
Behind the Façades

a novella by

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Chapter 1

Toffee leaped onto the kitchen bar counter, his graceful arc honed by years of habit. Kiwi watched intently with her wide, gleaming kitten eyes. She mewed inquisitively while pondering the leap from the grey flagstone floor, finding Toffee's proud, self-sufficient tail whisks over the wood counter to be an additional temptation. She jumped, caught the counter edge, scrambled her hind paws against the stucco partition that held the bar, and heaved herself up, now mewling happily. Toffee, splayed across the counter, his gaze outdoors otherwise unmoved, flicked an ear back as Kiwi appeared in front of him, then flicked it forward again, studiously ignoring the presumptuous kitten. Kiwi circled him then pounced into his long-haired belly, an embodied feline shadow disappearing into a mass of Maine Coon fluff.

Karin watched them attentively, smiling. As the resident human, she was responsible for the newly-arrived black kitten and her three-year-old brown mackerel tabby Maine Coon. Kiwi had come directly from a grey tabby mother and siblings, her black coat attributable to a father *in absentia*. Toffee had been abandoned in an apartment building entrance three years earlier, in August, the month when families in Western Europe left on long vacations and sometimes, too often, also left their pets, never intending to

care for them again. Although Karin and her neighbours had spread word of a lost kitten, no one stepped forward to claim the soft-spoken, awkward youngster. Toffee had been delighted to have a new home and had taken to Karin immediately as a kitten. Kiwi, freshly separated from her birth family, had preferred to hide and cry for two days, her constant, distressed wails rending Karin's heart.

Once she had mourned her family, Kiwi realized that Toffee could be her new friend, and she set about to win his heart with indomitable dedication. She followed him everywhere, observed him with rapt attention, approached him with ears and tail perked, purred and rubbed her head against him, allowed him to grab her pliable scruff in dominance displays, presented him with toys, swatted his enticing, furry tail. Toffee was dubious at first, but slowly warmed to the kitten's irrepressible affection.

Karin felt quite secondary in it all, but was happy for the growing warmth between the two cats. Toffee had lost an older cat companion a year earlier, and had been lonely since, with Karin's long days away at work. Karin would come home to an alternatively aloof, nervous, or needy Toffee who never seemed to find enough comfort in her human arms, though he clearly loved her, seeking her out at her bedtime to purr and sigh happily on her chest. For Karin, seeing Toffee relaxed and contentedly engaged with another cat again was its own reward, and Kiwi's obvious delight at having a new feline family was wonderful for her

as well. Karin could rest knowing that the two were getting along well.

Later that evening, while taking photographs of the happily squirming kitten playing with its tail in her lap, Karin noticed that the zoom lens didn't seem to turn to its wide angle position. She snapped a few shots anyway, Kiwi purring contentedly as, between tail snatches, she sought out fingers and, when found, grabbed them in her soft paws, claws retracted, for quick nibbles and wet sniffs. Karin looked away from the viewfinder, scritching Kiwi's ears as the kitten's purrs increased in volume. Karin checked the lens with her free hand, gently turning the zoom ring, which stuck dully halfway between the 35mm and 24mm marks, refusing to go any lower. "Cripes. That's what I get for trusting him with my camera. Jerk. Unbelievable." She then switched to a mocking sing-song voice to repeat words he had said before borrowing her digital reflex: "I had lessons from a friend who's a professional interior photographer. I have everything ready and planned out: tripod, time of day for the best lighting – to avoid those awful afternoon shadows, you know – nice wide angle set up for good depth of field, this will be great. Wish I hadn't forgotten the battery for my new camera, I got it just for this, with the wide-angle lens. I guess yours will have to do." Kiwi briefly stared, wide-eyed, at Karin's novel voice, then returned to pursuing her wayward tail and any fingers that ventured near. As Karin returned to her regular voice, she cursed again, fuming that she really should have known better when the man of her ire later asked what the focus

ring was for. “To focus. You can do it manually,” she had told him flatly, their relationship having been interred a few minutes earlier.

