

CATWALK

A Feline Odyssey

by

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This book is entirely a work of fiction.

Any resemblance to any real cat, either
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Chapter 1

The Newlyweds

Heaven knows, I never intended to be the rambling kind at all. I would have been perfectly content to live out my entire life in one place, with a single family to love and care for me, instead of wandering about the country like some feline vagabond, depending on my wits and the kindness of strangers.

Certainly nothing in my early history indicated that my case would be exceptional. The circumstances surrounding my birth were sadly typical; indiscriminate mother, anonymous father, just one of five unwanted kittens in an unwished-for litter, doomed from the start to be the unfortunate subject of one of those universal classified ads; "Adorable kittens, free to good home", that sort of thing. Of course, female kittens aren't easy to find homes for, even for free, so my sister and I eventually wound up in the local pet store, but there too, we were pretty much overlooked for a long time.

Then one day a pretty girl about five or six years old skipped into the store. Dark brown curls bounced below a blue knitted cap, and the matching blue sweater hung carelessly off her shoulders. She marched straight over to our cage and poked her fingers through the wire mesh, trying to touch my sister's tail. Sister swatted at her fingers with one tiny forepaw and the girl laughed. Her parents hurried over to see what mischief their daughter was getting into. Frowning at us, the mother took her hand.

"Come on, sweetie, let's go," she urged. "We still have lots of shopping to do." When the child failed to respond, her mother attempted to lead her away, but the result was instant rebellion.

"I want a kitty!" she wailed, clinging to the wire with her free hand. Her parents glanced at each other nervously.

"You don't need a kitty, sweetheart," her mother coaxed. "You already have a parakeet and three goldfish. Come on, now, we have to get you some new shoes."

"I don't want new shoes!" howled the defiant child. "I want a kitty!" Her father tried to pry her fingers loose from the wire, but she hung on ever tighter and shrieked at the top of her lungs. "I want a kitty! I want a kitty!" The parents began to get desperate.

"Darling, that's a girl kitty. Now we don't really want a girl kitty, do we?" her mother pleaded. "Now please be a good girl and we'll go to another pet store and find you a nice boy kitty, okay?"

"I don't want a boy kitty! I want THAT kitty!" Her parents looked at one another in despair, each hoping the other had an idea. Neither did. Resigned, they called the manager, who'd been standing nearby pretending not to notice the disturbance. He opened the cage door and put my sister in a small box with holes in it. Then he added a bag of cat food to the sack containing the bird seed and fish food the parents had already bought. That accomplished, the family exited the shop, the victorious brat skipping along proudly carrying her latest trophy, with her miserable parents following along behind, totally defeated.

The next day was a long and lonely one for me. So was the next day and the next. The manager gave me a rubber ball with a bell in side to play with, but it wasn't nearly as much fun as wrestling with my sister. Nobody paid much attention to me anymore, and it began to look as if I would be there for a long, long time.

A week or so later an attractive young couple wandered into the shop. Sound asleep when they first came in, I woke up when the puppies in the next cage started yipping. The young lovers strolled about the store, their arms wrapped around each other, looking at all the different animals in their cages. When they finally arrived at my station I was just stretching out my muscles from my nap.

"Oh, Sam," the woman cooed, "Isn't he adorable? Just like a little grey tiger."

"He's a she," corrected Sam, checking the sign, "and yes, she's adorable." Feeling playful after my nap, I chased my tail around a few times and batted my ball across the cage. It buried itself under the shredded papers and I dove in after it, emerging nicely decorated with a sprinkling of confetti. The young woman bounced up and down and giggled.

"That's what I want," she sighed, "that darling little kitten."

"Are you sure that's a good idea, getting a female, I mean?" Her companion looked rather doubtful. "What happens when she grows up and starts having kittens of her own?"

"That's not going to happen," she insisted. "I'll keep her inside. She won't be any trouble at all, you'll see." She snuggled closer to her husband and hooked her thumbs into his belt. "Please, please, please? It's my birthday, and that's what I really, really want, please?"

Sam laughed and kissed her forehead. "Okay Beth, if you're sure that's what you really, really want."

Together they picked out some cat food, a red rubber ball, and a blue catnip mouse, while the manager folded out another box with holes. I was on my way to a new home.

* * * * *

"Have you decided what you're gonna name your little mischief-maker?" Sam was stretched out on the couch with his head nestled in Beth's lap. She had her legs tucked up under her, and was twisting a lock of his jet-black hair around her fingers while I was engaged in a thorough exploration of her empty book bag on the coffee table. She giggled at his description of me.

"Mischief-maker, huh? I'll show you who's a mischief-maker!" She ruffled his hair and pulled a big handful of it down over his eyes. He reached up and pulled her head down for a kiss.

"You didn't answer my question. What am I supposed to call the little monster? 'Hey you'? Or how about 'Yo, cat'?"

"Of course not, silly." Beth tilted her head to one side so that her long, blonde hair brushed his face. "How about *Panthera Tigris*? That's the scientific name for tiger."

Sam laughed. "So why not just call her Tiger?"

"No, Tiger's too common. I'm going to call her 'Thera'."

"Thera." Sam shook his head. "No good, no good at all. Sounds like a name for a planet, maybe, or a new kind of vitamin. I like 'Tiger' better."

"You're terrible!" Beth jumped up from the couch, dumping poor Sam onto the floor. "Just for that you can scrub your own back tonight." She flounced into the kitchen and started banging around with the pots and pans. Sam sighed.

"Come here, Tiger." He reached into the book bag and tickled my belly. I nipped his fingers and he chuckled. "You really are a tiger, aren't you?" He rolled my new ball off the table and across the room. I charged after it as it bounced off the bookcase and into the hall. I batted it back into the living room, and Sam and I took turns knocking it around until Beth called him to dinner.

The next few days were rather confusing, with Beth calling me "Thera", and Sam calling me "Tiger", but before too long Beth gave up and started calling me "Tiger" as well. After that it was easier.

My new home was small and cozy, with hardwood floors instead of carpeting, and a few small rugs scattered about. That was okay with me, because wood floors are great for running and skidding, and the rugs were neat to crawl under or roll up in. I did wish, though, that my sister could have come with me to this new place. It would have been so much more fun to have someone my own size to chase and wrestle with.

The young newlyweds were a study in contrasts. Sam was tall and dark-haired, quiet and muscular. His wardrobe consisted of blue jeans, denim work shirts and sturdy high-top boots, and his transportation was a beat-up old pickup truck. Beth was short, blonde, and blue-eyed, a bundle of dimples and giggles. She rode a little motorscooter to her classes at the local college, and she seemed always to have a book in her lap.

Some evenings after dinner the two of them played music and danced and cuddled 'til all hours of the night. Other times they played games like Monopoly and Scrabble on the floor in the living room. I enjoyed the games, too, but I made up my own rules. My strategy was direct and simple. I just charged into the middle of whatever game they were playing and scattered the cards or game pieces to the four winds. Since they never could figure out how to put everything back where it had been, I won by default.

Early one Sunday morning Sam was standing in front of the closet with several neckties in his hand, trying to decide which one to wear with his one and only suit. I jumped up, snagged a pretty blue one and hauled it into the bathroom.

"Hey, come back here!" he hollered. He chased after me and cornered me behind the toilet. "Give that here, you little beast. Beth'd skin you alive if she saw you with that! That was my birthday present last year." He pulled another one out of the bunch and dragged it across my back. "Here, you can have this one. Come on, trade, okay?" He eased the blue one out of my claws and wound it around his hand. "You're going to get me in big trouble, girl."

The new tie soon became my favorite toy. I'd trail it around the apartment with Sam chasing me, then he'd snatch it away and drag it into another room with me galloping along behind, trying to get it back. It was a great game.

Months passed. The days got shorter and the nights a lot cooler. The leaves on the tree out by the street turned brown and fell to the ground. The sky turned grey and cloudy, and a sharp, cold wind blew the dead leaves into the gutter and down the street. At night I had to crawl under the blankets to keep warm. Down at the bottom near Beth's feet seemed to be the best place. Her feet were nice and warm, and she didn't kick around all the time like Sam did. No matter how cold the weather, though, the little apartment always overflowed with warmth and love.

* * * * *

One chilly evening the young couple went out shopping after dinner, and returned with, of all things, a tree! I thought they had lost their minds. They'd had plants in the house before, it's true, but those were just small potted plants that sat on the coffee table or dangled in macrame hangers in the windows. This tree was almost as tall as Sam himself, and it had no pot nor soil at all, just a little stand cobbled together from two pieces of wood.

"Okay, where do you want it?" Sam's voice came from somewhere behind the quaking green boughs.

"Over there, in the corner," Beth pointed, as though her husband could actually see her. "Wait a minute. Let me move the small bookcase." Sam dropped the tree with a thud.

"Holy smokes, that thing is heavy!" He flopped on the couch and propped his feet on the coffee table. Beth scowled and he quickly put them on the floor. "Do you know where the decorations are?"

"Of course I do. You just get that wooden thing off and get it in the stand." Beth brought out a box filled with all manner of bright, shiny objects, and the two of them began hanging them on the tree. It looked like great fun, so I decided to pitch in and help out. I could only reach the bottom branches, but I managed to knock three of the balls onto the floor before they ran me off.

Peeking into the box, I spotted a long, glittery tinsel rope, kind of like a silvery snake. I hauled it out and headed for the kitchen, trailing it behind me, but Sam cut me off at the door. He pried the "snake" from my mouth and carried it back into the living room. He started winding it around the tree, and immediately I pounced on the other end. That's when Beth put me in the bedroom and closed the door!

When they finally let me out again the transformation was astounding! Red and gold and silver ornaments dangled from every branch, and a parade of colored lights blinked on and off. The exotic smell filled the apartment and excited my curiosity, but when I chewed one of the branches it tasted awful and made me sick. I swatted at one of the red balls, but much to my disappointment it didn't come off this time. It was tied on with a piece of yarn instead of a hook.

From that day on it seemed like there was always something going on in our little home. The evenings were filled with visitors, and the talking and singing and eating lasted until late at night. Every day the cards piled up a little higher on the table in the corner, and fancy wrapped boxes nearly overwhelmed the hall closet.

The whole apartment fairly floated with all the delicious smells coming from the tiny kitchen, as the happy pair baked cookies and cakes and cinnamon-scented loaves, all of which they wrapped in foil and blue ribbons. Some they gave to the many friends who came to visit, and some they took away in Sam's truck. Everyone seemed unusually good-natured and excited, as if any day now something wonderful was going to happen.

Finally the big day came. Sam and Beth brought out all the packages from their hiding place in the closet, and a spectacular pile they made. Big ones and small ones, square ones and round. Beth opened the smallest one first.

"Here you go, critter." She threw me a brand new catnip mouse. Then she

and Sam proceeded to unwrap all the other packages under the tree. Soon the floor of the living room was littered with paper and ribbons and empty boxes. What an opportunity! I jumped into a pile of red paper, and it made a wonderful rustling sound. I slithered under a big sheet of blue paper and carried it across the room with me. I raced back and forth again and again, jumping and rolling and tearing. Sam and Beth were both laughing at me, but I didn't care. I hopped into one of the big boxes and burrowed under the wads of tissue inside. Then I jumped out and back in again. I hadn't had this much fun in months!

Next I tried a smaller box, but I couldn't get all the way inside that one. My front half fitted in, but my hindquarters still hung out, so I pushed it until I ran into a wall. At least I guess it was a wall. I tried to back out, only to discover that my front half was firmly wedged inside. I kept backing up, turning this way and that, but still I was a prisoner. Finally I bumped into the coffee table and the box came off. Sam and Beth were lying on the floor now, laughing until the tears came.

I plowed through the pile again, seized a long piece of red ribbon, and took off into the kitchen. Sam chased after me, but I was too quick for him this time. I doubled back between his feet and zoomed down the hall into the bedroom. Under the bed I dove, the one place I knew he couldn't follow. He reached in as far as he could, but I scooted out the other side and dashed back down the hall to where Beth waited, propped up against the couch. She was laughing so hard I was afraid she would hurt herself. I draped the ribbon across her lap and rolled against her leg.

"Silly Tiger," she giggled. "Silly, silly girl." She tied the ribbon into a huge, floppy bow around my belly, and I tumbled and rolled, trying to dislodge it.

"All right, that's enough," Sam laughed. "Don't tease her too much." He untied the ribbon and rolled it around his hand. Then he began to pick up all the torn paper and ribbons. He gathered up all the empty boxes and bags and stomped them into one big box and put it out for the trash man. I was really sorry to see it go. It was the perfect pussycat playground.

We had a long, miserable, rainy winter that year. For three full months it seemed as if the sun had completely abandoned us. Eventually, though, the storms subsided and the sun came out. Blessed, glorious sunshine! The poor, bare tree out by the street suddenly burst into a cloud of pink blossoms, and a hundred butterflies appeared and fluttered from flower to flower. The days were warm, the sun shone most of the time, and even when it did rain, it was a soft, gentle rain that made the flowers grow instead of beating them down into the mud.

Every morning, even before daylight, a mockingbird outside our bedroom window woke us all with his good-morning song, his way of telling every other bird in the neighborhood that this was HIS territory, and they'd jolly well better stay away. He and his mate were building a nest in the tree outside, and a family of squirrels kept popping in and out of a hole in the trunk. The whole world seemed to be fairly bursting with new life.

About this time I was beginning to get some spring feelings of my own. I didn't know what it was, exactly, just an odd sort of restlessness inside me that made me want to get out and roam. The big black tomcat from up the street seemed to sense it, too, and every night he showed up to serenade me through the window. I wanted very much to go out and join him, but I couldn't open the door by myself, and Beth and Sam simply refused to let

me out. No matter how much I begged and pleaded, they always said "no".

Once I got really upset and bit Beth on the ankle, not very hard, but she got mad and swatted me away. I didn't really want to hurt her, I was just so frustrated I didn't know what else to do. After a time the strange feelings went away and I felt like my old self again. It was quite a while before Beth would cuddle me again, though.

Something else was changing, too, something between Sam and Beth. They smiled at each other a lot more, an "I've-got-a-secret" kind of a smile, and it seemed as if they never stopped hugging each other. Soon Beth started to get a little bit round around the middle. She wasn't getting fat, exactly, but each time I went to get on her lap, there just wasn't as much lap as there used to be. This was odd because Beth had always been kind of a health nut, and she still did just as many exercises as she always had, maybe even more, but it didn't seem to make any difference. She just kept getting rounder and rounder.

Soon it was summer, and the hot weather kicked in for real. The apartment got dreadfully stuffy during the daytime, so they always left the bathroom window open so I could lie on the windowsill and get some fresh air. At night they opened all the windows and set a fan on the floor to draw the cool air inside. Now, instead of sleeping on the bed with them, I sacked out on the floor next to the window. It was cooler down there.

Sam and Beth had been making some pretty substantial changes in the room across the hall from where they slept. It had been Beth's sewing room and library, but now they put up new curtains and silly wallpaper with rabbits and rainbows all over it. They brought in new furniture, too, a rocking chair and a small dresser, and a little bed with railings all around. I naturally assumed it was for me, but every time I jumped into it they tossed me back onto the floor. There were toys, too, a huge box full of them. Dolls, stuffed animals, and big plastic blocks in bright colors. When they had finished they closed the door up tight.

Beth had stopped going to classes, but she still read a lot, and when she wasn't reading she was sewing. I liked having her home all the time, but she never seemed to have time to play with me like she used to. If I brought my catnip mouse and laid it in her lap, it was always "NOT now, Tiger" or "Can't you see I'm busy now?" Well, when was she ever NOT busy anymore? I tried playing by myself, but it just wasn't the same.

Then one day something happened that changed all of our lives forever. It didn't seem all that important at the time, but I can see now that that was when the trouble all started.

I was kicked off the bed rather rudely that morning by Beth, who was obviously very excited about something.

"Wake up, Honey." She shook her husband's shoulder violently. "Come on, wake up. It's time."

"What time is it?" He rolled over and looked at the clock. "It's only two-fifteen. I don't have to be up 'til six. Go back to sleep." He rolled over and pulled the covers up over his head. Beth shook him again.

"Sam, wake up! We have to go to the hospital. Come on!"

"The hospital? Now?" Sam was suddenly wide awake. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! Come on, get dressed." She threw some clothes onto the bed and pulled a small suitcase out of the closet. Sam was rushing around looking for his shoes, and Beth kept saying "Hurry up!" It was all I could do to keep from being trampled to death. I finally decided

that under the bed was the only safe place for me. They made a couple of phone calls and took off without even having breakfast. Luckily I still had some dry food in my bowl from the day before, so at least I didn't have to go hungry!

Sam came home late that afternoon, much more tired than usual. He opened a can of cat food for me and went in and flopped on the bed. He didn't even bother to eat or shower. I expected Beth to come home any minute and start their dinner, but it was well past six o'clock and she still hadn't shown up.

Sam woke some time after dark and fixed himself a cheese sandwich and a glass of milk and carried them into the living room. I put my paw on his knee and meowed and he took me on his lap and gave me a bite of cheese. Then he scratched my neck and between my shoulder blades and all down my back. I hadn't had that much attention in a long time, and I really soaked it up! Beth still wasn't home when bedtime came, so I curled up on the pillow beside him to keep him company. The apartment seemed so cold and empty without her there.

Morning came, and still no Beth. Sam fixed breakfast for both of us, and went out for a while. He came back a couple of hours later, happier than I'd ever seen him. How could he be so cheerful when our beloved Beth was missing? I was really worried. She'd never been gone like this before.

Sam and I spent a lot of time together in the next couple of days. I'm sure he must have missed Beth just as much as I did, but he didn't seem at all worried about her. Then one afternoon he brought her home again, and I assumed everything would get back to normal. I was wrong. Nothing would ever be the same again.

Chapter 2

Trouble in a Blanket

When Beth climbed out of Sam's truck that afternoon she carried a small bundle, not much bigger than I was, wrapped in a fluffy pink blanket. Walking up the sidewalk, she hugged it tightly to her body, as if protecting it from some invisible danger. Once inside the apartment, she went straight to the bedroom and curled up on the bed, still cradling the mysterious bundle close beside her. Naturally curious to see this great new treasure, I hopped up to have a look. Much to my surprise, Beth shrieked and pushed me away.

"Sam, get her away! Get her off the bed!"

"Darling, don't be ridiculous. Tiger isn't going to hurt the baby. She's just curious, that's all." Sam sat on the side of the bed and lifted me onto his lap. Beth glared at him and scooted farther away.

"I don't care, I don't want her around my baby. You know what they say, cats suck babies' breath. Just get her away!"

"Beth, I'm surprised at you, believing an old wives tale like that! You of all people should know better, with your college education and everything."

"You leave my education out of this!" Beth snapped. "Anyway, she might accidentally lie across her face and smother her, or she might get mad or jealous and bite her. It's just too dangerous."

"Now listen, honey, be reasonable." Sam's voice was showing signs of impatience. "You read the paper, and you watch the news every day on the TV. Have you ever once heard of a cat attacking a baby or harming it in any way?"

Beth frowned. "I guess not. But it COULD happen. I mean, you never know, right? Oh, Sam, please. I just don't want to take any chances. Just keep her away from the baby, at least for a few months." Sam sighed. He carried me out of the bedroom and set me gently on the little rag rug in the hallway.

"You wait here," he told me. "I'll be right back." I sat down in front of the door and waited. I could hear their muffled voices from inside the room, but I couldn't make out what they were saying.

After a while Sam opened the door and hoisted me into his arms. He carried me inside and sat down once more on the bed. They had unwrapped the bundle and I saw for the first time the strange new creature they had brought home. It looked almost like a miniature person, but it sure didn't act like one! It didn't walk or talk or do anything a regular-sized person does, it just lay there on its back with its eyes squeezed shut tight, making little grunting noises and waving its arms aimlessly about. Sam placed me on the quilt close to the creature and stroked my back.

"Tiger, I want you to meet Donna. She's our new baby, and she's going to be living here from now on." I stretched out my neck VERY cautiously and sniffed its nearly-bald head while Beth watched suspiciously. Just then it jerked its arms again and I jumped back, retreating to the comfort and safety of Sam's lap. He chuckled and scratched my neck. "You see, honey. There's nothing to be worried about. She just wanted to know what it was, that's all." Beth didn't seem very convinced.

"Just the same, I don't want them left alone together."

For the first few days Beth kept the baby in the nursery most of the time, in the little bed with the railings, and about every five minutes she'd drop whatever she was doing and hurry in to check on it to make sure it was alright. After about five days of not getting anything done, she got herself a sort of little harness made of blue canvass, so she could carry it with her wherever she went, and believe me, she did exactly that.

Sam and Beth acted as if this "Donna" creature were the greatest thing that ever existed in the whole wide world, although for the life of me I couldn't figure out why. She had to be taken care of ALL the time. She couldn't even feed herself. She howled a lot, even in the middle of the night, and whenever she did, one or the other of them would have to get up and feed her, or change her clothes, or pound on her back, or carry her around the room for an hour or two.

She didn't seem to be good for anything except to hold on their laps and make silly faces at. If they got her to be a pet, they made a mighty poor bargain, I'd say. They'd have been a lot better off with another cat, or at least a puppy, something I could play with once in a while.

It seemed like Sam and Beth spent every waking moment taking care of the new baby. I hardly got any attention at all. Once in a while Sam took me on his lap and petted me, but Beth rarely even touched me anymore. I honestly couldn't understand why. I hadn't done anything wrong that I

could think of, so why should she be so angry with me?

All their friends came to visit again, eager to cuddle and coo over the new baby. No one noticed me at all. I rubbed against their legs and tried to sit on their laps, but they all just pushed me away! It was like I'd suddenly developed the plague or something.

Soon the weather turned cold and those interminable rains began again. I seemed to spend most of my days just sprawled on the windowsill, watching it come down.

Christmas came, and again those wonderful boxes were stacked under the tree. They spread out a blanket for Donna near the tree and began the game. Beth picked out one of the smaller packages and handed it to Sam.

"This one's from your mom. It says 'Open Me First'," she explained. Sam ripped off the bright red wrapping paper and pulled a shiny new camera out of the box. Beth squealed with delight. "Fantastic! Now we can take pictures of the baby!" Then just as quickly her smile faded. "Oh, but we don't have any film." Sam laughed at her downcast face. He pointed the camera at her and snapped the shutter. The camera flashed and Beth blinked.

"Silly goose," he grinned. "There's film in the camera, and four extra rolls in the box. Did you really think my mother would give us a camera and no film?" Beth smiled, a small embarrassed smile.

"No, I guess not," she admitted. She picked up Donna, who was still lying on her belly on the floor, and snuggled her against her shoulder. "Take one of both of us," she instructed. Another snap, another flash, and the deed was done. "Now let me take one of you." She handed over the baby and took the camera and another happy smile was recorded. Then it was time to get back to the serious business of opening presents.

Box after box was opened, and present after present was piled in front of the baby. I waited patiently for mine, but no one even looked my way. Presents for Donna, presents for Beth, presents for Sam. More presents for Donna, but nothing for me. Nothing at all.

I nosed among the empty boxes and rooted out a nice long blue ribbon to play with. Sam stood up, and for a minute I thought he was going to play chase with me, but no such luck. He quickly gathered up all the papers and boxes before I'd even had a chance to start tearing them apart. All I had left was that one pitiful ribbon, and no one even to share it with. I dragged it into the kitchen, stretched out on the cool floor, and chewed on it while I tried to figure out what to do. There had to be a way to get them to play with me.

When I came back into the living room Sam and Beth were still taking pictures. Sam picked up a pink rabbit's fur teddy bear and poked it at the baby as she sat cradled on her mother's lap. Beth tried to get her to play with it, but she just sort of picked at it. What a waste! I strutted over and knocked that silly bear right on its fat, furry behind. Then I grabbed it by the ear and dashed across the room.

"Tiger, no!" Sam yelled. He snatched the toy out of my mouth, rather roughly I might add, and gave it back to that dumb old Donna, who still just sat there and stared at it. I was both angry and hurt. What right did they have to push me aside and give all their love to this intruder? After all, I was there first!

Over the next few months Donna began to show some promising signs of becoming an actual person. She could hold toys in her hands and stick them

in her mouth, and the cooing and gurgling sounds she made were sometimes almost human. Still, she really wasn't much more interesting than your average stuffed animal, yet Beth was completely taken up with her. She spent more and more time playing with her, sometimes neglecting her housework and Sam's dinner in the bargain.

She talked to her, sang to her, and carried her about the apartment showing her things. She sat her in a little seat on the living room rug and dangled brightly colored toys and rattles in front of her. When Donna finally reached out and grasped a red plastic teething ring, Beth was overjoyed, and when she could actually sit up by herself, even Sam seemed to consider it a major milestone.

Eventually Donna learned to do something really spectacular. She learned to crawl! Sam and Beth were beside themselves with excitement. What an accomplishment! Well, big hairy deal! I could crawl when I was less than a day old, and I couldn't even see yet, so why should they think THAT was so amazing?

In the days that followed I tried again and again to make them notice me. I dragged my beat-up old necktie through every room of the apartment, but no one followed. I batted my rubber ball into Beth's feet in the kitchen, but she took no notice whatever. I even hauled out my battered and tattered old catnip mouse from behind the stove. I carried it into the living room and laid it at Sam's feet, but when I meowed for him to throw it for me, he only reached down, patted my head, and went on reading his newspaper. I tried throwing it around myself, but all the good catnip smell was gone, and I soon got bored with it.

The door to Donna's room was open, and I slipped inside. I hadn't been allowed in for several months, but it was pretty much as I remembered it. One side of the crib was down, and a small crocheted afgan hung almost to the floor. It was soft and fluffy and smelled of baby powder, so I rubbed my cheek against it to leave my own scent. I jumped into the crib and nosed around under the covers. More baby powder. I sneezed. The pink fur teddy bear leaned against one railing, its glassy eyes staring into space. I nudged it and it fell on its side. I bit one of its paws and shook it gently.

The raw animal smell awakened something wild deep inside me. I growled and shook it hard. Its lack of response irritated me and I seized it with my paws and rolled with it across the mattress. I flailed wildly with my rear feet, sending up a cloud of pink fur. I jumped away and pounced afresh, my savage instincts aflame with this novel sensation. I rolled and tumbled, kicking and tearing fiercely.

A seam popped and some foam beads came out along with some cotton stuffing. I hooked into it with my claws and yanked at it with my teeth. More stuffing. Tufts of pink fur covered the blanket and clung to my body. Every kick brought forth another wad of cotton and beads. The head came off and rolled onto the floor. I followed and batted it back and forth across the room a few times. Finally, tired and bored, I left it in a corner and wandered off.

Beth came into the bedroom where I was busy washing the downy grey fur on my belly. She grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and toted me to the front door. Without so much as a word, she tossed me onto the sidewalk and slammed the door behind me.

I was stunned. I didn't know what to think. Going from a soft bed in

a warm apartment to a cold, hard sidewalk in the middle of February wasn't part of my plan at all. The ground was still damp from the previous night's rain. The sky was completely covered with gloomy grey clouds, and a cold wind cut through my fur. This wouldn't do at all!

I meowed at the door, but there was no answer. I meowed a bit louder. Still no response. I stood on my hind legs and scratched on the screen door as high as I could reach, but still no one came. I climbed almost to the top of the door, searching for any kind of an opening, but there was none. No way in at all. Things did not look good.

I sat down on the doormat to consider my predicament. As this was the only door in or out of the apartment, sooner or later someone would have to open it. Then I'd have a chance to get back inside. Anyway, I couldn't believe they really meant to leave me out there. It was my home, after all, and what I did wasn't really so terrible, was it?

I curled myself up into a tight little ball to get as much protection as possible from the icy wind. Nothing to do now but wait. After what seemed like hours the door opened. It was Sam. I tried to push past him into the warm room, but he blocked the way with his foot.

"Oh, no you don't," he said firmly. He came out, closing the door behind him, and I noticed for the first time that he was carrying my food and water dishes. He led the way around to the side of the building where the wall offered some slight protection from the wind. Sam placed the bowls on the flagstone paving under a large canvas awning and seated himself on a faded lawn chair. I jumped onto his lap and tried my best to make up to him.

"I'm sorry, Tiger," he told me. "You just can't do things like that. I understand how you feel, believe me. I don't blame you for being jealous, I'm a little bit jealous myself, but that's the way life works sometimes. The baby comes first now." He petted and cuddled me and talked to me for a long time, more than he had in months. I couldn't understand everything he talked about, but his voice was kind and gentle. I was sure they had forgiven me, and that everything was going to be alright.

Sam put me back on the paving stones and straightened up. He walked back around to the front door and I bounded happily along beside him. At the door he stopped and I rubbed against his leg and purred. He bent down and stroked my back.

"Sorry, Tiger," he said. "I wish I could let you back in. Maybe in a few days she'll get over it." He slipped inside and I was alone again. I couldn't believe it! I thought they loved me! How could they shut me out of my own home? Surely it was a mistake. I called and called as loudly as I could. No answer. I scratched at the screen and called again, but it was no use. My most pathetic yowls met with only silence.

It was getting colder and I was hungry. I returned to my food bowl and ate most of the dinner Sam had left for me. Then it was back to the front door to try again. Surely they would let me in now. They had to! More scratching and calling but still no response.

It was now late afternoon and the sinking sun had thrown a chilly shadow over my once happy home. I could see lights coming on in the windows all over the neighborhood. All those people were snug and warm in their houses, just as I should be. It wasn't fair! What did they expect me to do now? Where was I supposed to sleep?

I looked around for a possible denning site. The front yard was wide

open, but a high board fence enclosed the back of the lot. A squarish opening led to a great black empty space under the house, but I wasn't about to venture in there. Who knew what dangers might be lurking back there in the dark. I preferred to stay out in the open where at least I could see what was stalking me.

Near the front corner of the building a large leafy bush hung its branches all the way to the ground, implying shelter from the cold. I crawled underneath and tried to find a dry spot where I could be more or less comfortable. It wasn't much defense against the biting wind, but it was better than nothing at all, and I didn't seem to have much choice.

The lights in the windows winked out one by one as the inhabitants behind them prepared for bed. The windows above my head went dark, too, and I knew Sam and Beth would soon be asleep. I missed my soft bed and the warm bodies beside me. I wished with all my heart that I could be safe inside where I belonged. What a miserable way to spend the night! Maybe in the morning they would let me back in. I hoped so. I sure didn't want to spend the rest of my life sleeping under that bush!

Finally I fell asleep. I woke up several times to find the night still draped around my resting place, but eventually morning did come, and the cold night died a quiet grey death. I stretched the chills out of my aching joints and crawled out of my leafy shelter. My food bowls were still where Sam had left them yesterday, but someone had sneaked in during the night and eaten my leftovers. I returned to my post at the front door to wait for Sam. I didn't have to wait very long. He was out bright and early with a can of tuna and the bag of crunchies.

"Good morning, Tiger," he smiled. "I see you survived the night in one piece." After filling my bowls and changing my water, he gave me a few quick strokes and headed back inside. I tried to follow, but once again his foot blocked the way. A short time later he came back out, got in his truck, and left for work.

I didn't see Beth all day. I explored the tiny yard and chased a chattering squirrel part way up the tree, but I didn't dare go very high. I'd never climbed a tree before and I wasn't sure how I'd get back down again. Most of the day I just slept. When Sam came home from work he fed and cuddled me just as he had the previous evening. How could he could act like he still loved me, and then shut me out like that? I ate quickly and returned to the front door.

The wind was crisp and cold, and great ugly black clouds piled up across the sky. Big splattering drops of rain dampened my fur as I dashed for the sanctuary of the bush. Unfortunately, it didn't shelter me for very long this time. The rain pounded its way through the leaves, and soon I was soaking wet. I tried the feeding station around at the side. The canvas awning deflected some of the driving rain, but gave no protection whatever from the freezing wind. There was only one place left to hide.

I scooted around to the back of the house and slipped through the opening into the great blackness underneath. It was damp and dirty and full of spider webs, but at least it was shelter. I still didn't go very far inside, just enough to get away from the wind and rain. I knew there were other, bigger cats in the neighborhood, and I didn't want anything between me and the exit, just in case!

It rained all that night and most of the next day, so I was pretty hungry when I finally emerged. Sam had evidently put out my breakfast at

the regular time that morning, but there wasn't much left in the bowl. I finished off what little there was and then proceeded to try and clean my coat. That was a pretty big job in itself, as I was covered from head to tail with dirt and spider webs. I hadn't made much progress when Sam came out with my evening meal.

"There you are, poor girl," he sympathized. "I hope you found a dry place to sleep last night." I rubbed against his legs and purred to let him know how glad I was to see him. I guess he wasn't so glad to see me, though, because he pushed me away instead of petting me. "Sorry, girl," he said. "These are my good work pants. I can't have you getting them all dirty." So I was "dirty" was I? Well, I expect he'd be dirty, too, if he'd had to sleep where I did!

That night the tomcat from up the block came by and paid me a visit. He wanted to play, but I hid under my bush and swiped at his nose when he came poking around. It would have been nice to have a playmate, but he was just too big and rough to suit me. A couple of weeks later, though, I started having those spring-type feelings again. This time when he came around I let him stay.

About two weeks later I began to notice changes in my body. For one thing, my belly began to get a bit rounder. Slowly at first, hardly enough to even notice, then more and more every day, until by the end of about six weeks I was really quite tubby. I was going to have kittens.

I was so proud, I wanted everyone to know about it. I told Sam each time he came out to feed and pet me. At first he didn't notice the difference, but soon I got to be so big it was obvious even to him. He felt me all over, rolling me on my back and probing gently at my bulging belly.

"Oh, Tiger!" he scolded. "What have you gone and done now?" As if I had committed some great sin or something! He disappeared into the house and came out a few minutes later with Beth. She squatted down and looked me over disapprovingly but wouldn't touch me, though I rubbed against her leg and sang my loudest.

"Great. Just great." She gave me a bit of a shove with her foot. "What are we supposed to do now?"

"We?" Sam sounded surprised. "She's your cat! You promised to keep her inside when she was in heat, remember?"

"Well, how was I supposed to know? Anyway, it's too late now. You'll just have to get rid of her."

"Get rid of her! Just like that? This is a living creature, Beth, not a sack of garbage. You can't just go and dump your responsibilities because they've gotten to be a little inconvenient. Just what do you expect me to do with her, anyway? Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a good home for a pregnant cat?" Beth crossed her arms and scowled.

"I don't care what you do with her. Just drop her off someplace. Somebody'll take care of her. All I know is we can't have a bunch of kittens running around the place." Then she stomped back into the apartment, slamming the door so hard the windows rattled. Sam sat down on the front porch. He sighed a great, deep sigh and pulled me onto his lap.

"Looks like we're both in it now, Tiger-cat." I purred and pushed my cheek against his arm. I knew I could count on him, at least.

Two days later Sam came out of the garage shortly after breakfast, carrying a big cardboard box with a lid on it. He set it on the ground

beside me and removed the lid.

"Come here, Tiger. Have a look at this." I stretched up and peeked over the edge. Inside there was a nice, soft layer of rags, covered with an old green towel, the perfect nest box. Quick as a wink I hopped inside. I purred and meowed in my sweetest voice to let him know I approved. He'd come through for me after all. Sam smiled and patted my head. Then he fitted on the lid and picked up the box with me inside. This was something I hadn't expected.

He carried me a short distance and set the box down again. I bumped the lid off and found myself alone in the cab of his pickup. Sam returned a few minutes later with the sack of dry food and some cans, and found me perched on the seat waiting for him. He popped me back into the box and covered it again. I tried to push my way out a second time, but this time the lid was too heavy for me to lift. The engine started and we drove away.

I didn't say anything for quite a while. I was disappointed that they weren't going to let me back into the apartment, but I was sure that wherever Sam took me would have to be a nice place. He loved me, I knew, and he wouldn't let anything bad happen to me. We rode for what seemed like a long, long time, and I began to be uncomfortable. It was stuffy in that box, and I wanted out. I called to Sam and he answered me in a quiet voice.

"Easy, girl, we're almost there. Just be patient." I asked him to please let me out of the box, I wouldn't get in his way, but I guess he didn't understand. He just kept driving and didn't talk anymore. Finally the truck stopped and the engine died away. I heard the door open and felt the box being carried from the cab and lowered to the ground. Sam raised the lid and patted my head.

"Well, we're here." I peered over the rim of the carton, eager to see what kind of place he'd brought me to, but I was sorely disappointed. Around me were some large, square buildings, an empty parking lot, and a street with no cars. No trees, no houses, and no people. Only Sam and I, and a few old newspapers blowing across the lot.

I didn't like this new place at all, and I told Sam as much, but he acted as if he didn't hear me. He opened the cans of food and emptied them onto a piece of cardboard next to the wall of one of the buildings. He laid the bag of dry food on its side and filled an old plastic dish with water. He walked back to the truck and I followed. He climbed into the cab and I jumped onto his lap. He started the engine and sat there a moment, very quiet.

"Goodbye, Tiger," he said softly, and kissed the top of my head. Then he lowered me to the ground and closed the door. The truck started moving forward and I had to dodge out of the way of the rear wheel. I ran after it as it rolled out of the parking lot and into the street, but it was out of sight before I got halfway down the block.

I sat down on the sidewalk and waited for Sam to return. I knew he wouldn't leave me alone for long in a place like this. I kept watching the street where he'd gone, but there was no sign of the truck. After several hours I got tired of waiting and walked back to the spot where he'd left my food. It was late afternoon and I was hungry. I ate my fill and went back to the street to wait.

Chapter 3

The Loft

Sam didn't come back that night, or all the next day and night. I ate when I was hungry and drank when I was thirsty, but I never ceased watching and waiting. The wind had died down, but the nights were still cold. I knew my babies would come soon, and I feared the nest-box he had left me wouldn't give enough shelter for the tender little things.

On the second morning cars began appearing on the streets and pulling into the parking lots, and I waited with renewed hope for Sam's return. Dozens of cars and trucks packed into the lot, but none of them looked familiar. Soon all the spaces were full, and still they came. They filled the streets and the driveways, until there was no more room anywhere. Still no Sam. Where was he? Surely he hadn't forgotten me.

My nest-box rested close by the rear entrance of the building, and soon I was surrounded by a group of men in work clothes, all talking at once. A balding man in a blue denim shirt squatted down and lifted me out of the box where I had taken refuge. He held me up for inspection while the others poked and prodded me with rude fingers.

"Is it a male or a female?" one asked.

"Oh, it's a female all right, and pregnant in the bargain," the man holding me answered. "Due any minute, too, by the look of her."

"Where d'you suppose she came from?"

"She flew in by private jet from Monte Carlo, stupid. Where d'ya think she came from?" My handler was arrogant and contemptuous.

"I guess somebody musta dropped her off."

"Figured that out all by yourself, did ya? You're so brilliant you hurt my eyes." A large, red-faced man in a silvery helmet shoved his way through the circle of workmen. He blew a cloud of cigar smoke in my face and snarled at the man holding me.

"Is that your cat?" he demanded.

"Hardly. Just a stray somebody dumped over the weekend." The blue-shirted man's manner was noticeably different toward the newcomer.

"Well, get it out of here."

"She's pregnant, sir," one of the other men spoke up. "Looks like she's due any minute."

"Does this place look like a maternity ward to you? I said, get her out of here! Now!" The helmeted man tossed my nest-box and what was left of my food into a big trash container and dumped the water from my dish onto the pavement.

Blue-shirt carried me to the edge of a plowed field next to the lot and gave me a nudge with his boot. I might still have followed him back to the building, but some of the other men began pelting me with dirt clods and small stones, and I was forced to run in the other direction. Twice I tried to turn back, but each time I was met with a renewed hail of rocks and clods.

In all my life I had never met with such treatment. I couldn't imagine what I might possibly have done to deserve such punishment. I wasn't bothering anyone, and I certainly wasn't causing any damage to their property. I was only waiting there for Sam to come back and take me home again. Now he wouldn't even know where to look.

At the far side of the field I sat down and licked a tender spot on my left shoulder where one of the rocks had hit home. I had no idea where I would go next, but I decided it would probably be best to steer clear of strangers for the time being.

A huge mound of trash and weeds occupied one corner of the field, and I managed a make-shift nest in one part of it where I could rest and wait. It didn't provide much shelter against the cold wind, however, and that night I shivered more than I slept.

Morning came, and still no sign of Sam. It was up to me to find my own way home. I wasn't any too sure of the direction; I had, after all, made the trip inside a closed box. All I could do was start walking and hope for the best.

Before I did any walking, though, I needed to find something to eat. I'd heard some faint rustlings in the trash pile, but my efforts at locating the source of the sounds had proved fruitless. I crossed the neighboring street and skirted the buildings on the far side, alert for any signs of danger. It was still early and the workers hadn't yet begun to arrive.

Two big trash bins huddled against the back of the building, and the lid was up on one of them. I scrambled inside and dug through the trash until I found some scraps of yesterday's lunch. It wasn't much, and hardly the kind of meal I was accustomed to, but something was better than nothing, and it quieted my rumbling stomach for awhile.

I pressed on. The extra weight I carried inside me kept me from making much speed, and I tired easily from lack of proper nourishment. Hour after exhausting hour, block after wearying block I plodded on, passing uncounted factories and warehouses, at last arriving at another vacant lot, this time an unplowed field overgrown with weeds and grass.

I lay down somewhere near its center to rest and observe. I could feel the kittens moving inside me, and I knew it wouldn't be much longer. I would have to find shelter, and soon. A long, low building at the far side of the field had several windows broken out in the rear, and there didn't seem to be many people about. Perhaps I could find warmth and safety inside.

Hugging the ground, I crept to the edge of the field and concealed myself in the tall grass where I could watch without being seen. A big boxy-looking truck pulled into the lot and backed up to the side of the building. A wide door slid up, and the tumult of machinery and men's voices spilled out into the quiet afternoon air. Two whining yellow machines loaded stacks of cartons into the waiting vehicle, then the door rolled down again, and the truck drove away, satisfied with its booty. No one from inside came around to the back where I was hiding, so I figured I was pretty safe, at least for the time being.

At long last the work day was over, and the workers had all gone home. Lucky them. Only one man remained behind to watch. I waited until he was out of sight, then stole around to the side where the trash bins were parked. A few scraps and leftovers were all I found, not nearly enough to feed a soon-to-be mother.

Back at the rear of the building, it took me three tries to get a foothold on the windowsill and scramble through the opening left by one of the broken panes. When my eyes had adjusted to the darkness, I was able to make out row upon row of boxes and cartons stacked higher than a man's head.

I wound my way up and down several rows, and eventually came upon a rough wooden staircase leading upwards to the left. The dusty, worn steps smelled of grease and oil. I hesitated a moment, testing the air with my sensitive nose. Then, very cautiously, I mounted the narrow steps.

At the top, a wide platform ran the entire length of the building, a catch-all storage for everything that didn't belong anywhere else. A

single railing about three feet above the planking guarded the edge, but otherwise it was completely open. Perhaps this was the hiding place I sought. I picked my way among open boxes and stacks of paper and bits and pieces of old machinery.

Something rustled in one of the boxes, and I caught the scent of another creature. It reminded me of the little white mice in the cages at the pet store, but it was sharper somehow, and wilder.

Finally, far to the rear, in an out-of-the-way corner behind a pile of empty cartons, I found what I was looking for. A bunch of old cleaning rags had been carelessly tossed into the corner, providing an ample supply of nesting material for an expectant mother. They weren't as clean as I might have hoped for, and they smelled faintly of oil and turpentine, but they were soft enough, and I was in no position to be picky. I arranged them into a comfortable bed and settled in to await the birth of my babies.

I didn't have long to wait. The first kitten arrived about two hours later, a pure white male the size of a large mouse, his eyes shut tight against the world. I washed him thoroughly from one end to the other, and then, just to make sure, I washed him again. He was so small, so helpless, and so beautiful!

The second kitten came an hour later, another male, as black as the other was white. I gave him the same twice-over cleaning and then stretched out so they could enjoy their first meal. They had a bit of trouble at first finding my nipples in all that soft, grey belly fur, but their noses showed them the way, and soon they were both sucking greedily.

I was fairly bursting with pride. Never before in the entire history of the earth had there been two such beautiful kittens! I wanted to tell the whole world, but there was no one there to tell but the stacks of boxes, so I just purred quietly to myself and my gorgeous babies.

Suddenly I heard the patter of tiny feet on the wooden floor. I turned my head just in time to see a small dark shape disappear behind a pile of machine parts. I kept my eyes focused on the spot where it had vanished, and soon a twitching nose poked around the corner, followed by a pair of beady eyes and two small round ears. It was a mouse, all right. Not all white and pink-eared and tame like the pet shop mice, but a mouse just the same. It probably lived in one of the half-empty boxes piled all around.

The kittens were sleeping quietly now. Soon it would be daylight and I needed to eat again. As cautiously as I had crept up the staircase, I crept back down. The night sky was patched with thin clouds, but a warm breeze hinted of spring. I nosed around in the trash bin, but finding nothing else edible, I slipped across the pavement to the field beyond.

