

# *The Town Drunk*

*Presents*

## **Cat Futures**

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*Illustrated by Gayle Klar, from a photo by Jaime M.L. Marschalk*

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I'd only been dating Amy a couple weeks when she asked me the question that changed everything. It happened in a coffee shop a couple blocks from campus. She'd just come from an art history class and sat warming her hands around a double mocha grande with extra whipped cream, waiting, as I finished reading the last few paragraphs of a novel for English Lit.

The minute I closed the book she pounced. "So, Steven, are you a cat person?" She's like that, no build-up, just right to the point. A refreshing change from the kind of girls I usually dated.

We'd met at the campus health center. Friends had brought me in after I'd landed hard on my head during a game of supposedly touch football. She was there having some prescription filled. The first time I saw her, she seemed surrounded by a glow of light. Okay, it could've been part of being smacked in the head, but at the time I just stared at her like I was seeing an angel. Then she turned, and her eyes caught mine, and the next thing I knew I was introducing myself to her and asking her out.

And now, two weeks later, she was asking me about cats.

"What? Well, I guess. I mean, sure, I like cats. I don't dislike cats. I've never had any though; we always had dogs when I was growing up. And my little sister had a rabbit once."

"You're talking about pets," she said. "I'm talking about cats."

"Yeah?" She still had that glow. I couldn't see it any more, but I could feel it.

"Cats aren't pets. They're autonomous beings that sometimes choose to share their lives with you."

"Cats aren't pets?" I took a sip of coffee. Not a latte or an espresso, just ordinary coffee. That's the kind of guy I am.

“Well, okay, *some* cats are pets. But that’s like some people are dumb, you know? Like some people go through life as drones, no imagination, no creativity, no ambition. So, yeah, some cats are like that, there are drone cats. Those are the ones that are pets. But the *real* cats, they’re special and they’re smart and they are most definitely *not* pets.”

“Do you have a cat?” I asked. I’d never been to Amy’s place, but I knew she had an apartment somewhere off campus. Like I said, we’d only been dating a couple weeks, and on the few occasions we ended up somewhere, it had always been my dorm room.

“I don’t *have* one, but there’s a cat that who came to live with me three days ago.”

I smiled at that. I’m not sure why, but it sounded cute to me. So many things about Amy struck me as cute. “What’s her name?”

“I can’t pronounce it. It’s in cat talk.”

“Cat talk?”

“The language of cats. Not the pet kind, the real kind. And he’s a he, not a she.”

“Well, if you can’t pronounce his name, what do you call him?”

“I call him Mr. Buttons. But he says his name in cat talk translates more closely to ‘Traveler Amidst Shadows of Possible Destinies.’”

She said it with a totally straight face, and I had to fake a sneeze to keep from laughing out loud. When I’d recovered, I asked, “Why is that his name in cat talk?”

“Because,” said Amy, “Mr. Buttons can tell the future.”

“How do you mean?” Don’t get me wrong, I had real feelings for Amy, but this was starting to go from silly to weird, and you only have to date one really weird girl to get a little gun-shy about it.

“He knows things,” she said. “Things that are going to happen.”

“Right,” I said. “And he tells you these things?”

“Steven, don’t be silly. Cats can’t talk.”

“Then how does he—”

“He uses the words on the refrigerator. Those magnetic poetry things. You know, individual words that you rearrange to make a haiku or sonnet when you’re putting away the milk.”

“And the cat does this? Puts the words together in different ways to tell you the future?”

“Yep. He’s only been doing it for the last few days. I haven’t told anyone else. You’re the first.”

“Why me?” I asked, not sure if I meant it rhetorically or not.

And then she smiled and I felt that glow again. Yeah, I was smitten.

“Because Mr. Buttons told me to. He wants you to come see him. He says there’s something about the future you need to know.” She looked at her watch. “Do you have time now? I’m all done with classes for the day.”

We finished our coffees and I followed Amy to her car, my boots crunching through the snow. We drove to the older section of town, about as far from the university as you could go, to a small collection of apartment buildings that had probably looked shabby back when they were new, and they hadn’t been new since my parents were in diapers. A shining blanket of snow makes a lot of buildings look nicer; it didn’t help here. Amy pulled the car into a parking lot and stopped in a numbered space. We got out and I followed her through a rusty gate and up two flights of stairs. Her door had three locks.

