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FREEING THE BEAST WITHIN
All Hallow's Eve

BY

JUDE MASON

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FREEING THE BEAST WITHIN

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Dedication:

To all those cat lovers out there, and to the cats they love.

Chapter One

Morgan stretched cat-like and a grumbling purr erupted from deep in her chest. The bed, Joshua's bed, felt luxurious beneath her. A soft quilt, made by a local woman, and given to him as a gift for services rendered, wrapped her in its warm embrace. Crisp linen sheets matched the predominant earthy brown of the quilt and smelled of him and her, and the lovemaking they had shared the night before. She smiled, remembering his teeth at the back of her neck as he plunged into her. Her stretch turned into one of those glorious bone cracking, back arching moves that left her feeling as if she could take on the world. And when she turned her head, there he was, watching her.

"Good morning, sexy lady." His voice was still full of sleep and sounded raspy, but his gold-flecked eyes sparkled in the early morning sunlight. His smile touched her heart.

Peering at him, she returned his smile, and reached to stroke the softness of his long black hair. "Good morning to you, my sexy beast."

Her reply made his smile broaden even more. They had spent the last two weeks in bed more than out, or running naked and wild through the woods surrounding his small cabin. She'd never been happier, or felt more free. The years of denial, hiding from the reality of her existence seemed like someone else's memories—someone else's nightmare. She had finally allowed the sleek, fast cougar its place. Encouraged by this new man, she'd allowed the animal within herself to grow, becoming one with the wildness she'd always known was there, but had fought. *Joshua*, even saying his name in her mind made her heart beat faster.

"I want you to stay with me, here." He reached for her, his hand sliding around her waist and pulling her closer. She rolled, and cuddled against him, her breasts pressing flat against his ribcage. One arm lay across his chest, her fingers going instinctively to a taut brown nipple. Her face nuzzled into his neck.

"I know you have a job, a life, but I know you'd be happy here."

They talked about her staying before, several times in fact, over the past two weeks. The offer was tempting. She'd never felt more at home anywhere. It was as if

she'd finally found the one place she belonged, and the lover who was her perfect match. And he was.

"I know I would be. I've never felt so...so comfortable with someone before."

"Then stay." He leaned down and kissed the top of her head. He pulled away; just enough so he could slip the fingers of his free hand under her chin and lift her face. Gazing into her eyes, his face became serious. "You know with my inheritance we don't have to worry about money."

That was true. It was that inheritance, which had brought her to him. She'd been the executor of his father's will and the bearer of the sad news.

"But, I have clients who depend on me." She pulled her face out of his hands. To stay would be a dream come true, but she couldn't just leave her job without some kind of notice. In a soft, wistful tone, she added, "I can't just walk away without making some kind of arrangements for them, even if I wanted to—"

"And do you? Want to stay, I mean."

She looked up at him, eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Yes, I want to. Two weeks isn't enough. I want more."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him even harder, his morning erection trapped between them. Effortlessly, he rolled them both so she wound up on top. Straddling his hips, she broke his grip and sat up straight. The bedding slipped down her back and came to rest against her bottom. Naked, the chill morning air puckering her nipples and sent goose bumps up her arms and across her chest. She shuddered. Her breasts wobbled, and she saw his eyes move to her breasts. "It looks like you're a morning person." She dropped a hand to where his cock thrust up between them, and palmed the shaft.

He gasped. His hips thrust upward and his gaze flashed to her face. "Not necessarily. More of an opportunist. I'll take whatever I can, when I can." He said it lightly, but she somehow knew he was talking about more than just sex.

"Life's been tough for you out here?"

"Life is life, wherever you are. The animal within makes it tough sometimes." He placed his hands over her breasts and while she stroked his cock from base to crown and back, he tweaked her nipples with his thumbs. "People around here are more likely to shoot a big cat than leave it be. Keeping away from the campgrounds and farms is bad enough, but come hunting season, it's next to impossible for me to get out."

Morgan tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but with his hands on her and the firm shaft she held, were more than a little distracting. The word shoot got her

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attention, but the pleasure of his hands quickly tore it from her conscious thoughts. Sighing, she leaned into his hands. The smooth length of his cock slid easily in her hand as she eased her fingers up and down. His pubic hair tickled her hand on each downward stroke. Another shiver raced up her spine.

Discussion forgotten, she raised herself off him and angled his prick toward her pussy. The touch of the glans against her nether lips dragged a groan from him. He tightened his hands, the soft plumpness of her breasts bulging between his fingers. A dull ache began, and grew, and she reveled in it.

Slowly, she sank down on his shaft. Her inner muscles clutched at him and relaxed, as if trying to suck him in. Inch by delicious inch he filled her, the head splitting her first, widening the pathway for his girth. When she could no longer hold him, she placed her hands on his shoulders and groaned. The last inches filled her. The tip of his cock nudged her cervix. A tiny stab of discomfort took her breath, but euphoria quickly followed.

"Fuck!" Joshua breathed. His eyes were wide. A flush crept over his chest and up his neck. "Don't move. Damn girl, don't clench or I'll lose it."

She watched a bead of sweat trickle down the side of his face. He pulsed inside her. Her body reacted instinctively, clamping on him. She smiled, but tried to keep still and give him time to regain control. Mornings seemed to be special for him, and she loved the power she had over him then.

He growled that low guttural sound she'd grown to love when he fought his animal needs. His hands dropped to her hips, and gripped them tight, painfully tight, for the first moments of his struggle. She felt him pulse again, and knew his battle was a close one. But even as she thought it, he sighed and gazed up at her.

"You enjoy this way too much."

She chuckled and nodded, the question of her staying delayed, at least for a little while. Carefully, she raised her hips, until just the tip of his cock nestled between her labia. She held, teased and tormented him with her nearness until she couldn't stand it another second, then sank back down.

"Not too much." She ground her hips into his, feeling the shaft inside her moving, rubbing against places not often touched. "Just enough—exactly enough." Taking his hands in hers, she leaned forward and pressed them against the pillow, one on each side of his head. "Hold still and let me do all the work."

"You know I can get free."

"Of course, that's part of the challenge." Morgan shifted her weight, and felt him tense his thigh muscles. "Let me have control."

"Okay, but I don't think I can hold off for long like this."

"You'll last as long as I want." Her voice had a teasing edge to it.

Sliding almost completely off him, she gave him only enough time to take a deep breath before lunging down. She tried to vary the speed and depth of her strokes, to keep him on the edge of release. At first, he just moaned with every downward stroke. A warm gush of air and a whisper of sound brushed her cheek. That turned louder when her tempo increased, and he growled when she suddenly stopped halfway down his shaft.

"Fuck!" He arched his hips upward, plunging his cock as deep into her as it would go.

"Yeah, that's what it is." She lifted off him, letting his cock slip completely out of her. "Oh dear, look what you've gone and done now. You'll have to behave better than that or—"

"Or what?" He glared at her, the gold flecks in his eyes flashing.

Instead of answering, she maneuvered herself so his cock slid wetly against her slick, puffy labia. Then, while looking him in the eye, she drove herself onto him. Excitement surged inside her. Her pulse pounded wildly in her temples. Thighs tight with tension, she thrust herself onto him, quickly rising to that moment of bliss she felt coursing beneath the surface.

Joshua seemed to sense her need and his body rose to answer. Hips slammed into thighs. Groans turned to cries of pleasure. The slap of flesh on damp flesh filled the room. Then came a keening cry of pure animal delight, and both of them froze as waves of ecstasy shuddered through them. He pulsed inside her and she clamped down on him, milking the male essence rhythmically from his twitching shaft.

