

BloodWolf

Sierra Dafoe

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"The image of the lone wolf, while romantic, is essentially a myth. The solitary wolf, although capable of survival, is a pitiful creature. Isolated from his pack, or in search of a mate, he has remarkable powers of endurance and can... cover great distances in his search... Desperate for company, he will often become unstable or depressed..."

"My grandfather told me it was Wolf who first taught humans how to live in harmony. Wolf is the Great Parent, the Great Teacher who shows us the right way of living with each other... Wolf is the Healer, bringing wholeness to the wounded spirit and the divided clan."

Prologue

Las Vegas, Nevada

Two men faced each other across the poker table. One was enormously fat, his belly rising like a mountain above the green felt plain of the table's top. The other was lean, lean and tall, with hair so black and glossy it almost looked wet, making Cassie think of the thick, heavy oil forced from the sun-cracked earth of her native Rusk County, Texas.

There was something about that second man, something that made Cassie waggle her hips as she eased her way through the crowd, made her bend forward a little farther than was strictly necessary to set his drink -- an expensive French merlot -- by his hand. He had a scent to him, a tangy odor like pine trees -- or no, that wasn't it. Something wild, though. Outdoorsy. It contrasted strongly with his manicured nails and elegant appearance, and Cassie felt her nipples hardening beneath her bandeau top.

"There you are, sir." She hoped he'd look up, hoped his gaze might linger on her remarkable cleavage as so many men's did. She'd used her tits to great advantage over the years -- they'd gotten her out of the seedy trailer park she'd been raised in, out of Texas, out of poverty and into an exceedingly cushy job as a cocktail waitress at the Mandalay Bay Casino and Hotel. And sometimes, when a man's gaze fell to her bosom, Cassie would smile, and waggle her hips that extra bit. And the next day she'd have a new dress, or some jewelry. Once, even a car.

But when *this* man looked up, his gaze rose directly to her face.

He had the most remarkable eyes, Cassie thought as her lungs, which had forgotten for a moment how to breathe, fought to remember. Not brown, not hazel, they were *amber*, a clear, light-shot color like honey in a jar, with sunlight streaking through it. They looked at her, and the noise and the lights of the casino slid away.

So did her defenses. Cassie gulped, feeling exactly as she had when she first came to Vegas, a gawky knob-kneed kid with nothing but a knapsack and a big pair of boobs. All the poise, all the polish she'd learned over the past five years was gone, leaving her shaking and awkward, vulnerable in a way she hadn't allowed herself to be since the age of twelve, when her latest "uncle" had called her to him and held her between his knees. "Some nice titties you got growin' there, Cassie," he'd said.

Some nice titties you got growin' there.

The man's eyes changed as he watched her, becoming softer, somehow deeper. "Tell me your name." His voice was like his eyes -- deep, rich, gentle.

"Cassie. Cassie Smith."

His full lips curved in a small smile. Reaching for the pile of poker chips in front of him, he held one out to her. "Here. Find yourself a different job."

Blindly, she took it and started to turn away, but he grabbed her wrist, pulled her down toward him. His gaze was intent on her face, and a heat she'd never felt in all the nights she'd held a man in her bed, listening to the increasing pace of his breathing and counting the tiles in the ceiling above her, unfolded between her thighs.

"You're better than this, Cassie Smith," the man whispered. Tears sprang to her eyes, sharp and stinging. In the amber glow of his eyes she saw very clearly exactly what it was she'd been doing for the last five years.

But she saw something else, too. She saw that he was right. She *was* better than this.

He held her gaze till she nodded. Then he released her. Dazed, bewildered, Cassie walked back to the bar, teetering on four-inch heeled pumps that suddenly felt so precarious -- a narrow, treacherous height she might tumble from at any moment. Then she looked at the chip in her hand.

It was blue, with black, white and yellow checks running around the edge and the casino's logo in the center.

Ten thousand dollars. He had just given her ten thousand dollars.

No. What he'd *really* given her was a way out.

Cassie folded her fingers around it, feeling the hard edge digging into her palm, and started to cry.

Across the room, the man with amber eyes watched the girl dab at her quickly smearing mascara with a cocktail napkin, then, head held high, stride resolutely from the poker room, ignoring the bartender's disbelieving glare.

His name was Baudouin Delacor. He was almost a thousand years old. And he loved these frail, complex humans in a way he knew he could never explain.

Cassie Smith, for example. Delacor smiled slightly -- as with most things about him, the expression was tempered with grief. The girl was no one really -- a pretty young woman lost in a world that was too big, too wide. What her future would bring, who could tell? But at least for one brief moment, he had touched her life, and changed it.

It was such small things, the momentary connections like this that made his own life bearable.

Occasionally, in his wanderings he'd amuse himself by peering at the faces he passed, young or old, world-weary like himself or fresh as a new-picked peach, wondering whose life, whose story he might become entangled with next.

His own story bored him. It was the same -- always the same. Delacor turned back to the table, suddenly restless. It was time to end this charade. Time -- once again - - to move on. He laid down his cards.

"Full house," the dealer announced. "Nines over threes." He looked at the fat man, who simply folded his cards, and back to Delacor. "Well played, sir." A smattering of applause from the crowd, and they began to drift off. The dealer indicated the heap of chips in the center of the table. "Shall I have these taken up for you?"

"Please." Delacor rose.

* * *

"Here."

The cabbie stared into the rear view mirror. "Here, sir? But --"

"Stop here."

The tires crunched to a stop on gritty sand. Handing a hundred-dollar bill to the driver, Delacor got out. The thump of the cab door closing behind him was very loud in the silence.

He waited until the noise of the retreating cab had faded away. Then he tilted his head back, studying the smattering of stars just peeking through the darkening arch of the sky.

It had been a night very like this one that the *um al duwayce* had come for him. The stars had been different, half a world away, but the sand and the silence had been much the same.

He had smelled it first -- a whisper of sweetness on the warm desert wind, cloying and spicy, but somehow stale, cold, rotten with age. The scent had filled his mind like a madness, setting fire to his nerves and hazing the night with a veil of crimson. Then he'd seen it in the distance, gliding toward him across the sand. Even now, he could feel the heat that had burned in his loins at the demon's approach.

Closing his eyes, Delacor let himself remember...

* * *

It wore the shape of a woman, dusky and slim, draped in a silken robe that glimmered in the moonlight like cobwebs, so sheer and delicate it seemed it would shred at a single touch and float away. Her hair, black and glossy as onyx, fell in a straight, heavy line to her slender waist. Above it, her breasts curved, full and ripe. As she neared, he could see the darker brown of her areolae beneath the gauzy fabric.

Spellbound by lust, he stood, unaware of his sword sliding from his hands and tumbling to the sand below. His blood thundered in his ears as she studied him, her dark, secretive gaze finally coming to rest on the swell of his cock. She knelt before him in a whisper of silk, her long, clever fingers undoing his garments.

And then she took his throbbing shaft in her mouth.

* * *

Swallowing, Delacor tilted his head back, feeling his balls grow heavy. His cock pulsed, lengthening beneath the fabric of his pants. Groaning, he clenched his fists, refusing to touch himself, to relive the need that just the memory of the demon's touch could arouse.

The *um al duwayce*. The succubus. It was hunger incarnate, a searing, endless lust that fed off its victims, drawing their essence, their life force, into its primordial emptiness.

A light breeze skidded up from the south, blowing across the sparse vegetation of the Amargosa Desert and setting a clump of yucca to clacking softly. It brought with it the tang of sere, uninhabited spaces; rugged, rolling lands in which nothing but coyotes and rodents and scorpions moved. The scent filled his nostrils, sharpening the hunger that twisted inside him, the taint the *um al duwayce* had left in his blood.

It did not always kill its victims. No, some it merely *changed*, infecting them with its own insatiable desires. Beasts became feral, men became *vampyr* -- cannibals living off the blood of their own kind. And he, Baudouin Delacor, who had never been a man...

He hated this, hated what he was about to do. But already his hands were ripping at his cufflinks, dropping the pearl-tipped bits of metal behind him as he strode deeper into the Nevada night. His Cavellini suit jacket he left draped over the spindly limbs of a sagebrush, his belt near the base of a striated rock. Kicking off his shoes, he shed the rest of his clothes, retaining only the small waist pouch he habitually wore under his shirt. Cinching the pouch's strap tight around his lean waist, he narrowed his eyes, and waited.

To the east, above the horizon, a golden glow painted the sky -- the moon, just shy of full, hidden still behind the low-lying hills. It called to him -- a call that had once been the keenest of joys to answer.

Now the thought of what it meant sickened him.

Five, the old priest had told him. There are five aspects of the demon, representing each of the elements -- earth, air, water, fire... and spirit. For it is not truly flesh, Baudouin -- it is essence. An essence which can poison any living thing.

But these five -- they are its avatars, its manifestations. Destroy those, and perhaps...

Perhaps. It was the best Father Giovanni had been able to give him. The regret in the old man's eyes had not been feigned.

I am very sorry for you, my son.

Gone to dust centuries before, Father Giovanni, who had not cursed him or called him damned.

Delacor had already destroyed one, that first, beautiful, ethereal woman who had floated across sands the prophets themselves had trod. He had lain with her under the full Eastern moon, coupling again and again in an inhuman frenzy of lust -- until he'd felt her teeth on his neck.

She'd laughed, he remembered, even as he'd plunged his sword into her. Laughed and then stood before him, the wounds closing as he watched. Horrified, he'd stumbled back and she'd followed, her hands reaching out for his still rigid cock. Her scent -- the sickly-sweet odor of decayed spices and rotting flowers -- had surrounded him, making his head whirl.

Shrieking, torn between loathing and the desire to thrust her to the ground and split her open with his cock, Delacor had struck again and again, retreating before the *thing* that pursued him, remorseless, undying, until at last he'd severed its head with one great sweep of his sword, and the avatar of the succubus, the flesh in which it had clothed itself, had tumbled to the sand.

But the poison it had left in his blood still remained.

For eight months now he had suppressed it, hiding himself as the moon grew round, avoiding its light. Drinking himself into a stupor to try to silence the craving inside him, he'd sweated and shrieked inside sterile hotel rooms, holding himself back by sheer will from ripping open the curtains, letting the moonlight pour down...

He'd tried it before over the centuries, many times. Tried to starve the hunger into submission. Each time, he'd hoped he could outlast it, that without the blood his affliction demanded, he would die.

He didn't. The torment simply grew stronger with each passing moon till he could no longer fight against it, and must give in.

Bending down, he scooped up a handful of sand, letting it trickle slowly through his fingers. Moments passed, each one a grain of sand falling, falling... The moon cleared the horizon, and then there was no more sand, no more hand to hold it, no more Baudouin Delacor. A massive black wolf with eyes the color of amber stood in the desert, scenting the wind.

Breaking into a long, steady lope, the wolf headed north.

Chapter One

Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona

Spades bit into the dry earth, sending whorls of sand so fine it plumed like smoke into the air. Lauren Cole squatted at the edge of the square pit, shielding her eyes from the slanting early-morning sunlight, then raised her Nikon for another shot.

"Watch it!" Randy barked as Daniel, one of the three students, stepped back, fouling the thread stretched from peg to peg around the perimeter of the pit. As he stooped to disentangle himself, Randy hopped down into the four-foot deep excavation, squatted, and brushed carefully at the sand that had settled over the exposed find.

"What is it, Professor Anders?" Kelly, a lean-limbed sophomore with a cute little button of a nose, called from the opposite rim. Kelly Mapplethorpe. She'd tied her tee shirt up under her breasts, revealing a smooth, firm belly and taut back muscles. Her skin showed the telltale flush of incipient sunburn, and Lauren felt a certain grim satisfaction.

Flaunt those babies however you like, sweetheart, she thought uncharitably. It's going to be damned uncomfortable sleeping for you tonight.

It was, she suspected, more uncomfortable sleeping accommodations *every* night than Kelly had hoped when she'd signed on for the trip. Not that Randy would so much as look at one of his students. Hell, he hardly remembered to look at *her* half the time.

At that thought, Lauren sighed.

"Nicrosaurus," Randy replied. "Big one. Get a shot of this, honey, would you?" He smiled at Lauren, a gleam of excitement in his cornflower-blue eyes as she clambered into the pit and hunkered down beside him.

She was acutely aware of Randy's muscular thigh, deeply tanned and coated with soft gold hairs, brushing against hers. It wasn't hard to understand Kelly's attraction to her energetic, good-looking geology teacher, but it was damned annoying to have the girl shoving her tits at him every chance she got.

Adjusting the f-stop, Lauren decided against changing lenses -- the pit was dusty, and she wasn't spending another night cleaning sand out of the lens-mounts. Not if she could help it. She could think of far more pleasant ways to spend the short desert evenings -- if only Randy were more distractible.

He wasn't, she had to admit, the most exciting lover to begin with. Strictly your meat and potatoes kind of guy. He wasn't even that crazy about blowjobs, though he'd given up fighting her on *that* score at least. Lauren absolutely loved the taste of his thick, solid cock -- especially when he was all sweaty and salty from a dig. He tried to reciprocate every now and again, but his heart wasn't in it, and it showed.

Is there anything more of a turn-off, Lauren wondered, than being eaten by a guy who just doesn't like it? But after twelve years in L.A., Randy was like a fresh breath of air. Friendly, optimistic, almost naïve, full of a wholesome exuberance that still made her smile. It was that exuberance which had won her heart ten months ago. Jaded and exhausted by the cynicism of Los Angeles, where obscene wealth and unspeakable poverty lived almost cheek to jowl, she'd been more than happy to chuck in the towel when the University of Phoenix had offered her a position.

Those who can't do, teach. Lauren grimaced. No one had said it, but it had been there in everyone's eyes when she'd told them. Her editor, her friends -- hell, even her landlord. Why did everyone always equate having the goddamn sense to leave L.A. with failure? Hell, she'd won a Hearst for her piece on the ongoing fallout, a decade later, from the '92 riots. *Not Beverly Hills: 90002*, she'd called it. She'd been rather proud of the title.

How much proving did she have to do before she earned the right to leave with dignity? Shocked, Lauren realized she was still seething, even now. She had a sneaking suspicion that what had really been behind the lukewarm good wishes and thinly

veiled sneers of her colleagues was jealousy -- not of her awards or her office (not a desk, an honest to God *office*) at the *L.A. Times*, but of the fact that, having worked so hard to achieve them, she'd had the courage (or sheer common sense) to give it all up.

Nodding to herself, she snapped another picture. That was it, she was certain. By choosing to leave, she'd confirmed what they already knew, deep in their hearts. Los Angeles was a rat race. A place where, as one extremely talented and alcoholic screenwriter she'd interviewed once had said, one didn't have friends, only business associates.

Randy was the absolute antithesis of L.A. And he certainly didn't have any qualms about teaching geology, even though his heart -- and his doctorate -- were both in paleontology, his interest restricted to summers and these work-study digs.

"Don't you resent it?" she'd asked him once. He'd glanced at her, his hands pausing over the bone fragments he'd been slowly assembling.

"Why should I?" he'd answered, his expression honestly puzzled.

That was Randy. Sweet, straightforward, what you see is what you get. With Randy there was no such thing as a hidden agenda. It was an incredibly soothing quality.

It was very, very hard to admit that it was also, well, *dull*.

Lauren shifted carefully to the other side of the fossil to catch the shadows better. Randy had unearthed the massive skull to a depth of four inches in places, revealing a perfect profile view of its three-foot long jaw and bristling teeth. "What a monster," she said admiringly.

"It's not actually a dinosaur," Randy replied, "it's a phytosaur."

"A what?"

Randy grinned. "Sloan?"

The gawky, black-haired geology major looked up from the square he was excavating. "Phytosaur. Late Triassic. Kind of a big crocodile cousin. I think I just found its back paw."

"How big?" Lauren glanced again at the teeth. Some of them were as long as her outstretched fingers.

Randy shrugged. "Oh, maybe eight meters."

"Twenty feet? That thing was over twenty feet long?" Lauren imagined a L.A. transit bus with fangs, and shuddered.

"Yup." He stood, brushed his hair back and glanced at the sky. The sun had shifted higher, and the morning softness had already burned from the air. "It's gonna be a busy day."

Lauren smiled as he reached down, helped her to her feet, and playfully brushed the dust off her butt. Kelly was scowling, watching them from the corner of her eye. Well, Kelly would just have to take her hormones elsewhere. Randy was *hers*.

He might be predictable. He might be -- okay, *was* -- a little monotonous in the sack. But these were drawbacks that, after twelve years in La-La Land, Lauren felt she could happily overlook.

Lauren spent the entire day taking pictures -- close ups of the fossil (*Lyle*, the students had already dubbed it), group shots, Randy and the three kids standing at the edge of the pit during lunch break, arms draped across each other's shoulders and grinning like idiots. Kelly, of course, had snuggled right up against him, her boobs brushing his chest as she pressed herself close. Lauren had gritted her teeth, and snapped the photo.

The sun had nearly set, and shadows stretched long from the base of the wind-sculpted buttes across the hard, reddish plain of the desert by the time the long arch of the spinal column finally started to emerge. Randy was squatting by the skull carefully brushing fixative over the exposed bone when Kelly called from the far side of the pit.

"Professor Anders? I think there's something else here."

