



THE DEMON OF PELICAN BLUFF

...The visions came with the scent of sex and the sharp intake of breath that accompanied the feral thrust of a cock between her legs. Instead of lounging on a Sunday morning reading the latest journals with a man she'd playfully call "professor," she saw herself clutched in the dark-skinned arms of a winged beast. She saw golden eyes and upswept brows and long fingered hands that delved between her ass cheeks and pinched her nipples. She felt his tongue, hot and wet on the skin beneath her ear, felt massive thighs part hers and heard her own voice plead with him for release.

What frightened her most about the visions and the dreams was that she wasn't fighting to get away from the monster. She was clutching his muscular body to hers, arching her needy sex against him and urging him to fuck her. She was ravenous for it, for the scrape of sharp teeth over her breasts, the slap of heavy balls against her ass and a panting, gasping orgasm that left her breathless and trembling. And always alone.

She had to be going insane. Dreaming of sex with a monster, a creature that mounted her and took her body with reckless abandon—it was just not normal. Yet she craved it, and that's why she wanted to go out into the forest all alone. Not to exorcise the demon from her mind once and for all, but to see if it would come for her and give her what she craved...

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BY

JENNIFER COLGAN

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AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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CHAPTER 1

Cade Morrison eyed his surly reflection in the small mirror that hung next to the door of his office. The slate blue eyes that stared back at him narrowed in determination to hide their weariness. He'd have to keep his sunglasses on this morning, even though the sky was overcast and the weather service had predicted rain by noon.

He rubbed at the dark stubble coating his chin and vowed once again to bring a spare electric razor to keep on hand for these nights he spent at the ranger station. Far too frequently these days, he'd found himself making do with yesterday's shirt and a quick scrape with a disposable pilfered from the emergency supply cabinet.

As much as he detested the idea of hosting some quirky, *National Enquirer* type pseudo-scientist for a fruitless day's expedition into the woods, maybe this whole charade would put an end to the "sightings" and allow him to go home and sleep in his own bed on a more regular basis.

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So despite his lingering headache, blood shot eyes, and five alarm coffee craving, he had to play nice with the nut job from the university for the sake of his own personal hygiene if nothing else.

“Damn, damn, damn...” According to his watch, she’d be here any second.

Cade made a quick circuit of the office, grabbing his hat and glasses, self-consciously checking his uniform shirt for sweat stains and downing a final gulp of lukewarm decaf. He cursed Joe Fortin, his health-conscious weekend relief ranger, for stocking the supplies based on some nutritionist’s recommendation rather than the needs of a man who got four hours of sleep on a good night. Without that burst of caffeine, Cade would be lucky not to end up curled in some bear’s den for a long winter’s nap. He’d just have to stop off at Thacker’s General Store on the way to the lake to get his fix. If the lady scientist complained about the delay, that would be too bad.

The tentative knock on the door, delivered on the dot of nine A.M. caused a sigh, followed by a brief prayer for deliverance. Cade hadn’t heard a car pull up on the gravel lane below, or heard footsteps on the two-story flight of aluminum stairs that led up to the station.

Not only was the lady scientist damnably punctual, she was stealthy besides.

“Come on in.” He decided against rushing to the door to open it for her. After all, he didn’t want her to get the impression that he was in any way pleased by her arrival in Pelican Bluff.

The door opened with its usual whine and creak just as Cade slipped his aviators down the bridge of his nose.

Backlit by the gray-white sky, she was little more than a slim silhouette at first, dressed in faded denims, hiking boots and a down vest and matching backpack right out of the latest Abercrombie and Fitch catalog. He’d expected that. What took him by surprise, though, were the rich chestnut curls, stunning baby blues, and that sweet mouth

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pursed in a curious grin. For one riveting second, he was lost.

Oh, hell. Why did she have to be hot?

Cade managed to regain his composure and closed the distance between them in two long strides. He thrust his right hand out and gave her his professional grin. "You must be Lauren Jensen from the university."

Her smile faded by a watt or two. "*Laurel*," she said, slipping a cool hand into his. She had a strong grip for a woman, straightforward and firm. From behind his tinted lenses, Cade held her gaze for a split second longer than professional courtesy dictated.

"Sorry." He broke contact first and hooked his thumbs in his belt loops to keep from fidgeting.

"Everyone makes that mistake. You must be Ranger Morrison."

"I am." And for the first time since he'd awakened on the station's musty couch, he was glad of that fact. "I apologize for not meeting you downstairs. I didn't hear you pull up."

"Oh, my fault. Mayor Mallon drove me here. He had an emergency back in town and I convinced him to drop me off at the head of the trail. I enjoyed the walk and it gave me a little bit of a feel for the place."

Cade watched her eyes while she spoke. Like a trained observer, her gaze darted around, first over his shoulder to the magnificent view of the late summer tree canopy visible out of the station's wide observation windows. Then it tracked across his desk which was littered with papers and some of the sensational news clippings George Mallon had no doubt used to entice her to come all the way from her cushy university office to the edge of the national forest to have a look-see for herself. Finally, her scrutiny came to rest on him, and damn it all if he didn't feel the temperature rise just a few degrees.

"Shall we get started?" she asked.

A full second passed while Cade's brain processed her words

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through the remnants of his sleepless night and caffeine deficiency. “What? Oh...yes. Sure. I’m not really familiar with what you people do...in cases like this. It’s been a while since we’ve had anything, you know, *unexplainable* happen in these parts.”

“We people?” Her expression was both bemused and skeptical.

“You know...” Cade smiled big and waggled his eyebrows at her. “Bug hunters. That’s what we call ’em. We get a few expeditions every year, looking for Big Foot, or hoping to be the first to see a sea monster in the lake.”

“We call ourselves cryptozoologists, Ranger Morrison. And we hunt more than bugs.”

“Call me Cade, please.”

“You can call me Dr. Jensen.” There wasn’t a hint of malice in her tone, but nevertheless Cade felt suitably chastised. He’d already insulted her profession and screwed up her name. Damn Joe and his decaf.

“Right. I’d offer you some coffee, doc, but I’m fresh out. If you’d like to settle in at my desk, you can look over some of the reports while I see if I can scare up something to brew.” He gave his desk a disparaging glance and hoped she’d decline the offer. Part of the problem was the local newspapers were blowing this whole business way out of proportion.

“Actually, I’d rather not have my impressions clouded by other people’s perceptions just yet. I’d like you to take me to the sites of the ‘incidents’ so I can take some samples and then later on, maybe after I’ve interviewed some of the eye witnesses, I’ll look over the written accounts.”

“Fair enough.” Cade stifled a sigh. A long walk in the woods with a gorgeous woman by his side and no caffeine to help focus his thoughts...it had to be Monday. “It’s a bit of a ride to Bluff Lake so we’d better get going if we want to beat the rain.”

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“I’m ready when you are.”

Cade nodded and another one of those brief but awkward moments followed. He had to wonder if Dr. Laurel Jensen had a clue that she was here less to investigate some strange sightings in the forest than she was to feed into Mayor Mallon’s skewed belief that this type of half-assed publicity would be a boon to Pelican Bluff’s budding tourist industry. He headed for the door, careful not to brush against her on his way outside. “All right, then. There’s nothing like a good bug hunt.”

* * *

Laurel Jensen rolled her eyes at Cade Morrison’s khaki clad back and followed him out the door of the Pelican Bluff Forest Service Station.

Par for the course, she’d decided the moment she’d laid eyes on her dubious tour guide. If she’d come to the little northern town, perched on the edge of the Superior National Forest, in her capacity as a tenured adjunct to the university’s prestigious biology department, she might have expected a better reception, but when she wore her unofficial and only barely tolerated crypto hat, she’d come to expect reactions like Morrison’s. Hunting down the strange and unexplainable, the shadow creatures that existed, or were hoped to exist, on the fringes of science, had earned her nothing more than a dopey grin and a condescending dismissal. And besides that, it looked like he hadn’t even bothered to shave.

Her mild pique carried her halfway down the stairs in his wake before vertigo set in and she had to clutch the cold, silver railing and drag in a calming breath of humid morning air.

Why did Morrison’s station have to be on stilts? She’d barely made it up the twenty-six steps to his door without succumbing to a panic attack, and now he was loping toward the ground like a...well, like a man used to working above the tree tops. She hated him already.

If she’d been wise, she would have stayed safely on the ground and

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yelled up at him to meet her on terra firma, but that would have only proven that her *Overcoming Phobias* workshop wasn't worth the week's salary she'd paid for it.

One, two, three, four. She counted off steps in her head, concentrating all her energy on keeping herself upright and breathing normally. A few more—five, six, seven, eight—and she'd be safe and sound, without having embarrassed herself by hyperventilating in front of, or in this case behind, Ranger Morrison.

He reached the bottom first and, without looking back, headed toward the dark green Forest Service SUV parked in the gravel cul de sac next to the station.

Normally, Laurel might have found it rude, but on this occasion, she was grateful for his lack of attentiveness. By the time she reached the vehicle and hoisted herself and her pack into the passenger seat, her legs no longer felt rubbery and her pulse had stopped racing.

She considered it a victory.

At least Morrison waited for her to buckle her seat belt before he slammed the 4x4 into reverse. "I hope you don't mind a slight detour. Like I said, I'm out of coffee and I could really use a shot of caffeine this morning. I'm going to swing up Lake Road and stop at the general store."

"It's your call. I don't have any particular schedule." Laurel feigned disinterest. She pulled her camera out of her pack and double checked the battery charge. Her hands shook a little, a residual effect of the dizzying descent from the station. She certainly didn't need any caffeine, and judging by the cocksure way Morrison maneuvered the winding curves of the one-lane road, he didn't either.

Morrison glanced over at her. His eyes were still a mystery behind the mirrored lenses. "If you don't mind my asking, did the mayor *hire* you to come out here and poke around?"

"Hire me? No. Why would you think that?"

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“Well, your time’s gotta be worth something and, in all honesty, and I’m going to be blunt, doc, this is all a publicity stunt. Some kids got spooked out by the lake a couple of weeks back. They talked and talked about it until their friends had to go and have a look for themselves and wouldn’t you know it? They got spooked, too. More talk. Newspaper gets involved. Somebody draws a big, scary picture and George sees dollar signs. He’d like nothing better than to have our very own Nessie or Bessie or Sasquatch, and if a fancy scientist confirms there’s something ‘unnatural’ in the woods, well hell, Pelican Bluff might actually show up someplace other than a Forestry Service map.”

Laurel found herself momentarily entranced, not to mention vaguely amused. Cade Morrison talked fast, a lot like the way he drove, a little erratic, but hell bent for his destination. He didn’t pull punches or waste time in the slow lane.

“And are you trying to find out if I’m in for a cut of the profits?”

“It doesn’t matter to me. I just don’t want you to be too disappointed when you don’t find your boogeyman in the woods and Mallon starts pressuring you to come up with ‘evidence’ that he can use in his ‘Demon of Pelican Bluff’ marketing campaign.”

Laurel eased back in the surprisingly comfortable bucket seat and stretched her legs. She debated whether to be insulted by Morrison’s insinuations or grateful for his candor.

Finally she settled on middle ground. “I’m a biologist by trade, Ranger Morrison.”

“Call me Cade.”

“Cade. The university pays me to teach freshmen how to dissect a fetal pig. I publish two peer-reviewed papers a year on in vivo modification of macromolecules and I pick up extra cash over the summer tutoring high school seniors coming into the pre-med program. Cryptozoology is my hobby, one that the university tolerates because I

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haven't embarrassed them yet by running off after a stray yeti or joining the Lock Ness Scuba Club. I came here at Mayor Mallon's request because I found the details of the sightings to be compelling enough to warrant investigation. There's no contract, no percentage, and certainly no paycheck involved."

He was silent for as long as it took him to whip the 4x4 through a hairpin turn and into the gravel lot of a little pine log structure sporting the name Thacker's. Didn't anyone pave their parking lots up here in the untamed north? Laurel asked herself when they bumped to a halt. Her stomach gurgled in annoyance, reminding her she hadn't bothered to take a Dramamine tablet this morning.

He shot her another look. At least she assumed his eyes had turned in her direction. "I wasn't fishing. I just wanted to be sure you weren't under any false impressions."

"The only impression I'm under is that someone saw something in the woods surrounding Bluff Lake that bears investigating. If the mayor thinks I'm going to manufacture evidence or file false reports in order to fuel the tourist trade, he's got another think coming." Laurel didn't wait for a response. She opened the passenger door and slid the very long way down to the layer of chopped shale that served as a parking lot.

She strolled toward Thacker's without looking back.

* * *

"Izzat her?" Matilda Conway whispered when Cade set his Jumbo Joe on the counter ten minutes later. He reached for a half dozen sugar packets from the caddy next to the register and tore them open all at once. After a gulp or two, he almost felt normal. The aroma alone had begun to unfog his brain already.

Somewhere at the back of the store, Laurel Jensen was caught up in the feminine wonderland of Matilda's homemade potholders, tea cozies, and lace doilies. He'd heard some very unscientific oohing and

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ahhing while he'd been filling his Styrofoam vat with thick, black Colombian roast.

"Yep. *Doctor* Jensen is a biologist."

"She's a tiny little thing. How's she going to catch the monster?" Matilda's voice dipped back to a whisper on the last word and her big brown eyes darted toward the back of the store.

"I don't think she plans on catching it. She brought a camera and a very small backpack. No tranquilizer guns, no nets or cages."

"You wouldn't get me out there with anything less than the U.S. Marine Corps and a small nuke."

"It's probably just a black bear, Matty. Don't go all *Die Hard* on me."

"A bear with wings? The Walcot boy said it had wings."

Cade snorted. "And he's eighteen, horny as a three-headed bull and he'd probably been sucking on a joint half the night. Don't worry about it, Matty. Forget the whole thing."

Matilda probably would have talked all day, but Laurel's arrival at the front counter put a damper on any further speculation. Cade noted Dr. Jensen had resisted the charm of Matilda's handicrafts this time. She plunked down a bag of salty pretzels and drew a rumpled five out of the tight front pocket of her jeans.

"Bait?" Cade asked.

She gave him a droll look. "No. These are for me. It's been scientifically proven that cryptid's prefer snacks with a higher protein content. If I'd needed bait, I'd have gone with peanut butter cups or beef jerky."

Cade blinked, and Matilda nodded as if she wholeheartedly agreed.

"Cryptids? Sounds like bugs to me."

Laurel snatched up her pretzels and pocketed her change. "It's a blanket term used to describe unclassified, unconfirmed or hypothetical animals."

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“Oh.” Cade sipped his coffee.

“I knew that,” Matilda said with a proud grin. “I’ve been doing some research on the Internet and I think I know what *it* is.”

The good doctor looked mildly shocked. Apparently she wasn’t used to small town lack of privacy. Everybody knew everybody’s business up here in the Bluff and they made it their own. Speculation on the sightings was already running high thanks to the mayor’s enthusiasm. Laurel would have to get used to the fact that everyone she met while she was here would have an opinion to share.

“All right, Matty, what’s your theory? Maybe you can save Dr. Jensen here a trip up to the lake.”

“It’s Mothman.”

Laurel coughed and Cade laughed. “Told you. Bug hunt.”

“The alleged Mothman sightings in West Virginia took place almost forty years ago. It would be highly unlikely—”

“Got any fly swatters, Matty? I think you may be on to something.”

Matilda blushed. “Oh, now. Don’t listen to me. I just thought, you know, with the wings and all.”

“It’s...not a bad deduction...of course, going solely by the physical characteristics.” The doctor did that verbal backpedal people did when they didn’t want to come off sounding like an unsufferable know-it-all and it was already too late.

Cade swallowed a grin with another sip of coffee. “We’ll keep you posted, Matty. Gotta go. Doc, you ready?”

“Yes. Very.”

Cade tipped his hat to Matilda and headed for the door.

“I doubt this is a Mothman sighting, but if stories like that are allowed to circulate—”

“Allowed to?” Cade cut her off as he started the engine and wheeled out of Thacker’s parking lot. Laurel clutched her pretzels with one hand and the passenger side panic handle with the other while they

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bounced back onto Lake Road. “They’re already circulating. That’s what I’m telling you, doc. You’re wasting your time if you want any scientific proof of anything. What you’re going to get here in Pelican Bluff is a whole lot of wild stories passed from hand to hand, round and round until you end up with Elvis riding a dinosaur on roller skates and ten people willing to swear on their grandmother’s grave that’s what they saw.”

She was quiet for a full minute, staring out the window at the dizzying rush of tall, skinny spruce and tumbles of granite boulders. By the set of her shoulders, Cade could tell she was holding something in. He’d have figured it for another rant on her impressive credentials, and he very nearly jammed on the breaks in shock when she finally did respond.

“I hope it’s more than that...Cade. Not because I want publicity, or even the thrill of actually discovering a heretofore unknown species, but because I want some validation. I believe this creature exists because I’ve seen it myself.”

