

BANTAM BOOKS

RITA MAE BROWN

& SNEAKY PIE BROWN

Cat on the Scent

A MRS. MURPHY
MYSTERY

THE
NEW YORK
TIMES
BESTSELLING
SERIES

It Takes a Cat to Write the Purr-fect Mystery



Cat on the Scent

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ITOKO MAENO



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To a cat queen,
Elizabeth Putnam Sinsel

Cast of Characters

Mary Minor Haristeen (Harry), the young postmistress of Crozet

Mrs. Murphy, Harry's gray tiger cat

Tee Tucker, Harry's Welsh corgi, Mrs. Murphy's friend and confidante

Pewter, Market's shamelessly fat gray cat, who now lives with Harry and family

Pharamond Haristeen (Fair), veterinarian, formerly married to Harry

Mrs. George Hogendobber (Miranda), a widow who works with Harry in the post office

Market Shiflett, owner of Shiflett's Market, next to the post office

Susan Tucker, Harry's best friend

Big Marilyn Sanburne (Mim), the undisputed queen of Crozet society

Tally Urquhart, older than dirt, she says what she thinks when she thinks it, even to her niece, *Mimi*, the Magnificent

Rick Shaw, sheriff

Cynthia Cooper, police officer

Herbert C. Jones, pastor of Crozet Lutheran Church

Blair Bainbridge, a handsome model who lives on the farm next to Harry's

Sir H. Vane-Tempest, a modern Midas who proves there is nothing like the greed of the rich

Sarah Vane-Tempest, the much younger, fabulously beautiful wife of the imperious H. Vane

Archie Ingram, as a county commissioner he has been a strong advocate of controlling development and preserving the environment. Too bad he couldn't preserve his marriage

Tommy Van Allen, tall, dark, and handsome, he's been wild as a rat ever since childhood

Ridley Kent, an easygoing man who has inherited enough money to sap all initiative. He means well

1

The intoxicating fragrance of lilacs floated across the meadow grass. Mrs. Murphy was night hunting in and around the abandoned dependencies on old Tally Urquhart's farm, Rose Hill. Once a great estate, the farm's main part continued to be kept in pristine condition. A combination of old age plus spiraling taxes, and wages forced Thalia "Tally" Urquhart, as well as others like her, to let outlying buildings go.

A huge stone hay barn with a center aisle big enough to house four hay wagons side by side sat in the middle of small one-and-a-half-story stone houses with slate roofs. The buildings, although pockmarked by broken windows, were so well constructed they would endure despite the birds nesting in their chimneys.

The hay barn, whose supporting beams were constructed from entire tree trunks, would outlast the century and the next one as well.

The paint peeled off the stone buildings, exposing the soft gray underneath with an occasional flash of rose-gray.

The tiger cat sniffed the air; low clouds and fog were moving in fast from the west, sliding down the Blue Ridge Mountains like fudge on a sundae.

Normally Mrs. Murphy would hunt close to her own farm. Often she was accompanied by Pewter who despite her bulk was a ferocious mouser. This evening she wanted to hunt alone. It cleared her mind. She liked to wait motionless for mice to scurry in the rotting burlap feed bags, for their tiny claws to tap against the beams in the hayloft.

Since no one paid attention to the Urquhart barns, the mousing was superb. Kernels of grain and dried corn drew the little marauders in, as did the barn itself, a splendid place in which to raise young mice.

A moldy horse collar, left over from the late 1930s, its brass knobs green, hung on the tack-room wall, forgotten by all, the mules who wore it long gone to the Great Mule Sky.

Mrs. Murphy left off her mousing to explore the barn, constructed in the early nineteenth century. ~~How lovely the farm must have once been. Mrs. Murphy prided herself on her knowledge of human history, something the two-legged species often overlooked in its rush to be current. Of course, she reflected, whatever is current today is out of fashion tomorrow.~~

The tiger cat, like most felines, took the long view.

Her particular human, Mary Minor Haristeen, or Harry, the young, pretty postmistress of Crozet, Virginia, evinced interest in history as well as in animal behavior. She read voraciously and expanded her understanding of animals by visiting Virginia Tech in Blacksburg and the Marion DuPont Scott Equine Research Center in Leesburg, Virginia. Harry even studied the labels on crunchy-food bags to make certain kitty nutrition was adequate. She cared for her two cats, one dog, and three horses with love and knowledge.

