

## CHAPTER 1

Tuesday, June 5, 12:29 PM

At first Brenda Boniflora dismissed her sense of unease.

The barking of Mandy, her German shepherd rescue dog, alerted her to the presence of intruders. Their truck came up her long gravel driveway, around the turnabout, and stopped in front of her ranch-style house. Brenda removed her reading glasses and peered outside.

The Fish and Wildlife Service insignia on the truck's door intrigued her. But the Animal Health Inspector had visited a month ago. Were these strangers here about the tigers for Putin?

She'd returned an hour ago from her jog inside the fenced forty acres of her rural property in Fairfax County, northern Virginia. Her part-time staff left soon after. Brenda showered, then ate lunch and pored over the financial records for both her cat breeding and pet-safe home inspection businesses. She'd operated at a loss for the past three months and drew on her line of credit. To trim costs she dropped her advertising and reduced the hours of her staff.

The man and woman who emerged from the truck both wore shades. But the sun was hidden. Dark clouds skirted low across the sky as if chased by something malevolent.

Ever since John, her husband and business partner for thirty-two years, died in a car accident over three years ago it had been a struggle. The first year was the worst. She went through all the stages of grief, and still ran their businesses alone. Afterwards, her intense yearning for a steady boyfriend drove her to search for love everywhere—even through the Internet. But she hadn't yet found a man whose qualities could measure up to those of John.

Mandy barked with ferocity and jumped at the eight-foot high chain-linked fence that encircled the north half of Brenda's home and ended near the front door to the breezeway.

Mandy was more hostile than she'd ever been. Why? These trespassers posed no threat. Did her guard dog sense something that she couldn't?

Brenda strode to the front door centered in the breezeway that connected her house to the garage, then stepped outside and stood on the landing. "Stop, Mandy. What's up with you?"

But the dog barked louder. Odd. She'd always obeyed when told to stop. Why not now?

The man and woman strutted in a confident, authoritative way. Their sunglasses unsettled her—she couldn't see their eyes. But some people always wear shades outdoors. And the sun had been bright earlier. Nevertheless, she retreated back inside and shut the front door.

They rang the doorbell. "How can I help you folks?" Brenda asked through the intercom.

"We're Ralph and Nancy, special agents with the Fish and Wildlife Service," the man said. "We're here to inspect your big cat rescue facility and cat breeding operation."

"Would you please show some identification? Hold it up to the security camera."

Ralph held up his business card. It showed the logo of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Brenda pushed her red-blond hair past her ears. "I'd have appreciated a phone call first. And an Animal Health Inspector came recently. He called before he came. Why didn't you-all?"

“The other inspector is with the Department of Agriculture,” Ralph said. “We’re with Fish and Wildlife. And visits by special agents are never announced.”

“Is something wrong?” Was she in trouble with Fish and Wildlife? Her cats weren’t neglected at all, but she now worked up to sixty hours a week to make up for the loss in labor.

“I’m sure everything is in order, Ms. Boniflora,” Nancy said. “It’s just a routine visit. Y’know, we’ve got a quota to meet.”

“That’s a relief.” Brenda glanced at the landscape. The wind swirled dry clay from the gravel driveway into dust devils, and whipped the treetops into a frenzy. Their branches groaned in unison. The forecasted storm was near. “Did you come to talk about the Siberian tigers?”

“That’s just one of the things we’re here to discuss,” Ralph said. “May we come in?”

She let the special agents into the breezeway. “May I have your business cards?”

They each gave Brenda their cards. She donned her reading glasses, kept on a cord around her neck, and scrutinized their business cards. They seemed genuine.

“Mind if we leave our shoes on?” Without waiting for an answer Ralph strode past her.

Brenda glanced up. “All right. There’s coffee in the pot, if you’d like a quick cup.”

“Sorry, ma’am, we’ve got other appointments.” Nancy slipped past Brenda as well and entered the house. “This won’t take long.” They gazed at the security monitor in the breezeway.

Ralph stood six feet high and wore a tweed flat cap. Stubble covered his double chin, his clothes were rumpled, and his belly slumped over his belt. That seemed unprofessional.

“Why aren’t you in uniform?” Brenda asked. “The Animal Health Inspector wore one. He was as clean as a hound’s tooth. And why do you wear those plastic nitrile gloves?”

