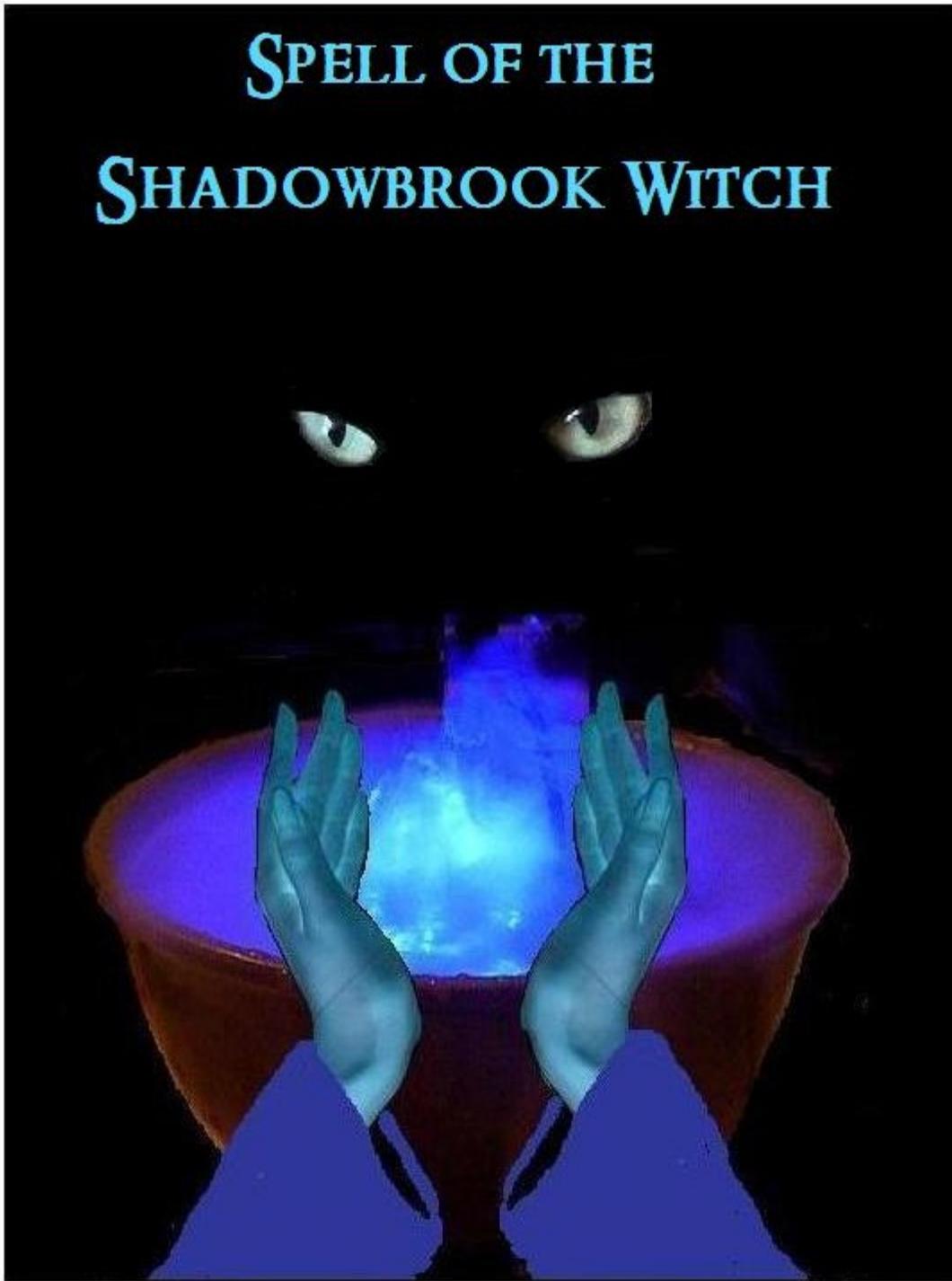


*Email me with your comments!*

# SPELL OF THE SHADOWBROOK WITCH



A NOVEL BY GERALD LEE GIBSON

*To my wife Donna,  
Daughters Jennifer and Kerri,  
Son Matthew,  
Seven Grandchildren, and the  
Inspiration of my Cats*

## *Kingdom of the Cats*

*In the shadows, in secret play,  
the feral felines roam.  
Drawn by serendipity,  
they live without a home.*

*Castaways and vagabonds,  
true children of the night  
in their secret twilight kingdom  
they shun dawn's lonely light.*

*In the alleys and the field,  
among the silent grass,  
all minor mammals quickly yield  
or become a cat's repast.*

*Wary until daylight wanes,  
in darkened habitats  
at night the feral felines reign  
in the Kingdom of the Cats.*

*~ Gerald Lee Gibson*

## Table of Contents

[\(Click on Title\)](#)

<b>Chapter One:</b>	<b><a href="#">Double, Double Toil and Trouble</a></b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter Two:</b>	<b><a href="#">Circle of Lights</a></b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter Three:</b>	<b><a href="#">Witches' Bane</a></b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Chapter Four:</b>	<b><a href="#">Kingdom of the Cats</a></b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Chapter Five:</b>	<b><a href="#">India's List</a></b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Chapter Six:</b>	<b><a href="#">Missing Persons</a></b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Chapter Seven:</b>	<b><a href="#">Sam's Place</a></b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Chapter Eight:</b>	<b><a href="#">Feline Retribution</a></b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Chapter Nine:</b>	<b><a href="#">Buck's Gang</a></b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Chapter Ten:</b>	<b><a href="#">The Old Woman's Zoo</a></b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Chapter Eleven:</b>	<b><a href="#">The Witch Must Die!</a></b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Chapter Twelve:</b>	<b><a href="#">Mimjet and Francine</a></b>	<b>80</b>
<b>Chapter Thirteen:</b>	<b><a href="#">Darkened Habitats</a></b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Chapter Fourteen:</b>	<b><a href="#">Irma and the Preacher</a></b>	<b>102</b>
<b>Chapter Fifteen:</b>	<b><a href="#">The Sorcerer</a></b>	<b>110</b>
<b>Chapter Sixteen:</b>	<b><a href="#">Mortimer, the Priest</a></b>	<b>120</b>
<b>Chapter Seventeen:</b>	<b><a href="#">The Spell Reversal Team</a></b>	<b>129</b>
<b>Chapter Eighteen:</b>	<b><a href="#">The First Attempt</a></b>	<b>141</b>
<b>Chapter Nineteen:</b>	<b><a href="#">The Search for Madelyn Fontaine</a></b>	<b>153</b>
<b>Chapter Twenty:</b>	<b><a href="#">The Great White Witch</a></b>	<b>163</b>
<b>Chapter Twenty-One:</b>	<b><a href="#">Back to Shadowbrook Arms</a></b>	<b>174</b>
<b>Chapter Twenty-Two:</b>	<b><a href="#">A Gathering of Cats</a></b>	<b>180</b>
<b>Chapter Twenty-Three:</b>	<b><a href="#">The Second Attempt</a></b>	<b>189</b>
<b>Chapter Twenty-Four:</b>	<b><a href="#">Lilith: Mother of Witches</a></b>	<b>194</b>
<b>Chapter Twenty-Five:</b>	<b><a href="#">A New Beginning</a></b>	<b>201</b>
<b>Epilogue:</b>	<b><a href="#">One Year Later</a></b>	<b>208</b>

## Chapter One

### Double, Double, Toil and Trouble

India Crowley, Shadowbrook Arms' resident witch, stood a moment as if in prayer. In the torchlight, with her shadow cast on the wall, she swayed back and forth, leaped awkwardly into the air, and began pirouetting across the lawn. It was difficult for her friend and co-host, Irma Fresco, not to believe that she was drunk or under the influence of drugs. India was, in addition to being a vegetarian and non-smoker, a teetotaler, and yet she appeared intoxicated and out of control. Her long black dress, pointed hat, and cape seemed out of place in this crowd. The sound of Morgana and the Living Dead was not synchronized with the movements she made. A more fitting score for India, Irma felt, would have been Camille Saint Saen's Dance Macabre. A more appropriate place to perform would have been in the privacy of her own home. India was not even trying to dance to the music, for it seemed as if she had a symphony playing inside her head. Irma saw her pause, cup her ear as if Lucifer, himself, were speaking, roll her green eyes around in their sockets, shake, spin, and stop abruptly as if she were suddenly possessed.

As India performed her silly dance, Irma shuddered and looked away. Every Halloween India would put on her witch costume and try to get everyone in the mood. No one had taken her seriously at Shadowbrook Arms until tonight. Halloween normally fell during the workweek. Except for the few trick-or-treaters in the complex, this holiday had been limited to short-lived gatherings around the pool, in which India would giggle, dance around foolishly awhile, and mingle in the crowd.

This time Halloween was on a Saturday, which meant tenants would be rested up enough to participate and still be able to recuperate the next day. It was typically cool for late October, and yet several people were in the Jacuzzi and pool. The theme tonight was supposed to be the occult. Only a few tenants, other than India and herself, however, had worn a costume or even donned a mask. Irma's devil's costume, which India coaxed her to wear, was too tight. The horns on her hood were crooked, and, for some reason, her pitchfork, which looked more like Neptune's trident, was too big. Added to the glasses magnifying her blue eyes, the suit covering her girlish frame made her appear cute and comical instead of scary: a nearsighted and underfed she-devil with a goatee penciled sloppily by India onto her chin.

Tonight's party offered many treats for Shadowbrook Arms: food, drink, camaraderie, and a chance to watch India perform as a witch. She would give them a good show. No longer would they see her as an amateur or make-believe witch. She would have a captive audience, primed with alcohol and food. It would, Irma warned her, prove disastrous if she carried things too far. She must not go overboard this time, as she had in the past. It was, she reminded India, her last chance for fame; everything else she had done in the past had been a rehearsal until tonight.

But already, during India's performance, Irma could see the stirrings of her friend's metamorphosis and the emergence of a dark period of India's life. India's prelude was not part of the program, and it was not what they had agreed upon today. She was supposed to give a demonstration of witchcraft, using some of the ritual tools of her craft, nothing more. Instead of

the friendly witches' waltz she normally improvised for the occasion, however, she began doing the dance of the sorceress leading up to the Black Mass.

For several moments, as she made her debut, Irma, a man in a vampire's costume, and a woman dressed up like a mummy, stood there on the grass, glancing self-consciously at each other, grimly appraising India's dance. They had become, in the words of Buck Logan, the "ghoul squad," officially part of India's coven, but, in reality, merely her friends. Occasionally, she would hear a shout from the patio aimed at either India, herself, or the vampire and mummy standing in the crowd. The most embarrassing catcall came from Jim Courtney, who shouted "Irma, you horny devil, you!," while Tom Wellitz and Ed Montez crept up in back of her and played with her tail.

The worst humiliation Irma had suffered so far, however, was right in front of her: India Crowley, her co-host, best friend, and the master of ceremonies—Shadowbrook Arm's very own resident witch.

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When her dance was over, India stood there awhile longer staring inappropriately at the sky.

"Oh Lucifer," she cried pompously "give me wisdom tonight that I may do your will. Make these, your children, believers. Punish those who mock me in my trial!"

Unable to believe her ears, Irma stood there at the forefront of the onlookers, feeling their discontent. "It's only a demonstration folks," she tried to play it down. "India's giving us an example of the Black Mass."

". . . Make me strong Lucifer," she continued after a pause, "put the right words into my mouth. Make them listen to me, your servant India, in my hour of trial!"

"Psst India," Irma tried getting her attention, "are you nuts? This isn't what you planned!"

Already, there was hostility in the audience. With expressions of righteous indignation, Sam Burns, the apartment manager, and his fiancée, Alice Wagnall, who were staunch Christians, began making their way through the crowd. Others in the audience, who were less bold, shook their heads and turned away. In spite of these danger signals, India started the next phase of her production, with a look of ecstasy on her face. She began mixing Satanism, voodoo, and witchcraft together in her rites. A series of hand movements in the air, indicating an upside cross, was followed by what sounded like voodoo chanting, then an incantation, using pig Latin and backward spoken words. Afterwards, to everyone's amazement, she reached around below her and began throwing in dried leaves, dead insects, and one live toad into a cauldron on the lawn. Into the pot she also tossed dirt, several handfuls of grass, and a small, shriveled up bat. As a finishing touch, she plucked a snail from a hedge nearby, and, after adding water from the pool, began stirring this concoction and mumbling lines from MacBeth:

Double, double toil and trouble;  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.  
Eye of newt and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,  
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,  
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing.

From the cauldron below, a hidden sheet of dry ice reacted to the water thrown in. The carbon dioxide vapor rose mysteriously up into the night, indicating that her potion was just right, and yet one of the main ingredients, the toad, jumped out of the cauldron and began hopping across the lawn. Her recitation from MacBeth had been just a warm-up. It was time to show them her stuff and begin casting spells. India demonstrated all phases of her art then, from black magic mumbo-jumbo to an attempt to conjure up spirits from the dead. After awhile of this showmanship, however, she heard rebukes from the audience, as this last outrage sank in.

“Sacrilege! You’ve gone too far!” cried Sam.

“Call on your master if you will,” Alice followed “but only Christ can raise the dead!”

Afterwards, in what seemed like a chain reaction, she heard more protests, such as “This is offensive!” and “It’s an outrage against God!”

Recognizing the manager and his fiancé’s voice among the dissenters, she felt momentarily shaken, but continued with her spell, calling on Ashtoreth, Moloch, and Baal to appear in the vapor, until other voices, including her friends, brought her down to earth.

Looking up from her cauldron then, she followed Irma’s example and explained to her audience that this was merely a demonstration of the black arts and not the real thing. Sam, Alice, and several others, who had seen enough, had already exited, but a surprising number of tenants hung on, amused by what they saw. More and more tenants continued to arrive as India performed, drawn more by the music, commotion, and food. Among these later guests Wanda Craven and, not long after, Neva Bravnic, the two women India hated most in the world, appeared on the scene. Before she realized what she was doing, India began casting a spell against the two women, mumbling lines, which had nothing to do with MacBeth. Lapsing into what Irma knew was black magic again, she wiggled her long fingers over the cauldron. With her eyes tightly shut and her lips moving feverishly as she chanted, India uttered what sounded like nonsense to Irma, until Irma remembered something she had read.

“Wait a minute,” she slapped her forehead, “this isn’t a witches spell. It’s devil-worship-- a diabolic rite!” “India,” she said aloud, “you’re quoting Satanism again, not MacBeth. You’re supposed to be a white witch, not this evil crone! Snap out of it woman! You’ve driving everyone away!”

But India would not listen to her. By the time she had finished her incantation, everyone except Irma, her two other friends, and a few late arrivals, had grown tired of her nonsense and began socializing on the patio or lounging with others in the Jacuzzi or the pool. As her audience disappeared, she grew frantic and began ringing her hands. It had all come apart, she believed, when Wanda and Neva arrived. They had jinxed her somehow and spoiled the mood. Not one to give up, however, she tried other forms of black magic to win them all back. She tried making a magic circle. She recited her favorite portion of the Book of Shadows—Wicca’s index of magic and mysticism, and, after running out of quotes, recited chilling portions of the Satanic Bible written by Anton LaVey. For several moments, India exhibited her knowledge of the dark arts and flare for both drama and the occult. But it was too late; her moment of glory had passed. She had made a complete spectacle of herself.

After attempting a séance with her friends, she gave up in despair, blaming her failure on their lack of concentration and faith. She withdrew to the far end of the lawn then, her long pale arms rising up to the sky. Her voice, now hoarse from shouting, became shrill, almost demonic, as she asked Satan to curse Shadowbrook Arms. A special malediction was leveled against

Wanda Craven, Neva Bravnic, and their friends. When she returned, she skipped, cart wheeled, and broke into another dance, as if some cosmic secret had just been revealed. What she failed to accept, even now, was that no one cared. She had blasphemed against God. She had shown a complete lack of sensitivity and good taste.

While she did her dance, the vampire and mummy stole away sheepishly to get out of their costumes, resurfacing that hour with drinks in their hands, as if they had just arrived. There was no question at that point who had stolen the show. Wanda Craven and Neva Bravnic had taken the spotlight away from Shadowbrook's witch. While several of the men competed for their attention, the few women left in the water glanced with mixed emotions their way.

Finally, while still in her devil's costume, Irma discarded her pitchfork permanently for a drink. It was not just a Halloween charade for India anymore. Her dance macabre had become serious business for her—her last chance for fame. She began disrobing as she danced, tossing her cape, dress, and pointed shoes onto the lawn. Her black slip clung to her shapeless frame, emphasizing her complete lack of curves. Her long, stringy dark hair, laced with sweat, was truly witch-like as it whipped around her face and neck. As she pirouetted again across the lawn, Irma could see more tenants departing, until, at one point, they began leaving in droves. It was late and they were tired. Enough was enough, they mumbled amongst themselves. Many of them turned for one last look as they left the scene. But the remaining men (Tom Wellitz, Buck Logan, Jim Courtney, Ed Montez, and Drew Connors) ignored her antics completely as they crowded around Wanda Craven and Neva Bravnic in the pool. The two women, unlike India, were not working on mere adrenaline. They were becoming progressively drunk. It had also seemed to Irma, as she sipped her second and then third beer, that they were encouraging these men. She had heard titillating stories about them from India. It never occurred to her that Wanda and Neva were anything more the nymphomaniacs that India claimed them to be or that her gossip might be based upon hearsay, innuendos, or lies.

Irma had watched the party progress from an innocent poolside barbecue to a wild free flowing bash. She had witnessed many of her neighbors transform from casual participants to happy-go-lucky revelers, ready for a good time. But she could not have imagined what was in store for Shadowbrook's tenants tonight.

After most of them had tired of the festivities and gone to bed, Tom, Buck, Jim, Ed, Drew, Wanda, and Neva lingered in the pool. She alone watched the finale to India's dance. The five men continued to compete for Wanda and Neva's affection, while she remained faithful to her friend: a lone sentinel representing Lucifer, the Prince of Hell.

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As she pulled the devil's hood off her head, her short, disheveled black hair sprang out in all directions. Slowly she turned, adjusted her wire frame glasses on her little nose, and looked wistfully across the pool. It had been a personal disaster for India Crowley. The remaining tenants were in the Jacuzzi at that moment, after progressing from the pool. Their laughter had softened to a quiet fellowship that only they could hear. But in the background, with the radio turned off, a terrible silence had set in. She knew that India had stopped dancing and that she perceived herself as a flop. After tonight's debacle, it was obvious to Irma that India, after dabbling in her black arts for so long, had slipped finally over the edge.

As she looked back at where India had been, she saw her shadow silhouetted against the wall. The tiki torches made her seem ten feet tall. She had become almost statuesque. Her head

was down and her shoulders were slumped. As she stood in front of the flickering light, Irma felt both pity and disgust for her friend. India wanted approval and recognition for her art. Irma had, with the greatest patience, watched her rehearse and then stood on the sidelines as she began her performance, coaching her when her antics grew increasingly bizarre. India, however, had not followed the script. The advice Irma had given her—don't overdo it, avoid black magic, and keep it short—had been ignored until it was too late.

While India gave everyone the evil eye and slipped back into her dress, the five men made a tightening circle around Wanda and Neva. In friendly competition they edged closer and closer to the women. No longer satisfied with mere flirtation, however, they seemed to be casting lots for the pair. It was obvious to Irma, after listening to India's gossip, what they had in mind. More ominous to Irma now, was the darkening expression on India's face as she watched the activities in the Jacuzzi. Finally, after a clandestine exchange of words, Irma watched, with mixed emotions, as the women and their admirers began climbing out of the water. As they stood shivering by the edge, Wanda and Neva were again surrounded by men. In spite of India's efforts to ruin their good names, Irma felt no resentment toward them. She had envied them in the past for having so many male admirers, but she did not envy them now. She suddenly felt sorry for them. Her imagination ran amuck a moment as she watched them lead the five men upstairs, and she sensed, even in her dulled state of mind, that something dreadful was about to happen to them tonight. She could not have imagined that it would happen to her too. Had she not been momentarily drawn into her own thoughts and getting progressively drunk, herself, she would have been alarmed at the way India behaved.... She was not just angry with Neva and Wanda tonight; she was angry with everyone at Shadowbrook Arms, including her best friend.

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At this point, India's eyelids drew together into evil slits. Though she had temporarily lost her voice, she emitted a strange and unsettling wheeze. Her gaze, for that matter, told her friend that someone was going to suffer for tonight. Irma assumed this meant Wanda and Neva. As they were exiting, however, her gaze swept the others too and also fell upon her. Everyone here at Shadowbrook Arms, she conveyed, had offended her, including Irma Fresco. *They were all going to pay!*

Irma now wondered what was going on inside India's dark skull. Would she cast a spell on her enemies? Would she set the apartment complex on fire? Why would anyone take her seriously after tonight? Although she felt sorry for her friend, India had asked for it. She would not listen to her. In spite of Irma's warnings and the reaction of her audience, she had continued on recklessly throughout the evening. By the time Wanda and Neva had arrived, she had already gone overboard. So it was absurd for her to blame them for her mistakes. She had, on her own volition, ignoring sound logic and good taste, self-destructed. As always, she had gone too far, tried to do too much, and broken every rule in the book. Because of her loyalty to India Crowley, she, as Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, like her mentor, would be a laughing stock at Shadowbrook Arms.

For several moments, Irma took advantage of the cheap beer sitting in ice near the pool and continued to get drunk. In the past, when India had socially slipped, Irma would smile at her and lead her gently away. Until now India could always rely on her for comfort and reassuring words. Tonight, however, Irma's patience had been worn thin. India's stupidity had been too much even for her. Her amusement and fascination with India's eccentricity had turned to

disgust and disdain. For the first time in her life, she had deliberately gotten herself drunk. Quickly, and without ceremony, she began blotting out tonight.

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Out of nowhere it seemed, the apartment manager and his fiancée now returned to the scene. They had waited until the party was over and India was alone to begin another attack. Sam, the manager, who was studying for the seminary, and his fiancée Alice, had attempted, with little success, to rehabilitate many of the tenants at Shadowbrook Arms. Irma, who was a Roman Catholic, had resented their fundamentalist preaching, while India, Shadowbrook's witch and their hardest case, had always been amused. Tonight, Irma reflected with a smile, the situation was reversed. She found this particular episode entertaining. She was seeing India get what she deserved. But this time India was not amused. Earlier, she recalled, Sam and Alice had gone on the attack. India, at that stage, seemed beyond redemption. She had committed heresy, sacrilege, and blasphemed God. Now, after waiting for everyone to exit, they were suddenly back.

"It is written:" Sam pointed accusingly at India "thou shall not suffer a witch!"

"The Lord will not tolerate sorcery!" piped Alice.

"But you've gone beyond mere witchcraft;" Sam waved his Bible "you're a devil worshiper now!"

"The Lord will not suffer devil-worship!" Alice chimed.

As they began quoting passages from the Bible, Irma grew self-conscious, withdrawing to a far corner of the lawn, until finally, she found herself peeking over a hedge. India had begun shouting profanities back at them. Several of the tenants, Irma noted, were drawn back by the commotion and looked down from the second floor balcony to see what was going on. Because they were used to their manager's preaching and had accepted India as their resident witch, most of them returned to their apartments, snickering amongst themselves and shaking their heads. Neva, Wanda and their friends, however, made the mistake of laughing at her now.

In a sudden and demonic rage, India's eyes narrowed again, her nostrils flared, and she pointed a trembling finger at everyone in sight. "You whores," she pointed first at Wanda and Neva, "shall know what the word alley cat means, because you'll both become one!" "You, you, you, you, and you," she spoke bitterly to the five men, "shall regret your beastly behavior, because you're going to become exactly how you've behaved!" "And you two, my pets!" she turned to Alice and Sam. "I have the same end planned for you!"

Wringing her bony fists, she vowed, in a crone-like voice, that they would all pay the ultimate price for crossing the Shadowbrook Witch. But to Irma Fresco, who was hidden behind a bush, the malediction had been dodged. Did she mean her too? Irma wondered as she peeked over a branch. What had *she* done to offend her friend?

Raising her pale arms to the sky, India cried "Oh Lucifer, come to me tonight in my circle of lights. Do for me as you have done for witches in the past. Give me your magic for my immortal soul!"

After heckling her awhile, the merrymakers departed the scene. While India had been threatening them, Sam and Alice had playfully made the sign of the cross with their fingers. As the threat sank in, however, Irma saw them flash frightened looks at each other as they shrank away. Irma, who wished she could somehow disappear, herself, and reappear in her apartment without being caught, was now trapped behind her bush. India had not forgotten her. Had she not openly criticized her tonight? Had she not abandoned her during her darkest hour? Irma

knew she had her in her sights. As she stood behind the hedge, she could hear India humming madly under her breath. Slowly, sheepishly, with a beer in her hand, Irma left the safety of her bush and began walking into the light.

She did not want to suffer the others' fate. For several moments she waited for her friend to vent her wrath. It seemed as if India had some form of group disaster in mind for the others. She wondered what she had in mind for her. India just stood there quietly, though, as Irma returned to the patio, appraising her it seemed, Irma wondering when India's justly deserved *I-told-you-so* would pop out of her mouth. It was on the tip of her tongue, ready to be launched as India evil-eyed her. For a few moments, she continued sipping the beer in her hand, pretending not to notice the hostile look on India's face. It was like ignoring an oncoming storm. The sound of laughter fading topside indicated that the party was over. Perhaps, she thought fleetingly, it was transferring to Wanda and Neva's apartment. They were, she recalled India saying, both nymphomaniacs who enjoyed endless sex. After only a moment more of distant revelry, however, the complex became suddenly quiet, as if the volume had been suddenly turned down. With the exception of a small clean-up crew working quietly nearby, she found herself alone with her friend. With feline hostility, edging ever so close to her, India toyed with Irma as if she were a mouse, and then slowly broke into a smile. Somehow, during this interval of time, Irma managed to finish her beer, and bring another can up to her lips.

"You embarrassed me tonight," she heard India say.

"What?" Irma swallowed noisily. "...You talkin' to me?"

"Yes, you uncouth little bitch I'm talking to *you*!" Her green eyes flashed. "Several times tonight you criticized me and made me look silly."

"Silly?" Irma made a face. "*Me*, India? You're saying *I* made you look silly!"

Up-ending her can, she took a long, sloppy swig of beer and looked vacantly at the sky. She had, India now claimed, not supported her at the party. With her devil's costume, she was supposed to mingle and act the part. Instead, she had hung back as if she was embarrassed. Now, the reason she was getting drunk was because she was ashamed of herself. She was a coward and a worm! She had failed her miserably tonight!

"India . . . Poo-oor India!" Irma said between gulps "... If I'm a worm, you're a maggot! . . . If I'm a coward, you're a sacrilege against all that's decent in life!"

Her beer was taking effect. India knew this too, and yet her green eyes continued to smolder with rage. After finishing up her fourth can of beer, Irma felt invincible. She was on a roll. As India elaborated on her lack of backbone, the point finally came when both she and her friend irrevocably crossed the line.

"Innn... dia," she said during a series of loud, unladylike belches "lay off me.... You hear me woman, lay off!... I'm tired of your crap!... That's all it is too, India, crap!"

"Crap?" India's lips trembled and her fists clenched. "You think what I do is crap?"

"Crap!" she replied, taking a long swig. "C-r-a-p, crap!"

"You want crap?" India eyed her fiercely "*I'll give you crap!*"

"Go 'head, take yur besh shot!" Irma said with a slur.

She was sinking fast. By now, she had guzzled down her fifth and last beer and was thoroughly drunk. With the last rush of alcohol hitting her empty stomach, the buildings around her and India Crowley began to fade in and out as images in a rippling pond. She could hardly remember what India had just said. As she held her ground, barely able to stand or even walk, India gave Irma her most menacing pose. In what looked like a karate movement to her, she

lifted one arm up and displayed two fingers, the other arm also gradually rising, until she began making hocus-pocus movements with her hands and mumbling gibberish under her breath.

For a moment Irma found herself giggling uncontrollably but also growing increasingly ill. Finally, as India's hands froze into a two-finger hex position, a reaction that must have seemed causal to India began taking effect. A wave of nausea, triggered by Irma's last gulp of beer, followed the chemical explosion in her head and stomach, resulting in the inevitable purge.

"You uncouth pig!" she heard her shout. "You filthy little swine!"

At that point, the clean-up crew and several tenants peeking out their windows began to laugh. Given a temporary reprieve, Irma Fresco wiped her little mouth with her sleeve, bowed foolishly, and staggered slowly away.

## Chapter Two

### Circle of Lights

Between her departure from India Crowley and waking up on the bathroom floor, Irma's memory was a blur. She recalled being very sick and groping miserably up the stairs, but, from this point on, all her other memories, including India, oozed back as thick dark syrup through her skull. She could just barely recall bending over the commode and rolling onto the floor, and yet, as she awakened with bladder pangs and a chiming in her brain, she could clearly remember the look on India's face. It was a mixture of horror, loathing, and shock.

For some reason, this recollection made her laugh. There was nothing funny about India Crowley's actions tonight. She could find nothing humorous in that look on her face or what came out of her mouth. India was, at this stage, quite deranged. And yet Irma laughed so much now she began hiccupping and almost lost her breath. Pulling herself slowly up onto her legs, though, she confronted herself in the mirror, and was reminded of last night. When she caught her reflection in the glass, the entire episode began flooding back as one dark wave. A higher pitched giggle, emanating from hysteria rather than mirth now flowed out of her mouth. Suddenly, her amusement was gone, and in its place there was a gradual awareness of something terribly wrong.

As she tried to vocalize her concern, her tongue seemed to be ten sizes too big for her mouth. With such a din in her head, she could barely concentrate, and she also found it difficult to stand. And yet this primitive perception she felt made her angry as well as afraid.

"Thad bish!" she drawled, standing shakily on her feet. "Thad crazy, goddamn bish! Who she thing she iz? Id washn't my fauld she made a fool of herself! Where she gid off talking to me like thad?"

Looking around for her watch, Irma groaned when she saw it lying in the toilet below. "He-ey," she made a face, "how'd I do thad? The bish hex me; thash wha' she did!"

After lifting it out of the bowl and rinsing it off, she remembered that it was waterproof. She also noticed that it was one-thirty, which meant that she had only slept an hour. She was still quite drunk. As in the case of most drunks, she was not thinking clearly when she decided to confront India at this hour. She remembered India talking strangely to her. She had called her a worm and later a pig. She had a cloudy notion that something was wrong, but she wasn't sure what it was.

Still feeling queasy, she used the toilet, splashed water onto her face, and headed shakily for the door. There was no time to slip into something chic, Irma thought light-headedly. The top portion of her costume was now soaking wet, and the goatee drawn by India had just been smeared all over her face. By the time she exited her apartment, the adrenaline pumping through her system had sobered her enough to keep her on her feet. As she stumbled up the staircase, however, her wobbly legs remained unsynchronized with her brain. Mouth agape, glasses askew on her nose, she turned left, realizing belatedly it should have been right. Squinting myopically down the hall, she adjusted her glasses and shuffled back in the right direction until reaching India's door. Afraid to knock on the door, she peered into her living room window, her little nose pressed against the glass.

Although the curtain had been drawn, a section of it had been caught by one of India's garish ceramics, allowing her to see just enough of the kitchen beyond. A dreadful odor floated from her apartment. She could see India still in her black dress, sitting on the floor inside a circle of lights. Candles were set evenly around her. Various witches' paraphernalia were situated nearby. Normally, Irma would remember enough of the diabolic rites to recognize a magic ring. Satan's star was in the center, surrounded by symbols and words. Judging by the smell, India had also been brewing something up on the stove. But the effect of the alcohol Irma had imbibed was still strong. All of these familiar symbols of India's black art seemed disjointed in her head. In her present state of mind, she was fortunate just to be able to hear her words and comprehend her chant.

She seemed to be praying to herself at first. The words "Bagabi laca bachabe, Lamac cahi achiababe" sounded like gibberish to her, even though India had mumbled something like this earlier downstairs. She didn't know what it was supposed to mean or if India was making it up as she went along. As her voice rose in a chant, though, she recognized lines from the Diabolic Rites followed by India's own special request:

"Emperor Lucifer, master of the underworld. Look with favor upon India, your servant. I'll trade my soul for your power, if you make my magic work and if you allow me to have vengeance on my foes. Oh master, make my potions and spells successful so I can do your will!"

"I knew it," Irma snickered to herself. "Reached into her bag of tricks, she did. No fire tonight. No murders. Poo-oor India, she's finally gone over the edge!"

After giggling awhile and doing a little jig, she began shuffling down the hall. Having no desire to confront Shadowbrook's self-proclaimed witch, she wanted to put as much distance as possible between herself and what was going on in that room.

Until now, India had been a white witch. White witches, India had explained to Irma, worshipped gods and goddesses of nature and relied upon these forces when casting their spells. Her occasional quotes from the Diabolic Rites and sudden interest in black magic and alchemy, though seemingly harmless at first, should have alerted Irma to the dangers in this shift. India Crowley had crossed the line. By her own actions, she had become a black witch. She had graduated, as many witches finally do, into the black arts, from natural magic to sorcery, and from white witchcraft to the Diabolic Rites. This wisdom, however, though locked in Irma's mind, now contended with five cans of beer.

For several moments, as she leisurely walked back to her apartment, she erupted into genuine, non-hysterical, glee: "Emperor Lushifer? Mashter of the underworld? I should've recorded thish!"

Feeling cocky now, Irma found herself shrugging off the whole affair as she would a bad dream. As she paused to get her bearings, however, a full-fledged nightmare began heading her way. Her laughter and her equally ill-conceived urge to whistle as she staggered down the hall demonstrated how intoxicated she still was. Penetrating her drunken brain was a sound that, in witches' parlance, could wake up the dead. She had no desire to retrace her steps, especially back to India's apartment, but the eerie sound she was hearing came from that direction: about twenty paces from behind, she judged, exactly where the parted curtain in India's living room had been. This time, after reluctantly shuffling back, she listened breathlessly by the window before peeking in. India, with her eyes shut and palms uplifted, was in a state of ecstasy, chanting her incantation in a quivering, wailing voice that made her sound possessed:

I deny the creator of heaven and earth.  
I deny my baptism and the worship I formerly paid to God.  
I cleave unto thee and in thee I believe.

After uttering what sounded like gibberish again, she raised her pale arms toward the ceiling and cried out in a husky voice:

Oh Lucifer, Prince of Darkness, come to me tonight,  
so that we can make our trade.  
I will sign a contract with you: my soul for your power.  
Please father Satan, hear me at last!

As Irma watched in disbelief, India stopped suddenly, her green eyes popping wide, her arms dropping down limply to her sides, and a look of awe radiating from her face as she stared into space. A silence followed that was more terrible than any noise. Irma looked away for a moment not sure whether to stay or flee. When she looked back, she saw through the darkness of the living room into the dimly lit kitchen, as she had before, India, the magic circle, and witches' paraphernalia all around... and something else that filled her with dread.

A dark silhouette now hovered beside India as she sat on the floor. The candle flames quivered as it moved into the light. Even in her present state of mind, Irma knew what this was. India, after years of make-believe witchcraft had summoned the powers of darkness. Whether or not it was Satan, himself, he seemed to change form continually as he joined her in the circle, yet remained a total abstraction instead of the creature Irma had been imitating tonight.

"Dear God," she gasped, "India did it! *She made contact with hell!*"

In an ecstatic voice, as she gazed inappropriately at the ceiling, India cried "Thank you master for sending me your servant with the power to do your will!"

For a few moments, as Irma looked into the room, India reached out joyfully to the demon. Seeing it quiver in response, Irma heard it reply icily "I am Nebo, the Shape-Changer, servant of Satan. Through me, you have power, but you are *his* child!" Their voices fell to a murmur, as Irma looked on. She could see India show homage to the demon, but she could not understand what she said. A new and more terrible nausea gripped Irma as the full meaning of this sank in.

Pausing a moment to purge herself on the pavement below, she began backing away from the window. She could not deny the evidence before her eyes. Sam and Alice had been right to condemn her: India *was* a witch. This was unhallowed ground, and yet she found herself drawn back to the crack in the curtain. When she looked back into the apartment, the demon, now an orange bipedal filament, moved vaporously around India, as she moved zombie-like, in a state of diabolical ecstasy, toward the door.

At that moment, Irma backed away from the scene, sobered yet numbed by what she had discovered.

"This is a nightmare," she decided, adjusting her glasses on her nose, "I'm asleep.... I'm dreaming.... Dear Lord, *let me be asleep!*"

Forcing her benumbed legs to move, Irma fled, as quickly as her little body would take her, back to her apartment. She was driven now by one single goal: lock the door, throw the deadbolt and wait for the nightmare to pass. Although the drunken slur had disappeared from her

voice, she still felt the effects of the beer. After stumbling down the staircase, she became disoriented as she had when she was trying to find India's apartment. Not remembering what staircase she came up, she was uncertain if she was supposed turn left or right at the bottom. Hearing footsteps in the distance, she ran down the corridor, realizing belatedly that she had, in fact, gone the wrong way. She remembered something from her catechism at Catholic school at this point that seemed appropriate. Looking heavenward, a prayer formed on her lips. In a loud croaking voice, she first cried "Get thee behind me Satan!" Then, as she saw India appear miraculously in her path, she began, with hardly a slur this time, to quote the Twenty-Third Psalm:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.  
He leadeth me beside the still waters.

"Well-well," purred India, a fiendish look in her eyes, "if it isn't my little devil, Irma Fresco!"

He restoreth my soul and leadeth me in the paths  
of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the  
shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art  
with me.

"I'm going to do something to you. You'll never guess what it is!"

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence  
of mine enemies.  
Thou anointest my head with oil.  
My cup runneth over.

"You will have a new body and a new pair of eyes! You too will have new powers when I'm through! You will be my precious, furry pet!"

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the  
days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of  
the Lord forever and ever. Amen.

"It's something missing from my life that every respectable witch needs." she was saying, as Irma closed her eyes and prepared herself for the worst. "It makes it that much better when the pet is my best friend!"

"Pet?.... What pet?.... What are you talking about?" Irma murmured hysterically as India approached.

As India continued inching toward her, her hands reached out to embrace as well as to curse. The demonic apparition, which had not completely joined its host, now materialized by

her side. Petrified with fear now, Irma noticed that he had the outline of a man, the consistency of smoke, and yet was transparent, without eyes, nose or mouth. She watched in horror as the orange bipedal shape moved over India, enveloped her body, and seeped into her skin.

With her lips frozen, throat paralyzed, and eyes tightly shut, Irma tried willing herself awake, but something was dreadfully wrong. For that moment, as India radiated phosphorescently in the dark, she tried uttering the Lord's Prayer this time, but the words caught in her throat when she opened her eyes. This was all real she admitted to herself. She had never felt pain in a dream, and yet the bump she received after stumbling on the stairs now throbbed. She had also scraped one knee. There was, she reasoned numbly, no mistaking the authenticity of this scene. It looked real, it sounded and felt real, and it even smelled real.

When India began to wave her hands around in the air and mumble her spell, there was no mistaking the odor of brimstone as she spoke: "By the power within me and the powers that be, a rat you once were and a cat you now be!"

Suddenly, as India stopped waving her hands around and pointed a long slender finger directly at her, a strange light-headedness overtook Irma. She felt herself caving in on all sides and falling swiftly downward as if she was shrinking, which, in fact she was. When the shrinking had stopped, she could see, as light entered her costume, her black paws. She could feel a thick black coat of fur over her skin.

"There-there," she heard a voice from without. "Poor kitty. All tangled up in that nasty devil's pants."

As a great, dark hand probed into her costume, Irma tried to speak. But she realized that she no longer had vocal chords.

"Meeowww!" she found herself crying. "Meeowww! Meeowww! Meeeeowwwww!"

Almost instinctively, as India grabbed her tail, Irma did the most natural thing for a cat to do and bit India's hand. As soon as India released the appendage, she bolted from the fabric, scampering frantically off into the night.

Penny Gruber, India's next-door neighbor, who had been peeking fearfully through her curtain, could see the small, furry black cat dart past. From the shadows, she witnessed the Shadowbrook Witch in angry pursuit, shouting madly "I'll find you my pet, and when I do I might just have you *stuffed!*"

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Only a few moments after Irma had escaped, India heard laughter in Shadowbrook Arms. Several men were walking toward her now, their mischievous faces captured in successive porch lights as they approached. The post Halloween party at Wanda and Neva's apartment had evidently ended. They were walking away from it with smiles on their faces, not realizing what was waiting for them down the hall.

"Well, well," cackled India, rubbing her hands together as they approached, "Buck, Tom, Jim, Ed and Drew.... Out late tonight, are we boys?"

"Hey, ish Broomhelda!" drawled Buck, obviously quite drunk. "You wuz supposa zap us!"

"Yeeeaah," Tom said, slack jawed and barely able to stand. "You wuz gonna turn ush into animummals!"

"That I am, my pets, that I am" India cackled, positioning her hands.

Penny Gruber now caught the voices in the corridor outside her living room and heard India's response as the men began heckling her again. Through her parted curtain, she could see India passing by her window after attempting to capture the little cat. The young spinster didn't understand what was happening yet. India looked very much like an adolescent trick-or-treater wearing an oversized costume and ill-fitting hat. She didn't look like a witch, and Penny was unaware that Irma had been turned into a cat. She knew only that India had been acting quite unhinged tonight, both inside and outside her apartment. Penny had the misfortune to share a common wall with India Crowley. After hearing strange and unearthly voices on India's side of the wall, she had attempted to reach Sam Burns the apartment manager, but Sam was evidently not home, and she was tempted now to call the police. The question is, Penny wondered aloud, "How do I report such a thing to the police? What do I say?" "Let's see," she rehearsed hysterically, "Officer, I hear strange sounds on the other side of the wall. I think my next door neighbor is a witch!"

Penny drew back fretfully from the curtain as Buck and his gang heckled India, greatly disturbed by the noise. The fact was, she noted with surprise, India seemed unusually calm this time. Even though they were heckling her unmercifully, she hadn't lost her temper. When the would-be witch began walking toward them out of her visual range, Penny shrugged her shoulders and began shuffling off to bed. For some inexplicable reason she would live to regret, however, she decided to have a look. Unlocking her door, she peeked down the corridor, wishing very much that she had the courage to give them a piece of her mind.

"Damn you Sam Burns," she cursed, "where are you?"

Three or four apartments down the corridor, India had stopped in front of Buck Logan and his friends. Penny cringed at the sound of their drunken laughter as India cried out "By the power within me and the powers that be, rats you once were and cats you now be!" Afterwards, she heard the terrible sound of India's cackling, as if she was about to do something diabolical to the young men. She did not know yet that she already had.

Before returning to her living room and bolting her door, she looked back fearfully one more time and saw the young men standing together laughing at India's spell. Suddenly, as would five pairs of starched fabrics going limp, their clothes fell simultaneously to the ground. It was, Penny thought with a gasp, as if the young men had shrunk into the shadows at India's feet. She could not believe her eyes. The darkness had swallowed up Buck and his friends.

"It has to be an optical illusion," she told herself with a shudder. "India can't really be a witch!"

As she listened to the eerie sound of mewing of cats, however, and watched India chase them into the dark, understanding dawned in Penny's horror-stricken mind. Retreating back into her apartment, she locked and bolted the door and returned the night latch to its cradle.

"That settles it," she said breathlessly, scurrying to her phone, "I'm calling the police!"

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Down the staircase and across the lawn, Irma had run. Low down to the ground she traveled, below an awesome network of giant buildings and plants, through a netherworld of shadows, barking dogs, monstrous vehicles, into endless alleys and unlit stretches of street. Without stopping or looking both ways, she scampered across roads and passed driveways on her quest to escape. Without a destination in mind and with her only goal to flee, she found herself deep into the nearby town before she decided to stop.

Now, just when she thought she was safe, she was confronted with a new problem almost as bad as the first: *she was lost*.

“Son of a bitch!” she thought to herself. What came out of her mouth, however, was a faint but very distinct meow. This noise, which was intended to indicate alarm, sounded strange flowing out of her throat. Also strange to her senses was the sensation of having thick black fur all over her skin.

Her misfortune was softened by the fact that *she was alive*. She was not yet stuffed as India threatened nor would she become her ‘pet.’ Some things, she believed, were actually an improvement upon the old Irma. She no longer had to wear glasses. With twenty-twenty vision, she could see the most minute details in the darkest spots. She could also smell the most finite aromas, and was much faster and more agile than she had been before.

But she was still a cat, who was under a witch’s spell, and *she was lost*.

To make matters worse for her, she was, at this very moment traveling the wrong way. Instead of heading back north as she should, she was traveling south, skirting passed the civic center, into the outskirts of skid row. Totally unfamiliar with her surroundings here, she had no way of knowing which way to go. Irma, the woman, had a poor sense of direction, but at least she could hail a cab or wave down a bus. Irma, the cat, on the other hand, could neither hail nor wave. She had no vocal chords, and she had no hands. Street signs seemed to be twenty stories above her head. As a human, her sense of direction might have been inadequate, but as a cat, she seemed to have no sense of direction at all. The important fact for Irma, at this point, was that she had escaped India’s clutches. There was no telling what sort of spell she might cast on her next. She might even have lived up to her threat and had her stuffed.

Into a world of darkness and danger, Irma now found herself marooned. From the nightmarish point in which she was transformed, until the moment she curled up in a discarded grocery sack in an alley and fell asleep, barely a half hour had passed, and yet this was already the longest period of hell she had ever endured.

## Chapter Three

### Witches' Bane

During these moments, in which India Crowley's vengeance was taking place, many of Shadowbrook's tenants had heard the commotion but had gone back to sleep. For Sam Burns, Shadowbrook's preacher-manager, Halloween had turned into the worst nightmare of his career. After taking Alice home, he was afraid to get out of his car. For the first time since his childhood, in fact, he was frightened of the dark. India's threats had sounded so genuine to him. It was as if, after being artificial and phony all these years, she had finally gotten it right. *She was a witch!* He felt like Elijah in the Old Testament, who, after being a crusader for God, allowed Jezebel, a petty, small-minded queen, to drive him away. Sam, who believed India was a charlatan, had been caught off guard. Suddenly, he and Alice seemed to be confronted with the real thing: a Satanist and witch, who believed she had diabolical powers. In spite of what had been an unshakable faith for him, he was afraid, and his confidence had been badly shaken.

To play it safe for a while, he planned to hole up in his apartment, until the Halloween curse had passed. Until India cooled off or came to her senses, he would feign illness and use his answering machine to filter out his calls.

From what Sam viewed as her dance macabre, when India made her entrance and began pirouetting across the lawn, through her incantations over her cauldron, his anger had mounted. At that moment, she represented all that was evil in his life. As a student of the Bible, it was his duty to set things straight. It had reached a flash point when India began summoning spirits from her pot. After exiting the party in protest, he and Alice Wagnall, his fiancé, continued monitoring India's behavior from his apartment nearby. In the darkened room, they could look discreetly across the lawn and watch her every move. In consideration for the other tenants, they had waited until the party was over before launching another attack.... It would have been better, he realized now, if they had minded their own business and just left India Crowley alone.

Now, in the protection of his own apartment, Sam was having second thoughts about this ill-conceived and poorly timed attack. India had chosen her path. She was a lost cause. Of all the tenants to sermonize to, why had he picked her? Had he been showing off to his fiancé again? Was he trying to prove what a hotshot minister he was going to be? *Just what was he trying to prove?* Earlier she had been humbled by their attacks. He remembered seeing it in her face. At that particular moment, however, it appeared as if India had been given by her benefactor, Lucifer, a second wind. He had seen that in her face too. When she erupted in demonic rage, he and Alice pretended to be amused, but they were, in fact, very disturbed,... especially him.

Because of Sam's growing fear, he tried to barricade himself from the outside world. To prevent another encounter with India Crowley, he would lay low tonight. For the last hour, he let his answering machine filter all his calls. If he heard a knock at the door, he would peek through the peephole, and if he spotted India in the porch light, pretend he wasn't home. He had received several protests at the party about her behavior from onlookers who had witnessed her one-woman show. He had, as he dozed in his chair, received follow-up complaints from India's next door neighbors about strange noises coming from her walls. These callers reported sounds of

ecstasy, anguish, or pain. In the words of one of the male tenants “India sounded like she was getting laid.” How could he respond to such complaints? They wanted him to confront that deranged woman. No way, he vowed to himself, would he step outside. Unless it was Alice, his mother, or the police, he would let callers think he wasn’t home. For the tenants insisting on making their complaints in person, he would tell them that he was ill and couldn’t come to the door.

For the time being, unless he turned off the machine, he felt duty-bound to at listen. Tomorrow, he reasoned, in broad daylight, when matters, died down, he would answer their complaints. Not now, he shuddered. India was out there, lurking in the shadows. The other tenants hadn't seen that look on her twisted face or suffered those piercing green eyes. They didn't share his uncanny feeling that he had been cursed, and something dreadful might happen tonight. As he fell into a fitful, troubled sleep, he could hear their annoying voices over the answering machine. It was becoming redundant and frightfully annoying to hear the same complaints again and again. Why didn't they just give up and let him be? Finally, as his eyelids registered REM, Penny Gruber, India's next-door neighbor, gave her testimony on his answering machine that India was a witch. What else is new? He thought fleetingly. Everyone at Shadowbrook Arms knew that by now. While in the throes of a dream, he found himself fleeing the Shadowbrook Witch, until Penny's voice rescued him from his dream.

The gist of her complaints, spoken in a loud, whiny, and petulant little voice, seemed almost dream-like, as his eyelids fluttered open, and he sat there staring at the machine. What he didn't grasp yet was the fact that he had unwittingly lifted his phone off its cradle and held it to his ear. Hearing his groggy reply, Penny Gruber summarized India's nefarious activities tonight. It was a summary of all the other calls. After listening to her living room wall, she had, as the other callers, heard eerie sounds on the other side. She also claimed to have heard a strange voice inside India's apartment: a whispery series of utterances barely detectable as she strained her ear. It was, however, what Penny claimed to have seen outside her apartment that gave Sam pause. According to the young spinster, India had threatened to have a small black cat, that had ran by her apartment, stuffed. This had made no sense at all to Penny or Sam. At first her behavior seemed psychotic more than diabolical, but then, as Buck and his gang arrived on the scene, India grew calm and crafty. It was, Penny confessed, an India she had never seen before.

At this point, his subconscious mind, having registered this report, was prickled with both irritation and nagging concern. For a few seconds more, as she talked, Sam studied the receiver in his hand. His encounter with India, voices from the answering machine, brief nightmare, and the current voice in his ear seemed surreal, parts of the same silly dream.

"... A few seconds later," Penny was explaining "as India confronted the men, I heard her say 'by the power within me and the powers that be, rats you once were and cats you now be.'" "... All I saw after that," she added after a pause, "was India waving her hands at them and suddenly seeing five cats!"

"I thought I was dreaming?" he muttered under his breath. "Are you part of my nightmare? ... I don't remember cats in my dream."

"It's a nightmare all right," Penny shot back, "but it's *not a dream!*"

"What're you driving at Penny?" he asked, glancing at the clock. "Are you saying that India turned those men into cats?"

"I know this sounds strange, but I know what I saw!" she spat into the phone. "You've got to do something Sam! You're the manager. *It's you're job!*"

"Call the police." he replied lamely. "I can't help you tonight."

"I've already called them," she said through clinched teeth. "but that was half an hour ago. I don't think they took me seriously, Sam. You, as apartment manager, should've called them hours ago!"

"I've been sick," he lied.

“You were okay last night,” she challenged. “I saw you and Alice at the party. You were a *firebrand* then!” “Come on, Sam,” she blared into the receiver, “everyone knows your not sick. You just haven’t been answering your phone!”

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It was two a.m., Sam thought grimly, November first, Sunday morning. Halloween was over, but a curse now hung over Shadowbrook Arms. After listening to Penny admonish him about his duties as manager of the apartments, he found himself consenting to her demands but without Christian charity or a sense of duty. She had prickled his conscience. He just wanted her to leave him alone.

“All right, Penny,” he said quietly into the phone, “calm down, “I’ll check it out. What you’re asking me to do is very difficult, but I’ll do what I can.”

Shutting his eyes, he ran a trembling hand through his dark brown hair. Without saying goodbye, he hung up the phone and rose shakily to his feet.

“The jig is up!” he said aloud. “.... That stupid meddling bitch!”

For reasons he could still not fathom, he believed India’s threat. Penny’s anxiety mirrored his own fear. He believed everything she had said, and yet he felt ridiculous for being afraid. He had seen India as a pathetic shadow of a woman. He had rebuked her often, not just last night. Where was his faith? How could he allow her to effect him this way? For that matter, where was his Christian charity toward poor Penny? She had been absolutely right: it *was* his job. He was the apartment manager! It was his job to protect the tenants. Why was he such a coward? *Where was his faith?*

“Stupid meddling bitch!” he nevertheless repeated as he looked down at the phone.

Adding a silent curse, which should have been a prayer, Sam felt ashamed as he picked up his coat and slowly put it on. Deeply afraid, at this point, he unlocked the door, threw back the deadbolt, opened his living room door, and slowly walked across the lawn, onto the patio, and then up the staircase, at a slow and measured pace.

He dare not ask himself what all this meant. Either India Crowley was insane or playing a sick joke. She could not possibly be a witch! Several people had complained of hearing strange noises. Penny Gruber, however, had been the first tenant to officially report witchcraft at Shadowbrook Arms. Of course Penny had seen things before. As he gripped his flashlight in his hand, he remembered another early morning tale. That particular time, though, Penny reported seeing her father’s ghost. The old man, she explained to Sam, had treated her horribly when she was a child. After several beatings, she and her mother had escaped to start a new life. Upon her father’s death during a bank robbery, he ceased to be a threat in her life, until last week, when Penny reported seeing him in her room.

“And why not?”, Sam asked himself bitterly now. “If there can be witches, there can be ghosts. . . There can also be zombies, vampires, and little green men!”

As he approached India’s apartment, he found it dark, foreboding, and deathly silent. Obviously the witch was not home, he reasoned shakily, as he contemplated her front door. After knocking so faintly he barely made a noise, he backed away from the spooky apartment and quickly trotted away.

“Oh well,” he told himself, scanning the darkness ahead, “India’s not home. Maybe she’s riding her broom somewhere, flying around like a ghost. She’s probably over some graveyard right now, looking for Penny’s old man!”

Laughing hysterically to himself, Sam put distance between himself and India's address. He imagined he heard footsteps following him downstairs, but, when he turned to look back, he saw only a large yellow cat running past.

"Here kitty-kitty," he called light-headedly. "Don't be afraid. That mean old witch can't hurt you! You're *already* a cat. Maybe she'll turn you into a person now." ". . . unless," his smile faded, ". . . you were one of *us!*"

"I'm right here," he heard her whisper now.

"What? Who said that?" He froze in his tracks.

"Over here," she giggled.

"Where? I don't see anything," he slowly looked around.

"Here!" The whisper grew louder as he rotated his head. "No here! . . . Over here! . . . No, *right here!*"

Gripped with hysteria now, Sam knew she was close. He wanted to run and call for help, but his vocal chords seemed paralyzed, and for some reason he couldn't move. So he did the logical thing in his frame of mind: he prayed. Unlike Irma, who quoted the Twenty-third Psalm, Sam made up his own prayer, uttering it in an almost mute whisper India could not hear:

Lord, suffer ye not a witch.  
In thy name, I ask for protection against  
India Crowley, the Shadowbrook Witch.  
Send her into eternal damnation where she belongs.  
Protect me, your faithful servant Sam Burns  
against the powers of darkness,  
so I may continue to serve you on earth.

"Sam Burns," India cooed, emerging from the shadows, "are you calling upon God?"

"Uh huh," he nodded, petrified with fear.

"You pompous, overbearing son of a bitch!" She cackled. "It won't do you any good!" Although his eyes were wild with terror, and he could barely talk, Sam tried to sound brave. "I-I'm n-not afraid of you!" He forced out the words.

"Yes, you are," she taunted, "I saw it in your eyes last. You and Alice were both afraid. I see it now—the cold breath of fear." "By the way," she smirked, "where *is* the bitch?"

"She's out of town." Sam shot back. "You leave her alone!"

"I'll get her," India promised. "It's just a matter of time!"

"What do you mean *get her?*" he asked in a strangled whisper. "What exactly are you going to do?"

"You already know Sam." her normally pale face seemed phosphorescent in the dark. "You saw one just pass. I haven't been able to catch any of them yet. But there's no hurry. They have to return sometime to their apartments, unless they plan on becoming strays."

"You're insane!" he managed to utter. "You're stark raving mad!"

"You *wish!*" she snarled. "No," she took a condescending tone, "I'm not mad Sammy; I'm quite sane. I know exactly what I'm going to do."

"Then you're evil!" he pointed a shaky finger.

"Wrong again Sammy. I'm not evil," she shook her head. "I'm pragmatic. I know a good thing when I see it."

Expecting to be stabbed, clawed, or chewed, Sam held his flashlight in a defensive posture and began backing away.

“Back off, you devil-worshiper!” he spat. “You try to sink those claws into me and I’ll knock you on your ass!”

“I’m not going to scratch you my pretty,” she cackled softly. “In fact, I’m not going to touch a hair on your head!”

As she moved in what seemed like Karate motions, he noticed a strange ethereal light in her eyes and that peculiar glow increasing on her skin. Now that she was completely out of the shadows, he wondered fleetingly where she had been. What mischief had India done? Perhaps she had been out riding her broom? “Truly,” he admitted giddily to himself “this woman *is* a witch. . . a bona fide, cauldron stirring *witch!*”

“By the power within in and the powers that be, a rat you once were and cat you now be!”

