



MYSTICAL
CAT
SHELTER



HEATHER FAWCETT

AUTHOR OF *EMILY WILDE'S ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF FAERIES*



BY HEATHER FAWCETT

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Agnes Aubert's Mystical Cat Shelter

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NEW YORK



Del Rey

An imprint of Random House

A division of Penguin Random House LLC

1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

randomhousebooks.com

penguinrandomhouse.com

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Hardcover ISBN 9780593973257

Ebook ISBN 9780593973264

International edition ISBN 9788217300754

BOOK TEAM: Production editor: Loren Noveck • Managing editor: Paul Gilbert • Production manager: Angela McNally • Copy editor: Liz Carbonell • Proofreaders: Pam Feinstein, Susan Gutentag, and Karina Jha

Book design by Caroline Cunningham, inspired by an original design by Virginia Norey, adapted for ebook by Arienne Dinh

Title page frame and chapter opener ornament: Svetlana Parshakova/Adobe Stock; cat illustration: Adobe Stock

Cover design: Lolloco

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland.

<https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

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For Artemis, of course



CHAPTER 1

I paused on the threshold of the shop to stamp the frost from my boots. It settled on the sills and cobblestones at night now, a fine white fur, as if winter were a great beast who skulked through the city while we slept, leaving bits of pelt behind. At least the snows hadn't arrived yet, which was some relief.

I removed my gloves, surreptitiously checking my sleeves for cat hair. The landlord, an older, narrow man, watched me with an expression of gravity disproportionate to the situation.

"It's a good size," I said, finally giving up the attempt at honesty. The shop was not as bad as some of the others, but even if it were, I was desperate to find something to compliment. I noticed only a little mould in the corners, and no evidence of mice, though it was perhaps half the square footage claimed by the newspaper advertisement.

M. Levasseur smiled, not quite hiding his relief. "It is that," he said. "You will not find anything larger in this neighbourhood, mademoiselle, where folks work hard and learn to make do."

He gave me a pugnacious look, as if readying himself for an argument. I only smiled, feeling a stab of relief—this suggested that I was not the first to enquire about the place. And now that I had seen it, I could guess which side—landlord or tenant—had been rejected.

“Good location for a charity,” he went on. “The Sisters of Salvation have their shop across the square. And Saint-Jean gives free meals almost every day.”

“Oh?” I said nervously, pretending to be surprised. On my walk there, I had passed Saint-Jean, a pretty but worn-looking stone church at least a century old, and the Sisters of Salvation, which provided free clothing to those who could not afford any. I had, in fact, made use of both during especially lean years.

A foghorn sounded, and I heard the rumble of ships being unloaded at the river wharves, smelled the mingled algae and soot. I could not help thinking that an isolated location such as this, tucked in amongst warehouses and far from the bustle of the city, was not ideal for my particular needs.

You’ll make do, a little voice lectured me. It added in its pessimistic way, *You’ve been turned down eight times. Stand up straight.*

I adjusted my posture and smoothed the tension in my face, aiming to project the confidence of a seasoned businesswoman. It was more difficult after a long day; my back ached, and on the whole I would have preferred to be at home in a hot bath.

“Why are you moving?” M. Levasseur said bluntly, as if already anticipating an unfavourable reply. He struck me as a frowning sort of man, with the perpetually lowered eyebrows of one who makes a study of disapproval, but nevertheless he seemed to be warming to my presence, and especially to my approval of his property, those abundant eyebrows levitating higher on his pale face.

“I was renting a shop on Rue Sainte-Roseline,” I said simply.

“On—” His expression changed. “You weren’t *there*? Where it happened?”

I did not want to discuss this. And yet I very much wanted him to feel sorry for me, so I made myself say, “You read about it in the papers, then?”

“Of course. They said a dozen shops were blasted.”

“Yes—I’m afraid mine was among the hardest hit. It is, at present, barely habitable. My landlord, Mme. Richard, will verify the particulars.”

I opened my folder and removed a piece of paper. On it were a half-dozen references, their names and addresses neatly typed.

“I know her—a good woman.” His face, I realized, had reddened a little on my behalf. “Goddamn magicians! Duelling in broad daylight, in the middle of a street full of decent, hardworking folk. But isn’t it just like them?”

“Indeed,” I said, my throat tightening. “So you understand my haste to move.”

“Goddamn magicians!” he said again. Abruptly, he seized my hand and pressed it. “You have my condolences.”

