

Dinosaur Lake

By Kathryn Meyer Griffith

Dinosaur Lake
by Kathryn Meyer Griffith
(a romantic science fiction horror novel)

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Table of Contents

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Epilogue

Chapter 1

“Ma’am, please watch your step,” Henry Shore, Chief Park Ranger for Crater Lake said, cautioning the woman as she inched closer towards the caldera rim overlooking the lake. A leather holster holding the ranger’s gun squeaked as he moved.

The ranger was tall and wore a flat-brimmed Smokey the bear hat which often hid his intense blue eyes and shaded a handsome face. It was a movie star’s face, his wife, Ann, always said, set off by long dark hair that curled down around his strong neck; hair longer than park regulations allowed, and his one eccentricity. He’d worn it that way since he’d left the New York police force.

His wife maintained he was pining for his hippie youth and perhaps that’s why he’d lost so much weight the last few years; he was as slim as the day she’d married him. He looked really good in his dark green and gray uniform.

When he realized the woman hadn’t heard him, Henry instinctively reached out and took her pudgy arm, pulling her away from the edge. Visitors (that’s what they called the tourists who flowed into the park) rarely listened. They traipsed all over the place never looking where they put their feet, lollygagging along. Always feeding the animals, though they’d been warned not to because it was against park rules. Some of the wildlife could be dangerous, especially the bears. They weren’t like the stuffed teddy bears one could buy in the Rill Village toy shop, cute and cuddly—the real ones could bite. At least once a year some naive park visitor was mauled or bitten by an animal because they hadn’t heeded the rangers’ advice. But park visitors and their money, Henry knew, were what kept the park open and the paychecks coming.

“It’s dangerous to get too close,” Henry warned the careless woman. “The rim is composed of loose rocks and dirt combined with patches of snow.” It was not unusual to have snow on the ground until July. “It’s very unstable. Doesn’t take much to go sliding over the edge or to start an avalanche.”

He didn’t tell her about the dog which had escaped from its mistress last week and chased a squirrel right over the edge and all they recovered was the poor dog’s dead, broken body. It would only scare her. In most spots, nothing could climb up or down from the rim to the lake. Nothing.

“It’s a straight plummet of nearly five hundred feet in some places, and in others as far down as two thousand, to the water. Right here it’s about fifteen-hundred.”

The woman caught her breath, met Henry’s eyes, and nodded gratefully. She clutched her purse closer to her coated side and obediently stepped back. So did some of the others who’d inched too close to the precipice. They were already winded from toiling uphill a quarter of a mile through the close-set trees, slipping on the remaining patches of snow and hunks of lava rock and powdery pumice, weighed down with all the junk park visitors inevitably seemed to drag along: video and regular cameras, cell phones and enough food to last a week.

In the park it was chilly, even though it was mid-June. The summer season lasted barely two months until early September. Then the white stuff would begin to fall and continue falling until early June. There were heavy traces of snow dotting the landscape around them and crusted up along parts of the rim. Last winter the park had had over seventy inches. From December to March, Henry and his wife had holed up in their little stone house after their work days, before the roaring fire, like hibernating bears.

“You say the lake was once a volcano?” the woman covered her earlier indiscretion by asking politely, her eyes studying the blue lake shimmering so far below, a huge sapphire embedded in a setting of multicolored rocks and lush evergreens.

“Yes, ma’am,” Henry replied, going into the well-rehearsed spiel he’d learned when he’d first signed on as a lowly park ranger. It was the same speech, the same tour he’d given, in one form or another, at least a thousand times. He could recite it in his sleep, even if he didn’t do it daily any longer.

“Ages ago Crater Lake was a volcano called Mount Mazama, part of the Cascade mountain range that stretched from Mount Garibaldi in what is now British Columbia to Lassen Peak in northern California. Geologists estimate it erupted about seven thousand years ago. Fiery magna, ash, cinder, and pumice spewed out in avalanches, some of them coming from underground beneath the base of the mountain. The escaping lava streams left a vast cavity that caused the twelve-thousand foot peak to collapse and form this breathtaking caldera.

“Over the centuries the caldera accumulated water from rain and snow and created the lake you see below. Evaporation and seepage, balanced with precipitation, keep the water level fairly constant; there are no inlets or outlets that we know of. The lava cooled over time and now the water’s pretty cold, fifty-five degrees at the surface in high summer; much colder at the lower depths. Right now the surface water is around thirty-eight degrees Fahrenheit.”

Henry frowned slightly. But, according to George Redcrow, one of his park rangers and a good friend, the water was steadily warming. George thought it had started with the earthquake they’d had a few years ago.

Henry continued with the rest of his speech.

“The pure water supports little life, except for aquatic moss, which, by the way, is found at extreme depths in this particular lake. Originally the caldera contained no fish due to the lack of adequate food and spawning grounds; but over the years we’ve stocked it and now there’s rainbow and brown trout, and Kokanee salmon in it. No fishing license is required.”

Henry didn’t notice the women attempting to snag his attention. He was looking in the other direction, still talking.

