

Whispers in the Forest

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The Letter and a Journal

After her long plane trip home, Sarah changed into flannel pajamas, dropped onto the sofa, and propped her sock-covered feet on the coffee table. On the table was an ancient journal, and next to it was a thick envelope addressed to her. “To Sarah from Daddy.” At the funeral, her father’s closest friend, Doc, had handed both to her, saying her father thought she could read either one first, depending on how she felt.

“Do you know what he wrote or what’s in the journal?” she asked as she took them from him.

“Yes. He gave them to me to read. All I can say is that Frank loved animals as much as I do, maybe more, and that he loved you most of all.”

Doc’s quiet voice was mellow and soothing. Had he developed it to calm the animals in his veterinary practice or was he born with it? This was only the second time she’d met him, the first being ten years before when she’d visited her father for Christmas. Though Doc’s mustache was now fully gray and he was a bit plump, he was the same. Quiet. Kind. Very much like her father.

Doc patted her shoulder, a gesture she was sure he used with suffering animals, but it didn’t occur to her until now that, in a way, he was also patting himself. He and her father had been friends for years, and his best friend’s death must have caused an emptiness in his life.

She reached for the journal on her coffee table, the child within thinking that, if she didn’t read her father’s letter, if it remained in the future, then so would he. He’d still be with her, encouraging her to believe in magic, to believe that anything was possible.

Why had she moved to the other side of the country so many years ago? To marry a man who turned out to be a waste of time? She shouldn't have stayed, shouldn't have replaced visits back home with phone calls, should have traveled the distance back to her father's living room to share stories and possibilities.

She ran a finger across the smooth spot in the center of the journal's rough fabric cover where "Elizabeth Cooper" was written in a child's careful hand. Cooper was her family name, and so this was probably a long-ago relative. Had her father always owned this journal? Why was she only just now seeing it? She opened to the first page, its paper thick and slightly yellowed.

June 17, 1811

My name is Lizzie Cooper. I'm ten years old today and this journal is a birthday present from Mama. She says I should write stories about my cat in it so I'll stop telling them out loud because it makes Papa mad. He says there's something wrong with me, and sometimes he says even worse things. Mama thinks Papa will be less mean to me if I don't talk about Willow in front of him, but I don't think it will help. He's a mean man, and he'll just find something else to be mean about. That's all right. I'm used to it. Willow says I'm good the same way her family is, and if she could, she'd turn me into a cat and take me to live with her in the barn where Papa wouldn't notice me, and if he did, I could bite him with my sharp teeth and then run away to live on another farm where no one is mean. But I wouldn't do that because then I wouldn't have Willow and the others. Or maybe they'd decide to go with me. I bet they would.

Willow is the prettiest calico because she's mostly white with patches of gray and brown that are really light like the watercolor picture on the wall in the parlor. Her eyes are a sparkly mix of dark and light gold, and she always looks as if she's smiling. She's so

beautiful. She says all cats are beautiful, but I think some are more beautiful than others, and she's the most beautiful of all.

Her mama named her for the special willow plant that grows by the stream, the one we humans call a pussy willow. Isn't that interesting? It's perfect too. The pieces of gray on her are the same color as those soft pussy willow things.

Willow says she remembers all the way back to before her eyes opened, and she still remembers seeing her mother for the first time. Her mother's name is Daisy because she's all white. She's young and smiles just like her daughter does and she loves playing with all her kittens whether they can whisper like Willow or not.

Daisy and Willow are always whispering to each other, but when they sit up in the loft and whisper very quietly, I move away so I can't hear them because Mama says eavesdropping isn't nice. One day, though, I couldn't stop from asking Willow what sorts of things they talk about. She said they mostly talk about barn life, particularly the calves because they love watching the babies. Other times, they talk about hunting. Sometimes they talk about Papa because they don't like how he treats me. They also don't like how he treats the cows. I said our dog, Friend, protects the cows. Willow agreed and said Friend sometimes runs in front of Papa, blocking him when it looks like he's going to hit a cow. Friend is a good dog.

A few months ago while Willow and I were weeding the garden, I asked her why only she and her mother and grandmother can talk. What about the other cats? She didn't know and said she'd ask. Her mother didn't know, and even her grandmother said she'd once asked the same question, but no one seemed to know. They had lots of stories, but they were all made up. Some things just are what they are.

One really interesting thing is that Friend can whisper too, though for some reason, I can't hear her. Sometimes Willow tells

me what Friend is saying, and sometimes I ask Willow to pass on a message to Friend. I wish I could hear our dog, but at least we can talk through Willow.

I have to stop writing and bring Willow back to the barn. I brought her from the barn and to the house, then to my bedroom because Papa and my brothers went to town for supplies. They'll be back soon. I wish my big brother was still here. Joseph is good and he's gentle and he listens to my stories and he likes cats.

Chapter 1

Honey sat in the loft, listening to the tractor rumble to a stop near the barn door. It was better than the old tractor that made thunder sounds, which hurt her ears and scared her. The tractor sounds stopped and she heard Julie walk inside, but Honey didn't move, not until Chaser barked, announcing he was on duty. She stood up, leaped up onto a hay bale and then down to its other side rather than go around it only because it felt good now that she could make it to the top in a single jump. She trotted to the edge of the loft and peeked down, ears and whiskers forward, tail tip twitching in anticipation of the cows ambling toward the barn door, Chaser urging them on. The cows were silent except for the oldest one who always mooed until she was outdoors. Mostly, her attention was on Chaser, her black-and-white friend who was doing his dog job, deftly avoiding heavy bodies and sharp hooves while urging the cows along or helping a calf that struggled in the crowd. He was good with babies, always helping and protecting them.