The flowers continued to push up around the buildings. The lilac bushes, enormous, burst forth each spring. The sadness of the decaying old place was modified by the health of the plant life.

The cat emerged from the barn and glanced at the deepening night clouds, deciding to hurry back home before the fog got thicker. Two creeks and a medium-sized ridge were the biggest obstacles. She could traverse the four miles in an hour at a trot, faster if she ran. Mrs. Murphy could run four miles with ease. A sound foxhound could run forty miles in a day. Much as she liked running, she was glad she wasn't a foxhound, or any hound, for that matter. Mrs. Murphy liked dogs but considered them lower species, for the most part, except for the corgi she lived with, Tucker, who was nearly the equal of a cat. Not that she'd tell Tucker that. . . . Never.

She trotted away from the magical spot and loped over the long, flat pasture, once an airstrip for Tally Urquhart in her heyday, when she had shocked the residents of central Virginia by flying her airplanes. Her disregard for the formalities of marriage did the rest.

Tally Urquhart was Mim Sanburne's aunt. Mim had ascended to the rank of undisputed social leader of Crozet once her aunt had relinquished the position twenty years ago. Mrs. Murphy would giggle and say to Mim's face, "*Ah, welcome to the Queen of Quite a Lot.*" Since Mim didn't understand cat, the grande dame wasn't insulted.

On the other side of the airfield a rolling expanse of oats just breaking through the earth's surface undulated down to the first creek.

At the creek the cat stopped. The clouds lowered; the moisture was palpable. She thought she heard a rumble. Senses razor sharp, she looked in each direction, including overhead. Owls were deadly in conditions like this.

The rumble grew closer. She climbed a tree—just in case. Out of the clouds overhead two wheels appeared. Mrs. Murphy watched as a single-engine plane touched down, bumped, then rolled toward the barn. It stopped right in front of the massive doors, a quarter of a mile away from Mrs. Murphy.

A lean figure hopped out of the plane to open the barn doors. The pilot stayed at the controls, and when the doors opened, the plane pattered into the barn. The motor was cut off. Mrs. Murphy saw two

figures now, one much taller than the other. She couldn't make out their features; the collars of the trench coats were turned up and they were half turned away, dueling gusts of wind. As each human braced behind a door and rolled it shut, the heavens opened in a deluge.

A great fat *splat* of rain plopped right on Mrs. Murphy's head. She hated getting wet, but she waited long enough to see the two humans run down the road past the stone houses. In the far distance she thought she heard a motor turn over.

Irritated that she hadn't gone down the farm road and therefore might have missed something, she climbed down and ran flat out the entire way home. She could have stayed overnight in the Urquhart barn, but Harry would panic if she woke up and realized Mrs. Murphy wasn't asleep on the bed.

By the time she reached her own back porch forty-five minutes later, she was soaked. She pushed through the animal door and shook herself twice in the kitchen, spattering the cabinets, before walking into the bedroom.

Tucker snored on the floor at the foot of the bed. Pewter snuggled next to Harry. The portly gray cat opened one brilliant green eye as Mrs. Murphy leapt onto the bed.

"Don't sleep next to me. You're all wet."

"It was worth it."

Both eyes opened. *"What'd you get?"*

"Two field mice and one shrew."

"Liar."

"Why would I make it up?"

Pewter closed both eyes and flicked her tail over her nose. *"Because you have to be the best everything."*

The tiger ignored her, crept to the head of the bed, lifted the comforter, and slid under while staying on top of the blanket. If she'd picked up all the covers and gotten on the sheets, Harry might have rolled over and felt the wet sheets and the wet cat. Mrs. Murphy was better off in the middle; and she would dry faster that way, too.

Pewter said nothing but she heard a muffled *"Hee-hee,"* before falling asleep again.

2

The slanting rays of the afternoon sun spilled across the meadows of Harry's farm. The hayloft door was wide open, framed a sleeping Mrs. Murphy, flopped on her back, her creamy beige stomach soaking up the sun's warmth. The cat's tail gently rocked from side to side as though floating in a pool of sunlight.