“Later, additional volcanic activity within the caldera produced the cinder cone, a volcano within a volcano, which you see below to your right.” He pointed at a diminutive island that rose out of the water and was covered with evergreens. “The island is known as Wizard Island—which, by the way, is as high as Niagara Falls and covers several acres. The island also holds three or four boat houses where some of the tour boats are kept. There are also two smaller cones in the lake, but both are below water level.”

Someone asked, “You don’t have any major volcanic activity these days, though, do you?”

Henry recognized the nervousness in the man’s voice. Standing there, vulnerable as they were, he could sympathize with the man. Even a tiny earthquake sounded threatening to someone already on steep ground.

“No, sir, that all stopped thousands of years ago,” Henry tossed back the standard answer he was supposed to give, though he disliked lying. The key word in the man’s question had been *major*. No, no major earthquakes. But he remembered the earthquake they’d had a few years ago. It hadn’t done much damage above ground, but no telling, as George had pointed out, what it had done to the magna underneath the caldera and beneath the park’s land.

Yet no need to frighten the visitors.

“Over there, you can see Phantom Ship, the only other above-water cone island in the lake.” The Chief Ranger directed their attention back to the landscape around them, and the people craned their necks searching for it. “There. That miniature island covered in wildflowers, trees, and topped-off with columns of volcanic rock, which gives it its unique silhouette and thus its name.”

“Yes,” someone muttered, “it does look like a ship, doesn’t it?” A chorus of agreement followed.

“I suggest that, if you have the time, you take one of the day cruises to visit both islands. They’re well worth the ticket and the trip. But be prepared for a wait as the boats fill up quickly.”

He paused. Beneath his boots he thought he felt a slight tremor. Then nothing. “No private boats are allowed in Crater Lake, only the park run concessionaires’ tour boats. I’ll warn you all now, in order to preserve the purity of the water, no one is allowed to swim in the lake, either.” Yet people regularly snuck into the water, as cold as it was, for a quick swim anyway, just to say they’d done it.

Henry watched what appeared to be two water bugs across the lake leaving Cleetwood Dock. They were really sixty-foot boats heading towards Wizard Island. Probably the last tour of the day and running late.

Below were more people with other tours walking along the crater’s rim. Sometimes their voices could be heard drifting on the wind, snatches of conversations or soft laughter that played in whispers around Henry’s head.

He acknowledged, with a smile or a tip of his hat, the people in the tour group working their way past them up the two-and-a-half miles from Rim Drive to the fire tower at the summit of Mount Scott. Mount Scott was the highest point in the park at 8,926 feet. It had a wonderful view of the surrounding lands, including the second highest mountain in the park, Cloudcap, and was popular with the visitors.

Henry nodded to the park ranger in charge, Matthew Kiley, returning the other man’s grin of amusement, and continued his presentation without a hitch. His men still got a kick out of seeing him with the visitors, especially since his recent promotion to Chief Ranger. They all knew that Henry hated his office and shiny desk. He missed being their friend, their colleague and detested having to boss them.

Henry enjoyed being outside, damn the waiting paperwork, the telephones, the computers, the meetings and the politics of his new position, and grabbed every chance he could to be out in the park. He told everyone that being short-handed as they were, with the budget-cuts and the federal shut-downs, filling in on guiding the tours was the least he could do to help his over-worked men. Truth was, he just plain enjoyed it.

He was disgusted with the way the Federal Government had cut funding to the park and how they’d refused to replace Ranger Griffen, who’d retired last month. His men might have to accept temporary pay cuts, if he wanted to keep everyone on the payroll. Money was tight. If it weren’t for the park visitors and their generous donations, the park would have to close.

“To your left,” Henry forced himself to smile for the people in spite of his gloomy thoughts, inhaling fresh air into his lungs, “is Cleetwood Cove. You can’t see it clearly because it’s five miles away, but it’s the only entrance or trail down to the water, weather permitting. Boat tours leave every two hours.”

One of the children pestered a grownup to let them go on the boat tour and got a resigned, but weary nod.

“There are only six lakes in the world,” Henry resumed in a resonant voice, “deeper than Crater Lake, which, at its greatest depth, has been measured at 1,932 feet. In the western hemisphere, only Great Slave Lake in Canada is deeper, and only by eighty-three feet.”

He stared out over the circle of water below, still able to appreciate the beauty of the place after all the years he’d been there. It was a sight he wanted to look upon every day for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, though trained as an E.M.T, a firefighter, commissioned as a gun-carrying law enforcement officer, and a park ranger, he’d eventually be forced to resign someday. Time doesn’t stand still for anyone. He and Ann had already decided to relocate after his retirement somewhere in the area, perhaps around Klamath Falls.

Somehow the land, the park, had captured Henry’s heart and soul. He’d never felt such a passion for a place before. Ann was always amazed at the love her husband had for their home.

A young woman with fiery red hair peered over the edge, tossing a small rock into the abyss. She was about to toss a shiny piece of quartz, but decided to pocket it instead. Looking up guiltily, the woman pretended to pay more attention to Henry’s speech.

