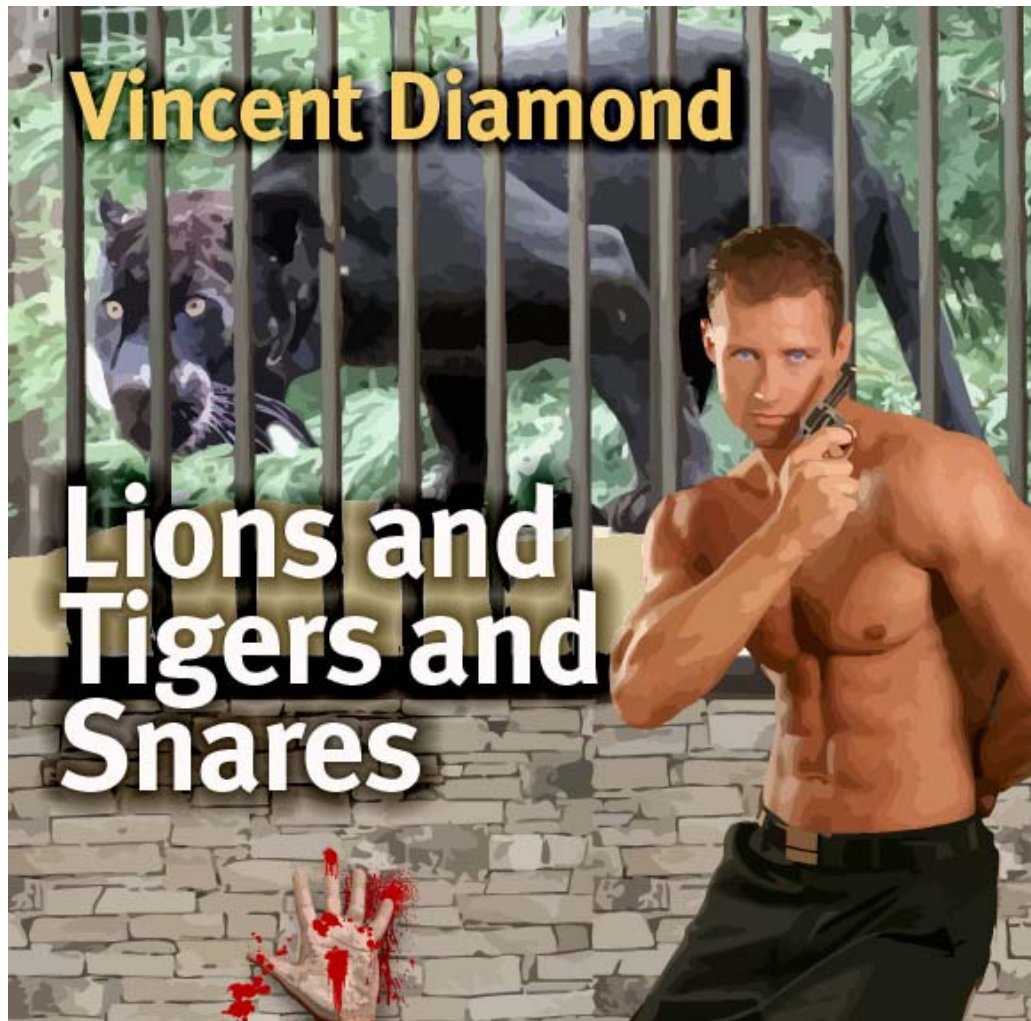


Vincent Diamond – Lions and Tigers and Snares



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Lions and Tigers and Snares

Mid-afternoon is usually quiet at a big cat refuge, but the lion's roar drowned out Captain Russo's voice on my cell phone.

"Hold on a sec, let me get past Walter Martin." I strode past the lion cage. Flies buzzed over a beef leg at the cat's feeding station; Walter had popped off the ends of the bones to lick at its yellow marrow. The rank odor of rotting meat and lion crap made me wrinkle my nose. The bucket of chicken parts stuffed with Imodium I carried had its own stench. What a job.

"Who the hell is Walter Martin, and what is that frigging noise?" Captain Russo's nasal tone wavered a bit. The signal was never strong at the Patacoochee Wildlife Refuge in north Florida. Eighty miles northwest of Gainesville, and fifty miles south of Tallahassee made it pretty inaccessible—for cell phones and visitors. I had the headset on so that if anyone were watching—not that it was likely, but I had to be careful—it would just look like I was talking to the cats. This time of day, the cats slept, and the humans got out of the heat as much as possible.

"He's a lion that Kendall bought in a Wal-Mart parking lot, believe it or not. He's just sounding off, letting everyone know this is his territory." The lion's guttural roars actually moved in my chest. The whump of air displaced by the animal was eerie and affecting. I stepped around a jaguar cage that held a stand of pine trees to help buffer Walter's roars. I kept moving towards the cougar habitat. "Better?"

