

THE CAT LADY'S SECRET

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Dedication

To my favorite and best gift from God, my amazing
husband Billy.

"...as we forgive those who trespass against us."

1

With the ties of her green apron flopping with each step, Annie Crawley rushes out of the Down Home Diner and quicksteps across the red brick street, just beating the traffic light. She swipes her mud-brown hair from her forehead, mouths "Hi, Millie" at me, and plops on the other end of my bench on the courthouse lawn with a phone at her ear. Her place on the bench is perfect, because now I can eavesdrop. And judging by the angle of her brows over her nose, I certainly need to. If anyone can help her with whatever etched those stress lines around her lips, it's me. Well, me and Emily Taylor. But Annie doesn't need to know about Em. No one does.

"I don't understand. What's keeping you?" Annie says into her phone. Just last month, she showed up in town with one bag and a red pickup, both of which have seen better days. She got herself a job at the diner and an apartment at Lawn View—something else that has seen better days.

I don't want to be too obvious about how far my ear is stretched in her direction, so I keep my eye on a yellow tabby sitting in the shade under the boxwood hedge outlining the courthouse. If I wasn't busy stickin' my nose into Annie's business, I'd grab the

long-handled fish net resting against my knee and go after it. That's something else I do—catch stray cats, though I've never used the net.

"You lost it? How?"

The tabby's ears prick forward at Annie's raised voice. So do mine.

"Stolen?"

That did it. Annie's shout sends the cat darting across the lawn and behind the courthouse's air conditioning unit. But it's not like he's safe. I know where he is.

"How long will it take?" Annie rubs her temple. *"I love you, too. Bye."*

"Trouble?" I ask as she snaps her phone closed.

"That was my husband, Kyle." The weak smile she gives me doesn't erase the worry lines plowing across her forehead. *"He was supposed to finish his job in Waco and join me here in Dogwood."*

"But...?"

"But he closed our bank account and got a cashier's check so we could open an account here, and he left it in the truck overnight and" — tears brim in her dark eyes, and her soft voice pitches to a high wail—*"someone stole it!"*

"The check?"

"No, the truck! Now he's not just broke, he can't even get here. Oh, Millie, what are we going to do?"

Fat teardrops dive down her cheeks and splash on her quivering lips.

I scoot over to her and wrap her shaking shoulders in a hug. Rubbing her arm, I let her cry until her nose is good and red and her eyes are puffier than plump pillows.

"I'm sorry." She dabs at the wet spot on my

shoulder. "I just miss him so much."

"I know you do. It'll be all right. You'll see."

She nods but doesn't look convinced. In fact, she looks like a cat stole her ice cream. Well, good thing I'm here. I reckon this is a problem Emily can fix.

"The diner's filling up again. I have to get back to work." Still sniffing, she rises and smoothes the wrinkles out of her waitress uniform. "Come by after the rush, and I'll fix you some soup."

"Too hot for soup."

She laughs. "A sandwich, then."

Such a sweet lady.

I watch her cross the street, grab my tote and net, and get up from the bench. I've got a cat to catch.

No more than halfway around the courthouse building, my feet start hurting, but I glimpse a yellow tail between the air conditioner unit and the brick wall. The cat's facing away from me, and in this stifling August heat, the AC fan is whirring loud enough to drown out my footfalls. I drop the tote and slip my net behind me. I don't want to scare it and certainly don't want to use the net if I don't have to. Cats go bonkers when caught in the nylon and wear themselves out trying to get free. I've never had to use it and don't want to start now.

I get fairly close, drop to my knees, and start cooing at the critter. Maybe I can coax it out without having to chase it. Sometimes I can do that, if the cat's not too wild. As I inch toward it, getting dirt and grass stains on my hands and knees, the back door to the courthouse pops open.

The noisiest gaggle of humans known to man swoops and clatters down the stairs, and the cat takes off.

