

## Chapter One

"So..." Hardy threw down his cigarette and straightened from his slouch against the cement block wall. "What happened?"

Abraham Masterson was so disgusted by what the top promoter had said, he didn't answer the question. He brushed by his manager with a grunt and headed down the dreary hallway toward the weight room. Bram needed to find something other than Hardy's face to punish. A three hundred pound bench press would do.

"That bad, huh?" Hardy asked, trotting along behind. A weasel of a man, he was dressed in a shiny green gabardine suit and a purple shirt with matching tie. "I hate to say I told you so, but I told you so, Masterson. You signed an ironclad contract. When the boss says you gotta do something, you gotta do it."

"And if I refuse?" Bram tossed over his bare shoulder.

"You wanna go back down to the bush leagues? The GWL doesn't like wrestlers who don't do what they're told."

"At this point, I don't give a damn what the League likes or dislikes. They can all go to hell."

"Don't go crazy on me, Masterson. Don't do something stupid."

"Me do something stupid?" Bram halted at the end of the hallway, ripped off the band of leather tied around his head and raked a hand through his shoulder length hair. He was surprised he hadn't pulled it all out by now. Lord knew he had reason to. "If picking up a woman and slinging her over my shoulder like a sack of grain isn't stupid, I don't know what is."

"Look at it this way. You're helping someone gain valuable experience."

"Come again?"

"Masterson, these girls are actresses. Each one is paid to faint in ecstasy when you carry her out of the arena. Think of the stunt as providing a starving artist with a job."

"That's quite a rationalization, even for you, Hardy."

"Then try this one on for size. The fans love it."

Excerpt: BEAUTY AND THE BEASTMASTER by Carol Devine

"The fans love it all right. They love to hate it. I almost had a riot on my hands last week in Philadelphia."

"Philly don't count. That was your first fight against the Bulkster--the audience was supposed to get excited. We had plenty of cops to hold 'em back. And you have to admit, the girl that night played her part to the max -- especially after you got her back to the locker room."

"Is that what you think I want -- my own personal groupie? I've got enough of those already. The problem isn't the women, Hardy. It's the attitude. I see, I want, I take. That's not what I want to represent."

"Why not? You're the Beastmaster. The baddest of the bad. You're supposed to grab whatever the hell you want -- be it man, woman or beast."

"Cut the crap, Hardy. The only reason you like this stupid stunt is because of the publicity it generates . More publicity for me means more money for you."

"So I care about money. So do you. Not long ago, you said you couldn't make enough. You told me to go after every gig, no matter where or when. Three hundred and nineteen days we were on the road last year. Now that you've made it to the big time, you could pick and choose your fights, your arenas. Instead you complain about the one thing that sets you apart. Most guys would kill to be in your position. "

"I'm not most guys."

"You can say that again. Last week you had a fight with The Bulkster, the most popular wrestler in the history of the universe. The TV rating for your match was the best the GWL's had in two years. You want to screw that up? I don't understand why you don't want to do this stunt. It's like Superman refusing to fly. It's what makes you different from all the rest."

Bram turned his back on Hardy and flung open the weight room door. Bulkster stood at the far end, rubbing baby oil over his biceps. Serpent was pressing and the Dynamite Duo were seated on the remaining two weight machines, psyching each other out. So much for pumping iron.

"How much time before my fight?" Bram asked Hardy as he grabbed a roll of white tape and wrapped his knuckles. The punching bag would have to do.

Hardy shrugged and lit another cigarette, uncaring about the rules banning smoking. "Fifteen minutes, max. Robot and The Duke have already started."

Excerpt: BEAUTY AND THE BEASTMASTER by Carol Devine

Striding to the heavy bag hanging in the corner, Bram let loose with a flurry of punches. There was a small split in the middle of the worn plastic cover and he aimed there, hoping it would shred beneath his bare hands. Something had to give.

"You take a look yet at who you're supposed to grab tonight?" Hardy asked.

The heavy pound of fists hitting vinyl filled the room.

"Do you even know where she's sitting?"

Bram swore under his breath.

"Section 5, third row from ringside, seat 1, right on the aisle."

The split in the cover widened. Bram saw the bulge of packed material, saw how the bag would explode beneath his next punch, saw the burst of padding come pouring out. Abruptly, he pivoted and stripped the tape from his knuckles. There were some things worth fighting for. The inevitable wasn't one of them.

"Where's Tasha?" Bram asked as he grabbed the towel Hardy tossed.

Hardy took one last drag, dropped the butt of his cigarette and ground it in the threadbare carpet. "Mack tied her up in the locker room."

Bram stopped toweling the sweat off his bare chest. "He left her alone?"

"I needed him to run a couple of errands. What's the big deal? You told me she's as harmless as a kitten."

"Cats that big are never harmless." Bram hurriedly shook back the damp hair clinging to his neck and retied the leather band around his head. He already wore his costume--a leopard-skin loincloth, kneepads and boots. While his costume was simple, his leading lady was not. She was complicated, sensitive to slight, whether real or imagined.

"Tigers hate to be confined, especially Natasha. Imagine a 400 lb. angry kitten and you tell me what might happen."

When he found her, she was pacing this way and that, held fast to a five foot length by her chain leash. Its free end was wrapped around the leg of a bench bolted to the floor. At least Mack had tied her to something secure.

Excerpt: BEAUTY AND THE BEASTMASTER by Carol Devine

She prowled three steps, curled around and went back--an endless circle to and fro. Until she saw him. Then she stopped and roared, the tilt of her huge triangular head indignant. Bram shuddered to think what memories the confinement might have awakened in her.

"Hush, baby," he said in the tender voice of a lover. His hands roved over the soft striped fur behind her ears and scratched there in the way she loved. She bobbed her head and Bram relaxed as a deep chuffing sound rumbled from her throat. She must be in a good mood tonight. Forgiveness had come easy.

Shoving his fingers beneath her collar, he loosened the twisted chain as he talked nonsense into her ear.

"Poor, Tasha. You weren't sure if I'd ever come back, were you?" Bram vowed to give Mack a piece of his mind for leaving her here alone. Most living creatures learned to cope with loneliness. This particular animal had not.

Hardy finished his cigarette. "I hate to break up this touching reunion but you're on in two minutes."

Bram unwound the chain from the bench leg, wrapped it around his right hand and stood up. Natasha lifted her head and watched the door intently, tail twitching.

"We're ready."

