

Dejungled



amanda apparius
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“Elliot Tracy Stryker can have my babies any day.” Indigo said. She held the leash of her rosette-speckled ocelot, Anya Absurd. Sure, most New Yorkers had larger cats, but the three and a half foot long ocelot was the perfect size for Indigo Birch’s five and a half foot tall body. Comparably, Anya was lacking in girth whereas Indy seemed to expand at least a centimeter every day, but Anya didn’t care. In fact she enjoyed winding her way onto Indy’s lap to use the excess stomach flub as a pillow.

“Since when did you decide that Elliot would be your next obsession? He’s been around our group for a year now.” Calico, the best friend with better looks and a better cat, asked.

“He’s not an obsession,” Indigo said, but Cali gave the wrinkly, raised forehead. “Well he’s not yet. I always thought he was cute.”

“Yea, well who doesn’t?” Calico wrapped her acrylic fingernails tighter around the blinging leash of her sleek, sexy Persian Leopard.

Calico, as always, had the best of the best, the hottest of hot. The hot new trend of 2019 was to own a large cat. Not a fat, rolly house cat that looked like it had swallowed a cup of miracle grow, but a jungle cat (as they were referred to by the media even though not all of them came from the rainforest).

Like Cali, a New Yorker was most fashionable if they owned a Leopard (she had managed to have one shipped from a zoo in Armenia – an incredible feat of persuasion and flowing cash from her parent’s pharmaceutical pocket). High Schoolers like us typically preferred the spotted cats. The Cheetahs were reserved for the athletics and the Lion for the buff, gay men. The

least desirable carnivore to be seen leading down the street was the panther. Black was out, Manhattan wanted its spots, stripes, and wild manes.

Elliot Tracy Stryker owned a Mountain Lion. Pumas were manly but not flashy like the African Lions with their silky hair and flamboyant pride so it was perfectly okay that he owned one. Indy couldn't help shivering with nervous (sexual) tension at the thought of her and her friends' first stroll through Central Park with Hazel Eyed Juggernaut, Elliot's Mountain Lion.

Everyone had been there from Damien Moody, Indigo's acne cursed, Emo pant wearing grade school friend to Cali and her beloved boyfriend Blue in his overpriced Dolce & Gabbana tee-shirt and old man loafers. It was no different than their usual walks at the park, although this was before any of their parents' had bought them their own cats. Elliot had, of course, been the first to jump on the Jungle Trend.

That's when Indigo knew she didn't want to be Elliot's friend anymore. She wanted him to whisper Darcy speech in her ear and whisk her away to his parent's Union Square mansion above the Virgin Mobile store where they could steal iced drinks and sip them on the garden terrace while watching their cougar and ocelot curl into balls under the shade of a building top tree. Sex, of course, would follow on his leather couch shamelessly and ferociously as they would rip clothes and bite lips.

"Jesus Sadie, it's just a squirrel." Calico tugged on her cat's leash, "You'd think a damn rodent wouldn't even faze these guys anymore, but instead they start acting like slobbering, mindless pooches." Indy was silent in thoughts of Elliot lying na-

ked with fading fingernail scratches on his chest from their animalistic lovemaking. “Oh, quit it already.” Calico pinched Indy’s arm, “Seriously, what made you suddenly want Elliot like this?”

“Ever since he got Hazel...I just can’t get over how perfect he is.”

“What? Just because he has a cat like a hundred other people in this city?”

“Yes.” Indy said. What else brings out a boy’s qualities more than a stroll through Central Park with a mountain lion? Indy recalled Elliot’s forearm muscles twitching and tightening when Hazel had caught sight of a little girl whizzing by on a bicycle. What a great hunt that red flashing whirl must have presented to the cat’s deprived predatory senses. The girl’s braided blondie scent, like bakery brownie, had lingered in the air, teasing the Hazel’s taste buds. It takes a real man to control a cougar from leaping after that kind of snack. It would take that kind of man to control Indigo’s spaztastic life.

