

THE LAST JOURNEY



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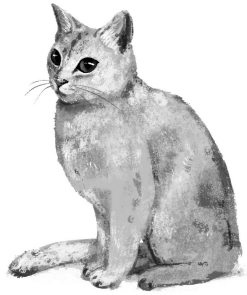
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For Nicky Pellegrino, who was the first
to meet them, Sarah Nathan whose
tarot foretold their future and Sandra
Furness, high queen of the floofle gang.



CHAPTER ONE

Chosen One

Before the dark times of *The Curiosity*, when it seemed that fate held nothing more in store for me than to be an ordinary house cat, my mama knew otherwise. She had seen my future and was convinced that I was destined to be extraordinary.

She knew it even before I was born. When I was still curled up in the dark universe of her belly, soothed by the kettledrum boom of her heart, with my three sisters packed in there so tightly alongside me that it was impossible to know where one of us began and the other ended. ‘Soon you will emerge, my Little Prince,’ she purred. ‘Tiger in my tummy, you who descend from

the immortal one, the goddess Bastet. Your bloodline as sacred as the river Nile. Just as the Egyptians worshipped your forebears, in time, everyone will speak your name, my Little Prince. For you will be the cat who will change the world.'

I know, I know. Mothers always think their sons are special. Mother cats particularly so. And what was so special about me? I was not born a hero. When the earthquake that is birth forced me out into the world, I couldn't even see! Like all kittens, my eyes were still tightly shut. I felt Mama's sharp teeth crunch and chew through my umbilical cord to free me from her and then she was licking, licking, licking me all over with her rough, scrapy tongue to waken me from my womb-slumber and dry me, and all the while as she focused on me she was giving birth to my sisters. They were blind too and they mewed and burrowed their way to suckle on Mama so that we merged again at her belly on the outside this time and nuzzled and drank. It would be another ten days before we could see each other and before I could see the face of my mama, her eyes shining with pride. 'My Little Prince,' Mama purred as she groomed my fur with her damp, brushy pink tongue. 'You are everything I knew you would be!'

Mama was a seer – cats refer to it as having *The Sight*. Normally a cat who has The Sight can predict what will happen, often a few seconds ahead. You'll see them, the

seers, being particularly good at catching birds. The way they leap through the air before they could possibly have known where the bird would land? It is *The Sight* that guides them, puts the bird right in their paw. Mama's visions though were far more powerful than that. She could see not just into the future but in every direction across time. Cats do not write down their histories and so our past is often a mystery to us. Yet between her ears my mama held all the centuries of stories, of who we once were and how we came to be.

'The ancient Egyptians befriended us first,' Mama told me. 'History books will say they "domesticated" us. But they did not. That was the most cunning part of the trick we played, letting the humans think they had tamed us as pets when in fact we had made them our slaves. How else would you describe our relationship? They fed us, stroked us, loved us and in return we walked roughshod over their hearts and came and went and did whatever we pleased! It was Bastet, the ancient one, who was the first cat to learn to miaow. A wheedling, a baby-mimic, a cry to break the hardest hearts. The miaow did its work and soon we had the humans running after us to do our bidding.

'Bastet the cat goddess with her high noble forehead, sharply pointed ears and narrow face like the sphinx itself. Such was her power and beauty, the Egyptians created statues and worshipped her as divine, made her their god.'

Mama's stripes on her brow furrowed. 'But even a god can fall, can they not? One day they are sacrificing meat on the altar in your praise, and the next they're serving you cat food in a bowl and telling you to lump it. The world can change in the blink of an eye, Little Prince, and we must always be ready. We live alongside the humans but our position in their household remains always precarious.'

Pre-cari-ous. Mama spelt it out for me. 'It means we are never safe,' she explained. For every tale of happy domestication there were horror stories of cruelty. Dark times when the humans turned on us. *The Cat-astrophes* Mama called them. The scariest of these stories were the ones with the witches.

'When a plague swept the land and humans died by the thousands,' Mama said, 'their deaths so sudden and violent that everywhere you looked, the bodies were stacked because nobody was left to remove them. The whole city had the stench of death about it. And the humans, looking for someone to blame, decided in their madness that it must be our fault!'

