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Lyrics to "They Can't Take That Away From Me" (from "Shall We Dance"). Music and Lyrics by George Gershwin and Ira Gershwin, © 1936, 1937 (Copyrights renewed) George Gershwin Music and Ira Gershwin Music. All rights administered by WB Music Corp. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission of Alfred Publishing Co., Inc.

Chapter 1

Hot breath from the lioness touched my cheek. Round dark irises in gold eyes, nostrils flaring and relaxing, a complex pattern faint on the black nose pad, the harsh breath of a meat eater. She stood as tall as I, reared up with her big front feet at my shoulder height. She was all about power: massive jaws, thick forelegs, heavy shoulder muscles. Power she'd never used, never run down and throttled her unwilling dinner, never torn it into fragments she could eat. The familiar fact that she was on one side of the wire and I was safe on the other seemed profoundly odd, a peculiar twist in the ancient relationship between our species.

She opened her mouth a hesitant crack. "Good!" I told her and pressed a miniature raw meatball through the heavy mesh. Her rough pink tongue, the size of a washcloth, worked carefully, scrubbing every trace off the wire.

Spice seemed to enjoy these training sessions as much as I did. She had the basics of the contract down—pay attention and she could induce me to produce something tasty. "Up" and "stay" were in place, and I could inspect her front feet and face up close. Soon I'd get a good look at her teeth, after we worked more on "open up." The near-contact oxygenated my blood with ancestral fear, diluted by familiarity and good steel down to a pleasant fizz. It was the booster shot I needed to face the evening.

I pulled the handle to open the guillotine door. She dropped down to the ground—class over—and padded outside to join the pride. When I got better at training, I'd see what I could do with Sugar and Simba. Spice was easy—smart and willing, fearless, the logical place to start my education.

Past time to leave work. Time to go home. A quick visit to Rajah, the old Bengal tiger, put off the duty. I strolled down the dimly lit cement hallway, passing empty night dens until I reached his at the end. Raj was an elegant slack rug, yellow and black ribs rising and falling. He opened one eye when I made tiger hello noises and didn't get up. Still mad.

Being late wouldn't help. Time to go.

I walked through the cool late afternoon of early October to the time clock at the Commissary, nursing Spice's success like my last bite of chocolate bar. Wet socks squelched in rubber boots, and my back was resentful of a day spent lifting and scrubbing. I swiped my time card and turned away from Finley Memorial Zoo, trudging toward the parking lot, where my good-looking, funny, hard-working husband waited for me. I reached deep to find a chipper smile.

Rick had punched out ahead of me and waited in his new pickup in the employee parking lot. Green paint glowed in the gray light, not yet dulled by road grime. I climbed in and we pulled away from the zoo as light autumn rain started. Windshield wipers gave rhythmic warning that summer was shutting down. We caught Interstate 5, vena cava of the Northwest, and headed south toward Vancouver, Washington. Finley Zoo is a several miles north of town, in a once-wooded area yielding to row housing. My real sense of home still resided in Portland, across the Columbia River where I'd grown up, but I had picked up the Vancouver inferiority complex in my two years living here. No, not Vancouver, Canada. Yes, in the United States. Portland's little sister, just as Finley Zoo was an outdated miniature of Oregon Zoo in Portland. But Vancouver shared the Northwest rain and casual style of Portland, and Finley had lions and zebras as authentic as any other zoo. We flowed with three lanes of traffic past a mix of housing, strip malls, and industrial buildings.

When it became clear Rick wasn't going to break the silence, I asked, "How's the snake project with Dr. Dawson?"

"She laid ten eggs last night. They all look good."

Why wasn't he crowing to me? He and the zoo vet had worked hard for this, tinkering with diet and temperature. I shoved fatigue and worry aside. "That's really great. You did the research and made the changes and it paid off."

"Uh huh. Doesn't count until they hatch."

So that topic wasn't going anywhere. "Any news from lunch?" I'd eaten in the Feline kitchen with my friend Linda Carson instead of joining the group at the cafe.