“There has to be a better reason than that.” Cali bent over her Leopard, Sleek Sneak Sadie, to adjust the pink-jeweled collar with its pear-cut diamond studs. It was essential, according to the Jungle Trend Frenzy (the newest fashion magazine on the stands), that every dejungled cat have a big name and an iced collar. Manhattan’s animal lovers had turned into nostalgic race-horse goers, fabricating names such as Catwalk Me to the Mall and Lawless Carnivore. Nicknames were crucial and for the most part the ridiculous word pairings were hardly ever mentioned and existed solely in 4.5 pt font on the silver nametags dangling from Coach or Gucci oversized, buckled collars. Cali owned one

of these and Indy used an old dog collar because she thought her ocelot was pretty enough without the extra glitter.

“It just took something domestic, like him buying Hazel, for me to realize how perfect of a hubby he would be,” Indigo said, “He plays piano, loves animals, is passionate about school, you know AP Chemistry is tough work, and he likes Greek food like I do, and we’ve talked sometimes and he always makes me laugh...” Indigo started shaking with zealous over-lusting. She had a normal everyday shake from her messed up nervous system and drug overloaded body (drugs taken for asthma, hyperhidrosis, and legume allergies), but this shaking was from pure imaginary excitement.

“You never talk to him when we’re all together. And how is his parent’s buying him a cat that hunts for meat highlighting his husband-like qualities?” Calico laughed and gave the don’t-do-this-again look. Don’t fall on your face in love with another guy that you know is too good for you. Cali never had to say it out loud, but it was in her thinned eyes and the way her hand twisted around Sadie’s leash in a frustrated punching motion.

“I do too talk to him, mostly texting, but still that counts. Besides this is how I like it to happen, friends first then dating.” Indigo often preferred to ignore her friend’s better judgment.

“I’ve heard that one before...Matt, Jason, Jasper...they were all friends who you suddenly realized were your soul mates and who then disappointed you.”

“Gee, thanks for the moral support, Cali.” Indigo winced, she, too, had tightened her grip and as a result the chain links of Anya’s leash had pinched the skin between her thumb and point-

er. She concentrated on the tiny red mark, acting preoccupied with the injury so as to avoid the You're-Unhealthily-Obsessed-with-Unavailable-Boys conversation.

They both took a seat on a bench overlooking the lake near the Belvedere Castle. Runners panted by, their skinny Cheetahs hauling at an unbearable pace causing heavy footsteps and uncomfortable breathing noises as ambient noise to their declining conversation.

“Sorry, I don’t know what Elliot thinks. I don’t talk to him much but Fawn does. I guess you could ask her or find out for yourself.” Indy knew this meant something more along the lines of Elliot is a good looking, desirable bachelor and you don’t stand a chance with your sweaty hands and fat rolls. Despite harshness, Calico was a good friend who always brought Indy back to reality. She never had to say things out loud, but Indy knew what she meant and sometimes that unspoken brutality prevented a lot of disasters. Problem was that Indy only heeded Cali ten percent of the time.

Anya was licking the small pinch mark on Indy’s hand. She looked down into the ocelot’s oversized green eyes and tapped her on her nose. “At least Anya loves me.” Indy said. Cali snorted something unintelligible as Indy unwrapped an old milk chocolate Easter egg and fed it to Anya. Her jaw pumped up and down, mashing the cocoa as she continued to nuzzle against Indy’s kankles.

Indy looked up to see Damien Moody and his brown Husky walking toward them. His acne had cleared a tiny bit since sophomore year, but he still wore those tight hipster jeans despite his

unmuscular body frame. She couldn't help wincing at how they silhouetted his twig legs to looking even twiggy. "She's a true female chocoholic isn't she?" Moody asked.

"Yea, I guess she is," Indy said, "But you know, Jungle Trend claims that cocoa is what jungle cats crave most aside from red meat." This bit of information had made Indy extremely excited for the fact that her crap job at Chunk O' Chips Ice Cream Parlor & Bakery could be put to use by thieving leftover holiday candies to bring home for Anya and herself.

"Well the editors of an urbanized city magazine must definitely know what's best for wild animals' diets." Damien made an awkward motion to sit on the bench, but Indy's body mass was taking up space for two and a half people, and although she was devoted to Moody's friendship, she didn't move to make room for him. She wanted to get back to the previous, definitely more interesting conversation.

"You going to the new bar tonight Damien?" Cali asked and then sideways glanced a smile at Indy. Cali was under the impression that good ol' Damien Moody was pining for Indy, but Indy knew that he was just a long time friend. She almost wanted to ask his opinion about Elliot, but then decided she didn't want to be pathetic to more than one person that day.

