

The Marriage at the Rue Morgue

By Jessie Bishop Powell

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Chapter 1

Lance Lakeland dodged as a well-aimed fecal mass sailed past him.

“Thanks for the warning, Noel,” he called as he headed towards me. “Integration not going so well?”

“Slow.” I had been toting breakfast to the enclosures before I stopped to check in on our newest monkey. The pungent smell of overripe fruit mingled with the earthy scent of Ohio forest as I leaned across the chow bucket and Lance bent down so I could peck his cheek. “Anyway,” I asked, “what’s up?”

Lance’s hairy right hand crept up to the top of his head. Though I couldn’t see it from my own height of barely over five feet, I knew he was scratching his bald spot. His left thumb started drumming on the dial of his two-way radio, and he hunched in what I called his gorilla pose. “Bub got in,” he finally said.

“What?” My sympathy for his stress faded fast. “I thought your brother wasn’t coming!” I thumped down the chow again, primates temporarily forgotten in light of this new personal crisis. “What are we going to do with him?”

“I don’t know,” Lance said. But he did know. We both knew. His right hand moved down to the back of his neck, and he looked at the bucket of food like maybe the answer was fermenting in the mangos and bananas.

Around us, the din of primate chatter edged up a notch. The animals were restless, perhaps keying off of their caretakers’ moods, or maybe reacting to the distant racket of mall construction. In one enclosure, chimpanzees emitted their characteristic high-pitched screeches with lower huffing-hooting accompaniment. In another, the red-ruffed lemurs’ chatter

periodically erupted into chirps and croaks. In front of me, the rhesus macaque screamed bloody murder. It didn't seem at all repentant about throwing its excrement at my fiancé.

Above the animal ruckus, a car honked. The animals increased their volume. "Wonder who that is," Lance said. "We're not expecting anybody at the visitors' gate, are we?"

"No."

We looked at each other. I said, "That better not be your brother."

Simultaneously, Lance said, "If that's Bub, I swear I'll kill him."

"Tell me you didn't invite him to stay with us."

"No, no!" Lance held out his arms, palms open. "I told him you and I would have to discuss it."

"Making *me*, of course, the bad guy if we say no." I trained my glower over his shoulder and tried not to be angry. The anger boiled down to stress and the fact that we should have listened and taken the entire day before our wedding off work.

The horn blared again. I looked towards the barn. "Art will get it," Lance said. "He was sitting up there fiddling with paperwork when I left him. Give him something to do."

Thinking about Lance's brother again, I said, "I love you." But I was thinking *Perspective, perspective, perspective* to keep myself from shouting.

"Good thing," Lance replied. He lowered his eyes to the bucket between us.

Since Lance was taken up with scrutinizing the meal, I turned my attention to the monkey. Although he looked starved, his real problem was an inappropriate diet. He smelled better now that we had regulated his insulin levels and gotten his kidneys under control, but his body still showed signs of his former circumstances. Most of all, the neglect could be seen in his face, where his prominent nose seemed too close to his sunken eyes.

This knowledge didn't fix the problem of my future brother-in-law. At forty-two, I was far from the typical first-time bride. It was difficult enough getting around the fact that Lance's brother Alex was very much a volatile ex-boyfriend of mine, without dealing with the landmine of my future mother-in-law's fury should she feel *I* had denied Alex hospitality. She already considered me monstrous for leaving one brother for the other, never mind that it happened ten years ago and I had good reason.

Sophia's willingness to make herself comfortable in Lance's and my guest room in the days leading up to the wedding had initially given me hopes for a less tense relationship. But my hopes of her acceptance faded considerably when the first words out of her mouth off the plane last week were, "He's finally gotten you to change your name, has he?" Nor had she been happy to learn that even after my title became "Mrs.," my name would still be Noel Rue. I had not reached middle age without becoming firmly attached to my own identity, and I didn't plan to change the paperwork on everything from my driver's license to a bevy of graduate degrees.

Lance clearly hadn't thought of who would be portrayed how and in whose eyes, should Alex be consigned to a hotel. In fact, it was doubtful he had thought of seriously turning his brother down at all. More than likely, he had said anything to get his younger, more athletic, more financially successful sibling off the phone so he could come break the news of the arrival to me.

"Where is he now?" I asked. "How long do we have to come up with something?" It was always possible he had flown in at the more distant Dayton, or even Cincinnati, airport, not up the road in Columbus.

This time, Lance didn't say anything. He looked around me. Then his hands went down to his sides and our eyes finally met.

“He called you from our house, didn’t he?” I asked.

