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CALLUM

As he followed the two women into the hall, Callum's heart was racing. For days, he'd been anticipating the moment he finally got to meet Cora, and now that it had arrived, he had to fight the impulse to dart ahead, and push his way into the living room. He glanced round at Esme, wondering what she was making of this mystery, but she just looked dazed.

As Sadie reached the door, she turned and gave a heavy sigh.

"Och, Jean, I'm sorry, hen. I wasn't being fair. I ken how much work Cora has been recently and you've taken good care of her. Put the kettle on and I'll help you tidy up the mess in the kitchen. The bairns can introduce themselves to Cora."

"Aye, a wee cup of tea's a fine idea."

Harmony restored, Jean and Sadie retreated to the kitchen, leaving Esme and Callum standing at the living room door.

"Who the heck is Cora?" asked Esme again. Callum

didn't reply, partly because he wasn't a hundred percent sure himself. He hadn't seen Cora, only listened to Sadie's garbled tale of theft and arguments and panic. The two women might have got it all wrong. Some domestic cats, like the Maine Coon and the Norwegian Forest, were much bigger than the average. But what if Sadie was right?

Anticipation buzzing in every nerve, Callum turned the handle. The door swung open and he stepped inside. The first thing he noticed was the pungent, acrid smell of cat pee. His lip curled and he put his hand to his nose. "Oh, man. That's honking."

Behind him, Esme spoke, her voice tinged with horror. "What's happened here? What on earth's that horrible stink?"

Callum took a few cautious steps forward, nerves tingling. His heart was banging against his rib cage. He was desperate to see Cora, but he didn't want to be dinner—the information he'd googled yesterday in the school library had made him wary.

Skilled hunters, so quiet and secretive that their presence in an area could go unnoticed for years... they are excellent climbers and use rocks and trees to watch for prey to ambush.

So where was she lurking, and was she likely to pounce?

The room was in semi-darkness, as the wooden

shutters were drawn, but when Esme flicked the light switch, Callum gasped. The room was a shambles. A chair was upended, castors still spinning. Smotes of ash from the open fire swirled in the draught. Pictures hung on the walls at crazy angles. A ripped cushion lay on the floor, and its fluffy white feathers spun like snowflakes.

He saw the cat right away. In her natural environment, her reddish-brown fur would have been excellent camouflage, but the poor beast was unable to hide herself against a background of rose-sprigged wallpaper. In a corner of the room, beside a massive oak sideboard, she crouched: dark-spotted, long-legged and about the height of a Labrador.

“Wow...” he murmured, unable to take his eyes off the animal. The cat stared back at him, eyes like amber headlamps, long, tufted, triangular ears twitching. Her intelligent expression and fluffy white beard gave her the face of an ancient, wise guru, and it was hard to believe she was so young, only a few months old.

Beside him, Esme gasped. “Is that a... is that a lion?”

He'd promised himself he wouldn't speak to Esme any more than necessary, but couldn't help seeking revenge or stop himself mocking her ignorance.

“Don't be a numpty. It's a Northern Eurasian Lynx, of course. Everyone knows that.”

Esme flushed scarlet as her hair, but he didn't care. Isobel had called him stupid often enough, and Esme

had laughed every time. She'd stand there, at Isobel's side, grinning, full of herself, loving being one of Isobel's gang.

"It can't be." She shook her head, appearing to be unable to believe what she was seeing. "Lynx are wild animals."

He rolled his eyes. "So are lions. And giraffes. And hippopotamus. But this particular wild animal is a lynx."

As he spoke, Callum kept his eyes firmly on the cat. In the wild, Eurasian lynx were reclusive, and avoided humans completely, but they could be aggressive when cornered. The lynx stared back at him, and yawned, as if the sight of him bored her, revealing a gory, blood-red mouth and rows of needle-sharp teeth.

Esmé's eyes widened and she took a step backwards. "Okay, so she's a lynx, but what's a lynx doing in my gran's house? Has she escaped from a zoo?"

The sound of Sadie's stick clicking on the hall tiles made Callum turn. She waved at him. "We thought we'd better come and check the wee devil's behaving herself!"

He watched his foster mother hobble down the hall, trying to keep ahead of Jean. There was no doubting how fond they were of Cora, but the two women had really messed up. Their behaviour hadn't shocked him, but how would Esme feel, about her grandmother being a criminal? A mischievous smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

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“You asked what the lynx is doing here?” He was looking at Esme, but raised his voice, so it carried. “Jean and Sadie stole her.”

“We did no such thing!” Jean pushed past Sadie, who was standing in the doorway, surveying the mess. “We didn’t steal her!” She put down the tea tray and flopped onto the couch, sending duck-down from the ripped cushions swirling round her head. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, I’m like a snowman in a snow-globe. Let me get a cup of tea to calm my nerves, and then I’ll explain.”

