

# Dazzled

By Judith Marie Austin

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To my husband, Ross, for his unending support;  
to my twin sister, Linda, for being with me every step of the way;  
and to my beloved niece, Lindsey, for her kick in my butt.

## PROLOGUE

An icy stare pierced the back of his head. He tensed, breath caught in his throat. Someone was watching him. His pulse quickened, racing with the pounding beat.

Drawing a deep breath, he quelled the urge to turn and scan the packed nightclub. Scores of people stood three and four deep at the bar. Crowded tables were crammed so closely together, servers could scarcely maneuver. The eager brunette at his elbow would have to wait.

“I’m so sorry. I wish I could get to know you better.” He smiled and shrugged. “A previous appointment.”

He caught the bartender's eye and passed him a hundred dollar bill. “This ought to cover it, Nick. Oh, and this lovely lady’s drink too.” He nodded, smiling at the brunette, and wove his way through the crowd.

Outside, the air was crisp and cold. Stepping to the curb, he climbed into the waiting car.

The Mercedes S-Class Sedan sped north up Michigan Avenue, his driver weaving in and out of traffic that was sporadic at one o’clock in the morning. In the back seat, he pulled up the latest edition of the *Chicago Tribune* on his iPad, clicking on the Main News section.

Scanning the headlines, the byline beneath the first credited Dan Dreisen. The second read Sam Haskins. The third byline hit pay dirt: Bill Fisher. His eyes flew to the picture and locked on the credit. “*Tribune* photo by Lindsey Morrison.”

The formula was holding. It had to be a partnership.

He leaned back and smiled slowly. A woman. His smile broadened. Lindsey. Lindsey Morrison.

## ONE

The odor surged out even before I slid inside the taxi. Pine. Chemical pine. Nauseating pine. All from three reeking cardboard pine trees swinging from the cabby's rear view mirror. I rolled my eyes and got in anyway. This was miles away from being the biggest mistake I'd made today.

No, the biggest mistake I'd made today was turning down a cup of coffee with the man still standing on the curb in the falling snow.

With five-star effort, I refused to stare out the rear window. I would have kicked myself, but I knew it was futile. My frozen legs were numb. "The Tribune Tower," I directed the driver through chattering teeth. Eying his turban, I hoped he spoke English. "On Michigan Avenue just north of the river," I added.

"Yes, miss." Twisting the wheel and slamming his foot to the floor, he drove us careening through the slushy streets of Chicago's Chinatown that, at eight-twenty in the evening during a blizzard, were nearly empty. His radio jabbered an indecipherable language that might have been Farsi or even Pashto for all I knew.

I pushed my camera and backpack across a seat held together with silver duct tape and leaned back trying to ignore the pine stench. All in all, it had been a truly rotten day. I was going to check in at the office, download the photos on my SD Card and go home. And once my legs thawed out, I was going to kick myself. Hard.

I couldn't believe I'd turned him down. Okay, it wouldn't have been a real date, but it would have been a move in the right direction. God knew I hadn't had a real date in... No, I couldn't remember that far back.

Not that I'm unattractive. Okay, I'm not drop dead gorgeous either, but I can hold my own if you're partial to pale blondes with dark brown eyes. Dressed up with a little eye shadow, mascara, lip gloss, the right clothes, the right shoes, I can turn a man's head.

The problem is, stiletto heels can be a real pain in the ass when you're halfway up a lamppost looking for the best angle.

See I'm a shooter, a photographer, for the *Chicago Tribune*. Which is fine for paying the rent; lousy for a social life. My looks aren't the issue. A love life takes time. Lots of time.

I didn't have any time.

By devoting every waking hour to the job, I'd managed to get promoted to the daily city desk in a little over four years. Close to a record at the *Trib*. All it took was a lot of pushing, a lot of shoving and a lot of tough high profile work that got noticed by all the right people.

I live for international news, my passion, but the system said I had to work through city and national first. Not easy for someone as impatient as I was. A shooter's job consists mainly of waiting. And waiting. And waiting.

Take today. I'd spent all morning in a stuffy overheated room at City Hall waiting with forty other media people for the mayor to show up for yet another press conference on his still-in-limbo city budget. And the mayor was late. Very late. What's worse, my editor had assigned Sam Haskins as the writer on the story.

Of all the writers on the main news desk, Haskins was the scummiest. For a morning press conference, the city always put out bagels and coffee to feed the hungry lions. I could count on Haskins to make a beeline to the free food every time. "Hey, Morrison," he'd yelled from clear across the room, "I'll betcha the mayor's more than forty-five minutes late. I win, we go to my place. You win, you get to tie me up."

It turned out, the mayor was over two hours late because he was holed up in a private meeting with the FBI.

Then we heard from the mayor that undercover agents had tracked a shipment of three tiger skins, 12 leopard skins, 110 kilograms of tiger and leopard bone, 36 tiger claws, 181 leopard claws, two leopard teeth and one tiger penis to the Shu Wah Natural Health Center in Chicago's Chinatown. And that was only part of the story: A live tiger had been found on the premises.

That was the makings of my afternoon. And evening. Sam exited early to go back to the office to crank out yet another city budget story only Norm, our editor, cared about. I spent the rest of the day at the Shu Wah Natural Health Center.

Around three in the afternoon Bill Fisher had joined me, his gaping overcoat pockets stuffed with a couple of still warm, squashed, corned beef sandwiches. Bill didn't like to miss lunch, and he didn't like his shooters to miss lunch either. Truth be told, Bill drank too much, smoked too much and seriously didn't care about fat counts, cholesterol, lung cancer or calories, but Bill was a good friend and a great colleague.

Assigned to the Chinatown tiger story, Bill spent the rest of the afternoon and evening interviewing everybody and anybody he could get his notepad next to. And I waited.

About six o'clock it had started to snow. The kind of snow you get at Chicago's lakefront, the thick, dense, can't-see-two-feet-in-front-of-your-face kind. Within half an hour there was an inch of feathery white on the ground, and it was still coming down.

Not two hours later, five inches were piled up, and it was coming down even harder. Bill and I were circling the outside of the Shu Wah Natural Health Center trying to keep our circulation going. I couldn't have been any colder or wetter if you'd pushed me into Lake Michigan. Even my ponytail was an icicle.