Lance nodded once, an infinitesimal slump of the head, and then he resumed his examination of the food bucket.

“Which means,” I went on, “it’s a good bet that whatever *we* say, your mother has already counteracted it.” We’d invited Alex to the wedding as a courtesy to Lance’s parents, and now that he had accepted our grudging offer at the last possible moment, I wanted to move back in time and rescind the invitation.

Now, Lance put his hands in his pockets and nodded.

I blew out a loud breath, trying to decide if anything could be done. Nothing came quickly to mind, and instead I looked over at the monkey I was trying to socialize. Maybe *he* had some ideas.

Darting glances at the humans, the rhesus crept over to the food I had so recently delivered to his bowl. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as he slid a hand into the mix. He checked again to make sure neither of us planned to snatch his selection back. Lance assumed the same nonchalant pose that I had suddenly adopted, pretending to look at everything *but* the monkey. It scurried over to the cage’s far corner to eat, and I tried to think rationally about my future in-laws.

“If Alex contributed to this guy’s normalization, I might be willing to forgive him quite a lot,” I finally said. “Maybe I could stay the night with my folks.”

Lance sagged in total defeat. “Maybe that would be best,” he said quietly. Then his shoulders came up again. He said, “If you do, I think I’ll come with you.” It was the first time since I’d seen him coming down from the barn that he’d looked even remotely happy.

“Seriously?” I asked.

I had hoped my question contained a hint of *are you crazy?* But Lance missed my tone or chose not to hear it. “It’s perfect!” he said. “Mom hasn’t spent a night in the same house as Bub since he left for college. We’ll leave the two of them alone and see who comes out alive.”

I hissed, then picked up my bucket and headed towards the other cages, where hungry primates hooted and warbled in anticipation of their meals.

Behind me, Lance continued, “Maybe she’ll . . .” He trailed off, seeming to realize I’d walked away.

I called back, “Great. That’s going to fix everything.”

The squirrel monkeys twittered and scolded while I filled their bowl and shook some crickets on top. If we didn’t mix their diet up on a regular basis, they would get bored and stop eating.

Lance caught up to me and said, “It’s not like he’d seriously hurt his own mother. Bub isn’t the same guy we used to know.”

“I don’t want to hear it. Don’t you *dare* tell me how fabulous he suddenly is.” Now I felt as frustrated as Lance had looked when he first arrived beside the rhesus’ cage.

We stared at each other across the squirrel monkey feed for a few more moments. I picked the bucket up, but Lance took it out of my hand. He set it down behind him, out of my reach. “It’s all going to be finished tomorrow,” he said. And then he kissed me.

I had seen the kiss coming, but I still nearly lost my balance when he pulled me towards him. He’s quite a bit taller than I am, and his arms encircled my shoulders as he drew me in close. I wrapped my own arms around his waist and felt my initial flush of surprise turn into one of desire. A lot of our friends seemed startled when we opted for a ceremony to formalize the union we had known was permanent for a very long time. But when I imagined kissing Lance

like this, in front of our assembled relatives, colleagues, and comrades, I knew it was exactly the right thing for us.

When we finally broke apart, Lance said, “Allow me, madam,” as he bowed down to collect my bucket for me.

“Oh!” we both said.

Lance had put the bucket entirely too close to the spider monkey enclosure. Although none of them could reach it with their arms or legs, a very determined tail had crept down to wind around the bucket’s handle. The little animal was now straining mightily to lift the prize it felt it had won. Lance deftly unwound the tail and pulled the food out of reach. I rewarded the intrepid explorer by feeding that group next. Then, Lance still carrying my bucket, we headed over to the colobus area.

Before we could deliver to that group of primates, Art came on the radio. “Sally, Lance, Noel, Trudy, Gary, Janie, Allen, Pat, Linda, all of you, whoever’s here today, get up to the entrance fast.”

“Art,” Lance said, “what’s wrong? You’re paging last spring’s interns. And Sally and Gary both graduated!”

“Never mind that!” Art shouted. His voice breathy, and urgent, he went on, “There’s an orangutan up here!”

Chapter 2

Lance dropped the bucket and started up the hill, trying to raise Art again. I raced along in his wake, but his long legs easily outpaced my short ones.

“Art! Arthur!” Lance said. “Can you hear me? Is anybody closer to the gate than I am? Noel and I are under the barn down by the chimps.” Under the barn was our quaint way of describing much of the sanctuary’s property. The barn was at the highest point, and everything else sloped down from it. The phrase most commonly referred to the area down around the enclosures, where the barn was always directly visible. We were past the chimps now, rapidly moving up to the barn doors.

