



MY
BELOVED
MONSTER

Masha, the
Half-Wild Rescue Cat
Who Rescued Me

CALEB CARR

New York Times bestselling author

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Who Rescued Me*

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York Boston London

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CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

PART ONE: DESTINIES

[Prelude: 17 Years](#)

[Chapter One: The Encounter](#)

[Chapter Two: “You Have to Take That Cat!”](#)

[Chapter Three: The Cat-Boy](#)

[Chapter Four: Masha Unbound](#)

[Chapter Five: A Mystery Unfolds](#)

[Chapter Six: Masha Doubles Down](#)

[Chapter Seven: Wrapped Inside an Enigma](#)

[Chapter Eight: The Brave Wounded](#)

PART TWO: ARENAS

[Chapter Nine: Lions Were Slaughtered There, Too](#)

[Chapter Ten: The Blood Rites of Spring](#)

[Chapter Eleven: *Unus ex Debilatum*](#)

[Chapter Twelve: The Stairway to Nowhere](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Wounds of a Warrior Queen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: City for Conquest](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: She Beat Up a *What?*](#)

[PART THREE: CAMPAIGNS](#)

[Chapter Sixteen: The Lady Vet](#)

[Chapter Seventeen: Watchcat](#)

[Chapter Eighteen: Pacts](#)

[Chapter Nineteen: Echoes](#)

[Chapter Twenty: Bonded Fidelity](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One: Devil Cat and Demon Dogs](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two: Two Afflictions, One Struggle](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three: The Wraith](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four: Striking a Bargain](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five: *Göttindämmerung*](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six: *Mors Fortium*](#)

[Epilogue: Legacies](#)

[*Photos*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*Discover More*](#)

[*Suggestions for Further Reading*](#)

[*Also by Caleb Carr*](#)

For Herself:

Always, now, forever.

And for Those Who Came Before,
whose lives and too-often-tragic ends
imparted so much of the knowledge that
allowed me to build a secure world with Masha.

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*She will always be the only thing
That comes between me and the awful sting
That comes from living in a world that's
so
damn
mean.*

—Mark O. Everett
“My Beloved Monster,” 1996

PART ONE

Destinies

PRELUDE

17 YEARS

During those years, the days and weeks began to matter much less to me than did the phases of the Moon, the winds, and the seasons. Once, I might have noted that such a long span could have contained an appreciable marriage, or the bulk of a career, or a child's development from birth to high school graduation. But those kinds of milestones, never very important to me, shrank to complete insignificance while we lived together in the house that steadily became, from the instant she entered it, more hers than it was mine. Increasingly, my sense of time became *her* sense of time, and her sense of time was governed by sunlight and darkness, the sounds of the prevailing winds shifting from mild to roaring over the chimney, and the changing shape of the glowing, arcing disc in the night sky, which she sat and watched from her various outdoor and indoor reconnaissance posts. We filled each day—and even more, given our shared habits, each night—with the business of those hours: writing for me, hunting and defending our territory for her, and sleeping as well as sustenance for us both. But any larger, external sense of life moving on was, ultimately, ruled by the seasons.

Yet there were internal and alarming signs of life's passage, too: we both had injuries and illnesses and the simple perniciousness of age to remind us that the years were mounting up, that we weren't as strong or as fast, or as quick or resilient, as we'd been at the start. But neither of us ever stopped fighting against such attempted intrusions into our long-established routines. And ultimately what mattered most was not the maladies and the hurts but the fact that we were there for each other, always and at every possible moment,

during and after them. For as long as was needed, time was suspended; and only when each crisis passed would the primacy of the great unseen clock that divided light from darkness, heat from cold, bare branches from lush vegetation, be acknowledged again.