## Chapter Two

The continuous human roar hurt Amanda Tarkenton's ears. She sat amid a sea of people packed to the rafters of Denver's Downtown Arena, surrounded by shouts, catcalls and curses that would have made a sailor blush. Aside from her, everyone was standing and yelling, eyes riveted on the ring in the center of the arena floor. The odor of burnt popcorn mingled with the smell of too many excited bodies .

Amanda shook her head, hunched over the legal pad on her lap and wondered how much more of this she could take.

"What in the world are you doing?" A beautifully manicured hand whisked the legal pad away. "How could you work at a time like this?"

Caught in the act, Amanda pasted a repentant look on her face. "Sorry, Julie. Boggs assigned me a new case today. I wanted to write down a couple of ideas while they're still fresh in my mind. "

Julie Williams snorted and tucked the legal pad under her arm. "You're completely hopeless. I brought you here to escape from work, not do more of it. Forget about your caseload for five minutes and stand up. You're missing all the action."

Amanda followed the indignant stab of Julie's scarlet fingernail to the platform rising in front of their ringside seats. In the middle grappled two bare-chested, meaty men. The one called Robotman wore skin-tight pants studded with rivets .

His opponent, The Duke, had on cowboy boots and a pair of cut-off jeans which left little to the imagination. John Wayne would not have been proud.

"No offense, Julie, but I've had about as much action as I can take. I'm ready to leave whenever you are."

Julie shook her head vigorously, her red curls spilling over the lapels of her blue suit like so many yo-yos. "Are you kidding? The guy I've been raving about all night is wrestling next. I promise you he's worth waiting for. He's Channing Tatum, Wil Smith and Tarzan put together in one gorgeous package."

Amanda rolled her eyes, knowing there was no arguing with Julie when she was this obsessed, especially over a man. Her best friend had been looking forward to this moment all evening.

Excerpt: BEAUTY AND THE BEASTMASTER by Carol Devine

So had Amanda -- but only because once Julie got a glimpse of The Beastman or whatever his name was, she'd finally be ready to tear herself away from this idiotic so-called sporting event and go home.

"All right," Amanda sighed. "One more. But I refuse to get up from this chair until we leave. Someone might recognize me ."

"Oh, please. Here? Besides, even members of the infamous Tarkenton family are allowed to have a little fun."

"Remember what the tabloids did to my brother last year? All he did was go to a public beach."

"You forgot to mention your very eligible brother had a Hollywood starlet dressed in a string bikini hanging on his arm at the time," Julie corrected. "He asks for that kind of attention. You don't. Sit if you must but we're not leaving until the next match is over."

Sighing, Amanda shielded her eyes against the glare of the spotlights. The blinding light and continuous noise had produced a terrible headache, worse than anything she'd experienced at a criminal trial. So much for celebrating her twenty-eighth birthday in grand style. When Julie promised a taste of popular culture, Amanda envisioned a trip to Colorado's famed Central City Opera House or an evening with the symphony. Instead, Julie brought her to the city arena for the Friday Night Superstud Event. If it hadn't been for their long-standing friendship, Amanda would have left before the first match.

She rubbed her temples and slumped her seat. Mercifully the fight ended. After the winner exited in a flashy show of Wild West exuberance, the house lights flashed, signaling the introduction of the next two combatants.

Bass drums began to pound a primal rhythm, heavy and deep. The sound throbbed, vibrating her chair. Eerie calls of jungle birds pierced the crowd's hum. Abruptly, everyone quieted. The odor of burning popcorn faded. What lingered was the sound of rain falling on broad, green leaves and a first metallic whiff of danger.

The arena went black. Amanda glanced over her shoulder and slowly straightened, struck by the change in atmosphere. A prickling of foreboding crawled up her spine. She felt alone in the darkness, surrounded by trees dripping with moisture, oppressed by a sodden sky.

Ridiculous, she thought. She was sitting in the middle of the Downtown Arena in Denver, not some rainforest in Brazil. She faced forward, folded her arms and fought the emotional manipulation. But the feeling of oppression stayed with her, heightened by the thrum of the drums. She felt eyes upon her. Animal eyes.

Excerpt: BEAUTY AND THE BEASTMASTER by Carol Devine

Spotlights arced through the darkness. The drumbeat picked up speed. Her scalp tightened with the acceleration of sound.

The tempo hypnotized as surely as the flute of a snake charmer. She craned her neck and followed the overhead shaft of light with her eyes, curious despite herself. What kind of wrestler warranted this introduction?

Bram stepped out into the circular pool of white light. The first moment always blinded him and he stood motionless for several seconds, allowing his pupils to adjust to the brightness. He couldn't see the crowd but he could hear them--hear that first sudden gush of exhaled air as they saw him--him and Tasha. He tugged once on her leash. The movement was imperceptible to most, but the tiger felt it and responded with her loudest roar. He felt her excitement charge along the length of chain which ran from her neck to his fist. She lived for these moments. Bram was grateful he had the opportunity to give them to her.

The drums rose in volume and he stepped into the rhythm, walking the hundred or so steps from locker room to ringside like a king with his jungle queen. Tasha played her part well, stalking like a hunter, her muscles slinking beneath the smooth fur of her tawny striped coat. He lifted the lowest rope surrounding the ring and she leaped upward, making the jump look effortless. Only Bram knew what it cost her.

He grabbed one of the corner turnbuckles to hoist himself up. The edge of the spotlight caught the crowd and he noticed a woman sitting in the front row. Everybody else was standing, swaying to the drums, caught up in the drama he took pains to create. Everybody except her.

She sat in her chair, feet flat on the floor, arms crossed in judgment, blonde hair pulled back from her face. Bram recognized her with a sense of shock. Amanda Tarkenton, daughter of the late Senator John Bertram Tarkenton. Fifteen years ago, he'd been tragically killed while leading a civil rights march to Washington and since had achieved martyred status. The Tarkenton family's history of public service, influence and sacrifice rivaled the Kennedy's. So did the size of their bank accounts.

She looked like she'd come straight from the board room of IBM. The black business suit she wore fit like a dark, severe glove. He didn't have to study her face to know she wasn't enjoying herself. Nine to five types usually didn't go for his brand of entertainment. Bram wondered why she'd bothered to come.

He leapt into the ring and walked the perimeter with Tasha, acknowledging the audience's boos with an upraised fist. He got a better look at her then. Her spot-lit hair arrested him--

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the color was pure gold. Even from twenty feet away, he noted the flawless porcelain face, marred only by the downturned mouth.

