

Be careful what you wish for

It's seven o'clock on a Tuesday morning, and I open my eyes to that familiar feeling. Not exactly depression but far from joy. Just... flat. For no real reason that I can pinpoint. I have a good job, extremely well-paid; a luxury flat in West London; and a brilliantly supportive family. No man in my life, but I'm okay with that. I don't need a man to make my life complete. I mean, sure, it would be nice but it's not essential. My two adorable Silver Bengal cats, Thunder and Storm, give me more than enough love for now. I should be happy, so why aren't I?

I sit up in bed, and push my 600 thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets to one side. From the kitchen, my coffee, timed to perfection, is already percolating. Another day at the office looms. I'm a corporate solicitor – a newly made senior partner, no less, in one of the most prestigious firms in London. It's everything I wanted when I was studying. The prize I had my eye on from the start. And I've made it. I'm there. But by God, the hours are long and arduous. It leaves time for little else. Most days, I feel like I'm chasing my tail and rarely leave before eight-thirty. Even then, I often have to bring work home and continue. It's the price of success, apparently. And if I don't want to do it, there's no shortage of people behind me that would jump into my shoes without a second glance.

I get up from my bed and walk to the shower, pulling my T-shirt over my head and letting it drop on the floor. The heaviness settles in the pit of my stomach as I turn it on and step into the steam.

My bathroom, designed by me, has the best shower unit. It's a state-of-the-art steam room and sauna, as well as a power shower, with multiple jets and heads. I set it to pummel me, easing the ache out of my shoulders under the almost-scalding water. If I could wash the lethargy out of me, I would.

After showering, Thunder and Storm are waiting for me in the kitchen, mewling loudly. Thunder throws himself down from his place high on top of a cupboard, bounds from the worktop and onto the floor in one fluid movement, to wrap himself around my legs, twining his body in and out in our morning dance. As

usual, Storm can't be bothered to move, and instead rolls lazily over in her bed in the corner.

'Come on, then,' I tell her. 'Brekkie.'

She still doesn't move, instead choosing to glare at me. No doubt she'll get up and shoot over at the last minute when I put her bowl down, determined that Thunder won't get her share.

While the cats eat, purring and vibrating loudly, I pour my coffee. My coffee machine cost me well over a thousand pounds, but it was a must-have for me. I can't function without the best coffee, a special blend I have made up in Harrods. I close my eyes at the first sip, savouring the rich, deep taste as it powers through my body, and lower myself onto my favourite calfskin stool at the breakfast bar. I love this kitchen. When I bought this place, one of the big draws was that I loved the décor. It was perfect, and I didn't have to change a thing. It could have been designed with me in mind. The best thing of all about it is the spare bedroom, which I was able to turn into my own art studio. My biggest love in life is painting and drawing. In another life, I would have been an illustrator, making stories come to life. But I've always known that probably wouldn't pay the bills. So, I did the sensible thing and did a law degree instead. Despite my success, though, the ache inside me that I can't spend anywhere near the time I'd like to paint grows ever stronger. The trappings of my success feel like a prison at times. Success keeps me trying harder all the time. I know, deep down, that's the real reason for the way I feel. I'm on a fast train and can't get off. I thought that when my job brought me success and the admiration of others (my nickname at work is the Golden Girl), that happiness would follow, but it hasn't.

I dress for work, pulling on the clothes I laid out the night before. All expensive, and all just things. To be honest, I prefer wearing my painting clothes: torn jeans and an ancient shirt, with paint splatters covering ninety per cent of it. When I put them on, my body just relaxes in a way nothing else comes close. As I pick up my briefcase and head for the door, I detour into my studio, Thunder and Storm circling my legs. They know. Whenever I feel down, they're there, attuned to my moods.

‘It’s okay,’ I tell them, bending down to stroke their soft fur. ‘I have to go to work.’

My easel, with its canvas in place, sits in the middle of the room, with the light from the window shining on it. I’ve been painting a house that exists only in my imagination. It sits high on a bluff, overlooking the sea, with forest to the rear. It’s a stone-built, one-storey structure, with ivy softening the walls and twining around the windows. It’s my dream house. Painting it has brought it to life, and it’s now the last thing I think of at night and the first thing on my mind in the morning when I wake up.