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As she cast her spell, Sam braced himself for its effect. Irma, who had been intoxicated already, did not experience the full effects of the spell that Sam felt now. A strange yet ominous peace filled him as he reviewed his life.

He had failed the Lord. He had demonstrated to the tenants at Shadowbrook Arms his cowardice and unfitness for his job. A feeling of shame filled him as his body began its incredible change. He had many God-given gifts: he was intelligent, he had a sharp memory, and quick tongue. But he lacked courage, and he lacked Christian resolve. During his last hours as a mortal man, he had also demonstrated his characteristic small-mindedness toward others. He had been, as Saint Paul called it “a sounding brass or tinkling cymbal”, yet he had lacked Christian charity and love. He had been a firebrand, as Penny had put it, but a bogus facsimile, ready to turn tail and run when wicked Jezebel appeared. Nevertheless, through it all, as her magic took effect, he thanked God that a worse misfortune had not visited him. Until hearing her incantation, he expected something terrible. It would have been much worse to be turned into a frog or toad.

He had always loved cats. He had, during his “pagan days” in college, even written a poem about them. As he began shrinking, however, and plunging downward into the darkness of his own clothes, Sam was again gripped with fear. He felt more helpless than at any other time in his life. He had no idea what India had in store for him next. When the phenomena ceased, he felt a continuous outgrowth of hairs all over his skin, indicating immediately what was. India’s spell had worked. In an eerie glint of light, he could see that his fur matched the dark brown hair of his head. Shock, dismay, hope, and relief mingled as oil and water in his mind. Aside from his disorientation and light-headedness, however, he felt no different than before. He was still Sam Burns, he reminded himself shakily. It was as if he was wearing a fur coat all over his body, including his face, and he now had four legs instead of two, yet still had a heart, soul, and mind. In spite of his feline body, he was still a man!

“My name’s Samuel Isaiah Burns!” he reminded himself, as he felt her probe inside his clothes. “*I’m still a man!*”

“If you try to escape,” he heard her say, “I’ll strangle you and have you stuffed!”

As shadowy fingers moved through his jacket and then his shirt, he was ready to bite and scratch her hand. But it would take a miracle to save him now. This time India was wearing a pair of gloves as she gripped the back of his neck and lifted him out.

“You are,” she cooed to him, “my finest specimen and greatest triumph. You’re the loveliest brown cat I’ve ever seen!”

Although he spat, clawed, and hissed, Sam found himself being carried in this humiliating fashion down the hall toward India’s apartment and an awful fate as either her pet or sacrifice in one of her pagan rites. Just when he thought he would never see daylight again, though, he noticed, with his greatly improved vision, a distant patch of yellow charging their way. Something remarkable if not miraculous began happening that would ultimately set him free.

The great yellow cat that had been skirting the shadows now appeared directly ahead, running toward India, as if he was going to attack.

“It’s him, that troublesome Buck,” she made kicking motions with her foot. “Oh, if only I had a club or a net.” “I’ll get you, you little bastard,” she warned him, holding her prize higher and higher in the air. “I’ll find a big net, catch you, then have you mounted on my wall.”

In spite of her warning, Buck was characteristically fearless. In an effort to defend Ed, his Hispanic friend, the big blond athlete was credited with battering three hoodlums half to death. For the first time in their relationship at Shadowbrook Arms, Sam was glad to see him. The hope he felt during his metamorphosis now seemed justified, as the large feline began his assault. In one great lunge, Sam would always remember, he leaped onto her hand, bit down savagely into the glove, and hung their patiently with Sam, as she howled in pain. Afterwards, when she had released his neck, Sam hit the deck running. Without looking back, he and Buck fled the Shadowbrook Witch, scampering down the staircase, through the complex, and into the buildings next door.

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On their way through what appeared to be a maze of skyscrapers and Jack-in-the-Beanstalk trees, they were bound by a common plight. As humans, they had barely spoken to each other. Buck had, in fact, hated the self-righteous preacher and warned him on several occasions to shut his pious, Bible-thumping mouth. With Sam’s deep convictions as a born-again Christian and Buck’s hedonistic attitude on life, they were complete opposites in almost every way. But that was last night, Sam reminded himself, in another time and age: a world of giants and shadows, now ruled by the Shadowbrook Witch. Into this new kingdom of cats he now entered, with Buck Logan, his rescuer, leading the way.

On agile paws in place of clumsy feet and with the ability to see the most minute details in the dark, Buck and his new friend flew through another apartment complex, across its parking lot and passed a dreamscape of monstrous structures and trees, until reaching a shadowy field across the road. When they had scampered to the center of the field and into the middle of a foreboding stand of trees, Sam was greeted by Buck’s circle of friends. He knew at once who they were. It was, of course, those other reprobate tenants Jim, Tom, Ed, and Drew.

Just as first light was brimming the distant hills, Buck’s great yellow body leaped lithely onto a nearby stump. He seemed to enjoy his newly changed shape. He was, of course, as he had been as a human, their leader now. They could not communicate, as they once had. They could only rub against each other, as cats often do, and make that familiar rumbling purr deep within their throats. And yet they all looked quietly up to Buck now, wondering what he was going to do, joined together the morning after Halloween by the same witch’s spell.

In spite of his gratitude for being rescued, Sam wasn't encouraged by this scene. Instead of acting like men who had been turned into cats, Buck and his friends did not seem to be acting at all. They really *were* felines: a collection of stray cats gathered together into a pack.

Quick to sum up his options, though, Sam realized that, unless he struck out on his own, there was no where else to go. These were, however strange it seemed to him now, his people. He was in a new kingdom that was governed by new laws. The very notion of leaving it seemed unthinkable to him as he closed ranks with the others into a fellowship that needed no symbols or words.

## Chapter Four

### Kingdom of the Cats

As Buck hopped down to join the group, the big yellow tabby began licking his best friend Tom's head, and then began moving down the line, giving each of the other felines a token lick. It was, Sam understood, a sign of friendship, so he was naturally moved when he felt Buck's tongue on himself. It was, he recalled the sensation, a rough little tongue. Buck purred loudly as he moved the muscle up and down Sam's head. A familiar chirrup accentuated the purring sound, at times becoming a rumbling noise—typical feline noises indicating friendship and, in this case, a greeting. Not knowing if he should respond, Sam looked with embarrassment at the ground. He felt moved, but he was also aware of something terribly wrong with this behavior. Of the six bewitched humans gathered in the field, at least Buck understood what being feline meant. He was too genuine for Sam's comfort, reminding him very much of his own tabby cat when he was a child.

When Sam tried to respond, a mewling followed out his throat, phonetically indistinguishable except for the infliction he put on each meow. He couldn't muster up a purr or chirrup yet, but it seemed to be enough for the other cats. They all began licking him too, as had Buck, as if, now that their leader accepted him, he was okay in their eyes, no longer the self-righteous son of a bitch they knew at Shadowbrook Arms.

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All of the cats, including himself, had some of the same characteristics they once had as humans. Sam looked down at his paws and glanced back at his rump to discover that his sable coat was the same shade of dark brown he once had on his head when he was human. He was, judging by the shadows he and Buck cast during their flight, a medium-sized cat just as he had been a medium-sized young man. Buck Logan, who had a shock of blond curls on his big head before, was now a large yellow tabby with brilliant copper-colored eyes. A strange and incomprehensible buzz filled Sam's head, as if everyone was attempting to communicate all at once. Their voices were muffled and unclear. He couldn't discern words yet, only grunting and groaning emotions. The big tabby licked him in response to his own effort to talk and promptly showed him his behind. It was as if, in spite of the lack of females, he was nothing more than a member of Buck's pride. After being an overbearing young man, he was, naturally enough, top cat of the group.

Tom Wellitz was the next feline to greet him—a low, friendly rumble emanating from his throat. He was, as the other members of Buck's gang, a follower, rather than a leader. Normally silent and taciturn until he had something to say, he now exhibited that same serenity he had as a mortal man. He reminded Sam very much, in both body and temperament, of a Maine coon: a sturdy, longhaired and emerald-eyed cat, with patches of white on his paws and nose, whose striped tail resembled the tail of a raccoon.

It was not difficult for Sam to pick Jim Courtney out of the group. Jim, a portly man in life, was now the largest member of the gang: a fluffy, fat, blue-eyed cat, with calico fur. Good natured and talkative in his first life, he was now the most noisy of the felines, meowing when he had nothing to meow about and purring non-stop since Buck introduced Sam.

All of the cats, including Buck, Sam believed, were trying desperately to talk. There were definite sounds in his mind coming from various felines, which expressed puzzlement, amusement, anger, and surprise, but no words. Not knowing from whom the sounds originated, Sam did not even know who was trying to communicate until someone bumped up against him or licked his head. He was able to match the other two cats with their human names by a process of elimination. Drew Connors, who had been a gawky, tow-headed youth, was now the scrawny, tan colored feline sitting by himself, the most dejected looking member of the group. As if the dark forces of magic had a sense of humor, Ed Montez now had the classic features of a pedigreed Havana, a shorthaired cat with a dog-like muzzle, whose chocolate colored coat, Sam recalled, was similar to a Cuban cigar.

Unlike the other cats who seemed concerned about their state of affairs, Ed played abstractedly with a bug. Now, after several moments of idly batting it around with his little paw, the small grasshopper he had trapped on the ground, was dead. A curious look appeared in his green eyes, and his canine muzzle seemed to draw up into a pout. It almost seemed to Sam that, losing his humanity, Ed didn't understand what he had done. He had just tortured a defenseless bug to death, and he felt no remorse, only that feline curiosity Sam had seen in his own childhood cat when he had just killed a mouse or bird.

"Well, he's finally succeeded," Drew's thoughts filled Sam's head. "He and the rest of those strays are going to make fine cats. As for myself, I keep expecting to wake up, and all of this nonsense will be a bad dream!"

Though his mouth had not moved, it occurred immediately to Sam that the tan cat, whom he was certain was Drew, had 'spoken.' The same brooding gray eyes he had as a human were focused upon him now. After watching the cats' feline movements and hearing their feral cries, Sam realized, with great relief, that he was not alone. At least one of them could still *talk*. As the sound on a badly tuned radio, the buzz in Sam's head was suddenly muted; above the confusing din, Drew Connors, as a voice in the wilderness, was communicating... *with his mind!*

Judging by his past, Drew had the most complete metamorphosis of them all. He had, Sam recalled light-headedly now, always been backward and uncoordinated as a mortal, and yet he was, as a cat and in spite of his humble anatomy, obviously the smartest member of Buck's gang.

"What? What did you say?" he looked at Drew in disbelief. "Your mouth didn't move, and yet and yet—"

"I spoke! It's true," Drew looked squarely into Sam's warm, golden eyes. "It sounds like science fiction, but I spoke. I could hear you thoughts too, not as a human, of course; we no longer have vocal chords. And don't ask me how it's done."

"But I heard you *immediately!*" thought Sam, trotting up to him. "All I hear from those guys is racket: purrs, chirps, and grunts."

"Those dummies have learned how to do it yet," explained Drew. "Either that or they're too stupid to try."

"Why did you and I learn so quickly, while the others act so much like cats?"

“Look at yourself.” Drew cocked his head. “You *are* a cat too. We *both* are. They’re just more stupid than us. I think they’re trying though. I just hope they learn soon. It’s not something you can teach anyone; there’s no textbook for reading minds.”

“Mind-reading!” Sam looked up to the sky. “Is it possible? I thought that kind’ve stuff was all make-believe. I never believed in telepathy or extra-sensory perception, and yet we’re living proof of it.” “We’ve... we’ve,” he searched for the right words, “been *truly blessed!*”

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Settling next to each other now and exchanging companionable looks, Sam and Drew became fast friends. An incredible awareness filled Sam’s mind. The fear that he wouldn’t be able to communicate with the other cats had been cancelled. Cats *could* communicate; Drew proved it. The other cats were learning too. He could hear their efforts, rising from unintelligible mental grunts to short, uncouth sentences that only humans thought could make. When Drew transmitted his thoughts to him, Sam understood him as clearly as if he spoke in English to him. Though they couldn’t actually talk, they had read each other’s thoughts as well as cat-like movements: the expression in each other’s eyes, bodily movements, and the quiver of each other’s snout. Was this form of telepathy a typical cat trait that all cats possessed? Or had it been bestowed upon them by God? If it had been a gift from God, it wasn’t in the Bible, and yet it was like spiritual balm for Sam’s troubled soul.

“Thank you Lord,” he mewed hopefully under his breath. “In my wretchedness, you’ve given me special gifts: a feline’s instincts, a mortal’s brain, and most of all *the ability to read minds!*”

“Very pretty,” Drew nodded to him, “... but it’ll get worse, my friend, if we begin *thinking* like cats.”

“What do you mean?” Sam tried to frown.

“It’s part of the spell,” Drew seemed to sigh. “After awhile, India promised us tonight, we won’t even know who we are.”

“I can’t believe that,” Sam shook his head. “God’s punished us enough! He won’t let her do that!”

“You really believe He cares about us?” Drew replied glumly. “We’re cats Sam: *felis catus*. We don’t have souls.”

“Who said we don’t?” Sam reasoned desperately. “Where in the Bible does it say we don’t have souls.... You have a soul Drew. I have a soul. Remember that, if nothing else. That’s *one thing* India Crowley can’t change!”

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For the new Sam Burns, Drew, Buck, and their circle of friends were now his family and home. Right this moment, in fact, Drew Connors was his link to the outside world. Soon, however, to Sam’s relief, his head was filled with Buck, Tom, Jim, and Ed along with Drew’s thoughts—a maddening experience at first, but reassurance that, in their mental humanity, he and Drew were not alone. The other cats were learning to communicate their thought processes, as Drew hoped they would. Sam wondered if the stimulus of he and Drew’s telepathic discourse had jogged their feline minds. Together, as a team, they would lift the spell. And they must hurry, he and Drew now reminded them, for they were running out of time!

Already, a mere hour after India's imprecation, as part of her curse, they could be losing their humanity. Sam feared, in spite of his own fine words, the bewitched cats would, as a result, also lose their souls. For the time being, as he sat alongside of Drew, Sam concentrated upon his blessings, looking wistfully in the direction of Shadowbrook Arms. He was alive.... He was not a frog or toad.... He had special powers and *could read minds!*

Buck, he noticed, was trying to be brave. The big tabby's mental words to his gang were simple, but encouraging, at this stage, growing in coherency as he used his telepathic powers. At first his efforts demonstrated the difficulties he and most of his friends had while in their feline bodies. The instincts of cats also worked against the mental capabilities of human beings. Since Buck, Jim, Tom, and Ed were physically driven young men, it seemed only natural that they would have problems now. And yet, at one point, in the simplicity of his logic, Buck uttered what Sam thought might be the ultimate solution for their dilemma: "We must kill the Shadowbrook witch!" Almost immediately as if a mental fog had lifted, the remaining cats began chattering intelligently with each other inside everyone's head.

"Didn't Dorothy's house destroy the Wicked Witch of the East's power by squashing her to death?" Buck asked them in a surprisingly articulate way.

"Yeah," replied Tom, nodding with excitement, "remember what happened to the monkeys when the Wicked Witch of the West melted on the floor?"

"The spell was broken!" Ed cried with glee.

"They turned back into people!" Jim blared into their collective thoughts.

"Wait a moment!" Drew protested, scarcely believing his ears. "That was a movie! Those people were actors, not real people! That doesn't count!"

"Maybe it's true," Sam murmured reflectively, looking back at Drew. "It could be our only option."

"What?" Drew cried in disbelief. "That *can't be* our only option. That woman is dangerous, Sam, and would probably have had us all stuffed!"

Hearing Sam's declaration of support, Buck gave him an approving look but frowned at the reaction from his gang. There was merit in Drew's concern. Both Sam and Buck reflected upon India's hatred for them.

"Kill the bitch! Kill the bitch!" chanted Jim, Tom, and Ed.

They simply could not rush back and take on the Shadowbrook Witch. Buck, as a leader of his gang, wanted a plan, but he had no idea of what it might be.

"Listen, you numbskulls," he snapped, hopping upon his stump, "you want to wind up as a trophies on India's wall?"

"No," they meowed.

"Would you like to be turned into frogs or toads?"

"No-no," they replied hissing and humping up their backs.

"Then hunker down lads," Buck counseled gently. "Let's get some shuteye and wait for the dawn."

Upon Buck's signal, Sam trotted over and joined him on his stump. Drew joined Buck uneasily on his other side.

"We must think of a plan," Sam transmitted to Buck.

"Yeah," Buck agreed, looking down at his gang, "a *good* plan!"

“Plan? *What* plan?” Drew blurted mentally. “We have no hands to hold weapons or implement plans. Our bodies would be crushed by that woman. We’re cats now, guys, no longer men. What possible plan could we have?”

Buck and Sam didn’t have a clue.

The six cats’ eyes flashed on and off eerily as they caught passing motorist’s lights. Sam knew that the mirror behind the felines’ light sensitive eyes had merely transformed their copper, green, blue, and hazel eye colors into fleeting flashes of brilliance, and yet he shuddered at this effect. He could see them so clearly with so little light, but it was their smells that formed constellations around him now. Already, he could distinguish Buck and Drew’s odors from the others. The awful din of their collective thoughts, which would take getting used to, remained as restless murmurs in his head. The rubbing and purring of Buck and Drew was a distraction too. The group’s feral feelings, which had no language, pervaded his mind, as the primal, unspoken, emotions of all cats.

“Don’t worry,” quipped top cat, emitting an expansive yawn, “we’ll kill the witch, just like Dorothy did in the Wizard of Oz!”

Sam, feeling uncomfortable with the big cat’s proximity, edged tactfully away.

“I’m not so sure Buck,” he tried not to sound critical, “the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz was fiction. She never existed.”

“What?” Buck tried to frown.

“You mean she wasn’t a historical character?” they could hear Jim and Ed’s thoughts.

“For Christ’s sake, *it was a movie!*” Drew shook his head in dismay. “Dorothy didn’t kill the wicked witch; the witch was crushed by her house. We don’t have a house men; all we have are claws on our little paws. We can’t shoot or stab her to death either. We certainly can’t hold a knife or gun!”

“Will,” drawled Buck, lapsing slowly into silence again, “... our movie will have a happy ending... We’ll think of a plan!”

In reality, the big yellow tabby was doing what all cats do after a long eventful day: fall asleep. All of the cats, including Sam and Drew, now needed a nap. Exhaustion came suddenly over them as a heavy, pervasive wave.

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Things could have been much worse for them, Sam thought, looking down at the group. They could, as Buck pointed out, have been captured by India and become trophies on her wall, and they could also have been sacrificed or thrown into her pot. There were, he believed, worse animals to be than cats. India could have turned them all into all kinds of creeping, crawling, or slimy things, much worse than even frogs or toads.

Sam wanted to believe that India had, in some ways, done him a favor in selecting such a sleek and intelligent form. He had once read a book about cats. Cats were, he learned, in many ways superior to human beings. He was, as a prime example, with his coat of sable fur, far more handsome than he had been before. He was also, with his new body, faster than he had been as a human. He could see much better and smell odors he could not possibly have detected before. In spite of everything he once thought he knew about cats, they could, after all, ‘talk.’

Whether it was called telepathy or a supernatural gift (which he would much rather believe), they could read each other’s minds and movements, as clearly as plainspoken words. This no mortal man or woman could do. There were no sentences exchanged out loud, and yet

clear English words were passed back and forth inside their heads. After a short period of adjustment, even Jim and Ed were communicating quite well.

Realizing that he was this very moment sharing Buck's stump, a man who had hated him as a human, actually filled him with pride. He was one of the pack. Sam felt his hairs bristle on his back and an involuntary purr rumbled in his throat. A strange feeling of camaraderie he had never known before overtook him: a team spirit more akin to pack mentality, devoid of clear logic or spiritual aims. He was more intelligent than Buck and had, whether they had liked it or not, been their spiritual conscience in human form in the past, receiving their verbal barbs but begrudging respect for never wavering in his faith. But now he was a sleek and agile member of Buck's gang. He had become an animal he had always admired: a cat. His natural dread was tempered by this irrational and unbiblical pride.

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The nagging fear gripping him, as he and Drew left the stump and found themselves a place to curl up and sleep, was softened greatly by his common bond with the pack. As he looked around to survey the others, however, he was struck by the lingering feral movement of the group. He watched the rest of them as they bedded down beneath bushes and a discarded cardboard box, and noticed his fellow felines scratching, preening, and purring as would ordinary cats. Already, it seemed to him, they were becoming more and more like felines.... How long did they all have?... A few weeks?... A few days?... Was it measured in mere hours?

As he looked up again to the heavens above, he felt, for the first time in his life, alienated from his God. He had always loved the little furry beasts, but did they, as he promised Drew, really have souls? When dawn came several hours from now, they would all have to face the new day, no longer as humans but as cats. Sam found himself remembering the poem he wrote in school. He realized, as he recalled each verse, what a lonely life this might turn out to be.

In the shadows, in secret play,  
the feral felines roam.  
Drawn by serendipity,  
they live without a home.

Castaway and vagabond,  
true children of the night.  
In their secret twilight kingdom  
they shun dawn's lonely light.

In the alleys and the field,  
among the silent grass,  
all minor mammals quickly yield  
or become a cat's repast.

Wary until daylight wanes,  
in darkened habitats.  
At night the feral felines reign  
in the Kingdom of the Cats.

## Chapter Five

### India's List

The age old question pre-dating Judeo-Christianity, "Do other living things have souls?," was dimly felt by at least one of the bewitched humans. In spite of having what he thought was a strong Christian faith, Sam Burn's mind was filled with heresy now. His childhood belief that pets had souls and the current reality that he was, in fact, a cat, left him with no other choice but to believe the ancient wisdom of Hinduism and the worshippers of primitive religion: *animals had souls*. If worse came to worse, he wanted to believe, he and the other felines would remain, in purest forms, cats, but they would not lose their souls!

It hadn't been considered by any of them yet that India might turn all of Shadowbrook Arm's young adults into cats. But, as the six male cats bedded down in the field, waiting for dawn's light, the Shadowbrook Witch, herself, remained on the prowl for more victims. She was not finished yet; there were several on her list. For Wanda Craven and Neva Bravnic, who India hated most, bewitching would be a more difficult task, since both of these young women were heavy sleepers and had drunk heavily Halloween night. Conventional knocking or doorbell ringing would not have awakened the pair, so India used her bony fists to club their door, until the sound of bam-bam-bam, bam-bam-bam caused a faint stir inside.

Wanda Craven, who was currently purging herself into the commode, heard the commotion outside but was too weak to immediately respond. She rose shakily upon her legs and moved sloth-like toward the noise.

"I know you're in there," cried India. "Open the damn door!"

Clearly, even in her drunken state, Wanda knew India was deranged. Even in her diminished state the thought of opening the door struck her as absurd. Wanda knew exactly what to do.

"I'mm calleeng the poleece!" She drawled through slackened jaws.

"Who-oo izzit?" Neva called from the other room, unable to even move.

"Iz thad bish Inndia!" Wanda staggered to the phone.

"I just want to talk to you," India's voice softened but then she shrilled, "Open the god damn door!"

After rapping on their door until her knuckles were raw and calling out irritably several more times until she had driven herself hoarse, India decided, she would throw her spell. "And why not?" she asked herself with a cackle. She had the power. What a great joke it would be on these two bimbos! They would literally wake up as cats and not know what hit them. The thought delighted India Crowley very much.

“Dawn’s light will be the beginning of your new lives,” she said aloud now. “By the power within me and the powers that be, rats you once were and cats you now be!”

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With that chore out of the way, the Shadowbrook Witch left Wanda and Neva’s apartment and hunted for more victims on her list. She had decided to bewitch Tanya Vetter (the Halloween mummy) next, who, like Irma Fresco, had abandoned India’s cause.

Sheldon Griffith (who had been the vampire at the party), like Alice Wagnall (who was also on her list), lived elsewhere and would both, India now decided, get their comeuppances another day. A good time, she believed, would be when they came looking for their mates. Alice, she was sure, would return soon looking for Sam. Sheldon, who lived across town, she didn’t expect for several days. As fate would have it, however, she would bag Sheldon too. Tanya, with the excuse that Sheldon shouldn’t drink and drive, invited him to stay with her that night to sleep it off. Sheldon, of course, hadn’t drunk as heavily as Tanya and could have safely driven home. He understood Tanya’s true motive: she wanted him to sleep with her after the party. Ironically, sleep is exactly what his drunken fiancé and he had been doing for the past several hours. If he had gone home after the party as he planned to, he would be in his own bed right now instead of confronting their deranged friend. It would be only Tanya who was suffering India’s curse.

For everyone within earshot, at which the spell was aimed, there was no escape. Although it had been executed differently each time, the result was the same. Aware or not, awake or asleep, they each became members of the species *felis catus* (the common house cat). Depending upon what they looked like as mortal men and women, they resembled their human selves, whether as pedigree, tabby, or a mixture of different breeds.

She had toyed with Irma and Sam, allowing them to say their prayers and wait for “the end”, while wasting no time with the five drunken young men. For Wanda and Neva, she added a short introduction to her spell that delayed its effects, so that the process wouldn’t take effect until dawn. As they slept, without even suspecting, the two women would change from humans into felines the very moment sunlight entered their rooms.

Not so for Tanya Vetter, her backstabbing, two faced, non-supportive friend. This time she would catch one of her victims before she got away. She had brought with her a laundry sack to put her in and a spool of twine to tie the sack. What she didn’t expect, as she rang the doorbell, was the sound of Sheldon’s voice on the other side of the door. Awakened by the incessant ringing, he snapped on the nightstand lamp, stumbled out of bed, and padded hesitantly down the hall. Within seconds, his fiancé was also on her feet, struggling apprehensively into her robe.

“Who is it?” she asked, her eyes wide with alarm.

“I’m not sure yet,” he replied, rotating the peephole in the door. “It’s a woman.... She’s wearing black.”

“If she doesn’t go away,” Tanya cried, “call the police!”

“It’s *her*,” Sheldon gasped, focusing squarely upon her snarling face, “India Crowley, still dressed like a witch!”

After discovering India outside Tanya’s door, he assumed it was an emergency and quickly let her in. India moved from the porch light into the shadowy living room. Her rumpled black dress and peaked hat, bent rakishly at an angle, appeared comical on her adolescent frame.

Her dark hair was now matted by sweat on her forehead, and her face, totally devoid of makeup and color, was ghastly pale, her bloodshot green eyes seeming to bulge out crazily in her narrow head.

Ignoring Sheldon's scrutiny, India rubbed her bony hands expectantly and cackled with glee. "This is indeed a bonus," she said under her breath. "I'm going to bag you both!"

When Tanya joined him by the door, India wasted no time casting her spell. Sheldon laughed heartily. Tanya, who was thoroughly disgusted with India Crowley's behavior, demanded she leave. Within the blink of Tanya's long eyelashes, however, as soon as India added her sign, they both experienced the metamorphosis that had claimed Tanya's neighbors at Shadowbrook Arms. Soon, too quickly to even protest, Tanya and Sheldon found themselves tangled up in their clothes, and a pair of gloved hands fishing around to retrieve them before they could escape.

"I've got you my pretties." India cackled, lifting them out one by one and dropping them into her sack. "Don't try to escape!" she added, as they wiggled frantically inside.

After tying the sack shut, she gave them a few playful kicks to show them that she meant business, slung the sack over her shoulder, and was on her way.

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Almost as after thought now, India made the fateful decision to add Penny Gruber to her list. As the young spinster was peeking out her window that hour, India saw her shadow against the light. Although Penny pulled back cautiously as India approached, she did so slowly, her silhouette cast on the blinds long enough for India to see. Instead of simply calling out her spell as she had done to Wanda and Neva, she decided to add her to her sack.

This was India's first mistake. Unlike the other victims who had suspected her too late, Penny had heard and seen strange things this morning. She was determined not to be added to India's list. She would not be turned into a cat and become her sacrificial offering or hapless pet.

"Penny, my dearest, it is I your next door neighbor." India tapped lightly on her door.

After hearing, as had the other frightened tenants, the sounds of spells and incantations shouted at the top of India's lungs, Penny had hoped that the police would finally arrive. Now, due to their tardiness, she must take matters into her own hands. The illegal thirty-eight special she had purchased from a co-worker this week was aimed shakily at the door. A look of hysterical resolve now settled upon her face.

"Penny honey, let me in, I have a present for you!" India said more sharply now.

"Is it the same present you gave to Sam and the others?" Penny snarled, determination lighting her turquoise eyes. "I've got ears India! I know what you did! *Everyone* at Shadowbrook Arms must know by now!"

"Penny, that's nonsense, open the goddamn door!" India began pounding with both fists.

Penny could hear the sound of mewing from inside the sack. She knew what had happened to them: India had turned them into cats. India was turning *everyone* into cats! After hearing the spell earlier and those terrified meows, she knew her own life was in peril. A great dread filled her when she heard India's threat: "If you don't open the door Penny, I'll set your apartment on fire! I can do it woman; I have the power! Now *open your goddamn door!*"

"All right," Penny replied calmly "but stay exactly where you are!"

"Yes, of course my pretty!" India clasped her hands.

"Stand directly in the porch's light," she added, raising her pistol and taking aim.

“Behold I stand in the light!” India was saying as Penny swung open the door.

Before she could even open her mouth, Penny had squeezed off several rounds. Hearing the shots outside, Sheldon and Tanya froze at the bottom of the sack. India imagined great bolts of fire tearing into her chest, but Penny had fired her first volley over her head. As she stared in disbelief at her intended victim, she saw the smoking gun crack off another round, this time shooting off her hat, and she immediately wet her pants. A look of horror was frozen on India Crowley’s face as her life flashed before her eyes.

“P-p-pen-pen, P-p-penny p-please!” She found her vocal chords becoming paralyzed, her eyes filling with tears, a puddle forming below her skirt. “Ohhh s-spirit h-helper s-save m-me, don’t let me die!” her voice gurgled out her throat.

“You save them first!” Penny pointed the gun at the sack near India’s skirt. “Then you can turn the others back into humans, and maybe I’ll let you live!”

India began acting even more strangely then. Her eyes rolled back into her head. She began shaking all over, as if she was having a seizure, and Penny heard someone else’s voice coming out of her mouth.

“Kill her! Kill her!” Sheldon and Tanya chanted inside the sack, which to Penny’s ears was merely a couple of frantic meows.

“You-u-u must na-aat kil-ll me-ee! Only I can-nn lift the cur-rrse!” the spirit whispered from her trembling lips.

After reaching out further to Penny in what seemed a menacing gesture, India finally felt the bullets from Penny’s gun and began falling backwards over the balcony, her black cape and dress bellowing in the breeze. Believing now that she had rid the world of the Shadowbrook Witch, Penny was unprepared for the sight she was about to see. By now Sheldon and Tanya had torn the sack, squeezed out, and emerged just in time to witness the next scene. There below Penny seemingly dead on the concrete below was the one woman she dreaded most in the world. To accentuate her fears was a strange orange light emanating from India’s skin. A miasma was oozing from her body, rising as would swamp gas toward the sky, stopping in front of her stunned face, and then hovering there as she watched it take shape.

Transforming into a biped, without a mouth, nose, or eyes, it remained translucent, radiating a pulsing orange light. In the time it took Penny to open her mouth and scream, the demon could have entered her and taken control. But then suddenly, as the scream tore from Penny’s throat, it receded back toward India, filtering back into her gaping mouth. Penny stood there with the two frightened cats by her feet, ready to pull the trigger again, but remembering what the witch had said: only *she* could lift the curse.

“What have I done?” she lifted Sheldon up with her free hand. “I’ve sealed your fates forever if she dies!”

“Nonsense!” Sheldon tried to communicate. “Finish her off! Who knows what she has in mind next for us!”

“Yes,” Tanya cried from below, “kill her before it’s too late!”

But Penny could not fire another round. It was one thing to stop the Shadowbrook Witch; it was quite another to fill her full of lead. She felt drained of courage. She believed she had already done irreparable harm. While India lie like a broken doll on the ground, Sheldon and Tanya tried using their telepathy without success. Penny was still human. She would never understand unless she was one of them. As a mortal woman, she couldn’t kill a stricken animal in cold blood, even India Crowley, the Shadowbrook Witch. So she stood there torn between

wanting India to die and hoping she would live to lift her curse. After seeing the familiar orange glow momentarily light India's face, then disappear into her green eyes, she saw movement in the witch. Her hand twitched. Her leg jerked. Her right arm raised slowly from her side. Unknown to Penny, India was trying to speak, and the two cats were trying one more time to sway her mind. As Sam and Drew, they had, as they egged her on, 'spoken.' Though quick to grasp this skill, the realization registered slowly for them. In their attempt at communicating, they spit, hissed, and growled at Penny, scarcely aware they were reading each other's minds.

"Kill the witch!" Sheldon's words echoed in Tanya's brain. "She would've killed *you!* She was going to set your apartment on fire!"

"Yes Penny," Tanya wailed, "kill the witch while you still can!"

"... By the...power within... and the power that be," Penny saw India's lips move but didn't understand. "I have to kill her!" she was saying to herself. "I have to destroy her.... But if I kill her what will happen to those bewitched cats?"

In her effort to stop the evil filling her brain, she lifted the revolver to her forehead in preparation to pull the trigger, and then dropped it limply to her side when a sudden dizziness overtook her mind. Sheldon attempted to wriggle free but found her arm clamped tightly around his feline body. Her entire frame, from head to toe, tingled as if electrically charged. Not having the strength to hold her weapon because of her shrinking bones, she gripped it in both hands. As a result, Sheldon was dropped immediately to the ground. The spell that was claiming her, as it had the others, had come weakly from India's lips. India had rewarded her mercy with a final act of wrath.

"I...must... kill... the... Shadowbrook Witch!" she uttered thinly, before the gun tumbled finally onto the ground.

Now, almost in slow motion compared to the others, Penny suffered the same fate. Her body continued shrinking, as would a deflating balloon, reeling and plunging into her pajamas and robe, landing on four paws onto her slippers below. By now, Sheldon and Tanya uttered curses of their own but had the presence of mind to usher Penny away.

"She should've killed her!" Tanya cried.

"But she didn't!" Sheldon spat. "She stood there and let India turn her into a cat! I've read about these matters. You have to kill the witch to break the spell!" "Why didn't you kill her while you had the chance?" he continued pushing Penny along. "We'll be stuck this way the rest of our lives!"

At this point it dawned on the three cats: they had telepathic powers. Even without meowing and moving their mouths, they could 'hear' each other's thoughts.

"This is really annoying," Tanya shuddered.

"It's incredible," marveled Sheldon. "It's called mental telepathy. I've heard about the sixth sense, but I never believed it. You're talking inside my head—both of you. You're angry at Penny and she's filled with regrets."

"I should've killed her outright," Penny lamented. "If only I could've read your minds before India cast her spell. I never liked cats much. Now *I am one*. Oh, this is dreadful—just awful. Why didn't I finish her off?"

"It's too late for regrets," spat Tanya. "If I could hold that gun in my paws, I'd kill that bitch!"

"Well, it's impossible now," Sheldon sighed. "We can't stay here at Shadowbrook Arms. That woman's still alive."

As sirens erupted in the distance, the trio looked down once more at the Shadowbrook Witch. In the dim light of dawn, without her pointed hat, with her long stringy dark hair spread on the ground, India Crowley looked permanently damaged. She was, they realized, at least out of commission until they could figure out what to do, but she was, as Sheldon pointed out, still alive, and she might come after them when she got on her feet. The sight of India lying below as a broken marionette belied the threat she posed. Even in this condition, she had cast a spell on Penny, and was, as far as they were concerned, still dangerous. While the other cats felt their adrenaline rising, Penny was stricken with conscience for what she failed to do. For a moment she seemed frozen in shock. Then, after being nudged by Sheldon and Tanya, she followed the instincts of her feline body, scampering with her newfound friends down the hall.

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Taking the same path on which Irma Fresco fled, they ran down the staircase, across the lawn, and into the shadows beyond. Low down to the ground they traveled, below soaring buildings and colossal plants, through an awakening world of traffic, pedestrians, and stray dogs, with everything several times larger, and, because of their acute senses, louder and brighter and smellier—into an alien, hostile world, that was no longer their home. Through darkened alleys and patches of street where sunlight never touched, they fled, driven by India’s menacing face, until finally, without knowing it, they found themselves in the same part of town as Irma Fresco, before deciding to stop.

“Now we’re lost,” Tanya complained.

“We were *already* lost,” Sheldon nuzzled her neck. “We must find somewhere to stay and sort things out.”

“What about her?” Tanya gesture with her nose.

“She’s our responsibility,” he transmitted flatly. “She’s got nowhere else to go.”

Penny’s mind was so shaken they could barely read her thoughts.

As sunlight filled the hollows of the city, the little trio wandered aimlessly on the outskirts of town, not realizing how dangerously close they were to skid row. Due to the forces that be, they were, as the previous seven victims, diverse pedigrees. As if the Good Lord had some hand in Sheldon’s bewitching, He allowed the young man to be transformed into the most hardy breed of cat, a Norwegian forest cat, which was good because he would need this hardiness in the trials and tribulations he and his two female companions had to endure. Sheldon looked very much like Tom, the Maine coon, but had a more husky build, a triangular face and lower set wildcat ears. Unlike the American breed, the Norwegian forest cat accompanied the Vikings on their voyages at sea. Sheldon had stunning yellow eyes, which would give him a fierce appearance to feral cats on the street.

Of all the young people bewitched by India Crowley, there could not have been a greater contrast than between the big ‘Wedgie,’ as cat fanciers would call him, and his two companions. Though Tanya and Penny could have cared less about such facts, Sheldon, whose parents were cat fanciers, themselves, and had entered their three cats in various shows, marveled at his luck. Tanya, a pale, fawn colored seal-point Siamese with sapphire blue eyes, belonged, Sheldon recalled, in the oldest breed of cat that had once been treasured by the royalty in Thailand. Penny, the most beautiful of the bewitched cats and certainly the strangest, had, in spite of her name, been turned into a lithe and mysterious, jade-eyed Abyssinian. True to this old English breed, she had a mountain lion’s coloring: a ruddy shade that also looked like wild rabbit fur.

Sheldon, who had a great knowledge of cats, began thinking like a feline, himself, at this point. He was aware of the large, muscular, thick gray-furred body that matched his human frame and felt honored and even stirred to be the guardian of these beauties.

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When the trio saw other cats coming in and out of alleys, they agreed, after Sheldon's suggestion, that this might be a safe place to stay. They had not seen any dogs going in. There were no monstrous automobiles inside to run them down. After picking a likely corridor that had only a few derelicts idling inside, they found an abandoned crate and settled uneasily inside.

"Well," Sheldon looked over at Penny, "at least I've got female companionship. I'm bedded down with two babes!"

Tanya, in spite of her exhaustion, flashed him a jealous look. Penny, the dowdy spinster, who, as a human, had dull red hair and an unspectacular frame had been transformed into a lithe and lovely cat. Now, to add to her charm, there was a mysterious, far off quality about her, as she stared, with her bluish green eyes, into space.

Sheldon, who sat between the two females, gave them both a lick. Tanya tried to frown at this feral act, but Penny remained frozen in a statuesque pose. The feline half of Sheldon Griffith was at odds with his human nature, as the emotions of passion and pity reeled in his mind.

"Penny." He purred gently. "It's all right. You couldn't kill her, but that's okay. I might not have been able to do it myself!"

"I would've!" Tanya hissed bitterly. "Because of her, we might as well be dead!"

"Tanya." Sheldon gave her nudge. "That's enough! She believed she was saving us by not finishing her off. Who knows? By now, thanks to Penny, India *might be* dead. Life, even as a cat, is precious. Think of it, Tanya; try wrapping your mind around it. She could've turned us into toads or frogs, but we're cats, with telepathic powers, who escaped a wicked witch!" "Our lives aren't through," he added, giving her more licks, "just different. We still have our minds. We'll figure this out. Who knows? This might just be a bad dream. We're good people, Tanya. What's that old saying about good triumphing? I have to believe it. If India dies, zap!—we're back in human form. If not, there has to be a counter spell. Good will triumph in the end!"

Sheldon's pep talk failed to elicit a response. Once more, she shuddered at the action of his tongue. It was something cats did affectionately while grooming each other, not at all like human foreplay. Despite her repulsion, however, Tanya accepted Sheldon as their protector. His pep talk was typical of his optimism. A strange, calm fell over her as she listened to him purr and share his thoughts. She wanted to believe him. For the duration of their bewitchment, however long that might be, she would have to trust his judgment. Out there, in a world that loomed so much larger, there were unimaginable dangers. Inside the crate, their makeshift refuge, she at least felt temporarily safe.

His voice murmured inside her head: "... Our minds are still human, and our feelings are human. All that's changed is our bodies. Hopefully, by this afternoon the witch will be dead, and—poof!—the spell will be broken."

Tanya nodded faintly at his words. This seemed like their only hope. Turning his attention to Penny, Sheldon nuzzled her affectionately. Her whiskers bristled his mouth, yet she remained frozen in silence, her mind difficult to read.

“I’m worried about her.” He looked back at Tanya. “She has the look of the Sphinx. She’s in deep shock and seems to be in another world.”

“We’re all in another world,” Tanya replied wistfully, laying her chin on her paw, “...a world of giants, shadows, and cats.”

## Chapter Six

### Missing Persons

Dawn exploded in the horizon, spilling over the rooftops to ignite the day. Because Wanda Craven's apartment faced east, it was as if a nuclear explosion had erupted outside her room. As the sunlight flooded through the open curtains, its warmth struck her face as it protruded from her blanket, gradually awakening her from a dream. The memory of what seemed to be a nightmare lingered in her mind. The nonsensical imagery playing in her brain had been interrupted by the dark intangible silhouette of the Shadowbrook Witch. Standing outside their apartment in her costume, she had promised them that dawn's light would be the beginning of their new lives. Unable to confront Wanda or Neva directly, she had thrown out her spell. At first Wanda could piece together very little of the spell inside her fuzzy head, knowing only that India Crowley had stood ranting and raving outside her door. Although Neva had been too groggy to comprehend, Wanda remembered this frightening experience clearly. The memory of India's horrible behavior last night surfaced darkly in her mind. In spite of her condition after the party, she had paused while calling the police and craned her ear in time to catch the gist of the spell: ". . . rats you once were and cats you will be!"

Though Wanda had felt threatened by the woman, she could not take India's witchcraft seriously. When India had finished her business and walked away, she hung up the phone, heaved a sigh and ambled off to bed. Now, on the threshold of awakening, it appeared as if she was having another dream. It seemed as if she was covered with fur. It was terribly hot inside her blanket now, so she struggled out of the fabric, shook herself vigorously, and then jumped onto the carpet below. She wondered fleetingly now how it was possible for a woman nearly six feet tall to vault so lithely out of bed.

She stood there on all fours, looking up at the monstrous bed, and found herself thinking about this funny dream. What came out of her mouth now was not laughter but a mewling sound. When she called out Neva's name, in fact, it was a very distinct meow. Looking down finally at her feet, she was surprised to discover that they were covered with long white hairs. After looking behind her, she also discovered that she had a long fluffy white tail that she could wag to and fro. This, of all her supposed dream imagery, pleased her most of all.

Reacting naturally to her new self, Wanda scampered excitedly around the floor looking for a mirror, until she realized she should be looking up, not straight ahead. With incredible agility, after scooting down the hall, she vaulted up onto the bathroom sink and looked pertly into the glass. Staring back at her now was the most beautiful white Persian cat she had ever seen. She had, in fact, long fluffy fur on her short square body, a wide flat face and large round blue eyes. As her wondrous tail swished to and fro, she studied this dream image, wondering how it was possible that she was still asleep. Not only was she controlling this dream, she was looking at herself in a mirror. The image did not waver. Her senses were more expanded than they had ever been. Placing a paw on the glass, then licking her image several times and performing other tests, she sat there staring into the mirror.

She remembered reading something about dreams that caused her ears to perk up and tail to rise in the air.

“This is impossible!” she tried to say. “I know I’m dreaming and can control it, which makes this a lucid dream. You can’t look at your reflection in a lucid dream without waking up! That means I can’t possibly be asleep! I’m awake! I’m not dreaming at all! . . . *India turned me into a cat!*” But what came out of Wanda’s mouth, as these thoughts raced through her brain, was the same meowing sound she had heard before.

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For Neva Bravnic, the same realization naturally came more slowly. She had drunk more heavily last night than her roommate. She was a much heavier sleeper than her friend. Lastly, and most importantly, Neva’s face was covered by her blanket, which shielded her from the dawn. Though its heat crept into her cocoon, she remained in a twilight sleep, the fragments of the troubling dream she shared with Wanda about the party, filtering into her mind, as her conscious mind took control.

“Meow! Meow! *Meow!*” she heard her roommate call. When this didn’t work, Wanda burrowed her little snout into the blanket and searched frantically for her friend. “Neva! Neva! *Neeeva!*” the words continued to echo in her mind, but what stirred Neva into wakefulness was the commotion on her bed.

Jerking awake finally, she lie there inside her cocoon as Wanda cried, “Wake up Neva! She’s turned us into cats! *This is not a dream!*”

As Neva crawled out of her blanket, Wanda was amazed to find her feline counterpart as strikingly beautiful as herself. She was, Wanda marveled, almost a photo negative of herself: a solid black Persian with a white patch between her luminous yellow eyes. They were, as they had been as humans, perfect counterparts to each other. While Wanda had been a tall, blond woman with an hourglass shape, Neva had been a stunning black women with a streak of gray running through her dark hair.

Because Neva believed, as had Wanda earlier, that this was simply a dream, she sat there a moment watching her roommate go berserk, curious, as cats often are, but totally aloof. Although she could not understand her yet, she followed her hesitantly into the bathroom and up to its large mirror. Unlike Wanda, she had never read the article in Reader’s Digest about dreams. She couldn’t comprehend that such a feat should wake her up. She was, she told herself, asleep and having a silly dream. She had no idea who that other cat was, but found its actions amusing. She promised to tell Wanda about this dream imagery when she woke up.

And then something incredible occurred to her. It was the same phenomena experienced first by Sam and Drew: Neva read Wanda’s mind. The words, however, were sluggish at first, fading in and out as a radio channel going out of range. Gradually, she was able to piece together what Wanda said into one distinct sentence: “Neva, she did it, just like she said she would: *she turned us into cats!*” And Neva knew, that very moment, both intuitively and empirically, that the fluffy white cat talking to her now was Wanda Craven, her roommate and long time friend.

As they stood there side by side looking into the mirror, they remained in shock for several moments, until they heard a knocking on their door. It was Neva, the brightest of the two, who made the first move.

“Hurry Wanda,” her crinkly voice rang inside Wanda’s skull, “we must escape the Shadowbrook Witch!”

“Where?” Wanda began to panic. “There’s nowhere to go but out a bedroom window.”

“Then a bedroom window it is.” Neva replied flatly. “Either that or wind up becoming India’s pets”

The very thought of being placed in a cage or tortured to death by India, caused Wanda to jump off the sink after Neva and scamper down the hall. When they had reached Wanda’s room, pushed the window open, and tore a gaping hole in the screen, Neva explained to her hysterical friend that they must drop onto the grass and not on the sidewalk below. After stepping lightly off the narrow ledge, Neva, who as a mortal woman would have broken both her legs, demonstrated the tremendous advantage India had bestowed. Not only did she land lightly on her little paws but she hit the ground running. Taking the cue, but at a slower pace, Wanda felt badly shaken by the fall, and yet found herself catching up, as Neva ran down the sidewalk and away from Shadowbrook Arms.

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By now an ambulance as well as the police had arrived on the scene. While two police officers began gathering information, the attendants checked the stricken woman’s vital signs before strapping her onto the gurney. Her wounds were given emergency dressings and an I.V. was stuck into her skinny arm. Both men had snickered a moment about her witches costume, but their smiles faded when they realized how badly injured she was.

“This one looks like a flat-liner, Harry,” a squat, chubby attendant announced, shaking his balding head.

“Wait a minute, Ted,” his tall black partner exclaimed with surprise, “I got me a pulse. Looky there, it’s not much, but it’s a pumpin’.” “Come-on Broomhelda,” he re-checked her vitals, “you know you going to hell; you don’t wanna burn!”

“No question about it Harry, you got the gift,” Ted crowed, as the two men raised the gurney up to spirit her away.

“Saved that woman’s soul, I did,” Harry declared lightheartedly, as the older man huffed and puffed with the load.

The attendants shoved India’s gurney into the ambulance expeditiously now. As Ted pulled out of the parking lot and turned on the siren, he and Harry conversed, in loud voices, about last night’s football game. Harry didn’t agree with the referee’s call during sudden death “It had spoiled everything!” he complained, while Ted, who had won a hundred dollars in the hospital pool, was jubilant now.

“Ted, don’t you give me that jive!” Harry spat, thumping the dashboard with his palm. “You might’ve won money on it, but you know that was a bad call!”

“Just like the last election, eh Harry,” Ted replied smugly, as the ambulance hurtled through town. “You were wrong about that *too!*”

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The fearful wail of the ambulance faded in the distance as the morning quiet returned. Anyone not yet roused by the night’s horrors at Shadowbrook Arms must have been awakened by this familiar sound. An eerie silence now greeted the two patrolmen when they surveyed the complex. Not one onlooker was found ogling the victim at the scene. After dividing the upper level and the lower level between themselves, they could find few tenants to even answer their doors.

Just when Wanda and Neva were in the process of escaping, in fact, one of the policemen had, after unsuccessfully rousing the tenant next door, stood on the balcony waiting for one of them to respond to his knock. With the stony expression displayed by all patrolmen, he showed no emotion, though a crooked smile played on his swarthy face. Afterwards, upon moving to the apartment where Tanya Vetter lived, he got the same response. Down the line he strolled receiving the same reaction again and again, undaunted in his work. After repeatedly knocking on Buck Logan's door and ringing its doorbell, however, it occurred to him, with the same deadpan look he had before, that this tenant, as all the others, was probably not home.

A paper skeleton was taped to the door, a reminder that last night had been Halloween. At that point, a faint frown broke his stony expression, and yet he sang to himself abstractedly as he tapped his foot, "Them bones, them bones, them dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!"

"Well, that's the last one," he concluded, checking it off on his list.

A faint shrug preceded his expansive yawn. He was, in spite of his stoic nature, irritated with the reception he had received. Bending slightly over the guardrail, he spat contemptuously onto the walkway below. After waiting several moments for his partner to emerge from the morning shadows, he called down in an uncaring voice, "Hey, Al, you having any luck?"

"Yeah, Tony, but only two: Dolores Jeffries and Frank Harper—both senior citizens," his partner replied, shielding his eyes from the sun. "How is it going up there?"

"Persona non grata," Tony declared wryly, shaking his head. "I've covered all tenants on level two. No one's home up here or maybe, like Brer Rabbit, they're just laying low."

"Not everyone," Al declared, waving his notepad. "That old fellow next door in 1h said he heard the victim yelling and carrying on up and down the corridors between two and three AM last night. He also heard the shots. His next door neighbor claimed she heard it too. Unfortunately neither one of them thought to look out their windows to see who it was."

"How very strange," Tony looked down at him with incredulity, "our report lists several tenants reporting wild behavior last night, and only two people answered their doors!"

"That's right," Al snorted, glancing at his list. "It was those same two who reported gunshots this morning on level two!"

"But they didn't see anything?" Tony shook his head with disgust.

"Nope," sighed Al, "not a thing!"

"I suppose they didn't know who was making the commotion either," Tony rolled his eyes in disbelief.

"No, it's just like the three monkeys:" Al quipped, heaving a sigh, "see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil."

"Yeah," Tony chuckled, searching his memory, "...and Sergeant Schultz in Hogan's Heroes. Remember what he was always saying to Colonel Klink? *I kno-ow nawthing!*"

Al, who was much younger than Tony, had never heard of Sergeant Schultz, Colonel Klink or Hogan's heroes but found this uncharacteristic attempt at humor by the senior patrolmen amusing.

"Yes, it's just plain stupid," he chortled, looking in the direction of apartment 1h. "The old gent lived right below where the victim was shot but didn't think to look through his peephole to see what landed a few feet from his front door. Both he and the lady claimed they mind their own business and don't know anyone here at Shadowbrook Arms. Where have I heard *that* before?"

“Okay, I give up Al . . . Where’s are all the people who attended the party last night?” asked Tony, scratching his head.

“That’s a good question,” Al drawled, placing a thumb in his belt. “According to both the tenants I talked to, there are dozen of young adults and several middle age folks living in these apartments, and yet they’re the only two who even answered their doors. No one around here wants to talk. You’d think there was no witnesses to this crime. They’re hiding out like scared rabbits. Even those two I questioned didn’t see what happened. My guess is that the rest of them are probably drunk on their asses inside their apartments or just too afraid to respond.”

“You can’t blame them,” remarked Tony thoughtfully, walking down the staircase toward Al. “. . . It’s like those drive-by shootings we respond to in town. No one knows anything, and even the people who heard gun shots aren’t stupid enough to find out.”

“*If* they’re even home,” Al qualified, watching him amble down the steps. “I’m getting déjà vu now Tony. This has all happened to us before.”

“Déjà vu?” Tony made a face. “That’s a fancy name for repetition, isn’t it Al?”

“I think they’re going to need search warrants to investigate this place,” Al declared, making a sweeping motion with his hands. “All this might just turn out to be some sort of mass murder. You know, maybe one of those cult things we see once in awhile. I got a bad feeling about this, Tony, I really do!”

Touched by the enthusiasm of the rookie patrolman, Tony broke into wry laughter. Al was writing his thoughts down in his notepad as they walked. The two policeman now headed toward the squad car together to make their preliminary report which, they were certain, would lead to a full fledged investigation today. Al, of course, believed SWAT teams would be needed, while Tony saw this as more or less routine.

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Officer Al Roberts, as his nametag proclaimed, was a much taller man than his partner. Removing his hat to expose unnaturally blond hair, he sat it down on the dashboard as he called in to the station. Tony took the opportunity to call his wife on his cell phone and chat with her a spell. Afterwards, as the two patrolmen waited for a team of detectives to arrive, they chatted about the strange events reported at Shadowbrook Arms. Tony also took the opportunity to read Al’s notes, marveling at how verbose the young man was. In Al’s thinking, it was similar to the frat house mass murder at the university, but Officer Tony Vega saw no similarities between the two. As far as the practical-minded Tony was concerned, the young rookie was exaggerating again. He had, he reflected, in Shakespeare’s words, made “much ado about nothing.”

“You’ve got this on too grand a scale,” he decided, scratching his bristly chin. “This lady, Indira Kruger (is that what you wrote?), was wearing a witches costume. She was a nut case, who must’ve shook these people up good last night. One of them at the party got mad at her and put out her lights. It was a crime of passion, Al, and too much booze.”

Al looked at Tony in disbelief. “Passion? Come on Tony, you don’t have passion when you’re drunk on your ass. This is a hate crime. Whoever blasted that lady was not filled with liquor or passion. . . . This place is just too quiet Tony. I bet he went on a murderous rampage afterwards and killed *them all*.”

“Hate *is* passion,” replied Tony, shaking his head in disagreement. “Liquor doesn’t require hate. These people were drunk and raising hell when that woman was killed. Some drunken bastard lost his temper last night and blew her away!” “I don’t know why no one wants

to answer their door,” he added quickly with a shrug, “maybe they’re frightened, maybe they’re asleep, or maybe they’re not home. But they’re not dead, Al; that just doesn’t add up!”

“Hate, passion, booze” quipped Al, “fear, death, or sleep.... Whatever you call it, Tony, they had one helluva party here last night!”

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Not noticing the police car parked in front of Shadowbrook Arms, the two bewitched women had continued running down the sidewalk, detouring through the same maze of giant buildings and parking lots that Buck had taken after rescuing Sam. Now, a city block away from the complex, unsure which way to go, they met the pack coming the opposite way. A great excitement arose in Buck, Tom, Jim, and Ed for the female cats headed their way. Sam and Drew held back, as if they were no longer part of this group.

Not realizing who their admirers were, the girls grew terrified as the big yellow tabby and his friends began sniffing their behinds and rubbing against their sides.

“Oh sweet mama!” Buck licked Wanda’s snout.

“These be fine pussycats,” concluded Jim singling Neva out.

As Tom nuzzled his head against Neva’s neck, Jim mentally cried, “No, no, I get the brunette kitty first. You wait your turn!”

Tom and Ed, who were no match for Buck and Jim, backed up forlornly, as Sam and Drew looked on.

“At least they’re communicating,” Drew thought to his friend.

“Yes,” sighed Sam, cowering back with Drew, “but they seem to be regressing now—reverting to their old selves.”

“Hello, ladies,” he called, boldly scampering over to them now.

As soon as he got within distance, he could hear their pleas.

“Help us!” their voices cried out in his mind. “Sam, Drew, we know you’re there!”

“It’s Wanda Craven and Neva Bravnic!” Sam exclaimed. “I had a hunch India wouldn’t stop with us. “Buck, I know you heard that,” he shoved himself in front of the girls. “Buck, you’re not a beast, you gotta keep telling yourself that.... Come on Jim, your about to commit rape!”

“Huh?... Rape?” Buck and Jim transmitted back and forth dully, exchanging dubious looks.

“Yes, that’s right gentlemen. Wanda and Neva are your friends,” Sam continued to reason with them. “You’re terrifying them. Can’t you see that?”

“They weren’t terrified *last night!*” Jim protested, growling deep in his throat.

“Phew! They’re right, Jim,” Buck settled back on his haunches, a dumbfounded look falling over his face. “I-I can’t believe what I was gonna do! I really lost it, didn’t I?”

“Yes, Buck, and we’re running out of time,” Sam rubbed up against the shaken tabby. “You remember what we were talking about this morning?”

“Oh yeah,” nodded Buck, “you’re gonna e-mail your fiancé for her help. But I don’t agree. I think we should kill the bitch!”