Embarrassingly, his concern brought tears to my eyes; I cry as easily as I blush—namely, at the drop of a hat. At the same time, I felt the uncoiling of a familiar resentment, which had long been apt to emerge at the mention of magicians. I didn’t like this side of myself, and endeavoured to push the anger down. Anger had always struck me as an impractical emotion, anger at magicians even more so—not that the inequity of their power, and the poor use so many put it to, did not warrant it. And yet if one were to be angry about *that*, one might as well be angry at the whole world.

M. Levasseur took me on a tour of the upstairs apartment, his manners notably improved. It was as dismal as the downstairs shop, poorly insulated and rather dirty, and the hot water in the bathroom sink barely trickled. But the upstairs was just for me, so I didn’t worry over it too much. The bedroom window afforded a view of the St. Lawrence and had a ledge wide enough to accommodate even His Majesty’s ample behind. He had a fondness for window ledges, and I could easily picture him there, lazily sunning himself.

“I can see you’ll be no trouble,” M. Levasseur said as we made our way back downstairs. “I never like arguing with my tenants. Ruins the relationship. Just last week I evicted a woman from an apartment not far from here. She had two children, but did she tell me when she signed the lease? I don’t like renting to children—you never know what they’ll do to a place. When she fell behind on the rent, it was almost a relief.”

“*Ça alors*,” I murmured.

He was at least good enough to seem chastened by the look on my face, for he added quickly, “It’s a matter of upkeep—maintenance doesn’t come cheap. I take my responsibilities seriously, unlike some. You wouldn’t believe the stories I hear.”

“Any in particular?” I said, because I was beginning to wonder if M. Levasseur’s poor opinion of his colleagues might not be taken as a recommendation. And yet the human heart is an eclectic thing, an assemblage of prejudices and affections, and I’d known the man for only ten minutes—how was I to know how the ledger was weighted in his case?

He eyed me, seeming to take my measure. My face is round and frequently red, for reasons sometimes related to emotion and other times to no factor I can identify, which together with my wide-set eyes makes me appear younger than my thirty-five years, as well as earnest and overeager. Élise likes to joke that I look as if I am forever on a mission to sell cookies. I am unexceptional in every other respect, from my hair—naturally curly, but rather unruly and more pale than it is any specific colour—to my mundane height and figure, but I’ve found this to be an advantage in dealing with the sort of individuals who resent those who stand out.

“If I had a daughter,” he said at last, “I’d warn her away from the place on Rue des Hirondelles, for one. Can’t keep a tenant, and no surprise. Something not quite right about the owner. You hear odd stories...Then there’s that restaurant in Montgomery Square—the basement floods at least twice a year.”

“I appreciate the advice,” I said, though I was disappointed it was not more relevant. I wasn’t looking to rent a restaurant, and I didn’t need to enquire further to know I’d never be able to afford a shop on Rue des Hirondelles. It was odd, though—this was at least the third time in a week I’d heard mention of that particular street. First Élise had suggested we canvass the shops there for donations, then a man handing out flyers had tried to convince me to attend a musical performance at one of the cafés.

I shook my head. A coincidence, no more.

“Let’s get started on the application,” he said, politely pulling out a chair for me at the rickety table. He drew a wrinkled bundle of papers and a pencil from his vest pocket. “What sort of charity do you run? I don’t need specifics, just a general idea. I’ve got it—you knit sweaters for orphans, *hein?*”

Here was the moment. I steeled myself and said, “It’s an—animal charity.”

“Ah!” he said. “You raise money for the elephants or some such? I’ve heard elephants are having a time of it these days.”

I had the sense that he had not given much thought to elephants before now. “Not elephants, no. Cats.”

“Cats?” he repeated, and never have I seen a look more blank. “What about them?”

Despite the cold, I felt a prickle of sweat along my hairline. I’d practiced the conversation in my head, and yet still I felt it drifting off course and towards the same conclusion the others had. “The city has a large cat population—”

“That it does,” he said, frowning. “I had a colony set up shop behind a building of mine. Unsanitary little things. So you take care of them, do you? It’s not a bad idea, though they do keep the rats down.”

“Ah,” I said with a forced laugh. “We—yes, we take care of them. Though not in that way. My organization takes them in, cleans them up, ensures they’re adoptable, then tries to find them a comfortable home.”

“You take them in?” His blank expression seemed to be slowly transforming into one of horror. “Where?”