* * *

Exhausted, heart-sore, Delacor stumbled down from the foothills of the Spring Mountain range as the sky slid toward twilight. Naked but for his waist pouch, he

crouched by a tiny stream welling from between two boulders, and splashed the icy water over his face and arms.

There were two coarse black hairs trapped under his fingernails along with brownish clots of dried blood. At the sight of them, bile rose in Delacor's throat. He thrust his hands into the water, scooped sand from the bottom of the stream, and ground it between his fingers until his cuticles were shreds and his palms burned with abrasions.

It did no good to tell himself it had only been a dog.

His shoulders slumped dejectedly as Delacor leaned back against the rough boulder, letting his long-boned hands dangle between his knees. In the distance, the lights of Las Vegas glimmered, turning the horizon a poisonous yellow.

He was tired, so tired of this pointless existence. When the demon's madness came on him, it blotted out memory, conscience... everything. The *um al duwayce* had turned him into a beast for which there'd never before been a name. Not the *loup-garou*, the werewolf, but the *loup de sang*.

The BloodWolf.

Wolves, the beautiful, wild cousins of his kind, had all but disappeared from the world, a fact that was both a sorrow to him, and a relief.

But there were always dogs.

Remembering the two black hairs that had been trapped beneath his nails, Delacor dropped his face into his palms and howled his grief and fury.

Slowly, the sound of trickling water returned him to himself. It reminded him sharply of home, of the high craggy tors and deep, silent forests of the Languedoc. But the air here was heavy with a coppery stink that drifted down from the north -- from the barren, blasted wasteland that was the Nevada Test Site.

So many kinds of evil, in one tiny world.

Lifting his head, Delacor scented the breeze. Under the stench of Armageddon were smaller, softer smells -- the clean tang of running water, the cool bite of the pines,

the earthy fragrance of rock and dirt. From Route 160, three miles east, came the reek of exhaust.

But there was something else, beyond all these. Something...

There. A tendril of odor, twisting through and underneath the closer, stronger aromas. A stink so faint it was almost undetectable. It was dry, sickly-sweet, vaguely erotic -- the scent of old perfumes, rotted by time. Miles away, maybe hundreds. But there.

The musty fragrance shuffled back the centuries like cards in a deck, and he saw it again in his mind's eye, gliding toward him like a mirage over saffron-colored sand. The *um al duwayce*.

It had awakened again.

For nine hundred years he had sought some trace of it, hoping to find the four remaining avatars, to destroy them and so remove one evil, at least, from this poor, tortured world. Then, perhaps, the corruption inside him would also be removed.

He was no longer sure he truly believed that. It was the *belle mensonge*, the beautiful lie. Without it, he might well have despaired long since, and let himself be overwhelmed by the poison inside him.

He knew, no one better, what the succubus could do. Whether he could ever free himself of its defilement or not, it had to be stopped.

It would seek prey, and quickly. Of that he had no doubt at all. Already Delacor was on his feet, moving cautiously through the scrub. Grimly, he smiled, wondering whose life he was about to become entangled with now.

But as he raised his head to the evening breeze, freshening now as night drew down, he felt a strange sensation prick along his limbs. It took him much longer to identify the feeling than it did to find the direction.

Squatting down, he concentrated. A moment later, all that could be seen at the edge of the bushes was a massive black wolf, staring down from the foothills over the flat, shallow bowl of the Las Vegas valley.

East. He'd have to go east now. And somehow he knew he had to go fast.

As he broke into the wolf's steady, ground-devouring run, for the first time in centuries Delacor felt a whisper of hope.

Chapter Two

It was almost completely dark, and Randy was still hunkered in the shadows of the pit, studying the knob of bone that protruded from the wall about eight inches above the base. The two boys and Kelly watched eagerly as he traced it lightly, following the small curve of exposed fossil with one finger.

"Well?" Lauren snapped. She was tired, and grimy from the day's exertions, and not at all amused by the way Kelly was leaning over Randy, even though he ignored the girl completely. "What is it?"

He looked up at her, excitement sparkling in his eyes. "I've no idea at all." His broad grin punctured her discontent, and Lauren couldn't help grinning back. But her expression changed as he straightened, a bit stiffly, and gave Kelly a look of beaming approval. "Good work. All right, let's cover them up."

Lauren had time for a quick wash behind the tent as Randy helped the students peg a heavy tarp over the dig, protecting the exposed fossils from the night winds of the desert. Then, freshly scrubbed and dressed, she started for the mess area, working her fingers through the tangles in her drying hair.

A soft evening breeze had begun stealing along the ground, bringing with it a faint, tangy scent that made Lauren think of cloves. She stopped abruptly. Food wasn't really what she was hungry for, was it? In the distance, she could see Randy, no more than a shadow against the dusky purple sky as he headed back from the pit. Twenty yards to her left, in front of the three pup tents where the students slept, a fire flickered brightly in the growing gloom.

Lauren smiled again, and headed back for the large tent at the base of the butte. It was almost completely dark inside, and she quickly shed her clean clothes and slipped under the sleeping bags on the mat. She caught the tang of spices again and

tilted her head back, breathing it in, wondering briefly what late blooming plant produced it. The nylon of the sleeping bag rustled as it slid across her naked skin, teasing the small nubs of her nipples, and a familiar warmth stole through her groin.

Gods, it had been days since they had made love! Randy shied away from public displays in any case, and the close proximity of the students' tents had squelched any hopes Lauren had of getting laid. But tonight the very air seemed to whisper of carnality, and she could feel her body radiating a sensual heat in the darkness of the tent.

She heard the tent flap rustle as Randy entered. "Laur?" She chuckled softly in reply, and heard him pause just inside the tent. Then his footsteps approached, and she felt a sudden rush of irritation as a match scraped and the propane lantern flared into life on the small chest next to the mat.

Its greenish light fell over Randy's broad cheekbones, casting tiny shadows from the rough stubble on his cheeks and jaw. His hair, matted with sweat, stood out at odd angles as he glanced in her direction. Lauren, who had been about to toss back the sleeping bag, displaying her naked body before him, checked at the febrile excitement in his eyes.

She was used to his enthusiasm. Originally from Minnesota, with the strong-featured good looks and fair coloring of the Norwegian ancestors who had, by sheer perseverance, wrestled a living from that vast, untamed land, Randy had a placid but tenacious disposition that was admirably suited to the slow, painstaking excavations he loved. He'd wax rhapsodic over the tiniest thing -- a chip of bone, a fragment of petrified plant life, squirreling it away like some miniscule piece of a gigantic puzzle. Which, Lauren supposed, it was.

But the gleam in his eyes now was different. It was restless, unsettled, not at all like the sparkle of optimism she was used to seeing in them. "Randy?" He started, and Lauren realized that for all he'd been looking straight at her, he hadn't really been seeing her at all. "Randy, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. I don't know. I... We may have found something." His expression was oddly hollow, both excited and yet filled with a curious reluctance, as if he was afraid to give rein to the agitation inside him.

"Well, obviously," she replied, a teasing lilt in her voice. "Do you think there's more, then?"

"No. I mean, yes, I'm pretty sure there is, but..."

"But what?"

He ran a distracted hand through his hair, mussing it further. *Really*, Lauren thought, *a few more days of this and he could play a mad scientist to perfection*. Well, that is, if mad scientists were ever nicely muscled and handsome.

"I don't know, Laur," he repeated. "I just don't know."

"Any guesses, even?"

"I said I don't know!"

"Okay! Jesus." His vehemence surprised her. Briefly, she tried to remember if he'd *ever* spoken crossly to her before. "I was just asking."

"I'm sorry, hon. I didn't mean to snap."

"It's okay. C'mon. Come to bed." Tossing back the corner of her sleeping bag, she jerked her head in invitation. He hesitated, and she added, somewhat tartly, "Honestly, Randy! It'll still be there in the morning."

He chuckled at that, and the tension in him seemed to ease as he pulled off his boots and shirt, and stretched out on top of his sleeping bag. He really *was* excited, Lauren thought, if he'd let himself get that wound up. Reaching over, she turned off the lamp, then curled up beside him, her head pillowed on his broad chest, and lay listening to the wind scurry over the sand outside and the slow, steady beat of his heart.

She loved the way he smelled. Even after a long day's work in the sun, his odor was pleasantly musky rather than acrid. Snuggled close against him, she felt a renewed pulse of arousal at the feel of his warm, strong body next to hers. Turning her head, she let her cheek brush the smooth skin of his shoulder, and then licked it with her tongue lightly, enjoying the slight tang of salt. Sliding tighter against him, she kissed the side of

his neck, and let her hand drift down his abdomen to the front of his shorts. "You're not going to sleep with these on, are you?"

She felt his cheek curve in a smile and, encouraged, undid the snap at his waist and slid her hand inside. His cock wasn't especially long, but it was nice and thick. Solid, like Randy. Solid and comfortable. Curling her fingers around it, she felt it start to stiffen under her touch. She loved the way it filled her palm, the smooth, velvety skin of its head. The meaty curve of the lip brushed against the inside of her thumb as she worked her hand slowly up and down, tugging gently at the thinner skin of his shaft. Beneath her cheek, Randy's shoulder shifted as he turned slightly toward her, gathering her in his arms to kiss her.

His lips trailed lightly against her own -- dry, almost tickling. She squeezed his cock harder and he pressed his lips more firmly against hers in response. No tongue. Of course not. When she kissed him the way *she* wanted to -- mouths wide open, tongues intertwined -- he invariably complained she was suffocating him. Once he'd said it was like kissing a cow. Archly, she had inquired how, precisely, he'd know.

But it had hurt, all the same.

He moved again, and she withdrew her hand from his shorts. He tugged them off, then rolled her onto her back. Deep in her heart, Lauren sighed. Sometimes she couldn't help wondering if anyone had ever told him there were more than two positions for sex.

Well, at least tonight they could go for option number two. She didn't feel like being trapped under him, fighting for room to rub her own clit as he plunged himself into her. No, tonight she wanted *freedom*.

Pushing back, she shoved him away before he could mount her. "Uh-uh, loverboy. Tonight *I'm* in charge." In the darkness, she heard his exasperated sigh. But he rolled onto his back anyway, and curved his hands around her hips as she straddled his thighs.

Leaning forward, Lauren lowered her chest till one nipple grazed Randy's nose. Obliging, he tilted his head back, catching it between his lips and suckling lightly. His

shaft throbbed against the swell of her mons, and slowly, Lauren rocked against it, rubbing her clit against its hard ridge.

God, she was horny! She would never admit how many times she'd played with herself before he came to bed, working up enough lubrication to make intercourse pleasant. Tonight, that was definitely not going to be a problem -- she was sopping wet. She could feel her juices slicking his cock as she slid back and forth. Randy's breath was coming faster now, and his hands tightened on her hips. *He* was ready, she thought tartly. But tonight, she wanted more.

Arching her back, she pressed her breast against his mouth, willing him to suck it more firmly. Hell, even bite it. He had teeth, for God's sake -- why couldn't he ever *use* them? Squirming above him, she ground her cunt against him, mashing her clit against his cock as she leaned forward harder, feeling his grip tighten, tugging at her, trying to get her to let him inside.

Laughing, Lauren fought him, thrusting her breasts against his face, feeling a wild giddiness rush through her as he thrashed between her thighs, desperate to be inside her, to plunge his cock into her blazing hot cunt --

With one last flail, he shoved her off, and Lauren tumbled to the mat, gasping in shock. "Jesus, Lauren!" She heard him panting in the darkness, his breath rasping in his chest. "Are you fucking trying to smother me?"

Realization hit her, followed by sudden mortification. He hadn't been desperate to fuck her -- he'd been desperate to get her *off* him. She heard him sit up, heard the soft whisper as he ran a hand through his hair, trying to regain his composure. Biting her lip, she waited, unmoving, feeling her cunt throb with undiminished hunger. Finally she said, "Randy, I'm sorry."

He sighed heavily, and gathered her back in his arms. Lauren lay, her head pillowed on his shoulder, trying to ignore the aching points of her breasts, the slickness between the swollen lips of her cunt.

"Christ, Laur. I just can't... I'm not like that, you know that."

"I know," she whispered, so softly it was doubtful whether he even heard her. But he sighed again, in resignation. This time, when he rolled her onto her back, Lauren didn't protest.

His cock nudged against her, easing slowly into her. Lauren closed her eyes, feeling her cunt tighten around it, eager for all of him. Fighting back the urge to thrust herself upward, she slid her arms around his waist, hugging him close -- his breath warm and gentle against her neck. Turning her face toward him, she kissed his cheek.

Smoothly, like clockwork, he slid his shaft in fully, neither slow enough for her to savor the sensation nor quick enough to rouse her with a sense of his desire. With the same even rhythm, he withdrew. Lauren bit her lip again and wondered if he'd be offended if she worked her hand down between them to massage her clit. Instead, she cupped her hands around his buttocks, and concentrated on the feel of his cock moving inside her.

His balls, large and tight, brushed briefly against her ass with each stroke, and Lauren spread her legs wider, tilting her hips upward. She dug her fingers into his asscheeks, pulling him harder against her, feeling a novel, aching emptiness as his scrotum dragged against her asshole. Her jaw went slack as the heat in her cunt flared upward again, greedy, demanding, and her hands clamped down on his hipbones, shoving them back, then harder against her.

Harder, and faster. Oh, God, yes. His pubic bone slammed against her clit, igniting a bolt of lust that shot through her like lightning. She tossed her head, moaning incoherently, vaguely aware he was hissing at her, telling her to hush. Thrusting her hips upward, she sank her teeth into his shoulder even as she speared herself furiously on his thick, meaty cock...

With a wrench, Randy yanked himself away, and Lauren whimpered at the sudden emptiness inside her.

"Fuck." That one word was so laden with disgust that Lauren flinched as if he'd raised a hand to slap her. "Christ, Lauren."

She reached out vainly as he rose, her hands closing on nothing but empty air. She could feel him, in the darkness, standing over her. Then she heard the rustle of fabric as he pulled on his shorts, and a heavier thump as he tugged his work boots on. "Randy? Randy, I'm sorry..."

"You're really good at making me feel like a piece of meat, Laur, you know that? Sometimes I wonder if it's even really me you're fucking."

The tent flap opened, and for a moment she saw him, outlined against the sprinkle of stars outside. Then he was gone.

Biting her lip, Lauren listened to the fading crunch of his footsteps on sand. She threw herself back down on the mat and slammed her fists against it, feeling hot, bitter tears slide down her cheeks as she stared blindly into the darkness and waited.

* * *

Kelly had been seriously pissed when she'd seen Lauren loading her stuff into the back of the van. She had plans of her own for this trip, thank you very much, and they sure didn't include dealing with some bitch who was too uptight to even kiss her fiancé in public. C'mon, what kind of relationship was *that*?

Not that she'd ever let Daniel kiss her in public either -- but that wasn't a relationship. Hell, he wasn't even her *boyfriend*. He was just convenient.

He was a pretty good fuck for a college boy, though -- inventive, eager without being grabby, and enthusiastic, of course. He liked it bossy, she'd found -- most men did -- and she lay now on her back with his face buried in her cunt, his tongue dancing over and around her swollen clit, occasionally darting lower to flick at her wet folds. She'd kept him there for the past twenty minutes, clamping his head between her thighs when she came too close to coming.

Now, hearing a noise, Kelly swiveled her neck, tilting her head so she could peer out of the tent. She'd left the flap open, enjoying the cool, scented breeze, and now the ground outside was bathed in the glow of the rising moon. By its soft light she could see Professor Anders, stalking out of the shadows beneath the butte, obviously heading away from his tent.

She was right, then. Kelly smiled in triumph. She'd have bet twenty-to-one little Ms. Tight-ass wasn't putting out right. No wonder the professor (he was *Randy* only in the middle of the night when, her fingers working busily, she moaned his name into the privacy of her pillow) spent more time with a bunch of old bones than he did with his fiancée.

Well, Kelly was going to fix *that*. She might only be a sophomore, but she'd be willing to bet she knew more about pleasing a man than Lauren Cole had ever bothered to learn.

Arching her back, she slid one hand up to her firm, round tits and pinched at one nipple. She closed the other in Daniel's thick hair, forcing his face harder against her. Eagerly, he clamped his mouth around her aching clit, suckling it enthusiastically as she shoved him down harder, letting out little yips as the hunger inside her burst at last into waves of fire. They lashed through her body, again and again as she heard the frantic motion of Daniel's hand on his cock.

"Stop that!" she hissed sharply, and kicked downward. The noise ceased. "I'm on the pill, you dumb shit. Now come here and fuck me."

She loved the look on his face as he lowered himself above her -- slack-jawed and desperate for the feel of her cunt. "Fuck me hard, Daniel. Now!" Plunging into her, he slammed his cock home. Ow! Oh, yeah. He froze there, quivering, trying to hold back his peak. Fuck *that* shit.

Grabbing his ass, Kelly writhed against him, and heard him whimper with need. "Harder, baby," she commanded. "C'mon, is that all you got?" With a wild, snorting groan, he wrenched her thighs wide and pounded her cunt, ramming his cock into her with a frenzy she really quite liked. Snaking her hand down between them, she rubbed at her clit, sending sparks of lust jolting through her as she urged him on. "That's right, baby, fuck me hard, fuck me deeper. Oh yeah, give me all of it. Come for me, baby, c'mon..."