Trudy, the only intern on Art’s list who was still with us over the summer, came on. “I’m inside. I was getting lunch together, but I’m going to the gate as soon as I can find keys.” It didn’t matter that it was only ten a.m. and I was currently delivering the last round of breakfast. Food prep was probably the biggest job we did at the center. Trudy was working up lunch so our next round of volunteers would be able to step up to a table and start chopping as soon as they arrived around noon.

One of our daylong volunteers, Darnell, entered the conversation. “I’m on my way up there now. I can’t see anything but the trees yet.” For a moment, he went silent, though we could hear his engine rumbling in the background as he failed to let go of the ‘send’ button. Then he said, “Oh . . . man. You gotta . . . Art! Turn your sound back on!” Another pause, then, “He sees me talking on this thing and he’s waving me to put it down. He’s out of the cart.” The cart would

be one of the center's two golf carts, which we frequently used to move around the property.

Darnell continued, "He's exactly right. There's an orangutan outside the gate, and it's loose."

"Get Art back in his vehicle!" Lance shouted. "Carry him if you have to."

"I'll do what I can," Darnell said. "But he's got the gate open."

"Who opened the gate?" Lance demanded.

"*He* did," Darnell said. "Art did. Just now. And he's walking towards it."

Lance said, "Get Art in *your* vehicle if you can."

Darnell didn't answer, perhaps having finally obeyed Art's instructions. Lance reached the barn and fought with the door, too impatient to treat the frame as gently as was required to open it rapidly. I took his hands off the handle, jiggled it gently, then twisted and pulled.

The outside smells gave way to contrasting odors of hay bales and veterinary disinfectants as we passed the clinic inside the barn. Although we shared our veterinarian with the animal husbandry department at Ironweed University, most of our larger primates were conditioned to present their body parts for shots, blood drawing, and light wound care without leaving their enclosures.

The clinic's antiseptic smell faded and Lance strode in ahead of me. "What does Art think he's doing?" He jammed his radio back in its holster. "If there's seriously an ape . . . and if it isn't in a cage . . ." he spluttered to a halt in front of Trudy, who was holding her keys up, waiting for us. She jingled the set, and the two of them walked out of food prep together.

Lance continued, "He cannot confront an orangutan on his own. How can he think of opening the gate and letting it in?" There was no time for me to answer *because he's Art, and when has logic or common sense ever stopped him from doing whatever crossed his mind?*

“Come on!” Lance took the keychain out of Trudy’s hand, but then seemed to realize what he’d done and handed it right back. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t . . . we can’t . . .”

“I know,” Trudy said. “We’re in a rush. Come on.”

Neither of them even mentioned Lance’s and my truck, the keys to which were in my pocket. I took a different route, detouring to the offices beyond the food prep tables. I grabbed a smaller key and motioned them both to the other golf cart, the one Art hadn’t taken with him to the gate. “If Art has the radio off, it’s for noise. Our cars are going to be too loud. If Darnell didn’t already spook it in that SUV, we’d be sure to if we came roaring up in Trudy’s . . . car.” I’d nearly called Trudy’s worn sedan a wreck.

“We need to ensure our own safety!” Lance pointed out.

“Then we’ll climb in with Darnell,” I said. “Do not stand there arguing.”

Trudy jumped in beside me and Lance ran ahead to open the larger sliding doors that we use to get vehicles into and out of the barn. As Trudy and I drove by him, Lance jumped onto the rack we normally use for carrying food or sedated primates to and from the farthest enclosures. We didn’t waste time closing the doors as we hurried down the service road.

Our preserve was located in an old growth forest with a lot of burr oak and maple trees. So our ride was a shady one, spent in the company of trunks and loamy earth. A golf cart goes at about fifteen miles an hour even when it is absolutely racing. So, in spite of my jamming the accelerator pedal to the floor, it felt like eons before we pulled up behind Darnell’s tan SUV.

Darnell’s SUV completely blocked the view in one direction, and the trees crowded in on either side, preventing us from assessing the situation from our distance. Once I stopped the cart, we all sat for a moment. “What now?” Trudy whispered.

Lance swung down from the rack and moved ahead on soft feet, motioning Trudy and I to stay put. “Now, we wait,” he whispered as he passed us.

“Damned machismo,” I muttered, and climbed out to follow him, Trudy close behind.

He stopped to the left of the SUV’s hood, arms raised like he wanted to grab Art and pull him back. I had to peer under one of those lifted arms while Trudy stood on her tiptoes behind me and tried to look over his shoulder. To our right, Darnell still sat at the wheel, doors shut, windows up. He was so focused on the scene unfolding in front of him that he didn’t seem to notice our arrival from behind.