We were, then, ourselves timepieces: both of us recognized this quality in our respective souls and bodies, of course, but we also caught it, perhaps more pointedly, in each other's. Injuries and illnesses from which we recovered less and less rapidly until every one left traces and then changes that were no longer disguisable, no longer subtle at all: these were the inescapable marks of time, as were the limitations they represented, and they could only be ignored up to a steadily more constricted point. It was in both our natures to keep trying to push past the constrictions, often dangerously, and always to each other's dismay. But we did it anyway, both knowing that when we fell short of any given objective, we would not be alone. Perhaps we were even testing that consolation, just to be sure of its permanence. After all, the sometimes-agonizing pain resulting from those reckless attempts was, with only a few exceptions, never so great as was the comfort of each other's company during convalescence. And that was one more thing that kept me, and I suspect her, from even imagining a day when the pain would have no remedy or consolation at all.

Seventeen years; and here we are at that day. The one of us in spirit, the other in scarred, aging body with just one risky job, the last risky job, left to do: to tell the story of the shared existence that filled those years. For, after all, they were years that formed—whatever our method of measuring them—a lifetime; a lifetime that cannot help but remain vivid in my memory. It was Masha's lifetime: Masha, the name that she chose for herself during our very first meeting. Yes, she was a cat; but if you are tempted, even for an instant, to use any such phrase as "*just* a cat," I can only hope that you will read on, and discover how that "mere" cat not only ruled her untamed world, but brought life-affirming purpose to my own.

In the face of such claims, a question persists: "But how *could* you live for such a long time, alone on a mountain with just a cat?" It's sometimes asked prejudicially, by people who, if queried in reply as to whether they would be as amazed if I said I had been living with a dog, or even a horse, nod and opine that they could imagine *that* scenario—but a *cat*? Such people are usually beyond any ability to really process explanations; but to those who

aren't, I can only say that the experience of being a person alone with a cat for so long and in such wild country depends to some extent on the person, but far, far more on the individual cat. And in Masha was embodied a very rare animal indeed: a cat who expanded the limits of courage, caring, and sacrifice. Think that's beyond a cat? Think again.

There are aspects of her story that you may consider embellished; but I can assure you that they are all perfectly true. Hers was the kind of life that most cats—locked away in little apartments and houses, often with the best of human intentions, yet with the unchangeably wild parts of their souls nonetheless inhibited, and no outdoor domains to rule—can only experience in dim flashes, as if envisioning a glorious if perilous past incarnation. The kind of life, in short, that most cats can only dream of...

Masha lived it.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ENCOUNTER

The drive north those seventeen years ago actually took little more than an hour and a half; but it seemed longer, a false impression created whenever I found myself driving through Vermont. It's a state about which many New Yorkers, myself included, tend to feel a bit ambivalent, not least because Vermonters (or "Vermunsters," as New Yorkers often have it) can sometimes be a self-satisfied if not downright smug and even hostile lot, who consider themselves more "organic," more closely tied to and respectful of the land, than are their countrymen next door. A friend of mine from their largest city of Burlington, for example, once told me that Vermonters view the difference between New Yorkers and themselves as "the difference between fleece and wool": exactly the kind of fatuous crack that can (and did) elicit a creative volley of obscenities from denizens of the Empire State.

Regional animosities aside, however, there were more immediate grounds for my uneasiness that autumn day. As it happened, animal shelters in much of northeastern America had for some months been plagued by a particularly virulent and deadly form of kennel disease; and if you were thinking about adopting an animal, which I was, you had to make absolutely sure that you went to a shelter known to be clean and uninfected, like the one outside Rutland, Vermont, toward which I was headed. It had been okayed by my then-veterinarian, and this was not an excess of caution: one of the most insidious things about this disease was that, like many kennel plagues, it wasn't just transmitted by cats and dogs to one another in shelters and breeding mills: people, having visited an infected place, could bring the

illness out and transmit it to animals in other places by carrying it on their skin, clothes, and hair. The consequences of such carelessness could be extreme, as I'd recently learned through a visit to an unsafe location: when I told my then-vet that I'd visited the place and even touched one animal, he ordered me to go straight home, take a very hot shower for at least half an hour, and burn—yes, *burn*—the clothes I'd been wearing. Then I would have to wait a minimum of two weeks before visiting any approved shelters, to make doubly sure I wasn't carrying the illness.