CHAPTER 2

The last thing Laurel had expected to do today was spill her guts to some skeptical forest ranger. Even Mayor Mallon didn't know the real reason she'd agreed so readily to drive all the way from St. Paul to Pelican Bluff to investigate the ramblings of half a dozen teenagers and weekend hikers. No one over the age of twenty-one had seen the "demon" as they'd already taken to calling it. No one had reliable photos or video footage. There were no casts of footprints, no spore, no scat. Under normal circumstances she'd have responded to the mayor's request with polite disinterest and given him the names of several amateur crypto groups that would have been thrilled to poke around the Bluff and scare themselves silly with campfire ghost stories and Blair Witch style documentary filmmaking. Considering what Cade Morrison had just told her about George Mallon, that probably would have gone over far better than a lone investigator with a digital camera and a few specimen bags in her backpack.

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Now, with one candid revelation, she'd descended from her tower of academia. She noticed him tap the brake and gave him credit for not screeching to a halt by the side of the road to laugh his damn fool head off at her. Nevertheless, she braced for his response.

"So...our demon makes it all the way down to the Twin Cities?"

Crap. How could she begin to explain this? If she told Morrison the whole, sordid truth, he'd probably suggest therapy, and then she'd have to explain that unfortunately, the therapy wasn't helping. She still had the visions and the new and often paralyzing fear of heights coupled with the most intensely sexual dreams she'd ever experienced.

Now would be a good time to cop out, she decided. She rattled her bag of pretzels and tore open the cellophane. "I doubt it's the same creature in both places...and I'm not making any scientific confirmations. I've seen something that bears a resemblance to the description Mayor Mallon gave me." She fished out a pretzel and offered him one. He took it, jammed it in his mouth to suck on the salt.

"Hmm. Well."

"I would appreciate it if you didn't spread that bit of information around."

Morrison crunched the pretzel and picked up speed again. "Why'd you tell me, then?"

God, she wished she knew. "I don't know. Maybe it's about time I told someone."

* * *

Cade kept his own counsel during the twenty-minute ride up Lake Road. His mind was anything but quiet, though. He kept stealing glances at Laurel and wondering why he hadn't once felt the urge to laugh at her confession. In all honesty, he felt something more like sympathy than dismay. Crazy or not, it took some kind of courage to track down a monster, even one that probably lived in her own head.

By telling him, she'd taken one step onto a narrow tightrope. She'd

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trusted him with something that obviously made her intensely uncomfortable and that put her position as an impartial scientific observer in jeopardy. She'd also caused a frisson of nameless anxiety to scurry up his spine. If a respected biologist from the university was seeing winged monsters, then maybe there was a little more to it than just the wild stories of teenagers who'd scored a bag of joints for a weekend fling at the lake.

He had no idea how to respond to her, really respond. He had an arsenal of flip remarks and clever one-liners, but absolutely no desire to use them. In fact, he sort of wanted to apologize. If not for his own insensitivity, then for her predicament.

Best not to get too deeply involved, he admonished himself when Bluff Lake became visible through a break in the tree line. He didn't need any more complications in his life.

"We're here. The sightings took place about two hundred yards up the Red Circle Trail. It's a mild incline, easy walk both ways, nice views of the lake."

"Okay. Can you tell me how high the elevation goes around here? Are there any...caves or anything high up?"

"Not in this area. Other side of the lake there are caves in the foothills, a few small ones up on the bluff, and a number of abandoned silver mines. There are a few spots where the mine shafts intersect with natural caverns. They're all off limits to tourists though. We let two professional spelunking groups in twice a year, but that's it for foot traffic. I hope you're not planning on poking around in there, because I'm not equipped for that kind of an expedition at this time of year."

"Lord, no. I was just wondering. A creature like this...assuming...well, it would have a lair, and a natural cave system or abandoned mine with little human traffic would be an ideal hiding place. I might like to see the entrances of the shafts."

Cade cut the wheel and brought the 4x4 to a halt at the head of the

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trail. The suspension bounced a little and he waited until the vehicle settled to throw his door open. "You're not one of those types who always wants to go just a little bit farther, are you? I take you to the cave entrances and you want to look inside. I let you go inside and you want to follow some tunnel for a few feet, then a few feet more and before you know it I'm doing something I didn't want to do because you charmed me into it."

She shot him that quirky smile again and once more his spine tingled in a way that made him a little more than nervous. "You don't seem like the type that's easily charmed."

Cade met her gaze through the open cab of the truck. "Not easily. But I have a bad feeling that if anyone can talk me into something I don't want to do, it's you, doc."

"Are you flirting with me?" She laughed, but there was a brittle edge to it. She was scared and trying to make light of something that meant a lot more to her than she was letting on.

"You don't seem like the type that's easily flirted with."

She shut the passenger door and met him around back. "I'm not. I guess that makes us even, for now."

He resisted the urge to help her shoulder into the straps of her backpack. With a quick glance at the darkening sky, he gauged they probably had less than an hour before the rain started. No more chit chat.

"Let's get moving. If it rains hard, the trails start to wash, and it'll be messy as hell trying to get back here."

She nodded once and they set off through the low overhanging trees toward the lake shore.

* * *

Bluff Lake was almost perfectly circular, a trait which had caused it to originally be classified as a crater lake rather than a glacial one. Fed by run off from the bluff behind it, its waters were icy, clear and a little

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choppy thanks to the damp wind that had picked up since they hit the trail. Laurel found it hard to believe it was late August. The pine scented breeze that swirled around them had a cool edge to it that raised goose bumps under the collar of her vest.

Or maybe it was the way Cade Morrison lightly touched her arm as they hiked in long, powerful strides up the shale-lined trail. His fingers brushed her sleeve twice, and she caught her breath when he tapped her shoulder and pointed into the distance at a flash of white disappearing among the close-set trunks of Douglas fir. "Buck," he said. "Moving fast like something spooked him, but I doubt it was us."

"Are you trying to scare me, Cade?" It certainly had worked. Laurel refused to acknowledge her growing apprehension. Something in her belly had curled into a tight ball and her heart was hammering as if she'd been running up the trail. This was exactly how she felt in the dreams—a knot of terror growing inside her, coupled with a sexual buzz that had her desperate for release when she woke. She pushed aside disconcerting memories of the beast following her in the half-light, stalking her and breathing in rhythm to the staccato beat of her heart. She ignored the vision of a rough hand on her skin, long fingers tracing a shivering line down her flesh while a tautly muscled body loomed above her.

Her sex clenched at the inappropriate path her thoughts were taking. This wasn't the time for a forbidden fantasy...if she could even call it that.

"You all right?" Cade's voice cut through the fog.

"Fine. How much farther?"

"Just past those rocks. There's a place up here where the kids like to come. They build a fire and stretch out on a flat rock. The first group said it came at them over the rocks, jumping or flying. Chased two of them—"

"Don't tell me any more. I'd rather hear it from the witnesses

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directly.” In truth, she didn’t want to hear it at all. She’d lived it, in her sleep, over and over again for months. She didn’t need any more images in her head.

Cade pointed up the trail and Laurel surged past him, swinging her backpack off her shoulder as she went. She pulled her camera out and tucked it in the pocket of her vest, then did her best to shut Cade Morrison’s presence out of her mind while she cased the area.

The flat rock he’d talked about was more than the length of a Greyhound bus. It jutted out of a tumble of boulders through the parted trees like a huge natural diving board. If the lake had been closer, it certainly might have been used that way. Unfortunately a dive off the end of the rectangular slab would have landed anyone attempting it face first in a tangle of elderberry. Beneath one end of the rock was a carved-out indentation in the dirt, too small for bear, but probably a nice hideaway for a smaller predator like a fox. A narrow hole went deeper beyond the indentation, and, as if he sensed her intention, Cade handed her a flashlight from his belt.

“Little small, don’t you think?” He leaned close over her shoulder while she peered into the tiny cave.

“Not for a bat. If this hole connects to a cave system, that might explain people seeing wings. A flock of bats coming out to feed can be a terrifying sight.” She knew it wasn’t bats, but she wanted to maintain that scientific aloofness. If she could give it a reasonable explanation, maybe the nightmares would cease.

“Mmm. Bats.”

Bastard. Laurel ignored his tone. “Hand me a stick.”

“You’re going to poke in there? You don’t know much about forest etiquette, do you?”

“Should I ring the bell?”

“Give me the flashlight.” He took the light back from her and sidled in close, pushing her gently aside. He hunkered down, coiling powerful

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muscles, and stretched forward, looking into the hole. "I'll be damned," he said a moment later. "Hand me a stick."

"What? You see something?"

"I sure do." He reached one hand back, grasping as if he expected her to obey his request without question. She found an implement—a gnarled spruce branch about a foot long and handed it to him, sap-sticky end first just for good measure.

"Thanks." She didn't miss the sarcasm. He angled the flashlight with one hand and fished around with the stick. A moment later he pulled out a diaphanous object. Grimy but transparent, torn and fluttering in the breeze, it looked vaguely like...skin. Laurel's breath hitched and held until Cade dropped the thing on the ground and reached into it with his bare hand. He pulled out a pinch of dry, gray green matter and sniffed it.

"Yep."

"That's pot, isn't it?"

"Old. It's been here a while. Looks like this bag's been chewed on. Squirrels with the munchies. Nice."

Relief made Laurel momentarily giddy. She laughed. "Someone's going to be disappointed the next time they come up here."

Cade wrapped the remnants of the bag up tight and, out of a sudden sense of partnership, Laurel reached into her pack and handed him one of her own plastic specimen bags. "Use this."

"Thanks." His smile was genuine and just a little bit sexy.

She backed up a step and turned her attention to the surrounding area. No time to get caught up in Cade Morrison. One mystery was enough for this trip. The fact that he could go from condescending to charming in the space of a split second left her off balance. Maybe that was why she'd told him her secret so readily.

Still annoyed with herself over her unscripted moment of honesty, she decided a little distance would be a good idea. While Cade bagged

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his own brand of evidence, she circled the flat rock, eyes on the ground looking for anything that might prove to her the beast was real.

On the far side, she found a natural set of steps formed by a series of flattened rocks. She hoisted herself up and strolled out to the end of the granite precipice. The view was magnificent. From here, it did look like one could sail off into the lake. The bowl of the sky was gunmetal gray now and angry clouds were rolling over the bluff, but she imagined on a starry night this place was magical. Why would anyone need to be high to appreciate a view like this...a place so high up...

She crouched down and put her hands on the sun-warmed surface of the rock to remind herself that she was on the ground...okay, on a big rock which was on the ground. She'd climbed up without thinking about it, just like she'd done at the ranger station. Therein lay the horrible part of this newfound phobia. She'd spent twenty-nine years of her life never giving heights a second thought, riding roller coasters, climbing ladders, flying all over the country. And now, these dreams had brought panic attacks that hit in the middle of her normal activities without warning. In her visions, the beast stalked her and carried her off to a dark lair where he...it...touched her and made her feel things she couldn't put into words. The terror of it, coupled with the sexual high made her tremble.

She screamed when a hand closed over her shoulder, and she practically jumped into Cade Morrison's arms.

"Whoa there—hey. Sorry to startle you. Did you find something?"

"What? No." She extricated herself from the comforting circle of his arms and glanced over her shoulder at the edge of the rock. Too close. Way too close.

"It's a long way down. I got a little dizzy."

"It's six feet."

"Ever hear it's not the fall that kills you, it's the sudden stop?"

"You're afraid of heights?"

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“No. I’m afraid of falling from heights.” Laurel sidled past him and headed for the way down. No hand rails this time. Six feet, she told herself. Less on this end of the slab. She sat down on the rock and swung her legs over, not caring if she embarrassed herself by going down on her butt.

Cade practically leaped over her and took the steps with the skill of a mountain goat. Then he turned and reached up his hand to her. “Come on. I’ve got you. You won’t fall.”

God, she wanted to believe him. She wanted to look into his eyes and trust his strong arms and broad back and sexy smile. She gave him her hand.

A blurry second later she was standing on the ground and Cade was looking down at her. She saw her pale reflection in his aviators just before he reached up and took them off, and her heart dropped right out of her ribcage and landed in her stomach.

Those eyes. Bluish gray like the shale that covered the forest floor, rimmed with the faintest hint of brown. She’d never seen eyes like his before.

Now he had a whole face, a handsome one with a strong chin, aquiline nose and a few little lines around his eyes. His lips pursed and her heart stuttered. “You okay now?”

“I’m fine. Thank you.”

“It’s starting to rain; we should go.”

“What about the other sites? This isn’t the only place the creature has been seen, right?”

“Two sightings here, one the other side of the lake also. But that’s a ride and a walk. I’ll be happy to take you tomorrow.”

Laurel sighed. She’d originally planned on spending a few days, maybe even a week in Pelican Bluff, but now, with her heart ping-ponging around in her gut and her body tingling from Cade Morrison’s touch, she wasn’t sure she could trust herself to handle it.

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A wise girl would catch the first bus out of town.

“All right. Tomorrow.”

“I’ve got to take this stuff back to the police station. By then it’ll be close to noon. Can I buy you lunch at The Grill? They make great sandwiches and homemade soup.”

Thunder rumbled over the lake and a chill settled in Laurel’s chest. “That sounds good.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t find anything out here.”

She gave him a quick glance before he turned to head back down the trail. Honesty begat honesty. Maybe it was time to confide in someone all the way. “I’m not,” she said and matched his strides all the way back to the truck.

CHAPTER 3

At five-thirty Cade gratefully turned over his desk to Bud Palantine and set off for home. A microwave pizza and a cold beer waited. Not as satisfying as the lunch he'd shared with Laurel Jensen this afternoon, but infinitely less unsettling.

Somewhere between Kady Hendricks's homemade corn chowder and hot apple pie he'd found himself laughing with the pretty biologist and wondering if it would be too forward to ask her to dinner.

People would talk, of course. The only thing that would serve to stall the churning wheel of Pelican Bluff's rumor mill on the subject of their lunch date was the auspicious arrival of George Mallon right in the middle of it. The mayor had squeezed his girth into the booth next to Laurel and in between his hopeful questions about evidence and official scientific reports, he'd flirted with her shamelessly.

Cade had admired the way she held her ground, and up until the moment George paid their tab and spirited her away to his office for a

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caucus on her discoveries, he'd been entertaining the idea of letting their afternoon run into evening. At the time, he'd been a little pissed at George. Not that he felt the fifty-six-year-old, twice-divorced armchair athlete was real competition, but nevertheless he'd felt a little bereft sitting there, finishing his coffee and pie all alone.

Looking back, he realized George had probably done him a favor. Laurel Jensen was undeniably attractive, but she didn't seem the type who'd appreciate a quick and discreet dalliance with a small-town boy. Add in whatever psychological baggage had her believing she saw monsters, and she spelled trouble with a capital T. Yep. He'd have to remind himself to send George a thank you note for putting the kibosh on his roguish romantic notions.

By the time Cade pulled into the driveway of his secluded A-frame, the rain that had started out beyond the bluff was coming down in sheets. He should have stayed in the truck until the worst of it passed, but it felt like he'd been away for months and the promise of a hot shower, and a quick meal lured him into the downpour. He slowed halfway to the door, enjoying the quiet rush of the rain and the sweet smell of damp leaves. Tonight he'd sleep with the windows open and let the night sounds lull him.

Once inside he set the lights low to accommodate the headache that had returned sometime after lunch, and in the dimness he indulged in forbidden thoughts about the lady scientist.

As he stripped off his damp shirt he pictured himself peeling off her vest and the tight T-shirt she wore beneath it. With no practical knowledge of her body, he had to imagine full, pert breasts and honey-toned skin under his hungry hands.

With the release of his belt he saw himself popping the top button on her jeans and slipping his hands inside. He imagined pulling her against him in the dark, feeling the friction of her hot flesh against his rain chilled skin.

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By the time he stepped under the steamy spray of his shower, his erection was full and rock hard. He didn't waste time wondering how long it had been since he'd made proper use of a hard-on. He'd given up feeling sorry for himself over the break up of his last relationship and had long ago settled into bachelorhood with a vengeance.

The only drawback to not having to make room for tampons in his medicine cabinet and sexy lingerie in his underwear drawer was that usually he pictured his ex while he jerked off in the shower.

Now he had a new face, a new body to help fulfill his fantasies.

He pumped hard, one hand splayed on the tiled wall to hold him steady while he imagined Laurel Jensen writhing in his arms. Slippery wet and soapy. Nipples peaked. Her hair streaming down her back. She'd gasp his name while he thrust upward into her willing body. He'd push her back against the wall, lift her legs and urge her to wrap them around his waist, and he'd fuck her until they were both on the verge of collapse.

It didn't take much more than that. Cade's muscles went taut all at once and hot cum spilled over his fist and washed down the drain. He sighed heavily with the last pulse and dropped his head under the spray to let the water blind him.

