CATS

CATS

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If you were fire, this is how you'd want to burn, a true democracy of flame, all with an abundance and none with more than the other. They tried to fight it, tried to find an entry point, but all were consumed, as if fire knew they'd be coming and was tormenting them. All they could do was watch. It was marvelously contained. It burned quick and tidy. Just the old house. It would be remembered as one of the most bizarre and terrifying fires in Kalispell's history. Five people dead. A child survived. A child and a half dozen cats that must have jumped from the fire. The child, a burnt-orange haired boy, seven-years old, his name now forgotten unless one cared enough to query the Internet, was found watching from the front walkway when the first neighbors arrived.

"He was quiet and unresponsive," one recalled. "Like in a trance." The interviewer suggested he was in shock, obvious to anyone watching the report back then. When the fire department arrived, they had to work around him. He stood there on the front walk as if waiting to be asked inside. They tried to move him but he kept going back, lifting the cats and carrying them across the street. The chief asked the neighbors to take care of him. No one offered. They didn't know the boy, barely knew the family, even after five years on the block. They kept to themselves. They were rarely out. They never spoke. We didn't even know how many people lived there. School? Guess so. No, don't know where, never even saw them at the bus stop; I suspected their parents drove them. But I don't know, never saw them do that either. "Cats seem to be the only friends the poor kid's got around here," the chief noted to reporters.

An elderly woman took him. She'd lived across the street, same house for fifty-three years. She knew the family, enough about them anyway. Enough to talk to the media but she didn't. The things she saw weren't the type of things she wanted to share. Didn't matter that they were dead. It wasn't how she was raised, wasn't how she lived. She knew lots of things about all the neighbors but she never gossiped and refused to repeat gossip.

Years ago, her kids gone, she and her husband sat at the small kitchen table most of the day. Then, she rarely took note of the outside. She drank tea and he, tomato juice. They small talked while he read the paper, she her romance novels. He carved miniature soldiers; she crocheted. Then he died. Then she had plenty of time to watch the world outside go by. The neighborhood was young, then old, then back to young again. She watched life in the streets, the holidays, the parties, the gatherings. That was a year before the odd family moved in. They did nothing, and that fascinated her.

She didn’t have much luck with him either when she took him by the shoulders to lead him away from the burning house. He came with her dutifully. There was no struggle, no reluctance. But as soon as she released him, he headed back to the fire. Something was drawing him back. “His family,” the chief said. “He’s in shock; something inside is telling him he can’t leave them alone. I’ve seen it before.” She didn’t think so. She had been watching the family long enough. Something else.

She was too old to be chasing him down but somebody had too, and no one else offered. Or dared, was a better word. She could see it on their faces. She watched as neigbors crossed the street to avoid going by the house. They'd grab hold of their child's hand when there was an absolute need to keep on the sidewalk, and hurry their way past when on their own. And always with an eye on it, as if from a dark corner evil would come. It wasn't a fear of this peculiar boy. He was, after all, just a child, and all knew of children and childish things. It wasn't fear of his family, as unsettling as they were. It was the unknown, and this family had become the boogey-men beneath their beds.

At her third attempt she brought him inside her home to the barking of her Yorkie. For the first time he stood his ground upon being released. "You like puppies?" she said, picking up the dog. "Actually, she's small but not a puppy; she's almost eight years old. I got her for my birthday." She brought the Yorkie closer so he could pat him. But he didn't. He cocked his head, studying the dog. The Yorkie growled as it pulled away. "JoJo stop that," she said. JoJo's aggression was not unusual, it being part of the breed, but like the neighbors JoJo had an instant uneasiness around the boy. "Looks like you two need each other," she said, knowing the boy hadn't a clue to the reference, even if he was listening.

She tried putting JoJo into his arms; she wouldn't go. Just as well, the boy didn't seem interested in holding her. "I've got a few things to do," she said. "So I need you to watch JoJo for me. Can you do that, watch JoJo?"

He responded with the same quizzical look he used to study the dog. But he followed her onto to front porch and stood in place while she fastened JoJo to her leash and the leash to the wrought iron post. She went inside and watched. The boy didn't leave. He stood gazing lazily at JoJo who sat himself down on the far end of the porch.

She went about her chores in the kitchen. She was pleased to have reached him with JoJo, even as a momentary distraction. A new fascination to take him away from the horrors facing him. Perhaps, she thought, he would never recover. She allowed herself to imagine his future without a family, perhaps without a mind. It would take time. She'd be gone before he either overcame or succumbed. At least in this moment, she had reached out and he had grabbed hold. If he can remember only that, she mused, maybe it will be enough to help him through.