Simon the possum, curled in a gray ball, slept at the mouth of his nest made from old hay bales. A worn curb chain glittered from the recess of his den. Simon liked to carry off shiny objects, ribbon, gloves, even old pieces of newspaper.

Below, in the barn's center aisle, Tucker snoozed. Each time she exhaled, a tiny knot of no-see-ums swirled up, then settled down again on her shoulders.

May, usually the best month in central Virginia, along with colorful Octobers, remained unusually cool this year, the temperature staying in the fifties and low sixties. One week earlier, the last of April, a snowstorm had roared down the Blue Ridge Mountains, covering the swelling buds and freezing the daffodils and tulips. All that was forgotten as redbuds bloomed and dogwoods began to open, lush white or pink. The grass turned green.

This afternoon the animals couldn't keep their eyes open. Sometimes an abrupt change of season could do that, wreaking havoc with everyone's rhythm. Even Harry, that engine of productivity, dozed in the tack room. She had every intention of stripping and dipping her tack, a monotonous task reserved for the change of seasons. Harry had gotten up that morning in an organizing mood but she had fallen asleep before she had even broken down the bridle.

Alone—if one counts being divorced but having your ex much in evidence as “alone”—Harry ran the small farm bequeathed to her by her deceased parents. Farming, difficult these days because of government regulation, made enough money to cover the taxes on the place. She relied on her job at the Crozet Post Office to feed and clothe herself.

In her thirties, Harry was oblivious to her charms. Her one concession to the rigors of femininity was a good haircut. She lived in jeans, T-shirts, and cowboy boots. She even wore her cowboy boots to work. Since the Crozet Post Office was such a small, out-of-the-way place, she need not dress

for success.

In fact, Harry measured success by laughter, not by money. She was extremely successful. If she wasn't laughing with other humans she was laughing with Mrs. Murphy, wit personified, Tucker, or Pewter, the cat who came to dinner.

Pewter, curled in Harry's lap, dreamed of crème brûlée. Other cats dreamed of mice, moles, birds, and the occasional spider. Pewter conjured up images of beef Wellington, mashed potatoes, fresh buttered bread, and her favorite food on earth, crème brûlée. She liked the crust thin and crunchy.

In the distance a low purr caused Mrs. Murphy to flick her ear in that direction. The marvelous sound came nearer. She opened one eye, casting her gaze down the long dirt road dotted with puddles of water from last night's rain. She stretched but didn't rise.

The throaty roar sounded like a big cat staking out territory. She heard the distinctive crushing sound of tires on Number 5 gravel. Curious, she half raised her head, then pushed herself up, stretching fore and aft, blinking in the sunlight.

Pewter lifted her head as well.

Tucker remained dead to the world.

Mrs. Murphy squinted to catch sight of a gleaming black car rounding the far turn.

“Company's coming.”

No one below paid attention. She leaned forward, sticking her head out the second-story space. Harry's nearest neighbor, Blair Bainbridge, cruised into the driveway behind the wheel of a black wide-body Porsche 911 Turbo.

Tucker barked. Mrs. Murphy laughed to herself—*“Dogs!”*—as she sauntered over to the ladder. She excelled at climbing ladders and at descending them. The latter took longer to learn. The trick was not to look down.

She scampered across the dusty center aisle and out to Blair. Harry woke up with Pewter licking her face. Tucker, sniffing about interrupted sleep, emerged into the sunlight.

“Hello, Mrs. Murphy.” Blair grinned.

“Hello.” She rubbed against his leg.

“Anybody home?” Blair called out.

“Be there in a minute,” a foggy Harry replied.

The tiger cat walked around the low-bodied, sleek machine. *“A cat designed this.”*

“Why?” Tucker viewed the car without much enthusiasm, but Tucker never had much enthusiasm.

when awakened.

“*Because it's beautiful and powerful.*”

“*You don't like yourself much, do you?*”

Harry walked out, then stopped abruptly. “Beautiful!”

“Just delivered.” Blair leaned against the sloping front fender. “Makes all the crap I own worthwhile.”

