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Feinstein had always kept a tidy place. How could she not? She spent every waking moment in search of imperfections.

Now the place had been torn apart. Nearly all her furniture had been dragged to one side of the apartment, and stacked up or leaning against the wall—Victor’s wall. It looked like the insides of a ship thrown to one side by a wave. And there were blankets—so many blankets—in every crevice, and piled up to the ceiling.

A sitting area remained apart, a couch with carved-out flowers and a nightstand. On it an ornate lamp glowed bronze, and a staticky radio sang Patsy Cline. It was tucked in the farthest corner, away from the bulwark of armoires and coffee tables, away from 3B.

Feinstein put on a kettle for tea. Greg sat on the sofa, and she next to him with her hands folded in her lap. Victor was ‘just like her ex-husband,’ she said. They were both ‘rude, nihilistic adulterers,’ she said, but Greg was pretty sure Victor had never married.

The kettle whistled. Her cloudy, cataract eyes rolled in their sockets, and she felt her way to the kitchen. Instead of pouring it into the tiny cups with tea-bags and dollops of honey waiting, she poured it out and restarted the process. A whistling kettle meant it was too hot.

When the tea finally arrived (enough for two sips), she closed her eyes and savored the scent.

Greg downed the honey-water in one gulp, and clinked the empty cup on the plate. “So what the hell was that?”

“As I said, it’s a demon.”

As much as that made sense, it was useless. Demons were not something he could call an exterminator for, take legal action against, nor interact with in any reliable way.

She sighed and looked away. She looked ashamed.

“Miss Feinstein?”

She spoke a single word: “Isolation.” She sat there like it explained everything.

“What does that mean?”

She sighed. “My son was talking to me. Before the cat became...”

*A demon.* Greg didn’t like saying it either. The more he said it, the crazier he felt. “Timmy’s your son?”

“Yes.” She breathed deep on the tea. “He was talking to me. Calling about once a month. Once a month is good for a kid, believe it or not.”

Greg wasn’t sure about that. If his mother were alive, he’d call her every week. Every other week, at least—or once a month, on the outside.

She snarled, baring white gums. “He married the wrong woman. You have no reason to care, I know that. But I’ll say it once, because it’s the truth. That woman turned my boy against me. And Timmy was all I had.” Her scowling face managed a deeper scowl. Wrinkles showed between her wrinkles. “Angel knew it.”

“The cat.”

Her fingers whitened around her teacup. Her voice dropped to a near-whisper, so Greg leaned in close. “I was in the laundry room when I heard a growl. It thought it could have been—God, I don’t know, a wolf? Its footsteps were heavy. Then Victor comes in, talking to it like a pet. *She’s not ready*. That’s what he said.”

“Ready? Ready for what?”

“I don’t know, but he kept saying it. *She’s not ready. Not yet, baby girl*. I begged him, *get her away from me*. I could just hear this... snarling. but he wouldn’t talk to me. He just kept talking to that *thing*, saying, *she’s not ready*.”

Greg waited for more.

“I don’t know what ‘ready’ is, but I know what she wants.” Her eyes seemed to gain their sight as she spoke the next words. “She wants me isolated.”

“How do you know?” The question had leapt out of his mouth, but he already knew the answer. He felt it when—

“She would purr to me!”

Oh, *the purring*. Greg looked at the wall of furniture, wondering if the cat was purring as they spoke. He considered pulling a few blankets to see if he could hear something. He just wanted a little hit.

“Every night, she came right up to that wall and purred.”

The purring was anesthesia. It made Clara un-allowed. Hell, even his instinct for survival couldn’t get a word in edgewise when that shit was rolling. *Put me under, Doc*.

“And you know when it starts? When I think of my son. When I think of how he *hates* me. Or doesn’t care.”

Like how Clara didn’t care.

“I didn’t believe it at first. So I did some testing. I sat right next to that wall and started boohooing about how alone I am, and how much I deserve it. And you know what? Cat starts purring. Like a whisper in my ear. And I start following the sound. I’d have gone in by now if Victor didn’t keep his door locked.” She set her teacup aside with a shaky hand. “She *feeds* on isolation. She controls you with it.”

*Enslaves.*

“Go ahead, call me crazy. I’m just a crazy old woman, right? I was right about the demon, wasn’t I? *Wasn’t I?*”

“Yes you were.” He looked her over and tried to find sympathy. It did not come easy for a woman like Feinstein. *Boo hoo, I’m blind*, had been good for about a month, until she started calling the cops on other tenants for vacuuming their floors too aggressively. “You need to move to another apartment.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“It’s no charge.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“You can’t stay here.”

“They found me in the laundry room, it wouldn’t help.”