And really, it was impossible not to stare. Darnell was right on both counts. Art’s orangutan was real, and there was nothing separating us from it, because Art had opened the gate. Art walked slowly forward, beckoning in gentle welcome. A textbook case of why we don’t invite tourists on the premises, but the behavior was coming from the facility director. Good that the animal was too busy pulling apart the wooden crate it had apparently been transported in to pay attention to much else. It seemed the arrival of our vehicles hadn’t signified anything worthwhile. Which meant we might have time to get Art back to safety. He knew we couldn’t walk up to an unknown ape and strike up a friendship.

We interact with our primates, but we do it in a controlled way. And we *don’t* do it without the safety of a solid enclosure or cage between ourselves and our charges. We also don’t handle orangutans at all, and I only seemed able to remember tidbits about them. So much of my recent knowledge came from experience with other species. What I needed right now was a good book. Or, that failing, an orangutan handler. But aside from zoos, the only accredited facility in the U.S. that handled these great apes was in Florida.

Art murmured to the orangutan as he moved. I could hear his voice, but not the words, though I knew from his tone the things he would be saying. "Poor guy, looks like you've had a rough day. Bet somebody took you out for a ride and then left you here. But it's fine now, because I'm here. I can help you out." It was the kind of thing he said to every primate that came into our care. The kind of thing we all said to our new charges. The rest of us said the words to focus ourselves and establish some kind of vocal interaction. Art said them for the animals.

Art meant the orangutan to hear and understand him, even though his intellect must have been telling him that he needed to shut up and get in, if not Darnell's SUV, then at least the golf cart he had driven down to the gate. But he didn't even look behind him, and the SUV sat sandwiched between the two golf carts on our little service road, quite as if it had been parked there for the long term.

Earlier, I had thought that this kind of behavior was Art at his most batty. Now, I thought it was Art returning to his childhood. When he was a boy, Art's mother gave him a monkey for his birthday. By the time the creature was a few years old, it had to wear a muzzle except when it was caged. Realizing that his parents were planning something dire, the young Art ran away to the zoo with it. He happened onto a sympathetic keeper who made room for Art's little animal. And from the day he met that kindly zoo director, Art had been on his way to a career in primatology.

With that much experience, Art knew that the animal at our gates couldn't possibly understand him. His conversations with the staff always came back to the fact that we needed to follow established patterns of positive reinforcement using rewards and target and clicker training to achieve desired behaviors in our own captive population. It wasn't that the primates lacked intelligence. Rather, they didn't think like humans, and we, as their caretakers, had a

responsibility to communicate with them in ways they could understand. But Art, in spite of what he knew, still believed the right tone and body language could convey a complete message. He was still healing the little kid who had to donate his own pet to save it from euthanasia. He was still personally rescuing all the other primates facing down similar fates.

He took seriously his role as a caregiver to unwanted creatures who had outgrown social roles they never should have been assigned. He wanted them to know they had found a true home at last when they entered our enclosures. Which was fine, except when he did something stupid.

Lance muttered, "You're going to get yourself killed, Art." But he spoke so softly that even I barely heard him. Art was too far ahead. Reaching out to pull him back was impossible. And none of us wanted to spook the animal the man was trying to cozy up to. Not to mention nobody brought a dart gun to the party.

We owned them. Sometimes, especially if we were called into a bad situation by the police, wary animals could only be sedated with darts. But estimating the weight of a full grown orangutan would have required seeing it first. Not to mention that this whole adventure had started with honking. That creature arrived in a car, and it was in the middle of an adrenaline rush, which could completely neutralize the tranquilizer. A dart would probably only startle him and make him mad. I was relieved we'd forgotten the guns.

But then, it was pretty clear we needed *something*. The orangutan didn't look or smell like it was having the most winning day so far. Even from a distance, I could see that its orange hair looked dull and dirty. More than that, the hair was obviously tousled and matted, the back hair trailing down to the ground in dreadlocks that must have been collecting excretions. A rank odor of feces and decay emanated from the animal so strongly that I couldn't imagine coming

into close contact with it without first putting on several layers of facial mask. It was like standing next to garbage.

Possibly, it would be so exhausted that Art could coax it through the gate, and we could get Art into Darnell's SUV to talk about the situation. If it was conditioned to humans, it would consider the fence a barrier, even though it could easily vault over it. Maybe we could get it in and work from there. It wasn't a healthy animal, and I wished I could recall the list of diseases it might be carrying. I found myself simultaneously hoping that its bad health would prevent it from hurting Art and fearing that those conditions would make it more likely to lash out. But Arthur Jamison Hooper was not considering these things. He was walking forward with the very clear intent of getting the newcomer in.