Rick slid out of his preoccupation. "Denny says this big chicken processor is spreading hoof and mouth disease to cattle all over the world so that he can control the protein supply for everyone on the planet." He gave it to me dead-pan, confident of my reaction. "He says there's a Web site with all kinds of evidence backing it up, but the Feds are going to shut it down any day."

Denny Stellar, fellow animal keeper, my ex-lover and Rick's current friend, did not confine himself to conventional reality. "Where does he get this stuff? He has got to be the most gullible and suspicious person ever born."

"Gullible *and* suspicious? Way to go, Iris." Rick fussed with one of many little knobs on the dashboard to get the airflow exactly right.

He didn't ask why I hadn't joined him for lunch. He didn't ask about the cats or my day. I told him anyway. "I'm doing a morning session and an afternoon session with Spice. She's picking it up fast. We're having a good time. I wish I'd started this a year ago."

"Good day, huh?" Rick said, slipping in a blues CD.

"Only the last part. The female clouded leopard isn't settling in. She's still awfully timid. Arnie screwed up the routine on my weekend and now she won't eat until I'm far, far away."

I supposed, briefly, that it was unfair to blame Arnie Bertram for my troubles since he rarely worked Felines. He was primarily the bear keeper and couldn't be expected to know everything. But I had left detailed instructions and he had ignored them. "He didn't do the lions right either. Sugar's so confused she won't come in. Wallace said not to feed her until she does. So she's going to bed hungry tonight." Count on Wallace, foreman with heart of stone. "And Rajah is in a major tiger-snit because I locked him out of his den and put Simba in there for half the day to get a fecal sample. His den has lion cooties."

"Yeah. Sounds like a hassle." Rick tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to Billie Holiday.

*"The way you hold your knife
The way we danced till three
The way you changed my life
No, no they can't take that away from me."*

After a mile or two of silence, I said, "You're good at training. Maybe you could come by late tomorrow and watch a session with Spice, give me some pointers."

"Sure."

Dial tone. File not found. Please call again during our regular business hours.

I decided my feet would rot if I left them wet another minute. I leaned forward against the seatbelt to unlace them. "And my boots leak."

"We'll go out and have some fun tonight." He smiled at the prospect, already there.

We were off the freeway and heading through the outskirts of Vancouver, the north end of town.

I kept my voice light, no whining. "I was hoping maybe we could both stay home tonight. Talk, maybe plan for Christmas or something." Like we used to, I didn't add.

"I'd rather find some live music."

I gave up. "You mean, go out and drink a bunch of beer and feel like shit tomorrow?"

"You can always stay home and watch TV," he said as we pulled into the gravel driveway. "I've got energy for a little action."

Maybe there's a reason he's a reptile keeper, I thought. Maybe he lacks talent for warm-blooded species. No, not that many months ago, the world was rich with small joys and big possibilities when we were together. I remembered thinking he was the best listener ever. Then we married and he got tired of me.

Barefoot, I stepped gingerly across the gravel and up the cracked cement path, a dark green rubber boot and a damp sock in each hand.

Vancouver is a bedroom community for Portland and it's thick with lovely neighborhoods. This wasn't one of them. The little rental was a one-story wooden bungalow painted gray. The garage roof sagged and a huge Douglas fir tree waited for the next big windstorm to fall and kill us in our bed. Inside were two bedrooms, a kitchen, one unreliable bathroom, a living room, and two bored dogs. A six-foot wood fence around the back yard was what originally captured my attention, and "pets permitted" in the rental agreement corralled my signature, back before Rick. Then, the house had seemed snug and cute.

Winnie, my tan and gray shepherd mix, and Range, Rick's black mostly-Lab, were ecstatic to have their pack re-united, and thrilled that once again, we were going to shovel out the kibble. Rick got his beer out of the fridge and headed for the TV.

"Aren't you going to feed the dogs?" I asked.

He stopped to dispense kibble while I rummaged in the fridge. The dogs licked their bowls to a high gloss, then swapped places, each irrationally confident that, some day, the other dog would overlook a choice morsel. Recovering quickly from the inevitable disappointment, they nosed their way out the doggy door to the back yard.

