



A. ERIN GOLDING

SONG OF THE
BEAST

ra^venous
romance

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A Ravenous Romance® Fantastica™ Original Publication

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

Vasha's heart beat to a dangerous rhythm. Dangerous to the humans, anyway.

The unguent spread smoothly over her flesh. She liked the sensation, but it felt strange to be applying anything like this to her body. She definitely wasn't in the habit of using creams or lotions, anything with an artificial scent. Her sense of smell wouldn't stand it. Perfumes were for humans.

This, though, was something else.

Vasha grinned. The day was bright, even with the thin layer of clouds across the sky. She stood naked at the center of a little grove of trees. Her clothes hung from a low, bent branch. What she was doing was already starting to feel ritual-like. She'd been doing it for weeks now, once every day. She rubbed the cream into her skin the same way each time, beginning at her feet, working up her legs and body. Right now she was smearing the stuff over her firm, flat midriff. Once applied, she no longer felt it. It didn't dry stiffly on her, even though she coated every inch of herself.

Her special ally had supplied her with this stuff. It had taken years—hell, *decades*—to finally find something that worked. Vasha wasn't tapped in to human culture, to their advances in science and medicine and all the other technology that they were so pathetically proud of. But she understood that there was a general advancement among the creatures. They made new things, usually useless things. She had watched them build industries and raise nations and overpopulate the Earth, like they wanted to deliberately destroy it.

None of that had ever helped Vasha. The humans were weak. They were, in a sense, her prey, though she didn't hunt them for food.

To the human race she was only a fable, a legend. Being a fable kept her safe, she thought. Only crazy people hunted after legends, and they never had any real resources.

One day, though, the truth would come out. It was inevitable, a direct result of the campaign Vasha herself was waging. She meant to change the humans, to convert them one by one, to build an army of her own kind. It was a huge ambition for someone who had started out so humbly. But the Beast had changed her. She wasn't who she'd once been.

* * * *

Vasha was her true name. It had been given to her by her mother, a name rich with the flavor of the maternal continent, Africa. She liked its sound. Unlike so many others born into slavery, she hadn't been given a false name, hadn't had to accept one of the careless, thoughtless names given out by the ghost-men. She'd been born Vasha, long ago. She remained Vasha to this day.

They had never gotten their chains on her. She had never felt the ghost-men's iron. Neither had their whips ever kissed her back. She was proud of this. She had escaped when she was a girl, a child, too young even for the most perverted of the ghost-men. She had gotten away before any of them had felt the urge to touch her.

It was the son of one of the ghost-men, she later learned, who had delivered her from those shacks and fields, and all the pained faces of the slaves who had surrounded her since she

was an infant. That son—barely more than a boy himself, really—was responsible for her birth. Some half-buried conscience had forced him to arrange, at great cost and personal danger, to have Vasha taken away. So, she had escaped the hopeless life she'd been born into.

Years of turmoil and adventure had followed. She'd still had a child's mind, and her memories of that period of her life were murky. How untamed the American landscape had been back then. The people taking care of her kept taking her west—but she'd had no concept of “west.” She remembered long empty prairies, bone-chilling nights, shadows dancing around the campfires. She remembered the people she traveled with. None of them was her mother, and Vasha had wondered why she wasn't there.

She had no sense of a destination, though the adults—who were both like and unlike the ghost-men of her childhood—often talked about a purpose, a plan. A place to go? Vasha didn't know. *This* had seemed like a place to her, the wagons, the horses, this company that had taken her to their bosom. She liked these people. They were rough but not cruel. They laughed and sometimes even sang. No one beat her. No one tried to put chains on her.

But eventually, after months—years, more likely—they did reach someplace. That or the caravan had simply broken up. She wasn't sure. Still, she had arrived. What followed was a time of hard labor. She remembered scrubbing floors, chopping wood, feeding pigs. But she knew, somehow, that this was her job, that it was employment, that she wasn't working just because someone had told her to. She was paid coins—or, rather, the woman who had stayed on from the wagons as her guardian collected those coins.

Vasha never went seriously hungry. She slept in a bed, inside a tiny house with the woman, whose name was Rebecca. Rebecca was much older. She had wispy little whiskers growing from the tip of her chin, and hair that was straight and brittle, unlike Vasha's own tightly coiled dark hair. Vasha worked, and Rebecca made certain she was fed and clothed and warm. Sometimes there were cruelties, though never from Rebecca. Vasha had sketchy memories of hands raised against her, insults snarled, boys chasing her and throwing rocks.

But it wasn't like being under the whips of the ghost-men. She knew that much. She was not unhappy. It was a livable life.

And one day it all changed.

There was fear where they lived. It was fear she remembered from the time of wagons and horses and traveling. The constant fear of what was outside the circle of the campfire. Mysteries and horrors seemed to wait out there. But there were concrete dangers, too. As Vasha was different from the people around her, there were still others who were different from her. Those others were savages and cutthroats, and everybody had to watch out for them. Vasha had had to learn to fear these unseen strangers, but she'd never quite gotten the knack of it. Her earliest memories were of menacing men, but these stories weren't about them.

Rebecca had explained. “They devils. Evil like nothin' you knowed, girl.” It wasn't much of an explanation. Vasha had already known evil. So she was more curious than scared.

When the warriors swooped down on the place with their rifles and war cries, Vasha had hidden. She had burrowed into the mud and stayed there, with pigs squirming all around her. She never saw Rebecca alive again, nor most of those people she'd been surrounded by these past years.

Eventually she dug her way out of the mud, long after the screaming had stopped. A few fires were still burning. The place where she had lived was gone, more or less. Only smoking timbers remained of the tiny house she'd shared with Rebecca. Here and there somebody moaned. Vasha got water for some, blankets for others, whatever they asked for. She couldn't,

however, give any answers to their terrified questions. She didn't know if the savages would come back. She couldn't say if help would arrive for the wounded.

It was night. A fat full moon, like the overfed colorless faces of the ghost-men, rose. It shone down on the destruction, on the dying as they slipped one by one into silence. It shone on Vasha, who wandered around numbly, more stunned than horrified. Were those whooping red-faced warriors somehow in league with the ruthless ghost-men from so long ago? The outlandish idea felt more real every minute. Surely the ghost-men wanted her back, even after all this time. Would that mean, though...that she would see her mother again?

But the great bloody drama wasn't yet done. At a deep hour of the night, as Vasha sat on a charred barrel and plucked idly at a seam of her dress, she heard the song of the Beast.

She immediately looked up at the moon. The sound had seemed to come directly from there, from above. She expected to see the moon changed into a living face, one full of the animal fury she'd heard in that first cry. But the moon was still the moon. Then a second howl came, closer than the first. She stood up, with the moans of the dying people all quiet now.

The Beast appeared.

How lovely, how lovely, she had thought. The folks from the wagons had often spoken of God, using glowing words that Vasha only half-understood to talk about God's actions and wisdom. It was like God was the exact opposite of the evil things they were all so afraid of. The strange thing about it, though, was that the people were afraid of God, too. It was confusing.

In that first moment when she saw the Beast, however, Vasha decided that *this* must be God. He certainly seemed to fit the description: glorious and menacing, exciting and scary.

She didn't run, not even as the Beast paused to raise its snout and sniff the air. Somehow she knew when it had caught her scent—or maybe it had had it all along. It moved toward her, its fur shining in the moonglow, a deep growl in its throat. It ignored the dead bodies. The last embers of the burnt buildings made its eyes glow.

Vasha looked into those eyes. She didn't run. Not even when the Beast leapt suddenly into a charge, that growl turning into another song-like howl that shattered the night.

That was the night Vasha received her Bite.

* * * *

High overhead, a jetliner left a streak of white on the sky. Vasha's memories were from long ago. She continued to rub the cream into her skin. It was important that she do so, to cover her scent.

Her kind was superior to all others. *All* others. No exceptions. She was the pinnacle of intelligent life on the planet. No creature was stronger, more able, more suited to survival. She felt a glowing pride in that fact.

How strange and sad that the Community didn't understand. It baffled her. There was a ready-made network—organized, practical, innovative. But they were blind fools. They couldn't see the obvious purpose of their breed. No other animal in this world could do what they did. No other creature had the power to *transform* a member of another species into one of its own. It was an amazing process. It was godlike, even.

Still grinning, Vasha continued to massage the odorless unguent into her bare flesh. She and the Community had been adversaries for a long, long time. They were at crossed purposes. But Vasha had an advantage now, and she meant to press it.

The thought excited her. So did her own handiwork as she kneaded her breasts. Her nipples came erect. Her dusky body was supple, her limbs taut. She looked no older than twenty, though she was unimaginably old by human standards. The Bite she had received from the Beast had given her this long, age-less life.

Her breath hitched as her nipples slid through her fingers. This stand of trees was out on somebody's back fields, an isolated spot. Nobody was around. This was farming country. Vasha had delivered her Bite on the last full moon, to a victim she had chosen beforehand. Normally she would have moved on from the area, but with this scent-killing cream she could stay around. She had a reason for doing so.

She finished applying the unguent she'd gotten from her special ally, the only other one of her kind with whom she'd ever conspired.

Vasha's excitement didn't go away. It grew. She didn't retrieve her clothes but stood there in her isolated grove as her coated flesh rippled. She touched her breasts again, feeling their firmness, unchanged from her youth. Her heart beat a harder rhythm now. True arousal was taking hold of her. She felt herself getting wet. She clenched her teeth as she slipped a hand down her tight abdomen, fingertips feeling the tickle of her black curls as she reached her groin. She brushed at these coils for a moment, teasing herself. The anticipation was delicious.

Finally, she showed a little mercy to herself and delved her fingers into the triangular patch, finding the waiting slickness. Again she teased herself, just grazing her lips with the crescents of her fingernails. The contact sent a sweet shiver through her. Her other hand continued to work her breasts, squeezing a rising pleasure from them.

Delicately, she traced her vaginal lips. Her feet were apart and planted. Tight muscles stood out along her thighs and calves. She was, of course, in fantastic shape. It was a part of what she was, the nature of her breed. The Bite didn't just give longevity—it made you strong and fit, it amplified your senses, especially the sense of smell.

More than those benefits, though, it gave an almost permanent sexual excitement. Or at least it made arousal very easy to achieve. Vasha had always liked this aspect of her condition. A lot. Funny how that fact never turned up in the stupid legends humans told each other about her kind.

She spread her folds, and slipped her finger inside herself. It was just the middle digit at first, and just up to the first knuckle. But even that was enough to send pleasure streaming through her limbs and whirling in her skull. She felt her slick silky interior as she stirred the finger in a slow circular motion.

The air felt good, warm and filled with the odors of the land. There was a luscious thrill in being nude outdoors. It was even more of a thrill to manipulate herself like this—fully exposed, even though she was fairly well screened by the trees and her nose told her nobody was nearby. Still, she liked the teasing hint of exhibitionism. She could imagine hungry eyes watching her.

A growl started in her throat. She tugged on her hard swollen nipples, tweaking the buds. She slipped the finger deeper into herself. Then she joined it with another. And a third. She pushed deep with the three fingers, until her base knuckles ground against her damp entrance.

With her other hand mauling her breasts, Vasha jammed her fingers in and out of herself. Wetness poured over the fingers. Her thumb caught her clitoris with every plunge, and she jumped with each contact. The growl rose. Her head rocked back. Her teeth bared in another fierce grin, then her mouth opened, and the cry poured up out of her. A howl. Her own beastly

song, though it wasn't much like the fearsome, powerful cry she'd heard on that long ago night when her flesh had felt the Bite.

Her come shook through her, making her cry waver, even as the pleasure reached its crescendo. Bliss flooded over her, drenching her hand. She felt the squeeze of her flesh on her fingers. It was a satisfying come, a happy diversion. But it was just an appetizer for the meals to come.

Vasha blinked and looked around. Her cry had attracted no attention, which was just how she'd figured. She had chosen this isolated place carefully. It was near to where she'd taken her last victim, but far enough that no one from the Community was going to just accidentally stumble on her. And if this unguent continued to work, they wouldn't get her scent, either.

She at last went to put on her clothes. They were nondescript, dingy. She had been living out here in the wild for weeks now, waiting for the next full moonup.

Her body was a taut, muscular wonder, but it wasn't unmarred. Above her firm right breast was her Bite. It was as livid against her dark skin as it had been on the night she'd gotten it. Bites didn't heal, even though the fresh-looking wound caused her no pain. If this was the price her kind paid for being what they were, it was fine with Vasha. She didn't mind wearing the evidence of who she was.

One day, all the creatures of the Earth would wear marks just like hers, and that would mean the end of the humans.

Chapter Two

One of their rovers had caught the Whiff, and now Mark Curtz was going out there for a look. It might be nothing. Mistakes happened. Even the best of the rovers didn't have a perfect sense of smell. But Mark, as he guided the off-road 4x4 along the rutted, unpaved road, already had a feeling that this would be the real deal.

But again, he could be wrong. He acknowledged this as the vehicle bumped and jounced its way down the country track, under a clear bright late morning sky, with the air rife with honeysuckle or what have you. He was at heart a city boy, but he enjoyed the countryside a lot, especially the unspoiled patches, where you could imagine nothing had changed for centuries, where the grass grew and there were animals. Where humans hadn't left their greasy handprints everywhere.

Mark's strong hands handled the truck easily. He had grown up with cars. His dad had owned a garage, and many of Mark's first memories were of that oil-smeared pit of a place, with half-dismantled autos everywhere and mechanics working on the machines. Those vehicles, built like battleships, had belonged to the old style of American manufacture. Mark's dad had run a successful business. Freddy Curtz hadn't cheated his customers and his work was high quality. Mark had taken his father's lessons to heart—even if they hadn't really been lessons.

This scenery, then, was quite a contrast to the environment of his boyhood and adolescence. Then again, his whole *life* was different from everything that had gone before. He was, literally, a different person now. Hell, he thought as he grunted a laugh, "person" wasn't even technically the right term anymore.

This thought wasn't bitter as he guided the truck further along the road where it wound between the gentle grassy hills. Mark Curtz didn't feel cheated by what had happened to him. He didn't think he'd been robbed of a precious ordinary life. He didn't curse his condition.

Which was why, of course, he had this job. He was a good face for the Community—proud, clear-headed, able. He served as a kind of ideal example. It was best for the newly turned to meet someone like him first. He could help with the transition, the sometimes severe trauma that hit those who had received the Bite and didn't yet know what the hell had happened to them.

Around a bend a gate came into view, with a mailbox standing sentry at the foot of a long rising trail. The drive was graveled, and it led up to the spread, a sprawling single-story house with a satellite dish on top of it, a barn, and several outbuildings.

Mark slowed and stopped. He idled the engine a moment, letting the sound carry across the acres, then cut the ignition. He stepped out, into the buzzing warmth of the morning. The 4x4's cooling motor ticked loudly. The door, when he shut it, seemed to echo like a thunderclap.

He looked around. Nothing moved. He heard insects and the chirps of birds. The farm looked peaceful. The small cloud of dust thrown up by his wheels had settled. He deliberately drew in the air. He knew damn well he didn't have the olfactory capabilities of, say, crazy old Zach, their preeminent rover. But he was a member of the Community, and therefore his sense of smell was something well beyond the scope of humans. If there really was a Whiff out here, he ought to be able to smell some trace of it.

Mark closed his eyes, breathed in. And caught a faint hint of what he was looking for. It was really just the hint of the familiar odor, hardly much different from the other, more obvious animal smells in the air. There were chickens here, as well as goats and maybe some heavier

livestock out in the pastures beyond the house and barn. But he wasn't smelling those. No. He had definitely caught the Whiff.

Now, to find the source....

He had stood at the gate for several minutes now. Nobody had appeared from the house, no one coming over the rise from the pastures. He could, of course, lean on his horn until someone showed, but that struck him as unforgivably obnoxious. This wasn't the city. He wasn't a cabdriver trying to goad a bus out of his way. He understood the pace of places like this.

Besides, it was very possible he had already been spotted, that he was being watched right now.

He checked the name on the mailbox. J. Machado. The gate, he saw, wasn't locked. He wasn't, however, about to open it wide and drive his truck up to the house. That would be impolite, at best. He would go on foot.

Mark didn't look too out of place. The off-road 4x4 was a little too new to be convincing, but he had on a comfortable pair of hiking boots, black jeans that were graying from use, and a khaki T-shirt that was maybe just a little tight across his taut pectoral muscles. As he slipped through the gate and started up the drive, he felt the easy muscular movements of his limbs. His stride was long. He stood at six feet, two inches, and his frame was sturdy.

It hadn't always been this way, he remembered with another little laugh. Once, he had been an awkward boy, shy and scrawny, lousy at sports, hopeless with girls. He had shown some natural talent as a mechanic, but that might have just been the subtle encouragement from his dad. Freddy Curtz had had a way of convincing people they could do things that they maybe wouldn't have believed otherwise. It was one of the reasons most everybody who had worked for him had liked him so much, had thought of him as a decent man.

Of course, that decency hadn't saved him in the end.

Mark didn't let himself get sidetracked. The events he was thinking of were many decades in the past by now, and he'd learned to leave them there for the most part. Right now, he had a job to do.

Gravel crunched under the soles of his hiking boots as he climbed the long mild grade. Sweat started to spread at his armpits. He wore no deodorant, no aftershave, used no scented shampoos or body lotions. It wasn't like he reeked like a pig or anything, but damned if he was going to douse himself in fake flower scents. People could handle the natural smell of a reasonably clean body. Worse, for him, was being assaulted by clouds of perfume or cologne. Did people really like the smell of all that cloying shit?

Another mental sidetrack. He shook off the thoughts and continued his climb up the quarter-mile drive. He ran fingers through his longish, dirty blond hair. Had he worn a cowboy hat, he could have protected himself from the sun better. But that would've been a bit much, he judged. You didn't want to look like you were trying too hard.

Whoever was giving off this scent—growing stronger as he approached the house—he or she was probably scared, on edge, liable to react violently. Mark didn't want to seem in any way *bureaucratic*. Most people, on some level at least, feared organizations. The Community barely qualified as any sort of formal organization. Its members, by their nature, operated loose and fast. They were spread out, not pinned down in any one place. That was how they liked it.

But there was still a true sense of belonging. And Mark Curtz was here to represent that organization to this potential new member.

"What do you want?"

He froze. The voice was hoarse but firm, and he heard the warning in it. Leaving his hands in plain view, Mark turned toward that voice. It had come from the direction of the barn, which was now about thirty yards away. He was about the same distance from the house.

A woman, with the morning's shadows falling across her face, stood no more than a dozen steps from him. An instant ago, he would have sworn, no one was there.

He said in his easy, rich tone, "I was hoping to see Ms. Machado." The name had been unknown to him until he'd seen it on the mailbox. It wasn't the job of the rover who had gotten this Whiff to provide exact information. That was up to the likes of Mark, who could think on his feet.

"Miss will do," the woman said. She had long dark hair, spilling all the way to her bare upper arms. She wore a sleeveless denim shirt and baggy corduroy pants with both knees patched.

"Miss Machado, then. Are you her?"

"You sound like you're guessing." She didn't sound quite so threatening now.

"I suppose I am. I didn't come here with a physical description." Mark kept tone his casual. He had a confident masculine voice—again, quite unlike his old teenager's squawk. "I am going to guess, though," he continued, giving her his first cautious smile, "that you *are* her."

She had a hand in a pocket of her pants. Mark had been wondering, more than a little anxiously, if she was concealing a weapon there. But after a moment, she took the hand from the pocket and gestured toward the house.

"Let's go inside," she said, and he turned and started ahead of her toward the ranch house, his ears tuned carefully to every step she took behind him. He had been doing jobs like this for a long time now, but they weren't always smooth. Best to be ready for surprises.

* * * *

He expected strong black coffee, maybe poured out of an antique brass kettle, but she sat him down in a spacious, modern front room with a flat-screen TV on one wall and abstract art on the others, and served him Coca-Cola on ice in a tall fluted glass.

She sat across from him on a rattan settee, knees together, elbows on her corduroy thighs. Her body hung forward, and her face was tired, though also, he saw now, quite pretty. She looked to be in her late twenties—and surely she *was* in her late twenties, he reminded himself. When you were in the Community, you sometimes forgot that people outside it were what they appeared to be. He, for instance, looked like a thirty-year-old human male.

But he wasn't any of that. Except male, of course.

"If I could ask you a few questions..." he began.

Her eyes, with dark circles under them, snapped up. They were a deep brown, with long natural lashes—again, very pretty. Her gaze was suddenly shrewd. "You're not selling Jesus," she said. "You're not the Fuller Brush man. You haven't flashed a badge. You're nobody official, whoever you are."

Mark blinked. Her manner wasn't rude, but this woman seemed to prefer to cut to the chase. That was okay with him. "I'm not a cop, no. I am a representative of sorts, though. But I'll get to that later. I'm going to ask my question now."

"Then ask it." Her darkly underlined eyes were defiant. She probably hadn't been sleeping well.

“I will, Miss Machado,” Mark said. He leaned forward in the chair. “Where did you get bit?”

He saw the shock cross her face and tighten her shoulders. There was no standard procedure for situations like this one, Mark knew. No script. You played it by ear.

A cube of ice snapped loudly in his glass. He wasn’t planning on drinking the soda.

“How...,” she started in a whisper. Then with more force she said, “How do you know about that?”

“My answer will only raise more questions. But I’ll tell you anyway. I can smell it on you.” Which was true. This close the scent was unmistakable.

He watched her trying to make sense of what he’d said, but she just looked baffled.

Softening his voice, he leaned back in the chair. “I’m going to show you something.” He took hold of the khaki T-shirt and drew it halfway up his abdomen, exposing the firm swells of his abdominal muscles. He also showed her the circles of scar tissue on top of his bottom left rib. The flesh around it was bruised. Wounds like this didn’t fade with age, he knew. They stayed fresh.

The woman stared at the mark with her deep brown eyes.

Mark let go of the shirt. He said, “My name is Mark Curtz. We found out about you because of what we call the Whiff. It’s the odor you now give off, barely perceptible to most humans. But some of us have a talent for tracking the scent.”

She gazed awhile longer at his midriff, even though it was now covered. This might go in any direction now. Mark had had a lot of experience in this, but the very first thing you learned was how unpredictable people could be.

Finally she looked up into his eyes, which unlike hers were more golden than brown, and said, “Mark Curtz. I’m Jill Machado. This is my farm. About three weeks ago I was attacked by...by something. An animal. Only it was something more than an animal. I knew that then, and I know it now. You were saying *we* and *us* just now. It’s not only you and me, is it?”

“No.”

“I think you have all the answers I need, everything I’ve been wondering about since that night. You do, don’t you?”

“I do.”

She stood from the settee. She paced one way across the russet-colored tiles of the big front room, then came back to stand directly in front of him. “You want to see where I got bit?” Not waiting for a reply, she reached up and tore the snaps of her sleeveless denim shirt from throat to navel. She wore no bra, and her breasts were firm pale mounds, tipped with nipples of soft pink.

Between her exposed breasts was the Bite. It was as fiery and fresh as Mark’s own appeared to be. But hers really *was* recent. As fresh as the last full moon.

He stood from the chair. Jill Machado’s tired eyes brightened now with tears, though she didn’t start sniveling or sobbing. He had already decided she was a tough woman. She would survive what had happened to her. She would even, if she wanted it, most likely make a good addition to the Community.

She hadn’t refastened her shirt. There was no one else in the house—it was silent. Mark put his strong hands on her bare shoulders, feeling her warmth. He felt the confusion and need in her that was desperately looking for a way out.

Jill looked up with teary eyes. Her head tilted back, and she offered her mouth to him. She wanted his kiss. Already she knew he was one of her kind, and she needed him to comfort her.

* * * *

The house was indeed empty except for the two of them. Mark also thought that this whole spread was empty. Not a farm that had fallen in disuse over time—instead, one recently abandoned, or shut down. Probably Jill had sent all her workers away after the attack, and after the changes had started. That meant she'd been out here alone for three weeks—confused, afraid, with no idea of what was happening to her.

It was a goddamn good thing, Mark thought as he followed her to the bedroom, that the rover had caught the Whiff before the next big moonup.

Jill had taken his hand, and he was letting himself be led. Her fresh scent was intoxicating. The smell of the newly turned was so ripe. It was irresistible. But he had enough self-control to rein himself in. He wasn't an animal. Nobody like that belonged to the Community. His people were civilized, caring, helpful.

But Jill's intentions were clear. This wasn't hysteria, he sensed as they entered the big bright bedroom. A skylight let the daylight pour in. The room was as tastefully decorated as the rest of the house. No clichéd hick shack, this. Jill Machado operated a sophisticated agricultural business, and her home showed it, with all the modern amenities.

As for Jill Machado herself...

Mark studied her as she let go of his hand and glided out into the middle of the room. The sunlight poured over her, picking out soft highlights in her long dark hair. He could still feel her lips on his. He had kissed her, there in the front room, letting her decide how intense the kiss should be. It had turned out to be something, their lips parting, tongues touching.

Now she flexed her shoulders, and her open denim shirt spilled down her tanned arms. She dropped it on the floor at the foot of the big bed. Her forearms were round with muscle. She wasn't just some weakling administrator, then. Probably she'd grown up on this farm, or done physical work most of her life. Apparently she'd made the place pay. This house was impressive. It would make a good haven if she agreed to join the Community. Of course, it was up to him to recruit her.

This, though, wasn't a part of that recruitment, Mark told himself sharply as Jill toed off her shoes and undid her baggy corduroy pants. When those pants slid down her shapely legs, something heavy hit the white, fleecy carpeted floor.

She did have something in her pants pocket, probably a pistol, Mark thought. Jill was turned away from him. Now she looked back over a shoulder, raising a dark eyebrow. "This'll be more fun if you strip, too," she said.

He laughed. He already liked this woman. Despite what had happened to her, she'd kept a good sense of humor. That meant that she could adjust, that she could keep her head.

"You're right," he said, and peeled the khaki shirt up over his head, revealing his Bite a second time. He understood why she, though naked, was turned away from him. She was hiding the livid mark between her breasts, probably thinking it made her body ugly. She was wrong, of course. If things went right for her, if he could ease her into the Community, Jill Machado would see that wound as something beautiful.

He kicked off the hiking boots, and drew the graying black jeans off, one leg at a time, feeling Jill's brown eyes on him. Mark Curtz, very unlike his younger teenaged pre-Bite self,

was confident about his body. He was muscular but not bulky. He looked like an athlete built for speed, more like a swimmer than a football player.

Nude now, the two stood apart a moment.

“You’re lovely,” she said, a second before he was going to say the same thing, in those very same words.

Instead of speaking, he crossed toward her, his body already responding to her. He touched her shoulder, again feeling that warmth, and turned her towards him. She held a hand between her breasts.

He touched her hand, moved it gently but firmly away. As he did, he heard her take a sharp breath. He bent, paused to look into her eyes, which, though she was done crying, were still red. He smiled tenderly. Then he put his lips to her Bite.

Jill gasped again.

Suddenly, she seized Mark by his collar-length dirty blond hair and hauled him onto the big bed with her. He went willingly, eagerly. He imagined she’d always been pretty strong, but she was now probably only beginning to understand her new strength.

Mark found himself on his back. The wide bed had a white comforter. The mattress was soft. His pupils shrank in the bright light from the skylight. But Jill came between him and the reinforced glass on the bedroom’s ceiling. She was straddling him, thighs gripping his flanks. He looked up into her grinning face. For many days she had felt a kind of aloneness that most humans never felt, no matter how much bullshit poetry they wrote about heartbreak and solitude. Jill Machado had, for these past three weeks, no doubt felt like the only one of her kind. On some level, she must have realized that she was no longer a human being.

But now she had him as a touchstone, a point of reference. He was her guarantee that some other person had been through the same experience.

Mark Curtz had been through it. Goddamn right he had.

Her mouth came swooping down on his now. It wasn’t a soft kiss this time, followed by a coy hint of tongue. Jill’s kiss was ravishing. He felt her tongue drilling into him. She had leverage on him, and he let her enjoy it. Jill grabbed his wrists. She dug her knees into his sides. His cock surged erect. He felt her wetness where she straddled him, just below his navel, warm and oily. Her stiff nipples grazed his chest as she squirmed on top of him. He felt her hot breath.

She pulled her mouth away, still holding his wrists, and jammed her left breast at his lips. “Suck my tit!” she commanded.

It wasn’t the first order Mark had ever received, and he was glad to comply. He lifted his head and closed his mouth on her perfectly formed breast. His tongue flicked her hard nipple. She shivered on top of him, a snake-rattle shiver.

Jill tightened her grip on his wrists. She dug her knees in tighter, like a cowgirl taming a horse she wasn’t sure about. With her hair tumbling around her face, she hissed, “I said *suck* it. Don’t tease me!”

Mark clamped his lips on the breast. He sucked hard, trapping that sweet firm bud of a nipple, batting it with his tongue, even grazing it with his teeth. Above, Jill growled.

She had strength in her body, yes, and that strength had only increased since they had climbed onto the bed. But he was just going along, letting her enjoy the feeling of holding him down, mastering him.

With a twist and jerk of his arms he freed his wrists. He closed both hands over her lusciously curved hips. Suddenly he heaved, lifting her, pulling her up the bed—she squealed in surprise—and brought her pussy down on top of his waiting mouth.

The squeal of surprise turned into a snarl of pleasure.

“Fuck, yeah! Get that tongue up in there!”

She liked to talk—that was fine by him. Her thighs pressed him on either side of his face. The dark thatch of her curls tickled his nose. He had the taste of her on his tongue. Her juices were flowing. He lapped at her silken folds. She was still jockeying for prime position on his face, hips swiveling, crotch bucking.

When she had him where she wanted, she pressed on him again. He clutched her thighs, and stabbed up into her with his tongue, penetrating deep. Jill ground on him, her ass flexing on his chin. She reached down, grabbed a handful of his hair, and held tight. Again, she was like a cowgirl, riding now, working in cooperation. Mark swirled his tongue. Her thigh muscles clenched him, clamped him. He felt the pressure on his skull. His hair was being pulled at the roots. He didn’t mind that, either. This was probably the first sex she’d had since the Bite. He felt privileged to share it with her.

Mark had at her clitoris, polishing the needy nub with his tongue. Jill let out a cry, and that sound rose and rose, through the octaves. Mark slurped at her clit, applied the same suction to it as he’d done for her nipple. He even, delicately, skimmed it with his teeth.

Her orgasm drenched his mouth.

The hand let go of his hair. The muscles of her thighs relaxed. He eased her off his face. She lay back on her elbows, dazed eyes wandering, then finding him. When they did, her gaze moved down his body to his hard cock.

She lunged across the mattress, reaching the nightstand by one side of the bed. She tore open a drawer and came back with a square foil packet. Mark managed not to chuckle.

Now, he knew, wasn’t the time to tell her that she didn’t need to worry about condoms ever again. No virus or illness was going to pass between them. Her body had changed. She was more powerful than any human. She would come to understand that her system was now virtually invulnerable.

Jill Machado also didn’t need to be concerned anymore about pregnancy, unwanted or otherwise. Their kind reproduced only through the Bite. But that information, which she might find upsetting, could also wait.

He thought she was going to hand him the condom. Instead, she took hold of his cock. For a few seconds she just squeezed it and ran her fingers up and down, tracing the veins lining his shaft. She cupped his balls, which sent pleasure through his whole body.

Finally she tore the foil, and scrolled the latex down his shank. Mark couldn’t remember the last time a woman had done this for him. He liked how it felt, even if the precaution was totally unnecessary.

When she was done, she looked at him with glittering eyes and said, “Now it’s time to fuck me.”

He rolled her onto her back and knelt between her outspread thighs. Her pussy gleamed. He felt her juices, still warm, on the lower half of his face. Her taste was seared onto his tongue. He set his cockhead to her cleft.

The entry was easy, smooth. She gripped him with an elastic pressure. Even through the condom, he felt her sweet grip. She took his inches, responding to the penetration. Her hair was fanned out, dark against the white comforter. Her eyes rolled up into her head, and she let out another cry.

Mark Curtz had been told to fuck her. Fuck her he did.

He started with a slow, almost lazy, rhythm. These were strokes he could have counted off—"one Mississippi, two Mississippi." He gave her time to adjust to him, let her get the feel of his body on top of hers. Her skin was moist. Her legs crossed him over the small of his back. He felt her anklebones digging into him. Her hands settled on his shoulders as he started to pump harder into her.

She pulled him harder toward her, into her. With every plunge now, he heard and felt his balls slapping flesh. He could also feel the rough edges of her Bite against his pecs. Jill pulled him closer still, drawing his face down on top of hers. She kissed him, and her mouth came away wet. She licked his lips, his chin, his cheeks, tasting her own juices, sharing the same flavor he had in his mouth.

