

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Lust Bites

Kristina Lloyd, Portia Da Costa & Mathilde Madden

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About the Book

In the canon of the supernatural, nothing is as timelessly erotic as the vampire. Three writers from the cream of Black Lace prove the vampire's bite is always the deepest.

Buddies Don't Bite

'She wanted to kiss his sweet red mouth, push her tongue between his lips, and find out if those large, white teeth of his were really as sharp as they sometimes looked . . .'

Zachary Trevelyan is a vampire but a mishap involving kisses and necks leads him to fall in love with his best friend, Teresa. And not only that, he *really* wants to bite her.

Vampire's Heart

'When she cried out, showing the stretch of her long pale neck, Billy recognised her as the woman he'd once loved, the woman he'd once killed . . .'

For centuries, Billy's been yearning for the woman he accidentally killed as a novice vampire in Constantinople. Now she's back, reborn as Esther, the explorer. Exiled in the Arctic, Billy's already battling his lust to devour her all over again.

Under Her Skin

‘Did the idea of Darius Cole, a notorious powerful vampire, wanting you to come and spend time with him in his castle excite you? Did it arouse you?’

The only way that Merle Cobalt can save her father’s life is to spend 25 days living with renegade vampire Darius Cole. But vampires are known for their mind controlling powers. Merle knows that after twenty five days with Cole any concept she might have of her own free will could be meaningless.

Lust Bites
Kristina Lloyd
Mathilde Madden
Portia Da Costa

BLACK
LACE

The Vampire's Heart

Kristina Lloyd

Prologue

In the moments before Esther's return to the world, Billy Dresner III was slouching towards the waterfront, past crumbling tenements, alleyways and whores, a stolen black Labrador trotting at his side. According to the tag, its name was Maxie. But no matter.

By the derelict warehouses of the Hudson, Billy knelt and killed the dog with a single bite. He fed in a guilty frenzy, trains rumbling in the distance, until he was snagged by a sense of movement far beyond the city and across the cold dark ocean.

Could it be?

Billy rose, face lifted to the heavens. Yes, it had to be. This was it. The moon silvered him in a seraphic glow, his shorn hair glinting, and he stared into the night, a bloodied masculine angel, hardly daring to believe.

Over 3,000 miles away, north of London's Maida Vale, a girl was born who, according to the midwife, had 'two arms, two legs, one head'. When the slippery livid child released her first roaring breath, Billy knew the world had changed.

He stood by the crumbling docks, gazing up at a hundred thousand million stars.

She was back.

Somewhere on earth, she was back. Centuries of longing were coming to a close, a prospect that filled him with happiness and dread. Tears glittered in his eyes. He blinked and let them fall, promising himself that this time he would be kind to her.

1

THE ICECAP SPARKLED in the starlight, and the team was the only sign of life, six halogen headtorches shining on the snow, sledges hissing as they hauled. Doug's breath was laboured, his coughing fits hampering their progress. They were behind schedule and wouldn't reach camp for another hour.

'You OK?' checked Esther. It hardly seemed worth asking because she couldn't see his eyes. Instead, she saw only her reflection in the silver mirrors of his snow goggles.

'Fine,' said Doug, his voice hoarse. 'Stop asking, will you?'

A fur hood fringed his half-masked face and his brown beard was jewelled with frost. Esther heaved alongside him, ski-poles stabbing in the snow, saying nothing. Half a mile ahead, the other four moved as one; small colourful figures on the dusky ice. It shamed her to think they might have guessed her secret.

'Give me your warmth,' Doug had said last night. His hand had moved inside her thermals, making her whimper in response. Their breath had puffed out, freezing white in the air. She remembered his voice, gentle through gritted teeth. They mustn't be heard by the others.

'You're wet. You want it,' he'd huffed. His fingers, brutally cold at first, worked inside her. Their sleeping bags hissed as they moved on shifting layers of caribou skins and synthetics. Doug's voice scoured her senses the way his beard scoured her skin.

Even in a heated tent, it was too cold for sex. Doug was too cold for sex. Esther couldn't even be sure they liked each other any more. But she could see they were complicit in their need, hungry to stave off the threat of oblivion this boundless, moonlit world inspired.