Not until her mother had taught her and her two brothers how to climb down from the loft did Honey meet Chaser. She quickly learned he was guardian of the kittens, her mother never leaving unless Chaser was there to watch over the babies. Honey asked him one day if he'd always loved babies, and he said it wasn't until he was half-grown, not until he'd nipped a calf's leg, proud of his own power, and then heard its cry and seen pain in its eyes, pain that

seemed less about a nipped leg and more about how he'd wanted to hurt her. That's when something changed inside him, and from that day forward, he guarded that calf, guarded all calves, and when Honey and her brothers were born, he guarded them too. It was his job, he said. He whispered these things in broken pieces because he wasn't very good at whispering, but Honey had learned from her mother how to put together his puzzle words.

The cows were now out the door, but Honey stayed where she was to watch Julie clean where the cows had spent the night. Cows were messier than cats. She hoped Julie had brought special food for her and her family, but Julie didn't look up at the loft and call. Chaser said the air around Julie had changed when the persons called Mom and Pop had left. It was a mix of happy and sad and worried all at the same time. He told the cats who understood whispers that lots of boxes were put in a big truck, then the truck left, and Julie and Mom and Pop got in the farm truck and drove away, but when the truck returned, only Julie was in it. Many days had passed, and Mom and Pop were still gone. Chaser didn't understand any of it, and he missed Pop in particular, missed following him around, trying to figure out what he was doing. Pop would talk to him in person talk, and though Chaser didn't understand, he'd woof in agreement.

Honey came out of her thoughts when a strange person walked into the barn. Julie turned to look at him, stiffened, and leaned on the stick thing she'd been using to clean the cow space. Did she need the stick to hold her up? When a draft came in through the barn door and passed over the stranger, then drifted upward, Honey decided Julie must have been upset by the stranger's scent. He smelled wrong, so terribly wrong, run-away wrong.

Done with his cow duty, Chaser trotted through the door and then stopped to stare at the stranger. He stretched his head forward to catch the person's scent, his fur rising just as Honey's

had. He looked up at her, then back at the person. Without whispering a word, his message was clear. Don't come down.

Honey whispered to her family to come look. Her great-grandmother yawned and said, "Really? I was having such a nice dream." Honey's grandmother came to the edge along with her mother, but her great-grandmother trailed behind, reluctant to get up from her nap. The others waited for her impatiently until she came to the edge.

"Bad person," her great-grandmother said and then when Honey's two brothers raced from the back of the loft to the steps, she shout-whispered, "No!" but Honey's brothers could neither speak nor hear whispers.

The two kittens stretched down to the first step, then reached over to the side rail to scramble down as if it were a tree, one of them meowing at the other. The bad person lurched at the sound, his neck stretching like a bird's as he lifted his head upward. His eyes landed on the four cats crouched near the edge. Honey's eyes grew large and black as he looked at her, and she hissed in an involuntary show of fear.

"Hide," Chaser said as he went toward her brothers, who had landed on the floor. He chased them, goading them toward the barn door, urging them to move faster as if he were herding cows.

Honey and her three mothers remained where they were until the kittens were out the door, then they raced over bales of hay, dust scattering under their paws and straw flying behind them until they reached a far corner. Honey couldn't see the bad person anymore, but she smelled the stink of his fear. She pressed into the bodies of her mothers, and they pressed into her, their ears flattened in fear because the stranger was talking, but it sounded as wrong as his smell. She'd heard animals captured by the local fox. They screeched, and that's how the stranger sounded—like a rabbit caught by a fox. In the gaps between his noises, Honey heard her

family's tails switching back and forth, back and forth, a statement that this person didn't belong in their barn, didn't belong anywhere.

Chaser's soft footsteps sounded on the floor of the barn as he came back in, and then Julie and the bad person's footsteps dwindled as they left. Honey crept back to the edge, finding Chaser looking up from below. "He's a bad bad bad person," she whispered.

Chaser tucked his tail between his back legs. "I follow. I watch. You stay loft."

A long time later, he returned, and though his tail hung low, it wasn't between his legs. "Bad person gone."

The four cats descended the ladder and followed Chaser as he walked to the door, then around to the rear of the barn, through clumps of grass, past the large shed where the old tractor now lived, and stopped when they were in the thick, tall grass.

"He come back," Chaser said. "Dog know."

"Why would Julie let a bad person come back?" Honey's mother asked. "She doesn't like bad persons, does she?"

"Persons not us. We not like, we not go near. Persons are..."

"Strange," Grandmother said.

"Very strange," Great-grandmother added.

Wanting to feel better, Honey focused on her mother's autumn-colored fur, then her grandmother's light gray fur with its dark streams rippling through it, and finally at her great-grandmother's light gray fur. They were so beautiful. She looked back at Chaser, concentrating on his black coat decorated with white fur on his face and paws and then his white chest where the fur flowed long and soft. He, too, was beautiful. She loved her family and they loved her in return. Without knowing where it came from, she said, "Persons get broken like twigs."

Chaser peered at his most favorite cat, the sweet Honey, her white fur decorated here and there with soft pools of light gray and brown. As always, she seemed to be smiling, but she was innocent and could be hurt as easily as the long-ago calf, maybe easier. As fearful as he'd been when chasing her brothers, the fear he now felt for Honey tightened into physical pain.

“When bad person come back, I follow. I warn. Keep cats safe.”

They talked in whispers like the hush of tall grass brushed in a breeze, talked until Honey's brothers discovered them, and it was time to return to the barn, Chaser herding the brothers, watching as they all climbed up to the loft.

As the days passed, Chaser reported that Julie was packing boxes the way Mom and Pop had, was putting them in her truck, and then driving away, but she came back and packed more boxes. This time she let him go with her. They stopped at a house surrounded by many more houses, she brought the boxes inside, then drove back to the farm for more boxes plus two chairs and a bed. One day, a she-person drove to the farm in a very small truck that he thought was called a car. Julie got in the car with the person, they drove away, and then Julie returned in the car without the she-person. Chaser observed all these things, but he didn't know what they meant. He knew only that it felt wrong.

Honey's great-grandmother had listened to each report, being unusually quiet as if it meant nothing to her. When Chaser said Julie had stopped going to the house, Great-grandmother spoke. “One day, Julie will leave and not come back. I feel it in my old cat bones. I worry about the cows and chickens, though mostly the cows. I like them better.”