Jojo was yipping madly on the porch. She finished washing her tea cup and dried her hands. Within that time JoJo had stopped. *Let it go,* she told herself. The boy may be teasing or scaring the dog but the interaction was good for him. Alone and quiet was a bad combination. It wasn't that long ago her own kids were that age. It's what dogs did for little boys. She stepped into the front room. Through the window she saw his head. He was sitting contentedly but his stare was again across the street at his house.

He was sitting with a cat nested on his lap, the source of JoJo's wild yips. "Ah, you have a new friend, I see. Make certain not to let Jojo off her leash again; she likes to wander. So where did she run off to?" She didn't expect an answer.

She stepped off the porch, calling out as she walked around the house. Her screams drew the attention of all those on the street. Even the boy took the time to divert his gaze to the dog. Of course there was nothing she could do. The dog was consumed in dying flames; her charred carcass beyond help and recognition. She looked up at the boy, her mouth agape, her eyes hiding neither the horror nor the contempt. The boy had seen enough. He sighed and turned his attention back to the raging fire across the street.

CATS

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Libby, Montana – 27 years later

There wasn't much to love about Libby, Montana, but then, there wasn't much to hate either, and that was good enough for him. It was small; it was slow; it was country. There was plenty of hunting, fishing, and hiking. There were people, of course, but enough space between them so that he could avoid and ignore at his leisure.

When Alston Waters retired from the FBI, he had no plan. He could have hung on until mandatory retirement at fifty-seven but "hanging on" to anything was not a philosophy of life he embraced. Hanging on to his prior career as a Marine officer, hanging on as a Supervisory Special Agent, or hanging onto his wife, entailed having to look back with regret. *Yeah life*, he would be saying, *I hung on.*

So he dumped all three in quick succession. His military career was the first to go. When his promotion to major took him out of the field and put him behind a desk with no respite in sight, he resigned his commission, to his wife's displeasure. She enjoyed the ten years of travel, especially the last billet at Kaneohe Bay in Hawaii. When she asked "so what next?" he shrugged. She wasn't sympathetic.

She had reason. They had three children, two boys and a girl, all under the age of eight. The thought of heading back to live with her parents in Akron or his in Grand Rapids was not a happy one. The FBI was hiring. He applied and was selected.

That was over twenty years ago. They were assigned to the Minneapolis Division, bad enough for her. After three years, he volunteered for the resident agency in Pierre, South Dakota. That made it worse. She and the kids lasted two years. The divorce was finalized eight months later. "Self-destructive," she called him in the papers. He had no clue what that meant. Was that even grounds for divorce? *Infidelity.* Surely that was grounds. *Extreme cruelty*, another good one. Or *Habitual Drunkenness.* But it didn't matter, he wasn't the one who filed.

She got remarried. It didn't take long. Truth was, he suspected it was in motion halfway through the Pierre assignment. He missed the kids and kept up on their birthdays and holidays. Two were married now. He didn't attend. Sad, but he wasn't invited. Not being around to defend himself really hurt the relationships. If it was him with the kids, he wouldn't have fostered such an atmosphere of hate, that much he knew. But what did he know; he was self destructive.

He would have stayed in the Bureau if he could have rewritten the rules. He became Supervisor of the Pierre office. It wasn't a bad gig. Being a small office he still got out to investigate, so the supervisor part just meant reviewing reports and going down to Minneapolis once a quarter. Then the seven-year rule came up. After his seventh year it was up or out, either up to FBIHQ in Washington or step down to be a Special Agent again. Washington wasn't going to happen. As for the step down, no big deal, and the pay stayed the same.

Only the step down entailed moving from Pierre; can't work where you once supervised was the logic. They needed him back in Minneapolis. They didn't need *him;* they needed bodies. And they needed them on the Counterterrorism squads. He had never worked CT, never been trained, never wanted to be. He was a criminal guy: bank robberies, kidnappings, gangs, drugs, Crimes on Indian Reservations. He lasted there three years, until he was fifty-two. With his twenty years in, he retired. Again, without a plan.

While on the SWAT team, he took several TDY missions around the country, several to Butte, Montana where he got to know a few of the county sheriffs. He was retired for less than a year when he received a call from Tom Vanderpool, perpetual Sheriff of Lincoln County. He was a gruff, old Vietnam Vet in his early seventies. As a retired Marine Gunny Sergeant, they hit it off when they first met. He called Alston "decent" for an officer and Fed. Praise didn't get much higher than that from men like Vanderpool.