I dug out leftover drumsticks, probably grown by Denny's protein conspirator. With mashed potatoes and frozen peas, they rode noisily on the microwave carousel. Rick took some of the peas and added grated carrots and lettuce. These he delivered to Bessie Smith, his green iguana.

We ate in front of the TV—Rick on the good sofa, me on the green recliner—watching the news with the dogs curled at our feet. Rick had his beer; I had leftover coffee.

I stared through the newscasters, unhearing. If we had a quiet evening at home together, maybe we could talk, maybe figure out why the affection and laughter were being swamped by irritation with each other. Maybe together we could find our courage, if courage was what was needed, to see what had turned a wonderful courtship into a stale marriage in a few short months.

I wondered if his drinking was the cause of our joyless relationship or the result. Despair had humbled me; I was ready to take whatever blame was my due. He just had to meet me part way. And soon, because hope was being run out of the territory.

"I'm going out to the Bird and find some people," Rick said. The Vultures' Roost was his favorite watering hole. "You coming?"

"No way. I'm beat. And it's your turn on dishes. Why not stay home?" I wasn't going to beg, damn it.

"Why not have some fun? They've been having live music. You suit yourself—I'm outta here when the news is over. I'll get the dishes in the morning." Meaning he'd be back after midnight, stinking of beer and cigarettes.

"You've been out every night this week. I'm tired of getting lit. Can't we hang out together for a change? I thought you'd want to hear that Muddy Waters CD you got in the mail."

"The CDs will keep. You're tired, I'm not. So you watch TV or go to bed early or whatever. I won't be gone all that long. They have a new group tonight and I want to hear it." He flipped a piece of chicken skin to Range.

"Just Range?" Winnie was alert, expecting fair play.

"Give me a second, for Pete's sake." He tossed her a scrap.

"You're going for the beer," I muttered, getting to my feet.

"Hey, what's with you? I don't think I'm the one with the problem. I get up in the morning and do my job." It was a familiar riff between us, familiar and futile.

I gathered the dirty plates and hauled them into the kitchen, wondering how we always managed to get so sour so fast. If he would only tell me... Lousy sex? Not enough? My cooking? Too much complaining? How did geese and wolves pull off this "mated for life" thing? More legend than fact, that's how.

After dumping chicken bones into the garbage, I put a plate in front of each dog for pre-washing.

"Hey, bring me a beer as long as you're in there," Rick called.

Whatever my failures as a partner, it was clear, beyond doubt or denial, that Rick was far more interested in drinking beer than in being my friend.

I went to the fridge and pulled out today's six-pack—down two bottles, neither into me. I took the whole thing into the living room and pulled out Number Three. The glass neck fit in my hand, a comfortable heft. I looked at Rick, oblivious in front of the television, and adulthood took a vacation. Winding up like a sixth-grade pitcher in Little League, I hurled the beer bottle across the living room and against the wood front door. The smash was delightful, definitely worth the smell and the flying glass. Both dogs were in the bedroom and under the bed in seconds. I could feel my face flush, frustration erupting into anger, rage drowning worry and loneliness. Bottle Number Four performed as well as Number Three. Number Five was a little wild, hitting the door jam, but I was still getting warmed up. Rick was on his feet yelling at me. I wasn't listening. My arm was loose; I was hot. Number Six was going right over the plate and through that door.

Rick moved fast and grabbed my arm. I like to think that I'm as strong as most men, but he had my wrist in a grip I couldn't begin to counter. "Are you out of your mind?" he shouted. "You knock that off or you are really going to regret it."

"Let go of me, you bastard. I've already got plenty of regrets." I jerked my arm free, but he grabbed the bottle away.

I walked into the bedroom, closed the door, and stood there waiting for my vision to clear. The rage drained out. I stood shaking. Through the thin walls, I could hear the hiss as Rick uncapped Number Six. I dumped a pillow out of its case and jammed some clothes in, grabbed my toothbrush from the bathroom. Carefully not looking at Rick, I got my jacket off a chair in the living room. Winnie and Range crowded next to me, worried but ready for a walk. I squeezed out the back door with Winnie only.

