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The Quiet Kittens

The light of the full moon spilled into the alley like cold milk. Used to be something to look forward to. Since the killings, things had gotten sour. The alleyways hissed with animosity. Battles over territory. Squabbles over food. A dirty look. Everyone was dancing on the edge of a knife.

Stub braced himself on top of the air conditioning unit. Somewhere out there, it was about to happen again. Not a damn thing he could do about it. Watched the air blow up in between the fur of his bum paw. The soothing murmur of its mechanical hum like his mother's purr. Reminded him of when he was a kitten. How simple things were then. Took a breath and pretended everything was going to be okay. Knew it wasn't.

A mother's mournful cry crashed through the alleyways, silencing everything in its wake. Made Stub's black matted hair stand on end. His salt and pepper moustache stiffened. Could feel his heart pounding in his whiskers. Made his head feel iced with fear. Murder.

Hoped it wasn't Abby. Something in his gut said otherwise. A sinking feeling that made him want to puke. That cry was too familiar. Damnit. She was a good tabby, always kept her fur clean. Just had her first litter of kittens. Should have been Stubs, but they weren't. Five innocent darlings that didn't deserve this shit. Knew he needed to hurry. Knew it was already too late.

Stub hobbled his way across the rooftops towards the apartment complex she lived behind. Wasn't far, few blocks. Still, his bum leg burned from the exertion. Hopped down to cross the street. Same street where he lost his tail to that large honking beast with glowing eyes.

He was young then, too naive to look both ways. Sprinted across. Pain in the frayed nub of his tail, some cruel trick of memory. Missed how the other half helped him balance. How it had that nice poof the ladies seemed to like, but none of that mattered anymore. Mangled leg. Mutilated tail. Best not to think about it. Just another broken piece of him he couldn't fix.

Could already see strays scattering from the scene. Bunch of scaredy-cats who only look out for themselves. Typical. Thought about yelling out to see if anyone would be of any help. Knew better. Knew they didn't give a damn. If the killer was running amongst them, there was no way of knowing. Probably long gone by now.

Leg was throbbing by the time he got up on the roof. Crippled from that damned Doberman last year. Mangy mutt had another cat treed. Stub was the diversion. In this city, you pay the price for trying to do the right thing. No good deed goes unbitten.

Turned the corner and bumped into a familiar face. Wide as hell and rust orange.

Chunk. The saint that lived out back behind the McDonalds. Had a cozy little spot behind the dumpster. Steady diet of expired quarter pounders and fries. Wasn't the most reliable partner, spent most of his time napping off the calories. Couldn't count on him to do any climbing that's for sure. Always complaining about his paunch dragging on the ground, rubbing raw. One thing that was for certain is that he cared. He tried to make things better and look out for his fellow feline. A tragically rare trait these days. Had a few run ins with coons where he really helped. Wasn't one of those pussycats that would bail on you when things got tough. Hardened by the streets, Chunk wasn't afraid to throw his weight around.

Butted heads like brothers. He smelled like grease and apple pie.

"You heard it too?" said Chunk, already breathing heavy.

“Pretty sure it’s Abby.” Stub leaned up against the corner and took the weight off his leg. Tried to shake out the searing electric burn that pulsed beneath his fur. For a moment, was thankful that the pain took his mind off things.

“We need to keep moving. For her sake. For the kittens.” said Chunk as he leaned into Stub. Stub leaned back, using Chunk’s sturdy form for support as he limped along towards Abby’s place.

Pulled Stub to that black spot in his memory. To what had happened last month. The month before. To the reoccurring nightmare. The *thing* he tried to forget. Shoved in a cardboard box and hidden inside where he hoped to never see it again. The inconsolable void of murder’s shadow. Exhausting every possible lead and finding nothing but dead ends, month after pointless month, wore his soul thin. Clinging to the edge of a feeble hope that the killer would somehow slip up and give himself away. Nothing but a pipe dream. Cursed to be the ones to have to pick up all the pieces. Bit by horrible bit. The weight that’s carried by those that give a damn.

“Can’t stop thinking about it. Why kill something you don’t plan to eat. Hell. It don’t make any sense,” Chunk swatted at a piece of dirty tin-foil.

“None of it makes a damn bit of sense. Mind if I snag this? I am going to need to make a quick stop on the way,” Stub hovered over the foil like it was dinner.

“Let me guess...you need to pick up some Nip. Same shit different day,” Chunk shrugged Stub off of him, forcing him to support himself.

Stub crumpled up the tinfoil into a little ball and shoved it his cheek for safe keeping.