Yeah. Laurel Jensen was the perfect woman. Gorgeous, smart and sexy—and not going to be around long enough to complicate his life.

* * *

"I have a view of the town's only gas station," Laurel said as she wiped condensation from the bathroom mirror with a threadbare hand towel. She tucked her cell phone between her shoulder and her ear and unwrapped a miniature bar of rose scented hand soap.

Two hundred miles away in St. Paul, Frank Jericho, Ph.D. gave a throaty chuckle.

"People go up there for the scenery and you get a gas station? I thought you were planning to camp out."

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Laurel stepped out of the bathroom and eyed the folding tent and other equipment that took up half the storage alcove of her motel room. “It’s pouring up here tonight. I’m glad you convinced me to book a room just in case.”

“I can still grab a flight to Duluth tonight and be up there by morning. I still can’t figure out why you want to do this alone.”

“Because I do, Frank. I don’t want you traveling all night just to help me poke around in the woods looking for nothing. I’m starting to get the picture that the mayor up here just wants publicity. He’s looking for a *brand*, something to boost the souvenir trade. I’ll probably be on my way home tomorrow afternoon after I look at the other campsite. I bet I’ll never even take my tent out of the bag.”

There was a pause and Laurel imagined her colleague and closest friend pacing in his oak paneled home office and settling into his burgundy leather captain’s chair. “I don’t know why I have this urge to tell you to be careful. I don’t want to make you nervous, but I’ve been worried about you lately and it bothers me that you’re all alone up there in the wilderness.”

Laurel laughed. Frank was sweet, overprotective, and too intuitive for his own good. She settled on the double bed and stretched out her legs before responding. “I know I’ve been a little scattered lately. Maybe the peace and quiet up here will help me sleep better. Listen, if I do turn up anything—which I doubt I will—I’ll call you and you can meet me up here. Otherwise just think of this as my pre-term vacation and don’t worry about me. I’ll find a way to have a good time.”

Frank gave an indulgent sigh. Laurel wished she had the courage to tell him as much as she’d already told Cade Morrison, but the biochemist’s fraternal instincts would have gone into overdrive if he believed she had any more wrong with her than just insomnia caused by free-floating anxiety. “Next time you need a vacation, why don’t you go to the Bahamas like everybody else?”

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“I will. In fact, as soon as I get home, I’ll make reservations for spring break.”

“That’s my girl. You need to take care of yourself. Listen, I’ve got a fax coming in from Nancy at NYU and I have to give her a call, but I’ll be up for a while. If you get lonely out there in the boonies, give me a call back, okay?”

“I’m going to turn in early...but thanks. If I need to talk, I’ll call you. I promise.”

They said their goodbyes and Laurel set her phone on the night stand next to the bed. She settled back against the thin pillows and covered her eyes with the heels of her hands.

Why was she masquerading as normal for Frank? He of all people would understand that the pressures of academic life could become overwhelming at times. He’d realize that her schedule of classes, her personal research and publishing deadlines, as well as her mounting faculty responsibilities played a large part in driving up her stress levels. More stress meant less sleep and less ability to focus, which led to the daydreams and the disconnected feeling that had plagued her since that first, terrifying vision three months ago. Scary as it was, it all added up, really. Even her therapist had said strange dreams and loss of connection to the world around her were very common responses to an increased work load and the false perception that she somehow wasn’t measuring up to the expectations of her colleagues.

Any girlfriend would tell her lack of sex was probably more to blame than anything else. When she’d signed on full time at the university after graduation, she’d stopped dating. There just wasn’t time for it, and she’d never been interested in casual sex, as if the alternative was formal sex of some kind.

Laurel figured there’d be time for a relationship someday, time for long walks, candlelit dinners, and bouquets of flowers delivered to her tiny office on her birthday. One day she’d set up house with someone

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who shared her tastes and her work schedule. They'd buy a puppy to take the place of the children she knew she'd never be able to handle.

That had been her dream.

Now when she closed her eyes, instead of a trendy off-campus apartment with a queen-sized feather bed and walls covered with bookshelves, she saw something raw and erotic.

The visions came with the scent of sex and the sharp intake of breath that accompanied the feral thrust of a cock between her legs. Instead of lounging on a Sunday morning reading the latest journals with a man she'd playfully call "professor," she saw herself clutched in the dark-skinned arms of a winged beast. She saw golden eyes and upswept brows and long fingered hands that delved between her ass cheeks and pinched her nipples. She felt his tongue, hot and wet on the skin beneath her ear, felt massive thighs part hers and heard her own voice plead with him for release.

What frightened her most about the visions and the dreams was that she wasn't fighting to get away from the monster. She was clutching his muscular body to hers, arching her needy sex against him and urging him to fuck her. She was ravenous for it, for the scrape of sharp teeth over her breasts, the slap of heavy balls against her ass and a panting, gasping orgasm that left her breathless and trembling. And always alone.

She had to be going insane. Dreaming of sex with a monster, a creature that mounted her and took her body with reckless abandon—it was just not normal. Yet she craved it, and that's why she wanted to go out into the forest all alone. Not to exorcise the demon from her mind once and for all, but to see if it would come for her and give her what she craved.

CHAPTER 4

Cade knocked on the door of Laurel's motel room at 8:30 A.M. sharp.

Even though the sun was already bright and hot, he'd left his aviators on the dashboard. For the first time in a week, he'd woken up in his own bed feeling like a man rather than a beast of some kind. It was nice not to have to hide behind his sunglasses to maintain a professional appearance for a change.

The door swung open barely half a minute after his knock, and Laurel smiled at him. Her damp hair was woven into a thick braid that made her look enticingly virginal. She wore a red plaid shirt knotted at the waist over a beige T-shirt and sexy faded denims. His heart wobbled mid-beat and made a leap for the base of his throat, and his cock reminded him of the shower scene he'd played out again for himself this morning.

Maybe it wasn't a good idea to let his fantasies run amok until after

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the good doctor left town.

“Hi.” She leaned on the door frame and gave him a once-over that had him considering a muscle flex just for good measure. Could it be she harbored some fantasies of her own?

“Hi. I figured you’d want to get an early start, so I picked up breakfast from The Grill. Egg sandwiches and a gallon of coffee for me, a couple of low fat bran muffins and bottled water for you city folk.”

Her lips quirked and she cocked a hip at him and patted her rear. “Does this butt look like I live on low fat bran muffins and bottled water? Give me a break.”

Cade gave her a half smile and made a show of leaning forward to inspect said butt. It had been a while since he’d been dealt one of these famous female trick questions and he knew he had to answer carefully. “Yes. It does. Up here women need some meat on their bones. If you’re going to go stomping around in the woods, you need some protein.”

Her expression melted and she blushed. “Oh, God. I’m sorry. I really wasn’t fishing for a comment on the size of my ass. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot.”

“No problem. I haven’t been ‘on the spot’ in a while. I could use the practice. How’d I do?”

“Pretty good. It was thoughtful of you to get breakfast, thanks.” While he enjoyed the view, she hurried around the room, grabbing her backpack and camera. When she met him at the door, he caught a whiff of rose soap and strawberry shampoo mixed with a scent that was uniquely female.

“I guess you’re off duty today?” She nodded to his plain T-shirt and jeans. He still wore his utility belt and carried his radio and pager, though he wasn’t on call until later tonight.

“Technically it’s my day off.”

“I didn’t mean to take up your personal time with this—”

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“It’s fine. Most of my days off, I’m out hiking anyway.”

“Looks like no rain today. Do you think we’ll have a clear night?” she asked as she pulled the motel door shut and breezed past him toward his truck.

“If I had to guess, I’d say yes, but up here that’s not a guarantee. You planning on going out in the woods after dark?”

“That might be the best time. All the sightings have been at night. I have camping equipment, which I figured I’d bring up later if I found any evidence of cryptid activity.”

Cade stifled a long-suffering sigh. Damn, damn, damn. Now she wanted to camp out in hopes of being attacked by Mallon’s demon. Crazy little fool. If he didn’t offer to go with her, he had no doubt he’d be running up to the bluff in the middle of the night to rescue her from something.

He shook his head and pasted on a fake smile. There’d be no point in arguing with her. “Whatever makes you happy, doc.”

* * *

This time Cade drove around the lake, following the meandering path of the aptly named Upper Bluff Road.

The scenery was breathtaking, Laurel supposed. At least it seemed very nice each time she forced herself to glance out the passenger’s side window of his truck. To her endless annoyance, the lean, denim and cotton clad body in the driver’s seat had captured her attention the moment she’d answered his knock this morning and refused to let go. For some reason, Ranger Morrison was even sexier out of uniform. His dark hair was neatly trimmed and with yesterday’s stubble cleanly shaven, his face seemed leaner, his jaw more square. The sharp cedar scent of his aftershave gave him an air of rugged sophistication and a natural appeal that had her imagining him shirtless and sweaty, performing some manly chore like chopping wood or...making love.

No. No. No. Her logical brain had listed all the reasons why she

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couldn't afford a crush on Cade Morrison. Top on the list scribbled on her internal chalk board was the big one: *Long distance relationships are doomed from the start.* Under that, all in caps, reason number two was even more compelling: *HE THINKS YOU'RE INSANE.*

She hadn't come up to Pelican Bluff looking for anything other than an end to her growing anxieties. She needed to lay her sex demon to rest, not get laid...although... No. That was definitely not the answer to her problems.

She attributed her sudden interest in Cade's strong, ringless hands, his long legs and charming smile, to the residual affects of the dreams. The demon had ravaged her again last night, leaving her both sated and trembling. She'd woken in the throes of an orgasm and now, with a real live man sitting beside her, it only made sense that her thoughts would turn to a more normal outlet for her sexual frustration.

Understandable or not, she had to get over it.

"The mayor hinted that there may have been a more recent sighting," she said, tearing her gaze away from the fascinating landscape of his denim clad thigh. "He was being deliberately vague—said the witness was afraid to come forward unless there was some kind of confirmation that the creature actually existed."

Cade glanced her way, but Laurel kept her eyes on the winding road ahead. "George isn't a bad mayor, but he's a great politician and he knows how to work people. Just between you and me, it sounds like he's got someone willing to swear to everything you say. Probably someone with a little more credibility than six kids who just barely graduated high school."

Laurel nodded. "I was skeptical myself, but I figured maybe you'd heard something about a new sighting."

"Not recently. I'll bet a few come on the holiday weekend in September, though. More people up here, more coolers packed with beer, you're gonna get sightings of all kinds of things."

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“You think the mayor is playing me, don’t you?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying, doc. George wants this to be real, and he’ll make it real. One way or another.”

* * *

Laurel was quiet for the rest of the drive and pensive when they finally reached the Upper Bluff Camp Area on the far side of the lake.

Here the air was warm and still under the thick canopy of spruce boughs. Cade noticed wolf tracks right away, too close to the first mile markers of the popular Blue Triangle trail for his liking. He didn’t want to stumble into the territory of a roaming alpha male this morning.

“Let’s take the upper trail.” He directed Laurel away from the wolf tracks and made a mental note of their location and direction. “It’ll get us there a little faster.”

She said little during the walk, just snapped a few digital pictures and crouched here and there to examine what appeared to be random marks in the dirt.

When they reached the site of the second incident, she stopped even before Cade said anything.

An eerie sense of familiarity permeated the place. Cade had been up here too many times to count, but for some reason every leaf, every branch seemed extraordinarily clear to him, as if it were etched in his subconscious.

“It’s too quiet up here,” Laurel said. Her voice intruded on the uneasy peace of the empty camp site. “Shouldn’t there be more noise?”

Cade shrugged. If he said yes, she’d think he was trying to scare her. If he said no, he’d be lying.

His palms had begun to sweat and the back of his neck prickled. He’d been in the proximity of ranging wolves before and never felt this strong sense of unease. “We should make some noise of our own. The larger animals up here tend to avoid people unless there’s food around. Come on, we’ll head up a little farther and I’ll show you the mine

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entrance. Remember, no going inside.”

“I remember.” She bent to take a picture of a broken twig, then passed him on the narrow trail as if she knew as well as he did where they were going. Cade didn’t try to slow her down. Instead he picked up the pace until they were both practically running up the trail.

Laurel stopped at the rock hewn entrance of a cave that connected with the long abandoned silver mine. Hidden under a curtain of ivy, a rusted iron grate served as a deterrent to unauthorized explorers. Before he could move to stop her, Laurel had yanked aside the clinging vines and was rattling the ancient metal.

“Look, those rivets holding it into the stone are loose. Anyone could have moved this,” she said.

He crouched down next to her for a closer look. This particular grate had been here for more than twenty years. It dated back to Cade’s teenage years when a young couple had gotten trapped in a minor cave-in and died of starvation before rescue workers could locate them.

The rivets looked like they’d been pried from the rock. Someone had dug their way in and carefully laid the thick foliage back in place to hide their handiwork.

“This could be a lair.” Laurel took a quick flash photo of the scratches and chips in the stone around the broken rivets.

“Or it could be some damn fool’s idea of a good time. I’m gonna have to get a crew up here to fix this. Last thing I need is to have to haul some hiker corpses out of the mine shafts.”

She gave him a questioning look with those gorgeous eyes. “But you could seal it in—or out.”

“It is a figment of somebody’s imagination.” The words came out without warning or thought. Cade would have taken them back in a heartbeat if he could have. They hadn’t discussed Laurel’s own sighting of the creature any further. In fact, they’d seemed to consciously avoid any mention of how or where or when, and Cade had begun to hope

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that maybe he'd just imagined her confession. The look in her eyes told him he hadn't.

"What I mean is, since we don't have proof that anything lives in here, we need to reseal it to keep hikers safe. I can't have kids climbing into the old mine shafts."

"Okay, but what if it's an animal—a bear, let's say?"

"Bears don't clean up after themselves. If a bear had broken these rivets—and that's unlikely unless someone had put food on the other side of the grate to entice him—he'd have torn everything away from the opening and left it. A person put these vines back over the grate to hide it, not a bear."

"And you think a person broke these rivets?"

"Twenty year-old iron? Sure. Somebody your size could have done this with a screw driver and a hammer."

"Can we at least look inside with the flashlight?"

Cade unhooked it from his belt and handed it to her. Leaning close now, over her shoulder, he peered into the narrow cave along the dusty yellow beam of light. Roots and broken rock littered the ground behind the grate. The area looked scuffed and scraped, but there were no discernable footprints or animal tracks that he recognized. With the low rock overhang inside, only the shortest person would be able to enter the cave without ducking or crawling, and he saw nothing that looked like hand prints either.

"I don't see anything that indicates anyone's actually been in..." Laurel's voice trailed off when the flashlight beam skipped across a golden sparkle on the ground.

Cade leaned in closer, put his hand over hers on the shaft of the flashlight and directed the beam in a shallow arc across the cave floor.

"I guess bears don't leave their jewelry behind either," she said.

"Crap. Now I'm gonna have to go inside."

"Your idea, not mine."

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Cade ignored her satisfied grin and yanked the rusted grate forward. It creaked and scraped and the unbroken vines seemed to pull back, as if they were reluctant to offer admittance.

Laurel held the flashlight while Cade crawled toward the glittering spot in the dry dirt.

A gold chain with broken links lay coiled upon itself. It was thick, like something a man would wear. Expensive. Cade held it up in the light and shook the dust from his fingers.

“Do you think it’s traceable?” Laurel asked.

Cade eased his way out of the cave and placed the chain in her palm for safekeeping while he struggled the grate back in place. “Even if it was engraved with a name and address, it wouldn’t mean anything. Someone could have lost this years ago and some small animal could have dragged it in there. The openings in the grate are big enough for a rat, or a squirrel or a chipmunk to get in.”

“Occam’s Razor.”

“What?”

“Occam’s Razor. The most logical explanation is usually the correct one.”

“I know what Occam’s Razor is, doc. I’m just surprised to hear it coming from a cryp-to-zoo-ologist like yourself.”

Laurel rolled her eyes at him. “What I’m asking is, what’s the most likely explanation? A tiny little animal finding it and deciding to hide it in a cave, or somebody losing it while climbing into a hole they’re not supposed to?”

Cade held her bright gaze for a moment. He imagined the long, heady debate this could lead to and decided against taking the bait. “I’d say either one. I’ll bring this to the chief of police and see if he can ask around.”

“Maybe someone was using the cave to hide so they could play a prank on the kids that were camping.” Laurel rose, dusted off her hands

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and held the chain out to Cade.

He took it and tucked it in his front pocket. "Now that sounds reasonable."

"Then don't you think we should look farther back in the cave?"

"Ah!" He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "I should have seen that one coming. No. We shouldn't."

"If this is a hoax, don't you want to prove it?"

"Sure I do. I'll come back with a crew. We'll clean out the cave and reseal it and if we find someone's winged demon costume, no one will be happier than me to show it to the mayor."