At this, I'd uttered a quiet, saddened version of one of those volleys of obscenities to which I've mentioned New Yorkers being partial. I'd finally gotten ready, even anxious, to adopt another cat, and it'd taken long months of mourning for me to reach that point: my last companion, Suki, had, after four years of unexpected but very close cohabitation, been claimed by the cruelly short life expectancy (just four to five years) of indoor-outdoor felines, especially those in wildernesses as remote as the one we inhabited. In fact, before encountering me and deciding that I was a human she could trust, Suki had lived on her own for two years and raised at least one litter of kittens in the wild, and so had beaten the odds admirably; but her disappearance had nonetheless been a terrible blow, and, as I say, it'd taken a lot for me to get to where I could think about bringing someone new into my world. The prospect of waiting another two weeks once I'd made up my mind was therefore mightily disappointing; but it was my own stupid fault and I had to accept it.

Winter rarely comes late in the Taconic Mountains; and with autumn reminding me again of this fact, and my having recently moved from a small derelict cottage into a ridiculously oversized new house that I'd very nearly bankrupted myself building, I began to feel that renewed companionship was not only desirable but necessary. After all, when you live at the foot of a particularly severe mountain called Misery that is riddled with bear dens, coyote packs, bloodthirsty giant weasels called fishers, and various other predatory fauna, it's all too easy to sense how "red in tooth and claw" Nature can really be—especially when the temperature hits thirty below and the snow starts coming in three-foot installments. On top of all that, I was already dealing with several chronic health problems that had long since led me to live a solitary life, so far as my fellow humans were concerned. Taken as a whole, these factors were pushing that tooth-and-claw sensation over the line

and into dread, and the importance of having another living thing with whom to share those long, looming months was mounting.

So I quickly began to scan online photos of available cats at acceptable shelters. You can never go by appearance alone, of course, when it comes to animal adoption: personal chemistry between adopter and adoptee is far more vital, something that helps (but does not solely) explain the failures of so many adoptions during the Covid-19 pandemic, when pre-adoption visits were largely forbidden. And it's not just one-way: whatever your own feelings regarding any possible cohabitant, you *have* to give that animal the chance and the right to decide if you're the correct person for her or him. (If it seems odd that I don't use the word "pet," I can only say that I've always found it a diminutive behind which lurk a thousand forms of abuse.) So far as mere photos went, however, Rutland did seem to have some likely candidates; and since my vet had given it the okay, I decided to call and set up a visit.

And then, the first hint that something unusual was up: I was told that in fact they had more cats on hand than were pictured on their website, though when I asked why, the voice at the other end became evasive. It wasn't the kennel disease, a plainly distracted attendant assured me when I asked; but as far as candidates for adoption went, well, it would probably be best if I just came up and had a look.

The idea that this was more perfidious Vermunster-ing did cross my mind; but I tried to stifle such provincial feelings as I headed north. And, overall, by the time I'd covered half the distance to the shelter I had overcome most of my uneasiness and felt ready to meet whatever awaited me.

I was, in a word, not.

The Rutland County Humane Society, like most such institutions, is located not in the city from which the county takes its name but just outside it, in a much smaller community called Pittsford. The structure, too, was not unusual for such facilities: a low, somewhat rambling single-story building of aging-modern vintage, surrounded by dog kennels and other telltale signs. It looked relatively peaceful as I parked, despite the predictable barking of the dogs who were outside at that moment and evidently thought I might be their ticket out of the chain-link. But when I stepped inside, a different atmosphere prevailed: controlled urgency would be the best way to put it, with attendants in full and partial scrubs rushing about and trying to cope with what was

apparently an overload of business.

