



Ferocity

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Category: Romance, Adult, Paranormal

Description: The bravest never go looking for trouble Hearts and Paws Sanctuary has been in Scarlett Leon's family for generations. When her grandfather wasn't running the day to day activities, her father had been. Then, ten years ago, in a tragic accident, her family perished leaving Maisie and Scarlett to run the day to day operations and care for their residents. Together they have saved countless injured and malnourished animals and domesticated big cats. However, two months ago, her sister set out to destroy their haven. Well, not on Scarlett's watch. With the help of Edward (Ed for short), Dave, and Kenny, she'll do whatever it takes to keep their animals safe. Scarlett might have been the ugly, anti-social daughter no one talked about, but she won't let her legacy go waste. Her ancestors built Hearts and Paws Sanctuary for a reason, and she'll do whatever it takes to make sure her sister doesn't turn it into a wasteland. Maisie might be the King of the Leon family, but come hell or high water, Scarlett will be the Queen of their legacy.

Total Pages (Source): 44

Chapter One

Hearts and Paws Sanctuary...

“Scarlett, come here. I think one of the lions is sick...”

Those two stupid sentences changed Scarlett Leon’s life forever. Thinking back on it, she should have found her father and had him come with her to the enclosure. But, she’d been ten, wide-eyed and filled with wonder. Nothing would have stopped her from trying to help. It was in her blood.

Her parents along with her grandparents owned the sanctuary for injured and abused big cats for almost thirty years. Her sister, Maisie, and she were in charge of visual checks outside of the enclosures before and after school. If they saw anything out of the usual, they were to report it to their father, and he would take care of it. At night, they were supposed to clean the pens and feed the cats. Unfortunately, the ‘menial jobs,’—cleaning and feeding the animals—as Maisie put it, were left for Scarlett to do. She didn’t mind though. It’d given her extra time to learn about the big cats who called Hearts and Pawshome and it engrained the strict rules her grandfather set forth in her brain as well.

The number one rule of staying alive around some of these beasties was to stay out of their space. Many of the lions, tigers, and cheetahs were being put through the paces of rehabilitation, yet they were just as liable to attack someone rather than acknowledge a human was trying to help them. People were their sworn enemy and who could blame them? Several of their tigers were hand raised, domesticated to a point, before being viciously beaten so they’d fly into a rage and attack when

cornered or touched. Self-preservation had been brutally engrained into these animals and even though Scarlett and her family would never do anything to hurt them, they weren't so keen to trust them—yet.

She also knew to be on alert around them at all times, still, the idea of one of their cats getting hurt, caused her to throw caution to the wind that particular day and she headed straight for the lion's habitat.

Their sanctuary was located in the mountainous area of Colorado and through hard work and dedication, mimicked the desert plains of Africa. Medium-sized Acadia trees were strategically placed around the five-acre exhibit along with small bushes and shrubs. Pride rocks and dens were built with clay, chicken wire and stones to give the males a place to lay in the sun and survey their lands. Off to the right of the enclosure was a man-made watering hole. So they could drink and swim as they would in the wild. Due to the amount of rain and snow they received year-round, they never had to worry about filling it and the lions enjoyed it. However, when Scarlett spotted Maisie and one of the lions her sister said was in trouble, Scarlett's heart stopped.

Maisie and the lion were drenched. The feline was limp, and Scarlett couldn't see if it was breathing. Stupid, stupid me, she entered the restricted area without even a second thought. Those big cats were her life and her love. It didn't even compute why Maisie was in there or how she'd been able to sit with the lion without being mauled. Scarlett, in her naivety, believed they'd finally earned the trust of the particular lion, Kobo, and he'd allowed her sister to enter and save him.

She ran to her sister's side like a fool.

It was instinct for the cats to give chase when they saw prey. That day, Scarlett became a source of food for them, despite the fact she'd been the one to feed them and slowly reacclimate them to human contact—something her parents didn't know

about until that fateful day. When the metal gate slammed behind her, she took off for her sister and the injured lion. Scarlett had been so focused on saving the cat, she didn't even see Jäger nor did she hear him. He'd been waiting. Watching. It was almost as if he anticipated Scarlett's arrival then he pounced. The weight of the four-hundred-pound lion landed on her and knocked the air out of her with such force, she didn't think it would ever come back.

His massive paws swatted at her as she tried desperately to get out from under him. Scarlett screamed for Maisie's help, but by the time she could get a glimpse of where her sister had been, Maisie was gone and so was Kobo. She didn't understand what was happening to her as the heat from the lion's breath fanned across her cheek. The rancid smell of meat and things she didn't want to contemplate, wafted from the lion. She covered her face, in an attempt to protect it while Jäger began to scratch and nip at her skin. He was going to kill her. She knew it. The lion could and probably would eat her whole before anyone could reach her side. It'd been her fault too. She broke the rules. Without even a care for her safety, she ran headlong into a fucked-up situation.

Scarlett uncovered her face for a split second and screamed again, hopeful someone—anyone—might hear her and come to her aid.

It'd been the opening Jäger needed.

His paw came down in an arc across her face and she felt it. Her skin was on fire. Pain, the likes of which she can't explain, exploded over her eye and cheek. The warmth of blood flowing from the slice, ran down her face and into her mouth, causing her to gag on the thick, coppery liquid. It filled her ear as well, making it hard to hear and her vision, in her right eye, became a blanket of red.

This was how she was going to die.

The repeat of a rifle startled her, but not as much as Jäger's body falling on her. She couldn't see anything then. His big body covered her from head to toe along with his blood. She was suffocating, not just from him being on top of her, but also due to the amount of blood she'd lost and was still losing. The area erupted in shouts and noise. The ground vibrated beneath her as people ran toward where she lay near the watering hole.

But she feared, they were too late.

Scarlett was cold. So, so cold. Every breath she took was excruciating. Her hands tingled as did her legs. The sound of bees buzzing filled her ears and her head pounded. It took her father, uncle and her grandfather to get Scarlett out from under the lion. By the looks on their faces when they finally appeared in front of her, she'd realized she was a goner. They all peered down at her in fear and disgust. The sight of her made her uncle physically sick.

That's when she passed out.

Even now, sitting at her desk, in her office, overlooking Hearts and Paws Sanctuary twenty years later, the memories were still so fresh. It'd been like it all happened yesterday, and she still couldn't figure out how it transpired. She didn't know how Maisie got into and out of the enclosure and out without anyone seeing Maisie. She didn't understand how a lion, soaked to the bone, didn't leave a trail of water behind him, or as her parents said later, dry as a bone. She also couldn't explain how her sister was able to change clothes so quickly either.

Of course, like always it seemed, when she could finally talk and had healed enough the doctors didn't think there'd be permanent damage, just a scar, her father made her explain why she'd gone into the area with all of the lions. She described in detail what she saw. How Maisie had called her for help and how her sister had been inside the pen with Kobo.

He didn't believe Scarlett.

Maisie, after the accident, claimed she never went into the lion's pen. She didn't see Kobo and she claimed she didn't scream for Scarlett's help. She said she'd been inside the whole day. Scarlett knew her sister was lying, but Maisie was the star of the family. At thirteen she already ran one of the many educational shows at the sanctuary, and their family and friends compared her to a young Bindi Irwin. Scarlett, on the other hand, was a grunt. Until that fateful day, she fed, cleaned, and spent most of her time with the cats—more than most did on even a weekly basis. She saw their pain. She understood it on such a visceral level, she'd been determined to rehabilitate all of them herself. However, since the day they put Jäger down, she hadn't been allowed to see her lions like she used to.

“Hey gorgeous,” Kenny, one of their on-site caretakers, and her friend said, entering Scarlett's office, pulling her from her wayward thoughts. “Why are you inside this gloomy place and not out enjoying the nice fall day? Pretty soon, you'll be demanding your pumpkin spice latte.”

He pulled the cup out from behind his back and placed it on her desk. She liked Kenny. He came on when they needed him most. Two months after her eighteenth birthday, her parents along with her uncle and grandfather passed away on a trip to Mozambique to rescue a few lions. Their flight had gone down over the Indian Ocean while they'd been on final approach after circling the airstrip several times. They—her and Maisie, were compensated by the airline, but, in the long run, no amount of money brought their family back to them.

“Thank you, Kenny,” she said. “You're too kind to me.”

He waved her off. “Ain't nothing but a thing. So, you want to see some of the cubs taking their first steps outside?”

She did and she didn't. Maisie had gotten a wild hair up to her ass about the sanctuary. She thought it would be amazing to breed their big cats and sell them to make money. Scarlett disagreed. Those animals weren't capitulation toys. They were abused, and, in most cases, left to die. They shouldn't have to go through estrus and pregnancy just to add an attraction to Heart and Paws.

“Kenny...”

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He held up his hands. "I agree with your stance on this, boss. I feel the same way you do. However, it's done. We have seven new cubs and they're growing like weeds."

"We also have seven more mouths to feed," she muttered.

"Again, I agree with you. But, come on Scar, don't you want to see babies?" He wiggled his brows. His bright amber eyes sparkled with hope and happiness. How could she turn him down?

"It has been years since I've been to the enclosures."

"Then today is the perfect day to reacclimate yourself with your feline friends." He held out his hand to her. "I won't let anything happen to you. I promise."

Everyone at the sanctuary knew what happened to her. They had to know according to Maisie. It'd been one of the fanciful stories her sister liked to tell anyone who came to work for them. The day Scarlett was mauled and survived. Somehow, it also became a story about Maisie as well. Her sister didn't care if the memories of it still haunted Scarlett. Maisie didn't care if people stared at Scarlett's disfigured face or pointed at her while whispering.

None of Scarlett's pain mattered to Maisie, only the money she could make for the sanctuary. Scarlett, like their big cats, were sideshow freaks compared to Maisie's flawlessness. "It's not that I don't trust you..."

"But, you don't want to be seen in public?" He quirked a brow. "Don't you think you've hidden away long enough, Quasimodo?"

“Asshole!” Scarlett threw a binder clip at him and laughed. “I am not Quasimodo.”

“No, you’re not. You’re a sexy as hell lioness, who should be with her pride.”

As if.

“Boy, you’re blowing smoke up the wrong woman’s ass,” she said, shaking my head.

“Who knew you were a sweet talker.”

"I call ‘em as I see ‘em." Kenny was easy on the eyes and, though he flirted like a tom cat in heat, he was all hot air and bluster. He was mixed like her. His mother white and his father black. His skin was a deep bronze color and his hair fell to his shoulders in loose, dark brown curls shot with golden highlights. He belonged on a damn magazine cover, not in her sanctuary picking up poo. Yet, he stayed on with them.

He also treated her like she wasn’t disfigured. Like she didn’t have a scar from her scalp line down to her cheek, and she appreciated it.

Scarlett learned pretty quick some men were either repulsed by her or they considered her an oddity. Her scar tended to make them stare or give her looks of pity before walking away. She should've been able to say she was used to it by now, however in the twenty years since the accident, she didn't think she'd ever been comfortable in her skin.

If anything, it got worse as she grew up. Her teen years were atrocious. College was marginally better. But, again, most of the guys she dated, only wanted one thing—sex. For them, she was a conquest. For her, the only place she felt like she wasn’t coming out of her skin, had been home, at Hearts and Paws, because none of the big cats treated her like a freak of nature.

Nonetheless, her scar and the tale behind it didn't dissuade Kenny. He tried and tried to get a rise out of her. He tempted her with treats and soft platitudes. He talked to her and handled her like a wounded animal. Sometimes she wondered if that's what she was.

“What are we going to do with seven more mouths to feed?”

Kenny shrugged. “Not my call, Scar. Only Maisie’s.”

She frowned. Since their parents passed away, Maisie had been the one in control of the day to day business aspects of the sanctuary. In the beginning, Scarlett thought everything would be fine. Her sister loved the animals, maybe didn't do as much work as Scarlett did, but Maisie had been the face of their charity along with the sanctuary for many years. As such, it wasn't like her sister could get elbow deep in the chow or shit.

Scarlett's 'disfigurement,' allowed her sister to take over the public perception of the refuge while Scarlett ran the maintenance half of the business—which should have included the veterinary and wellbeing of the big cats along with the financials, but Maisie insisted since she went to the charities and did all the leg work, she should be responsible for the balancing the yearly budget.

“You're right it is,” she replied, standing. “But, from the cut in the upkeep budget Maisie made a couple of weeks ago, I can tell we're not bringing in the money we used to. Seven new mouths to feed means more food, more bedding, more everything.”

She knew she sounded like a broken record, but if someone didn't say it, they were lost. Maisie didn't have control of the financial side like her sister wanted everyone to see she did. If they cut corners any more than what they'd already done, it could mean disaster for the animals and their preserve. Scarlett had to figure out what was

happening to all of their money and stop it quick. She wouldn't allow her family's legacy to be destroyed—even though the people she still respected and loved had turned their back on her many years ago.

“Are you coming to see the cubs?” Kenny got a hopeful look on his face. “I understand you're worried about the future. I am too. But you should be here with us right now. Worry about tomorrow, well, tomorrow.”

“I'm worried about the practical. I'm worried about the fact my sister isn't following the protocol my grandfather insisted upon. ‘All animals brought to the sanctuary must be neutered.’”

Kenny frowned. “I'm not paid to ask those questions. I do the heavy lifting when need be.”

No, but she should have. Huffing out a breath, Scarlett pointed to the hallway leading to the enclosures. “Show me these cubs.”

He squeezed her shoulder and pressed her to his side when she joined him. He was all brawn and model good looks and he even smelled expensive. Observing him from a distance as she did on occasion, she hadn't expected the strength he exuded or the comfort she could find in his embrace. She also shouldn't have wanted to bury her face in his chest and inhale the luxurious scent of sandalwood and leather. Damn it, what the hell is wrong with me?

Kenny led her down the corridor to the door separating the main building from the actual refuge. The dull, fall sunlight balanced out the cool breeze of the coming winter. Already, there'd been snow in the forecast. It wouldn't stick yet, however, it reminded her of all the work they still needed to do, to prepare the property for a long cold season.

They passed through the employee entrance to the back area where all the internal cages were kept. In the distance, she could hear the roar of the lions calling out to each other, or the likely case, they were waiting to eat since it was just about time. Kenny opened the door to the tiger area first and she stepped inside. The visceral reaction had been instantaneous. Her palms began to sweat and the sound of bees buzzing filled her ears. She detested this. She hated the fact her heart felt like it would leap from her chest. Despised the bouts of dizziness leading up to her passing out. She loathed the fear a place she'd called home for so long, could seep from her.

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Having a panic attack was no joke and she hated them with a passion. So, she used the rules her grandfather made for the sanctuary as a way to stay as far as she could from the enclosures. However, in reality, she stayed away because of how she felt the minute she stepped foot inside. It killed her to stay away. Those were her cats and to not be able to be with them every day, well, depression took root. Yes, her parents forced her to talk about the event, but there was nothing like the comfort of a big cat to wash all the pain away. So, little by little, she'd try to see her most beloved big cats from outside. It never ended well though. The minute she'd spot one of the lions coming toward her, Scarlett would run from the fence line quicker than a cheetah chasing a rabbit. Today, was the first time in almost three years since she'd been inside the facility.

Kenny pushed open the metal door, allowing her the first glimpse into the cages they used for housing the animals at night and during the winter. All of them were empty except for one. Her breath came a little quicker with each step she took. Her heartbeat a wild tattoo. She couldn't run away this time. She had to face her fears no matter what. As she peered into the housing cell, three sets of small blue eyes peered up at her. Their tiny tiger bodies were laid out like their mother while peering up at her as if she were a curiosity or an oddity.

One meowed, causing their mother to lift her head and stare right at Scarlett. She froze. Fear ignited her fight or flight response. She had to get out of there. What if tigress got out? What if she lunged for Scarlett? What if the tigress blamed her for Jäger's death? Stupid, to even think such a thing, but for Scarlett, the question was part of the visceral reaction she had when any of the cats saw her. The animals, to her anyway, weren't witless. They were intelligent. They remembered the smells and tones of voice. They knew time as well. The tiger could very well eat Scarlett,

finishing off what Jäger started twenty years ago. Instead, the tigress yawned, lowered her head and went back to sleep.

"All worked up for nothing," Kenny murmured. "You do fear these animals, don't you?"

Scarlett turned around and started back for her office. "I don't have time for your nonsense."

"You don't want to see the lion cubs?"

She paused. "You're acting like this is a good thing, Kenny. We are a sanctuary where animals come to rehabilitate and live out their remaining years. Not get treated like breeders."

He held up his hands. "I already told you I agree with you, Scar. However, they're here and we need to care for them. Maybe find them new homes when it's time and deal with the fallout from the mating in an appropriate manner."

He was right. Again.

She chalked her reaction up to being afraid. To be so close to the one thing she loved so much it almost resulted in her death. Scarlett didn't know how she'd get over her phobia, but she realized standing there, how much it affected her daily life. She'd built herself a cocoon and never came out again. She'd also relinquished the bulk of the decision making to Maisie and now, she regretted it. "Fine. Show me the lions."

Kenny grinned. "There's the spark I've been waiting to see."

She rolled her eyes and muttered, "I'll show you spark."

When they stepped into Fabien's office, she'd seen the two sets of lion cubs as well. One belonged to Thadeus; a new lion from a neighboring town's circus, which had been shut down by the Humane Society due to the horrid conditions the animals were kept in, and Hera one of their older lionesses. The other set, according to Fabien one of their veterinarians, had been conceived before they received the lioness.

No one knew about it.

She called BS. Her sister arranged everything and part of the family protocol set up by their grandfather was to have a veterinarian check over every animal before it entered the sanctuary. Scarlett knew she sounded like a militant person when it came to the rules, but they were there for a reason. If the lioness was pregnant before she arrived, well Maisie should have known and taken it under advisement. But it wasn't here nor there now. The cubs were alive and thriving. All they could do now was provide support for them.

Once they'd received a full report on the baby lions and tigers, Kenny walked her back to her office. He stood at the doorway staring down at her with such an intense amber gaze, it stole her ability to breathe. The anticipation built between them, for what, she didn't know, twisted her insides and she worried she'd melt into a pile of goo. This man, looming over her, left her a befuddled mess.

"Have drinks with me and the guys," he murmured. "You should get out of here more. I think if you did, you'd heal."

She frowned. "So I can be the laughing stock of this place? No thank you."

"No one is laughing at you, Scar."

"No, you're right. When they're not laughing, they're staring at me or giving me looks of pity." She stepped away from him, needing the space to gather herself.

“No one does that either.” He stepped in front of her, stopping her in her tracks. “You’ve been treated as an outcast by your family—your sister—for so long, you’ve continued to oppress yourself on your own.” He traced the jagged line of her scar with his fingertip. “You’ve got a scar. Who cares? It’s a badge of honor.”

She snorted. “Do you know how many times doctors have said the same thing to me? Oh, I shouldn’t be ashamed. I survived. You didn’t lose your eye, so buck up. You and them, don’t have to deal with the constant whispers and sideways glances.”

“Then those people are assholes,” he murmured. “Come with us, Scar. Just one night.”

She cut her gaze to where the binders sat on her desk waiting for her to dig in. She'd been going through them before Kenny stopped her. Like she told him earlier, the budgets were cut, and she had to find out why. Going out would take her away from her task. "I can't." She stepped around him and headed to her desk. "I have too much work to do."

He nodded. “Seven new mouths to feed.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, shit, Scar,” he said, strolling back toward the exit. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear you didn’t like me and were making excuses.”

She opened her mouth to refute what he said, but Kenny was already gone, leaving her to stare at an empty entryway. Scarlett sat at her desk and blew out a pent-up breath. What the hell just happened? Why had the air in her office become so oppressive, and not in a bad way either? Why did she think her heart would cease to beat, even though she was a good way away from the enclosures? And, why did she see a hint of hurt in his eyes when she rejected his offer? You’re reading too much

into it. Kenny doesn't like you. He wants to help you get over your fears. So, why didn't she go out with him if that were true?

Scarlett groaned in defeat.

"Stop torturing yourself," she chided. "And, get back to work. The books won't figure themselves out on their own."

Chapter Two

In the past week, Scarlett had poured over every entry and every receipt, and she still couldn't figure out why the sanctuary was losing money. The books hadn't shown any type of discrepancy. None of it made any sense to her. She carried the binder with her as she made her way to the breakroom down the hall from her office. The heady smell of fresh coffee lured her in. She was a prisoner to the bean and, whoever made the sinfully aromatic pot, should be rewarded and summarily fired. It wasn't a good habit to drink the hot brew late at night. Unfortunately, until she figured out what was going on with the sanctuary, late-night coffee runs were going to become her new usual.

Scarlett poured herself a cup and glanced at the microwave, noticing, for the first time, how late it had gotten. Two in the morning. She definitely didn't need the cup of coffee in her hand, especially when the numbers on the page were beginning to blur together. However, she couldn't stop, she had to find the mess and clean it up. If she could do so, it would force Maisie to discontinue this breeding project of hers. Plus, it wasn't like it brought any more money into their refuge. If anything, they continued to run into the red which would have never happened with her parents.

"You're still here?" Kenny leaned against the doorframe; a crooked grin tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"I see you went out again." She emptied two packets of sugar into her cup along with a dollop of cream before glancing up at him. "You're drunk." She took a sip of her coffee then poured a little more of the cream into the cup.

"No, I'm not." He pushed off the jamb and sauntered toward her. His eyes were a bit glassy. His gait was a bit loose. If he wasn't drunk like he said, he'd been well on the way to being so.

"Tell me you guys Uber'd or Lyft'd home."

"We Uber'd or Lyft'd home." He chuckled.

Scarlett frowned. "You might not be drunk, but you're not sober either. Go back to your bunk and sleep it off. Five comes early around here. 'Specially when you come home at two."

"Pfft..." He placed his palm to her hip and a passionate, searing heat surged through her. "I'm not going to bed until you join me."

"Okay," Scarlett moved away from him and instantly missed the warmth, "now I know you're drunk. Go to bed Kenny."

"Scar..." He gave her the saddest puppy eyes she'd ever witnessed and considering cats did it better than dogs, was telling. "You know we'd be good together."

"Be that as it may," she said. "We're treading into workplace sexual harassment."

He inched closer to her. "If I was trying to 'workplace,' harass you, I'd have done this." He bent his head and brushed his lips over hers twice before he settled in.

The light smell of whiskey and sin laced his breath. The heady taste on his tongue drugged her. She whimpered as her notebook and cup fell from her hands, crashing on the tile floor. She wrapped her arms around his neck and dragged her fingernails down the back of his head. Kenny groaned. The sound vibrated against her chest and she gasped. They shouldn't be doing this. He wasn't in the right frame of mind and

her... Well, she shouldn't be doing it. Yet, as many times as she told herself to stop or to stop him, she couldn't do it.

Kenny laid her on the table behind her. The cool surface had her arching to him. Again, she tried to force herself to end this little sordid interlude, but it didn't work. Fire raced through her veins along with anticipation. Maybe he was right all along. She shoved the thought aside. If she debated the situation too much, she'd end up making a fool of herself. Instead, she concentrated on the man leaning over her. He ran his hand up her inner thigh, pushing her billowy skirt out of the way. Her heart hammered as he traced a little pattern along her dark flesh, hypnotizing her.

She moaned, grabbing the back of his shirt. Scarlett pulled it from his pants then shoved her hands under the plaid material. His skin was soft, and his muscles quivered at her touch. He mumbled something against her lips before reaching between them. He worked open the button fly of his jeans and gave a muttered curse while rubbing himself. For a split second, she thought he'd come to his senses and was about to stop when he pulled his wallet out of his pocket and removed a foiled disk from inside. Kenny threw his wallet on the floor and placed the purple wrapper between his teeth.