I'd taken hundreds of pics, but I hadn't gotten the shot I needed: The tiger. There'd been no go-ahead, no approval, no permissive nod. No one was even talking about photos of the tiger. I hadn't even seen the tiger.

We were about the only media people left, and I figured Bill was only staying because he felt guilty about leaving me alone. It certainly wasn't because he thought he was going to get some big scoop when and if Shu Wah ever appeared. Shu Wah was probably in Nicaragua by now, and if he wasn't, he was a fool.

About eight o'clock I saw three men in overcoats coming out the front door. Bill was trying to remember a joke that didn't sound very promising, and I interrupted. "Heads up." I gave him a quick elbow jab. "Who's that?"

Bill glanced up. "Feds."

I brought the camera to my face, focusing quickly. As the three men strode toward us, Bill took a step forward. "Bill Fisher, Chicago Tribune. Can you comment on the condition of the tiger?"

Head down, the guy in the middle growled, "No."

"Can we get photos of the tiger now?" I asked.

The man on the right looked up and motioned inside the store. "Ask the Director. Tall guy, black hair."

Inside the tiny store was a shambles, elbow-to-elbow crowded. At least two dozen men wearing plastic gloves were taking what looked like every bottle, box and bag in the miniscule shop. Odd smells, musty and pungent, filled the stale air. Carts and baskets filled with confiscated goods lined the only two aisles.

A guy inside the front door extended an arm, stopping us. "Who are you?"

Bill showed him his press card. "*Chicago Tribune.*"

"Don't touch anything," the guy warned.

A group of men stood in the back of the store where another door was propped open. Snow was blowing in. Surreptitiously clicking shots, I could see one guy had a long white lab coat under his unbuttoned overcoat. Another grasped a brown leather bag, a stethoscope slung around his neck. A tall black-haired man was talking earnestly with them both, his breath an erratic cloud in the cold air.

"That the guy?" I asked Bill, nodding toward the back.

Bill's eyes were focused on the group. "Yeah. You go around the side. I'll get the permission."

"Right."

Moving quietly, I slipped through the crowd of people and peered out the open door, squinting against the huge snowflakes blowing in my face.

A heavy metal cage, not large, maybe fourteen feet by eighteen nearly filled the entire outside enclosure. A tiger lay on his side in the cage, motionless. I wasn't sure the tiger was alive until I saw the thin puff of white as he exhaled.

The big cat was emaciated, bones visible even under the snow. His eyes were closed, all four paws bloody and misshapen. Big patches of fur were missing. He looked ragged, skeletal. Near death.

I raised the camera to my face and shot a dozen or more pics. Cautiously I stepped out the door and down two steps.

"*What the hell are you doing?*" a deep authoritative voice thundered.

I looked to the top of the steps. Fierce black eyes glared at me. Startled, it took a moment to realize he was the FBI director, his mouth compressed into a hostile scowl. "Taking a few photos. Lindsey Morrison, *Chicago Tribune.*" I smiled my most winning smile.

"Give me that camera," he demanded, thrusting out his hand. "No pictures of the tiger."

"I put everything on an SD Card," I said quickly.

"Then give me the damn SD Card!" he ordered.

"Give him the card," Bill said from behind the director. "Sorry, Lindsey." Disappointment etched his face.

"What about freedom of the press?" I demanded. "What about---"

"With guys like this, you have to pick your fights carefully," Bill said softly.

"But---"

Bill stepped out from behind the director and stared into my eyes. "This isn't a fight you want," he said. "Give it up."

Turning to the director, I tried one more time. "This is a significant story. This could be Page One."

The black eyes narrowed. "I said, 'No pictures.' That poor bastard has suffered enough. He's not going to spend his last few minutes posing for pathetic pictures to sell your damn newspaper. Get out of here."

Frozen, fumbling a little, I pulled the SD Card from the camera and dropped it into his hand.

Turning for one last look at the tiger, I could see he hadn't moved. I could barely see the puffs of breath. The heavy snow had buried the tiger's coat, hiding the orange and black stripes in a blanket of white.

“Can’t you at least move him somewhere warmer?” I asked. I took a deep breath and bit my lip. “Or drape something over the cage?” That was better.

“We are doing everything possible for the welfare of the cat which includes *not* using him as a promotional item for the *Chicago Tribune*.” Still scowling, the FBI director took my arm, yanking me up the short flight of steps.

His hand gripping my elbow, I felt my head swirling in the pull of that furious black gaze.

“Sir,” Bill started, “if I could just get a brief comment on...”

The Director shifted his eyes to Bill. “Go,” he said, his voice low. “No photos and no interviews. You’re finished here.”

\* \* \*

Back on the street, Bill heaved a big sigh and stuck his hands into his pockets. “Well, that’s it. Somewhere in this town there’s a double Jack Daniels calling my name. Wanna join me?”

I frowned. “What about the tiger? What are they going to do with him?”

Bill shrugged. “Don’t know. The guy with the lab coat, you saw him?”

I nodded in a sudden flurry of snow, struggling to see through the white flakes clinging to my eyelashes.

“He’s the big cat vet from Brookfield Zoo, and the other guy, he’s from Lincoln Park Zoo. They’ll figure out what to do.”

“He didn’t look very good to me,” I said.

Bill shrugged again. “He’s not good. One of the vets told me his blood count’s so low, it’s practically off the scale.”

I could feel my eyes narrow. “Why?”

“Tiger blood is a primary ingredient in some of the ‘natural health’ medicines Shu Wah was selling. People come from all over the country to get it. All over the world. Shu Wah figured if he could keep the tiger alive, he’d have an endless supply.”

“Of tiger blood?” I was aghast.

“And fur and claws, bones and organs. It’s a lucrative business. Very lucrative. The body parts of one tiger alone are worth over a hundred thousand bucks on the black market.”

Snow was cold on top of my head, but I didn’t care anymore. “So they were selling off bits and pieces of this *live* tiger? For how long?”

“That’s what I’m gonna find out, but not here, not now. These folks are done talking.” Bill raked a bare hand over his head, sweeping off a layer of snow. “Hey, that Jack Daniels is still yellin’ my name. You joining me or not?”