When her spasms lessened, and her breathing took on a less frantic pace, Morgan focused on the man below her. His black, wavy hair lay plastered to his forehead and his face was flushed, but the smile drew her down. Their lips met in a soft kiss that soon became more passionate. Tongues entwined and fought. His arms found their freedom and wound around her waist, pulling her close.

She lay upon him, breathing deeply of his scent. She didn't realize she was going to drift off to sleep until suddenly her eyes closed.

Chapter Two

Awakened by his lips on hers, she purred and wrapped her arms around his neck. When he broke the kiss moments later, his eyes locked on hers and he whispered, "Stay," her heart nearly broke. She wanted to so much, but couldn't let her responsibilities go.

Rolling out of bed, she walked to the window overlooking the small lawn at the back of his cabin. The forest beyond seemed to call to her, and she longed to let go of her human existence and simply run free as she had a few nights before.

"I want to." She turned and looked back at him, still stretched out on the bed. "You know I do."

Naked, his body covered in sweat, his cock softened and curled across his lightly furred lower belly, he lay unselfconsciously looking at her, with such longing in his eyes it made her heart ache. "I know."

"I have to make arrangements for a few clients, give notice on my apartment, and pack my stuff up. I'll be free to come back then."

Gracefully, like the big cat she knew him to be, he rose from the bed and went to her. When he wrapped her in his arms again, he kissed the tip of her nose. "I know you have a life away from here. I just don't want to lose you now that I've found you."

Slipping her arms around him, she smiled. "There's no way you could. Your father knew, somehow, that we should be together. I wish he'd said something sooner." Going onto her toes, she kissed him softly.

"I do too, but he did make sure we got together. I'll always remember you that first evening. Scared out of your mind in unfamiliar territory, but determined to do what needed to be done. And later..."

Smiling, she remembered later very well. "Yes. Later—amazing wasn't it?"

"More. I'd dreamt of you, painted you, fantasized about you. When I saw you in the woods beside the lake, I thought I'd finally lost my mind." His voice had grown husky as he spoke, and she knew he was remembering the long years of loneliness, of hiding his secret. "I didn't think I'd ever find you."

"But you did." She kissed his chest. Laying her cheek against the warm flesh, she felt his heart beating. "You did, and there's no chance you'll lose me."

They stood silently, each deep in their own thoughts. Through the open window, the world came to life; birds and insects buzzed and twittered. A rustling in the underbrush spoke of squirrels or mice. She smiled, and wondered at how quickly she had grown to love those sounds.

"Let's go for a walk before breakfast." Joshua relaxed his grip and stepped back. "You'll love the shore at this time. Animals come to drink. We might get lucky and see that doe I've seen hanging around."

"I'd love that."

They dressed, him in cut-offs and a white, sleeveless t-shirt, her in a short, pale green shift, and they were nearly ready. Both needed coffee; they'd found that out about each other that first morning. Without their morning brew, neither was fit company. Barefoot, with a mug in one hand, and the other firmly wrapped around the waist of their lover, they strolled down the path leading to the lakeside.

Morgan's memory of her first mad rush along the trail had her trembling with excitement. The smell of ferns and the deeper musk of rotting vegetation, which had at first seemed so foreign, so repugnant, now seemed beautifully natural and right.

They were about halfway to the waterfront when Joshua stopped, and with his coffee mug indicated the skeletal remains of a deer just off the pathway. "You know, together we might be able to put a stop to lot of the poaching around here." Joshua had told her enough about his passion to protect wildlife in the area to know he was serious. "This one was shot sometime last fall when I was away. Bastards!"

She cringed from the pile of bleached white bones. She'd been down this trail before, several times, but until he pointed them out, she'd missed seeing the remains. It had been a buck. The antlers shone a pale gold in the sunlight; the rest was white and brittle looking. Bits of fur clung here and there, but rodents had picked the carcass clean.

"They knew I'd be away. They must have."

"How horrible. Such a fine creature to be left to rot, the meat wasted. It's as if his life was worth nothing."

"A real hunter would never have poached off my land. Would never have left meat lying to rot. Whoever did this, is a criminal." He tightened his grip around her waist and urged her to continue their walk.

After a few steps, still feeling her anger, Morgan couldn't keep silent any longer. "You really think we can do something to stop this?"

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"Yes, I do."

"But, it'd be dangerous, right?" Surprisingly, the thought of doing something dangerous didn't frighten her. In fact, it gave her a rush.

He was silent for a few moments, and just as she was about to repeat the question, he answered. "Yes, it might be dangerous. But not as dangerous as it would be for a normal human."

She looked at him, at first not understanding, but then the realization of what he meant sank in, and she smiled. "You mean, we'd work as cats," she said flatly.

"Of course. It's a gift; why not use it to our advantage?"

Hearing him say it so calmly, so naturally, made her realize how much she'd kept hidden even from herself. How much she'd ached to set her animal side free. "Yes, there's no reason not to, is there?"

"And every reason to do something. The local game wardens can't catch them; maybe it's time someone else stepped in."

They walked on, both quiet, deep in thought. Nearing the lakeside, Morgan became aware of a soft slurping sound, and stopped. Joshua, sensitive to her, stopped beside her.

"Listen." She hoped he understood. She wasn't afraid, but there was something ahead.

Joshua pulled her toward him, and with his mouth next to her ear, he whispered, "Careful. It could be anything." He didn't stop her from going ahead of him.

She was first to see the doe. With her head only about a foot from the water and her hindquarters facing them, she sprawled on the grass. At first, Morgan thought the animal had been injured. The tawny brown beast lay on its side, its belly writhing in a most unusual way. Then she realized what was really happening and gaped. From the well-muscled hind end, just below her tail, the head and upper body of a wet newborn fawn protruded and squirmed.

"Holy..." breathed Joshua barely loud enough for her to hear. The doe heard him though, and struggled, trying to get to her feet.

Morgan stepped back, carefully. Her back touched Joshua's body, pushing him. Her mind was filled with awe—new life, right in front of her, coming into the world.

When she'd backed them both away and the trees partially shielding them, she squatted down. Reaching her mind out, she sent out feeling of calm, hoping the doe would settle down again before she caused any damage to her fawn.

It must have worked, or something did. The huge brown eyes gazed around, and then she gave a shudder and put her head back down in the grass. Her middle bulged. A new contraction forced a soft grunt from the doe. She kicked her long slender legs and tensed. The tiny body behind her oozed a little further out. Another shudder followed, along with a mighty heave, and the tiny body plopped out onto the grass and lay motionless.

Morgan stood frozen as well, scarcely daring to take a breath. A hand, his, touched her hip. He squatted behind her and suddenly his leg brushed her bottom. His breath on her neck made her shiver. He took the forgotten cup from her hand, then leaning forward a little more, he whispered, "Don't move now or she'll bolt."

She wouldn't have moved if a tree had fallen on her. Birth, the miracle of life, was beginning right in front of her. After seeing the bones of the stag, it was so much more important—as if this birth somehow made up for the death.

Just then, the tiny bundle of wet newborn jerked. The doe, in the gentlest way imaginable, twisted her head and licked the embryonic sack covering its progeny. The squirming bundle soon became a head and shoulders. Then, before it was even clean of its birthing sack, it struggled to its feet. Wobbling, falling repeatedly, it made its way to its mother's belly. The afterbirth presented, the doe groaned one last time and scrambled to her feet.

Morgan's legs ached before she realized how long she'd been watching. The fawn had suckled at his mother's teat. Yes, he was a male and would hopefully grow to replace the bones and hide left by the human monster. She moved. A branch snapped beneath her naked foot. The doe's head snapped toward her—eyes wide, afraid. For a long frozen moment, the doe and she stared into each other's eyes. Something passed between them—an understanding of being female—of being responsible for birthing young and replacing those lost.

