

## Chapter Five

“There have been five in total. One in 1918, a drifter was found clawed up and gored. They never ever figured out what his name was. He’s buried in an unmarked grave in the town cemetery. In 1935, a prostitute was found with her throat ripped out and claw marks all over her face. Another in 1972, a bunch of hippies were smoking up on Lev land, they were doing some sort of Wiccan spell under the full moon. According to stories, a huge lion tore through their group and killed two of them. And then in 1978-”

“I get it,” I said. “But why hasn’t anyone done anything about it? If there is a lion running around killing people, shouldn’t someone have caught it by now? It must be a whole family of them. Lion’s don’t live that long, do they?”

“No, they don’t. Why don’t you tell me what you saw and then I’ll answer your questions?”

I told him everything. I detailed my cold terrified night. It turned out Hank ran a sort of conspiracy theory website for the town. He had been cataloging the lion attacks, searching the old historical records and looking for some sort of pattern.

“The Lev family swears they don’t have anything to do with it. The police and animal control have searched the property multiple times, but they’ve never found anything.”

“So, why are you convinced they have something to do with it?”

He looked at me aghast and then said, “Do you know what Lev means?”

I shook my head and then sneezed loudly into a tissue. I was feeling worse. Thankfully Harold and Sarah kept some aspirin in the back, but it wasn’t doing much good. My head was pounding and my nose was getting stuffy.

“It’s Russian for Lion,” Hank said. “This family of Russian billionaires comes here with the last name lion and then there’s a bunch of lion sightings. That can’t be a coincidence.”

“So, you think that they’re lion tamers?” I asked.

“No, I think they’re lion breeders. Shady people love having rare, exotic animals as pets. It’s a status thing for them. And what is more exotic and rare than a lion? An actual pet lion. A fool and his money are soon parted and there are plenty of fools who would pay a lot of money so they could brag about a pet tiger.”

I was so tired. This was too much. I didn't want to have anything to do with illegal lion breeders. I pulled my blanket around my shoulders, my throat was getting sore and my headache was getting worse.

"So, can I put your story on my website?" he asked.

"Sure," I said with a shrug. "Just don't put my name or any identifying information. At all. This is very important."

"Complete anonymity. But the people of this town deserve to know what's going on down at the Lev property. Just because they're rich doesn't mean they can let dangerous, wild animals roam around."

I was barely listening, I felt awful. I was cold, shivering from head to toe, but my face felt hot. I kept pressing my cold hands to my hot cheeks in an effort to spread the warmth.

"Are you alright?" Hank asked.

"I spent the night in an abandoned barn in winter in Maine, I don't feel great," I said.

"Well, here's my website. Look for your story, it'll be up by tomorrow," he slid a cheap looking business card towards me.

"Thanks," I said with a sniffle. "But no information about me on the website."

"Agreed," Hank said.

A fog descended on me as Hank left. My vision was going blurry and my head was pounding. I had never been more tired in my entire life. After he left, I found I couldn't remember too many details from our conversation. Everything felt fuzzy and far away. I wanted a bed. A warm, soft bed that I could fall into and sleep for as long as I wanted.

The bells on the door jingled and then to my surprise I saw Anton Lev enter. He stepped through the door and took his hat off, slipping it into his pocket. I looked up at him with my hooded eyes.

He made his way over to me, resting his hands on the counter.

"Hello, Kristen," he said.

"Hi," I replied. My voice was slurred and my eyes were struggling to stay open. Was all of this his fault? Could Hank have been right? Were the Lev's breeding lions? It seemed so improbable as to be impossible. But I had seen the lion with my

own two eyes. I had heard his roar and seen the yellow eyes of a predator that would have easily devoured me.

“You don’t look very well,” he said. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I might be coming down with something,” I said staring right into his strong, dark eyes. “I spent the night trapped in your barn being hunted by a wild animal.”

“Yes, I heard from the police,” he said. “I’m sorry that happened. If I can offer you anything in the form of help. Anything you need.”

“Why was there a lion on your property last night?” I demanded.

“A lion?” he asked and for a second, I almost believed that he was shocked. But there was something in his eyes that wasn’t quite right. He was lying. “There aren’t any lions on my property. Maybe it was a coyote or-”

“Do you think I’m an idiot?” I asked him. “I know the difference between a lion and a coyote.”

