

A CAT TO DIE FOR

Maria Grazia Swan

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This book was inspired by two extraordinary women dedicated to help improve the life of animals, cats in particular.

Samantha Martin is the founder and master trainer of Acro-Cats. If you're not familiar with the project, these are cats trained to perform in circus like acts. Keep in mind, we are talking cats. I know what you're thinking; cats-trained-perform, all in the same sentence? Absolutely and that's what makes it so unique. And it's all done to help other cats in need. Here is the website where you can find the schedule of their coming appearances through the United States, <http://www.circuscats.com>

And then there is **Lynda Logan**, my boss and director of the no kill shelter Home Fur Good in Phoenix, Arizona.

I'm one of the volunteers there and I confess, when I describe the building of Furry Friends Founda-tion in my book I'm really describing Home Fur Good. Lynda and her crew of dedicated volunteers rescue and place hundreds of cats and dogs, some they pick up di-rectly from the Euthanasia list of the day. And they function on donations only. So if you are in the mood for a pet, or want to volunteer, come and visit us. here is the website www.HomeFurgood.org.

CHAPTER 1

Orange County-California. Summer 1994

“Is Margo still in Hawaii?” Linda rearranged the colorful brochures touting the purpose of the Furry Friends Foundation, FFF, the rescue animal shelter both Linda and Mina worked for.

Mina nodded. “She’s supposed to come home next week, but who knows with her? When she’s around Gino, nothing matters. Good for her, I guess.”

They had been allowed to set up their adoption booth in the parking lot of the Dana Point Harbor from eleven in the morning until five in the afternoon, and it was now four-thirty. There were lots of empty parking spaces even with people still meandering around from various souvenir stores to the juice and ice cream place. Mostly families with kids, but they’d be gone soon.

“We should start packing; we’re the only exhibitors left. There’s some kind of charity event later on with live music, I’m told. I promised we’d be out of here before the happy hour masses descend upon the marina.” Linda checked her stack of papers. “We didn’t do too badly, only three cats left, okay, four, but the black kitten is spoken for. Next year we should bring a few puppies too.”

“Are we taking the cats back to the shelter? I have five boarders at my place, and that’s about all I can handle until Margo gets back.”

“Sure, I can stack the cages in my SUV.” Linda sighed. “And another weekend is now over and I haven’t met prince charming. Too bad we can’t stop for a drink.”

“Yeah, I need to get home. One of the cats I’m boarding is being picked up this evening, and I want to make sure everything is perfect. They don’t pay us the big bucks for nothing, and Millie, who’s still covering for Margo, can only do so much.”

Mina bent down and pulled out the first empty cage from under the long table. Mixed feelings arose when she looked at the vacant carriers. She always got misty when one of their precious cargoes left for their forever home. Regardless of all the self-taught rules, she couldn’t help but get attached to all those little furry orphans.

“What a perfect beach day.” With her right hand shielding her eyes, Mina stood up and glanced at the sun sliding toward the ocean. Soon it would plunge and bleed into the water before disappearing for the night. Most of the day-crowd had already gone home. The next wave of people would be coming for dinner, happy hour, and entertainment to be found in the various restaurants and bars dotting the harbor. “If you want to meet a man, you need to hang around until after dinner time. Now, it’s mostly couples and families, being Sunday.”

Linda shrugged. “Is that how you meet men? You stay until late?” *Me, meet men?* “How long does it take you to drive home from Dana Point?”

“On a weekend like today, about twenty, twenty-five minutes if I take the San Diego Freeway. It’s a whole different story during the week. And no, I don’t stick around to meet men.” Enough already about men! “Okay, let me take down the awning. Do you have room for everything in your SUV?”

“Yes, no problem. I’ll drive it over here, and you can help me load, to make sure everyone gets home safe. I bet with your Italian accent all you need to do is open your mouth and men offer you drinks. Right? ”

“Why all this talk about meeting men and buying drinks?! Let’s take care of the cats. Well, the only one you’ll have to worry about is Houdini, the escape artist. Come to think of it, he’s been awfully quiet. What’s he up to down there?”

Linda laughed, shaking her head. “I’m telling you, he only acts up when you’re around. He thinks you’re his mama because of the months you fostered him. We’ll never get him adopted with you around.”