"Yeah, that's better. Update me, Officer Reese."

"They're buying my cover. I must look like a typical dumbass pre-veterinarian summer intern." Russo snorted but let me keep talking. "There's two main guys here: Ricardo Lopez and Kendall Knight. Ricardo is the money man; he definitely runs the show that way. Kendall is the animal handler; he's licensed, very experienced with Class One carnivores, and he manages all the scutwork in the refuge."

“What do you know so far?” Captain Russo asked. The cell phone buzzed a little and I checked the signal—only two bars.

“Ricardo’s an asshole: loud-mouthed, aggressive, chain-smoker. He’s always showing up unannounced with strangers. Buyers probably. He teases the cats from outside the cages, gets them all riled. They hate him. Kendall, though.... “

I hadn’t quite figured out Kendall. With his muscular frame, soft brown eyes, and dark hair, he *looked* like a tough guy, but he was a real softie when it came to the cats. He clearly loved them. The week before I’d seen him stay up all night with a poisoned cougar somebody had brought in. He changed the cat’s IV, kept the cat calm, ran his sturdy hands over its shoulders and back when the heaves came on.

Kendall’s hands. I ran a palm down my belly.

“Kendall seems really dedicated to the refuge. He and his assistant keeper, Randy Duboy, are the only paid staff. Everyone else out here is volunteer. Kendall and Ricardo are pretty tense with each other. I’m not sure why. I did the night cage check earlier this week and saw them outside Kendall’s office, arguing.”

“What were they saying?”

“I don’t know, I was too far away. But I could tell by their body language they weren’t having a friendly discussion. Kendall was pissed.” I had stood in the shadows of a tiger cage and watched Ricardo drive away in his shiny Escalade. Kendall went into his office, left the lights off. I moved closer and saw him smoking in the dark. The acrid whiff of marijuana drifted outside on the breeze. I’d been tempted to go in and see what I could find out. Something made me wait.

He’s not ready yet. And neither am I.

“How fast can you get solid intel and evidence out of there?”

When we first planned this detail, I was supposed to have the whole summer to infiltrate the operation and figure out if Ricardo’s and Kendall’s big cat refuge was a front for moving endangered and prohibited animals in and out of the country. Collectors paid enormous sums for an endangered species in their private zoos. Big game farms needed a steady supply of animals to kill and mount for “trophies”. And both markets paid animal dealers and wholesalers big bucks to produce the inventory to do it. The department had investigated for over a year, and we had narrowed it down to a supplier working in the Southeast. Right now, Ricardo and Kendall looked like our perps.

Living animals as inventory. It made my teeth grind.

“I don’t know. It’s not like I can just go pawing through the office to look for it.”

“Find a way!”

“Captain, I—“

“Byron, that’s the whole point of undercover. You’re in there so you *can* go pawing through the office or get into the house or a computer. Get closer to Kendall and Ricardo, talk to that other kid. See what you can find out.”

Get closer? To Ricardo—not a chance. To Kendall? Chance. And a pleasant one.

“I’ll do my best. It’s kinda nice to be with the animals again.”

I’d actually been a licensed handler until a few years ago. My uncle had a roadside zoo when I was a kid: tigers, a couple of cougars, and bears. Later, I’d volunteered at the Midwest Tiger Refuge. I’m fine with the animals. It’s the people that are hard to handle.

“You okay? You keeping your cover?” Russo sounded on edge. He was always hyper

about maintaining cover.

“Sure.”

“No calling your friends, no checking email, right?”

“Nope. I’m isolated, just like you taught me.” That was a key to good cover, immersing yourself in the new world and leaving your real one behind. Not all cops could do it, but I’d managed it. My last lover, Miguel, didn’t much like my job. He’d put up with it for three years until having a partner who disappeared for months at a time finally wore him down.

Through the bars of the cougar cage, I saw a bare-chested Kendall come out of his house, a log cabin onsite. Strange. He usually disappeared after lunch. He looked around, spotted me, and waved. He headed towards me.

Shit. What the hell did he want?

“I’ve got to get off the phone, Captain. I’ve got company on the way.”

“All right. Check back when you have something solid or a week if you don’t,” Russo instructed.

“Yes, sir.” I bent down to the food slot and slopped out the chicken for the cougar. He ambled over, sick enough to be not-all-that-interested in food just yet. In a couple of seconds I had the headset off, and the phone tucked into a pocket. I heard Kendall approach but stayed down, talking to the cougar. I needed the time to get centered again, to just be Byron Smith, refuge intern, wanna-be veterinarian, just a harmless college kid.

Well, maybe a college kid with a crush.

“Hey.” Kendall’s voice was deep enough to make you have to really listen to him. He put a hand on my shoulder and I looked up. He wore only cargo shorts, and goddammit if he didn’t have great legs to match his solid torso. It wasn’t a body you got at the gym, it was a working man’s body—balanced, tanned, and he looked fucking delicious.

