

Chapter Three

My shift at the bookstore was over. I should have been walking home, but instead, I was sitting on a bench in the park donated by Nadezhda Lev. It was a lovely little park, even in the winter. There were dark, wrought-iron fences tangled with vines and flower beds that, in warmer times, were probably filled with bright flowers.

Shivering from the cold, I stood up but I didn't walk towards my little squatter's cottage. Instead, I headed down the street that led away from the park and into a small forest that sat on the western edge of town. I had seen the hiking trails before but hadn't yet explored them.

I was going to walk around for just a little while. I wouldn't let myself get too far into the woods. I had no plans for someone to find my frozen corpse after the snow had melted. I just really, really didn't want to go back to the nest of blankets and the fire pit, it was too cold. Too sad. I was sure if I went back there I would just sit in the corner and cry.

I had spent the day replaying Anton's offer in my head. He had offered to take me out and show me around. My stomach was rumbling from hunger and I was cold, but I still said no. He was hot and I was desperate, it should have been the perfect combination, but my pride had stopped me. I wasn't that desperate, was I?

No, not yet. I could make it a little bit longer. I had a job and I was making money. Soon I would have enough to afford renting a real apartment, one with electricity and water and heat. I wasn't ready to start going out with men just for a hot meal. I could make it a little longer. The winter had been hard, but winter wouldn't last forever. Spring would arrive, I could make it.

I walked down a long path, my feet crunching on the hard earth. Thick gray clouds covered the sky diffusing the bright light of the sun into a pale glow. It was getting darker, it would be night soon and then I would have to return to my shanty.

The path in front of me opened up to a wild field ringed with trees. Bright red POSTED signs were stapled to the trees. The field was desolate in the winter, the grass was brown and trampled from the snow. There was a large, decrepit barn in the middle of the field and, having nowhere else to go, I made my way to it.

The wind picked up, whipping my hair around my head. Dusk had fallen, darkness was taking over the field, but I didn't stop. The huge, three-story tall barn loomed in front of me. Portions of it were missing and I could see the inside through several large holes. I stepped through one of the larger holes and found myself in the barn.

There were rusted tools lying on the ground, bales of old rotten hay decaying in the corners. I wasn't even sure why I had come in here. The barn had just given me an excuse to walk somewhere, now I would have to turn around and go home.

There was a ladder built into one wall that led to a second floor. The beams looked sturdy and free from rot. I put one hand on and lifted myself up. Carefully, I made my way up to the second floor. From up here I had a full view of the rapidly darkening field. It stretched for miles, far into the horizon. It was dotted with trees and more decrepit buildings.

It felt good being up here. I was away from the concerns and the worries that haunted me when I was on ground level. From up here, everything was far away and hazy in the distance. Something moved in the field, it was darting around the edges, jumping out from the woods and scurrying about before diving back in.

It was too far away for me to see what it was. But it was big, lithe and fast. It looked like a big cat, like a lion. But they didn't have lions in Maine, it must have been something else. The wind whipped up, pulling my hair towards the opening in front me.

It was almost like I could see the wind carrying my scent. The dead grass ruffled in the wind as it raced towards the animal. Even from this distance I could see the lion lift its head and sniff the wind. It turned towards the barn and lowered itself into a crouch and then sprang up and raced towards me.

Shit! I thought in a panic. I raced for the ladder and clamored my way down. Why did I come here? What was I thinking? Once back on the ground I looked through the hole in the barn trying to see where the animal was. What it was.

For a moment, I saw nothing. I could hear my heartbeat thundering in my own ears. Maybe I could make a break for it. I moved to the hole I had come in through when I heard a rustling outside. I froze when a low growl reached my ears. I turned my head and for a moment, my heart stopped.

It was a lion, a huge lion. It had a tan coat and a thick shaggy mane blowing about in the wind. Its hard yellow eyes saw me and then it was lunging and scratching at the hole. I stumbled backwards as a huge paw lashed at me. The hole was too small for the big lion to get through, but there were other ways into the barn.

I was trapped. I quickly turned around and raced back to the ladder clamoring up to the second floor. I just pulled my feet up when the lion came charging into the barn. It was huge, massive. I couldn't believe how big it was.

