

Lilian Jackson Braun The Cat Who Wasn't There



The Cat Who Wasn't There



ALSO BY LILIAN JACKSON BRAUN

The Cat Who Saw Red
The Cat Who Could Read Backwards
The Cat Who Ate Danish Modern
The Cat Who Turned On and Off
The Cat Who Played Brahms
The Cat Who Played Post Office
The Cat Who Knew Shakespeare
The Cat Who Sniffed Glue
The Cat Who Went Underground
The Cat Who Talked to Ghosts
The Cat Who Lived High
The Cat Who Knew a Cardinal
The Cat Who Moved a Mountain

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DEDICATED TO
EARL BETTINGER, THE HUSBAND WHO . . .

The Cat Who Wasn't There



One



In late August, sixteen residents of Moose County, a remote part of the United States 400 miles north of everywhere, traveled to Scotland for a tour of the Western Isles and Highlands, lochs and moors, castles and crofts, firths and straths, burns and braes, fens and bens and glens. Only fifteen of them returned alive, and the survivors straggled home in various states of shock or confusion.

Among the travelers who signed up for the Bonnie Scots Tour were several prominent persons in Pickax City, the county seat. They included the owner of the department store, the superintendent of schools, a young doctor from a distinguished family, the publisher of the local newspaper, the administrator of the public library, and a good-looking, well-built, middle-aged man with a luxuriant pepper-and-salt moustache and drooping eyelids, who happened to be the richest bachelor in Moose County—or in fact the entire northeast central United States.

Jim Qwilleran's wealth was not the result of his own effort but a fluke inheritance. As a journalist, he had been content to pound a beat, churn out copy, and race deadlines for large metropolitan dailies Down Below. (So Pickax folk called the urban areas to the south.) Then fate brought him to Pickax City (population 3,000) and made him heir to the Klingenschoen estate. It was more money than he really wanted. The uncounted millions hung over his head

like a dark cloud until he established the Klingenschoen Foundation to dispose of the fortune philanthropically, leaving him free to live in a barn, write a column for the *Moose County Something*, feed and brush his two Siamese cats, and spend pleasant weekends with Polly Duncan, head of the Pickax Public Library.

When the tour to Scotland was proposed, Qwilleran and his feline companions had just returned from a brief sojourn in some distant mountains, a vacation cut short by disturbing news from Pickax. Polly Duncan, while driving home after dark, had been followed by a man in a car without lights, narrowly escaping his clutches. When Qwilleran heard the news, he had a sickening vision of attempted kidnapping; his relationship with Polly was well known in the county, and his millions made him an easy mark for a ransom demand.

Immediately he phoned the Pickax police chief to request protection for Polly. Then, canceling his vacation arrangements, he made the long drive back to Moose County at a speed that discommoded the two yowling passengers in the backseat and alerted the highway patrols of four states. He arrived home Monday noon and dropped off the Siamese and their water dish before hurrying to the Pickax Public Library.

He went on foot, cutting through the woods and approaching the library from the rear. In the parking lot behind the building he recognized Polly's small gray two-door and an elderly friend's ancient navy blue four-door. There was also a maroon car with a Massachusetts license plate that gave him momentary qualms; he had no wish to encounter Dr. Melinda Goodwinter, who had come from Boston for her father's funeral. He mounted the steps of the stately library in unstately leaps and found the main room aflutter with small children. There was no evidence of Melinda Goodwinter. The youngsters were squealing and chattering and lugging picture books to the check-out desk, on which sat a rotund object about three feet high, like an

egg with a cracked shell. The six-foot-two man pushed through the horde of knee-high tots, went up the stairs to the mezzanine three at a time, and barged through the reading room to the glass-enclosed office of the head librarian. None of the persons at the reading tables, he noted with relief, was the young doctor from Boston. Sooner or later he would have to face her, and he was unsure how to handle their reunion: with cool politesse? with lukewarm pleasure? with jocular nonchalance?

The librarian was a dignified and pleasant-faced woman of his own age, and she was eating lunch at her desk, the aroma of tuna fish adding an earthy touch to the high-minded bookishness of the office. Silently she reached out a hand across the desk and managed to smile her delight and surprise while chewing a carrot stick. A fervent and lingering handclasp was as amorous a greeting as they dared, since the office had the privacy of a fishbowl and Pickax had a penchant for gossip. Their eye contact said it all.

"You're home!" she murmured in her gentle voice after swallowing.

"Yes, I made it!" It was a dialogue unworthy of Polly's intelligence and Qwilleran's wit, but under the circumstances they could be excused. He dropped into a varnished oak chair, the keys in his back pocket clanking on the hard seat. "Is everything all right?" he asked anxiously. "Any more scares?"

"Not a thing," she said calmly.

"No more prowlers in the neighborhood?"

She shook her head.

For one uncomfortable moment his suspicious nature suggested that she might have invented the prowler episode to bring him home ahead of schedule; she was inclined to be possessive. He banished the thought, however; Polly was an honorable and loving friend. She might be jealous of women younger and thinner than she, but she had absolute integrity; of that he was sure.