"Jesus, Art," I muttered.

The center was Art's creation. It was his baby. He was a true conservationist who understood that monkeys and apes are not at all like the differently-sized humans television shows and films would have us believe. Even as youths, they can have behaviors that seem erratic to untrained eyes. But youngsters are smaller, less likely to break skin and bones when they act outside human expectations. And this was no youth. Yet Art was an impulsive man, somewhat unpredictable himself, and quite convinced of his own charms. Like all of us, he talked to the animals in our care while he tended to them. But he was demonstrating his most prominent trait right now, a complete lack of common sense. Or rather, a complete inability to prioritize common sense over love. Art considered himself personally responsible for everything that happened at the center. He thought he could fix anything. Rather than wait for the rest of us to arrive after his hurried call on the radio, he had taken action.

"Where can we even put it?" Trudy whispered.

That was another problem. We weren't equipped for orangutans. We had no enclosure, except for the one already home to fifteen chimpanzees, that could house a primate this big for any long term. And we couldn't dump a new housemate on the chimps. The newcomer needed to be quarantined until we could get him, if not directly to Florida, then at least to a zoo.

In fact, a zoo sounded like an excellent idea. All of the regional zoos had orangutans. Perhaps one of them could house this animal until the folks from down south could collect it. Our first call would be to the Ohio Zoo, where our friend Christian Baker worked as a keeper. He and his staff had been part of the crew that had intervened to save the lives of several animals when a couple of angry former employees in Michigan managed to turn loose an entire private zoo. Many animals were shot when they gamboled into town, but the keepers had saved a few. Perhaps *they* could lure in and trap this orangutan.

We had acted as intermediaries in the past, when an orangutan in an Indiana roadside zoo had suddenly become an inappropriate attraction. But again, in that case, we'd quickly gotten help from our friends at Columbus Commons.

The orangutan turned. The plate-like cheek pads that gave the top half of the animal's face its squashed appearance rotated away from the crate and towards our director. Art shifted his own body seamlessly into reverse. The big ape took one step, then another, and a third to follow before it stopped again, looking around at its environment in complete befuddlement.

And then it bellowed, a furious belch vocalization that startled me backwards several steps.

The animal's meaning was clear. It considered Art an intruder into its territory and wanted him out. When Art suddenly stopped moving backwards, the orangutan charged, screeching threats as it ran. It used both its hands and feet to surge forward. Before any of us

could act, one great hairy arm shot out and batted Art out of the way before the animal passed him and bolted into the trees, still vocalizing loudly.

Art staggered a few feet and landed beside the road with a soft whuff. Darnell shoved open his door and jumped out to race forward with Lance. Art jumped up almost as soon as he hit the ground and hobbled towards the SUV, his common sense seemingly restored by the rough landing. So Darnell scrambled back in and leaned across to open his passenger door instead, while the rest of us piled gracelessly into the back.

Art reached the vehicle as I dragged myself out from under the pile of me, Lance, and Trudy. Art was scolding us: “You came too soon! You came too soon!”

The orangutan had stopped short at the tree line, and it now stood huffing at our vehicle, deciding whether or not it was, in fact, a threat.

Art and Lance slammed their respective doors simultaneously, suddenly dampening the ape’s noise and cutting back the smell.

“We came too soon?” Lance said. “You wanted us to let that thing mangle you in the cart?”

“What?” Art seemed to shake something off to hear Lance, “I wanted you to . . . no . . . no . . . of course I needed help.” Then, Art’s face cracked open in a grin. “Did you *see* that? It was so *gentle* putting me in my place. It could have *killed* me instead of pushing me out of the way. Ha ha!” He ended on a gleeful laugh that suggested he hadn’t learned much of a lesson from getting too close.

“We need to lure it down to the barn,” Art went on, strategizing now. “It’s not ideal. But until we can . . . until something more appropriate . . . with food . . .”

While Art was talking, the orangutan offered one last shout at the SUV, then took off into the trees.

“There he goes,” Lance said as we watched it vanish. “Now what?”

“It’s fine,” Art said. “It’s all right. It looks half starved. My God, it needs our help. Did you see its backside? I think it should be pretty easy to draw in. I thought, but I never expected . . . something like *this* to happen. Darnell, can you take us back up?”

Darnell put his SUV in reverse, but he stopped immediately when we all felt a thump.

