throughout the room, a couple of whistles.

"The bed and breakfast couldn't take in that much money in a *hundred* years," the constable said.

Gustav Thorndike had sat down while Mr. Manor was talking. Thorndike stood up. "On the contrary, Constable Mizzen..."

"Gustav, you can still call me *Alexander*—I'm not rich yet," the constable joked.

Everyone laughed.

"Okay, Alexander—the fact is that in the last three months the mobile homes—the temporary bed and breakfast—has netted over three hundred thousand dollars. At that rate—we'll have the new construction paid for in a year and a half—and a nice slice for dividends—as you have already seen some of—in the meantime," Thorndike said.

"But, Mayor Thorndike—you know as well as we do that as soon as the cougar-human—I understand it's called 333—is caught or killed, Bear Skin will go back to the way it was before," Ingrid said.

"Not so, child. Bear Skin is now firmly on the *map*—so to speak—it'll never be the same again. It's famous—or perhaps *infamous*, if you will, throughout the world. It'll always be a tourist attraction. It's the place where something *amazing* happened. It's like *Tombstone* and *The Alamo* and *Bunker Hill*—people will always want to come and visit Bear Skin. I see the *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast* as only the beginning. I see Bear Skin with more shops—more festivals—more gaiety—beer gardens—people visiting from all over the world—just like those tourist villages in California!" Then, before anyone had time to think about what he had said, he quickly continued with a broad smile. "Now—let's see a raise of hands of all in favor of building the new *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast*!"

Everybody's hand shot up.

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"Carried!" Thorndike cried. "Mr. Manor, you've got yourself a deal!"

"Mayor Thorndike could sell a *goat* to an *ox* driver," the Coroner Öffner said. Laughter. "Come on—I'll buy everyone a beer at the Moose Head!"

Sam had clustered tables and chairs in the middle of the Moose Head Bar and everyone who'd been at the meeting in the constable's office was now seated, having a beer on the coroner's tab. Some news people and protesters had also joined them.

Patrick O'Finn blew the foam off his beer. "Now, that's a fine beer that'll head up like that," he boasted.

"Aye," Sam agreed. "Now, if I heard someone correctly—I think it was Ingrid—yes, Ingrid—you said the cougar-human was called 333. What did you mean by that?"

All eyes went to Ingrid.

"What she meant was," the constable interrupted, "we've recently gotten quite a lot of new information regarding the cougar-human and other things."

"For example?" the coroner asked, taking a pull on his beer.

"This last associate—that's what the professor calls these assassins he's been sending to kill me—and to kill others. Anyway he was planning to kill Wanda and I and anybody who had ever seen 333. He had us at gunpoint—said he was going to kill us even if we talked. Anyway, he got carried away and spilled his guts about the cougar-human, and about Doctor Paul and Margo—the redhead."

"But Alexander fooled him—shot *him* instead—just as he was about to—," Wanda said.

"Never mind," the constable interrupted. "You don't have to tell *that* part. Anyhow, this associate said Doctor Paul and Margo are not tourists like they seem to be—but rather Doctor Paul is really a professor called Professor Tyrone Kervello and Margo is really a psychiatrist who specializes in hybrid animals."

"Hybrid animals?" the mayor asked, astounded. "You mean the cougar-human really *is* part cougar—and part *human*?"

"Exactly. I suspected it for some time, but couldn't understand how it could be," the constable said.

"Now, you *know*?" the coroner asked.

"Yes, according to the associate, at one time, the professor was a professor of genetic engineering at the university in Etherington, then he apparently opened his own laboratories and began creating hybrid animals, which he sold to collectors throughout the world. The cougar-human escaped from the laboratory and came here. Her laboratory designation was Hybrid 333," the constable said.

"And they *abused* her while she was in captivity," Wanda added. "The poor thing—a little girl—only six-years-old—in a cougar's body—how horrible that must be."

"How horrible indeed," a newsman said, taking everything down on a tape recorder.

"The first associate to come after us was called Hawk. He planned to shoot Wanda and I with a sniper rifle from the top of Catherine's Point—but 333 must have smelled him and recog-

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nized him as one of her tormentors. Anyway, she made a meal of Hawk before he could get the job of killing us done. He got one shot off. It hit the sail of my boat, just above my head," the constable said.

"That was *too* close, your Honor," Pierre Corbèt cried.

"And the second attempt by the professor to send assassins to kill us was the one called Jake and the three others with him," the constable continued.

"Those were the three you and Herr Öffner did in," the mayor said.

"Yes, but Jake got away—and 333 made a snack of him—and carried off his head," the constable said.

"Carried off his *head*?" Molly asked, incredulously.

"Yes. You see—and this is according to the last associate—when 333 was in captivity—the professor fed her brains of dead animals, as a delicacy, he said," the constable said. "That's how she developed a taste for them."

"How *grotesque*," Patrick O'Finn cried.

"So, if the professor had sold 333, *before* she escaped—none of this would have happened," Wanda said.

"Well—the fact is, he didn't—and a lot of people are *dead* because of it," the mayor said.

"So—this Margo—is really a psychiatrist who tries to understand what's going on inside the brains of these hybrid animals that the professor creates," the coroner said.

"Yes, her real name is Doctor Patricia Rossiter," Wanda added, "and she's a redheaded *vixen*!"

"The associate said the professor's plan was to kill everybody who had ever seen 333—to eliminate anyone who could honestly testify against him in court," the constable said.

"His plan obviously *backfired*," Patrick O'Finn said.

"Yes. Now that the word is out about what the professor's up to—he's probably on the run," the coroner put in.

"I don't know *where* he and the psychiatrist are," the constable said. "Has anyone seen a crimson HUMVEE with gold door handles?"

No one said they had.

"I'll get on the phone and inform the Governor about the professor's laboratories in Etherington," the constable said. "I'm sure he'll want to shut them down immediately, and then I'm going to find that professor and his redheaded sidekick and bring them in—one way or another."

"What about 333?" Wanda asked.

"Eventually, we'll be going after her, too," the constable said.

"You remember you said you weel take me weezyou to get zees 333," Pierre cried, thrusting his fists into the air.

"Yes, Pierre—I said '*we*'," the constable repeated. "*You*, too."

Chapter 44

The crimson HUMVEE cruised effortlessly up the little dirt road that ran over foothills and through shallow ravines. It was packed to the gills with supplies and had satellite television and communications.

"Where do you suppose that damned creature is *hiding*?" the professor cried. "She's caused me so damn much trouble—I want to find her and *kill* her!"

"But you *won't*—you'll dart her with a tranquilizer, instead. You still hope—with everything that's gone wrong—that somehow you're still going to be able to sell her to that sheik in Monaco for twenty-four million," Doctor Rossiter said, dropping the HUMVEE into a lower gear so it could still easily negotiate the road, which was becoming steeper.

"Where are you *driving*, anyway?"

"I'm just driving—following your directions! Head for the *mountains*, you said. I'm heading for the mountains—look ahead of us—some of the most beautiful mountains in the world—especially now, in the spring!"

"Don't get mushy with *me*! Don't you know who you're *talking* to?"

"Yes. Indeed I *do* know whom I'm talking to. You're an *ex-CEO* who is now on the run from the police, *Tyrone*. I

thought someday I'd be able to get next to your heart—find where you keep your love—as deeply buried as it must be—"

"Oh—stop all that sappy crap. You knew what you were getting into—and for the same reason as the associates—for money—money—money! Now let's stop all the nonsense and find 333! She has to be up here—*somewhere*!"

Doctor Rossiter drove the HUMVEE as far up into the mountains as she could, until fallen logs, trees and deep ravines blocked the way.

"Well, this is *it*," she announced, complacently. "We'll have to *hoof* it from here, as they say, Tyrone."

"Stop calling me *Tyrone*. You're still my employee. By the way—why did you say the *police* were after me?"

"Well, put two and two together—we haven't heard from the last associate you sent to do the constable in—what was his name—*Sly*? Maybe he got arrogant and spilled his guts about the whole hybrid operation. He's obviously dead—or we'd have heard from him—and there's nothing on the news about the constable being dead—therefore, one might conclude that the constable killed *Sly*! Maybe he made *Sly talk* first!"

The news of the latest assassination attempt on the constable and Wanda had not yet hit the news.

"Bah—I'm not buying it. *Sly's* no *pro*, but he has experience killing. He was just out of prison on a murder one rap when I hired him. *Sly's* arrogant as hell, but not dead. Okay, maybe he didn't kill the constable—but *Sly's* not dead, I tell you—and by the way—your damn *pack's* on crooked!"

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Doctor Rossiter adjusted the pack on her back, and they were off, hiking.

The professor checked his dart gun to see if it had a tranquilizer cartridge in the chamber. He satisfied himself that it did.

They'd walked for over an hour.

"Let's take a break!" the professor said.

They sat down on a large rock that provided a panoramic view of the mountains and countryside.

"This is such a beautiful day. I wish it were different. I wish you and I—"

The professor cut her off. "Well, it *isn't* different—so just shut *up* about it!"

She got a sandwich and bottle of water out of her pack, began eating.

The smell of the sandwich, mixed with a scent 333's keen nose recognized as her mortal enemy, had drifted to her on the light breeze.

333 became alert; then on the move, between trees, down a small creek bed, out onto a large boulder where she saw her nemesis and Doctor Rossiter sitting on the huge rock far below.

"Are you going to claim Hawk and Jake and the other associates bodies—or are you going to let them go to unmarked graves?" Rossiter asked, taking a drink of water.

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Kervello ignored her question then asked, "How do you know *Jake* got killed?"

"It was on TV. There was a gun battle—three associates were killed—Jake got away. They found his purple beret the next day—and his body, but his *head* was gone—you can't get mug shots of a dead guy without a head."

"His *head* was gone?"

"The news said some animal must have carried it off."

Kervello shook off the thought. "333!"

"Probably. She obviously hated the SOB for what he did to her. Probably plays with his head, like a toy."

Kervello cringed.

Rossiter looked out over the rolling hills and valleys. "You can almost see Etherington from here," she said, and then she saw a flash of orange out the corner of her eye. She turned her head, looked at it. "Well—hope you're ready—she's *here*!"

"*Who*—?"

"333!"

Kervello turned, saw 333. Terror shot up his spine.

333 let out a blood-curdling scream—charged.

Kervello's hand shook as he raised the dart gun. Not wanting 333 to get too close to him, he fired prematurely. The dart hit her left front shoulder. She stopped, went to her knees, then raised herself again, slowly kept coming towards them.

"The damn dart didn't go *in* right!" Kervello yelled. "Give me another goddamn *dart*—*quick*!"

"I didn't *bring* any—I thought *you* had them!"

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Kervello tossed the dart gun, turned, began running back down the mountain towards the HUMVEE—Rossiter at his heels.

333 gained more and more strength as the slight amount of tranquilizer serum that had entered her system wore off. She got up on her hind legs—went after them.

"Oh, *God*—she *coming*!" Rossiter cried, running as fast as she could.

"I've got a pistol in the HUMVEE!" Kervello cried.

"You were so damned sure of yourself—you didn't even bring it *with* you!" Rossiter retorted, panting.

During the final few minutes before they would reach the HUMVEE, 333 regained her strength.

"*Do* something—she's *gaining* on us!" Rossiter cried, looking back.

Kervello grabbed the gold door handle, opened the door, jumped in; closed it behind him.

333 was only a few feet from Rossiter—closing fast.

Doctor Rossiter saw how close 333 was behind her, quickly decided there was no alternative but to stop, face her. She whirled about—looked 333 right in her huge, brown eyes.

333 stopped in her tracks, dropped down to all fours, closed her snarling mouth; looked up at Doctor Rossiter for a second.

"You poor *thing*," Doctor Rossiter cooed. "What has that uncaring monster created? You're his *daughter*. He treats you like you're *garbage*."

333 didn't understand Rossiter's words, but fully understood the tone of her voice, and to Rossiter's surprise, 333 lowered herself onto her haunches, put her head on her paws; began purring.

Rossiter put her hand on 333's head, began to pet her, then carefully moved her hand to the dart in 333's shoulder. Rossiter hesitated. She didn't know whether 333 would attack if she tried to remove the dart. She decided to try, anyway. She slowly moved her hand closer and closer to the dart. 333 continued to purr. Doctor Rossiter removed the dart. 333 smiled—tears came to her big, brown eyes.

Rossiter found herself wiping a tear from her own eye.

Kervello had searched the HUMVEE for his pistol, had finally found it. He lowered the HUMVEE window, stuck his arm out—fired a random shot. 333 sprang to her feet; began running.

"Hey—you *crazy*? You'll hit *me*!" Rossiter shouted.

Kervello kept shooting until 333 had vanished out of sight in a hail of misdirected bullets. "Get *in*! Let's get the hell out of here!" Kervello cried.

Rossiter got into the driver's seat.

"That was a moving little display of *affection*," Kervello said, sarcastically. Then he lamented, "If *I'd* tried that—she'd have bitten my *head* off!"

"Then it's too bad you *didn't* try it!" she yelled. "You could have killed *me* out there—and you wouldn't have given one goddamn if you had—*would* you?"

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Kervello didn't reply. He just ran his forefinger across his thin mustache; waited for her to start the HUMVEE.

Chapter 45

The constable's office rang with chatter as the group of people sat around the huge plasma TV watching the news.

The announcer was saying, "...what you're seeing is a standoff between the Etherington police and the security guards of a building that, it has been learned, is owned and operated by a Professor Tyrone Kervello. The reason for the standoff is unclear at this time. Our correspondent, Wendy Walsh is there—Wendy what's going on?"

"As you can see, Jack, police have surrounded the building. There are seven floors above ground and some below! The battle between the police and building security guards—who are obstinately defending the building—for what reason, we have no idea—the battle's been raging for over an hour. As you can see, the police are in flak jackets—they've been trying to shoot tear-gas into the building, but apparently the windows are bullet-proof. It's not clear if employees are being held hostage inside, or not!"

"Have you any information about the owner—this Professor *Kervello*?"

"We only know he was once a professor of genetic engineering at the university here—back to you, Jack!"

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"It's the most bizarre standoff to ever take place in Etherington! In related news—another story has just come to our attention. According to Constable Alexander Mizzen, constable of the little village of Bear Skin about thirty miles northeast of here, a hybrid animal escaped a year ago from the building the police have surrounded. I say *hybrid* animal—according to the constable, it's—listen to this—part *cougar*—and part *human*! It's killed several people, including two assassins who were intent on killing the constable—one known as Hawk, another as Jake. According to the constable, Hawk and Jake were two of the employees, known as *associates*, who worked for Professor Tyrone Kervello, who—as I said earlier—is the owner of the building the police have surrounded. The constable also said three other Kervello associates were shot and killed by the constable and his deputies during a running gun battle. An associate named Jake got away and was later found—*decapitated*—presumably by the cougar-human hybrid. The constable said he was told the hybrid had escaped from the building about a year ago—and is known as Hybrid 333. The constable said that Professor Kervello—the photo on your screen was taken of Kervello when he was professor of genetic engineering at the university—disappeared from public view following his tenure at the university and hasn't been heard from by anyone at the university for years, a spokeswoman for the university told our correspondent. Now, we learn Kervello has apparently genetically created at least the one hybrid—the part-cougar part-human creature known as Hybrid 333 that escaped—and is still at large. We concluded that the building under siege must have one or more genetic laboratories in it.

As I said, the hybrid's latest victim was a Kervello associate, called Jake. According to the constable, the professor has a close accomplice—a redhead named Doctor Patricia Rossiter. The professor's been seen in Bear Skin using the alias, Doctor Paul, and his redhead accomplice has been using the alias Margo. They've been traveling in a crimson HUMVEE vehicle with gold door handles. They're both at large and considered *dangerous*! Anyone seeing someone in a HUMVEE of that description is asked to call the office of the constable of Bear Skin, or the Governor's office. Do not—I repeat—do *not* try to apprehend the fugitives yourself..."

Someone turned off the TV.

The mayor fluffed his magnificent beard. "Word is out that there's a very dangerous animal that has killed several people—and yet more and more people are flocking to Bear Skin every day," the mayor said. "It looks like that would keep them *away*!"

"People *love* danger," Constable Mizzen said. "They like to feel a part of it—not *too* close a part—but the *idea* of it you understand. TV brings fictitious danger to their homes every day, but there's nothing like the *real* thing. You can watch the powerful water falling at Niagara Falls up close on TV, but it's just not the same as getting in a boat and going right up under the falls—and feeling something might happen—and your boat might be drawn *into* the falls—see what I mean?"

"Well, constable, it looks like you finally got the news coverage the way you've been saying all along that it *should* be," a newsman said.

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"Yes, it's comforting to know there are news people who are *not* prone to such outlandish exaggeration as resorting to *Big-foot* and outer *space* aliens and the like—saying Bear Skin is covering up Bear Skin *murders*," the constable said.

"So, does that mean you're going to drop your lawsuit against the *Tribune*?" a man asked.

The coroner thought he recognized the man as a member of the *Tribune's* staff. The coroner piped, "Absolutely *not*. As a matter of fact, what you just saw on TV *strengthens* our case *considerably*! We're going to teach the *Tribune* they can't slander Bear Skin citizens and get away with it—it's going to cost them *plenty*!"

"So, constable—what's your plan for apprehending the *professor*?" a protester asked.

"I think I know a way to get a handle on where the professor, and that redhead—Doctor Rossiter are—if the *weather* gives me a break."

"Now that we're getting to the truth of what's going on in Bear Skin—what's the true story about the *Chambers* boy?" a newsman asked.

"According to his father, little Willy Chambers was in their house looking for his little dog. He thought it went outside, so he went out into the backyard looking for it. According to his father, Willy's mother heard Willy say 'nice kitty'. The father went looking for Willy, and was astonished to see him in the back yard dancing with the cougar-human—333," the constable said.

"They were actually *dancing*?" the newsman asked.

"Yes—they were dancing. My assistant, Rolf, took photographs of their tracks in the snow. They were dancing, all right."

"Amazing! So, this Hybrid 333 sometimes acts like a *human*!" the newsman exclaimed.

"Yes—specifically—like a six-year-old girl," the constable continued.

"It's a *she*?" someone asked, surprised.

"Yes," the constable said. "As I understand it—it's a young girl in a cougar's body."

There was an audible gasp.

"Even so—neither a healthy cougar nor a six-year-old child usually has the desire to attack and kill *people*!" a woman cried.

"True," the constable continued. "But 333 has a *motive*. You see, the last Kervello associate—who was planning to kill Wanda and I—*talked* before I shot him. He told us he had personally sexually abused Hybrid 333 while she was still in captivity at Professor Kervello's laboratories in Etherington. I informed the Governor, and that's what the police siege is all about."

"My *God*—sexually *abused* her! The poor *thing*—no wonder she's killing *men*," a woman cried.

"Yes—I've been trying to kill what I thought was a mad animal—I thought maybe a cougar with rabies—or *crazy*—something like that—but *I'm* having mixed emotions about Hybrid 333 now. On the one hand she's obviously a vicious *killer* that has to be stopped. On the other—she's apparently a little

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girl trapped in a cougar's body—no fault of her own—who has been horribly abused," the constable lamented.

"She obviously has a damned good reason for killing *men*!" an outraged woman cried.

"My plan now is to *catch* her, instead of killing her," the constable continued.

"And just how do you plan to do that? Nobody knows where she *is*!" a man said.

"Exactly!" the constable said, furling his mustache. "But first things, first. Capturing the *creator* of Hybrid 333—Kervello—and Kervello's accomplice, is my *first* priority."

"Back to something you said, constable," a newsman said. "You said the associate who planned to kill you and Wanda *talked* before you shot him. Does that mean you forced him to talk at gunpoint?"

"No, I didn't force him to talk. He had a sawed-off rifle with a silencer on it. He obviously thought he had complete control over us. He said he was going to kill us anyway, so it didn't matter, he said, if he told us why. He threatened to attack Wanda if we didn't name everybody who had ever seen Hybrid 333. We didn't give him any names, so he began to attack her—that's when I shot him."

"Lucky you had your gun handy," the newsman said.

"Lately, I keep it handy."

"Did the man who planned to kill you and Wanda say why this Professor Kervello *created* the cougar-human creature—this Hybrid 333—in the first place?" a newsman asked.

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"The would-be assassin said the professor created them for money. He said Hybrid 333 was not the professor's only creation. According to the assassin, the professor's created other hybrids and sold them to collectors—for millions of dollars," the constable said.

"Millions of *dollars*?" somebody repeated.

"The would-be assassin said he wanted to *kill* you and Wanda because you had both seen Hybrid 333, correct?" the newsman asked, flipping to a blank page of his notebook.

"Yes. He said the professor had ordered him to kill everyone who had ever actually seen Hybrid 333—I think that's how he put it," the constable said.

"Even little Willy *Chambers*?" a woman cried.

"I guess so," the constable answered.

Chapter 46

The crimson HUMVEE sped down out of the hills, onto the flat shore of Lake Cristal.

Doctor Rossiter was driving; eyes on the road.

The professor sat in the passenger seat watching satellite TV. "Damn!" he cried. "Can't those fools do *anything* right?"

"Your associates?"

"Yeah—my *associates*! They've let the cops get into my *building*! The *idiots*! Now, everybody'll know what I've been *doing*! My business is *ruined*! They won't let me sell my *masterpieces* anymore! My magnificent work will be all for *nothing*!"

"Well—the associates didn't have much choice. As soon as the vending machines ran out—no more *food*!" Rossiter suggested.

"The idiots *could* have held out longer! The human body doesn't become dysfunctional from dehydration for three weeks!"

"Not even with the water to the building shut *off*?"

"Not even! Now, those stupid news people will be all over my laboratories—taking pictures of my precious hybrids! My *frog-duck*—beautiful duckbill and green feathers—marvelous creature—and my *dog-sheep*—a *barking* sheep—a

miracle of genetic engineering if I say so myself! Look at the TV—they've got *cameras* inside my *laboratories*! Damn! There's my *buffalo*-lion!"

Doctor Rossiter stopped the HUMVEE so she could watch, too.

The police siege had just ended. As the professor and Doctor Rossiter watched, some of his associates were being led out of the Kervello Building in handcuffs.

"There's *Mart*!" the professor cried. "They got *Mart*! He's the best damned dietician in the whole *world*! It didn't matter *what* hybrid I created—he always knew exactly what to *feed* it!"

Rolf was driving the brand new emergency vehicle the Governor had issued to the constable. It was the latest thing out; long, fast, had a top end of a hundred and fifty miles an hour, power steering, cruise control, automatic transmission, power brakes; a satellite communication system.

"Driving this baby's not like man-handling your jeep," Rolf commented, happily.

An orange light lit up on the console. The constable flipped on the speaker. "Constable Mizzen here!"

"This is Captain Farnsworth!" His voice came through surprisingly crisp and clear, even over the background sound of beating rotor blades.

"Go ahead, captain!"

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"We've spotted a crimson HUMVEE! It's parked along the lake road near where Cherry Creek empties into Lake Cristal!"

"Good work! I know where that is! Thanks a million! We'll close in on it from down here!"

"Sure you don't want *aircraft* support—a tiny *missile* maybe in it's gas tank?" Farnsworth joked.

The constable chuckled. "No, I want to capture that SOB in one piece! Thanks, anyway!"

"Okay—Farnsworth out!"

The coroner's pipe smoke drifted on behind him through the metal grating that separated the prisoner section from the double cab. "Damned nice of the Governor to buy you a new vehicle, Alexander."

"Yeah. I suppose he thought I might need something besides my jeep, the way Bear Skin's growing."

"You don't think it might have something to do with national publicity and the fact that the Governor's up for reelection, do you?"

The constable smiled broadly, laughed. "I suppose that *could* be it."

"Do you think the professor will put up a fight when we catch up to him?" Rolf asked.

"I *expect* him to put up a fight. After all the assassins he's sent out—I suspect he won't come along *peacefully*," the constable said.

"We're about to find out," Rolf said. "There's the *HUMVEE* up ahead."

The professor and Rossiter were watching TV so intently they didn't notice the constable's vehicle come to a stop a discreet distance behind them.

The constable, Rolf and the coroner quietly got out of the fancy paddy wagon.

The constable drew his .44, led the way towards the HUMVEE.

Rolf and Herr Öffner drew their pistols, followed closely behind.

The constable ducked down, eased his way to the passenger's door, grabbed the handle—jerked the door open. Opening the door put the constable momentarily slightly off-balance. He involuntarily lowered his pistol to balance himself again.

Surprised at the sudden intrusion, the professor let out a sharp cry, grabbed up his pistol from the seat beside him; stuck it in the constable's face—pulled the trigger, *click*—no explosion—no molten lead churned through the constable's brain.

The professor hadn't noticed he'd used up all his bullets shooting at 333. The next second, he was looking down the large barrel of the constable's .44.

"*Step out of the vehicle!*" the constable ordered.

Rolf opened the driver's door. "You, *too*, ma'am!"

The professor groaned as he stepped down out of the HUMVEE. The coroner snapped on cuffs; read him his rights.

"You can't arrest *me*—what's the *charge*?" the professor squeaked. "You'll *regret* this! Yes—you'll regret this *very* much! I always retain the best legal staff on the planet!"

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"For the moment—the charge is attempting to shoot an officer of the law," the constable said. "And I might mention that—if your legal staff was in the Kervello building in Etherington—they have probably been arrested by now like everybody *else* in that building! Come along with me!"

"You'll have the honor of being the first prisoner to ride in the constable's new *paddy* wagon," the coroner quipped, taking a draw on his pipe.

Rolf reluctantly read Doctor 'Margo' Rossiter her rights. Despite her evil involvement, he couldn't bring himself to hate her. He still saw her as a marvelous sex kitten. He couldn't help but admire the cut of her jib as he cuffed her lovely wrists.

"What are you *charging* me with?" Rossiter asked.

"Aiding and abetting!" Rolf said.

"*Tyrone* was the one who attempted to shoot the constable—not *me*!" she purred.

"Oh, you're not charged with *that*. I'm sure you remember dancing with me at the *Butterfly* Festival? You're charged with aiding and abetting, for telling the professor what I told you while we were dancing; about where the constable and Wanda were going to be the next day—out on Lake Cristal in the constable's sailboat—so that assassin could pick them off with a sniper rifle from the top of Catherine's *Point*!" Rolf said. "You took me for a fool—and I fell for it!"

"You can't make an aiding and abetting charge stick!" Rossiter said.

"Oh, I think we *can*. I think the professor will spill his guts and implicate you," Rolf said. "And there's the circumstan-

tial evidence. You tapped me for information about the constable's movements. The next day, the constable is shot at from the top of Catherine's Point by one of the professor's 'associates'. I think a judge will find *that* compelling evidence!"

They loaded the professor and Rossiter into the prisoner compartment behind the metal screen in the emergency vehicle.

"Herr Öffner can drive. I'll take the passenger seat and keep an eye on our guests," the constable said. "Rolf, do you think you can drive a *HUMVEE*?"

"I'll give it a try," Rolf said.

The professor grunted disapprovingly.

It was still early afternoon when they arrived in Bear Skin. It seemed that everyone had learned what was going on and had gathered on Beaver Street: dogs, cats, news people, protesters, tourists; curious Bear Skin citizens.

The coroner pulled the fancy paddy wagon up in front of the constable's office. The constable and coroner got out. Rolf parked the *HUMVEE*, joined them.

"Is this the infamous mad professor—who created Hybrid 333?" a newswoman asked.

"He's that professor—*greedy*—but not *mad*!" the constable replied.

"Where are you *taking* them?" a protester cried.

"We're taking them to jail in Etherington," the constable said. "I hope you protesters are satisfied now!"

"Not until the cougar-human—333—is captured or killed!" the protester cried.

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"Are you taking them to Etherington in your emergency vehicle?" a woman asked.

"No—by train. I want everyone to get a good look at the creator of Hybrid 333," the constable said.

"What's Hybrid 333?" a man asked.

"You probably know of Hybrid 333 as the cougar-human—cougar-girl, actually," the coroner said.

"What do you mean—cougar-girl?" the man asked.

"I don't have time to go into that right now," the coroner said.

Wanda came dashing out of the constable's office carrying an overnight bag. "They're running a special train for you—just the engine, one passenger car, caboose. It's waiting at the platform now," she said, straightening her hair. "I packed a few things for us!"

"What do you mean—*us*?" the constable asked.

"I'm going *with* you," she said.

The constable smiled. "Rolf—impound the HUMVEE. Stay here—keep the office open," the constable said. "We'll be back tomorrow," and then he asked, "Herr Öffner, do you want to go to Etherington *with* us?"

"No...I have a lot of work to do in Prescott," the coroner feigned, smiled, relit his pipe.

Chapter 47

A long, vigorous waterfall was cascading down the mountainside into a beautiful, blue gossamer, mist-shrouded pool. The roar of the plummeting water created a mantle of hypnotic harmony.

Rolf and Ingrid sat on a picnic blanket alongside the pool. The fronds of a nearby large fern spread out like delicate, green-feathered fans as if to protect the lovers from nature's view. From somewhere in the nearby trees, a mountain bluebird tried to raise its *chur-chur-cha-chur* song above the sound of the waterfall.