The air in the room was thick with expectation. Her breath came in heavy pants as she watched him lower his pants, so they clung to his hips then drew his boxer-briefs low enough to allow his thick dick to spring free. Her breath hitched. He was well endowed, long with just the right amount of girth. She licked her lips and the sound he made, snapped her attention back to him.

He ripped the packet open with his teeth then removed the latex disk. "Can't wait to get your mouth on me." Kenny rolled the barrier down his length. "Later though."

He covered her again. The scent of his aftershave mingled with the hint of whiskey when she inhaled, and a shiver of keen awareness skirted down her spine. Again, she

questioned whether or not she should be doing this with him, but the notion left her the moment he pushed aside her panties. She should have been embarrassed by the aroused wetness dampening them and her slit. Should have been ashamed by the way her clit hardened and throbbed as he slid his thumb down her opening.

“I told you,” he whispered against the shell of her ear. “We’re meant to be together.” He teased her with the tip of his cock before pushing forward.

Her mouth fell open as he filled her in one go. The sensation of being overfull accompanied the faint ripple of pleasure. She clung to him, digging her nails into his shoulders for purchase. She cursed him as he began to move with deep, purposeful thrusts because she'd never be able to look at him again without thinking about this.

Every.

Single.

Time.

Kenny leaned back and gripped her hips, guiding her over him. His face was a mask of pure pleasure as he continued at his desperate pace. With each shift of his hips, he awoke a different place within her—nerve endings she didn't even know she had sparked to life, sending tendrils of bliss through her until every inch of her tingled. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she sighed his name as the intense ball of warmth expanded inside her as a wave of expectancy washed over her.

She fit her fingers between them and circled her clit. The electric pulse ripped a cry of ecstasy fell from her lips and she shook from the force of it. It'd been as if the current shot through her, before zeroing in at where they'd been connected.

It was too much and not enough at the same time. Kenny's strokes shortened and his

features were a cross between pure pain and bliss. He braced himself over her, changing the angle of his penetration, allowing him to tap at her sweet spot several times. They didn't say a word in those moments. She accepted everything he gave her, while the sounds he made turned her on more.

Then, Scarlett pressed down on her clit and she went sailing. Her orgasm rushed to the forefront, pitching her into one of the best, natural highs she'd ever had. She shuddered and bucked against him riding out her release unable to make a sound because the force of it stole her ability to do so. Kenny cursed and let loose with a harsh sound. He thrust twice more and shoved as deep as he could go. He moaned her name and pressed his lips to the sensitive flesh right below her ear, the second she felt him throb deep within her.

They laid there, Kenny's weight comforting her as they caught their breath. She waited for some kind of recrimination to swamp her. It never manifested. Her mind quieted and her body hummed with sweet repletion. All too soon though, the moment was over. Kenny slipped from her causing both of them to groan. He didn't say anything to her as he took care of the condom and righted his clothes nor while she adjusted her panties and skirt.

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“Shit, Scar.” He bent down. “Almost messed up your notebook.” He picked up the folder and frowned. “What’s this?”

Scarlett’s brows furrowed. “I don’t know.” And, like that, their tryst was over. She extended her hand and he readily handed everything over. “I’ve never seen this before.” She pulled out the packet of papers while he cleaned up the shards of ceramic and tan coffee long forgotten by her. She flipped over the cover page with the sanctuary’s name on it along with her sister’s name. “Maisie...”

Kenny stilled. His body tensed as stopped wiping up the floor. “What does it say.”

“It’s a loan contract, I think. I’ll have to ask our lawyers, Dave, about it, but...” She flipped through the pages and whimpered. “Oh no.”

Kenny was at her side in an instant. “What?”

“It all makes sense now. All of it.” She looked up at him. “My sister used the cats as collateral, morespecificallyHearts and Paws, for the two and a half-million-dollar loan.” Worry mutated into rage. How dare Maisie use their animals for her gain. Plus, since her sister received the money for the loan, where had it all gone? They were operating on a shoestring budget as it stood. Two million would have bought their felines food, bedding, medicine and perhaps, allowed them to add the spotted leopard and/or the ocelot she'd turned down a few weeks ago.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered taking the contract from her. “Is there any chance Dave could have seen this before you did?”

Dave Youngblood took over his father's position as their lawyer a few years ago when his father retired. However, she'd known him since they were kids. Like Kenny, Dave tried to draw her out of her office and on occasion, when she was younger, out of her room. He didn't see her scar or at least swore he didn't. He tried to treat her like she was normal when Scarlett knew she was anything but.

“If he had, don’t you think he would have said something?” She rubbed her forehead. “Just when I didn’t think things couldn’t get any worse.”

“You need some sleep,” Kenny murmured. “You’ve been going over this stuff night and day for a week now.”

“Because I won’t lose this place. It’s my home.” She met his gaze. “I can’t allow her to run this place into the ground and lose the respect our family cultivated over the last five decades. Hearts and Paws is my—our legacy.”

"You can't fight Maisie if you're drop-dead exhausted." He took the folder from her and placed the loan document inside it before closing it. "Get some sleep then call Dave. I'm sure he'll help you figure this out."

"What are you getting out of this, besides a pity fuck?"

He frowned. “Don’t ever fucking say that again. I told you how I feel about you. What we just did won’t ever be a ‘pity fuck.’ We have a connection. Always have. You’ve been too stubborn to see it, Scar.”

No. She kept to herself because it’d been so much easier when she did. People weren’t her specialty, and neither were the animals in the sanctuary anymore. “You don’t know what you’re saying, Kenny. You’re still buzzing off the alcohol.”

“Are you saying I’m too inebriated to understand what just happened?” He stared

down at her with such intensity, she cringed. “Didn’t think so. I’m good and sober, love. Trust me. I don’t fuck while drunk. I like when my partners can consent before jumping in my bed.”

She winced at his tone. “Sorry.”

“Damn right you are.” He grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Never forget it either.” Kenny slammed his lips down on hers in a searing kiss. As quickly as it started, it was over, and he strode from her. “Call Dave. I’ll take you to his office when you’re ready.”

She placed her trembling fingers to her lips. Stupid man. Stupid body. She allowed herself to enjoy five minutes of peace, only to treat Kenny like shit the minute she’d gathered her tattered emotional blanket around her. What the fuck is wrong with me? Why can’t I be normal?

Later that morning, she placed a call to Dave. She tossed and turned more than she slept even though she’d showered to remove some of Kenny’s scent on her. She wouldn’t admit part of the reason why she couldn’t sleep was due to the smell of his aftershave, it lingered along with the images of them having sex on the break room table. I’ll never walk in there again and without seeing us on that table. Mortification rolled through her. Stop it. She’d done nothing wrong. Yet, it’d been a habit to berate herself as she had in the past. Like her parents had done before their death.

“Scarlett,” Dave said in greeting. His deep rich voice warmed her. “What a pleasant surprise. What can I do for you?”

“I really can’t talk about it here, but can I come to your office?” she asked, glancing out over the sanctuary from her office window.

There, near the lion cage stood Kenny and Edward or ‘Ed,’ for short. Kenny hired

him a couple of years ago and so far, the guy had been a perfect fit for the sanctuary, but he didn't talk to her much. Kenny assured her it was due to his condition—shyness. Of course, she doubted it. She placed another person's unwillingness to talk to her on her shoulders and blamed the wicked scar on her face. While she continued to watch them, they laughed about something and a foreign warmth bloomed deep within her. As she turned to look at the blue notebook, she caught a glimpse of Kenny staring up at her with the goofiest of grins. The asshole. Why did he have to be so damn happy?

“Scarlett... Scar?” Only those closest to her used the nickname Dave has bestowed upon her.

“Huh? Oh, sorry.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I’m a little distracted today.”

He chuckled. “I can tell. I said I can see you for lunch. I’ll order in for us. How does Francesca’s sound?”

“Perfect,” she sighed. “You should know, Kenny will be with me. He’s bringing me.”

“Sounds great,” Dave replied. “I’ll clear my schedule then. I’m glad you called, Scar. I’ve missed your company.”

She grinned at the sincerity of his voice. “I have too. It’s been way too long. But, uh, can we keep this to ourselves, please?”

“Sure, Scar. Should I be worried?”

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The hint of concern in his tone had her rushing to answer. “No. Not at all.” Liar.

Once he saw the contract, he’d lose his shit. “You know how I feel about stuff... People.”

He sighed. “Yeah. I wish you’d see yourself how Kenny and I do.”

“Well, it won’t happen any time soon,” she muttered.

“Huh?”

“Nothing. I said I can’t wait to see you,” she stated, covering her ass.

“Me neither. See you in a couple of hours.”

Dave hung up just as there was a knock at her door. She tilted her head. Edward was standing there. His bright green eyes flashed a hint of mischief and a bit of unpredictability. Scarlett sat up a bit as he approached. He, like Kenny, was handsome. His skin had been sun-kissed from working outside while he’d been employed with the sanctuary. He was muscular too, more so than Kenny and Dave. His sandy-blond hair fell over his brow in loose wavy curls, giving him a boyish appearance.

“Miss Leon,” he said, his deep voice surprising her. “Kenny wanted me to tell you to be ready at noon. We will be accompanying you to Mr. Youngblood’s office.”

“Oh,” she said, confused momentarily. “You’re coming with us?”

“Yes, ma’am if that isn’t a problem.” His gaze didn’t quite meet hers.

“Look at me,” she said.

He raised his gaze to hers.

“Now, that’s better. It’s only a scar, Ed. Nothing to be afraid of.”

He recoiled and made a sour face. “I’m sorry if you believe I am afraid of you, Miss. I’m not. I’ve heard from workers you don’t like people staring at you.”

She sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I’m sorry, Ed.”

“Not a problem.” He grinned and it transformed his features from boyish to downright handsome. “I think you’re sexy as fuck. Kind of intimidating. Saw you staring out over the sanctuary earlier. I get now why Kenny calls you the Queen Lioness around here.”

She ran her tongue along the inside of her teeth. “Does he now?”

Edward nodded. “Damn right he does.”

She laughed. “I’ll see you a little before noon, Ed. Tell Kenny to keep his mouth shut and to be ready.”

“Will do, boss lady.” He gave a quick wave then hurried from the office.

If she had to guess, he was in his mid-twenties which gave him a bit of a younger affability. Maybe she did intimidate him and maybe he was just trying to stroke her ego. Either way, she smiled as she continued to put together the information she’d gathered about the loan.

“Auntie Scarlett?” Her niece knocked on her door before stepping into her office. The younger version of her mother, Maisie, folded her hands in front of her.

“Hey, sweet girl,” she said. “What can I do for you?”

“Can we have lunch together?” Samantha had come from the product of a one-night stand. Maisie never said who the guy was or what happened, other than she wouldn’t give the precious girl up for adoption or abort her. At the time, she believed her sister, now... Maisie used the little girl more as a prop than loved her as her daughter.

“I’m sorry, Sam, I have a work lunch.” She stood then walked around the desk. “But I heard your mother has another one of her charity things tonight so if you want, we can have dinner and watch scary movies.”

The girl glanced up at her with sparkling grey eyes. “I’d like that.”

At ten, the little girl had always called Hearts and Pawshome. She ran around the place with such a carefree spirit, Scarlett wished she still had. Like Scarlett and Maisie, Samantha had tutors who came to the sanctuary to homeschool her as well. In a way, Scarlett hated it for her niece. She deserved to be with kids her age, not stuck around a bunch of adults—that was another bone of contention between Maisie and Scarlett.

"Great. I'll see you at five for dinner." She hugged Samantha and tucked one of her curly wheat-colored locks behind her ear.

“Pizza?” Her niece folded her hands in front of her. “Please? Mom doesn’t let me eat it very much.”

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“Pizza it is. I’ll have one of the workers pick it up for us, okay?”

Samantha nodded. “Thank you, Auntie Scarlett.”

“You’re welcome, precious girl.”

Scarlett stepped out of the elevator into the lobby of Dave's law firm. The different lines on the phones rang while both of his receptionists answered them one by one, putting them on hold before returning to the first call. The sitting area had been mostly empty except for an older couple. When they glanced up at her, they turned away. Nothing new there. She strode past them to the front reception area without a second thought. The receptionist on the left hung up the phone then glanced at her before quickly lowering her gaze.

Both Kenny and Edward made a derisive noise.

Scarlett shook it off. She was used to it. “I’m here to see Mr. Youngblood.”

“Name?” The woman still wouldn’t look at her.

“Scarlett Leon,” she answered.

The receptionist clicked a few keys on the keyboard in front of her. "Sorry, no appointment listed here. You'll need to call back later and make one."

She tilted her head. "Dave knows I am here."

"Computer says otherwise." The phone rang again, and the receptionist answered it, effectively cutting her off.

"Fuck this," Scarlett muttered.

"What are we doing, Miss Scarlett?" Edward hedged.

"Going back to Dave's office." She shrugged. "He knows we're here."

Kenny laughed. "I love it when you're a badass." He placed his hand on the small of her back, guiding her down the hall to the large office with the bay windows overlooking Colorado Springs. A thrill shot up her spine as the memories of what they'd done the night before, sprung to life.

"Miss... Miss, you can't go down there! I'll have to call security." The receptionist leaned over the counter and shouted.

"Then call them." Scarlett shrugged. "Dave knows I'm coming."

At the mention of his name, his head popped up and he gifted her with a brilliant smile. He stood then and buttoned his jacket as he made his way to her. "You look radiant as always." Dave wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug. "God damn it's good to see you away from that forsaken sanctuary."

"Watch it. I happen to love my sanctuary."

Dave nuzzled her neck and chuckled. "Yeah, well..." He motioned for them to follow. "Come on, we have all afternoon and I want to know what you're being so secretive about."

“Mr. Youngblood,” a man called out and Scarlett pivoted with Dave.

The security guard had two others flanking him, each one a little more intimidating than the last. The grim set of his face denoted the fact he'd been called up there most likely by the stupid receptionist who'd arbitrarily decided Scarlett shouldn't be there. Shitty people do shitty things. It's not about you, Scar, she told herself.

“Yeah, Tommy?” Dave stepped forward. “Is there an issue?”

The man shook his head. “We were called about a disturbance.”

Dave glanced over his shoulder at Scarlett and winked. “Well, as you can see, there isn't a disturbance here. Just the co-owner of Hearts and Paws, here discuss business, which she had an appointment for.”

Tommy nodded. “Sorry, Miss.”

Scarlett raised her hand and gave him a dismissive wave.

“Who called you up here Tommy?” Dave continued down the hall to the security guards.

“I did, sir,” the woman who'd disregarded everything Scarlett said, stated.

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"Ah, Delores. You're fired." Dave looked at Tommy. "Make sure she gathers up all of her belongings. I'll call Charlotte in payroll and have her check drawn up immediately. Don't leave her side."

"B-but Mr. Youngblood, I didn't realize—"

"No," he answered. "You didn't. Miss Leon is one of my dearest friends. If you'd have looked at the digital planner we use here, you'd have seen my schedule for the afternoon was cleared specifically for her."

"I-I'm sorry, sir."

"No, you're not. You're sorry you got caught. There's a difference." He glanced at the second receptionist. "Denisha, call over to HR and ask them to post for a receptionist job. Let them know it's a rush."

The woman nodded. "Right away, sir."

With everything settled, Dave returned to Scarlett's side and they continued to his office. "Sorry about that."

"It is what it is," she answered then introduced Edward. "I don't know if you know who Edward is, but he's one of our workers at the sanctuary."

"I know, Ed," Dave said.

She glanced at Kenny then to Edward. "You do?"

"Uh-huh," Dave answered. "We have boys' weekends sometimes."

"He knows my Pops," Edward said with a roll of his shoulders.

"Small world we're living in," she muttered. "Anything else the three of you want to tell me before we get to work?"

Dave, Kenny, and Edward looked at each other.

"Yeah," Dave said. "We intend to make you ours, Scarlett Leon."

She took a step back. "What?"

Kenny came up behind her. "You heard the man. Last night was just the beginning of what we have in store for you."

She laughed. "You're all crazy. Good one. You got me." The aroused determination in Dave's blue eyes matched the same look in Edward's. "Oh fuck off, the three of you. What the hell are you getting at here?"

Dave lifted his head in the direction of his office. "Come along Scarlett. There's much to discuss over this working lunch and we're already losing valuable time."

She gazed at the office, not but a few feet from where she stood then at the men surrounding her. None of them made a lick of sense. Make her theirs? What the hell? Had she gone to bed and woke in some alternate universe? "You're all freaking me out a little." She motioned to Edward. "We barely know each other."

"I hope to change that, Miss Scarlett. Please have lunch with us. I don't want to continue this conversation out in the open."

She frowned. No, neither did she. “Fine. Lunch.” She glared at Dave. “We have business to discuss and not this tripe of being in a relationship. Scarlett Leon doesn’t do relationships.”

Kenny chuckled, easing her toward Dave’s office. “Not before, but you will now.”

She snorted. Bet me.

Chapter Three

Dave chose the conference table to the right of his desk. It gave them room to eat while they went over whatever Scarlett had found. Once their lunch arrived, they dug into it and when they were halfway done, Scarlett opened the folder and pulled out a contract, one he’d never seen before.

“Where did you get this?” he asked, taking the folded-up paperwork from her.

“Accidentally found it last night,” she said. The pink tinging her cheeks told him a whole different story.

“Might have taken advantage of the situation,” Kenny added.

“You were like a tom cat looking to score, more like it,” she quipped.

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Edward laughed.

“It was in this register,” Scarlett said, pushing the notebook to Dave. “I’ve looked through it twice and I have no clue where it might have been hiding.”

Dave opened the document and began reading it. It was a standard five-year fixed-rate loan, using the sanctuary as collateral. He blinked. Had he read that right? He looked over it again, coming to the terms of the loan once more. "Who signed it?"

“Maisie,” Scarlett replied. “Shouldn’t it have had both of our signatures? Shouldn’t you have looked at it first before she signed anything?”

He nodded as he continued to read. Maisie not only put the sanctuary up for collateral, but also the family home in Boulder, and the small gift store/online store they ran to make extra money. It didn’t make sense to him why Maisie would be so stupid or careless. As it stood, Hearts and Paws operated part of the year in the black, the rest of the time, like the coming winter, they’d be working in the red, depending on credit to purchase most of their supplies. God forbid if one of the big cats got sick, it would bankrupt them for sure.

“First and foremost, what did this money go toward?” He placed the paperwork on the desk before taking another bite of his lunch.

Scarlett frowned. “I have no clue. We’re operating on a short budget as it is.” Kenny nudged her and she pursed her lips. “Maisie also mated a pair of tigers. She swears the lion was already pregnant when we brought her in and the other set of lions, well... I suspect Sheba and Thadeus were brought together as well.”

“How many more cats does that make?”

“Seven,” Kenny answered. “And counting.”

“What?” Scarlett dropped her fork. “What are you talking about and counting?”

Kenny rubbed his forehead. “A cheetah is pregnant.”

Scarlett pushed away from the table. Rage replaced the arousal pouring through her veins. “What do you mean, a cheetah is pregnant?”

“We found out this morning. Fabien confirmed it.” Kenny shifted in his seat. “Normally, I’d think Maisie was being eccentric, but this... I think she’s gone Cruella de Ville on us.”

“Big cats aren’t dalmatians,” Edward said. “And there’s not a hundred and one of them either.”

Dave barked out a laugh.

Scarlett frowned. “How far along?”

Kenny shrugged. “At least a month or two? She could have them any day now. Fabien wasn’t sure.”

“You’ve got a problem, Scar,” Dave said.

"You think. The timing of these 'pregnancies' almost syncs up exactly to when Maisie received the loan."

"Longer," Dave uttered. "For the cubs and kits to arrive after the paperwork had been

signed, Maisie would have had to have been tracking their seasons for at least a year, if not more. I think the luck came with the already pregnant lioness."

"Shit." Scarlett pressed her palms to her face. "What have I been missing? How did I not see this?"

"How could you have?" Edward placed his hand on her arm. "You've taken to being in the periphery most of the time. Maisie... She's conniving. According to what I've heard from the workers, she's been banging one of the veterinarian staff members."

"Fabien?" Dave pressed.

Edward shook his head. "Fabien wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole. He's gay and has a boyfriend, Paul."

Kenny shook his head. "Who's the part-time lover for Maisie?"

Edward shrugged. "Not sure, but he could also be Samantha's father."

All of the blood drained from Scarlett's face. It was instantaneous and Dave was by her side. Things had never normalized after the accident. While Scarlett had been shunned by everyone, including her parents, Maisie rose to power within the family. She'd sat on the outside and watched the interactions within the family. Maisie thrived on the influence she'd cultivated and now it seemed, it had manifested into authority as well. "Scar, what's wrong? You can tell us."

"This is all too much." She shook her head. "I thought... A small part of me thought the reason Maisie wouldn't tell us who the father was, had been because of her being assaulted."

"Now," Kenny hedged.

“Now, I think my sister is manipulating the whole sanctuary including us.”

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Scarlett sat there going over years of incidences at Hearts and Paws. There'd never been another accident like hers or anything major. If she allowed herself to believe her sister had been behind the whole incident with Jäger, then why wouldn't she pull off something as convoluted as this? But it didn't explain where the money was going.

"What do you want to do about it?" Edward asked, drawing near her. She didn't know him well, yet the kindness in his tone and his silent strength warmed her.

"We have to keep digging. There's no way we can't. I won't have the sanctuary's reputation tossed into the shitter because of one person's antics."

Dave went back to his desk and picked up the phone. "I know a person."

"Who?"

Dave held up a finger. "Hey, Timothy, got a second?" He laughed. "I have something juicy for that brain of yours and a bottle of your favorite scotch if you do this." He slid his gaze to Scarlett's and captured her. The twist of his features into that of a predator excited her and scared the shit out of her. "Wonderful. If you'll come by the office, I'll give you the full details. Oh, and Tim, keep this secret. We can't let this one get out, not yet anyway."

Dave hung up the phone and joined them, just as a knock came at the door. The head of security, Tommy, she thought his name was, entered the office a moment later. Worry creased his brow along with a bit of trepidation. He glanced over at her then quickly deviated his gaze back to Dave.

"Sir, Delores is gone. I made sure she got into her vehicle and drove away."

"Thank you, Tommy," Dave said. "Is there another reason you're here?"

"I'd like to apologize for earlier." Still, he couldn't or didn't want to look at Scarlett.

"Which part?" she asked. "The part where you avert your eyes or the part where you came running, even though I was in the right?"

The man frowned. "Both, I suppose." When he did glance at her, she saw the sorrow in his eyes.

"That will be all," Dave said.

Tommy nodded.

When the man left the room, Dave blew out a breath. "Sometimes I wonder if leaving my father's staff in place had been a wise decision."

"You have too kind of a heart," Kenny replied. "They see it and mistake it for weakness."

Scarlett agreed.

"Maybe you're right," Dave replied. "Anyway, Timothy will be here this evening to discuss this situation. He's the best forensic account in all of Colorado and I believe he should go over the books for Hearts and Paws."

Forensic accounting? Was this happening to her? "How much trouble will I be in if he finds something?"

“None,” Kenny answered, a little too quick for Scarlett’s liking.

“Not that I don’t believe you,” she said, “but, I’d rather hear it from Dave.”

“Depends on what you know and what you don’t.” Dave shrugged. “However, I have a feeling whatever Maisie is doing, she wouldn’t involve you. Hell, she might even think you’re too stupid to look. After all, who’s the one who has kept to themselves all these years?”

She frowned. When Dave put it that way, it made her blood boil. The single question she couldn’t get out of her mind had been, why? Why would Maisie do whatever she was doing? Why did she borrow money and use the sanctuary as the collateral? Why had she lured Scarlett into the enclosure?