About a week after the Great Beer Debacle, my best friend, Marcie Altman, came over in the evening bringing cider and dark rum. I'd gone to stay at her place, across the river in Portland, the night I walked out on Rick, so she knew the whole story. Denny had found me at work the following day and told me Rick was staying with him, so I had the house back. I also had both dogs, since Range didn't get along with Denny's new dog. That was fine with me. I liked Range and he was good company for Winnie when I was gone. Denny relayed Rick's request that I feed Bessie, as if I would forget we had an iguana. And there we'd been for a week, me with the dogs at home, Rick camped with Denny.

Marcie heated up the cider, added a lady-like shot of rum to two mugs, and started working on me to go to a party that night, one we had both been invited to. We sat on the sofa: me in jeans and a gray sweatshirt suitable for vacuuming dog hair on my day off, her—as always—in something coordinated and clean. Today it was a blue pullover and charcoal linen pants. She's blond with big blue eyes, short and round and shy. Marcie's the alpaca; I'm the big eland. But she's as close to a sister as I'll ever have. We met as freshman roommates. Her tutoring and encouragement helped keep me in college for two years, and I stood by her through an ugly boyfriend crisis our freshman year. When I got a summer job at the zoo between sophomore and junior years, that was the end of my interest in college, but not my friendship with Marcie.

Turning down parties is not natural to me, but I wasn't up for this one. "It's a zoo party. Rick's going to be there. No way." I was curled up with my nice hot mug; leaping into confrontation had no appeal. Remembering my eruption still made me shudder.

"He won't be there," Marcie said, holding up her hand palm-out for emphasis. "He'll think you'll show up and start lobbing long-necks at him. Incidentally, it still smells a little funny in here."

Rick had cleaned up the broken beer bottles before he left and I'd wiped down the floor with ammonia, but a hint of stale beer lingered. The front door had a few new dents, a little chipped paint, nothing to worry about.

"I'll get a new rug soon," I told her, "and Rick will too show up. He never missed a party in his life. You have Saturday off for party recuperation, but I have to go to work tomorrow."

"Iris, you've avoided him for a week. You don't answer his calls, you dodge him at work, you take vacation days. You look like your dog died. You know," she went on, glancing at me sideways, "you have to talk to him someday. And you need to get out and have some fun." She emphasized "fun" with a little upward flourish of her hands.

"So which one is this party supposed to do—fun or spousal dramatics?" I asked, slouching on the couch the way my mother told me never to do. "Either one means standing around with all the people who can hardly wait for the next chapter of 'Iris and Rick: Pair Bonding Catastrophe'. Anyway, what's keeping you from going with that new guy, Jake?"

"Jack. Wrong type for a zoo party. Cars with animal names are his idea of zoology." She waved a hand dismissively. "Where better for you to run into Rick than with your friends? My guess is that everyone wants to see you guys work this out. Once upon a time, you two really made each other happy. Call me a hopeless romantic, but I think there's still a chance you could get that back."

"I'm the hopeless romantic, the one who ran off and got married on impulse. At this point, I have no idea where he's coming from, and I guess I'm afraid to find out." I squirmed on the sofa.

"You're scared, that's all."

"Well, that makes it simple."

And maybe it did. I set the condition that we take separate cars so I could leave early. I dug around in the closet until I found a clean white jersey and a lacy yellow sweater to go over it. The top was skimpy; a thin band of belly showed if I kept my shoulders back. Black jeans, a pair of stylish black boots, silver dolphin earrings Marcie gave me last year for my twenty-fourth birthday. The black boots were freighted with meaning, but I didn't have anything else in the way of party footwear. Rick had talked me into them a week after we were married while we were in Portland shopping for a Mother's Day gift for my mom. I'd stopped to admire the boots, gleaming in Nordstrom's window, and he'd urged me to buy them.

"No way!" I'd scoffed. "Too spendy. And those heels will make me look eight feet tall."

"I'll pay for them and I wish you *were* eight feet tall. I want you to put them on so I can rip them off your body." He had grinned as he reached for his credit card.

I did think I looked sharp in them and he did rip them off my body later, although, with boots, it's more tugging and yanking than ripping. Sex and laughter...

