

Cat Lady

Penny opened her eyes to pitch darkness. She couldn't move and had no idea where she was. She'd had a nightmare again about the time she'd woken up half-frozen, two winters ago, in the grimy recessed doorway of a store on Hastings Street with crazy Dumpster Man curled around her body, snoring his fetid breath in her face.

Her legs twitched and she almost cried out in relief that they still worked. But what was wrong with her arms? Was she tied up? Maybe she'd fallen asleep on a park bench again and had been picked up by the police. No. They always just woke her up, poking at her with their clubs and a "move along, kid."

She let slip a whimper of fear and was answered by a familiar meow.

"Castor?" she whispered.

Another meow, to her right, followed by a rumbling purr. Castor's brother Pollux, who never meowed, purred in tandem on her other side.

Penny sighed in relief. She was lying in her own bed, safe in the house she'd lived in since Phineas had moved out and insisted she stay. She'd tried to protest

when he'd handed her the keys. She'd even offered to give him rent, but he'd said the house was paid for and she only had to deal with the taxes and utilities.

She had also tried to pretend she was annoyed at having to care for the several cats that came with the house, but had been so grateful for their furry company she hadn't been able to pull it off.

She tried to wiggle but her arms were pinned firmly at her side under the covers. Castor and Pollux snuggled themselves more securely against her, lying on her hands and effectively clamping her to the bed. She laughed at her predicament and closed her eyes to enjoy the warm fuzzy company.

Penny wondered why so many people made fun of women who lived with multiple cats. Cat ladies probably got more love and attention than most people. Being a cat lady isn't so bad, she thought with a smile.

The bed creaked and Penny opened her eyes again. She recognized Orion's fluffy shape at the foot of the bed. His sleek black fur stood out against the faded quilt.

"Come here, kitty," Penny murmured, and tensed her muscles as Orion delicately stepped onto her stomach. He felt like a bowling ball stomping around her gut on four pointy chopsticks until he found his favourite spot and settled his belly against hers with a purr of contentment.

She sighed and relaxed, squinting at Orion in the early morning gloom. There was something wrong with his face – a gray lump against his snout. Then it fell away and landed on the blanket. She only had time to register what it was before it rolled under her chin, out of her line of sight. Dark wet strings dripped from Orion's fangs, and he wiped a paw over his snout to clean it.

Mouse! Penny tensed again but couldn't do anything more than waggle her feet and head. She glanced at Castor and Pollux. Their ears were twisted tightly backwards to keep tabs on Orion. They looked annoyed and she was surprised they hadn't left the bed. The twins didn't like to share space with Orion if they could help it. They'd had her attention first and now he had trumped them with his offering.

Phin had warned her about letting the cats have access to the bedroom and had suggested she keep the door shut at all times. She thought he'd meant it would keep their fur from getting into her clothing and on the bed. He'd neglected to mention hunter-cat love-offerings.

She could feel the mouse's blood seeping through the thin quilt, and she suppressed a groan of revulsion. Orion might interpret any sound she made now as encouragement.

Too late. Orion looked up from where he'd been cleaning blood out of his long fur. He lightly tapped the dead mouse with a paw and it bumped against her bare neck. The tiny corpse had cooled and was tacky with congealing blood. It stuck to her skin.

Penny squealed and her whole body twitched. Castor and Pollux hissed at Orion and bolted from the bed. He hissed in return and Penny felt his claws unsheathe to prick her belly through the blanket. Her arms were free and she twisted to one side to dislodge Orion. He exploded off the bed with an outraged yowl. Penny rolled farther and fell to the floor, dragging the blanket and pillow with her.

The mouse fell on her cheek with a wet squitch and her stomach heaved.

“Get-it-off-get-it-off-get-it-off!” Penny screeched, slapping the mouse away and scrubbing at her skin as she struggled to untangle herself from the blanket. She scooted away from the bed, scanning wildly to see where the mouse had landed.

The room was brighter and she could now see several red splotches on the bed sheet. There was a chunk of pale grey fur stuck to one of the blood stains. She pressed a hand to her stomach to suppress her rising nausea as she spotted the tiny mangled mouse in the corner.

Penny staggered to her feet and nearly screamed again when Orion rubbed his head against her bare calf. His fur was damp. She swatted at him weakly and he raced out of the room and headed for the kitchen, where she could hear Castor meowing piteously for his breakfast.

“You’re all going to have to wait until this cat lady’s had a hot shower,” she shouted, pulling her t-shirt over her head and using it to scrub the ick off her cheek and neck. She jammed her arms into her bathrobe with a shudder and firmly closed the door on the carnage in her bedroom.