

Desert Witch

Chapter 1

The air buzzed with flies, attracted by the smell of blood and death. I covered my nose with my sleeve to suppress my gag reflex. This was not how I wanted to end the day after working a eight-hour shift at La Grande Dame Boutique.

Living in northern Arizona's high desert, just outside Sedona, I had seen dead animals before. But I had never seen an animal so freshly torn apart, and on my porch, no less. I'm the kinda gal who roots for the antelopes in Discovery Channel documentaries and cries when it gets caught.

The animal on my porch was so mutilated I wasn't sure what it was at first. Too large to be a jack rabbit. Maybe a coyote or a small deer. Whatever it was, something had reduced it to tangles of entrails and shreds of brown-gray fur clinging to a shattered ribcage. Brick-red blood surrounded the body like the halo of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

As curiosity overcame revulsion, I knelt down for a closer look. From what was left of the head, I could tell it was a coyote. Large paw prints tracked back and forth through the puddle of blood. From the size of the tracks, I guessed my mystery predator was a black bear.

But other clues suggested the predator might be something else. For starters, the distinct aroma of ozone mingled with the smell of fresh blood. And yellow-white foam glistened around the bite wounds. But there was something deeper and more sinister—a lingering energy of hate and craving.

Ever since I was a little girl, I have been sensitive to emotional energy. I can wander into a place and know if an argument has taken place or someone received bad news or expressed any other strong emotion. The stronger and more recent the emotion, the more I can sense it, even if the people have left.

My gut was telling me that this was more than a bear attack. The emotions I was sensing were too complex to be that of an animal. And at the same time, they didn't seem entirely human.

I gazed out at the ponderosa pine and scraggly juniper surrounding my two-bedroom house, listening for the crunch of heavy footsteps on pine needles. But the only sound was the persistent buzz of the flies and the delicate whistle-symphony of birds. No dark shapes moved between the trees or behind the outcroppings of red rock.

I considered calling the Arizona Department of Game and Fish, but decided it would be a wasted effort. They wouldn't remove the carcass if it wasn't on a state-maintained road. And since I hadn't witnessed the attack and couldn't tell them whether it was a bear, a puma or even a human that killed the coyote, they weren't likely to send someone out. I was going to have to take care of this on my own, which meant changing out of my work clothes.

I stepped around the carcass, careful to avoid the blood, and went into the house. It was dim inside. The faint odor of onions remained from dinner the night before. As I walked down the short hallway, I had the feeling there was something else I should be doing. Whatever it was, it could wait. I hoped.

I clicked on the overhead light in the bedroom. Piles of dirty clothes surrounded my unmade bed like a landfill. I had put off doing laundry for a week, lacking the time, the energy or both.

Removing my three-inch heels brought such relief to my scrunched toes the experience was euphoric. I massaged them back to life, then peeled off my pantyhose and the green one-size-fits-all dress, which was one size too small for my 200-pound body. I tossed both the dress and the nylons onto a nearby pile. Tomorrow was my day off. I'd do laundry then. Maybe.

As I changed into jeans, sneakers and a Pink Trinkets concert T-shirt, I heard a mournful whine from under my bed. I bent down and spotted the large, furry shape of Moose, my twenty-five-pound Maine Coon cat.

It surprised me to see him cowering under the bed. In the three years since I adopted him from the no-kill shelter, I had never seen him flinch at anything. Not that I ever let him outside to test his fighting abilities. But he would hiss at any coyote or javelina that dared walk past one of our windows.

“Moose? What’s wrong, big guy?”

Slowly, he crept out from under the bed and into my arms. Damn, he was getting heavy. He trembled and pressed his forehead against my cheek.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. Mama won’t let the big scary bear get you.” I rubbed his back until he calmed down, then set him in his bed, a wicker gift basket covered with old, mismatched towels and a layer of cat hair.

Now I had to figure out what to do with the dead coyote. Tossing it into the forest wasn’t an option. I didn’t want the bear or whatever it was showing up for leftovers. I would have liked to do the decent thing and bury it, but I didn’t own a shovel.

That left the inglorious option of stuffing the remains into a heavy garbage bag and putting it out with the trash. It felt like a sacrilege, but I didn’t see any alternative.

From under my kitchen sink, I grabbed a pair of yellow rubber gloves and a garbage bag. I was tempted to grab a plastic clothespin for my nose, but decided to tough it out, breathing through my mouth as much as possible.

Back on the porch, the smell of ozone and blood was now overpowering. Even with breathing through my mouth, my stomach grew queasy. “Let’s get this over with,” I told myself.

I inverted the bag and put my hand in like it was a puppet. Gritting my teeth and repressing the urge to vomit through force of will, I folded the center of the bag around what was left of the coyote’s skull and flipped the bag over it. Shielded by the bag-puppet, I ushered as much of the intestines as I could into the bag.

It was a gruesome task, but my strategic approach resulted in nearly all of the remains ending up inside the bag. I cinched it closed and dropped it in the garbage can buried alongside my driveway.

“God speed, little critter.” I probably should have said “Goddess speed”. I am a Wiccan, or at least I aspire to be. But “Goddess speed” doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue.

Now all that remained was a stew of congealing blood and tiny bits of coyote. I uncoiled a few loops of garden hose and sprayed the blood off the wooden porch. That's when something white and triangular in the ruddy puddle caught my eye.