She could feel his cock swelling even farther as he drilled her, his balls slapping against her ass, making it sound like he was spanking her. That thought tipped her over

the edge again, and she shoved herself against him, her cunt gripping his shaft as hard as a fist as he bucked and shot into her, moaning hoarsely all the while.

Kelly dropped her head back, enjoying the slow, sharp aftershocks that still surged through her. Collapsed on top of her, Daniel blindly nuzzled her tits, suckling one dark, erect nipple as he squeezed the other. She liked the feel of him clinging to her, the knowledge that all she had to do was speak and he'd do anything she liked.

Take that, little Ms. Tight-ass, she thought lazily. She couldn't wait to have Professor Anders where Daniel was now. The idea stirred her, and she became aware of Daniel's mouth on her breast.

If he kept that up, she might have to let him fuck her again.

Chapter Three

Lauren opened her eyes to the sight of a ragged bouquet of desert mallow, resting beside her on the pillow. Tears stung her eyes, and gratefully she gathered them to her chest, snuggling deeper into the sleeping bag as she listened to the profound silence of early morning.

Not quite silent. She could hear the crackle of flames, not too far off. The scent of camp coffee, thick and acrid, reached her nostrils, and Lauren rolled over reluctantly. Then she heard the distinctive *chunk* of a spade biting into sandy earth, and sat up abruptly. The sound turned the guilt she'd felt as she lay, staring into the darkness and feeling horribly alone, into resentment.

This was his idea of reconciliation? Leave flowers on her pillow and go back to his damn *bones*?

Well, fuck the fucking flowers.

Soft pink blossoms tumbled to the floor as Lauren scrambled up and pulled on her jeans. Stomping from the tent, she saw Sloan hunkered near the fire. He held out a cup of coffee, and she sipped, hissing as it scalded her tongue.

"Yeah, it's pretty awful," Sloan said.

She grimaced agreement. "The others aren't up yet?" Sloan shrugged, his gaze sliding away from hers. He turned back to the pan of eggs he was scrambling, and Lauren looked around.

The sky still hadn't lost the last flush of dawn, and the warm, slanting light fell in streaks of pink and amber between the jagged, jutting hills. The camp was huddled at the base of one massive butte, near the mouth of an arroyo. Some forty yards distant, Lauren could see Randy's outline against the sky, dirt and sand flying behind him as he dug.

As she approached, she noticed the pegs had been moved, circumscribing a rectangle now about thirty feet long and twenty wide. "Jesus Christ, Randy, couldn't you at least wait till the sun was up?"

He stopped, leaned on his shovel, and took the cup from her hands, for all the world as if it were just another day in Randy-and-Laurenvile. As she had, he grimaced at the taste of the coffee. "God, that's hideous. Which one of 'em made it?"

"Not Kelly, at least." Her voice was acerbic. "She's not up yet."

Randy grinned, looking so much like his usual self that Lauren wanted to slap him. "Neither is Daniel."

"Well, at least *somebody's* getting some," she replied tartly, then, as Randy's eyes darkened, immediately wished she hadn't. He looked like a remorseful puppy.

"Honey, I'm sorry. I --"

"Forget it. You were tense, and I was pushy."

"No, Lauren, I --"

"I said forget it, Randy!"

Turning away, she stared out at the desert, barely seeing it. She could feel Randy behind her, tense and uncertain. Almost to herself, she whispered, "It would have been nice to not wake up alone, though."

He came up behind her, slid his arms around her waist, holding her lightly. Lauren dropped her head back, resting it against his shoulder.

"I love you, Laur," he whispered. "But... sometimes I don't think I can give you what you want."

Tears prickled at the corner of her eyes, and she turned, burrowing into his embrace, hiding her face against his broad chest. "Don't say that. You *are* what I want, Randy."

Lifting her head, she gazed up at him until, gently, he kissed her, his mouth warm and reassuring. Even as a wave of relief washed through her, easing the momentary panic in her heart, Lauren felt a twinge of disappointment at that chaste, comforting kiss.

Why couldn't she be content with what she had? A fantastic guy, handsome, hard working, who wanted to marry her... And she wanted to marry him. She *did* -- even if his usual style of lovemaking left her grinding her teeth. And apparently he wasn't comfortable with any other kind.

Lauren sighed. Maybe she'd been too long in L.A. There were things one took for granted, living in a major city. Oral sex, for example.

It wasn't his fault.

He was studying her face earnestly, as if looking for a clue, a magic key to make it all better. Really, she was a fool if she couldn't learn to appreciate what she had.

"I'll make it up to you tonight."

"I'd like that." She leaned against him for a moment longer, enjoying the feel of his warm, strong arms around her. Then, cocking an eyebrow, she drew back and gazed at him challengingly. "Well? Aren't you going to show me your dino?"

He laughed, shaking his head at her quick shift of mood. "Sure. Just as soon as you help me dig it up."

Letting out a mock-groan, Lauren rolled her eyes and picked up a shovel. "Just show me where to plant this."

It had taken all five of them over ten hours to slowly scrape through the compacted clay and shale, working layer by layer down to Kelly's new find. For the final foot, they'd switched to hand trowels, painstakingly tagging soil samples as they cleared the last layers with delicate caution. Now Lauren watched, snapping pictures as Randy uncovered the slender bones of a forepaw, the wickedly hooked talons arched as if still seeking prey. The westerly sun seemed to tip them in blood.

"Jesus, Randy, what *is* it?"

Intent on his careful excavation, he shook his head -- whether in answer or a warning not to disturb him, Lauren wasn't sure. He started, almost dropping the dental pick he was using to unearth the delicate bones, as Kelly shrieked behind them.

"Help! Professor Anders!"

Spinning, Lauren saw that Kelly and Sloan had uncovered its skull. Playfully, the girl had stuck her hand deep inside the thing's jaw. She grinned impishly at Randy. "It's got me, Professor!"

"Kelly!"

At his barked reprimand, Kelly jerked her hand out -- too fast. One of the sharp, needle-like teeth caught her palm, gouging the skin. "Ouch!" Recoiling, she raised her hand to her mouth, sucking at the wound like a child. Randy gestured peremptorily, giving Kelly a stern look. Meekly, she extended her injured hand, and Lauren seethed inwardly as he examined it.

Oh, for God's sake! "It's just a scratch, Randy," she called. There wasn't even that much blood. Randy seemed almost to be caressing Kelly's hand, his thumbs stroking her palm...

No. Surely that was just her jealous imagination.

"It's not deep, but you'd better keep it out of the dirt. I'll bandage it later. Now..." Kneeling carefully to one side of the skull, Randy tilted his head, studying it. Sloan, behind him, stood tense with expectation. Daniel, big and blond -- he was a U of P halfback, desperately in need of the extra credit if he wanted to return the next fall -- whistled absently as he squatted at the rim of the pit, watching.

More cautiously than Kelly, Randy pressed the pad of a forefinger against one of its fangs, then withdrew his hand thoughtfully. Leaning forward, he peered into its empty eye sockets. Lauren half-fancied they gazed malevolently back.

"But what the hell *is* it?"

"No idea whatever," he replied. He glanced down at the tangle of bones protruding from the hard clay. "Almost looks as if he's about to bite Lyle's tail, doesn't it?"

Lauren scowled at the teasing tone in his voice. It wasn't funny. There was nothing amusing at all about that skull. The thing looked *evil*. "Well, whatever it is, you can't do much more tonight."

He glanced up at her, irritation flickering in his eyes. Lauren propped her fists on her hips. "Be sensible, Randy. Look at the light. Unless you're planning to work by flashlight, let's just cover the damn thing up."

Reluctantly, he pushed to his feet, dusting his hands off on the front of his jeans. "All right, folks. Put 'em to bed."

Without looking at her, he headed for the tents. Lauren paused for a moment, gazing out over the desert. The last streaks of crimson still hung in the sky, and the luminosity of dusk intensified the colors in the strata around her. Magenta, mauve, rust-red and brown, the Painted Desert stretched in all directions, breathtaking in its beauty.

Behind her, she heard the distinctive *thwap* of the tarp as Sloan and Daniel shook it out. The sound was loud in the twilight, and somehow it relieved her. The idea of that thing sitting there all night long, naked to the sky, its sharp teeth gleaming in the moonlight...

Lauren shuddered. Hastening her steps, she caught up to Randy and slid her hand through the crook of his warm, muscular arm.

* * *

Narrowing her eyes, Kelly watched Professor Anders head for the camp, arm in arm with *her*. Lauren Cole. Smug, flat-chested, superior bitch.

Complacently, Kelly smoothed her wrinkled shirt over the firm, lush curves of her chest. She was no fool, she'd seen the suspicious way Lauren watched her. And with good reason. It didn't exactly take Western Union to get the message Professor Anders was sending.

Kelly glanced down at her palm, smiling at the ragged gash in its surface. It didn't hurt much, just stung a bit, that's all. The memory of Professor Anders's touch was far more potent. She knew he'd felt the energy between them, the heat that had sparked in the depths of her cunt as he'd kneaded her palm.

Oh, yeah. He wanted it just as bad as she did. She hadn't been sure, not a *hundred* percent sure, before then.

Now she was.

Whistling, Kelly picked up a stray shovel and started to climb from the pit. On an impulse, she turned back, hunkered down by “her” fossil and whispered, “Thanks for the help, whatever you are. See you tomorrow.” Whimsically, she patted the skull -- then hurriedly jerked back her hand.

The air had cooled rapidly as the sun sank behind the butte. And yet the fossil was warm -- still holding the sun’s heat, she supposed, but it freaked her out just a bit, all the same. And the cut on her palm was burning again. Probably something in the clay dust still coating the skull.

Raising her hand to her mouth, Kelly sucked at the gash, remembering the feel of her forearm inside that cavernous mouth -- a toothpick, a pretzel. An insignificant snack. She shuddered, and forced herself to remember the feel of Professor Anders’s arm around her instead -- warm, strong, and reassuring.

A fresh flare of heat pulsed inside her cunt -- her very *experienced* cunt, Ms. Suspicious Bitch. Stick *that* in your pipe and smoke it.

She would have Professor Anders. Soon. She could feel it.

And in the meantime, there was always meathead Daniel.

Backing away from the fossil (she didn’t want to turn her back to it, for some reason), Kelly grinned to herself. One way or another, it was going to be an *interesting* night.

Chapter Four

In the dim gloom of the tent, Lauren bent to light the lamp. Randy entered behind her -- she could hear the rustle of the tent flap -- then he slid his hands around her waist and nuzzled her neck. "Leave it," he whispered.

Lauren protested as he caressed her sides. "Randy, I'm a mess, I haven't showered, I --"

"Leave it." Trailing his lips down the side of her throat, he pulled her back against him. The soft caress of his lips reawakened all the frustrations she'd repressed during the day, and Lauren sighed in remembered annoyance.

As if sensing her tension, Randy slid his hands to her shoulders, kneading the muscles until she slowly relaxed. Working downward, he massaged her back through her shirt, then eased it over her head and unsnapped her bra. Adding lips and tongue to the hands caressing her back, he continued the massage.

What had gotten *into* him? Not that she was about to argue. But for days, she'd barely been able to get him to touch her, and now...

Leaning forward, he whispered in her ear, "Do you like that?"

"Oh, yeah. Randy --"

"Sssh. Let me do this." Turning his attention to her neck, he worked both thumbs down the strong tendons, and her head lolled forward as she braced herself against the low table.

Usually he wasn't much into anything other than face-to-face fucking. It was wonderful, Lauren supposed, in a middle-America missionary-position kind of way, that he liked the visual connection so much, the ability to watch her reactions as they made love.

But there was something utterly erotic about the feel of him behind her, his cock pressed against her tailbone, his hands trailing over her skin. He could, she thought, be anyone -- anyone at all.

Kissing her shoulder, Randy reached forward, tracing the small, taut curves of her breasts. She could feel the pulse of his erection, snugged tight against her ass, as he ran his palms in circles over her nipples.

Lauren was almost shocked at how wet she was already. It was intoxicating, feeling him behind her, his chest against her back, his fingers tickling her nubs, his cock sliding against her ass cheeks. She arched her spine, pressing her ass harder against his shaft, and felt him respond with an answering pressure.

Exactly when during the course of the afternoon had he learned to make love like *this*?

"Professor Anders?"

God *damn* it! Lauren snatched for her shirt as Randy yanked himself away. Tugging it over her head, Lauren glowered at him. He grinned sheepishly and lit the propane lantern before opening the tent flap.

Kelly sidled in, all bashful and hesitant -- but Lauren wasn't fooled. Not for a second. The girl's big, innocent eyes flicked over Lauren's rumpled shirt, caught the flush on Randy's face, and positively glowed with a satisfaction she kept carefully from her other features.

"It's my hand, Professor. You said you'd look at it?"

Oh, give me a break! Lauren flung herself down on the sleeping bags and picked up a book, pretending to read it as Randy led the girl to the table and fetched the first aid kit. No way on earth was she going to leave the two of them alone in here, whatever the little minx might have hoped. Among other things, Lauren wouldn't put it past her to wreck Randy's career -- even if nothing had happened.

"Hmm. It looks like it might be infected. Does that hurt?"

"Ouch!" Kelly flinched, doing a marvelous job of looking helpless and needy. Lauren glared at her over the edge of the book. "It burns a bit, Professor."

Randy washed the wound thoroughly, sprayed it with disinfectant, then slathered on Neosporin and bandaged it carefully. Kelly propped her elbow on the table, holding her hand upright as he wrapped gauze around it so that Randy was practically forced to brush her breasts on each pass.

Lauren couldn't help noting the way he kept his gaze cautiously averted.

"There you go. All right and tight." He taped off the end, and Kelly looked up at him, startled.

"That's it?"

"Yup." He smiled, although his jaw looked rather tense. "Just keep it dry, and out of the dirt."

"Oh, okay. Well, thanks, Professor." The disappointment in her voice couldn't have been any clearer. Lauren suppressed a sneer as the girl headed for the tent flap, casting her a quick glance before looking back at Randy. "I'm sorry if I interrupted you."

Yeah. I just bet.

Randy puffed out his cheeks in a sigh as she left. "Teenagers."

"She's not," Lauren said tartly. "She's twenty."

"Same difference." Randy shrugged -- but his gaze sidled away from her. Or was that just imagination, too? Then he stretched and reached for his journal.

Rage flared inside her. "Oh, what? Kelly shows up and now you don't want to have sex?"

Randy gave her a look of pure disgust, then turned his back on her and opened the journal on the table before him.

That was it. She lost it. With a flick of her wrist, she flung the book at his back. When it hit him, he snapped his head around, staring in disbelief. His expression was closer to rage than she'd ever seen.

"Or is it just that you don't want to have sex with *me*?"

"God damn it, Lauren!" Randy slammed his fists down on the table. The first aid kit fell to the floor with a clatter. "What do you want from me? What is it that you want?"

"I want you to *fuck me!*"

Her screech punctuated the night. After it came a silence, broken only by the ragged sound of her panting and the rasp of Randy's breath. They stared at each other, shocked, mute with fury. The expression in Randy's eyes slowly changed, growing colder, distant.

He'd never looked at her like that before.

"What a lovely thing to scream in front of my students. Thanks, Lauren." Getting heavily to one knee, he started picking up the spilled items. Disinfectant. Ointment. Gauze bandages. She watched him wordlessly. What bandage, she wondered, could tape this night back together?

He finished reassembling the first aid kit, set it back in the corner. Then, grimly, he righted his stool, sat back down, and opened his journal.

Lauren laughed mirthlessly. "Oh, great. Get right back to your bones. God knows, it's not like they haven't been there for ten million years."

"Damn it, Lauren!" He slammed the journal shut. Pens rattled in the Mason jar on the table as he bumped it, turning to face her. "Do you know how important this is to me?"

"Fine," she said. "Maybe you can dig me up in another ten thousand years and we can have this conversation then."

"What conversation, Lauren? What, the fact that a nineteen-year-old student has a crush on me?"

"Twenty. She's twenty."

"So what? Lauren, I asked you to marry me. Or doesn't that mean anything, where you come from?"

Ouch.

Her reaction must have showed, because Randy's expression softened. He sighed gustily, and ran a hand through his sun-bleached hair. Then he pushed to his feet and crossed to sit beside her. He dropped his head, seeming to study the toes of his hiking boots. Lauren stared blankly at the wall of the tent. After a moment she groped blindly for his hand, felt his fingers close around hers.

"I guess I haven't been very good company this trip." His voice was bleak.

Lauren glanced at him. "Not especially, no."

"It's just that... Ah jeez, Laur, it's what I love."

Lauren nodded. But she withdrew her hand from his clasp. "I know."

He looked at her, an earnest, yearning question in his eyes. Randy. Safe, loving, reliable Randy. Lauren nodded again. "Yeah. Go ahead."

He leaned forward, kissed her forehead. He even fetched the book she'd flung, sliding it into her hands with a sad little smile. "I'll make it up to you, honey."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Irritably, she waved him away.

Reassured, he returned to the table, reopened his journal. Lauren could hear the scratch of the pen as he jotted down notes. After a few minutes, he chuckled.

"What's so damn funny?" she asked.