He stroked faster into her, his own excitement increasing. Her teeth bared again. Her breath hissed. The fingers of her left hand gouged his shoulder. Her right, meanwhile, squirmed between their smacking bodies. Suddenly, surprising him, he felt her fingering his Bite on his rib cage.

It set him off, an ecstasy that hit, it seemed, from every extreme of his pistoning body. Pleasure roared through him. His cock was thrusting at a blurring speed into Jill. Beneath them the mattress jounced.

She was shuddering underneath him, fingers raking at the mouth-shaped mark of his Bite. Her own mouth was open, an orgasmic cry rising from it. Again her eyes rolled up and disappeared. He felt her tightening around his manhood as he started to jet. The bliss, he was happy to find, wasn't lessened by the condom. Her cries matched the yowl of triumph that now tore from his throat.

The hard hot spurts eased, then stopped. Mark's ass relaxed. The rest of his muscles unclenched, too. He lay a moment more on top of her, feeling the sweet slickness of her spent body. He felt her heart beating against his own, slowing, just like his was doing. Breath returned to his lungs.

He blinked, and slid off of her. Her deep brown eyes looked up at the skylight, then around at the bedroom. Finally, she looked over at him with wonder.

Mark couldn't help but study her body. He felt no postcoital drag. She was lovely. He smiled, basking in the afterglow.

"So," Jill asked, "what do we call ourselves? There is a *we*. You said so. What, then, are we?"

The smile stayed on his handsome face a moment. But he answered her in a serious tone. "We are the Community. But I understand what you're really asking. There are lots of names for what we are. The one I always liked is... 'thropes."

Chapter Three

Zachary Montgomery Fitzsimmons shook the orange plastic prescription bottle until two Vicodin appeared on his palm. They went down with a swallow of lukewarm iced tea from the bottle that had been rolling around the passenger footwell for the past seventy miles. He made a face. He wanted something stronger to drink, something to give the pills a little boost.

He had pulled off the road, into a strip mall's parking lot. You saw a depressing, barely broken string of these ugly commercial places when you were traveling. America specialized in the useless consumer crap you could buy at places like this. Junk nobody needed, purchased on credit that guaranteed generations of debt. People were stupid. People were so fucking stupid you either had to laugh or scream. Or numb yourself with some pharmaceuticals.

Zach decided to laugh. Given a willing ear, he could go on and on about the sorry state of the country for hours. Then again, most people could work themselves up about the shitty condition of America, about its many failures and mistakes and so on.

Zachary, though, had a much deeper view on things than most people. He, after all, had seen this nation in its youth. He had something to compare it to. His disappointment in how it had evolved—*devolved*, really—was a lot more legitimate.

He rubbed at his eyes, then his jaw, which was fringed with graying stubble. His hair, too, was dusted with gray, but these were the only obvious clues that he wasn't a male of, say, thirty-five. His face was unlined. His body was fit, shoulders broad, arms well-muscled. He had a trim build that many years of boozing and doping hadn't done much to soften. He supposed he could cut off the beard, dye his hair or shave his head completely the way so many middle-aged douchebags did as soon as their hair started to thin the teeniest bit. But he wouldn't do that.

Over the past two and a half weeks he had passed through three states. It was amusing to think that this was the same land that had once been just sketches on unreliable maps for the American settlers. Before they were states, the land had been made up of territories. Before that, well, it was just *land*. It had belonged to the Injuns, although they'd never really owned it, never possessed it the way the white man would. They had been, in their kooky way, very compatible with the environment. But they hadn't known how to adapt. They couldn't figure out the puzzle of the arriving Europeans. And that had doomed them, from the moment the first Pilgrim shoe left a footprint on this continent.

Zach yawned. Though the car was stopped, he still felt it moving. When he closed his eyes, scenery rushed at him. That was what the road did to you. Zach didn't mind it. He was a rover. This was what he did.

Slouched back in his seat, he felt the first effects of the Vicodin working their way into his brain and body. Prescriptions weren't hard to get. Even when they got scarce, you could always buy what you wanted from someone. Everything was for sale.

With a long luxurious groan, he straightened up behind the wheel of the nondescript car he was currently using. He liked how it handled. In the not too distant past he had preferred to ride a motorcycle, enjoying the vivid freedom of movement, the howl of the wind. It had also been easier that way to seek out a Whiff. But, really, with the windows down, this car served just about as well. Motorbiking was grueling, and he wasn't a kid anymore. Not by any standard.

Back in the day, of course, he'd ridden horses. Now that was a mode of transportation where you sure as hell earned your destination. Weeks and months in the saddle gave a person a new understanding of discomfort.

As he reached for the ignition, he looked around the parking lot, disgusted. Fat people lumbering to and fro, pushing shopping carts, dragging along their gaggles of horrid children, loading pointless merchandise into their oversized vehicles. What a waste. What a joke it all was. Humans—or most of them, anyway—didn't even know enough to realize they knew nothing at all. They were greedy and stupid and weak, and they would pass through their lives without leaving any mark on the world, except to fuck it up just one tiny bit more.

Zachary laughed again, louder this time. His windows were still down, and somebody heard him and looked over. It was a woman with pudgy cheeks and vacant eyes.

He hit the ignition, lifted his middle finger toward her—such a fine, timeless gesture—and peeled out of the lot, off to find himself that drink.

* * * *

At age fourteen, Zach had gotten bucked off a horse and into a fencepost. The impact had knocked him cold, and when he'd eventually floated back up into painful consciousness, he had heard the laughter of men. He'd understood that laughing, even before the basic facts of his life had returned to him. He had fucked up and now came the ridicule. That was how the world operated.

The episode wasn't so much a lesson as the reinforcement of an education he'd already gotten. His poppa had striped his hide with a switch for far lesser mistakes than just letting himself get tossed from his saddle. And when his father was too drunk to carry out his duties, Zach had a bunch of older brothers only too glad to take up the slack.

But Zach had made his escape from his family. In fact, that incident with the horse and the fencepost had happened after Zach had left home. It was why the laughter of the other, mostly older hands at the ranch had sounded so familiar to him. They might've been his brothers. But they weren't. Zach had already left those sons of bitches—yes, his own siblings were *sons of bitches*—well behind him.

In those days, the size of the land was staggering. Not that the continent of North America had grown since then, but back during those times everything had felt much bigger. Territories were still being established. Injuns were afoot. The scale of the land wasn't anything a person could really grasp. The broad plains went on and on, seemingly forever. Nobody had conquered the continent. It still waited, big and foreboding and exciting.

Zach, independent at a young age, had felt tiny set against that gigantic backdrop. But he'd also sensed the exciting possibilities. He had understood what a man might do, particularly if he was handy with a gun and could ride a horse.

He had thought himself a man probably before he really was one. He drank liquor like his daddy, and tried to be just as mean. He learned to use his fists, now that he'd gotten older and bigger and was no longer surrounded by brothers twice his size. The fight finally felt fair to him, like he stood a chance.

Zach used his chance. He didn't let opportunities pass him by, at least not at first. In those early months of independence, with the reunified nation still bloody and shaken by the craziness of those goddamn Rebs, he worked hard at the ranch where he'd fled to. He felt safe knowing that no one in his family knew where he was, nor, very likely, did anybody really care. He was

the youngest and had always known he was the extra mouth to feed, the one the family couldn't really afford. When his poppa didn't make that clear enough, either verbally or with his fists, Zach's brothers told it to him outright, over and over and over again. The sons of bitches.

Yes. His father had been a monster. The less said about his momma, that sow, the better.

But they were the past, and as Zach's present started to evolve into a future, he began working his way westward. Where he'd grown up was already well out from the East, far from the cities and the government and all that strange nonsense. He moved deeper into the newly founded territories. He learned, really learned, how to ride a horse, how to rope and herd, skills that could serve him on just about any ranch he came across. He also learned how to handle a pistol.

He continued to drink, but that was the basic stuff of living in those days. You had whiskey with your breakfast. You might drink yourself senseless on any given night, and no one thought anything of it. (Nowadays if you indulged in any vice more than once, why then you were an *addict*. Heavens!) Booze was everywhere. So were whores. Zach enjoyed his young adulthood a lot, despite that had to bust his tail just to survive. The new freedom of his life still thrilled him, and he wondered why he hadn't taken off from home sooner. More often, though, he wished that everyone he'd left behind would die of smallpox.

Zachary never did learn the fate of any member of his family. For all he knew, their offspring had made it down through the years. But he had his doubts. The Fitzsimmons line was full of bad blood. Before he'd left home, he had already lost two brothers. One had died after an accident with a whipsaw, and fever took the other. *Fuck 'em*, Zach had thought then and now. *Fuck 'em both*.

Zach became capable with a gun. Then he got good. After that, he discovered that he didn't need to work himself ragged in order to live. Other people could work hard, and he could take what they earned. The trick to convincing those folks that they ought to surrender their money to him lay in the gun—the quickness with which he could use the weapon and, even more, his obvious willingness to do so.

Thus, he made his way. Also thus, he earned his reputation, a notorious one.

It was nice being feared. He liked it a lot. But if you were feared, he found, you were also *known*. People heard about you. Your name circulated, even if you picked up a nickname. The law had its eye out for you. After a while there was the sense for him that it was only going to be a matter of time before he paid the price for his deeds.

Zach tried to stay ahead of it. Civilization didn't move as fast as a man on horseback.

By the time he had grown into his manhood, he found himself running out of options. Even if he'd tried going back to a regular sort of life as a ranch hand, it would have been just about impossible. His name was known. His face was on handbills, with rewards printed beneath. He grew older, and his hair started to gray. But he was still good with a gun. And it was this skill that gave him his unlikely redemption.

A group of rival ranchers reached out to him with a proposition. They knew who he was, and they had sought him out specifically. They offered him a job. But the story they told sounded crazy to him. These wealthy powerful men, eyes bright and frightened in their fat greedy faces, wanted Zach to go hunt wolves.

Of course, it was more than that, and that was the crazy part. He sat in a parlor with lamplight and expensive whiskey, and listened to the stories. That was what they were—*stories*. They had to be, Zach had thought. But the money they were offering him was good. Very good. And he was running out of options.

However, he had a question to ask. “What for you want this done?” These men had to have some financial stake in this, some investment they wanted to protect.

But one of them said, voice a grave whisper, “Abominations must be put away.” The others all nodded grimly.

Zach agreed to it. When it was done, he told himself, he would celebrate with booze and whores, enough debauchery to erase the memories of the ranchers’ stories.

They told him where he was going. It had occurred to him that this might be a trap, but it was already too elaborate for that. Why go to the trouble? He had a reputation, yes, but he was hardly someone who would annoy men of such power. They wouldn’t *bother* to have him killed.

He lit out into the wild. On the way to his destination, stopping here and there at the few footholds of settlements he found, he heard more stories. They were all about wolves. He had to finish his job before the rise of the next full moon. So he had been told by the ranchers. Zach accepted this condition. What choice did he have?

Legends. Ghost stories. Crazy Injun talk. He’d heard lots of tales in his days. The open plains were full of such yarns. Now Zachary had to treat this one seriously. As he rode along, finding his way, he started to wonder if maybe it was true, what the rich men had said...maybe the wolves were real. Not just any wolves, of course. These were something special. And a lot more dangerous. He came to understand why he was alone on this job: nobody else wanted to do it.

After better than a week of riding, Zach entered what he’d been told was the home territory of the wolves. He scouted around, and soon enough located a camp. When he crept up on it, he was shocked to see how normal it looked. There was a campfire, a stream for water, some people lazing and some working. A typical camp.

People. They just looked like people to Zach.

But that didn’t matter. It was two days until the full moonrise.

Zach had his orders. He had been given this task. A big payment waited for him. These half dozen people stood between him and that money. He’d killed before. It was nothing new to him. This, though, was more along the lines of...an execution, or an assassination, like what had happened to poor ol’ Abe Lincoln when Zachary was a boy.

In the end, however, it wasn’t anything so grand. When he went into the camp, it was just a slaughter. He did it at dawn. Three were still sleeping when he shot them. The others, though they reacted with impressive speed, couldn’t get to him or their guns quick enough. Zach’s skill with a weapon served him well.

When he searched the bodies—they were four men and two women, of different ages and even races—for their effects, he discovered strange marks on each of them. Their flesh was marked with what looked like bites, fresh ones, like they’d gotten them yesterday. Or maybe these were signs of some disease they all shared. Zach left the bodies alone after that.

He left the camp. The “wolves” were all dead. More than ever, it all seemed like craziness. But so be it. It was the first and last time Zach ever explicitly killed for money, but he would remember the chill pale light of that dawn for a long, long time.

Riding out, he had to sleep under the bright full face of the moon, and on that night he started awake from a nightmare where his brothers—even the two dead ones—had staked him out naked on the ground, laughing at him, getting him ready for their father who was taking his time approaching with a rusty axe in his hands and a leering drunken grin on his face. Zach had felt the intense pressure of that grin, beaming at him like the noonday sun. He had felt singled

out by his father, picked for this terrible fate, as if this were the real reason he'd had young Zach in the first place. To be some kind of sacrifice.

When he woke, sweaty and shivering, the feeling didn't go away. Not exactly. He knew his poppa wasn't out there in the darkness...but something was. Something that *wanted* him.

It came for him. Zach fired off two shots, all he had time for, but he didn't know what he was aiming at. The thing jumped on him, large and furry and amazingly strong, coordinated like no animal ought to be. He tried to fend it off, but it was hopeless. He lay pinned to the ground, just like in his dream. Only instead of his daddy wielding an axe, he was about to be killed by this creature that couldn't possibly be a real wolf, but had to be something else, something more fantastic, something deadlier.

The creature didn't kill him, however. Zach kept on struggling and somehow managed to get over onto his stomach, which gave him the brief hope that he could escape. Wrong. He tried to crawl, to scramble away. The thing clawed at him—not at his flesh, though. Instead, it tore the clothing from his body. Before Zach could begin to wonder why, the beast, breathing hot breath on him, bit him just under his right shoulder. Pain jolted through him. He figured this would be just the first of many bites. The thing would maul him. If he was lucky, he would be left to bleed to death.

But he was luckier than that. After biting him, the creature vanished—just got up and took off. Over the blood rushing in his ears Zach thought he heard a wolf's howl in the distance. He lay on his belly, panting, under the blaze of the full moon.

* * * *

Afterwards, once he understood what had happened to him, he went eastward. It was like swimming upstream. For once he went *toward* civilization, something he'd never had much use for before.

But when got to the East, he found that the cities were almost as wild and violent as any outpost in the West. He fell in with the rascals and wastrels. He drank with them, and outdrank them. There were the wonders of opium to discover. The big noisy smelly cities were sewers, all of them, at least the more interesting parts, and it was there that Zachary Fitzsimmons lived.

It was a kind of redemption for him, in the end. He wasn't an outlaw anymore. The West was changing, as the nation continued to grow. He heard the news. The railroad. The rush to tame the wide prairies and soaring mountains. The new states being christened. Sooner or later, he figured, this whole continent would be a slum, overrun with lowlives, ruled by ignorance.

He tried not to care. He had worries of his own, namely managing his special condition. With every full moon Zachary had to take serious precautions. He did so, without fail. Even lacking a guide, even without someone of his kind to explain things to him, he had figured it out on his own. He knew what to do, how to keep himself from running amok at the end of each lunar cycle.

That wasn't all he discovered. Somewhere in among the whores and alcohol and opiates, he found he was not, in fact, alone. There was a scent—the Whiff, as he came to call it. Following it, he located someone like him, then another, and another, and others after that. They all shared his condition and all had amazing senses of smell. But Zach's was the best. When enough of their kind got together, it was decided that he would be in charge of finding even more, wherever they might be. The group gave him money. He was to travel. He would sniff out the others since, they said, there *must* be others still out there.

Zach was glad to do it. Not that he was really concerned with the lofty goals of the group, but by then he just wanted to get the hell away. Being with those others unnerved him. They were all like him. All had gotten bitten, all had been transformed. They had coped with the full moon, desperate to keep their natures a secret. Now they wanted to form a permanent organization, to help those like themselves, and—most importantly, they said—to keep themselves from creating any more of their kind through the Bite.

For Zachary, being in one place with those others felt like nothing so much as an invitation for some hired gun to come massacre them all. Maybe it would happen at dawn, a lone cold-eyed killer entering their lair, a murderer paid by men—by *humans*—who had somehow learned of their existence and wanted them destroyed....

Abominations must be put away.

So Zach went. Zach fled. He did the locating work. He was surprised how much he liked it. Later, as the group got bigger and better organized, he would believe that he'd been born to be a rover.

* * * *

He had caught the Whiff and reported it. The scent didn't match the present whereabouts of any Community member. That young stud, Marky, had gone to take care of it. Zach liked Mark Curtz. You couldn't help it. The kid was charismatic as all get-out, friendly, stable, the oh-so-perfect representative of the Community. He was the total opposite of Zachary.

Zach entered the dim dingy bar. Mark had his magnetism, but Zach had the nose. He took the scent of the patrons as he crossed toward the bar. It wasn't just that he could catch a far-off Whiff with almost pinpoint accuracy—it was that his nose was so keen he could detect amazing subtleties.

Here for instance, in the confines of this bar, Zach smelled the sweat and pheromones and all the other bodily indicators. Here was sadness. There was resentment. This guy was keeping some desperate secret. That man was spoiling for a fight. It was like they were naked to him, all caught up in their stupid lives, second-guessing themselves to death. Dumb-ass humans.

Zach ordered a whiskey, remembering strong sour mash out of the hills of Kentucky, knowing the drink would taste nothing like that. But it would do. The first sip had the right sting, mixing with the Vicodin. Once upon a time he had used laudanum, then morphine. Now the for-profit pharmacology industry was pumping out all sorts of painkillers. So the humans were good for something at least.

"Hey."

He turned. "Hey, yourself."

She might be thirty, but hard living had already added years to her. Even so, she was attractive. This was a woman who had been the Bad Girl a long, long time. Her bleached blond hair was done up in punk spikes, colored here and there with patches of pink. She wore tight clothing over a supple body, and in case anybody didn't get the message, she had a black leather dog collar around her throat.

Zachary got the message. With a smile he said, "I believe I'd like to buy you a drink."

She grinned. He liked the knowing look in her eyes, a refreshing self-awareness. This woman knew who the hell she was. She said, "I'd like that."

And so it went. Her small talk was flirtatious and reasonably clever, and Zach felt a growing sexual urge, despite the pills and alcohol.

Finally they got around to trading names.

“Cate.” She spelled it, as though it were important.

He said, “I am Zachary Montgomery Fitzsimmons.”

“Really now?” She laughed. She was drinking vodka.

“You bet.”

She repeated the name carefully. Then she added, “You’re quite a mouthful.”

“You bet I am.” He grinned. The whiskey was doing its job, working with the Vicodin. He felt like he was floating, but his desire for this woman was only increasing.

She said, “The choice of nicknames you must’ve had. Wow. Let’s see. Zach. Monty. Fitz. Then all the funny ones. Zach-Zach Heart Attack. Montgomery Ward. One Size Fitz All. I like Fitz. Do you mind? Did anybody ever call you Fitz before?”

“Cate, my angel, I’ve been called lots of things in my time.”

It would be just a matter of minutes now. They’d finish these drinks, then head out together. Find a motel. Fuck. It was all waiting to unfold, a process he had never gotten tired of, and probably never would. Sex was a great reason to stay interested in being alive.

But there was a sudden complication. Zach smelled the pool cue chalk. It was on the hands of the man approaching him from behind. The bar had two pool tables, and balls had been rolling and dropping into pockets since he’d walked in. Now someone oozing aggression from his pores was coming this way.

Zach picked out the thump of rubber-soled work boots. This guy knew Cate, probably intimately. Zach had no illusions that this was her first time in this bar. This guy probably thought he owned Cate. Wrong. But he’d drunk enough draft beer by now to do something about it.

Zach was still grinning at Cate. She looked past him suddenly and started to say, “Harry—”

But Zachary spun off the barstool, as nimble as a gymnast, cocked back his fist, and punched Harry in the face. It was more like what an ice hockey player might do. Harry’s head turned sharply on his neck, and he dropped to the floor without making a sound.

Zach let the whole bar see his grin. Harry didn’t appear to have any friends, at least none that were interested in avenging him right this second.

From behind him, the bartender said, “Goddammit, what the hell you think you’re doin’, huh?” But he wasn’t going to be any trouble, either. Zach could tell by his smell.

He threw an extra five on the bar top, held out his hand to Cate, and the two of them exited the place.

* * * *

She didn’t need to be told to leave on the dog collar. It was a part of her persona. The motel room was appropriately anonymous, and so rife with past smells even Zach couldn’t begin to sort them.

Cate left her clothes by the foot of the bed. Zach, who had stood and watched her strip, now took off his shirt. As he started to undo his pants, Cate glided across the carpet to him and took over unbuttoning his fly. The smell of vodka came from her, but she wasn’t drunk. Zach smelled her arousal, an odor that excited him, stirring his cock even as she drew down his zipper. His pants slid down the taut columns of his legs. Cate slipped her fingers into his cotton briefs.

“Time to see just how much of a mouthful you really are,” she purred. His punching out of Harry apparently hadn’t bothered her. Maybe she’d even thought Harry had it coming. Zach was glad the incident hadn’t scared her off. Then again, he guessed it would take a lot more than that to spook this gal.

As she drew down his briefs, she slid to her knees before him. His cock sprang into view. The room was dim, like the bar had been, but she wasn’t trying to hide anything from him. He looked down at her blond head. Her fingers curled around his shaft as he came fully erect. Her thumbnail traced his underside vein, playfully plucking it like a bass string. His flesh tingled with pleasure. His whole body was alive now, even with the booze and pills.

At the first touch of her lips to the swollen bulb of his cockhead, Zach gasped. Those lips settled into an *O*, and her tongue moved over his crown. She used it skillfully. She swirled circles on him, and he felt muscles loosening, letting go of the tension of the road.

Cate understood what to do with a cock. Her encircling lips moved down the length of his shaft. She showed no hesitation, no awkward pause when she hit her gag reflex. Cate just swallowed him. In a single slow smooth lunge, she took him completely into her mouth. Zach let out a grunt, appreciating her skills. He felt his balls pressing her chin. Her tongue continued buffing his shaft. The nimble tip investigated the veins that were still pumping blood into his already aching hard organ.

Cate cupped his balls, applying just the right amount of pressure, and set about treating him to a professional deep-throating.

Her bleached head, shot with pink, bobbed on him. The suction of her mouth was amazing. She buried her nose in his pubic curls. The sound of her slurping mouth filled the dim room. The aroma of her excitement increased. Zach looked down again, saw her free hand working between her legs where she knelt in front of him. Beautiful. Beautiful....

Zach’s feet were still in his shoes, his pants stretched between his ankles. He planted his heels. Cate had picked up her tempo. His cock disappeared over and over into the eager sucking mouth. She tightened her grip delicately on his balls.

He dropped his hands to her head. The tufts of her hair were gelled and stiff, but he worked his fingers in, taking grip. He started stroking into her mouth, matching her rhythm. She didn’t flinch. He felt his cockhead enter her throat with every thrust. She offered no resistance. *Au contraire*, he thought. He doubted he could wrench his meat away from her at this point if he’d tried. This was one determined female. Letting her have her way seemed like a good plan. It was the gentlemanly thing to do, after all.

Teeth bared now, grunting, Zach felt himself nearing the final stage. Cate still had a hold of his testicles. He didn’t doubt she could feel his balls starting to tighten. He was also sure she knew just what that meant. But she kept on blowing him, and he kept up his face-fucking momentum. His fingers clutched her bleached hair. His ass clenched. Her hand was still busy between her legs, and the scent of her orgasm hit. Bliss shuddered through her body, and communicated itself to his thrusting cock.

Zachary started to jet.

She didn’t pull away her mouth. Her lips remained sealed around him. She didn’t know it, but she had nothing to worry about at all from him, unsafe sex-wise. His breed didn’t carry any of the diseases of the humans. Zach hadn’t had a day of sickness in...well, it had been *quite* a few years.

His climax whipped through the hard pillar of his body, from toes to scalp. The pleasure swam in his blood, flooded his brain, streamed in his limbs. He shot hot spurts, and each one was

caught in Cate's mouth. He growled his pleasure, jamming his cock in deep, deeper, shooting his final surges of come right into her throat. If this was how she liked to fuck, it was okay with him. She could play Russian roulette all she wanted.

At last she released him, and rocked back onto her heels. He let go of her hair. Slowly she stood, beautiful and triumphant. A bead of his semen seeped from a corner of her mouth as she faced him and smiled.

A look of intense satisfaction was on her face. But there was something more there, a look that was almost defiant. A challenge. Zach, enjoying the orgasmic afterglow, thought he understood.

It was indeed a challenge.

Her eyes flickered to his hair, to the gray among his natural auburn color. She said, "You're older than a lot of guys I fuck around with."

He was sure that was so. Good ol' Harry had looked to be about twenty-five before Zach had taken him out with one punch.

"You still got it in you to satisfy me...old-timer?" Again she smiled, and the pearl of his come slid to her jawline.

Humans could be funny creatures. It was heartening for Zach when he met one that could still surprise him.

He kicked off his shoes and stepped out of his pants. She was a lovely thing, with full breasts and nice hips. Her skin was creamy. Something about her face made him think she had some Slavic ancestry.

Zach grabbed her by the leather collar and dragged her onto the motel bed.

He could smell her cunt. The wild aroma clung to the shaved little thatch of her pubic hair. It oozed from the fingers she'd used to get herself off while giving him his blowjob. Now she wanted to see if he could perform, if he could even hope to fake the kind of bounce-back you could expect from a younger man.

Grinning again, he threw her onto her back, threw himself on top of her. He seized her left nipple—the right was pierced with a miniature barbell—and gave the knob a twist. She felt good beneath him, thrashing about on the patterned spread covering the bed.

He held the stiffened nipple between his thumb and finger, pulling hard at it. Cate leered at him maniacally. "Think that hurts me, Fitz? Think you can hurt me, motherfucker?" Raw defiance in her voice now, unmistakable.

Zach turned the nipple tighter, then finally released it. He grabbed her shoulder and pinned her to the bed. With his other hand he pulled apart her thighs, and stabbed his fingers into her slick, nearly hairless groove. Her heat and wetness closed over his fingers as he corkscrewed deep inside her.

She responded. Her hips bucked. Her carnal scent flooded the room. She writhed, but he kept her pinned down. She was helpless to take the violent fingering he was giving her—but she was also, obviously, eager for it. This was how Cate liked to play.

But it wasn't going to be enough. He hadn't yet met her challenge, and he didn't want to disappoint her. As her pussy shuddered and clenched around his fingers, she cried out, a guttural snarl. It would have been enough to raise the hackles on a dog.

Zach, feeling the frenzy, unslopped his fingers and scrambled into place. Cate's blond head was whipping side to side, her eyelids fluttering wildly. Zach planted his knees, and in one furious drive he sank his renewed cock into her well-fingered hole. He was fully hard after a

brief, barely noticeable wilting, as erect as could be again. He plunged to his hilt inside her, and she bucked again, arms closing over his shoulders, strong legs wrapping his waist.

Her nails dug into him. He did nothing to try to stop her. He thrust into her without mercy, since mercy wasn't what she was looking for, not this woman. He pounded her, the ecstasy already gathering over him, permeating him, sizzling in the atoms of his being. Yes. Fucking was definitely a great motive for staying alive. It kept life interesting, kept you engaged.

Cate, lucky multi-orgasmic thing that she evidently was, quaked her way through another come. His body slapped against hers. She was damp with sweat. Each of his muscles felt keenly, individually alive as he hammered into her, his whole body working, belying all those years...years that would have long ago reduced a human to a dried dead husk.

Suddenly she was squirming under him, trying—really trying this time—to get free. Zach slowed, stopped, let her roll out from beneath him. He was puzzled. Did she want to end this? If so, that would be that, of course.

But that wasn't that, for which he was grateful. Cate pivoted onto her knees, grabbed the bed's cheap plywood headboard, and stuck her ass out toward him. Her head turned. Her face was like a death's-head. She said, "Fuck my ass, Fitz! Come there, motherfucker!"

Again he was grateful. A woman who knew what she wanted. How lucky that he could give it to her.

He scrambled into place again behind her. He jammed his thighs tight against the backs of hers. He pressed apart her knees with his own. His cock was already well-lubricated from her pussy, and he set his cockhead to the waiting dark pearl of her netherhole.

He knew enough to be gentle, even under circumstances like these. You didn't just slam somebody's asshole. You had to figure out what they could tolerate. Zach started feeding himself into her slowly, letting the firm ring of her hole slip up around the head of his cock. The grip of her flesh was fantastic. She was so hot inside.

Cate's fingers went white on the headboard. Her head turned again, and eyes blazed at him over her shoulder. She growled, "Motherfucker, I said *fuck* me!" She lunged back onto his cock, like a fallen hero impaling on a sword.

It was Zach's turn to cry out, in pleasure and surprise. She had taken him all the way, every inch. His balls were now flush against the fine firm globes of her ass. His cock was buried in her.

He liked the slightly perverse angle, liked how she gripped him. He stroked into her, feeling his own skin ooze with sweat now. What a delightful creature this was, he thought. He reached forward and grabbed hold of her collar once again, yanking hard on it. She responded by thrashing about, by knocking the headboard against the motel room wallpaper.

Zach fucked her all the harder. He felt the impacts in his bones, plunging to her deepest, most vulnerable depths. She yelled obscenities, then the sounds became animal noises only, free of language, communicating only her pure brutal ecstasy.

It touched on a memory, one Zachary recognized, even as he pumped her ass. This violence was familiar, this sort of snarling, sweating near-mindlessness.

This was like a full moon fury.

His second come, more powerful than his first, suddenly tore through him. He unloaded into her body a second time. She met each spurt with a climactic cry. Pleasure rose over him, consuming him, then it slowly released him.

After a moment he disengaged himself from her ass. He lolled back on the bed, hoping she didn't expect a third time from him, though if necessary he could summon the will.

Cate didn't want any more. She went into the bathroom, emerged a few minutes later, dressed, and kissed him with a minty mouth. She didn't call him Fitz, didn't call him motherfucker. He was turned so that she could see the livid Bite clearly visible on his back just below his right shoulder. But she didn't say anything about it. She just said, "So long, sport," and exited. That was fine with him.

* * * *

He didn't intend to hang around this pissant town, in case that knockout punch he'd delivered at the bar came back to haunt him. The road. He would get back on the road, like a good rover.

Of course, he was more than a *good* rover. He was the best. He ranged far and wide, back and forth across this continent. Right here was the middle part of it, lots of farms, lots of crappy little burgs like this one. It was land that had once belonged to the Injuns—sorry, Native Americans—and which was now a region full of poverty and ignorance. Then again, the whole fucking country was like that, right?

Zach took a shower. He could still feel the Vicodin, but the lift was weakening. Oh, well. He could take more. Maybe another drink would be in order. He wouldn't stop again at a bar, though. He'd get a jug for the road, he decided as he dressed.

On his way to check out, he paused outside the tacky row of motel units. He drew in the air. So rife with scents. But he was keyed primarily to one kind of smell, to the particular odor of his own kind. Usually he caught the Whiff of the newly turned, those who had received the Bite during the previous moonup. It was important to track those folks down before the next full moon. Important for their own well-being. Important to the Community, too.

Zachary Montgomery Fitzsimmons, who in a youth long ago had known a better and far more rugged land, hadn't caught the Whiff of whoever had delivered that last Bite, which Mark Curtz was right now investigating. Zach had only smelled the person who'd received the Bite. But somebody had done it. Some rogue. Someone outside the Community.

He went to turn in his room key. He was a rover. In a sense he was outside the Community, too. It sure as hell felt that way a lot of the time, at least.

And that too was fine by him. He didn't entirely trust the Community. It was almost—*almost*—like there was a scent of betrayal hanging over the whole, widespread organization. Or else he was just imagining it.

Chapter Four

“Keep running!” he shouted, voice echoing out across the pasture ahead of them. His legs pumped, his blood thumped in his veins, his body flowed with strength as he sprinted over the grassy plain.

Beside him, Jill Machado kept pace. A fierce grin cut her face. Her dark hair streamed behind her. He saw how gracefully she moved. He heard the steady pounding of her bare feet.

He saw wonder on her face, and was pleased. They had already crossed a long stretch of land, her farm’s land, running full-tilt. They were well past the point when any human, even the fastest, most fit track star, would have slowed or more likely collapsed into a heaving exhausted heap. But she was still going. Her body continued to perform. She wasn’t tiring.