The doe nosed her fawn toward the brush, away from the lakeside where she and he were the most vulnerable. The smell of the afterbirth was strong. That in itself was enough reason to leave.

When the two had disappeared into the underbrush, Morgan exhaled. "That was amazing!" She rose to her feet, and felt him do the same behind her. She turned, just as his arms went around her waist.

"Yeah, it was." He pulled her close and kissed her gently on the tip of her nose. "You know, I've seen the doe around the house. I knew she was pregnant, I smelled it on her, but I never dreamed I'd see her give birth."

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"I've never seen anything so wonderful." She looked up into his eyes, then added, "Maybe that's the wrong words. You're pretty amazing, too."

He threw his head back and laughed. "You're a crazy lady. You know that?"

"That's why you like me so much."

"We should bury the afterbirth. She'll want to come back to drink later and if it's there, it's liable to attract predators." He relaxed his arms and moved away from her toward where the doe had lain. A small mound of moist, blood-streaked tissue was all that remained of the miracle they had witnessed. She joined him in the grizzly task of scooping out a hole large enough. After pulling handfuls of grass, they eased the still warm mound into the hole. A few minutes later, they smoothed the dirt over the top and then added a layer of leaves.

"He's a fine little thing, isn't he?" Morgan mused, more to herself than him. "He'll grow into a fine buck. Prey for us, or for something else." Looking into Joshua's eyes, she smiled when she saw the hunger there, the acceptance.

"Yes, he will, providing he lives long enough." He squeezed her hand. "We'd better leave." He took her by the arm and guided her back to the pathway they followed from his cabin. "She won't want the stink of humans anywhere near where she takes her fawn."

Morgan eagerly followed—the memory of the birth and the first wobbly steps of the newborn foremost in her mind. He retrieved their cups, leading her away from where the deer had gone into the woods, and around the lakeshore. Barefoot, it was slow going, but after no more than ten minutes, they emerged onto a grass-covered beach. The willow trees had formed a large circle, leaving about thirty feet of sun-dappled grass bordering the water.

"This is beautiful," she sighed. Letting go of his hand, she went to the waters edge and knelt down. Her face peered back at her. Her eyes shone.

"Yeah, it is." He was behind her, close.

Looking over her shoulder, she shielded her eyes with her hand and gazed up into his. He was standing over her, his arms crossed, his feet naturally spaced for balance. He smiled down at her, and she knew he wasn't talking about the same thing she was. She wriggled her bum and arched her back. A purr threatened.

"Beautiful indeed." His voice was rough, his eyes shone with excitement. His smile broadened. "Do you swim?"

"Yes, I love to swim." She looked again at the water. Without another word, she rose to her feet and skimmed out of her dress. Warmth from the sunlight bathed her; a

cool breeze sent goose bumps racing across her chest, puckering her nipples in its wake. She posed with her hands held high, one leg extended toward the water as if she was about to dip a toe in to check its chill. She heard him gasp. Turning her head, she winked at him seductively over her shoulder, and then raced into the water. A few long strides, then a shallow dive took her into the cool embrace of the lake.

A dozen meters away she surfaced. She turned just in time to see his naked form racing for the water. Long, muscular legs powered him ahead, wavy dark hair flying, he took several long splashing strides into the lake, then knifed toward her.

Morgan squealed in mock terror. Turning away from him, she swam for the opposite shore, a couple of hundred meters away, as fast as her arms and legs would propel her. It'd been awhile since she'd done any swimming to speak of, but even so, she almost managed to make the other shore before a hand gripped her ankle. She laughed and let him pull her back. Her heart thumped wildly from the exertion. Blood roared in her ears and her breath came in great, long gasping inhalations.

"Gotcha!" Joshua cried as he pulled her into his arms. Wet flesh slid seductively against wet flesh. His hands found her breasts and cupped them, his fingers tweaking the sensitive nipples. His cock nudged her inner thigh, inches above her knee. When she spun toward him and wound her legs around him, his cock slid upward.

Looking into his gold-flecked eyes, she chuckled. "Yes, you got me, but I've got you, too." She slipped her hand between their wet-slick bodies and grasped his shaft. She gave it a squeeze and it pulsed.

She tightened her thigh muscles, digging her heels into his ass, drawing him closer. With a firm grip on his shaft, she rubbed his cock head over her pussy, zeroing in on her clit. A jolt of pleasure made her shiver. Hot juices flowed out of her and into the cold water.

Joshua groaned, and slid his hands from her breasts. A moment later, they found their way to her bottom. Each cupped a cheek and held her in place while she drove them both crazy with her teasing. When he groaned again, she knew he wasn't going to take much more of her torment. With an evil grin, she slid down onto him, but only for that single, heated thrust. Then, before he could grab hold of her too firmly, she pulled herself free.

His hands slid down her thighs, just as she pressed her hands to his chest and pushed away. She shot back into the water. Turning, she used her momentum to put some distance between them, even as her pussy clenched with disappointment.

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Behind her, she heard splashing, followed by a shouted, "Hey!" For a moment, it was quiet, and then a soft chuckle reached her. The silence that followed was ominous. She thought he'd stopped. But, when she heard the soft breathing behind her and the tiny sounds of water moving, she realized he was there, pacing her.

She increased her stroke, straining to outdistance him.

The shore loomed closer, the tree-lined beach a mere dozen meters away, when his hand gripped her ankle again. Snarling, she kicked, but was held in place.

"Come here," he laughed and pulled.

Morgan relented, willingly. He took his time, walking his hand up her leg, caressing and teasing her—revenge for her escape perhaps. She eased her legs wide, pushing her ass high, tempting him, and herself to rush. Breathless, she wanted him inside her.

"Not so fast, tease." His fingers found her heat, toyed with the lips of her pussy.

"You made me work so hard. Maybe I'm too tired to play." She gasped when his fingers targeted her clit. "Maybe I'll—"

A rifle shot broke the silence of the forest.

Morgan lunged away, all thoughts of pleasure gone. Behind her, Joshua was silent. She spun, searching for where the shot had come from. He was doing the same, treading water and wildly looking around.

When the echo stopped, she whispered urgently, "There," and nodded toward the shore where they'd seen the doe and fawn. A chill raced up her spine. An image of the doe bleeding to death, the fawn trying to wake up his mother flashed into her mind.

She glanced at Joshua, but didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. She turned and swam toward the far shore. The water dragged at her. She couldn't seem to gather any speed. Frustration and anger mounted. Behind her, she heard Joshua's stroke.

Then he was abreast of her, pacing her easily. His expression was dour. "Calm down, you'll make better time." His tone was flat. His energy was all for speed.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a second to focus herself. Her stroke evened out, her speed increased, and beside her so did his. They knifed through the water, leaving scarcely a ripple. As they neared the shore, he eased her to the right.

She brushed the bottom; rocks bruised her knees and shins. They rose to their feet and together scrambled for shore.

The woods were silent. No birds sang. No bugs creaked or chirped. Even the breeze seemed to have lost its voice. Naked and dripping, Morgan led the way. She

sensed something just beyond the line where grass met trees, and dog trotted that way. Her feral senses intensified.

Beside her, Joshua suddenly crouched down and peered at the ground. Soft loam, rocks, and a boot print, gave hint to what may have happened. The scent of copper touched her. She wanted to scream.

"Follow me," Joshua whispered and turned into the forest. She tucked in behind him, and where minutes ago she'd have admired the smooth play of muscles in his thighs and ass, all she could think of then was the smell of blood. He didn't go far. A handful of meters, not even far enough to completely lose the light, and he again stopped.