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Chapter 3

“Oh damn,” Lance said. “We forgot about the carts.”

I hadn't set the brake, so the golf cart rolled back a few feet and one wheel bumped off the road. We waited until we were at least reasonably sure the orangutan wasn't coming right back, and then Lance and I got out and pushed the one cart back onto the road while Art returned to the other. Lance performed a cursory inspection. “It's fine.” We led the parade back up to the barn.

By the time we arrived, Art's good humor had been fully restored. He zipped around to park first, then jumped down and clapped his hands. “Now,” he said, leading us all into the barn. “Here's what we need to do. Noel and Lance, you've only got a couple more hours today. This could take all afternoon.” He paused, laughing. “Did you see that beauty?” he asked us. “My God, when we get him back in shape he'll be three hundred pounds. He was so close. He touched me.”

“I'll say he touched you,” Darnell said. “He almost ripped your head clean off.”

“No, no no.” Art chortled his way over to food prep, where he continued the work Trudy had been engaged in before the orangutan's arrival. “That's the thing. It *didn't hurt me*. It could have done exactly that, Darnell. One smack. Boom. I'm gone. It pulled its punch, on purpose. It spooked,” he said. “If it hadn't . . . Well, we'll find him.”

I didn't cut in. Now wasn't the time for lectures, but Art had one coming. I met Lance's eyes, and I knew we were thinking the same thing. If anyone else on the staff had precipitated

such rank stupidity, personal affection wouldn't have stopped Lance and I from firing that person on the spot. Art was very lucky he outranked us both.

Now that he was happy again, Art began zestfully hacking a number of fruits while giving us instructions. It didn't seem to matter to him that the food had not yet been organized or that others would be arriving in the near future to address this project. His hands clearly wanted for action. Lance backed quietly away from the tables and into our office. I followed him as Art began to think out loud.

"I'll get a call in to Florida," Art said. He meant he would call Richard Norris, our contact at the sanctuary we would be sending the orangutan to once we caught him. Art had more ideas. But I didn't hear him because I shut the door.

"Talk fast," I told Lance, "because he's going to want us back out there in a minute."

But Lance seemed disinclined towards conversation, instead pausing to breathe deeply, arms crossed over his chest. Art might have recovered fully from his encounter, but Lance was still frightened. Me, too. I walked around behind my fiancé and reached up to rub his shoulders. Slowly, his muscles relaxed, and he rolled his neck from one side to the other.

We could see into the barn through an internal window. Art was using the butcher knife as a pointer to indicate people as he spoke. Since he only had two people to indicate, he waved it back and forth between Trudy and Darnell until he buried it in a watermelon. Lance shook his head. "This is extreme. Even for him,"

Our office had a good view of the rest of the barn. We could also see pretty clearly out into the woods, thanks to the vehicle doors that we still hadn't bothered to close. Through these, we watched the fruit truck lumber up the employee drive to the parking pad with our weekend delivery. "We need to warn Olivia to watch out," I said.

Lance nodded agreement, and I left him alone in the office.

“Trudy and Darnell, get ready to come with me,” Art was proclaiming, as I went through the barn. He wanted to talk to me, too. “And you two, Noel, Lance,” he said. He had dislodged the knife from the melon and was using it as a pointer once more.

“Not now,” I snapped. “Fruit truck’s here, and I want to be sure the driver doesn’t get any surprises.” Even as I spoke, Olivia swung the truck around to back it up to the open doors. The orangutan was riding on her tail, standing on the back lift holding onto the door’s handles like he was taking a ride on a trash truck.

“Noel, you have to—” Art began again.

“Art!” I snapped. “Dart gun.”

“What?”

I glanced his way, then pointed. When his eyes followed my gaze, they widened.

“Look at that” he breathed. “So smart.”

“So dangerous.” I cut quickly away from him and ran towards our medical clinic, hoping I could sedate the animal before Olivia even knew her danger. “Lance! Come out! I need help!”

“He knows,” Art said, not referring to Lance, but delivering Trudy and Darnell a classroom lecture about an animal that was going to come charging through the doors in a few seconds. “He associates us with food, and he knows the food comes on a truck.”

Lance didn’t emerge, and I couldn’t worry about why he wasn’t listening to me right then. “Trudy, Darnell, shut the door before it gets in.” Their feet thumped rapidly across the floor. If the orangutan associated the sight of the truck with food, I could only imagine what it would think of our prep tables.