“It’s standard protocol, ma’am, to glove up before we enter animal facilities,” Nancy said. “Keeps our hands clean. And special agents always dress in plainclothes.”

Brenda's two pet Savannah cats purred and nuzzled her pants. But the cats didn't approach the special agents. Strange. Her cats usually were all over any visitors.

Nancy was short, had furtive eyes and ferret-like body movements. Her wig was obvious. Ones of Brenda's friends also had to wear a wig after she went bald from chemotherapy.

*Lord, let that growth on my ear not be cancer.*

The mole on the underside of Brenda's right ear had grown over the past two weeks. She'd booked an appointment with her doctor for three o'clock, and couldn't miss it.

"What do you-all want to see first?" Brenda asked. "The facility for the rescued big cats or the one for my own breeding cats? I've kept the tigers well fed. I hope this won't take long."

Then it struck her. She'd forgotten to renew her animal import permit before last month's deadline. She needed the permit to import Serval cats from Africa for her cat breeding business. Would they ask her about that?

"We'll out of here in a jiffy," Nancy said. "We want to ensure your security system is up to snuff to protect the valuable Siberian tigers for the President. Let's look at the alarm control panel first. We'll tell you what improvements it needs to conform to current regulations."

Brenda balked. "I don't remember any rules for security systems when I started up."

"New regulations were just introduced last year," Nancy said. "I'll email you a copy."

So many damn laws. Would these upgrades cost much? Now she'd have to shell out more money she didn't have. Why didn't the Animal Health Inspector tell her about this?

"The control panel is mounted in my office, just down the hall," Brenda said.

"Smart to have it located so far from the door," Ralph said. "That hinders thieves from hacking into your alarm company's radio frequency. And I noted your exterior doorframes are reinforced, which is prudent. That prevents 'smash and grab' burglars from kicking in the door."

“Yes, my former husband was diligent about security.”

“Oh, so you live alone?” Nancy asked.

Heat burned up Brenda's neck and into her cheeks. Not by choice, dammit. If only her husband hadn't passed. Officials usually show more respect for a man. If she found a new partner, maybe he'd deal with these nose-y inspectors.

“You . . .” Brenda almost swore. She clamped her lips shut to prevent harsh words from slipping out, and took a deep breath. She could remain calm. This would all be over soon.

“You don't need to know about my personal life and all,” she said.

“It was just an innocent question,” Nancy said.

“I've got a good guard dog and the security system,” Brenda said. “Also my two part-time staff help care for my breeding cats, and many volunteers come to feed the rescued big cats. I don't feel vulnerable. If you came to see the cats, why question me about my marital status?”

Ralph's cell phone rang. He spoke into it. “Okay, we'll be there pronto. One moment.” He turned to Brenda. “Ms. Boniflora, I need to take this call in private. Nancy, I'll be in the truck. Make this inspection quick.” Ralph slammed the front door behind him.

Brenda led Nancy down the hall and into the office, where the special agent examined the alarm control panel. “What you've got here is mainly a perimeter protection system. It's bare bones, with only magnetic switches to protect your doors and windows.”

“I didn't want interior devices because my pets could set off so many false alarms.”

“The newer systems include passive infrared detectors that detect rapid changes in heat,” Nancy said. “And they use a horizontal beam only, mounted above the height of your animals. I'll bet you don't even have 24/7 monitoring by a security company.”

“Yes I do. My system isn't that primitive. Hey, why has my breezeway door camera blacked out on the TV screen?” Brenda pointed. “It worked fine just a moment ago.”

“You see?” Nancy said. “Your security system is already breaking down. Our supervisor won't be happy about that. You've got thirty days to upgrade it to the new regulations. We'll be back in a month to inspect again. You'll be fined if you don't comply.”

“Okay, okay.” Would these special agents shut down her operation just because her security system was so outdated? Brenda glanced at her watch. “I have a medical appointment soon, and you've got other commitments too. Shall we move along?”

“Of course. Show me your cat breeding operation first, then your rescued big cats.”

“I'll get the keys. The door to the cattery is down the hall. I'll meet you there.”

Once Brenda was alone, she lifted a framed painting from a wall. Under it, a hidden key cabinet was inserted into the drywall. She grabbed the keys to the cattery and the fence gates.