"What?" She made to go around him.

He held his arm out, stopping her. It wasn't enough. On the ground in front of him lay a small body. Tan, speckled with white spots across its back, spindly legs folded beneath it, lay the fawn. "Morgan, no, don't—"

"No!" Her anguished scream echoed through the trees. She pushed Joshua to the side, leaping past him. Knelt by the tiny body, she couldn't stop the tears that streamed down her face. She reached for the fawn, but her hand never made it.

Something struck her in the side of the head, sending her to the ground. Her vision blurred. Pain wrapped its arms around her, dragging her into darkness.

Chapter Three

Noise. Pots clattered in a sink. Water flowed, filling something. The smell of blood was overwhelming. Too close—too strong. She moved, tried to turn away from the stench of blood. Pain filled her skull. Her brain felt bruised, battered. Bile rose into her throat.

"Easy." Joshua's voice was soft, but even so, it jarred her nerves. "You've been shot. Creased the side of your head."

Cold softness pressed against her forehead. Like a knife, it cut through the pain, but didn't help her stomach any. She tried moving again, but was held down.

"Morgan, you have to lay still. I've almost got the bleeding stopped, but you have to be still."

"Sick," she moaned, and as soon as the word emerged, she felt as if her stomach was indeed going to erupt. "Stomach...sick." She managed to push herself onto one elbow and lean away from him.

"Okay, easy." He was gone. The soothing coldness went with him.

She swallowed. It didn't help. She wanted to vomit, but not here, not with him nearby. Her head felt as if it was going to explode. She hadn't even been able to open her eyes yet, and still the world spun.

"Here, suck this."

Something cold pressed against her lips. Instantly, she was thirsty and took the ice into her mouth. There wasn't enough to quench her thirst. There wasn't even enough really to wet her entire mouth. But it was heaven, and she suddenly felt worlds better when she finished the sliver of ice.

She sighed and laid back. Only then did she open her eyes. Joshua, still naked and beautiful, was above her. Concern wrinkled his brow and she reached a hand up to stroke his face. With a jolt, she remembered the doe and fawn. "The fawn?" She closed her eyes, and gathered herself for the news.

"Is alive."

When her eyes popped open, he was smiling down at her. Her heart pounded. "But...what happened." She reached up and tentatively touched her head. Matted, sticky hair clung to her fingers. A bandage covered the spot that hurt the worst. She explored that, but didn't probe too much. Dropping her hand to the bed, she looked up at him, waiting for him to answer.

"A poacher. We must have surprised him." He smiled, but there was no humor in it. "Two naked people coming through the bush after you'd shot a fawn...yeah that'd get anyone's attention." He leaned forward and kissed her softly on the cheek. "When I saw you go down, I almost went after him." Gazing into her eyes, he whispered, "I'm glad I didn't. Both you and the fawn needed me."

"The fawn. Where is he?" Again, she tried to rise, but her head pounded, driving her back down.

"Hey, you're really going to have to take it easy or I'll have to take you to a hospital. I can take care of you, but you have to do what you're told." The smile he graced her with that time was filled with humor, and caring. "The fawn is beside you, on the floor. He's frightened, but I think with some TLC he'll be all right."

"You brought it inside?" Incredulous, she again tried to sit up, and that time she managed to see over the side of the bed before collapsing back. There lay the tiny bundle of knobby bones and fur, sleeping or unconscious, she couldn't tell. "But what about the doe? Will she take him back if he's been in here? You know, with humans touching him? What's wrong with him?"

Joshua let her go for a few moments, but when it seemed like she didn't plan to stop her tirade of questions, he placed an index finger across her lips. Silenced, she glared at him. But when he smiled, she realized what she'd done, and smiled back.

"The doe, as far as I know, is fine. I saw her when I was carrying you both back here. She paced me. It was weird. She didn't seem to be afraid of me." He was thoughtful for a moment. Silence was like a blanket, luring her toward sleep. "Will she take her young back?"

His words jarred her from the threatened slumber. What was wrong with her she wondered? "To be honest, I have no idea. I've heard they don't, but I've never seen a doe so okay with a human taking her fawn either. Maybe she sensed I wasn't going to hurt the little guy."

"Maybe," Morgan's voice sounded weak even to her own ears.

"You're exhausted." He checked her forehead with his palm, and then kissed her lightly. "You've probably got a concussion, slight one maybe, but you need rest."

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"But, we need to find out who did this. I need to get hold of my office and tell them I won't be back..." She stopped.

He gazed at her, eyes wide. "Won't be back?"

"Well, for a while at least." The meaning of what she said sank in. For a while or more permanently?

He looked thoughtful again, but didn't press her. "Sleep now, we'll talk when you feel better."

"But the fawn—is he hurt badly?"

"No, about as bad as you are. Whoever the shooter was, he was a lousy shot. Or he was too far away to get a clean shot. The little guy has a hole in his ear and a bit of a crease on the top of his head. He's scared, in shock, but he'll be right as rain as soon as he gets some sleep. Just like you."

Morgan smiled weakly. "We'll get whoever did this, won't we?"

"Right now all you're going to get is some rest." He straightened up and took a light coverlet from the foot of the bed. Pulling it up around her shoulders, he added, "For now, you have to listen to me, or I will take you to the hospital."

Feeling her anger rise, she bit back a sharp retort before it left her lips. She knew he was right. "All right. I'll rest. Please take care of the fawn."

"No need to even ask. He'll be back on his feet before you are." Joshua got to his feet and turned to go. When he looked over his shoulder at her, desire reared its head and her anger died. She felt a flush warm her cheeks, and when he smiled at her, she knew he felt the same.

The muscles along his back rippled when he raised his hand toward her. "Sleep well, my sexy cat." Then he turned, and she watched the movement of his buttocks as he sauntered out of the small alcove, which had become their haven. He pulled the cloth-covered screen into place and was gone.

Her thoughts reeled. She'd been shot at—shot—wounded. Her head throbbed. Nausea again threatened when she shifted on the pillow. A shuffling sound came from the floor where the fawn lay, and she sent calming thoughts to the tiny beast. It must have done some good, because the noise stopped. His breathing was even, deep and easy. The sound of restful sleep.

She lay listening to him breathe, and that in turned calmed her. Her eyes drooped. The pain in her head became a distant sensation.

* * * *

Something woke her. It was dark, or nearly so. A noise, a soft bleating—close by. She moved, and memory flooded back as the pain in her head blossomed. It wasn't nearly as bad as it had been, but still it pushed her back down. Carefully, she raised herself until she was sitting cross-legged on the bed. Gazing over the edge, she smiled at her tiny companion. In the dim light, she saw that the fawn was alert. Although he was still lying down, his legs neatly folded under him, he peered around the room inquisitively.

"Hey little guy," she whispered. The fawn's head spun toward her, eyes wide. For a moment, he simply stared at her, his huge brown eyes unblinking. Then he shook his head and she noticed his injured ear. Joshua had cleaned it and shaved the hair from around the neat hole at the base of the little beast's left ear. It looked shiny, as if he'd put cream or salve of some kind on the wound. Reaching out, she let him sniff her hand, before she ran her fingers over his head. Yes, there was a crease there too. Nothing huge, but because he was such a tiny creature, so young and fragile, it seemed much larger.

"I see you're finally awake." More quiet than any human, Joshua had snuck into the alcove and stood at the foot of the bed. Dressed in his robe, his tall, lanky body was hidden from her. He leaned over, so he could see the fawn, and added, "Both of you."

"Awake, and feeling much better," she smiled at him. "Thank you." How quickly this man had stolen her heart. A sudden stirring between her thighs made her shiver. Lust for him made her pulse race, but she forced it down. "Did you find out who did it?"

