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## Pride

by

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The hot fur thing under Kevin's shirt clawed at his chest. *Nice going*, he thought. *First the bum rap for weed, and now if I don't get caught stealing lab animals, I'll get rabies from this freak.*

Frankenlab, at Franken U, AKA Franklin Agricultural College, was messing with animals, electrodes in their brains, cloning them like Dolly the Sheep, except not regular animals. Dead animals from frozen meat. And they were going to kill the animals.

He couldn't save them all. Those fuzzy orange-furred mice, most wouldn't make it. Those guys from Animals Our Brethren had pried open cages, and when the mice wouldn't come out, they shook them out, and when the mice squeed, cowering under lab tables, they kicked them until they ran into corners, and from there may God have mercy on their itty souls.

Kevin petted the little monster through his shirt, but it writhed around and gummed him. "I'm saving your life, dumbox!" He dashed out of the building

minutes before alarms brought the fire department.

Kevin had been in trouble before. A year ago, his girl friend's cousin Ed and he had been cruising around in Ed's van, which had expired plates. Kevin didn't know about the baggie of pot under the driver's seat. When the state patrol started following, Ed asked Kevin to switch places. His license, like the plates, was expired, he said. They switched, veering madly, on a lonely stretch of 422. When they finally stopped and the cops asked to search the van, Kevin shrugged and said okay.

"And whose is this?" Ed said, not me. Kevin was too surprised to look properly surprised, and this was a zero-tolerance state. So Ed got off with a warning, and Kevin, stuck with court-appointed counsel, served thirty days.

\*

Kevin had been looking for a job to pay for college, when local papers broke the story that some thousand-odd animals (mostly, admittedly, mice) would be killed because their experiment was over. What was he thinking of? He wasn't an animal-rights kind of dude. Still, he felt panicked exultation fleeing the scene of the crime.

He struggled to control his Pinto while driving with the squirming thing scratching inside his shirt. He fumbled the back door key and pounded downstairs to the basement, where he pulled the light cord above the laundry tub and took the furball out of his shirt.

"Oh God, what have they done to you?" It was deformed: big head, chopped-off tail. Cat? Dog? A mix?

He deposited it in the laundry tub. Boggling at the size of its mouth, he realized it needed food. Now.

Forward pointing eyes. Meat-eater. He ran upstairs and grabbed a raw chicken breast from the fridge. He held it out to the cub.

The cub flopped down on its belly in the tub, and tried to howl. All that came out was a squeak.

He tried to stuff the meat into its mouth, but it flinched away and lay looking at him, sides heaving.

Maybe the mother chewed the food up for it. Mother? Not hardly. This thing didn't have a mother. It was fucking hatched in Frankenlab.

Raised in farm country, Kevin liked animals. He sometimes even petted Rosebud, the town pit bull, when Rosebud wasn't into tearing people's arms off. If his parents had been rich, he'd be pre-veterinary at FrankenU. Or a cattle rancher, or a discoverer of rare snakes.

He retrieved a knife from upstairs, hacked tidbits off the chicken breast, and put them in the cub's mouth. The cub sucked on them, famished. It got to its feet and seized his finger with its front paws. Head held sideways, it chomped down on his finger. It did have a few teeth, it seemed.

He jerked away. "Stop it, you little monster!" Then he realized he might wake his mother.

*Kevin, it's a baby. Duh.*

Where would he get a baby bottle?

He opened a can of condensed milk from the pantry, dipped a chicken chunk in it, and let the monster suck milk off the meat. Twenty minutes later it either got satisfied, or gave up. Its little belly looked marginally bigger, and the can was empty, mostly spilled on the laundry tub or his shirt.

It stretched and unsheathed claws way too big for a little guy the size of a raccoon.

Kevin thought, *It'll purr now.* Instead, it washed its face, running front paws over those deformed big jaws.

And then, just when Kevin decided it was almost cute, it reached out a

claw and pricked his arm, not enough to hurt, just to say, More?