“It doesn’t make sense,” she whispered.

“What?” Edward hedged.

“All of it. The loan. My accident. The breeding.” She glanced over at him. “Take your pick.”

“I feel like this could be a trick question.” Edward scratched his head.

“Wait!” Scarlett held up her hand. “What if she’s doing this to set me up?”

“You mean take the fall for all of it?” Kenny paled. “Dave?”

“Not happening,” Dave answered. “She would have had to have signed your name to the contracts and put it into the business account without you knowing.”

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"She hasn't." It didn't mean she hadn't opened a separate account or wouldn't try to forge her signature in the future. "What about another account with our name? Wouldn't the bank have to tell me?"

"We'll have to look into it. When Timothy gets here, he'll be able to find everything. Do you have all the ledgers and banking information?"

Scarlett nodded. "As far as I know."

"Then he'll start there." Dave laid his hand over hers. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

"We should do it soon. Maisie has a charity event tonight and who knows what she'll get up to."

"You should go," Edward said. "Keep an eye on her."

Scarlett frowned. She promised Samantha she'd stay with her. "I never go to those. Besides, I promised Sam I'd have dinner with her. What would it say about me if I broke a promise?"

The corner of Dave's mouth kicked upward. "Sam, in this instance, will understand. I bet if you told her you were going to be a princess for a night, she'd help you get ready."

Heat filled her cheeks and a foreign sensation took root within her. "Everyone would know I was there."

“Yes, they would,” Dave agreed. “But if you had a date...”

“Who?”

Dave opened his desk drawer and pulled out a white envelope. “I might have a plus-one ticket.”

Scarlett blinked. “You’d take me?”

“Why not?”

“Maisie might get suspicious.” If her sister found out Scarlett was aware of her scheme, Maisie might take off, leaving the sanctuary holding the bag. “We can’t risk it.”

“You mean, you can’t risk it,” Kenny said. “You’re worried about what everyone will say.”

Shouldn't she be? No one saw her. Maisie made sure to spin a tale of tragic woe when it came to Scarlett. She'd been hidden away by her family, shunned and worst yet, felt the soul-deep pain of being unloved. In the last few years of their lives, her family had ripped her apart with their condemnation and anger. None of them believed her. They went to their grave assuming the worst.

Scarlett shrugged. “Maybe I can’t.”

“You have scratched and clawed for everything concerning Hearts and Paws,” Dave said. “Why are you quitting when the battle is just beginning?”

She didn’t have an answer. Maybe, she was more afraid of being rebuked than she’d been willing to admit. Maybe she did care a little too much about others’ opinions.

“I’m not quitting. I’m being practical.”

“You’re quitting,” Edward stated. “I can see it in your eyes, Scarlett. You’re so worried about how others see you, you’re projecting their whatever-you-want-to-call-it, onto yourself. Stop it.”

Easy for him to say. He didn’t have the stigma hanging over him.

“How about this,” Dave announced. “Have your dinner with Samantha. Then at eight, I will pick you up. We’ll get to the gala after dinner is served and we’ll only have to be there for the actual auction.”

His plan had merit. She wouldn’t be brushing off her niece and she’d still be able to see what her sister was doing behind her back. “I don’t have anything to wear.”

“Leave it to me,” Kenny said.

She snorted.

“What?” Kenny cocked a brow.

“You’re going to find me a dress?”

He nodded. “I sure am.”

She laughed this time. “I can’t wait to see this.”

On her way back to the sanctuary, she ordered a pizza for her and Samantha. Nervous energy filled her belly, and she worried she wouldn't be able to enjoy the pie with her niece. She didn't attend events. Didn't put herself out there for fear of people's reaction to her. College had been her first foray into society since the accident and, well, it as much as it didn't suck, she also learned people didn't have the best of intention. Once she returned home, Scarlett stayed out of the public arena. Her office and her apartment on the sanctuary grounds were her safe spots.

Thinking back on it, her self-imposed isolation didn't start after the lion attack, it was before. Her parents always treated Maisie better than Scarlett. She figured it had to do with Maisie being older. No matter what she did, no matter how hard she worked, her sister always had their full attention. Had her parents still been alive, she would have confronted them to understand their logic. As it stood, she either needed to accept it finally or continue to wallow in her self-recrimination.

"You're thinking too hard," Kenny said.

"How do you know?" She cut her gaze toward him.

"You tense up, more specifically, your face." He peered at her. "You also squeeze your hands together. I've never seen whiter knuckles in my life."

She sighed and flexed her hands. "I'm worried."

"About?"

“Everything.” She turned in her seat. “Do I dwell too much on my past?”

“If you ask me,” Edward said, sitting forward. “I think people make you dwell on it and you’re also too self-conscious.”

“Oh really?” She gave Edward her attention.

He nodded. “Yes. Look at you.”

“Edward...” Kenny snapped.

“No, I’m being truthful here. I’m not being mean. Scarlett hides. She stays in that damn office of hers while everything happens around her. She’s like... What are those things called...” He snapped his fingers. “A satellite! That’s it. She’s a satellite. She hangs around the peripheral watching her life and those around her go by, content to not participate.”

“You’ve got a big mouth,” Scarlett said, but also agreed with Edward.

"Sorry." Edward shrugged. "I call them as I see them."

“Don’t be. You’re right.” She frowned. When Edward put it like that, it made sense. She did peer into her life from the fringes. She’d done it for so long, it became a habit.

Kenny relaxed beside her. “I hate agreeing with the guy, but it’s true.”

“Nothing like being ganged up on.” She chuckled. “It’s conditioning. I should have stopped allowing myself to hide a long time ago. Unfortunately, I went with it.”

“But, you’re evil intimidating too,” Edward whispered. “It’s why I couldn’t talk to

you. You scared the shit out of me.”

She laughed again. “I wear my disgust on my sleeve, I guess. I hate myself for being weak and I hate everyone else for making me feel insignificant.”

They pulled up to the compound and the nervous energy increased. Kenny dropped her off at the main building where her apartment was located before leaving once more. She thought he’d have at least given her a clue what he’d be buying her to wear, instead, he said nothing. She entered the building and headed up to her space, needing just a minute to gather her tattered wits.

“Samantha said you’d be entertaining her tonight.” Maisie came out of the alcove near the stairs. “Are you sure that’s something you want to do?”

Scarlett stared at her sister. “What do you mean?”

Her sister nonchalantly lifted her shoulder. “Well, I wouldn’t want to put too much pressure on you. I know you have other things to do.”

“I don’t mind. She is my niece after all.” She continued to the stairs.

“You should know, she’ll be taking over my duties soon. Giving tours and such.” Maisie fiddled with one of her earrings. “I’m too old for it now. She’ll be the star of the sanctuary.”

“Sure, Maisie.”

Scarlett took to the stairs only to have her sister grab her arm. “You should understand your position here is expendable. I’m allowing you to stay here.”

Scarlett laughed. “The will and trust allow me to stay here and run the day to day

operations.”

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“Be that as it may,” Maisie began. “If money should get tight around here...”

She didn’t have to say the rest, Maisie would throw Scarlett out. She squared her shoulders. “Do what you please, Maisie. I need to get to my apartment. Samantha is staying with me tonight while you pimp out the sanctuary to pay for your new cubs and kits.”

“How dare you.” Maisie’s lip curled.

“How dare you. The trust for this place was specific. You broke the rules. Not any of us.” She should have shut up. Saying anything had a chance of blowing up in her face. Scarlett sighed. “This fight isn’t worth it.”

An evil smile curled her sister’s lips. “Exactly. You don’t have it in you to fight. You have always been a disappointment and you will always be a disappointment. You would do well to remember you can be replaced at any time.”

Scarlett laughed as she continued up the stairs. “Don’t worry, I know my place here.”

She stepped into her apartment and let out a cleansing breath. She had a few moments to change before Samantha would join her. By eight, the girl would be going to bed and she would be out of the apartment, on the way to the auction. She kicked off her shoes then headed to her room to change. She didn't know when Kenny would be back, and she hoped it wasn't while Samantha was around. Explaining to her niece her intentions would get back to Maisie. After the incident at the stairs, she didn't want to deal with her sister's bullshit.

The thought hit her then. Wouldn't it be easier to continue to embezzle money from the sanctuary, if Scarlett was gone? She shook her head. She knew her sister hated her, but this much? What would be the chances, she'd use her actions against Scarlett? The thought sent a bolt of fright and anger through her. It shouldn't have surprised her though. Maisie had shown her true colors when they were children. No matter what her sister said, she was trying to kill Scarlett that day.

A knock came at her door as she slipped on a sweatshirt and comfy pants. Right on time. She hurried from her room back to the entrance of her home. Opening the door, she saw Samantha and Gabe, one of the workers, standing at her threshold. In Gabe's hands sat the pizza she ordered on the way home. Samantha gazed up at her with a smile on her face while she hitched her backpack up on her shoulder.

"You're here." She took the pizza from Gabe. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"No problem, Miss Scarlett." He nodded before stepping away.

Scarlett moved aside allowing her niece to enter the living room. "Did you bring a movie?"

"No. I thought we could stream something." She held up her Fire stick. "Mom doesn't know." She giggled as she went to the couch and plopped down.

"We could get in trouble," Scarlett mumbled.

"No, we won't, Auntie Scarlett." She giggles as she attaches the stick to the television. "I want to watch anime. I know of a few good ones. You'll like it. Some of the people have scars like yours."

"No one has a scar like mine," Scarlett murmured as she plated up a couple of slices of pizza. "I have grape soda and milk, which do you want?"

“I want to go wild,” her niece answered. “Grape soda with ice.”

“On it.” Scarlett glanced up at the TV as Samantha set it up. The screen went black then a purple title box came up as the program loaded. “So, what’s this channel?” She came around the counter and handed the girl her dinner.

“It’s Anime Express. I like it. There are new shows every day. You can watch it in Japanese with subtitles or dubbed.”

When she came back to her niece’s side, the little girl already had a show queued up. “What’s this?” She took a bite of her pizza and sat back.

“It’s called, Alameda No Shouboutai.” Samantha took a bite of her food. “It’s really good. I told mommy I wanted to go to a convention where all this stuff is at.”

Scarlett curled up on the couch as the cartoon began with a catchy theme song. “They have those things?”

Her niece nodded. "Uh-huh." She pulled her tablet out of her bag and started typing on the screen. "See."

She took the pad from her niece and frowned. “This is huge.” She tapped the screen and skimmed the pictures. “And people dress up?”

"Uh-huh. It's so cool. All the kids are cosplayers now, Auntie." Samantha grabbed a notebook out of her bag. "I've been creating my costume for a couple of months now. What do you think?"

She cleaned off her hands then took the book. She stared at the intricate drawings, the color swatches, and budgeting of her niece's money. It also included where she could stay and how much she required for food and transportation. Samantha reminded

Scarlett of herself. Always knew what things would cost, how to be efficient, but also obtain quality items. In a word, she was impressed.

“Can we work on this together?” She pointed to the dress.

Samantha turned her wide-eyed gaze on Scarlett. “You mean it?”

She smiled. “I would love to help you.”

“That would be amazing! Thank you, Auntie Scarlett. You’re the best.” She hugged Scarlett tight before turning her attention back to the screen. “I can fill you in on what’s going on while we watch, okay?”

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Scarlett nodded. "I'd like that very much."

Sometime later, after Samantha had headed to her room in her apartment down the hall from Scarlett, a knock came at the door. She'd enjoyed her time with her niece and learned something new about herself, she wasn't too old to watch cartoons or anime or whatever it was called, and she liked the plot. When she opened the door, there stood Dave, Kenny, and Edward. Kenny held a garment bag in his hands while Dave had a bottle of champagne and Edward had flowers.

She stood aside as the trio entered her place. All three were dressed to the nines, catching her momentarily off guard. "I thought it was a plus-one?"

Dave shrugged. "I have some pull. I told a friend I would be inviting some potential investors and well..."

The friend would be Maggie Stenhouse, the President of the charity. "I'm sure she is hoping to bring in more money from you."

Dave laughed. "Well, you could use it right about now."

Yes, they could. "Sorry, I'm bumbling this up."

"You had pizza without us?" Edward held up a slice. "Vicious."

"He hasn't eaten yet," Kenny grouched. "Don't be a pig."

"I'm not," the guy said around a bite of pizza. "So good."

Scarlett shook her head. "I know we're stretched for time, so, let me see this dress."

Kenny handed over the garment bag. "I hope you like it."

She did too. "I'll only be twenty minutes, promise."

She hurried to her room and placed the bag on the hook behind her bedroom door, then raced into her bathroom for a quick shower. She should have done it when she got home, but having Samantha there with her, threw a wrench in her plans. Yet, she wasn't upset about it, she enjoyed spending time with the little girl and if all went well, she'd make Samantha's dream come true, she'd take her to that Anime convention.

After she'd cleaned up, she went back into her room and opened the garment bag. There, in burnt gold and lace hanged a full-length gown. The V in the front would go almost to her belly button and the full-back gave her an ounce of modesty. The gown was sleeveless and clasped together in a halter with a golden ring. She loved it and in the same breath, it terrified her. She narrowed her eyes as she spied a scrap of dark golden lace shaped into a mask. She picked it up and ran her fingers over it and noticed two little tabs on the inside.

A knock came at her door before Kenny opened it. She clenched her towel, dropping the mask to the floor. He held up his hands, keeping his distance. "I didn't mean to startle you. I thought you'd like the mask to give yourself some anonymity. I know these things are hard for you and you're right, your scar will give you away. So, I thought outside of the box."

She'd kiss him if he hadn't have startled her so bad. "Thank you." She stared at the dress then the lace mask she dropped on the floor, she felt like one of the characters her niece introduced her to earlier. "I appreciate it."

“No problem, Scar,” he murmured. “Now, get dressed, we’re burning moonlight here.”

She laughed as she picked up the mask. “Yeah, yeah. I’m going. I’ll be ready in ten.”

"We'll be waiting for you." Kenny gave her one last glance before exited her room.

As she looked at herself in the mirror, she bit her bottom lip. Well, are you a lion or are you a mouse? The corner of her mouth kicked up. Scarlett Leon was a lion and her sister was going to hear her roar.

Chapter Four

Dave guided Scarlett through the doors of the opulent ballroom. When she pictured the place, it hadn't been one of the swankiest hotels in Colorado Springs nor had it been full of mega-rich donors. So, where's all the money going? At least two of their benefactors were billionaires. They should be rolling in fundage for their sanctuary, yet every year they struggled and in the last few months, it'd gotten worse.

Scarlett strode through the crowd, unseen by most. Those who did lift their gaze to meet hers didn't seem to recognize her, which meant the disguise was working or because she hadn't been out in public, they didn't know who she was. The thought sent a rush of relief through her. All it would take was one person to know it was her and Maisie would try to push her out. Since their conversation at the staircase, she couldn't put aside how vile her sister had been. It was almost a cross between pure hate and guilty anger. Scarlett hit several of Maisie's buttons and the tongue lashing Scarlett received for doing so, still stung.

Dave patted her hand as he led her over to the wet bar. He ordered them a drink then turned to her. “You're tense.”

“Shouldn't I be?”

He shrugged. “No one seems to recognize you.”

She laughed. “Because no one has seen me since that fateful day twenty years ago.”

“True.” He accepted the tumblers from the bartender. “Here. Drink up.”

“Whiskey?” She spied the glass with trepidation.

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“Only the best for you.” Dave clinked his glass against hers.

“Oh, what the hell,” she murmured before taking a sip of her drink.

It burned all the way down and warmth bloomed in her stomach. Thankfully, she ate before she left the house. She gazed out over the space and frowned. There hadn't been a silent auction table like she'd budgeted for. The DJ, as corny as it sounded, had been replaced by a string quartet. Even the tables where those who'd come to enjoy a meal and the auction were non-existent.

She frowned.

“What's wrong?” Dave started away from the bar.

“Nothing I budgeted for is here.” She pointed out the differences. “It makes me wonder how many times this has happened.”

“It's always been this way,” Dave said. “I thought you arranged it this way.”

She shook her head and downed the rest of her drink. “No. The silent auction was one of the biggest draws and could net the sanctuary close to a half-million dollars. My mother started the trend. Specific places donated prizes and items for the smaller auction. It gave everyone a chance to win a lot number without having to do so in the public eye. Now...”

“Shit Scar,” Dave muttered. “I've never seen a silent auction.”

“What the hell is Maisie doing?”

“I guess we'll figure it tonight.” He placed his hand on the small of her back. “Let's go find the others. The auction should be starting soon.”

The auction. The main draw for those who attended. Usually, she saw the list of items up on the block, this year, not so much. A niggle of worry went down her spine. Nothing about the event sat right with her. Maisie was being secretive. Why? What was she missing?

What have you gotten yourself this time, Maisie?

“Did I tell you how gorgeous you are?” Kenny cocked a brow.

About ten times before they left the apartment. All three of them had as a matter of fact. A different type of warmth spread through her. She smiled as she glanced down. “You did. Several times.”

“Well, it's the truth,” Edward added, pushing his finger down between his neck and the collar of his shirt. “I hate these penguin suits.”

She laughed. “It's only for a few hours.”

“Yeah, yeah. I was hoping you'd help me take it off later.” His green eyes glittered with intention.

“Down, boy,” Dave grumbled. “We have a job to do here.”

Kenny snorted. “Don't act like you haven't been thinking the same thing.”

“I'm not denying anything.” Dave shrugged. “However, we're here to understand

what's going on with Maisie. As it stands, Scarlett has pointed out a few things I hadn't thought twice about.”

“It’s stuff no one else would notice if they weren't budgeting for the event," Scarlett explained what she'd pointed out to Dave earlier.

Kenny whistled. “What do you think all of this cost?”

“I'm not sure. I budgeted in for dinner. Doesn't look like there was one. There's not even any type of buffet tables out.” If her sister had done it this way to save money, shouldn't she have told Scarlett they were trying to conserve funds? Maisie had no compunction telling her the budget for food and veterinarian services had been cut at the beginning of the fiscal year, where was this any different? And, if they were trying to conserve money, shouldn't her sister have been upfront before she planned the event?

“I'd say there's a logical reason why, but something tells me there isn't a rational explanation behind any of this,” Dave said. “It makes calling Timothy in more imperative.”

Scarlett agreed.

The music stopped and Maisie appeared on a stage set up at the back of the room. It'd been decorated to match the sanctuary. Her sister wore a sleek royal blue skintight floor-length gown. The V in the bodice gave the crowd a glimpse of her breasts. She smiled as a round of applause went up. Scarlett narrowed her eyes. Maisie wore a diamond ring on her wedding finger and confusion filled Scarlett.

“When did she get married,” Dave whispered. His breath tickled the shell of her ear and she shivered.

“She's not.” At least Scarlett didn't think she was.

“Nice size rock on her finger says otherwise.” Dave peered down at Scarlett.

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“She wasn't wearing it earlier.” She would have noticed it since it'd been the hand Maisie wrapped around Scarlett's arm.

“Could she have a secret life?” Edward mused. “It'd make sense.”

Scarlett blinked. A secret life? Wouldn't Samantha have known about it and said something to Scarlett? She shook her head. No, she'd have known. Maisie would have rubbed it in her face that she'd gotten married. Wouldn't she have?

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the thirty-fifth annual charity auction benefiting Hearts and Paws Sanctuary, a refuge my grandparents started almost fifty years ago to preserve the lives of big cats from around the world.”

A round of applause filled the room. Scarlett found herself paying attention to every word her sister said, including the word 'my.' Maisie should have said theirs. The little factoid chipped away at Scarlett's confidence.

“I'd like to introduce the Co-MC for tonight's affair, my new husband, Eduardo Cruz-Velasquez.” Maisie held her hand out and a man, in his early forties joined her sister on stage. He was distinguished and carried himself with an air of superiority as well. Confusion filled Scarlett. Sure, they didn't have the best of relationships, but shouldn't her sister have told her about this new marriage?

She frowned.

“Interesting turn of events,” Dave said. “I can tell by the look on your face you had no idea.”

“I didn't.” And, what about the vet tech at the sanctuary? If Maisie was married like she said she was, had it all been for show? Or did she screw around behind her new husband's back? Ugh, this is all so confusing.

“What are the chances the loan was for the wedding?” Kenny mused.

“Using the sanctuary as the collateral? Wouldn't that send up red flags?” Edward asked.

“I agree,” Kenny added. “It's too flashy. Maisie is bold, but not that bold. However...”

“Tonight, we have a special auction planned. It's the first of its kind and, there are only seven blocks. Don't worry though. If things go according to plan there will be more,” Maisie said, drawing Scarlett's attention.

Seven blocks? She frowned and her stomach knotted. Oh God. Sure she was jumping to conclusions. She had a bad habit of it since paranoia seemed to follow her everywhere she went. But... Wasn't it too much of a coincidence? Seven. Not three or five, but seven. There were seven new mouths to be fed at Hearts and Paws.

“When you arrived tonight, you signed for the first time an NDA. I know some of you were skeptical about it and signed reluctantly. I appreciate you doing so, even if you were confused. It makes tonight's auction all the more exclusive.”

“What is she getting at,” Kenny murmured then cut his gaze to Dave. “Did you sign an NDA too?”

Dave gave a curt shake of his head. “I didn't plan on bidding. Only those who did had to sign it.”

“Doesn't make sense,” Scarlett said. “If she's doing something needing the protection

of an NDA shouldn't everyone be signing it?"

"I'd think so," Dave said. "However, I wasn't handed one on the way in."

"This is getting weirder by the second," Edward grouched. "What's going on here?"

"I think I know and you should too, Kenny." She glanced over at the man.

Kenny stared at her for long moments. Then, the realization of what Scarlett had been getting at filled his amber eyes. "You're fucking kidding."

"We'll see." She shrugged. "However, it makes sense for an NDA to be going around."

He scrubbed his chin and shook his head. "No way. Just, no way."

"Want to fill us in?" Dave stated.

"She thinks Maisie is auctioning off the cubs and kits," Kenny mumbled.

"The first item up for auction..." The curtain behind Maisie fluttered and a cart was wheeled out. On it sat a small black cage. Inside one of the tiger cubs from the sanctuary. "This is a six-week-old Sumatran tiger, born on the Hearts and Paw Sanctuary grounds."

A gasp erupted around the ballroom.

Scarlett's heart pounded. Rage burned through her veins. They were never supposed to breed or auction off the animals. They were meant to live free. She ground her teeth trying to control the need to go up onto the stage and smack the shit out of her sister. Her parents' and grandparent's legacy was falling into ruin right in front of her.

“We don't do things like this at Hearts and Paws; however, we know there are other zoos and conservatories who are looking to expand their population. This is your chance to give to our charity and bring in new visitors to your establishments. We will open the bidding at seventy-five thousand.”

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Scarlett's stomach churned. Bile bit at the back of her throat and she had to swallow several times to keep from vomiting. The room swam before her eyes. Her sister betrayed everything they'd taken pride in. She couldn't be there. She couldn't continue to stand-by and watch this...this circus.

Already, the bid had grown to over a hundred and fifty thousand dollars and was still going strong. She turned away and started for the door. She wouldn't sit idly by anymore. Determination replaced the rage. Dave placed a hand on her shoulder, stopping her progression. She spun on him, ready to give him a piece of her mind until she saw the same emotions in his soulful blue eyes.

“Don't you think it would be advantageous for us to stay and see who wins each of the auctions.” He pulled his phone from his pocket. “Snap a few pictures.”

She deflated. He was right. In order to nail her sister, she had to have evidence of what transpired there. “Fine. I need another drink though.”

“Come on,” Kenny took her hand. “Let's get you one of those pumpkin latte things you like. It's going to be a long night.”