Without turning his head, he replied, "I think I'll name it the *Laurenus Hornysaurus*." Then he glanced back at her, his eyes dancing with mischief.

Lauren stuck her tongue out at him and rolled onto her side.

* * *

Sitting in the cab of an eighteen-wheeler, Baudouin Delacor listened impatiently to its idling engine. Beyond the glow of the truckstop lights, the night spread out, velvet black and seemingly endless. Cars whizzed past along Route 40, their taillights like staring red eyes in the darkness.

Ever since sunrise, he'd felt a tension in his gut, a hideous sense that time was running short. Loping through the Hualapai Indian Reservation, he'd noted the sun sinking rapidly toward the horizon and had changed direction, veering southeast to Seligman where he'd pilfered a tee shirt and jeans from a backyard washline without

being seen by anything larger than a slat-sided cat. Leaving a hundred-dollar bill pinned in their place, he'd hiked to Route 40 and stuck out his thumb.

As the driver, a fat, aging fellow with arms covered in faded tattoos, heaved himself back up into the cab, Delacor said, "I'd better get off here."

"You sure? Ain't nothing past here till you get to Pinta."

Delacor nodded. Yes, he was sure. The scent was thick here, almost overwhelming, a stench like the foul decay of a tomb. It was close now, very close.

The trucker regarded him for a moment, then reached for his wallet and took out a twenty. "Here. Take it." Surprised, Delacor looked at the rumpled bill. "Go on, take it. Ain't gonna get far with no shoes on your feet." As he closed his hand over it, the old man grinned at him, showing pink gums where his front teeth had once been.

Delacor stood on the asphalt of the service station's parking lot, watching as the truck pulled back out. Slowly, it disappeared into the distance, blending with the traffic, just one more eighteen-wheeler, anonymous and unremarkable.

Clutching the rumpled bill in his fist, Delacor looked toward the small distant town, its lights twinkling bravely in the vast darkness. There was an ache in his throat, compounded by pain and estrangement and the beauty of innocence. For they *were* beautiful, these humans. Even in the midst of their frailties and pettiness there was love and generosity and kindness. What he would give to go down among those lights, slide into a life as ephemeral and nameless as the battered old trucker's, to be one of them.

He had never been one of them. Never. No matter how much he'd tried. And now --

Delacor paused, his black hair blowing in the wind. Turning his face away from the lights, he walked into darkness. As he went, he folded the bill the trucker had given him and put it carefully into his pouch. Then he peeled off the purloined shirt and left the jeans hanging from the branch of a tree and turned east, toward the moon.

Toward the moon and his enemy.

Chapter Five

Down the dark maze of the arroyo, a cool wind twisted, skittering through the dry vegetation and out over the sand. An unsecured tent flap fluttered in its passing, first revealing, then hiding the empty sleeping bag inside.

Forty yards away, Kelly stood at the edge of the pit, staring down at the blank gray surface of the tarp. The desert stretched before her, a vast silver landscape filled with twisted shadows and the torturous outlines of wind-sculpted rock. The fury, which had boiled inside her at Professor Anders's bland dismissal had evaporated entirely at Lauren's piercing screech.

Now she felt only restless, expectant, vaguely aroused. An electric tension filled her, oppressive and yet exhilarating like the air before a storm. It was as if the night was whispering to her, calling her. She wanted something... something...

Like being hungry, but you're not sure what for. Like that.

The scrape on her palm throbbed, itchy beneath its bandage. Moved by some impulse, Kelly reached for the tarp. She had to tug it quite hard before it came free of the pegs. It made a heavy, flapping, slithering sound as she dragged it aside.

The moon, just rising, flooded the pit with slanting light. In the low illumination, the fossils stood out like x-rays. She could see the curve of Lyle's spinal column, his long pointed snout. Behind him, *her* fossil seemed to be leaning forward, its head and forearms straining as if trying to break free of the covering clay. Professor Anders was right -- it did look very much like it was about to eat Lyle. For some reason, the idea made her giggle.

It also made her hungry.

The empty eye sockets seemed to stare up at her, their shadows filled with an unspoken message. Restive, impatient, she turned from the pit and shuffled back toward the tents.

Professor Anders's was set a bit away from the others. Inside, a lamp still burned, and she could see his shadow on the wall of the tent. That blurred outline fascinated her, and she stood in the night, her bandaged hand cradled against her chest, tilting her head back and forth idly, studying it.

Finally, she turned away, headed toward the three pup tents pitched near the fire pit. The flap of the middle tent, which was hers, still hung open, gaping slightly. Contemptuously, Kelly ignored it, walked past to the third, and squatted outside.

She could almost smell the heat of Daniel's body inside -- like the meat inside a nut, or a candy in its wrapper. A regular all-American red-blooded boy. Kelly laughed softly, the sound murmuring deep in her throat. She heard motion, then Daniel's sleepy whisper. "Kelly? That you?"

She giggled again. Everything seemed to amuse her tonight. The moonlight. His question. It all seemed so surreal. "Do you know," she whispered back, "I'm really not sure."

The pup tent was cramped. There was barely room for her to squirm in alongside Daniel. The cool, sticky canvas *thwapped* against her back, and she fumbled impatiently at the sleeping bag's zipper. "C'mon, goddammit," she hissed, tugging at the metal tongue.

Daniel fidgeted inside. "Just let me get it." His hands closed over hers, pulled the zipper down. He tossed back the top half and dragged her against him.

His skin was hot after the chill of the air outside, and Kelly slid on top of him, her thighs gripping his waist. He pulled her down to kiss her, but she turned her head aside, nuzzling the soft declivity beneath his ear.

The skin there was thin, almost delicate. Kelly trailed her lips along it, feeling the pulse of blood just beneath the surface, breathing in the scent of his hair, his warm flesh. She let her eyes fall closed as his hands slid to her ass, pinning her tighter against his

erection. She could feel it through the fabric of her jeans, hard and hot, pressing against the nub of her clit. Rocking her hips, she rubbed herself against it, mashing her clit against its pulsing ridge. "Oh yeah," she breathed, and ground harder.

"Ow!" Daniel's hands clamped on her asscheeks, holding her still. At the interruption of her pleasure, Kelly felt a momentary spurt of rage. "Kelly, I'm gonna have no skin left! Here, hang on."

Fumbling at her jeans, he tumbled her off him. The sleeping bag twisted, entangling them, and Kelly thrashed as the canvas of the tent again brushed against her. Daniel was tugging at her pants, trying to remove them. They fouled on her sneakers, and Kelly kicked out, annoyed. "Jesus, Daniel! Oh, fuck it. Just quit it!"

Scrambling out of the tent, she yanked her jeans up. Something made her glance at the first tent, on the far side of the firepit. Sloan's tent. She narrowed her eyes. How much had he heard?

"Kelly!" Daniel was crouched in the opening of his tent, beckoning her back inside.

No. No fucking way. Besides, she had a better idea.

Slitting her eyes at him, she smiled and jerked her head toward the desert. Turning, she walked away, confident he'd follow.

Yes, *much* better. The night air was cool against her itchy, overheated skin, soothing her restlessness to a kind of expectant certainty. The desert stretched out before her, glimmering in the moonlight. Its torturous landscape looked alien, otherworldly, adding to her weird, dreamlike mood.

It felt as if she were moving through water, as if every step she took was both buoyant and deliberate, predetermined. Ahead, the pit gaped, a flat, rectangular blackness, a hole in the surface of the eerie, glowing night, a portal, a *door*.

Yes. The word whispered around her, as if it were an exhalation of the night itself. And she responded, deep inside her, with a silent, absolute sureness.

Yes.

There was a rustling sound behind her -- Daniel, with the sleeping bag. She could hear it dragging along the ground. Her lips curving again in a slow, secretive smile, Kelly peeled off her shirt, feeling the stretch of her back muscles, the play of air over the flat span of her stomach. Standing at the rim of the pit, she dropped it, watched it flutter down into the shadows.

"Ah shit. What happened to the tarp?" Daniel came up beside her, and she glanced at him, irritated. What did it matter? Then she jumped lightly into the pit. "Kelly! Get out of there. C'mon, if the prof sees you..."

He trailed off as Kelly, turning to face him, reached behind her and unsnapped her bra. The expression seemed to drain from his face as her breasts spilled out, firm and large and almost perfectly round. Holding his gaze, she caressed them, playing with the nipples, then squeezing them together. She watched his eyes grow huge, his face going slack, suffused with arousal. His cock strained from the waistband of the cutoffs he'd pulled on.

"Don't you want it, Daniel?" Cupping her tits, Kelly reveled in the weight of them, the way they overflowed her hands, seeming to swell out into the night. "Don't you want *these*?"

Teasingly, she trailed her fingers over their lush curves, working up to the tips, then circled her nipples. The areolae were contracted into furrows, the nubs darkening further as she pinched them lightly. Looking down, she admired them, letting the sight of her fingers tugging at their points turn her on even more. She heard the sleeping bag slide from Daniel's nerveless grasp, the hoarse sound of his breathing, the soft scrape of his zipper. Glancing up, she smiled at the intensity of his gaze. His eyes were fixed on her tits, on her hands moving over them. She wondered if he was even aware he was gripping his cock, his fist dragging the skin up and down the swollen shaft.

She stepped back further into the pit, opened her mouth, licked her lips. "Come and get it then, tiger."

"Ah jeez," Daniel muttered. "Kelly, he's gonna kill us." Nevertheless, he slid his shorts off and followed her down.

The low, slanting moonlight left the base of the pit in shadows. Daniel trod carefully, coming toward her, avoiding the tangle of fossils in the center. She moved to the far side and leaned her back against the pit wall, stretching her arms out along the lip and leaning her head back. The stars, far overhead, twinkled coldly, and the Milky Way stretched, breathtaking in its clarity, across the arch of the sky.

She closed her eyes as Daniel leaned against her, his mouth warm on her neck as he kissed it. His hands closed on her breasts with adolescent urgency. She let him paw at them a while, enjoying the stimulation, and didn't object when he sank to his knees, squeezing her breasts together as he flicked his tongue over the nipples.

Lazily, she reached down, toyed with his hair awhile, then closed her fist in it, yanking his face tight against her. In response, he moaned and clamped his mouth around one nipple, sucking it in a delirium of voracious greed. Kelly arched into the sensation, enjoying the frantic tugging of his mouth, the way he pulled at her nipple while his hand raked over his cock. Tilting her head to one side, she watched him pinch the very tip, closing his fingers into a vise as he pumped his hips, trying to force the head deeper into his grip. All the while, his mouth sucked her tit, his tongue laving the nipple to a sharp, burning point.

Oh, yeah.

Pulling his hair, Kelly dragged his head away from her breast. He whimpered in longing, his tongue stretching forward, trying to get one last taste. His eyes were half-closed, clouded with lust. She shoved his head downward, toward the crotch of her jeans. "Take them off, cowboy," she whispered, "and eat me."

He fumbled her sneakers off, unsnapped her pants. Sliding them down over her ass, he paused a moment to fondle her round cheeks, digging his fingers into them as he dragged her hips forward and licked the smooth curve of her belly. Then he slid her jeans down to her ankles, the crown of his head brushing her mons, and held the fabric as she stepped out.

Burying his face between the v of her thighs, he darted his tongue over her dripping folds. Kelly could feel the motion of his shoulder muscles as he rubbed his

cock. Lifting her head, she gazed blankly, her vision blurred with arousal, and found herself staring into the eye sockets of the skull.

They were hollow, black, endlessly deep. Shadows moved within them, and Kelly felt as if it were watching as they coupled before it, like some ancient god observing the primitive rites of its worshipers. It loomed from the earth, not ten feet away, and under its gaze her body seemed to glow, incandescent with a power she'd never before felt. Her nipples ached, and she arched her back, lewdly thrusting her breasts into the moonlight, displaying them before the empty eyes of the skull.

It wanted something, she fancied, something *she* wanted, too. She was close to the edge, so close... but she wanted more. Her clit throbbed as she pulled her cunt out of the reach of Daniel's tongue and shoved him away, tumbling him backward to the dirt.

"What? Kelly --"

Grinning, she pushed him back down with her foot as he started to rise. He sprawled before her, his knees bent, his balls heavy and full between his thick athlete's thighs. Trailing her foot down his torso, Kelly rubbed her sole over his erection, then slid her toes down to the crack of his ass and nudged lightly. Panting, he stared up at her, his eyes wide and slightly frightened. That small gleam of fear pleased her. The sensation of power was almost overwhelming as she realized he was hers, *hers* to do whatever she liked with.

She stalked around him, studying him as he lay passive and aroused on the dusty earth. Perhaps she should turn him over, put him on his hands and knees, find something to fuck him with. Such an idea had never occurred to her before. She toyed with it, imagining penetrating that round, perfect ass, fucking him till he came, screaming in mingled pain and desire. Oh, she *liked* that idea -- or something inside of her did -- very much.

Kneeling down, she straddled his face, grabbed his chin, and yanked his mouth up to her crotch. Electricity exploded inside her as his tongue found her clit, flickering over its swollen length. She stared avidly as his hand moved over his shaft, smearing

the clear fluid already leaking from the tip down its length. Moonlight glimmered in the slickness, and she could see every twitch, every gape of his slit as he raked his fist downward, then back up to the head.

"Squeeze it again," she whispered. He did, his hand gripping the head so tight he whimpered. The sound vibrated against the lips of her cunt. Oh, *very* nice. What would more sound feel like?

His left hand was curved around her thigh. She took it and, leaning forward, led it to his crotch, pushed it between his legs till his fingers brushed his balls. "Now squeeze *them*," she commanded, and felt him gulp.

She stared down, watching as his fingers caressed his balls. His other hand rubbed his cock with short, eager strokes. Kelly sat back, pressing her cunt more firmly against his face. She felt his tongue slide inside her. "*Now*, Daniel."

The muscles of his forearm flexed and bunched as he dragged his balls up against the base of his cock and clamped them, hard. His back arched, and he screamed, the sound muffled by her body.

Kelly tilted her hips, shoving her clit into his mouth, and he sucked it frantically, moaning as he squeezed his testicles again and again, the strokes of his fist on his cock becoming harder, faster, almost vicious. Kelly watched, transfixed, as he savaged his cock, letting go of his balls now to wrap both hands around the shaft, pumping it with a mindless, wanton abandon. The tip swelled, rigid and shiny, almost purple in the moonlight, and his hands flew up and down in a headlong, spastic rhythm as the slit gaped open and spurted milky-white jets of semen onto the taut, smooth ripples of his abs.

Running her fingers through it, she smeared it across his chest, leaning forward as he suckled her clit in frenzied urgency, his cock still spilling come across his sticky fingers. His throat muscles worked repeatedly as he swallowed her juices. The night seemed to whirl around her, and the hunger inside her roared in anticipation.

Scrambling to her feet, she shifted around and straddled his thighs, grasping his cock in one hand and impaling herself on it, shoving it deep inside her with one hard

thrust. Grabbing his wrists, she dragged his hands to her breasts, and moaned as he clenched his fingers around them. "That's right, cowboy. As hard as you like. Make me pay for hurting you."

She watched his eyes change as the fear faded from them. Something different and darker shone in its place. His face looked older, harder, suffused with a desire most men never admitted to. Viciously, he grabbed her nipples and twisted. Kelly's head snapped back as pain flared through her, driving the hunger inside her up another notch. Yes.

Yes.

"Do it again." Leaning forward, she braced her arms on either side of his shoulders, positioning her tits directly above his face. He stared at them ravenously as his fingers worked over them, pinching, squeezing, punishingly rough. His cock throbbed inside her, swollen and stiff, hard as rock. He thrust upward with his hips, jabbing deep inside her, and Kelly gasped. "Oh, yeah, baby. That's right. Fuck me *hard*."

She could hear the pound of his heart as he strained below her, could practically see the blood surging through his veins, pulsing in his arteries, darkening his features as he drilled himself up into her with a deep, primal fury. Kelly rocked her hips back, egging him on.

His heartbeat seemed to throb through the night like a drum. The sound was intoxicating, maddening. It teased the craving inside her into a snarling, feral beast. Raising her head, Kelly gazed directly into the sockets of the skull. Her palm itched, under its bandages. She felt her limbs tensing, the muscles quivering, overflowing with strength. Her fingers dug into the dirt like claws.

Daniel stiffened below her, his hands cramping on her tits as his orgasm took him. His head rocked back and he groaned into the night as he exploded inside her, his come flooding her cunt. She arched her back, her cunt gripping him tighter, sucking him deep into the fire that burst within her womb, pouring outward in a flood of delirious sensation.

Now, something whispered, deep in her mind.

Do it now, Kelly.

She looked down at the white, exposed flesh of Daniel's neck. His head was still tilted back, his breath rasping through his throat. Need, voracious and undeniable, flooded through her, and Kelly plunged her head down, her jaw open, her teeth ripping. A second orgasm ripped through her like lightning, and Daniel's screams cut off abruptly.

A satiation so complete it felt almost like drowning stole along Kelly's limbs, and she rolled off Daniel's body and sprawled luxuriously on her back, staring up at the stars. Lazily, she drew her fingers up her belly, leaving dark, wet trails across the soft skin.

Something still tugged at her, a nagging, pulsing ache deep in her mind. There was something more, wasn't there? Something else to be done.

