

**THE CAT'S MEOW**

by

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Laurie Williams worked at The Willshank Construction Company, the business her husband, Bob, helped establish with his best friend, Ed Shank. Bob was killed in an accident on the job and Laurie now owned half the firm.

Even though it had been three years since her husband's death, Laurie couldn't help but feel lonely, and tears fill her eyes at least once a day. This afternoon gave her no relief. She slammed the ledger shut on her desk and stood. "I'm leaving early and going by the animal shelter. I'll see you in the morning."

Beth, the office secretary, glanced up and smiled. "I think that's a great idea. What type of a companion are you thinking about?"

"A cat or dog. Not sure until I look over the little varmints." Laurie grinned. "I'm sure one of them will steal my heart before I leave the place."

"No doubt." Beth handed her a sheet of paper. "By the way, this came over the fax machine this morning. Looks like they've had a prison break and are alerting companies in the nearby area who use delivery services to warn their drivers not to stop for anyone who appears to be in distress." Laurie studied the grainy photo of the long-haired man and grimaced. "He's a mean-looking bugger. Better make some copies and disperse them to our guys."

"Will do. Good luck at the pound."

"Thanks."

Laurie left the building and drove to the home for abandoned animals. She walked up and down the aisle, studying each and every cage housing the adoptable creatures. Several puppies caught her eye, but as she strolled by the felines, one reached out and swatted at her leg. She crouched down and touched the cat's furry white paw sticking through the wires. "Hey you, are you wanting my attention?" The cat meowed and put his other foot out. Laurie laughed. "You're a cutie. But you remind me of a skunk with your black back and white chest."

One of the attendants walked up to the cage. "Isn't she adorable? Unfortunately, she will be put down in another week if someone doesn't adopt her soon."

Laurie jerked up her head. "Why? Is she sick?"

“No, but we’ve had her for several weeks and need to make room for others coming in. We figure she’s close to a year old and most people want kittens.”

“But she’s so beautiful,” Laurie said, glancing back at the feline.

“I know. I’d rescue her myself, but I already have three cats and my husband said no more. The family who owned her had to give up the animal because they were moving, and pets weren’t allowed at their new home.”

“Does she have a name?”

The attendant smiled. “Her last owners called her ‘Stinker,’ because she reminded them of a skunk. Of course, you don’t have to use it.”

“Her tag definitely fits,” Laurie chuckled.

“She’s been spayed and is in excellent health.”

“I’ll take her.” Laurie stood. “I have a pet carrier in my car. I’ll get it while you get the paperwork ready.”

On the way home, she stopped at the local pet store and picked up cat food, a water dish and a litter box, along with some pet toys. Climbing back into the car, she turned toward the carrier. “Well, little Stinker, are you ready for a new home?”

When she arrived at the cottage, Laurie remembered she’d heard cats would sometimes hide for days before getting acquainted with their new surroundings. So to be safe, she loaded everything into the house, and set it up before she brought in the cat carrier. She then secured the front door to make sure the animal didn’t escape. Placing the cage on the floor, she put a couple of toys on the rug, then opened the wire door and took a seat on the recliner to watch.

The tip of the string she’d attached to the cage to keep it from slipping around in the back seat had fallen across the front opening. A white paw darted out and slapped at it. It didn’t take long before a black head with big green eyes slowly emerged. Laurie sat perfectly still, waiting to see what Stinker would do. The cat immediately eyed the toys on the carpet and dived for the soft little stuffed bunny.

Laurie laughed out loud as the feline batted it across the rug, then attacked it with all four paws. “Oh, you’re a clown,” Laurie said. “I don’t think you’re going to have any trouble adjusting to a new home.” She didn’t attempt to pick up the animal just yet, figuring she’d let the cat make the advances.

After two weeks, Stinker had made herself the queen of the household and Laurie enjoyed the company of the animal more than she’d ever expected. She wondered why she’d taken so long to get herself a pet. Now, she even looked forward to coming home from work. At least the house had some personality and not just cold walls. Stinker even played Hide and Seek when she arrived. Laurie would spend several minutes calling the cat’s name. Suddenly Stinker would lurch out of a hiding spot, scamper across the room and leap into her mistress’s

favorite chair. The game always sent Laurie into peals of laughter, especially when the kitty had guilt written all over her face. More than likely she'd find evidence of misbehavior somewhere in the house.

One night after work, Laurie pushed open the door of the cottage. The pitch-blackness of the room caused a chill to ripple down her spine. She must have forgotten to put on the light before leaving for work, and quickly flipped the switch, illuminating the lamp next to the recliner.