"I am attending, of course, how about you Indy?"

"Yea," Indy watched as Anya sniffed behind the ear of his Husky, Caramel, who in turn was attempting to rove around the ocelot's rear end.

"Great." Moody watched the two animals fondle a little longer and just as Indy was about to splurge her confession of

newfound love to him, he flicked his wrist good bye and said he'd see her later.

"I always liked him." Cali tantalized.

"Oh shove it." Indy stroked Anya's silky spots, silkworm hairs beneath her clammy fingers. Anya, the often hugged, overfed, silent listener was a pillar in Indy's life. She couldn't imagine losing her little ocelot. Everything from the little brown spot over her nose that looked like a coffee stain to the striped spots lining her golden back and the way she tilted her big ears toward every hint of noise, such as muffled crying into a pillow, made Indy love her from tail tip to pink nose.

Rumors were spreading about a new law against jungle cats. A lot of people rallied against the whole idea of wild animals "tamed" to city life, claimed it wasn't natural. Indy somewhat agreed, but she was too disconnected from all of that to care much except when there was the possibility of losing little Anya. The recent attack at the Canal Street Station was really stirring things up. A Bengal Tiger had tackled an old Asian woman who was carrying freshly wriggling fish home to her family. Despite this people were still ignoring the advice of the Animal Humane Society, PETA, RPDC (Rescue Patrol for Dejungled Carnivores) and the ASPCA. Hundreds of New Yorkers (and now even some Bostonians) were importing, trading, and buying big predatory cats for outrageous prices. No one wanted to listen to the liberal animal worshipping groups even though they were the knowledgeable ones when it came to carnivorous animals in unnatural environments.

Because of the excess news cover, Indy was becoming

worried about the growing number of Cat Attacks or what are crudely referred to as Pussy Pummels. That tiger attack had been caught on tape and replayed on the news countless times. Indy could picture the black and white form of the tiger being unsuccessfully led through the subway station by a short man. In jarred motion, it was caught crouching, leaping, and then jumping on top of the woman's shoulders. She had fallen to the concrete as though she had been propelled downward by the force of a moving semi, her limbs sprawling, her right leg spinning in the wrong direction and her slimy fish sliding out of their wrappings all the way to the edge of the platform and over into the pit of electric rails. Sometimes Indy felt as though she was going through that same experience of being thrashed by five hundred pounds of Halloween stripes, teeth, and claws. Elliot was a tiger tearing apart her brain, sinking its claws in forever, leading her in through that same pattern of hope and rejection.

"I don't know if I can do this again," Indy said after a long period of silence in Moody's wake, "I can't tell him how I feel and then get rejected again. How many times is it going to happen? Nothing ever works out for me." Indy enticed Anya to leap on to her lap and then proceeded to hug her, breathing in her musky, leafy smell.

"Things do work out for you." Calico offered a half smile and sympathetic eyes.

"That's a lie. I have no significant man in my life and I work at a Chunk O' Chips where I spend all day watching my apron expand outward with every bit of junk food I steal."

"Indy..."

“Yea, I know. I’m being a turd.”

“Tonight, do it. Ask him. Don’t wait around.”

“Do what?”

“Oh you know what I mean. We’re going to that new jungle bar, Tropical Tabby, right?”

“Yea?”

“Drink a little, loosen up, let your cats mingle, inch closer to him, dance...you know, seduce him.”

“You say that like it’s as easy as eating stolen cupcakes at work.”

Calico laughed, “It is, think about snatching Elliot as licking icing off your fingers.”

Indigo, back at her parent’s house in Williamsburg, slipped on her only black dress, tried to blot out the deodorant stains with a damp towel, and then decided to call Calico.

“What should I wear?” Her sweaty hands were slipping on the back of the plastic phone.

“What did you have in mind?” Cali asked, with that twinge of “not again” saturating her words.

“My black dress.”

“You always wear that.” Calico continued to criticize or approve pieces of clothing as Indy described them. A pile mounted on the bed, reminding Indy of how she was the only one who had ever thrown stripped clothes on her bed. Anya curled herself on top of the pile and Indy, defeated at the closet, went over to

stroke behind her ear. The ocelot purred.

“What about this pink zebra striped thing?” Indy pulled it out from beneath Anya’s vibrating body.

“Oh, I like that. Wear that.”