“And what,” Grandmother said, “will become of us?”

“We don't need persons,” Honey's mother whispered. “Cats can take care of themselves.”

Chaser was quiet for a while, then said, “Bad person bring boxes. Put boxes in Mom and Pop house.” That’s how he’d always thought of the house, even now when they were no longer there.

All whispering stopped as the cats thought about Julie being replaced by the bad person. Would it be safe to stay? Should they leave? They knew every part of the barn, knew where the mice lived, knew the pasture and how to walk the fence around it, knew where puddles formed in the rain and where to find grass that soothed unhappy bellies, knew where the pretty stream ran, and knew the best trees to climb so they could watch without being seen. How could they leave the home they knew and loved?

The day after Chaser told them the bad person had shown up and Julie had driven away in her car, another person walked into the barn, but he didn’t smell bad, and so the cats watched him from their loft, curious about the strange gray boxes he placed on the floor before walking back out of the barn. The cats climbed down from the loft, and along with Chaser, cautiously investigated. The boxes smelled of fish, an exciting smell, but Chaser seemed startled by them, whining, telling everyone to stay away. Honey’s three mothers stepped away, but they kept lifting their chins to sniff the wonderful aroma of fish. Chaser herded the two brothers out of the barn several times, but in the end, it didn’t matter. Honey and Chaser were at the far end of the barn when each member of her family, lured by the intoxicating aroma, walked into the boxes, which closed with sudden, metallic sounds.

“No!” Honey shout-whispered. “No!”

Chaser ran to the boxes, pawing at them as the trapped cats screamed. He tried to gnaw into the boxes, but it hurt his teeth. He could see his cats through the fencing on the sides of the boxes, but he couldn’t even talk to them through their yowling panic. He spotted the stranger through the barn door, saw the bad person behind him, and shouted for Honey to run. She ran into a dark

corner and watched as the stranger came into the barn, picked up two of the boxes, walked out with them and the screaming cats, then returned to pick up the other two, disappearing once again beyond the barn door. She raced out of her corner and was hit broadside by Chaser. He picked her up in gentle jaws, and keeping his back to the persons so they wouldn't see his cat, he walked with her through the small door opposite the big barn door.

Dangling from his mouth, his breath muffling other sounds, she could nevertheless hear a truck driving away. She knew it was the stranger, knew he had her family with him, knew he'd stolen them.

Chaser released her to the ground, whispered a loud, "Stay!" and ran around the barn to where the stranger's truck had been. He could track the truck, find out where it was taking his cats. But how could he leave Honey all by herself? No, she'd have to come with him. Several raindrops thumped onto the bare dirt, and he said "No!" inside his mind. The sky made a bright light followed by the big noise that always made his heart pound, and then it was suddenly raining hard. He stood there for a moment, immediately drenched, and whined softly. The scent of the truck was gone. He walked to the barn and around it to the small door where he'd left Honey, spotting her peering at him from just inside. How did he tell her? How did he even tell himself?

When she understood that her family was gone, that Chaser couldn't find them, she went up into the loft where it smelled of her family. For days, she refused to come down to eat even when Chaser brought food from the house, even when he brought her a large bird from the forest, even when he brought her the chicken eggs she'd always loved. After a week, after he'd tried everything, he stood on the barn floor looking up and shout-whispered, "You not leave me! You not die! If no Honey, I die." Then he whined softly, continuously, not able to stop himself. Honey heard his fear,

heard him crying, and for the first time in a week, she climbed down the ladder, doing it slowly, shaking a bit because she'd grown weak.

From then on, they hunted at dusk and dawn, and while Honey ate, Chaser watched to be sure the bad person wasn't near and to also make sure she was eating enough. It turned into a sad rhythm of hunting, eating, and hiding. At night, Chaser went to the house so he could eat, but more importantly so he could lie, making the person believe this dog was his friend. It meant he'd get table scraps to take with him when he slipped through his dog door. Food for his cat.

When Chaser wasn't there, Honey stayed in the loft, sleeping with her ghost family, their individual scents surrounding her. She dreamed they pressed against her, keeping her warm, loving her, and it helped her live through the days and then weeks and finally into winter when more mice came into the barn, serving themselves up for dinner. When she was hunting in the barn, she'd look up at the loft, imagining her family was waiting for her up there, and she'd whisper that she was catching mice for them and would be with them soon.

It was late in winter when the bad person came into the barn with things Chaser recognized. These were dangerous things. When he warned Honey to stay away from them, to not step near them, she trusted him and stayed away. In less than a day she heard a sharp sound and went to see what it was. One of the dangerous things held a dead mouse. It had killed her food. She didn't know what to do. Try to eat it? But Chaser said to stay away, and so she did. For several days, she heard those sharp sounds of meaningless death, and it drove her up into the loft where she dreamed nightmares. She came down only when Chaser brought food, and only to be kind to him. Without him, she knew she'd starve to death, something she thought she might welcome, but she loved Chaser and didn't want to hurt him.

When winter warmed into spring, she felt a yearning and a change within her, a sense of hope, which made her whisper to Chaser that she wanted to leave. Forever.

Chaser knew his little Honey needed a good life, not this one, and he knew of a place for her, but how was he to live without her? He was torn because his cows needed him in a way they never had before. He'd done his best throughout the winter, guiding the cows to bits of grass beneath the snow, but they needed more than that. They needed the bad person to bring them more food the way Mom and Pop had. Honey was stronger, less helpless than the cows. He told her he'd guide her to Julie's house, but he'd have to return to his cows until he knew they were all right. Then he'd go to her, stay with her.

“Promise?”

“Chaser promise.”

The Journal

Sarah stared at the letter on her night table, drawn to it, yet relieved to have the journal to read instead. She wasn't sure what she was avoiding. Her grief? Maybe guilt? She didn't know and didn't want to think about it, so she opened the journal instead.

