



Wolf in Tiger's Stripes

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The conversation seemed to hover like noxious smoke over the long, oval dining table, the words indistinct and, to Judith, irrelevant. She stared down at the incinerated contents of her plate, idly wondering how a woman who cooked as badly as her American-born but now thoroughly Tasmanian cousin, Vanessa, could even dare to hold a dinner party in the first place.

Judith prodded gingerly at the charred remains of what had once been prime rib steak, wishing she had the nerve to feign a headache, nausea, anything to avoid having to actually try to eat this burnt offering. But with the dinner party ostensibly in *her* honor? No, not a chance.

She wasn't comfortable at being the supposed guest of honor, either. Her cousin, goodhearted as she was, had absolutely no compunction about blatant matchmaking, and on this occasion Vanessa had outdone herself. It was seriously unnerving for Judith to find herself partnered at dinner with a man so splendidly masculine that under normal circumstances she'd have been blessing her now-Tasmanian cousin with every bite.

Bevan Keene, Judith had decided from the moment of seeing him for the first time, was the quintessential rugged Australian stockman—the physical manifestation of countless romantic and adventure novels. He was tall, lean, ruggedly handsome, but also urbane, clearly well educated, witty, dangerously charming, and too damned close for comfort.

And you don't believe in love at first sight. Not even lust at first sight. Well . . . usually.

But there was nothing usual about the effect Bevan Keene had created merely in being introduced to her, and sitting beside him now, Judith could almost feel the physical current that flowed between them. He wasn't touching her, never had, but . . . Judith's tongue flicked across her lips just thinking about what she'd like to do with the man beside her. Under normal circumstances!

These were not, however, normal circumstances. Here, now, Judith wasn't interested in any man, not even one so attractive and charming as Bevan Keene. So Judith had ignored Keene from the very start of the evening, or at least as much as she *could* ignore him without being outright rude.

None of her current antipathy toward men was *his* fault; it was all because of Derek Innes. And at the very least, there was no sexual baggage involved there, not on her part, anyway. But not really Derek's fault, either. Not entirely. *Your own fault, Judith Theresa—all your own fault.*

Judith was honest enough with herself to admit that, just as she admitted that Bevan Keene was turning her on just by sitting there beside her and assaulting his overdone steak with perfect teeth. He was himself edible in every way she could think of, except that she wished *not* to think of such things. Fat chance!

Try as she might, Judith couldn't stop herself from imagining those strong, tanned, capable hands touching her, that mobile mouth caressing her own lips before moving on to caress other parts of her body . . .

Tuning back into the hubbub of conversation, she had to give herself a mental shake. *No wonder the table talk is so overwhelming. They're all talking at once just to avoid having to eat. Lord love us, but I cannot understand why a vegetarian should ever be allowed to even try and cook meat, presuming of course that this ever was meat, which I'm beginning to doubt.*

Judith's own taste tended to huge, thick steaks that hit the plate kicking and bellowing. Quite early in her Australian sojourn she'd heard a Queensland local in an upscale restaurant proclaim, "Just cut off its horns and wipe its bum and put it on the plate." She had cringed at the vulgarity but secretly applauded the sentiment.

Now, glancing round the table while still ignoring the conversation, she noticed suddenly that she wasn't alone in her opinion of cousin Vanessa's so-called cuisine. Even Vanessa's husband Charles, the advertising executive known to be totally enthralled and totally smitten with

what he termed his “imported wife,” had barely touched the offering in front of him. Vanessa herself hardly appeared to have eaten anything, but then she had the excuse of soon-to-be-delivered twins.

Poor kids. You’ll probably grow up without ever knowing what a good steak tastes like. Nessie will have Charles fully converted by the time you’re weaned, and she’ll raise the lot of you on bean curd and lentils. Judith couldn’t escape the thought when it struck her mind, or the frown that accompanied it.

“This tucker’s a bit overdone, but not that bad, surely.” The voice was low, not quite a growl.

Judith almost leapt from her chair as the remark penetrated her self-imposed solitude but failed to touch her understanding.

“I’m sorry,” she replied, turning to the speaker. “I was . . .”

“You were looking as if you had a toothache, or more likely a stomachache,” was the reply from Bevan Keene, and it was accompanied by a scathing glance at the charred scraps on his own plate. He had done better justice to the meal than she, but not by much.

“It wasn’t the food,” she replied, her lips curving in what she hoped would emerge as a grin. “Although it could have been, couldn’t it? No, I was thinking of . . . something else.”

“Some thing, or some *body*?” he replied, softening the query with a smile. “I wouldn’t want to be him if it was a person you were considering. The look on your face suggested hanging would be too good for him.”

She’d been thinking of Charles and children, but his question thrust her mind back a notch, to Derek. “It would be,” Judith replied briskly. “Drawing and quartering would be preferable, I think. I’d like to watch him suffer.”

Bevan Keene’s hooded gray eyes sparkled to match the gleam of white teeth that flashed a quick smile. The gesture made the ends of his heavy mustache quiver, giving him a bold, almost flamboyant air. A pirate, disguised as a prominent Australian grazier.

“Pretty fierce talk,” he said. “Is it just because he done you wrong, or is there a helping of hell hath no fury in there?”