I wrench myself away from the picture and the room, my heart seeming to grow heavier and sit lower inside me.

‘Bye, darlings. See you later,’ I say to the cats as I close the door on them. I hate the fact that they’re house cats. They rarely go outside. They have no road sense and are unusually impressive to look at, not being the run-of-the-mill moggies. I’m always frightened they’ll get run over or stolen if they go outside. If I lived in the house in the picture, they could come and go as they wanted. No roads, no other people, no danger. Just me, them and nature in its abundant and breath-taking glory.

I pull the door closed behind me, still seeing their little faces staring at me without judgement. Hours later, after another gruelling day, I’ll return, exhausted and stressed. I’d give anything for something good to happen, just for once. Or maybe, just something else. Something different. The thought pulls me up short. Isn’t what I’ve got what I wished for all those years ago? I’m living the dream. I want for nothing. What the hell is wrong with me? I traipse down the stairs and get my head in the game.

When I return, much later than I intended thanks to a last-minute client meeting, I stop at the foot of the stairs leading up to my flat. It’s dark and it shouldn’t be. It doesn’t feel right. The air feels different somehow. The hairs on the back of my neck begin prickling and standing to attention. The light, on a timer, isn’t on to welcome me. I flick the switch and the darkness remains, leading up the stairs and around the

corner. It doesn't mean anything. Does it? Despite telling myself it's just my overactive imagination, my mouth feels dry and my pulse rate quickens.

My cats! Suddenly I'm racing up the stairs, switching on the torch on my phone. Shadows shift up the walls like ghosts. Or spiders scurrying from the light. Outside my door, broken glass lies scattered on the floor. That's why the light hasn't come on. The bulb, or what's left of it, has been dropped or hit with something. Do I call 999 or go in first? My door isn't properly closed, and I definitely didn't leave it like that.

Without stopping to think, I burst through the door, reaching for the light switch just inside. Light floods the hallway, and I stop dead at the sight. From here, the flat is mainly one big open plan space, and I can see right to the picture windows at the rear. Over half my stuff is gone. Whoever did this must have been at it all day. All my lovely things, bought by me over the years – stolen. The shock freezes me to the spot even as my brain tries hard to process what's happened. All the time, my heart is hammering so hard my ribcage might burst open. I feel violated, dirty and nauseous.

I pull out my phone and dial 999. 'I've been burgled!' I cry, over and over again. 'Please help.'

'Are you in the flat now? Is the intruder still there?'

'Oh my God, I have no idea!' I say, backing up towards the door. What if they are? If someone comes charging out at me now, what would I do? Then another thought hits me. Thunder and Storm are nowhere to be seen.

Raw fear starts to spiral up inside me, from the depths of my soul. Please God, let them be okay. Anything else I can handle, but if they've been hurt...

The emergency responder tells me police will be with me as soon as possible, even as I'm charging my way deeper into my flat, leaving the front door wide open behind me. Without realising, I've picked up a heavy vase from the console table that sits near the door. If there is someone here, they'd better watch out. I'm a warrior, strong and brave. If they mess with me, they'll wish they hadn't.

'Storm! Thunder! Where are you?' I call out, stopping to listen. Nothing.

I turn on as many lights as I can and throw open all the doors. I don't think anyone's in here. Lots of things are out of place or gone altogether. At first glance,

anything of any real value seems to be gone. Whoever has been here knows what the high value items are. All electrical devices, including my coffee machine, have gone. My personal laptop. All the TVs. My jewellery. My shoes. In the bedroom, my expensive clothes are all gone. But I care only for my cats and my painting studio. Breathing deeply, I tell myself if I have those, everything will be okay.

I call again for the cats and listen hard. A faint mewling sound, plaintive and weak, comes from somewhere in the flat, and my blood runs cold. I call out and hear it again. I think it's coming from the kitchen.

I run back into the kitchen area and stop, listening. 'Here, I'm here.'

I drop to my haunches and call for the cats again. From the small gap at the side of the fridge, where they can get under the kitchen units, Thunder squeezes himself out, followed by Storm.

'You clever babies,' I say. 'Did you hide from the bad person? Or people?'

