

**1032**

Talbot shrugged. "Well, if you're going in, it's almost four o'clock. You said you wanted to get in by four-thirty. Time to hit the shower, probably."

She kissed him, and her smile was seductive. "Why don't you join me?"

They let the hot water run over them, getting themselves good and wet. Liz held tight to the handrail as Talbot gently worked the lather up her thigh, teasing her until she was ready to scream, then slowly eased into her. Now it was his turn to take his time, and after they finished, they soaped up and scrubbed each other.

They got out and dried off, and Talbot wrapped himself in a bathrobe, while Liz shrugged into her waitress's uniform. He decided she made the simple dress look like a Christian Dior gown. She clasped his hands and kissed him one last time at the door.

"Oh, Don, thank you -- for everything. Will I see you tonight?"

His face darkened. "You wouldn't want to see me tonight," he muttered under his breath.

"What?" she looked puzzled.

"I have an online business conference to moderate tonight," he said, recovering. "I'll catch up to you tomorrow." He kissed her goodbye. "Don't forget to register for this coming term!"

He watched her go. Then he closed the door and sagged back against it.

'What in hell have I done?' he thought.

Never in a million years would he have believed he could do what he had done today. The feelings he was experiencing were alien to him. Kindness, consideration.... attraction? He had never felt them before. This was a woman he had planned to fuck in the afternoon, and then kill and devour tonight. The clash of emotions churned him up inside. He was confused -- and angry. But angry at whom? Himself? Her? Why her? He was almost shaking with rage. He walked out on the balcony overlooking the pool, searching for a diversion to take his mind off his runaway emotions. He plopped down in a chair and took a deep breath. Then he chuckled.

The "Bikini Bimbos" were on patrol. He had seen them yesterday afternoon when he'd gone for a swim. They were a bevy of five young women who dormed at the U of W branch down the highway.

They wore extremely revealing, next-to-nothing white bikinis. Returning students were always given free passes to the Royale's swim club during the week prior to "Welcome Weekend" -- traditionally Labor Day weekend. They called themselves the "Bikini Babes," and he wondered if they were aware of their other nickname! He understood that the "Babes" were U of W cheerleaders who "dressed up" for their visit to the pool. Each year new initiates joined as other girls graduated and moved on. They returned every year during this week, like the swallows returning to Capistrano. Their sole purpose in life was, apparently, to titillate and frustrate the men at the pool, and infuriate their wives and girlfriends. They reminded him of the lyrics to an old Eagles' song. How'd it go -- "Look at me / Look at me / I'm beautiful, I'm beautiful / I'm somebody?" That described the "Bikini Babes" to a tee.

And Talbot was certain that more than a couple of them had gotten help from a plastic surgeon's artistry.

He raised his eyebrows. Apparently there was trouble in paradise today. Janice, the blonde who was a clone for a young Pamela Anderson, and ostensibly the leader of the Babes, was getting in the face of Meryl, who looked to be the youngest of the group. She was probably an incoming freshman. For Talbot's money, Meryl was the prettiest girl of the five -- and he suspected that fact was not lost on Janice. Meryl was stunning; she had startling blue eyes and masses of wavy auburn tresses held in place by a green hair band. She had an incredible, perfectly-tanned body, and while she didn't have the biggest breasts, hers were almost perfectly-shaped. And she had an appealing deer-in-the-headlights expression that the boys found irresistible. The other three girls gathered around eagerly. He had learned their names, too. Judy was a raven-haired beauty, Tara was a hot redhead, and Crystal was another pneumatic blonde! They pressed in close to watch the catfight.

He expected to hear hissing and spitting and meowing any second.

"You can't be a full-fledged 'Babe' until you go skinny-dipping in the pool - it's your initiation!" Janice raged. "All the rest of us did last year!" Talbot found he didn't need his supersensitive hearing to listen in on the conversation; the normal hearing range of a human was more than sufficient. In fact, their voices were seriously grating on his nerves.

He found himself growing more irritable by the second.

"I don't want to!" Meryl protested. "I'd be so embarrassed!"

"Embarrassed?" Janice howled. "Christ, Meryl, you're practically naked now!"

