**Wild Cat**

‘He doesn’t say much, does he?’

*He* was watching the news. *He* was getting annoyed. *He* was trying to listen to what the presenters were saying: something about a dangerous animal that had escaped from a private zoo.

‘He’ was Jed. But ‘He’ could have been his actual name as far as Mum’s latest boyfriend, Ashley, was concerned. That or ‘Mate’. Jed never seemed to get called anything else.

Since Dad had abandoned them, Jed had seen a succession of boyfriends come and go. Some made more of an effort to bond with him than others, but they all bolted sooner or later. From some of the angry words exchanged in the final shouting matches, Jed wondered whether he might be part of the problem, but Mum never blamed him.

Jed knew that he should be better at keeping his temper. Sometimes he saw the signs early enough to remove himself from tricky situations, as Mum had suggested. Slipping out of the back gate for a walk on the hillside was his favourite escape route. Too often, however, he felt cornered and lashed out. He knew it was wrong to scratch and hiss and spit, but for some reason, he only remembered that too late.

‘The creature is thought to be an ocelot …’

‘Shall I phone for a pizza?’ said Ashley.

‘… rain forests of South America,’ continued the reporter over some footage of a leopard-spotted cat.

‘No offence, but you ain’t no cook,’ said Ashley to Jed’s mum. ‘Ain’t that the truth, Mate?’ he added with a sneering smile and a wink at Jed. He said nothing, but toyed with his beans on toast. Mum’s cooking was just fine by him and always would be.

‘Really?’ said Mum. ‘I’m not sure we can afford it again so soon.’

‘… people living in the Boxbury Beacons area have been advised not to approach anything resembling a large cat,’ added the reporter.

‘Hey, Mum!’ cried Jed, ‘The Boxbury Beacons. That’s here …’

‘Oi, Mate,’ snarled Ashley, ‘your mum and I are talking.’

Jed’s chair scraped across the floor as he jumped to his feet, ready to pounce, but Mum had already stepped between him and Ashley, signalling with a slight shake of her head for him to leave. With anger prickling his eyes, Jed darted out of the room. Slamming the back door behind him, he sprinted down the short garden path, through the gate and out on to the hillside.

It was a good couple of minutes before he slowed down. By this time, he was deep into the dense tangle of ferns that covered the Beacons, following one of the many narrow sheep trails that pushed through the undergrowth. Although shoulder-height to an average grown-up, the ferns were taller than him, so Jed knew he was well-hidden. Best of all, very few people ever ventured far from the paths and tracks that led hikers around these popular, picturesque hills, so he knew that he would be blissfully alone.

By the time he had reached his secret den in the small, grassy clearing, his breathing had calmed down to a normal rate and his heart had stopped thumping against his ribs. He dropped to his knees and crawled into the rough shelter he had built the previous week out of sturdy branches, interwoven with leafy twigs.

Why did Mum always attract such idiots? Was it something about her, or did all boys grow up to be selfish know-it-alls, he thought to himself as he began to practise the deep breathing that Mum had taught him to do whenever he was feeling stressed. As he listened to his breath filling his lungs then flowing out again, he relaxed so much he thought he could hear himself purring.

Suddenly, it hit him: he could hear purring. Not the soft rasp of a house-moggy, but a deeper, harsher purr. Fear turned his spine to ice. Tiny jewels of sweat broke out across his forehead. Slowly, slowly, he pulled himself up into a sitting position and turned around, fully expecting his last sight on this Earth to be the massive jaws of a tiger bearing down on him.

Instead, he saw nothing. Not at first, anyway. Then, as his eyes adjusted to the gloom at the back of his den, he found that he could just make out the shape of a cat, perhaps twice as big as a family pet, but certainly not a ‘big’ cat. Two bright eyes watched him steadily and Jed marvelled at how magically that cat’s spotted coat blended in with the dappled light.

He didn’t really know why, but he started to talk, quietly and rhythmically, like a verbal purr of his own. ‘It’s alright, it’s alright. Easy, easy, it’s alright. Good here, isn’t it. Quiet and peaceful; secret and safe. Have you escaped too? I ought to tell, but is that what you want? Sometimes I think I’ll run away too. I couldn’t survive, not on my own. But you … perhaps you could. You wouldn’t hurt anyone, would you? I ought to tell, but should I tell? What do you want me to do?’

The ocelot licked its paw. Jed reversed out of the den.

Back in his kitchen, Jed was greeted with a desperate hug from Mum, followed by a rapid-fire interrogation. Was he alright? Did he realise there was a wild animal on the loose? Did he know how worried she had been? There were police marksmen searching the hills right now. He could have been shot. Had he seen anything?

Jed thought of the wild cat, alone in a strange environment. He thought of the armed policemen. Should he tell? He weighed the options, then made his decision. He knew what was the right thing to do.