

A Whisker Away

I watched through my bedroom window as Dean disembarked from the limousine looking like James Bond and strutted towards Lucy's house in a way I never could have. She opened the door to reveal a princess in a black dress with hair that curled all the way to her waist. Thankfully, neither of them noticed me. That was how I preferred it.

"Are you ok poppet?"

Mum stepped into the room, her eyes following my gaze outside the window.

"You sure you don't want to go to Prom too?" she asked as Lucy's parents started taking photos.

"I'm sure. And stop calling me poppet. I'm eighteen years old!"

She gave one of her usual pity looks before retreating back into the hallway, leaving the door ajar. Seconds later, the new cat, Whisker slinked in and leaped onto the bed next to me. His gingery white fur became a golden coat in the sunlight as he turned his brilliant green eyes in my direction.

"Hey kid. What are we looking at?"

I merely shrugged.

"I see." His eyes had landed on Lucy. "Didn't fancy going?"

"No. I don't like parties."

"Me neither" he yawned as he stretched out his legs, mouth open wide.

"Do cats even go to parties?"

"Course not. Nothing appealing about being rammed close to a load of filthy bodies like some common canine. We're classier than that."

My focus wandered back to Lucy who was stepping into the vehicle. I spotted Dean staring up at me smiling. It wasn't a nice smile.

"So what's the story with them?"

I shifted my attention back to Whisker who now lay on his back, underbelly exposed and looking as comfortable as anyone I'd ever seen. And then, for some reason, I told him. I explained how I'd once asked Lucy out. About how she and all the others had laughed and made a mockery of me ever since. As if I needed to be mocked even more than I already was.

Whisker's ears pricked up, his eyes fixed on mine. "I'm sorry kid. Humans can be cruel. They'll get their claws into you for no reason sometimes."

"But they don't have claws" I responded with surprise.

Whisker cocked his head slightly. "Well, erm, never mind that. So what do you do for fun around here?"

I stood and made for my bedside table where my soldier figurine collection stood to attention. With annoyance, I readjusted them to each face in the correct direction. *Mum must've moved them again when she was putting socks away.*

"I like to play with my soldiers. I sometimes imagine grand battles and conquests all from this room. I like dinosaurs, myths and anything to do with ghosts. And sometimes, when I've lots of time to myself, I reimagine what the chessboard pieces could be."

"That certainly is a, ah, niche hobby you have."

"Yeah. The chess piece game always has endless possibilities. Just pick a theme and you have hours of entertainment. Oh, and I also used to have a pet rabbit that I played with."

"Right. But you finally came to your senses and decided to get a feline upgrade?" Whisker's tail curled to the side as he continued to slouch on the bed

"Actually the rabbit died."

"Oh. Well, either way, I'm sure it all worked out for the best as you got me in the end." Whisker paused, then lifted his head slowly. "I'm sorry, that was terrible of me. But now and then a cat needs to get their claws out."

"I don't think you're terrible. And you don't have your claws out?"

Whisker sighed. "Sarcasm really is lost on you isn't it kid?"

I hung my head. "Yeah, I've never really understood it."

I heard the limo engine start up, just as the sound of *Stand By Me* drifted up from downstairs.

"Ah, what about music? Another hobby of yours?" asked Whisker.

I shook my head. "I don't really like music. Mum likes this song though."

"Well, you really are a one of a kind kid."

I heard the tyres screech as Lucy and Dean pulled away. My throat had become a little dry and my airway tightened a notch.

"Whisker. Can I stroke you?"

His ears extended outwards. "Stroking? All the profound wisdom I could offer you, and yet, you feel my services are best placed in the field of sitting and being stroked? What an insult, how deeply tragic, I..."

He tailed off as I put him on my lap and began to stroke.

"Well, yes ok. I suppose I could get used to...Meow!"

I turned my back to the window, my attention focussed solely on Whisker as my hands moved across his fur, a feeling of warmth spreading inside me.

I hustled into my bedroom and slung my bag off my back. Carefully, I oriented my figurines to the correct positions with a small chuckle. *Whisker and his leaping around!*

I was still grinning when he entered the room and sprung himself onto the bed.