I bent down to pick it up. It was a large tooth, but it didn't look like any bear's tooth I had seen. Instead of the usual conical shape, this tooth was flatter and had serrations along each side. I rinsed it off and slipped it into my pocket. There was a taxidermy shop down the street from La Grande Dame. Maybe they could help me identify it.

I continued cleaning the porch, eventually scrubbing with a push broom and dish soap. Despite my best efforts, a crimson stain remained on the wood. Exhausted and out of ideas, I re-coiled the hose and went inside.

I collapsed on the couch and clicked on the television. Moose curled up next to me and began purring. Whatever appetite I had when I first arrived home was long gone, which was probably a good thing. I could stand to lose a pound or twenty.

I wanted nothing more than to zone out and relax. Still a little voice in the back of my head kept telling me there was someplace else I needed to be. Again, I dismissed it.

The local news featured a story about a missing boy, presumably taken by his non-custodial father. A special report on the ongoing drought in central Arizona followed.

As the program went to commercial, I remembered I had made an appointment to be interviewed by the high priestess of a coven I was hoping to join. I check the time. It was nearly six.

“Oh shit, I'm late.” I turned off the television, grabbed my purse and ran out the door.

The steering wheel rubbed against the top of my thighs as I climbed into my Nissan Cube, which I had nicknamed the Blue Box. I turned the key in the ignition and checked the rearview mirror. A glowing pair of amber eyes stared at me from the backseat.

I screamed through a nightmare memory from ten years earlier. I tried to turn around in my seat, but there wasn't room to maneuver. I threw open the door and wrenched myself out of the car. I would not be raped again.

I turned to face the intruder, desperately trying to claim my power. But instead of the crazed rapist from my past, a frail man with a thin face and a scraggly, white goatee sat in my backseat, staring at me through the passenger door window.

He looked to be in his seventies, possibly eighties. Almost as striking as his golden eyes were his maroon velvet jacket and white ruffled collar encircling his neck.

"Who the hell are you?" I realized I was pointing my pepper spray at him. I didn't remember grabbing it from my purse. Considering the back window stood between us, the pepper spray wouldn't do me much good unless he got out of the car. Or rolled down the window, which he did.

"Granddaughter," he said in a raspy, Spanish-accented voice, muffled by the glass that separated us. "I need help."

I relaxed a little. Perhaps the glowing eyes were just a trick of the late afternoon sunlight. This guy might be crazy with a fetish for Elizabethan-style apparel, but he didn't pose much of a threat.

"You are *not* my grandfather. Who are you and what are you doing in my car?"

"Please, excuse me. I call myself Don Diego Sanchez de Castillo." He bowed his head as he introduced himself. "I need help. Your help."

The frightened look in his eyes replaced my fear with pity. I lowered the pepper spray and opened the backdoor. The man smelled of mildew and death. I wondered when he last took a bath or washed his clothes.

On the other hand, I had to give the stinky, old guy credit. His costume was exquisite, complete with the baggy shorts and matching tights. “Hi, Don, I’m Eva. Are you lost? Did you wander off from somewhere?”

“No, Don is not my name. Don is my title. My name is Diego.”

“Okay, Diego, is there someone I can call to pick you up?”

“I need your help, granddaughter.” He enunciated every word.

“For the last time, Diego, I’m not your granddaughter.” This guy was on my last nerve.

“Look, I’m already late for an appointment. Can I drop you off somewhere in town?”

“No. I need your help.”

“Yes, yes, you’ve said that. What kind of help do you need?” Aside from his anti-psychotic medication, I thought.

“La Llorona. She is here. She will steal children.”

La Llorona, according to the centuries-old fairy tale, was a love-sick Mexican woman who drowned her children in order to date some rich dude. When he still rejected her, she cried for her lost children, searching the rivers hoping to recover them. My ex-girlfriend’s mother used to warn her that La Llorona would snatch her away if she didn’t behave.

Diego, if that was his real name, had clearly lost touch with reality. Instead of tilting at imaginary dragons, this modern-day Don Quixote was hunting a Mexican bogeyman, bogeywoman, whatever.

“Diego, La Llorona isn’t real. She’s a myth, like the jackalope or the chupacabra.”

“No! Not a myth!” His eyes flamed. “She is real. She is here. She will steal children. You must to stop her.”

I’d had enough. Helping an old man get home is one thing, but I wasn’t in the mood to deal with the Crazy. I pulled out my phone and called 911, turning my back on Diego so he didn’t hear the conversation.

“Coconino County 911, what is your emergency?” asked a male voice.

“An old man in a Three Musketeer costume just showed up at my house. I think he’s senile. Keeps going on about La Llorona and needing help.”

“What is your location, ma’am?”

Ma’am. Since turning thirty a few months earlier, I was hearing that word more and more often. I wasn’t sure I liked. Made me feel old. “I’m at 2749 Blue Agave Street in Sedona.”

“Is the gentleman injured?”

“Other than being delusional, he doesn’t appear to be.” I turned back to Diego only to find the Blue Box empty. I ran around the car, looking in the front seat. Nothing. He had vanished.

“Holy crap, he’s gone,” I said to the 911 operator. “I turned my back on him for a second and he disappeared.”

“Did you need us to send someone out, ma’am?”

I looked at my watch. I was very late. “No. If he shows up again, I’ll call back.”

I jumped into the Blue Box and checked the rearview mirror. No sign of Diego, thank the Goddess. The backseat remained empty aside from the a faint scent of mildew. I put the car in gear and sped off toward town.