At least Nancy hadn't asked her about the lapsed permit. Maybe that could stay hidden. Brenda met her in the hall, and unlocked the door to where the cats were housed. “Be my guest.” She made a broad sweep with her arm and allowed the special agent to enter first.

The large cattery contained a separate cage for each of her nine adult breeding Savannah and Serval queens, and floor-to-ceiling walk-in cages for the nine tomcats. All cages were equipped with scratching posts, watering devices and shelves for the cats to hop onto. A steady soft breeze wafted through the room.

“There's a separate nursery and play area for the kittens, a bathing and grooming area, and a storage area,” Brenda said. “And the adult cages have a flapped door that leads to an outdoor run, a 'catio,' which allows the cats to exercise.”

“You have a built-in air circulation system,” Nancy said. “And there's no smell of urine.”

“Yes, I wash down everything regularly and change their litter boxes daily.” Yeah, every day was a workday. She was exhausted. But there’d be no vacation for her.

“Excellent. Let’s look at your big cats. Are you certain they can’t escape?”

“Absolutely. The area is fenced and the all the gates are locked. And I’ve got a complete security system monitoring the area. We’ll go out the back door of the house to reach it.”

“Can your guard dog get to the back door?”

“No, her fenced area ends nine feet from it.” Brenda locked the cattery door and they exited through the back door. She led Nancy to the nearest fenced enclosures for the big cats.

“That fence looks to be ten feet high,” Nancy said. “I like the lean-ins on top.”

The top of the fence angled inward, to prevent the big cats from scaling it.

“Most of the big cats have a wooded half-acre to mosey around in. Every cat is separated from the others by fences. You can see a lynx and bobcat behind their front fences, and they’ve got high hopes that I’ll feed ’em soon. These few portable cages over here hold the big cats we’ve just received, while we prepare for them some of the fenced enclosures.”

Brenda stopped. “Here’s the Siberian tigers’ cage. Amura is feeding her cubs. We just moved them to this portable cage so they’ll be ready for their transfer.”

They stood by the seven-by-ten-foot cage, and admired the tigress. Her four cubs suckled her nipples where she lay. They were almost too big to be nursing. One cub must have bitten a nipple because Amura gave it a gentle kick. The cub rolled over, saw Brenda and came closer.

“What magnificent animals,” Nancy said. “Siberian tigers are endangered and rare. When the President presents these cubs to Vladimir Putin your business will benefit from the press. Just keep up the security until they’re transferred. So when’s the truck coming to pick them up?”

Brenda stared at her. “Tomorrow. You didn’t know that?”

Fish and Wildlife had arranged the transfer. Brenda was certain of that. Didn't the special agents communicate with other department staff?

"Oh yeah, now I remember now one of my colleagues discussing it," Nancy said. "Our team thanks you for holding them on such short notice—and for your service to our country. Do you have a tranquilizer gun, just in case?"

"It's locked in the gun cabinet, along with the darts. Why do you need to know?"

"Just want to make sure you're protected." Nancy examined the cage and shook the bars of the cage door. A low growl resonated from Amura's throat.

"This cage is secure, with a good lock," Nancy said. "Where do you keep the keys for the gates in the fences? Or do you have a master key for them all?"

Brenda strode to the back door, ahead of Nancy, and swore under her breath. Crap. She should have trusted her gut from the beginning. It was a mistake to let them case out her house. She'd better get this so-called "special agent" out of here. Even if she had to be nasty.

When they reached the back door Brenda spun around to face her. "Why should it matter to you? That's got nothing to do with your business here."

"Listen, ma'am, we have to do our job. If you don't cooperate, we can pull your permit."

"I've got rights too. I can file a complaint. Who's your supervisor?"

Nancy's beady eyes darted about and avoided Brenda's glower. "I'm sorry if I sounded harsh. Just following the rules. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Do I sound upset? Not just. My knickers are in a knot that you didn't call before you came. I'm hoppin' mad as a bullfrog on a sizzlin' skillet that you're asking questions you shouldn't. I'm frigging—"

"Don't have a hissy fit. Let's just get this over with. We both want that."



"You never did show me your badge, and you didn't tell me your supervisor's name."

"His name is John Little, if you must insist. Everyone calls him 'Little John'."

"Don't pee down my back and tell me it's raining."

"I'm serious," Nancy said. "That's his real name. The receptionist will direct your call."