"Great. When?"

"Coupla weeks."

She let out an exasperated growl and followed him down the trail, arms flailing while she complained. "Why so long? I'll be back in St. Paul by then—"

"Yep. It's not that easy, doc. We need a new grating cut to size, equipment for drilling into the rock to replace the rivets, and someone who's certified to enter the mine shafts. It could take a while to work all that out."

"Weeks? Come on."

"Safety first, doc. Safety first."

CHAPTER 5

“It came right at me, over the rock. I fell backward and hit my head *really* hard.” Andie Middleton twisted a woven friendship bracelet around her left wrist while she spoke. She sat before Laurel in George Mallon’s office, peering up periodically through the strands of corn silk blond bangs that partially hid her wide blue eyes.

“Did you black out?” Laurel asked and prepared to scribble the answer on her yellow legal pad.

“No, ma’am. I wish I had. It hurt—my head, I mean. But I didn’t pass out. I yelled for Terri and Jack. They were down below, bringing up the coolers.”

“So what happened next? Did it...attack you in any way? Touch you?” Laurel’s heart had begun to thump the moment Andie began relating the details of her ordeal up at the lake. The teenager’s fear and anxiety had become her own, internalized, as if she’d been there herself with the cold stone beneath her, her throat constricted in terror while

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the beast rose above her in the darkness.

“It stared at me then it...*he* put his wings out—”

“He? Are you certain it was male?”

Andie’s cheeks colored. “He...had a thing.”

Laurel blinked and Andie began twisting her bracelet in earnest. “A thing?”

“You know. A man part.”

“A penis?” For heaven’s sake, the girl was eighteen according to the original police report. She had to have seen one before.

Andie nodded.

“So it was naked?”

“Definitely.”

“Did it make any sexual overtures to you?” Laurel’s throat went dry on the question. Why did it bother her to think that the creature might have been looking to mate with a female other than her?

“No. I screamed and that’s when Jack came up top. He yelled—‘Holy shit,’ I think. Then it flew away.”

“It flew? Straight up? Or did it dive off the rock and use its wings to glide?”

Andie shrugged. “It dove I guess. I didn’t get up to look. I just laid there until Jack helped me up.”

Laurel nodded and made a few more notes on the pad. “Do you think a person could have jumped off the rock and run away?”

Again Andie shrugged. She twirled a strand of hair around her finger now, having abandoned the bracelet twisting. “I guess so. But this wasn’t a person.”

“I know.” Laurel drew in a calming breath. “Can you tell me about how wide the wing span was?” With her pen poised over the legal pad, she waited for Andie’s comments. Under other circumstances she might have dismissed the girl’s story. The details were hazy and though Andie hadn’t admitted it, both Cade and the police chief seemed to

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think there had been some mild recreational drugs and alcohol involved that night. Laurel had yet to interview a truly credible witness. The only verification Laurel had was the dream. She'd lived it just as Andie had, miles away in St. Paul, alone in her bed, only in her dream the creature hadn't flown away. He'd crouched over her and thrust a hand beneath her shirt. Rough fingers had sought her breast and muscular thighs had parted hers.

She stilled her sudden tremor at the memory of it and gave Andie a brittle smile.

"Wing span...I don't know. Huge. Pretty big. Maybe from there to there." Andie pointed from the corner of George Mallon's wide cherry desk to the door of the office. About six feet. That seemed small for a creature the size and weight of a man. Though it weighed less than forty pounds, the California condor had a greater wing span than that.

Laurel made some final notes and set her pad aside. "Thanks for agreeing to talk to me, Andie. I appreciate it. This must have been terrifying for you."

"I'm never going up the woods again. Are you...going to try to catch it?"

"I'm going to keep investigating. These types of things usually are never caught."

"So it will be prowling around out there forever?"

"I doubt that. In most cases, the sightings stop after a while. The prevailing theory is that these creatures seek a safer territory. Their survival instincts lead them to begin to avoid the areas where they've encountered humans."

Andie's pretty eyes glazed over and Laurel took that as a cue to rein in her science speak. "In other words, it will run away eventually."

"I'm still never going up there again."

"I don't blame you. Thanks again for seeing me."

Andie nodded and rose, offering a thin hand. "It was nice meeting

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you, Dr. Jensen.”

When the teenager had let herself out of the mayor’s office, Laurel sat back and sighed. That was the last of the witness interviews. All their accounts were strikingly similar, which wasn’t surprising since the six young people who’d seen the creature were all friends or acquaintances of one another and they’d had plenty of time to corroborate their stories. None of what Laurel had learned today would stand up to scientific inquiry.

The only thing left to do was go over the printed accounts and look for any discrepancies or details that the witnesses may have forgotten. Outside of her own personal experiences, this investigation had produced nothing concrete to suggest the creature actually existed.

Her only option to ease her own troubled soul would be to go out there herself and make the demon come to her before she lost her mind.

* * *

“Hey, doc. Fancy meeting you here.” Cade Morrison answered his door wearing faded cutoffs and a white T-shirt that hugged his biceps a little too well. The smoky scent of barbeque wafted on the cool breeze that swirled around his secluded cabin, adding to the mouth watering effect of the tight shirt and casual jeans.

Laurel forced her curious gaze up from his well formed pecs and looked him in the eye. “I’m sorry to disturb you. I stopped by the station and Ranger Palantine—”

“Bud.”

“Yes, Bud. He told me you had taken all the written reports and newspaper clippings home with you. I was hoping you might let me borrow them.”

Cade leaned on the door frame and jammed a hand into his front pocket. “George has copies of everything. I’m surprised he didn’t let you see them.”

“I figured your collection might be less...biased.”

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Cade laughed, obviously pleased that he'd succeeded in making her doubt everything Mallon told her. He stepped back and gestured Laurel inside. "Come on in. I'll get everything out for you. Hungry?"

She eyed him. "I don't want to intrude."

"If you were intruding, I'd have told you to come back tomorrow. Follow me."

He led her though the lower floor of the A-frame, one large sitting room with low, sleek furniture and a big screen television. At the far end was a working kitchen with a wrap-around counter top, pleasantly cluttered but clean. Beyond that, sliding glass doors led to a wooden deck where fat hamburgers sizzled on a gas grill. The view into the woods beyond was magnificent, serene and hypnotic. Laurel ignored the rumble beneath her sternum. It was hunger of a different kind, though the burgers smelled fantastic.

"Have a seat." Cade pulled a patio chair away from the cedar plank table that dominated the deck. "Dinner'll be ready in a few."

"This is really beautiful," she said as she lowered herself into the chair and stretched out her legs. "If I had this view from my apartment, I don't think I'd ever want to go to work."

"That's where I'm lucky. The view from my office is even better than this."

She laughed and drew in a breath of pine and mesquite scented air. "Bud is nice. He speaks highly of you."

"He has to. I'm his boss." Cade ducked through the sliding door into the kitchen. "Can I get you beer or cola?"

"Cola, please."

A moment later he returned with two cans and set them on the table. He took a moment to flip the burgers and then sat down across from her. "I figured you'd be setting up camp at the Bluff tonight."

"I should be." Good Lord, she wanted to be out there right now, tempting the beast.

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"It's not a good idea for you to be up there alone."

"I know. That's what's holding me back. I used to be a lot braver."

"There's a big difference between brave and foolish."

She sipped her cola and reveled in the sounds of the forest. "I'm not sure I know the difference any more."

Cade leaned back in his own chair, crossed his ankles and popped the top of his soda. "So tell me about it."

Laurel gave a start. She hadn't expected him to be so blunt. Then again, she hadn't told anyone, not even Frank, about her strange twilight encounters with the winged demon. She'd just assumed everyone would think she was crazy, and in fact, she wasn't far off from thinking it herself.

* * *

The burgers were beginning to smell done, but Cade didn't want to interrupt Laurel now that she seemed about to open up. He might have taken the question back if he could have, though. Did he really want to meet her demon? Wouldn't that seem a little too intimate for two people who had so little in common?

He held, listening to her rapid breathing and watched her fold her hands in her lap to hide their trembling.

"It was three months ago. The end of the term. I was swamped with work and barely had time to eat or sleep. I was walking between the dorms on my way back from a meeting with the head of the Biology Department. It had run long and it was probably after ten. I saw it out of the corner of my eye, something black in the shadows. I got out my mace and I kept walking until I heard a hiss behind me. Then I ran." She paused and looked off into the woods.

"He...*it* came after me. It seemed like it was flying. I screamed, but there was no one around. That was odd in itself. There are always students in the quad and dorm security is open twenty-four hours, but no one came.

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“It cornered me.”

Cade sat forward. He wanted to touch her, give her something to hold onto, but she seemed too far away. She was back at the university, alone in the dark with the monster.

“I closed my eyes. I figured I was going to die. It came so close, I could feel its breath on me, and it touched me.”

A stab of desire shot through Cade and he forced it away. Why would the details of this terrifying encounter turn him on? Did it seem like Laurel had clamped her thighs together tight? She’d closed her eyes and dropped her head back, though her shoulders were high and tense. Beneath her T-shirt, the hard points of her nipples stood out and Cade had to force himself to look away. His hand tightened around the cold aluminum can and the crinkle of thin metal helped to distract him.

“Next, I woke up sitting on a bench on the far side of the quad. I could remember sitting down to check my Blackberry. I still had it in my hand.”

“So it was all a dream?” Cade swallowed a quick draught, wishing it would cool the fire in his balls. He hated himself for the erotic scene that flashed through his head. Laurel Jensen with her back against a cool brick wall, eyes closed, breasts jutting forward into his eager hands and wanting him to touch her in every intimate way.

“It didn’t feel like a dream. But there was no other reasonable explanation. I’ve seen it again and again, in my dreams and sometimes like that, while I’m awake or at least while I think I’m awake.” She fell silent, studying her hands. Was she waiting for him to scoff at her, to tell her she was nuts?

He wanted to say the right thing, to find some combination of words that would comfort her, but what? Instead he rose and took the now well-done burgers off the flame. “Do you think the sightings here might be the same...more like hallucinations?” That wasn’t exactly the comforting words he had in mind, but Laurel didn’t seem offended.

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"I wish they were. Then I wouldn't feel like such a freak. A shared hallucination would suggest some kind of tangible phenomenon, something with an underlying psychological or physical cause."

Cade carried the plate of burgers across the deck. "Why don't we eat inside? It's a little damp out here still."

She rose and followed him inside, helped him set two place settings at the counter, and allowed him to pull out a tall stool for her. "This looks good."

"It's just a burger. I don't cook much, but now and then I get tired of frozen stuff." He smiled over the counter at her and settled onto his own stool. "How would you go about proving this is some kind of shared hallucination?"

"I'm not sure, yet. Maybe I'll have some ideas after I read the reports."

Cade nodded. "After dinner, they're all yours."

* * *

"I threw a rock at it and it screamed and 'rang' down the trail." Laurel shook her head and squinted at the hand written account that had been penned by Cory Creskin, age seventeen. He'd been one of the second group of kids to see the creature up near the bluff. "And these are high school graduates? He spelled screamed with two e's."

Cade sat on the floor, his long legs crossed at the ankles, a half finished beer cradled in his palm. He'd brought her the entire demon file after they'd finished eating and now his coffee table was covered with newspaper clippings from as far away as Duluth and copies of the original sworn statements taken from the witnesses right after each incident. He laughed. "I believe I said 'barely' graduated. This whole thing just smells like a hoax, doesn't it?"

"Yep. If it wasn't for...what I've seen, I'd be so out of here. Frank is going to box my ears for even thinking I had something concrete to investigate up here."

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“Frank?”

Laurel slid her gaze to Cade’s. Was there a hint of jealousy in his voice? “My faculty advisor. He’s a closet crypto, too, but he’s got a few more—how shall I put it?—skeptical bones in his body. He offered to come up here with me, but I haven’t told him about my visions and my dreams.”

“You don’t trust him that much?”

Laurel stiffened. Was that it, really? She cared about Frank, and his opinion mattered the world to her. She could not have stood for him to pity her. “I didn’t want him to worry. He’s a hard evidence guy. Hunches and intuition don’t factor into anything he does. He has to see proof. He built a reputation on that, though, so when he *does* get behind something, you can stake your life on it.”

“Hmm. Your credibility is on the line if you tell anyone about this.”

She nodded. Some of the weight of her secret had already lifted after confessing to Cade, but she still couldn’t picture herself telling Frank or her therapist about the dreams. “I’m beginning to think it might be better if I just try to forget about it. There’s nothing here that gives credence to the mass hallucination theory. At least nothing that would include me. These witnesses all went to the same high school and they all live in the same section of town, which might point to a commonality in food or water consumption, or an environmental factor, but then I’d expect other people in town to have similar experiences. Nothing that affects six high school students in Pelican Bluff could be common to one university professor in St. Paul.”

“These have all been multiple sightings, too. More than one person at a time. And you’ve been alone each time, right?”

Laurel nodded. Alone with the beast. She shivered at the thought of how badly she wanted to experience it again. How could she long for something so feral and frightening, so raw? She slid the paper she’d been reading back onto the coffee table and shot to her feet. Turmoil

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propelled her toward the front door and Cade nearly tripped over his feet in his haste to follow her.

“Hey, what’s wrong? What did I say?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing. I just think I should go. I think you’re right. I should get out of here. I’m going to drive back tonight.”

Cade grabbed her arm, curling long fingers around her wrist and halting her nervous flight toward the door. “I never said I thought you should leave, that was your idea. In fact, I think you should stay.”

“No. I can’t.”

“Why not? You look like you’re going to jump out of your skin all of a sudden. You shouldn’t be driving like this.”

“I’m fine. I just...” She closed her eyes against the flash, the dark vision that clouded her thoughts. Why now? The beast was coming for her now. It wanted her. Her body shook.

Cade’s arms slid around her, steadying her. “What is it?”

“I feel it. It’s happening again. It’s never happened in front of anyone before.” Fear and excitement clashed. Maybe it was a physical ailment. If she blacked out in front of Cade, she’d have her proof that the beast existed only in her mind. That would mean she truly was insane, but at least she’d know the truth. She sagged against him.

“Laurel? I’ve got you. You’re okay. Stay with me.”

Clawed hands tore at her clothes, delved into her jeans and found her sex. Her knees buckled with the force of it, the heady desire to be fucked here and now. “I can feel him. He’s touching me. He wants to be inside me.”

Cade’s startled gaze bored into her. “There’s no one here. Only me. Maybe you feel what I want.”

His voice rode over her, a balm to her raw nerves. Liquid heat coursed through her. Could he ease this terrible ache, this desperation to be claimed by the beast? “You want me?”

“God, yes.” He lowered his lips to her neck and suckled at the

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throbbing pulse point below her jaw. Laurel arched. This was what she wanted, what she needed. The beast clutched her, ready to take its fill from her willing body. She put her hands on either side of Cade's face, reveling in the scrape of stubble and the strong shape of his jaw. She pulled his mouth to hers and let him drink.

When his tongue slipped between her lips, she moaned. She'd never been so ripe for it before. She dragged one of his hands to the front of her jeans and guided him to open the fly. He complied eagerly, tore the zipper open, and had the thick denim riding her hips in an instant.

"I need you in me." She panted the words while he pulled the hem of her T-shirt out of her jeans and dragged the thin cotton over her head.

He pushed the straps of her bra off her shoulders and branded her burning skin with kisses from her ear lobe to her nipple. When he closed his hot mouth over the pebbled tip, she growled as if the beast was in her.

"On the floor." His command had her clit pulsing. She obeyed, dropping to her knees, then folding backward until she lay spread on the soft carpet. He was on her in a heartbeat clawing at her jeans until they came off with her panties hopelessly tangled inside them.

"God, what the hell are we doing?" Thick with desire, his words felt like a caress. He may have questioned their actions, but it didn't stop him. He tore open his cutoffs and kicked them aside. Stretching like a cat, his hard body extended, Cade pulled his own shirt off and flung it away. In a moment he'd shed his briefs and he was on her, hard thighs parting hers, his cock already glistening with pre-cum.

"You're going to fuck me. Right now." She reached for him and took him into her dual embrace, arms locked around his shoulders, pulling his heaving chest flush with hers, legs coming up around his waist, frantic to join with him.

She gasped at the hot intrusion of his cock. The soft head, wet with

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his desire, slid inside her easily, rubbing her clit as it went. One desperate thrust and the shaft sank deep, filling her. "Oh, Cade!"

He was everywhere at once, his mouth on her nipple, sucking hard, his hands beneath her ass, angling her hips upward so he could drive himself in deeper. Each thrust wrung a cry from her, laced with a ragged plea for more, and he obeyed.

Another flash and Laurel saw the beast above her. Dark skin, a face both terrible and beautiful, long tongue licking the sweat from between her breasts. She clenched her body, eager and afraid of the claiming. It hissed words to her, unintelligible but sensual and sexual in nature. He wanted her to know only him, to open wide for him and let him possess her. He wanted to be in her womb, in her soul, and she wanted it, too.