Wrong question. Judith felt herself going cold inside, could feel the barrier lifting between them like an icy curtain. She didn’t reply, merely turned her attention back to her charred steak. Bevan Keene watched her for a moment; she could feel his eyes as his gaze strayed across her features in a bold, if not blatantly sexual, appraisal.

It was as if he’d physically caressed her—she could actually *feel* his touch on her cheek, her lips. But then he accepted the rebuke without further comment and turned to speak to the person on his other side.

Judith returned to her reverie, all too aware that she might be visibly trembling at the intensity of the feelings his incautious questions had aroused. Done her wrong? Derek had done worse than that. He had virtually destroyed her career as an environmental journalist—that’s what he’d done! What she now felt had nothing to do with being scorned. It had to do with her shame and guilt at having been so easily manipulated.

So here I am, ten thousand miles from home, out of a job, probably blacklisted in the entire industry. All because of my own stupidity! Judith shook her head angrily. *Because Derek was just so damned smooth? So damned plausible? Or just because I’m what’s known as a natural victim?*

Judith stared blindly at her plate, wondering, not for the first time, how she could be smart enough to know her weaknesses, yet so stupid as to have let Derek manipulate her in the first place. Of course, with hindsight, she shouldn’t have let herself be led astray by Derek’s seemingly solid principles. The rising star of the Queensland environmental movement, he was, of course, relevant to her own work. But having trusted him was nothing short of stupid, and she’d known that even as she walked wide-eyed and innocent into his idealism-baited trap. Professionally questionable. Personally, little short of outright foolhardiness.

Right from the start, there had been a question of who was using whom, an issue Judith had idealistically assumed she could handle. Derek, as she now realized, had handled it better. He had used her right from the beginning and, worse, had always intended to!

He'd been handsome (not that it mattered because she hadn't been attracted to him sexually), charming, persuasive, charismatic—and as crooked as a dog's hind leg. Behind the façade, he was cunning, devious, and manipulative, a man so self-centered he would use anybody and everything to achieve his objectives. For Judith, it had been a monumental disaster, the ensuing story so blatantly and obviously rigged that it had given her New York boss—who'd been trying for two years without success to lure her into his bed—the excuse he'd been looking for to fire her on the spot. Derek had come out looking triumphant; Judith had emerged jobless and looking a fool.

And now here I am in Tasmania, of all places, licking my wounds and hiding from the world like a wounded animal. Good one, Judith Theresa!

She found herself thinking of the North American wolverine, an animal, which habitually fouled whatever it could not use itself, just to be sure no other animal could use it. She had once playfully told Derek the wolverine should have been dubbed the original political animal. Now, she realized, Derek himself was the classic wolverine, the consummate politician. A user, no more and no less.

It was the name of another animal, however, that brought her out of her fugue and back to the present with an almost visible start.

“. . . Tassie tiger? Well of course they're extinct. It would be nice, of course, to believe otherwise, but really . . .”

“It's not only the greenies that believe they still exist,” said Phelan Keene, the brother of Judith's dinner companion. “A lot of genuine bushies and graziers—people who *should* know—believe it too. Even the top scientists who've studied the Thylacine believe it *might* still exist.”

Or might truly be extinct, Judith thought. The Thylacine, more commonly known as the Tasmanian tiger despite being—technically—a marsupial wolf, was a conservation icon both in Tasmania and in the rest of Australia. The weirdly doglike creature with its tawny striped coat and distinctive gaping “yawn” was a much larger cousin to the Tasmanian devil so grossly miscast in cartoons, but had never quite gained international recognition in the same way. “And every year, some weirdo gets on his favorite hobby horse and starts things up again.” This came from the other end of the table. “And of course the media leap onto the bandwagon, and we’re off and running. *Tasmanian Tiger Sighted!* It’s a load of old cobblers, if you ask me. Damn it, Phelan, if tigers do exist, why don’t we get reports of them from somebody responsible? Like Bevan, or some other knowledgeable grazier, for instance.”

“Because no sane property owner would ever admit to seeing a Tassie tiger within a hundred miles of his own property,” replied the sandy-haired man seated beside Judith. In a voice that, while soft, seemed to reverberate through the sudden quiet in the room, he added, “If he did, he’d be overrun by government boffins and politicians and bloody journalists.”

A boffin is a so-called expert. Judith made the mental translation while almost tasting the acid in Bevan Keene’s final word, “journalists.” Not a new response to her, but seldom had she seen such a pronounced antipathy from a person who seemed otherwise calm and rational.

“Not to mention being held to ridicule and quite deservedly being called a liar and a damned fool,” came from the other end of the table, and Judith actually *felt* the tension that ran through her dinner companion, like some strange current of static electricity. Bevan Keene seemed to freeze in a posture that suggested he might leap to his feet and commit mayhem.

He replied with a quick and ready grin, but his tension was obvious enough, at least to her.

“That too,” he replied in that deceptively soft, growly voice. And Judith noticed he was looking not at the obnoxious speaker, but at his own brother. And the look was alive with warning.

Too late. Even as Judith began trying to interpret the subtle signal between the brothers, Phelan Keene was halfway to his feet and glaring across the dinner table at the man who'd mentioned fools and liars.