'Us?' I couldn't believe it. 'But why?'

'Witchcraft. They believed we were working with witches to create dark magic. So first they killed the witches, and then us too. Or at least as many of us as they could find. Those of us with The Sight had already gone, escaping into the woods to survive wild.'

‘And were the humans right? Were the witches to blame for the plague?’

Mama hissed at this. ‘Primitive superstition, stuff and nonsense. The plague was carried by rats. It was transmitted to humans when the fleas that bit the rats were infected by their blood and then bit the humans too.’ Mama licked a disdainful paw. ‘Of course, once they got rid of us, the rat population exploded and the plague only became worse and soon the humans were dying in even greater numbers.’

‘Serves them right!’ I said. ‘For being cat killers.’

‘They paid the price for misjudging us,’ Mama agreed. ‘For have we not proven ourselves loyal companions and friends to man? And now, Little Prince, the *Cat-astrophes* are back. The dark times are coming again. And when they come, you must be ready.’

Looking back, I wish I had asked Mama more about the future – about what lay ahead – but I didn’t know that our time together was about to end. When I was six weeks old, the breeder took my mama away to wean us. After that, I would catch glimpses of Mama from time to time, as she prowled past. Our closeness, our time together as mother and son, was over but my memories of her remained so strong. In my mind I could still hear her purr and remember the game we would play. The game was this: Mama would play-fight with me and I would bite and claw and then, when I got too fierce, she

would stomp down on my tail, pinning me with one single paw.

‘How do you catch a tiger?’ Mama would tease. And I would reply, ‘By the tail! By the tail!’

The breeder fed us now. Four little bowls lined up side by side filled with food. The breeder had blonde hair in groomed waves, and an orange suntan, and she wore pink tracksuits and smelt of cherry lipstick.

‘Aren’t you the pick of the litter?’ the breeder cooed as she held me up in one hand and used the other to take my photo with her phone. ‘An absolute stunner!’

The breeder had a Facebook page called *Glamourpusses*. I got a good look at the pictures she’d put up of me as I walked across her keyboard. My paws trod on the keys until the screen went black and she shrieked at me to get off and then there’d be pink manicured hands grasping around my belly and lifting me up and putting me back on the floor because apparently I had deleted the whole page and she had to start all over again.

The photos on the *Glamourpusses* page got loaded again. One of me and one of each of my sisters. I loved my sisters and felt sad to think I would soon be leaving them, knowing of course that since I was the pick of the litter, I would be the first to go.

And then my big day came. A woman strode up to the house in a suit and high heels, talking on her mobile and carrying a cat cage. When the breeder answered

the front door, the woman told the person on the other end of the phone that she was entering an important meeting and hung up, flung the cat cage down and raced over to the playpen where we were frolicking and made lots of *ooing* and *aahing* sounds about how beautiful we were.

‘What breed did you say again?’

‘Abyssinian,’ the breeder confirmed. ‘Very rare.’

This wasn’t true. Mama had told me that we Abyssinians had been rare indeed once upon a time, but by the time I was born we were plentiful. One of the top five breeds. The breeder, though, knew that people would pay more if they thought we were special.

‘Especially in colours like these,’ she added.

‘All four different colours! Isn’t it remarkable how they can come out like that when they have the same parents?’ the woman said.

‘Actually,’ the breeder said, ‘it’s possible for cats in the same litter to have more than one father.’

This is true. A litter of kittens can have many sires. But in the case of our little family of four, only one sire had been responsible and yet how different we all looked! There I was, with my fur of palest lilac-grey, peppered with coarse strands of charcoal, my soft tummy a buttery white and those racy raccoon stripes on my tail. ‘The boy is a silver with a hint of lilac,’ the breeder said. ‘While his sister here is a true Abyssinian ruddy.’ She picked up

my sister, coloured red like the desert, her eyes wide and green, rimmed with kohl like mine.

