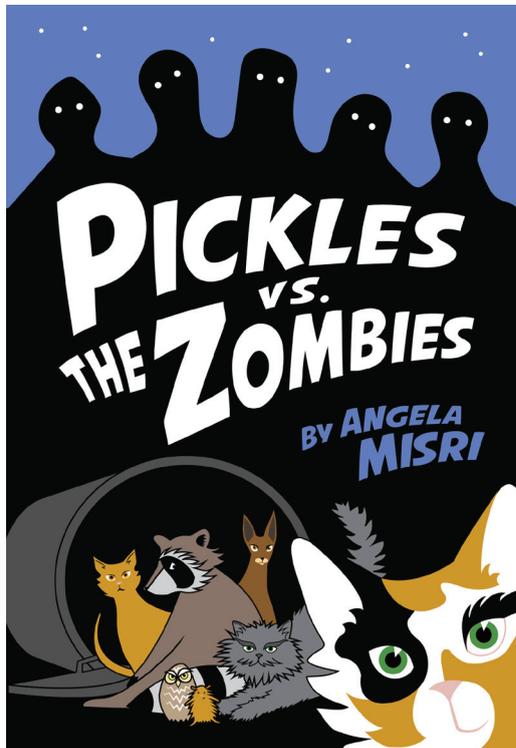


Excerpt from *Pickles vs. the Zombies*  
by Angela Misri



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## DAY ONE

I watched the era of human domination end from a sun-dappled window seat.

In hindsight, I should have taken it more seriously, but as a predator I was more curious than afraid. Also, I'm an indoor cat who watches way too much TV. My tolerance for dramatic violence might be a little messed up.

"Wally, wake up," I said, poking the fat, gray mass at my side with my paw.

"Huh?" Wally mumbled, hauling himself to attention. Wally was from a family of military cats; his prized possession was the bronze general's star on his collar he'd inherited from his father. Wally's mother was none other than the spy Von Paws. Yes, THAT Von Paws. Sadly, Wally was also an indoor cat, so he had never actually gone to war, something that bugged him to no end.

At this point, you're probably wondering what resplendent family tree I descended from. Well, sorry to disappoint, but like 75% of the housecat population, I have no clue who my parents are. My first memory is of rolling around in a glass cage with five other calico kittens who looked identical to me, down to the black freckles on our noses. I drank my first drop of milk from a latex nipple attached to the cage, and when I left on my current assignment, I didn't even have a name for the other cats to call out to say goodbye.

My pet and I were born the same week, and I was assigned to this home when we were both three weeks old. I was Connor's second word after "mama" and he was my first love and only family. Unless you counted Generalissimo Wally.

"Those three humans are eating an old human," I reported, my own eyes fixed on the bloody scene below.

Wally yawned, stretched, and finally turned his face to the street. “So?” he snapped. “Weaker gets eaten by stronger. Circle of life, Pickles. How many times do I have to explain it to you?”

“This is different,” I said, pressing myself against the glass. “There’s something wrong with the predator humans. They’re not talking. And they’re moving around super weirdly.”

Wally snorted. “Humans are terrible predators. What you’re seeing there is pack mentality. Obviously those three humans have dogs as owners. Poor monkeys.”

The three predator humans were shuffling away from their prey now, leaving behind a mess of people parts and a walker.

“They’re so slow, it’s a wonder they could catch anything to eat.”

“The prey was very old,” I said.

“Mmm,” Wally said, lowering himself back to his sleeping position. “Wake me up when the pets get home. I need to remind the male to clean the litter.”

I nodded, my eyes still on the newly quiet suburban street, watching as the leaves in the trees blew softly in the wind. I could hear no birdsong, and even the squirrels seemed to be taking a break from their incessant travels. It was the end of the human workday, but other than the attack we had just witnessed, I had seen no other humans in hours.

My pet was due home from the daycare soon, so I curled into a ball to rest. Connor was two and always needed my help to settle down when he got home. It was the busiest time of day for me, and I took my assignment seriously.

## DAY TWO

“They’re not going to come home any faster with this drama,” Wally called as I flew by him on the way to the backdoor.

Still nothing. No sign of my pet or Wally’s.

I whipped back to the front door where my partner was cleaning himself, rubbing his paw over his whiskers repeatedly. Describing Wally as a long-haired cat was an insult to hair, because surely he had enough hair follicles on his rotund body to supply three cats and a small toupee. In the summer, our pets would have to take him in to be shorn like the world’s smallest, toothiest sheep, lest he start running into walls, unable to see through his fringe of Sia-like bangs.

I stood at the front door, glaring at it. “The sun is down, the moon is up, and they’re still not home.”

“Stand down, soldier,” Wally replied, checking the star on his collar for shine. He rubbed his paw over it repeatedly until it sparkled the way it was supposed to. “They probably went on one of those human-only trips. It’s not on my schedule, but they are terrible at updating me on their movements.”

