

Tiger Queen

Bonus Scene



Rachel

Ten Years Later

We flew through the meadow in the middle of the park, wind blowing my hair back behind me. I hadn't had time to tie it with a scrunchy. We had left too quickly, and I didn't want to stop.

Because this wasn't a fun, relaxing trip into the park.

"I've told him," I said angrily.

Next to me, David clutched the handlebar above him and nodded. "I know."

"It's too soon. I'm not comfortable with it at all. Yet they did it anyway."

"I know."

"Do you?" I snapped. "Because you seem awfully calm about all of this."

"Honey," he replied calmly, "what do you expect me to do? I can't watch Jake around the clock."

I clenched my teeth while maneuvering the Mule around a copse of trees. I knew I shouldn't take my anger out on David, but I

was worried sick. And I wanted him to be as concerned as I was.

The Haines Wildlife Park was beautiful in the fall, especially now that the weather was cooling off. We were heading toward the east side of the park, which was open fields and meadows instead of the forest that covered the western side of the park. The land now thrived with wildlife. Deer, hares, and even a few skunks. Plus squirrels, muskrats, groundhogs, and all the other mammals native to North Carolina.

And the tigers.

I pulled the walkie-talkie to my mouth and said, "How's our positioning? Still clear?"

Anthony's voice replied, "*Nothing dangerous in your area. You've got a straight shot to the other Mule.*"

"They're still in the same spot?"

"*Affirmative. Haven't moved.*"

I wasn't sure if that was a good sign, or a bad one. David held on tighter as I sped up.

We went down one rolling hill, up another, and then spotted the second Mule. It was on the top of the next hill. I didn't see anyone else around it, and a pang of fear gripped my chest. If anything had happened to them...

I drove up the next hill and then skidded to a stop next to the Mule. Jake and his father Carl were laying on their bellies, aiming a pair of binoculars down into the meadow below. I caught a glimpse of a tiger loping out of sight.

Between the two adults was a five-year-old boy. The binoculars looked huge in his tiny hands, and he sat up and glared at me.

"Mom! You scared him off!"

Tommy was Jake's son in every possible way. Not just the mop of dark red hair and his dark eyes, but in the rebellious attitude that was beginning to manifest at his age.

“Get in the Mule with your uncle,” I told him.

“But *mom...*”

“I said get in the Mule.”

He let out a childish sigh and walked over to the Mule. David helped him buckle the seatbelt.

“Did you see it?” Tommy whispered. “It was so *big*.”

“I bet it was,” David said as they drove away. I waited until the rumbling engine noise was in the distance before I rounded on the other two Haines men.

“I’ve been trying to call,” I said quietly. “Neither of you have been answering your phones or walkie-talkies.”

Jake got up and shrugged. “We turned them off. Didn’t want to spook the tiger.”

“We discussed this. Tommy is too young! He’s not ready!”

“Then what age is okay?” Jake argued back. “Tell me exactly when you think it’s safe.”

“Older than five.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down!”

Carl climbed to his feet and brushed off his Haines Wildlife Park uniform. “I’m awfully sorry, Rachel. It’s all my fault. I’m the one who told Tommy...”

I pointed a finger at the boy’s grandfather. “Don’t cover for Jake. He’s Tommy’s father, and he needs to act responsibly.”

Sufficiently cowed, Carl gathered up the binoculars and put them back in the Mule.

“All we did was bring him out here...” Jake said.

“It’s not safe.”

“We made sure to check the maps first. Brought protection, too. Tommy was fantastic. He stayed quiet and careful, just like we taught him. Observe and do not disturb.” He grinned. “He’s so smart. Like

his mom. You should have seen how excited he was...”

“Flattery isn’t going to get you anywhere. We’ll talk about this later.”

I sat in the passenger seat of the Mule, and Carl climbed in the back. Then he handed me a notepad.

“Finished those tests early. All the scat looked good. Got notes on the behavior of Bill and Ted, too. They’re adjusting just fine.”

“Are they still sticking together?”

He nodded. “Looks like it. Although they’ve only been here a day.”

“That’s good news.”

Carl patted me on the shoulder. “Hell yeah it is.”

Since getting out of prison, Carl was a new man. It took me a while to trust him, and even longer for his three sons to welcome him back. But now he was working in the park with us, and he was a valuable employee. He took orders without complaint and did a thorough job. It was as if the pressure of being in charge was too much for him before. Now that he was a subordinate? He was downright *normal*.