June 19, 1811

I was too excited yesterday to write anything. When I was in the barn, Willow's mother told me her baby was going to have babies, and then Willow told me she'd known for a few days and had planned to tell me herself, but her mother did it first. I'm still excited today and I told Willow I'd make up a special bed for her, but she said I had to wait until she decided where she was going to have her babies. She had to make sure they'd be safe. I ran back here to find soft things that wouldn't be missed, but Mama needed help cutting up vegetables for a stew, and then my brother Charlie was mad that one of his socks needed darning, so I had to do that too. Why can't men and boys fix their own socks? When I got done with all the work, I came up here to my bedroom to look, but I couldn't find anything that wouldn't be missed. I thought about the attic, but by then, it was dark. I'll look tomorrow.

June 20, 1811

I asked the cats if more kittens meant there'd be more whispering cats, and Willow's grandmother, who's older and knows more things, said there will probably be no more than one. Sometimes there were two, the second one usually a boy, but boy whisperers were rare, and she'd only heard about it. I'm hoping this will be the rare kind and there will be two, a girl and a boy.

June 30, 1811

Willow doesn't look like she's going to have kittens. I asked how long it would be, and she said her mother told her the babies would be born about when the corn is ripe. That would be in August sometime. I wish I could fall asleep and keep sleeping until then because the corn harvest is far away.

Today I really missed Joseph because he always kept Papa away from me, and sometimes Mama too. I think Joseph left for the city because he couldn't stand it anymore, but I don't know for sure. Maybe there was some other reason. Anyway, it was Mama who needed Joseph today. Papa got into the jug of whiskey and he hit her. I cried with her, but I did it because I was mad.

I told Mama I was going to write Joseph and tell him, and maybe he'd come back home and protect us. She said I shouldn't, that Joseph had to leave because Papa would have killed him, and if he didn't, Joseph would have killed Papa.

Chapter 2

I was moving up and down, my feet sometimes touching a hard thing, and then I was on the hard thing and not moving and cold. After that, I drifted for a long time before ending up surrounded by heat and softness that moved around me and on me. I found sweet food that sang to me in a quiet rumble, filling me with peacefulness, and beneath the rumble was another sound that I think I only felt, a th-thum, th-thum. I didn't know what the sounds were, but I knew I wanted to be with them.

When I finally opened my eyes, I saw where the sounds came from and I could find the softness and warmth and food more easily. I saw the squirming things that squeaked when I squeaked, ate food with me, and I knew we were all parts of the same thing.

I grew larger, stronger, could walk and then jump and fall down, and so did the other parts of me, these parts being called brothers and sisters. When I wasn't asleep or eating, I took little journeys with them and played with them. If they were sleeping, I went toward what was shiny or moved or made noise, wanting to know what these things were, but I always went back to Mother. If I ventured too far, she carried me back to our place.

When I first heard a whisper, it was Mother telling me to stay still while she washed me. Mine was a world of newness—I accepted each new sound, sight, and smell as normal—and so when I heard the whisper, I answered it by saying I wanted to see what the sister

part of me was doing nearby. Mother made a bubbly sound, a new sound, but everything was new, and so I accepted it. When my bath was finished and I found my sister, she was staring at a sparkly thing in front of her. Unaware that whispering was special and never thinking she might not hear me, I said, “What’s that?”

“I don’t know, but it’s pretty.”

I touched it with my paw, and it rolled away. My sister bounced after it and touched it with her own paw, making it roll back to me. We were still playing with the sparkly thing when Mother walked up to us and looked at my sister. “You sparkle like the toy.” Then she looked at me, “And you are my little traveler.” She made her pretty bubbly sound. “Your names are Sparkle and Pilgrim.”

My sister was gray with little bits of white scattered throughout, white that caught light and sparkled. But Pilgrim? Did it mean traveler or did it mean black, which is what I was? I asked Mother, and she said I was born a traveler and simply happened to be black. If I was white, I’d still be a traveler because I loved moving and exploring. I also loved being black, but I guess that had nothing to do with it.

“Why are you named Mother?”

“You named me Mother, but others have called me Honey.”

“Others? Why? What does Honey mean?”

“Sweet.”

“What’s sweet?”

“It’s how some things taste, but it also means gentle and kind.”

“That’s what Mother means to me.”

She didn’t say anything, making her special bubbly sound instead.

After that, I made up my own names for things until I learned the real ones. For instance, there was Odd Paw. It was a high-up thing with no fur on its face. The first time Sparkle saw Odd Paw, she puffed up big and fluffy, but she did that a lot. I called it Odd Paw

because it moved on just two paws, waving its other two paws as if playing with the air. Sometimes Mother walked toward it, tail up, and Odd Paw would make soft sounds as Mother rubbed her face against one of Odd Paw's legs. Sometimes, Odd Paw gave Mother food. Was this Mother's mother? It didn't look like a mother.

I copied Mother, toddling over to Odd Paw, and it picked me up high, which would have been scary, only it wasn't because it felt familiar as if it had happened before, and besides, up there, I could see everything, including Mother sitting down below, wearing her smiley eyes. Later, I asked her what this Odd Paw thing was.

"She's a person."

"What's a person?"

"Not a cat. I call her Julie."

"What does Julie mean?"

"I don't know."

"How do you know her name?"

"There were others I once knew like Julie, and they always made the Julie sound to call her just like I make the Pilgrim or Sparkle sound when I call to you and your sister."

I stared at her for a moment. "Is she your mother?"

Her ears went flat. "No, my mother was a cat. A beautiful cat."

Flat ears weren't good, so I looked around to find something else to ask and saw my favorite sister with another sister. "How come only Sparkle and I whisper? Will the others ever whisper?"

"No. It's just you and Sparkle."

Her ears were moving forward again, and I wanted to keep them that way. "They all travel and explore, so why aren't they all called Pilgrim?"

"You're a different kind of traveler. You came to me in your own special way so I could love you."

"What does that mean? What does love mean?"