It saw me. It looked up at me and snarled. Quickly the lion paced around the room. He jumped up on a hay bale that collapsed underneath his weight. He let out a low,

grumbling roar and pulled himself free of the rot. He looked up at me and let out a roar so loud that my ears rang.

I scrambled back away from the ledge. I fell down into a small ball, pulling my knees up towards me as I fought back tears.

Why was there a lion here? How was there a lion surviving a Maine winter? This was insane, this was impossible. I was going to be one of those, you won't believe what happened to her stories. Mauled to death by a lion. It sounded like a horrible way to die.

It was still down there. I could hear it snuffling and growling. Could it get up here? It was too high for it to jump, but if it could find its way up, I would be screwed. It was getting darker and colder by the second.

I had no cell phone. I had no way to get in touch with anyone. I had no options. I stared out the open window and searched for any signs of human life. There was a full moon out and the field below me was bright.

"Hello!" I called out into the darkness. "Help! Is anyone there! Can anyone hear me?" My voice enraged the lion. I could hear him thrashing about below me. I dared to glance over the ledge where I could see him scratching on the ladder trying to make his way up. Our eyes met and his nostrils flared and he bared his teeth at me.

I spent the night huddled in the corner of the barn. There was some hay on the landing, dry, thank God. I gathered it up in a pile and then wormed my way inside. The hay was a slight insulator against the cold. I pulled as much of it to me as possible, praying for warmth.

The lion never left. I could hear it pacing the floor below me. Sometimes I would get brave and peak over the ledge, but it was always waiting for me. He would snap his jaws, snarl and roar.

I was freezing. Shaking from head to toe. I pulled my limbs free of my clothes and pulled myself into a tight ball, wrapping my clothes around me. My teeth were chattering and tears were freezing on my cheeks. It was so, so cold and morning was still so far away. I managed to close my eyes for some fitful minutes of sleep, but then the cold stinging my limbs would awaken me.

The lion never seemed to sleep. It paced below me and licked its lips. It was waiting for me and it looked like it was willing to wait forever.

Chapter Four

I opened my bleary eyes as the first rays of the sun were appearing on the field. A soft, pale light poured through the clouds. I was frozen solid. My body ached from the cold. I was tired and spent, I wanted to crawl into a bed, a real bed and sleep.

I didn't believe it at first. But when I couldn't hear the lion below me. I looked down into the barn and didn't see it anywhere. I looked up and out the window. There the great beast was, far off in the field, loping towards the sun. Was this a trap, was it really gone? I watched as it ran farther and farther away from me.

When it was nothing more than a dot on the far horizon I stumbled to my feet. It hurt to move. My joints cried out in pain as I walked towards the stairs. I clung to the rungs with my numb hands hurrying down the ladder. I still couldn't quite believe it was gone.

Daylight was breaking as I picked up my speed. I ran through the field. I tripped over roots and fell more than once. I kept looking behind me searching for the lion, but it was nowhere in sight. I ran until I was back on the trail. My lungs were burning from the cold and a stitch was forming in my side.

I didn't stop until I got to town. Once I was on the street surrounded by people, by real people, I managed to catch my breath. It seemed impossible that I had been this close to civilization. Last night it felt like I was the only person left in the world and now I was watching shop owners open their stores.

"Officer!" I saw two policewomen sitting in an idling police car and sipping their coffees. I ran up to their car and both of them stepped out to greet me.

"Lion," I gasped. "There's a lion on the loose."

"No there isn't," the older of the two women said. "That's just an urban legend teenagers spread. There is no lion on the loose in Maine, especially not in winter."

"I saw it!" I said my eyes searching between the two women. The older one had a head of shocking red hair and her name tag said "Officer Day." Her partner, Officer Ponderosa, was younger with long brown hair. "I spent all night trapped in the old barn off the hiking trail. I saw it there. It tried to eat me!"

They looked at each other and then back at me. "Really?" the younger one asked.

"Yes!"

"And you're willing to go on the record saying that?"

“Yes. If we go to the barn we could see paw prints,” I said.

“We can’t go to that barn,” Officer Day said. “It’s on private property. You were technically trespassing last night. Didn’t you see the posted signs?”