Mark had seen much of the farm now. They had passed where the chickens were kept, where she had the goats. No one else was in sight. Jill had told him earlier that she had in fact let go of all her farmhands all at once, even those who had worked at this spread for years. She hadn’t wanted to do it. She didn’t want to put anyone out of a job. But she’d felt she had no choice. Something strange was happening to her, and she didn’t want anybody around to see it. Instinct had guided her. Fear had been making her decisions for her these last three weeks.

She didn’t look afraid now, though, Mark thought as he matched her grin. He too had left his boots back at the house, and beat the earth with his naked soles. Earlier, after they had finally stirred from the bedroom, Jill had cooked a meal. He had helped. They’d had eggs—*unbelievably* fresh eggs—along with some fruit salad. After that, she had made coffee, and they had talked. He had started explaining things to her, how she could expect increased stamina and strength, keener senses and better reflexes. She had listened carefully to every detail. He fed her the information in amounts she could handle. Obviously, it was a lot to hear.

But she did handle it. She didn’t get hysterical. She didn’t freak out. She didn’t even cry again. Jill Machado appeared to understand that her life had changed forever. She was intelligent and centered. Right now, she seemed to just want to understand her new self.

He hadn’t yet gotten to the subject of what exactly she would experience at the next full moon, less than one week away. Better, he thought, just to let that sit for now.

When he’d judged she had heard enough for one session, he had set aside his empty coffee cup and held out his hand toward her. She smiled warmly. The sex earlier had created an intimacy between them. He hoped it would last a while.

“I’d like to show you something,” he had said.

Jill blinked, being mock-coy about it. “Oh my. I haven’t seen it all yet?”

He couldn’t help but chuckle. “No. Not by a long shot, my dear.” And he had led her outside.

Now they were approaching Jill’s property line. Beyond, in the distance, were sloping hills and the fields of other farms. Jill’s acres were located in a valley. Mark slowed, reaching out a hand to Jill’s shoulder. He felt the energy in her. He saw the healthy flush of her skin. She wanted to keep on going, he could see, to push herself to the limit. Right now she probably felt invincible, like she could race all the way to the edge of the planet.

“Hold on,” he said.

Reluctantly she slowed. They took a last few plodding steps together, then stopped. Her breasts rose and fell, and sweat shone on her face, but her eyes were bright and alert. The dark, tired rings had disappeared from under her eyes.

She turned the grin on him. "I want to go and go. I want to run forever."

"I know," he said, not noticeably winded from the sprint.

Jill looked back the way they'd come. Far in the distance were the house and barn. "Fan-fucking-tastic," she said.

"Yes. It is." None of her animals were this far out. He brushed a damp strand of hair from her face. "But we need to talk more."

She met his eyes. The grin faded. "You're going to tell me about...the full moon?" She looked pensive, understandably so.

He shook his head. She knew what she was and what the full moonup meant in general terms, information she'd probably gotten from movies. He would explain the reality of it, but not right now. He said, "I'd like you to tell me about the night you received your Bite."

Jill's face immediately closed up. She turned away, looking in random directions, anywhere that was away from him.

"Jill, it's important. Remember, I've been through it, too." Mark thought about showing her his Bite once more, but knew he didn't have to push it. She was an intelligent woman. She didn't need to be treated like a child.

Still, it was a moment before she looked back at him. "Okay," she said.

The day was still warm and bright, though some high altitude clouds were creeping in. Jill had put on an oversized T-shirt earlier. Now she wiped her moist upper lip on the sleeve.

"Okay," she repeated. "It was three weeks ago, like I said. It happened at night, which you obviously already know. I was coming home. I'd been in town all day. By the time I got back, all my employees had knocked off. Everything was normal. So very normal that night. I opened the gate, started up the drive in my pickup."

Mark had seen several vehicles parked by the barn. One was a tan, battered pickup.

"I parked, got out," she continued. "I was tired. Not the good kind of tired after you've done actual physical work. This was mental tired. I was emotionally fried. A whole day of paperwork in town, listening to a lawyer. Oh, no, not a divorce lawyer or anything like that. I'm not married. You don't have to give me that look."

Mark hadn't been aware he'd been giving her any sort of look.

Jill waved a hand, angrily. "It's all about the deed to this place. I've got a lazy-ass brother who thinks because Dad left me the farm, it means he *really* meant it to go to his deadbeat son. Doesn't matter. Johnny'll never get anywhere with what he's trying. Anyway...." She paused for another long breath. When she spoke again, her tone was quiet and serious. "Anyway. When I got out of the truck, everything seemed just like it should. I'm used to this place at night, used to being out here all on my own. It doesn't spook me, not even when the coyotes get going, not even if there's lightning flashing and thunder shaking the roof of the house. When I'm here, I know I'm home, and I feel safe. I felt safe that night. Relieved. I figured I could pour myself a drink, beam in a movie, and all would be right with the world again. I started toward the house. And then I...*felt* it."

Mark waited. He could visualize the scene.

Jill paused. She raised an eyebrow at him. "You know what I felt?"

"I do."

"Tell me, then."

“You felt a presence, when there was no one around and no reason for you to think that anybody should be.”

Her brown eyes widened. But she only nodded, and went on. “I stopped where I was. I had guns in the house, but none in the truck or the barn. I suddenly felt that having a gun in my hands right then would be a very, very good idea. It further occurred to me that standing there like that probably wasn’t my wisest move. I could, like I said, *feel* something, a living something, nearby. I’m not immune to nerves, but this wasn’t just some odd anxiety or weird little cold shiver. I felt a living force, and it was bearing down on me—me, specifically. Like I’d been selected. Maybe it’s how a deer feels five seconds before the bullet punches through his skull. I don’t know. I’m not in the animal killing business.”

The goats she kept were for goat cheese, she had said earlier. The chickens gave eggs.

She plucked at the grass with her bare toes, then said, “It came out of the dark. Well, not really *dark*. After all, the moon was up. Big bright moon, the kind that seems to make more shadows than cast actual light. But whatever I’d felt, whatever I’d sensed out beyond my range of sight, was now coming at me. I caught a glimpse, but I was already turning, running, heading for the house. I suppose I could’ve gotten back into the truck. I didn’t think of it at the time, though. I’ve wondered since if that’s what I should’ve done. I wonder if I could have...gotten away.”

Mark thought that was unlikely. Even if she had jumped in her pickup, gunned the engine and sped down the drive, her attacker would have overtaken her. But he just let her continue with the story.

“I didn’t get more than a dozen steps. Probably not even that. Then it was on me. It leaped on me from behind. Big, heavy, hot. Its breath poured over me. Its...hands....were they hands?...were on me. I thought—I thought.... Well, I don’t know what I thought. I was being attacked. It felt like an animal. But it was too big to be anything but—I don’t know—a bear. This wasn’t a bear. It moved too fast. Its actions were too deliberate. And I still *felt* it, you know? I sensed a kind of purpose from it, an intelligence. But there was a fury about it, too. A madness. You know what I mean?”

Mark nodded solemnly.

Jill made a dry click in her throat that might have been a try at a laugh. “Christ, you really do know what I mean, don’t you. I was on the ground. I was pinned. The thing was heavy, and furry, and seething. It was panting, growling. It almost sounded like language to me. I tried to fight it, but it was like wrestling a tractor. Fuck.” Tears had appeared in her eyes again. She swiped at them, as though she would have none of that now. “Then it started tearing at my clothes. It was intentional. This was what the thing meant to do. It stripped me there on the dirt, under the moonlight. It pulled me over onto my back. I looked up at it. I saw it, really saw it, for the first time. Teeth, eyes. That hungry mouth. And then...then the fucker bit me.”

Powerful emotions moved her attractive features. Plainly she had told no one else about this. That was good, Mark thought. But it was also a good thing that she was telling him now. He needed the information, yes. But she also needed to unburden herself. What had happened to her wasn’t any normal human experience. She hadn’t been assaulted, *per se*. She had not been raped. This was a transformation.

Jill made another dismissive gesture. “After that, it vanished. It got up and sprinted away. It ran like a dog, but it was no dog. I stood and staggered toward the house. Went inside, got a gun. But when I came back outside, it was still gone. No trace. I thought I should call the police. But I wanted to see to my wound first. You learn to patch up people when you work on a farm,

and I had plenty of first aid on hand. Where it had bit me...it felt—well, it didn't hurt exactly. I could feel it, but it was like it was glowing, like heat was radiating from it." She laid a hand to her chest, seeming to be unaware of the gesture. "I figured it was shock or something. I went into the bathroom, and started to wash the wound. There was blood but not much of it. I could see the punctures. The teeth marks weren't bleeding anymore. I poured antiseptic onto some cotton balls. I was going to sterilize the area, but...." She shook her head.

"You couldn't do it," Mark supplied.

"Right. I couldn't. Something stopped me, like a voice in my head. Leave it alone. Let it be. The heat was spreading. I felt it moving through my body now. But I just stood there, looking into the mirror. I didn't call the police. I didn't call an ambulance. I just let it spread, whatever the hell it was. I let it take its course. I didn't know why I did that. I still don't know."

He said, "It was instinct."

"Yeah. It felt that way, I suppose. But it also felt like I was losing my mind."

"You weren't. You aren't. What happened was a natural thing. A process. It's what the Bite is like."

"It was that way for you?"

"It was exactly that way for me. And for all the others."

"The Community?"

"The Community."

She sagged. "Holy shit. It's all real. These past three weeks, as I felt myself changing, I was starting to think that none of it had really happened. That I was going crazy."

Mark smiled at her. "Actually, sounds to me like you handled yourself very well."

"Thank you."

"You want to go back to the house?"

It had been an innocent suggestion. They had made a good start here. But he had a lot more to tell her. He needed more information from her as well, a better description of the creature who had attacked her...though Mark, by now, had a pretty good idea of who it had been. Who it had to be.

But right now Jill was leering at him. "Back to the house, huh? You know, you're the first guy in a long time whose bones I jumped twenty minutes after I'd met him. I swear, I haven't been this horny since my dorm room days."

Mark laughed, a rich, cheerful sound. An increased sex drive was a part of the change—a happy part, he'd always thought. He would have time to explain it all to her.

She grinned. "C'mon, I'll race you back to bed!" She started her sprint back to the house, which waited in the distance.

Mark, a few seconds later, followed, bare feet pounding the ground.

Chapter Five

Knowledge meant strength. Jill's life had taught her that. But the more you knew, the more you opened yourself up to fear, even terror. Human beings were the only creatures who knew about death. That was what people said. Jill, who'd worked with animals all her life, had her doubts. How many animals had she seen getting themselves ready for death, looking for a quiet isolated place, like in the end they only wanted some dignity?

But human beings knew almost from the get-go that their days were numbered, that death was going to come for them, one way or the other and no getting out of it. It was why people acted so batshit crazy when it came to religion, was her guess. Take fear of death, add God, and you ended up with a whole barrellful of nutty behavior. People were ready to buy—literally, *buy*, just ask your nearest televangelist—any answers that eased their fear of dying.

Now Jill Machado had answers to the questions that had been thrashing around inside her for days, for weeks. What was happening to her? Why was she having these strange, violent feelings?

The confusion had been awful. It had almost driven her out of her skull. She'd been all alone, pacing around her house with a pistol in her pocket. Outside, she'd shouted up at the stars until her voice had given out. Then a handsome prince had come to her lonesome land, and had brought her the knowledge she needed. And now...now, goddammit, she knew what was what.

Was she more or less afraid now?

Less, she had already decided. But the information that Mark had given her was also very disturbing. Her life had changed forever. She understood that. There was no going back. She didn't belong to the human race anymore.

That alone, she thought as she brewed coffee in her chrome and tile kitchen, might have been enough to drive a person crazy. *Hey, you. Guess what? You're not a human being anymore. You're a...you're a....*

Of course, Mark hadn't said it like that. In some ways he reminded her of a salesman, a very good one, so smooth with his clients that he didn't seem to be pushing his product at all. Every word he said sounded natural. Once he'd explained something, it seemed logical and inevitable. He was nice dude, and awfully good-looking, and one hell of a fine fuck....

Jill didn't blush as she thought this. One of the things that had disturbed her during the past weeks had been how persistently horny she'd been. She was no prude. She'd had her share of lovers—cut her swath from the herd, as they used to say. But lately she'd gotten out of control. She had found herself eyeing her male farmhands, thinking lustful thoughts that were almost grossly intense. It was one of the reasons she had let everybody go. Some “civilized” part of her had told her to remove the temptation, and so she'd sent them all away.

Mid-morning light filled the kitchen. Jill had been up for hours, but that was normal. This was a farm, and when you worked on one, you got to know the sunrise real well. She'd already put in some serious labor—more work, in fact, than what she had gotten used to these past couple years. Her workers were gone, and she was scrambling like crazy, trying to keep the place operating. Of course, she couldn't do it all on her own, no way. But she'd also had no choice in firing everybody. The pent-up sexual frustration since she'd been bitten had, just before she'd done that mass firing, reached the point where she was afraid she would actually attack one of

those bucks she'd had working for her. How would that have looked: woman farm owner rapes male employee...?

She shook her head as she went to pour the fresh coffee she had just made. It wasn't funny and she knew it, and so she didn't even snicker. She'd felt more than just an increased horniness since being bitten, of course. Maybe what she'd first noticed, the thing that had told her something really out of the ordinary had occurred to her, was her hopped-up sense of smell.

On the morning after the Bite—that was how Mark said it, with a capital *B*—she had woken up, after finally collapsing into sleep on her bathroom floor, to find that the world was now full of vivid, intense smells, all hitting her at once. The scents were both strong and subtle. They had textures. She had gotten up and walked outside, and had breathed in the morning air—air like she'd never known it before. Right then she had cried, out of fear but also because the scents were so beautiful.

Mark, in his salesmanly way, had been explaining to her that it *was* beautiful, that what had happened to her was a good thing. He brought her knowledge, and she welcomed it, even when that knowledge scared her some. She loved the idea of the Community. But she was afraid, understandably, of what was going to happen to her on this coming full moon, just a few days away now.

Even here in the house, with the strong aroma rising from the two beige coffee mugs she was carrying toward the bedroom, Jill could smell the damp wool of the goats, as well as the chicken shit from the coops. She didn't linger over how amazing it was to be able to read these scents from so far away. Rather, she worried that she couldn't possibly handle this farm all alone, no matter how hard she tried.

She paused in the doorway into the bedroom, looking at the mound of Mark's body under the covers. He was still sound asleep. City boy. Had she just been thinking of him as a handsome prince? This time Jill did snicker out loud. Mark wasn't a prince, and she wasn't the princess or the damsel or whatever the hell else. She knew what she was. She knew.

* * * *

Jill stopped suddenly on the way to the barn, shoes crunching sharply in the gravel. Mark, at last up and about, was ahead. He too stopped, and turned to look back at her.

Half a dozen strides from where she now stood, on a patch of ground, was where Jill had been attacked and bitten. But she barely glanced at the spot. Instead, she fixed Mark with a deep brown stare.

And she said, "Werewolf."

He waited, but she added nothing. Finally he smiled. It was a good smile, one designed to put people at ease. He shrugged and said, "Werewolf."

Jill nodded tightly. "I just wanted it said. Out loud. Before it became a big deal that nobody was saying it."

"It's a perfectly good word."

"Yes. I think so, too." She did think that. While Mark's word *'thropes*—short for lycanthropes, obviously—was just fine, nothing could beat that one word for its directness and power: *werewolf*.

Mark was still smiling as Jill realized only now that this had been building up in her since yesterday, since Mark's arrival at the farm.

"You do like to cut to the chase, don't you?" He moved toward her.

“It saves a lot of headaches,” she said, and the two of them kissed, easily, familiarly. Mark Curtz was the Community’s representative. Jill understood that. She did wonder, though, if every new potential female member got this sort of treatment from him, but the thought didn’t make her jealous.

He dropped a strong arm around her shoulders, and they started toward the barn again. “Come on,” he said, “I’ll show you what we have in mind.”

Jill went with him. Mark hadn’t made any kind of formal offer to join this Community yet, but maybe that wasn’t how it worked. She had already figured out that this group, though informal, was apparently very organized in its way.

Obviously it was also very secretive. It had to be, didn’t it? That was the nature of...of her kind. Yes. *Her* kind. Her kind were legends. They had to stay legendary. Mythological. It was better if the humans didn’t believe they were real. It had to be that way. Humans didn’t like what was different. Hell, they couldn’t even stand differences among themselves, even though they shared the same DNA.

Humans. “They”? That was how Jill was thinking of people now. She entered her barn, Mark’s arm still on her shoulders. It was already starting, she knew. She was breaking away, in her own mind, from the human race. It didn’t feel unnatural to her. Really, it seemed inevitable. She was already different. She was something she would have dismissed at any other time in her life—except, maybe, in her childhood—as a fairy tale.

And the next time the full moon rose, she knew, she would leave behind her humanity forever.

* * * *

He showed her what he wanted to do with the barn. It was a storage structure, not built for livestock, perfect for what he had in mind.

It was going well with Jill, but Mark didn’t waste time congratulating himself on his charms and people handling skills. This was a success because of Jill herself. She was adapting, right before his eyes. She listened carefully to what he told her. She asked questions when she had them, and didn’t flinch at the answers. It was good that she wasn’t hysterical. The Community needed ones like her. Cooler heads always prevailed in the end.

He felt at ease with her, too. Having sex had brought them closer together, but there was something else, a feeling of trust on her part and a growing affection on his. She really was a lovely woman, and he was impressed that she ran this whole farm at such a relatively young age. Of course, that job was a whole lot harder now that she had let her workers go, but that could be fixed, he knew.

After he had pointed out all the details to her inside the barn, showing where the stalls could be set up, he excused himself and went outside to phone in an update to the Community.

He got a signal and got Nalder on his cell phone. “A haven? You think?”

Mark had long since driven his 4x4 up from the gate. He leaned against it now where it was parked by the barn with Jill’s vehicles. “I do think,” he said into his phone. On the rise up here, reception was good.

“She’s...cooperative?”

Mark decided to act like he’d imagined that pause. Nalder could be an insufferable lech when she wanted. “She’s smart and capable. If she’s those things, then everything else follows.” He had no idea where Nalder might be just now. Like much of the Community she only stayed

for short spells in one place. It was why this farm was such an important place. An isolated spot like this was someplace where the Community members could stay for extended periods, if need be.

“That’s good, Mark, very good,” said Nalder. “I’ll get things moving. Expect us tomorrow—and inform us if this situation falls apart on you.”

“You’ll be the first to know,” Mark said, a little gruffly. He was a part of the Community, and he liked that sense of belonging. But he didn’t have to love every last member of it with a full and open heart.

He snapped shut and pocketed the phone. Nalder was okay, though. She, like him, was good at her specialty. She had a degree in engineering, and had worked as a builder. She was also good at rallying the troops, at least those who could swing a hammer with decent aim and saw wood without taking their own hand off. She would swarm in here tomorrow and do what needed doing to that barn. Even with days to spare until the next moonup, it felt like they were cutting it close.

Mark paused a moment, soaking up the quiet. The day was cloudier than yesterday but still on the warm side. There was lots to do, but it was all doable. He didn’t think this situation would *fall apart on him*. Nalder just had to get that last little dig in, didn’t she? He shook his head. Jill wouldn’t let him down, and he had no intention of letting her down, in any way.

At that moment she appeared. He looked at her, feeling himself slipping away into those brown eyes.

She tossed him a pair of worn work gloves. “C’mon,” she said. “The goats need their second milking of the day. This time I’m recruiting you.”

He hoped for a second or two that she was joking, but it was obvious she wasn’t. So he shrugged and followed her.

* * * *

He groaned, with “ooohs” and “ouches” thrown in, as he lowered himself onto the pillows scattered on the floor. Jill had put on some music, soft stuff with a lot of purring sax—what she would have called make-out music when she was a teenager. Evening had come.

She felt the same aches as he did. She’d exerted herself today, too, though she was more used to this sort of work. Even so, it was only her new stamina and strength that had let her work so hard.

“My poor suffering fella,” she said, pouring the wine and setting a glass near his hand.

“Sympathy,” he said, eyes closed, wincing as he adjusted his position. “I love it. More of that, please.”

“How about I add gratitude instead? I am grateful for your help today.”

Mark slitted open his eyes, as though he needed to keep them narrowed to hold back the pain. “It’s the least I could do.”

“No.” She shook her head. She had a glass of pinot for herself. “I’ve seen the least people can do. It’s far worse than nothing.” She was thinking of her brother Johnny. But she didn’t want to dwell on him. He felt far away, like he was a character from someone else’s life.

Which, she thought, he was.

“Hey. Come on down here.”

The den was carpeted and comfortable. Evening light was still dimming at the high windows. Jill lowered herself onto a big plush pillow, sitting cross-legged. She looked down at the man lying on the floor.

Mark lifted his pear-shaped glass. "To a new and better life."

"You don't have to oversell it," she said. "It's not necessary. I'm already sold."

He didn't take offense. "To more wine and less goat teat squeezing, then."

Jill touched her glass to his with a crystalline chime. "To that," she said, and sipped.

He levered himself up, with another grunt of discomfort, to take a drink. "Hey, that's good."

She nodded and smiled. The saxophone on the music system blew easy sound through the room. He was looking up at her. She saw the familiar glimmer in his eyes. She felt the first hint of her own arousal.

She said, "I've told you how I got bitten." She took another swallow of the pinot grigio. "Now," she went on, "I would like to know how you came by your Bite."

Chapter Six

Against the starry blackness, the face of the Beast was rising. Not all there yet. No. But growing, shining magnificently. Vasha, below, waited to receive its full blessing.

The day had been warm, but the temperature was dropping now. She felt the cool air on her face. She opened her mouth and licked at the night with her slick tongue. She was standing in her little grove of trees, in a clear patch at the center, so that she could look up at the moonrise. Definitely not yet full. A curve of the moon was vague, still in the Earth's shadow. But the Earth couldn't hide the Beast from the sun's full force for much longer. Nothing could stop that. Nothing would *ever* stop it.

Vasha grinned. She had blood on her teeth.

The opossum meat was as gamy as it got, particular when eaten raw, but this was how Vasha liked it. This had become part of her process over the years. As the full moon got closer, she became more like an animal. She killed game without using weapons and ate it uncooked. She wandered in the wild and didn't bother with civilized behavior. All this was, of course, just the lead-up to the Beast's arrival, to the big moonup, when she would become her true self.

For now, though, she had to be content with these preliminaries.

Vasha had had enough of the carcass. There was nothing quite like eating what you killed with your hands. It was straightforward. No worries about preservatives or pesticides—not that she ever had to worry about those. Viruses couldn't hurt her. Her system could handle any amount of toxins. She was superior. She was above nature. Or, to put it another way, the nature of her kind was superior to all others.

She raised her arms toward the moon. Even though it was incomplete, it was very beautiful. Her wet fingers glistened above her. The taste of the 'possum was in her mouth. She was still isolated in her small grove of trees, out on somebody's back fields. Humans had been claiming and dividing up the land for so long. They declared ownership of some piece of turf, put up their fences, marked their territory, and thought that was that. But they didn't really own anything, not the ground under their feet, not the skies above. They couldn't even really lay claim to their own lives.

Nature's laws said that what was superior ruled. What was inferior had to submit or die.

Excitement grew in Vasha, just like the Beast grew in the sky. Her nipples hardened under her dingy shirt. Her pussy moistened beneath her mud-stained pants. She had already stepped out of her shoes. She had been living out here these past weeks, ever since the last moonup. There was a reason for doing it, for staying in the area of where she'd delivered her last Bite. Normally she would have moved on immediately, in case some goddamn sniffing, snooping rover caught her Whiff. The rovers were always after the scents of the newly turned and she didn't want one of them to get her smell. She wanted nothing to do with the Community.

Vasha had a plan. She had delivered the Bite. Now she would wait for the next full rising of the Beast. With the unguent supplied to her by her secret ally, she didn't have to worry this time about her scent giving her away.

Her blood-wet fingers undid the buttons of her shirt. She dropped it behind her. She stepped out of her pants, and stood naked beneath the moon's glow, drinking in the pale light, feeling her heart racing, blood pumping. It wasn't yet the fury of the big moonup. It wasn't really

anything close to it. But it was enough to send her racing from the trees, bare legs swishing through the grass, leaping fences in the darkness, hurrying toward the night's purpose.

* * * *

She smelled the boy. Of course, he was no boy, just as she wasn't a girl. After a lot of careful figuring, checking through her memories for historical dates, Vasha had discovered that she had gotten her Bite when she was twenty years old. But she had turned twenty long, long ago. She was no girl. She wasn't a human female at all.

But the boy thought she was. For several nights now she had been teasing him. He lived in a sad sagging trailer at the edge of a property line, surrounded by oil stains and dead grass. Light burned inside. He was waiting for her. She smelled the scent of his anticipation and need. He had caught glimpses of her before. She had come up to this trailer and tapped on its sides, laughing under the windows. He had come out. She had let him see her, just for a second, as she turned and bounded away into the night. Twice he had come chasing after her. But she was too fast. Even if he'd come at her with a gun, he wouldn't have been able to get a bead on her. She could outwit him and any of his clumsy tools.

Besides, the boy didn't want to harm her. The boy wanted something else.

Vasha supposed he was a hired hand, or maybe some embarrassing relative who was being allowed to live in his trailer on this lonely corner of the family farm. She had never seen him receive any visitors. He drank his liquor and played a pretty good guitar, and lately had been holding a vigil every night, waiting for the mysterious woman to come back.

Bare feet padding through the grass, she closed on the trailer. Above, the Beast shone through the clouds. Rippling sensations went up and down Vasha's bare body. Her excitement rose as she breathed in more of the boy's scent. He was sober tonight and very alert. Vasha could smell him moving from window to window in the trailer, trying to be sly about it. He didn't want to scare her off.

Vasha grinned at that thought, the opossum blood no longer staining her teeth. The boy couldn't scare her away. These past few nights she'd only been acting like she was skittish, bolting the way a deer would whenever he got a glimpse of her nude body. Images of her, she was sure, had been torturing him mercilessly. That was good.

She sank deeper into the grass and crept up on the trailer. From here she could actually hear his footsteps, the nervous tap of his hands against his thighs as he bent and looked through gaps in the cheap blinds. He licked his lips repeatedly, his breath coming quickly. Mostly, though, she smelled his needy carnal scent. She had built this up for several nights, working him up into this state. Now it was time to finish what she had started.

He was ten yards away, at the window, eyes hot in his skull as he swept them back and forth across the empty field. Only, it wasn't empty. In a single smooth motion, Vasha rose to her full height. She stood naked to him in the moonlight. Even through the walls of the trailer she heard him gasp. She heard him let go of the blinds and race to his door, leaping outside, determined that this time she wouldn't get away from him.

This time, she didn't run. This time Vasha stayed, standing her ground.

The boy, in jeans and a heavy metal T-shirt, took four steps toward her, then stopped abruptly. In spite of his age—he was easily twenty-two—he had a boyish face, with wide-set eyes, and a head capped with a mop of black curly hair. His steady diet of alcohol hadn't yet ruined his physique, which was still young and plucky.

He was gaping at her, like he wanted to make sure she was real. She was certain he hadn't told anybody else about her. She could smell the scent of the pent-up secret on him. There were those of her kind who could interpret smells just that finely. In fact, Vasha knew that she would have made an outstanding rover.

Not that she would ever join up with the Community. Damn them.

"You're...for real?" His voice shook. He hadn't come any closer. He didn't want to spook her. Silly boy.

She said nothing. She gave that grin again. She knew how desirable her body was. Over the years she'd honed her feminine wiles. A woman could strike a pose, raise an eyebrow—and men, a lot of them anyway, would be helpless. So it had been. So it would always be.

Vasha, from the night she had received her Bite from the Beast, had felt herself change. She had stopped being a gawky girl. Her body had reshaped itself, growing taut and strong. Her breasts had become firm, her buttocks tight. Her limbs grew stronger. It was like she had become as powerful and elegant as a forest animal.

That was how the boy saw her, as a naked miracle bathing there in the light of the moon, like something from a fantasy, or a delirious erotic dream.

"What's your name?" he asked, but it wasn't a serious question. He blinked after he'd said it, like he couldn't quite figure out what idiot had asked it.

Vasha's grin intensified. Her own arousal grew. She smelled his growing excitement, too; a stirring male sweatiness.

Finally he took another step toward her, fumbling like he wasn't sure about the ground. But she encouraged him with her eyes, and his next step had more confidence. She could hear the thump of his heart, and felt blood singing in her own veins. The night had gotten quite chilly by now, but the moonlight on her exposed flesh felt hot.

Had that moon been a few phases further along, this scene would have played out a *lot* different.

Not that Vasha had any regrets. She already had plans for the next full moonup. But this eager boy with the moist palms was a fun distraction until then.

She wondered, for just a second, what his name was, then dismissed the thought. It wasn't important. He closed the last few paces to her. She turned, facing him. They didn't yet touch. She savored those last electrical seconds. Between them, the air crackled with yearning. Somewhere close by an owl, like it could sense the impulses, took flight.

The boy was looking into her face. He lifted a hand. His eyes started to slide down her body—then stopped. In a whisper he asked, "What happened to you?"

His eyes were on her Bite, which marked her just above her right breast. Vasha reached for his hand, drew it to her and set the fingertips on top of the ridges of her skin there. His nipples, she saw, poked at his T-shirt. Hers were still rigid. He trailed his fingers gently over the Bite, then he moved the hand lower to cup her breast. She heaved a breath. He was taller than her. He leaned, lowered his mouth toward hers, and their lips met.

Dark curls spilled over her face. The boy's hand tightened on her breast. Her nipple was trapped between two fingers. Those fingers had calluses—not from work, she guessed, but from lost years of plucking at the guitar, looking for some meaning to his life. Tonight, she would give him a purpose.

The kiss overflowed. Their tongues tangled with each other. Saliva dribbled to Vasha's chin. His hot hungry breath poured from his open mouth. He needed to get naked, Vasha decided.

She broke the kiss, grabbed the collar of his T-shirt and tore it down the front. His eyes bugged. He looked down as she finished shredding the cotton. For a second she thought he might protest, might say something totally stupid like, “Hey—that’s my favorite shirt!” But he didn’t. She threw aside the rags and reached for the catch of his jeans.

His hand closed over her wrist. He tugged her in the direction of the trailer. “Come inside,” he said.

She hadn’t planned to speak. Why communicate with words? But she couldn’t resist the comeback. “No,” she said in a sultry tone, “you come inside.” Not being gentle about it at all, she rid him of his pants.

They stood naked together beneath the Beast.

The two kissed again, mouths and bodies coming together. His arms closed around her. Her hands felt the lean muscles of his back. She could feel how hard he was, his cock still growing where it pressed against her tight flat belly.

Together, with a kind of urgent cooperation, they lowered to the overgrown grass. Vasha turned him, so that he lay on his back on the ground. She settled on top of him. Heat steamed from both their bodies. Their scents, already mingling, made her dizzy. He reached up for breasts again, pawing, groping and mauling. She let him do it, feeling the twanging thrill each time he pulled at her nipples. She was straddling his abdomen, smearing his heaving stomach with her flowing juices.

She grinned down on him, reached behind herself and took hold of his cock. He sucked in a breath, his chest rising. Was he so excited that he was going to come from just this touch? She hoped not. He didn’t disappoint her. He kept that hair-trigger, teenager-like orgasm in check. She fondled his cock, exploring him, measuring him with her hand. She gripped the silky, hard shaft. She ran the ball of her thumb across his crown, smearing the first stray oozes of pre-come across his cockhead. Extending her reach, she caressed his balls.

Beneath her, he squirmed on the ground. The tall grass whispered around them, keeping them half-hidden from watching eyes that Vasha’s sense of smell told her weren’t there. In the pale cloudy moonlight the boy’s face was twisted, wide eyes pleading. His hands grabbed at her breasts with a starving man’s need.

She had teased him long enough. She rose, eased back, and lowered herself onto his hard meat.

He cried out. Vasha, as she sheathed him with her moist gripping pussy, realized that she’d underestimated his manhood’s size. He wasn’t an oversized freak of nature, but his cock turned out to be even bigger than she’d thought, which she discovered as she lowered herself onto it. His girth pressed out against her damp pussy walls.

She gave herself a moment to settle lusciously onto and around him. She felt, as she always did, that she now owned this creature. She had taken into herself the neediest and most vulnerable part of him. His swollen organ was caught inside of her cunt.

His hands dropped from her breasts. They fell to her hips. Vasha planted one foot flat on the ground, then the other. A fresh grin tore across her face. She started to ride the youngster, her thigh muscles bulging, her knees rising smoothly. She lifted, feeling the oily slide of his cock. She lowered back onto him, taking the reaming of his cockhead and the length of his shaft behind it.