“Helps me focus. You know that,” said Stub.

“Focus my ass. I think you mean escape. You might as well be running like the rest of the pussycats,” said Chunk.

“If I’m busy bawling my eyes out how the hell am I gonna work the crime scene? Might miss something,” said Stub.

“Might miss something cause you’re high, ever think of that? Wonder how much you already missed,” said Chunk.

“Oh so it’s my fault we haven’t solved this yet? Is that it? What a bunch of dogshit,” said Stub as he started walking away.

“Ever think that I don’t wanna watch you go down that road? That I don’t wanna watch the Nip hollow you out like an empty trash can? That I don’t wanna lose you too?” said Chunk as he turned and faced Stub, a quiver in his whiskers.

“Thanks for the lecture. Really helps. Maybe if you laid off the burgers you would’ve caught the killer already,” said Stub.

“Whatever. You’re a real selfish tom sometimes ya know that?” said Chunk.

“Yeah. That’s me. Out here riskin’ my neck because I am selfish. Just go take care of Abby and I’ll catch up with you in a few,” said Stub.

“Whatever,” said Chunk as he turned to make his way towards Abbys.

Hated to part on such a sour note, but that’s just how things were these days. Everyone riding on the edge of their last nerve.

Stub came to a stop just outside of an abandoned factory. Adorned with broken glass, rotting wood, and nails he could catch his tail on. A terminal streetlight, barely flickering with life. Got shut down for rats a few years back. Stub meowed. Something low-key so Jitters knew it wasn’t some snitch. He was always paranoid snitches were out to get him and steal his stash.

Two glowing green eyes sprang out from the shadows deep within the building with a hiss. Skeptical head tilt. Bounced around, then dipped back into the shadows only to peek out

moments later. Another hiss. Could barely hear it. Stub replied. Kept it super chill. Confirmation purr. Eyes jumped close emerging from the black into the moonlight. Glassy. Dilated. No question whether or not he was high, but for how many days? Mangy and thin, a brown and black mix of who knows what. Fleas galore.

“Get away snitch! I’ll fuckin’ bite!” Jitters tilted his head and stared off at something unseen.

“Jitters, it’s me Stub. I’ve been coming here for months now,” Stub showed his half-tail hoping to jog his memory. Reminded himself to never end up like this. After the nightmare of these murders was over, he’d have to quit – cold turkey.

“Can never be too sure. Snitches everywhere. Tryin’ to rat me out and steal my stash!” Jitters turned side facing and hissed. Arched his back, making himself as big as possible, bared his teeth and swatted at Stub.

“Can you not?” Stub leaned away and prepped his paw at his side. He’d do it if he had to.

Stub spat the tinfoil onto the ground. Jitters cackled with glee and swatted it around in front of him. The little imperfections glistened in the light. Something about it even tempted Stub to join the chase, but he kept his composure. Jitters slapped it out on to the empty street, awkwardly hopping in pursuit.

“You know why I am here, Jitters. No games,” said Stub.

“After the killer, aren’t you? I heard it was bats. Bats coming down and snatching them up! Bats everywhere!” Jitters stared off into the sky. Didn’t justify that with a response.

“Come on, I don’t have time for this shit tonight. I brought you that shiny for trade now let’s have it,” Stub gave him a stern look.

“Is this what you want? Some of the good stuff?” Jitters whipped out a baggy of Nip from the darkness of the building. Smelled like delicious green. Stub felt his body pull closer; his nerve endings ached for it. His thoughts yearned for its sweet escape. Made him shaky with anticipation. Reached his paws out.

“Not so fast snitch!” Jitters pulled his head away, talking with his mouth full.

“I already paid you, damn it,” said Stub.

“One last thing.”

“Hurry the hell up!” The hair on the back of Stub started to get prickly.

“One good swat, pllllllllease.”

Stub took a deep breath. Pulled back his good arm and blasted the little piece of tinfoil into the building. Jitters dropped the Nip and pounced after it. His frantic laughter echoed off the walls like a madman’s.

Stub could hear Chunk and Abby meowing as he got close. Chunk had the impossible job of consoling the inconsolable. Stub didn’t envy Chunk. Dealing with all of that heartbreaking emotion. Somehow, Chunk could always make the darkness brighter. Also didn’t hurt that he looked like a big comfy pillow. Would never tell him that though.