"Stinker," she called, glancing around the room before turning the night lock. Tossing her purse and jacket onto the couch, she made her way to the kitchen, checking every corner and spot where the cat might be hiding. She made a stiff gin and tonic, then tossed some crackers and cheese onto a plate. It had been a rough day at the office and her neck felt tight.

Carrying her snacks and drink into the living room, she set the items on the end table and kicked off her shoes. She removed the barrette from her long brown hair, massaged her head, and ran her fingers through the strands as they cascaded over her thin shoulders. Frowning, she studied the empty chair and a surge of uneasiness soared through her as she headed down the hallway, calling her pet's name.

"Stinker, where are you? Are you ready for a treat?" When she heard the soft sound of mewing, she dashed into the bedroom, and found the cat lying on the floor wrapped in knitting yarn to the point where she appeared hopelessly bound. "Oh my God," Laurie said, as she unwound the strands from the cat's legs and body. "You could have killed yourself, you silly animal!"

Once free of the long strings, Stinker wobbled and fell to the carpet. Laurie picked her up, held her close and gently massaged the feline's legs. "How long have you been trapped in this stuff, my little girl? Let's hope you haven't eaten some of it." She glanced toward the closet where skeins of yarn lay in tangled heaps. "Boy, it looks like you found a Pandora's box. Well, that sack of goodies will either be thrown out or stored away so you can't get into it again."

She placed the cat into her wicker bed in the living room. "If you aren't better by morning, I'll have to take you to see Dr. Margery. I'm beginning to think you like your veterinarian better than me." Laurie then went back to the bedroom, gathered up all the loose yarn, stuffed it into a big plastic bag, tied the top, carried it out to the back porch, and dumped it into the trash. She dusted off her hands, and as she strolled through the kitchen, picked up a handful of kitty treats.

Laurie dropped the goodies into the cat's bed, then collapsed into the recliner, and pushed it back until her feet were elevated. Sucking in a deep breath and keeping an eye on her pet, she picked up the remote control and tuned the television to the local news channel.

Munching on her snacks, she reminisced about how lonely life had been until she'd adopted Stinker. A grin tickled the corners of her mouth as she glanced at the ornery little critter. The animal seemed to be getting the circulation back into her legs as she swatted at a string from the quilt inside her bed. Suddenly, Stinker's ears twitched and she stood with a hunched back, hissing at the window.

Laurie jerked her head around, and saw nothing, but heard the crunch of leaves. "Probably just a raccoon or possum making his rounds. Settle down, Stinker, you make me nervous when you do that."

She took a deep swig of her drink, and tried to concentrate on the news as they described the escaped convict. He was an accused murderer and considered dangerous. They cautioned the residents to keep inside and not to open their doors to strangers. Laurie fidgeted in her chair. These were the times when she wished she'd sold her cottage and moved closer to town. The last streetlight was a half mile away, making her area dark and forlorn. All the padlocks securing her abode meant nothing, if someone tried to break in. Who could hear her screams?

Laurie shook her head, dismissing the horrifying thoughts soaring through her mind. *Fear mustn't get its hold on me.* She pushed down the footrest with her feet, padded across the room to the desk, tugged open the drawer, reached toward the back and removed a small pistol. Turning it over in her hand, she checked to make sure it was loaded, then clicked on the safety. She tucked it into her slacks' pocket, and returned to the chair.

Her eyes gazed at the screen, but her mind drifted to the chores needing attention this weekend. First of all, she'd rake up those autumn leaves. During the weekdays, work at the office took most of the daylight hours. By the time she arrived home, the sun had dropped behind the hills, making the evenings too chilly to work in the yard.

Laurie let the soothing drink take over and felt her body relax. Now for a nice bubble bath before bed, she thought, turning off the television. She rose from the chair and stretched her arms above her head. Letting out an audible sigh, she picked up her jacket and purse, clicked off the light and made her way down the dark hallway leading to the bedroom. Stinker, seemingly recovered from her ordeal with the yarn, followed closely behind. Flipping on the lamp, Laurie placed the pistol on the night table, hung up her coat, and put her purse on the small desk. She went into the bathroom, poured bath salts into the tub, and twisted the faucets to full force, causing bubbles to fluff up the sides. Shedding her clothes, she stepped into the warm water, and immersed her body into the sweet smelling bliss.

She closed her eyes, and almost drifted into a light sleep, but suddenly sloshed upward, sending water over the tub rim and onto the floor. She heard the crackle

of leaves again and certainly hoped the noise stemmed from the footsteps of nosey nocturnal animals and not the escaped convict.

