

# JUST ONCE

DELETED SCENE #2



LORI HANDELAND



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Circus World Museum, in Baraboo, Wisconsin, original home of the Ringlings, had one of the largest collections of circus memorabilia, including circus wagons, posters and costumes, in the world.

Frankie had been assigned to photograph the summer show in the big top, and she'd promised Lisa she could go too. The *Journal* was okay with their employees bringing family to such events as long as the employee got the job done.

"Yay!" Lisa leaped off the bed, landing with a thump to rival that of any fourteen-year-old boy.

Charley was constantly amazed by how loud she was.

"You gonna be able to go along?" Frankie asked.

"Me?" Charley put his hand against his chest, got a palm full of sweaty T-shirt and fought not to grimace. "Of course."

"You don't look so good."

"I'm fine." He stood. "Just need a shower and some coffee." And some alone time so his hands would stop shaking.

"You want that coffee in the shower?"

"You'd do that for me?"

Those green eyes he loved so much met his. "I'd do anything for you."

About three hours later, they pulled into the parking lot with a gazillion other people.

Charley didn't care for crowds. He blamed being on the roof of the U.S. Embassy in spring of 1975. Vietnamese citizens crawling up the side of the building, rushing the helicopters, hanging off the sides. The Marines doing their best not to let Saigon deteriorate into De Nang, where they'd had to fire on the citizens to get Americans out.

Charley did all right if he was taking photographs. Looking through the viewfinder of a camera made everything around him fade. All he saw was what he framed in the shot. But if he was surrounded by people, if there was shoving and shouting, he panicked. He'd brought a camera—he always did—but he couldn't very well walk through the crowd with the thing attached to his face. At least not when he was supposed to be having a nice day with his daughter.

God, he was a mess.

He picked up the next best thing to Xanax and perched her on his hip. She put an arm around his neck, the other was occupied strangling Black Kitty. Instantly, he felt less schizoid.

Frankie took his hand. He could tell by her expression that she'd noticed. He supposed his eyes had been darting around like ping pong balls in a Bingo bowl.

"You need to go somewhere with less . . ." She made a *hoopla* gesture with both hands.

He considered saying *no* but why not? Frankie would be photographing the show for her feature. The idea of sitting in the big top with all these people . . . his eyes started to roll again. But he could take Lisa through the displays, see the animals, hang out in the back of the performance once everyone was seated.

He nodded, then nuzzled his daughter's hair. "You wanna see the lions?"

“Yay!” Lisa shouted, nearly deafening him.

“That would be a yay.” He winked at Frankie.

“I got you press credentials. That way you can go wherever, even behind the curtains and through the *no admittance* doors.”

Lisa was unimpressed with the circus wagons, some of which were very old and very cool. She liked the sparkly costumes—for about two minutes.

The history of Ringling, of the circus, made her tug his hand and demand, “Lions. Tigers. Kitties.”

When a lion roared, he barely caught her before she took off in that direction. Rather than take that chance again, he lifted her to his shoulders, then followed that roar to a tent labeled: *NO ADMITTANCE*.

He stood outside, uncertain. There was going wherever he wanted to get the picture he needed. Alone. And there was going where a lion roared with his four-year-old. Probably not the best idea.

“Hey, you wanna go in?”

An ancient, sun weathered man wearing a very dirty wife beater and even dirtier jeans several sizes too big for his narrow hips, approached.

“Is it safe?” Charley asked.

“Sure.” The guy swept back the curtain, and motioned for them to follow.

All the animals were in cages, of course. What had he been thinking? If the lions were walking around in a tent, they’d soon be walking around outside the tent.

“Lions, Daddy!” Lisa tried to climb down from his shoulders.

“You stay up there, baby girl.”

They might be in cages but there wasn’t a fence. Anyone could skip right up and stick their hand through the bars.

They spent a good amount of time visiting the lions and the tigers. The place even had a bear. The elephants were through the rear of the tent in a fenced off enclosure.

Lisa giggled until he thought she'd get the hiccups when their tour guide gave her some peanuts and one of the elephants snuffled it out of her palm.

"You wanna ride an elephant?" the guy, who'd introduced himself as Cliff, asked.

Charley eyed the sedate, though mammoth, creatures. "I don't think—"

"Oh, not those." He motioned for them to follow.

Lisa rocked back and forth, tiny heels banging against his chest. "Go, Daddy, go!"

Even farther away from the maddening crowd, a baby elephant stood tethered to a stake in a field of long grass.

"This is Samson. He loves kids." Cliff unhooked the chain. "You wanna hold her on, we'll take a spin."

Charley hesitated. Was this kosher? He had no idea.

"He gives hundreds of kids rides. Besides, he isn't going to take off with me holding him."

Charley thought if Samson wanted to take off, Cliff's skinny arms weren't going to stop him. He was a baby elephant, but still an elephant.

"Daddy, I wanna ride."

Well, he'd quit *Geographic* and started at the *Journal* so he would could do things like this with Lisa. He needed to do them.

Charley pulled her off his shoulders and plopped her on the elephant.

Her face when the animal started moving was priceless. He regretted, forever, not capturing it on film.

Samson walked around that field like a docile pony. He lifted his trunk and nibbled Lisa's leg. The joy of her laughter could cure cancer.

"I gotta take him out front so he can give other kids rides."

"Thanks, man." He tried to give the guy a fiver, but Cliff shook him off.