For a time I wandered aimlessly, noting all the various smells that came to me on the breeze. Then a chirping sound just to my right caught my attention. I froze in my tracks and crouched flat to the ground. The chirping was repeated, a bit louder. Silently, stealthily, I crept toward the sound. When it stopped, I froze. When it resumed, so did I.

A large brown grasshopper nibbled at the new green shoots of grass that poked their way up through the choking dead straw left from last summer's growth. From time to time it ceased its chewing and rubbed its hind legs together, producing the strange chirping sounds I heard. It wasn't much of a meal for a new mother, but beggars can't be choosers.

I crouched low, gathering my feet under me as I did so. Then I sprang forward, landing squarely on the empty spot where the insect had been just a split second before. Again and again I leaped. Once I had it under my paw, but it managed to wiggle free. Then it was mine, firmly imprisoned

under my front paws. One grasshopper hardly made a dent in my hunger, but the field was large, with new grass aplenty, and in a very short time I had caught and eaten two more of the crunchy little critters.

Dawn was breaking in the east, and I had to get back to my little ones. The workers would be arriving soon, and I must not be seen. Across the lot and up to the windowsill. It was easier now without the extra weight. Through the window and back up the stairs to my babies. A large mouse was nosing around the nest, but he disappeared in a hurry when he saw me coming.

Back at the nest, the kittens were wide awake and hungry. I checked them over carefully for signs of damage, and settled down to give them their breakfast. A bellyful of milk and a thorough washing, and they were ready for a long nap. So was I. It had been a long night.

That first day was a nerve-wracking one for me. The fear of discovery made it hard to get even an hour's sleep. All day long I could hear the machinery, the voices, the footsteps. Any minute now, one of the workers might climb the stairs to my loft. Any minute my little family might be found and evicted. I dozed fitfully all day, ready at a moment's notice to leap to the defense of my precious babies, but no one came. My secret was safe for one more day.

That night I decided to try out my newly developed hunting skills on the mice in the loft. Silently I waited in the shadows, alert for any signs of life. A high-pitched squeak drew my attention, and I crept noiselessly in that direction. I caught a glimpse of something dark and furry between two of the empty boxes.

I crouched at the ready and waited for my moment. The mouse twitched nervously, sensing its danger. It scuttled first to one side and then the other. For just an instant it was in the open and I took my chance. My aim was true, but gap between the boxes was too narrow. There was a shriek and the scrambling of tiny feet, and my dinner was gone.

The next mouse I stalked ducked into a hole in the back wall, and the third escaped by diving under a piece of machinery. Clearly this was not going to be easy pickings. I'd have to refine my hunting skills a bit more before I'd be able to catch one of these wary creatures. In the meantime I still had to eat, so it was back to the trash bin and the open field.

The trash yielded half a hamburger and some stale cheese, and that combined with several grasshoppers pretty well filled my belly. On the return trip to the warehouse I had a close call with the night watchman. He happened to come around the corner just as I was crossing the parking lot to my broken window. He flashed his light in my direction, but I dove under the trash bin, and he didn't see me. He walked past just inches from where I crouched, trembling with fear.

The next day passed quietly, and that night I went hunting again. I still didn't catch any mice, although I did get a clawful of fur on a near miss. The field teemed with grasshoppers and bugs, and I caught several before I spied a dusky brown lizard just finishing off his meal of a black beetle.

Instinctively I crouched, gathering myself to spring. A short leap and I had it firmly by the tail. Then suddenly it was gone, leaving behind its twitching tail under my surprised paw. I sprang back in amazement and the disembodied appendage flipped and flopped on the ground. I reached out and touched it gingerly, and it wiggled and twitched some more. I circled it warily, unsure how to proceed. Finally it ceased movement enough for me to eat it, but it was a meager substitute for a whole lizard.

The next few days passed quickly. My beautiful kittens grew bigger and

hungrier by the hour, and I did my best to make sure they were well fed and cared for. In time I became quite skilled at catching mice, and I devoured them completely, discarding only the feet and tails.

The workers were not yet aware of our presence in the loft. Once someone came up the stairs and rummaged among the boxes at the far end of the platform, but didn't come near the spot where my darlings were hidden. Still, I couldn't help being concerned. Their tiny mewling wasn't yet audible above the racket of the warehouse, but soon their eyes would open, and they'd be wandering about exploring on their own. Then how would I keep them hidden? Surely one of them would be seen, and we'd all be sent away.

One morning as I was giving the black kitten his twice-daily bath, I noticed that his left eye was beginning to open, just a crack. By the following evening both eyes were wide open, and his brother had one open and one halfway. Soon they were stumbling about on wobbly legs, checking out their small world. As yet they didn't stray more than a few feet from the nest, and would mew frantically whenever they found themselves out of my sight. When that happened I was obliged to come to the rescue and carry the lost lamb back to the warmth and security of the nest.

My kittens kept growing and I kept hunting. I'd already eliminated most of the mice in the building, and had to depend more and more on what I could catch in the field. There were mice out there, too, but they were harder to find, and quicker to dive for cover in their underground burrows. It wasn't easy finding enough food for my ever-increasing appetite. I desperately needed a rest, but I dared not miss even one night's hunting. I had to provide milk for my babies, and to do that I had to eat. A lot.

Late one afternoon I was roused from my nap by the sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs. My whole body was instantly alert. Every muscle tensed as I waited, listening, wondering how far he would come this time. I could hear boxes and cartons being shoved this way and that, as though someone were searching for something. Maybe for us.

Closer and closer the footsteps came, but still I couldn't see the searcher. A few feet from our hiding place they stopped. After a moment's pause, whoever it was walked off in the other direction, and I heard the footsteps thumping down the stairs. I relaxed again. He hadn't seen us. We were still safe.

My relief was short-lived. A few minutes later the worker returned, this time with a companion. Again I heard the sliding and shoving of boxes. What were they searching for? Maybe they had guessed we were there and were determined to find us and drive us out. Frantically I cast about for an escape route. There was none. Whatever they were looking for, they were between us and the stairs, and there was no way to get past with two helpless kittens.

Closer and closer, and then they were upon us. I heard the exclamations of surprise as the two men caught sight of my nest and its precious contents. I sprang in between, ready to defend my babies with my life if necessary. With arched back and fluffed-out fur, I tried to look as menacing as possible. If they wanted to harm my little ones, they'd have to get past me. The younger of the two men laughed.

"Well, well. Will ya lookit that!" Then he leaned over the railing and shouted to the workers below. "Hey guys! We got a family up here!" In a moment a dozen or more blue-shirted men crowded the platform, elbowing and shouldering for a better look.

"Well I'll be." one of them chuckled. "A real toughie." Suddenly the crowd divided and a tall black man emerged at the front. His white shirt

gapped open at the neck, and his tie hung loosely from both sides of his collar. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, and his once-shiny black shoes were scuffed and dusty. He stood hands on hips looking down at me. I hissed and snarled my fiercest. A chorus of voices greeted the new arrival.

"What are you gonna do with her, Jack?"

"Can she stay? She looks like a good mouser."

"Feisty little devil, anyway."

Jack was obviously the man in charge here, the one who held my fate and that of my kittens in his hands. Tensely I waited for the harsh words or the blows that were sure to follow. Nothing happened.

"All right, everybody back to work. I think I can handle this." A bit of minor grumbling and a general shuffling of feet signaled the exodus from the loft. This one man alone remained behind. He squatted down on his heels so that he and I were almost face to face. For a few moments we regarded each other, sizing each other up. I lowered my back into its normal position and allowed my fur to settle into place. A slow smile creased his face and he stretched out one hand for me to sniff. "I kind of thought we were running a little low on mice in here," he grinned. He stroked the top of my head. "Good luck, little mother. You'll need it." Then he straightened up, turned on his heel, and walked away.

Chapter 4

Tragedy

Life in the loft was a lot easier for me and my kittens now that the workers knew we were there. Most of the day we went undisturbed in our elevated kingdom, but whenever anyone did come up, there was always a kind word or a friendly pat for me and my little ones. Several of them shared odds and ends of their lunches with me so I no longer had to depend entirely on what I could catch in order to survive.

During the next several weeks, the kittens became increasingly active. They explored every nook and cranny of the loft from one end to the other. They climbed into every box and crate, and inspected each piece of broken machinery from every possible angle, including upside-down. They played hide-and-seek, and chased one another back and forth along the platform like a couple of low-flying jets. They jumped and tackled each other and tussled and kicked and chewed as if they truly intended to dismember one another.

Free now from the constant worry, I occasionally joined in their roughhousing. I could easily outrun and outjump either of them, but they always outlasted me. Most of the time I just kept out of their way, or at least tried to. Every so often, though, I'd get caught in the middle of one of their stampedes, and I'd have little kitten footprints up one side and down the other!

I was so proud of my beautiful babies! It was all I could do just to keep from busting out of my fur coat. I could lie there for hours watching them playing or eating or even just sleeping. Whenever any of the workers came up the stairs I was always right there to make sure he or she knew that those were my babies!

Charlie, the young man who had discovered us, was a regular visitor in those days. He tried very hard to be rough, tough, and gruff, but that black, bushy moustache did a mighty poor job of hiding the wide grin underneath, and the brown cloth cap which he kept pulled down over his eyes couldn't disguise the kindness there. Every day he brought his lunch upstairs and sat at the end of the platform with his back against the wall. He'd unroll the top of a brown paper bag and pull out the most wonderful treats, like a grilled cheese sandwich, or a thick slab of cold meat loaf.

"Here you go, little mother," he'd say as he broke off cat-sized pieces and laid them on the bag for me. While Charlie and I shared a little lunch and a lot of love, the kittens would amuse themselves by untying the laces of his sneakers, or trying to enlarge the holes in the knees of his faded blue jeans. When the brown bag was empty, Charlie would crush it into a little ball and toss it to the kittens, who then took turns batting it about in and out among the boxes until one of them would accidentally knock it over the edge and lose it.

I wasn't especially thrilled about that part of the routine. There was always the danger that one of them might get carried away by his own enthusiasm and go over the edge after it. I guess Charlie thought about that, too, because the second week he brought up a hammer and nails and fastened a wide strip of wood along the edge of the platform so that neither paper bag nor kittens would be inadvertently lost.

The kittens were eating some solid food by this time, but they still wanted milk several times a day, and I didn't mind that. Charlie brought a small litter pan for them to train in, since they weren't yet big enough to go outside. He gave us all names, too. The black kitten he called Midnight, and the white one was Snowdrop. Instead of Tiger, I was now to be called Tuffy.

The babies must have been about two months old when Midnight finally got up enough nerve to try the stairs for the first time. Always the largest and boldest of the two, even he was a bit hesitant about venturing into the great unknown by himself. At first he would only go down two or three steps, then immediately scramble back up to the familiar territory of the loft. After four or five round trips with no major mishaps his more timid brother screwed up his courage and followed.

After that there was no stopping either of them. Midnight would charge down the steps with Snowdrop hot on his heels. Halfway down they'd reverse directions and race back to the top with Snowdrop now in the lead. Following a brief tussle at the top of the stairs it was back down again, all the way to the bottom this time.

Before very long they were exploring all over the warehouse. I worried a lot about their safety with so much activity all around. Two big forklifts constantly cruised up and down the aisles, and there were so many feet that couldn't always see where they stepped. I had hoped to keep them upstairs with me during the day, but it just wasn't possible anymore. They had a cat's natural curiosity and were determined to investigate everything.

The plant manager, Jack Thomas, was an easy-going, tolerant sort. He hadn't paid much attention to me after that first fateful meeting, and I tried to stay out of his way as much as possible. His office directly under the loft was hardly more than a cubbyhole, filled with filing cabinets and a battered old wooden desk shoved into a corner next to a constantly overflowing wastebasket. Every so often the phone would ring and Jack would jot something down on his order pad. Then he'd walk to the door and call to Charlie, who relayed his instructions to the workers in

the staging area.

The warehouse itself was a busy place for most of the day. Trucks constantly came and went, loading and unloading the boxes and crates that were stacked in clusters and piles on the loading dock. The forklifts glided up and down the aisles, putting together the orders to be shipped out, and restocking the shelves with the new supplies that were always coming in. Charlie was everywhere at once, counting boxes, checking labels, comparing everything to the master sheets on his clipboard.

Most of the workers got along pretty well with each other and went about their tasks willing, even cheerfully. Then there was Harold. He seemed to go out of his way to look for trouble, and his most frequent target was Pam, the pretty young woman who ran the other forklift. Small and dark with flashing eyes and a ready laugh, she also had a sharp tongue which she willingly employed whenever anyone gave her a hard time. This Harold did at every possible opportunity. On one occasion he deliberately drove his lift in front of hers, causing her to run into him and spill her load.

"Watch where yer goin'," he sneered. "Woman driver."

"Yeah, well I noticed it was a woman who drove you to work the other day," she retorted. "You too hung over to find the way by yourself? Now pick up those boxes before I give you a Class A violation up your nose."

"Like hell I will. You ran into me, remember?"

"This clown giving you trouble again?" Charlie appeared around the end of the row, clipboard in hand.

"Nothing I can't handle, thank you," she replied. "Now are you going to clean up this mess or not?" Jack came out of his office to investigate the commotion.

"Pam, Harold, I'll see you both in my office. Everyone else get back to work." After a few minutes behind closed doors, the two drivers returned to their machines and together they restacked the jumbled load. Neither one looked very happy, but they finished the day without further incident.

Every day at lunch time all work ceased as soon as the catering truck appeared around the corner and parked at the rear of the plant. The driver opened the big flaps on the side of the truck, and climbed inside the back to put on his blotched white apron and cap. A short, stocky, white-haired man with a serious case of motor mouth, he regaled his customers with all manner of jokes and stories while he fried eggs and hamburgers and dished up steaming bowls of hot soup. Even some workers who brought their own lunches hung around the truck just to listen to Gus' tall tales.

Naturally, Harold the grouch didn't enjoy either the jokes or the cooking. It was his considered opinion that Gus was charging high prices for bad food, and "something ought to be done about it". Anyone else would have simply brought his own lunch from home, but Harold would never pass up such an obvious opportunity for complaining. Hardly a day went by without at least a few heated words between him and the long-suffering short-order cook.

Now with the weather turning warm, Charlie had taken to eating his lunch on the loading dock near the rear entrance. Here he could take advantage of the sunshine and keep an eye on the action at the same time. The kittens and I always sat beside him on the warm concrete, waiting patiently for the handouts that never failed.

"Hungry, Tuffy,?" he asked, teasing me with a bit of ham. He thought it great fun to make me stand on my hind legs and beg for my special tidbits. I wouldn't do it for just any old snack, but after all, ham was my absolute favorite. It was two days after the forklift incident, and as usual, Pam was one of the first in line at the catering truck. She almost

always ordered a fish sandwich and a tossed salad, but on this particular day she decided to have something different, "just for a change". However, she wasn't quite sure exactly what she did want.

"What's good today , Gus, old buddy?" she asked.

"Are you kidding, sweet thing? Everything on my menu is strictly first rate. Tell you what, though, I got a BLT that angels would die for, and my homemade split pea soup is positively world famous."

"Famous or infamous?" Pam teased.

"Darlin', you're breaking my heart! Do you know I lie awake every night just dreaming about my fish sandwiches in your delicate little hands, and this is my reward? Oh, the pain of it all!"

"Hurry it up, will ya!" Harold barked from behind her. "I haven't got all day, ya know."

"Keep your shirt on," was Pam's retort. "Are you in that much of a hurry to get your daily dose of food poisoning?"

"Yeah, well if you're so fond of his cooking, how come it takes you forever to make up your mind? Typical female, right, guys?" The bickering quickly degenerated into a one-sided shoving match between little Pam and the big, burly Harold. Gus hopped out of the back of the truck and tried to separate the two, but Harold gave him a push that sent him sprawling.

By this time the rest of the warehouse crew had gathered in the parking lot to see what the ruckus was all about. Charlie had been quietly watching the proceedings from his perch on the loading dock, but that last act of brutality was just too much for him to take sitting down. He tossed aside his lunch and plunged into the battle. Charlie was not a big man, but he was strong and quick, and he got in several good punches before Jack Thomas arrived on the scene.

"Bradley! Fraser! That's enough!" The two gladiators staggered apart, fists still clenched, glaring daggers at one another. Harold wiped a smear of blood from his lip. "Now what's this all about?"

"It's my fault, sir," Pam began, but Gus interrupted.

"It wasn't her fault, it was that jerk, Harold. He couldn't wait half a minute for her to order her lunch."

"Half a minute! Don't you mean half an hour? That little twit was takin' forever to make up her mind"

"Well, at least I have one," Pam snorted. "That's more than I can say for you"

"I said, that's enough. I won't have fist fights in my parking lot, I don't care who started it. I'm going to get to the bottom of this right here and now." Jack isolated the combatants and spoke to each in turn. Then he escorted Harold into his office and lunch service resumed. Ten minutes later Harold stormed out of the office and jumped into his pick-up, slamming the door so hard the whole truck rocked.

"You'll pay for this, you scheming little witch!" he hollered out the window as he roared out of the lot. Everyone finished lunch and returned to work, but there wasn't much conversation for the rest of the day. After the workers had left for the night, Jack turned out the lights and locked the doors. I heard him call "Good night, Joe," to the watchman and then his car drove away, leaving only silence behind.

Nights were long and dark in the deserted warehouse. After making the rounds to be sure no stray mice had sneaked in from the field outside, I settled in with Midnight and Snowdrop for a good long snooze. Some time later I woke to the sound of someone trying to pry open the window in Jack's office below. Then came the voices of two men arguing and several blows were struck. I crept silently down the stairs to investigate,

leaving my little ones sound asleep in the nest.

A shadowy figure emerged from the office and disappeared down the aisle toward the far end of the building. I couldn't be sure, but in the dim light it looked like Harold. I followed at a respectful distance and soon found myself in the back of the building where the two forklifts were parked for the night.

Harold climbed into the seat of the one nearest the wall, started the engine, and raised the lift to its highest position. A few feet away an assortment of tools were scattered on a long, low workbench. Harold selected a large wrench and a lamp with a hook on top and carried them back to the forklift. After hanging the lighted lamp on a crossbar, he squatted down with the wrench and began to loosen some bolts on the front of the machine.

I was so intent on watching Harold that I hadn't even noticed Midnight slipping in behind me. He must have thought the man was playing some new kind of game, and he invited himself to join in the fun. Double-bounding across the floor, he pounced on the end of the wrench just as Harold was pulling it down. Harold swore and dropped the wrench. He seized poor little Midnight by the throat, squeezing the life out of the small, struggling body.

Instantly I was on top of him, sinking my teeth into his cruel hand and ripping at his brawny arm with all my claws. He snarled another oath and grabbed at me with his free hand. Somehow in shifting his position he lost his footing and fell hard against the forklift. There was a grating sound as the front section of the machine gave way and fell toward us.

I leaped wildly, barely clearing the falling steel. Harold tried to scramble out of the way as well, but the heavy framework struck him on the head and shoulder, pinning him to the unyielding concrete. He lay groaning under the weight, his right hand still clutching my precious baby. Then the hand relaxed and Midnight fell to the floor. I nudged him with my nose, but there was no response. No sound came from the small, still form. I picked him up gently and carried him back toward the stairs.

Near the office door I met Joe coming in my direction. I laid Midnight at his feet and meowed up to him, hoping perhaps he could somehow help my little one. As he knelt to touch the lifeless body, I caught sight of his skinned knuckles and the dried blood on his forehead. I nuzzled his hand and he stroked my head. Then he straightened up and walked cautiously toward the flickering light in the back.

I carried poor Midnight up the stairs and laid him in the nest. Gently I washed from head to tail, just as I had the day he was born, but I knew this time it was useless. From the office below I could hear Joe making phone calls. Soon all the lights were turned on and the warehouse came alive with the sounds of people coming and going. Sirens blared, and flashing red and blue lights illuminated the parking lot.

I didn't go downstairs anymore that night. I really didn't care what they did down there. My baby was dead. That was all I cared about. All those people would just have to deal with their problems without any help from me. Morning came and the workers arrived for the regular shift. I could hear excited voices all over the warehouse as they discussed the events of the preceding night. Then I heard Charlie's footsteps on the wooden stairs. He walked the length of the platform and knelt down next to where Midnight lay so small and quiet. I meowed to him as he stroked the black softness of his fur.

"Poor Midnight," he murmured. "Poor Tuffy." I rubbed my head against

his hand and he petted me for a few moments. Then he disappeared downstairs, returning presently with a small cardboard box. Pam was with him, carrying an old blue T-shirt. Together they wrapped my little one in the shirt and laid him gently in the box. After securing the lid with a piece of string, they carried the box down the stairs and out the back door where a shovel waited. Confused and upset, I followed close behind, meowing all the way. Once I got tangled up in Pam's feet and she almost fell.

"Poor Tuffy," she sympathized. "You just don't understand, do you?" She picked me up and carried me across the pavement and out into the field. Charlie dug a deep hole and put the little box at the bottom.

"Do you want to say something?" he asked.

"I don't know," she whispered. "Just 'Goodbye, Midnight, and we'll miss you'. That's about all."

"Goodbye, Midnight," Charlie said. Then he gently filled the hole with dirt and patted it down with the shovel. Pam placed a few wildflowers on the little mound and shed a few tears into my coat. They carried me back to the loft where Snowdrop was totally consumed with the important task of pulling a long strip of tape off a box of bolts. Just as we arrived the box crashed to the floor and bolts went everywhere.

After my two friends had collected all the strays and restored them to their proper place, Pam tore the tape from the box and gave it to Snowdrop in order to avoid a repeat performance. Then they returned to their work downstairs and I gave Snowdrop a bath.

Charlie didn't eat his lunch alone that day. Pam brought her fish sandwich and salad and sat next to him on the loading dock. They sat there talking quietly to one another, until lunchtime was over.

After lunch, Jack sent Charlie to the back of the warehouse to assist Pam and a mechanic named Willie in repairing the broken forklift. With the help of pulleys and chains and a strong hook fastened to one of the rafters, they soon had the fallen section upright and positioned in front of the main body of the machine. Charlie and Willie held it steady while Pam screwed all the bolts in good and tight. Having assured herself that the gears were lined up right and none of the teeth were broken, she climbed on board and started the engine. The men stood clear while Pam raised the lift to its highest point and then lowered it back to the floor.

"Seems to be in pretty good shape, considering," she commented, "but that drive chain needs to be tightened up a bit. After making the necessary adjustments she tested it again and pronounced it ready for service. Jack came out of the office to see how the work was progressing.

"Ever run one of these things?" he asked Charlie.

"No sir, but I could learn," was the quick reply.

"Good," said Jack. "It may be a couple of weeks before I can hire a replacement for Mr. Fraser, and we have over a dozen shipments to go out today alone." He winked at Pam. "I'm sure Miss Davis won't mind taking a little time to show you the ropes."

"Not at all," she beamed. "My pleasure." So Charlie became a forklift operator. Jack did eventually hire a new man, but he took over Charlie's old job as stock clerk instead. A quiet young man, but friendly, he was a definite improvement over Harold the grouch.

Chapter 5

Young Love

Charlie and Pam became very close friends over the next several weeks. They took their lunch and coffee breaks together every day, and often left together after work. Several times I saw them holding hands when no one else was around.

Pam had never paid much attention to me or my kittens before, but now that the two of them were sharing their lunches, she always made sure she had an extra tidbit or two for Snowdrop and me. She was a great lover of fish, especially salmon, and I'd never tasted fish before. The first time she sat next to me with one of Gus' sandwiches I got so excited I almost snatched it right out of her hands.

"Hold on there, Tuffy! Wait a second!" she laughed. She held the sandwich out of my reach and broke off a small piece of fish. She placed the savory morsel on the concrete beside me and I wolfed it down almost before she could take her hand away. "Good grief, Tuffy, don't take my fingers off!" She broke off another piece and then another. By the time the sandwich was finished, I'd eaten almost half the fish myself. I let her have all the bun, though. "That's quite a fish lover you've got there," she commented. "Maybe we could take her up to the lake with us this weekend."

I don't know." Charlie sounded skeptical. "I'll have to think about that one." He offered Snowdrop a bite of his cheeseburger. Snowdrop sniffed at it suspiciously and patted it a couple of times with his paw to make sure it was quite dead. He worried it and rolled it around, and then, when it was thoroughly coated with dirt and grime from the loading dock, he finally condescended to eat it. Pam reached over and lifted him into her lap.

"You're just about the silliest cat I've ever seen," she informed him.

The following weekend Snowdrop and I found ourselves in a cage in the back seat of Pam's old green sedan, being transported up a winding mountain road. Charlie and Pam sat close together in the front seat, eagerly discussing their plans for the day ahead, while we in the back seat craned our necks trying to absorb all the exciting new sights and smells that assailed us through the open windows. There were more trees, and bigger trees than I'd ever seen before in my life, and the cool, crisp mountain air was fresh and invigorating.

Upon our arrival at the lake, Pam and Charlie transferred our cage and what seemed like an enormous amount of equipment from the car to a small rented skiff. They climbed in and Charlie pushed away from the dock. The battered wooden oars splashed rhythmically as Charlie pulled hard on the long, smooth handles, and the rusted oarlocks squeaked in protest. Pam sat in the stern holding the tiller and pretending not to watch the muscles rippling in his arms and shoulders. She didn't fool me, though. I'd seen THAT look before.

Once we were well out in the lake, Pam reached down and unfastened the latch on the cage door. I stepped out cautiously onto the scarred wooden planking, adjusting my movements to the rocking motion of the boat. Snowdrop followed without enthusiasm and promptly took refuge under Pam's feet. I don't think he felt very good.

I checked out the bottom of the boat and sniffed around the tackle box and fishing rods stored in the bow. I peeked over the side at the cold,

dark water of the lake as we glided across its ruffled surface. Not very inviting at all. Water is fine for drinking, but I'd just as soon not go swimming in it, thank you very much. Charlie stopped rowing and pulled the oars across his lap.

"This looks like a good spot," he speculated. He climbed across the seat to the bow and dropped the anchor line, while Pam looped a cord over the tiller. She opened the lid of the tackle box, and each of them picked up a fishing pole. They chose their bait and cast their lines and set about fishing in earnest. As much as they had talked on the drive up the mountain, they were almost totally silent now. The only sound was the gentle lapping of the wavelets against the side of the boat, the intermittent splashings of playful frogs, and an occasional frustrated sigh from Pam as once again her bait was stolen by a wily trout.

A brilliant blue dragonfly hovered over Charlie's shoulder for a moment, then vanished, and somewhere on the far shore a lone loon called to its mate. Apparently this fishing business consisted primarily of sitting and staring at the seemingly empty water, while insolent bass played hopscotch on the surface just out of reach. I curled up on the canvass covered cushion on the middle seat and prepared for a long, leisurely day of soaking up sunshine. Suddenly the quiet was shattered by a yelp from Charlie.

"I got one!" he hollered. "I got one!" He jerked on his pole and started reeling in the line. A moment later there was a great deal of splashing and something whacked against the side of the boat. I roused myself to investigate, but before I could even begin a proper stretch, Charlie reached over the gunwale and hauled up a flopping, jerking, silver-colored fish and proudly held it aloft. I sprang aside as a shower of lake-water dampened my back. "How about that!" he crowed. "Is that a beauty or what?"

"It's a beauty, all right," Pam agreed. It WAS a good-looking fish, I suppose, as fish go, and Charlie was obviously thrilled with his catch. He worked the hook out of its jaw and laid it across the seat. It was hard to make an accurate judgement, the way it kept flopping around, but I'd guess it was nearly as long as Snowdrop, without his tail.

Now this fish was still very much alive, possibly dangerous, and since no one else seemed to be doing anything to restrain it, I decided it was up to me to deal with it. I smacked it hard with my paw, but it only flopped and twitched all the more. I seized its tail in my jaws to drag it away, but it jerked around so much I lost my footing on the wet planking and the fish slithered away.

"That's okay, Tuffy," Pam laughed. "I'll take care of it." She raised the lid of the large chest beside her and dropped the wriggling creature onto the bed of crushed ice inside. Then she snapped the lid shut, baited her hook for the umpteenth time, and cast her line again.

Finally it was lunch time, and the poles were temporarily laid aside. Charlie brought out peanut butter sandwiches and coleslaw and a big Thermos of cold, sweet milk. He poured a bowl of the milk for Snowdrop and me, and set it on the still-damp planking. Snowdrop was feeling a bit better by then, but he still didn't have much of an appetite. I did, though. Everyone got cantaloupe for dessert, a new treat for me. A full belly, a warm sun, and a rock-a-bye boat brought on another nap attack, and once more I dozed off on my cozy cushion. Again I was awakened by a yell, this time from Pam.

"I got a bite! Charlie, look!" Her pole was bent almost to the water, and her line was stretched to the breaking point. "Holy Moly!" Charlie

scrambled to her side and steadied her grip. "Take it easy! Don't jerk the line. Easy now, easy." Something out there splashed twice and disappeared. Instructions came fast and furious now. "Give him some slack. Let him run Okay, now tighten the drag Pull up! Pull up!"

The huge fish leaped and danced on the end of the line as if it knew its very life depended on the effort. "Okay, reel him in No, let him go! Let him go!" Obviously, this was a very complicated operation. I made my way to the side of the wildly rocking boat and planted my forepaws on the railing. I wasn't going to miss a moment of this battle! "Okay, bring him in now, careful! Easy, now, easy."

Pam's face and arms glistened with perspiration, and her short dark curls were plastered tight against her head. The fish was nearly to the boat now, and was it ever a monster! It looked almost big enough to have ME for lunch! It wasn't jumping anymore, but it was still far from beaten. Charlie reached into the boat for the gaff, but as he turned back to snare the struggling bass, his elbow caught me on the shoulder and I went overboard!

The shock of the icy water took my breath away, and I fought to regain the surface. I gasped for air and started paddling for all I was worth.

I wasn't sure if I was headed in the right direction or not, but in any case I didn't get very far before a strong hand scooped me out of the waves. I clung mightily to that hand as it swept me back to the boat and safety. Charlie squeezed the excess water from my fur with his free hand and laid me across his lap. Pam quickly wrapped me in a warm sweater and cradled me in her arms.

"Poor Tuffy," she kept saying. "Poor Tuffy. Poor wet pussycat." Charlie pulled in the anchor and rowed back to the dock, where the rental agent gave them an old towel and a disgusted look.

"Cain't see takin' a cat on board a boat anyways," he grumbled. "Anyone knows cats an' water don't mix."

"Looks like you're right about that," Pam admitted. "Can we buy this towel from you? I don't want her to get chilled on the drive home."

"G'wan, take it. It's plumb wore out anyways," he growled. Then he added, a bit more kindly, "Sorry you lost that bass, ma'am. Ol' Thunder, he's a real fighter. Been tryin' to catch 'im m'self for years. Hooked 'im a couple o'times, too, but he always gets away."

"Thanks," said Pam. "Somehow I have a feeling that one's going to die of old age."

"Could be," the man allowed. "Could be. You want some peroxide for those scratches?"

"I guess so." Charlie waited while the man dabbed some foaming liquid on his wrist. As we made our way back to the car I thought I heard him mumbling something about "city folk", and "cats", and "ol' Thunder".

As summer passed into fall and fall became winter, Snowdrop continued to grow both in size and boldness. I had shown him my secret entrance to the warehouse and taught him to hunt mice and grasshoppers in the field next door, but he was always more interested in exploring than in hunting. I still thought of him as my little baby and couldn't help worrying whenever he wandered too far or stayed away too long.

The grass and weeds, dry and brown from the summer's heat, looked even more bedraggled now as they were beaten down by the relentless rains. The mice retreated into their underground burrows to live off their winter stores of seeds and grains. The crickets and beetles had pretty much disappeared. Only the occasional moth remained, flitting jerkily above the

wilting blades of grass before winging to its death in the lone spotlight above the warehouse door.

Snowdrop traveled farther and farther afield in his nonstop search for adventure. Even the drenching winter rains didn't hinder his endless wanderings. Always he came home grubby and dirty, and naturally it was my job as mother to help clean him up again. I could always tell where he'd been by the odors on his fur.

He was becoming more aggressive in his behavior as well. Once or twice at lunch time he tried to take a bite of fish away from me, and I was obliged to give him a couple of swats on the nose just to remind him who was the mother and who was the kitten. Even though he was nearly as big as I was, he still had a lot to learn about proper cat behavior.

As the nights grew longer and colder, a feeling of anticipation began to build among the warehouse workers. Pam and Charlie brought several lengths of red and gold tinsel rope and draped it over and around the railing of my loft. There were wreaths over the doors and paper ornaments hung in odd places all over the building.

A small tree stood in Jack's office, decorated with an outrageous assortment of brightly colored ornaments, but there was something else unusual about this particular tree. It didn't smell like any tree I'd ever come across before, and when I chewed one of its branches it didn't taste much like a tree, either. Still, it WAS green, and it WAS tree-shaped, and everyone seemed to like it.

The last day before the Christmas holiday there was a party at the warehouse. There were cookies and punch in Jack's office, and presents under the tree for each and every member of the crew, even Joe. Somebody brought a portable stereo and everybody danced and sang until the music was all used up. Not finding Charlie or Pam among the group gathered around the office, I went in search of them in other parts of the building.

Once away from the center of activity, the main part of the plant seemed hushed and abandoned, almost lonely. I finally found my two friends at the far end of the building, sharing the seat of Pam's forklift. There wasn't really room for two people there, but somehow they managed it, and didn't seem to mind at all being crowded. They were conversing in hushed voices about something apparently of the greatest importance. As I approached, Charlie pulled a little, black velvet box out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Pam. She hesitated a moment before opening the lid. Then she buried her face in Charlie's neck.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

"It's kind of small," Charlie said regretfully.

"It's beautiful!" Pam retorted. "Don't you dare apologize!" Charlie smiled bashfully. He took a tiny, sparkling ring out of the box and slipped it onto Pam's finger. It seemed a trifle loose, but from the way she acted, I guess it didn't matter much. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him the way Sam and Beth used to kiss such a long time ago. I decided as long as they were in the mood, I could use a little of that, myself. Before they realized I was even there, I was up on their laps and crowding between them, purring with all my might.

"Well, look who's here!" laughed Charlie. "Tuffy, my girl, are you going to be maid-of-honor at our wedding, or were you planing to give the bride away?"

"She'll be the flower girl, of course," countered Pam, "and Snowdrop can be your best man." She kissed the top of my head, and both of them petted me most generously.

"Ahem."

The young lovers started in surprise, dumping me onto the floor. Completely wrapped up in each other, they had quite forgotten there was anyone else around. Now Jack stood at the end of the aisle, one hand resting against a stack of boxes, and a knowing grin on his face.

"You two planning to stay here all night?"

"Why, what time is it?" Pam inquired, blushing.

"Almost a quarter past six." was the reply. "Everyone else is long gone. I was getting ready to lock up, and it occurred to me that I hadn't seen the two of you for quite some time." He was looking now at Pam's left hand. She followed the line of his gaze and blushed again.

"We're getting married," Charlie explained needlessly.

"No kidding," Jack responded. "Congratulations. Now will you kindly get out of here so I can go home? I have a family too, you know."

"Sure thing, sorry." and Charlie and Pam disappeared up the aisle. Jack turned in my direction.

"Merry Christmas, Tuffy." He winked at me, and then he too was gone. I made my way back to the stairs and was surprised to find an oversized bowl of dry cat food beside my water dish. Snowdrop was sniffing cautiously at the edge of the bowl, not sure whether to eat it, play with it, or run for his life. It was his first encounter with that particular form of nourishment, and he didn't know quite what to make of it. I knew what to do, though, and I certainly didn't hesitate to fill my belly! Eventually Snowdrop tried a few pieces too, but I don't think he was ever really convinced that that was food.

It was more than a week before the workers returned to the warehouse. I was making my morning rounds checking for mice when Pam and Charlie walked through the door. I trotted over and rubbed against Charlie's legs, purring "welcome home".

"Hey, how's my girl? How's the little mother?" Charlie cuddled me against his chest and Pam scratched between my shoulder blades.

"Where's Snowdrop?" she wondered aloud. "I don't see him around."

"Out wandering the neighborhood, I suppose," Charlie guessed. "You know how young boys are."

"I guess so. I hope they had enough to eat while we were gone."

I stuck with Charlie as much as I could that morning, even riding on his forklift for a while. That didn't work out too well, though. Too many sudden stops and turns. Eventually I gave up and took refuge in Jack's office. At lunch time I rejoined my two friends on the stairway. I had found that by stretching myself across both their laps I could be sure of getting at least one end of me petted almost all the time.

"I haven't seen Snowdrop at all today, have you?" Pam asked.

"No, as a matter of fact, I haven't."

Charlie leaned over and took a bite of her egg salad sandwich. "Of course you have to remember he is getting older now, and he's bound to wander off sometimes."

"Tuffy doesn't," Pam pouted. "She stays home."

"Yes, but Snowdrops's a male, and that does make a difference." Pam gave him a sideways look.

"Does that apply to human males as well?" Charlie laughed. "Maybe to some. Not to this one." Jack joined the little group on the steps, carrying a big mug of coffee in one hand and a fat ham sandwich in the other. Instantly I perked up. Ham was one of my all-time favorites. He set his foot on the bottom step and leaned against the railing.

"You two set a date yet?" he asked. I sat bolt upright on Pam's lap, zeroing in on the delicious aroma of the ham.

"Not exactly," was Pam's reply. "Probably sometime in April or May." By this time I was standing on the railing, meowing and rubbing against Jack's arm, the one that held that wonderful sandwich. Pam stifled a laugh. Jack took another bite and washed it down with a swig of coffee. He didn't seem to understand what I wanted, so I reached out with one forepaw and pulled his hand over to me.

"What's this, Minnie the Moocher?" Jack was amazed by my boldness.

"No, that's Tuffy the Moocher," Charlie laughed. "She wants some of your ham."

"Well, I never!" Jack exclaimed. He set his coffee mug on the stairs and tore off a small piece of ham. I wolfed it down in two bites and asked for more. He shook his head. "Forget it, kid. My wife made me this sandwich with her own loving hands, and I'm going to eat it all by myself. You go catch a mouse or something. Why do you think I let you hang around this place, anyway?" Charlie and Pam both laughed as Jack shifted the sandwich to his other hand and stooped to pick up his coffee. He was suddenly serious. "I hope you two can keep your minds on your work until April. I'd hate to see anyone get hurt just because someone wasn't paying attention."

Eventually winter slackened its grip and signs of spring began to show here and there. Tiny shoots of new grass popped up in the field next door, and everywhere birds gathered old grass and small twigs and bits of string to make their nests. I hardly ever saw Snowdrop anymore. He dropped by every so often for a quick snack and a motherly washing and then he was off again, pursuing his own adventures.

The young lovers at the warehouse spent virtually all their spare time making plans for their future together. Would they have a church wedding or a civil ceremony? Who should be invited? Where was the best neighborhood to look for an apartment? How much and what kind of furniture would they be needing? Should they keep both cars or sell the oldest one? Or how about selling both and get one really good one? So much had to be decided before the big day. I sat on Pam's lap while Charlie read from the want ads.

"Here's one on White Oak Avenue. It says 'spacious one-bedroom, one bath, custom carpets and drapes, pool, near bus and shops.'"

Pam looked up from stroking my head. "I really think we should be looking for a two-bedroom," she said. "I don't want to have to move again right away when we decide to start our family."

"Yeah, I s'pose you're right," Charlie agreed. "Better find one that takes cats, too." He winked at me and went back to his reading. Feeling rather bored, I climbed down from Pam's lap and wandered into Jack's office, looking for any sort of diversion.

Jack's chair was pushed back against the wall and his feet were propped up on the big wooden desk. One hand turned the pages of a well-thumbed paperback, while the other held the ever-present coffee mug. The clutter on his desk was dominated by a large, leafy green plant in a white ceramic pot, a Christmas gift from the employees. Strolling across stacks of orders and invoices, I made a circuit of the plant. I taste-tested one of the leaves, but it didn't seem very edible, so I satisfied myself with rubbing my cheek against the pot to leave a scent-marker. Jack looked up from his novel.

"Looking for something in particular, or just trouble in general?" As if he really expected an answer. I walked over and inspected the book. Apparently very popular, it had been read by at least three people besides Jack. "Do you read mysteries, too, or are you strictly into romance?" He

set his mug on the desk and hoisted me onto his lap. A trace of cologne lingered about his person, no doubt another Christmas present. His lap was warm and comfortable, and the insistent buzzing of a fat fly at the window soon lulled me to sleep.

Sometime later I was awakened by the sound of angry voices entering the office. Evidently a problem had developed on the dock between the loading crew and one of the truck drivers, and Jack was being called upon to settle the dispute. He set aside the sheaf of papers he'd been sorting, dumped me onto the still-warm chair, and strode outside. I followed at a more dignified pace.

Outside it was a fine spring day, the kind of day that calls for long naps and basking in the sun. A herd of puffy white clouds drifted lazily across a gorgeous blue sky, and a warm breeze stirred the new grass in the field. I stretched out full length on the dock and turned my belly to the warming sun. It felt so good after the long winter's confinement, and before I knew it, I was asleep again. When I finally roused myself the sun had settled almost to the hilltops and my warm spring breeze had turned distinctly chilly. I stretched and yawned and stretched again.

The disputed truck was still parked at the dock, its rear doors wide open, its cargo half-loaded. No one was in sight anywhere. Now and then the sound of voices drifted out from inside the warehouse, but no one appeared to take charge of the van or its contents. I sauntered over to inspect the stack of cartons waiting by the open door of the truck. Nothing unusual there that I could see. I walked around and hopped across the narrow gap between the dock and the truck bed. Inside it was about half full of various sized cartons stacked nearly to the ceiling. I sniffed around the edge of the boxes, checking for familiar and unfamiliar smells. The first row was only partially completed, making a sort of uneven staircase for a curious cat like me to climb to the top level. There was just space enough on top for me to walk upright, and I tiptoed cautiously across the upper layer of boxes, making sure of each step before I put my weight on it and moved forward. From time to time I crouched low, my belly fur touching the cardboard beneath me, ready to bolt at the first sign of danger. Nothing was moving anywhere. The air was stifling in the confined space, and I was turning to make my way back down when I heard voices again.

"You'll have to take that up with my boss," the driver was saying. "I've got a long drive ahead of me, and I'm already two hours behind schedule." Then, before I could dash back down my cardboard stairway, the two big doors banged shut, the bolt was thrown, and I was trapped! I heard the cab door slam and the powerful engine roared to life. I scratched at the door and meowed, but no one heard me. The truck was moving and I was a prisoner inside. I flung myself against the doors and howled, but all I could hear was the rumble of the engine and the echo of my own cries.

The vehicle swayed and jolted as it left the parking lot and onto the street. I could feel the fear growing inside me. It was dark in that closed-up box, as dark as any night I'd ever known. Even my sensitive eyes could detect only the slightest glimmer of light. Squeaks and rattles from the truck bed mingled with the roar of the engine and the whine of the axles underneath. Once in a while I could hear something of the surrounding traffic as well; the honking of horns, the squealing of brakes, the sound of a hundred vehicles all trying to be in the same place at the same time.

I fought down my panic and made my way to a corner where I could at least brace myself against the bouncing and jolting of the heavily loaded

truck. All I could do now was wait. Wherever it was going I was going with it, and every mile that it traveled took me another mile further from home.

Chapter 6

Lost!

The miles rolled on and the minutes stretched into hours. It was hot and stuffy in that closed-in truck and I was getting thirstier by the minute. Hungry, too. I hadn't eaten anything since that morning except for that little bite of Jack's ham sandwich, and even that was hours ago. I stretched out in my little corner and panted, trying to keep cool. The motion of the truck had changed somewhat. We weren't stopping and starting all the time, for one thing, and there was a lot less swaying and jolting. I couldn't tell how fast we were going, but I didn't really care about that. I just wanted it to be over. I just wanted out.

After a time I began to feel a little cooler. The floor I lay on was still warm, but the walls next to me had cooled down a bit. It must be dark outside by now. The truck slowed and turned and then came to a halt. An instant later I heard the cab door slam. At last the journey was over. Another moment and I'd be free. I stretched the kinks out of my aching muscles and waited for the rear doors to open. Nothing happened. I scratched at the door and meowed, but my voice came out so small and faint. What could be taking so long? Why didn't someone come and let me out?

A while later the cab door opened and closed again and once more we were under way. Apparently we weren't home yet after all. The driver must have just stopped for dinner before continuing his trip. But what about MY dinner? Didn't anyone care about me? My empty belly gnawed at me and my throat ached from the dryness. I lay back down in my corner, tired and discouraged. Eventually I drifted off into a deep and troubled sleep, lulled by the gentle vibration of my hard and lonely bed.