Why in hell was a Tarkenton here? She looked so bored, he could read her resentment and felt a corresponding resentment rise within his chest. He knew her type. Born with a silver spoon in her mouth, she was nothing but a spoiled, pampered prima donna.

Amanda didn't know what to do. He stared down at her, pinning her with eyes clear as green glass, a wicked grin turning his mouth up at the corners. Long black hair, held in place by a leather headband, framed a face carved by gods. Ridges of muscle stood out from his neck and shoulders. The broad bare chest, clean of hair, narrowed to hips covered in leopard skin. Bulky kneepads elongated the sleek vertical tendons cording each thigh.

Julie was right -- he was gorgeous -- but in no way did his looks make Amanda feel at ease. Instead she fidgeted in her seat, unnerved. Her knees pressed together. Goosebumps sprang up on her arms. She pulled the jacket of her suit tight across her breasts and looked away, grateful she was sitting down. The murderers she'd put away had never rattled her as much as this man did.

Julie poked her arm. "Well, Amanda, what do you think of the Beastmaster? Isn't he to die for?"

Her mouth was so dry, Amanda could not speak. She, Amanda Tarkenton, proud possessor of a sharp tongue and sharper wit, speechless? This couldn't be happening.

"Amanda? Are you okay?"

"Sure," she croaked and scrambled to her feet. She'd be damned before anyone, especially a smirking hulk like him, made her act like a feather-brained idiot.

"Well, what do you think?"

"Nice tiger. Now can we go?"

"Not the tiger, Amanda, the man. You haven't even looked at him."

Refusing to deny what wasn't true, Amanda scanned the ring. Thankfully, he'd shifted to center stage, his eyes glittering in the spotlight as he pivoted with the tiger in time with the drums, showing defiance in the face of the jeering crowd. The loudspeakers crackled with the announcer's voice.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, may I present, the Evil Master of All Beasts Great and Small, holder of the Global Wrestling League's Intercontinental Championship Title, winner of ..."

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The voice faded as she catalogued his features. The strong, masculine nose appeared to have been broken more than once, making the handsome face more virile. The rugged jaw would have been heavy on a smaller man, a less muscled man, but somehow looked perfect on him. His sheer size disconcerted Amanda and she hated the awe rippling through her as she studied the wide shoulders and thick biceps. Amanda did not like to think herself easily awed.

His hair's too long, she judged, and the eyes too green. He had to be wearing colored contacts. His deep tan spoke of time spent in one of those ultra-violet sun beds. The spotlight burnished his skin, showing each bulging muscle half shadow, half bronze. Probably steroid induced, she concluded. He didn't wear much in the way of clothes--but then, to give him some credit, he didn't have to. The leopard skin girding his waist and the obligatory kneepads and boots were more than enough.

"... May I present to you, the Beastmaster, and his Siberian tiger, Naaa ...taaaa ...shaaaa!"

The animal's name drowned beneath a deafening bellow from the audience. Amanda winced and watched the Beastmaster raise his chain wrapped fist. As if annoyed by the human roar of disapproval, the tiger sat back on its haunches and pawed the air. The belly fur was thick and white, like the finest Australian sheepskin. Although the animal looked well-cared for, disquiet pricked Amanda's conscience. She had never considered herself an animal-rights fanatic, but the sight of this magnificent creature being used in a show as phony as this appalled her. She grabbed Julie's arm.

"Does the tiger fight, too?"

Julie's answer was drowned out by a sudden blare of trumpets.

Amanda rose on tip-toe to see what the commotion was all about. Spotlights searched the arena before landing on another wrestler wending his way up the aisle. A sea of hands and boisterous cheers helped him along. Noise like this would damage the hearing of the hardiest head banger, never mind that of a sensitive animal. Concerned, Amanda glanced back toward the ring.

There in the relative darkness, she saw the gleaming arc of the Beastmaster's broad back as he knelt in the near corner not ten feet away and handed the end of the tiger's leash to a cowboy hatted man standing on the arena floor. After speaking a few emphatic words to the man, the Beastmaster helped the tiger climb from the ring, his fingers lost in thick fur as he eased the hindquarters down, care written in every line of his intent body. When he let the animal go with a soft pat, Amanda felt the caress in the heat firing her face. She

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swallowed, wanting to be rid of the feeling, aware that the way he handled the tiger affected her in some indescribable way.

Beyond him, she could just see the cowboy hat above the heads of the audience, hurrying up the aisle toward the exit, followed by a striped tail. Relieved to see the tiger safe, Amanda decided she'd follow up by issuing an inquiry on the use of tigers in a show like this. First thing Monday morning, she'd assign a paralegal to do some research. Presumably there was a federal or state statute written somewhere prohibiting such exploitation.

Spotlights swept by her front row seat as the second wrestler vaulted into the ring. Covered in a long shiny cape striped in red, white and blue, he doffed a red spangled top hat with a beefy hand and waved to the stomping, clapping crowd, his blond hair spiked in a short crewcut. His teeth looked iridescent against his ruddy face and he spun off the cape with a flourish. He wore blue satin bike shorts, embroidered with large white stars. Silver glitter sparkled on his boots. A huge man, he was even bigger and bulkier than the Beastmaster.

Good, Amanda thought.

"Ladies and Gentleman," boomed the announcer. "May I have your attention please."

Julie tugged Amanda's sleeve. "What do you think of this one?" she asked, her red head tilting toward the giant.

"You know how I go for these blond, All American types. What's his name?"

"Darren Do-Right."

Amanda could not keep a straight face. "Darren Do-right?"

"Yes, Darren Do-right. Fighter for Truth, the Righter of Wrongs -- Daring Darren Do-right."

Daring Darren Do-right? An uncharacteristic giggle shook Amanda. "Any relation to Dudley?"

"Here I come to save the day!" sang a Nelson Eddy sound-alike from the loudspeakers. Darren grabbed the announcer's microphone and began to lip-sync the words of the song.

Why the situation struck her as hysterically funny she didn't know. So far tonight, she'd endured a procession of wrestlers with similar outlandish names and attitudes and hadn't cracked a smile. But the laughter was real, coming from deep in her belly, causing her eyes to water and her body to relax. The release of tension felt wonderful. After a minute, she gasped to catch her breath.

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"Well, look at you. You're finally having a good time," Julie shouted over the corny music blasting throughout the arena.