“Modeling can't be that bad.”

“Can't be that good. It's not . . .”—he paused—“connected. It's superficial.” He waved his hand dismissively. “And sooner or later I'll be considered over-the-hill. It's ruthless that way.”

“I don't know. You're too hard on yourself. Anyway, it got you this. I don't think I've ever seen anything so beautiful. Not even the Aston Martin Volante.”

“You like Aston Martins?” His dark eyebrows rose.

“Love 'em. Not as much as horses, but I love them. The Volante is a sleek car, but you need the mechanic to go with it. This is more reliable.”

“German.”

“There is that.” She smiled.

“Would you like a ride?”

“I thought you'd never ask.” She spoke to the two cats and dog. “Hold down the fort.”

“*Yeah, yeah,*” Mrs. Murphy grumbled. “*I think we should all go for a ride.*”

“*No room,*” Tucker sensibly noted.

“*I don't take up much room—unlike you.*”

“*What's that supposed to mean?*”

“*Nothing.*” Mrs. Murphy raised her tail straight up, sashaying toward the house as Blair backed out. Mrs. Murphy thought the baritone perfect, not too deep, yet velvety.

“Only one hundred Turbos made for the U.S. market each year,” Blair said as he straightened out the wheel.

Pewter waddled toward the house. She gave the \$110,000 internal-combustion machine barely a look. “*Don't go so fast,*” she chided her cohort.

To torment her, the tiger cat bounded gracefully onto the screened-in porch, pawing open the unlatched screen door.

"I hate her," Pewter muttered.

"Me, too." Tucker walked alongside the gray cat. *"The biggest show-off since P.T. Barnum."*

"I heard that."

"We don't care," Tucker replied.

"You're bored." Mrs. Murphy ducked through the doggie door in the kitchen.

"Did she say I was boring?"

"No, Pewter, she said we were bored."

"Nothing ever happens in May."

Mrs. Murphy stuck her head out the magnetic-flap door. *"Blair Bainbridge bought a Porsche Turbo. I count that as an important event."*

Pewter and Tucker, walking more briskly, reached the screen door. The corgi sat while the cat opened it.

"That doesn't count." Pewter flung open the door.

Mrs. Murphy ducked back into the kitchen. Pewter dashed through the animal door first.

"What would you like to happen?" Mrs. Murphy inquired.

"A meat truck turns over in front of the post office." Tucker wagged her nonexistent tail.

"Remember the Halloween when the human head turned up in a pumpkin?" Pewter's pupils widened.

"Yech!" Mrs. Murphy recalled the grisly event that happened a few years back.

"Yech? I found it. You didn't."

"I don't like to think about it." Mrs. Murphy fastidiously licked the sides of her front paws, then swept them over her face.

She noticed the side of the barn facing north, the broad, flat side where the paint was peeling. A painted ad for Coca-Cola, black background underneath, peeled out in parts.

"Funny."

“What?” Pewter leaned over to groom her friend, whom she loved even though Mrs. Murphy often irritated her.

“How the past is bursting through—all around us. That old Coke sign—bet it was painted on the barn in the 1920s or '30s. The past bursts through the present.”

“Dead and gone,” Tucker laconically said.

“The past is never dead.”

“Well, maybe not for you. You have nine lives.”

“Ha-ha.” Mrs. Murphy turned her nose up.

“I bet the past wasn't as boring as today,” Pewter moaned.

“Things will pick up,” Tucker advised.

Truer words were never spoken.

3

Blair glided down Route 250 toward Greenwood at 60 miles an hour. He was only in second gear and the tachometer wasn't even close to the red zone.

Harry couldn't believe the surge of power or the handling. They hit 0 to 60 mph in 4.4 seconds. The balance of the car astounded her. The old farm Misfit blurred by, then Mirador (Misfit's big sister) then Blair downshifted, turned right, and headed back toward the Greenwood school, the road snaking and the car sweeping around each sharp curve without a shudder, a roll, or a skid.

“Don't you love it?” Blair laughed out loud.

She sighed. “Deep love.”