"A damned fool, maybe," Phelan said through clenched teeth. "But I'd go easy about calling people liars, if I were you. Bevan might accept it—he's a peaceful soul and he's a grazier, after all. He can't, as he said earlier, very well go around admitting he's seen tigers more than once in his short life. But I've seen them too, and my temper is a bit less gentle than his."

Judith could hardly believe her eyes and ears. It was like being transported back in history to a time when duels were fought. Phelan Keene had visibly flung down a challenging gauntlet and was poised for a fight—a startling transformation from the man who only moments before had been trading tax collector jokes with his stunning, relatively new wife, a woman who worked for the tax office and seemed quite used to her husband's teasing her about her work.

"Settle, boy." Bevan's voice was still low, but somehow it penetrated the now-hostile atmosphere at the other end of the table. The older brother at her side was, Judith felt, of a much less volatile nature than Phelan, but no less dangerous for all that. Probably even more dangerous. But for now his calmer temperament stood out as he spoke to defuse the issue. He spoke to the man who'd upset Phelan, but his eyes and attention were locked on his brother.

"I've seen a pink elephant or two in my time," Bevan said with a deprecating grin, "and a flying pig, too—once. But I wouldn't reckon any of them, or the circumstances, are subjects for discussion in polite company. We ought to change the subject."

Which, Judith realized, was a casual but deliberate way of telling his younger brother to drop the subject and do it now. Bevan Keene's apparent relaxation might seem real at the other end of the table, but she could feel the tension that remained in his large, muscular frame. Their elbows touched, although she didn't think Keene was aware of it—his concentration was elsewhere. But she could feel his muscles flexing, could see the taut tendons in his neck and jaw.

It was like being next to a wild animal poised to pounce, and without thinking, Judith reached out a hand and laid it on his thigh, seeking to calm him.

Not a good move! Because it wasn't his muscular thigh that her fingers encountered, but his lap. And because her touch didn't reduce *any* tensions, merely created tension of a different sort entirely!

Judith froze, strangely unable to obey the instinct to let go, move her hand, flee the encounter—maybe flee the entire scene! It was as if her fingers had been coated with glue, and when he turned to capture her startled gaze with his own, that only made things worse.

Keene's wonderfully mobile mouth curved in a grin that could have been amusement or sheer satisfaction. It didn't matter because Judith was transfixed by it, could only sit there, stunned as a tiny prey animal confronted by its nemesis predator.

She blushed—couldn't *not* blush, couldn't *not* be aware how her fair, freckled skin and copper-red hair made the blush impossible to hide. But she couldn't speak, couldn't think, and—worst of all—couldn't seem to let go of him!

Her mind had gone into idiocy mode. All she could hear in her head was a nonsense rhyme about the dreaded one-eyed trouser snake, and she wanted to laugh and didn't dare, wanted to let go of this *thing* that writhed and squirmed beneath her fingers, but couldn't do that, either.

She could only meet the amused stare from the softest gray eyes she'd ever seen on a man, could only fix a death-grip on what little composure she could still claim, could only nod in response when Bevan Keene finally spoke.

“Well,” he said, “that certainly got my attention.”

Six words only, but enough to break the spell. Judith snatched her hand away as if Keene's lap were a glowing stovetop. Somehow, she also tore herself free of his gaze. But she couldn't summon the clarity of thought it would take her to formulate a reply or—first choice!—leave the table without making a total spectacle of herself.

And then things got even worse.

Judith had been warned about the Keene family by her cousin and was half surprised that sister Alana, also at the other end of the table, hadn't leapt into the fray as well. The Keenes loved nothing better, she'd been warned by Vanessa, than to engage in familial slanging matches that to outsiders seemed uncommonly fierce.

But it wasn't the diminutive and lovely Alana that stirred the possum again. It was—and this, Judith thought, she ought to have expected—her own dear, severely pregnant cousin, Vanessa.

"Well *I'm* certain that Tasmanian tigers aren't really extinct," Vanessa said, beginning innocently enough. "Not that I've seen one, of course, although I'd love to some day. But if you and Bevan have seen them, Phelan, I know Judith would just adore to talk to you about it. Being an environmental journalist, she'd be absolutely fascinated, I'm sure."

Fascinated? No, dear cousin—more like MURDEROUS! If a Tassie tiger walked into this room right now, I'd feed you to it! How COULD you?

Judith could have cheerfully crawled under the table, she was so mortified. Her journalistic career, post-Derek, was nonexistent, and Vanessa not only knew that, but had been specifically told that it was an off-limits subject. Worse, the change in focus that Nessie's naïve comment had created was worse—if anything *could* be worse—than her feelings of

embarrassment. Phelan Keene positively glowered at her from his end of the table, and she'd distinctly heard a gasp of surprise from his sister Alana. And beside her . . .

Judith looked up to meet gray eyes now the color of wet Tasmanian mudstone, eyes that only an instant before had been laughing, had held the texture of gray velvet, even while visibly bemused at her predicament. No longer. Now they were hard, accusing, almost frightening in their intensity. Bevan Keene was looking at her as if she'd just crawled out from under a rock, and Judith's temper, matching her copper hair as it so often did, was poised to explode. Her own blue-green eyes flashed at the challenge in his gaze. She met his gaze fiercely, but in total calm, waiting for him to make the expected disparaging remark.