“I’m going home to a hot bath.”

“How about I join you?” Bill wriggled his bushy ice-coated eyebrows up and down.

I brushed the melting snow off my face and tried to smile. “Thanks, but no.”

Bill gave up good-naturedly. “Okay, kiddo. See you in the morning.”

I watched him shuffle down the sidewalk, kicking through the mounds of snow. By the time Bill got to the corner, I couldn’t see him through the snow anymore. I could hear him though, whistling a barely recognizable rendition of “It’s Beginning To Look A Lot Like Christmas.” More upset about the tiger than I wanted to admit, I waited until I couldn’t hear him anymore either, and then I started looking for a cab.

Of course, you can't get a cab in Chicago if the weather is crappy. You can only get a cab if it's seventy-five degrees, sunny, with a light breeze, and you'd really rather be walking. Then you can get dozens of cabs.

This was about as far from sunny and seventy-five degrees as you could get so it didn't surprise me there weren't any cabs.

Scanning the nearly empty street, less than a dozen cars on the road and even fewer people on the sidewalk, I stood for a minute in the snow, thinking about the two blocks of ice encasing my feet. My beat-up gym shoes were soaked and standing there in the slush, they weren't getting any drier. A big drop of water ran down my forehead and rolled off my nose, melted snow from the top of my head. Jeez, it was cold. Where were all the damn cabs?

I swung around sharply, already stepping out, thinking I'd head over to Wentworth Avenue and walked right into the most incredible man I'd ever seen. Tall, broad-shouldered, impeccably dressed. Knocked off balance, he grabbed me, and I grabbed him, and we were face-to-face, and he was smiling this great big gorgeous smile. Then I realized my mouth was open. And I was gaping at him. So I closed it. With a snap. And his smile widened into a grin.

"I'm terribly sorry," I mumbled out of a mouth that wasn't quite working.

"My fault," he offered smoothly, although clearly it hadn't been. I let go and started to pull away, but he was holding onto my arms, and he didn't let go. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked. What a voice. Low, but not too deep. Sexy. And wonderful diction. He pronounced it "shore" instead of the Midwestern "sher." Unfortunately I was "shore."

"I'm fine, thank you."

He let go, but stood there eying me up and down. I flushed, the heat rising from my throat flooding all the way to the tip of my dripping ponytail as I thought about my bedraggled appearance. Shifting nervously from one foot to the other, my dirty gray jogging shoes squished noisily, and my face grew hotter.

"You look frozen," he finally said.

"I am, a bit," I admitted, conscious of more melted snow running down my nose. "I was looking for a cab."

"That's not going to be easy tonight," he said.

It was difficult to tell in the streetlights and snow, but it appeared he had heart-stopping dark blue eyes and dark blonde hair, streaked, that was supposed to be brushed to one side, but kind of swept over his forehead. And a faint suntan that looked real.

He was dressed in a beautifully tailored black leather jacket with a black and gray plaid scarf draped around his neck, what looked like six hundred dollar jeans, and what had to be Tom Ford boots. A memorable spicy masculine scent hung in the air between us. "Let me buy you a cup of coffee," he said. "I'll call you a cab and in the meantime, you can warm up. It's the least I can do after practically knocking you down."

"But you didn't--"

"Nonsense." He took my arm, soggy jacket and all. "I insist."

I don't know why I hesitated.

But I did. And in that moment of indecision, I heard the horn blaring and tearing my eyes away, I saw the Checker cab barreling down the street. Years of reflex action threw my arm up. The driver slid over in a high fan spray of frozen brown slush.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "I really have to get back to my office."

His eyebrows rose. "Office?"

Obviously I didn't look the office type. "*Chicago Tribune*. I'm a shooter, ah, photographer," I said, holding up my camera. Sloshing through the mound of snow at the curb, I pulled open the taxi's creaking door. "Thanks for the offer anyway," I added, looking back at him, feeling awkward.

He was smiling again, amused, as his eyes shifted to my feet. "Are you going to tell me your name or do I wait for you to drop a wet sneaker?"

Cinderella on her worst day had never looked as bad as I knew I did. "Lindsey," I blurted. "Lindsey Morrison."

He held out a hand. "Michael Albright, and I sincerely hope we run into one another again."

I tentatively placed my icy hand in his, expecting a handshake. Instead he smiled and gazed into my eyes, closing both of his hands around my cold hand, smiling and holding my hand in his warm clasp for... forever it seemed.

Okay, I was charmed. Who wouldn't be? But after twenty-nine years, I was also a realist. This was not some small town where a chance encounter could turn into a pre-destined romance. With 2.7 million people, Chicago is classified a BIG city. I knew I'd never see him again.

\* \* \*

Pushing through the revolving door at the Tribune Tower, my shoes squish-squashing on the marble floor, I nodded toward the security guard. "Hey, Tony."

"Miz Morrison." Tony grinned. "Kinda late for you, isn't it?"

"Yep," I said. "I'm just downloading some pics. Anybody up on nine?" The ninth floor held, among other things, the tiny cubicle they called my office.

Tony smiled easily, his gleaming white teeth a contrast against mocha-colored skin. "Chester an' the rest in layout," he said. "An' Tommy Layko and a couple second shift guys."

Chester, his nighttime crew and the second shift shooters were supposed to be there. Tommy was a daytime shooter like me. He was new, and maybe that explained his dedication. Wet and frozen to the point of visibly shaking, I was beginning to seriously wonder what explained mine. "Okay, thanks."

I punched the "UP" button at the bank of elevators and waited, staring at the ornate antique doors, thinking about Michael Albright.

On nine, once I turned off the carpeted hall and into the layout department, my soggy sneakers made obscene sucking noises on the linoleum floor. Chester heard me coming.

"Still snowin' out there?" he asked. He didn't bother commenting on my appearance. Truth was, Chester had seen me looking worse. "What have you got?"

"Pics for Bill Fisher's Chinatown tiger story."

"Give me the card, and I'll get them to Fisher in case he's looking for them tonight."

I dug into my backpack with icy fingers and handed him the SD Card of photos I'd shot after the FBI guy had taken my first card. Exterior store scenes, close-ups of products. That was about it.