The apartment was pretty small, a studio with a bed that folded down out of the wall. Amy had a desk and a bookshelf and nothing else in the way of furniture. Instead of a kitchen, over in one corner there was a dorm fridge with a little microwave stacked on top. A sliding glass door on the wall opposite the front door opened onto a tiny balcony that held a pair of green plastic deck chairs, a litter box, and a basket of cat toys. The apartment was little more than a cracker box, but even so, it was nearly twice the size of my dorm room, and she had her own bathroom. The place looked shoddy, but Amy shone there, like a fairy-tale princess who couldn’t stop being a princess even though she’d been sent off to live with evil peasant stepparents in a thatch hut by a tulgey wood.

“So where’s the cat?” I asked.

“Mr. Buttons likes sunning himself on the balcony. I’ll go get him.”

I did a slow circuit of the apartment while Amy went to fetch the cat. Then I did it again. It was a really small apartment. She came back in with an enormous orange tabby cradled in her arms. She tickled him under his chin and murmured nonsense syllables to him.

“Here, you take him,” she said. “I’ll set up his word pieces.”

Fumbling, I took the cat. “I thought you said he used those fridge magnet things.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t do them on the refrigerator. I keep them in a cardboard box on the bookshelf. Here you go.” She set a shallow box on the floor, the kind of box your aunt uses to send you a Christmas sweater. Inside were hundreds of white plastic chits with words printed on them.

“How does this work?”

“You clear a space at one end of the box. Then Mr. Buttons uses his left front paw to pick the words he wants and pushes them into the right order.”

“Why the left front paw?”

“That’s the paw of prophecy,” Amy said, staring into my eyes, her face suddenly solemn and serious.

“Paw of prophecy?”

“It’s the one that only has four toes.”

I shook my head. “I’m missing something, I think.”

She paused, and her voice dropped to a near whisper. “The future isn’t spoken or written. It must be four-toed.” She paused, like she’d just revealed some holy truth, and then her lip started quivering and she broke up in laughter. “Ha! Got ya. There’s nothing to it, Mr. Buttons is just a lefty.” She giggled again. “A south paw.”

I rolled my eyes theatrically, which just made her laugh more. What can I say? My girlfriend likes bad puns. But although she’d been joking about why Mr. Buttons used his left front paw, she was still serious about the cat’s abilities.

“Okay, I’m going to leave you guys alone for a bit while I go get my laundry out of the basement.”

“What am I supposed to do with Mr. Buttons?” I said.

“He’s going to tell you your future. He’s fussy, though, and doesn’t want me here when he does it. But don’t ask him too many questions, I’ll only be gone five or ten minutes.”

She blew me a kiss as she walked out the door and pulled it shut behind her. I set the cat on the floor, and he immediately lumbered over to the cardboard box and began moving chits around with his left front paw. After a moment he looked up at me, rather expectantly I thought, or as expectantly as a cat can look I suppose.

“Sure, Mr. Buttons, I’ll play.” I pushed the chits around in the box until I’d cleared a small space. The cat had pulled his paw back while I did this, but as soon as I finished he plunged in, flicking word chits this way and that. Then, just as quickly, he stopped, backed away from the box, sat back on his haunches, and stared at me. I looked into the box. Six chits had been lined up in the open space:

I WILL TELL YOU THREE THINGS

I looked at the words for a full minute, and then looked at the cat. He flicked his tail from side to side, rose to his feet, and strode back to the box. Once again he moved words with his left front paw. When he finished, he backed off again. I looked into the box.

### YOU WILL MARRY THE GIRL IN TWO YEARS

“Oh really? C’mon, we’ve only gone out a few times. She’s special, and I like her a lot, but that’s crazy. Oh hell, I’m arguing with a cat. Maybe *I’m* crazy.”

Mr. Buttons cocked his head and pronounced a very clear “Mrowwr.” Then he moved back to the box and went at it again. When he finished this time he pulled his paw from the box but didn’t back away. He tilted his head and looked at me, as if daring me to look at the second of his three pronouncements.