“I might be attacked though. Dressing as a zebra doesn’t seem like a smart idea when going to a bar specifically catered to people and their large zebra-eating cats.”

“Nah, I think you’ll be themed to fit. Besides, they don’t eat pink zebras, only white ones.”

“Right you are.” Indy laughed and proceeded to squiggle into the tight striped dress, feeling somewhat ridiculous until she buttoned a black sweater over her chubby chest crack.

Indigo wiped her sweaty hand on her dress hoping that there wouldn’t be wet streaks on her thighs from the excess perspiration. Apparently the two whopping pills of glycopyrrolate didn’t want to work. She sat on a metal leaf shaped bench in the entrance compartment of Tropical Tabby. The curve of the bench twisted her spine and made waiting for her friends a rather uncomfortable experience. The bar had several sitting areas and one large dance floor, all hung with fake vines, plastic oversized plants, and faux tree trunks. The place was flourishing with feline fashionistas. In one corner was a posse of white tigers, all of their owners wearing white dresses with black belts or white suits with black ties to match their snowy animals. Anya and Indy were far from matching and this made her nervous. Were they supposed

to come dressed like their cat?

Every time the door swung, Indy's eyes darted around the bar so that it looked like she was preoccupied with something other than waiting for Elliot Stryker. A gang of Jaguar owners came in with I heart Jaguar tattoos and torn leather ensembles. Anya, clearly threatened, hid in the darkness between Indy's ankles. Her glowing eyes were the only part of her visible to the incoming flow of Jungle Cat junkies.

Damien Moody was the first familiar face to walk through the door. He didn't have a cat and clearly thought it better if he didn't bring Caramel. A poor little Husky dog would look like desert to the current crowd.

"Hey Indy." He sat down next to her on the sloping leaf bench that caused him to unintentionally slide toward her. She immediately wanted him to get up from Elliot's potential seat.

"Hey Moody." He bent down to pet Anya.

She purred.

After nearly another half hour of talk about the recent Bengal Tiger attach with Damien, their friends walked in, feline royalty, with their diamond collared kitties. Elliot was wearing a tan shirt, slightly unbuttoned, his chest showing casually. His swagger matched that of his Mountain Lion and the combination of rolled up sleeves (Indy was starting to think she had a forearm fetish) and his puma's powerful prowl made her stare shamelessly.

"That looks amazing on you. Take off your sweater!" Cali held out her hand to Indy and she snapped out of her hypnosis. They all made their way to an unoccupied corner of the artificial

forest where there were Persian rugs, plush cushions, and menus written on large, gold threaded, fabric scrolls. A couple pounds of meat as well as a couple gallons of Sangria were ordered for the over-thirsting pride of friends. Cali, her boyfriend Lionel Blue, Damien Moody, Elliot, Fawn Neary, and a couple of Fawn's man-hungry friends lounged in the stuffy circle of cat-hair covered seating.

"This place is nice," Moody stroked Anya behind her left ear, just where she liked it.

"Yea," Indy said.

"Do it now, ask him to dance," Cali whispered in her ear. Indy's immediate reaction was no, but then she kept looking at him talking to Fawn in her sleek black dress. Her and her friends' panthers blended in with the hem of her skirt, creating the illusion that she was wearing a couple large pairs of blinking eyes. Indy stared them down. She was up against a black goddess and her night posse when it came to courting Elliot Tracy Stryker.

Cali kept poking Indy's side, her finger sinking into a soft layer of chub with each repetition and therefore reminding Indy that she wasn't nearly as attractive as the slinky girls across the way. "Do it now or never, you can't wait around," Cali said. But waiting is what Indy did best. She had waited a year for Kyle Cup to figure out that they were perfect together and when she finally gave in and made a move on him (a text that said "I have feelings for you") her hope and blissful imaginings ended in one SMS full of rejection. Pathetic. Maybe it would be better to do it now, get rejected before the obsession really started, but then again, waiting was safer.

Hazel gave a low growl as Anya and Indy approached the pack of Panthers and Elliot sided by her school's very own thin, beautiful Jordan High seniors. She stood awkward for a moment before squeezing her way into a seat next to him, trying not to flash everyone in the process.

He didn't say anything.

"Hey Elliot." Indy leaked nervousness from her palms.

