

Rescued

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Dedicated to:

Mittens, Patches, Skunk, Warlock, Omen, Arion, Samhain, Mocha, Bean, Fermi, Pumpkin, Savannah, Agatha, and Autumn.

This story was written to raise funds for Cat Care Initiative, a non-profit based in Campbellford, Ontario. They work tirelessly to find loving forever homes for deserving cats or kittens, and to spay/neuter and provide housing for feral colonies.

<http://catcareinitiative.com/>

A few weeks after arriving in Widdershins, I knew I'd made a terrible mistake coming to this wretched town.

I shuffled along the sidewalk of Water Street, rain dripping off my hat and puddles seeping into my shoes. The sun had recently set on another day of wasted effort. I'd come to Widdershins hoping for a new start. For the chance to rebuild my life by opening my own business in a town where no one knew of my past. I'd bought a house, had business cards printed with *Griffin Flaherty, Private Detective*, and prepared to begin again.

And been stymied at every turn.

Widdershins was a port town, and not a small one—the inhabitants ought to be used to newcomers. But I'd never seen a people so determined to protect their secrets from outsiders. My attempts to cultivate sources who might be useful to my business had come to nothing. No clients rang my bell. I hadn't even made a single friend.

The latter was probably my fault, rather than that of my neighbors, though.

I could leave...but where would I go? My parents had made it clear I wasn't welcome back in Fallow. Certainly I couldn't return to Chicago; just the thought of setting foot in the streets again made me shiver with dread. If I failed here in Widdershins, I honestly didn't know what I would do. Where I might go.

I pushed open the gate to the walk leading to the house I couldn't yet think of as a home. I'd go inside and pour myself a stiff drink. With enough whiskey, perhaps I'd even render myself insensible to the point where I wouldn't awaken in the night, screaming because I thought myself back in the asylum.

A low, creaky-sounding meow came from beneath the hedge.

I stopped, uncertain I'd actually heard anything over the patter of rain on my hat. The sound came again, louder this time.

I'd acquired the property specifically for the tall hedge around the yard, which would shield any clients from prying eyes. It might not have performed that particular function yet, but it seemed to have shielded something else. I crouched down close to where I thought the noise had come from, squinting into the shadows beneath the tangled branches.

I could just make out what seemed to be a cat, hiding from the weather. A pet of the neighbors perhaps? It meowed at me again, its voice thin and as squeaky as a rusted hinge.

I'd always been fond of the barn cats on the farm where I'd grown up. "Hello," I said, holding out my hand. "Staying out of the damp, are you?"

The cat stood and approached slowly, wariness in its gait. As it emerged from the deep

shadows, I realized it wasn't as healthy as I'd assumed. Its flanks hugged its ribs, its belly a hollow, and its orange coat was dirty and matted.

"Oh no," I murmured. "What happened to you, poor thing?"

It sniffed my hand, then cautiously rubbed its chin against my fingers. I stroked it carefully, and was rewarded by a purr. "There you go," I said in the most soothing voice I could muster. "It's all right."

I feared trying to pick the cat up would frighten it, so I slowly backed away toward the house. Thankfully, it followed me eagerly despite the rain, and showed no hesitation to come inside when I unlocked and opened the door.

"You used to belong to someone, didn't you?" I asked. Perhaps it was foolish to talk to a cat, but I was sick of having no one to speak with. "Did you get lost?"

I walked to the kitchen, trying to think what I had that a cat might want. The fish I'd hoped to have for my own dinner seemed the best option.

The cat fell upon the fish with enthusiasm. Clearly the poor creature hadn't eaten in some time. I put down a bowl of water beside the plate, then sat on the tiles myself. The cat began to purr as it ate, and when I stroked its back it lifted its tail in response. A tom.

Once the cat had filled his belly with food and water, he crawled into my lap. I stroked him carefully, feeling for any wounds as I did so. There were some old scabs, and burrs and matts tangled his fur, but lack of food seemed his main complaint.

"Did someone throw you away?" I asked, as he butted his head against my hand. A rueful smile touched my lips. "That makes two of us, then." First my parents, and then the Pinkertons, had shown me the door and left me to fend for myself.

He curled in my lap, pausing just a moment to look up into my face. His eyes were a beautiful shade of golden orange. "It's all right," I said. "I'm not going to throw you out. You're safe now."

Within moments, he was deeply asleep. I traced the line of his backbone with my fingers, feeling each vertebra sharp beneath my hand. My belly grumbled, reminding me I hadn't had my own dinner, but I couldn't bring myself to disturb what must be his first deep sleep in who knew how long.