I am a short-haired calico, which, according to Wally, gave me a starting rank of Private. Wally gave me a thorough once-over as I stood at attention every morning. Every whisker and eyebrow hair was analyzed and adjusted to meet his exacting standards. I was pretty sure all promotions were based on growing hair as long and thick as his. So, I was going to be a Private forever.

“Relax, girl. Go read a book or something,” Wally said, turning away and stalking to our shared food dish. “The pets will be home soon.”

## DAY THREE

“It’s been three days,” Wally whined plaintively.

“You know there’s no one here to see you but me, right?” I replied without looking at him. I was back at the window seat, watching the street.

There had been another flurry of activity moments ago, with one of the groaning humans taking a beating from a pack of other humans. The “winning” human pack hadn’t eaten their adversary, though. Perhaps it was just an expression of dominance on their part ... like the sparrow I had threatened through the back window yesterday. I’m pretty sure she understood my hiss, even through the glass. Wally says most birds will drop dead of fright before taking on a real cat. I don’t know that he’s right about that, but I prefer a panel of glass between us just in case.

“This is unbearable,” Wally repeated, rolling around on the floor in mock-agony, “a standing army must have provisions.”

I rolled my eyes but was careful to keep my back to him, and not to show any disrespect. Wally had lived here for many years; his pets were the parents of mine. I owed him much for my training. Plus, I didn’t want to be demoted to whatever was below a Private.

“Uh oh,” I hissed, standing up.

“What?” demanded Wally from the floor.

I didn’t need to answer, though, as the object of my concern bounded up onto the roof, slowly walking towards the window where I now stood at the ready.

“Well, look who’s people-watching,” Ginger said, sitting on his haunches and trying to look casual. An orange tabby with very long whiskers and eyelashes. Ginger had white paws that looked like slouchy rolled-down human socks, a genetic feature he loved to take credit for, as if he picked his feet out of a Gap catalogue.

“Get lost, riff raff,” Wally said, landing beside me with more grace than usual.

“Or what?” Ginger replied, eyeing the slightly open window. It would be a squeeze for me to edge through to reach the orange-haired cat on the other side, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Just scram, Ginger,” I said, slipping my paw through the space under the window to demonstrate my intention.

“Hey, I just came up here to get a view of the zombies,” Ginger replied, turning his back to us and slowly walking away. Every move this cat made looked like he was posing on a literal catwalk. As if photographers followed his every move.

“The what?” I blurted out, hating myself the second the question left my lips.

Ginger turned around, his smirk wide. “The zombies. You know, the dead humans wandering the streets, eating anything that moves.”

“Never heard of ’em,” said Wally, but his ears (and mine) were pointed directly at Ginger.

“Zombies?” I repeated. I looked at the bookshelf behind us. Where had I read about zombies? Or had I seen them on TV? I spent most of my reading time immersed in graphic novels and manga.

“Maybe your pets don’t have a name for them, but mine do,” Ginger replied, sitting down to examine his claws, an action that usually got Wally’s back up.

Not today, though.

“Zombies eh?” Wally repeated, trying the word out himself. “Are they a new kind of human?”

Ginger rolled his eyes dramatically. “They’re not new, they’re just dead.”

“So, this isn’t just what happens to humans when they die?” I

asked. I'd never witnessed a human death before.

"No," Wally said before Ginger could answer. "My pet's father died before you were assigned, Pickles. He died, got stiff, never moved again. I got a good look at him before he was discovered."

Wally turned his attention back to the fluffy orange cat on the other side of the glass. "What makes you say they're dead?"

"The smell, for starters," Ginger answered, crinkling his pink nose for emphasis. "And the fact that they're impossible to kill."

Wally snorted. "Nothing's impossible to kill."

Ginger sat back down on our roof as if he had all the time in the world. "You watch. That zombie down there — he'll get back up."

I fixed my eyes on the still figure in the road, ignoring Wally's repeated snorts.

Minutes ticked by, but cats are patient: we watch.

Our patience was rewarded. The zombie began to stir, and I took an involuntary step backwards. Even Wally was amazed. The man's two arms had been lost in the battle we'd witnessed, but somehow, he pulled himself to his feet, silent but for the groans of his battered body.

"Well, I'll be a long-haired Siamese," said Wally through his teeth. We were all up, our tails twitching as the zombie slouched away, his movements as unnatural as the body that still moved.

I turned wide eyes towards Wally, new worries forming in my head. "Where is Connor?"

## DAY FIVE

“Stuffing yourself is a bad idea,” I said, watching Wally eat the food scattered on the floor.

It had taken some tearing and ripping, but we had managed to release the food from its canvas container this morning. There was now food scattered all over the basement floor, and Wally seemed to be doing his best to gather it all into the safety of his stomach.

I had gone through book after book looking for where I had come across the word [i]zombie[/i], but had found nothing. I was sure it was from a TV show. One Wally’s pets watched after Connor was in bed, usually with me curled up next to him.

“Wally ...,” I started to say, but a noise above us interrupted me.