Hours passed. Days, maybe, I wasn't sure. There was no day or night in my prison, only the gradual warming and cooling of the stifling air inside. I gave up crying. I gave up scratching. I'd almost given up completely when once more I was aroused by the changing motion of the vehicle. We seemed to be on city streets again, but there was a lot less traffic noise than before. I tried to stand, but my legs folded under me. The long fast had left me weak and unsteady.

The truck swayed again and jolted to a stop. I heard the gears grinding as we shifted into reverse. The brakes whined again and the engine died away. Surely the long ordeal was over and we were safely back at the warehouse. I hoped Charlie had a good breakfast ready for me. I was starved.

The steel bolts clanked in their brackets and the double doors swung wide. The bright sunlight almost blinded me after all those hours of darkness, but I staggered to my feet and tottered toward the opening. It felt so good to be home again! But who were all these strangers? Eagerly I searched the growing crowd for Charlie's face, or for that matter, any familiar face. A wave of voices swept over me.

"Hey, Jocko," one of them hollered. "Got yourself a mascot?"

"Taking on passengers now?" another called out.

"No way, man," the driver responded. "He musta climbed in when I loaded up in L.A. Outta the way, cat." And he shoved me roughly with his boot. I stumbled onto the loading dock, confused and frightened. Something was very wrong here. Where were Charlie and Pam? Where were all my friends? I cast about for someone or something I recognized, anything to help me get my bearings. Slowly the awful truth began to sink into my poor befuddled brain. I wasn't home at all! This wasn't my warehouse, and all these people were total strangers. I was lost again!

The driver had disappeared and the crowd was thinning out. The excitement had faded and it was high time they got back to work. No time to waste on a stray cat. My hunger hadn't faded, though. It was sharper than ever, and demanded immediate attention. I meowed to the man nearest me, but he walked away without even looking down. Only three men remained on the dock, and they were much too busy unloading the cargo to be bothered with my problems.

Feeling very much abandoned, I made my way unsteadily around the corner of the building. There had to be someone in this town who was willing to give a girl a helping hand. I was encouraged to find a puddle of rainwater in a depression in the pavement, and I eagerly drank my fill. It wasn't as clean as I would have liked, but it was cool and wet, and under the circumstances I couldn't afford to be choosy.

Somewhat refreshed but still enormously hungry, I followed my nose across the street to a little red-roofed diner from whose open door the most appetizing odors drifted out, a tempting trap to ensnare the hungry passer-by. I scratched at the screen door and meowed to be let in. My inquiry was answered by a short, cheerful, rosy-cheeked woman in a white uniform, a red apron tied around her ample waist, and an equally red cap perched precariously in a nest of grey curls. Even with the screen door between us, her gentle eyes and dimpling smile told me I'd come to the right place.

"Well, well, looky heah." She opened the door cat-wide and I slipped through. "Papa, we got us a customah." I smelled bacon and eggs and melting cheese, and my hopes rose as I trotted beside her through the dining area. It was a small diner by anyone's standards, just five red-cushioned stools along a short counter on the left, one of them occupied by my truck-driver, and three square tables next to the windows with eight or nine chairs neatly positioned around them.

The gold-flecked linoleum floor fairly shone from scrubbing, and the crisp red tablecloths matched the curtains which were pulled back to gain the full benefit of the morning sun. At the end of the counter was a free-swinging gate through which a person could walk with both hands full, and it was here that I was instructed to wait while my matronly angel went behind to see what she could scrape together.

"Fuh Pete's sake, Blanche, what's thayat? I thoucha sayed we had a customah!" This protest came from the big white-haired man who had just appeared through a door behind the counter. His once-white apron was stained with mustard and gravy, and his red face glistened with sweat, even though it was still quite cool outside.

"She IS a customah, Papa. She knocked at the doah eveh so polahtly and asked if she maht hev jest a baht ta eat."

"Is thet so? And did she mention jest how she's gonna pay fuh this li'l baht? Hones'ly Blanche, we cain't be feedin' ever stray dawg 'n' cat comes whinin' 'round the doah. We'd be flat busted broke insahd a week."

"While you're at it, ask her how she's gonna pay for the cross-country ride she took in my truck," the driver interjected. "Way I figure it, she

owes me about twelve bucks."

"Jis' this one time, Papa." Blanche ignored the interruption. "It ain't gonna kill ya ta give 'er a few scraps."

"Ya cain't feed a stray jis' once." The cook was getting a little annoyed. "They keep comin' back and comin' back. Once they know yu'll feed 'em, ya cain't never git rid of 'em." Blanche sensed she was losing the argument, so she tried another tack.

"So what were ya goin' ta do with thet messed-up griddle cake and them burnt eggs over theh?"

"Eat 'em mehsself, nacherly."

"Yeah, ya would, too, 'ceptn Doc Howard says yain't sposed ta be havin' eggs ever day, an' ya don't even lahk griddle cakes." Blanche lifted a small red bowl out of the dish rack. "Come on now, tell the truth. Ya don't rahllly want me ta send 'er away hungry, do ya?" Papa shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

"Do whatcha want, Blanche. Ya gener'ly do anyways." Blanche broke the hotcake into bite- size pieces and softened it with a little milk. She scraped the burned parts off the scrambled eggs and piled them on one side of the bowl and set it on the floor under my nose. While I ate she stroked my back and talked to me softly, and when I finished she picked up the empty bowl and placed it on the counter. I walked to the front door and she held it open for me.

"Take cayah, now ya heah?" were her parting words.

"An' don't come back!" shouted Papa from behind the counter. He needn't have worried. I didn't intend to stay. I was headed for home, starting now. But which way was home? The ragged two-lane blacktop was lined with stately magnolia trees that reached out their branches to touch each other, creating a tunnel of shade. Toward the east it quickly curved away and disappeared, but the road to the west seemed to stretch on forever. Something inside me said home lay in that direction, so westward I went.

The countryside in which I now found myself was totally different from the kind of surroundings I had grown up in. It wasn't just the trees, although it certainly did seem strange to see so many trees all together in one place. There was more of everything green here; more bushes, more grass and flowers, more weeds, too, I suppose. Even the very air was different - damp and heavy and pungent with the scent of flowers and the odor of the dead and decaying leaves that covered the ground everywhere.

I trotted along briskly for a time, stopping once to chase a flickering patch of sunlight that somehow managed to penetrate the leafy umbrella high overhead. A bright blue butterfly shimmered among the great white blossoms, gathering the sweet nectar that it needed to live. I pursued it halfheartedly for a few yards before it spiraled upwards out of sight in the column of light.

The cool cushioned earth made for easy traveling, and by noon I had left the town far behind me. I figured at this rate I'd be safely home in no time at all. On and on I went, and still the miles stretched out before me. Nothing looked at all familiar, but I pressed on, convinced I was headed in the right direction. A pair of blue jays screeched at me from the lower branches of a tall pine tree, but I paid them no heed. My mind was fixed on my goal, and I had no time for idle chatter.

The afternoon sun slid down toward the hills, and I started to feel a bit hungry. I slowed my pace to a walk and kept a sharp lookout for signs of life in the forest around me. First to catch my attention was a large grey squirrel poised head downward on the trunk of a young pine about ten feet off the road to my right. Its short legs stretched out at right angles

to its body, and its long padded toes and sharp claws gripped the rough bark while it checked out the area for predators.

I dropped into a low crouch, waiting to see if it had spotted me. Its fluffy brown-fringed tail twitched nervously, but it wasn't looking in my direction. My own tail jerked involuntarily, anticipating a tasty meal. Slowly, silently, I crept forward, keeping my body low and my eyes fixed on my prey. The squirrel turned its head my way and I froze, flattening myself against the carpet of pine needles, ears pinned back flat against my head. The squirrel jerked its tail violently and skittered sideways on the tree trunk. It was time to make my move.

Seizing a moment when its head was turned away, I gathered my feet under me and dashed across the five feet of open space between us. I missed, but not by much. The squirrel spun around and raced up the trunk, out onto a straight, strong limb. I followed stubbornly, ignoring the sharp needle points that pricked the tender pads of my feet. My quarry paused for a brief moment at the tip of the branch, then launched itself into the air. It disappeared into the welcoming foliage of a neighboring tree, leaving the empty limb quivering with the memory of its leap.

Fully intending to follow my vanishing dinner, I took a few more steps toward the end of the branch, only to discover too late the considerable weight difference between a cat and a squirrel. The branch sagged suddenly, and I was dumped unceremoniously onto another limb a couple of feet below. I scrambled for a foothold and lost, falling again, this time all the way to the ground.

They say a cat always lands on its feet, but don't you believe it! We always try, but we don't always succeed. This time I landed squarely on my rump, and did it ever smart! Fortunately it wasn't much of a drop, and nothing was seriously damaged except my pride. Naturally it didn't help matters any to have to listen to the outraged chattering of the squirrel who now considered itself quite safe, and was perched high in the second tree denouncing me to the entire neighborhood. It was plain I wasn't getting my dinner here.

I gave my bruises a few comforting licks and moved on down the road, looking for less troublesome prey. A brown rabbit grazed on the tender new growth of a low-growing redbud - a bit too large for me to take on. About half a mile further on a sharp rustling in the leaves alerted me to the presence of a fat brown mouse looking for seeds or bugs or whatever he could find for his own dinner. Now this was more to my liking. A short stalk, a quick pounce, and I had my evening meal. Not a huge meal, but quite satisfactory just the same.

Gathering darkness signaled the end of a long day. I made myself a bed in the hollow under the upraised root of a large pine tree, and in no time at all I was fast asleep.

Early the next morning my peaceful slumber was shattered by the most horrendous noise, like someone hammering on the tree trunk directly above my head. Tat! Tat-ta-ta-tat! Ta-ta-tat! Tat-ta-tat! I shook myself awake, hauled myself out of my makeshift bed, and craned my neck to see what in the world was going on.

At first I didn't see anything unusual at all. The tree above me seemed quite empty, and the woods all around were just beginning to stir in the misty morning light. A swarm of bees mumbled drowsily in a hollow tree a few yards away, and a white-tailed deer stepped daintily across the edge of the clearing, followed in fits and starts by her wide-eyed, speckled fawn.

I was just beginning to think I had dreamed all that racket when a big

chunk of bark landed directly on my head. I backed off a couple of feet and again searched the high branches for the wise guy with the hammer. All I could see was a smallish black and white bird with red markings on its head clinging to the bark and picking at something under the bark. After devouring the bug, or whatever it was, the bird moved up and to the right a few inches and cocked its head as though listening for something. Apparently not finding what it wanted, it moved a bit farther on and listened again. Then it struck at the bark hard and fast with its beak. Ta-ta-ta-tat! Ta-ta-tat!

So that's where all the noise was coming from! All that commotion from one little bird. How in the world could it pound away like that without giving itself a splitting headache? It certainly was giving me one! The bird cocked its head and listened again. Ta-ta-tat! Ta-ta-ta-tat! Now it pried off a loose chunk of bark and tossed it to the ground. It stabbed at the edge of the opening it had made and came up with another beetle. I could see now it was only getting its breakfast, but what a way to go about it! Well, at least it was getting something. I was reminded of my own empty stomach, and the need to fill it as quickly as possible.

I knew better than to waste my time and energy chasing after things in trees, so I left my feathered alarm clock to its beetles and started on a serious hunt for my own kind of meal. There had to be something in all these wide woods for me to eat. I hadn't gone far when I stumbled on a covey of quail in the undergrowth, and I do mean stumbled. Literally. They were so well camouflaged that I didn't even see them until they were right under my feet, and they scattered so fast that before I could decide which one to go after, they were all gone! I stepped more carefully after that.

Further on I spotted a tiny grey and brown bird pecking at something on the ground. Not much of a meal, but when you're homeless and hungry anything looks good. I crept silently forward, my belly to the ground, until I was within easy striking distance. Seeing my final rush, it flew upward in a desperate escape attempt, but I leaped high into the air and brought it down with my forepaws. It was a mighty small tidbit, but enough to keep me going for one more day, and I was glad to get it.

I'd left the road some time ago and was now deep into the woods, maintaining my westerly course as much as the terrain allowed. The ground under my tired feet felt damper now, almost soggy in spots, and I had to cross a couple of small streams to avoid changing directions. The first one was narrow enough for me to just hop across, but at the second, I had no choice but to get my feet wet. The water wasn't terribly cold, but the pebbles on the bottom were a bit slippery, and I got my belly fur wet.

As I reached the far bank and shook the water from my paws, I detected the scent of some unknown creature hidden under a mound of decaying leaves. I circled cautiously, sniffing at it from all sides. There didn't seem to be any danger, so I reached out and patted it gingerly with one paw. It moved ever so slightly and I leaped back, ready to take flight at the first sign of pursuit.

Nothing happened, so I reached out and tapped it once more, harder this time. The mound moved again and a large green head with bulging yellow eyes reared up to face me. The huge mouth opened just wide enough for me to see the creamy white lining, then snapped shut again. It seemed I had disturbed a fat bullfrog taking its daily snooze after a night spent hunting insects.

Not quite sure how, or for that matter even whether, to attack this strange beast, I decided the best approach was the direct one. I pounced

squarely on top of it. It felt all slithery and squirmy and I hopped back off, still unsure of the wisdom of this venture. The drowsy frog waddled a few feet away, trying to hide himself under the lacy fronds of a nearby fern. However his camouflage was no match for my appetite, and in a few short minutes there was one less frog in that neck of the woods.

I pressed on ever deeper into the unknown wilderness, stubbornly ignoring complaints from my sore feet and aching legs. A light rain began to fall, but still I kept going. It was at least two hours until dark, and I wanted to put as many miles behind me as I possibly could before nightfall. Soon, however, the shower became a downpour, and I was forced to seek shelter in a hollow log.

Several times that night my sleep was disrupted by the strange and fearful bellowing of some unknown wild creature hidden deep in the forest beyond, and the incessant whine of thousands of insects combined with the constant roop-rooping of the frogs made it a long night indeed. I was mighty glad when the sunrise brought the end of the rainstorm, and I was able to move on again.

The dawning of a new day brought further changes in the surrounding landscape. The rolling hills and pine forests were gradually replaced by a marshy cypress grove that dampened my feet with each step I took. Grey-green moss hung in feathery strands from every branch of every tree, and the air teemed with gnats and mosquitos. They landed on my back and buzzed about my head, even crawling into my ears and nose.

I was in constant misery, scratching and sneezing and shaking my head, trying to rid myself of the bothersome pests. Finally I broke into a run, trying desperately to outdistance my tormentors. As long as I kept moving they couldn't settle on me, but I knew I couldn't keep up that pace for long.

Suddenly and without warning the marshy ground gave way to a full-fledged swamp, and I was up to my chin in cold, murky water. By the time I clawed my way through the tangle of reeds and sawgrass back to solid ground I was thoroughly soaked and muddy. I didn't even bother to try and clean myself up, I just wanted to get out of that miserable swamp. I chose my path more carefully now, zig-zagging and backtracking, jumping from a half-rotted log to the upraised "knee" of an ancient cypress tree, and from there to a spongy, moss-covered knoll. Always I searched for the dry ground that would lead me around this seemingly endless marsh that blocked my way. I was being drawn further and further off my course, and still there was no end in sight.

It was beginning to look hopeless. Then slowly the contour of the land changed. The soggy flatness of the land tilted up, and I found myself at the edge of a broad, shallow, slow-moving stream choked with cattails and water lilies. My route to the west was still blocked. Only the nature of the obstacle had changed.

Stopping to rest on a rare patch of bare ground, I took a minute to rest my weary feet. An erratic dragonfly swooped past my left ear and hung in mid-air a foot in front of my nose. Then it zoomed away, coming to rest on a nearby cattail, its lacy wings still vibrating from its flight, its blue green body shimmering in the afternoon sun.

A long-legged heron in mid-stream stabbed its knife-like bill into the quiet water and came up with a very unquiet fish. A quick movement of its head flipped the meal into position and then it was gone, a smooth lump flowing down the long, curving throat of this very efficient fisherman. I suddenly remembered I hadn't eaten yet that day, and my poor empty stomach was complaining loudly.

A black turtle with red markings around the rim of its shell sunned itself on a rock not far away, the ideal opportunity for an easy meal. I stalked it stealthily, but oddly enough, it took no notice of my approach. In fact, it seemed to be totally unconcerned with my presence. I crept up silently and sniffed its hind leg. It didn't move. I gave it a couple of quick, hard swats, testing its defenses. To my amazement, the foot simply disappeared under that hard black shell. A circuit of the animal revealed that indeed, not only had all four legs vanished, but the head and tail as well.

No problem. I'd simply turn it over and go at it from the underside. Hooking my claws under the rim of the shell, I easily flipped it upside-down, expecting to find my dinner waiting. But where had it gone? The golden yellow underbelly now exposed to view was just as hard and impenetrable as the upper shell. A small indentation at each corner hinted at a way in, but all my efforts to open it were in vain. The fortress was secure.

I rocked it back and forth with my paw, but got no response from the creature within. I nosed around underneath looking for a possible access and succeeded only in causing it to slide down the embankment where it lodged against a tuft of grass at the water's edge.

Discouraged, I sat down on the damp earth to ponder my next move. As I gazed forlornly at my elusive dinner, the embattled turtle suddenly sprouted into life. The belly plates popped open at both ends and two feet emerged, followed in quick succession by the head and two more feet. Last of all came the silly, pointed tail. It rocked itself back and forth on the slope until with one supreme effort it managed to hook its claws into the clump of grass, and over it went. Upright once more, it trundled on down through the grass and reeds and disappeared into the stream. Only a slight disturbance of the lily pads on the surface betrayed its progress in the slow-moving water.

Most of the daytime animals were preparing now for sleep, while the night shift was just beginning to rouse itself. A flock of egrets coming in to roost in the high branches on the opposite bank disturbed the whole neighborhood with their cries and calls as they settled in for the night. Their snow-white plumage collected and reflected the parting rays of the setting sun, tinting them pink and golden.

Hopping from branch to branch, they greeted each of their neighbors in turn as they made their way to their oversized nests. The younger birds, not yet fully fledged, set up their own noisy clatter, demanding one last meal from the tired parents.

My own dinner was finally supplied by a pair of spotted frogs foolish enough to make themselves heard before the fast-approaching night could make them invisible. Shelter was harder to find this time, but I made myself at home under the doubled-up knee of an enormous cypress. Again my dreams were accompanied by the unceasing "roop-roop" and "ribid-ribid" of hundreds of lonely frogs, and several times I was awakened by the threatening bellow of the unseen monster somewhere out there in the trackless forest.

Chapter 7

The Poacher

Morning opened its sleepy eyes and unfolded a perfect blue sky with a single white cloud suspended above the eastern hills. Its edges glowed silver and gold as the rising sun ducked behind it, casting a chilly shadow over the landscape.

After my breakfast and bath I continued my journey northward along the course of the stream. I knew I had to find a way across, but I hadn't yet figured out how I was going to manage it. Some stretches were wide and lazy, other spots were narrow and noisy, but never quite narrow enough to risk jumping across. At one point I actually thought I might be able to walk across on a bridge of lily pads. They certainly looked sturdy enough. Unfortunately, my first step forward gained me nothing but a soggy chest and paws.

I finally decided I would have to do the one thing a cat purely hates to do; I would have to swim across. Well, I was half-soaked already, so I might as well take the plunge and get it over with.

A few yards ahead was a promising stretch of water, peaceful-looking and relatively free of the lily pads that now would only hinder my progress. It looked to be about twenty or thirty feet wide, certainly no more, and I was sure I could swim that far easily. I plunged in and started paddling. The water was colder than I'd anticipated and I began to regret my hasty decision. Maybe if I'd gone just a bit farther I might have found an easier crossing.

The farther out I swam, however, the swifter the current became, and I found myself being quickly swept downstream. Several times I got tangled up in patches of weeds and had to fight hard to keep from being pulled under. The icy water had sapped my strength, and I was wondering now if I would make it at all. Downstream a lone snag jutted out of the water, the rotting stump of a long-ago tree. If I could make it that far I could rest a moment and perhaps warm up a bit before completing my swim.

I made it! As I swept past I hooked my claws into the soft wood and held on for dear life. I tried to scramble out of the water, but the climb was too steep and my strength was almost gone. I just clung to the stump and tried to catch my breath amid the swirling waters.

A sleek brown otter left his den in the far bank and swam out to investigate the intruder in his personal domain. He circled the snag a couple of times, chirping his curiosity. Then, apparently satisfied that I was harmless, he proceeded to show off his own swimming skills. He dove and twisted and swam on his back with his forepaws folded across his belly.

He did curliques and loop-the-loops and chased his tail underwater. He was having the time of his life, and why not? He belonged there. I certainly didn't. I couldn't wait to get back on dry land.

Just then a peculiar thing happened. What had appeared to be an old dead log lying on a sandbar not far away suddenly rose up on four stubby legs and plodded to the water's edge. Of course I could see now it wasn't a log at all, but rather some sort of giant lizard, five or six feet long and very fierce looking indeed. The otter's mood changed instantly. He shrieked a warning and dove out of sight, leaving nary a ripple behind him. The super- lizard was still moving toward me and I felt a growing sense of dread.

A second and more desperate attempt to mount the stump was more successful, and I was safely out of harm's way, at least for the moment.

The menacing creature circled the snag, his long, toothy snout and flat back just showing above the water line. An instant later a deafening blast ripped the quiet morning, and the lizard sank thrashing beneath the surface as a dark red stain spread over the churning water.

"Got him, by George!"

Intent on the approaching danger, I hadn't even noticed the boat drifting down toward us on the current. It was a wide, flat-bottomed affair, squared off at both ends, and piloted by a tall, dark-skinned man. He stood in the center of the flimsy craft, guiding it through the maze of rocks, snags, and assorted plant life by means of a long, stout pole held upright in both hands. A long-barreled gun lay at his feet, and several strange basket-like contraptions were piled at one end of the boat.

The man maneuvered his vessel into position near where the giant lizard had disappeared and threw overboard a large rock with a stout rope tied several times around it. Thus securely anchored, he began probing the chilly depths with his pole. Then he reached down with the boat hook, and with a grunt and a heave he hoisted the carcass out of the water, swinging it on board with his free hand.

"That's one 'gator won't be keepin' me up no more with his all-night bellerin'," he muttered to himself. Evidently this monstrous creature was the source of the terrible noises I'd been hearing every night since I'd entered the swamp. The man spread a sheet of heavy plastic on the bottom of the boat and rolled the carcass onto it. With all the jostling and shifting around I half-expected the boat to capsize at any second and pitch them both into the stream, but he seemed to be quite experienced at this sort of thing.

He pulled a wicked-looking knife from a leather sheath on his belt. Its keen-edged blade flashed in the sun as he set about skinning the enormous reptile. His skillful hands made short work of the messy task, but even so he kept looking nervously about as though fearful that someone might interrupt him before he finished. When the job was done, he tossed the naked carcass overboard, and once again it sank into the depths, leaving a second red stain that quickly dissolved.

He rinsed the sheet of plastic and folded it around the rolled-up skin, shoving the whole package under the narrow seat at the front of the boat. He took a long, last look around to reassure himself that he was quite alone, and then turned his attention to me.

"So, cat, you watch what I do, but you don't say nothing. You good cat." The stranger's voice was low and soft as he addressed me. He raised his rock anchor and drifted down almost to the snag before dropping it again. The boat swung at the end of the rope and the back end bumped against my perch.

"Where you come from, eh, cat? What you doin' out here in middle of Miller's Crick? You need exercise, you go for swim, eh?" He laughed at his own joke. "Who you belong to anyway? I don't know nobody in these parts has cat like you." He reached out a gloved hand to lift me from the stump. I drew back instinctively, not quite trusting this furtive stranger. I didn't much like the situation I was in, but I wasn't convinced I'd be any better off with him.

"Easy now, cat. Tony don't going to hurt you. Come on, I take you for ride, I give you dinner, eh? Maybe you like play with my little girl Anna Maria." I didn't seem to have much choice in the matter. If I fought him I'd probably end up back in the icy water again, and I sure didn't want that. I settled in on the other seat and indulged myself in a long, leisurely bath while my new acquaintance pulled up the anchor and poled on

down the stream. Around the next bend he dropped anchor again.

"You want see how I catch the crawdads, eh, cat?" Tony selected one of the basket-like devices from the pile and attached it with a short line to a rod about three feet long. "You see, cat," he explained, "this hole on top here have many long reeds all way 'round, all pointing in. They bend very easy, so. You see?" He thrust his hand into the trap and the reeds parted easily. When he withdrew his hand the reeds came together and closed the hole.

"I put little fish in trap, so." As he spoke, Tony dipped a small fish from the plastic bucket at his feet. "This is bait, see? Now I put trap on bottom where crawdad lives. Crawdad is hungry, yes? He sees fish, goes in to get fish, crawdad is trapped. Is good trick, yes? I catch many crawdad this way. Sell to fish market in town." So saying, he dropped the trap over the side and pushed the rod firmly into the mud on the bottom. After tying a short red ribbon to the top of the stake he raised the rock anchor and together we drifted on down the stream, with Tony using his pole occasionally to direct his craft around a rock or through a mass of water lilies.

He was appropriately dressed for his work in a long-sleeved shirt to protect his arms from biting insects, and a wide-brimmed hat to keep the sun off his face and neck. A faded red neckerchief tied above his collar completed his outfit.

We hadn't gone far before I spotted another red ribbon ahead of us, fluttering at the end of its pole like a captive butterfly. Tony guided the boat close to the flag and dropped anchor. He grasped the stake with both hands and yanked it free of the muddy bottom. Attached to it was another trap just like the ones in the boat, only this one had something in it, something very much alive.

Tony flipped open the flat end of the basket and dumped the trapped thing onto the bottom of the boat. This water-dwelling animal was truly unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It wasn't large, only about four inches long, but a more menacing creature would be hard to imagine. Long and brown and slender, it resembled nothing so much as an armour-plated cigar, with a pair of black beady eyes on its sharply pointed head and a set of small butterfly-type wings on the sides of its tail.

It had four legs on each side of its body, rather like a spider, and a pair of extra long feelers mounted just behind its eyes waved angrily about as if searching for the architect of its imprisonment. But what really got my attention were the two claws. Monstrous things they were, each of them nearly half as large as the creature itself, and highly dangerous-looking, snapping at the air like a hungry pair of iron jaws. It turned in my direction and I quickly tucked my tail under me, wary of those powerful pincers even at a distance. Tony laughed at my precaution.

"You smart cat," he said. "You watch your tail, I watch my fingers, see?" He picked it up gingerly with a gloved hand, holding it firmly just behind those grasping claws. Its tail curled under to touch its belly, and the feelers whipped about more angrily than ever. One of them wrapped itself around his wrist, but he didn't seem to notice. "Is nice fat crawdad, yes?" He thrust his catch into a large wet burlap sack and twisted it shut. He baited the trap and replaced it in the stream. "Now we go find some more, eh?"

He hoisted the makeshift anchor and we were off again, drifting with the current. The next trap yielded two of the crusty creatures, and so did the next. These last two had apparently been fighting in their confined quarters, and one of them was missing a claw. Tony was unperturbed. "You

want fight? Okay, fight. Just don't eat each other," he admonished them. Over the next couple of hours Tony visited dozens of traps, and by the time the sun was half-way up the sky the burlap sack was bulging with crawdads.

"Now we go home, eh, cat?" He tied a cord around the neck of the sack and picked up his pole. Pushing the boat to the bank, he climbed ashore, holding a long rope tied to the front of the craft, and began the long haul upstream. If he'd had fairly easy going on the way down, he more than made up for it on the return trip. The current wasn't terribly swift, but even so he had to struggle for every yard. His shirt was soaked with sweat after only a few minutes, and frequently he had to sit down and rest. Several times the boat got hung up on a hidden rock or snag and he had to push it free with his pole. Lunch consisted of crackers and cheese and a tin of sardines. Tony got the crackers and most of the cheese. I got most of the sardines.

It was almost nightfall when we finally reached a rickety old pier where a battered red pickup truck waited silently in the gathering dusk. It was a worn and weary man who tied his boat to the pilings and boosted the heavy sack containing the day's labor onto the pier. Next up were the rifle and the 'gator skin in its plastic cocoon, and then it was my turn. Tony mounted the short ladder and sat down to rest for a few minutes. He rubbed his aching legs and shoulders while I inspected the dock.

"You tired, cat? I'm tired. I work hard today." He took a deep breath, as though summoning his last reserve of energy. "Now we go get dinner, eh?" He stood up, a bit unsteadily, and hauled the heavy sack to the waiting truck.

"Can I give you a hand with that?" Tony started at the sound of another voice. A man in a tan uniform stood at the front of the vehicle.

"Uh, no thanks, Danny. I got it okay. I not so tired now." Tony heaved the sack into the bed of the truck. "I not hear your Jeep just now. You not driving today?" He cast a longing glance at the rifle lying next to the incriminating bundle on the pier, and then at the pistol firmly holstered at the other man's waist.

"I parked up the road a piece. Thought a little walk might do me some good. A man gets fat and lazy just sitting around the office all day." Somehow the newcomer didn't look like the type of man who was likely to get either fat or lazy. Although a good four inches shorter than Tony, he was fit and well-muscled and at least fifteen years younger. His handsome, sun-browned face was friendly, but there was also a look of determination, and the kind of inner strength that makes good men great and bad men dangerous.

"Looks like you had a pretty good day today," he observed. "What's that over there?" indicating the untidy bundle I was currently examining. "You haven't been digging up turtle eggs again, I hope."

"Oh no, sir! Is no turtle eggs! Is just old piece plastic I use sometime when it rains. Is nothing." Tony rubbed his palms nervously along the seams of his trousers.

"You look beat. Why don't you rest your bones? I'll get the rest of your things." Danny started toward the pier, but Tony moved quickly ahead of him.

"Oh no! Is okay. I'm not tired, not a bit." He bent down and seized the plastic, but in his haste he grabbed the wrong corner and the concealed skin tumbled out onto the dock at his feet. He stared mutely as it slowly uncoiled itself onto the rough planks. The game warden heaved a sigh and leaned over to pick it up.

"I've warned you about this before, Tony. You know it's illegal to hunt

alligators, but you keep right on doing it." Tony's fists were clenched and his eyes blazed.

"So what you want I should do, Mister Baldwin? You want my family should go hungry? You like my kids to go barefoot all winter? You think I make lots money selling the crawdads, eh? I'll tell you how much I make! Nothing! That's how much! Ten cents piece, that's what they pay me! Ten cents! You know how much a day I get? Five dollar, six maybe! How I'm supposed to feed my family on five dollar a day? You tell me how?"

"I don't know, Tony." The warden sounded tired. "I wish I had an answer for you. All I know is I can't let you go on poaching alligators. There are too few left as it is."

"So you'll put me in jail, eh, Danny? And who took you out fishing when your daddy was too busy, tell me that? Who taught you to shoot and set snares? Who showed you where to look for night-owl's nest, and where the muskrat makes his home? You just 'bout grew up with my oldest boy, Will, and now you want put me in jail?"

"I don't want to, Tony, Lord knows I don't want to, but you leave me no choice. I've let you off too many times before. I'd be derelict in my duty if I let you go again. I have a responsibility to the state and to the wildlife in this parish, and I have to take you in. I'm sorry, Tony, but that's the way it is."

"So that's the way it is, eh, Danny?" Tony's voice had a dead sound to it. "So what happens to my family now? Who feeds my kids if you put me in jail?"

"Your family will be taken care of, I'll see to that. Come on, let's put your things in my Jeep. Is that your cat? I haven't seen him before."

"Him? No. I find him on snag in Miller's Crick. Almost he was 'gator's breakfast. I think maybe I take him home to my kids, but now I don't think so no more. Maybe you take him home with you, eh, Danny? Your wife Sally, she likes cats, yes?"

"Yes, Sally likes cats alright. We already have a couple, but I'm sure she won't mind taking in one more, at least until we can find out where he came from. Better let me have the keys to your truck." Danny shouldered the rifle, Tony retrieved the sack of crawdads from the pickup, and we all walked up the road to where the warden had left his vehicle.

The road into town was rutted and bumpy, a rough ride even in a rugged vehicle such as we had, but eventually we did arrive safely. Our first stop was the fish market, where Tony disposed of his catch. Then we went on to the sheriff's office. Danny parked in front and shut off the engine.

"'Fraid this is it, Tony."

"You really gon' turn me in, Danny?"

"I have to. It's my job. You know that."

"I know. Is your job. You do what you got to do."

"Do you have enough money to post bail?" Sam was concerned, but Tony only shrugged his shoulders.

"I got five dollar, eighty cents. You think the sheriff he take five dollar, eighty cents?"

"I doubt it." Danny pulled a worn leather wallet out of his back pocket. "Here, let me loan you the money. You can pay me back."

Tony shook his head. "How? How I pay you back? No Danny, you keep your money. Just tell my Angie I don't be home for dinner, okay? You do that for me?"

"Of course I'll do whatever I can, you can count on that."

"I know. We better go in now. Your Sally, she worry if you be too late." The two men got out of the vehicle and walked into the office

together. About half an hour later Danny came out alone looking tired and grim. He settled himself into the seat and we drove away. It was pitch dark by now, and the headlights bobbed up and down as we jolted and swayed up the narrow lane through the dense forest. A pair of rabbits bounded across our path as we rounded a curve, and a bit farther on I was tossed to the floor under the dashboard when Danny slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting a mother raccoon and her toddling litter.

"Sorry about that, cat," he apologized. It was the first time he'd spoken since we left the sheriff's office. I decided to stay on the floor for the balance of the journey. It seemed safer. A few minutes later we bounced into a broad clearing and our headlights fell on a little pigtailed girl, five or six years old, turning somersaults in the bare dirt in front of a dilapidated shack. Her sash had come untied, and her dress, much too big for her anyway, slipped up around her shoulders with each roll.

Rough and plain even in its better days, Tony's home had not taken the passing years kindly. It hadn't been painted recently, if ever, and was currently the same shade of brown as the soil from which it sprang. The windows stared blankly into the darkness, and the whole structure leaned noticeable to the left. It seemed incredible that people might actually live in such a place, but there they were.

A single lantern hung above the door, illuminating the front of the house and part of the yard. A grubby little boy, a bit older than his sister, balanced precariously on the porch railing. He placed one foot carefully in front of the other until he reached the corner, at which point he pivoted, nearly falling, and started back in the other direction. A jeans-clad girl, a gangling teenager, sprawled on the porch step, trying to read a ragged romance magazine by the too-dim light from the lantern.

Danny climbed out of the Jeep and the children gathered around him, chattering enthusiastically. He responded to their eager greetings, but the unhappy business that had brought him there was foremost in his mind.

"Is your mother home, Sophie?" he asked the older girl. Just then a small, thin woman appeared at the open door, drying her hands on her faded blue apron.

"Oh, it's you, Danny. I thought it be Tony. He's a bit late tonight." The graying hair pulled back harshly from the lined face and the sagging shoulders told anyone who cared that this was a woman who had seen too many hardships in her life, and far too few pleasures. Danny was about to add another stone to her load, and he didn't relish the idea.

"Can we go inside, Angie? I need to talk to you."

"Sure, sure, come on in. Tony be home any minute now. He be so glad to see you. Maybe you can stay for dinner?" The two of them entered the shack and the battered door closed behind them. Immediately the Jeep was surrounded by a crowd of boisterous youngsters, not only the original three who had greeted Danny, but two or three others who seemed to materialize out of nowhere.

"Look! A kitty!" shrieked a tiny brown-eyed girl of about three. She clambered into the jeep and I dove for cover under the seat, out of reach of small, grubby hands. Her dirty round face appeared at the opening and her eager hands explored my place of refuge, but I managed to elude her grasp. "I can't get her," she wailed. "You get her for me, okay, Sophie? I want to hold her. Get her for me, okay?"

"Oh, leave 'er alone, will ya? You're scarin' 'er half to death." The older girl tried to pull her sister out of the jeep. "You don't know how to hold a cat, anyway. You always squeeze too tight."

"Do not! Do not!" The toddler clung to the side of the vehicle.

"Yes you do. Remember Miss Carrie's cat last time we went into town? You almost killed it, remember? She had to take it away from you 'cause you were squishin' it."

"Was not! Was not!" The youngster hammered angry fists on the side of the jeep.

"Come on. Leave her alone. Geeze Louise!" Sophie dragged the howling child toward the shack. Other faces appeared in the gap, and other voices tried to coax me out, but I was having none of their persuasion. I stayed where I was. Then suddenly Danny was back and the game was over.

"Sorry kids, I have to be going." And then we were off again, bouncing down the road to a chorus of goodbyes.

Chapter 8

The Sanctuary

The porch light was on and the blinds were drawn over the windows of the trim little log cabin that crouched under a huge cypress tree. Danny pulled into the driveway next to a small, nondescript sedan with a Greenpeace sticker on the bumper and a battered used-to-be-white teddy bear in the rear window shelf. He set the parking brake and lifted me into the crook of his arm, taking care to tuck my tail underneath as he did so. The screen door slammed, and an attractive young redhead in jeans and a green plaid shirt bounced down the two log steps and crunched down the graveled path to the driveway.

"Daniel, where on earth have you been? Dinner is positively ruined, and what in the world have you got there? This last question apparently referred to me.

"It's a cat. See, four legs, long tail, fur coat?"

"You just described half the mammals on this continent, genius. Anyway, you know what I mean. Where did you get it? And don't tell me it just climbed into your Jeep and said 'Take me home'" Danny laughed.

"Not exactly. I got it from Tony this evening. He picked it up off a snag in Miller's Creek, and I have no idea how it got there, so don't ask."

"So why didn't Tony take it home for his kids? I'm sure they'd love to have it." Sally and Danny mounted the steps together and Sally held the door open for her tired husband. Inside the warm cabin he kissed her and handed me over.

"It's a long story. Show him where the food is, and I'll get cleaned up for dinner." Danny beat a hasty retreat into the bathroom, leaving me in the custody of his bewildered wife.

"Well, I like that!" Sally held me up and looked me full in the face. "Just what we need. Another wayfaring stranger. Well, as long as you're here, you might as well have dinner." She carried me through the kitchen into a small enclosed porch where eight or ten assorted bowls, plates, and saucers were strung out across the floor. There was water, milk, some sort of broth, and several other types of food, some half-eaten, some nearly gone. Sally set me down next to a small bowl of milk. "I'm sure you can find something to eat in all this mess."

I lapped at the milk and it was delicious. Sweet, cool, and oh, so soothing to my parched throat. The beef broth was tasty, but a large bowl with the remnants of some canned peaches puzzled me. I sampled a couple

of pieces and it was good, but not really what I was looking for. The next thing in line was a dish of something moist and savory, kind of fishy-tasting, and I ate until I could hold no more. When I poked my head around the kitchen door again, Danny was just coming in from the living room. He put his arms around his wife's waist and kissed her nose.

"What's for dinner, gorgeous?" He looked somewhat doubtfully at the empty stove.

"How about a meat loaf brick with rubber gravy and some concrete cornbread?" Sally suggested. "Honestly, honey, you should have called me if you were going to be so late. Dinner was ready three hours ago."

"I know, I know. It's just that certain things had to be taken care of, and I kind of got tied up. You know how it is." Sally raised her left eyebrow about half an inch.

"I do? Oh well, never mind. I'll just open a can of tuna or something. At least the salad's still good."

"I thought we weren't eating tuna anymore. Something about whales or some such."

"It's dolphins. Driftnets kill dolphins. Anyhow, this brand has promised to use only line-caught tuna from now on." Sally found half an onion in the refrigerator and unwrapped the foil.

"So how will you know if they do or not?" Danny was skeptical. "It could be just a publicity gimmick, you know."

"Well, they're allowing independent observers on board their boats now. It's the only way to keep them honest, I guess." Sally finished chopping the onion and opened the pickle jar. "By the way, you still haven't explained about Tony and the cat. Why didn't he take her home to his kids?"

"Can't. He's in jail." Danny handed her the jar of mayonnaise. "I caught him with another alligator skin. Had to take him in."

"Poor Angie. That's going to be really rough on her, especially with all those little ones. How long is he going to be in for, do you know?"

"It's hard to say, really. Depends on what charges they file and how hard the prosecutor pushes. Depends a lot on the judge, too. It could be anything from a few months to several years. He might have gotten off with a fine, but he'd never be able to pay it, anyway."

"So in the meantime what happens to Angie and the kids?" Sally put the finished salad on the table. "She sure can't get a job. They'll have to go on relief." Danny nodded.

"Probably. I hope Will doesn't have to come home from school. It'd be a shame to have to pull him out in the middle of the semester. He's got a good future ahead of him. I just hope this doesn't mess things up for him."

I left them to enjoy their dinner and went off to explore the rest of the cabin. It was of simple but sturdy construction. The inside of the timbers had been squared off and sanded smooth, and the pale wood seemed to glow in the dark. The only light in the living room came from a small fire that flickered to itself behind a glass screen at the other end of the room.

The logs shifted and settled, and a momentary shower of sparks was followed by an equally brief spurt of flames. Then it died down and resumed its own quiet conversation with an occasional pop and sputter to anyone who might happen by. A bell-shaped clock hummed softly on the mantelpiece next to a plaque that read "Save The Earth. We May Need It Later."

A huge grey cat was stretched full-length on the hearthstone, toasting

his belly, the tip of his tail twitching contentedly. The growing coolness of the empty room prompted me to join him. Three feet from the fire a small black female materialized in front of me, blocking my path. In no uncertain terms she informed me that the youngster asleep in front of the fire was her own precious baby, and if I was planning to mess with him I'd have to deal with her first.

Considering the fact that her "baby" was more than twice my size, I would hardly have thought I represented much of a threat to his safety, but I was in no mood to tackle an over-protective mother. I decided to look for a less hazardous resting place.

A soft blue cushion in the corner beckoned me, and I took my weary body there, leaving her and her son to their fireside comfort. She sat down next to him and tenderly washed the side of his neck. Rolling toward his mother, he wrapped his paws about her neck, seizing her soft throat in his jaws. Then he released his grip and washed where he had "bitten". A brief wrestling match ended with the son running into the kitchen and the mother curled up in front of the dying fire.

With dinner over and the dishes cleared away, Danny and Sally moved their center of activity to the living room. Lamps were turned on, a couple of stubby logs added to the fire, and a sad song about broken hearts and wasted love drifted down from the old radio on the shelf. Danny came over to my corner and squatted beside me. He scratched under my chin and behind my ears and I favored him with a small meow.

"Comfy there, puss? I presume you've met our Miss Lightfoot here." He glanced at the feisty female by the fire, who at that moment was enormously busy ignoring everyone in the room. "I hope you're all going to get along okay. She's friendly enough once she knows you're not going to hurt her baby. As if I COULD hurt that great hairy monster even if I wanted to. Danny settled into his easy chair with the newspaper, and soon the only parts of him still visible were the two hands holding the paper, and the two long legs stretched out on the footstool in front of him.

Sally sprawled on the couch with a book, and was immediately pounced upon by the big grey cat, who had followed her in from the kitchen. He rubbed his cheek against the edge of the red-bound volume, shoving it up against her nose.

"Oh, Cheetah, are you having another love attack? Can't a girl even read a book in peace?" She raised the object in question out of his reach with her right hand and stroked his head with her left. Cheetah responded by curling up on her stomach and purring loudly.

"Whuff." he said. Danny straightened up and lowered his paper.

"I see where a plastics company is thinking of building a new plant in Pointe Coupee Parish. That'll bring in a lot of new jobs." Sally frowned. "It'll probably bring in a lot of pollution, too. That company has one of the worst emissions records in the industry. It seems to me it doesn't do much good to give people jobs if you're going to turn around and poison their water"

"True," Danny acknowledged, "but I should think there ought to be a way to do it without polluting everything."

"I'm sure there is. They just don't want to spend the extra money to do it. I've written a letter to the governor and one to our representative in the State Legislature. People shouldn't have to choose between food on the table and clean drinking water."

"Well, I hope it does some good, but I have a feeling those people don't care very much about common folks like us. All they care about is how much tax money it'll bring in.

"You're probably right, but I have to try anyway."

"Whuff," said Cheetah.

"Oh, I am petting you, you big baby! How did you get to be so spoiled, anyway?"

"I can't imagine." Danny smiled and returned to his paper. Sally resumed reading her book, holding it high out of reach of the over-attentive cat. Eventually the fire died away, leaving a pile of warm, grey ashes punctuated by a few glowing embers. Danny stretched and yawned and looked over his shoulder at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Almost nine-thirty." He walked over to the couch and whacked Sally on the bottom with the rolled-up newspaper. "Come on, gorgeous. Bedtime." Sally rolled over, dumping the outraged Cheetah onto the floor.

"Already?" she complained.

"Already," Danny confirmed.

"Seems like we just finished dinner."

"Dinner was late, remember?"

Sally reached over and laid her book on the round coffee table. "I remember. Oh boy, do I remember." She turned off her reading lamp and the two of them disappeared down the hall.

