

Copycat

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Random House Children's Publishers UK

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About the Author

Also by Colin Dann

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Sammy was the first to hear the thud of heavy footsteps. A number of men, dressed alike in navy blue overalls, were stamping quickly towards them. Sammy recognized the threat at once and called a warning. 'Pinkie! Kittens! Run! Run!'

For a long time, life in the London park has been easy and peaceful for Sammy, Pinkie and their kittens. But all that is about to change – there is a purge of the growing numbers of stray cats and dogs in the city. Sammy and Pinkie must now face the urgent questions of survival. . .

Colin Dann

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For Colin and Liz

Kittens no more

‘Well, Pinkie,’ Sammy said to the little white cat, ‘the cold weather’s over. We should think about moving.’

Pinkie was washing her face, licking a paw and rubbing it across her pink nose and ears. Her blue eyes opened as she paused in her cleaning to look at her mate. ‘What’s the rush?’ she asked lazily. ‘We’ve been snug here, haven’t we?’

The male tabby sat on his haunches. ‘The youngsters are restless. They’re wandering farther than they used to. They need to explore.’

‘Oh yes – they get that from you,’ Pinkie answered. She stood up and stretched in a patch of spring sunlight. The clump of thick bamboo where they had made their den rustled slightly in a warm breeze. ‘The park’s wide enough to satisfy their curiosity. Fern and Moss seem quite happy here.’

‘For a while maybe,’ Sammy said. ‘But their brother has adventure on his mind. Little Sammy won’t be checked for long.’

Pinkie gave Sammy her full attention. He was not a handsome cat. The uneven markings on his face marred his looks: in particular one broad stripe that ran from one corner to another seemed as if it had been added as an afterthought, crossing out what was already there. But Pinkie loved that face and she purred.

‘All right, Sammy,’ she said agreeably.

The pair of cats had been living in London’s Regent’s Park since before the winter. It was a safe haven for them in the great city and their kittens had been born and

nurtured there. But Sammy had a roving nature and wanted a change, sure he could make his little family and himself comfortable elsewhere. He began to scout around.

A few days later, a change came about that neither Sammy nor Pinkie could have foreseen. The local council – as well as many neighbouring ones – had long been aware of the problem of strays, which were believed to pose a health hazard. A spiralling increase in numbers, especially of cats, had led to a decision to take drastic action. As many as possible were to be rounded up, and then either neutered or destroyed. Some people thought it a harsh solution, but even they had to admit that things could no longer remain as they were. So teams of control officers equipped with vans, snares, crates and other essentials were dispersed throughout the city. The London parks were targeted as some of the chief areas of concern.

One April afternoon Sammy, Pinkie and the youngsters were dozing near their den – not in a group, but scattered around within sight of each other. They had all eaten and they were feeling drowsy and lazy. Sammy was the first to hear the thud of heavy footsteps. A number of men, dressed alike in navy blue overalls, were stamping quickly towards them. Sammy recognized the threat at once and called a warning.

‘Pinkie! Kittens! Run! Run!’

Pinkie didn’t need to be told twice. She was on her feet and racing after Sammy all in one swift movement. Together they ran like the wind. They were nearly at the other side of the park before Pinkie turned round to check on the youngsters.

‘The kittens – they’re not behind us,’ Pinkie wailed.

‘Sammy, you must go back for them.’

Sammy knew at once what he had to do. ‘Pinkie, hide behind that hedge and stay very still,’ he warned his mate.

‘You’ll be safe there for a while. I’ll come back as soon as I’ve found them.’

He moved cautiously, back across the park, darting from behind one tree, bush or hedge to the next, never venturing out in the open, until finally he reached the site near the den. All was quiet. The men seemed to have disappeared, but Sammy did not let down his guard. He hunted for the kittens in all the most likely places, and then in the unlikely ones, but there was no sign of Little Sammy, Fern or Moss. It was beginning to get dark, and Sammy knew he must return to Pinkie.

She was still hiding in the hedge where he had left her, looking worried as if anticipating the news.

‘They’re nowhere to be seen,’ said Sammy sadly. ‘We can only hope that they’ve escaped in another direction.’

Pinkie was greatly distressed. ‘But – but what if they’ve been captured?’

‘If that’s true, there’s nothing we can do,’ Sammy confessed. ‘But we must get used to being alone again. The kittens have gone. And we’re still in danger.’

Pinkie looked at him sadly. ‘You mean –?’

Sammy licked Pinkie’s fur, trying to calm her, and said, ‘I’m sure those humans will come back, and we have to make sure we’re not anywhere around when they do. We must save ourselves. It will be just you and me, Pinkie, the way it used to be. And we can have more kittens when we know we’re safe,’ Sammy added. ‘We have no choice now but to go on our travels once again.’

Buster

Pinkie still yearned for her lost family. She couldn't accept that the youngsters had gone from her life for good. Supposing somehow they managed to return and found that she and their father had moved away? What would become of them?

'Sammy, we can't just go wandering,' she pleaded. 'Where would we go? We don't know anywhere else.'

