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**SOPHY BURNHAM**



**LOVE,**   
**ALBA**

"...a charmed journey to the last sentence."

Love is a nail that pierces your heart, leaving you sighing, heart-sick, yet never willing for it to stop. Who would have thought that at her age Lorna would fall in love? Or hide it at such cost? But it began with her fancy, newly painted, orange toenail nudging me aside.

“Out of my way. Move.” Lorna pushed me. “Scat.”

Such a disagreeable word. You’d think a lady wouldn’t use such language to a cat.

I slid out the door and up the stairwell to a pretty little balcony I’d spotted earlier and stopped short. A huge black male rose from the floor, muscles rippling. He hissed at me, lips drawn back in a snarl. I felt the hair rise on my neck. But sometimes the best thing to do when you’re scared is to pretend you’re not. I sniffed the fresh, warm, balmy air, with its scent of lilacs and new-mown grass, and settled cautiously in the sun, my back half-turned to him.

Everyone says I’m beautiful with my gold highlights and smoky tones. I was wearing my blue necklace with diamonds that Lorna says makes my eyes even bigger and bluer.

He stretched luxuriantly, darkness like thunder, and lay down facing me.

==You must be new.

I stared into the distance, ignoring him.

==You moved into 2.

I washed my shoulder.

==Cat got your tongue?

Males can be so. . . vulgar. I looked down my nose at him and sniffed.

==Well, aren’t you going to talk? Too proud? Stuck up?

He stood up then, enormous, and started toward me. I shot to my feet. My goodness! He was the size of a raccoon. I gave a swish of my tail and ran, heart pounding, into the building and down the stairs—skittering through the doorway toward Lorna, no pretense at being brave.

“Oh, there you are.” She picked me up and snuggled her cheek in my fur, while I clawed up onto her shoulder in distress. Lorna is beautiful, with short tousled curls, and no one smells as good as she. But it’s not only her scent that you notice. It’s her calm and quiet energy. You just feel good when you’re next to her. This morning she was dressed in jeans and a white tee shirt while she unpacked. She spilled me to the floor. We’d been doing this (moving, I mean) for the past two days, and I was tired of it, and I guess Lorna was, too, because she had already remarked to me acidly how in novels the heroines were never caught vacuuming or doing the ironing but only led exciting lives chasing spies or catching criminals, and how banal it was to find ourselves in Washington, District of Columbia, our nation’s Capitol, with the biggest problem being unpacking books and music or going to market to buy food.

“Now for the couch.”

She put her shoulder to the tattered sofa (tattered because I prefer its upholstered legs to my scratch post) and pushed.

==Lorna! Stop!

I jumped to the windowsill and curled up beside the bitter-scented geranium, spiking red against the thin white curtains.

==Sit! Relax!

Sometimes I think the 2-leggeds are deaf. But then I remember they aren’t as smart as cats.

What else could I do? The planter was so big that I had to shift my whole weight against it. It fell with a CRASH and broke into a dozen shards, scattering dirt, leaves and roots across the floor and rugs.

==Oh, I said daintily.

“Oh, Alba!” Lorna wailed, and then, to my surprise, she burst into tears. I felt awful. She swiveled on her pretty feet, turning in helpless circles. “I don’t even know where the dustpan is!” Just then the front door banged open against the wall, and we both turned in surprise.

He was dressed in khakis, barefoot, unshaven, his hair tousled, and his eyes half-closed in sleep, and in his arms lounged the huge black male.

He hissed. The next moment he shot to the floor. I jumped for the curtains.

Lorna screamed.

My claws ripped through the fabric. I twisted round, hit the floor with a thud, and threw myself behind the chair, every hair on end. Then I took a stand, tail lashing, ears back, and lips drawn into a frightened snarl. He was twice my size. His fur bristled, his tail turned into a bottlebrush, his green eyes snapped. Did he know he was in the wrong—invading my apartment? On *my* territory? I rushed him, scattering books and papers underfoot.

“Alba!” Lorna flung herself at me.

“Goliath!” shouted the intruder.