My throat was suddenly sore, remembering. Living together hadn't been just irritation and argument, not at first. I checked the mirror. Dark hair was shoulder-length and needed a trim, a little untidy. I tried for a sexy tousle. Definitely tall with the boots. The jeans were new, clean, and tight in the right places. I sighed, wondering who or what I was getting dressed up for. A week without sex was adding to my thinking.

We caravanned, me leading in my pickup, across the old Interstate 5 bridge to northeast Portland. People who live in Vancouver, USA, spend a lot of time switching states, hopping across the Columbia River to the big city.

Hap Ricketts, the Commissary manager in charge of supplies and animal food, held a rowdy, noisy party at least once a year. Marcie and I walked toward his stucco house, loud music inviting us in from the chilly evening. No one was likely to hear the bell, so we let ourselves in. The place was crowded with zoo people, both staff and volunteers; a few of Hap's half-feral bike club friends; and miscellaneous significant others. We added our jackets to a four-foot stack in the living room. I caught a glimpse of Denny's blond head. He was running the music system from a bedroom off the dining room: surf rock and lots of it. I gave that two minutes until Hap got the sound back to Motörhead.

Hap interrupted a story he was telling Arnie, the bear keeper, to wave and shout something incomprehensible at me that seemed to be a compliment. Maybe it hadn't been such a bad idea to come. Or to wear the boots. As long as Hap stayed away from the jello shots and didn't repeat the scene from last year's party—pinning me against the wall in the hallway to vow his eternal friendship and deathless loyalty. Rick had rescued me with high-spirited horsing around that left Hap laughing. If Hap's wife, Benita, had found us instead, she would have eviscerated me on the spot with a plastic spoon. I'd forgotten that little situation. Where *was* Benita?

Marcie fished a dripping soda out of a cooler and I found a bottle of wine and a plastic glass. I didn't want beer that close to my nose. The music hit a brief lull and I could hear Hap's parrots screeching in a back room.

I pushed through the crowd toward the dining room, where the food was likely to be. I love party snacks. I could hear howling—somebody was in a party mood. Next it would probably be gibbon hooting or competitive birdcalls. The crowd shifted and I stopped dead. In the middle of the room with a half dozen other people stood Rick, bright blue T-shirt with a black lizard design, worn jeans, and scarred motorcycle boots, waving a tall glass. He had his head back, eyes closed, and was howling like a particularly horny he-wolf. I stood stock-still, fight-or-flight reactions surging back and forth.

Flight won. I turned to go, but Marcie grabbed me by the elbow. "You big chicken. You can't run from him. You *work* together." She tried to whisper, but had to use a medium yell to be heard. Her fingers flicked "go in there." I hung back as pride

and anxiety fought it out again. This time pride won. He wasn't going to run me out of a party with my people.

Sam Bates, the elephant and hoof stock keeper, was responding with a pretty good coyote serenade when I stepped into the room. They were arguing about fox barks when Rick finally saw me. He went still for a second, then nodded curtly. Sam turned to see who it was. Somebody behind me said, "Let the games begin."

Sam and others began drifting casually out of the room. Benita, luscious in a tight red blouse and matching Capri pants, smiled brilliantly at me and tip-toed out on her four-inch heels, leaving Rick and me, plus a few innocents neither of us knew. I stepped uneasily toward the food and grabbed a paper plate. Rick rocked a little on the balls of his feet as I piled up chips, salted nuts, and vegetables with dip, not looking at him. The tension was roughly equivalent to Bonneville Dam's electricity output.

Done with foraging, I cleared my throat, something caught in it. "Getting your daily quota?" I waved toward his glass.

"No. It's root beer. Sam makes it." He held it out to me. I eyed the glass suspiciously.

The music volume dropped, changed to k.d. lang singing about love. Denny setting a mood? Promoting eavesdropping? You never knew with Denny. Rick said something softly; it might have been "Don't quit me, babe," but I couldn't be sure.

"We should talk." Not that I had a clue what to say.

"Outside. My truck?"