Morning came early in the Baldwin household. Long before there was so much as a glimmer of light peeking through the neatly curtained living room windows, there was a bustle of activity in the kitchen. Sally opened cans of cat food and filled the dry food bowls from a row of bags in the back porch. Spurred by the emptiness in my stomach, I headed for the nearest bowl, only to be intercepted by that old cross-patch, Lightfoot, whose low growl and upraised paw plainly told me that her "baby" had first dibs on breakfast and I would have to wait my turn.

Now, ordinarily I'm a peace-loving animal, and I'd never start a fight without good cause, but I was really hungry, and this "baby" business was getting a bit ridiculous. I laid back my ears and countered her growl with my best hiss, and her upraised paw with one of my own. A short exchange of lightning-quick swats drew Danny's attention.

"Come on, you two. Cut it out. There's enough there for everybody." He put down the bright red apple he was slicing and carried one bowl of food to another area of the porch. After instructing Lightfoot to stay in her own section and mind her own affairs, he set several more dishes on the floor and opened the back door to the most astonishing assortment of animals I have ever laid eyes on.

First in was a three-legged raccoon that scooted across the floor with amazing agility and immediately dispossessed Lightfoot of her bowl of cat food. Surprisingly, she gave him no argument, but moved placidly away to share Cheetah's bowl. An owl with a bandaged wing, released from his cage in the backyard, walked haughtily through the open door, followed at a respectful distance by a pair of young opossums who headed straight for the fruit dish. Last of all came a shy, spotted fawn. She hesitated, then gathering her courage, she crossed the threshold and thrust her moist, black nose into Sally's hand.

"There you are, Poppy. Right on time as usual." Sally offered a large bottle of warm milk, and the young doe took the nipple eagerly. As she greedily slurped her breakfast, little rivulets of milk dribbled down her chin and onto the linoleum floor, only to be mopped up immediately by the waiting opossums. A second bottle followed, and then the beautiful young creature was gently ushered back outside, where she vanished into the early morning mists.

By this time, most of the other foundlings had finished their respective

meals and made their exits as well, and the young couple turned their attention to their own breakfast. No hearty bacon and eggs here, but steaming bowls of cereal with lots of fresh milk and fruit seemed to satisfy just as well. Sally filled the sink with soapy water and cleared the kitchen table while Danny filled his lunch box with sandwiches and a Thermos of hot coffee.

"Do you think you'll be going into town today?" he asked.

"Probably" Sally replied. "First I want to check on Angie and find out if she needs anything. Then I thought I'd drop by the diner and see if they could use some part-time help. Sophie's almost sixteen, she could work the dinner rush after school lets out."

"That's a great idea." Danny kissed her on the nose. "Anyway, if you get time, I'd appreciate it if you could pick me up some more socks. Just about every one I've got left has a big hole in the heel."

"I'd better write that down. Socks for Danny. Anything else?"

"No, that's about it. I have to get going. It's getting late." At the front door they hugged and kissed again.

"Be careful!" Sally called after him. "Don't let the 'gators get you."

With the breakfast dishes out of the way, Sally made the necessary preparations for the morning's errands. A shopping bag set upright on the table received a box of oatmeal, several cans of vegetables, a package of macaroni and a sack of beans. Half a dozen juicy red apples and a box of homemade peanut butter cookies wrapped in waxed paper topped off the package quite handsomely. Sally pulled on her blue corduroy jacket and cap and slipped the shopping list into her pocket.

I had been watching her preparations with interest. Warm and cozy as the cabin was, Danny was right, it was getting late, and I was anxious to be on my way again. Sally slung her big black purse over her shoulder, picked up the bag of groceries, and headed for the door. I was right behind her.

"Oh, no you don't." She scooped me off the floor and deposited me on the back of the couch. "I'm not going to have you wandering off into the swamps again, making alligator bait out of yourself." I protested, but in vain. There was no way I could explain to her that I wasn't just wandering, that I had a home of my own that I was trying to get to. There was a firm "ka-chunk" as the key turned in the lock and the "clip-clop" of her shoes as she hurried across the porch. Then her little car scrunched out of the gravel driveway and a deep stillness settled over the cabin.

The curtains had been drawn back and the bright new sun sliced through the sparkling clean windows. A broad sunbeam flung itself all the way across the living room and halfway up the far wall, warming the bare floorboards and flipping on the nap-switch somewhere in the back of my head. Since it was obvious I wasn't going anywhere for awhile, I decided to make the best possible use of my time.

Lightfoot and Cheetah were curled up together in the big easy chair, Cheetah's head resting on his mother's shoulder. Picking the choicest part of the sunbeam, I stretched myself out, belly up. The next thing I remembered was the "kachunk" of Sally's key in the lock, and a resounding "thunk" as her heavy purse hit the floor.

"Make way, kids. I'm beat." She pushed the two snoozing cats onto the floor and flopped into the easy chair. Kicking her shoes off, she pulled her right foot into her lap and massaged it with both hands. "You know what I think, cat?" She addressed the question to me. "I think if God had meant for us to wear shoes, we'd have been born with square feet."

She put her right foot back on the floor and picked up the left, rubbing

each of the toes thoroughly in turn. I stretched, rolled over, and sat up. My tail curled around me and I gave it a couple of half-hearted licks. Not because it was dirty, you understand, but just because it was there.

"By the way," Sally wondered aloud, "What is your name, anyway? We can't go on indefinitely calling you 'cat'. You have to have some kind of a name." She wrinkled her forehead thoughtfully. After a few minutes of contemplation she hauled herself out of the chair and disappeared into the kitchen. Returning momentarily, she stood in the doorway, a tall cold glass of juice in her left hand. She leaned against the framework and took a long drink. Suddenly she pointed her finger at me, and I set myself to run for cover.

"Gypsy!" She exclaimed. "That's the name for you, Gypsy!" And with that Sally plopped back into her chair, spilling a few drops of juice on her shirt as she did so. She brushed them off and took another long drink. I relaxed. At least she wasn't going to attack me. For a minute there I wasn't so sure. I walked over to her chair and placed one paw on her knee, asking permission to climb into her lap. She smiled and patted her leg. "Come on up, it's okay."

I didn't need to be coaxed. I hopped lightly into the chair and curled up in her warm, comfortable lap. Sally finished her juice and set the empty glass on the small table beside her. Turning me over, she cradled me in her arms almost like a human baby. Her slender fingers ruffled my belly fur and I purred appreciatively.

"You sure are a softie," she told me. "Now if you and Lightfoot can just learn to get along, everyone will be happy." I felt a light touch on the end of my tail. Looking down, I saw Cheetah sniffing at its tip, curious about the stranger in his domain. He seemed harmless enough, so I said nothing, but pulled my tail up out of the way. Still curious, he stretched up and sniffed at one of my feet, then patted it gently with his forepaw. I growled softly in the back of my throat.

"Hey now, don't be that way." Sally was trying hard to keep the peace. "Cheetah just wants to be friends. He won't hurt you." I didn't have anything against poor Cheetah, of course. I just didn't want his mother coming around accusing me of abusing her "baby" again. I jumped down and returned to the cushion in the corner, while Cheetah took over my place in Sally's lap. Lightfoot was keeping an eye on me from where she lay draped across the back of the couch, so I stayed put until feeding time.

Just as in the morning, our meal was followed immediately by the feeding of the outdoor menagerie. Poppy got her two bottles of milk, the opossums got their bowl of fruit, and the owl and raccoon got pretty much whatever they wanted. Finally they were all shooed back outside except for the owl.

"You stay in for awhile," Sally instructed it. "I think we might have a look at that wing tonight." She tried to smooth its ruffled feathers, but it made an odd clicking sound with its beak and skittered away across the floor. "Okay, okay. I won't bother you." Sally returned to the kitchen to start Danny's dinner.

The table was laid and dinner nearly ready when I heard the crunch of tires in the driveway. Sally threw the potholders onto the counter and made a beeline for the front door, scattering cats in all directions. The door slammed and there was a minute of peace, then Sally and Danny entered arm in arm, passing directly into the kitchen. Danny set his empty lunch pail on the counter and lifted the lid of a whispering pot.

"Mmm. Split pea soup. What else?"

"Scalloped potatoes and deviled eggs. Okay?"

"Sounds fabulous. How'd things go today?" Danny stole a bit of potato

from the dish on the table. "Ooh, that's hot!"

"Serves you right, smarty." Sally ladled soup into his bowl. "Everything went okay, I guess. As well as could be expected, anyway. I took Angie a few groceries, and we talked for awhile. She's holding up pretty well. She's going to write to Will at Southwestern. I talked to Scotty down at the diner and he says Sophie can fill in for two hours a night on the dinner shift. Have you heard anything more about Tony?"

"No, nothing. He's still in custody, that's all I could find out." Danny sat down next to his wife.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Sally stopped a spoonful of soup halfway to her mouth. "I thought of a great name for our new addition. How about Gypsy? Is that perfect or what?"

"Gypsy." Danny considered for a moment. "I like it. Yeah, that's a good name for her. Gypsy. Come here, Gypsy." He stretched out his hand to me. I sauntered over and sniffed his fingers, and he scratched behind my ears. I put my paws on his knee, but he lowered them back to the floor. "Not at the table, Gypsy girl. Why don't you go play with Lightfoot and Cheetah?" And turning me around, he gave me a pat on the rump. I headed for the living room and my comfy pillow, but as I passed Lightfoot sitting in the doorway she gave me a swat on the shoulder. I gave her back two of the same and we exchanged hisses.

"Girls, girls! No hitting, now. Be nice," Sally admonished. I gave Lightfoot a parting whack and scooted into the living room, but she made no attempt to follow. Her son lay sprawled in front of the fire as usual, one paw over his eyes as if to shield them from the light. Just for meanness, I swatted him on the foot as I passed. He stretched, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

Sometime later my own slumber was disrupted by a curious commotion coming from the direction of the back porch. Poking my head around the door, I observed Danny and Sally scrambling across the floor in hot pursuit of the injured owl. Hissing and clicking, its one good wing flapping wildly, it half-ran, half-flew into the corner, alighting on an overturned orange crate. Then, as the frustrated pair closed in on it, the owl shot between them and clawed its way to the top of the old rocking chair, scattering wads of stuffing all over the floor.

Sally and Danny sat in the corner, panting. Their vigorous exertions, combined with the long-sleeved jackets and heavy gloves they wore to protect themselves from the bird's powerful beak and talons, had caused them to become just a tad overheated. After a moment's rest and a brief strategy session they resumed their pursuit of the reluctant fowl.

Sally remained in the corner while Danny circled around the chair and diverted the bird's attention with a short piece of broomhandle. With the owl thus distracted, Sally glided in noiselessly from behind and slipped both hands around its body, pinning both wings to its sides.

What a screeching and hissing there was, as the entrapped bird protested the outrageous deception! All objections proved useless, however, and the owl quickly settled into a grumbling submission. Danny's expert hands cut away the restraining bandage from the injured wing. He ran his fingers down the length of the bone and probed around the joint. Sally gave him a questioning look, and he nodded.

She set the owl on the scarred wooden floor and released her grip, taking a quick step backwards. They both watched as the bird stretched and fluttered its newly unfettered limb, carefully at first, then with greater and greater confidence. Its wingspan was enormous, nearly the entire width of the porch. I ducked back out of sight, suddenly apprehensive of my own

safety. Then I heard the door open, and I screwed up my courage enough to take another peek.

Danny stood at the open door, clucking softly to the owl, who toddled cautiously toward him. After a couple of false starts, and with a lot of encouragement from Sally, the distrustful fowl stepped through the door and stood on the broad step outside. It stretched its wings to their fullest extent, paused for one brief instant, then soared up into the starry blackness overhead.

Chapter 9

Fellow Travelers

I slept soundly that night, and when morning came I was well-rested and ready to be on my way. I ate my full share of breakfast and then some. No telling when I'd be eating again. Sally watched, amazed.

"Danny, did you see what Gypsy had for breakfast this morning? You'd think she hadn't eaten in a month! She's been here two days now, and she just keeps packing it away. Honestly, I don't know where she puts it all!"

"She does eat quite a bit," Danny acknowledged, "but who knows how long she's been out on her own, or what she's had to live on. I'm sure once she realizes it'll always be there, she'll stop eating so much. Is my coffee ready?"

"I think so. Yes, it's done." Sally unplugged the coffeepot and poured the steaming liquid into Danny's Thermos. She measured a few spoonfuls of sugar and some milk and twisted the stopper down tight. "Have you got everything now?"

"Yep, that's it." Danny snapped the latches on his lunch pail and reached for his hat. That was the signal I'd been waiting for. I slipped into the living room and hid behind the couch. The young couple emerged from the kitchen and paused at the front door. Danny looked down affectionately at his wife. "You really are beautiful, you know that?"

Sally heaved a great sigh. "That's what all the men tell me."

"Monster." Danny swatted her lightly on the rump. He opened the door and bent down for his good-bye kiss. This was my chance. I was out the door and gone before either of them could react. I heard Sally calling out to me as I rounded the corner of the cabin, but I didn't even break stride. I bounded across the clearing and into the woods, heading westward once more.

I was glad to be on my way again. I didn't care that the sky was grey and overcast. I didn't care that the ground was cold and damp. I didn't even care that I had left behind a warm, dry cabin and two kind, caring people who only wanted to help. All I cared about was covering as many miles as possible before the day was over.

The wet grass brushed my sides and dampened my fur. A black-and-yellow striped garter snake whisked across the rail just in front of me, startling me and causing me to leap high into the air. I had forgotten how many other creatures inhabited this forest. I remembered the owl with its enormous outstretched wings, and I shivered just a little. Still I pressed on.

Patches of fog drifted along the earth and clung to the branches of the trees as if looking for a comfortable place to bed down for the day.

Something moved in the bushes ahead and I ducked behind a clump of grass, but it was only a small brown marsh hare shuffling through the undergrowth. It met my gaze briefly and went on about its business. The last I saw of it was its cottony white tail bobbing up and down in the grass.

I wondered just how much farther it was to my home and my friends. I really wasn't crazy about all this endless walking. I couldn't even be sure if I was headed in the right direction. Still, something inside kept pushing me on. A flock of geese passed high overhead, forming an imperfect "V" against the threatening sky. They called loudly to one another as they hurried northward to their summer breeding grounds.

Now another obstacle loomed in my path. Ahead of me a high mound of earth, higher than an house, stretched for miles in either direction. Its steep slopes presented a formidable barrier to my progress, but going around it could cost many long miles. Tired as I was, I had no choice but to climb. My ascent was painfully slow as I picked my way among the shrubs and other assorted small vegetation that covered its sides. A startled lizard scurried from under a bush and vanished just as suddenly as it had appeared.

My relief when I reached the crest was pitifully short-lived, however, for I was now confronted by a truly uncrossable barrier. A wide river, muddy and cold, flowed serenely past just a few feet below the spot where I stood. What was I supposed to do now? How would I ever get across? I lay down on the embankment with my chin on my paws, tired and discouraged.

A riverboat chugged past, towing a long string of flat barges upriver. Its low, echoing horn sounded about as sad and lonely as I felt. I stood up, stretched my legs, and followed. There was nothing else to do. How long I walked I do not know. Without the sun as a guide I couldn't even be sure if it was morning or afternoon. The pitiless sky had turned ugly and black, threatening rain. A spider's web of lightning shimmered across the horizon, followed shortly by the rattle of distant thunder. I walked faster, pushing my endurance to the limit.

Huge drops of rain fell here and there, not enough to wet the ground, just enough to make the air thick and heavy. The lightning flickered again, closer now, and the crack of the thunder made me jump. Darkness fell swiftly, and the cold, dark clouds enveloped the earth. No moon tonight. Not a star anywhere, not even a winking firefly. Only gloom and darkness to match the misery in my soul.

I wished I hadn't been so eager to leave the Baxter cabin. It would be warm and dry and cozy now, with its whispering fireplace and its comfy cushions. There'd be dinner, too, all the cat food I wanted and more. I saw lights up ahead, and quickened my pace to a trot. Where there are lights there are people, and that meant shelter and maybe even food.

Half an hour later I stood at the foot of a tall bridge that carried a two-lane highway across the rushing river. I watched the homebound traffic speeding to and fro over the glistening pavement. Aware only of the night and the advancing storm, the cars rushed heedlessly past, their glaring headlights first blinding me and then plunging me into renewed blackness as they receded into the dark. The steel girders clanked twice for each vehicle that hurried across, and the aging timbers squeaked slightly, not so much complaining as simply commenting on the burden they were obliged to support.

I dared not try to cross the bridge under the present conditions, so I sat for a time considering my situation. A flash of lightning directly overhead lit up the countryside like a split-second of misplaced daylight. Every detail of the scene before me was perfectly outlined, like a

black-and-white photograph etched on my brain; the bridge, the roiling river, the gleaming roadway. Then in the same instant it was lost again, and the deafening thunderclap that followed on its heels brought me back to reality in a hurry.

I darted around the concrete footing and slithered under the huge steel girder just two steps ahead of the cloudburst. In the shelter of the heavy timbers it was at least dry, if not exactly warm, and I huddled in a hollow of the soft earth. At long last the lightning and thunder slackened and I allowed myself to be lulled to sleep by the rumble of the traffic passing above me.

* * * * *

At first I wasn't sure what had awakened me. The night was still black, but there was a flickering light below me, and the sharp smell of smoke cut through the damp air. Peeking over the mound of dirt, I spotted a young man (or really I should say boy, he couldn't have been more than sixteen), hunched over a struggling campfire contained in a circle of stones.

Small even for his age, he looked smaller still in the over-sized black leather jacket that pushed up around his ears and bulged across his shoulders. The sleeves hung down over his hands so that only his fingertips were visible, and an intricate pattern of silver studs exploded across his back and chased themselves down the sleeves to his wrists. Heavy black boots swallowed his legs almost to his knees, and a pair of leather gloves poked their black fingers from the hip pocket of his well-worn blue jeans. He hummed a fractured tune as he picked out the notes one by one on the long, slender keyboard balanced across his knees.

The sudden crunch of boots on gravel startled him to his feet, causing him to bump his head on one of the support beams. Then he nearly fell into the fire, struggling to pull a short hunting knife from the inside of his right boot.

"Wh-who is it? Who's there?" His young voice cracked as he crouched in the firelight, straining to see into the darkness beyond.

"'Tis only I, my young friend, returning triumphant from a successful forage among the estates of the local gentry." The owner of the second voice ducked under the rough timbers and paused. "I assure you, lad, there is no need to arm yourself against me. All I have I willingly share with you."

"I-I didn't know it was you," the boy stammered, red-faced. "I thought it might be, you know, the cops." He rubbed the bump on his head, ruffling his short brown hair.

"And what would the constabulary want with an innocent young lad such as you obviously are? Or is it possible I am mistaken? You are perhaps a murderer, or at the very least a robber of banks?"

"Nah, I just ran away, that's all."

"I see." The older man pulled off his wide-brimmed hat and wiped his face with a damp sleeve. "Well, as long as you have your weapon at hand, you may as well employ it in a useful occupation." He produced a handful of carrots from the pocket of his huge trenchcoat and passed them to his companion. A pair of turnips appeared next, followed by three small potatoes. Last but not least came a thick slab of bacon and a half-dozen eggs. The youngster gaped in amazement.

"Wow!" he marveled. "How'd you get all that stuff?"

"Tribute, dear boy, tribute from a grateful populace." His roomy backpack yielded up in its turn a saucepan, a skillet, and a pair of dented

tin plates. Fresh water from his canteen filled the saucepan, which he set to boil over the fire while he greased the skillet with a chunk of bacon fat. Having stowed his keyboard in its carrying case, the teenager peeled and sliced the vegetables and plopped them into the boiling water.

The frying bacon and eggs were beginning to smell mighty good from where I sat. I wasn't entirely sure about the characters of these two men, but I was awfully hungry, so I decided to take my chances. I approached the fire and introduced myself with a polite meow.

"Great! Just what we need, a stray cat." The boy started to reach for a rock, but the man restrained him.

"Stay, lad. Assail not thy brother in distress. There is always room at the table for a fellow wanderer."

"Come on, man! There's hardly enough here for just us! I'm not giving up any of my breakfast for some stray cat!"

"One is never too poor to share with those less fortunate. Furthermore I seem to recall that it was I who provided you with the meal you now so jealously guard." The youngster blushed at his companion's gentle reproof.

"Sorry. I guess I got carried away. I'm just hungry, that's all."

The man nodded. "Aye, hunger. The loyal escort of every wayfarer. A new acquaintance for you now, but in time you will come to know him very well indeed. He will walk ceaselessly in your shadow, and betimes, you will walk in his. Come, friend. Join our lavish banquet. We have food enough and to spare." The kind stranger held out a slice of bacon. I took it gratefully and breakfast proceeded without further incident.

My new-found friend shared his bacon and eggs with me, along with a sampling of carrots, which were pretty good, and turnips, which I didn't care for. The teenager still guarded his plate rather more closely than necessary, but he did allow me to lick up the egg yolks after he finished. When the dishes had been washed as well as possible in the muddy river and restored to their place in the knapsack, the older man glanced quickly around for anything left behind. His gaze fell on me.

"It would appear some alternate mode of transportation might be appropriate for our diminutive associate."

"Don't tell me we hafta take HER along!" the boy protested.

"But of course she shall accompany us. Surely you would not suggest we leave her alone, a refugee in this barren wilderness."

"Doesn't look all that barren to me," the lad muttered to himself. His companion paid no attention. He unbuttoned the front of his coat and checked several large pockets that someone had sewn into the lining.

"I think this will be eminently suitable." He tucked me into a nice, roomy one on the left side of his chest. "Yes, that will do very nicely indeed." Now, mind you, I didn't really need a ride. I could easily have run circles around the two of them all day long, but it was SO warm and cozy in that pocket, that I saw no reason to object. I just settled in and made myself comfortable. He buttoned the coat halfway up and adjusted his knapsack.

"And now, my boy, I presume you are prepared to quit this luxurious abode and cast yourself into the raging tempest without."

"I'm not your boy!" the youth exploded. "I'm not anybody's boy! I'm a grown man, and I'll do what I want, when I want! My name's David, and you'd better start calling me that if you know what's good for you!"

"As you wish." the man assented. "It is indeed a noble name, a royal name, even. David, slayer of giants, leader of conquering armies. A valiant warrior and a proud sovereign. And what Titans would a modern David aspire to topple? From what fearsome Goliath do you flee in

apprehension?"

"You're crazy! I'm not afraid of anybody. Come on, let's get going, okay? I don't want to spend all day under this bridge." A moment later we emerged into the glare of the morning sun. "Say, I thought you said it was still raining."

"I was speaking metaphorically. Storms come in many guises, not all of them meteorological in nature. There are tempests that arise between nations, and minor squalls between individuals. There are economic storms and spiritual ones, but the most violent storm of all is that which rages within a man's own bosom, between that which he should do and that which he would, between duty and desire, so to speak."

"Swell." David shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. "Why can't you talk like a normal person? You sound like something out of English Lit."

"Ah, then you are not entirely ignorant of the classics. But why should you object to the use of traditional English? The language of Shakespeare is the language of the immortals, of Byron and Milton and Keats, of Francis Bacon and Alexander Pope and of our own illustrious forefathers. The greatest poets, philosophers and statesmen throughout the centuries have made rich use of the whole of our cant. Why should I be satisfied with less?"

"It just sounds weird, that's all."

"The unfamiliar always tastes strange to the uncultured tongue. Nevertheless, the more extensive one's personal vocabulary, the more skillfully one can express one's innermost passions."

"Yeah, well I'd just as soon not 'express my innermost passions' if it's all the same to you."

"Of course, dear boy. It is as you desire." The ill-mated pair were by now nearly across the stalwart span. They walked quickly, the sturdy timbers fairly ringing under their booted strides, while below them the muddy river rushed by unheeding.

The man in whose bosom I rested was far and away the taller of the two, muscular in build with straw-colored hair and sky-blue eyes. His face was handsome, if somewhat battered, with a crooked nose and a long, ragged scar crawling downward from his left eye. The over-sized trench coat swung open now, a consequence of the warming sun and his brisk pace. The dilapidated felt hat had been folded and stuffed into a trouser pocket. His faded blue work shirt was tucked into a rumpled pair of grey trousers, which were stuffed in turn into a well-worn set of hiking boots.

David's attire was far less well adapted to life on the road. The stiff leather jacket covered only a thin white T-shirt, and his motorcycle boots were never intended for long-distance walking. He had to take three steps to his companion's two, but I got the feeling he'd rather eat glass before he'd admit to being tired.

A car approached. The tall man turned to face it, his right arm stretched out to the side, thumb extended upward. The car passed without slowing down. The tall man turned and walked on. David kicked a stone across the road.

"Not likely to get a ride in these parts," he grumbled.

"Unfortunately, the odds do seem to weigh against us. There is a certain innate lack of trust among civilized men. The more possessions a man has, the more he tends to fear his fellow man. Still, there is nothing to be lost in the trying." They walked in silence for a while. David was the first to speak.

"Hey, how come they call you 'Red', anyway? You don't have red hair. Did you dye it or something?" The tall man smiled.

"No, lad. There has been no modification of my hair's pigmentation. Red is merely the diminutive form of Redmond, the name given me at birth by my sainted mother."

"Redmond! That's a weird name. Sounds like a town in Ohio or something. How come your mom stuck you with a name like that?" Red shook his head.

"Of her motives I know but little. She died when I was but an infant. As to the name itself, it carries no shame. It is of Teutonic origin, and means 'advisor and protector'."

"Is that what you're trying to do now, advise and protect me?" David's tone implied a challenge.

"Do you perceive a need for guardianship?"

"Not me! I guess I can take care of myself okay."

"Yes, I believe I observed an example of that stewardship yesterday in the hardware store."

"I would've gotten my money even if you hadn't been there. I still have 'Slim', here," tapping the side of his boot. "I didn't spend half the day cleaning his store just for the fun of it. He'd of had to pay me."

"Quite possibly he would, but in a hamlet of such limited scale, the local gendarme is seldom far afield. Assault with a deadly weapon is a serious charge, though not as serious as murder."

"I would've gotten out okay, I don't need anyone to stick up for me."

The morning grew warmer and I began to feel a bit overheated in Red's coat pocket. Besides, my legs were getting cramped, and I needed to get out and run for a while. I thanked him for the ride, and told him politely but firmly that I would prefer to walk on my own feet now. He chuckled and fished me out of his pocket.

"Well, little one, I had nearly forgotten I carried a passenger. Are you in the mood for some invigorating exercise? Ah, but first there is the matter of your christening. One really must have a name, if only for the purpose of ignoring it. David, what title would you propose for this gentle lady?"

"How about 'Hey You'?"

"A practical appellation, to be sure, and undeniably effective, albeit a trifle too general. No, I think our lady friend deserves something more dignified, befitting her royal station. Ah, I know just the thing. Regina! Now there's a name truly in keeping with her exalted lineage. A royal name for a Gypsy queen."

"Queen, huh," David snorted. "Looks more like a tramp than a lady."

"Judge not by outward appearance, but by quality of character. Noble conduct is more to be prized than a captivating countenance." Red placed my feet on the ground and smoothed my ruffled fur. "You may walk with us on the broad highway or carve a solitary path, the choice is yours, and my blessing as well."

The soil was dank and musty after last night's rain, and a hundred shimmering droplets clung to each blade of grass. A broad meadow strewn with scarlet blossoms beckoned to me and I responded eagerly. Plunging between drenching stems, I dashed first one way and then another, sniffing, nibbling, sampling. Everything had to be tested and tasted. Something smelled vaguely of mint and I flung myself on it, scenting my fur with its sharp perfume.

A brown speckled lizard dashed away in great panic. Beetles scurried in and out, and a fat bumblebee wandered from flower to flower. The whole meadow fairly teemed with life. A plump grey mouse stuffing its cheeks with new grass proved an easy catch. Too easy. I let it go and it

scurried away. I followed and trapped it again under a large milkweed plant. I tossed it into the air again and again. When I was quite satisfied with my work I carried it proudly back to the road and laid it at Red's feet, meowing excitedly.

"Ha! You call that queenly?" David's scorn was evident.

"Most emphatically. Self-sufficiency is one of the unmistakable hallmarks of nobility. Not only has the lady provided her own sustenance, she is offering to share it with her less fortunate companions. Thank you kindly, Regina. Your gift is most generous. And now I believe we are all ready to resume our pilgrimage."

Red had rolled his overcoat into a compact bundle and strapped it to the bottom of his knapsack. David's jacket was draped over his left shoulder, and the keyboard case swung at his side, the whole of his worldly possessions held in his two hands. I picked up my trophy and trotted beside them, easily outpacing their longest strides.

It was a fine day, a wonderful day in fact, to be out and about. The weather was perfect, the air fresh and clean. A meadowlark serenaded us from a weather-beaten fencepost, and a flock of pale blue butterflies flirted with the flowers in the meadow. Surely only good things could happen on such a beautiful day. I stole a few moments to devour my catch and then hurried to rejoin my friends.

Another car swung around the bend, late for some urgent appointment. Again Red tried his thumb. No luck. The sun climbed to its zenith and held, almost blinding in its pure whiteness. Red retrieved his hat from his trouser pocket and pulled it down to shade his eyes. David could only hunch his shoulders and keep his eyes on the road. Somewhere close by a train whistle cried out, two long, lonely sobs that hung suspended in the warm air. David gave Red a questioning look, but the older man shook his head.

"'Tis the song of the 'Limited', a fleet and lavish conveyance meant only for the fortunate few. Our mode of transportation is of a somewhat plainer sort, more in keeping with our current fortunes and prospects."

"Hey, isn't it about lunchtime? I'm starved." Red gave him a long, searching look and shrugged his shoulders. "There is a modest farmhouse yonder. Mayhap we can acquire some provision there." Ten minutes later he swung open the gate of a white picket fence and knocked smartly at the door of a spare, two-story clapboard house set firmly in the center of a neat and well-kept yard. A hard-looking woman in her late forties peered suspiciously through the screen door.

"Well, what do y'all want?" she demanded. Red doffed his hat and bowed deeply from the waist.

"Forgive us, kind lady, for interrupting your busy schedule, but I couldn't help noticing your want of a kitchen garden to supply your pantry with essential herbs, and the produce necessary for the wholesome and nourishing victuals your family relies on. My companion and I would be willing, nay eager, to till this fertile soil that your spring planting may be delayed no longer. And all this at absolutely no cost to you, save the price of a wholesome meal and a drink of cool water."

The woman scowled mistrustfully. "Thet kid out theh, is he some kahnd of gangsteh? He looks lahk a gangsteh."

"Not at all, madame. Only a young lad in need of a hot meal. I will personally vouch for his good character."

"Well, if you say so, Ah guess its all raht. As long as he's not a gangsteh. Ah don't want any gangstehs on mah propety. Is thet cat yoahs?"

"Aye, madame, she is our traveling companion."

"Well, see she stays away from mah chickens. Ah jest hatched out a new brood, and ah don't want ta see her chasin' any of 'em." She led the way to the rear of the house where a small supply shed yielded up the necessary tools. After indicating the desired location and size of the plot they were to cultivate, the doubtful matron retreated to the relative safety of the house, leaving the men to their labors. For my part, I found a nice, comfortable spot in the shade and curled up to watch or sleep as events might dictate.

Shovel and spade, hoe and rake, all were put to vigorous use by both laborers, although it was obvious that Red was doing quite a bit more than an equal share of the work. He made no comment, however, but did his part thoroughly and efficiently, stopping only to quench his thirst at the old-fashioned hand pump that emptied into a metal washtub near the back door. I lapped up the water that splashed onto the smooth stone at its base, and returned to my resting spot in the shade.

Suddenly my full attention was riveted on a plump white hen that had just strolled into view around the corner of the shed. The jerking motion of her red-crested head matched her spasmodic steps as she cautiously approached the scattered grain and kitchen scraps evidently left over from an earlier feeding. A cluster of a dozen or so downy yellow chicks skittered at her heels, vying with one another for the few seeds and crumbs that remained. What an opportunity!

Instantly I was alert and ready for action. Gone was the drowsiness of a warm spring afternoon. Gone were the tired feet that had walked so many long miles. In their place was a hearty appetite and the instinctive stalking reflex that even a well-fed cat never completely loses. Creeping, crawling, belly to the ground, I slid forward, taking advantage of even the scrawniest weed for cover.

Silently, stealthily, closer and closer I crept, never taking my eyes from my quarry. The witless fowl continued their foraging, blissfully unaware of their mortal danger. I was almost there. I gathered my feet under me and wiggled my haunches, preparing to launch myself at the hapless hen.

"Regina!" A large dirt clod exploded on the hard-packed ground just inches from my nose. Every muscle in my body reacted simultaneously. I sprang straight up into the air and came down with all four feet running. A second clod steered me away from the flock and toward the front of the house. I didn't slow down until I was safely around the corner and out of the line of fire. From the cool sanctuary under the front porch I peered out to see if anyone had followed me. No one had, but I waited in the darkness a few minutes longer, just to be sure.

My courage gradually returning, I made my way along the wall and peeked around the corner into the back yard. Everything seemed normal. Red and David were raking the finished seedbed, breaking up the clods and grooming the rough surface. The chicks pecked industriously at the gravel path while the hen chortled over them possessively. No one noticed my reappearance, or even seemed to notice I'd been gone. Gathering up the tattered shreds of my crumpled dignity, I strolled nonchalantly back to my shady spot and made a conspicuous display of washing my paws.

Red made a final pass with the rake and stood back to admire his handiwork. Then he gathered all the assorted tools into an orderly array along the side of the shed and knocked firmly on the rear door of the main house.

"Greetings again, good madame. I believe you will find the results of our afternoon's labors to be most satisfactory, and I have no doubt that

you will wish to discharge your part of the bargain with equal dispatch and enthusiasm." The woman stepped out and surveyed the garden plot skeptically.

"Ah guess it's alraht," she allowed, frowning. "Ah'll see if Ah kin rustle y'all up some grub." She disappeared into the kitchen. Enthusiasm was evidently not her strong suit. Red peeled off his shirt at the pump and rinsed it thoroughly. He drenched his head and arms in the icy cascade and sponged his upper body with the dripping shirt before wringing it out onto the ground. By the time the lady of the house returned with their meal, he had dressed himself with the still-damp garment and was smoothing his blonde hair with a gap-toothed comb. She looked at him with distaste.

"Heven't got much, jest some left-over pot roast and a little bread."

"Such simple fare is ambrosia to a hard-working man. We are most grateful." Red accepted the bowls with a slight bow. David took his dish and sat on the chopping block.

"Bread's kinda dry," was his only comment. The three of us made short work of our meal and prepared to move on. Red filled his canteen at the pump and tucked it into his knapsack. With the rinsed dishes in hand, he knocked one last at the back door.

"What is it now?" demanded the irritated occupant.

"My apologies again. I desire only to return your tableware with our compliments. I trust the fates will reward your cheerful benevolence."

"Don't know about no fates, but mah husband'll reward y'all with a shotgun if y'all ain't gone bah the tahm he comes in fuh dinneh, an' thet'll be any time now, jes' soon as the sun hits the top o' the bahn theh."

"Fear not, kind lady, we shall be well on our way ere then. Come, Regina, we must take our leave."

"What a stingy, hateful old grouch," David muttered under his breath. As we neared the front gate, he turned and yelled back at the house, "You have a nice day, too, lady!"

"Be not harsh nor hasty in your judgements, lad," Red admonished. "You know not what misfortune or affliction may have brought her to this state. Mayhap one day you also will suffer adversity and be in need of a helping hand."

"May suffer! May suffer, he says! Look at that!" David held his raw and blistered hands. "If that's not suffering, I'd like to know what you call it. And all for a lousy bowl of stew and some stale bread."

"'Tis painful at first, to be sure, but time and labor will put callouses on tender hands."

"Callouses! Who wants callouses? I'm a musician, not a ditch-digger!"

"A musician you may well be, and have talent in abundance, but talent alone will not put meat on the table. You have had two meals this day, both palatable and nourishing, a luxury I have not known in weeks. The day may indeed come when you will earn your bread with your music, but for the present a strong back and calloused hands are the instruments of your survival." David was silent. He kicked a rusted tin can across the road, walked over to the other side and kicked it back. Somewhere in the tall grass a cricket chirped, and the sun touched the roof of the barn.

10
Riding the Rails

As the sun nestled into the cradle of the rolling hills, a sudden chill fell over the land. Red and David hastened to pull on their coats, and of course, I was already wearing mine. Somewhere in the distance a train whistle shrieked a warning cry. Red quickened his pace, and David and I followed suit.

The tracks were clearly visible now, twin streaks of silver in a bed of black cinders cutting through the open farmland. To our left it passed through a grove of stately pines before winding its way into the low hills. The train was still several miles off, a long, slow snake of brown and red with two monstrous black locomotives for its head. By the time we reached the cover of the trees it was less than half a mile away, and both men were puffing and panting.

A four-strand barbed wire fence separated us from the tracks and Red demonstrated to David just how they would hold the strands apart for each other so they could slip through quickly while the train was passing. Back in the shelter of the pines, Red briefly explained the perilous art of boarding a moving train; always mount at the rear of the car, you're less likely to be yanked off your feet and under the wheels. Run beside the train, grab the ladder, and swing yourself on board. It sounded simple enough, but I was skeptical.

David was fairly bouncing with excitement. What an adventure this was! Just wait 'til he told those know-it-all street punks back in Knoxville! They thought they were so tough. Bet none of THEM had ever hopped a train! Then he suddenly recollected that he was traveling AWAY from Tennessee, and his enthusiasm was somewhat dampened. Oh well, it was still a great adventure, and he was going to make the most of it. Red smiled a little sadly and shook his head.

"And what of you, Mistress Regina? Are you also anticipating a soul-stirring experience?" He tucked me into his pocket and buttoned his coat snugly as the dual locomotives swung into view. Not until the engines had passed out of sight did they leave their hiding place in the woods. Climbing through the fence, David snagged his beloved leather jacket on one of the barbs, tearing a small, three-cornered hole. He swore at Red. "What's the matter with you? You were supposed to be holding the wire for me!"

"A taut strand may be stretched just so much and no more. 'Twas your undue haste to stand erect that damaged your garment."

"Oh, so now it's my fault, is it? Well I'll tell you...!"

"To assign blame at this juncture will gain us nothing and cost us valuable time. Allow me to suggest that we defer this discussion until we are safely aboard this contraption." Choosing a flatbed-type car as his target, Red jogged along beside the track until the back of the car was almost even with his elbow. He reached up, grabbed the third rung of the ladder, and swung himself up with the easy grace of the skilled veteran. Then it was David's turn.

The long, heavy freight train wasn't moving at any great speed, but the teenager was tired, and his energy was waning fast. His boots slipped in the loose gravel, and he stumbled as he reached for the ladder. Red seized the slender wrist with one powerful hand and lifted him bodily off the ground and away from the deadly wheels. After several heart-stopping seconds of dangling and twisting, David managed to grab the ladder with his

free hand, and found a place for his feet on the car's undercarriage.

"Okay, I've got it!" he hollered above the clatter of the wheels.

"Are you certain?"

"I said I'm alright!" Red released his iron grip and stepped a short distance away on the bed of the car. David joined us a moment later, flushed and breathless. He flung himself down on his stomach and hung his head over the side, watching the ground rush past below. Even at this slow speed it was a dizzying spectacle. The cinder roadbed and the square wooden cross-ties melted together into a blur of greyish brown. Red leaned over and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Take care lest a loose fragment be cast into an unwary eye."

"Buzz off, willya? I told you I can take care of myself." Red shrugged his shoulders and ambled off to examine the cargo. He had chosen his target well. This particular car carried five unmounted truck cabs, glistening blue titans of the open road. Bypassing the first, he tried the door of the second one, and it swung open invitingly. Inside it was still fairly warm and almost quiet. He slipped off his knapsack and set it on the floor. I climbed out of my pocket and inspected the seat while Red folded his coat and laid it in the corner. I put my paws on his knee and he scratched my neck.

"It would appear we shall sleep in some comfort tonight, Regina." The door opened and David stuck his head inside.

"Wow! FAN-tastic!" Red slid over and David climbed in on the driver's side. "Man, wouldn't I love to have one of these babies! Vrun! Vrun! Look out for that curve!" He gripped an imaginary steering wheel and cranked it sharply to the left, throwing the whole of his upper body into the action. "Errk! Man, that was close!" He grabbed his imaginary gearshift lever and stomped his left foot hard on the floor.

"Ouch!" He balanced the offending foot on his right knee and undid the buckles at the top and ankle. Gingerly he drew off the boot and carefully rolled the long, brown sock over his foot, revealing a round, red patch of raw flesh at the back of his heel, and another, smaller one on his little toe. A similar examination of the right foot disclosed nearly identical wounds. "Criminy, would you look at that!" Red nodded. He rummaged around in his knapsack and came up with a crumpled tube of ointment. "I trust this will afford some temporary relief, although a well-fitted pair of hiking shoes would provide more of a long-term solution."

"Thanks, but I've done just about all the walking I intend to do. From now on I'm riding the rails. I can go anywhere I want, any time I want, and it won't cost me a cent."

"So thought I once, and so have many others. Sadly, many a bed of roses is found to be full of thorns ere morning comes. Now, at the risk of seeming ungracious, I must ask you to take leave of us. 'Tis eventide, and the lady and I have need of repose."

"Kind of early to be turning in, isn't it? Or are you just too old to stay up past sundown?"

"'Tis a matter of necessity and not of stamina. We must arise early and make good our departure before this carriage arrives in Shreveport on the morrow. Railroad security does not look kindly upon non-paying passengers. It is my intent to retire early, and I heartily suggest you do the same."

"Shoot, I'm not afraid of any old security guard. I can take care of myself."

"So you have informed me. All the same, it would not be prudent to expose oneself unnecessarily. Now, if you will excuse us, Regina and I shall attempt to get some sleep."

"Suit yourself, old man." David hopped down and sauntered around to the rear of the flatcar, carrying his socks and boots. It was almost dark now, and even inside the cab it was getting chilly. After locking both doors, Red folded and wedged his long frame onto the narrow seat and draped his coat over himself for a blanket.

He cradled his head on his right arm and raised up the edge of the coat with his left. I burrowed underneath and curled up close to his chest. His huge hand curved protectively around me, and soon he was fast asleep. It took a little longer for me, however. Riding on a train was a new experience, and required a bit of adjustment. There was a lot of bouncing and vibration, not unlike riding in a car, but every few seconds there would be a peculiar jerk to one side. It was a bit unsettling at first, but eventually I got used to it, and soon I, too, was in dreamland.

It seemed like only a few minutes later I was jolted awake again. The train squealed to a halt, rolled backward a little, then stopped again. I climbed onto Red's shoulder to get a better look. He stirred, rubbed his eyes, and half sat up. I clambered up to the back of the seat and peered into the darkness. We seemed to be stopped next to another set of tracks running parallel to our own. A whistle blew and the train moved forward, pushing several cars onto the siding. The whistle blew again and we were pulled backwards, only without the extra cars. One more blast and we moved forward once more, closing the empty space with a jolt.

"Alexandria," Red informed me. "They always change a few cars here." Now we were moving again, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Red curled up and went back to sleep, while I continued to watch the passing night from my lofty perch. Soon, however, the chilly air got the upper hand over my curiosity, and I returned to the welcoming warmth under the coat.

It was still dark when Red finally roused himself again. The train had slowed noticeably and we were passing through some sort of town, one that seemed to be made up more of oil rigs than of houses. He pulled on his coat, retrieved his knapsack from the floor, and went in search of his young companion. It was downright cold now, and I was glad I had my fur coat to protect me.

We found David huddled in the last cab, curled up into a shivering knot with only his leather jacket for warmth. When Red tapped on the window he jerked slightly and tried to pull the jacket up around his ears. Red knocked again, harder. David slowly uncoiled, and sat up stiffly. He looked at us, ran his hand through his hair, and turned his head away. Red tried the door handle and found it locked.

"Well, at least the lad shows SOME sense." He banged the door once with a huge fist and shouted above the noise. "Come, lad. We must make good our escape." David rolled the window down an inch.

"Is this Shreveport?"

"Bossier City. Shreveport is but moments away. Make haste. We must alight lest the yard dogs be upon us."

"You jump if you want to. I'm staying here." He rolled up the window and lay back down on the seat. Red sighed. He slung on his knapsack and tucked me into his pocket. At the rear of the car he climbed down the ladder and stood on the bottom rung. Jumping clear of the train, he hit the ground running, lost his footing, and rolled down the embankment.

A thin line of grey showed on the horizon, silhouetting the oil derricks like giant skeletons stalking the barren land. All around us the cricket pumps nodded their sleepy heads, up and down, up and down, like monstrous devouring insects sucking the life from the earth. The air was heavy with

the acrid smell of unrefined petroleum. It burned my nose and I sneezed.

"You have my sympathy, Mistress Regina. 'Tis a foul odor indeed, albeit essential to the economy of this blighted region." Half an hour of rapid walking brought us to the outskirts of the railroad yard, a scene of controlled chaos. Everywhere there was activity. Banging and clanging, whistles shrieking and horns blowing, trains moving and trains standing still, cars and lines of cars being shoved to and fro by the small yard engines. Our train had finally come to rest in the very center of this confusion.

