

The Mystery of Cats

I knock on the mahogany door. This isn't on my list of things to do for fun, but here goes. *Anything for Lee*. The door opens and Ms. Rosewood appears, one hand holding a crotech hook and the other what looks like a half-completed crochet-whale.

"Can't you people read the sign?" She grumpily points the hook at the black and gold plaque on the door, which says "No Soliciting."

"I'm really sorry to disturb you. I'm your neighbor Ella, do you remember me?"

She stares at me for a long time. "Can't say I do, but what do you want?"

"Umm.. so my cat is missing and I'm looking around to see if she entered anyone's home. Can you check if she is in your's?" I hand her one of the Missing Posters in my left hand.

"I'm busy right now, but I'll check. And, the funny thing is, my little kitten is also missing. While you're looking for your cat, can you look for mine too? She has a pink collar with paw prints on it."

I'm barely able to say "Of course" before she closes the door. *What are you even busy with?*

This house is the last one on my list for today, so I head back home. Inside, playing a video game while laying on the couch is my brother.

It should have been both of us knocking at doors and seeing if Lee was there, but my brother used the excuse of his soccer game to get out of doing it today.

But he did agree to search his room, which has a million nooks that a cat can use to hide.

"You find anything?" I ask.

"Nope," he doesn't look away from his game. "But did Lee by any chance have ginger stripes?"

That was a kinda stupid question, which pulled the last string keeping me together. "Did you ever see any?" I counter. "Of course she doesn't!" Annoyed, I slam the Missing Posters on the marble table and storm upstairs to do my homework.

But my brain doesn't cooperate. *Arrggghh*. I close my eyes, wishing my parents had agreed to let me go to more houses. But according to them, "Life has to go on." *How can my life move on while my mind can't?* My parents had adopted her when I was 2 years old, and she's been my oldest friend – and one of my best. My first word was Lee, which was me trying to say her name, Louisa. The nickname stuck.

I sigh as my mind goes through all the information I collected today. *What if a creepy psychopath kidnapped Louisa and Ms. Rosewood's cat? Or worse ...*

I close my eyes. They have to be fine, I try to reassure myself. I try to read, my favorite thing to do, except playing with Lee, but my mind keeps getting distracted.

Soon, the worry overwhelms me, and I give in to the urge and go downstairs, speedwalk past my brother, stopping only to put on my shoes, into the street, and knock on my delightful neighbor's door for the second time today.

"Can't you read th– oh, it's you again. What do you want this time?" She asks, looking even more annoyed than before.

"I'm very sorry again, but I just can't rest before I see her again.

She hesitates, and then her face softens almost imperceptibly. "I miss my little Ginny too. She is my best friend, and frankly, my only one." My heart breaks a little. How lonely she must be. I decide that from now on, I will do my best to be nice to her. Even if it kills me.

She continues, "I didn't get a chance to search my house, but I will right now. Would you like to come inside?" I don't know why she's acting so nice all of a sudden, but remembering my promise, I agree.

Inside is an explosion of yarn in all the shades of the rainbow and about a 30 more. My resolution that *Lee must be in here* hardens as I look around. Maybe she accidentally went into the wrong house, and after seeing so much yarn, didn't want to leave?

Something catches my attention. On one of the wooden shelves, there is a crotech-cat the exact shape, size, and color as Louisa.

Ms. Rosewood follows my gaze, "Ah, yes, your Lee was my inspiration for that piece. I loved your relationship, how you were so close to her. You both are the reason why when I was drowning in debts and depression, I decided to adopt Ginny. She gave me the happiness I needed to pull myself back on my feet," she smiles.

Whoa, who are you, and what have you done to my grumpy neighbor?

Catching the way I'm looking at her, she straightens and walks towards the staircase. "You can search here while I search upstairs."

An hour later, we both are slumped on the enormous sofa. There definitely aren't any cats here.

"Do you want some tea?" Ms. Rosewood asks, standing. Tired, I agree. I must have searched every corner of her enormous house, but there's no sign of Lee anywhere. I sit up and something catches the light and my eye — an orange hairball.

I gasp, "Ms. Rosewood, is Ginny ginger?"

"Yeah," she chuckles. "Even old people read Harry Potter."

"I have to go, but I'll be back." I take 2 seconds to put on my shoes and run back to my house. My brother's in his room. I race there and slam open the door.

"Privacy much?" My brother rolls his eyes.

"Why were you asking about Lee having red hair?"

He sighs, "Stripes, not completely."

"Had you, by any chance, seen a red hairball?"

His brows furrow, "Yes, how did you know?"

"I'll explain that to you later, but first I need to know where you found it."

"You sure yo—"

"Darren, please, it's important."

He looks at me for a moment, sighs again, and goes into his closet. I follow him and my eyes widen. This place has 2 million nooks a cat could hide in.

He closes the door from the inside and points to the place behind it, "Here, I found it here."

I take one look of this place and get to work moving stuff, despite his protests. *It's not like this place can get any messier.*

Finally, I remove one box from its place in the shadows, and guess what I find — the cats. Lee is protectively in front of the smaller one — pink collar, red fur — Ginny. I sigh in relief, but then notice that Ginny is hurt. Lee stops giving the menacing expression when she notices that it's us, but doesn't step away.

The doorbell rings. "Go get it," I tell my brother, not wanting to move. For once, he actually does it.

"It's Ms. Rosewood," he calls.

"Let her in!" I yell so my voice can reach downstairs, hoping he will.

The door opens and he races up the stairs and whispers, “Why do we need her?”

I roll my eyes. “You can come up!” I yell. “We’re in the room closest to the staircase!”

After a few moments, the door to the rooms opens. “Where ar — oh, wha — you found her!” she interrupts herself a couple of times, runs into the closet, sits in front of both cats, and smiles... till she sees the slash across Ginny’s leg. “Who did this to you?” she looks at us. “Do you know anything about this?”

We both shake our heads. As annoying as Darren is, I know that he would never harm anyone. Ms. Rosewood looks at me for a minute and him for two, and then shakes her head. “Oh well, at least you found her. That’s what’s important. She can now go to a vet.”

“But why would Louisa hide something like this from us? We adopted her when she was a year old.” If Lee doesn’t trust me, I don’t know what I’ll do.

Ms. Rosewood shakes her head, smiling softly. “Who knows what’s going on in the minds of cats, but if there’s one thing I’m sure of, it’s that your Lee loves and trusts you. Why they both hid instead of finding us is one of the world’s great mysteries. And from what it looks like, she’s the one who helped Ginny find a safe space. If I could, I’d thank her, but since I can’t, thank you, Emma.”

My brother is barely able to stifle his laughter, the last word unknowingly taking away a teensy bit of the sincerity from the speech. I can’t help but smile. *Some things never change.*