But he said nothing. They sat there, each now oblivious to the dinner party around them, eyes locked in some strange form of combat for which Judith didn't even know the rules. It seemed at first as if everyone around them was waiting, impatient for the explosion, but then somehow her surroundings faded, leaving only his eyes, his face with its beaky, high-bridged nose, his abundance of curly, sandy hair. Until finally she was compelled to break the unnatural silence because his eyes were changing even as they held her. His expression softened, the hostility melding into something else, something equally dangerous, but much less obvious. Now there was a sort of slyness there, strangely predatory.

There was a warning, too, of some kind, but it wasn't strong enough, or alarming enough, to quell Judith's seething defensiveness.

"You have something against journalists?" she heard herself asking, and then, unable to bear the silence, added, "Or is it just *female* journalists?" before he could possibly have replied to the first question. Then she waited and continued to wait as Bevan continued to look at her, his gaze now leaving her own and patiently, deliberately, stalking across her face, her lips, her throat, and down the slender lines of her body as far as he could see. Then back to meet her stare boldly, blatantly, challenging in its intensity.

His gaze was that of a great predator assessing prey, until it suddenly changed—as did his eyes. At least they seemed to, although common sense said it wasn't possible for them to flash in the instant from dove gray to a deep, menacing yellow shade. Wolf's eyes. Tiger's eyes.

Predator's eyes!

And this time, when he used them once again to assess her body, it was with an almost tangible touch. She felt the caress that began in the hollow of her throat, shivered as it traced a circuitous track down to the cleft between her breasts. Her nipples literally sprang to attention as invisible fingertips plucked at them. In her tummy, thankfully hidden by her napkin, she felt an awesome tingling, almost a humming sensation. It was as if she'd gulped too much air and bubbles were floating there, bubbles which occasionally burst.

When he did speak, it was in a voice so low that only she could hear, and that barely. His voice didn't carry past her, couldn't possibly have been heard across the table.

“You're overreacting.”

Only the few words from his lips, but his eyes—miraculously gone back to gray again—spoke volumes. All in a language Judith didn't want to hear, didn't want to know, didn't dare try to even comprehend. *I want you*, those eyes said. Loud as a shout in her suddenly feverish brain. *I want your body and I want your mind, but your body first. And I'll have it, too. When I'm ready.*

“Or is it *environmental* journalists you take such an immediate dislike to?” she challenged, having to force out each word against a heart that thumped in her breast like some great drum, making it hard to breathe, harder still to think. Overreacting? Well of course she was overreacting, but now that *he'd* mentioned it, damned if *she'd* admit it, anymore than she'd admit the incredible sensation of a caress that began at one kneecap and slowly, deliberately, crept up the inside of her thigh.

Judith had to force herself not to look down, not to acknowledge the weirdness of it all. Because both of Bevan Keene's hands were there on the table before him, in plain sight. And they had been all along. She was certain of it. Well . . . nearly certain.

Bevan raised one eyebrow, his eyes again light gray, gleaming like wet, radiant jewels. Laughing at her—she knew it. And she hated it!

“You’re awfully defensive,” he finally said. “This is me, remember? Not whomever you were thinking of before.”

“As if there were any relevant difference,” Judith said with a sneer, her mind somehow freed by the sound of his voice. But her heart still thumped like a wild thing caged, and she could feel his gaze, a caress upon her skin. Was the entire dinner party watching this bizarre exchange, she wondered? And, if so, what on earth would they make of it?

She shivered, then fought the shiver before it could radiate to her very core.

“Oh,” he said in that soft, curiously gentle voice, that distinctive Tasmanian accent. “There’s a difference all right. And you know it, too. Even a female . . . environmental . . . American . . . journalist could figure out that much,” he added, stretching out the words, deliberately provoking her without raising his voice much beyond a whisper.

“Not this one,” Judith snapped, again wishing she could just crawl away silently under cover of the table, or disappear in a puff of smoke. Anything that would allow her not to have to continue this farcical debate, a discussion all the more ridiculous because it had been she who started it. Because now that they’d clashed, now that they’d made more than just polite social contact, Bevan Keene could no longer be ignored.

Not that she wanted to anymore. Quite the opposite. What she *wanted* was—

“You’re just cranky because I didn’t react like you expected me to,” he said with a quiet chuckle. “You wanted me to go all feral and insulting, just so you’d have somebody to vent your spleen on.” He shook his mop of sandy curls. “That bloke who done you wrong sure did a number on you. Top job. He’s turned you off men and got your liver in a right royal snit at the same time.”

It might have been funny, had it been true, but it was nonetheless far too perceptive. And it might have been even funnier, had she not, just a moment earlier, had her hand in his lap without having the faintest idea how or why.

None of which explained why this man could somehow look at her and turn her insides to mush. She was saved from having to reply by a demand from farther up the table that they pass up their dinner plates to make room for dessert.

It gave her a welcome opportunity to hop up and help with the job, and to scold Nessie when the two were alone in the kitchen. Not *much* of a reprimand—how vigorous could one be, after all, with a woman due to birth twins at any moment?

“I’m sorry . . . I’m sorry . . . I’m sorry,” her cousin pleaded before Judith even got warmed up. “It just slipped out. It wasn’t deliberate.” Then Vanessa retreated into her own viewpoint, once she had realized she was safe in her advanced state of pregnancy. “What harm did it do, for goodness’ sake? I noticed you and Bevan getting on like a house on fire.”