“Hey yourself.” When I stood, I noticed his face had crease marks on one cheek; he must have been sleeping. I wondered who he’d been sleeping with and what it would be like to take a nap in the afternoon, and wake up next to him.

Stop it. Concentrate on doing your job.

“I need your help tonight. Can you work some overtime?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“We’ve got a big shipment of cats coming in; it’ll be late. Probably after midnight. Randy’s got food poisoning, we think. He’s been throwing up all day. Can you help?”

“Sure. Just let me know what time.”

“I’ll call you at your trailer.”

“Why so late?”

His face closed off a little. “The truck’s just running behind schedule.”

“What’s coming in?”

“Leopards and jaguars, a couple of lions.”

“Yeesh, leps and jags. Not my favorite.”

“Not mine, either, but that’s the gig.”

Leopards were the most difficult of all the big cats to manage. All the animals here were wild—and dangerous, of course—but funnily enough, lions and tigers, though much larger, were easier to handle. You can read lion and tiger facial expressions pretty easily and gauge their body language to get a sense of what they might do. Leopards and jaguars were harder; their faces weren’t as animated as the other big cats and worse—they planned ahead. I’d seen a pair of leopards work together once to grab a domestic cat who had wandered into their cage. One of them stalked it from behind; the second deliberately jumped against the fencing, ricocheted off and chased the housecat into its partner’s claws. The smartest of the big cats. That made them the scariest.

“Do you need help to get the holding pens ready? I can stick around after my shift.”

Kendall touched my arm. “No thanks, I can manage that. Just let me call you when the truck gets in so we can get these animals offloaded.” His gaze held me, those soft brown eyes, and now I noticed his thick eyelashes. And his lips were so full and inviting....

My arm tingled where he touched me.

“Call me later,” I said past a swallow.

“Thanks, Byron.”

I watched him walk away. His shoulders were wide and brown, he had long legs and a high butt. My cock snaked over inside my pants, just a little.

Geezus, this job was turning messy.

The thunderstorm woke me before Kendall called. A huge crack of lightning snapped

close by my trailer, the clock radio flickered, and then went dead. I sat up, disoriented. The dream I'd been having left tendrils of confusion in my head. Did I really kiss Kendall or did I just dream it?

Ten minutes after he called, I was back at the refuge. A semi puffed exhaust into the rainy night. Oak trees swayed in the wind and clumps of Spanish moss and leaves lay on the ground. The rain pounded loud as hail on my little Ranger.

Great. The cats will love this shit.

To my surprise, Ricardo was there. Big-bellied and bearded, he smoked constantly. He used a walking stick, whether affectation or genuine need, I couldn't tell. He wasn't out in the rain, of course, but he barked orders from the shelter of the quarantine barn.

Randy was there, too, looking pale. He and Kendall had the truck's back doors open, and I smelled the cats in the cargo area. The acrid smell of cat piss and wild animal permeated the hold.

I got soaked just running from my truck to the semi. The rain stung against my face and arms. We went to work.

Most animal dealers used steel cages fitted with special load units at the top so you could slide in the metal gripper bars to lift the cages without coming too close to them. We off-loaded a half dozen of the spotted leopards this way, sliding them out to the gate, riding the noisy ramp down to the ground, then carrying them into the quarantine kennel. The cats growled and spat at us; they would have anyway, but the thunderstorm didn't make it easier. They paced in their little travel cages, knocking us off-balance as they jerked from one side to the other. I slipped and fell once, and we dropped the cage into the mud. One of the big male leopards clawed through the bars, his thick paw reaching out to snag at us. My shoulders ached after just fifteen minutes.

Kendall looked pissed. He didn't talk to the cats like he usually did; he just lifted,

grimaced against the weight, and kept us moving. We put a black leopard into a quarantine cage, and as we closed the door, Randy bent double, and puked on the concrete floor.

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry. Shit!” He heaved again, grabbing at his belly.

Kendall put a hand on his back. Randy kept vomiting, not bringing up anything substantial. Kendall kept rubbing Randy’s back, soothing.

The same way he did with that sick cougar.

“It’s all right,” Kendall said. When Randy stopped heaving and wiped off his mouth, Kendall stepped to the mini-frig at the end of the aisle; we usually kept meds in it. He pulled out a Gatorade and handed it to Randy. “Sit down and rest for a while. Drink this. And then you’re going home.”

“No, I’ll be okay.”

Ricardo stalked over. “Get moving, girls. Quit pussyng around.”

Kendall glared at him. “He’s sick.”

“I don’t care. These animals need to be in place and cleaned by tomorrow afternoon. This is taking too long. Get moving again.”

Randy wiped a shaky hand over his face. “I can work.”

“No, you won’t. Go home and get into the doctor in the morning. Call me if you need help getting there.” Kendall looked at him with concern.

“I’ll get Melissa to take me. Thanks, Kendall.”