I ducked into the clinic and reached for one of the two dart guns stored on the wall. Although it was similar to a rifle in appearance, its long barrel meant it was unlikely to be mistaken for a firearm. We kept the immobilizing agents in a locked cabinet, and I fumbled with my keys in my hurry. Cabinet open, I took out two darts and a dart-loading syringe, hoping that I was guessing the animal's weight accurately. I prepared a dose large enough for a full grown male chimp, but I couldn't be sure it would work for the behemoth out front. I needed two shots if I was going to be sure.

Then Lance joined me.

"I was afraid you weren't coming for a minute there," I told him.

"I had a couple of calls to make," he said. "I got Olivia on the phone and now she knows to sit tight."

That coupled with the sound of the doors sliding shut brought me a measure of relief. We had contact numbers for our vendors and volunteers, but mostly we needed them for more mundane reasons. This was about as far from mundane as things got. Personal safety was the number one concern when dealing with apes, and I knew that even if my hastily assembled darts reached their intended target, there was a possibility that I would not have prepared a strong enough solution, and that I would only make the orangutan angry or woozy.

"And," he went on, "I couldn't get anybody in Florida on the horn, but I got to Christian at Columbus Commons. He says we're aiming for the shoulder or the outer thigh. Otherwise we'll injure it without doing any good." Typical, but good to be sure. These primates didn't have many concentrated muscle masses to make for good darting targets, and those that existed were small. Making it all the better that Lance had reached Olivia first on the phone.

"And try not to let the animal see the darts. It probably knows what they are."

I thought that last thing would be impossible. “Thank you,” I said and hugged him tight. Any minute now, I expected to wake up again and have to redo the whole morning because this had all been a dream.

Lance returned the embrace. “We’re good together,” he told me. I wondered, *In general or with run amok apes in particular?*

I shouldered one of the rifle straps and Lance took the second from the wall, along with my second dart.. “Let’s go.”

Out in the barn, I realized we had another problem. With the big doors closed, I had lost my visual on the animal. I placed a quick call of my own to Olivia. “Is it still there?” I asked her. “Can you tell?”

“Yes” she squeaked. “I see it in the rearview. Its butt is sticking out. My whole truck is rocking. Noel, can that thing get to me in the cab?”

“You should be safe where you are.” I didn’t add *As long as it doesn’t notice you.* Because if the orangutan decided it wanted in the front of the truck, window glass wouldn’t be much of a bar to its gaining entry. Olivia didn’t need to know that.

I hung up and outlined a plan to Lance. “We’re going for the outer thigh,” I said. “Let’s go out the back door and try to come up from behind.”

“Great!” Art said. I hadn’t even heard him join us.

“Great what? You sit tight and don’t put your body in danger.”

My annoyance with his attitude must have shown, because he adopted a more serious tone to say, “I’m going around the other way. I’ll distract it so you and Lance can get a clear shot before it sees you have darts.”

“Art, no!” I snapped.

“Noel,” he said. “I haven’t completely lost my mind. I was far too excited, and I put all of us in danger. If I had settled down and waited for the rest of you, it would have sat there tearing up its crate for another twenty minutes at least. We would be able to do this without further stress to the animal or danger to ourselves. This is my fault. Let me make it right.”

I might have argued him down, but Lance said, “Fine, it’s not a bad plan. You carry out half that watermelon you were so busy hacking up and throw it away from the barn, then run back to the door. We will signal you on the *radio* when you need to do it.” Lance reached over and turned Art’s radio on before patting him on the shoulder. Then he repeated, “Let’s go.”

Trudy stood inside, holding the sticky back door almost shut so we wouldn’t have to either leave it wide open or fight the frame and knob if we had to beat a fast retreat.

Lance and I circled around one side of the barn while Art went the other way. We moved quickly. The primate noise down below us had reached cacophonous levels. The chimps in particular were screaming warnings to everyone in their vocal radius. We didn’t think silence on our part was either necessary or particularly prudent. Olivia sounded terrified. She needed rescue, and she needed it quickly. As soon as we split off from Art, Lance and I started running. He was polite enough to slow his feet to a trot so I could keep up, but we still moved fast.

We could smell the orangutan long before we came around to see it. That rotting fecal odor was unmistakable. By the time we arrived, it had foiled the truck’s simple padlock (via the expeditious method of ripping the padlock off) and let itself into the back to have at the fruit. It was still distracted, all right, but now it was a much harder target to reach, and a mobile one to boot. Its hindquarters, which should have been conveniently facing us, were disappearing into the truck’s open bay as we arrived.

My cell phone rang right then, the noise falling into a momentary silence in the ruckus. I answered without looking away from the truck. Olivia whispered, "It's in the back now. I heard the door go up."

"Yes," I said. "It is. You should be able to see us, too." And I hung up on her. Lance waved.