Amanda wiped her eyes, heedless of her carefully-applied makeup. "I give up. This wet blanket is finally going to dry. Daring Darren got to me."

"I should have known a patriot like you would go for the man wearing red, white and blue. Me, I like them tall, dark and handsome." Julie placed her hands over her heart and fluttered her eyelashes dramatically. "I'm a true Beastmaster fan."

"The Beastmaster more than lives up to his name. He's a villain of the highest order. I hope he loses."

"He won't. Darren's never fought him before ."

"What does that have to do with winning and losing?"

Julie snapped her fingers in front of Amanda's face. "Have you learned nothing tonight? Darren's the good guy. The Beastmaster has to cheat to win so we can see how evil he is. He's got a great stunt that he does at the end of the match to prove it. Darren must lose to set up the grudge match."

"Grudge match?"

"Sure. Grudge matches really draw the fans. When Darren loses tonight, he'll vow revenge. Next week, these two will fight again in some other city. The Beastmaster will lose and then he'll vow revenge, preserving the rivalry. Geez, Amanda, if I didn't know better, I'd think you actually thought these matches were for real."

"You mean they aren't?"

"You're kidding, right?" Julie peered into Amanda's face, her light blue gaze uncertain. "You can't believe pro wrestling is truly competitive, can you?"

"Isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"You tell me. "

"I can never tell whether you're joking or not," Julie grumbled. "You've got the face of a poker player."

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"Thank you," Amanda said with a smile. "It comes in handy, especially when my opponent at the defense table calls a witness who's not on my list. To answer your question, I do realize that these fights are completely fake. What I can't figure out is why you enjoy watching them when you already know the outcome."

"Amanda, pro wrestling isn't about sport. It's about good and evil, about having someone to cheer for and boo against. It's a modern morality play."

Morality? Amanda's gaze swung from Julie's face to the two combatants in the ring. Darren Do-right stood in one corner, carefully folding his cape as the announcer finished his spiel. The Beastmaster prowled on the other side of the ring, watching the entire proceeding, menace in his eyes.

Bram ran his first move through his mind, aware that Amanda Tarkenton had distracted him from his usual concentration. He took great pride in making his fights look real and the planning he put into his performances was proof of that pride. Darren was a heavy man, big-boned and well-muscled, which made the physical demands greater tonight. Not many of the other wrestlers could lift him. The final body slam they'd practiced was especially difficult.

The referee bent to clear the top rope of the ring, which was Bram's cue. He charged Darren without warning and knocked him flat with a straight armed clothesline. Darren fell dramatically and bounced on the special surface of the mat which absorbed shock, much like a gymnast's mat. The crowd was immediately into the match, screaming for Darren.

Bram launched himself in a flying leap. At the last second, Darren rolled away and scrambled to his feet. Bram landed face down and stayed there for the seconds it took Darren to attack.

A sharp elbow landed on the small of Bram's back and ground into his spine. The audience roared their approval.

Bram lifted his head and grimaced, treating the fans to the effects of what looked like excruciating pain. Through slitted eyes he caught a flare of golden hair. She sat like a statue, unmoved. He twisted sharply, butting Darren in the face with a two-fisted roundhouse punch. Darren looked surprised but fell back to the mat as planned. Bram threw himself on top, going for the pin.

"Sorry about that, man," he murmured close to Darren's ear.

"Better not happen again."

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The referee's count reached two before Darren exploded, forcing both men back on their feet. Bram staggered around like a drunk before Darren charged. The shoulder block connected in his solar plexus and Bram closed his eyes, grateful for the blast to his gut. He needed something to bring him back to the present. During his staggered circuit around the ring, he'd glimpsed Amanda Tarkenton again, her face devoid of expression. What would it take to get her to react? Blood and guts?

Bram grimaced as Darren punched him, first left, then right, then left again. Bram swayed as if stunned to give Darren time to climb the ropes and stand atop the nearest turnbuckle, ready to jump. Anticipation careened through the audience. Some were chanting "body slam" over and over, always a good sign. The more the fans participated, the better. While he waited, Bram scanned the front row. She was easy to pick out because she was yawning.

Darren launched himself from the turnbuckle. Bram bent his knees so his legs would take the brunt of the blow and bellowed when he crashed to the mat, Darren on top. The ref ran over to make the pin official. Bram waited until the last possible moment, then butted the ref in the face with an elbow as he threw Darren off.

The crowd booed, their outrage like a physical wave. Noise washed over him. He used their emotion to feed his own, charging like an angry bull. He whipped Darren around in a vicious-looking headlock. While the referee writhed on the floor in agony, his hands placed conveniently over his eyes, Bram pummeled Darren using a variety of punches, most of them illegal under the rules. The fans were really into the match now.

As Bram circled Darren before the final bodyslam, he glanced at the golden head. She lifted her chin as their eyes locked.

Bram read utter contempt on her face.

It was then he got an idea. An awful, wonderful idea.

### Chapter Three

The idea took shape as Bram completed the final moves of the fight. Dropkick. Miss. Get up, feint left. Knee slap from Darren, then the final move as Bram flipped him on his back. Brace and lift, one thousand one, one thousand two. Duck while Darren crashed. Fall and hold. The ref leaned down and counted to three to make the pin official.

Fans screamed for Darren to get up but Bram held him securely. The ref waved his arm, declaring the fight over. Bram leaped to his feet, fists raised as he was announced the winner. He liked the sound of the crowd ... the boos were loud but not rabid. Scanning the periphery of the ring, he heard the first blare of guitar chords from "Wild Thing", his theme song. And she was still there. It was now or never.

Amanda watched the Beastmaster jog a victory lap in the ring before halting in front of her, his arms up in triumph. He tipped his head back and whooped, then leered at her, his black brows raised in boastful arrogance. He even had the audacity to open his mouth and lick his chops. Offended, she eyed him with loathing and fought against her natural instinct to back away. She'd never retreated from a fight in her life and this man was most definitely daring her into one. It was obvious what the Beastmaster was thinking. It was obvious to everyone what he was thinking. That insolent gaze was undressing her in front of all these people. A hand from behind jabbed her shoulder. She heard giggles, murmurs saying she must be the one.

Julie tugged her elbow. "Amanda?"

"What?" Amanda refused to break eye contact with the Beastmaster until he bent to duck under the top rope of the ring. "What?" she asked again, turning toward Julie.