“Crater Lake is approximately 25 miles in diameter and the rim that we’re standing on is formed of varicolored lava rocks,” Henry told the group.

“The water is so incredibly blue,” one of them, a short man with a wild-looking beard commented, unintentionally interrupting him. The visitors always noticed the vivid blue color. It was one of the first things they commented on.

“I’ve never seen such a brilliant blue,” said another guy, further back in the crowd, supporting the observation. He was holding the hand of a young girl, about ten years old, with braces that glittered in the sun every time she smiled.

Henry explained. “That’s because the water is so crystalline and unpolluted it acts as a prism for the sun’s rays, reflecting them to the surface. When it’s overcast or cloudy the blue isn’t quite as intense.”

The water below, a mirror, cast back everything around it in hauntingly muted colors. A hawk swooped down over their heads and with a dip of its wings soared into the billowy clouds above.

It was getting late. Time to wind up the tour and get the people back down to their RVs, or lodge rooms, safe and snug, before the night fell. The park could get very dark after the sun went down.

He sped up the program, shivering with the first arrival of the cold evening air. “The lake was discovered in June 1853, by a party of prospectors led by John W. Hillman as he was searching for the ‘Lost Cabin’ gold mine. He never found the mine, but while climbing up the slopes of Mount Mazama to get a better view of the area, he and his mule nearly stumbled over the precipice here. Which would have been a really bad step.”

A couple of chuckles.

“Though Hillman never found the lost gold mine, discovering the lake was almost as good. I believe this is the most beautiful lake in the world—but, then, I guess I could be biased because I live and work in the park. Well,” Henry declared, “it’s time to return to the lodge.”

Out of nowhere, the red-haired woman blurted out, “Have you ever seen the creature in the lake, Ranger Shore?” She was snacking on a big bag of M&M’s and between her words she crunched on the candies.

“What creature?” Henry was smiling.

“Oh, the serpent creature...the one that lives in the lake? My friend, Martha, was here last summer and she told me she saw this...*thing*...swimming in the lake one night.

Looked sort of like a huge snake, only with a shorter neck and a fatter body. She swore it was greenish in color, and scaly. A water serpent. Just like that thing in Loch Ness, only smaller. Loch Ness, in Scotland, you know?"

Henry could only nod. He couldn't believe the woman was going on and on about a lake monster. There were no such things. Into his mind stomped the image of Godzilla climbing out of Crater Lake, spiked tail swinging and beady marble eyes scowling as it frantically waved around its tiny, clawed front arms. Henry had to stop himself from laughing.

"My friend said the creature nearly scared her to death. She'd gotten separated from the rest of her tour group exploring Wizard Island, and saw the thing in the water off shore. It circled three times glaring at her. She was terrified it was going to come up on land after her. She wasn't the only one who saw it, either. Herman, her boyfriend, saw it, too."

"Did she get a photograph of it?"

"Well, no. She was so scared she forgot all about her camera, and by the time she remembered the creature was long gone. She said it was really fast."

All eyes were on Henry. He didn't know what to say. Was the woman a crack-pot, or what? She seemed normal enough, no drooling or twitches, but one could never tell.

He sighed, trying not to appear rude. "Ma'am, as far as I know there is no serpent, no huge creature of any variety in Crater Lake. And believe me, if there was one, I'd be the first to know it," he insisted, with a casual shrug. "One of my rangers would have seen and reported it long before this. They patrol the lake every day."

The woman grunted in a dismissive way, didn't say anything else, but her eyes kept squinting out at the water from under her raised palm. The sun was beginning to set in all its splendor. The whole park was bathed in a mist of golden pinks and yellows. Clouds raced across the sky like candy-colored wisps of cotton.

What bizarre things people can come up with, Henry thought.

With an amused smile, he turned and started to lead the group back down the mountain when the ground began to shake, the trees around them swayed violently and the earth heaved beneath their feet. From far off came the sound of crashing rock and distant screams. Henry barely had time to steady himself against a rock and to see the panic in his tour group's eyes before the quake was over—as suddenly as it had begun.

He quickly checked on his charges. No one seemed hurt. No real injuries though everyone was shaken up and frightened.

Relieved, the ranger hoisted up some of the visitors from the ground where'd they'd fallen or had simply plunked down in surprise. While they brushed off, he apologized for the unusual and unfortunate occurrence. Then, to get their mind off any aftershocks, exclaimed, "I think that's the last of it. It was only a slight earth tremor, folks. No danger at all. So why don't we just keep on moving? Hot chocolate and a nice warm fire's waiting for you down at the lodge. Our treat."

As swiftly as he could, without starting a full-blown stampede, he herded them down the trail towards the lodge. Waiting for the big one to hit. Praying it wouldn't.

He wondered how bad the damage below the rim was this time.

They were a third of the way down when the guy with the beard spied something in the middle of the path. He bent down and snatched up an object in his hands, abruptly careening off through the bushes towards a wall of crumbling rock that hadn't been there on their way up.