Mother remained very still, only her eyes moving from me to the other kittens, then back to me. “Love is wanting to be with your family, it’s what always pulls you back to us when you wander away.”

I listened to the taps and clanks from what I thought of as the food place, thinking of how the sounds always lured me, making me want to investigate. Whenever I went there, it wasn’t long before I felt the need to return to my mother and sisters and brothers. It was an urgent call, and so now I had a name for it: love.

One day, I heard sounds similar to what the Julie person made, but they were deeper and louder, and Mother hustled all five of us into the dark place where I think I began. I could feel her tension, so I tensed up too, but I couldn’t resist stretching out far enough to peek. Just before Mother rolled me back to her with a paw, I saw a not-Julie person with fur on top that was gray and sparkly like my sister’s, and there was face fur too under the nose. Julie and the other person made quiet sounds for a while, and when the sounds were gone, Mother brought us out from our dark place.

“It was bigger than Julie,” I whispered to Mother.

“That’s because it was a he, not a she like Julie. He persons are bigger.”

“Are he persons bad?”

“Some are.”

“Was this one?”

“I don’t think so, but cats are cautious, mother cats especially, and it’s my job to keep my babies safe.”

“Does he have a name like Julie does?”

“Doc.” Mother looked away and then moved quickly to my brother, who was hanging by one claw from a curtain.

Nothing lasts long in a kitten’s life. There were toys to play with and two brothers and two sisters to jump on, and so I went back to those things, forgetting about the Doc person.

Our days were filled with games, exploring, eating, and mother interrupting us for baths because we weren't very good at it. She did her best to teach us where we could and could not go, though she often failed with me, sometimes picking me up by the scruff in exasperation and carrying me back where I belonged. I'm not sure, but I think we spent most of our time napping. Sometimes I dreamed I was drifting, and I thought everyone had the same dream until I told Sparkle about it. She said she dreamed about pretty things like water drops around the water bowl. Maybe we all had our own dreams, ones we were born with.

We grew and worked on skills such as climbing the furniture and those hazardous curtains. Climbing to the top of a curtain was easy, but unclimbing wasn't. It made us cry or give up and tumble down. Tumbling solved the problem, of course, but it was startling.

I got good at seeing color, seeing Mother's whiteness with small splashes of tan and gray. She was soft and sleek, her hair not messy like ours, and her face was always smiley.

One of my brothers was all white with a dot of gray on his forehead, another had dark and light orange stripes, and there was a sister covered in random spots and streaks of orange and black. My favorite, though, was Sparkle, who followed me wherever I went. Even though she was messy like the rest of us, the sparkly white mixed into her gray fur and the white on her paws and chin were pretty. I didn't mind that she followed me. It meant there were two of me.

I knew I was black, but not until I saw myself in the water bowl did I know I was black all over. Even some of my whiskers were black. Being the color of night meant I could hide in dark places, scaring brothers and sisters when I jumped out and pounced on them.

Though my name was Pilgrim, Sparkle had a second name for me. When I blasted headfirst into her or stole her toy, she'd hiss and

call me Stink, but I knew she loved me because she always came back to me.

The other three kittens were good for wrestling with, but they didn't whisper, and they never named things the way Sparkle, Mother, and I did.

"Why can't they whisper?" I asked.

"Very few cats can whisper," Mother said, "but all cats talk. They do it with their bodies and sound." We both looked in the direction of a tiny meow coming from one of my brothers who was alone on the far side of a chair. "What's he saying?" she asked.

"Where is everyone?"

"See? They can speak." She walked around the chair to my brother, gave his face a quick wash, and then he followed her back to me. "There, little one," she said even though he couldn't hear her. "Maybe Pilgrim will wrestle with you." Which I did until he fell asleep. Then I looked around for Sparkle who was, of course, close by.

She was always there. If we were sleeping in a heap and I woke up, padding away, she woke immediately, maybe pausing for a yawn, but then she was on my trail. If I stopped too quickly, she'd plow into my rear, and if I was leaping and running for reasons unknown and tumbled over a toy, she'd be watching, showing her amusement with ear and whisker. If I was on a serious excursion and didn't hear her, I'd look back, making sure she was there, and she almost always was, though sometimes she stopped to gaze at a spot of light on a chair, a tangle of green string, Mother's ear, or even nothing at all. She was good at gazing.

To make sure we understood non-whispering cats, Mother taught us about confident tails, disinterested tails, and nervous tails, about perky ears and flat ears, and about eyes, which were really interesting. They could show wide-open interest, half-closed peacefulness, or black eyes for seeing all there was to see in case of

darkness or danger. Eyes could smile by closing slowly and then opening again. Mother did that all the time. Then there was the big fluffy puff, which meant “I’m big and fearsome and terrified.” We babies were good at the big puff, practicing it all the time, but Sparkle could puff better than all of us, puffing so big that everything but her eyes, chin, and toes disappeared. Mother pointed out all the sounds we could make like little squeaks, long and wobbly meows, and loud meows along with small screeches when someone bit too hard. We could hiss in anger or as a warning, and we could growl out a threat. Purring, she said, was all about happiness and peace. There was also something she called a yowl, done when extremely upset, but she wasn’t going to demonstrate it because it was too loud. It would scare the non-whisperers and maybe Julie too. She said we’d know a yowl when we heard it. The best sound of all was Mother’s bubbly meow that said hello or that she was happy or someone was amusing her. Sparkle and I tried to do it, but we both failed. She sounded like she was choking on a piece of string, and I sounded the same as I did when I fell from the curtain. Mother said only some cats could do it and don’t worry about it.

Her descriptions were soft, not heard with our ears, but more like whispers floating in our minds. I felt sorry for my two brothers and other sister because they had no whispers in their world. At times, one or another of them would stare intently at us as we chatted, puzzlement on their faces. Were they aware they were missing something?

One day, Sparkle asked Mother if she’d always been a big cat and if she had brothers and sisters like we did.

“A long time ago, I was a baby like you, and there were other babies.”