"Oh hey Indigo, how are you?" He twinkled, "We were just talking about this place, kind of a drag isn't it?" Indy thought that the gold gilded garden club inside of this building was anything but a drag. Before she could even respond he had already turned back toward the out of style, yet still sexy, Panther girls.

Indy felt her dress tighten considerably against her sweater-covered chest as she bent to pet Hazel. The Puma, overwhelmed by the fat pink striped thing attempting to touch him let out a fierce roar that caused Cali and Blue to stop making out and the Panther girls to pause with their glasses of Sangria halfway to their mouths.

"S-Sorry about that." Indy tried to laugh but then tiny Anya ripped a growl greater than her lungs should be able to manage and took a step forward. Indy tugged back on the old dog collar but nothing she could do could prevent Hazel from standing, crouching down, and slinking toward the ocelot. "Er, Elliot, I think..." But the Puma's slack rein and Indy's untimely inability to speak clearly resulted in a quick combination of leaps, growls, flesh tearing, and throat clinging. Little Anya had somewhat of an advantage as she yanked the leash from Indy's hand and leapt on the back of the snarling tan cat. Hazel whipped

his head around, grabbed her ankle and with a crack Anya was on the floor, the paw skewed in a new direction. Soon the Panthers were getting restless and the girls with their meatless arms couldn't hold on and a massive black pile of teeth and slashing began to tumble around the jungle themed club, picking up new fighters along the way including one of the white tigers who was stained with blood less than two seconds in.

“Shit.” Elliot looked at Indy for the first time all night.

“Oh...” She was trying, with all willpower, not to cry as she crouched over Anya's injured body.

The Rescue Patrol for Dejungled Carnivores pulled up in their black trailers. The big green letters in a loud sans serif, RPDC, were emblazed in Indy's mind as they drove away with a bandaged Anya, foaming Hazel, and a couple of the Panthers. Indy wanted to chuck her heels at the back of the thieving truck and then run after it down Sixth Avenue past the Red Meat Boutiques and Bagel Cafés until her legs would carry her no more, but instead Damien Moody was at her side. In fact he was holding her up. She stepped away.

“Thanks Moody. You seen Elliot?” Her voice sounded meek after the loud rips and roars of the fight. He would be looking for his Puma right? Couldn't they chase the van down together and save their cats from being deported by the RPDC? Indy tried to imagine them caging Anya in the cargo of a small plane and shipping her to a wild jungle where she would be forced into its overwhelming giant green depths. Her little spotted paws wouldn't last on the rooted, twigged floor of wilderness. Concrete

and blacktop were her home.

“He left already, took a cab,” Moody spoke to her, not offhand like Elliot had with his Onyx groupies behind him in the club.

“Oh.” So much for the rescue run, she thought.

“Was he your ride home? I can take you back to your place,” Moody placed his hand back on Indy’s shoulder and slid it down the length of her arm. Her hairs stood on end as Anya’s often did when she was petted. Indy wanted to slink up against him like a wounded feline and ask for an ear scratch, but he wasn’t Elliot. Elliot was who she wanted, wasn’t he? But why? He had hardly looked in her direction all night, not until after the disaster anyway. But Moody was Moody, that friend who she would always associate with the awkward, childish stage of grade school. Indy stepped away again.

“I usually take the subway. I can manage on my own.”

“Indy, it’s late and you just had Anya taken from you. Can I at least go find Cali and ask her to make sure you get home okay?”

“I’m not drunk or anything.” Indy wiped her hands down the front of her dress. Wet marks were inevitably left behind.

“I know, it’s just that you look so miserable, I want you to be safe.” He stepped forward.

“I look miserable? Thanks a lot.” Indy felt like crumpling onto the pavement, but her old self pulled through, the one that falsely resurrected her heart. Maybe Elliot would call and ask about her tomorrow. This could be the connection for them to really talk one on one instead of with their friends hanging around.

“I’ll be fine Moody.”

Indy headed down Sixth, leaving her friend a silhouette beneath the blinking sign, “Tropical Tabby”.