I struggle to my feet to watch the commotion. Maybe some of these folks will head for the diner and leave Annie a big tip—

Heaven, help me—there are journalists in that group! Press passes big as day displayed on their chests. One of 'em turns his camera toward me, and I skedaddle before it clicks. If he gets a picture at all, it'll be a blur of floppy hat, orange t-shirt, and purple polyester pants.

Even that's too much.

2

"Annie Crawley's husband, Kyle, is stuck in Waco." In the bedroom of her downtown apartment, Emily Taylor propped a cordless phone on her shoulder and reworked her hair into its clip. The sun had given her dark hair chestnut highlights and the effect made her smile. Couldn't buy *that* in a bottle. "Someone stole his truck along with a cashier's check for their entire savings."

"Where do you find these people?" Connor Matthews's brusque voice fit a rotund lawyer in a vested suit, like the one he always wore to the office. But he didn't intimidate Emily. A friend of her parents, he'd been part of her life since childhood. Now she considered him the best financial adviser, confidante, and go-to guy whenever she needed something done.

"Millie tells me. You know how she is."

"I don't know a thing about her. I've seen her around town a time or two, but haven't met her yet. When are you going to arrange that?"

"Oh...someday. Anyway, can you get Kyle here? Maybe give him a few extra bucks?"

"How much?"

She nabbed a quickly calculated figure from her mind and gave it to him. "But please handle it yourself. No secretaries."

"I always protect your anonymity, Emily, although it would be easier if you trusted Kellie. She'd

keep the time of day secret if I asked her to." He emitted a light snort. "But I know how you feel. I'll manage this myself."

"Thanks. I really appreciate your humoring me about this." Emily smiled at an image of Connor's chubby assistant scrambling up the courthouse steeple and draping a sheet over the clock.

She walked barefoot on the carpet through the living room to the kitchen and pulled a water bottle from the fridge. "How is my charities account doing? I haven't been using too much of it, have I?"

"Unlike your personal account—which desperately needs a cash infusion—it's still flush with your inheritance from your parents' estate. You didn't use it too much in Houston."

"I didn't need it then. As long as I could organize a fundraiser, I could raise enough money for just about any cause."

"It's a shame you can't do that now."

"I wouldn't dare. If anything about me leaks back—"

"I know, I know. This is all about Wade Coulter and what he did to you in Houston." His tone changed, became gentler. "You'll have to forgive him, you know."

"Forgive him? He ruined me. Ruined my business, my reputation." Her anger was tempered by fear of the man. The look he'd given her as she'd testified against him—a look of savage hatred—haunted her to this day. If he discovered where she was, would he come after her?

"I understand your feelings. After that fiasco, it's a wonder you're still charitable at all."

The thought of stopping what she so enjoyed

doing weighed heavily on her mind. She couldn't possibly. "In spite of what he did, I can't stop caring, can't stop wanting to give to people and help them." Emily's heart clutched as a wistful feeling washed over her. "And it's not like it's all out of good intentions. I get something out of it, too. This...connection, I guess, that I feel with my parents is important to me."

"They were the most generous people I knew."

"Yeah, they were." She sighed.

The car accident occurred over six years ago, but the pain of losing them hadn't diminished. Doing what she could to live by their example seemed even more vital now that she'd returned to her hometown. She couldn't abandon their legacy. "I want to follow in their footsteps, but I must remain anonymous. Nothing about me can get back to Houston. You wouldn't believe what a close call Millie had with a journalist at the courthouse today. Someday, she's going to wind up right on the front page of the *Dogwood Daily*."

"I don't understand what you need her for." Connor's chair squeaked. He mumbled something to someone in his office and then returned to Emily. "I'm sure you get solicitations in the mail, just like the rest of us. Pick a cause and go for it."

"Oh, but it's so impersonal. Besides, once you start that, you can never escape. It's like you're on a secret list of contributors that's passed around to everyone who needs money. And *everyone* needs money. My problem is I can't say no." Her blood pressure spiked at the thought of the stacks of letters and phone messages on her desk in Houston from organizations wanting her funds. Save the whales, support wind energy, rebuild the town hall, contribute to the firemen's retirement fund. The list grew exponentially,

and actual contributions only led to more solicitations. "Millie discovers the people who need help but don't ask. They're the ones I want to find. And no one needs to know."