The only hiccup was that Tommy had found an old photo of grandpa when he still had a mohawk. He insisted that Carl shave his head into a mohawk again, and Carl loved the boy so much I was certain he would eventually cave just to make him smile.

We passed through the main gate and parked next to the other Mule at the headquarters building, which was previously the visitor’s center. Anthony was inside, seated behind one of the monitoring desks with an array of eight computer monitors in front of him.

“Afternoon, boss,” he said. “I take it everyone was okay and safe?”

“This time,” I muttered.

“Jake’s more careful than he used to be. He wouldn’t let

anything happen to Tommy.”

“They turned their radios off. If anything happened, or if one of the larger packs turned in their direction? They wouldn’t even know.”

Anthony shrugged. “You know, I’ve been thinking about it. You’re gonna be mad at me, but I agree with Jake. Tommy’s old enough to into the park. Under supervision, of course.”

I walked behind the desk. A walled playpen had been erected there, and my two-year-old was bouncing happily. As it always did, my heart swelled with joy at the sight of him. Especially when I picked him up and he smiled widely, his crystal-blue eyes full of a child’s wonder.

“Would you be okay with it if it was Alexander?” I asked while bouncing the toddler in my arms. “Or is it just okay to risk your nephew’s life?”

Anthony frowned and considered the question. “Maybe? I don’t know. I like to think that I treat Alexander and Tommy the same. But now that I consider the idea genuinely, I do feel myself recoiling from the thought of Alexander going into the park. Maybe that’s because he’s still only two. If he was five, I think I would be okay with it.”

“Well, I’m not,” I replied. “Five is too young.”

“What age *would* be okay? Six? Seven?”

“You sound like Jake.”

Anthony hopped up and kissed me on the cheek. “We’re brothers. We can’t help but sound alike sometimes.”

Despite this specific disagreement, Anthony and Jake were *wonderful* fathers. Totally devoted to their sons with all the love in their hearts. I loved the big tiger-loving family we had here.

Although I was secretly hoping for a daughter. Sometimes I felt outnumbered with so many Haines men around! Now that David and I were trying, I hoped he gave me a little girl. One with big blue eyes and a head full of curly hair.

Carl came into the headquarters and took Alexander from me. The baby giggled as his grandpa held him high over his head and made faces at him.

“Are you going to take him out into the park too?” I asked dryly.

Carl only grinned at Alexander. “Your mommy’s being dramatic. It’s time for your afternoon nap, because you get cranky around this time every day. Yes you do! Yes you do!”

I smiled as he carried his grandson away. Sometimes I couldn’t believe that he was the same man who had run Crazy Carl’s zoo. The man who had threatened to kill me. People really could change, it turned out.

Our headquarters collected tons of data on the animals in the park, and I spent half an hour reviewing all of it. Checking for anything abnormal about the tigers. We had two hundred big cats in the park now, most of which had been moved from run-down zoos or private owners who couldn’t properly take care of them. The two newest cats, Bill and Ted, looked to be in surprisingly good health. Everything on the screen matched up with the notes Carl had taken.

Our operation here was growing so much that we were always busy. We were even hiring an intern to help with all the work. And along those lines...

I glanced at my phone. I had a missed call from a Florida phone number. “Shit. I’m late.”

I jogged out of the headquarters and toward the park entrance, where the old zoo parking lot used to be. A girl with fiery red hair was waiting by the gate.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said while unlocking the gate. “You must be Polly. I’m Rachel Koenig.”

She blushed. “Of course I know who you are! It’s so good to meet you!”

I led her back to the headquarters and gave her a quick tour.

Anthony was gone, so the building was empty. We sat at one of the desks and began the interview process. I didn't have any questions prepared, so I just winged it and asked whatever came to mind. Questions about her experience, her interest in animal conservation, the zoo residency where she got experience. She had degrees from Florida State, which was one of the things that had made her resume stand out.

"You completed your doctorate earlier this year?"

"Yes ma'am, I did."

"How's Bernard Laughler? Is he still kicking around the biology department?"

The girl groaned. "Oh yes, he is. Laughler's class is the only C I've gotten in my life!"

"Well, I won't hold that against you because I got a C too. And I had to work my butt off for it."

The interview went well. Polly was clearly nervous, but she had good experience and I liked how she answered her questions. I led her out, shook her hand, and told her we would be in touch.

I returned to the headquarters, did a few more wellness checks on the animals, and then headed home for the night.

"Just in time!" Anthony called from the kitchen. He poked his head through the door and pointed at me with an oven mitted-hand. "I was about to call you."

"This isn't bad for Rachel," David said, glancing at his watch. "She usually stares at the monitors for at least another half hour."