Red moved swiftly but noiselessly down its length, checking under each car, looking for David, I assumed. A hundred yards from the end the sounds of a scuffle drew his attention. He moved forward until we were almost even with the voices and then stepped carefully between two boxcars. It was David alright, and he was in real trouble this time. A big, burly guard had him shoved up against one of the cars, his right arm twisted savagely behind his back, his face pressed against the unyielding planks.

"Ah'll teach yew ta pull a knife on me, yew smaht-aleck little punk." He slammed the boy's head against the car and yanked it back by the hair. David yelped and tried to break free, but the guard only twisted his arm all the harder. "Go ahaid, punk. The moah yew faht the bettah Ah lahk it."

"Lemme go, you big ape! I didn't hurt your stupid train. What's so terrible about taking a little ride, anyway?"

"What's so terrible abaht it? It's against the law, thet's what so terrible abaht it. Thet's the trouble with yew young punks, ya got no respect fuh the law." He half-dragged, half-shoved the unfortunate lad toward the control shack. If someone didn't do something fast, that boy was going to jail. Slipping in quietly behind the unwary guard, Red knocked him to the ground with a well-placed kick in the back of the knee. He tried to pull David away, but the boy hung back.

"He's got my knife."

"A mere possession, not worth the sacrifice of your freedom." Red grabbed his arm and hauled him forcibly away between the cars. He shepherded his young charge past half a dozen trains, some moving, some not, and all the while behind us we could hear the shouts of the outraged guard. Others joined in the chase, and the voice of at least one ferocious-sounding dog was added to the general clamor.

A high board fence loomed before us. There was no way David was going to make it over this new obstacle alone, but Red boosted him up and over the wall as if he weighed no more than a cat. Two big black dogs bore down on us as Red leaped up to grab the top of the barricade. He missed. Another try and he got a handhold, barely in time to hoist himself - and me - out of reach of the dogs snapping jaws. Safely on the other side, the two fugitives paused to catch their breath. David was the first to speak.

"So what do we do about breakfast?" I couldn't believe my ears! Here we just barely got out with our lives and all he could think about was his stomach.

"Ah, yes," Red mused. "Once again the quest for sustenance. 'Tis the very core of our existence, to survive and reproduce. In this instance a problem quite easily solved. If you will deign to follow my direction, you will soon discover the characteristic gilded arches of a popular eating establishment. Their waste receptacle is wont to contain rations aplenty for the hungry and the homeless."

"Me? Go dumpster diving? I don't think so! I've still got almost half of the ten bucks I got for sweeping out the hardware store, and I intend

to have a decent breakfast for a change. I'll see you later." David slung his keyboard over his shoulder and marched proudly through the front door into the restaurant.

"Well, Regina, shall we see what culinary delights await the less prosperous?" Behind the building two large trash cans contained all the refuse from the previous day's business. Hundreds of paper cups, burger trays, and plastic tableware mingled with half-eaten meals and general leftovers. We were both experienced foragers, and it didn't take us long to put together a substantial if soggy meal. When we were at last full we went around and met David coming out of the front door.

"Where to now?" the boy wanted to know.

"Back to the railroad yard to seek out our westbound transportation."

"Aren't you scared of the 'yard dogs'?"

"I do not intend to enter the yard proper, only to observe from a favorable vantage point." Red led the way to an old red brick apartment building a short distance from the switching yard. Around in back, he pulled down the creaking fire escape ladder and we climbed to the top. It was five stories up a very old and unsteady stairway, and frankly I was mightily relieved when we were all safely on the roof. Red set me down so I could stretch my legs and do some exploring. "Beware of roaming too far afield," he cautioned.

I wasn't likely to wander far on a building of that size. A low wall ran all the way around the flat roof, and sort of shack in the middle provided access to the inside stairwell. There was a vent pipe for the furnace and several TV antennae for the tenants, and that was about it. I sniffed around the base of the vent pipe and chased a fat brown cockroach under the stairwell door. Then I went back to where the two men sat on the wall looking out across the valley.

Our elevated position afforded us a spectacular view of the countryside for miles around. To the south and east lay the oil fields of Bossier City, through which we had so lately passed. A busy airport to the north sent screaming jets into the peaceful morning skies, guaranteeing that at least in that neighborhood everyone was awake. To the west, a broad, winding river, and beyond that the urban jungle that was Shreveport. David's curiosity was piqued.

"Have you been through this part of the country before?"

"Numerous times, my boy, too numerous to count."

"Is that the same river we've been following all night?"

"Indeed it is. That is the celebrated Red River, renowned of song and cinema, a thousand miles of life flowing from the Texas panhandle to the Louisiana basin."

"You mean this is the 'Red River Valley' my grandpa was always singing about? I always thought that was just something somebody made up."

"On the contrary, it is quite real, though the precise region referred to in the lyrics is somewhat north and west of here, specifically the Texas-Oklahoma border."

"What's going on down there?" David's attention was focused on a knot of activity in the railyard below us. Several yard engines bustled up and down the lines pushing cars back and forth, two or three cars here, half a dozen there, two dozen or more on yet another track.

"What you are witnessing is no less than the birth of a freight train. Solitary units, boxcars, flatcars, tankers and reefers, individually with no object or aim, are coupled together to form a single entity, a living, breathing organism with a purpose and a goal; to wit, interstate commerce. Without these shining rails and panting engines our great nation would not

be what it is today."

"Are you putting me on? What about all those big rigs out there on the highway? You know what they say, 'Everything travels by truck'."

"A statement is not a fact simply by virtue of having been broadcast over the electronic media. A hundred years before the first gasoline powered delivery van, the railroads were transporting goods and passengers up and down the eastern seaboard on regularly scheduled runs. 'Twas trains that crossed the endless prairies and trackless deserts, and trains that scaled the lofty mountains and spanned the perilous chasms that blocked the way to the golden west and threatened to stifle the glorious vision of Manifest Destiny. Even today more cargo is borne by rail than by road."

David was silent for a while. We sat and watched as the procession of cars grew longer and longer. Soon it had outgrown the yard and had to be pushed out onto the main siding. Red stood up and brushed himself off.

"It would appear the hour of departure is at hand." We wound our way through the morning traffic and crossed the bridge into Shreveport. I felt as if we had walked into another world. There were so many trees, tall trees, broad, sheltering trees, it seemed more like a forest than a city. They shaded the shops and houses and overhung the streets and sidewalks like an immense green parasol. A chilly mist hung in the air, impervious to the best efforts of the rising sun. The only break in the leafy canopy was along the railroad right-of-way, a green-walled canyon in the vast expanse of vegetation.

A single blast of the horn signaled the approach of the Texas-bound freight. Two locomotives passed, one facing forward, one to the rear. A long string of tankers followed, gleaming white cylinders strung together like beads on a chain. Then came the boxcars, red ones and brown, even a few yellow ones, most of them sealed and padlocked. Finally there was one with an open door. Red hoisted himself inside and turned to give his friend a helping hand.

"Get lost! This car's taken." A gravelly voice barked from the inner reaches of the car.

"Fear not, my good fellow, we mean you no harm." Red pulled David all the way inside.

"Are you deaf? I said get lost!"

"Do my ears deceive me, or could that be the long-absent compatriot of my golden youth? Hopalong, you old renegade, would you address a fellow knight of the rails in so inhospitable a manner?"

"Red, you old scoundrel! I don't believe it! Humblest apologies, old buddy, I didn't recognize you. Who's the debutante? You taking on trainees now?"

"Reginald Jenkins, may I present young David Gabriel, a wayward lamb in search of a wolfpack. He has deemed his home life unbearable and has chosen instead the life of a vagabond." Red walked over and sat down cross-legged next to his old friend. David remained standing near the door.

"What's the problem, kid?" questioned the stranger. "Your old man beat you up?"

"Shoot, no. My dad never laid a finger on me."

"Well, what was it then? They feed you on moldy bread and gruel? Your mother spent the rent money on booze?"

"No, nothing like that. They just wouldn't let me do anything, that's all. They treated me like some kind of kid."

"And what did you want to do that they didn't approve of?"

"Well, like I had to be home by eleven every night, even on weekends."

And they went and sold my brother's motorcycle. I told them I could get it fixed up for a hundred bucks or so, but they claimed it was too dangerous. Like I was some kind of baby or something."

"And why didn't your brother get it fixed himself?" Hopalong pulled out his pocket knife and scratched something in the floorboard.

"'Cause he's in the army, that's why. Soon as he gets home, though, he'll want it back, and then they'll be sorry."

"And just how did it get damaged in the first place?"

"Some jerk ran him off the road and he cracked up in a ditch."

"Oh, I see. So then their real crime was trying to keep you alive until his return. How very unreasonable of them. I understand now why you had no choice but to run away. After all, a man has a right to kill himself if he wants to."

Red seemed to have forgotten about me again, so I wiggled out of my pocket and introduced myself to his friend.

"Well, and what have we here? Red, you sly old dog, you're trying to keep a pretty lady all to yourself. What's the matter, you afraid of a little competition?"

"A thousand pardons. Miss Regina, may I present my good friend Hoppy. He's a rogue and a rake since time immemorial, a heartless Casanova without a conscience, so guard your affections closely."

"How do you do, Lady Regina?" Hoppy extended his hand.

"Don't mind him, he's just jealous 'cause I'm so handsome and charming. Come over here and shake hands with a true gentleman." He petted me and scratched my back and I purred my appreciation. Then I curled up between them and allowed them to share my affections. Seating himself a short distance away, David pulled off his boots and socks and scrutinized the blisters on his feet. They had dried up during the overnight train ride, but the long walk this morning had made them raw and angry-looking.

"Looks like you could do with a good pair of walking shoes and some thick socks," Hoppy observed.

"What for? I'm not going to be doin' any more walking 'til I get to the coast. I'm goin' to ride this baby all the way to LA."

Hoppy snorted. "You should be so lucky. And what happens if you DO manage to get to LA? You got a rich uncle there or something?"

"Boy, you don't know much, do you?" The teenager's tone was scornful. "LA is where all the big recording studios are. I'll get me a gig in one of the clubs 'til I can land a contract with one of the big record companies. I'm goin' to be a multi-millionaire, then I guess nobody'll be tellin' me what time I hafta be home at night."

"You must be pretty good with that gizmo, than. How about giving us a demonstration?" David unzipped his keyboard case and laid the "gizmo" across his lap. He pressed a couple of keys and a discordant squawk issued forth. Then silence.

"I guess the batteries croaked," he offered lamely.

"Oh, well, I imagine you can get new ones next town we come to." Hoppy consoled him. "That shouldn't be too much of a problem for a multi-millionaire."

"Well, I'm not exactly a millionaire yet," David admitted sheepishly. "I just spent my last four bucks on breakfast. I didn't know I was goin' to need batteries."

"Ha!" chortled the grizzled veteran. "I knew there was a good reason why I didn't like those new-fangled gadgets." He produced a battered and tarnished harmonica from his coat pocket and blew a couple of tentative notes. He played a few bars of a mournful-sounding ballad, and Red joined

in with a rich, full baritone.

"I'm just a poor, wayfaring stranger
Traveling through this world of woe,
And there's no sickness, no toil or danger
In that fair land to which I go.

"I'm goin' there to see my mother.
I'm goin' there no more to roam.
I'm just a-goin' over Jordan.
I'm just a-goin' over home."

Chapter 11 A Vagabond's Life

David shivered. He turned up the collar of his over-sized jacket and pulled the sleeves down over his aching fingers. "Is it always this cold in these old boxcars?" He had to shout to be heard above the clatter of the wheels.

"On the contrary dear boy," Red assured him cheerfully. "Come the fullness of summer, the temperature in such a coach will frequently surpass one hundred and thirty degrees. More than one man has taken his last ride in this ambulatory sarcophagus."

"Isn't it ever just comfortable?" David grumbled.

"Now that you mention it, I seem to recall two or three days last June when it was almost bearable. Is that in harmony with your recollections, compadre?" Red turned to Hopalong, who grinned and nodded.

"Sounds about right. 'Course I'm generally a tad farther west this time of year. Winters in Florida, summers in Oregon, spring and fall in sunny California."

"Well, it wouldn't be so bad if I could just sit by the door for a while. At least there's a little sunshine over there."

"Sorry, kid, but if the guards spotted you we'd all be going out that door head first."

"How about a fire, then? Looks like somebody had one in here." David pointed to a charred spot in the corner which I was industriously inspecting. Nearby a hole gaped in the floor where several planks had been ripped out. I crept to the edge and peeked over. Far below, the ground rushed by at dizzying speed. I lay on my belly and watched, hypnotized.

"I wouldn't recommend building a fire in here. Too dangerous. If it got out of control we'd all be incinerated. Besides, they'd be sure to spot the smoke. Then we'd be lucky if all we GOT was thrown off." A sudden, unexpected jolt threw me dangerously close to the yawning chasm, and I clawed frantically at the floorboards. When I had regained my footing, I retreated to my friend's side, seeking his companionship and the comforting warmth of his huge coat.

"Poor Lady Regina. Is it fear that causes you to tremble so, or is it merely the frigid atmosphere of our rude coach? No matter. You are always welcome, whatever the cause."

On and on we rattled through the flatlands of east Texas. There were no trees now, only now and then a battered tumbleweed snagged in the barbed-wire fence along the tracks. From time to time a cluster of oil

wells popped into view, only to sink out of sight again in the endless sea of grass. The only sign of life was the occasional jackrabbit bobbing across the prairie, and a few scrawny cows foraging mournfully on the new grass.

It was mid-morning when we lurched to a halt on a siding a couple of miles from an isolated town. The now-familiar back-and-forth movement told us we were picking up some additional cars. A volley of strange new smells assaulted my nostrils and demanded investigation. I was almost to the door when a trumpeting bellow stopped me dead in my tracks.

"WHAT was THAT!" David looked as alarmed as I felt. Red chuckled.

"An awesome creature to be sure, but hardly one to inspire fear. That voice belongs to *Elephas maximus*, the workhorse of Asia. Beast of burden from a more primitive time, preferred transportation for kings and conquerors alike."

"What are you talking about? What's he talking about?" A confused David turned from Red to Hoppy.

"He means an elephant," Hoppy grinned. "It sounds like we're picking up a travelling circus of some sort."

"Smells like it, too. Whew!" David wrinkled his nose. "Say, shouldn't there be a town around here somewhere?"

"'Bout two miles to the east. Why, were you planning a stopover?"

"Well, for an hour or so, anyway. We've passed a dozen towns already today, and never even slowed down. Aren't they at least going to stop somewhere for lunch?" Hoppy snorted.

"Train crews bring their own lunches, boy. They keep a tight schedule on these lines. Time is money, and they don't waste any on small towns like Mineola. Don't worry, we'll be in Dallas by this afternoon. Should be able to scrounge up something there." The train began to move again, gradually picking up speed as it glided unhindered across the fertile plains. David sighed. He rested his chin on his knees and picked at a loose sliver on the plank next to his boot.

"I don't get it. I always thought riding the rails was supposed to be exciting and thrilling, but so far it's been nothing but miserable. How come you guys keep doin' it if it's always this lousy?" Hoppy shrugged.

"At my age what else am I going to do? Without money you can't even get decent clothes, let alone rent an apartment. Without good clothes and a permanent address you can't get a decent job, so where do you get the money to begin with? Sticking up strangers in dark alleys?"

"Yeah, but how did you get into this in the first place? You must have had a home to start with. Everybody does."

"No, son, not everybody." Hoppy hauled himself to his feet and stepped to the open door of the boxcar, noticeably favoring his left leg. Gripping the upper railing with both hands, he scanned the passing terrain as though searching for his lost youth somewhere out there on the distant horizon. After a few moments he turned and moved once more into the shadows.

"I never knew my father. He took off when I was two days old. My mother died from a back-alley abortion before my sixth birthday, and I spent the next eight years being shuffled from one foster home to another. I was beaten, starved, abused and accused, sometimes by my own kin, sometimes by strangers. In between foster homes I was confined in juvenile halls and boys' homes along with thieves, vandals, hoodlums, and just plain bullies.

"Twice I actually got to go to school, for five months in the first grade, and about three months of junior high. Why I didn't end up a drug dealer or a bank robber I have no idea. It was certainly no thanks to the

child welfare system of the great state of California. When I turned fourteen they gave me a hundred dollars and cut me loose, and I've been on my own ever since."

"You mean you've never had a job or a car or anything?" David was incredulous.

"Shoot, boy, of course I've had jobs. I've had a hundred jobs. I've picked fruit and worked the fields with the braceros all up and down the coast. I've washed dishes and painted houses, delivered booze for a liquor store and betting slips for a bookie. I've worked the salmon boats in Alaska and the shrimpers down in the Gulf. Even had my own boat for a while, 'til my partner ran it onto the rocks off Anacapa. I've been a short-order cook, a security guard and a dock worker.

"I spent three weeks once stuffing a sausage machine in a meat-packing plant, and yes, I did my three years in the Army. I lost most of my left foot outside of Denver when I tried to hop a train that was going a bit too fast. I spent nearly three months in a charity ward and then they kicked me out and I hit the road again. Took almost a year before I was able to put a boot on again."

"I guess that's why they call you 'Hopalong'" David speculated.

"Bright boy! You figured that out all by yourself." Hoppy leaned against the door frame, laughing heartily. After a pause he continued. "I was even married once, if you can believe that. We had a big silver Jag that we drove down to Florida one summer. On the way back we broke an axle just south of Atlanta and wound up selling it to a couple of jerks for fifty bucks 'cause we didn't have enough money to get it fixed. We hitched all the way back to L.A."

"So where is she now, your wife, I mean?"

"Beats me. She ditched me in Phoenix about twenty-five years ago. Shacked up with some Italian guy worked for the Post Office. She said she needed more security."

"Why didn't you just settle down and stay in one place? Maybe she would've stuck with you?"

"I don't know. I guess I kept thinking there had to be something better just down the road. A better job, cheaper rent, nicer climate, you know, the grass is always greener, that sort of thing. It just got to be a habit. Now it's my life." Hoppy sighed and kicked a pebble out the open door. Suddenly tired, the intrepid vagabond hitched himself across the shuddering coach and plopped back into his chosen corner. I wiggled out of Red's coat and curled up on Hoppy's lap while David digested this new information.

The endless prairie unrolled just out of reach, and somewhere up front the elephant trumpeted again. I shivered and snuggled closer into my new friend's lap. The yellow triangle of sunlight moved slowly across the ragged floorboards, transforming itself eventually into a bright, white rectangle straight across the center. The whistle shrieked, the brakes whined, and once more we slid to a stop on a long siding. Red got to his feet, dusted himself off, and turned to his young companion.

"If you feel the want of comestibles, and I have no doubt that you do, you will perforce have to labor for them once again, distasteful as that may be to one of such delicate sensibilities."

"You mean get a job with the circus?" The cloud of gloom that had darkened the lad's face vanished in an eruption of new excitement. He was on his feet in a flash. "Wow! That'd be great!"

"Likely not a permanent situation," Red shifted his backpack into position, "but a mobile enterprise of this ilk will almost invariably

engage outside laborers to perform those heavy chores which they themselves prefer to forgo." By now the men were back on solid ground, and I followed close behind. Off we went to find the man in charge. All around us was organized confusion. Everyone knew his job, or seemed to, and did it as quickly and efficiently as possible. A long line of trucks waited by the side of the road running parallel to the tracks. Twenty-three carloads of trunks and crates, canvass and lumber, people and animals, had to be unloaded from the train and delivered into town as swiftly and efficiently as possible.

Two carloads of white horses, twenty or more, whinnied and tossed their heads as they were led down the ramps to the waiting trailers. Restless hooves pawed the ground and silvery manes and tails whipped the trainers' arms and faces. It must have been torture for those spirited creatures to see all those miles and miles of unbroken prairie just a few yards away, with all that sweet new grass just waiting to be cropped, while they were cooped up in box stalls with nothing but dried alfalfa and a few oats, and a carrot or two for a treat. But their complaints and protests fell on the deaf ears of men in a hurry to get the job done.

Three elephants put in an appearance and were led to the road by their handlers. No truck ride for these monsters. They had to make it to town under their own steam. Lined up head to tail, each elephant grasped the tail of the one in front of her with her trunk, and stout chains bound together all the legs on one side. The lead animal wrapped her trunk around the trainer and hoisted him effortlessly onto her massive shoulders. A word from him and they were off, marching in step, a lumbering army of grey in a small cloud of dust.

Moving up the line, we passed a cage of monkeys being unloaded, their excited chatter heightening the sense of confusion surrounding us. It wasn't hard to spot the commander of this eccentric army. He was the red-faced, perspiring little man in the center of the tumult, waving his arms excitedly and screeching orders at groups of workers who generally ignored him. Having been with the outfit for years, they'd been through this same routine hundreds of times before, and were already doing whatever it was he was hollering at them to do.

"There's our man." Hoppy stated the obvious. "You better let me do the talking. If we left it up to Red, we'd starve to death before the man figured out what we wanted." He winked at David and approached the human tornado. "Excuse me, sir." The circus owner whirled about, nearly striking Hoppy with one flailing arm.

"What? What do you want? Can't you see I'm a busy man?"

"Yes, sir, I sure can. That's why I thought you could use some extra hands. My friends and I could use a few bucks..."

"Oh, you could, could you? Well so could I, pal, so could I. Tell you what, though. You help us get this outfit into town and set up before dark and I'll give the three of you a case of tuna and a ten-pound sack of potatoes. Okay?"

"It's a deal. What do we do?"

"You can help put up the grandstands. Hobbs'll show you what to do. Hobbs!" He waved frantically at a group of men loading planks onto a flat-bed truck. None of them turned in our direction. "Well what are you standing around for? Go on, they'll show you what to do."

"Thanks," Hoppy replied, but the little man didn't hear. His attention was riveted on the horses and their handlers. One of the stallions had broken free and was charging straight for the open field across the road. Halting at the fence, he reared up on his hind legs, whinnying and pawing

at the air. A dozen men rushed at him from all sides, shouting and waving frantically. The first to reach him made a grab for the bridle and got kicked in the shoulder for his trouble. The agitated creature whirled and galloped toward the tracks, scattering the men like feathers in the wind.

Suddenly a sharp whistle cut through the tumult. The stallion stopped dead in its tracks and reared again. It stood pawing and snorting next to the fence. The trainer strode forward, seized the bridle, and patted the quivering neck. A single soft word, and the animal was quiet again, completely docile and content to be led.

"Idiots! Fools!" the trainer raged. "They might have injured you." He steered his restless charge to the nearest trailer and guided him up the ramp to safety. The excitement was over. Everyone returned to his own work and we headed for the lumber truck. By the time we got there, they were tying down the load with heavy canvas straps.

"Which one of you is Hobbs?" Hoppy inquired.

"I am. Who wants to know?" The tallest man gave a final hard yank on his strap and turned around.

"The boss said we could help set up the grandstands."

"Okay, climb aboard. This load's ready." We made ourselves comfortable on the stack of lumber, and the truck bumped on down the road toward the town. The flat grasslands and scattered oil wells soon gave way to the small lots and square, box-like homes of the migrant workers. No lush, green lawns surrounded these simple houses, no hedges or flower beds enlivened their drab sameness. Only here and there a chicken scratched for bugs in the bare dirt, and a small, black-haired boy threw a stick for his dog to chase.

A mile or so into town we came to a broad open space between a small park and a big, new shopping mall. This was an entirely different sort of neighborhood from what I'd just seen. The houses in this section were newer and prettier, and there were flower beds, and trees for shade.

The truck pulled into the vacant lot and everyone jumped off. Fifty or more men were already at work preparing the grounds for the great event, and more were arriving all the time. The two largest elephants were being dressed in heavy chain harnesses and hitched to the biggest, longest pole I'd ever seen, while nearby two strong men used a long two-handled shovel to dig a hole at the center of the lot. Now this definitely required immediate investigation. I trotted over and thrust my head between their feet to get a peek at their work, but one of them bowled me over with his boot.

"Stupid cat, you'll get yer dang fool head lopped off." I resented the insult, but I sat myself down a few feet away and waited until they had finished. As soon as their backs were turned I snuck over for another look. It was a deep, round hole about a foot in diameter, with a long, sloping channel cut away on one side. I leaned over the edge, trying to see the bottom.

"Look out!" A huge gloved hand flung me aside just as the massive pole came sliding down the channel and slammed into the side of the hole. The elephants strained in their harnesses and the gigantic timber began to rise, slowly at first, then faster and faster until with a whoosh and a thud it settled into the pit. Stout cables and sturdy pegs anchored it to solid earth and at last it stood alone, a huge finger pointing significantly at the hastening sun. Two slightly shorter poles were quickly erected on either side of the main shaft and several large sections of faded red and brown canvas were rolled out onto the ground around the network of cables. The Big Top was taking shape.

The next half-hour was pure bliss. What fun I had chasing the billowing fabric as it was dragged and pulled and hoisted into position! Tunnels formed and vanished in a matter of moments. Mountains and valleys appeared and disappeared. Back and forth, under and over, up and down, I raced and scampered and bounded. Once I almost made it to the peak before my claws failed me and I slid, scratching and scrabbling, back to the bottom. Whump!

Undaunted, I scuttled under the flapping edge and galloped full tilt around the inside perimeter of the tent, dodging poles, ropes, and workmen's boots. Then out the front entrance, across the field to the trucks, and back. I was in kitty heaven. By the time all the canvas had been raised and secured most of the lumber from the trucks was unloaded and stacked near the center pole. I nearly tripped poor David, who was carrying a pair of twenty-foot boards into the tent.

"Watch out!" he hollered. "Blasted cat! You're goin' to get us both killed." He dumped his load onto the growing pile and sat down to rest.

"Come on, kid, keep moving. We've got to hustle if we're going to get these bleachers up in time for the eight o'clock show." Hobbs deposited his own cargo and returned for another load. David sighed, pulled himself to his feet, and followed. I mounted to the top of the stack and scrutinized the uppermost plank. Worn smooth by countless feet and posteriors, it was scented from end to end with a tantalizing variety of odors. I smelled popcorn and perfume, peanuts and perspiration, stale tobacco and soda pop, an endless diversity of fascinating scents.

"Okay, this is how it works." Hobbs picked up a pair of planks and addressed his class of two dozen or so less than eager pupils. "Each board is slotted on both ends, and the slots fit into each other, like so." He demonstrated. "Each slot is numbered and the numbers go together in order. One goes into two, three into four, and so on. You'll start over here in this corner and keep going until you run out of boards. Anyone who stays to the finish gets a free pass to the first show. Now get moving."

I watched for a while as the crew began to assemble the grandstands, piece by laborious piece. The boards weren't heavy and the men worked steadily, but still it seemed to be taking forever. Finally I grew bored and moved off in search of something a trifle more stimulating.

Not far away a second, smaller tent had been erected to shelter the several cages containing the performing animals. In the first one an elderly lion paced continuously in his few square feet of space. Barely able to take three steps in any direction, still he moved incessantly back and forth, back and forth. Obviously weary and yet indescribably restless, he passed me again and again, looking but not seeing, searching endlessly, hopeless and yet hopeful. Pausing momentarily, he gave out with a deafening roar, the most awesome sound I've ever heard, or ever hope to hear again. It was nothing less than a cry for help, at once terrifying and mournful, and my heart ached for him.

How sad to spend one's life like this, imprisoned in an eight-foot world with the whole of the universe just beyond the bars. Never to charge across the open plains or lounge in the shade of a wide-limbed tree. Never to know the freedom of his heritage or even the company of his own kind. Destined to call ceaselessly into the night with no hope of an answer. A few square feet to pace in and two meals a day, this was his life, the only one he'd ever known. I stood on my hind legs and reached my forepaws up to the bottom of his age, but he didn't see me. I called to him, but he didn't hear. Back and forth, an endless journey from nowhere to nowhere. There was nothing I could do so I moved on.

The next cage was infinitely more cheerful. It wasn't much bigger than the first, but the occupants didn't seem to mind. A pair of young bear cubs, probably litter mates, wrestled and rolled and boxed like children just let out of school. Small and black, with wide brown eyes and round, furry bellies, they resembled nothing so much as a couple of animated teddy bears, the kind young girls like to set in neat rows on their beds. But stuffed bears never had claws like those two. Long and yellow and ominous-looking, they clicked and clattered on the wooden floor as the cubs rolled and tumbled. I'd sure hate to be on the receiving end of those weapons.

One of the cubs spotted me and ambled over for a closer look. He poked a fat, furry paw between the bars and made a half-hearted swipe in my direction. Standing as tall as I could, I sniffed at his extended paw, dodging back hastily when he swung again. A moment later he was tackled from behind by his rambunctious littermate and they were off again, rolling around the cage, oblivious to everything but their own high-spirited play.

The next enclosure was the monkey cage. Screeching and chattering, they leaped from bar to bar, a dozen or more creatures vying for territory where there was little to be had. Occasionally one would sit down in a corner to rest, only to be roused by a more restless member or the troupe. Thoroughly depressed, I departed the animal tent and went in search of a more cheerful environment. Crossing the compound, I checked in on the Big Top, where Red and the others still labored at erecting the grandstands. Eight feet high and still building.

Beyond the Big Top a row of small trailers was temporary home for the performers and road crew who wandered now from trailer to trailer, talking, laughing, calling out to one another. A strikingly pretty girl in her late teens sat on the wooden steps in front of one of the mobile homes, brushing her waist-length black hair. The cool evening breeze teased at the dark, wavy mass, blowing it this way and that, playing hide and seek with her deep brown eyes.

Bending her head forward, she brushed the rebellious mane into a single handful at the crown, securing it with a sturdy clip. Raising her head, the young woman again applied the brush to the elegant cascade, but with little apparent effect. It danced and shivered in the breeze like a thing alive, a restless and wayward waterfall of gleaming ebony. The temptation was too much. In three bounds I was on the steps, batting at the glorious, swirling mass with both paws. Light as a feather it was, fresh and sweet-smelling as a summer morning.

"Hey, watch it!" The brush dropped to the dirt and both her hands reached up to rescue the long, black ponytail. "Where did you come from, anyway?" The girl lifted me onto her lap and tried to untangle my claws from her crowning glory. She didn't get much cooperation. Every time she pulled one lock free from my grasp another strand fluttered past my nose, and I made a grab for that. It was such wonderful, delicious fun! "Lisa!" She wailed in desperation. The trailer door opened and another girl poked her head out, a year or two younger, perhaps, but just as dark, and just as pretty.

"Yeah, what?" she asked, impatiently.

"Can you do something with this? I'm trying to fix my hair." The older girl lifted me up toward her sister.

"What, and spoil all her fun? I guess not!"

"Come on, you know I have to get dressed. Just hang onto her 'til I can get my hair braided."

"Okay, just don't take all night." Lisa sat me on her lap and tempo-

rarily disengaged my claws from her sister's tresses. The older girl divided her ponytail into three sections and began weaving them together. Each time she flipped a hank of hair in my direction I grabbed for it, sometimes missing, but more often not.

"Lisa!"

"Sorry. It's just so cute the way she does it."

"Yeah, well you're the one who said don't take all night."

"Okay, okay." Lisa moved a bit farther away and a few minutes later the braid was finished. The wind was chilly now, and the girls got up to go inside.

The interior of the trailer was a model of disorder. Piles of clothing completely obscured the narrow couch and spilled out into the walkway. The small table was hidden under piles of fabric and fringe, boxes of sequins, and bags of beads. Skimpy costumes in various stages of completion hung from the cabinet handles, and the light fixture was draped with velvet ribbons. The open door of the tiny closet revealed just two coats, three sweaters, and two finished costumes.

I found myself on a small counter top strewn with a fascinating assortment of cosmetics. There must have been at least a dozen lipsticks, and a whole rainbow of eyeshadows in round plastic compacts. Powder and rouge, perfume and nail polish, everything a young girl might possibly want to make herself attractive was right here on this table. I poked at a lipstick and it rolled a few inches, stopping against a hairbrush. I batted it again in the other direction.

"You'd better put her down from there," The older girl advised.

"Ah, come on! She's not hurting anything," Lisa fussed. "She's just playing."

"You wouldn't say that if it was your puppet collection she was into." I nosed the lipstick past the hairbrush and around a half-empty shampoo bottle. I reached around the bottle and instantly leaped back, scattering cosmetics everywhere. My fur stood on end, and my tail was double-sized. There was something behind that bottle, something small and bristly and springy, something unlike anything I'd ever encountered before. Was it alive? I couldn't tell. I crept forward, inch by inch. There it was, up against the soap dish, the strangest-looking caterpillar I'd ever laid eyes on. Its skinny black body was topped by a single row of long, curved hairs, and I couldn't see any feet at all. It didn't move, but it might still be dangerous. Two quick, hard whacks with my paw produced no reaction whatever. So it wasn't alive, but what was it? I heard laughter and turned around.

"Look at that, Gina. She's trying to murder one of your eyelashes!"

"Well, thanks a lot for telling me. Now would you PLEASE get her down from there?"

"Spoilsport." Lisa lifted me off the counter and carried me to the door. "Sorry, cat. Out you go." And the door closed firmly behind me.

A few people still scurried about in the twilight, clutching their coats tightly against the biting wind. The long day was nearly spent, and it was time to go look for my friends.

Chapter 12

The Circus

The scene beyond the trailers was a radically different world from the one I'd left such a short time before. A growing crowd of townspeople milled about in the purplish glow of the floodlights, becoming louder and more boisterous with each passing minute. Mothers in heavy coats and high-heeled shoes clutched desperately at small children in mufflers and mittens who waited impatiently for their turn on the carousel. Giggling teenage girls flirted vainly with lustful teenage boys who in turn gaped longingly and hopelessly at the scantily clad dancers gyrating on stage in front of one of the smaller tents.

Twice I almost got stepped on as I wound my way through the forest of feet. Inside the Big Top the completed grandstands waited for the crush of people that would soon overwhelm it. Two men making a final inspection glanced up as I entered, but there was no sign of my three companions. Maybe they were in one of the other tents out back.

The animal tents were a-bustle with trainers and handlers, some costumed, some not, but I didn't see anyone I recognized so I moved on. Another tent fairly teemed with men in strange and exotic garb. Wild colors and painted faces, baggy pants and over-sized shoes, frightful wigs and floppy hats filled the aisles and clustered around a long table lined with lighted mirrors.

Rounding a corner, I suddenly came face to face with the biggest, fattest mouse I could ever have imagined, even in my wildest dreams. Standing on its hind legs, it was nearly as tall as a man, and its huge belly protruded out past its pink-toed feet. I arched my back, fluffed out my fur, and hissed a sharp warning. Conversation ceased as all heads turned in my direction.

The giant mouse squatted on its haunches and picked up its long, slender tail with one of its paws, shaking it close to my nose. I growled and took a step backward. It shook its tail again and I slapped it, hard. The mouse laughed, a muffled laugh that seemed to come from somewhere deep inside. It dropped its tail and gripped its head with both forepaws, lifting it off its shoulders to reveal a man's head inside. I took another step backward. The man laughed again.

"What's the matter, kitty-cat? Don't you like mice?" He reached out one paw, or was it a hand? I couldn't be sure, but I wasn't taking any chances. I hissed and whacked it with one of MY paws. "Feisty little thing, isn't he? Here, kitty, kitty. Come here, kitty." It was too much for me. I spun around and dashed out the way I'd come in, not slowing down 'til I was well away from THAT tent-full of crazies.

Beyond the last tent was the staging area where the parade of performers were making final preparations for their entrance. The elephants were first in line, magnificently regal in their red velvet drapings and gilded headgear. Behind them the restless horses pranced and strutted in the eerie light, pale phantoms from another world descending to grace this modest extravaganza with their ethereal beauty. Eager-eyed young boys clutched jewel-encrusted bridles while slender beauties in sequins and beads ascended their snowy mounts, perching sideways on sleek bare backs.

I recognized Gina, prettier than ever in blue and gold spangles, blue ribbons floating down from her hair as she leaned over to take the reins. I shivered a little, seeing all that bare skin on such a chilly evening. Just looking at her made me feel cold. Dozens of performers were lining

up behind the horses, but my friends were still nowhere in sight. A blonde-haired man in tight blue trousers and vest swung a glittering blue cape around his shoulders and fastened the heavy gold clip at his neck. He strode toward the head of the parade, turning to poke one of the girls with a short, jeweled baton as he passed.

"Putting on a couple of pounds there, eh, Patsy?" Walking backwards he jokingly chided the attractive brunette.

"You should talk," she retorted. "Another week and you won't be able to fit into that getup at all. Pretty soon even Daisy won't let you ride her."

"Very funny. Woops!" He whirled suddenly and almost tripped over an unexpected obstacle - me. "Pussycat, you better learn to stay out from underfoot." He swooped me up and held me high overhead in one hand.

"LA-dies and GEN-tlemen, your attention, PLEASE! PREEE-senting in ring number one, THE first, THE last, THE only, QUEEN of the Jungle! THE fiercest, THE wildest, THE most savage cat ever seen west of the Mississippi, The Feline Terror of Texas! See with your own eyes with what sly and cunning proficiency she stalks her prey! Marvel at the skill, the dexterity, the adroitness with which she dispatches her luckless victim! Why, if she were ever to escape from her steel-buttressed cage and turn her wrath upon the rodentia of this colony, I GUARANTEE you that within three weeks there'd not be a living mouse within a HUNDRED YARDS of this tent!"

"Alright, Dancer, quit goofing around and let's get this show on the road." It was the little red-faced man with the flailing arms, and he was in no mood for games.

"Aye, aye, sir." Tucking me into the crook of his arm, Dancer saluted with his baton and marched smartly to the front of the line. He reached up and stroked the broad forehead of the lead elephant. "Daisy, HI!" he commanded. Her huge trunk encircled his waist like a wrinkled grey boa constrictor, and a moment later he was seated astride her massive shoulders. He set me between his knees and stroked my sides. "Ready, pussycat?" Like I had a choice.

Dancer raised the baton and pivoted to check the rest of the procession. Everyone was ready. "Daisy, HO!" Daisy lurched forward. I lost my balance and fell on my left side, digging my claws into the heavy fabric in a desperate effort to keep from slipping off. I seriously considered jumping, but it was too far down, and besides, I was afraid of getting stepped on.

Dancer steadied me with his free hand and stroked my back reassuringly. "Easy, little one, nothing to be afraid of. Just relax." He ducked his head as we passed through the opening and entered the Big Top to the cheers and applause of the waiting crowd.

What a spectacle! The once cold and empty grandstands were filled to overflowing with people. Men, women, and children, teenagers, grandmothers and babes-in-arms. Shoulder to shoulder, packed in as tightly as sardines in a can, and still they kept coming. They filled the aisles, stepping on each other's feet. They pushed against the railings, threatening to spill out into the ring like a river at full flood licking at the top of the levee.

Grinning boyishly, Dancer waved to the excited throng and they returned his greeting with redoubled enthusiasm. I had by this time adjusted to the elephant's rolling gait, and was almost enjoying the ride. I searched the crowd for a familiar face, but it was just one huge blur. It might as well have been a field of poppies, for all the difference I could tell. Then almost before I knew it, we had made a complete circuit of the ring and

were ducking out the side entrance. Daisy trundled to a halt about a hundred feet from the tent.

"Daisy, down," Dancer commanded. The great creature's forelegs buckled and she pitched forward, forcing me once again to scramble for a foothold. Then her backside dropped too, and we were level again. "Sorry, pussycat, I forgot to warn you about that." Dancer's belated solicitude was scarcely adequate remedy for my frayed nerves.

I vaulted down from Daisy's head and bolted for the nearest tent. It was one of the animal tents, empty now except for a very old, very shaggy sheepdog curled up sound asleep in the corner. I sniffed warily at his flank, but he never even raised his head, just opened one eye under its hairy fringe and closed it again. I snuggled up to his warm body and let myself relax.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I remember was all the clanging and shouting as the animal cages were wheeled back into the tent. You'd think with so many different wild animals in such rickety cages they'd be a little bit careful about how they handled them, but no. They shoved those battered metal cubicles around as if they contained nothing more dangerous than a flock of parakeets. Two of them crashed together in the corner, setting the monkeys to screeching and the lion to roaring. Even the old sheepdog got up to see what all the commotion was about.

I slipped unobserved through the front entrance into the open compound. The crowds were gone now. A few small groups of the curious wandered about, poking their heads into the tents and quizzing whatever circus personnel they could capture, however briefly. For the most part, though, the townspeople had retired to their homes, and the performers and laborers went about their business unimpeded. I was about to head off in search of an acceptable berth for the night, when I was arrested by the sound of a familiar voice. It was Red, trying to get the attention of Dancer, who was more concerned with unharnessing a nervous Daisy.

"Pardon, good fellow. I seek a fellow excursionist, a feline associate whose company you shared briefly this evening."

"Can't you see I'm busy?" Dancer interrupted impatiently. "I've got no time for riddles."

"The cat, man," David interjected. "The little tabby you were carrying in the parade. He's all hung up on it and he won't leave 'til he finds it."

"Well, I don't know where she is. She took off right after the parade and I haven't seen her since."

"Never mind, there she is!" David exclaimed. He scooped me up and handed me to Red. "Now can we pick up our so-called pay and get out of here? I'm starving." They located Hobbs and the owner in one of the trailers across the midway and a few minutes later, armed with a hastily scribbled voucher, they presented themselves at the paymaster's table. Big and beefy, with an evil-smelling cigar clenched in his teeth, he scowled first at the paper and then at the men.

"You three together?" he demanded.

"That's right," Hoppy replied. "We helped put up the stands."

"Give 'em a case of that tuna," the paymaster directed his assistant. "Next."

"Wait a second," Hoppy protested. "The boss told us we'd get a sack of potatoes, too."

"Oh, really?" The paymaster yanked the cigar out of his mouth. "Whaddaya think this is, Ringling Brothers?" He sized up the trio in front of him and then shrugged. "Give 'em their sack of potatoes." he barked.

Red picked up the tuna and Hoppy slung the potatoes over his shoulder, and we headed out away from the lights and the people. David trudged glumly along beside them, limping almost as badly now as Hoppy.

About half a mile from the fairgrounds a ramshackle old barn sat isolated and deserted in the center of an abandoned cotton field. A scattering of dirty white tufts still clung to the stems, mocking ghosts of a failed enterprise. The brambles caught at the men's clothing as they passed through the untended field.

Inside, the drafty old barn smelled of alfalfa and machine oil and manure, and it wasn't a whole lot warmer than the outside. The huge double doors hadn't closed in years, and the bitter wind found plenty of cracks and holes to penetrate into this shabby refuge. Still, it was better than no shelter at all, a fact we were not the first to discover.

Two grimy and unkempt hoboes glowered at us from their declared territory, a more or less intact feeding stall they had appropriated as their personal domain, and in which they had built a small fire. However, the sight of the provisions carried by my friends wrought an astonishing transformation in the attitudes of these two previously hostile natives, and they fairly bubbled with hospitality.

"Welcome, friends, welcome." The larger of the two, a slovenly brute draped in a motley combination of military and civilian garb, nearly tripped over his own feet in his haste to greet us. "Come in, come in, join us. Plenty of room for everyone. We're all friends here, eh, Billy Boy?" He kicked his companion's feet aside to make room for the newcomers.

"Sure, Sarge, sure. Plenty of room." Billy hitched himself into a corner, trying to make himself as unobtrusive as possible. He wasn't much older than David in years, but infinitely older in worldly experience. His clothing was a pitiful collection of shapeless rags, patched and repatched until there was little if anything remaining of the original garments. Lacking any sort of shoes or boots, he had wrapped his feet in burlap sacking and bound them up with short pieces of yellow twine.

Separated from the fire's warmth, he shivered and pulled his knees up under his chin, but his companion didn't seem to notice. He was much too busy rolling out the red carpet for the new arrivals.

"Sit down, sit down. Make yourselves to home, folks. 'Come unto me all ye that are heavy-laden', right? Lay down your burdens and rest. Now we have everything - shelter, heat, and rations, all a soldier needs, right, Billy Boy?"

"Sure, Sarge, sure." Billy wrapped his arms around his knees as he was seized with a sudden, violent fit of coughing. Sarge ignored him and continued.

"Now let's see here. You, young feller," addressing David, "Put some of those spuds on the coals there, get them started cooking. I'll have this box open in a jiffy." Sarge pulled out a very large, very sharp knife and deftly sliced the top off the cardboard carton. I shuddered and buried myself deeper in Red's pocket. This man could be dangerous. Red shed his knapsack and I heard him rummaging through it. Then I smelled tuna. I popped my head out just in time to see him empty one of the cans onto his tin plate.

"For you, Mistress Regina." He smiled as I scrambled out of my sanctuary and began wolfing it down. This was great! This was definitely the tastiest tuna I'd ever had, far, far better than mere cat food. Sarge couldn't believe his eyes.