And yes, she *had* wanted it. Still did. But she wanted it in the way an animal wants it, and that wasn't reason enough.

Imagine a place where your mind is free, where the glacial air is fresh and pure. Imagine dazzling white landscapes, polar bears and seals as you follow in the footsteps of history's great explorers. Imagine the Arctic. Imagine the challenge. Imagine everything is possible with White Sky Adventures.

This trek was no holiday. Partly sponsored, partly funded by White Sky, its purpose was to establish routes and itineraries for a new line in extreme vacations. Doug, a healthy office worker with a sense of adventure, belonged to the company's target demographic. If he struggled with the level, then it was probably too tough.

Esther had to slow to match his pace and the rhythm frustrated. Her thighs and arms wanted to push on, to work at their muscular peak, and this sluggishness dragged on her body. She would need to gain greater patience if she were to make it as an expedition leader.

Their skis hissed in the lengthening silence until, in a voice quivering with emotion, Doug said, 'My feet hurt. Can you understand that? My feet fucking hurt.'

'We'll look at them later,' said Esther, and she thought of Shackleton all those years ago, removing his boots and seeing frostbitten flesh fall from his toes, exposing bone.

You couldn't escape the stories of this place. Sometimes, it was a mythical land where ancient explorers sailed

through peppermint green seas, mistaking icebergs for giant swans and narwhals for aquatic unicorns. Over the centuries, reports had come back of ghostly mountains, mock suns and nights lit with curtains of coloured phosphorescence. Sometimes it was a frozen desert, tempting men onto foolish, heroic quests. Their stories hung in the emptiness: tales of survival and loss; of horror and madness; of people on the borderline between life and death. And, of course, there were many untold stories too, stories with no one left to tell them.

‘Give me your warmth,’ Doug had said.

Esther cringed now to think of his hand between her thighs last night. It seemed an extraordinary intimacy when, for the most part, hands out here were hidden inside gloves. If you wanted to eat a person, it was said, first remove their hands. Hands make us human. And hadn’t there been rumours of cannibalism and severed hands on Franklin’s final expedition? Where might the hands go? Could there be a cache or two out here, buried under the snow, perfectly preserved?

No, it didn’t do to think such things. But spend enough time on the ice and anyone’s thoughts will start to warp.

‘Hey!’

A voice sailed across the ice.

In the starlit gloom, Esther could make out Bird, their team leader, waving a ski pole in the air. He pointed east, directing their attention. Esther checked her wrist-watch for bearings. It looked like a minor deviation, probably to investigate something unusual, most likely a dead animal. A break in the monotony was always welcome. She started to pull away from Doug, towing faster.

It would be better tonight. They would reach the mushers’ cabin, an isolated timber lodge where all six would share a room. For the last three nights, they’d camped by snow walls, the team dividing themselves among four-man and two-man tents, an exercise in team-

building Bird was experimenting with. Even the married couple, Margret and Johannes Kappel, were to sleep apart. Esther had spent most nights in the large tent, lying alongside Adrian, the landscape photographer, or Margret, who talked German in her sleep. She'd spent last night paired with Doug.

'I haven't slept since we got here,' he'd said bitterly just as Esther was about to drift off. He made it sound as if it were her fault and Esther, cocooned in her sleeping bag, didn't reply. He would never sleep if they started talking.

'I hate this place,' he went on, addressing the domed ceiling. 'I hate the darkness. The sun doesn't rise. There's no dawn, no new day. I hate it. It's all the same fucking endless night.'

Esther rolled onto her back and they lay there like two larval grubs. 'It'll change soon. When the sun comes, the days start getting longer really quickly.'

'It's too big,' he said. 'I can't get my head round it. Too much space.'

'I know,' murmured Esther.

'And too cold. Too cold to sleep.'

'Try,' said Esther. 'Just try to sleep.'

They lay there in silence, the amber tent faintly lit by a star-encrusted sky, shining down and glancing off the ice. Snowlight, Esther called it. She adored the ice. It thrilled and appalled, holding a serenity never far from treachery. You couldn't fathom it. Areas of Greenland were still marked 'unexplored' on maps. And even if its terrain were charted, you wouldn't know it. You could never know its heart.