Her bluntness must have surprised him. He glanced up at her, eyes wide, then quickly down at the fawn again. Before he replied, he moved around the bed slowly and squatted beside the tiny deer. Carefully, he reached out, cupped the pointed little chin in one hand and slipped the other over his head and ears. "He seems okay. I'm so surprised at how at ease he's been with us."

Morgan rolled onto her stomach, pushing the cover he'd spread over her down. She reached over the side of the bed and tentatively stroked the fawn's neck. He trembled for a second, but only for a second. Sliding her hand further along his sides and back, seemed to soothe any anxiety he might have had. He lifted his head from Joshua's hands and looked at her. For an instant, there was a connection. A trust fashioned from a shared incident perhaps. Then it was simply the eyes of a fawn, gazing into hers.

"Yes, I am, too. His mother is outside, waiting for him. It's the strangest thing. You'd think she'd be hiding, maybe even resigning herself to losing him. But, she's waiting. I can feel it.

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"Oh, and yes, I found a trail, and the scent of the guy who fired the shots. A Baxter, a stinking Baxter." His eyes shone. The gold flecks had disappeared and his eyes shot daggers. "When we've taken baby out to his mother, I think you and I need to do some hunting."

"Hunting," she breathed. Her pulse quickened. She closed her eyes, and a vision of chasing something, the coppery taste of blood heavy on her tongue. Shuddering, feeling the excitement growing inside her, she opened her eyes and peered at him. His hunger was there. And, his anger. Shoulders tense, his face was flushed, and if she could trust her own eyes, she could see one of his incisors glinting against his lip.

"Yes, hunting." He fixed her with a steady gaze. The pupils of his eyes, elongating, grew brighter, the gold more pronounce. "I think it's time to teach a poacher a lesson. Don't you?"

Blood roared in her ears. The headache she'd had when she woke was gone. Her muscles tensed, bunched then relaxed, as if ready to run. "Yes, it's time."

He slipped his hands under the fawn and lifted the tiny bundle of soft fur and energy into his arms. It didn't struggle much, simply settled in for the ride. "Let's see if mother is ready to get reacquainted. A day and a half is a long time in the life of an animal, especially one this young."

Morgan clambered off the bed, and still naked, followed him out. The floor was cool against her feet as she rushed past him to open the door. Once outside, he stopped. She stood beside him, looking into the night for the doe.

"Where did you see her?" she asked, but before he could reply, a rustling sound came from the brush only a few feet away. Joshua bent, and put the fawn down on its still shaky legs. It shook itself, nearly falling over in the process.

The doe stepped into the clearing. Cocking her head, she grunted. The fawn scampered to her, its tail flicking and waving like a tiny flag. She inspected him, nuzzled and licked at his face and head, but after only a few moments, accepted him. She pushed at him, urging him toward the tree line, then turned and snorted at the two humans. Without further acknowledgement of their aide, the pair wandered into the woods.

"He'll have a headache for a day or so, but she'll take care of him." Joshua slid his arm around her and pulled her close. "He'll be fine now."

"Only if the poaching stops," she spat the words out; angry that such a tiny animal's life had almost been taken.

Jude Mason

For the next hour or so, Morgan and Joshua followed the doe and her fawn, occasionally catching glimpses of them making their way deeper into the forest. Assured the animals were going to be all right, they finally turned away, leaving them in peace.

Chapter Four

Walking back toward the cabin, her thoughts again turned to who the shooter had been. She didn't say anything until they'd arrived at the back door. Reaching out, she grabbed Joshua's arm and pulled him around to face her. "Tell me about the Baxter's."

"The Baxter boys." His body stiffened against her. "The Baxter's own a big chunk of the other side of the mountain. Tommy Baxter is the oldest son, spoiled, and used to getting his way. You know the kind; he's the one who's most likely responsible."

"Most likely?" She eased into his arms and looked up at him. "I thought you were more certain than a most likely."

"I'm sure it was Tommy," he said flatly. "He and I have had a feud going for years. He thinks he saw a cougar in my house. I called him crazy." He smiled, but there wasn't any humor in it. "Ever since then, he's been sneaking around. He's told folks I've got a cougar out here, and it's killing animals—dogs, goats, even a cow or two." He turned her into the house and followed behind, his hands on her shoulders. "Besides, I found his scent. It's him."

He closed the door behind them and guided her to the couch. It was darker inside the cabin than out. With their sharper vision, though, they didn't need a light. Spinning her, he pulled her into his arms.

"Do you have some kind of plan?" She nuzzled his neck and eased her hands inside his robe, across the smooth expanse of his chest.

"He'll be back tonight—unless we stop him." He inhaled sharply when she took each nipple and pinched them. "He's got to come back to see who he shot. I bet he's spent the last couple of days sweating, waiting for the cops to show up and arrest him. He'll have to find out why that didn't happen. Maybe he thinks he killed me."

Pushing his robe off his shoulders, she kissed her way across his chest. Her blood felt hot coursing through her. Her vision was much sharper than she ever remembered it being before. She ached for something—but wasn't sure what she craved. "I want him." From the back of her throat came a purring sound.

"Yes, I know you do. I do too." Joshua's hands raced over her back, pulling at her, encouraging her. "It's nearly moonrise," he murmured. "Do you think you're strong enough to hunt?"

Leaning down, she took his tiny man-nipple between her teeth and gently bit. His shudder excited her even more. Flicking her tongue across the sensitive nub, she reveled in the power coursing through her. With a grunt of frustration, she drew her mouth away. "Yes, I'm strong enough. I want this Tommy Baxter to feel my anger." It just pissed her off that she had been such an easy target.

"Then we'd better get outside, into the bush." He pushed against her shoulders, easing her away from him. "We're not going to wait here. We'll take this battle to him."

"Show me how." She looked eagerly up at him. She'd never hunted before, but suddenly the desire to do so was nearly driving her crazy. Turning away from him, she went to the door and waited for him to follow. He was there a moment later, naked and flushed. His eyes sparkled, and from the way his muscles twitched, she knew he was as excited as she was. His cock was heavy, not erect, but thick and thrust out before him. For a moment, she almost took hold, but pushed her lust for him aside.

The air outside made her flesh tingle and come alive. Inhaling, she smelled the woody sweetness of the cedar trees close by and the heady musk of animals hidden in underground lairs or peering at them through the trees. The doe and her fawn were to the right, near enough to watch them, but far enough to be out of harm's way. The muscles in Morgan's legs ached with the sudden need to work.

"You feel it, don't you?"

She turned and glared at him. "Feel what?" She spat out the words before she realized what she'd done. Immediately she regretted them, but he smiled.

"Yeah, you feel the ache." He suddenly stretched his arms high overhead, grimacing when his chest muscles twitched noticeably. "Soon, you'll feel like you're being torn apart. It's the change. You know it, but each time you forget how bad it hurts."

Fear gripped her. She remembered the tearing pain from the few times she'd been conscious for the cougar's emergence. All the years of taking drugs, denying the beast, hiding in drugged dreams had done her no good. These past weeks had shown her the beginnings of her truth, and with Joshua's help, she'd survive. "Yes, I feel the ache." Her voice sounded wrong, harsh. "It's happening. I'm...I'm not sure what to do."

"Do?" He flashed her a confused glance, but instead of backing away, as most people in her life had, he stroked her arms and lifted her chin for a soft kiss. "My sexy

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cat, you can do nothing but allow the change to happen. Breathe deeply, and let your animal out. Don't fight it. When you learn not to fight it, you'll remember so much more and the change will be easier." He ran a thumb over her cheek, and then pressed it against her lips. She took the digit between her teeth, gently biting at the rough flesh.