Nervously she stood, grabbed the towel and dried the dripping moisture from her skin. She snatched her nightclothes from the hook on the door, dropped the gown over her head and shrugged into the terry robe. Turning off the light, she slipped into the bedroom and found Stinker sitting straight up in the middle of the bed instead of curled up near her pillow. The hair on the cat's back ruffled as she stared at the window. She let out a couple of sharp hisses.

"What is it, Stinker? You've never acted like this before when the raccoons made their rounds." Laurie knew the doors were locked and the rest of the house secure, so she flipped off the bedside lamp, pushed back the curtain and studied the darkness. The moon drifted in and out of the clouds as Stinker continued to grumble low in her throat.

At first Laurie couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. But when her eyes adjusted to the darkness, her heart leaped into her throat. The silhouette of a man sneaking alongside the bushes caught her eye. She watched him make his way toward the front of the house.

She reached for the phone with a trembling hand, but when she put the receiver to her ear, her mouth went dry. No dial tone. He must have cut the wires. She reached for her purse and fumbled inside for her cell phone. Her heart racing, she punched in 911, but nothing happened. Then it dawned on her she hadn't charged the battery in several days. Laurie made her way to the dresser and groped in the drawer for the transformer, but couldn't find it. "Where the hell did I put it," she mumbled, raking her fingers through her hair. Then she remembered she'd last used it in the kitchen, and never put it away. "Damn," she said aloud.

Dropping the cell into her robe pocket, she picked up the gun from the table and eased out of the bedroom. Alert for any sound, she poised the gun in front of her. Stinker trotted close at her heels. Laurie glanced into the den adjoining the kitchen, and sucked in her breath.

A man's form blocked the moonlight coming through the large window. His large hands rested against the frame and suddenly, he gave the screen a yank. She froze at the sound of splintering wood. When he stepped back and disappeared from her sight, she dashed into the kitchen and found the cell phone charger still plugged into the wall. Not wanting to stay in this room, she wrenched the transformer from the socket and stuffed it into her pocket. When she turned to head back to the bedroom, she tripped over Stinker and slammed her knee against the hardwood floor. Still gripping the gun, Laurie jumped to her feet, and winced at the stabbing pain in her leg. She glanced toward the window just as a large rock exploded against the glass, sending showers of silver splinters across the

room. Panic surged through her veins as she hurriedly limped toward the bedroom. Once inside, she pulled in the cat and shut the door. Laurie knew the flimsy lock would never hold out the madman. Placing the gun on the dresser, she dragged the heavy vanity chair to the door and hooked the back under the knob. Maybe it would at least give her time to call the police. Sweat formed on her forehead as she plugged in the charger and attached the phone. She kept glancing at the door as her trembling finger punched in the number.

When the operator came on, Laurie's voice shook so bad she could hardly talk. "Hello, help me. I think the escaped convict is breaking into my house at this moment."

"What's your address?"

She rattled off the house numbers. "I'm at the end of Crocker Lane. Please hurry, I'm sure he's entered my house by now. And I'm here alone."

At that moment, the door crashed open and the chair fell to the side. A huge man who appeared seven feet tall stormed into the room and stood between Laurie and where she'd placed the pistol. As he advanced, she screamed and dropped the phone. Clutching the front of her robe she moved backward until she found her self in the corner. "Please, don't hurt me," she cried, tears streaming down her cheek.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and threw her onto the bed.

"No, please, no," she sobbed, curling into a fetal position. Taking a deep breath, she tried to clear her mind of the horror she was about to endure. *Concentrate. Think of something to distract him.*

"Quit your whining. Don't have time for sex. I need food and then I'm outta here." He yanked her up by the arm. So get your ass in the kitchen and find me a bite to eat."

Laurie hurried toward the door just as Stinker darted from under the bed and streaked out of the room.

"Whoa! You got skunks in this house?"

"No. She's my cat."

As hard as she tried, Laurie couldn't help but limp.

"What's wrong with your leg?"

"I fell today and landed on my knee. It's just sore."

She let out a yelp as he gave her a rough shove. When they reached the dark room, he put his fists on his hips.

"Now, where the hell are the light switches?"

"Over by the door."

When he flipped on the lights, he squinted, and Laurie gasped at the sight of the big man. He was clad in what she suspected to be an orange prison jump suit.

It had dirt down the front as if he'd climbed through mud on his belly. The pant legs covered his feet to the point where she couldn't tell if he had on shoes or boots. His hair was matted and he had a smudge of dirt on the end of his nose. The man's eyes sent shivers down her spine. They were an unusual light blue and appeared to stand out from his face like they were perched on sticks.