She poured tea into mugs and then pointed towards the lynx, who was still crouched in the corner, watching them.

“Right, here’s what happened. In the summer, Sadie and I were visiting the Rothiecraig estate. We went for a wee stroll and we found a tiny, mewling, scrap of a kitten, abandoned in the long grass at the side of a path. The poor wee soul might have died if we hadn’t rescued her.”

Sadie broke in, determined to give an honest account. “Aye, she looked like she’d been abandoned. We picked her up and gave her a cuddle, but we know now that we should have left her where she was. And we should have let the gamekeepers at the estate know we’d found her. If we’d known that she wasn’t an ordinary moggy, we would have.” She hesitated, and then pointed at Jean, shifting the blame. “Taking the kitten home was that yin’s idea.”

Jean blushed and didn't argue. "I've had an awfy problem with mice, and you know Shug. He's useless. Enjoys the company of the mice and is too lazy to mind them sharing his dinner. I thought the kitten was a stray, and nobody would mind. It was only as the weeks passed, and she started to get bigger... and bigger... that I realised I'd made an awfy mistake."

Sadie sank into an armchair and gave a heavy sigh.

"Aye, Jean called me, all discombobulated, and so I came roon here and took a few pictures of the cat. The following morning, I drove to the library, and asked Sheila, the wee lassie who works there part-time, for a shot of that internet thingy. Her jaw dropped, because, I'll admit, I've said my piece a few times about the library wasting money on computers when they should be spending it on books."

"You should have sent me instead." Callum grinned. "Sheila will think you're a right hypocrite now."

Sadie shrugged. "So what? As my maw always said, *'we've no say over what other folk think of us.'* We can only control what we do ourselves, so we should focus on that. Anyway, whatever Sheila's thoughts, she hid them well. In fact, the lassie was very helpful. She showed me how to get onto the Google." A triumphant grin spread across the woman's face. "It didn't take me more than a few seconds to find an animal that looked exactly like our Cora. Though finding oot the kitten Jean had taken

home was actually a Northern Eurasian Lynx was a big shock to my system, I can tell you, and Jean didn't take it too well either."

"No, I didn't, right enough. I really thought Cora was an ordinary moggie, and she's no that." Jean appeared to be an expert at stating the obvious. "I mean, look at her. She's still a kitten and look at the chaos she's creating already."

Callum's mouth twitched, and he turned away, so Jean wouldn't think he was laughing at her.

"And she needs to go back, where she belongs, wi the rest of those big cats in Rothiecraig." Jean's voice cracked, and tears ran in rivulets down her wrinkled cheeks. "She needs to be free, and wild."

As if she'd been listening, the lynx left her position by the sideboard and started prowling, showing off her long body, and her short, black-tipped tail. Her paws were enormous, with big furry pads like snowshoes. As she passed Callum, she rubbed her shoulder against his leg, the way a cat might, and he felt the power of her muscles and the dense softness of her fur before she continued to pad across the carpet. She paced up as far as the television and back, in a well-worn path, stopping now and then to scratch at the wallpaper.

Jean's right. That animal needs to be free. She's miserable in captivity.

Esme was standing with her back against the wall, at

the far side of the room. She kept glancing towards the door, as if she was preparing to bolt.

“What if it attacks?”

“There hasn’t ever been a case in Europe of a wild lynx attacking a human.” Callum spoke confidently, but he couldn’t be a hundred percent sure they were safe. After all, Cora wasn’t living wild. She was trapped, and both animals and humans can react badly when they’re cornered. That was one thing he knew all about.

“I don’t understand.” Esmé’s voice shook with nerves, and she couldn’t seem to tear her eyes from the prowling lynx.

If it had been anyone else Callum would have felt sorry for her. Well, anyone else, bar Isobel.

“Gran, you said you got it from an estate? Where is this place and why do they have wild animals running loose? Isn’t that really dangerous?”

“They’re not running loose. At least they’re not meant to be.” Jean’s voice was uncertain. “Cora was, mind you. We’d have known she was a lynx, if she’d been behind bars.”

“The lynx are supposed to be behind high fences. Seven of them, four females and three males, have been released on RothieCraig, an estate to the north of here,” Callum explained. “The owner of the estate, Morag Campbell, is a massive fan of rewilding. She has reforested a massive area, but now has a problem

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with deer numbers. So, she has reintroduced a pack of grey wolves and the seven Eurasian lynx in an attempt to control the number of roe deer. In separate areas, of course, because in the wild, wolf packs have been known to take down a lynx.”

“She has released a pack of wolves? Jeez.” Under her freckles, Esme’s skin had turned pale. “Remind me never to go for a walk anywhere near that estate.”