"You gotta be kidding!" he sputtered. "Wasting good food like that on a varmint? Why, that's almost criminal! Who's more important around here,

your buddies or a dad-blamed alley cat?" Red's wrath was stirred.

"First and foremost, you will kindly be advised that Regina is no alley cat. She is a gentlewoman of the most noble breeding, only recently fallen on hard times through no fault of her own. She has been a true friend and companion to me, giving unstintingly of her affections and asking in return only those most basic necessities of life. Furthermore, I cannot help but wonder at your temerity in presuming to challenge my distribution of the foodstuffs brought here by me and my friends and shared with you as a favor, and not a duty."

"Okay, okay. Don't get yourself in a lather." Sarge raised his hands in mock surrender. "I guess we can spare the poor critter a bite or two." The two men matched each other glare for glare as the fire subsided and the coals winked out one by one. Hoppy poked the potatoes in the ashes and selected a fat one for himself. Brushing it off gingerly, he broke it open on his plate and blew on it to cool it.

"Be mighty nice if I had a bit of butter for this," he mused. "Maybe some sour cream and chives."

"Why not some bacon bits, too, while you're at it?" Billy chimed in, momentarily getting into the spirit. "Might as well go the whole hog." Then he lost himself in another spasm of coughing.

"Better have that cough looked at," Hoppy advised. "Sounds serious."

"Mind your own beeswax, gimpy," snapped Sarge. "He doesn't need any nursing from the likes of you, thank you very much." He fished a pint of whiskey out of his fatigue jacket and passed it across to his friend. "Here kid, this'll fix you up." Billy took a swig and handed it back, shuddering. He took his potato and chewed at it half-heartedly.

"I don't feel so good, Sarge," he coughed. "Maybe I should see a doctor."

"What for? So he can give you a couple of aspirins and charge the county fifty bucks? Stop worrying. You just got a little cold, that's all. Couple of days and you'll be fine. Here, have another slug. Best germ-killer there is."

Billy shook his head. "I guess I'll try and get some sleep." He curled up into a tight ball in his corner and pulled a ragged blanket over himself.

"'Bout time we all turned in, I expect." Hoppy hoisted the half-empty case of tuna onto his shoulder and Red took the sack of potatoes. "We'll take one of the other stalls. Wouldn't want to crowd you fellows." Two compartments away he spoke in a lower voice. "We'd better sleep in shifts tonight. That's one mean hombre if ever there was one." He glanced over his shoulder. "I'll take the first watch. Red, you can take the second. David, you'll stand the third watch. You should be pretty well rested up by then."

Red stretched out along the outside wall with his head resting on the sack of potatoes, a rather lumpy pillow at best. He wrapped his long coat snugly about himself and began snoring within moments. David set his keyboard down in a corner and pulled off his heavy boots.

"I'd keep a close watch on those clodhoppers tonight if I were you," Hoppy suggested. "That Billy Boy was looking a mite jealous there."

"Don't worry, I will." David sighed wearily. He curled up into a knot, tucking the boots under his head, and swiftly followed Red into dreamland. I gave myself a long, leisurely bath, taking special care with my face and neck. That tuna dinner had been delicious, but I didn't care to have any leftovers hanging around my whiskers. Hoppy watched from his post at the doorway, a half-smile lurking around the edges of his care-worn face.

Finished with my purification rites, I burrowed under Red's coat and dropped off into a deep, sound sleep, only to be rudely awakened a short two hours later.

"My apologies, Lady Regina," Red whispered. "I assure you it was not my intention to pitch you onto the floor in so abrupt a manner."

"Here, I'll take the poor battered child." Hoppy tucked me into his own overcoat and carried me to the corner, where we slept undisturbed the rest of the night.

Morning was announced by the fractured crowing of a young rooster somewhere out there in the deserted cotton field. I'm sure he was doing his best to sound big and bold, but to me he only sounded ridiculous. I crawled out of Hoppy's coat and stretched myself, front legs and torso first, then the back legs one at a time. The cold, bitter wind from last night was gone, but a chilly fog hung in the air, casting a damp shroud over the interior of the old barn.

I sniffed Hoppy's rumpled hair and pawed at his "potato pillow". Then I checked out Red, lying nearby, still asleep. David sat on the tuna carton in the opposite corner, one arm draped across his knees, the other hanging limp at his side. His head tilted awkwardly back against the rough planks behind him, and his breathing was heavy and even. I rubbed my cheek against his hand and he started awake.

"Good grief, cat, you scared the stuffings out of me!" He felt around on the floor next to the carton and then leaped to his feet. "My boots! Somebody took my boots!" Heedless of his own safety, David charged through the opening in his stockinged feet and raced to the end of the building. He was back in less than fifteen seconds, breathless and enraged and limping from a stubbed toe. Red and Hoppy were just beginning to stir.

"Pipe down, kid. You trying to wake the dead?" Hoppy got up stiffly, shaking the dirt from his coat.

"They took my boots! Those dirty, rotten, low-down, thieving creeps stole my boots!" David kicked the wall in impotent fury and wailed with the fresh pain. "And my keyboard. They took that, too!"

"Holy smokes, boy, don't tell me you went back to sleep with those two butchers within spitting distance! Criminey! We're lucky they didn't slit all our throats just to see which one of us'd bleed to death the fastest."

"Look, I didn't do it on purpose, you know," David protested. "I was tired. I just closed my eyes for a second, and the next thing I knew it was morning. Anyway, I don't know what you're so upset about. It was my stuff that got stolen, not yours."

"Boy, you are as ignorant a greenhorn as I've seen in all my born days. You are gonna get yourself killed and anyone else stupid enough to be standing within a hundred yards of you. Well, excuse me if I check out of your suicide tour. I have a feeling if I stick around another day I'll never make California." Red interrupted with a wave of his hand.

"An honorable and upright man once said 'He who is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone'. We have all made our fair measure of mistakes, and if we are truly fortunate we may even survive to profit from them. Now may I respectfully suggest that we reconcile ourselves to our losses and press on with the essential business of the day? If perchance one of you might be moved to secure a bit of kindling, we could prepare our breakfast and be on our way."

"I'll get the firewood. I wouldn't want poor baby to get any stickers in his feet." Hoppy limped out through the big double doors and vanished into the fog. Red handed David an old-fashioned can opener for the tuna, while he himself commenced peeling and dicing a potful of potatoes. Before

David had the first can halfway open I was on his lap, meowing for my share.

"Hey! What makes you think you get the first can?" He held it up out of my reach and shoved me off his lap, rather more roughly than necessary, I thought. I squealed a protest, and Red turned to see what was going on. David read the disapproval in his face. "Well, she was trying to steal my tuna," he declared defensively. Then he smiled sheepishly. "I guess I should have given her some first, huh?" Red nodded and handed him the plates. Dumping the can he held onto one of them, the teenager set it in front of me and I dug in with relish. I could really get used to this! I emptied the plate and washed it clean.

Hoppy returned with an armload of sticks, and in no time at all a nice, warm fire blazed cheerfully in the corner stall, chasing away the dampness as well as the atmosphere of gloom. I drew in as near as I dared to the comforting warmth. For a short while there I almost felt as if I had a home again. Maybe not the ideal home, but there was shelter, good food, and friendly people. What more could a girl want? Unhappily, it lasted but one short hour. Then the dwindling fire was stomped out, the last glistening coals were kicked apart, and we were on the move again.

The walk back to town was a leisurely stroll for Red and Hoppy and me, but for David it was a humiliating ordeal. He winced at every pebble and groove in the road. The whole trip was an obstacle course to him - every rut a stumbling block, every puddle a cold and sodden swamp. Concealed thorns and shards of glass lay in ambush for his every step. What should have been a short and pleasant walk was reduced to an agonizing pilgrimage.

At the same time, the very conditions that made the journey so miserable for David made it an exciting adventure for me. Every loose pebble was a hockey puck to be batted back and forth across the road. Every rut was a trench to hide in, a cover for an all-out assault on unsuspecting feet. I chased grasshoppers in the cotton field, and butterflies in the early-blooming clover. It was a beautiful, bright morning, and I felt wonderful.

Dirt roads gave way to asphalt, and muddy fields to sidewalks and homes. We passed shops and houses, vacant lots and apartment buildings, continually attracting the stares and comments of the local inhabitants.

I guess we did make a pretty strange caravan at that; two ragged and weather-beaten hoboes and a young boy limping along in his stockinged feet, with a small tabby cat playing tag with the shadows on the pavement. But we ignored the snide comments and hurled insults and kept to our course, finally halting in front of a square white building in the middle of a long block. A sign above the door read "Salvation Army". Red put his hand on David's shoulder.

"These people will be more than willing to communicate with your kindred on your behalf if you should so desire. You need not disclose your current whereabouts if you find the notion distasteful, however, I consider it only humane to at least apprise them of your continued existence." Noting the lad's hesitation he added, "You need not fear abandonment. We three will abide here until your mission is accomplished."

"Thanks." David limped into the building and the older men seated themselves on the steps to rest and wait. I climbed onto Red's lap and helped myself to some serious petting. I hadn't had any all morning, and I was starting to get withdrawal symptoms. I closed my eyes and stretched out my neck so he could scratch behind my ears. It was pure pleasure. David returned presently, in far better spirits than when he had left. He also sported a new pair of black sneakers.

"I just talked to my dad. He's taking the next plane out of Knoxville. He'll be here in a couple of hours. I guess I'm going home."

"Good for you," Hoppy congratulated him. Do you want us to wait with you?"

"Nah, I'll be okay. You guys go on without me. I wouldn't want you to miss your train. Maybe we'll meet up again sometime."

"Sure, kid, sure." Hoppy and Red shook his hand, then turned and walked down the steps to the unforgiving streets as David retreated to the security of the shelter.

Chapter 13

Busted

The bright Texas sun soon burned through the morning mist and warmed the reluctant streets and sidewalks. Though we kept pretty much to the outskirts of town, there still wasn't a lot in the way of trees and grass. A small orchard offered a bit of relief from the noon-time glare, and we gratefully accepted. Hoppy and Red shed their knapsacks and coats and flung themselves on the still-damp soil under a craggy old grapefruit tree.

"Mercy!" Hoppy yanked off his shoes and massaged his abbreviated left foot. "I swear I'm getting too old for this kind of life. I gotta find me a rich widow and settle down someplace." He stretched out on his back and locked his fingers behind his head. "California would be nice, don't you think? Or maybe Colorado. You know, up in the mountains in one of those ski resorts?"

"Despair is the price one pays for setting oneself an impossible aim." quoted his companion.

"A man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" countered Hoppy. "And speaking of reaching, it looks like there's still a few grapefruit up there at the top." He pulled on his shoes and hoisted himself into the crotch of the old tree. "Don't go away, I'll be right back." I watched anxiously as he scrambled higher and higher into the brittle branches, slipping once and bruising his knee on a sharp spur. Finally he reached the upper limbs where the yellow fruit dangled so temptingly.

"Look out below!" Two large, juicy globes thumped to the ground, followed by another and then another, nearly a dozen in all. A couple of them split open when they hit, squirting out a fine spray of pungent liquid. I sniffed at the nearest one, jumping back in surprise at the strong odor. People actually ate these things? While Hoppy let himself down from the gnarled tree, Red gathered up the fragrant harvest and carried it to the "dining area". Cutting a hole in the end of one of the fruits, he squeezed the aromatic juice over his plateful of tuna and helped himself to a generous bite.

"Exquisite. A meal truly fit for a king."

"King of the road, maybe. Somehow I can't see any real royalty being satisfied with a one-course meal, no matter how hungry he was."

"True nobility is defined not by bloodlines, but by honor and integrity." intoned the traveling philosopher.

"Yeah, right." His companion was singularly unconvinced. "Maybe you can sell that line to a babe-in-the-woods like David, but you're just wasting it on an old 'roader like me." He squirted another shot of juice onto his

fish and stirred it into a thick slush. "Good thing there's only one can left. I doubt if I could stomach another meal of this stuff."

"A monotonous diet is surely preferable to an altogether empty stomach." Red was just finishing the last of his meal.

"That's debatable." Hoppy pulled out his battered old harmonica and played a lonesome tune. One of the holes seemed to be plugged up, and he dug out an old pocket knife to clean it out. I decided it was time I gave Red's knapsack a proper investigation.

Nuzzling the flap open, I wormed my way inside, pushing past cooking utensils and a dented tin cup. A safety razor in a plastic bag rested next to a half-eaten pack of crushed crackers. Several partly-used matchbooks hid in various nooks and crannies, and a multi-bladed jack-knife poked its nose out of a small inside pocket.

A flat, perfumed object wrapped in a bit of newsprint turned out to be a sliver of soap, worn down to a thin slice, but still carefully saved for one more use. There were two ragged paperback books and a magazine with half the pages missing. Down at the very bottom, I discovered an old, thin blanket, fuzzless and threadbare from years of use.

My inspection now completed, I turned around and made my way back to the opening. I poked my head out, and that's when I saw them - two men in uniforms, guns drawn, approaching with all the bluster and bravado of a pair of army privates just come face-to-face with the Mongol Hordes. Alarmed, I ducked back in and watched.

"Hands up! Nobody move!" one of them hollered.

"Now which one do you want, 'hands up' or 'nobody move'?" Hoppy laughed. "You can't have it both ways."

"Shut up!" ordered the officer. "Put your hands on top of your heads and don't make any sudden moves."

"Alright, alright." Hoppy and Red complied with the commands. "Mind telling us what we're being arrested for?"

"Trespassing, loitering, littering, vandalism, petty theft, carrying a concealed weapon."

"That's not a weapon, it's a pocket-knife," Hoppy argued.

"If you need more, there's vagrancy, disorderly conduct, unlawful assembly, destruction of private property, resisting arrest," the other officer ran down the list.

"Who's resisting? Ouch! Easy with those handcuffs," Hoppy complained.

"Constable, I assure you these charges are wholly unwarranted." Red added his voice to the debate. "We have damaged nothing, the few fruit we gathered was the abandoned excess from last year's harvest, and anything we may have discarded temporarily, we full intended to retrieve and dispose of in the appropriate manner."

"Sure, sure. That's what they all say. Now move it!" Red's knapsack was jerked upwards by the straps and carried to the waiting patrol car. The cooking pot slid onto my leg, pinching it against the canteen, but I was too terrified to utter a sound. There was a jolt as the sack was dumped into the trunk and the lid slammed. The engine kicked over, the gears ground, and there was a scuffing sound as the tires spun in the loose gravel. A few bumpy moments later we were on the main road and headed into town.

I poked my nose out of the top of the knapsack, but I couldn't see a thing in the blackness around me. The hot, stifling air stung my nose and made my throat constrict. I pulled my head back inside and waited again. After a short but fitful drive the car was parked and the trunk lid opened. It sure was good to breathe fresh air again. I was aware of being lifted

and carried into some sort of building, but I was still too frightened to peek out or even to meow. The bag was plunked down onto a hard surface and I heard the arresting officer's voice.

"Hey, Benny, got some property to be booked."

"Be right with you," was the reply. Then a moment or two later, "Okay, what's all this?"

"Property of one Reginald William Jenkins, age fifty-two, address - none, occupation - none, booked for trespass and vagrancy."

"Let's see what we got here." Somebody opened a large book. "One grey overcoat, one hat, one four-inch pocket knife, one brown rucksack." He opened the pouch and spilled out the contents. "One plastic water bottle, one metal cup, one metal plate, one metal cooking pot. One spoon, two, no, three books of matches, one brown wool scarf, one navy wool blanket, at least I guess that's supposed to be a blanket. One safety razor, a week-old newspaper. Is that it?"

"That's all." Hoppy's voice.

"Okay, sign here. The rest of this is his?"

"That's right," responded the officer. "Property of Redmond Clark Easton, age forty-five, address - none, occupation - handyman, or so he says, booked for trespass and vagrancy. Okay, we got another coat, tan, one hat, one green rucksack..." The top flipped open and we were nose to nose. "What the.... Rogers, did you know about this?"

"Are you kidding?" Rogers was as surprised as he was. "Criminy, no wonder the blasted thing was so heavy! I can't believe she never made a sound!"

"So what am I supposed to do with this?" Benny lifted me out onto the counter.

"Don't ask me! You're the property clerk. I'm just a rookie street cop. Isn't there something in the rule book?"

"Hold on, I'll check. Benny dug out his operations manual and flipped through it. He checked the index and the table of contents. "There's nothing in here about live animals. Let me call downstairs. Maybe Lieutenant Wilson knows something." Picking up the phone, he punched a couple of buttons and waited. Officer Rogers took the receiver.

"Hey, Lieutenant, you know those two hoboes Springer and I just brought in? Yeah, well you're not going to believe this, but one of them had a cat in his backpack... That's right, a cat... So what are we supposed to do with it?... Are you sure?... Okeedoke." Rogers hung up the phone. "He says call Animal Control and let them take it to the pound."

"Animal control it is." Benny reached for the phone, but the officer stopped him.

"Hold on a second. If we send her to the pound they'll just put her to sleep. There's no way they'll hold her sixty days for a vagrant."

"So what else can we do?"

"Let me take her. My niece Rosalia's birthday is tomorrow. She's always wanted a cat. This one would be perfect."

"What about it, Easton? Technically she's your property."

"Certainly I have no desire to see her enter the Valley of the Shadow prematurely." Red's voice was quiet. "If I could but be assured that she will be treated with dignity and respect..."

"Look, this is a great family," Officer Rogers tore a sheet of yellow paper from a pad and began filling in the blanks. "They'll take good care of her, I promise. Here, just sign this release form." Red hesitated. He looked over at me. "Listen," Rogers pressed him, "If you don't sign she'll be put to sleep, simple as that. Yes or no?" Red made no reply, but signed

the form and slid it across the counter. "Great! You won't be sorry, I promise." Benny resumed his inventory.

"Okay. One metal cooking pot, one canteen, four books of matches..." I watched him pile all of Red's belongings into a sturdy cardboard box. "One piece of soap, one package of... um... crackers, one Swiss Army knife..." and on it went. When the list was completed and signed he labeled the box and found a place for it on the long row of shelves behind him. "Now all we have left is one tabby cat, female, of undetermined age and origin." He stroked my head and tickled under my chin. "Where am I supposed to file her?"

"I get off watch at six o'clock," Rogers told him. "Just hang onto her until then."

"I can't keep a cat in here!" protested the beleaguered clerk. "The Captain'll kill me if he finds out."

"So don't tell him."

"Yes, but where am I supposed to keep her? What's she going to do in here all day?"

"You'll think of something," the young officer assured him. "Listen, I have to go. I've got to get these guys to the lock-up. See ya."

"Hey, wait a minute..." But they were already gone. "Well, kiddo, I guess it's just you and me. Let's see what we can find for you here." Benny set me on the white tile floor and exited briefly into a dark storeroom, returning with a wide, flat cardboard box which he plopped on the floor in the corner. In the wastebasket under the counter he found a discarded newspaper, which he proceeded to tear into strips to fill the box.

A further search of the wastebasket yielded a plastic food tray. Rinsed and fill with water from the drinking fountain in the hallway, it made a serviceable water dish. I drank eagerly and long. That ride in the patrol car had made me thirsty. Once my immediate needs had been attended to, Benny resumed his normal duties, one of which was to sort through a stack of papers on the counter and arrange them into piles. He was still sorting when a tall man in a brown suit appeared at his window.

"Evidence box." His request was curt but polite.

"Yes, sir, Mister Timmons. Got the number?" Benny opened his log book. The man read the number from a small black notebook and Benny flipped through the pages of the log. "Here it is. Just sign and I'll get it for you." He drifted down the row of shelves until he found the box he wanted. "Here you are. Got court today?"

"Uh huh. Arson and burglary. A real creep." Timmons lifted the lid and rummaged around inside. He pulled something out, looked it over and tossed it back in.

"Oh yeah, I remember. That skinny guy. Stole everything he could carry and then set fire to the house. Three different places, right?"

"That's the one. Got enough in here to put him away for ten years. I hope." Timmons tucked the box under his arm and headed for the door.

"Good luck," Benny called after him. The prosecutor waved over his shoulder and was gone. Benny returned to his paperwork. Finished with his sorting, he carried the first pile over to the filing cabinet in the corner, and for the next ten minutes of so he opened one drawer after another, tucking papers into folders until the stack was depleted.

By the time he finished all six piles, I had explored every nook and cranny of that room and found absolutely nothing of interest. The floor was waxed, the shelves were dusted, and each of the dozens of boxes stacked in neat rows had a secure lid, making them disgustingly cat-proof. I ran

the length of the room a couple of times and tried a few skids in the corner, but there wasn't distance enough to get up any real speed.

I curled up in the empty space between two identical cartons and watched the intermittent procession of diverse characters who presented themselves at the window. A timid little man with wire-rimmed glasses and a receding hairline approached and looked nervously about. He hesitated and then gave a light tap on the bell. Benny turned around.

"Yes, can I help you, sir?"

"I c-came to pick up my th-things," the little man stammered.

"And what things would those be?"

"My b-boots and th-things. They were s-stolen last year by a m-m-mugger. They s-said I could have them b-back now."

"Do you have the court release paper?" Benny opened the log book.

"Yes, s-sir." The little man retrieved a small square of paper from his inside coat pocket and unfolded it. Benny found the number in his log and the corresponding box on the shelf. He removed the inventory list from a plastic sleeve on the front of the carton and read it aloud as he lifted each item from the box.

"One pair snakeskin boots. Those must have cost a bundle. One snakeskin belt, one gold watch with diamond face. You must really be loaded."

"I am s-successful, sir, I am not l-loaded," the little man retorted, a bit defensively.

"Whatever you say, sir. But in the future I'd be a little more careful where I wore those things, if I were you. Some people seem to have a lot of trouble resisting temptation. Sign here, please." The little man drew himself up to his full height. "Well you are n-not me, s-sir, and I will th-thank you to keep your advice to yourself. F-furthermore, I was under the impression that it was the d-duty of law enf-enforcement to p-protect innocent citizens wherever they w-went and whatever they w-wore."

"Yes, sir, I'm sure they do their best." Benny tried to smooth the ruffled feathers. The indignant businessman gathered up his recovered valuables and stalked away, leaving Benny at the window, shaking his head. "I don't know" he mused. "Sometimes I think the ones with the most money have the least brains."

The next customer was an accused swindler who had just been bailed out by his lawyer and was there to pick up his personal possessions. It seemed he'd been writing a lot of checks for money he didn't have, but he was innocent, he insisted. It was all just a silly misunderstanding. He'd talk to the bank manager and they'd have it cleared up in no time at all. Benny nodded and smiled and waited on him, but when he was gone, Benny's expression was one of contempt.

"Can you believe that?" he fumed. That's the fourth time he's been hauled in here in the last six months, and he always manages to weasel out of it. Must have some real tight connections somewhere. Come here, you." He lifted me onto his lap and cuddled me until the next visitor arrived.

Finally it was six o'clock. Benny closed the window of the property room and prepared to leave. He put his lunch box on the counter and draped his windbreaker over the back of the chair. My drinking water was emptied into the hall fountain from whence it came, and my litter box disappeared into the big trash bin outside the rear entrance. He glowered menacingly at me.

"If your pal Rogers doesn't show up pretty soon I'm tossing YOU out the back door. too," he threatened. I meowed and rubbed against his leg. He didn't worry me. Just then there was a tapping on the window. It was

Officer Rogers.

"I'll take that cat off your hands now," he offered.

"'Bout time," Benny sniffed. "I was just about to chuck her out the back door. Vicious little thing darn near chewed my legs off."

"Oh yeah?" Rogers challenged, "Show me the bloody gashes."

Benny pulled up his pants legs and inspected his ankles. "Okay, so I'm a fast healer," he conceded, "but believe me, she's vicious."

"Oh, I can tell, I can tell. Now hand her over." Benny passed me across the counter and Officer Rogers draped me across his shoulder. His neck smelled of soap and his short, dark hair was slicked down flat against his head. At the end of the hall he made a sharp right turn through a swinging door and we entered the locker room. Instantly we were the center of attention. Whistles and meows came from all sides. Someone tried to bark like a dog, but it was a mighty poor imitation.

Several officers clustered around wanting to pet me, and Rogers consented. "It's okay with me if it's okay with her," he told them. Of course it was okay with me. I loved every minute of it.

"Hey, Stan, where'd you get the pretty lady?" wondered a handsome young officer still in uniform. Rogers chuckled.

"Hauled her in off the street. No visible means of support, you know." That got a big laugh.

"Are you taking her home to Caroline?"

"Just for tonight," replied my rescuer. "Tomorrow I'll run her out to Joe and Delia's place in Bowie. Listen, I gotta go. Caroline always worries if I'm late."

It was getting dark when Stan Rogers started up his car and pulled out of the back parking lot. He made a quick stop at a small store for some cat food and litter and we were on our way again. A short drive brought us to a one-story apartment building on the north side of town. He backed into the carport and shut off the engine.

"This is it, princess. Your palace for tonight." At the front door he fumbled for his keys. The door swung open, revealing a tall blonde in a tight blue sweater and jeans.

"You're late," she snapped. "Dinner's getting cold."

"I'm only ten minutes late." He stepped past her. "Dinner doesn't have to be ready exactly when I walk in the door, you know. I wouldn't mind a few minutes to unwind."

"Well, excuse me for trying to do things on time." Her blue eyes flashed. "And what's the big idea bringing home a cat? You know we're not allowed to have pets in the apartment."

"I know." Stan dumped me on the living room floor. "It's just for tonight. I'll take her up to Bowie in the morning. Rosie's always wanted a cat, and I thought it'd make a nice present for her."

"So you went out and bought a cat, just like that?"

"Well, actually...." Stan began and then stopped short. "Yeah, just like that. Look, she'll love it. Come on, didn't you say dinner was ready?"

"No, what I said was, 'Dinner's getting cold'."

"So let's go and eat already. I'm starved." He exited into the kitchen, accompanied by his wife. I was hungry, too, so I followed along, meowing loudly. Stan opened a can of cat food and reached for a small blue and white saucer. Caroline took it from his hand.

"Not my good china. Here, you can use this." She handed him a pink plastic bowl and he set it brimming on the floor. "She better not make a mess. That stuff stinks." I ate quickly and left them to their dinner. Stan didn't linger over his meal, either. Half an hour later he was back

in the living room, buried up to his eyeballs in the newspaper.

From the kitchen came the clatter of dishes being cleared from the table, and the swoosh of water filling the sink. Glasses tinkled, silverware clinked, and pots and pans clanged, and in due time everything was washed, rinsed, dried, and stowed away. Caroline appeared in the doorway, drying her hands on a blue-and-white checkered towel. Stan seemed not to notice. Caroline threw the towel onto the kitchen counter and herself on the couch, causing it to bounce visibly. Stan lowered his paper and his guard.

"I don't see why you have to drive all the way up to Bowie tomorrow," Caroline pouted. "Knowing you, you won't be back 'til midnight, and the whole day will be shot. What am I supposed to do here all by myself while you're off gallivanting all over the state?"

"You could come with me, you know," her husband suggested. "You might even enjoy yourself if you halfway tried."

"Spend my Saturday with a crowd of wetbacks and roustabouts? Fat chance! Listen, why don't you just forget about them and take me somewhere for a change? We haven't been to a movie in weeks."

"Now you know why I'm going out there tomorrow. I'm Rosalia's godfather, for Pete's sake, and I'm not about to miss her quinceañera. If you really want to see a movie we can catch a matinee on Sunday."

"Her keen-say-what?" Caroline stumbled over the unfamiliar word.

"Keen-say-ahn-yetta," Stan pronounced it slowly and carefully and she repeated it after him.

"Keen-say-ahn-yetta. So what's the big deal? Why should you be so worried about missing it?" It's just a birthday party, for Pete's sake. She has one every year."

"It's much more than a birthday party. The quinceañera is the formal recognition of a girl's coming of age. It's the Mexican-American equivalent of a Sweet-16 party, a debutante party, and a religious dedication all rolled into one. It's the single most important milestone in her life, except for maybe her wedding.

"She gets several weeks of religious instruction by the priest, almost like for First Communion. Then comes the dedication and presentation, and of course, there's always a big party after the service. She is escorted to the church by a young man of good standing, and both her padrinos, that is her godparents, and all her friends and relatives are expected to be in attendance, especially her Godfather."

"So in other words, you spend the whole weekend with your brother and his greaser friends and I'm supposed to be satisfied with the leftovers."

"Come on now, you know that's not true. We'll have all of Sunday together. Besides, I take you lots of places. We've been to Six Flags twice already this year. And the Cotton Bowl. That was a great game!"

"Oh, wow. Thrill of a lifetime." Caroline wasn't impressed.

"And what about that week in Galveston? Marine World and the Space Museum? Don't tell me you didn't enjoy that!"

"Sure, but that was almost two years ago. I'm talking about right now. This weekend."

"So why don't you come with me?" Stan offered again.

"Delia and her family are really nice people, once you get to know them. Just give yourself a chance."

"Come on," Caroline challenged, "What could I possibly have in common with a bunch of immigrants?"

"Immigrants, she says." Stan laughed. "Now listen girl, I don't see you wearing no moccasins nor feathers in your hair. For your information,

Delia's Spanish ancestors settled this area a hundred years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, and her Indian ancestors were here twenty thousand years before that. So you tell me who's the immigrant."

"Well just the same," Caroline fretted, "we have absolutely nothing in common."

"How do you know that?" Stan laid his paper aside and slid over to his wife's end of the couch. He put his arms around her waist and pulled her onto his lap. "You've hardly even spoken to them. Did you know, for instance, that Delia's crocheted shawls have won blue ribbons at the Montague County Fair the last five years running? And I'm sure you didn't know that her sister Carmella has just about every book and magazine article ever written about Marilyn Monroe, not to mention a stack of movie posters and stills about this high." He held his hands about four inches apart. Caroline was suddenly very interested.

"No kidding! You never told me that."

"You never asked. How about it? Will you go with me?"

"Well, I guess just this once. Hey, you know what? I've only got about two hours work left on that pink sweater I've been crocheting. I could finish it up tonight and I'll have something new to wear tomorrow." She practically leaped up from the couch and yanked open the door of a short, square wooden cabinet in the corner. A bit of rummaging around produced a large cloth bag with heavy wooden handles and numerous small pockets on the outside.

Seating herself cross-legged on the couch, she pulled out a rosy pink wad of some sort of soft fabric with a long, silvery rod stuck through it. When the rod was withdrawn, the wad opened up into a lacy square, and a ball of pink yarn dropped out and rolled across the floor, trailing a single strand of pink behind it. What fun! I pounced on it and somersaulted over, kicking at it mightily with my hind feet.

"Oh, no!" she wailed.

"I'll get it." The heroic Stan came to her rescue. He gently pried the fluffy ball from my ardent grasp, getting a few nicks in his hands in the process. None too eager to relinquish my prize, I followed him back to the couch, springing up again and again to catch at the dangling yarn.

"Thanks." His wife gave him a quick kiss and dropped the liberated yarn into her lap. I draped myself across her thigh and watched while she worked the length of yarn into her pattern. Soon the ball of fluff began to move again, a little hop here, a roll there, a skip and a jump over there. It was too much to bear.

In the blink of an eye, I snatched it from her lap and conveyed it back to the floor. It was a short-lived conquest. Stan lifted me by the scruff of my neck with one hand, and with the other he extricated the feathery trophy from my clutches. He held me at eye level and shook his finger under my nose.

"Listen, twit," he scolded, "she can't get anything done if you keep harassing her like this." He hauled me into the kitchen and deposited me on the table. "Sit," he ordered. I sat. He dug around in the trash container and came up with an empty mayonnaise jar, which he washed thoroughly, inside and out. After drying it with the dish towel he carried it, and me, back to the living room. He plopped me onto the floor and the errant ball of yarn into the jar. "How's that?"

"We'll soon see." Caroline continued working her delicate magic while the captive yarn hopped and bounced and jiggled inside the jar. I reached to grab it again but the glass was in the way. It looked so easy, so tempting, and yet suddenly it was impossible. I tried several times to

poke my paw through, but to no avail. Curses, foiled again.

"Looks like that'll do it, thanks." She smiled over at her husband. After a few more thwarted jabs at the jar I turned my attention to the work in progress, or more accurately, to the glistening wand she was using to create it. Long and slender, with a hook on the end to catch the yarn, it slipped in and out of the lacy fabric with amazing speed. Her agile fingers manipulated both the instrument and the yarn as if they were an extension of her own body. In and out, loop the yarn and pull it through. So swiftly she worked.

I stood up with my front paws on her leg to get a better view of this dancing device that seemed to have a life of its own. What did it taste like, I wondered. Was it hard or soft? I took a swipe at it with one paw. Missed. I grabbed at it with both paws and pulled it to my mouth. It was cold and hard and slippery, with a sharp, metallic taste.

"Now didn't I tell you to leave her alone?" Stan lifted me onto his lap and tried to make me lie down, but how could I be expected to settle down and be quiet? That flashing bit of steel was like a magnet pulling me forward. I strained against his hands and swung repeatedly but futilely at the tantalizing object. Stan moved farther away. "I'd better find something else for you to do for awhile."

He put me on the rug and spread a sheet of his newspaper over me. I whirled around, pretending to be trapped. When I poked my nose out one side, he threw down a second sheet to cover me again. I turned in another direction and found the same situation there. This bit of silliness continued until Stan ran out of paper and most of the floor was overspread with the scattered pages. Then it was all mine.

I pushed the papers around with my nose. I crawled under them and over them. I rolled and tumbled and ripped and shredded until the living room resembled a major recycling center. I lay in the middle of this wonderful mess, breathless and exhausted. Stan was laughing so hard he gave himself the hiccups.

"You incredible nut!" he gasped. "I've half a mind to keep you myself." He started picking up the papers, so of course I pitched in to help. Every page he reached for, I jumped on. Every sheet he tried to pick up I pulled back down. It was a delightful game and I was winning, paws down.

"Come on, now," he fussed, "you're not playing fair." He grabbed a plastic apple from a bowl of fake fruit on the coffee table and hurled it into the kitchen. When I naturally chased after it, he hurriedly stuffed a handful of papers into the wastebasket. I came racing back to assist him and he threw a banana. Soon the living room floor was cleared, but the kitchen was littered with phony fruit. "I've changed my mind," he panted. "Tomorrow you go."

All this time Caroline had been crocheting industriously, and the new sweater was finally finished. When the last seam was sewn and tied off, she washed it in warm water and squeezed it dry. Unfolding it onto a large towel on the kitchen table, she pulled and patted it into shape and stood back to admire her handiwork.

"What do you think?" she inquired.

"It's beautiful," he declared, "and you'll be beautiful wearing it." She covered the garment with another towel, weighting down both ends with heavy books.

"You stay away," she commanded, tapping me on the nose. It was late, so Stan fixed me a bed in the bathroom, showed me my litter box, and turned out the lights. I waited until everything was quiet and I was pretty sure they were both asleep. Then I slipped silently into the bedroom and curled

up between them.

Chapter 14

The Big Bash

The shiny blue sedan headed north through the early morning haze. Stan and Caroline were both decked out in their Saturday-morning finest, Stan in a blue suit and red tie, and Caroline in her new pink sweater and matching pleated skirt. Even I had a bright pink ribbon tied in a perky bow around my neck.

I curled up on Caroline's lap, and her gentle fingers caressed my head and stroked my back as we sped down the highway. It was so soothing, so relaxing, I was hardly aware of time or distance. Their voices faded in and out as I floated on the edge of sleep, like a bit of driftwood riding the swells far out at sea, up and down, up and down. Before I knew it, we were at our destination.

A squat, square box of a house with a red tile roof, it sat on the corner of a street lined with dozens of other identical squat, square boxes. Set close to the curb without benefit of lawns or sidewalks, they seemed almost to be conspiring with each other in a kind of sinister plot to escape the bleak sameness of their existence. A solitary oak tree stood on the opposite corner, a cruel reminder of everything this neighborhood lacked.

We were greeted at the front door by a short, dark-skinned woman, a plump grandmotherly person with greying hair and an enthusiastic smile.

"Stanley, entrad por favor. Come in, come in," she bubbled. "Ah, and my beautiful Caroline, so happy I am to see you! Bienvenida. Welcome to our home. So pretty you are today. Tan bonita. Come in, please. We are still getting ready as you can see. Luís, take your feet off the sofa! Ramón, help your little brother with his tie." She swept us into the spacious living room and seated us on the blue-flowered couch as the children scrambled to do her bidding. Stan took a quick look around the room.

"Mama Morales, you took the slip-covers off the furniture!"

"But of course, caro mio." She spread her hands expressively. "Today is a special day. Everything must be perfecto." She tickled under my chin. "La gatita, the kitten, she is for Rosalia?"

"Yes. I hope it's okay with everybody."

"Okay? Sure is okay. Rosie, she will love it."

"Yes, but what about Joe and Delia?" Caroline worried. "You don't think they will be upset?"

"Upset? For why should they be upset? Cats are good luck. Every home should have a cat." Mama Morales walked to the hallway. "Delia! Joe! Come look who's here!" Then to the guests, "They will be so happy to see you, especially the beautiful Caroline. Such a long time it's been!"

"Stanley, you old son-of-a-gun! 'Bout time you showed up!" A handsome man in his thirties entered from the hallway, obviously Stan's older brother. Except for a little something around the eyes, the two could have been twins.

"Joe, you remember Caroline..." Stan began.

"Of course I remember," Joe interrupted. "I'm so glad you could come."

We haven't seen you since the twins' christening. Rosie will be SO happy. She always asks about you. Well, what have we here? Is that for Rosie?"

"Yes." Caroline shifted nervously. "I know we should have asked first, but..."

"Don't be silly. Rosie's always wanted a cat. I just hope she's a good mouser. We could use..."

"Ki-ki!" The conversation was severed in mid-sentence by an earsplitting shriek as a small tornado in the form of a dark-haired two-year-old girl battered its way across the room, successfully eluding all the outstretched hands that sought to abort her headlong charge. "Ki-ki!" Trampling all over her aunt's feet and wrapping her chubby arms around her knees, the toddler abruptly released them and grabbed for me, entangling all ten fingers in my fur. I hunkered down and waited to be rescued.

"Lucía! Cuidado! Be careful! Don't hurt the kitty." Mama Morales pried the stubby fingers from their death grip and held her firmly by the wrists. "Suavemente. Gently, like this." She guided one of the fat fists in short, fitful strokes along my back. "Pet the kitty, don't grab. She might get afraid and scratch you. What's the kitty's name?" she asked Caroline. Caroline looked inquiringly at Stan, who shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess that's up to Rosalia," he supposed.

"Ki-ki!" Lucía shrilled. "Ki-ki! Ki-ki!" Just then someone else entered the room, and even little Lucía was dazzled into silence. A lovely young woman stood framed in the doorway, magnificently arrayed in white lace. Her long, black hair spilled down over her slender shoulders, and a bouquet of white flowers trembled in her nervous fingers. The two women standing just behind her beamed with justifiable pride. For a moment or two no one even breathed. The young enchantress took two steps forward and made a complete pivot, triggering a chain-reaction of ripples around the hem of her gown.

"So how do I look?" she asked apprehensively. Her father stood up shakily, as if in a trance.

"Baby, you're beautiful," was all he could manage.

"Just like a bride," Stan complimented, beaming ridiculously.

"Querida!" whispered Mama Morales. "Qué linda!" Rosalia stood blushing in the center of the room while everyone crowded around, demanding hugs and kisses.

"Uncle Stan, I'm so glad you're here. And Aunt Caroline! Oh, I knew you'd come, I just knew it!" Rosalia embraced her so enthusiastically one of the other women felt obliged to intervene.

"Rosie, dear, be careful! You'll spoil your dress!" She straightened a shoulder seam and fluffed a bruised ruffle. "After church, then you can hug all you want."

"Oh, Mama, you're always so practical! How can you be cool at a time like this?"

"It's called maturity, dear. Something you are sadly lacking."

"Ki-ki! Ki-ki!" Lucía tugged at her sister's skirt, demanding attention.

"Yes, Lucy, I see you. Now, please don't pull on my dress. You might tear it."

"Ki-ki!" the child persisted, pointing toward the coffee table under which I had taken refuge. Rosalia's dark eyes widened.

"A kitty!" she squealed. "Oh, what a pretty kitty! Is it for me?" She scanned the circle of faces, hoping for an affirmative answer. Joe grinned and nodded.

"It's from Uncle Stan and Aunt Caroline. Like it?"

"Like it? I love it! Oh, Uncle Stan, Aunt Caroline, thank you so much! Oh, please can I hold it, just for a second, please?"

"Not now, carísima," Delia tried vainly to calm her impetuous daughter. "You'll get cat hairs all over your beautiful dress. Joe, set up that litter box in the bathroom for now. Hurry, we're going to be late."

"We have plenty of time, dear. You're always running ahead of yourself." Joe assured her.

"Well, that's better than always running late like some people I know."

"Yes, dear," Joe laughed. Stan poured the litter and Joe plopped me into the box by way of demonstration. "You use that, not the carpets," he instructed me, as if I were some ignorant alley cat that didn't know the difference. Then the whole clan trooped out the front door and I had the house to myself at last.

What a relief! Venturing out of the bathroom and down the hallway, I peeked in the first doorway I came to. It was a bedroom, small, dark, square and neat, and smelling faintly of lilacs and talcum powder, kind of like Mama Morales. A white hand-crocheted spread covered the bed, and a multi-colored afgan was folded across the carved mahogany footboard. Above the matching headboard a painting of a woman and her Baby smiled down at me, giving the room a warm, friendly feeling.

On the opposite wall a large wooden crucifix hung between a pair of ornate brass candle holders, all three polished until they fairly glowed. This was without a doubt the tidiest bedroom I'd ever been in. Nothing was out of place, nothing was scuffed or soiled, not a speck of dust was visible to the naked eye. Even the books in the glass-fronted bookcase were carefully arranged according to height.

I sniffed at the base of the closed closet door. More lilacs. A well-handled rosary hung from the bedside table, catching a tiny slice of sunlight that sneaked through a crack in the heavy draperies. I batted it gently with one forepaw and it swung back and forth, twinkling in and out of the light. I watched, then swatted it again, harder. It slipped a little, then caught itself on the edge.

The glassy beads clicked against each other as it swung, back and forth, back and forth. Click, click. Click, click. I grabbed at it with both paws, intending to pull it down for a taste-test, but I got more than I bargained for. The rosary came down, all right, but so did the book it was draped around, walloping me on the rear end and administering its own punishment for the trespass committed against it.

I jumped back, ready to bolt, but there was no further movement. Cautiously creeping forward, I sniffed at the small black leather-bound volume. Like the rosary it was well-handled. The battered binding and worn pages bore witness to years of constant reading and re-reading. A nudge from my nose brought no response. Chewing one of the beads of the rosary was most unsatisfactory. Cold and hard it was, like something stone or metal. This was basically a very boring room. I was sure I could do much better elsewhere.

Down the hall another open door beckoned, another bedroom to be explored. Larger and brighter than the first, not quite so neat or nearly so private, this was Joe and Delia's room. The king-sized bed boasted a blue and white quilt tied at regular intervals with blue yarn bows. White curtains at the windows were pulled back to welcome the morning sun, and the blue carpeting soaked it up as fast as it streamed in.

The closet door stood open, revealing an army of brightly colored dresses, blouses, and skirts. A small detachment of men's shirts and trousers huddled together at one end, heroically defending their few inches

of space against the relentless onslaught of feminine apparel. Assorted sandals, pumps, and sneakers littered the floor, and a rainbow of sweaters overflowed the upper shelves.

I hopped onto the bed and froze in my tracks as a wave of motion surged across the mattress. I waited until the surface was still again before taking another tentative step. Once more the coverlet sank beneath my feet and another set of ripples swept across the bed. This was definitely strange. Another step, another ripple. I didn't like the feel of this at all. I backtracked carefully to the edge of the bed and jumped off, glad to be on solid ground again.

A cubbyhole of a bathroom offered promise of diversion. The ceramic tile lining the shower was hard and cold to my feet, and still damp in spots. A blue and white bath towel crumpled on the floor smelled of shampoo. I pounced on it and rolled over, flailing at it with my hind feet, but it didn't put up much of a fight and I soon lost interest.

The counter top was a different story. Soaps and perfumes, brushes and combs, and of course, plenty of make-up. Lipstick! My personal favorite! Two whacks and it was on the floor and me right after it. Into the corner and back out again. Around behind the toilet and out the other side. I would have made a great hockey player!

I made three or four passes across the smooth tile floor before finally losing it behind the door. Though plainly visible under the bottom edge, it was nonetheless totally resistant to my best attempts to retrieve it. I could touch it, I could even roll it around, but somehow my every effort only sent it sliding further into the corner. Frustrated, I left it to its fate and went in search of fresh amusement.

My next stop was the twins' room. Two small beds with railings on the sides, two small dressers, one pink, one blue. Stuffed animals and oversized building blocks made a chaotic obstacle course of an otherwise clean floor. A friendly sunbeam spilled its gold luster across one of the beds, and I stretched myself out full-length in its center. The amiable aroma of spicy roast beef drifted through the house, forecasting a pleasant lunch. But first, nap time.