Julie sat down heavily. Amanda had never seen her friend look so... astonished. Her reddish eyebrows arched like question marks. Her mouth hung half open and she stared at Amanda as if she'd grown two heads. "Amanda?"

"Yes, I'm right here. What's wrong?"

"He stared at you, Amanda."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Julie. It didn't mean anything," Amanda said, thinking Julie was crazy to be jealous. As far as she was concerned, the Beastmaster was a total jerk. She grabbed her purse in one hand and her friend's arm in the other. "Let's go now, okay?"

Excerpt: BEAUTY AND THE BEASTMASTER by Carol Devine

"But we can't. You can't. Don't you understand? He's picked you. I don't know why but he's picked you."

"Who's picked me?"

Bram kept his eye on Amanda and jumped from the ring onto the arena floor. She'd turned her back on him with a dismissive wave of her hand to talk to a redhead seated in the chair next to hers. He stalked her in three strides and seized her around the middle, his big hands a vise at her waist. Shrieking, she dropped her purse.

Bram sensed her immediate panic, felt the give of the feminine bones, and recalled a young golden eagle he'd caught once -- his first. Unable to fly, she'd scuttled away on the ground whenever he dared come near. Some damn fool hunter had shot through her wing. After many hours of patient stalking, she'd become exhausted and he'd managed to grab her and hold her against his chest, protecting her with his coat. When he'd finally gotten her back to the ranch, he discovered the fright had killed her.

After Amanda's first initial shock was over, she struggled, lashing out with arms and legs. Her spirit surprised him. Not that he couldn't handle her--he was a large man, weighing well over two hundred and fifty pounds. He doubted she weighed half that. But he sensed her mortification in the desperate way she fought. Bram almost put her down. Except she wasn't a defenseless wild bird and he knew she wouldn't die. She'd protest. He'd picked her for that very reason.

She didn't disappoint. Swearing, she twisted backward and tried to gouge his face. That decided him. He jerked her around and swung her up over his shoulder in one quick motion, then headed for the nearest exit. It was the wrong door and would put him on the back side of the arena, opposite the locker room, but at this point, he didn't care.

"Put me down this instant!" she screamed.

Fingers stabbed and clawed his back. Her nails must have been short because they caused little pain. Bram held her firmly over his left shoulder, his left arm circling the back of her thighs. Fans were taking pictures, videos. His right hand smoothed her skirt down. The material was butter-soft. Silk. Again he wondered why a woman like her would come to the arena for anything having to do with sports, much less pro wrestling. His ex-wife had hated his profession so much she had never seen him fight.

Squirming, she twisted against his shoulder, but her position didn't allow her enough leverage to do much. She bucked and went for his groin with a vicious kick. Pointy-toed shoes bounced off his washboard abdominals. Bram hitched her up higher on his shoulder

Excerpt: BEAUTY AND THE BEASTMASTER by Carol Devine

just to let her know he wasn't amused and knocked off her pumps with his free hand. If she got hold of one of those heels, she was strong enough to inflict serious damage.

Her fists pummeled his back. Her screams could wake the dead. In desperation, she grabbed the back of his costume and tried to rip it off. Bram didn't shorten his stride as he barreled his way up the aisle. Even if she'd been successful at tearing the reinforced spandex, he wouldn't have put her down. Nudity would have fit the Neanderthal picture he was trying to create. As it was, Hardy and the GWL couldn't help but get the message about the inappropriateness of this stunt, Bram thought wryly. When he got Amanda Tarkenton out of the arena, he was sure she'd complain to anyone who'd listen. Best of all, her last name insured plenty of people would.

The swinging doors of the exit loomed before him. Cameras flashed all around. Arena security was supposed to keep the fans from hurling trash while he strode up the aisle. They didn't seem to be having much trouble tonight. In fact, the crowd was cheering, not jeering. That gave him pause.

Puzzled, Bram slowed his step and let his gaze linger over individual faces in order to divine what the hell was going on. The arena lights had been up since the beginning of the fight to insure everyone could see the action. He didn't need to be a genius to gauge their expressions. They were cheering for Amanda.

"Whip his butt, lady!"

"Tame the Beast!"

Bram swore and exploded through the exit, letting her backside take the brunt of his burst past the double doors. Dread spread through his gut. If the fans were cheering, that meant they liked what they saw. And if they liked what they saw, they'd demand to see it again and again and again.

Amanda's breath tore away when he dumped her on the floor. The shock of having the ground under her again sent her reeling backward. She hit the wall and froze, pinned by his condemning glower.

"Satisfied, Masterson?" he yelled.

The man was certifiably insane. She sidled along the wall, looking for escape. They were alone in a dingy doorless hallway, lit by metal lamps which dropped from the ceiling. Not all of them worked. The stink of stale beer and spent tobacco made her want to gag.

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She took off at a run. Her nylon clad feet slid on the grimy concrete floor. Grunting with effort, she staggered and picked herself up, desperate to get away from him. She had no idea what he was after, nor did she care. Since her father's death, her life had been threatened by crazies and hard-core criminals enough times to know that speculation at this point was moot.

"Hey, come back here!"

Pounding footsteps. A heavy weight hooked her arm. She rammed her elbow back and whirled away, gaining a few yards. The hall stretched as far as she could see, empty. Barely muted applause wrapped her in noise. Amanda screamed for help but the crowd's roar drowned out everything.

He grabbed her from behind, catching the material of her jacket between her shoulder blades. Amanda fought with all her strength and heard the rip of fabric as she twisted and kicked away from him. He swore as the jacket fell from his hands, empty. She sprinted but he grabbed her again in seconds.

Running hadn't worked so she launched herself at him, using a technique learned from a self-defense class she'd once taken.

She aimed at his eyes with clawed fingers. He ducked at the last second and grabbed her up in a massive bear hug, his thick arms wrapping her against his chest. He'd lifted her so that her entire length was flush against his. Her toes barely scraped the floor. Amanda flailed with her legs but he moved forward and pushed her spine against the wall, effectively sandwiching her between his body and hard concrete blocks.

"Stop it," he yelled.

Amanda was so incensed she barely heard him. He smelled all-man, all sweat and power, and she struggled like a wild thing caught in a trap. He held her securely, one arm angled across the back of her shoulders and head, while the other arm wrapped her hips. His knees pressed her knees, pinning them against the wall. She felt his thighs pushing hers, felt the heat of the male bulge above, and went crazy.

"Damn you!" she screamed.