Brenda folded her arms and stood rooted to the ground. "I want you off my property."

"Okay, forget the keys. We appreciate your cooperation, ma'am."

Brenda led Nancy through the house, then along the breezeway to the front door.

"Well, I'll be off," Nancy said. "I've got your card and I'll email you that information."

Brenda didn't answer. She watched the woman march to the truck. The backside silhouette of the other officer showed he was in the passenger's seat.

Why wouldn't he be driving now? He'd been the driver before. Was he on his cell phone again? Hard to tell. Nancy reefed on the truck door against the wind. They drove away.

The storm broke and rain pelted the house roof like a drum roll. Brenda changed into her inspection attire, a navy blue blazer and color-matched stretch pants. She donned her waterproof jacket and slipped the special agents' business cards into her pocket.

On instinct, Brenda changed the security codes on her exterior door locks. She turned the house alarm on and exited to the attached garage. She drove away and the heavy rain pounded the top of her car. As the wipers moved back and forth, she debated about the Fish and Wildlife agents, and the arguments swished back and forth in her mind.

She should call their office. See if they really were special agents. But what if they were legitimate, and their supervisor asked her about the lapsed permit? She'd be in real trouble then.

Yet if they were thieves . . . There'd been so much theft on acreages recently . . .

Brenda pulled off to the side of the road, retrieved the business cards and called their

office. When the receptionist answered Brenda said, "I'd like to speak to John Little. I guess everyone there calls him 'Little John'."

"Ma'am, I've worked in this office for twelve years, and there's nobody here named John Little. Never has been. Have you dialed the wrong number?"

"Oh, I've got the right number. You should know that a man and a woman are posing as Fish and Wildlife agents. They're actually thieves casing out people's homes."

"That's interesting, because we had a truck stolen from our compound just last night. We'll look into this. The police may need to speak with you."

"Good. I'll be calling them now anyway." Brenda gave the receptionist her contact information and rang off. She glanced at the time. If she called the police now, she could be late for her medical appointment. But she still made the call to the county police station.

The desk officer promised to alert a nearby patrol car. They'd check out the neighborhood, and her house in particular, as part of their daily rounds.

Yet when their conversation ended anxiety still nagged her. She'd have to cancel her pet-safe home inspections for that afternoon and come straight home after her doctor's appointment.

*The sooner I get home the better.*

## CHAPTER 2

Tuesday, June 5, 1:38 PM

“When you look back upon your life, your triumphs despite your defeats, tell me what emotion stuck in your gut whenever you killed a man?”

Peter Truman's glare skewered Justin's eyes. “Is this a confessional?” he said in reply. “Then how did it feel when you shot and missed? A greenhorn could have made that shot.”

“When I missed Vespido? But our job was to take him alive. You wanted to waste him.”

“Or at least pistol-whip him.” Peter glanced through his study window at the black Ford Fusion that had just parked across the street from his bungalow in Washington DC. The tinted windows obscured the driver. Why didn't he get out of his car? Was he a watcher?

Peter's last kill was a lady about his daughter's age. Unresolved anguish from that event rose like the bile in his stomach that gave him heartburn. He pushed the memory under. “I don't know why I was so desperate to kill Vespido.”

“I do,” Justin said. “The Wasp evaded the FBI. He should be a smear on a windshield.”

“Why are you here? On a workday? It's not just to play checkers.”

“Because of sensitive information the National Security Agency received last night.”

“Someone tailed you here.” Peter jumped his checker over two of Justin’s pieces.

“Impossible. When I drove here I followed the standard protocol for evasive procedures. And the few who know about this info all have maximum security clearance.”

“See that parked black Focus? Driver’s been in his seat for ten minutes. Meaning—”

“That could be anybody. Maybe waiting to pick up someone. It’s been years since Vespido’s threat to kill you and your children. He’s likely forgotten about you by now.”

Peter shook his head. “Vespido *is* like a wasp—once he’s on to you, he never gives up. The Witness Protection Program saved my family. Your move. I wish you’d play chess.”

“You beat me every time at chess. Where’s the fun in that? Now I’m down at this game too. So what do you do in retirement with all your spare time? And when are you getting your air conditioning fixed?” He hung his Brooks Brothers jacket over his chair back, and wiped sweat from the hairline of his Afro taper fade haircut. “It’s freaking hot in here.”