Tilting her head back, Kelly glanced at the skull, glimmering in the moonlight. It sat silent now, waiting. She sensed it wouldn't wait long. Not happily, at least.

Sighing like a child ordered to clean up her room, she climbed heavily to her feet, reached down, and closed a fist sticky with blood in Daniel's hair. "C'mon, you," she said amiably, and tugged.

Spastically, jerk by jerk, Daniel's body slid through the dust toward the gleaming white skull.

* * *

Sloan had very nearly stopped them when Kelly jumped into the pit. Okay, sure, they liked fucking -- and he liked watching them do it. It wasn't the first time he'd spied on them, his hand surreptitiously pressing his cock as they thrashed and groaned. But Jesus Christ! Those fossils were priceless.

When Kelly had removed her bra though, all thought of stopping them, of rousing the professor if he had to, fled. Man, what he wouldn't give to get his hands on those tits. He'd wrapped them around his hard-on instead, peering from behind the pile of dirt from yesterday's digging. They were far too involved to hear his hoarse breathing.

Watching the muscle-bound stud squeeze his balls at Kelly's command almost tipped Sloan over the edge, but he held back, watching avidly as Kelly switched positions, mounting Daniel and offering her tits to his grasp. Sloan bit back a moan as Daniel twisted her nipples, and his hand moved faster over his throbbing shaft.

He was right on the edge when Daniel arched below Kelly, throwing his head back in ecstasy as he shot his wad into her. Sloan felt the first pulse in his own balls as she plunged her head down.

Then the screaming started.

Stumbling backward, his shorts around his ankles, Sloan fell to the sand, scraping his ass raw. Yanking his shorts up, he scrambled to his feet and ran, feeling the fabric of his cutoffs tug at his erection with each stride. He sobbed in horror as the screams faded, sliding into a last wet burble of sound. He wasn't running for the tents, now far behind, he wasn't running for help -- he was simply running, as fast and far as his legs could take him.

He staggered as his shorts, pressing and scraping across his still throbbing cock, pushed him over the edge. Dropping heavily to his knees, he moaned as his cock jerked and spasmed, spurting hot, sticky fluid. Leaning forward, Sloan vomited onto the sand.

Chapter Six

Lauren thrashed once, felt the book slide from her chest to the floor of the tent, and sat up.

Something had disturbed her -- a noise, perhaps. Whatever it was, it was gone now. The camp was silent around her, the kiddies long since all tucked in their beds. A light breeze gusted outside, moaning between the buttes. The propane lantern hissed, casting harsh shadows in the tent's corners.

She didn't know what the time was, but it felt late. She'd been so deeply asleep she'd been drooling, Lauren realized. Brushing the slick dampness from her cheek, she looked around for Randy.

He was still where he'd been when she fell asleep, hunched over the small table like a man possessed, a book open before him. He didn't seem to be reading, just staring blankly, almost as if he were in a trance. She watched for a while. He didn't move.

Finally, she chucked her pillow at him. He looked up, startled, and Lauren recoiled. In the greenish light of the lantern, his face looked like a death's head -- the eye sockets no more than shadowy pits, the cheeks hollowed, the skin white with exhaustion. Then he shifted, shaking himself like a dog shedding water, and the impression faded.

"Sorry, is the light keeping you awake, hon?"

"No," she replied. "Just making sure you're still breathing."

He smiled wanly, still looking dazed, and Lauren flipped the edge of the sleeping bag back. Crossing to the bed, he flopped down on his stomach, sighing heavily as he collapsed. Lauren smiled and stroked his hair softly. "So have you figured out what it is yet?"

He hesitated, then rolled onto his back. "I don't know, Lauren. I just don't know. I've never seen anything even vaguely like it. The nasal cavities, the cranial dimensions... it's all wrong."

"What do you mean, *wrong*?" Reaching over, Lauren ran her hand idly over the warm, bronzed expanse of his chest. He shifted restlessly, and she withdrew her hand, pulling herself up into a sitting position with her arms wrapped around her legs.

"Look, I... It's nothing. Just a feeling, I guess. The hairs on my neck..."

Playfully, she slid her hand around the back of his neck. "They feel fine to me."

"God damn it, Lauren!" He jerked his head away. Lauren froze in surprise, a sliver of hurt piercing her chest. Distractedly, he ran a hand through his hair, making the shaggy mess worse. "I'm sorry, hon. I didn't mean to snap."

"It's okay," she replied -- too quickly. "You just need some sleep."

He sighed, rose, and turned off the lantern. When he lay back down, Lauren curled up on her side, keeping a thin strip of distance between them. Outside the tent, the wind scurried over the sand. Heat radiated off him in waves, and Lauren wondered for a moment if he was ill.

After a few minutes, she felt him shift closer, rolling onto his side so they faced one another in the darkness. Then he slid his hands beneath her tee shirt and cupped her breasts.

Finally, she thought, and leaned into his touch, hoping against hope that whatever had gotten into him earlier would still be there. No such luck. He was stroking her now with his usual hesitant delicacy, as if she were a doll or -- God forbid -- a virgin. She had to bite back a sigh of exasperated disappointment.

But the feathery touch of his work-callused hands was slowly drawing a first, tentative tendril of warmth from between her thighs. She could hear his heart pounding with arousal, feel his breath growing quicker as he kissed her, his tongue probing modestly between her lips. Once, just *once*, though, she wished he'd be a little less diffident, a little more --

Oh.

Her spine seemed to melt as Randy, with an uncharacteristic roughness, squeezed her breasts -- hard. Ducking his head, he tongued her nipples through the fabric of her shirt, and Lauren felt her cotton panties growing distinctly damp. "Mmm," she murmured, and wrapped her arms around his neck, wanting to hold him there. But with an impatience that both surprised and delighted her, he tossed his head like a bull, freeing it from her clasp, then yanked her shirt upward, exposing her breasts to the cool night air.

Immediately, her nipples contracted, and Randy lowered his head again, closing his lips around one taut nub while he rolled the other between his rough fingers. Moaning slightly, Lauren arched her back, urging him on. Whatever had gotten into him, she was *loving* it.

Fumbling, she felt for his crotch, found the thick swell of his erection, and caressed it through his boxers. He rocked his hips forward, pressing himself more deeply into her grasp, and at the same time tightened his own, pinching her nipple fiercely.

Ouch! Lauren jerked back. "Hey, not so hard!" He didn't answer. He just lay on his side, unmoving, as if waiting for her to roll back toward him, bring her breasts back within reach of his mouth.

What the hell? Usually he was a talker, murmuring in her ear as he caressed her, lifting her chin to gaze into her eyes. This silent, fiercely intent Randy was a little... well, *weird*.

Still, it was definitely an improvement over his usual so-soft-it-tickled approach. She moved back into his arms, lifted his hand and placed it again on her breast. "Just a touch gentler, honey, okay?"

His tongue snaked out, brushed her bruised nipple. Lauren jumped, and then held herself still as he devoured her breasts, crushing them in his grip as he sucked at them greedily, first one, then the other. She tried to relax into the sensation, but it seemed like every time she started to enjoy it, his teeth would catch her nipple, jarring her out of the experience.

For once, she wished she could see his expression.

She was actually relieved when he slid his hands down to her hips. Firmly, he pulled her toward him, his erection jabbing her stomach as he shoved it against her. He thrust a hand between her legs, probing her crotch, but the moisture that had slicked her cunt was gone, evaporated like mist.

"Randy, I --"

Suddenly, he shoved her onto her back, his hands pawing at her underwear, his thighs already between her own, forcing them open. The heat pouring off his body was fiery in its intensity. What the *hell*?

"Randy. *Randy!*"

He froze, one hand closed on the crotch of her undies, the other God knew where -- on his dick, she suspected. It was too dark to see. "Randy, could we please slow down just a bit?"

There was a pause. Then he said, "Sure," rolled off her, and lay motionless on his sleeping bag.

Lauren stared at the ceiling, her stomach knotted with rage. Rage, and a certain nebulous fear. Of *Randy*? Ridiculous. Coldly, she said, "I didn't say *stop*, you know." He didn't respond.

None of this was like him in the least.

And what *was* going on here, anyway? Out of all the times she'd tried to get him to be a little more passionate, a little more forceful...

Ah.

Suddenly Lauren felt awfully dumb.

She'd asked him for this, so many times. Well, not *this*, exactly, but a little more force, a little more passion. At least he'd been trying. She could hear his breathing, heavy and tense in the darkness. She was glad, actually, that she couldn't see his face, couldn't see the hurt and disappointment in it.

How many times, she wondered, had it been like this? How many times had he been being perfectly wonderful, and she simply hadn't *noticed*? If she felt he'd been

slighting her over the past few weeks, wouldn't it be just as fair to say she'd been taking him for granted?

No more of that. From now on, she was going to appreciate everything she had. If she didn't, she might as well go right back to L.A., back to her condo and a cat that really *did* ignore her, and the whole damned rat race.

"Randy, I'm sorry." Lauren snuggled against him apologetically, raised one hand and traced the line of his jaw. It was tight, the muscles bunched as if he were clenching his teeth. "We can try it again, if you like."

She felt him shrug. "Go ahead, if you want."

It was something at least. Tentatively, she slid her hand down his chest, the utter lack of sight making her doubly aware of the texture of his skin, the swell of his pectorals, the slight indentations between his ribs. The fine blond hairs that dusted his chest tickled her palm, and she smiled.

Playfully, she circled one of his nipples with her finger, teasing the tight nub. She liked his nipples, tanned a deep ruddy bronze, found them incredibly sexy. But when he flinched, she immediately moved her hand, and continued her tactile exploration.

There was something so soothing about this, so intimate and comfortable. Even though she'd said yes when he'd asked her, this was the first time she'd been actually able to imagine being married to him, sharing a bed, a home, a life. And what business had she had, saying yes in the first place, when deep in her heart she hadn't been sure at all? Had she been so desperate to prove that she wasn't a failure, that she wasn't throwing her life away by leaving L.A., that she'd made the right choice? Had the sneers and jibes and unspoken judgments affected her so profoundly?

Was she really *that* insecure?

Yes, she supposed she was. And Randy, steadfast, loving Randy, had borne the brunt of it. Lauren blushed, grateful for the concealing darkness, as she remembered how she'd bridled at Kelly's transparent attempts at seduction. As if Randy would ever stoop to such bait!

Really, she'd been completely, utterly, and totally an ass. Well, she would make it up to him, damn it.

Starting right now.

"Turn over," she whispered. After a brief hesitation, he did. Smiling into the darkness, Lauren swung her leg over his thighs and straddled him, rubbing the warm, heavy muscles of his back. He really *was* hot. Perhaps it was just too much sun. He shifted slightly below her, and she paused until he lay still again.

Working slowly down the corded columns on either side of his spine, she reached his tailbone and pressed her thumbs firmly against it. He groaned slightly, and encouraged, she lifted his hips slightly and slid his boxers off. Then she kneaded the firm, smooth curves of his ass, digging her fingers into the muscle. He flinched -- not with pain, though. Arousal? She hoped so.

Lowering her head, she kissed his back, then licked the velvety skin between his shoulder blades before sitting back up and sliding her hands down the outside of his thighs, intensely aware of his hard, rounded ass cheeks brushing her mons.

Her breath was shallow, a little shaky, and Lauren realized she was nervous. Shifting off him, she gripped his hips and tugged him up into a kneeling position. Then, before she lost her nerve entirely, she reached around and closed her hand on his cock.

It pulsed in her grip, hot and hard against her palm. *Oh, thank God.* She'd been terrified that he was hating it, silently suffering through her unwanted attentions. More confidently, she snuggled against him, pressing her breasts beneath her thin tee shirt against his back as she caressed his shaft, trailing her fingers over it, tickling the fleshy lip of its head. He sighed and leaned back into her.

Better and better.

Then he closed his hand over hers, squeezing it tight around his cock. Holding it firmly, he moved it up and down, using her hand to masturbate himself with. Lauren's cunt throbbed at the sensation.

His skin was like velvet, sliding between her fingers. It grew thicker, stiffening further as he worked her hand over it. His head rested against her shoulder, his strong

neck inches from her lips. Lauren ran her tongue down it, enjoying the clean, slightly salty taste.

His breathing grew harsher, and his hand clamped down on hers, moving it faster. His hips flexed as he bucked up into her grasp. Her fingers were beginning to ache and, with a tentative jerk, Lauren tried to extricate her hand. His fingers tightened, mashing her fingers beneath his grip as he raked her hand up and down.

"Ow! Jesus, Randy!" This wasn't funny, it wasn't okay, and it *sure* wasn't arousing. "Randy, quit it!"

Yanking her hand free, Lauren glared into the darkness. Which was, she supposed, pretty ridiculous. She shoved to her feet, meaning to light the lamp and have this out with him once and for all, but Randy grabbed her wrist, jarring her shoulder as he tumbled her to the floor of the tent.

Dear sweet Jesus, what was *wrong* with him? Fury shot through her, but behind it, the question burned at her mind. Randy scrabbled at her thighs, and she felt the first trickle of fear as he forced them apart. Kicking out, she felt her heel connect with something, and he tumbled sideways.

Lunging to her hands and knees, she scrambled toward the tent flap. In the darkness behind her, something growled -- and for one crucial second, Lauren froze.

That's not Randy.

With the thought, an icy certainty filled her. Oh, she knew the traps women laid for themselves. *He'd never act like that, really. He doesn't mean it. He's not being himself.* She knew them ad nauseum; as a journalist she'd heard them over and over. But this... this was different.

That's not Randy. That's not even human.

She threw herself toward the flap, but a hand clamped around her ankle. Twisting desperately, she locked her fists together and swung with the entire weight of her torso. Pain screamed through her knuckles as the blow connected, but his hand fell away. Thrusting herself forward blindly, Lauren ignored the silence behind her. He

could be dead, he could be knocked out -- she didn't care. She tore at the tent flap and fled into the night.

* * *

On hands and knees, Kelly stroked the skull with long, firm motions, almost like a woman scrubbing a floor. Blood coated her arms to the elbows, glimmering wetly in the moonlight. Pausing, she reached down into the open cavity of Daniel's abdomen, scooped out a mass of spongy, blood-soaked tissue, and rubbed it over the exposed bone.

"There, there, you greedy thing." Her tone was indulgent, vaguely maternal. Blood soaked into the bone like water into a desert, leaving no trace. Tugging at the rubbery rope of Daniel's intestines, she pulled them out, wrung them, foot by foot, like a dishcloth. Blood splattered down onto the fossil beneath.

Slowly, slowly, the gleam of bone faded. A thin haze of flesh formed over the skull. Plunging her hand up under Daniel's ribs, Kelly yanked out his heart, held it aloft like a trophy. Then she squeezed it, laughing as the blood gushed out.

The blood slowed to a trickle. She nudged the corpse with her toe. "All gone," she said sadly, and looked at the skull.

It wasn't a skull any more, not really. Tendons laced the massive hinge of its jaw. Pink, suppurating gums lined the needle-like teeth. Where the eye sockets had been, a milky film now stretched, almost like cataracts.

It was still hungry. She could feel its appetite beating against her, as tangible as hot sunlight or ocean waves.

"I told you already. It's all gone!"

A fierce stab of pain shot through her skull, and Kelly grabbed at her forehead. "Don't *do* that!" She kicked at it and heard a wet, squelching thump.

A flutter of movement in the distance caught her eye. Kelly crouched down quickly and watched as Lauren stumbled from Professor Anders's tent and fled, her white cotton panties catching the moonlight like a rabbit's tail.

That's right, little bunny, run. Run into the hills. Kelly nearly laughed aloud, but she stifled it, cupping a sticky hand over her blood-smeared mouth. She glanced around slyly. All else was still.

Then a light bloomed inside the professor's tent, warm and amber. The skull seemed to whisper behind her, but she ignored it.

He wanted her. Randy. Could it be any clearer? He was calling to her, his light like a beacon to guide her to him. She felt a flare of longing, deep in her cunt. How she'd waited for this moment!

And oh, how very hungry she was.

Like a moth drawn by a candle, Kelly glided across the pit and climbed out onto the sand.

Chapter Seven

"Laur?" Blinking, Randy pushed himself up, and groaned. His head was throbbing so hard he saw splashes of light against the darkness. Cupping his forehead, he sat, trying to push through the sense of dislocation.

He was in the tent. On the floor. There was a sleeping bag under his thigh, tangled into a ball -- and empty. The whole tent felt empty, abandoned.

Why did his head hurt so much?

He'd been dreaming, something about the fossil, something... He couldn't recall...

Had they fought? His head swam, trying to remember. It was a safe guess, though -- they were always fighting these days, and he was never sure why. He couldn't seem to make any sense of her, of her moods, her sudden outbursts -- but at the same time, that was what had attracted him to her. He liked her unexpectedness, her passions, the way he'd manage, sometimes, to do or say the right thing and her face would fill with light like the sun breaking free of a thundercloud.

It was a sight more precious to him than he'd ever found words to tell her.

The eastern wall of the tent was beginning to glow as the moon cleared the top of the butte outside, but it wasn't enough light to see by. Carefully, Randy felt through the darkness till his hand brushed the table. Sliding his palm along its surface, he located the lantern and lit it.

His books and journals littered the table. Looking at them, he vaguely remembered paging through them, half in a trace. Then Lauren had -- what? Made him go to bed, that was right, he remembered that much. Had he had a fever?