Cade drew his mouth to hers and woke her from her vision with a deep kiss. "It's me, Laurel. It's me. I'm in you." He punctuated each sentence with a deep thrust that rocked her hard against the carpet. She shuddered and curled around him, desperate for more, for the seductive slide of his shaft like steel and velvet. He braced one hand on the floor above her head and bent to whisper in her ear. "I'm coming."

She nodded, breathless. Her own body responded to the quickening of his and she moaned. The deep sound tore from her and an indescribable sensation rose from her thighs, up into her sex. Cade lowered his mouth to her shoulder and nipped hard. The pain shot through her and set off her orgasm and his. She stiffened, every muscle taut against the pleasure of it. Above her, his hard body trembled and he delivered himself deep, the hot river washing away any thought of the beast.

CHAPTER 6

The friction of a cool cotton sheet against his growing erection woke Cade hours later. The details of his erotic dream in which Laurel rose above him, her sleek body arched in ecstasy, faded only to be replaced by the very real desire to have her again.

They'd finished on the floor, raw and panting, and without comment, he'd tugged her to her feet, led her to the couch, and fell upon her again. The memory of her writhing under him, clawing his back with sensual scratches and her hoarse whispers in his ears drove the pounding in his cock to a fever pitch.

The woman was a goddess. Her hands, kneading his muscles, had drawn him constantly deeper into her. Her breasts, full and sweet and tipped with hard pink nipples, had scraped his chest and ignited his nerve endings to a frenzy.

She smelled of cinnamon and female arousal. Her scent clung to him and to the sheets of his bed where they'd tumbled for a third round

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of completely uninhibited sex. Cade remembered falling asleep with her perfect ass pressed against his cock, his arms wrapped around her waist, and one leg thrust between hers. Too spent to continue at the moment, he recalled telling her he wanted to wake up fucking her and she'd agreed.

He rolled to the right, stretching one arm across the empty bed. The glowing numbers of his alarm clock told him it was after ten. They'd been going at it for three hours and asleep for less than one.

Where was she?

He pushed himself up on one elbow and scanned the dark bedroom, listening for telltale sounds of a female in the nearby bathroom. No shower. No gentle clatter of the medicine cabinet—they either snooped or looked for mouthwash.

Maybe she'd gone down stairs.

No point in modesty now. Cade threw the sheet aside, brushed a hand over his cock. God, he needed her so badly. He'd never needed a woman like this—once or twice in an evening maybe, but this felt like obsession. If he didn't have her body in his arms, her sex wrapped around his soon, he'd go mad from it.

The nightstand caught his attention when he swung his legs out of bed. A six pack of condoms sat untouched in the top drawer.

He hadn't even thought about it. Hadn't protected her. Jesus, what a bastard he was.

She'd been afraid, caught in the throes of some strange vision, and he'd taken her, hard and fast and then again without thought that maybe she hadn't been fully aware of what she was doing.

Well, maybe not the first time, quick and dirty on the floor with her panting, "Fuck me harder!" in his ear while she came. But definitely the second time on the couch when she'd rolled him beneath her and mounted him, bit and suckled him, and rode him to oblivion.

And certainly the third time here in his bed when she'd demanded

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all he had and still begged for more.

Panic gripped him halfway down the stairs. The open floor plan of his cabin let him see the first floor was empty. No light in the kitchen. Her clothes were gone from the hasty pile in which they'd been left tangled with his on the floor behind the couch.

"Damn, Laurel, why now?" As clear as if she'd left a note, he knew where she'd gone. She hadn't reconciled with the beast. Even after all they'd done, she still wanted the creature to claim her. Fuck.

Hurling every expletive he could think of, Cade raced back up the stairs and grabbed the first pair of pants he laid a hand on. He pulled on a sweatshirt and sneakers and raced back down.

It wasn't the thought of Laurel Jensen wandering alone up at the bluff in the middle of the night that had sent his heart racing and his gut clenching. It was pure male possessiveness. She belonged to him now. If the beast was real, Cade was not about to share his woman with it. He'd kill the demon with his bare hands before he'd let it put its inhuman hands on her.

* * *

The gold chain spilled from Laurel's fingers into her open palm. Two parts of the whole tumbled together into a shimmering pile of delicate links in her hand.

She'd found them on the nightstand next to Cade's bed, in a small ceramic dish that held coins, a bent paperclip, a drug store receipt. The normal flotsam from a man's front pockets. She'd smiled indulgently while she stretched under the sheet. With Cade's steady breathing calming her, she felt at peace for the first time in months.

He'd sated her unnatural desires, taking the place of the beast and giving her what her aching body craved. And God, he'd been good.

By the third time they'd climaxed together, she could barely recall her attraction to the creature. Maybe the whole sordid mess was nothing more than a bad case of sexual frustration.

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The growing feeling of relief had died in an instant, though, leaving a cold, hard spot in the middle of her belly when the moonlight through Cade's tall bedroom windows glinted off the gold.

She'd fingered the receipt aside, dug through the change, and found the broken chain they'd unearthed in the little cave above the bluff.

Then she'd found the rest of it. Another piece of the same chain, shorter and without the dust from the cave floor embedded in the links, lay at the bottom of the dish.

Her blood froze.

He hadn't given it to Pelican Bluff's police chief. He hadn't needed to. Cade knew to whom it belonged.

In a panic, she'd swiped the two pieces and crawled down the stairs terrified she'd wake him. She'd dressed quickly and ran outside, cringing when the engine of her rental car shattered the silence of the woods.

Now she stood in the clearing above the bluff, the mine entrance at her back and a breathtaking view of the moonlit lake before her.

He would come for her.

She knew it.

She belonged to him now, had always, she supposed. He'd chosen her, gone sifting through the dreams of hundreds, maybe thousands, until he found the one woman who would accept him and want him to touch her.

Then he'd drawn her here so that he could have her.

Though the breeze coming down from the north was cool, Laurel stripped off her shirt. The cedar scented air hit her bare skin and she shivered in delight, ran her hands over her erect nipples, then down into the waistband of her jeans.

He'd find her ready for him, eager to be taken.

Not long after she'd cast her jeans and panties aside, she heard the rustle of leaves over head. An image of him, wings outstretched,

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flashed in her mind.

She dropped her head back and closed her eyes, let her hands rest against her naked thighs. The gold chain swung from her fingertips, tickling her hyper-aroused skin.

Her body tensed when the flap of wings stirred the air. He landed on the ground behind her, graceful and cautious. She held still, drawing careful breath into her lungs, and she squeezed her eyes shut tighter in anticipation of his rough touch.

“It’s all right. I’m here for you. I’ve come just like you wanted me to.”

Laurel sensed his approach. He understood her words, but in this form he could not respond. These lips, this throat weren’t made for human speech. His kind communicated with touch, through actions, not words.

He came up behind her, hung his head over her shoulder.

The heat of his muscular body warmed her, eased her shivering. His feral scent filled her lungs, dark musk and the essence of a predator.

Laurel’s clit pulsed. This stance, him standing behind her, the insistent bulge of his cock pressed between her ass cheeks, his lip inches above the pulse point in her neck, communicated his intent to her far more clearly than words. This was the mating stance, the claiming. By removing her clothes and standing still, dropping her head back and exposing her throat, she was accepting his dominance and offering her body for his use.

One eternal moment passed while he contemplated. Laurel smiled. Even like this, a fugitive, hunted and feared by humans, he had time for a mating game.

He gave her a millisecond of doubt, let her wonder if he’d choose her now that he knew the hunt was over.

And he did.

Laurel let out a sharp, startled scream when his arms locked around

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her waist. His wings shot out like sails rippling against the heavy air, and he leapt off the ground with her.

God, no! She'd anticipated everything else, the raw power, his animal nature and the fact that he would not be at all gentle with her like a human lover would be. Unlike Cade, he would not stroke her hair or run his hands down her body in a gentle caress. He would simply take her and bend her to his will.

She'd expected to be mated, sated and used relentlessly, but she'd never thought for a moment that he would be able to fly off with her in his arms!

The first true fear Laurel had felt all night gripped her heart like a steel band when her bare feet left the ground.

In the space of one strangled gasp, they rose above the trees. The lake shimmered like a jewel in the moonlight for just an instant, and then the beast banked hard toward the north.

Laurel's legs swung precariously over the sharp tips of tall spruce. Cool air rushed into her open mouth and she choked on her next breath.

"No! Please—put me down!" The wind whipped the words away as soon as she gasped them out. Above her, his heart beating steady and strong against her back, the creature radiated its mating triumph.

He'd seized his intended and was now spiriting her off to his lair.

Laurel clutched at his arms. Thick and cabled with super-human muscle, they tightened around her. Her belly flip-flopped when he banked again and she screamed when she saw the sheer cliff of the bluff coming at her, a shoulder of black rock against the glowing midnight blue of the sky.

She cringed, shrinking against the hard body that held her fast. Couldn't he sense her terror? Didn't he care that he was about to frighten his chosen mate half to death?

Blackness closed over her and for a second Laurel thought she'd passed out. Unconsciousness would have been a gift, but the adrenaline

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pumping through her system wouldn't allow her to fade away.

She blinked into nothing and then rough ground came up under her feet. He'd flown into a cave and dropped her on the ground.

Or rather, in his defense, he'd set her down on her feet. The fact that her knees subsequently buckled and she collapsed in a heap wasn't entirely his fault.

"No. No. Take me back down." Laurel's logical brain battled with her hysterical psyche for dominance. How high was the bluff? She had no idea. Could she climb down from here, naked and barefoot? Was that preferable to being flown, hurtling through the sky on the leathery wings of a demon?

"Oh, my God!"

He rose up before her, silhouetted against the moonlit sky, hands on his hips, his demon wings at rest behind his broad shoulders. He was as terrible and as beautiful as she remembered from the visions.

Dark skin, not a human shade but stone gray, stretched over the hard planes of his body. He was all muscle, defined as clearly as if he'd been sculpted by a master artist.

His face, an alien countenance, held amber eyes, sensual full lips, a strong jaw and pointed ears.

"What are you?"

She'd almost forgotten he was naked...and aroused. And unwilling to be distracted with conversation.

He held out one hand to her. A gift. A final opportunity to accept him on her own terms before the inevitable took place.

She nodded.

In an instant he was on her, lifting her and carrying her deeper into his lair where he'd fashioned a soft bed of what appeared to be pilfered sleeping bags. He placed her in the nest, the most gentle move he was capable of, and then, without preamble, he parted her thighs with own.

Involuntarily, Laurel tensed. She'd dreamed of this so many times

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and each time her surrender to the beast had been both painful and pleasurable. He'd given as well as taken, and her orgasms in his arms had been indescribable.

Yet now, finally lying beneath him, his cock seeking entrance, his long-fingered hands clutching her ass, her breasts, she froze. This was real.

Somewhere, beneath the abject terror caused by their impromptu flight, beneath the logical veneer that told her no such creature could exist, her body responded. A small ember of desire ignited and though her muscles protested, she opened for him.

The first thrust left her weak and trembling, her body arched with it. He was long and thick and hot. Her inner walls clenched tight and her clit pulsed insistently. Rather than pulling out and preparing for another thrust, he drew her up hard against him, his hands kneading her ass and angling her hips until she was pressed so tightly against him that she cried out from the pressure.

His lips found her throat and he suckled there, scraping sharp teeth against her skin. She bucked, eager for more, but afraid that in his haste to claim her completely, he would hurt her.

"Please...I can't breathe..."

Her words found their way past his ferocity and he eased back just a bit. One hand delved between her cheeks and she felt the insistent pressure of one finger. The thrust came fast, tearing a gasp from her a second before an orgasm ripped through her.

Back and front he worked her while she writhed, first away from the hard thrust of his finger or his cock, then toward it. No man had ever done this to her before, not even Cade...Cade.

Laurel locked her arms around the demon's back and gasped harder, higher with each dual thrust until the sensations within her coalesced again into a second coming.

Her scream of completion echoed through the cave and when she tightened with the last of her strength, he came in her and they were one.

CHAPTER 7

When dawn broke over the lake, Cade stood on the northern shore forcing air in and out of his tortured lungs. Sweat poured down his face and into the damp collar of his sweatshirt. The fabric clung to him like a too-tight skin he longed to shed.

It seemed like he'd been walking the trails around the bluff all night, though he didn't remember where or when his frantic search for Laurel had begun.

At some point, he'd called Bud Palantine on his radio and made the formal report. Laurel was officially missing. Her rental car sat unlocked at the base of the Blue Triangle trail and her clothes lay crumpled beneath a knotty pine by the abandoned mine entrance.

The rusted gate was still in place, so she hadn't gone inside, thank God, but where then? Naked and alone...anything could have happened to her.

He jumped when a hand closed over his shoulder, and he whirled

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around, ready for a fight. Bud wheeled back, his hat tipping off his head and falling on the soft ground behind him.

“Easy, Cade. Easy, it’s me. Damn, how long have you been out here?”

Cade doubled over, rubbed his hands on his thighs and coughed trail dust from his lungs. “Don’t know. Couple hours. Search party?”

“They’re assembling on Upper Bluff by the car. We’re going to take it inch by inch and go all around the lake. How long d’you think she’s been out here?” Bud’s normally ruddy complexion had paled with the severity of his task. It had been a while since anyone had gone missing in this jurisdiction.

Cade swallowed hard and responded through dry lips. “About nine hours.”

Bud checked his watch. “That’d put her leaving the motel around ten...”

Cade shook his head. No time for secrets. “My place. She was at my place.”

Bud only nodded, handed Cade his canteen. “Take a drink. She’ll be all right. She’s a smart woman, Cade.”

“She’s after the creature. That’s not so smart. She came up here alone to find that thing.”

“Some Halloween spook didn’t get her, Cade.” Bud clapped a hand on his shoulder. “That thing’s not real.”

Cade didn’t respond. He gulped Bud’s water and rinsed his mouth with the last sip. Beside him, Bud tensed at a sudden burst of static from his radio.

“We’re in position...” A distant voice crackled over the connection, one Cade didn’t recognize.

“That’s a go. I’m with Cade up at the lake. We’re working our way down to you.” Bud’s response was clipped, professional. Far too calm. Cade whirled away, one hand in the air to dismiss Bud’s startled

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question.

“I’m going higher up. She didn’t head back toward the road. That thing took her toward the bluff, I know it.”

Bud’s response faded against the crackle of twigs under foot and the whistling of the north wind. This was no time for procedure and systematic searches that would turn up nothing. This was war.

* * *

Laurel woke shivering and sore. The thin bed of sleeping bags and torn blankets might have seemed soft at first, but nothing could change the fact that beneath the layers of down and shredded nylon lay nothing but cold granite.

A moment’s disorientation faded, replaced by the realization that the bright glow from the cave entrance was sunlight. She’d been here, in the creature’s lair, all night.

But he hadn’t.

She pushed herself to a sitting position, careful of the overtaxed muscles in her thighs and belly.

The beast was gone. He’d left her here alone. Was he content that now that he had made her his, she wouldn’t try to leave? Or was he simply unconcerned with her fate now that she had served her purpose.

She untangled a strip of blanket from the nest and wrapped it around her, more for comfort than propriety. With the creature’s sultry body heat gone, the place was damp and chilly.

Though her body still seemed to vibrate from his rough touch, the insatiable need to be taken, the craving for him from which she’d suffered for months, seemed to be fading. Was it over then? Was this all there would be? One night clutched in the arms of the beast, his willing mate, his possession...then nothing?

She might have believed it all a vivid dream except for two things. The view from the demon’s aerie made her dizzy. She had to be a hundred feet up in the side of the bluff with no way down save to fly, or

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fall. And, lying on the stone floor, a few feet away from the entrance of the cave, were two pieces of the broken gold chain.

She'd managed to hold onto them during her flight, must have dropped them when her demon lover deposited her on the ground.

These were her only evidence, but still nothing she could ever share with anyone. Anyone except for Cade.

Her heart lurched. Would he find her in the daylight? Would he know where to look? She crept back to the edge of the cave. A rock ledge jutted barely a foot beyond the dark face of the bluff.

She couldn't bring herself to stand upright, or even to sit with her bare feet dangling over the edge. The drop was too sheer, the ground too far below.

She screamed for help and the sound echoed back at her from deep within the cave. Could there be a mine shaft this high above ground? A natural tunnel perhaps, that might lead her back to the forest floor?

No. She didn't dare go spelunking in the dark, barefoot and wearing nothing but the thin scraps of some hapless camper's picnic blanket.

"Damn you! Why up here? You know I'm afraid..." Laurel folded herself into a sitting position and rubbed her stinging eyes. "You know I'm afraid because you *made* me afraid so that I wouldn't escape."