"Stop fighting!" he roared, using his considerable weight to smother her against his chest. "I won't hurt you."

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Amanda didn't believe him. Panicked and barely able to breathe, she worked desperately to free her hands. One wrist was pinned between his hip and hers. The other wrist he held, his fingers locked over her rocketing pulse.

"Hold still," he said close to her ear. "If you run scared, you'll hurt yourself. Calm down and I'll let you go."

Amanda's next scream strangled in her throat. His deep voice reassured her like none she'd ever heard, despite the mortification she felt at being so easily caught and pressed to the wall by his bulk. She swallowed and tried to think, halting her struggle. The pressure of his body eased and he spoke to her again in a low tone. She had to stay still in order to hear it.

"I'm going to let go of you in a minute. We'll count the last twenty seconds or so together to give you time to calm down. Once I release you, you'll be free to leave. But don't run. You've lost your shoes and this floor is slick cement."

He paused as if waiting for an answer. Amanda didn't trust him enough to oblige.

"I know you have no reason to trust me," he said as if he could read her mind. "But if you attack me or run away, I'll hold you until you do trust me. Do it now and save yourself a whole lot of trouble. Okay?"

Slowly she nodded. The motion was small because her face was wedged against his chest.

"Say something so I know you've understood me."

Amanda opened her mouth but no sound could get past the huge lump in her throat. She swallowed several times before she croaked, "I understand."

"Good." His hand squeezed her wrist as if to reassure her.

She swallowed again at the unexpected gesture. If only he wasn't so damned big. Amanda shut her eyes and fought a wave of pure panic, reminded of how bodyguards once pinned her to the floor in a similar hold when she was twelve years old. There had been gunshots then. Many shots. She remembered her terror and that mind-numbing feeling of helplessness.

He continued to talk, his voice low and deep. Sonorous.

She bit her lip and concentrated on the steady baritone, ordering herself to focus on it. Memories receded, replaced by the reality of flesh and blood, sweat and strength. Vibrations from his voice rumbled beneath her cheek.

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"I'm going to begin the countdown now, from the number twenty on down," he explained.  
"Twenty, nineteen, eighteen ..."

The pressure of his body eased after each count. Opening her eyes, she didn't say a word, preparing herself for anything.

"Seventeen, sixteen, fifteen, fourteen ..."

So far, so good. He'd kept his word. The small of her back left the wall and the hand pinned between his thigh and her hip became free. She flexed her fingers, hope and fear alternating within her. She didn't want to believe she could trust this man. When she recalled how easily he'd caught and held her, she didn't want to believe she couldn't.

"Thirteen, twelve, eleven ..."

He loosened his hold on her shoulders and let her body slide down his until her feet touched the floor. Her head was freed and she tilted it back in order to read his expression. If he looked the least bit threatening she was going to shove him with all her might and take her chances.

"Ten, nine, eight ..."

His heavy black brows were drawn together in a fierce frown. Yet his eyes were mild, a yellow-green, communicating a hint of wry humor. The humor alarmed her, for she remembered his sarcastic smile in the arena. She searched his face to see if he meant to convey consideration or mockery.

"Seven, six, five ..."

His jaw was set in tight control. What that meant, she couldn't decide. Large hands circled her waist as he took a half step backward, setting her away from him. His voice resonated as he slowed the count.

"Four."

She tensed, too aware of the change in tone, of his hands, of how strong he was. He could squeeze the breath from her with one brutal motion.

"Three."

Amanda stared at his mouth, listening for clues, unable to forget the violence with which he'd wrestled, be it entertainment or not. She weighed her options, wondering what might happen if she kned him in the groin.

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"Two."

If she attacked first, he possessed the physical superiority to do just about anything. Beneath his thumbs, her stomach contracted in a sudden, obvious inhalation. Anything.

"One," he said with finality.

In the same moment, his hands left her waist. She looked up to thank him, expecting those mild eyes. But he'd changed. Those eyes were now a vivid green, their color swirling like polished malachite. Amanda froze, inner alarms clamoring, held still like a doe blinded by the headlights of an oncoming car.

His head lowered and his mouth brushed hers. The kiss held her in place like a physical shock, rooting her to the spot. She couldn't believe he'd freed her. She couldn't believe he was kissing her either. Both conclusions were so diametrically opposed she couldn't reconcile the truth of what was happening.

But she could certainly feel it.

If he'd been the least bit aggressive, she would have run. But he skimmed, light as wind. The sensation was so soft and nonthreatening, she closed her eyes, unwilling to trust her senses. That was her first mistake.

A thumb grazed her bottom lip. The wind changed direction, gathering heat and momentum. He pressed closer, framing her face with calloused warmth. She raised her hands to deflect what she couldn't understand. Her palms grazed hot skin and flexed muscle. A low moan rose in her throat. She had to part her lips to choke the sound back and he drew closer, weaving fingers in her hair. She forgot where she was as their mouths mated, until hunger existed within her, alone and strong.

"What the Sam Hill is going on here!" yelled Hardy.

Bram tore his mouth away from Amanda's and staggered back, his head shaking in disbelief. What the hell had happened? This woman parted her lips and he'd been ready and willing to take her without thought or care, in a dirty hallway littered with trash, while fifteen thousand people stood on the other side of the arena wall, screaming like banshees.

Bram braced himself and gave her the once over, all too aware of the thick pounding of his pulse. Her hair had escaped its pins. Gold tumbled around her shoulders. She gaped at him and collapsed against the wall. He'd wanted her to be surprised, even shocked. By the looks of her, she was.

"Saved by the bell," Bram rasped. "Thanks, Hardy."

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Amanda's gaze darted between the two men and realized that if the thin man hadn't shown up, she'd probably be sinking to the floor with the Beastmaster--and she wouldn't be wrestling with him either. Despite all he'd done to her, she'd allowed him to kiss her. In fact, she'd been transfixed by it, by him. Amanda drew her shaking arm across her mouth as she let the dreadful insight sober the beat of her heart and wash away any adrenaline, any thrill that may have lingered.

Thrill? Disgust was more like it. Truth was, she should be gagging. Beastmaster indeed. The man was an animal. He'd tried to humiliate her from the moment he'd laid eyes on her. Leering at her. Grabbing her. Tossing her around like she was his own personal toy. Better men had been convicted on less.

"How dare you," she said and advanced on him with narrowed eyes. "How dare you pick me up and throw me over your shoulder like a side of beef! No one has the right to violate another human being like that, do you hear me? No one!"