"You're beginning to tick me off," he said. The cub's gaze radiated adoration . It licked his hand, nearly rasping his skin off.

Its fur was golden retriever blonde, its eyes the color of river moss. Green-eyed blonde, like Sara. Dappled coat, like freckles on Sara's sweet shoulders. Sara Jones: they were almost a couple before his arrest; now she acted distant.

The monster leapt out of the tub and landed on the floor. It shook itself, surprised at the fall.

He lay down and stared at it, eye to eye. "You need a name."

He was furious that they planned to kill it. It was harmless. Uh, maybe not harmless. Planning to get big, judging from those paws, each the size of cheeseburgers. But innocent.

"What the hell have I got myself into?" he asked it.

Its grotesque little face radiated adoration.

With the knife he'd used to cut the chicken, and thinking of Sara Jones, he tapped the little monster on each shoulder, and said, "I dub thee Sir Jonesy."

\*

For a week, he kept Jonesy locked in the root cellar. His mom either didn't know, or pretended not to. Rosebud, Mr. Trumbull's pitbull, kept getting off his chain and sneaking over to paw at the basement door. There was an article in the paper about the lab fire, but the lab animals weren't mentioned.

The scientists downplayed it all. The animals had been slated for "sacrifice," Dr. Betty Hartley said. Federal regulations required that animals be euthanized at the end of an experiment, she said, plus the money had run out. Cold. "Sacrifice": nice euphemism. Like "put to sleep." Like anything ever woke up from that sleep. Sacrifice? What, were they going to dance around

an altar and beg God to protect them from weird-ass animal zombies?

Dr. Hartley said she was sad that the animals had all died in the fire, but accidents will happen.

So now he couldn't let anybody in on his secret. It would be insane to let the scientists find the cub again and kill it. But Jonesy (the cub was female, he discovered) whined and shivered in the root cellar, so he brought it upstairs.

His mother was not pleased.

"Look, Mom. I know it's humongous for a kitten, but that's all it is. Pet it?"

She refused to touch it. "I don't care what it is, I don't want it in my house."

"Listen, they'll kill it if I take it back. It's cute, see?" He held it to his chest to minimize her view of the monstrous head. Its fur was rough, not silky like a kitten's. But it was warm and happy to snuggle.

"Cute? Kevin, I'll show you cute. I know you stole it from Frankenlab. It'll probably get up in the night and suck our blood."

"Shit, mom. It eats milk, not blood. You can't just kick it out on the street like a -- like a broken TV."

"Kevin, get a job. And get that thing out of my house."

But Kevin's mother was too tired to put her foot down.

\*

The cub's teeth started coming in. On a diet of ground meat that Kevin got from dumpster-diving, it had loads of energy. It used the energy stalking Kevin and shredding everything in Kevin's room.

The eye teeth erupted. And erupted. And erupted. Not domestic cat teeth. Long as the fishing knife the cops had taken away from him when he was caught with the pot.

He woke up one morning to find out the monster sitting on his chest, hungry or affectionate, as if you could tell even with a tame cat.

"Man," said Kevin, peering closer, "Your mom should have sued your orthodontist."

The cub did not laugh.

Not a vampire, but those sharp, sharp teeth --

And then his mind chewed through a bunch of information and farted out the truth. Rumors of ice age frozen flesh? Cloning? Bingo.

The damn thing, scrutinizing him with gold-green eyes, opening its huge mouth in a silent howl, was a sabertooth tiger.

"Woo, dude. I thought you were trouble before."

It would need lots more meat.

At first he bought cheap cuts, then when he realized his money from mowing lawns wasn't cutting it, he abstracted food from his own meals and from the refrigerator. And dumpster-dove the local supermarket.

One day, he found his mother in the kitchen, her hand bandaged. He hoped the bite was from Rosebud, but if Rosebud had bitten her, she'd probably be a mangled corpse.

He sank into a chair, while the sabertooth attacked the stinky mess he'd brought home for it.

"That's it, Kevin. You're my only son, the light of my life, a good smart boy although way too trusting, but that cat is out by tonight or I call the cops." She blew her nose on a crumbled tissue. "I know where he came from."