“More fire than getting on, Nessie,” Judith replied, thankful she could steady herself against the kitchen counter because she felt strangely weak in the knees. “Which isn’t the point! The point is that we had agreed—AGREED, DAMN IT!—not to mention my job. My *former* job, Nessie. I’m not any kind of journalist right now, except the unemployed kind. That’s why I’m here, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Oh, come on. You’ll have your job back soon enough. Or a better one. *Much* better, if you can get on Bevan’s good side and put this Tassie tiger story together,” Nessie said in what Judith considered her cousin’s usual blind naïveté.

“For goodness’ sake, Nessie. There *is* no tiger story, and if there were, Bevan Keene would be the last man on earth to give it to me. And the last one I’d ask, if you want to know the truth. Why on earth did you have to saddle me with *him* tonight, anyway?”

“Apart from the fact that he’s devastatingly handsome, charming, rich, and *available*, I hate uneven dinner parties,” Vanessa replied calmly.

“You hate dinner parties, period! Anyone could tell that by your so-called cooking,” Judith muttered as she turned to shuffle slices of store-bought lemon meringue pie onto serving plates.

“Now you’re being catty, Judith Theresa,” her cousin replied. “And that isn’t at all like you. The Judith I remember would have been cutting up Bevan’s meat and feeding it to him by hand if it meant a crack at a fair-dinkum ‘tiger’ story,” she concluded, lapsing into the lingo of her adopted country.

“I’d need a chainsaw to cut up any meat you’d cooked,” Judith snapped, her already fragile and aggravated temper betraying her. Of absolutely no consolation was her memory of a comment from her old friend Jeremiah Cottrell, a British magazine publisher, upon hearing of her sacking and anticipated trip to Tasmania to lick her wounds and recuperate. Jeremiah hadn’t offered her a job—that would have been too easy. He’d left her to her suffering instead, but with a bit of salt for the wounds.

“Turn me up a new slant on the Tasmanian tiger saga—with pictures, of course—and I’ll almost let you write your own ticket,” he’d said. Joking, of course. He had to have been joking. The reality was what had been said at the dinner table. About once a year somebody resurrected the saga of the Tassie tiger and gave it another stroll down the proverbial garden path. Because—and she’d have been the first to admit that—it was such a *wonderful* story!

An animal known to have existed right into modern times, but now presumed to be extinct. Except for the fact that people kept reporting having seen live specimens, even if no real evidence was ever produced. No validating pictures, or scat, or guaranteed tracks, or hair, or even—especially important—a recently dead tiger carcass. The last wild specimen of the Thylacine, the marsupial wolf called Tasmanian “tiger” because of its partially striped coat, was accepted as having been shot in 1930, and the last specimen in captivity died on September 7, 1936.

But people kept seeing them. Or saying they did. And for those who investigated such matters, the sightings provided a provocative mystery. Most reports were from bushmen, farmers, or rural residents who should have known what they'd seen. Others held somewhat less credence, but every year there were sufficient reports to keep the legend alive.

Because people *want* the tiger to have survived, Judith thought. Just as they want there to be a Sasquatch, and a Yeti, and an Elephant Graveyard. Like the best of her professional colleagues, Judith was a confirmed skeptic, and yet . . .

* * * * *

“So,” said Bevan Keene when she returned—having run out of plausible excuses to delay any longer—to sit down beside him, her temper somewhat cooled but her defensive armor fully in place and mollified not a whit by his politely rising to hold her chair. “What are *your* feelings about Tassie tigers, Miss Bryan? Do you believe, or do you consider them in the same class as the Dodo and the Passenger Pigeon? Or . . .” and he grinned, “. . . your American Bigfoot, or Sasquatch.”

His grin nearly did her in. It was a predator's grin and the grin of a happy child and the smug, self-satisfied smile of a winner—all in the same package. But there was something else in that package, too, something sexual and sensual that struck her like a bolt of lightning. Once again, she felt her knees go weak and was immensely pleased he was holding the chair she collapsed into.

“I'd like to believe they still exist,” she said, fighting to hide the raggedness in her voice. “It's not that many years since they were known to be alive, and according to rumors on the conservation front, there's been more than one shot since then, too. It's just that nobody's been prepared to admit such a thing. People want them to exist, want to believe in them. That's why I think this latest suggestion that they try to clone one is going to fail, even if it were to succeed. People don't want a clone. They want a symbol!”

Like Bevan was a symbol . . . of everything masculine. This man wore his masculinity like a second skin, not blatantly, but with a total, powerful self-assurance that threatened and promised at the same time. And he was focused upon her now with a frightening intensity.

His expression seemed to reveal surprise. “You’ve studied the subject, obviously.”

“It’s an environmental issue, and I am—was, actually—a journalist who specialized in such things.” Her reply was carefully worded, cautious. So was her reaction to Bevan Keene. She hardly dared meet his eyes, lest they lure her into inappropriate thoughts. *Enjoyable* inappropriate thoughts.

My God! Did I just think that? I couldn’t have. But I did. And I do!

Judith suddenly realized she was avoiding Bevan’s gaze by looking at his lap. Worse, her hand was following her glance, moving as if possessed of a separate will. She yanked it back before he could notice . . . she hoped.