Car doors slammed and excited voices punctured the fragile bubble of my dreams. They were back. Confusion reigned. Everyone was talking at once. Yes, it was an inspiring service. Yes, Rosalia was especially pretty today. Did everyone see that hat Mrs. Garcia was wearing? Yes, the one with all those flowers all over it? She better hope the bees don't try pollinating it. When the clamor subsided, Delia took charge.

"Rosie, you take Lucy and go get changed. Joe, Stan, make sure the boys get their suits hung up, and I mean properly! Everyone else - into the kitchen." I ducked into the bathroom as the herd stampeded past and flowed into the various bedrooms. In the kitchen Delia was handing out aprons and work assignments. "Carmella, you and Caroline set the table. Mama, why don't you start slicing the pepinos? I'll get the rice and the tamales heated up."

"What are pepinos?" Caroline queried.

"Cucumber halves, stuffed with cream cheese, onions, and diced green chiles," Carmella explained. "They're kind of fattening, but it's worth it."

"Sounds delicious," Caroline agreed. Delia slid a large earthenware dish into the microwave. She opened the door of the big oven, stabbed a fork into the fragrant roast, and pronounced it ready. The deep roasting pan was removed from the rack and immediately replaced by a wide, flat platter spread with odd little corn-husk bundles about the size of a

child's fist. With the liquid strained from the roasting pan, Delia proceeded to concoct the most tempting gravy, alternately stirring, tasting, and adding minute amounts of various seasonings until she was one-hundred-percent satisfied. She offered her mother a taste.

"Está bien?" she asked.

"Muy bien," the older woman confirmed. By now the dining table was fully furnished with an elegant white lace tablecloth and three generations worth of china, glass, and silverware. The male members of the company drifted in from the bedrooms, eager to share in the coming feast, but significantly less inclined to participate in the so-called "woman's work" of preparation.

"Joe," Delia called, "You'd better get in here and start carving this roast. Everything else is ready." Joe picked up the knife and fork and began cutting thin slices from one end. I stood on my tippytoes and reached up his pants leg as far as I could, hoping to snag a juicy morsel for myself. No such luck. He shook me off and pushed me away with his foot.

"Rosalia, will you please get this critter out of here before she gets stepped on?" he hollered. The temporary celebrity was just coming in from the living room with little Lucía in tow. As soon as the toddler spotted me she charged.

"Ki-ki!" she screeched, careening through the intervening forest of legs with amazing agility. I darted under the table, but she followed without so much as bending her head. Dodging chair legs and shuffling feet, I scooted into the narrow slot between the refrigerator and the wall. Looking back over my shoulder I saw her chubby arm stretching toward me, her wiggling fingers just inches from my tail. I tucked it under me and hissed a warning. "Want ki-ki!" she wailed in frustration, jamming her small torso further into the gap.

"Lucy, come away from there." Adult hands dragged the protesting child from the opening and set her on her feet. "Leave the kitty alone. Come on, it's dinner time."

"Ki-ki!" she howled, pulling mightily against the restraining hands. "Ki-ki! Ki-ki!"

"Yes, honey, I know, but you can play with the kitty after dinner. Come on, now. Upsa-daisy." The next thing Lucía knew, she was strapped firmly into her high chair with a bib tied around her neck, staring contemptuously at a bowl of rice and shredded beef.

"Shall we say the blessing now?" Joe asked. Everyone bowed their heads and closed their eyes while Joe said a short prayer. Everyone, that is, except Lucía.

"Want ki-ki." she pouted. Plowing both hands into the rice, she squeezed it out between her fingers, drizzling the fractured grains across the white plastic tray and onto the speckled tile floor. I crept out from my sanctuary and sampled a few crumbs. Kind of bland, I thought. However, the rice was followed almost immediately by two handfuls of the coveted shredded beef, a marked improvement. I gobbled up the tasty treat and begged for more, but more was not forthcoming.

"Lucy, just look at the mess you're making!" Delia inserted a child-sized spoon into one grubby fist and guided a mouthful of rice to its proper destination. Spoonfuls of beef alternated with spoonfuls of rice until the bowl was empty and the child was full. Meantime at the other end of the table, Joe was carrying out a similar process with her twin brother, Luís. I abandoned my vigil and withdrew to the peace and quiet of the living room.

After dinner the men-folk once more yielded the kitchen to the feminine majority and re-assembled in the living room. Again I was set upon by eager toddlers. Under the watchful eyes and guiding hands of their father, I was petted and fondled, carried and cuddled. I was dressed in doll's clothing and stuffed into a doll's carriage, bundled in a basket and zipped into a bowling bag, rolled up in a bath towel, and tucked up under matching sweatshirts.

By now my once-proud ribbon was a pitiful shred of its former self, and I was quite relieved to surrender it to more thoughtful hands. Finally I took refuge under the couch, far out of reach of fat, frustrated fingers.

In late afternoon the house began to fill with guests. Friends and relations came from all over the county, most bringing food and drink, and all bearing gifts for the ecstatic Rosalia. A five-piece mariachi band arrived with their instruments and set up shop in a corner of the room. All non-essential furniture had been removed, and the floor was soon crowded with high-spirited dancers. All through the evening friends and well-wishers came and went, some staying only a few minutes, others remaining for hours.

The twins, allowed to stay up long past their normal bedtime, eventually fell asleep of their own accord and were carted off to bed. The music and dancing continued well into the night, and it was nearly one o'clock when the band finally packed up their instruments and departed. Caroline was curled up on the couch, her head resting in Stan's lap. At some point during the long celebration she had kicked off her shoes, and now a large run was plainly visible in the hose above her left heel. Her spouse shook her gently by the shoulder.

"Wake up, Sunshine," he whispered. Caroline muttered something unintelligible and burrowed deeper into his lap. He shook her again. "C'mon, wake up. We have to get going." She roused herself into semi-wakefulness and made a half-hearted stab at restoring her rumped hairdo.

"What time is it?" she yawned.

"Five 'til one. We've got a long drive back to town."

"Don't be ridiculous." Joe came in from the kitchen dragging a partly filled trash bag. "No way are you two driving back to Dallas at this hour. You can sleep here tonight and go home in the morning."

"Thanks, Joe," Stan responded, "but we wouldn't want to put anyone out of their beds."

"No one's going to be put out of their beds," his brother reassured him. "The sofa folds out into a queen-sized bed, sheets and blankets are in the hall closet. Delia!"

"What, what?" his wife poked her head around the door.

"Would you get the sofa-bed set up so these two idiots don't get themselves killed trying to drive home tonight?"

"Sure thing. Just pull the cushions off, you two. I'll get the bedding." Five minutes later a comfortable bed was ready and waiting. "Come on, Joe," Delia called into the kitchen. "We can finish cleaning up in the morning. I'm beat. Ramón, Rosie, it's hours past your bedtime." Rosalia wandered down the hall and into her bedroom. She returned a few moments later looking worried.

"Mom, have you seen my new kitty?" she asked.

"Not since dinner. Joe, have you seen the cat?"

"Last I saw her she was diving under the sofa to get away from the twins." Rosalia knelt at the end of the couch and peered underneath.

"There you are, kitty. I was afraid you ran away." She reached her

hand toward me. "Come here, kitty," she coaxed. I stayed put. "Here, kitty, kitty," she tried again, but I didn't budge. "Mom, she won't come out," she complained.

"She doesn't know you yet, honey," her mother soothed her. "Just leave her alone for tonight. She'll be okay under there. Tomorrow when it's quieter she'll come out. Now get along to bed."

"Aw, Mom," Rosalia protested.

"She'll be fine. Now go." Reluctantly Rosalia shuffled back down the hall, gently herded by her parents. Dressed in borrowed nightclothes, Stan and Caroline were soon comfortably nestled in together, and in next to no time both were fast asleep. I slipped soundlessly out of my hiding place and wiggled up under the covers at Stan's feet where it was warm and safe.

Chapter 15

Of Mice And Prairie Dogs

Offhand, I could probably think of about eighty-seven different ways of being waked up in the morning, but I have to tell you that being kicked in the head at six a.m. is not one of my favorites. Of course, it was purely unintentional on Stan's part, and I didn't suffer any lasting harm. I didn't even bite the foot that kicked me, I just slithered out from under the covers and headed for the kitchen and breakfast.

"Well, good morning, pussycat. I'm glad somebody besides me has the gumption to get up early." Delia ceased beating her eggs and set the bowl on the pristine white counter top. "Let's see. I'm sure there's at least a couple more cans of cat food somewhere around here for you. Yes, here we are. Tuna and kidney. How does that sound?" It sounded fine to me and I said so. Having located and filled a suitable cat bowl, she resumed her morning ritual.

While I ate I watched curiously. Frankly, I had been dying to see how she managed to prepare the astonishing variety of foods I'd seen the day before, encumbered as she was by her inch-long, blood-red fingernails, but to my amazement, they didn't seem to hamper her movements in the least. She poured the beaten eggs into an oversized frying pan and stirred slowly and methodically as the pale yellow liquid thickened and set. A dozen or more strips of bacon sizzled on the griddle, impatient to be turned. Now there was a breakfast a girl could sink her teeth into!

By this time the coffee was perking merrily, and the tempting smell of the stimulating beverage wafted through the house, prompting yawns and moans from more than one bedroom. I scanned the kitchen for some indication of the previous night's festivities, but the mess and disorder had mysteriously vanished. Only the serene humming of the automatic dishwasher gave the slightest hint that anything had happened at all. Mama Morales entered the room, touching her daughter lightly on the shoulder.

"Buenos días, hija." She greeted her eldest with a gentle squeeze.

"Buenos Días, Mama." Delia smiled and returned the hug. Mama unfolded a fresh tablecloth and spread it over the table, smoothing the creases with the easy skill of years. Not the elegant white lace cloth from yesterday's fiesta, this one was a sturdy and serviceable floral print, no longer new, but not yet stained or faded. She laid out the everyday dishes with the

same loving care that most people reserve for their best china.

Plastic cups and bowls, mixed remnants of at least three different sets, shared table space with a trio of ceramic coffee cups, each with its owner's name emblazoned on the side. "Joe" was big and bold, an oversized mug with simple black letters on a plain background. "Delia" was small and dainty, a garden of blue roses and delicate gold script. "Dolores" fell somewhere in between in size, with the name in small black letters beneath a replica of the mother-and-child painting that hung in her bedroom.

"We'll need two more." Delia handed her mother a pair of plain blue cups for the overnight guests. Just then Stan sauntered in from the living room, tucking his shirttail into the waistband of his blue suit pants.

"Something sure smells good," he observed. "Do you serve gringos here?"

"Only if they're related," Delia laughed. "Is Caroline up yet?"

"Sort of." Stan accepted the proffered cup of coffee. "She's in the bathroom looking for some aspirin. I have a feeling she'll be in there for a while." He took another sip. "This is great coffee, Del. Better pour some for Caroline. I'll take it into her. Black, no sugar. Thanks." He disappeared down the hall with the steaming cup. Now Rosalia made her debut, sleepy-eyed, yawning, still in pajamas and bathrobe.

"I'll have mine black," she declared, "with just a little sugar."

"Ho, ho, ho," retorted her mother. "You'll have yours when you're sixteen and not a minute before."

"Aw, Mom! You never let me do anything I want to! I'm not a little kid anymore, you know. I'm supposed to be a grown-up now."

"So act like a grown-up and stop whining. Rules are made for a reason and you know it. Now go sit down." Rosalia shuffled to her chair and plopped herself down, still miffed. Delia stepped to the doorway. "Joe," she called.

"Coming, Love." Joe emerged from the hallway with Lucía astride his shoulders and Luís clinging to his left leg like an overgrown monkey. He kissed his wife, disposed of the twins, and took his place at the head of the table. "Where are Stan and Caroline?"

"In the bathroom," Delia replied. "Stan took Caroline some coffee. She's a little under the weather this morning."

"You mean she's hung over." Ramón strolled in, trying to look ever so mature and sophisticated.

"Ramón! Qué vergüenza!" Mama Morales admonished. "For shame to be so unkind!"

"Well, it's true!" Ramón protested, the picture of injured innocence.

"It's not always right to tell everything you think you know," Joe reproved him. "You could be wrong, and besides, a little Christian charity never hurts."

"Ki-ki!" announced Lucía, waving her spoon at my head. I raised up on my haunches and sniffed at it. Nothing. Everyone laughed.

"Kitty," Delia prompted.

"Ki-ki," Lucía declared.

"Have you thought of a name for her, Rosie?" Joe asked.

"Not yet, Papa."

"Ki-ki," Lucía insisted. Ramón laughed.

"Sounds to me like she already has a name." He offered me a tiny chip of bacon and I graciously accepted.

"Nonsense," Delia scoffed. "That's just baby talk."

"No, Mama, I like it." Rosalia tossed me a piece of her own bacon. "Kiki. It sounds kind of exotic, you know, like Hawaiian or something." Her mother sighed.

"Alright then, Kiki it is. But no feeding her at the table. And she will be your responsibility. Your father and I will pay for her food and litter and to get her fixed, but everything else comes out of your allowance, agreed?"

"Yes, Mama." Rosalia withdrew the second piece of bacon she was about to offer me. I kicked at an itchy spot on my neck and Delia grimaced.

"Looks like the first thing she needs is a flea collar. I'll take you to the store tomorrow."

"Yes, Mama," Rosie sighed. Just about that time Stan and Caroline joined the family and breakfast concluded without incident. Then they were off to church again, and I was treated to another two hours of peace and tranquility. After Mass came another delicious lunch and another living room gabfest. Rosalia held me on her lap and caressed me while she sat quietly, absorbing the adult conversation. Presently, Delia reached over and tapped her husband on the knee.

"Joe, did you remember to set that mousetrap in the kitchen cabinet like I asked you to? I thought I heard something rustling around under the sink this morning."

"Oh, you know what? I forgot all about it. I'll do that right now." Joe headed into the garage, returning shortly with a pair of strange wood-and-wire contraptions. "Now where, exactly, did you say you heard this ferocious rodent?"

"Under the sink. At least that's what it sounded like." Delia was already in the kitchen, indicating the appropriate cabinet doors. Joe opened the doors and hauled out a large cardboard box.

"Good grief," he complained. "What's all this junk in here?"

"It's not junk, I'll have you know," she retorted. "It's just extra freezer containers for when Rudy and Raphael bring up oranges and grapefruits from El Paso. Where do you think that fresh juice you get every morning comes from, anyway?"

"Okay, okay. Just get it out of my way." Joe pushed the carton aside and stuck his head under the sink. I edged in closer. Personally, I wondered why they were bothering with a trap at all. Just give me a couple of long, dark nights and I'd deal with it. Luis peeked around the door frame, his curiosity doing deadly battle with his fear.

"Mouse?" he inquired timidly.

"Yes, honey," his mother answered. "Daddy's looking for a mouse." Luis ventured out a bit further and wrapped his arms around her legs.

"Found a hole and some droppings." Joe pulled himself out from under the sink and reached for one of the traps. "Are there any cookies left from last night?"

"Cookies? Don't you want cheese?"

"Uh uh. Mice are basically grain eaters. Anyway, cheese gets stale too fast." Delia shuffled through a row of sealed plastic containers on the counter top.

"We have chocolate chip, peanut butter and oatmeal."

"Let me have an oatmeal." Joe broke off a chunk and popped the rest in his mouth.

"Cheater!" exclaimed Delia, laughing. "That's for the mouse." Joe baited and set the trap and crawled back under the sink. He shoved another box aside to get a better angle, and that's when it happened. A tiny grey mouse broke cover and darted across the kitchen floor. I started after it, but Joe jerked around and his foot knocked me for a loop.

"Ouch!" he yelled as he whacked his head on the garbage disposal, and "Ouch!" again as the mousetrap snapped shut on his thumb.

"Ay!" shrieked Delia, taking a sharp step backwards.

"Aaah!" hollered Luís, dancing up and down on his mother's foot. He headed for the living room at warp speed, with the confused and terrified rodent in hot pursuit. Somewhere between the table and the door the mouse overtook him and tried to pass. Unfortunately, in the process it violated one of the basic laws of physics, namely that two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Luís occupied the mouse's space and kept going, heedless of the fatal results of his headlong dash. He didn't stop running until he was on the couch, safely wrapped around Rosalia's neck. Stan stood in the doorway, nearly doubled over with laughter.

"Luís, you killed it!" he guffawed. "You stomped the poor mouse to death!" Cautiously, I approached the motionless creature and craned my neck to sniff its flank. I whacked it gingerly with my forepaw, but the tiny troublemaker didn't budge. It was dead, alright. I gave it another smack for good measure, then climbed over Joe's still prostrate form to see if it possibly had any relatives still in the cupboard. No such luck. It was musty and damp inside, but there was no sign of life. Stan carried Luís in from the living room and showed him the dead mouse.

"See, Luís, he's dead." He set the lad on the floor and poked at the rodent with his finger. "Poor little mouse. He didn't want to hurt you, he was just scared, same as you were." Luís nudged the corpse with the toe of his sneaker.

"Mouse dead?" He still wasn't entirely convinced.

"Yes, the mouse is dead," his mother assured him, not quite recovered herself. "Thank goodness." Ramón sauntered in and gave it a little kick.

"See, you don't need a cat or a mouse trap," he scoffed. Just send Luey in to stomp on them." He picked up the mouse by the tail and went to drop it in the wastebasket.

"Better put it in the can outside," Delia advised. "You don't want the cat trying to drag it out of the trash. Oh, and speaking of outside..." Suddenly remembering something, she stepped into the living room. "Caroline, come on out back. I want to show you my cactus garden. Rosie, can you do me a big favor and put the twins down for their naps while I give Aunt Caroline the "grand tour"?"

Caroline followed Delia through the kitchen and out the back door. Naturally I went along to protect them. Who knew what evil monsters might lurk out there in the wilderness. Someone had to take care of these helpless females.

Outside the sky was clear, the sun was bright, and the temperature was rising fast. The large covered patio next to the house boasted a white wrought iron table with two matching lounge chairs, and a sporty canopied swing big enough to seat two or three people, depending on how fond they were of each other. Beyond the patio the unfenced yard sprawled away from the house, merging abruptly into the borderless prairie. A wide graveled path meandered in and out among a carefully laid-out garden of desert plants, some of them in full bloom, others just beginning to bud.

"Oh, how lovely!" Caroline exclaimed. "Where on earth did you find all these beautiful plants?"

"Well, most of them are native to this area," Delia explained, "You just don't usually see them all together in one place like this." While the two women toured the garden I took a little unguided excursion of my own. Each group of plants was bordered by a ring of loosely placed stones of varying shapes and sizes. Although warmed on the surface by the afternoon sun, underneath the stones the soil was still damp from last week's heavy rains.

A lizard basking on a large white stone dashed for cover as I ap-

proached. Lucky for him. I stepped over the rocky boundary to inspect the plant life within the crude circle. Actually, I'm not sure I'd class most of them as plants at all. They were more like giant pincushions than bushes or shrubs. I addressed the nearest one with the greatest of care and still got my nose pricked. Why on earth would anyone deliberately plant such a thing in their yard? A crown of paw-sized pinkish-grey flower buds around the top hinted at one possible answer, but as far as I was concerned, it was hardly enough to justify the obvious hazard.

In the next plot a massive cluster of long, green spears threatened me with their needle-sharp points, but from the center, a thick stalk soared upwards, holding aloft a dazzling bouquet of waxy white blossoms, hundreds of pendulous bells flinging sweet perfume into the morning air.

"I know what that is," Caroline interrupted her hostess' discourse. "That's a yucca plant. I've seen them hundreds of times while I'm driving, but I've never been this close to one before."

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Delia smiled proudly. "That variety is called a desert candle. There are about fifteen kinds altogether. The Joshua trees are the biggest, but they'd never fit into this garden."

"I can imagine," Caroline agreed. They continued their circuit of the yard, and I was just turning to follow when I caught a sudden movement out of the corner of my eye. I walked to the edge of the lot where the orderliness of civilization surrendered to the random wilderness. I'd seen something move out there, but what? The unbroken prairie stretched for miles in all directions. No trees, no bushes, just the tender green shoots of the first spring grasses. Here and there a low mound of earth interrupted the interminable flatness, but otherwise the horizon seemed quite empty. There it was again. Just a flicker of movement atop one of the earthen mounds. Then a head poked out. Not a mouse. Not exactly a squirrel, either. The creature barked at me, a short, sharp "arf", and dropped back down out of sight. Now here was something worth investigating. I crept forward, flattening myself out on the hard, sandy soil. My only cover was a stumpy little tuft of last year's grass, dry and brittle and dusty, but it would have to do. I sneezed.

After a minute's wait, the head reappeared, followed by a plump, cinnamon-brown body and a short, twitchy tail. Definitely not a mouse. Too fat to be a squirrel. Besides, with those stubby legs it'd never make it up a tree. That is, if there were any trees around, which there weren't. The fat rodent raised itself on its haunches and fixed me with a defiant glare.

"Arf!" it yipped. "Arf! Arf!" My own tail twitched involuntarily, but I held my ground. When it popped back into its burrow for a moment I quickly slithered forward to within a few feet of the mound. Again the creature mounted its gravelly pulpit and hurled insults and epithets in my direction. I'd had just about enough of this.

Gathering my feet under me, I wiggled my haunches and launched myself full speed at the insolent beast. Uttering a loud shriek, the rotund rodent dropped into its hole as if it had been sucked in by a vacuum cleaner. I missed by a hair. Sand and gravel flew as I dug furiously at the burrow's entrance, determined not to lose my plump quarry. But the ground, though damp, was harder than I'd anticipated, and I wasn't making much progress. I wasn't more than an inch or two down when I heard an irate "Arf! Arf!" behind me.

Whirling around, I found my erstwhile victim seated atop another mound a few yards away, angrily accusing me of all manner of heinous crimes, including, but not limited to, trespassing, breaking and entering,

destruction of private property, and assault with intent to do great bodily harm. Or was that attempted murder? I wasn't quite sure. In any case I wasn't denying it. I set myself and charged again, but I wasn't even close this time. The agile pest dropped into the hole and popped up from yet another mound, now fairly bobbing up and down with rage.

More than a little peeved myself, I attacked a third time, only to find myself being mocked from still another mound. This was ridiculous! Nothing could move that fast. A movement to the left caught my eye. I spun around just in time to see a furry head yanked back into its burrow. Then another popped up for just an instant a few feet to the right.

So that was it! I wasn't dealing with just one creature, I was sitting in the middle of a whole colony of fat, sassy rodents. Infuriated, I charged mound after mound, only to be thwarted at every attempt. Not even a tiny clawful of fur rewarded my most valiant effort. Back at the first hole, I dug wildly, sending up a shower of sand and gravel. Peals of laughter from the house interrupted my frenzied excavation. I turned and glared at the amused assembly of ladies sipping sodas in the cool comfort of the shaded patio. I suppose they thought they could do better! Well, just let them try!

I thrust my forepaw into the hole clear up to my shoulder, swinging futilely at the empty space below. Rats! Nothing! It galled me to admit it, but I was beaten. Defeated by a posse of crafty critters I could devour in two bites if I could only catch one. Well, phooey on them all! I didn't really want to catch the little hooligans, anyway. It was just a silly game.

Shaking the dirt from my paws, I drew myself up to my full height and stalked proudly from the field of battle, ignoring the taunts and insults being hurled in my direction from the mounds. Who cares what a rodent thinks anyway, right?

I strolled as nonchalantly as possible back to the patio where the ladies were now happily occupying themselves with their needlework. Mama Morales' fingers fairly flew as the bit of lacework she was crocheting grew by leaps and bounds. Rosalia was embroidering a blouse with red and yellow roses, while nearby in the swing, Delia was teaching Caroline a rather intricate knitting pattern. I rubbed against Caroline's leg and she reached down to scratch my neck.

"How's it goin', Kiki? Catch anything for dinner?" I overlooked the slanderous reference to my hunting skills and permitted her to continue her caresses. I'm a most generous and forgiving cat, and besides, it felt terrific.

"I've never seen a cat yet that could catch one of those prairie dogs," Delia chuckled. "Even the coyotes have a time of it."

So that's what they were called. Prairie dogs. Mighty poor excuse for a dog, I'd say. Prairie pups was more like it. And I'd catch one alright. Some day. Delia handed the knitting to Caroline. "Here, now you try it." Caroline looped the yarn over her delicate fingers and counted.

"One, two, yarn over, purl, yarn over." The skein of yarn bobbed and jiggled in the basket and the blue steel needles clicked and flashed in the afternoon sun. Which to attack first? A most delightful dilemma.

Yarn is soft and marvelous fun to pull and kick, but with four of them there I probably wouldn't even get it out of the basket. Knitting needles, on the other hand, aren't much fun to chew, but they make great flip-toys, and if I grabbed it quickly enough, I might actually get away with it. Decision made, I raised myself halfway up on my back legs, carefully gauging the movement of the needles, waiting for just the right moment.

"Oh, no you don't." Caroline had spotted my poised paw. My golden opportunity was lost. "Rosie, I think your new friend needs to go back in the house for awhile if you don't want pink yarn all over the patio." Rosalia giggled and laid aside her busywork.

"Come on, Kiki." She draped me across her shoulder and carried me into the quiet coolness of the kitchen. Setting me on the floor, she pointed me in the direction of the living room and patted me on the rump. "Go pester the guys, why dontcha?" Good idea. I slipped silently into the next room and concealed myself behind an overstuffed armchair. A large game board lay open on the carpet with a number of plastic tokens placed around the edge in a seemingly random arrangement. With a flick of his wrist, Ramón rolled a pair of dice across the board.

"Five," he announced. He seized a tiny silver race car and scooted it along the edge of the board. "Uhdn, uhdn, uhdn, uhdn, errk! Baltic Avenue. Who has Baltic Avenue?" Stan rifled a stack of cards and shook his head.

"Nobody yet. You want it?"

"Nah, that's peanuts. Waste of money. Your turn, Dad." Joe picked up the dice and shook them in his hand before tossing them out. They bounced smartly across the board, knocking a green plastic cube onto the carpeting.

"Easy there, old chap." Stan retrieved the errant token and replaced it in its proper space. "That house ain't insured for earthquakes. Looks like you got a ten." Joe counted off ten spaces with a miniature dog.

"Ventnor Avenue. I'll take that." He handed Stan a few papers from the stacks in front of him and received in return a small square of cardboard with a yellow stripe across the top. He placed it proudly in a row with two other similar cards. "That gives me a monopoly," he declared.

"Want to buy some houses?" Stan asked.

"I wish. I'm 'bout out of money now. Your turn." Stan's roll of the dice netted him eight spaces and a fifty dollar penalty for landing on Community Chest. Now it was MY turn! As Ramón gathered up the dice and prepared to roll, I planted my feet, wiggled my behind, and charged. Plastic tokens rolled in all directions and play money flew about like autumn leaves in the wind. The board slid out from under me and I tumbled head over heels into Joe's lap.

"Oh, man, way to go!" Ramón wailed. "Now look what you've done, you stupid cat! I oughta strangle you!" He made a dive in my direction, but Joe pushed him back.

"Hey, calm down, son. It's only a game, for Pete's sake. Besides, we weren't that far along, anyway. We should be able to figure out where everything was. Now put your little hot rod back on Baltic Avenue and simmer down, okay?" With a little help from Stan and much grumbling from Ramón, the game pieces were re-established in their proper positions on the board, and each player gathered a quantity of cash approximately equaling his balance before my cataclysmic entry. "Now, whose turn was it?"

"Mine," pouted Ramón, not quite ready to forgive and forget.

"Go ahead, then."

"Okay, but you better hang onto that cat."

"Don't worry, I will." Joe turned me on my side and scratched the downy white patch under my throat. My bib, I like to call it. I closed my eyes and purred contentedly. When Ramón rolled the dice, I opened one eye halfway and closed it again. Better not. Why spoil a good thing? Anyway, I'd already scored all my points. Cleared the board in one fell swoop. Not bad for a beginner, eh?

The game continued for over an hour before Luís appeared at his father's

elbow, rumped and sleepy-eyed. His t-shirt was up under his armpits and his trousers were twisted alarmingly to one side. His left sock was halfway off, and the other was missing altogether. He tugged at Joe's sleeve.

"Daddy, dweese," he whimpered.

"Just a minute, shortstop. I haven't finished my turn yet. I'm putting another house on each of these here." He handed several bills to Stan and got a pair of tiny green "houses" in exchange. Luís yanked harder at his shirt.

"Daaady, dweese!" he insisted.

"I'll get it, Dad," Ramón volunteered. "I don't want you disturbing that cat. C'mon Luey."

"Thanks, kiddo. You know, you're not half bad for a teenager." The youth led his brother into the kitchen, returning in a minute or so with a small two-handled plastic cup filled with grape juice.

"Okay, sit down." Luís sat on the floor and Ramón handed him the cup. "Careful, now. Don't spill it." The toddler grasped the curved handles and raised the cup to his lips. A purple waterfall cascaded down his chin and drenched his shirt front.

"Watch out there, Luey," Stan chortled. "Some of that's getting in your mouth."

"Oh, man!" moaned the teenager. "Can't you drink anything without spilling it?"

"Patience, son," his father admonished. "I don't recall you doing a whole lot better when you were his age."

"Well, I don't see how I could have done much worse." Ramón repossessed the juice cup and set it on the coffee table. He started to peel off the boy's soggy t-shirt, but Luís was having none of that.

"Dweese!" he wailed, reaching for the cup.

"Might as well let him finish," Joe advised. "He can't get much wetter than he already is" The lad's second attempt was somewhat more successful, in that he got almost as much juice in his mouth this time as he did on his shirt. He handed the empty cup to his brother with a slobbery grin.

"Dweese," he commanded.

"No way, Jose. You've had enough 'dweese' for awhile. At least your shirt has." Luís screwed up his face and threatened to add a torrent of tears to the already-soaked garment, but the fortuitous appearance of his mother short-circuited that intention.

"Mama!" he squealed, teetering across the room and wrapping himself around her knees.

"Oh, Luís, just look at you!" She picked him up to assess the damage.

"He wanted some juice," Ramón explained.

"I can see that. Never mind, I'll get him cleaned up. Are you two staying for dinner?" Stan looked at his watch.

"I didn't realize it was that late. I hate to say this, but we really have to get going. I have to work tomorrow, and it's a long drive home."

"Oh, Stan, I was having so much fun!" Caroline protested. "Couldn't we stay just a little longer?"

"Sorry, babe, but it really is getting late." Caroline picked up her purse and delivered hugs and kisses all around.

"Now you be sure and call me when that new pattern comes," she instructed Delia.

"I sure will. And I hope it won't be another year and a half before we see you again."

"Don't worry, it won't." Stan hugged his sister-in-law, and the family

trooped outside to wave goodbye from the curb.

Chapter 16

Desert Dangers

It gets hot in Texas. The air shimmers and dances above the plains, and the baking sun draws a spider's web of foot-deep cracks in the hard-packed clay. Lizards dig in under the biggest rocks they can find, and even the prairie dogs hide deep in their burrows, venturing out only in the late evenings to scrounge for seeds and dry grasses. And cats? Well, cats mostly stay indoors, if they have a choice, in the cool, comfy world of air conditioning and ceiling fans.

The early mornings are nice, though, for strolls in the garden and for long, leisurely baths on the patio swing. My stitches were by now completely healed, and the fur on my belly was rapidly growing back. I was certainly glad to be rid of that horrible funnel collar, too. What a nuisance that was! For nearly two weeks I hadn't been able to wash anything but my front paws and half of my tail, and eating or drinking anything was a major challenge.

After my bath came the usual rounds of the garden and then the prairie dog colony. The first mound had fresh scent, and I probed it with one forepaw. Nothing down there but air. The second and third mounds produced the same result. Rats! After all this time you'd think I'd be able to catch at least one of the wily critters, but I hadn't even come close.

Beyond the last mound, a scraggly creosote bush squatted next to a cluster of sand-blasted rocks, half concealing them with its twiggy umbrella. I hadn't been out there yet. Maybe it was worth checking into. My approach was casual but cautious. There was nothing particularly menacing about this particular rock formation, still, one can't be too careful when venturing into unfamiliar territory. I nosed around the base of the largest boulder and placed one paw on the smooth stone. It was still cool to the touch, though the sun had just begun to caress its crown with one golden finger.

One easy bound brought me to the peak, where the sparse leaves struggled to provide just a bit of shade. Clusters of small yellow blossoms adorned the branches, and a lone honeybee clambered over the delicate petals, its leg-baskets heavy with pollen. I sniffed at the spray of flowers it had just left, but the fragrance frankly left a good deal to be desired. In fact, the whole plant had a vaguely oily smell.

I slid down the shady side of the boulder and instantly froze in my tracks. I stood motionless, hypnotized by the wedge-shaped head that undulated before me, jaws agape, hooked fangs bared. The dusky brown and grey coils of its long, lithe body churned restlessly, and its upraised tail rattled a stern warning. The menacing head flashed toward me. I leaped aside, feeling the brush of those fangs against my shoulder.

A more sensible cat would have probably high-tailed it for home and

counted herself lucky, but something about this creature challenged me to stand and fight, and I was never one to back down from a challenge. I'd had run-ins with snakes before, but a garter snake isn't much more troublesome than a lizard when it comes down to a pitched battle. This was different. I knew instinctively that this was a dangerous, even a deadly foe.

I circled to the side, looking for an opening. The serpent turned with me, its rough scales rasping like footsteps in dry leaves. It lunged again. Another near miss. I retaliated with two sharp thwacks to the back of its prostrate head. The snake pulled back into itself and regarded me with cold, yellow eyes. Its forked tongue flicked in and out, testing the air for my scent. Again I circled and again it struck, this time a glancing blow to my flank. Close. Too close. I backed away a few feet to consider my strategy.

My foe was quick and unpredictable, and I had only my reflexes to keep me alive. On the other hand, it seemed to have a fairly limited striking range, much less than its overall length might suggest. If I stayed just beyond that strike zone, I should be pretty safe.

I paced back and forth just outside what I judged to be the danger zone, teasing it into another strike. It worked. This time it fell several inches short of its target. The snake pulled itself upright and fixed me with a baleful glare. Its tail rattled furiously. Try that again, it hissed. I did. The result was the same. Now it was just a matter of time and patience. Mine was strong. The snake's was wearing thin. Another strike and another. I could tell it was tiring. Two more futile lunges and I made my move.

Choosing the moment after a strike when the reptile lay prone and vulnerable, I sprang. I seized it a few inches behind that treacherous head and shook it savagely. The long body twisted violently, flipping me off my feet, but I hung on desperately. I didn't dare let go now. I clamped down harder and jerked my head from side to side. My jaws ached, and my shoulder was painfully bruised from being slammed against the ground, but still I held fast. The snake was almost finished. It twitched a few more times and lay still. Cautiously I released my grip and stepped back. One more spasm and it was over.

I tapped it with one paw just to make sure. Nothing. A few licks to my sore shoulder and I was ready to attempt the next step - getting it back home. After all, I had to show off my prize, didn't I?

Preferring to avoid those still-gaping jaws, I seized the beast by the tail and started dragging, or should I say trying to drag? That sucker was heavy! I braced with all four feet and pulled with all my strength. It moved just a little. One step backward, brace and pull. Step back, brace and pull. Slowly but surely it was coming.

The sun rose ever higher in the sky, and the hard-packed earth grew hotter and hotter. Every rock, every tuft of grass was a major obstacle. Nearly an hour had passed before I finally reached the edge of the garden. Another twenty minutes or so brought me to the back door. I meowed and knocked for admittance. Mama Morales was the first to respond.

"Ay, Dios mío!" she shrieked and slammed the door in my face. Some welcome! Slightly exasperated, I knocked again. From inside I could hear Mama's voice, still frantic, and Delia, trying vainly to soothe her hysterical mother.

"Cálmase Mama. Take it easy! You give yourself a heart attack. Now what on earth..." she was saying as she opened the door. "O-o-o-oh!" and once again the door slammed shut. After a moment it opened again, just a

crack, and Delia peeked out. "Oh my goodness." Closed again. This was getting real old, real fast. After all the trouble I'd gone to to bring them this magnificent trophy, this was the reception I got? I knocked again and meowed loudly.

The door opened a fourth time and out came a broom handle. Delia poked at the snake a couple of times to satisfy herself that it was truly dead. Then she opened the door a bit wider, snatched me inside, and slammed it shut again, leaving my hard-won prize on the patio. I protested loudly but in vain. The door stayed closed.

"Kiki, what in the world....How in the world....Kiki, are you out of your mind? You could have been killed! Kiki, don't you ever do that again, do you hear me? Not ever!"

"Ay Dios mío." was all Mama Morales could manage.

When Ramón got home from school that afternoon there was another flurry of excitement.

"Wow!" he exclaimed when shown the lifeless reptile. "Kiki did that? Cool!" He fetched his pocket knife and cut off the rattler's tail, shaking it teasingly under my nose. I reached for it, but he snatched it away. "No way, kiddo. It's mine now." Most unfair, I thought. After all, I did all the work. Just what was his contribution, anyway?

At his mother's insistence, he wrapped the remainder of the corpse in a double-strength paper bag and stuffed it into the trash can by the back door. Of course, he had to haul it out again later to show his friends from school, and later still when his dad got home from work. They measured it and weighed it half a dozen times, and then they weighed me a couple of times just for comparison. Finally Delia came out and announced dinner.

"You'd better hurry up if you're going to eat and still make it to the concert on time. It's nearly sixty miles to Fort Worth, and you know how Willie Nelson hates to be kept waiting."

The dinner dishes finished, Delia sat beside me on the patio swing, sipping a king-sized soda through a straw. Just inside the garden's edge the twins gathered bluebonnets under her watchful eye. The ice cubes tinkled against the sides of the glass as she absent-mindedly swirled it in her hand. A grey and brown bird landed on the yucca plant, chirped once, and flew away. Not a breath of wind stirred anywhere. The phone rang in the kitchen. Delia set the half-empty glass on the wrought-iron table and went into the house.

I dropped down onto the smooth flagstones of the patio and wandered out to where the youngsters were playing. Lucía picked up a small stone and rubbed it against her T-shirt. The flat edge flashed in the sun as she turned it over.

"Pretty," she said. She licked it and rubbed it on her shirt again. "Pretty." She showed it to Luís, who reached out as if to take it. "No!" She shoved the rock into her tiny pocket. "Mine." Luís thrust out his lower lip and glowered momentarily at his sibling. Then he squatted and began searching the ground around his feet. After all, if a mere girl could find such a priceless treasure so easily, surely he could do at least as well. Stone after stone was examined and summarily cast aside. I pounced on each as it landed, batting it about on the ground until the next one fell, and the next. This was a great game!

"Pretty." Lucía held up another pebble, smaller than the first, but smooth and round and white, like a crystalline bird's egg.

"Let me see." Luís made a grab for the prize, but the little girl's fingers closed tightly around it. Her brother made a clumsy attempt to

wrest it from her grip.

"No! Mine!" Lucía took a step backwards, tripped, and landed on her behind, dropping her handful of wilted blossoms. She tucked her clenched fist under her other arm and drew up her knees to defend the coveted treasure. "Go away!" Totally frustrated, Luís resumed his search. Stone after stone was inspected and rejected, but he would not give up. Finally, success! An egg-sized rock with an irregular surface that reflected the sunlight like a hundred tiny mirrors.

"See, I got one, too." He showed off his find. Lucía nodded approvingly.

"Pretty," she agreed. Another dozen or so stones were scrutinized and discarded with no further luck, and finally the twins turned their attention to other amusements. Lucía yanked a tall stem of grass from its moorings. A tassel of seeds dangled from its tip and she twitched it temptingly in front of my face. "Kiki," she cooed. I swung at it obligingly and she pulled it away. "Kiki," she cooed again, shaking it just out of my reach.

I pounced, pinning it to the ground. She yanked it back and the seeds stripped off under my paw. Lucía poked the frayed end at my face. It tickled my nose and I sneezed. "Salud," she giggled again.

Just about then, an odd, scruffy-looking bird dashed out from behind a boulder, its crested head thrust forward, its long skinny legs almost a blur. It stabbed at something on the ground, picked it up, shook it, and threw it down hard. A lizard, maybe, or a small snake. The bird picked up its prey again and jerked it into its pointed beak. It swallowed once and the unlucky victim vanished without a trace, whereupon the hunter zipped away, darting hither and yon until its mottled brown plumage blended into the mottled brown of the terrain and it too was only a memory.

"Birdie!" Lucía squealed, running after it at top speed. "Birdie, birdie." Not to be outdone, Luís followed close on her heels, barely keeping up with his sister. They ran until both were out of breath, but found neither track nor feather of the elusive bird.

"Here birdie, birdie," Luís called, looking about as if expecting it to reappear on his command. "Here birdie, birdie." The only response was the breathless panting of his playmate. 'Round and 'round he turned, fruitlessly searching the landscape. A smooth flat pebble drew his attention.

"Kiki, look." Luís picked it up and sent it skipping across the desert floor. I darted after it, finally snaring it on the third bounce. Both youngsters laughed out loud. Luís retrieved the stone from my possession and threw it again. Once more I chased it down and subdued it.

"My turn." Lucía picked up the rock and mimicked her brother's sideways toss, but alas, it bounced once and died.

"No, no, like this." Again the pebble skipped gaily across the hard earth with yours truly and the twins in hot pursuit. This particular diversion continued for more than half an hour, with only occasional interruptions while the two contestants squabbled over whose turn it was to throw. Once I thought I heard Delia's voice calling us, but it sounded awfully faint and far away, and the kids didn't seem to hear it at all. Meanwhile the sun slipped unobserved behind the low hills and an ominous shadow swept across the plains. Almost immediately the temperature dropped noticeably.

I felt more than a little uneasy, but the young adventurers ignored the fading light, totally engrossed in their game. Toward the east, the quarter moon was already halfway up the sky, and here and there a few

bright stars were plainly visible. Somewhere off to the right a coyote yelped twice and then howled. Farther away another answered its call. Lucía looked about her, suddenly perplexed.

"I'm thirsty," she complained, sitting down abruptly. She scanned the barren landscape as if expecting her mother to materialize with a cold drink. "I'm thirsty!" she hollered, kicking at the dry dirt with the heels of her red and white sneakers. I walked a few feet in the direction of home, hoping the children would follow, but they paid no attention.

Luis looked around for the house and saw nothing. Picking up a rock from the ground near his feet, he spun around several times and hurled it with all his might into the gathering twilight. He took his sister by the hand and pulled her to her feet.

"Come on," he demanded, and led her away into the wilderness, apparently using the random missile as his navigator. I followed close at their side, fully aware that we were headed in the wrong direction, but powerless to intervene. The coyotes howled again, and I shivered just a little.

A light breeze picked up as darkness fell around us, bringing a distinct chill to the night air. The twins huddled closer together as they plodded on and on. It was hard for them to see where they were going, and both children stumbled frequently. Finally Luis broke the silence.

"I'm cold," he whimpered.

"Me too," Lucía answered. "I want to go home."

"Me too." Stubbornly they pressed on, clinging to each other as much for comfort as for warmth, and all the while moving farther and farther from the destination they both so desperately desired. Lucía began singing, softly at first, then louder, as if to bolster her sagging courage.

"Wrinkle, wrinkle, little star,
Now I wonder what you are,
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond an' a sky,
Wrinkle, wrinkle, little star,
Now I wonder what you are."

Luis joined in for a couple of rounds, and then they both fell silent again. They walked more slowly now, but still they moved forward. It was now almost pitch dark. Suddenly Lucía tripped and fell flat. She lay prone for a moment, not moving at all. Then she gave a tiny sob, then another. Luis sat down beside her and began to cry, too. Close by now, the lone coyote answered their wails with a howl of his own.

Lucía jerked and sat bolt upright. She scuttled close to her brother and they huddled together, staring into the inky blackness, still shivering, still sobbing softly. For a long while neither of them moved. Their breathing was heavy and slow. Finally Lucía got up and brushed the dirt from her clothes. Her brother stood and took her hand again. They looked about them dazedly, no longer sure of their bearings. They took a few faltering steps and halted.

"I'm tired," whispered Lucía.

"Me too."

"I want to go to sleep."

"Me too." The youngsters squatted down and carefully brushed away the stones and debris from the small area around them. Then they curled up together on the unforgiving ground, snuggled in each other's arms like a pair of exhausted kittens. I stationed myself close by to watch over them. A night hawk circled slowly overhead, and a speckled lizard skittered past the mesquite bush. The coyote howled again, ever closer, ever more menacing.

Shadowy figures moved furtively in the darkness. From far off came the baying of a hound. I stretched out on the still-warm earth and gazed into the night, marveling at the variety of animal life that populated this seemingly lifeless wasteland. A small mouse-like creature emerged from its burrow, nervous and jerky, nose atwilt. Its tiny front paws seemed completely out of proportion to its large head and enormous hind feet. My own tail twitched a little. Should I try? No, better not. Best to stay with my helpless charges.