Ricardo threw a lit cigarette butt onto the floor and lit another. Kendall pointedly

walked over to stamp out the glowing ember. They looked at each other. Some long-standing animosity coiled up between them as easy to see as the cigarette smoke in the air.

“You’re not sending him home. We need to get this work done,” Ricardo snapped.

“I *am* sending him home. He’s my employee and my responsibility. You don’t have a say in how I run my people.”

“Watch yourself. You’re not the only game in town. Remember our deal.”

Kendall glanced over at me, his mouth tight and set. He swung back to Ricardo. “Shut the fuck up.”

Ricardo smiled and shrugged. “You’ve got more to lose than I do, Mr. Smartass.”

“Get out.”

Ricardo flashed yellow teeth again. “Have them ready for inspection by two o’clock. We’ll be out then to show the stock.”

Kendall’s shoulders tightened when he heard “stock”. I knew then he was like me; he didn’t think of these creatures as stock, and it angered him to see them treated like nothing more than a box of soap or a can of soda.

We watched Randy and Ricardo drive away then went back to work.

The rain started to taper off when we had three cats left. By the time we got them settled, we were covered in mud and sweat. Bits of cat fur stuck to us. Cats often shed when stressed, and we both had puffs of leopard and jaguar hair on our arms and faces. Kendall hadn’t said much after the scene with Ricardo, and I could see he was both tired and worried by the set of his shoulders and the pinch of his eyebrows.

“They all seem pretty healthy,” I said. “Nothing to deal with right away.”

“Yeah,” Kendall said. He wiped his face with a towel, handed it to me. “But healthy to what end? What a waste.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.” Kendall turned his gaze away.

“What is it?” This was the time to push, when he was tired and vulnerable and might reveal something he normally wouldn’t.

“Not something you need to worry about.”

“But *you* need to worry about it?”

He looked at me then. He wanted to tell me; I could read it in his face. He leaned against the wall, arms folded. I mirrored him, a technique I’d learned in an interrogation seminar. Mimic the suspect’s body language—he might change his attitude. And talk.

I pushed a little more. “Kendall, what’s wrong? It seems like something’s not quite right about these cats.” I leaned a little towards him. Did he lean back? I couldn’t tell, but I was close enough to see the pulse beat in his throat and smell him—sweat and rain and cat all mixed together.

He was silent. Around us, the rain pattered gently on the barn’s metal roof. A cat sighed. I heard the jaguar behind us licking itself clean; the rough rasp of its tongue bristling against its damp fur. The mud on my arms itched.

I pressed my upper arm against his solid bicep, almost a nudge.

He wiped his face with one hand, his voice tired. "I'm just as caged as these cats are."

I held my breath. Let the silence make him want to talk.

I pressed his arm again. He didn't lean away. Encouraging.

"Kendall?" I chanced it, put a hand on his dirty forearm and held his gaze. "Maybe I can help."

"You can't."

"Maybe I can."

"I don't think so. But thanks, anyway. You're a good kid." He looked down at my hand then up. Our gazes locked and the moment caught fire.

"I'm not just a kid."

He grinned and stepped away. "All you college kids say that. Come on. I need a shower, and a smoke, and I bet you do, too."

We showered at his house—in separate bathrooms, to my disappointment. That vibe was between us, the near-certainty that we were going to hit the bed, but there was just enough ambiguity in the air to make me nervous. Maybe I'd misread him; maybe he was just one of those guys who made a lot of eye contact and was a toucher.

I slipped on the clean shorts Kendall had left for me in the bathroom. Music came from the living room, something with saxophones and quiet drums, a slinky sound. The smell of pot wafted through the house, strong stuff. When I came around the corner, Kendall was sprawled on the sofa, a towel wrapped around his waist.

Oh, this looks promising.

His skin had minor tan marks. His skin was dark already and there was just a hint of browner skin on his arms and lower legs. With his dark eyebrows and brown eyes, he sure wasn't the All-American golden boy I saw every morning in the mirror. Italian, maybe? Hispanic? Either way, caramel-colored skin like his begged to be suckled, licked—appreciated.

Get some intel. I heard Russo's voice in my head, telling me to do my job, but my dick had other considerations. Get some ass was what it told me.

Kendall waved the joint at me, holding his breath.

"I probably shouldn't. Grass just makes me horny," I said.

"Then you should definitely have some." His grin was wide. He lay back against the leather sofa and spread his legs apart, enough for the towel to reveal one meaty upper thigh.

I swallowed and stepped past the coffee table. The joint's ember glowed in the dim room and it felt like Kendall's eyes glowed the same way. What was he thinking?

I took a hit, coughed a little then held it down. The smoke filled my lungs, and in a few seconds a quiet buzz of ease moved through my skull. I closed my eyes and took another toke, letting its soft haze fill me. The sofa cushions squeaked and shifted down as Kendall moved closer. I felt him near me, felt the warmth of his skin. "Take another hit," he said, his voice soft now.