He continued to tremble under her. Already his hips were thrusting helplessly upward, but Vasha didn’t hurry. She hadn’t invested several nights in this game just to satisfy this human

male in the first few seconds of penetration. She meant to enjoy herself. She was, after all, the superior form of life.

But after a moment or two of this slow grind, her own natural impulses started to take her over. She gave in to the urges, to her aroused instincts. Digging in her bare toes among the grass blades, she bucked harder on top of him. She twisted her hips as she impaled herself again and again on his staff, feeling new sparks of pleasure each time. She heard and felt her ass slapping against his tense body.

His fingers dug into her hips as he lifted himself from the ground with desperate, violent upthrusts. She planted her palms on his chest for better leverage, and felt the thudding of his heart. She looked down into his young face and saw tears streaming from his eyes, even as an expression of tortured ecstasy came to those features. Vasha fucked him all the harder.

Above, the Beast watched from behind a veil of shadow. In the years that had followed her Bite, she had wandered the open ranges of this young country. She had come to understand herself, to see and appreciate how important she was. With every full moonrise she had grown more confident and certain. She had exercised her rights as a superior being. She had done as the Beast had done to her in that burnt-out village where she gotten her Bite. In those years she had become herself.

Since then, she had never relented, never surrendered.

She was riding the boy like he was a maddened animal. He was thrashing about now, jamming his cock up into her wildly. She wriggled on top of him. As the final pleasure started to swarm over her body, Vasha's fingers tightened on his chest, clawing him. Her head of coiled black hair whipped from side to side. He was shrieking like a crazy person beneath her, eyes still flowing with tears, his spit flecking her arms. She slammed herself down onto him with a savage, reckless intensity.

Her orgasm stormed across the night. Again it was almost electrical. In the surrounding field more birds took flight. In the boy's shabby trailer a light blew out over the sink with a sharp snap. But all that might have been coincidence.

Vasha rode the rapture, letting it take her away into a swirling, erotic darkness. The joy streamed through her limbs and permeated her body. The boy erupted, his thick hot seed shooting geyser-like up into her.

The phasing moon whirled and twirled, and at last came to a standstill.

Her head lolled to one side. Her eyes were closed. Slowly, she lifted her lids and once more looked down at the male body caught underneath her. She had drawn blood from his chest, though the wounds weren't anything serious, just little crescents of red that glimmered in the moonglow.

Had there been a true moonrise tonight, Vasha knew, this boy would have received the Bite from her. But that wasn't going to happen. Instead, she would be the memory he would hold onto for the rest of his pitifully short life. He would never forget her. This night would torture him with its beauty for all his days.

Vasha disengaged herself. She stood, feeling the sweet warm ooze of his come on the smooth insides of her thighs. He was blinking up at her with swollen red eyes full of wonder and longing. No, he would *never* forget her. Just as she would never forget the son of one of those ghost-men from her girlhood, the boy-man who had fathered her, then who had shipped her away like so much cargo.

Without a word, she turned and dashed away into the moon-silvered dark.

Chapter Seven

“Freddy Curtz owned a garage. He had a good head for mechanics. But he was even better with people. Not that he saw them as machines, I don’t think. But he understood how people were put together, what they could do if they had confidence in themselves. And a way for a person to gain a confident attitude was, he knew, for somebody else to believe in them and their abilities. It’s why people liked to work for him. He was a decent man.”

Mark had piled several of the big spongy floor pillows behind him, and now sat propped up. Jill refilled his glass with the white wine, not for the first time.

He hadn’t planned to start out talking about his father, but there it was. He was telling the tale of Freddy Curtz and his noisy, greasy, efficient garage, even though Jill had asked him about his Bite and how he’d come about it. It was a fair, tit-for-tat question. He, after all, had asked her the same thing and she had answered. So he had to, as well.

But he would do it at his own pace.

“My dad was inspiring,” Mark said, pausing for another taste of the pinot grigio. He liked the wine. Working with those damn goats earlier had been a lot more strenuous than he would have figured, even with his stamina and strength. Farm work was *hard*.

“Inspiring?” Jill prompted. She was still sitting cross-legged by him, an earnest look on her face. She seemed to be a natural good listener.

Mark gestured with a hand still sore from milking. “Well, not to overstate it, but the man could get a person to do stuff. Freddy had this knack for matching people to tasks, even when the given individual didn’t quite believe that he or she was capable of accomplishing it. But to him, it was already a done deal. At least, that’s how he acted. He exuded this kind of perfect faith, and it was irresistible, I tell you. I saw it work over and over again. I practically grew up in that garage.”

He was smiling. Jill waited patiently. She wasn’t calling him out for not immediately answering her question.

Pushing on, knowing of course what was coming, he changed his tone to a more serious one. “Freddy encouraged me. My mom was long since out of the picture. I could see, even as a teen, how my life was probably going to shape up. I wasn’t much to speak of when I was an adolescent boy. I was geeky and gawky, and no girl on the planet, I was sure, would’ve given me the time of day. And no blaming them. But I did show signs of knowing my way around an engine. DeSotos, Studebakers, Caddies....”

He paused again for a sip of the wine, and for a sly look at Jill. There was information he still hadn’t given her. He had, in stages, explained to her that she couldn’t produce children any longer the way humans did. He’d learned that she had never had kids, never been married. She had taken the news calmly—not dismissing it, but truly and honestly absorbing it. It hadn’t freaked her out.

But now he was hinting around another important fact of her new condition, one shared by all those who received the Bite. It something else that might unsettle her.

“So you became a teenaged grease monkey?” she asked.

“I did. Sort of. I was still in school, though. My dad wasn’t in any kind of desperate hurry to rush me into the business, understand. He just wanted to give me a good option. We never actually talked about it, but I think he had it in mind that one day I’d take over the place. A father

passing on his business to his son. What could be better? Wouldn't even have to change the sign." Mark's grin felt only slightly strained.

Jill, deep brown eyes watching, nodded as if able to relate.

Mark let out a breath. He suddenly wanted to race to the end of this part of the story. "He was a decent man. But being decent didn't cut it. He expected a lot of his employees, and if they screwed up bad enough, he would get rid of them. Not everyone can be inspired, it seems. One guy Freddy canned, this alcoholic who could make any motor *purr* when he was sober, decided he didn't like getting fired. He decided Freddy was responsible for all the ills in his life. He said so in the kindergarten scrawl of a letter he left behind when he broke into the garage after hours, shot my father five times in the chest and face, and tried to burn down the place. He mostly managed to set himself on fire, though, and he died twenty hours later in a burn ward."

Mark lifted the glass to his lips, but it was empty. Jill held out the bottle, offering to pour. He nodded, and she did.

With his father's death now recounted, Mark moved on. This was the easier part of the story, mostly because it was so dull, filled with episodes that didn't really add up to a single event. He had gotten traded around to distant relatives for a while, had stayed in school until he couldn't stand it a minute longer, then he had hit the road. Literally. Thumb out, a knapsack on his back, like a hobo. The dream of owning and operating the garage had long since disappeared. He'd never quite found out what had happened to the business, who had profited from its sale or liquidation or whatever the hell had become of it. He had visited the shuttered garage once, a dismal sight there on its familiar corner, with passersby not even glancing at the building.

Whatever money he might have had coming to him also apparently disappeared. He had never seriously tried to find out what had happened to any inheritance he'd been due. He was, after all, still a kid. When adults talked about legal mumbo jumbo, it gave him a headache, just like schoolwork had.

So, the road. Hitchhiking, stopping here, stopping there, working the proverbial odd job. He had entered his adulthood without a fixed address. Travel kept him skinny. He stayed on the edges of things. He found he could survive this way. The states flew by, first one way, then the other, as he crisscrossed the country. He was in no hurry. There was nowhere to go. A war came along, and with it a draft—at this, Jill raised a startled eyebrow but said nothing—and Mark found he had to go even further off the beaten path. He managed. He didn't live like a wild animal, though. "I was more," he said with a tipsy smile, "like a raccoon. You know. Living alongside civilization, but not really a part of it. But when you see a raccoon, you don't run screaming. You just figure he's going to be digging through your trash later."

Jill, still cross-legged on her pillow, kept listening.

"Then it happened. I slept in a tent a lot of the time. Mind you, it wasn't a life of terrible deprivation. I had money. I had access to most amenities. I could go into a town, have a milkshake, get a shower at the Y. Mostly, there was a strange sameness about it. Every road looked alike. Every town had its twin someplace. But, anyway...." He tapped his finger on the rim of his glass. "Anyway, I was in my tent one night. The moon was up and full, but I wasn't especially aware of that fact. I'd camped a few hundred yards off a road, in a little hollow. Nobody was around. I read by candlelight awhile, then got into my sleeping bag. The howl didn't wake me. It was what came *before* the howl that woke me up with a jolt. I felt the presence, somewhere nearby. At first I told myself I was just shaking off a nightmare, but I was wrong. I felt singled out. I felt that whatever was out there—and by now I was sure something

was outside—was watching me. Then I *knew* it was. Then, as I got out of the sleeping bag, I heard the howl. A couple heartbeats after that, the thing tore through my tent.”

Jill shivered, a small but discernible shudder that went across her shoulders. She took a swallow of her wine.

Mark said, “Canvas suddenly in shreds. The hot heavy body on top of me. It tore at my clothes. I fought it, but even if I’d been a strong man, it wouldn’t’ve done a lick of good. I felt the breath on my bare body. And finally,”—he touched his left side, through his shirt—“the Bite. Then it was gone.”

“Christ,” said Jill.

He nodded, wondering why he had started his tale with his father. This certainly wasn’t the first time he, as a representative of the Community, had related the story of his Bite. It was almost always necessary to tell it to the newly turned. It put them at ease and made him more relatable.

But this time he had shared something he considered truly personal, the tragic account of Freddy Curtz, who no doubt would have enjoyed seeing his only son grow up to take charge of the family business. Why had Mark told this woman something so private? He found, though, that he didn’t regret doing it.

After a time Jill asked, “Then how did you join the Community?”

He shrugged. “I was in the same emotional state you’ve been in these past weeks. Confused, scared. Everything smelled impossibly intense. I felt like my body was changing, getting stronger with every passing minute. Lucky for me, I put out my thumb after only four days of that, and a guy named Zach pulled over in his Plymouth to give me a lift. He was with the Community, and he explained it all to me.”

* * * *

They didn’t make love that night, which was in its own way rather intimate and sweet. The wine might have been a factor, since the two of them did end up putting away a lot of it. Even so, Jill didn’t doubt that Mark would’ve performed had she goaded him—or, hell, even just *asked*.

Instead, they did eventually go to her bed together, and held each other and talked awhile more. Jill had, of course, paid close attention to what Mark had said earlier. She’d recognized the clues he had laid down, those mentions of old American car brands and a military draft. She already understood that in her post-Bite life she would never bear children, and she found she could handle that fact. After all, she’d never planned on a family. This, though, was an even more startling revelation. Even with the wine spinning in her skull, she wanted some clarity.

“So,” she murmured against the hollow of his throat, his body warm alongside hers, “how long do we live, anyway?”

She listened to his breath catch, then slowly release. She could smell the alcohol on him, and on herself. Days ago she had stopped wearing any artificial scents, unable to stand the odors.

Mark cleared his throat. “It’s not known. But longevity is a component of our lives.”

The scholarly tone, especially since she could hear the slur under it, struck her as funny. She giggled softly against his neck. “Okay, professor. You want to give me a ballpark figure?”

After a pause he chuckled. “I can’t. We’ve got members of the Community—like that Zach I mentioned?—who’ve lived for...oh, decades and decades and more decades.”

“But the point is we don’t age, right?”

“It seems that way.”

“The Bite makes us immortal?” The words, once she’d said them, seemed to twirl above the bed, against the pane of the skylight. The moon up in the sky wasn’t full yet.

“No,” Mark said, tone serious again. “Not immortal. We can die. We can be killed.”

“By silver bullets?” Jill nudged him under the covers with an elbow to show she understood how ridiculous that sounded.

“By any bullets,” he said emphatically, and she thought of his father. “And by all the usual ways people can be killed.”

But she was unable to resist another little gibe. She asked, “So the Bite passes on all these powers and physical changes. It’s the same as being bit by a vampire?” She expected the kind of groan usually reserved for bad puns.

But Mark just said, “If vampires were real, then yes.”

Longevity. The man she was lying next to was far older than he appeared, then. She had figured him for thirty, but she was wrong. She was still thinking in human terms. Now a new calendar ruled her life.

How long, she wondered, would she live? The thought left her breathless. It was beautiful and scary. This wasn’t immortality. She got that. But longevity was such an evocative word. It promised miracles. She would, if she avoided accidents, go on looking like she did for...for, well, at the very least for all those decades that Mark had mentioned. And maybe a lot more than that. Maybe—what?—*centuries*. Never looking like she was older than twenty-eight.

Jill could have drifted to sleep with that thought in her mind. Instead, she lifted her head from Mark’s shoulder and looked at him in the night’s lovely gloom. The house was silent.

“When you described your attack,” she said, “the thing tearing through your tent—your actual description of the creature...it sounded familiar to me.”

His eyes were open. Even in the dark she could see their golden color. He said, “She’s the same ’thrope as attacked you. I’m sure of it. And she’s dangerous.”

Chapter Eight

At nine-twenty AM the following day, the Community showed up at Jill Machado's farm. She heard the vehicles approaching and came out of the poultry house, wiping her damp forehead. Mark was still sleeping off the wine—or else just sleeping, according to an internal clock that didn't include waking up with the sun. Jill was doing what she could to keep the farm running, but once again she could see how hopeless it was.

She hopped in her tan pickup and drove down the gravelly slope to the gate. The vehicles pulled up, three of them, one of them a truck with its bed loaded with construction materials.

Jill leaned on her gate and looked at the arrivals.

"Morning," said a woman, stepping out of the lead vehicle. Sunlight lit up her blond hair. She had high cheekbones. She moved gracefully as she approached the other side of the gate. "We're not too early, are we?"

"Early? It's practically dinner time." Jill looked past her, at the vehicles and the other people sitting in them. She felt a thrill. Mark, of course, had told her to expect these visitors today. And here they were. *The Community*.

"Ah," the blond woman said and gave her a wry smile. "Life on the farm. You're Machado. I'm Nalder. The rest of this bunch have names, too. We're ready to go to work if you're ready for us. I'm guessing that Mark's lazy ass is still in bed."

"You're guessing right that he's still asleep," Jill said. The woman had a forceful manner, but Jill didn't think she was being hostile. She unlatched the gate and pulled it aside. "Come on up." She got back in her pickup and led the vehicles up toward the barn. She kept looking in the rearview, a single excited thought playing again and again in her brain. These people were like her! They were her kind. She had counted at least half a dozen. A month ago she wouldn't have believed that even one could exist. (C'mon—*werewolves*? Get real.) Now there were almost enough here to field a baseball team.

Mark's "lazy ass" didn't stay in bed much longer. He came out of the house, blinking, even before Jill went in to fetch him. He didn't look too badly hung over. Jill had just gutted her way through her hangover this morning. Nothing cleared a head faster than hard work.

"Hey," Mark said. He combed back his longish hair with his fingers as he stood on the porch. He looked toward the barn, where the vehicles had parked and were unloading.

Jill stepped up, gave his cheek a quick kiss, and said, "The gang's all here, it seems."

"I should've been up to say hi."

She shrugged. "It doesn't seem to matter." She looked behind her to see the men and women, who were different ages and ethnicities, already heading to the barn. All of them looked very physically fit and able.

"Are you okay?" Mark asked her.

She thought he meant her hangover, then realized she was frowning. She turned it into a smile for him. "I can...*smell* them."

He smiled back. He was still barefoot. "Me, too. It's what woke me up."

Jill breathed in the odor—almost, but not quite, animal-like, with a kind of living warmth underneath it. She had smelled it on Mark already, but now it was concentrated. It wasn't unpleasant. Not at all.

"Did you meet everyone?" he asked.

“Well....”

He grunted as he shook his head. “Let me guess. Nalder curtly introduced herself, and that was that. Right?”

Jill didn’t mention what the blond-haired woman had said about him. She said, “They’ve got work to do. I’ll meet everyone later.” Truthfully, she felt like she needed a little time to absorb the fact that these folk were *here*, that they existed at all.

“Yeah,” Mark said, stretching out his arms to either side until something popped in his shoulder. He looked like he needed coffee.

Before he went inside to get it, Jill said, “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Your story. What you told me last night. About being on the road and hitchhiking, all those years of traveling—wouldn’t that make you suited to be a rover? That’s what you call them, isn’t it? Rovers? The ones who travel and seek out the Whiff.”

He looked at her a moment. “Rover, that’s right. It takes a certain personality type to be one. When I joined the Community, I thought that’s what I should be doing. But we found out I was better at, uh, outreach.”

Jill smirked, very surprised to find herself blushing. “I’ve never heard it called *that* before.”

“That’s not what I mean!” he said in mock-outrage. Again he ran fingers through his still tangled hair. “If I don’t get some coffee in me soon, bad things are going to happen. Let me do that, then I’ll help out with whatever needs doing.”

“Even if I put you on milking duty again?”

“Even if.”

He turned and went back inside, and Jill looked after him, feeling her affection for him growing, surprised for a second time at its intensity.

* * * *

Proper introductions were finally made. The hard-working crew took a break around two. Jill had already peeked into the barn to see how the renovations were going. She was impressed by how fast and well the group worked, nobody dogging it, everybody knowing what to do. She guessed that at least one or two of these folks had some background in construction. This was no do-it-yourself project.

She didn’t bother them while they worked. She and Mark tended to the goats and chickens. If she could have recruited a few of the others, all the work that needed to be done might have actually gotten done, but she didn’t yet know her fellow Community members. Hell, she wasn’t even sure she qualified as a real member. Was there going to be some kind of initiation? She hoped it didn’t involve hazing.

By two o’clock she had admitted to herself, finally and totally, that there was no way she could keep her farm operating without a team of hands, preferably the very same employees she’d had to let go earlier in the month. But how could she have outsiders here, when every full moon she would—would....

Jill didn’t follow the thought through to its end. Instead, she considered that word: *outsiders*. She understood what that meant. It was all because of her Bite. Her mind-set had changed. She was really starting to think in something other than human terms. Her basic identity was changing. Human beings were now strangers, outsiders, others. It was incredible.

Nalder breezed into the house ahead of everybody else like she owned the place. Jill, who was taking a break from work with Mark, looked up. Nalder, she realized, was going to take some getting used to. The others waited on the porch.

Jill crossed to them, beaming a smile, and said in her best hostess tone, "Won't you all please come in."

In they came. They were six, plus Nalder. Jill figured they had already put in what amounted to a full day's work, at least according to most people's standards. Then again, *people's* standards didn't matter here. These weren't people.

But they were hungry like people. Jill had food on hand, but wasn't so sure about feeding so many mouths at one time. Her former employees had always seen to their own meals. However, before the job could overwhelm her, up stepped a jackrabbit-spry man with a flashing smile, fast hands and a hint of a drawl, who, Jill quickly found out, had been a line cook in a diner for years before receiving his Bite. He took over the kitchen with a kind of magical ease, never having to ask Jill where anything was, whipping up fast hot plates of food. His name was August.

The others were Mikhail, Jackson, Cindy, Brooks, and Ming. Jill learned these names around the dining table, as the bunch settled in to eat, with her sitting at one end. The group's table manners were on the raucous side, which Jill didn't mind. There were no rituals before the meal, nobody saying grace. Jill had found that despite all the other changes that had happened to her, her appetite hadn't really changed. That seemed sort of strange to her. Of all the things, she figured her eating habits would have changed. Really, shouldn't she be...hungry like the wolf?

No one noticed when she laughed to herself as plates and bowls were passed around, knives and forks clattered, and everybody talked. It was mostly about the job, how much they'd done so far as well as arguments about how long the rest would take. It sounded to Jill like the barn's makeover would be done a day or two from now.

Jill said almost nothing, still soaking it in. She watched the fast, friendly repartee. The group traded insults, but nobody took anything seriously. Jill liked the camaraderie. She kept silently repeating to herself: *I am one of them, I am one of them*. Not trying to convince herself, just celebrating the fact.

Now and then someone would ask her something directly. The perky, red-headed woman named Cindy wanted to know how many rooms the house had.

"Is that something to ask just like that?" shot the one named Jackson, a man who looked to be forty, but with the bright eyes of a child. "Why don't you ask how much money she has in the bank while you're at it?"

"I handle financial matters," Ming said.

"I was thinking about sleeping arrangements," Cindy said to Jackson.

"Oh, I'll bet you were," came from Brooks, who then laughed behind his napkin.

Around and around it went. Eventually Jill did give Cindy an answer. She actually hadn't thought about how she was going to accommodate all these people in her house. It was big enough, if some of them didn't mind sleeping on couches or the floor. Mark, sitting next to her at the table, would still sleep with her, she presumed. She hoped.

Then again, she didn't know how it would work with all these others here. These people were all new to her.

Suddenly, into a lull, Jill blurted, "So, all of you belong to the Community?" It sounded stupid even before the words were out of her mouth. She cringed with embarrassment.

The lull lingered for a terrible moment. Then in an accent that might have been Russian, Mikhail said, “The cat is now bagless.”

“Goddamn, Mik,” said August, who’d served everything there was to serve and had joined the gang at the table. “I told you—learn those idioms right or avoid them altogether. It’s your choice, man.” He flashed Jill a smile that was bright against a face the color of creamed coffee. “He means, the cat’s out of the bag.”

“Oh,” Jill said, sounding just as stupid as before. Then she suddenly burst into laughter.

Others joined her. It felt good. It was the first time that Jill felt like she really belonged to the group.

At the long table’s other end sat Nalder. “That’s right, Machado,” she said, forking up more of the noodles and meat sauce that August had put together so fast. “We’re the Community. And this is about what it’s like. We don’t usually get together in numbers any bigger than this. Security is all-important. We hide in plain sight, but that’s hiding, nonetheless. The humans can’t ever know about us.”

Jill met the blond woman’s eyes across the length of the table. She had stopped laughing. “But don’t they already?” she asked. “I mean, I knew the werewolf legend from the time I was a child. Didn’t all of you? Doesn’t that mean that the...the humans know about us, at least on some level?” Again she felt that shift in her identity. It was a little like vertigo.

Nalder was definitely an attractive woman, but her smile—at least the one she now gave Jill—was thin and cold. She said, “On some level. Just like they *know* that aliens abduct and anally probe rednecks every chance they get, and there’s a prehistoric dragon living deep in a certain Scottish lake, and that Oswald jerkoff was a patsy, and blah blah blah. Humans like that stuff. They’re drawn to it. We, our kind, are lucky that they just scooped us up into that same net of ridiculous fantasy. If they got hold of one of us and strapped us down to a table and performed a vivisection, they might learn about our true nature. And don’t think they wouldn’t do it. Christ, humans kill each other when one group is wearing the wrong kind of hat. Imagine what they’d do to us. Imagine how desperately they would like us to be real—just so they could vilify us, fight against us, subject us to torture. We would be a great diversion for them, an entertainment. I’m sure their goddamn politicians could run successfully for office on a campaign against our kind. Those sick motherfuckers would—”

“Nalder,” Mark said, saying her name softly but firmly. The rest of the table had quieted. “Jill gets it. And all the rest of us have already heard this.”

For a moment—it seemed like a long moment, to Jill—the two locked gazes.

Finally, Nalder pushed aside her plate. “Okay, boys and girls, fun’s over. Time to get back to work.”

With that, the crew left the table, heading back to the barn. Mark helped clear the dishes and clean up, while Nalder’s words stayed in Jill’s mind. Though she had only been one of their kind for a short time and hadn’t even yet been through her first full moon as one of them, Jill saw the truth of what Nalder had said.

The humans were dangerous to their kind.

* * * *

Dinner was less elaborate. That was how it went on a farm, Jill knew from a lifetime of experience. You ate the big meals when you needed them, during the day. Again August took

over her kitchen and raided her supplies, and made a feast, more or less. There was a lot of wine poured during the meal, which made it even more fun.

Jill, for the first time since she was a teenager, let herself be peer-pressured. She took a glass of wine that she didn't really want—or at least her body, still smarting from this morning's hangover, wasn't thrilled by it. But she eased into it with a few sips and was soon enjoying it.

Really, though, it was the pleasure of this company that kept her smiling. She liked this bunch. They were all friendly toward her—even, in her way, Nalder. Jill could already feel like she really belonged here.

No one, it seemed, was going to formally ask her to join the Community. It seem to be a done deal already.

What would happen, though, if she decided to decline the offer? What would they do? Would they...force her to join? She frowned at the thought, wondering where it had come from.

The wine came with them into the big front room, where everyone sat on the furniture and engaged in fast, cheerful talk. The barn project was going very well. Jill hadn't gone out for a second look, trusting in their skills. Besides, she had spent the rest of the day playing catch-up to all the chores that still needed doing on her farm. It was hopeless, but she tried not to let that nag her right now. The only one who would be happy about the farm's failure was her brother Johnny, and no matter what happened—no fucking matter *what*—that deadbeat nogoodnik wasn't going to get his mitts on the place. Dad had left it to her. Even with all the legal gobbledygook being thrown at her lately, Johnny's claim was bullshit. He was just annoying her for no good reason. Just like when they were kids.

Jill let herself laugh at that.

Nobody noticed. The members of the Community passed around her bottles of wine and yammered and laughed as the evening gave way to night. She continued to breathe in their scent. It was downright comforting by now. She learned something about the workings of the Community itself as the conversation bounced around among her guests. It was both loose and organized at the same time, just like Mark had hinted. They kept up communications, which was a hell of a lot easier with modern technology than it had once been. So said the man named Brooks who was drinking a lot of Jill's stock of rosé.

"How many are there?" Jill asked, one of the few direct questions she had asked tonight. "How many members of the Community, all told?"

"Slightly upward of two thousand," said the woman called Ming, a slim, rather stunning woman with black bangs and, apparently, a head for figures. She handled a lot of the Community's finances. Every member was provided for, Jill had learned. The Community was a safety net in more ways than one.

"Two thousand..." Jill murmured, not sure if the number seemed awesomely high or way too low. Two thousand others like her. But two thousand against millions—*billions*—of humans?

"And more join us...periodically." Ming stretched out for a refill, and Jackson tipped more merlot into her glass. Ming went on, "Or, actually, not periodically. More like at random."

"Or," Mikhail said, "as though it is meant with a mad method."

"Idioms, Mik!" August said.

A method to the madness, Jill silently said. She wanted to ask more. For all that she had learned, there were still a lot more questions that needed answering. But now wasn't the time. The wine was taking its toll. She was sitting on the rattan settee with Mark, who had an arm casually over her shoulders. She liked the feel of him there. She found herself looking forward to

later on, when they would be in her bed again. Tonight, she'd already decided, they wouldn't just snuggle.

She had meant to take it easy with the wine, but she did end up drinking a lot of it. Things started to blur a little. People seemed to be disappearing. They were going off in pairs, Jill realized. Jackson, the man with the bright eyes, and Ming had slipped away together. Cindy and August were now nestled together on the floor, under a pile of the extra blankets Jill had handed out earlier. And she was pretty sure that Mikhail and Brooks had vanished at the same time.

The flat-screen television hanging on one wall was off. The art she'd collected for the room's other walls was barely visible in the dimness, which meant somebody had turned the lights down. She leaned further into Mark. His fingers trailed over her bare upper arm.

Across from them, Nalder was sitting in a chair. It was the same one Mark had occupied on his first visit, Jill noted. But the fact felt as abstract as the art on her walls. The blond-headed woman was staring across at both her and Mark. Her eyes seemed to catch whatever light was in the room and reflect it.

August and Cindy were nuzzling and kissing on the floor, rolled up inside several blankets. Jill's hand touched Mark's thigh and squeezed. He closed his hand over her left breast, through the linen shirt she wore. His touch felt good. Jill did not feel self-conscious.

Not until she realized that Nalder...

(*Nalder*, that had to be her last name, right? Nobody named their kid Nalder, not unless it was some weird nineteenth-century name, which would mean that the woman was—Jesus—who knew how many years old? But no. Probably a last name. After all, she'd been calling Jill by *her* last name all day and evening.)

...not until Jill saw that Nalder was suddenly standing before the settee, having risen and crossed from the chair. Nalder, with her blond hair and superb cheekbones. Nalder, now extending her hands down to the two occupants of the settee. Nalder was smiling a very sultry smile as she said, "Well, you two lovelies, shall we retire?"

Chapter Nine

In her freshman year at college, Jill had had a female lover. Actually, that might have been overstating it. There had been a skinny, pale, dark-haired girl who Jill had gone to bed with on four different occasions over two and a half months. She was named Courtney, but went by—or insisted people call her—Azrael. She was a gruesomely unhappy Goth type who Jill got to be friends with in the random rough and tumble of dormitory life. Jill couldn't now remember *why* exactly they'd become friends. Azrael's outlook was the complete opposite of Jill's, who had been raised to believe in personal responsibility, the payoff that you got from work, and a general trust in the universe to sort itself out given enough time and patience.

Azrael, on the other hand, seemed addicted to her sadness, like it was a drug she couldn't stop taking. But she was shockingly beautiful, in a crushed flower kind of way. The first time she and Jill did anything sexual together—the first time Jill had *ever* done, or even considered doing, anything with another woman—had started with Azrael moping on Jill's bed at two in the morning. Then Azrael was in tears and in Jill's arms over some weird unfathomable sorrow. Then, maybe inevitably, Azrael and Jill were lying together on that same bed, arms around each other, kissing passionately.

It had shocked Jill, even though she didn't freak out about it later. This was college. Her father had wanted her to have a higher education, to gain adult knowledge and experiences for whatever choices she would make later on in her life. Well, sex with Azrael had definitely been a new experience, and Jill couldn't now say she hadn't enjoyed it, despite the emotional minefield she'd had to walk with the Goth chick.

Any worries that the lesbian episodes would affect Jill's relationships with men came to nothing. Guys still turned her on just fine, thank you very much.

Azrael had dropped out and that was that. Since then, Jill hadn't dabbled in lesbian sex, but it occurred to her now that that might have been more because the opportunity simply hadn't been there since her college days. Maybe she was more than curious about women, and just hadn't found the chance to explore her natural curiosity a little more.

How else could she explain the sudden interest and desire she felt at Nalder's invitation? The woman was still offering her hand to her.

Mark, next to her on the settee, stopped groping her breast. He murmured to her, "Um, of course, you don't have to...." Nalder was offering him her other hand, obviously meaning to take them *both* to bed. Mark hadn't reached for her hand, either.

Jill could feel the wine she'd had, but she was still thinking clearly. She could decide this. She could even work it out intellectually if she liked. Apparently, this was how these people behaved. The couples who'd paired off earlier had made that clear enough. Hell, Cindy and August were heading for third base on the floor right in front of her. These people didn't worry much about sexual morals, then.

That sounded reasonable to Jill. She'd never really liked having morality mixed up with sex, anyway. It led to ulcers and poor decisions. She giggled. Then she reached up and took Nalder's hand in hers.

The blond woman's grip was strong, but still felt like a woman's hand. The contact brought up memories from Jill's past, those few nights she'd spent locked in passionate womanly

lovemaking with her Goth schoolmate. Jill remembered soft breasts beneath her caressing hands, the feel of Azrael's mouth against her, the taste of the dark-haired girl's pussy on her tongue.

Suddenly these memories were very vivid. They felt more like premonitions now. Was this another effect from her Bite—or was wanting this woman just more of that crazy horniness?

Instead of trying to answer the question, Jill giggled again. Overanalyzing seemed silly right now.

Beside her, Mark hadn't yet taken Nalder's other hand. Jill turned to look at him and saw he looked hesitant.

"You're sure?" he asked her.

"Not to a mathematical certainty, no," Jill heard herself saying breezily. "But sure enough to want to find out."

Mark paused long enough for Nalder to say, "Maybe she just wants me, tough guy. Ever think of that?" Her tone was humorous, but there might have been an edge to it.

Nalder's hand suddenly tightened, and Jill was drawn smoothly to her feet. Both women looked down on Mark, there on the settee. Behind them, on the floor, Cindy grunted with satisfaction under the bundle of blankets. August groaned in reply.

Mark hopped to his feet. His golden eyes were bright. Jill could smell his growing excitement as it overcame whatever hesitations he was feeling.

The three hurried together to Jill's bedroom.

* * * *

The night sky was clear, like a glass slide under a microscope, every star sharp, like they were radiating cold fire. Even though the house was well-insulated, Mark felt the chill of the night outside. It was a night for predators, for fast kills, for the taste of blood under an open sky. It was a night for conquests.