That was it.

Somehow she understood, though he'd never uttered a word in any human language. His movements, his actions had told her. He needed her here, away from other humans, where he would be safe and free to do what he was compelled to do. He possessed her now, finally, as they'd both dreamed so many times. He wouldn't let her go now that he had her where he wanted her to be.

And she might have stayed. She might have accepted this hazy, erotic half-life as the concubine of the beast, save for this place. If she could have left, she might have chosen not to, but she would be no one's prisoner.

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She'd find a way out of here if it was the last thing she did.

* * *

Cade sank to his knees at the base of the bluff and wiped stinging sweat from his eyes.

He didn't need to check his watch to know it was well past noon. The shadows were already growing long under the trees. He hadn't eaten, hadn't rested.

His radio burbled with the conversations of the search party. Now they were looking for him as well as Laurel. He didn't care.

George had taken over the search, his deep voice laced with undeniable glee at the thought that his monster was now real enough to have abducted someone. He'd come to that conclusion on his own, though, and he was probably the only one who believed it.

Cade still didn't care. George would never catch the beast, but Cade would, and he would make it disappear forever once he reclaimed Laurel.

He craned his neck, searching the black rock and blue sky, and a second later his radio clattered to the ground, lost in translation.

* * *

The scraps of bedding formed a thick rope that Laurel prayed might be long enough to allow her to climb down from the aerie. During the hours it took her to tear as many strips as she could and knot them together end to end, she didn't allow herself to consider how she would talk herself into climbing over the side of the rock ledge, or to what she would tie the rope to anchor herself, for that matter.

One thing at a time.

Her chore kept her hands busy and her mind from dwelling on unnatural thoughts. Was she more afraid that he would return or that he would not? The ache in her thighs and her back, the scent of him on her nearly naked body reminded her of his relentless claiming and made

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her sex clench in anticipation of another round.

She'd given herself to Cade last night and then, just as eagerly to the beast, and her only shame this morning was that she regretted none of it.

In fact, she wanted more.

Her hands shook as he tied the final knot and surveyed her work. More than half of the fabric from the nest now lay in multi-colored coils around her on the cave floor.

How far would it take her?

Well, she reasoned, if it wasn't long enough to get her down the rock face, perhaps someone below would see it. A bright line winding down from the mouth of a nearly invisible cave would certainly draw the attention of someone on the ground...eventually.

She began to wind the rope around her forearm, elbow to palm, in thick loops and she'd almost finished when leathery wings stirred the cool air behind her.

She screamed, more startled than truly afraid. He'd come back for her in daylight.

Like a giant bird of prey, he sailed into the cave and landed with undeniable grace, his heavy thighs tense, knees bent. Laurel dropped the rope and backed up. What would he do? Could he tell that she'd been planning an escape?

His stance belied curiosity, his feral gaze, sexual hunger.

He advanced and, involuntarily, she retreated. For a moment she thought he would simply ignore her show of reluctance. His kind took what they wanted and since she'd accepted him last night, the rules had been established. She held her breath and let defiance creep into her gaze. "You can't keep me here. I need to be able to leave."

He tilted his head, as if contemplating her demand rather than merely trying to understand it. He advanced another step and she retreated. Now with her back against the cave wall, she had nowhere

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left to go. If he moved toward her again, she would submit...because her body needed it. Beneath the torn cloth she wore, her nipples peaked and her thighs dampened. Why did she want this?

"You can have me. But you have to promise to let me leave. I can't live up here. I can't..." A glint of gold caught her eye as she spoke. Lying in the dust beneath the coils of her makeshift rope lay a piece of the chain. She knew instinctively that a sudden move would convey the wrong message to him, but she had no other choice. She dropped to her knees and lunged for it, knowing he'd be on her in a heartbeat, and he was.

He wrapped one hand around her wrist and drew her up against him, then clamped an arm around her waist. Laurel's knees went weak and she sagged. Her body became liquid in his arms. Was it some kind of spell, a reaction to his scent and his presence? Or merely her own long hidden desire to be owned, to give herself over to an undeniable power?

"What are you?" She panted the question while he tore her makeshift covering aside. He lowered her to the remnants of the nest, his hands delving between her thighs, his head bent, tongue igniting lines of fire down her body. She arched when he grasped her hips and settled his hard body against her. "Where did you come from?"

Behind him, his wings stretched upward, rigid now and long, like the cock he positioned beneath her clit. In a moment, he'd have her, he'd be inside her and she'd lose all reason once again.

On a gasp, she wrapped her legs around his waist, reveled in the rough slide of his skin against her thighs. She let him in, taking his thrust. She closed her eyes, bit her lower lip, and moaned as he filled her.

Moments of pure sensation passed while he pumped his lean hips, keeping time with her racing heart beat. Within her, an orgasm built to fever pitch and she went taut in his embrace. "Please, please!"

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That, he understood. He made a sound of acknowledgment and snaked his hands beneath her ass. Laurel tensed for it, blind with pleasure. With a growl, he exploded within her and she shattered beneath him, trembling while her body rocked with waves of pleasure.

“Oh godohgodohgod!”

With the last of her strength, she did it. She held the chain up in front of his glowing eyes while his cock throbbed the last of his seed into her womb. The movement startled him, but not as much as her words.

“Come back to me, Cade. I know your secret.”

CHAPTER 8

Every muscle in Cade's body felt stretched to the breaking point. A jackhammer pounded at the juncture between his skull and the back of his neck, and his skin tingled as if something were crawling under it. "Jesus. What the hell—"

Laurel's face appeared above him, hazy at first and smudged with dirt. Cool, gentle hands roamed over his chest, smoothed his cheek, and brushed hair from his eyes. "Welcome back, Ranger Morrison."

Her voice was husky, silvery and seductive. And she was naked. That's right. They'd been together—aw hell, they'd fucked like it was the end of the world.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Only a couple of minutes. How do you feel?"

He thought about that. Other than the sore muscles, he felt damn good. He stretched, and one foot hit what felt like cold, hard rock.

He sat up fast against the insistent pressure of her hands on his

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chest. She pushed him back down. “What happened?” He remembered waking up alone, then the frantic search for her and watching the sun rise over the lake through bleary eyes.

And now here she was. Alive. Safe. They appeared to be in what looked like a cave. She was naked, her body streaked with dirt and smelling of sex. Good God. “Laurel—”

“I’m fine. Lean back and breathe. We need to talk.”

“Uh...*yeah*. Where the hell *are* we, for starters?”

“Up on the bluff, in your...*his* lair.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” He made a move to get up again, but she threw one leg over his naked torso and straddled him. It felt good, incredible in fact, but for some reason his cock wasn’t in gear at the moment. He felt spent, like he’d had one hell of a wet dream.

She held up a gold chain, dangled it in the feeble arc of sunlight that reached into the cave. “Recognize this?”

“Looks like my chain. I lost it a few months...a...go...” Shit. How could that be?

“It’s the one we found in the mine entrance. It was in a bowl next to your bed.”

She’s crazy. She’s insane.

“You don’t remember it, do you? You don’t have any recollection of becoming the beast.”

He sighed, closed his eyes. “Come on. Are you telling me I’m some kind of were-monster? Give me a break, doc.” He pushed against her, but she held fast, tightening her gorgeous thighs around his.

“I just watched it happen. You took me last night. You flew me up here and you...he...” Her eyes fluttered closed and her chest seemed to swell with the memory of it. “I don’t think I know the word for what he did. It wasn’t making love, but it wasn’t fucking either. He...you *took* me.”

A mixture of shame and blatant disbelief washed over him. His

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cheeks burned with it. What the hell was she saying? “You’re in shock.”

“No. I think *you’re* in shock. Whatever happens to your body is so traumatic that you block it out. You don’t remember any of it.”

She brushed wild brunette curls from her face and for an instant she looked like a scientist again, prepared to give a lecture. Adorable. Hot. Certifiable.

“Something happens to you, Cade. You’re...it’s like you’re channeling this being. He’s something alien...demon, I don’t know, but I don’t think he’s in you all the time. He’s not part of you. He’s just using you. Almost like an avatar. It was strange. You didn’t transform—you know, like a werewolf.”

“You believe in werewolves, too?”

She rolled her eyes. Did she realize how sexy she was, above him, her hands on his chest, breasts rising and falling while she spoke?

“Pay attention, Cade. This is real. This is something like I’ve never experienced before. You’re becoming something. It’s taking you over and using you, like a template, a pattern. Your body goes away, your mind goes away and he’s in your place. When he’s finished, he fades and you just...come back.”

Cade held her serious gaze for a beat, two. What could he say to this? “Laurel, people are looking for us. We need to get out of here.”

“We need to find out exactly what’s happening to you and find a way to make it stop. Whatever this creature is, he’s got me in some kind of mating trance. I can’t think when he comes for me, when he wants me. I’ll do anything he wants.” Now her voice held a hint of concern, maybe real fear, but she fought it well. “I can’t resist him. I’m not sure I want to, but I can’t be what he wants. I need to make it stop so I can go back to being normal, and I need you with me.”

* * *

Laurel climbed off Cade, reluctant to break contact with the

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reassuring warmth of his skin. The glazed look in his blue eyes told her he wasn't comprehending this. Of course it was beyond anything she'd ever encountered, or ever imagined. If he didn't believe it, how could she prove to him that what she'd just witnessed was real?

While the beast lay in her arms, panting, his hands still kneading her flesh, she'd shown him the gold chain, the one tiny connection between him and the man he'd taken over.

For a moment, his golden eyes held fear, maybe regret and then he'd simply gone, leaving Cade lying spent, unconscious, sprawled across her body. She hadn't had the energy then to panic, which was a blessing. Her analytical mind had taken over and left her with nothing but unanswered questions.

She brushed cave dust from her knees and her backside and picked through the tattered blankets until she found another piece of cloth large enough to cover herself. "I have no idea where your clothes are. You'd better grab one of these."

He sat up, shook his head. "What is all this?"

"It's a nest. I was brought here to...be his mate. He chose me, and he lured me here with the visions. Somehow he made me desperate to know what he was, to find him."

"Against your will." Cade's eyes went dull.

"No! God...no. It was my will." Laurel shook her head and pinched the bridge of her nose between her fingers. "I don't know what the hell is happening. I know this, it's against *your* will and that's why it has to stop. Whatever he is, he can't use you like this." She bent to recoil the rope she'd made. "Do you have any idea how to get down from here?"

Cade rose, unsteadily at first. His muscles flexed and rippled and Laurel had to remind herself that she'd just had sex. Now was not the time to be thinking about another round.

Cade walked past her and peered over the rock ledge. "Damn. A bunch of sleeping bags tied together isn't going to get us down there."

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"I'd suggest flying but—"

He shot her a look.

She put her hands on her hips. "That's how we got *up* here."

"Right." He took the rope from her, played it out end over end, counting yards under his breath. "We might have enough to make it to the outcropping to the lower left. It's a good twenty-five feet. Then from there, we reclaim the rope and work down the rest of the way."

"We?"

"You moving in up here?"

Laurel peeked over the side. The outcropping in question looked incredibly small and far away. There was no way in hell she could make it down there without a blindfold and tranquilizers. "With all due respect, Ranger Morrison, fuck that. You go down and send a rescue truck for me."

His features morphed into a faint smile. "A rescue truck? The closest a truck is going to get to this cave is about half a mile, sweetheart. You want down from here, you're going to have to climb."

She swiped a hand over her face and flung her curls out of her eyes again. *I can't*. Where had all that indignant courage gone? Why was she more afraid now than when she'd faced the prospect of escaping on her own?

"What about one of those evacuation slides like they use in high rise fires and air plane crashes?"

"That would be great. It would take about six hours to get one here from the nearest airport."

"Oh. Not too bad." She could wait. Six hours wasn't that long.

"You're coming down with me, Laurel. Right now. I'll be with you every step of the way and you'll be fine."

"I really don't think I can."

"You made the rope. What did you think you were going to do with it?"

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"I made it to keep busy. I guess I figured someone would come along and...rescue me."

Cade crossed the cave floor and put his arms around her. It felt good to lean into him. "I have. If you do what I say and don't panic, we'll be down from here in an hour."

"An hour!"

"I promise I won't let anything happen to you." He kissed her forehead once, just a light brush of his lips, and something fluttered in the middle of her chest. She'd be all right. She'd be all right as long as Cade was with her.

* * *

"Don't look down." Cade rested against a sharp corner of granite, one arm wrapped from wrist to elbow in the makeshift rope, the other curled around Laurel's waist.

"Why do people always say that? Like I have a choice." Her whole body trembled with the effort to keep her attention focused on her handholds and footholds.

"We're almost there."

"No, we're not."

"You're not making this easy."

"It's not my job to make it easy. It's yours."

"Feisty is good. Keep up the feisty, doc." He swung down toward the rocks below and Laurel yelped in surprise.

"Too fast! Too fast!"

"We're almost there. I promise you. Come on. Put your left foot down."

"I can't."

"Sure, you can."

"No. I. Can't."

"Sorry, I mean your right foot."

"Pay attention."

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Cade laughed despite their precarious location. The snap in her voice was a good sign. Anger was better than hysteria. She was crazy, brave, beautiful. His mind should have been on each miniscule movement as they inched their way down the nearly vertical slope, but all he could think about was getting her back in his bed where she'd be completely safe and completely his.

A shower of loose stones rained down from beneath their feet and Laurel stiffened. "What was that?"

"Nothing. It's fine. We're fine. There you go." Another ten feet and they'd be down. It seemed like a mile, but they'd make it. A quick glance down showed him his radio on the ground and his clothes lying in a heap next to it.

Jesus, what the hell had really happened here? At least he wouldn't have to walk back to Lake Road in the buff.

"Stop looking down," he said again. "Look at my hands. Watch my hands."

"Right. I got it. I'm good. I'm breathing." Her voice wavered just a bit.

"You're fantastic. You can do this."

"I can. I'm good. Keep moving, let's get this over with."

* * *

When her bare feet finally made contact with the forest floor, Laurel had to fight the urge to drop to her knees and kiss the ground. Their path down the rock face from the impossibly high mouth of the cave seemed even more precarious from below. How had she managed not to have a full-blown anxiety attack?

Cade. He'd given her the strength to get through it.

She wanted to throw herself into his arms, but at the moment he seemed distracted. He appeared to be debating whether or not to break into the frantic conversation crackling from the radio in his hand.

"We're going to have a lot of questions to answer," he said, turning

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toward her. He handed her the gray sweatshirt that had lain on the ground with his jeans and sneakers. "George is going to have his media circus." His eyes held a question Laurel wasn't sure how to answer.

"I won't tell anyone what happened."

"You're going to have to tell them something."

Laurel slid Cade's sweatshirt over her head. Already she felt closer to normal. He handed her the sneakers and sweat socks.

"No, my own clothes are around here somewhere. We just have to—"

"Donnie's got your clothes."

"Donnie?"

"Police dog. Bloodhound. They were going to bring him in late morning."

Laurel sighed. There wasn't going to be an easy way out of this. Nevertheless, she gave Cade a reassuring smile. "I've gotten good at covering up the truth in the past few months. I'll think of something."

* * *

It hit the fan when they emerged from the woods an hour later in the vicinity of Laurel's rental car. Joe Fortin stood with Officer Duncan Brown of Pelican Bluff's Police Department. The two men were leaning over the hood of the Chevy sedan, a map of the forest spread out and held in place against the light breeze by their radios and Dunc's handcuffs.

"Jesus Christ! Cade, are you all right?" Joe was the first to turn around. A huge smile of relief creased his features.

Dunc was more circumspect. His analytical gaze went straight to Laurel's wild hair and bare legs. "Laurel Jensen?"

"Yes, sir."

"You all right, ma'am?" Dunc snatched up his radio and brought it to his lips, prepared to call off the search with a word. "I can have an ambulance here for you in five minutes. Why don't you come over here

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and sit down?"

"I'm fine, officer. Thank you. I'm not injured." Laurel brushed dark curls from her face and worked on a reassuring smile. Dunc didn't seem to be buying it.

"Cade, what the hell happened? You've been out of radio contact for hours." Joe strode over and clapped Cade on the back while Dunc called off the search. A cheer broke through the static on Cade's radio and his heart went heavy with pride. The people of Pelican Bluff were good and honest. They didn't deserve to be lied to, but he saw no choice.

"We're all right, Joe. Both of us. We just need a little space."

Dunc already had Laurel in hand and was guiding her gently toward his patrol car which was parked in front of hers. She cast a skeptical glance at Cade before she folded herself to sit in the back of the cruiser.

Joe followed Cade's gaze with his own and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Did she see that thing out there? That's what everyone is saying."

"No." Cade swallowed the bad aftertaste of the lie. "She just got lost in the woods. City girl. She shouldn't have been hiking alone."

"What'd she take her clothes off for?"

Cade only shrugged. "You got any coffee in your rig? I could use something hot."