I did. I held his gaze this time, while the smoke curled into me. Kendall eased closer. "Give me some," and he opened his mouth, and I breathed some back into him. He took it in and stayed close, his lips against mine, just breathing each other for a few seconds.

I kissed him first, a real kiss, our lips brushing, then pressing against each other. His full

lips were pillow-y, softer than anyone I'd ever kissed.

My cock lifted and poked out of the flimsy shorts I wore. Kendall's hands were all over me: my chest, my belly, my legs, and finally on my cock, stroking me. I gasped and tightened one hand around his beefy neck. "God, I want to fuck you. Please tell me you've got supplies," I whispered.

"Right here." He leaned over and pulled over a box from the coffee table. Inside condoms and lube, thankfully.

He pressed me back into the sofa and straddled my lap. I tore the towel off and was thrilled to see his hard cock right in front of me. Its tip glistened, and thick purple veins ran its length. And he was big, two fistfuls of man.

He put one hand behind my head and guided himself into my mouth. I stretched around him, working the tip until he thrust in with a groan. He was demanding; not that I wasn't willing, but there a quiet thrill in knowing that he was probably strong enough to keep me pinned down. I opened my throat and let him all the way inside.

He grunted and started to pump.

I could see his belly tighten with each thrust, feel his thighs tense as he worked over me. His hands moved down to my shoulders. His eyes were closed, his mouth open, his lips wet with my spit. I used one palm beneath his balls, gentle squeezes in time with his thrusts and he moaned. "Oh, Byron, just like that."

I put one finger to his mouth and he latched onto it. His tongue worked on me, a sensual suckling that made my cock bob against my belly. When I pulled my finger away, he opened his eyes and looked down at me. I held his gaze, moved my hands over to the box, and squeezed some lube on my fingers.

I worked my slick finger behind his balls, our eyes locked together. He went still for a

few seconds, his thick cock filling my mouth, the smell of him covering me. I didn't wait; I slipped my wet finger into him and he shuddered. His groan filled the room.

I found that little bump inside him and rubbed it with my finger. His grip tightened on my shoulder, so hard that it hurt, but I didn't mind. He suddenly started moving again, a frenzy of motion over me and in me, and I thrust back into him with two fingers now, and he cried out, an inarticulate groan of passion. And then the taste of him, coming in my mouth, filling me with salty fluid.

I held him; I was in control now. I milked him dry, sucked every drop of semen out of his beautiful cock. It went soft as I held it, limp and heavy. There was a slick plop of sound as I let him go. My hands clenched against his butt, and I kissed his cock again and again.

Kendall's eyes were soft as he looked down at me.

He sagged onto my lap, heavy and thick-bodied. We sat still for a few minutes, rocking together against the cool leather. His belly lay against my cock, the tickle of his pubic hair on me made me smile.

After a while, I couldn't stand it any longer. I sat up, struggling against his weight. He had a light film of sweet sweat on his face, and I wiped it away with my thumbs. "Condom?"

He held up a zebra-striped package and grinned. "Jungle Love brand. What do you think?"

"Too cute. I think you should dress me up and let me get busy."

Kendall smiled as he got me prepped. The condom was slick with lube and cool, while his fingers were warm. When I was ready, I pressed us sideways. His thick thighs wrapped over my waist. I kissed him a few more times, wanting to thrust into him,

wanting to ride him like a demon. Something made me hold back.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. His face was tight with yearning.

I’m a liar and a bastard for what I’m doing to you.

“Nothing,” I answered. “Just savoring the moment.”

“Stop savoring and start fucking.”

I pushed his knees back and positioned my cock against him. I couldn’t meet his eyes, so I closed mine and slipped inside him. Past that band of muscle and then—*oh, god yes, he’s tight on me, oh god, so good*—and my brain clicked off. The smell of his skin against mine, the squeak of the sofa springs as I pumped, the feel of his body pressed to me, his arms tight and strong. We stopped kissing; we were just mouthing each other, with soft cries of encouragement and passion. I felt myself climbing, higher, higher as I pumped harder and harder.

“Come in me, Byron. Give it to me,” Kendall’s husky voice in my ear. It was enough to send me over.

I cried out and came hard.

When I was back to the real world, he was kissing my neck and shoulders, and rubbing his hands over my back. I pulled back but he kept me close. “Stay here, just for a minute.” He grimaced and stretched his legs down and I slipped a little out of him. It felt so warm and sweet to be held this way.

It scared me.

This wasn’t what I’d signed up for; I was here to do a job.

After a while we lay front to front on the sticky sofa. Kendall smiled, pushed my sweaty hair back and kissed me. “A shower, a smoke, *and* good sex. Who knew?”

“You feeling better?” I palmed down his torso, admiring his full chest and broad shoulders.

“Yeah, a lot better.”

I leaned up and grabbed the throw from the back of the sofa. We snugged a couple of pillows under our heads and lay back together. Time to push a little more, I decided.