Mark knew the room. He knew this big comfortable bed by now, too. But tonight it all seemed strange to him. Anything could happen here, he knew. The thought was exciting. It also scared him a little.

Nalder was leering at Jill, who gave her back a smile that was only a little bit doubtful. Really, Jill seemed more or less okay with the idea of this threeway, like it was just a lark. He'd never figured her for a prude. But was she ready for something like *this*?

He lingered in the doorway as the two women, hand in hand, reached the foot of the bed. No lights were on the room, but starlight came from the skylight, pouring over the two heads, one blond, the other with long dark hair. Mark watched as Nalder took Jill in her arms, drawing their bodies together. Nalder touched Jill's chin with her fingertips, tilting her head, and gently laid her lips on Jill's.

Mark's cock was swelling. The reaction was more than just automatic. He was aware of his growing feelings for Jill Machado, something beyond what he normally felt with those he made first contact with as a Community representative.

As Jill returned Nalder's kiss, Mark's excitement increased. He had a history with Nalder, too. They had been serious lovers for several months, back when she had first joined the Community. Relationships within the Community weren't always, or even often, monogamous. But they had shared something together. At least for a while, until Nalder's in-your-face personality had finally gotten too much for him.

Nalder was her own woman, free to express her opinions, and anybody who had a problem with that could go screw themselves. That was her philosophy.

The two women were kissing more intensely now. Tongues flashed. Their bodies ground against each other. Hands moved, fingers got busy. Jill's linen shirt flew away and landed on the carpet several feet away. Nalder's blouse vanished. Feminine fingers closed over bare breasts. Nipples grew hard. Soon, the rest of their clothing disappeared, and the two nude women stood together at the foot of the bed.

Despite the hard-on now raging in Mark's jeans, he might have slipped away at that moment, leaving the women to explore each other without any manly interference from him.

But Jill turned toward him. "Come with us," she said, the words dreamy and tender.

Nalder, when she looked over at him, was more direct. "Yeah, come on. Get out of those clothes, for fuck's sake. I want to feel that cock in me again—and I want to watch you ream this sweet gal's pussy." With that she pulled Jill with her onto the bed, into the starlight from the skylight that lit the bed's big white comforter like a field of snow.

Mark stripped and rushed to join the women.

* * * *

Memories of Azrael flashed through Jill's mind, then vanished. Nalder, after all, didn't look anything like the Goth girl, except that they were both exceptionally attractive. Jill's college fling did, however, let her know what she was doing. But even if this had been her first time with a woman, Jill figured instinct would have told her what to do. After all, sex between two women—or two men, for that matter—wasn't any weirder than what happened between women and men. Sex was a wild, sometimes deranged, act.

Or it was when you were doing it right.

Laughter caught in her throat as she tumbled onto her back, Nalder's soft but strong body falling on top of her. The blond woman's hand grabbed her breast. Jill's nipples were already hard. Her flesh tingled, like from a rising electric current. Her pussy's folds were damp, and got damper as Nalder's thigh jammed itself against her crotch. The woman's mouth came down on hers again, and the kiss was like nectar. Jill stabbed her tongue up into Nalder's hungry maw, where it met its match.

She felt Mark climbing onto the bed with them. She was glad he was here. It wasn't that she was afraid to be with Nalder on her own—well...maybe she was, just a little. But anyway, she wanted Mark to be a part of this. She felt safe with him, something different from what, say, a student might feel for a beloved teacher. Mark had been her guide so far into her new life, and into this Community. Jill didn't want their relationship to end once she'd learned the ropes.

She ran her hands over Nalder's back, thrilled at how smooth her skin was. Her body was wiry. Jill cupped the woman's firm ass with both her hands. She sank her fingers into the taut flesh.

Nalder's warm breath flowed over Jill. She tasted wine on the woman's tongue. She smelled the blond's odor. She felt the slickness of Nalder's pussy against her thigh, felt Nalder deliberately rubbing herself there, smearing Jill's skin with even more aromas.

Mark laid down beside her. Jill felt his fingers on her arm, sensed—still—that he was hesitant. She didn't doubt for a second that this scene excited him. Hell, she could smell that clear enough, and could now feel his warm straining cock against her other leg. Jill had already guessed that he and Nalder had some kind of history together. With the way things seemed to

work in the Community, she wouldn't have been surprised if the members slept with each other whenever they got the chance. Why not? What could be more secure than sex with one of your own kind? Every sex safe lecture Jill had ever heard in her life had already gone out the window for her. If being a *'thrope*—as Mark liked to say it—had one ultimate advantage over being a regular, normal human being, it had to be that you could fuck however you wanted, without having to worry about birth control or condoms.

Jill broke the kiss with Nalder. She slipped an arm underneath Mark's shoulder and pulled him closer. She was about to kiss him, but Nalder beat her to it, leaning over and ravaging Mark's mouth with hers. Jill grinned. She crossed her other arm tighter around the blond woman, liking how she felt. Jill groped Nalder's backside again, letting her fingers stray down into the groove of her ass.

Mark's mouth came off of Nalder's. He shifted closer, and Jill finally kissed him. The rasp of his stubble felt strange for just a second. She sucked on his tongue, liking his taste. His cock was rubbing on her hip now.

Jill's fingers continued to delve into Nalder's beautifully shaped ass. Her fingertip grazed the woman's sphincter, and Nalder's body jumped, bouncing the mattress beneath them all. Jill started to take her hand away.

"No!" Nalder panted. "Finger me there. If you want. *I* want it!"

Jill had never done this before. With Azrael it had mostly been them taking turns going down on each other, which at the time had seemed to Jill as the best way to go about their lovemaking. Her and her college chum had never done anything she considered drastic, like breaking out strap-ons, vibrators, or whatever other equipment might involve girl-on-girl sex.

Neither had Jill ever fingered her former female lover's asshole. But this was what Nalder wanted. So Jill gave it to her.

She wet her middle finger in the juice Nalder had already left against her leg. Then she set the fingertip again to the woman's crinkled ring. Jill slowly circled the opening with her finger, feeling Nalder buck against her again, a growl in her throat.

Finally, Jill sank her finger into the woman's hole.

"Fuck—that's *good*!" Nalder gasped.

Jill grinned, amazed by how intimate the simple act was, and by Nalder's intense response. She started to swirl her finger inside, having gone no deeper than to just past her fingernail. But Nalder was obviously loving it.

Jill realized that Mark's cock was no longer pressed against her hip, and also that Nalder had let go of her breast. Jill, her finger still in the woman's ass, looked down and saw that Nalder now had a hold of Mark's cock. She squeezed it lovingly, then reached further down to cup his balls.

Beautiful, thought Jill before any other reaction could overtake her.

Her finger squirmed some more inside Nalder's tight hot hole. She never penetrated further than her finger's first knuckle, but Nalder still quivered and quaked, and finally came. Heat radiated from her body. Her hole clasped the tip of Jill's finger. Jill grinned again, wondering just how many years it had been since she'd last gotten a woman off.

Nalder raised her head from where it fallen on Jill's shoulder. Her blond hair seemed to glow. Her whole body was now moist with sweat. Her eyes drilled into Jill's.

"I want to taste your pussy, my dear," she said. "And I want him to fuck me like a bitch while I'm doing it."

Jill went breathless. She realized that Nalder had said this not just to excite her—and no doubt herself—but to give Jill a heads-up as to what was coming so that there would be no unexpected shocks. Jill was touched by the gesture. But she was even more excited by the offer.

“Then get down there and eat it,” she told the blond, surprising herself.

Nalder eagerly pushed herself up off Jill’s body. Jill spread her thighs. Mark withdrew from beside her, moving around the bed, repositioning himself. Everything seemed as coordinated as a ballet.

Jill felt smooth shoulders sliding along the insides of her legs, followed by the soft tickle of Nalder’s blond hair, which was done in a kind of pixie cut. Finally, Jill felt the hot breath on her pussy. Pleasure flowed all across her body, raising gooseflesh, tingling her already erect nipples. Putting her elbows behind her, Jill lifted her head so she could watch Nalder’s mouth make contact.

But Jill’s reaction snapped her head back on her neck, so that she barely saw—but she damn well felt—Nalder’s lips first touch her pussy. It was like a fabulously intimate kiss. Nalder’s mouth moved hungrily, spreading Jill’s folds. Jill looked again, this time seeing Nalder’s tongue as it lapped Jill’s groove from end to end.

She flowed onto that tongue, letting her juices drench Nalder’s mouth. The Community woman drank what Jill gave her and went deeper, as Jill opened her thighs even wider, hips squirming, jamming herself harder onto that mouth.

Meanwhile, behind the woman and her cat-lapping-milk-from-a-saucer pose, she saw Mark taking position behind Nalder’s raised ass. His face was flushed. Jill, with her eyes slitted, watched him settle on his knees. He connected himself to Nalder’s waiting pussy, and set his hands on her hips.

When Mark started fucking Nalder, the blond woman ate Jill all the harder. She speared Jill with her tongue. She snuffled in Jill’s dark curls. Mark began with slow, steady strokes, just like he did when he and Jill made love. This time, though, she had the pleasure—and it definitely was a *pleasure*—of watching him do it. His body was so beautiful in motion like this. His muscles rippled every time he thrust. She saw how his fingers curled around Nalder’s hips, how his dirty blond hair spilled over his forehead. Everything about him excited Jill. She appreciated him. He was magnificent. And she loved him.

That last thought might have derailed her under different circumstances. She’d loved before, or at least she’d felt what she had always thought passed for love—a lasting affection for and deep trust in the other person, along with sexual passion and a few other intangibles. If you felt that way about someone else, and a reasonable amount of time went by where your feelings didn’t fade away, then, sure, you could call it love.

But those past “loves” (it already felt that way, like they belonged in quotation marks) had never been like this. Those earlier romances that had lasted for a while had lacked this one important factor, one she hadn’t even really known was missing before: *belonging*. Absolute, complete belonging. That was what she had with Mark. He and she were of a single kind, and that bound them more than any mix of human emotion.

Even so, she wasn’t about to blurt out her declaration of love just now. She would wait for a better time.

Jill bared her teeth as her pleasure continued to escalate. The timing of the revelation was funny, she knew—realizing her love for this man while he was fucking another woman. But that felt right, somehow. It seemed natural. This must be the way of the Community, this sort of ultimate sharing.

But, really, she *was* connected to Mark, physically, even now. He was plowing into Nalder with greater speed and force, and every impact drove the woman's face harder against Jill's pussy. Nalder's tongue swiped at Jill, catching her throbbing clit with every sweep. Jill looked up to see Mark pounding against the woman's backside. Fleshy ripples rolled across the firm surfaces of Nalder's ass. Mark's handsome face was twisted into an expression that told Jill his come was approaching. Jill knew it like his cock was inside her, instead of this other woman.

Jill's hips rose from the bed. She was humping against Nalder's mouth, even as the woman caught and sucked on her clitoris. The suction was intense, and Jill cried out, feeling her orgasm looming. Nalder was growling again, and the animal humming went through her tongue to Jill's pulsating clit. Nalder was trembling. Jill felt her body quivering as she closed her legs tight over the woman's shoulders, squeezing, feeling the rise of her climax, a vast tide of pleasure.

She flooded Nalder's mouth once again, even as the jerks of her body and snarls from her throat told her that Nalder's orgasm, her second, had also hit.

But it was the cry from Mark, who had kept mostly quiet as he'd steadily stroked into Nalder from behind, that tore through the bedroom. He let loose a yowl of orgasmic victory. By the way his body wrenched Jill could see he was emptying his come into Nalder. A look of tortured rapture took hold of his face. His fingers dug into Nalder's hips, then after a moment they let go.

Mark's forehead glistened. He dropped back onto his haunches. Nalder sighed luxuriously against Jill's pussy, then slowly lifted her head, pausing to plant several delicate kisses on the soft inner flesh of her thigh.

Jill, as she hadn't done in some while, opened her eyes fully. For an instant, it seemed that Nalder's head was glowing. Jill blinked, startled, until she realized that the light was brighter. She looked up, through the skylight, and saw the moon floating now in the starry blackness. It was still shy of its true shape, still shadowed by part of the Earth. But the full moon was coming. Soon.

A dark tingling anticipation gripped Jill. It was something deeper and more dangerous than arousal. A fresh grin cut across her face.

Nalder had pushed up onto an elbow. The lower half of her face shone. Squatting behind her on the bed, Mark's cock gleamed. His staff, even in its postcoital half-mast state, was enticing. Jill wanted it—*needed* it. And she would have it.

"That looked like fun!" she said suddenly, and grabbed Nalder by her upper arms. With a quickness and strength that surprised even her, Jill got the blond-haired woman over onto her back. Nalder actually yelped, but she got the idea quick enough, and happily spread her legs as Jill shouldered into place. Jill was on her knees and elbows, ass in the air, with Nalder's just-fucked pussy spread before her. Jill felt free to do anything she wanted. There were no consequences. This was the Community.

Nalder's folds shimmered. Mark's come was still warm as it dribbled out of her, dotting the comforter with tiny pearl-colored islands. Jill had had a respectable number and variety of sexual experiences in her life, including, of course, her lesbian fun with Azrael, for which she felt a certain pride. But it had never before occurred to her to lick a man's semen out of another woman's vagina. Something like that had never even crossed her sexual radar at any point she could remember.

But she set about that now. Willingly. Eagerly. Hungrily.

Jill tasted the saltiness of Mark's come as she put her tongue into Nalder. Semen-slick pussy lips parted for her. She felt wiry blond curls against her chin and cheeks. The aroma was overpowering, a raw organic smell. Excitement rising again, Jill worked her tongue harder.

Her own damp pussy had started to chill when the mattress shifted under her knees, and she felt Mark moving into place behind her. His taut thighs pressed on hers. The knob of his cockhead brushed against her already lubricated passage. He thrust himself inside with slippery ease.

As with Nalder, Jill made a growl of pleasure in her throat. She slurped at the woman's pussy, with Mark's come drizzling down her chin. She found the swollen nub of Nalder's clit and had at it—licking, sucking, even applying her teeth to it, though she did that delicately, very delicately.

Nalder's responses were gratifying. She grunted and thrashed. Her hands reached down, Jill thought to brush aside Jill's dark hair so she could watch her perform—but instead, Nalder grabbed hold of Jill's hair, so to pull her mouth more firmly against her mound. Jill liked that, especially when Nalder started bucking against her face.

Mark had settled into a consistent stroking rhythm, the same he'd used only moments earlier. Jill was grateful for whatever it was about being a 'thrope that gave the males of their kind such quick recuperative powers. Mark's cock filled her again and again. She felt the smack of his balls on the curves of her ass as his tempo started to increase.

"Suck me!" Nalder shouted. "Eat my cunt!" Her fingers tightened, and Jill felt her hair being yanked at its roots. She didn't mind. She did wonder, though, if Nalder's shouts were loud enough to carry through the house. Oh, well. It didn't matter. Everyone else was up to the same thing, probably.

As Jill had done, Nalder humped her face. The speed of her bucking hips increased, until she was writhing on the bed. Her come was accompanied by another series of cries. Jill savored the overflow of juices, drinking from Nalder's pussy as though it were flowing with elixir.

After a time the fingers unwound from Jill's hair. Nalder pulled herself away, and Jill felt her face cooling. Mark paused, slipping out of her and gently pushing her over onto her back again. He set himself on top of her, his body a comforting weight. His firm pecs pressed down on her breasts. She spread her hands across his broad shoulders. She took him into herself once more.

Somehow it was innocent and tender, even as he moaned and grunted above her. Even as Jill wrapped his waist with her legs, eager for his cock to reach the deepest limits inside her. Even when she realized that Nalder was lying on her side a few feet away, casually fingering herself while she watched the two of them fucking. Only then did Jill notice, at last, Nalder's Bite, on her hip, the mark as vivid and raw as any of theirs. The whole scene was still beautiful.

Jill felt another great surge of pleasure as Mark came in her, touching her at her core with his seed. Muscles locked and her back arched as the pleasure overtook her, conquering her. Her soul rang with music. Above, the incomplete moon looked down on them all, and Jill surrendered her climax up to that pale glorious god.

Chapter Ten

After another full day, the work was finally done in the barn. Everybody celebrated. It was a real party, with loud music and dancing, too much to drink, musical bed partners, and every other kind of decadence they could hope to find on Jill Machado's isolated farm.

Actually, they managed very well. It reminded Jill of the crazy celebrations that accompanied events at her college, like wins for the football or basketball teams. Her school had had great programs for both, though she'd never really given much of a damn about sports one way or the other, which hadn't stopped her from celebrating along with everyone else. Who didn't like a party?

With the work completed—and the crew had done a damned impressive job, in Jill's judgment—they thinned out the ranks. Of the visitors, only August and Nalder stayed, and of course Mark Curtz. Mikhail, Jackson, Cindy, Brooks, and Ming all departed, taking two of the three vehicles they'd brought. Jill was surprised to realize that of the five who were leaving, she'd had serious sexual contact with three of them at various times during that party. But nothing bad came of it. Jill knew that Mark had taken Ming to bed at one point, and she was okay with that. She had even braced herself in case she felt jealous, but it had never happened, for which she was very grateful. She'd always thought that jealousy was an ugly, immature emotion, and was glad to find she could put her money where her mouth was.

She made cheerful goodbyes to those leaving. Already she felt a deep kinship with them, a feeling that didn't fade even after they were long gone down the road. They belonged to the Community, and she belonged to the Community. That organization was more like a concept than a place, something based on shared ideals.

Or, in a less graduate student paper sort of way: Jill belonged to the club.

She liked it. She even liked Nalder, and not just because of the sexual intimacies the two women had shared. It was one thing to enjoy mutual cunnilingus. It was something else to be able to stand the woman's company away from bed. So Jill knew from her dorm experiences with Azrael.

Nalder was still sarcastic and tactless, however. When Jill went to her to ask for her help with the farm animals, Nalder said, "I'm not squeezing any goat tits, Machado, and I sure ain't wading through chicken shit. But I'll load barrels or sling hay or anything like that you got."

Even with that stipulation, Jill was glad for the extra help. August pitched in, too. He also stayed on duty in the kitchen, which was doubly amazing considering how hard he worked in the coops and the fields. Yet he could still put together tasty meals for everyone in a matter of minutes. Mark continued to aid her in any way she asked.

She did, however, have one question for Nalder. "What's your first name?"

"What the hell's in a name, Machado?" the blond-haired woman shot back, with enough sting to tell Jill she'd hit a nerve. That thought pleased her.

She asked the other two about Nalder, but nobody wanted to say anything. August even claimed outright that he didn't know Nalder's first name. Mark hemmed and hawed. "Well, darling, you know nobody likes a tattletale...."

Jill laughed. *Tattletale*? Was this the third grade all over again? But she liked making her investigations. It felt like she really belonged to the group if she could tease with them.

She had already seen the barn, but Mark took her in there again and pointed out all the fine details. Despite the makeover, her barn was still perfectly functional as a storage space. But it was easy to see what had been added. Ten concrete stalls had been built, with the chains for the harnesses staked deep into the cement. Mark showed her how the locks engaged and, just as importantly, how they unlocked. They weren't complicated because they weren't supposed to be. Anybody, with a little effort, could unlock him- or herself.

"You're sure these locks can't be worked while we're...while...." Jill felt the words go dry in her mouth.

He touched her shoulder and gently squeezed. "No. It's fail-safe. We've used devices like this for, well, a long time."

"It's seems so...." Jill waved her hand up the line of stalls, realizing that the gesture said nothing. She finished, "Low tech."

Mark chuckled. "It is, I suppose. But it's a time-tested solution."

"No offense about the low tech comment," she added.

"None taken."

She trusted him, of course. She trusted the Community. She understood the principles of this society, and agreed with them. People—humans—shouldn't be forced to become something else, which was just what a Bite would do to them. 'Thropes were only capable of delivering said Bite on the night of the full moon, so the obvious answer was to keep themselves restrained on that night. That was the basic philosophy of the Community, really: restraint.

"Not everybody does this," Jill heard herself say quietly.

Mark dropped his hand from her shoulder. He understood what she meant. "No. Not everybody."

"You call them—rogues?"

"That's what we call them."

"Why do they do it?" Jill asked. "I mean, why do they *deliberately* do it?" But what she was really asking was: *Why was it done to me?*

It seemed to Jill that Mark heard her unsaid question. His gold-colored eyes flicked away, toward the far end of the line of stalls. "You'd have to ask one of them," he said darkly.

"But there has to be a reason. And there must be enough of them running loose out there that you've given them a name, their own category. They're 'thropes, yes, but they're also rogues."

"We don't know how many there are." He gestured, just as meaninglessly as she had before. "But the Community outnumbers them, I'm—we're sure of that."

"How do you know?" asked Jill.

"The rovers. If there were, say, hordes of rogues, they'd have been sniffed out by now. But the rovers only come across them now and then, here and there. They're few. They have to be few." His gaze came back to her. He'd spoken like he was repeating dogma.

Jill almost let it go, almost backed off. But she needed to know. "Why do they use the Bite that way?" She realized she'd raised her hand to touch the spot between her breasts, where her mark was hidden by her sleeveless denim shirt.

Mark let out a dull sigh. After a moment he said, "I guess the rogues see things differently. They don't want peace with the humans. They want to, essentially, destroy them. To overrun their numbers with our own. Change as many of them to us as they can."

She blinked at him. "That's crazy!" she cried. "A human-werewolf war? That's something out of some fucking graphic novel!"

Mark's brows came together as he frowned. "Graphic...? Oh, comic books. Yeah, I guess it's like that."

"It's loony tunes!" She wondered suddenly if Mark had seen those Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck cartoons, the old Loony Tunes features themselves, in their first runs. She hadn't yet asked him about his precise age. She didn't know if it would be tacky to do so, or even if she really wanted to know.

"Well," he muttered, "it's a different way of looking at things."

"What?"

"Calm down. I'm not advocating for the rogues' way of looking at things. But if you actually want me to take a guess—which is all I can do—then I'd say they probably regard human beings as an inherently inferior species. Humans are the Neanderthals; we're the *homo sapiens*. They've got to go, so that we can take control. Fulfill our evolutionary destiny. Something like that."

"That's sick," Jill said.

"I'm not trying to make the argument. But the fact is that we can turn them into us, and they can't do the reverse."

She suddenly felt dizzy. She reached out for outer edge of the nearest stall. The concrete had been shaped smoothly and skillfully. She doubted that professional contractors could have done a better job, and by doing it themselves, of course, the project remained a secret.

"You okay?" Mark asked.

She blinked again, this time to clear her head. "Yes. It's just a lot to absorb. I'm still learning. And, frankly, I'm nervous as hell about the full moon."

"I'd be worried if you weren't." He offered a tentative smile.

She appreciated it, and returned it. She stepped into the stall. They were each about twelve feet across, opening out onto the barn's interior. She tugged on one of the chains. The links rattled heavily.

"Those aren't going to give," Mark said. "Trust me."

"I do trust you." Jill's attention moved to the harness hanging from the stall's ceiling. It looked simple and sturdy, something like a combination of saddle and straitjacket. She touched it a little squeamishly. The contraption swung, creaking softly.

"That's not going to give, either," Mark reassured.

"What's it made of?"

"It's kind of like Kevlar. Better than that, though."

"How did you get your hands on it?"

Mark chuckled again. "We've got ways."

Jill didn't doubt it. She had asked about the Community's operations while all her visitors were still here, and what they'd told her had amazed her. This secret society operated like a sophisticated terrorist cell, with lots of resources and a willingness to relocate at a moment's notice. Then again, Jill thought, maybe that wasn't so hot of an analogy in this day and age.

She pushed the harness again, watching it swing. "I'd like to see it work."

"You will. Soon enough."

She was facing away from him. In a strange, quiet voice she said, "I'd like to see it work...now."

It was like she could see his puzzled look, the way he cocked his head sometimes. Then, slowly, he would realize. Jill waited him out without looking back.

"Well,"—she heard him pause to swallow—"we could. If you're serious."

Jill glanced over at the barn door, which was ajar. Outside, evening was coming on. Nalder had already knocked off from the farm work and gone into the house. August wouldn't be far behind, and he would be busy getting dinner together.

Finally she turned. Mark looked, for just that first glimpse, like a dumbstruck boy who'd been offered something "naughty" and didn't know how to act. But he snapped out of it and broke into a smile.

The light was getting dim in the barn, falling from gaps in the boards. Jill smiled back with a growing heat. Minutes ago they had been talking about profound things. Now her excitement was burning that away, like summer sunlight on morning fog.

"On the full moon night," she said, "we won't be—dressed. Will we?"

Mark shook his head. "Not unless you want whatever you're wearing shredded."

A snap at a time, she undid her denim shirt. He didn't come to help her but just watched, riveted, as she dropped the shirt off her shoulders. She found she wasn't at all self-conscious about her Bite. She unfastened the fly of her baggy corduroy pants, the pair with the patched knees. These were, she realized as they slipped down her legs, the same clothes she had been wearing on Mark's first visit. Only this time she wasn't carrying a pistol in her pocket.

Nude, she stepped up to the harness. The air was cool on her skin. So was the evenly poured cement underfoot. She reached up and took hold of one of the dangling chains, running the links through her palm. She didn't know what kind metal this was, but she would have bet it was some kind of industrial strength material.

Jill turned and looked at Mark. "Will you help me into this thing?" she asked in a little-girl-lost voice—not enough to be nauseating, but enough to get the response she wanted.

Mark's eyes went wide. He strode forward eagerly. It was the reaction she'd hoped for.

With a gentleness that couldn't hide his mounting excitement, he helped Jill into the harness. The shell closed over her torso and shoulders, cinching around her waist and neck, not tight enough to choke or even pinch. It was all held together at the front. Giving her a last questioning look, to which Jill nodded, he slotted the lock together. It was a hunk of some high-impact metal, with four brass tabs attached to it. Mark pointed out how you just had to press the tabs in sequence to undo the thing. But even that action, he assured her, would be beyond the capabilities of a 'thrope in the grip of the full moon. During that time, mental capacities shrank as physical instincts and prowess took total control.

The harness felt solid. It held Jill in a way that made her think she was being gripped in a giant's fist. But it was flexible enough for the bodily expansion that she understood happened at the transformation. That was why the collars at the neck and waist were so spongy. One chain was attached to the harness between her shoulder blades, its other end bolted to the ceiling. Another, at the small of her back, staked her to the floor. Two more fixed her to either wall.

Jill moved around. The links rattled. She had a short range of movement. She couldn't reach out to either wall. Again she pulled on her chains.

"I'll be helpless," she murmured. Her hardened nipples brushed the underside of the harness. She was already starting to grow damp with anticipation.

"You'll be restrained," Mark said, just as softly. His gaze slipped down her, to her bare legs, to where they met at the dark patch of her curls.

Jill reached out and took hold of the two chains holding her to the stall's walls. Her fingers gripped the links. The metal was cool and heavy. "I feel helpless," she said.

Mark had stepped back to survey her. Now he strode toward her again, seeming to loom, the muscles tight under his khaki T-shirt. Jill, without consciously meaning to, retreated the step and a half the rig allowed her to move. He closed that distance, too.

He pressed against her, a solid manly weight. Jill felt the hardness of his crotch, but didn't permit herself to let go of the chains so to grope him. He reached up and, very delicately, slid his fingers into her mass of dark hair. His fingertips combed their way over her temple, slipping around to the base of her skull where, suddenly, those steely fingers clutched. Jill gasped as her hair was pulled into a knot at the back of her head—not enough to hurt, but definitely enough to awaken her nerve endings. Electricity seemed to dance across her scalp.

His face hovered inches from hers. Delicious danger lit his eyes. Excitement raced within Jill. Her heart sped. Her flesh prickled. Then his mouth crashed against hers. At first her lips were still, even as his mouth started ravaging hers, stubble rasping her, his tongue prying. Then her lips came alive, and she returned the rough kiss. Even as she did it, though, she knew that this kiss was under Mark's control, and that just thrilled her more.

Mark stabbed his tongue deep, mouth grinding on hers. His hand cradled her skull, not letting her head move unless he moved it. Jill let herself go with it. This was what she'd wanted, wasn't it? Some impulse had led her into this, though it was something unusual for her. Only once or twice in her life could she recall every trying any kind of rough sex play.

But she trusted Mark. She had even said as much out loud.

His other hand moved now. It touched her naked thigh, then slid up the satiny inner flesh. Jill shuddered. The harness' interior was lined with a smooth, soft material that would prevent chafing. But her thoughts weren't on her own comfort right now. She was caught up in Mark's devouring kiss, and concentrating on the progress of his hand as he reached the top of her thigh.

His fingers grazed her moistened pussy lips. Again she trembled, the chain links clinking, the harness itself creaking loudly. He spread her folds with his thumb and finger. Even unable to watch him, Jill could follow what he was doing. He traced a teasing fingertip along the inner edges of her furrow. He was so gentle and delicate about it that it was its own kind of torture, even as his other hand still gripped her hair brutally.

Jill felt her first need for air. She could only get tiny gasps as Mark's hot mouth stayed on hers. Her need to breathe built over the course of just a few seconds, but it was enough to set off a little panic in her, something from the back brain, flooding adrenaline through her veins.

In the instant before that need started to become something serious, Mark yanked away his mouth and jammed three fingers up into her pussy.

The shock lifted her up onto her toes. Her knuckles whitened on the chains. She let out a ragged strangled cry, even as she gasped for her breath. Pleasure radiated through her, touching off small bursts on the way to her brain's core pleasure centers. Her backbone jerked.

Mark had sunk his three fingers into her up to his base knuckles. She felt herself stretching. The sensation wasn't without pain. It *definitely* wasn't without pleasure. With another shudder, she came on his fingers. His hand released her hair. Jill's head fell back, onto the harness' neck collar. White specks swam across her vision, and heat spread over her entire body.

It was a long moment before the pleasure let go and awareness returned to her. She lifted her head. Mark was just finishing tossing aside his graying jeans. His cock jutted, the cap already glistening with a dribble of pre-come. His muscular body was primed. He stepped toward her once more.

They didn't kiss this time. Instead, he seized her thighs, pulling her feet off the ground, raising her legs, drawing her toward him. Jill felt herself swing from the ceiling chain, the

movement making her stomach flutter, reminding her of playground swings and roller-coaster rides. But the thoughts vanished as Mark's cock touched her entrance. With a single movement he thrust himself into her.

Jill groaned raggedly again as she clamped herself around the familiar length. Mark's hands cupped the firm globes of her ass. He planted his feet. Then he started stroking into her.

Only, he wasn't doing the moving, Jill realized with a strange perverse thrill. It was for a moment that weird effect of being aboard a train while another one is sitting next to it on another track—when one train pulls away you don't know right away which one is moving, and it's disorienting.

Mark stood as rigid as a statue, using the harness to rock her forward and back, onto his cock. Knowing that she had no active participation in this act other than to serve as the hole for his hard staff brought shameless pleasure to Jill. Her muscles trembled. Sweat flowed. Her mouth hung open, and her eyes started to roll up into her head.

The sinister joy kept on growing. Mark was spearing her to her depths with every impalement. She writhed on him. Her ass quivered on his palms. She was making sounds now that she didn't recognize. The bliss peaked, inevitably. But her climax seemed like it was made up only of the same pleasures she was already feeling. Her orgasm wasn't a single event so much as a continuation. She felt it flooding her, taking her, drowning her, bearing her up, then pulling her under again.

Somewhere in the middle of that widespread come, Mark shot his hot spunk into her. She felt each jet. She breathed in their mingled scents.

After a while, he lowered her feet back to the ground. She felt limp. He coaxed her to let go of the chains, so that her hands dropped to her sides and circulation returned, humming in her fingers. But he let her press the brass tabs of the lock herself, which was the right thing to do. She stepped out of the harness and into his arms, and they held and held each other.

When they did kiss again, it was soft and tender. That too felt right.

"What does Millie make you think of?" he asked in the fading twilight still spilling through the barn's gaps.

Jill's long eyelashes brushed his chest as she blinked at this non sequitur. "What?" she finally asked.

"Millie. Makes you think of...?"

She thought about it. "Mildred?" she finally ventured.

"Uh-uh."

She considered further, and the answer came. She started to quiver again, this time with laughter. "No."

Mark dotted her temple with his lips. "Oh, yeah," he said. He too laughed.

She listened to that laughter as it rumbled in his chest. He continued to hold her. She felt a kind of itching restlessness that hadn't faded with her orgasm.

"It's the moon, isn't it?" she asked after a moment. "It's why I'm feeling antsy."

"Yes. The nearer the full moonrise gets..." His arm moved on her back, the hand making a gesture she didn't see, but she understood the meaning.

Jill said, "I love you."

After only a tiny pause, Mark answered, "I love you back." Maybe not the perfect way to phrase the statement, Jill thought, but she was glad—terribly glad—to hear it anyway.