'You enjoy patronising me, don't you?' whispered Doug. His breath had misted above them in apricottinged clouds.

Esther sighed quietly, 'Doug, please. I don't want to -'

'You enjoy it,' he accused.

His sleeping bag rustled as he edged closer, speaking against her ear now, his breath tickling. Esther turned

away, wanting to ignore him because he was being an idiot, but Doug was quick. Fabric hissed in a flurry of movement and he switched on a torch, filling the tent with the fake daybreak of halogen.

In the clear white light, Esther could see all the detail of his toffee-brown eyes, the pores on his nose and individual hairs on the edge of his beard. She recalled first meeting him at a cheap and cheerful pasta restaurant with a bunch of other people. 'Mmm, nice,' she'd thought, knowing he was slated to join the team. And 'Mmm, even nicer' when, at the end of the evening, he'd given her a goodbye peck on the cheek, his beard scratching pleasantly, his hand a light pressure on her hip.

There'd been a spark between them from the off but they'd always maintained a professional distance, even when flirting.

'If it weren't for this trip,' Doug had once teased, 'I'd make a pass at you.'

Esther had tried to convince herself their feelings would fade once they hit the ice but instead it seemed Doug's desires were being channelled in a new direction. He was becoming increasingly irritated with her. She could see he was struggling with the trek but wasn't sure how much. He might be just tetchy. Or he could be seriously losing it.

'What's wrong, Doug?' she asked. 'Why are you being like this?'

He looked down at her for a long time before declaring, 'I want you'. His voice, bold and strong, made the words sound so uncomplicated, and it stirred Esther's lust. She gazed back, confused. For that moment, she felt she might be with Doug from home, the man she liked, not Doug the team-mate who'd been behaving like a prick. This was too dangerous. They had another three weeks on the ice, and the fallout could be hell, the impact on the team disastrous. Esther wondered if Bird, noting the tensions between the

two of them, had paired them in a tent hoping to solve the problem.

‘Doug, please,’ she said. ‘Let’s just sleep.’

Doug frowned then, before Esther knew what was happening, he was kissing her hard, his bristles crushing into her skin as he filled her mouth with the hot slithering shock of his tongue. He clutched a fist of her long dark hair, knocking her woollen cap askew. Despite herself, Esther responded, protesting faintly as they kissed.

She could smell him, a hint of stale sweat and unwashed hair but knew she didn’t smell too great either. When you bathed by frolicking half-naked in the snow, you didn’t bathe too often. Their mutual grubbiness excited her. It felt primitive and abandoned, perfectly in tune with their surroundings.

Oh, why couldn’t this have happened months ago? Why couldn’t he have pressed her against his car and pushed his hand up her skirt? Why couldn’t he have fucked her over the big table after one of their team meetings? Why couldn’t they have done what she’d fantasised about and maybe they’d have got it out of their systems?

Esther pulled back. ‘Doug, don’t,’ she whispered, her breath clouding on his face.

Again Doug ignored her and again she let him. He tugged the zipper of her sleeping bag, its metallic rasp slicing through the silence as the casing split open, revealing Esther, unpeeled in tubular underclothes.

She wriggled to tug a caribou skin over them as Doug shoved his hand down her thermals. His fingers were so cold that when he buried two inside her, Esther gasped in discomfort.

‘You’re wet. You want it,’ he breathed, watching her expression as he roused her.

‘You sod,’ she whispered, closing her eyes.

‘Don’t you like it?’ he murmured. He kissed her neck, teeth scraping and whiskers prickling.

Esther adored it, and was disappointed at how easily Doug had knocked her off balance. Christ, was she that weak? A few days in the Arctic and any man starts looking good? But no, she liked him. Not this much though. Oh, get a grip, she told herself. Think about tomorrow and the day after: six people in the middle of nowhere, team spirit splintering around their sordid little secret.

But it was difficult to stop when his fingers were so good. Physical pleasures were rare, and this was heaven, her juices spilling warmly as he masturbated her.