I might not have informants, or clients, or friends. Without the first two, I'd soon not have any money or any house, either.

But it seemed I had a cat.

* * *

When I arrived home the next night, I opened the door to find the cat waiting for me just inside. Before I could even take a step into the entry hall, he twined around my ankles, purring and meowing a greeting.

"Well, hello to you, too," I said, bending over to scratch between his ears. He bumped his head enthusiastically against my hand. "Are you hungry? I stopped at the butcher and bought some proper food for you. And for me as well."

I hung up my coat and turned on the gaslights, listening to the soft *tip-tip-tip* of his paws against the floor. He wound round my ankles again, then rubbed his head on my shoes.

Perhaps it was pathetic, but the house seemed far less...empty...tonight. And there was something to be said for having someone so glad to see me at the end of a long day.

I fed him, then set about making my own dinner. "I need something to call you if you're to be staying with me," I said. "What do you think of Saul? It's the name of a character from a book I read once. He had orange hair, and so do you."

Saul continued to devour his food, although he did at least flick an ear in my direction to show he was listening. Soon his stomach bulged beneath his ribs, and we retired to the study, where he curled up on my lap.

I leaned my head back and contemplated the empty mantel above the fireplace. I'd had photos and pictures in my apartment in Chicago, but as for what had happened to them, I didn't know. If anyone had bothered to tell me, I didn't remember.

The only things I could remember from those days were Glenn's screams, and the burning touch of the thing deep in the tunnels beneath that accursed basement.

God, how he'd screamed.

My breath came short, as though some constriction tightened around my chest. The acidic scent that had saturated the room where Glenn died seemed to clog my nostrils. If I shut my eyes, I'd be there again, screaming along with Glenn in the dark.

"It wasn't real," I said aloud, but my voice sounded like it belonged to someone else. It *couldn't* have been real. Monsters only existed in bad fiction and children's stories.

"Mrrp?" Saul inquired sleepily.

I focused on the feel of his fur beneath my fingers. I forced myself to see his vibrant orange, not the gray shadows which haunted my mind. His purr vibrated against my legs, and his raspy tongue absently licked the back of my hand as I stroked him.

He was real. This moment was real. I wasn't in a basement, or the asylum.

There were no such things as monsters.

Eventually my breathing eased, along with the sense that the memories of the basement lurked ready to swallow me.

"I'm broken, Saul," I said, though I felt a fool, confessing to a cat who couldn't understand the words I spoke. He wouldn't even know his name yet. "I love women, but I love men more, so I can't go home again. Ma and Pa think the asylum cured me of it, but it didn't." I swallowed. "I went mad, you see. I thought I saw something impossible...but they tell me I'm wrong. They say a monster didn't kill Glenn, that it didn't leave the scar on my leg. They say ordinary men attacked us; that they threw acid at me and dissolved Glenn's body in it. That the sight unhinged me, and I can't be trusted to know my own memories."

I sighed. "And they're right, of course. Otherwise I wouldn't feel like I could close my eyes and be back there. Or wake in the night, certain I'm in the asylum. My mind isn't right, and I don't know that it ever will be again. No one will want to be friends with me, once they find out. I can't ever risk having a lover spend the night, in case I have a fit."

Saul tipped his head back and looked at me. I scratched under his chin. "But you don't care, do you? Will you love me even though I'm mad? Even though I'm broken?"

I took his rumbling purr as all the answer I needed.

* * *

My house, which had seemed so empty, began to feel more lived in, due in large part to my fluffy roommate. He slept for most of the first week, but never failed to meet me at the door each night when I arrived home. His enthusiastic greeting always buoyed my spirits no matter how the rest of the day had gone.

When my first client hired me, I pored over the details of the case with Saul in my lap. A few days later, another client came, and then another.

Saul recovered enough to make excursions into the yard. Still, he always greeted me at the gate, or waited on the porch. I found that I liked not only having his company, but also feeding and otherwise taking care of him. Having to structure my time around his needs, having him rely

on me, meant I couldn't just give up and lie in bed all day, even on the days I wanted to.

And in return, he loved me even when no one else did. Even when I was sure no one else ever would.

October came and went. A steady diet of the proper meats from the butcher, supplemented by the rodents he began to catch, soon had Saul looking nothing like the pathetic creature that had slept in my lap that first night. His marmalade coat grew long and full, and wonderfully silky.