She kissed his thumb, and released it. "Okay, I'm ready." A cramp dug into her belly, forcing her to her knees.

He dropped down with her, still stroking her arms. Crawling around her, he stroked her back and the taut roundness of her ass. "I'm here. It's all right; you'll be fine. I'm here with you and I'll watch out for you."

His soothing voice droned on as she watched the big white moonrise above the trees. It pulled at her core; the beams of pallid light seemed to bore into her, sending her muscles into spasm. Writhing in an agony of change as her bones twisted and stretched, she groaned and gnashed her teeth. Even those changed, grew or shrunk, as the moon's glow worked its magic on her.

From somewhere distant, she could hear a cat snarl, as if it too was in agony. Too engrossed in her own torment, Joshua's anguished cries went unanswered—unheard because of her own private trials.

The pain lasted forever, or so it seemed to her. She was finally able to take a breath and there was only the filling of lungs and the pleasure of being, and she rejoiced in the experience.

She'd fallen to her side and lay sprawled in the grass. Her vision seemed different, her senses more acute. The change was complete. Beside her, sprawled and looking at her, was the cougar she'd seen two weeks ago. Joshua, black and sleek, begging for the stroke of her hand, if she'd had a hand. Looking down at herself, she saw her fur, nearly white and as sleek as his. Paws, with toes that flexed like fingers never could, ending in claws that she knew were capable of rending flesh with the ease of a hot knife through butter. She stretched and her back arched, her hind feet clawing at the grass.

Enough, she thought, and bounded to her feet—all four of them. Her angle of sight was off, but she soon acclimatized to it. Colors, enhanced, vibrant, but subtly different than her human eyes recognized, made her momentarily dizzy.

Beside her, he also rose to his feet, and stretched his mighty cat muscles. He was glorious. Blacker than the night around them, his coat shone with a glossiness that begged her touch. The only colors on him were his beautifully gold-flecked eyes, and the

gleaming teeth he showed her when he yawned. His purr surprised her, but in a heartbeat, she responded with her own deep throaty rattle.

He took a step toward her, rubbing his shoulder against her side. A nudge—and she followed him when he continued past. They entered the woods. The lower branches brushed his sides, then hers, as they padded to where the scent of a man rose from the dark forest loam. Mixed with the deeper, mellower scent of the woods, the musky aroma of man made Morgan sneeze.

Her dark companion peered over his shoulder at her. He shook his head, and with a scowl, leaned down and inhaled the odor of the man. She joined him, and with a deep inhalation caught the less than subtle hint of gunpowder. Its tang made her wrinkle her nose.

A grunt from Joshua interrupted her perusal. Sure, that he had her attention, he turned and with a flick of his long supple tail, bounded into the woods. Every few meters, he stopped and put his nose to the forest floor again. She followed his lead and realized he was ensuring they were on the right trail. And what a vivid trail it was. With her human eyes, she would never have seen it. The outline of each footprint was outlined in a darker, more pronounced black—the depth, more well defined. Sweat, from the man's foot, reeked of fear.

Gradually, they climbed out of the lakeside meadow Joshua's cabin inhabited, and entered the hills. The cedar trees grew taller, the undergrowth less dense. The terrain went from rugged, log hopping to a moss-covered carpet, and they increased their speed. Even in the near total darkness beneath the trees, the trail was easy to follow.

Through a stream and over rotten logs left behind when the area had been harvested decades ago, they raced toward the top of the hill. Joshua urged her to lead for part of the way, as if testing her ability to follow the man's scent. It wasn't hard. The farther he'd gone, the more nervous he'd become. The shooting of the fawn had been one thing. Apparently, the shooting of a human was something else entirely, and he was scared.

Suddenly beside her, Joshua snarled.

She stopped, and listened intently for whatever had angered or frightened him. A quick glance at him and she realized he hadn't been frightened, but was ready to do battle. The fur across his shoulders and along his backbone stood on end, his head was low, and his teeth bared.

He slunk forward.

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Sinking to her haunches, she flanked him. Muscles bunched and twitching with excitement, she tried to calm herself. Something was ahead—she could smell it—metal, wood, humans, and something else.

At the top of the rise, both she and Joshua went to their bellies and peered ahead. The house was big, much bigger than the cabin they'd left an hour ago. A split-level, with a large covered veranda circling the first level lay ahead. There were windows all around on the first level, almost none on the second. It was as if they didn't want anyone to see what went on in those upper rooms. Whitewashed, but ill-kept and in need of repair, the house could have been lovely. But the lack of care and the weeds growing up to the porch gave it a look of abandonment.

Chapter Five

Morgan realized that she thought, *they*, not him. There was only a single fresh human scent that dilapidated house. The others were ancient. Joshua had said it was a family home, but her nose told a different story. There was one man here, and he smelled of fear. She peered anxiously toward the windows. Most were black, like the maws of some great many-eyed beast. Those at the front of the house were lit, sending long, ghostly fingers of light across the weed-packed yard. And through one of those windows, she saw a man pacing. Every few moments, he'd stop and go to a darkened side room and peer out into the darkness. Then he would return to his restless trudging back and forth.

Built just over the rise, they'd have to cross an open rocky outcrop to get to the brush surrounding the house. Even in the dark, twenty-five meters of open ground was a lot when you were being watched, especially if you were cloaked in white fur. If they made it, they would have long grass and shrubs to hide behind while they approached the house.

It would be so much easier, better for them, if the man would come out and into the open. But, how to get him there. An idea struck. A dangerous plan perhaps, but one she knew would work. Crouched beside Joshua, she knew he'd object. He'd be there to protect her though, and she trusted him.

Moving a little away from him, she took a deep breath, preparing herself. Then, before he could grasp her plan, she took off, running low to the ground, as fast as she could over the ridge and toward the dark green belt of shrubs. She knew her white pelt would be a target. Joshua's black would keep him hidden, safely though, until he was close enough to trap their prey.

Until he did, she was in danger; she would be the prey. Only her speed would keep her from another bullet. If Tommy Baxter was watching closely, and had his gun ready, she was racing toward a possible fate worse than a flesh wound.

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Adrenaline seared through her veins. Her heart pounded. Clambering over the highest boulder, her claws skidded across the rocks and she nearly fell. Pebbles skittered, marking her position. She held her breath, but surged ahead.

A soft growl to her left told her Joshua was near. But even with her feline vision, when she glanced his way, he was invisible, save for the outline of his back and tail against the moonlit rocks.

A noise from the house jerked her attention that way. A window had been pushed open wide, a man's silhouette was clearly outlined. The way he peered around, his head flitting nervously from one direction to another, spoke of near panic.

She made it to the tall grass and slunk into its dew-laden embrace. After a few careful strides, she stopped to let herself calm down. Panting, she let the heat drip from her tongue; occasionally licking her nose while her quivering slowed, and then finally stopped.

A moment later, Joshua joined her. She knew he wasn't pleased with her, but they were closer to their prey and she hadn't been seen. She also knew they'd talk later, and felt a rush of pleasure at the prospect.

He nudged her neck, licked her ear. When he exhaled, the puff of air into her ear canal made her shudder. Her purr erupted in her chest and she had to force it away.

Ahead, the window slammed shut. Both of them ducked a little lower into the weeds. Looking toward the house, she saw the front door open and a tall slightly overweight man strode onto the veranda. He was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, and at first, Morgan didn't think he was the one—too ordinary looking. Dark-haired and bearded, he looked a little like a bear. But when he reached behind himself back into the house and brought out a rifle, she knew he wasn't just somebody living in Tommy's house. It was him.