"Anything good?" Chester asked.

I grimaced and shook my head. "FBI confiscated the good stuff."

Chester's eyebrows rose toward his hairline. "FBI?"

"Cranky, pissed off FBI," I said, focusing on the clock on the far wall. Eight-fifty.

"Go home," Chester said, "before you catch pneumonia." He was downloading the pics off my SD Card into his computer.

“I’m just going to check my voicemail.”

\* \* \*

As expected, the red message light on my phone was blinking hysterically. I punched the code for message retrieval and waited. Predictably the first was from Sam Haskins. I fast-forwarded over his raving. The second was from Teddy Senko.

“Lindsey, darling,” purred the receiver. “Barry and I are hauling out boxes of Christmas stuff and feeling festive so we’re doing something special for dinner tonight and thought you might like to come. Don’t say no. It’ll be *tres casual*, just come as you are. Around eight o’clock. ‘Bye!’”

Teddy’s “bye” ringing in my ears, I looked at my watch. Eight fifty-five. Well, it hadn’t been my day.

Barry and Teddy were my best friends. They lived down the block in a great old Gothic brownstone. Barry was a banker, very high up with National Boulevard. Teddy was a creative VP for Foote, Cone & Belding Advertising. They were both gourmet cooks. When they said “something special for dinner,” it was special. My stomach growled painfully. The corned beef sandwich was long gone.

Well, I should at least acknowledge the invitation.

Barry answered on the second ring. “Lindsey, where are you?”

“I just got back to the office and wanted to thank you for the invita---”

“How soon can you get here?” Barry demanded.

“About ten minutes, but I---”

“Ted’s just putting out dinner now. I’ll have him hold off.”

“But---”

“No buts,” Barry said firmly, “except your butt. Get it over here.”

“I’m a wreck,” I protested. “I’m so wet and frozen, once I thaw out, I’ll be dripping all over.”

“I’ll meet you at the door with a towel.”

“But---”

“Two towels. *Bath* towels.”

My stomach growled again. “Okay, you win.”

“I always do.” Barry was immensely pleased with himself. “Hurry.”

## TWO

It was close to midnight when I curled up in bed, closing my eyes, willing myself to sleep.

Must be the caffeine in Teddy's *chocolat pots du crème*, I thought twenty minutes later, still wide awake.

Flipping over, I scowled. What the hell was Michael Albright doing out in the middle of a blizzard anyway? Well, he was probably looking for a cab, too. I closed my eyes and sighed. And there I was looking just like the "Wreck of the Hesperus." Why did this stuff only happen to me?

I raised the hand he'd held so long to my nose to see if I could detect his cologne. All I could smell was the sandalwood scent from Barry and Teddy's guest bathroom soap.

Really annoyed now, I tucked my hand under the comforter and turned over. Again.

I'd put my love life on the back burner when I'd moved to Chicago four years ago. Grimacing in the dark, I shook my head. Who was I kidding? My love life wasn't even on the stove. My career was what mattered. My future. World recognition as an award-winning photographer.

Oh, if Teddy and Barry dragged me to a movie, old *bete noir* classics were my favorite, I'd look at the love scenes, and think, damn, I wish that would happen to me.

Love and fate and destiny.

But it wasn't something I really thought would happen to me. I didn't have the time for it. Or the energy.

I flipped over again. Go to sleep!

\* \* \*

It was a slow morning. I'd gone out early for a rush hour stabbing on the Lake Street elevated train platform, come back from the "el" station around eight, downloaded the pics and was still at my desk at nine waiting for the next assignment. Paperwork wasn't my favorite pastime. I was bored figuring out yesterday's time sheet, trying to ignore the headache that told me I hadn't gotten enough sleep.

Yawning, I entered eight and a half hours for the Chinatown tiger story on the computer keyboard and watched the total for the day appear. Fourteen hours. What a life.

I was concentrating on not thinking about the tiger when I heard Bill Fisher. "Hey, Morrison." Bill's gravelly voice carried from the doorway across rows of mostly empty workspace cubicles. "Let's hit it."

I grabbed my backpack. Stuffing a couple SD Cards into a zipper pocket, I ran, dodging partitions, to catch him at the elevators.

"Where're we going?" I stepped into the lift.

"Division and State," Bill said. "You know that four-story structure that's been standing there with nothing being done to it in a month?" I nodded as we strode in unison across the Tribune Tower lobby. "Well, it seems the contractor got a permit for a three-story concrete foundation..." We pushed through the revolving door and stepped outside. "But he started putting up four stories of steel. He's got a well-placed brother-in-law and figured nobody would notice."

I stopped dead on the sidewalk, still wet and slushy from yesterday's snow, staring at Bill. That was it? That was the story? That was hardly worth an Honorable Mention on page 63.

Bill kept going, flailing his arm for a taxi. A Yellow cab pulled over, and Bill climbed in, leaving the door open. I walked over slowly, my feet dragging on the concrete sidewalk.

“Trust me,” Bill said, tugging my sleeve to get me into the cab. “I’ll make it a story worth reading. Besides…” He tilted his head at the Tribune Tower. “You were as claustrophobic in there as I was.”

\* \* \*

The steel structure was already rusted. Horizontal girders were piled high with new snow. For safety, the construction company had moved the pedestrian sidewalk, putting up a covered plywood barrier on State Street. Tattered handbills and graffiti covered the temporary walkway.

We walked around the site. It was obvious the building hadn’t been worked on in weeks. Two heavy rusted locks hung on the chain link gate.

I scanned it carefully, darted across Rush Street and up Division to get a larger view and then jogged back. Bill was making a snowball with his bare hands, packing the wet snow tightly. “I could do the typical long shot from across the street, up the block in front of Butch’s.” I pointed to the famous singles bar halfway up the next block. “But I’d rather shoot it closer and get the sidewalk barrier with the graffiti. Maybe you can use the sidewalk safety issue.”

Bill threw his snowball at the steel structure, nailing a crossbeam. The snowball hit right on target, splattering evenly. “Take ‘em both,” he said, kicking a lamppost to knock the slush off his shoes. “I don’t know what hook I’m gonna use yet.” He turned his coat collar up against the bitter wind screaming down Division Street from the lake.