‘Abyssinians can be tawny too.’ The breeder picked up my other sister, soft fawn-coloured with fur-puffs sprouting vigorously from her cheeks and a lanky tail. Then, finally, she picked up my littlest sister. ‘This is ... the smallest one,’ the breeder said, avoiding the word that she used when she was not with a customer, which was ‘runt’. ‘But she’s feisty. Lots of attitude. Very playful.’ My runt sister was a lilac, much darker fur than mine, and while my eyes were green hers were amber.

‘Oh, they’re all so beautiful,’ the woman in the red suit said.

Yes, I thought to myself. *We are beautiful*. But obviously I was the most beautiful of them all. I looked at the woman with the cat cage and prepared myself. So this was it. My time had come. I was leaving home at last for my adventures in the wide world.

‘I love the silver one with the stripey tail ... but I really want a girl,’ the woman said.

I was astonished. Wanted a girl? Who wanted a girl kitten when there was a handsome boy like me on offer?

Speechless, I watched my lilac sister with the amber eyes get picked up and popped inside the cage and I listened to her persistent yowls while the woman remained for far too long still standing on the doorstep, saying goodbye to the breeder. The woman said that she worked a lot and

lived alone. My sister would be her companion when she got home late at night. Boring! Even worse, she lived in an apartment right by a busy road and that meant my sister would be a permanently-indoor kitty. Frankly, it didn't sound like much of a life. Rather her than me! And yet I admit it all the same – I was in shock that this woman had passed me over! I was the chosen one and yet I hadn't been chosen.

And so when the next visitors came, a family this time, I pulled out every trick in the book. I chased an imaginary ball of fluff on the floor. I pounced on my teeny tawny sister and wrestled her to the ground and bit her tail.

'You're actually hurting me,' she squeaked. But she had the last laugh because again, the family wanted a girl. And although they *oohed* and *aahed* at the exotic colour of my fur, in the end they chose her, not me.

'She's so sweet and good-natured,' they said as they packed her into the cage with her special blanket and her even more special food that the breeder had sold them. I watched the youngest child, a boy, poking his sticky lolly fingers through the bars at my sister and once again I was glad that this wasn't going to be my home, but I still felt the pang of not having been chosen.

And then it was just me and my other sister. The last sister. The two of us together. And the world seemed to stand still after that. Nobody came for another two weeks because it was Christmas and everyone was away

on holiday. And so, without new homes to go to, my sister and I settled in to remain with the breeder and we made our own fun. We climbed the Christmas tree together to the very top branches until it threatened to topple over, and we swung from the fairy lights and knocked the baubles off on purpose and batted them around the floor and under the sofa, and then, at the point when the pine needles on the tree were turning brown and the breeder was muttering about us both being too hungry and eating her out of house and home, a new family came.

‘The red one,’ the boy said. ‘I want the red one.’

And I looked down at my own fur, short and baby-soft lilac-grey, dark sooty rings on my tail. And my sister went to her new home and then I was alone.

I had never been alone before. I didn’t like it. It was miserable to have no one to play with, no one to tell my secrets and my plans to. And yet those days of loneliness were important, because they made me understand what it was to be Lottie.

‘Lottie’s an only child.’

It was the first thing her mother said to the breeder when they walked in the front door. The way she said the words ‘only child’ was almost as if she was describing an illness. ‘So this kitten will be like a substitute sibling for her.’

‘He’s certainly a character,’ the breeder said. I wasn’t sure if that was a compliment. I don’t know why I did it,

but I made such a song and dance to impress Lottie and her mum. After all, I was the only kitten left so they didn't really have a choice in the matter. But I wasn't leaving anything to chance. Who knew? Perhaps they might have their heads turned at the eleventh hour and decide to buy a puppy instead. And so I performed every party trick in my ten-week-old repertoire.

I miaowed up a storm, I frolicked and batted at things that weren't there and then I grabbed bits of wool in my tiny front paws and rabbit-kicked at it with my hind legs. I rolled about and bared my butter-cream belly and looked wistful, making my enormous eyes even larger so that I had the most soulful appearance, almost as if I was trying to break their hearts. Because I needed this girl to want me.

'I'm an only child too now,' I miaowed to her. 'I'm just like you. We are perfect for each other. Choose me, Lottie, and I will be yours and only yours and I will love you for ever and never leave you.'

