

STRAY

Rainwater trickled through the cobblestone streets as the sun rose. The night's storm left the changing trees dripping onto the town. The yellow-tinged leaves sagged, threatening to fall onto the worn paths over which they hung. Few were awake on that first morning of autumn, the temperature's slight shift not enough to wake the sleeping town.

Evelyn, however, had been awake for quite some time. She watched as the newborn sun grazed the buildings in her town square. Made of red clay, the houses projected a warmth into the air and onto the uneven roads running between each home. It was times like these that Evelyn admired the most. While she loved her neighbors, she felt they had a habit of marring the quiet magic of an early morning.

Evelyn's garden grew tall, turning toward the light in hopes of soaking up a lasting bit of sun before the winter came. Delicate blossoms opened their eyes, aware they had limited time, yet unburdened by the realization. Evelyn would plant them again next year and they would know a new life.

The young woman let her fingers weave their way through her hair as she watched her garden, contemplating the day and what it could bring. Subconsciously, her fingertips found the small silver charm dangling around her neck; the simple rose etched into it made her smile. Passed down from generation to generation, her grandmother had given it to her when she turned twelve after her mother passed. Only once Evelyn knew its meaning was her grandmother willing to part with it. Now, the soft leather of the cord was familiar, almost a part of her.

Her dark eyes glittered with sunrise and mischief. Far and away the most beautiful woman in the village, Evelyn remained graceful and kind. The fact that men looked her way only encouraged her to challenge their expectations. Her hair was dark, wavy, and as feral as the desert sitting at the edge of town. As a child, she was always told to tame it, but could not bring herself

to do so. Balancing the raging nature of her hair were her dark and steady eyes, unwavering and grounded. On many, they could have been deemed plain, but on the young woman they created harmony. Brown burst from the center of her eye, spreading a feeling of true interest and connection. As if, in every way, she *saw* you. And she wanted to. This, with her willful smirk and freckled skin, gave everyone in town comfort. She was, in every way, real.

At some point in recent years, her usual kindness had waned despite her best efforts. With consistent and stale advances from the men of the village, she was forced to put up a cold and impenetrable front. However, as the fall came in her 27th year, so did a desire for a partner. A companion. In her family, generations of mothers had told her there was no need for a man, and in many ways this was true. All the same, Evelyn grew tired of waking each day on her own, with no one to share the morning. She knew the days would ripen and grow colder. The thought of growing old alone made her uneasy, but the thought of being someone's wife did the same. A life forever linked to a man. A man who, society dictates, would dictate her. If she were someone's wife, what would happen to her? To her garden? To the things she called *hers*? Courtship and marriage meant losing all that she had to herself.

The solution came to her one night, revealing a way to stay anonymous through a final test for her suitors. She decided that the vying gentlemen would have to obtain her necklace and return it to her. The seemingly simple task would surely dispel men after her for only her looks, once they realized the necklace would be found on the neck of the neighborhood stray cat. In town, she intended to spread news of this contest at the pub. With a little luck the men in town would know by nightfall and in the morning, the race would begin.

The pub was rowdy and stuffy, filled to the brim with villagers after the day's work. Mary, the barkeep, stood behind her counter holding men at bay by promising them beer in exchange for a reasonable disposition.

"Evelyn! Come on over honey!" The mention of Evelyn's name parted the sea of drunken men. Most knew of the relationship between the two women and were careful not to stand in the way. Evelyn gave Mary a grin and sat politely at a stool.

"Just a glass of water please, Mary."

"Oh, just water? You feeling alright, dear?"

With a wink and a slight turn to the room, Evelyn responded "Oh, just fine thank you! I need a clear head. I believe I may start taking suitors and I want to give it my full attention."

With that, the atmosphere in the bar changed. Conversations dwindled as the men in the room began to listen to Mary and Evelyn.

"Really? That's nice dear. But how will you choose?" It was clear the room was listening, but Mary continued as if this were all in private, as Evelyn knew she would. Mary eyed her playfully as she waited for an answer.

"Well, you see, I have placed my grandmother's necklace around the neck of a lovely stray. The man that brings me that necklace may court me."

Mary's tight blonde curls bounced as she shook her head in confusion. "You silly girl. Catch a cat? What a ridiculous contest. Anyone can do that."

