

Truth & Consequences

"There it is, ladies and gentlemen," Carter said, spreading the feast of photographs before them. "Proof positive that County X has itself a little werewolf infestation."

Lyle Davis and Robert Wyotski snatched up the pictures. Davis lifted two photos and settled back in his seat to savour the images while Wyotski hunched over his share, gorging on them. Elena Michaels pushed back her chair and crossed her arms.

"We are professional paranormal investigators, Mr. Carter, not sideshow thrill seekers," she said. "But I can see how you made the mistake, since we were all gullible enough to pay fifty dollars to see this trash."

"Welcome to the information age, ma'am," Carter said. "Knowledge is a commodity. Your entrance fee entitles you to these pictures and the names of two eyewitnesses. You want more, you pay more."

Elena plucked two photos from Wyotski's hand. He yelped and reached to snatch them back, but at a glare from her, he withdrew his hand.

"Cattle mutilations are common," she said. "This could be the work of ordinary wolves."

"Without revealing the location of County X, let me assure you, there are no wild wolves there. Never has been. I've got a notarized statement from a wildlife expert to confirm that."

"It's a staged hoax," Elena said.

"A damned elaborate hoax, then," Carter said. "Three murders and over a dozen eyewitness accounts."

Davis laid his photos down. "The Gaines Institute may not be interested, Mr. Carter, but PRC is."

"So is the Hecate Society," Wyotski said. "What exactly are you offering?"

Carter smiled and passed around three folders. "A package deal, folks. Laboratory results, expert reports, notarized witness statements and, most importantly, the location of County X. A hundred grand: half before and half after you visit the town."

"Ridiculous." Elena tossed her sales folder onto the table. "We can't justify that kind of cash outlay on the basis of a few photos."

"Neither can we," Davis said.

"Then there's option two," Carter said. "For a hundred bucks, you can come to a meeting tomorrow and I'll feed you more details."

Carter snapped shut his briefcase, then sauntered to the door. "Same time; same place; same terms. Cash only and no cameras."

He deserved this. After ten years of lying and finagling and dodging, Jose Carter deserved this. He'd been scouring the international small town papers for an idea when he'd found County X. It was a ready-made scam. Start with a few strange occurrences, stir in some superstitious farmers, spice it up with some creative details and you had yourself an unexplained phenomenon. For once he wouldn't need to escape to the Cayman Islands when it was over. His mark would pay the money, travel to County X and find what he'd described—or something close enough to it that a lawsuit would be fruitless.

He'd called Elena's hotel room and offered her a freebie for tomorrow. It was a lousy business move. She would be difficult and he didn't need her, but he couldn't resist a challenge, especially when the challenge looked as good as—

Something crackled outside his open window. Carter started, then strode across the room and pulled back the curtains. The back-lot of the hotel was black and still. An icy breeze gusted

through the screen. He bent down to close it. Then, in the wind, he caught the scent of musky perfume. He squinted into the darkness. Nothing moved. He shook his head and shut the window.

"We need proof," Elena said before she even took a seat at the next day's meeting.

"Unquestionable proof."

"All proof is questionable," Carter said. "But I'll get you as close to it as I can. What's better than eyewitness reports?"

Davis smiled. "A live specimen would be nice."

Even Elena laughed. Then she shook her head. "Witnesses will say they saw Christ and Elvis sharing a Big Gulp if you pay them enough."

"I have lie detector results," Carter said.

"What kind of eyewitness reports do you have?" she asked. "Farmers who saw a large German Shepherd in a field?"

Carter grinned. "Better. Much better. One of my witnesses caught the wolf at a kill. He fired a shot and nicked it on the shoulder. It ran into the woods and he followed. When he got in the forest, he could see it in the distance. But it wasn't a wolf."

Elena sighed. "It was a human, right? How convenient. I've heard this story a million times. I'd hoped your proof was a bit more original."

"Why?" Wyotski asked. "How else can you substantiate a werewolf story? Either you have to catch one in a transformation or injure one and force it to change shape."

"For a hundred grand, I expect more," Elena replied.

"Well, I don't," Wyotski said. "If I may read your material tonight, Mr. Carter, I'll be prepared to make an offer in the morning."

"I have copies for you all," Carter said.

He took three new folders from his briefcase. Wyotski grabbed one. Davis took the other two and held one out to Elena. She glared at Carter, but took the folder.

"My hotel is listed on the cover," Carter said. "I'm busy with other clients all day, but I can meet you tomorrow evening. Come by my room around eight."

Elena yanked her coat from her chair and left. Her colleagues hurried after her.

Carter chuckled and tossed his material into his briefcase. He'd put a lot of effort into this one: leather attaché case, rented meeting room, professionally prepared documents and all the little touches. For fifty grand, he could afford to polish the package.

He went into the hall to get a Coke. The second floor of the conference center looked as if it had been modeled after a honeycomb, with a myriad of halls encircling the cell-like rooms. He'd thought the soda machine was around the left corner. It wasn't. A map by the stairwell showed the machine to be somewhere to the north. It was really too much trouble, but an evening of conning made him thirsty.