“You shouldn't be trying to sweet-talk me,” she said, as they walked back up to the bar.

“If I was sweet-talking you,” Kenny answered, leaning in. “I'd say, I can't wait to get you out of that dress and make you scream all night.”

“You're such a perv.” Yet his words made her tingle from head to toe.

“Only for you.” When the bartender approached, he gave the guy their order then tucked her into his side. “We'll figure this out. The more information we have the better chance we have to take her down.”

“She's my sister, though,” Scarlett said, defending Maisie. “Shouldn't I have some kind of reservation about this?”

“Should you?” Kenny took her hand in his. “Think about it this way. With what we know about your sister, do you think, if your roles were reversed, she'd be nice about it, or make sure you suffer?”

The answer was simple. Maisie would always make Scarlett suffer. “What about Samantha?”

“What do you mean?”

“What will happen to her?” Since Scarlett never said who her father was, she'd have no one besides Scarlett. How did she explain to her niece why she put her mother away?

“She'll live with you, I suppose. Shouldn't she? Sounds like to me, her mother doesn't have any use for her, except for her being a token to show off when appropriate. Kind of like your parents did with Maisie.”

“No.” Scarlett shook her head. “Maisie was more outgoing. She showed herself off. Samantha reminds me of myself at her age. Then this happened.” She motioned to the scar. So, no. They're not the same. Maisie is a conniving woman, hell-bent to get what she wants.”

“Here you are,” the bartender said. He turned to walk away then stepped back to them. “Aren't you, Scarlett?”

Fear gripped her. If Maisie found out she was there, their plan would be foiled.
“Uh...”

Kenny eased himself in front of her. “You don't want to do this, friend.”

The guy lifted his hands. “I didn't mean anything by it. I'm just surprised to see you is all. You're not one to come out to these things.”

“No,” she replied. “I'm not. I did this time.”

“Well, we're glad you did.” He smiled before walking away to help another patron.

She let out a breath. “That was close.”

Kenny chuckled. “Yes, it was.”

Dave held her hand as they drove home. The adrenaline rush was wearing off and she was spent. However, they got the information they needed to take down Maisie. The seven cubs were auctioned off for a total of two million dollars, surprisingly, the amount of the loan Maisie had taken out against the sanctuary. The likelihood of her paying it back though was slim and none and that bothered Scarlett more.

As they pulled up to the staff quarters, Edward and Kenny got out leaving her with Dave. She peered up at him through her lashes as he continued driving toward the main building housing her apartment and her office. Nervous energy filled her belly. He hadn't said a word on the drive home—none of them had for that matter.

Scarlett tucked her bottom lip between her teeth as he pulled up to the building and put his car in park. What did she say? Of course, he'd made bold statements about

making her his, but what did that mean in the grand scheme of things?

“Would you like me to walk you up?”

“S-sure,” she said. “I’d like that.”

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They'd departed from the hotel before the gala officially ended, to be sure Maisie wouldn't see them. After the incident with the bartender, she'd been paranoid, to say the least, even if he didn't seem like the type to rat her out.

“You're acting like a skittish newborn foal.”

She laughed. “I suppose I am.”

“You worried about what I have intended for you tonight?” The way his blue eyes swirled with intention and lust stole her breath.

“A little, if I'm being honest.”

“Don't be. I won't do anything you don't want me to do.” Dave opened the door to his car then got out. He came around the vehicle and opened her door. “You're always in control and you can always tell me no.”

“What if I don't want to?”

“Then we'll see where this takes us.” He took her hand and escorted her inside. The small security light illuminated the area for them as they walked up the stairs to her apartment.

Tension radiated between them. Her heart pounded and her stomach clenched. Getting down and dirty with Kenny had been one thing, it happened. There were no pretenses or thoughts. No questions or understandings. The sex between them was dirty and fast. It was also amazing sex. Looking at Dave as they crested the staircase,

she wondered if they could do the same.

You've been friends for years, it might be awkward. And, therein lie the problem. They'd known each other for a long time. Since they were ten. Since she'd had her accident. She should have been comfortable with him, yet a bit of her worried about what would come next. "Have—have you done this before?"

They stopped outside her apartment. "Sex? Sure. You?"

Heat filled her cheeks. "You know I have."

"I did. I enjoy seeing your cheeks turn a rosy shade of pink though when you're bashful or embarrassed." He wrapped his arm around her middle and tugged her close. "I can also see the worry and concern in your eyes. You're thinking about our friendship."

She dipped her chin.

"None of that," he said, lifting her face so she had to stare at him. "I've loved you since the minute I saw you. Scar and all. This just seems like a natural progression."

"You love me?" She cocked a brow.

He nodded then kissed her. It started sweet, simple. Nothing like Kenny's powerful hunger. Then Dave deepened it. He consumed her. His big body loomed over her as their tongues tangled together. She moaned into it, wrapping her arms around his neck. How two different kisses could set her on fire, she'd never understood.

Dave pulled back then, breaking the kiss. "We should do this inside. Not out here. Not where we can get caught."

She let out a shaky breath and nodded. "I agree."

The minute they were inside her apartment, Dave had her pinned to the door. He placed her legs around his waist, surprising her. The muttered curse falling from his lips turned her on. Both men, Kenny and Dave acted as though they'd been starved of her. Like they couldn't get enough, and it confused her. How did she earn this kind of devotion from them?

His hands slid up the outside of her thighs, pushing the flowing gown out of the way. The cool air of the room licked across her exposed flesh and goosebumps were left in its wake. She moaned, burying her face in the crook of his neck. He palmed her ass, squeezing and kneading the round globes until she thought she'd go insane.

"Bedroom," he muttered.

"Down the hall," she said, pointing in the general direction.

He didn't put her down, instead carried her where she pointed. He also didn't let her go as he put her on the bed. Instead, he ground his hips against hers and let out a muffled curse. She ached for him. In this position, he had to know how wet he made her. How stiff her nipples were and how her pulse hammered at her throat.

"Dave..." she whispered.

"I know," he replied. "I feel it too."

He stepped away, removing his clothes one piece at a time. She lifted her trembling hands to do the same and he stilled her, with a shake of his head. She stared up at him as he pulled down his pants. The black boxer-briefs outlined the thick stalk of his erection along with the wet spot at the tip of his cock. He cupped himself and groaned. She'd been entranced as he stroked himself through the barrier. The length

of his dick grew with each pass until she thought he'd burst from his underwear.

“Take off your dress, leave your stockings and garter on.”

The corner of her mouth kicked up. “How do you know I have panties on at all?”
Knowing full well he'd felt it when he palmed her ass.

“Don't toy with me right now,” he grunted. “I've waited for this moment for a long time.”

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She gasped, shocked by his words. She quickly worked to undo her dress then slipped it off. The coolness of her room caused her nipples to become painfully tight buds. She squirmed on the bed while he took his fill of her. She lowered her gaze to his groin and noticed the small dot had grown larger.

“Don't worry, all that's for you,” he said as if reading her mind.

Dave joined her on the bed then, covering her exposed body with his. He kissed her once more and she melted into him. She tingled from head to toe with anticipation, but if he had an inkling of going faster, he didn't express it. He'd been content to tease and touch her. She ran her fingers through his perfect dark-blond locks as he dipped his head and kissed a path between her breasts. As he slid down her body, she noticed the contrast in the color of their skin. Where she'd been a deep shade of brown, his was lightly tanned and fit. It was obvious, between his work as a lawyer, he'd found time to work out and she appreciated it.

“Where'd you go?” he murmured, nipping her hip. “You got this faraway look in your eyes.”

“I was appreciating your body,” she said.

A cocky grin tugged at his lips. “Were you?”

Heat filled her cheeks. “Yes.”

“Good to know.” He tugged on her panties until they ripped free. “Now that's what I'm talking about.” He buried his face between her thighs and moaned. “So good.”

His tongue lashed at her throbbing clit and her ass came off the bed. “Sensitive. I fucking love it.”

Scarlett rode his face while gripping his hair. He drove her insane, pushing her toward cataclysmic orgasm. It built, twisting her insides into one giant pleasure-filled ball. It expanded until she thought she'd go insane. He teased her though, perched at the brink of orgasm while he ran his tongue along her slit and inside of her, but not once did he draw the taut bead into his mouth.

“Come for me,” he muttered against her pussy. “Let me taste you.”

He pushed two of his broad fingers into her at the same moment he latched onto her clit. She screamed his name as everything inside of her shattered. Nothing had ever felt as exquisite or as painful as the release racing through her system. Her back bowed, her hips rocked and every muscle in her stomach twitched and jerk. When she came down and could draw in a breath, she shook. The simple act had turned her inside out and left her dazed. His masculine chuckle, sent a bolt of lust through her still trembling body and a new wave of need built low.

“My turn.”

He shoved his briefs off and covered his body with hers. In the next second, he filled her. The thick stalk of his cock stretched her in the most delicious ways, pushing her into a small, yet still powerful climax.

He stilled and groaned. “You're so fucking tempting.” He pulled out and stroked himself a few times before grabbing his pants. “Make me forget my senses.” He withdrew a small grey disk then ripped it open. He rolled the condom over his length and dear God, even watching him do such a mundane task, turned her on.

By the time he entered her again, she was on edge. He stole her ability to reason or

control the situation. She kissed him, trying to express the desperate way he made her feel, and Dave returned it with the same amount of vigor. She burned for him, swore she'd combust before they were finished and then enjoyed the idea of dying in his arms because the sex had been fantastic.

“Dave,” she whimpered digging her nails into his shoulders.

He shuddered, his hips faltered. “Shit, don't say my name like that. You got me at my limit already.” He retreated and slammed into her twice more.

She cried out, clinging to him. Everything inside her was poised once more the impending orgasm building. It was too much. Too good. He'd ruin her. She knew it. “Please!” She'd never sounded so desperate in her life. Never so out of control. Only two men had left her witless and insane and Dave was one of them.

“I love it when you beg me. Gets me so fucking hard and ready.” He licked his thumb before pressing it to her clit. She bucked against him. “Fuck my dick, Scar. Give it to me.”

He continued to manipulate her clit while she rolled her hips, more so jerking over him as each thrust touched all the sensitive places inside her. Her mind fractured and her eyes fluttered closed seconds before she came apart in his arms. It was so powerful; her breath had been lodged in her throat and her body had gone tense.

He was right there though, milking her clit while he fucked her in hard uneven thrusts and when she could finally draw a breath, she flew. The warmth of his body covering hers, added to the sensations bombarding her as she rode the waves of her release. The sounds he made when he thrust twice more then still, added to euphoria fueling her pleasure. Nothing compared to being in his arms. She didn't think anything would either. Dave gathered her in his embrace and groaned as he slowly pulled from her. “God...” He pressed a kiss to her temple as she snuggled into his warmth and closed

her eyes.

“Wow,” she murmured, not able to move, even if she wanted to. Had anyone told her earlier in the week, she’d end up in bed with Dave and had sex with Kenny as well, she’d have said they were crazy.

“I know, I felt it too.” He placed another kiss to her temple. “I know.”

Bone-Deep exhaustion overtook her, and she could feel herself drifting. Maybe she should rest for a bit before they had to get back to work. She realized on the way home, after everything they learned at the gala; they'd face more challenges before things would finally settle down. But, for tonight, she just wanted to be here in the moment with Dave. “Don't leave me.”

“Not going anywhere, Scar. Promise.”

Chapter Five

The next morning, Scarlett woke up alone. Disappointment filled her. She shouldn't have been, after all, there were no promises made while in the silent interlude before she and Dave began again. She also couldn't say the sex hadn't been amazing. Because it was. It curled her toes, melted her heart and made her wish for things she had no business wishing for—like Dave still in bed with her.

Oh well, it's for the best anyway.

Scarlett slipped out from under the rumpled covers and sat up. She glanced at the clock and frowned. It was a little after six, and according to Dave, Timothy would be there by eight. She ran her fingers through her bed-tangled hair and frowned. The area looked like a bomb had gone off in it. Her dress lay in a heap by the door, presumably where Dave had thrown it. Her stockings and garter were haphazardly

thrown over her bedside lamp. Before she could take a shower and begin her day, she'd have to clean up. No way in hell, she'd want Samantha to see her room in such a state.

Once she was finished and the room looked somewhat presentable, she took a shower then dressed. Her curly hair had gone frizzy, so instead of leaving it down as she normally did, she twisted it into a severe knot at the nape of her neck. The smell of coffee wafted from her kitchen as she stepped out of her room moments later, and she frowned. She hadn't smelled the brew when she woke, which meant someone had to have been in her apartment, right? She strode down the hall and came to an abrupt halt when she saw Kenny and Edward sitting at her small table in the alcove by her kitchen. Both sipped on their cups while reading a newspaper. Both were also acting as if their presence was normal. The timer on her oven, she hadn't even realized was on, dinged announcing whatever they'd made was ready.

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Edward got up from his seat then paused when he saw Scarlett staring at both of them. He tapped Kenny's shoulder, who glanced up at her as well. A cheerful smile tugged at his mouth, crinkling the corners of his eyes.

“Well, good morning,” Kenny said while Edward continued to the kitchen. “Did you sleep well?”

Scarlett frowned.

“What are you guys doing here?”

Kenny closed the paper in his hands then folded it like it was the nineteen-fifties. “Dave called us earlier, said something happened at the office and had to leave you. He asked if we could come over, so you weren't alone when you woke.”

“And breakfast?” she asked, still not sure if she accepted his answer or not.

“Most important meal of the day,” Edward said. “Or, at least, that's what my mom would say.”

“Dave said he'd call you later because he knew you'd have your hands full with Timothy and the forensic stuff. He also said something about getting in touch with a couple of friends about the pictures we captured last night.” Kenny motioned to the chair beside him. “Sit, you look like you're about to jump out of your skin.”

“Wouldn't you be, if you found two men in your apartment acting like they owned the place?” She sat down beside him and blew out a breath. “So, I suppose you also know

what happened between Dave and me last night?”

“You boned,” Edward said. “If it was any indication by the heated looks you were giving each other on the way home, it was nasty as hell.”

Heat filled Scarlett's cheeks. “Well...”

“You don't have to tell us,” Kenny reassured her.

“Yeah, you do.” Edward brought her a mini quiche along with sliced fruit and a roll on a small plate. “I want to make sure I can satisfy you like Kenny and Dave can.”

She choked.

Kenny smacked Edward on the back of the head. “Idiot.”

“What?” He rubbed where Kenny hit him and frowned. “I don't want to disappoint. If I'm lacking, I better get to studying.”

Scarlett stared at Edward for a second. “How would you know if you're lacking?”

He shrugged. “Not sure, but I think checking out some porn will help bring my game to a whole other level if I know what Kenny and Dave can do for you.”

She laughed. “You're one weird guy.”

Edward grinned. “Can be at times. Eat up.” He pointed to her plate. “You have a full day in front of you.”

Kenny cursed as he glanced at his watch. “Time for us to get going. If you need anything, you know where we are.”

She nodded, taking a sip of her coffee. “Yep. I doubt I'll need you though. I think I got this.”

“Perfect. Don’t forget, Dave said he'd call later.” Kenny stood then and came over to where she sat at the head of the table. He leaned down and placed a kiss to her lips then motioned for Edward to follow.

Except, the younger man didn't. He went straight to Scarlett and brushed his lips over hers. It was a feather-light kiss, but it made her lightheaded all the same. Edward winked at her as he followed Kenny out of the apartment. She couldn't believe him. Between Kenny and Dave, Edward was the most timid, yet he also had a quiet strength to him she admired. She glanced down at her breakfast he made for her and dug in. The savory mixture of eggs, bell pepper, ham, and cheese, melted in her mouth. A happy, content sigh passed her lips as she took another bite. Edward would have to teach her how to make the quiche, she could become quite addicted to them.

After taking her final bite of the egg mixture, she moved on to the fruit and roll and noticed Kenny had left the morning paper on her table. The front page was an article about the gala and how much money was raised for her sanctuary. She was applauded for her hard work, but also demeaned for her reclusive ways. Little did anyone know, she'd been there, just not where she'd be seen.

The quote from her sister had been a bit pretentious and ironic as well. “The funds raised here will go to new exhibits and make sure each big cat has a free and loving environment for the remainder of their days.”

Scarlett snorted. If only the public knew the truth. She finished off her coffee then grabbed her plate and mug then carried them to the sink. Once she'd rinsed them, she put them into her dishwasher to start later. She only had a few minutes to get to her office before Timothy showed up. The last thing she wanted to do was tip off her sister they were on to her.

She grabbed her bag from the hook then her keys out of the bowl next to the door, thankful Dave had put them away for her. She strode down the hall to the offices facing the sanctuary. When she first picked her space, she knew, if she couldn't be with her animals, she'd be close enough to look at them throughout the day. Even though it'd been a long time ago, she yearned for the day she'd be able to go back into the enclosures and see her friends without feeling like she'd die from heart palpitations.

Scarlett stepped into her office and turned on the lights. She pulled back the curtain on the window and gazed out over the property. She belonged out there. She belonged with her feline friends. The idea her sister didn't feel the same as she did about the cats who called their property home, irritated her. They were depending on her and Maisie to protect and shelter them. To love them. She spotted Kenny and Edward dropping off food for each of the cats. The way they interacted with each one, like the guys knew the felines on a personal level, warmed her heart.

A soft knock came at her door and she turned around. There in the doorway stood a man a good three inches taller than Dave. He had jet-black hair and almond-shaped obsidian eyes. He lifted his hand in greeting before stepping inside Scarlett's workspace.

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“I’m a little late. My name’s Timothy—Tim for short. Dave didn’t tell me you were all the way out in the mountains.” His deep voice surprised her and he wasn’t even close to what she’d been expecting. If she was honest. She thought Timothy would be a short, pudgy, middle-aged balding man.

She shook her head as she closed the door behind him, locking them in. “Sorry, I’m Scarlett.” She held out her hand to him. “Thanks for coming on such short notice and welcome to Hearts and Paws, the business side, of course.”

When their hands touched, a surge of electricity skirted up her arm. The reaction startled her, and as she looked up at Timothy, she found he stared at her with the same perplexing expression she felt. Clearing her throat, she released his hand and motioned for him to take a seat across from her.

“Dave said this case is unique in a way,” he said, without missing a beat. “Care to elaborate?”

“Sure.” She willed her fingers to stop trembling and her heart to stop pounding. She had to focus on the seriousness of the situation with Maisie and not the tingling coil of arousal building within her. Scarlett started from the beginning. She gave him every financial folder she had for the sanctuary along with the loan paperwork and the latest ledger from the bank she’d received. It was a lot of information for him to have to analyze, but if Dave was right, he’d be up to the task. “There’s one more thing.”

“The auction last night?” Timothy cocked a brow as though he anticipated her statement. “I’m already on it. Dave texted me the photos and the amounts of money.”

“Yes.” She closed her eyes. “I mean, you are?”

He nodded. “I’m the friend with Wildlife Management and CITES connections. I’ve got a friend who can do this on the down-low.”

“You’d...You’d do that for me? Someone, you don’t know?” She tilted her head to the side, trying to size him up.

“I would, yes.”

“You don’t know me. I could be worse than my sister.” The bitterness of the lie fell from her and she hated the way it made her feel. She’d never betray her feline companions’ trust nor her friends.

“Dave wouldn’t have called me in to help, nor would I be here, if I thought you would be anything but who you are, Scarlett,” he replied. “Dave and I have been friends since college. We even pledged the same fraternity. I trust his judgment calls implicitly.”

She could tell by the way Timothy talked about Dave, the man held her friend in the highest esteem. “Okay. So, where do you want to start?”

“How about small and we’ll work our way up?” he answered.

“Sounds great. I have everything in order here.” She grabbed the red notebook she’d put together earlier the day before. “I have everything color coordinated by type of bill, when it’s paid and when there is a flux in usage amounts.” She handed him the binder. “It’s five years’ worth of information. I also have the thumb drive to go with it if you prefer.”

He stared at her; a stunned expression colored his handsome features. “When Dave

told me you were thorough, he didn't explain it was this thorough.”

She laughed. “I watch every penny that comes in and goes out. I know how to budget, ration, and save. What I'm not good at, is finding the holes or discrepancies.”

“Well, leave that to the experts.” He winked at her. “You are amazing, Scarlett. Dave has told me a lot about you over the years. What the bastard left out was how beautiful you are.”

Her cheeks burned and the tickling euphoria from being complimented filled her chest. Timothy had been too kind to her and yet, he'd been sincere with his appreciation of her, which knocked her for a loop once more. “Thank you.”

“You're not going to refute what I've said?” Timothy laughed. “Boy, Dave will be pissed when I tell him. He owes me twenty bucks.”

“You made a bet?” She didn't know if she should laugh or be pissed off Dave was making bets against her.

“Yeah, friendly of course.” He lifted his hands. “He said you don't take compliments well when it comes to your beauty because you're always worried about your scar. I see it as a badge of honor and courage. Now, my mom and dad, on the other hand, might think you're a badass Yakuza member and keep their distance.”

She laughed, how could she not? “Yakuza? Not even close.”

“Anyway, Dave told me what happened. He's always believed you when it came to the accident. I tend to side with him too after listening to his assessments.” Timothy opened the notebook. “So, I guess I'll take a look at this now.” He pointed to the open desk. “Over there?”

He left her speechless. She nodded then swallowed hard. “I’ll grab us some coffee. I’ll be right back.”

She headed out into the hall and pressed her back to the door when she shut it behind her. What the hell was wrong with her? Why did her heart go skippity-splat every time the guy opened his mouth? And, after last night with Dave, how could she even feel even the slightest bit aroused by Timothy?

Maybe it's because he's kind.

He was. He listened to her. He didn't interrupt her like some would and he genuinely cared about her big cats. God, the simple way to her heart, it appeared, was loving her animals as much as she did.

She walked down the hall to the breakroom, her mind was still foggy from Timothy's care and compassion. As she stepped around the corner, she ran smack dab into Kenny. “Sorry.” She mumbled the words as he held onto her so she could catch her balance.

“That bad?” he murmured.

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“Huh?” She lifted her chin so she could look at him. Worry filled his eyes. “Oh, no. Not at all. I think you'll like him. He's...” What? What did she call him? Nice seemed a little too lacking of a term. “Exactly who we need to do the job.”

Kenny grinned and her belly felt as though a million butterflies beat against the inside of it. “Excellent. I am sure Dave will happy to hear it.”

“How's it going out there?” She hooked her thumb toward the enclosures.

Kenny blew out a breath. The switch in his emotions set her on edge. “Not good, Scar. Two more female lions are pregnant. At this rate, they'll be born during the coldest months. I fear for their safety and their mother's safety.”

Scarlett grit her teeth. “Guess Maisie knew her auction would be a success ahead of time.” She wanted to lay into her sister and knock some sense into her, for all the good it would do.

“We'll figure it out. We always do.” He walked with her as she entered the breakroom. “Speaking of which, did you receive the receipts from last night?”

Come to think of it, when she sat down at her desk, they weren't there. Usually, after the charity events, Maisie's assistant brought her all of the paperwork along with the deposits, today, not so much. “Maybe she got caught up fucking her new husband.”

Kenny choked on his coffee. “Damn, Scarlett, remind me not to take a sip of anything before you say shit like that.”

She shrugged. "Well, it's true."

"It bugs you." He joined her at the creamer and sugar station. "Knowing she got married, didn't tell you, and hasn't introduced you to him yet."

She shook her head. "No, what bugs me is she got Samantha to cover her tracks. My niece deserves better."

"Do you think Samantha even knows?"

Scarlett scrunched up her face. "What do you mean? How could she not? They all live under the same roof."

Kenny held up his hands. "Or, she spends more time here than with her mother."