“So, you and Ricardo.... Things seem pretty tense between you two.”

“Tense? You could say that.” He looked away from me, as if embarrassed.

“You guys exes or business partners or what exactly?”

“Soon to be ex-business partners if I have my way.”

“What’s the deal?”

Kendall sighed. He ran a hand down my chest and fingered my belly button. “Ooooh, an outie. Aren’t you too sexy?”

I touched his chin and made him look at me. “You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. But.... This could be more than just sportfucking, ya know? If you let it.”

His brow furrowed, but he didn’t pull away. He pressed closer and let his fingers run over my face. “Light us another joint, wouldja?”

After a couple minutes, the joint was half-gone, and he was more relaxed. I took a couple hits but didn’t want to get too stoned; he didn’t seem to notice. He told me how Ricardo had showed up a couple years ago when the refuge was in bad financial shape, how

Ricardo had funded a lot of the improvements to be certified as a quarantine facility, that Ricardo paid him a salary that anyone south of Atlanta would blink at. Everything seemed good for the first year then Ricardo started bringing new cats to quarantine. They'd stay for a couple of weeks, then be gone; Kendall didn't find out where until this spring.

Ricardo was supplying the game farms in Texas and Alabama. Wholesale prices weren't very high for some big cats—hell, you could go to any animal auction in the South and buy an adult tiger for six hundred dollars—but the rarer breeds earned Ricardo real money.

“He makes me sick. What he does with these cats makes me sick.” Kendall smacked his palm against the sofa. “That fucker.”

“What's his hold on you? I mean, it's not the gay thing, is it?”

“He doesn't care who I fuck.”

“So, what's the deal?”

Kendall pointed to a few photos over the fireplace. I got up for a closer look. They all showed Kendall and a dark-haired woman. Older? Younger? It was impossible to tell. She had the distinctive appearance of the retarded: her body blockish and solid, her eyes a little flat, her smile innocent and wide. “Sister?” I asked.

“Yeah, two years older. She's not profound, just moderate. We tried her in a group home but even that was too much for her. So, I've got her in an ALF. She's happy there.”

“And having her here isn't an option, obviously.”

“Not with my job. Maybe if I were an accountant or something. You know how the cats are; I can't even bring her here to visit.”

“Is that where you go on Wednesdays?” He nodded. “ALFs like that are expensive, I bet.”

“Four grand a month.”

“And how much does Ricardo pay you?”

His dark eyes gazed at me, cold now, a little reptilian. Maybe that was the anger.

“Enough to take care of her and the cats.”

“You trying to get out?”

He sat up on the sofa, the throw puddled over his legs. He palmed his face, pulling his features back into a grimace that looked like a lion phelgming—scenting the air. “I’m trying to figure out a way to get out. The refuge can’t survive on donations alone; we’re too isolated. I’d have to get a fucking job.”

I sat down again, close. “Or keep less animals.”

“Not an option.” Of course not, not for Kendall.

“You know for sure that’s Ricardo’s selling these animals off to dealers? And that he’s importing them illegally?”

“Yeah. He’s got a connection with some old Army buddy of his who’s still in Thailand. They fly direct into the country, some kind of military plane that doesn’t file flight plans. You can buy anything in Bangkok; hell, you can buy *humans* in Bangkok.”

“Does he have any records here? Any invoices or receipts?”

“He keeps some kind of ledger in the office. Plus, he has his iPhone.”

“Videos maybe, of the hunts?”

“He’s got some in the office with the VCR, but they’re old. Most of the stuff he has coded on his website.”

“Any other evidence?”

Kendall looked at me sharply. I saw the realization hit him, saw the second that he knew I was after something. “Who the hell are you?”

“I’m not who you think I am.” I pressed him back and straddled his thick thighs. I nuzzled at his nipples; his chest hair tickled my lips, soft. Kendall groaned. I pinned his thick arms over his head. His pupils were huge; they made his eyes look abnormal, a little creepy. “Maybe there’s a way to get you out of this situation. Are you willing to testify against him?”

His eyes went cold. “Will it put him in jail?”

“In prison. And we’ll find a way to save these cats you’ve got now.”

He looked over at the mantel and grimaced. A few seconds ticked by. He grabbed my hands and pulled them to his chest. “What do you need me to do?”

The sun rose and the room grayed with soft light. I saw hope in his face, a way out of the mess, a way out for the cats. “Okay, here’s the plan....”

The plan went fine until Ricardo got hold of the kill gun from Kendall’s office.

Most wildlife facilities had a shotgun onsite—for a worst-case scenario. It wasn’t something a handler ever wanted to face. Killing an animal you were trying to protect

felt like the worst kind of failure. But you needed one nearby.

There wasn't time to get Kendall wired, so I made do with a little hand-held mini recorder tucked into his waistband. I had Russo and his team in the woods outside the entrance, and when the buyer's truck rolled in, I kept my headset on, and hid in the quarantine barn's office. I could see and hear what went on in the walkway and a little of the cages.