Callum chewed on his lip, unsure how to break the bad news. “The problem is, Esme, that’s what we’re about to do. Thanks to Sadie and Jean here, one of the female lynx is missing a kitten. They need us to take Cora back to Rothiecraig.”

Esme’s eyes widened. “No way. That’s not even funny.” She turned to Jean. “Nan?”

But her grandmother didn’t reply, just sat on her couch, picking feathers from her trousers. Panic started to flicker in Esme’s eyes. “I’m not going anywhere near that place. No chance. Wolves scare me to death. It’s not happening.”

She turned to Sadie, who was sitting calmly among the debris, sipping tea from a mug. “It’s your fault, as much as my gran’s. Why can’t you just bundle your stolen property into the back of your truck and take Cora back to where she belongs?”

Callum chewed on his lip, really struggling not to laugh now, as Sadie’s face turned a vivid crimson.

She gave a deep, injured sigh. “Jean and I can’t take her, because if we’re caught on the estate, we’ll be arrested, even if we’re not with Cora.”

Esme’s eyes flicked from one woman to the other, clearly waiting for an explanation, but for a long moment neither of them spoke.

Then Sadie broke the silence. “We’re not allowed on the Rothiecraig estate. We’re banned. There might even be a legal injunction.”

Callum had heard this saga already, but he couldn’t stop his loud snort of laughter. Sadie glared at him. “It’s no one bit funny.” She clicked her teeth and told Esme the entire story. “Your granny and I went to the estate with the Woman’s Rural. That snotty cow, Muriel Douglas decided our usual lunch in the village hall wasn’t good enough, and arranged for us to go to Rothiecraig for afternoon tea.”

Jean broke in. “Afternoon tea, have you ever heard of anything so daft! Aw it did was put me off my dinner.”

Sadie rolled her eyes. “Jean, that was the least of your worries. Hold your wheesht and let me finish. So, after we’d eaten our sandwiches and scones, we aw split up and went for a stroll through the grounds. That’s when we found the kitten. And after we got back from our walk, there was an unfortunate stramash between me and Ross Bauld, the estate manager. I was a bit uptight, you see, because we’d been standing in the rain, waiting

for the coach to turn up. It was twenty minutes late, and I had the hens to see to.”

Esme’s gran snorted. “An unfortunate stramash? It was a full scale rammy!” The lynx approached the couch and sniffed her trouser leg. Slowly Jean reached out her hand and tickled the lynx behind the ears. “Aw, you’re a bonnie lass, are you no?” She looked up again. “Aye, it was a complete rammy. Sadie shouted at Bauld that re-introducing wild animals was madness. She told him that lynx and wolves were vicious predators and if any of her precious sheep got eaten by one of his ruddy wild beasts, there would be trouble. There’s been terrible stories in the papers, you ken, of escaped animals savaging sheep, so she wasn’t completely out of order. But she probably shouldn’t have threatened to use her shotgun.”

“Och, be fair! I said I’d use the gun on Bauld, no on the lynx, or the wolves.” Sadie seemed keen that Esme understand that point. “Wild animals can’t help their natures. If they went after the sheep, they’d just be following their instincts. But that baldy-headed eejit shouldn’t be setting wild animals loose on folk’s farmland. He should ken better.”

“Bauld by name, bald by nature!” Jean sniggered at the joke. “Anyway, Ross Bauld wasn’t one bit pleased. He roared that people had no right to be spreading lies, and when Sadie had another go at him, he lost the rag, and tellt Muriel Douglas the Women’s Rural wasn’t welcome

back on his estate. She was mortified, and raging wi the pair of us. It was a long, awkward journey home, I can tell you, and there's been a frosty atmosphere at aw the Woman's Rural meetings since."

Sadie's flush darkened to magenta. "Aye well, that's as maybe. But the point you missed, Jean—and when it comes to deciding who's to blame it's a crucial point—is that on that coach home, there was an extra passenger, one you'd neglected to tell me about. I didn't ken you had one of Morag Campbell's ruddy lynx tucked into your Co-op bag for life, did I?"

5



ESME

As the women's story unfolded, and as the lynx continued to pace, Esme's anxiety tightened its grip, until she felt her chest was clamped in a vice, her breathing constricted.

I can't stay here. I need to go home. This is a crazy situation. OMG, that big beast is coming closer. If it leaps on me, I'm dead. It'll grab me by the throat and crush my windpipe. That's what lions do, and there can't be that much difference. They're both big cats. They're both carnivores.

Panicking, she shrank back against the wall, as Cora prowled towards her, sniffing the air. When the animal's furry body brushed against her leg, Esme gasped. Her fingers tightened on the phone in her pocket. Reception was terrible here, but if she could get an emergency message through to her mother, surely Mum would rush back and rescue her daughter from this nightmare. However important the weekend conference, the prospect of her daughter being eaten alive would surely come first. Her fingers fumbled for the buttons, while she