### THE GIRL IS IN DANGER UNLESS YOU HELP HER

“Danger? What kind of danger? You’re freaking me out, cat.” I got up from where I’d been kneeling alongside the box. I went to the sliding door and out onto the balcony. I needed air. This was just too much. I liked Amy, I liked her a lot. Sure, maybe in time I might even realize I loved her, really loved her, not just the smitten, infatuated feeling I had for her right now. But, there was something seriously wrong here. Her cat foretold the future? What was up with that?

After a bit, Mr. Buttons followed me out onto the balcony and began doing that cat thing where they rub back and forth against your legs. When he had my full attention once more, he turned and walked back inside, back to the box. He didn’t put his paw inside; he just sat down next to it and glanced up at me.

I came in and knelt by the box again. The cat had already laid out the third message. I read it and just stared for a while, trying to take it all in.

### THEY GAVE HER THE WRONG MEDICINE

I stood and went into the bathroom. It was the kind of tiny bathroom that you’d expect with a tiny apartment, and it had the standard mirrored medicine cabinet over the sink. I opened the door and found what I was looking for, a small, plastic, amber vial from the health center pharmacy. I took out my cell phone and called the phone number on the vial.

They answered on the third ring. “Campus pharmacy.”

“Hello, I’m calling for Amy Saunders with regard to...” I checked the label. “Prescription number 3821964.”



“I’m sorry, sir, I can’t discuss another person’s medications without her permission.”

“Yeah, okay, but I just want to make sure she’s got the right pills. You can call up the prescription on your computer, right? Are the pills supposed to be blue?”

“Blue?”

“Yeah, light blue, with a runnel down the middle so you could snap them in half.”

“No sir, that’s not right.” The voice paused. I imagined the pharmacist on the other end of the phone biting her lip. “Are there any markings on the pills?”

I spent the next few minutes describing the pills in detail, reading the full label off the vial, and then promising to take Amy to the health center immediately.

She returned with a basket of folded laundry just about the time I was closing my cell phone. She still had that same glow about her, just as when I’d first met her.

“I’m back. What did Mr. Buttons tell you?”

“I’ll tell you all about it in the car,” I said, though I knew I wasn’t going to mention any of it. Not then, maybe not ever.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going to the health center, and you’re going to let me drive your car. You’ve been taking the wrong pills for the last two weeks. You could be delusional, or worse, you could start having seizures.”

“What are you talking about? Is this a joke? Did Mr. Buttons put you up to this?”

I took the laundry basket from her and set it aside and gathered her in my arms. “It’s going to be okay. Another week, and it could have been very serious, very bad, but the pharmacist said you haven’t been taking it long enough to do yourself any permanent harm. C’mon, I’ll drive.”

And that’s what I did. When we got to the health center, they took Amy into an examination room and confirmed what Mr. Buttons had told me. They said they needed to keep her there for a few days to flush the drugs out of her system. She’d be fine, barring some slight memory loss.

I promised Amy I’d take care of the cat until they discharged her, and the look of gratitude on her face made me glad I’d done so. But when I went back, I couldn’t find him anywhere in the apartment. He was just gone.

The box of word chits, though, was on the floor where I’d left it, along with a parting note:

TOSS MY STUFF  
I'M DONE HERE

Mr. Buttons, a.k.a. “Traveler Amidst Shadows of Possible Destinines” had moved on.

I still didn't want to believe in a cat that could order me around with word chits, but that ship had long since sailed. So I gathered up his food dish, litter box, toys, and any other evidence that a cat had been in the apartment. As I carried everything down to the dumpster, I tried to make sense of it all. Why had Mr. Buttons told *me* Amy was in danger, instead of just telling her himself days earlier? Hadn't that put her in more danger? I still couldn't understand it.

When she came home a few days later, Amy didn't say a word about the cat foretelling the future. She didn't remember ever having a cat, and when I asked her, she laughingly told me to stop teasing, because she'd always wanted one but her apartment building didn't allow pets.

I attributed it to the memory loss and dropped it. I couldn't explain what had happened, or how, but it didn't matter. Amy still had that glow about her, and I was still smitten. We kept dating, and my feelings for her only grew deeper.

It took a couple months before I finally realized the obvious truth. Mr. Buttons hadn't come into Amy's life to save her from pharmaceutical incompetence; he'd come to bring us together. I still didn't have an explanation, still didn't understand how it had happened, but when I looked at Amy I could see my future. And I no longer needed a cat to spell it out for me.

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