Ricardo and his Texas boys strolled through, Kendall a step behind, glowering.

"Look at these cats!" Ricardo banged his walking stick against a cage door.

The black leopard in the cage growled and crouched down in one corner, unwilling to move. Bored, Ricardo turned to the next cage. The spotted leopard there was waiting for him. When he raised his stick, the cat leaped against the barrier at face level, its claws out. The chain link rattled fiercely as it pawed the metal. Ricardo jerked back in surprise, then recovered. He smacked the leopard's paws from the outside, but it didn't back down.

"Stop it." Kendall's voice was tight.

Ricardo just grinned. "They need the excitement."

"No, they need to be back in the wild. They don't belong in these cages." Kendall stood in the aisle, fists clenched.

"I don't need your candy-ass animal rights crap right now. Shut up."

"You know they're endangered and you sell them. You're helping to destroy the entire population."

"These animals are going to die anyway! If I can make some money speeding up that

process, then that's my right."

Good work, Kendall. Get him on tape, get the evidence.

The buyers edged out, looking anxious.

"It's not your right, you lousy fuck. You're not taking these leopards; I'm keeping them."

Ricardo's face went blank, utterly smooth. I had that split-second of gut warning and before I could get out of the office, into the barn, Ricardo swung his walking stick against Kendall's head. An ugly crack of sound and Kendall crumpled to the dirt floor, on his knees. He covered his face as blood spilled into his eyes and mouth.

It made my guts twist. Seeing him hurt made my chest go cold. How far to let this go? Should I hold back, wait for Kendall to get Ricardo to say the right words?

The cats went nuts.

They smelled the blood, started yowling. They clanged against the metal cages. The leopard closest to Kendall swiped out with one thick paw, snagged his boot. It actually dragged him a few inches towards the cage.

Kendall kicked back and swayed on his knees. The blood from his scalp wound was bright red, healthy-looking. It turned to copper on barn's dirt floor.

Ricardo prodded his stick into Kendall's belly. "You are not going to ruin my operation here. You work for me, you little shit."

Kendall tried to rise but Ricardo jabbed the stick into his chest, knocking him back into the dirt. The cats paced in their cages, smelling the blood, sensing a potential victim who was injured—vulnerable. Kendall spoke through gritted teeth. "You're not taking them to Texas to kill them. I'll kill them myself, right now, before I let you do this again."

“We’ll see who does the killing today.” Ricardo slammed the stick against Kendall’s neck, and he went down again, face in the dirt.

Ricardo gahlumped into the office; even with the walking stick he could move pretty fast. He was in the door and grabbing the shotgun off the wall before I even realized it. He turned, saw me, and his eyes went flat again—dangerously cold. I started to reach for my ankle holster, but he smacked me in the belly with the butt of the shotgun. The air whooshed from my lungs in a sickening wrench. I staggered against the desk, trying to stay up.

Ricardo broke the shotgun, checked the shells and marched back out into the barn.

I sucked for air, hitting the desk with my palms, trying to get my lungs to inflate. Gray speckles of light flashed in my vision.

Oh no, I cannot faint now.

It felt like forever, but it was only a few seconds. I heard Russo’s voice in my earpiece—“Are you there? Byron, are you hit?”—endlessly, over and over until I could finally get some oxygen.

“Move in! Move in! He’s got the shotgun!” My voice was whispery, dry but I heard Russo’s “10-4” from the other end.

I fumbled in my ankle holster and drew my .45. Frightened as I was, I still remembered to clear the doorway before exiting, to check my line of fire even as I moved towards Ricardo. His back was to me, and he prodded Kendall with the ugly end of the shotgun.

Kendall stayed down.

“Drop your weapon, Ricardo! I’m a game commission officer, and I’ve got a gun on you.

Put it down and turn around slowly. Hands in the air!”

He stiffened. I focused on his broad back, ample target area from just four yards away. The gun was still pointed at Kendall’s bloody skull.

“Do it, Ricardo! *I will* shoot you. Drop it!”

It was truly slow motion. His head turned first. I saw his wide eyes, his mouth open and snarling—then his stomach made the turn, his left hand on the stock and he kept turning and turning, the shotgun swinging towards the cage to my left, then around, its metal glinting, his finger on the trigger—*oh, no, the shotgun, oh no no no no!*

I squeezed the .45’s trigger fast—one, two, three, just like on the range—then stopped to check my target. Ricardo dropped to his knees, the blossom of blood on his shirt dark red, heart’s blood, and his eyes rolled back and he took forever to pitch face forward into the dirt.

The shotgun clattered to the ground.

I kept my gun out and bent to check him. No pulse, just warm flesh, still and silent. My earpiece squawked but I couldn’t focus on Russo’s words. I kneed over to Kendall.