“Miss Fein—”

She held up her index finger like it formed a shield from Greg's words. "This has been my home for twenty years. Long before you showed up. I'm not going anywhere."

He'd always heard about people living in war zones or refusing to evacuate for a natural disaster—old fucks with nothing left to care about but their own doggish, territorial instincts. Here it was in the wild, with the same stubbornness, and the indignant proclamations of Victor Mason.

Outside the apartment, the wooden hall squeaked. Victor was back. The squeak became a groan, then footsteps, thunderous and slow. It was an odd sensation, to feel trapped in his own building, paralyzed on that flowery sofa.

It was an *angering* sensation. His hand gripped the night table, ready to bear his weight. He wanted to march to door, and barge into the hall, and tell tell Victor to get the hell out his building, and take his cursed fucking cat with him.

His hand relaxed. He snuck to the door and saw Victor through the peephole, limping and out of breath. Mud on his jeans. They listened to the footsteps pass.

After a minute, Greg snuck out and hurried for the stairs, minding the squeaky floorboards. His thoughts raced, but one thing was clear as he fled down the stairway to his own apartment. Litigation and lost business be damned, Victor had to go.

He sat at his dinner table, elbows on his knees, phone in hand.

What would he say if he called the cops? That call could not include the words, *demon cat*.

It would have to be reported as a legitimate health or safety concern. He could claim an allergy, he supposed—a *severe* allergy, so they couldn't ignore it.

*A deathly allergy*, he thought, realizing Feinstein had given him the exact same lie.

But a landlord didn't have the rights a tenant did. The best he could hope for was a warning, a fine, a misdemeanor charge—nothing that would solve the problem quickly.

His hand was getting his phone sweaty, he put it away. His fear of the cat had been a vague thing, a weirdness to shudder at and dismiss. Even during the tussle, he was only reacting, the fear more a compulsion than a feeling. Now his mind wondered. What might have happened if Feinstein hadn't opened that door? Could it slam him into the wall? Could it tear flesh with its bite?

He imagined Clara's reaction to his death. Her face contorted with grief, maybe a tear. Her hands covered her face, her posture crumpled, and she keeled over sideways and landed her head on the arm of another man. That man was a silhouette with a presence like a blackhole. Greg steered his mind away to avoid getting caught in the wake.

The silhouette was gone, but Clara wouldn't leave. It was six weeks ago. As he cleaned up dinner, she sat in the empty chair he stared at now,

sipping wine. He had expected her to hurry off to work, but there she lingered, like she was waiting for something. Something Greg had not provided.

*Now* he didn't want to wallow in his own skull. *Now* he wanted to tell her that something was seriously wrong in 3B, and it was about a cat, but it was about him too. *Now* he wanted to tell her what he saw in the warping face of that cat, the face of all humanity, scowling back at him with horror for all his silence, his unlike-ability, his emptiness. *Now* he wanted to talk. Why couldn't he have wanted that before?

He watched his past self wish Clara a good day at work and head for his room. Dumb, stupid, idiot, stupid fuck.

He would have told her everything. *Greggy*, she would have softly said, and scooted that chair over so she could wrap her arms around his side. Her breath would have warmed his neck, her kiwi-shampooed hair would have tickled his nose, with just a hint of tobacco from the cigarettes she liked to “sneak” when she went to the bathroom. He would have rested his cheek on her head, and she would have rocked him, right there at the dinner table, and warmed his hand with hers, and told him everything would be wonderful because she'd be with him forever—if she were there.

But there was no hand on his. It astonished him somehow that he should take up all the space of his apartment, just a man scowling at his dinner table. He might as well be packed away somewhere, or stacked up with all the other vegetables like logs on a wood-rack.

“Jesus Christ.” He slapped the table hard to cut the silence. Lows like this were not acceptable. Pontificating over his loneliness—*gross*. His self-respect had been on the decline since the day he met that damned cat.

Then he made a decision that made him smile.

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In the movies, leaving an anonymous tip always involved someone in a phone booth with a trench coat and concealing hat. There were no phone booths in town. Besides, he had evidence, of a sort.

He grabbed the tape with the footage of Victor running down the hall after his hooker. He grabbed the broken camera too (he wasn't sure why, but it couldn't hurt). He printed out a note with one line: *Victor Mason is a dangerous man, please investigate.*

He felt like an amateur criminal. He thought about writing, *Anonymous Tip* on the envelope. He debated on the likelihood of them using handwriting analysis to track him. Fingerprints. Almost certainly not, but he wasn't comfortable with even a tiny risk. He wiped down the camera and tape, stuffed it all into a heavy-duty envelope addressed to the police, and dropped it in a public mailbox.

As soon as he got back, he pulled a document from his files, one he'd typed up months ago. The header read in large bold print, NOTICE TO EVICT.