"I have herbal tea in my thermos. It's all yours."

Cade moaned. "Crap, Joe. Why can't you have high test in your tank like the rest of us?" He laughed, but the sound was hollow.

Joe clapped him on the back again. "Trust me, Cade. The last thing you need right now is something that will strip the lining off your stomach. You'll thank me later."

* * *

The questions went on and on, just as Cade had predicted. Laurel answered each one fired at her by Officer Brown, Ted Dyers, Pelican

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Bluff's Police Chief, and two concerned paramedics. She remained polite and accommodating and managed to tell them nothing concrete about her time lost in the forest.

They gave her back her clothes, which had been thoroughly slobbered on by Donnie, a sad-eyed bloodhound with a drooling problem who seemed even more relieved than the humans to see her back safely. They also returned her purse and the keys to her rental car. Good Lord, what a fool she'd been. So eager for the beast, she'd run off like some empty-headed school girl to be with him in the middle of the night.

Now all of Pelican Bluff thought she was either crazy or on drugs, or worse, that she'd been abducted and probably raped by some deranged hitchhiker.

The paramedics lectured her on the necessity for a complete physical, which she politely refused. The rangers lectured her on the dangers of hiking alone, even on the best marked trails. The police officers ran her name through the DMV and informed her with tight smiles that she had a spotless record and would do well to keep it that way. Every face that loomed before her, including Donnie's, was drawn in sympathy or concern, except for that of George Mallon.

When he arrived at the police station, ruddy and blustering from his day-long search for her, he gave her a bear hug and a conspiratorial wink. He shooed Dyers out of the office she'd been taken to and hitched one large hip on the corner of the big oak desk.

"I appreciate your discretion, Dr. Jensen," he began and his face split in a broad grin. "You're a true professional, but now that I'm here, we can cut to the bottom line. I can steer the investigation from here, but I need to know all the details that you're not telling my police officers."

"There's nothing to tell, Mayor."

"George, please. Call me George." He nodded and rose to quickly

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tip the door of the office shut. "That's better. Now, you saw it. I know you saw it."

Laurel sighed. She could lie to her therapist, a woman she paid to listen to her problems. She could lie to Frank, her closest friend. She could lie to Mallon. "No. I'm sorry. I didn't."

His smile faltered, flickering on and off like a loose light bulb. "You can tell me, Dr. Jensen. I *believe* in the demon."

"I know you do, mayor. And I wanted to also. I really wanted to see it for myself to finally have credible evidence of a living cryptid. I went up to the lake hoping, if the conditions were right, that I would see it, but I didn't."

"It abducted you." His voice was flat, his expression mildly hopeful.

"No. I got lost. That's all. Ranger Morrison found me. There's nothing more to it."

Mallon ran a hand through his artificially black hair. "Well, you still believe it exists. There's something out there in the woods, Dr. Jensen, and I still want you to help me find it."

Laurel dragged herself to her feet and clutched the now empty Styrofoam coffee cup Officer Brown had given her. "I'm sorry I don't have anything more interesting to tell you, mayor. In cases like this, there's often very little scientifically viable evidence. You will probably never be able to prove conclusively that the creature exists." Her heart had begun to race and she felt lightheaded under his steely gaze.

"You know something, doctor. I can see it in your eyes. You saw it. Please, just tell me you saw it."

She could throw him a bone and play on his obvious desperation, or she could cut him loose.

"I'm sorry, George. I didn't see anything. I just got lost." She dropped the cup in the trash bin next to the desk and strolled out, leaving the Mayor of Pelican Bluff sputtering behind her.

CHAPTER 9

Cade hesitated outside the door of Laurel's motel room. He'd raised his hand to knock and thought better of it. He almost walked away, then came back and raised his hand again.

Why was he here? He'd told himself he needed to check on her, make sure she hadn't been ravaged by the hoard of well-meaning public servants that had swarmed around her since they'd walked out of the woods. The other lies he'd told today had come so naturally, he almost believed this one himself.

The real reason he'd come to the motel had more to do with unrequited need than anything else. He'd taken her back from the clutches of the beast and he damn sure planned on keeping her.

He knocked and the door flew open as though she'd been standing there waiting for him to make up his mind.

She fell into his arms and before they could stumble backward across the threshold, he was kissing her.

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He'd come for this. To touch her, taste her. She was like a drug he'd become addicted to overnight.

"I was worried about you. No one knew where you'd gone," she said when she broke that first, breathless kiss. "Are you all right?"

He took her face in his hands and kissed her twice more, quick but deep. "Yes. I'm sorry I abandoned you."

"No, no. It was better I handled it alone. I don't want them to think you had any more to do with it than just being the one who found me."

"Bud knows you were at my place last night, but he won't say anything."

"Maybe you shouldn't be here." Her eyes held worry. All for him. A fist clenched in his gut and sure enough, he was glad his stomach held only Joe's herbal tea and not acidic black coffee.

"We don't have to hide anything. We can be together if we want to be."

"It's not about us being together. It's about them linking you to the creature. The mayor doesn't believe my story. He thinks I saw it and that I'm holding out on him. He left a message on my phone telling me a newspaper in Silver Springs will pay a thousand dollars for an exclusive interview with me. He thinks I'm playing him to milk this for cash."

Cade sat on the bed, drew Laurel in front of him, and held her hands in his. "He'll hound you. He's not going to give up his marketing plan that easily. Just watch. In a day or two someone else will see the beast, someone who wants that thousand dollars from the newspaper."

She nodded, put her hands in his hair, then wrapped her arms around his back. The scent of her filled his lungs, clean and damp. Freshly showered, she reminded him of meadow flowers and sun-warmed peaches.

His balls tightened and he ran his hands up under her T-shirt. "I need you," he whispered, his voice thick. "It's all I've thought about."

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Under his eager hands, her skin pebbled to gooseflesh. He raised the hem of her shirt and pressed his lips to the soft, sensual spot just above her navel. Her body tensed and she arched back, fisted her hands in his hair and spread her legs.

“Cade—”

“I want you.” He dropped his tongue into the tight hollow, nipped at her belly and curled his fingers around her sumptuous ass.

Her hips surged forward and Cade leaned back, pulling her onto the bed with him. While his tongue sought entrance between her lips, he pushed one hand inside the waistband of her jeans.

“Oh, Cade...it’s him. I see him...”

“Who?”

“The beast. He’s coming again...it must be this. Us. He doesn’t want you to have me again.” Cade rose up over her. Her eyes had gone wide, pupils dilated to pools of black. She seemed to look through him.

“The hell I won’t have you again. I’m not sharing you with him.” Anger buoyed him and he yanked her shirt up, exposing her breasts. He dove, taking one erect nipple into his mouth.

While he suckled hard, she writhed under him, her breathing shallow and fast.

“No, Cade...you’ll change. You’ll become him right here. He doesn’t have to hide from me anymore.”

Cade ignored her protests. He was in control, not the beast. He tore her jeans open, thrust a hand between her legs and rubbed at the hardening nub of her clit. She moaned and bucked against his hand.

“Not here—we can’t!” She pushed his hand away, clamped her knees together. “We have to find him, find where he comes from and stop him. We can’t let him come through again, because he’ll ruin you. He wants to take you over completely and then you’ll disappear.”

“You don’t know that.” He certainly didn’t know it. He still couldn’t accept the things she’d told him had happened last night.

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"I do know it." Laurel sat up and rested her hands on his chest again. "I know his thoughts. He's trying to lure me in, make me accept him again. If I let you in, he'll be able to take over again and I won't be able to resist."

"So to keep him from having you, I can't have you either?"

"Yes."

Cade flung himself to his feet. This was too much. He refused to believe it. "I'm me, Laurel. Look, no wings. No fangs."

"He doesn't have fangs."

"I don't care what he's got. He doesn't have me. This monster is in your head."

She clamped her lips shut and stared at him long enough to make him wonder if his words had truly damaged her. When she spoke, though, there was no anger in her voice. "I will prove it to you. We have to go back up the lake trail, to the mine entrance. I think that's where he comes from. We need to go in there."

"Ah! I *knew* it. I knew you'd have me poking around in there." He shook his head. How had he known that the moment he first saw her, she'd have him doing anything she asked?

"Trust me, Cade. Please. Don't ask me how I know. It's like I can understand what he's about. When he was...when we were—" She faltered and rage swirled in Cade's gut.

"When he was fucking you senseless last night?" The burning in his chest grew. Was it jealousy? Possessiveness? This thing had its hands on her body. It had touched her, and she'd liked it. She'd gone willingly into the woods and given herself to this creature. Now she wanted to go looking for it again.

He rubbed a hand over his face, his tired eyes, and the stubble on his jaw. His reflection in the mirror above the room's small bureau looked haggard and pale. If there was indeed a beast, it wasn't hard to believe he might be looking at it right now.

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“Cade.” Her voice was soft, soothing. “Come with me and let me prove it to you. We can find a way to end it.”

He held for a minute, meeting her gaze in the mirror. “Fine. Let’s go and end it. Now.”

* * *

Laurel pulled the edges of her jacket together and zipped it closed against the internal chill. The late August sun had warmed the dappled trail leading to the old mine entrance, but the summer heat wouldn’t penetrate to her bones.

The cold dampness of the deep earth had already crept inside her and she wondered if she’d ever be able to warm herself again.

While Cade tore the vines away from the rusted metal grate, she took one last look at the sky through the interlaced branches above. She wished they could have told someone where they were going. While she had almost no doubt in her mind that they would find the beast within the old mine, she had no idea how they would defeat its hold on Cade with nothing more than a flashlight, a rope, and the few other supplies they’d picked up during a brief stop at his place.

“Stay behind me,” he told her when he’d cleared the grate and pulled it far enough aside for them to squeeze through. “And here.” He handed her his radio. “Just press the call button. Bud is on duty. He’ll hear you and he’ll come for you if you need him.”

Laurel held his gaze for a full minute. Cold realization crept up her spine and tightened the skin on the back of her neck. Cade had already decided there would be one victor in this battle. Either he would survive, or the beast would claim them both.

He broke eye contact before she could think of anything to say. Wordlessly, he climbed into the cave and she followed.

The beam of his flashlight seemed terribly weak. It illuminated only a small circle of rock in front of them. Cade crouched low, then sat on the cave floor and thrust his long legs out in front of him. “Here’s why

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this place is so dangerous.” His voice echoed off the damp walls. “The mine shafts branch out below ground level. This was worked by just a few men at a time. They’d crawl in here and climb down a series of wooden ladders to get to the shafts below.”

With that, Cade rolled onto his stomach. He handed Laurel the flashlight and then, in an instant, he was gone, over the side of a heretofore invisible ledge.

“Cade!”

“I’m right here. Come slowly over the side, legs first, and I’ll help you down.”

Laurel held her breath. She tried to reason that this wasn’t the same as climbing down the bluff. She was, after all, under the ground, not above it. And since it was nearly pitch dark, she couldn’t see where she’d be falling to anyway. “Oh...crap. Why ladders?”

“Roll onto your stomach and push back. I’ll grab your legs.”

“Under other circumstances, that would sound sexy...ah!” She did as he instructed, remembering only at the last minute to grab the flashlight and the coiled rope Cade had brought with him from the back of his truck.

His hands slid up her jean-clad legs and he tugged her body toward him in the dark. A second later she was on the ground again. Only the faintest blush of sunlight crept over the ledge above them, illuminating nothing but the narrow shelf of rock on which they now stood.

Cade took the rope and the flashlight from her again and pointed the beam toward the jutting points of what appeared to be an aluminum ladder leading still farther below.

“I thought you said wooden ladders,” she challenged when he dropped the rope over the side of the second ledge.

“Someone replaced this back before the cave-in...bolted it to the rock.”

“You’ve been in here before, haven’t you?” she asked while he

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slung one leg over the edge and climbed onto the ladder. Once again, he handed her the flashlight.

“Why do you think I keep a close eye on this place? I used to be one of those kids who liked to explore down here. Until that couple died, my friends and I came here any chance we got. I’m lucky I survived some of the shitheaded things I did when I was a kid.”

Laurel followed Cade down the ladder. Her mind whirling. “Did you come after?”

He was quiet for a second, only the sound of his labored breathing reached her. “Sure. We all did.” He put his hands on her waist and helped her down the final few steps of the ladder.

At this level, the cave branched out into two wide arches. The tunnels stretching beyond the openings were black as midnight and smelled stale and musty.

“Which way?” Cade asked.

Laurel closed her eyes. The darkness seemed to ring in her ears as if the lack of light could actually make a sound. Instinct pointed her to the left. The beast felt her presence and it both angered and excited him. A vision of him flashed before her, his hands reaching for her body, wings outstretched. He couldn’t wait for her to come to him.

She pointed and held her hand out to Cade. He slipped his fingers around hers and squeezed tight. “We don’t have to go any farther.”

“Yes, we do. He’ll own you if we don’t. He’ll own me. I don’t want to belong to him anymore.”

* * *

They followed the flashlight beam into the left hand tunnel. After a few yards it began to slope downward. The ancient wooden beams that held the mine shafts open had begun to decay in earnest. They had to duck under splinters of old wood and remnants of the pulley system that had been used to drag buckets of dirt and silver ore to the surface.

It was all familiar territory to Cade. He and his high school friends

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had crept along these corridors, feeling invincible and heroic. He remembered where they'd carved their names, intrepid explorers leaving their mark for posterity, and he illuminated the old graffiti for Laurel.

"There I am. CM, BP...that's Bud, DB, that's Dunc."

"Dunc?"

"Officer Brown. A bunch of small town boys. We didn't stray far from home, did we?"

"So you've all been down here."

"Sure. I bet even George used to poke around down here when he was a kid, though that would have been a while before my time."

Laurel stumbled and he caught her. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Caught my foot on a rock. Let's keep going."

"It gets tight down here."

"We have to go deep. His lair is going to be well hidden. Someplace none of you would have ever found before."

"This is dangerous. We're getting into the area of the cave-in."

"I know. I can feel him getting closer." She gripped his arm and her hands were as cold as the rock over their heads. "He's in my head, Cade."

"Fight him. Don't let him control you."

"I'm trying."

Cade fought to keep the beam of the flashlight steady, but his arm seemed to be going numb. Each step he took became more difficult and his mind wandered to thoughts of Laurel. He saw her cushioned on a pile of torn blankets, naked and panting, her body glistening with sweat. He would have her again. He would claim his mate once more and she would never want to leave him again.

"Uh...Laurel?" When he spoke his voice was thick. The words came at a price, tearing from his throat and leaving it raw.

She turned to him just as he dropped the flashlight. "What is it,

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Cade?”

She seemed so far away, though she stood right next to him. It took him a full minute to draw a single word from the depths of his soul. “RUN!”

CHAPTER 10

The moment she heard the snap of thick wings spread against the chilly air, Laurel should have run. She should have obeyed Cade's final command, but she didn't.

He was already gone when she flicked her eyes to the side. The beast stood in his place, his terrible/beautiful face and granite muscles drawn like a curtain over the spot where Cade had been.

His desire for her was palpable. It radiated through the air and through the inexplicable psychic link they shared. Rather than succumb to the suddenly all-encompassing need to be possessed by the beast, Laurel leapt away.

Deeper into the darkness with the fading beam of the flashlight bobbing ahead of her, she sprinted, ignoring the uneven surface of the cavern floor. If she fell, he'd have her, but she had to risk it. She had to draw him farther below ground.

His confusion reached her through the tenuous link. He had

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expected her to flee and he relished the chase.

Images of how he would reward her disobedience flashed in her mind. Sweet, seductive punishment, pleasure that would leave her too weak to escape his grasp would become all she'd ever know again, if he caught her. It was all she could do to resist it.

A waist-high barrier of rock loomed ahead of her, and while she struggled to climb over without losing her grip on the flashlight, Laurel fought back with visions of herself wrapped in Cade's arms, writhing under his human body and begging for the true release only he could give her.

The beast seemed stunned by her rejection. He'd offered her everything she secretly craved, courted her in the way of his kind and laid claim to her. There should be no other for her now.

"I don't want you anymore!" Laurel's voice echoed, as did the sound of her feet hitting the cave floor on the far side of the rock berm.

She wondered if this was what remained of the fatal cave-in, and if that tragic event had been what first released the beast.

Beyond the rocks, the cavern opened up. No need for man-made tunnels here. Even as the beast drew near, Laurel scanned the walls with the jaundiced beam of the flashlight. It had to be here, close by, the beast's point of origin.

She sensed him rising over the rocks behind her. He could have lunged for her, gliding down on his wings and had her beneath him in an instant, but he hesitated. He stumbled, and Laurel's heart leapt.

Could Cade be fighting for control?