She walked down the smelly stairway to the subway station and waited on the Brooklyn bound side of the platform. Her train approached, a steel elephant stampeding toward her with a big yellow circle and the black letter “L” plastered on its forehead. She sat down and immediately became obsessed with watching an old, slightly whitened Leopard, lying between the legs of a woman reading Emma. The Leopard’s eyes were lolling open and shut with each jolt of the subway car, lazy and content, unharmed. On the other end of the train sat a pair of teenage boys spoiling their pointy-eared Lynx with pieces of Ferrero Rocher chocolates. They had just untied a platter of a dozen gold balls and were continuously unwrapping one at a time, biting it in half and then feeding the rest to their Lynx. Anya loved those things, but she was broken legged and confiscated to some unknown location and Indy was left with nothing but a slip of paper guaranteeing information when it could be provided. Indy was alone and the abundance of cat love was depressing her.

Indy slinked out of her pink zebra outfit, whipped it at the floor like a wet towel, shoved the pile of clothes from her bed and lay down with a pint of Double Chip ice cream sprinkled with chili powder. She wanted to be fat. Why not? Elliot didn’t notice

her anyway. He was into Fawn and her inky, out of style, Panther gang. The phone rang.

“Indy, you okay? Moody wanted me to check on you. Said you were a little out of it, in shock or something.” Cali’s voice was dragging, drunk but intelligent.

“I’m fine.”

“You want me to come over? I’m sorry about Anya. I should come over.”

“No, no, it’s okay, really. Go home with Blue, I’m sure you two are ready to crash.”

“But you need someone Indy, I know you. You’re tearing yourself up.”

Indy looked down into the soupy mess of ice cream and spice at the bottom of her carton. Yes, she was tearing herself up. “I’ll be okay, we’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Promise? I feel really bad. I’m the one who told you to go over there.” This was Cali’s less intelligent drunk side, spilling out senseless feelings that she usually contained within her perfect, straight-A head.

“Cali, it’s really okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

But the next day came and she was sure she wouldn’t see who she wanted to see. Not Anya, not Cali who was most likely going to sleep until three hung-over on her day off, not Elliot by far, and not even Fawn so that she could beat her skinny ass for being a stealing skank.

Moody knocked on the door at noon carrying a tray of four coffees.

“But there’s only two of us.” Indy sipped through the plastic mouth hole.

“Yea,” He shrugged.

“And?”

“I like a lot of coffee, that’s all.”

“Uh huh.” Indy gave him a pursed lip look, but then she remembered the instance, way back when, at Lamplight Café. Moody and Indy had spent nine and a half hours on the modern red lounge chairs behind the central fireplace “studying” for astronomy. High School was brand new and exciting and the prospect that coffee would sustain you had convinced them both to order two at once. They dumped their first cup scalding down their throats, counting on an immediate reaction of caffeinated energy, and then continued to sip on the second for hours until more than five different couples had sat in the chairs next to them. Studying had dwindled with each hour as they talked about stupid things like whether or not they wanted dandelions growing in their lawns when they got older.

Finally a smile spread Indy’s lips apart and she laughed.

“So you remember?”

“Yes, I do. Is that your plan for today? Sit useless for hours until night creeps up on us?”

“No, I thought we might chug the first and then take the second to go. I want to drive you to the RPDC center. It’s out a ways uptown, near that horse park.”

“You are a god right now,” Indy said to be nice, but as the

words came out of her mouth, she felt they might be true.

“Let’s go then,” He laughed, unlidded his coffee, and slurped until there was nothing left but a creamy froth on his lip. Indy did the same, pausing halfway through to laugh at his white mustache and then continuing until she saw the grainy bottom of her cup. As they were leaving her apartment, she hesitated near the phone. It’s red plastic spoke to her, reminding her that Elliot might call, but she had that coffee in her gut and it was warming her and the prospect of seeing Anya was far more of a draw than the sound of Elliot’s voice.

“I’m parked over on First Avenue, didn’t feel like driving across the bridge.” Moody explained as they made their way through the Sunday Brunching crowd on Bedford Avenue. There was a long line outside of Molly’s Meat Mart. An illustration of a raw red cow decorated the vintage wooden sign above the shop. It was a hole-in-the-wall butcher’s block, but it carried the freshest meat and the most variety in seasonings. They even had a powder that would make the bloody twenty-dollar steaks taste like they were drenched in roasted Alfredo sauce. Indy hesitated near the end of the line. “You coming?” Moody stopped.

“Yea, I just...” Indy, surprised at her own weakness, breathed deep to hold back a shaking cry. “I would buy something for Anya. I never come here because it’s so expensive, but I want to get her something special. But then I thought, what if she’s gone already?”