Kevin didn't blame her. She was tired from overwork, just wanted to be left alone and sleep more than five hours at a time. They'd been moderately affluent before Kevin's dad left. But Dad had a really good lawyer. The measly child support had stopped when Kevin turned eighteen. Dad still sent

birthday cards with a two dollar bill in each.

"If the boy wants ta college education, a job will make him appreciate it more."

Jobs, yeah, well. Jobs for twenty-one year old guys who've done even a little time aren't easy to come by. Odd jobs, maybe shoveling walks in winter. Kevin wasn't a drinker, so he didn't have AA networking to fall back on.

Also, the damn cub was too mischievous to leave alone for long.

The week before the cat nipped Mom, he'd come home from helping a neighbor get her hay in and found the cub playing with a large rat. When the sabertooth saw him, she grabbed the rat in her mouth and tried to run away. Thank god it had been a rat and not those ratty-looking poodles the Parks owned.

So Mom was right. The cat needed a home

Sara. Their beginning romance had aborted, but he ran into to her sometimes at the feed store. She'd understood Kevin didn't know about the pot. But she always said, "It's not a good time," if he wanted to come over to the farm, or ask her out, not that he had much money for dates.

Guess she didn't want to be with a loser.

But, hell, he could rise again. Many great men, millionaires, politicians, had a shady past.

Sara didn't hate him.

He put the cub in an appliance carton (it whimpered, but complied), wrapped it with pink and ivory paper and gold ribbon, and lugged it to the Pinto. The cub thrashed around inside the box on his front seat, while he drove like a maniac to Sara's farm. Sara's parents hadn't really worked the family farm much since her granddad died, just kept geese and a big garden, and when they moved south to escape the winters, Sara kept the farm. Kevin used to help

out, before he went to jail.

He lost his nerve and left the gyrating package on her paint-peeled porch.

\*

The phone was ringing when he got back.

"Kevin, what is this? It nearly took my arm off."

He breathed slowly. He'd enrolled in an anger management class while in jail, not because he had problems with anger, but because the textbook looked interesting, and he found the breathing helped calm him. "Sara, it's a sabertooth tiger."

"They're extinct."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, so's the Bill of Rights. But this thing is a clone. From frozen meat."

"And this concerns me how?"

"It's, uh -- "

"Look, Kevin, I remember the Maine Coon kittens you gave me. I love those cats. But this is different, no? You must have stolen this thing from the college. And that's not all. It's going to grow up and be really aggressive. And, well, also -- "

"Sorry. I'll come and get her back. Don't let her out, though. I'm not sure she knows how to defend herself."

When he got to the farm, Sara acted nervous, but she kissed him, and they sat on the couch and talked, about Ed, about jail. They didn't have sex, but he got his hopes up they could reconnect. Jonesy, meantime, tried to shred everything in her living room. She had put out a bowl of hamburger, otherwise the cub might have started shredding their clothes.

"It's not exactly cute," she said.

Jonesy's whiskers were almost as amazing as her teeth. Long and



delicate. She stalked everything in the room, even shadows.

Kevin watched. The cub would hunker down and wriggle her backside, then dart forward and roll upside down. The hunker/wriggle part looked like any cat, but he'd never seen an animal do a half roll while attacking. Did that have anything to do with the sword-like canines?

"Kevin, you know I love animals."

Kevin said nothing. Their shoulders touched, and he put his hand on hers.

She left it there. "Okay. Until you get a place of your own. Don't come visiting without calling, though." She withdrew her hand.

Somebody was living with her. Of course.

\*

The arrangement lasted three weeks.

When he drove over in answer to her phone call, Sara was crying. Jonesy had killed one of her geese, a real achievement, since even Rosebud was loathe to fool with the geese. But when Kevin opened the door, he boggled at how much the sabertooth had grown. Jonesy had to weigh as much Rosebud now.

Oops. What if Jonesy had attacked Sara?