“Good day at work kid?”

“Fairly.”

“Did you see Clara on the bus again?”

“Not today. I think she works late on Tuesdays.” I stared out the window at the house opposite. Lucy’s old house that Clara and her friend now lived in.

Whisker’s tail rubbed me as he clambered onto the window sill for an improved view. “You thought anymore about talking to her? And I mean properly talking to her.”

My shoulders sagged. “I have. But, I haven’t found the right words yet.”

“What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue?” Whisker gave me a sheepish look.

“What?”

“Oh never mind. Hey, what do you reckon her cat’s name is? I still haven’t met her.”

“There’s thousands of names, how should I be able to guess?”

“Hmm. Well, you could start by ruling some out. Do you reckon it’d be something as original as *Whisker*? Or perhaps something more mainstream?”

I thought on that for a moment. “Are you being sarcastic?”

Whisker chortled. “Well done kid, you’re finally cottoning on. It’s only taken you eleven years!”

I snickered along with him before another thought crossed my mind. “Whisker, do you not like your name?”

He stared at me blankly for several seconds. “I’m very grateful for it. Especially after all the effort you put into thinking it up.”

“I’m being serious.”

He dropped back down to the bed. “Not at first, but it’s grown on me. I’m a creature of habit so there’s no going back now I’m accustomed to it. Besides, it could be a lot worse. There’s new cat down the street called Mr. Tubbington can you believe? *Mr. Tubbington!* Not even a given name! As if the family name Tubbington has been passed down generations of feline aristocracy!”

I laughed, almost hysterically. Until my eyes found the photo of mum on the wall.

“You still miss her, don’t you kid?”

I nodded, averting my gaze.

“She’d be proud of you. You’ve come a long way kid. I think you would have surpassed her expectations.”

“Really? I can’t even ask someone if they want to hang out with me!”

“But you’re getting there. Think of all the other things you’ve accomplished. A stable job. You look after the house. You cook for yourself and feed me. I mean, could you be a little more generous with *my* portion sizes; sure, but one step at a time eh?”

Silence ensued and my mind shifted from one thought to another, mum’s image coming into focus again.

“Hey kid, why don’t we do that chess game you like?”

I glanced in his direction where he’d raised his head to one side in that adorable way he sometimes did. “Why don’t you do it this time Whisker?”

“Me? What have I done to deserve this highest of honours?”

“Just get on with it” I chuckled.

“Right. I’ll do an animal version. A *jungle* animal version” he finished with enthusiasm.

“I’m listening.”

“Naturally, the lion becomes the King and the lioness the Queen.”

“Makes sense” I agreed.

“And then for the Bishop...it needs to be someone authoritative. I’ll go with a jaguar!”

“Why?” I questioned.

“Strongest bite force relative to their size kid. Never mess with a jaguar.”

“And what about the knight then?”

“A leopard of course. Moves like nothing else on earth.”

“A leopard? If you’re doing animals surely you would just make it a horse?”

“You show me a horse that can climb up a tree and I’ll give you my entire month’s allowance.”

“You’re a cat, you don’t have a monthly...never mind. What about the Rook?”

“That would be a cheetah. Fastest player on the board when unobstructed.”

“Whisker, you’ve just done all the pieces as big cats! It’s supposed to be all jungle animals.”

“Well, those are the best ones I could think of. But if you’re so concerned about diversity, I’ll turn the pawns into wild dogs.”

“Unbelievable” I mouthed, but allowed a thin smile to escape my lips.

The light had come on in Clara’s house and I peered over, wondering how her day had been.

“Do you think she’ll take me seriously?” I asked without looking at Whisker, my thoughts flashing back to Lucy and her friends ridiculing me.

“You really like her don’t you kid? Is she the one you want to have kittens with?”

“It’s not even like that. I just want to at least be friends. You know, spend some time with her.”

I caught a glimpse of Whisker nodding his head. “Do you think I’ll ever be brave enough? To ask her? To ask anyone?”

Whisker curled himself onto my lap and purred. “You’re not far away kid. Not far away at all. But all in good time. When you’re ready.”