A gentle push against her haunch reminded her of how dangerous their position was. Less than twenty-five meters from the house, if they made the wrong move, this man, Tommy, might very well see them.

She watched Joshua ease through the long grass and weeds, moving in a winding path toward the house. She followed his lead, but not his path, and zigzagged forward, always keeping the man in her sight. A thistle caught at her hide, something dug between the pads on her left paw and she bit back a yelp. The journey took too much time. She was afraid the man would go back inside before they got close enough to charge.

Joshua bolted. He had managed to get a little closer than she had, and took the opportunity to rush the man first. She was right behind him, her cougar scream making the hair on her own neck stand up.

"Christ!" the man screamed. He had just enough time to raise the rifle to his shoulder. Before he could aim, or pull the trigger, Joshua was on him. The man hit the floor with a loud thump, but somehow managed to keep his hold on the gun.

Cat claws ripped through cloth and soft human skin. Cat teeth sank into tasty human flesh. Ear splitting screams tore at them. As Joshua raised his head to scream his triumph, she joined him. Straddling the man's flailing arm, she took hold of the gun with her teeth and flung it off the porch.

"No! Get away!" His pleas came fast, furious, and made little sense to either of them in their rage. "Help!" The call echoed through the night, unheard and unheeded.

The t-shirt came away in Joshua's mouth, and the rank stink of the man's sweat was like a cloud around them as he spat it out. The smell of urine followed as his bladder emptied.

He fought. He cried and swore; he beat his fists on whichever cougar he could reach. His frantic struggles to free himself acted like an accelerant. The more he strained and flopped around, the more Morgan wanted his blood. The bastard had shot at her, wounded her and the fawn. He deserved to pay, and pay dearly.

Putting her shoulder against Joshua's body, she pushed.

At first, he resisted. Ignoring her nudge, he continued to torment the terrified man. When she persisted pushing, finally snarling her annoyance at him, he raised his head and looked at her. Her demeanor must have been enough.

He moved aside, but snarled down at the supine man. Blood streamed from a dozen wounds on the human's chest and belly. One thigh lay bare, the denim ripped from knee to crotch. Blood oozed from the opening, soft white flesh gleamed in the harsh light shed from the still-opened doorway.

Joshua snarled and took a last swipe at the man's face, missing his eyes by millimeters, leaving a gash across his forehead. He took up a post standing above the man's head, and glared down at him—daring him to move.

Morgan stepped between the man's legs and gazed at his face. He stunk of fear and piss, and her desire to take his life diminished. It would be much too easy to take the life of the whimpering retch, cowering before her. She'd have her revenge. So would the doe and her fawn.

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She snarled, making sure he saw her teeth and the fire in her eyes. She loathed him. To her, he was less than a man. It took no skill at all to shoot a helpless fawn, to deprive the doe of raising her young. And to shoot at a woman, naked and unarmed, well he was truly not worth the skin it took to cover his bones. He didn't deserve the opportunity to procreate. She would see to it that he never got that chance.

She felt a droplet of saliva drip from her chin—heard the tiny splat when it landed on his too-white flesh. Snarling, she raised her paw; claws extended, and remained poised, ready for the strike.

"No...please...oh, God, please...I—I..." The stammering, sputtering retch mewled and squirmed, trying to escape the two of them. With Joshua to keep him from scrambling away, she took her time and reveled in watching him squirm.

When she finally brought her claws down, slicing through the well-worn denim covering his manhood, her aim was true. Blood poured through the rent in his jeans. His hands flew to the new wound, desperately trying to staunch the flow. His voice failed him, little more than a high-pitched squeak came from his pain-stretched mouth.

She took a step back and watched him writhe. Lifting her gaze, she looked questioningly at Joshua. His eyes were glued to hers. He stared at her, as if judging her. After a long drawn out moment, he snarled and returned his gaze to the whimpering man.

The man's crotch was covered in blood. A slash in his jeans showed her the damage she'd done, and if her cat's mouth had been able to smile, she would have. His penis was still intact, but he was no longer a man. She'd done a good job. He would never breed. If he lived, and she prayed he would, he'd be useless.

To finalize his humiliation, and take her final revenge, she leaned down and licked the open wound in his groin. Her sandpaper rough tongue dragged over raw flesh, and his whimpers turned to a howl of renewed anguish. Another lick, to be sure her saliva entered the wound, and she backed away. The taste of coppery blood thrilled her. The realization of what she'd done thrilled her even more.

"Get away," Tommy screamed, and dug his heels into the ground, trying to push himself away from her. Joshua snarled down at him, freezing him in place. Trapped, he had no choice but to endure whatever torment they handed out.

Morgan took the initiative. Moving a couple of meters away, she changed.

Pain tore along her limbs as the bones transformed, stretched, and formed into the slender arms and legs of a woman. Agony took her breath as her fur was absorbed, and her body shifted. Her face burned with a fire that tore at her soul, as her skull

reconfigured itself to her human guise. She lay on the rough ground, panting for several heartbeats and gathering her strength.

The man screamed. He rolled over and tried to crawl away. Only Joshua's diligence, as well as the death grip he took on the back of his jeans, kept him from escaping. His screams turned to a terrified howl, as he was dragged, then tossed to the grass on his back. Covered in blood from his waist to his knees, he lay trembling with fear.

When the pain lessened, Morgan rose and stood with her feet spread, and glared down at the prone man. Behind him, Joshua went through his own change, much quicker than she had. He too stood over the wounded man, naked, feet spread and arms crossed over his chest.

"We aren't going to kill you," she spat. "We want you to remember what you did, and who did it to you." She stepped closer, and with a naked toe, nudged his crotch.

His animal howl of anguish filled the cool night air as the sudden pain knifed through his body. "Please, no more!" he shrieked, looking from one to the other.

"I wonder if the animals you've slaughtered thought that same thing when your bullets ripped into them." Joshua's voice was ice, even Morgan looked at him. He'd seen the remains of the freshly murdered animals. "You deserve worse." With a look of disgust, he spat a large gob of saliva at the man's chest. The splat sounded loud, the wetness seeping into another of his open wounds. "You'll run with the beasts, but you'll be less than any of us."

"Run with the beasts?" Even through his pain, Tommy seemed to understand something more than the beating had taken place—something even more than the emasculation. He glanced from Joshua to Morgan.

She laughed, but without a note of humor. "Every moonrise, you'll change. You've got no one to help you. No animal will come near you. You'll run alone." She paced back and forth, making sure he could see her entire body, as she glared down at him. "You'll never dare be with a woman again." Glancing down at his mutilated crotch, she licked her lips and added, "Not that it'd do you any good."

Aghast, Tommy looked down at his ruined manhood. His mouth dropped open, but nothing more than a sigh came out. He trembled, and reached for the blood-soaked wound. When it connected, the salty sweat in his palm must have sent a new wave of agony knifing into him. His eyes bulged. His trembling took on a fevered pitch. Finally, he screamed, a long, loud, wailing, "No!" The anguished cry of a wounded beast filled the air and went on and on, in an endless cry of realization.

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While he writhed and bemoaned his fate, Joshua shrugged and turned his face to her. "We're done here. He's of no use to anyone now," he looked down, a cruel smile tugging at the corner of his full lips, "and no danger." Gazing back into her eyes, the smiled turned into a lustful leer. "You, on the other hand, naked as you are, are full of dangers."

Her face grew warm. She stretched out her hand, ignoring the agonized man between them. "Let's get out of here. The smell of this...man," she smirked, and pushed at him with her toe, "is revolting."

Laughing, naked and beautiful, Joshua strode around the prone man and took her hand. "Come with me."