A spasm of willpower made her push against his chest. 'Doug, back off. We can't do this.'

He curled his fingers inside her, giving her a steady look. 'We can,' he said, and Esther began sliding towards agreement.

'You've wanted this as long as I have,' Doug went on.

'But the others,' breathed Esther.

'They don't need to know,' said Doug, and he worked his fingers with deep slow thrusts.

Esther moaned, succumbing fast. She needed badly to feel him inside her, to have his cock hammering into her soft wet warmth. She wanted to feel fleshy and vivid, and soon all she could think of was something along the lines of being hung for a sheep as a lamb.

'Oh, just fuck me,' she gasped, shoving her thermals down to her ankles.

Doug seemed surprised and a touch disappointed that she'd relented so quickly. Perhaps he'd been hoping for a fight. Puffing and grunting, he knelt up, fiddling with his underwear as Esther dropped her knees wide, her hips tipping in search of him. Doug fumbled to drape a fur over his half-bared butt. His knob nosed at her entrance then he plunged deep, his thickness prising her flesh apart, making Esther groan.

'Shhh,' he warned, because the other tent was only feet away. Bearing his weight on his arms, he slid in a series of

deep deliberate strokes.

'Ah, ah,' she whimpered, doing her best to keep quiet. Increasingly urgent, their groins mashed together in a clumsy, savage fuck. Skins and fur slipped about them, nylon hissed and the flysheet flapped as they gasped and panted, bucking and frigging.

'Take it, go on,' Doug had murmured as he'd neared his peak.

Then they'd climaxed separately with hushed private shudders, eyes squeezed shut, heads turned aside. In the morning, Esther had woken with embarrassment and regret. Presumably Doug had felt the same.

He'd worn snow goggles for much of the following day, even though it was dark. 'My eyes are sore,' he'd rasped when Adrian had asked about them. 'My eyes and my feet, OK?' He broke into a fit of coughing. 'Oh, and did I mention my throat?'

He couldn't look Esther in the eye, more like. He had to hide behind big mirrored lenses, about the only place you *could* hide out here. Whenever Esther looked at him, all she got were reflections.

Bird called across the ice. 'Hey, looks like a carcass!'

The wind was gathering and snowflakes whirled in the dimness.

Esther stabbed her poles harder, heaving on her sledge, eager to join Bird as he hauled closer to the lump on the ice.

'Fox,' he said as Esther approached. 'What a beauty.'

Snowflakes flitted across the beams of their headtorches as they studied the creature, its white fur stiff with icicles, mouth sagging open, gums and yellow teeth exposed. Drifts of snow slanted against its belly, and its neck was ripped open in a meaty gash, the snow pink and pitted where blood had seeped down.

'Funny kill,' said Esther. 'What did that?'

‘Dunno,’ said Bird. ‘Weird. It’s hardly been touched.’ He toed the fox with his boot. ‘Not much blood either.’

‘Must have been a while ago,’ said Esther. ‘Tracks are all covered.’

‘Hmm. Maybe,’ said Bird.

Johannes approached. ‘My God,’ he said brightly. ‘Precisely in the neck! It is looking like vampire bat.’

Esther laughed, yet even as she did so she felt a sense of unease. She turned to see Doug trekking on his own, his headlamp shining in the snow-filled dusk, a lonely figure bent like a cripple and refusing to be drawn.

And she looked back at the fox, remembering another tale of two stranded explorers who’d survived for weeks by drinking each other’s blood. A man and a boy, she seemed to think, stuck on the coast. Yes, they’d drunk blood from a shoe, that was it.

Halogen light danced over the dead fox. Its throat sparkled like spilt rubies, the stained snow glittering like crushed pink glass. And Esther thought of those two men gazing at a frozen ocean, the blood thick and warm in their mouths.

She screwed her eyes shut, wishing she didn’t think these things. Iciness stippled her cheeks as snowflakes hit. She wished she could clear her mind and escape all the stories. Out here, they always seemed too real.

To the untrained eye, *Hope’s End* was nothing but a blip on the landscape, a hump of snow in a waste of ice. A Cold War relic modelled on igloo curves, it had fallen into the hands of the vampire community when one or two significant maps had been redrawn, and one or two significant people had been killed, easy things to achieve when there are vampires in high places. Mortals might be surprised by the number of monsters at the Pentagon.