He plopped down at the kitchen table and stared at her. She quickly looked away as she felt it wouldn't be a good thing to meet the frigid look from his cold eyes. He terrified her. The news had indicated the man had murdered more than once and was considered very dangerous.

She made her way to the refrigerator and opened the meat drawer. Fortunately, she'd bought extra food at the grocery store yesterday, thinking she might have Beth and her husband for dinner sometime this weekend. "I hope you like steak," she said, placing the package on the cabinet along with salad makings and a loaf of French bread.

He grunted.

Her body shook as she felt his stare following her every move.

"How about a baked potato?"

"Just fix the damn food," he roared. His gaze shot to the window as several headlight beams along with red and gold arches of light streaked across the window. He bound from the chair. "How the hell . . ."

He turned and reached for her just as she pulled the skillet from the cabinet. She swung the heavy iron pan in an arch, but he ducked and the blow only skimmed the side of his head, coming to rest on his broad shoulder. He yanked it from her hands and threw it across the room, barely missing Stinker, who clambered around the door jamb.

Grabbing Laurie's wrist, he yanked her toward him and hissed. "You bitch. I should have known you had a cell phone."

Laurie struggled to get away, but he twisted her arm behind her back, forcing her to cry out in pain.

Suddenly, a bullhorn sounded loud and clear. "We know you're in there, Avery. Come out with your hands up."

The murderer threw a neck hold around Laurie's throat and tightened his grip. "I've got a pretty little lady in here who wants to live. So you better hold your fire," he yelled.

A large beam of light shot through the broken window and he swung Laurie toward the ray.

She clawed at his arm in vain and cried. "Please, do what he says or he'll kill me."

The voice on the bullhorn blasted through the silence. "Come out with your hands up, Avery. You try anything and you'll be in more trouble."

Avery pulled Laurie toward the darkness of the hallway, grumbling. "Looks like my steak dinner just went out the window. Damn cops. And all because of you." He gave a quick jerk of his arm and made her gasp for air.

"Why are you doing this? I haven't done anything to you," she sobbed.

"Cut out the blubbing crap. Where are the keys to your car? I gotta get out of here."

"In my purse."

"Where is it?"

"In the bedroom."

He released his grip from around her neck and pushed her down the hallway. Laurie rubbed her throat with her free hand, while he held the other tightly against her back. It ached fiercely, she felt like he'd broken it at the elbow. Stumbling forward, she moved into the room. Lights were intermittently crossing the window, causing an eerie glow. She spotted the pistol on the dresser, and prayed he hadn't seen it. But her hopes went up in flames when he reached over and picked it up.

"Very nice," he chuckled. "What's a pretty lady like you doing with a gun?"

Laurie didn't answer, and pointed toward her handbag. "There's my purse."

He reached across her, gun in hand, and picked it up, then dumped the contents onto the bed. When he reached for the keys, Stinker flew out from under the bed with a loud snarl, pounced on his hand, and began biting and clawing at his fingers.

"What the hell," he screamed, shaking the cat free, and firing the gun at random.

Laurie had watched Stinker's antics with wide eyes. Her heart leaped in panic when the weapon discharged. But the cat had disappeared along with the car keys.

"Where'd that damn animal go?"

During the turmoil of the incident, Avery loosened his grip on Laurie. She pulled away, dashed out of the bedroom and ran through the house. Scrambling over the broken glass in the den, she threw open the door and stumbled onto the porch. An officer caught her in his arms and immediately pulled her to safety, seating her in one of the patrol cars.

Tears streamed down her face as she watched the house and mumbled. "My little Stinker, I hope you're safe."

The officer bent closer to her face. "Sorry, ma'am, I didn't hear you."

"My cat saved my life. I hope she's all right."

He smiled. "Felines are fast and know how to hide. I'm sure she'll be fine."

Several more shots were heard from inside the structure. Laurie jumped out of the car, holding her arm and gnawing her lip as she stared at the front door. "Why is he shooting? There's no other person in the house. Dear God, I hope he hasn't killed my kitty."

Avery came flying out the front door. Streams of blood flowed down his cheeks and his arms flailed wildly as he tried to knock off the black animal who'd secured a firm grip with tight claws around the murderer's head. "Get this animal off me," he screamed. "The stupid thing's going to blind me."

The next morning, Laurie opened the local paper and read the headlines; "Our Hero, Stinker, The Cat's Meow." A large picture of her furry lifesaver took up most of the sheet. Laurie smiled and turned it around toward her pet, who was leisurely cleaning herself. "Hey, little hero. You made the front page."