



CAT ON   
THE FENCE

— BY THE TAIL - BOOK II —

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## CAT ON THE FENCE (By the Tail, Book 2)

### *Excerpt*

Karabi sat at the conference table with her arms folded. The two other seated staff members were listening casually to the speaker at the front of the room, occasionally nodding in agreement. But as far as Karabi was concerned, the man speaking was full of it. It had been two weeks since the breakup with Rao and Karabi had only just started to get over the emotional turmoil that interaction had caused her. Now here was another man – whom she'd just met and didn't even know yet – who was getting fully under her skin.

Alexander McClellan was his name. And he was dangerous. He'd just been contracted as Financial Analysis Consultant and was on the Operations Team for one quarter. As far as Karabi could tell, it was going to be a long, painful three months. From the moment he opened his mouth she knew he was trouble. This guy had the kind of amazing voice that was so seductive it made all of his ideas sound good, even his shitty ones. Kevin Green the Operations Manager and everyone else on the staff might have fallen for his charm and slick tongue but Karabi wasn't going to. So what if he was kind of nice to look at. Scratch that – *very* nice. A lion was pretty to look at too but it still might bite somebody's head off if they weren't careful when they entered its cage.

Two of the lionesses in the Big Cat House at the zoo where she worked had each recently birthed a trio of rambunctious little cubs, but last week the male lion, Musaka, got a bit too rough with one and severely injured him. The mother quickly punished the large male – with fatal intent likely, had zookeepers not intervened as quickly as they did – leaving the zoo with *two* injured cats. Musaka was healthy and strong, and his injuries would heal relatively quickly and easily, but the cub, Kimba, needed intense specialized care around the clock. All of which would cost money the facility didn't have funding for. On top of the medical expenses was the fact that the habitat now had six new animals, meaning the already-strained budget was looking especially bleak.

So they'd hired this guy to come in and try to tackle their urgent financial quandary. If Alex did a good job and the staff liked him, they were going to offer him a permanent position on the team. But Karabi wasn't so sure he could see past dollar signs long

enough to notice that there were living, breathing animals in the zoo. At this moment he was talking about staff cuts, which had Karabi grinding her teeth.

"I've looked at the headcount, expenditures and revenue per exhibit, and have come up with a potential plan to rebalance the staff based on where the activity and income is at. The Big Cat House is one of the most profitable departments here, and should therefore have the lion's share – excuse the pun – of the budget. By halving the staff in the Small Mammal and Reptile House and reducing the Waterfowl Lagoon budget by a third, we'd be able to cover all identified cat expenses and still have some leftover for unexpected overages."

"Except that would put good people out of work in a tough economy," Karabi said with a pointed expression on her face. "Not to mention it would undermine the quality of care for the animals at both of those exhibits."

Alex turned his focus to her, his posture remaining straight and self-assured. "Job cuts happen in a tough economy. It's to be expected. And spending less doesn't necessarily have to mean providing less. I have confidence that the staff here is fantastic at what they do, and are fully capable of coming up with a plan to continue to provide quality care even with a lower budget."

Karabi shook her head. "All the brilliant planning in the world couldn't make up for a shortage of personnel."

"Sure it could. Corporations around the globe do it every day."

"But this is not a corporation. It's a not-for-profit institution."

"Being not-for-profit doesn't exclude you from needing to care about the bottom line. You could go bankrupt if you don't run this place like a successful business."

"We'd go *morally* bankrupt, however, if we ran this place like most businesses do."

He paused for a moment. Then a strange smile formed on his face. "I understand, um, what was your name again?"

"Karabi. Karabi Minstry."

"Right, Karabi. I understand that you're passionate about keeping the family together."

She fidgeted in her chair uncomfortably. Something about the way Alex said her name, the way he was eyeing her as he said the word *passionate*... Images of the two of them

having hot, intense sex in various positions on the boardroom table flashed in her mind. Karabi gave a slight shake of her head and a quick cough to clear her thoughts. "I am."

He nodded. "I respect that. I have an alternative. We could raise the money through a charity event. Don't you guys raise close to a million at your annual fundraiser dances? You'd only need a fraction of that to stay in the black."

"The Zoo Ball won't happen until the summer."

"Right, and the targeted proceeds for this summer's ball have already been earmarked for research and foundation donations. But I'm talking about hosting a different one. Next month, with a Valentine's Day theme, specifically for this cause."

"In just a month? How would we do that? It's way too cold to put out a tent, and there's no building here really suitable for a big indoor party."

"We could rent out The Loft in Willis Tower."

"You mean the Sears Tower?" Karabi hated that they'd changed the name of the building, which was once officially the tallest building in the world and known worldwide for decades as Sears Tower, to Willis Tower. And so she, like many other Chicagoans, refused to call it anything other than its original name. No matter *who* bought it and took it over.

"That's expensive. It'd be at least a few grand just to rent the place out."

"I already did the math. If we charge a premium for the tickets, and we get even a quarter of the turnout you get on average from your events, we'd bring in close to ten times what we pay for it."

Karabi wrinkled her nose. "What kind of zoo throws a high-priced, fancy fundraiser at the top of a high-rise building?"

"The kind of zoo with two injured lions, desperately needing cash for their care."

She rolled her eyes. Just the thought of getting all dolled up and attending a party full of uppity pretension and expensive eveningwear left a nasty taste in her mouth. Sure, Mr. Fancy-Suit would be more than happy to attend some bourgeois ball. With his perfectly tailored suit and shirt, spit-shined shoes and two-hundred-dollar watch. Even his wavy brown hair was neatly combed, unlike most of the men and women who worked there. His gruff, extended goatee and mustache seemed almost out of place on him. Karabi wondered if he intentionally left it a bit on the scruffy side to make it

appear as if he didn't care all that much about his appearance. If he did, Karabi wasn't buying it. No way this guy who dressed as if he were coming in for a TV interview rather than a meeting at the zoo would leave his facial hair unintentionally ungroomed. He had to know it softened his otherwise unapproachable and high-strung movie-star appearance. Drew attention to his bright, piercing blue-gray eyes. She wanted to rub her hand against the stubble, to feel its roughness against her skin. Next thing she knew she was imagining grabbing Alex by the tie and pulling him down on top of her, onto the tabletop, and anxiously unbuckling his pants.

Wait, where did that thought come from? She shook her head as if to rid herself of fleas. "No, an impromptu fundraiser should be a last resort."

He sighed and rubbed at his face. "Okay then, no people cuts and no fundraisers. We could sell off the healthy cubs, and increase your bottom line this quarter by up to thirty percent."

Karabi's stomach churned at the word *sell*. "We only trade animals. We don't sell them."

"Not even to for a thirty-percent profit increase?"

"Again, we're not-for-profit. What we need is better budgeting, not bigger profits."

He gave a hearty chuckle—a deep, rolling sound that was chock full of belittlement but still somehow laced with masculine charm and appeal. "It's quite obvious, Miss Ministry, that finance isn't your expertise. But that's okay, I'm willing to take the time to break it all down for you. That is after all what I'm here for."

"That's great," Karabi said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Some of us are here for the animals."

"So I see," Alex said. He bent toward the table and wrote something down in his notebook. "Salary reviews are coming up next week. I'll keep that in mind when we discuss your raise versus those who are here for a job."