"Then, with hope, I shall be courted by tomorrow evening." Evelyn took a small sip from her glass, extremely aware of the way this news had hit the room. Some of the men gave looks, suggesting they thought the whole thing to be outrageous, while others looked confident. With a

wink to Mary, Evelyn excused herself before anyone could ask after her. She slipped into the streets as the night fell.

In the early hours of the evening, Mary finally locked up her bar, kicking out a group of young, foolish men who had spent the evening discussing cat-catching tactics. She turned the lock on the door and pulled her hair back, ready to fall into bed as soon as she got home. As she turned onto the main street, something brushed against her leg. A small, black cat weaved between her legs, purring profusely, jingling as it went. Mary crouched, picking up the small cat and tucking it into her arms. Beneath the long fur, Mary saw something sparkle, then hide away again. The cat purred again, stretching its neck out to allow Mary to see more clearly. Attached to a thin leather cord was a charm Mary quickly recognized. She felt the engraved symbol with the pads of her fingers, unable to see it clearly with the little light she had.

“Huh. Not very difficult to catch, are you? Let’s hope the next person you find is a good fit for our dear friend.” She scratched beneath the cat’s chin, letting it stretch out in her arms. “Alright then, you get going. You’re going to be very popular tomorrow.”

The next morning when Evelyn woke to take in the quiet town, she found she was too late. Instead of the empty streets that she was used to, she found men prowling around corners. Eyes low, they crept slowly, as if afraid to scare away their prey. Evelyn smirked, stretched, and ran her hands through her unruly hair. With the lazy pace of a spectator, she found her way to her usual seat beside her garden and sat in wait for someone to approach.

“Pspspsp” Evelyn heard from around the corner of her home. Filled with curiosity, she left her perch and turned her attention to the whisperer.

The man reached a gentle hand out to a black cat who was creeping its way toward him. Its big eyes glowed against its dark fur. Though it was curious, the cat approached hesitantly as if stealth were on its side. The man brushed dust off his face, leaving streaks on his skin. It was clear to Evelyn that he had been out searching all morning and considered the necklace a priority.

“Come here, little one...” The man whispered more to himself than the cat, urging it closer. He crept forward, leading with an outstretched hand. The cat crouched suddenly, turning the tables on its companion. The man froze, afraid of scaring the creature away. With a quick breath as the only warning, he lunged forward. The breath was all the cat needed. It darted under the man’s arms and sped around the corner, out of sight and reach. The man tumbled into the dirt in front of the garden. Once the dust cleared, he found himself at the feet of Evelyn herself. She offered her hand, which he gladly took.

“Thank you, milady. I apologize for the bungling approach, but cats are ever so quick.”

She smiled at the young man, analyzing his features before straightening his jacket.

“Did it work out for you, sir?” She smiled at him.

He cocked his head at her, questioning, but not arguing, her forwardness. “In a way, I suppose.”

Evelyn looked at him approvingly. “Perhaps next time, try letting her come to you.”

The man blushed, “I will. Thank you.” He turned to go when Evelyn caught him by the elbow.

“Excuse me?” She asked. “I haven’t seen you before. Do I know your name?”

The man turned his gaze to the ground. Without his eyes on her, Evelyn felt she was able to see him clearer. His dark skin shimmered and the skin around his eyes crinkled from, she

assumed, laughing. He was, in his own way, beautiful. A welcoming beauty. She felt herself begin to smile again and held her face firm.

“I do not believe you know of me, miss. My name is Thomas. I come from a village not too far east. I was told there was a beautiful and kind woman here looking for a gentleman. I can only assume that to be you?”

For the first time, Evelyn blushed at the mention of her beauty. It felt strange for the term to be applied to anyone but the man himself. “I do not know if I qualify as beautiful, but I hope to be kind. And I am recently open to suitors.”

“You are beautiful, miss.” He stated it with no hesitation or elaboration. He meant it simply and firmly. She was beautiful. Evelyn released Thomas’s arm and watched him go. This was not at all the way Evelyn expected to feel after only the first day. She felt the heat remaining in her cheeks and hurried inside.

For the rest of the day, not one person saw the famed stray. She must be in hiding, the village thought, and by the evening, many had given up for the day. Evelyn made her way to the bar that night, seeking company more than a drink. But instead of entertaining conversations about the cat, the contest, or her courting options, she sat quietly in the corner, exchanging only a few words with Mary when she wanted another drink.