And that overload was easy to see in the main hallway that led back among offices and exam rooms: cages of every description, all containing cats, were stacked three and four high against one wall. All this was in addition to the animals and habitats in the couple of rooms that housed the usual complement of whiskered ones. I asked a passing attendant what was happening, and got a quick explanation: apparently an elderly recluse, one of those people who give the phrase “cat person” such a pejorative connotation among much of the general public, had been raided a couple of days earlier. The bust had happened for the usual reasons: neighbors reported intolerable smells and sounds coming from the woman’s small house, and when animal control officers gained entrance they found sixty-odd cats struggling to survive in what was supposed to be their home.

Such awful places and the people who create them out of some delusional sense of caring are not uncommon (more’s the human shame), but this case had been extreme by any standards: the first order of business had been to find shelters among which the cats could be distributed, then to wash them, since hygiene in the small house had been nonexistent (urine being so soaked into the floorboards that the wood was spongy), and finally to get them all spayed and neutered. It was an enormous undertaking, one requiring the staff of as many shelters as possible, and the charitable offices of every vet in the area who would help. Things were only now starting to come under control, I was told, so if I wanted to roam around by myself I was welcome to, and someone would be with me as soon as possible.

Absorbing all this information, I began to look at all the mostly terrified, still recovering faces inside the cages. For a moment I speculated on the nature of a human mind so tragically warped that it could create such awful consequences, but the moment was passing: a flash of color from down low caught my eye, and I spun around. Initially I thought I was hallucinating: the color was very close to what Suki’s had been, and I’d always considered her fur unique. Blonde, with almost a halo-like ticking of pure white at the tips of her fur, it had created an arrestingly beautiful, in some lights even ethereal, effect; and here I was seeing it again, or so I thought. I went immediately to the spot.

Down near the floor, trapped in one of the small traveling carriers that make human lives easier but also prevent their occupants from either standing

up fully or stretching out completely, was a young cat, unmistakably female (the smaller and more delicate size and shape of the head is the first and quickest way to judge), with two of the most enormous eyes I'd ever seen. She had clearly seen and sensed me before I'd become aware of her, and now she was watching my approach intently, even imploringly. I'd been right, the general color of the fur was like Suki's, but there were important differences: Suki had been a shorthair, whereas this one's fur was lengthy, growing in flat layers that avoided too much of a "puffy" effect. Her tail, however, was unabashedly large and luxuriant in all directions, like a big bottle brush or duster. In addition, where Suki's eyes had been a brilliant shade of light emerald, this girl's eyes were remarkable for their deep amber—indeed golden—color, as well as for their enormous size in proportion to her head. They had a round, what is called "walnut" shape (as opposed to the more exotic "almond," or oval, eyes of many domestic cats), and their pupils were almost completely dilated, despite her being in a well-lit area. Fear or discomfort could have been responsible for this dilation, of course; but she didn't seem to be either in pain or deeply afraid. It was more like nervousness, an attitude that would have been fully justified by the predicament in which she found herself. Yet as I got nearer, this explanation didn't seem to fit, either.

Up close, her big, brave stare took on an air of searching insistence, which only made it more expressive. Indeed, it was one of the most communicative gazes I'd ever seen in a cat, a look facilitated by the structure of her face: the eyes were oriented fully forward, like a big cat's rather than a domestic's, and seemed to comprehend everything she was studying—especially me—only too well. When she held her face right to the cage door, I could see that her muzzle was frosted white at the nose and chin and oriented downward more than the outward of most mixed breeds, allowing her even greater range of vision. On either side of her head she had tufts of fur extending out and down, like the mane of a lynx or a young lion; and these led to and blended in with an unusually thick and impressive "scruff," that collar of vestigial extra skin around a cat's neck that their mothers use to lift them when they are kittens (and that some humans, even some veterinary assistants, mistakenly believe they can grab to control and even lift a grown cat harmlessly, when in fact cats find it uncomfortable and cause, sometimes, for retaliation). Finally, exceptionally long white whiskers descended in two arched, rich clusters from

the white of the muzzle, increasing the effect of the kind of active wisdom present in big cats, as did the animated ears, each turning and twisting on its own at every sound.