They clamber onto me. They're frightened, not at all their usual confident selves. I run my hands over every inch of them. They seem to be okay. I can just imagine them cowering under the kitchen cupboards, listening to whatever was going on around them. They're wary of strangers at the best of times. I pick them up, holding them close, and go, more slowly now, from room to room. There's no one here. They're long gone. Maybe whoever it was knew my routine. Maybe they watched me leave this morning and broke in soon after, with all day to snoop and pry and take what they wanted. It seems the most likely. With some of the furniture they've taken, there's no way this was the work of just one person. To the neighbours, it must have looked like I was moving out and hadn't told them. Which wouldn't be unusual seeing as I barely see them. I don't know their names and they don't know mine. We have separate mailboxes on the wall outside the main front door, with just the flat number on.

The room that's most untouched is my art room. My paints are all there, along with some of my canvases and illustrations that I keep in there. Thankfully, the unfinished painting of my dream house is still there, too. I mean, what good would a half-finished painting be to anyone? It's not like they could sell it. The relief that my studio has been largely undisturbed is overwhelming. I drag one of the remaining dining chairs in there and that's where the police find me when they arrive.

The cats are on my knee. They look bewildered, with eyes as wide as saucers. They haven't left my side since I got home. They cuddle tighter into me as I speak to the police officers.

I go over what's missing with them, adding that until I look around properly, I won't know exactly what's missing.

'I'd make you a coffee, but they've taken the coffee machine. Oh, and the kettle.' I have a few cups left, but most of my kitchen gadgets are gone too.

Eventually the police leave me in the remains of my flat, having informed me that there has been a gang at work in the area, and this type of thing has been all too common.

'They're very organised, I'm afraid,' one of the officers had said, not needing to add that it's a gentrified area, with expensive properties no doubt filled with luxurious items. Like mine.

I still have my bed, but no TVs. My large, bulky sofa is still here, too. It's seen better days, thanks to the cats' claws. It's probably why I still have it.

I sit on the bed and the cats crawl from my knee and lay beside me, their tails swishing. They seem much happier now the police have gone. I lay back on the bed, my mind churning through the day's events.

How do I feel? This morning, I was down, overworked and exhausted. And now? I sit up, still trying to analyse it. I should feel worse but I don't. It's odd. All my lovely things have been taken from me, but I don't feel too bothered. Thunder and Storm are fine. I have my painting things. My coffee machine can be replaced. It can all be replaced.

This morning, I'd wished for something different to happen, but I hadn't meant this. Maybe I should have been more careful what I wished for.

I stroke Storm's head, scratching between her ears. I'm being stupid thinking that. I haven't brought it on myself. If I keep on down that road, I'll end up blaming myself, and the only people to blame here are the scumbags that think it's okay to take what doesn't belong to them.

A thought so wild I can barely contemplate it enters my head. I could sell up, leave this all behind. Give up my job and do what I always wanted to do. I could try to get jobs as a freelance artist. My heart lifts at the thought and I feel lighter than I

have in a long time. If I moved away from here, taking the equity in my flat, I could buy a modest little place far north of here and have loads left over. Somewhere with open countryside and space to breathe. If I didn't have a massive mortgage, I wouldn't need such a stressful and high-powered job. The cats could have more space and freedom, as could I.

But could it work or am I being stupid? Deep down, I don't think it's stupid. Lots of people have a life change. I swing my legs off the bed, feeling happier than I have in a long time. Has my brain been telling me this all along, and I haven't been listening? I'm not one for making snap decisions, but it feels so right. I'll sleep on it for a few days, but I think I'm going to do it.

I get off the bed and walk to the room opposite. My studio. Leaving the door open, I put on my painting clothes, sit down and begin to paint, adding light to the stone of the little house. I'm humming now, my brush flicking over the canvas faster and faster. I smile as I paint. I don't know what the future holds, but I know I'm looking forward to it. It's all a matter of where you put your value. I think I've been putting mine in the wrong place. The burglars may have done me a favour after all.

Thunder mews loudly, annoyed at being ignored.

'I'm painting our new home,' I tell him as he fixes me with his emerald eyes.

If it's out there, I'll find it. And if not, maybe I can build it.