I slithered through her fingers as the black cat dashed to the table-top, with me right behind, slipping on the geranium dirt. A lamp fell and shattered. Lorna lunged to catch me. The man leapt for Goliath, and both 2-leggeds collided and fell amidst the boxes, dirt, stems, and broken terra cotta. Goliath dashed behind the sofa and out the door.

I chased him as he whipped into the hallway, down the stairs, and into the apartment below ours. Then I ran back upstairs to prowl my perimeter. I was a ball of electricity, every hair alight. Being attacked is frightening for a poor little thing like me. His scent was everywhere. I wasn't sure if I hated it or not.

Meanwhile the 2-leggeds had untangled themselves with apologies, and the man was brushing Lorna off. He suddenly stopped, embarrassed, and the next thing I knew my sensitive, kind, sweet Lorna, who wouldn't hurt a spider, Lorna who always catches flies under tumblers of glass and carries them carefully outside rather than

swat them dead, who eats vegetarian so she won't harm an animal— had turned on him. Her eyes flashed.

“What do you think you're doing, barging in like that?”

“I came to stop the noise.”

“Noise? Of course there's noise. I'm moving in.” Her eyes filled with helpless guilty tears.

“As anyone can see.” He gestured to the room. “But it's Sunday. I'm trying to sleep.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” she said with open sarcasm. But she was shaken. His dark eyes and broken nose gave his face a rugged charm. The problem was, she really was apologetic and didn't want to admit it. “I'm so sorry to have woken you up.” She tossed her chin. “And I'm especially sorry at your revenge. Look at this place.”

I crept under the couch to hide. She flicked off the CD. The silence hit like thunder. The place was a wreck.

He looked about a moment, picked up a toppled lamp and put it on a table.

“And how dare you bring a cat into someone else's apartment!” she challenged.

==And a male, I called out, who might spray.

“And a male. I'm lucky he didn't spray!” she continued.

His jaw clenched. “And you're lucky I didn't call the police,” he said in a voice dangerously contained. “I came up merely to ask you to be quieter. Or maybe to offer you a hand later, like a good neighbor, if you would stop moving furniture right this minute, right on top of my head.” He picked up an overturned chair and set it right side up.

“Oh,” she said.

He stared at her.

“I'll try to be quieter.” Her reluctant apology.

“I'd like that. I worked all night. I'm trying to sleep.”

“Oh. Do you work every night?” she asked in a tiny voice, and I

could hear the thought whirling through her mind: that buying this apartment on the floor above him was a bad idea.

“I’m a lawyer. I’ve got a big case coming up.”

“Oh. Well. I’m sorry.” She shot out her hand. “I’m Lorna Stanford.”

“David Scott.” There was an embarrassed pause as they shook hands. “David Campbell Scott.”

“Ah,” she deadpanned. “Lithuanian, I presume.”

He blinked, then laughed, to her delight. Her face lit up as she joined him.

After he left, she flung herself onto the sofa. She was shaken. “Oh, dear, I shouldn’t have shouted at him. Whatever will he think of me? And we’re neighbors.” A moment later she rolled over on her stomach to hang over the edge and peer at me hiding under the couch.

“Come out, Alba. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. Come on out, kitty-kitty.”

But I huddled in the dark, flaring with nerves. Once I saw two ducks get into a fight. They reared up on the water angrily, quacking at each other and beating their wings. The fight was over as soon as it started. Then each duck stood on the water and flapped as hard as possible to rid itself of excess energy. Being a cat, I groom my fur. The 2-leggeds think we’re washing, but actually we’re licking our light into place. The 2-leggeds aren’t even taught how to comb their energy down their arms and sides or pat their auras into place. Instead, they walk around all day, bristling and boiling, with no idea how to rid themselves of the residue of their distress.

Lorna, for example, walked into the kitchen for a cup of tea. She broke out laughing, and the next second kicked a box in irritation. That was how she released her energy. Then she reached for the phone to call her friend Nicole, whom we all call Nikki.

Only she didn't tell the whole story. She didn't reveal why she thought the situation so funny that she told it twice, not forgetting to repeat his name: David Campbell Scott. Nikki listened politely, but what she wanted to talk about was her boyfriend's birthday coming up next week and the marriage proposal she expected on that day.





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