Later, the swelling moon would rise. It was two nights away from its fullest, most glorious phase.

Chapter Eleven

Zach inventoried his stash of pills on the ribbed passenger seat of the trashy, semi-vintage car he'd bought this morning. His other car had conked out on a back country road. He'd left it there, hiking through the night to the next town. Nobody would trace the abandoned vehicle back to him, or to any member of the Community. It was easy to get around human laws. You just had to know how to play the game, and you learned that game over time, over far more many years than those dumb-ass people could ever hope to live.

He had paid cash for this new vehicle—new to him, anyway—buying it off a good ol' boy who couldn't keep his eyes from spinning like tops at the thought of somebody forking over *money* for this piece of shit.

But Zach had gotten the rube to empty out his medicine cabinet for him, too, handing over something like four hundred dollars worth of prescription pills. Of course, a lot of the drugs were either expired or of no use to Zach, but it was the principle. Besides, the car wasn't in that bad a shape. It would run for a while, then it would die, and Zachary would get another set of wheels.

That was the life of a rover.

And *this*, he thought as he sorted through his various pill bottles, was the life of drug taker. He still had everything he'd rescued out of the last car in his knapsack, and he added those pills to what was already laid out on the seat. He studied the pills with a professional eye. It was enough to get him through the coming full moonrise.

There were two schools of thought about how Community members should handle the unavoidable full moon transformation: restraint or catatonia. Either tie yourself up somewhere, which was the more popular method, or you could knock yourself out.

The danger with the first way was that you might, in your wolf state, break out of the restraints, though Zach understood that this almost never happened anymore if you took the right measures.

The problem with the second way—dosing yourself senseless until the full moonup was over—was that you could kill yourself doing it. A bad mix of pills or not understanding your own tolerances to drugs meant trouble. It was a dangerous game. But only for the amateurs.

Zachary Fitzsimmons was no goddamn amateur.

This was how he'd been doing it for almost of all his life as a 'thrope. (He liked that term—'*thrope*'; it had pizzazz.) It was how he'd been able to stay in the cities after his gunfighting days were done. Back then, he had been a known degenerate, anyway. The people he kept company with expected him to be out of his mind on booze and opiates, so it was no surprise to anybody when he disappeared for a twenty-four-hour period or so, retreating to whatever slimy hole of a room he was living in at the time. The only danger was that if someone were to come looking for him, they would find him helpless and in his transformed state. Luckily, that had never happened. Or if it ever had, it would have probably been one of his acquaintances—and they were always so drunk and loaded anyway they'd just dismiss what they saw, no matter how outrageous.

But Zach didn't have friends like that anymore. He knew no one outside the Community, and even among them he was hard pressed to call any a friend. Now he was always on the road. The only sure time he would come to a stop was the night of the big moonrise, which was

quickly approaching. He would check in to a motel room, swallow some carefully selected pills, wash them down with some whiskey, and snooze right through to the other side.

Simple. Elegant, even. The method suited him. He even believed in the whole point behind the precaution. His kind needed to exercise restraint. No Bites. That was the creed.

Right now, all across the land, the scattered members of the Community were getting ready. They were doing what they did at the end of every lunar cycle. They had basement rooms all ready, soundproof sheds, isolated places rigged with restraining equipment so that once the change came they, in full werewolf mode, couldn't get loose.

They would *want* to be loose, of course. The instincts would overwhelm them. As their bodies changed, they became powerful and mindless at the same time.

"Kinda like a congressman," Zach commented aloud, and chuckled.

He was no scientist. He had no idea how their race had gotten started. How could they reproduce by converting humans, members of another species, to what they were? Zachary didn't have the answers, and had never pretended he did. Answers like that would mean medical investigations, scientific study—just the sort of attention their kind had carefully avoided for centuries. Or longer.

For Zach, being a 'thrope was a practical thing. It was a condition he'd adjusted to. It had given him an interesting life, and would go on doing so. But he didn't exactly revel in what he was. Was that from some lingering guilt over those six of his kind he had slaughtered in that little camp, long ago? Maybe. Or else he just found what he was...unsavory.

Abominations must be put away.

He laughed out loud again as he finished up the inventory of his drugs, but the laugh this time was humorless. He had pulled onto the shoulder to count up his stash. Now he threw the car into gear and sped back onto the road.

The moonup was coming. But he still had a job to do.

He was doubling back, toward the place where he'd gotten that last Whiff, the one which Mark Curtz had gone to investigate. Zach answered to nobody. As a rover—as the very best of the rovers—he decided his own routes, his own timetables. Usually he went on instinct alone. He could cover a lot of ground, but he covered it however he liked. He might cross four state lines in a thirty-hour period, or he might circle an area over and over, sure that something was there, even if it took a while to nail down the scent.

Right now, it was like he had a sliver of a smell under one of his fingernails. When he had caught that last Whiff, it had only been the scent of the newly turned—that was, the *victim* (if that was the right term), not the attacker. He hadn't detected whoever it was who had delivered the Bite. That happened. Usually the attacker was long gone from the scene, leaving behind only the one with the fresh Bite.

Those newbies had to be gotten to quickly, before they contacted someone in authority, before police and doctors got called in and tests were made, revealing Christ knew what about their kind. Certainly the new fish had to be reeled in before the next full moon. Zach knew goddamn well what it was like to face your first big moonup without any sort of instruction or preparation, just trying to handle the craziness all on your own.

It had nagged at Zach for days now. On that last Whiff, he thought maybe—just fucking maybe—there had been something...*underneath* the main odor of the one who'd gotten the Bite. Like a faint echo, a trace of another of their kind. Was it that woman's attacker? Maybe. At the time it was nothing Zach had been able to identify clearly. It easily could have been a mistake on

his part. Mistakes did happen, even to him. Hell, he knew about mistakes better than most in the Community.

But he wanted to double check. He wanted another sniff of the area. He wanted to be sure he hadn't missed anything.

He drove on, down another quiet country road. He liked the back ways. This was as close as he ever got to the old days, with wide open spaces, lots of land lying around that nobody was bothering with. He could, if he wanted, imagine that whole chapters of American history hadn't yet been written, that the sad stupid story was still waiting to be told. He could, if he tried—really *really* tried—even imagine he was still that boy, the one who hadn't yet learned the ways of the gun, who hadn't boxed himself in with bad choices until he'd had to become the tool of more powerful men...until that terrible dawn when he had become the executioner.

Zach had accepted his role as a rover in the Community long ago. During the years that had passed, the humans' tales of monstrous wolves faded into myth, then into just plain campiness. He had never told anybody about what he'd done all those years ago, that bloody visit of his to the isolated camp, where apparently those six people had come together to try to live in peace—that or they were just hiding out there, waiting for another full moonrise so they could go terrorize the countryside again. He'd never found out for sure who they were or what they were up to.

Later on, though, he did learn who it was who had attacked him, who had given him his Bite. Her description had gotten passed around among the Community members over the years. She had delivered many Bites over time. The dark wolf. The queen of the rogues.

* * * *

Among the trees Vasha had scattered the carcasses she'd eaten over the past days. She ate only the small wild animals, never anything that could be a pet or a farm animal that somebody might own. It wouldn't do to get the humans looking for her. She had already finished her daily ritual of applying the scent-masking cream to herself.

She had left her Bite on the woman who owned the farm, having first scouted out the location and picking the female as her target. Since then, she had remained in the general area—and had gone *undetected*. Nobody from the damned Community had caught her Whiff and come searching for her.

With this unguent she had made herself effectively invisible. So far, anyway. She owed her special ally a debt for giving her the cream.

She was waiting. The full moon wasn't far away now. While she waited, she thought.

She had known about the Community before they knew about her. That only stood to reason. She had lived a long time. She was one of the oldest, if not *the* oldest, member of their species on the continent. (Probably it was a different story in, say, Europe, where the werewolf legends were deep, where there might be ones of their kind who were much older.) Therefore, Vasha had learned a thing or two.

For one, she knew about secrecy. Even though she meant to convert the human race to her own kind, she didn't just attack at random every full moon. No. There was a system, a method. She followed her own rules, and those rules were there for her protection. It was important that she survive, that she continue to do her work. No one else was going to lead the way. Her cause was in her own hands.

Granted, she'd had her wild period. After she had received her Bite, there in that village that the tribespeople had attacked, she had prowled the land for a time. She had reveled in how strong her body had become, the incredible increase to her stamina. She could run for hours and hours. She brought down game and ate it. No animal could fend her off. She no longer felt fear. She could pick out scents over amazing distances.

When she experienced on her first full moonrise, the first time she saw the rise of the Beast...well, that was a true wonder. A miracle. She had howled that night, singing her song to the Beast.

For a while after that first moonup, Vasha had preyed on people randomly—not to eat, of course, but to *change*, to make more of her kind. At first she didn't know that this was what she was doing. She just followed her new instincts, very powerful ones, that drove her to do this every time the Beast rose full. But soon she learned. She understood. And she saw her purpose.

It was after the slaughter that she changed how she operated.

That incident had been tragic, or so she'd thought at the time. Six of the people she had given her Bite to had been shot by a gunman one morning, no doubt a man hired specifically for the job. That group of six had banded together. They knew what had happened to them, even if some of them could still barely bring themselves to believe it. They had isolated themselves out of fear—fear of what they found themselves becoming and doing every full moon, as well as fear for the consequences of those acts.

So they made their little camp, away from all other signs of people. They wept and prayed. Vasha visited there more than once, trying to convince them to accept what they were. They wouldn't listen. They feared and hated her...though that didn't stop them from transforming, from going on a rampage on the nights of the full moon.

But the gunman ended that. Vasha had discovered the slaughter, and she hunted the killer. It seemed to her that she probably should have murdered the man, torn him to shreds. But that wasn't the way. Murder was for humans. Her kind had a better way to get revenge. She simply gave him the Bite.

Yes, and now he was a part of that damned Community, Vasha thought as she picked at a bone, eating the last bit of cold meat off it.

After that mass killing, she had changed her methods. She didn't just roam through the plains and hills, taking whoever she happened to come across at the full moon. She had no education, of course, but she wasn't unintelligent. Maybe her Bite had even stimulated her mind. She thought carefully now, and devised her plan.

She soon started to pick her targets ahead of time, deciding that this or that person was worthy of the Bite, setting her mind on her prey so that even after the change came over her with the rise of the Beast, she would home in on the specific person. It was easiest to pick off those who lived in isolation. She figured that a worthy choice for her Bite was someone already basically fit and able—which meant she didn't choose children or old people, nobody sick or crippled. She wanted only the best.

It was also helpful, she found, to stay in motion. Travel got easier as the years went by and things got more industrialized. Of course, it was awful to see what the humans did to the once pristine land, but what could you expect from such stupid, self-destructive creatures?

But she soon had new worries. She wasn't alone. She already knew that. Somebody, after all, had bitten *her*. Each full moon she added to the numbers of her kind, hoping that these newly turned ones would in their own time instinctively create still more by way of the Bite. But that wasn't always how it went.

Vasha learned that some of these people were organizing themselves. She passed through cities and detected their concentrated scent. She had money by now. It was amazing what a few dollars turned into when left alone in a bank account for a couple of decades. She hired detectives, who brought her the information she wanted, though they themselves didn't really understand what they were investigating. But Vasha understood.

These others of her kind were forming themselves into a secret society. Some were no doubt ones she had personally converted. But they were just like the weeping, praying ones from that little camp long ago. This new group, sophisticated and a lot better equipped, also rejected what was obvious to Vasha: that their kind was meant to conquer this world.

Instead, this pathetic group wanted to coexist with the humans.

After a time the Community, as they called themselves, detected her. She was approached and offered membership. She remembered now how they'd smiled, how sentimental those fools had been. They'd made her angry. She had shouted at them, hurling insults, damning them, even as she tried to convince them that her way was right. Why else would two such species as theirs and the humans exist on one world, she argued, if not for the more powerful to push out the weaker?

But they wouldn't listen, wouldn't hear her argument. They only wanted her to join them. They beseeched her to stop doing the holy work of the Beast. She rejected them. She cursed them. Finally she had fled, and in all the years they had never caught up to her again. She was too wily for them, too fast.

Vasha wasn't the only rogue. Not everyone joined the Community. Some understood, at least a little. Some, after receiving their Bite and somehow escaping detection by the Community before the next full moon, stayed free agents. A lot of them retreated to cabins in the woods, mountaintops, anywhere where a person could live completely isolated. Some even came to see things the same way as Vasha. They let the Beast have free rein. But they were careless about it too often. They ran wild and got themselves killed. They attacked people who could defend themselves and were shot in the process.

Stories emerged from a few of these incidents. But they weren't dignified legends anymore. Now it was tabloid trash reporting and crazy Internet hearsay. Man shoots bigfoot. Woman fends off attack by man-wolf monster. So far, no bodies had been recovered. No proof of their kind existed.

Even Vasha knew that their kind had to, for the time being, stay hidden. One day the scales would tip and the children of the Beast would outnumber the humans. And even though that day hadn't yet come, she knew it could not be stopped.

* * * *

He was going in circles, literally, but he had a reason for it. He had stopped at a roadside bar for a quick shot—okay, two shots—but was now back on the job. Long ago he had learned to screen out the smell of alcohol.

The scent, the scent....

Zach could almost—*almost*—nail it down, but not quite. Hell, he couldn't even yet say it was real, much less pinpoint it. Maybe he was turning this into some kind of obsession, a nit he now just had to pick. Maybe the truth was there wasn't any Whiff out here at all.

But he kept on looking anyway, turning off a two-lane strip onto the same unpaved access road for the third time in two hours. Of course, this might call attention to him, but it

couldn't be helped. This was starting to feel urgent. Or maybe he was just feeling antsy about the coming full moon.

One of the benefits of being a 'thrope, so went the general consensus among the Community, was that you didn't age. Zach himself was a poster child for this. When he told a newbie his real age—something he didn't do very often, granted—he could count on an extreme reaction, usually followed by something like: “Oh my God—that means I'll never get any older!” The newbies always liked that idea.

Thing was, he wasn't so sure it was true.

Zachary Montgomery Fitzsimmons had lived a *long* time. No denying that. But had he really stopped aging? Altogether? He wasn't so sure. He could remember doing his rover duties on motorcycle, remember the extra bit of zip he'd had just ten years or so ago. Sure, he could still fuck with the best of them...or could he? Hadn't his sex drive cooled just the teeny tiniest bit over the years?

He was among the very oldest members of the Community. If he had to guess, he would say that he actually was still aging. His aging process hadn't stopped, not completely. Obviously, it had slowed way the hell down—but that did mean he was still aging.

This wasn't an observation he had shared with any of the others. Nobody had ever said anything about any change in his appearance, though he was pretty sure there was more gray in his hair than there had been, say, thirty years ago. That this went unnoticed might've been because he saw the others so rarely. Mostly he stayed in touch with the network via cell phone.

He still regarded human beings as stupid. It didn't matter to him what the Community's party line was, that humans had a basic nobility blah blah blah. Zachary thought they were idiots. Always had, always would.

But it might just be that his breed wasn't so very much better, in the end. After all, what would this world look like if lycanthropes had followed a more normal kind of evolution, and had become the Earth's dominant species in the natural course of things? Wouldn't they, eventually, have built cities, polluted the skies, invented gods, started wars for no goddamn good reason, and done a lot of the same dumb-ass shit that humankind had done over the millennia?

Maybe. Maybe not. Zach was no scholar. But he had enough years under his belt to pass for wise.

He gunned the trashy car, already aware that the engine wouldn't be functioning for too much longer. He pushed it anyway, knowing he had to cover ground. The car's windows were down. This was the same rural area where he had gotten the previous Whiff of the woman on the farm. This scent he was following—or thought he was following—wasn't hers. He was sure of it, as he drew in dusty air kicked up by the tires. Again, he was able to filter out the impurities.

The scent might have been something cooked up in his overworked brain. Which meant that, maybe, he was just going crazy. And maybe *that* was how age finally caught up the 'thropes. Your body didn't get old. Instead, it was your mind. Maybe he only had senility and dementia to look forward to.

Zach could only grin, and rev the car faster. With every yard of road he ate up, it seemed he was getting closer to the elusive scent. If this were the Whiff of somebody newly turned, the Community had to get to them before the next moon. If the scent belonged to someone else...like, say, a *rogue*...then different steps would need to be taken. Either way, his job was clear.

He would run down this scent, like a wolf following prey.

Chapter Twelve

It felt like a challenge to Jill. Not like some big intimidating problem that had to be tackled, but more like a schoolyard *I-dare-you*, where she either had to put up or shut up. It felt that way even though nobody at all had dared her into this. There was no peer pressure whatsoever this time. Least of all from Mark, who had been skittish about her participating in a *threeway*, much less this.

There wasn't even any formal management of the event. Instead, the four of them just seemed to wander into the bedroom all together after the night had closed in. It was just the four of them left at the house now—Jill, Mark, Nalder, and August.

Jill glanced over and saw Nalder casually shrugging out of her top, while August was stepping out of his shoes. Mark, like he had last time, threw her a hesitant look, hanging back from the other two. Jill gave him a smile and undid her denim shirt. She felt no fear. Everything seemed to be happening so naturally. They might have been a foursome of friends undressing to take a swim in a river.

But that wasn't what was happening at all. Even as more clothing dropped to the fleecy white carpet, Jill felt her excitement rising. This would be fun. She was sure of it. Already the mathematical possibilities were racing through her mind, but she cut them off, not wanting to get ahead of herself.

Just let it happen, she told herself, the smile still on her face as she shed the last of her clothes.

The others moved onto the bed, and she followed. August was kissing Nalder's shoulder, his hand stroking her haunch. Nalder didn't seem interested in preliminaries, or else she was just eager. She reached a hand between the muscular male's legs and cupped his balls, rolling them gently but urgently on her fingers. August's cock, the same creamed-coffee shade as the rest of his flesh, was already rising. Now, as Jill watched, it surged into an impressive full hardness. He put his hand on Nalder's breast and squeezed, her erect nipple peeking out between two of his knuckles.

Jill was sitting back on the bed on her knees, enjoying just watching the two of them. She felt Mark ease in behind her, his hands on her shoulders, grip strong. He didn't pull her away, though. Instead, he pressed his face alongside hers, and watched with her, cheek to cheek.

Nalder had taken hold of August's cock now. Jill saw the woman's fingers whiten, her grip was so tight. August appeared to like that. A grin cut across his face. His hand moved to Nalder's pussy, fingertips stroking her folds, which were already glistening with moisture.

The blond-headed woman twisted suddenly onto her back, somehow contriving not to let go of August's delectable-looking organ. She lifted her knees toward her shoulders, spreading her legs wide, showing off the nimbleness of her body. Her face was flushed, eyes bright.

Jill felt her own pussy dampening in sympathy. All this was happening right in front of her, just a few feet away. August and Nalder obviously didn't mind being watched. Jill heard Mark's breath quickening. His chest pressed her back, and she felt the thump of his heart. She also felt his cock stirring against her.

Nalder held onto August's shaft as he inserted it into her. Jill suddenly recalled a boyfriend who'd hated having his cock touched whenever he was penetrating her, like it was of

some great manly importance that he be the one to guide it in. But the memory went skittering away before Jill even attached a name to the male in question.

It obviously didn't bother August. He drove deep into Nalder, and Jill watched as the reaction rolled up the woman's body, an almost visible erotic force. Nalder's back arched beneath her, and a soft cry left her lips.

August stroked into her, long slow motions, like a painter starting out on a canvas with even, unhurried brushstrokes. Jill stared, wide-eyed, realizing if she hadn't already that this was a rare privilege, a sexual vantage point she'd never enjoyed before. She wasn't watching a porno—this was *real*, happening in real time, with people she knew. All that made it way more exciting than any skin flick or porn Internet image could ever be.

She saw how August's cock gleamed with Nalder's juices. She watched the flesh rippling across Nalder's flat stomach and taut thighs with August's every impact. He was fucking her harder now, plowing deliberately. It was amazing to see the pistoning of his body, graceful and furious all at the same time. His face was a rictus, his eyes narrowed. Jill noted the slap of his balls, the road map of veins standing out on his forearms as he held his upper body above Nalder's. The woman's breasts jounced.

"Beautiful....," Mark murmured. Jill felt the movement of his lips, heard the whispery excitement in his voice. His fully erect cock pressed her at the small of her back.

It *was* beautiful. A delight to see. As August's speed picked up, a rhythm that was no doubt going to spurt his seed into Nalder in a matter of moments, Jill decided: *I'm going to suck his cock*. The thought, sudden and forceful, sent a twinge of anticipation through her, one that actually brought gooseflesh out on her arms.

Nalder shook with her climax, both hands clawing the white comforter. August was only seconds behind her. Jill watched him come and saw, really saw, maybe for the first time, the differences in how a male and female body responded to that ultimate moment of fulfillment. Again it was beautiful to see.

With a slow satisfied groan, August drew his slick cock from Nalder's well-ravaged slot. He sank back on his haunches. Nalder lowered her legs, grinning not at the man who had just fucked her but at Jill.

Nalder said, "Bet you can't wait for a taste of him."

Jill gasped, both with excitement and surprise. "How the hell do you know that?" she asked, thinking of her determination of a minute ago to suck August off.

Still lying on her back, Nalder shrugged. "Oh, just instinct, my dear. Plus I know how tasty he is."

Mark laughed. Jill felt his hands pushing against her back. "You'd better go get your treat, then."

Plainly August was okay with the idea. Grinning again, he slouched back, knees bent, legs spread. Jill glanced back at Mark, wondering if she'd see that hesitation once more, but he was all smiles. He even gave her a wink.

For just a heartbeat or two, Jill was shy about the whole deal. She had no misgivings about blowing August, who was a handsome male. But could she really do this with the others, both of whom she'd already had sex with, watching?

August's cock, still halfway hard even with his last come only minutes old, beckoned to her. Hell *yeah* she could do this, she decided.

On her knees, with her ass pointed upward, Jill settled into place. She took the semi-erect organ in her hand, feeling its slipperiness. She was glad he hadn't wiped off after shooting his

load inside Nalder. Jill had already tasted that woman's pussy, and wouldn't mind sampling her flavor on another man's cock. Even the concept of that—much like the earlier one she'd encountered when she'd eaten Mark's come out of Nalder's cunt—gave this moment an added notch of excitement, even naughtiness. Was this how it felt to play at being a slut? Maybe. But of course there was nothing *slutty*—such a stupid word, anyway—about any of this. These were the people she belonged with. And this was how they played.

August grew impressively in her hand. Jill, hurrying, dropped her lips around him. There was nothing quite like feeling a man grow hard in your mouth. His shaft swelled, and his cockhead moved into the back of her throat. Jill accommodated him.

The taste was truly fantastic. Nalder's flavor was definitely present, but August's own tang was mixed in. Jill tasted the stray ooze of his come. She inhaled the sweat in his dark pubic curls. She fondled his balls.

Then she set about blowing him.

He was wonderfully responsive, squirming and groaning, letting her know her oral skills were what they'd always been. Jill had never understood women who were repulsed by this particular act. It struck her as a perfectly lovely form of intimacy. Also, there was something primal about it, a kind of aggression and vulnerability that she couldn't resist. How often, after all, was a female in a position where she had a man so very...well...helpless, for want of a better term?

As though to prove this point to herself, she delicately grazed the sensitive head of August's cock with the edge of her front teeth. August jerked and sucked in an audible breath. But Jill had no mind to hurt him. She was too busy savoring him.

Her mouth plunged up and down on the meat, which glistened now with her saliva. Her long dark hair was pooled over August's lap. He reached down to brush back her locks, probably wanting to look at where he was so intimately connected to her. Jill, still on her knees and elbows, craned her neck slightly to look up into his eyes. She saw the expected bliss there.

But August, of course, wasn't the only one watching. Peripherally, Jill caught sight of Nalder, who had sat up and was gazing rapturously at the two of them. Mark was still behind Jill, and she had a sudden urge to see him—to watch him watching her. But she wasn't about to break off the blowjob.

Mark made his presence known, though. Jill felt his hand brush her ass, stroking her lightly. She flexed under his touch, remembering how he'd fucked her while she had gone down on Nalder. Suddenly she wanted that again, although she was still reluctant to break contact with August just to tell him so.

Fortunately she didn't have to. Mark was attuned to her. Or else he just couldn't resist her in this posture. The mattress shifted under her knees. She felt the fronts of his thighs against the backs of hers. She was wet, ready for him. As she adeptly sucked August's cock down to its hilt, Mark touched his cockhead to her moist entrance.

He filled her. A cry erupted deep in her throat, setting off a vibration that brought a fresh ragged groan from August and pressed his legs tight about her shoulders. Pleasure streamed within her, radiating through her muscles, her bones.

With two cocks in her, Jill settled into a new rhythm, like she was a cog in some mad carnal machine. Mark started driving into her from behind. She borrowed his tempo and applied it to her deep-throating of August's cock. Almost instantly the three of them were functioning in perfect synchronicity. Wet slurps, and the grunts of effort and pleasure filled the bedroom.

But Jill, quite suddenly, wanted something more. It was even worth halting her delicious blowing of August to pass her instructions to Mark.

She did so, raising her mouth from the cock and saying, without looking over her shoulder, "Put it in my ass." Then she dropped her hungry maw back onto the throbbing member.

She didn't see Mark's reaction, but she imagined she must have provoked at least a second or two of dismay. Maybe a widening of his eyes, maybe a full-on slack-jawed gape. Whatever it was, he quickly obeyed her command.

It had been a long time since Jill had last done anal. It was, again, a prime kind of intimacy, though this time the vulnerability would be all on her. She was okay with that. She also trusted in Mark's skills and his feelings for her. He wouldn't let himself get carried away. He would observe the sort of safety that was prudent when you were taking a hard cock up your ass.

His cock was nicely lubed from her pussy. Jill felt the swollen crown roll several times across her pucker. Already sweet sensations were awakening from the contact, that luscious, vaguely forbidden pleasure she remembered from the few other times in her life she'd indulged this desire.

Eventually, Mark settled his cockhead flush against her hole. Then increment by increment, he started feeding himself into her. Jill, her head still rocking on a neck that wasn't yet stiff or tired, was keenly aware of the penetration, wary of any discomfort or outright pain. None came, not even a twinge. As Mark's shaft slipped a centimeter at a time into her tight channel, she felt only a wildly growing pleasure. New excitements seemed to unlock from her body. The warmth in her swelled, sweeping over her. Her flesh slickened with sweat.

She thrust back against Mark's invasion, encouraging him. Soon he was deep inside her. She felt his testicles press against the sphere of her ass. Two cocks were penetrating her to her absolute depths. It was fantastic.

"Holy fuck, I can't stand this one more second!"

Jill's eyes, which had drooped languidly shut, sprang open at the loud cry. Under her, the bed jounced. Keeping August in her mouth, Jill gave her head a little snap, flicking the hair out of her eyes enough to see Nalder vaulting across the bed. She landed with her legs on either side of August. She bent her knees, hunkering, straddling his face. Jill had a flash of her seizing August's hair and jamming her pussy onto his mouth, then dark locks fell over her view of the woman's flexing heart-shaped ass and she heard only Nalder's animalistic grunts.

So it went. Apparently August had no problem with eating out a pussy he'd come inside of only a short while ago, and Nalder, from the sounds she was making, was evidently pleased with August's tongue. Mark, meanwhile, was still stroking into Jill's ass, and the pleasure of *that* was extreme. Jill shook, realizing only now that these pre-orgasmic shudders were more powerful than some outright comes she'd experienced in her lifetime. Then again, she'd never done anything quite like this before.

August's balls started to tighten in her delicate grip. Nalder, whose moist humping of August's mouth Jill could hear, let loose a yowl of satisfaction, no doubt drenching her lover's face. Mark had hit an eager—maybe even an overeager—speed, but that was fine with Jill.

When August started to jet into her mouth, she drank every succulent spurt. In the same instant, Mark's juice poured into her, filling the unfamiliar cavity with a hot liquid load. Jill convulsed with pleasure, feeling the joy rip through her from strange directions, crisscrossing her, redoubling in strength.

The four of them shook and spilled and moaned and, after some while, gently and lovingly collapsed in a heap.

Later still, with a dreamy smile on her lips, Jill turned to Nalder and said, “That was lovely...Millicent.”

Nalder’s blond head snapped up. Violence shone in her eyes. Almost immediately, however, she flicked her gaze from Jill to Mark.

“God *damn* you, Curtz...,” she growled.

Everyone laughed, even, after a minute, Millicent Nalder.

Chapter Thirteen

The tensions ran through the sleepers' minds like fast, sinister snakes. Mark had to fight to fall asleep, even after another day of hard labor on Jill's farm. More of this, he figured, and he'd be ready to qualify as a bona fide farmhand—not a career path that interested him, mind you. But Jill needed help with the place, and he was happy to lend a hand.

Well, "happy" might be overstating it, he thought after he'd jerked awake for the fifth or sixth time in the past two hours. He'd been having ugly nightmares, the really complicated kind where you felt more tired than when you went to sleep.

On the other side of the big bed, Jill was tossing and turning, too. She had wrestled with the covers, and at one point had beat her pillow with her fist for almost a full minute. Mark didn't know if she had been awake during that.

He knew the others were having the same trouble sleeping because that was what happened. No avoiding it. Tomorrow night, the moon would be full. Already the power of it was influencing them. Not just the four of them here at this country home, of course—but rather the whole Community, everywhere on the continent. And, yes, the rogues, too. Every 'thrope everywhere knew that tomorrow was the *night*.

Mark, too edgy now for another try at sleep, eased out of bed. Moonlight spilled through the skylight, showing him Jill's dark hair spread on her pillow, and her body beneath the comforter. They hadn't made love tonight. Neither had there been any group activities. Nobody could focus enough to get properly in the mood. That was okay with Mark. Sex was fine—and sex with Jill in particular was great—but he didn't want to use it just as a distraction. If nothing else, Jill needed to face what was coming with a clear head.

Looking around on the floor, he found a pair of his snug navy briefs and slipped them on. Then he crept from the bedroom.

Jill Machado was magnificent. This was, at least in part, his cool, considered opinion as a first contact representative of the Community. The woman was really handling herself. He had watched how she had adjusted. Jill wasn't prone to panic. Even before he'd gotten here, she had been dealing with her situation as best she could on her own. It had been sensible at the time for her to fire all her workers. Clear everyone out, figure out what was going on without any interference. She had listened to her new instincts. That was smart, since they were there for a reason.

It was possible, he thought as he padded through the dark house to the kitchen, that she might even have been able to deal with her first full moon without any outside help. In the Community you heard the stories from the oldest members, about how they'd handled their first transformations totally on their own, with nobody advising or comforting them.

Mark admired that, even if he had heard and *heard* the stories over the years, until they got to be like tales told repeatedly by aging relatives to the rest of the family, whether the kids wanted to hear it again or not. Then again, the Community was a family. More of one than the humans could ever know.

But with Jill, for him, there was something more. *I love you*. It was what she had said to him, and he'd said it back, not out of obligation, not from some silly romantic reflex, but because he meant it. He did love her. Of course he did. He couldn't help himself—and didn't want to.

But it wasn't the first time he'd had such feelings for someone new to the Community, someone with whom he had made the first contact.

He wasn't hungry, but a cup of herbal tea sounded good right about now. As he entered the kitchen, he felt a presence and was suddenly alert. But a second later the scent registered, and he relaxed.

"How're you feeling?" he asked, at the edge of the chrome and tile kitchen. It seemed like a harmless question.

"I'm still pissed at you."

Mark shrugged. She was sitting in the dark, and her tone was terse.

"Oh, come on, Nalder. What's in a name?" He felt his way along a counter, the edge cool against his fingers.

"Now you're stealing my lines," she said. She was ahead, on one of the stools just past the sink.

He said, "I thought I'd make myself a nice cup of tea." He knew where the stove was, but not what cabinet to look in for tea. Somehow, it seemed wrong to turn on the light. Nalder had gotten here first.

"A man would pour himself a stiff drink."

"I'm not a man."

That got a wry chuckle out of her. His eyes were adjusting. The kitchen had windows, and the moon's light was, of course, strong tonight. He saw her outline, her pixie haircut. She slid something across to him. "Here," she said. "I made this ten minutes ago, and apparently I'm not going to drink it. It's chamomile."

Mark touched the cup. The string and tag of the tea bag hung over the side. He dropped the bag in the sink with a small wet smack, then took a sip. The tea had barely cooled.

"Thanks."

"No worries." Chair legs scraped the tiles. A stool was pushed toward him in the dimness. "You could sit," Nalder suggested.

"I could." After a moment, he did.