“Not this again, Buck,” Sam could not help showing irritation, “we talked about this too. Drew is right, how are you going to kill her without not being killed yourselves?”

“Yeah, right,” Buck hung his head in dismay. “This doesn’t look good Sammy, not good at all!”

Sam turned to the two females, who, gushing with thanksgiving, saw Sam as their protector now. Drew, who had his eye on Neva, himself, was at that moment counseling Jim and Tom about their behavior, while Ed was batting something on the ground.

“All right gang,” Buck took command, “let’s get going! Ed, you stop playing with that bug!”

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The eight cats, looking even more like a pack than before, chatted excitedly with one another on their way back to Shadowbrook Arms. Sam explained, as Wanda rubbed up against him repeatedly, that he was engaged to Alice Wagnall, the very person who was going to help them now. But this made no difference to Wanda. Sam, her hero, cut a fine figure as a cat. Drew trotted alongside of Neva now, while Buck scampered ahead with the remainder of his pack, listening to Jim complain about his hunger and also hearing Tom and Ed’s fears. No one would have guessed that this troop of felines were sending telepathic messages back and forth to each other now.

When they reached the outskirts of Shadowbrook Arms, the group slowed down. There were police cars surrounding the complex. A whole team of detectives were roaming around the apartments now. Buck offered magnanimously to scout ahead, but Sam insisted that they all forge onward cautiously, since Buck couldn’t stop the witch by himself. It was an encouraging sign that detectives had arrived. Perhaps India would be arrested was their collective hope, but they must, Sam counseled, keep a low profile. If they were spotted, someone might call animal control. Thanks to the Shadowbrook Witch, they were cats now, and they would be seen as a pack of homeless strays.

As they arrived at the walkway leading into the complex, they recognized Pedro Garza, one of the gardeners, bending over his mower. It was landscaping day, they recalled. In spite of the investigation underway, a team of workers moved around the complex, trimming bushes and mowing lawns. A second gardener, Jaime Ortiz, was suddenly hailed by the landscape supervisor Manuel Rodriguez, who spoke gravely to the younger man. The men spoke Spanish and gestured vigorously back and forth. Buck turned to Ed then and asked him to translate what they were saying. Reluctantly, Ed trotted closer and perked up his ears.

“Well,” transmitted Jim impatiently, “what are they saying?”

“Manual’s telling Jaime what happened last night.”

“Did they arrest India Crowley?” asked Sam, hope rising in his mind.

“No,” Ed wrinkled his doglike muzzle, “they’re investigating a shooting. Manuel overheard the detectives talking to police officers, who arrived first on the scene.”

“What? Who was it? Who got shot?” The questions asked by all the cats resounded telepathically in Ed’s head.

As the little Havana perked up his ears again, the group crowded around him, trying to decipher what was in his mind. Normally, his breed had sensitive hearing that should have been able to pick up the murmurs of the speakers as if they were but a few feet away. Unfortunately, because he was bombarded by so many voices, it was difficult for him to concentrate. To make it that much more confusing, was the fact that the words he received audibly had to be translated from Spanish into English inside his head before being passed telepathically to the other cats. It was like trying to discern one voice in a crowd of speakers, who were speaking a different language, with everyone talking at the same time.

“Well, tell us already,” prodded Jim. “Is India dead?”

“Yes, Ed, did India get shot?” Sam’s feline heart pounded heavily in his chest.

Ed, with great difficulty, had decoded what Manuel said. By now the gardeners had walked away to finish their chores.

“Yes, I think it was her,” his answer came slowly. “... There was, according to Manuel, no identification on her, but the woman taken by the ambulance was wearing a witches costume. They took her to the county hospital as a Jane Doe.”

“Poetic justice,” Drew thought grimly.

“Perhaps, but she’s alive,” declared Sam, charging ahead, “and we’ve got time to break the spell! Come on cats, we’ve got to contact Alice, before its too late!”

“How much time do we have Sammy?” Wanda asked scampering by his side.

“I don’t know,” he looked back at the others, “but I have a feeling it’s better for us if India lives. The cure would remain locked up in her head if she dies!”

Reluctantly, Buck and his gang followed Sam, Wanda, Neva, and Drew. The group was hungry and needed a place to hide. Buck didn’t agree with Sam now. It all seemed to good to be true that India was close to death.

“Now’s our chance to kill her!” he transmitted to his gang. “Let’s find that hospital she’s in and pull out all of her plugs!”

“Yeah,” cried Jim, “just like in the Wizard of Oz!”

“You promised Sam,” Tom reminded him as they followed the other foursome down the hall.

Sam, still within telepathic range, now looked back with disappointment at Buck.

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By the time they had reached Sam’s apartment, they had passed one of the detectives and two policemen in the corridor walking in the opposite direction. The detective did a double take when he saw the eight cats but was too preoccupied with his investigation to care. The two policemen, Al and Tony, stopped a moment, marveled at the procession, but, after coaxing from the detective, continued on their way. It was not quite the mass murder Officer Al Roberts had imagined. The appearance of the feline troop was merely an oddity to them this morning. Since it was not even twenty-four hours since the commission of the crime, the fact that twelve of the tenants were not home meant nothing to the detective, though it kept alive Al’s theory of a mass murder here last night. Those missing were reportedly young people—some of the very people who probably knew India Crowley. The police had checked all of their apartments and found them empty, which didn’t seem significant to Detective Randolph or Officer Vega. After all, it had been Halloween and the weekend, a time for partying for spirited youth. For all they knew they had all taken their merrymaking to the beach.

It took several moments for Buck and Sam to tear a hole in the living room’s side window screen. While they stood there a moment deciding who would go first, Buck informed Sam that Jim, Tom, and he were going to his place first. There was a lot of food there, he explained with perfect logic, and it might be too crowded in Sam’s place for all of them to be there at the same time. Sam made him promise to return after they had eaten, so they would be in his apartment when Alice arrived. It seemed so reasonable that the other cats would want to be on familiar ground, that Sam didn’t protest very much. But he was filled with misgivings about

Buck taking his friends to his own place. In a feral sense at least, the big tabby seemed more clever than he appeared.

## Chapter Seven

### Sam's Place

As Sam led his troupe into his apartment, the camaraderie in each of their heads was tempered by the realization that they were running out of time.

"Let's eat!" the others cried.

"The first thing *I'm* going to do," Sam vowed mentally, as he waited for Wanda and Neva to enter the hole in the screen, "is e-mail Alice. I sure can't use the phone!"

"I'm going to get something to eat," Drew replied with a meow, leaping up onto the ledge ahead of Sam.

When they had all passed through the screen and congregated in the living room, Sam said a prayer of thanksgiving, while the other cats bowed their heads. Wanda, Neva, and Drew had accepted Sam as their leader now. Wanda, in fact, had grown fond of the once self-righteous apartment manager. She continued to rub up against him every chance she had, bringing forth the response "Please Wanda, I'm engaged to Alice. Let's just be friends!"

Drew had no such inhibitions when the beautiful black fluffy Neva rubbed up against him. Her purring and bubbling form continued to tease and tempt the tan cat, until finally, as they all congregated for their meal, Sam took time to warn his newfound friends. After pulling a portion of last night's roast from the refrigerator, he dangled it thoughtfully in his muzzle, and then dropped it unceremoniously onto the floor in front of the group.

"All right, let's not stand on formality," he transmitted as they devoured their meal.

"I love roast," exclaimed Neva. "All we need is the right wine!"

"I could use a beer," Drew replied, giving her a bump.

Sam poked his head into the circle to get his share. Wanda, inspired by her friend's spirit, nudged Sam playfully with her nose. When this failed to elicit a response, she followed Drew's example and bumped Sam several times with her rear.

"Listen Drew." Sam backed away from the group. "You cats be careful. Neva might not be human, but she's a still female."

"Well, *duh*." Drew chortled, giving Neva a wink.

"I'm a feeee-male, but I used to be a woman," she purred brazenly.

"Sammy, you're such a prude," Wanda pretended to pout.

"Hold on, let me finish!" Sam barked into their heads. "As a female—this goes for you, too, Wanda—she can get pregnant, just like humans. I've seen cats mate when the female's in heat!"

"I wish you wouldn't talk about me in the third person," Neva complained, licking gravy off her paw.

“And I’m not a prude,” he directed his thought to Wanda this time. “I’m just trying to use my God-given brain!”

“Oh God, doesn’t care about us anymore,” said Neva carelessly, swishing her fluffy tail.

Sam could not believe his feline ears. He was even more distressed than when Drew made that similar comment last night. “We’re just animals now,” he had communicated. “We don’t have souls!” Sam then watched Neva and Wanda preen themselves, as would two ordinary cats and detected telepathically Drew’s urge to curl up and take a nap. It was clear to him that they were sinking into felinity fast.

“First of all, “ he frowned at Drew, “all animals and plants are part of God’s creation, not merely humans. No, don’t wiggle your whiskers at me, Neva. I’ve given this a lot of thought.... This is not our fault. Buck, Tom, and the rest of us didn’t deserve India’s wrath. The Lord must still consider our souls in spite of her evil act. Perhaps, even so, all living things have souls. When I was a child I wanted all my pets up there with me. Now, I’m almost certain they will!”

“But it’s not in the Bible,” Drew teased. “What would your Bible-thumping Alice think?”

If Sam had not detected humor in Drew’s voice, he would have taken issue with his new friend, but he half believed what Drew said, himself. Rising up and stretching, he trotted into his study without a word.

“Where’s he going?” Wanda paused in her preening to ask.

“Let’s go see,” Neva, yawned expansively.

“Hey Sam, I was just kidding,” Drew scampered ahead of the others now. “It all just seems like such a joke!”

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The cats were all sleepy now. Sam sat in front of his laptop, which he managed to pry open, and looked down at them from his desk, the screen’s eerie light making him that much more attractive to Wanda below.

“What’re you doing, Sammy?” She asked pertly, a portrait of feline beauty registering in his mind.

Sam feared for his humanity more than ever this hour. He was beginning to feel attracted to the beautiful white Persian cat now that he was a cat, and he almost felt disloyal to Alice for the thoughts racing in his head.

“I’m trying to use the keyboard,” he answered simply, making another feeble attempt.

The stubby appendages of his paw made it difficult to use the computer. For a brief moment the hourglass hung suspended after the Windows screen appeared, taunting him with the reminder that time was running out. By trial and error, he was able to bring up Microsoft Outlook and enter his e-mail box. As he attempted to compose a message for Alice, however, it was much more difficult for him. He drew back, cocked his head reflectively, and tried again. Seeing a crafty look on Wanda’s face, he cautioned her again “Please behave yourself!” as she hopped onto the desk. But Wanda had no intentions of not seducing him and feigned interest in the screen.

“What’s that?” She pointed her little white paw.

“It’s an e-mail screen,” he thought warily, as she edged closer. “Surely you’ve seen *that* before!”

Embarrassed at his ineffectiveness, he offered no more explanation. Soon Drew and Neva were also crowded around his laptop with expectant looks on their faces. Wanda now

rubbed her rump against Sam's leg. Neva did the same to Drew. Sam was now certain that, responding to feral urges, the girls were in heat. Drew and himself, for that matter, were reacting, as would two normal male unneutered cats.

"Stop it Wanda, I'm trying to think!" He hissed, humping up his back.

"Yeah, stop it again and move away closer!" drawled Drew, nestling beside Neva and licking her ear.

"As I was going to explain to Wanda," Sam communicated to the group, "it's hard to use the keyboard with these stubby paws." "You see what I mean?" he asked, trying to hit a few key. Sa;lioxcweasfgnmaslk.,cviomn! appeared on the screen.

"Oh, dear me," mewed Wanda.

"Looks like gibberish," observed Neva.

"I'm lucky I got this far," Sam confessed, trying one more time.

A similar mish-mash of letters was now displayed in the e-mail address box.

"Try using just one," Drew held up a nail.

"I already tried it," whined Sam. "You've got skinny claws, Drew. Mine are stubby, fat little appendages. How do you expect me to type with these?"

"Oh, I used to play the piano," Drew explained, typing a message in the hunt-peck-style in the message portion of the screen.

In capital letters, the message read playfully SAM HAS FAT PAWS! HA! HA! HA!

"I like his fat little paws," Wanda purred loudly now.

"All right, Drew," Sam announced solemnly, "you're going to be our inputter."

"That sounds sexy," cooed Neva.

"Now listen to what I tell you to type." Sam nudged her aside.

Drew's held his paws over the keyboard. "Okay." He looked at Sam anxiously. "Let's get started."

That moment, as Sam began to dictate, the landline rang. After a series of jarring rings, it switched to the message machine, followed by a beep, then the voice of the caller: "This is Dolores Jeffries, in apartment 1g. Where are you Sam? Why don't you answer your phone? The police were here; must've been a dozen of them. Did you know that? Are you even home? You should've talked to those men, not Frank and me. You're the manager of this complex. That's part of your job. And what was all that racket early this morning. You should've called the police Sam—"

Dolores continued to list his failings as an apartment manager, which included his inability to maintain order in Shadowbrook Arms. Pouncing on the machine, Sam cried, "Enough! We don't have vocal chords. I'm turning this infernal thing off!"

The girls laughed as he fumbled with the machine. Drew trotted over calmly to lend him a 'hand.' The girls hopped up onto the desk to offer moral support.

"My paws are useless," Sam groaned, pawing frantically. "Why did they make such a tiny switch."

"Remember," Drew counseled, "one toe and one nail." "Here." He bumped Sam gently aside. "I'll shut that bitch up."

"—and further more," droned Dolores, "I think India Crowley is insane. I heard she claimed to be a witch—*Bleep!*"

Stopped in mid-sentence, Dolores last words reminded them of the dilemma they were in. They were cats under a witches spell. When the cell phone Sam had left by his easy chair began

to ring, the group ignored it. It was probably Dolores, guessed Sam. The old woman would probably send him a text message too, but it didn't matter. Without voices, they couldn't answer the cell phone or landline. The keys were much too small on the cell phone, even for Drew. What they could do, Sam reminded them cheerily, was send a message from his laptop.

"Let's pull up Alice's e-mail," Sam directed as the four cats stared at the screen. "Type the first letters of her name, Drew. It'll pop up automatically."

"Wow," Wanda purred, you're computer's smart!"

Certain she was teasing, Sam explained tongue in cheek. "It's in my contact list. All Drew has to do after we compose the message is hit Send, and everything is sent to the recipient, just like a letter."

"Huh?" She gave him a blank look. "What about your return address?"

"That's automatically provided." Sam pointed a paw. "Right there above To:, next to From:—'SamBurns112@hotmail.com.'"

"There's one hundred and twelve other Sam Burns out there?" Wanda muttered in amazement to Neva. "I wonder how many Neva Bravnic's there are."

"All right Drew," Sam forged ahead. "In the Subject Box, simply type 'please respond quickly,' with several exclamation points."

"Gotcha," the tan cat flexed his paws. "Let's see," he said, his whiskers bristling on his mouth. "Voices in the head are one thing, words are quite another."

"No-no," Sam sighed wearily, "that's a B, Drew. We need a P. P-l-e-a-s-e."

Wanda's behavior worried Sam the most. How could anyone in the twenty-first century be that computer illiterate? Had she just been teasing? Playing a dumb blond was something she had done very well as a human. His newfound friends were behaving less and less like humans and more like cats. In spite of Drew's boasts, it took him awhile, by trial and error, to find the right keys, correct his errors by backspacing, and achieve a semblance of what he wanted. To Sam's annoyance and dismay, Wanda and Neva began acting very much like distracted felines as Drew struggled with the words. Wanda was again preening herself and purring loudly as Neva batted a paper clip around on his desk. And Drew, though probably the smartest of all the cats, had forgotten how to spell.

"Okay." Sam gave him a nudge. 'Pleex Comt Quik' is good enough. Alice will know *for sure* there's something wrong." "Now go to the composition box," he instructed wearily, "and type the message."

Drew cocked his head in a thoughtful feline pose. "That sounds easy enough. What do you want to say?"

"First off, type Alice at the top of the page."

"All right." He flexed his paws again. "Spell it for me."

"A-l-i-c-e."

Inexplicably, Drew turned away from the keyboard. For a moment the male cat had forgotten his attraction to Neva and hissed at the black Persian as she played with his tale. To make matters worse, Wanda now rubbed against Sam, her whiskers brushing the side of his face.

"Stop it you dumb bitch!" growled Drew.

"You have lovely brown fur," Wanda purred loudly in his mind.

"Drew," Sam shrilled into their heads, "get back to work. Wanda, Neva get off the desk. Go take a nap if you can't behave!"

Along with all their other cat-like traits, Sam was very worried about the cat's attention spans now. They could not seem to focus at all, even Drew. Wanda was the worst. Was this, too, a sign they were becoming more feral? How much time did they all have left before they were one hundred percent cats?

"In that large area below," he motioned testily to Drew, "type: Please drop everything and get here as fast as you can. Don't worry about India. She's been shot and is in the hospital, but don't call the police; they won't believe what has happened. We'll just wind up in the city animal shelter. . . . Signed Sam, Wanda, Neva, and Drew."

"I think you better remove the last three names," Drew suggested wryly, drawing back his paw. "She won't understand us being here, Sam. She'll think we corrupted you last night."

"You're right," Sam sighed, discouraged by the way the girls were acting now. "She doesn't like Wanda and Neva very much, and she probably doesn't like you. Leave off yours and the girl's names, but add *I Love You* before my name and a dozen exclamation points behind."

It took several moments for Drew to type Sam's message. The spelling was atrocious and Drew left out articles of speech, which made it sound primitive and ill thought, but they were running out of time. Alice knew Sam was an excellent writer. When she read this gibberish, he reminded himself, she would know there was something wrong.

"Now hit Send at the top of the screen," he concluded after inspecting the e-mail, "and let's hope Alice checks her e-mail."

"Wow, that was fast!" cried Wanda.

"No, Wanda, it wasn't fast," Sam looked at her in disbelief. "If Drew had his human appendages and faculties, that message would be long gone," "but he doesn't," he added shaking his head, "because Drew's a cat. Like you and me, Neva, he's beginning to act and think like a cat. I fear for Buck and the others. The question is 'how long do we have?'"

Only Drew registered alarm at this thought and he was, as they sat there waiting for a response from Alice, quickly distracted by Neva's presence. As the females continued purring and occasionally emitting a yawn, and Drew began licking Neva's head, a thought came into Sam's overwrought mind.

"Drew," he commanded gently, "type in the Google Search menu *Witchcraft*."

"Where's that?" Drew squinted at the screen.

"Hit the backspace arrow at the top. Right there!" Sam pointed testily. "That's it. It's right in the middle of the screen."

"Good idea Sammy," Wanda came close again, her feline breath blowing warmly into Sam's ears. "Can I help?"

"This time, Drew, try to spell it exactly as I dictate."

For a moment, Sam struggled with the word, realizing that he, too, was having trouble with abstract symbols in his head. When, after a series of hunting, pecking and backspacing, Drew managed to type *Witchcraft* exactly in the Google Search box, the web provided him with countless entries for this theme.

"Smart thinking," Drew nodded, cocking his head. "Go to the source!"

"I'm looking for information that might explain this spell," he informed the group. "Good Lord, there must be a thousand entries for this. Let's see if we can find one for—what should we call it—oh yes, shape-changing spells."

For several moments the four cats hovered around the screen, as Drew began scrolling with the mouse, a much easier task than typing keys. As their eyes went down the list searching

for something that might help, each one called out mentally when they saw something significant, but in the end, after a dozen failed attempts, and after a long night and morning with little rest, they had simply worn themselves out.

“I’m going to take a nap,” Neva thought, hopping down onto the floor.

“I’m going to *help* her take a nap,” Drew responded in quick pursuit.

“Remember this one word:” Sam called after them now “*litter!* If Neva gets pregnant, she won’t just be carrying a baby, she’ll have a litter, not the roadside kind but kittens—several of them, capiche?”

Neva flashed Drew a terrified look. With these thoughts in mind, the couple found a corner, curled up together, and were soon fast asleep. Sam and Wanda, who were also ready for catnaps, leaped off the desk and found themselves a nest too, but the apartment manager lie there with an ear cocked for the sound of Alice’s key rattling in the door.

As Sam slept, he dreamed that he was on the broom of the Witch India Crowley and they were flying over the rooftops of Shadowbrook Arms. Below him he could see lighted windows with empty rooms. The implications seemed plain to him, for Alice walked through the complex with a lantern, as Diogenes carrying his lamp, searching for the lost cats. At that point in his dream, he realized that he was India’s pet. He recalled a portion of the poem he had written in college:

Castaway and vagabond,  
true child of the night.  
In his secret twilight kingdom  
he shuns dawn’s lonely light.

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Alice Wagnall felt both physically and mentally exhausted after a sleepless night and hectic day at the office. Sunday had proved to be an ordeal for her. It had been almost impossible to focus on her work and keep pace with the busy real estate firm. Her boss expected her to work extra hours on weekends when needed, even on Sunday, which was the Christian Sabbath, but she had honestly not been up to it this time. She and Sam’s confrontation with India Crowley last night had left an impact on her mind. After a brief nightmare in which she found herself running from India Crowley’s wrath, she lie awake most of the night worrying about what India might do. The curse India leveled against everyone at Shadowbrook Arms had seemed so ridiculous at the time, but then, as Alice thought about it more and more, the argument that Sam tried to use on her about India finally losing her sanity didn’t ring true.

“India’s not merely crazy, Sam,” she had argued last night, “she’s evil. I saw the *Devil* in her eyes!”

Now, after several excruciating hours at the office, Alice felt weak and emotionally drained. All day long she had worried that, when she contacted Sam again, something dreadful would have happened to him and the others at Shadowbrook Arms. He had tried to allay her fears Halloween night and, when they parted, promised to call her the next day. But he hadn’t called her or send a text message to her today and she could not reach him on the phone. What did his silence mean? Was Sam merely being inconsiderate again, or had something happened to him last night? Unfortunately, Alice hadn’t brought her laptop with her this morning or she would already know there was a problem.

After frantically unlocking her apartment door, charging through the living room, and pouncing on the laptop on her desk, she hastily brought up her email, and spotted the cryptic title in her inbox.

“Pleeez Comt Quik?” she read aloud. “What does that mean?”

Quickly entering the message box, she stared with incredulity at the screen:

Alice,

Plese drop everthing git here fast you can don't worry about lnd she been shot an in hospital don't call polce they won't bleeve what happen we wind up in animal shliter.

I lov u Sam !!!!!!!!!!!!!

“The city’s animal shelter?” Alice mumbled numbly to herself. “Now why would he say something silly like that? Has Sam forgotten how to spell?” And then India’s curse thundered into her head. Suddenly Alice’s nearly photographic memory captured almost the entire imprecation: “. . . You,” India had cried out to the Buck, Tom, Jim, Ed, and Drew, “shall regret your beastly behavior, because you’re going to become exactly how you’ve behaved!” “And you two, my pets,” she had promised Sam and herself. “I have the same end planned for you!”

“Beasts? . . . Turned into beasts?” She backed away, as if stricken by the screen. “No, no, I don’t believe this! I’ve got to get over there! Oh sweet Jesus, is this what Sam meant?”

Without even shutting down her laptop or locking the front door after herself, Alice dashed back to her car, her mind racing with terrible imagery, her throat constricted with fear as she attempted to pray. This time it was more difficult to talk to God. As she considered the implications of the e-mail Sam had sent and remembered India’s bizarre behavior last night, she tried to tell herself that this was all just too ridiculous to be true.

“India is a make-believe witch,” she told herself, racing across town, “she can’t harm us! This is just a cruel joke! Oh, Sam you’ve got a lot of explaining to do!”

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When Alice reached Shadowbrook Arms, she shuddered as she passed through the entrance to the complex. Her first impression as she turned left from the breezeway and stopped in front of apartment number 1a was that the complex was unusually quiet. Only last night this apartment complex was alive with merriment. She might not have approved of the drinking behavior and attitude of some of its young residents, but they had not deserved the malediction thrown at them by India last night. *What a dreadful thing to say to them!* She thought giddily, as she pulled her key out to unlock Sam’s door.

Somewhere, she could imagine, India standing over a cauldron and stirring its contents with a big spoon. Now, as she entered the dimly lit apartment, she noticed two cats hopping off the couch as if in greeting. Almost immediately afterwards, two more cats joined the first pair, purring and meowing loudly as if they were glad to see her too. The first questions to come into her head then were *Why would Sam have all these cats in his house? Is he cat-sitting for someone? He knows I hate cats!* Then, staggered by the implications growing in her mind, she found herself collapsing into a nearby chair.

At that point, a sable brown cat jumped up into her lap, purring so loudly she could not help but to feel moved in spite of her state of mind.

“Nice kitty,” she replied, her heart pounding loudly in her chest. “... You seem to be a nice cat!”

“It’s me, honey,” Sam looked squarely into her face. “You gotta get over your dislike of cats!”

Hopping off her lap, he motioned to her with his snout, meowing vigorously, then led her trembling frame from the living room to his study. All the while the other cats also meowed excitedly, purring loudly now that their rescuer had arrived.

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“Now what’s this nonsense about an animal shelter,” she muttered, positioning herself expertly in front of the computer. “... Oh, someone’s been reading about witchcraft... My-my, how interesting... how very quaint! The stereotype card-carrying witch!”

“She’s in denial,” Sam observed, looking back at the others on the floor.

“I think she’s in shock,” thought Drew, appearing suddenly on the desk.

“I can’t believe it,” transmitted Wanda. “She doesn’t like cats!”

“Yes, Wanda” Sam said, rubbing Alice’s cheek with his snout, “she doesn’t like cats, but we’re very special cats. She’ll like *us!*”

Alice cringed at the sensation, her natural aversion to felines warring with the realization growing in her mind. Wanda took an immediate dislike to her, but Drew, Neva, and Sam looked desperately to Alice for help.

“She’s looking at the witch on the screen hovering over a cauldron,” Sam acted as narrator. “... There’s a black cat nearby in the picture sitting by a broom.... Come on Alice, wake up and smell the coffee!”

After coaxing her in the background, as would fans at a sports event, the four cats came right up to her face and studied her slack-jawed expression. Again she cringed, but this time she fought so hard against her dislike of cats a hysterical smile broke her face. All of the cats purred loudly, occasionally meowing with encouragement for Alice’s help. Surely there was something this human woman could do.... And then it happened: Alice Wagnall collapsed onto the keyboard, her blond hair covering it like a mantle, her hands dangling over the floor.

“What’s wrong with her *now?*” asked Wanda, nudging her with her nose.

“It’s obvious,” cried Sam, hovering frantically around her head, “Alice has fainted. We gotta bring her around.”

Barking orders to his group, Sam’s first concern was Alice’s pulse, which he couldn’t take. While Wanda and Neva went to fetch a wet rag, Drew tried his paw at checking her pulse, while Sam stuck his snout under her hair to make sure she was breathing. Suddenly, as he began licking her furiously with his tongue, she awakened from her faint, protesting groggily as the rough little muscle worked on her cheek.

Rising up with blurry eyes and a light head, Alice stared vacantly at the telltale screen and rotated her head slowly his way.

“Sam?” She murmured breathlessly. “... Is that really you?”

“It’s true,” nodded Sam, wishing she could read his mind, “India has turned us all into cats!”

## Chapter Eight

### Feline Retribution

Before Sam sent his e-mail to Alice, Buck, with his own solution in mind, had led his small band of felines to his apartment at the end of level two. The four young men had been living in Buck's tiny domicile, while Drew Connors had his own apartment across town. Unfortunately for Buck and his gang, the side windows for the living room, unlike Sam's place, were locked tight. While Sam and his new friends ate heartily and rested in the safety of his apartment, Buck and his gang tried unsuccessfully to slide a window open after tearing a hole in the screen.

"This is just great!" groaned Jim, "I need food! Let's go back to Sam's."

"Sam's got enough problems without us," Buck spoke with resolution now. "I know of another place we can go."

"Sam's place is fine with me," Tom said eagerly, "let's go back to Sam's."

"Yeah, I'm starving," Ed declared dismally, "I could eat cat food right now."

"I wanna big thick steak!" pouted Jim.

"No, I gotta better idea," Buck said, scampering down the hall.

Unable to keep up with the fleet footed ex-athlete, the other three grumbled and hissed as they tried catching up, then froze in their tracks when he stopped at a familiar door.

"Whoa there, Bucky-boy," Jim called out shakily now, "this is India Crowley's apartment. We've got no business in there!"

"Listen, guys," Buck implored, "we gotta check out the witch's apartment before the cops return. Maybe we can find a book with her spells in it or something. I'm sure she's got something yummy to eat!"

"Hah!" Jim retorted, holding firm, "she probably eats witches food: snails, lizards and toads."

"Yeah," Tom nodded in agreement, "what about that witch whats-her-face in the Land of the Dead who ate *dead people*?"

"Come on Tommy," Buck was becoming frustrated now, "that was a B-grade horror movie. I'm sure she eats normal food like us." "Besides," he took on a crafty look, "I got something *else* in mind too!"

The other cats sat there in various poses of incredulity or rebellion: Jim with the closest thing to a frown he could muster, Tom facing the opposite way and Ed distracted by a tiny ant. In spite of these typical feline responses, Buck began working at India's living room window screen by himself until the material was finally torn. When Buck grew tired, Tom and Ed felt guilty enough to take turns, themselves, until a gaping hole was created by the constant action of their paws.

“After grabbing a bite,” Buck explained as he climbed through the hole, “we’re gonna have some fun!”

“This is a dumb idea, Tom shook his head as he watched Ed follow Buck in. “It would be much easier to hole up at Sam’s!”

“I’m not going in there. I’m going back to Sam’s!” Jim decided, looking with terror at the hole.

Suddenly the remaining two cats froze in their tracks then broke into the characteristic spooked cat pose of humped back and upright frizzled tale, hissing at the sound of a human voice.

“All right, team,” someone shouted at the top of his lungs, “let’s secure this area and call it a day!”

With no apparent witnesses, the investigation of India Crowley’s accident had been brief. The investigation team, which had combed the grounds for evidence and questioned several more tenants, now responded to the lieutenant’s order as factory workers to the whistle, retreating in bored detachment to their cars.

“I’ll catch up later,” Detective Randolph called to his partner, “I wanna ask a few more questions.”

“Get your asses in here!” the two laggards heard Buck cry into their heads.

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Without further argument, Jim and Tom followed Buck and Ed’s example up and over the ledge, through the screen and onto the carpet below. Jim landed with a thud, while Tom landed lithely on all four paws. The big gray Maine coon, though timid, cut the most handsome figure of the four.

“We got to do this caper today,” Buck said conspiratorially to them now. “I think trashing India’s apartment is a good way to keep our minds focused on what we are: humans, not cats.”

“Look at us boys!” he hopped up on a chair and inspected himself in the living room mirror. “We can’t make love properly in this form. We can’t do foreplay. We were gonna hump two female cats until Sam stepped in. Pretty soon we won’t even like human food. We’ll be chasing rats and birds, like Ed!”

“Disgusting!” Jim spat. “It makes me sick!”

“I never chased no rats and birds, only bugs,” Ed replied defensibly, wagging his chocolate tail.

“Well, it’s not normal,” Tom joined in scornfully, “you’ve got to show more control!”

“The point is,” Buck redirected sternly, “we’re human underneath this fur, not beasts. We gotta stay focused on our enemy: India Crowley. We’re gonna show that bitch what we do to witches here at Shadowbrook Arms!”

“Yeah,” Tom nodded with approval, “humans don’t stay mad; they get even! *Let’s kick ass!*”

“I’m hungry.” Jim said, collapsing in a multicolored heap.

“You puto! You need a bath!” Ed’s voice growled inside Jim’s head.

Jim jumped up and hissed: “You disgusting bug-killer! You dare criticize *me*? At least I don’t *act* like a cat!”

“No,” Ed challenged, “you act like a *pig!*”

Rising up with his back humped, Ed seemed ready to do battle. Buck came between his two friends immediately, shocked by what he saw. Tom joined him now to form a united front.

“You see what’s happening Ed? You too Jim!” he challenged. “You’re acting like beasts—both of you! Stay focused on the enemy: India Crowley.”

“Jimbo, my old friend,” the top cat transmitted gently, after taking the portly cat aside, “Get this into your thick skull: the enemy is the Shadowbrook Witch, not Ed. You should feel sorry for poor Ed. He’s sinking fast. Look at him. You guys used to be buddies. Let’s stop acting like spooked-up cats and try to figure out how we can break India’s spell. Let’s not fight amongst ourselves!”

“Sam will help us.” Jim suggested, looking forlornly around the room. “Let’s go back to his apartment where there’s food and it’s safe!”

“In due time,” Buck promised, surveying the scene. “Weeeeeee, this is great!” he scampered across the floor. “What shall we do first?”

“What do you suggest?” Tom asked thoughtfully, as Buck ran aimlessly around the room.

“Let’s shit on her carpet,” Jim offered, squatting on a likely spot.

“Let’s piss on her furniture,” Ed walked over to the couch and raised his leg.

“Very good,” Buck nodded, marking a few zones, himself, “we’ll stink the place up first then get down to some serious destruction before we leave.”

“I’m going to tear up all her clothes and soil her bed,” Tom said gleefully scampering into the hall.

“I’m going to find some food,” Jim said, looking back proudly at his mess. “Wow, that’s worst than human shit!” He wrinkled his pudgy nose.

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The four male cats proceeded to befoul and damage India’s apartment, the greatest stroke of mischief coming from Buck who managed to tip over her fish tank and, with the help of the others, kill all her fish. It occurred to Tom, the most civilized of the foursome, how cruel this act was. Buck, who began having second thoughts, himself, also looked on in horror, when Ed, as expected, ate several of the hapless fish before it was time to leave. Buck, who, as Tom, was trying to hold onto his humanity, was having no more success than the others, and yet he felt a pang of guilt now. He knew that this was wrong even though he ate one himself.

“Jesus,” he drew back and shuddered, “I don’t believe we’re doing this. We just killed a dozen of these poor little bastards. Enough already. Let’s get out of her bedroom. This makes me sick!”

“Ed ate four fish! Ed ate four fish!” Jim pointed his nose accusingly. “This guy’s out of control!”

“Well, I didn’t eat *any!*” Tom said self-righteously, trailing behind the others. “I’m going to get me some *human* food!”

Once more Ed hissed at Jim, and Buck again moved as a buffer between the two cats, again counseling Jim to be more patient with his more feral friend. They had to be careful, he explained to them both, and not make a lot of noise. A catfight would draw attention to their gang and bring animal control down on their heads. For several moments, to everyone’s delight, they gorged themselves on lunchmeat from India’s refrigerator and slackened their thirst from India’s toilet, lapping the water up with their rough little tongues.

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On the way back to the living room, Buck suddenly remembered why they came here and began looking around for a special book.

“Wow,” he remarked, rummaging with his nose and paws through the clutter on her desk, “she’s messier than me! Here’s an apple core. Look at this; it looks like a cigar!”

“What are we looking for?” Tom inquired, scanning the bookcase above. “I’ve never seen so many books on witchcraft and Satan worship! Where do we begin?”

“Spooky books, with witchy titles,” Jim answered his friend.

“Yes, and ones with weird pictures, like this one,” Buck found a large, beautifully scrolled volume with the title “Sanctum Regnum” on the cover. With a great deal of effort, Buck opened the book. A circle of naked woman were portrayed on the title page dancing around a steaming pot.

“Whoa, this is more like it,” he crowed, literally drooling onto the page.

Unfortunately for Buck, it was impossible to turn the page. He attempted several times to flip the gossamer paper, tearing pages and, at one point injuring a nail, until he drew back, hissed at the infernal book and let out a loud meow.

“Oh what’s the use!” he groaned in despair. “We don’t know what were looking for. I can’t function with these stubby paws.”

“What do we do?” Tom looked up expectantly at his leader.

“Let’s take a nap,” thought Jim with a yawn.

After thinking about it for a moment, Buck again displayed his characteristic resolve. Hopping off the desk, he scampered down the hall, disappearing in a flash through the screen. One-by-one, the cats followed as before, Jim barely making it this time through the hole. When the group emerged in the corridor outside, they rallied around their leader, overstuffed, drowsy, and ready for a nap. Buck was thinking again about killing the Shadowbrook Witch. He didn’t know exactly how to accomplish this feat, but his mind was now set.

The sudden return of humans in the courtyard below, however, sent them scurrying back as frightened, hissing cats down the hall. Voices, at first unintelligible, echoed throughout the complex as two gardeners, finished with their chores, walked through the corridor below.

The four cats recognized the language spoken, laughing hysterically amongst themselves. Ed was immediately ordered by Buck to decipher what they said.

“They’re talking again about what happened,” Ed translated swiftly, perking up an ear, “... Manuel, the landscape supervisor is telling Pedro, one of his men, about the woman’s accident... Manuel said the woman is a witch... she was shot by one of the tenants... but she’s alive... They could find no identification on her and no one would talk about it... Most of the tenants pretended they were not home until the detectives arrived and made them answer their doors.”

“That’s incredible.” Buck wanted to slap his forehead in disbelief. “All the mischief she’s done, and she’s admitted as a Jane Doe!”

“We’re *John Does*” Jim uttered a bitter laugh. “It’s like we don’t exist.”

“Shhh! There’s more,” Ed interrupted, tip-toeing to the rail. “... Manuel just told Pedro that the woman, because of her injuries, must be in a deep coma.”

“But she still might live.” Tom shook his head in dismay. “What if she recovers?”

“Yeah.” Jim nodded. “Witches have special powers.”

“She’ll come after us, guys.” Buck groaned. “I’m telling you; we gotta kill the bitch before she wakes up. We gotta pull her plugs!”

“Hold on a minute,” Ed shushed them, “I hear Frank Harper talking to one of those detectives. He heard the shots.”

“Detectives?” Tom wrinkled his snout. “I thought they left!”

No longer needing Ed as a translator, the four cats stuck their little heads through the bars of the balcony, their fuzzy ears angled forward for maximum reception.

“Mister Harper,” uttered the detective, “we found the weapon in the bushes in front of your apartment, only a few feet from where she fell.”

“Don’t know about no weapon,” grunted Frank. “Just heard shots—four or five maybe. Thought they were fire crackers at first.”

“Mister Harper, after all that commotion, you didn’t think to look out your window or front door?”

“Mind my own business,” the old man said in a deadpan voice. “Them kids is *always* running amuck!”

Detective Randolph, the last member of the team to depart, walked away to join his partner, laughing under his breath. The four cats shared the detective’s mirth. Because none of her neighbors had come out to investigate, India Crowley was emitted to ER as a Jane Doe. Giggling uncontrollably a moment, Buck felt light-headed yet filled with purpose as he scampered toward the stairs.

“Lets go men!” He called back cheerily. “We know what hospital she’s in. We know what we gotta do!”

“We’re going to the county hospital?” Jim’s thoughts shot into his head. “Are you nuts? That’s clear across town!”

“You’re not seriously thinking of going there *now*?” The slits of Tom’s feline pupils widened with alarm.

Jim and Tom backed away in dread. Ed, anticipating Buck’s next move, had already began running toward Sam’s when he was called back with the others now.

“Ed! Jim! Tom!” He transmitted shrilly. “You want to be cats the rest of your lives?”

“No,” Jim and Tom both replied faintly, “we want to *live*!”

“Then, if you want to live as humans and not cats,” Buck beckoned, “follow me. I’m going to kill the Shadowbrook Witch! I’m not going to wait around for some bimbo to step in like Sam’s doing. All my instincts tell me that this is right. We got to do this *ourselves*!” “Are you with me?” He challenged them now. “So help me, if I have to, I’ll do it myself!”

By now, he had at least fired up Ed, the most feral of the four. As Buck scampered down the staircase, the little chocolate Havana raced passed Jim and Tom, quickly materializing by his side. The remaining two, shamed by their own frailties, followed at a distance, until Buck and Ed, pausing at the edge of the parking lot, allowed them to catch up.

As a pack once more, they scampered down the sidewalk. Together, they ran across the intersection when the light turned green: four small members of the species *felis catus*, on a crusade to kill a wicked witch, who held all their fates in her comatose hands.

## Chapter Nine

### Buck's Gang

Buck and his gang soon ran into difficulties as they wandered through town. During one terrible moment, they were chased by feral dogs and Jim was almost nabbed by them because of his ponderous weight. Only the timely appearance in a vacant lot of an abandoned automobile saved the portly cat's life. Fortunately for Jim, the big dogs couldn't climb into the window he had scrambled through. He sat on the ruined front seat, hissing and humping his back in the fashion of cornered cats. The dogs barked and growled around its perimeter for a while until turning their attention to the other cats that had shimmied up a tree.

As Buck, Tom, and Ed looked down from the sycamore serving as their refuge, a troop of unruly teenagers discovered Jim's plight and chased the dogs away, but, so typical of carefree of boys, began teasing him by shaking and pounding on the abandoned car.

"Here pussy, here pussy-pussy-pussy!" a tall, freckly blond-haired, buck-toothed adolescent called to Jim.

In his scrawny hand were the remnants of a jumbo-jack, which he now used as bait.

"Don't eat it Jim, you'll catch AIDS!" Tom broadcasted from the tree.

"No, you can't catch it that way," scoffed Ed.

"Yeah, Tommy," Buck bumped him playfully, "who ever heard of a cat catching AIDS? But don't take the bait Jimmy. He's not going to give you his food."

Jim edged closer to the window, reaching out with his fat little paw in the hopes that the boy would, in fact, toss it into the car. The other three boys, a muscular black lad and two Latinos who were identical twins, began to taunt the cats in the tree with their burgers and fries, as the first boy dropped his burger suddenly into the car.

"Bless you my son!" Jim cried, leaping ravenously onto the food.

"What did you do that for Billy?" The young black snarled. "You hate cats. You've *always* hated cats!"

"I never said I hated cats, Kareem," Billy replied, flashing Jim a toothy smile. "I said I hated *your* stinking cat!"

"I don't hate cats," one of the twins chimed. "I think they're cool! My Aunt Consuela's got twenty or thirty cats running around her house!"

"Your Aunt Consuela is loco!" Kareem snarled.

Inexplicably now the boys set their food down a moment and joined the first boy as he began shaking the tree. Fortunately for the cats, the sycamore limbs were sturdy enough to withstand the jolt. All that the foursome succeeded in doing was shake down a few dried leaves.

“When you’re done eating, Jim, stay where you!” Buck ordered from his limb. “. . . Lord, those fries look good!”

When it appeared that they were having little effect, three of the boys backed away as Billy continued shaking the tree.

“Come on Billy, leave those poor cats alone!” Kareem became irritated with his friend.

Buck, Tom, and Ed, if they had not been so hungry, would have laughed at his efforts now. The blond-haired, freckly-faced boy was a parody of themselves. Not so long ago Buck and his friends had idled their time away in such a way. Now it was *them* up the tree. A new respect for life grew in the minds of the cats as they shared Buck’s thoughts.

Almost as suddenly as they appeared in the lot, the four teenagers exited the scene, the sound of their banter a haunting refrain. Below the cats refuge, Kareem, in spite of his tough talk, had left the remains of his burger and the twins had left them their fries.

“Gentlemen,” Buck looked back at Tom and Ed, “*let’s eat!*”

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On their way across town, the cats discovered a quirk in their feline anatomy. Although they had excellent night vision and much greater binocular and peripheral visual range than human beings, they had trouble focusing on street signs. It was, Buck grumbled, like being nearsighted and farsighted at the same time. He found, after trial and error, that if he stood long enough and stared unwaveringly at a road sign, he could bring it into focus, but it gave him a headache and made him dizzy. Tom, Ed, and Jim would take their turns reading signs until they too were stricken with this strange affliction.

Unfortunately, Buck was no longer certain he was even on the right street leading to the hospital. He remembered a certain boulevard that ran directly into the county hospital complex, but the name of the boulevard or avenue, which should intersect this main thoroughfare, had not yet appeared. Since Shadowbrook Arms was on the outskirts of town, common sense told him to move directly west until they found the right road, but their last efforts at reading road signs had not been encouraging. They all had headaches and queasy stomachs. In spite of their efforts, they could not be sure of the street’s name. Buck was familiar with enough of the city’s landmarks, and he was certain that the street’s name was a number and began with an F, but that could be the First, Fourth, Fifth, Fourteenth, or Fifteenth Avenue. After an hour of trudging across town, the foursome had only reached Ninth Avenue; there was, Buck realized, as they continued down the main boulevard, an indeterminate number of intersecting avenues and side streets ahead of them, with portly Jim stopping continually along the way. At this rate how long would it take to reach the hospital? At what point would they collapse from exhaustion or, after continually reading the signs, have their heads explode? What if, wondered Buck, his feline brain had been deceiving him all along and the county hospital was really on Fourteenth or Fifteenth Avenue, not First, Fourth or Fifth? That would mean they had been going the wrong way all this time and should have turned due east, not west, at the stop light on the corner of Thirteenth and Main near Shadowbrook Arms.

Buck looked around at his trusting friends and heaved a sigh. That moment, as they stopped at a red light and stared blurry-eyed up at the sign, Jim once again passed into harm’s way by walking directly into the path of an oncoming truck. Fortunately, the driver, who honked his horn and wrung his fist, had enough time to stop. It was, Buck recalled his parent’s pet, a

natural tendency of cats to dart across the road, and yet he was shocked to see his friend bolt ahead that way.

“Don’t do that again!” His thoughts shot into Jim’s head.

The portly cat retreated from the crosswalk but stared vacantly at his friends, exhausted and delirious in his search for food. It was actually the second time in less than an hour that Jim had tempted fate and, including the incident in the vacant lot, the third time he came so close to death. Earlier Jim had veered off the sidewalk into traffic to sniff out a discarded morsel of food. He either lagged behind them and made them wait until he caught up or behaved erratically as he had this hour and startled Buck out of his wits. It seemed quite apparent to Buck that, in addition to looking like a cat, Jim was thinking like a very stupid cat too.

Buck’s rush of emotion was naturally picked up by Tom and Ed, who were acting very feline, themselves. In companionable affection Tom rubbed Buck’s side, a deep purr rumbling from his chest, while Ed began to self-consciously groom himself, as would any ordinary cat. Reflecting upon these feline traits, Buck, as leader of the foursome, felt a measure of responsibility for their predicament now. Had he not talked his friends into attending the Halloween party instead of attending a football game as they planned? Had he not encouraged them to pursue Wanda and Neva and also been the chief heckler against India at the ill-fated party Saturday night?

He had decided, with Sam’s encouragement, to fight the effects of India’s spell, although he disagreed with Sam on how this should be done. You don’t play games with your enemy, he confided to Tom earlier, *you kill it!* He had always been a physical person, deciding back at Shadowbrook Arms to use his competitive energies against India’s spell. The only thing that came to mind as he sought to undo her spell, however, had been the Wicked Witch of the West in the Wizard of Oz, whose death resulted in her subjects being transformed immediately back into human form. It had seemed so logical to him this morning, so simple, and perfectly clear: *Kill the witch and you break the spell!*

Now there was a long, hazardous journey ahead of them in which he must constantly look out for Jim and bolster everyone’s spirits. He was, as Sam Burns and Sheldon Griffith, a shepherd, who must continually guide and prod his friends.

Sam’s way, though wrong, was much easier, he decided as he led them across town. All they had to do was wait in the apartment until Sam’s bimbo girlfriend arrived. All of Buck’s instincts told him that waiting for Alice Wagnall to do something was a futile waste of time, but after only a few hours of navigating these cats, he longed for the warmth, food, and safety at Sam’s place. No longer was he totally convinced they were doing the right thing.

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Tuning in to the others’ thoughts, Buck grew self-conscious of his own thinking as he glanced around at his friends. Had they read his troubled thoughts? It appeared as if Jim was too great a distraction for them at this point.

“Oh, that’s disgusting,” he heard Tom say to Jim, “that’s someone’s food droppings. You’re gonna catch something! We just ate an hour ago, Jim, *what’s the matter with you?*”

“He’s not a cat,” snickered Ed, “he’s a pot-bellied pig!”

“Jim can’t help it,” Buck explained to Tom, gently nudging him away. “He’s turning into a beast. We’re all turning into dumb beasts. Remember what we were going to do those female cats back at the apartments?”

“Yeah,” Tom nodded gravely, “how could I forget?”

“Wanda! Neva! Oh, *sweet mamas!*” crowed Ed and Jim.

Jim and Ed, to Buck’s surprise, now joined in friendly banter as Buck took Tom aside. On the subject of feline “pussy,” as Jim put it, the two adversaries had found common ground. Their dialogue served to camouflage what Buck had to say, reaching the foulest limit either of them had gone. Buck felt relieved that his own negative thinking had not affected the Maine coon. He had always seemed to be the most levelheaded member of Buck’s gang.

“Listen Tom, I know where that hospital is,” he said, wincing at Jim’s wit. “Although I’m not sure of the street’s name, I delivered pizza there often enough. But it seems like a million miles away!”

Wrinkling his pink nose, Tom reflected on Buck’s thoughts. “.... You think we should split up?”

“Well, we can’t very well leave Jim behind,” Buck looked back at the big calico, “not by himself anyhow. Ed’s kind’ve crazy right now. You know what I mean? I was thinking I could use that craziness to get the job done, while you and Jim could hole up somewhere safe!”

“Nothing doing,” Tom shook his head. “we’re a team—*all of us!* Jim and I will wind up in the animal shelter if you leave us behind. I can’t control that clown!”

“I suppose he’d be a handful,” sighed Buck, glancing back at Jim, “I just wish we’d left him at Sam’s as he asked. That was a close call with the truck, and he almost got chewed to pieces in that vacant lot. The fact is, Jim’s too slow. He’s slowing us down!”

“You know it’s scary,” Tom replied reflectively, listening to Jim and Ed, “I want to believe they’re kidding, but the truth is we’re all thinking like cats. They think Wanda and Neva are babes. We all did, until Sam woke us up. That’s disgusting, Buck. We still have our minds.” “.... I don’t think about cats as I did before,” he reflected dreamily after a pause. “Too many of them are homeless, discarded creatures, searching for handouts and shelter in a dirty city or the outskirts of town.... They’re someone’s daughter, son, mother... or pet.”

“Come on Tom, admit it, you’re a cat too. As far as cats go, Wanda and Neva are beautiful. How can that be disgusting if we’re cats?” “.... And that’s why we have to fight this,” he searched for just the right words. “.... Our bodies are cats, but our minds are still human. Unfortunately, Tom, we also have cat glands. We got to kill that witch, Tom, but we got to do it right. There’s too many people depending on us now. You gotta promise me that if Jim begins to slow us down too much you’ll stay back with him and let us get this done!”

Reluctantly now, Tom agreed, impressed with Buck’s sense of duty. He had never seen Buck filled with such purpose. The two cats walked back toward Ed and Jim, Buck wondering if Jim had caught the gist of their conversation. There seemed to be a limit to telepathic range. After a certain distance, Tom observed, the conversations in their heads began to break up as would a bad reception on a radio or, viewed nautically, as a submarine going out of sonar range.

“Listen, you’re my best friend,” Buck gave the Maine coon a nudge, “but I don’t trust Ed. The way he’s thinking now, he might abandon Jim. This is only a contingency plan, Tommy. I want us to pull this off together. We’ll always be a team.”

“I hope so,” thought Tom, glancing over at Jim. “I can’t manage him by myself!”

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The four cats were getting used to their new bodies, moving as homeless alley cats toward their goal: the county hospital, where India Crowley, the Shadowbrook Witch lie. Ultimately, do

to their small size and their problem with reading road signs, they began feeling as if they were on an endless road and were, in effect wandering aimlessly through a giant maze. Buck had been certain they were heading in the right direction. After finding the correct road, turning right and then heading north, they should run smack into the hospital. But the trip was wearing them down, especially poor Jim, and the mental strain on Buck, their leader, was felt by them all.

“Let’s face it, we’re lost,” Ed was the first to think, a snarl twitching on his canine snout. His expression almost broke the big yellow tabby’s heart, for the once stoic Ed Montez wanted to weep, an act that seemed impossible for a cat.

Jim was the slowest, but Ed was the worst. Time was running out for them all.

“Come on, I know you’re all tired, but we got some walking to do,” Buck coaxed his friends.

Trotting ahead a few paces for emphasis, he noticed that typical feline detachment again. It was almost as if they had not heard him at all.

“Come on, let’s stay together,” he snapped irritably, stomping his paw. “No straying off to chase bugs or birds Ed. No more sniffing at garbage Jim. Tom, you were holding on pretty well until you started all that scratching and itching. Give me some support!”

“I think I got fleas,” Tom complained, suddenly chewing his rump.

Looking back in disbelief, Buck was deeply disturbed by this latest example of feline behavior. Tom, who reminded him very much of his parent’s cat, was his best friend and greatest support. He didn’t know what to say. He wanted to cry and scream as had Ed, but these were human actions impossible for him to display. In the most human expressions he could muster now, Buck cursed angrily and shook his head at their fates as he watched his friends scratch, sniff and groom themselves as common cats. Unfortunately, due to his own regression, Buck’s attempt at human emotion degenerated into typical cat-like behavior. The big yellow tabby, hissed, humped up his back and let out a long, angry feline growl.

## Chapter Ten

### The Old Woman's Zoo

In the land of giants, Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny, three more members of the species *felis catus*, made their way through a hostile maze of feral cats and dogs, unfriendly humans, and sudden and dangerous turns. So far, in their quest to survive, they had found an unoccupied crate in an alley to hole up in, but today, as hunger and thirst plagued them, they had been forced to leave their haven to find sustenance. Sheldon, of course, was the first to suggest this. Penny, who still seemed to be in shock, didn't protest. Tanya, who wanted to protest, seemed to be too exhausted and overwrought to try.

With great trepidation, therefore, the trio had exited the crate, looking back fondly at this warm refuge, which the philosophical Sheldon saw as sort of primal womb. As the leader, he was afraid to move too fast lest Penny linger in the shadows and become lost or move too slow and allow the impulsive Tanya to charge ahead of him into the path of a moving vehicle and be crushed to death. At this point, barely a half hour after they had left the crate, Sheldon, who had the greatest challenge of all the cats, nudged the two females along tirelessly, almost lovingly, moving back and forth from front to rear in a fashion similar to a dog shepherding sheep.

The safest place for them in the light of day was not the alley anyway, he had convinced the girls. The alleys of this part of the city were filled with all sorts of dangers, foremost of which were the crazed derelicts roaming the streets. Trotting inexhaustibly back and forth down the boulevard as he coaxed the females along, Sheldon was at the end of his wits as he listened to Tanya gripe and prevented the catatonic Penny from walking off by herself.

"I'm tired.... I'm hungry.... When can we stop?" Tanya groaned.

"Come on girls," he prodded them gently, "we have to find food and drink. We should find a restaurant next to an alley where we can rummage through its garbage. They throw perfectly good food away at times; we should be able to scrounge up a meal."

"I told you," Tanya hissed, "I'm not eating garbage. I wanna Big Mac. I wanna coke and fries."

At that point, even the taciturn Penny looked at Tanya in disbelief. Sheldon was encouraged by this reaction and nestled her affectionately as the trio paused on the street. In many ways, Penny, a sleek and ruddy Abyssinian, personified the deep, inexplicable mysteries of her breed.

Above them, looming what seemed to be miles up into the bleak sky, the dark buildings contrasted the bursts of warm light from the storefronts lining the street. Pawn shops, liquor stores, and retail stores had begun to sprout up as they left skid row, but so far there were no restaurants sitting next to alleys or dumpsters that were visible from the street. The sidewalks and gutters were cleaner now and there were fewer derelicts up here, but there was much more traffic now and consequently more dangers when they crossed the street. Several times Sheldon hissed at Tanya for not paying attention to such threats. At one point, as he looked ahead and saw a McDonalds on the corner of Eighth and Main, he panicked when Tanya bolted ahead.

“Stop you stupid woman!” He cried out in her head. “Wait for the green light. Don’t you dare run that light!”

“Big Mac, coke, fries!” She replied in rote.

Looking back at Penny now, he said simply as if he was talking to his pet Irish Setter “Sit!” and raced frantically toward the scampering cat. The wide boulevard now teeming with morning traffic was barely a city block ahead when Sheldon began to gradually gain ground. Penny sat serenely watching him charge ahead, the thought fixed in the darkness of her brain that she was lost but was among friends who would feed and protect her. She was going nowhere. There was nowhere *to go*. Through the sluggish legs of early morning shoppers and passed a street lined with noisy cars, Tanya and Sheldon darted in and out, until on the very threshold of the thoroughfare, Tanya ran squarely into the legs of a woman pedestrian on the sidewalk. The woman let out a yelp and swiped at her with her cane. Sheldon realized, after seeing the way she struck out while staring straight ahead, that the woman was blind. This fact helped save the dodging Tanya from being clubbed to death and allowed Sheldon a chance to get in front of her and stop her in her tracks, as the woman ambled on her way.

“So help me Tanya, I’ll fight you before I let you run across the street.”

“It’s green now,” she hissed and spat, “get out of my way! I’m going to cross!”

“We’ll wait for Penny,” he transmitted menacingly. “It’ll turn green again. We’re not leaving Penny behind!”

“I hate Penny,” wailed Tanya. “I hate that stupid bitch! She’s slowing us down. This is all her fault!”

“No, listen to me,” Sheldon’s feline face tried its best to show emotion now, “India Crowley is at fault here, not poor Penny. She’s not slowing us down, *you* are by this *nonsense*. I told her to wait for me back there.” “Now come on Tanya,” he nudged her with his nose, “I’m worried about Penny. She might wander away in her state of mind. That will be *your* fault!”

Trotting reluctantly behind Sheldon after his rebuke, she continued to bristle, emitting an occasional hiss, until they reached the spot where Penny had been. A visual line between the legs of advancing pedestrians told him that Penny was gone.