I wanted to know more, but she said it was a story meant for another day. She walked away, and we knew there'd be no answer, not now anyway, so we found something else to do.

Mother had a place she jumped to where she'd stare into some kind of light that made her face glow. We all tried to follow her, but we couldn't jump that high, nor could we claw our way up without falling off. Being a pilgrim, no place could go unexplored, and I eventually clawed my way up without falling over backward. I reached out to the flat place where Mother sat, and hauled myself up next to her. She said her bubbly hello, and then moved over to make room for me, turning back to the light. I followed her eyes and heard her whisper, "Window."

I reached out to touch what I didn't understand. Air that was hard? I leaned forward and stretched my neck to sniff, catching myself just before spilling down to the floor. Then I saw an enormous fly go by. I jumped and puffed and fell off the edge. Righting myself, I looked up and saw Mother looking down at me with interest. "That was a bird, little Pilgrim...and are you all right?" Kittens have no sense of dignity, and I assured her I was fine. Sparkle, as expected, had been watching, and she jumped me because I was already down, giving her the advantage.

I kicked her with my back legs. "Get off!"

She squeaked from the kick, then said, "Climb up again. Show me so I can do it too."

After watching me make it to the top, Sparkle tried her own paws at it, thumping back to the floor several times before making it all the way up. It was crowded, but I was with my two most favorite cats all huddled together, Mother purring while we looked at a fascinating window world. It's still in my collection of memories, the special ones I take out to look at when I'm drowsing on a warm day.

Though I remember everything, only some of the memories are in my special collection. There was the time Sparkle and I were idly watching the other kittens when we happened to look at each other, both of us surprised. “Sparkle, your eyes aren’t blue anymore. They’re amber like Mother’s.”

“I was just about to tell you that your eyes aren’t blue anymore either.”

“Are they amber?”

“No. They’re green like what Mother calls grass outside the window. And they have little glow spots and they’re so pretty!” I washed my paw, pleased with myself, and she swatted me, so I jumped her, she scrambled to get away, we both fell over, then leapt up to chase each other, which was more fun than eye color, but all of it was filled with happiness, and so I added it to my memory collection.

As time passed, we stopped stumbling over our own paws, we learned how to use a litter box, how to eat the food Mother ate, and how to wash better, though Mother often gave the final touches. She was fussy that way. We had kittens and toys to play with, and pleasant visits from Julie, who we sometimes followed into the food place with hopes of treats. Julie added a larger, easier to climb thing in front of the window with more ledges where we could sit, but we five kittens insisted on being at the top all at once, which led to swatting parties and crashes to the floor. Life was good.

On a day when the sky was mostly blue with white fluffy things called clouds, Mother called us to follow her to a wall. She nudged at it, and a small part moved. She backed up and did it again, making sure we watched. Then she pushed at it with her head, walked through, and disappeared. It was like the floppy stuff hanging beneath a chair, the part I liked to scoot beneath to hide, then leap out and scare a random sibling into full puff. Being the

brave sort, I pushed at the floppy thing and instantly knew I was beyond the window. Sparkle followed me, but Mother had to go back inside to nudge the others through the floppy thing.

I let out a great meow and raced outward in big kitten leaps, great enough that I tumbled head over tail into the tall, sweet-smelling grass that went on into forever. I jumped and puffed with excitement, tried bouncing sideways, which didn't work well in tall grass. I heard Sparkle's whispered laughter, and so I showed off by racing through the high grass as best I could, running on and on and on until I didn't know where I was. Worse, I didn't know where Mother and Sparkle were. I listened, hearing no calls. I ran back the way I thought I'd come, but I still didn't know where I or anyone else was and I wanted us all together, because that's how love is. It's when I made a sound I'd never made before but recognized immediately. It was a yowl, and it scared even me. I heard grass swishing, a thumpity-thump, and Mother was there. She did her bubbly meow, washed my face until I felt a lot better, then turned, and whispered, "Follow me," which I did so closely that I was nearly under her belly.

My two brothers and one sister were sniffing and bounding, but Sparkle was hunched up like a gray ball with sad eyes. I ran to her, leaned against her, and licked her ear. She buried her face in my neck, then backed away, flattening her ears, and hissed, "Stink!" I heard Mother whisper a laugh, but I didn't care. I was with my sister, I wasn't scared anymore, and I knew what a yowl was.

After that, Mother brought us outside often, always keeping one of her amber eyes on me. We didn't go out on leaky-sky days, something Mother called rain. I tested this thing called rain one day and discovered why Mother didn't take us out in it. It was like falling in the water bowl. I tried shaking off all the wet, but I ended up with wet spikes of fur. It was awful. Mother gave me a complete bath, purring with amusement. I didn't think it was amusing at all.

These were days of adventure and discovery, a world filled with green stuff and smells and hoppy, buzzy, flying things, all of which Mother gave names to like squirrel, butterfly, and bird. I usually remembered to alert Sparkle before I went exploring, and she usually followed, but she had her own interests such as how things smelled or felt beneath her paw. When she didn't follow, I brought her gifts. She loved big yellow flowers, and though they had an interesting smell, Sparkle and I agreed they had an ear-flattening taste, so I found other gifts for her like a round hard thing Mother called a nut. It smelled good, and it was so much fun to play with that Sparkle, whose mouth wasn't big enough, convinced Mother to bring it inside. It became a favorite toy, particularly on the hard part of the floor where it rolled faster and made noise. The other kittens liked it too, and even Mother enjoyed playing nut games with us.

Mother taught us to sniff for a special grass we could eat when our bellies didn't feel right, and when it was hot, she led us to the shade beneath trees. I loved sitting with tree branches above me because something was always going on in them. The birds landed up high and watched us as we watched them. Sometimes I'd meow at them, but they didn't meow back. Squirrels were up there too, racing across and down and up, their claws scraping and scratching. They'd often yell at us, though I don't know why. I think they dropped nuts just for us to play with. Trees, we discovered, were easier to climb than curtains, but unclimbing them was a bigger problem because we often went too high. Mother talked to us, and showed us again and again until even the non-whisperers knew how to come down backside first, at least close enough to the ground to jump. Mother was extra patient with the others, but eventually they were just as good at it as Sparkle and I were. The one thing they didn't learn quickly was to not climb too high. Mother had to rescue one or another of them periodically.