“It’ll be repaired today. And I don’t have spare time. Since a web designer spiffed up my sites, both my detective and butterfly breeding businesses have picked up. Get to the point.”

“Your reputation at the FBI is legendary. We’d like you back for one last assignment. The new hires are as useless as blind cats trying to bury their turds on a frozen pond.”

“What makes you think I’d ever want to work for the Feds again? What’s the catch?”

Justin leaned close. “Vespido is headed to America. He could already be here.”

“Why’d he risk coming back onto American soil?”

“I can’t divulge squat until you’ve signed up. Do this for your country. You know more about Vespido than the combined intellect of our national intelligence agencies. We need you.”

“But I don’t need the stress. Crown my king.”

“You want to catch Vespido as much as we do. That six-inch scar on your chest gives you reason to hate him. You almost died. I still feel that I let you down.”

Peter shook his head. “I used to hate him, and it ate at me from the inside out. I had to release it to stay sane. Now I just want him to live . . . outside of my life.”

“Yet you’d have liked to have killed him.” Justin jumped his checker over Peter’s piece. “‘I love only what a person hath written with his blood.’ Nietzsche wrote that. It suits you.”

“Don’t blame yourself for what Vespido did at that screwed up shootout. I’ve moved past that. You should too . . . I snapped at you just now because you asked such a personal question.”

“Right. Now about our offer. You’ll be a free agent. It’ll just be part time.”

“The bureau is never part time. On assignment, it’s fourteen hours a day.”

“We’ll pay you triple your old salary.”

“I don’t need the money.” Peter scanned the street. Sharon should have arrived by now.

“C’mon, you need more action in your life, more intellectual stimulation. You’re going to seed. Shave off that goatee, trim those wild eyebrows, and get more exercise—”

“My eyebrows are sorry they offend you. My goatee says take a hike.”

“The President has asked you to serve your country.”

“He has?”

“In a manner of speaking. Vespido is as dangerous as Bin Laden was. The President wants the best men on the case. You’re the best of the best.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

“It’s a fact, not a compliment. Pete, you chased Vespido for nine long years before his threats forced you to retire and go into hiding—how long ago exactly?”

“Thirty-eight months.”

“Here’s a golden opportunity to take revenge and trap the bastard. He ruined your life.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Peter sighed. For decades he’d wasted time trying to reform people. Now he’d given up. “I don’t want revenge. I want to free from Vespida. You kill him.”

Justin cracked his fingers. “I know what’s up. You’re scared shitless of him.”

“Now you’ve really pissed me off. Listen up. I’ll shoot him as soon as I see his weapon.” Peter stood. “I don’t give a damn if Vespida murders me. I’ve lived a full life.” But Vespida’s threat to torture and kill his kids while he watched, bound and helpless . . . He leaned on the table to steady himself, steady his nerves. “You’ve used up your welcome. I’ll show you to the door.”

“Sit down,” Justin said. “They told me to try that line. Look, we’re in crisis mode here. The FBI’s number one most wanted criminal is probably now on American soil, right under our noses, and we can’t even trace him. Do you realize what’s at stake?”

“Yeah. My tranquility.” He sat and laid a hand on his colleague’s shoulder. “I’ve had it dealing with the political crap from the bureau. Never did fit in—wouldn’t play by the rules.”

“That’s an understatement. What can I do to make you change your mind?”

“So far you’ve bribed, bullied and insulted me. But you haven’t put forth any solid arguments that’d entice me. Give me one good reason why I should sign up.”

Justin gave him a hard stare. “Because you’re a man of integrity. Because you care about people and what could happen to them. And because late at night you’ll be haunted by the faces of those killed in Vespida’s attack, knowing you might have stopped it but didn’t.”

Peter rubbed his wedding band. The heat rash around it itched. He didn’t know why he still wore the ring—Mary had been dead over a year. If she were alive, she’d tell him to walk away, and he would. But now he was free to make up his own mind, free to confront and conquer his deepest fears. He knew this day would come. He slid the ring off his finger and pocketed it.

"You're right," he said. "I'd feel guilty about it." But before committing he needed to set his affairs in order. Mary was still in his will. And he should see his accountant, to solidify his plans for the transfer of his estate to his son and daughter should he die. About the kids . . . Their security could be compromised if he signed on. How would they react to that news?

"Great. We'll sign you up tomorrow."