“Oh my God!” Sheldon lamented. “She didn’t wait. Look what you’ve finally done Tanya. She knew you she didn’t like her. Now she’s gone!”

“I-I didn’t mean to,” Tanya’s snout quivered, “I’m sorry—”

“Stow it Tanya! It’s too late for that. I don’t have the foggiest notion where she’s at. I don’t see her up and down the street. She could be anywhere now!”

“What about this alley?” Tanya thought desperately. “There’s doors in back of these buildings. Maybe she ran into one of them.”

“Well, let’s go find out,” he retorted, scampering ahead of her, “she couldn’t have gone far.”

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Sheldon felt great sorrow for Penny and only anger at the repentant Tanya now. For several moments the pair ran down the alley, sniffing and looking each way, hoping that Penny had merely stopped to recline somewhere in her dulled state of mind. When they reached a midpoint in the passage, however, both cats were exhausted and nearly out of their minds with dismay. It seemed to be an endless alley with nothing but dirty back doors and barred up entries along the way. There was no sign of a living soul in this corridor let alone a small Abyssinian

cat. When, with much less confidence, Sheldon and Tanya decided to continue on, they could finally hear, after a few more moments, a distant telepathic surge: a plaintive cry, that of a cat in distress, rising in volume in their heads as a sonar blip on a submarine from an approaching ship.

“Penny!” Sheldon cried.

“What if it’s just another cat?” Tanya looked ahead with dread.

“No, that’s alarm we feel, Tanya, human alarm,” Sheldon insisted, scampering ahead toward the source of the noise.

Tanya followed reluctantly behind, fearful of the unknown. Seeing Sheldon dart sharply to the right several meters ahead, almost paralyzed with fear, Tanya now called out to her protector: “Wait! You’re going to fast!”

No longer in his proximity, Tanya became immediately disoriented by the in and out, sonar-like, instructions transmitted.

“Tanya,” came the broken message of her fiancé, “...this corridor... Penny’s voice... not far ahead!”

“What? You’re breaking up,” she called out frantically to Sheldon. “Which corridor?... Which way did you go?”

Suddenly, one of the denizens who roamed the boundaries of skid row, emerged from a dark corner ahead, reached down and grabbed Tanya by the nape of her neck, and began to carry her back into the darkness from whence it came. The little Siamese spat, clawed, and hissed continually, but to no avail, as the creature carried her into a small backyard beneath a single gnarled tree to a cage in the corner of the yard.

There, in what looked to Tanya very much like one of the rabbit cages her grandfather had kept on his farm, sat none other than her fiancé Sheldon and Penny Gruber. Swiftly, before the other two could escape, the lid was opened by the creature, Tanya was dropped in, and the lid was latched quickly shut again. It was only then that Tanya, looking back with momentary relief, could see the old woman walk away into her shadowy house.

“Now you’ve done it!” she spat at Penny. “Your little zombie routine has landed us all into a cage!”

“No-No-No!” Sheldon vigorously shook his head. “Penny was grabbed by that lady just like you and me. It might be my fault for leading you into this trap, but it’s your fault Tanya for getting us into this jam, not poor Penny’s. This would never have happened in the first place if you hadn’t taken off like you did!”

“My fault! My fault?” screeched Tanya. “You run into a trap and it’s *my fault?*”

The sounds emitted from the cage sounded typical for angry cats. The old lady looked out her timeworn door and smiled. Tanya and Sheldon were both hissing and wagging their tails, whereas Penny suddenly humped her back up as the old woman approached, indicating feline alarm.

The old woman was returning with two dishes in her gnarled hands: cat food and water. She had a kindly face. Her balding head and ragged dress and coat made her seem like one of the homeless folks roaming the streets, and yet she obviously had this small shack to live in and could afford to feed three cats. Upon opening the lid, Sheldon was tempted to leap up and out in order to escape these daffy girls. One of them wouldn’t talk and the other one wouldn’t shut up. Is this how I’m going to spend eternity? He asked himself, forgetting that the others could read his thoughts.

“I’m sorry,” he said simply now, looking down at the cat food and bowl of water deposited by the crone. “Let’s eat!”

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As Buck and his gang continued their odyssey across town, Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny sat forlornly in the backyard of the old lady, looking out of their cage.

“I’m not eating cat food!” Tanya mentally protested with a pouty little meow.

“It’s not so bad,” Sheldon said spiritedly. “Come on Tanya and Penny, eat up; we need our strength, so we can escape.”

“You keep talking about escaping,” Tanya sneered. “You still haven’t come up with a plan. Come on, mister hot shot, give us a clue!”

“The plan is simple,” he said patiently. “We wait for the old bitch to reach into our cage and then we spring!”

“That’s not a plan,” Tanya snorted, “that’s an act of desperation! That crazy old woman will club us to death!”

At just that moment, they both looked back in the cage to catch Penny nibbling at the dish of food.

“Oh my God.” Tanya made a face. “She’s eating that stuff! She’s must really be gone!”

“I dunno.” Sheldon pressed in toward Penny. “She’s got her appetite back. Maybe that’s a good sign!” “Penny,” he tested, “is that good? Do you really like that shit?”

“It tastes like my mother’s meatloaf,” Penny relayed mentally, munching thoughtfully on her food.

Sheldon and Tanya rubbed up excitedly against their companion, surprised and delighted by her response.

“Penny! You’re all right now!” Sheldon exclaimed. “We thought you were nuts!”

“Oh, I’ve always been nuts,” she said matter-of-factly, ready to shovel more in. “I’ve just had so much on my mind. My head seemed so crowded when India turned me into a cat. I guess I was in shock, but I don’t really mind being a cat.”

“Don’t say that,” Tanya scolded her. “Shame on you for saying such a thing!”

“Yeah, Penny,” Sheldon agreed. “You don’t want to wander around scrounging for hand-outs and shelter all your life. I used to hate cats. Now I realize how special they are and how mistreated they are, but I don’t want to be one of them. What kind of life would this be, Penny. We got to escape. I need you gals with me on this!”

“Tanya is right,” Penny looked up from the plate, “the old woman would kill us before she’d let us go.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Sheldon asked, looking at each female now.

“Yes,” murmured Penny, “as a matter of fact, I do.”

Walking over to the cage door, she pointed with her snout, thinking, “that’s not the way.”

“Then tell us, already,” Tanya sneered.

“I think we should play dead,” she said simply. “People don’t keep dead things around. They throw them away.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” Tanya exclaimed in amazement. “She’d probably have us stuffed.”

“Wait a minute,” Sheldon thought, nudging Tanya’s head, “that might be a good idea.”

“What?” Tanya started. “You’ve been a cat too long. Your brains are addled. Play *dead*? Are you serious Sheldon?”

“What is the first thing you’d do if you found one of your pets lying dead in its cage?” He tried to reason with her.

“Well,” Tanya considered, “... I wouldn’t pick it up right away. I’d go get some newspaper or a rag to pick it up.”

“Precisely,” Sheldon said enthusiastically, “and what else would you do or shall I say *not do*?”

“Shut the door!” cried Penny. “Oh, I like his mind.” She turned for agreement to Tanya then.

“Back off, woman,” snarled Tanya. “I liked you better when you were mute!”

“This is no time for petty jealousies,” Sheldon chided her now. “I think this might work. We’ll wait until we hear the squeak of her back door, and then we’ll get in freaky positions.”

“Freaky? I’m not sure what you mean?” Tanya rubbed up against him coyly. “You sure you don’t mean kinky? I know what *kinky* means.”

“You sure are stupid,” Penny thought, shaking her head.

“Tanya knows what freaky means too,” Sheldon tried to smile. “It’s like in road-kill. Come on, girls, you’ve seen dead things before.”

“Ooooh yick.” Tanya shuddered. “I ignore such horrors.”

“Here’s an example,” Sheldon dropped down, rolling over on his back and sticking out his paws.”

“And like this,” Penny, dropped to her side and stuck out her tongue.

“I can do that,” Tanya said petulantly. “Watch this!”

Tanya rolled onto her side too, stuck out her paws rigidly as had Sheldon and let her tongue hang out of her mouth, similar to Penny’s pose. Clearly, Tanya’s pose was the best.

“Well, we know one thing for sure,” Sheldon observed. “There’s only so many positions a dead cat can take. I think our basic positions will do.”

“Now that this is settled,” sighed Penny, “let’s eat. *I’m famished!*”

“Move over,” Sheldon joined her at the dish.

“Yuck,” gagged Tanya, “I’d rather starve!”

## Chapter Eleven

### The Witch Must Die!

Following the memory map still functioning in his mind, Buck tried to lead his troop of cats on the same course he took when he was employed as a pizza deliveryman. He recognized, in exaggerated proportions, several landmarks along the way, but he and his friends continued to have trouble with the signs. Such a search would work well for a six foot five, two hundred and twenty pound human but was difficult to do for a cat, who was only one foot tall. He had, as did his friends, short legs, a squat little body and, as far as he was concerned, poor eye sight to boot. To make matters worse for Buck, he couldn't remember the name of the street and had to constantly watch over his friends, especially the incorrigible Jim.

Buck tried very hard during their journey not to share his fears, but, because of their collective consciousness, found this difficult to do. He was almost certain, at this point, that they were lost and wondered if it was even possible for them to reach the hospital across town. His friends were exhausted. He was, after drinking beer and overeating for so long, out of shape and ready to drop. As an out-of-shape young men, they were now out-of-shape cats, especially Jim. At any moment, Buck suspected, the big calico was going to collapse into a multicolored heap and expire before their eyes.

But then suddenly, as the four cats stood at the corner of First and Main looking gravely at the road ahead, Buck caught sight of an ambulance stopping in front of a Jack-In-The-Box Restaurant and saw his chance.

“Okay, guys, follow me!” He let out a loud meow, scampering toward the vehicle.

As he had hoped, the two ambulance attendants, in their hunger for Jumbo Jacks, had left their front seat windows open. Following their leader up and over the open window in the door, the other three cats knew exactly what Buck had in mind. Obviously this ambulance, with the county hospital logo emblazoned on each side and on the back of the vehicle, would head back to the hospital unless the attendants got a call. Fortunately for the four cats, who now huddled beneath a gurney, this was exactly the case. After only a few short moments, the two attendants returned to their vehicle with sacks of food in their hands and, in even less time, were heading uptown to the county hospital, sipping cokes and munching fries.

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For the first time in several hours, Buck felt encouraged. *Obviously*, he thought to his friends, *the Lord listens to cats*. He had for the first period in his adult life prayed to God. The realization that time was running out for them could not dampen his enthusiasm. As one of the attendants broke into a sneezing fit up front, he gave his friends a mental pep talk: “This is our big chance, boys. When we get to the hospital we’re gonna find that bitch and turn off her life support system!”

As Buck continued his pep talk, his bombastic tone was reminiscent of how he sounded as a mortal man. As the four cats purred and nestled against each other's sides, one of the attendants continued to sneeze violently up front.

"Jeez Bob," they heard one of them cry, "cover your face. I don't want your friggin' cold."

"I'm sorry, Murray," responded Bob in the most miserable tone, "my sinuses are really bothering me, but it ain't no cold. I don't feel achy; I feel sneezy."

"Yeah, Bob, it's just like the time you didn't have the *flu*," Murray replied sarcastically, shielding his face and trying to hold the steering wheel at the same time. "The only other time you get this way is around cats. Come on, Bob, you got another cold. I better get me a bottle of vitamin C or some Cold-Eeze."

"No, listen to me, Murray," Bob responded after a muffled sneeze, "I'm only allergic to one thing: cats. I don't got no fever. I don't feel hot. It must be in the air."

"Wait a minute," Murray did a double take, "didn't we leave the windows open?... You don't suppose one of them mangy alley cats we saw running down the street climbed aboard?"

"Uh oh!" Tom's voice came into Buck's head.

As would a zombie, Bob rose up from the passenger seat and began lumbering through the ambulance. The four cats braced themselves for a battle with the advancing human, but he began sneezing so badly his associate demanded that he lie down in back until they reached the hospital. Once again it seemed as if God had answered Buck's prayers. As Bob lie there on the gurney over the four cats, his condition naturally worsened. Fortunately for poor Bob, his associate reassured him several times, the hospital was not far away. Help was on the way. Soon they were pulling into the emergency zone of the hospital, and Buck was telling his gang how they should escape.

Buck's plan was simple. When the attendants exited the vehicle, they would probably, because of Bob's condition, exit immediately and leave the windows open again, affording the four cats the opportunity to flee. If they closed their windows, one of them would push the crash bar in the back gate and they would rush out. Jim and Ed nodded with approval, but Tom, with his typical politeness, found fault with the plan.

"Listen Buck," he said incredulously. "they might lock the ambulance. What do we do then?"

"They won't do that," pshawed Buck. "Trust me on this Tommy. We made Bob really sick. Besides, these guys are stupid; they're predictable."

"Humans *aren't* predictable." Jim disagreed suddenly. "I was a human, and you were a human, and we weren't *predictable!*"

"Trust me," snorted Buck, looking over at Tom for support.

"Yeah, Jim, I guess he's right." the tomcat nuzzled between them. "We gotta have faith!"

Ed, who had been napping, looked up after the last sneeze. Jim nodded his fluffy head. In their current anatomical forms, they had all questioned this concept. Faith, like soul, seemed to apply only to conventional mortals, and would seem to be too great an abstraction for their bewitched minds. And yet all of them, even Ed had been praying during the last half hour.

"I have faith," Jim thought resolutely.

"Me too," Ed tried to frown.

Buck smiled proudly at his three friends.

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After the two attendants had exited the ambulance, the sound of Bob's sneezing trailed off significantly in the distance. At Buck's signal, the four cats scrambled out a window of the vehicle and scampered across the crowded parking lot toward the emergency ward of the hospital. They looked like any foursome of cats, with the exception, unknown to the rest of the world, that they were communicating telepathically, with each other, Buck giving them simple commands and warnings each step of the way.

"We're not going into the emergency entrance," Buck directed curtly. "Follow me down this path, until we find an open window or door, so we can go in the back way."

"I'm hungry," whined Jim, "when do we eat?"

"You're always hungry," Ed teased "You were a fat human; now you're a fat cat."

"I'm hungry too," Tom seconded Jim, as he kept pace with his friends.

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The buildings surrounding Buck's gang were shaded by oak and elm trees, the pattern of their branches and leaves moving eerily to the rhythm of a sudden breeze. The cats spooked a moment at this aberration, until Buck reminded them of what this phenomenon was. It was one more reminder that they were losing their human minds, as they completed their transformation to cats. A terrible moment in which Ed chased a ground squirrel up a tree and, after Buck coaxed him down, when they all spooked at the distant bark of a dog, underlined this fact in all of their minds. When, after sniffing and eyeballing every promising bend and turn ahead, Buck spotted a door propped open for the janitors, the big tabby charged ahead with a loud meow that was supposed to be a yell.

As they reached the ominous door, all four cats again spooked as a janitor emerged pushing a cleaning cart with a mop handle clinched in her hand. Buck again scolded them for their feline behavior, although he had spooked too. Before she removed the jam, which was propping open the door, the top cat flew into action. After hearing him meow, the other cats streamed out of the nearby bush. It was important that she be distracted somehow so the four could scoot past her into the room. Buck hissed at her, looking very much, as he approached, as if he would pounce onto her legs. The other cats also hissed and humped up their furry backs, moving back and forth on their tiptoes as they waited to enter the room. The woman panicked, as planned, and ran screaming back into the building, leaving the opening free. Buck ran in, and, close on his hind legs, scampered Tom, Ed, and Jim. Realizing that they were in a utility room, Buck sat cursing a moment, which amounted to a long fit of hissing, until he saw that there was an elevator straight ahead. The woman had gone out of a door on the side of the room, which was now closed. Buck's gang now gathered around him in a terrified knot.

"What do we do? What do we do?" They asked repeatedly.

"Listen," Buck looked around at his friends, "I noticed this building sloping down a hill. This is the basement of the same building that the emergency ward's in. It has to be. We lucked out boys!"

"Luck?" Jim groaned. "That bitch is going for help!"

"We gotta push that button up there," Buck motioned with his snout. "Don't argue with me Jim; we don't have much time!"

"But it's impossible," Jim groaned, collapsing in a furry heap.

“He’s right,” Ed spat angrily, “we don’t got the elevation, Buck. We’re gonna wind up being caught and sent to the pound!”

“I think I know how we can do it,” Tom came suddenly alive. “All we need is the woman’s mop. Three of us should be able to hold it, while Buck does one of his famous lay-ups and presses it home.”

“I haven’t played basketball in months,” Buck protested, “I’m gonna break my neck.”

Nevertheless, as his three friends grappled with the mop below, the big tabby prepared himself for the jump, mustering all his mental energy and strength. When it was positioned precariously near the target, Buck leaped up once, twice and finally, with the third attempt, pressed the mop so it hit the up button, then dropped heavily onto his paws.

The up arrow, which was the only direction in the basement, flashed on, a bell rang, and the door slid slowly open. By then the cats heard noise from behind the door. Collectively spooked, they humped their backs and hissed, startling the advancing maintenance men out of their wits. All four cats made it safely into the elevator before the doors began to close.

“I’m not grabbing those cats,” one of the men announced. “Let’s call security!”

“I got a better idea,” the second man said, snapping his fingers. “We’ll call animal control!”

“Now what do we do?” Tom asked, cringing inside with the others.

“It’s moving on its own,” Buck observed, after the doors shut tightly and the elevator left the utility basement, where it originated, and began rising up its well. “The first floor is lit up. That’s where emergency and the main floor connect. Someone up there pushed a button.” “.... They’re standing there waiting now,” he added, with a gasp. “We gotta move fast!”

As the elevator rose sluggishly to the next floor (the very floor where India Crowley lie), Buck stood on his trembling paws in front of the other three cats, expecting the worst as the elevator came suddenly to a halt.

“God protect us!” He tried to say, a series of inflected meows flowing out instead.

When the door opened, they looked out to see a crotchety old lady holding a small child’s hand.

“Kitties!” The little boy pointed excitedly.

“Good Lord!” The old woman screamed.

“Let’s run for it!” Buck ordered, skirting passed the pair.

“Damn varmint infested county hospital!” The old lady wrung her fist. “I know’d they had cockroaches. I heard they got rats. But *this is ridiculous!*”

“Kitties run! Go Kitties!” The little boy cried with glee.

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Buck’s gang had the opposite problem from Sheldon’s trio. Whereas Sheldon, Tanya and Penny were trying to get out of a jam, Buck’s gang seemed to be trying to get into one. (At least that is how Jim, Tom, and Ed saw it.) The foursome had no illusions that what they were doing might land them in the city pound.

As they darted down a hall, slipping passed startled nurses and patients into shadowy nooks and crannies to escape detection, a pair of hospital security guards had reluctantly began their search for the “mad” feline pests. Animal control attendants, they had been told, would not be allowed in the hospital since it might lower morale. What they didn’t know, as they passed a

patient in the hall, was that beneath the sheet-draped gurney on which the patient lie, the Shadowbrook cats had found temporary refuge.

The realization that they were temporarily safe but on the emergency floor where India probably lie only increased the cats collective fears, for none of them knew what to expect in the room of a comatose witch. Now that they were on the right section of the hospital, they must, Buck insisted, look for policemen or other conspicuous officials who would lead them to India's bed. These thoughts, which were picked up quickly by the others, invoked immediate arguments from Tom, Jim, and Ed.

"All right, mister hotshot, where's the cops and officials? All I see are nurses, injured people, and a pair of rent-a-cops walking up and down the halls," Ed thoughts shot into Buck's head.

"I'm watching, looking and listening," Buck explained feebly, peeking out at feet moving up and down the hall.

Beneath the sheet draped gurney with its patient waiting for transport to another location in the hospital, Buck gently scolded his friends for their skepticism, but found it difficult to impress them when they could read his own emotions, which included abject fear. Quite unexpectedly, however, when it appeared as if Buck had led them into a foolish trap, they noticed a commotion in the room right across the corridor. A policeman, escorted by a young nurse, entered the room, and then exited after a short while with the nurse by his side. A doctor also peeked in, followed by another nurse with an I.V. bag in her hand.

"Thank you Lord. Thank-you-thank-you-thank-you!" Buck purred loudly now.

"You're insane!" Jim peeked in terror across the floor.

"Wow! What colossal luck!" Tom nudged Buck. "But how're we gonna sneak in?"

"I'm thinking," Buck replied, his little snout poking out of the sheet.

"You forget," Ed transmitted sarcastically, "we can read your thoughts too. I don't see nothing but a big question mark in your head!"

As they waited for an opportunity to slip across the corridor and sneak into room 1B, the patient on the gurney complained to a passing nurse: "how much longer are you people gonna make me wait for my tests."

"We're very busy sir," she sighed, reluctantly stopping in her tracks. "We've had several code blues today."

"I don't care if they're code reds," the man groaned, rising up as if to climb off the gurney, "I've been waiting a half hour here. I gotta take a pee!"

"All right sir," she guided him gently as he touched the floor, "I think 1F has been emptied. You can use the restroom there."

"You know," the man said querulously, "I think you got rats in this hospital—big ones. I could've sworn I saw four of'em scoot under me just now."

Looking back with a shudder, the young nurse uttered a nervous laugh, "Oh, that's silly sir, we don't have rats here at County Hospital."

"Oh yeah?" sneered the man as she lead him into the room. "You folks got enough *cockroaches*. I must've seen an army of'em marching across the floor."

At just that moment, the door to Room 1B opened and another doctor emerged with a grim look on his face.

"This is our chance!" Buck shouted into their collective thoughts. "He left the door ajar. Let's get in there now!"

“Yeah,” Ed seconded him, “let’s go snuff that witch!”

The nurse, who had assisted the patient, glimpsed the foursome scurrying into Room 1B, but dismissed it with another shudder, but a young intern did a double take as the calico tail of Jim disappeared into the room. Fortunately for the cats, another code blue suddenly sounded from the nurses’ station, and the doctor was immediately distracted to the issue at hand.

“Your ours baby!” Buck said, hopping gleefully upon India’s bed.

“Let’s bite her!” Jim thought maliciously.

“Let’s scratch her all over then chomp off her tits!” cried Ed.

“Wait a minute,” ordered Buck. “Ed and Jim: stop gnawing on her hands and face. This is an assassination, not (he searched a moment for the right word)... a butchering site. Let’s be civilized. We’ll pull all her plugs and then split. So, stop it! We don’t got time to chew her up!”

At just that moment, however, the suspicious young intern returned to the scene. Soon afterwards a young nurse joined him in the room. The cats’ quick feline reactions allowed even the portly Jim to scurry swiftly under India’s bed as the door creaked. But once again his calico tail was seen.

“Hello,” the young doctor called into the shadowy room, “is anyone in here?”

“What’s wrong Doctor Wiggins?” The young nurse, who had recently exited India’s room, sounded fearful, herself.

“I-I thought I saw something run into this room,” he explained awkwardly. “I’m sure it’s due to lack of sleep.”

“I saw something too,” she reached up to touch her delicate throat. “The patient I was assisting said he saw rats and cockroaches running up and down the hall.... But I’m not sure what it was.”

“Say,” the doctor snapped his fingers, “one of the night nurses told me this woman was dressed up like a witch.”

“That explains it,” she giggled hysterically. “I think security should handle this.”

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Coincidentally at that very moment, after reporting into their supervisor on their walkie-talkies, the two security guards passed by India’s door again, having no desire to hunt for the cats or, as an eyewitness on the first floor told them, “monster rats.” Since the maintenance crew had, with the maintenance manager’s authorization, called security instead of animal control, the two officers felt misused. In the words of the security supervisor, himself, “it ain’t our jobs to chase strays!”

“I dunno Louie,” the handsome black security officer declared as they began scanning the main corridor, “I think them cats was a figment of that janitor’s imagination.”

Louie removed his hat to scratch his baldhead. “You think so Lamar? Those animal control guys should handle this anyhow. They get the big bucks, not us. I don’t particularly want to get the Pasteur treatment.”

“Say,” Lamar winked mischievously, looking around the corridor, “we could take a look up on the roof,” “and,” he patted his bulging shirt pocket next to his badge, “maybe have us a smoke.”

“We could also stop by the cafeteria, grab some coffee, and take our break,” said Louie, adjusting his hat smartly on his head.

“Yeah,” Lamar nodded with inspiration, “and while we’re at it, Louie, we could have us some lunch and take our time coming back. Let those animal control guys do their job!”

“Oh, look here, Lamar,” Louie pointed with mock dismay at his wrist, “it’s one o’clock! Beep-beep-beep: search ended. *Time for lunch!*”

“You da man, Louie,” Lamar high-fived his portly friend, “you da man!”

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While the security guards excused themselves from the search, Buck and his gang remained trapped beneath India’s bed as the young doctor stole quietly back into India’s room.

“So you’re a witch, eh?” he looked with misgivings at the comatose woman. “The night nurse said you were pretty banged up when they brought you in. Got yourself shot up too.... Let’s see,... your Alpha waves seem to be in operation.... But everything else is... phew!... *off the chart!*”

As they listened to him talk to the patient, the cats, who huddled next to their leader, exchanged nervous mental chatter. Buck’s own fears were transparent in spite of what was said in their minds.

“Don’t worry, boys, we’re safe,” he promised them. “This guy’s afraid of his own shadow. As soon as he leaves, we’ll get the job done, and no one will be the wiser when we escape.”

“Yeah, in your dreams!” Jim spat bitterly. “We’ll get gassed like all those other poor bastards at the pound!”

Ed, who had been silent for awhile, asked Buck, “Hey man, how we gonna sneak out of here? You really think it will be as easy as sneaking *in*?”

“Yes, he’s right, Buck,” Tom offered timidly. “It’s one thing entering a darkened room, but now we have to exit into a well-lit corridor. We need another plan.”

As they collectively thought about their dilemma, a different nurse, who was a towering Amazon of a woman, came in with a new I.V. bag and a syringe on a tray. The doctor, who was still mumbling to himself, looked back at her self-consciously, wondering if she had overheard him, and then, without further adieu, exited the room. The sounds of the large nurse working above them on India’s bed, now accentuated their fears, for here was a human who could do great harm to their little feline bodies. Directing their misgivings to their leader Buck, Jim, Tom, and Ed began to blame him for everything, from their bewitching, which, according to Jim, would never have happened in the first place if they had gone to the football game, to Ed’s feeling that this entire fiasco at the hospital was suicide. According to Tom, Buck’s best friend, “it was better to be a live cat, than a dead human!”

Buck moved to the far end of their temporary haven, overwhelmed by the voices in his head. It was, he was certain, the worst day he had suffered in his short life.

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When the Amazon finally left the room, Buck forced himself to make the first effort to kill the Shadowbrook Witch. It was, he would admit later to his friends, the most clumsy feat he had ever attempted, partly due to his fear of being immediately killed and partly because he did not know exactly what to do. As he scrambled up and onto her bed, looking each way in an effort to find the quickest way to unplug or turn her off, Buck uttered every prayer he could think of including the one his parents taught him as a child.

“... If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

As he approached the heart lung machine, he looked around feverishly, mentally muttering, “Let’s see, where do I begin?... Humph, that big pumper looks like the key.... But all I need is a plug.... It looks like it’s plugged directly into the wall.”

“Then do it already!” Jim’s thoughts screamed into his head.

“Get up here and help me, you cowardly sons-of-bitches!” demanded Buck.

“Just unplug her,” Ed suggested lamely. “That shouldn’t be so hard.”

Hopping upon the case containing the indicators, Buck called out in desperation, “Come on you guys, give me some support!”

“What do you say men?” Tom tried to sound brave, although fear registered strongly in his mind.

As he walked over India’s bosom and stood on her emaciated head, Buck decided to attack the lung machine first. Pulling the plug out seemed impossible for him at this angle and too difficult for his little paws. As he leaped onto the machine, he turned in time to see his three friends join him on the bed. The reluctance in their movement did not stop them from joining Buck’s effort to kill the witch. Ed and Jim could not help scratching her up as they traipsed over her frame. Tom marked a spot directly by her ear. While Buck tore and chewed with little effect at the rubber hoses strewn between India’s face and the machine, Jim attempted to push buttons over various indicators and Ed and Tom decided to work on pulling out the plug. Before Buck could make a hole in the apparatus, Jim could successfully push a button or turn a dial, and Tom and Ed could get even get a grip on the plug, the door opened, a shaft of light filled the room, and the cats scrambled under the bed.

“That was close!” Jim announced with a sigh.

“We failed! We failed!” Buck mentally wailed. “We’ll have to try again.”

“What is that smell?” Doctor Wiggins asked the young nurse.

“It smells like urine,” she answered, carefully inspecting the bed.

“Doesn’t this woman have a catheter?” The doctor asked, sniffing India’s face. “Wait a minute, I smell urine up here, beside her head.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible,” the nurse shook her head, dabbing a Kleenex over India’s cheek.

“Well, let’s get someone in here to change this woman’s bed clothes and nightgown. You might have to check the mattress too.”

“Uh oh, did you hear that?” Jim asked with a feline gasp.

“Yes,” Buck decided, “that’s our cue. We’ve got to get out of here before they get back here and mess with this bed!”

“When?” asked Tom and Ed.

“Now,” cried Buck, “as they’re leaving—before they shut the door behind them, we have to escape! Turn sharply left, men, and we’ll head toward the exit down the hall!”

Buck set the example, praying that the others would follow suit, scampering ahead of the more slowly moving doctor and nurse toward the door. Although he was able to run clear of them and out the door, the other cats ran right into the legs of the doctor and nurse. The nurse screamed and the doctor gasped as they tripped over the cats. In the process Jim’s leg was injured by a misplaced foot and he was limping as he exited the room.

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As Jim entered the corridor, he could see only humans moving up and down the hall: visitors, patients, and hospital staff, but no cats. He was alone; terror gripped the calico now that he was separated from his friends. An amazed and flustered Doctor Wiggins followed the injured cat, wondering what he should do. He had, in the two years he had been with the hospital, seen cockroaches skirting the baseboards and even spotted a few rats, but cats in a patient's room? That was a first!

"Hey, someone, anyone," he sputtered, looking around for help, "there's cats loose on the ward!"

"Oh, dear me," a heavyset bespectacled nurse gasped, "I'm not gonna touch that beast. He may be sick. Let's go find an orderly."

"We just need a bag or something," replied the doctor irritably. "He's not sick; the poor little fellow's injured. I clobbered him accidentally with my shoe!"

No one, however, within earshot or visual range, responded to Doctor Wiggins's call. Most of the traffic in the immediate vicinity stopped or slowed down, giving the cat a wide berth as it hobbled across the floor.

Jim could scarcely believe he was in such a predicament. Fortunately, he looked as if he was sick. No one wanted to pick up a sick cat, he recalled: it might be rabid or, if it was injured like him, simply be in a nasty mood. In spite of the excruciating pain he felt, Jim managed to emit a long drool from his mouth, jerked his head a few times and then growled, hissed and humped up his back. The young doctor, who was having second thoughts, cringed at this effect. As he followed at a safe distance now, he called the nurses station on his cell phone and asked for the number of animal control. Bertha Welch, the supervisor, informed him that someone had already been called. Patients and visitors already thought the county hospital was a pestilential hole, she explained bluntly, so they must try to do this as quietly as possible, themselves, using security or maintenance personnel.

Unfortunately for Doctor Wiggins and the Emergency Medicine Ward at the county hospital, the maintenance men had been the ones who called security, and the two officers, Lamar and Louie, influenced by the attitude of their supervisor, continued to lay low, waiting complacently for animal control officers who would never come.

Filled with misgivings now, Doctor Wiggins retreated up the hall to the nurse's station to confront the intransigent Bertha Welch. Unhampered by friend or foe, Jim limped down the corridor in the direction that the other cats had run, his shaggy coat looking like a multicolored dust mop dragging the floor. To some observers, who were cat lovers, he invoked pity but for others, shocked by his appearance, he was the subject of great shock and fear.

"Mad cat! Mad Cat!" a corpulent woman visitor cried.

"Why the poor thing's hurt," a young lab technician said with concern.

To keep from being captured or clubbed by panic-stricken visitors or staff, Jim detoured into another room. This time there was a patient in the room and a nurse was, at that moment, checking his I.V. Luckily for Jim, the man was unconscious and the nurse was too preoccupied to notice as he ran under the bed.

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After Tom and Ed made their getaway through the legs of the doctor and nurse and followed Buck to the main corridor and on toward the exit down the hall, Buck called to them that he was going back for Jim. They must, he advised grimly, wait for some nice person to open

the door for them; it was their only chance. Jim and he would meet them by the large elm tree they had passed on the grounds. He knew it would be dangerous, but Buck's concern for Jim was overwhelming now.

"Stay put Ed! No chasing squirrels!" He ordered the Havana as he scampered back down the hall.

"I'll keep an eye on him," Tom promised as he and Ed ran the opposite way.

Now, more than ever, Buck needed his mental telepathy to reach out to his injured friend.

"Jim, Jim, where are you?" he called out in his mind. "Oh man, you really screwed up now!"

From his own memories, which remained strong in spite of his fears, came the same comparison Tom and Tanya had made to sonar. His hope was that the closer he came to Jim the stronger would be Jim's call for help, but so far his head was filled with nothing but the normal static of the human's world.

Reasoning that Jim had probably not even made it down the first corridor to the main hall, Buck ran directly to the point where they had found the gurney near India's room. The unfortunate patient was still lying on it in a state of torpor as he waited for his tests. When he was in mental range of his friend, Jim could hear him calling "Jimbo, Jimbo, answer me Jim!"

"I'm in here!" He called out from beneath the bed.

"Where?" Buck called frantically. "Give me some landmarks."

"I'm across from a drinking fountain." Jim explained, peeking out into the darkened room. "I saw it when I ran into this room."

"There's one of them!" cried the nursing supervisor, pointing at Buck.

"Yes, indeed, Miss Welch," snorted Doctor Wiggins, "an American shorthair tabby, I believe. You actually think I would touch those filthy beasts? I don't want to have the Pasteur treatment, Miss Welch? You've got serious problem on this ward!"

"I know, I know," she muttered light-headedly as Buck searched for his friend. "That's not natural for a cat, not natural at all. Where are those goddamn guards?"

"Forget the guards," Doctor Wiggins now uttered a bitter laugh. "They're worse than useless. Nurse Sullivan saw Officers Lamar Hastings and Louis Bozelli, the two deadbeats sent by security, in the cafeteria. One of our x-ray technicians saw them in the veranda a few moments ago smoking up a storm."

"Oh, dear me." Bertha Welch clasped her forehead in disbelief. "Maintenance should have handled this as soon as they entered the building. It's all their fault!"

"Forget maintenance," grumbled the doctor, "those numbskulls are the ones who called security! They don't want rabies shots either, Bertha. I don't care about hospital policy or what the hospital superintendent says, we need animal control! We need those bastards NOW!"

"Yes, yes, of course Doctor Wiggins." the harried supervisor nodded, raising her cell phone to her ear, "I'll call animal Control at once. I just hope they get here soon!"

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After seeing the drinking fountain and spotting the room across from it, Buck scampered inside, startling the attending nurse out of her wits.

"Mad cat! Mad cat!" came the refrain.

"Under here," Jim called.

While the nurse went to find help, Buck darted under the bed. There was hardly any time left, but he now talked to Jim as he would a child.

“Jim, you remember that decoy play we did in football? You know the one where the halfback runs out as if he’s gonna catch a pass, but the quarterback runs for a touchdown himself.”

“Yeah,” said Jim meekly.

“Well, you’re the quarterback this time, Jim.” Buck said moving forward now. “.... I’m going to create interference while you head toward the exit passed the elevator down the hall. That’s the goal post, Jimbo—*freedom!*”

“I think I remember seeing the exit,” Jim said fearfully. “But I’m not sure I can make it. My leg’s really banged up. I can barely walk.”

“All you gotta do is follow me,” Buck explained softly. “I’m gonna act so deranged, no one will dare touch me. You just follow along. Capiche?”

“All right,” came Jim’s mental response.

With this diversionary tactic in play, the calico would make his escape. Buck trotted out, letting out a terrible caterwauling sound that male cats performed when protecting their territory. Jim jerked around, as he had before, as if rabid or possessed with an evil spirit. No one in the corridor would attempt to apprehend them by themselves, and everyone was calling for someone else to do the deed. Lamar and Louie were just this moment returning from their break, and none of the orderlies had the nerve to go after the cats. By the time a nurse’s aid had the ingenious idea to throw a laundry sack over them, Buck, growling and snapping at her ankles and shoes, had led the equally demented but much slower Jim to the corridor leading in the direction of the elevator and the exit down the hall. The nurse’s aid shuddered and gave up the attempt, as a mixed group of cat fanciers and cat haters watched the cats escape.

Now it depended on whether someone would take the elevator up to the second or third floor or open the door leading out of the building before they were caught. Taking the elevator back down to the utility basement might prove to be a trap or a dead-end at this point. The most important thing, Buck explained to Jim, was getting off this ward. When the heavysset bespectacled nurse and an orderly appeared suddenly in the main corridor, the two cats felt as if they were, indeed, trapped. Both the nearby elevator and the exit down the hall remained unused as they waited for a Good Samaritan or unwitting visitor or hospital employee to appear. Meanwhile, the nurse and orderly looked fearfully at each other but moved steadily toward the cats.

“There’s two of those little sons-of-bitches!” The nurse snarled.

“Do you remember what we did to India when she tried to put us in her sack?” Buck asked his terrified friend.

“We scratched her,” Jim answered, looking with horror at the advancing pair.

“I bit clear to the bone!” Buck reminded him.

Just as the man and woman were upon the cats, the woman brandishing a toilet plunger that she would use as a club and the man lifting up a sack to nab them, the bell to the elevator sounded, the door opened, and Buck and Jim ran inside passed a startled young woman, who immediately exited onto the ward. The nurse and orderly staggered after the cats. Before they could capture the two, however, Buck ran between the corpulent woman’s legs, scratching her badly on the way through. While the man tried to place the sack on Jim now, the big yellow tabby turned and began biting the man’s shoe, the woman ineffectively swatting at him with the

plunger, which glanced off Buck's thick skull. As the orderly tried to shake Buck off his shoe, he began to howl as the tabby's teeth bit through. Jim likewise sank his fangs into the nurse's unshaven leg. The woman dropped the plunger and the man dropped his sack, both of them howling with rage but limping from the scene. Jim now hobbled behind Buck towards the exit where the young woman was now heading. Both of them sensed that she was a cat fancier, although she appeared to be frightened of them now.

"Careful! Watch your timing!" Jim counseled frantically. "Wait for her to open the door!"

At first, as she opened the door, the woman looked back in fear at the approaching cats, but then, in order to impress her with his intelligence, Buck paused and, in a very unfeline pose, pointed his paw at the door and nodded his head. The woman stared in disbelief at the big yellow tabby and, holding the door open now, let Buck and then Jim pass.

"Thank you for helping us escape!" Buck meowed, while he darted passed her shapely legs.

"Why, you were trying to talk to me, you poor little beastie!" She declared with an English accent, waiting for Jim to catch up. "I will help you escape!"

"She heard you," Jim transmitted, out of breath, purring in spite of his pain.

"She's a cat lover," explained Buck, affectionately rubbing against her leg. "Maybe she'll take us home."

Though Buck easily followed her down the path, Jim could barely walk now. To prove that he was intelligent too, Jim made all sorts of squeaky and mewling sounds and gestured with both his paws and head. Seeing his affliction, the woman lifted him up and told the other cat to follow her to the car. Fortunately for Buck, the other two cats had not obeyed his instructions and were waiting directly outside the building. As soon as the woman saw Tom and Ed, she asked the tabby whether or not his friends were trying to escape too. Buck nodded vigorously and the woman uttered a hysterical laugh.

"Show the woman that your not dumb cats!" Buck ordered them as they followed them to the woman's car.

Tom and Ed now ran ahead of the trio and performed all sorts of antics, including playing leap frog and rolling around crazily on the lawn. The young English woman's apprehension had almost disappeared as she allowed the four cats to climb into her small car. For a moment, she sat there marveling at the miraculous cats. With Jim laid gently in the back seat and Buck, Tom, and Ed huddled around the woman in the front, the car backed out of the stall, rolling quickly out of the parking lot and onto the street.

"We failed to kill the witch," Buck transmitted to his gang now, "but we did our best! I'm sure we can find a way to give this kind woman directions to Shadowbrook Arms.... At least we're still alive!"

"I'm hungry," groaned Jim from the back seat.

"I'm tired," Tom admitted, laying his head on the woman's lap.

Ed, who was too tired and hungry himself to be distracted by birds or bugs, curled up next to Buck, reading his friend's sorrow more clearly than the others now.

"Don't blame yourself," he consoled his friend. "It wasn't meant to be. It won't be so bad being a cat!"

## Chapter Twelve

### Mimjet and Francine

It proved to be virtually impossible to give directions to the kindly British lady. She appeared to be slightly mad. Buck tried to aim her in the right direction by rising up on his haunches, pointing a paw straight ahead to indicate due south and meowing vigorously to press the point home. She laughed with delight and nodded her head with approval at his antics, but then she promptly turned left at the next signal and began heading due west across town instead of south to Shadowbrook Arms. All the while she hummed and muttered happily to herself but otherwise paid him no heed.

“Oh, I wish you could understand me,” Buck groaned. “We need a GPS. You’re going the wrong way!”

By now, the other cats had become significantly agitated, themselves, after Buck’s antics. Tom and Ed watched in dismay as the big tabby jumped directly onto the dash and then slid down onto the floorboard when he lost his grip. The woman admonished him mutely by wagging her finger at him and giving him a little swat. To move out of harm’s way, Ed left the crowded front seat and joined Jim in back. With a hiss, Tom shifted quickly to the right as Buck scrambled from the floorboard back onto the seat.

Buck realized how foolish he had been to assume he could communicate with this woman. He was a cat. He could not talk nor gesture adequately with his stubby paws. The more he meowed and carried on, the more agitated the other cats became. The woman found his movements distracting and even frightening when he rose up on his haunches again, came right up to her face, and meowed directly into her ear, trying desperately to say, “You’re going the wrong way, you dumb shit!”

“Scoot, skidattle! Bad cat!” She scolded, gently slapping his rump. “Sit down before I have a wreck!”

“All right Einstein,” Jim drawled as Buck hissed and humped his back, “what do we do now?”

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” Buck transmitted forlornly, stretching up onto the dash, his tail swishing below her chin. “I assumed she would take us home. But this woman’s dense. She won’t be able to understand us until we find a computer or something to type a message on.”

“What if she doesn’t have a computer?” Tom gave him a dubious look.

“What if she lives in the next county and drives us fifty miles out of our way?” asked Ed, while toying with the buttons of a sweater lying on the seat.

“What if, what if!” Buck became defensive. “What do you guys expect after we climb into a stranger’s car? We’re safe and sound for now, aren’t we? She’ll probably feed us when she gets us home.”

“Yeah sure,” responded Jim glumly, looking down at his injured leg. “How do you know she won’t eat us instead?”

“She’s an English lady,” Tom said, shaking his head. “My grandmother was English. She *never* ate cats!”

“Listen, Tommy,” Jim continued to wince with pain, “there ain’t no people more civilized than Koreans, and them folks eat *dogs!*”

Ed had been absorbed in his destruction of the woman’s sweater but perked his ears up now.

“Jim,” he said wryly, “that’s the third time since we began this caper that you’ve made a racist remark!”

“What?” Buck and Tom looked back at Ed.

“I’m saying he’s prejudice,” Ed reiterated, having torn almost all of the buttons off the woman’s sweater now. “He’s a big fat racist pig!”

Buck and Tom understood Ed’s mood. As a human, Jim had never shown much prejudice, but Ed was toying with the big portly feline again as he had done so many times before. Fortunately for the smaller feline, Jim was disabled or there might be trouble in the car.

“Some people eat cats when they’re hungry,” Ed thought off-handedly to himself. “What’s the big deal? You eat chickens, cows, and pigs, don’t you? You do what you gotta do.”

“Shut your disgusting mouth!” Jim tried to rise up again but then laid back down with a groan. “So help me, if I wasn’t laid up like this, I’d kick your wetback ass!”

Jim’s bigoted adjective made Buck and Tom cringe. Ed stuck out his little pink tongue and called Jim a big fat racist pig again.

“That’s enough Ed!” snapped Buck, as he jumped up on top of the seat.

Though he was in a more tranquil mood, Buck’s impulsive leap caused the other cats to spook. He sat there precariously next to the headrest, as if it was his stump now, surveying the road ahead as if he didn’t have a care in the world. The woman swatted his tail out of her face and smiled tolerantly at him, but she was growing impatient with his behavior in the car. She could not possibly have suspected the commotion going on inside the cats’ heads or their concern about her behavior now.

“We either allow this woman to take us home,” Buck announced, looking down at Jim and Ed, “or we continue to make a fuss like we’re doing and get tossed out of her car.”

“All right,” Ed shrugged, “let’s don’t piss her off.”

“Have you forgotten?” Jim looked up at him with dismay. “I can’t walk.”

“Very well,” Buck peered down challengingly at him, “then why are you worried about winding up on this woman’s plate?”

“I-I dunno,” Jim tried explaining. “I’ve had a lot of nightmares since Halloween. Awful ones, much worse than before. It starts with India chasing us down the hall...”

“You forget,” Buck reminded Jim, “we shared the same nightmare. We still share it.” “It’s like,” he searched for the right words, “... we have the same *brain.*”

“Buck,” Jim looked up at his friend, “I have a bad feeling about that woman. I think she’s nuts!”

Buck, who had been looking down at the woman's cleavage, was silent a moment. He had thought the same thing himself. Ed sat there on the shredded sweater across from Jim thinking about what Jim had said too. It was true, they collectively agreed, the woman grinned a lot, muttered to herself and was in a big hurry to get home. Buck was growing sleepy from the motion of the car, however, and was remembering when he was a human being.... He was driving Mary Lou Bailey, South High's cheerleading queen, to the prom.... He had been a big wheel on campus then, but College had proved to be a disaster.... His short life had proven, in fact, to be one, long pointless effort to recapture those golden moments at South High. Knowing now, that his friends shared his thoughts, as they drifted off to sleep, he shared with them his fantasy about the English lady, whose breasts called out to him from her dress. For several moments, until sleep stole their consciousness, they took turns trifling with the woman, but as humans with fingers able to squeeze, what Buck nostalgically called, the 'melons' on her chest.

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Jim was feeling poorly now. Even the mischievous Ed, who loved to needle him, felt concern for the portly cat. Because of his large girth, he needed almost half of the back seat to lie comfortably. Ed moved further away, at Buck's signal, to give him more room. Soon, to Buck's satisfaction, both Jim and Ed began falling asleep. For a moment, as Tom joined Buck on the other side of the head rest, their tails swishing to and fro, the woman grew irritable again at this distraction and shooed Buck, the closest of the two, down from his perch. Tom remained aloft a few moments while Buck hopped down obediently to sit beside the woman, purring loudly with contentment as she stroked his head.

The woman alternately petted Buck and reached up to stroke the furry Maine coon, who dropped down to curl up next to the big tabby on the seat. Jim was snoring peacefully in the backseat of the car. Displaying typical feline caprice, Ed had forgotten his feud with Jim and used the calico as a pillow as he fell slowly asleep.

Not so long afterwards in their journey, as the cats fell in and out of slumber, the automobile began pulling into a long, windy private road that led up to a large white house on a hill. Almost immediately, the cats felt a rise in elevation and noticed a sudden drop in noise after leaving the busy street. Buck, Tom, and Ed were able to stretch up on their legs and peek out through the window glass in order to marvel at the mansion, while poor Jim could only lay there and ask them what they saw. Buck and Tom described, for Jim's benefit, a huge, green lawn onto which sprinklers were showering, tall majestic elms and sycamores casting shadows on the ground, a circular driveway with a sculptured but inactive fountain in the middle, and a spooky nineteenth century mansion on top of the hill.

"Oh, this lady's *rich!*" Ed crowed. "She must have been a visitor or patient in that hospital. She doesn't have to work!"

"I don't like this," thought Jim with a shudder, "it's too isolated. It's much too quiet. It reminds me of Norman Bates' house: the one in Psycho where he keeps his dead mother mummified in an upstairs room."

"The only psycho around here," Ed snickered, "is you!"

Watching the woman stop her car and beam quizzically down at him, Buck thought about what Jim had just said, wondering if it was possible that the young English woman was really insane.

A tall, dark skinned man appeared suddenly by the car, opened the door, and stood there like a statue as she scooted out. The woman exited slowly, her movements stately as if she might be playing a designated role. As the three cats filed out of the car, Jim hobbled down to them and was immediately cradled in the tall, dark man's arms.

"They're going to eat me, I just know it!" He cried.

"Calm down Jimbo," Buck called up to him. "This guy's her servant. He looks like one of them Hindu towel heads. They don't eat cats, only oriental food and cows."

In deed, Mimjet, as she called him, wore a white turban on his head and a stunning white suite that was buttoned at the collar. A dark purple sash was tied around his waist.

"Miss Francine has brought visitors for the Cromwell family again," he acknowledged as he held Jim gently in his arms.

"They're magical cats, Mimjet!" she looked down at the remaining cats, clasping her small hands.

"Yes of course, magical in deed." Mimjet looked at her indulgently now.

"Jim's right, this place is spooky," thought Ed, keeping pace with Buck.

Tom was tempted to run for it now, but there was, he realized quickly, nowhere to go.

"Come on kitties," she beckoned, opening the front door and following Mimjet in.

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Darkness gobbled them up as they entered the inner sanctum, until at last, when they had reached the center of what appeared in the dim light to be a large spacious living room, an inexplicable shaft of light from a ceiling window engulfed the group. The suddenness and eeriness of the setting caused the cats to hiss and spook. For a moment, it seemed as if Jim's fears had been justified. Gradually, however, as if an old-fashioned gas lantern was slowly being turned up in the room, there was enough light to see French provincial furniture and fine Persian rugs. Portrait and landscape paintings on the walls and a large crystal chandelier hanging from the windowed ceiling completed this picture of late Victorian opulence, until, finally, the lights were turned up fully and the cats could see clearly the outer perimeter of the room.

A carved wooden staircase wound down from the second floor to the living room. Two scantily clad wood nymphs had been carved at the end of each rail. Through a large doorway on the other side of the room they could see the hall and front doors through which they entered this eerie mansion, and at the other end of the room a large expanse of gabled windows beyond which a garden house bloomed.

Observing Jim's infirmity now, Mimjet immediately laid him on a ruby red cushion, and then four bowls of food were brought out immediately by two twin adolescent Indian servants, who wore exquisite yellow shifts and sported gold dots on their foreheads and jingling bracelets on their slender wrists.

"I don't like this at all," came Jim's refrain.

This time Jim spoke for all of them, and yet the famished cats were drawn magnetically to their bowls. Expecting mere cat food, they found instead a tasty porridge of meat and lentils. When they were done, Jim and Buck each let out a proper belch. With Francine and Mimjet's backs turned, Ed marked a spot on the rug. Tom, the most cerebral of the four, could not help marveling at the paintings on the wall. While the other three cats huddled apprehensively together on the floor, the twins reappeared with first aid items to treat Jim's injury. Quickly but

gently, Mimjet applied a dressing and a very professional looking splint to Jim's injured leg, which he said was not broken but merely sprained with a small cut near the paw.

"Well children," Francine now rubbed her porcelain hands together, "let's see what you cats can do."

"Oh, we're cats now, not kitties," sneered Ed. "The bitch wants us to *perform!*"

"Don't piss her off Ed," cautioned Buck, noticing the wet spot on the Persian rug.

"Well," observed Tom, "at least she hasn't put us in a cage. We'll just do a few tricks and, presto, be on our way!"

"Listen Tommy," Buck looked into the Maine coon's emerald eyes, "we don't know where we're at now. We're clear across town. More importantly, Jim's injured and can't travel. She's gonna have to take us home. We can't *be on our way!*"

"We need a plan," Jim joined the mental conversation.

"Yeah," Ed seemed to sneer, "like the one Buck had in the hospital. *Some plan!*"

A miniature playground slide and a host of other pint-size gymnastic equipment was brought out now by the twins, whom Mimjet called Indira and Maj. Francine and Mimjet stood back in anticipation of the show ahead. What was the most frightening experience the cats had experienced so far in this house now materialized on the staircase. Four small children—two boys and two girls, between the ages of four and eight, ran down the steps, followed by a man and woman walking arm-in-arm. The family looked like it stepped right out of a Charles Dickens classic, Tom commented to his friends.

"Nanny, nanny, what did you bring for us?" a golden haired little boy squealed.

"Mister and misses Cromwell," Francine motioned proudly, "I've brought the children magical cats this time. They're so very smart. I found them in the hospital after I visited Papa."

"Jesus Christ," spat Buck, "she's a nanny! She brought us home to entertain these brats!"

"I'm out of here!" Ed prepared for a hasty retreat.

"Me too," Tom seconded Ed. "These folks are going to make us personal pets for those kids. We'll become prisoners in this house!"

"I remember seeing this place in a horror movie," Jim was rambling fearfully again, "... yes, it was about a haunted house. The pictures had faces like those on the wall.... The banister came alive like a big giant snake."

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Francine lifted up Tom, whom she considered to be the cutest of the four, and placed him on the ramp on the slide. As she bent down, the other three cats once again noted her cleavage. Francine, they also mentally agreed, had nice looking legs.

"You dear little pussy," she said in a singsong voice, "show us what you can do!"

"Tom's a little pussy!" Ed taunted.

"I'll take *her* pussy," blurted Buck. "That woman's a *babe!*"

"What am I suppose to do?" Tom asked, looking down helplessly now at Buck.

"Piss on it," Ed suggested.

"No, shit on it," recommended Jim.

"Don't you dare!" Buck cried. "Come on Tom, you're smarter than the rest of us. Use your head. Do a dance for them after you go down the slide, and make funny sounds."

Almost in rote, the frightened Tom climbed up the ladder of the slide, holding the rails shakily with his paws. Meowing musically as he prepared to slide, he then slid down on this

back, landing with a thud on the floor. The boys and girls and their parents clapped enthusiastically. Tom hissed angrily at them before running over to his friends. Mimjet and Francine exchanged worried looks as they watched the children run to the cats. Dreading his own debut, Ed hissed and humped his back, while Jim could only groan.

The next to perform, thanks to little Margaret, who placed him rudely on the slide, was Buck Logan, who almost bit her as she lugged him up the steps. After slipping awkwardly down the slide on his paws, Buck landed upright, did an imitation of a bucking bronco, rolled over several times and then, remembering what his Siberian husky had done while guarding the house, played dead. This brought on even greater applause, but Misses Cromwell's face had begun to show alarm, while there seemed to be a crafty look on Mister Cromwell's face.

Jim was injured and could not perform, Mimjet explained testily, as Margaret tried to pick him up. Ed balked at the idea, protesting "I'm not a trained monkey," until being coaxed by Buck onto the slide.

The little Havana now did an obscene parody of a female cat in heat when he reached the top of the slide. Then, after drawing his little canine muzzle into a snarl, he went down sideways on the slide to avoid crash-landing and attempted to walk on his hind legs a moment after rising to his feet.

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It was, Mimjet convinced Mister Cromwell, physically impossible for the cats to perform on the miniature seesaw, trampoline or swing. All in all, as circus acts go, the cats agreed that it was an unspectacular performance, something any circus animal could do.

"Let's give them a *real* show," Buck called out mentally to his gang. "When they find out what we really are, maybe they'll let us go!"

"Or put us in a cage," Tom warned him. "Then we'd be too valuable to release."

Ed and Jim nodded in agreement with Tom. As the four cats argued about the merits of being *too smart*, they bobbed, shook or cocked their heads, looking very much like deaf mutes gesturing to each other, with the exception that, unknown to the humans, the cats were also talking inside their heads. The impression, thought humorous by the children, received a mixed reaction from the parents. The father was delighted while his wife was horrified at this unnatural scene.

Clapping their hands with delight as the felines regrouped, the four golden-haired children raced out to grab up one of the cats. Mimjet ran ahead of them frantically waving his hands. In the background the parents continued to look on with frowns on their faces, murmuring heatedly to each other a moment. It was becoming obvious to the cats that they were not happy about something. The woman was especially agitated and seemed to point accusingly at them now.

"No, no, little children," begged Mimjet, "leave the kitties alone."

"I don't like this!" Jim's catchphrase filled their heads.

"Yeah," Ed's eyes narrowed with thought, "I'm getting a bad feeling too."

Quite instinctively now, in the most dramatic reminder that they were felines, Buck, Ed and Tom spooked and Jim let out the most horrible hiss during the commotion. All four cats bared their fangs and huddled together in a tight knot, as Mimjet tried to shield them from the children's hands.

"Mummy! Mummy! Papa! Papa!" the children ran screaming back to their parents.

“What is the meaning of this Francine?” The father asked, looking menacingly down at the cats. “Sheila feels that these cats are acting very strangely. Are they drugged or are the little beasts mad?”

“I don’t know Reginald, they were so cute at the hospital and in the car,” Francine’s voice fluttered. “I think these little beasties might just be nervous. I know they’re not drugged, and I’m certain they’re not mad.”

“I think that these little fellows are marked out by the gods,” Mimjet announced boldly with a slight bow. “We must treat them with respect for what they are.”

“Mimjet, I’ll have no more of your heathen talk in my house!” The wife shrieked. “Reginald,” she complained, turning to her husband, “it’s bad enough that your father’s firm sends us to this wretched land. He had to send his own personal secretary to corrupt my home.”

“Now, now Sheila,” Reginald patted her wrist, “you mustn’t get your heart in a dither. This couldn’t be as bad as those iguanas Mimjet brought into the house.”

“Iguanas?” Ed turned to Buck. “My grandparents had a couple of those running around their house down in Mexico. I hated those ugly lizards. Jim was right to be scared. These people are nuts!”