"I let her run," she said. "You can't keep an animal like this cooped up. And it killed Emily Dickinson." Emily Dickinson was one of her geese. She named her geese after women poets.

"What have you been feeding her?" He felt shame that he hadn't offered to pay for Jonesy's food. As if he could. He had a sudden panic over the welfare of the two Maine coon cats, but they were dozing on the sofa. The sofa was shredded, but the cats were fine.

"I feed her canned dogfood, but she's always hungry. I haven't seen a

raccoon in the neighborhood for two weeks. Kevin, I don't know where you can take her but she can't stay here."

Was Jonesy grown enough to survive on her own, on garbage, raccoons, and people's geese? "How did she learn to eat the raccoons?"

"When I separated them, Emily kind of -- split open, you know -- and Jonesy stood over Emily, and then, as if she was sorry for the poor goose, she bent over and started licking her feathers, and she tasted the blood, and all of a sudden -- "

Kevin had seen barn cats experience this epiphany. They discover their toy tastes good. Most learned from the mother cat, but get them hungry enough --

"She doesn't bother the geese any more. They run away. But then there's the deer."

Kevin looked at his baby monster. "Jonesy couldn't take down a deer."

"Maybe not, but she sure knows how to chase them. And I worry about Mr. Trumbull's cows."

Kevin stood. "Thanks for taking care of her."

She took his hand, then moved closer. They gazed at each other. Could he kiss her?

She stepped back. "Take her somewhere. Hey, what about your Dad's old trailer?"

The trailer featured scarcely more than a bed and a mini-dinette, abandoned on the lot near his mom's apartment. Roof leaked, plumbing wasn't connected. No trailer park would let him in with that wreck.

Nor with an "exotic animal." Even if he could pass Jonesy off as a rescued bobcat or lion cub.

"I'll call around." He had brought a collar and leash, and he snapped

these on Jonesy. Jonesy had been on leash before and didn't like it, but she trusted Kevin enough not to fight.

Kevin was becoming an expert on smilodons. They weren't even from the same branch of the Felida family as lions and tigers, but still might live in families. He must seem to Jonesy like her mother or the leader of her -- what did they call lion families? -- pride.

He smiled at Sara, eyes full of hope.

"Go!" she said, shoving him playfully. The sabertooth bared huge teeth at Sara until she smoothed its back fur. "You can come back. Bring Jonesy if you can control her. Just call first."

He led the sabertooth to his car. His mind roiled with possibility. Ask her! he thought. She's got a new guy, or she doesn't. Ask!

Too many secrets in Kevin's life: an animal he couldn't give up and couldn't keep, and a girl he wanted and whose life had become a mystery.

"Cat," he said. "We ain't neither of us got no pride."

\*

Kevin's uncle owned some unworked farmland twenty miles out of town center. He got permission to park the trailer there, planning to haul water and use cartridges for gas heat. He bought a generator and parked the trailer well back from the road.

Odd jobs weren't enough. His mom's restaurant needed a dishwasher. Since the owner knew him -- and about the jail time -- there was no background check problem. Kevin bought a cellphone that didn't require a credit card, and the modern man out of his time and ice age cat went there to live their hard life.

College plans receded into mist. Maybe someday Kevin could write a book about this. He bought a cheap digital camera and started a journal of the Jonesy's growth and behavior.

The sabertooth soon learned to paw open the refrigerator. Kevin was forced to keep only vegetables in it. To supplement the dogfood, he brought home a cut-up chicken or a chuck steak every night. Jonesy tore into these, sometimes before Kevin could get the wrapper off. Sometimes the wrapper would get impaled on the four inch-long canines, and she would run around the room trying to scrape them off. Kevin fell down laughing the first time that happened.

Kevin's own meals were either vegetarian or eaten at the restaurant.

\*

He bought a used copy of *Born Free* at a yard sale. Jonesy wasn't any kind of modern cat, but it was a start. The librarian found him treatises on the smilodons of North America, though he wasn't even sure that's what Jonesy was. He had to play it cool when the librarian got nosy about his interest in cloning.

