

Finding Lucky



by Nicole M. Taylor

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*The True Story of a Kitten Who Was Saved,
and Who Saved in Return*

written by

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This is a true story. It is told from the perspective of the cat.

For Lucky — who was the smallest thing in all the world, and became the greatest. And for everyone who has ever been saved by the very thing they saved.

Acknowledgments

With all my love and gratitude to my husband, Andrew, who helped me save Lucky's life on that stormy day, and who has been my steadfast support through every storm since.

This story belongs to him as much as to me.

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Chapter One: The Tall Wet World



The world was green and enormous and it would not stop moving.

Blades of grass rose up on every side, taller than he was, taller than anything, bending and dripping and slapping wet against his face. He could not see over them. He could not see under them. He could only push, one small shaking leg at a time, through a forest that had no end and no edge and no floor he could trust.

He was very small. He did not know how small, because he had nothing to measure himself against except the grass, and the grass was a giant. Everything was a giant. The drops of rain that fell on his back were fat and heavy and cold, and each one landed like a paw pressing him down into the mud.

He could not see. That was the worst of it. Something had sealed his eyes shut, some crust that had been there since before he could remember, and no matter how hard he tried to open them the world stayed dark. He knew there was light

somewhere beyond the dark, a gray watery light, because it pressed faintly against his eyelids. But he could not reach it. He lived inside a small warm blindness and crawled toward nothing.

So he did the only thing he knew how to do. He opened his mouth and he cried.

It was not a loud cry. He wished it were louder. In his chest he could feel how big the cry was supposed to be, how much of it was in there wanting to come out, but by the time it reached the wet gray air it was only a thread of sound, thin as a whisker, swallowed instantly by the rain and the wind and the vastness of the tall green world.

Still, he cried. He cried because somewhere, not long ago, there had been warmth. There had been a soft wall of fur to press against, and the smell of milk, and other small shapes crowded close around him breathing in the dark. He did not have words for any of this. He only had the shape of the missing thing, a hollow place inside him exactly the size of everything he had lost, and the cry was the sound that hollow place made.

He crawled. The mud sucked at his belly. His paws were not made for this — they were tiny and soft and folded under him with every step — but he pushed on anyway, toward nothing, away from nothing, because to stop crawling was to give up, and something small and stubborn inside him would not give up.

Then the ground shook.

Not the whole ground. A thudding, close by. Heavy and rhythmic and getting closer. Something enormous was coming through the grass.

Chapter Two: The Thing With Two Legs and a Beak



He froze.

The thudding came again, and again, and with it a new smell — dry and dusty and feathery, nothing like the milk-smell he longed for. The grass parted somewhere above and to the left, and a shadow fell over him. He could not see it, but he could feel it, a great looming warmth blotting out even the faint gray light.

It clucked.

That was the only way his small mind could hold the sound — a low, clattering, self-important noise that seemed to come from something proud and enormous and not very kind. He heard the scratch of great clawed feet raking the mud. He heard the rustle of a body far bigger than his own, a body of feathers and bone and sharp edges.

He cried out again, hoping, the way he always hoped, that the big thing might be the warm thing coming back.

It was not.

The beak came down like a falling branch.

It struck him on the top of the head — a hard, blunt, jabbing blow that knocked him sideways into the mud. Pain burst white behind his sealed eyes. He scrambled, legs churning, and the beak came down again, pecking at him the way it might peck at a beetle or a fat gray field-mouse, something to be tested, tasted, broken open.

He did not understand. He only knew that the world, which had already taken the warmth and the milk and the light, now wanted to hurt him too. He was the smallest thing in all that enormous wet green world, and the world had noticed him at last, and it had come not to save him but to strike.

He rolled. He kicked. He pushed himself backward through the mud with every ounce of strength left in his four-ounce body, into a thicker part of the grass where the great clawed feet could not easily follow. The beak jabbed once more, catching only wet earth. The proud clattering noise moved off, losing interest, thudding away to some other corner of the enormous yard.

He lay still in the mud, shaking. His head hurt. His eyes were still sealed. The rain still fell. He was still alone. But he was alive, and something inside him — that same small stubborn thing — lifted his head out of the mud, opened his mouth, and cried again into the storm.

He did not know it, but this time, far away across the tall green world, something turned to listen.