Rolf reached into a small cooler, brought out a bottle of champagne.

"Oh," Ingrid cried, "what's the special *occasion*?"

"Do we need a special occasion?" Rolf asked, looking for the corkscrew. "What did I do with the *cork* remover?"

"Maybe it's in the picnic basket."

He found it, stabbed the bottle's cork with vigor. "There!" he said, with considerable satisfaction in his voice. "Where are those plastic champagne glasses?"

Her delicately tanned hands produced two, held them out to him.

He twisted the corkscrew, pulled the cork out a ways; urged it the rest of the way out with his thumbs. The cork made

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an explosive *pop* as it shot out of the bottle's neck. Ingrid gave a little cry, smiled broadly. With her golden hair framing her face in the sunshine, Rolf thought she must look like an angel.

"You still haven't said what the occasion for *champagne* is! Wine or beer on a picnic I can understand—but *champagne*? How can you afford champagne, anyway?"

He poured the cold, bubbling champagne into the plastic glasses. "*Thorndike Bed and Breakfast* dividends, sweetheart. Here's to *us*!" he said, touching his glass to hers.

"The bubbles tickle my nose!" she cried, as she drank down all of her champagne.

He finished his, put down his glass. "I have a little something *for* you," he said, reaching into the pocket of his jacket that was lying by his rifle on the blanket. He brought out a little black box, handed it to her.

She dropped her glass. Her eyes sparkled as she took the box, excitedly flipped open the top.

"Oh, *Rolf*—it's a beautiful *engagement* ring!"

He smiled. "*You're* the one who's *beautiful*!" he said, tenderly kissing her cheek.

She removed the ring from its case. It had a large diamond with smaller rubies around it, all inset in white gold. She handed it to him; extended her left hand. "It's *lovely*! *You* put it on my finger!"

He took her hand in his, slipped the sparkling ring onto her finger, leaned over, firmly kissed her ready, damp lips, slipped his hand up under her light-yellow dress; felt her warm

golden, satin fleece through her skimpy bikini panties that she wore for him; in one quick easy motion—stripped them off.

Her eyes became glassy as she melted into his arms.

When they awoke from their short nap, the sun was directly overhead, a bald eagle circled high above.

"I don't ever want this day to end," she said.

"It doesn't *have* to. Night will come, followed by another day, but we can stay in love, forever."

"Do you ever think about *her*?"

"Who?"

"*Margo*, of course!"

"Her name really isn't Margo—it's Doctor Patricia Ros-siter."

"Well—*do* you?"

"Do I *what*?"

"Do you ever *think* of her?"

"No—of *course* not. She's in jail in Etherington. She helped the professor send those assassins out to kill the constable—and Wanda. And if they hadn't been stopped, they would have come after *us*. They were going to kill everyone who had ever *seen* Hybrid 333."

"Oh, Rolf—do you think the assassins are *all* dead? The associates, I mean. Maybe they'll try to kill little *Willy*!"

"You know about the *associates*?"

"Sure, it was all on the TV news in the constable's office," she said. "I know about Hybrid 333, too. I know she killed a lot of people, but I can't help feeling sorry for her. She's

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really just a little *girl* trapped in a *cougar* body. They should take that professor—and that redheaded assistant of his and—"

Rolf stopped her words with a kiss. "Hungry?"

"I could eat a *bear*," she said, pulling the picnic basket closer to her.

"Well—I'm sure there's a bear close around here somewhere."

They laughed.

"What's your favorite piece?" she asked, bringing out a fried chicken drumstick.

"*You* are!" he said.

Her face flushed. "Oh, you—always thinking of *sex*. I mean, piece of *chicken*."

"The breast, I think. I like the thigh, too, though!"

She handed him a thigh.

"How did you get away from your mother long enough to come on a picnic?" he asked, biting into the chicken.

"I told her I was going to spend the day with Trendy." A squirrel chattered. "I don't know why mama hates you so much," she said, scooping potato salad onto a paper plate. She put a plastic fork with it; handed it to him.

"I think it's because you're all she *has*. She's afraid I'll take you away from her."

"Well, that would go for anyone I could have met—not that I would ever fall in love with anybody but *you*," she hurriedly added. "When can we get *married*, Rolf?" she purred.

"I'm saving up my dividend money. We can't just keep driving my old truck. I want a *new* one—and I want to be able to

buy you all kinds of nice clothes—beautiful dresses—things like that."

"Oh, you're so sweet, Rolf. I can hardly wait 'til we can be together—have our own place."

"That's *another* thing I'm saving up for—our own place. I don't want to rent," he said, taking another piece of chicken out of the basket.

"You can't plan on the *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast* lasting forever. Sure, it's making good money, now—while all these curious people are in the village, but when they leave—"

"The constable doesn't think Bear Skin will dry up after Hybrid 333 is stopped. He thinks it'll become a very popular tourist village."

"Tourist *trap*."

"Yeah, but people need to have fun somehow—and the constable said, with the population increase, he'll need to add one or two more people to our staff—and he said I'd be in *charge* of them. That means a pay increase and the title of deputy *constable*. How does *that* sound—Deputy Constable Arbeiter?" he said, taking a bite of potato salad.

"Oh, *Rolf*," that'll be *wonderful*!" she cried. "And I'll be *Mrs.* Deputy Constable Arbeiter!"

He laughed, gave her a peck on the cheek; grabbed his rifle, quickly brought the butt of it to his shoulder, aimed. "*POW—!*" he said.

"What *is* it? Is it Hybrid 333?" Ingrid cried, alarmed.

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He laughed, laid the rifle back down. "It's nothing. I was just sighting in on a squirrel—just practicing to see how fast I could do it—in case Hybrid 333 jumps out of the bushes."

"*Oh*, you almost made me wet my *panties*!"

He leaned over, kissed her. "You don't *have* any panties *on*."

"Oh, Rolf—I love you so much..."

They made love again.

"We better get you back before your mother goes looking for you," he said.

"Oh, Rolf—I'll always remember this day—this place. This will be *our* place, *forever*," she sighed.

He kissed her.

They loaded their things into his truck. She snuggled up against him; began their journey back to Bear Skin.

Ingrid saw Rolf glance into the rearview mirror. "What is it?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing. I thought I saw something orange. I don't see it anymore."

"Probably just flowers," she said, taking his free arm in hers.

"You make it hard to drive," he said, jovially.

"I can make it *harder*!" she said, smiling.

Hybrid 333 came out of the edge of the undergrowth near the pool; watched their truck disappear down the road.

DON LEWIS WIREMAN, SR.

She could have attacked when they were asleep, but Ingrid's female aroma had kept her from it.

She sniffed the ground where they'd had their picnic; picked up the light scent on the ground of Ingrid's perfume, of fried chicken, of champagne; decided she liked all those smells.

Then her nose picked up the odor of *sex*; drove her frantic, enraged. She slowly raised herself up onto her hind legs, pawed the air—let out a blood-curdling *scream*!

Chapter 48

The special train, carrying Constable Mizzen, Wanda, and the handcuffed prisoners: Professor Tyrone Kervello and Doctor Patricia Rossiter; plus many curious passengers, had taken fifty-seven minutes to diesel it's way from Bear Skin to Etherington.

There, as prearranged by the constable via cell phone, Etherington police had come aboard, had taken the professor and Rossiter away to jail amid the applause of the inquisitive passengers.

As the constable and Wanda were standing on the sidewalk in front of the Etherington train station, a police car pulled up to the curb in front of them. A young, stiff-backed, uniformed police officer wearing glasses got out; walked up to them. "I'm Officer Maxwell. I'll be your driver while you're in Etherington," he said. "Where would you like to go, Constable Mizzen?"

"To the building where the police siege took place," the constable replied.

The officer put Wanda's bag in the trunk. They all got into the police cruiser.

As they passed a statue of a man on a horse in the middle of the street, Wanda asked, "Were you at the *siege*, Officer Maxwell?"

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"Yes. At first, I wasn't one of those assigned to go inside. I helped handle prisoners and hostages as they came out of the building. Later, the inspector took a few of us down into the laboratories."

"Who were the hostages?" the constable asked.

"Employees of the professor," Officer Maxwell said.

"Wasn't *everybody* in the building an employee of the professor?" Wanda asked.

"Yes, but the professor had a special group called his *associates*, who were very loyal to him. The associates took the secretaries and other employees hostage as soon as the fight for the building broke out."

Officer Maxwell turned onto Washington Boulevard.

"From what we saw on TV, it was quite a shootout," Wanda said.

"Yes, ma'am. That's some building. The windows are bulletproof," Officer Maxwell said. "We tried firing teargas. It just bounced off."

"How did you get in?" the constable asked.

"A SWAT team finally got on the roof and put teargas into the air conditioning ducts."

"Was anyone hurt?" Wanda asked.

"Three policemen were killed. I don't know how many of the associates were killed."

"Do you think we can go inside the building?" Wanda asked.

"I don't see why not. They've ventilated it. There was some concern that the hybrids—the strange creatures down in

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the basement laboratories—might become suffocated from tear-gas—so, as soon as the building was evacuated of people, huge fans were used to clear the air in the entire building."

"So, you went in and saw the *hybrids*?" the constable asked.

"Yes, I was with the group that took the first news people down to photograph them. Those things down there are really *weird*. Have you seen any of them on TV?"

"A few. The ones we saw on TV were very strange," the constable agreed.

"Won't the hybrids *starve*?" Wanda asked. "They must need special *food*."

"The *inspector* thought of that right away. He found out that some guy named Mart had been the professor's hybrid dietician. The inspector got a judge to grant Mart immunity from prosecution if he'd continue to feed the hybrids. The problem is—now the State has to foot the bill for taking care of them until somebody decides what to do with them."

Officer Maxwell parked the police car in a parking slot. They got out. There were several police cruisers parked outside the building, a guard at the door.

"This is Constable Mizzen of Bear Skin," Officer Maxwell explained to the police guard.

The constable showed his credentials.

The guard waived them through. They went inside.

"Wow!" Wanda cried. "Marble *floors*! Gold *everywhere*!"

"As amazing as it is, the fixtures really *are* solid gold, not just *plated*," Officer Maxwell added.

"Wow—solid *gold*!" Wanda cried. "And look—*crystal* chandeliers. The professor sure liked *luxury*—no *wonder* he drove a HUMVEE with gold door handles!"

"Where to, from here?" Officer Maxwell asked.

"Down to the *laboratories*," the constable said. "I want to see what the *fuss* is all about."

Officer Maxwell pressed an elevator button. They waited. The elevator finally reached their floor, door opened, empty. The three stepped in, the door closed.

When the elevator door opened again, they stepped out onto a laboratory floor—into a cacophony of sounds.

"I hear a *dog* barking!" Wanda said.

"*You'll* be surprised what that is. Let me *show* you," Officer Maxwell said. "Come this way."

They came to a huge cage containing, what the tag on the cage said was hyena-lioness 243. The hybrid in the cage occasionally let out a staccato roar, like it was in a hurry to finish roaring and get onto the next one. It had an ugly, hyena-like face, mottled brownish-black hair, as opposed to the splendid golden coat of a lion. It had the tail and feet of a lion. Its beady, black eyes stared back at them. The vicious, exposed fangs; salivation of its hideous, protruding mouth proclaimed its desire to attack.

They walked on. The next cage contained what the tag said was buffalo-lion 167. The animal inside was huge. It had

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tightly curled, yellow-orange hair, a humped back, lion's eyes, hooves, and what looked like an attempt at growing horns.

Then they came to the cage that contained what was doing all the barking.

"Good *God*—it's a barking *sheep*!" the constable exclaimed.

"The tag says *dog-sheep 059*," Wanda said.

"See the man in the white frock?" Officer Maxwell asked.

"I see him," the constable answered.

"He's the dietician I was telling you about. His name is Mart. He's coming this way."

"Would you tell him I'd like to speak with him?" the constable asked.

Officer Maxwell had a word with the dietician and presently returned with him.

"This is Constable Mizzen," Officer Maxwell said to the dietician by way of introduction.

"And this is Wanda *Hammel*, my fiancée," the constable said.

"Nice to meet you both! I'm Mart," the dietician said.

The dietician was a short, wiry little man with reddish-yellow hair. He reminded the constable of sheriff Atridge in a way. His white frock almost touched the floor.

"I understand you worked for Professor Kervello," the constable said.

"Yeah, I worked for him."

"It must require a lot of knowledge and experience to know what to feed all of these different kinds of hybrid *animals*," Wanda said.

"Yeah, I suppose. I'm a graduate veterinarian. I specialized in dietetics at the university."

"The university here in Etherington?" the constable asked.

"Yeah."

"Is that where you met Professor Kervello?" the constable asked.

"I won't answer that without an attorney present," the dietician said.

"Why not? I understand you're immune from prosecution," the constable said.

"That's a laugh. I'm immune from prosecution by the State, but nobody's immune from prosecution by Professor Kervello. He's filthy rich from selling hybrid animals. He's a billionaire. Money will buy the death of anybody, if it's put into the right hands."

"You mean—he'd have you *killed*?" Wanda asked.

"After he had me thoroughly tortured, first."

"Did you know Hybrid 333?" the constable asked.

"I guess I can answer that. Yeah, I knew her. I fed her every day. I loved that cougar-girl. She could be vicious—like the cougar—or the mountain lion, which is the same thing as a cougar—on her mother's side. Or she could be very gentle. She hated the associates."

"Why?" Wanda asked.

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"I won't answer that outside a court of law. Let me just say they didn't treat her very nice."

"Was she the only hybrid that was part human?" the constable asked.

"Yes."

"What did you feed her?" Wanda asked.

"Raw meat. I don't think her human side liked it, but her system tolerated it well."

"Did you ever feed her *brains*?" the constable asked.

"I never did, but whenever a hybrid would die—sometimes from old age, or disease, or on purpose—the professor would excise the brains and feed them to Hybrid 333."

"Did you say—some died—on *purpose*?" Wanda asked.

"Yeah. The professor created some of the hybrids for fighting to the death."

"My God," Wanda gasped.

"For example?" the constable asked.

"For example, Amazon *roosters*."

"Amazon roosters?" Wanda repeated.

"Yeah. The professor created Amazon roosters by somehow combining the genes from the brain of the Amazon piranha fish with the genes of the Mexican fighting cock. The result was a vicious fighting rooster—with *teeth*—and the flesh-eating disposition of a *piranha*."

"What did the professor *do* with them?" the constable asked.

"Sold them to somebody in Asia. Over there, they bet on which one will kill the other one first, you know."

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"Did you ever see two of the Amazon roosters fight?" Wanda asked.

"Yeah. The professor expended a pair that he could have sold for several million dollars. The fight was a horrible sight, actually. They ate each other—violently—blood and feathers flying everywhere. It was all over in a few minutes. I'm *talking* too much. The professor will have me killed."

"For what it's worth—the professor's in jail," the constable said.

"It doesn't matter if he's in jail or not. If he wants me dead—he'll have me *killed*!"

"In that case, I'll not detain you any longer. I'm sure it will all come out in court," the constable said.

The dietician bowed slightly and went on about his work.

Chapter 49

Following their visit to the laboratories, the constable had Officer Maxwell take he and Wanda to Hotel Natasha.

"Is there a good restaurant nearby?" the constable asked Officer Maxwell.

"There's what some consider to be a five-star Chinese restaurant, just a couple of blocks to the west of the hotel. There's the Lake Cristal yacht pier restaurant within walking distance—a little pricey, a coat and tie place, but it has great atmosphere. There's the mall with restaurants, just across the street from the hotel. Etherington has a lot of nice restaurants; most are along the waterfront. I'd be glad to drive you anywhere you'd like to go," Officer Maxwell offered.

"Thanks, but we'll be on our own from now on. Thanks for all your trouble," the constable said.

"Are you leaving tomorrow?"

"Yes," the constable said, "we're catching the train back to Bear Skin tomorrow, after we explore Etherington."

"If you'd like me to take you to the train station tomorrow—"

"No, we'll grab a cab. Thanks for the tour of the laboratories. That was a once in a lifetime experience—I hope!" the constable said.

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"Here's our number at the police station—just in case you need help for any reason," Officer Maxwell said, handing the constable a card.

"Thanks again," the constable said, as he and Wanda exited the vehicle.

Officer Maxwell got Wanda's bag out of the trunk. The constable took it. Officer Maxwell got back into the cruiser; took off.

The constable and Wanda checked in, got separate rooms in Hotel Natasha.

A porter took the bag.

They all got on the elevator.

A tall black man in a classy brown suit, diamond tiepin, shiny brown shoes got on with them, porter pressed a button; waited. The elevator stopped at the third floor, porter got off. The constable and Wanda followed, classy black man stayed on, door closed.

"Did you see that *diamond*?" Wanda cried.

"I saw it," the constable said.

The porter took them to their adjacent rooms.

"Who gets the *luggage*?" the porter asked.

"The lady," the constable answered.

The porter opened the door of Wanda's room, inspected it, set the luggage on the luggage stand.

"Oh—a *view*!" she cried, as she looked out the window towards the lake.

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"An excellent view, ma'am," the porter said, turned, went back out into the hallway where the constable was waiting.

"Alexander, I'll see you in a little while," she called.

"I'll meet you here in twenty minutes," the constable answered.

"In the hallway?" Wanda asked.

"In the hallway. We're going shopping, before dinner."

Wanda closed her door.

The porter inspected the constable's room. Satisfied, he turned to leave.

"Here you go," the constable said, handing him a twenty.

"Oh, that's *way* too much," the porter said.

"I don't get to the city much, so I can afford to tip well, when I do," the constable said. "And besides—*discretion* is the word, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, yes, sir, of course, you and the lady—same hotel," the porter said, his black face glistening mischievously, eyes twinkling.

"This mall is *huge*," Wanda cried, as they stood looking over a decorative wood rail at the two, huge, busy floors below.

Carnival music was playing. A merry-go-round full of delighted children was whirling around far below.

They saw people carrying packages, window-shopping.

"You haven't told me why we came to the mall," Wanda said.

"For one thing, to get some appropriate attire for dinner," the constable said.

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"And for *another* thing?"

"For another thing—to get you an *engagement* ring."

"Oh, Alexander, can it really be *happening*? I've been hoping you would say that—for so *long*!"

He smiled at her. They kissed.

Some dresses caught his eye. They stopped in front of a clothing display window. "What do you think?" he asked.

"I like that off-lavender evening dress in the window," she said.

They went in. A young lady came up to them. "May I help you?"

"The lady is looking for an outfit that would be appropriate for dining at the yacht pier restaurant. Dress—shoes—the works."

Wanda squeezed his hand.

"Yes *sir*! Please come this way, miss."

Wanda smiled at the constable, went with the clerk.

The constable sat down, watched as Wanda tried on dresses; paraded them in front of him. She finally found one she liked. "Will *this* one do?" Wanda asked.

It was similar to the one they'd seen in the display window.

"Perfect!" the constable agreed.

The constable purchased the dress, a matching purse, shoes; incidentals. They left the store.

They eventually came upon a men's clothing store.

The constable bought a Western-style suit, tie, shoes; handkerchiefs.

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They found a luggage shop. He purchased a suitcase for their new clothes.

Then they found a jewelry store. He bought her a fabulous diamond ring set in platinum.

"Oh, honey—it's *terribly* expensive!"

The constable smiled; gave the jeweler a nod.

The jeweler sized it to her finger, put it in a satin-lined case. The constable slipped it into his pocket.

They returned to the hotel, took showers in separate rooms, dressed, met in the hallway as planned.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Starved!"

"You look *great*!" he said.

"*You're* the most handsome *cock* on the *walk*," she replied, laughing as she ran her fingers along his lapel.

"You're the most beautiful lady in all the *West*!"

"What about all the *East*?"

"There, too," he said.

"I see why you decided on a Western-style suit."

"Why?"

"So your .44 would look natural hanging on the side."

"Well—*does* my .44 look natural hanging on my side?"

"Yeah—that's what I mean—it looks natural with your Western suit—hanging on your hip like that."

They strolled down the sidewalk that ran in front of Hotel Natasha—on around the corner, onto a street that wound its way

down to the shore of Lake Cristal; then along it into a spacious park.

"There's a *doe* and her *fawn*!" Wanda cried.

As they walked along, she got a cosmetic case out of her new purse; began applying eye shadow under her eyes.

Then, in her mirror, she noticed a man.

"There's a black man behind us. I think he's following us. He might be the same one who was in the elevator. You remember—the one with the diamond tiepin."

"I remember. What makes you think he's *following* us?"

"He's not gaining on us, or dropping behind. He's just keeping the same *pace*."

"Maybe he's just going to dinner, like *we* are," the constable suggested.

"Maybe—maybe not."

"Let's find out."

"How?"

"We'll walk in a large circle—back around towards the way we came. If he still follows us—we'll know."

They began walking a circuitous route, but the black man continued to follow.

"Oh, *God*—you don't think the professor sent another of his assassins to *kill* us, do you," she whispered.

"If so, he won't get the job done—if *I* can help it. I have an idea," he whispered.

"Yes."

"See that picnic table up ahead. A shrub covers the view of part of it. We'll sit at the table. I'll sit on the side the shrub

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covers the view of. You sit on the other side, where the man can see you. We start talking. You keep on talking—like I'm still there talking to you. I'll slip around and get behind him."

They sat at the table, started talking, and, as planned, the constable slipped off into the shrubs, circled around the black man—came up behind him, stuck his .44 under the black man's ribs. The black man threw his hands into the air. The small camera he had been holding went flying. "Don't *shoot*! Take my wallet—but don't *shoot*!"

"Who *are* you?" the constable demanded.

"Raymond Flattower—a reporter for the *Etherington Tribune*!"

"So, you've been following me and my lady friend—trying to get some *dirt* on us?"

"My boss found out you was in town—said to trail you—take pictures—something about a counter suit. That's all I know about it. Please—don't shoot!"

The constable slipped his .44 back into its holster, found the camera in the grass, picked it up, tried to open it, remove the film. "What kind of camera *is* this? It doesn't have any *film*," the constable asked.

"It's *digital*—doesn't use film."

Wanda came running up to them.

"He says he's been taking pictures of us with this camera—for his boss at the *Tribune*. I can't figure out how to get the *pictures* out of the damned thing!"

Wanda laughed. "That's a *digital* camera," she said. "Give it to me."

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The constable handed it to her. She flipped open one end, pulled out the memory card; closed it again.

"*This* has all the pictures in it," she said, putting it into her purse.

"You can't take *that*—it's *expensive*—my boss will *kill* me!" the black man said.

"Either him or me—take your choice," the constable countered.

The black man cringed. "Okay—okay! Are you going to *arrest* me?"

"No, you got lucky. I'm on my way to have a special dinner with my lady—otherwise, I would—and tell your boss if he *sics* any more reporters on us—I might mistake them for one of the professor's assassins—like I almost did *you*—and put a large hole through them with my .44—*get* all that?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You can go now," the constable said.

Harbor light reflections danced in the placid, sunset-painted water, like magic marionettes.

Hundreds of yachts were moored along the pier, their masts silhouetting skyward.

"It's an enchanting evening," Wanda cried, as they stepped onto the long, yacht pier.

They could see people in silhouette, fishing at the end of the pier. Others were strolling along it.

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As they entered the tantalizingly smelling restaurant, a host in a tuxedo greeted them crisply. "Do you have reservations?"

"Yes, I called earlier from the hotel. The name is *Mizzen*," the constable said.

The stuffy host checked the reservation registry. "Yes, Mr. Mizzen—please come this way."

"It's *Constable* Mizzen, actually," the constable said.

"Yes, of course," the host said, in his driest voice. Then he hesitated, realized. "Oh, good *Lord*—you're the Constable *Mizzen* in the *news*! Oh, I'm *so* sorry—I got *carried* away. I almost *never* do that!"

"That's okay," the constable said, a thin smile on his lips. "Yes, I'm he."

"So glad to meet you, constable. This is your table. Enjoy your dinner," the host said, bowing and scraping, obviously still embarrassed. "Your waitress will be with you in just a minute!"

"Thank you," the constable said, as the host seated them; left.

"The tablecloth and napkins are pure *linen*," Wanda whispered.

A waitress, wearing a short, black evening dress with a white apron, came to their table, handed them menus.

"Oh—my *God*—*Vicky*! Is it really *you*?" Wanda cried.

"Oh, for the love of Pete—*Wanda*?" the spindly-legged waitress cried. Then realizing they were creating a spectacle, put

her fingertips to her lips. "Oops—I'm supposed to be *dignified*," she whispered, blue eyes sparkling with excitement.

"It's so marvelous to see you again," Wanda said.

"I hardly recognized you in that beautiful outfit," Vicky said.

"Well, I seldom get to the big city—just dropping off some *prisoners*," Wanda chimed, "and maybe getting *engaged*! Oh, where *are* my manners! Vicky, this is my fiancé, the Honorable Alexander Mizzen, constable of Bear Skin. Alexander, this is Vicky Spears. We went to high school together in Prescott!"

"A pleasure to meet you," the constable said, smiled.

"I've seen your picture on TV. I'm a *fan* of yours!" Vicky said, with obvious delight. "I'd love to talk to you both all evening—but I'd get fired. Would you like some more time to decide?"

"Yes," the constable said, picking up his menu.

Vicky disappeared.

"It's right damned nice to be the one waited *on* for a change," Wanda chimed, picking up her menu.

At her remark, a couple at a nearby table quickly put their heads together, began whispering.

Vicky returned with a dozen beautiful, fresh, red roses, arranged in a crystal vase, set them in the center of the table. "Compliments of the house!" she said, smiling, bowed slightly, backed away, disappeared again.

Strains of Frank singing *You are the Sunshine of My Life* filled the restaurant.

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The constable didn't hesitate a second. He felt the time was right. He got up from his chair, went to Wanda's side of the table—dropped to one knee on the plush carpet.

"I've been in love with you from the first moment I laid eyes on you," he said. "I'll try to make you a good husband. Wanda—will you marry me?"

Tears came to her eyes. "Oh—yes—yes, Alexander—yes!"

He took the ring from his pocket, slipped it on her finger.

With tears running down both cheeks, she gently tugged his beard to her; gave him a long, passionate kiss.

The applause was deafening. The place went wild.

The room filled with tiny pink balloons.

A waiter, dressed to the teeth, brought an iced-down bottle of champagne in a silver bucket, sat it on a tripod next to the table.

Vicky brought them crystal champagne glasses.

Amid a standing ovation, the waiter popped the cork, poured the cold bubbly.

The constable stood, sat down on his chair. "To a long and happy married life!" he said, dinging Wanda's glass with his.

"To *us*!" she cried.

Then—*without warning*—shots rang out! The window near them disintegrated. Glass exploded everywhere.

"Get *down*—! Everybody—get *down*!" the constable cried, wielding his .44 as he dashed out the restaurant exit into the parking lot.

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He saw a gray sedan speeding away. A pistol popped out of its passenger window; fired at him. The constable took careful aim—*bam—bam—bam*—put three holes in the trunk of the speeding car. It careened out of sight.

He ran back into the restaurant. "Is everybody *okay*?"

No one said they weren't. A few were still scrambling out from under tables.

He took Wanda's hand; quickly escorted her out of the restaurant.

Five police cars screeched to a stop in front of the place. Uniformed police were suddenly everywhere.

A police cruiser pulled up alongside the constable and Wanda.

"Are you all right?" a familiar voice asked. It was Officer Maxwell. "Get in."

"Yeah, we're okay," the constable said, opening the door for Wanda.

They got in, closed the door.

"That was a close one," Officer Maxwell said, beginning to drive off.

"Yes. *Too* close!" the constable agreed. "I put three bullet holes in the trunk of the drive-by vehicle—a gray sedan. That's all I could tell about it."

Officer Maxwell got on the radio; put out an APB for a gray sedan with three bullet holes in its trunk.

"Where are you taking us?" Wanda asked.

"We're going to cordon off your hotel. You'll be safe there tonight. Or, you can spend the night at the police station."

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"The *hotel* will be just fine," the constable said. "I appreciate you all going to so much trouble."

"Oh—you haven't seen my *engagement* ring, Officer Maxwell," Wanda cried, proudly putting her hand where he could see her sparkler.

"Congratulations!" Officer Maxwell said. "You make a handsome couple!"

"Thanks," Wanda said, sitting back in her seat, proud as a peacock.

A room service delivery boy wheeled a service cart into the constable's room.

"Since we didn't get a chance to toast our engagement," the constable said. "I took the liberty of ordering champagne and caviar."

The constable tipped the delivery boy a twenty. The boy left, smiling broadly. As he left, the constable happened to see the hand and sleeve of a uniformed policeman standing in the hallway just outside his room.

Wanda looked at the crystal bowl of caviar and crystal plate of crackers. "I've never had *caviar* before. How do you go about *eating* the stuff? What is it, anyway? It looks like *berry* seeds."