One day I caught a butterfly. It tasted as awful as crawly things did. Both of them had to be spit out or thrown up, sometimes followed by eating belly grass or racing indoors to the water bowl.

I learned that the air talked, telling us if it was going to rain, and if the air was moving, it told us who or what was ahead of us or behind. Mother said it helped keep us safe and was also important when hunting. We'd already practiced hunting on our own, which Mother said we were born doing, but there were special skills yet to learn.

Sometimes I'd lose focus when Mother was teaching, swiveling my head to watch a bird or dipping my nose to sniff a bug, but she'd bat me with a soft paw to get my attention. She batted Sparkle more often because my sister was always gazing at little things she thought were pretty. Though Mother gave lots of attention to all her babies, I know she spent more time with us, insisting we remain alert. We learned by watching and listening, the others learned only by watching.

She was particularly adamant that we never approach a strange person. We should hide, listen, sniff, watch, and most importantly, pay attention to how we felt because, if the person was bad, we'd know it. This led to all kinds of questions. Were there lots of persons? Were they all dangerous? Was Julie dangerous? Would they eat us? Mother didn't think they'd eat us, but they might hurt us. She led us to a far off corner of the grass to a place where high sticks she called a fence poked up from the ground. She told us to sit, be quiet, and watch. She had to bat all of us periodically to keep us from meowing, wandering, or falling asleep, but we eventually heard footsteps. A person moved past, and Sparkle displayed a magnificent puff, which made all the rest of us puff up. Next, something whirred past, and on top of it was a small person. We all puffed up even bigger, Sparkle adding an emphatic hiss. We sat for a long time, hearing and seeing persons until Mother once

again reminded us to always be cautious of persons. She flattened her ears, saying she'd been places, seen things, and our lives depended on caution.

The day came when our serious hunting lessons began. Mother was persistent and patient, teaching us to creep up on silent feet, doing it by lifting one paw, slowly moving it forward and down softly, then lifting another paw, another, and another. Our bodies, she said, should be close to the ground, our heads stretched forward, and our ears should also be forward, swiveling one at a time to locate sounds without looking at anything but our prey. We practiced our skills on fluttering leaves, butterflies, twigs, and one another.

One day when we heard faint grass rustlings, she told us to follow her, copying everything she did. We did our Silent Paw, our ear swivels, and even managed the back leg adjustment that made our butts wiggle, but when she pounced, it was as if she was here and then she was there with nothing in between. When she straightened, she had a tiny animal gripped in her mouth. She whispered, "Mouse," and slowly set it down in front of us. Sparkle and I eagerly ran into each other, complete hunting failures, while the others were too surprised to move at all. Mother trapped the mouse beneath her paw, then let it go again. This time I managed to touch the mouse with my own paw, but it skittered away. Mother repeated the exercise several times more, and though we did better, we were still failures. Finally, she dispatched the mouse with a single hard bite and laid it on the ground. I jumped at it, Sparkle jumped at it, but then we backed off, not knowing what to do. Mother ate it, and we stared at her. Eat it? This was food? Really? She spit out a hard thing, licked her lips, and said, yes, this was real food. What Julie gave us wasn't real? No, she said, not as real as this.

Hunting became an obsession. We practiced on each other, even on Mother, who'd roll over, pretending she'd been caught, then do a bubbly laugh in our faces and squirm away, rolling us off her, scattering us like leaves in a breeze.

We continued growing, becoming less prone to dropping in our tracks for a nap. It had been a while since we'd gone to Mother for food, preferring the delicious, though apparently not real, food that Julie gave us. We spent more time taking our own baths, though sometimes Mother pinned us down with a paw, washing us from whisker to tail tip. Did we want to smell? Did we want enemies to find us and eat us like a mouse?

Now and then, she brought us back to the fence. We watched persons, and we even saw a stranger cat that looked at us through the spaces, then walked away. It was black like me, but he had a white chin, chest, and paws. Mother said cats liked variety, that no two wore the same fur. We also saw a big hairy brown thing that smelled like it didn't wash as well as we did. Sparkle puffed up huge at its loud breathing sounds, at its huge mouth hanging open, and mostly at its teeth that were as long as our ears. When I noticed that its tongue looked drippy, I puffed up too. Why a drippy tongue got to me more than long teeth is still a mystery.

"Dog," Mother said.

"What's that?" I whispered.

"Not a person, not a cat, but something else. Some are good, some aren't. The ones who aren't good like to chase and kill cats. Not all, but some. I once knew... Never mind."

"How will we know if they're not good?" Sparkle asked, still puffed up even though the dog was out of sight.

"Watch from a safe place. You can read their bodies if you remember something really important: We switch our tails when nervous or angry, but they do it to show friendliness. They don't meow. Instead, they do a thing called barking. If it's soft and they

do it only once, they may be saying hello, but if it's loud and they keep doing it, run for safety. If you can, race up a tree because they can't climb. If you're cornered, puff up as big as you can, lay your ears flat, and hiss and growl for all you're worth. If the dog moves closer, claw its nose. The dog will probably back off, giving you time to run away and climb a tree or scoot under something too small for the dog."

Mother got very quiet, the only sound being a deep breath before she walked away, tail and ears low. I tried doing the same thing, dropping my ears and dragging my tail while walking slowly, wanting to know the feeling that went with it. I sensed something inside me, but I didn't understand it. All I knew was that I didn't like the way it felt.