Chapter Three: The Hands



The rain grew heavier. The light behind his eyes grew grayer, then dimmer, and the cold began to creep in past his fur and into the small machine of his body, slowing it down. His cries came further apart now. He was so tired. The mud was almost soft. It would be easy, he felt, to simply stop.

And then the ground shook again — but differently.

Not the sharp clawed thud of the beaked thing. This was a deeper tread, softer somehow and yet far larger, an earthquake with patience in it. It came closer. And closer. And the grass, the endless towering grass, began to part above him in a great sweeping motion, folding away to the sides as though the sky itself were opening. He should have been afraid. He was afraid. But he was also too tired to run, and some part of him — the part that remembered warmth — did not want to run at all.

A shape leaned down over him. It was the biggest thing he had ever sensed, bigger than the grass, bigger than the beaked thing, bigger than the storm. It blotted out everything. If he could have seen it he would have seen a face, and eyes, and an expression that he had no way of understanding. He could only feel the enormity of it, a great gentle mountain bending down out of the gray to look at one tiny drowning speck in the grass.

Then came the hands.

They were warm. That was the first thing, the only thing that mattered, the thing that reached all the way down into the cold slowing center of him and touched it. Warm. The hands slid under his soaked and shivering body, and they were so large that they held all of him at once, every leg and his tail and his aching head, cupped completely inside a warmth that did not peck and did not clatter and did not leave.

He was lifted.

The whole world dropped away beneath him — the mud, the grass, the cold — and he rose up through the rain in the cradle of the enormous warm hands, higher than he had ever been, up toward the great gentle mountain-shape and its unseen face. He should have been terrified of the height. He was not. Because for the first time since the warmth had vanished from his life, he was not falling.

He was being held.

He pressed his tiny face against the warm skin, and he opened his mouth, and the cry that came out was different now. Not the thin lost thread of before. This one had something new woven into it, something he had almost forgotten the shape of.

Hope.

Chapter Four: The Box, the Towel, and the Little Duck



The rain stopped.

It did not slow or drift away — it simply stopped, all at once, and the roaring wet wind stopped with it, and the cold stopped, and he understood in his dim small way that he had crossed some boundary, that the enormous warm hands had carried him out of the storm-world and into somewhere else entirely. A place with still air. A place with a roof.

The smells were all new. Dry warm smells, and food smells, and under everything a deep steady scent that clung to the hands and the arms and the great bending shape above him — a scent he did not have a name for but would, from this moment on, know better than any scent in the world. The scent of his person. He breathed it in until it filled him.

He was lowered — gently, so gently — into a new world with walls.

The walls were tall and brown and close on every side, and the floor beneath him was not mud but something soft, something folded and warm and dry that his exhausted paws sank into gratefully. A towel. He did not know the word. He only knew that it was soft, and it was warm, and it did not try to hurt him, and after the storm that was very nearly everything.

There was something else in the box with him.

He bumped into it as he crawled the small circumference of his new walled world — a shape about his own size, or nearly, standing patiently in the corner. He pressed his sealed face against it. It did not move. It did not clatter or peck. It had a smooth roundness to one part and a soft give to the rest, and it smelled of nothing alive. A little toy. A small duck-shaped thing, put there, he would understand much later, so that he would not be entirely alone in the dark.

He did not understand kindness yet. He did not have the concept. But he was lying in the middle of it, wrapped in a towel that had been folded for him, beside a toy that had been chosen for him, inside walls that had been built for him, and some animal part of him registered the truth of it even without the word: he had been the smallest and the most lost thing in the whole enormous world, and something very large had decided that he would be saved.

He curled himself against the little duck. He was still hungry — so hungry — and his head still ached where the beak had struck, and his eyes were still sealed against the light. But he was warm, and he was dry, and the terrible aloneness had lifted.

For the first time in longer than his small memory could hold, the kitten slept.

Chapter Five: The Long Fight to Eat



He woke to warmth pressing at his lips.

Something was there, right at his mouth — small and smooth and rounded, and behind it a smell that undid him completely, that reached straight past his exhaustion and his fear and his aching head and grabbed the oldest, deepest, hungriest part of him and shook it awake. Milk. Warm milk. The smell of the lost warm world, here, now, pressed against his mouth.

But he did not know how to take it.