Abby lived in a nook between two salmon apartment buildings stacked with human garbage. A black cat and a few other strays watched from the rooftops. Several housecats stared out of apartment windows with their crummy judgmental looks. Those useless fluffs were about as pathetic as they come. Scowling from paradise. Didn’t know a damn thing about what it was like on the streets. Shapes in the shadows moved unseen, maybe coons. Maybe something else. The coppery smell of blood weighed heavily in the air.

Stub dumped out the Nip and snorted it up before reality could set in. Always made him sneeze. *Sneeze*. Hated to waste any. Couldn't help but roll around and rub his face in it. Subtle vibrations rippled up his spine. A fluid filled chamber in his brain opened up. Euphoric ooze coated his nervous system like a warm blanket. Exhaled, and with it, all his cares, all the horrors of the world swirled into oblivion. No past. No future. Only the detached present. Smudged and surreal. His eyes – wide as the moon and black as the sky. His body – goop. A thick film coated his vision in an iridescent veil. Heard Abby crying. Another hit for good measure.

Two cats rounded the corner just as Stub had finished the last hit. He was so nipped he could barely tell it was Chunk and Abby. Faces blurred out by the high kept the pain of her expression at bay. It dulled the guilt he'd feel from Chunk's disapproving gaze. They were all just shifting colors he couldn't bring himself to understand. Stub was thankful for the high, there was only so much a cat could take. She leaned into Chunk, hard. Shaking so bad she could barely walk. Stub tried to focus on the good times. His mind drifted to a past untainted by the murders. Back when they used to hunt rats together in the alley. Back when they were together. She could pounce with the best of them. Her silky amber fur reflected the streetlights in this uncanny way. Could still see her soft blue eyes. Beautiful. Shook it off. Made him dizzy as hell. Memory and reality both sloshing around in his head.

Meowed so Chunk would know to take Abby away. Hid behind a pile of garbage. This was standard procedure. Best not to have any of those embarrassing Nip interactions. Say something he'd regret later. Probably worse. Chunk's meow let him know Abby was cleared from the scene. Stub took a deep stuttering breath.

Stub turned the corner and looked upon the abomination. A silence came over him. Murder. Could feel his heartbeat pounding at the back of his eardrums. “You knew these kittens. You knew these kittens,” a thought beckoned from the depths. He pretended not to hear.

Four frail bodies were lined up in front of Abby’s shoebox nest. Carefully posed and equidistant. Mangled puffs of fur drifting on top of maroon pools, steaming with death. Tongues ripped out. Placed pristinely in a row. This screamed personal, but what the hell could a kitten possibly do to deserve this? Not a damn thing. The recognizable parts of their faces shifted under the influence of the Nip. Helped him push away the memories of them. Teaching them to hunt because their dad was never around. Countless kisses from their gritty licks. Their names and personalities crashed against a dam inside Stub’s mind, trying to break him. To flood the city with his tears. Stay focused. Throats ripped out same as before, except somehow cleaner. Precision bite, right through their jugulars. Hoped that meant they suffered less. Killer’s getting more confident, more refined. Smell of saliva masked by something minty. But what was it? Breathed it in to his memory while it was still fresh. No claw marks on their bodies at all. To grab something without claws boggled the mind.

Eyes drifted towards shapes in the dirt. Shallow impressions of the killer’s footprints. Obscured. Hidden by what? No little divots where the claws should be, but still, cat-sized. Then Abby’s prints, could never forget hers. Chunks coming in. Deep as hell from all that weight. Five sets of kitten prints circling the nest. They didn’t know to run. Sat there and waited to get torn apart like good little kittens. Suddenly, a hopeful feeling. Chased it straight into the epiphany. Five kittens. Four bodies. Followed each set of prints to its unfortunate end. Nip helped him feel the difference of each individual step. The fifth ended with a deep impression near the back of the nest. Must have jumped into the storage pile just behind. Boxes and containers stacked up

and forgotten. Stub meowed. No response. Followed the scent closer. Tried not to get his hopes up.

Claw marks at the top of a blue bin, barely open. What horror was hidden within? Hopped up and looked inside. Had to know. Pile of fur in the darkness, wedged between stacked books. Had to be Leo. That scrappy little shit was always his favorite. Only one who would've had the courage to make a run for it. Stub meowed. No movement. Nothing. Slapped the bin. Still nothing. Reached in with his good arm and gently snagged some fur. No movement at all. Nothing. Got Leo up to his mouth and hopped down. Rolled him over to take a look.

The kitten was alive. Could see the rise and fall of his breath. Its eyes were open staring at something in a distant world. Alive but not living. Listened for a heartbeat. Steady pace. Too steady. Killed Stub's excitement. Gave it a few gentle pats, but no movement. A flash in the corner of his eye. Black fur caught in the kittens little paw. The first sign of hope they've had since the killing began. Stub snatched up the evidence for safe keeping.