No, you wouldn’t know the camp was there. Its entrance was a crevice in a bank of snow zig-zagging down to the

building itself, a huge high-tech dome with comfortable living quarters, two redundant research labs, a gym, a sun room and vast amounts of storage space. Its inner walls were formed of billowing curves that had something to do with tensile architecture and insulated breeze block. Billy didn't know how it worked. All he knew was that it did; and that was thanks to the billions of dollars invested in military science.

All this sophistication at the vampires' service, and Suzanne had nearly blown it. Billy was furious. He strode down the corridor, combat boots thumping, in one hand a dead white fox, in the other a dead white hare. His muscles flexed beneath his white T-shirt and dustings of snow melted in his wake.

Why the hell did she have to turn up? For months, he and Simeon had lived alone, everything fine. Suzanne appears and it's chaos. Fucking chaos.

In the main room of the dome, a sparsely furnished arena where candles cast shadows onto curved white walls, Suzanne lay naked on a polar bear rug. Her honey-pale limbs and honey-blond curls gleamed in the fake firelight. The polar bear was open-jawed, head fixed in a mute roar. By Suzanne's side was Renfield, their pet cat, a fluffy vampire pedigree, purring contentedly as Suzanne plucked single strands from its silvery blue fur.

Billy slung the two carcasses across the room. Streaks of blood smeared on the faux stone floor as the bodies skidded towards the rug. The cat scarpered with a yowl and the animals lay there, glassy-eyed, old blood clogging their white fur like damson jelly.

Suzanne recoiled. 'Ugh,' she cried, rolling away with her hand to her mouth. 'Oh, that's rank!'

Billy's face was impassive, his voice quietly menacing. 'It's your kill,' he said.

'Oh, take it away,' complained Suzanne. 'I'm sorry, OK? Now, take it away.'

She turned to face the fire, presenting Billy with her pert little ass, hand still clamped to her mouth. He wasn't moved in the slightest, not today.

'You need to clean up after yourself, Suzanne,' he warned.

'I forgot,' said Suzanne.

'People are trekking out there. All it takes is one stupid _'

'I know, I know,' said Suzanne. 'It won't happen again.'

'I know it won't,' said Billy. 'Because, if it does, I will chain you up in the play room. I will deny you sex and blood. And you will be so tormented you'll start wishing you were mortal.'

Billy ran his hand over his head, palm skimming his beige-blond mohawk. Broad-chested and lightly tanned, he cut a punkish military figure in khakis, tight T-shirt and scuffed army boots. Some vampires found him scary. Suzanne, damn her, wasn't one of them.

She rolled onto her back, knees flopping wide. 'Do you want to fuck?' she cooed, splaying herself with her fingers. Shadows danced on her skin, and beneath her trimmed golden pubes, her scarlet slit glinted.

'No.' Billy meant it. She was too obvious. He was already bored of her.

'Oh, c'mon, Billy Boy. There's nothing to do around here. Just a little fuck.' Suzanne squashed her breasts together and wagged a pointy, lascivious tongue at him.

Billy ignored her and went to retrieve the carcasses just as Simeon wandered into the room, three large phials in his hand. A pallid lanky figure with bony features and long black hair, he had that air of Transylvanian nobility Billy really went for.

When Simeon spotted the carcasses, he drawled, 'Oh, must we make the place untidy?'

He flicked his head, making his black hair swing, a theatrical gesture that today irked Billy. The two men had

been together centuries (though it was a bit on-off) and, having no reflections, were more familiar with each other's face than their own. 'I don't know where you end and I begin,' Simeon used to say in the nineteenth century when they were tragically in love, as was the fashion.

In some ways, those blurred boundaries would always hold true. Billy often felt he could only see himself through Simeon's eyes. 'You have the most perfect straight nose,' Simeon would say. Or, 'Your eyes are palest green with black rings around them. Weirdly bright, so intense. And yet, wow, almost translucent.' Recently, he'd declared that Billy's eyes were as wild and luminous as a husky dog's. They were always trying to describe each other's eyes. 'Violets,' Billy would say to Simeon, tonguing his eyelids closed. 'And amethysts. So fucking dangerous.'