This was the strange cruelty of it: the thing he wanted most in the world was right there, and his own body did not know what to do. There had been a way, once, in the warm dark before the grass — a soft wall of fur and a rhythm and an instinct that worked without his ever having to think. This was not that. This was small and

firm and strange, and when the warm drop touched his tongue he sputtered and turned his head away and cried in frustration and fear.

The warm drop came again. And again. Patient beyond patience. It did not give up, even when he did. It touched his lips, and he turned away, and it waited, and it came back, hour after hour, through a whole day and into the night.

He could feel the great shape above him even in his blindness — feel it leaning close, feel the deep steady scent of his person all around him, feel that whatever held the warm milk-drop was not going to leave, was not going to lose interest and thud away like the beaked thing had. It stayed. Through the dark and into the light and back into the dark again, it stayed, offering, offering, offering.

And on the second day, something in him gave way.

The warm drop touched his tongue, and this time — half by accident, half by a desperate ancient instinct finally catching hold — he swallowed.

The milk went down.

It was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him. Warmth spread from the center of him outward, into his cold thin legs, into his aching head, into the very tips of his ears. He swallowed again, greedily now, and again, and the warm drop kept coming, matching him, filling him, and he drank until his impossibly small belly was round and tight and he could not hold another drop.

Then, milk-drunk and warm and full for the first time in his whole short desperate life, he collapsed sideways against the little duck and slept the deep boneless sleep of something that has, against all odds, decided to live.

Chapter Six: The World Opens



The medicine came each day after that.

He hated it at first — a strange cool touch at the corners of his sealed eyes, a smell sharp and unfamiliar, applied by fingertips so much gentler than anything that large had any right to be. He would squirm and complain his small complaints. But the fingertips were patient, the way the warm milk-drop had been patient, and they came back every day, cool and careful, working at the crust that had kept him in the dark since before he could remember.

And then one morning, the light got in.

It was only a crack at first — a thin bright line at the bottom of one eye, blurry and blinding and overwhelming. He blinked and flinched and the crack of light swam and stung. But it was there. The gray watery glow he had only ever felt against his eyelids was suddenly real, suddenly in him, and though he could make out nothing but

shapes and brightness he understood that a wall had come down, that the small warm blindness he had lived inside was ending.

Each day the crack grew wider. Each day a little more of the world poured in.

And oh, the world. It was so much larger than he had known even from crawling through it blind. From down on the towel, looking up, everything rose to impossible heights. The walls of the box, which he had thought enormous, turned out to be nothing — beyond them the room went up and up and up, past the legs of great wooden things, past sheer cliffs of furniture, all the way to a ceiling so far above him it might as well have been the sky.

And moving through all of it, tending to him, was the shape. His person. He could see her now — not clearly, not yet, but enough. Enough to know the size of her, which was the size of a mountain that walks. Enough to know that when she bent down over his box she filled the whole world above him, that her hands coming toward him were larger than his entire body, that she was, by every measure his small mind could take, a giant.

A gentle giant. The gentlest thing in all the towering world. And she had chosen him.

He looked up at her out of his one newly-opened eye, this enormous warm being who had reached into the storm and pulled him out of it, and something settled into place inside him that would never again come loose. He did not have the word for it. The word was love. But he did not need the word. He had the thing itself, whole and total and permanent, and it looked up out of the bottom of a cardboard box at the giant who had saved his life.

Chapter Seven: Chasing the Milk



He got stronger.

It happened faster than anyone might have guessed for something that had so recently been all bone and shiver. The warm milk did its work. Each day his legs held him a little better; each day the walls of the box seemed a little lower; and one morning he discovered, with a jolt of pure astonishment, that he could stand at the wall of the box, hook his front paws over the top, and haul his whole round belly up and over the edge into the vast world beyond.

The vast world was a kitchen. He did not know the word. He knew it as a great gleaming plain of hard cool floor, stretching away in every direction toward cliffs and canyons of things he had no names for, all of it lit from far above, all of it echoing.

And he knew that somewhere in it was the milk.

This became the whole purpose of his days. The great warm shape of his person would move through the kitchen — a tower on the move, footsteps like soft thunder — and he would launch himself after her across the enormous floor, legs pumping, tail up, running as fast as his small body could go and crying the entire way. His cry had gotten stronger along with the rest of him, though it was still small, still a thread against the size of the world. He threw all of it after her anyway.