Made Stub feel proud of the kitten. He gotten a piece of the killer and lived. The ol' scratch and jump. Pretty impressive. Pretty lucky.

Stub meowed for Chunk and Abby. They came running around the corner. Stub stepped back revealing the kitten, which was staring at the ground.

"My boy! My baby boy!" The kitten, still as a statue, as Abby spoke. The vacancy in his eyes. She rushed over, wrapping him up in her arms. His body, a limp noodle.

"He'll never be the same Abby," said Stub. She looked over with tears in her eyes. Shouldn't have said that.

“What he means is,” Chunk bumped into Stub, knocking him onto his back. “He’s just in a bit of shock. Should be back to normal before you know it.” He shushed Stub with his tail and shook his head.

“Mommy’s here baby. Milk? Do you want some milk? Latch baby. Latch,” The kitten stared at her exposed belly, plump with dinner. He crumpled into her and shut his eyes. Abby held him and sobbed.

There weren’t enough tears. Not for what happened tonight. Not for any of it. It was the saddest thing he ever saw. Somehow worse than the bodies. Kitten so sad he couldn’t cry. Another break in his heart that could never be fixed.

“You gotta let me do the talking,” Chunk held out his paw and helped Stub up. Eyes wet. “Still, damn fine work.”

Stub leaned up against the dumpster. Gave Chunk a hell of a grin. Pawed some leftover Nip off his whiskers with his bum leg. Nodded. Felt damn good to do something right. Something that mattered.

“You’re a real piece of work you know that?” Chunk shook his head. Only bad part about the Nip is that he couldn’t truly appreciate the look on Chunks face right now.

“There’s something else,” Stub pulled out the black fur.

“We’re gonna get this son-of-a-bitch,” Chunk hugged Stub so hard he could hear something crack in his arm. Would feel that tomorrow.

“Best you look after Abby and the boy tonight. Killer might want to come back and finish the job. I’ll go ask around about a black cat,” said Stub.

“You two assholes better not be keeping anything from me! My children are dead! If you find out who did this, I need to know.” Abby had murder in her eyes. Had every right to feel that way.

“I am sorry Abby,” said Stub. Didn’t dare look at her. Couldn’t take it.

The drizzling sound of something wet. They looked back at the kitten. He looked up at something while urinating on the ground. He was trembling. They all rushed to see what Leo was looking at. Top floor of the yellow apartment building, big window. Nothing in it. Killer must have jumped down from that roof or something. Definitely important. Chunk moved in front of the kitten to block his vision. Gestured Abby that they should be heading out. Rats would be around soon, not safe for a kitten.

Chunk helped Abby and the little one settle in. Back behind the McDonalds, they were tucked into a storm drain which had been his home for the past three years. The poor kitten still hadn’t made a peep. The kid had seen too much, might never meow again. Might never latch. Starve, lost in despair. It was the worst thing Chunk could imagine. Starving because you’re too sad to eat. Hell. Thought murder was the bottom of the hole, but it just keeps getting deeper. He hunkered down, blocking the drain with his massive form in case someone decide to come back and finish the job. Anyone trying to get to Abby and the kitten, would have to go through him. He hoped Stub would be alright out there on his own.

Stub staggered towards the yellow apartment building. Leaping between rooftops was always risky after a few hits of Nip. Could focus on judging the distance or jumping correctly – not both. Stub sprinted and flung himself like a lunatic across trivial gaps. Better to be sure than to fall. Didn’t care what it looked like.

Came across Ripley. Brown short hair snuggled up against a chimney.

“Hey Ripley, didn’t happen to see who killed those kittens did ya?” said Stub.

“You know I don’t stick my nose in other felines’ business Stub. Don’t wanna end up lookin’ like you. That fur is terribly matted. Maybe if you focused on yourself, you wouldn’t be so messed up,” She rolled her eyes.

Stub sat down next to her. Tried not to take it personal. “What about the kittens? Someone has to do something about it.”

“Do they Stub? Do they? Well that someone isn’t me. Not my problem. Never will be,” She pushed past him.

“How do you expect things will get any better?” said Stub.

“That’s just it. I don’t,” She jumped down out of sight. Typical.

If he didn’t do something, no one would. That was pretty clear. Everyone too concerned with themselves to look out for anyone else. That’s the problem with a big city. Too much anonymity. No one gives a shit. Too easy to keep climbing towards the next best thing than to ever address what’s wrong. He couldn’t let this slide even if he wanted to. Especially now. Stub cared for Abby and the kittens more than he cared to admit.