Billy grabbed the carcasses by their hind legs. 'Your cousin's a disgrace,' he said.

'He's bullying me,' simpered Suzanne. 'Make him stop.'

The fox's tongue lolled as Billy slung it over his shoulder, carrying it with the dead hare to the snow pit outside. On his return, he found Renfield licking streaks of blood from the floor and Suzanne and Simeon each with a phial of Blud. The pool balls had been racked up on the table.

'Blud?' Simeon threw a phial to Billy. He caught it deftly. Along its length, etched white lettering stood out against the red liquid contents. BLUD™: FOR VAMPIRES WITH A HEART.

Billy had a heart. He hadn't tasted human blood for 26 years (except once), animal blood for ten. He'd gone cold turkey the moment Esther had been reborn because he wanted to devour her. He wanted her warm blood pulsing down his throat, her heartbeat filling him with life as she expired, just as it had done the first time in a courtyard in Constantinople. She'd tasted so good then, her blood flowing so sweetly, her neck as soft as a peach.

Almost 300 years later, and her death was still the most beautiful experience he'd known. Unless he quit human

feeding, she'd either be dead again in no time or he'd make her a vampire. Either way, she'd be lost to him, and neither was an act of love.

He snapped off the top of his Blud and downed it in one. He tried to repress a shudder as the liquid slipped down his throat then he dashed the phial into the fire. The flames blazed green for a brief roaring moment.

'Hmm, well,' said Simeon, offended. 'Cheers everybody.' He and Suzanne raised their phials, Suzanne taking three sugar cubes from a pewter bowl on the hearth, adding them to her Blud before drinking it through a straw.

Simeon and Suzanne drank Blud to supplement their real feeding. Pickings were slim on the ice. Sometimes Simeon went to the coast and returned with tales of polar bears and all the blubber he had to bite through. But Billy knew he fed on the Inuit. He could see the flush in his cheeks and it made him so hot. When Simeon had tasted mortals, Billy wanted to fuck his brains out.

'Yuck,' said Simeon.

'Bleurgh,' said Suzanne. 'I vote we kill those trekkers. Tonight.'

Emerald flames surged twice.

'Can't you for once drink it without complaint?' said Billy.

'Oh, for God's sake, chill,' snapped Simeon, crossing to the CDs. 'I'm sick of this, absolutely sick of it. Some little whore from your past turns up and you -'

Billy was onto him instantly, moving with preternatural speed, a blur trailing behind him. Simeon's jet black bob sliced the air, his expression stunned as Billy slammed him against a wall, forcing him into an armlock.

'Jesus!'

Simeon's right cheek was squashed to the wall and Billy whispered in his other ear, his words slow and threatening. 'Don't you ever say anything like that again. Ever.' The two vampires stayed still, breathing heavily. Nostrils flared in

Simeon's big aristocratic nose and candlelight cast a silvery patch on his black hair.

'Her name's Esther,' murmured Billy. 'Say it. Say Esther.'

Simeon remained silent until he was prompted by an extra twist of his arm. 'Esther, Esther,' he said.

Billy gave him a hard shove then stalked off.

'Esther,' repeated Simeon, wriggling his shoulders and stepping away. 'Remind me why you guys never hit it off. Oh, that's right. You accidentally killed her. How could I forget?'

Billy had him up against the wall in a flash, arm twisting high again. Simeon yelped in pain.

'You've never loved,' accused Billy.

Simeon gasped in outrage. 'Hah!' he said. 'Hah! And I'm here because . . . because what? Fancied a change? Got bored of humans so thought I'd up-sticks and go feed on . . . on Arctic fucking lemmings? And synthetic fucking blood?'

Billy twisted his arm even higher. 'Never loved!' continued Simeon. 'Well, what am I doing in this dump? Is it because . . . because I think you're kind of OK? Kinda cute? Or because I . . . Ouch! God knows why . . . You get off on coming here. But, you know what? I find it a pretty big deal. I hate it, hate it. I'm only doing it for you because I care. And I am actually suffering quite majorly.'