He screamed for milk. He screamed his tiny furious joyful scream, chasing the mountain that walked, and when she stopped and bent down and gathered him up, the whole enormous world would swing and lift and rise, and he would find himself carried up, up, up into the one place in all the towering universe that he wanted to be.

The cradle of her arms.

That was where the milk lived. He had learned it as surely as he had learned his person's scent — that this warm curved place high above the cold hard floor was the source of everything good, the safe high harbor where he was fed and held and where nothing, not the beaked thing, not the storm, not the cold, could ever reach him. He would settle into it and drink and feel the deep steady heartbeat of the giant against his side, and the whole terrible grass-world would feel like something that had happened to some other, smaller, unluckier cat.

He was not that unlucky cat anymore. He had a box, and a duck, and a giant who loved him, and a name.

The name had come somewhere in those first desperate days — he felt it more than understood it, a particular warm sound the giant made when she looked at him, a sound that meant him and only him. He did not know what the sound was. But it was his. He had been the unluckiest scrap of life in the whole wide storming world, and the giant had looked at him and given him, of all the sounds in all the world, that one.

Lucky.

Chapter Eight: Climbing to the Warm Place



As he grew, so did his climbing.

It started with her clothes. When the giant stood still and he was down on the cold floor wanting up — always wanting up, always wanting the cradle and the heartbeat and the warm — he discovered that the great soft folds of fabric hanging down from her were not a wall at all but a ladder. He could sink his tiny needle-claws into them and haul himself up, hand over hand, a determined small climber scaling the sheer cliff of a giant, up and up toward the distant warm harbor of her arms.

He climbed her like the grass had once towered over him — except now he was the one rising, now he was the one refusing to be stopped by anything's size. Halfway up he would cling and cry, and always, always, the great hands would come and gather the last of the distance for him and lift him the rest of the way home.

But the climbing that mattered most happened at night.

Each night, after the last warm feeding, the giant would lower him back down into the box, onto the soft towel, beside the patient little duck. And each night this was, to Lucky, an intolerable mistake. The box was fine. The towel was warm. But it was not the place he needed to be, and he had discovered exactly where that place was, and no wall of cardboard was going to keep him from it.

The place was her neck.

There, tucked into the warm curve where her throat met her shoulder, he had found something even better than the cradle of her arms. He had found her pulse. He could feel it beating there, steady and deep and slow, thrumming against his whole small body — the same heartbeat he had first felt from inside her arms, but closer now, wrapped all the way around him, warmth above and warmth below and that great slow drum of life beating him gently to sleep.

So every night he fought his way back to it.

He would climb the wall of the box. He would cross whatever dark and towering distance lay between the box and the giant. When she was up on the great soft plateau where she slept, he would find the blankets that hung down off its edge, sink in his claws, and climb — a small determined shape scaling the side of the enormous bed in the dark, hauling himself up over the top and picking his way across the vast landscape of folds and pillows until he reached her neck, and curled himself into the warm pulsing hollow of it, and slept.

He would not sleep anywhere else. He had crawled alone and blind through a storm at the very start of his life, and he had decided, with the whole force of his small stubborn heart, that he would never be alone in the dark again.

Chapter Nine: Wherever She Was



One neck was not enough. Lucky wanted all of her, all the time.

It was not enough now to sleep against her pulse at night. In the daytime too he had to know where she was, had to be able to see the mountain that walked, had to be near enough to reach her if the world turned cold and terrible again the way he knew, deep down, it could. Being apart from her felt wrong in his body, an itch he could not scratch, a low alarm that would not switch off until he found her again.

So he followed her everywhere.

If she moved from one room to another, he poured himself after her across the floor. If she stepped through a doorway and the door began to close behind her — shutting him out, putting a wall between them — he would plant himself at the shrinking gap and cry with all his might, a small outraged wail of pure protest, until the wall opened again and he could slip through to her side. He could not bear a

closed door. A closed door was the storm. A closed door was the grass. A closed door was being small and alone in a world too big to survive.

His favorite place to be near her was the workbench.

It sat high above the floor, a great flat plateau where the giant would settle for long quiet stretches, bending over tiny bright things and moving them with small tools, absorbed and still. Lucky learned to climb up to it — up a chair, up whatever offered itself, hauling his growing body up onto the high tabletop to be at her level, in her space, part of whatever mysterious thing it was she did up there.