“The pets!” I exclaimed, bounding away and taking the stairs two at a time. Wally was calling for me to stop, but I hadn’t scented my pet in days and I was too excited to slow down.

I careened around the corner into the kitchen to stop suddenly in front of three humans I had never sniffed before.

My ears flattened as they all turned towards me, their arms raised in aggression.

“It’s just a cat,” one said, lowering his weapon slowly.

“How do we know it’s not a zombie cat?” another demanded, advancing on my position.

Part of me wanted to run away (okay, let’s be honest here, most of me wanted to run away), but Wally was beside me, so I followed his lead and made myself as big and intimidating as I could.

“There are no zombie cats,” the third said, returning to his looting, placing cans of our pets’ food in his backpack. Wally hissed at the pack of humans, who ignored him, focusing instead on their nefarious deed. They were worse than raccoons, looting and stealing our pets’ food.

“Pickles, count everything they take,” hissed Wally from beside me, “we will at least report our losses if we can’t stop them, I swear it.”

From the messages flying off his whiskers, Wally was about to jump onto the counter and take a swipe at the nearest human when the first thief pulled out of one of Connor’s little juice boxes. That was low, to steal from a baby animal. I growled low in my throat to warn him to put it back down.

“I hope the kid got out okay,” he said, his eyes sad as he held the small box in his hand.

I felt a chill run down my spine. Did he know something about my pet?

The other two humans stopped their scavenging at his softly spoken words.

“The whole family is probably laying low till we hear something on the radio.”

“Hear what?” I hissed. “Where is my pet?”

They ignored me, their language skills as limited as their eyesight.

“We might even meet them on the road,” said the human, replacing the juice box in the cupboard and hefting his backpack.

They turned and walked past me, their bags full of our food, and it was only at the back door that the sad one locked eyes with me. He bent down and unlocked the cat door, pushing it so it swung, showing me our backyard. Then he was gone.

## DAY EIGHT

“This is pointless.”

“What’s pointless?” asked Ginger from outside on the windowsill. He’d been quietly watching us try to turn on the radio for the past ten minutes, and we had done our best to ignore him.

“We have to find out where Connor is, and those thieves said the radio would tell us,” I answered, knocking the black rectangle controller to the floor. Radios were human contraptions, sometimes filling our house with tonally questionable music. Wally claimed to enjoy something he called “jazz,” but its chief attraction seemed to be that it put him and his pet to sleep within minutes in the recliner, leaving us with their loud, matching snores.

“Why are you here?” Wally demanded, stalking to the window, his tail twitching.

“Boooooored,” Ginger answered, rubbing himself against the windowsill and scenting it, “Nothing to do at home. Nothing on TV. So bored.”

“Stop that!” commanded Wally. “This is not your territory. The borders are well-marked. Private Pickles, make a note.”

Ginger wasn’t listening, though. He had turned towards the back fence, where two humans pawed in a vain attempt to gain entry.

Suddenly a new zombie appeared, entering the yard from the corner, groaning and slouching alarmingly quickly towards Ginger, whose back arched like a furry stegosaurus. This zombie I recognized. He used to be called Vish, and he used to care for Connor when the parents were away. Now ... he was in no condition to care for anyone.

We could hear Ginger’s hissing through the cat door, filled with dire warnings and threats, but the once-Vish ignored them all,

continuing to advance on the orange cat.

Dead humans behind him, a dead human gnashing his teeth mere yards away, Ginger reacted at the same time I realized his intent, scrambling through our cat door and into our house with all the grace of a pug walking a balance beam.

“What is wrong with you?” hissed Wally, his eyes locked on the humans, but his words entirely for the invading cat.

“What did you expect me to do?” he hissed back, all three of us now lined up in a row of hissing, arched anger, our teeth bared at the young dead human on the other side of the glass. The two other zombies had pushed down the back fence and groaned their way to the once-Vish where he pawed at the door. I’m more scared than I have ever been in my life and it’s this stupid orange cat’s fault.

“You led them right to us,” I said through my chattering teeth.

“Yeah, because they totally missed you before,” Ginger replied, anger and fear evident in the twitch of his tail.

But the humans seemed confused by the door, pressing against it but making no move to turn the handle.

“What are they waiting for?” Wally demanded, his eyes switching between the shambling, groaning threats.

“I ... don’t think they remember how to open doors,” I said, as surprised as Wally at their clumsiness, I was sure we were done for.

They spent a few more minutes vainly slamming their bodies against the door and glass and then turned to leave, one at a time, their expressions vacant.

We stood there, tense, unwilling to believe that they would give up so easily.

I was scared to unlock my limbs. Afraid I would collapse onto the floor like some kind of liquid cat and never re-form into a solid.

Predictably, it was Ginger who relaxed first, easing out of his

aggressive stance to sit back on the rectangular controller on the floor.

A buzz of static made all three of us jump as the radio came on.

“By the Saber!” Wally cursed, his voice high and surprised.

“Shh!” I replied, willing my heart to stop hammering in my ears and positioning myself right next to the speaker. “I hear humans!”