At the sound of my ringtone, the orangutan stuck its head back out the door. Apparently, cell phones meant something to it. It was easy to imagine that the animal's head was a giant pancake as it glowered at me, thanks to those cheek pads. But my pancakes had never looked at me like *I* might be on the menu. It squinted as it stared, and I held my gun behind me. I thought now, I might be able to hit a shoulder.

"Art," Lance had his radio. "Watermelon."

The ape jerked, now looking at Lance.

"Oh! Right! Hang on there," Art crackled back.

Two things happened simultaneously. Art popped around the other side of the building, the melon held aloft in both hands. I could see him in the distance, but I tried not to lose my focus. At the same time, the orangutan brought out one of its massive hands from the back of the truck. It held a melon of its own, this one a cantaloupe.

"Hey, big guy!" Art shouted. "Dinner's on me!"

Art and the ape threw at the same time. Art hurled the melon as far as he could make it go, then took off rapidly in the other direction, exactly as Lance had instructed. But I had already been unnerved by the way the animal was looking at me. Long before it threw the cantaloupe, I had to let it see my dart gun, pulling it up to make a rapid shot. The gun jerked as I squeezed the trigger, and I missed my shot entirely. The cantaloupe sailed over and smacked the ground right

at my feet, knocked only slightly off course by my dart, which met it halfway to its destination. I groaned.

Art's champion hurling days, if he had ever had any, were clearly several years in his past. The watermelon only went a few feet before it splatted on the pavement. But it was a sufficient distraction that the ape jumped down and shambled off to investigate the fruit, the fetid aroma increasing as it presented us with its dreadlocked back.

Beside me, Lance's rifle popped softly, and the second dart took wing. "Damn, I should have waited," he said. The dart made contact somewhere around the animal's buttocks and bounced off its fecally-armored dreadlocks. If the orangutan even noticed, it didn't show. It pursued the watermelon exclusively, having reached accessible food at last. Although orangutans are geared up to explore their meals, the wide open watermelon appealed to the ape even more than the closed cantaloupe it had thrown from the truck.

While it ate noisily, Lance signaled me to keep an eye on the animal and sped over to Olivia's passenger door. He mounted the running board and knocked on her window. A few seconds later, she emerged and they ran to me. The orangutan never lost interest in Art's melon. Lance even had time to run over and shut the truck's back door. It wouldn't stop the orangutan from climbing back in, but it might slow it down a little, maybe long enough to target its shoulders, which weren't clotted with feces.

Although the orangutan looked up briefly when Lance pulled the truck closed, it didn't get up to act, and we all three ran back the way Lance and I had come. "Art, we need two more darts," Lance said into the radio as the three of us sped around the building again. "We both missed."

“You didn’t,” I puffed, stretching my legs to their fullest to keep up with his easy jog. Olivia had outpaced both of us, fear spurring her on to safety as soon as we came around the side of the building and she saw Trudy standing at the back door waving us in.

“Might as well have,” Lance replied.

“That poor creature.”

“I know. I could smell it when we were down by the gate. I could *see* it. But we were all more concerned with Art then. The full impact didn’t hit me. I hate to admit it, but I can almost understand why Art tried to let it in like that.”

I said, “Almost.”

Back indoors, Art said, “Let’s do this differently.” Trudy had taken Olivia under her wing and led her into Lance’s and my office to sit out the shakes. And Lance had explained how his dart had simply failed to penetrate the thick layer padding the animal’s whole lower back. Art continued, “I think we need to step back. We aren’t going to catch it this way. We’re going to stress it out, and possibly expose it to the heat of the day when we don’t have enough muscle between us to get it inside. We need to lead it off a ways so we can get our lunch crew in here safely, and pretty soon we need to get lunch out to the enclosures.”

He outlined a perfectly reasonable plan delegating lunch details, explaining how staff should go about safely delivering food to the enclosures, and fleshing out a process to lure in the orangutan in the evening. We would set out a series of tempting treats and blankets, then dart it when we had a better chance of making our shot. “So,” he wound up, “Lance, you and Noel go get your marriage license so we can have a ceremony tomorrow.”

“What? We can’t *leave* right now!” Lance protested. “We have to work as a team to get it to go far enough away so we can unload the truck and Olivia can get out and everybody else can get in.”

“We’ll be fine,” Art said. “Please. I’ll be so sad if something stupid *I* did stops the two of you from getting married tomorrow.” As he spoke, he tilted his head and opened his eyes wide, so he looked already bereft. When Art had that expression on his face, I knew who was going to win.

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