'You enjoy suffering,' hissed Billy.

'Jesus Christ, man, you are such a cunt.'

Billy slammed Simeon's body to the wall once more. His erection was thickening and he pressed it against Simeon's butt.

'It's not even the same woman,' accused Simeon. 'It was centuries ago. Ever heard the phrase time to move on?'

'It's the same soul,' breathed Billy.

'And that gets you hard, does it?'

Billy grasped a handful of Simeon's hair, pulling his head back so his throat arched. His Adam's apple made a voluptuous jut in that long stubble-flecked neck, a sight that flooded Billy with memories. 'Oh, if you were mortal.'

'And what?' challenged Simeon in a stretched, reedy voice. 'You'd do what you did to her? Love me to death? Or what you did to me? Make me a vampire, possess me and make me yours?'

Billy tugged Simeon's head back still further, his grip tightening on his hair.

'You don't give a person room to breathe,' wheezed Simeon. 'That's not love, that's suffocation.'

Billy jerked Simeon away from the wall, clasp arm and hair to frogmarch him across the room. He forced him over the pool table, pressing his head onto the turquoise baize. The white ball span away and bounced off the side cushion.

'You're jealous,' murmured Billy. He tugged Simeon's flies open, pushing down his clothes to bare his pale slender ass, wisps of dark hair fringing his crack. Simeon's erection bounced free and Billy leant over him, wrapping his fingers around that big sturdy shaft. He wanked him gently. 'Jealous,' mocked Billy, his lips behind Simeon's ear.

Simeon lay still, breathing hard and saying nothing as Billy's fist shunted along his cock, and Billy's crotch dug into his buttocks. After a while, in a tender mannered voice, Simeon whispered, 'Yes. I'm jealous. What of it?'

A surge of respect and lust nearly knocked Billy for six. Hurriedly, he unzipped and let his pants drop to his knees. 'Get your top off,' he said in a quiet command and Simeon obliged. He groaned as Billy rubbed saliva into the puckered bud of his asshole, and worked his fingers in to open him up. Billy pumped his fingers, gazing at the shifting sinew of Simeon's back, at the wings of his shoulder blades and the way candleflame and shadow rippled over his ivory skin.

It was a perfect back. Billy withdrew and clasped his own cock, blood-hard in his fist. He loved Simeon like this: submissive after a row, horny, sluttish and spread. He spat onto his fingers, moistening himself before pushing at Simeon's ring with his fat, flushed glans.

'You fucker,' said Billy tenderly. Slowly he eased forwards, meeting the circlet of muscle, forcing himself past its resistance as Simeon exulted and cursed, fingernails clawing the turquoise cloth. Both vampires groaned deeply as Billy slid his meat into the snug silky depths of his lover's ass.

Billy held his breath, his hand against the small of Simeon's back, relishing the hot squeeze around his swollen cock.

'Oh, man,' groaned Simeon. 'You complete me.'

Billy started to fuck him with slow easy lengths. The men breathed with heavy concentration until Billy drew a sharp thumbnail across his lover's back, making Simeon groan. Blood rose to the surface and spread onto Simeon's alabaster skin. God, it was a beautiful sight. Billy slammed harder and faster.

'Oh, man,' said Simeon, jerking himself wildly.

'Jealous,' panted Billy.

'I fucking love you,' gasped Simeon and then he shot his load.

'Ah, fuck,' muttered Billy, going at him like a jackhammer.

The sprawled cat rubbed its belly on the hearth rug, frothing itself to climax. Suzanne, legs wide, masturbated with both hands. 'I love it when you two get off with each other,' she said. 'Makes me want to feed.'

2

IN THE LANTERN-LIT log cabin, Margret grinned at the camera, her flushed face dimpling. The ear flaps and tassels of her blue woollen hat hung by her cheeks, giving her the appearance of a jolly medieval Dutch woman.

‘If I could have anything in this moment,’ she said, ‘I would be having a hot bath with bubbles.’

‘A glass of beer,’ said Johannes as Esther panned to him. ‘And some kisses from my young and beautiful girlfriend who I am very much missing.’