Stub could see a cat inside a window of the yellow apartment building. Hairless sphinx with just its head poking up, giving Stub judgmental looks from the comfort of a squishy pillow. Could see it had a sweater on. Ridiculous. Disgusting to see a cat with no fur. All that skin and wrinkles seemed unnatural.

Damn housecats. Conceited fluffs with no sense of the real world. Locked up in their warm houses with every luxury imaginable. Never worried about when they’ll get their next meal. Endless supply of free nip. Spoiled rotten. Wouldn’t last a day out on the streets. Strong

wind would blow them into the gutter, never to be seen again. Always spend their time napping while strays are out here trying to survive. Like they could do better. What a crock of shit. Stub never wasted his time talking to them before, but this time he had to. Might've seen something important.

Stub made an epic leap to the windowsill; it was just wide enough to stand on. Overshot. Smacked his head on the window hard. Almost fell. Had to pull himself back up. Could feel something warm leaking from his nose. Going to feel that tomorrow, with everything else.

"Oh, are you okay sir? You're bleeding," said the sphinx, smiling. Teeth so damn white it was clear they never had to eat roaches to survive. Voice was tender. Naïve like she'd never had a hard day in her life.

"Thanks. I am good. Was barely a scratch," said Stub, regaining his balance.

"Are you sure? It's really coming out," said the sphinx. It was too. Stub could feel the warmth dripping down onto his paws.

"Enough chit-chat, fluff. Look, I am only talking to you to find out if you saw anything strange tonight. Regarding the kittens," said Stub.

Sphinx paused. Tilted her head. "Well sir, that's rather rude don't you think? And you haven't even introduced yourself. Even for a stray that's pretty surprising."

Stub choked down his pride. Even for a stray? Housecats always act tough behind the protection of a window. "The name's Stub, pleasure to meet you ma'am," Stub bowed his head. It wasn't a pleasure. Did it for Abby. Did it for the kittens.

There was a twitch in the sphinx's eye. Something rubbed her the wrong way. "Pumpkin. Pleasure to meet you as well sir."

Stub held back laughing at that name. Had to turn away. Pretended he had an itch. Brain kept repeating it, trying to break him. Pumpkin. Pump-kin. Chunk would bust a gut over this one later.

“Is everything alright, sir?” Pumpkin stared at Stub with her two different colored eyes. One - a streetlight yellow. The other - moon blue.

“Yes. Sorry. Allergies. Did you see anything strange tonight? Did you see anything happening to the kittens?”

“Only heard them meowing sir. Meow. Meow. Meow. Incessantly begging to be fed. Looked outside and saw something black jump down from above. Scared me half to death. Then the kittens got quiet. I figured it was their mom finally returning with the teat. I bet they’re napping with their full little bellies, all sweet and sound.”

“Not exactly...Did it look like a cat to you? Or bigger like a coon or somethin’?” said Stub. All of Pumpkins non-verbal cues were unusual. Tilted her head at every other thing like she didn’t understand. Useless fluffs.

“Oh I might not know much sir, but I do know a cat when I see one,” Pumpkin pressed her face up against the glass, hot breath fogging her expression into obscurity.

Stub was looking for a black cat. Male. Minty breath. Weird footprints. Talking to Pumpkin corroborated the black fur he found at the scene. At least this wasn’t a complete waste of time.

“So something happened to the kittens? I sure hope everything is alright,” Pumpkin tilted her head.

“Murdered. Looks like the rats have already started cleaning up. Best you don’t look below ma’am,” said Stub.

“Oh how dreadful! I hope they didn’t suffer. Let me know when you catch that dirty stray,” Pumpkin smiled. Dirty stray. Ignorant fluff. Stub knew there was a good reason he never talked to them.

“Thank you ma’am. Appreciate your help,” Stub did appreciate it. Had a direction now. Black fur on the kitten’s claw. Eye-witness sighting of a black cat just before. After three months of bodies with nothing to go on, things were finally adding up.

“Pleasure speaking with you Stub,” said Pumpkin as she disappeared into the apartment.

Stub was glad that was over with. Climbed up a set of metal coated cables next to Pumpkin’s window. A form in the distance. The moonlight illuminated the silhouette of a black cat a few houses away, still watching from a shadowy nook. Stayed to watch the rats eat? Unusual.