I let *Stand By Me* play from my phone as I stroked Whisker. My eyes remained outside my window, fixated on Clara’s home under the overcast sky. A funny feeling tugged within my chest.

*

“Whisker, what have you done?”

I stared at the mess that littered the first floor landing; books, letters, greetings cards. All of the things mum had stuffed into the cupboard before...

Whisker bounded up the stairs. “Hey kid. Sorry, had a hunch there might be some treats hiding in there. Obviously, I was wrong but I plan to make it up to you in strokes.”

“But I’m the one that strokes you!”

“You’re getting way too smart for me kid. My days may be numbered after all.”

I ignored him, picking up one of the letters which had been opened but still lay within the envelope. I unfolded it, realizing it was a correspondence between mum and one of her old friends.

Several strides later, I was on my bed, devouring its contents as my hands shook.

“What does it say kid?”

“She never really believed in me. Mum. She wanted me to move in with her friend if she eventually passed. She didn’t think I could cope.”

Whisker tilted his head up to me. “But you didn’t move in with her friend. You stayed here. You made it work. You made this your home all by yourself.”

“I KNOW THAT. BUT *SHE* DOESN’T!”

Tears streamed down my face. She’d never know. She’d never see what I’d done. *Who I’d become.*

Whisker brushed past my legs, his tail lingering as he circled the same spot on the floor. “Let it out kid. It’s ok.”

I cried for at least ten minutes. When I stopped, I felt a little better.

Whisker made his customary ascent onto the bed. “Had to wait for the water works to end. You know how I feel about water.”

I brushed the last few tears away. “I need to go and speak to Clara. Today!” I added, feeling a level of resolve in my voice that wasn’t normally present.

“Well ok kid, if you say so. But remember how you made that oath to yourself that you were gonna do it on your thirtieth birthday? And remember how that was three weeks ago now? Sure you don’t just want to stroke me instead?”

I stood up, ignoring his comments. With a jolt of energy, I burst from the room and thundered down the narrow, rickety steps that barely seemed able to take my weight anymore.

As I pulled open the front door, I could have sworn I heard Whisker’s voice shouting “Good luck kid!” from above.

I emerged from the house into the afternoon drizzle. Heart pounding, I edged closer to Clara’s house.

Memories of Lucy and her friends plagued my thoughts as I drew nearer. My heart quickened its beat as my throat dried. Turning around, I caught a glimpse of Whisker in the upstairs window, the letter I’d just read clamped tightly in his mouth.

I swivelled around. A few seconds later, I knocked on her door.

She looked surprised to see me. “Hello Zane.”

“Hi Clara” I managed to stammer. “Not often I hear people say my name these days. Not human people at least.”

She giggled at that. *Actually giggled!*

I cleared my throat. “Clara, I was wondering if you might like to hang out some time?”

She looked at me, cheeks going slightly red. Then they widened into a smile. “Yes, I’d like that. How about today?”

Today? “Sure. Give me a few minutes to go and grab my keys and I’ll meet you back out here?”

She agreed and I raced back into my house and went straight for my bedroom. I could barely contain the excitement within me. I’d done it! *Finally done it!* I had to tell Whisker.

I displaced a couple of my figurines in my haste as I entered the room but didn’t stop to realign them or pick up the one that fell.

“Whisker. I asked her. She said yes!”

Whisker lay on my bed, but there was no reaction from the ginger tabby cat.

“Did you not hear me?”

He remained indifferent, as if he wasn’t hearing a word I said.

“Hey, is this because I didn’t stroke you earlier you stubborn little...”

Exasperated, I put him on my lap and stroked him. He purred, allowing me to scratch him behind his ears, seemingly enjoying the sensation. But he didn’t talk.

I didn’t have time for his games so I bolted back downstairs, grabbed an umbrella and locked the door behind me. I turned in the middle of the road to see him prowling along the window sill. The rain became heavier, lashing at the window and I watched as Whisker disappeared from view.

In that moment, it hit me. My heart broke as I realized the two of us would never talk again. A crushing pain emerged somewhere deep inside of me. *My oldest friend.*

But then, I heard footsteps behind me and Clara's voice.

I withdrew my gaze from my bedroom window and turned, ready to face whatever came next.

You've got this kid.