I suppose I should have known at this point that the situation was beyond repair, but desperation propelled me to continue, and also I have a tendency to babble when under stress. “Cats are extremely clean creatures. And as companion animals, particularly for the elderly, as well as the ill and infirm—well, their value to society cannot be overstated. Indeed, I once visited a hospital with a resident cat who—”

“You take these animals in,” he repeated, more slowly this time. “And you want to house them *here?*”

I swallowed. My silence was answer enough.

“Oh, no,” he said. “No, no, no. That will not do.”

He stood abruptly, taking the papers and pencil back and tucking them into his pocket, his eyebrows descending to their former latitude.

“Mine is only a small organization—” I began.

“Very good, mademoiselle,” he said, giving me a tight smile as he moved towards me, one arm politely extended as he shooed me from the shop with an efficiency that suggested extensive practice. “Best of luck getting your charity off the ground.”

“We’ve been in business for over five years,” I said, even as I was swept ever closer to the exit. “My current landlord can—”

“Mind the step,” he said, opening the door. And then, with an abruptness that left me breathless, I was standing on the landing, and the door had closed in my face.



CHAPTER 2

I wandered for a time after that, my feet choosing the direction, paying little attention to my surroundings. I believe it was the cold that shocked me out of my daze; the sun had set, and the sky was a wash of navy and violet, the street lanterns flickering to life. I looked up, startled to find myself in the heart of the old city, standing outside a café just beginning to bustle with the evening crowds, men and women in their good hats and coats. Somehow, I was approaching an intersection with Rue des Hirondelles, where there was the shop for rent that M. Levasseur had unnecessarily warned me away from.

At the thought of M. Levasseur—not to mention impossibly out-of-reach rents—I felt my vision grey. I gazed into the café window, which was lightly steamed, many of its confections arrayed in little baskets in easy view of passersby. I must have stared at an egg tart for a solid minute, stomach rumbling, before I reminded myself of my budget—there would be no egg tarts until I found a place to live and work, and perhaps for some time after that, depending on the cost of my new accommodations.

I then spent another period of time staring at a chocolate brioche.

The bells of the basilica began to sound, though it wasn't until the narrow street was filled with their ghostly echoes that I realized the time. I turned from the café and hurried home, avoiding a knot of young people who

seemed half drunk already, two of the girls clasping hands and spinning in a circle, laughing, their skirts and coats fanning about them.

It wasn't a long walk from the bustle of the restaurant district, but it felt it. The cobblestones grew more uneven, forcing me to mind my step, and the buildings leaned towards each other. My neighbourhood was mostly working-class apartments made from the customary grey limestone, with the odd grocer or café thrown in; about half were out of business, partly because the tram lines didn't come this far. I stopped outside what should have been an unexceptional little place with dingy stonework and a rusty iron door, but was now quite an eye-catcher, given that two of the windows were shattered, their shutters blackened as if by fire. Between them was what looked a little like a lunar crater, about ten feet wide and imperfectly boarded up—I'd had a terrible time of that because the hole was so jagged and uneven, the scorched stones peeling back on either side as if they'd melted and re-formed. On the door was a sign that read:

Les Amis des Chats – Refuge Animalier
Cat Friends – Animal Shelter

I had not been the worst affected—that honour went to the sandwich shop across the street, which had seen all its windows shattered, its foundation cracked, and its door blown backwards into the shop. The owner—an elderly man named Hamad who, despite his gruff and unsmiling demeanour, had routinely brought leftover deli slices for the cats—had been unable to afford the repairs. Now it sat abandoned, empty windows yawning like dark mouths.

I could hear His Majesty yowling at me before I even put my hand on the doorknob. How the beast sensed when I came within fifty feet of the building was a mystery I'd never solved; either he did it by smell or—more likely, knowing His Majesty—some unholy sixth sense.

I unlocked the door, locked it firmly behind me, then pushed through the wooden gate I'd installed beyond the antechamber. His Majesty was coiled

about my legs in an instant, loudly protesting the delay in his supper. Banshee, somewhat less intemperate, stood and goggled at me from the middle of the room with her perpetually confounded expression. The shelter cats, who occupied an array of cages in the next room, also began to register their protests, though I knew Élise had been attending to them for most of the afternoon.

“I know,” I said, pausing to disentangle His Majesty from my ankles. “I’m sorry—I was distracted by pastry. You wouldn’t understand, of course. If it doesn’t bleed, it isn’t food.”

I wiped my feet on the welcome mat, which was embroidered with the shelter’s motto, *A cat is the soul of a home*, in French and English, which we also had on our stationery. Then I fed the two of them—His Majesty first, of course; he would accept nothing less.