“Not all of them,” Jim shook his fuzzy head. “Mimjet’s our friend. He patched me up pretty good.”

“Yeah,” Tom nodded thoughtfully, “Mimjet is our protector. I’m glad he’s on our side.”

While the cats discussed how they were going to communicate with the humans, they again seemed to be in a mute discussion. Reginald and Sheila Cromwell and their children withdrew from Mimjet, Francine, and the cats to an upstairs room. In spite of their performance, the humans seemed to be very upset about the cats. Had it not been for the incapacitated Jim, the cats would have fled. A heated discussion followed, as Mimjet seemed to stand guard over the beleaguered cats.

“Oh Vishnu, I will not let your children be harmed by those limeys,” he promised, looking protectively down at the four. “Sir Sidney Cromwell understood my gifts, but his son has been influenced by that religious fanatic of a wife. Please give me wisdom and protect your children from their whims.”

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Encouraged greatly by Mimjet’s support, Buck attempted to communicate one more time directly with Mimjet and Francine. Running over to where a telephone sat on a tiny Victorian cherry root table, he attempted to hop up on the table and only succeeded in knocking over the vintage piece of furniture and cause Francine to gasp. Next, as Mimjet looked on in awe, he ran to a portrait of an ugly crone-like woman whom he thought looked like a witch, and let out a loud meow in an effort to make his point. Rising up on his haunches, he pointed to the painting and then, when this drew blank looks on the pair, ran over and pointed at the buttons on the phone. “We were bewitched,” he tried to tell them. “I need a computer to type a message on, so you can understand me!”

When this didn’t bring on the correct response for Buck, he hissed at them and ran around in circles a moment forgetting completely he was not a cat. Francine, who grew faint at this sight, wrung her hands in despair.

“Oh, Mimjet,” she cried, “stop the little beastie before he damages something in this house!”

“Miss Francine,” he shook his head, “you are one dumb English woman. That cat is trying to communicate with us. He’s throwing a tantrum now because we’ve been so dense!”

“I know they’re special Mimjet,” she said, reaching out in wonder at the cats, “but Sheila Cromwell is old fashion in her religion. She thinks they’re possessed. What have I brought into this house?”

“Possessed?” Mimjet looked at her in disbelief. “... You mean by the Devil?... This concept is so silly, Francine. In my religion, which is so sensible, your Lucifer would merely be another god.”

“I’m sorry Mimjet, it’s true. That’s how many Christians think,” she said, walking over to calm the cats. “There-there my children, don’t be afraid.... I won’t let them put you in cages and take you away.”

“Is that what the Cromwells are planning on doing?” Tom asked Buck.

“I don’t know, but I need a computer!” Buck declared, looking anxiously around the room.

“I think we’re goners. They’re probably going to call the animal shelter. We’re gonna get gassed!” Jim laid back in despair.

“I think you watch too many movies,” Ed decided to be brave. “Mimjet won’t let us be gassed.”

Buck and Tom nodded in agreement, but all four cats were frightened now. Mimjet looked at the cats protectively and placed his finger in front of his lips to signal silence as footsteps sounded from the staircase across the room. To greatly increase their fears was the sudden appearance of Reginald Cromwell again, who appeared to storm up to Mimjet with the most menacing look, but then suddenly, looking back to make sure Sheila couldn’t hear, whispered something confidentially into the Indian’s ear.

“Say, what’s that bastard up to?” Jim was the first to ask.

“I wish we could read their minds,” complained Tom.

“Yeah,” Ed nodded, “I don’t trust that dude.”

“He’s coming toward us,” warned Buck, moving protectively in front of his gang, “the son-of-a-bitch’s got a smile on his face!”

“So you little fellows want to communicate,” Reginald rubbed his greedy hands together. “Do you have any idea how valuable you are?”

“I told you,” cried Tom in their collective minds, “we’re too valuable to let go!”

Buck hissed at the man in a crouched profile as he reached down. Ed joined him with a humped back. Tom sat beside an equally timid Jim, a growl coming deep from within his throat.

“Listen,” Reginald beckoned, backing up a pace, “if you can really understand me, then follow me to my study. There’s a computer there, for which we can prove what you are.”

“And who do you think they are?” Mimjet asked with suspicion. “They don’t trust you sir. I think they believe you will put them into a cage.”

“I had to act outraged in front of Sheila,” Reginald explained, bending down, snapping his fingers and whistling at the cats.

“Damn, I like this man!” Buck scampered over to Mimjet and rubbed his leg. “He’s not going to let Reginald hurt us, because he thinks we’re gods.”

“I ain’t no god,” Ed snorted, moving cautiously up alongside Buck.

“What about me?” Jim called after them, as Reginald picked Tom up in his arms.

Once again the cuddly looking Maine coon had been favored among the cats. At that point, as if he had, in fact, read Jim's mind, Mimjet walked over and picked the calico and his cushion up delicately in his arms. Reginald, who began talking baby-talk to Tom, led them all up the stairs passed a glowering Sheila to his study in a far corner of the house. Francine, who had been taken back by this turn of events, had demonstrated to the cats how unstable she was by retreating from the scene. But now, as Mimjet, Reginald and the cats departed for Mister Cromwell's study, she materialized in the hall upstairs, wringing her hands and casting a frightened look at the distraught Sheila as she passed by.

"What have you brought into our house, Francine?" Sheila tried to shout, but found herself gasping for breath.

"These cats are not evil, Sheila," Francine spoke pleadingly. "Please open your mind to what this means!"

Sheila Cromwell's asthma was now acting up. The breathlessness of her response belied her own words. In spite of her staunch religious upbringing in which her American mother instilled a black and white, demon-ridden view of the world, she was deeply thrilled by the prospect of having such miraculous cats. Her guilt at having this temptation grew after Francine followed the group in, the door shut, and she found herself tip-toeing to her husband's study and listening at the door.

"Calm down, Francine," Reginald said, patting the nanny's arm, "Sheila's mad at you, but I'm not! We—Mimjet and I—know what you brought into this house."

"Magical cats!" Mimjet beamed.

"But why are these cats in your study, Reginald?" Francine asked in a constricted voice. "You don't let anyone into your study, not even Misses Cromwell!" "Why is Mimjet turning on your laptop?... What are you going to do?"

"You've done jolly good this time!" He said, patting her head.

Mimjet sat at the desk, turned on the laptop, and, after while waiting patiently for the Windows desktop to appear, watched the hourglass as the system booted up.

"Hmmm," he muttered abstractedly to himself, "Your system is slow sir. By golly, I should be using my computer. I put a new CPU unit into my laptop, and I'm *in* like that!" He snapped his fingers. "You need high speed cable, not this outdated DSL hookup. Everyone I know uses high-speed cable. Aborigines in Australia have high-speed cable.... Even my uncle Raji, who believes the world sits on a giant tortoise, has high-speed cable."

"Dash it, Mimjet, get on with it!" Reginald cried, setting Tom down rudely in front of the screen.

Tom's attractive feline form had become a curse. Francine sat down heavily on the other side of the room, as the Maine coon looked back at his gang. The hourglass finally disappeared. Mimjet, who had found an outdated version of Microsoft Word on Reginald's system, now brought it up on the screen. As Tom prepared his little paws for the task, Buck told him exactly what to type. Tom discovered, as had Drew, that he could use one digit, but the effort was very great, because it required continually flexing the one toe each time he wrote a letter or two.

Outside the study, Sheila listened intently to the discussion, very much tempted to enter the room. As she eavesdropped upon this family history-making event, her four children appeared suddenly behind her startling her half out of her wits. The other half, however, managed to pick up the remaining conversation inside.

“Mummy, mummy, what is Papa doing to our cats?” Little Roger whispered discreetly to her, tears streaming from his powder blue eyes.

“Yes, mummy, why are you mad at the cats?” asked puffy-eyed Ruth, still simpering under her breath.

The remaining two children asked similar questions. All four children had been weeping copiously. Misses Cromwell felt even guiltier now for the heresy filling her mind. *What wonderful pets they would make for the family!* She dared tell herself as she ushered her children to their rooms.

“Shush, children.” She pushed them impatiently. “Papa is studying the cats. Now get back in your rooms!”

In contrast to her own thoughts, however, Sheila reminded them of what she told them before about the Devil appearing in many different forms, and that what they had seen downstairs was not natural in God’s eyes. As she said it, she almost bit her tongue. The purest form of hypocrisy and a crisis of faith similar to the one Alice Wagnall was feeling right now rose up in her mind: half of her rejected the notion outright, while the other half was excited at the prospects ahead.

In the study, Tom had managed to type, after entering gibberish at first, a simple salutation at first that included all their first names. This first demonstration caused Francine to weep with joy and the other cats to cheer him mentally. The very first word typed on the Microsoft Word screen caused Reginald to literally jump for joy, himself, the tall Englishman nearly bumping the ceiling with his head. Mimjet, however, took an attitude of prayer and knelt down piously a moment to give thanks to both Vishnu and the goddess of cats. With Sheila not in the room to appease, this pagan gesture mattered little to Reginald, who bent down and jubilantly read the misspelled message Tom had typed: We r humans who been turnd by shadowbrk wich nto cats.

After this declaration, which took much effort by the jittery Tom, the Maine coon added a note for Sheila’s sake: We r Chrstians tu !!!!

“This is marvelous!” Francine bolted uncharacteristically from her chair.

Having heard her husband utter each message aloud, Sheila now gave in to her impulse and barged into the room. Not far behind her were her naughty children who, having snuck back out of their rooms, heard Papa’s declaration too.

“How can this be?” Sheila grabbed her forehead in disbelief. “My grandmother told me there were witches, but I never believed it. I always thought such people were possessed by demons or merely delusional, like my Uncle Robert, who thought he was a Leprechaun. But Uncle Robert was mad, grandmother was mad.... I wonder now if I am going mad too!”

“We’re all a little mad, Misses Cromwell,” Francine’s voice fluttered again. “We live in a mad, mad world!”

As Sheila muttered to herself, Francine stood in the background dazed by what was happening in the Cromwell house. Reginald began instructing Tom to do a mathematical problem using the Windows calculator this time. Buck hopped up and attempted unsuccessfully to use his much fatter paw. Tom then performed a simple set of multiplication, division, and subtraction problems as directed. Mimjet suggested afterwards that Tom give them some details of the bewitching, which would be recorded in a special file. Tom, though his digit was growing weary at the effort, was egged on by his friends.

“Come on Tommy, you can do it. I know you’re tired,” Buck bumped up against him affectionately now.

“You da’ man, Tom!” Ed crowed from below. “*You da’ man!*”

In what Tom would later claim was the most important document written in his life, the Maine coon wrote, with help from his friends:

hallown nite India croly cas spell on yung peepel at shadowbrk arms. she turn us into cats. she sed we wll ireversbly remain cats. we bleev when she die, we be humns again, but she not dead, she in coma at county hosptl close to dead. we cud not kill hr. please take us home to sam the partment manager at shadowbr arms, so we be with our frnds--sam wanda neva n drew hu also r turned into cats.

Tom hadn’t known that Sheldon, Tanya, Penny, and India’s best friend Irma had been turned into cats too or Mimjet and the Cromwell family would have been even more amazed than they were. Reaching over the cat, Reginald saved the file as “Miracle Cats” and then rudely set Tom next to Buck on the floor. Jim still sat on his cushion dumfounded by it all. Ed had just marked yet another spot on the carpet as the Indian studied the message on the screen.

“We must honor his request!” Mimjet announced, hovering protectively around the cats.

“Are you insane Mimjet?” Reginald cried, rushing over to lock his door. “These cats are worth a fortune. We’ll do no such thing!”

“What are you up to Reggie?” Sheila asked with astonishment. “I thought your business was printing equipment. How can you make money off these cats?”

“How indeed, dear Sheila,” Reginald looked back with contempt. “You know my father’s business is crumbling. Why do you think I wanted to come to America? I’ve always told you this is where the money is. Until that numbskull was elected, it had a strong economy. How’d I know it would go belly-up? Now, by Jove, we’ve got *four magical cats!*”

“No, no, you can’t keep them against their will!” Mimjet gave a wounded cry.

“I can, and, by Jove, I will!” Reginald said, grabbing up the phone and barking orders to members of his staff.

“Clyde,” he began, “I want you and Earl to bring me that big metal cage I used for Dodger before he ran away. Yes, that’s right, clean it up a bit. Now put Bridges on.” “Bridges,” he took on a sterner tone, “I want you to stand guard inside my study and have Turner, my chauffeur, guard the door. Don’t argue with me Bridges, hop to it! Tell Veronica, our chief maid, to go fetch a month’s supply of cat food and kitty litter—about ten bags.”

“Oh, Papa, are we going to keep them?” Little Malcolm spoke for the rest.

“Yes,” he answered slyly, scuffing Malcolm’s locks.

“You bastard! You rotten son-of-a-bitch!” Ed and Jim cried.

“Wait, calm down lads,” Buck called out in their heads. “We’ve got Mimjet on our side. Things could have been much worse. They could have sent us to the pound!”

“I told you this would happen!” Tom spat accusingly at Buck. “It’ll be just our luck if India lives just long enough for the spell to become irreversible while we’re here. We’ll remain cats for the rest of our lives, Buck! We’re too valuable to release. They’ll never let us go!”

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Against the protests of Mimjet, his twin nieces Indira and Maj, and the unheard protests of the cats, Reginald and his servants placed all four cats into Dodger’s cage. An improvised

kitty litter was provided by Veronica, which was nothing more than a small sand box the children played with in the yard. When it became apparent, however, that the kitty litter would not fit in the cage with the cats, it was decided by Reginald that the cats would be allowed to roam freely in the study behind the locked and guarded door. Reginald suspected the cats would trash his study but was buoyed by the financial prospects ahead. When he departed for dinner with his deeply disturbed wife and deliriously happy children, he made sure Turner, his hefty chauffeur, was stationed at his study entrance. He also left Bridges, a retired boxer, instead of Mimjet (whom he no longer trusted), to guard the cats. Had it not been for his standing with Sir Sidney Cromwell, Reginald's father, Mimjet knew he would have probably been fired earlier in the hour, but he now found himself responsible for Reginald's financial scheme.

Francine was allowed to stay in the study also, which implied that she was still employed too. But Reginald ordered his wife to keep the children away from the cats, until they had grown accustomed to their captivity. They were far more than pets, he assured Sheila; they were the family's future!

As the burly Bridges exited for several moments to relieve himself, Turner remained stationed at the entrance but Mimjet was now free to talk to the four betrayed cats.

"Listen my children," he whispered to them, as he looked back guardedly at the nanny across the room, "... I don't know how yet, but I'm getting you out of here. We can't do much this evening, but, by golly, I'm taking you home! It will mean that I will be unemployed, but I have a cousin here in America, who owns a restaurant, so I shall do just fine."

"What about me?" Francine asked, rising anxiously from her chair. "I don't want to be fired. I shall tell the mister and misses what you're up to. They won't let you take them out the house!"

"And I will tell the mister and misses that you have been spending shopping money on yourself and stealing food from their shelves," Mimjet declared dryly, looking at his nails.

"Th-That's a lie!" she cried out in a broken voice. "I've done no such things!"

"I will make them believe it, dear nanny," Mimjet promised, reaching down and petting the most sullen of the cats. "You will, in fact, help me spring these poor beasties. We're going to take them home!"

Ed, who had been tempted to bite his dark, weathered hand, found, as the other cats, a mesmerizing warmth in this man's voice and eyes. For the first time since his bewitching, Ed, the most feral of the cats, rubbed up against a human's leg, a low contented rumble flowing out of his throat.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Darkened Habitats

The old woman left Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny trapped in the cage throughout the afternoon. The three cats could not fathom why she wanted them penned up in the cage and began to imagine the worst as the hours dragged on. Situated pill-mill around the yard were other smaller cages, now empty, that had probably been filled with other animals. It looked as if the old woman had once had her own private little zoo.

The backyard now reflected the dilapidated condition of the house. Perhaps the woman had left through the front of her small house and had gone shopping or to work. That would, they agreed, explain why she had been gone so long.

Of course Tanya had her own theory.

“I bet she’s going to eat us,” she declared as they lie in torpor for a while.

“No, Tanya,” Sheldon sighed, giving her a lick, “that crossed my mine too, but I believe that old woman’s just crazy. I’m sure she’s done this before. When we know she’s home, we’ll execute our plan.”

“We might not have to play dead,” Tanya said bleakly. “She might just club us to death when she returns.”

“I was wondering about those cages too, Sheldon,” Penny gave him a nudge. “Why are they empty? Did those animals just die or did she sell them after capturing them? Did the woman really have some kind of backyard zoo?”

“I don’t know Penny,” he shrugged, looking around the yard. “They look really old. Maybe she once had chickens. Her house really looks ancient. The town probably grew around her. I don’t think it’s even legal to have animals caged in your backyard now.”

As Sheldon and Penny shared Tanya’s fears, they remained nestled together, purring in spite of their alarm, the girls looking to Sheldon to make their plan work.

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When the three cats were sound asleep and the sun began to drop behind the building to signal the advance of night, Sheldon awakened from a dreadful dream in which the old woman was coming at them with a meat cleaver in one hand. As he opened his eyes he could hear a noise inside the darkened house, a scratchy operatic piece that made the dwelling seem even scarier than before.

“Wake up!” he cried into their heads. “The old woman’s back. Get ready to play dead!”

The three cats stood up and readied themselves for the slightest squeak from the old woman’s back door. Sheldon uttered a clumsy prayer and Penny, who was Jewish, found herself chanting “Hear O Israel the Lord is One...” But the old woman never came. The house was dark and the music played, and yet their keeper remained cloistered inside, the mystery causing great strain on the three.

Sheldon did not want them to have to make their escape in darkness. Their night vision as cats was, in many ways, superior to what it was in the day, but the thought of negotiating the street at night seemed unthinkable to him now. Just when the sun was about to burn out and it appeared as if the old woman had gone to bed or was perhaps lying drunk in her house, the door hinges squeaked and the three cats flopped down in the positions they had decided upon earlier in the day. It seemed as if darkness fell just as the old woman came outside with her flashlight, training it immediately on their cage. Sheldon lie on his back, Penny on her side with her legs stuck straight out, and Tanya lie crumpled in the corner with her tongue stuck out of her mouth.

“Oh Lordy me,” she wailed, “what happened to my cats?”

“All right it worked,” Tanya’s thoughts flashed into Sheldon’s head, “but what if she comes back with a trash can and sack and just throws us immediately into it after dragging us out?”

“Don’t move Tanya and Penny, she’s coming straight toward us!” Sheldon’s thoughts rang out in their heads.

Flinging the lid open and shining the light upon the three cats, the old woman cursed and groaned then cursed again. As Penny had predicted she would, the woman left the lid open but stood contemplating what to do.

“Listen girls,” Sheldon ordered gently, “as soon as we see the light retreat across the yard, we must make our getaway. The old woman is looking right now for something to put us in. We’ve got the element of surprise on our side.”

When the old woman had walked only a short way from the cage after spotting a trash can in her yard, Sheldon sprang up and out of the cage, followed by Tanya with Penny not far behind. The old woman had just turned in her tracks when the Penny’s tail disappeared over the fence as she followed the other two into to the darkened alley beyond. The old woman’s words as they ran toward the light of the street at the end of the alley would strike the trio as humorous when they looked back at this episode later tonight: “Come back, come back you bastards, I’ll kill you if you don’t come back!”

“Where do we go now?” Tanya’s question came first.

“To the street,” answered Sheldon, “and after that in the same direction we were heading before.”

“And what direction is that?” asked Penny now.

“If we can still make out the outline of the mountains in the distance, we know we must head the opposite direction: south.”

No sooner had they reached the street than the footfall behind them told them that the old woman was in pursuit. As it turned out, there was just enough daylight to see the silhouette of the mountains, so the trio did as Sheldon suggested and headed south. As fleet footed cats, they easily outran the old woman to begin their long journey back to Shadowbrook Arms.

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Irma Fresco, as Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny, was now a lost cat on the street. Unlike the misbegotten trio, however, Irma had never been captured and held captive by a deranged old woman. But also unlike the trio, she was on the street by herself. It was night. It was getting darker and darker. She was alone. After wandering the street for an entire day, unable to find her way out of the maze-like buildings, poor Irma found an alley behind a restaurant on the outskirts of skid row that had several old crates stacked up and hunkered down in a warm corner

to wait for garbage from the restaurant to be thrown out so she could scrounge up a meal. Through it all, her natural optimism, though tested and battered, would not let her give-up. When she had regained her strength and rested up awhile, she would be off again to find her way back to Shadowbrook Arms. She didn't know what exactly would come next or how the spell could be lifted but an inexplicable feeling of peace came over her as she nestled in the newspaper-lined crate. It was as if something incredible was about to happen to her, if only she would wait a little longer to find out.

As night fell again on the street, Irma looked out of her crate and watched the old man who dumped the trash for the restaurant, pause to light up a smoke. He was obviously a street person, himself, though his bearing did not seem downtrodden to her. Perhaps he was down on his luck or had always been a bum throughout his life....What did it matter? She asked herself as she began to drift off to sleep.... At least he was a human.... He could make a living for himself... walk in and sit down at a table, eat spaghetti with a fork, and drink a hearty red wine.

Only moments away for Irma was her delivery from the street, but for now she was back in her mother and father's home, listening to them speak Italian to each other as they all gorged themselves on mama's chicken cacciatore and sausage laden spaghetti, her mother called Fresco's supremo. She could almost smell the sauce and savor the wine that her grandfather claimed to have made himself.

"Quel gusto meraviglioso!" Irma murmured in her sleep.

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On his way home from ministering on the street—hungry, tired and footsore, Elijah Gray, self-styled missionary for the homeless and misbegotten, was ready, as Irma Fresco had been, for a hot meal and long night's sleep. As he sat behind the steering wheel listening to the Trinity Gospel Hour, he longed for the roast he had left simmering in the crock-pot this morning. It should be nice and tender about now, he thought, humming along with Sister Mildred Sterling's rendition of The Old Rugged Cross. His entire life was now devoted to the Word. After being a down-and-out drunk for several years, himself, and then being saved by missionaries on skid row, he always felt guilty driving so quickly through this sector of town. There were hundreds of lost souls in this neck of the woods, who were just like he used to be and who needed salvation too. But unlike the teams of missionaries who came out here in the daytime, he was but one soldier for the Lord; and, more importantly, it was evening now. It was also quite dark. No one in their right mind would attempt to preach to the derelicts down here at night.

When he looked ahead and saw a man stagger out of the alley toward the street, he instinctively pressed the accelerator with his foot, looked the other way and began singing along with the radio, "There's an old rugged cross on a hill far away, a symbol of suffering and shame." As a bloodied man staggered out on the road in the path of his car, however, Elijah stopped in mid-verse, stomped his breaks, a stream of blasphemies flowing out of his mouth. His headlights now captured the gory visage of an elderly man who seemed dazed and disoriented in the light. Sticking his head out the window as he pulled his vehicle to the side of the road, Elijah asked the man, in a croaking voice, if he was all right, feeling very foolish when he knew very well he was not.

Grabbing his good luck baseball bat that he used when playing on the Missionary Fellowship League and praying for forgiveness for the blasphemies he had leveled at the man, Elijah assumed a defensive posture as he approached the man. Knowing this neighborhood as he

did, he trusted no one. Suddenly, only a short ways ahead, the man collapsed onto the pavement, which could, he told himself, be another trick. On the other hand, he felt obliged, as a God-fearing Christian, to play the Good Samaritan now.

Coming forward slowly and peering down at the injured man, Elijah saw that the stranger was bleeding from the head and apparently unconscious. Steadily lowering his club, he bent down as slowly, laid the bat aside, mere inches from his hand, and reached out carefully toward the man.

“Mister, . . . hey mister,” he murmured, touching the man’s sleeve. In apparent response, the man’s hand twitched and his leg shook uncontrollably now. “Lord, help this poor man,” Elijah prayed, jumping up and running to his car.

“I’ve got a first aid kit,” he called back shakily, wondering if the man was having some sort of fit.

At just that moment another pair of headlights broke the darkness. Elijah now hoped that, in spite of his old distrust of the police, it was a patrol car and not a car load of thugs on the prowl. Easing his bat down so it sat beside the car, he reached down shakily below the front seat, found the first aid kit he kept handy for emergencies, which had only been used once (for a paper cut he received during the mission’s paper drive), pulled open the plastic lid, and rummaged around for band aides, bandages, and clips. He heard, though didn’t see, someone walking toward his automobile, his destination, he hoped, the stricken man. Because the stranger had stopped his vehicle in back of his and not in front of his car, all he saw was a shadow moving in his direction. The shadow called out something, either to himself or to the man lying in the road, but Elijah couldn’t make out the words. He now cursed the fact that his police record prohibited him from owning a gun. The next best thing, he realized, was his trusty bats, which lie next to the car.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” he prayed feverishly now.

Tucking the bat below his arm pit so it stuck out menacingly in plain sight, he continued with a free hand to search for a pack of gauze and antiseptic to clean wounds, ready to bring his weapon out and club the stranger senseless if he tried to attack. His street instincts were strong now. His heart was beating so loudly he could barely breath. For a long, terrible moment, he forgot completely about the first aid kit and concentrated only upon the baseball bat pressing against his ribs. Before long, the incorporeal being materialized as a human being in his headlights. Though Elijah felt cowardly, he continued to hold the first aid kit, ready to drop it instantly and brandish his bat, as the stranger bent down and looked at the man on the ground.

It was not a policeman, as Elijah had hoped. There was no way of knowing, in fact, whether the stranger meant him mischief or not, until he turned to face him now.

“I think the old fellow is all right,” he called back in a deep, baritone voice reassuringly, after moving into the lamplight to inspect the man. “He’s probably just a local drunk.” “....Yes, I can see that most of the gore on him is really just grime,” the stranger added reassuringly, straightening up and walking his way.

“Yes, . . . of course,” Elijah mumbled breathlessly.

He couldn’t seem to find his voice now as the other man moved toward him.

“Here, let’s bandage this old timer’s head up,” the stranger said, reaching for the first aid kit clutched awkwardly in Elijah’s hand.

Self-conscious of the baseball bat tucked under his arm, Elijah tossed the weapon into the car, but held protectively onto the kit with one hand, afterwards shakily doling out band aides, bandages, and gauze.

“No, no, we don’t need all that,” the stranger laughed softly, pointing into the box “this little band aide should do it,” “and maybe one of those,” he reached in and pulled out an antiseptic tube.

Gathering his wits, Elijah held onto the antiseptic in order to directly assist the old man. He felt ashamed for his cowardice and wanted to make amends, but he also wanted to show the pushy stranger who was in charge. Had he not stopped his car first and brought out his first aid kit? Why had this strange man felt obliged to stop?

The old man’s jerky motions earlier had evidently been his efforts to get onto his feet, for he rose up finally when he saw the two men approach.

“Get your hands off me; I ain’t done nothing,” he snapped querulously, as they advanced. “I tripped over a cat, I did, ran into a trash can and fell flat onto my face.” “No, no, back off,” he waved irritably, “I don’t need no band aid or none of that burny stuff. I just got a little cut.”

“Please.” Elijah reached out with his antiseptic. “Let us not forget the Good Samaritan. The Lord wants us to tend lost sheep!”

“Hell, preacher,” snickered the old man, “I ain’t no lost sheep.” “I got slimed when I fell down in that alley,” he explained, wiping offal from his face, “I was in there dumping garbage. I do it every night for extra cash to pay for food. Shoot, this little cut on my forehead ain’t nothing. Last month, I got mugged by a bunch of kids up on Fifth. Took all my earnings, they did. Don’t you fellahs concern yourselves about me. You scared me half to death!”

As the old man rambled on about his plight on the street, the stranger offered him some gauze to wipe his face. In spite of his initial refusal to accept help, the old man took the gauze as well as the band aide and antiseptic from him, bowed politely and, shaking his head at the short prayer offered by Elijah, ambled back toward the alley from which he had emerged. There was, in fact, Elijah recalled, a restaurant on the other side of these buildings that had been in this neighborhood for many years, but he found it hard to believe they would hire a local derelict to dump their trash.

“The old man’s proud,” he said to the stranger, stretching out his hand. “My name is Elijah Gray. I used to live on the street, myself, before I turned to God.”

“Blaze O’Dare.” The other man shook his hand vigorously. “I’m glad to be of assistance to you.”

In the glow of the street light Elijah could see the Egyptian ankh medallion around the man’s neck and an astrological pendant on his coat: badges that the preacher immediately recognized as symbols of the occult. The darkly clad man, he also noted, had the small crafted goatee associated with sorcerers and necromancers, his complimentary dark hair and eyes contrasting the red-headed and beardless Elijah, whose steel blue eyes burned with suspicion now. In turn, with equal wariness, the stranger noticed Elijah’s dark suit and the small gold cross around his neck. As if to make this discovery even more portentous to Elijah, a small black cat trotted out of the alley shortly after the old man re-entered, tippy-toeing anxiously into the light. Elijah could not think of anything clever to say to such a man and sensed a similar reaction from him. Already, however, as his pulse quickened and mind raced, Elijah felt something providential in this encounter, as if his ordered and uneventful life was about to take a drastic turn.

At that point, the little black cat bumped a bottle sitting on the sidewalk that chimed against the wall. Blaze O'Dare, who was startled this time, gasped, uttered a little laugh and followed Elijah's gaze to the creature, as she stepped off the curb and walked toward the two men.

"What else should we expect?" He forced out another laugh. "Wasn't last night Halloween?"

"I see you're in the spirit," Elijah snarled faintly, motioning to the pendant on his chest.

"Oh this," Blaze replied with a shrug, "I was at a sort of Halloween party myself—a conference uptown."

"I can imagine," Elijah said with unveiled contempt, "what sort of the conference *that* might be!"

"As a matter of fact," Blaze started to say, but then, thinking better of it, looked down at the small cat approaching them now.

The cat was moving fearlessly toward them, purring loudly and holding its tail high.

"I'll be damned!" He said, whistling under his breath.

*You probably will!* Elijah thought to himself, as he studied the little cat. Shrugging his shoulders at the preacher's self-righteous attitude, Blaze mumbled good night and began walking back to his car. Elijah, who had always been fond of cats, felt sudden compassion for the little beast. He wondered now if this had been the cat that had spooked the old man.

The cat had the characteristics of the Devon Rex breed: a pixie-like feline with huge fox-like ears, an elfin face, large round eyes, and a sturdy little body that was covered with soft wavy black fur. Though Elijah was unfamiliar with cat breeds, he realized, even from a short distance, that this was an unusual cat.

"Meow! Meeoww!" came its plaintive reply.

"A cat, . . . a black cat too," he said, bending down hesitantly now. "What else on a night like this?" he laughed giddily. "But kitty," he knelt down and reached out his hand, "Halloween is over. Where will you now go? What will you eat?"

Immediately, quite unlike most alley cats, she trotted over to his extended hand, rubbed it with the side of her face, and then looked up to him with big blue eyes. Moved by this simple gesture, Elijah picked up the strange little cat and carried her back to his car.

"What is your name kitty?" he asked in singsong voice.

Gently setting her on the hood of his car, he rummaged around in his pocket for something for her to eat.

"Irma Fresco," she responded hopefully, purring loudly as he searched for food.

"Sorry kitty," he declared finally, "I just remembered: I ate those Twinkies with my lunch."

"I don't want your Twinkies," she mentally cried. "I hate Twinkies! I want a Big Mac. I want a shake so thick you can eat it with a spoon!"

She wanted very much for this kind man to somehow read her mind, but when she tried to talk, her pleas came out as so many meows: the typical sound of a hungry cat. Although it seemed foolish, she continued to meow plaintively to Elijah now. She also attempted to plant thoughts in his mind, as she would a confessor, everything that happened to her on Halloween night, the morning after, and her ordeal on the street. She was tired, hungry, and in constant danger around larger and less friendly cats. But the man wasn't telepathic, she thought bitterly, or, after recalling the rude way he treated one of the strangers, apparently very bright.

Early this morning, before beginning an agonizingly long day of wandering through town and hunting for food and shelter, the realization grew in Irma that India's spell could only be cancelled out in two ways. Either she must be killed to end her bewitchment or Irma needed to find a formula to reverse the spell. It had seemed so hopeless for her this afternoon that her only concern had been that she would not starve to death before she could find such a cure. As night came again, however, she was reminded once again that she was running out of time. Unless the witch was dead, India's curse, she realized bleakly, must be broken by another person: a white witch or sorcerer with equal powers. India had told Irma enough about witchcraft for her to know these facts, but how could she impart this information to someone else and actually be helped by such a person before it was too late?

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In the background the other man, Blaze O'Dare, had stopped in the middle of the street to survey this scene. Elijah Gray, Blaze marveled, had been terrified after stopping to help the old man, and yet he took time now to comfort a stray cat. The little cat, desperate to communicate, sat on her hind legs and moved her paws up and down as would a pony. Elijah began to laugh with amazement, especially when she meowed furiously to get his attention. Blaze, however, didn't laugh. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled up as he considered what he had just seen. But there was more; Irma, realizing she had gotten their attention, did a little dance, her meows coming out in a singsong fashion that also stopped the preacher cold.

It was Blaze's turn to laugh as he studied the cavorting cat.

"I'll be damned!" He cried with delight. "I'll be god damned!"

"It gives me the creeps," Elijah fingered his cross.

"Meow, mew-mew, meeeeeeeow, mewowowowowowow!" Irma continued to utter, almost out of breath.

Striking Irma as very hopeful now, as she performed, was the other man approaching and his apparent curiosity for the unknown. He seemed to be the smartest of the two. Although they couldn't hear her thoughts or understand her meows, she felt better now. It seemed more difficult, with each passing hour for her to recall the events of last night. It was as if she was becoming a cat mentally as well as physically. She had found herself purring inexplicably and licking her paws. She had humped her back and hissed in feline fashion several times in reaction to fear or irritation. These natural feline instincts, she feared, would gradually replace her humanity, until she was nothing more than a feral, dimwitted beast. But Irma Fresco knew that there were countless ways to communicate with humans. After being surrounded by drunks for so many hours, she had found two kindly souls, not only sober but with automobiles to spirit her away.

She would do everything she could think of to prove how human she was. As both men looked down in awe, she covered her eyes with her paws, then covered her ears and mouth. Afterwards, she rubbed her tummy, growled like a dog and then wiggled her scratchy little tongue.

"I assume she's been trained to do that stuff," Elijah blurted anxiously, "but I've never seen a cat do *that!*"

Suddenly she jumped off the hood and, for a few seconds, the two men were afraid she would run away. After dipping her paws into water in the gutter, though, Irma was trying to write something. This was immediately evident to the two men. The large swath of letters,

however, were impossible for them to decipher, especially now that Irma was on the verge of exhaustion and she was too weak from lack of food to adequately move her paws. After trying to write a quick SOS, she collapsed onto the pavement and meowed softly to herself. *I need a computer or large piece of cardboard and something to paint with*, she thought to herself.... *I need food...and sleep.*

Reaching down with a mixture of compassion and wonder Elijah picked up the little black cat.

“This is no ordinary beast!” Blaze exclaimed, reaching out to pet the purring cat.

“No, it’s certainly not,” Elijah agreed, feeling her little heart pounding in her chest.

Cradling her gently in his arms, he felt her body trembling, not from fear he was certain, but from lack of nourishment and fatigue. Elijah harbored suspicions for Blaze O’Dare, in spite of the miraculous event they both shared. The perceptive mister O’Dare noted that the preacher was holding the black cat protectively, not merely affectionately in his arms. Elijah was, in fact, remembering how important the black cat was in witchcraft and the occult. He wondered now if the stranger had this in mind as he marveled at the cat.

“Please, I’m interested in these sort of things,” Blaze said delicately. “Let us share this event, my friend. I have a lot of contacts for such matters.”

“What sort of contacts,” Elijah’s distrust deepened. “I believe in the Good Book, sir. You seem to be someone who dabbles in the occult.”

“I’m a good sorcerer,” Blaze blurted. “I don’t consort with evil spirits, nor do I mock God.”

“So you admit it, do you?” Elijah looked at him incredulously now. “You admit using the black arts!”

“No, I admit to no such thing,” Blaze explained tersely. “I believe in God’s powers and the magic of other holy books too. In fact, I’m a Roman Catholic. I just know there are other spirits and forces that can be harnessed as well.”

“Sir,” Elijah held firm, “if you play with the Devil, you’re gonna get burned!”

“Poppycock!” Blaze said, stomping his foot.

During their conversation, Irma searched her tired mind for a way to communicate with these men. Elijah now stuck the little cat into his jacket as if to protect her from this man. Irma stuck her little black head out and meowed.

“Oh please,” she thought frantically, “give me something to communicate with. “In God’s name, help me before its too late!”

Irma’s shoulder now rubbed against something in his pocket that beeped when she placed her paws on it. At first she thought it might be his cell phone, which would be useless to her now. Then, it dawned upon her what the object might be. The two men ceased arguing about whether or not the sorcerer was evil or not and listened to the sound.

“What’s that noise?” Blaze asked, watching the cat poke her head out and meow.

“It sounded like the little calculator I bought last week,” Elijah smiled, reaching in to grab the cat. “My little friend has found itself a toy.”

“How very strange.” Blaze frowned, as the preacher lifted her back out. “It’s holding onto the calculator with its paws.”

“Let go kitty,” Elijah tried to pull the calculator from her paws. “Why it’s holding on for dear life!”

“Oh yes, it’s definitely trying to communicate with us,” Blaze clapped his hands in delight. “Set it on the ground and see what it’ll do.”

“It’s so exhausted,” the preacher protested. “Will it have the strength?”

“We owe it to the cat, reverend,” the sorcerer insisted. “Let’s put it in the light and see what it does.”

As Elijah and Blaze watched in wonderment, Irma began inputting numbers into the calculator that equaled letters of the alphabet. It was very difficult with cat paws, especially in her current physical state. She found the five on the keyboard and then tapped the zero, followed by another five.

“Lemme see,” Elijah said, squinting down at the tiny calculator screen, “it looks like 505.”

“No,” Blaze exclaimed, slapping his forehead with his hand, “it’s an SOS. It just gave us a distress call!”

“Nonsense,” Elijah shook his head, “it’s just playing with it. A cat can’t do *that!*”

“Okay, let’s try something else,” Blaze clasped his hands excitedly. “Kitty, if you were giving us a distress call, press the following series of numbers: 5, 7, 3, 2, 8.” That’s the pin number for my debit card.”

As she punched the numbers into the calculator exactly as Blaze directed, Irma realized that she was making a breakthrough. Still not believing his own senses, Blaze insisted on performing an even more definitive test. This time, as she sat serenely in the lamplight, he told her to do a mathematical problem. Irma, after remembering her high school math, pressed the square root key and squared the number 8. She then divided the result, 64, by 8 and then divided random numbers into each other and then multiplied the dividend by the divider to achieve the same result. For dramatic effect she bowed to them in the most human-like pose possible and waited with her paws folded for their response. The two men stared at her in even greater disbelief. Elijah reached down and picked her up, not even bothering to also retrieve the calculator on the ground. Blaze picked up the device and looked at the numbers and placed it with great reverence into the preachers vest pocket.

“Isn’t that the most amazing thing you’ve ever seen?” he asked the preacher now.

“Yes,... it’s a *miracle*,” Elijah said, analyzing the cat.

“This is a remarkable beast,” Blaze declared, pulling her gently from his hands. “Fear not my little friend, you are among friends!”

“But this can’t be possible:” Elijah muttered with a dumbfounded expression “a cat who does mathematical problems and writes words?”

“This,” Blaze said, holding her up to the light “is no ordinary cat, reverend. Look at those fox-like ears and those big blue eyes. I’ve never seen a cat like this before. Although you can’t tell by its anatomy, this poor beast was once a human. It’s under a witch’s spell!”

Irma mewed softly in protest as she was held up to the glow and was studied by the men. The sorcerer was hurting her fragile ribs, and yet he understood her dilemma the best. Unable to cry like a human or express her thanks, Irma Fresco did the next best thing when he sat her back on the hood and began licking his hand. In order not to hurt the kind man who first gave her notice, she licked his hand too. With great affection, her original rescuer picked her up again, rubbed her head and gave her a kiss. As Blaze marveled at how powerful such a witch must be, the preacher remained silent. Obviously unwilling to look to a supernatural cause, himself, Elijah found her existence too inexplicable to attempt such an explanation.

It did not matter to Irma what the self-proclaimed sorcerer believed. Thanks to his perceptiveness after the good preacher discovered her on the street, she now had two protectors and advocates. She didn't need vocal chords or mental telepathy to talk to humans. She could communicate with her paws.

After being placed back inside the first man's jacket, she continued purring loudly, waiting impatiently for another miracle to happen in her life: to be changed back into her human form.

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For a moment, as the preacher and sorcerer discussed this marvelous cat, Blaze argued on behalf of its humanity. The preacher, on the other hand, stubbornly refused to believe such a thing. It seemed to Elijah Gray that the basic Biblical premise of man's uniqueness was at stake now. There was nothing in the Holy Bible about such transformations. But it was an argument that he couldn't win. There were no verses from the Bible he could quote to support himself or religious counter-arguments he could use. Deep down in the rational part of his mind, he could find no other explanation for the cat's performance tonight except for the blasphemous one uttered from Blaze's mouth: *it was under a witches spell!*

"Well," he confessed wearily, "I would rather believe it was actually human than an infernal spirit."

"Believe two things reverend:" Blaze spoke with great respect, "I am not a servant of Satan and this little cat is no infernal spirit. It is, you of all people should know, a creature of God!"

Seeing conviction in the sorcerer's words, Elijah shrugged, yet shook his red head in despair. Under normal circumstances, he would have held up a cross to this man and recited Christ's exhortation "Get thee behind me Satan!" But the preacher, like the cat, was exhausted after such a long day. . . and something else, he would not admit even to himself, played in his conscious mind. . . . Was it excitement, an inexplicable wonder lust for the unknown? Was it the Devil, himself tempting his logic now?

Whatever it was, he now had a *miraculous cat!*

## Chapter Fourteen

### Irma and the Preacher

Blaze convinced Elijah to bring the wondrous cat to his apartment, which was not far from this part of town. The sorcerer fully accepted the preacher's adoption of his newfound pet and he seemed, as the preacher, himself, to have its best interest at heart. In Blaze O'Dare's apartment they could feed the hungry little cat and allow it to recuperate, while utilizing Blaze's library in planning their next move. Despite his acceptance of this situation on the cat's behalf, the preacher remained deeply suspicious of both O'Dare's motive and profession. He could just imagine what kind of books were on the sorcerer's shelves.

As the preacher followed in his Toyota behind Blaze's ramshackle station wagon, he was tempted to turn down the very next street and lose him before he got any deeper into this mystery. For the little cat's sake and his own mounting curiosity, however, he could not turn the wheel. He was ashamed to admit it to himself, but he was, as he suspected earlier, actually excited. Not since his service in Iraq or his honeymoon with Karen had he felt such an inexplicable rush. He continued to follow the station wagon until they reached a low rent district similar to his own. Visions of the Black Mass, witches covens, and other primitive rites continued to swim in his head.

By the time he parked his car and was led by the enthusiastic sorcerer up the stairway to his small, mid-twentieth century apartment, he had convinced himself that he was walking into a spiritual trap. Quoting portions of the Twenty-third Psalm and humming a hymn to himself, he could barely speak as he followed Blaze into a cluttered, evil smelling room.

"Home sweet home!" The sorcerer seemed to cackle as he ushered Elijah into his living room and shut the door.

"Praise the Lord!" Elijah gasped, surveying the walls and floor. There were, ironically, no visible satanic or occult paraphernalia, charts or symbols in the living room, and the smell he thought was evil was merely incense mixed with apparent food odors. Blaze, not unlike Elijah, himself, was merely a sloppy housekeeper. A sigh of relief escaped his constricted throat. He felt light-headed and almost at home.

Even when they entered the kitchen and he saw jar after jar of ingredients that looked suspiciously like items used for a witches potion, the preacher couldn't take it seriously, for alongside of herbs, dried insects and whatever else he used in his experiments as a sorcerer, he also saw jars of peanut butter, jam, mixed nuts, and a small framed picture of Jesus Christ on the kitchen wall. A very normal looking calendar below a setting of children playing in a park was hung beside a bizarre painting of leprechauns dancing around a pot of gold to put the finishing touches to this eclectic setting. There were also boxes of cereal, cans of food, and unwashed dinnerware in the

sink, just like his own apartment. Perhaps, he thought giddily, the suspicious looking jars were merely exotic food items, and Mister O'Dare was really a harmless eccentric dabbling in the occult.

After lifting the drowsy cat out his jacket and watching O'Dare pour it a bowl of milk and then scrounge around in his messy kitchen for something for them all to eat, Elijah wondered if his revised judgment of the sorcerer might be correct. O'Dare might even be a borderline schizophrenic. Elijah had seen enough of them on skid row. It both disappointed and relieved him greatly to see this charade. The disappointment, he wanted to believe, was for the cat's sake and not his longing for adventure. The relief was that he was out of both spiritual and physical danger. Though he was still affronted by Blaze O'Dare's profession, he almost felt sorry for him now and found it difficult to believe he could help the cat.

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Elijah broke into hysterical giggles when he realized, after closer inspection, there were, in fact, dried grasshoppers in one of the jars. To increase his inexplicable mirth, the sleepy little cat turned her nose up at bowl of the milk offered to her and looked with disappointment at the salami Blaze had just shredded onto a plate.

"What is this?" Irma now looked back at her protector. "I'm starving, and I get salami and milk?"

"Why are you laughing?" Blaze frowned indignantly at Elijah. "I have nothing else to offer. I thought cats liked milk and meat!"

"Ho-ho, you forget, my dear sorcerer," Elijah wiped his eyes and hiccupped, "underneath that fur it's still human. And this is further proof!"

"You're right," Blaze's expression changed, "look at it—the poor thing. This cat deserves a steak and glass of beer!"

"That sounds great!" Her mouth dropped and eyes popped wide.

As she sat up pertly to expose her tummy, the sorcerer did a double take.

"Hold on a minute," he cried, reaching for the cat.

"What are you doing now?" Elijah asked, watching him lift her up and look between her legs

"I knew it!" Blaze said gleefully. "She's a girl! This little cat is someone's daughter, sister, or wife!"

"Hey, watch it sorcerer," she tried to protest. "Show some respect!"

What came out of Irma's mouth, as before, were a series of meows that caused them to laugh that much more. However, when in typical feline reaction Irma hissed, humped her back, and growled deep in her throat, their laughter came to an abrupt halt.

"She's going quickly," Blaze swallowed heavily. "I'll get my stuff. We gotta get more information from her. We gotta move *fast!*"

"Yes-yes, let's get started," Elijah nodded with concern, then, experiencing a double take, himself, called after the retreating Blaze. "Stuff? What kind've stuff? Exactly, what kind've *stuff* do you mean?"

Elijah's returning vision of witches cauldrons and satanic rites was replaced by the amateurish hustle of Blaze holding an astrological poster, a pot of blue poster paint, and several marking pens. Immediately, upon recognizing this equipment, Elijah gave a

nod of approval though he was not impressed with Blaze's expertise. The cat, he noted, looked disappointed too.

"This is your big solution?" She wanted to ask, looking up at the silly man.

The sorcerer stopped thoughtfully, thinking he understood her reaction, and, with inspiration, ran over to a cupboard. Pulling out a can, he found a can-opener, quickly opened the can and dumped its contents into an unused pot on the stove. Dumping the previous uneaten salami and its plate into the sink with the other dirty dinnerware, he exhibited the contents of the pot to her before returning it to the burner as if he was preparing for her the most elegant casserole.

"Pièce de résistance," he exclaimed, turning up the heat. "Corned beef and hash!"

He now went to the refrigerator and brought out more lunchmeat, condiments, bread, and two cans of coke. The sorcerer moved so quickly now, his hands were a mess and there were mustard and mayonnaise spots on his coat.

"I'm so easily sidetracked," he said apologetically to Elijah. "I know you're hungry too. I wish I could give you both a proper meal, but this is all I have."

"You're a very gracious host," Elijah quickly replied. "It's more important that you feed the poor cat."

After a few moments, in which he muttered quizzically to himself, searched the empty cupboard for something else and then salt and peppered the hash, he dumped the pot into a large plate and presented it to the hungry cat.

"Oh joy," thought Irma sarcastically, with a little curtsy, as she looked down at her food, "au gratin potatoes and châteaubriand!" Nevertheless, she turned enthusiastically to her food, purring loudly and even wagging her tail.

Blaze rinsed his hands off under the faucet and wiped them off on the kitchen curtain. Setting two plates filled with pastrami and lettuce sandwiches and potato chips, alongside of two glasses filled with coke, the sorcerer and preacher joined Irma for a hasty meal. Elijah rose up from his food, found an empty cup on the sink, rinsed it out thoroughly and brought water back for Irma's meal. Irma, however, lapped coke from Elijah's glass.

As she gobbled up the corn beef hash and helped herself to Elijah's drink, she bristled at the sorcerer's touch, not knowing completely what to expect. What she needed was a laptop or ipad. O'Dare's equipment seemed primitive. As she chewed her last morsel of food, she again bristled at his touch. He was feeling her bony ribcage and legs. Having wolfed down his own food, he then sat there impatiently waiting for Elijah and Irma to finish their meals. Elijah, who had been famished, himself, reflected fleetingly upon his chicken-in-the-pot. It would *really* be done now, he smiled wryly to himself. No sooner had he finished his dinner than Blaze was cleaning off the table and spreading out his gear.

"Now we must find a way for our little friend to *talk!*" Blaze announced. As an afterthought, he snapped his fingers and looked around his cluttered kitchen, biting his lip pensively as he searched the room. "We need a wash pan," he declared, "to wash her little paws after we're through."

Without a word, Elijah rose up, spotted a large empty pot on the refrigerator, filled it with water and sat it on the nearby sink.

Irma sighed with resignation. "All right, let's get started," she brightened, a faint purr returning to her throat, "but I need a computer and a graphics program to do this right."

"Is this possible?... How can she write?" Blaze could hear the preacher mumble over his shoulder as he turned the chart face down to expose a white surface and set an opened pot of blue poster paint by her side. With a shrug, he then tossed the marking pens onto the floor.

"You need a housekeeper," Elijah snickered, giving the cat a pat.

"I need a *laptop*," Irma looked with disappointment at the paint.

"Calm down child. He knows what he's doing," Elijah now read her mood, for her fur had begun to bristle again as she contemplated her task.

Blaze now moved the pot in front of Irma's pouting face. Elijah, as Irma, was beginning to doubt Blaze's qualifications as a practitioner of the black arts. The man, did not own a computer, let alone a typewriter in his cluttered home. Elijah, who not only owned a notebook computer, himself, but a printer and advanced software too, couldn't imagine not having the Internet in his life. Blaze now explained, for the cat's benefit it seemed, that the paint was water based and could be easily rinsed off her paws. Irma, realizing the significance of her chore, was growing excited about what she wanted to say. Pouring a glob of the blue paint on the corner of the paper and positioning the purring cat, he now forced her front paws onto the sheet. Irma, who knew exactly what to do, rose up quickly and began to move her right paw around until she had written her name. In large crude letters she scrawled "Irma Fresco." Unlike Drew and Tom, she spelled it perfectly. In spite of what they knew, both men gasped with amazement as she placed a large messy exclamation point next to her name.

"Well, we know that she is right-handed or, should I say, *right-pawed!*" The preacher grinned, watching in awe as the last character was finished on the sheet.

"Irma Fresco. That's a fine name!" The sorcerer clapped his hands together and sat down light-headedly in a chair. "Now, as I ask you *yes* and *no* questions, please respond with one meow for yes and two meows for no. As we play this game, please write down as best you can the name of the person who has bewitched you. If you will, also write down your address. We must return to the scene as quickly as possible to begin your cure!"

Irma nodded and licked the sorcerer's hand, two very unfeline gestures that gave them more encouragement as the sorcerer continued.

"Are you losing your memories of the past?" The sorcerer looked worriedly down at the cat.

"Meow meow," she looked up pertly.

"Good." O'Dare sighed with relief. "Write down the name of the witch and your address as we talk."

"Meow!" She chirped, struggling with the task

"Are you a Christian?" Elijah blurted now.

“Is that really relevant?” Blaze asked, rolling his dark eyes.

“Meow!” Irma responded, pausing to scrawl an R and C on the sheet.

By now the back of the astrological chart was a splotchy mess of paw marks and streaks that the two men could barely read. Blaze and Elijah whispered back and forth in an effort to translate the scrawl below.

“Hmmm, so you believe in the powers of prayer?” Elijah took his turn, the sorcerer shaking his head in dismay. “Have you asked the Lord to change you back?... You have? Goo-ood girl.... Now, I think we’ve translated what you just wrote. You just give me a nod this time to verify what I read. I noticed you’re getting a little hoarse. You must have been meowing a lot, eh? There-there, stand back and take a breather. Let’s see what we have.”

“R and C stand for Roman Catholic,” he declared, watching her quickly nod. “Good girl; at least you’re a Christian. You’re halfway there.... The name of the witch is Indira Kruger.... No,... Indy?... No, not Indy.... India? Yes?... The last name isn’t Kruger, though.... It’s rather messy, isn’t it. Would you try writing that part again?”

“That’s a W and that’s an O.” Blaze offered, pointing at the sheet.

“That letter,” Elijah pointed, “looks a little like a T.”

“Yes! So far we have India Crow... Crowley?” The sorcerer now took over, pausing to rub his eyes. “Don’t remember that in my index. Must be a new one. Now let’s work on the address.... Shad...dow.... Is that right?”

“What sort of index?” Elijah asked, suspicion returning to his eyes.

“Yes, that’s the first part.” Blaze squinted. “The next part of the name is B... r... o... o... k. Brook!” “Shadowbrook.” He nodded. “Good.... Now the last sequence of letters are A... r... m... s.”

“Shadowbrook Arms.” Elijah cried excitedly now. “That must be a hotel or apartment complex!”

Irma then wrote with her little blue paws the address and the name of the city it was in. The two men, having seen certain patterns in her lettering, recognized the street name more easily now and were able to decipher the numbers to the address within a few moments to complete the address. All they needed now, Elijah suggested with mounting interest, was a map to locate Shadowbrook Arms.

At that point, the sorcerer searched his cluttered office a moment until finding a Thomas Guide and a city map. Quickly now, they were able to search the index of the guide to find the grid numbers and page numbers of the street. The latest Thomas Guide had well established landmarks, including shopping centers and apartment complexes and they were able to pinpoint Shadowbrook Arms, which lie in the suburbs only a ten minute drive across town.

Irma had, with all her energy, communicated what her rescuers felt they needed to know. However, when she attempted to write down the satanic formula India had used in her circle of lights and also the words to the spell, itself, she drew a complete blank. She had always thought her excellent memory would save her, but this time, in her current state of mind and body, her memory had failed. Once more she felt overwhelming exhaustion. Withdrawing her little paw from the poster paint masterpiece, she allowed

Elijah and Blaze to gently clean her up and responded with docility as the preacher stroked her fur.

“You’ve been a very helpful kitty,” Elijah whispered to Irma as he stuck her inside his coat. “Through the power of the Lord, as our new friend Blaze promises, we’ll have you back in good form!”

“Sure... sure... sure,” Irma thought groggily as she fell asleep.

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It was at this point that Blaze O’Dare unveiled his plan. The preacher was watching the sorcerer clean up his mess, which amounted to nothing more than tossing everything, including the poster paints, into the sink. In a matter-of-fact tone, O’Dare said a very strange thing.

“Well,” he yawned expansively, stretching out his arms, “it’s time now to bring in the expert!”

“What?” The preacher bolted in his chair.

Shaken awake by this motion, Irma also asked “What?” in a sleepy meow, peeking fearfully out of Elijah’s coat.

“The expert,” explained Blaze matter-of-factly, “the one who can break this spell.”

“But I thought *you* were the expert!” Elijah shot back angrily. “What kind of game is this?” He looked down menacingly at him now. “No more bullshit sorcerer. Do you really know how to help this cat?”

“Ye-es, I think I know how she can be helped,” Blaze said less confidently this time.

“You *think* you know?” Elijah frowned in disbelief. “You *think* she can be helped? What was all this stuff we were doing, some kind of sick game Mister O’Dare?”

Clearly, by this latter form of address Blaze had been demoted in the preacher’s eyes.

“I’m out of my league,” the sorcerer confessed, lowering his chin to his chest.

“What is *that* suppose to mean?” asked Elijah, dropping back heavily into his chair. “Out of your league?... What *league* is this?... You can’t mean a witches league or sorcerer’s league!”

“Yes,” Blaze murmured faintly.

“You’re not serious!” Elijah’s mouth dropped progressively. “... There’s actually such a thing?... An honest-to-goodness witches and sorcerer’s league?”

“There are several such organizations,” Blaze explained motioning to the hall. “I have a library of them in the other room.”

Irma was not disappointed at all. After considering what Blaze had just said, she began to purr as a thought took hold. Unlike the preacher, this admission filled her with hope. Until this moment the sorcerer’s actions had not given her much encouragement. She had listened to India enough to have some idea of what Blaze meant now. They needed a powerful wizard or witch who could break India’s spell. Blaze obviously wasn’t it.

When the full impact of what Blaze had just admitted to Elijah had sank in, the preacher was appalled (at least the self-righteous part of him was). According to this self-proclaimed sorcerer now, it required the intervention of a white witch or wizard, much more powerful than himself, who would perform a counteracting spell. When the correct formula and magical ingredients and paraphernalia were used correctly by this agent, the spell would be broken. It was as simple or as difficult as that. Just exactly what this counteracting spell was Blaze didn't know yet, but he planned on finding out soon.