“*Was?* That isn’t what Nessie said.”

“Nessie is prone to putting her own interpretations on things even when she isn’t . . . in her present condition,” Judith said, then hurriedly corrected herself. “No, let’s be fair. It’s got nothing to do with Nessie. Okay . . . I *am* a journalist, and I did specialize in environmental matters. But I’m . . . between jobs right now. There, does that satisfy you?”

It didn’t satisfy *her*! She was physically holding her right hand with her left, willing it to stop this nonsense. But she couldn’t stop her imagination, much less the frisson of excitement that single word—*satisfy*—sent tingling down through her tummy.

Some sort of emotion flashed across Bevan Keene’s face, but it was too fast for Judith to interpret. Then he was looking directly into her eyes, and his speculation was all too obvious.

“I’m not easily satisfied, when it comes to some things,” Keene replied enigmatically. “Although I guess everybody needs their dreams. Even journalists. So tell me about your dreams, Ms. Bryan. Not the ones about the scoop of the century. I’ve no interest in that. But your *real* dreams.”

And he spiced the question with a smile so devastating it nearly took her breath away, if only for an instant. This man was too clever, too perceptive. What would he reply, she wondered, if she told him straight out that he both fascinated and terrified her and she wasn't even certain why?

"Not a dinner subject, I'm afraid," she said as calmly as she could. Lying and astonished she even *could* lie. "I'd rather discuss tigers."

"Oh, I'm sure you would," was his reply. "I'm sure you'd like nothing better than to write a scintillating article about a prominent grazier who says he sees them regularly in his back paddock." And again there was that devastating grin, only this time tinged with cynicism. Surprisingly, though, he didn't wait for a reply. "Or, better yet, some reliable, responsible observer you could report as having seen tigers in one of the areas the greenies are trying to save. Wouldn't *that* be a coup?"

More than just cynicism, now. His voice, his entire demeanor, sparked with a sarcasm that bespoke a deeper anger. Obviously, he didn't like activists.

"Not without proof," she said. "*Real* proof, I mean. Without concrete, unassailable evidence, it would be nothing at all. Unless, of course, a politician claimed it, in which case it would be *less* than nothing."

Bevan Keene raised one eyebrow. "Why, Ms. Bryan, do I detect a note of genuine cynicism there?"

"Realism, not cynicism," she replied. "Politicians are like bananas—they can be green or yellow or rotten, but they always hang together in a bunch and they're always bent. That's not *my* quote, but one I've found to be pretty accurate overall."

He didn't so much as flinch. Never registered even a flicker of surprise.

"My goodness. We've found common ground after all," Keene said. And grinned hugely. "I was beginning to despair." And he grinned again, this time a predator's grin, smug and self-satisfied. Like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood.

He looked calmly around the table as if about to ask how everyone else felt about politicians. And he smiled again.

My, what big teeth you have, Grannie, Judith thought. *The better to tell lies with, perhaps. Common ground? There is absolutely nothing about you that's common.* Again, Judith had to mentally recoil from Bevan Keene's devastating charm, suddenly worried by just how easily he turned the charm off and on to suit his purposes.

"It is my firm belief that there is nothing so perfect in this world that it can't be totally stuffed up by a bit of political intervention," he said, and the bitterness in his tone was there to taste, to smell. It was tangible, given life by his voice. Then he shook his head, and bowed his mass of sandy curls almost apologetically.

"Forgive me," he said, and appeared to be genuine. "I was just reminded of the time-honored rule that religion and politics ought never to be allowed in dinner party conversation."

"And sex. You forgot to mention that," Judith said, the words out of her mouth before she realized she was thinking them.

"How could I?" His words slid past a grin so deliberately wicked she might have laughed had he not followed up with "Merely put on hold, my dear Ms. Bryan. There is a time and place for everything."

He never touched her, but his glance was like a physical caress that began at her copper-red hair and flowed slowly downward, gently stroking her eyelids, touching the sensitive spots behind her ears, forcing her to lick at her lips to see if she could taste it. By the time the caress got that far, her nipples had hardened in anticipation, aided by an apparent inability to draw a decent breath.

Merely put on hold? she repeated silently. *I'll give you "on hold," you smug, arrogant bastard.*

Keene's tongue flicked sensually across his lower lip, then—almost apologetically, she thought, though that made no sense—he looked away and reached down to spear a piece of the lemon meringue pie, giving her a chance to recover.

But he was waiting for her to say something, so she let fly with the first nonsexual comment that popped into her head. “Have you really seen a Tasmanian tiger? I mean . . . really, truly, alive and walking around?”

“Would I lie to you?”

It was a strange response, subtly out of context, definitely evasive, she thought. “I rather expect you would, in this case,” she replied honestly. “Although I don't know why you'd bother. I've told you, I'm not working, not looking for any sort of *scoop*, which is an outdated word, by the way. I'm just curious.”

“Ah, yes, so I noticed.”

Bevan Keene's words held both acceptance and accusation. Then he lapsed into silence. He just looked at her, his gaze once again moving across the terrain of her face as if he were attempting to memorize it. And the wry twist of his lips said it all. He didn't believe her for a New York minute.