"I never have had it, either. It's fish eggs—cured sturgeon eggs from Russia, I believe," the constable said, working the cork on the champagne bottle. "I thought we'd give it a try. I've heard it's the romantic thing to do!"

"Oh, Alexander—you've made me so happy!"

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The cork suddenly exploded out of the bottle. They both jumped, laughed.

"Too bad we're not *nervous*," Wanda cried.

They laughed again.

The constable filled two champagne glasses, handed one to her.

"Where were we—before we were so *rudely* interrupted?" the constable asked. Then he answered his own question. "Oh, yes—the toast—to a long and happy married life," he said, raising his glass.

Their glasses made a delicate musical tone as they came together.

"To *us*!" she said.

They kissed.

"Well, let's give this caviar a try. I suppose we spread it on a cracker, like jam," she said, taking a cracker and spreading caviar on it with a silver, broad bladed knife. "Open *up*!"

She popped the cracker into his mouth.

His face turned red from revulsion of the caviar, but he said nothing. He quickly washed it down with champagne.

"I see you *love* the stuff!" she said, laughing. She spread caviar onto another cracker. "*Your* turn to do *me*!"

He took the cracker from her; popped it into her mouth.

She forced it down with champagne. "*Yuck!* That's the damndest thing I've *ever* tasted!" she cried.

He laughed. "Indeed, it *is*!" he agreed.

He refilled their glasses.

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Smiling, they drank their champagne, began peeling off each other's new clothes.

Chapter 50

The constable and Wanda sat drinking coffee in the hotel café. A uniformed policeman sat nearby.

A paperboy came through selling papers. The constable bought a *Tribune*. The headline read: BEAR SKIN CONSTABLE HOLDS TRIBUNE REPORTER AT GUN POINT.

"Those *bastards*!" Wanda exclaimed.

"I suspected something like that!" the constable said. "They're trying every trick in the book to try to beat our libel and slander lawsuit against the *Tribune*."

"You don't think the *Tribune* is behind the drive-by shooting," Wanda said.

"No. I don't think the *Tribune* would go *that* far."

Officer Maxwell came into the café, walked up to their table. "I'm here, as you requested, constable."

The constable left some money on the table.

They left the café, got into the police cruiser.

"Where would you like to go today?" Office Maxwell asked.

"We've discussed it," Wanda said. "First, the museum, then the hospital, lunch at the Chinese restaurant, the courthouse; then the university campus."

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"That should take us right up to train time, for the evening train to Bear Skin," the constable said.

Chapter 51

The living room in Gertrude Rhinemann's house was gloomy. It was late in the afternoon and the fire had not yet been lit in the fireplace.

Gertrude sat in one of the soft chairs near the hearth sipping tea. Ingrid sat in the other, trying to read a magazine in the dimness.

"I want ta talk ta ya—about Rolf," Gertrude said, with a trace of rancor in her voice.

"I don't!" Ingrid replied.

"We're goin' ta 'ave ta talk about 'im sooner or later."

"Okay, start talking."

"I didn't want it ta be like this."

"You didn't want it to *be*—period," Ingrid said, tossing the magazine on the floor. "You have never liked Rolf. I don't know what you have against him. He's a wonderful man. He's honest. He's kind. He's generous. He *loves* me—and I love *him*! See this beautiful *ring*? We're *engaged*. Do you understand, mama—*engaged*? Rolf and I are going to be *married*. He's saving his money to buy us a new truck—and a new *house*!"

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"Ah! Wake up, child. 'E's just the constable's assistant. 'E makes peanuts! 'E won't ever get ya no new truck an' dream 'ouse."

"Oh—yes—he *will*. He's invested in the *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast*. He's been getting dividends—hand over fist—and the constable said he's going to hire some more help—and Rolf will be promoted—and be put in charge of them. Soon we'll be married—and—," Ingrid said. Gertrude couldn't see Ingrid's broad smile, in the dimness.

"And—*what*?" Gertrude cried, becoming alarmed.

"And—in our new house—we're going to have—a *nursery*—just for the *baby*!" Ingrid said the words quickly.

"Mein *Gott*—what *baby*?"

"Rolf and *my* baby—right *here*—" Ingrid cried, putting her hand on her stomach. "I'm *pregnant*—! I'm going to have his *baby*, mama—I'm going to have his wonderful *baby*!"

Ingrid heard Gertrude's teacup crash to the floor. Ingrid jumped to her feet; ran to her. Gertrude had fainted.

"Mama—oh, *mama*—wake *up*! Oh, where are those smelling salts?"

She finally found them in a drawer, stuck the vial under Gertrude's nose. Gertrude came around.

"Oh, mama—you had me *scared*. You want the doctor?"

"No," Gertrude said, recovering quickly. "Oh—child—don't ya see what ya've *done*? All o' Bear Skin 'll be talkin'."

"I don't care what Bear Skin—or anybody else thinks! Except you! I want you to be *happy*."

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"Ow can I be 'appy? You're ma *life*—ma *everythin*!"

Gertrude cried, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Oh, mama—what's *really* bothering you?"

"That's w'at's botherin' me. You and Rolf—and now—*yer baby*—"

"It's *your* baby, *too*. You're going to be a *grandmother*!"

Gertrude broke into open sobs. "W'at's ta 'appen ta *me*?"

Ingrid removed a hanky from Gertrude's pocket; handed it to her. "Oh, *that's* what it is. Well, you're going to come live with *us*, of course. You didn't think we'd *abandon* you, did you?"

Gertrude sighed a great sigh of relief, looked up into Ingrid's face. "Oh, child—'ow could I 'ave been so *stupid*? I see now—you and Rolf only 'ad the best o' intentions." Their eyes met. "Tell Rolf 'e can move in. The three o' you can live 'ere, 'til yer dream 'ouse is built."

Ingrid gave her mother a great hug. "You *do* understand!"

Gertrude looked into space for a moment, then said, "I've been jus' thinkin' o' maself. I'm goin' ta be a *grandmother*! That's really *wonderful*, ya know?"

"I know, mama."

"Does Rolf know 'bout the baby?"

"Not yet. I'm waiting for the *perfect* time to tell him."

There was a knock on the door. Ingrid ran—opened it. "Rolf!" she cried.

"Did your mother get bullets for her rifle, yet?" Rolf asked, stepping inside.

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Ingrid laughed.

Gertrude heard the remark, chuckled. "Come in young man! You're just in time ta light the *fire*!"

Ingrid closed the door.

Rolf was puzzled by Gertrude's sudden change of heart. He took off his hat. Ingrid took it. He handed her a brown paper bag.

"It's heavy. What's in it, dear?" Ingrid asked.

"A peace offering," Rolf said. He immediately went to the fireplace, began building a fire. "How are you this evening, Mrs. Rhinemann?"

"I 'av never felt better in ma 'ole life!" Gertrude said, smiling. Then she added, "Ingrid—yesterday, I stashed a bottle o' cherry brandy on the bottom shelf o' the China closet. Do ya think this is the *perfect* time for all o' us ta 'ave a nip?"

"Oh—yes—mama—perhaps it *is*," Ingrid said. "Perhaps it's the *perfect* time!"

Rolf got a booming fire going. "There—it should be warm in a few minutes," he said. He sat down in the overstuffed chair Ingrid had been sitting in.

Ingrid brought three glasses of cherry brandy, handed one to her mother, one to Rolf, then sat on Rolf's lap.

Rolf didn't understand why Gertrude didn't protest.

Ingrid raised her glass. Gertrude and Rolf did likewise.

The firelight shining through the cherry brandy in their glasses made the brandy take on a fiery-red glow, like communion wine in church, Gertrude thought.

"To our *baby*!" Ingrid chimed.

"What *baby*?" Rolf asked.

Ingrid took his hand, gently placed it on her stomach.

"*Ours!* Yours—mine—*and*—mama's!"

"Oh—*wow!* I'm going to be a *papa!*" Rolf gave Ingrid a serious kiss. "I'm going to be a *papa!*"

"And I'm goin' ta be a *grandmother!*" Gertrude sighed.

They sat quietly for a moment then all took a sip of brandy.

"Mama said you and I and the baby can live *here*, until we can afford to get the new truck, and build the new house," Ingrid said.

"That won't be long from now," Rolf said, taking another sip. "Mayor Thorndike said the other day that the dividends will be ten times what he thought they'd be—in the short run, anyway."

"Does that mean we're rich?" Ingrid asked.

"Not yet, but if Bear Skin continues to prosper, it could get real good for us," Rolf said. "I've been thinking that after we get a new truck and new house—maybe we can get some kind of business started—a grocery store, or something."

"See, mama—I told you how wonderful Rolf is!"

"I don't know what you like to eat, Rolf. We were planning to thaw out some moose liver—and make liver and onions," Gertrude offered.

"That would be splendid—," Rolf said, clearly not knowing how to continue what he was planning to say.

"But, not tonight," Ingrid interrupted. "Rolf brought things for *salad*—and something else."

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"You peeked!" Rolf said.

"Yes," she said, giving him a peck on the mouth.

"What's wrapped in the white paper?"

"Inch-thick beefsteaks—the best Trendy had," Rolf said.

"Well—I 'ad ma mouth all set fer moose liver and onions, but I guess a thick beefsteak and salad will be okay," Gertrude said, chuckling.

Rolf and Ingrid laughed.

Chapter 52

Lawyers on both sides had worked for months preparing briefs in the case of *Citizens of Bear Skin, Prescott, et al vs. The Etherington Tribune*, a libel suit.

A slander suit of similar description had progressed simultaneously.

Both cases had finally reached their respective juries, and the juries had decided on them.

Mayor Thorndike called a meeting in the constable's office.

"As you have probably seen on the news—the *Etherington Tribune* lost the libel case that our good coroner, Brett Öffner, filed some time ago against them on behalf of all of us. I say 'our' coroner, because he does more coroner business in Bear Skin than in *Prescott*!" the mayor said, smiling.

Laughter.

"Well, it's *true*—now back to the business at hand. We sued the *Tribune* for fifty million dollars for libel. The jury awarded us ten *million*!"

A cheer went up.

The mayor went on, "The judge stated that the *Tribune* had—and I quote—'maliciously and recklessly printed the articles at issue', unquote."

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Another cheer.

"In a separate, slander, suit, the jury found in favor of the citizens who filed including, Constable Mizzen, his able assistant, Rolf Arbeiter, and Coroner Öffner. The sum of three million dollars will be divided among them."

"Oh—there's our new *house*!" Ingrid cried, hugging Rolf.

The mayor went on. "Here's what the judge said in *that* case: 'the evidence is clear and convincing that the *Etherington Tribune's* public statements in question were made with actual malice towards the plaintiffs.'"

"Not that I'm in zee hurry, understand, but how is zee money from zee libel case going to be divided?" Pierre Corbèt asked.

Laughter.

"According to the judge's ruling, a certain percentage will go to each primary plaintiff. The rest will be equally divided among the citizens of Bear Skin!" the mayor said.

Resounding applause filled the room.

"When will we see some *money*?" a woman asked.

"As expected, the *Tribune* will file an appeal, but Judge Petrocft assured me, there's no way they'll win," the mayor said. "That's all I have. If no one has any more questions, the meeting is adjourned—all *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast* investors are asked to remain."

"Those of you who stayed are all *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast* investors, yes?" the mayor asked.

A little old lady in the last row said, "No—but I want to *be* one!"

"I'm sorry, but the investment period ended the middle of last month. No one else can invest without the consent of the majority of the investors," the mayor said.

The constable spoke up, "I vote, she's allowed to invest!"

"Let's see a show of hands of those investors who agree with the constable," the mayor said.

All hands went up.

"Okay, the secretary will record the fact that the assemblage has voted that you may invest. What's your name?" the mayor asked.

"My name's Jenny—Jenny Wilson!"

"And how much money do you wish to invest, Jenny?" the mayor asked.

"Sixty-six dollars and seven cents!"

Laughter.

"What are you all *laughing* about? That was all I could save up from my pension, all last winter—and it includes what I got from selling worms, so far this summer!"

"By gory, that be a tidy sum—when ya look at it *that* way," Patrick O'Finn cried.

"I'm sorry for what I said! Yes—a tidy sum!" the mayor said, embarrassed. "Now—as to the reason I asked you all to meet. A tremendous opportunity for new investment in the *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast* has presented itself. And, since we're all going to come into a considerable amount of money as a result of the libel suit, I propose that we pledge a total of a mil-

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lion dollars to the *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast* investment fund!"

"Will that be enough to cover the cost of building the permanent building and landscaping?" the constable asked.

"It will cover it—and supply it completely, for a year. By that time, the new edifice will be self-supporting, will be able to provide its own supplies—and pay dividends to each and every *one* of you to boot!" the mayor said.

"What if it *doesn't*!" a man asked.

"Then—we'll all take a *bath*!" the mayor said.

"Even if it's not *Saturday*?" a woman asked.

Laughter.

"Even if it's not Saturday!" the mayor said.

"That's not fair! Us little investors get wiped *out*!" a man in the back said.

"The larger investors will get hit hard, too, if it goes under," the constable said. "I pledge two hundred thousand dollars of my libel money to the investment fund!"

"I pledge two hundred thousand!" Rolf said.

"I pledge two hundred thousand," Coroner Öffner said.

"That's six hundred thousand!" the mayor said. "Only four hundred thousand left to go!"

Chapter 53

Constable Mizzen sat at the counter in the café having breakfast. Wanda warmed his coffee.

"Now that you're rich, I suppose you'll be dumping *me*!" she joked.

"Well," the constable said, taking a sip of coffee. "In the first place, I'm not rich, *yet*. *We're*—you and I—*we're* not rich is what I mean to say. We're in it for the long haul, you and I. If the *Tribune's* appeal makes it through District Court, none of us will get a dime from the lawsuits! In the *second* place—whether or *not* I'm rich, has nothing to do with you and I getting married."

"I just wanted to *hear* you *say* it," she said, leaning over the counter giving him a kiss.

She went around the counter, sat by him.

"Well, just suppose you get a cool million before taxes, what will you do with it?"

"I've pledged two hundred thousand of it to the *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast* investment fund," he said, and then he quickly added, "Rolf pledged the same, and so did the coroner."

Wanda looked a little rejected.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

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"Well, I was hoping you'd bring me into your decision making, now that we're engaged—and all that."

He gave her a peck on the cheek. "Yes, the 'all that' has been *great*. Okay—what do you *think* of my investing two hundred thousand in the investment fund?"

"It's risky, but so is every investment, I suppose."

"So—do you like the idea, or not?" he said, dipping his toast into his egg yoke.

"I like it."

"I'll do it, then. That settles that."

Her eyes got a far-off look in them. "Alexander?"

"Yeah."

"What do you think will happen to the professor and that Margo woman?"

"Professor Kervello and Doctor Rossiter—well that's for a court to decide—but if it were up to me, I'd go for the death penalty," he said, washing his breakfast down with coffee.

"Yeah. The way I see it, they're responsible for all the deaths and killings that have happened as a result of the professor's creating 333."

"I don't know how the law reads when it comes to creating hybrids, but there must be something on the books about cruelty to animals," the constable said.

"Not to change the subject, but do you think the police caught the drive-by shooters in the gray sedan?"

"If they did, they haven't let me know. That shooting may be unrelated to the professor and us."

"What do you mean?"

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"They could have been trying to kill someone else in the restaurant."

Chapter 54

Hybrid 333 licked the fine, reddish-golden fur of her mother's cheek in the warmth of the morning sun. Directly, the mother returned the gesture.

The mother had driven off her male mate before her cubs were born.

Dominant male's kill females and kittens.

Three fluffy, bouncy cubs momentarily joined the mother and 333, but became bored almost immediately, went scampering off by themselves, playing tag; tumbling down the hill in front of the cave.

The mother got up to look for them.

333 stood up on her hind legs—let out her piercing, high-pitched baby-like cry. The cubs paid no attention, didn't return to the cave like they usually had. 333 got down on all fours, joined her mother in the search for the cubs.

They found them frolicking near a little pool.

A field mouse darted out from under a broad, green leaf, scampered across the mother's path. The mother slapped a paw on it, called to the cubs to come to her, which they did. They'd learned from experience that not to come when called meant instant, forceful, disciplinary action.

They gathered around her furry paw; immediately understood they were to play another of the many games they'd played in the past with small animals; designed to teach them hunting skills.

The mother let the mouse go. The cubs began batting it back and forth between their paws, then to another cub; back and forth, back and forth. Then they began chewing on it, until it finally succumbed. They fought with each other over which got to eat it.

It was a great morning for an outing, so the troop trailed on down the hill towards the valleys far below.

As they descended, the mother found various other small animals, like the water snake and a baby rabbit to use as props for teaching them to hunt.

After a few hours, they'd meandered down onto the flats leading to Lake Cristal.

There, from a vantage point, 333 saw the *place of lights*. Since it was daylight, there were no lights yet on in Bear Skin, but she could see, even through the increasing illness dimming her vision—which was becoming worse every day—the out-of-focus, tall whiteness of the church tower. Its fuzzy white image reminded her of the upright-walking creatures that had mistreated her long ago.

She became most furious—parted from the others—headed directly for the church.

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It was Sunday. Pastor Energisch was dressed in religious attire; a silk sash about his neck hung straight down the front of his elegant white cleric robe.

He'd decided to take his preaching stance at the head of the aisle to be closer to his flock instead of speaking from the pulpit as usual.

The afternoon sun was hot. The church doors were left wide open to hopefully cool the church somewhat.

333's eyes didn't focus well, but she was able make her way up the church steps on all fours, through the huge double doorway—into the *church*.

As she started up the aisle—people saw her come in—*screamed!*

Those who couldn't see her were alarmed by the screams of others who could.

Confounded by so many upright-walking creatures—she stopped halfway up the aisle.

The dreaded killer was in their holy place—right there—in the aisle next to them! During the first few seconds, people had trouble making themselves believe it—but there she was—*deadly—silent*. One person poked the next; carefully pointed at 333—the thing of their *nightmares!*

Terrified—some continued screaming, cringed away from the aisle like heads of wheat in a sudden storm.

333 raised herself *up* onto her hind legs, to her full, seven-foot height, sniffed the air—and, puzzled by what she smelled—let out her terrifying high-pitched scream.

One woman near the aisle fainted. The man next to her was afraid to move; powerless to help her.

People shuddered, cowered with fright. Panic set in.

At the rear of the church some snuck out through the church doorway—ran for their lives. The rest felt trapped like the proverbial fish in Sylvester's bowl.

333's eyesight, weakened by her progressing, debilitating illness, caused her to see everything slightly out of focus. She made out oceans of startled, frightened eyes on either side of her, didn't know what to make of them, became more confused; dangerous.

Then—from somewhere in the mixture of scents—she smelled little Willy Chambers.

Recognizing his scent caused some of her violent passion, which had driven her to the white church in the first place, to subside.

From the moment 333 had entered the church, Pastor Energisch, either from fright or dedication, had stood firm; had not moved or spoken. Was sure he was up against the *killer*.

He got down on his knees, put his hands together with fingers piously pointed in prayer pose, closed his eyes; prayed aloud, "God, at last you've brought the devil creature to our holy church. We pray that you calm its mind and send it on its way," he said, remaining on his knees.

Scott Tamerlane, sitting a few seats from the aisle, had a good view of 333. Her wild, exquisite, exotic, colorful, female beauty frightened, yet thrilled his artistic nature. He watched her large, brown eyes with fascination as they swept between the

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congregation and the kneeling pastor. He decided there was something sad about them, yet something that flickered like fire, which could change moods in a flash; unleash a horrible, unforgettable, devastating menace upon everyone there, forever marking the day with infamy.

Constable Mizzen felt for the .44 on his side, found it, slipped his fingers around its pistol grip. He knew he wouldn't use it except as a last resort lest he'd accidentally hurt or kill someone in the crowded church. However, he knew he'd have to take that chance—if 333 attacked.

Wanda noticed a flicker of anxiety in the constable's face, then, mesmerized—half-terrified, she began staring at 333, stunned by the humanness of 333's broad, pug nose.

When Pierre Corbèt saw 333, the hair on the back of his head stood up. His fantasies about *pouncing* on her and *trouncing* her vanished in the cold light of reality. Cold sweat sprang out on his forehead above his wide eyes. For once in his life he was glad to be short—*maybe zee muscular cougar-girl with zee sharp teeth won't notice me*, he thought.

Gertrude Rhinemann trembled at the sight of 333. Images of the mutilated, naked body of Herr Streiker flooded back to her mind. Her eyes automatically scanned the room for Ingrid.

Ingrid fiercely clutched Rolf's hand. Her bright blue eyes showed fear, but at the same time—a powerful determination to take whatever was to come.

Rolf stealthily slid his hand down his thigh towards his pistol; then realized he hadn't put it on; tried to remain cool.

Sally calmly opened her tiny, beaded purse, got out a tube of lipstick, a small mirror; began fixing her face. *If it's my day to die, I want to look my best*, she thought.

Hans wished he had a grip on his meat cleaver.

Coroner Öffner calmly lit his pipe, which he'd never done in a church before.

Paul Chambers held his arms tightly around little Willy, who was struggling to get away.

The pastor finished saying prayers, slowly got to his feet, stood looking directly at 333.

In 333's diminishing, unpredictable mind—*sudden flash of violence*—poor vision—the pastor's *white robe* all of a sudden marked him for extinction, for destruction, for mutilation in a most hideous way—and 333 could almost taste the soft, juicy texture of his warm brain.

As 333 crouched on all fours for her impending attack, the constable's fingers involuntarily tightened on his .44 in anticipation of an assault by 333 on the pastor.

The pupils of 333's brown eyes appeared black as she fiercely glared at the pastor's form. All of her body muscles tensed—ready to spring; long fangs extended. A drop of saliva fell from the tip of her ready tongue, a low, guttural sound emanated from her throat. Even in her weakened condition, she was ready to tear into the pastor.

Suddenly, little Willy Chambers, who'd ducked his father's grip, dashed out into the aisle—in-between 333 and the pastor. "Nice kitty!" he said, in his baby voice, flailing his arms about.

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At that moment, 333's violent brain was churning like the flames in a raging furnace; intent on attacking the hated streak of upright whiteness in her dim vision.

The sound of little Willy's voice—suddenly *quenched* those cranial fires.

To everyone's surprise, 333 raised herself to her full height on her hind legs—began to *dance*. Willy started to dance along with her.

A united, gasping *ahh* issued from the congregation.

Several in the rear of the church took the opportunity to sneak out, but most had gotten to their feet, were straining their eyes to see what would happen next.

Trendy knew it was risky, but she silently made her way to the church piano: sat down, began to play a little tune she'd learned as a kid during Sunday school classes.

Little Willy, a broad grin on his face, began to move to the music—only a couple of feet from 333. 333 smiled, began to move to it, also.

From his vantage point, the constable knew he had a clear shot at 333's head. He knew he could kill her without hitting anyone, yet his mental conflict was great. Within seconds, he consciously reviewed what he knew about her and what his responsibility to the community was. On the one hand it was not her fault that she was like she was, someone had violated the laws of nature to make her that way. On the other, she'd killed Bear Skin citizens and must be stopped.

He decided against killing her there and then, as long as she didn't become agitated again. He intently continued watching her actions.

As little boys will, little Willy quickly tired of dancing, wanted to play. He dashed around 333 and, smiling and flailing his arms, began running in baby steps towards the open doorways of the church. 333 dropped to all fours, crept along the carpet after him.

The constable made his way to the aisle; drew his .44; began to slowly follow.

Trendy stopped playing the piano, turned to watch.

Little Willy darted outside.

333 turned her head back in the direction of the pastor, growled, looked for a second as if she might turn on him—attack him after all.

At that moment, Willy's mother rushed out into the aisle crying; began running towards 333. As she tried to pass the constable, he reached out his hand, stopped her. She saw the pistol in his other hand; calmed down somewhat.

333 could vaguely see the white rectangles of the doorways—the bright sunlight showing in through the entrance to the church; made a run for it—accidentally knocked Willy down.

A protester, who'd stationed himself just outside the church doors, saw the constable rush out, pistol in hand. The protester cried, "*Kill it! Now's your chance! Kill it! It attacked the little boy! I saw it attack the little boy!*"

333 quickly disappeared around a corner of the church, vanished into nearby woods.

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"You could have *killed* it! We'll report you to the *Governor*! You neglected your duty as a *constable*!" the protestor cried.

Mrs. Chambers ran to little Willy, looked him over; held him to her bosom. "Did it attack *Willy*?" she cried at the constable.

"No—333 just had to get by him. She bumped him a little, that's all. She didn't intentionally hurt him," the constable said, sliding his .44 into its holster.

"Where nice kitty go, mama?" little Willy asked.

"That damned thing scares me to *death*! One minute it acts like a cougar—the next—like a little kid!" Mrs. Chambers cried, hugging Willy.

"You're right on both counts, Mrs. Chambers. It's a little girl in a cougar's body," the constable said.

"A little *girl*—in a cougar's *body*?"

"Yes."

"How can such a crazy thing *be*?" Mrs. Chambers asked, amazed.

Willy's father, Paul Chambers, hurried up to them. "Is *Willy* okay?"

"He's okay," Mrs. Chambers said. "He's the most okay person here! *I'm* a nervous wreck!"

Paul Chambers took Willy from his mother. "Let's go home. You've had a full day, young man."

"Nice kitty," little Willy said.

The pastor came out into the sunshine. "Glory be to God! He works his wonders in miraculous ways!"

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Wanda took the constable's hand.

Rolf, Ingrid, Gertrude, the coroner, the mayor, Hans, Sally, Trendy, Patrick O'Finn, Pierre and a protester gathered around the constable.

"You need to do something about that 333. She scared me out of twenty years growth!" Mayor Thorndike commented to the constable.

"If you were twenty years *younger*—it wouldn't even be *noticeable*!" Patrick O'Finn interjected.

Laughter.

"Yeah—the constable *better* do something! He had a chance to *kill* that thing—and *didn't*!" the protester piped. "I'm calling the *Governor*!"

"Go ahead—call anybody you want—call the *President*! Every last one of us in Bear Skin will testify that Constable Mizzen acted correctly!" Mayor Thorndike countered.

"That's a fact!" the coroner agreed, relighting his pipe.

"Damned country hicks," the protester mumbled under his breath.

"What did you say?" the constable asked.

"Oh, nothing," the protester replied walking away.

Chapter 55

The next day the pastor held a meeting in the church, for anyone who would attend.

About half of the usual Sunday goers showed up.

333 had scared the hell out of them all. The pastor wanted to do something about that. "Maybe the constable should have shot it," he suggested.

"Constable Mizzen did the right thing by letting her go! It's not *her* fault she's killed people!" Rolf replied.

A hush fell over the room.

"The Hybrid 333 thing is an abomination to God Almighty! It should never have been created in the *first* place!"

"But she *was* created," Rolf commented.

"By a man of *greed*! By a man who thought of nobody but himself—a professor of genetic engineering, I believe. Mark my words—genetic engineering is a curse upon humanity. Look what a horrible killer it has created—and there's no telling how many *more* such creatures that professor has created!" the pastor continued.

"But the creature the professor created—*Hybrid 333*—can be as gentle as a *lamb*—you saw how she danced with little Willy Chambers. Just *think* of it—she's a little six-year-old girl

in a cougar's body. Did you see her beautiful brown eyes—and that cute pug nose?" Wanda piped.

"I saw violent *black* eyes! I say the thing must be *eradicated*!" the pastor spouted.

"We've tried—and failed," the coroner pointed out.

"Perhaps you didn't have enough *incentive*," the pastor raved. "I've *changed* all that! That's the reason I've called you all together—to tell you that I've taken the liberty of collecting money from newspapers all over the country. I'm now in a position to offer any one of you ten *thousand* dollars—yes—I said ten *thousand*—for killing this Hybrid 333 thing!"

Constable Mizzen had been on the phone with the Governor, but had stepped into the church just in time to hear the pastor make the reward offer.

"I'll have to arrest anyone who tries to go after Hybrid 333 without my permission," the constable said, in a calm voice.

"I can tell your heart isn't in *killing* that monster!" the pastor countered.

"No—it's *not*! I'm convinced that—if we're going to try 333 as a criminal—right here—today—then I say we must find her *innocent* of all charges! Why? Because she's only six-years *old*, for Christ sake!"

"Do not blaspheme in the house of the Lord!" the pastor railed, becoming more emotional every second. "The thing has to be *stopped*!"

"I've been talking to the Governor. We have a plan to capture her. I can't talk about the details right now, but I assure you—we have a plan," the constable swore.

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"No plan has ever been successful before!" the pastor continued.

"Exactly—that's why it makes no sense for people to go up into the mountains and flail around looking for her. It's like a shell game. Now you see her. The next thing you know—she's moved to somewhere else. She's smart! She's much more intelligent than a regular cougar. Her brain must be mostly human!" the constable concluded.

"Except when she attacks one of our citizens!" the pastor cried.

"I've talked to the Governor about that, too. He's going to provide a military cordon. Bear Skin will be cordoned off all around by National Guard troops. Well—I've said all I came to say," the constable declared. "But I warn all of you again—don't anyone go after 333—ten thousand dollars—or no ten thousand dollars," the constable said, sternly.