"Tell me again exactly what happened," Qwilleran said. "Your voice was shaky when you talked to me on the phone."

"Well, as I told you at the time, I was returning after dark from the library banquet," she began quietly in her clear, considered manner of speaking. "When I drove into Goodwinter Boulevard—where curb parking is not allowed, as you know—I noticed a car parked the wrong way in front of the Gage mansion, and I could see someone sitting behind the wheel—a man with a beard. I thought that was strange. Mrs. Gage was still in Florida, and no one was living in the main house. I decided to notify the police as soon as I reached my apartment."

"Did you feel personally threatened at this point?"

"Not really. I turned into the side drive of the mansion and was driving back to the carriage house when I realized that the car was following me without lights! And then—*then* I was terrified! I accelerated and parked close to my doorstep with the headlights beamed on the keyhole. As I jumped out of my car, I glanced to the left. He was getting out of his car, too. I was able to rush inside and slam the door before he reached me."

Qwilleran tapped his moustache in an expression of anxiety. "Did you get a further look at him?"

"That's what the police wanted to know. I have the impression that he was of medium build, and when I first pulled up to the drive my headlights picked up a bearded face behind the wheel. That's all I can tell you."

"That narrows it down to forty percent of our male population," Qwilleran said. In Moose County beards were favored by potato farmers, hunters, sheep ranchers, fishermen, construction workers, and newspaper reporters.

"It was a bushy beard, I would say," she added.

"Did Brodie give you a police escort as I requested?"

"He offered to drive me to and from work, but honestly, Qwill, it seemed so unnecessary in daylight."

"Hmmm," he murmured, slumping in his chair in deep thought. Was it a false alarm? Or was Polly really at risk?

Rather than worry her unduly, he asked, "What's that absurd egg doing on the check-out desk?"

"Don't you recognize Humpty Dumpty? He's the focus of our summer reading program," she explained patiently. "The children are helping to put him together again by checking out books. After they've taken home a certain number, he'll be well and happy, and we'll have a party . . . You're invited," she added mischievously, knowing he avoided small children.

"How do you know the kids will read the books after they get them home? How do you know they'll even crack them?"

"Qwill, dear, you're so cynical!" she reproved him. "Your stay in the mountains hasn't mellowed you in the slightest . . . By the way, did you see our elevator installation? We're very grateful to the Klingenschoen Foundation. Now the elderly and infirm have access to the reading room."

"You should ask the K Foundation for some chairs with padded seats," he suggested, squirming uncomfortably. "Apart from Humpty Dumpty's great fall, is there any other world-shaking news in Moose County?"

"We're still grieving over the suicide of Dr. Halifax. Dr. Melinda returned for her father's funeral and has decided to stay. Everyone's pleased about that." It was a small-town custom to use the honorific when a local son or daughter had earned it.

Melinda Goodwinter had been Polly's predecessor in Qwilleran's affection—as everyone in Pickax knew—and he was careful not to react visibly. Casually he asked, "Will she take over Dr. Hal's patients?"

"Yes, she's already sent out announcements." Polly spoke of Melinda with studied detachment.

"How about dinner tonight at the Old Stone Mill?" he asked, changing the subject to conceal his personal concern about Melinda redux.

"I was hoping you'd suggest it. I have something exciting to discuss."

"About what?"

She smiled mysteriously. "I can't tell you right now. It's a wonderful surprise!"

"Where shall I pick you up? And at what time?"

"Shall we say seven o'clock?" Polly suggested. "I'd like to go home to change clothes and feed Bootsie."

"Seven o'clock it is."

"Are you sure you aren't too tired after all that driving?"

"All I need is a strong cup of coffee, and I'll be swinging from the chandeliers."

"I've missed you, dear. I'm so glad you're home," she said softly.

"I've missed you, too, Polly." He started to leave her office and paused on the threshold, from which he could see the reading tables. A white-haired woman sat knitting laboriously with arthritic hands; an elderly man was bent over a stack of books; a younger man with an unruly beard was leafing idly through a magazine. "Who's the fellow with the beard?" Qwilleran mumbled behind his hand as he stroked his moustache.

"I don't know. The woman is Mrs. Crawbanks; her granddaughter always drops her off here while she does errands. Now that we have an elevator we've become a day-care center for grandparents. Homer Tibbitt—you know him, of course—is doing research for the Historical Society. The younger man, I don't know."

Qwilleran strode through the reading room to speak to the thin and angular Mr. Tibbitt, who was in his nineties and still active, despite creaking joints. "I hear you're digging into Moose County's lurid past, Homer."

The retired school principal straightened up, his bony frame clicking in several places. "Got to keep the old brain cells functioning," he said in a cracked voice. "No one's ever recorded the history of the Goodwinters, although they founded Pickax one hundred fifty years ago. There were four branches of the family, some with good blood and some with bad blood, sorry to say. But the clan's dying out in these parts. Amanda's the last of the drinking Goodwin-