The Journal

July 12, 1811

I haven't had a moment to myself. Papa's family is coming to visit, and Mama and I have been doing nothing but cleaning and baking. And it's been so hot that Mama and I periodically go down into the root cellar just to cool off. Yesterday, Mama said I could spend a little time at the stream with my feet in the water, so I went to the barn for Willow and we walked there together. The water in the stream is always cool and it feels good on bare feet. Poor Willow was panting like Friend in the heat, and I felt bad because I'd convinced her to come along, so I suggested she give the cool water a try with just one paw. She decided it was too hot to worry about cat rules, and she stepped right into a shallow spot and stayed there until it was time to go back. She was anxious to tell her mother all about this, but we couldn't find her mother, not until Friend told us she'd dug a hole for the cats in the shade behind the barn. That's where we found Willow's mother and grandmother, but when they heard about the water, they decided they'd stay in the cool dirt.

In the evening, Mama came with me to the stream because she needed to cool off, and who did we find there but Willow and her two mothers standing in the shallow spot! Mama was amazed, but I wasn't. I said I'd told Willow how nice the water was, and she'd tried it and loved it, and then when we got back to the barn, we'd told her two mothers about it. Mama looked doubtful, probably thinking I'd discovered the cats doing this earlier in the day and had made up a story about it. What happens to people when they grow up? Why do they stop believing?

July 21, 1811

Papa's family has finally left. I couldn't stand all the noise, but worse, I couldn't stand them. They think cats belong in the barn catching mice and rats, which makes them as filthy as rats. I don't like people who don't like cats, which means, I guess, that I like Mama and Joseph but not Papa and my two other brothers.

I think Willow is looking just the tiniest bit plump, and I've begun wondering if maybe it's not such a good idea for Papa to notice. There are Willow, her mother, and her grandmother, and then there are several of Willow's brothers and sisters. Would Papa decide it's enough cats and take Willow's babies to the stream and drown them? Back when Friend had puppies, Papa couldn't find anyone to take them, and so he drowned every single one of them! I cried, and so did Friend for the longest time. As soon as I thought of this, I ran to the barn and told Willow she had to choose a birthing spot that Papa would never find.

I'm not happy.

August 5, 1811

Willow spent last night with me because Papa was gone overnight on business, but I know better. He's off in town with his friends doing whatever it is they do. Mostly drink, I guess. We walked to the barn this morning, both of us quiet. I was worried about her babies, and maybe she was worried too, but she didn't say. I sat in the loft with everyone for a while, and we talked about silly things. It was easier than talking about important things. As I was climbing down, I saw Willow's mother start to wash Willow as if she was still a kitten who needed a mother's care. It made me want to cry, but I held it in until I got back here to my bedroom.

I almost forgot to mention that I found the perfect bed for Willow. It was in the attic in an old trunk covered in dust, which means it hasn't been touched in a long time. Inside were old

clothes, but the best thing was the softest piece of fur. Maybe it was for a hat that no one ever made. I told Willow I have something for her and will bring it as soon as she's found the perfect spot.

I can't wait for her to have her babies.

August 6, 1811

Willow and her mother and I had such a good time last night. First, I brought the fur to Willow and placed it where she wanted it, which was in the back corner of the loft behind an old wooden box. She loved it! I thought I saw tears in her eyes, but I couldn't have because cats don't cry.

Then we talked about all kinds of things, but the most interesting thing was when I asked her mother if she was going to have more babies someday. She said whispering cats could have only one litter. I wanted to know why, but she didn't know. She only knew it was true. Then I asked who Willow's daddy was. The answer was so strange that I can't stop thinking about it. She said there aren't any daddies, that whispering girls are born with kittens inside them, and when the time is right and a girl needs or wants her own kittens, the kittens inside her start growing. How is this possible? All babies have fathers, don't they? I'm a farm girl, and I know all about that stuff. It's why there's a bull with the cows and a rooster with the hens. I wouldn't be here without Papa, though I wish that weren't true.

If whispering cats are possible, I suppose fatherless kittens are possible too.

Chapter 3

It was an ordinary day, Julie serving our morning meal, and then doing things in the food place. I followed and watched for a while, but she ignored me, eventually going up the stairs to a room where we weren't allowed, so I returned to my family. We played for a while, took naps, woke up yawning and stretching, and then flowed out our floppy door to explore, chase each other, practice hunting, and sit in the sun. We'd been outside long enough that one brother was snoozing beneath a tree while Mother rested on a branch not far above him. Sparkle and I were arguing because we'd run out of other things to do, but we stopped when Julie called to us, which she did now and then if she had something special for us. We all trotted back in, then stopped in a tight group because Mother had meowed so quietly that only we could hear her. Even the non-whisperers knew she was telling us to stay with her.

Two stranger-persons stood in the room, making sounds different from Julie, not soft and soothing, but high and loud as they rushed at us. I puffed, Sparkle puffed, and we pressed to either side of Mother, moving with her as she backed away. I could hear and feel her heart beating fast. My two brothers and other sister seemed confused, then curious, and without caution, they went toward the two persons. Mother whispered, "Danger!" but they couldn't hear whispers, not even loud ones. One person picked up our sister, the other picked up our two brothers. Mother shout-whispered for us

to hide, and because it sounded like a silent yowl, we raced after her, the three of us squeezing beneath one of the chairs where we dropped our heads low enough to see beyond the floppy thing that hung down from the chair.

I could see the strangers' feet, hear their screechy sounds as they moved out of the room, still holding our brothers and sister. What were they doing? Where were they going with my friends? Then I couldn't see them anymore, hearing only their footsteps and then the door to outside. After that, I heard nothing. No persons. No brothers, no sister.

"Come," Mother said, as she crept from beneath the chair, leading us to our floppy door and outside.

She walked slowly, tail down, head down, ears to the side like wings. We trailed behind, and when she stopped close to the fence, she sat down, saying nothing. I sat down on one side of her, Sparkle on the other, and we both pressed into her soft fur. A feeling of heavy emptiness passed from Mother into me.

After a long silence, she whispered, "I didn't think it could happen again."

The rest of Pilgrim's story awaits you along with a story he never knew, the one told in an old journal and in a letter about another black cat named Nightwalker.

[Whispers in the Forest](#)