The tabletop was full of wonders. Little coils and threads of bright metal that rolled and tangled so satisfyingly under his paw. Small strange shapes that skittered when he batted them. Wire that looked, to his delighted eye, exactly like the tail of some tiny prey animal begging to be hunted. He would pounce and tumble and send things rolling, and sometimes the giant would make a low sound and move him gently aside, but she never sent him away, never made him go down to the cold floor and be alone.

And when the playing wore him out — which it did, quickly, for he was still small and still growing and still spent most of his energy on the enormous work of being alive — he would find some safe corner of her workspace, some nook among the quiet humming equipment, only inches from her busy hands, and he would tuck himself into it and fall fast asleep.

That was the whole of what he wanted. Not the wire, not the coils, not even the milk, in the end. Just this: to be near her. To fall asleep an arm's length from the giant who had saved him, close enough to hear her, close enough to smell her, close enough to know beyond any doubt that this time, he had not been left behind.

Chapter Ten: The Birthday-Cake Way of Eating



There came a day when the milk was not enough.

He was bigger now — properly bigger, with real weight to him, with legs that carried him at a gallop and a voice that had grown from a whisker-thin thread into something that could truly be heard. And one day, instead of the warm milk, the giant set down before him something entirely new. Something in a low dish. Something that smelled so intensely, so richly, so overwhelmingly of food that his whole body pointed at it like an arrow.

He had no idea what to do with it.

He knew milk. Milk you drank. This was not milk. This was soft and lumped and piled in the dish, and it did not come in a warm drop at his lips, and for a long confused moment he simply stared at it, this glorious-smelling mystery, not knowing how a cat was supposed to get such a thing from the dish into himself.

So he did the only sensible thing. He put his whole face in it.

It was, he decided instantly, the correct decision. The food was everywhere — on his nose, on his whiskers, on his chin, in the fur of his cheeks — and some of it, gloriously, went into his mouth, and it was even better than it smelled. He ate the way something eats that has known real hunger and will never quite forget it: with total, joyful, undignified abandon. He buried his face and pushed it deeper and came up wearing more of the meal than he had actually swallowed, a small striped creature frosted head to ears in dinner, exactly the way a very young child buries his face in the very first birthday cake of his life.

He did not care how he looked. He had been bones in the mud. He had cried into a storm with a voice too weak to carry. Now there was a whole dish of good warm food set down just for him, by the giant, in the safe bright indoors, and he was going to wear every bit of it he pleased.

And there was more, always more. The giant wanted nothing but the best for him — he could not have known this in words, but he lived inside the truth of it. Only the best food filled his dish. It was set down for him again and again, and he ate and ate, and where he had once been light as a fallen leaf, he began, day by day, to become something solid. Something strong. Something that had, against everything, grown.

Chapter Eleven: The Giant Kitten



The days stacked up into a life.

There had been a small ritual, in the early time — Lucky being lifted and weighed, set on some cool flat surface while the giant looked closely at him, day after day. He did not understand it, but he felt the care in it, the same care that was in the milk-drop and the medicine and the folded towel. And whatever the weighing measured, it climbed. He could feel himself climbing it. Every day there was a little more of him.

Until one day there was rather a lot of him.

The kitten who had weighed almost nothing — who had been, at the very start, no heavier than a small coin, a thing you might not even feel in the palm of your hand — grew, and grew, and did not stop growing. His legs lengthened. His chest broadened. His paws, once too soft to hold his own weight, became great padded

things that landed with a thump. The gray of his kittenhood deepened and organized itself into bold handsome stripes, a proper tabby coat, gray upon gray in elegant bands from his nose to the tip of his long strong tail.

He became, in time, a giant himself.



It was a strange thing, and a funny one. The other cats of the household — for there were others, he had come to learn, a whole shifting population of ordinary-sized cats going about their ordinary business — looked up at Lucky the way he had once looked up at the grass. He towered. He loomed. When he walked into a room the smaller cats registered his size the way the world registers weather. The scrap of bone and shiver that a free-ranging chicken had once pecked at like a field-mouse had grown into the largest cat in the whole house.

And no one who looked at him now, this magnificent broad-shouldered giant of a tabby, could quite believe what he had been. That he had fit, once, inside two

cupped hands with room to spare. That he had weighed less than a quarter. That he had come within a whisker's breadth of never growing at all.