His head ached. Sunstroke, maybe.

Randy stared blankly at the twisted sleeping bags, feeling the first stirrings of alarm. The mats were askew, the pillows flung violently about. But where was Lauren? Surely she wouldn't have gone wandering off in the middle of the night. Most likely she was just taking a piss.

The wreckage of their bed seemed to mock that possibility.

He knew she'd been unhappy, and she had some right to be, he supposed. He did get awfully wrapped up in his work but he only got out here twice a year, if that. It wasn't too much to ask, was it?

Kelly.

Remembering, he groaned and sank down onto the campstool. What on earth had possessed him to let the girl come? It was ridiculous though -- Lauren had no reason to feel jealous. Student or not, Kelly was hardly the sort of girl to interest him. Her overt sensuality was disturbing, to put it mildly. Rather like being stalked by a tigress in heat.

Disturbing, and okay, a little arousing. It wasn't like he was ever going to *do* anything about it.

The feel of her breasts brushing the back of his hand as he'd bandaged her palm... Randy flushed.

How could he have been so *stupid*?

There was a rustle of movement, outside the tent. Lifting his head, he called hopefully, "Lauren?" His voice, he realized, was little more than a croak.

But it was Kelly who twitched aside the flap and slid out of the night.

The girl was naked, spattered in blood, and Randy's first panicked thought was that she was hurt, badly. *Shit!* It was a twenty-mile drive before he'd even reach a paved road, and another thirty to a hospital...

Then she came toward him, one hand tracing a lazy design on her torso -- up the belly, around her nipples, down again to the thatch of her sex. Randy's feet tangled in the stool as he lurched to his feet, and he stumbled as he backed away till he hit the wall

of the tent. She smiled at him blandly, as if completely unconscious of the blood coating her. "I saw your light, Randy."

At the use of his name, the hairs stood up on the back of his neck. Her eyes were oddly unfocused, seeming both to study him and hardly notice him at all. And still her hand kept tracing that triangle on her body -- crotch to nipple to nipple to crotch. It mesmerized him, drawing his gaze again and again to exactly those places he didn't want to look. Swallowing hard, he forced his head up.

"Are you hurt, Kelly?"

She laughed, low and long. The sound sent a shiver through him -- not of fear, or not *only* of fear. There was a thrill of risk in it, a dangerous carnality that seemed to mock him. *If you're man enough*, that laughter taunted. *If you're man enough...*

The challenge in it roused him. Without conscious volition, his gaze slid again to her blood-spattered body. She was short, compact, with breasts that thrust forward, large and round as cantaloupes. Her waist tucked in nicely before flaring out again to lush, curvy hips. He'd caught himself more than once staring at her ass in the halls, and she turned now, displaying it before him. Full, taut ass cheeks above sturdy, muscular thighs, tapering down to slim ankles. Kelly reached back, grabbed her cheeks in both hands, spreading them slightly as she tilted her hips. Randy swallowed again, realizing for the first time that he was stark naked -- and painfully erect.

"Oh, you like that, Professor Anders." Smiling at him over her shoulder, she wiggled her butt. He could see the swollen, glistening lips of her sex, the small pink rosebud of her tight asshole. "Doesn't your bitch let you put it up her ass?"

"She's not my -- don't *talk* that way, Kelly!" But his cock twitched against his belly. *Doesn't your bitch let you put it up her...*

Jesus.

"Get out. Now."

She smiled again.

"I mean it."

Pouting, Kelly moved as if to leave, and Randy breathed a sigh of relief. Shit, if Lauren came back now...

As if by accident, Kelly stumbled over the stool, crying out as she fell. Automatically, he moved toward her, reaching to help her up -- but she hadn't tripped. She'd draped herself purposefully over the stool, her ass tilted up toward him, her thighs spread wide. He yanked his hand back from her shoulder. Her skin had been so hot, almost burning...

What would it feel like, to be inside her?

Ah, Christ. "Kelly, no. Please. Come on, get up."

Reluctantly, her full lips curved in a sulky droop, she rolled over on the stool. For a moment her head hung off one side, her back arched over the seat, her huge, perfect tits thrust directly up at him. His hands quivered at his sides, aching to squeeze them, torment them as he had Lauren's --

What? When did I --

His head whirled, his blood pounding at his temples. The tent seemed suddenly stifling, the air thick as if filled with incense.

Randy gasped, flailing backward gracelessly. It took all his will to thrust himself away from Kelly's offered body. Blood roared in his ears, sounding like a cyclone, a whirlwind. The tent spun like a vortex, sucking him toward that hot, waiting cunt. Eyes wide, he watched as she slid forward onto her knees, trapping his cock in her mouth in one smooth motion. She pumped her head downward, once, twice, her tongue flicking over his shaft, scalding him. His balls swelled in anguish, and Randy shut his eyes.

Please, God, make her stop. I can't. I can't stop her...

He didn't *want* to stop her. The sensation was intoxicating, driving away all thought of Lauren, his job, his reputation... Nothing mattered but her lips tugging at him, stretching around the thick, sensitive head, plunging down till he felt himself enter her throat. A sound that was almost a whimper escaped him as he fought to hold himself still, to resist the urge to fuck her mouth till he came in great, spurting wads...

Ah, shit.

When she pulled back, he didn't jerk himself away, as some tiny part of his mind still knew he should. He stood motionless, waiting, as she licked her lips and looked up at him, a satisfied smirk on her catlike features.

"Now," she murmured, "tell me you want it."

Her lips whispered against his swollen, aching cockhead. His balls contracted, heavy as lead, and his legs felt like they'd been turned to jelly.

"I want it, Kelly."

He pushed his hips forward slightly, and she licked just the very tip of his cock. "Say it again."

More fervently, he repeated, "I want it. I want my cock in your mouth."

"More." She opened her lips, dragged her little white teeth over the velvety skin. A rush of saliva flooded his mouth, and Randy swallowed again. He could feel his body quivering, senseless with desire.

"I want to fuck your mouth, Kelly. I want to fuck it hard. "

"Louder."

That light tickle again, spreading her lips open, teasing the tip before she pulled back. Randy's balls throbbed. "Suck me, damn you. Put my cock in your mouth. Come on, damn it! *Suck me!*"

Clamping his hands in her hair, he forced her head downward, and Kelly barely had time to wrap her lips over her teeth before he was shoving his cock into her. He jerked himself back out, and Kelly eagerly gobbled the tip, sliding her tongue around its meaty lip before he slammed it in, rocking her head back.

She wanted him to fuck her? Oh, he'd fuck her all right. He'd fuck her in every hole she possessed till she trembled beneath him, begging for mercy.

The night swirled around him, the air intoxicating, heavy with scent. It was thick, cloying, not entirely pleasant. It made him think of altars on which incense was burned -- incense and other, darker, sacrifices.

Reeling, delirious, he fucked Kelly's mouth. She squirmed, fighting his hold, and he grabbed her hair harder, pounding his cock deep into her throat. At the satisfied

gleam in her eyes, he realized that was exactly what she'd wanted. Sobbing with mingled lust and despair, Randy felt his balls swell, aching for release.

* * *

Deep in the twisting cleft of the arroyo, Lauren crouched, shivering in nothing but her tee shirt and panties. Hard rock scraped against her butt where she hunkered beside a boulder, and her bare feet against the rough stones were chilled to the bone.

The night had gotten cooler as the moon rose, shrinking as it neared its zenith. Now cold white light poured down the steep sides of the chasm, giving every rock, every pebble, every outcrop and ledge its own, distinct shadow. It picked out her shape like a floodlight, making her feel hideously exposed, and she shrank closer to the boulder, trying to hide in the thin sliver of black the moon cast at its feet.

There was an eye in the night, watching her. An amused, malevolent eye.

Oh, ridiculous!

Lauren clenched her chattering teeth. Inside her, fury warred with shock and dismay. What the *hell* had happened in the past twenty-four hours that she was suddenly squatting behind a rock, freezing her ass off in the middle of the desert?

The night hung around her, preternaturally silent. Something breathed at the edge of her awareness, like a great, hungry, invisible beast. She could almost smell its foul stink on the air, the sweet, sickly odor of carrion, rotting meat...

Scowling, Lauren jabbed her toes into the sand, felt the scrape of pebbles against her cold skin. *That* was real. That was solid, not these vapors of her imagination. Randy, a rapist? C'mon! She *knew* him, knew him inside and out. He was levelheaded, straightforward, just plain *decent*. It was impossible.

Another part of her was keenly aware of the throb in her knuckles, the bruises on her knees.

Oh yeah, it's possible, Lauren. You just don't want to believe it.

True enough -- and yet it didn't feel quite like that, like a dismaying truth she was trying to avoid. It felt more like being told the earth really *was* flat, or that what she'd thought were her hands were actually a kind of fleshy spider that had crawled

onto her arms and taken up residence. Impossible, of course... but you'd stare at them, wouldn't you, feeling your world slide treacherously around you? You'd scoff -- but wouldn't there also be just that faint trace of doubt?

Moonlight coated the landscape, making solid stone seem shadowy and unreal.

No, Lauren decided abruptly, *there wouldn't*. The idea was insanity. Shivering in the moonlight, she called up the image of Randy's face, just that morning, tilted up toward her with his eyes gleaming in excitement. She thought of the way he'd looked, so serious and hopeful, as he'd proposed, three months ago, sliding the stunning one carat solitaire that was really far more than he could afford onto her finger with a look of such *pride*...

No. It didn't add up. Something about the whole thing -- Lauren smiled grimly -- *stank*.

It was very hard to stride purposefully over gritty, shifting sand, especially barefoot. The jagged edge of a rock caught her heel and she hissed, but kept her head firmly erect as she stumbled her way back out of the arroyo, acutely conscious of the black spaces beneath boulders, the shadowed cracks between stones. There were snakes out here, scorpions... Her heart thudded in her chest, but she didn't slow down.

Something was wrong here. Something was horribly, horribly wrong. And damn it, she was going to find out what.

Right now.

Chapter Eight

Lowering his head, the BloodWolf sniffed at the uneven tracks in the sand. They were recent, headlong. A scent of panic clung to them. But they led north, away from the stink of corruption ahead. Whoever the ragged tracks belonged to was safe for the moment. Delacor turned away, lifted his muzzle -- and caught the smell of blood on the wind.

No. Oh, no.

It had already killed. Once, at least. How many more had it infected?

Lunging forward into the night, the BloodWolf ran, a shadow on the desert, a familiar fear growing in his breast.

Late. Too late.

Snarling, the wolf ran faster.

* * *

At the sight of the lantern's glow inside the tent, Lauren sighed with relief. He'd probably been waiting up, worried sick. At any rate, she was grateful she wouldn't have to wake him. Pushing back the tent flap, she walked in, and stopped short.

Kelly crouched on the ground, naked, her massive breasts brushing Randy's thighs as she sucked his cock. No -- Lauren stared -- as Randy fucked her mouth. His knees were bent, his legs spread slightly, and Lauren could see Kelly fondling his balls as he rocked his hips forward, driving himself between her stretched lips. His hands were fisted in her hair, yanking her to him, his eyes half-closed in ecstasy as he watched every stroke.

Lauren felt her heart crack into bitter shards as she watched him pounding Kelly's mouth with a greedy intensity he'd never shown her -- no. He had. Once.

Tonight.

It was true, then. It was all true. The man she'd been so sure she knew had never existed.

Randy hadn't even looked up as she'd entered. He hadn't even done that. She meant so little to him that he wasn't even *ashamed*.

A sob burst from her as she whirled away, shoving back through the tent flap. She was running again -- she didn't care. This time, she wasn't coming back.

As she scrambled into the Jeep, she heard a shout behind her. Too late -- it had already been too late when she'd walked into the tent, saw him fucking Kelly's mouth, his face lax and heavy with the urgency of lust... Viciously, Lauren twisted the keys in the ignition, slammed the Jeep into gear, furious at the tears that coated her cheeks and doubly furious at the throb of arousal in her cunt.

Tires spun in the silence as she peeled out, barely seeing the rough track in the headlights before her. All she saw was Randy, his eyelids dropping, his mouth hanging open in carnal rapture as his hips pumped and pumped and...

She jammed the Jeep into third. It bucked below her, slithered across the sand toward the ditch at the side. Tromping the gas, Lauren spun the wheel, dragging the vehicle back under control.

Her breath hitched in her chest as the track straightened ahead of her. With grim determination, Lauren floored the pedal. Thirty... forty... fifty... The engine whined. She shifted up into fourth.

Sixty...

Something gleamed for a moment, at the edge of her vision. A long black shadow dashed out of the night, into the headlights. The brakes squealed as she slammed them down -- far, far too late. There was a heavy, meaty thud, and a shape flew through the air.

"Jesus!" Lauren spun the wheel, trying to stop. The tires hit the embankment, rode up and over. The Jeep lurched and almost toppled as it thumped into the ditch and came to a stop, its axle hung up on the embankment, the back tires spinning free. Leaping out, Lauren ran back up the track.

Moonlight glimmered on the compacted sand. The track stretched, empty. But...

No, that thump had been all too dismally real. She hadn't imagined *that*.

She sprinted down the track, her head swinging from side to side, her gaze sweeping the roadsides. A shadow, off to her left. Something in the ditch? She dashed toward it, then stopped abruptly.

Ah, shit.

Not a dog, as she'd thought. A man, his limbs skewed at impossible angles.

Shit, oh shit.

Sobbing, she crawled down the slope, her limbs shaking with reaction. He was naked, she realized with a dull sort of wonderment. No, not quite -- there was what looked like a leather fanny pack cinched tight around his waist.

What was a naked man doing in the middle of the desert?

His profile in the moonlight seemed carved from white marble. Square, strong jaw. High, beautiful cheekbones. Thick brows arched low above a proud Gallic nose, with black, tousled hair shading his broad forehead. His lips, slightly parted, were full, classically curved... and very, very pale.

He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. And he was dead.

Her tears spattered in the sand as she reached for the fanny pack. Maybe there'd be a driver's license, identification, *something*...

Her fingers brushed the supple leather, and a hand grabbed her arm.

Lauren shrieked and scrambled backward. She tripped, fell to the sand, and huddled, shuddering, as the man slowly sat up. He blinked twice, then jerked his head, his black curls tossing as he did so. Lauren heard the grind of vertebrae as his spine cracked, straightening. He stood carefully, as if feeling to make sure all his limbs were still there. Then he looked down at her.

His eyes were the color of fresh-minted gold. They seemed to glow in the moonlight, like an animal's. The shape she'd seen dashing in front of the Jeep...

Lauren shook her head mutely, pushing herself back away from him, scooting up the slope of the ditch on her butt. He'd been dead. Dead! She'd seen the angle of his neck, the way his body was twisted...

He looked at her calmly, almost coolly, and said, "There isn't time for this. Please." Taking her wrist, he pulled her upright. He was tall, she realized, tall and lean, with muscles like a swimmer's or a long-distance runner's. His fingers around her wrist were long, supple, the tips slightly spatulate. An artist's fingers, or a lover's.

Trembling, she yanked her hand from his grasp. "You were dead!"

He shook his head. "No."

"Yes! I saw you! You weren't even *breathing*!"

He ignored her entirely, climbed up the embankment, and glanced down the track in the direction she'd come. "You found something today. Yes?"

She stared at him. How did he know? He glanced back at her, his dark face full of a sudden impatience. "What was it?"

She shrugged. "A fossil. Just bones. Randy --" Her jaw clenched on his name, and bitter tears spilled down her cheeks. The man lifted her chin, studying her face. Through her tears, his face seemed to glow with watery light. The face of an angel, or a saint.

He was so beautiful.

The entire situation was utterly surreal.

"Tell me your name," he said.

"Lauren. Lauren Cole."

"Lauren." His voice had a softness to it, a cadence that made her think of foreign films. The accent was light, barely discernible. She couldn't place it -- but she loved the sound of him saying her name. "Lauren, whatever happened tonight, whatever you saw -- it's not Randy's fault."

Laughing cynically, Lauren yanked her chin away. "Not his fault. Yeah. Sure."

"You must understand --"

"Understand what? He was *fucking her*!"

"If he hadn't, he'd already be dead."

What? Lauren stared.

"Come on." Grabbing her hand again, he strode toward her Jeep.

"Come on where? Look, Mister --" Lauren jerked free of his grasp. "That Jeep's not going anywhere," she said caustically. "It's stuck."

He just glanced at her sidelong, those golden eyes gleaming down, and pushed her forward, impelling her toward the Jeep. "Get in."

Lauren caught herself against the fender, whirled around. "Fuck you."

The look he shot her was almost contemptuous. "If we don't get there soon, your Randy will die. Now get in."

He was insane. She was stuck in the desert with a dead, naked, insane Frenchman. "Are you deaf? I told you -- the fucking thing's stuck!"

"Not for long." He walked to the front of the Jeep, bent his shoulder against it.

"Fine." Lauren clambered into the driver's seat, flinching as the Jeep shifted below her, sliding deeper into the ditch. Slamming the door, she hunched behind the steering wheel, staring skeptically at the naked man.

"Start the motor and put it in reverse."

She sneered. "It won't help."

"Just do it!"

Fine. She jammed the key over, ground the clutch, spun the wheels. If he *did* actually manage to get the stupid thing free, she'd leave him so far in the dust...