Karin didn’t even know if “relationship” were the right word. They had been together for a year, but, as she realized their last evening together, she didn’t know who Oskar was, only what he had shown her. Karin’s head spun. “Observe whether someone’s actions match their words,” she reiterated the maxim that had served well for so long. “I did that. His actions matched his words. He spoke easily, sincerely, none of it was forced, he behaved upright with others too, he never slipped until the end. But then I found out even his actions were lies. How can you *be* a lie? What kind of alienation must someone be living in order to do that so easily?”

Karin sighed, letting the pain of a chimerical loss pulse through her. In the end, he had existed only in her imagination. She felt as if she were falling into a vertiginous gap each time she realized that her idea of Oskar, was probably unknown even to Oskar; he was incapable of depth and commitment, unable to recognize the value of dedication and trust, all qualities she had attributed to him before discovering the truth, or rather, the lack of truth.

Meanwhile, Kiwi had jumped to the living room floor, where she had discovered an old and ratty stuffed toy fish of Toffee’s. She was subduing it with gusto while Toffee watched her from atop the dining table, wearing an

expression of haughty disdain mixed with curiosity. Karin chortled as Toffee's tail rhythmically smacked the antique oak she had found in a secondhand shop, also abandoned, due to scratches that Karin easily sanded out: "you want to play but are still asserting your alpha status, silly," she teased the cat. Toffee slowly, very slowly, blinked at Karin. Karin approached him, settled her hand between his two velvety ears and rubbed his head affectionately. *Thwap* went his tail again, his eyes trained on the red toy fish, and Karin laughed.

Chapter 2

One month earlier, Oskar's phone had beeped the Morse code for SMS while he sat on Karin's couch. They had just returned from a long dinner at a seafood restaurant in Vieux Nice, whose speciality was terracotta amphorae. The clay vessels were filled with red mullet, sea bream, shellfish, and potatoes, all caught and grown locally, then closed with tinfoil to steam in a brick oven. Karin knew that Oskar loved seafood; she had looked forward to surprising him with one of the best restaurants in the city. She had been particularly hopeful about this date – Oskar lived in Sweden and had a second home not far from Karin, on the French Riviera. Until now, he hadn't been able to visit often, but recently he had started a new business venture in the area, saying he'd done it to be able to stay more often.

Oskar clearly enjoyed his meal at the Niçois restaurant, but Karin had mixed feelings. To start, Oskar had greeted their waitress with an overt body scan, then turned to Karin to ask, in front of the waitress, how it was possible for French women to be so small, and what it might be like to sleep with someone who had such narrow hips. Taken aback, even wondering if she had missed a joke, Karin laughed nervously, then caught the waitress' eye and said to her with a polite smile, "I'm sure our waitress speaks

English, let's see what's on the menu." The waitress shot a searing glare at Oskar that he did not notice, as he read the list of wines with a slight smirk. Karin resolved to speak with him about it afterwards.

"Oh, look!" Oskar exclaimed, "they have my favourite Bordeaux!"

"There are also some wonderful rosés made in the area," Karin suggested, "do you want to try a Bellet? They're from the hills just east," Karin echoed the cardinal direction with a nod to her right. The hills of Nice had soils that nurtured olive trees and grapevines alike, with local *domaines* creating olive oils with no bitterness, tasting of the sun itself, and rosés with a refreshingly full, rich palette from their fruits.

"My god, you always know where north is, don't you?" Oskar said in a tone that was neither admiring nor complimentary. Oskar continued during Karin's bewildered silence, "I think with fish, a red Bordeaux would be best. Anyway, I'd love to treat you to it, I'm sure you can't afford such a good bottle on your own! A Saint-Emilion Grand Cru isn't something one drinks every day."

Oskar's intent was now clearer to Karin, in that it had nothing to do with her and everything to do with Oskar's ego. She was none too happy with the direction their evening was taking. *Continued...*

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