



LORICE

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Scholastic Press / New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-5461-8594-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

26 27 28 29 30

Printed in India 197

First edition, October 2026

Book design by Elizabeth B. Parisi



Often wonder if things would have been different if Bunny Van Hopper had been a calmer, humbler rabbit. But she wasn't.

From the moment I was placed in the cage next to hers at the Mount Charles Animal Shelter, I became her captive audience.

“Ah . . . a kitten,” she said, wrinkling her pink nose.

“I’m not a kitten,” I insisted. “I’ve seen most of the seasons.”

I thought about the woods. The trees towering over

me, and the rushing river. My mother and siblings curled around me in our little den. And the rain that had come earlier that fall and swept away everything. Almost everything.

“I’ve seen a lot of things,” I added.

“Well, you’re a scrawny one, then,” she said. She shifted her weight and moved away from me. “You’re not sick, are you?”

“I’m not sick.” I wasn’t. But the last month had been



long, and cold, and I'd spent most of it hungry. My skin felt tight and thin, stretched over my knobby bones. The stress of it all (not to mention the tiny biting insects that always sought me out) made me groom myself constantly, so I'd lost a good bit of fur on my belly and hind legs.

"Well, no one's going to claim you looking like that," she said. "Stop grooming yourself like a mad thing! And eat everything they bring you, even if you don't like it. Though I'm sure you're not one to be choosy. I, on the other hand, was brought up eating the highest-quality produce and rabbit pellets, scooped thrice daily into a shining silver bowl. 'Nothing but the best for my Bunny,' my mistress would say."

I heard all about Mistress, how kind and generous she was, and how she'd let Bunny scamper freely around her mansion. Bunny would nestle on a cashmere blanket thrown over Mistress's lap, even while Mistress dined. Mistress would caress Bunny's ears lovingly and call her a sweet velvet baby.

When Bunny wasn't eating or gossiping about the other

animals in the shelter (which she did often) or sleeping (which she did even more often), she was talking about her life in the mansion with Mistress. It was a lot of responsibility, being the rabbit's only audience. And it wasn't always interesting. But I did learn a lot about the human world and being a house pet. And the more I absorbed of Bunny's world, the more my own past receded. It was as if I was drifting down a river, leaving it all behind on the shore. At the time, forgetting was my only comfort.

One afternoon, Bunny was telling me all about television and watching shows on Mistress's lap when we heard high-pitched barking. The rabbit's ears perked up.

"Sounds like Asti," she said.

"That big poodle?" I said as the door opened to our room of cages.

"Come on, Asti, that's a good girl," said Cheryl, one of the shelter workers. She was holding the dog's leash, tugging on it gently. "We're going this way."

“I told you. I have a feeling about these things,” the rabbit said, giving me a smug look.

“I thought Asti was adopted,” I said. I remembered a couple coming in just after I’d arrived, a man and a woman with big smiles.

“*Was* adopted. Some animals just can’t handle the pet life,” Bunny explained. “Asti is a skittish one.”

“Skittish?” I asked.

“She’s scared of everything. And when she gets scared, she . . . makes a mess. If you know what I mean.” The rabbit sniffed. “I heard the couple who took her home had another, smaller dog. Asti lost control whenever she saw it.”

The big white poodle whimpered as Cheryl led her into an open cage in the dog section.

“Well, it was only a matter of time,” Bunny whispered.

As Cheryl locked the cage and walked away, Asti continued to whimper mournfully.

“If my memory serves me, this is her third failed

adoption,” Bunny said. “Some of these sad creatures won’t ever find a home outside of these cages.”

I tried to put my paws over my ears, but it was no use. The poodle’s cries echoed through the shelter halls. They seemed to vibrate inside me.

Those cries still haunted me on the first day I saw Him at the shelter. It was like any other day; we’d just been fed: a scoop of dry kibble for me, a scoop of pellets and a handful of carrots for Bunny. She scarfed hers down in no time, while I nibbled at mine.

“You’re shy about everything,” she commented, bits of carrot hanging from her whiskers. “Even eating.”

“I just like to take my time,” I said. Recently, I’d learned that the slower I ate, the fuller I felt. This came in handy when I didn’t know where my next meal would come from. But Bunny was used to getting what she wanted, when she wanted it, and the shelter workers were quick to bring it to her. Otherwise, she’d whine and kick and gnaw at the bars of her cage.

“You must be bold,” Bunny said. “No one wants to adopt a pet that’s afraid of everything, like poor Asti. You must develop a spirit of adventure, of *joie de vivre*!”

I swallowed a mouthful of kibble. “Ghwaa duh . . . what?” I asked.

“Hmph,” said Bunny, brushing off her whiskers with a paw. “A joy of *life*, my dear. An interest in being out in the world! You don’t want to be cooped up in here forever, do you? With these squeaking guinea pigs and skittish poodles and unworthy human servants?”

I could have taken that moment to remind her that she was raised by a breeder, and then in a mansion, while I was born feral and therefore “out in the world.” I’d experienced quite enough of the cold, and the hunger, and the loss, and the loneliness. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing left for me out there. I could have reminded her of all that, but I didn’t. Because at that moment, the door opened, light streaming in from the front office. Cheryl entered, with two

other people following behind her. One was a woman with long, dark hair. The other was a boy.

Bunny made a noise that sounded like hiccuping. I thought she was having trouble digesting her food, but it turned out she was just happy.

“It’s . . . Him!” she managed.

“‘Him’?”

“Max Winters is his name, and that’s his mother, Mrs. Winters,” she said. “He’s adopted all sorts over the years, and he treats his pets with care and kindness. They say he lives in a wonderful house, a place called Five Manderley Lane, with all the food you can eat and lots of room to scamper!”