While the preacher tried to comprehend what had happened to him tonight it appeared as if he was moving in a dream or nightmare. He regretted that his faith didn't matter to O'Dare and hoped somehow that he could still win with the power of prayer. The only thing that seemed to be real at this point was the warm little cat purring on his chest. If he awakened now in his bed and it was only a dream, he would miss her greatly. Already, Irma Fresco had become more than just a pet.

"Who knows what we're going to need for this caper," he heard Blaze say in a most cavalier fashion as he rose shakily to his feet. "We may even need your religion. White witches have been known to consort with God."

"Forgive my ignorance," Elijah said hoarsely, his heart still pounding in his chest, "but you are, whether you call it that or not, dabbling in the black arts. I will pray when I deem it necessary, whether your white witch or whomever-you-call-it likes it or not."

"Fair enough," the sorcerer nodded, reaching inside his coat to give Irma a pat.

Irma hissed and almost bit him now. Blaze withdrew his hand with disappointment and stood there deep in thought, as if he was mulling over another plan. Elijah found himself nodding off to sleep. It had been a long day. An irrational fear that he would awaken and Irma would disappear from his life forever broke his somnolence. His head jerked up. Inside his coat the little cat mewed. He looked up then and realized that Blaze was no longer in the room.

It was as if he had, in fact, awakened from a bad dream only to wake up in another.

"Where are you?" He called out fearfully. "What are you up to *now* Sorcerer?... Admit it O'Dare, you cannot help her! For you this is all a game!"

"It's not a game, preacher... I *can* help!" the sorcerer announced at the doorway to the hall. Walking over with a book under his arm, he said with great conviction, "Whether you like it or not, I'm all you and the cat have. Please trust me. Give me a chance to help!"

The jolt Elijah had given her had once again ended Irma's catnap. The little cat stuck her pert head out and looked up at the preacher as if to protest then climbed out, stretched on the table and suddenly, inexplicably, leaped from the table to the sink.

In too many ways, the two men and Irma, herself, realized she was acting like a cat. One more indication that she was becoming feral came when she felt compelled to stop by the toaster sitting by the sink. As she looked into the shiny side of the toaster, she marveled at herself, realizing with some degree of pleasure, that she was a very pretty little cat. She had, in fact, owned a black cat when she was a child.... Now, she told herself dubiously, she *was* a cat. But, as Elijah and Blaze had noticed immediately, she

was no ordinary black cat. She had in the midst of her pixie-like face, as she had as a human, brilliant blue eyes, but also large, fox-like ears that did not seem to match any cat she had ever seen. For a moment she admired her reflection, as kittens often do, and then, losing interest, abstractedly turned her attention to a small scrap of food lying on the draining board, which she began to bat around playfully as the two men watched.

She was losing her humanity. She was beginning to think, eat, and act like a cat. The preacher felt great compassion for her and, in spite of his misgivings, wanted Blaze O'Dare's help.

"While I look in my library," the sorcerer directed gently, "would you like to read my Bible. We need all the help we can get. I won't be long."

Blaze handed him a large King James Version of the Holy Bible. The preacher, who was moved by the sorcerer's gesture and surprised he would have such a book, took it graciously with a nod and, after thumbing through the Scriptures, found a likely spot in the eighth chapter of Acts:

.... There was a certain man, called Simon, who bewitched the people of Samaria. To him they had regard, because he had bewitched them with sorcery.

But the passage, which was a part of New Testament Scriptures, didn't seem appropriate now, and it didn't bring the preacher justification for how he felt. Like him or not, Blaze O'Dare, for his own selfish reasons perhaps, was trying to help, which was more than what Elijah was doing now. There simply was no prayer in the Bible for breaking the spell of a witch. Elijah could also find nothing in the Scriptures about beasts having souls, which made it difficult for him to have a dialogue with God. The Bible, though it had become the law of his life, had no answers on this subject. His excitement for the miracle was tempered by this realization, which caused a crisis in his faith. And the realization grew in the preacher, as he searched the Bible, as would a glimmer at the end of a long, dark corridor, that there were forces for fighting evil not covered in this book.

## Chapter Fifteen

### The Sorcerer

As Elijah sat at the kitchen table reading from the Bible loaned to him by the sorcerer, Blaze looked through all his documentation, feverishly searching among his piles of books and binders, racking his brain for sources that might help. Though he didn't want to be spiritually contaminated by O'Dare's collection, Elijah discontinued his futile search in the Scriptures, gently cradling the cat inside his coat, and stood in the doorway leading to Blaze's study, watching the sorcerer in his search.

Blaze O'Dare's study was almost as messy as his living room and kitchen. There were bookcases along on all four walls, but there were as many volumes stacked precariously on top of the cases and lying all over the floor. Elijah's twenty-twenty vision enabled him to discern at a glance volumes of books on incantations and spells as well as books on various herbs and chemicals that witches used. Without looking back at his newfound ally, Blaze continued searching his archives until he found one familiar looking book lying amidst the clutter: The Directory of North American Witches. Elijah noticed two other books Blaze had set aside lying on the floor with worn covers, which he could not yet discern.

"Oh, don't tell me," Elijah managed wryly, "a witches telephone directory."

"Let your fingers do the walking," Blaze replied in a singsong voice.

Handing it to the preacher and then reaching back to pick up the other two books (one large, densely scrolled volume and a smaller black book with unreadable Gothic lettering on the jacket), he led them back into the kitchen and placed the three books next to the Bible Elijah had laid on the table. Under normal circumstances the preacher would consider this an act of defilement, and he still bristled at the placement.

"What're those other books about?" His voice now dripped with suspicion. "I don't want to be involved in anything blasphemous or sacrilegious. Let's keep this above board!"

"Just references, reverend," Blaze opened one of them up and displayed it to Elijah. "This one is a comprehensive digest of all the spells that can be broken by counter-spells. The smaller volume is a sort of "who's who" in magic and sorcery. There's nothing really blasphemous or purposely sacrilegious about these books."

Elijah remained silent, while stroking the cat inside his coat.

“I’ll have to search these books awhile,” Blaze smiled wanly at the preacher, a tired resolve in his eyes and voice.

“And I’ll make us some coffee,” Elijah volunteered, walking back down the hall and scanning the disheveled kitchen for something resembling a coffee pot.

When the smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the small kitchen, a familiar nostalgia swept over Elijah as he sat reading the Scriptures to himself. Once, before hitting the skids, this aroma would be the first important stimuli reaching his senses in the morning. His wife Karen, who would leave the house earlier than him, worked as an accountant uptown and would already be dressed, breakfasted, and sipping her first cup of coffee when he staggered into the kitchen. Their daughter Nancy would be in her high chair finishing her breakfast, her chubby legs protruding from a brightly colored dress. Her tiny feet would be clad in shiny shoes and frilly socks. A grin on her heart-shaped face and twinkle in her blue eyes belied the caterwauling she would make each time her mother dropped her off at preschool. Elijah would never forgive himself for being so irritable that morning. He had been up until the early morning hours grading essay papers and, at the very moment when he was gazing into his loving wife’s eyes for the last time, he had been grumbling about how much he hated his teaching job at the high school. Instead of asking Karen how their daughter was doing in preschool or wishing her a good day as she removed the bubbly golden-haired child from her high chair and stood her on the floor, he sat there looking blankly at his steaming cup of coffee, fleetingly watching her, briefcase in hand, escort Nancy out of the kitchen to vanish forever from his earthly life.

Karen had never been baptized. Thanks to her parents’ agnostic frame of minds, Nancy had never been christened and was, therefore, unbaptized too. Their small family had never set foot into a church or opened the large Bible his folks had given to them on their wedding day. He regretted more than anything in his life that he had deprived them, through his ignorance, of a religious foundation in their lives. Thanks to a drunken driver text-messaging on his cell phone as he ran a red light, he would never have the chance. After those darkest of days, the memories were dimmed in alcohol and drugs, until one bleak morning he opened his family Bible and began reading it at last.

Responding to the sorcerer’s voice, he awakened from his reverie, a page from the New Testament looming into view as Blaze commented on something he had just found in one of his books. Tracing his finger down to Revelations 3:20, he found one of his favorite verses:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

He looked up into the sorcerer’s haggard face, which did not match his dauntless spirit, wondering again how and why he, a man of God, was in this godless man’s home.

“What? . . . What did you say?” he asked, blinking as if he had just nodded off to sleep.

“It appears as if this spell requires a white witch of extraordinary powers,” Blaze was explaining as Elijah jerked awake. “For each witch listed in this directory, there are probably ten more not listed. It is not a comprehensive list, just a sampler of North American witches, who volunteered their telephone numbers and addresses. In this smaller black book I found the names of several master witches and sorcerers, with far greater powers than myself, who could perform such a rite, but most of them are listed in the registry—the large scrolled volume here—as deceased. The other three, who are still alive, are not living in the United States.”

The preacher shook his head vehemently at what the sorcerer had said. “I’m going to continue searching the Scriptures for something that will help,” he promised dubiously, repulsed by the whole idea of using witchcraft instead of God.

“There is one more practitioner that may assist us greatly. You may even approve of this one,” Blaze pointed to a page in the scrolled book. “According to the great Wizard Hildebrand, a witch powerful enough to change mortals into animals is almost always possessed by a satanic presence that controls her powers.”

“What does that mean to us?” Elijah asked, with a shudder. “Are we now talking about an exorcism instead of an incantation?”

It somehow seemed less terrible to Elijah, and yet it invoked a painful memory in his mind.

“Do you believe in demon possession?” Blaze searched the preacher’s face. “.... I’m not sure that I do. Everyone that I’ve seen who claimed to be possessed by demons were possessed by drugs.”

“I’ve seen drug induced demons with my own eyes,” Elijah nodded, recalling the young man he had once tried to save.

He had, he explained to Blaze, failed miserably in his attempt to exorcise the young man of his demon and only succeeded in getting himself scratched and bitten by the man and spending several days going back and forth to the clinic as he awaited the results of the young man’s autopsy to rule out rabies. All he had gotten out of the attempt were a tetanus shot, twenty-four stitches, and an additional test to rule out contamination with HIV. He had felt fortunate that he had gotten off with only small scars on his neck and wrist, but he never again attempted to exorcise his fellow derelicts of demons again. The small apartment downtown he had made his home and spiritual headquarters had his favorite passages from the Bible hung at various locations on the walls. A new one, after his ordeal with the possessed man, was the verses from Saint Matthew recounting Jesus Christ’s cleansing of the man of unclean spirits, a reminder of Elijah’s spiritual limitations.

“The rite of exorcism,” Blaze explained with a tolerant smile, “is best performed by a priest, not a Protestant minister. And for this demon, who Hildebrand calls the Shape-Changer Spirit, a demon responsible for this type of witches power, we will need a defrocked priest, who also dabbles in what you call the black arts.”

“What? Now that *is* blasphemy.” Elijah jumped up from his chair. “I will have nothing to do with a reprobate priest. In the first place he’s a Catholic!”

“Ah hah! Then, in addition to being narrow-minded, you’re also prejudiced,” Blaze sighed, shaking his head. “Not only do you not like witches and sorcerers, but you don’t like Catholics as well. I was once a Catholic, preacher. Our friend Irma is one too. Yet I have a Protestant Bible—the King James Version at that. What do you have against Catholics Mister Gray? Are they not Christians, like yourself?”

Elijah noted that the sorcerer had demoted him now. Not only was it Mister O’Dare, but it was Mister Gray too.

“I’m not prejudice against Catholics,” Elijah replied defensively, “I just don’t agree with their theology. Everything in their religion revolves around praying to saints instead of praying directly to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

“Well, the fact is we need an ex-Catholic priest, who is now a practicing wizard and still communicates with God,” Blaze explained, turning to his registry and searching the index for just such a man.

“But that’s a contradiction in terms,” Elijah frowned, setting the Bible aside. “You can’t have a man of God, priest or otherwise, worshipping the natural forces and still communicating with God. In short, you cannot serve two masters at the same time.”

“Don’t worry Elijah,” Blaze looked up briefly from his search, “this seems outrageous to me too. I may never have been a very good Catholic, but I can’t imagine God listening to such a man.”

“You’re a Catholic and you’re a sorcerer,” Elijah offered, a note of sarcasm creeping into his voice. “You certainly have enough books on the subject. Why can’t you just do it yourself?”

“You’re not listening Elijah,” Blaze sighed with disgust. “I explained to you my limitations. We need a white witch or priest who is a wizard or sorcerer. Mortimer Hildebrand and his spiritual predecessors claim they can fight such a witch. According to my registry, the only one living who fits that bill is Hildebrand, himself, and I doubt if he’s even alive. Besides he will need all sorts of paraphernalia that I don’t possess.” “Time is running out for our little friend.” He pointed to the cat. “Hildebrand believed that men and women who were transformed into animals, especially cats, would lose their humanity completely if the spell was not broken within a few weeks after being cast.”

“It can’t be hopeless!” Elijah cried, pulling out Irma lovingly and stoking her fur. “We can’t let Lucifer prevail!”

“I know, I know,” he said, patting the preacher’s arm, “but it may come down to working with a super-witch or wizard. What else do we have?”

“I just don’t know,” Elijah sighed, setting the purring cat down. “... Maybe we could use my computer to surf the web.”

“Yes, that’s a possibility,” Blaze nodded thoughtfully, “but I’m not certain that witches or wizard directories will be found on the web.”

Irma immediately hopped back onto the sink to stare reflectively into the toaster. This time she looked past the strange-looking cat into her thoughts and recent past. A memory was surfacing in her mind. Suddenly, the words to India’s spell came flowing back to her. By the time India had bewitched her, the rush of adrenalin in Irma’s system

had sobered her up. Memories of the incantation India uttered in the circle of lights, however, were still sluggish, because Irma's drunken state of mind.

"Meow!" She cried out. "Meowow! Meeeeeeow!"

"What's wrong Kitty?" Blaze asked with acute interest. Elijah wondered if she might not be ill.

Scampering down to the floor and then leaping up to a small table below a telephone on the wall, she searched for a way to communicate directly again. Newspapers, magazines, and assorted junk greeted her eyes, but nothing for communication. What she longed for was a computer. Everyone in this day and age had some form of computer. *This sorcerer lives in the Stone Age!* Thought Irma, looking angrily around the room.

"She just wants to communicate," Blaze concluded, standing back and watching her sniff and poke around. Elijah sighed with relief and was encouraged by what he saw. Losing patience with Irma's antics, however, both men tried to help her in her quest.

"You want pen and paper?" Blaze asked pulling these items out of his coat.

"Get real sorcerer," she turned and hissed, "I can't hold a pen! My paws are my brushes; and I made a mess of *that!* We need to work on association." "Here," she meowed, as a magazine tumbled onto the floor to expose telephone directories beneath.

"I see! You want to look up a number, right Irma?" Blaze slapped his forehead. "That's so obvious. Why didn't *I* think of that?"

He immediately picked up both the white and yellow pages and carried them to the table, with Irma scampering ahead.

"No-no, you dumb shit," she spat, humping her back, and clawing at his foot, "I want to do association and point at pictures. I want the yellow pages, not that other book!"

By the time he had set the directories down, she was already trying to rifle through the yellow pages with her paws and nose.

"Wait, let her show us, herself," Elijah suggested, waving Blaze away.

"She won't know how to spell Hildebrand," Blaze argued impatiently, reaching for the white pages now.

"Sssssssss!" spat Irma. "Back off, this is my search!"

"You don't really think she would be looking for that name in the telephone directory?" Elijah asked with disbelief. "You're reaching for straws Blaze!"

"Very well," the sorcerer backed away from the snarling cat, "but we need the white pages now."

But Irma was not looking for Hildebrand. She was busily pointing at words in various portions of the yellow pages to express herself. The result, after selecting the corresponding pages for By (Buyer's Guide to Automobiles) and powers (Power Tools) up to the last words in India's spell almost wore her out.

Unfortunately, however, what she had wanted to convey "By the powers that are and the powers that be, a rat you once were and a cat you now be," was translated on Blaze's note pad as nothing but gibberish.

“Buy power tools, rat eradication, and cat grooming... what does that mean Irma?” Elijah asked delicately, patting the spent feline as she lie panting on her side.

“You two are a matched set.” She looked up bleakly at the men. “. . . Bring on this super-witch or wizard. But he’s gonna need the spell and incantation. Better yet he’s gonna have to kill the bitch!”

As Elijah brought Irma a bowl of water and then sat watching her doze, Blaze idly scanned through the white pages, instead of the yellow pages, until he did a double-take and moved his finger back up the page.

“Wait a minute,” he cried out, startling Elijah and awakening Irma from her nap. “I thought it might be possible, but not really probable. Mortimer Hildebrand was listed in the index as living in our town. But I didn’t think I’d find him in *this* book. I didn’t even believe he was *alive!*”

“Are you telling me you found him in the white pages?” Elijah asked in disbelief. “Are you certain that it’s the same Mortimer Hildebrand, who’s a priest?”

“There’s only one way to find out!” Blaze jumped up and ran for the phone.

“You did good!” said Elijah, scuffing Irma’s neck.

In addition to not having a cell phone or computer, Blaze had only a rustic landline on his kitchen wall. After misdialing and then finally hearing the ringing of Hildebrand’s phone, Blaze held his breath. Elijah prayed quietly to himself, as Irma sat up anxiously on the table, meowing softly under her breath. Blaze gasped as he heard the man’s frothy baritone voice.

“Mortimer Hildebrand here,” he announced simply.

“*The* Mortimer Hildebrand,” Blaze asked breathlessly, “The very same Mortimer Hildebrand who is a defrocked priest and Great Wizard of the Christian Occultists?”

“You are very cruel to remind me of that young man,” Mortimer replied coldly into the receiver. “I’m in retirement now anyhow. How did you get my number? I thought it was unlisted. Are you a reporter or some kind of nut?”

The sorcerer came straight to the point. “I have a woman who has been turned into a cat.”

Click went the phone.

“Did he hang up?” Elijah rose up anxiously. “Call the son-of-a-bitch back!”

“Oh dear,” the sorcerer groaned, “I hate talking on the phone.”

“I don’t believe it. Let me do it, myself,” the preacher motioned for him to step out of the way. “I used to be a teacher, and I spent many hours talking to parents on the phone.”

“Well, this is not a parent,” Blaze offered him the receiver, “this cranky old man was once a great wizard.”

“I’ll use my cell phone.” Elijah said, reaching into his pocket. “To me he’s just another heretic. You’ve got to use a little tact with someone like that.”

Blaze called out the number for him. After stumbling with the dialing combination a moment, Elijah cleared his throat and motioned for Blaze to set down. With the cell phone pressed against his ear, Elijah received Irma on his lap, stroking her with his free hand. She was purring loudly as Mortimer answered the phone.

“Mortimer Hildebrand,” he announced again, causing Elijah to blanch.

“I’m Reverend Elijah Gray,” the preacher deliberately used the Catholic term for minister. “After performing several tests upon what appeared to be common alley cat, we believe she was once a woman before being bewitched.”

This time the receiver was slammed into its cradle.

“So much for your telephone voice,” Blaze exhaled deeply. “We’ll just have to drive over there cold!”

“But there’s no address listed after his name,” Elijah observed after pinpointing his number again. “We *have* to get him on the phone!”

“Meeeeeeowwww!” Irma said, pawing the phone.

“You want to talk to him kitty?” Blaze smiled wanly. “How cute! But he’ll think it’s another crank call!”

“And why not?” Elijah lifted up the receiver. “After hearing her attempt to talk as she did to us and then listening to my two-bits, he might soften this time.”

“We have nothing to lose,” Blaze nodded to Elijah. “Give’em hell Irma!”

As soon as Elijah had dialed the number and positioned the phone next to one of Irma’s fox-like ears, Mortimer Hildebrand’s voice blasted into his receiver: “Now see here you psychopathic moron, I value my peace and quiet. I’ve served my church all my life. Now I just want to be left alone!”

“Meeeeeeowwww. Me-me-me-me. Mo-mo-mo. Meow-wow-wow!” Irma tried every combination she knew. In the background Elijah was hollering “She’s trying to talk. Just ask her a question: one meow for yes and two meows for no.”

“All right kitty-cat,” Mortimer spat with great sarcasm. “Are you a reporter?”

“Meow-meow.” she said pertly.

“Are you a nut?” his voice softened.

“Meow-meow.” she again replied

“Were you once a woman?” Mortimer voice constricted now.

“Meoowww!” Irma replied brokenly this time.

“I believe she’s actually weeping,” Elijah offered from the background. “.... Can you help her sir?” He asked earnestly after a pause. “Can we bring her over tonight?”

“Yes, of course,” the priest responded hoarsely, obviously taken back. “Have you got a pencil? I’ll give you my address.”

“Here, Blaze, give me a pencil,” Elijah snapped his fingers impatiently.

Handing him a pad and pen, Blaze watched as Elijah very expertly jotted down the address, thanked the priest, and then hung up the phone. Rising up excitedly and rattling his car keys, Blaze stared with a wild surmise straight ahead, still not believing everything that had happened tonight. Elijah had a grim look on his freckled face that seemed more like resignation now.

“All my life,” Blaze said dreamily, “I’ve wanted to meet someone like that, and all this time he’s been living right across town.”

“Come on,” Elijah motioned impatiently again, scooping up the cat, “let’s get this over with. I hope this is not another disappointment for Irma. I can’t believe we’re turning to a defrocked priest.”

“Where’s your faith?” chimed the sorcerer gleefully. “Why don’t you take my Bible along.”

“Yes,” nodded the preacher obligingly, picking up the book, “my faith has always been here in the Scriptures. But this flies in the face of everything I believe!”

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As Blaze opened the passenger door for Elijah and motioned him to crawl in, the preacher uttered a hasty prayer, “Lord give me the wisdom to know whether I am doing the right thing.” The silence that followed in his soul seemed to be answer enough, and yet Elijah knew that this man was trying to undo a terrible deed. Mortimer Hildebrand was yet another player in God’s mysterious plan. How could the Lord’s hand not be there too? Could it be that God, who was somehow in league with a practitioner of magic and the occult, was also aligned with a heretic priest?

“Do you believe in Jesus Christ?” He finally asked Blaze, as the automobile sped quickly through town.

“What?” The sorcerer asked in disbelief. “... I thought we settled this nonsense. What kind of question is that?”

“A very simple question,” Elijah answered, staring into the darkness outside of the car. “Do you worship Christ or do you worship the Devil? You claim that you’re a sorcerer.... Perhaps that title needs redefining for me.”

“In the first place,” Blaze responded thoughtfully, “not all sorcerers or witches are evil. Some of us do good works in the world. Look at Mortimer Hildebrand: he still claims to be a priest!”

“You’re avoiding the questions,” Elijah said, shaking his head and biting his lip. “Do you worship Satan? You must have some kind of livelihood. What exactly *do* you do?”

“I am not a devil-worshipper or practitioner of black magic,” Blaze tried to explain. “I practice white magic, not black magic. I am aligned with the positive forces of nature and your god.”

“Tsk-tsk, such candy-coated words:” Elijah could not help being sarcastic “positive forces of nature and *your* god, not God, but *your* god. Please humor me, my newfound friend. Who are you working for, the Lord God Jehovah or the Lord Satan, and what exactly do you do?”

“I was trying to explain to you,” Blaze grew irritated now. “I work with nature. Through ancient Druidic formulas and Wicca incantations, I am able to probe the mysteries of life and, when I am very lucky, harness these forces to change men’s destinies.”

“Luck, now it’s luck, is it? You cannot answer me directly, can you Blaze?... Because it’s true,” Elijah pointed accusingly at him, “you don’t worship God. You don’t pray to achieve your ends. Instead you mix potions together, mumble imprecations, and wave you hands in the air.” “You can’t serve two masters mister O’Dare,” he cried out at the sorcerer again. “You either work for God or you work for Satan. There’s no twilight

zone or never-never world between. Please answer me directly to give my mind peace: who do you work for, and do you pray for you ends or merely cast spells?"

"I worship God... sometimes," Blaze answered lamely. "I pray... in a different way than you. But why do you need absolutes? Isn't it enough that we're on the same side?"

"The same side? That's what I'm trying to establish," Elijah snapped irritably. "The fact is I'm beginning to actually like you. But we can't be on the same side unless we have the same *boss!*"

"All right, I don't worship the Devil. I believe in God. I occasionally pray to Jesus," Blaze replied obligingly again, as he looked into his rearview mirror. "Nature's a manifestation of God, is it not? No? You don't agree? What do you want me to say?" he asked in exasperation as Elijah shook his head.

For a moment the sorcerer thought he saw a flashing red light in his rearview mirror.

"The truth!" demanded Elijah, folding his arms.

"The truth? What is truth? There are many truths?... Here," Blaze began fumbling with a chain around his neck, "do you wish to see my crucifix? I used to be a Roman Catholic before they excommunicated me. Will that help convince you that I'm on your side?"

"Yes,... perhaps," the preacher nodded reluctantly, watching nervously as the sorcerer pulled it out, "I'd like to see it, but it matters very much which way its positioned. Careful sorcerer! I'm protected by the Holy Spirit. I'm an emissary of God!"

At that point, Irma attempted to communicate with him again and beseech the narrow-minded preacher to work with the sorcerer and keep his mind open for what lie ahead. "Listen to him, you pompous fool," she wanted to say. "This is my only chance. I don't want to be trapped in a cat's body the rest of my life!"

"There," Blaze said finally, holding the crucifix up to the light inside the car, "right-side up, you'll note, and the genuine article. Are you satisfied now? Would you like to see the small icon of the Madonna and Saint Christopher medals I keep in the glove compartment of my car. I remember the words to the Rosary too. You want me to quote that too?"

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, blessed be the fruit of your womb..." he chanted in a loud voice.

"No, no, stop it, I'm not a Catholic," Elijah explained with a tired sigh, "but it's sacrilegious to use holy relics as good luck charms. Already you have committed blasphemy by calling on the forces of nature.... What is a small piece of metal forged in the likeness of Christ on the Cross matter to someone like you?"

"Right!" Blaze forced himself to smile. "Can I take this as a tacit form of acceptance by you? Wouldn't my skin be burned by the touch of a cross if I were in league with the Devil? Let us work together to solve this momentous puzzle, eh! Think of it Elijah, 'we have a cat who is under a witches spell.' Is this not the greatest test of our professional lives?"

Elijah responded more graciously than he felt: “It’s like you said; we’re on the same side.”

The small reorganized world in which he carried but a small candle in the dark, was changing suddenly for him. As the automobile entered the tinsel and fluorescent quarters of Uptown where Mortimer Hildebrand lived, he wondered if his faith would ever be the same. Perhaps it would require redefining, but he refused to believe it would change his life. He would still continue to work for the Lord during his free time. He had come a long way since winding up on the skids. Now, to save one small black cat, he was plunging onward to do battle with the Evil One again, but this time on a grander scale—against the very incarnation of evil in a Christian’s mind: a witch, collaborating with a sorcerer and defrocked priest to achieve his ends!

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For Irma Fresco, whose humanity was disappearing each hour, the world had begun transforming from a world of vision to a world of scents. Scent is the main identifier for felines such as herself. The preacher and the sorcerer were therefore separate constellations of odors that she could already distinguish from each other in the dark. Unfortunately, Irma had not yet gained the feline’s tolerance of foul odors, so the smells bombarding her delicate nostrils were still offensive, especially since neither of these men bathed regularly and the inside of Blaze’s station wagon smelled of all manner of roots, dried insects, and herbs.

She couldn’t talk and she couldn’t see images in the same way she saw them before. Due to her small size, everything was gigantic and awe-inspiring to her. She had been forced to cling to shadows, those screens of darkness she had normally shunned as a two-legged woman, and thanks to India Crowley, her one-time friend, her life had shrank down to a twilight world of scent and touch and a visual nightmare of looming terror and threats. But that was changing. Now she was being rescued by two of those smelly giants from the human world: one man representing natural forces and one man representing God. A third rescuer, a priest, a member of Irma’s own Catholic faith, now promised to offer help. Perhaps, if nothing else, her shattered faith might be restored.

Irma, like Sam Burns, who had suffered her same fate, wanted to believe that it would take the power of prayer as well as supernatural powers to break the spell. What was the point of life if it could be altered only by incantations and spells and if faith and good deeds meant nothing against the blind forces of magic and the occult? A great dread and loneliness filled her when she remembered that her own prayers hadn’t benefited her in the least. If she had known that Sam Burns and other young adults at Shadowbrook Arms had been bewitched, she might have felt even greater despair. Why were the forces of light so impotent against the forces of darkness? Why had India Crowley, by simply following the ancient formulas in the black arts, been allowed by a Christian god to turn her into a cat? Somehow, in some way, she promised herself, these mortal men were going to help her. If no one else, she would believe in *them!*

## Chapter Sixteen

### Mortimer, the Priest

Despite her depression, Irma found the warmth of Elijah Gray's jacket and the rocking motion of the automobile comforting. She was still sound asleep when Elijah climbed out of Blaze's station wagon and followed the sorcerer up to Mortimer Hildebrand's door. When the door finally opened, its hinges creaked in the fashion of all clandestine inner sanctums. Blaze exhibited how amateurish and superstitious he was to Elijah when he crossed himself and made a quick, deft sign with his hand to ward off the evil eye in anticipation of Mortimer Hildebrand's appearance at the door. Inside the preacher's coat Irma had felt warm and secure, but now, with the sound of the creaking door, she grew frightened.

"Come in," a deep, resonant voice beckoned from the dark interior.

"I don't like this," Elijah murmured fearfully to the sorcerer. "I don't like this at all!"

"Don't worry," consoled Blaze unconvincingly, "the priest sounded innocent enough over the phone."

"Incredible!" Irma meowed, peeking out of Elijah's coat. "A preacher, a sorcerer, now a priest!"

Holding a crucifix in one palm and a rabbit's foot in the other, Blaze led Elijah into Mortimer's house. After mumbling a magical formula that escaped notice too, Blaze introduced himself and the preacher, and then introduced the cat peeking out of the preacher's coat. It was difficult for Mortimer Hildebrand to detect between his visitors who was most afraid of him: the trembling sorcerer or the cringing preacher, who followed Blaze into the room. The little cat peering out of Elijah's coat also appeared frightened of him as he reached in to give her a pat. Irma, who was not a practicing Roman Catholic, herself, had been startled by the man's cold hand and, despite an earlier resolve to trust him, took an immediate dislike to the watery-eyed old man.

In spite of being excommunicated by the church, Mortimer Hildebrand still wore priestly attire. His clerical collar was frayed and his black suit was faded and worn, but he carried himself as a priest. He did not, as the preacher, approve of the sorcerer's ankh necklace or the occult medallion on his vest. When he led the preacher and sorcerer into his small apartment, his visitors could see a picture of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the current Pope on one wall and several smaller icons on the tables and bureaus on the opposite side of the room. Blaze, who would never have confessed his misgivings about turning to a defrocked priest, was merely confused. *Christianity allied with magic*, he asked himself, *is it really possible? What sort of practitioner is this Mortimer Hildebrand that Christ and the Virgin Mary are part of his art?*

Elijah didn't understand the iconography in Hildebrand's house either, but he was satisfied that he didn't see any satanic paraphernalia in the priest's home. Hildebrand, he concluded, for all his eccentricity, seemed to be a practicing, all be it Roman Catholic, Christian. In spite of his dislike of what he called "Papists" and his disapproval of a Christian dabbling in magic and the occult, he took comfort in seeing Jesus and Mary's pictures on the wall.

When the priest caught sight of Irma's large ears and elfin face, he recognized her breed immediately. The little cat was a Devon Rex, he announced astutely. More importantly to him, as his watery eyes focused upon the creature peeking out of Elijah's coat, was the expression on her face. "This," he murmured to himself, "is no ordinary cat!" There was intelligence, along with fear, in the cat's blue eyes and an intensity in its gaze and faint, rumbling purr. Irma responded to his kindly pat with a rising growl, which seemed to underline her protector Elijah's fears.

"Don't animals sense evil?" Elijah wanted to ask someone now.

Almost as if he had read his mind, the priest seemed to recoil at his expression, and was also disappointed with the reaction of the cat.

"I'm not a devil-worshipper," he told the scowling preacher and the growling cat, as he led them all down a hall. "I sometimes work with intermediary spirits in order to achieve my ends, but I pray to the same God. When I perform an exorcism, I must do exactly as Christ once did in Capernaum." "Do you remember the passage Reverend Gray?" He tried warming up to the preacher. "*You* probably don't!" He looked disapprovingly at the sorcerer now. "But the fact is that the transformation of animals requires more than the power of prayer; it also requires the assistance of intermediary spirits to achieve my ends."

"My God, I don't believe this!" Irma tried saying in a series of meows. "If only you could read my thoughts! All this occult trivia won't help! You're wasting time with this clown!"

"Exactly what intermediary spirits are you talking about?" inquired Elijah, his eyes flickering with distrust. "Ghosts, angels, poltergeists? Are these spirits heaven-sent or among the dark forces used by sorcerers and witches in their rites?"

"Spirits of the dead *are* in fact ghosts, not angels," the priest explained, gently reaching into Elijah's coat to touch the cat. "Angels only come down here for special reasons. There are no such thing as poltergeists on earth. But there are evil spirits, which we often call demons: free-moving agents, the counterparts of angels, from hell instead of heaven. I am, in addition to having the gift of spell-changing and exorcism, a medium. I can utilize the spirit world—ghosts, if you prefer—who can help bring out the demons who have given the witch or sorcerer their powers."

"Sweet Mother Mary," spat Irma, rolling her blue eyes, "I never heard such crap! You're going to have to use her spell against her or *kill the bitch!*"

As if to say "Ah hah, I told you so!" Elijah flashed Blaze a triumphant look. Irma was growling and hissing, her nails digging into the underlining of Elijah's smelly coat. This was, in Elijah's mind, dabbling in the occult: witchcraft. Why couldn't the priest just admit it and forego this claptrap? Although the self-styled sorcerer was incredulous, himself, about the priest's claims, Blaze, as had Irma, now rolled his eyes, but at the pig-headed preacher, not the priest, as Hildebrand continued to make his point. Of the two visitors, the priest liked the preacher the most and felt spiritually closer to Elijah than the sorcerer in spite of the preacher's distrust. Before hearing Mortimer's claims, Irma had high hopes that priest might help them. Now, as he continued his discussion, Elijah was forced to reach in and continually console the unhappy cat.

“It’s true,” declared Mortimer pedagogically, “that in the Apocryphal Scriptures, Saint Thomas’ Gospel relates a story of the Christ Child performing a shape-changing miracle too.”

“Oh,” groaned Irma, “now a *Bible story!*”

“It seemed so outrageous to the early church fathers,” droned Mortimer, “they eliminated it from the Canonical Scriptures. But the fact is there was a precedent from the Master, himself, the greatest magician of them all, for such transformations. You must understand gentlemen: no sorcerer can do such a feat, and only a priest in direct communion with the Savior has the power to reverse such a spell. The difference is that Jesus Christ didn’t require intermediary spirits. He *is* God. A spiritually connected priest such as myself needs all the help he can get.”

“But you’re considered a heretic and blasphemer,” the sorcerer played the Devil’s advocate this time. “You were, just like me, excommunicated from the Roman Rites. Why would the Lord work with someone like you instead of working through the legitimate Catholic Church?”

“Because, unlike *some people*,” he looked squarely into Blaze’s eyes, “I didn’t forsake my Christianity to practice magic. My faith *is* my magic, and it’s *my life*. I don’t play with it or mock God. The center of my magic is Christ, and the prime force moving everything else is prayer.”

“Incredible!” The sorcerer muttered to himself as Irma continued to growl.

A smile played on his bearded face. The preacher, however, was not amused at all by these conflicts.

“What causes humans to be transformed into animals in the first place,” he redirected the subject. “Is it through the power of Satan or simply the ability to harness these free-moving agents? How is it possible that a man of God would associate with such things?”

“It’s the power of a great demon, whose identity I must discern,” explained the priest without hesitation.

After hearing his answer, Irma realized just how knowledgeable the priest was. All of a sudden, after such a long-winded seemingly irrelevant stream of information, his words came as a thunderclap in her mind. *The power of the great demon!* Had she not seen such a demon in India’s apartment? Was not this apparition invited during India’s circle of lights?

“How did he know that?” She wanted to ask the preacher. “He couldn’t of known it... unless, unless...”

Irma’s tense little body suddenly relaxed as the priest reached boldly into the preacher’s jacket and brought out the trembling cat.

“Calm down,” he said soothingly, “you are among friends!” “... I’ve heard about it before but mostly in cats,” he explained calmly, “a dog, a pig, and even a horse. It’s impossible to determine if a human can be turned into a primitive form of animal or a plant.” “For a creature such as this,” he said, placing the small cat below them on the desk, “it’s easier to detect how much humanity is left in the beast. It only takes a small trace when bringing them back to humanity. After that, when they are fully a beast, it will be too late.”

Irma found herself lulled by the benign forces of these men. Regardless of whether they could help, she did, in fact, believe that she was among friends.

“I’ve never really believed this was possible, myself,” Blaze responded in awe. “Have you ever brought out such a demon and undone his magic. This isn’t some sort of pet theory of yours, is it Mortimer? Can you really save this little cat?”

“Yes, father,” she looked up quizzically at the priest, “I need more than theories right now.”

“Please remember that this isn’t a *pet* nor a *cat*.” Hildebrand said, smiling at his play on the words. “... It’s merely a woman transformed into her current form. She’s still spiritually human.... With the Lord’s help, I’ve done it in the past. *I can do it again!*”

With these words, the strange man won Irma’s affection, and her growl was replaced by a pleasant purr.

“Once,” Hildebrand continued softly, stroking the small, purring beast, “I wrote a paper on it and was promptly censured by the church. It was considered heretical. Later, when I refused to retract my theory on free agents, I was ex-communicated. It didn’t matter that what I was doing was for Christendom and the Holy Mother Church. I am, they believe, a heretic and blasphemer. I consider myself still a priest, but I’m on my own now. The Lord is my guide!”

“So our free agent or demon has magical powers,” Blaze muttered in amazement. “Why didn’t I know about this. I’ve never read anything like this before. What kind of powers are being let loose on the earth?”

“Oh, this is nothing new,” explained Hildebrand, studying the small cat closely now. “It has been going on for thousands of years without anyone understanding the evidence at hand. Cats, dogs, and other intelligent mammals might communicate their dilemma to a practitioner, if one were available, but no one was the wiser when a man, woman, or child was transformed into a dumb brute or plant. They simply disappeared, when in fact they might be close by, unable to communicate to their family members, spouses, or friends, as had our little friend, what happened to them. Fortunately, most conjurers aren’t very original, since the common house cat (*felis catus*) is the most common result. It seems as if every witch with the power to cast transformation spells will, in fact, change her victims into cats. Perhaps it was such cats who accompanied so many witches on their nightly journeys. But it’s believed that great master witches could turn their victims into funguses or lichens if they wished. This is, of course, almost a death sentence for their victims. Their demons have much greater power!”

“So we’re dealing with a mediocre witch?” Blaze pursed his lips in meditation.

“And a mediocre spirit,” Elijah offered, looking down protectively at his new friend.

“Good grief!” Irma thought looking back and forth between the three men.

“If this was the sixteenth or seventeenth century, I would say that you’re *both* right,” the priest commented as he fondled the cat. “However, considering that this is the twentieth-first century and this has occurred only ten times in the last one hundred years, we must accept the fact that this is a very dangerous witch.” “... This is, after all, gentlemen” he paused for emphasis, the Age of Unbelief. We don’t have an inquisition to capture and try such a witch nor do we have a credulous public to give us moral support. We can’t rely on local law enforcement to help or protect us in our endeavor. We can’t even expect local Christians to believe such a tale. We are alone in this, gentlemen, totally isolated as any other member of a lunatic fringe seeing Leprechauns or little green men.”

Blaze exchanged a frightened look with the preacher as Mortimer paused to study the expression of the little black cat purring contentedly in the arms of her latest protector.

“During the Middle Ages and fifteenth through sixteenth century,” he continued thoughtfully, “when thousands of witches were burned, tortured, and hanged, it was much more common. Back then we could hunt them down with a force of ruffians or police and drag them off to justice, if they didn’t hex us first. There were, of course, untold numbers of frogs, lizards

and especially cats who had once been human beings. Since those dreadful times, the ability to transform humans into animals seems to have disappeared almost entirely. There is no record of it again until a few isolated case in the late nineteenth century and the period of time during the nineties when I encountered seven related cases in California, Utah, Mississippi, and New York. I believe that, with the new millennium, *super witches*—the kind that were encountered by the Inquisition and witch hunters of the sixteenth and seventeenth century—began sprouting up.”

“These are,” he turned to face the two men, “the End Times, are they not? We must expect all manner of evil in the world!”

“Okay, priest, enough of your fine words. You claim you can do it. *So do it!*” Elijah responded in a put-up or shut up tone.

Blaze was growing impatient himself but found the preacher’s sarcasm intolerable, and yet Hildebrand understood Elijah’s concern. As Elijah had felt earlier, he was not fond of the sorcerer. It must have been painful for him to associate with such a man, he told himself, as the preacher cast him a reproachful eye. Elijah, ironically, had begun to feel sorry for the sorcerer, who was trying so hard to be Hildebrand’s friend. Blaze, he realized, was a harmless eccentric, whereas the priest’s claims defied everything in which he believed.

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Silence fell over the room as the priest considered Elijah’s demand. Irma was very tired. She hadn’t slept more than a few moments at a time since her escape from Shadowbrook Arms. Even in the safety of Blaze’s apartment and in his automobile the two men had kept her awake with their constant chatter, allowing her only a few catnaps tonight. Considering everything she once believed and the elements of India’s newfound profession that had rubbed off on her, she still couldn’t understand how a defrocked priest, street preacher, or make-believe sorcerer could undo the spell. And yet the priest seemed to be on the right track, and if it hadn’t been for the kindly preacher and inquisitive sorcerer, she would still be on the street.... She was, if nothing else, among friends.

Exhaustion was overtaking her again, so that even the mesmerizing touch of the priest failed to cause her to purr. Instead of a feline purr, the small black cat looked up at Mortimer, sighed, and purposefully laid her chin on his hand. Moved by this human gesture, the priest’s eyes twinkled and a smile broke his wrinkled face. “I can work with this cat,” he announced cheerily. “There’s plenty of humanity left in her. Look at that adorable posture. I just need to communicate with her. We need to find out as much information about the antecedents of the spell as we can.”

“Excuse me sir,” Elijah cleared his throat with irritation, “we’ve got all the information we need. All we need is for you to unzip her, if, in fact you can!”

“Oh, how rustic, Reverend Gray,” Mortimer’s eyes narrowed slightly, “just when I was beginning to like you, too.... Tsk-tsk-tsk, a *Doubting Thomas!*”

“Listen, you fools!” Irma came alive again. “You need more than his pretty words! You need the words to India’s spell.”

“We don’t have much time,” Blaze reminded him, as he reached down to scratch Irma’s head.

“Don’t worry,” the priest smiled reassuringly, also stroking the cat.

Irma now bristled at Mortimer’s touch, not knowing what to expect from him. Hildebrand wanted to perform a few tests on her to see how far gone she was. It seemed

redundant to the preacher, but the sorcerer signaled patience with his eyes. Mortimer began by teasing her with his hand. She reacted to his playfulness with a disapproving hiss, batting her paw at his advancing and retracting hand. She was cranky, at this point, and yet she purred when he began gently scratching her head and seemed to be falling asleep. Irma was anxious to communicate some more and had no patience for his silly tests. She was also exhausted. After he thumped the table behind her to check her reactions, she humped her back up in a typical cat-like pose and hissed again, this time growling deep in her throat.

“Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!” She meowed loudly.

The priest told the preacher and sorcerer that he had performed his simple tests successfully and that it was not too late, but they had, in fact, only a few days to undue the spell. In too many ways she was behaving like a beast.

“Well, duhhh,” Irma gave him a feline sneer.

“Now I want her to communicate with *me* this time,” Mortimer said, looking around his cluttered office, and biting his lip pensively as he searched the room.

“Don’t tell me,” she collapsed unhappily onto the table, “you don’t have a computer! He’s looking for a piece of paper for me to write on! I just know it! I can see it in his eyes!”

“Let’s see, where’s my laptop?” he mumbled aloud now.

“Huh, what did he say?... At last!” she brightened, the purr returning to her throat.

“Gimme a keyboard. Better yet gimme a computer with a graphics program, and I’ll give you a first rate report!”

“Thank God. He’s computer literate,” Mortimer could hear Elijah murmur to Blaze.

“Oh, I have a computer too, but it’s busted right now,” Blaze replied conversationally. “I’m going to buy a laptop, myself.”

“I have a state of the art model,” the priest explained, rummaging around his cluttered desk, “a 1.1 gigahertz speed, 4 gigabyte Ram, and 500 gigabyte hard drive. Every bell and whistle possible, including a webcam and fast internet cable,” “... but it’s tiny,” he added cheerfully, glancing down at Irma, “much smaller than a laptop—a mini-notebook they call it, just big enough for our little friend!”

The priest’s house was not nearly as messy as Blaze’s apartment. His study was neatly arranged, in fact, except for his desk. Piles of notes lie in a bizarre order that only the priest could explain. Beneath the papers a shiny, silver Hewlett Packard notebook emerged. A modest sized printer/fax machine unit nearby implied that the priest meant business. His visitors were duly impressed.

“I have a feeling that she wants to tell us something more,” Mortimer now declared, setting the notebook in front of Irma’s face. “Now here’s how were going to do this kitty,” he said lightheartedly. “Since you have only stubby little paws, I want you to come right up to the keyboard and use only one claw.” “Can you hold up one claw for me?” He asked, tickling her chin.

“Yes-yes, let me have it! Let me have it!” Irma wiggled excitedly now.

“Oh good, you’re right-pawed,” he sighed with delight. “... That’s it, one claw.... She’s got the hang of it boys!”

Slowly but steadily, in hunt-and-peck style, Irma typed out with more difficulty this time “by powers within an powers that b, a rat you once wr an a cat you now b.”

“It’s the spell the witch cast upon her!” cried Mortimer, who danced a little jig.

“So that’s what she was driving at when she was pointing at the yellow pages,” Blaze said, scratching his beard.

“Boy, are *we* dumb!” Elijah said, shaking his head.

“Well, I’m impressed.” the priest whistled under his breath.

Mortimer corrected the errors Irma had made then watched her nod with approval. Although he seemed genuinely awed, a frown played on his wrinkled face. Irma now typed out the incantation India uttered in her apartment. Recalling the blasphemous prayer, he was convinced it was used to invoke the demon. Genuinely proud of herself for remembering the incantation, she pointed her paw at the screen. Immediately, to her satisfaction, the priest corrected the errors then read it aloud in a deadpan voice:

I deny the creator of heaven and earth.  
I deny my baptism and the worship I formerly paid to God.  
I cleave unto thee and in thee I believe.  
Oh Lucifer, Prince of Darkness, come to me tonight  
so that we can make our trade.  
I will sign a contract with you: my soul for your power.  
Please father Satan, hear me at last!

Elijah cringed at this blasphemy. Even the liberal-minded Blaze blanched at what Irma had typed, now uttered by the priest. A flicker of disappointment clouded Mortimer’s expression that grew to compassion as he considered Irma’s achievement. Obviously, she felt as if she had done something quite important and she was waiting for him to acknowledge it now.

“Listen, my child,” he addressed her as a human this time, “I know what you have typed below the spell: it’s the incantation. . . I’ve seen this before. But these formulas, remarkable though they are, cannot be used to reverse India’s spell. A counter-spell is based upon age old formulas written by wizard-priests and white witches, but their power is based upon many factors.”

“Gibberish!” Elijah spat angrily. “What the hell does all that mean?”

“It’s hopeless! Hopeless-hopeless-hopeless!” Irma wailed in a long plaintive meow.

“Wait a minute!” the priest protested.

“Plee-ease,” Blaze held up his hand, “let the man speak!”

“All right I’ll cut to the chase,” Mortimer Hildebrand said, spreading his fingers and shutting the laptop’s lid. “It’s too late to go over to India Crowley’s apartment tonight. Witches, as you probably know, are very powerful during this time.” “Let’s all grab a snack and get a few hours sleep. Tomorrow, bright and early, we’ll all visit Shadowbrook Arms. Fear not, I’ll be spiritually armed when I meet the witch. I’ll use one of several different formulas I have memorized to undue her spell!”

“Now that’s a good a idea, isn’t it Reverend Gray?” Blaze tried to console the preacher.

“Humph,” Elijah said, following the others into the kitchen, “we’ve wasted a lot of time!”

“Can you really help me, father?” She wanted to ask the priest, as he carried her in his arms. “. . . You’re a nice man, you really are, but you’re also kind’ve goofy. India never told me about priests using God to fight spells. She never talked about using magic this way. Witches are bad, never good. India proved that to me!”

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In truth, the sorcerer was beginning to doubt Mortimer Hildebrand's qualifications as a wizard, himself. The priest was the most unorthodox cleric he had ever known. Not only did he claim to have clairvoyant and magical powers, which seemed to be in contradiction to his spiritual claims, but he was an exorcist too. How could a priest, even a defrocked priest, mix Christianity with the occult? Would God really work with such a man? This last question, regardless of his misgivings, had possibilities for Blaze O'Dare's future and the salvation for his own soul. As they all bedded down after a snack of brownies and hot chocolate, the sorcerer heard the priest ask the cat as she curled up on a cushion beneath the couch where the preacher lie, "Do you believe in the powers of prayer, Irma Fresco?"

"Meow," she replied.

"Have you asked the Lord to change you back?"

"Meow," she looked up sleepily.

"You have? Goo-ood girl. Prayer is good!" the priest sounded genuinely pleased.

"There's no denying it," Blaze murmured to them dreamily, as he dozed in his chair, "... this puts a whole new spin on the word magic!"

Turning his attention to the preacher, the priest asked Elijah, in idle chitchat, what his Protestant denomination was. Although this seemed to be a very personal question to Blaze, Elijah, without hesitation, answered promptly "God's Army, we don't have denominations on skid row."

This confession startled both Mortimer and Blaze. Irma was jerked awake when he mentioned that dreadful place.

"Skid row?" The priest probed indelicately. "How fascinating! You were assigned to that region?"

"No," Elijah replied wryly, giving Irma a pat, "I *lived* in that region."

"I'll be damned!" She looked up groggily. "You lived in that awful place?"

"What?... What did he say?" Blaze, who had almost fallen asleep, himself, bolted upright in his chair.

"It's a long story," the preacher sighed, as he stoked the cat. "We should all get some sleep."

"I'll make you a deal," Mortimer gazed quizzically across the room, "I'll give you my life in a nutshell if you give me yours." "You too," he added quickly, looking over at Blaze. "I'll bet *you* got an interesting tale."

"I'm game," the sorcerer shrugged.

"Very well," Elijah sighed, staring reflectively at the ceiling, "I'll give you my life in a nutshell.... I've told this to only few people. There's really not much to tell."

Irma hopped up on his shoulder and looked down into his drowsy face. His normally resonant voice, now somnolent, was joined by a loud, rumbling purr from Irma's chest, that was pleasantly distracting to the preacher. He had fallen in love with the little black cat. To Irma's great surprise, evident in her big blue eyes, Elijah had been an up and coming high school teacher. When his wife and child had been killed by a drunken driver, however, he became a drunk, himself, and wound up, after a long period of decline, on skid row. After a few years of living on the street, the Lord led him to God's Army Mission—a broken, misbegotten soul. After a period of study at the church, he became a spiritual advisor to homeless men at the mission, while earning a modest income teaching adult education uptown.

Blaze, who seemed eager to relate his own down-and-out tale, surprised Irma almost as much as Elijah when he claimed that he, like Elijah, had once been quite successful but in business, until one day, after reflecting on his life and career, he dropped out of his unfulfilling marriage, abandoned his spoiled daughters, and, while living on a humble inheritance, devoted most of his time to the occult. Mortimer, who could find no parallel between the two dropouts, let this opportunity to needle the sorcerer pass. With surprising honesty, Blaze explained how he joined a club of would-be sorcerers but was now freelancing on his own. As his listeners fought the throes of slumber, he admitted that he had attempted sorcery, himself, but had only limited success. Finally, when it appeared as if the sorcerer was finished, Mortimer began, in his gravelly voice, to relate his own life experiences, the most astounding tale of them all (had they only stayed awake!) From his early seminary days, when he realized he had special gifts, through the difficult period when he found himself crashing headlong against church dogma and law, he had spent many years as a priest and then as an excommunicated priest battling evil on behalf of Christ—if not for the Holy Roman Church.

It was the kind of story of which novels were written and movies were made, but, by the time Mortimer had finished his own nutshell account, everyone, including the little black cat, who had curled up on the preacher's chest, had fallen into a deep, untroubled sleep.

## Chapter Seventeen

### The Spell Reversal Team

Shortly after dawn, after a breakfast of crumb cake, coffee, and tea, Elijah Gray and Mortimer Hildebrand followed Blaze O'Dare to his station wagon in single file down an ancient walkway leading to the street. Irma was still groggy from her nightmarish odyssey on the street. So much had happened to her since Halloween night in so little time. As she peeked out from Elijah Gray's jacket at this world of shadows and giants, she was reminded of the times she had carried her own cat inside her coat when he was a kitten. Muffin had been her favorite cat; she sorely missed him now.

With lingering trepidation, the preacher scooted into the front seat of Blaze's station wagon, his arm protecting the cargo in his coat, while the priest climbed into the middle seat of the car. Where the third seat had been there was a pile of evil smelling and inexplicable junk. The floor was cluttered with all manner of trash, including candy wrappers and crushed cans. A talisman of twisted hemp and Rosemary hung from the rearview mirror. The dreadful odors pervading the vehicle were expected by Mortimer, but made Elijah slightly ill. Irma peeked out once and wrinkled her little pink nose. Her human dislike of foul odors had actually been sharpened by a feline's sense of smell. Many of these terrible odors had also permeated India's apartment: rare as well as common pharmacopoeia for various witches' spells.

For a moment, as Blaze started up his engine, he checked the Google map Mortimer printed out for him that lead to Shadowbrook Arms. According to the sorcerer, it would take only twenty minutes to reach their destination. Factored into his calculations was, of course, the stop he would make at the next corner to get gas. During this period, in which the Blaze went through a stop sign and, at one point, almost veered off the road, as he checked the map, Elijah and Mortimer exchanged worried looks. Twenty minutes with Blaze behind the wheel was too long!

As he stood pumping his gas, yawning expansively and, with his free hand, vigorously scratching his bearded chin, he looked quizzically into the distance with one eye half shut. He had, the others suspected, not slept well last night. The magical cat had caused his normally overactive imagination to soar. Their imminent encounter with the very woman who had bewitched Irma Fresco had galvanized his purpose in life. The Spell Reversal Team, as Blaze dubbed them, was, indeed, the high point in all their lives and probably the greatest challenge even in the priest's long career. But for Elijah Gray, the preacher, it was a sober occasion that also challenged his faith. He was out of place in this evil smelling car and felt ill-suited to be a member of this team. As the station wagon pulled away from the service station, he had the irrational urge to bolt out of the vehicle, while it was still moving slowly, and run away with the cat. That would, he realized, seal her fate but it might save his immortal soul.

For a few moments, as he listened to the purring feline, he had to remind himself why he was here: Irma Fresco, a bewitched young woman; *she* was why he was here. He was forsaking everything to save one small, black cat. She had captured his heart, fired his imagination, and defied everything he believed in now. To calm himself, the preacher continued to stroke the sleeping cat.

“You’re the reason,” he whispered into his coat, “I’m in this evil-smelling car!”

Filled with *déjà vu*, Irma licked his rough hand just at Muffin had once done to her long, long ago.

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In the background the priest was explaining the fallacies of witchcraft in the Middle Ages. In Elijah’s current mood, the sound of his gravelly, quavering voice was like finger nails raking on a blackboard. Far worse, however, was the inattentive attitude of the driver as he continued looking over his seat.

“Pay attention to the road!” Mortimer scolded him finally, as they approached a light.

As Elijah sat in the front seat next to the sorcerer listening to Hildebrand carry on, however, his fears gradually lessened. With Mortimer’s prodding, Blaze was forced to pay more attention to the road. Irma, due to Elijah’s caresses, fell into a sound, almost dreamless sleep. The preacher found this all quite boring, himself, and, in spite of the annoying subject matter, also fell asleep, but the sorcerer was fascinated with Mortimer’s knowledge. He had never known an unrepentant heretic priest as unconventional as this man. Occasionally, the priest would stop in his narrative to scold the driver and keep him focused on the road.

“All this time down through the ages,” he droned pedagogically, “men and women, who were not witches at all but divinely endowed mortals with God sent powers, have been persecuted by Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant Christians along with occultists, when in fact only the witches and sorcerers had cast evil spells and done great mischief in the world.” “You’re driving too fast;” he interrupted himself, “slow down!”

“Unfortunately,” he continued warily, “those unorthodox individuals professing to be healers and diviners as well as spell-changers were often persecuted for their non-canonical practices and heretical interpretation of Christianity along with the devil-worshippers who had done only evil in their careers.” “Now you’re going *too slow!*” he cried.

“... The only legitimate and sanctified way to use spirit agents is through Christ as the source,” concluded Mortimer. “The other source for black magic is, of course, Lucifer, a fallen angel.... Now that’s better, sorcerer. Look straight ahead, not at me, pay attention to the highway, and maintain a legal speed limit as you drive!”

Unruffled by the priest’s criticism, Blaze peered out of his windshield with great inspiration at the busy morning road.