Jonesy shredded any book he brought home. To her, books, like everything else, were toys. So his reading was restricted to the library and their internet computers, and since he didn't like leaving the cat alone when she was awake, he kept all his research in his head.

He couldn't keep the sabertooth penned up, any more than Sara could. So, after a few weeks, he let her off the long line he'd tied to the trailer, and watched her lope the perimeter of the mowed area, where the demolished farmhouse had set. The line wouldn't hold her anyway, if she wanted to get away. She would chew through chain, though it might damage her beautiful teeth.

She stopped periodically to smell things, and her ears perked at the passage of a bird.

Then she saw the fox, and he thought he'd have to change her name to

Turbo.

Did she eat the fox? No doubt she'd caught it. No bloody carcass in the trampled down area where the chase had ended. But for two days later, Jonesy looked quite pleased with herself.

The rest of that summer, the winter, and spring. The sabertooth grew sleek and menacing, muscles moving smoothly under short tawny fur. One of her magnificent eyeteeth loosened. When it fell out, she let Kevin feel inside her mouth, and under it, another tooth was coming in. Which grew and grew and grew. The other side did the same, and one morning he awoke to her heavy paws on his chest and opened his eyes to see her monstrous white glistening sabers new and sharp and creamy white, each as long as the knife they used in the restaurant kitchen to hack apart beef joints.

Her inscrutable face and hot moist breath made his heart jump with terror. But she was his companion; he had held her under his shirt. He had fed her milk.

He reached up and stroked her ears, which alone of her fur retained kittenish silkiness. Then, with the greatest caution, he touched her saber fangs. Smooth, like ivory knives. This meant she was -- Smilodon fatalis? Smilodon neogaeus? Or the other genus -- Megantereon? He couldn't tell: he was no paleontologist.

He called Sara, to share this experience. She picked up after two rings, and hung up. But not even Sara's rejection could spoil that moment.

He was the first man ever to touch a living smilodon's teeth, and survive.

\*

Sara would call now and then to ask about Jonesy, or tell him about a job opening. He could leave the sabertooth with her during the day, she said.

But when he called, employers always knew he was the kid who went to

jail for drugs. Such is rural town gossip.

Jonesy and he walked the perimeter of the farm every night, out of sight of the road. He'd been four years out of high school. College seemed much further away now. He thought, *Some would say I have no life. A dumbass job. Had good grades, could gone to college, married a beautiful woman who owned land. Lost all that because I trusted the wrong person, didn't fight the system hard enough. Could have done better. But I've touched the saber teeth of a smilodon, and if no other gift is given me in this life, that might be enough.*

If Jonesy missed anything, she never said so.

Then Jonesy came into heat.

As she came insinuating up to him, dragging her butt against the floor, trying to hump the ragged sofa arm, beseeching him to do something, anything, he just said, "Kitten, I'd write you a personals ad, but your kind don't subscribe to the Country Cryer."

Neutering, but how the hell would he pass her off as anything but what she was? The vet would remember the incident at Frankenlab, and all would be up. Another jail sentence for Kevin. Worse for Jonesy: "sacrifice" at the hands of the scientists.

He tried penning her in the trailer while he slept in the Pinto, but she started chewing through the metal window frame. He let her out, and she howled to get inside with him.

Next night, his cell phone rang.

"Kevin, Keith, whatever your name is. People hear that howling, don't know what it is. But I do."

Kevin's heart lurched. Caller ID said: *B. HARTLEY*. The scientist. "Doctor Hartley. You plan to 'sacrifice' her now?"

“No, you dolt. Do I have to spell it out for you? I incited your stupid Animals Our Brethren people to start that fire so she’d get away.”

He took it in. “She’s in heat. What should --”

“She’ll either go out of heat, or she’ll attack somebody. She may even decide you’re the lucky tom. Give her back to me.”

“Was there another sabertooth? A male?”

"Of course not, you idiot."

He snapped the cellphone shut and threw it against a wall.

Jonesy disappeared into the woods behind French Lick Creek.