The boy was at the other side of the room now, looking at the dogs. He had a round face with rosy cheeks, and short dark hair. He was quiet and gentle around the animals, unlike most children I’d seen.

“These dogs look nice,” Max said. “But they’re too big. I want something I can cuddle on my lap.”

“We have cats over here, and some rabbits,” said the shelter worker, gesturing over to our side of the room.

“He’s coming!” Bunny exclaimed. She groomed herself, smoothing her fur. “How do I look? Do I look cuddly?”

“I suppose so,” I said. The fur on my belly and legs was only just starting to grow back in, so I didn’t have much to groom. Besides, who could I ever impress?

The rabbit tut-tutted. “What would you know, anyway?” she said.

As Max and his mother and Cheryl reached our section, Bunny rolled onto her back and exposed her fluffy belly.

“This one’s got some personality,” Mrs. Winters said. “You’ve never had a rabbit.”

“I don’t know,” Max said.

“Her name is Bunny Van Hopper,” his mother said, reading the tag on the cage door.

“Her previous owner was an elderly lady who went into a retirement home. They didn’t take pets,” Cheryl explained. “We’ve been caring for this old girl ever since. She’s quite a character.”

“Don’t call me old!” Bunny squeaked. “You’re not exactly a kit yourself, *Cheryl!*”

“She’s very . . . vocal,” Max’s mother noted.

“Let’s take her out so you can hold her,” Cheryl suggested. Max stood back as she opened the cage.

“This is it!” Bunny exclaimed, chittering and kicking her feet. “My big chance!”

“She seems happy to meet you,” Mrs. Winters said.

“She’s heavy,” Max said.

“What does she eat?” Max’s mother asked Cheryl.

As the two stepped to the side to talk, Max held Bunny awkwardly.

“Watch and learn,” she said to me. She burrowed into the crook of Max’s arm, twitching her nose, putting on a grand show. “This is how you make them fall in love with you!”

“Wow, you’re friendly,” Max said.

As he extended his hand to pet her, she chattered happily. Perhaps too happily.

“Ouch!” Max cried, pulling back his finger.

“Are you all right?” asked Mrs. Winters.

“She bit me,” Max said. A small bead of blood appeared on his index finger.

“It was an accident!” Bunny cried.

While Max’s mother took him to wash his hands and find a bandage, Cheryl put Bunny back in her cage. The rabbit whined all the while.

“Don’t shut me away again! Give me another chance!” she said, kicking her hind legs.

I was so focused on Bunny, I didn’t see the fingers poking through the cage right away. When one of them touched my fur, I jumped.

“I don’t know about that one, Max. She seems jittery. And small,” said his mother. She crossed her arms, and a few metal circles around her wrists made clink-clank noises. “And her fur looks a little . . . patchy.”

Max looked at the tag on my cage door. “Her name is . . . ‘Kitty?’”

“Not exactly original,” Mrs. Winters noted.

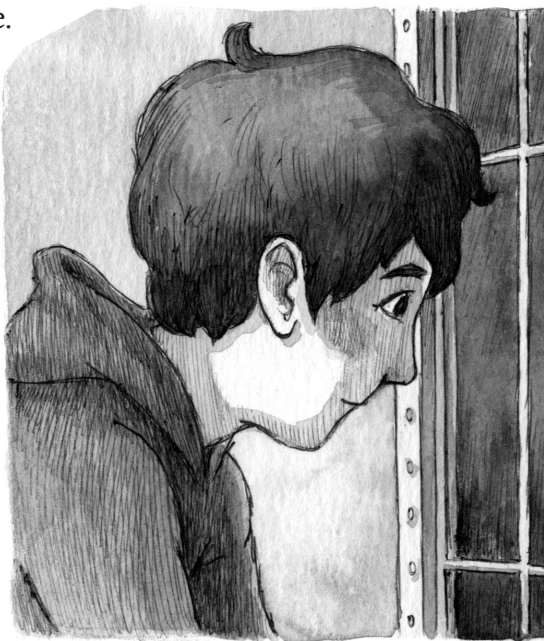
“Well, to be honest, we didn’t expect her to survive,” Cheryl explained. “She was found out in the woods on her own last month, half starved and covered in fleas. We’re thinking she was the runt of the litter—her family must have abandoned her.”

I am not a *runt*, I thought. And that’s not what happened. My mother, my sister, and my brothers would never have abandoned me.

But this was no time to drown in sad memories. I did my best to push them down, down, down.

“She looks much better now,” Max said. “Maybe a little sad, though. Are you sad, Kitty?”

I mewed, trying to sound friendly, but it came out more like a tiny cry.



The boy's face filled the outside of the cage, so barely any light filtered in. I saw something in his eyes then. Max looked sad, too.

"We're looking for a *fun* pet to cheer you up," Max's mother reminded him. She looked at the shelter worker. "Max lost his cat a little while ago. She was really special. So maybe it's too soon for another cat—or any pet—right now. Let's go home and think about it,

Max. Okay?"

Slowly, the boy nodded as his mother led him away.

"Well," Bunny said. "You certainly did all you could to distract him from me. Are you trying to sabotage my chances?"

"I didn't do anything," I insisted.

"When you're young and tiny, you don't have to," she



said, twitching her nose. “No matter. The boy’s mother loved me—how could she not? I’m cuddly, I’m loyal, and I’m fun. Which is more than I can say for you. Next time someone considers you, try not to look so pitiful and gloomy, if you can. Show some confidence. And for goodness’ sake, do *something* with that fur, now that it’s finally grown back in.”

“I’ll try,” I said.

“Just not with Max. He’ll be back for me,” Bunny said, nestling into her bed of hay. “Trust me. And when he is, I’ll be ready. And calm.”