“Hey, Kendall,” I said and rolled him over gently. His eyelids fluttered and he groaned like a bull. “Open your eyes for me, please.”

His face was slippery with blood. “What happened?” His voice was raspy, filled with pain.

“Ricardo tried to shoot you. How’s your head?”

“Shitty. Really shitty.”

“You’ve probably got a concussion. Just lie still.” I pressed my headset. “Russo, tell me there’s an ambulance on the way. We need medical attention!”

“Pulling in right now. Ambulance is at the back.”

“I’ve got one suspect down, one civvie with a head wound.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No, it’s Kendall. He’s one of the good guys.” I managed a half-smile, put one trembling palm on his slick face. He grasped my hand with his, clutching, tight as a cub. The pain in his eyes made me feel nauseated; he’d taken some hits for his cats, and for my operation.

I heard the trucks barreling up the drive. The cats roared and screamed around us.

I bent down and kissed his soft lips. The blood was salty and sweet at the same time.

He let his fingers trail against my chest. “You stay with me?”

“I’m not going anywhere, don’t you worry.” I kissed his hand and held it until Russo’s team arrived and my vision went fuzzy again—just a little— the adrenaline seeping from my system. The EMTs jogged in with a stretcher, and they pushed me away.

Shaky, I couldn’t stand. I watched them work on Kendall with Russo at my side. He took one look at Ricardo’s body oozing blood into the ground and just stood next to me, a fatherly hand on my shoulder.

Nine days later, the windows open to a late-season cool front. We woke in Kendall’s bed. The bandage was off his scalp and fresh pink flesh grew over his lacerations. He’d done a

night in the hospital, then a week of rest at home. The department put me on administrative leave, SOP after a shooting. I was fine with the time off. Randy and I managed the cats for the week Kendall was down. Hard work.

Each night Kendall and I soaked in the tub together, and he made me forget my sore muscles.

“Wanna go into town and hit the buffet for breakfast?” he asked.

“You that hungry?”

“Starved.” His hand worked between my legs, tugging my testicles in a gentle rhythm. My cock filled with blood and stretched against my belly. “Maybe I need an appetizer first.”

“I think you do.”

He nuzzled down my belly as he straddled my thighs. The heat of his mouth on my cock made me shiver—so soft inside yet insistent. He really liked to suck when he gave a blowjob; sometimes it tickled and hurt at the same time. I watched his head bob up and down as he wet me with his spit. He kept one hand between my legs, stroking just behind my balls. The other was wrapped around me, squeezing just beneath the cap, just the way I liked it.

I loved watching him over me: his gleaming hair, his neck muscles that corded as he worked my cock, his shoulders smooth-skinned and solid. His long eyelashes lay against his cheeks, hiding his beautiful eyes. He jerked me faster, my breathing raced and sweat prickled my chest and belly.

Close now, so close.

“Look at me when I come.” My voice was scratchy. “Make me come, Kendall.”

He bent lower, took me into his throat and milked me. The pressured heat ran up my balls and throbbed through my cock. He raised his eyes to mine just as I came and held me with his gaze as he swallowed me down. My fingers gripped his shoulders until the skin turned red, and I bucked with my hips, wanting to fill him with more, more, more.

He let me go and kissed up my belly. The breeze carried in the whiff of wild animal and just as he lay his head on my chest, Walter's roar belted through the compound.



If you enjoyed this story, try these:

[*Rough Cut: Vincent Diamond Collected*, available from Amazon:](#)

(print and Kindle).

[*Horse Tales*, available from Smashwords:](#)

[*Feathers*, available from All Romance E-books:](#)

Animal charity information

A portion of the proceeds from all of my writing and editing projects is donated to various animal charities. Among the ones I support:

***Animal Attraction 2*, available from Torquere Press:**

[Gentle Giants Draft Horse Rescue](#)

[Florida Draft Horse Rescue](#)

These non-profit charities provide rescue and rehab efforts for the draft breeds of horses: Belgians, Clydesdales, Percherons, Shires, and other heavy breeds. Sad as it is to say, because of their size, these animals too often end up in feedlots, headed for slaughter.

***Feathers*, available from Lethe Press**

[Audubon Birds of Prey Center](#) in Maitland, Florida

***Horse Tales*, available from Smashwords or Kindle**

[Equine Rescue League](#)

About the Author

The alleged Vincent Diamond once drove from Tampa to Anchorage, Alaska in the days before the Alcan Highway was paved. Once. For the past few years, I've written, edited, and proofread for various publishers, and I take on select, private clients. When I can get away from the keyboard, I'm in the ring trying to pick up the correct diagonal at the trot, collecting caladiums, or pondering the beauty of tigers.

Signed and inscribed copies of *Rough Cut* are available directly from me. Let me know how you'd like the book inscribed, and I'd be happy to send it to you (\$22, U.S.) Please feel free to email me: [vincent @ vincentdiamond.com](mailto:vincent@vincentdiamond.com).