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The re-definition of white magic by Mortimer Hildebrand, an ex-priest, was an illumination to the sorcerer. The conflict between his preoccupation with the occult and his own discarded Roman Catholic faith now seemed to be resolved. During Mortimer’s lofty summary, Elijah had dreamed briefly that he was back in time with his wife and child. They were picnicking in the park. Karen was singing an off key tune. Nancy was frolicking nearby with a big, multicolored ball. Filtering into his bittersweet dream on the threshold of twilight sleep,

however, were the last words of Mortimer's discourse on witchcraft: black magic... Lucifer... fallen angel. Yet what amazed Elijah the most, as he awakened from his catnap, was Blaze's rapt expression and tone.

"Hallelujah! Amen!" The sorcerer exclaimed.

"Did I miss something?" he asked groggily, looking around the car. "... I heard the word Lucifer and amen in almost the same breath."

"I think your friend is having a spiritual reawakening," the priest noted with mirth.

Blaze's admiration for this man came as no surprise to Elijah. Mortimer Hildebrand was equivalent to the Pope in the sorcerer's eyes. For Elijah to accept Hildebrand's powers, however, required a complete reinterpretation of his own hard-won faith. The implications of a defrocked priest, who could use God to perform what appeared to be, despite the priest's explanations, black magic, were enormous. There was, according to Mortimer Hildebrand, celestial magic and infernal magic—both of which were being done through good and evil agents, respectively, quite apart from the spirit of the Lord. Given what he heard in his twilight sleep, Blaze's comprehension of this blasphemy as a spiritual awakening was too much for Elijah's fundamentalist mind.

Suddenly, the preacher, who had slept for only a few moments, found himself joining the discussion in progress, the sorcerer's exclamations triggering his response.

"For all your naivety, Blaze, do you really believe your soul is being uplifted by this man? He thinks you're a heretic and I'm a spiritual bumpkin. He can barely mask his contempt for either one of us now!"

"It's not my soul, it's my spirit that is uplifted," Blaze grew defensive, looking back at the priest for support, "but you wouldn't understand preacher, would you? You think they're both the same!"

"They *are* the same," Mortimer frowned at the back of Blaze's head. "The preacher knows the difference. *I* know the difference!" "Now look straight ahead," he demanded again, thumping the seat, "and pay attention to the road!"

"You see! You see!" Elijah exclaimed, slapping his thigh. "Contempt! He knows it, and I know it. You can't help yourself, sorcerer. Heresy is as natural to you as breathing air." "And you," he looked back suddenly at the priest, "have so corrupted the definition of grace that you would put Lucifer alongside of God!"

"What?... What's that you say?" the priest sputtered with indignation now. "I have corrupted nothing. You're just too pig-headed and self-righteous to understand!"

"What's going on out there?" Irma peeked out of the coat.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" Blaze cried, clutching the steering wheel in dismay. "We're on the same side! Please remember our purpose. India Crowley's the enemy, not each other. Let's focus on *her!*"

"Very well, sorcerer, calm down," Elijah replied, as the car began to weave, "do as the priest says. Pay attention to the road!"

In a hoarse voice, as Blaze settled down at the wheel, Elijah apologized for being rude. With controlled venom this time, however, he asked the priest, "Just who's suppose to be responsible for the miracles asked for by supplicants through prayer? Is it God Almighty or some magical formula uttered by a defrocked priest? Explain to me how an all-powerful God can allow innocent men and women to be transformed into beasts simply by the casting of spells?"

“Whoa preacher, slow down a moment, this at the heart of the matter, but let me continue,” insisted the priest, as the station wagon came to a stop.

Calmly now, Mortimer explained to them the apparent conflict between magic and God’s grace. Blaze took the opportunity at the red light to inspect his own crudely drawn directions he copied out of the Thomas Guide, comparing it with the map provided by the priest.

“I’m glad you printed this out,” he muttered distractedly, “I can scarcely read my scrawls. Unfortunately, the letters on the printout are too small. You should’ve blown this up a bit...”

As Mortimer lectured the preacher, Blaze held the map up to his squinting eyes, until he was satisfied he had read it correctly.

“... Innocent folk have been food for the devil for thousands of years, but Satan could not own the God-fearer’s souls. Ritualistic spells and incantations were merely outward signs of inward grace and meant nothing without faith in the Holy Trinity, which included the Holy Ghost, who worked as the prime-mover when the spirit world was invoked.”

Blaze continued to marvel at the ambiguities of the priest. Although he found it stimulating himself, he couldn’t blame the narrow-minded preacher for having serious problems with Mortimer’s theology. In Elijah’s thinking Hildebrand’s explanation of spirit-helpers was both confusing and unsatisfactory, for by definition the Holy Ghost *was* the chief spirit on earth. The Holy Ghost didn’t require intermediaries, whether they be called saints, angels, or ghosts, and, for that matter, *priests!* Elijah also didn’t believe in the demon possession inherent in the priest’s claim, a theory the sorcerer was skeptical of himself. Elijah had seen too many men, as raving drunks, who were simply burnt out on cheap wine. As a street person, himself, who had seen so much of the real world, the preacher believed only in the power of prayer as the agent to change one’s lives. Now, the poor fellow was in an automobile with a sorcerer, heretic priest, and a woman who had been turned into a cat. They were all, at this very moment, Blaze reflected as he scanned the road ahead, heading toward a confrontation with a witch who had marshaled the forces of Lucifer onto her side.

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Blaze O’Dare, who had play-acted as a sorcerer for so long, was now being challenged today with the real thing. It was, he knew with certainty, no longer a game. There really were dark forces out there that could be harnessed, but the price, he had always thought, was one’s immortal soul. Mortimer Hildebrand’s presence now seemed to change all that. When he pulled his automobile up to the curb in front of Shadowbrook Arms, the three men climbed shakily out of the station wagon. The preacher, sorcerer and, if truth be told, even the stony-faced priest were filled with dread. Irma, who had been awakened constantly by the quarreling men, clung to the inner lining of the preacher’s jacket, her little snout poking out of his coat, reminiscent of a joey looking out its mother’s pouch. Elijah Gray, having confronted unknown terrors on skid row and countless encounters with deranged men, was now being challenged with the very source of evil. Both he and the sorcerer were at the mercy of a priest who was going to do spiritual battle with a witch.

“All right, Mortimer Hildebrand,” Blaze was the first to break the silence, “what now?”

“I shall say a prayer,” Elijah said, caressing the cat. “We’ll all recite the Lord’s Prayer.”

“I don’t want any part of this!” Irma’s thoughts screamed, her claws digging more deeply into the underlining of his coat.

“Fear not!” Hildebrand replied, bolting ahead of the others. “We have the woman’s name and her apartment number. She can’t harm you in my presence. You folks stay behind me. I have the gift of spell-changing, and she’ll recognize it as soon as I recite the proper invocation while holding up my cross.”

“We must hurry! We must hurry!” Blaze, who felt he should say something, blurted excitedly.

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name,” Elijah began reciting, while stroking the cat, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it in heaven...”

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When they had found India Crowley’s apartment, the priest just stood there in front of the door after knocking and then ringing the doorbell, praying feverishly to himself. It comforted the preacher to hear him pray so hard, but he found it difficult to join in, so he prayed to himself and noticed, with incredulity, that Blaze O’Dare was praying too. As they waited for India to answer her door, they heard a voice from the corridor below call out “India Crowley’s not home.”

“Well, we tried,” Blaze sighed deeply, turning for acknowledgment from the others.

Elijah, in spite of his pity for the little cat, was also relieved. The priest looked down at the speaker and found a small, swarthy-looking lady looking up myopically from the staircase below. For a moment he wondered if she too might not be a witch, until he realized that she was a nurse. She wore the typical white uniform of the nurse, including cap and nametag and there was a briefcase clutched in one of her hands.

“Not home, eh,” Mortimer said lightly, “are you quite certain, my dear?”

“I saw them take her away,” the nurse snorted, shielding her eyes from the sun.

“W-What?... W-What did you say?” Hildebrand stammered, walking down several steps in order to hear her reply.

“Ask Sam Burns, the apartment manager in 1A,” the nurse shrugged. “He was there last night. I was working the third shift at the county hospital when that lady was shot, but I arrived home the next morning in time to see them put her into the ambulance.”

“You saw her?” Mortimer seemed to gasp. “Was she awake?... Was she even alive?”

“I couldn’t tell,” she shook her head wearily. “I saw them put her in an ambulance, is all. I didn’t get involved.”

“I don’t understand.” The priest looked at her in disbelief. “Didn’t the police ask you any questions? You’re her neighbor, are you not?”

“Yes,” the nurse shook her head, “but when I got off of the bus, I walked passed the complex and came in from the other side. I pretended I wasn’t home.”

The priest moved several steps down toward her, causing the woman to shudder at this darkly clad specter in the morning light. To add to the eeriness in her tired mind was a glimpse of the sinister sorcerer and the black cat peeking out of Elijah’s coat.

“Please... answer a few questions for me,” the priest frowned with concern. “... Firstly, did anyone identify India Crowley?”

“I don’t know,” she answered fearfully, “it was none of my business. I never liked the woman. I told you I came in the other side.”

“Then you saw this from a distance?” He pressed, inching further down.

“Yes,” the nurse retreated further, “I could see them put her on the stretcher. She was wearing her witch’s costume she had on Halloween night. All I could see from my vantage point were policemen and ambulance attendants. Okay?”

“Lived here for years and no one comes forth,” Mortimer muttered aloud. “... Are you folks afraid of India Crowley? I wouldn’t blame you if you were.”

“Frankly, I never met her,” the nurse replied, a tinge of impatience joining the alarm in her voice. “They had a pretty wild party that night. I was going to catch the eleven-thirty bus just about the time things were getting out of hand. That’s all I know. I’m very tired, father. Have a nice day!”

“Wait, please one more question,” the priest wrung his hands, as she rapidly ascended the stairs, “... tell me what you saw Halloween night.”

“It was ridiculous,” she waved back in disgust. “She shouted some kind of hocus pocus at those hell-raisers. I saw Wanda, Neva, and Buck and his friends heckling India. I remember hearing Sam and his girl friend Alice give her what-for.”

By then, as her voice trailed off into the floor above, a few other tenants had peeked fearfully out their curtains to see what other horrors lurked outside.

“I wonder if India had any identification on her,” Mortimer mulled, his chin dropping to his chest.

“I bet she didn’t,” Blaze giggled hysterically. “Too bad for India; you know what that means boys—a bona fide card-carrying witch transported as a *Jane Doe!*”

“I know what hospital she’s in,” Elijah offered, as they now searched for apartment 1A.

“Yes, yes,” Mortimer nodded impatiently, “we all know where they take Jane Doe’s. The county hospital is a dreadful place.” “You know what this means gentlemen?” He heaved a great sigh.

The sorcerer nodded unhappily. Elijah, though filled with misgivings, had relaxed greatly, but a sadness filled him when he thought about Irma’s fate. Irma, who purred loudly inside his coat, was now confused by this turn of events. They now had a dying witch. What did that mean? Both Blaze and Elijah were afraid to ask.

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After only a few knocks on the manager’s door, they heard the deadbolt lock rattle inside the apartment and saw the door crack faintly with the chain still fastened in place.

“My name’s Mortimer Hildebrand,” the priest introduced himself quickly. “I need to talk to Sam Burns about the woman who was shot last night. We need to ask him some questions about her. It won’t take long.”

“No, go away,” a woman cried out. “I have enough to deal with right now!”

The door slammed shut and the deadbolt was again thrown.

“Please ma’am,” the priest begged her now. “You won’t believe what I have to tell you. But I have reason to believe that the witch India Crowley has done great mischief here. I have the power, through God, to undo her spell.”

Alice Wagnall had been peeking through the peephole of the door after shutting it but now ran over to look through a crack in the curtains at the unlikely threesome by the door. When she saw the head of the small cat peering out of the preacher’s coat and noted the clerical collar of the priest, who stood by her door, she decided finally to let them in. As Irma and her three guardians entered Sam’s apartment, her mind was bombarded with feline outcries. It

overwhelmed her at first, until she was able to match the voices with the cats. Sam, Wanda, Neva, and Drew hailed her, as long-lost friends. Suddenly, the living room was filled with mewing, purring, and licking cats. Blaze made the sign to ward off the evil eye, Elijah whistled under his breath, and the priest made the sign of the cross as they looked down at the cats scampering around the room.

Brief introductions followed after which Alice led them to the center of the room and looked Elijah squarely into his eyes. Impulsively, with constricted voice, Elijah now held out his charge: "This is Irma Fresco. We found her downtown, near skid row. Please let her stay here with her friends."

"Oh these folks were never friends as mortals," she explained, setting Irma next to Wanda, who gave her a spontaneous lick. "As cats, some of them, the ones not in my apartment, were Sam's enemies here at Shadowbrook Arms, until their leader, Buck Logan, saved Sam's life. Sam communicated this to me on his laptop. He's very worried about Buck and his gang now. The group in Sam's apartment have grown especially close as felines. I think Wanda, that big white cat, has a crush on Sam. We must save them all reverend. I can't imagine how dreadful they must all feel, but I know that we have little time."

The priest, who had been listening intently to their conversation, stepped forward now as the preacher and sorcerer began playing with the cats. As an indication that he was the leader, he led her into another room out of earshot of the cats.

"We have limited information on India Crowley's condition," his gravelly voice uttered. "How bad off is she now?"

"I don't know," Alice answered, shutting the bedroom door. "Sam, the brown cat, and Drew, the tan cat you saw in the group, were able to type out information they gathered from the maintenance and janitorial workers here at the complex. The story goes: 'India fell from the second deck, after being shot by someone, and landed on the cement below. The point were she fell was near Penny Gruber's apartment.' We think Penny was one of the tenants turned into a cat. Tanya, who lived on the second deck, is missing also. I called them both and there was no answer. Like the other tenants not accounted for here, I'm afraid they might be out there somewhere, alone and frightened too."

The priest's face had fallen with this news. After hearing she had been shot, he had considered the possibility that India might be unconscious. Now, with the confirmation that she had also landed on hard cement, he prepared himself for the worst: India Crowley might soon be dead.

By now, Elijah, who had been eavesdropping, officially entered the room. A few seconds later Blaze entered, holding a large black cat.

"Can we still do it?" Blaze asked, scratching Neva's head. "Don't these kind've people have to be awake?"

"Yes... as far as I know," Mortimer sighed, the disappointment obvious in his voice, "but India also landed on concrete. I'm certain she must be very critical, perhaps near death."

"Oh dear," cried Blaze, as Neva wiggled in his arms, "that's something we must find out!"

"What if she's unconscious?" asked Elijah, as the other cats began streaming through the door.

"I don't know. It depends. But we have to act quickly!" Mortimer answered dubiously, looking around at the cats.

With Sam's group and Irma listening intently below, the humans now openly discussed going to the hospital. Alice insisted, against the priest's wishes that she go along too. Sam was, after all, her fiancé. Was this not something that affected her life too? Mortimer, however, felt that she should stay with her new charges. They would need her protection now. Elijah and Blaze agreed, but Alice was adamant. About everything, Sam recalled, Alice was adamant. Sam beamed with pride up at her as she folded her arms. After listening mutely to the argument, the cats were confident that Alice would win and turned their attention back to the new addition to their pack. For the first time that Irma could remember, she was a popular member of a group. The three men understood, as had Alice, that the five cats were "talking" to each other now. Although Alice said it gave her the creeps, the men were amused by the way the five cats nodded and cocked their heads at each other. The priest took this opportunity to make an announcement to them in order to allay their fears.

"Listen, I know you can understand me," he yelled through cupped hands. "Help is out now. Do you understand me children? If you understand, nod your little heads!"

"Why is he hollering at us?" asked Drew, beckoning Neva to come down.

"He thinks were hard of hearing," Neva replied, jumping finally out of Blaze's arms.

"But we're not children," Wanda wrinkled her pudgy nose. "He should talk to us as adults."

"Cat's are always children," Irma transmitted thoughtfully. "My Muffin never grew up."

The entire group of cats bumped their new friend, nudged her playfully, and took turns licking her head. Unlike Wanda and Neva, who were beautiful, Irma's big blue eyes, fox-like ears and, elfin face made her appear unique and perhaps cute more than pretty in Sam and Drew's eyes. Strangely enough, the petite little black cat "looked" like Irma Fresco, in the same way that Sam, Drew, and the other females resembled their humans selves. Elijah could see that she was happy that she was accepted into this group. Beaming down at them, he whispered, "You're in good hands Irma. You'll be safe here with your friends."

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Wanda and Neva, who had avoided Irma as humans, now warmed up quickly to the little black cat, but it was Sam who became her best friend. Three mysterious strangers, whom Drew referred to jokingly as the ghoulish squad, carried their fate in their hands. With that settled, the five cats chattered light-heartedly in each other's head.

"Well," Sam took his turn bumping up against Irma, "we can thank Irma Fresco for bringing us help!"

"No Sam," Irma said pertly, "*they* brought me. I'm just sorry that India zapped you too."

"She zapped *all* of the young people at Shadowbrook Arms," he explained grimly, looking over at the humans. "As you heard, Buck and his entire gang were bewitched. They're over at his place now. We think Tanya and Penny have been turned into cats too."

"Tell me the truth," Sam motioned with his head, "do you really think those men can help?"

"I think so," she answered hesitantly, "at least they want to really bad!"

"Tsk-tsk, you were her best friend," Wanda observed politely, appearing suddenly by her side. "She turned you into a cat too."

"Oh yes," Irma sighed, "Tanya was also her friend, but India has a *new friend* now."

Sam allowed Alice to scoop him up while conversing with Irma and was jealously watched by Wanda, who hung at Elijah's legs as Sam continued to converse with Irma (now held in the preacher's arms). A sleepy Neva was again cradled in Blaze's arms. Drew, after trying to get Irma's attention, was picked up by the priest, who stroked the tan cat gently as he walked back across the room.

Wanda, who was once a prom queen and college debutante, was the only cat not being carried in a someone's arms. After seeing her moping in the background, Sam meowed vigorously until Alice sat him on the floor. Sam then ran over to Wanda, gave her a lick and then pointed at her with his paw.

"Come on Alice, open your heart," his golden eyes seemed to say.

Alice, with reluctance this time, took the cue, walked over and scooped the big white, fluffy Persian up in her arms. For the first time, in her small, will defined world, she felt inexplicable warmth for one of her least favorite creatures: felis catus. She sat down with the feline version of the woman she hated as a human, repelled at first, but then, as Wanda curled up in her lap, began stroking the purring cat. Hearing their collective purrs and weighted down with the gravity of this scene, the sorcerer and preacher also sank into the easy chair and sofa, respectively, with looks of astonishment in their eyes. Finally, as the cats began to squirm, they were set down on the carpet. Irma quickly joined the other cats, rubbing and purring amongst her newfound friends, happy she was no longer alone.

The argument on whether Alice Wagnall would accompany them to the hospital now settled, the three men were led back to Sam's study, the woman chattering hysterically about everything she had seen so far. Irma ran freely with the other cats over the carpet, into the kitchen for a quick meal, and then back into the living room with the others, exhilarated by these events.

"We're gonna break this spell," she transmitted jubilantly. "You just gotta have faith!"

Blaze, Elijah, and Mortimer listened and watched as Alice explained what was on the website, which had been brought to her attention by the cats.

"Humph, a website for witches," the priest noted with a shrug. "I've got a much larger database myself."

"But look at this one screen," Alice persisted, clicking the mouse.

"It's a list of spells and incantations," Blaze murmured with interest. "I've got a list like that myself."

"I don't believe it," Elijah grumbled under his breath, "a website for witches. Why am I not surprised?"

"Are there any applicable ones?" Blaze interest grew, as the priest sat beside Alice in another chair.

"Well, let's us take a peek," the priest sighed heavily, shaking his head. "... I can't imagine that any of these are legitimate.... Ho-ho, how quaint! Here's one for removing warts. .... A love potion for frigid women... aphrodisiacs... and, tsk-tsk, countless nonsensical things, but nothing remotely close to spell-changing here."

"I agree, there's nothing there," Blaze nodded thoughtfully, looking over Mortimer's shoulder. "These are simple potions, not spells. Abracadabra, hocus-pocus stuff."

"Yes, indeed, most of these entries are standard witches fare," Mortimer looked up with irritation at the bad-breathed Blaze after scanning down the list. "These kind of people make a game of witchcraft and sorcery. I think this entire website is a sham and a disgrace!"

“Well, what do you suggest?” Alice asked bleakly as Sam looked up at her from the floor. “... Look at him, my baby,” she said in a strangled whisper, a tear rolling down her cheek. “We were going to be married after he finished graduate school. I-I was going to have a husband, but now I have a houseful of cats.” “I don’t even like cats, Mister Hildebrand,” she added, mournfully, giving Sam’s head a scratch, “that’s what makes this such a joke!”

“Calm down Miss Wagnall,” the priest rose up on stiff knees, “you must trust us. You must not lose faith!”

“You’re a practicing warlock,” she erupted into hysterical sobs, “you’re talking to *me* about faith? I’ve been a Christian all my life. This is almost impossible for me to accept!”

“Well, I’m also a Christian,” Elijah declared heavy-heartedly. “You’re just going to *have to*, Miss Wagnall. These cats are running out of time!”

“We believe in Jesus Christ too,” Blaze offered, reaching down to stroke Wanda’s head.

Alice now confessed in detail her misgivings, as had Elijah, about turning to magic and the occult to undo an evil deed.

“Where does God fit into this scheme?” she asked with tearful blue eyes. “Can a witch’s formula only be undone by a warlock’s spell?”

Silence followed as Mortimer surfed the web. The argument Alice gave was familiar to Irma by now, but her new friends found the dispute unsettling.

“What’s the matter with that bitch?” Neva asked as Mortimer once again explained his role, “who cares how they cure us, just so it gets done.”

“Hey, careful that’s my fiancé!” Sam protested, bristling at her slur.

“I’m sorry Sam,” Irma came over and bumped his side, “but Neva’s right. We need all the help we can get. Elijah, the preacher there, is praying to God. Who knows, maybe it’ll work. But the priest uses both religion and magic; he thinks he can reverse our spell if he can confront the witch.” “... Unfortunately,” she paused to reflect, “India’s had a terrible accident. She might not even be alive!”

“What? What did you say?” Drew came running over now.

“Does this mean there’s hope?” Wanda grew excited too.

“Yes, of course, there’s hope,” little Irma said, raising her paw. “I have faith in those guys. Don’t ask me why. I like to think it’s all that praying I did when I ran away from the witch, but I owe a lot to that sorcerer, too, for bringing me here.”

“A sorcerer?” Neva bristled.

“Is Mortimer Hildebrand really a warlock?” Sam asked, trying very hard to frown.

“No,” Irma answered thoughtfully, “Mortimer is a defrocked priest, who practices magic. He’s a wizard, like Merlin once was.”

“Oh gee,” Sam thought sarcastically, “I feel so much better: a sorcerer and now a wizard, who was once a Catholic priest.”

“What about the preacher?” Drew motioned with his head, as they looked over at the men, “where does he fit in? He seems out of place here.”

“He’s my special friend—the one who found me,” explained Irma with a fond glance. “That man used to be a high school teacher until his wife and daughter were killed by a drunken driver. He spent years on skid row, himself, before he turned to the Lord.”

“I’m glad he turned to the Lord,” Sam sighed wistfully. “We need Him now.”

“Now that doesn’t make sense to me,” Wanda seemed almost self-righteous now, “the man’s family is snuffed out by a drunk and he *becomes* one!”

“You’re talking about the capital ‘H’ Him, aren’t you?” thought Irma, ignoring Wanda’s response.

“Yes,” Sam nodded, “one should not put their faith merely in men.”

“You mean woman, don’t you?” Drew joined in now.

“Yes, of course, that too. Alice’s a real peach,” Sam sighed, giving them all a nudge, “but I’m afraid she’s not going to be much help. She doesn’t even like cats.”

“Not even *us*?” Neva made a face.

“Well, maybe *us*,” Sam transmitted thoughtfully, “... at least me. I mean we *are* engaged, aren’t we?”

“I think Alice has a good heart, Sam,” Irma thought, watching Alice discuss something with Elijah now. “She was raised that way; my father hated cats too. She’s confronted with a fantastic dilemma—the same one that Elijah, the preacher, faced when he discovered a bewitched cat.”

“I still find it hard to accept, myself,” Sam admitted to the others, as he glanced back at the humans.

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Looking across the room at the four cats now, Elijah commented to Alice, “It does look like they’re talking, doesn’t it?”

“They *are*,” The priest nodded with understanding. “I’m certain that they use mental telepathy. Look at the way they carry on. They remind me of deaf mutes. Instead of the Universal Sign Language, they use their *minds*.”

“It all seems impossible.” Alice shook her head, collapsing forlornly into a chair. “This is all too much to digest.”

“Alice, sweet Alice,” Blaze gave her a consoling pat, “open our mind if not your soul. Think of poor Sam’s reassessment. It was hard for the preacher too.”

“It still is,” Elijah confessed, shaking his head.

“Listen young lady,” Mortimer spoke sternly to her now, “I remember the oft told story about a narrow-minded old man, who having lived all his life in the back woods, was taken to a zoo by his worldly son. When he was introduced to a giraffe in its pen, one of the most humorous of God’s creatures, he shook his head and said to his son ‘no such creature can exist.’” “That is your proverbial giraffe, my dear.” He pointed at the cats. “You must accept the fact that a witch has transformed those young adults into cats!

“... Now that we’ve agreed to take you along, Miss Wagnall,” he continued severely after a pause, “you must promise to open your mind as you opened your hearts to these poor creatures. As your fellow Protestant fundamentalist, Elijah Gray, has done, you must set aside your own narrow-minded interpretation of Christianity these coming hours for the greater good.”

Elijah bristled at this characterization but had to agree.

“There now,” Mortimer patted her trembling hand, “is that acceptable to you, my child? Speak now, before we begin our journey, or keep your peace.”

“Very well,” she found herself holding Elijah, her kindred spirit’s, hand, “but I will be praying for guidance, Mortimer. Elijah and I will allow no satanic mumbo jumbo in this affair!”

“You’ll do just fine,” Blaze consoled her, this time patting her back.

But Alice didn’t like the sorcerer any more than she liked Mortimer Hildebrand, the priest. After making sure that all the cats had plenty of water and food and cleaning the kitty

litter she had improvised for them, she picked Sam up and gave him a hug and bid them all goodbye. When the foursome reached O'Dare's station wagon, the priest sat next to the sorcerer in the front seat this time and Elijah and Alice quietly took their place in back.

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"So you found out India's room number, Miss Wagnall?" Mortimer looked back pensively now, as the station wagon headed up town.

"Yes, I told them I was her sister over the phone," she looked with suspicion into the priest's eyes. "Tell me, since you call yourself a priest, ... how could our Lord allow this to happen?"

"I don't believe it!" the sorcerer groaned.

"He didn't *make* it happen," the priest corrected her gently, as she sat uncomfortably in her seat. "This has been going on for thousands of years. It's obviously strong in this age. This witch evidently has very great powers!"

"Wait a minute," Blaze offered, snapping his fingers. "I remember reading about this in Ring of Darkness, a book I just finished. Doesn't a witch's power end when she dies?"

"I'm not so sure the spell, itself, ends. Besides," the priest shook his head, "She's not quite dead. For my purposes, she's also not alive. Ring of Darkness was written by a historian compiling information on the occult. He wasn't a sorcerer or a priest. You can't use this as a source."

"Are you saying it's hopeless then?" Elijah murmured dreamily after reflecting on his wife and child. "What about the powers of prayer?"

"The power of prayer is still strong," the priest looked back over his seat to explain. "You more than anyone else here, because of your ministry in skid row, know how powerful prayer can be. God will find away for us whether or not she is unconscious or awake.... Perhaps even when she's *dead!*"

But the misgivings on the priest's stony face and Alice's blue eyes were all too evident as they embarked upon their mission. Mortimer didn't look as confident as when they first set off for Shadowbrook Arms. Blaze, who sat next to the priest, sensed this more than the others. He managed, in spite of their anxiety, to show concern for their feelings and yet smiled and hummed happily to himself as he considered the adventure ahead.

## Chapter Eighteen

### The First Attempt

Alice, who knew exactly where the county hospital was located, directed them quickly to their destination. The two years she spent in real estate had given her a working knowledge of the city and its suburbs. On the way to the hospital, the group discussed what they would say to the nurses and doctors. In order to have visitation rights, they might have to identify themselves as relatives of India Crowley, who, they would explain, was admitted as a Jane Doe. Alice would claim to be India's sister and Elijah would try to convince them he was her older brother. The priest, who would claim to be her parish priest, would simply be on hand to give her the Last Rites, and Blaze O'Dare, who had stretched the truth more times than he liked to admit, would be her favorite uncle. Alice would approach the receptionist first. If worse came to worse, they would have to somehow sneak into India's room to perform Hildebrand's rite.

Upon reaching the county hospital, the foursome exited the station wagon and, with great trepidation, entered the lobby. It was crowded on this Monday morning. Whole families were assembled in the room and every type of visitor imaginable, including a few street people who had come in to sleep in the lobby chairs. An attractive African American receptionist sat at her desk, peering over the counter. A low buzz of conversations had filled the lobby until the 'Spell Reversal Team' entered the door. Now, as they caught a glimpse of the team, a hush fell over the room.

As Alice stepped up to the counter, she hastily stated her mission, "We're here to see India Crowley."

"Psst! Psst!" Blaze tried getting her attention. "India won't be on file. She was admitted as a *Jane Doe*!"

"Yes, Alice," whispered Mortimer, "this wasn't the plan. Explain that to her!"

The woman smiled indulgently, turned to her computer as Alice spelled out the name, and quickly typed it in. Then, after humming to herself a moment, she sighed, looked up from the screen, and gave Alice a blank stare. "I'm sorry ma'am. No one by that name was admitted."

"Oh, she's here all right." Alice nodded, wringing her hands. "We heard about the accident. We know she's here!"

The receptionist frowned thoughtfully. "All right, if you're certain. We get a lot of Jane Does. Are you folks relatives of the patient?"

"Yes, yes!" Alice exclaimed, almost choking on the words. "We're all she has."

"All right," replied the receptionist, looking back at the screen, "what's the address?"

In a nervous voice, Alice quickly rattled it off. While she was at, after Mortimer bent forward and whispered in her ear, she explained that India had a gunshot wound and had been wearing a witches costume when brought in.

“That’s the address all right,” the receptionist said, cocking an eyebrow, “and that fits the description, but the report I’m reading says she was shot. That’s more than just an accident ma’am. That’s *attempted homicide!*”

“We didn’t know,” Alice blurted. “All the cats, I mean tenants, told us she fell from the balcony.”

“Uh huh, that happened too,” she continued reading the report, “tsk tsk, massive injuries. Only family’s allowed in.” “They’ll have to clear you in ER.” She looked up sympathetically. “This is the main lobby.”

“Oh dear me,” Alice groaned, “we entered the wrong building. Will they let us in?”

“Honey.” She reached over to pat her wrist. “This County General, not the Mayo Clinic. You wouldn’t believe the folks they let in.” Pointing a long manicured finger, she added pleasantly, “Turn left at the main hall. Follow the red line, until you reach the ER lobby. It’s room 1B. You’ll have to check with the receptionist and attending physician. Don’t worry, they’ll let you in. They’ve seen all types!”

“Thank you, you’ve been very kind.” Alice sighed with relief.

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Judging by her grin, the woman had been amused with this group. Mortimer and Blaze were pleased by the receptionist’s attitude and quickly put the episode behind them. Alice and Elijah, however, were uneasy about the subterfuge and their collaboration with the sorcerer and priest. It had almost been too easy. Unlike their cohorts, who viewed this as a great adventure, they were fearful about the mission ahead.

“What if they interrupt your exorcism?” Elijah inquired anxiously, lagging behind, as they followed Mortimer down the hall.

“I’ve explained that this is much more than an exorcism,” Hildebrand replied in a hushed tone. “... It’s critical that everyone except the clerics stay out during the first phase of the rite.”

“You mean the preacher gets to go and I don’t?” Blaze asked in a hurt tone.

“I’m a devout Christian like yourselves,” Alice also protested. “I’ve been the one protecting those cats!”

“Yes, yes, Alice, if you were an ordained minister, like him, I would let you in,” the priest explained irritably, pointing to the preacher. “Explain to her Elijah how dangerous this rite is.”

Elijah nodded gravely, the thought of sharing this potentially blasphemous rite with Mortimer Hildebrand filling him with dread.

“I’m not afraid,” Alice persisted. “I want to add my prayer to the rite. You’ll need all the prayers you can get!”

“I’m not afraid either!” Blaze protested, his face puffed up with rage. “*You*—a defrocked priest—have no right to prevent *anyone* from going into India’s room! How dare you deprive us of this event!”

“Yes, he’s right,” agreed Alice, folding her pale arms, “you’ve been excommunicated from your church. What gives you sole right to perform this rite on India Crowley? Do you really think you’re more qualified to talk to the Lord?”

“Please, ” Elijah regained his voice, “let’s not quarrel about whose going to help. We’re not even in there yet. Believe me, Miss Wagnall, I don’t relish going in their myself. I personally believe that it’s strictly a matter of prayer. I don’t know what you have up your sleeve Hildebrand, but, like it or not, I’ll be there behind you with my *own* petition!”

“All right,” the priest replied, folding his arms, “but Blaze O’Dare, the sorcerer, isn’t going in! He would profane the rite and defeat anything I might accomplish in there. I may seem like a heretic to you Miss Wagnall, but I assure you the Lord doesn’t see it that way. Mister O’Dare on the other hand has made a career of his blasphemous rites and could only bring down disaster on us if India comes to.”

“You’ve not liked me since you laid eyes on me,” Blaze said in a wounded tone. “It was I who looked you up in the first place and gave you this opportunity. Why are you so pig-headed? Why can’t you let me help?”

“Shut up all of you!” Elijah took control again. “This personality contest between sorcerer and defrocked priest is not helping the matter at all. Blaze can go in with Alice at first. We have to pretend like we’re visiting her, don’t we? It’s only when you get into the rite that we might have to clear the room.”

Hildebrand grumbled querulously at them: “Blaze and the witch are on the same side. I don’t think he should be in her room *at all!*”

“If she’s dying as I suspect,” Alice said to Elijah from the corner of her mouth as they approached the reception desk, “they should let her *entire* family in.”

Looking over the ER receptionist’s counter and down at the smallest woman she had ever seen, Alice did a double-take, then, quickly getting into character, gave her spiel rapidly with heartfelt crocodilian tears and even less convincing sobs. Though it hadn’t been necessary in the main lobby, she introduced everyone as she had planned to do originally. The small furtive eyes of the tiny receptionist could only see what was directly in front her or on the brim of the counter. She didn’t see the men at all. The charade, Blaze quoted Shakespeare, was much ado about nothing, and yet, after Alice’s amateurish performance, they were amazed at the ER receptionist’s response. The first receptionist had at least spoken to them and given them directions, but this lackadaisical woman merely grunted and motioned for them to proceed. There seemed to be little security in this hospital. Elijah wanted to believe the Lord was guiding their steps. He held onto this thought desperately as he contemplated their mission. Alice now motioned for them to follow her through the double doors and down the corridor to India’s room.

“Where’s room 1B?” she mumbled, scanning the door numbers, her fist rising hysterically to her mouth. “I’ve never been more frightened in my life. What if she awakens before you do your thing? Will we be turned into cats or *something worse?*”

“Please,” Hildebrand said, looking past Elijah to Blaze O’Dare, “take her back to the waiting room. It won’t be safe in there!”

“I want to see her.” Blaze set his jaw. “I truly believe I can help. Alice Wagnall’s prayers should be able to help too. When you make contact with the unconscious woman’s demon and things appear to be getting out of hand, I’ll escort Miss Wagnall out of the room. Okay?”

“All right... but I think this a bad idea,” the priest sighed, slowly opening the door to Room 1B.

“Just don’t start with any devil-worshipping mumbo jumbo,” Elijah growled under his breath. “... Try to remember when you were a God-fearer and pray only to the Lord. Don’t you dare invoke one of your occult spooks!”

It was a stinging rebuke to the overbearing priest, but Mortimer was much too frightened right now to care.

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As they surrounded the inert body of India Crowley, they were shaken by the tubes laced in and out of her nose and mouth. The sound of a heart lung machine and the continual rise and fall of readouts from monitors on each side of her bed offered no encouragement to them now. And yet Hildebrand, after bending down to listen and watching India and her monitor readouts for several moments, felt reassured.

“We’re not too late,” he said, releasing a long, wheezing sigh. “She lives and her mind’s still strong.”

“Oh really? And how does he know that? She doesn’t look very lively to me?” he heard Elijah mutter sarcastically to himself.

Looking down at the life-support system attached to her vegetative frame, both Blaze and Alice found themselves agreeing with the preacher.

“Oh dear! Oh my goodness!” Alice shook her blond head.

“Come now, old boy,” Blaze said, eyeing the heart and lung machine. “How can you reach anyone in that condition? She’s brain dead. Spirits don’t inhabit corpses or brain dead people like her.”

“It’s no use. It’s hopeless. Sam, my darling, will forever remain a cat,” Alice concluded, her quivering little chin dropping to his chest.

“Nonsense! She’s not brain dead,” Hildebrand said, pointing to the monitors. “That one readout there shows her alpha wave lengths peaking. There’s activity in her brain!”

“Oh yeah, what about that other readout?” Elijah asked, pointing to the monitor on the other side of the bed. “That looks almost flat to me.”

“That’s the heart monitor,” Hildebrand pshawed, waving his hand. “That’s why she’s on this machine. We gotta get this over with before she flat lines completely. At that point, when the spirit is free and on its own, it’ll be too late. We must hurry!”

“All right now,” the priest said, placing his hands together to signify worship, “you’ve all seen her. I must pray. You three stand in the background and pray silently; let’s keep the field free and let India’s spirit hear one voice.”

“What if you need help?” Elijah asked, following the others to the farthest corner of the room.

“Will the spirit become visible?” Blaze’s voice was a mixture of excitement and fear.

“If things get out of hand,” Hildebrand replied sternly, “you must get out of the room at once. You can’t protect me at that point; the Lord will be my shield and truth will be my sword!”

“In Matthew, Mark, and Luke Christ casts out demons,” Alice said almost to herself. “Nowhere in the Bible have I ever read about spells being reversed or humans being transformed into cats.”

“Back! All of you!” the priest exhorted them now.

Turning to India’s bed, he looked down at the stricken woman and prayed silently at first. It was a prayer to gather strength: “Lord make me strong, but let my heart be humble to your call.” But the words that followed shook the others as they tumbled from this wizened little man.

“Jesus Christ, God and Savior, please enter this woman’s heart when the spirit of evil leaves her wretched soul. India Crowley, if you but awaken to my summons, you can dismiss

this foul fiend yourself. You have great power. But you're master cannot protect you against death. Awaken daughter of darkness, so that you may see the light!"

He didn't dare tell his associates how basic the plan accompanying the exorcism would be; they might lose confidence in his abilities entirely. For a dying witch, the priest must, in addition to casting a counter-spell, attempt to save her immortal soul. This had been the procedure for wizard priests as far back as the Middle Ages. But this witch had a demon that had created great mischief on her behalf. Few clerics had ever undertaken the dual tasks of exorcism and spell-reversal at the same time. Moreover, unlike most other victims of demon possession, India had apparently, through black magic, invited the evil spirit into her soul. This was a powerful spirit, using her twisted ambition for his own end. But just as the witch could invite the spirit in she could dismiss him. The priest could not exorcise the demon until the witch, herself, had a change of heart. The counter-spell he had selected, based upon an age-old formula, was intended for a conscious witch, who could be brought to repentance for her sins. India was not only unconscious and unable to repent; she might very well die before she regained consciousness at all. Hildebrand was hoping that, in the event he could awaken the comatose witch, her fear of damnation would make her cooperate, so that she, herself, would dismiss her demon and cancel the spell.

At this point, as he followed up his exhortation with prayer, there was a movement that was visible only to the priest, himself, as he looked down into India's face. India's eyelashes fluttered faintly and the small finger on her left hand twitched ever so slightly as she seemed to struggle back to the light. A war, Hildebrand could imagine, between God and Satan was at that moment being waged in India's unconscious mind. If only he could talk to the previous, unpossessed India, he might find out more about the spell. Surely she would fear for her immortal soul.

"What's he doing now?" Elijah whispered into Blaze's ear.

"I dunno. I've never seen a spell reversal before, only read about them," answered Blaze, doubt growing in his mind.

Alice was praying feverishly now on her knees as the priest again shouted into India's face: "Awaken child of perdition. The demon will gladly escape from your dying body now. You are no good to him anymore. Come forth as I offer you the Last Rites or forever burn in the fires of hell!"

India's eyelids opened slowly. With the tube down her throat, she could only make a croaking sound as she tried to speak. She seemed to be filled with great misgivings for her predicament. She knew she was dying and she had heard the priest's prayer. (At least this is what they all wanted to believe.)

"Praise the Lord!" Alice wrung her hands.

"She's awake! I heard her make a sound!" Blaze lurched toward India's bed.

"Here, give her this pad and pencil if she can't talk," Elijah said, handing the priest the stationary he found lying on the end table near her bed.

The priest stood there in momentary shock as if he could not believe his own powers.

"Blink your eyes three times if you wish to receive the Last Rites and fear for your immortal soul."

In what looked to the group like voluntary eyelid flutters, India signaled to the priest. Mortimer fell to his knees, as did Alice again, while Elijah staggered back to the window in disbelief. Blaze, ignoring his rabbit foot, now pulled out his crucifix and kissed it tenderly as if it

was a living thing. The priest wasted no time in giving her the Last Rites in the hopes that it would prove to be a buffer against the internal battle she would have to fight to rid herself of her demon and thereby cancel the evil spell.

“This is so bizarre!” exclaimed Alice, withdrawing to the corner of the room. “A defrocked Catholic priest is giving the Last Rites in the presence of a sorcerer and Protestant preacher. What would Sam say now?”

Elijah shushed her gently and said under his breath “Sam is a cat, my dear. The Lord must hear this heretic’s prayer.”

Memento etiam, Domine, famulorum famularumque tuarum  
qui nos praecesserunt cum signo fidei, et dormiunt in somno  
pacis. Ipsi, Domine, et omnibus in Christo quiescentibus, locum  
refrigerii, lucis et pacis, ut indulgeas, deprecamur. Per eundem  
Christum Dominum nostrum...

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During the Last Rites, India Crowley’s body remained motionless except the slightest movement of her eyelids and little finger of her left hand. There was no demonic agitation or terrible sounds, which was evidently due to her condition. Clearly India was dying, and her demon had greatly diminished powers. At least this is what Hildebrand thought as he called upon the demon to come out, the very act of which he hoped would reverse the spell.

“In the name of Jesus Christ, the Savior, God incarnate, the Holy Ghost, I demand that you depart this woman, Indian Crowley, who has asked forgiveness of Christ to die in grace with the Holy Catholic Church!”

And then India’s inert body was suddenly animated. It began to twitch terribly as if a palsy now afflicted it. Her eyes opened wide and her pupils rolled around crazily in their sockets.

A low howl deep in her throat rose to a terrible pitch: “ooooooooo!”

“Uh oh!” Blaze said with a gasp.

“She didn’t blink at you,” Elijah observed, “she’s having a *convulsion!*”

“Get out of here—all of you!” the priest cried. “Anyone in this room when the demon is exorcised risks becoming his next abode. You Blaze are especially susceptible. You’d be a perfect base for mischief of his kind!”

“But I want to help,” Blaze protested weakly, following Alice Wagnall quickly out of the room.

A sigh of relief escaped the sorcerer’s lips as he contemplated what the priest had said.

“You too!” the priest pointed to Elijah. “You’re not immune to him either!”

“But what about you?” the preacher asked, looking with horror at India’s twitching body.

“He cannot enter my soul,” the priest explained, pushing him out the door. “He’ll try to physically kill me, but I’m not afraid. You, on other hand, must not afford him another home when he finally leaves. If my prayers are strong enough, he will leave this place quickly and, unless I’m mistaken, begin looking for another host in the first victim on hand.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Elijah’s jaw was suddenly set. “If anything happens to you, who will finish the exorcism? We can’t take the chance.”

“You can’t finish an exorcism, my dear fellow.” the priest shook his head. “You’re not qualified to do such a thing.”

“Why,” Elijah frowned, “because I’m not a Catholic.”

“No, that has nothing to do with it,” the priest explained, looking back nervously at the woman. “You may not approve of what I’m doing.”

“Oh,” Elijah frowned, “and what is *that*?”

“There’s no time for this!” the priest cried. “Please exit at once!”

“Do you, in fact, know what you’re doing?” Elijah asked, as the priest shoved him out of the room.

“Trust me,” were the priest’s last words as he shut the door.

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Elijah felt relieved to be shut out of this dreadful business. He had sensed by Mortimer’s secretiveness that the defrocked priest was going to mix Roman Catholic Christianity and conventional sorcery together. Now he was convinced of it. In good conscience he couldn’t allow himself to be a part of this abomination. In his own personal brand of born-again Christianity, he considered it the worst form of heresy, and yet he wanted the terrible dilemma confronting them resolved. He had, after years of preaching on the street, been confronted with something more terrible than the dark environs of skid row. He told Alice and Blaze that he was going to the hospital chapel to pray directly to God. The Lord, he reminded Alice, didn’t need formulas or ritual to answer prayer. Citing the Centurion who approached Christ on behalf of his dying servant, he reminded her that it wasn’t necessary to be there to pray for someone in distress. Prayers could be answered from afar.

Elijah and Alice left together to find the chapel. Blaze insisted on keeping watch at India Crowley’s door. The terrified look the sorcerer registered in her room was still frozen on his face.

“Please hurry back,” he called to them as they walked down the hall.

“Don’t open that door,” Elijah said over his shoulder. “Wait until he invites you in!”

As the pair entered the All Faiths Chapel of the county hospital, they glanced at the Christian cross on one side of the room and the Star of David on the other side. In the back of the room, Elijah gathered with a glance, were a gilded Buddha in one nook and a New Age crystal for self-meditation in a special niche in the wall. Moving to the crucifix, not sure whether to kneel, stand or sit in the pew closest to this Roman Catholic symbol of Christianity, they stood there a moment contemplating what sort of prayer they would give God for such a problem in such an ecumenical and eclectic room.

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The nurses on duty, in fact, believed the priest was giving India Crowley the Last Rites; otherwise they would have stopped these strange goings on at once. To camouflage the words he was saying, Mortimer used Latin, which he felt both the Lord and the demon understood. The nurses had peaked in on him only once since allowing him to enter India’s room, concluding that the “*kyria sanctum and agnus dei*” he threw in for effect was part of an authentic Catholic prayer. At the very moment that Elijah Gray and Alice Wagnall were settling in prayer on their knees in the chapel, the priest Mortimer Hildebrand was calling again—this time in English—for the demon to exit his host.

“Unclean spirit I said depart this innocent victim.... All right she’s not so innocent!” he cried out in exasperation. “But she’s a child of God, who’s gone astray and no longer needs your service. Out demon! In the name of the Savior, Jesus Christ, out out out!”

But India didn’t move at all now and, in fact, appeared to be giving up the ghost, herself, which could mean her spell would die with her and her victims would forever remain cats. Canceling India’s spell, he believed, required her to be conscious. India, in spite of demonic animation, was in a deep coma now. After trying to exorcize her demon several more times, Mortimer was reminded of the main difference between this attempt and his two previous spell-reversals that resulted in canceling the spells: the previous witches had been wide awake and had been cooperative. They had repented of their mischief. To add to the difficulties of this session was the fact that India was not repentant. Even if she was conscious, her cooperation couldn’t be guaranteed. He therefore needed her to be awake and alert, so he could explain the mortal danger her soul was in and how he could help save her if she sought God’s forgiveness and mercy.

Another thought that had nothing to do with the success and failure of his mission plagued him now: once again there would be no eyewitnesses to these events. On both occasions no one, including the press, had been on hand to witness the bewitching and it had been foolish for him to tell eyewitnesses that he was performing anything but an exorcism. He had been branded a lunatic by the public and a heretic by his church. In addition to performing the spell-reversal secretly again, it appeared this time that he was going to fail. His arrogance had blinded him to the truth. Slumping down in his chair, Mortimer looked up at the ceiling a moment in helpless despair. “Lord,” he murmured, “I can’t do it this time. In my vanity and conceit I assumed too much. I’ve never worked with an unconscious witch before. Please give me the wisdom and strength to save this poor wretch and those unfortunates under her spell.”

“May I come in,” he heard a familiar voice breaking into his prayers.

“Yes-yes, come in sorcerer,” the priest mumbled hoarsely, without looking around. “There’s no danger in this room unless our subject dies. Her vital signs are still arcing on the monitors, but for all practical purposes she may as well be dead. I never counted on a subject being this unconscious and close to death. I know of no special prayer or exhortation for this. I’m sorry, but all I’ve done is pray myself hoarse.”

“If I may say so,” Blaze said, taking a seat next to the slumping priest, but sitting on the edge of the chair as if he might want to make a fast retreat, “I’ve never attempted something like this either, but I wouldn’t give up—not completely. You need modern medicine to help cancel this spell. You need more than prayers right now. If the doctors can’t bring her to, there’s nothing we can do.”

“Then you’re saying, in fact, that we should just give up,” Mortimer replied accusingly, looking askance at the sorcerer, aware of the other man’s fear. “It took courage for you to enter this room O’Dare. You may go now. I will stay with the subject until she dies.”

At that point, however, there was a rap on the door. A short, gaunt, bespectacled doctor whizzed in, carrying the patient’s chart in one hand, wagging his finger at the officiating priest with the other hand for allowing someone else to be in the room.

“Oh, it’s all right doctor,” Blaze reassured him, standing up and moving out of the way, “I’m India’s favorite uncle. She would want me to be here at the end.”

“Hmmm,... I guess it won’t hurt,” the doctor sighed, after looking down at the patient and inspecting the monitors by her bed. “I’m not sure if she’ll ever awaken. I’m afraid, in

addition to being filled full of lead, she's taken rather a bad fall: massive skull fracture, broken neck and internal injuries made all the worse by bullets penetrating her lungs and liver."

At just that moment, Elijah and Alice were returning into the room also, overhearing what the doctor had just said to the two men. Elijah's face was grave with concern as he placed a hand gently on the doctor's shoulder.

"Doctor," he intoned softly, "as her spiritual family, may we pray together in her room? Your chapel is far too ecumenical for our tastes. Did you know that you even have a Buddhist statue in one corner of that room? Perhaps if her priest, myself, my sister Alice, and the sorcerer—I mean uncle—pool our spiritual energies together we might gain God's ear."

"No loud noises," the doctor wrung his finger. "The nurses said you were shouting in here. We have other critically ill patients on this ward!"

"Excusez-moi!" Blaze clasped his hands together and bowed.

The doctor now gave the sorcerer a dubious look. When he exited the room, Elijah searched the room for another chair but realized that Alice would have to sit on the floor as he, himself, unless one of the other two men were gentlemen enough to offer her his seat."

"Well, what do we do now?" Elijah asked, scooting down at the nearest wall. "I just couldn't pray in that chapel, not with that hideous portrayal of Christ on the wall and all those idols around the room."

"Did they really have Buddha in one corner?" the sorcerer inquired, turning around in his chair. "Oh, Miss Wagnall, how rude of me," he noted apologetically, knocking himself deprecatingly on the noggin with a thumb.

"Thank you, but this floor's comfy enough." She sighed, resting her forehead on her knees. After a short pause she wailed plaintively, "Oh, this is a nightmare—a living hell!"

"The only one," Elijah said, looking abstractedly at the ceiling, "who's in danger of hell is India Crowley. She's in the worst nightmare of us all. Her soul is in danger of eternal fire!"

"Nonsense!" Blaze pshawed, with a snarl. "You worship a God of wrath with an unforgiving nature. My God forgives the weak and lowly. He would never consign a soul to everlasting hell."

"His god *lives* in hell," Alice murmured into Elijah's ear.

"God is universal," the sorcerer declared. "He doesn't speak merely to Christians and Jews. He listens to Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. He listens to primitive headhunters on the Amazon and to the lowest urchin on the street."

"We would expect you to make such a statement," Mortimer clucked, a look of amused contempt on his face. "Now I might include Jews and Muslims as my neighbors in heaven, but Buddhism is actually atheistic and Hindus, who are polytheists and idolaters, believe in reincarnation, not heaven. Perhaps a wino or derelict would merit paradise, but do you really believe we'll find cannibals or headhunters up there?"

"This is all academic," Alice looked up with tears in her blue eyes. "You men deal with words. The preacher and I deal with faith. The Lord, in his infinite wisdom, has decided to leave things as they are. My fiancé and those other young adults of Shadowbrook Arms will remain cats. God has spoken!"

"Amen," Elijah said, bowing his head.

"You accept this?" Blaze arose up slowly. "Has it ever occurred to any of you," he asked, glancing around the room, "that God has nothing to do with it this time? You people blame Him for *everything!* This, we have already established, is the devil's work." "And no," he looked over

at Elijah now, “get it through your thick skull that I don’t worship Satan. Most witches and sorcerers fear him even more than Christians. In the words of Sherlock Holmes, they know his game! Quite often he’s the reason behind a malady, which requires a spell, but not always. Sometimes, those things you blame on God such as illness and war are based upon human error or just dumb luck.... God doesn’t prevent us from dying of cancer, so why would he prevent us from being turned into cats. What’s worse? I’d rather be a cat! This time we’re not dealing with dumb luck or human wickedness, however; we’re dealing with the great architect of evil—the genuine article. We need a powerful witch, not God, to reverse this spell!”

“I’ll have nothing to do with witchcraft,” Elijah rose up as if to go.

“Neither will I,” Alice vehemently shook her head.

“Humph!... Where exactly would you find such a witch?” Mortimer seemed to explore the idea. “... I can’t believe that God will stand by and let the forces of nature take control. He’s helped me twice now to reverse this sort of spell. Perhaps the preacher’s right: all we need is stronger faith.”

“What makes you think that God reversed those spells?” the sorcerer dared ask, wincing as the priest rose up from his chair. “Perhaps God allowed these natural forces to do his work for him. How do you explain the cures of the savage pygmy in Africa or shaman in American Indian lore.... Why can’t you all broaden your definition of faith to include other peoples, who simply use other methods to achieve the same ends.”

“Because, my dear sorcerer,” Mortimer’s voice dripped with sarcasm and he gave him his most severe frown, “Christianity is not merely a matter of technical results; it is built upon grace and the belief in the hereafter.”

“Oh come now, my dear fellow,” the sorcerer snickered, “you are a defrocked priest, a heretic who reverses witches spells. I would think you, of all people, would understand the broader meaning of God. Are you trying to tell me that, after being cast out into eternal darkness by the Holy Mother Church, you still embrace Catholicism? Have you learned nothing from your heresy and God-given gifts of exorcism? You need the forces of nature as much as I. Is not nature a creation of God?”

“Hah,” Mortimer snarled with contempt, “*an oxymoron!*”

“Wait a minute! Maybe I wasn’t paying attention,” Elijah interjected irritably, “but having Mortimer Hildebrand solve our problem was *your* idea. Have you lost faith in him too?”

“Faith *is* the problem here,” Blaze replied, “not the good priest’s efforts. I’m quite sure he’s successful when his subjects are conscious. But India Crowley’s unconscious, and her demon will not budge until she dies. Also, she’s unrepentant. She can’t help us by her faith.”

“There’s that word again,” Alice said sarcastically. “You’ve practically redefined it for us! Faith in what, mister O’Dare: God, nature or the Devil?”

“All right, very well, she’s got a point,” Mortimer suppressed a yawn. “Spell-reversal, like exorcism, whatever we choose to call it, requires the powers of God to achieve such ends. This means having faith, not simply having knowledge of occult paraphernalia and spells. We are dealing in God-given power, sorcerer. There is no such thing as magic per se.”

“Oh,” Blaze pursed his lips, “then what do you call Christ’s raising Lazarus from the dead and all those other miracles performed in both the Old Testament and New Testament of the Bible. There’s millions of miracles reported by witnesses. Call it God’s magic, voodoo, sorcery or what-have-you. But the fact is they have no basis in logic or science. Abracadabra, hocus

pocus, or whatever—they're just that: magic! Why can't you believe and accept magic for what it is and from other practitioners if they're working for the same ends?"

Elijah looked at O'Dare in disbelief. "Are you seriously suggesting that we find this Queen of the Witches and turn India Crowley over to her now?"

"Do you really know such a witch?" Mortimer drew close to Blaze. "Or is this just more of your theatrics sorcerer?"

"I have a register of witches," Blaze explained, looking over to the preacher. "You saw it, remember?"

Elijah nodded grimly.

"The truth is," said O'Dare, intimidated by the preacher's glare, "he didn't want me to use a witch. He made a great fuss, so I turned to my register of priests, who perform exorcisms and such. There is a small number, of which you, Father Hildebrand, belong, who, in the course of their exorcisms, can also reverse spells."

"So I wasn't your first choice, eh?" Mortimer scowled at the sorcerer. "... Well, you didn't tell me that she was unconscious either. I can't call on her demon without her being awake or repentant, can I? I'm afraid the power of prayer in this case requires consciousness of the subject."

"I can't support this," Elijah shuddered, setting his jaw.

"Neither can I," Alice snorted.

Remembering what her fiancé had said to India during the Halloween party, she quoted self-righteously from Exodus 22:18 and Deuteronomy 18:10: "A witch is an abomination to the Lord: Thou shalt not suffer a witch!"

But the sorcerer, who had suggested just such a person in the first place and had come up with Mortimer as an alternative, now felt vindicated.

"If you will not try to save these poor souls by any method at hand, I shall go it alone!" he declared turning on his heel as if to leave.