"You're right," said Bram, casting a significant glance at Hardy. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Amanda challenged. He hadn't even bothered to look at her when he apologized. She stabbed the middle of his massive chest with a finger, her voice dripping contempt. "You don't know what the word means."

Bram stiffened at the insult implicit in her tone. Her eyes were impossibly violet and glittered in the harsh uneven light from above. Her color was high, streaking her pale cheekbones rosy pink, staining her lips a subtle red. Or maybe the kiss had done that. He recalled the touch of her lips beneath his, cool and smooth, and her tiny gasp of surprise when their mouths met.

He'd meant the kiss to reassure her, he thought. But as soon as he thought it, Bram discarded the rationalization for the lie it was. He'd wanted her. The memory burned, making him want her all over again, especially when he remembered her response.

She'd wanted him, too.

Bram searched her expression, rigid with righteous indignation, and didn't like what he saw. He wasn't going to overlook her part in all this. Just a few minutes ago, she'd come on to him. She ought to shoulder some responsibility for what happened, too.

"It couldn't have been too much of a violation," he said. "You kissed me, remember?"

She slapped him across the face. Bram caught her arm and held it fast, fingers wrapped around the delicate wrist. She lifted her chin a notch, defiant. Bram eyed her, knowing pride

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when he saw it. What she didn't have in muscle, she did have in sheer guts. So he kept his anger in check and said, "Don't ever raise your hand to me again."

"Don't ever touch me again."

Bram released her. "We're even now," he said and stepped back, palms up in a gesture of conciliation.

"Oh, no, we're not," she denied. "Before we're finished here, you're going to promise that nothing like this will ever happen again, with me or anyone else. It's insulting, demeaning and--"

"Done," he said flippantly and grinned like he knew something she didn't. Amanda stiffened. He was so sure of himself, so bull-headedly male. That he could stand there, utterly secure in his physical superiority, while she ranted and raved, infuriated her. She vowed to break his composure, just as he'd broken hers.

"Who's in charge of this production? Is it you?" she demanded of the thin man. His green suit and purple tie looked like something from a clown's closet.

"No, ma'am," Hardy denied, hands up. "I'm only the Beastmaster's manager."

"Hardy can tell you how to reach the officials in charge," Bram added. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got an appointment with a lady who growls if I'm late."

He shouldered past her. Amanda swore there was a deliberate swagger to his step. She grabbed his forearm. "Before you disappear into the sunset," she said, "I'd like to pass on one small tidbit of information."

He looked down his nose at her. "What's that?"

"I'm bringing you up on criminal charges," she announced. The charges wouldn't stick, Amanda knew, but this muscle-bound maniac wouldn't know that. She meant to give him a taste of his own medicine, prosecutor-style.

"Criminal charges?" Bram asked in disbelief, unable to help his grin.

"Yes," she hissed.

"What happened -- you break a fingernail?"

She didn't smile as she ticked off two trumped up charges for him to mull over.

"Kidnapping and felony assault."

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Bram threw back his head and laughed. He should have known. Not only was she prone to exaggeration, she had no sense of humor. "If I'd wanted to kidnap and assault you, you can bet we'd be out of the city limits by now. And you'd be screaming for more."

"Now, Masterson," Hardy said, stepping between them. "I'm sure the lady could be persuaded to drop any charges if you offered payment for the pain and suffering she's endured."

"What pain and suffering? She loved every minute of it." Bram winked. "Didn't you, darling?"

"You're sick," Amanda retorted. "You should be locked up and the key thrown away."

"Lady, I'll give you a thousand dollars right now if you would sign a release saying nothing happened," Hardy pleaded.

"Speaking of money," Amanda continued, "I'm also filing a civil suit. I'll sue you, the wrestling league, the arena, and everyone else who's responsible for letting a deranged mental case like you drag off someone from the audience."

"Lady," Hardy interjected with a note of desperation, "Masterson made a mistake. He wasn't supposed to take you -- the league hired an actress to play the part."

"Shut up, Hardy." The last thing Bram wanted was to have his motives explained to Amanda Tarkenton. After that last wisecrack, she was asking for it.

"Is that how you justify victimizing people?" she accused. "By paying them?"

Hardy wrung his hands. "This is a show we're putting on here. Entertainment."

"I, for one, am not entertained. Even if this overgrown gorilla mistook me for someone else -- "

"There was no mistake," Bram interjected. "I picked you on purpose. I knew you'd put up a good fight."

"What?" she sputtered. "Why you contemptible, lecherous beast!"

Bram touched his brow in mock salute. "At your service, Ma'am."

"Look, lady, Masterson never meant to hurt nobody," Hardy said. "In fact, he's been trying for months to get out of performing this stunt. Maybe this is his way of -- "

Bram pushed his manager aside. "Shut up, Hardy. This is between her and me."

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Running footsteps echoed down the hall. Amanda turned to see Julie and three gold-jacketed arena personnel loping toward her.

"Amanda!" Julie shrieked. "Are you alright?"

Though embarrassed by Julie's public display, Amanda took the time to reassure her friend, knowing she must have been worried sick. "I'm fine, Julie. Really."

"Quick, Hardy," said Bram. "Write that down for the late edition. 'Kidnapped and Assaulted Woman is Fine.'"

Amanda faced him. Since the arrival of the others, his posture had grown more arrogant. He stood with his arms crossed and his feet braced, glaring down at her as though she was the one who'd committed the crime. As though she were the one who'd done something wrong. The bastard. He was the one at fault.

He 'd been mocking and insolent throughout, discounting her outrage and Julie's fears.

"You think this is all a joke?" Amanda asked.

"Now why would I think that?"

Amanda arched a cool brow. Having him arrested might not be such a bad idea. She'd never met anyone who needed a night in jail more. "If you think I'm not serious about pressing charges, you're mistaken, Mr. Masterman, or whatever your real name is."

"Masterson. Abraham Masterson," he said, his green eyes alight with mischief. "Hardy, give her my business card so she gets the name right."

"Are you kidding?" Hardy choked out. "Bram, she's gonna sue you."

"Give her my card."

"Masterson, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Hardy yelled. "This lady is serious here."

"So am I." Bram didn't take his eyes off Amanda. "Excuse the delay, ma'am. My manager sometimes forgets who signs his paychecks."