Taken together, the features were of the type that some people call a “kitten face,” and with reason: the look is unmistakably reminiscent of very young cats. But even more vitally (if less sentimentally), forward orientation of the eyes in adult cats serves the same purpose that it does in their big, wild cousins: more coordinated binocularity (or stereoscopies) improves vision, especially when roaming and stalking at night. Then, too, it should be remembered that “kittenish” does not imply ignorant or naïve: feline cubs and kittens have one of the steepest learning curves in Nature. From weaning through their earliest weeks they are forever studying and observing their surroundings, along with modeling their elders and experimenting when on their own. This is true even, and often especially, when they seem to be simply playing; and it’s all so they’ll be ready when their mother kicks them out and on their own, which in the wild occurs at only four to five weeks.

Was this cat hunting *me*, then? That didn’t seem the explanation, though her detection of me before I’d even caught sight of her did indicate an agenda of her own. And there was something very intriguing in that, because of what it exemplified about how cats read, identify, and select human beings.

As I got closer, she continued to put her nose and face up against the thin, crossed bars of the cage urgently, her confidence and her persistence seeming to say that I was right to be intrigued by her, but that my main task right now was to get her *out*. Smiling at this thought, I leaned down to put my face near hers, but not so near that she couldn’t see me (at very close range—closer than, say, six or eight inches—cats’ eyes lose some of their focus). Then she began to talk, less repeatedly and loudly than the other cats, and more conversationally. I answered her, with both sounds and words, and more importantly held my hand up so that she could get my scent, pleased when she inspected the hand with her nose and found it satisfactory. Then I slowly closed my eyes and reopened them several times: the “slow blink” that cats take as a sign of friendship. She seemed receptive, taking the time to confirm as much with a similar blink. Finally, she imitated the move of my hand by holding one of her rather enormous paws to mine, as if we’d known each other quite a long time: an intimate gesture.

It may seem that I was reading too much into a few simple interactions,

especially something so simple as smelling my hand. But things are rarely as simple as they may look or seem, with cats. The question of scent, for instance, is not only as important for cats as it is for dogs, horses, or almost any animal; it is arguably more so: besides being somewhat less efficient up close, cats' eyes are not at their best in bright light. Their vision truly comes alive at middle to long distances, and especially, of course, in the near-dark (they are technically *crepuscular*, or most active in the hours just before complete sunset and dawn), all of which contributes to their sometimes "crazed" nighttime activities. When you enter a well-lit room and a cat looks up at you from a distance anxiously, they're doing so because at that moment you are a general shape that they need to hear from and smell. Our voices are important initial identifiers to nearly all cats, and having further determined who we are by scent, they will relax—or not, depending on their familiarity with us and what our chemical emissions, even if unremarkable to us, say about our intentions.

It's often thought to be folksy wisdom that cats can detect human attitudes and purposes. Yet they can indeed sense such things as nervousness, hostility, and even illness in what we radiate. On the other hand, if we emit warmth, ease, and trust, they can tell that, too. But this is not some mystical ability: cats are enormously sensitive to the chemical and especially pheromonal emissions that many other creatures, including people, give off according to their moods and physical states. This uncanny ability developed as part of their predatory detection skills but broadened to include self-preserving appraisals of animals that might be a danger to them. Conducted through not only the nose but also the Jacobson's, or *vomeronasal*, organ in and above the palate (which they access by way of the Flehmen response, during which they open and breathe through their mouths in a distinct way that is almost like a snarl by isn't one), this ability is chemically complex but vital. During both predation and defense and ever since their earliest decision to live among us, it has helped them determine not only what potential prey and dangers are about, but which humans they will and will not trust or feel affinity toward.

Put simply, if you're a person who finds cats untrustworthy or sinister, then you bring that lack of trust to every encounter with them. You involuntarily exude it, chemically, and no cat will want anything to do with you. Similarly, people who are allergic to cats often justify their dislike of felines by spreading the myth that cats somehow conjure a dysfunction in the