A week later she slunk back. Kevin waited, but she was not knocked up. How could she be?

\*

He was pretty sure Jonesy was keeping down the deer and raccoon population, but nobody mentioned missing any dogs. Cats, maybe.

When he needed to go to work, he had to lock her in the trailer, and she gnawed at the door and chewed the knob. Thank God she didn't have opposable thumbs; she was smarter than most dogs and cats. And some people.

But heaven, even Kevin and Jonesy's twisted heaven, can never last.

He had to run an errand. The feed store, which closed in the evening, was the cheapest place to get her dogfood.

How she got out and trailed him wasn't that hard to reconstruct. He'd been careless. As he walked out of the store, he nearly tripped over her sunning herself on the front steps.

And across the square was Rosebud. Rosebud wasn't supposed to be out, either, but Mr. Trumbull was pretty lax too.

Rosebud hated cats. And Jonesy smelled like a big, unneutered cat.

Rosebud killed cats. Smart cat owners in French Creek Township kept their pets indoors. As to farm cats, thank God Rosebud couldn't climb trees.

Rosebud was across the square, urinating on a post. He stopped abruptly and put his leg down, tiny ears perked, nose twitching. Then he charged.

Halfway across the square, he suddenly changed his mind. Uncertain, he froze, then turned tail.

Jonesy wasn't a long distance runner, but she was fast on a sprint.

What Kevin saw next was that weird smilodon leap. Jonesy charged and without stopping, rolled to her back, hugged Rosebud's neck, then sank her saber teeth into the dog's throat. The dog heaved into the air, Jonesy rolled over on top of him, and the two struggled. Rosebud had no offensive weapons but his jaws, and he'd never had to defend himself before, so his struggles turned to spasms and in seconds, he lay still.

Jonesy straddled the dog and raised her bloodied jaws in a terrifying roar. Everybody ran out of the feed store, the diner, and the gift shop.

Jonesy lowered her jaws and began to tear pieces out of the dog's belly.

Kevin fought vertigo and nausea. Somebody yelled, "Anybody catch that on video?"

He charged across the square, screaming at Jonesy. Three guys tried to stop him, yelling, "It'll kill you!" but he slid to a stop by the scene of carnage and yanked on Jonesy's collar.

"He's crazy!" somebody yelled.

Kevin realized he was crazy. Jonesy weighed maybe five hundred pounds by now. He'd read plenty of accounts of people mauled by previously docile big cats. Why did he assume Jonesy was different?



But he had to get the cat away, before somebody with a gun thought to use it.

A small, strong hand gripped his wrist.

Sara. Sara had the rifle her grandfather always carried in her truck. It had been a fixture in the truck for so long he'd forgotten about it. Nor did he wonder why she happened to be in town that day.

She gave him a serious look, then handed him the rifle. "It's under control," she yelled at the gathering crowd. "Back off before somebody gets hurt."

The dog was mangled meat. Jonesy had ripped open its throat and its belly and was standing over it, sides heaving with desire, jaws quivering with hunger and triumph.

The crowd all took a step back.

"Get her in the truck," Sara said. "You can still control her, can't you?"

Jonesy roared again, a softer roar.

Very deliberately -- he believed that crap about animals being able to sense fear, but also knew he could fake courage pretty well -- he took a handful of the loose flesh at the back of Jonesy's neck and said in a low growl, "Into the truck, bad girl."

And it was over. Jonesy lowered her head and her stump of a tail and climbed into Sara's truck. Kevin slammed the door.

Which left Sara and Kevin standing outside.

Sara was shaking. She reached up and grabbed Kevin's ears and kissed him hard, tongue and all. Breaking loose, she said, "You're an idiot! But, God almighty, you've got guts!"

What now? Kevin couldn't leave Jonesy inside the truck; first, the sabertooth would demolish the inside. Second, it was a nice spring day, sunny,

and heat would eventually build up and kill her.

But he could no longer predict the cat's behavior. Jonesy's blood was up; she might boil over.