'Oh, Pinkie, how can you say that? Have you forgotten the great journey I once made to find you? Is it so long ago? I roamed all over the city and understand its ways. Depend on me. You won't come to any harm.'

'Of course I hadn't forgotten that,' she answered. 'But you were on the move all the time. You didn't make a home anywhere.'

'I saw plenty of places where I could have,' Sammy told her. 'Look, I know how you're thinking. You can't get Fern, Moss and Little Sammy out of your mind. Neither can I. But, Pinkie, they won't be coming back. I don't know who those men were or what their purpose was. But they wanted to catch as many cats as they could. They would have had us too if I hadn't been so alert. There was a menace about them and you can be sure they didn't have our interests at heart.'

'Yes,' Pinkie whispered. 'I know. You're right. It was just . . . just a mother cat's feelings.'

Later that day Sammy caught a pigeon. Pinkie was uninterested. 'You must eat,' Sammy urged her. 'We shall

need all our strength. I want to set off at dusk, and we don't know where our next meal will come from.'

Pinkie ate obediently but without relish. Sammy paced up and down alongside the high hedge. As the light began to fade he led Pinkie across the park, avoiding the wide open spaces. They reached another quarter. On the edge of the park there was a road with houses and parked cars.

'So far so good,' Sammy murmured. The words were hardly out of his mouth when a tremendous commotion broke out behind them.

'What is it?' Pinkie shrilled. Birds rocketed from the treetops, squirrels shinned up the trunks. Startled cries of birds and animals spread all around them as the tramp of heavy boots sounded once more, echoing horribly as they approached. Suddenly a feline scream made the cats' blood run cold. Sammy knew it was the last desperate cry of a cornered animal.

'They're back!' he cried. He was dreadfully frightened and began to run blindly towards the road. Pinkie followed him instinctively, but Sammy wasn't thinking properly in his panic and almost blundered into the path of another group of men emerging from a van.

'Catch it!' one of the men bellowed and another made a lunge at the terrified Sammy, who darted just out of reach and raced on along the pavement.

Pinkie dived under a parked car and cowered in its shadow, unable to see where best to run.

'This way!' a cat voice hissed at her from the other side of the road. She glanced up and saw a tabby, smaller and fluffier than Sammy, poised on the kerb. She hesitated only for a second. Where was Sammy? Then the boots came crunching in her direction again and she pelted across the road without even thinking about the traffic. The strange tabby scampered ahead, past houses and gardens, Pinkie close behind. Then Sammy came running towards them.

'Sammy!' Pinkie called anxiously.

The smaller tabby half turned. 'Your mate?' he asked.
'Yes.'

'OK. In here.' He jumped over a low wall into one of the gardens, ran towards the house and disappeared inside through a hole in a side door. Pinkie and Sammy were close behind and followed him. They didn't know where they were, but the house was silent, dark and comforting.

'I'm Buster,' came the tabby's voice. 'It's Sammy and -?'
'Pinkie.'

'Right. Pinkie. Well, this is where I live, Sammy and Pinkie. We're on our own. My master's not home, so you can relax.'

The din in the park was scarcely noticeable in the house and the two fugitives were able to calm down.

'You very nearly came croppers, the two of you,' Buster commented after a moment.

Sammy saw they were in a kitchen. He remembered very well how a kitchen looked. 'You've really done us a good turn,' he said gratefully to the stranger. 'Pinkie and I were planning to move away, but we weren't quick enough. Our kittens were taken earlier. Have you seen those men before?'

'Frequently. Don't you know about them?'

'Nothing. How could we?'

Buster showed surprise. 'Well, they've been around often enough recently. They're collecting strays. Surely you've heard about the purge? All the cats - and dogs - along here know about it. Where have you come from, then?'

Sammy explained.

'Hm. Maybe you've been lucky,' Buster remarked. 'Now, make yourselves comfortable. You can lie down here on the mat by the table. You might as well. You'll be here for a while.'

'Where do they take the - the strays?' Pinkie asked.
'What do they do with them?'

'Who knows?' Buster grunted.

The cats, by now accustomed to the poor light, began to examine each other more closely. Buster was spotlessly clean and well groomed.

'You've the perfect bolt-hole here for avoiding capture,' Sammy said.

'I have,' the tabby agreed. 'But they wouldn't come after me anyway. I'm not a stray. There are still plenty of animals like you to keep those humans busy. Your numbers seem to grow all the time. I suppose that's the reason for this purge. Then along come the vans and those men dressed all the same. Tramp! Tramp!' he said, imitating the sound of the stomping boots.

'Don't,' Pinkie begged. 'It's too horrid.'

Sammy was puzzled. 'How do the men know which cats are strays and which are like you - I mean . . .'

'Pets?'

'Yes.' Sammy knew the word. 'Pets.'

Buster was amused. 'Well, look at you,' he chuckled. 'Isn't it obvious? You're like wild animals compared with me.'