He turned; left the church.

Wanda followed.

Chapter 56

The Fourth of July celebration was in full swing. *Oom pah-pah* bands rattled the air throughout Bear Skin. The huge park was filled with picnickers. The smell of smoke, hotdogs, hamburgers, boiled and fried German sausages permeated the air with their mouthwatering aromas. Carnival music from a Ferris wheel rang its repetitious rhythm throughout the park. Children ran, laughed; played.

Pierre Corbèt reached up his stubby hands, took a hotdog and soft drink from the vendor, scrambled through his pockets, produced a bill, passed it up over the hotdog stand's edge. The vendor took it, handed his change down to him.

Pierre saw Patrick O'Finn sitting under a tree; went and sat down beside him.

"Top 'o the mornin', Pierre. What do you *'ave* there?"

"Zee hotdog weez zee German mustard!" Pierre said. It popped as he bit into it. Then he noticed Patrick was sipping something. Pierre finished chewing the bite, asked, "What's in your glass?"

"Don't tell anybody—Irish *whiskey*," Patrick said, taking another sip from his little green cup. "Were you at the church when the pastor and the constable had words?"

"Oui!"

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"I take it, you 'aven't collected the ten thousand dollar reward for killin' Hybrid 333!"

Pierre just looked at Patrick, took a sip of his soft drink, laughed.

"Pour that soft drink crap *out*! I'll be given you a good Irishman's drink!" Patrick cried.

"A Frenchman washing zee German hotdog down weez zee Irish wheeskey? Zat's zee strange idea," Pierre said. "No—I weel wash eet down weez zees strawberry soda!"

"*Ack!*" Patrick cried. "Throw that stuff away! Look at what you're doin' to your *body*, man. I say pour that crap *out*—and be givin' me your cup so I can fill it with good Irish whiskey!"

Pierre, stubborn as a mule, eventually washed down the last of his hotdog with his strawberry soda, gave Patrick his empty cup. As promised, Patrick filled it with Irish whiskey from a quart bottle he'd been concealing with a newspaper.

"That's more *like* it!" Patrick said. "Now, where *were* we? Oh, yes, I was askin' if you 'ad collected the ten thousand dollar reward for killin' Hybrid 333!"

Pierre drank a big gulp of whiskey, shuddered, said, "No—the constable said he was going to take me weeth heem when we go *capture* her!"

"And just hoo do you think you're goin' to *capture* her? She's a might bigger than the *both* of you put together—and meaner than O'Reilly's junkyard dog, when she wants to be," Patrick said, taking a sip.

Patrick had been sipping Irish whiskey for over an hour and was quite sloshed. Pierre, not used to drinking Irish whiskey, was fading fast.

"Do you think 333 should be *killed* or just *captured*?" Patrick asked, his voice getting weak.

"She's zee exquisite *femme fatal*—beautiful beyond description—and capable of zee fierce violence!" Pierre slurred. "To tell you zee truth, Patrick—she scares zee hell out of me, as zee Americans say."

"You didn't answer me question," Patrick said, leaning his head back against the tree.

"Do you think zee *Mona Lisa* should continue to hang on zee wall—or be tossed into zee flames?" Pierre asked, to see if Patrick was really listening.

Patrick didn't answer. Pierre looked over at him. Patrick was snoring.

Pierre leaned his head back against the tree, finished the whiskey in his paper cup, dosed off in the pleasant afternoon sun.

Curiosity about Hybrid 333 had brought people to Bear Skin from all over the world. Many of the residents of Bear Skin were of German descent, and for the first time—this Fourth of July—sausage vendors from the Old Country had brought their sausages for the first Bear Skin Sausage Fest.

Sausages were being prepared according to Old German recipes that'd been handed down from generation to generation.

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Germans love their sausages and are perhaps the world's best sausage makers, although, the Polish give them a run for their money.

A special area of the park had been set-aside for the Sausage Fest. Cold mugs of Dark German beer, paper plates of sausage dishes, and hot potato salad were being served to tables with bright red tablecloths, by maids dressed in frilly, Old German costumes with white caps and white aprons.

Rolf and Ingrid were sitting at a table near an *oop pah* band.

"This Fourth is the first time we've had the Sausage Fest," Ingrid yelled over the reverberation of the pulsating tuba. "It's fascinating!"

"Want to try the *Ferris* wheel?" Rolf yelled.

Without another word, they downed the remainder of their beer, dropped their paper plates into a trashcan, jogged to the Ferris wheel. There were only four people in line ahead of them.

"I haven't been on a Ferris wheel—"

"Since you and I sneaked away from your mother and rode it—*last* Fourth of July," Rolf interrupted.

"Yes—you remember!"

The Ferris wheel stopped, some people got off, and the four people in front of them got on. Rolf bought two tickets; they climbed into a seat. The attendant latched the bar in front of them. After a few moments, the wheel began to turn.

"You can see *everything* from up here!" Ingrid cried.

"*I* can only see *you*!"

"Really?"

"Really!"

"And what do you *see*?" she asked, with dancing eyes.

Rolf touched his nose to hers, backed it away.

"I see an ocean of velvet blue in your eyes. I see a soft round nose and tender, golden cheeks I love to touch—and golden hair I love to get lost in—supple breasts that a Greek god would have gladly become mortal to—"

A shot rang out. The seat near Ingrid splintered. A sharp piece of wood pierced her left arm. Blood gushed.

Riders on the Ferris wheel began screaming.

Rolf yelled to the attendant, "Get us *down*! Get a *doctor*!"

As Rolf ripped his cell phone from his pocket, he peered out, trying to see where the shot had come from. Another shot rang out, missed. Rolf saw the tell-tale flash—where it had come from. He heard the constable answer the phone. "Ingrid's been *hit*!" Rolf yelled into it. "I see the shooter—he's running towards the parking—black T-shirt—jeans—still carrying a pistol!" Rolf cried.

Rolf heard the constable say he'd get an ambulance, and for Rolf to put pressure on Ingrid's wound.

The Ferris wheel riders, trapped in their seats above the ground like rats in a barrel, were screaming for the attendant to get them down. The attendant was frantically working the Ferris wheel controls; letting people out of their seats as fast as they reached the ground.

The constable quickly made his way to the Ferris wheel.

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"Those other riders can *wait!* Can't you see that the lady's been *shot?* Get her *down* here—*now!*" the constable yelled at the attendant.

The attendant complied as the wail of an ambulance siren became louder and louder.

Rolf and Ingrid's seat was soon rotated down to the bottom of the wheel.

The constable took a look at Ingrid's wound. Rolf had made a tourniquet with his handkerchief and comb; stopped the bleeding.

"You saved her life!" the constable praised Rolf. "She probably would have bled to death."

The ambulance pulled up. Two medics piled out. One quickly went to Ingrid; the other got a gurney out of the back.

"We'll dress the wound on the way to the Thorndike Aid Station," the medic attending her said.

"I'll go with you!" Rolf volunteered.

"No, honey—I'll be all right," Ingrid said, wincing with pain. "You and Constable Mizzen find who tried to kill us."

The medic attending her gave her a shot for pain.

Rolf kissed her.

The ambulance took her away.

The constable and Rolf watched the ambulance until it was out of sight.

"Did you get the shooter?" Rolf asked.

"No—he got into a fast car—got away. I decided I'd better get over here and see how badly Ingrid was hit. I notified the State Police," the constable said. "The shooter won't get far."

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The constable and Rolf walked back to the Ferris wheel.

Riders were still screaming, panicking.

"Okay! Okay! Everything is all *right*! Everything's under control!" the constable yelled at them.

They began to quiet down.

Dusk had painted everything in shadow.

Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of reddish-yellow light. Everyone watched as it climbed and climbed—then burst outwards into a huge circle, a myriad of colors high above, followed by another explosion; another.

Then, in a complete reversal of a few minutes before, people began flocking to get in the Ferris wheel line so they could get high up, get a better view of the fireworks.

333 was at first startled by the fireworks display as she watched it from her high, mountain retreat. Then, weary from her aggressive illness, she laid down in the mouth of her cave, closed her big brown eyes; went to sleep.

Chapter 57

The coroner warmed his hands in front of the cozy fireplace in the constable's office, lit his pipe; sat down in the comfortable chair next to Constable Mizzen.

"Where were you *yesterday*?" the constable asked. "I expected to see you at the Fourth celebration."

"A young woman in Prescott drowned in her bathtub," the coroner said, taking a puff on his pipe. "I wanted to take a drive up here to watch the fireworks, but I had to work late."

"What did you discover about the woman?"

"Turns out, her husband took out a large insurance policy on her a few weeks before. Discover—yes—well I discovered she had contusions consistent with a blow on the head."

"She could have slipped and hit her head," the constable said, staring into the fire.

"She could have—but she didn't. The contusion hemorrhaging exactly matched a baseball bat the police found in another room. It still had traces of her blood type on it."

"We had a bit of excitement here last night, too," the constable said.

"Really?"

"Rolf and Ingrid were on the Ferris wheel. Some punk *shot* at them."

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"While they were up on the *wheel*?"

"Yes."

"That must have been pure hell—there was no place for them to run. What *happened*?"

"A bullet hit the chair they were riding in. A big flying splinter of wood struck Ingrid in the arm."

"Is she all right?"

"Yes. She's fine. She spent the night in the aid station—lost a lot of blood. Rolf stayed with her all night."

"Rolf and Ingrid are quite close these days," the coroner said, relighting his pipe.

"They're engaged, you know."

"No, I didn't. I must give them my congratulations. So, she's okay?"

"Yes. Doctor Quincy says she can go home today," the constable said.

"What was the *shooting* all about?"

"The State Police caught the shooter. They got a confession out of him in exchange for a lighter sentence," the constable said.

Swirls of the coroner's pipe smoke billowed about them, as he puffed away.

"The shooter said he was hired by Professor Kervello. I swear, Kervello's going to be the death of me, *yet*—even from *jail*," the constable continued.

"Literally!" the coroner agreed, sincerity in his eyes.

"What was the shooter hired by the professor to *do*?"

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"The professor still has some crazy idea that killing everyone who can testify against him will help his case," the constable said.

"Ingrid?"

"The shooter was probably trying to hit Rolf, and missed."

"As I was driving into Bear Skin this morning, I saw a lot of military. It looks like they've cordoned off the entire village."

"They have. It's part of a plan the Governor and I cooked up to keep Hybrid 333 from getting in."

"She's obviously the smartest cat I've ever heard of. Do you think cordoning off Bear Skin will keep her out?"

"I hate to see her be killed—but we can't let her kill another human."

"I know it's a sore subject with you, but have you given any thought to going out *after* her again?" the coroner asked.

"Yes. I have a plan. The Governor thinks we better keep it under our hats for the moment."

"I've been your friend for a long time, Alexander," the coroner said, looking down his nose.

"Oh, hell—okay—I'll tell you part of it," the constable conceded.

"Oh, *no*! A secret's a *secret*! Don't *tell* me," the coroner said, puffing on his pipe in an exaggerated fashion.

"Yes, well," the constable said, leaning his head back against his chair. "I went to school with a young man who is now a wildlife biologist for the State of Alaska. I gave him a

call the other day. He said, if he can get close enough to 333, he can dart her with a tranquilizer."

"That sounds simple enough, but how the hell are you going to *find* her. You can't just fly around in a chopper with a bullhorn shouting *kitty—kitty—kitty!*"

"I have an idea, but it's too early to talk about it," the constable said. "Let's go have some breakfast at the café—I'll buy!"

The golden disc of the rising sun had crept above the horizon like an oriental god ushering in a new day. The constable and coroner were arrayed in dazzling light as they entered the café.

"Well, if it isn't the twin *sleuths!*" Wanda joked, reaching for the coffeepot.

"*He's* the sleuth," the coroner corrected, as they sat down at the counter.

"Let me see, now—you take sugar *and* cream—Alexander just likes lots of *sugar*," Wanda said, giving the constable a sly smile.

"Like I said, *he's* the sleuth—but I seem to detect there's something *serious* going on between you two!"

Wanda held up her left hand and showed the coroner her engagement ring.

"*Whoa!* You two are *engaged?*"

The smile on Wanda's bright face said it all.

"Congratulations! When did *that* all happen?" the coroner asked.

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"I popped the question when we took the professor and that redheaded doctor to jail in Etherington."

"Romantic," the coroner said, doctoring up his coffee with cream and sugar.

"Oh, it really *was* romantic! We got all dressed up in new clothes and Alexander took us to dinner at the yacht pier restaurant!" Wanda cried. "You should have seen Alexander's fancy new Western *suit*!"

"That's an exclusive restaurant. It's owned by a Sicilian named Garbonni or Garbonzo—something like that," the coroner put in. "There's been trouble there at times."

"Well, Alexander, he gets down on one knee and proposes to me. I was so happy I could have—"

"Alexander proposed right there at the table—in front of *everybody*?" the coroner asked, catching her in mid-sentence.

"That was my whole idea," the constable said, "to let everybody know about our *engagement*."

"He had no sooner proposed—and put this beautiful ring on my finger," Wanda said, showing the coroner the ring again, "then—*bam*!"

The coroner's eyes brightened between puffy eyelids. "*Bam*, you say?"

"It was *horrible*!" Wanda cried. "How *could* they ruin our *engagement* like that?"

"Who? Who *ruined* it?"

"All of a sudden—*bam*—the window next to us *exploded*! Somebody shot the *window* out!" Wanda cried. "Glass went flying everywhere!"

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"*Who?* Who shot the window out?" the coroner asked, again, becoming frustrated by the delay in finding out.

"It was a drive-by shooting. A gray sedan," the constable said.

"Alexander is so wonderful—so *brave!* You should have *seen* him—he grabbed his pistol and ran right out the door after them—put three holes in their *trunk!* He could have been *killed!*" Wanda cried, wiping a tear away with a paper napkin.

"Did that *stop* them?" the coroner asked.

"No," Constable Mizzen said, taking a sip of coffee.

"*Then* for God's sake—tell me what *happened!*"

"The Etherington police gave chase, but they still haven't found the car—or who it was who shot at the restaurant," the constable said.

"At the *restaurant.* You think maybe they *weren't* shooting at *you?*"

"Maybe they were. Maybe they weren't. A lot of things go on in Etherington. It's got about half a million population, now. When a city gets that big, lots of things happen," the constable said.

"Speaking of lots of things happening," the coroner said, "what's the *special* this morning, Wanda?"

"Ah, we have a special on chopped German sausage and scrambled eggs!"

"Not for me! I ate all the German sausage I could take, yesterday, at the *Sausage* Fest. I've had enough to last me until *next* year's Fest," the constable said.

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"Well, I *didn't*," the coroner said, sternly, then smiled, put his pipe away. "Please dish *me* up some, Wanda!"

Chapter 58

It was almost dark on the far-distant horizon.

The voluminous, dark gray clouds that loomed over Bear Skin masked occasional sheet lightning, threatening rain. A glimmer of amber light through a hole in the clouds struggled to illuminate the village.

Private John Rich, of the Army National Guard reached his hand into his green fatigue shirt pocket, pulled out a pack of cigarettes, took one out, stuck it between his lips, put the pack back in his pocket, found his lighter, lit the cigarette.

The now and then glow from it showed the concern on the young man's face. Like everyone else in his outfit, he'd been briefed about 333, and his mission to kill her if she tried to pass by his sentry post: part of the military cordon that surrounded Bear Skin. He was fresh out of boot camp and was very nervous about trying to defend a village, or anything else for that matter, against the legendary, violent human-animal.

333 was resting on her haunches in nearby shadows watching him through blurred eyes. She began to make a crying sound, like a regular cougar sometimes makes to attract prey—which sounds exactly like a little baby crying.

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Some clouds slowly parted, allowing a brilliant, full moon to light up everything.

Private Rich heard the cry. He looked around to see where it had come from. He heard it again, decided it was coming from behind a bunch of shrubs; thought it unlikely anyone would leave a baby out by itself after dark, but he knew stranger things had happened. He decided to investigate.

Ingrid had had a spat with Rolf: their first quarrel. She'd run out of her mother's house, crying. Rolf had tried to console her, but to no avail. He'd finally given up; gone back inside.

She'd cried for a while, had decided she didn't want to go back in, had resolved to let him simmer.

She'd begun walking to her grandmother's house; located in a dark, hardwood grove near on the outskirts of Bear Skin.

The trail was familiar to her. She and her mother had often walked it. As she went along, she recalled the terrible, misty morning she and her mother had walked it in the winter and had encountered the horribly mutilated body of Herr Streiker. Images of the scene kept flashing back, making her edgy. She began looking around at the gloomy outlines of bushes and trees, imagining she saw the shape of 333; the shape of a bear; the shape of a wolf.

As she reached the top of a rise, a dog darted across the trail in front of her. Her heart missed a beat. Fright was beginning to take hold. She was glad of the moonlight, which offered some security. She looked back at the trail behind her; decided

she was more than halfway to her grandmother's house—no turning back.

A rifle shot blasted the night's silence.

Ingrid stopped, stood paralyzed for a moment looking in the direction the sound had come from. Then, as her eyes focused on the distant scene, she heard a scream.

By the light of the moon, she saw 333 take down Private John Rich.

The first thing he'd seen of 333 was a splash of orange color when she'd sprung on top of him in one leap. He'd fired his rifle. The bullet had gone wild, but the shot had alerted other soldiers.

Ingrid watched as lights around the cordon began popping on, vehicles began starting up.

Ingrid watched with fascination, transfixed by what 333 was doing to the soldier. She heard the soldier scream again—then, suddenly, become silent. Ingrid was revolted as she saw the silhouette of 333 rip flesh from the soldier's body, eat it.

Ingrid continued watching as the lights of military vehicles began closing in on 333's position—then, horrified—Ingrid saw her raise her head, become aware of the vehicles coming towards her—look directly at *Ingrid*—began running in Ingrid's *direction*. Terrified, Ingrid bunched her long skirt up above her knees, began running toward her grandmother's house as fast as she could. Then, realizing she would never make it far with the skirt restricting her movements, stopped, frantically ripped away the two buttons that attached the skirt to her waist, dropped it to

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the ground, began running again, then sprinting—in bright red bikini panties Rolf had bought her.

As she ran, she frequently glanced back over her shoulder to see if 333 was gaining on her. For a time, 333 was closing the gap between them, which panicked Ingrid into trying to run even faster, then 333's debilitating illness caused her breathing to become labored. Her stride became irregular; she began to fall back.

Finally, in the moonlight, Ingrid could see the dark outlines of her grandmother's large, log house looming up ahead; couldn't see any light coming from the windows. *Be home—oh, God—be home, grandma—be home!*

As she got nearer, she began yelling, over and over, "*Grandma—open the door—! Please—open the door—!*"

Ingrid ran up the flagstone path to the front door.

In her agitated state, she didn't see that the door was open. Only the obscure screen door was keeping her outside in the arena of hell—with 333 coming after her.

Ingrid pounded on the screen, her face contorted with fear. She could almost feel 333's teeth in her flesh. "*Grandma—oh, grandma—where are you?*" she cried, sobbing.

"I'm right here, dear," a calm, gentle voice said through the screen. "Come in. Come in, dear—you'll catch your death in the damp air," she said, unlocking the screen.

Ingrid tore open the screen door; rushed inside, locked it behind them; peered out through the screen to see if she could see 333.

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"Calm down, dear. Tell grandma all about it," the little old lady said. Then she saw how Ingrid was dressed. "Oh, my! Do you know you are only wearing your...unmentionables?"

"Oh, grandma—never mind that! Call the constable—get *help*—it's *coming*!"

"What's coming, dear?"

"Hybrid 333—she's *here*—right outside the door somewhere. She *chased* me! Where's the *phone*?"

"Who's...Hybrid 333, dear?"

"I don't have time to explain—where's the *phone*?"

"On the stand by the sofa, where it has always been, dear."

"Close the door—*lock* it—she's *coming*!" Ingrid cried, picking up the phone.

"Who's coming, dear? Will she be staying for supper?"

"Just close the *door*—I'll explain later!"

"I can't close it, dear. One of its poor hinges is broken. The man said he was coming to fix it last week, but he never did."

"Oh, *God*," Ingrid cried. "The constable's line's are busy!"

"Is the constable coming for supper?"

"No, grandma—he's not coming—I can't get him on the phone—do you have a *gun* in the house?"

"A gun? Whatever for, dear?"

"To shoot 333 with!"

"I thought someone was coming to supper."

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"Don't you know about 333? She's part human and part cougar!"

"That's ridiculous. Have you been tippling?"

"Grandma—I tell you we're in *danger*—do you have a *gun*?"

"Sh-h!" the little old lady said.

"What *is* it?" Ingrid whispered.

"Do you hear *that*? It sounds like someone is sawing logs on my step," the little old lady whispered, going to the screen door. "Oh, my—*look*!"

Ingrid regained her courage, went to the screen door, stood beside her grandmother then, as her grandma was doing, put her face up against the screen; peered through.

333 was lying on the doorstep in the light of the moon—*purring*.

"Oh!" the little old lady whispered. "Oh, my!"

"That's Hybrid 333!" Ingrid whispered.

"Have you seen her before?"

"Yes—Rolf and I—" Ingrid hesitated, and then went on, "Rolf and I saw her once last winter, when we were skiing."

The little old lady reached up, turned a small knob on the coal oil lamp that hung on the entrance wall. The lamp brightened somewhat, illuminated 333; yet didn't frighten her away.

"Oh, she's *beautiful*!" the little old lady whispered. "Look at those big brown eyes—and her pug nose. Her face looks almost human."

"Yes—and she's so *sleek*. She doesn't have a tail, grandma."

"Well, I suppose she doesn't need one. What would she ever use it for?"

They just stood spellbound, admiring Hybrid 333, for a few moments.

"Why did you want to *shoot* her?" the little old lady finally asked.

The scene with the soldier flashed through Ingrid's mind.

"Oh, God—I've got to tell *somebody* she's *here*!" Ingrid whispered.

"No, dear. Let the poor thing rest. She's probably had a rough day. Maybe I can find her something to eat."

"*No*, grandma—nothing for her to eat—I've got to get the *constable*!" Ingrid cried, trying the phone again. It was still busy.

"What do we need the constable for? Is he coming to supper?"

Ingrid looked down at 333, studied her for a long time; finally said, "You know, grandma—maybe you're right. After all, it's not Hybrid 333's fault that that greedy professor created her. Have you been following the news story on TV?"

"I don't have TV, dear."

"Newspaper?"

"I only see a newspaper now and then when I visit Trendy at the grocery store."

"Oh, that's right, you like to keep things like they were in the old days."

"Yes," the little old lady mused, then added, "I can't get over how beautiful that big cat is. Shall we let her *in*?"

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"No, grandma, I don't think that would be wise."

"I don't think that cat's *well*," granny commented.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you see the foam coming from her mouth?"

Ingrid looked carefully at 333's mouth, and then said, "You're right, grandma, there are some bubbles of white stuff—maybe she *is* sick—that would explain why she couldn't *catch* me."

"She chased you, dear?"

"Yes."

"Did you get the constable on the phone?"

"No, grandma—I've changed my mind."

"That's our female prerogative, dear."

"Yes, grandma."

Suddenly, the pleasant resonance of 333's purring was drowned out by the shriek of an army MP vehicle's siren.

333 raised her head; saw headlights approaching, dashed off into some deep shadows, was gone.

The MP vehicle pulled up in front of the house, stopped, two military police, each wearing a helmet with a white stripe down the front and a sidearm, got out, went to the door.

"Good evening, ma'am! I hate to bother you so late, but we're looking for a wild animal. It's been seen in this neighborhood. It's very dangerous! Have you seen it, by chance?" the MP asked, not able to avoid glancing down at Ingrid's bright bikini panties.

"What does it *look* like?" the little old lady asked innocently, her eyes twinkling.

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"Uh...well, I haven't actually seen it myself, ma'am. I'm told it's sort of an orange color—looks like a cougar."

"It looks like a cougar—but isn't necessarily a *cougar*?" granny asked.

"Well, ma'am, I'm told it's *part* human—with no tail."

"Oh, part *cougar* and part *human*—with no tail?"

"Well, yes, that's right, ma'am. Have you seen anything like that?"

"I can't say that I have," granny answered, then turning to Ingrid, "Have you seen anything like that, dear?"

"I can't say that I have," Ingrid echoed.

"Would you folks care to stay to supper?" granny asked.

"Oh, no, ma'am—I really wish we could—I really, really *do*," the MP said, glancing down at Ingrid's panties one last time. "But we'll have to be on our way. If you see a suspicious animal, call the constable's office, immediately!"

"We surely will! We surely will!" granny chimed.

They watched as the MP's got into the jeep; drove off.

"That nice policeman seemed to be quite taken by you, dear."

"I guess I'd better get dressed. Do you think you have something I could wear?"

"There's a pair of old levis in the closet. Your grandfather used to wear them when he worked in the garden, bless his soul—by the way, dear, I've been meaning to ask you—whatever persuaded you to walk all the way out here this time of night?"

"Rolf and I had a spat. I went for a walk, grandma—thought of you—and here I am."

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"You and Rolf had a spat—that's *serious!*"

The telephone rang.

"I'll answer it, dear. You have no luck with the telephone." Granny picked up the receiver, said, "Hello!" listened for a minute. "It's for you, dear. It's your dear *Rolf*. He wants to *apologize*."

The rest of the night, the army combed the area looking for Hybrid 333.

The following day they continued the search.

Days turned into weeks. Over flights of military planes, helicopters, companies of soldiers on foot and ground vehicles scoured the village and surrounding mountains. No sign of 333 could be found.

Chapter 59

The day of the hunt in the mountains for 333, which the constable had planned for quite some time had arrived.

The clock on his office wall said seventeen after eight a.m.

He was doing paperwork at his desk when the phone rang; picked it up, "Constable Mizzen."

He heard Captain Farnsworth's voice say, "I could get court-martialed for telling you this—instead of first informing my superior officer—but since it was your idea to use a chopper to find Hybrid 333, as they call the cougar-girl on the news, I'm going to take the chance. I did an over flight of the mountains, like you asked. We've located her. She's apparently living in a cave above Spruce Springs. We saw a full-grown cougar and some cougar cubs with her."

"Great work!" the constable commended. "How soon can you pick us up? In thirty minutes...helicopter warm-up...checkout and all that. I understand. Okay—in thirty minutes—land on Beaver Street in front of my office like you did last time—and Captain—thanks!" The constable punched the off button, then pressed more buttons.

Gertrude Rhinemann finally answered.

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"Good morning, Gertrude—this is Constable Mizzen. Let me speak to Rolf. Did he do something wrong? No. I just need to speak to him—in a hurry. They're still in bed? I'm not surprised. Well—pound on the *door*! Tell him to meet me in front of my office in ten minutes. Tell him we're going up in a *chopper*—got all that? Okay. Thanks!" He hit the off button.

He thought for a minute, pressed autodial. A lady's voice answered, "Coroner's Office."

"This is Constable Mizzen—please get Coroner Öffner on the phone—right away. Busy with an autopsy? Tell him it's *urgent*!"

The constable waited. After a couple of minutes, Coroner Öffner's voice came on. "Öffner here!" the constable heard him say.

"I know I said to meet us here at ten o'clock—but there's been a development. Captain Farnsworth has spotted 333 at a cave above Spruce Springs. We need to act fast—to make sure she doesn't *leave* before we get there. Can you be here in the next twenty minutes? You'll try. Okay." The constable pressed the off button; put down the phone.

Benson—Benson—Benson! What did I do with Benson's card? the constable thought, then aloud he said, "He wrote his phone number on it!"

At that moment, Rolf came into the office from outside looking like he'd been exercising in a gym. "I heard you say something. Were you talking to me?" he asked.

"Uh...no—I was thinking out loud. I put Benson's card somewhere here on my desk. Oh, here it is. You remember

Benson Wilde—the State of Alaska wildlife biologist I told you about. The Governor flew him in from Alaska at my request. Benson got in last night. He's going with us. He's going to try to tranquilize 333 with a dart gun."

"Gertrude said something about a chopper."

The constable looked at the clock on the wall. "It'll be out front—in about twenty-five minutes," he said, glancing at the clock. He punched some numbers on his cell phone; heard someone mumble something. "Benson?"

He heard Benson Wilde say, "Good morning—what's up, man?"

"There's been a change in plans. 333's been spotted. We're meeting in front of my office right away...you will? Sorry for the inconvenience. Okay, see you in a few minutes." The constable tapped the off button with his finger, then exclaimed, "Oh, my God! I almost forgot *Pierre*!"

"What?" Rolf asked, rubbing his eyes.

"*Pierre*—I told him he could go with us when we went after 333. We've got to take him *with* us! *Find* him—bring him here—*fast*!"

"I don't know where he *is*," Rolf protested.