“She makes me smile. Some of the others . . .” He rolled his eyes. “I see how she likes the big cats.”

“We won’t go back in,” Charley hastened to reassure him.

“I was gonna say there are some lion cubs she might like to pet.” He pointed to a tent on the left side of Samson’s field.

“She can pet them?”

“They’re small. Pretty tame. I bottle fed ‘em. They’re used to humans.”

Cliff and Samson strolled off, the elephant stuck his trunk in the man’s back pocket. Charley lifted his camera and took several shots. When he looked down, Lisa was slipping into the lion cub tent.

He ran, bursting into the tent only a few seconds after she had. By then she sat smack in the middle of three lion cubs that were tied to the center pole, and they were mauling her. Her shrieks stopped his heart. Until he realized she was laughing.

The cubs licked her face, rolled into her lap, presenting their bellies for a rub. They climbed onto her back, nibbled her hair, but they didn’t scratch or bite.

Charley didn’t stop taking pictures until the loudspeaker trumpeted, “The second show will begin in twenty minutes. Please make your way to the big top.”

Uh-oh. They were supposed to have met Frankie after the first show. He was surprised she hadn’t tracked them down. Although they were a little off the grid.

“Gotta meet Mommy.”

“No.”

Charley hadn’t yet mastered the art of getting her to mind him with a word and a look the way Frankie had, but he tried anyway.

“Lisa. Now.”

She laughed and hugged a lion.

One thing Frankie had told him was he could not let Lisa get away with ignoring him. If he told her to do something, he

needed to keep at her until she did it, even if he had to “help” her do it.

He stepped over the nearest lion cub, which batted at his pants’ leg and picked Lisa up, then set her on her feet. “Mommy is waiting.”

For an instant he thought there’d be all out rebellion. Her lip jutted out, there was mutiny in her eyes. Then she smiled that smile that lived in his mind whenever they were apart.

“Okay.” She patted each lion on the head.

He took her hand and they started to walk away, but Lisa hung back. “Honey, we have to—“

“Daddy!”

A lion cub had hold of her leg in its lion cub claws.

Lisa pulled, trying to get away. Her jeans tore.

The sound seemed to excite the cubs. The other two jumped on her other leg. Lisa started to panic. So did Charley.

As soon as he’d pulled the needlelike claws of one of the cubs out of her jeans, another grabbed her. He tried to pull her by the arms. The third latched on and all of them pulled the other way as if Lisa were a rope in tug of war.

“Shoo!” He flapped his hand at them like an eighty-year-old woman trying to get the raccoons out of her garbage.

“What the hell, Charley?” Suddenly Frankie was there, yanking lion cubs from their daughter. When they tried to grab Lisa again, she bared her teeth. “Back off.”

The animals skittered away as she swung Lisa onto her hip.

“You let her play with lions?” Frankie examined Lisa’s legs—no bloody rivets, only a few white surface scratches

“Yes?”

Why his answer sounded like a question, Charley wasn’t sure. He’d obviously let her play with lions. Although *let* probably wasn’t the right word. He’d let her get away from him for an instant, and by the time he’d caught up she’d already been part of the pride.

He'd just keep that part to himself.

"Did you think it would make a good picture?"

"What? No."

She jabbed a finger at the camera hanging around his neck. "You mean to tell me that if I develop that film there won't be pictures of our daughter playing with lions."

"I didn't say that."

"Aha!" She strode out of the tent, but then rounded on him so fast he nearly slammed into her. "What were you thinking? You should know better."

Should he? How?

"Mommy! Daddy found me lions and they loved me!"

"Of course they did."

Lisa's face, which was lit up like sunrise, caused all the fight to drain out of Frankie, just like that.

"Daddy's her hero. Always will be."

"Okay." He was so confused. "I'm sorry?"

"You should be." She leaned her forehead against Lisa's, then kissed the child's cheek, set her on the ground, took her hand and began to walk to their car. "You gave me a heart attack."

Should Charley say he was sorry again or was that just redundant?

"I wanted you to spend time with her. I should have known that the time would be Charley time."

"What does that mean?"

"You run at life full tilt. You aren't afraid of anything. Neither is she."

He was afraid of a lot, but if Frankie thought he wasn't, he'd just let her keep thinking it.

"You're miserable, aren't you?" she asked.

"What? Me? No."

"You are the worst liar on the face of the earth. Go back to *Geographic*, Charley."

Was she kicking him out? Over the lion cub mistake? He could just see that on the divorce decree.

*He allowed our child to play with lions.*

It might almost be worth it to see a judge's face. No, nothing was worth losing Frankie. Nothing.

"Fancy, don't do this to me."

"How is telling you to go back to a job you love doing anything to you?"

She was being noble not litigious. Whew!

"I just need some time. It'll be fine."

She slid a glance in his direction. "Really?"

"Promise."

Three months later Charley lay in a hospital with a broken leg courtesy of James Lofton, and his walking papers courtesy of Elmer Strahan.

"You can't take your eye off the ball, Blackwell! That's what photographing sports is all about."

Instead Charley had been taking pictures of the crowd and *bam*, out went the lights.

"Will you go back to *Geographic* now?" Frankie asked.

His elation might have been from the morphine. Had to be. What man in his right mind was thrilled to be fired from a major newspaper and sent back to a nomadic existence where he saw the loves of his life once a month if he was lucky?

Charley Blackwell, that's who.