The implied threat was enough to get Hardy to obey. He pulled out a wallet from the inside pocket of his suit and handed Amanda a card. She took it warily. Despite Masterson's cavalier manner, she half expected him to snatch it away. She couldn't understand why he practically was inviting a lawsuit. Unless he believed she was bluffing. Which, of course, she

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was. What he'd done was reprehensible, but she had neither the time or the inclination to pursue it. He was small potatoes compared to the real criminals she dealt with everyday in her capacity as a city prosecutor.

On the other hand, she wasn't about to let him off scot-free.

Pursing her lips, Amanda considered Masterson. "Since you're being so generous with your card, you may have one of mine." She snatched her clutch purse from under Julie's arm, opened the bag and slid her business card out from a recessed pocket, bestowing the rectangle on Hardy. He read the card and groaned.

"Bram, do you know who this woman is?"

"Amanda Tarkenton, daughter of the late great John Bertram Tarkenton."

So he'd recognized her. Few people did anymore. Unlike the rest of her family, she deliberately stayed out of the public eye, preferring to carry on her father's legacy in relative anonymity. Given Masterson's profession, she'd rather thought he wouldn't know her from Adam. Hiding her chagrin, Amanda inclined her head ever so slightly. "Amanda Tarkenton, Esquire."

"Not only is she a Tarkenton, she's a Denver Deputy District Attorney," wailed Hardy.

"What an illustrious career," said Masterson. "Your family must be proud."

He made it sound as though they were anything but. If she caught him off guard, he didn't show it. Amanda wished she could strangle him. Part of her problem was that she had underestimated him. He was turning out to be a clever adversary, fully able to call her bluff. But she had years of verbal sparring behind her, both in the courtroom and out. She wasn't about to let this guy get the best of her.

"Your family must be proud of you as well. Tell me, do they call you Beast for short?"

"No, but you can."

His knowing smile irritated her further. Amanda extended her hand to prove she wasn't intimidated. "How do you do, Mr . Masterson?" she asked, taking refuge in excruciating politeness.

Instead of shaking her hand, he bent over and kissed the back of it. The feel of his lips on her skin evoked memories from tonight she'd rather forget. If she hadn't been so distracted, she could have anticipated his mocking gesture and punched him in the nose.

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"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Tarkenton," he said, rising from a sweeping bow. "Or should I say Mrs.?"

Amanda hid the urge to rub out the warmth lingering on her skin and addressed the implied question. "I prefer Ms. So much more mysterious, don't you agree?"

"Very." Those green eyes missed nothing. He was cataloguing her now. "Amanda. The name suits you. Old fashioned. And every inch the lady."

She almost murmured a thank you to his compliment. Almost.

She had to concede that he could turn on the charm when he wanted. Probably setting her up for a good hard fall. She abruptly took a different tack. "About your tiger," she began.

"Tasha?"

"Your treatment of that animal is appalling. She deserves better than to be paraded around like a highly trained dog. She should be in a zoo somewhere or ..." Amanda faltered, unsure where exotic animals could go besides a zoo. "Or back in the wild," she continued. "Where tigers belong."

He chuckled. "Tasha's not the first tiger to perform in front of an audience. Ever been to the circus, Miss Tarkenton?"

"At least the circus is legitimate entertainment."

"And pro wrestling is not. Is that the point you're trying so hard to make?" he asked, his tone steely.

Julie caught her hand. "Amanda, let's get out of here."

"Not until I get an explanation," she answered, holding her ground in the face of his glare. "Although that may be impossible. How anyone can rationalize using such a magnificent animal in such a demeaning way is beyond me."

"Tasha wants to perform. If I didn't let her, she'd die."

Amanda snorted and rolled her eyes. She should have known the man would offer some melodramatic excuse. For a moment, she'd made the mistake of thinking he might have a chink in that thick, sarcastic armor he wore so well. She should have known better. After all, he was a professional wrestler, engaged in providing sensationalistic drivel to the masses.

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"The fact remains," she said tightly, ignoring Julie's insistent tug on her arm, "that your use of the tiger constitutes cruelty to animals. I'll report this to the proper authorities."

"Be my guest," he said, infuriating her more.

She heard Julie groan as she stalked forward. "I find your attitude disgusting! Not only do you behave like a gorilla, but you're a male chauvinist pig as well!"

He swept a theatric hand over his heart. "You wound me, gentle lady."

Amanda inwardly seethed. Before she left him tonight, she meant to see that smirk wiped from his face. He'd think twice before he abused another living being, be it man, woman or tiger. She glided closer to him, invading the personal space between them.

"What's with this Tarzan act of yours?"

He looked taken aback, just as she hoped he would. "What do you mean?"

She tilted her head to the side, considering him. "You have heard of Tarzan, haven't you?"

"Hasn't everyone?"

Despite the offhand question, he looked thoroughly puzzled. She raised her hand and skimmed a careless line down the middle of his broad chest as she spoke, just to let him know he didn't scare her in the least.

"Tarzan, the Apeman?" she asked.

"What about him?"

"You and he seem to have a lot in common. You both wear animal skins." Her palm flattened over his ripped stomach. Amanda lifted her head and smiled serenely, in spite of the tremors shaking her insides. She'd baited her share of bears, but this one was the biggest by far. Still, she was surrounded by a number of people, including Julie and several security personnel. Besides, Abraham Masterson deserved the worst insult she could think of.

As her fingers dwelled upon his warm skin, she watched his expression become more wary by the second.

"You're both strong."

"Yes?"

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"And very big." She heard gasps from the peanut gallery surrounding them and saw Hardy's scrambled retreat from the corner of her eye. But she was not concerned with them. She wanted to get a reaction out of the Beastmaster.

"Stop it," he grated.

"You're blushing," she said and widened her grin to show her delight.

"Yes, I am."

His honesty deflated her. She stared at the great expanse of his chest and stepped back, not knowing quite what to say. But after all he'd said and done, she wasn't about to apologize. Nor could she bring herself to admit defeat.

"Amanda, I think we better go," Julie said, pulling her arm.

To save face, Amanda allowed Julie to drag her away. Round one to the opponent, she conceded to herself. He was not only strong. He was also intelligent. She'd underestimated Masterson because of how he looked and what he did. That wouldn't happen again.

She spied her jacket heaped on the dirty floor and scooped it up. Glancing at the knot of men gathered around the Beastmaster, she held up the torn jacket. "I'll send you the bill," she said.

"Do that, Ms. Tarkenton. In person. I can't wait to see you again."