“They can’t do that, I promise.” Damien grabbed her sweaty hand and they hurried to the L where a small girl and her mother were huddled over a baby Cheetah, feeding it from

a bottle and then they walked to Moody's car where they passed a college student on a bench sharing ice cream with his Snow Leopard. Indy was thankful for the cat-less car ride. Moody weaved his way through Manhattan as Indy kept repeating how lucky it was that he had a car. Taxis didn't usually accept cats unless you paid an extra, extravagant fare.

The Rescue Patrol for Dejungled Cats had a large, spaceship-esque oval building in the middle of a paved pasture. Next-door was North Fork Stables, the horse-riding facility that specialized in trail rides through Central Park. Indy thought for a moment that their location seemed unfortunate. If a cat were to get loose a horse would definitely be going down as an entrée.

Indy and Moody approached the windowless building, avoided the countless black vehicles poised for an animal capture in the surrounding parking lot, and entered through the front doors. Metal rafters were visible up above and the ground was dirt littered with animal droppings that had been missed during clean up. The only obvious place to go was a counter where there were nails to be avoided in the unfinished wood. Indy smacked the little silver bell a little too hard and a few growls echoed from unknown locations within the dome.

A woman, dressed in a blue jumpsuit, walked to the counter from the black depths of the arena. Indy assumed there were cages upon cages in the shadows. She couldn't see quite far enough to determine what exactly lie on the floor ahead, but she did recognize one thing.

"Elliot."

"What?" Damien looked around, but he didn't have to look

for long. Stryker was walking out of those shadows behind the jumpsuit woman.

“Can I help you?”

“What are you doing here?” Something Indy didn’t recognize was tightening her throat and bounding her muscles into an uncomfortable strain. She practically spat at Elliot over the woman’s shoulder.

“I came for Hazel.” He said.

“By yourself?”

“Yea, why?”

“Because you weren’t the only one to lose your cat last night, what about Anya?” Damien butted in and Indy wished he would let her have at it. Things were happening to her body that made her want to scratch Elliot in a very non-sexual, yet excessively ferocious way.

“I knew Indigo would get here on her own.” Elliot shrugged.

“Oh really?” Indy’s stomach dropped. Why hadn’t he called her to make sure? And then to make matters even worse, Fawn, still wearing her black dress from the night before, emerged from the ambiguous depths of RPDC with a cloud of dust trailing her high-heeled feet as though she were a desert goddess.

“Oh Indy, I’m so glad you made it out here. We weren’t sure you’d be able to.” Elliot shot a meaningful look over his shoulder and Fawn shrugged. Who did he think he was, lying like that?

“So why didn’t you guys call her before coming all the

way out here?” It was Damien again, and Indy was glad this time because a feeling of heat was overwhelming her vocal chords. A sudden desire to see Anya and get home as soon as possible came over her.

“I came for my ocelot,” Indy turned to the woman behind the desk, “She was picked up last night on Sixth and Twelfth.” Indy brandished her crumpled piece of paper that the jumpsuit men had given her before taking Anya.

“I’m afraid we haven’t investigated her case yet. When there is dangerous activity, as witnessed last night by our team members, we have the right to detain your animal until we are certain that the safety of the cat and yourself are guaranteed on her return home.” She scribbled a signature on two different forms then handed one each to Elliot and Fawn, “Your animals will be waiting outside.” This was spoken in a softer voice as if it wasn’t meant for anyone else’s ears.

“Wait,” Indy watched as Elliot and Fawn headed for the exit, “You...you already had time to investigate their cats? How is that possible?” Indy pointed her finger at them, the flub of her arm waved in the wake of her vigorous action.

No response. Had she not spoken loud enough? Indy turned to Damien for help, but he was jogging lightly toward the exit and for a brief minute Indy thought he was leaving her but that assumption could not have been more wrong. She watched as Damien caught up and stood directly in front of Elliot, blocking him from the entrance. Indy thought she saw Fawn’s mouth moving in question, but sound was muffled by the sudden culmination of all that heat in Indy’s body as she watched Damien’s

fist land in Elliot's beautifully chiseled cheekbone.

Indy was waiting for Elliot, with his muscled forearms, to react in a punch that would knock Damien straight to the floor, but instead he lifted his hand to his jaw and watched the stream of crimson running from between his pearly whites. Fawn had stopped all movement completely and was staring at Indy as if she expected an attack from her, too.