Scarlett rubbed her forehead. "I can't think about that right now. I have to find where the money is going."

Kenny wrapped his arm around her. "You do, and you can do both. Remember, she's your blood. Don't allow her mother to turn her against you."

No, she wouldn't. "You always know the things to say to calm me down."

"It's a gift. Ed calls it being a Scarlett whisperer." He grinned.

She rolled her eyes. "He's so weird."

Kenny barked out a laugh. "Yes, he is." He leaned in then and kissed her. The simple touch of their lips released the anxious knot in the pit of her stomach. "You better get back to Timothy. We don't need him wandering around while Maisie is on the loose."

No, they didn't. "Thanks for this."

"It's what I'm here for." He kissed her again before disappearing down the hall in the opposite direction from where he'd run into her.

Scarlett hurried back to her office and found Timothy already setup and working. He had the red notebook open while he made notes on a tablet beside him. She placed the coffee down on the table away from the electronics and went to her desk. Not having the deposits for the auction bothered her.

"I couldn't help but notice you don't have any of the paperwork from last night." Timothy grabbed the travel cup and removed the lid before taking a sip. "Is that normal?"

"No. I should have had everything when I started work today."

"When Dave explained the loan, I had an idea." Timothy joined her at her desk once again, sitting in the seat opposite of her. "Maybe you've had the same."

"Hit me," she said before taking a drink from her cup.

"What if she doesn't plan on giving you the receipts. What if, she's planning to pay off the loan that you're not supposed to know about?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Do you have ESP or something?"

He chuckled. "Not in the slightest. Your mind is yours to have filthy daydreams about me without me interfering."

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She jerked, spilling some of the coffee on her thumb. She hissed putting down the cup and Timothy was at her side, apologizing. “Your timing sucks.”

“Sorry, bout that. I guess I got carried away.” He grinned. “Anyway, Dave worried about the same thing when it came to the loan and I agreed. It would make sense if she’s trying to cover her tracks. If she paid it off, perhaps in her mind it would mean there was nothing illegal about it. However, we all know better.”

“Or she thinks she is above the law,” Scarlett replied.

“That too.” He held out his hand to her. “Let me see your hand.”

“It's okay.” She brushed him off.

“Please?”

She relented, placing her hand in his. He bent his head, peering at the red mark forming near her nail bed and the space between her thumb and forefinger. He brought her hand to his lips and placed a kiss there. The bolt of shock accompanied a little thrill of anticipation. This man... She didn't know what to think of him. Timothy let her hand go then went back to his desk. “Don't worry too much about the deposit and transaction information, we have it with photos and video/audio logs. Your sister would be hard press to say we're lying, especially with a room full of people and yourself.”

“Right,” she agreed, pushing aside the tingle of awareness still spreading through her. “Denying it will only make this worse for her.”

It'd been one of the reasons Scarlett relented and went with Dave to the auction. She had to see for herself what her sister had been up to. What she found out while there, however, pissed her off. Scarlett always knew the battle—any battle against Maisie would be an uphill fight pretty much the whole way, but she could do it. Hell, she spent the majority of her time clawing her way through life, how would this be any different?

“When you're done there, I'll show you the binder with our food bills, it's a little more involved than the utilities.”

Timothy nodded. “Sounds great. With as well as you've documented everything here, I have no doubt the food ledgers will be easy to follow.” He frowned. “Which reminds me, how many other books are there? I mean, I can assume there is more than the one set you've kept, correct?”

“Yes, it's easier if we both have them on hand should anything arise. If they're not in the safe in Maisie's office they're at her home. And, if they should fall into the wrong hands well...”

“I understand. We're going to have to take a little trip you and I,” he said. “What do you say to a working lunch, just the two of us?”

“What did you have in mind?” He closed the lid on his laptop and folded his hands behind his head. “We need everything. We need all of the banking statements deposits and withdraws, and I'd like access to any loans the sanctuary ran on as well as charitable contributions. I figure your bank would have all of it on file, wouldn't they?”

She blew out a breath. “That's a lot of information. But, yes, they would. They can't also say no to me since my name is on every inch of everything regarding Hearts and Paws.”

“Good to hear.”

A message popped up on her computer from her sister. She pulled it open and frowned. If she wasn't so pissed off at the moment, she would have laughed at how comical the situation was or how it all fell into place. “I think we're onto something and you were right. My sister is lying out of her ass.”

“Oh?” Timothy joined her and read the note Maisie left her.

The auction didn't do so well. No one bid on the lots you provided. I will send an updated budget forecast shortly. ~M

“You've gotta be shitting me. We need to call Dave. Now.” He slipped his phone out of his pocket. In the next second, he had it to his ear. “Mr. Youngblood, please. Yes, tell him it's an emergency, it's Mr. Yakimoto.” He placed the phone on the desk and hit the speaker button.

“Timothy, what's the word?” Dave said when he answered the phone.

“I've got you on speaker and I'm here with Scarlett.”

“Hey Scar, is Tim treating you well? He's not being too much of a pervert, is he?”

She bit back a laugh. “Not really.”

“Something's wrong,” Dave said. “I can hear it in your voice.”

“The deposits from last night didn't come in,” Timothy said, keeping his voice pitched low.

“Son of a bitch,” Dave sighed. “We have all the information. How could she lie?”

Scarlett snorted. “Why wouldn't she. She doesn't believe I was there last night, so why would she have to worry about whether or not I knew about the auction's earnings? Besides, not like I go out to the enclosures to check on the cats. I'd be the last to know if they were gone.”

“True,” Dave said.

“I'm sure she's working on some kind of plausible reason they were moved as well,” Scarlett added.

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“Also true,” Dave stated. “Do you know what you're going to say to her?”

“I think I am going to feel her out and ask about the other silent donors we usually receive gifts from.”

“Good idea. Meet up for lunch?”

“We're going to the bank. I think I can get more information there, than here at the sanctuary,” Timothy said. “Meet us there just in case there's red tape we can't get through.”

“Can do,” Dave said. “Meanwhile get those videos I sent you ready. We'll need to present those to the authorities sooner rather than later.”

Scarlett swallowed the lump forming in her throat. “There's something else I need to tell you.”

“What is it?” Dave asked.

“Two more lionesses are pregnant,” she answered. “Kenny told me when I went to grab coffee for Timothy and me.”

Timothy cursed under his breath. “Well, we know how she's going to make money now. Question is, will it be for Hearts and Paws or for herself.”

“Damn it, Scar. I'm sorry this is happening. Can you call Fabien and find out if he can do a rush on spaying and neutering at the compound?” The idea had merit. However,

she worried Maisie would continue to bring fertile felines into the sanctuary which would stress all of the other big cats out.

“I will, later, not over the phone. I have a feeling though until we get to the bottom of this, Maisie will continue with her breeding program, even if it is at a detriment to the cats.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’ll let you know at lunch what she said about the other donors.”

“Sounds good,” Dave answered. “Pick me up here at the office at noon.”

“We will,” Timothy said. “We’ll be in touch.” He hung up with Dave then cast his gaze at her. “Sounds like we have a lot of work ahead of us. Ready to get dirty?”

A new determination filled her. “You’re damn right I am. Let’s get to work.”

Chapter Six

“I think I’ve found it.” Timothy brought his computer over to where Scarlett was sitting behind her desk. “She’s good, but not good enough.”

Scarlett peered up at the screen. “What am I looking at?”

“I’m glad you asked.” He pointed to the yellow highlighted entries. “See these items? There’s one every month for three distinct amounts. Five hundred on the first. Seven-fifty on the fifteenth and fifteen hundred on the twenty-fifth. They’re going to an account named Sandusky Supply. I tried to find it on the internet, but it doesn’t exist.” He paused. “Let me rephrase that. They do exist. In name only. Their web presence is a shitty dime-store setup. The template comes from a blogger site. The links refer back to the main page. Well... You get the picture.” He peered up at her. “I’m assuming by the face you’re making you don’t do business with them either?”

She shook her head. “No. I've never heard of them. We get our supplies from a local hay farmer. The medicines come from a Veterinary supply office and Fabien handles it. Our meat is from a local butcher who can keep up with our demand. The same goes for the fruits and treats for the animals. They all come from Colorado Springs farmers markets and such. We try to keep everything nearby for delivery purposes. Besides, the manifests are in the yellow binder. The one you haven't gone through yet.”

“Figured as much.” He placed his computer on her desk. “I can trace these payments back ten years, Scarlett.”

“How much money is that?” She cringed thinking about it.

“Three hundred and thirty thousand dollars,” he said. “And, that's just one account. I am sure there are others with probably varying amounts of money being taken out. In my estimation, she's made several of these shell businesses to cover her tracks.”

“Well, she'd have to pay with a check or online, right?” The look Timothy gave her, as though she'd been too naive in her thinking, had her cringing in embarrassment. “She wouldn't want to be too blatant, right?”

“She got away with it for ten years, didn't she?”

He had a point.

“Okay, so she enters each transaction appearing to go to a supply company and she puts the money into another account?”

“Yes,” Timothy answered with a nod. “As I said, these are the first of the expenditures that I found. I am sure there are more.”

But how? There had to be some kind of trace of the money. “Can you find the amounts in the bank statements? Sure, it would be easy to steal from the till during the spring and summer since the sanctuary is open to the public. The rest of the year, we rely on donations. Those donations are either through our site or come in the form of checks. Not so easy to take from.”

“Who goes over the mail,” he asked.

“Well, Maisie does,” she said, then groaned, closing her eyes. “How could I be so blind?”

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“Hey, don't go getting down on yourself,” he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “She's kept you in the dark for as long as both of you have been running this sanctuary, maybe longer it appears. Now, at least you know where the money is going to and why your budgets have been cut.”

True. Nevertheless, it didn't make sense. Maisie had everything. She was the belle of the ball. The daughter who did no wrong. The one who could dance into a room and everyone fawned over her. Money, when Maisie had been younger, wasn't even an issue. With her small appearances on local news channels and library tours she did along with parades and merchandising while sharing their big cats with the masses, she should have had more than enough to live on. So, what happened?

The phone on Scarlett's desk rang, drawing her from her thoughts. She blew out a frustrated breath. The more they learned about her sister, the more she felt like she never knew Maisie. Timothy grabbed his laptop and stepped back, giving her room to answer the phone. “Hearts and Paws, this is Scarlett Leon how can I help you?”

“Miss Leon, this is Mr. Brinks from PP&E. I thought I would let you know the loan has been paid in full.”

She cut her gaze to Timothy. “What loan would that be?”

The man cleared his throat. “The one your sister, Maisie came in and requested. She said both of you were in agreement the sanctuary needed a few upgrades.”

She snorted and stared at Timothy. “Right, the loan. Sorry. We've been busy with those upgrades. I'm glad you could help us out on such short notice.” Each bitter

word she spoke only ignited the anger coursing through her.

“Not a problem,” Mr. Brinks said. “Also, if you don't mind letting Mrs. Cruz-Velasquez know that the secondary loan for supplies has been drawn up. She can come in and sign for it when she's ready.”

She arched a brow. “I’m sorry, did you say, ‘she,’ can come in and sign for it? I thought both of us, per our family’s will, had to sign for it?”

Mr. Brinks cleared his throat. “Dear me, she said you might forget, due to your injury.”

Injury? What the fuck?

“Miss Leon?” Mr. Brinks said. “Did I lose you?”

“No, I’m here.” Scarlett sighed. “Right, my injury. I guess my mind is a little foggy today. What was the new agreement?”

"Well, your sister has power of attorney over you and the sanctuary. She has since your parents died." Papers rustled in the background causing dread to seep into her system. "Seems your parents put you under conservatorship as well. Due to your injuries sustained by a lion attack. Anyway, as such, your sister can sign for the loan herself. This was just a courtesy call since I haven't been able to reach Mrs. Cruz-Velasquez."

Scarlett wanted to scream. To rage and kick. Her parents had complete control over her life and now, Maisie did too. All because she tried to help her sister and the lion. She didn’t know if she should cry or throw up. Instead, she bit her tongue. “Right, right. Sorry, thanks again for calling.”

“My pleasure, Miss Leon. I’m glad you’re back to assisting your sister. I am sure she appreciates your help.” The man hung up, leaving her to stare at the receiver in her hand.

“Well, it seems our guesses were correct. Maisie used the auction money to pay off the loan. And, get this, it was for upgrades to the facilities here.” She let out a derisive laugh. “And my sister has a conservatorship over me.”

“What?” Timothy narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean upgrades? What do you mean conservatorship?”

“Yep, it seems that's what she was using the money for. The other, I guess our parents had one on me since the accident, so my oh-so-kind sister carried it over after their deaths.”

Timothy sat opposite from her in a huff. “This is fucked on so many levels I don’t know where to begin.”

“We’ll start with the easy stuff. Dave and his father would never draw up the conservatorship documents on me. So, if what Mr. Brinks said is true, they went to someone else.” She frowned. “There would also be court hearings and mental health or psychical examinations. I’m sure there’s more I’m missing too.”

Timothy played with his bottom lip. He pulled at the plump flesh using his thumb and forefinger, drawing her attention to the sensual bow of his mouth. His obsidian eyes swirled with intent as he listened to her and when he cut his gaze toward her, the pure unadulterated resolve etched into his features had her panties dampening. Damn, why did he have to be so sexy while she was trying to be serious? You should be ashamed of yourself. Lusting after one man while two have warmed your bed, she chided herself. “I doubt Dave would have either. I think both sets of documents are forgeries.”

She snorted. "You don't know my parents well enough. After running headlong into the lion's den, I'm sure they thought about sending me away, too."

"Wouldn't you have known when you were in college?" he hedged. "At some point, the information would have come out."

True. Yet, what stuck in her crawl was how vindictive her family could be, especially where she was concerned. It'd been why she turned out as she did—a bitchy shut-in. "Guess we'll never know. Anyway..."

Timothy adjusted his position in the chair. "So, about the upgrades. No one just decides to upgrade a place like this. Most importantly, not one working in the red part of the year. How did she prove the assets to afford the loan payments on a two million dollar loan?"

"Maybe she used the ledger she's been hiding money in? It only seems appropriate since she's concealing the money from the actual sanctuary."

Timothy nodded. "Plausible. She would've needed an architect to draw up plans and a construction company? Maybe a bid or two to show different projected costs?"

"She probably had it," Scarlett said. "If she can forge the books, what's to stop her from doing the same with the bidding." She closed the lid on her laptop and stood. "Can't deny she isn't good at her job. She's a performer when it comes down to it." "Guess those classes finally paid off."

"We need to get the bank to hand over all of the loans for the sanctuary. We're running blind. Even with what I've uncovered on my own, I think there's more."

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A knock at her door drew her attention. She held up her finger as she crossed to it. Scarlett opened the door and relaxed. "I'm glad you're here." She stood aside as Dave entered her office. Ever since they were little, Dave had this sixth sense about him. Whenever she was in need, he came running. Any time. Any day.

"I couldn't shake the feeling something was amiss when we talked, so I came here instead." He sat next to Timothy. "What did I miss?"

"The bank called Scarlett," Timothy said. "Seems the loan has been paid off and now another has been drawn up."

Tension radiated off of Dave. "What?"

"It gets better," Scarlett muttered. "Seems the money was earmarked for upgrades to our facilities."

Dave chuckled, the dark sound slithered down her spine and was filled with foreboding. "Oh really?"

Scarlett inclined her chin. "Seems Mrs. Cruz-Velasquez can pick up the paperwork whenever she's ready. But there's more." Scarlett filled Dave in. She knew she'd have to do it again when she saw Kenny and Edward. A part of her wished Dave would have been with his friends and brought them with him to get all the nonsense out of the way.

"Shit." Dave scrubbed his face. "We can't allow this to continue."

“Well, anything we do now, might cause Maisie to run,” Timothy said. “We have bits and pieces to this puzzle. Not the whole thing.”

“Well, first thing’s first. We need to see the conservatorship paperwork. My father didn’t handle it,” Dave said. “If anything, he advocated for Scarlett. He demanded your parents send you to therapy and then asked to question Maisie for them. He never believed her cock and bull story about not being anywhere near the cats.”

“How do we get them if we don’t know who the lawyer was that helped my parents?” Scarlett asked.

“We go to the bank. More specifically, I go to the bank. Since I represent the sanctuary, I should have all copies of important documents. If the Leon Trust was left to you and Maisie, then the trust should know under what conditions you’ve been put on conservatorship.” Dave stood then. “Give me an hour and then we’ll wrangle the other two up and go over what we have.”

“Sure,” Scarlett said. “An hour.”

“Don’t look so down, Scar. We’ll figure this out. I am a hundred percent sure this paperwork is bogus.” He crossed to her and placed a kiss to her lips before cutting his gaze to Timothy. “Take care of her.”

Timothy nodded. “You got it.”

Dave strode from Scarlett’s office. Rage burned through his veins. None of the documents the bank had were real. Which meant, Maisie also pulled the original will and trust from the bank and replaced it with forged documents. What was her end game? What did she hope to accomplish? As it stood, she was running the refuge into the ground. Give the place another year, maybe five, and it would be boarded up. She wouldn’t have to deal with it.

Yet, didn't it play better for her if she kept the sanctuary? Then it hit him. What if Maisie wanted a redo of her childhood? What if she wanted back into the limelight? Play the savior when her sister became incapacitated. The thought gave him pause. Fuck me. He pushed out the door of the main building and came face to face with Kenny and Edward.

"You," he said pointing to Kenny. "You're coming with me. Edward, I need you to go up and sit with Scarlett. Make sure she doesn't do anything stupid. Timothy is already up there."

Edward nodded before pushing between Kenny and Timothy to get to the door. When he was inside, Dave turned to Kenny. "I'll explain everything on the way to the bank. But, this is worse than both of us knew."

Kenny gave him a look crossed between confusion and anger. "How did I fucking know."

"It's a wonder we didn't figure it out before now." Dave jogged toward his car. "Hurry, we can't let Maisie see us. I'm sure the bitch has a snitch or three around here. We don't want to let her know we're onto her."

Kenny climbed into the passenger side of the vehicle. "You're right. So, spill."

Dave pulled out of the gated property and turned onto the paved road. "It's a clusterfuck. Worse than I expected. I hope to get more answers at the bank." He started from the beginning and told Kenny about the conservatorship. The fact the loan had been paid off and what it'd been for. By the time he finished, they were pulling up to the bank.

"Give me a second," Kenny said. "I feel like breaking shit."

Dave understood. "My dad would never do something so deranged."

Kenny waved him off. "Never thought he would. Nor you."

"Good. This could be fucked when we get in there," Dave said. "You sure you're up for this?"

Kenny grunted. "Yep. Lead the way."

They stepped inside the bank and Dave went straight for the first available teller. He grinned as he folded his hands on the counter. "I wonder if you could call Mr. Brinks and let him know Dave Youngblood here is to speak with him."

The girl smiled in return. "I sure can. It's good to see you again, Mr. Youngblood." She picked up the phone and dialed an extension. When the person answered she began to speak. "Mr. Youngblood is here to see you, Mr. Brinks. Should I send him up?" She waited for a beat. "Can do. Thank you." She hung up the phone then motioned to the staircase to the left of where they stood. "Mr. Brinks will see you now. Have a good afternoon."

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“Thank you.” Dave turned from the counter and headed for the stairs. “Should be interesting.”

Kenny chuckled. “Being told you’re part of an embezzlement ploy at best and money laundering at worst...”

“Yeah, like I said, interesting.” Dave smirked as they stepped onto the landing.

Benji Brinks, branch manager and head of the loan department for PP&E Bank, approached both men with his hand extended. “I was surprised when Mandy said you were here. It’s been a minute.”

“Sure has.” Dave shook his hand.

“Good afternoon, sir,” Kenny said, taking Benji’s hand. “Thanks for seeing us.”

“Come on, let’s talk in my office.” Benji waved them toward the corner office with a nice view of downtown Colorado Springs. When they were situated in his office, he continued, “How’s your dad? Still got that sixty-seven handicap?”

Dave nodded. His plan was simple. Kill Benji with kindness then ask for all the paperwork dealing with the conservatorship and the will. Might be confusing for him, however, enough was enough and Maisie was going down. “He’s doing well. Said he got together with your father at the club the other afternoon. Those two are inseparable.”

“I swear they’re connected at the hip.” Benji laughed. “It’s good for dad. Since mom

died, he's not been the same."

"I'm still so sorry about that." Benji Brinks' mother passed away in her sleep. The autopsy ruled the cause of death cancer related, though she'd been cured. The way Benji explained it, she had a massive heart attack due to the chemotherapy weakening her heart. She was only fifty-five. "Glad dad's around to help out when he can."

"Five years in and we both can't figure it out." Benji sighed. "Anyway," he cleared his throat, "I'm guessing this isn't about my father. What can I do for you today?"

"I know this is going to sound ridiculous," Dave said, sitting forward. "I know I gave you the Leon Trust and Will, but I can't seem to find it anywhere. I also lost the conservatorship paperwork. Can you get me a copy? I know it has to be placed with all the loan documents." He tried to appear as sheepish as he could. "I'm blaming a secretarial mix-up at the office. I have a new person who is overeager to please sometimes, and she gets in over her head."

Benji snorted. "I understand. Let me pull up the file then go grab it. I can have a copy for you lickety-split."

"Thanks, man," Dave said. "You're saving my ass on this."

"Not a problem." Benji tapped a few keys. "How is Scarlett doing? She seemed out of sorts earlier."

"Off day," Kenny said. "I think she needs a vacation."

"Well, if the sanctuary is doing as well as it is, she should take one. The refuge is in perfectly capable hands with Maisie."

Dave grit his teeth. It took all of his strength to not blurt out, what was going on.

Dave needed to be sure first. He had to read the conservatorship papers to find out which doctor supposedly examined Scarlett. Or, if like the website for the supply company Timothy told him about, it was a forgery too. Later, when he had a better grasp of the situation, he would come back and fill Benji in. Hopefully, it wouldn't be too late. "Maybe."

"Ah, here it is. Give me a moment." Benji exited the office and went in the direction of the large two-story vault. Upstairs it housed all of the paperwork on their customers along with loans. Downstairs, they kept all of the safety deposit boxes along with the bank's money.

"Leave it to Maisie?" Kenny snorted. "Not even close."

"I don't think Benji knows how deep the shit is about to get for him and this bank," Dave said. "When he does, I'm going to hate putting the nail in the coffin."

"It'll teach him to research better." Kenny shrugged.

"Yeah, but at what cost?"

"Don't matter," Kenny grunted, crossing his arms. "Scarlett has been fucked over for long enough."

True. She had. "You're right."

"I know I am." He pointed to the vault. "Unwitting or not, this man helped Maisie cut Scarlett out of what made our girl happy. The sanctuary is her home. Maisie couldn't give a shit about it and she's spent her life preparing for this moment."

When Benji started back to them, Dave cleared his throat. "We'll figure it out after we leave here. Can't talk about it now."

"I agree." Kenny pasted on a smile when Benji joined them. "Sorry, it took me a minute. Someone did a horrible job of filing."

Or, someone didn't want Benji or anyone for that matter to find the file. "Not a problem. Again, I understand."

Benji opened the file and flipped through all of the documents then stopped on the information Dave requested. He folded his hand on it and lifted his gaze to meet Dave's. "You don't have to lie to me."

Dave blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I know I had this conversation with Scarlett earlier and now you’re here looking for this paperwork your secretary conveniently lost?” Benji cocked a brow. “Be level with me.”

Kenny let out a breath. “Well, at least he got smart quick.”

"I think we should do this somewhere private because the implications behind what I am saying could potentially take down anyone in the vicinity of it." Plus, anyone who saw Maisie as a friend, could potentially blow what little case Dave could build for criminal prosecution.

