**Chapter XX**

Kate stretched her arms over her head, closing her eyes happily. Sweat matted the back of her hair and her T-shirt. There was some shade provided by the tall lime trees and weeping beeches around her. Kate had reached the half-way point in her run, a wide bridle path at the south end of the large, beautifully green Hyde Park, and was rewarding herself with leisurely break in one of her favorite places. It was a haven for her fellow joggers, as was the riders who trotted horses down the dirt path. The steeds contributed a musty scent to the heavy spring fragrance of daffodils and bluebells that carpeted the ground. Kate started swinging her arms lightly from side to side. Her muscles sighed as they slowly relaxed out of their stiff bunches.

She watched an older woman pushing a stroller. Kate’s face broke into a grin when she saw two Pekinese sitting lazily inside like canine royalty. Their tongues lolled in delight as they passed by, and Kate laughed.

“And *that* is exactly why we are infinitely superior to those pompous pooches, Rosalind,” came a disdainful voice somewhere behind her. “They have four, perfectly healthy legs and refuse to use them. Lazy, spoiled creatures.”

*That’s an odd thing to say*, Kate thought, casting a glance around. The joggers were far ahead of her, and there was no one coming up behind or beside her. Birds trilled overhead, the only other sound nearby. Shrugging to herself, Kate widened her stance and leaned in the direction of the weeping beech to touch her toes.

Her eyes widened. Three cats were basking in a spot of sun that streamed through the thick leaves.

“Then humans have the nerve to say *we* loaf around all day,” a small calico murmured, ears twitching. “What’s wrong with taking a kip here or there? How else would our fur keep that purrrfect sheen? How, Fifi?”

“Exactly my point.” A black and white cat turned and began licking her back with her long, pink tongue.

Kate gawked at the pair. Were the cats *talking*? No, that was absurd. Kate turned her head to the side. Far behind her, a poodle strutted primly on its leash as his young owner bopped his head to music from his headphones. Kate’s head moved to the other side. The path was empty.

Kate heard a delicate sneeze from the beech. She slowly returned her attention to the cats. A black female with white stockings shook her head and resumed her preening. The last of the trio, a ginger tabby, reached out his paws with a long yawn. He seemed wholly uninterested in the female cats’ conversation. He flipped over, belly exposed, and closed his eyes.

Kate straightened, the flummoxed look never leaving her face. Three cats. Three cats unmistakably fitting Millie’s description of her long-lost feline companions. Including their names, Kate suddenly remembered. Rosalind, Fifi, and Prince Albert. If she had actually understood them, which Kate continued to dispute in her head, then she might have really found Rosalind and Fifi.

Rosalind was now eying the ginger tabby, whose chest rose and fell blissfully. She gave the calico a mischievous look. Rosalind flattened herself against the ground. With an exaggerated leap, she buffeted the sleeping cat’s nose. With a yowl, the tabby fritzed out of his slumber, limbs shooting out as he leapt on all fours. The tabby looked around wildly.

“What? Who’s that? *Rosalind!*”

Rosalind made a show of looking for the perpetrator. “What, Albert? What happened?”

The ginger tabby looked affronted. “Did you see her attack me?” he asked the calico sulkily. “You saw her, didn’t you, Fifi?”

Fifi gave Albert a non-committal look, then scratched her ear with a claw. “How would I know? I was looking over there.” She upturned her head, green eyes meeting Kate’s. “At that girl there. She’s been watching us. It’s rude, really, staring like that.”

“Stare back,” Rosalind suggested.

“You’re Millie’s cats,” Kate said, flabbergasted. “And you’re talking. You’re really… talking.”

Fifi, though, continued to itch her ear as though Kate hadn’t spoken. “It’s beneath my dignity to respond to her. The girl’s just doing what all humans do. You know, how they pretend to meow and coo and say silly things like, ‘Awww, you’re so cute!’ like they can understand us.”

“But I *can* understand you,” Kate found herself responding. A bolt of fear and excitement shot through her. She could really hear them.

This time, Fifi froze mid-scratch. Barely moving her lips, Fifi mewed anxiously, “Rosalind, did she just talk to us? I mean, actually *talk* to us?”

Albert’s fur stood on end. “Oh no, oh no, oh no, she recognizes us, she knows we escaped, we’re done for, oh no, oh no…”

“Shh, Albert!” Rosalind hissed. She placed a paw back on the ground and started calmly biting at her claw. “Stop having kittens and relax,” she said out of the corner of her mouth. “It’s not like she has a box and is ready to scoop us into it. Just be quiet and act *normal*.”

“What’s normal?”

“Aloof, Alfred. Act aloof.”

“What’s aloof?”

Now Fifi gave him a small swipe with her paw. He ducked as she glowered at him. “Like you don’t care about anything, Albert. We’re cats. That’s what we *do*. What on earth did you do in your last five lives?”

“Oh,” Albert said unconvincingly. His hair was still pricked on his back. “I’ve been aloof. I’ve been very aloof. I’m aloof right now. See?”

There was a distinct, aggrieved sigh from Rosalind. “You know what? Forget aloof. Just play dead. You’re good at that.”

Fifi had sat once again and stared off into the distance. She reminded Kate of a Sphinx, poised with a timeless gaze. Looking panicked, Albert began to swat at an imaginary foe. Kate watched silently. Her initial shock was ebbing to her fascination. Unlike the other strange experiences she had had, understanding the cats’ conversation was *fun*.

After a moment, Albert stopped batting the blades of grass. “Is she going to go away, Rosalind?” he mewed tentatively.

 “I don’t know, Albert,” came the black and white cat’s vexed reply. “Why don’t you just *ask* her?”

“It’s just…” The ginger looked imploringly at Fifi. “Do you remember those pates that Millie served? The whitefish? Every day at half four on those silver platters and with a side of catnip.”

The calico snorted disdainfully. “That wasn’t worth being forced to wear those foo-foo outfits.”

Albert cringed. “They weren’t too bad,” he said with what Kate swore was a pout.

“*You* got to wear a crown,” Rosalind put in sourly. She had given up her pretense of grooming. “I had to wear a *tutu*. Embarrassing. The ducks still mock me. That’s why we left, remember?”

“Disgraceful,” Fifi agreed. Her eyes became narrow slits as she glanced up at Kate. Quickly looking down, she resumed her imperious stare. “She. Is. Still. Staring. At. Us,” Fifi muttered under breath.

“I can also still hear you,” Kate replied. To Albert, she said, “I’m sure if you went back to Millie, she would give you whitefish. She misses you a lot.”

Albert’s eyes widened. Rosalind’s ears flattened, and Fifi’s back and tail puffed out with raised fur.

“Run away!” Albert yowled. He didn’t wait for a response from the females as he sprinted out of the beech. “She’s after us! Run away!”

Rosalind’s expression soured at Albert but she needed no encouraging. She and Fifi bounded away after the tabby.

“Albert, I’m going to turn you into dog food for this!” Kate heard Rosalind meow. Kate’s gaze trailed the cats as they zipped down the grass and darted into a line of trees. She could hardly breathe. As Kate began to trot slowly out of the park, she imagined her bewildered expression wasn’t so different from Fifi’s.

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