There was a job with the department. It was a three-year contract for a training officer, renewable, depending on funds. Sheriff Vanderpool had a man like Alston in mind when he introduced the idea to the Commissioners. When he met up with a mutual friend at a seminar in Butte and heard Alston had retired, well, the timing couldn't be better. Was he interested?

Alston's federal pension set him up pretty well, especially in South Dakota, especially for his simple needs. And his fly fishing skills were getting serious attention amongst anglers. But he couldn't do that forever. He was only fifty-three, for crissakes. Some of his contemporaries were still in the Corps. Starting a life of leisure this early would make him real old, real quick. Vanderpool suggested he drive to Libby to check it out, a fifteen hour drive at most, fourteen or less if he badged his way through. Alston didn't need to check; he took the job before hanging up.

He closed up his small cabin on Bad River and was packed in less than two hours. No sense selling it; he wanted to come back. And renting meant worrying it would get trashed. He asked a neighbor to keep an eye out and dust it every month or so.

Training officer. He thought about it on the drive. Did that entail Equal Opportunity Training? Workplace violence? Community Policing best practices? He doubted it. Those words coming from Vanderpool's mouth would have sounded laughable. Still, he should have asked. Maybe Vanderpool was attempting to pawn such duties onto a contractor so as to free the real training up for a real cop.

He took his time, a leisurely lunch and dinner, a stop off at Custer National Forest. Letting his mind wander as it was prone to do on long road trips, he realized that for an out-of-the way state, Montana, like Ohio, had quite a few familiar cities, Libby not among them: Billings, Helena, Butte, Missoula, Bozeman. And a few famous landmarks: the Little Bighorn, Glacier National Park, Great Falls Portage, Upper Missouri Breaks, Bear's Paw Battleground. Well, except for the Little Bighorn, perhaps not so popular, except to the avid outdoorsman/history buff.

He made it in at one in the morning, seventeen hours. His GPS showed the Kootenai River just east of the downtown. His fly fishing skills would not suffer. He checked into the first motel he saw, the Sandman Motel Down Under. Blurry-eyed and half hallucinating, who could pass up on a name like that? He awoke at seven. Vanderpool told him to call him whenever, and schedule a time to meet. Whenever was fine with him. He grabbed a bear claw and coffee at the breakfast bar and walked east to the river. Bumping into the Amtrak tracks, he meandered over to California Avenue and onto the river bank. It was wide at this point, and not terribly scenic. It

had a fairly fast flow and was no doubt pretty deep, not the best for fly fishing. Still, river like this had to have dozens of streams both north and south. Definitely needed to do some research.

He went past the Sheriff's Department on his return trip. It was close to eight-thirty. He asked a non-uniformed bleach-blonde woman at the front desk for Vanderpool. She informed him the Sheriff was out on a run. Alston assumed it was for breakfast. Vanderpool came in ten minutes later, sweating vigorously in his long-sleeved Green Bay Packer jersey. It had been nearly four years. He'd lost weight, a lot. He looked good, better than Alston. Fly fishing didn't keep one in Marine shape. The sheriff sopped sweat from his neck with a face towel while offering his free hand to Alston. "Bright and early, huh? That's a good thing."

"I only did it to get a coffee and pastry," Alston said. "I'm not jogging."

"Not by choice for me. Got to, according to the docs. High blood pressure. Either I run or cut out the coffee, beer, and chocolate."

"Could do all three," the blonde said without looking up from her desk.

"Meet Bev? My mother died and left her in charge. Talk in the office. Want another cup?"

"I could use it."

He nodded to the corner. "Gotta get our own. Bev don't do coffee."

"Damn straight, hun."

The office, like the building, like the city, like the state, was austere. It fit Gunny nicely. "When you get in?"

"O-dark-thirty."

"So haven't seen much yet."

"I took a walk to the river. Good fishing?"

"So I've heard. Don't do any myself. So ... why'd you quit the Bureau?"

"Didn't quit, Sheriff, I retired."

"Call me Tom or Gunny. Why'd you retire?"

This was the interview *after* accepting the job. He wondered if giving the wrong answers would get him bounced before day one. The hell with it; the answers were the correct ones for him. "They pulled me down to the big city to work terrorism."

"And you don't think that's important work."