"Well, no one will find out through me or my office. I'll get the Crawleys set up, anonymously as usual."

She'd always known she could count on him, but his assurance brought her a surprising sense of relief. "You're the best, Connor. Thanks."

As she disconnected, the doorbell rang downstairs, and she headed to answer. Her apartment was on the second floor of the old Woolworth's building in downtown Dogwood. The first floor served as a cat refuge, The Litter Box. As she crossed to the front door, the resident felines eyed her lazily from gray, carpeted structures intended to keep them happy and playful. She scooped up a calico to keep it from dashing outside and toed away a neon-green tennis ball from the glass paneled door. Pulling aside the blue full-length drapes she'd had made for privacy, she peeked out.

Dr. Scott Barlow stood on the other side of the glass, juggling a thirty-pound bag of kitty litter and another of dry cat food. His smile had made her heart mushy since they were kids. Funny how the tables had turned. Back then, he'd been too timid to ask her out. Now, she was the one who shied from his invitations.

With a smile, she unlocked the door and pulled it open. "What's this?"

"A little present from Barlow Animal Clinic. Where do you want them?"

"You are too sweet for words, you know that? Bring them back here." She led the way to the storeroom, snaking around cat toys, oversized litter

boxes, and half-empty food bowls.

Scott sidestepped a gray tom bolting across his path. "I noticed the building next door has a fresh coat of graffiti. It's a wonder they haven't hit your place." His voice developed a serious tone. "I worry about you here. When are you going to move?"

"Soon, I hope." She'd be able to shop for a new place when the second installment came from the sale of Deck the Walls, her interior decorating and design firm in Houston. Between the semiannual purchase installments and the royalties from her wallpaper designs, she had more than she needed in her personal account to pay the mortgage on this building without delving into her charities fund, but she'd have to delay buying a house.

One of the downsides of agreeing to heed the words of a financial advisor was the promise to wait for his approval to make large expenditures. And judging by the "cash infusion" comment Connor had made earlier, he wouldn't be granting his approval until the next installment.

"But it's safe here. I've never had reason to be afraid." She pulled open the storeroom door and pointed to the corner. "You can put the bags here."

But Scott didn't follow her. He dropped the bags in front of an old glass display counter several feet away and stooped his lean frame to peek into a tan pet carrier.

She backtracked to join him.

On the countertop, a yellow tabby cowered in the corner of the molded plastic carrier. Emily lowered her head next to Scott's and glanced in. "This is Daisy. Millie thought you'd like her."

"She does know how to pick her cats."

The musky fragrance of Scott's cologne zinged Emily's senses into full-alert mode, and she took a step back.

"So, when do I get to meet Millie?" He straightened and shifted his hazel eyes to her. "Is she here?"

"She is, but she's resting. The heat really takes it out of her." Emily rubbed her hands together. "Shall we get started? We only have four this time. Two were adopted last week."

"I need to put these up first." Scott hoisted the bags and carried them to the storeroom. "Just shots and exams today?"

"Yes, except for Daisy."

He emerged from the storeroom. "I'll take her back to the clinic with me. Let me get my bag."

Two hours later, after the resident cats had endured a needle and a quick exam, Emily rested a hand on Daisy's carrier. "You be a good girl. Don't go giving the doctor trouble."

"Oh, she won't. By the time I'm done with her, she'll sleep a good twenty-four hours." His strong, surgeon-soft hand covered hers, warming it like a kiss from the sun. "The church is hosting a concert tonight. Would you like to come with me?"

She slid her hand from his and looked away. Why hadn't he asked her out years ago? Her life might've taken a different turn if he'd been as persistent about dating her when they were younger. "Thanks, no. I have...things to do."

With the tip of his finger, he turned her chin to face him. "Em, what happened in Houston? When are you going to tell me about it?"

"You don't want to know." She closed her eyes to

shut out the compassion his expression offered. "Please don't ask me again."