Those words stole her heart. She never wanted to leave him. He was her perfect mate and accepted all of her, not just the public face she had to show the world. Melting into his arms, she tilted her face up just in time for his lips to find hers. Warm and incredibly soft, his mouth possessed hers. When his tongue slid across her lips, she allowed him entrance. Their tongues tangled together, stroking and tasting the hot breath breathed into each other's mouths. The world around them faded, vanished as they reveled in each other.

Nothing mattered but her man, this beast, consuming her. His breath was sweet with the scent of blood. Hers no doubt was the same. When he slid his hand over her breast and thumbed her nipple, she shuddered. Lust boiled in her veins.

"Help me!"

The guttural, pain-filled cry was too loud to ignore. Mouth still agape from the kiss, Morgan peered down at Tommy and chuckled. The would-be hunter/poacher held a small mound of his own flesh in an open palm.

"Help you?" she snarled, "I'd sooner help the animals you've slaughtered. There's a saying, 'What goes around, comes around.' It's come around." She returned her attention to Joshua, and with his hand in hers, pulled him toward the lake.

Joshua yelled back over his shoulder, "Be careful when the change comes. You won't find friends in the woods. The animals will know you—know you for the murderer you are. And, they will hunt you when you move among them." Then, turning and ignoring the cries of anguish that filled the night, he hurried to walk beside Morgan.

* * * *

The trek back to the lake was quiet, but rushed. It was as if they were both eager to be free of any thought of the retch they'd left writhing on the dirt encrusted porch. For

Morgan it was more. She knew what she had done when she touched her tongue to the open wound, but wondered if what she'd done was right.

Only when they had almost reached the lake, she allowed her senses to reach out to Joshua. He walked with her, paced her, allowing her time to digest and come to terms with what she'd done. She sensed his caring, and his acceptance of her, and his love. She also realized that he'd have done worse by far than what she had.

The water came into sight through the trees. Moonlight sent a long finger of brilliance over its white capped, black waves, reaching toward them, as if beckoning them to come closer. The call didn't go unheeded. Joshua grabbed her hand more tightly, and took off at a pace she found almost impossible to match. Her feet skimmed the grass, and when he didn't stop at the lake's edge a few moments later, she found herself over her head in the chilly water.

Breaking the surface, she gasped from the sudden cold. Treading water easily, she peered around, looking for him. She couldn't find him, and was frantic. Was he all right? Maybe he'd trapped a foot or something and couldn't surface. Her search grew more panicked.

Then a touch on her leg turned into a caress up her thigh. His body slithered up hers, slick with water, more sensual than she could have imagined. A moment later, he was treading water in front of her. His chest brushed her nipples, his hands crept along her sides then between her legs. "Feeling cleaner now?" he whispered, and she immediately wanted him.

He'd known and found just the right way to fix things. She twirled in place, lifting her arms high and laughed with pleasure. Yes, she felt wonderful and wanted, and loved. "Yes, I'm feeling exactly right. Thank you."

He pulled her close and again pressed his lips to hers. She was hungry for him then, and when he took her tongue between his teeth, nipping at the sensitive tip, she groaned. An ache, deep in the pit of her stomach tormented her. Her pussy clenched. His cock nudged her inner thigh, its heat a reminder of how cold the water was.

"Come on, to shore before we drown each other." He slid away from her, heading toward shore and the grassy beach she could see clearly in the moonlight. She followed, her stroke as strong as his, and was beside him when he rose, god-like from the water.

"I'm not leaving you." She blurted the words before realizing they were there.

He turned and looked at her, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I know. I've known from the moment I saw you that you'd stay. It just took you a little longer to get it too."

All Hallow's Eve: FREEING THE BEAST WITHIN

"Beast," she laughed. "We'll have to make some calls, but we'll talk later." She took his hand and pulled him to the grass with her. Twisting on the way down, she wound up on her hands and knees.

"Yeah, I'm a beast. Your beast," he murmured, and growled as only he could.

She raised her ass in the air and swayed from side to side, silently, blatantly, urging him on. Goose flesh raced up her back and made her shudder. But when he touched her with the faintest of touches on her inner thigh, she felt faint. Easing her knees apart, she waited, breathlessly for him to take her—to plunge his beautiful cock deep inside her—but he didn't. It wasn't his cock, but his tongue flicking across her cunt from behind. Rough, wet, excruciatingly long and dexterous, his tongue moved over the folds until he'd found the hard knot of her clit. Centering his attention there, a cry of pleasure forced its way from deep inside her.

"Yes!" she hissed, and pushed back against him. His hands went to her hips, holding her in place as he dined on her. His tongue delved deep, lapping at the rich nectar deep inside her cunt. A spasm shook her, unexpected, shocking, and delicious. His teeth grazed the tiny shaft of her clit: his nose pressed against her perineum.

Digging her fingers into the cool sod, she shuddered and moaned, desperate in her need for him to fill her. Her cunt clenched.

He flattened his tongue and licked her from clit to anus. She whimpered. He retraced the path and she sobbed her frustration. Then she waited. His hands remained on her hips, but only the cool night air touched her sex. She felt every shift in the air—every tiny pulse in her clit.

"Back onto me." His voice was rough with passion. His hands trembled.

She pushed back and his cock was there, the round dome spreading her labia. It slid down the length of her clit and held poised at the opening of her cunt. Morgan held still. Gasping at the torturous nearness of him, she held still for as many heartbeats as she could.

She couldn't hold back any longer and eased herself onto his shaft. Hot, slick, hardness filled her. The tip touched her cervix and she groaned at the slight pain from the unfamiliar pressure. When he was fully inside her, she clenched. His groan told her he was close. So was she.

"Do me hard," she growled.

His fingers dug into her haunches. His withdrawal was painfully slow, as if he had all the time in the world to tease her, and he did. She felt the bulbous head spread her lips, and remain there for as long as she could hold her breath. When she inhaled,

desperate for air—for him—he lunged in hard. The pace he set then was perfection. Her head spun as pleasure mounted with each thrust. She couldn't get a full breath, but didn't care, as long as her flight to orgasm continued. Nothing else mattered.

When his teeth sank into the back of her neck, she howled, long and loud. Her world exploded. Blind, but for the flashes of light behind her eyes—deaf, but for the roaring of her pulse—she soared. Her cunt clamped down on him, pulling this climax from him. She felt his cock pulse, and heard his deep groan burst from him. His next lunge forward was harder, his grunt more desperate. Twice more, he thrust into her with all of his strength as he emptied himself. When his spasms were done, he collapsed on her back, gasping.

She bore his weight, but only for a few moments. Then, they fell to the side, his cock still held deeply within her body. A few more weak pulses wrenched the last of his orgasm from him. He shuddered, and his fingers relaxed their hold on her, changing to strokes and caresses.

"You'll stay now." His tone was sure; there was no room for argument.

"Yes," she sighed, a smile on her lips. "I'll stay. I'm home."

His arms went around her, hands cupping her breasts. His breath on her shoulder was hot against her damp skin. At the base of the nearest tree, Morgan saw the doe lying down, resting with her fawn. Yes, she was home.

About the Author

Jude's imagination frequently leads her astray, and she eagerly follows while trying to keep out of trouble. For those of you who know her, you'll know that's not always easy. A picture, a smell, an unexpected glimpse of flesh, or a load of soil in the back of a pick-up, are all fodder for her writing. If you'd like to keep up to date with her publishing successes, visit her website.

Jude's short story, "And There Were Beasts", recipient of #10 Best Short Story Romance at the Preditors & Editors 2005 Poll.

Also available from Jude Mason and Venus Press...

And There Were Beasts (Prequel to Freeing the Beast Within)

'The Deal' 1: The Deal

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