The Jeep bucked, and she felt the front wheels spin, digging themselves deeper into the sand. Then Lauren stiffened in shock as she felt the vehicle moving upward. In the headlights she could see the man's -- Delacor's -- shoulder muscles bunching as he pushed it up the slope. *That's not possible. Even with the front wheels helping, it's not --*

The rear end slid higher, jutting out over the embankment. Lauren's teeth snapped together as it tumbled back, the rear wheels thumping onto the track. Stunned, forgetting her intention to speed away and leave him there, she stared as he leapt into

the passenger seat, not even breathing hard. "Drive," he said tersely. "Head back to your camp."

"How did you do that?" she demanded.

He shook his head as if to say it wasn't important, and gestured imperiously at the steering wheel.

"Mister, the only thing you're going to find back there is my fiancé fucking one of his students."

"Let us pray you're right." His voice was grim. "And the name is Delacor. Now drive." She glanced at him uncertainly, then, catching his tension, threw the Jeep into first. The tires spat sand and gravel as she peeled out, racing her sudden fear back to the site.

Chapter Nine

He'd lost her. Even as he'd shouted after the departing Jeep, Randy had known it was hopeless. She was gone, forever. He'd never get her back.

He stood in the center of the dark, silent camp as the sounds of the Jeep faded into the distance. He felt literally petrified, turned into stone. Everything he'd done, every choice he'd made, had led only to this.

What in hell had he been thinking? It was like he'd been hypnotized -- one moment, he'd been trying to get Kelly out of the tent, the next, he'd looked down to see his cock in her mouth, and Lauren whirling away, a shattered expression on her face.

What had happened, in between? Why couldn't he remember? Was it simply that he didn't *want* to?

No, he supposed he didn't.

He felt a hand touch his back, feather-light, and spun, his hand swinging out of its own accord. Black, pounding fury welled up inside him, and he wanted to smash Kelly's face in, wanted to grind her into the dirt for what she'd done...

There was nobody there. His fist whipped through empty air, fell uselessly to his side. From somewhere, he would have sworn he heard laughter, a low, scathing, feminine chuckle.

"Who's there?" he shouted. "Kelly?"

Nothing. Not even the laughter. But a phantom hand brushed his shoulder again.

"God damn it, *who's there?*"

Randy.

The voice seemed to sigh out of nowhere. Randy froze. A breeze clacked through the spiny brush, and faded. For a moment, he caught a whiff of scent -- rancid cinnamon, or mildewed spices. Then it was gone.

"Randy?"

He whirled. Kelly was standing before him, her breasts gleaming in the moonlight. The blood smearing her body had dried, leaving dark, leprous looking splotches across her belly and thighs.

Where the hell did all that blood come from? Randy was appalled. How had he even brought himself to *touch* her, let alone --

Randy...

He jerked his head up, his gaze wildly raking the darkness.

"Randy, what's wrong?" Child-like, Kelly reached for him, her fingers outspread. He stared in horrified fascination at the blood caked under her nails.

"Don't touch me." Holding his hands up protectively, he backed away.

"But Randy, don't you want me?" Her wide eyes peered up at him, innocent, bewildered -- but her mouth was curved in a knowing smile.

"Stay away from me! Just... stay away..." He stumbled backward, blundered into the firepit. Dead cinders crunched under his bare feet, and ash plumed around him. He bent over, coughing.

Still she came toward him, her arms outstretched, beseeching. "I know you want me, Randy. Please, just touch me."

"No!"

Randyyyy...

A warm, invisible hand brushed past his ankle, slid up the inside of his thigh. The aroma of incense filled his nostrils.

No, Please, God, no...

He felt it stroke his balls. His cock twitched. Kelly reached for him. "Just let me touch you..."

He broke and ran.

The world shimmered in silver, shallow, unreal. His breath rasped in his ears, and his heartbeat thudded through his chest. His lungs burned. But the smell, the damnable smell, only got stronger. As he ran, his cock thickened, flopping before him. His head spun with the charnel smell of rotting flowers.

Suddenly he lurched, his left foot slipping down into darkness. Randy flailed, his arms windmilling, fighting for balance as the dirt under his feet crumbled.

Staggering back, he stared down into the pit. Blackness smeared the bottom, not shadows, but...

His stomach heaved as he saw Daniel's mangled corpse, the guts strewn across the ground. But it wasn't till he saw the thing behind it that Randy started screaming. He never even heard Kelly as she slid up beside him and pushed him over the crumbling edge of the pit.

* * *

Lauren rode the clutch, shifting gears with a clash. She didn't dare spare a glance at the man sitting beside her. The headlights swept over the curves of the track, glared off the U of P utility van parked near the camp, and came to rest on the wall of the butte. Almost before the Jeep had stopped rolling, she leaped out and rushed to the tent. Getting out behind her, Delacor paused, sniffing the air.

"He's not here!" Panicked, she burst back out, dashed for the pup tents. "There's nobody here!"

"There." Delacor nodded toward the distant pit. Immediately, Lauren broke into a run.

In four loping strides, he caught up to her and grabbed her arm. "Softly, Lauren." His strange amber eyes caught hers, held her gaze till she nodded. Then he led the way, sinking low to the earth twenty yards from the pit and gliding forward silently. Lauren followed as quietly as she could.

She should have been prepared, she thought in some bleak, cynical part of her mind. She shouldn't have been so shocked by the sight of Randy, straddling Kelly's torso, his hands squeezing her tits together as he pumped his cock in between them.

The two were facing away from her, at an angle, giving her an outstanding view of his shaft sliding in and out between her huge, luscious mounds.

It hurt. God, *how* it hurt! Forgetting Delacor's words, she started to rise -- though whether she was intending to stalk down there in fury or slink away in pain, she never found out. Delacor placed his hand on her back, holding her down, and nodded past them, toward the far end of the pit.

Lauren stiffened, suppressing a scream. Turning her face away, she caught Delacor watching her, his expression willing her to silence. She clung to his gaze as if to a lifeline, till the whirling nausea that gripped her started to ease. He shifted close, and once again she became conscious that, other than the pouch on a strap around his waist, the man beside her was completely naked. She was keenly aware of the feel of his skin against hers, his lips brushing her ear as he whispered, almost silently, "I will get her away. He will want to go to her. Do not let him."

She turned toward him, her eyes asking the question -- *how*? Gently, as gently as a mother or a priest, he pressed his lips to her forehead. "Remember, he loves you. And be brave, Lauren Cole."

Delacor slid down into the pit. Quickly, he moved to his left, and saw Lauren, from the corner of his eye, shrinking back into the shadows. *Good girl*. It was better she stay hidden for as long as possible.

Warily, he eyed the half-buried thing. It pulsed now, the veins and arteries lacing the half-formed flesh. *Um al duwayce. Succubus. Akhkharu. Skatene*. It was the nameless monstrosity behind a thousand legends, reaching back into the dawn of man's earliest existence -- and farther, Delacor realized, as he studied the thing protruding from the clay which had held it for millennia. Already he could feel its power beating against him. It was hunger incarnate; the desire to suck, to devour, to consume. None could approach it and not feel its influence.

Its attention, he could tell, was all on its captives. The lust that beat in his loins, the merest effect of its nearness, was nothing to the torment he'd feel when it sensed his presence.

The two victims writhed, coupling wantonly before the half-reanimated thing like savages performing at the feet of some ancient god. The girl's face contorted in eager pleasure as the man above her squeezed her breasts, twisting her dark, engorged nipples as he worked his cock back and forth between her huge mounds. Her mouth was open, her tongue lapping the juices from Randy's hard, swollen tip with each stroke. It took all the strength of Delacor's formidable will not to sink to his knees between her parted thighs, plunge his shaft into her ripe, waiting flesh...

No. He must not go to her. He must make her come to *him*.

Averting his gaze, he tilted his head back, let the tendril of awareness emanating from the monster touch him. It seemed to hesitate, uncertain. Delacor opened his eyes and looked up at the moon, now hard and bright as a coin overhead. The blood lust sprang up within him, a deep, greedy howl of need. He fought it back, holding it like a ravening beast on a leash -- but the *um al duwayce* sensed its presence. With a sudden, eager rush, the succubus's power flowed into him, reinforcing the blood lust till it flared up like a bonfire.

Kelly strained forward now, eagerly wrapping her lips around Randy's cock. Delacor saw the flush in her cheeks, the white gleam of her teeth. If she bit the man, if she so much as punctured his skin...

He would have to hurry.

Gritting his teeth, he struggled for control. His entire body burned, filled to overflowing with febrile lust. The fever of the succubus pulsed in his testicles, in his manhood, till his shaft jutted out before him, hard as if it were cast of iron. Through half-lidded eyes he saw Kelly lift her head, as if scenting the air.

That's right, you can feel me. You can feel the poison inside me. It is stronger in me than in that one. You want me. You want this.

Squirming from under Randy, she slid to her feet. Randy lunged for her, but she raked her nails at him, hissing, and evaded his grasp. Delacor heard a rattle of sand and pebbles behind him as Lauren sprung into the pit. *Yes. Go to him. Keep him from her.* He circled the pit, drawing Kelly after him.

Come for me, then. You can smell it, can't you? Yes.

He could feel power flowing from the half-reanimated avatar behind him, stronger now, this close to it. Hunger roared through him, and he could no longer completely suppress it. He must *not* lose control!

Panting heavily, he waited for the girl. She approached slowly, her eyes unfocused, her lips parted with lust. Her head wavered, swinging as mindlessly as a compass needle back toward Randy, and Delacor realized he must touch her, now, before he lost her attention.

There was nothing she could do to him. He had already been tainted. But at all costs, he must keep her from Randy.

Running his hands down the curve of her hips, he stooped and trailed his tongue up the side of her neck. Her gaze shifted back to his face as Delacor drew back, studying her. Her eyes were blue, blue and clear as forget-me-nots, the eyes of a child or a doll. Innocent.

There was no innocence left in her, Delacor reminded himself. This close, the heat of her body was overwhelming. He could feel it against his chest, his thighs, the hard shaft of his cock. Lauren screamed in fury, somewhere behind him, but the sound was distant, unimportant. He brushed his hands over the swell of Kelly's breasts, teasing the nipples, and smiled as she shuddered.

"Do you like that, *ma chérie*? Do you want me to touch you?" Wordlessly, she nodded. Delacor leaned closer, letting his cock rub against her firm belly. "Do you want me to *fuck* you?"

She said nothing, but her open, panting mouth and heavy lidded eyes answered for her.

"Then, my darling, get on your knees."

The urgency inside him leapt up another notch as she knelt before him, wrapping her lips around his cock. Her fingers trailed across the strap of his waist pouch, seeking the buckle, but he brushed her hand away. She slid it instead to his hard, swollen balls.

Delacor closed his eyes, swallowing. How long had it been since he'd allowed a woman to touch him so intimately?

He knew the answer. It was branded forever in his soul.

Looking down again, Delacor studied Kelly's face, her little button of a nose, and found nothing inside himself but grief. She *was* innocent, truly. She had not asked for this. But she had been marked by the *um al duwayce*. He could see the tattered bandage on her right hand.

The girl was no longer human -- she was *vampyr*, and would prey on her own kind forever -- unless she was destroyed.

Kelly's lips moved greedily over his shaft, and Delacor watched her, feeling an ironic despair. Was there no end to the pain life could bring? Lovely, flawed, undoubtedly selfish, nevertheless she had been human.

And now she must die.

With a deep self-loathing, he felt his balls tightening, heavy with come. In another moment, he would spill his seed in her mouth. The urgency in his loins roared in anticipation, and he struggled against the impulse to knot his hands in her hair, drag her hard against him as he pounded her throat...

His face twisted into a grimace as he pulled his cock gently from the warm, wet embrace of her lips. A sound that was both growl and whimper burst from her as she writhed, trying to reclaim his shaft.

"No, *chérie*," Delacor whispered. Bending down over her, he cupped her face in his hands, effortlessly holding her away from his body despite her furious struggles. Lightly, tenderly, he kissed her feverish forehead. She hissed at him and snapped, trying to sink her teeth into his forearm.

Delacor tightened his grip, feeling her cheekbones creak beneath his palms. Closing his eyes, he murmured briefly, a prayer so old he thought he'd forgotten it.

Then, with a horrifying, inhuman strength, he snapped her head hard to the left, and watched as the light in those doll-like blue eyes flickered, froze, and died away.

Chapter Ten

As soon as Kelly -- or the thing that had been Kelly -- slid out from under Randy, Lauren leaped down into the pit. The sickly sense of betrayal that had rocked her when she'd first seen them together was gone. She could *see* the glazed look in his eyes, the terrifying absence of personality.

That's not Randy. She remembered her reaction, back in the darkened tent. No, it wasn't. Torn between terror and hysteria, Lauren glanced at the shape in the corner of the pit. Ten hours before, it had been nothing but petrified bone. Now the skinless flesh oozed pus, and she could see the beat of its pulse through its veins.

None of this was possible. But the moment she'd entered the pit, she had felt it -- a wall of carnal energy that beat at her like sunlight, or gusts of wind. Had it been there all along, earlier, and she, already sexually frustrated on her own account, simply hadn't noticed?

I want you to fuck me!

Remembering, Lauren blushed. Yes, she rather suspected it had.

Now she felt her body glowing, as if she had stepped into an inferno. An arousal so intense it was agony throbbed in her groin. Her swollen clit chafed with the tiniest shift of position, and for a moment she gave into the urge to thrust her hand into her panties and rub it. Saliva seemed to explode in her mouth as she pressed her fingers against the hot, aching point of her need.

Before her, as if drawn by a magnet, Kelly turned to follow Delacor. Lauren saw Randy reach after her clumsily, stupefied by lust. For a moment she felt nothing but a vague irritation -- she wanted to watch them as she rubbed herself -- but then Kelly spun, hissing at Randy. The sound shocked Lauren, for a moment, back to rationality --

it reminded her of the way Randy had growled at her, earlier. Impelled by a sudden terror, Lauren ran to him, grabbing his arm.

Please, please let him still be free of whatever has possessed her! Staring into his eyes, she couldn't tell. His handsome, boyish features were twisted with bestial rage as Kelly slipped after Delacor. He lunged after them, and desperately, Lauren hung on. Feeling the lust-maddened strength that propelled him, she realized she couldn't possibly hold him back.

Remember, he loves you. Delacor's voice rang in her ears and, biting her lip, she raged at herself. *Do you love him, Lauren? Do you really?*

Then what are you willing to do to keep him alive?

The way he'd glanced up at her, just this past morning, his eyes alight with excitement, and vibrancy, and joy...

Anything, she realized. Anything at all.

Sprinting in front of him, she tore off her tee shirt. Grabbing his hand, she plunged it between her thighs. Like a dog scenting a rabbit, his head turned, his nostrils flaring.

This time, at least, being wet wasn't a problem. At the touch of his fingers, the heat in her cunt swelled to a fire. God, how she wanted him! She wanted him to fuck her, viciously, ruthlessly. With a thrust of her hips, she drove his hand deeper, his fingers sliding between the dripping folds of her cunt.

For a moment, he wavered. Then with his other hand, he ripped off her panties. The elastic snapped, catching her across the ass, and the sudden sensation made her gasp in anticipation.

She was no longer anything like in control of herself. Reduced to an animal, a lust-maddened beast, she wanted to *fuck*, God damn it, wanted to feel a hard, stiff cock plunging into her. Writhing against Randy's hand, she lifted her ribcage, let her breasts press against him as she wrapped her arms around his neck, and felt his fingers slide into her wet, waiting cunt.

Yes. Her eyes closed as she savored the feel of his hard cock prodding her belly. But then, like sand being sucked from a beach by the retreating tide, she sensed his attention wandering away from her. Glancing over her shoulder, Lauren saw Kelly looking back at them, her wide, glazed eyes glittering in the moonlight, beckoning.

Lauren screamed in fury as Randy slid from her grasp. Enraged, she pounced after him, throwing herself onto his back. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she clung as he roared, spinning, trying to dislodge her. She clung tighter, her fingernails raking his chest, until he reached back and grabbed her arm, almost wrenching it from its socket as he hauled her off and slammed her to the floor of the pit.

She lay, trying to draw breath back into her lungs, staring up as he towered over her, blotting out the moon. For a moment she thought she saw a flicker of confusion in his eyes. Confusion, and fear.

"Randy?" she whispered.

There was no way to tell if he'd heard her, but it was enough, it was *hope*. Before he could look away, she spread her legs, letting the moonlight shine on her wet, hungry cunt. Trailing a hand down her stomach, she pressed her clit lightly, gasping at the sensation, then slid her fingers lower.

His gaze was fixed intently on her hand, and Lauren smiled to herself, feeling her own excitement heighten as he toyed with his cock. She loved his cock, she loved the shape of it; the head that was as thick and firm and fleshy as a plum; the thick, solid shaft that filled her so nicely. Spreading the inner folds of her cunt with one hand, she slipped a finger deep inside her, and saw him grab the swollen tip of his cock and squeeze.

Working her finger in and out, feeling it slide easily through her juices, Lauren was amused to notice that Randy's hand kept time with her strokes. Playfully, she sped up, and watched his grip tighten as his face flushed with the telltale signs of incipient orgasm.