“Well, would you look at this,” the man shouted over his shoulder. “The earth has split open. There are bones all over the place—animal bones of some kind. They’re too big to be human.” The man’s voice drifted off into silence, as something else caught his attention.

The crowd, lemmings, followed.

Henry nudged through the park visitors and strode up to the bearded man as the guy leaned over something on the broken ground. He wanted the man to rejoin the group and get going again. Besides, he was concerned about Ann, his daughter, Laura, and granddaughter, Phoebe. He hoped Ann had made it home from work before the earthquake had hit. The thought of her caught out alone somewhere on the winding roads with the earth tossing around her and night coming, made him uneasy.

“What are they?” Henry asked.

“Don’t have a clue to what they are.” The bearded man stood up, dusting the dirt from his hands, the interest fading from his eyes quickly. “But they’re damn big, that’s for sure. Maybe bear bones?”

“Maybe,” Henry speculated, staring at the huge bones strewn about on the ground and embedded in the wall of crumbling earth, trying not to let his shock show. He’d seen plenty of bear bones before and what was in front of him were bigger than any bear bones he’d ever seen. The earthquake must have uncovered them. Must have split the earth open. Whatever they were, they were well-preserved, nearly perfect specimens. For a second, he believed he might be looking at a prehistoric graveyard, full of ancient dinosaur fossils. A remarkable find. Then, reality returned. *Dinosaur fossils?* Impossible!

The man who’d discovered the bones glanced up at the sky. “I guess we should get back, huh? Who cares about a bunch of old bones, anyway?” He strode away from Henry and didn’t look back. The others wandered away. They were too shaken up over the earthquake, too eager to get off the rim, to care about dirty bones.

Disbelief muffled Henry’s reaction as he glanced at the protruding white bones, but caution silenced his tongue. It was better that he voiced none of his suspicions. He wanted time to come back and have a better look. Until then he’d keep it to himself. Could they really be dinosaur fossils?

Henry had been obsessed with dinosaurs as a kid and had read every book about them he could find. He’d been a shy, fat child with no brothers or sisters and few friends. Most of his time was spent alone, reading books and living either in a far distant future or in a Jurassic dream world.

He’d collected and built model dinosaurs, as well, of every species unearthed. He thought of all the dinosaur movies he’d sat through, all the museums he’d haunted, the countless pictures of fossils he’d studied in books. Though he wasn’t an expert on the subject by any means, he knew a great deal more than most amateurs.

For years his ambition had been to become a paleontologist, go on digs around the world. The dream of a child. That was before he’d grown up and had somehow, one day, found himself a cop. His family hadn’t been able to send him to college. They’d needed him to work and help out financially during tough times when his mother had fallen ill. Becoming a cop had been his second choice. But being a cop as long as he’d been had enabled him to achieve Chief Park Ranger in a place as close to heaven as he could have ever found. Not a bad trade, after all.

Now here he was, all these years later, recapturing his first and fondest dream—possibly discovering a dinosaur bone yard. Henry scanned the remnants one last time, trying not to be too obvious or hopeful. They might turn out to be something else entirely.

Henry's tour group had noticed the darkness enveloping them and was getting edgy, shivering in their coats. They wanted to get going. After the earthquake, they were anxious to leave the rim behind and didn't seem interested in the discovery. And he had to get them down to the lodge before nightfall.

Tomorrow he could deal with the bones. He made a mental note to call John Day Fossil Beds National Monument when he returned to the lodge and have them send out a staff paleontologist to check out the site. He'd better do things by the book to protect the find, otherwise he'd have every amateur paleontologist in the country arriving in droves and flooding the park. Henry was elated at the possibilities, but also worried. They'd have gawkers and the curious, as well, no doubt. The bones could turn the park into a circus. He'd seen it before. The park was crowded enough with the usual yearly visitors. He liked things the way they were.

Henry raised his head, his eyes taking in the beauty of the place. A cold northern wind cut across the slope, a mist hung in the air filled with the smell of coming rain. Gray jays cried to each other across the distances, signaling the end of the day. The sun was settling on the horizon in a bed of darkening shades of apricot and pink.

Peering at the watch on his wrist, Henry said, "Well, people, it's getting late." Part of him hated leaving the bones, but the night was taking over and his tour people were spooked and tired. Time to go.

"If we don't arrive back at the lodge in the next hour, they'll send out a search party." Flashing his lazy park ranger smile he gathered them around him for the descent down.

Twenty-five minutes later Henry delivered the group to the lodge. Then he checked his office for messages and contacted John Day Fossil Beds National Monument to leave word about the bones for one of their paleontologists. They always had one or two on staff at all times.

He jumped into his cherry-colored jeep and maneuvered the vehicle through the darkening park, making his last rounds of the day. It was another old habit from his time as a lowly park ranger that he couldn't kick now that he was Chief.