I opened my mouth but said nothing. *Yes, I saw the signs. But I didn’t know that meant there was a lion running rampant on the property.*

“What’s your name and address?” The older officer said as she opened a notebook.

Crap! This wasn’t what I wanted. None of this was right. Was I about to be in trouble for trespassing? Did no one care that I had seen a freaking lion the night before?

“Never mind,” I said, backing away.

“You’re not in trouble,” Officer Ponderosa said as she moved slowly towards me. She was approaching me like I was a wild animal, her hands were up and her knees were bent. She was ready to tackle.

“No, I don’t want to file a report. I didn’t see anything.”

“If you’re in some kind of trouble, we can help you.”

“No. I’m not…” I said. “Please, just leave me alone.” I turned around and hurried down the street turning down the first alley I could find. Tears poured down my face, but I wasn’t sad, I was frustrated and confused. I had spent the night hunted by a huge wild animal and when I went to get help, I was reminded that I couldn’t go for help.

I wiped a tear away. Thankfully, I had a shift at the bookstore. At least I would have somewhere warm to spend the day.

I hurried home to get some clean clothes and then went to the Y to shower. I arrived at work early, letting myself into the bookstore and making a fresh pot of hot coffee for the customers, and a cup of tea for me. It took forever for me to finally feel warm again. I had a tickle in my throat and with my blanket wrapped around me, I prayed that I wasn’t getting sick.

It was a thankfully quiet day. I struggled to keep my eyes open. I’m sure I fell asleep more than once, but the jingling bells on the doors always woke me up when a customer entered. I kept thinking I heard the lion. Soft footsteps upstairs, the glimpse of a tan coat and my heart would start jackhammering in my chest.

The bells chimed and I was jerked awake. I looked around praying there was no one in the store. I couldn't keep falling asleep like this. I was going to lose my job, or worse, someone could do something to the bookstore. I didn't want to let Harold and Sarah down. They had taken a chance on me.

I sat up, forcing my eyes to stay open. I smiled at the man who had just walked in. He appeared to be around my age, in his early twenties, with long hair he kept in a ponytail and the thin shadow of a mustache on his upper lip. He was wearing a tattered trench coat and a pair of mud-scuffed boots.

He looked around the store, glancing up the stairs and listening before he finally approached the desk.

"I heard someone saw a lion last night," he whispered. He stood at the counter but didn't look me in the eye. Instead, he rifled through the brochures we kept on a small rack.

"Yeah, I did," I said. Being tired made me cranky and impatient.

"Really?" He asked, looking at me. "Are you messing with me? Did Paulie put you up to this? That guy's a jerk and you should keep your distance.

"I have no idea who Paulie is," I said. "Last night I went for a walk, wandered onto private property and spent the night stuck up in a barn while a lion tried to eat me. You can go and see the paw prints. I was in the abandoned barn up off the hiking trail by the park."

"That's Lev property," he said. "They are crazy about trespassing. Two years ago Sonny Marks got drunk and ended up on their property. They had him arrested and pressed charges for trespassing." He raised his eyebrows at me as if I too could not believe what I was hearing.

"How did you find out about this?" I asked.

"Police radio," he answered. "I was listening this morning while I had my coffee. I heard Day and Ponderosa telling animal control that the new girl who worked at the bookstore claimed to see a huge animal on the Ponderosa field."

"How did they know who I was? I didn't even give them my name."

"It's a small town. You're new. Everyone knows you already."

I rolled my eyes. I had never lived in a small town before. I had been born and raised in New York City where I never had any idea of who my neighbors were.

"So what's the deal with the lion? When I told the cops they thought I was joking."

He leaned towards me and in a conspiratorial whisper said. “The Lev family keeps lions on their property. I’m sure of it. They moved here in the early 1900s, running away from the Bolsheviks. Before that, Williamstown was just a small logging town, nothing special. But then, things got weird.

When the Lev’s moved in, the lion stories came with them. The very first sighting of a strange, big cat was the summer of 1918, just one month after the Lev’s first moved here. There have been sightings and maulings ever since.”

“Maulings?” I asked. I remembered the lion from the other night. The way it paced below me, waiting for me to fall so it could devour me.