"Here's the thing," Peter said. "My children ought to have a say. I need to discuss this with them first. And I have to see my lawyer and accountant. You'll have my answer in a week."

"But we need you *now*." Justin knelt on one knee, arms clasped. "I'm begging you."

Peter guffawed. "You know how ridiculous you look? You're not proposing to me. Get up. You see, my friend, that's what ticks me off about the bureau. You try to force me to decide in an instant. If I join the manhunt, what if Vespida finds out where I live, where my kids are?"

Justin sat and didn't answer. He arranged in stacks the checkers not in play.

"I figured as much. This is a huge decision for me and my children. I'm old enough now to live my life the way I want. So you can either cool your heels and do it my way, or beat it."

There was another reason Peter wouldn't sign on right away. He wanted those young FBI punks to stew in frustration when they tried without avail to find this master criminal. Then he'd step in to help. They'd resent an outsider butting in. He wanted to earn their respect. That's what a guy really craves. Maslow was right. To be esteemed ranks damned high on a man's needs.

The door to the black Ford Focus opened and his daughter Sharon stepped out. So the driver wasn't a perp who followed Justin after all. Why didn't she get out as soon as she parked?

"I will tell you this much," Peter said. "On some Middle Eastern chat lines over the dark web there's an obscure Internet presence that's risen from the chaos of the Syrian civil war. He's established a doomsday cult called the New Order of the Assassins."

“What are you thinking?”

“This cloaked Internet presence has the same speech pattern as Vespido's voice. Uses many of his telltale phrases. I'll bet this guy is Vespido. He's saying that suicide bombings are ineffective because the public is inured to them. That assassinating top political leaders aligned against their beliefs will change the world, will redefine history. Personally, I think he's wrong.”

“So we should increase the protection detail for the President?”

“And any other dignitaries he meets. Here comes my daughter. Time for you to leave.”

The doorbell rang. Peter walked his former colleague to the door. “Sharon, you remember Justin? Why are you driving that car? And why didn't you get out right away?”

“You silly goof. I texted you, said I bought a new car and I'd take you for a spin today. Remember? And after I parked I couldn't find my cell, even when I searched my whole purse. My phone had fallen under my seat. Then I *had* to answer my email and Facebook and everything else. Don't you check your text messages?”

“Sometimes.” Like never. What's wrong with people, don't they call anymore?

“Why are *you* here?” Sharon narrowed her eyes at Justin. She didn't shake his hand.

“This is your first visit since we've been in Witness Protection. What do you want from Dad?”

The silence became uncomfortable. “Don't call me,” Peter said to Justin. “I'll call you.” The two shook hands, and Justin left. “Let's go, Sharon.” Peter locked the front door. “Just so you know, I brushed him off.” They sauntered over to Sharon's car. “Where are you driving us?”

“It's a surprise.”

“What are you pulling on me? I hate surprises.”

“You'll enjoy this one. Trust me.”

“Coming from you, that sounds ominous.”



While Sharon drove Peter fended off her attempts to pry from him what Justin wanted.

“So here we are,” Sharon said.

“The Washington Humane Society. An animal shelter? Why do you want another cat?”

“Just come in. Humor me.”

“Right now I’m ready to bite a head off.”

“Save it for something more appetizing.” Sharon manhandled him inside and headed to the cat cages. She stopped by one. “Peter Octavius Truman, meet your new companion.”

He stared at the cat Sharon selected. The cat stared back and won the contest.

“Sharon, whenever you use my full name, you want your way. I don’t need a companion. Definitely not a cat—it’ll cause nothing but trouble. So this is your surprise? I’m out of here.”

“Don’t be silly.” She grabbed him as he turned and pulled him back. “You’ve moped around your house these fourteen months since Mom passed away. You need some company.”

He shook off her hands. “I already have fish and butterflies.”

“Don’t start on this again. Those creatures are not sentient beings. You need an intelligent animal to comfort you and be your friend. You can cuddle a cat.”

“Cuddle my ass. What kind of nonsense is that? And you know I’m sensitive to cat hair.” Peter folded his arms and drummed on them with his fingers.

“Don’t swear in public, it’s not polite. Besides, this is a low-shedding cat—the only one I’ve seen on their adoption website after four months of searching. Last night, it popped up. A male Bengal. What a *magnificent* animal. He’s covered in spots, just like a jaguar. I took time off work just for you, so be thankful. This is a marvelous opportunity.”