"He's staying at the *Thorndike Bed and Breakfast*. He's getting free rent in a mobile home as part of his dividends. If he isn't there—try his leather shop. If he isn't there—try the Moose Head! Hurry! We've got to get to 333 before she leaves the cave and goes hunting, or something! And get out of those *sweats*—and strap on your *pistol*. If the chopper has to land you might

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need it. 333's not alone—there's *cubs*—and their *mother*! A mother cougar will defend her cubs to her death."

Rolf nodded, dashed out the door.

Mayor Gustav Thorndike had volunteered to lead the group of horsemen, so the constable had sent him to the mountains earlier that morning together with the Prescott Canine Corps and their specially trained dogs.

The constable decided to check on their progress. He located his satellite cell phone, punched in some numbers. Thorndike answered.

"Thorny?"

The signal was weak, but the constable could still make out what the mayor was saying. "It's been a splendid ride in the country!" the constable heard him say.

The constable raised his voice, so he would be more easily understood. "Thorny—333's been *sited*! She's at a cave above Spruce Springs! If you see her, don't move in until you see the chopper, then use the dogs to draw her out like we planned! Good luck! And Thorny—333 has company—a mother cougar with *cubs*! As you probably know, a mother cougar will fight to the death to protect her cubs, so be careful how the Canine Corps uses their dogs, otherwise, some hounds might get killed!"

The coroner was the first to arrive in front of the office. He negotiated his stout body down out of his SUV, ambled over to where the constable was standing.

"I thought you were in a hurry—where's everybody?" the coroner said, lighting his pipe.

"They'll be along," the constable said. "Here comes Benson, now!"

Benson Wilde's appearance resembled his name. He looked like he'd just returned from a wild African safari. He was wearing a pith helmet. His heavy-weave khaki shirt and pants hung loosely about his body. His trousers billowed out at the sides like riding pants, then disappeared down into the tops of shiny black boots. His black eyes were shining. The clean-shaven, cocoa-colored skin of his face reflected the weak sunlight as if just moistened with lotion. He carried a leather gun case in one hand; black elephant hide case in the other.

Before Benson reached them, the coroner commented, "I thought you told me you went to *school* with him—he's *black*!"

"My high school was integrated," the constable said, waving to Benson. "Does that bother you—that he's black?"

"No—no. I'm a little surprised, that's all," the coroner said, sucking on his pipe.

Benson walked up to them, set his stuff on the ground. "Good morning, gentlemen."

"Benson—I want you to meet Brett Öffner—Brett—Benson Wilde."

"Good to make your acquaintance!" Wilde said in an enthusiastic Jamaican accent, shaking the coroner's hand.

"Glad to meet you," the coroner said.

"Alexander—you picked a great day for the hunt, man!" Wilde cried.

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"Just an accident. How was the trip from Alaska?" the constable asked.

"Oh, the airline flight was okay. We had bad weather over Anchorage—after that—no problem there, man. The tricky part was getting out of the backcountry so I could catch the airline flight to Etherington. I was tranquilizing polar bears. I had to fly out of some rugged mountains in a bush plane. Flying with a bush pilot is some experience, man!"

"Are the mountains in Alaska as rugged as *those*?" the coroner asked, pointing to the Pondanus Mountains north of them. "That's where we're going."

Wilde looked where the coroner was pointing. "Hah—your mountains wouldn't even be *hills* in Alaska, man!"

They laughed.

Rolf's old truck pulled up; parked. Rolf and Pierre got out, walked over.

In his usual fashion, Pierre flailed his arms, jumped up and down. "Thank you for taking me weez you!" he cried.

"Benson—this is Pierre Corbèt—the finest leather craftsman in all the world. If you don't believe it—just ask him." Benson laughed. "Pierre—this is Benson Wilde. He's going to shoot 333," the constable said.

"Oh—*no*!" Pierre cried, "*No*—don't *shoot* her! I know I talked about *pouncing* on her and *trouncing* her—but I am now a new man—after I saw her in zee church. I—how do zee Americans say—I fell in *love* weez her. I was scared at first—she eez zee exquisite *femme fatal*, after all. She has zee violent spirit of zee cougar—and zee gentleness of zee lamb!"

"Take it easy, man! I'm just going to shoot her with a *dart* gun. It'll put her to sleep for a while—so we can bring her back to Bear Skin. That's what we hope to do—stop her from *killing* more people," Benson Wilde said.

Pierre stopped flailing his arms. "Oh," he said. "Zat weel be zee great zing."

The constable started to say something, but the beating of the chopper's propellers drowned out his words as it settled down in front of them.

Several hundred people had gathered around to watch the take-off.

"Don't *hurt* her!" a woman shouted from the crowd.

"*Kill* the freak beast!" a protester yelled.

"What ya takin' the *midget* for—*bait*?" a rabble-rouser cried.

Against his better judgment, the constable had taken the Governor's advice and had called in Sheriff Atridge and his deputies for crowd control. The camouflage-uniformed deputies had formed a formidable-looking circle around the helicopter as though ready for war. *Atridge wishes he and his boys were the ones getting on the chopper, instead of us*, the constable thought.

The constable and his small crew climbed aboard; got strapped in.

The constable found a place for his rifle. Checked the .44 pistol on his side to make sure it was loaded.

Sitting next to him, Rolf saw him do it, checked his own pistol.

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The chopper lifted off amid mixed shouts from the crowd, some of pleasure—some of disdain.

When they were up, Captain Farnsworth gave his usual introduction over the intercom.

Pierre was delighted to be up in the air, but a little timid about the chopper's open door. He could see the last of the village rushing under them, far below.

The constable was trying to make himself heard over the chopper's roar as he talked to Thorndike on his cell phone.

The coroner was about to light his pipe.

The co-pilot saw him get some matches out of his pocket. "Sorry, Coroner Öffner—no smoking on the chopper!" the copilot said over the intercom.

"I forgot," the constable said. "I should have remembered—from the last time you took us up."

"Zees eez great!" Pierre cried into the intercom.

"Pierre, if you're going to shout—turn off your intercom first," the coroner suggested. "We can't hear ourselves *think*!"

"Sorry! Zees eez zee way to go!" Pierre cried, then flipped off his intercom switch.

The coroner, sitting next to Pierre, saw he was still flailing his arms, yelling to himself above the roar of the chopper.

"Can you see us, yet?" the constable shouted to Thorndike over his cell phone. "You can? Okay—listen carefully." The phone made a strange noise. "I think the signal's weak—are you still *there*? The sound of the chopper will hopefully drive 333 and the other cougars into the cave. Okay—we

have a cage hooked to a cable inside the chopper. When you see the chopper is directly over the mouth of the cave—let the dogs loose. With a bit of luck, 333 will come out of the cave to fight off the dogs, and Benson will shoot her with his tranquilizer gun! Then, when she can't move—the Canine Corps guys move in and put 333 in the cage—and we'll haul her up into the chopper, so we can get her back to Bear Skin before she comes out of it—just like we planned!"

The constable heard Thorndike say something about best laid plans of mice and men, then the phone went dead. "Hello! Hello—!" the constable shouted. "Are you still *there*?" No answer. The constable pressed his redial button; still no answer. "Damn technical wonders!" he said, stuffing his phone into his pocket.

Over the intercom, he said. "I've lost contact with the *ground* crew!"

"*Look—zee magnificent cougars!*" Pierre cried over the intercom, looking through the open doorway down at the cave opening below. Hybrid 333, her mother and cubs were milling around in front of the cave.

As the chopper circled, the constable saw the mother cougar pick up the cubs one at a time by the back of their neck, take them inside the cave.

333, in a show of defiance at the chopper's deafening presence, raised herself up on her hind legs, weakly thrashed the air with her paws, dropped back down on all fours, slowly made her way into the cave.

"Well, *that* part worked," the constable said, pleased.

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As the chopper continued to circle overhead, the constable saw Thorndike below on his horse, saw horsemen and dogs spreading out, approaching the front of the cave. The constable tried again to make contact with Thorndike. "Damn phone! I can't raise Thorndike! I've got to tell him the hounds are moving in too *fast*!"

As the constable anxiously watched, the lead hound ripped up over the edge of the embankment—raced right into the cave—a second later, zipped back out of the cave, ears laid back, tail between its legs.

Other hounds furiously mounted the embankment—stopped short of the cave opening, milled around baying.

Directly, a brave hound entered the cave. The snapping and snarling mother cougar quickly drove it out; then went after it with a vengeance. The wounded hound yelped, dashed away.

Wanting to be near their mother, the three little cubs followed her outside the cave. The mother, feeling her cubs were threatened, lit into the nearest hound, killing it.

The constable spotted 333 slowly making her way out of the cave into the sunlight. *There's something wrong with her*, he thought. *She doesn't have much energy*.

"There she *is*, man!" Benson said, slipping into his harness, chambering a tranquilizer dart.

The mother cougar hastily nipped each cub. They got the message—darted back to the safety of the cave. She quickly followed.

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333 painfully made her way to near the edge of the embankment; rose up on her hind legs.

In the chopper, Pierre cried, "She eez *magnificent!*"

"Can you get a shot, *now?*" the coroner asked Benson.

"Bring the chopper around a little more," Benson said over the intercom as he dangled against his harness out of the open door.

Captain Farnsworth obliged.

Benson fired.

333 looked up at the chopper, weakly slashed the air with her paws one last time, dropped to the ground, remained motionless.

Thorndike and three other men dismounted from their horses.

As they climbed over the embankment, they saw the mother cougar just inside the cave opening with her cubs; knew she might attack.

In the chopper, the constable kept his rifle ready. He didn't want to have to kill the mother cougar. He hoped she would stay put while the men got 333 into the cage.

Then the constable saw Thorndike hesitate, take his hat off, rub his forehead.

"I've got to get on the *ground!* Thorndike's afraid to go *near* her!" the constable cried. "Is there a place flat enough for you to *land*, Captain?"

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"I think so," Captain Farnsworth said, beginning the maneuver.

As the chopper touched down, the constable hopped to the ground, rifle in hand, ran to Thorndike. "You *okay*?"

Thorndike was white as a sheet, nodded weakly.

"You've done a *great* job, Thorny. I didn't know you had it in you. Go back to your *horse*—I'll take care of things here!" the constable shouted over the chopper noise.

Then he hurried over to where 333 was lying on her side. He motioned a couple of hound tenders to come help him. They were reluctant to go near her. "It's *okay*—she's out cold!" the constable assured.

Captain Farnsworth hovered the chopper overhead.

The constable signaled him to lower the cage.

The co-pilot maneuvered the cage out onto the short cable boom, lowered it to the ground.

The constable grabbed hold of the cage door; tried to open it—couldn't—tried again. "It's *stuck*! Lend a *hand*!" he yelled. The men helping him grabbed hold—sprung it open.

"*Okay*! Let's get her into the *cage*—before the mother cougar tries to *stop* us!" the constable yelled. "*Careful*!" he cried, trying to lift 333's furry head. He hadn't realized she would be so heavy. He signaled for additional men to dismount and help.

They finally got her into the cage, closed the door; inserted the lock pin.

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The co-pilot worked the winch controls, brought 333's cage up into the chopper.

Captain Farnsworth landed the chopper long enough to pick up the constable, then headed towards Bear Skin.

Chapter 60

Word that the chopper was bringing 333 in had reached Bear Skin well ahead of the first sighting of chopper propellers beating their way towards the village through the afternoon sky.

Hundreds of people had gathered along Beaver Street in front of the constable's office in great anticipation of her arrival.

National and international TV crews had set up equipment. News people from all over the world were anxiously waiting.

Even the protesters had an ample supply of signs, some pro—some con, just in case.

Tourists in every manner of dress were busily chatting about what she might be like. Some dreaded seeing her, thinking her evil. Others had a more positive image.

Even the Governor had flown in from the capital by helicopter for the occasion.

Sheriff Atridge, on the lawn in front of the constable's office, was barking orders to his troops. "Push everybody *back*—! Make a large circle for the *chopper* to land!" he yelled.

The noisy chopper settled down on the lawn amid a cheering multitude.

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The crowd went wilder as Constable Mizzen came down the chopper's metal steps, rifle in hand.

Sheriff Atridge gritted his teeth enviously. With a little luck *he* could have been the one getting the adulation.

Pierre stepped down out of the chopper next, arms flailing like a Roman hero coming back from a successful military campaign. The crowd went crazy.

Next, the coroner made his appearance amid a round of applause.

Then khaki-attired Benson Wilde, wearing a pith helmet, appeared at the chopper door and—rifle case in one hand, black elephant hide case in the other—cheerfully made his way down the steps onto the lawn. Flash cameras popped as he took his place next to the constable and coroner.

Finally, Rolf made his way down to the grass amid cheers from the younger set.

Then, the moment everybody had been waiting for—the co-pilot maneuvered the cage containing 333 out of the chopper door—carefully lowered it onto the lawn in front of the constable's office.

There were gasps of amazement at seeing 333's fierce beauty—then, seeing she was not moving, a respectful silence fell over the crowd.

The co-pilot retrieved the cage cable, climbed back into the chopper. Its blades began beating furiously as it rose noisily; quickly out of sight.

333 hadn't moved during the entire chopper flight. Now, as the world watched, she began to stir.

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Cameramen zoomed in on her.

News people turned equipment on.

Protesters began trying to decide which signs to hold up.

Sheriff Atridge glared at 333's cage. He still couldn't believe that the constable had been telling the truth all along—that 333 really wasn't just an ordinary cougar gone mad, rather, a strange crossbreed of some kind—an abstraction that Atridge could not completely get his petite brain around, but finally did concede that her face looked somewhat human.

Atridge could not handle the thought that 333 had somehow made a fool of him by not being at her cave when Atridge had gone to kill her—so *he* could have become the hero of the day instead of the constable.

The more Atridge thought about it, the more furious he became, until finally—in a fit of temper—he drew his .357 from its holster—pointed it at 333's head.

A shockwave of astonishment pulsed the onlookers.

As Atridge was about to pull the trigger, a quiet voice behind him said, "Put your pistol away, sheriff—or I'll blow your brains out." The Governor had anticipated Atridge's action, had moved up behind him—placed the barrel of his pearl-handled derringer against the sheriff's neck.

Atridge recognized the Governor's voice, flushed deep red—slipped the .357 back into its holster. Three of the Governor's security agents moved in, escorted the sheriff—soon to be ex-sheriff—away.

Suddenly, 333 opened her eyes!

The crowd began buzzing with excitement.

Gertrude and Ingrid had worked their way to the edge of the multitude so they could see her better. "Oh—*look* at 'er big beautiful brown *eyes*!" Gertrude cried.

"Yes—she's a magnificent creature," Ingrid agreed.

"I love her pug *nose*!" Sally exclaimed. "It reminds me of that movie star—what's her name...?"

"Oh, I know who you mean—*Sarah* something," Ingrid suggested.

"No, it's not Sarah," Sally said. "I'll think of it in a minute."

Ingrid studied 333's mouth for signs of frothing like she'd seen the night the military police had come to her grandmother's house. Yes, tiny white bubbles were issuing from between 333's lips. *The poor thing's very, very sick*, she thought, sadly.

333 raised her magnificent head, looked around—was instantly *horrified*. She could barely see them, but there they were—the unnatural lines—cage bars—that her nightmares had been filled with for so long. Realizing she was locked up again, she fitfully crawled on her stomach here and there with as much energy as her diminished strength would allow, found no way to escape the hated mass of upright-walking creatures that she smelled all around her. Panicking, heart frantically racing, she tried to get up on her legs, fell back to the cage floor.

Patrick O'Finn involuntarily sucked in his breath, felt wretched; wanted to help her get up.

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Trendy put her hand to her mouth, watched as 333 once again tried to stand. Everyone held their breath as they watched to see if she would make it.

She finally got up on all fours, stood, trembled, drooled at the mouth a couple of minutes—fell again.

"What's *wrong* with her?" someone cried.

The constable turned to Benson. "Is the way she's acting, because of the *tranquilizer* you darted her with?"

"No, the tranquilizer has completely worn off. Your cougar-girl has something seriously wrong with her—something that has nothing to do with my darting her. She's a very sick cookie, man—a very sick cougar-lady!"

Chapter 61

A wispy cloud eased its way across the face of the full moon.

333's head lay on her paws in the subdued light, the flickering glow from the fire pit occasionally highlighting the side of her face.

Almost totally blind, she could only see the vague outlines of people sitting around her cage—sympathetic people who had continued their vigil deep into the night.

A dog barked—she jerked nervously, but her senses were weakened by illness to the point that she couldn't react.

Benson daringly slipped a bowl of water into her cage. She didn't drink any. He left her, walked over; plunked himself up next to Rolf on the tailgate of Rolf's truck where Rolf and Ingrid were sitting.

Rolf noticed tears running down Ingrid's cheeks, put his arm around her, pulled her tousled blonde head to him—then to Benson, asked, "What do you think is wrong with the cougar-girl?"

"Man, I don't know. She's suffering from some kind of disease!"

"What kind?" Ingrid whimpered, wiping tears with the back of her hand.

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"She's bubbling at the mouth—very weak—can't stand up—nervous—has fits of aggression—but not enough energy to carry them out—seems to have no real interest in what's going on around her—and—my guess is—she's lost a lot of weight, man."

"So, what could it be?" Rolf persisted.

"The only disease I know of with those symptoms is one that *sheep* get. It's called Scrapie," Benson explained. "But the cougar-girl is obviously not a sheep."

Trendy saw Ingrid crying, got up from where she sat near the fire, went to her. "I feel so strange about her," Trendy confessed taking Ingrid's hand. "I hated her with all my heart when she was killing people—but now—seeing her laying there so helpless—" Trendy began to weep. "I can't help but love her."

Then, in the stillness of the night, Rolf saw a few people turn their heads, nudge others. He noticed they were watching something besides the cougar-girl.

He scrutinized the shadows they seemed to be looking at. Finally, he saw it, too—a *cougar*, cautiously making its way in the moonlight towards the cougar-girl's cage. His hand instinctively reached for his rifle.

"Look," he whispered to Ingrid.

When she saw it a stifled cry came from her lips.

Trendy caught on to what they were looking at; watched intently.

Benson, and soon, everyone else, was watching the cougar's stealthy movements as it cautiously eased its way closer and closer to the cougar-girl's cage.

"It's the cougar-girl's mother," a deep, masculine voice from next to Rolf whispered, "with her *cubs*."

Rolf recognized the constable's voice, saw the cubs, nodded in agreement.

333 raised her head, looked in her mother's direction.

Her mother put her nose through 333's cage bars.

333 struggled, finally crawled across the cage floor to her mother. They touched noses.

Tears rolled down Ingrid's cheeks as she saw the mother licking froth from 333's lips. "The poor thing," she whispered.

"Yes—both of them," Ingrid managed between snuffles.

"Look—the *little* ones," Trendy murmured.

Everyone watched as the cubs tried to get closer to the cougar-girl, stopped by the cage bars.

333 seemed to acknowledge their presence, then suddenly, in a jerking fit she rolled over, tried to get to her feet—let out a heart-rending scream, fell back to the cage floor—didn't move again.

The mother sensed that her child was dead, yet, reluctant to leave her, put her paw through the bars; tried to touch her cougar-girl.

The coroner moved to the tailgate. In a low voice he said, "Well, she's gone. The cougar-girl is no more."

The constable gripped Rolf's rifle. Rolf let go of it.

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As he slowly made his way towards the cougar mother, the constable didn't know what she might do. "Your baby's gone," he said, in a mellow voice. "Go back to the mountains! Go! Go *on* now!"

The mother's eyes suddenly filled with fire. She snarled, hissed a couple times; slashed the air with her claws.

"Take your cubs home!" he said, motioning with the rifle barrel.

After a few tense moments, the mother turned, began moving away from the cage—her cubs followed her off into the early morning shadows.

Relieved, the constable walked up to the cage, shined his flashlight on the cougar-girl's face—saw tears in her lifeless, human-like eyes.

People began to gather around the cage.

"A hell of a way to be treated," the constable exclaimed, wiping away one of his own tears with his sleeve, "and a god-damned hell of a way to die!"

"That professor will rot in hell for this," Pastor Ener-gisch commented.

"I sure hope so," a man's voice behind the constable said.

The constable turned to see who'd spoken. There was still the glint of a tear in the Governor's eye.

Pierre Corbèt emotionally gripped the cage bars with his sturdy little hands, peered at 333. "On behalf of everyone in zee world—I say zees words over your body, cougar-girl. You were not meant to be—but you were created, anyway. You did what you had to do. Rest in peace, amen!"

Several near him echoed his amen.

Suddenly—from somewhere behind the constable's office—loud voices began yelling, "*Burn the HUMVEE! Burn the HUMVEE!*" splintering the somber moment.

The constable quickly gave Rolf back his rifle, dashed into his office, returned with his own. "A riot—! Let's go take a look, Rolf—the rest of you stay *here!*"

News people and camera crews followed the constable as he and Rolf hurriedly made their way to the back of the building. As they rounded the final corner, they saw protesters, torches in hand, carrying signs that read, 'PROFESSOR—THE BABY KILLER'—in front of the chain-link-enclosed yard where Rolf had impounded the professor's crimson HUMVEE.

The constable saw that one of the protesters held a metal can—had removed its lid.

"What are you *doing* there?" the constable demanded, then approaching the man said, "Give me the *can!*"

Seeing the constable's rifle and the news cameras, the protester handed it over peacefully.

The constable held it to his nose, smelled it. "*Gasoline—!* What the hell were you people going to *do—burn* the professor's HUMVEE—?" he shouted, glaring at the protesters. "That HUMVEE is State property! It's *evidence!* Now get the hell *out* of here—before I *arrest* every last *one* of you—!"

"But—" the protester he'd taken the can from began, "we can't just let the professor get off so *easy*—after what *he's* done!"

"He's in *jail!* Leave it up to the court to decide what happens to him!" the constable countered.

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"But—"

"But, *nothing*—now get *along* with you!"

The disgruntled protesters grudgingly disbanded.

Dawn was just breaking as the coroner solemnly covered 333's lifeless body with a white sheet. "Some of you—get the stretcher out of my SUV over there!" he said.

Some young men responded, laid a stretcher beside 333's body.

Other's, including the Governor, lifted her onto it, then the young men carefully hoisted it into the back of the SUV for the trip to the Prescott morgue where 333 would be thoroughly analyzed.

Chapter 62

In contrast to the modern, glass and steel high-rise buildings surrounding the perimeter of its lush, green grounds, the Etherington Courthouse loomed as a massive, authoritative-looking reddish, decorative cube of large-block masonry. Its three rows of elongated windows looked out onto the city like sentinels of justice. The four-sided clock tower on its roof supported a zinc dome with a tall gray spire.

People were streaming down the sidewalks leading to the courthouse—for the beginning of the trial of *People versus Professor Tyrone Kervello*.

The constable, the coroner, Wanda, Rolf, Ingrid, and Pierre Corbèt were walking towards the courthouse together.

"I wonder if creating a part-human—part-animal is *legal*," Ingrid wondered aloud.

"Zay do eet een China," Pierre chirped.

"I read where the fine for creating human-animal hybrids in Australia is \$200,000 Australian dollars," Wanda added.

"I understand from the news that cloning human-animal hybrids doesn't violate European law because the embryos are not one hundred percent human," Rolf said.

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"I heard—I think it was on TV—that in New Zealand they're going to introduce legislation to allow certain cloning," the coroner put in.

"I heard that, too," the constable said. "As I understand it—the purpose of their legislation is to provide research to make genetic modifications for preventing inheritable diseases—like Huntington's."

"Zat would be zee good zing, no?" Pierre asked.

"It would be a good thing if it can be controlled. If some greedy scientist—like Professor Kervello—creates human-animals for sale, outside the law—if it *is* outside the law—that would be bad," the constable answered.

"But zay have zee ferocious lions and tigers in zee *zoos*. Zer eez no law against zat," Pierre pointed out.

"But if a ferocious animal gets out of its cage and *kills* somebody—like Professor Kervello's human-animal did—*that's* probably against the law, depending on the circumstances," the constable said.

"*Oui!*" Pierre agreed. "But is eet against zee law for heem to create eet in zee *first* place?"

"I think the main question is—is it legal to deform a human being—by creating him or her as part of some dumb *animal*?" the coroner surmised.

"Well, this trial will tell what a jury thinks about what the *Professor* did," the constable concluded.

As they walked up the reddish-brown masonry courthouse steps, they passed protesters with signs milling about the front of the courthouse.

They left the protesters, went on through the double glass doors, onto the main floor.

"The trial is being held on the third floor," the constable said, pressing the elevator button.

"Who's the judge?" the coroner asked.

"I heard they were sending in a special Superior Court judge from the capital to try this case. I think his name is Jenkins," the constable said.

"I didn't think they could bring in an outside judge like that," Rolf said.

"I think it has something to do with the international publicity—or notoriety—something like that, to make sure the case is handled according to certain procedures," the constable said, as he got on the elevator.

The old elevator squeaked and rattled as it carried them to the third floor, door opened.

They got off, went into the courtroom entrance hall, then through two metal detectors, body searches. They passed armed guards as they went through the tall mahogany courtroom doors, sat down together on one of the many long, polished-oak benches.

"Who are the people sitting at the tables down *front* there?" Wanda cried. "Oh—I see that damned *Professor*!"

"*Sh-h!* They'll make us leave," Ingrid cautioned.

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"The people at the table on this side," the constable said, pointing, "are the Professor and his lawyers—his legal Dream Team. The other ones are prosecution attorneys—the District Attorney and his staff."

"That damned professor is dressed to the *teeth*. I've never seen such a beautiful suit in my entire life! I thought he'd be dressed in yellow and black striped *jail* pajamas," Wanda whispered.

"Oh, no, after the preliminary hearing he was allowed out on two million dollars bail—under house arrest because of his international connections—was required to stay in Hotel Natasha—lots of security," the coroner said. "If he makes all his court appearances, he'll get his two million bucks back."

"Poor baby," Wanda whispered, sarcastically.

"As rich as the Professor is—I think he probably has good lawyers," Ingrid suggested.

"The best money can *buy*, I understand," the constable acknowledged.

"Oh, look!" Wanda cried. "Scott! That's Scott *Tamerlane*—see him? Near the *front*! I'm going down there and *chat* with him," she said, bounding off like a little rabbit, before the constable could warn her to stay because court was about to begin.

But Wanda only chatted with Scott for a moment; hurried back.

"Well, what did he *say*?" Ingrid asked.

"Something about they don't allow cameras and recorders in the courtroom—anyway, he has a job with a Philadelphia magazine to do sketches of the court scenes."

"Wow! Good for him," Ingrid said.

Wanda had just sat down when the uniformed, armed, black female bailiff came out, announced, "All *rise*—! Superior Court for the county of Emerald in the case of *People versus Tyrone Kervello* is now in session—Judge Myron Jenkins presiding!"

"What about that redheaded floozy—Patricia *Rossiter*? I thought she'd be on trial with the professor," Wanda whispered to the constable, as they stood up.

"Good question."

Judge Jenkins made his entrance wearing a long, black robe, gray head uncovered. He was a tall man, made an imposing impression; took his seat on the judge's bench.

Everyone else, except the bailiff, sat down.

Dead silence in the courtroom.

"District Attorney Brian Melville—you are the lead attorney for the prosecution?" the judge asked.

The District Attorney, crisp-looking in his dark gray suit, red and white tie, stood up. "Yes, your Honor."

The judge made a note on his ledger.

"Mr. Harry Belcher—you are the lead attorney for the defense?" the judge asked.

Harry "the Knife" Belcher looked like he'd slept in his wrinkled black suit, loose tie, face looked like he was suffering

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from a hangover. He rearranged some papers on the table before him then slowly responded, "Yes, your Honor."

"The counsel for the defense is reminded that it is proper protocol in this courtroom to *stand* when addressing the bench," the judge said, not looking up from his writing.

Belcher made a half-hearted attempt to rise, then settled back onto his seat.

The judge called both counsels to the bench, talked to them quietly about protocol.

Counsels returned to their tables.

The judge pulled the long-necked microphone to him and began. "To my knowledge, the criminal case before this court is unique in the annals of human existence. It involves the taking of human life by a part-human—part-cougar creature that was allegedly created in a laboratory by the defendant, Professor Tyrone Kervello, for the purpose of monetary gain. The creature inadvertently, as the result of apparent neglect, was released to the public and said creature did cause the death of four persons. Subsequently, the defendant allegedly attempted to obstruct justice by ordering one or more members of his corporation to cause bodily harm to come to others in an attempt to prevent them from testifying as witnesses. The clerk will read the charges."

The court clerk who was a matronly-looking lady in her mid forties sat and read the charges against Kervello into a microphone. "Count One. The defendant, Tyrone Kervello did create for the purpose of monetary gain, using illegal biological techniques, a violent creature, part-animal and part-human.

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Count Two. Did neglect to restrain said creature referenced in Count One, resulting in the death of four persons by said creature. Count Three. Created and illegally trafficked in the international sale of human-animal hybrid creatures. Count Four. Hired would-be assassins to do bodily harm to potential witnesses. Count Five. Hired assassins with the intent of doing bodily harm to an officer of the law. Count Six. Personally wielded a firearm with the intent to do bodily harm to an officer of the law. Count Seven. Did cause, directly or indirectly the sexual abuse of the human-animal hybrid referenced as Hybrid 333."