I swallowed and it hurt so much it brought tears to my eyes. I was so tired that I wanted to cry. I looked at this rich, handsome, rugged man standing across from me. He would probably leave here and get into his fancy car, all nice and warm. And then head home to his huge, giant mansion. I hated him at that moment.

“Why were you in the barn?” he asked, his voice terse. “The property boundary is clearly marked with no trespassing signs.”

I shrugged, “fuck the signs.”

“Ignoring the signs is what led you to be trapped in the barn,” he countered.

“No, you breeding lions on your property is what caused me to be trapped in a freezing cold barn all night long.”

“What?” he demanded and this was an honest what. He honestly had no idea what I was talking about. “Don’t believe that nonsense. We don’t breed lions, tigers or anything like that. We never have. It’s a stupid rumor.”

“I know what I saw,” I said.

“I’m taking you to the doctor,” he said shaking his head.

“I’m fine,” I said, my voice loud. “I’m just tired. I need to get some sleep and then I’ll be fine.”

“Where are you staying?” he asked.

“None of your damn business,” I said, pulling back and away from him.

“Look, this is a small town. Everyone knows that you’re here, but no one knows where you’re staying. Which makes me think that you’re not staying somewhere good. You were trapped on my property last night and now you look very sick. I want to make that right.”

“I don’t need your charity,” I said. I couldn’t go to the doctor, I had to stay hidden. My father had eyes everywhere.

“Why are you being so obstinate?” he demanded. “I’m trying to help you. That’s all.”

“I’m fine on my own,” I replied.

He shook his head. I don’t remember him leaving. I barely remember leaving the bookstore. I locked the doors, set the alarm and headed towards my squatter’s paradise in a thick haze of fever.

It was starting to snow. Big, heavy, puffy flakes of snow that settled on my head and shoulders, clinging to my jacket. Already the snow was beginning to stick to the tops of cars and buildings. It was going to be a doozy. They were predicting two feet.

I was ready, I thought, as I stumbled towards my office suite. I had plenty of dry firewood and some fruit. Plus, I could walk to the bookstore even through thick snow. I just had to get through the night.

I could feel that I had a fever. I had taken some aspirin with me and I took three of them once I was in my little nest. I wasn’t sure if I should be taking them, because of the baby, but being sick would’ve probably harmed it more, so I decided to risk it.

It felt wonderful to be laying down. I was so, so tired. I forced myself to build a small fire and pop the window open.

I could stay awake a little while longer, just until the fire went down. I just needed to keep my eyes open.

## Chapter Six

I was so tired, but sleep refused to come. Dead-eyed I stared out the window and watched heavy flakes fall outside. Snow, so much snow. I loved snow. Growing up, my favorite thing to do was take a walk after the snow had fallen. The city felt like it was covered in a thick, soft blanket. Everything was quiet and soft in a way the city never was.

It was one of the reasons I came to Maine. I wanted to live in the country, far from the city. I hadn't planned on living in an abandoned building, I imagined it would have been nicer if I lived in a real house.

I felt hot and cold all at the same time. My face was burning, but the rest of me was shivering. Every time I drifted off to sleep I would wake myself up with my teeth chattering. My throat was raw and painful, my head was pounding and my entire body ached. Tears slid down my cheeks. I wanted to go home, but I didn't have one. This little room with its trashcan fire was my only home and I hated it.

Finally, well into the night, I managed to fall asleep. Shivering in my nest of blankets I could see figures in the shadows on the wall. Monsters lurked and jeered at me, threatening me that soon, so soon they would come for me. Faces and figures jumped out at me and I hid under my blanket in the hope that if they couldn't see me, they couldn't get me.

Then I heard something, a noise coming from the window. Bleary-eyed I peeked over the blanket. The fire was dead, I didn't remember closing the window, but it was sealed shut, so I must have.

I squinted, trying to figure out what was happening outside. I saw a flash of tan and then a huge paw was scratching at the window. The lion had found me. It had come looking for me and now it was going to eat me. There was nothing I could do. I was too tired, too sick. The lion would get me.

I watched as the lion managed to open the window. Its huge paws pushed the sill open and it poked its mangy head inside. My eyes weren't working correctly. One moment it was a man and then the next it was a lion. I would see it moving on all fours and then blink and it was on two legs.

"No," I moaned. "Leave me alone." It came out a sob and feebly I brought my hands up to protect my face.