“‘Ah, what?’” she was finally forced to ask, knowing it was a stupid question even as the words left her lips, knowing there was no valid answer, only one that would take advantage of the opportunity she'd now given him to heap insult upon injury. To get even.

Bevan Keene just shrugged, although there was a slight twist to his lips when he finally did speak. “I was walking through North Hobart one day,” he said, “and I saw a dog there. He was a blue heeler crossed with mastiff, or Rhodesian ridgeback, or pig dog of some kind, or all of the above. And he had stripes in just the right places, and just the right type of head, and the light was just right, and for an instant, there—right in the middle of the city—I could have *sworn* I'd just seen a tiger.”

The calm, calculated evasiveness served only to infuriate Judith. She had asked her question in good faith, and now he was laughing at her.

“Well, pardon me for asking,” she snapped, and turned away, glaring down at her dessert, wondering if she’d be able to resist the urge to make Bevan Keene wear it.

“Now don’t get cranky,” he said with a broad grin. “I wasn’t playing word games. I was only making the point that there are times we see what we want to see, or maybe just what we hope to see. I can’t explain it better than that, and I realize it makes no sense, since obviously I wouldn’t *expect* to see a tiger in the middle of Hobart, would I?” Then he sighed and continued. “In my whole life, I’ve seen what I thought was a tiger three times. The very first time Phelan and I were together and we both saw it. Or did we? We were only boys then, and although we both knew the bush and would have been considered competent observers, at least in some circles, we were still just boys! Did we see a tiger? Or just what we wanted to see, expected to see, hoped to see?”

“Because at that age, of course, we were both total romantics. We wanted to believe, so we did believe.”

He chuckled, a low, growling sound that rippled with humor. “Of course Phelan’s still a romantic, which is why he got all frothy there when the discussion was getting heavy.”

“And you’re not? A romantic, I mean?” Judith asked the questions without thinking about how it might be interpreted, her mind solely on the subject at hand despite the intense attractiveness of the man she spoke to. But once the words were out, so were the implications. And again she felt that insane compulsion to reach out, to touch him, to dare to let herself drown in his eyes, to succumb to the inappropriate thoughts scheming in her mischievous brain.

Bevan’s eyes and wry grin answered the innuendo even as it emerged. He looked into her eyes, then deliberately allowed his gaze to caress her cheek, her lips, her throat. It was as if he’d used his fingers; she felt her skin begin to tingle, felt a strange, hollow feeling that started in the

pit of her stomach and flowed in waves of prickly heat to tauten her breasts, throb at her nipples and groin.

“Not about tigers. But in other areas, I’m . . . open to persuasion,” he responded. “Although as I said before, there is a time and place for everything and this, Ms. Bryan, is really not either one.” And his eyes danced with laughter.

Judith retreated from them, turning her attention to her dessert and the sweet, sticky dessert wine in front of her. She had already drunk too much—*that’s my excuse and I’m sticking to it*—but was obsessed by the need to do something, anything, to check the developing situation.

Bevan Keene clearly felt no such compulsion.

“You’re going all cranky again,” he said, reaching out to lift her fingers in one huge hand, his touch seeming gentle for the size of his hand. The gesture was so totally unexpected that Judith froze, then mentally cursed herself for losing the opportunity to escape, or snub him, or . . . ? Because suddenly she was aware only of the touch of his fingers like thistledown along her wrist, tracing the pale veins that now throbbed to a cadence he was creating, controlling.

This was worse than when he’d looked at her, when he’d seduced her with his eyes. Much worse! Now the seduction was as much physical as mental. And she was under *his* control. His fingers talked to her in a private, secret language known only to the two of them, in a conversation unnoticed by the others at the table, incomprehensible to them if they did notice. It was different—totally different—from her touching of him or his earlier flirting.

This was far more serious, far more dangerous.

“Yes, you’d believe in tigers,” he said aloud, literally sighing the words. “You’d have to, I reckon. You couldn’t help yourself.”

“I’d like to believe they still exist, yes,” Judith answered, her voice trembling with the shudders of sensation he was creating with his fingertips. “But you’re not helping. If you’ve really seen them, why won’t you tell me more about it, help me to believe?”

His chuckle was halfway to being a laugh.

“You don’t need *my* help to believe,” he said. “I’ve just told you that. I also told you, if you were listening earlier, that no sane property owner would admit to seeing a tiger—especially to a journalist!”

“But you’ve already admitted it.”

“I have? Methinks, my dear Ms. Bryan, you’d best clean out your shell-like, virgin ears. All I said—and under duress I’d deny saying even *that*—was that I *thought* I saw a tiger, and that I was but an impressionable lad at the time. And that another time I thought I saw a tiger, but it was in the middle of Hobart, which makes the statement ridiculous from any viewpoint. No story in either, sorry as I am to disappoint you.”

Sorry—my ass! You’re not one damned bit sorry. You’re enjoying yourself, and you’re enjoying making me look and feel like an idiot. Well damn you, and damn your Tasmanian tigers, too, Mr. Bevan-bloody-Keene.

But what she said was, “I’m only disappointed I’m here on such a short visit. I’d have liked the chance to see a Tasmanian tiger for myself. In fact there are a lot of things I’d like to experience here in Tasmania, but I guess I’ll have to give most of them a miss.”

She threw Bevan Keene her most haughty sneer, yanked her arm free, rose from her chair, and flounced from the room. Time to help Nessie in the kitchen, and this time she *would* plead a headache.