"The defendant has pleaded not guilty to all counts, during the preliminary hearing," the judge said, making notes, then looked up at the jury. "If there is any reason any of you cannot serve on the jury, raise your hand now."

No hands went up.

The court clerk handed a microphone to the first potential juror in the jury box.

"State your name," the judge said to the potential juror.

"Mildred Tompkins."

"Do you believe you can make your decisions based on the evidence you will hear in this courtroom and nothing but that evidence, and that you can render your verdict based on 'beyond a reasonable doubt' of the defendant's innocence or guilt relative to the charges against him?"

"No, your Honor. Ever since I first saw that horrible man on TV, I've *hated* him. I think he's guilty as *hell*!"

Rumbles in the courtroom.

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Belcher rose to his feet. "By 'horrible man', to whom are you referring?" Though Belcher *looked* as if he'd just finished shearing sheep, he quickly revealed that he had a highly-polished *tongue*.

Mildred Tompkins pointed to the defendant, Professor Tyrone Kervello.

"I move to dismiss for *cause*, your Honor," Belcher said, sitting back down.

"You're dismissed," the judge said to Mildred Tompkins.

The microphone made *r-r-ipping* feedback sounds as the dismissed Mildred Tompkins passed it on to the next potential juror, as she was leaving the jury box.

"Be careful when you pass the microphone," the judge admonished, then he asked the next potential juror the same question he'd asked Mildred Tompkins.

Each potential juror was questioned in like manor. Seven were replaced for *cause*.

Eventually, the *peremptory challenges* by the lawyers began.

"State your name," the judge said.

"John P. Fallingsworth."

The District Attorney rose to his feet, addressed the potential juror. "Have any of your relatives or anyone you have known personally, ever been *murdered*, Mr. Fallingsworth?"

"My Uncle George—down in Falls City—was murdered by a punk that was trying to rob him. Uncle George fought him off, but later died from the stab wounds."

"Do you think you could put that incident aside and treat the evidence presented in this court in an unbiased manner?"

"I do."

The District Attorney sat down.

Belcher rose. "Mr. Fallingsworth, did your Uncle George ever give you any *money* or spend money on you?"

"Yes. He put me through high school—and a year of auto mechanics school."

"So, when he died, did that deprive you of any funds?"

"I don't understand what you're asking."

"When your uncle was killed by the person in question, did that reduce the amount of *help*—the amount of *money*—you probably would have received if your uncle had *not* been killed?"

"Yes. Uncle George planned to send me to a four-year college, but without his help..."

"I move to dismiss, your Honor," Belcher said.

"You are dismissed," the judge said.

"The lawyer didn't say why he was dismissing that potential juror," Wanda whispered to the constable.

"That's the way it works. He doesn't *have* to," the constable whispered back. "If the lawyer thinks a potential juror will vote against his client, the lawyer just asks the judge to dismiss, and he does."

Jury selection continued for the rest of the day.

Chapter 63

A jury of seven men and five women had been selected for the jury and were sitting in the jury box. Four alternate jurors would also observe the trial in case some of the jurors became ill.

Witnesses who were to be called by either the prosecution or defense to testify, such as the constable, were not allowed to be in the courtroom until called and could not remain afterwards.

Since the government had brought the case against Professor Tyrone Kervello, prosecution would begin the trial with the first opening argument.

District Attorney Brian Melville, lead attorney for the prosecution, stood, walked to near the jury box, interlaced his fingers, began. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. The case you have become part of and are now the jurors of: *People versus Tyrone Kervello*, is unique. It is one of abject *horror*—one of *mutilation—sexual—abuse—greed—neglect—deception*—attempted *assassinations* of officers of the law—and attempted murder of ordinary citizens! Prosecution will show beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant, Professor Tyrone Kervello did biologically create—in violation of United States laws and laws of foreign lands—for the purpose of monetary gain—a vio-

lent monster—part-human, part-cougar. Prosecution will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant neglected to restrain that monster with the result that it violently attacked and viciously *mutilated*—and *killed*—four persons. Prosecution will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant illegally sold part-human—part-animal creatures to private collectors in other countries. Prosecution will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant did *himself* attempt to *kill* an officer of the law. Prosecution will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant hired assassins in an attempt to prevent witnesses of his illegal acts from coming forward to testify against him. Prosecution will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant hired an assassin with the intent to kill Constable Alexander Mizzen, an officer of the law. Prosecution will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant, using a firearm, attempted to murder one or more officers of the law. And, prosecution will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant, Tyrone Kervello, did permit sexual abuse to the human-animal referred to as Hybrid 333. As members of the jury, it is your duty to find the defendant, Tyrone Kervello, *guilty* of all of these charges brought against him!"

District Attorney Melville turned away, slowly made his way back to the prosecution's table; sat down.

"Mr. Belcher, do you wish to make an opening argument?" Judge Jenkins asked.

Belcher shuffled through some papers, slowly got to his feet. "Yes, your Honor," he said, as he ambled up to the jury box.

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He made eye contact with each juror, then began. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the prosecution would have you believe that my client, Professor Tyrone Kervello, is some kind of *fiend*. The prosecution cannot prove any of those charges the District Attorney has just so eloquently articulated. Defense will bring forth witnesses who will testify to the excellent work the professor has achieved." Belcher hesitated a fraction of a second, then continued. "Research into the new world of genetic engineering is a wonderful tool—a way of opening new channels for curing diseases and changing the way we see animals today—a way of making them more enjoyable for mankind. Our zoos are filled with lions, tigers, cougars, bears, and other vicious animals. Are we to blame their *creator* for their *viciousness*? I say we are *not*! Yet, we go to the zoo and enjoy the thrill of those animals' savage splendor. Lions and tigers have been crossbred for many years now, they're called *ligers*. My client has taken this process one step forward. He has combined various animals with various others, to create additional splendid creatures for our delight. He is not alone in this endeavor. In many countries, including the United States—in some of our most prominent universities, research scientists like Professor Kervello are creating hybrids—yes, even hybrids that are part-*human*—part-animal. In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, as the trial progresses you must constantly keep in mind that the *prosecution* must *prove*—beyond a reasonable *doubt*—my client's guilt of any of the charges brought against him—also remember that the *defense* does *not* have to *prove* his *innocence*.

As you weigh the evidence in this case, always keep those facts in mind. Thank you."

Belcher slowly returned to the defense table, then turned, said, "Your Honor, I move for *dismissal* of this trial on the grounds that the case against my client has insufficient legal basis."

"Motion denied," the judge said.

Belcher wasn't quite through. He leaned on his fingertips. "Your Honor, I move for a change of trial venue," he said.

"Motion denied. Mr. Melville, you may call your first witness."

"The prosecution calls Gertrude Rhinemann."

Gertrude was brought in by the bailiff from where she'd been waiting in the corridor.

The bailiff swore her in. "Do you swear the testimony you are about to give in this court is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?"

"I do," Gertrude said.

"You may take the stand," the bailiff said.

Gertrude sat herself down in the witness box.

"State your name," the judge said.

"Mrs. Gertrude Rhinemann."

"Mrs. Rhinemann, please tell the court where you were on the morning of the twenty-fifth of December last year—when you and your daughter found the mutilated body of Julius Wilhelm Streiker," the District Attorney said.

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"Objection, your Honor. No grounds have been established that the body was 'mutilated', or that it was that of Julius Wilhelm Streiker," Belcher contended.

"Objection sustained."

"I'll rephrase the question. Mrs. Rhinemann—on the morning of the twenty-fifth of December last year, you and your daughter were out walking. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Tell the court what you saw that morning."

"It was Christmas mornin'. Ingrid found 'is body first. 'Twas still so dark, I don't know 'ow she even saw it."

"By 'his body' are you referring to the body of Mr. Julius Wilhelm Streiker?"

"Yes—'e was usually called *Herr* Streiker. 'E was German, I think."

"Objection, your Honor, positive identification of the alleged victim has not been established," Belcher said.

"Mr. Melville, are you going to establish the positive identification of Julius Wilhelm Streiker?"

"With a later witness, your Honor."

"Overruled, Mr. Belcher. Continue Mr. Melville."

"By *Ingrid*, were you referring to your daughter, Ingrid Rhinemann?" Melville continued.

"Yes."

"Tell the court what happened next."

"Well, when she came upon 'is body, I think she screamed. Anyway, when I saw it—we both screamed. A man—'is name was Max—'eard us. 'E opened a window o' 'is

cottage and stuck 'is 'ead out. I told 'im ta get the *constable*—that someone 'ad been *killed*."

"Did he get the constable?"

"Yes. 'E fetched the constable right away."

"Describe for the court what Herr Streiker looked like when you saw him that morning."

"Oh, 'twas awful, 'is blood was *everywhere*."

"Objection, your Honor," Belcher cut in, "the witness testified—and I quote, 'It was still so dark, I don't know 'ow she even saw it', referring to the body. How could the witness know it was *blood*?"

"Objection sustained."

"What was Herr Streiker wearing?" the District Attorney asked.

"It's so *embarrassin'*—must I answer that?"

"You must answer the question, Mrs. Rhinemann," the judge said.

"'E was *naked*."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"Objection. Considering the lighting condition the witness just described—how could the witness be able to see that the body in question was naked?" Belcher asked.

"Sustained. Rephrase your question, Mr. Melville."

"What was the condition of the daylight at that time, Mrs. Rhinemann?" the District Attorney asked.

"Oh, it was gettin' light enough. 'E was *naked*, all right!"

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"*Completely* naked?" the District Attorney asked.

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"Except for 'is *boots*—and 'e 'ad a *ring* on one finger."

"No further questions, your Honor," the District Attorney said.

"Your witness, Mr. Belcher," the judge said.

Belcher stood behind the defense's table. "Mrs. Rhinemann, do you wear classes?"

"When I read."

"Only when you read?" Belcher pressed.

"Yes."

Belcher removed some papers from a folder. "Your Honor, defense wishes to introduce into evidence certified copies of a prescription and a receipt from the Family Eyeglass Center, which show that the witness purchased new eyeglasses two years ago. Defense has an expert witness who will testify that said eyeglasses are for *distant* vision—not for *reading*—no further questions."

"Defense's exhibit will be received into evidence," the judge said.

"Oh, 'ell, I completely fergot about *those*! I *never* wear 'em, *anyway*!" Gertrude cried.

Laughter.

The judge pounded his gavel. "Order in the courtroom. No profanity will be allowed in my courtroom. You may step down, Mrs. Rhinemann. Mr. Melville, call your next witness."

"Prosecution calls Ingrid Rhinemann."

The bailiff brought in Ingrid, swore her in. She took the stand.

"State your name," the judge said.

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"Ingrid Rhinemann."

"Miss Rhinemann, are you the daughter of Gertrude Rhinemann?" Melville asked.

"Yes."

"On the morning of last Christmas day, were you accompanying your mother, Gertrude Rhinemann?"

"Yes."

"Where were you going?"

"To my grandmother's house—my mother's mother's house."

"Why were you going there?"

"She had invited us to come have breakfast with her."

"About what time was it when you and your mother were on your way to your grandmother's house?"

"I don't know. I didn't look at a clock. It was early though. The sun was not up when we left the house."

"Did you have an unusual experience that morning?"

"Yes."

"Please tell the court about it."

"Mother and I were on our way along the icy path that goes to grandmother's house. It was foggy. I guess mother's foot bumped a chunk of ice. She picked it up and tossed it into the fog ahead of us. It disappeared. A little while later, I came upon a terrible sight—the remains of Herr Streiker."

"But you didn't know it was Herr Streiker at the time, is that correct?"

"That's right."

"Tell the court what happened next."

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"Well, he was a bloody mess—and naked. I screamed. Mother screamed."

"You saw the body of a man, correct?"

"Objection your Honor, prosecution is leading the witness," Belcher said.

"Sustained. Mr. Melville, rephrase your question."

"Describe for the court the condition Herr Streiker was in."

"Oh, he was a *mess*, like I said. It looked like he'd been ripped apart by a wild animal. His face was.... Well, it was almost *gone*."

"What was he wearing?"

"Like I said, he was naked. I'd never seen a naked man before—still had his boots on—oh, and he had a ring on."

"No further questions."

"Your witness, Mr. Belcher."

Belcher ambled to the witness box. "Miss Rhinemann, you testified that the fog was so thick last Christmas morning when you were walking with your mother—that when she tossed a piece of ice into it, the ice disappeared, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And yet, you were able to see what the man *looked* like?"

"Yes."

"If, as you testified, the sun was not yet up and the fog was so heavy you couldn't see through it—how do you explain that you were able to make out what the man *looked* like?"

"The magic mist."

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"The magic *mist*?" Belcher asked, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

"Yes."

"Describe for the court what you mean by 'the magic *mist*'."

"Well, everybody around *Bear Skin* knows about the magic mist. At a certain time in the morning when the fog is hanging in and the sun is coming up, the fog lights *up*—kind of like a light bulb—it glows—no one knows why—and you can see quite well. Maybe not *quite* well, but you can see."

"And this *phenomenon* is called 'the magic *mist*'?" Belcher asked, mockingly.

"Yes."

"No further questions."

"The witness may step down. Court will adjourn until one o'clock this afternoon," the judge said.

Chapter 64

Prosecution calls Alexander Mizzen," the District Attorney said.

The constable was brought in, sworn in.

"You are the constable of the village of Bear Skin, correct?" District Attorney Melville asked.

"Yes," the constable replied.

"On the morning of the twenty-fifth of December last year you were summoned by a citizen of Bear Skin to a grisly sight, were you not?"

"Objection, your Honor, prosecution is leading the witness," Belcher interrupted.

"Rephrase your question, Mr. Melville."

"Were you summoned that morning?" Melville continued.

"Yes."

"Tell the court what action you took that morning."

"It was early. Maxwell Teeler—he's known around Bear Skin as Max—pounded on my office door, woke me up, said someone had been killed, would I come at once. I asked him what it was about. He said Gertrude Rhinemann had yelled to him that someone had been killed."

"Then what did you do?"

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"I got into my clothes, called my assistant, Rolf, and grabbed a lantern. When people heard—they came running out of their houses."

"How many people would you say?"

"Oh, perhaps a dozen altogether."

"Then what did you do?"

"I hurried up the trail that Max said Gertrude—Gertrude Rhinemann was on. I met up with Gertrude and her daughter, Ingrid. They led me to the scene of the crime."

"Objection. No crime has been established."

"Sustained. The jury will disregard the statement. Continue Mr. Melville."

"Did you encounter a body along the trail?"

"Yes."

"Describe for the court what you saw."

"I saw the naked body of a man lying on his back on the snow."

"Was he alive?"

"No. He was dead."

"How could you tell he was dead?"

"He was frozen stiff. Blood was on the snow around him. He'd been mutilated. Most of his face was missing."

"Did you believe at that time that this person was a victim of foul play?"

"Objection. Prosecution is leading the witness," Belcher said.

"Overruled. Continue Mr. Melville."

"Constable Mizzen, did you examine the scene?"

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"Yes."

"Tell the court what you concluded."

"The body of Herr Streiker was naked, except for his boots, a ring on his finger—and a bloody axe in his hand."

"Objection. Identification has not been established."

"Sustained."

"The body was naked, except for unlaced boots. There was an axe in the grip of the victim's right hand. The condition of the body and the tracks in the snow led me to conclude he'd been killed either by an animal or by a person," the constable said.

"After that, did you consider it to be a crime scene?"

"Yes."

"No further questions. Prosecution reserves the right to recall the witness."

"Granted. Your witness, Mr. Belcher."

"Constable Mizzen, you said when Maxwell Teeler got you up the morning of the twenty-fifth of December last year in your office—you grabbed a lantern. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Describe the lantern to the court."

"It's a standard coal oil lantern."

"By a standard coal oil lantern—do you mean the kind that you raise the glass up and light the wick with a match?"

"Yes."

"Compared to the light a flashlight puts out, would you say the lantern you took with you put out as much light, or less light?"

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"Objection, your Honor," Melville cut in. "The witness is not testifying as an expert on luminosity."

"Sustained."

"Why did you take that lantern, instead of a flashlight?"

"I was in a hurry. It was handy."

"Constable Mizzen, you said you saw tracks. Were they the tracks of a man?"

"Some were the tracks left by the victim's boots. There were also other tracks."

"Describe these other tracks to the court."

"They were unusual. They were small and clearly the toe prints came to a point, like claws."

"You say 'clearly', yet you observed them by the light of the coal oil lamp, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Now these track you said you saw. You're sure, considering the light conditions that morning and the fact that you made your observations under adverse conditions—you're absolutely certain they came to a point?"

"Yes."

"Do you have photographs of these tracks that 'came to a point' to show the court?"

"No."

"You knew when you left your office that you were going to a location you described for the court as Maxwell Keeler saying, and I quote 'woke me up, said someone had been killed, would I come at once.' Is that correct, Constable?"

"Yes."

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"You were going to a place where 'someone had been killed' yet you didn't bother to take a *camera*—is that correct Constable?"

"Yes."

"Explain to the court why that was."

"My assistant, Rolf Arbeiter, is the official photographer. I leave crime scene photography to him."

"Did Rolf Arbeiter take any photographs of these tracks that 'clearly came to a point'?"

"No."

"Why was that?"

"He'd forgotten his camera in all the excitement."

"He had forgotten his camera in all of the excitement. Is that your testimony, Constable?"

"Yes."

"Did Mr. Arbeiter go back after his camera?"

"He attempted to."

"Explain to the court how he attempted to."

"He returned to the village to get it, but a snow storm laid down so much snow he was not able to take any photos."

"Objection, your Honor," Melville cut in. "Mr. Arbeiter is not the one testifying."

"Sustained."

"You have no photographs of these mysterious tracks that 'came to a point'. Is that correct?" Belcher asked.

"That is correct."

"No further questions."

DON LEWIS WIREMAN, SR.

"You may step down," Judge Jenkins said. "Call your next witness, Mr. Melville."

"Prosecution calls Brett Öffner," Melville said.

Coroner Öffner was sworn in.

"State your name," the judge said.

"Brett Öffner."

"You are the coroner for Emerald County. Is that correct?" Melville asked.

"Yes."

"How long have you been the Emerald County Coroner?"

"Nine years."

"Where do you reside."

"In Prescott."

"Is that where you have your office?"

"Yes."

"Coroner Öffner, on or about the twenty-fifth of December last, you were called by Constable Mizzen to the scene of a crime that had taken place in or near Bear Skin. Is that correct?"

"Objection. Counsel is leading the witness," Belcher said.

"Sustained. Mr. Melville, rephrase your question."

"Were you summoned on that day?" Melville asked.

"Yes."

"Describe for the court what you did."

"Constable Mizzen phoned me early that morning. He said Herr Streiker had been killed. I drove to Bear Skin and retrieved the body."

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"By Herr Streiker are you referring to Julius Wilhelm Streiker?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it was the body of Julius Wilhelm Streiker?"

"He was identified by a witness to the crime scene."

"What was the name of the witness?"

"Gladys Forthworth."

Melville went to his table, picked up a paper; returned, handed it to Coroner Öffner.

"Do you recognize this affidavit?"

"Yes. It's the signed affidavit of Gladys Forthworth, testifying to the identity of Julius Wilhelm Streiker."

"Prosecution wishes to introduce the affidavit into evidence."

"Objection," Belcher said. "The witness is not qualified to testify as to the authenticity of the signature on the affidavit."

"Pass the document to the Bench," the judge said.

The bailiff transferred the affidavit to the judge.

"The affidavit contains notary seal testifying to the authenticity of the signature. Overruled, Mr. Belcher. Exhibit will be received," the judge said.

"Is the affidavit the only way the victim, Julius Wilhelm Streiker, was identified," Melville asked.

"He was also identified by comparison of x-rays taken of the victim's jaws to dental records obtained from the Bear Skin dentist."

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Melville produced a sheaf of documents, presented them to the coroner. "Are these the dental records you referred to?"

Coroner Öffner rifled through them. "Yes."

The judge accepted them into evidence.

"Coroner Öffner, did you perform an autopsy on the remains of Julius Wilhelm Streiker?" Melville asked.

"Yes."

"Please tell the court what your findings were."

"It's all in my report, but to summarize: Herr Streiker's body was lacerated over about eighty percent of its surface. The snow and ice that he was encased in indicated he had lost a lot of blood before dying. He was naked, except for his unlaced boots, and a ring on the forefinger of his left hand."

"Anything else?"

"Objection. Prosecution is leading the witness," Belcher said.

"Sustained."

"Coroner Öffner, in your opinion, would you say the victim Julius Wilhelm Streiker was *mutilated*?"

"Objection."

"Sustained."

"Was what you have told the court—*all* of your findings?" Melville asked.

"No. The victim's *brain* had been removed from his skull."

There was the sound throughout the courtroom of people sucking in their breath, then mumbling.

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"Silence in the court. Any further outbursts and I'll clear the courtroom," the judge said.

Melville produced a stack of photographs taken of Herr Streiker by the coroner during the autopsy. Coroner Öffner identified each one. The judge glanced through them, accepted them into evidence, asked the court clerk to pass them to the jury for inspection.

"Coroner Öffner. In your opinion, would you say Julius Wilhelm Streiker was the victim of a crime?" Melville asked.

"Yes. I'd think there must be a law against mutilation like I described."

"Objection. No perpetrator of a crime has been established," Belcher said.

"Sustained. The jury will disregard the witness' last statement."

"Coroner Öffner, during the course of your examination, did you draw any conclusions as to what might have killed Julius Wilhelm Streiker?" Melville asked.

"His lacerations were consistent with those caused by the sharp claws and fangs of a cougar, mountain lion, or bear. However, I have neither observed nor read about one of the animals I mentioned entering the base of the skull and removing the brain."

"Did you perform any further tests on the victim's corpse?"

"Yes. I ordered samples to be analyzed for DNA."

"Were they so analyzed?"

"Yes."

DON LEWIS WIREMAN, SR.

"What, if any, were the conclusions of the DNA analysis?"

"The analysis of hair and blood found on the axe in Herr Streiker's hand indicated that neither the hair DNA nor the blood type matched *any* known man or animal."

"Are you aware of any comparisons of DNA or comparison of other tests made subsequent to that time?"

"Yes."

"Tell the court what these comparisons revealed."

"As indicated in my report. Subsequent tests revealed that the results of the first DNA and blood analyses were consistent when compared to the same type of analyses of a human-animal which I later learned was called Hybrid 333."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"Order in the court," the judge said.

"No further questions at this time. Prosecution reserves the right to recall the witness," Melville said.

"Granted. Your witness, Mr. Belcher."

"Coroner Öffner, since you live and work in Prescott, why is it that you frequent the village of Bear Skin so often?"

"Objection," Melville said. "No evidence has been presented to substantiate the frequency with which Coroner Öffner goes to Bear Skin."

"Sustained."

"Coroner Öffner, is the name Sam Bateman familiar to you?" Belcher asked.

"Yes. He's the barkeeper at the Moose Head Bar in Bear Skin."

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"If he were to testify—how many drinks per week do you think he's say that you consume in the Moose Head Bar?"

"Objection," Melville cut in. "Coroner Öffner is not on trial."

"Sustained."

"No further questions," Belcher said, returning to his table.

Chapter 65

Sally Fontaine fidgeted in the witness chair. She would have rather been outside having a cigarette.

"Did you know Clyde Breuger?" Melville asked.

"Yeah. I knew him. I really liked him a lot."

"Just answer the question," the judge said.

"On the evening of the 17 January this year, were you in the Moose Head Bar in Bear Skin?"

"I probably was. I usually am."

"Objection," Belcher said. "The witness has not confirmed that she was in the Moose Head Bar on the day in question."

"Sustained."

"I submit as evidence a notarized affidavit signed by Sam Bateman—the bartender at the Moose Head Bar—to the effect that the witness was present in the Moose Head Bar on 17 January of this year," Melville said, submitting the affidavit.

"Continue, Mr. Melville."

"Miss Fontaine, were you in the Moose Head Bar the evening before Clyde Breuger was found dead?"

"Yes."

"Did you talk to Clyde Breuger on that occasion?"

"Ya mean, did we shoot the breeze?"

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"Yes."

"Yes."

"Describe for the court what happened."

"Well, I noticed Clyde sitting at a booth by himself. I took my beer over and tried to cheer him up. Pretty soon, he got up and went into the poolroom to play some pool."

"Then what happened?" Melville asked.

"I stayed at the table sipping the cold beer he'd bought me. I heard Sam—that's the bartender—yell for somebody to get out. I jumped up and ran into the poolroom. I saw Sam toss Clyde outside."

"Then what did you do?"

"I ran out after Clyde. I was kind of crazy about him, really. He usually treated me good. He was mad and frustrated that night—very drunk. I tried to get him to go home. He swung on me. Caught me on the cheek a little. There's only so much a lady can take. I went back inside."

"Miss Fontaine. The day following this incident, that would be 18 January, did you see Clyde Breuger again?"

"Yes. He was dead. All bloody and everything. It was horrible," she said, putting her hand to her mouth.

"You positively identified the body as that of Clyde Breuger?"

"Yeah."

"No further questions. Defense reserves the right to recall the witness."

"Granted. Your witness, Mr. Belcher."

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"You're known around Bear Skin as somewhat of a *slut*, are you not, Miss Fontaine?" Belcher asked, brutally.

"Objection, your Honor. Defense is badgering the witness."

"Sustained. Defense will abstain from the use of slang."

"Are you a drinking woman, Miss. Fontaine?"

"I have a few now and then."

"I can put a witness on the stand who will testify that you spend most of your waking hours in the Moose Head Bar and that you consume at least the equivalent of ten bottles of beer a day. Do you agree with that assessment, Miss Fontaine?"

"I have a few," she said adjusting a shoulder strap on her dress.

"While in the Moose Head Bar you solicit men with the intent of prostitution—is that not correct, Miss Fontaine?"

"Objection, your Honor, the witness is not on trial."

"Sustained."

"No further questions," Belcher said.

"Constable Mizzen, on 18 January this year you were summoned to the site of a deceased person; were you not?" District Attorney Melville asked.

"Yes."

"Tell the court about that incident."

"I was having breakfast in the café when a boy—Billy was his name—came running in. He told me there'd been a killin'. That's how he said it. The coroner was in the café at the

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time. The three of us got into the coroner's SUV and the boy told the coroner how to get to where the body was."

"Then what happened?" Melville asked.

"When we got to the scene, people were gathered around. My assistant was taking photographs of the crime scene. I examined the body and area."

"Objection," Belcher said. "A crime has not been established."

"Sustained. Continue Mr. Melville."

"What were your findings?"

"The face had been eaten so badly that it was almost unrecognizable—and the brain—it had been eaten out from the back of the head."

There was a rumble in the courtroom.

"Silence in the courtroom," the judge said. "Continue, Mr. Melville."

"Did you believe a crime had been committed?"

"Yes. From what I saw, I thought Clyde Breuger had been killed by the cougar-human also known as Hybrid 333."

Melville got some photos from his table, returned, handed one to the constable.

"Was this one of the photos taken by your assistant, Rolf Arbeiter, at the crime scene on that day?"

"Yes."

"Constable Mizzen, do you recognize the person in the photo?"

"Yes."

"Tell the court who it is."

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"Clyde Breuger."

"No further questions."

"Coroner Öffner, following your autopsy on the body of Clyde Breuger is it your conclusion that he was killed by the cougar-human known as Hybrid 333?"

"Yes."

"No further questions, your Honor."

"Court will recess until ten o'clock tomorrow morning,"
the judge said.

Chapter 66

"State your name," the judge said.

"Ethel Hammond."

"Mrs. Hammond, tell the court what relation you are to the deceased, Tom Hammond," District Attorney Melville said.

She absentmindedly passed the leathery fingers of her left hand through her unruly gray hair. Strands of it brushed the black shawl draped over her shoulders. "I'm his mother."

Melville handed her a notarized affidavit.

"Mrs. Hammond, is that your signature on this affidavit?"

She got reading glasses from her pocket, put them on. "Yes, it's my signature. I signed it the day I went to the morgue to identify Tom," she said, tearfully putting away her glasses.

"Did you identify him as your son, Tom Hammond, who had been killed by the part cougar—part human known as Hybrid 333?"

"Objection your Honor. No evidence has been introduced as to what caused the death of Tom Hammond," Belcher protested.

"Sustained. Mr. Melville, rephrase your question."

"Your Honor, prosecution wishes to introduce the affidavit indicating the identity of the victim, Tom Hammond, as a prosecution exhibit."

"Received."

"No further questions. Prosecution reserves the right to recall."

"Granted. Your witness Mr. Belcher."

Belcher's dingy brown slacks riffled with wrinkles as he ambled up to the witness stand, put his hands on the rail. "How old are you, Mrs. Hammond?"

"Objection, your Honor, the question has no bearing on the case," Melville interjected.

"What's the reason for your question, Mr. Belcher?" the judge asked.