I clicked a couple dozen pics up close, then trotted up Division to get the long shots. Bill had moved to the northeast corner, his chin buried in his collar, hands deep in his pockets. I ran across the street, kicking up slush, dodging a CTA bus to join him. “Anything else?”

“Yeah.” Bill’s eyes were shining. “We’re in the neighborhood. Let’s pay a call on the big cat vet at Lincoln Park Zoo.”

\* \* \*

His name was Blum. Dr. Joshua Blum.

“I don’t have time for this today,” Blum said brusquely, staring at Bill over a carelessly stacked desk.

“We don’t need much time. I’m just looking for some background information for a follow-up story on the tiger found in Chinatown yesterday. How many tigers are still alive in the wild?” Bill asked calmly. “Rough numbers,” he added. He hadn’t taken out his omnipresent pad and pen for notes. I was sure it was a calculated move to convince the good doctor we really weren’t going to take much of his time.

Blum ran a hand through thinning gray hair. “Conservative sources are putting it at 3,200.”

“What’s happening to them?” Bill asked.

Blum sighed heavily. “Habitat destruction is part of it. Their once vast domain in Asia has been converted for human use which makes it unhuntable. For a solitary and intensely territorial carnivore like the tiger, the loss of land is devastating.”

I could see the wheels spinning in Bill’s head. “What about poaching?” he asked.

“That’s the other major contributing factor in the demise of the tiger.” Blum’s eyes burned. “The problem is, the poachers aren’t just killing the tigers. They’re killing the tiger’s

prey, and hungry cats won't reproduce. The big cats left in the wild aren't producing any more cats. When the last few tigers in the wild are gone, that's it. There won't be any more."

"Can we win this fight?" Bill asked, watching the doctor's eyes.

"Only if we can catalyze local interest. All the international wildlife organizations are already fighting the cause and losing. If we could bring it down to the local level, then maybe we could win. The only way to save tigers is to make them worth more alive than dead."

"If all the international wildlife organizations are already fighting the good fight, how are the poached tigers still being distributed?" Bill had his pad and pen out now, was scribbling.

"Dealing in endangered animals and animal parts has become as corrupt and profitable as drug trafficking. Only a miniscule percentage of import and export shipments are ever examined." Blum sighed again. "Regrettably, it isn't difficult to get past the minimal controls and short-handed staffs."

"What do you know about the Shu Wah Natural Health Center?" Bill asked quietly.

Blum leaned back and eyed Bill thoughtfully. "If you're asking specifically about Shu Wah's, nothing. If you're asking in general about those types of businesses, plenty."

Bill nodded, silently urging Blum to continue.

Blum sighed again. "The world is full of millions of people who want instant cures for whatever ails them." He swung his eyes around to meet mine. "And I'm not just talking about impotence or fountain of youth remedies. I'm talking about arthritis, rheumatism, cancer and AIDS. Muscular dystrophy, Parkinson's, diabetes and Alzheimer's. These are people who've already tried FDA-tested drugs, they failed, and they're looking for a miracle."

Dr. Blum stood and pulled on an overcoat. "The more exotic, the more expensive, the better. I've got to make some rounds. If you have more questions, I suggest you come along." He circled the desk, heading for the door.

I grabbed my backpack as Bill shoved the pad and pen into his pocket.

Outside, Blum hadn't gotten three feet when he hissed, "Oh, for Christ sake!"

Startled, I glanced around. "What is it?"

Eyes narrowed, Blum pointed to a young woman about thirty feet away with two small boys in tow. "Why do people wear fur coats to a zoo?" he demanded.

"It could be fake fur," Bill said reasonably.

I stared at the coat, at the luxurious lynx fur rushing in waves against the bitterly cold wind and shook my head. It was real.

"I've devoted my life to keeping animals alive, and women like that think nothing of parading around in dead animal skins." Blum turned on me, furious. "Don't ever wear a fur coat to a zoo!"

"I prefer live animals," I said.

\* \* \*

"Did you get everything you wanted?" I asked Bill as we were leaving.

Bill shrugged. "For the most part. After we calmed him down. Blum's a little rabid on the fur coat issue."

I shot him a sidelong glance. "So what's next? A trip out to Brookfield Zoo so we can talk to the other vet?"

"Lunch first," Bill growled. He stamped his feet to kick off the wet slush. "I'm freezin' my ass. Let's grab a burger at P.J. Clarke's."

"You buying?" I settled the camera strap on my shoulder.

“If that’s the only way I can talk you into it.”

“It’s not the only way,” I admitted, “but it’s the best way.”

Bill planted a hand on my back and gave me a shove. “Get going.”

\* \* \*

It was a little early at P.J.’s, just a couple of businessmen in suits at the bar with their ties draped over their shoulders, but the grill was fired up and the aroma of browning onions was tempting and thick.

I shrugged my jacket off and slung it over the back of a chair at a table facing State Street. “This okay?”

Bill nodded, hanging a ratty overcoat that had seen better days on a hook by the door. He was rubbing his cold hands together as he sat down across from me.

A waiter wearing a spotless white apron sauntered over. “Can I get you anything to drink?” he asked, laying a small green order pad and a stubby pencil on the table.

“I’ll have a beer,” Bill said. “Michelob on tap?”

“Yes, sir.”

Bill nodded and looked to me.

“Coffee,” I said. “With cream.”

“I’ll be right back,” the waiter said, moving toward the bar.

Bill picked up the order pad and tore off a couple sheets. He scribbled quickly for a minute. I tried to read what he was writing, but it must have been some kind of personal shorthand. Squinting, I frowned. It could have been about the tiger. Or the steel hulk on the corner. Could have been a love letter. Or a grocery list.

Bill stuffed the notes into the pocket of his old navy blue blazer. “Do you know what you want?” he asked, pencil posed over the order pad.

“Just a burger,” I said. “Cheeseburger with cheddar.”

“Medium?”

“Right.”

“They’ve got great beef barley soup.”

I glanced outside to the frozen street. “Okay, a cup of soup, too.”

Bill wrote the order down somewhat more legibly than his previous notes and added his. He handed it to the waiter who was returning with the beer and coffee.