After a long moment, he agreed, with sad resignation in his voice. He rubbed her shoulder. "I guess I'd better get back to the clinic."

She nodded. Her heart grew heavier with every step he took toward the door. But she was right to keep their relationship on the level of friends. After everything that happened in Houston, dating him now was out of the question.

With the cats on the first floor fed, watered, and pampered for the night, Emily settled in front of the TV in her apartment with a lonely supper of leftover tuna casserole and a diet soda. Lonely wasn't a good word choice. Being alone wasn't the same as being lonely, and being alone had its benefits. She could eat what she wanted, when she wanted, and didn't have as many dishes to wash. She could watch old movies, one of which flickered on the screen now. She could...

She could stop trying to convince herself that being alone was fine. It wasn't. It was just for the best. Still, in the year she'd been back in Dogwood, she'd learned to appreciate her freedom.

The silence had oozed into her awareness only because Scott had made his house call earlier. Having him at the refuge had been fun, and she'd enjoyed herself. Enjoyed laughing with him. But that didn't mean she was ready to give up her new lifestyle. She wasn't lonely.

To prove it to herself she cranked up the volume on the movie, and then flipped through the mail she'd

left on the table earlier. Another money request from a green organization. Would those people *ever* give up? The bulk of her mail was the same. Send money for this, donate to that. She dropped the unopened solicitations on the floor to toss in the trash later.

The next envelope held a Houston return address. Another installment check for Deck the Walls... already?

Emily jumped from the sofa to double check her calendar. The payment wasn't due until the following month, but who cared? Now she could start house hunting!

She grabbed the phone. She couldn't wait to tell Connor about the check.

3

"Come here, baby. Come on." I don't know why it is my voice goes up an octave whenever I'm calling a critter. Rarely works. No amount of high-pitched *here, kitty, kitty* will get a feral cat to come.

But I keep trying. Have to. Just because a new house is in the plans, doesn't mean The Litter Box will be closed. As long as there's a stray cat to find, I'm gonna find it—along with anything else of interest.

This week's been slower than winter molasses, and I haven't found another cat downtown since Daisy. That can only mean the downtown area is stray-free, thank you very much, and it's time to move on. Besides, I haven't worked the bus station in a month. With all the fast-food dives around here, it's a prime location.

I caught sight of this stray a few moments ago, and now I'm on my knees with my backside in the air and my face poked under the driver's door of a rusty convertible, trying to coax the long-haired gray cat closer. Can't use my net. She'd dash off like a pit bull's on her tail, and I'd never catch up with her.

She stares at me, smoky blue eyes wide and wary, and stays scrunched up against the right back tire. Car engines rumble in the lot, their exhaust mixing with the fumes from the bus idling nearby. I choke on a cough.

"Come on, kitty. I won't hurt you."

Feminine laughter pierces the air, accompanied by a deeper chuckle, and I see two pairs of legs pass by the other side of the car. Squeezing tighter against the tire, Kitty twitches her ears to the voices behind her. But she keeps her focus on me.

"Hey, lady, need some help?" A kid with four studs in each ear, a torn t-shirt, and a sweet smile squats down near me.

I smile at him. "No, thanks. I can handle it."

"Suit yourself." He rises and moves on.

I look under the car. The cat's gone. Oh, well. There's bound to be another around somewhere.

Using the car door for support, I hoist myself up, grab my net, and hobble past a small group of people to a bench. My feet always hurt, so it's mighty nice to have so many benches around. This one is covered with advertisements: a real estate office, Down Home Diner, Carter's Floral Emporium. I sit down and lean back next to Parker Milligan's face grinning from his insurance company ad. Such a nice man. Kind eyes.

Another bus pulls up, and its brakes huff a dying breath as it stops. The doors whisk open, allowing four people to file out.

"Kyle!"

Racing past me, Annie launches herself into the arms of a young man with dark eyes and a black t-shirt stretched over bulging muscles. He picks her up and swirls her around. The long, loving kiss they share warms my heart. So nice to see folks in love.