“Where?” Benji said.

“The pub on Skyline. Meet us there in fifteen and use the alley entrance. Bring the file.” Kenny stood. “I need to stretch my legs.” He patted Dave’s shoulder as he started for the door.

Dave gave Benji a shrug. “We’ll take you not showing up as an accessory to the fact. See you in fifteen.” He strode from the office, his head held high and his heart hammering. God damn, it'd been a long time since he played the intimidation card. He'd been content to help businesses form plans and draw up the necessary paperwork for such. Being in that office... Shit, he wished he'd gone into criminal law.

When he met Kenny outside, the guy was leaned against his truck, taking a drag off

of a cigarette. Kenny's features were strained. His right hand had been balled into a tight fist and his posture radiated don't-fuck-with-me. "We're on." Dave squeezed his shoulder. "Come on. Let's get going. We'll need a dark corner for this."

Kenny grunted out an answer Dave didn't catch, and it was probably a good thing he didn't. They drove through town in silence until they pulled up to the pub and parked. Kenny turned to him. The strain rolling off of him did nothing to settle Dave's worries. "If he doesn't answer our questions, we go to the police with what we have. I don't give a shit how little is there. Scarlett won't spend another day under her sister's bullshit."

"Think I don't understand where you are right now?" Dave asked. "I saw her right after the attack. Saw how her family treated her. Saw how her sister got all the praise while Scarlett was compared to Maisie. She had no life. None. That sanctuary is hers. It's her curse and her salvation."

"Then you agree?" Kenny popped a brow.

"Yeah, I agree. I would've done it even if you didn't give your macho speech."

Kenny laughed then groaned. "Shit. I feel like I have a million knots tied together inside me. When one loosens, another cinches down."

Dave felt the same way. "Let's get inside and get set up. I hate to say it, but I think we should record the meeting."

"Yeah, the minute Benji finds out what Maisie has been doing and how much trouble she's in, he might change his tune and deny everything." Kenny popped open his door. "Then where would we be?"

"Right back at square one." Dave climbed out on the passenger side and followed

Kenny into the pub.

“Only we’d have information this time,” Kenny muttered as they stepped inside.

There in the back, with a single light above it, was a small booth big enough for the three of them. Dave nudged Kenny and they made their way to the back. While they sat and waited for Benji, he tried to collect his thoughts and figure out how to ask the questions they’d need to have answered before they could take everything to the DA.

With one phone call, everything had changed. The knowledge of how Scarlett had been treated by her family was always a tangible thing to Dave. However, the depravity of her sister, Maisie, destroyed what little respect he had left for the Leon family—minus Scarlett.

"Heads up looks like Benji wants to do the right thing," Kenny said, lifting his chin toward the entrance.

"We'll find out shortly, won't we?" Dave asked, turning slightly in his chair. "For all, we know he's here to tell us to fuck off."

“Wanna make a little wager?” Kenny teased.

Dave grinned. “You’re on.”

Chapter Seven

"So, obviously this isn't good," Dave said when Benji sat. "You know that now, don't you?"

Benji grimaced. “I sat there for a minute after you left and looked through the folder. I can’t believe we missed it.”

Kenny held up his hand. “We won’t entertain your pity party. Sorry.”

“Oh. Oh no. I didn’t mean it like that,” Benji said. “Not in the least. I’m angry. I feel... Dirty.”

Good. He should feel worse than dirty. Dave stared at Benji for a moment, sizing him up. “What are you going to do to fix it?”

“Whatever it takes.” Benji pushed the file toward Dave and Kenny. “The loan officer was Victory Griffen. She’s one of the top loan people at the bank. Looks like from what I can see, she’s done several smaller projects with Maisie including setting up a secondary account in Maisie’s name. Right now, the balance is four million.”

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Dave sat back in his chair and blew out a breath. When approached Timothy about the job, one he knew the guy would take the job and two when Timothy started digging, Dave knew the man would find the missing money, how much, would be the main question. Yet, as of that particular moment, Timothy had only found three hundred and thirty thousand which meant there was more hidden. So, it begged the question, where did the remainder of the money come from and where in the ledgers was it hiding?

“Shit man,” Kenny spat. “Didn’t you think to, I don’t know, keep an eye on the accounts or something?”

Benji shrugged. “Why would I? Look at it from my perspective, no one said there was an issue until this moment. Should I have maybe dug deeper? Sure, possibly, but the bank also handles accounts for other businesses as well.”

“I need everything going back from the beginning. How long do you think that will take?” Dave folded his hands on the table.

“Tomorrow morning? I have to do this without anyone knowing, I would assume?” Benji cocked a brow.

“The quieter the better,” Dave answered. “I’ll be your contact since I’m the lawyer for the sanctuary, and I should have been called when all this shit started. My job, Benji, is to protect not only the Leon family legacy but also the animals sent to live with Scarlett and Maisie. At this point, I’ve failed both. I don’t like being a failure.”

“I’ll have them for you.” Benji pushed the conservatorship paperwork along with the

will and power of attorney across the table. "Take these, for now, maybe they'll help you more."

They would. They were the starting point of all of this. If he could figure out who the doctor was that gave Maisie the conservatorship over Scarlett, he could also hand that to his friend in the District Attorney's office. "Thanks."

Kenny leaned forward. Rage burned in his eyes. "If we find out you breathed a word of this, friends with Dave or not, you will go down just like Victory. Don't fuck with us."

Benji blanched. "Never. I-I swear."

Kenny wrapped his knuckles against the table. "Okay. Then we'll expect the rest of the information by the morning." He motioned to Dave. "We should go. Don't need people talking."

Dave agreed. "See you soon, Benji."

Scarlett sat across from Dave, Kenny, Edward, and Timothy. The conference table between them had been covered in documents, some of which, she'd never seen before. Plus, she was still in shock. When Dave arrived back at her apartment with the conservatorship file along with the new will and power of attorney, she was devastated and although she knew they were forgeries, she also realized there was no depth to her sister's depravity.

If anything, she was in for a showdown with her sister. However, the battleplan was still a work in progress. "So, where do we go from here?"

“I have a meeting with my friend this afternoon,” Dave said. “Afterwards we’ll know if everything we have is civil or criminal.”

“Criminal,” Timothy said, without looking up from his computer. “Embezzlement is a crime.”

Scarlett gave a soft chuckle. She liked him. Though they’d only known each other for a little while, he’d grown on her. “We’ll go with criminal then.” Timothy glanced up at her and smirked, before going back to whatever he’d been working on. “I don’t recognize any of this stuff. I don’t know the doctors or psychologists. My parents never sent me to one after the attack. I guess it was some punishment for being on the wrong side of the fence.”

“That’s fucked up,” Edward said.

She shrugged. “Can’t say I knew any better either. I made the choice to run headlong into the area knowing full well what the ramifications would be. So, if I had an occasional bad dream, well, it was my penance.”

“Fucked up, is what it is,” Dave muttered. “If it hadn’t been for my father insisting you be added to the will and the ownership of Hearts and Paws, I’d hate to have known what would’ve happened to you the day they died.”

“Thrown out with the trash,” Scarlett said. “I’m not even being dramatic about it. I know the truth about this place. I hate to admit it, there have been more times than not where I’ve wanted to leave.”

The lingering guilt and how much she despised her parents due to how they treated her after everything happened ate away at her for a long time. It’d been a chore to be there. To see everyone come and go from the animals she loved, yet she couldn’t. And, even when she got up the mental strength to do so, her body shook so bad, she’d

been rooted in place. The first time she'd gone into the enclosure after the incident had been with Kenny when he showed her the new additions.

"Don't beat yourself up about it, Scar," Dave said. "You had every right to pack up and leave this place and never come back."

"I couldn't do it," she whispered. "It's quite obvious who cares for the big cats and who doesn't. Then there's Samantha."

"You've got more compassion than I do," Timothy said. "I would have cut ties and not looked back."

She tilted her head. "Would you have?"

He nodded. "Don't know what these guys think, but it sounds like your sister hates you so much, she'd rather have you dead than alive. Or if she can't kill you, she'd have you committed."

Observant. "Well, she didn't kill me, and I've not been committed yet."

"Yet," Timothy said. "I believe she set you up that day in the enclosure."

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“I think we’re all of the same thinking,” Kenny said, speaking for the first time since they arrived at Dave’s office.

“Can’t prove it,” she replied. “Unless we get a confession out of her. Maisie incriminating herself is slim to none.”

Dave motioned to the conference table where all the documents were laid out exposing Maisie’s schemes and scams. “You sure?”

No, but if she had to guess, her sister would blame her new husband or worse, Scarlett for trying to remove Maisie from the will or whatever ridiculous excuse she could come up with on the fly. Scarlett learned early on, Maisie got what she wanted, when she wanted, and no one crossed her. Scarlett, on the other hand, got shit and shoved into it.

“I can’t comment.” She pulled the banking statements forward. “I still can’t believe I missed all of this.”

“It’s pretty easy to when Maisie’s your conservator,” Kenny quipped.

“Touché.”

Dave glanced at his watch. “It’s time for me to head out. Why don’t you head back to the sanctuary and I’ll let you know something when I can?”

"No." She shook her head. "This is my life. If you're going to talk to the district attorney, I'm going with you. He should have to look me in the face and tell me

whether he can or can't do anything with the information we have."

"Well, you heard the lady," Kenny teased, winking at her. "Take her with you. If you can't knock any sense into the DA, you know Scarlett can and will."

Warmth bloomed within her as heat spread across her cheeks. "You're so bad."

"I've been wondering what you'd look like when you blushed," Timothy said.

Scarlett blinked surprised by his words. "Oh?"

He nodded. "Yeah. You're absolutely gorgeous."

An hour later, Dave and Scarlett sat before the district attorney going over all of the information they'd collected. Nervous energy coursed through her. What if all of this was for not? It was only their word against the documents that fooled even the bank. But surely the DA would dig deeper than they had, and would find the truth, right?

Someone, somewhere in her life had to begin to believe her over Maisie. Yes, each of the men who'd spent the better half of the week surprising her and trusting her, were in her corner, however, it wouldn't mean anything if her life wasn't her own.

"Where did you say the phone number for this psychologist lead you?" the District Attorney asked.

"Defunct number," Dave answered. "The same can be said for the lawyer who put the new will together as well."

"And the bank accounts?"

“Shills,” Scarlett answered. “Our forensic accountant found the website. It’s a basic blog theme made to appear sophisticated. However, when you delve into the site, it all leads back to the home page and a comment page.”

The DA scrubbed his chin as he picked up the loan application and file from the bank. Benji had been forthcoming, Dave explained, but not without some persuasion. To think, while she did her level best to keep them in the black, her sister had been undermining her. No matter how many times she thought she'd be able to retain her sister's love and approval after so many years, she had to face facts, Maisie hated her for no particular reason, other than, Scarlett had been born.

"Did this Benji Brinks know at any point anything was going on regarding the conservatorship or the changing of the will?"

“He thought it was on the up and up,” Dave said. “I believe him. I think if he’d have thought something was wrong, he’d have called Scarlett.”

“And this Victory Griffen?”

“Not sure. She is on all of the loans since the new will and conservatorship were created. So, either she is an unwitting pawn or she’s working with Maisie.” Dave scrubbed his face. “Marcus. Give it to me straight, what can we do to fix this? Scarlett has never been hospitalized, except for after the lion attack. She’s never been seen by a psychologist. All of the paper trails end in bogus information.”

“Would you be willing to prove it wrong, Miss Leon?” Marcus folded his hands on the desk. “Are you willing to go through the paces, see a psychologist and talk with a doctor?”

Dave opened his mouth to speak, but Scarlett placed her hand on his forearm. “I’ll do it.” She didn’t like it one bit. She shouldn’t have to prove she was innocent.

Nonetheless, she'd agree to it. If it meant proving once and for all who her sister was, she'd do whatever it took. "When can we start?"

"Let me call a few people. If we can get the ball running quickly, I'd say as soon as next week. We'll do everything in one go." Marcus picked up a document off the table. "Your sister got married recently. Do you know anything about her husband?"

"Eduardo?" She shook her head. "No. Should I?"

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"He's got ties to some intense people," Marcus answered. "I'll do a little digging there too. It would be great if you knew when they started dating or got together."

Scarlett snorted. "My sister has a baby by a man she'd never tell us about and has now gotten married to another man I didn't know existed until the night of the auction. Plus, according to our vet, she's sleeping with one of his techs."

He frowned. "Right, the auction." Three thumb drives sat on the desk in front of his laptop. "Have you seen the facilities these cubs are going to?"

"Some," she replied. "My parents would have known them longer. They were all in the rescuing business together."

He handed Scarlett the original will she'd had since her parents passed away. "Can you show me the clause about not selling or no reproduction of the animals at the sanctuary?"

"It's not in the will. It's in the by-laws of the sanctuary—something my grandfather insisted on. All big cats must be neutered or spayed when they are brought to the refuge."

"And this just started happening?"

She nodded. Scarlett had done a little investigating on her own when no one was paying attention. "Yes, Fabien our veterinarian was going to spay one of our oldest female tigers, but Maisie put her plan in place and with the new arrival of a male, well... Nature took its course."

“The lion?”

“Maisie claims the lion was already pregnant when she arrived at Hearts and Paws.” It still rubbed her the wrong way. If what Maisie said was true, that meant the organization that rescued the lion had also lied about the animal’s status—something Scarlett had a hard time believing since they’d worked together for more years than she could remember.

“You’re not convinced,” he said. “Why?”

Scarlett explained her theory. “If I were to believe my sister, the company would have had to have known the tiger was pregnant and deliberately not told us. In all the years my family worked with them, they never lied. Why all of a sudden would they start now?”

"All right," Marcus stated. "So, without doing any more digging and going by what you've both said and what we have evidence for, we have two cases here. One for embezzlement and fraud and the other for the illegal sale of exotic animals, which might be a bit harder to prove. Since you've agreed these sanctuaries also taken in big cats who need to be rehabilitated and live free lives and, since they are preserves dedicated to taking care of the exotic animals, they have permits to do so."

“But—”

Marcus held up his hand. “We could go after each refuge if you’d like, however all of the animals would be confiscated. Where would we put all of them to be sure they were safe?”

She knew of some places offhand who would take the cats, no questions asked, but not the hundreds in all of their care. "So, what do we do?"

“Go with the embezzlement and fraud. We should be able to prove it without a reasonable doubt.”

“Should?” Scarlett cocked a brow.

“We never deal in absolutes, Miss Leon,” Marcus said. “Telling someone they’ll win is a big no-no. It opens us up to lawsuits. I’d rather be cautiously optimistic than completely pessimistic.”

It seemed reasonable, considering the situation they were in. "Fine. We'll do it your way then."

“It doesn’t mean the charges are any less heinous, Scarlett,” Dave said, trying to reassure her. “It means, giving the other animals a chance at having fulfilling lives from here on out. I know you couldn’t deal with their neglect on your hands if something was to go down.”

She would too. She'd take all of the guilt and suffering upon her. She always had. It made her empathetic to the plight of the big cats. If they investigated the individual sanctuaries and found wrongdoing, who knew where the animals would end up or worse, euthanized. Yet, on the other hand, she felt ganged up on, like she had to consider everyone else before she thought about herself or her cats. She had to make sure others were still taken care of first and wasn't that some shit? Why couldn't she be selfish for a while? Why couldn't she come first?

“What’s the look for?” Dave peered up at her from the paperwork in front of him.

“What do you mean?”

He laughed. “It’s like you want to kick our ass and cry at the same time.”

“Maybe I do.” She shrugged. “Maybe I want to rage at everyone about the injustice of it all.”

Dave sighed. “I know, Scar. I’m sorry. I wish we could fix all of it.”

“We can,” Marcus said. “I know you have someone who has connections. If you put a bug in their ear, I am sure CITES and Wildlife would be there checking out each of the facilities. I’m not sure what would happen, but at least you’d have peace of mind.”

A sense of relief washed over her. She realized sometimes her emotions got the better of her and since all of the shit started with Maisie, she’d been a wreck. It was as if Scarlett had been swimming upstream her whole life. When she got to where she thought she should be, something else would happen, pushing her back down to the inlet. Now, she was impatient to get back to where she needed to be—caring for her beloved cats.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I appreciate it.”

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“Any time.” Marcus stood then and held out his hand to Dave. “I’ll call you, as soon as I know something.”

“I appreciate it.” Dave shook his hand before wrapping his arm around Scarlett. “If we find out anything else, I’ll have it couriered over to you.”

“I appreciate it.” The DA glanced at Scarlett. “Don’t get too down on yourself. We still have a long road ahead of us, but I believe in this case.”

“Thought you couldn’t make assumptions,” she said with a smirk.

“I’m not.” He grinned. “We’ll be in touch.”

Dave led her out of the courthouse where the DA's office had been located. As she stepped outside, she paused, surprised by how quickly the weather changed. Snow had begun falling at some point while they'd been inside. At least two inches of the white stuff, if not more, already lay on the ground. Where it might not have stuck to the roadway, it clung to the grass and brown autumn leaves. Soft mounds built along the tops of the hedges and around the trunks of trees. Even the crisp, cold air smelled of the coming winter. There'd been a time when she would have hated the snow, now, she enjoyed it.

“We should hurry. Wouldn’t want to get stuck out here and there’s no telling when they’ll start the plows.” Dave opened the car door for her then assisted her before going around the front of the vehicle to get in behind the wheel. “Call Kenny and tell him we’re on the way. If there’s already a couple of inches on the ground down here, no telling how much is on the mountain.”

"Looks like we'll be snowed in for a while too," she said pulling her phone from her bag. She scrolled through the contact list before stopping on Kenny's name. She pushed the call button and waited. After he answered, she spoke. "Hey, it's us. Dave said to have the road to the sanctuary cleared off for us."

"Should have taken the truck," Kenny grumbled.

"Didn't think it would snow," she replied. "You're going to do it though, aren't you?"

"What do we get out of it?" Kenny asked.

"Who's we?" She narrowed her eyes as they drove through the barren town.

"Edward and me, Timothy is too pretty to do any kind of manual labor."

In the background, she heard Timothy's deep laugh and it sent a flutter of lust through her body. She shouldn't feel any type of attraction to him and she'd chided herself before for feeling as she did, especially since she'd had sex with Dave and Kenny so far. "What do you want?"

Dave laughed. "Loaded question, Scar."

"You. With us. For one night," Kenny said. "I'll shovel snow from now until it melts if we can have you."

"Kenny, I—" What? What did she say? Her thoughts fled her as she sat beside Dave. All of them? What did that mean? What happened afterward? What if one of them got jealous or worse, all of them did? She cut her gaze to the man beside her. If she thought he'd help her make any type of decision, she'd been sorely mistaken.

“One night. That’s all we want,” Kenny repeated.

“What if it’s not enough?” she murmured. “What if you all want something, I can’t give you?”

“Then we’ll cross that bridge when we get there, Scar,” Kenny assured her. “We’re not talking eternity here.”

For some reason, his words stung. “Right. One night.”

“Don’t get like that either Scar,” Kenny said. “You always get snippy with me when you take my words out of context.”

“No, I think the context was there the whole time. We’re starting up the road now. I’ll lose my signal in a minute. Start clearing the trailhead for us so we don’t kill ourselves on the way up.” Blowing out a breath of frustration after hanging up with Kenny, Scarlett threw her phone back into her bag.

“He’s got a point,” Dave muttered.

“Not you too,” she whimpered. “Why are you both riding my ass about this?”

"Because, isn't it obvious? He was asking you to accept us for the night, sure. But, he wants more like I do. I won't speak for the others as of now, but I am sure they would too if you gave them half the chance." Dave cut his gaze toward her. "So, are you going to be a chicken or are you going to be a lion?"

She laughed. “What’s with that analogy?”

He shrugged. “Sounded good, didn’t it?”

“I guess I am going to be a lion. Can’t let my feline companions down, can I?” She placed her hand on his thigh then grew serious. “This could potentially blow up in our faces.”

“Nah, I trust Marcus,” Dave said. “If he can put everything together quickly for us, by next week, we can begin the rebuilding process for the refuge.”

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“Not what I was talking about,” she stated.

Dave came to a stop at the closed gate leading to Scarlett’s property. “Figured as much. You’re such a pessimist.” He leaned across the seat and brushed his lips over hers and groaned. “I have wanted to do that to you since we arrived at the DA’s office.”

“Why didn’t you?”

"Can't be seen playing tonsil hockey with my client before going in to present a case to the DA," Dave answered. "Not that I mind, but at this stage, the fewer people know the better off we're going to be."

“I guess you’ll have to make it up to me later, huh?” Her tone held a flirty edge to it.

"Suppose so." He kissed her again before getting out of the car. Dave had been right. With as much snow as there was in town, it'd only gotten worse the closer they'd gotten to home and visibility was almost non-existent.

He opened the gate to the property then jumped back into the car so they could continue up the hill to where the refuge was located. He didn't say another word about what happened with the DA nor about Kenny's proposition. Of course, it could all be due to him concentrating on the road that, with each passing second, became more and more impassible.

“We should have waited,” she said as the tires slipped before finding traction. “We wouldn’t be driving in this shit.”

“Tell me, what’s scarier. The snow or fighting a fucking lion and winning?” Dave slowed their progression as they came to a particularly nasty part of the road.

“I don’t think I can compare the two.” Scarlett grabbed onto the armrest, digging her fingernails into it. “They’re both different situations.”

"The same kind of conditions though," Dave hedged. "So, which is worse?"

Both situations, as he put it, could've ended up with her being killed and both held an unknown quality to it too. Being in the enclosure with Jäger didn't frighten her, it was what happened after being in there that did. The road though... Every curve and dip in the road brought about an unfamiliar factor. They could be too close to the edge and fall off. Or worse, they could miss a turn and go off the side of the mountain.

"This road," she said. "I loathe it on a good day. With this snow, I downright hate it." Ahead of them as they came around the final turn, Kenny was in the big plow truck clearing a path for them. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding since they started up the mountainside.

“Looks like the cavalry has been busy.”

Scarlett glanced at the dash clock and frowned. They’d been driving for almost an hour and it hadn’t felt that way. “Wow, guess so.”

As they pulled into the sanctuary, Dave parked in the maintenance garage, while Kenny brought the plow closer to the main building. “Don’t need a frozen car in the morning.”

"No, you don't." She opened the passenger door then instantly regretted it. A cold blast of air knocked the breath from her lungs. She shivered standing there as the garage door lowered. "Shit. I hate the snow."

Dave was by her side, throwing his coat over her shoulders. “Come on, let’s get you inside so we can update everyone.”

“And then,” she prodded, glanced up at him as he guided her through the garage.

“And then,” Dave said. “We’ll figure out where this night is going to take us.”

Chapter Eight

While she'd been gone, Kenny, Edward, and Timothy had turned her apartment into a cozy retreat made especially for her. The fireplace she rarely used had been cleaned and a fire burned within it, warming the space. The smell of something delicious baking in the oven drew her attention after she stepped into her home. Scarlett strode into the kitchen and opened the oven. The blast of heat followed by the ooie-gooie bubble of cheese and sauce made her mouth water. Someone made homemade lasagna while she and Dave had been gone.

“Don't open the door,” Edward said, hurrying into the kitchen. “It'll cause the layers to fall.”

“That's on a cake.” Scarlett closed the oven then turned to him. “Did you make this?”

“Yes.” He eased her out of the way. “It still has twenty minutes to cook.” He pulled the lid off of a pot still on the stove. “This is the leftovers. You can freeze it and use it later.”

She peered into the pot. Half the contents remained, and it smelled heavenly. “Thank you.”

He nodded. “Go get changed then we can eat.”

“Aren't you a pushy one.”