Enough. She wanted him *in* her. Now.

Rolling to one side, she pushed herself onto all fours, and smiled in triumph as he dropped to his knees behind her. The heavy odor of incense floated around them, increasing her need. Tilting her ass high, she rocked her hips backward, and felt Randy grab them as he rammed his cock in.

Ruthlessly, he dragged her against him, his hips slamming her ass as he drove into her with a frenzy that made her squirm with delight. He slid one hand from her hips to the dripping folds of her cunt, and then -- Lauren's eyes widened even as she thrust back to meet him -- she felt his finger pressing firmly against her asshole.

Slick with her own juices, it slid easily past the tight ring of muscle, and Lauren moaned with ecstasy as he pumped his hips forward, shoving both his cock and his finger deep into her. In tandem, he slid them out, only to plunge in again, fucking her cunt and her ass simultaneously.

Delacor and Kelly were both long forgotten. Nothing existed but the feel of Randy fucking her, his cock stretching her wide, his finger violating her in a way she'd never known she wanted. She barely noticed the scent like spoiled cinnamon in the air, or the sand under the palms of her hands as she pushed back to meet his thrusts, feeling his pace increase.

The double fullness was intoxicating beyond anything she'd ever known. She could feel the lips of her cunt swell further, and her rectum gaped and quivered, seeking to draw him deeper. As if reading her mind, Randy obliged, ramming himself inside her, and then pressing deeper still.

Reaching down, Lauren stroked her clit once. That was all it took, and then she was tumbling, inside herself, down into a vast molten ocean of hot, pounding waves. They swept through her, seizing her body, making her howl aloud as her cunt and asshole clamped and released. Randy's cock flexed inside her, swelling even further as he hammered it, spurting, as deep as he could. At the feel of his cock splitting her open, Lauren came again, moaning in ecstasy as he clung to her hips, quivering, his pulsing balls sending wave after wave of come shooting into her.

Groaning, he dragged his cock almost all the way out, only to shove it home again. "Lauren..."

He was still completely erect. Lauren felt a fresh shiver of desire go through her and wiggled her hips.

"Lauren, I can't stop."

She started to reply, but a hideous, ripping sound made him jerk himself away. Lauren whipped her head around just as the earth trembled beneath them, and she scrambled back, screaming, from the *thing* tearing itself loose from the ground.

Even as he snapped the girl's neck, Delacor felt it -- a pulse of fury that seared through his mind, jabbing behind his eyeballs like a white-hot spike. Groaning, he stumbled backward, claspings his skull, staring in horror as skinless muscle flexed, tearing the wedge-shaped head free of the clay. The massive jaws snapped, seizing Kelly's body as it tumbled, and the razor-like teeth sheared through her neck. Her head tumbled to the ground, bounced, and rolled a few feet away.

Delacor's stomach heaved. Blood gushed from the stump of her neck, and a gray, slab-like tongue flickered out, licking at it. The jaws worked once, twice. And then Kelly was gone.

Like green furze spreading over a stagnant pond, heavy, mottled hide spread over the raw flesh. The film evaporated from the monster's eyes, and it turned its head, gazing directly at him. The neck muscles bunched. The hard clay encasing it shattered as it ripped itself from the ancient grasp of the earth.

Lauren screamed again, a high, terrified shrill, but Delacor had no time to turn, no time to warn them. Closing his eyes, he let his body *shift*...

Lauren's scream choked off in a dumbfounded squeak. She realized, distantly, that Randy was dragging her back, but her body was too numbed by shock to feel it.

She had *seen* him -- Delacor -- standing there, and then...

No. Impossible. As impossible as the thing prying itself loose from the ground. It was dead, *dead!* Two hundred million years ago. But as she watched, it yanked a forearm free and tried to scrabble at the enormous black wolf which had leapt to its back and was now gnawing frantically at the base of its skull.

He could taste the poison flooding his mouth. But what matter? He was already poisoned. The monster's blood was like acid, burning as it flowed down the neck from the wound.

What would it do to him? Already he could feel its venom pulsing through his veins, reawakening the bloodlust. It would be stronger now, he feared. But still he bit deeper, tearing at the thing's flesh. Its shrieks split the night as it thrashed below him, and a gash opened in the earth, widening as it struggled.

Grimly, Delacor dug in his claws, somehow hung on.

Thrusting his jaws deep, he located hard bone, thick as a tree limb. Desperately, he worried at the cartilage between. The monster bucked, trying to dislodge him. Then, with a heave, it ripped its hindquarters free.

It would roll now, crush him. And that would be the end.

It would not be such a bad thing, to die -- he'd prayed for death so many times. But Lauren would die with him, and her Randy -- and how many others, with the *um al duwayce* again free to roam the earth?

Snarling, Delacor bore down with all his might, feeling tendons shred beneath his sharp fangs. The monster tossed its head, roaring. As it did, he thrust his jaws into the sudden gap in the vertebrae and clamped down.

Something snapped, deep in the thing's neck. The huge head lolled forward, tearing free of its own weight. As the enormous body tilted, Delacor lifted his head. The two humans, clinging to each other, were staring at him, their faces dumb with horror.

Run! Delacor shouted inside his mind.

The carcass below him pitched forward and crashed to the ground. Under the impact, the crack widened, gaping suddenly in the night. He fought for a grip, his claws

scrabbling against the blood-slicked skin, as the monstrous carcass slid slowly downward.

Flinging himself frantically, Delacor leaped, his forepaws catching the crumbling edge of the crack, his hind paws scrabbling for purchase. He saw Randy drag Lauren, screaming, out of the pit. She was fighting him, clawing at his arms, trying to climb back down in.

Why?

Her face was slicked with tears as she struggled furiously to get loose. She wanted --

Cher Dieu!

She wanted to save him.

The night roared, and the avatar of the *um al duwayce* tumbled finally into the chasm it had itself created. Clinging by his claws, Delacor found he had no regrets. Perhaps it was best this way -- no goodbyes, no explanations. It would be hard enough for them to live with what they'd just seen.

He could see Lauren sobbing as Randy hauled her to safety. She had wanted to save him. She had seen what he was, and still she'd wanted to save him.

That was enough, he thought with a small inward smile. For him, perhaps, the story finally ended here.

Satisfied, at peace, the BloodWolf let himself fall.

Epilogue

Boulder, Colorado

Watching in the bathroom mirror, she slowly removed the daisies braided into her hair. She was nervous, she realized, and was surprised.

You'd think that would have been earlier, wouldn't you? Lauren thought wryly. But she hadn't been. She'd felt nothing but a proud, solemn happiness at the sight of Randy, looking very handsome and earnest, waiting for her at the stone they'd chosen for an altar beside the crystalline waters of Wonderland Lake.

Both of them had felt it'd be better to leave Arizona. They didn't talk about it often, the things that had happened that night. Sloan, when they'd found him, had been more than happy to keep his mouth shut and forget the whole thing ever happened. The small, localized earth tremor had puzzled seismologists, but with funding tight, no one had pursued it very far.

The memorial services, though, had been ghastly. Randy had sat through them ashen-faced and frozen. Afterward, he'd clung to her with a need she knew she'd never be able to refuse.

Lauren picked up one of the daisies she'd removed, carefully unfolding the petals that had gotten bent. Before they'd left for Colorado, she'd insisted on going back. Leaving the unhitched U-Haul in the visitor's parking lot, they'd driven out to the abandoned site, silent for the entire twenty-minute ride. When they'd gotten there, they still hadn't said much as they walked over the ground that had fallen in on itself, burying Lyle -- and whatever had been unearthed with him -- under forty metric tons of sand, rock, and clay.

They'd stood for a long time, listening to the sound of the wind skittering over the desert, unable to find any words of comfort to offer each other until the sun bathed

the rocks around them in harlequin hues of lavender and orange. But Randy had held her as she'd wiped at the tears streaming down her cheeks.

He was teaching at Colorado College now, very excited to be a part of its famous natural sciences department. And Lauren found she loved Denver. Her editor at the *Denver Post* had thrown her an impromptu bridal shower, and then offered her a weekly column -- one that people actually *read*.

In short, their life was better than either of them could have imagined, eight short months ago.

So why, as she struggled out of the frothy white dress Randy had insisted she wear (of all the stupid things -- she'd had to hike in to the lake in jeans and then change) did she suddenly feel such dread?

Because it's your wedding night, silly.

Wedding afternoon, actually. But on the other side of the hotel bathroom door was a bed, and in that bed was Randy.

She shouldn't have let him make them wait. They should have leaped this hurdle months ago, not waited till now when the expectations were so high.

They hadn't slept apart since the first night they'd returned to Phoenix. Lauren could no longer imagine a life in which Randy was not a constant, the daily touchstone of her existence. But not once in all that time had they made love.

For a long time, it hadn't mattered in the least. But finally, as the months passed and the shock and grief slowly diminished, she'd begun to feel again the first stirrings of desire.

Wait, Randy had said, let's wait. Lauren, I want to do this right.

And so they had.

Now Lauren stood in the bathroom of their honeymoon suite, almost as frozen with terror as she'd been that night in the desert. She gazed out the window at the steep, wooded slopes of a mountain, not a hundred yards away. In the crisp air the aspens had already turned, coating the massive ridges with gold.

What if it didn't go right? What if she couldn't respond? What if --

"Laur? You still alive in there?"

"Coming," she called. Quickly, she slid out of her bra and panties, and turned toward the door. Then, checked by a sudden impulse, she picked the daisy back up. Sliding open the window, she tossed the flower into the cool breeze, watching it tumble as it fell out of sight.

She would never forget him, she swore, raising her eyes to the towering mountains. They were so enormous it was almost incomprehensible. But their beauty pierced her heart.

"Laur?"

Smiling, she opened the door. Randy *was* in the bed, sitting up, the heavy linen sheet modestly draped over him. He looked at her standing there, utterly naked, and tossed the sheet back.

He was beautiful too, in his own way, Lauren thought. His long, powerful body was still tan from the summer, contrasting nicely with the white of the sheet. She loved looking at him, at the play of muscles in his torso, the firm bulges in his arms...

"If you're done ogling the merchandise," Randy interrupted her reverie, grinning. When she didn't return his grin, his gaze softened, and as the playful sparkle died from his eyes she saw the desire behind it, smoldering deep in their clear, intense blue. "Lauren..."

"I just... Randy, I can't forget."

"I wouldn't want you to. Come here." Gently, he reached for her hand, drawing her to the edge of the bed. His hand stroked her back as she sat, breathing deeply, trying to relax. She turned to him, meaning to ask a question -- something -- but the words fled from her mind as his mouth came down on hers, warm and firm and gently insistent. Slowly, he prodded past the barrier of her teeth, and sighed into her open mouth as she met his questing tongue with her own.

His tongue tasted sweet and warm, and she sucked it lightly, waiting for him to pull back. Instead he opened his mouth wider, hungrily flicking his tongue against hers.

Saliva flooded her mouth -- and his too, she realized. She heard small, mewling noises, almost whimpers, and realized they were coming from her own throat.

His hands were buried in her hair, pulling her mouth more firmly against his, and Lauren pressed herself closer, mashing her breasts against his broad chest. Suddenly, a hunger which was all her own, which had no taint of that *thing* about it, flared inside her, and they tumbled backward, their mouths still locked together, their limbs winding around each other as if they couldn't get close enough, couldn't squeeze tight enough...

Or maybe, she thought distractedly as Randy moved his head downward, nuzzling and nipping at her aching breasts, maybe it was there all along, and I couldn't see it, couldn't feel it, couldn't --

She gasped as Randy drew one nipple between his lips, suckling at it as if he was starving. Wetness burst between her thighs, and she became aware of his cock, nudging insistently against her hip. Reaching down, she wrapped her hand around it, marveling again at its hard velvet thickness. It pulsed eagerly against her palm, and suddenly Lauren felt she would die if she couldn't have him inside her now, right *now*. Tugging at his shoulders, she pulled him back up above her as she spread her thighs. He hesitated.

"Oh please, Randy. We've waited far too long."

"With you," he murmured, a chuckle lacing through his words, "five minutes is too long."

She started to expostulate, then saw the merry gleam in his eyes. Giving him an evil smirk, she tilted her hips, and saw his eyes darken with desire as his cockhead slipped inside her. "Oh, Jesus, Laur," he breathed. "You feel just like velvet."

"Funny, I was just thinking the very same thing."

Flexing his hips, he slid into her smoothly, and Lauren felt the familiar pressure against the walls of her passage as his cock prodded deeper, spreading her open. Wrapping her hands around the back of his neck, she pulled his face down to hers, wanting all of him inside her -- his tongue, his cock. Randy happily obliged, rocking her

steadily to a peak that was as gentle and slow as snow falling on a hillside. He held her close as she orgasmed, her cunt tightening around him, crying out lightly as her body quivered beneath him.

Opening her eyes, she found him still looking down at her. She raised a hand to touch his cheek and he turned his head, placing a kiss in her palm. "Is it so bad this way, Lauren?"

"This?" Her eyes widened. "Was *this* what you wanted, all those times you..."

He nodded, his gaze never leaving her face.

"Oh, Randy," she breathed. "No. No, it's wonderful."

"Good." He yanked himself out of her, and grinned at her gasp. "Now turn over."

"What? Randy!"

"You heard me, wife. Flip."

She stared at him, astounded, till he seized her hips and bodily rolled her beneath him. At his tug, she lifted her ass in the air, feeling him rise to his knees behind her. "Randy, are you sure..."

His fingers slid through the sodden folds of her cunt, flicking lightly at her clit. Lauren gasped again, and bucked lightly. Then she froze as his hand was removed, feeling his fingers a moment later spreading her slick juices over her exposed rectum. At the same time he bent low over her, his cock rubbing against her opening, and whispered, "Oh yeah, I'm sure. Or did you want to tell me it was only that *thing* that made you enjoy *this*?"

And on that word, he rocked his hips forward, burying his shaft in her hot, waiting cunt, sliding first one finger, then two, past the resistance of her sphincter. Lauren panted, swept away by the sensation, feeling herself laid open below his probing touch. Reaching down, she slid her hand between her thighs, found the heavy weight of his swollen balls, and caressed them gently. He responded with a groan, and thrust harder inside her, pounding her cunt with an undeniable craving as his fingers slid more gently but firmly in and out of her willing ass.

"Oh, Lauren," he moaned, "the things you make me feel..."

"Like what?" she whispered, floating on the delirious edge of orgasm. Her nipples dragged against the smooth linen sheet, sending another flare of heat through her groin.

"Like I want to fuck you. I want to come in your mouth."

Lauren felt her breath catch, and her cunt pulsed with need.

"I want to lie beneath you and let you ride me. I want to squeeze your breasts till they ache. I want to watch you touch yourself till it drives me crazy and I'd do anything, anything you asked me, just for you to let me inside your cunt."

Lauren's head swam as she listened, feeling her breath grow hoarse as his cock jabbed her harder, keeping time with his words. Was this *Randy*, saying these things? She couldn't believe it. But if he said six words more, she was going to come. Right now.

His free hand slid from her hip to her thigh, trailed slowly up it till his fingers brushed the spot where their two bodies joined. She felt him buck at the feel of his fingers rubbing his cock, even as it plunged into her. Then he reared back above her, his thumb flicking her clit as he pounded her cunt, his breath hissing between his clenched teeth. "Oh, Jesus, Lauren. I'm going to --"

Yup. Six words. She beat him to it.

* * *

Later, when something like thought had finally returned, she rolled to him lazily, tracing circles on his broad, sweaty chest. "Well, well," she chuckled. "I think that calls for champagne, don't you?"

"Oh!" Randy sat up. Outside the sliding glass door leading to their balcony, the sky was growing dim in the quick twilight of the mountains. "I put it outside to keep cool. Hang on half a sec."

Lauren lay back, stretching luxuriantly. If life got any better than this, she thought it might kill her. She heard the rumble as the glass door slid open, then a pause.

"Laur?"

She sat up. Outside, she could still see the champagne sitting in its bucket, the two glasses forgotten beside it. Instead, Randy held a battered old leather pack, turning it over and over curiously in his hands. "Do you know where this came from?"

But already she was on her feet, dashing out to the balcony. "Huh," she heard Randy say behind her. "There's a note."

Leaning against the rail, she strained her gaze upward. For a second, she thought she caught a shadow in the twilight, a flicker of movement as some animal slipped from the ridge above.

Then it was gone -- if it had ever even been there at all. She stood naked in the wind that gusted down from the mountains, shivering as she unfolded the note Randy held out to her. It was written in an elegant hand on a torn piece of hotel stationery, and as she scanned it, suddenly Lauren didn't feel the cold at all.

Be gentle with each other. And always remember -- there is more of good in this world, than evil.

-- Baudouin Delacor

The End

Sierra Dafoe

Sierra Dafoe imprinted early on the one, the real, the only Robin Hood (and we all know who that is!) and has been in love with the heroic adventure story ever since. She branched out from there into fantasy and science fiction and even a few forays into horror, but still has a deep-seated weakness for those cocky, handsome rebels.

Rather unsurprisingly, Sierra lives in northern New Hampshire's White Mountains -- which is good, because nothing short of their beauty would likely ever drag her away from her keyboard! Visit her at her website, www.darkerdesires.com, for excerpts, contests, freebies, and more!