"Sir! Get out of the way..." The jumpsuit woman was now sprinting past Indy and she understood why within the next three seconds.

00:01 : Indy saw a flash of black and orange in a whirlwind of spiraling stripes and pumping hind legs.

00:02 : She heard the echo of a guttural growl, low, but hungering with a carnal need for fresh meat as the form of a galloping cat became focused in her peripheral vision.

00:03 : Indy watched as the bodily mass of a 600 pound Bengal Tiger pummeled toward Elliot and Damien at the same time as the 130 pound jumpsuit woman ran and flailed her arms in useless exertion.

Indy watched as the brawn of the Tiger, sliding in stride beneath a heavy coat of black stripes, pounced with paws like knifed baseball mitts. He landed, a carnivorous bulk of male predator, on top of Elliot's beige sweater and ripped off his ear in one swoop of vigorously, biting, teeth. Just then a loaded needle punctured the Tiger and jumpsuit men were running from every direction. The blood coming from Elliot's skull would have been like a glassful of sweet rum for every animal under that roof.

The heat had left Indy's body and instead she found her

hands coated in dust from the dirt floor. Damien was by her side. Voices were echoing loudly in the dome. Sirens were outside. The tiger was removed to a heavily padlocked cage outside. The blood was left pooling, wafting in delicious waves of air toward the noses of countless cats in the shadows of RPDC.

“He caught wind of that tiny bit of blood.”

“Some of these cat’s haven’t had raw meat in days.”

“We were just leading him to the exercise pen.”

Sentences. Some made sense, but most passed through Indy’s mind without much thought. Elliot Tracy Stryker would be earless.

“Where is Elliot?” Indy heard her voice and her eyes began to focus on reality again. They were in Damien’s car.

“They took him to the Emergency Room.” Damien looked ghastly.

“What’s wrong, will he be okay?”

“I did this,” he said, “If I would have just held it in...I made him bleed. I didn’t really want him to bleed. I just wanted to get back at him for you. He was treating you like dirt...I didn’t mean to make him bleed.”

“Damien,” Indy said, “It’s not your fault.”

“That sucks.” Cali, foregoing any need to be eloquent, sat next to Indy on her bed three days after the incident.

“Yea.” Indy sighed, “I feel bad for Damien.”

“I look at Damien with a new light now, I didn’t know he

had it in him.” Cali polished off her pinky nail with a second layer of pink paint. Sadi lay on the floor, panting and following Indy’s rotating fan with her head. The television was on. They had just finished watching a news clip about the RPDC Tiger Attack. It turned out that it was the same one that had attacked the fish lady in the subway. Indy was painting her nails black. Any other color felt too cheerful.

“I have to go into work soon,” Indy said.

“I’ll come with, I want some ice cream.”

“I need some ice cream. Particularly two scoops of Double Chocolate with Dark Mocha Chip.”

“You’re really addicted aren’t you?” Cali asked as she twisted the nail polish shut.

“I can’t help it. Chocolate reminds me of Anya.” Indy accidentally let the large blob of black polish on her brush spill onto the skin of her middle finger as she pictured her little ocelot licking mocha from her whiskered lips. Instead Anya was still at the spaceship building being held until further notice, whenever that might be.

“That’s so stupid. Anya is a tiny little thing. She’s the one who got attacked at the club.”

“Yea, I know.” Indy tried wiping the paint off her skin. It smeared an ugly mess onto her chubby finger.

“Well you mentioned that Elliot and Fawn were getting their cats back before...well before anything happened. How is that possible?”

“Elliot’s gorgeous and schmoozy? I have no idea. Anyway, Fawn was still wearing her outfit from the night before.”

“Oh,” Cali made a sad face, “If you don’t see it now, I have to tell you. Elliot Stryker is an asshole.”

“Yes, thank you. I know,” Indy said. Elliot had failed her. He had lied. He had slept with another girl who had no redeeming qualities except her jean size. He failed her ideals, her fantasies, and her hopes of a ridiculously perfect scenario of falling in love while walking jungle cats beneath the willow trees and moonlight of Central Park. Indy knew for sure that she would rather have Anya nuzzled into her stomach fat than the prospect of Elliot Tracy Stryker being her true love.