The black cat had come into my life a year after Banshee had. Despite having essentially wandered into the shelter—I’d opened the back door one morning and found him perched coolly on the step as if waiting for an appointment—he was not even slightly tame, but seemed to have adopted the appearance of being so out of self-interest. An enormous beast with a single white boot, His Majesty ruled the shelter with an iron paw. He disdained the fellowship of other felines but delighted in the role of tyrant, stalking about the shelter cats as if they were little more than furniture and stealing food with impunity, except on the occasions when he decided to make an example of some foolish upstart. He had never been challenged twice.

Naturally, I had never dared attempt to adopt out His Majesty, and as he showed no signs of wishing to move on, I had officially declared him my responsibility, although his entrance into my life had been more akin to a hostile takeover. He was not an affectionate cat, demonstrating a cunning tolerance of petting but little enjoyment, though he had a great fondness for laps, and would stake his claim to mine whenever I took some time for myself with a book, growling low in his throat when I considered putting the book aside. More than once had I been forced to stay up past midnight

before the beast deemed his considerable square footage adequately warmed.

Banshee, a nearly round tabby, was perhaps the only cat able to dwell alongside the likes of His Majesty without being terrorized, for Banshee was unterrorizable, not from strength of character but from a complete lack of sense. I doubted Banshee would survive a day if left to her own devices, for she would routinely get herself into impossible danger, clambering up to the rafters or into claustrophobic crawl spaces, whereupon she would become stuck. She demonstrated no awareness that fire was hot, and had made multiple attempts at getting inside the woodstove while it was alight, until Robin had finally built a screen around it. Banshee's most habitual occupation was sitting in the middle of a room and staring fixedly at a single point for no discernible reason. His Majesty, having made a few attempts to frighten her after he moved in—on one occasion pinning her to the floor with his jaws around her neck—seemed to have decided such efforts were beneath him when it came to creatures as pathetic and inexplicable as Banshee. I'd occasionally had the impression that he even pitied her, for he would sometimes deign to allow her to curl up against him, which was not a liberty he allowed any of the shelter cats.

Banshee's name came from her curious voicelessness; never had I heard her make a sound, purring excepted, though she often seemed to be trying, sometimes even wandering about the place opening and closing her mouth in my direction, as if desperate to warn me of some impending doom. Robin and I used to joke that she was, in fact, creating an appalling racket, but that it was a sound that could be heard only by the inhabitants of some unhallowed supernatural realm.

I fed the shelter cats next—we had forty-eight, which was an all-time high and a great strain on our budget, but what could I do? Turn them out, with winter on the horizon?

I paused at Thoreau's cage to give him extra attention. I knew I shouldn't play favourites, but Thoreau, a genteel senior whom Élise had found

shivering in a box behind the central train station, had been at the shelter six months, the longest of our charges.

The cat leaned into my hand. Thoreau was a beautiful, gothic grey, and the least demanding of the brood. Given the pitiable state in which we'd found him, from mites to broken ribs to an infected eye, I often had the sense he was still attempting to comprehend how dramatically his existence had been altered.

Clowder was pawing at the bars of her cage with increasing desperation, so I opened the door for her to hop down to the floor. Her four kittens—only about a month old—followed, which I could tell Clowder did not appreciate. She gave me a harried look.

"You're right, I'm sorry," I told her. "You deserve a little holiday, don't you?" I checked that each of the kittens was well, then lifted the lot—two orange tabbies, a tuxedo, and a small calico, like her mother—into the cage and closed the door.

I spent a few moments tidying, shadowed by Clowder and Banshee. Clowder kept a nervous eye on His Majesty, but he was not in the mood to exercise his authority, and was sleeping off his dinner in his favourite chair, tail twitching.

The shelter layout was simple; it had been a tailor's before, which had proven ideal for my purposes—the large back room where the coats and dresses had been worked on was big enough for the cat cages, while the smaller space at the front was all we needed for interviewing prospective adopters. Off the back room was a tiny kitchen. It was as dilapidated as the rest of the shelter, and one could only get it so clean before one's efforts were thwarted by ancient and immovable stains.

The wind picked up, whistling through the hole in the front room. I endeavoured to ignore it.

I had been planning on a meager repast of cheese and tinned soup—between us, Robin had been the chef—but I found that Élise had been to the café on the next street and left me a mushroom pie wrapped in paper. It was still slightly warm.