"To establish mental state, your Honor," Belcher said.

"Answer the question Mrs. Hammond."

"Sixty-seven."

"How old was your son when he died?" Belcher asked.

"Twenty-two...no...I think he was twenty-three...no..."

"No further questions, your Honor."

"Coroner Öffner, were you called to the scene of an incident to retrieve the body of a trapper known as Tom Hammond?" District Attorney Melville asked.

"Not called, exactly. I was already there," the coroner said.

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"Tell the court about your experience at that time."

"The constable—his assistant, Rolf Arbeiter, and hound handlers from the Prescott Canine Corps, and myself took hounds up into the mountains by snowmobile."

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"What was the purpose of doing that?"

"The plan was to find and kill the cougar-human known as Hybrid 333 that had terrorized Bear Skin and killed two of its citizens."

"Did you find Hybrid 333?"

"We got separated in a blizzard. I personally didn't come in contact with Hybrid 333. After we regrouped, we discovered that the constable was missing. We searched for him and finally found him—unconscious—buried up to his chest in snow. We also found the body of Tom Hammond at that time."

"Subsequent to that time, did you transport Tom Hammond's body to the morgue in Prescott?"

"Yes."

"Did you perform an autopsy on his corpse?"

"Yes."

"Tell the court what you determined, if anything from that autopsy."

"The body had extensive lacerations. The brain had been removed."

"What did you conclude was the cause of death?"

"The lacerations on the body and removal of the brain were consistent with those of the corpses of Herr Streiker and Herr Breuger. Analysis of hair found in the wounds showed that they were those of the cougar-human known as Hybrid 333. I concluded that the death of Tom Hammond had been brought about by Hybrid 333."

"Was it your opinion at the time of autopsy that Tom Hammond had been mutilated?"

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"Objection. Mr. Melville is leading the witness," Belcher said.

"Sustained."

"No further questions, your Honor. Prosecution reserves the right to recall," Melville said.

"Granted. Your witness, Mr. Belcher."

"No questions," Belcher said.

Kervello darted a hard glance at Belcher, his lead Dream Team defense attorney. Belcher showed no response as he returned to the table where Kervello sat.

"Court is adjourned until one o'clock this afternoon," the judge said.

Chapter 67

"State your name," the judge said.

"Colonel Alfred P. Sparker."

"Colonel Sparker, on or about the evening of 17 July of this year, Private John Rich was a member of your Army National Guard company, is that correct?"

"Yes. I was his commanding officer."

"Private Rich was found dead, was he not?"

"Yes."

"Tell the court what knowledge you have of that incident."

"Private Rich was on guard duty that evening, as were many other soldiers. We had established a military guard perimeter around Bear Skin to prevent the cougar-human known as Hybrid 333 from entering the village. Private Rich was attacked by Hybrid 333 while on duty that evening."

"How do you know Private John Rich was attacked by the cougar-human known as Hybrid 333?"

"Due to the circumstances, Private John Rich's body was later autopsied. Hair found on his body was determined to be that of Hybrid 333."

"Did the autopsy determine that Private Rich's brain was missing?"

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"To my knowledge, it did not determine that his brain was missing."

"No further questions, your Honor. Prosecution reserves the right to recall."

"Granted. Your witness, Mr. Belcher."

"Colonel Sparker, are you a medical doctor?" Belcher asked.

"No."

"Is it possible that Private Rich could have rubbed against a tree or something that had Hybrid 333's hair on it?" Belcher asked.

"It's possible."

"Is it also possible that Private Rich could have been killed by a bear or other animal—and not by Hybrid 333?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The autopsy report says Private Rich's wounds contained Hybrid 333's hair."

"Have you read the autopsy report?"

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"Well, no. Not every page."

"So, you are not completely informed as to the entire contents of the report, is that correct?" Belcher pressed.

"Your Honor. If please the court, prosecution is prepared to submit as evidence the military autopsy report on Private John Rich which indicates he was killed by the tearing out of his throat by fangs and claws—and that analysis of hair found

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in the throat wounds were consistent when compared with the analysis of Hybrid 333 hair found by Coroner Öffner of Prescott on the victims, Streiker, Breuger and Hammond," Melville said.

"Submit your evidence, Mr. Melville," the judge said.

"No further questions, your Honor," Belcher said.

Chapter 68

"State your name," the judge said.

"Martin Resolve."

"Mr. Resolve," your nickname is Mart, is that correct?"

District Attorney Melville asked.

"Yes," Martin Resolve answered, reservedly, not looking in Professor Kervello's direction. He'd worked for Kervello for many years and was highly intimidated by him. Resolve was quite sure he could shorten his own life considerably just by saying the wrong thing while testifying.

"Have you ever worked for the defendant, Tyrone Kervello?"

"Yes.

"Tell the court about that employment."

"I worked for him in his laboratories in the Kervello building here in Etherington."

"In what capacity?"

"Dietician."

"You are a special dietician, correct?"

"Yes. I specialize in the nutrition of rare animals."

"In other words, you know what and how to feed rare animals and were responsible for feeding them at the Kervello laboratories, correct?"

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"Yes."

"Describe for the court what kinds of animals you were responsible for feeding while working for Professor Tyrone Kervello."

"Objection, your Honor. The kinds of animals the witness fed is not relative to this case," Belcher cried.

"Overruled. The witness will answer the question."

"The *peacock*-rat was most challenging from a nutrition point of view."

"The peacock-rat?"

"Yes."

"How was the peacock-rat created?"

"Objection," Belcher cut in. "The witness is not an expert on genetics."

"Sustained."

"Why was the peacock-rat a challenge from a nutrition point of view?" Melville asked.

"The peacock part of the peacock-rat was India pheasant, which requires about a thirty percent protein diet—dried cat food works well—also bread, cheese, rice—insects. Peacocks are mostly vegetarians. The other part of the peacock-rat was rodent. A regular rat will eat anything. It prefers large quantities of ripened meat, but has been known to kill small animals and eat their flesh. Although meat is high in protein, the peacock-rat was apparently *psychologically* unprepared to keep down rotten meat and the rat part of it didn't like a steady diet of cat food."

"Objection, your Honor. The witness is not an expert on psychology!" Belcher protested.

"Overruled. Continue, Mr. Melville."

"Did Professor Kervello keep the peacock-rat for a pet?"

Melville asked.

"No. He sold it."

Mumbling in the courtroom.

"Objection," Belcher cried. "The witness is not an expert on Professor Kervello's financial activities."

"Overruled."

"What kind of animal would you describe the peacock-rat as being?" Melville asked.

"A hybrid—a cross between two different animals—also known as a chimera."

"Did the defendant own many of these hybrids?"

"Yes."

"Were they all kept in his underground laboratories?"

"Yes—until they were shipped out."

"Describe to the court approximately how many hybrids you were aware of that were kept in the defendant's laboratories before being shipped out."

"The hybrid's cages were numbered. The hybrid inside the cage was designated according to its cage number, Hybrid 100 and so forth according to the number on it's cage. That's how I kept my feeding records straight. The bear-hog was Hybrid 437."

"Then, is it your opinion that at least 437 hybrids were created in the Kervello laboratories?"

"Yes."

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"Why do you happen to remember the number of the bear-hog?"

"Because the bear-hog was a very violent creature—hard to feed. It was so dangerous we had to have a special steel trap door built in the top of its cage so we could insert live chickens."

"Each hybrid was numbered and the number was displayed on their cages. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"At the time you worked in the Kervello laboratories, did you know about a hybrid referred to as Hybrid 333?"

"Yes. I was responsible for feeding her."

"By 'her', you mean that Hybrid 333 was female?"

"Yes."

"Why do you say she was female?"

"Oh, she was obviously female—female genitalia—part cougar—and part Professor Kervello *himself*," Mart Resolve said, then his face took on a grayish look as he realized he'd implicated Kervello.

Gasps in the courtroom.

"Order," the judge said, tapping his gavel.

"Objection. The witness is not an expert on genetics," Belcher cried.

"Overruled. Continue Mr. Melville."

"Are you saying that Hybrid 333 was part cougar and part—Professor *Kervello*?"

Kervello shot Martin Resolve a condemning look.

"Objection. The witness is not an expert in genetics," Belcher cried, feeling Kervello's pressure to silence the witness.

"Overruled."

"Was Hybrid 333 difficult to feed?" Melville asked.

"Yes."

"Tell the court why that was so."

"Right after Hybrid 333 was born feeding her was not a serious problem. She did well on her mother's cougar milk. But when she got older and started on solid food—that's when the problems began."

"Describe to the court what you mean by that."

"Some days 333 seemed to like raw meat—as the cougar side of her demanded. Other days she couldn't keep it down. Also, the lab boys would feed her other things. I objected to that, but they were in tight with the Professor, so I didn't say anything."

"What kind of other things did they feed her?"

"*Brains*—high in cholesterol—very *bad* for her, but she eventually learned to like eating brains."

"By lab boys, who exactly are you referring to?"

"Professor Kervello's *associates*. That's what he called them—his associates."

"It's your testimony then that on occasion Professor Kervello's associates fed brains to Hybrid 333. Is that correct?"

"Objection. Counsel is leading the witness," Belcher cried.

"Overruled. The witness will answer the question."

"Yes."

"In your opinion, was the selling of these hybrids illegal?"

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"Objection. The witness is not an expert on the legality of the sale of hybrids," Belcher cried. "Also, your Honor—no legal precedent has been established in this state or in this court pertaining to the legality of the creation or sale of hybrid animals."

Judge Jenkins' face became crimson. "Counsel will join me in my chambers," he commanded, rising from his chair.

"All rise!" the bailiff cried.

Following considerable deliberations in chambers on the question of the legality of the creation or sale of hybrid animals, court resumed.

"Restate your question for the record, Mr. Melville."

"Mr. Resolve, in your opinion, was the selling of these hybrids illegal?"

"Defense has been overruled. Answer the question Mr. Resolve."

Martin Resolve hesitated, then in a low, guarded voice said, "Yes."

"State your answer a little louder for the court," the judge said.

"Yes, I think it probably was illegal."

"No further questions. Prosecution reserves the right to recall."

"Granted. Your witness Mr. Belcher."

Belcher shuffled some papers, read a note; asked, "Mr. Resolve, did you ever actually *see* one of Professor Kervello's associates *feed* brains to the hybrids?"

"No."

"Did you ever see anyone *buy* one of the hybrids?"

"No."

"Did you ever see the bear-hog bend the bars of its cage?"

"No, but..."

"Just answer the question, Mr. Resolve," the judge said.

"No, I didn't actually see the bear-hog bend the bars."

"No further questions, your Honor."

"Call your next witness, Mr. Melville," the judge said.

"Prosecution calls Doctor Patricia Rossiter," Melville said.

Kervello glared at Rossiter as she entered the courtroom with the poise of a fashion model walking a ramp: silver slippers, two inch heels, navy blue satin blouse and matching skirt, flaming red hair in a bun.

"State your name," the judge said.

"Patricia Rossiter."

"Doctor Rossiter, do you recognize the defendant?" Melville asked.

"Yes, he's Professor Tyrone Kervello," she said through rosy lips.

"Please point to the person you are referring to."

Rossiter pointed at Kervello.

"For the record, the witness is pointing at the defendant, Tyrone Kervello," Melville said, then asked, "Doctor Rossiter, were you employed by the defendant?"

"Yes."

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"How long?"

"Seven years."

"In what capacity did you work for him?"

"I'm a psychiatrist. I have a Ph.D. in psychology and an M.D. I was employed by him to study his hybrids and advise him about their psyche."

"By his hybrids, you are referring to his animals that have been genetically cross-bred—resulting in such creatures as the peacock-rat and the bear-hog?"

"That's correct."

"Tell the court how the psyche of the bear-hog differed from that of just a bear or just a hog."

"From a psychiatric point of view, combining the genes of the bear and the hog and thereby creating the bear-hog Professor Kervello had in his laboratory resulted in a traumatic mixture of their two natural psyches."

"You say 'traumatic'. By that do you mean, *disturbing*?"

"Objection. Mr. Melville is leading the witness," Belcher cried.

"Overruled. The witness will answer the question."

"In the bear-hog hybrid's case the result was *insanity*," Rossiter continued.

"Then would you say the bear-hog was *born* insane as a result of being created by the combination of genes of a bear and hog?"

"Yes. In laymen's terms—*deranged*—stark raving *mad*!"

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"Order," the judge said. "Continue Mr. Melville."

"Doctor Rossiter—during your employment with Tyrone Kervello—were you requested to study a hybrid known as Hybrid 333?"

"Yes. I've submitted my report containing the results of that study, to the prosecution."

The District Attorney handed her a copy.

"Is this your report of that study?"

"Yes."

"Your Honor, prosecution submits the report identified by the expert witness as a prosecution exhibit."

"The report will be accepted into evidence."

"Doctor Rossiter, give the court a summarized account of that study—including your conclusions," Melville continued.

"Hybrid 333 was created by combining Professor Kervello's genes with that of a cougar," Rossiter began.

"Objection, your Honor," Belcher cried. "It has not been established that the witness had access to such knowledge."

"Objection overruled. Continue Mr. Melville."

"Doctor Rossiter, how do you know the genes that were combined to create Hybrid 333 were those of Tyrone Kervello and a cougar?"

"I had them both tested for DNA."

"You had a DNA test done on samples of Tyrone Kervello and of the cougar?"

"Yes."

"You had frequent access to Hybrid 333, correct?"

"Yes. I had DNA run on a sample of her hair."

"And Tyrone Kervello?"

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"I had DNA run on a sample of his hair that I picked up during one of our conferences in his office."

"Objection," Belcher cried. "Doctor Rossiter did not have defendant's permission to perform a DNA test on him."

"Sustained. The jury will disregard the witness' last statement."

"Doctor Rossiter," Melville continued, "during the course of your studies of Professor Kervello's hybrids, did you have access to routine analyses that were performed for DNA on each animal—or in the case of Hybrid 333—of Tyrone Kervello and an animal—before the genes were united to create the hybrid?"

"Yes. Computer files were kept on them."

"Are the results of Professor Kervello's personal DNA recorded in that manner—in a computer?"

"Yes."

"Have you studied those personal DNA files pertaining to Professor Kervello?"

"Yes."

"So, you have knowledge from that source of what the defendant's DNA results look like?"

"Yes."

"Is it still your testimony that the defendant's DNA results indicated that his genes and those of a cougar were united to create Hybrid 333?"

"Yes."

"Doctor Rossiter, that would make Hybrid 333 the defendant's *daughter*, would it not?"

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"Yes, certainly from the human baby's genetic part of Hybrid 333."

"Doctor Rossiter, would you say you were close to Professor Kervello, professionally, I mean?"

"Yes."

"To your knowledge, did the defendant *sell* any of his hybrids?"

"Objection."

"Overruled. The witness will answer."

"Yes. He sold all of them, except the few that escaped—and the ones he raised for his amusement—and some that died before he could sell them."

"Do you know how much money he got for any particular hybrid?"

"He was offered twenty-four million dollars for Hybrid 333 by a sheik in Monaco."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"Are you aware of the sale of others of his hybrids?"

"He said he'd lost fifty-four million on the hybrids that escaped one day. I know for a fact that he made billions from selling hybrids."

"Objection," Belcher cried.

"Overruled. Continue Mr. Melville."

"Tell the court about the hybrids that escaped one day," Melville said.

"It was late in the afternoon. The first thing I heard was alarms sounding. Someone was saying over the intercom that some of the hybrids had escaped and were loose in the building.

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That made everybody nervous, as you never know what a hybrid will do. Professor Kervello called me into his office—to watch what was happening in the underground laboratories on his closed circuit TV."

"And what did you see happening in Tyrone Kervello's underground laboratories?"

"One of the cameras was showing the cage of Hybrid 333 and that of her mother. Both of their cage doors were wide open. They had escaped from their cages."

"What was the reason they escaped?"

"The professor kept a chimpanzee in the building. It was a friendly sort. It roamed freely wherever it liked. That day it took a fancy to the bolts that secured the hybrid cage doors. It removed the bolts from several cages. On TV, I saw it turning summersaults."

"Was the Kervello building secured?"

"Yes. Very tight security."

"Did Hybrid 333 get out of the Kervello building?"

"Yes. It was a matter of timing, really. I learned later that part of the security system had been temporarily disabled so a delivery truck could deliver supplies. After the truck left, the security system was not restored when it should have been and Hybrid 333 and her mother got out through the delivery door."

"Doctor Rossiter, would you say it was a sign of exceptional intelligence on the part of Hybrid 333 to find her way out of the building?"

"Yes. The building's a maze of hallways and rooms. Hybrid 333 was a wonderful, very intelligent hybrid."

"Would you say that Hybrid 333 was capable of violence?"

"Oh, yes. Very capable. She was part cougar after all, and cougars are naturally violent. They have to be to stay alive in the wild."

"Would you say you developed a fondness for Hybrid 333?"

"Oh, yes, definitely. I enjoyed her very much."

"Doctor Rossiter, is it your opinion that Hybrid 333 was psychologically deranged as a result of her being a mixture of the genes of Professor Kervello and a female cougar?"

"Not as a result of her gene makeup—no?"

"I sense a reserve in your answer. For some other reason, then?"

Patricia Rossiter felt a sudden tingling of fear slither up her backbone as she glanced at the table where Kervello smugly sat with his Dream Team of attorneys. Kervello's beady black eyes were drilling holes into her. She decided she would voluntarily talk about the feeding of brains, but would have to be asked about sexual abuse before disclosing anything about it.

"It's my professional opinion that Hybrid 333 developed a taste for brains while confined to the laboratory."

"Why was that?"

"Professor Kervello's *associates*—those bastards that worked down in the underground laboratories—fed her the brains of dead animals."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

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"Doctor Rossiter, you will refrain from using slang in my courtroom," the judge admonished.

"Yes, your Honor."

"Doctor Rossiter, in your opinion was the creating of the hybrids you were witness to, legal?" Melville asked.

"Objection. The witness is not an expert on legal procedures," Belcher cried.

"Sustained."

"No further questions at this time, your Honor. Prosecution reserves the right to recall," District Attorney Melville said.

"Granted. Your witness, Mr. Belcher."

Belcher ambled up to where Doctor Rossiter sat. "Doctor Rossiter, the reason you are testifying against Professor Kervello is because you turned State's evidence. You made a plea bargain with the prosecution, is that correct?" Belcher asked, pointedly.

"Objection. The witness is not on trial," Melville said.

"Sustained."

Rossiter despised Belcher, Kervello's weasel-like little attorney.

"When you worked for Professor Kervello, did he pay you well?" Belcher asked.

"Yes."

"You were very close to the professor—his right-hand woman, correct?"

"We worked closely together."

"You were his *lover*, correct?"

"That's a lie. I never was."

"Doctor Rossiter, you testified before this court—and I quote, 'Yes, certainly from the human baby's genetic part of Hybrid 333', when asked about Hybrid 333 being Professor Kervello's daughter. Do you remember that testimony?"

"Yes."

"So I ask you, Doctor Rossiter," Belcher said in a disdainful tone, "then, by implication, the *cougar* part of Hybrid 333 was *not* Professor Kervello's daughter, is that your opinion?"

"As far as I'm aware, the professor could not father a daughter that was a cougar, by definition."

"Doctor Rossiter, you testified in this court and I quote, 'He was *offered* twenty-four million dollars for Hybrid 333 by a sheik in Monaco.' Is that your testimony?"

"Yes."

"To your knowledge, did Professor Kervello sell—not just that he was *offered* twenty-four million dollars for Hybrid 333—but did he actually *sell* Hybrid 333?"

"No."

"No further questions."

"Court is adjourned until ten o'clock tomorrow morning," Judge Jenkins said.

Chapter 69

"State your name," Judge Jenkins said.

"Yusef Abdel Adbak Boudin."

"Mr. Boudin, are you a United States citizen?" Melville asked.

"No," Boudin answered, with a heavy accent.

"What country are you a citizen of?"

"Bahrain."

Kervello leaned across the table, whispered to Belcher. "How the hell did *he* get here?"

"He's on the witness list. You know him?" Belcher whispered back.

"Yeah."

"Mr. Boudin," Melville said. "Do you know the defendant, Tyrone Kervello?"

"Yes. We have met on certain occasions."

"Tell the court the nature of those meetings."

"The first time I met Professor Kervello was when he came to Bahrain two years ago."

"What business did Professor Kervello have in Bahrain?"

"He came at the request of my brother-in-law, Mahatmas Quizar."

"Did your brother-in-law tell you the nature of Professor Kervello's visit?"

"Yes. Professor Kervello was there to sell Mahatmas another hybrid."

"Had the defendant sold a hybrid to Mr. Quizar before?" Melville asked.

"Objection. Hearsay," Belcher cried.

"Overruled. The witness will answer the question."

"Yes."

"Were you ever present during the actual transfer of payment from Mr. Quizar to the defendant for a hybrid?" Melville asked.

"Yes."

"Tell the court about that occasion."

"Two years ago, when the professor met with my brother-in-law, the professor sold to my brother-in-law a crocodile-ox."

"Did you actually see the crocodile-ox?"

"Yes. It was a horrible creature—huge mouth—many teeth."

"Did you see Mr. Quizar give money to the professor in payment for the crocodile-ox?"

"Yes."

"Tell the court about that transaction?"

"We had finished dinner and were having cigars and brandy. The professor and my brother-in-law were joking about how well one of the dancing girls was—how do you say—stacked."

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"Continue, Mr. Boudin."

"My brother-in-law asked the professor if he would like to have her for the night."

"The professor said yes, he would. That's when my brother-in-law called his exchequer and the girl over to the table. He had the exchequer write a check for the professor."

"Do you know how much the check was for?"

"Yes. My brother-in-law was boasting about it. He signed it and showed it to everybody at the table. It was for seventeen million dollars."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"Mr. Boudin, why are you testifying here today?"

"My brother-in-law sent me to testify."

"Why did he send you?"

"He is afraid of the legal implications of owning—shall we say—'unusual' animals. He said he wants to put everything above board."

"Then is the court to understand that your brother-in-law believed buying the crocodile-ox was illegal?"

"Objection. The witness cannot testify as to the knowledge of another person," Belcher cried.

"Overruled."

"Yes. I'm sure he thought it was illegal, otherwise why would he go to all the expense of sending me here to testify?"

"Was the crocodile-ox the only hybrid you are aware of that the professor sold to Mr. Quizar?" Melville asked.

"No, not at all. There was the horse-rabbit...the robin-fox...the parrot-snake..."

"Objection, your Honor—there has been no groundwork laid establishing that the witness saw money exchanged for those hybrids," Belcher cried.

"Mr. Boudin, to your knowledge did the defendant at any time sell or try to sell a part-human, part-animal hybrid to Mr. Quizar?"

"Not to my knowledge—only mixed animal hybrids. Wait! Professor Kervello did suggest that my brother-in-law buy a part-human—part-animal. I think he called it Hybrid 333."

That caught Kervello's attention. He turned his head; glared at the Boudin.

"Mr. Boudin, did Mr. Quizar offer to buy Hybrid 333?" Melville asked.

"Yes. He offered the professor fourteen-million US dollars for it."

"Did the defendant accept that offer?"

"No. He said he had received a higher offer from a sheik in Monaco."

"Did the defendant say how much that offer was for?"

"I think he said twenty-four million."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"No further questions," the District Attorney said. "Prosecution reserves the right to recall."

"Granted. Your witness, Mr. Belcher."

Belcher got up, walked over to the witness.

"Mr. Yusef Abdel Adbak Boudin," Belcher said with a sneer, slurring the name. "Were you actually present when your

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brother-in-law allegedly offered Professor Kervello money for Hybrid 333?"

"No."

"No further questions."

Chapter 70

"Prosecution recalls Rolf Arbeiter."

"Proceed Mr. Melville," Judge Jenkins instructed.

"Mr. Arbeiter, do you have a title associated with your work?"

"I'm the assistant to Constable Mizzen."

"In that capacity, are you a deputized officer of the law?"

"Yes."

"Last summer, you and Ingrid Rhinemann attended the Bear Skin Sausage Fest in Bear Skin, did you not?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember what day that was?"

"It was the fourth of July. The Fest was held on the fourth."

"Did anything unusual happen to you and Ingrid Rhinemann on that occasion?"

"We were shot at."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"Explain to the court how that came about."

"Ingrid and I were riding on the Ferris wheel. We heard a *pop* sound—like a firecracker. I felt Ingrid jerk. I looked at her and saw she was bleeding."

"Had she been shot?"

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"A bullet had hit part of the seat near her and a wood splinter had struck her arm."

"Did you see where the bullet came from?"

"There was another shot..."

"Did that shot hit you or Ingrid?"

"No, but at that time I saw a man on the ground below us with a gun. He was running towards the parking area. He had on a black T-shirt and jeans. He was carrying a pistol."

"Then what did you do?"

"I called the constable on my cell phone."

"Was the shooter apprehended?"

"Yes, he tried to get away in his car. The State Police caught him. They got a confession out of him, in exchange for a light sentence, I understand."

"Objection. Hearsay," Belcher cried.

"Overruled, continue Mr. Melville."

"Did Ingrid Rhinemann completely recover from her wounds?"

"Except for a small scar."

"Do you think the shooting was an accident?"

"No. I think the shooter was trying to kill us."

"Why would he want to do that?"

"To keep us from testifying against Professor Kervello, like I'm doing now."

"Your Honor, prosecution requests to submit a notarized affidavit signed by the man who fired those shots at Rolf Arbeiter and Ingrid Rhinemann as a prosecution exhibit."

"What is the nature of the affidavit, Mr. Melville?"

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"It's a confession your Honor. It states that the man who fired the shots at Rolf Arbeiter and Ingrid Rhinemann was hired by the defendant, Tyrone Kervello to kill both Rolf Arbeiter and Ingrid Rhinemann," District Attorney Melville said.

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"Silence in the court. The affidavit will be placed into evidence."

"No further questions. Prosecution reserves the right to recall," Melville said.

"Granted. Your witness, Mr. Belcher."

"No questions," Belcher said, not standing.

Chapter 71

"State your name," the judge said.

"Wanda Hammel."

"Miss Hammel, what is your relationship to Constable Mizzen?" District Attorney Melville asked.

"He's my fiancé."

"On or about the middle of June of this year, you and the constable had an unwelcome visitor in the room you were in. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Tell the court about that experience."

"Well, a dog was barking. It woke me up. That's when I saw this man sitting in the corner of the room. He was holding a gun—pointed at us."

"By us, you mean yourself and the constable?"

"Yes. Alexander was next to me."

"By Alexander, do you mean Constable Alexander Mizzen?"

"Yes."

"Then what happened?"

"Then the man ordered me to wake Alexander up."

"Did you?"

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"Yes. I prodded him a little. Turned out, as he told me later, he was really awake, just pretending he was asleep. Anyway, Alexander looks at the man and asks him what he wants."

"And what did the man want, Miss Hammel?"

"He wanted to know if we were the only ones who had ever seen Hybrid 333. He said he had been ordered by Professor Kervello to kill everyone who had ever seen Hybrid 333."

"Alexander asked him if he knew two of Professor Kervello's other associates, Hawk and Jake."

"Did he know them?"

"Yes."

"Then what happened?"

"The man said he worked for Professor Kervello—turned out later the man's name was Sly—said if we didn't tell him the names of everybody who had seen Hybrid 333 he'd do certain things to me that Alexander wouldn't care much for. Then he told us Doctor Paul was not a tourist, but was really Professor Kervello, and that Margo was not a tourist, but really Doctor Patricia Rossiter. Then he said Professor Kervello created Hybrid 333 and that she was part cougar and part human. Then Sly told us he was going to do to me what he and other of Professor Kervello's associates had done to Hybrid 333."

"And what was that?"

"I asked him if he'd raped her."

"What did he say?"

"He said that if—then he used the 'F' word—he said if doing that 'F' thing to a cougar was rape that he had raped Hybrid 333 when she was in a cage in the professor's laboratory."

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"What was the reason he told you he'd raped Hybrid 333?"

"Because—he said if we didn't tell him what he wanted to know—he was going to do to me what he'd done to her."

"Then what happened, Miss Hammel."

"He started to pull off my blankets—and Alexander *shot* the son-of-a-bitch!"

The courtroom erupted.

"Order!" the judge said, pounding his gavel.

"No further questions. Prosecution reserves the right to recall," Melville said.

"Granted. Your witness, Mr. Belcher."

"Miss Hammel, you said and I quote 'Alexander was next to me' unquote. By Alexander, were you referring to Constable Alexander Mizzen?" Belcher asked.

"Yes."

"You were in bed with Constable Mizzen?"

"Yes."

"Are you *married* to Constable Mizzen?"

"No."

"Objection, your Honor," Melville cried. "The *witness* is not on trial!"

"Sustained!"

"No further questions," Belcher said.

Chapter 72

"Constable Mizzen, you apprehended the defendant, Tyrone Kervello, did you not?" District Attorney Melville asked.

"Yes. I, my assistant, Rolf Arbeiter, and Coroner Öffner apprehended Professor Kervello."