Black cat noticed that Stub was heading over and jumped down out of sight. With the Nip fading, it was still hard to stay stealthy. Wild jumps made him stick out like a sore paw. Didn’t matter. Once he got focused on something he could never let it go, no matter how hard he tried. Jumped over to where he last saw the black cat. Sniffed around a bit. Nothing familiar. Nothing minty. Looked down to see the cat walking down the alleyway. Walking. Not running. Like he had nothing to hide. Clever.

Slid down a blue plastic awning and jumped to the ground. Landed awkwardly on his bad leg. Sent lightning burning up his arm into his brain. Shook it out. Barely helped.

Black cat turned back, saw Stub following and sped up a bit. Tracks on the ground, clear as day. Not enough to rule him out as the killer. Pressed on. Followed the tracks through a hole in a fence. Few blocks from where the murders happened. Down through a narrow passageway between the apartments.

“You got a problem?” A voice from above. Made Stub go stiff. The black cat was perched on top of a set of metal stairs that led all the way to the roof of the building.

“Maybe I do. Maybe I don’t. Came to find out which,” Stub was almost sober now. Played it cool as best he could.

“Always thinking it’s a black cat, what a damn cliché. You don’t want any of this old timer,” Black cat scraped his claws across the metal grating. Sharp, but nothing to meow home about. Hissed a bit. He was right. Stub didn’t want any of it. But when they hell did it matter what he wanted. Only justice mattered. For Abby. For the kittens.

“Saw you watching the rats clean up. Bit unusual don’t you think? You one of those sickos?” Stub looked up, his eyes slowly returning to normal size.

“Piss off. Wasn’t watching them clean up. I was thinking. You know? That thing you should do some more of,” Black cat put his paws up, mocking Stub.

“Thinking. Thinking about what?” Stub made a little circle. Showed less aggression.

“What’s it to you?”

“Humor me.”

Black cat paused. Sat down. “Was thinking about ripping apart the bastard that did that to those kittens.” Honesty in his voice, or a convincing lie. Impossible to tell.

“Oh really? How do you explain this then?” Stub pulled out the black fur.

“What the hell is that?” Black cat hopped down to the ground to get a closer look. Only about twenty tails away.

“Black fur in a kitten’s claw. One that survived. He’s a hell of a jumper. But you already know that don’t you?” Stub extended his paw closer. Limped a bit to make his right arm look useless. It mostly was, except for that one good swipe he still had left in him.

“Are you really trying to accuse me of killing all those kittens? Idiot. You’re about to get humbled old-tom,” Black cat’s fur stood on end. Almost made Stub flinch. Almost.

“Witness saw you jump down towards the kittens. Then it got quiet. How do you explain that?” said Stub.

“A lie,” The black cat turned its side, hissed, and moved towards Stub.

That’s right. Just a bit closer you fool. Stub relaxed in preparation to strike. His claws – sheathed razors.

“Stop! I don’t want you to fight!” A female’s voice from behind. Made the black cat stop in his tracks. Skid a bit. Almost got the paw. He didn’t know how lucky he was.

Another black cat with two kittens rushed around the corner.

“Stay back! This creep is gonna get it!”

“No!” She darted in front of him, nudging him back. The kittens close behind, rushed up and rubbed against him.

Stub took a deep breath. Not enough to clear his name, but it didn’t seem like the black cat fit what he was looking for. Still, he’d have to follow up to be sure.

“Sorry ma’am. Just trying to get to the bottom of all this. I apologize for any inconvenience,” Stub bowed his head.

“Take your shitty tail and get the hell out of here before I change my mind,” the husband nodded. He had to look like he won front of his lady. Stub would let him have this one, for now. Stub turned and started back home.

The rain started to bleed out from the sky. Big fat globs of it. Didn’t bother finding cover. Being wet was insignificant compared to everything else. He invited it in. It made him feel something that didn’t hurt so damn much. Took him out of his head. Running into another dead

end after getting his hopes up felt like a new low. Had he missed something? Couldn't go chasing down every black cat on the street looking for a fight. Made him consider Jitters theory about the bats. Only briefly. Wouldn't hurt to clarify things with Pumpkin. Did she really lie? And if so, why? Either way it was something Stub needed to follow up on.

Stub barely managed to climb all the way back up to Pumpkin's apartment. The night was taking its toll on Stub's aging body. Peaked inside. Humans must have left the window open. Meowed. No response. Maybe Pumpkin had already gone to bed. Housecats sometimes had weird sleep schedules. Seemed like everything they did was opposite. Stepped inside to look around. Shook off the rain.