Mina squatted to look under the table where they kept the cages neatly lined up facing each other so that no pet could escape even if they managed to open their cage. “Ah, I knew it. You little devil. Linda, watch your end of the table. I don’t know how he did it, but he’s wandering between the cages and the plastic sign. I’ll catch him at the other end.” She heard Linda chuckle.

“Give in and adopt the calico already. You two are made for each other. Uh-oh, we have prospects coming this way. A nice couple just got out of a black car—looks like,” she let out a low whistle, “a Maserati.”

“Here kitty-kitty.” Under the table, Mina tried to get the cat’s attention. “Linda, you give them your spiel, you’re better at it than I am.” The cat evaded her. “Damn it, Houdini.”

“Well, hello…” Linda’s voice had a saucy tone, and she delivered her pitch with a perfect tempo.

She’d be great for a sports car commercial, thought Mina, or in this case to get passersby to stop, listen, and perhaps fall in love with a cat.

“Are you selling cats?”

Mina, still under the table hunting Houdini, smiled. Selling cats? The young woman sounded adorable, with a bit of an accent. Exchange student maybe? Just then, Houdini sprang from a space between the cages and Mina caught him with one hand.

“No, no. We’re a pet rescue organization, but you can adopt a cat if that’s what you’d like to do. This one is already spoken for.”

Was Linda talking about the black kitten? Mina crawled back toward Houdini’s cage with the cat in tow.

“We have a few available here and many more at the shelter. Adorable puppies and dogs also.”

“Nadya, you have a cat,” the man said.

Mina froze. It can’t be. She blinked, as if that could change anything, and Houdini the escape artist took that moment to slip out of her hand. That voice. No, not now.

“Yes, darling, I have a cat here in California, but what’s so wrong with looking?” The young woman sounded much put out.

Darling? Mina held her breath. Her hands shook. Maybe she was mistaken. She hadn’t heard his voice in what, two years? He was someone’s darling, someone called Nadya?

“Would you like to see our other cuties? Mina, what are you doing down there?” Linda called out cheerfully. “Hey, Mina, we have a lovely young lady who would like to look at our cats?”

Linda, shut up, don’t say my name! Before Mina could find her voice, and some courage, Houdini leaped over her legs and darted for the side of the table Linda was supposed to be guarding but wasn’t because she was too busy talking to the cat lover. Mina scampered after the cat, and in the heat of the chase she lunged, falling on her knees with a thud, her hands missing Houdini by a whisker. She stared in horror at the four-legged rascal as he scurried up a man’s trouser leg. No, not *a* man’s trouser leg—Diego Moran’s trouser leg! Mina looked up, her face on fire. Diego looked down, unruffled. He’d heard Linda call her name. No fair.

Mina watched Diego watch her, and she couldn't help wondering if he was thinking of the last time they'd seen each other. Incapable of controlling her emotions, Mina had run over his motorcycle with her car to stop him from getting too close, and once again convincing her he loved her. He hadn't changed much, she reflected, except for the better, or maybe it was the effect of the setting sun providing an aura of quiet complacency to the face of the complex man she had known so intimately.

"Hello, Diego," Mina said, and then she noticed that he held Houdini by the scruff while bending slightly to offer his hand to help her up. His hand. Might as well be a poisoned apple.

He cocked his head expectantly and she remembered they had an audience. Mina grabbed onto him and got up. He must have felt the trembling of her hand, because his expression changed, now looking anything but complacent. Mina recovered her hand and worried about how her expression looked now.

"You two know each other?" The voice belonged to a young beauty. Her dark hair, short and curly, gave her the look of a Renaissance cherub. Nadya had glossy, luscious lips, and fiery eyes that darted from Diego to Mina and back again.

"Know each other? Oh—yes." Careful to avoid touching his hand again, Mina took the calico from Diego and scratched behind the cat's ears, playing for time to collect her thoughts, and her racing emotions. "Gino. He's our common denominator. Gino and I are... neighbors—in Italy, I mean." She smiled innocently, and unconvincing, at the young woman.

Nadya rested her hand on Diego's arm.

Marking her territory? Mina moved behind the table and stood next to Linda.

"Is that a calico? Let me see?" Nadya's eyes suddenly fixed on Houdini, who Mina clung to for comfort. The young woman seemed definitely interested in the pet. "Darling, don't you think this cat looks just like my Zeus?" There was excitement in her voice.