There didn't seem to be any lasting harm from the earthquake. All the buildings and landscape appeared unchanged. Some of the rangers had reported the quake, and reported no measurable damage. As Henry drove past, he could hear the campfire program in progress at the Mazama Campground. Indian Legends of the Park was the story topic for the night and all the park visitors seemed lost in George Redcrow's vivid tales. Ranger Redcrow was a wonderful storyteller, and Henry's best friend, even if the man was a superstitious know-it-all.

Henry pulled into Lost Creek Campground to look over the new arrivals and introduce himself. Didn't take long. He enjoyed meeting the people who sometimes came from around the world to see Crater Lake. Being a ranger had brought him out of the shell he'd forged when he was a New York cop. Early on, he found he liked chatting with the visitors about anything and everything. Not only did he enjoy the social aspect of meeting them, but it helped him keep his finger on the pulse of the park and its needs.

He didn't tarry long with the campers, though, home was calling.

The souvenir shops in Rim Village were closing for the day, and the restaurants were full for suppertime. Henry drove by the dormitories that housed over two hundred park employees, mostly young people working their summer vacations, though the workers' ages

had increased with local unemployment the last couple of years. Half the people in the surrounding towns seemed to be working in the park lately. They said there were no jobs left in the outside world.

Everything appeared quiet. Apparently the earthquake hadn't left much of a mark down below in the park. Most visitors he inquired of said they'd hardly felt it.

Satisfied, Henry continued home, a place nestled on the fringe of the woods three miles past Rim Village. It was cozy and simple, fashioned from stone that was plentiful in the area. He pulled alongside the house as true night replaced twilight, releasing much colder temperatures and the nightly forest sounds.

Getting out of the jeep, he stood silently for a few minutes in the gloom under the trees. He treasured this place. Eight years ago he'd been a stressed out cop in New York City, overwhelmed with the gangs, scum-of-the-earth drug dealers and the never-ending rat race of big city life. In the end, the heartlessness of his job had affected Henry's morale.

He'd gotten sick of the hypocrisy of police work long before that August night, chasing those punks through dilapidated welfare apartments, when the kid with the gun, who couldn't have been but ten years old, had stepped out from a shadowy nowhere...and coldly shot him.

Henry had nearly died.

He'd told Ann from the hospital bed that he couldn't live that way anymore.

Months later, after he'd recuperated, he was offered the job at Crater Lake. Then Ann confessed, with a hopeful smile, that she'd always wanted to live in the wild woods of Oregon. And that was that.

Their life was good now.

Through the screen door, Henry saw Ann setting the table for supper. She was a pretty woman, slim, not real tall, with short blond hair and light gray eyes. Henry noticed a touch of gray encroaching into the blond the last year or so. It looked good on her, matching her eyes. She had a soothing way of making everyone believe everything was all right. Nothing riled Ann.

Laura and Phoebe were in the house, too. They were there often since Laura's husband, Chad, had run off a few months ago. Chad was a kid when they married and never could handle the responsibility. Once the baby came, he'd split. Laura hadn't heard a word from him since.

Laura was helping her mother set the table while Phoebe, Henry's granddaughter, sat trapped in her highchair, watching with big innocent brown eyes, a sad baby grin playing over her face. Her blond hair a soft cotton halo.

Ann looked up at Henry and smiled as he walked in the door. "I picked up some fried chicken and all the fixings at KFC on my way home. It'll be ready in a jiff."

"Good, I'm hungry as a bear." Henry kissed his wife and hugged his daughter.

Laura had gained weight since her husband had abandoned her, but Henry could hardly say what he thought, that she looked like the Good Year Blimp. She always ate herself fat when she was depressed. It was a shame, he thought, because his daughter was a lovely woman, otherwise, with long chestnut brown hair and penetrating blue eyes.

Henry placed a kiss on Phoebe's head. "Did you guys feel that earthquake?"

Ann nodded, a biscuit in her hand. "I worked later than usual, so I was at the newspaper when it hit. It shook the town. No real damage, though. Darn." She snapped her fingers in disappointment. "Widespread destruction would have made terrific pictures for this week's edition." With a mischievous grin, she buttered the biscuit and put it to her mouth.

“You ghou!” Henry teased. But he understood her desire to get a good story for the newspaper she worked for. Good stories boosted circulation.

Sweeping off his hat he placed it on top of the refrigerator. His jacket went across the back of the chair that he settled into.

“It rattled some glass in the gift shop,” his daughter confided, biting into a piece of chicken. She was already on her second helping of everything. “Didn’t break anything, though. Real mild.”

“Wasn’t as bad as I thought, then,” Henry muttered. “It was worse up on the rim. I was worried about all of you.”

“That’s sweet of you, honey,” his wife leaned over to lay a kiss on his cheek, “but we women can take care of ourselves, can’t we, Laura?”

“Well, it scared me,” Laura huffed between bites.

Phoebe grabbed at her grandpa’s arm. “Pa-pa,” she beseeched.

Henry released the baby from her highchair prison. As he settled her into his lap, she flung her chubby arms tight around his neck. He was happy that everyone was okay, happy to be home with his family.