"Very important. Got a rash of Somalis going back to the homeland to learn how to do bad things. Just not for me, that' s all."

"You're sounding defensive, Alston. Don't be. I'm the one makes this decision and I made it. Just wanna know where your head's at."

Alston decided to hold his tongue and let the boss be boss. "First things first, don't know what your financial status is but I know Feds get a decent pension. But I remember, you're divorced, right, and got kids

"She's remarried and the kids are grown."

"Didn't remarry?"

Alston shook his head.

"I did. Twice. Got it right this time, I think."

Alston got it. They'd be working close together and Gunny wanted to get a feel for his wiring.

"So anyway, salary. Best I could get you was twenty-four grand. And that's bare naked. No medical, no dental, no matching four-oh-one. Days off and sick leave, that's left up to me, but trust me, I'll be liberal. I know how much you Feds enjoy your down time."

It was a joke, mood lightening. Alston gave in with a tight-lipped smile.

"Probably should have given you that input when we spoke, but I was hoping to get you more. Which I did, by the way. Originally they budgeted twenty-two."

Alston was fine with it. He did his homework on Wikipedia. Median income for a family in Libby was about twenty-seven thousand. This pay and his pension put him three times above that, and he had no one in tow. Must make him the richest man in town. "Money's fine, Gunny. But I'll take you up on the liberal leave for my fly fishing."

Gunny filled him in on the town, the county, and the department. The county was big but small; 20,000 folks crammed into 3,700 square miles. The department had thirty-eight sworn deputies. That raised Alston's eyebrows. "Don't take their law enforcement very seriously, do they."

"'Bout as serious as the rest of the country takes the military, not a damn 'til the shit hits the fan. But that's why I got the contracting bug. Too many additional duties for my deps, too many damn distractions. If it were up to me I'd contract out the entire admin BS. Dispatch, detention, community outreach, parking enforcement, process servers. Bam." He slapped his meaty palm on the metal desk. "Patrols and investigations, that would be it."

"So I take it I'm gonna be handling all the gum-on-the-bottom-of-your-boot jobs?"

"Some. Kinda, yeah."

"EEO, community policing, type stuff."

"Not gonna lie to you, Alston."

"Not gonna lie to you either, Gunny; I'd rather be in Minneapolis working terrorism."

"Well, that boat's sailed, hasn't it?"

"You think that makes me out of options?"

"Look, Alston, I didn't call you just to be my PC officer. You have skills and experience. But you have no god damn − "

"Sheriff." It was Bev from just outside the door.

"Yeah, sorry. I meant to say, you have no gosh darn personality to speak of, and that's comin' from a Marine Gunny, mind you. But I've been to your tactics classes and seen you lead drug raids. I've listened to your op orders. We need that here. So yes, to justify having you, I need to use you for the other stuff, but trust me on this, your skills will be used and abused to the fullest of my power."

"When do I start?"

"Tomorrow. Eight. Unless you're up for an early morning jog with me."

"In my contract?"

"Nope."

"I'll pass."

Gunny flipped him a binder. "Read the policy manual. You have any recommendations, keep 'em to yourself for now. Wait till you learn where the bathrooms are before making yourself at home."

Alston stopped at Bev's desk before leaving. "I've been advised I have no personality, so I guess I gotta develop one so I don't have to hear it for three years. I'm Alston Waters, new department training officer."

"Makes you feel any better, Mister Waters, I don't have much of one myself. Course I don't have to, I married the boss.

CATS

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Boning up on EEO and the like was mind numbing. Alston was always in compliance with the laws and rules as an officer and agent, but the laws and rules had nothing to do with why. They were just constructs to insure common decency, and since when did common decency need such oversight? Most of the stories the manuals gave as practical exercises consisted of behavior he associated with little boys pulling girls' pigtails and schoolyard bullying. The lessons, designed to drag on for two hours, he could sum up in two words. "Grow up."

As for personality, he gave it his best shot. He enjoyed instructors who could tell a good opening joke. Course, he enjoyed the drill sergeant approach, as well. He learned early on he was neither. He couldn't tell a joke; he couldn't curse. His lessons were peanut butter and saltine cracker dry.

Out in the field he was at his best. Lincoln County issued forty caliber Beretta PX4 Storms. Not a bad sidearm but Alston preferred his forty-five. The office had two shotguns and four M-4's. One deputy was proficient with both, sixteen had never shot an M-4, and twelve had discharged a shotgun just enough to be dangerous to any good guys standing nearby.