Just behind them, a blonde woman crumbles, weeping into the arms of another who'd just stepped from the bus. "Oh, Mom, he's worse."

"What does the doctor say?"

"They can't do any more for him here." Her sobs

draw everyone's attention.

Mom wraps both arms around her daughter, shielding her from the curious, and starts the awkward walk to the parking lot.

Dear Father in Heaven, they look so shattered. As they pass me, I hear the mother shushing and cooing. "Let me drive. You're in no state. What room...?" Her voice fades as they drift away from me.

"Hey, Millie!" Annie drags my attention from the two. "This is Kyle. He's here. Isn't it wonderful?"

I push to my feet and give them my best smile, but they don't see it. They see only each other. "Well, I'm glad you could make it happen."

Annie looks at me brows raised. "I didn't do it. I don't know how it happened. Two days after I talked to you, he calls and says he got a bus ticket in the mail. A bus ticket and a *check*."

"Isn't that nice."

Kyle flashes his crooked-toothed grin. "The check is for more than what was stolen from me."

"Much more," Annie says. "Enough that we can open our restaurant."

"A&K's Barbecue." He puffs out his impressive chest like a cartoon rooster.

"And you come by whenever you want, Millie." Annie lays a hand on my arm.

I pat her fingers. "I'll be your first customer."

Smiling and beaming love at each other, the two walk to the parking lot, their arms wrapped around each other so tight dust mites wouldn't fit between them.

I sigh and watch them ride cloud nine to the parking lot. Kyle opens the door to their old red pickup, and Annie leaves his grasp long enough to

jump in. When he plops down in the driver's seat, she leans over for another kiss.

I grab my net and hook the tote bag on my shoulder. Time to stop ogling the lovebirds and go for a walk.

From the bus station to the hospital is a long five blocks—a miserable walk anytime, but especially in the mid-morning heat. My net is too short to use as a staff, so the best I can do is just limp along.

The hospital entrance doors slide open. Frigid air from inside blasts out, evaporates the sweat on my face, and feels heaven-sent.

People stare as I cross the polished gray floor to the elevator bank, same as they stared while I walked over here. I greet them head-on. I know I'm a sight. Who wouldn't stare at an old woman in a bright green t-shirt and baggy plaid pants? Can't blame them for that.

The elevator dings and the glossy doors split. I walk in and lean against the wall across from a couple who look to be in their late thirties.

"Down?" The man asks.

I nod.

He looks gray and crumpled, crinkled all over like he'd slept in his clothes. The woman with him looks worse. The dark rings under her eyes would spook a goblin.

I take a closer look at her. She's the crying lady from the bus stop. Just who I was looking for. God saved me from a room-to-room search.

With another ding, the doors slide open again, and

I follow the two out, juggling my net while I fish change from my pocket. I may not have caught a cat at the bus station, but I did come up with a few quarters.

Although yummy scents tempt me to turn left to the cafeteria, I go right, following a few steps behind the couple. Just ahead is a wall of vending machines. Their backlit blues, reds, and greens shimmer like semi-precious stones. I'm parched, so the only one that interests me is the one with the water. Give me good ol' water anytime.

"Mama wants cheese crackers." The woman stops at the snack machine next to me. She frowns and whispers to her husband. "I don't care what we have to do. If they find out he can be helped in Dallas, we're going to Dallas."

"I'm not arguing with you." His voice is low, weary. He drops some change into the chip machine and makes a selection. "But I have to figure out..."

I look from the vending machine to the three quarters in my hand and back again. A bottle of water is a buck and a half? Highway robbery! Where'd it come from? The fountain of youth?

"There must be a way. He needs to go, and I need to be with him. I'll drive to Dallas and live in the car if I have to."

"No, I can't let you do that." His change clinks in the slot, and the machine spits out another selection. "Maybe I could take out a second mortgage on the house."

With another quarter, I could buy a soda. Why is *water* more expensive than sodas? Doesn't matter. I don't have another quarter.

"A little short?"

I drag my gaze from the unattainable blue bottles.