A short stretch of flat land beckoned. He smoothly shifted. The speedometer glided past 100, then Blair expertly down-shifted as a curve rolled off to the right.

Unfortunately, Sheriff Rick Shaw was rolling, too, right out of Sir H. Vane-Tempest's driveway. He hit the siren and snapped on the whirling lights.

“Damn,” Blair whispered.

“What's he doing out here in the boonies? He ought to be on Route 29.” Harry glanced in the rearview mirror.

“Is it Rick or Cynthia?” Blair squinted at the distant object, which was fast approaching.

“Rick. Cynthia doesn't wear her hat in the squad car.”

“That makes sense. Turn your head and the brim hits the window.”

“Rick's balding, remember.”

“There is that.” Blair half smiled as he pulled over. The Porsche stopped as smooth as silk. He lowered the window and reached in the side pocket of the door for the relevant papers as Rick

lumbered up.

“As I live and breathe, Blair Bainbridge.” Rick bent over. “And our esteemed postmistress. License please,” he sang out.

“Oh.” Blair fished around in his hip pocket, pulled out his crocodile wallet, and handed the license to Rick.

“Blair, do you have any idea how fast you were moving?”

“Uh—yes, I do.”

“Uh-huh. You know, of course, that the speed limit in the great state of Virginia is fifty-five miles per hour. Now I don't think that's the smartest law on the books, but I have to enforce it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“When did you get this vehicle?”

“This morning.”

“Uh-huh. Why don't you get out of the car a minute.”

In a show of sympathy, Harry unfastened her seat belt and got out, too.

“Lemme see the engine.”

Rick popped up the back, revealing a giant turbo covering the engine.

“That's a pain in the ass,” the sheriff grumbled.

“It's the turbo, chief, it forces air back in here,”—Blair pointed to the inlet side—“which boosts the horsepower to four hundred. Here's the delivery side.”

“Four hundred horsepower?” Rick whispered reverently.

Blair smiled, knowing the sheriff was hooked. “The intake, or flow, is split toward the left and right exhaust turbochargers. The air gets reunited, flows past the throttle, and goes into the cylinder head in virtually direct sequence.” He paused, realizing he was getting too technical. “The pollution level falls below government requirements, which is a good thing. Drive a turbo and be environmentally responsible.”

“Uh-huh.” Rick ran his hand over the rear fender, which slightly resembled a horse's hindquarter, then ducked his head inside the driver's side. “Not much room in the back.”

“Big enough for Mrs. Murphy, Tucker, and Pewter.” Harry finally said something.

“I'm surprised they aren't with you.” Rick pushed his hat back on his head. “Now in order to be fa

here, I need to know a little more about this car. Can we all fit in?"

"Sure," Blair said.

"Tell you what, guys, I'll stay with the squad car. You two roll on," Harry said.

Rick furtively looked around. "Well—"

"No one will know a thing. If anyone stops, I'll say you're investigating a rustling call and I can't come along for the ride. You're out in the pasture."

"Well—all right," Rick agreed. "If H. Vane-Tempest happens to come by, don't say a word."

"Got his nose out of joint again?" Harry casually asked.

Rick grunted. "He's a little different."

"Different!" Harry giggled. "He's got more money than God and he acts like he *is* God."

"He and Archie Ingram pester me with more calls than anyone else in the county, and this is a county full of nutcases."

Archie Ingram, one of the county commissioners, a handsome man, courtly to women, was so violently opposed to most development schemes that he had attracted radical detractors and equal numbers of radical supporters.

"H. Vane is a big noise in the environmental group. I guess he and Archie have to work closely together."

"Ideas are one thing. Temperament's another." Rick hooked his thumb in his gun belt. "I predict those two can't stay on the same team for long."

"Sheriff, would you like to drive?" Blair asked.

"Well—"

"Go on."

Rick slipped behind the wheel.

Blair winked at Harry, then folded his six-foot-four-inch frame into the passenger side. "That button will push the seat back or forward. There you go. And you can raise or lower the seat, too."

"Isn't that something?" Rick's seduction would be complete once he touched the accelerator. He reached to the right for the key.

"On the left."

“That's weird.”