Edward shrugged. “I'm learning from you.” He trapped her against the counter. “Kenny and Timothy said I need to be a bit more assertive with you.”

“Did they?” She bit the corner of her lip. Edward didn't have an assertive bone in his body. He was docile. A bit airhead-ish at times, but he also had a compassionate streak even she couldn't ignore. “So, this is you being assertive with me?” When he didn't answer, she pressed. “You got me here. Now what?”

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The sound that emanated from him seconds before his lips pressed to hers, reminded her of a feral animal going in for the kill. The kiss was demanding, hard and insistent. He ran his tongue across her bottom lip and when she opened for him, he pulled back. “All in due time.”

The assuredness in his voice surprised Scarlett. He left her an aching mess and he didn't even touch her, besides her lips. She let out a shaky breath as he moved back, affording her a quick escape and escape she did, to her room, where Timothy was waiting on her.

Surprise, surprise.

He sat on her bed, his elbows on his knees and his hands folded. The minute she stepped inside, his head lifted and those obsidian eyes of his met hers. She could drown in his gaze, the darkness overtaking her with minimal effort.

“You seem pensive,” Scarlett said breaking the silence lingering between them. “Did something happen while I was gone?”

“No,” he answered. “I was contemplating what I'd do next.”

He'd lost her. “Huh?”

“Well, I have to stay here tonight.”

“Right.” She stepped farther into her room, closing the door behind her.

“And, I think Dave, Kenny, and Edward have something planned for you later.”

So did she. What it would consist of, she didn't know, but it made her all hot and bothered and a little impatient as well. All four of them had been driving her insane with their subtle caresses and glances. Nonetheless, she also couldn't help but worry too. “What do you have planned for me?”

He stood then; his imposing figure loomed over her. Without the fancy suit and tie, he appeared bigger, a bit beefier. Timothy wrapped an arm around her and tucked her to his body. “Is it crazy I find myself attracted to you, even though I don't know much about you?”

The utterance of his words surprised Scarlett. “I suppose it depends on what you mean, by not much?”

“I know about your accident and about the bullshit your sister is trying to pull, but when it comes to knowing you—your likes and dislikes, I'm still in the dark. Still, even without knowing your favorite book or if you enjoy certain movies, I can't help falling for you a little each day.”

She peered up at him. “How do each of you accept me, as I am, without holding an ounce of jealousy between you? How do four men, all different in some substantial ways, find me attractive?”

He shrugged then, the nonchalant movement filled with grace and determination. “It's easy. We have one goal in mind when it comes to you.”

Foolishly she asked the question sitting on the tip of her tongue. “What?”

“Making you happy.”

Scarlett ducked her head as heat filled her cheeks. "People like me don't get that happiness."

"Why?" He lifted her chin, forcing her to stare at him. "Because you were tricked and now scarred? Because your parents shunned you after the accident? Why do you think you should be seen as the evil or bad sister who has to be the shut-in?"

"Because it's true," she whispered. "All of it."

Timothy ran the pad of his thumb across her cheek. "Not even close. Just because your parents were blinded by your sister's sweet demeanor, doesn't mean the rest of us are. We see what she's doing."

"It's too late though. Even when the truth comes out, people will see me as the one who caused my parents hardship and heartache. I'm the burden."

Timothy snorted. "You only are, because you deem yourself to be." He bent his head and brushed his lips over hers. "You're conditioned to be. We'll change that. Help you see you're more than the scar on your face."

He kissed her again. Where Edward was hard and demanding, Timothy coaxed her to open for him. He teased the seam of her lips until she chased the kiss. When their tongues touch, she let out a startled whimper. Timothy fisted her hair, tugging her head into the position he wanted her in before deepening the kiss.

Scarlett sank into the sensation, pressing her body to his. The evidence of his arousal rubbed across her lower belly and it sent a rush of desire through her. She couldn't explain what was happening or why, but she accepted it. Maybe later, she'd contemplate her decision to give herself to all four men. Or, perhaps, in a way, it'd been her destiny and something others wouldn't expect of her.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “I told the others I'd wait until later, but I don't think I can.”

“Well, it's going to have to,” Kenny stated. “Dinner's ready.”

Scarlett glanced over her shoulder at Kenny. He leaned against the doorframe, his gaze heavy-lidded, his body tense, like he'd been ready to pounce. The hungry look in his amber eyes caused her to shiver in need. “Oh good. I'm starving.”

Timothy tucked her to his chest, the possessiveness of his hold, surprised her. “We'll be there in a minute.”

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When she finally emerged from her room, Timothy by her side, she found the guys sitting at the small kitchen table she'd hardly used. Someone had found the leopard print placemats she'd found at a discount online store and put them on the table along with two of the long stem candles she'd kept in case the power went out.

“Wow,” she said, crossing to the chair Kenny held out for her. “What are we celebrating?”

“You,” Dave answered. “We thought after everything you'd been through; you deserved a night of elegance.”

“Elegance, huh?” The corner of her mouth tugged upward. “With paper plates?” Since her parents’ death, Maisie controlled their parent's estate, which meant she owned all of their parents’ good china. Not that she minded. Scarlett didn't cook much so when she did, paper plates made for easy cleanup.

“We're improvising,” Dave said with a lift of his shoulder.

“I can dig improvising if I'm treated to delicious food all the time.”

“I'm going to hold you to it,” Edward said, cutting into the lasagna.

She waited patiently as he served up each of them a square of noodly goodness then added a bit of salad from the bamboo bowl situated beside the casserole dish. The dressing had already been added to it, a special recipe from Edward's family.

Once everyone had their food, she began to eat. The spice of Italian sausage paired

well with the sweetness of the tomatoes and basil. Each bite was like an explosion of flavors on her tongue. She gave a happy hum of approval wiggling in her chair. It'd been a long time since she had a homemade meal.

“I think she likes it,” Dave stated, laughter tinging his voice.

“Or she was really hungry,” Edward said before popping a piece of bread into his mouth.

“I love it,” she said. “It's really good.”

“Leave room for dessert,” Timothy said. “I may have made something.”

“What are you guys? Culinary chefs?” she teased.

“When you live alone, you tend to either sink or swim,” Kenny said. “We all cook. We all clean.”

“I only cook when I have to and then it's something simple,” Scarlett said.

“I won't ask the stupid questions,” Dave muttered. “With us, you'll learn.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Thanks, I think.”

He laughed. “Don't look so suspicious. We'll have fun. Don't worry, Scar.”

“Easier said than done.”

Dave inclined his head. “Touché.”

“So, how did the meeting with the district attorney go?” Kenny asked.

“It went about as well as we could expect,” Dave stated. “I think he'll help us, it's mostly a race against a clock none of know when it will run out.”

“We had to choose one or the other,” Scarlett added. “Either we went after the selling of the cubs or we went after her for fraud and forging documents.”

Kenny blew out a breath. “Shit. Both are bad.”

“Sure,” Dave said. “However, when Marcus explained it, getting Fish and Game out to check on the cubs and the documents for each of the preserve, could end up netting nothing for us. As long as the refuge has the proper paperwork and licenses, they're not doing anything wrong. Plus, they're taking the cubs off of Scarlett's hands. In the eyes of the court, it would've been seen as no harm no foul. The fraud and forgery, on the other hand, have a better chance. We know everything so far has been a farce. Marcus is going to take a look at everything we have then present it to a judge for a warrant. When he has it, he'll let us know. Until then, we have to act as if nothing has changed.”

“Is there a chance Benji might squeal?” Timothy asked.

“No. I think he was in the dark the whole time. Victory though... I believe she's in all the way,” Dave said. “I wouldn't be surprised if Maisie gave the girl kickbacks for her help and not investigating anything.”

“I'll be happy when this is over with,” Edward said. “Every time something happens, it's like it gets worse instead of better.”

“It will get worse before we can breathe again,” Dave replied. “It's always like that.”

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“And, that's our cue to stop talking about all the bad.” Kenny pushed away from the table and gathered everyone's empty plate. “No sense of messing up the evening we had planned for Scarlett with this bullshit.”

“True.” Dave threw his napkin on his plate before Kenny grabbed it. “We'll have time for the other later.”

“What about dessert?” She glanced around the table. Three sets of hungry gazes lit on her and the space became suffocating with arousal.

“Yeah about that,” Timothy said, standing. “I lied. You're our dessert.”

Her breath hitched. “What?”

He held his hand out to her. “You're our dessert.”

“I think you caught her off guard.” Edward chuckled. “I think she expected a real treat.”

“Oh, she's going to get one. Several in fact,” Kenny said, coming up beside her chair. “You ready, Scar?”

“Not sure,” she said, licking her bottom lip. “I'm a little overwhelmed.”

“We'll go slow,” Dave added. “You can say stop at any time and we'll back off.”

“It's all about you tonight, princess,” Timothy stated. “We're yours to command.”

“Well, in that case,” she said. “What do you have in mind?”

“Debauchery.” Edward rubbed his hands together.

“You're being creepy,” Kenny said. “Back it down about a million.”

“Hedonism?”

“Yeah, you're still coming on a little strong.” Timothy laughed.

Scarlett snickered. Of all of them, Edward had a wicked sense of humor, even though he didn't realize it. His flighty, wacky personality balanced out the other three she realized standing there. Edward was a breath of fresh air and she found it endearing. Plus, whenever he spoke, it cut the tension building between all of them.

“We thought your bed would be the best place for all of us to have our way with you,” Kenny said. “However, it's kind of small.”

“True. There's only one of me, so a double bed seemed practical.”

“Well, we're going to have change out your bed for something bigger from here on out,” Dave said. “I'm thinking custom made for all of us. You'd be in the middle of course.”

“Do I get a say?” She arched a brow.

“Maybe later,” Kenny murmured, beside her. “Until then, we came up with the next best thing.”

Timothy placed his palm on the small of her back and eased her forward. There in front of the fireplace was a pallet made of blankets and pillows. Her coffee table had

been moved to the side as was her couch, something she hadn't noticed when she exited her bedroom. Against the wall near the fireplace, someone had gathered wood from near the paddock and brought it inside so they wouldn't run out.

They've thought everything through for this. Which made her wonder if their expectations would match up for the night. She didn't know what to say as they gathered around her. Dave had rolled the sleeves of his shirt up while Kenny removed his, allowing her to glimpse the compact muscle she'd sensed under his shirt the night in the breakroom. Edward had also removed his shirt and damn had he been a sight.

She took her fill of all of them, allowing her gaze to trail across their bodies. They were all unique. All handsome in their way and they all wanted her. She couldn't believe it. The snick of silk against cotton drew her attention to Timothy who'd removed his coat and was undoing his shirt. With each button, he loosened from its mooring another inch of his tan flesh came into view.

"I think she likes what she sees, gentlemen," Kenny said. "But, Scar, you're a little overdressed."

"Am I?" She ran her hand down the front of her tank-top.

"Very much so." Timothy came up behind her again, this time running his fingers up her sides.

She shivered. "What should I take off first?"

"This." He grasped the hem of her tank-top and pulled it off. He groaned. "All this beautiful dark skin." He pressed his lips to her shoulder while cupping her breasts. He squeezed and plumped them before drawing her nipples between his thumb and forefingers.

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“Shit,” Edward murmured. “You didn’t prepare me for this.”

"Sometimes it's better to see her than be prepared." Dave winked at Scarlett.

"Sometimes it's more fun having her melt all over your dick."

She sucked in a breath. “Dave.”

“Am I being too forward, again?” He took a step to her. “What you gonna about it?”

His hands went to her sleep pants, tugging them down with one go. “I love your fucking panties. They tell stories.”

“They do?” Edward tilted his head. “What do they say?”

“I’ll show you,” Dave said, pulling the youngest one forward with him. “Her pussy is wet.”

She was too. Between Timothy playing with her nipples while manipulating her breasts, and Dave talking about her panties and how wet she was, Scarlett ached to be touched there too. She arched into Timothy’s touch, pushing her hips toward Dave’s hand. “You’re all going to be the death of me.”

“Maybe.” Dave slid his index finger along her slit, causing her to gasp before he settled in and began circling her clit. “Mmm. This little bead. Get on your knees, Ed. You’re going to taste our precious Scar first.” He ripped the material from her, and her eyes fluttered closed. “I’ll buy you more when we can get back to town.” He tapped the inside of her thigh. “Spread them nice and wide so Ed can get his mouth on you.”

Her heart hammered and the muscles of her stomach tensed with anticipation. Edward inched closer to her. He caressed her flesh, dragged his fingernails down the inside of her legs, giving her a bit of something more. A fire sparked inside of her and she hissed in pleasure. When he pressed kisses to her skin, she went weak-kneed. Had Timothy not been behind her, holding her up, she would have fallen, she knew it.

Then, Edward's mouth was there. He ran his tongue through her slit gathering up the evidence of her arousal. He reared back and groaned before delving forward once more. He took from her like a man possessed, cliché as it sounded. Edward licked and sucked on her pussy. He made love to it with his tongue pushing the appendage into her as deep as he could go before pulling out. Scarlett ran her fingernails through his hair and held him to her when he latched onto her clit. He sucked the hard bead into his mouth while flicking it with his tongue.

She cried out, startled by the tingling sensation coursing through her. Her hips snapped as she rode his face. And, when he moaned, the vibrations hit her just right. A keen sob built in her chest until it spilled from her lips. Her legs trembled and she shook in Timothy's embrace. The satisfying sounds of approval coming from the men around her drew her from the haze of her release.

Edward inched backward. He drew his thumb across the area below his bottom lip then stuck the digit into his mouth and groaned. His docile green eyes sparkled with lust. They were a bit glassy as though he'd been drunk on her release. "Fuck, she's tasty. I could eat her all day—every day."

Together, all four of the guys helped her to the floor. If one of them had left her a shaking mess, there'd be no way she'd survive the night. She spied a quick look at all of her men and wondered who would be the first one to make a move. The clank of a belt drew her attention to Timothy who removed his pants then joined her on the floor. He wasn't overly built but still athletic and fit. He had an impressive form and by the bulge pressing at the front of his boxers, well... She was tempted. He glanced

down then drew his gaze back up to her and smirked. “Like the angle of the dangle?”

She laughed. Scarlett covered her mouth. “Sorry, shouldn’t be laughing.”

“I like laughter during sex,” he said, prowling toward her on his hands and knees. “Keeps it interesting and not so boring.”

She went down to her elbows as he drew closer. In the glow of the fireplace, his skin shimmered. Scarlett licked him then, wondering if he'd taste as good as he looked and, damn, did he. He grasped her hair and groaned when she swirled her tongue around his nipple before biting the inviting tip.

He barked out a harsh curse and his gaze flashed to hers, filled with fire and desire. He'd curled his lip in a sexy snarl and a fresh wash of her need dampened her already wet slit. “What do you want, princess? Do you like it hard and rough?” He wrapped an arm around her middle and flipped her onto all fours, surprising her not for the first time. “Want me to take you from behind? Make you scream my name?”

She went down onto her arms and whimpered. Her breath came in fluttered pants and her heart slammed out a wild tattoo. She wiggled her rear across his groin and bit her bottom lip. The little appetizer from Edward amped her up. She needed all of them. She shouldn't want them all though. It was ridiculous to think all of this could work out, but here she was, and she didn't think she could go back to normal after this.

Timothy gripped her hips and ground his crotch against her. He muttered something she couldn't quite hear, but it satisfied her that he could feel at least an ounce of what she did. She heard the tearing of a foil package before the wet tip of his cock rubbed at her pussy. The outline of his underwear did him no justice. He was long and thick and fuck, she wanted him then and there.

He pushed into her with a thrust then he retreated and filled her completely. She cried

out, gripping the blankets with everything she was worth. Timothy pressed his chest to her back as he began to move, holding her in the position he wanted her in. It was dark and delicious, almost animalistic. He fucked her in such a way, he touched her in all the right spots, and had she been standing, she'd have gone to her tiptoes, unable to stand the growing coil of expectancy and bliss shooting through her.

“Jesus, that’s so fucking hot.” Dave positioned himself in front of her. He stroked his dick while watching them. “Open up, Scar. Suck me, but don’t make me cum. I want to do that inside of you.”

Her eyes fluttered closed. She opened her mouth and Dave slid his dick along her tongue twice before she closed her mouth and sucked. Scarlett bobbed her head trying to keep pace with Timothy, but it was a losing battle. He kept at her in such a way, she could barely concentrate enough on sucking off Dave.

“Personal space will be invaded,” Kenny said before he lapped her at her clit with his tongue.

Her eyes widened. Holy shit. She moaned around Dave and he shuddered. His hand went to her hair holding her head in place as he fucked her mouth, counter to Timothy’s thrusts. She rolled her hips, growing closer by the second to finding her release once again. She’d never thought of something like this being exciting or arousing. However, with each lick of Kenny’s tongue and the way Timothy filled her pussy and Dave used her mouth. Fuck... She was blissed out of her mind.

“Fuck, princess got me close. Whatever you’re thinking about, your sweet, tight pussy is strangling my dick.” Timothy’s pace increased. “Tell me you want it, Scarlett.”

She cried out. “Please.”

Dave grinned at her. “So pretty. I love seeing you out of your mind. You’re so fucking sexy. Isn’t she Edward?”

Edward joined her, laying on his back so he could lick and suck on her nipples. The intensity of the situation shattered her. Everything inside of her tensed to the point of pain mixing with pleasure then Kenny was drawing her clit back into his mouth. He nipped at the nub and she screamed. Behind her, Timothy groaned, shoving himself as deep as he could go. His hips gave a few quick, hard flexes before he let out a sigh and pressed a kiss to her spine.

“So fucking perfect.” Timothy pulled from her. “I think we should give Edward a chance with Scarlett.”

“I agree,” Dave said. “I think we’ve been tempting him enough.”

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“Thanks,” Edward said. “I feel like I could nut any second.”

He donned a condom then pulled her onto his lap. Edward’s fingers dug into her hips as he lowered her onto his dick. The thick length of his dick pushed into her and she saw stars. She was super sensitive, the soft tissues of her pussy rippled around his intrusion. Edward strained beneath her. His green eyes fluttered shut while guided her over him. His strokes were short and hard. There was a desperate edge to his movement, just like his kisses. She gave over to him, enjoying the response from her body as she rode him.

Kenny came up behind her. He palmed her breasts, kneading them and teasing the soft flesh. She arched her back, placing her head on his shoulder while Edward’s thrust became unhinged. “Look at him, Scar, he’s so fucking turned on he’s struggling to hold on.”

She made an unladylike sound. “Kenny...”

"Uh-huh. I'm right here. I can't wait to get inside you. Bust inside you." He moaned against her ear.

She bucked against Edward and he snarled, gripping her tighter. She'd wear his marks in the morning and a sense of satisfaction filled her. A smaller, though still, heady orgasm cashed over her and seconds later, Edward shouted out his release. She lowered to his chest, content to lay there while she gathered her breath. She wasn't sure if she could continue with Dave and Kenny waiting patiently for her to go to one of them. Between the three amazing orgasms, she wanted to curl into a ball and sleep.

“I think we’re wearing out our girl,” Kenny said.

“We should try something new,” Dave replied. “See if she likes it?”

She was floating then. When she opened her eyes, Kenny lay on his back, and she’d been draped over him. He filled her in one thrust and she moaned. Her vaginal muscles flexed and twitched, accommodating his intrusion.

“Don’t move and breathe,” Kenny whispered into her ear.

She glanced over her shoulder as Dave towered over both of them. “What’s... what’s he going to do?”

“We’re not sure it’ll work...” Dave sucked in a breath. “If it does, it’s about to get wild.”

She felt a warm liquid at her sex as Kenny gave a few lazy thrusts. Then Dave added his fingers. He pushed in counter to Kenny’s thrust. The foreign sensations bouncing through her left her curious and filled with anticipation. Then, Dave removed his finger and replaced them with his tip. “Uh... Guys...”

“Shh,” Kenny murmured. “We’ve got you.” He traced a pattern along her back lulling her as Dave breached her sex.

“Oh, fuck me,” Dave snapped. “This is going to be a test of will power.”

They were both inside her, Kenny more so. The stretch of being overfull, caused a thread of pain to push away the arousal still burning deep within her. However, Timothy was there, rubbing her clit, keeping her right there with them. Having two dicks inside her was...more than a little more than strange, yet when they began to move...

Ho-ly shit.

Places inside her she didn't know existed, came to life. Pleasure singed her from the inside out. With each pump of their hips, they took her higher, made her crave them more. It was indescribable. It was euphoric. Amazing. Scary. She'd never felt so many emotions ping-ponging through her system at one time until that moment. She dug her fingernails into Kenny's chest and he grunted, bucking into her was a deep thrust.

Her mouth fell open. She shook in their arms. She was going to die before all of it was over. She knew it. Already everything around her vision darkened. The delicious coil of lust burning in her gut became an inferno. She could feel herself growing wetter by the second, to the point the squelch of her pussy added to the atmosphere surrounding them. The tingle of her arousal strengthened, and she tensed. Her breath came in short, harsh pants. Then she was rolling her hips. Her climax hit her the minute Dave filled her. Her clit throbbed in time to the pulse of her release. Both men, Kenny and Dave increased their speed, prolonging her release.

“Coming,” Dave groaned.

“Same,” Kenny added.

Their thrusts were erratic. The sounds they made were filled with pain and pleasure and then she felt it. The throb of both men as they found their release within her. Dave pressed his forehead to her shoulder as he shook behind her trying to breathe while Kenny threw his arm over his eyes. His lips were parted. His cheeks were pink as was his chest. He panted for breath like he'd run a marathon, and in some ways he had.

Dave slipped from her first, gathering her in his arms so Kenny could pull out as well. He turned her face to him and placed a kiss to her lips. “You okay?”

"No," she muttered. "You all killed me. How the fuck are you going to ask me that?" She tried to smile but found even the slight movement was too much for her body at the moment.

"Well, at least she still has the sassy bite to her," Timothy teased, handing Dave a wad of tissue.

"Damn straight," Kenny said, coming up beside her. He wrapped his arms around her. "Seriously though, none of us were easy on you. Are you okay?"

She gave him a tired nod. "Yes. I'm sure I'm going to be sore in the morning, however, it was worth it."

She snuggled into Kenny's embrace and felt the warmth of the blanket engulf her. "Good to hear." He pressed a kiss to her temple. "We're all going to be staying here tonight."

She yawned and her eyes drifted shut. "Okay."

"Wow, she must really be satisfied, she's so agreeable," Edward said, joining them.

“Still kick your ass,” she said, slurring her words.

“I’d put money on it.” Timothy laid in front of her, while Edward was beside him, and Dave lay on the other side of Kenny.

“Second it,” Dave said.

She laughed. “You’re all assholes. Let me sleep.”

“As you wish, princess.”

Chapter Nine

“Oh, there you are,” Maisie said, coming into the breakroom. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

If she had been, she’d have found Scarlett in her office, still trying to reconcile the books—which, not for nothing, would never be fixed. “I’ve been in my office all morning.”

It’d been two days since the guys bedded her and each one kept in contact with her either through text message or phone. Kenny and Edward spent their lunch with her while Timothy and Dave had dinner with her at night.

“Oh, right,” Maisie said, trying to smile. “Your office. Anyway, I thought I would let you know, I am taking a small trip. There is a juvenile lion in need of rehabilitation in Indiana. Some jackass used the cat as a sideshow attraction for his used car lot.

Pathetic people.”

“Maisie, we don't have the room,” Scarlett said.

“We have forty acres plus.” Her sister motioned to the area surrounding them. “If we can't house big cats in need, what's the point of being open?”

“Fine, let me rephrase it,” Scarlett said, squaring her shoulders. “Since we have another litter of cubs coming and the budgets have been cut, there isn't enough food or money to care for another lion you won't neuter.”