"We have to get her out of here before the cops come," said Kevin. He shrugged, grabbed Sara's keys, and sprang into the truck.

Jonesy didn't kill him. The rest of his life, he would wonder why. Because he was dominant? Because she loved him? Do top predators know love?

He let Jonesy out of the truck outside his trailer. She lingered, licking his hand and making begging grunts, so he opened one of the dogfood cans. She took it away from him and rasped the horse meat out, then lay down in the grass.

He went inside and wept.

\*

Yes, somebody had videotaped it. Not the two animals running toward each other, not Jonesy's karate-like attack, but the dog underneath Jonesy, thrashing, then still, and Jonesy pulling out intestines. The video played several times, always zooming on the dead pitbull, then panning to Kevin pulling the cat away. He lay on the bed staring at the ceiling

Thank God the cat looked like a female lion in the video. Some bystanders remarked on its teeth, but nobody connected it with the break-in and fire at the lab a couple years previous.

\*

In the evening, Sara brought his car back. He didn't know how she started it, but she came in uninvited and lay beside him on the bed.

They kissed. She said, "Lock the door."

He did, obediently. "It won't stop Jonesy, if that's what you're thinking."

\*

Hours later, they dressed and talked about hunting for Jonesy. Nobody seemed to recognize either of them from the video. Nobody was knocking on the door. But Kevin's mind roiled with possibilities: if somebody recognized Sara's truck, they'd go to her house, then figure she was here. They'd come with guns for Jonesy. Jonesy was tame; she wouldn't know to run.

Hellfire. Maybe Jonesy should be put down.

He said, "I always thought you still loved me a little. Unless this is just a stress reaction."

She leaned into him, then grabbed and shook him, hard enough that he thought, she's going to slug me next. She said, "I loved you, you jerk, but I couldn't keep on loving somebody who was stupid enough to go to jail for what he didn't do."

"Ed is your cousin. I couldn't rat out your cousin. And I never was sure the pot was his, anyway."

"Idiot!" And she did slap him, not enough to hurt, then turned away, hiding tears. "Ed is a goddamn jerk. He got you in trouble, you shielded him. He's my blood, but nobody I'd ever choose for family. Kevin, Kevin. I can't be with a man who spent time in jail and who -- who lives with this monster."

"You like animals."

She sobered. "I do. I'm not sure what you should do with Jonesy. Maybe we could get rid of her somehow? Not kill her. Find somebody who would take her and keep her safe. Would you do that if I asked?"

"And we'd be like before?" He didn't say, *And you'll marry me*, but he hoped she'd know that's what he meant.

"We'd at least solve a problem. I have a friend who knows how to sell things on the internet. Remember those people who tried to sell their kid on e-

Bay?"

"They got caught."

"They were stupid. E-bay's not the option I had in mind. Listen, Ed isn't the only shady character we know. Maybe we can find a place for her."

He was reluctant. "Sara, don't get her killed. "

\*

He stayed up drinking cola after she left, but fell asleep in his lounge chair and awoke to early light and his cell phone ringtone.

"It's happened," said Hartley.

"What?" He thought she was talking about the attack on Rosebud.

"Sara Jones, that's your girl, right? The cat's over at her farm."

"Yeah, but Sara will be okay. Jonesy loves Sara."

"Judas Priest, boy, that cat is a top predator. Her definition of love is different from yours and mine. Big cats seem okay for years, then go off like a bomb and eviscerate somebody for no reason. For hunger. For a mate. Because a fly bit them on the nose."

"She loves Sara -- "

"Yeah, she loves you, too. And maybe she thinks Sara is a rival in love."

That sounded crazy. But Kevin pulled his clothes back on and ran to his car.

\*

He beat the police cruisers to the farm.

Jonesy was bashing the front door, roaring her earsplitting roar, not the roar of triumph she'd roared over Rosebud, not the roar of desire she'd yowled in heat. This was rage. And she was destroying the door.

As the first cruiser threw open its door and a cop sprang out with weapon drawn, the door imploded and Jonesy bounded inside.