“A leftover from the great racing days when drivers had to sprint to their cars. If the ignition was on the left it gave them a split-second advantage. The driver could start the car and shift into gear simultaneously.”

“I'll be damned.” Rick turned the key. The pistons awakened like Sleeping Beauty.

Rick stalled out.

“Takes a while to get used to the clutch. Everything is much more sensitive than you or I am accustomed to—it's not so much about technology, it's about feel.”

“Yeah.” Rick engaged the clutch and touched the gas, then shot down the road.

Harry folded her arms across her chest, watching the car lurch into second. It would take Rick a few more tries.

She walked back to the squad car, sat down, and clicked on the two-way radio.

Milden Hall, the estate of Sir H. Vane-Tempest, was immediately behind her. The overlarge sign emblazoned with a gold griffin on a bloodred field, swung slightly in the breeze.

Harry turned off the radio, swung her legs out, and closed the door. The day was too pleasant for sitting in the car. She walked back toward the sign. A car cruised around the corner, having turned on 250.

Harry waved and Susan Tucker pulled her Audi to the side of the road.

“What are you doing out here?”

Harry walked over to her best friend. “Joyriding. Blair bought a Porsche Turbo and as luck would have it, Rick Shaw came out of H. Vane's driveway just as we slowed down to eighty-something.”

“Where's Blair now? In jail?”

“No. He's letting Rick drive the Turbo.”

Susan laughed. “That's a good one.”

“What are you doing out here?”

“On my way to drop off books for Chris Middleton. I want to persuade him to give a talk at the high school for career day.”

Chris was a small-animals veterinarian, one of the best.

“Good idea.”

“And then I have to meet Mim, Her Royal Pain in the Ass, at the club. She's fussed up about the board meeting over the water supply. The county's been fighting about the reservoir so long I don't know why she still lets it get to her.”

“We've got to do something with the development in the northwest corner of the county. They need water.”

“Exactly, but the reservoir plan is already outdated and it hasn't been built yet.” Susan pouted for a minute. “Archie Ingram, as usual, wants to turn the clock back to 1890.”

“Make it 1840. Then he could own slaves.” Harry approved of conservation but Archie Ingram took it too far.

“Good one, Harry.” Susan smiled. “Oh, that reminds me, the battle reenactment at Oak Ridge—you have to be there.”

“No I don't.”

“Yes you do, because Ned needs camp followers.”

Ned was Susan's husband, a lawyer by trade and a reenactor in Civil War battles on weekends. The latter was becoming a passion.

“Susan, I hate that war stuff.”

“Living history.”

“I'll think about it.”

“Harry . . .” Susan lowered her voice.

“Susan . . .”

“You do it.”

“Takes two women to keep your husband happy these days.”

“That's right, girlfriend. And I even have your costume.”

“Susan, you're both nuts.”

“You'll look fetching in a bonnet.”

“I'm not wearing period clothes—period!”

Harry heard the distant, distinctive sound of the Porsche. “Push on, because Rick will be embarrassed if he gets back and finds you here. We don't want Blair to get a ticket.”

“Tell Blair that Ned expects him in the First Virginia.” That was the name of Ned's unit. The reenactors were fanatical about detail, down to the last button.

“I will.” Harry kissed her on the cheek. Susan kissed air in return, then drove away.

By the time the Porsche drove into view, Harry was back leaning against the squad car. A beam of light from the Porsche hit Rick Shaw, who stayed behind the wheel.

“You deserve a car like that, Sheriff.”

“I never drove anything like that in my life,” Rick said, his voice full of wonder. He wouldn't get out of the car. He was like a child at Christmas, sitting under the tree, fondling his favorite present.

“I just had to have it.” Blair smiled. “Boys with toys, as Harry would say.”

“Hate to leave this baby.” Rick finally slid out from under the wheel. He walked alongside the front of the car, running his top finger over the curving, graceful lines. “Kind of like an egg on its side.”

“Yes.”

Rick opened the creaking door of the squad car. “Blair, stay inside the speed limit.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Harry, mum's the word.”

“Okay.” She smiled at Rick, whom she liked even though he chided her about being an amateur detective. His word was *busybody*.

He flicked on the radio.