There might have been something of an insult in the tabby's words but Sammy quickly realized their truth. He knew enough of human intelligence to accept that this distinction would be sufficient for clever humankind. He was deeply impressed by the idea and actually began to see Pinkie through different eyes as he looked from her to Buster and back again.

Pinkie reacted differently. 'You're a cosseted cat,' she retorted. 'Sammy and I have to do the best we can for ourselves without any other creature's help. And I wouldn't have it another way even if I could.' She wasn't used to sitting in human dwellings and the unusual warmth and cleanliness made her uneasy. 'When will your master return?' she asked nervously.

'Not till it's dark,' Buster replied. 'Don't worry, you're safe for the moment.' He got into his basket and appeared

to be ready for sleep.

‘But we can’t stay here!’ Pinkie mewed. ‘You saved our skins, Buster, and we shan’t forget it. We’re out of place, though. We have to leave. We shall be discovered.’ She was very jittery.

‘Relax,’ Buster soothed her. ‘There’s nothing to be afraid of here. I’ll see to it. I’ll know when my master’s coming and I’ll hide you.’

‘We don’t want to be hidden! Do we, Sammy?’ Pinkie begged her mate. ‘We want to go.’

‘Wait. Wait, Pinkie,’ Sammy said coolly. ‘We can’t go anywhere until we know the risk of capture has passed.’

‘Exactly,’ purred Buster. ‘I’ll look after you. You can share my food. See that tall cupboard? There’s a big space behind it where you can hide while my meal is being prepared. I used to hunt for mice round there. Never found any, though. It’s the perfect place for you two. Afterwards, when I’m left to myself – out you come again! And then we’ll make plans. I’ll try to think of a way to help.’ He began to lick his chest fur in a methodical way. He was quite in control of the situation.

Shortly after dark the room was swept momentarily by a brilliant light. Pinkie scurried to the hiding place at once. Buster got up, stretched and yawned. ‘The master’s back,’ he said. He knew the light meant the man’s car had turned into the drive.

‘Will he come in here first?’ Sammy hissed.

‘No, not straight away. You’ve plenty of time.’

The front door banged. Buster’s owner’s footsteps sounded in the hall, then the cats heard the creak of the stairs. The footsteps continued overhead. There was the noise of running water. ‘He’ll come soon now,’ Buster announced. Sammy crept behind the cupboard and huddled beside Pinkie.

A young man opened the kitchen door, flicked on the light switch and began to talk to his pet. 'There you are, then.' Buster threaded his way in and out of the man's legs, his tail held high. 'I suppose you're hungry, like me? Yes, that's it. We'll get it all ready. Now, don't trip me up, good boy.'

To Sammy and Pinkie, hidden but wary and tense, the man's presence in the kitchen seemed to last an eternity. Two or three times Pinkie almost fled from cover when the man approached the cupboard. Somehow she managed to keep a grip on herself and at last the man took his own meal on a tray out of the room, switching off the light.

Buster called them. 'There's food here. I left you some. I usually go with him now. I'll be brought back here later when he goes to bed. After you've eaten, you'd better keep out of sight.' He trotted away to his human companion.

Sammy and Pinkie appreciated what little Buster hadn't eaten of the cat food. Then Pinkie said, 'I don't like it here. Let's go *now* - the way we came in.'

But Sammy said, 'I'm tired. And it's warm in here. We can't come to any harm. Don't you want to see if Buster comes up with an idea?'

'Oh - Buster!' she scoffed. 'What does he know about what we want? You heard what he thinks of us. He's so superior.'

'No. No, I don't think so,' Sammy disagreed. 'We're different, that's all. You and I have to get right away from this area, from the city itself if we can. Otherwise we'll always be under threat. Buster does understand that. I'm willing to wait and hear what he has to say about it. He might be able to help. How about it?'

Pinkie sighed. 'Why ask? I know when your mind's made up.'

On the move again

Buster's return to the kitchen was hours away. In the meantime Sammy and Pinkie tried to doze. Eventually the pet tabby's owner felt ready for bed and Buster was carried to his basket and given a good-night cuddle. The kitchen door was closed soon after and the man retired upstairs.

'Come on. Now's the time,' Buster called.

Sammy and Pinkie emerged eagerly.

'I've thought of the perfect way to get you out of your difficulties,' Buster announced. 'I'll arrange for my master to take you.'

'What?' Pinkie screeched. 'What are you talking about?'

'Patience,' Buster soothed her. 'Let me explain.'

'It'll need some explaining,' the white cat retorted. 'We don't want any involvement with humans.'

Buster gave her a long-suffering look and even Sammy was irritated. 'Pinkie, *please*.'

'If you'll just listen,' Buster sighed. 'My master is the key to it all. He has a car.' He wiped a paw across his whiskers. 'Those machines travel at quite unimaginable speed. It could take you anywhere.' He paused and looked at the cats dramatically.

'Out of the city altogether?' Sammy asked.

'Very probably. When my master comes back in the evening there are often strange scents all over the car, not at all like those from the city. So it's a good guess it has travelled a long way.'

'Why ever would your master want *us* in his car?' Pinkie demanded. 'He doesn't even know about us.'