Since Chad had taken off, he’d been trying to persuade Laura to live with him and Ann. But Laura, at twenty, was fiercely independent and hard-headed. She’d been that way all her life and wasn’t about to change.

Everything they ever wanted Laura to do, finish high school and go to college, meet a decent young man, Laura had done exactly the opposite. She dropped out of school at seventeen, ran away from home at eighteen to marry Chad because she was pregnant. Babies having babies.

In some ways, Henry and Ann blamed themselves for Laura’s rebelliousness. They thought they hadn’t left New York soon enough and it’d hurt Laura in the early years because she hadn’t gotten enough attention and supervision. Henry blamed himself because he hadn’t beaten the crap out of Chad the first time he’d laid eyes on him. The litany of guilt concerning his daughter went on and on.

But since Chad had left, Henry and Ann had come to believe they had a second chance with Laura. They accepted what most parents have to accept sooner or later—that it was possible to be the best parent you knew how to be and still have your kids mess up.

Ann had said all along that with time Laura would grow up, do what she had to do and be fine. She’d make it, in the end, because she was a smart, ambitious girl. Like many kids, her youth and her hormones had led her astray. Eventually, she’d wise up, face reality and get back in the game.

Ann was right. Laura was finally growing up. She was changing every day, taking responsibility for her actions and decisions. She wanted to do it on her own while Henry wished she’d let them help more.

Henry’s worries evaporated as the three women he loved most in the world vied for his attention.

He ate his chicken, mashed potatoes, and coleslaw with gusto; fed and played with his granddaughter and listened to the women’s gossip. The three of them discussed their day. It was a ritual they looked forward to, eating supper together a few times a week and talking. Ann wanted to know about the earthquake, and Henry wanted to know about what was going on in town. Even Laura seemed in better spirits than she’d been in weeks, chatting more than usual about her job and people she’d met that day. She had a sense of humor and would tell funny stories about them which made Henry laugh.

Three hours later, when Laura and Phoebe were gone, Ann and Henry sat on the front porch swing, creaking back and forth, bundled in their coats and snuggling. Porch therapy, they called it.

The woods were pitch black, but a soft glow from the windows behind them spilled into the darkness. Ann pointed to a pair of glowing orbs at the fringe of the forest and a blurry shape hiding in the night's shadows. Then there were two shadowy shapes.

"Look," Ann whispered, squeezing Henry's hand and pointing with the other. "Deer."

The two humans held their breath and watched the night deer until a forest noise scared the animals off. They were always seeing wild animals from their porch. If they were still, quiet, in the mornings especially, raccoons and squirrels would scramble up, unafraid, and stare at them. Sometimes Ann would feed them. Throw out peanuts or raisins. Sometimes the animals would even run up and eat them.

Ann told him she once saw a black bear in the distance, which was where she wanted it to stay. She was terrified of the larger creatures, especially the ones with teeth and claws. A few times she'd seen bobcats and coyotes, but their appearances were unusual. They tended to avoid people. And no one had seen a grizzly in the park in years. They tended to stay in the back woods.

After the deer were gone, Ann divulged her secret, "Laura told me before she left she enrolled today in GED classes in town. Two nights a week beginning next week. One of her dorm friends is going to watch Phoebe."

"About time," Henry mumbled. "But I'm tickled to hear it."

"She wants to go to night school afterwards. Wants to be a nurse's assistant, maybe even a full-fledged nurse someday."

Henry hugged his wife and placed a kiss on the tip of her cold nose. "That's the best news I've heard all year. I was wondering how long it'd take her to go back to school and get some real direction in her life." Relief was in his voice.

"I agreed that, in a tight pinch, we'd be the back-up to watch the baby," Ann added.

"Sure, no problem." Henry didn't mind watching Phoebe. She was a good child, easy to care for.

Out in the woods something big rustled through the foliage, then it was gone.

Ann put her foot down and stopped the swing. "That was something today, wasn't it, that earthquake? The second one we've had in as many years. Though it wasn't bad in town, it must have done some damage somewhere."

"I thought as much, too."

Henry could just make out his wife's face in the light from the kitchen. A sharp wind ruffled her hair. To him she still looked like the woman he'd fallen in love with all those years ago. She was still beautiful to him, still sexy and vital. His mind wasn't on what she was saying.

"Zeke read the news wires, checked the Internet. They suspect the most damage was done deep underground." Zeke was the managing editor, and Ann's boss, at the Klamath Falls Journal.

"Do they know where the epicenter of the earthquake was?" His attention captured by the serious tone in her voice.

"You're not going to believe this," she hesitated, then went on, "but the information we got at the paper said it was here in the park. The quake was a bad one. Under the lake."

"I was afraid of that." Henry released a sigh. "Up on the rim when it hit, it knocked a bunch of the visitors right on their butts."

Ann didn't laugh.

Henry remembered the wall of bones. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten to tell Ann about it sooner. Too much on his mind with his daughter visiting and the earthquake, probably.

"You'll never guess what the quake uncovered partway up the trail towards the rim."

"What?"