But Lucky remembered. Not in pictures, not in words, but in the deep animal grain of him. He remembered the storm in the way he loved the indoors. He remembered the hunger in the way he ate. He remembered the beak in the way one of his eyes — the tender one — would sometimes droop and close when he was frightened or worn out, as if flinching still, all these years later, from a blow that had fallen when he was four ounces and blind and alone.

And most of all he remembered the hands. He remembered being lifted out of the cold. He carried that memory the way he carried his own heartbeat, always, everywhere, and it had made him what he was: not just a large cat, but a devoted one. A cat who had been given everything, and who was only waiting, without knowing he was waiting, for the day he might give it back.

Chapter Twelve: The Place Between



The years went by, gray and warm and good.

Lucky grew from a giant kitten into a great calm cat, ten years deep into a life that had very nearly not happened at all. His days had a shape he loved: the giant, always the center of it, the mountain that walked, still and forever his. He no longer had to climb her clothing — he could leap now, in a single easy bound, up to any height he pleased. But he still slept, every single night, in the one place in all the world that was truly his.

Not the floor. Not the foot of the bed. Squarely in the middle, between the two great warm shapes who slept there — his person, and the other one, the second giant who had come into the warm indoor world somewhere along the way and who smelled of safety too. Right between them, in the exact center of the warmth, Lucky

slept. Every night. It was his place. He had earned it in a storm ten years gone, and nothing and no one would move him from it.

That was where he was, close and warm and certain, when the world began, very quietly, to change.

It was nothing he could see at first. Cats know their people the way they know their own paws, and Lucky knew his giant down to the smallest thing — the rhythm of her step, the sound of her breath, the particular warm scent of her that had been the first good thing in his life and remained the truest. And that scent, one day, began to shift. Something underneath it. Something new and wrong that he had no name for and no way to understand, but that his body noticed the way his body had once noticed the beaked thing coming through the grass.

Something was not right with his giant.

He did not know what. He could not know what. He only knew the signs of it as they came, one by one, in the language a cat can read.

He noticed how she went still. She would settle somewhere and simply stop, for a long time, longer than made sense, her eyes fixed on a wall or up at the ceiling as if there were something written there that she was trying and failing to read. He would come and press himself against her in these still times, and sometimes she would not seem to notice him at all — she who noticed everything, who had noticed one four-ounce speck crying in a storm across a whole wide yard.

He noticed the way she sometimes seemed lost inside her own home, the safe bright indoors, as though the rooms had rearranged themselves in a way only she could see.

And he noticed the leavings.

Chapter Thirteen: The Long Absences



Sometimes she went away.

This had happened before, of course, in the ordinary way — the giant would leave through the door and come back later smelling of the outside world, and Lucky would protest the door and forgive the absence and reclaim his place at her neck the moment she returned. That was normal. That he could bear.

This was different.

He would watch her go, in these strange new times, and something in the way she moved would tell him it was not the ordinary leaving. He would follow her as far as he was allowed and then be left at the glass, looking out, and he would see her — small now with distance, shrinking, a diminishing shape crossing the great outside toward the car that waited at the edge of everything. He would watch that shape climb

in. He would watch the car carry her away down the long gray road until it was nothing, until she was gone past the edge of the world he could see.

And then she would not come back.

Not that night. Not the next. The bed would be wrong — a great cold plateau with a hollow in the middle of it where his place was supposed to be, where the warmth was supposed to be, where she was supposed to be. He would go to the middle of the bed anyway, out of loyalty, out of hope, and he would lie in the cold hollow and wait, and she would not come, and something in his broad strong chest would ache in a way it had not ached since he was four ounces and blind and alone in the tall wet grass.

He did not have the word for where she had gone. The word was hospital. He would never have the word. He had only the absence, vast and frightening, the mountain that walked simply gone from the center of the world, and the not-knowing whether she would ever walk back into it.

Once, this happened and stretched on so long that the seasons of his small routines all came undone. A whole turning of many days and nights with the hollow in the bed and the wrongness in the house and the ache that would not quiet. He barely ate. He sat at the glass and looked down the long gray road where the car had gone, and he watched, and he waited, in the particular patient hopeless devoted way that only an animal who has decided to love one person completely can wait.

He was waiting there when at last, one day, the car came back up the road.

Chapter Fourteen: What the Cat Does



She came home changed.