The lion was whispering something in my ear. Soothing, calming words. His giant mouth came down and he gathered me up in it. But he wasn't eating me. He pushed the blankets aside and helped me sit up.

"Come with me," I heard him say, but I didn't know how a lion could talk. I stumbled to my feet as he took me up in his mouth. I felt like a cub carried by her mother. I was on my feet, my hands buried in the lion's mane. But no, we were both up on two feet, it wasn't a lion, it was a man.

I could barely stand. I could barely walk. The lion was supporting me. We found our way to the door and he kicked the chair aside and opened it. The rest of the building had a creepy desolate feeling. Wires hung from the ceiling, chairs lay scattered over the bare floor. But we didn't stay long. We moved to the front door and he kicked this open too.

The wind hit me like a ton of bricks. My hair was lifted up off my shoulders. Snow was swirling around us in a fierce gale. I couldn't see more than a few feet in front of me. The world outside was a frozen hellscape. The snow was already past my ankles as the lion, or maybe it was a man, pulled me towards a waiting car.

The car was running and it was so wonderfully warm inside. I fell into the backseat where a blanket was waiting for me. I stretched out as the lion lifted the blanket over me.

The door slammed closed and for a moment, I was alone in the running car. Then someone got in the front seat and slowly the tires crunched through the snow and the movement rocked me back to sleep.

\*\*\*

I don't know how long I was out. I had no memory of leaving the car and no idea where I was. I opened my eyes to soft, yellow sunlight pouring through a huge, ornate window. I wasn't in my squatter's home, I was in a real one.

The bed beneath me was impossibly soft. It felt like the mattress had conformed perfectly to my body. The sheets were silky smooth and I felt so wonderfully warm. It took a moment for my eyes to focus. I felt a sharp sting in my left arm and looked down to see an IV leading to a clear bag suspended above my head. I felt better. My throat was still scratchy and I still felt weak, but my headache was gone, my limbs had stopped shaking, the aching was gone.

The room was painted a soft yellow with dark trim. There were long, heavy red curtains on the windows and framed paintings of dogs and horses lined the walls. My bed was large and ornate with a carved headboard.

I felt so warm and comfortable. I was perfectly happy to just lie in this big, soft fluffy bed forever. I didn't care where I was or who had brought me here. I was too tired to fight anymore. I didn't yell for help or try to escape, I just closed my eyes and slipped into a pleasant sleep.

I woke up to a cold hand on my warm forehead. I opened my eyes and saw Anton Lev standing over me with a worried look on his face.

*Anton Lev*, I thought. It was impossible. Why was he here? How did he find me? I tried to sit up, but Anton just shushed me and gently pushed on my shoulder until I was on my back again.

"Just rest," he said quietly. "Don't try to move, you're still very sick."

"Where am I?" I asked. It came out a hoarse whisper and the act of speaking tore my throat apart.

"You're at my house," Anton said as he sat down in a stiff, high-backed chair next to the bed. "I found you last night."

"How?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter," he said with a shake of his head. "You were half-dead from fever when I found you. Why were you sleeping in that abandoned office?"

I shrugged weakly and said, "Nowhere else to go."

"I offered to help you," he said. His dark eyes were staring directly into mine. He ran his hands through his thick beard and then put his elbows on his knees. "Why did you say no? You could have frozen to death last night."

I didn't know what to say. I had been so tired and terribly sick as it would turn out. I couldn't think straight or plan ahead. Anton was waiting for an answer. He stared down at me, but all I could do was shake my head and then look away. I looked over at the IV.

"Who did this?" I asked.

"A doctor came, the family's personal physician, he saw to you last night. He had to leave to see to some other patients, but he'll be back later today. If he can get through the snow," he replied. Outside everything was white, the snow was stilling falling without a break.

"Over two feet so far and they think we might get another," Anton said as if he could read my mind. "You might be stuck here for a few days. But you don't need to worry about anything. You're safe here. No one is going to hurt you."

My eyes were heavy. They were closing despite my struggle to keep them open. I shouldn't stay here. I should leave. I didn't know this man. I had only met him a few times at the bookstore. He could be anyone.

But the bed was so comfortable and I was so warm. Whatever medicine I had been given was doing the trick. I felt monumentally better than I had the night before. I just felt tired, impossibly tired.

He told me to trust him and I wanted to. His eyes were gentle and he had only ever been kind to me. Would it be so impossible for him to actually be a good person who wanted to help me? Maybe there were good people left in the world after all.