Rage crackled through Maisie's brown eyes. “What did you say to me?”

“I said, no more, Maisie. No more taking in animals I know you're going to breed and sell.” Scarlett crossed her arms. Her heart hammered and her breath came in soft pants. She trembled from head to toe, nervous about what could happen next, but she'd also been proud of herself for finally standing up to her sister.

“No.” Maisie shook her head. “I didn't ask your opinion, Scarlett.” Her sister snapped off the end of Scarlett's name as though she'd bitten her. “I'm telling you what I am doing. You don't have a say here anymore.” A triumphant smile finally filled Maisie's features. “While I am gone, you will be moved out of this building. You are no longer welcome here.”

Scarlett bit her tongue. No longer welcome there? Since she'd been ten, she hadn't felt welcome there, yet she stayed. She endured and now her sister wanted to lord over her, after everything Scarlett found out, hell no. “Fine.”

Maisie narrowed her eyes. “I thought you'd put up a fight for your precious lions and tigers.”

She snorted. "Then you don't know me at all." More had rested on the tip of her tongue, but it wasn't worth it. She grabbed her cup of coffee off the counter beside the coffeemaker and headed back to her office. In a way, Maisie's announcement had lifted a weight off of Scarlett's shoulders, but also added it back on times a thousand. If she left like her sister wanted, the animals in their reserve would die, or worse, be sold off to the highest bidder.

"When I get back, you're done here, Scarlett," her sister screamed.

"Yeah, heard you the first time." Scarlett continued on her way and when she entered her office, she closed the door behind her, letting out a breath.

"Want to tell me what that was about?" Kenny asked, startling her.

Scarlett jumped spilling some of her coffee onto her hand. "Damn it. I'm going to start tying bells around all of your necks."

Closing the distance between them, Kenny laughed. "Might be fun and kinky." He took the cup from her then placed it on her desk. "Want to tell me what happened?"

"I'm sure you heard some of it," she said, drying her handoff.

"I did, but I want to hear it from you."

She sighed, dropping into her chair. "It's all bullshit, Kenny. You and I both know it. I should take her up on her offer and walk away."

"What did she say?"

Scarlett gave him a droll stare. "She's bringing in a juvenile lion and in the same breath is throwing me out when she returns."

“Good,” he replied. “Then she doesn't suspect a thing.”

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“I guess not, considering we haven’t heard back from Marcus.” She knew he'd call when he had an answer, but the waiting game was killing her. Add in her sister's announcement and she fretted.

Hard.

“It's why I am here. We just got the call. Well, scratch that, Dave got the call. I'm just the messenger. We're a go. The warrant has been drawn up and signed by the judge and as soon as Marcus can, he'll be turning it over to the police department to have her picked up.”

It couldn't come soon enough. “She's leaving tomorrow.”

He nodded. “Heard. What if she's not leaving to find a lion but leaving to try to get away before the shit hits the fan? Remember she was supposed to get another loan.”

Scarlett waved him off. “Benji said they'd continue as if nothing had happened to keep the scent off Victory and Maisie. Only after my sister is arrested would the other come to light.”

“Never know with her though,” he replied.

“True. Again.” Scarlett deflated in her chair. “Maybe she is bluffing. Maybe this lion is an excuse so if something went down while she was gone, I'd be her alibi.”

“Or her scapegoat.”

“Well, we know what's coming. I guess one of us should call Dave and let him know the update.” She picked up her phone prepared to do it herself since Maisie had told her the plan, but Kenny stilled her.

“I'll do it. I'll call him. Why don't you go relax or something.” He winked at her. “We haven't been exactly easy with you over the last few days.”

He was right, they hadn't been. She hadn't received so much attention since her accident and even then, it'd been bad attention. Nonetheless, a nice soak in her tub and a nap would be amazing. The snowpack was sticking, and it caused a deep chill to settle in her bones. She couldn't get warm enough as it was unless she was snuggled deep within her blankets, between her men. “Sure. A bath sounds amazing right now.”

“I'll come get you after I talk to Dave and we figure everything out.” Kenny stepped away from her allowing, her to exit her office.

“You'll come get me.” She looked up at him.

“Of course.” He nodded. “Now get your sweet ass into your tub, missy. That's an order.”

Goosebumps spread across her skin at his tone. Of all four of them, he and Timothy had a startling command to their tones that demanded she follow everything they told her to do.

“Aye, aye captain.” She gave him a mock salute before hurrying to her apartment.

The minute she opened her door and saw the picture Samantha drew her the other day, the excitement of her lover's words, bled from her body. When Maisie was arrested, her niece would be left to pick up the pieces. The girl would be left

parentless for an indeterminate amount of time and it broke something inside of Scarlett. She understood what it was like to be without parents and she never wanted Samantha to feel an ounce of shame or the inadequacies she did as a child then as a teen when her parents died. Of course, she had zero doubt, she wouldn't take Samantha in and protect her. Men or no men, Samantha deserved to grow up in a loving, caring home. Scarlett would do the best she could to provide it. Still, with Maisie out of the picture, Samantha would need all the support she could get.

Scarlett spent one more minute staring at the smiling faces leaping off the page of her niece's artwork then continued down the hall to her bathroom. In a few hours, maybe a day all of their lives were going to change. The turmoil of the trial might bring to light others in their small community who commit heinous crimes, especially in the wildlife refuge community. It might also have ill effects on the bank she used, due to Victory's mishandling of funds. She could list more complications from the pending indictments she was sure of it, but it wasn't here nor there. She only needed to worry about Samantha and Hearts and Paws. Nothing else.

When she stepped into her bathroom, she turned on the tub and began filling. She undressed and for the first, in a long time, stared at her body. Her face, she realized, later on, hadn't been the only place for scars. She had two on her side, full claw marks from Jager and one puncture wound near her heart. Later, she found out, after she woke in the hospital, the reason it'd been so hard for her to breathe had been due to her punctured lung, not the amount of blood filling her mouth. She spent several weeks in the hospital healing and relearning how to breathe and move again.

Now, they were pale, jagged lines contrasting her dark-brown skin though she still had a visceral reaction to them. When the tub was filled how she liked it, she slipped into it and moaned. Muscles she hadn't realized were tense and sore spasmed and released, relaxing her. She leaned her head back against the soft padded edge and closed her eyes. Kenny was right, she needed this.

“Scarlett! Wake up!”

She blinked several times. The water had gone cold and her fingertips were pale and pruned. How long have I been here? She glanced up at the form looming over her and frowned. Timothy? Why is he here?

“There you are.” He shook his head. “Only been trying to wake you for five minutes.”

“How long have I been asleep?” She ran her hand over her face and recoiled from the cold. “Can you give me a second to warm up?”

Timothy pointed to the shower. “One step ahead of you.”

“You're a Godsend.” She kissed him then and climbed out of the tub. “I guess I was more tired than I thought. What's going on?” She stepped under the heated spray and groaned. Slowly the numbness of the cold water washed away.

“They picked up your sister,” he said, handing her a towel when she stepped out. “She was on her way to the airport with her husband.”

“What?”

He nodded. “Yep, gets even better too.”

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“Oh?” She knew Maisie was leaving but had she been spooked? “What's going on?”

“Seems Eduardo is also on the run. He's married and has two kids in Spain. His wife has been searching for him through the courts since he sold off her father's coffee-growing company and made billions of Euros.” Timothy grinned.

“Fuck me,” she whispered, sitting down on her small bed. “How the fuck did Maisie meet this guy.” She held up her hand. “Rhetorical question. It doesn't have to be answered.”

“Oh, I was going to say, my pleasure.” He knelt in front of her, his obsidian eyes swirled with heat, completely ignoring the second part of her statement. “I've only yet sampled your sweet little pussy and I want more.”

“Down boy,” she chuckled. “We don't have time to mess around.”

“Says who?” He untucked the tab of her towel, allowing it to fall around her. He groaned. “Perfect.”

“Hey, Mr. Perfect, Dave said to hurry your ass up, we have shit to do,” Edward said from the door of her room.

Timothy pressed his forehead to hers. “We'll continue this later.” He brushed his lips across hers then stood. The evidence of his arousal pressed against the front of his slacks as he turned to grab his jacket.

“Uh, sure.” She touched her bottom lip with her fingertips. “What else are we

doing?”

“Dave is drafting a statement for you to make since Maisie's arrest is all over the news due to Eduardo's subsequent arrest as well.”

“A what now?” She didn't make the statements; she only ran the day to day operations. “I'm not sure me talking is a good idea.”

“Sure it is, princess,” Timothy answered. “Now get dressed. We need to leave in ten so we can head to Dave's office where the press conference will be.”

“Press conference? You're joking right?” She couldn't believe what he said.

“I don't joke about stuff like this. Quit stalling. I already laid something out for you.” He pointed to the bag hanging from her closet door. “Or well, picked it out should be the better word for it.”

She went to the bag, her forgotten towel lay in a heap on her bed and pulled the zipper down. The burnt gold dress hanging there took her breath away. It was conservative but sexy. It would come to her calves and had a slit in the back. The scoop neckline wasn't too revealing but also had a playful edge to it. She loved it and feared it at the same time.

“There should be a box at the bottom of it too. Hope you like Disney.” Timothy headed down the hall, leaving her to dress.

She pulled the gown from the bag, then retrieved the black box. Once she was dressed, she opened the box and found a small lion pendant necklace inside. The eyes were the same shade of amber as her eyes. She grinned. She loved it. She put it on then walked out to the living room. There on her couch and in her chair sat Timothy, Kenny, and Edward. “Can you finish zipping me?” She turned away from the guys to

show them what she needed to have done.

“I've got you,” Kenny said, coming up behind her. “You're so fucking sexy. When Timothy showed us this, I thought he lost his eff'n mind.”

“Now?” She faced him when he finished.

“I think we're all lucky SOBs, Scar.” He turned her in the direction of her room. “Finish getting ready, we have to go soon.”

“Right. I'll be done in a minute.”

When they arrived at Dave's law firm, the lobby was swarming with reporters and security. Barriers had been set up to keep clients safe while also keeping the media at bay. Scarlett checked in and the stoned-faced security guard led her down the hall away from Dave's office to one of the big conference rooms.

“You should know,” the security guard said. “This place is a madhouse.”

“Kind of figured it out from everyone in the lobby,” Scarlett replied.

He snorted. “This is ten times worse.”

How much worse could it get? As soon as the thought entered her mind, she chided herself for even thinking it. The security guard opened the door for her, and her breath hitched. The folding doors at the end of the room had been pushed open allowing more access to those who might need it and, in this case, it was for the press overflow. Shutters snapped and the bright light of flashes, momentarily stunned her. When the guys said press conference, she thought maybe local people, not this.

“I don't think I can do this,” she said between clenched teeth.

“We've got you Scar, we're right here with you.” Kenny pressed his hand to the small of her back and urged her forward.

“There are so many people,” she muttered moving toward the desk in the front where Dave sat. In front of him were two mic stands and a notebook. He glanced up the minute he caught sight of her and grinned.

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“Ladies and gentlemen, Scarlett Leon, youngest daughter to Margaret and Stephen Leon,” Dave said.

A murmur ran through the crowd and the old sense of paranoia roared to life within her. They were talking about her scars. How gross they were. How deep they were. How they couldn't understand how a parent would let her out looking as she did.

“Don't do it,” Kenny murmured in her ear. “They're not here to create a monster out of you, they're here to hear what you have to say, so go tell them the truth.”

She joined Dave at the table, her heart lodged in her throat and her stomach tied in knots. She tried to smile at everyone but failed miserably, she could tell. She tried to be polite and say hello but even her voice failed her at the most inopportune time. Scarlett cleared her throat and tried again. “Hello. Thank you for coming on such short notice.” Her voice wobbled and she placed a hand to her chest, trying to settle herself. “You'll have to forgive me. I've never done this before.”

Dave opened the folder for her. Inside sat the prepared statement. “At this time, Miss Leon will only be making a statement. She won't be answering any questions, however, if you'd like to leave them with my secretary, I can make sure she answers them so you can run your stories at a later time.” He glanced at Scarlett. “Whenever you're ready.”

She nodded and let out a breath. “Thanks.” Scarlett looked at the statement and grinned. She couldn't have said it better if she tried. “When my grandfather opened the gates to Hearts and Pawsto help injured and abused big cats, he didn't understand the impact he'd have on the animal kingdom or in Colorado Springs. Over the years,

we have strived to care for all those big cats who might be sick or dying or those felines who have been kept in cages only released once a day to perform. Though time has passed, situations don't change and today, I am pleased to say, our forty-acre plot of land is being used to its fullest potential. In the last twenty years, we have rehabilitated over fifteen big cats along with rehomed three of those felines into local and national zoos. Those who have been here for their last days have been treated with compassion and love and knew they were wanted at the very end.”

Dave handed her a kleenex, surprising her. Surely she hadn't been crying already? Yet, when she dabbed her eye, she found it wet. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem.” He urged her to continue.

“You see this scar and you're reminded of a time when I'd been too young and too naive. I love these beasties with all my heart and to see one suffer, I couldn't take it. Well, that's why I am here today. As I've said, these cats are my legacy. They are who my family has fought for and will continue to fight for, for as long as God will give me the chance to. Effective immediately, Maisie Velazquez-Cruz has been removed from the business. She has been arrested for fraud, forgery, and embezzlement and, as of this moment, I have become the sole owner of Hearts and Paws.” She turned to Dave and gave him a curious look. They hadn't talked about how they'd fix the situation with her and Maisie, except for getting her sister out of the business. “Also, effective immediately all remaining charity events have been canceled due to extenuating circumstances. When the dust has settled and things have returned to normal, the charity faction of Hearts and Paws will return.” She glanced up at the crowd of reporters and noticed they all sat forward, hanging on to her every word. It was weird and made her uncomfortable, but also strong and confident. “In closing, Hearts and Paws will always remain committed to caring for any sick or injured animal that may cross our path. If you know of any animal, big or small in need of help, please call us at 1-888-BIG-HART that's 1-888-244-2372.” She closed the notebook and stood; Dave was right at her side.

Kenny joined her then and ushered her out of the room. Her knees were weak. Her hands trembled. It'd been done before it began and though she'd been exhausted, she was also energized.

“What should we do next?” Edward asked.

“Celebrate,” Timothy said. “For righting this sanctuary.”

She wanted to, really did in fact, but she also had to protect Samantha. “Raincheck, guys. I need to go to Samantha and explain everything to her.”

Kenny frowned. “Poor girl.”

“Don't worry about her. We'll all be here for her,” Dave said. “It is what family does for one another when they're down, right?”

Scarlett grinned. “Right.”

Chapter Ten

Three years later...

The warm water of the shower rained down on Scarlett as Edward ground his groin against her. They'd woken together and gone for a run then came back and ended up in the shower. The flex and ripple of her release was accompanied by the throb and warmth of his. After three years of hard work and dedication by them all, it seemed like the perfect time to add a new member to their family. Whose it would be, didn't matter. They'd all love him or her as if they belonged to each of the guys and her.

“Wow, Mrs. Youngblood, you sure do know how to please a man,” Edward teased, pressing his lips to the back of her shoulder.

She'd married Dave because he'd been the one to step forward first. She figured somewhere along the lines, the guys picked a leader and he was it, but it didn't mean she didn't love them all equally and see them all married whether or not it was constitutional. No, in her heart, the day she said those vows to Dave, she was making them with Kenny and Edward and Timothy. It's also why her wedding band was unique as well. Four princesses cut diamonds for each of her husbands.

“Don’t tell my husband, he gets cranky and jealous,” she replied, stifling a laugh.

“I hear you both,” Dave yelled. “And I’m coming in.

Edward kissed her once more then slipped from her. “Guess this means my time with you is up for now.”

“For now,” she agreed. “Meet me later and we’ll have a romp in the hay.”

“I fucking love you.” Edward laugh. “You’re so crazy.”

“It’s called spontaneous,” Dave said, joining them. “Good morning my love.”

“Morning, husband.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Dave gathered her up in his arms. “Did you save some energy for me?”

She rolled her eyes. “Jealous?”

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A possessive glint filled Dave's eyes. "Never."

"Good, because I have the energy if you've got the time," she answered.

"I've got all the time in the world right now. I'm on vacation for a week." He kissed her. His mouth melding her to hers as he settled in for a sensual glide of their lips.

She moaned and he swallowed it, pressing her back to the cold tile of the wall. "Can't be too long we have the event this morning."

"We won't." He lowered her onto his cock, and she sucked in a breath. "Damn, I'll never get used to how snug you are."

She'd never get used to how many men loved her and cared for her. "Yeah, well, I'll never get over having you as my husband. I don't deserve any of this."

His thrusts were languid, meant to prolong their coupling. "One of these days you will. Until then, we'll remind you daily how lucky we are."

When they emerged from the bathroom sometime later, everyone was up. Since Maisie's arrest and the subsequent public release of her parents' will and the power of attorney, Scarlett and the guys had moved into the house her parents kept away from the sanctuary. The house was only an hour and a half away, plus it gave her a sense of peace not living in her self-imposed sanctuary of paranoia and ridicule. As an added bonus, it gave Samantha room to make new friends, go to school and explore a little, since all she'd known was the sanctuary as well.

However, moving away came with new responsibilities, like hiring extra crew members to watch over the big cats through the night, just in case. It also meant an early wake-up calls for all of them, so they could return to the sanctuary. It made the days long and the nights too short for her, but they managed and for all their hard work and dedication, it was paying off.

Her niece sat at the table with Timothy and Kenny eating breakfast while Edward was at the coffee pot pouring himself a cup. Somehow, they were making this work. She joined Samantha at the table and snatched a piece of toast from the stack. "Is everyone ready for the big reveal?"

"Yes!" Samantha threw her fist in the air. "I handed out all the tickets just like you said to, Auntie Scarlett. All of my friends think it's so cool."

In the beginning, her niece cried all the time. It was hard explaining to a little girl why her mommy had to go away and it'd been difficult to process even for Scarlett, how some of it was her fault. At first, she thought Samantha would hate her, but once she worked through the pain and anger at her mother, the little girl began to open up again, becoming the beautiful young teen sitting with them at the table.

"Well, this summer I'm putting you to work," Scarlett said. "It's time you learn the trade."

"Really?" Samantha's eyes grew wide with excitement.

"Yes. I thought about starting a summer with big cats volunteer program with teens." As it stood, she was waiting on the extra funding and the increase in their insurance then they'd be good to go. Scarlett figured there were others out there like her who'd want to make a difference in the world when it came to conservation and rehabilitation of animals, why not give them a chance as kids to learn at Hearts and Paws.

“That’s awesome, Auntie.” Samantha pushed away from the table. “I need to grab my bag and then I’m ready to go.”

“Perfect.” Scarlett finished her toast and grabbed a travel mug of coffee. “We’ll meet you outside in five.”

“Okay!” The little girl practically ran to her room, leaving Scarlett with her men.

“So, this summer program...” Kenny came up behind her. “Got any room for one more?” He placed his palm on her lower belly.

She laughed. “If you play your cards right. Although, Dave and Edward got a head start on you and Tim.”

“We’ll be rectifying that later,” Timothy said, placing his and Samantha’s dish in the sink. “Or maybe on lunch break.”

She laughed. “All of you are insatiable.”

"Only where you are concerned," Kenny said, stepping around. "Let's get a move on, don't want to be late to our event."

Once they were outside, they loaded up into Dave's new truck and headed for the interstate. Anticipation crawled through Scarlett's stomach. She was equal parts nervous and excited to open the two new exhibits she'd been planning for, for years. Thankfully, the weather was finally cooperating with them. For the last three weeks, it'd done nothing, but rain and she worried it would drown them out of the opening.

Now, all of her worryings had been for not. The sun was out, and the ground was drying. Of course, she'd helped it along by adding more dirt to some of the wettest areas. When they hopped on the freeway and headed south, she turned to the backseat

and grinned. Samantha sat between Edward and Kenny watching some show on her tablet. Each of them had headphones on and they all appeared content.

“You worry too much about her,” Dave said. “She’s fine.”

“Maybe.” The trial for Maisie had been long and difficult. Samantha was shown a side of her mother the girl most likely had never seen before then. She had to hear about all the sordid details of her mother’s fraudulent marriage to a guy who’d been married four times and divorced only one of them.

In the end, Maisie received twenty years for the forgery, fraud, and embezzlement and Eduardo had been deported back to Spain to face whatever awaited him there, charge wise. Since her sister’s incarceration, she’d asked Samantha if she wanted to see her mother, but she refused. Maybe one day, Samantha would visit Maisie and her mother would explain why everything had to happen as it did. Until then, Scarlett would be there for her niece every step of the way.

“She gets it,” Timothy added. “I bet, given time, she’ll tell you more about your sister than you even know.”

The thought sent a chill down Scarlett’s spine. “Bite your tongue. I hope she never had to endure what I did.”

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She might have never found out the truth of how Maisie pulled off her stunt with Kobo and Jäger, but in the grand scheme of things, it didn't matter. Scarlett got her life back. Sure, it was a bit banged up and had a few nicks missing from it, but it was hers and she was proud of herself.

An hour later, they pulled up to the sanctuary and stopped. Cars were filling the parking lot and there were lines already snaking toward the portable turnstiles. A giant banner hung from the facade showing their newest member, Daye, a two-year-old Ocelot. Dave continued down the employee road and entered through a side gate. Inside the facility, the level of excitement pushed away Scarlett's nerves. She'd never seen the sanctuary this busy before. It was a little overwhelming, to say the least.

They got out and she took a minute to steady herself. “Wow.”

“Wow is right,” Dave said coming up next to her.

“Did you see all the people,” Samantha said. “They’re all here to see Daye.”

Yes, yes, they were. “Why don’t you go get ready and meet us by the entrance when it’s time.”

Samantha nodded. “I have all of my lines memorized.” She pulled out a small stack of cards. “But, just in case, I brought these with me.” She giggled as she skipped off to where they kept the employee vests.

Today, was the first day a Leon would be giving a tour of the facility since Scarlett’s accident. She thought it only appropriate, her niece got the honors. Scarlett started for

the individual enclosures and stepped inside. A few days after Maisie was arrested, Kenny convinced her it was time to start talking through all of her pain and guilt.

Again, in typical Kenny fashion, he'd been right. Since she started seeing her therapist, the anxious knots and feeling as though she couldn't breathe when she stepped inside the pens had disappeared. Sure, it didn't happen overnight, but gradually, she could resume being able to sit and feed her felines. The first time she ate with Shiva, she cried. The big 'ol lioness put her head on Scarlett's lap and she swore the animal felt the same as Scarlett did.

"Well, it's almost showtime. Are you ready?" Timothy came up beside her as they headed for the entrance to the park.

"As I'll ever be," she said. "And it's all because of all of you."

Dave took her hand, stopping her midstride. "No, Scarlett, that's where you're wrong. All of this," he motioned to the sanctuary, "is because you never gave up. It's because you love all of these felines as much as you love us. I can't speak for anyone else, but I can for myself. I am so fucking proud of you and I know if your parents were here, they would be too."

She blinked back the tears burning the corners of her eyes and grinned. "I love you guys so much. Thank you for believing me."

"I'm ready!" Samantha came running toward them. "I'm so excited! I just can't hide it."

Scarlett laughed. "Then let's go knock them dead."

They walked to the front gates of Hearts and Paws and Dave flicked on Samantha's mic. The girl stepped forward and waved to the crowd. "Good morning everybody, we're so glad you could join us."

Had Scarlett been told three years ago, this would be her life now, she would have laughed. No way in the world she deserved any of this. Yet, here she stood with her family and now with her big cats, ready to take on the world.

The crowd laughed and applauded Samantha and Scarlett grinned. “Yes. Today’s going to be a great day.”

THE END