"It ripped open the ground and now there's this wall of...bones. I'm not sure, but I think they could be...prehistoric. Maybe even dinosaurs. Most astonishing thing I've ever seen. They're so damn big."

Now his wife laughed. "Dinosaur bones? Are you sure?"

"No, but they could be. I'm no expert, but as a kid I was really into fossils. Dinosaurs. Live and dead. I know more than the average person about the subject."

"I don't believe it. Dinosaur fossils. What a story. Henry, if it's true, do you know what this could mean to the park? To all of us?"

"Oh, that's the downside, I'm afraid I do. The discovery could screw up the whole park. We'll be overrun by park authorities, reporters—no offense to you, honey—sightseers, scientists and bone nuts from all over the place. All of them wanting to dig up the bones and the rest of the park's land, to boot."

"I sympathize, but, aside from those problems and overpopulating your precious park, it's a fantastic discovery. Look at it that way. You'll have to take me up there so I can get some pictures."

Henry moaned. "And so it begins."

"Have you told anyone else yet?"

"Oh, I've put a request in to John Day's for one of their paleontologist to come out. Take a look. Their paleontologists were gone by the time I called, but the secretary promised she'd give the staff the message. Someone will be sent out as soon as possible."

"Great," Ann said. "I want to get up there and get pictures before they make the entire area off limits. If it's really dinosaur bones, they'll section it off to keep everyone away. You know those paleontologists; they'll want to keep the discovery and all the fame to themselves."

Henry moaned again.

"So," Ann coaxed, leaning in close and snuggling as extra incentive, "will you take me up there tomorrow, first thing?"

"Okay." He gave in. He knew better than to keep Ann from a story. It was like trying to keep a cat away from catnip.

"Promise?"

"I promise." He chuckled, envisioning all those strange bones in the ground. Ancient remnants of the distant past. Dinosaurs. Remarkable.

"Did you know," he spoke, becoming the passionate child again, "that the Apatosaurus, which means *deceptive lizard*, once known as the Brontosaurus, might have measured ninety feet in length, and weighed nearly 38 tons?" Grown up or not, he still loved thinking and talking about dinosaurs.

"Ninety feet. That big, huh?"

"Oh, and they believe the Diplodocus," Henry continued happily, "also a herbivore, a plant-eater, could have been around ninety feet as well, with a whip-like tale forty-five feet long. And Brachiosaurus, from the same time, the Jurassic Period, could have weighed 100 tons." Henry paused, "Come to think about it, I wonder what dinosaurs were common around here sixty-five million years ago?"

“I don’t have the slightest idea,” Ann responded. “Maybe that paleontologist you’ve sent for will know.”

“He might.” Henry yawned. “I can’t wait to get another look at those bones in the light.”

“I can’t wait to see them, either. I hope it’s sunny tomorrow. I want good clear pictures. Zeke will positively drool when I take them in. They’ll help our circulation for sure.” She leaned her head contentedly against Henry’s shoulder. “Sweetheart, do you know I love you because you never cease to surprise me?”

He laughed softly. “I hope you always love me and I hope I always surprise you.”

“Until we’re both old and gray,” Ann murmured the promise they gave to each other at every opportunity.

Henry embraced his wife, and whispered, “Isn’t it about time we go in?”

“Yeah, it has gotten pretty cold out here, hasn’t it?”

Their laughter mingled and, arm in arm, they went in to bed.

Chapter 2

The next morning Ann received an early wake-up call from Zeke at the newspaper, something about the final computer layout of that week's edition being wrong, and she had to get into the office right away. She had to help Zeke fix it or the newspaper wouldn't get to the printers on time.

Reluctantly, Ann postponed her trek with Henry to take pictures of the bones. People who work at small town newspapers wear many hats. Ann wasn't only a reporter; she helped sell the advertising, design the ads, help put the paper together every week and send it off to the printers. It was always a delicate balancing act, especially since the Klamath Falls Journal was, as with many small newspapers these days, in financial trouble. Ann did everything she could to help keep it off its death bed. After all, it was her job on the line.

"I'll get that layout fixed and to the printer's quick as a bunny," Ann quipped, crawling out of their warm bed and into her robe, "and return as fast as I can. If you check here later this afternoon, I should be back. Then you can show me that fossil bed, all right?"

"Sure, honey, I'll swing by after lunch, and take you up there," Henry murmured, sticking his head under the covers, wanting nothing more than to recapture sleep. The alarm clock hadn't even gone off yet. It was barely dawn. Zeke and that crazy newspaper. Didn't the old guy ever go home anymore?

Then the image of those monstrous white bones up on the rim came back to haunt him. He jumped out of bed and fought his wife for the bathroom. In the end, they shared it, and were both dressed and on the move within the hour, going separate ways after a hug and a kiss. No time for breakfast, just a quick cup of coffee.

Henry drove alone to ranger headquarters in a dawn's light which reflected off the frost that covered everything. There were dirty mounds of left-over snow in patches that wouldn't be completely gone until midsummer. It'd taken Henry a long time to get used to the unbelievably long winters in Oregon. Now he didn't mind them.