There was a lot of small talk they could make, chitchat—some of it would even be productive. Nalder and August would stay on here at the farm until the big moon passed. It would be better for Jill, the newbie, to have more than one of her kind around for the event. But what would happen after with Jill was something they should talk about. Obviously, those ten stalls in her barn were valuable. The Community always needed another haven, a safe house where members could come to on short notice. The Community was scattered, and many of them traveled a lot. That was what a secret life was like. You didn't just dig in somewhere and hope nobody noticed you. You moved around, and you didn't let anyone—that was, humans—get too familiar with your face, your ways. You stayed away from serious friendships outside your own kind.

Sometimes it was very hard for the new ones. They couldn't understand why they had to give up their old relationships. Mark didn't think Jill would be a problem. Her only real tie seemed to be to her brother, the one she'd mentioned who was called Johnny. Apparently they weren't friends.

Jill Machado's isolated farm, now equipped with ten restraining stalls, was too valuable to give up. Hopefully she would stay on here. It would serve the Community.

But Mark and Nalder didn't talk about any of this. He sipped his tea, and she sat there on the next stool. He sensed hostility from her. Or thought he did.

When the tension finally got to him—like he needed any more—he blurted, “Are you really still angry that I told Jill your first name? Millicent is a lovely name, after all.”

“Yeah, the boys in my junior high thought it was just the coolest thing *ever*.” Nalder barked a laugh, then went silent.

Mark drank more of the chamomile, not tasting it. It wasn’t having any of the soothing effects he’d been hoping for.

“Then,” he said, “what is it, my dear?” He could practically feel her glaring at him in the unlit kitchen—or else he was still uneasy from his nightmares. He scratched his bare thigh. He was just starting to feel a little chilly in his briefs. Nalder appeared to be wearing some flimsy underthing.

He heard her draw a breath. When she spoke, her words were as terse as before. “I like that girl.”

“I like her, too.”

“I’m worried about her.” Nalder let out a sigh. “I’m worried *that* you like her.”

Mark was stunned. This was unexpected. This was...jealousy? It was totally out of character for Nalder.

“Well, look,” Mark started, fumbling a bit with what he assumed were Nalder’s sensitive feelings, “it’s, uh, it’s just that Jill and, um, me—”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Curtz!” She slapped the countertop. “I’m not envying the girl. You think it bothers me that you’re fucking her? Think again.”

Suddenly it did seem stupid. After all, Nalder had been in bed with the two of them *while* they were fucking. “Then, what is it?” he asked.

“It’s Jill I’m concerned about. Like I said. I can see that she’s got feelings for you. Oh, she’s as free with her body as any of us—*sexually liberated* we called it back in the neurotic days when I was still growing up. But Jill has singled you out. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’d already told you she loves you.”

Mark didn’t say anything, but that silence was its own answer.

He saw Nalder’s head nod. “Right. Okay. I know how she feels. I remember how it was. You kind of swooped in. You saved my life—or at least my sanity. I had a good life. I was an engineer. I had fought hard to be successful in a field where, back then, most women didn’t make strides. I was reasonably happy, even. I believe I would’ve gone on to live a normal, rewarding life. Probably would have even knuckled under one day and gotten married.” She laughed dully, but with a hint of longing in it. “But instead, I went on a fishing trip one weekend and some big hairy beast attacked me outside the cabin on the second night, and that was that. A few days later, back home, terrified and half out of my mind, you showed up. A rover had caught my Whiff, and you were there to explain it all to me, to make it better. And you did make it better. I fell for you. I remember telling you I loved you, remember it down to the finest details—the lighting in the room, the feel of the bed covers against my skin, the tick of the bedside clock....”

Mark remembered it, too. It had happened a few days after he’d made contact with her, when the emotions between them were still white-hot.

A hand touched his. Nalder squeezed his wrist, the grip strong as she made her point.

“All I’m saying, Mark, is that if you tell Jill you love her—*mean* it. She deserves the truth.”

The grip tightened, like a shackle, then was gone. Nalder slipped off her stool and padded past him, exiting the kitchen. He felt the brush of her negligee against his leg.

Mark stayed and finished the chamomile. It was some time before he returned to Jill's bed.

* * * *

It was a tense and pretty unproductive day on the farm. Some work got done, but it was haphazard. Jill's products were piling up. The eggs and milk had to go out, but she had canceled all pick-ups when she'd fired her workers. She had wanted total isolation, thinking it was the only way to deal with what was happening to her.

But by now she was almost used to her new condition, her body's new strength and improved senses. It was starting to feel...normal. She liked that.

She liked the company of the members of the Community here on her farm, too. Today, though, with these last daylight hours before night and the full moon's rise, she passed by the others almost without seeing them. Her focus was elsewhere, away from her fields and animals. She was thinking about...mating.

Well, not quite *that*. It wasn't a sexual urge she felt. It was, instead, something deeper, more primal.

The anticipation and tension were distracting. Jill had slept bad, struggling through nightmares for what had felt like—and maybe were—hours. She felt achy, though she wasn't actually sore. Mostly she just felt mentally and emotionally restless. It was worse than it had been yesterday and the day before. It was like the night before a childhood Christmas.

"Yeah," she found herself muttering out loud. "If on Christmas morning you sprouted fur and fangs." Her voice startled her. She looked around. It was just her and the goats. Good. She didn't want the others seeing her talking to herself.

Actually, this was less of a Christmas feeling. It was more like the eve of losing one's virginity—presuming you'd had a specific occasion picked out for your first sexual experience. (Jill hadn't. It had happened suddenly—*very* suddenly—with one of Johnny's friends. Not her proudest moment.) Right now she felt anxious and full of a sort of frightening wonder.

Tonight, in a way, she would lose her virginity again. She would undergo her first transformation. When the big moonup came, she would become something powerful and dangerous. She would be overcome by the urge to go out and reproduce herself by sinking her teeth into a helpless human being—giving her Bite and creating another member of their species.

But this was something *she must not do*. So went the Community's credo, though nobody had actually spelled it out like that. Even so, she understood, and she agreed. It was wrong to force this change on others. Humans had rights. Those rights had to be respected.

Jill dropped what she was doing. All of a sudden she was sick of it—the farm, the animals, her way of life. If Johnny wanted this goddamn place so bad, maybe she ought to just give it to him, no matter what clear-cut arrangements their father had made. Daddy had died abruptly. One day he'd been complaining about stomach cramps, and four weeks later it was all over. He had stayed alert and coherent nearly to the very end, for which Jill was grateful. She'd gotten to say everything a loving daughter ought to tell her father on his deathbed. Really, it had been a good way to go.

She sat down on the grass, dropping her head between her knees. Long dark hair spilled to the ground. The restless tension in her was worsening. She doubted anything could ease it. This was her new life. This was what she had to look forward to every month. There was no escaping it. She didn't even bother making a menstrual cycle analogy—it was too obvious.

Jill Machado had never felt any particular need to breed. She didn't dislike babies, and didn't imagine her life was too important for the time-consuming work of raising a child. That, however, wasn't the same as wanting a baby. She had always believed that children, once you committed to them, had to be your number one priority over all else, over whatever plans and ambitions you might have had for yourself. Your whole life from that moment on had to be directed to raising a healthy and sane child. If that was too much for you, no problem. Don't have a freakin' kid, then.

So it was very unnerving, right now, to find herself preoccupied with the desire to procreate.

The Bite, the Bite....

She wanted to chomp into a body, a warm human body. If Mark hadn't already told her, she wondered if her instinct would have told her what the Bite meant. Would she have known what she was doing if she'd been left alone to run loose tonight? Would she have felt this same desire to go forth and reproduce?

Or would it have just been like a madness, just her in her transformed state running through the night, looking for flesh?

Images rushed through her head. She shut her eyes. Her body throbbed. She reached under her shirt and touched the ridges of her Bite, feeling the individual teeth marks. She shivered.

Someone cleared his throat.

His throat. Jill, eyes still closed, smelled him.

"Is it time?" she asked Mark.

He didn't reply, and she opened her eyes, finding his booted feet in front of her. She had lost track of things, including the time. Were they supposed to be heading for the barn now? She looked up.

Mark smiled, though she saw the tension on his face. "It's time to eat," he said, extending a hand down to her.

Jill wasn't hungry, but she put a hand in his and let him pull her to her feet. She really had lost track of the time. The night was coming, and it would be dragging the moon along behind it.

Still holding hands, she and Mark walked toward the house, for a last meal.

* * * *

No one had an appetite, of course. But August had made some simple dishes, lots of sticky rice and some mashed potatoes, foods that were easy to get down and which would get everybody through the night. After all, nobody was going to be eating anything again until tomorrow morning.

In fact, nobody was going to be doing anything before then but rattling their chains and howling.

Mark, despite his effort to keep his poise in front of Jill, winced at the thought. Knowing he had no real reason to be afraid didn't help. They had taken every precaution, seen to every safety measure. Those stalls out in the barn were perfect. So was this isolated location, where they didn't have to worry about soundproofing.

Dinner conversation, however, was limited, full of long silences. At the table, Mark and Jill were at one end, Nalder and August at the other. Mark was...preoccupied, which was one of those awful understatements. Everybody at this table was *preoccupied*.

But Mark kept darting glances down at Nalder, as she picked at rice with her fork. He felt resentment, even as he tried to ignore it. He didn't appreciate what she'd said to him before in the kitchen, that smug tripe about "meaning it" if he dared to tell Jill he loved her.

Well, he had dared, had told her, and had meant it. It was already done. So why the hell would he let Nalder's words get to him now? It was because of their own time together, of course. She knew him intimately, as more than just a mere lover. Their relationship had been for real. Nalder—always *Nalder*, even back then, never Millicent—had said she loved him. Mark had said it back, meaning it.

Only, it hadn't lasted. Well, that was how things went, right? That was the nature of relationships. They were always potentially on the brink. So it had gone with the two of them.

It annoyed—no, something more than *annoyed*—him that Nalder had picked a time so close to the big moonup to unload this twisted feminine head game on him.

But he wouldn't let it unsettle him, he told himself. His feelings for Jill concerned only Jill—not Millicent Nalder.

Mark turned his attention back to Jill. She forked up some mashed potatoes, without much enthusiasm. He understood her lack of appetite, but she would be glad later that she'd eaten. The experience, he well knew, was draining. More than that, though, he understood the anxiety she must be feeling. He sure remembered the first time he had changed. It had happened in a padded basement room where the members of the Community had put him. He had been attached to a leash, and remembered nearly strangling himself.

Techniques had improved. The setup out in the barn was first-rate. He had already said as much to Jill, but he wanted to reassure her more. He reached over and gave her arm a squeeze, offered a smile.

She looked back at him blankly a moment, then forced a smile of her own.

"It's going to be okay," he said softly. It was the first thing anybody at the table had said for several minutes.

Jill jerked a nod.

Nalder set down her fork. "It's time to get out there," she said.

Mark looked at the clock. It was early, but too early was a lot better than too late. August, face set, started collecting the plates from the table. The others stood, looking at one another. Mark's gaze passed over Nalder. The blond-haired woman's face was as tight as his own felt. He took Jill's hand as they all filed out of the house, heading toward the barn as the evening gathered around them.

* * * *

"I won't be able to see you?"

Mark shook his head as he checked the harness' lock.

"I wish I could," Jill said.

He didn't look up. "No, you don't."

She supposed that was true. Tonight she would be experiencing her first transformation. That was going to be traumatic enough. No sense in adding to the shock by watching her lover go through the same drastic change.

He seemed tense. Understandably. Jill had left her clothes in a neat pile just outside the stall. The harness held her around her torso. The chains' links clinked. Her bare flesh prickled with the evening's chill.

"It was more fun last time I was in this rig," she muttered.

Finally he did look into her eyes. A smile pulled at his mouth. "It sure was."

August and Nalder were getting into their harnesses further along the row. Jill heard Nalder saying, "Next time, I want a fucking space heater! It's cold in here."

"What?" August retorted. "You weren't born in a barn?"

"I was born in Manhattan."

"Oh, there's a difference?"

Jill laughed at the banter, but it sounded strained to her ears. Mark had checked her harness at least four times. Jill had no doubts it was secure. But she still felt afraid, anyway.

"It's okay to be scared," he said.

The platitude surprised her, until she realized that he was probably saying it for himself as well as her. She said, "I'm more than *scared*."

He nodded. "I'll be right there,"—his eyes flashed to the concrete wall on her right—"in the next stall. By the time you see daylight tomorrow, this will be over."

"Until the next full moon," she said.

"Until the next full moon."

He leaned in to kiss her, and she was again reminded of being in here before, with her swinging in the harness. But the memory, as lovely as it was, felt remote, overwhelmed by her anxiety—and by the pressing urge she now felt.

The Bite, the Bite....

"I love you," he said, the words firm, almost like something he was saying as testimony. It was a better version than the first time he'd said the words.

Jill said, "I love you, too."

Mark stepped back, longing and tenderness in his gaze as he looked at her a last time, then he turned and headed into his own stall.

Jill Machado looked up at the fading light falling through the barn's slats. Night would come. She *wanted* it to come...even as she dreaded it.

Chapter Fourteen

After nightfall, about seven miles from that woman's farm as the crow flew, Zach's newly acquired car gave out. He'd abused the vehicle, running it over terrain it had never been built for, not even when the thing was new. But now it was dead. He had cracked the rear axle.

But Zach didn't stay to cry over spilled milk. He shoved open the car door and marched several more yards up the dirt road that was scattered with rocks, one of which had busted his axle. The car had died halfway up to a row of hills. He could see their darker humps against the country night sky.

He had the scent!

Finally he was sure about it. He stopped and sucked in the air, singling out the one odor. It was like a tiny thread in a tapestry. But he had isolated it. It was a Whiff.

More than that, it was a Whiff he recognized. He was the best of the rovers—his sense of smell was acclaimed, and rightly so. When he caught a scent, it stayed in his memory, even from long ago.

It was...*her*.

Doubt tried to creep in as he stood there on the dirt road, with the dead car twenty feet behind him. Okay, so he'd caught a Whiff, but that didn't mean he had found her, that he had gotten a bead on the female who had attacked him so long ago, who'd torn his clothes and given him the Bite just below his shoulder....

"No, goddammit!" he shouted into the night, voice echoing. "It's her. It—is—her."

He grinned and the grin froze there. Until he felt a new doubt.

The full moonup was coming. Tonight. He had to go get ready. He had to find a room, load up on pills, and ride the change out, just like he did every month. How the fuck could he do that and chase after her at the same time?

He couldn't. But he didn't let that stop him. Determined, he turned around and strode back to the car. He grabbed his phone, but there was no signal. Figured. He was in the boonies, and reception was iffy. He might have better luck at the top of these hills, which was where he was heading. It was from up there that the Whiff came.

Zach loaded up his knapsack again. Plastic bottles rattled as he slung it over his shoulder. He paused to give the car a kick before leaving. This was the second auto he'd lost in a very short span of time. Oh, well. The Community had deep pockets. And no matter how much he considered himself an outsider, a loner, he *did* belong to the group, and he would serve that Community by tracking this Whiff himself. No matter what the cost.

* * * *

She walked down from the hills into the valley, legs flashing darkly in the fading daylight. She moved like a queen, and felt like one. She felt a royal purpose. No, not royal—*holy*. Her ambition tonight was grand, a heavy burden that she carried willingly, eagerly. Tonight, the Beast was with her. It was waiting to rise, to shine down on her. Her. Vasha. The chosen child.

She felt serene and anxious all at once. The intense states melded in her, becoming a fresh delicious emotion. No human could experience this, no matter what drugs they took or what gods they worshipped. The humans were poor, limited, miserable creatures.

They had to be swept aside. Nature had created the children of the Beast. Nature meant for this to happen. Her kind had been put on the Earth to replace humanity.

So it must be. So it shall be.

The words were like a litany in her mind as she made her way downhill. The grasses thinned as she got near the last property line. Beyond here was the woman's farm. Vasha had given that woman the Bite at the last full moon. Since then, the Community had been here. She could smell their presence. She was no rover, but she had lived a long time and her senses were potent. It was something the younger ones probably didn't know. Your powers grew over the years. You became more formidable. And you got shrewder.

The hills far up on either side of her were getting dark, losing detail, becoming silhouettes. The air became brisk. All around, the light dulled. Vasha came to the fence and stopped. She smiled.

She shed her clothes. In her pocket was the small jar of unguent. She was very careful with the precious substance that had allowed her to return here tonight.

Setting the clothing neatly by the fence, she jumped over the wire. Straight ahead in the distance, on its own little hill, sat the house. It was lit, like a beacon, calling to her. She had come here during the previous rise of the Beast. Now she was back. She had never done this before. Once she had delivered her Bite her normal procedure was to move on, knowing that the Community wouldn't be far behind. Her plan had always been to spread the blessing of the Bite far and wide, like a werewolf Johnny Appleseed. She had figured that at least a few of those she turned would reject the Community just like she had done.

But with the Whiff-deadening unguent, she had the freedom this time to return to the scene. She was going to let loose the woman, the one who had felt her Bite at the last full moonrise. The Community had discovered that woman, yes. But that didn't mean they'd completely corrupted her with their pathetic philosophy of coexistence with the humans.

Vasha planned to reach her, to *turn* her again, though this time to a new way of thinking. Their kind was the superior breed. They were destined to inherit the Earth.

The last of the light faded from the sky. Beneath, Vasha stood naked. She shivered with anticipation, like she was awaiting the touch of a lover.

Awaiting the kiss of the Beast.

She started walking again, toward the lights on the hill. The moon was starting to rise. She felt it. Within a matter of minutes it would clear the horizon, and she would become her true self once more.

* * * *

Zach's toe caught a stone, and he went sprawling to the ground. He lay panting and basted with sweat. He had been hurrying through the growing darkness. He felt drained. *So much for the famous stamina of lycanthropes*, he thought, even as he tried to push himself back up. But he didn't have the strength, not right this second. He needed a minute to get his breath back.

He felt old. That was maybe the worst thing.

Then again, he'd been going up and down hills, across fields, running himself ragged, pausing only now and then to take a fast breather. Goddamn right he was tired. And if that meant feeling old, too, then fine. He *was* old. Unthinkably old, in fact, by human standards.

All this time he had been staying on the scent—coming close to losing it more than once, but always finding it again. She had been here, covering this same ground. He could tell the Whiff was recent, even though it was also strangely weak. It was like something was interfering with the smell. A couple of times it had fooled him, and he'd actually questioned his own abilities. But pride had saved him. It was an honest pride. He was the best of the rovers. His talents were legendary. He had caught the rogue's scent and had stayed with it, faint as it was, and had followed it doggedly.

But tonight was *the* night. The full moon would rise soon. Very soon. Time was running out.

Even so, he lay there on the ground a little bit longer, with the twilight closing in. The cool air chilled the sweat on his body. His knapsack had slid off his shoulder and now hung around his elbow. He was still carrying around his collection of pills, as well as a pint of bourbon he'd picked up yesterday, when the car was still running. Thinking ahead, he had put together the correct dosage for himself from among all his painkillers and sleeping pills and whatnot. He had put these into one plastic bottle, so that when the time came he could just pop the pills all at once and wash them down with a belt of booze.

But he hadn't figured on still being *outdoors* when that time came. By now, according to his usual routine, he should be checked into some cheap-ass motel room, with the door locked and himself laid out on the bed, comatose. That way, when the transformation came it didn't matter. Whether he was unconscious in human form or as a 'thrope, out was out. He would snooze through the moon, just as he had done many, many times before.

But that wasn't how this moonup was working out. He tugged the knapsack back onto his shoulder as he forced himself to sit up. His head whirled. He had been pushing himself. But it was necessary. He'd tried again to get a decent signal on his cell phone, never finding enough bars, even on the hills. He had done this until he'd realized that the battery was nearly dead, which had seriously pissed him off—mostly because he should have noticed it earlier. That was sloppy on his part. Unprofessional.

It meant he was on his own. He had the rogue's scent, and he had to follow it without any help.

It was *her*. It really and truly was. He had no doubt now. Vasha. That was her name. He knew this because long ago the Community had made contact with her, after Zach himself had caught her Whiff and zeroed in on her. It was a smell he had recognized, something from his deep past. *Her*. The creature that had come for him out of the night, singling him out, while he still had the blood of those six victims on his boots. *Her*. Vasha. That was the name she had given, before rejecting the Community and its ways. She wanted to be a rogue, obeying nobody's rules but her own.

Vasha had turned him. She had given her Bite to Christ knew how many others, as well. She was a danger, out of all control, like a force of chaos that had to be stopped. Her decades-long rampage had to come to an end.

When Zachary finally tried to get to his feet, pain shot up his leg. "Fuck," he said through clenched teeth. A twisted ankle. Wasn't that just great.

He found the scent again, locking in on it. It was still strangely diluted, but it was there. A little while ago he had come across a little grove of trees on the neglected back end of a farm.

Her scent had been stronger there, but probably only because Vasha must have stayed there for some while. He had found the bones of animals among the trees, too.

Zach put weight on the leg. His ankle had indeed twisted, but not too badly. He pushed forward, hobbling a little. The pills rattled in his knapsack. The bourbon gurgled in its bottle. He had a little time before the moon's rise, just not much of it.

He dreaded that moonrise, but some part of him also welcomed it. It was like fearing and lusting after something at the same time. But he had faced these same feelings many times before. He could handle it.

What worried him most, though, was what he was supposed to do when the moon did rise. Should he just lay down in a field somewhere and dose himself? What choice did he have? He couldn't just let himself transform and run loose. That would be irresponsible. Criminal, even. It went against the laws of the Community.

But Zach couldn't give up now. He went limping down a long grassy slope. Vasha was close. He could still catch up to her, he felt sure. She had to be stopped before she turned more people. Even the lazy, ignorant, dumbshit humans who had used this planet as a toilet for a century or more didn't deserve that. Vasha had to be brought down, one way or the other.

And when he caught up with her, on a more personal note, he could take his revenge on that bitch. After all, he hadn't *asked* to be a fucking werewolf, had he?

Panting and grimacing, Zach made his way through the dusk.

Chapter Fifteen

Nothing could have prepared her. Jill knew that now, and accepted the fact. Even though she was afraid, she was also curious. Soon she would *become*. She would transform into another type of life form. The idea was incredible. A whole new experience awaited her.

But the very notion of that change also seemed sort of...ridiculous.

She looked up at the gaps in the wall, at the light that had faded. Her time as a human was running out. Outside, in the sky, the moon was going to rise. But—so what? How the hell could the moon possibly have any effect on her physical state? The moon was always full, in a sense. A crescent moon was still the moon, intact and complete. It was just a matter of perspective. No principle of physics could explain a person changing just because of the presence of the full visible moon. After all, what if it was a cloudy night? Huh? What about *that*?

Jill saw her objections for what they were—last minute rationalizations, like she was trying to think her way out of a problem that couldn't be solved intellectually. Werewolves were legends. All legends, like religions, broke down into nonsense in the light of reason. But if you looked at them the right way, both the bogeyman and God seemed perfectly reasonable.

Mark was in the stall to her right. Jill took comfort from his nearness, even though he was completely out of her sight. Further down the row, August and Nalder had joked and joshed for a while before finally falling quiet. Jill understood that these people were here for her benefit, to help see her through her first moonrise as a 'thrope. She was grateful to them for that.

Even so, she knew now that no amount of preparation could have gotten her ready—really ready—for what was to come, what was already starting.

She heard a low growl somewhere in the barn. Her naked body prickled with strange sensations. The harness creaked as she fidgeted. Links rattled along the lengths of her chains.

"Jill?" It was a male voice, concerned. "You okay?"

There were lights on in the barn, burning dimly. The night's chill grew, but Jill didn't feel it. Heat rose in her, climbing her legs, spreading over her groin and her stomach, reaching the place between her breasts. Her hard nipples pressed the harness, which held her from her throat to her hips.

The low growl she heard was coming from her. It sounded almost musical to her, like an overture to a song. Strength poured into her, following the heat. Suddenly, thoughts about how crazy all this was disappeared. This wasn't a college physics problem. It wasn't a prank or a fantasy. This was her *life*. Her new reality.

She grinned.

The male voice called out again, reassuring her. He kept saying a name, but she ignored it. What was happening to her was much more interesting. Her strength grew in her body and limbs. She heaved with the intense power. What she had been experiencing over these past weeks was nothing. Now it was like she was on fire with strong urges. She wanted to exercise her new powers. Of course she did. What could be more natural?

She wanted to run, like she remembered running before, through the fields with the man at her side. The...man? She didn't know who that could be. All that was left was the impulse: *run*, run through the night!

She took a step. Metal clinked. Something held her. But nothing could hold her, she told herself. Her strength was still growing, even now, even after it felt like she was already

impossibly strong, rippling with muscle. She thrashed her arms, which hung free. Her legs, too, were loose. But somehow she couldn't get anywhere. She took one step, another half-step—and then she was stopped. Something grabbed her around her middle, something that wouldn't let her go.

She felt panic. Then rage. Her last complex emotions vanished, replaced by primitive ones. The woman who had been Jill Machado writhed in her harness. The chains whipped harmlessly, holding to their imbedded bolts. A large cuff held her around her neck, and another gripped her waist. One of her arms came into view. Muscles bulged beneath a dark shiny coat of fur.

She was caught. Every deep instinct told her to get herself free, to go do what must be done. She needed to rampage. She needed to...to....

Bite.

The need grew into an agony. She had no real thoughts in her head anymore, just instinct. She understood herself like she never had before, in her former life.

Jill, who was Jill no longer, flailed in the harness and whipped her head from side to side. She opened her mouth, baring her fearsome teeth, and let loose the howl that was her only form of verbal expression. She sang her song. In the barn, her cry was taken up by others. She wasn't alone.

* * * *

The Beast rose into view when Vasha was a quarter of the way to the house. She felt it without even looking up. She kept her holy purpose, even as her change started. Of course, she welcomed the change. She embraced it, literally, opening her arms as her skin tingled, as her body took in the moon's power.

The growing strength was like being carried up on a rocket, sent high into the sky. Her already strong senses became even sharper, and the night lit around her, her eyes seeing as an animal's did in the dark. Smells rushed at her. She heard rodents scurrying and birds taking flight.

She was moving faster across the fields now. She fell into a fast, rolling rhythm. Her limbs pumped. She felt powerful. She felt like she was made for the hunt. Teeth flashed in a predatory grin, along a mouth that was still stretching into a snout. Her nostrils flared on the black knob of her nose. Ears that were pointed and furred rose from her changing skull. She was retaking her natural shape.

Vasha—somewhere she still knew that name, *Vasha*—dropped to all fours as she ran toward the lights on the hill ahead. This wasn't her first full moonup. She didn't intend it to be her last. She had lived a long time, and she had learned much, not the least of which was how to handle herself during a transformation. She had set a goal for herself. Even as her instincts took over, that goal remained in her mind.

The woman, the woman...she would find the woman, the one who'd felt her Bite last time. That woman was important. Vasha would set her free, give her the chance to know herself as she now was: a child of the Beast.

Vasha thudded across the ground. She had swelled with muscle. The night air streamed through her black fur. From ahead came the howls. The sweet song of her kind. The woman would be among them, Vasha knew—even now, in her changed state, she *knew*.

That woman would join with her, or Vasha would tear out her throat.

She raced toward the house, beneath the glare of the Beast.

* * * *

Zach actually had the bottle of pills in his hands—hands that had already started to change, to thicken with pads, the nails growing and curving. This was the last possible moment when he could still take his dose. He felt afraid. He wanted nothing so much right now as *advice*. What should he do? He wanted someone to tell him. He wanted the Community to guide him. It was ironic, since he'd always considered himself a loner.

Right now he was alone. Alone, knee-deep in the field grass, with the moon rising, with his transformation underway. For the first time in many decades, he would actually be conscious for the change.

Unless he swallowed these pills. Right now.

But his job wasn't done. Vasha was still at large. He had trailed her to this field, in sight of the farmhouse that belonged to the woman whose Whiff he'd detected a few days back. He understood. He had put it together. Vasha was going *back* there.

Zach felt sensations he barely recognized anymore. His body was changing. His flesh prickled with emerging fur. His very bones were reshaping. The last flickers of rational thought went through his brain. Before the primitive instincts overtook him, Zach deliberately dropped the small plastic orange prescription bottle. Pills rattled out onto the ground. He let go of the knapsack, too. His clothing was already tearing, seams popping as his body grew. Strength flowed through him. The ankle he'd twisted earlier suddenly didn't hurt anymore.

As he hadn't done in ages, he faced the change in a sober state. But somehow the goal he had set for himself, the one he'd been pursuing all this time, stayed in his mind. It was simplified, the way an animal might know something, but there it was, nonetheless: find the she-wolf, find Vasha—find her and stop her.

He had her scent. It led straight ahead, toward the lights in the distance.

Zachary dropped to all fours, teeth bared, the moonlight shining on his gray and auburn coat. His massive muscles bunched as he leaped forward. He ran free through the night, thrilling to the joy of the hunt.

* * * *

Some part of Mark's primitive mind was still aware of the female. She was nearby, beyond this wall on one side of him. She was there. And she was important to him.

But his fear and fury had him preoccupied. He was immobilized, held somehow in this terrible, small space. Metal rattled as he thrashed back and forth. Something held the upper half of his body. He clawed at the thing. He yanked at the chains, but his efforts did nothing. He still couldn't get anywhere.

He needed to be free. It was urgent. He needed to obey his instincts. His teeth ached, and only when he sank those teeth into flesh would that ache go away.

But the female, just beyond this wall...she mattered, too. She *belonged* to him, somehow.

It was confusing. But none of it made any difference, not while he was still trapped like this. It was maddening. He lifted his head and howled in frustration, the cry ragged in his throat. He swung his arms but couldn't reach either of the walls. He clawed again at whatever it was

that was grabbing him, but it stayed pressed around his torso, holding him where he was. His long curved nails just skittered off.

He was helpless. His teeth snapped at the air. The night was out of his reach.

* * * *

There were two structures. One was empty. Vasha's senses told her so, without her even needing to investigate. She had raced up the slow rise, with the moonlight on her back. Now she turned toward the barn, pausing, her huge muscled chest rising and falling. Simple thoughts still played in Vasha's mind.

Her emotions, like her reasoning powers, were reduced to the basics. But what she did feel, beyond the wild thrill of the night, was pride. She was proud of what she was. She was...superior.

Vasha grinned a—literally—wolfish grin, and stalked toward the barn on the hilltop. Lights burned inside, dimly. The door was closed, but she could see how flimsy it was. She gathered her speed and strength and threw herself at it. Boards splintered. She went through.

The scent of her kind was intense in here. She heard them howling much clearer now.

She sucked in the odors as she moved ahead, her eyes flashing in the dimness. She longed to deliver her Bite—that was her basic drive. But these creatures here weren't ones she would give her Bite to. Instinct told her that she shouldn't put her teeth to her own kind. She needed other flesh for that—*human* flesh.

Hot saliva dripped from her jaws. She wanted that flesh so badly.

But she was here for another purpose. Somehow there was something even more important than the Bite. Incredible. But she knew it to be true.

She moved along a row of stalls, seeing the equipment inside them but not really understanding what she saw in any rational way. They were just shapes and objects.

But when she finally came to a stall occupied with one of her own kind, she paused again. The creature, huge and fur-covered, was writhing about, but wasn't able to move beyond a few steps. Every time he—it was male—tried, there was rattling sound. Vasha knew that sound. She could almost connect a term to the image, but not quite. If someone had said the word "chains" to her just then, it wouldn't have made any difference. Even so, there was a hint of memory as a strange phrase went through her head: *the ghost-men's iron*.

Vasha growled at the chained creature, her hackles rising. He looked back at her, frightened and enraged. He didn't like being trapped like he was. She could see that.

She moved past him. Next was a female. Her snout was in the air, and she raised howl after howl. Vasha heard the rage—and the desire. This one was desperate to get loose, so she could go out and deliver her Bite. Vasha passed the female by.

In the next stall was another male, his fur a beautiful light brown, his body strong and vital. But he was trapped by the chains, as well, and also by the strange things that held him and the other two, caging their upper bodies, leaving their limbs to thrash around uselessly.

This male suddenly cut short his howl. His golden eyes fastened onto Vasha. He stared at her with wonder or fear or...recognition? The idea was too much for Vasha's mind. She looked back at him for a moment, but she still had her purpose. She moved on.

Vasha, moving free while these others were immobile, came to another female. *The* female. Her fur was dark, eyes a rich brown. Her body was supple and strong. But she was as chained and helpless as the others.

Here was the one Vasha wanted. She paced toward the female, entering the stall. Vasha felt the hard cool concrete under the pads of her feet. She drew in the scent, confirming that this was the one. The dark brown eyes looked back at her. Those eyes burned with an urgent need. This one desperately wanted her freedom, even more than the others wanted theirs. This female, here, was...important.