Taking a long swallow, Bill ran his tongue across his upper lip as he set the frosted mug on the red and white checkered tablecloth.

“You got home all right then?” I asked, referring to the night before.

“Eventually,” Bill said, screwing his mouth a little to one side. Evidently he’d had more than one double Jack Daniels. Maybe he’d been bothered by the tiger too. His light blue eyes were tinged with a rim of red.

He was reaching for his beer again when I caught sight of three men hurrying by the window. One of them was talking animatedly. A blond man in a gray overcoat. It was Michael Albright. Surprised, I swiveled on the chair, my gaze following him down the sidewalk.

As though he could feel my eyes, Michael pulled up short, turning to look back. It took the other two men another four steps to realize their companion had stopped. I could see Michael mouth the words, “I’ll catch up with you,” as he started back to P.J.’s.

\* \* \*

Unbuttoning his coat, Michael strode to our table. "Hello again, Lindsey Morrison." His dark blue eyes were warm and sparkling, his wide smile disarmingly open. In a replay of the night before, I couldn't find my voice.

Michael's thick honey-blond hair was tousled from the wind, his cheeks slightly pinker than they would have been had it not been so terribly cold. The gray cashmere coat was over a charcoal gray suit with a matching gray silk shirt and striped tie in shades of gray. His gleaming black shoes were unspotted by any trace of slush.

Conscious effort finally untied my tongue. "Michael Albright, isn't it?" I asked. Never having been coy in my entire life, I don't know why I was choosing to start now. I knew it was Michael Albright. I'd spent most of the night chiseling his face into my memory.

I smiled slightly and held out a hand, realizing I was still a mess. Groggy and cranky, that morning I'd pulled on old baggy pants and a stretched-out, covered-with-fuzz-balls sweater. After the walk through the snowy park, the same beat-up sneakers were still dirty, wet and worn. I sighed softly, knowing I would have chosen the same attire even if I'd been wide awake and perky. Clothes had never been a top priority with me.

Michael was holding my hand, and I blushed, conscious of the heat rising in my face. Pulling my hand away, I indicated Bill. "This is Bill Fisher. We work together. Bill, Michael Albright."

Bill took a long swallow of beer. "How do," he drawled, his eyes flickering to me as he gripped Michael's hand in a perfunctory shake.

"Pleased to meet you," Michael said, still charming. "So you work for the *Chicago Tribune* as well?"

"Bill's a writer," I said hastily. Bill was scowling. What was that all about?

"And you're a photographer, ah, shooter," Michael corrected himself. He rested a hand possessively on top of the table.

"You remembered." I couldn't believe I was saying this stuff.

"Perhaps you'll take my picture sometime," Michael said. The invitation in his voice was unmistakable. Disconcerted, I thought it might just be my imagination. Please don't let Bill get started I silently begged The Powers That Be.

It didn't work. "Next time you do something newsworthy, we'll work it in. Do you have a best side?" Boy, was Bill sarcastic.

Pausing, Michael gave Bill a thorough once-over. "If I do, I'm sure Lindsey will find it," he said smoothly. Turning to me, he smiled. "I'm glad we keep running into one another. I hope we'll meet again."

Please don't let him hold my hand in front of Bill, I prayed. Instead Michael gave my hand a gentle squeeze and released it, his eyes lingering on mine. I could feel the heated flush again.

Michael started to button his overcoat. "Nice meeting you," he said to Bill.

"Likewise." Bill lifted his half-empty beer mug and tipped it toward Michael in a mock salute.

Then Michael was gone, disappearing out the door, striding past the window and moving down the street. I couldn't help staring through the window after him.

Bill interrupted my reverie. "When did you meet Albright?" There was a definite edge to his voice.

I turned from the window to find hostile eyes staring at me. Pretending indifference, I shrugged and looked away to the black man in an orange and black Chicago Bears jacket taking a seat at the bar. “Last night right after you left. I turned around to hail a cab and walked right into him.”

“You might want to stay away from him.” There was a warning in Bill’s voice.

Surprised, I swiveled around. “Why?”

“Nothing in particular.” Bill dodged the question. “You just always see him with the wrong people.”

“What kind of ‘wrong people’?” I asked.

“Suspected *Mafioso*, drug lords, crooked aldermen. He knows a lot of people. Has a lot of connections. Most of them aren’t good.”

“What does he do?”

“Retired a couple years ago with a bundle from the Board of Trade. Now he’s supposed to be a financial consultant. You never see him in the spotlight; just the people he hangs with. All the wrong ones,” Bill repeated.

The waiter arrived with our soup and burgers, and Bill dug in. Much more slowly I picked up my sandwich. “Is he married?” I mumbled into the burger.

I could feel Bill staring at me just before he erupted into guffaws of laughter. “Michael Albright? You gotta be kiddin’. With all the dames he’s got hangin’ around, why would he wanna get married?”

I refused to look up, and Bill stopped laughing. “Look, Lindsey,” he finally said, “I’m not kiddin’. The guy’s nothin’ but trouble.”

I chalked it off to jealousy. It didn’t take a Pulitzer Prize to figure out Bill was hung up on me. I knew it. I’d known it for months, practically ever since I’d been on the city news desk.

At forty-seven, Bill had been with the *Trib* for over twenty years. He was as senior as a guy could get. In fact, he would have been promoted to international news a long time ago, except he didn’t want it. He turned it down. Bill just plain loved Chicago and loved Chicago news. He loved Chicagoans. And Bill hated corruption in a city where it ran rampant.

When Bill said he was going to get to the bottom of the Chinatown tiger story, you could believe him. He was good, damn good. The steel hulk on the corner was going to be a day at the beach. A born investigative reporter, Bill would pry and dig until he got everything out in the open, then he’d weave the story and make you want to read it. Bill had more awards than all the other Main News reporters put together. I don’t think it meant anything to him. What mattered was the truth. That was all that mattered.

And there were times when I felt attracted to Bill. His mind anyway. He was smart, and he could get to the heart of an issue like nobody else. And Bill commanded respect. I admired that. I admired it greatly.

But Bill was married. For the third time.