The department's shooting drills had consisted of static exercises at ranges of five to fifteen yards, and the entire day, from warm-up to qualification, took less time than the affirmative action classes. Alston introduced the use of barricades and shooting from inside a vehicle. He constructed stand alone doorways and window frames to simulate room and house entries. He purchased three pepper-popper targets, with his own dime, to develop speed and accuracy. He developed a close-range exercise designed to enhance their point-and-shoot skills. The range days went from ninety minutes to four hours. Not everyone was pleased.

"I get the training," Vanderpool said. "And so do the young deps. But you got older ones out there. Standing that long isn't good for them."

"I hope to hell that's *their* bitch and not yours."

"Course it's coming from them."

"Some of those deps are sucking wind walking up to the firing line. Speaking of that, do you even conduct PT tests?"

"Why? To put on record they're out of shape? They know that. It is what it is, so the saying goes."

"Agreed. And what it is is those people have no business being in law enforcement."

"You've seen the EEO guidelines try getting rid of them."

"Just saying, Gunny, time to get serious."

"You just need to slow it down."

Alston nodded, more in understanding than agreement. "You got over thirty-seven hundred miles out there, and a lot of open spaces. Long guns are what you need. And good small unit tactics. Remember Leonard Peltier?"

"Out here, who doesn't?"

"Those two agents had a fighting chance if they had something better than three-fifty-seven revolvers."

"Getting bushwhacked didn't help," Vanderpool said.

"No. But I know Agents Coler and Williams would have changed the outcome with M-4's."

"That's a budget issue."

"But why aren't the ones you got issued? They sit in the arms room; they need to be in someone's backseat."

"Yeah? Whose? You said so yourself, only Deputy Lester is proficient. You want him to be a one-man SWAT Team?"

That was the opening Alston was working towards. Not a SWAT *team*, not for a forty-person department, but an entire department that could function as one if the occasion arose. Alston had been a team leader on the Minneapolis SWAT for twelve of his twenty years. He applied for the FBI's elite Hostage Rescue Team but was cut at the end. They gave no reason, they never do, but it was his personality again that did him in. He simply didn't mix well enough with the team.

When he returned to the office he was inundated with supportive e-mails about how BS it was, that he was the most tactically proficient agent in Minneapolis, and the best marksman. It had to be politics again. But to Alston, peer relations were an acceptable reason to bounce him, and that had always been his Achilles heel.

Knowing your partners capabilities, knowing they know what you know and are able to execute, that's the hallmark of any team in any field. So maybe Lincoln County didn't have the resources for a dedicated SWAT team; they could still be taught the weapons and tactics. All it took was time and training. In a crisis, that would serve them all well.

"I think your deps need team building; they need some dedicated field training," Alston said.

"Sounds like you wanna take them out on an FTX."

"A field training exercise is exactly what they need. I'm not questioning your leadership or skills here, Gunny, but do you have a plan for your primary targets in this county? I mean, from a crisis management point of view, your hard targets, soft targets?"

"We have no nuclear power plants here, if that what you mean."

"No, but you have a big ass dam on that river out there. Closer to home, you have schools, hospitals, shopping centers, movie theaters. You need floor plans on file for those places, and wiring and plumbing diagrams. Whenever they change, you need updated copies. Your deps need to know the entrances and egresses. I know you have festivals here. You need tactical operation plans, not just plans for traffic control and parking enforcement. And by the way, you know that none of them even know what MOUT training is?"

Sheriff Vanderpool sighed and gave that look reserved for city officials who walked in with a parking citation. "Remember that hint I gave you about reading the policy manual and ─."

"Really Gunny? That's the best you got? What I'm talking about here is exactly what you hired me for. You don't want it ... let me go. Your county; your problems. I got no dog in this fight."

"I guess I look at Lincoln County as a sleepy, old place that doesn't need stuff like crisis management and terrorist screenings. Maybe I could be more forward looking without going all

Rambo on the place. But you've been hired and I've been elected. Not your thing, I know, but I got politics to play by. And I got budgets and perceptions."

"You really think the people around here are going to fight you on this?"

"Hell yes. I think it'll scare the shit out of 'em. What do I know that they don't? What am I hiding?"

"You don't need to tell them."

"I make sure nothing goes on here in secrecy; it's how I keep my integrity and my parking spot."

"You don't tell them about my range drills. You don't tell them about my defensive tactics classes."

"Those aren't costing money."

"And neither will this."

Vanderpool sat up in his chair and cleared his throat. "Neither will what, Alston?"