“Car 1. Car 1.”

“Car 1,” Rick answered.

“Where you been, boss?” Deputy Cynthia Cooper's voice crackled.

“Sir H. Vane-Tempest's. His wife says Archie Ingram threatened her husband with bodily harm. He pooh-poohs it. Said they simply had a disagreement over sensitive environmental issues.”

“Oh la!” Coop sang out.

“See you in ten. Over and out.” Rick started the motor and Harry backed away from his window. Rick winked at her, then pulled out, made a U-turn, and cruised back to 250.

Blair folded his arms across his muscled chest. “Man fell in love before my very eyes.”

“Doesn't everyone?” Harry enjoyed her double entendre, for Blair was stunning to the point

leaving women breathless—and a few men, too, for that matter.

“How about you, then?” He held open the driver's-side door, ushering her into the cockpit.

Harry sat still, inhaling the rich leather smell as she reached for the key on her left. Blair closed the passenger door behind him.

“Ready, Eddy?” She turned over the key.

“Shoot the goose, Bruce.”

“I never heard that.”

“Maybe it's shoot the juice.” Blair laughed.

She did and they roared into Greenwood, around the little town, and back to Crozet by every back mountain road she could remember.

When they finally pulled into her driveway, Tee Tucker burst through the animal door of the house and then pushed open the screen door, happy to see her mother.

Mrs. Murphy turned to Pewter, both of them reposing on the kitchen table, forbidden to them and therefore more appealing. *“That dog will never learn.”*

Pewter tapped her skull with one extended claw. *“Dog brains.”*

Mrs. Murphy jumped over to the window over the kitchen sink. *“They're coming inside. Off the table.”*

Pewter waited until she heard the screen door slam before leaving the table.

“Hi, kids,” Harry greeted her cats, who ignored her.

“Make her suffer for leaving us here.” Mrs. Murphy stalked into the living room.

Pewter, knowing some manner of food would be placed on the table, decided to be mildly friendly.

Harry spied the cat hair on the table and wiped it off with a wet dishrag. “You were on the table.”

“Was not,” Mrs. Murphy called from the living room.

“Was too,” Tucker tattled.

“Shut up, you little brownnose,” Mrs. Murphy yelled at the dog.

“Blair, thank you again for letting me drive a dream.” She opened the refrigerator door, removing corn bread and butter. Not that she had made the corn bread; Miranda had given her a big pan of it on Friday after they left work.

“Any time.”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. Susan drove by while I was waiting for you and the sheriff. She said N expects you in the First Virginia for reenactment at Oak Ridge.”

“I'll call him.”

“I didn't know you were into that battle stuff.”

“I'm not. They're short of bodies.”

“Isn't it expensive to get the gear?”

“Yeah, but I can't complain if I've just bought a Turbo, can I?” He laughed. “Some of these guys are a little extreme, but I'm looking forward to it.”

“*Extreme?*” Mrs. Murphy sardonically replied as she walked back to the kitchen, pointedly not paying attention to Harry. “*They're a quart low.*”

“*I think it's fascinating.*” Tucker sat down on Blair's foot.

“*You think anything's fascinating that has dead bodies in it.*”

“*Well, dogs eat carrion. That's what they're for, I guess.*” Pewter pressed against the refrigerator door. “*Nature's garbage collectors.*”

“*People hang out deer for a few days,*” Tucker rejoined.

“*Better gut them the minute you kill them or you'll have some terrible-tasting deer.*” Mrs. Murphy wasn't fond of venison, but she could eat it if prepared in buttermilk.

Pewter moved back to the table. “*There aren't going to be any dead bodies at the reenactment, just people pretending to be dead.*”

“*The way things have been going, the commission meeting coming up might have a few dead bodies.*” Tucker giggled.

Pewter turned her full attention on Harry, who had set out some thinly sliced roast beef.

“Stay on the floor.” Harry read her mind, not difficult under the circumstances.

“*One teensy piece,*” Pewter begged.

“*Me, too.*” Tucker had been transformed into Miss Adorable.

“No,” Harry said, but without much oomph.

“*She'll weaken if you sit by the chair.*” Pewter hurried to get on Harry's right side.

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