"Tell the court what happened."

"I got word the professor's crimson HUMVEE had been seen down near the lake."

"Lake Cristal, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then what did you do?"

"Rolf was driving the paddy wagon. I had him stop some distance behind the HUMVEE. We got out. I drew my .44 and we approached the vehicle with caution. From the outline I saw through the back window of the HUMVEE, I could tell the professor was sitting on the passenger side. I made my way to that side of the vehicle. I opened the passenger-side door."

"Did you have your .44 in your hand at the time?"

"Yes."

"Then what happened?"

"As I opened the door it swung open faster than I had anticipated. It pushed me off balance a little and made me lower my pistol to catch my balance. Before I could bring my pistol

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back up, the professor shoved a pistol in my face and pulled the trigger."

"Did you hear the hammer of the professor's pistol click?"

"Yes."

"Then what happened?"

"I apprehended and handcuffed the professor and took him and Doctor Rossiter to Bear Skin and from there by train to Etherington. The Etherington police took over from there—took them to jail."

"No further questions. Prosecution reserves the right to recall," Melville said.

"Granted. Your witness, Mr. Belcher."

Belcher swaggered up to the witness box.

"Constable Mizzen, after you turned Professor Kervello and Doctor Rossiter over to the police, you and a woman spent the night together in a hotel, did you not?" Belcher cried, trying to impeach the constable.

"Objection, your Honor. The constable is not on trial."

"Sustained. The jury will disregard the question."

"No further questions," Belcher said.

"Call your next witness, Mr. Melville," the judge said.

"Prosecution calls Claude Stillwell to the stand," Melville said.

"State your name," the judge said.

"Claude Stillwell."

The bailiff swore him in.

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"Mr. Stillwell, do you go by a nickname?"

"Yeah. I'm sometimes called 'The Snitch'."

"Were you ever employed by the defendant Professor Tyrone Kervello?"

"Yeah."

"For how many years?"

"Oh, I figure about five—somewhere in there."

"Where did you work?"

"I was a clean-up man. I worked in the laboratories."

"You were a kind of janitor, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"During your employment with the defendant were you aware of a cougar-human hybrid called Hybrid 333 being kept in a cage in one of the laboratories?"

"Yeah."

"Did you ever witness the abuse of Hybrid 333 by anyone?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"By Professor Kervello."

The courtroom erupted.

"Silence! Silence in the courtroom!" the judge called.

The rumble died away.

"Continue Mr. Melville."

"Mr. Stillwell, tell the court what you saw."

Kervello's eyes burned into the witness, but he was helpless to stop Stillwell from speaking. He wished he'd had 'The Snitch' killed long ago.

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Stillwell had been assured by the prosecution that he'd be put into the witness protection program, which offered a more comfortable life than his janitorial work had afforded, so he continued.

"It was one night—maybe even early in the mornin'. I cleaned-up on the graveyard shift. I noticed a bunch of associates gathered around Hybrid 333's cage. She was screamin' somethin' awful. I sneaked behind some boxes and watched. Then I seen the professor at the end of her cage."

"What was the professor doing?"

Stillwell darted a glance at the professor, met his cold, dark glare.

"He was *screwin'* her," Stillwell said, bluntly.

The courtroom erupted.

"*Silence!*" the judge said, rapping his gavel. "Continue, Mr. Melville."

"Mr. Stillwell, by screwing her, do you mean the defendant was having sexual intercourse with Hybrid 333?"

"Yeah."

"How did he go about it?"

"What do ya mean?"

"She was part cougar. I would think it would be difficult to have sexual intercourse with the cougar part of her—to say nothing of the human *baby* part of her. How did the defendant accomplish it?" Melville asked.

"I figure they must have gave her an injection of somethin' then put her in the stall."

"Describe the stall for the court."

"It was a metal stall—metal pipe I'd say—like a cow stall I suppose ya could say. It was locked around her haunches so she couldn't move. Her ass was stuck up against the end of her cage. She didn't have no tail so the professor didn't have no trouble screwin' her."

"Then what happened?"

"When he finished, the associates around the cage took their turns with her."

"Is it your opinion, Mr. Stillwell that Hybrid 333 was *raped* by those men on that occasion?"

"Yeah—I'd say so—the human part of her, for sure. I don't know what ya call screwin' a cougar."

"Objection! No legal precedent has been established defining the *rape* of an *animal*," Belcher cried.

"Sustained. The jury is advised to disregard the *cougar*-part of Hybrid 333 and only consider the *human* part in their deliberations," the judge said.

In so saying, Judge Jenkins had permitted the rape charge to stand.

Belcher gasped.

Kervello stared at Belcher in disbelief.

The courtroom erupted.

"*Silence* in the courtroom!" the judge said, pounding with his gavel. "Continue, Mr. Melville."

"No further questions, your Honor," Melville said.

"Your witness, Mr. Belcher," the judge said.

Belcher's face was dead serious. He craved to impeach Stillwell in the worst possible way.

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"Mr. Stillwell, why are you called 'The Snitch'?" Belcher cried.

"Objection. The witness is not on trial," Melville countered.

"Sustained. Continue, Mr. Belcher."

Belcher tried again, a little more calmly this time. "Mr. Stillwell—you make part of your living by *snitching*, is that correct?"

"Objection, your Honor," Melville said.

"Sustained. Mr. Belcher, any more attempts to impeach the witness and I'll personally see to it that you are disbarred. Do you understand me?"

Belcher scowled, didn't answer, just walked back to the counsel table, sat down.

Chapter 73

"Mr. Belcher, call your first witness for the defense," the judge said.

"Defense calls Sandra McLeash," Belcher said.

"State your name," the judge said.

"Sandra McLeash."

"Do you know the defendant, Professor Tyrone Kervello?" Belcher asked.

"Yes."

"Where did you meet him?"

"I was a student of his at the university here in Etherington."

"Would you describe the professor as being a nice man."

"Oh, yes, very nice."

"Do you believe him to be *honest*?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he's *dangerous*?"

"No."

"Did he ever mistreat you in any way?"

"Oh, no."

"Did you find him to be likable?"

"Yes."

"Did he get along well with others?"

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"Yes. He was friendly with everybody."

"No further questions," Belcher said.

"Your witness," Mr. Melville.

Melville had a pensive look on his face as he approached the witness stand.

"Miss McLeash. It is *Miss*, correct?" Melville asked.

"Yes."

"Miss McLeash, how old were you when you met the defendant Professor Kervello?"

"I was a freshman, eighteen years old."

"You testified that you found him likable. Is that still your testimony?"

"Yes."

"Just how *likeable* did you find him?"

"Objection. Counsel is badgering the witness," Belcher cried.

"Overruled. The witness will answer."

"Oh, I liked him a *lot*."

"In fact, Miss McLeash, you liked him *so* much that you had an *affair* with him, did you not?" Melville asked.

Miss McLeash swept her long, chestnut hair back over her shoulders with her hands.

"Objection," Belcher cried.

"Overruled. Witness will answer."

Miss McLeash paused, glanced at Kervello. "Yes."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"No further questions," Melville said.

DON LEWIS WIREMAN, SR.

"Witness will step down. Call your next witness Mr. Belcher."

"Defense calls Doctor Isaac Newman."

"State your name," the judge said.

"Isaac Newman."

Bailiff swore him in.

"Doctor Newman, you've been called as an expert witness, is that right?"

"Yes."

"What is your specialty?"

"I'm an expert in DNA analysis."

"Have you seen the results of the DNA analysis for Hybrid 333 that was presented as evidence to this court by the prosecution?"

"I have."

"Have you conducted independent DNA analysis on Hybrid 333?"

"I have."

"Have you compared the results of both analyses with each other?"

"I have."

"What was your conclusion as to how they compared?"

"They were exactly alike."

"So, your analysis agreed completely with that of the prosecution?"

"Yes."

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"Did you have an opportunity to make a similar comparison between the DNA analysis you performed on Professor Kervello and that performed on him by the prosecution?"

"Yes."

"What were your findings in that comparison?"

"The DNA result matched, exactly."

"Did you make a comparative analysis of the DNA results between Professor Kervello's DNA and that of *Hybrid 333*?"

"Yes."

"In your opinion, did *that* DNA comparison show a match?"

"No—it did not."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

"So, is it your opinion—based on that evidence—that Professor Kervello's genes could *not* have been used in the creation of Hybrid 333?"

"That's my opinion."

The courtroom erupted.

"*Order*," the judge said, pounding with his gavel.

"No further questions," Belcher said.

"Your witness, Mr. Melville."

Melville stood, remained by the counsel table. "Doctor Newman, on what do you base your conclusion that the defendant's genes could not have been used in the creation of Hybrid 333?"

"I base it on probability. In the case in question, the probability of his genes having been used to create Hybrid 333 was less than fifty percent in my opinion."

"DNA analysis is not an exact science, is it Doctor Newman?"

"No."

"So, based on the statistical deviation that fifty percent can have from the norm on the DNA probability curve—*could* that deviation allow the probability percentage that the defendant's genes were used in the creation of Hybrid 333 to be say—fifty-one percent—indicating that the defendant's genes *could* have been used?"

"Well, I suppose, if you put it *that* way."

"I *do* put it that way, Doctor Newman."

Doctor Newman flushed.

"Doctor Newman, is it your professional opinion that Hybrid 333's DNA indicated that she'd been created from human *and* cougar genes?"

"Yes."

"No further questions, your Honor."

"The witness may step down. Call your next witness, Mr. Belcher."

Belcher and the rest of the professor's Dream Team, all graduates of famous law schools, had debated at length about whether or not to put the professor on the stand. They finally decided to put him on.

"Defense calls Professor Tyrone Kervello," Belcher said.
All eyes went to Kervello.

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The professor's snappy gray silk suit and hundred-dollar tie showed him off to his best advantage to the jury as he crisply rose; strutted to the witness stand, sat.

"State your name," the judge said.

"Tyrone Kervello."

He was reluctant to take the oath. He didn't like the 'so help me God' part, but the bailiff finally swore him in.

"Professor Kervello, you were a renowned professor of genetic engineering at the university here in Etherington, were you not?" Belcher asked.

"Yes," Kervello answered, obviously not enjoying being on the hot seat.

"You wrote books on the subject, correct?"

"Yes."

"Please tell the court why you gave up your tenure at the university and left to open your own laboratories."

"A wealthy uncle of mine died, leaving me a small fortune. I'd been working on a government grant to develop stem cells for use in the prevention of diseases, such as Parkinson's disease. One evening while I was working in the laboratory, I discovered a method of combining genes from different animals—to create a totally new animal with qualities of both. That fascinated me. I began crossing butterfly genes—creating butterflies with magnificent color schemes never seen before. People collect butterflies, of course. One day I was offered two-hundred dollars for one of my butterflies. I sold it. That was the beginning. I set up a small laboratory in a house down by the lake. When I'd made enough money selling hybrid butterflies

and other small hybrid creatures, I added it to the money I'd inherited—and had the Kervello building built to my specifications."

"Did you believe at the time that your laboratory was legal?" Belcher asked.

"Of course it was legal. Completely legal. It still *is* legal!"

"Professor, were any of the hybrids you created in the laboratory, dangerous?" Belcher asked.

"Absolutely not!"

"And you say they were not, because they never hurt anyone, is that correct?"

"That's correct."

"One day some of the hybrids got out of their cages. Tell the court what happened."

"I'd received a Rhesus monkey from a friend of mine in Botswana."

"You have friends in many parts of the world, correct?" Belcher asked.

"Yes."

"Was the monkey a pet?"

"Yes. It amused the lab employees so I let it run loose for their entertainment. One day, the monkey fooled around with the bolts that held the hybrid cage doors shut—removed several of them, releasing the hybrids inside."

"And one of these hybrids happened to be Hybrid 333, is that correct?"

"Yes."

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"So, it was an *accident* that Hybrid 333 got away?"

"Yes."

"You said you have international friends. Did you ever make a gift of a hybrid animal to one of your international friends?" Belcher asked.

"Yes, frequently. The hybrids were unique, well received. I gave many away to international friends."

"Did you ever sell any of your hybrids to people in other countries?"

"No."

"The witness is reminded he's testifying under oath," the judge said.

What the hell can the goddamned judge add to my charges for lying—a misdemeanor charge? Kervello thought.

"Please repeat your answer Professor," Belcher said.

"My answer is still no."

"Did you ever hire anyone to kill someone else?"

"Of course not."

"Did you pay one of your associates to kill everyone who had seen Hybrid 333?"

"Ridiculous!"

"Just answer the question," the judge said.

"No, I did not," Kervello's lip curled as he said it.

"Did you ever attempt to kill Constable Mizzen?" Belcher asked.

"Of course not."

"Did you ever sexually abuse or allow sexual abuse to occur with respect to Hybrid 333?" Belcher asked.

"Never!"

"No further questions, your Honor," Belcher said.

"Your witness, Mr. Melville," the judge said.

Melville glanced at his notes, walked up to the witness box. "Professor Kervello, when you were asked by the defense counsel, 'Did you believe at the time that your laboratory was legal?' your answer was, and I quote, 'Of course it was legal. Completely legal. It still *is* legal!' unquote. Is that still your testimony?"

Kervello grimaced. "Yes."

"If your laboratories were operating legally, why did you have so much security in your building?"

"For the same reason anyone does—to protect valuable property."

"Professor Kervello, when the police stormed your building, they found its windows to be bulletproof. Wouldn't an alarm system have sufficed? If there was nothing illegal going on inside, why the bulletproof glass?"

Kervello remained silent.

"Answer the question," the judge said.

"It must have been an engineering oversight when they built the building."

"You testified, did you not, that the building was built according to your specifications?"

"Yes—they must have made a mistake with the windows."

"Professor, you testified that the hybrids you created in your laboratories were not dangerous, is that correct?"

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"Yes."

"Would you consider a creature to be dangerous that violently tears apart four human beings—and *kills* them?" Melville asked.

Kervello hesitated.

"Witness will answer," the judge said.

"Yeah. I suppose."

"You did create Hybrid 333 in your laboratory did you not?"

"I had help from my associates—like Doctor Rossiter."

"Just answer the question," the judge said.

"Yes," Kervello squeaked.

"Professor Kervello, did you have a permit from the city of Etherington to have dangerous animals in your possession?"

Kervello hesitated.

"The witness will answer the question," the judge said.

"It must have expired," Kervello squeaked.

"Your Honor, if it please the court, prosecution will submit evidence in the form of certified City of Etherington records that show the defendant at no time applied for a permit to possess dangerous animals."

"Evidence will be accepted. Continue, Mr. Melville."

"When Constable Mizzen attempted to apprehend you, did you point a pistol at him and pull the trigger?"

"I can explain that," Kervello said.

"Yes, please explain to the court," Melville said.

"I had recently encountered Hybrid 333 in the mountains. I was nervous. When the door to my HUMVEE suddenly

flew open—I thought it was Hybrid 333 attacking me—I tried to fire my pistol at it."

"Let the court understand, you had traveled some twenty miles from the mountains down to the shore of the lake in a fast vehicle, and believed that Hybrid 333 had followed you all that way and had—*opened* your car door with her *paw*—and was trying to attack you, is that correct?"

"Yes," Kervello said with a straight face.

"Professor Kervello, have you ever had sexual relations with your daughter-*in-vivo*, known as Hybrid 333?"

"Of course not!" Kervello yelled, sensing a trap.

"Your Honor, if it please the court, prosecution wishes to submit into evidence a confiscated video recording created by Professor Tyrone Kervello's own video recording equipment connected to his close-circuit TV system that shows the professor having *sexual intercourse* with Hybrid 333 as testified to earlier by a witness in this court."

Kervello's face fell. *That goddamned Belcher. The blithering idiot. I paid that SOB twenty-million dollars to defend me. The phony bastard didn't do it. I'll have the SOB killed for this.*

"The exhibit will be accepted as evidence. The jury will be permitted to view the video recording," the judge ruled.

The courtroom erupted.

"*Order* in the courtroom!" judge Jenkins said. "Continue, Mr. Melville."

"No further questions, your Honor," Melville said.

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"Counsel will prepare final arguments. Court will recess until ten o'clock Wednesday morning," the judge said.

"All rise!" the bailiff said.

Chapter 74

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," District Attorney Melville began, "you heard testimony in this court that the defendant, Tyronne Kervello, created in his laboratories a violent part-animal—part-human creature known as Hybrid 333. You heard testimony about and saw photographs showing the mutilation and death of four innocent people by the teeth and claws of Hybrid 333. You heard of the defendant's intent to sell Hybrid 333—his own biological daughter—to a sheik in Monaco for twenty-four million American dollars. You've heard testimony that the defendant provided insufficient security to contain Hybrid 333. You've heard the testimony by Abdel Adbak Boudin who resides in the country of Bahrain—that the defendant *sold* more than one hybrid to Mr. Boudin's brother-in-law—who resides outside of the United States of America. You heard testimony that the employees of the defendant, known as Kervello *associates*, attempted to kill witnesses who had seen Hybrid 333. And—did the attempts at assassination stop with witnesses? No. Not only did his *associates* attempt to exterminate *witnesses*—they attempted to *kill* two officers of the *law*—Constable Mizzen—and his assistant, Rolf Arbeiter, as well. *And*—ladies and gentlemen—not only did the defendant use his *associates* to perform his violence for him—he *himself* would have shot Constable

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Mizzen to death had the defendant had bullets in his pistol. And—finally ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you've seen the video of the defendant actually *raping* his very own—*restrained*—biological daughter—Hybrid 333—who was at the time, only *five* years old. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I implore you to find the defendant, Tyrone Kervello, *guilty* of all counts as charged. Thank you."

Melville bowed his head slightly, slowly stepped away from the jury box, returned to his chair at the prosecution counsel table.

"Mr. Belcher," the judge said.

Belcher took one last glance at his notes, slowly swaggered to the jury box. He'd gone to the extravagance of wearing a well-tailored handsome, blue business suit to try to sway the jury during his final argument.

"The learned prosecution counsel would have you believe that Professor Kervello is a rapist, an attempted murderer of witnesses and law officers—a hateful man—a mad scientist who indiscriminately creates animal-human creatures for fun and profit. I say to you ladies and gentlemen of the jury—prosecution has not proven even a single *one* of those charges beyond a reasonable doubt. I repeat—*beyond a reasonable doubt*. On the *contrary*, you heard testimony as to the kindness he showed to one of his students while he was a professor of genetic engineering at the university right here in Etherington. Professor Kervello is a pillar of his community—a misunderstood pioneer in the field of genetic engineering. It's true that he created an odd kitten, but one with a gentle side—a kitten that

would neither harm lady nor child. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury—I beseech you to find my client innocent beyond a reasonable doubt, of all charges brought against him by this court. Thank you."

"Court will be in recess for half an hour," Judge Jenkins said, rapping his gavel.

When court resumed, Judge Jenkins read his instructions to the jury.

"There are many issues in this case and as members of the jury you must weigh each one against the evidence you've heard in this court, and against no other information. You must decide if the defendant did illegally create a violent, biological creature that was part-animal and part-human. Did the defendant create hybrid creatures, that is, offspring from combined genes of more than one animal and did the defendant do it for monetary gain? Did the defendant do everything he could to restrain violent creatures he created, if you decide he created them? Or was he negligent in that effort and thus responsible for the death of the four people killed by the human-animal hybrid known as Hybrid 333, which has been characterized as a dangerous creature that the defendant created in his laboratory? Did the defendant illegally create and sell or attempt to sell one or more human-animal hybrids outside of the United States? Did the defendant hire assassins to harm would-be witnesses to the existence of Hybrid 333? Did the defendant hire assassins with the intent of harming an officer of the law? Was it the defendant's intent to shoot his pistol at an officer of the law? And, did the

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defendant himself, or did he permit persons in his employ to sexually abuse the five-year old human-animal hybrid known as Hybrid 333 while she was restrained in captivity in his laboratory?"

The judge then read an excerpt from an applicable Etherington city law: "No person shall, without a permit, have, keep or maintain or have in his or her possession or under his or her control, within the city limits of the city of Etherington, any chimpanzee, gorilla, bear, wolf, coyote, fox, badger, nondomestic feline, including but not limited to, lions, tigers, leopards, jaguars, bobcats, ocelots, bears, cougars...such a permit shall be granted only upon a showing by the applicant that adequate safeguards have been instituted and will be maintained which effectively control any dangerous or vicious propensities of such animal and eliminate any danger to individuals and properties; and providing, that the keeping and maintaining of such animal will in no way constitute a nuisance to the occupant of any surrounding property."

The judge read excerpts from other applicable laws, then defined Hybrid 333. "Hybrid 333 shall be defined as referring to a female, part-human, part-cougar created by man by the artificial conjunction of genes from both human and cougar, creating a hybrid comprising both."

The judge continued. "This is a criminal trial, therefore, you the jury are to base your decisions on the evidence heard in this court and only on that evidence. You, the jury, must weigh each count against the defendant separately and come to a conclusion as to the guilt or innocence of the defendant based on

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the premise of 'beyond a reasonable doubt'. You are the sole judge of the facts and the believability of the witnesses who have testified. You are to base your conclusions on the evidence presented during the trial. The opening and closing arguments of the lawyers are not evidence. My instructions to you contain my interpretation of the laws that govern this case. You are required to adhere to these laws in making your decision regardless of what you believe the law is or ought to be. The jury will now begin deliberations. Court will recess until the jury has reached a verdict," Judge Jenkins said, rising.

"All rise," the bailiff said.

Chapter 75

The jury had not reached a decision by the end of the day so, for security reasons, the judge had the jury sequestered in a well-secured hotel for the night.

Just before lunch the next day, the jury reached its decision.

"Has the jury reached a decision in the case of *People versus Tyrone Kervello*?" the judge asked.

The jury foreman stood. "We have, your Honor."

"Pass your verdict to the bench," the judge said.

The court clerk took an envelope from the foreman, handed it to the judge. Judge Jenkins read it, passed it back to the clerk. "The jury foreman will read the verdict," the judge said.

Kervello's lips were taunt as the clerk passed the verdict back to the foreman.

The foreman read it. "Count one: the defendant, Tyrone Kervello did create for the purpose of monetary gain, using illegal biological techniques, a violent creature, part-animal and part-human. We the jury find the defendant *not guilty* on count one."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

Kervello smiled.

"Count two: did neglect to restrain said creature referenced in Count One, resulting in the death of four persons by said creature. *Not guilty*."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

Kervello happily patted Belcher on the shoulder.

"Count three: created and illegally trafficked in the international sale of human-animal hybrid creatures. *Not guilty*."

Rumbles in the courtroom.

One newsman tried to leave to get his story out early, bailiff stopped him.

Kervello was ecstatic.

"Count four: hired would-be assassins to do bodily harm to potential witnesses. We find the defendant *guilty* as charged."

Kervello's face dropped.

"Count five: hired assassins with the intent of doing bodily harm to an officer of the law. We find the defendant *guilty* as charged."

Kervello glared at the jury foreman as if that would somehow change the verdict.

"Count six: personally wielded a firearm with the intent to do bodily harm to an officer of the law. We find the defendant *guilty* as charged."

Kervello realized he was going to be put away for a long time.

"Count seven: did cause, directly or indirectly the sexual abuse of the human-animal hybrid referenced as Hybrid 333. We find the defendant *guilty* as charged."

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The courtroom erupted.

"Order!" Judge Jenkins said. "A court date will be set for sentencing. Court's adjourned!"

"All *rise*!" the bailiff said.

Chapter 76

Three months later.

The golden Hawaiian sun had just risen and taken command of the quiet ocean. Exotic birds chattered among swaying palms. It was one of the finest days in Hawaiian history.

The constable was sprawled out on his stomach on the grass near the edge of the blue, crystal-clear kidney-shaped swimming pool, eyes closed. Wanda lay by his side.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"I was trying to decide whether to go swimming again, or take a walk down the beach."

"It's our wedding day and you're thinking about taking a *walk*?"

"Yeah, what else?"

"I'm thinking of putting on a grass skirt for you tonight in our hut after we're married."

"That'll be a waste of time."

"Why," she asked, looking at him through her dark sunglasses.

"I'll have it off of you in a second."

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She leaned over, kissed him on the ear, then rolled over onto her back; faced the sun. "You can play the ukulele," she said.

"What?"

"You can play the ukulele while I do a grass-skirt striptease. When in Hawaii—do as the Hawaiian's do."

"Sounds fun."

She reached her colorful canvas bag, got a photo from it, held it up. "Bear Skin folks sure know how to show their appreciation."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm looking at the photo that was taken of you receiving the cowhide saddle the folks of Bear Skin got together and had Pierre make for you to show their appreciation. Pierre did a super job of tooling 333's likeness onto the seat."

"Yeah, I really like that saddle. Bear Skin folks are the greatest. Pierre did a great job on it. Where *is* Pierre, by the way?"

"Around here somewhere—probably on down the beach. I heard several of them talking about a Hawaiian music concert this morning. He'd better not get lost—he's going to be Rolf and Ingrid's best man."

"You probably didn't know, but Rolf and Ingrid were planning to pay for the saddle all by themselves."

"No. That was nice. They're a great couple. I'm glad they decided to come to Hawaii and make it a double wedding."

"Yeah," Wanda agreed.

DON LEWIS WIREMAN, SR.

"Pierre is doing a good leather goods business—Hybrid 333 wallets, Hybrid 333 belts..."

"Not to mention his contract with Mayor Thorndike to make *Thorndike Bed & Breakfast* souvenirs," Wanda added.

"Thorndike was right to make the bed and breakfast permanent. He's made a ton of money. Tourists just keep pouring into Bear Skin."

"We're not doing bad ourselves," Wanda said.

"No. Between the lawsuit settlements and the bed and breakfast dividends, we're sitting pretty."

"And—?"

"And what?"

"House."

"And our new house is under construction," he added.

"Yes—!"

The constable rolled over, opened his eyes. "Here we are—lounging in the sun—while there's probably a foot of snow on the Hybrid 333 statue the town put up in the middle of Beaver Street."

"Yeah, wonderful," Wanda said, reaching for her exotic drink. "Somebody did a great job of making her statue. She's standing up on her back feet—dancing with a statue of little Willy. Nice touch! What did Coroner Öffner say she died of?"

"I can answer that," the coroner said, rolling over to face them.

"Thought you were asleep," Wanda said.

"I was," the coroner said.

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"So, you didn't hear anything about a grass skirt?" Wanda asked.

"Not a thing," the coroner lied.

"So, what *did* Hybrid 333 die from?"

"The autopsy showed she died from a progressive disease called BSE. It's the human equivalent of mad cow disease," the coroner said.

"I thought cows got mad cow disease from eating feed made out of cow brains," Wanda said.

"They do. Hybrid 333 got BSE the same way—from eating animal and human brains," the coroner said.

"So, she was human enough to get this human BSE disease," Wanda said.

"Yes. Did I mention she was pregnant?"

The constable and Wanda sat up.

"*Pregnant?*" Wanda cried. "Oh, the darling little *girl*—pregnant! How could that *be*?"

"The autopsy showed the fetus was developing like that of a cougar. Her cougar side was mating age, of course. She must have mated with a cougar," the coroner said.

"Wow—with a *cougar*," Wanda repeated in disbelief, thinking how she herself would go about such a task.

"Yeah, that's what it looked like," the coroner said, reached for his pipe, lit it. It's funny how things work sometimes."

"What do you mean?" the constable asked.

The coroner picked up the newspaper next to him. "*Now* the newspapers are *praising* 333—calling her Cougar-Girl and so

forth. Not long ago they couldn't wait to get their fangs into her. The good publicity keeps Bear Skin tourism booming—helps us bask in the Hawaiian sun," he chuckled.

The constable glanced at the newspaper. "I can't make out the headline from here. What does it say?"

The coroner handed Wanda the paper. "*You* tell him!"

Wanda read the headline aloud, "KERVELLO GETS TWENTY YEARS!"

"I'll bet my grandfather clock that he'll be out in three!" Wanda piped.

"If there'd been a law against creating dangerous hybrids, he probably would have gotten life without possibility of parole," the constable said.

It got quiet for a while, then the coroner said, "I've been meaning to ask whatever happened to Patrick O'Finn? He sold his barbershop, but I never heard what happened to him."

"He took his investment money and bought an old castle in Ireland—went and lived in it, too," the constable said. "When he cut my hair he used to tell me if he ever got rich, he'd buy a castle in Ireland—stock it with the prettiest lasses he could find—have one or two rooms filled to the ceiling with Irish *whiskey*—go wild boar huntin'—ridin' on a mule."

"Riding on a *mule*?" the coroner asked.

"Yeah, he said it gave the boar a fighting chance," the constable said.

They heard strains of the *Hawaiian Wedding March* coming from the beach.

"Sounds like they're about ready for us," Wanda said.

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"You haven't got cold feet and chickened out?" the constable asked the coroner.

"Hell *no*, *I'm* not getting married. I'm just going to be you and Wanda's best *man*," Brett Öffner said, taking a draw on his pipe.

"Just *checking*," the constable said.

The End