The apartment was full of strange pleasures Stub had never imagined. It was warm. Dry. There were ramps running all along the walls with caves he could hide in. Fluffy pillows pleading to be napped in. Tubes he could dive in. Empty boxes that beckoned to fit snugly around his body. A board wrapped in rope that made his claws hunger for a scratch. A pink ball, a stick with a feather, a bottle-cap, a ball of yarn, and a stuffed mouse all lined up equidistant against the wall, like they'd never been played with. Stub walked over and swatted at the stuffed mouse. Couldn't resist.

Meowed again. Nothing. Stub poked his head out of the living room, down to the hallway which was adorned with human pictures. There were a few of Pumpkin dressed in ridiculous outfits. Large one of her dressed in a pumpkin outfit. Pumpkin Pumpkin. It was too much. Couldn't help but laugh. Chunk would never believe it.

"Good evening Stub. I see you let yourself in. How impolite," Pumpkin's giant bat ears protruded from the darkness of a cave, high up on one of the ramps.

Stub looked up. “Sorry ma’am. I meowed a few times. How come you never answered?”

“I see you’ve been touching my things!” Pumpkin jumped down and pawed the mouse back into its proper place. Glared at Stub.

“Nice place you’ve got here. All these toys and comfy pillows, I bet you never want to leave.” Stub tried to ease the tension. Impossible to get someone to answer questions if they’re mad at you. As she walked past, Stub saw something he didn’t expect. No girl parts, or boy parts. Just a scar where something used to be. Pumpkin was a he. Neutered. Stub felt like an idiot. How many times had he called him ma’am? He did have a high-pitched voice, easy mistake when talking through a window.

“Pumpkin, I am sorry I called you ma’am. I didn’t know.” He was sorry too. Nothing funny about getting your nuts chopped off. Had only heard rumors of things that terrible. Never imagined they were true.

Lightning unraveled from the clouds like electric string as Pumpkin hopped up onto the windowsill. Pumpkin pawed the window closed as it squeaked its metallic scream. His paw moved as if he’d done it a thousand times before. “I was so young when it happened, I barely remember. Just glimpses of that shameful cone they made we wear. I feel no desire to mate. No desire at all... Have you ever imagined what it would be like to not have claws? To never be able to scratch? To look at a female in heat and just feel nothing?” Pumpkin stared out the window.

Stub could see the rain reflecting in his eyes. “That sounds like the worst thing I’ve ever heard. I’d probably lose my mind.”

Pumpkin looked back. Smiled. He had a hell of a set of fangs on him. Stub wondered how he kept them so white.

“They’ve taken everything from me. The Humans. My claws. My masculinity. And yet, I could not survive without their generosity. They even brush my teeth. I love them, but I hate them. I want them to rub my belly, but can’t help but to bite,” said Pumpkin.

Never thought he’d feel bad for a housecat. No balls. No claws. Hell. Stub would rather jump off the roof than live like that. Maybe all those times he thought housecats were giving him dirty looks wasn’t the case. Not judgment, but envy. Not paradise, but a prison. And he’d thought this night couldn’t get any worse.

“Well I know it won’t make you feel any better, but check this out,” Stub turned around and showed how he got his name.

Pumpkin hopped down to take a closer look at his tail. “How’d you lose it?”

“One of those glow-machines the humans ride around in,” Stub sat back down. Pumpkin nodded as he sat in front of Stub. A few tails away. “Look Pumpkin, I talked to a black cat tonight who I thought might have been the killer. Didn’t check out. Was there anything else about what you saw? Anything that you forgot to tell me?”

Pumpkin paused. Smiled. “Forgot? I am not sure I would put it that way,” Pumpkin turned and jumped back onto the couch. Stub noticed a tiny scratch on his back, just at the edge of his sweater. Bit of fabric missing too. His head felt icy. His guts squirmed. Walked forward and smelled it in the air. The undeniable aroma of mint, fresh off Pumpkin’s breath.

The truth came crashing down inside Stub’s brain like an avalanche, numbing him to the core. Male. No claws. Nice teeth. Mint. The black fur, not fur, but fabric. Kitten-sized scratch. The toys lined up just like the kittens were. The little bits of evidence that had been building inside Stub for months converged into a horrifying mosaic.

Pumpkin sat at the window, staring at Stub in its reflection as lightning split the fluffy clouds.

“I see your hate Stub. I can feel it when you look at me. But I don’t hate you. No. I envy you. Your life. Your claws. Your balls. Your freedom. All of it,” said Pumpkin.