She scrambled farther into the cavern, frantic to find what had to be there. Deeper into the cavern to the far end where a nearly intersecting row of stalactites and stalagmites formed what looked like the gaping jaws of a toothy beast. Beyond that sharp demarcation and above, the flashlight beam fell on a smooth column of rock. Laurel pushed forward, squeezing between the jagged points and shone the light

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upward.

The smooth column became a leg, two. He stood on a ledge of rock about five feet off the cave floor. His body rose up, erect, in a fighting stance, knees slightly bent, seemingly wedged into a deep niche carved in the rock.

Centuries of water had leached through the porous limestone above and marbled his torso and thighs with colorful mineral streaks so that his stone body was no longer uniformly gray. Runnels of mossy green, rust, and sulfuric yellow marred his chest, the ridges of his abdomen, and his legs, pooling at his feet in a pattern that resembled an artist's palette.

His eyes were closed. His mouth stretched in a soundless scream of agony and his wings coiled tightly behind his back.

She'd found him.

Entombed.

Here, encased in a skin of actual stone, he'd stood far longer than he could remember. Lured here and trapped by humans who'd lived long before the time of the written word, he'd long despaired of ever roaming the surface of the world he'd chosen to conquer.

When the rocks had shifted, his tomb had cracked open and the essence of his soul found freedom, but only when he borrowed the body of another.

He'd taken a young man with red hair and strong muscles, only to discover that he too was trapped underground with the shrieking, terrified female who was his mate. When the young man's body died, the beast's soul had returned to his granite prison and waited.

Then another came.

Cade.

"You can't have him!" Laurel turned and plastered her back to the stone wall beneath the rock ledge. The beast loomed over her, wings outstretched, his erection high and hard. He wanted her still. He needed

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to feel the touch of a living, breathing being. Needed to feel her heart beat against his chest and her body clench and quiver around his.

“You can’t have Cade. Let him go.”

The flashlight clattered to the ground when the creature put his hand on Laurel’s shoulder. She didn’t scream.

All desire to run, to fight, left her and she sagged against him when he pressed his body over hers.

He made his intent clear through the link he’d forged between them. He had no intent to harm her because he needed a mate. He would take her back to the aerie, far from this cold, dark prison, and he would keep her there forever. In time, she would want for nothing save his touch.

She nodded and bared her throat to him. He accepted her surrender eagerly, laying claim to her once again with his mouth and his hands.

“Fight him, Cade. Save me and save yourself...” she whispered in the creature’s ear when he bent to scoop her up in his arms and carry her away.

* * *

He’d never understood before. Never realized that he might have the power to control it.

The dreams had come now and again since he was seventeen, since that last time he’d come to the old mine for a weekend expedition with Bud the month before he’d left for college in New Mexico.

Dreams of flight, of power, had ruled his sleep ever since. He remembered only a few details, bits and pieces really, and he’d never much cared if they had deeper meaning.

When the dreams became sexual, raw and explicit, he hadn’t complained or thought it odd. They were only dreams, after all, vividly satisfying and strangely empowering. Over time, though, he’d remembered less and less until he believed they’d stopped coming all together.

Then Laurel looked into his eyes and told him he could fight it. He

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didn't have to go away and let the beast take over. Why had he never realized he had a choice? Why had he never wanted one?

She lay in his arms now, her breathing shallow, eyes half-closed. He carried her back through the mine tunnels as if she weighed nothing. He possessed her.

Once again, she'd fallen easily to his will because deep in her soul, she wanted him, craved the feral touch of a demon lover.

She'd been the first to accept him. He'd searched for years, haunting the dreams of females every night, hearing them scream and flee to safe havens in their minds to escape his dark desires. She'd been the first to embrace him and to accept that he was more than a nightmare and less than a construct of the devil. She knew he was not the antithesis of the god that human's worshipped or a creature from the depraved depths of hell. She understood that he was a throwback to an ancient race that had once been flesh and bone, destined to rule this world and so many others like it. But here, those early men had called him enemy rather than embrace his leadership and bow to his superior strength. They had feared and hated him and plotted to destroy him forever.

In the intervening centuries, he'd often wished they had.

Cade forced his thoughts into linear progression again and managed to take back some semblance of control. One step at a time, he carried Laurel toward the mouth of the cave. The ropes and ladders were useless to him. His wings lifted him up the ledges with little effort and when he stood at the mouth of the cave, with late sunlight still streaming through the trees beyond, he set her down.

The beast fought for dominance, tossing images of Laurel at him with a vengeance. She'd clung to him in the night and reveled in the claiming.

With every ounce of strength, Cade forced himself to turn away from the mouth of the cave and made the beast take him back to its

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tomb.

* * *

A sharp sound woke Laurel from her dream state. Was it the snap of a twig or the rapping of rock on rock?

The ground beneath her trembled for a second and a puff of stale, dusty air erupted from deep within the cave.

“Cade!” She rolled to her feet and flung herself back into the small space, but a choking cloud of dust repelled her. She reeled back, coughing, her eyes burning.

What had he done?

She stumbled back, dizzy from the sudden return to full consciousness. She’d been wrong. She’d given the beast too much power over her and then expected to be able to stop him.

He was no cryptid. He was not a lower being, but something that had once been akin to a demigod. And he wasn’t unaccustomed to being refused.

The only reason he hadn’t killed her was that he needed contact with another mind, another body. The quest for power sustained him, but a deep, aching loneliness drove him to search for her. Because she had embraced the unknown, he thought of her as a kindred spirit, finally a suitable mate.

When the dust settled, she peered over the rock ledge. It wasn’t far down, maybe six feet to the second ledge. She could climb down and look for Cade. She could still make a fair exchange.

“You can have me!” she called into the murky blackness. “Just let him go.”

* * *

Her voice reached him from the depths of a dream and Cade stirred. His back ached and his head threatened to pop open like an overripe melon. He retched on the dust that clogged his lungs and prayed for

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blessed unconsciousness.

Then he heard her call to him again.

Laurel!

With a moan, he rolled to his feet. All around was blackness, dark as death. It rang in his ears and he strained them, listening for any sound other than the shimmering fall of dust from the cave-in he'd caused.

One shot, fired from the old pistol he kept locked in a case under his bed, was all it took. He'd tucked the weapon in his belt, under his shirt, and he hadn't told Laurel about it when they stopped at his place for supplies.

He'd planned to kill the beast with one shot between its golden eyes.

But he'd found a better way.

"Cade!"

"Laurel? I'm here..." A faint light became visible and he focused on it, watched it flicker and race around the rocks above him. He felt on the ground for the pistol, but came up empty-handed.

He'd have to leave it here for now. Once he got all the paperwork in hand to reseal the cave, it wouldn't matter what had been left down here. The pistol. The rope. The remnants of a demon encased in stone.

No one would ever find it again.

Her blurry form appeared and the flashlight beam hit him in the eye. "Laurel..."

"Cade...oh, my God. Are you all right?" She slipped into his arms and he lowered his lips to the top of her head and kissed her hair.

"I'm okay."

"What did you do? What happened to it?"

"I...I kicked out one of the old wooden girders. The thing was about to collapse anyway. It sealed the cavern off completely." Maybe, one day, he'd tell her the entire truth. Someday after they grew old

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together.

“We should get out of here. We don’t know if he can still...”

“He can’t. He’s gone. I promise.”

He couldn’t see her eyes, but he sensed her expression. She looked at him with complete trust. She wrapped an arm around his waist and leveled the flashlight at the rocky floor ahead of them. “What are we going to tell George?”

Cade spared only a brief glance back at the new wall of rock that sealed off the lower cave system. He could think of plenty of things to say to Mayor Mallon, none of them polite. “We’ll tell him the Demon of Pelican Bluff is dead.”

CHAPTER 11

“I don’t want to go back to the motel,” Laurel said with a pointed glance at Cade. His 4x4 careened down Lake Road as if he meant to beat the encroaching twilight back to town.

He kept his eyes on the road, thankfully, but gave her a lopsided grin. “I had no intention of taking you there.”

“Oh.” She didn’t smile but her heart began to beat a little faster. From the moment she first saw the beast transform back into Cade, she’d worried that their attraction was nothing more than an illusion. When they’d made love the night before, it had been the beast who’d wanted it, who’d orchestrated the sexual frenzy she’d experienced. She’d wondered if Cade had merely been an unwilling host to the essence of the beast when he’d taken her.

Now she’d have her answer.

He made the sharp turn onto the tree-lined lane where his cabin stood, warm and welcoming in the half-light. It felt like coming home

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and Laurel admonished herself for the possessive thought.

She had a life in St. Paul, one that she wasn't prepared to give up quite yet. But for tonight, she could forget and give herself over to another kind of claiming.

* * *

Cade led her up the stairs and sat her on the bed. He threw off his jacket and helped her shed hers as well. Then he knelt in front of her and took her hands in his. "No demands," he said. "I'm not asking for anything. Just stay with me tonight. All night."

Laurel smiled. "I had no intention of leaving."

"Good."

While he worked at removing her hiking boots and socks, she watched the play of muscles under his T-shirt and noticed the faint hint of red highlights in his black hair. She stroked the wayward strands from his eyes when he looked up at her and spread her knees to make room for him in between.

"Isn't it kind of early to go to bed?" she asked when he stood and stripped off his shirt.

"It's dark. What better place to be when it's dark."

"You have a point." She reached up and worked her fingers into the waistband of his jeans, opened the button and tugged on the zipper. Beneath the white cotton of his briefs, his erection was already hard and insistent. "We both smell like cave," she said when he pulled her shirt over her head.

"Mmm. I'll take that to mean you'd like to shower with me."

Laurel laughed. "In the lab, we call that jumping to conclusions without sufficient evidence."

"I've got plenty of evidence. First of all, I'm half naked. You're half naked. You said we stink and I tend to agree. Furthermore, the thought of you all wet and soapy and near enough for me to get my hands on you, is the best idea I've heard all week. What more evidence

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do we need?"

"I'll need proof that you have clean towels." She rose, allowed him to open her jeans and push them down her legs.

"Well, I have *dry* towels."

"Good enough." She giggled and relief surged through her. She felt free and real. The beast no longer lurked in the shadows of her mind.

With a sudden reckless abandon, she stripped off the rest of her clothes and raced Cade to the bathroom.

* * *

It was easy to forget the events of the day with Laurel's wet skin sliding under his hands. The grip of the beast faded to nothing and the cascading hot water washed the memories away down the drain.

He wouldn't regret it, would never think of it again. He'd done what was necessary to save them both and now he would reap the rewards of wresting his woman from the clutches of the demon.

He cupped her perfect ass and pulled her hips against him. She sighed and dropped her head back, allowing the shower stream to sluice sweet smelling bubbles over her breasts and down the gentle slope of her belly.

Déjà vu.

He'd been with her here before, one hand kneading her nipple to a tight peak, the other moving her lower body into position. He remembered the feel of her soft skin and the sound of her gasp when he slipped his cock between her thighs.

He lifted her, braced against the shower wall and settled her on him. She moaned.

"Oh Cade..."

With her ankles crossed over his ass, she rode him, drawing herself up, graceful as a swan, beguiling as a mermaid. He grunted his pleasure each time she came down on him, the grip of her tight sheath spiraling him higher and higher.

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“I need you...” he whispered the words while he nibbled at her neck. “Come for me...”

With a cry that ended in a tight moan, she did. Hard and fast, she shook with it and his body answered her with just the beginning of an orgasm, somewhere deep. He needed more and he needed it now.

He swept the shower curtain aside and stepped out of the tub. In two strides they were in the bedroom and on the floor, water seeping into the carpet around their bodies.

Cade lowered himself, impaling her again, even as the waves of sensation clenched her muscles tight. Once inside, seated to the hilt, he let himself go. The ferocity of it didn't frighten her...in fact, she seemed to blossom beneath him. She met him thrust for determined thrust and clawed at his back. Her thighs tightened on his waist and her body arched into his just before he exploded.

The release shook him to the core and left him gasping. With the last of his strength he looked up and caught her smiling at him.

“What?”

“Who needs towels? We can just roll around on your carpet.”

He gathered her in his arms and kissed her hard. “Is that a scientific conclusion, doc?”

“Yes, it is. It's probably the only one I've made this entire trip. And it's the last one I plan to make for a while.”

“Taking a sabbatical, I hope?”

“No...just another roll around the floor, with you.”

EPILOGUE

Two Months Later

“Two hundred and fifty miles southwest of the Aleutian Islands, a Russian fishing boat just hauled in something that looks like an unknown species of *Architeuthis*,” Frank Jericho said as he fell into step with Laurel. They’d just rounded the corner of the biochemistry library and the October wind nearly stole the flimsy fax paper from his hand.

Before it had a chance to blow away, Laurel snatched it from him and flattened it over the top of the stack of books she carried. “Giant squid are a dime a dozen these days.”

“They’re willing to send out tissue samples. I can get us on the list.”

“I’d rather go for sushi.”

Frank laughed and tucked his hands into the pockets of his pea coat. “This is the third cryptid project you’ve turned down since you came

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back from Podunk. Don't tell me you've lost the fever."

Laurel slowed and her mouth twisted into a wry grin. Unmistakable jealousy laced Frank's voice every time he spoke of her excursion to Pelican Bluff. "It's not called *Podunk*, Dr. Jericho. And to be perfectly honest, I just don't have the time to take on any extracurricular projects right now."

"Too busy to pursue your favorite hobby? Laurel, I thought we discussed this. You weren't going to pull another semester working yourself to death. What happened to making reservations for the Bahamas for spring break?"

She smiled all the way now and crumpled up the fax. Frank stared in horror as she tossed it in the next trash can they passed. "Already done. Reservations for two at a place called Green Turtle Cay."

Frank stopped walking. Laurel got about four steps ahead of him before she turned. "What?"

"I really didn't think you would do it."

"Well, I probably wouldn't have two months ago. In fact, I can say with all honesty that I only told you I would book a vacation so that you wouldn't worry about me."

He nodded. "That, I'd believe. What changed your mind?"

Laurel glanced past Frank's shoulder at a tall figure lumbering across the quad. Right on time. "*He* did."

Frank turned as Cade strolled up. "Ah. The park ranger, I presume."

Cade smiled at Frank, though his eyes were on Laurel. A wave of heat began to creep up from under the voluminous scarf she wore over her sweater and jeans. "Yep. You must be the stuffy biology professor."

Frank feigned shock, but the corners of his mouth turned up. "I hear you drive too fast."

"I hear you work too hard," Cade countered without missing a beat.

"You've corrupted my most dedicated adjunct and now I can't even

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interest her in the rotting corpse of a giant squid.”

“Mmm. Squid.” Cade put his arm around Laurel. “How about seafood for lunch, doc?”

“Sounds great. I’ve got to drop these books off with one of my TA’s before we go, but we should be on the road by two.”

“On the road?” Frank’s curious gaze bounced between them. “You’re leaving early—on a Friday? Who are you and where is the real Laurel Jensen?”

“She’s going rock climbing this weekend.” Cade took the heavy books from her and slung them under his arm. “Then, she might even be taking Monday off.”

“That’s a foregone conclusion, Ranger Morrison.”

Frank continued to stare, and for a moment Laurel worried that he might actually be angry with her. When he broke into a wide smile, she let out the breath she’d been holding.

“Good for you. Good for both of you.”

“Thanks, Frank.” Laurel gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“I guess I’ll see you Tuesday, then.”

“Probably.” She laughed and Cade nudged her. “We’d better get going.”

Frank walked away smiling and only once looked over his shoulder before he disappeared from the quad.

When he’d gone, Cade gave Laurel a serious look. “No more visions? No more nightmares?”

She shook her head. “How about you?”

“I’ve been waking up at night wishing you were next to me, but my dreams have been otherwise pretty boring.”

“Good. Follow me with those books...” She led him up the stairs of the biochem library. “I don’t want you having too much fun without me. How’s George been?”

“Recovering his composure. He’s still offering a reward for

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evidence of a demon sighting, but so far, no bites.”

“With the cave sealed up again, I don’t think there will be.”

Before they reached the door of the library, Cade turned. “So, what Frank said is true? No more cryptids for you?”

“I’ve seen all I need to see. Besides, I don’t have time for that anymore.” She leaned up on her toes and kissed him. “You’re all the beast I can handle.”

JENNIFER COLGAN

Drawn to spicy tales of adventure from an early age, Jennifer Colgan (who also writes as Bernadette Gardner) made the leap from writing hard science fiction to writing erotic romance in 2005 and has never looked back.

Now multi-published, Jennifer also writes paranormal, fantasy and contemporary titles as well as science fiction erotica (under the name Bernadette Gardner). When not exploring distant galaxies or alternate universes, Jennifer can be found at home with her husband of fifteen years, two children and one slightly neurotic Dalmatian. She spends her spare time reading, quilting and haunting the local craft stores and looks forward to bringing steamy stories to her fans for decades to come.

You can visit her websites to learn about her works in progress at www.bernadettegardner.com and www.jennifercolgan.com.

* * *

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