Margret acted scandalised and everyone laughed, Bird squeezing his toy accordion to add to the noise.

‘And some superior music,’ added Johannes, wagging his finger in the air.

‘He wants Wagner,’ yelled Adrian.

‘Hey, you want Wagner?’ asked Bird. ‘I could give it a go.’

‘Ogh!’ laughed Johannes. ‘Please spare us this attempt. It is too terrible.’

Esther panned to the head of the table, the camcorder recording the coffee mugs and glasses of brandy schnapps to focus briefly on the playing cards laid out in a patience game in front of Doug.

‘Dougie?’ she said cheerily. ‘If you could have anything right now?’

Doug glanced at the camera, brown eyes pinched, and turned quickly away. ‘No,’ he croaked, raising his hand to shield his face. ‘Please.’

Esther flinched. Oh, what a clumsy thing to do.

Johannes clapped Doug on the back. 'Tomorrow will be better, my good man,' he said. 'But now you must rest your foot and your throat and your mind also.'

Esther panned away, recognising how awful it must be to have a bunch of people trying to coerce you into bonhomie when you were feeling low.

'Seems Doug's a little camera shy,' she said lightly. 'Losing his voice too. Unlike Bird here, our entertainment for the evening.' Bird, a thin balding man with a big hooked nose, winked to camera. 'Bird's ambition is to make it into *Heat* magazine.'

'Ah, heat,' said Margret. 'How I would like some heat.'

Bird hoicked his foot up onto the bench. 'You hum it and I'll play it, shweetheart.'

The cabin looked similar to a sauna with its slatted log walls, bunks and benches but the temperature was only just warming up. Propane lanterns hung from the ceiling, their mantles glowing and casting glints onto saucepans and utensils hanging above the cooking area. Three small windows looked out onto the dark icecap, making the interior feel extra cosy. A couple of stoves burned steadily, the smells of coffee, food and fuel lingering in the air. They'd eaten well, a meal of mushroom and chicken pasta followed by a batch of biscuits knocked up by Bird, all topped off with glasses of brandy schnapps in honour of Margret's 32nd birthday.

'Who's for checking out the skidoos?' asked Bird. 'Take 'em for a little whiz across the ice. Make sure everything's shipshape.'

'Oh, yes,' enthused Margret. 'I would like to celebrate my birthday with a small race perhaps.'

'Cool,' said Adrian. 'Wouldn't mind doing a few long exposures as well. That sky's something else tonight.'

'Ah no,' began Johannes. 'I think I would rather stay -' He caught a warning glance from his wife and cut himself

short. 'A wonderful idea. I hope we will not be getting stopped for drunk-driving.'

'Essie?' said Bird. 'Do you want to hang here with Doug?'

Bird had a clever way of making orders sound like suggestions.

'Yeah, fine.'

Doug glanced up from his card game and shot Bird a grouchy look.

The other four donned their cold-weather gear and headed for the snowmobiles, stored for trekkers' use in a rudimentary garage. With their absence, the cabin felt awkwardly quiet. The gas lanterns purred faintly and Doug's cards made a plasticky snap. Esther wrote her expedition blog, stylus-tapping her entry on her palmtop. 'The wind was strong when we broke camp this morning and Adrian's sleeping bag pad was blown away. We laughed as he tried to run after it.'

Doug broke the silence. 'I shouldn't have come,' he said, his voice dry and strained. 'I don't think I can hack it.'

He looked at Esther and his eyes, scanning nervously, seemed to demand something of her. His beard was growing out of shape already, and he had a hint of wildness in his manner. For Doug to be showing signs of instability already was a worry. It was well known the solitude of the ice could send people crazy, and anxiety, irritation and depression weren't uncommon. All that nothingness affected a person.

The Long Eye, they called it, or the thousand-mile stare. Esther had seen photos of explorers gazing right through the camera, right through the viewer. Their eyes were blank, their expressions suggesting they were seeing some incommunicable horror beyond. She'd heard of how their thoughts would warp, drifting from reality to abstraction. But in the pictures, they didn't look as if they had thoughts. They looked hollowed out, the living dead.