As he turned from the map, a figure moved into a side-hall, giving him a glimpse of motion without shape. He looked each way. He'd got a cheap rate on the conference room because it was after hours and all other meetings were long over. The janitor, then? He strode to the side-hall and peered down it, seeing nothing.

He shook his head and turned right. As he walked, he heard the dull thudding of his shoes on the linoleum. Then he picked out a sharper sound accenting his own. He stopped. Silence. He resumed walking, concentrating on filtering out the sound of his shoes. It was there again: a clicking, distant yet regular. He closed his eyes, trying to place the sound. Before him, he pictured bare calves extending from a linen dress and ending in high-heeled shoes. His eyes flew open and he grinned.

Elena.

He spun around. No-one was there. He picked up his pace and began to whistle. The clicking faded into silence. He found the dispenser, bought a Coke and sauntered back to the conference

room, still grinning and still whistling. He swung through the door, expecting to see Elena waiting for him. There was only his open briefcase, and the subtle hint of musk perfume.

"Damn. What's your game, babe?"

He hurried from the room and down the flight of stairs. An elderly man guarded the front lobby.

"Did a woman go by here just now?" Carter asked.

The guard shook his head. "A woman and two men left half-an-hour ago. No-one else has gone out or come in since."

Carter smacked his palm against his thigh, muttered an oath and strode to the doors.

The next evening Elena accompanied Davis and Wyotski to the bidding, but made no offer. Though Carter kept giving her opportunities, she remained silent. Then, as the two men were haggling over the package details, she stood with a sheaf of papers in her hand.

"Gentlemen," she said. "Before you sign any cheques, I think you should hear a story about a poltergeist."

Carter froze.

"Emma Simmons was an elderly woman fascinated by the paranormal," Elena said. "In 1992, her husband died. He slipped in the tub because Emma took out the mat to wash it. Three weeks later, she started experiencing poltergeist activity."

"I don't see—" Wyotski began.

"You will. Soon after, she met a man, who claimed he could exorcise her house, for a price. Emma paid and the poltergeist disappeared, as did her housekeeper. Ever heard this tale before, Mr. Carter?"

"No. It sounds fascinating, though."

"Yes, well, Emma turned out to be smarter than her con-artist thought. When she realized she'd been defrauded, she hired an investigator, who discovered that our Mr. Carter has quite the history of exorcising . . . exorcising cash from other people's wallets with paranormal cons."

"Ridiculous," Carter said.

Elena smiled. "Perhaps. We'll see what the police say. They'll also be interested in these papers I took from your briefcase. Letters from your so-called experts asking for payment."

"One expert," Carter said. "I only bought one. The rest are legit."

"I'm sure they are."

Carter bolted. Elena grabbed for him. Her fingers brushing his shirt, but he made it out the door and kept running, heading for the forest.

Branches scraped at Carter's face and undergrowth tugged at his feet as he ran. He should have headed for the road, not the woods. He cursed himself for panicking. Except for that one expert's testimony, his story was true. As for the Simmons affair, no one could ever tie him to that. The housekeeper who'd set up the phony haunting for him had been dead for two years.

He heard something behind him, but didn't turn. A rabbit, most likely. Cops wouldn't chase him in here on a mere fraud charge. The noise grew louder and more rhythmic, a steady thumping like a heartbeat magnified a thousand times. He glanced over his shoulder. Not twenty meters behind him was a huge, white dog, looking like a phantom as it loped through the woods, unhindered by the brush and dense trees. For a moment, just one brief second, a thought darted through his mind. Then he dismissed it and ran.

The noise vanished. He spun around, almost tripping over his feet. There was nothing behind him. He grinned and wiped filthy fingers across his sweaty forehead. Some neighborhood mutt playing a game. He bent his head back, gulping air, then started to walk. He should go back and explain his story to the cops. To them, Elena Michaels would be nothing more than another ghost

hunting wacko. If he went back now—He stopped. There, on the path ahead, was the dog. It was walking toward him, with the unhurried gait of a pet greeting a friend. Then it paused, and lowered its forequarters, as if inviting play. Carter forced out a grin.

"Hey, mutt. If you're looking for a playmate you—"

The dog pounced, hitting Carter in the stomach. His arms flew up to protect his face as the canine's teeth clamped down and tore out his throat.

"Thank-you very much, gentlemen," Elena said as she walked back into the hotel room. "I appreciate you cowering here while I try to chase down the bad guy."

"We stayed to talk to the police," Davis said. "They said you can file a report tomorrow."

Elena snorted and walked into the bathroom, leaving the door open as she washed her hands.

"How many times are you two going to fall for these hoaxes?" she asked.

Silence returned from the main room. She scrutinized her image in the mirror, then flicked a bloody clump of gore from her hair.

"Get it through your heads, boys, there's no such thing as werewolves."