“Marvelous, hogwash. The cat is pathetically underweight. And I see burn marks through its fur. Obviously it’s been abused, so now it distrusts humans. I’m not impressed.”

“Then tell me, what the hell do you want?”

He frowned and shook his head. He let his shoulders slump and his chin fall to his chest. His voice changed to a soft lament. “When you lose someone you’ve loved more than yourself, things that once mattered don’t anymore. And after your mom passed, Rex died in my arms.”

“You adored your German shepherd. Why don’t you get a dog here? Lots of choices.”

“No, I like big dogs, and they often die within twelve years. I couldn’t bear to lose another. What’s wrong with me? My fervor is gone. I still care for you, but you’re right, I also need a friend. I wish I had your mom’s joy for life. She gave up everything for us and was cheerful about it. I was an idiot and discounted that—I was so wrapped up in my job. Now I’m stuck in purgatory—worse, I’m dying on the inside.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” She patted his arm. “The bond between you two was special. I love you too, but you need to focus on someone or something. Look at it this way. You know you can’t save the world—you can’t even save all these animals here.” She waved her arm about the room. “But you can show you do care by making a small sacrifice—open your heart and your home to this one scrawny and abused cat.”

Peter leaned his hand on the cage door, and his fingers grasped the grate. He sighed. “I haven’t owned a cat since you were a kid. I don’t even remember how to take care of one.”

“That’s why I’ve bought you some books on how to care for cats. Hey, look.”

He twisted his head and followed her gaze. The cat came forward and sniffed his finger. Then the cat licked it, with a tongue like sandpaper.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

“The cat likes you. Accept it as your fate. This was meant to be.”

Peter stuck his fingers into the cage. The cat rubbed his face on them and purred. It was certainly affectionate. He could use some companionship now. There was no one to talk to all day long at home. And he didn't get out much. But this was bad timing for bringing a cat into his house, when possibly he was about to sign on with the FBI. The cat would only be in the way.

"Will you babysit the cat at your house for me when I need to go away for detective assignments? It might be for a few days. Maybe even a week or two."

"We could work it out. I'm sure my cat will get along with this one handsomely."

Peter stroked his goatee. "Then I'll tell you what. I'll *consider* the possibility of taking this cat if you stop trying to hook me up with every single woman you know. And quit emailing me links to those damned Internet dating services."

"But you're only sixty-three, you've got your whole life ahead of you—"

"I mean it. People on dating sites lie about themselves all the time."

"I don't see why you don't even go on a single date—"

"Just stop, will you? Promise me this instant or I'll walk right out of here."

"Okay, I get it." She held up her palms. "I'll stop playing matchmaker."

"I'll hold you to your promise." He could find a woman on his own, thank you very much. Sharon dragged the last candidate—a chatterbox with a hyena's voice—right into his home. "If you try any more tricks I'll take this cat straight to your house and *you* can care for it."

"Peachy."

"You're asking me to make a big commitment. This cat could live twenty years. Will you look after it if I can't anymore?"

She opened her mouth, but didn't speak. "Absolutely," she said at last.

"All right then, I'll take the cat."

“Terrific!” Sharon hailed an attendant, who approached. “We’d like to adopt this cat.”

“Ah, good choice,” the attendant said. “We haven’t had a Bengal here for ages. Just came in yesterday.” He unlocked the cage, stroked the cat and drew him into his arms.

“What’s his name?” Peter asked.

“We’re not sure. He’s a rescue cat. Dropped off by the fire department. Some guy abused it. A professor, even.” The attendant shook his head. “It takes all kinds.”

“Then I’ll name him ‘Shrink’.”

“What an odd name.” Sharon took Shrink from the attendant and petted the cat. “Why is his cage padlocked when none of the other cages are?”

“Because this cat is a trickster,” the attendant said. “Refused to eat his kibble. Last night he escaped from his cage, unlatched the lunchroom door, and opened the fridge. He had food spread everywhere, and was having a picnic. That’s never happened here. Afterwards we had to give him the more expensive canned food just so he’d eat.”

The attendant paused. “Scientists say cats have the intellect of a two-year-old child. But I think your cat is even brainier. It’s uncanny. Shrink is not a normal cat.”