“You can leave. Why not just hop out the window and never come back?” Stub stepped closer. The gory details of all the crime scenes kaleidoscoping through his brain.

“It took me three years to learn to open the window. Pawing at it day after day. I can go outside, but I’ll never be free. You know as well as I that I could never survive out on the streets. I can see it in how the strays look at me through the window. How you look at me. Like I am soft. Some spoiled little fluff loafing around in paradise,” Pumpkin bared his teeth as he spoke, not quite smiling.

“A cat who’s soft doesn’t go around taking his problems out on defenseless kittens. What the hell did they ever do to you?” said Stub, moving closer.

“I hate kittens. It’s how they meow. Conceited brats incessantly begging for something they don’t deserve. Feed me. Hold me. Love me. I have to sit in here and listen to it. Year, after year, after year. I watch them pounce and catch things with their claws. Scratching as they please. Mocking me. Growing up. Falling in love. Mating. Making more kittens. The world taunts me from my prison window. A constant reminder of what I am missing. Of what’s been taken from me,” said Pumpkin.

“God dammit Pumpkin! Does that make you feel like a big-tom? Killing helpless kittens? Why don’t you bite someone your own size?” Stub could feel the rage building inside, taking over.

“No. I thought it would make me feel better, but it doesn’t. Only in the moment when I kill do I feel anything at all. And then it’s gone and I am overcome with the desire to kill again, and again, and again. A hole that can never be filled. I couldn’t stop even if I wanted to.”

Pumpkin looked back at Stub, “And I’ll never stop. I am too addicted to feeling their last pitiful meow as I rip out their throats. How it tickles on my tongue. I love to watch the moonlight leave their eyes.” Pumpkin breathed onto the glass, blurring his reflection.

“And you rip out their tongues? You’re sick! You’re fucking sick!” Stub moved forward, could feel his paw relax, ready for blood. His fur like iron spikes.

“I want to keep them quiet forever,” said Pumpkin. Calm as death.

Stub pushed off hard with his hind legs and lunged at Pumpkin with everything he had. Pumpkin sprung up onto one of the ramps, just out of reach. Stub was breathing heavy, already exhausted.

“Shut up! Just shut up!” Stub paced, unraveling more with each step.

“You want me to be quiet? That’s exactly right. We’re not so different you and I,” said Pumpkin as he moved up the wall ramp. Stub jumped up towards the ramp. Pumpkin was ready for him. The dull slapping sound of Pumpkins paw smacking Stub in the face in rapid succession, knocking him back to the ground.

“Shouldn’t you know better than to leap at a cat who has the high ground? Honestly Stub. Your lack of physical ability is a sight to behold,” said Pumpkin as he looked down from the edge of the ramp.

“Piss...off,” Stub’s bum leg trembled underneath him as he struggled to pull himself to his feet. After everything that day, his body was giving out. Blackness closing in around his vision. Sparkling streetlights. Not now. Damn it.

“Look at you. You can barely stand. I could just walk up and bite you,” Pumpkin jumped down, his teeth bared. Pumpkin walked toward Stub, “Here it comes.”

Stub could feel the tingling heat of Pumpkin’s minty breath upon him, that helpless sensation as he awaited certain death. Must have been how the kittens felt just before the end. Before the bite. Summoning every fiber of his being, Stub swiped for the fences. His razor sharp claws sliced right through Pumpkin’s bare neck, just above the collar of his black sweater. Instead of the vicious bit he’d expected, Stub realized too late he’d felt nothing more than the grit of Pumpkin’s gentle lick as it had combed his cheek.

“Thanks for playing with me,” Pumpkin gurgled, collapsing in his own blood.

The thank you in his eyes shattered Stub’s heart into oblivion. The tears rolled out. Couldn’t help it. Pumpkin exhaled and stared at something in another world.

Stub didn’t think it would feel like this. So damn empty. Didn’t feel like justice. Felt sour. Just another broken cat that couldn’t be fixed.

Stub looked around in the silent apartment for an exit, as Pumpkin’s blood seeped into the eggshell carpet. Thought of Chunk, Abby, and all the broken families these past few months. A part of him felt glad that they would be safe now. That they might have some closure. Not that anything could ever be enough.

Was there any way out of this damn apartment? Stub didn’t have three years to figure out how to open the window. Climbed up and looked outside. Could see Chunk’s wide form in the distance. Must have gotten worried and went out looking for Stub.

Stub meowed as loud as he could, but it was no use. No one could hear him through the pouring rain. He noticed how his breath fogged up the window, illuminating the veil of his glass prison.