And she did. It was easier than trying to forget Bevan Keene’s parting remark, softly spoken in a voice that was half threat, half promise.

“You’ll keep,” was all he’d said, but it echoed through her real or imagined migraine and, eventually, into her dreams.

The first dream Judith ascribed to drinking too much wine and eating too little food. It crept into her mind that very night, padding softly on Tassie tiger feet.

She was in a dense, subtropical rainforest. Running. Running from a myth, from a specter of her imagination. And she was naked, or nearly so, her nightgown torn and rent almost to rags, hiked up so she could run faster, could more easily clamber over huge windfall logs, scramble between the immense, old-growth trees that hid the sky.

Slitted, sly yellow eyes peeked from the blackness of the surrounding night, then suddenly became gray as Tasmanian mudstone as the dream swirled and whirled with no obvious sense of direction. As *she* swirled and whirled with no sense of direction, she only had a sense of being followed, of being watched, of being prey!

As if from the stygian darkness above, she somehow watched herself doing a tuneless dance in a tiny clearing, could see the watching, terrifying eyes—feral and yellow, then foreboding and gray—but not the creatures they belonged to, saw only the vaguest of shapes, the shifting light patterns that suggested stripes, the flashes of ivory that bespoke gleaming fangs.

And then she saw herself fall, and felt—rather than saw—the leap of the Tassie tiger as it pounced. Whereupon it all changed again, and the tiger wasn't a Thylacine, and the eyes weren't those of a Thylacine, but those of Bevan Keene—not that this made them any less powerful in their effect on her.

She was in her own body then and saw, even recoiled slightly as she saw, his gleaming teeth bared in something between a smile and a snarl, his generous, expressive lips moving to her throat. She felt the touch of his teeth, but only for a second. Then the touch was replaced by the delicate touch of a lover's fingers against the pulse in her throat.

And those same fingers then magically journeyed across the terrain of her half-naked body, pausing to tease at a nipple, bringing it to a turgid erectness, a painful tenderness, then to play a silent tune across the flatness of her tummy, the fingertips able to drum up butterfly sensations inside.

Were these Bevan's fingers, then, which stroked and tickled and stimulated her to the edge? Which made her body arch to lift herself against their touch? Which suddenly went from tender to fierce as they lifted her passion higher and higher and then, ruthlessly, threw her into overdrive, ignorant and uncaring of the uncontrollable bucking and thrusting of her body as . . .

They were, Judith discovered when the spasms of passion had ceased and her eyes were suddenly, almost frighteningly, wide open to the reality of the bedroom around her, not Bevan Keene's fingers, but her own body twisted in the sheets.

She lay there, sleepy and wide awake at the same time, staring at the ceiling but seeing Bevan Keene's face, Bevan Keene's eyes, even hearing—in her half-awake memory—Bevan Keene's voice. Until it changed from predator's growl to the maniacal shrieks of kookaburras laughing up the dawn.

* * * * *

Judith didn't believe in omens or even in coincidence, but it was a challenge not to. It was as if the conversation from what she thought of as the incineration dinner had itself ignited and now seemed destined to spread unchecked. A tiger sighting was reported from near Diddleum Plains, northeast of Launceston, followed by another, less believable sighting by some tourists who had managed to get lost in their attempt to reach Holwell Falls, to the northwest.

There was nothing particularly relevant about either report except the excuse for every newspaper in the state to bring out all the hoary old theories and pictures from their files. The various conservation groups leapt onto the bandwagon with quite predictable speed, demanding that yet another area be locked away from all development, exploration, or public access.

“Except from the bushwalkers, of course,” Judith found herself remarking wryly to her still-pregnant cousin Vanessa. “It’s really quite amazing how all these conservation groups believe that their own people are so pristine and lily-white, but everybody else is some sort of villain.”

“You really are getting cynical, dear,” Nessie replied calmly. “You want to watch yourself, or you’ll have no credibility left unless you’re prepared to lie down in front of a bulldozer somewhere.”

“I will NOT! And, I would remind you, cynicism is part and parcel of being objective about these things. Environmental journalism is a highly emotive subject.”

Judith’s horror at the suggestion wasn’t even remotely feigned. She was herself a conservationist but had always prided herself on being a *reasonable* conservationist. She had little time for the radicals who chained themselves to trees or—worse!—deliberately spiked trees, putting honest forestry workers at risk just to make a political point. As for lying down in front of bulldozers, she felt that backing extremist views with extremist actions did nothing but give the entire conservation movement a bad name.

Her own journalistic credibility had been solidly founded on a staunch neutrality and a fair presentation of every side of the issues until she’d been led into treacherous waters up in Queensland by Derek *damn-his-soul* Innes and discredited in the process.

“I doubt if I’ve got any credibility left anyway,” she admitted to her cousin, equally an admission to herself that she had now faced up to the situation and accepted the reality of it, if not the unfairness. “What I ought to do is go looking for a job selling shoes or something,” she mused aloud. “I really don’t think there’s much left for me as a journalist.”

“You’re wrong, and what’s more, you know it,” Vanessa stated with typically naïve conviction.

And was proven correct not five minutes later when the telephone rang to connect Judith with Jeremiah Cottrell in England.