Why had he thought Sara was safe? For some reason -- oh God maybe it was sexual rivalry -- Jonesy was after her.

Kevin bolted out of his car and up the porch stairs.

Inside, he smelled the fury of big, enraged cat.

"I'm up here!" Sara screamed.

He pounded up the stairs three at a time.

Sara's voice came from the upstairs bedroom. Outside that closed door, Jonesy reared on her back feet, head scraping the ceiling. She clawed at the door knob, chewed at the door panels.

One door panel split and fell inward. Jonesy threw herself with renewed rage, and the door splintered.

"Here girl! Bad girl!" Why hadn't he thought of bringing meat?

No. Meat wouldn't work.

Sara was screaming, punching at the jammed window.

He raced up and grabbed the cat's collar, but she turned and knocked him flat.

As he lay gasping from the blow, Jonesy lunged for Sara.

He crawled, dizzy, trying to rise despite the agony in his chest. He just reached the door when Jonesy rolled across the floor, sprang up, and sank her teeth into Sara's throat.

Sara's eyes went wide, green as Jonesy's eyes. Her head snapped back. The cat ripped out her flesh together with a piece of her tee shirt, then howled, head thrown back, whiskered black nose grazing the ceiling light fixture.

Then the cat leapt through the window, splintering the frame.

Kevin crawled over to Sara. Her head was nearly separated from her body, blood gushing everywhere, in her beautiful golden hair, on her torn shirt, the cracked linoleum floor. More blood than he had ever seen.

He buried his face in the hollow between her breasts and sobbed.

Then he rose and looked out the window. Jonesy was loping into the barn.

He felt his way down the stairs, shattered. Sara was so beautiful. And Jonesy, his charge, his responsibility, his pet, had killed her. Pet? Oh, no. Not a pet. No more than an astronaut would call the moon a pet. No more than a composer would call his greatest symphony a pet. No more than a mountain climber would call Everest a pet.

He stumbled out into the light. Five police cruisers ringed the house now, and a paramedic van. One of the paramedics had the rifle from Sara's truck.

"Cat still in there?" one cop yelled.

"Sara's upstairs. She's dead," Kevin said. He sank to his knees and sobbed.

Hartley appeared. "The cat ran into the barn. I saw it."

The paramedic raised the rifle, and another cop hauled open the barn door. He had a German shepherd with him on a short leash. Kevin pulled himself erect.

The dog strained forward, then turned to cower behind the cop. The cop broke into a run, at the same time trying to unholster his service revolver.

Jonesy exploded out of the barn. The cop with the dog fell down and Jonesy vaulted over them.

Kevin heard the sound of the rifle being cocked.

Kevin screamed, "No!" He launched himself at the rifleman.

The rifleman stumbled and the shot went wild.

A tawny streak -- Jonesy -- broke into the woods behind the barn and coursed out of sight.

Hartley screamed, "Why did you do that?"

"Killing the cat won't make Sara be alive again."

"You're in denial! The smilodon will kill again."

Kevin was silent. Hartley was right. He had no idea why he had pushed the rifleman. He felt his arms being jerked back, cuffs cut his wrists. But the sabertooth, the miracle from another world, was free.

"You were involved with Sara Jones," Hartley said. "I thought you loved her."

"I did. Not what matters."

"This monster kills the woman you love, and you protect it?"

How could he explain?

\*

Jonesy was never found, though attacks on domestic animals and deer increased in the county for a few weeks. Maybe the sabertooth died, maybe she went north, where the woods were thicker and the game larger.

Kevin went to jail. He got most of a college degree in there, gratis the state. He wasn't street smart, that was obvious, but he had a talent for book learning.

His life had changed forever. He got out of jail, went to university, studied paleontology, but studiously avoided Franklin U and Hartley, though she begged him for his photos of the smilodon.

He never married.

But he had companioned a smilodon, brought back from the deeps of time. It had been like stepping on the moon. He had touched its white, saber-like teeth. And it made him immortal.

It was enough.

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