

A close-up, high-resolution photograph of a lion's face, focusing on its eyes, nose, and mouth. The lion's fur is golden-brown and highly detailed. The lighting is warm, highlighting the texture of the fur and the intensity of the lion's gaze.

BEASTS

QUICKREADS

JANET LORIMER



Ellie Orson couldn't stop shaking. Even after one of the police officers put a blanket around her shoulders, she was still trembling. "You're in shock," he told her.

Then a man in a gray suit sat down beside her. "I'm Detective Ulric," he said. "Ms. Orson, I know you've had a bad experience—but I need you to tell me what you saw."

Ellie gazed at him. "If I tell you, you won't believe it," she said. "*I* don't believe it! And I'm the one who saw—*it!*" She shuddered.

Detective Ulric gently patted her shoulder. "This brute has struck before. But you're our only eyewitness. I *must* know what you saw—no matter how strange your story sounds."

Ellie took a deep breath. She forced her thoughts back to what had happened less than an hour ago.



Ellie was studying to be a lab technician at the local community college. To pay her way through school, she waited tables at the Top Cat Restaurant.

Tonight, just after closing, the cook had asked Ellie to haul a bag of trash out to the dumpster.

Dragging the bag behind her, she'd stepped into the alley. Next to the dumpster, she saw a man bending over a figure on the ground. At first Ellie thought they were two street people. Then the standing man looked at her.

Horrified by the sight of him, she screamed and ran back inside the kitchen, slamming the door shut. Then she heard a terrible roar, and the rasping *scritch-scratch* sound of fingernails—or maybe claws—on the door.

Ellie screamed again. This time, a couple of busboys came running. When they opened the door, they saw a woman lying on the ground, groaning—but the attacker was gone!



“**T**hat’s it,” she told Detective Ulric. “That’s what happened.”

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, “Okay. Now I must ask you to describe the man you saw.”

Ellie felt sick to her stomach. “You—you don’t understand,” she gasped. “He—*it* didn’t even look human.”

Ulric frowned. “Just what do you mean, Miss Orson?”

“I don’t know how to explain,” Ellie groaned. “He looked part human, part animal. His face was covered with hair. His eyes seemed to—well, *glow*. And his teeth—” She shuddered again. “He had *fangs*,” she whispered.

Glancing at the detective, Ellie could see

that he was trying to picture what she'd seen. "I told you that you wouldn't believe me," she said.

The detective turned and gazed at her. "Oh, but I do," he assured her.

Ellie stared at him in shock. "But it doesn't make a bit of sense!" she exclaimed. "There's no such thing as a creature that's part animal, part human." She thought for a moment. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe the guy was wearing some kind of ugly monster disguise. Or—or maybe he was just badly deformed or . . ."

Detective Ulric smiled. "I meant that I believe you *think* you saw someone who's part human, part animal. But you're right. No man could *really* be part animal." He paused and his smile widened. "Now could he?"

But Ellie noticed that the smile on his lips had never reached his eyes.



After completing his interview with Ellie, Detective Ulric drove her home. "I've

assigned a female police officer to stay with you,” he said. “More officers will be stationed outside your building. You’ll be quite safe.”

“Safe from what?” Ellie asked in surprise. “No one attacked *me*.”

Ulric glanced at her. “We’re just trying to cover all the bases. I don’t think that thug will come after you. On the other hand, you’re our only witness. When we catch this guy—and we will—you’ll have to testify.”

Ulric walked Ellie to her upstairs apartment. But when she unlocked the door, Ulric reached out and stopped her from entering.

“Just to be safe, I’ll go in first,” he said. He checked the living room and kitchen. “All clear here,” he called out.

Ellie was eager to get out of her uniform and into a hot shower. “I’m sure everything’s fine. I always lock up tight before I leave,” she said as she headed for her bedroom.

Ulric shouted at her to stop, but she had already opened the bedroom door. *A big dark form with glowing red eyes was crouching near the open window!* When she screamed

in terror, the creature let out a roar.

Detective Ulric pushed her to one side. Then he drew his gun and fired at the cowering, dark form.

The creature howled in pain—then seemed to disappear out the window!

Ulric hit the light switch next to the door. Seeing that indeed the room was empty, the detective cursed in anger. “He got away!” Ulric groaned.

Ellie pointed to splatters of blood on the floor under the window. “It looks like you hit him,” she said.

Ulric studied the drops of blood. “I don’t think he’s badly hurt,” he said. “I’m afraid the bullet just grazed him. Unfortunately, his wound is likely to make him even more dangerous.”

“I don’t understand how he opened the window,” Ellie said as she crossed the room. She noticed a tuft of hair—or was it fur?—caught on the window-sill. Without thinking, she closed her hand over it and shoved her hand into her pocket. “I know I locked that

window before I left for work.”

Ulric closed and locked the window. “Oh, you aren’t giving him enough credit,” the detective said. “This fellow is very clever. How do you think he knew where you lived?”

Ellie gasped. “He *followed* us?”

Ulric nodded. “He must have. That means he must have been hiding close by while I questioned you. I hope that scares you, Miss Orson,” he added seriously. “That fear could save your life, you know.”

Ellie sank down on her bed. Her voice was shaking. “What am I going to do?” she cried out. “The monster knows where I live and where I work!”

“Don’t worry,” the detective said. “Tomorrow morning I’m going to see that you get out of the city for awhile. I’ll take you to a place where I know you’ll be quite safe.”

Ellie thought of something as she saw him to the front door. “The blood! Are you going to take a sample to the lab? Maybe you can get some DNA from it. Then we can figure out what that creature really is.”

The detective laughed. “You’ve been watching too much television,” he said. “That creature, as you call him, is most likely to be a very sick person who needs to be caught and treated.”

Ellie couldn’t understand why he wasn’t eager to get the blood analyzed. Would she have to do some detective work on her own?

Before she went to bed, Ellie put the tuft of hair and a note inside an envelope. On the outside she wrote the name of her lab partner at school—Todd. She put the note in her purse.

“Okay, Detective,” she muttered to herself, “if you won’t, I *will*.”



Early the next morning Ulric was putting Ellie’s suitcase in the trunk of his car. He shared the good news that the victim would soon be out of the hospital. Ellie was relieved. “Can we stop by the college?” she asked. “I need to pick up some assignments.”

Ulric agreed, although he also insisted on

coming in with her.

Ellie got her assignments. Then, while Ulric talked to her teacher, she secretly handed the envelope to Todd. “Read this later,” she muttered.

Todd nodded.

Ellie was glad that he was playing along. She hoped he’d be able to do what she asked.

A few minutes later, Detective Ulric pulled the car away from the curb. “Where are we going?” Ellie asked.

“To a safe house,” Ulric said. “I’m not going to tell you just where it is. It’s really better for you not to know.”

“But *I’m* not the bad guy,” Ellie objected. “What harm would it do?”

“You just might accidentally tell a friend,” Ulric said with a smile. “Right now we can’t afford to trust anyone.”

“I really don’t think so! Why would any of my friends tell a horrible creature with fangs where I’m staying?” Ellie said sarcastically.

Ulric wasn’t amused. “What makes you think the man you saw *always* looks like he