I let them tease me while we set the dinner table. Carl put Alexander in the playpen then helped Tommy up into his seat. He dropped a napkin into his grandson's lap and then ruffled his hair until it was messy.

"Stop it grandpa!" the boy whined, but there was a laugh in his voice. It was their normal dinner game. I smiled at them. Today's events out in the park, Carl really did love his grandchildren.

Anthony brought dinner out—chicken casserole. Tommy stared at the soupy dish and complained that he didn't like it, which meant we had to spend the next ten minutes describing every ingredient inside. Only then did he tentatively try a spoonful.

"How'd the interview go?" Jake asked.

I glared at him from across the table. "Don't think you're not still in the doghouse."

Jake shrugged. "I just want to know how the interview went."

"I'm curious too," Anthony chimed in happily.

"She was good. I want to hire her."

"You're biased because she's from Florida State," Anthony replied. "We should find a good Duke girl to work here."

"As soon as Duke starts churning out qualified animal conservationists and veterinarians, we'll hire one."

Carl barked a laugh. "Oh snap! She's got you there."

"Duke is a great school!" Anthony argued. "In what world do you guys think Duke is sub-standard?"

Tommy tugged on Anthony's sleeve. He glanced at me and then whispered, "I saw a tiger today."

"I know, buddy. I heard! I bet that was neat."

I glared at Anthony, but he ignored me and continued humoring his nephew.

"It was orange, and black, and even a little white. On its belly. Dad said it's a *Bengal* tiger. They're from India."

"The Indian subcontinent," I clarified. "They're native to Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan as well."

"It was *huge*," Tommy went on over me. "It had the prettiest stripes. They're for *camouflage*." He had to say the word slowly, pronouncing every syllable with care.

"That's super cool, buddy!" Anthony agreed.

“I think it’s my favorite tiger *ever*. In the whole wide world. Dad! What’s your favorite tiger?”

Jake finishing chewing and put his fork down carefully. “My favorite tiger was named Big Caesar.”

“Was he *big*?” Tommy asked.

“So big!” Jake replied. “He was enormous. We raised him since he was a little cub. He spent most of his life in a smaller cage, but he got to live in the park when he was older.”

“Wooooow,” Tommy said. “Where is he now?”

Jake smiled sadly. “He died five years ago. Right before you were born, actually.”

“Aww,” Tommy said.

“Don’t be sad. He lived a good life.” Jake glanced at me. “Thanks to your mother and this wildlife park.”

“Oh!” Carl suddenly said. “Tommy, did you show your mother what you made?”

Tommy glanced at me. “I was waiting for her to stop being mad.”

I put down my fork and sighed. “I wasn’t mad at you. I was just worried.”

My son pulled out a folded piece of construction paper. He slid it across the table like it was a list of hostage demands. I unfolded it and held it out—it was a picture of a tiger drawn with crayons. Next to the tiger was a stick-figure woman with long yellow hair.

“That’s what we saw today,” Tommy said shyly.

“And who’s this?” I pointed to the stick figure.

“That’s you! Grandpa told me you’re in charge of *all* the tigers in the park. How you love them and built this place for them because you’re a good person.”

I glanced at Carl. “Did he now?”

Carl gave me a toothy smile.

“It was so cool, mom,” Tommy said. “It was resting in the sun. I think it was having a nap, because it was tired! I take naps when I’m tired, too. I think that’s really neat. Tigers are a lot like us.”

I could see the excited sparkle in my son’s eyes. Going into the park today had awoken an interest in him. It reminded me of myself at that age after seeing my first animal. I knew that I needed to cultivate that passion, not suppress it.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said. “If you eat all your casserole tonight, I’ll take you into the park tomorrow.”

His jaw dropped and his eyes widened. “Really?”

“But we have to be careful,” I warned. “Tigers can be very dangerous. And I’m going to give you a book to read tonight about the behavior of tigers, and the physical signs to watch out for. If you study that, and eat your dinner, we’ll go look at more tigers tomorrow.”

“Okay!” He dug into his dinner with renewed enthusiasm.

The thought of him going back into the park filled me with apprehension, but part of being a mother was allowing your children to grow and experience new things. Even if it scared me. I looked around the table at the other men. All of them were smiling at me—David smiling proudly, Anthony beaming happily, and Jake grinning gratefully. And Carl smiled at all of us like the proud grandfather he was.

I smiled back at them. I loved my family more than words could describe. I wouldn’t change anything for the world.

And to think it all started with my drunk roommate submitting my resume as a joke.