I hesitated, then abandoned the plate. My stomach wasn't really up for salsa-flavored chips anyway. We walked through the living room and outside, ignoring people who were busy not noticing us. I shivered as the night air hit me and kept on shivering in the passenger seat. He started to reach out to pull me closer, but caught himself as I growled. Cuddling was not on my agenda, cold or not. He started the motor and turned on the heater. I shifted my boots around a big envelope on the floor mat.

Rick twisted around to face me, leaning his back against the door. "I been trying all week to figure out what to say to you," he said, slow and quiet. The streetlight left one side of his face in shadow. "I was really hacked off at you for getting hysterical and making a mess. It really bothered me that you spilled beer all over the house." He folded his arms across his chest. His voice stayed pensive. "Then I thought, why am I worrying about the beer and the house? We had something really good and it's all screwed up. I want to quit being annoyed at you and you being mad at me. It's too hard."

"Too hard?" I could feel anger rising to warm me and steady my knees. Too hard to find his own rental? Too hard to be my friend, like he used to be, before we got married?

"Yeah. Too hard going it alone. If it's going to be this tough, I want it to be from figuring out what we need to do. I want it back like it was before, not all the tension and bad feelings."

He looked through the windshield at the empty street. His face in profile was too much for my heart. I looked away.

"I miss you," he said.

I stared down at my black boots, invisible in the shadows under the dash, and tried to find a home for the anger. I couldn't. It eased on out. "What went wrong? I don't understand what went wrong."

He turned to face me again. "I figured out part of it, I think. You know how it is with your parents? You grew up knowing what being married is like when two people do it right, the way your folks do. It wasn't like that for me—I never saw being married work out."

It didn't seem the time to launch into a critique of my parents' marriage. For sure, it was better than ours. Rick's parents had died before I met him; he'd never wanted to talk about them. "So why did you want to get married?"

"I really didn't think about it. Maybe I figured it would keep you with me."

"What about your folks?"

"They really didn't like each other. Nonstop fighting and bitching. Fun for me was somewhere else, where they weren't. They were both heavy drinkers. It's probably why my mom got diabetes and Dad had a bad liver. They both died before they were fifty. My sister left when she was sixteen. I never really put it together until now. Pretty stupid, huh?" He was looking out the windshield again, not at me.

"So why did we end up doing them instead of my parents?"

"I don't know. It has to be me, but I just don't know. It's not what I want, that's for sure." He turned toward me. "It was so great at first. I feel like I wrecked it. Maybe we should have stayed together and not gotten married."

"Well, we *did* get married," I said. "So we either re-run your parents' marriage until we get divorced or we do something different." "Divorced" sent a shiver up my spine.

He flinched, too. After a moment, he said, "I'll try to quit the beer. I think you must be right about that, because the idea really bothers me, like I'll never feel good again. But I can do it. I've started."

He sounded like he meant it.

"I'm not sure what to do about the rest of it," he added. He ducked his chin and looked hard at me. "You still in the game, then?"

I shifted toward him, relief and a timid joy washing out the last of anger and sorrow. "Yeah, that's a start. Maybe get into a group or something for the alcohol. We can figure out the rest of it one step at a time."

He nodded thoughtfully.

We talked until the party emptied out, one or two at a time. We watched Denny walk Marcie to her car. One by one, vehicles coughed to life, headlights flared, and they retreated, leaving a quiet street dotted with pools of light from street lamps.

We talked until we ran dry and still we sat in Rick's truck, the motor muttering peacefully. When he pulled me into his arms, the last of the knots in my heart and stomach eased. We held each other like hurt children. Finally I raised my face and, gently, he kissed me.

That first kiss was sweet, filled with relief that we hadn't decided to part forever. The second kiss was a reminder that we'd kissed before and knew how to do this right. The third was between consenting adults. I slid my hand under his tee shirt, feeling warm skin over the muscles of his chest and back. He reached down and grabbed the big envelope next to my feet, dropping it behind his seat back. I twisted around and he shifted over to the passenger seat underneath me—a little difficulty getting the seat leaned back, my knees straddling his lap—then his mouth found mine again and it wasn't difficult at all. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that all the windows were steamed up. Then I forgot about the rest of the world.