And Lottie reached down and picked me up and hugged me to her chest. It was all a bit much for me, being held so tight for the first time like that, and before I could think about the consequences, I squirmed and scratched and leapt out of her grasp and I was falling, falling, falling all the way to the floor.

'Oh my goodness,' Lottie's mum said. 'Careful, Lottie! You can't just drop cats like that.'

And I wanted to say, 'No! She hasn't done anything wrong. It was my fault! I wasn't quite prepared to be loved so quickly. But if you take me home with you I will try harder and I will be stroked and cuddled and I will purr with delight and sleep on beds and use my scratching post and my litter tray. I will play with catnip mice and swing from the curtains and come whenever Lottie calls me for dinner. I'll sniff and turn my nose up at the various biscuits and wet food as if it doesn't interest me despite claiming to be starving just a moment ago. And if you serve me fresh fish I will growl like a beast and chew it with spiny baby teeth and choke down chunks of it without chewing much at all because I am so delighted. And even though I let everyone in the family pat me and anyone in the neighbourhood feed me, I will always make it clear that I belong only to Lottie, that I am her kitten. I will love her fiercely and loyally in a way that only the two of us, the only children, will understand.'

'I'll show you how to do it. Here, hold him like this,' the breeder said to Lottie. And she picked me up with her hands covered with golden rings and carried me back to the girl and I didn't squirm. And Lottie's mum handed over her credit card.

At last I had found my home.

I wanted to sit on Lottie's lap in the car so I could feel the warmth of her and snuggle into her cardigan, and Lottie wanted me to do that too but her mum said that

wouldn't be safe. And so I travelled in the cage. I cried at the bars and begged for release and Lottie said in a soothing voice, 'Don't cry, kitty.'

But I did cry. I cried so loud and so hard that finally Lottie's mum said, 'Oh for pity's sake. I can't think to drive. Okay, Lottie. Take him out but you have to hold him tight.'

And suddenly I was free and my eyes were up at the level of the car window so I could see outside and wow! We were moving so fast! The sights rushed past me.

I looked up at Lottie's face. Blunt brown fringe, crooked teeth, freckles, green eyes almost the same colour as mine.

'It's okay, Pusskin,' she said. 'We'll be home soon.'

'That's a cute name for him,' Lottie's mum said. 'Pusskin. Shall we call him that?'

'Maybe,' Lottie considered.

Pusskin? Really? Personally, I felt like this diminutive name did not speak to the power of my destiny. And yet it was the name Lottie cooed in my ear as we drove on. On the high street, the giant red growling monsters – Lottie called them buses – crowded alongside us. It was a relief when we turned into Cheshire Street, named after the cat I presume. Mama, not one to shirk on education, had told me about all the famous literary cats as well as the real-life historic ones. Then into Wood Close past the St Matthew's gardens where there were loads of people all crowding around the church.

‘Is it a wedding?’ Lottie asked.

‘I wish!’ Lottie’s mum said. ‘No. It’s the election today. We’re voting in a new government.’

‘What was wrong with the old one?’ Lottie asked.

‘Everything apparently,’ Lottie’s mum sighed. ‘Or rather nothing. Sometimes people want change, but change isn’t always good.’

‘Is this going to be good change?’ Lottie asked.

‘I doubt it very much,’ Lottie’s mum said darkly.

Not far past the church, we slowed down and turned into a street signposted Goldman Close. And here we were: we had arrived at the cul-de-sac which was to be my home.

I didn’t know then what a cul-de-sac was. You might describe it as a road to nowhere. Which is to say the road does a circle and loops back on itself. In Goldman Close, the circle of the road swept around a green lawn, at the centre of which stood a large oak tree. Cars had to drive all the way around the oak tree and then back out the same way they had come in. I didn’t know then that growing up in a cul-de-sac is a fine thing if you’re a cat. I was still a kitten, wide-eyed in the face of the world and unaware of the joys that a dead-end street could bring. I would learn so much in the days, months and years to come, but at that moment, as Lottie carried me from the car and took me inside my new home, all I knew was that I was now a resident of 27 Goldman Close, that my name was Pusskin and that I was going to grow up to be the cat who changed the world.