“You sure you’re okay, love?” Her friend checked in every once in a while.

With a quiet smile, Evelyn would nod and drift off in thought once again. Perhaps this whole thing was silly. Why not just allow the men of the village to court her? She could turn them down easily enough. She had never had trouble making her mind clear. But that was the issue now. A clear mind. Every time she believed it to be, she thought again of Thomas, and her thoughts were no longer hers.

“Mary,” she declared as the barkeeper swept by, “I think I’ve made a mistake.”

Her friend only raised her eyebrows. Evelyn never made mistakes, and if she did, she would never admit it. “I believe I have found my match, but now he must bring my necklace to me before everyone else.”

“Truly I don’t know how it has taken this long. The poor beast came up to me the very night you announced the task.”

Evelyn smiled at this. “Maybe that is because you are the truest of heart, Mary.”

Mary scoffed at the notion. “I think your stray just has a love of beer.”

“That may be true as well,” Evelyn laughed and raised her glass, delighted to be joking with her friend as opposed to thinking about Thomas.

The challenge continued for the next few days. In the village, neighbors would give updates on the coming and going of the cat. Many tried to catch it by pouncing when it was distracted or even setting traps, but each time it felt as though the animal was two steps ahead. Evelyn watched as man after man gave up on the task or decided on more aggressive techniques. The only one to give the cat space was Thomas. She watched as he would leave treats in the cat’s favorite spots, leading it toward the garden where he sat. When faced with an opportunity to trap the creature, he sat instead. Quiet and focused, he sat with the stray cat, giving it the space it so desired. Eventually, Evelyn felt the walls come down. It was clear Thomas was interested, not in trapping the animal, but in a friendship. A friendship no other man sought. This interested Evelyn, but she kept her distance in spite of it all.



The leaves had almost all fallen by the time the cat felt comfortable with Thomas. They sat, not close enough to touch, but close enough to talk. Each day Thomas would tell the cat a story, weaving in bits and pieces of the life that had led him here.

Years ago, Thomas had known a young woman. The two had grown up together, and over time, Thomas had realized he loved her. She taught him a great deal and when the two of them came of age, he felt sure she was to be his wife. One day, on a picnic in the cool spring, he knelt before her and asked her to be his wife. She had looked at him that day, not in love, but in fear. She loved him, she insisted, but she was not his. And she never could be.

The secret, he told the cat, was that he had always known this. He was so grateful for the young girl's love that he hoped she would ignore her desire to go off on her own. Instead, Thomas's proposal only encouraged the girl to take the leap. That summer, she set sail on a small boat traveling the nearby seas. It was meant to be a short trip. She was meant to come back to him. She never did.

“So you see, my friend, I have spent a lot of time loving. A lot of time confused about what love is. Was that your job? To teach me to love, not to possess?” He asked. The cat moved closer, rubbing its head along Thomas's leg. “You know, I never thought I would love again. Now I am not so sure.” With a gentle hand, he reached for the cat's ears and petted them gently. “My goodness, you are beautiful.” His hands hovered around the necklace. “Are you ready for me to take this, my friend?” The cat looked at him, her brown eyes clear. He truly felt seen. The cat bowed her head to him. Slowly, he released the latch, letting the necklace fall into his hand. “Thank you.”

Thomas petted the cat again, grateful for her companionship as they walked to Evelyn's home. The lights in the window were soft and warm, welcoming him past the garden and toward her doorstep. He paused, necklace in hand. "I do believe I will love you, Evelyn," he said to the quiet creature. He knocked on the door.

As the winter warmed, Evelyn sat on her porch, wrapped in a blanket and watching the birds coming home from their journey. The world was quiet and she was alone. The town remained still as she slowly opened the door, careful not to slam it, as Thomas was still asleep. She watched his face from their bedroom doorway, unperturbed by the day. He always slept in, leaving her time to rouse herself in the comfort of her own solitude. She softly slid into bed next to him, curled up in the space he created, and felt his arms tighten around her. His eyes eased open to find her tucked into him. "Good morning, love. How long have you been awake without me?"

She looked at him, her wild hair untamed, "Long enough."