So I ignored the *innuendoes* and laughed off the obvious come-ons and declined the invitations for a drink or dinner. Bill and I were good friends, and I wanted to keep it that way. I could learn from Bill, I cherished his friendship, and it wasn’t hurting my career either. Bill got the lion’s share of the high profile stories which meant I got the lion’s share of the high profile stories when Bill picked me as his shooter.

But there was more to it than that for him. Take yesterday. Bill didn’t have to spend all night standing in the snow. He could have been tracking any other lead on the same story and

gotten further, but Bill knew I had to get a shot of the tiger, and he didn't want me catching a sniffle all alone.

So you could call his attitude romantic jealousy. Or you could call it paternal protection. Or you could just say Bill was trying to be a good friend.

Unfortunately, I didn't care what you called it. I knew what I wanted, and Bill Fisher's warning notwithstanding, it came wrapped in a gray cashmere overcoat.

## THREE

The *Trib's* morgue didn't hold dead bodies. It held dead stories - filed, cross-filed and crisscross-filed. For finding information, it was better than any library, even the inestimable Chicago Public. And two weeks later I was feeling all too *simpatico* with Eve and her apple tempted beyond any semblance of self-control to discover everything it could offer on the subject of the all-too-charming Michael Albright. All it would take was one call to my pal Marty.

Marty and I went way back to when the *Trib* had hired me four years ago.

My starting editor had suggested I do a little research to get warmed up to what the *Trib* expected for its paycheck. So one night, quite late, I'd wrapped up my last assignment and headed for the fourth floor most of which was devoted to the monstrous morgue.

There I was, it had to be pushing ten o'clock at night, thumbing through index card after index card in a row of antique wooden index files that stretched the entire length of the building. I'd picked the subject of Police Chief Kamsleyak, looking for something, anything, to test my knowledge of filing systems and numbering codes and how to find something from a set of eleven numbers and six letters. It was laughable. I couldn't begin to make heads or tails of the system. Did I feel stupid.

"Can I help you with something?" The rather high-pitched nasal question had come from a very thin, extremely suspicious young man wearing headlamp-sized eyeglasses. His *Trib* photo ID card clipped to his shirt pocket right below the pen-filled pocket protector had identified him as Martin Tevlensky, Librarian.

I'd indicated my official ID card - Lindsey Morrison, Photographer - and smiled, hoping to charm him into helping me. Gesturing to the pulled-out card drawer, I'd said, "I'm looking for anything we might have in the files on the new Chief of Police, but I don't think I'm looking in the right place."

His reply had been short and terse. "You're not."

So much for charm. "Maybe you could help me," I'd suggested, keeping the smile. "I'm new with the *Trib*, and my editor..."

"Who's your editor?" Martin had interrupted.

"Stan Denny, why?"

"I didn't get any paperwork on it."

What paperwork? Nobody had said anything to me about paperwork. What was Tevlensky talking about? A permission slip?

I'd indicated the mile-long index file. "The last thing you need is more paper, Marty. May I call you Marty?" I'd ignored the scowl. "So I'm guessing you're just having fun with the new kid, and that's okay. To tell you the truth, I expect it, but let's cut to the part where the fat lady sings, shall we? Denny sent me here because he wants everything you've got on Police Chief Kamsleyak, and he wanted it half an hour ago. Now I can go back empty-handed, but that's going to look as bad for you as it does for me."

I'd stared into Tevlensky's eyes behind the thick eyeglasses. "Because when Denny gets done roaring and pounding his fist, he's going to ask me why I didn't just ask for help. And I'm going to tell him I did ask for help, but you were having so much fun pulling my leg you couldn't be bothered with his petty little deadline."

The magic word: Deadline. There wasn't any word in the English language that parted the waters around the *Trib* better than "Deadline."

"You'd better have him call me direct." The non-believer had started to walk away.

“Wait!” I’d said.

Marty had turned around.

I’d smiled again. A huge smile. “I’m running out of time here, Marty.” I’d made a big show of checking my watch. “I’ve only got ten minutes, and Denny’s going to have my head. Can’t you tell me how the card system works? I’ll figure it out from there.”

Marty had taken another step. “No.”

No? “Okay, joke’s over. Look, you’ve got a job to do, and I’ve got a job to do. My job includes finding a file on Kamsleyak. Your job includes helping me find it.” I’d yanked out a drawer. “Now are you going to find him in here or not?”

Martin Tevlensky had smiled a highly amused smile and shaken his head. “Nope,” he’d said, walking away. He’d gone six feet and stopped, looking back. “You coming?”

“Not until I find Kamsleyak.” I’d planted my feet.

“You’re not gonna find him in there.” Marty had started walking again.

I’d slammed the card drawer shut. “Then what drawer am I going to find him in?”

“You’re not gonna find him in any drawer.” Tevlensky had kept walking. I’d seen his scrawny shoulders shaking with silent laughter. “We don’t use the card files anymore. They’re just for the tourist tours. Everything’s been on computer for years.”

\* \* \*

Five minutes later sitting in front of a computer monitor Marty had navigated his way through an impossibly complex program to every story ever printed on Kamsleyak. What’s more, he’d printed off the last six stories and given me page layouts of exactly where the stories appeared in the *Trib* on the days they ran.

“Well, that’s it for the last two weeks. Did you wanna go back further?” Marty had looked up from the computer monitor.

“No, this ought to cover it. For Denny, I mean,” I’d added quickly.

Marty had still been punching computer keys. “See, if Kamsleyak was a big shot, it’d take a lot longer to pull everything up, but he’s pretty small potatoes even if he is the new Police Chief.”

“So they file an eReplica, a page-by-page digital version of every edition, every day?” I’d asked, staring over Marty’s shoulder.

“Yep.” Marty had been busy closing down the search.

Marty never gave me a hard time after that. I guess his act didn’t come with an encore. Over the years we even became reasonably good friends. Well, as much as Marty was friends with anybody. So I knew if I just picked up the telephone, he’d pluck any Michael Albright stories from that incredible computer stash in no time. Providing, of course, there was a Michael Albright story.

After literally days of toying with the possibility, I decided I’d just go online myself. No point in getting Marty involved. If there was any information about Michael, it would be online.