He figured he'd get another cup of coffee or two while he was checking on his men and his messages. He played with the thought of going up to the lodge later for a real breakfast, but ended up stopping at a place inside the park and bought a large box of donuts for everyone. He did that once and a while as a treat. As he did, his men loved pastries; even though they were bad for the waistlines.

Munching on a glazed donut, he pulled into park headquarters. He strode through the door, opened his office and hung up his coat. Before he could grab a cup of coffee and his third donut, one of his rangers strolled in and took him by the arm.

"Boss, I need to talk to you," his friend, George Redcrow said, shutting the door.

"Well, good morning to you, too, George," Henry announced. His eyes wistfully glanced through the glass window towards the perking coffee pot. "You could have at least let me get my coffee. I was this close." He waved two fingers an inch apart in the air between them.

George grunted, "Time for coffee after I tell you what I've got to tell you."

Redcrow was half Indian, on his father's side, and he looked it. He possessed sharp features in a hawkish face, soul-reading unnerving dark eyes and an earthy wit to match. Nearly as tall as Henry, he was heavier set, his gray-streaked hair longer, wilder, like his eyes

and his nature. An excellent park ranger, he had an uncanny wisdom about the land Henry could only attribute to the fact he'd spent most of his life in the woods.

But he was the most superstitious human being Henry had ever known. George actually believed in ghosts, monsters, and U.F.O.s. In every other way, though, he was level-headed, intelligent and intuitive. He was a good man to have on your side or at your back in a tough spot. Henry had seen him take down a rampaging drunk with one swift move; had seen him diffuse tense or dangerous situations many a time with a calming word or two. Henry respected the man.

"Okay, spill your guts, ranger. But make it quick. I've got something very important to attend to and I haven't had enough coffee yet. I'm about to go into serious caffeine withdrawal."

George lowered his voice, "Thought you'd like to know I've been finding a lot of dead animals lately on Wizard Island."

Henry shrugged. "What's so unusual about that, other than the fact the animals swam all the way out to the island and ended up dying there?" Death was a part of nature. Animals grew old and died, or attacked each other and died. Weakened animals froze in the bitter winters and were uncovered, rotting, after the snows melted. Dead. That was nature.

Henry started inching closer to the coffee pot like a man dying of thirst might move towards water. George stuck to him. "The way they died."

"I have to have a cup of coffee, George," Henry said, opening the door. It was early enough, right before the morning shift, that the room was pretty nearly empty anyway. He couldn't understand why George had wanted privacy if he was only talking about dead animals. Henry had assumed it was a personal matter. "What do you mean? How did they die?" He located his cup and reached out for the coffee pot.

"The carcasses, or what was left of them, were mauled and eaten by something that must have the biggest teeth we'll ever see."

"A bear?"

"No, the attacker was much larger than a bear. In fact, one of the carcasses was a bear."

"Oh." Henry's eyebrows lifted and he let his lips smile gently. "Interesting. I guess now you're gonna try to convince me it was one of your aliens...or some monster that's taken up residence in the lake?" George's words had reminded Henry of what the red-headed woman had said the day before.

"Monster in the lake? What are you talking about?"

"Ah, up on the rim yesterday, before the earthquake, some crazy woman told me a friend of hers saw something in the lake last summer. A big water creature of some sort. Have you heard any weird stories like that from any of the other rangers or visitors? Has anyone reported any strange animal sightings in or around the lake?"

"No," George frowned, "but that might explain the tracks."

"What tracks?" Henry raised his cup of coffee to his lips with a contented sigh. The first few cups every morning were sheer ambrosia.

"The tracks around the carcasses, the ones leading back into the water. They were enormous." George looked at him, apprehension in his gaze.

Henry laughed. "Come on, George, lighten up. It was probably some overgrown cougar or an exceptionally big-footed bear that dragged its kills out to the island for feeding privacy. Bears around here do get quite large. You should know that. You've been here pretty much forever."

George's eyes, flint hard, glittered. "Then I should recognize bear or cougar tracks when I see them. And I'm telling you, they weren't either. They weren't like anything I've ever seen. Ever. Not to mention—why would any predator drag its kill all the way out to that forsaken island to eat it? Swim all that way? Why? Animals don't care where they feed. Maybe we should start looking for something larger something...different. Could be there is something in the lake."

Oh, great, Henry mused, eating another glazed donut and watching his friend, George has finally gone 'round the bend. Must be all that solitude.

George lived alone deep in the park in a cabin that was practically inaccessible. He liked it that way. He'd never been married, though he'd had a long string of lady friends. He'd worked odd jobs in the park since he'd been sixteen and had become a park ranger at twenty-one. He knew the park well and was familiar with every animal that crawled or scurried in its woods or swam in its lakes.

"George, you know, you need to get out more. Find a new woman. Not mooch so many suppers at my house," Henry stated flatly.

"Boss, I'm not fooling around."

Wiping sticky crumbs from his fingers on a napkin, Henry gave in. "Show the tracks to me." *****END OF FREE READ

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