That was easy. Mina sighed. I think I handled that well. There were no more questions about how her darling and the cat woman knew each other.

"Yes, Nadya, they're the same color." Diego avoided looking at Mina, and the cat for that matter. "We should get going, people are waiting." He bent down and brushed his hand over the spot where Houdini had clung to his trouser, forcing the young woman's hand to slide off his arm.

Mina noticed the well-tailored suit he wore. Italian no doubt, as was the light blue shirt worn with no tie. Nadya's voice brought her back to reality.

"Is this a male? A male calico?" Nadya adjusted the bejeweled belt on her purple dress and acted like she hadn't heard a word Diego had said.

"Yes," Linda answered when Mina remained silent. "And we're aware it's very rare for a calico cat to be male. Houdini here is about one year old and—"

"How much?" Nadya asked.

"How much what?"

"The cat—Houdini—what a silly name for a cat. I'm buying it. Now. Name your price."

What? Mina clung more tightly to Houdini.

A sense of uneasiness clouded the ensuing silence. The splashing of water on the side of the motorboats, and waves crashing against the jetties seemed to be the only audible noises for a while.

"Nadya, we're leaving California in forty-eight hours. What are you planning on doing with the cat?" Diego's voice sported the same blandness and restraint as his forced smile.

“We’re flying out by private jet. Who’s going to check if I have one or two cats in the carrier? Heh? Who?”

Mina suddenly felt sorry for the man who’d broken her heart, so she found her voice. “Look, Nadya, we don’t sell cats. Regardless of how much money you’re willing to pay, it’s not about money.” Maybe she was being too harsh; this wasn’t about her. “You’re welcome to fill out adoption papers and leave your phone number. We’ll call you if your application is approved.” She picked up an adoption packet from the table and offered it to Nadya, but by the look on Nadya’s face Mina thought she was about to be assaulted by this petite bundle of fire.

Diego stepped in and took hold of the papers and of Nadya’s arm. “Let’s go. We can talk about this in the car.” He turned to Mina and to an astonished Linda. “Ladies, thank you.” He nodded and left with a reluctant Nadya hissing at him in something that wasn’t English.

“What was that all about it?” asked Linda. “Whew, I thought that little princess was going to hop over the table and slug you good.”

“Linda, why are you calling her a princess? Do you know her?” It was difficult to carry on a conversation. Part of Mina's brain, and most of her soul, walked alongside Diego on the way to the Maserati. The minute the car left the parking lot, she felt relief, followed by a sense of undeniable loss. As usual, all her emotions were openly displayed, this time in front of Linda. Mina hadn’t even realized that her coworker had taken Houdini from her arms and secured him in his cage. After all this time Diego still held all that power over her. *Maledizione*.

“No, I don’t know her,” said Linda, “but she acts like royalty. Never mind the spoiled brat. Tell me about the brooding hunk, and don’t think for a minute you’ll get away with the just-friends routine. I didn’t buy the Gino’s story, and neither did the princess. I assume the reason she wants the cat is to piss you off. Did she steal Mr. Diego from you? No, that’s not it. You’ve never seen her before. I could tell, the same way she could tell there’s a lot more going on between you and her darling than the ‘common denominator.’”

“Was.” Mina focused on packing things up.

“What did you say? Was what?”

“Linda, whatever we had between us has been over for a long time. Years. Maybe I should adopt Houdini? Silly name for a cat,” she mimicked Nadya’s accent. “Bitch.”

Linda was laughing and laughing as they folded the tablecloth. “I’ll let you off the hook for now, kiddo, but you and I are doing dinner this week, and I want to hear all the dirty details about the love affair. Hey, Houdini comes out ahead. You taking him home tonight?”

“I can’t. I need to make room in the main house and sort of prepare Aria. She wasn’t too enchanted by his gimmicks when I fostered him. Probably felt like he was getting all the attention since I had to bottle-feed him the first few weeks. I’ll call the office in the morning, have them draw up the adoption papers, and then go pick him up. Maybe I’ll take Aria with me, so it won’t feel like he’s invading her space. Then they’ll go home together.”

“Sounds like a plan. Hey, I bet he’ll call you.”

Mina knew who Linda meant. She also knew he wouldn’t call her. Why should he? She was no match for this Nadya.

Walking to her car, Mina felt old, ugly, dejected, and very, very lonesome.