I swung around to my computer, pulled up Google and typed his name. Hundreds of articles popped up. Michael Albright was a popular name. Authors, doctors, chemists, attorneys, motorcycle stunt guys. Then I found a photo of the Michael I was looking for. Double-clicking on it brought up a story on bond fraud. *Bond fraud?*

Maybe I needed Marty after all!

Gazing over Marty’s shoulder three minutes later, I skimmed one of the five follow-up *Trib* articles quickly. The bond fraud, supposedly masterminded by Michael, had caused him to

be arrested three years ago. Two stories later I read that he'd been released on bail. Reading the last story, I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the charges had been dropped.

Scanning more *Trib* articles on Michael, I didn't find anything that looked even vaguely suspicious. What I did find were dozens of stories about Michael's philanthropic efforts with the homeless and the disadvantaged.

Why a man like that would be interested in me was perplexing and seemed totally incongruous. We couldn't be more different. We couldn't have less in common.

Depressed, I pulled on my jacket, turned out my cubicle lights and headed for the elevator.

\* \* \*

Although it was late, I walked home. It's not far to my apartment from the Trib Tower, about ten blocks. Straight up Michigan Avenue, keep going when it turns into Lake Shore Drive, turn left onto Schiller to Dearborn. Takes half an hour if you're really hauling. Forty-five minutes if you're doing more thinking than walking. I was thinking.

Maybe it was time to do something about my non-existent love life. Okay, maybe not with Michael Albright. God knows, he wasn't calling me, and I didn't know where to call him. Not that I would have. Well, maybe I would have. That wasn't the point. Did I want my life all complicated and confused? It was easy now, simple and easy. My job. The *Trib*. Awards. Glory. Recognition.

Christmas makes Chicago one of the most beautiful cities in the world especially if it's night-time and snowing. Michigan Avenue was lighted from south of the river up past The Drake Hotel with billions of tiny white lights hand-strung on dozens of winter-bare trees. Snow was floating in the air, swirling gently.

Couples were strolling, pausing on street corners, sharing kisses before the "Walk/Don't Walk" signs changed. Dads were holding up little kids to the vignette window displays in the Macy's Water Tower store to see the elaborate scenes.

And I was feeling sorry for myself. A career is one thing, but a camera's not much comfort on a cold winter night. I pulled my collar up and stuck my hands in my pockets. The sidewalks were slushy, once again my sneakers were soaked, and now I was even more depressed.

The wind picked up north of The Drake so I cut in a block and walked up to State Street passing the structural skeleton I'd shot not that long ago. Recalling Bill's negative comments, my curiosity about Michael Albright came back as strong as ever. I hadn't seen anything online that would lead me to believe what Bill had said. Well, except the alleged bond fraud, and those charges had been dropped. Clearly Bill was wrong, and Michael hadn't been involved in any bond fraud.

Making my way down the snow-slick sidewalks of North State Parkway past the historic homes of Chicago's Gold Coast, I could see inside to the lighted rooms. Every house was decorated for the holidays with Christmas trees and *menorahs*, pine boughs and wreaths, blue lights and white lights and fantasies of many colored lights.

There was no Christmas finery in my plain little shoebox of an apartment. No Christmas tree. No wreath. No lights. No candles. I promised myself I'd get a tree this weekend and haul up the Christmas decorations from their dusty home in my basement storage locker. Maybe I'd plan a simple dinner party, something I couldn't possibly screw up. I'd invite Bill and his wife, and Chester and his wife, and Teddy and Barry to pay back for Thanksgiving dinner the week before.

They always invited at least a dozen people to Thanksgiving dinner, strays like me, who had nowhere else to go. Well, I could fit just eight around my dining room table and counting me, that made seven. Seven. Not eight. Always the odd man out. Maybe I was ready for a relationship after all. Maybe my life needed some complication. Some excitement. Some passion.

\* \* \*

Another contradictory week of murders and holiday festivities chugged by, and I decided my decision had been ridiculous at best. It took two people to have a romance, and I was clearly missing half of the equation.

When my telephone rang, I assumed it was Norm looking for the pics I'd taken at noon, and in fact, I did have them. They were checker-boarded across my monitor. "Yes?" I was pulling up more photos.

"Lindsey?" Norm's voice had gotten deeper.

"Yes?" I clicked on two more photos.

"Lindsey Morrison?" The voice wasn't Norm.

I scowled at the phone receiver. "Yes, who is this?"

"Michael Albright."

I lost my heartbeat. It was gone. I couldn't feel my heart beat. How long could a person live after their heart stopped?

"Lindsey, are you there?"

"Yes." Okay, I had a voice, but no heart.

"You're not easy to track down," Michael chided.

"No, I'm not. I mean, I'm never here. I'm always out. On assignment." Articulate to a fault. Better I would have found my heart and not my voice.

"I'm glad I kept trying."

My heart started beating. It was trying to break through my rib cage. "So am I," I said too loudly over the pounding in my chest.

"Lindsey, I know you're busy, so I'll get right to the point. Will you have dinner with me Saturday night? I know it's short notice," Michael added apologetically, "but please say yes."

"I, ah, I don't usually make plans. I never know when I'll have to go out. On a story. Or I might get hung up on a story." Was I nuts?

"Couldn't you make an exception?" Michael urged. "Take the night off. I've got a cocktail thing I've got to attend at the Art Institute, but we can make that short and then have dinner anywhere you want."

"A cocktail thing?" I asked. What's a cocktail thing?

"Just drinks and an award I'm getting. Thank God it's not dinner." Michael laughed.

An award he's getting? "I wouldn't want to inconvenience you if something came up. Not if you're the guest of honor," I said.

"I can't think of any pending wars." Michael's tone changed from teasing to urgent. "Say yes, Lindsey. You know, I was watching it snow last night, and all I could think about was you and the night we met. I really want to see you again."

Could any woman in her right mind say no to that? "I'd love to." Talk about instant capitulation. Why couldn't I ever play hard to get?

Michael didn't give me a chance to change my mind. "I'll pick you up at six o'clock. What's your address?"

“Fourteen-thirty North Dearborn,” I recited automatically. “Apartment seven twenty-eight. It’s an older high rise.”

“I’ll see you Saturday night at six. Oh, and Lindsey?”

“Y-yes?” I couldn’t breathe.

“Thank you.”