Lucky felt it the instant the door opened — the shifted scent, the slower step, the fragile careful way she moved now, as though the world had become a thing that had to be handled gently or it would break. She was thinner. She was tired in a way that went deeper than tired. And that wrong new thing that lived under her scent was stronger now, closer to the surface, unmistakable.

He did not run to protest the way he once had. He did not scream his tiny outraged scream. He was a great calm cat of ten years now, and he understood, in the wordless certain way of his kind, that this was not a moment for protest. This was a moment for staying.

So he stayed.

He became her shadow, the way she had once been the whole of his sky. Where she settled, he settled. When she went still and stared at the wall or up at the ceiling, lost somewhere he could not follow, he did not need her to notice him — he simply pressed the solid warm length of his body against her and stayed there, a steady weight, a heartbeat she could feel even when she was too far away inside herself to feel much of anything else. He had learned this from a master. He had learned it, long ago, from the warm milk-drop that came back and came back and came back and would not give up on a kitten too weak to drink.

On her bad days — the days of pain, the days of confusion, the days when her eyes filled and spilled over for reasons he could not know — Lucky did not leave. Not for food, not for the litter, not for anything, until he absolutely had to and only for as long as he must. When she cried, he was there, pressed close, purring the deep steady purr that was the only medicine he had. When she slept the heavy exhausted sleep of the unwell, he slept against her, his weight an anchor. When she sat lost and staring into the middle distance, gone somewhere frightening inside her own head, he sat with her and waited for her to come back, exactly the way he had once sat at the glass and waited for the car.

He did not understand her illness. He never would. He had no words for what was happening to his giant, no way to grasp the fear she must have carried, so young, struck down so suddenly by something with no shape he could see.

But he did not need to understand it to fight it. He fought it the only way a cat can fight anything: by refusing, absolutely and without exception, to let her face it alone.

Chapter Fifteen: The Debt Repaid



Slowly — so slowly, the way the light had once crept back into his sealed eyes one thin bright crack at a time — his giant began to return.

There were doctors, though Lucky knew them only as more strange absences, more trips down the long gray road, more comings-back. There was medicine, though he knew it only as a new smell in the house and a slow steadying of the wrongness beneath her scent. Day by day, the way he had once grown from bones into a giant, she climbed back up out of wherever the illness had taken her. The still, staring times came less often. The lost look faded. The step grew surer. The scent beneath her scent grew quiet again, and one day he pressed himself against her and felt, for the first time in a long and frightening while, that the thing that had been wrong was wrong no longer.

And through the whole of it, from the first shifted scent to the last, Lucky had never once left her side.

He could not have told you why. He was only a cat. He had no grand idea of debts or duties, no memory he could hold up and point to. But it was all in him just the same, woven into the deep animal grain of him, the whole of it — the storm, the grass, the beak, the cold, the crawling blind and alone with a cry too weak to carry. And the hands. Above all, always, the hands, reaching down out of the gray to lift one drowning speck out of the mud and carry it into the warm.

She had stayed up through the days and nights for him when he was too weak to eat. He stayed up through the days and nights for her.

She had not given up on him when giving up would have been so easy. He did not give up on her.

She had refused to let him be alone in the dark. And now, when the dark came for her — the quiet frightening dark of an illness with no shape, that hollowed out the middle of the bed and sent her small and shrinking down the long gray road — he refused, with every ounce of the giant she had grown him into, to let her be alone in it either.

He did not know the word for what passed between them, in those long hard days and the good ones that came after. He did not know the word when he was four ounces in the grass, and he did not know it now, grown and gray and ten years deep into the only life he had. But he did not need the word, any more than he had ever needed it. He had only ever needed the thing itself.

The thing itself is this: once, a giant found the smallest and most lost creature in all the wide storming world, and she looked at it, and she decided it would live. And the creature never forgot. And when at last the giant needed saving too, the creature she had saved was there — had always been there, would always be there —

pressed warm against her side, giving back, at last and in full, the one thing he had been given.

His name was Lucky. It was not a fancy name, or a unique one. It was an ordinary, everyday name.

But it was true. He was the luckiest cat in all the world — pulled from a storm, fed drop by drop, loved into a giant. And she was lucky too, though she might not have known it yet on the day she carried him in from the rain: for she had not simply rescued a kitten that day.

She had rescued the very thing that would one day rescue her.