She had a point. Meryl's bikini was the skimpiest of the bunch. The bottom was practically nonexistent -- a thin strip of cloth that rode up in her pubic notch, with wisps of auburn curls peeking out. There was nothing in the rear except a thong that disappeared between her smooth buttocks. The top consisted of two tiny triangles that barely covered her nipples.

Suddenly both of Janice's hands darted out and stripped Meryl. The auburn haired beauty screamed in outrage as a cheer went up from the men, followed by jealous screeching from their 'significant others.' The two girls were fighting now, shrieking and slapping, pulling each other's hair.

And then it all exploded inside Talbot like a wildfire.

The irritating noise -- the screaming and the shouting, the smell of rage and fear from the two combatants, the jealousy, pheromones and testosterone -- all of it ignited his already swirling emotions like a match tossed on a pool of gasoline. He cried out as bolt of pain seared through his stomach.

Long claws and thick, coarse fur burst from his hands. Horrified, he jerked his head down and saw that his feet were sprouting hair and talons as well.

He was Changing!

Overwhelmed by his emotions and the commotion at the pool, he had let down his guard, and the beast was out -- and he couldn't drive it back inside himself! Alarmed, he bolted to his feet, knocking over the chair. He couldn't let anyone see him!

Meryl, meanwhile, had torn off Janice's bikini and shoved her in the pool. "You go skinny-dipping, bitch!" she cried. She stormed off, sobbing, naked except for a pair of flip-flops. She grabbed an oversized terrycloth beach robe and slipped it on; then she stomped up the trail into the woods to a rousing round of applause.

The wolf-thing Talbot was becoming locked in on the retreating girl, memorizing her scent.

Another wave of hormones assaulted him. He felt his face twitch as a muzzle and fangs started to grow. His muscles thickened; his bones snapped and stretched. He stifled a moan of agony as his burgeoning form expanded and tore the robe to shreds. He darted inside, tearing off the remains of the bathrobe, and then dashed out into the hall, which was thankfully empty. He jerked open the door to the staircase that led to the roof.

By the time he reached the top, he was fully transformed.

The werewolf streaked across the rooftop, almost too fast for the human eye to follow. If anyone was looking his way, they would see only a tawny, indistinct blur. Without breaking stride, he launched himself into the trees, scrambling from one to another. When he was deep enough into the woods, he climbed down, following a deer run he had found that intersected the trail the auburn-haired female was taking. She was easy to track; her scent was strong with rage and humiliation.

He would be waiting for her....

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"Quittin' time!"

Brianna Lang stretched luxuriantly at her desk. She had spent a long, harrowing shift working on the "werewolf" case, and the brutality of the murders had shaken her. She'd had enough for one day.

Steve Dante glanced up at her from behind a microscope. The corners of his brown eyes were crinkled with concern. "Busy night ahead?" he asked, feigning nonchalance. He was ready to jump out of his skin; he frantically tapped his right foot under his desk.

"No, I'm bushed. Gonna go home and take a shower and crash in front of the tube."

"No.. hiking or anything?"

"No. This stuff today about wore me out. See you tomorrow, Stevie."

Dante relaxed visibly, and the lines on his forehead eased as he watched her leave. A moment later, his cell phone beeped, signaling he had a text message.

"MY PLACE AFTER U GET OFF. PIZZA AND THEN UR NEXT 'LESSON!' BRI."

Dante chuckled and pocketed his phone. Now that was something to look forward to!

Outside in the parking lot, Brianna slid behind the wheel of her Ion. She hated lying to Steve, but she didn't want him to worry. A smile pulled at the corners of her mouth when she thought of Dante. He was such a sweetheart! The sex part they could work on; he'd get better with practice -- and Brianna intended to give him ample opportunity to practice! But when the molten heat of first lust burned out down the road, he was someone she was sure she could count on for the long haul that a really good relationship required.

Brianna pulled out into traffic, drove the four blocks to Parker's Woods, and whipped into a parking spot in the lower lot. Parker's Woods was a city park that adjoined the Winslow Junction State Park, the one that wound its way around the lake -- and came within a stone's throw of the murder scene. Unless there was a phalanx of sheriff's deputies and rangers totally sealing off every inch of the wilderness area, she could get in.