His behavior also became far more boisterous, particularly when it came to running up and down the stairs, as though determined to trip me. "I should have named you the Marmalade Menace," I complained one evening when he'd nearly sent me sprawling. "You do realize, if I break my neck on the stairs, there won't be anyone to feed you?"

He ignored me in favor of stopping to wash his foot. I dropped my files in a stack beside my favorite chair and settled in front of the fire. November was hastening to its end, and the nights had grown cold.

"I have a new case," I told Saul. I'd become accustomed to telling him of my work, in part because putting the details of a case into words forced me to order my thinking, and sometimes led to new insights. And in part because it made the evening feel more sociable, as foolish as that sounded.

Finding a human friend felt like an insurmountable task most days, though. I'd considered visiting the bathhouse near the waterfront, for the physical release if nothing else. But after the asylum, the thought of strangers touching me sent ice through my veins. As for pretending I was whole and normal for a friend...I already did that all day, for my clients and informants. I didn't know if I had the ability to put on such a front socially as well.

Saul sprang into my lap and butted his head against my chin. It brought a smile to my face. "I've always got you, though, don't I?" I asked. He repeated the action, and I kissed him between the ears. "Yes, yes. I love you, too, silly thing. Now lay down so I can read."

He did, though he took his own time about it. "As I was saying," I went on, "I have a new case. A murder, in fact. The police think it was a robbery gone wrong, but his father disagrees and has hired me to find the truth."

I picked up a book from amidst the papers my client had given me this afternoon. "The dead man mailed his father a strange tome written in cypher." The slender volume was bound in a peculiar, fine-grained leather. I opened it, staring again at the symbols and nonsensical words. Something about the book disturbed me, though I couldn't put my finger on what, exactly. Saul sniffed it curiously, then went back to grooming himself.

"There's some sort of expert at the Ladysmith Museum, who apparently might be able to help crack the code." I put away the book and picked up his file, which I hadn't yet had time to examine. "Percival Endicott Whyborne," I read, then shook my head with a laugh. "Dear lord, he sounds insufferable already."

* * *

"That's the last of it," Whyborne said, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. My spare room, which I'd used for storage, now stood empty. Well, empty except for Saul, who sprawled on the newly bare floor like a fluffy orange rug.

"Excellent." I wound my arms around his waist, and he leaned back against me. Since he was a good deal taller, it meant my cheek pressed against his shoulder. "We'll move your things in tomorrow. Do you want to go back to your apartment tonight, or would you prefer to spend the night here?"

“There are a few things I should finish packing,” he said reluctantly. “But I’d rather stay here. If you don’t mind.”

As if I’d invited him to share my home and my bed, but would begrudge him an extra night. “I don’t know,” I pretended to consider. “What do you think, Saul?”

At the sound of his name, Saul looked over. Whyborne pulled away from me and went to pet him. “Hmph. Saul loves me, don’t you?” he asked. Saul purred and rubbed against Whyborne’s legs, leaving behind a healthy coating of cat hair on his trousers.

“Then if Saul says it’s all right, I suppose you can stay,” I said, with a wink to let Whyborne know I only teased. The world had not been as kind to him as it should have, and he had his own wounds and scars to bear.

“A good thing for me you rescued him, then,” Whyborne said, straightening from his crouch. “We could eat out, if you’d like. Since we worked hard today, that is.”

“And so we can celebrate your moving in?” I asked. “What a wonderful idea. My shoes are still in the bedroom—let me get them, and I’ll join you downstairs.”

Whyborne left. Saul followed me into my room, jumping up on the bed when I bent to put on my shoes. He purred and rubbed against me, and I kissed his head. “You’ll get twice the affection, now that Whyborne’s moving in,” I told him. “What do you think of that?”

I closed my eyes and breathed in the cedar scent of his fur. I thought of all the long nights, when I would have been utterly alone had Saul not called out to me from beneath the hedge. Without him, the days and evenings would have been unspeakably lonely.

Knowing that I could tell him the worst things about myself, and that he would still love me without condition, had made those weeks so much less bleak than they would have been otherwise. If I hadn’t had him there to love me, to ground me with his purr when the memories threatened to overwhelm me even while awake...I didn’t want to contemplate it.

“Whyborne said I rescued you,” I told him. “But I think, in truth, it was you who rescued me.”

The story of how Whyborne and Griffin meet and fall in love is related in Widdershins (Whyborne & Griffin #1), available in ebook, print, and audio.