The mouse bounced across the desert in magnificent leaps, using its long, tufted tail as a rudder. Stopping at a clump of dry grass, it pulled down the seed heads one after another, stripping the seeds with its sharp incisors. It didn't swallow them, though, appearing instead to store its haul in its cheeks, causing them to bulge absurdly. From plant to plant it bounced, harvesting seeds until its cheek-pouches could hold no more. Temporarily satisfied with its booty, it scampered back to its underground home, only to reappear minutes later to re-stock its strange tote bags.

A huge hairy spider popped up seemingly from nowhere and scurried off in search of whatever it is that huge hairy spiders eat. Assorted bugs and beetles ran, hopped, and flew about, filling the air with buzzes, clicks and whistles. Again I heard the baying of a hound, and it seemed to be coming closer. I sat up and peered into the blackness. Was that a light I saw in the distance? No, nothing there. Must have been my imagination. But there it was again! Just a glimmer, just a flicker, but definitely a light of some kind, and coming this way.

The hound's baying was more insistent now, and I could hear men's voices, too. I didn't know whether to rejoice or prepare to do battle. On the one hand, if these men were good people they might be able to help the twins get back home. But on the other hand, if they weren't so nice, they might even hurt them.

Then there was the dog to consider. I have nothing against dogs as a species, but so many of them seem to be just naturally mean to cats and children. Well, whatever the case, I'd certainly do my best to see that no harm came to my young friends.

Closer and closer they came, until they were nearly on top of us. The hound's baying was almost frantic. The twins stirred and started to sit up, rubbing their sleepy eyes with grubby fists. The waving beam of light shone directly in my face, blinding me momentarily. I hissed and arched my back, trying to look as ferocious as possible.

"There they are!" someone shouted. Three men in uniform rushed forward, while a fourth held back the barking dog on a long leash. One of the men scooped Lucia up from her dusty bed, while another lifted Luis to his feet. The lad started to cry as the deputy hoisted him up to his chest.

"It's okay, little fella, don't cry," the officer soothed him. "We're gonna take you home to your mother."

"Is that their cat?" asked the third man.

"I guess so. Bring it along, anyway," replied the first deputy, who seemed to be in charge of the expedition. "Oh, don't forget the signal."

"Coming up." The third officer unholstered a large pistol and fired into the air. A loud pop and a whooshing sound were followed a moment later by a second pop and a bright flash of light. For a few seconds the whole area was illuminated by a brilliant whiteness. Every bush and boulder stood out in stark black and white. I jumped and backed away, unsure whether to stay with the children or make a run for it. I stayed.

"Come here, kitty." The deputy holstered the gun and gently picked me up. A cat man for sure. We all started back in the direction the men had

come from, and were soon met by a pair of Jeeps.

"Are they alright?" called out one of the drivers.

"Seem to be," the first officer responded. "We can check 'em over better when we get 'em home." Everyone, including the dog, piled into the two vehicles, and we bounced and jounced across the desert toward home. Delia and Mama Morales waited at the edge of the garden. They each took one of the children and smothered them with hugs and kisses.

"Oh, my babies. My poor, poor babies," Delia half-laughed, half-cried.

"Gracias a Dios," whispered Mama Morales. They carried the little ones into the house, surrounded and attended by five proud and happy police officers. The one with the dog stayed outside. The sergeant sat down at the kitchen table with his clipboard and started writing up his report. The young explorers were inspected from head to toe, but the most serious injury seemed to be Lucía's skinned knee.

Once all the forms were filled out and all the questions satisfactorily answered, the deputies packed up their gear and their dog and headed back into town. A warm bath, clean pajamas, more hugs and kisses, and the twins were finally tucked into their own beds. A moment more and they were fast asleep. In the driveway a car door slammed. Delia closed the bedroom door and hurried down the hall. It was Joe with Ramón and Rosalia, just getting back from the concert.

"Well, did everyone have a good time?" Delia hugged her husband.

"It was great. Willie was in rare form." Joe kissed her on the forehead. "How was your evening?"

"Fair. Kiki and the twins went for a walk. All in all it was pretty quiet." Mama started to speak but reconsidered. She smiled and nodded.

"Pretty quiet," she affirmed.

"And how are the little angels now?"

"Sound asleep, of course." Delia indicated the closed door. "It's almost one-thirty, you know."

"Yeah, I guess we all better get to bed. Ramón, Rosie."

"Ah, Dad," they wailed in unison.

"Now." The teenagers exited, grumbling. Joe kissed Delia again. "Sorry you had to miss out on all the fun. It must have been pretty boring for you here with Mama and the kids." Delia smiled.

"Oh, we kept pretty busy," she assured him, "and we weren't the least bit bored."

Chapter 17

On The Road Again

I could tell from the grim expression on Joe's face that the news wasn't good. He didn't even bother to shut the front door behind him, he just slumped into the big easy chair, still holding his lunch pail in his left hand. Delia quietly closed the door and hurried to his side.

"They're going to shut down the field," she said. He nodded glumly. "How long did they give you?" she asked. He looked at her for the first time, then back at the floor.

"Three weeks. We get paid for four." Delia took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Well, that's that." She carried the lunch pail into the kitchen and returned with a glass of ice water. "Have you decided yet about California?" Joe took a sip from the glass and stared morosely at the ice cubes.

"That's a mighty big leap across the arroyo. What about the kids?"

"Well, if we have to move, now's the best time. They'll be out of school in another week, and if we give our notice now, our last-month deposit'll carry us through July. You can call Rick and have him line up a place for us in Los Angeles."

"I don't know, babe. I just hate to make such a big decision in a hurry. What do I know about auto body work, anyway?"

"Rick'll teach you. Joe, we've talked about this for months. We knew it was coming sooner or later. The field just isn't productive anymore, and even if you found another rigging job, it could happen again. Auto body work is always there."

"I know. I guess I was just hoping for a miracle." Delia brushed the hair out of his eyes and kissed him tenderly.

"But don't you see, maybe this IS your miracle. Maybe this is God's way of telling you there's something better out there for you." Joe smiled, a small smile.

"That's my little Pollyanna for you. Always seeing the good side of everything." He finished the drink and wiped his hands on his trousers. "I'll call Rick after dinner. See if he even still WANTS me out there."

Ramón and Rosalia weren't exactly thrilled when they heard the big news. Rosie swore she would absolutely die if she had to leave all her friends, and Ramón was positive he could have made first string on the football team next year. Now what were they supposed to do, just pack up and leave everything? Open rebellion threatened until Mama Morales stepped in and put down the insurrection.

"Now listen here, you kids. Everything your papa does, he does for you. You think this is easy for him or your mama? They've lived here all their lives, same as you. All their friends are here, same as yours. But things change, and we have to change to live. Your papa doesn't work, we starve, simple as that. Now stop complaining and start packing."

The next few weeks were pure chaos. Every few days Joe brought home another batch of boxes from town, and Delia and Mama spent nearly every waking hour sorting and packing, sorting and packing. The twins and I were in seventh heaven. Nothing beats a room full of half-empty boxes for pure, unadulterated fun.

Delia was particularly methodical about her work. She took one room at a time, sorting, packing, and marking each box by room and by contents. Every room had at least one of what she called a "we-don't-have-room-for-this" box, into which went outgrown and outdated clothing, unused gadgets, and unplayed-with toys, often over the violent, "I might want that sometime" protests of the original owner. Delia held firm, however, and 90% of her initial decisions stuck.

The original plan had called for Ramón and Rosie to do all their own packing, but as it developed, their concept of "packing" consisted primarily of taking armloads of clothes from closets and drawers and dumping them willy-nilly into the biggest boxes they could find. Their mother found this method quite intolerable, and soon stepped in and took over their rooms as well. Personally, I think that had probably been their strategy from the beginning.

When all the packing was done, close to two dozen we-don't-have-room-for-this boxes were stacked in the garage, waiting for the scheduled yard sale. Delia classified, appraised, and priced everything, and on the appointed day, arranged it all in an orderly display in the front yard. I chose a shady spot under the cashier's table where I could enjoy the proceedings without danger of being stepped on.

It was a bright, sunny Saturday, and the first customers arrived even

before Delia finished setting up her cash box. They seemed for the most part a quiet and orderly lot, so I left my sheltered retreat and mingled with the crowd. I thoroughly enjoyed the company, being petted and stroked by many, and picked up and cuddled by a few.

"How much for the cat?" one man jokingly asked Delia, scratching expertly behind my ears.

"Sorry, not for sale," she smiled back. "My daughter would never forgive me."

"Ah, well," sighed the would-be cat buyer. "Her gain, my loss." He paid for the two books he'd picked out and drove away. I rubbed against Delia's legs and purred.

"You'd better stick a little closer around here, Kiki," she scolded gently. "We don't want you getting carried off, now, do we?" I curled up under the table next to her feet, content for the moment to be just a spectator. Joe, Rosie, and Ramón took turns relieving Delia as official treasurer, and by early evening more than two-thirds of the items on display had been sold. By six o'clock the flow of customers slowed to a trickle, and the family began gathering up the remainders into boxes and carrying them back into the garage.

"Well, how did we do today?" Joe asked Delia.

"Pretty good, I think. I haven't counted it yet, but I'm sure we took in well over a hundred dollars." She dumped an armload of unsold shoes into an empty carton. "Monday I'll call Salvation Army to pick up the rest of this stuff."

"Sounds like a plan," Joe smiled. "Now when's dinner?"

"You rat, you." Delia swung at him with a sofa pillow, but missed. "I'm not even done picking up and you want dinner."

"Just kidding." He took the pillow and kissed her cheek. "I've already made a salad and there's a pizza in the oven. You get tonight off for a change."

Three days later it was finished. Boxes and cartons lined every wall, and the closets and cupboards were totally barren. Even the garage was all cleaned out except for the oil stain on the concrete floor. Joe and Delia stood on the patio, gazing out over the vast expanse of the plains.

"We've been here a long time," Delia sighed.

"Almost fifteen years," Joe assented.

"I'll miss it."

"I know. But we'll have a new place just as nice."

"Will I be able to have a garden again?"

"Anything you want, my love."

"It's almost eight." Delia shook herself out of her reverie. "You better go rent the truck."

"I suppose so." Joe kicked a pebble across the flagstones. "I guess there's no changing our minds now."

An hour later Joe was back with a huge yellow truck. He backed it into the driveway and rolled up the big door at the rear. Time and time again they walked up the twin ramps into the gaping maw, carrying furniture, boxes, and suitcases.

I was in a tizzy, running first to one, then another. Twice Rosie almost tripped over me, and finally they gave up and locked me in the garage. For nearly two hours I paced the empty floor and meowed, but no one heeded my calls. At long last the house was empty and the truck was full. Joe pulled down the big door and locked it.

A late lunch consisted of potato salad, canned corn, and milk, served on paper plates and eaten seated around a tablecloth on the kitchen floor.

Then the cloth was folded up, the dishes stuffed into a trash bag, and Delia took a last walk through the house to make sure nothing was left behind. Rosie picked me up and kissed me on the head.

"Time to go, Kiki." She tucked me into my carrier, snapped the door shut, and carried me out to the car. The family all held hands and said a short prayer. Then Joe hugged and kissed his wife, and he and Ramón climbed into the cab of the big truck. Mama and the twins clambered into the back seat of the car, and Delia and Rosie sat up front with me. The truck pulled out of the driveway and into the street, with the car following close behind.

Rows of houses soon gave way to shops and stores, and before long we were out on the open highway. Hoping to get a better look, I meowed to be let out of the carrier. With a little pleading and coaxing and a lot of promises from Rosie, Delia at last consented.

"Just put the harness on her so you can keep her in your lap." It was the first time the harness and I had met, so it took a little poking and prodding, as well as some fitting and adjusting, but soon I was standing on Rosie's lap, drinking in the landscape as it zipped past the window. There was nothing of major interest, really; a few houses, the occasional stunted tree, and lots of wide open spaces. Still, it was something to look at. A herd of a dozen or more horses raced for miles along the fence, turning aside only when a small river intervened.

"Horsey!" Lucía shrieked. "Horsey, horsey!" Up to this point, the twins had been pretty quiet, occupied with the brand-new Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls their "Abuela" - their grandmother - had made especially for the trip. Now they suddenly came alive in an avalanche of chatter.

"Mommy, I want a horsey."

"Mommy, can I sit up front?"

"Where's Daddy? I want Daddy!"

"I want to ride in the big truck."

"Are we going to Cafora?"

"I'm thirsty."

"Me too." Mama Morales opened the zippered bag at her feet and gave a bottle of soda pop to each of the twins and to Rosie. That subdued them for about ten minutes, then the clamor began afresh.

"Are we there yet?"

"Can I have an ice cream?"

"Mommy, Lucy hit me!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!" And finally:

"Mommy, I gotta go!"

Delia sighed. "It's only six miles to the next rest stop," she told the twins. "You can wait that long."

"But I hafta go NOW!"

"Well, you'll just have to wait a few minutes." The next few miles were unpleasant to say the least, but somehow we made it to the rest area without a major accident. The twins tumbled out of the back seat and Delia herded them toward the restrooms, while Rosie hitched up my new leash and led me to the specially designated pet area. I found a nice sandy spot to do my necessities, and we returned to the car by way of the water fountain.

Once everyone had had a chance to stretch their legs, we were back on the road, and two hours and a hundred miles later we pulled into Amarillo, hot, hungry, and dead tired. In the parking lot of a cut-rate motel, we

waited while Joe checked us in, then we followed the truck around to the back. Rosie carried me into the room and flopped on the bed.

"I'm gonna die." she moaned.

"You're not going to die," her mother assured her.

"Then I'm gonna kill those kids."

"You're not going to do any such thing. You're going to be patient and loving and understanding, just like the adult you're always saying you are. A long trip like this is rough on little kids, and it's up to us to try and make it a little easier for them."

"Rough on them! How about me? I will positively expire if they keep that up all the way to Los Angeles." Joe appeared in the doorway.

"How's everyone doing so far?" he asked.

"Surviving. You watch the kids while I go get something for dinner. We passed a grocery store a few blocks back."

We slept dormitory-style that night; guys in one room, girls in the other. Bright and early the next morning we hit the road again. We'd been climbing quite a bit the last two or three hours the previous day, and we were still climbing when we crossed the border into New Mexico.

The two-lane highway we'd started out on had turned into a four-lane interstate, wide and smooth and fast. Scattered herds of cattle grazed on the broad grassy plains, and a few more trees began to appear, popping up on the horizon, flashing past my window, and dropping away behind us. Ahead a range of mountains loomed high and forbidding. The air was noticeably cooler than it had been in Texas, and continued to drop the higher we climbed, though the skies were still sunny and clear.

The twins each had a fresh new coloring book to engage their attention, but with only a single set of crayons between them, some conflict was still inevitable. You'd think that with over forty different shades to choose from, there'd be no problem, but somehow, they always seemed to need the exact same color at the exact same time, and no other shade would do.

Lunch time passed without reaching a major city, so at length we stopped at a roadside rest and ate the lunch Delia had packed that morning. Afterwards, Mama Morales took the twins for a short walk while Joe and Delia relaxed in the shade of an ancient pine tree. Ramón sat in the cab of the truck listening to a baseball game on the radio, and Rosie and I went our own way, exploring amongst the shrubs and vines that bordered the diminutive park.

I sniffed all the strange new smells and played briefly with a big black beetle that tried to hide under a mound of decaying leaves. When I poked at it, it raised up its tail and emitted a foul odor, and I was glad to leave it alone. All too soon it was time to leave, and once again the little caravan pulled onto the highway. Huge peaks towered above us on all sides, threatening us with their enormous bulk as we wound our way between them. Albuquerque came and went, and still we climbed upward.

By mid-afternoon we had crossed the Arizona border and were descending onto another broad, high plateau. More cattle grazed on the green grass, oblivious to our passing. Behind us grey-black clouds boiled up into great, high towers of gloom. Swiftly they covered the sky, blocking out all trace of the sun. Most of the cars on the road switched on their headlights, even though nighttime was still many hours away. Fingers of lightning flashed from cloud to cloud and up from the earth. Thunder crashed and boomed all around us, and Luís began to wail.

"Mommy, I'm scared, I'm scared."

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Luís," Mama Morales soothed, stroking the frightened child on the head. "Thunder and lightening are only God's

fireworks. Good little children have nothing to fear from them."

"That's right," Delia agreed, adding, "Just don't touch the door handles or play with the windows." Huge raindrops splashed on the windshield, and Delia turned the wipers on high. The wide highway instantly became a flowing river, all marks and lines completely obliterated by the rushing water. Next came the hail, tiny rocks of ice that cracked and splattered across the windshield and danced on the hood. Traffic was getting crazy, with many cars slowing almost to a crawl, while others plowed through the shallow lakes as if they didn't even exist. For my part, I thoroughly enjoyed nature's heroic display, but was very, very glad to be able to view it from a warm, dry place.

Then, as abruptly as it had begun, it was over. The dark, sullen clouds moved off to the north, and a spectacular rainbow arched across the sodden land. Spanning from peak to peak, it formed a great kaleidoscopic gateway, beckoning us to enter. Ooh's and ah's issued from the back seat as squeals of delight replaced tears and wails. The pavement soon dried and cars and trucks resumed their normal pace as the squall faded into uneasy memory.

The dinner hour found us in a small town far from any major metropolitan area. The truck in front of us pulled into a grey little motel just off the main drag. Joe got out and walked back to the car.

"I think we better call it a day," he told Delia. "It's almost a hundred miles still to Flagstaff, and I really don't want to push it."

"You're right," she nodded. "I'm tired, too. That storm was really something else. You get us checked in and I'll see what we have for dinner." Dinner was prepared and consumed amid much hubbub and conversation, most of it centering around the afternoon thunderstorm. Afterward, everyone turned in early.

"We've got a long day ahead of us tomorrow," Joe advised them. "We still have almost six hundred miles to go, and we'll have to get up mighty early if we're gonna make it in one day." True to his word, Joe knocked on our door at the crack of dawn the next day, and we were under way again within an hour. The route was still an uphill climb, and Delia watched with concern as the needle on one of the car's numerous gauges flirted with its little red line.

"We're not going to overheat, are we?" Rosie asked, frowning.

"I hope not," her mother responded. "We're almost to the top now. If we can just make it to Flagstaff we should be okay. According to your father, it's all downhill from there." Well, we made it to Flagstaff, and it was down-hill for a long, long way. The hot, dry air shimmered off the blacktop, giving the illusion of large puddles of water that vanished at our approach. I stretched out panting on Rosie's lap, trying desperately to cool my overheated body. She turned to Mama Morales.

"Grama, will you hand me the water bottle, please." She uncapped the bottle and sprinkled a little on my fur, ruffling it with her fingers to expose the skin. It helped a little, and I was able to relax a bit. Another, albeit smaller range of mountains rose from the desert floor, and again the needle wavered. Our poor, overburdened car managed to climb this set as well, and once more we seemed to be on a downhill course. An hour later we arrived at the shore of a great, slow-moving river.

"Holy smokes!" Rosie exclaimed. "Is that a lake or a river?"

"Actually, it's both," Delia told her. "According to the map, that's Lake Havasu, which is part of the Colorado River. It's an artificial lake formed by a dam. That's California on the other side."

"California! You mean we're there?"

"Cafora! Cafora!" Lucia piped up from the back seat. The twins had

spent most of the morning hours playing with their yarn pictures, weaving the brightly colored cord in and out of holes punched into squares of cardboard. Now they snapped to attention, alerted by the magic word.

"Are we there yet?" Luís inquired.

"Not yet," Mama Morales assured him. "In a while."

"In five minutes?"

"No. Maybe in four or five hours."

"Is that more than five minutes?"

"Yes, dear, quite a lot more." We crossed the river and stopped for lunch outside a small town at the foot of yet another mountain range.

"I'm worried about the car with all these mountains," Delia told Joe. "It's been running awful hot, and we still have this Mojave Desert to cross." She pointed to a spot on her map. "What if we break down out there somewhere?"

"You worry too much. I checked the car over before we left home. The fan belt's a little worn, but it'll hold 'til we get to Los Angeles. We don't have time now to be hunting around for a mechanic. Besides, they'll always soak you in a place like this. They know it's the last town before you cross, and they figure they've got you over a barrel." He rubbed the top of her head. "Don't worry. We'll be fine." Delia glanced across the street to the bank building where a sign flashed "115°" and "12:36 PM".

"I hope you're right," she sighed. After lunch we all piled back into the vehicles and headed up the grade. Rosie had folded a wet towel on the seat for me to lay on, but it was still miserably hot. At the top of the pass we stared out across a vast, barren desert, bounded on all sides by still more mountains.

"I don't believe it," Rosie groaned. "I thought California was supposed to be this great, wonderful Garden of Eden or something. There's supposed to be orange trees and strawberry fields and big lawns and swimming pools and everything. This is worse than Texas! Mom!"

"Now calm down, dear. It can't all be like this. Once we get through this one desert, I'm sure it'll be very nice."

"This one desert! This one desert is a million miles wide! We'll never get across it! We'll die out there, I just know we will!"

"Rosalia, you're being ridiculous. We'll be across before you know it, and we'll be at Uncle Rick's in time for dinner. Now settle down and hush up before you wake up the twins."

We glided down the western slope and out across the flatland. Waves of heat bouncing off the highway distorted the landscape like a TV set with a bad transistor. Even with all the windows open, the air in the car was stifling. I lay on the damp towel and panted, waiting for the cool breeze that didn't come.

All at once there was a pop and a loud flapping noise from up in front. Delia signalled and pulled off to the roadside. Joe pulled over as well and walked back to see what the trouble was. Delia had already popped the latch on the hood.

"Something went just then," she said. I think it's the fan belt." Joe raised the hood and looked into the engine compartment. He shoved his hands into his back pockets and stared out across the desert for a long minute. Then he reached into the front seat for the map and spread it out on the roof. He ran his hand through his hair and scanned the road in both directions. Presently he tossed the map back into the car and gestured toward the west.

"There's supposed to be a junction a couple of miles ahead and a town off to the side a ways. They should at least have a service station there."

They usually carry fan belts."

"But what if they don't? Or what if they don't have our size? This isn't exactly a new car, remember?" Joe seemed not to hear her questions.

"Leave the hood open a crack. Just stay behind me and take it real slow and easy." He strode back to the truck, leaving her standing alone beside the car. She got in, crossed herself, and turned the key.

"I knew it," Rosie moaned. "We're going to die out here." We crept along the shoulder at what seemed like a snail's pace, until at last we came to a small side road. It was an worn and weathered old two-lane, laced with cracks and patched with tar, not the least bit inviting, but Joe said that was the way to go, so that was the way we went. If there was a town anywhere out there, it was mighty well hidden. All I could see was a beat-up old road and a line of telephone poles stretching out into nowhere.

We hadn't gone far when a cloud of steam erupted from under the hood. Delia pulled off the road again, though it seemed quite unnecessary to me. There wasn't another car in sight for miles, and from the look of it, there hadn't been for years. Joe brought a jug of water from the truck and poured some of it into the car's reservoir. He waited a few minutes and added some more, then got back in the truck and pulled away, all without uttering a word to anyone. A few miles and an eternity later, we finally spotted a little cluster of buildings in the distance. Delia let out a sigh of relief.

"If nothing else, they'll have a telephone," she muttered. I wasn't so sure. The closer we got, the more deserted it looked. None of the structures had been painted in years. In fact, Most appeared to be completely abandoned, their windows all boarded up or broken out. Not a soul stirred anywhere.

We drove into the only gas station in town, if in truth this could properly be called a town, but no cheerful "ding-ding" announced our arrival. The gas pumps were certifiable antiques; slender cylinders of rusted white with clear glass globes on top. Joe went inside to find the attendant. He emerged some minutes later, accompanied by a big black dog and a sun-dried patriarch of indeterminate years, evidently the owner.

"Ain't had no one out here lookin' for a fan belt in years," the man was saying. "You folks sure you ain't lost?" He poked around under the hood. "Only got a few belts left, and most of them pretty old. Happen to know what size you need?" Joe dug around in the glove box for the owner's manual and found the necessary information. The proprietor grunted and walked back into the shop, returning shortly with a dusty-looking fan belt. "Must be your lucky day, son. I called my grandson, he'll be down 'bout half an hour to put it on."

"Half an hour! In this heat?!"

"Put it on yourself if you want to. You a mechanic?" Joe sighed.

"No. I'm not a mechanic."

"Me neither. Used to be. Gave up on these new-fangled cars years ago. Cain't make heads or tails of 'em anymore. Guess you'll have to wait, then." He bent over and peered into the car. "Got cold pop in the machine if anyone wants it, an' there's a bit o' shade around the side there, might help some." Everyone climbed out and stretched their aching muscles. Rosie snapped on my leash and we followed around to the east side where a slice of shade offered some slight relief from the scorching sun. Delia's attention was drawn to a group of wire enclosures on stilts a short distance away.

"What are those empty cages for?" she asked. The owner shrugged his

shoulders.

"Rattlesnakes, Gila monsters, tortoises, anything to bring in the tourists. Had a bobcat once, but he died. Too hot for 'im I guess."

"Tourists?" Delia was mystified. "Why would anyone drive all the way out here just to see snakes and lizards?" The man looked at her strangely, then gave a short laugh.

"Guess you are a little young at that," he said. "Ma'am, you see that road you just came off of? Well, that there's ol' Route 66. Don't look like much now, but that used to be the number-one route 'cross the country years back. Went all the way from Chicago, clear through to L.A. 'Course that was 'fore they put in the interstate, cut off all these little towns. Used to be we'd get a hundred customers a day in here, now I'm lucky to get one. That interstate pretty well killed this town."

"How do you stay in business, then?"

"Lady, the only reason I'm still in business is because I OWN it, lock, stock, and real estate, and the only reason I ain't sold it is 'cause no sane person'd buy it. Used to be a gold mine, now tain't nothin' but a worthless chunk o' desert."

"But how do you live off it?"

"Don't live off it. Live off Social Security. This here's just someplace to go so's I don't fight with my wife. I kinda get on her nerves sometimes."

"But what on earth do you DO all day?" Rosie queried. "I'd go nuts out here all by myself!"

"Oh, I read a little. Listen to the radio sometimes. My friend Deke comes over mornings, we play checkers, maybe a little poker. We get by."

"I would die, I would positively curl up and die." the teenager moaned.

A short time later a bronzed young man on a grimy three-wheeler roared into the station. He didn't appear to be any too pleased about being called away from whatever it was he'd been doing, but he brightened visibly when he saw Rosie.

"Hey, brown sugar," he winked. "You just passing through or has word of my charm and good looks reached all the way to...." he leaned around and checked the license plate. "Texas, is it?"

"Can it, Romeo. These folks ain't got all day. Just fix the car and git on back home to your fiancé"

"Spoilsport." The young would-be Casanova grinned and took the belt from his grandfather. Half an hour later we were ready to roll again.

For a while it seemed as if Rosie was right; that desert stretched on for mile after desolate mile, while the sun beat down mercilessly from an utterly cloudless sky. The inside of the car was like an oven, and my wet towel didn't help much. Rosie poured more water over my fur, but still I panted miserably. The little ones tossed and turned in the back seat, and the adults were soaked with perspiration. Rosie fanned herself incessantly with a magazine, her hair piled loosely on top of her head just to keep it off her neck.

"We're going to die out here," she moaned. "I just know we are." Delia had both sun visors turned down over the windshield, but before long the sun dropped down below the bottom edge, shining directly into her eyes. She tried sitting on a pillow, but that only worked for about twenty minutes, then the problem returned with a vengeance.

"Rosie, I need to borrow your polarized sunglasses for awhile. Here, you can use mine."

"No way. Yours are so dorky."

"Rosalia, if I can't see where I'm going, we're going to run off the

road and be killed. Now I'm not asking you, I'm telling you, give me the glasses!" Grumbling, Rosie handed over the cherished sunglasses.

"At least we'd be out of our misery," she groaned. On and on we drove, with no relief in sight. It felt as if we were being slowly roasted to death in some gigantic furnace. Then, just about the time it seemed that, like the ancient Israelites, we were doomed to wander forty years in the desert, we finally arrived at a town. Joe parked the truck next to an ice cream parlor and we all bailed out. Inside it was a completely different world - a cool one. At first the shopkeeper wasn't going to let me in, even on a leash, but one black look from Rosie and he quickly changed his mind.

"She's my seeing-eye cat, do you mind?" she snapped. Everyone ordered his or her favorite flavor and they seated themselves at one of the little tables that lined the window.

"How much longer 'til we get out of this desert?" Ramón asked through a mouthful of rocky road.

"We'll be heading up into the mountains again soon," Joe replied. "Once we cross the Cajón summit it should be a lot cooler."

"I hope so," Rosie fretted. "We're about boiled to death in that car. At least your truck has air conditioning."

"I know you're uncomfortable, and I'm sorry about that. I'd planned on crossing the desert in the early morning, but it just didn't work out that way. Just hang in there a couple more hours and we'll be there."

"It'd better be worth it. This has been the most horrible three days of my entire life." Rosie finished her dish of maple pecan and put it on the seat for me to lick. It was pure heaven, and I polished off every last molecule. No one wanted to go back out into that searing inferno, but at last the inevitable could be postponed no longer. At least now we were in the shadow of the mountains, out of the direct sun, but somehow it didn't seem much cooler.

An hour later we crested the summit, but contrary to Joe's prediction, it was nearly as hot on the other side. Maybe four or five degrees cooler, but not so's you'd notice. Dinnertime found us still on the move, passing fields and farmlands, and ever-increasing numbers of houses and roadside businesses.

"How much farther now?" Rosie pouted, hardly expecting an answer.

"Well, we just crossed into Los Angeles county," Delia replied. "With luck we should be there in about an hour."

"Another hour," Rosie sighed and slumped back in her seat. A growing volume of homeward-bound automobiles clogged the roads as we traveled through what seemed to be one single, endless city. A multitude of trucks spewed their noxious fumes into the air all around, eventually forcing us to roll up the windows to avoid asphyxiation.

Finally, just as the setting sun dipped its red rim to touch the dry, brown hilltops, Joe spotted the long-desired exit, and we abandoned the freeway in favor of the city streets. We made a left turn and ducked under the overpass, then another left turn and yet another. Joe parked the truck in front of a one-story blue and white house, and immediately both vehicles were surrounded by a tribe of happy, shouting people. At long last we were in California.

Chapter 18

Welcome To California

It started the minute we walked through the door.

"Achoo! Aa-chooo-!" Aunt Marilyn sneezed violently and waved Rosie away with both hands. "Don't come near me with that cat! Aa-a-choo!"

"I'm sorry, Aunt Marilyn. I didn't know you were allergic to cats." Rosie took a step backwards. "You never told me."

"That's because you never had a cat before. Aa-choo!"

"I've only had her a couple of months. Uncle Stan gave her to me for a birthday present. I thought Mom told you."

"I guess I forgot to mention it," Delia interjected. "I didn't know you were allergic, either."

"Well, she can't stay in the house! The porch. Put her on the back porch for tonight. It's screened in, she'll be okay out there. We'll figure out something in the morning." So my first night in California was spent alone on a screened-in utility porch with only a cricket for company.

It wasn't so bad, actually. The night air was warm, and I had food and water bowls, my litter box, and my towel-lined carrier to curl up in. I didn't get a lot of rest, though. Old, half-forgotten memories continually wandered through my dreams and disturbed my sleep. Besides, there was a nosy dog that kept sniffing around the outside door and scratching at the screen. He sounded big, and none too friendly.

The next morning after breakfast Rosie fitted me into my harness and took me out to explore the yard. I rolled and stretched on the wide green lawn and nosed around the low borders of sweet-smelling flowers. Two very large, very green trees splashed their lacy shade over half the back yard, and tangled strands of ivy reached above the top of the chain-link fence, trying to climb even higher. I felt more alive than I had in months.

A black and yellow butterfly drifted past overhead and I leaped after it. I missed, of course, but who cared? I felt as if I were flying myself. We chased it across the yard to a towering row of hollyhocks that lined the side fence, and followed as it fluttered from blossom to blossom, gathering precious nectar and yellow pollen. Finally sated, it soared upward, losing itself in the foliage overhead.

The dappled sun danced on the cool grass, and farther to the rear of the yard a small fountain bubbled its sparkling water into an ornamental pond, rippling the round, flat leaves floating on its surface. Brilliant yellow flowers resolutely held their heads just above the surface, fearful of drowning in the chilly depths. A closer inspection revealed several bright orange fish swimming about among the aquatic plants, but Rosie dragged me away before I could get a really good look. I made a mental note to re-examine that particular feature later, when I was off the leash.

A rough stone path led around the other side of the house, and we walked it at leisure, sniffing plants, pawing at pebbles, and just generally nosing around. Near the end of the walkway a small shed-like structure nestled against the wall of the house, partially obscured by a large flowering shrub.

Sensing danger, I crept forward with the greatest of caution, peering around the drooping branches to see what creature inhabited this diminutive dwelling. It was just as I had feared. A huge black dog lay fast asleep on an old rug, half in and half out of its house. Carefully I backed away and we turned to go, fearful of any sound that might awaken the slumbering monster. But despite all our heedfulness, one of us, and I'm not naming

any names, managed to step squarely on a dry and brittle twig that lay across the path. It snapped with a resounding CRACK.

Instantly the brute was on its feet, barking as if the yard were full of invading Martians. Focusing on his perceived feline foe, he charged up the walkway, scattering rocks, sticks, and leaves in his wake. I jerked the leash from Rosie's petrified hand and raced for the nearest tree.

I hit the trunk four feet off the ground and kept going. Higher and higher I climbed, until I could no longer see the ground or my mistress or the snapping, snarling beast jumping and scrabbling at the foot of the tree. Even at that height I didn't feel safe. I shivered and trembled as I clung to my branch, my leash hopelessly tangled in the limbs below.

The back door slammed repeatedly as the occupants of the house emptied into the yard. Excited voices jumbled together as everyone tried to overtalk everyone else, but throughout the cacophony I could clearly hear Rosie's hysterical wailing. Then the clamor subsided and presently a long wooden ladder poked its nose up through the tangled growth. It trembled briefly and Ramón's head appeared below. He mounted to the top of the ladder and squinted up at me. I hissed and tried to climb higher, but the leash held fast.

"I can't reach her from here," he called down to the expectant assembly. "I'll have to get up into the branches."

"Be careful," his mother implored. "I don't want you to fall and break your neck."

"Don't worry, Mom, I won't fall."

"Hang on, Kiki!" Rosie cried. "We'll get you down."

Ramón snorted. "'We', she says. 'We'. I don't see HER climbing up any forty-foot trees to rescue her precious cat." Up through the canopy he ascended, choosing his footholds with care and gripping the sturdy limbs with both hands. At last he was nearly level with my precarious perch. Slowly he worked his way out along the limb until he was almost within reach.

He leaned over cautiously and reached out one hand in my direction. I snarled and swung at it with a full complement of needle-sharp claws. He quickly pulled back, nearly losing his balance. The branch under him sagged dangerously. Far below the waiting crowd gasped.

"Easy, girl, I'm not going to hurt you." Ramón reached out again, this time grabbing my leash instead. He pulled it loose from the entangling boughs and wrapped it around his hand. Gently at first, then harder, he tugged at my harness, trying vainly to coax me back to what I'm sure he thought was safety. I hissed and snarled and hung on for dear life, unwilling to relinquish even this precarious sanctuary.

"Come on, Kiki. Come on, girl." He yanked hard on the line, and suddenly I found myself swinging freely in the harness, legs flailing wildly, claws grasping at nothing. Gingerly he worked his way back to the center of the tree and climbed down the trunk, still dangling the leash at arm's length. Several times I managed to grab onto a branch or a bunch of leaves, but each time he pulled me loose again. Easing himself onto the ladder, he descended carefully rung by rung until his furry pendulum was within reach of the congregation waiting on the ground.

"Here, Kiki, come here, baby." Rosie raised eager arms to take me in. I grabbed at her hands in mid-spin but she yanked them away again. "Careful, Kiki. Don't scratch me." Ramón stepped down one more rung.

"Grab the back of the harness," he advised and she complied. He dropped the leash and finished his descent.

"I'm sorry, Rosie," Aunt Marilyn said unregretfully. "I'm afraid she'll

have to stay in the porch as long as you folks are staying here." She tightened her grip on the lunging monster's collar and I growled quietly in their direction. Rosie frowned.

"Can't you just tie Brutus up once in a while so she can come out and play around?"

"Now what kind of watch dog would he be if he was tied up? Anyone could climb right over that fence and carry off half the house. I'm sorry. She'll either have to stay inside or take her chances." Rosie sighed and carried me back to the house. The screen door banged shut behind her and she flopped into the faded armchair in the corner of the porch.

"Mean old witch," she muttered under her breath. "I sure hope Dad finds a house for us in a hurry. This place is absolutely the pits." She unbuckled my harness and let me slide out of it onto the slab floor. I took refuge on the back of her chair, still grumbling my outrage.

"I know what you mean," Rosie echoed my sentiments. "It's not fair at all. Nine people in the house all day long and she can't tie up her mean old mutt for ten minutes so we can get a little sunshine. 'Someone could climb over the fence and carry off half the house.' Sure. Like someone's going to break into a house with nine people in it. Like that fool dog wouldn't bark his fool head off if anyone came within a hundred feet of this place even if he WAS tied up!"

She kicked off her sandals and slumped down even farther into the sagging cushions. "Housing shortage, my Aunt Petunia! I never saw so many houses in my life. Nothin' BUT houses, houses, houses."

"Oh, there you are." Delia came in from the back yard. "You'd better go dig out your swimsuit and cap. Aunt Marilyn's ready to drive us to our swimming class." Instantly Rosie perked up. She scrambled out of the chair, collected her shoes, and hurried into the house. Delia petted me twice and followed. The remainder of the backyard audience filed back in, chattering among themselves, ignoring me entirely. My part of the show was over, it would seem. The inside door slammed behind the last of the parade and I was alone.

I jumped from my perch to the rough shelf that lined the inside of the porch about three feet above the floor. Here were collected the essential discards of twenty years of home ownership; a hammer with a broken claw, a paint brush stiff with dried green paint, a single worn and dirty glove, a coffee can half-filled with bent nails, rusted screws, and tangled string. Next to them sat three gallon-size paint cans whose fossilized drippings obscured all identification, and beyond that an opened can of motor oil and a carelessly folded blue plastic tarp.

Adjacent to the screen door, a square cardboard carton more than filled the shelf, overhanging the edge by a good two inches. I raised up on my hindquarters and peeked in side; just rags. I nudged it and it moved a little. I pushed it again and it slid a little more. A good, healthy shove and over it went, PLOP, onto the floor. Too bad.

Well, surprise! Look what the box had been hiding - a jagged six-inch gash in the weathered porch screening. Interesting. I plucked at the mesh with my claws and brought down a shower of rust and dust. I sneezed. I poked one forepaw through the slit, but the sharp edges pricked my skin and I pulled it back.

More plucking produced another mist of debris. Mildly annoyed, I shook it off. A fresh breeze carried with it the sweet scent of the jasmine growing nearby. I reached through the tear all the way up to my shoulder and probed the air outside. Nothing. I pulled it back and washed the pads delicately. Next I tried the other paw. So far, so good.

I thrust my head and shoulders through the opening and surveyed the scene beyond. There was the lawn, still green, the fence, the pond, all unchanged. The trees still stood tall and strong, just as before. No sign of the dog. Probably sound asleep again in his doghouse. The hollyhocks waved slightly, beckoning me to come on over. I pushed all the way through and dropped noiselessly to the grass below.

A fast twenty-yard dash brought me safely to the back fence. Scaling it was easy, ivy and all, but I hesitated before committing myself to another strange backyard. I didn't smell a dog, but that didn't necessarily mean it was safe. At that moment I heard a loud barking behind me and turned to see my nemesis launching himself across the lawn. I jumped.

I hit the ground ready to fight, but no enemy appeared. Holding my body close to the earth, I slunk through the weeds and uncut grass, staying close to the side fence, just in case. At the sidewalk I turned and headed east. I knew now where I was going. Down the block a pedestrian tunnel bored a great hole under the freeway, dark and menacing, its walls stained with graffiti and grime.

Two young punks in baggy jeans slouched against one side, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. As I entered, they moved to the center of the corridor, making sinister barking and meowing noises. I turned aside to pass, but the youths shifted their own positions to cut off this detour as well. The nearest one squatted and spread his arms wide to intercept my advance.

"Here kitty, kitty," he snickered. "Come here, puss, puss." As I shot past he lunged at me, falling and burning himself with his cigarette. He yelped and threw the empty beer bottle in my direction. It missed by a mile, shattering instead against the opposite wall.

"Good shot, dog breath," his companion scoffed. "You really nailed that one."

"Ah, shuddup."

Back in the sunlight I slowed to a trot to conserve vital energy. The next obstacle in my path was a four-lane boulevard, clotted with rush-hour traffic. Intimidating to contemplate but simple enough to navigate; just wait on the corner with the people and cross when they do. There's safety in numbers.

I continued in this manner for some time, sticking as much as possible to the quiet side streets, avoiding most of the noise and congestion. Then I was out of the residential district and into a mostly industrial area with its businesslike, no-nonsense atmosphere.

Out there the whole character of the environment changes. Shrubs and trees disappear, houses give way to great square boxes, and lush green lawns are replaced by huge plots of hot black asphalt. Vaguely distressing to some, it was a beautiful sight to me, comforting in its homeliness. I had wandered these streets before, it seemed a lifetime ago.

I picked up my pace, buoyed up on wings of anticipation, past factories and warehouses, block after block of shops and mills, more sure of myself with every step. The streets were familiar now, like old friends badly missed. I turned the last corner into my own home territory. I was nearly there.

But what was this? Something had changed drastically. There was supposed to be a big open field here - my field - the field where I'd hunted night after night to feed myself and my little ones, the field where poor Midnight was buried. Instead there were bulldozers, a massive concrete slab, and four huge stacks of lumber. Workmen swarmed over the site, sawing, hammering, shouting.

I hesitated, unsure for a moment if I was even in the right neighborhood. But no, there it was, over on the other side, just like I knew it would be. I dashed across the busy worksite, dodging two-by-fours, sheets of plywood, and heavy boots. The old, potholed parking lot lay ahead. Strange it should be so empty at this hour. It was a workday, at least it seemed to be for everyone else. I recognized Joe the watchman's car, but he should be here at night, not in the middle of the day.

My window was still out. I scrambled through and checked inside. Silence. I made the rounds as a formality, but the old warehouse was as empty as my heart. I even checked the loft and Jack's office, all to no avail. I climbed back out the window and went around to the side where Joe's car was parked in the shade. The driver's door was open and he was seated behind the wheel, reading an old travel magazine. His empty coffee cup sat on the pavement beside the open door.

I reached up to him and meowed urgently. He looked down at me and his jaw dropped. "Tuffy, is that you? It IS you! I don't believe it! Where on earth have you been all this time?" He put down the magazine, and carried me back through the side door of the warehouse. Inside Jack's office, he picked up the phone and dialed, all the while holding me as if he thought I was going to run away or something. He tapped his foot impatiently, waiting for someone to answer. No one did. "I guess he's already gone."

He hurried me back to his car, dumped me on the front seat, and started the engine. Then he opened his door again, retrieved his coffee cup, and we were off.

"Tuffy, where on earth have you been?" he asked again, as if I could actually answer him. "Do you have any IDEA the trouble you've caused? Do you KNOW how worried they've been about you? These kids were supposed to be married two months ago, but Pam didn't want to get married without her Tuffy. Two months they waited for you, but you don't show up. Finally they give up. Poor Tuffy isn't ever coming back. So what happens? Today, TODAY you show up! Some sense of timing you've got!"

Joe parked the car with a multitude of others beside a small white steepled church on a quiet, tree-lined street. He tucked me under his arm and hustled me down the sidewalk and up the wide front steps. Inside the foyer he was waylaid by a slicked-down young man in a light blue tuxedo and a crisp white bow tie. After a brief whispered conversation we slipped silently inside.

The little chapel was filled to overflowing with enraptured people all dressed in their Sunday best, but I had no trouble picking out Charlie and Pam. They stood facing each other at the front of the church, Charlie as handsome as ever in a spotless white tux, and Pam, radiantly beautiful in a cloud of white lace, her face covered but not hidden by a transparent white veil. I squirmed to be put down, but Joe held tight to the scruff of my neck.

"Shh," he whispered. "Just a minute." The minister had just finished speaking. Charlie lifted Pam's veil and they kissed. The minister turned and addressed the congregation.

Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bradley."

Joe set me on the carpet and I bounded down the aisle to greet my friends. Pam gasped.

"Tuffy!" She bent down, scooped me into her perfumed arms, and held me close. "Tuffy, you made it! I knew you would, I just knew it!" A single tear slid down her cheek and dampened my fur.

THE END