When Vasha came within range, the dark-eyed female didn't attack her. She let Vasha come even closer, sniffing at her but making no hostile moves. Vasha's mind worked hard. She felt dizzy from the effort. She was looking at the thing that imprisoned this female, the strange ugly extra skin over her upper body, attached to the chains that were *the ghost-men's iron*. Vasha still didn't understand the phrase, but she somehow grasped its basic meaning.

She needed to get this female free. That was why she had come here.

Vasha's black fur bristled. Her eyes narrowed. She was concentrating.

She lifted a front limb, then rose onto her back legs, balancing. Standing. It was the same way these others were all reared up in their stalls. She touched the female's caging thing at its front. Her nails clicked on the small brass squares there. The female didn't flinch. Maybe she too understood, a little. Maybe.

Vasha, using a single claw with a finesse that should have been beyond her, went to work on the lock.

Chapter Sixteen

Jill, who no longer had any concept of herself as *Jill*, didn't fear the beast. The black, furry creature was familiar somehow. It fascinated her. On a primal level, she understood that the creature was like her, one of her kind. It was the first time she'd seen one of her own breed.

How beautiful, how powerful....

She felt no violence, either from herself or this other one, who, Jill somehow knew, was also female. Jill was stuck where she was. That much she'd been able to work out. When she moved, there was a rattling sound, then something caught her and held her. She couldn't get free, though she didn't understand why.

Now there was this other, the one with the black fur, who rose onto her hind legs as Jill watched. She was big and muscular. Her head was long and narrow, and her eyes burned brightly. She gave off a familiar odor, which was reassuring. Jill didn't attack, not even when she came close and raised a paw, with one claw extended.

Jill couldn't see what the black beast was doing, but she saw the concentration on her face, how her eyes focused. She was fiddling with the thing that held Jill trapped. She was using her claw. Jill didn't interfere. This female didn't mean to harm her.

The night still called. The need within Jill was only getting stronger. She wanted to howl again, to snap her teeth. She felt a hunger that had nothing to do with eating or fucking. What she wanted to do—absolutely *had* to do—was to charge out into the night, under the moon, and find her prey. She didn't know how she knew about the moon, since she couldn't see it in here. But it was there in her mind, pale and round, calling to her, giving her strength.

The Bite. The Bite. Her jaws ached. Saliva spilled from between her teeth.

Somewhere nearby she heard a crash. It was like the breaking sound that had occurred just before this black beast had appeared. Something else had entered the barn.

The other female jerked around, still on her back legs. She growled deep in her chest, a frightening, exciting noise. For a moment her single claw stayed extended, then she dropped to the ground on all fours and bounded out of the stall where Jill was still trapped.

No.

Jill couldn't shout the word, but the meaning was clear to her. *No, don't go. Stay and finish.* She wanted the female to make the grabbing thing let her go. In frustration, Jill thrashed around again, flailing the chains and straining against the harness.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, it let her go. Jill tumbled forward, dropping for the first time onto all four limbs. She felt the cool stone on the pads of her feet. Her claws clicked on the surface. She arched her back. She was free! Muscles rippled beneath her coat. Her strength surged.

How beautiful she was. How powerful.

She didn't know what had happened to the other female, where she had gone. Jill's instincts were truly taking over, pushing out everything else. She had a purpose, and she would fulfill it.

Jill stalked out of the stall, leaving behind the swinging chains and empty harness. She would go outside and feel the moon's kiss.

She would seek out her prey.

* * * *

He'd had an easy time trailing her to the top of the hill, and once there, he saw the hole in the door.

But Zach's rational mind was nearly drowned out by the thunder of instinct. His blood was pumping, limbs working, senses seething with life. He loved it. It was something he hadn't experienced for so long, something smothered under years of pills and alcohol. At long last he knew the freedom of the night, and it thrilled him.

Despite his joy, despite his urge to go racing through the night, he turned toward the barn and leaped through the hole, knocking loose more boards. He was still looking for someone...someone of his own kind. A female. Black fur. She even had a—name? What was a name? He didn't know. He had only a whisper of a word in his head.

Vah-shah....

Meaningless noise. Or almost meaningless, anyway. But he did have an image of her. It was there in his mind as he moved deeper into the barn, smelling her scent, as well as the odors of others. More of his kind were here, but they weren't his concern. He had come only for the female with the black fur.

His teeth bared. He snarled.

Then she came into his view.

Tension whipped through his body, tightening his muscles, raising his gray and auburn hackles. His tail bristled. His hind claws dug into the ground as he prepared to launch himself. The female glared back at him with bright eyes. She seemed to be mocking him. Fury rose in him, and he realized that he meant to *murder* this fellow creature.

So be it.

There were others of his kind nearby, but they weren't moving around for some reason. He ignored them. He even ignored the one—a single glance told him it was another female—who slipped out behind the black-furred creature, coming this way before stopping, turning in the opposite direction, and springing away. She didn't matter to Zach. Nothing mattered but this one. His enemy.

She closed toward him a few more steps, then dug in. Her teeth gleamed, dripping. He returned the challenging grin.

They leaped at one another.

* * * *

She came within sight of Mark's stall, then turned around the other way and fled. She was *loose*, and that was wrong. It was all wrong.

Mark didn't—couldn't—understand, even as his mind struggled with the overwhelming concepts. He wanted to feel the moonlight, and to run through the dark in search of flesh. Yes. Yes. He wanted those things. He wanted to give his Bite.

But there something even more urgent. Her. His...mate. He had to protect her. And she had just walked past his stall.

Also, there were others here in the barn, ones who didn't belong. Things had gone wrong. He didn't understand all the details, but as the female, his mate, passed briefly through his view, he let out a howl of distress and warning. He felt a new kind of panic, different from the animal

confusion of being confined. He was afraid for *her*. What she might do, or what might happen to her. He needed to save her. It was his duty.

These advanced ideas translated into instincts for him. Even though he had no access to the particular memory or any way of understanding it right now, when he'd been two years old he had been on the porch with the family dog. His mother—she was still around back then—was dealing with a plumber called in to fix the upstairs toilet. The dog, a big collie, had suddenly left the porch and gone tearing off down the street. Little Mark had panicked. The only sure thing he knew right then was that Phantom (“Fannuh” was how he had said the name) wasn’t supposed to go anywhere without a leash. So, in his footie pajamas, Mark set off after the collie.

The adventure had ended without tragedy just four blocks away, with a neighbor bringing the boy and the dog back to Mark’s tearful mother. But Mark reacted the same way now, so many years later, under these very different circumstances.

He saw Jill leaving the barn and knew she wasn’t supposed to go anywhere. So he had to go after her.

For a while now, like the others in their stalls, he had been fighting his chains and harness and not getting anywhere. Some part of him perhaps understood that he wasn’t *supposed* to get free of this trap, but that didn’t stop him from trying.

Now he doubled his efforts. He threw everything he had into trying to break loose. He wrenched at the chains. He tore his claws across the harness. He flailed, using every bit of his muscle. The chains whipped. Cement dust flew.

His mate. His mate! Protect her. He had to protect her!

There came a *snap*, and suddenly the halves of the harness hung free on either side of him. It took only a second for him to realize he was no longer trapped. He flung off the caging thing from his brawny upper body. He dropped into a crouch. He felt the freedom of the night calling him. His fur rippled.

But he disregarded all his other instincts. He breathed the scent, *her* scent. He raced out of his stall, hearing snarls and whimpers and the sounds of a fight from one direction, even as he turned the other way—following her, needing to reach her before...before...whatever might happen to her.

He dashed the length of the barn, toward a place in the wall where three planks had been broken off at ground level. He went through, ducking under the lowest of the freshly splintered beams, charging out into the moonlight.

* * * *

She had completed her task. The female was free. But now Vasha had another concern—the male who had followed her into the barn. He had engaged her in combat.

Vasha found herself enjoying it. The two of them slammed together, jaws snapping, claws out. Her body thudded into his, and both of them tumbled to the ground. He was menacing, but she wasn’t afraid. She leaped up and swung her claws at him, catching his thick shoulder. She felt flesh tear beneath his coat.

The blood smell excited her even more.

But the male wasn’t finished. He threw himself on her again, teeth ripping at her face. She turned her head as she fell to the ground a second time, kicking upward with her hind legs, trying to dig into his belly. She felt pain from her right ear as he caught it with his fangs, and she couldn’t hold back a whimper. Her own blood scent now mixed with his.

In spite of her efforts, she wasn't able to get her rear claws into him. He pressed his weight onto her, pinning down her kicking back limbs. She flinched from his teeth as they continued to snap at her face, grazing her snout.

Suddenly the fight wasn't fun anymore. She was a physical match for him, but this male fought with a wild, relentless fury. Vasha was struggling now to get out from under him.

Blood made his fur shiny, but he was in a frenzy. All of a sudden, she stopped resisting him, tightening all her muscles for one concentrated push. Before she could do anything, though, he dropped his jaws onto the left half of her face and sank his teeth deep into her flesh. The pain was blinding. The shock almost finished her. But she now had the leverage she needed and managed to shove him off her all at once. Her blood was on his teeth as he fell over to one side.

Vasha got her legs underneath her. She had freed the female. That was what mattered. Her work was done. Now she raced toward the hole in the door she had made earlier, meaning to escape this place.

She didn't reach it.

The auburn and gray creature came down on her from behind, his weight crushing her helplessly to the ground this time. All her limbs were caught beneath her. His claws were on her shoulders, *in* her shoulders, sinking into her flesh, bringing her new pain. She fought again, struggling even harder than before but also with less strength. She had to get out of here. She wanted to feel the Beast shining down on her once more, once....

But the jaws fell on her a second time. This time the fierce teeth clamped onto the side of her neck, closing tightly. The mouth tore into her, grabbing hold of a meaty chunk of her throat.

As her enemy tore it away, she felt warmth rushing. It was, in the first second or so, comforting, like the hand of some angel pressing her neck. But then the agony and shock slammed into her. It still felt warm, but it was the warmth of her blood gushing out and matting her beautiful black fur. The last of her strength went streaming away with it.

Vasha's struggles beneath her enemy's pinning body were already hopeless. But she fought on anyway, even as the warmth turned to a cold that spread over her body. There would be no binding this wound, no way to recover the blood she'd already lost.

She kept on fighting. There was nothing else to do.

After a moment, though, she realized distantly that all she was doing was squirming about on the ground. She wasn't even sure if the male was still on top of her. There wasn't pain anymore from her shoulders or her ear or face, or even from her gouged-out throat. The cold closing over her had become something deeper, more tangible. It caressed her now.

She looked toward the hole in the door, even as her sight started to dim. She saw the pale light outside, and felt a longing for it.

Vasha did not close her eyes as she died.

Chapter Seventeen

The night was impossibly alive. It blazed. It thundered in Mark's veins. The moonlit blackness rang in his ears.

A sweet chill raced along his body as he charged across the ground. The air streamed over his fur. The tall grass fell away on either side of him, clods of dirt coming loose under his powerful paws. He felt like he was made for this. He felt completely *right*.

The frantic joy filled him. His instincts called, and he obeyed, and wanted to go on obeying, doing what had to be done....

No. No!

There was something else he had to do, something more important. In the rush of freedom, it had already slipped his limited mind. Even so, somehow he managed to stop. Moonlight glowed on his yellowish brown coat. His heart pounded. He wanted to keep going, but he resisted the urge. His strong limbs quivered, but he didn't let himself go racing wildly into the nighttime, to seek the prey he wanted so badly.

Mark, who wouldn't have known his own name right now, concentrated. It was hard, almost hopeless. His brain didn't operate rationally anymore. Whatever he was supposed to be doing, other than satisfying his needs, he had already forgotten.

Until he caught her scent.

At that, he felt new impulses redirecting him. Suddenly he did understand, in a pure, simple way, like an animal would. His mate. She had fled. He had to go after her.

He went leaping onto the trail she'd left behind. Again his body was pumping. The night was lit for him like it was daytime, but he didn't see her anywhere ahead. Still, her particular scent told him which way to go. He charged across the fields, the need to find her overwhelming all his other urges. He wouldn't forget a second time. Nothing could be more important than *her*.

When he reached the fence, he jumped over the wire without breaking stride. Beyond, the land opened up, rising on either side. The countryside was big, wide. So much space. What if he lost her in all this?

His doubt felt strange. It was, really, too complex an emotion for him now. Even so, he felt the fear that went along with that doubt. But he only met it with more determination. He would find her. He had to.

He pounded away into the distance, his fur rippling.

* * * *

She raced deeper into the night, deeper into the wonder of her new life. This *was* new, something she'd never experienced before, even though her instincts made it familiar, telling her what to do, where to go. Already the barn, where the grabbing thing had held her earlier, was fading into a vague memory. Now, she was out under the sky where she belonged.

Above her were the stars and, of course, the moon—a big bright circle carved into the black.

Jill sprinted along. She had already leaped over one fence. Now she jumped another as the land sloped upward. She felt powerful. She felt like she could run forever and never get tired.

But this night was about more than running. Again her instincts guided her, told her what had to be done. She was looking for prey. She had to deliver her Bite.

The thought—less a thought, more an impulse—caused her to charge faster and higher into the hills. There were other animals scurrying in these fields and winging in the sky above, but they didn't concern her. They were lesser, weaker creatures. They fled from her, burrowing and scampering away. But her prey was something else...something more worthy of her Bite.

She cast ahead, using her sense of smell. A fantastic variety of odors came to her. She sorted them rapidly, sure somehow she would know what she was looking for when she smelled it.

Suddenly, she had the scent.

Her heart beat faster. Her blood sang. Hot saliva whipped back along her snout as she raced even harder, upward, reaching a level part of the land where the grass grew taller, untended. She aimed toward the scent, tasting it on the air, feeling its living heat, knowing that this was her right prey.

She slowed. She ducked low among the long grass. This too was instinctive. She was a predator, yes, but a sly one. She wouldn't just lunge at her quarry. She would prowl up on it, with stealth.

Her jaw throbbed with anticipation. Her teeth ached to sink into flesh. It was a need stronger than anything she'd felt before. The grass shushed over her body as she crept forward. Now that she had stopped running, she heard the night's soft sounds more clearly.

She also heard the sound of her prey.

He—a male, she somehow knew—was pacing around outside a small, shabby enclosure. He had a head of dark unruly hair, and he walked on hind legs. He wore...clothing? But where his flesh was bare, there was no fur.

What *was* he?

But she knew. He was prey. He was a human. Any more complicated explanations didn't matter, and anyway she wouldn't have understood them. She crept slowly through the grass, peering out at him as he walked back and forth. He was making sounds that weren't howls or growls.

"Where'dja go? Where yuh gone? Come back. P'ease. P'ease, come backa me!"

But the sounds had no meaning for Jill. She looked the male over carefully. He was young, healthy, though at the moment he seemed unstable. He held something in one hand, and when he lifted this object to his mouth, which he did again and again, she heard liquid slosh. There was a sharp odor around him, and she thought it might be coming from the container.

She wanted him. She would have him. But first she would circle the area, sniffing out any possible danger. It wasn't enough just to be strong, she knew instinctively—she had to be smart, too.

When she was still some distance from the male human, her ears flattened back on her skull and muscles tightened across her shoulders.

There was another of her kind approaching from behind.

* * * *

He wouldn't have caught up to her if she hadn't stopped. His speed was no better than hers, which wouldn't have kept him from chasing her for mile after mile, until his strength gave out. He would have given his life to catch up with her.

But now she was *there*, just ahead. Her luscious scent filled him. This was his mate. He was joined to this female. He had to protect her.

He slowed, his senses telling him where she was—a short distance ahead, screened from view by the tall grass. Her scent pinpointed her. But he looked past where she was, scanning the vicinity, even though he didn't know what dangers might be there. He acted according to instinct. This wasn't his first time in this form, though being loose like this was something new.

Past where the dark-furred female crouched, another figure—a...a human?—was visible. He was stumbling around outside a trailer. He reeked of alcohol, and was babbling to himself. Mark caught the other odors he gave off—sorrow, self-pity, and anger. He didn't seem to be a threat, but Mark was careful anyway.

The human couldn't see him, and couldn't be allowed to see him. That, for some reason, was important. Mark slipped down into the grass, hunkering low, and moved forward. The fronds closed over his back. The grass whispered across his fur. He nosed his way along. His mate was ahead. She wasn't moving, but she was aware of him. Did she recognize him? She had to, *had* to. But maybe, right now, she was too distracted. He didn't want to scare her off.

These were complex thoughts, but the basic ideas came across as he advanced, a step at a time.

* * * *

She was captivated by the other's scent. It held her where she was, well shy of her prey. Why was she waiting? The human was right there. She had scouted the area well enough. There was no danger. She could take the human male, put her teeth into him....

Yet the scent of the *other* mesmerized her. It was a male scent. It belonged to one of her own kind. She had met others like herself tonight. But like the female with the black fur who had somehow freed her earlier, she didn't react violently to the male's presence. Even so, her heart quickened. She turned and saw the grass moving, a line coming toward her.

Jill could have fled. Or she could have rushed at the human, and delivered her Bite. She knew in that intense moment that she had these options, that she had a choice to make. Separate instincts were pulling at her for the first time. They were confusing. They were agonizing. She held back a whimper.

She chose.

She went to meet the approaching male, the one who was of her own kind.

Somewhere behind her, already half-forgotten, the drunken human slurred, "P'ease, c'mon back. I love yuh!" He wasn't talking to the creature in the grass, which he hadn't even seen. He had been walking up and down by his trailer. Now suddenly he tripped and fell face first on the ground. A moment later, he was snoring.

* * * *

Later on, as the moon continued across the sky, Jill would remember only the beast with the light yellow-brown fur. She would recall his breath, and his tongue as it lapped at her snout. She would feel again the quickening of her body, and know his strength as he mounted her. The pleasure stayed with her. It sealed a bond between them. They were truly together now.

Afterward, she followed him back to the barn where everything had started, where there were others of their kind, one of them seriously injured, one of them dead.

She didn't go again out into the night, even though the big beautiful moon continued to call to her.

Chapter Eighteen

Zach had lost a lot of blood, but August, it turned out, was very handy with a first aid kit, even more so than Jill. When the night had passed and the former cook had reverted to his human shape, he bound up Zachary's wounded shoulder. A Community doctor was called in, and the rover was put in a bed in Jill Machado's house and tended to.

He learned all this afterward, when he was fully awake again. It wasn't how he usually woke up after a full moon, with pills and alcohol in his system. He had faced the full moonup in a conscious state. He had also engaged in deadly combat.

The doctor—a bona fide, licensed practitioner—gave him painkillers, then gave him more when Zach explained his tolerance levels. His shoulder hurt. It was a deep pain, but it was dulling now. Probably that ache would stay with him. The wound wouldn't heal, either. It had been made by a 'thrope. That bitch had clawed him.

But Zach had done worse to her. The thought gave him satisfaction. It also gave him closure, like he was finishing a fight that had started long ago. She had given him his Bite. Now he had repaid her.

His memories of the fight in the barn were the memories of an animal, but since he'd woken up he had put it all together in his mind. He remembered chasing Vasha into the barn and engaging with her. He remembered tearing out her throat.

They told him that her body had already been disposed of. There would be no trace of the rogue.

He got out of bed, against the doctor's warnings, and stepped out onto the house's porch. The day was warm and pleasant. The next big moon felt very far-off. He breathed in the air. He smelled what there was to smell. He didn't know what he was sniffing for—maybe some vague paranoid thought that Vasha might have had an accomplice in this. But he had no real reason to think that.

"I had a hard time smelling her," he said to Mark, who stood with him on the porch. He was the one who'd confirmed to him that Vasha was dead and her remains eliminated. "Even when we were fighting, I could barely get her Whiff." Zach shook his head. "I...I don't know how she did it. But somehow she altered her scent. Deadened it. I just, I, uh...."

The doctor, a dignified-looking, red-headed man with fast eyes and faster hands, named Conrad, told him he needed a week in bed. Zach agreed to two days. When those days were up and he was ready to go, the woman who owned this farm, Jill, handed him the keys to a knocked-around tan pickup. "Sure you won't stay?" she asked.

He shrugged, favoring his right shoulder. "I'm a rover, darling. I don't *stay*."

The truth was he'd already had enough of this close contact with the Community. He had never gotten over the strange, unfounded sense that there was something wrong with the organization, some basic flaw. Not in its ideals, no—but somehow the whole deal felt...*off*. It was like a scent he couldn't pin down, one as ghostly as Vasha's had been. How she had managed to deaden her odor like that still troubled him. Even so, he was damn glad she was dead.

Right now, though, Zachary Montgomery Fitzsimmons wanted to hit the road. And so he did.

Mark entered the barn just as Nalder was hammering in the last nail. She had singlehandedly repaired the barn door this morning. Now she was finishing off the back wall, where Jill had burst through and Mark had gone after her.

Nalder straightened up. Sweat glistened on her forehead where it had missed being sopped up by her bandanna. She tossed the hammer down onto the blanket where her other tools were spread, and looked at Mark.

“Just in time to say ‘Oh, you need some help?’”

He smiled at her sarcasm, knowing she wouldn’t have wanted anybody else underfoot for a job as small as this one. He looked over her work. The wall appeared as intact as the barn’s door—not a patch job, but solidly rebuilt.

“It’s great work,” he said, waving a hand at the row of concrete stalls, as well. “All of it.” But he also meant in the disposal of Vasha’s body, which they had cremated and scattered. Nalder had handled most of that, too.

She looked over the stalls herself. After a moment she shook her head. “Can’t agree, Mark. The first night they’re in use, two of the harnesses fail.”

“I wouldn’t say *fail*. Vasha somehow unfastened Jill’s rig. And mine, well....”

“Yes, that was a fuckup on your part. You didn’t lock yourself in properly.” Nalder didn’t add a *tsk-tsk*, but only because she didn’t need to.

Mark was still embarrassed by that, and knew he should be. He had been in too much of a hurry, hadn’t done up the brass tabs like he was supposed to, simple as that. Probably he’d been preoccupied with Jill in the next stall, which was no excuse. Security in the Community was all-important.

Even so, that mistake of his had saved Jill from doing something she probably would have regretted for years to come. To say nothing of saving that man at the trailer.

Nalder knew this, too, and so didn’t press him. He helped her gather up her tools, and carried them out to the truck with the big bed, which was still loaded with the leftover construction materials. Dr. Conrad had left last night. It had been good to see him. He was an invaluable asset to the Community, ready to see to their medical needs whenever there was an emergency.

“Sure you and August don’t want to stay on another day? Rest up.”

Nalder looked at Mark and quirked her mouth. “You’re sounding like Jill, acting like the perfect hostess.” Before the comment could be taken for something nasty, Nalder added, “Let’s get real, Marky. Our frolicsome foursome would get tired after a while. August and me’ve got places to go. Besides,”—she looked at him seriously—“you and Jill should have some time together. Some real time. I can see how she feels about you. And you...you feel the same way. Don’t you?”

“I do.”

She smiled, and it was a warm, real smile. “I’m glad.”

Mark Curtz kissed her on the lips, the contact quick and meaningful. By evening, Nalder and August were setting off. Jill and Mark, standing at the top of the drive with their arms around each other, waved to their friends. When the dust had all settled and the truck was gone down the rutted road, they turned and went into the house.

* * * *

Jill sipped the bubbly golden wine. Mark, having had enough alcohol for the time being, was nursing a cup of chamomile. The visiting Community members had torn through Jill's supplies, both her booze and food, but she didn't care. Tomorrow she would take one of her other vehicles, or maybe borrow Mark's 4x4, and restock the house. Everything could be replaced. Everything would be.

The Community, though, was permanent. And she belonged to it. The thought made her warm, even more than the wine did.

"So," she said as they sat in the big front room, "what now?"

Mark looked tired, but a good tired—the fatigue that came from accomplishing something, from facing and defeating danger. He sat beside her on the settee. "Now," he said, turning to her, "I think you ought to rehire your workers. Get this farm going again."

"What about the gear in the barn?"

"Tell everyone you've taken up a new hobby."

"I'm serious."

Which she was, and he could see it. He gave her knee a squeeze, his touch familiar. "Clear out the barn of whatever equipment you want your employees to have access to. You've got plenty of other outbuildings on this spread. I will, of course, help you move things around. Then declare the barn off-limits. Simple."

"Simple," Jill said, and it was. A neat solution. It wouldn't do for anyone to be asking questions about those ten concrete stalls, much less the chains and harnesses. She thought about putting all those farmhands back to work. It was necessary. There was no other way to keep this place running. It would be good for the farm to be operating again, and to be employing people who had been so loyal. She would just have to make sure nobody was around on full moon nights.

"As for your brother...", Mark went on.

"Johnny." She almost spat her brother's name.

"The Community has a member or two versed in the law. We can bring someone in, get Johnny off your back. Permanently. Once our guy gets through with him, he'll want nothing to do with this farm."

"A werewolf lawyer," Jill said. "That sounds like something scary."

Mark sipped his tea. Night had closed in. It seemed strange for the house to be so quiet.

"So," she said, "what now?"

He turned again, frowning for a second. "Now? Oh, now." He waved his hand. "Now, you're a part of the Community. We try to help our kind. We can use this place as a haven. Your farm is a source of income, too. Ming can add its profits to the revenue stream. Believe me, we've got folks who can turn your dollars around, kick you back double what you're making. No bullshit. I know one broker who's been at it—under a few different names, of course—since Black Tuesday, 1929. Which he insists he didn't cause, by the way." Mark gave her a grin.

She reached over and put her hand on his thigh, feeling the muscles there.

"So," she said, setting aside her wine, "what, my dear, about *now*?" The grin she gave him was different from his.

He didn't frown this time. His eyes widened, and it was a little funny to see. He must have realized it, too, because he chuckled at himself. He set down his teacup. They rose together from the settee, hand settling into hand.

The walk to the bedroom was a familiar one.

When they got there, they lingered at the foot of the bed. Mark was more interested in undressing her than himself, taking care with undoing each button, with every whisper of fabric over her skin. His gold eyes shone with a strange, almost virginal excitement, like he was seeing her for the first time. Jill liked that. He had her completely stripped before she'd even gotten his shirt off.

He bent to kiss her shoulder, her throat. She felt his breath on her breasts, and she expected him to kiss her nipples, which were stiff with anticipation. But he gently brushed her Bite with his lips, the kiss soft and tender. Jill's back arched. She pushed hard against his mouth, as tingles raced over her skin.

After that, she pretty much tore the clothes off him. His cock was growing, the shaft straining erect. Her wetness felt extreme to her, a flood streaming from her pussy, already making the smooth inner flesh of her thighs damp.

She tumbled onto the big bed, which had seen a lot of action these past days, and pulled Mark down on top of her. He felt brawny and alive. She wanted to join herself to that strength. Their mouths came together, tongues scouring. Her heart beat fast under the place where she had received her Bite. She wasn't afraid of what she had become, not anymore. She had faced her new reality. She had withstood it. She still had memories of what had happened that night, how she had *not* satisfied her urge to deliver her Bite. How she had chosen instead this man, this beautiful man...this love.

His strong hands had hold of her breasts. Her fingers raked over his broad shoulders. The mattress bounced under them as he jockeyed for position and she squirmed into place, feeling the urgency become a frenzy.

She opened herself to him. He plunged into her in a single thrust, his cock skewering to the hilt, his luscious cockhead reaching Jill's neediest depths. She couldn't hold back her cry, and there wasn't any reason to. Her fingers sank into his firm back, her trembling ass lifted from the bed, and her orgasm was like a lightning strike, an impossibly fast, blinding bolt of pure power that lit every part of her. The pleasure was as fast as an overload, and left her dazed and awestruck by what had just happened.

She was, maybe, even just a little bit embarrassed. Maybe this was how a man felt when he came too fast...?

But Mark didn't seem to realize she felt embarrassed. He settled into a steady rhythm, drawing in and out of her, giving her the full length of himself every time. His hard pecs pressed her. She also felt the rasp of his Bite against her, and wished she had kissed him there the way he'd done to her. But there would be time later. Hopefully, a lot of time. She heard the smack of his balls against her body. Jill lifted her legs and crossed them over his back, locking her ankles together, hanging onto him like she was holding onto a ship's mast on a rocking sea.

He started to speed up, to lunge harder. Jill felt the impacts as they rippled up her body, bringing her more pleasure. She held him tighter, feeling her flesh grow moist against his. The ends of his longish dirty blond hair grazed her cheeks and lips. She looked up into his face and saw his eyes narrowing, teeth baring. For the flash of an instant, the wolf's face was there, lovely and dangerous. But it didn't frighten her. She'd seen him in that state, after all, just as he had seen her. It had been a kind of intimacy no two humans could ever experience, or even understand.

They had mated as wolves that night. Now, tonight, they joined in human form, and it was just as profound. They shared a bond beyond petty jealousy and minor emotions. Mark, with his glorious cock thrusting inside her, was mated to her.

Her gaze moved from his face, past his heaving shoulder, finding the skylight. The moon hung there, part of its curve missing from it, not quite full anymore. But it would grow again, and nothing could prevent that. It obeyed laws set down in the physics of the stars and planets.

Eyes still on the moon, Jill squeezed tightly around her lover, and came with a helpless quivering, even as Mark's body tightened and he jetted into her. The pleasure was powerful, mingling, running deep through both of them. They shared the orgasmic joy, and it was more intense for that sharing.

After, he stayed on top of her, stayed inside her, slowly softening, their bodies cooling.

He murmured against her temple, where her dark hair clung damply. "I can operate out of here. For a while, anyway. Go make initial contacts with newbies within a reasonable radius of this farm. If you want me to stay on here, that is."

By his tone she knew he was assuming nothing, and she appreciated that. But it was very easy for her to kiss the hollow of his throat, and say, "Stay. Stay." Again she tightened her arms over his shoulders, pulling him more firmly on top of her. She felt him stirring again, still inside her, the connection unbroken.

Jill Machado looked past the brawny shoulder once more, up through the skylight to the pale shape set against the night's black velvet. Her heart lay open to both Mark and the moon.

* * * *

Dr. Sebastian Conrad had driven in a long looping circle, enough that nobody would notice him returning to the area in the night. He had even stayed out of range of that rover, that one who had killed Vasha. That was an unfortunate setback. But setbacks happened. It was the greater game one had to keep in mind. The players were the lycanthropes and the humans, and the humans would not win the game. They could not.

Conrad picked his way through the grass, knowing it was better to get where you needed to go in your own time rather than rushing and missing your target. He drew in the night air. Certainly he was no rover, but he had lived a long, long time, a stretch that would amaze even the Community's oldest members. Over the course of that life his senses had become very sharp.

He had the scent, and got closer to it with every step he took. His distinguished features were composed. His red hair, gray at the temples, was neatly styled. He had about him an air of calm and dignity.

It was something of a risk coming back here, even with the precautions he'd taken. But he thought it unwise to leave behind this crucial piece of evidence. It wasn't likely anybody who discovered it would put all the pieces together, would understand that Vasha had not worked alone, that she'd had—as she liked to say—a *special ally*.

Their first encounter had happened many, many years ago. It had been after Conrad's own wild youth, a time of recklessness when he had roamed the countryside, giving his Bite to whoever he pleased, indulging his whims. Back then his only plan was satisfying his own needs.

Long, long ago...yet even so, he still recalled Vasha, that dusky-skinned beauty and how she had seemed to welcome him when he'd rushed at her there in the smoking ruins of that village. He had singled her out, sensing in her the possibility of a kindred spirit.

Much time had passed before he saw her again, but by then she too had matured, and had come to the same conclusion as he: the humans were weak and had to be conquered. So the two of them had formed their private little alliance, seeing each other only at lengthy intervals, keeping tenuous contact but always sure that the other was there, advancing their mutual agenda.

Sebastian Conrad—born under a different name, on another continent, ages past—reached the fence and followed it for a while. He focused on Vasha's scent, though he knew her body was cremated and gone. But she had left behind her clothes, and a hint of her Whiff was still on them. It might be enough for some member of the Community to track. Conrad wouldn't risk that.

Still not hurrying, he at last came to the little pile of clothing there on the ground. In a pocket he found the small jar. He had devoted what would have been the length of a typical human lifetime in the development of this unguent. It was the product of a great deal of research, money, and effort. He kept up his medical licenses, renewing them under different names every few decades, just so he could have access to the humans' research facilities.

Of course he'd had to keep this project secret from the Community. It wouldn't do for any of those misguided fools to know they had a traitor among them.

Vasha's death was a setback, yes. Fortunately, there were other rogues out there.

Dr. Sebastian Conrad tucked the bundle of dingy clothing under his arm, and slipped the jar of cream into his coat's pocket. Then he started back to where he'd left his car.

THE END

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