In truth he didn't want to handle this alone. He had never done the real magic required of sorcerers. He was, in fact, a burnt out executive, whose wife had left him with three spoiled daughters and who, after a ruinous divorce, had begun dabbling in the craft as a hobby to spice up his life and make up for an unfulfilling career. Now Blaze O'Dare (alias Horace M. Dwyer) had his big chance, and if it meant that he was only being a manager and coordinator, as he had been in his previous life, that was all right with him. This would be the ultimate success story for him. He was a main player in an ongoing pageant and miracle. He had redefined himself after stumbling onto the greatest adventure of his life.

"I will agree to help you only if you promise to make Christ the center of you rituals and ceremony," Mortimer said, wringing his gnarled finger at the reluctantly retreating Blaze.

"Of course," Blaze said dubiously, "we will need all the help we can get."

"No, you can't do this. Listen to what he's saying," Elijah pleaded for reason. "He's going to get a card-carrying witch to break the spell. You're hoping he will allow Christ into the picture, but by definition that's quite impossible. It's an oxymoron, as the priest said himself. Alice is right: suffer ye not a witch! Have you forgotten the Salem Witch Trials and the Spanish Inquisition? Christianity will have nothing to do with magic and spells. Witches don't call upon the powers of righteousness to break their spells or work their incantations."

"Mister Gray," Blaze looked irritably over to the apoplectic preacher, "don't quote us scriptures or try to use your archaic Judeo-Christian ethics on *me!* Christianity, the priest has at

least learned, is a dynamic and ever-changing phenomenon. Those folks during the Salem Witch Trials or the Inquisition didn't know what witches were any more than they did in the Old and New Testaments. They thought they were *all* bad. But they weren't all bad; many of them were just trying to serve mankind in the same way clerics and missionaries have done and do today."

"Listen, sorcerer," Mortimer wrung his finger at him again, "let me make this perfectly clear. As far as I'm concerned, witches *are* by definition bad. Do you really expect the preacher and I to forgot five thousand years of history and tradition, simply because we are confronted with the unknown. I believe that God will make plain to us his purpose here, just as he did for me in the past." "Not for one moment," he spoke to Elijah this time, "will I forgot who is at the center of all miracles," "for miracles, not magic," he concluded, looking back at the sorcerer, "are at the center of such phenomena. I speak from faith as well as experience sorcerer; while you are speaking merely on behalf of occult tradition."

The preacher would not budge on this issue. Alice shook her head vigorously once more.

"I'm sorry Mortimer, we can't equivocate here," Elijah insisted stubbornly, folding his arms. "We're Christians, not practitioners in diabolic rites. This is black magic—nothing more: a thing of the devil!"

"Ye shall not suffer a witch!" came Alice's refrain.

The foursome quarreled for several moments as India Crowley's life hung in the balance. No one agreed with the sorcerer, but Mortimer was greatly torn by his own unorthodox faith and the fear that this dreadful demon's magic would not be undone. The two witches he had known personally in the past had been evil witches whose magic he had to undo but only after their deathbed repentances. Both witches had, of course, died embracing the Lord. He had never known a good witch, especially one with allegedly such great power. But what if such a witch really existed? Did he, through his own arrogance again, have the right to stand in the way of those poor creatures' only chance for salvation, even if it was provided by such questionable means? How, for that matter, could Blaze O'Dare's super witch not be guided by God if she had such a saving power?"

"All right, sorcerer, ... we'll find your super witch," he said with resignation, looking back at Elijah and Alice. "I just hope that the good preacher and Miss Wagnall will add their prayers to ours. We need all the help we can get!"

While the preacher and Alice Wagnall lingered in the room, the priest followed the sorcerer into the hall. He had hoped that the other two would join them, but it appeared as if he was the only one who was going to support the sorcerer in this dreadful affair.

Elijah turned to Alice finally, the terrible dilemma registering on his freckly face. "Those poor souls are trapped in feline bodies. I will continue to pray for them.... You go back and take care of the cats. I must tag along and make sure that God is truly represented in this affair."

## Chapter Nineteen

### The Search for Madelyn Fontaine

Elijah joined the other two men just as they were about to climb into Blaze's car. Mortimer was grateful that the preacher had decided to join them, but he saw that Elijah was coming along with the greatest misgivings and acknowledged this with a severe nod of his head and the vaguest of smiles. As they were backing out of the parking stall, they could hear Alice calling out to them. Blaze stopped the car and Alice climbed in the back seat with Elijah. The only thing she could think of saying at this point was "Do you expect me to call a cab?"

She had a look of great anxiety on her pale face. Elijah felt great empathy toward her, since he had the same feelings himself. Repelled by his threadbare suit and bristly face, she nevertheless held his rough, freckly hand as she would any brother in Christ. Elijah, who could not help comparing this frail creature to his long dead wife, was embarrassed by the gesture but was also deeply moved.

"God will show us the way," he said in a constricted voice.

With less enthusiasm than before, the priest asked the sorcerer where they were going. Everyone assumed that Blaze O'Dare knew where to find the witch. With a cavalier look on his bearded face, he pulled a scrap of paper out of his coat and handed it to the priest. On an eight by five note card was written in bold ink *Madelyn Fontaine, City of Angels Hospital, Acute Psychiatric Ward, 7500 Hellman Ave, Rosemead, California*

"I was going to tell Elijah about this woman, but I was afraid he'd go ballistic on me," he said, glancing self-consciously into his rearview mirror.

He could not read the expression on Elijah or Alice's face, but the priest appeared to be dumfounded by what he had just read.

"I recall visiting an old friend here," Mortimer muttered aloud, "... he had a mental breakdown after giving his life to the church.... They transferred him from the county hospital to this facility.... Yes, I'm certain this was the place. They had to use a straight jacket on him and ply him with drugs.... Is that where you're taking us Blaze?"

"Yes," Blaze answered calmly, "we will find a way of getting her out of the hospital. She's probably in one of those minimum security wards and can leave whenever she wants."

"Acute Psychiatric Ward? A *mental* hospital?" Alice's mouth dropped in disbelief.

"He knew this all along!" Elijah pointed accusingly at the rearview mirror.

"Yes, yes, I think he did," Mortimer mumbled light-headedly to himself, "where else are you going to find a card-carrying witch? Already our task seems more impossible than ever. They might not even let us in!"

"They will," Blaze said confidently. "We'll get her out!"

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For nearly a half hour, as the sorcerer searched for the hospital, a stunned silence enveloped the car. Though it seemed unconscionable for Blaze not to mention this detail, Mortimer wasn't surprised. It was only natural that doctors would consider Madelyn Fontaine insane. Blaze O'Dare was, himself, slightly mad. As far as the preacher and Alice Wagnall were concerned, the thought of working with a mentally disturbed witch made it all the worse. Yet the priest, who felt spiritual failure acutely now, half hoped it was true. He didn't want to be bested by a witch. His break with the mother church would appear to be complete if a godless witch could do God's miracles instead of himself.

"Why was she committed?" Elijah asked finally after Alice whispered the question into his ear.

"According to the Witches Registry, Madelyn Fontaine, who was once a nun, became a recluse," Blaze explained, as he turned his station wagon slowly into the hospital parking lot. "Her neighbors and her remaining family probably got wind of her exploits and thought she was nuts."

"She was a nun?" Alice murmured in disbelief.

"Why am I not surprised?" Elijah heaved a sigh.

"The question is: 'will they let us in to see her?'" Mortimer asked looking nervously out the window at the imposing white edifices of psychiatric buildings.

"Don't worry,... I'll get us in," the sorcerer promised, parking in the visitor's section and climbing quickly out of the car.

"Us?... " the preacher murmured, shaking his head, "I don't think so!"

Alice uttered a hysterical laugh.

Much more slowly this time, the priest began moving out of the car, a most troubling expression breaking upon his stony face. For a few moments he settled back in his seat. Looking back at the pair, he seemed to share their apprehension.

"My dear fellow," he peered out at Blaze, "we can't very well storm the hospital as we did before. This is a mental hospital; many of these patients are in locked rooms. I'll accompany you if you insist, but Madelyn Fontaine is, after all, one of your own."

Blaze had mixed emotions after hearing his lackluster response. Reluctant to go it alone, he nevertheless realized he was now in control. It was up to him to move this timid crowd.

"Come on Father Hildebrand," he spoke deferentially to him now, "a priest can always open certain doors."

"Oh, I don't know," the priest glanced back at Alice, "this might need a woman's touch!"

Alice blue eyes narrowed to slits but she said nothing. Elijah, who felt almost useless now, merely snarled. As Mortimer climbed finally out of the car, Blaze tried reassuring the remaining occupants how much they needed them now. Was it not the preacher, Elijah Gray, who made this entire venture possible by discovering the bewitched cat? Was it not in Alice Wagnall's tender care that they found four more miraculous cats?

"Yes, yes, let's get this over with. Enough of your fine words!" the priest said, making scooting motions with his hands.

Looking back at the automobile, Mortimer motioned politely one more time for Elijah and Alice to join them as the couple sat silently in their seats.

"Come-come, the sorcerer is right this time," he called blithely to them, "*we're a team!*"

“Yes,” Blaze signaled impatiently, “let’s get this show on the road!”

When neither the preacher nor the woman budged, however, the priest frowned at this apparent mutiny and motioned for the sorcerer to go on. For a brief moment, as Mortimer looked back at the pair, he envied them both for what they didn’t know. They were offended by the woman’s profession. They couldn’t possibly know how dangerous such a woman could be... even at a distance.

“Ta-ta, we won’t be long!” the sorcerer promised in a singsong voice.

“Lord,” Mortimer whispered under his breath, “I’m being led by a fool!”

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Blaze O’Dare was in his element now. Mortimer could scarcely believe where he was being led: into an insane asylum, in search of a witch. It seemed to be a low point in his spiritual life, and yet, after seeing all those bewitched cats, it might also be considered a high point in his career. Elijah and Alice had been quite happy this time to be left sitting by themselves in the car. How fortunate were they both to know what they believed. Both of them, Mortimer understood, had been spiritually shaken, especially by the decision to find a witch to undo India’s spell. He envied them for their moral outrage but resented them greatly for their lack of support. He felt only jealousy and defeat now, two emotions that were unworthy for a man of God.

Alice turned to the preacher now with a worried furrow developing on her brow.

“What kind of creature,” she asked, releasing his hand, “do you suppose they’re going to bring back to the car?”

“I have no idea,” Elijah sighed, watching the two men walk through the parking lot toward the entrance to the hospital. “I doubt they’ll be able to get her released. If she’s mad, she’ll be of no use to the sorcerer anyhow. This all looks very hopeless to me.”

“It’s just as well,” Alice said with resignation. “I don’t want my Sam in a witch’s debt!”

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After the sorcerer asked the receptionist if it was possible to visit with Madelyn Fontaine, there was a long delay. The receptionist searched her computer screen and then mumbled something into her phone. A young man, obviously a member of the staff, now appeared at the reception counter with the news that it was against hospital policy and state law to allow people to visit such a deeply disturbed patient unless they were members of the family. At this point, thought the sorcerer, the prim looking Alice would have added credibility to the team. When Blaze claimed that he and the priest were her long lost brothers, the doctor gave them an incredulous look and asked if they could supply proof. Mortimer gave him the added reason to visit Madelyn that he was a priest who could give her spiritual comfort. (He had almost said the Last Rites.) But the receptionist, who had continued looking through her registry of patients in the computer as the doctor talked, came back with the disturbing news that Madelyn Fontaine had been released last year.

Whether or not they would be allowed into visit her was suddenly academic now. It seemed as if the hospital staff had no grounds in holding her in spite of her preposterous claims and the agitated state she was in when she was brought in. Madelyn was eccentric and unpredictable, but, in a clinical sense, she was not really insane. She seemed more *obsessed*, the doctor explained, than *possessed* as her relatives claimed. The policy in this state was, after all, to let marginally insane individuals out if they posed no threat to the public. After a few weeks

of testing and observation, in fact, Madelyn was turned back out into the streets whence she had come.

“Oh, Lord of mercy!” the sorcerer groaned. “Is there any kind of forwarding address?”

“No,” the young doctor shook his head, “but Miss Fontaine has a sister. I won’t give you her address, only her telephone number. I’m concerned about her myself and I begged her not to go.”

“We’re running out of time,” Blaze shook his head in dismay.

“Okay doctor, please let us have her sister’s phone number,” the priest sighed, holding out his hand.

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Elijah and Alice had mixed emotions about what the sorcerer and priest discovered. On the one hand, they were relieved that they would not be dealing with a witch. On the other hand, this meant that the cats might remain felines for the rest of their lives. The sorcerer, more than the priest, was visibly shaken by the news. For him it meant that his hopes of working with a super witch had been dashed. After he gave Elijah and Alice a brief explanation of what they discovered, the group was plunged into silence. Blaze drove the station wagon back to Sam’s apartment, so they could check on the cats. The group needed food and rest before forging ahead. Blaze was anxious to call Madelyn’s sister, Lillian Fontaine.

All five cats were sleeping together in a fluffy bundle of fur on Alice’s bed, but when they heard the door rattle, they spooked and darted under the bed. The natural vigilance of cats was beginning to manifest itself in their feline brains.

Alice began to panic when she couldn’t immediately find the cats, calling frantically “Sam!... Sam!... Where are you, you silly cats?”

She kept hoping that she would awaken one morning and this would all be a bad dream. Soon, however, as the humans searched for the cats, Irma, Sam, Wanda, Neva, and Drew cautiously exited their hideout. Alice was the first to hear their meows from down the hall. When Sam spotted his fiancé, he scampered over to her but found her detouring suddenly into the bathroom before he could leap into her arms.

Alice now gasped as she opened the door.

“Uh oh,” Sam thought to Irma, “she found our mess!”

“Wanda and Neva shouldn’t have tried using the toilet,” observed Irma with a shrug.

Alice, who had to use the toilet, herself, glanced with horror at the kitty litter on the floor. The box filled with garden soil had been inadequate for the cats’ needs. The aroma of feces attacked her olfactory nerves immediately as she stepped into the room. To avoid the mess, the Persian cats attempted unsuccessfully to use the commode, smearing excreta on the seat and floor. Fortunately for the other humans, there was a second bathroom in the master bedroom. After sanitizing the scene, Alice sat down reluctantly on the seat, wondering, as she held her nose, where she would find another box.

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Almost immediately, upon entering the house, the sorcerer had called Lillian Fontaine, Madelyn’s sister, and when she didn’t answer her phone, left a message on her answering

machine: “This is Blaze O’Dare, a friend of your sister Madelyn. Please call me locally at 310-217-7638.”

While the sorcerer checked the kitchen ostensibly to find more cats, he made himself a Dagwood sandwich. Elijah had walked into Sam’s study and sat down idly in front of the laptop, searching the witches website that was still on her screen. The sorcerer explained to the downcast priest, through mouthfuls of sandwich, just what he thought their super-witch might do. She would, he believed, need a powerful spell, and she might even have to call on a ghost or two to help her in her work.

As he listened to Blaze O’Dare, the priest realized how much of an amateur the sorcerer had become. Madelyn’s sister might not even be home and even if she returned their call, might not know where Madelyn could be found. Knowing now that Blaze was once a successful businessman, he couldn’t imagine how someone could become so eccentric and misinformed. It didn’t occur to Mortimer that the sorcerer might think the very same thing of him or, for that matter, Elijah and Alice considered him an even greater heretic than Blaze.

Mortimer Hildebrand was ashamed of himself for what he was beginning to feel: defeat, mingled with jealousy for the alleged super witch; contempt for a self-styled sorcerer, who deserved his Christian compassion; and his own growing doubts about his relevancy as a priest. Very soon, he thought petulantly now, he would reassert himself and put this amateur in his place. He must, as a Christian, however, swallow his professional pride and work as an equal with Madelyn Fontaine if she could be found. He would not let her make a mockery of his faith. If they couldn’t find her or she proved to be a fake, he must also have the strength to take control and do everything possible to save the bewitched cats.

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Having cleaned up the cats’ mess, Alice relieved herself, splashed water on her face, and, after removing lids from boxes in Sam’s closet, presented them as kitty litters for each one of the cats. To allow the cats privacy, Elijah had suggested that they place them in various corners of the house. Each of the cats now had their own private potty. After carting several plastic bags of soil from the complex’s garden back to the apartment, they poured equal amounts of soil into each lid. Afterwards, though she could barely mask her dislike of cats, Alice reached down to her fiancé and picked him awkwardly into her arms. Without a second thought, Elijah reached down to scratch Irma’s head and, watched with fondness, as she trotted down the hall. Sensing, with his feline instincts, the reticence in his fiancé’s touch, Sam realized how difficult this was for her. Showing such affection seemed natural for Elijah Gray. Sam had always felt disappointment for his fiancé’s dislike for furry creatures, especially for her loathing for cats. Now it wounded him to think that she still harbored this emotion. It was as if she couldn’t love him for himself.

“You have to get over your hatred of cats,” he wanted very much to say. “I’ve always loved cats. I even once wrote a poem about cats, which you think is blasphemous now. For Christ’s sake, Alice, get over it. *I’m a cat!*” Unable to vocalize this to her, the feline motor that caused him to purr turned off and he became still and rigid in her arms.

“She can’t read your mind, Sam, but *I can*,” Irma looked up to him now. “You’re a cat now, Sam. That’s what Alice sees.” “Come on,” she beckoned, wiggling her little snout, “let’s go find out what’s going on.”

“Do you think they’re gonna be able to save us?” Sam asked looking down from Alice’s arms.

“One of the humans said they were going to use a witch to break the spell,” Irma explained patiently, wishing Sam would hop down.

Sam grew tense in Alice’s reluctant arms. Even as a cat under a witches spell, the very idea sounded outrageous to him. Alice grew concerned about his reaction.

“You can’t fight evil with evil!” Sam’s protest filled Irma’s head. “God won’t work with a witch! I thought the preacher and priest were going to help us. Why would they turn to a witch?”

“That’s what I heard,” replied Irma pertly, scampering ahead, “let’s go listen to what they have to say.”

“Wait for me!” Sam called excitedly, wiggling out of Alice’s arms.

Sam leaped down and scurried after Irma down the hall. Already, the other three cats had checked the remainder of the house to see what was going on. Instinctively again, Drew had marked a spot and looked back sheepishly at what he had done. No one had seen him, but he was reminded of how much of cat he had become. Neva, who had obviously been in her period as a human, was in heat now. She was aware of her behavior and, remembering Sam’s warning, fought against her animal instincts too.

Sam, Irma, Neva, and Drew had found some excitement in being cats. Irma, in addition to what the transformation had done to her senses, had found a newfound popularity. From an eccentric camp follower of a would-be witch she had become a miracle cat in the preacher and sorcerer’s eyes and was now accepted as an equal by Sam, Wanda, Neva, and Drew.

Sam, like Irma, had begun to enjoy being a cat. He felt almost guilty for this emotion when he considered his feelings for Irma now. As Drew had been drawn to the spunky Neva, he had been drawn to the little black cat but for her personality, not her sparse feline frame. He had never liked her as a mortal, but there was a warmth and genuineness about her he found difficult to resist.

While Neva, a passionate adult, was now an overheated cat, Drew had been, even in the company of his neighbors Buck, Jim, Tom, and Ed, a subdued and cerebral fellow whose bashfulness often prevented him from even going on a date. Now, in Neva’s feline eyes, he was a ‘stud.’ Like the other cats, he had senses he never dreamed he could have, including telepathy, and he enjoyed an inexplicable sense of camaraderie with the other cats far beyond the shallow friendship he had with Buck’s gang.

Whereas the other four cats might survive in each other’s company as cats, Wanda, although enjoying being a cat, herself, at times, was now lost in her new body. She had been a popular cheerleader in high school and a fun-loving scandal as a college dropout. It hadn’t mattered to her that Sam had been engaged to Alice; Alice was, after all, a human. She didn’t even like cats. But Sam’s sudden friendship with Irma caused jealousy in the big white fluffy cat. She felt lost. She was uncertain how she fit in. Wanda now tagged along after Sam and Irma with a dejected look on her face. It appeared as if the main discussion on witchcraft wasn’t in the living room or his study but was in the kitchen now. The cats had eaten all of the lunchmeat and needed the humans to find them some more food. When the priest caught sight of Drew, the first cat to enter the kitchen, he lifted him playfully up into his arms and scratched his head. Drew, who was looking for something to eat, hissed and bared his fangs and was

immediately dropped to the floor. Sam, Irma, Wanda, and Neva also hissed at the old man for being so dense.

“We want food,” Drew thought, nudging the refrigerator door, “give us something to eat!”

“I’m just thirsty. I want some milk,” Neva rubbed the priest’s leg.

When Mortimer lifted her up to reciprocate her apparent affection, Neva hissed too. Wanda jumped up on the sink and motioned with her snout, her tale erect, as would a pointer at the faucet.

The sorcerer clasped his hands with delight. “Oh how cute, Mortimer, they’re thirsty and hungry. My dog used to do that. Let’s fix them a platter of food.”

“I’ll draw them a bowl of water,” the priest sprang into action.

“I’ll fix you men something to eat,” Alice announced as she entered the room.

A brave little smile registered on Alice’s face. She fixed herself and Elijah a sandwich and, because the priest and the sorcerer had already eaten sandwiches, themselves, cut them both large triangles of pie. The five cats were treated to tuna, fresh out of the can, and small inedible sprigs of parsley Alice found in the crisper. Pleasing Neva and Wanda very much were the little saucers of milk poured for all the cats.

While everyone ate, Alice checked all the kitty litters, using a large salad fork from Sam’s kitchen to remove deposits found in two of the lids. While the four cats continued to feast on the tuna and lapped up the milk in their saucers, the three men discussed the unanswered phone. The cats kept their ears pricked for what the humans were saying, in case it might affect them. Sam and Irma, who finished eating quickly, listened the most carefully to their discussion but found it trifling at this stage. The sorcerer was explaining his own pet theory that poltergeists, whom the priest didn’t believe in, were merely malevolent ghosts and were many times mistaken for demons in the corporeal world. The priest nodded politely his eyebrows knitted in thought.

At one point, however, as if he hadn’t even been listening to the sorcerer, he couldn’t help muttering aloud, “what if Lillian Fontaine is dead or on vacation? What if she never comes home at all?” Alice told him, in a sanctimonious tone, that he must have faith, while Elijah, who had been shocked at what he had found on the web, sat reading one of Sam’s bibles to himself. The cats were upset with what Mortimer had just said. In typical feline fashion they swished their tails to show displeasure and exchanged worried looks as they followed the humans out of the room.

The priest decided to call Lillian, himself, partially to demonstrate he was in control. When she called back, it was his voice he wanted her to hear, not that scatter-brained sorcerer’s. He might just scare her away. After dialing her number and finding her not home, he left a second message that, unlike Blaze’s simple communication, carried a note of urgency in the message: “This is Father Mortimer Hildebrand. It is important that you call me at once at 310-217-7638 regarding your sister Madelyn!”

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There was nothing more they could do for several hours but rest and partake of Alice’s hospitality. Elijah found the little black cat, sat her on the kitchen table, and, after eating another piece of pie offered to him by Alice, lay down on the sofa with Irma and took a nap. Upon hearing a snore rumble in his throat, Irma immediately hopped off his stomach and began looking

for Sam. Blaze and the priest, who had each picked up a cat to cuddle, themselves, dozed in the living room's easy chairs, while watching the television, Wanda and Neva, respectively, slipping tactfully away when they had finally fallen asleep. Alice, who had held her fiancé patiently in her arms a moment as she looked at the sleeping men, sat him down finally to join Irma on the carpet and then went about cleaning up recent deposits the cats had recently made, including a puddle of urine one of them inexplicably left on the kitchen floor. Ultimately, she too, after a sleepless night, hard days work, and mental fatigue, lay down on Sam's bed and fell fast asleep.

When the humans were napping, the five cats gathered together at the foot of Sam's bed, Sam nestling between Irma and Wanda, and Drew cuddling up with Neva—all five cats nestled into a tight, furry, multicolored heap. Irma had talked her new friends into being patient with Alice, since her own parents had disliked little Muffin too. It was obvious to all of them that Alice, whose own fiancé was a cat, had been shaken greatly by this ordeal.

Each of them shared a telepathic nightmare of forever roaming the world as cats, portions of Sam's poem continually replaying for them in his head.

...Wary until daylight wanes,  
in darkened habitats.  
At night the feral felines reign  
in the Kingdom of the Cats.

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Time continued to run out for the cats as their human benefactors waited for the phone to ring. When it finally rang, Alice grabbed it up quickly from the nightstand and held it breathlessly up to her ear. The five cats spooked momentarily but then, remembering what this sound meant, settled back down together in the same groupings as before.

Because they had lost so much sleep, the sorcerer continued to snore in his easy chair and the preacher rolled over on the sofa with a pillow pressed onto his ear. The priest, who reacted sluggishly to the ring, sensed immediately that Alice had picked up the phone and stumbled, in a crotchety manner, toward Sam's room.

"Please Miss Wagnall," he called, hobbling to the bed.

"Hello," Alice's voice quivered.

"Is Father Hildebrand there?" a woman asked in a scratchy, irritable tone.

"I'll take it from here," Mortimer insisted, holding out his hand.

By now the general commotion had awakened Elijah and Blaze. Both men jumped up shakily and staggered across the floor, Blaze protesting that it was he, not the priest, who made initiated the call.

"Plea-ease help us find Madelyn Fontaine," Alice blurted tearfully into the phone. "My fiancé and his friends were turned into cats. They're losing their humanity now. They're beginning to even *act* like cats!"

"Is this a crank call?" barked Lillian Fontaine into the phone. "Woman, are you deranged?"

"Hello, this is Mortimer Hildebrand," the priest announced to Lillian after disengaging the phone from Alice's hand. "Please allow me to explain our dilemma before you hang up the phone."

“My sister has caused our family much grief,” Lillian said with a groan. “I don’t know where she’s at now. I think she’s living on the street. I really don’t know for sure.”

“Please, tell me where you saw her last. Do you know in what part of town she may be?” The priest’s gravelly voice sounded calm.

“I woke up one morning and she was gone,” Lillian gave a verbal shrug,

“Come now Miss Fontaine,” he prodded politely, “surely you know where she hangs out and her favorite haunts.”

“Haunts? Now that’s a pretty word,” Lillian cackled bitterly. “You must know that my sister is a witch, eh? You want her to cast or undo a spell? She can do both you know. Unfortunately, she can’t make money out of her talents. Whenever she tries to market her skills, she fails miserably. It seems as if the powers that be will not allow her to use her gifts for profit. My parents disowned her when she quit the convent, but I tried for years to turn her talents into cash.”

“Well, Miss Fontaine,” Mortimer replied with disgust, “it sounds to me as if you’ve driven her away. Just where do you think your sister might be?”

“Try the square downtown,” she offered bleakly. “If she’s not there, she could be anywhere: uptown, downtown, skid row. *I no longer care!*”

“We care. Goodbye Miss Fontaine,” the priest said, gently hanging up the phone.

Turning to the others, who were now gathered in the room, he explained the vast terrain that they would have to explore in order to find the witch Madelyn Fontaine. It struck the priest, sorcerer, and Alice Wagnall as impossible, but Elijah, who was familiar with this sector of town, was more optimistic about their prospects now.

“If you insist on this enterprise,” he said with resignation, “I know the streets in skid row pretty well. The only difficulty we will have is spotting one isolated person among those lost souls.”

“Well, let’s get started,” the priest said, heaving a sigh.

“No,” Elijah said emphatically, shaking his head, “it’s too late to start today! It’ll be dark soon; you won’t be able to find anyone down there at night.”

“It’s also dangerous,” Blaze reminded them. “We’ll start first thing tomorrow morning.”

“But it’s not dark yet,” protested Alice. “The cats are running out of time!”

“I’m sorry,” Elijah patted her arm gently, “but I’ve been in that neck of the woods. It would be both futile and dangerous to attempt to find a homeless person at night. They all find shelter during the evening. By the time we park and began our search, we’d be swallowed up in shadows.”

Elijah was mentally reliving his own experience on the street. The utter futility of the entire enterprise depressed him, and he felt great pity for Alice now that it appeared her fiancé would remain a cat. Blaze remembered that night when he had stopped at the boundary of skid row and discovered Elijah and the wondrous cat. Though he was excited about this enterprise, he was quite satisfied to wait until dawn. For the priest, who was torn by his own theological pride and his guilt that he wanted this mission to fail, the fact that they were waiting until tomorrow morning only delayed their dreadful meeting with the witch.

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The five cats remained together on the bed, sleepy yet aware of the momentous undertaking ahead. Sam conveyed his concern to the others about being cured by a witch, but at

this point even he was ready to try anything that might work. None of the cats moved from the bed as the humans stirred in the next room. The ambience and warmth of their nest seemed overwhelming. The sound of their purring was louder and their collective thoughts stronger than ever before.

Alice entered Sam's bedroom and reached down to give Sam a token scratch behind his ears. He hissed at her for not picking him up this time, and felt Irma licking his head soothingly when she left the room. While the four humans sat in the living room discussing their search tomorrow, the five cats seemed only concerned about today. Sam turned to Irma, in a most feline way, and found himself grooming her too. Drew began licking Neva and Neva, realizing that Wanda was feeling left out, began licking her in turn. The familiar, proverbial purr accompanying such typical feline behavior remained loud and unanimous among the cats.

## Chapter Twenty

### The Great White Witch

In the morning, Alice awakened to find the cats waiting patiently in the kitchen for their next meal. The men were still sound asleep when she tiptoed down the hall. Quickly, after months of preparing meals for Sam, Alice was able to whip up a hearty breakfast for the men. Breakfast had been an important meal in Irma's life, so she resented the communal tray shared by all the cats. While Alice fixed the men a proper feast of scrambled eggs, bacon and toast, Alice chopped the bacon strips up for the cats, slopping eggs into the mix, and sprinkled it liberally with salt.

"Oh yummy," Wanda observed sarcastically, "a giant omelet!"

"I like bacon and eggs too," protested Irma, "and in my *own* plate."

"And where's the toast?" asked Drew, joining them at the tray. "I like coffee with my food."

"Come on gang," thought Sam, looking dubiously at the food. "Alice is trying. She even put a bowl of milk for us to lap up with our tongues."

"They're right, Sam." Neva made a face. "We want our own dish and bowl!"

"Yeah, and separated," Wanda turned up her nose, "not mixed up like mush!"

Taken back by their mutiny, Sam, as apparent leader, lodged their collective complaint.

"Alice," his protest came out as a series of meows, "you're treating us like pets! Your communal tray is unsanitary and unacceptable. We want our own separate meals!"

Alice, though saying nothing, wondered if he might be ill.

"Oh Look Mortimer," Blaze said through a mouthful of eggs, "Sam's trying to talk."

"Is he alright?" the priest looked down with concern.

Hopping up on the table, his feline motor rumbling loudly, Sam meowed plaintively at the woman who would be his wife, rubbing his furry head on her chin as she tilted her head, then hissing when she placed him gently back on the floor.

"It's useless," he told his friends. "Without a computer screen or other communication device, Alice is dense. She doesn't have a clue!"

"The woman's stupid!" spat Wanda. "She's a scatter-brained twit!"

"Don't blame Alice," Irma sighed, looking down at the tray. "This is difficult for someone who hates cats."

"Irma, sweet Irma," Sam thought, still bristling at Alice's response. "Alice treated you with contempt when you were human—so did I, and yet you defend her indifference. In our case, indifference is worse."

"Indifference sucks!" echoed Drew.

“Perhaps,” shrugged Irma, looking up at the table, “but Alice is fragile. Her situation grows impossible. Any moment, I fear she might break.”

“Impossible?” Neva joined the discussion. “Look at us, Irma. We’re cats. Now that’s *impossible*, and it hasn’t broken *us!*”

“Alice,” Drew summed up her problem, “must put away her fundamentalist Christian logic and get with the program. She must overcome her hatred of cats.”

Elijah’s sudden gesture of affection toward Irma sharply contrasted Alice’s mood.

“There’s my kitty,” he murmured, grabbing her up into his arms. “Let’s give you a proper meal!”

Drew, Neva, and Wanda now took the cue. Elijah realized that Irma wanted her own plate. Unfortunately, Irma noted with irritation, he still treated her like a cat. For several moments, as she nibbled a strip of bacon and munched on a fresh mound of eggs, he scratched her head and ran his fingers down her bristling back. Thanks to his spontaneous gesture, both the sorcerer and priest followed suit, providing the remaining cats with their own plates.

“They love cats,” she transmitted to the others. “They might scratch our heads and tickle our bellies but they know we’re humans underneath.... Someday Alice will love us too.”

“I hope your right,” Sam looked into Irma’s blue eyes.

As the humans watched the hungry cats, Alice sat at the table pecking at her food, glancing back and forth quizzically at Irma on the table and the cats dining on the floor. Irma, who had been finishing up the last of her eggs, looked down at Sam that moment and gave him a wink. Sam attempted this gesture but wound up blinking both eyes. The action, which seemed natural to her friends, would have impressed the humans greatly had they all not drifted back into their thoughts. Today, they were all going to search for a super witch in order to undo another witch’s spell. Even the hardened and worldly priest found this difficult to digest.

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To expedite their search, Mortimer suggested, as they exited Sam’s apartment, that they take two cars, but the preacher vigorously disagreed. He was, he argued, the only one of the four who knew that part of town, so it was senseless to break up the group. Because his own vehicle was parked in front of Blaze O’Dare’s apartment, Alice would be forced to use her own car. Blaze’s station wagon would have to follow her tiny automobile through the worst part of town. It was much safer to stay in one vehicle, he convinced him. For this part of the enterprise, at least, it would also be better if he drove.

Skid row had been Elijah’s old stomping ground, he reminded the priest; his knowledge of it would make it easier for them to find the witch. With this settled, Elijah, for a brief spell, was in the driver seat. Blaze was quite happy to turn over the steering wheel, while he and the priest chatted in back. While the preacher navigated the station wagon, Alice sat in the front seat alongside of him, nervously biting her nails. United in their misgivings now, Elijah and Alice remained silent as the two men conversed.

The sorcerer and priest agreed that Madelyn probably retreated into skid row to practice her black art. Where else would a witch, who was penniless, go? To gather information, nearby Pershing Square was an open forum for every sort of eccentric imaginable, so the team began searching this location first. Several informants admitted to seeing a strange-looking woman, whom they thought was a witch. Not one person, however, knew her whereabouts or even her name. Madelyn had evidently been secretive about her profession. She had been like a phantom,

coming out in daylight just long enough to titillate their imaginations before disappearing into the shadows at night.

Madelyn's sister had suggested they begin at Pershing Square and search for her on the street, but this included a vast area of Los Angeles, inhabited by thousands of homeless people living on skid row. The task, with these limited coordinates, was staggering. Finally, under the statue of a bygone general, they got their second clue to Madelyn's whereabouts. It had been a long morning. An old lady, in a large straw hat, sitting with all her earthly belongings beneath a large sycamore tree was the sixteenth homeless person approached that day. The Spell Reversal Team had been discussing the prospects of trying another sector of town. Perhaps, suggested Mortimer, they should have started directly on skid row. Everyone, even the sorcerer, dreaded this inevitability. The preacher reached out to steady Alice, as the young woman grew faint. As they bent down to check if the seventeenth informant was awake, the old woman raised her straw hat, exposing a wrinkled, sun-blotched face. A loud belch escaped her toothless mouth. A crooked smile played on her withered lips. When asked promptly by the sorcerer if she had seen a strange looking woman who claimed to be a witch, she gave that familiar cackle of old crones and pointed to the street. The woman's gnarled finger, he noted with a shudder, was pointing due east: the direction of skid row.

"Lillian was right." He looked around the group.

"Yep,... I remember ol' Maddy," she was muttered, raising a paper sack up to her mouth. "... You know, that woman thinks she's a witch. Offered to teach me witchcraft, she did, but I didn't believe her. No sir! Fact is she scared me. I never wanna go back there again!"

"Where?" Blaze lurched forward excitedly. "Tell us where!"

"Lemme see," the old woman looked up quizzically, wiping her mouth with her sleeve. "... Lord that woman's ugly. I don't like thinking about her. Gives me the creeps!"

"Please ma'am." Mortimer leaned down and handed her a five-dollar bill. "It's important that we find her soon."

"Say," she cackled again, "you don't believe she's a witch, do you? Ain't no such thing as a witch."

"The directions ma'am," Blaze prodded, handing her another five. "Please clear your mind and tell us where Madelyn Fontaine resides."

"Resides? Hah, there's a pretty word!" She cackled to herself.

The woman, who took another long swig from the bottle hidden in her paper sack, now looked vacantly at the ground as if trying to gather her thoughts.

"This isn't very encouraging," Alice mumbled, looking around the park. "Doesn't *anyone* know where Madelyn is?"

Elijah frowned with disapproval at his friend.

"Waitaminud," the woman's voice slurred greatly now, "...I 'member.... Maddy iz living in a ol' abandon warehoush."

"But where?" Blaze asked impatiently. "Can you pinpoint where it's at?"

"She couldn't pinpoint *her shoes*," Alice grumbled under her breath.

Elijah, giving Alice a pat, stepped forward now. "Madam," he called out severely, "the Lord loves you, I'm sure you've fallen on hard times, but we need to find this woman. How far down that street? Do you know the address?"

The old woman sat there in the dress and coat in which she walked had out of the world, a picture of physical decay. For a moment she attempted to draw from her wine-damaged brain the

location where Madelyn could be found, but then her head jerked up and she looked passed the priest and sorcerer at Alice, who stood impatiently by Elijah's side.

"Valerie," she called in a clear, unfaltering voice, "is that you?"

"Let's get out of here," Alice shivered, as the crone pointed her way.

The foursome began to retreat to the station wagon, as the woman rose up on her shaky legs and called out the bygone name: "Valerie! Valerie!"

"Please Miss Wagnall, where's your Christian charity?" whispered Elijah, squeezing her trembling hand.

"Yes, he's right," Mortimer scolded, glancing back with disdain. "Where's that's faith you flaunt at Blaze and I? You're behaving deplorably this morning, Miss Wagnall!"

"How dare he, a heretic priest, lecture me." Alice gave Elijah a wounded look. "I shudder at the prospects ahead, not that poor wretch."

"Then why're you here?" the priest asked, a frown breaking his stony face.

"The question is," Alice shot back angrily, her hands on her hips, "'why're *you* here?' You, who claim to be a wizard priest, must now consort with a witch!"

At that point, Mortimer and Elijah exchanged worried looks. The sorcerer looked back with scowl. For Alice Wagnall, the events since Sunday evening had take their toll.

"Well, I think we have enough information," Blaze said motioning them on. "All we have to do now is look for an old warehouse on this street."

The priest looked at him in disbelief. The old woman appeared to be following them in a drunken stupor. Long ago she had lost a daughter, sister or friend named Valerie and turned to drink. At least this is what Elijah was thinking as he walked with the others toward the car.

As they slid into the automobile, Elijah looked once more across the lawn at the old woman beneath the sycamore tree, searching his mind for a prayer. For a moment, as stood there next to the station wagon, his elbows resting on its roof, he sensed dissension inside the car. Though it was quiet inside the vehicle, he could almost hear their thoughts. The sorcerer, who had his own personal agenda, was thinking *get this show on the road!* Yet everyone else, including himself, was torn by doubts. On the one hand, they wanted this distasteful business of consorting with a witch to come to an end. On the other hand, they would do practically anything to save the bewitched cats. The last thirty-six hours had been an incredible experience for Elijah Gray. In spite of the uncertainties, he remained excited. A new, unexpected, purpose illuminated his life.

"Lord," he mumbled, "watch over this woman, who's name I don't know... Keep her physically safe but protect her from the dark forces of skid row."

As he prayed, the old woman raised her straw hat suddenly, gave him a salute, and called out, in an unslurred voice, through cupped hands: "I remember now... Bracken Brother's warehouse... That's where Madelyn Fontaine is!"

"God's blessing and grace upon you," Elijah shouted back, ducking into the car. "I've heard of that place," he told the others light-headedly. "I passed it, myself, when I was on the street. We've almost pinpointed the location of Madelyn Fontaine!"

"At last," the priest's gravelly voice chimed, "from a burnt out drunk, *comes the truth!*"

"The Lord is with us," Blaze replied dubiously.

"He maketh us walk in green pastures," Alice added with a frown.

Elijah Gray, who had once been a burnt out drunk, himself, looked back thoughtfully at the priest. As he pulled from the curb, he glanced back with a smile at Blaze O'Dare too, patted Alice's hand and, feeling a rush of Christian love, offered them all a prayer.

"Lord," his voice rose steadily, "guide our footsteps and protect us from the unknown. We move as sleepwalkers on unhallowed ground. Remind us often that it's your will, not fate, magic or chance, running the world. Keep our spirits up but our pride low. Make us wise, help us to be brave, yet remove the vanity of enterprise making this an adventure instead of a mission to save our friends."

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Everyone, including Blaze O'Dare, was stirred by Elijah's prayer. Nevertheless, the rebuke cast upon the sorcerer was clearly understood. It was Blaze who discovered Madelyn Fontaine, the witch. Elijah gave him begrudging admiration for this. Unlike the others, however, Blaze's motives were suspect, and his intentions seemed all too clear. The excitement was now obvious on his bearded face. After meeting five enchanted cats, they were going to meet a super witch. Today they would take another romp into the occult—a leap into the unknown.

Looking out of the station wagon's dirty windows, the Spell Reversal Team was encouraged by its progress so far. Remembering the ease at which they entered India's hospital room and considering how quickly they found out where Madelyn lived, Elijah wanted to believe that the Lord was guiding their steps. Drawing from his memory, he told them exactly what to look for on the street. The Bracken Brothers Warehouse was a distinct landmark on Skid Row. There was no mistaking its early twentieth masonry and facade. It was over a hundred years old, yet you could still read its sign. It was Blaze, following Elijah's description, who recognized the architecture at once and the faded lettering on a brick wall.

Pointing his finger excitedly, he shouted, "There it is, I found it—the *Bracken Brother sign!*"

The priest nodded grimly. Elijah sighed. "Oh Lord," Alice groaned.

Alice closed her eyes in prayer, while the priest fingered rosary beads he had been carrying in his coat. Though worn and fading, the sign loomed unmistakably over a dilapidated door. After finding curb space on the sinister-looking street, Elijah parked the station wagon, his face pale with fear. Blaze, of course, was ecstatic, bouncing up and down like a toddler in his seat. They were about to enter Madelyn Fontaine's haunt. It was, in fact, in his thinking, like finding the Holy Grail. Elijah, like Alice and the priest, was visibly frightened. With wide unblinking eyes, they tried preparing themselves for the unknown. The sorcerer seemed to be chanting a mantra, as the priest and woman prayed. This time, to maintain a manly air, Elijah thought about the poor old drunk, wondering what would drive a woman onto the street. Had it really been the loss of Valerie? Or had it simply been alcohol that transformed her life. Perhaps Valerie was still alive somewhere and was looking for the old woman too.... Perhaps, his mind shifted back to the present, Madelyn, the witch, was but an urban legend, and their search for the warehouse was leading them to a dead end.

The foursome approached the dilapidated looking building. The entrance was boarded up as were the windows facing the street. Obviously the large delivery entrance was in the alley or in back of the building, on another street, yet they discovered, after close inspection, that the sidewalk entry had been breeched. The boards across the entrance had been pulled loose and

were attached only to the hinged side of each door. The double doors, themselves, were ajar and easily pulled open at the first tug.

“Dear God,” mumbled Mortimer, whistling under his breath, “every vagabond in town could be lying in wait!”

“We need a flashlight,” Alice said with a shiver.

“Hold fast at the entrance,” Blaze said, motioning to his car. “Let me get my lantern. It’ll light this place up!”

As they lingered in the doorway, Elijah remarked that he had passed this spot several times when he was on the street but had not dreamed of going in. Alice was visibly shaken as the priest gave an exorcist prayer to chase free-floating demons from the scene.

“Do you really think that’s necessary?” she asked, as she watched him make the sign of the cross and kiss the crucifix around his neck.

“I have it!” Blaze called, trotting up with the lamp. “This will shine away any spooks!”

“Here let me hold it. I should proceed first,” the priest insisted, taking the lantern firmly in his fist. “With me in the forefront, you’ll be protected against free-floating spirits. It might be a good idea if Miss Wagnall goes back to the car.”

“Father Hildebrand,” Blaze snapped irritably, “this is a witches haunt. Don’t you think a sorcerer should be the first to confront a practitioner in the occult?”

“Ah hah,” Alice whispered to Elijah, “he admits it!”

“You are under a misconception sorcerer if you think that you’re protected from someone like Madelyn Fontaine.” Mortimer looked back with disgust. “On the other hand, if it’s true that she could not profit by her magic, she might very well be serving *my* god.”

“*Your* god?” Blaze snorted. “How very arrogant, Mister Hildebrand.”

“It’s nonsense,” Elijah made a face, “a contradiction in terms. A witch or sorcerer can’t serve God. Do you really believe, Mortimer, that God will work with such a woman? Our only hope is through prayer!”

“Then, my dear preacher,” the priest called back, raising the light, “by all means pray!”

“Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly,” Elijah began mumbling under his breath. “For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, and the way of the ungodly shall perish...”

Swinging the lantern to and fro as he would an incense burner during Mass, Mortimer shouted, “Spirits depart! We come in the name of the most high, Jesus, who is God, Lord of Lords, three-in-one, Christ the Redeemer and Savior of mankind!”

“Father, shut up!” cried Blaze, yanking on his coat. “If anyone’s in here, you’re certain to scare them away. They don’t care if you’re a priest. They might even waylay us if you’re the best defense we’ve got!”

Across the concrete floor of a warehouse that once housed produce for the city’s early markets, the lamp highlighted piles of trash, human excreta and rats, who skittered from the glow into the shadows beyond. There was, to their amazement, apparently no one else in the empty warehouse, at least not until they had walked into the middle of the large room and were able to detect light coming from a distant source.

“What’s that?” Alice asked in a constricted voice.

“What is *what*?” the priest squinted into the shadows. “All I see is darkness. I don’t understand why this warehouse is so empty. Obviously it hasn’t been used as a dwelling for street people for quite some time.”

“There, I see it too,” Blaze pointed, “over there in the corner light in that room!”

“The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want...” “Elijah murmured, touching the wooden cross around his neck.

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With the lantern held high, the priest led them to the far corner of the warehouse. They could see an indistinct silhouette now in the glass windows of an early twentieth century dispatcher’s office. Miraculously, after all these years, the glass was unbroken. Stenciled lettering on the glass, **Dispatch Office**, was still quite distinct, but someone had also painted in bold letters below the department title: **MADELYN FONTAINE’S PLACE - KEEP OUT!**

“My-my, how prosaic,” Blaze giggled hysterically to himself.

“Should we knock or something?” Elijah reached hesitantly for the door.

“I shall call her name first,” the priest announced shakily, pulling out his rosary beads and crossing himself with his free hand. “All of you stand back. Sorcerer hold the lantern. Preacher, give me a special prayer. I’ve never approached a witch this way.”

“And what special prayer would that be?” The preacher frowned.

“Madelyn Fontaine! It is I, Father Hildebrand, a Roman Catholic priest. Please open your door!” Mortimer finally called.

The priest followed up his call with a faint knock on her door. The door creaked open finally, and a grotesque parody of a witch stuck her warty, misshapen head out of the door, exposing toothless dark gums.

Though smiling slyly, Madelyn’s first words were hostile: “What do you want? Can’t you read? The sign says ‘Keep Out!’ That means *you!*”

As they backed away from the office, terror gripped the group. Madelyn’s mere presence had left an impact on them. Now they had been rebuked by a witch. She accused them of being trespassers, yet cackled with glee as they regrouped on the warehouse floor. It seemed plain that she was making sport of them as she crooked a gnarled finger, inviting them back to her a small, evil smelling room. This behavior, which seemed like trickery, gave them no comfort. Was this an example eccentric behavior? What did Madelyn have up her sleeve? The door creaked open farther and farther, the face falling back into shadows as the outline of a short, stocky, and hunchbacked elderly woman stood silhouetted in the light. Taking the lamp from the sorcerer’s trembling hands, the priest led the way. Alice clung to the preacher’s coat tails as they walked slowly back to the witch. Considering her commitment in a mental hospital, Elijah wondered if Madelyn had, in fact, been insane: a deranged hermit, perhaps psychotic, living an urban legend on Skid Row. Blaze, however, like Alice, was fully convinced Madelyn was a witch. This was not merely a haunt as he thought earlier; it was her inner sanctum: the abode of a powerful witch.

No longer tongue-tied or dazed, the priest removed the crucifix from his neck, wondering, himself, if they had not walked into a trap. Holding up Christ’s effigy, he tried unsuccessfully to pray, noting in the lamplight that she had one blind eye. The crone had been right, he thought with a shudder, Madelyn was horribly ugly. It was no wonder that her sister Lillian tried to cash in on her face.

“Do you worship Satan?” He found his voice at last. “If this be false, kiss the cross held up to your lips!”

“It’s like looking at the Gorgon!” gasped the sorcerer.

Alice ejaculated with wide, unblinking eyes: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch! There shall not be found among you anyone that maketh his son or daughter a witch. I shall cut off witchcraft from thine hand...”

As she quoted passages from the books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, Micah, Samuel, and Acts, Elijah began quoting from the Psalms: “Preserve me, O Lord: for in thee do I put my trust... Save me, God; for the waters are come in unto my soul...”

Everyone in the room shuddered as the woman bent farther and farther toward the crucifix, certain that her mouth would be branded by the act. Blaze made a sign to ward off the evil eye, following this heresy with a Catholic prayer: “Holy Mary blessed art thou among women. Blessed be the fruit of your womb in Jesus Christ...”

The priest was so exited now, as her lips made contact, he almost dropped the cross. “She did it!” he cried. “She kissed the crucifix! In spite of herself, she’s a child of God.” “Gloria patri et filio, et spiritui sancto,” he made he sign of the cross. “Glory be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.”

“Come in, don’t be shy,” she croaked, her good eye looking squarely at the priest. The other eye looked off, as would a chameleon, at the sorcerer, now frozen statue-like in his tracks.

“No, no,” Blaze mumbled, holding forked fingers up to the witch, “it’s the evil eye—a witches’ trick. This may be a trap!”

“Get a hold of yourself, man!” snapped the priest, nudging him into the room.

The truth was, of course, Mortimer had thought the same thing, himself. The foursome filed slowly into her inner sanctum, their eyes wide with fear.

“I’ll wait out here.” Alice said, moving to the end of the line.

“Don’t be afraid,” Elijah took her trembling hand. “This woman kissed the cross.”

“How perfectly ducky,” she murmured hysterically, “a witch kissing the cross of a heretic priest. That gives me no comfort Elijah. Blaze could be right. This could be a trap!”

Madelyn Fontaine visitors reminded her of children entering a haunted house. She seemed to be enjoying this immensely as they crowded into the room. In spite of the priest’s actions, they still had misgivings about Madelyn. No one expected such an ugly witch. Everything they dreaded in this encounter had come true. Not only did Madelyn have the look and the sound of a bon a fide witch, there was an aura in her haunt that spoke of spells and incantations and an evil smell that no detergent or air freshener could wipe clean. After only a few moments, however, as the shock wore off and they studied the room, Madelyn’s visitors realized they had nothing to fear.

The witch now shut the door. Mortimer sat the lamp down on a table near the entrance, backing away slowly with baited breath. The light, added to the candles burning, highlighted objects that had been in the shadows in the filthy room, causing them all to shudder with horror at the jars of bats’ wings, dried toads, and general pharmacopoeia lining the walls. Tables sat cluttered with pots and more jars. A huge unfurled banner illustrated the cosmos in astrological terms and there were also countless rows and piles of occult paraphernalia hanging from the ceiling in baskets and lying on the floor.

In stark contrast to all this sorcery, there hung on a relatively barren wall near the corner of the room a crucifix. Below the cross, there was a scriptural quotation from First Corinthians, from the same chapter quoted to Buck Logan by Sam Burns:

*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

“Don’t these things cancel out each other?” Blaze asked, marveling at the conflicts in the room.

“Highly inappropriate,” Elijah grumbled under his breath. “The Lord can’t abide in this room.”

“The Lord and I are allies,” Madelyn said, motioning for the frightened Alice to sit down in the room’s only chair. “Here my sweetie, you look affright. Don’t mind the mess. What’s that old saying? You can’t judge a book by its cover. He-he-he!”

“I must tell you why we’re here,” the priest said, trying to focus on her one good eye. “This is difficult for me... for all us, in fact. But you may be our only hope.” “Sweet Mother of Jesus!” he murmured to himself, as he tried not to stare at her eye.

“You require a reversal, eh?” she replied with a cackle. “You want old Madelyn to change some poor soul back into human form, eh? Now why would old Madelyn want to help you, eh?... He-he-he!”

“There isn’t merely one person.” The priest sighed. “There might be as many as eleven people—all of them living in Shadowbrook Arms. Many of them found sanctuary in this woman’s fiancé’s house.”

“Eleven people? Not one, not two or three. Eleven you say?” the old woman’s toothless mouth dropped. “What kind of witch *is* this? Eleven people indeed!”

“Yes, eleven bewitched humans—my fiancé too!” Alice nodded in the background now.

“Eleven young adults,” the priest pressed forward bravely. “Can you help us Madelyn Fontaine?”

“I can. I can indeed. But I can’t get a farthing for it,” she complained, looking this way and that with both eyes, reminding Blaze O’Dare once again of a chameleon lizard as she looked around the room.

“What happened to you?” the sorcerer asked bluntly, looking over the priest’s shoulder at the witch.

“You mean the eye?” she pointed, looking past the priest. “Or the teeth? Ain’t many of those left! He-he-he!”

“No, not the eye. Nor the teeth. The *woman*.” Blaze came forward slowly. “You’re a witch in league with the Christian God. That’s very strange.”

“Aye, I wasn’t always a witch,” she replied, studying him with her good eye. “Was once a nun, I was, and I never stopped believing in God.” “Don’t look at me that way missy,” she smiled at Alice. “Promised God, I did, if he gave me one more chance, I’d give it all up and return to the fold. But I can’t seem to break with my past completely. As you can see this room is a mixture of two worlds that, believe me, don’t mix. Like oil and water. And yet I discovered, to my surprise, that there really is such a thing as white magic. It requires one strong ingredient that makes it more powerful than black magic: God. This means, of course, I can no longer profit from my magic as I once did, and I can’t do it on my own. I asked God to cure my arthritis and psoriasis, I did, but He wouldn’t heal me. I can’t use my magic for profit, self-healing or *even to feed my face!*”

Madelyn’s good eye roamed restlessly around the group. The room grew eerily quiet as she paused. In spite of her croaking voice, she had, with a faint English accent, articulated

clearly. She wasn't insane. Although her appearance had seemed repulsive, the group felt much better about Madelyn Fontaine. She was once a nun, who still worshiped God. She couldn't, as Lillian told them, profit by her art, which meant she used it unselfishly to help people... and cats.

"... Aye, I'm telling you, He's a hard God!" she continued with sigh. "What He *will* do—and nothing more—is give me back my soul. I must, in a sense, as a bleeding penitent, earn my salvation. Each time I go against a powerful black witch to undo her spell, I'm risking my mortal life but insuring my salvation. Frankly, I'm tired and worn out by my work, but I'm not afraid to die—not anymore. You must realize, of course, that any witch capable of turning that many people into cats is quite dangerous, even to me."

"She's... in a coma," the sorcerer replied hesitantly. "She can't be a threat to anyone now!"

"Whoa!" Madelyn hooted, stomping her foot. "She's no threat. No sireee. Now how in Creation do you expect Madelyn to deal with such a witch? She must be awake! Awake you fools! What kind of sorcerer are you that you don't know that?"

"Not a very good one I suppose," he replied humbly, looking at the floor. "All I want to do is help. That's why we turned to you."

"Will," she gave him a sly smile, "you did right, you did. Madelyn's probably the only witch on earth who would attempt such a feat." "But you didn't turn to Madelyn first did you, eh?" she cackled softly, looking back at the priest. "Got yourselves an exorcist—a demon chaser. He ain't no help sonny. He needs'em awake, so he can talk to them. For him they must be aware of the ordeal."

"I've had successes before," Mortimer said with slight indignation. "A priest is merely an intermediary between God and man. I am a wizard priest who reverses spells!"

"Pshaw!" Madelyn snarled.

"How can *you* do it differently if you still require God?" Blaze asked with a frown.

"Listen sorcerer, Jehovah is the greatest magician of them all!" She wagged a gnarled finger at him. "To harness him simply requires a different approach, requiring prayer. I can pray up a storm when I'm in the mood. The trouble is I can no longer call on the Great Mother Lilith or her minions for help. That's taboo. I've been forbidden to do that!"

"Whose Lilith?" Alice whispered to the preacher.

"Lilith is a legend," explained Elijah, "nothing more."

"Lilith was once an angel who fell from grace," Madelyn quickly corrected him. "Many of my sources of power were once angels, who're working there way back to God. Not all of them are demons. The forces of white magic are that in-between never-never world of good and evil. What do you think pixies, fairies, and elves are? There is power in both worlds. I'm not suppose to play with both sides any longer, and yet that's exactly what I must do one last time."

"You'll risk your immortal soul?" asked Alice, her expression changing to awe.

"Perhaps," Madelyn shrugged. "I did this one time long ago on a woman, who had a similar problem than your witch. She too was unconscious and dying. Priests can't exorcise unconscious patients, so one of the witch's friends called on me. It took a whole mess of work to undo that spell. Now, in addition to everything else, I'm confronted with multiple spell reversals. Do you have any idea how complicated this might turn out to be?"

"Will you be needing Lilith?" the priest looked at her dubiously.

“Father Hildebrand I need certain things. I shall know more what I need when I enter her room. Do you know how difficult it might be just to get into her hospital room? That will require magic in itself.”

“There are too many contradictions here,” Elijah grumbled stubbornly. “On the one hand you say that you work with both magic and God and sometimes have to rely on both worlds. I don’t believe you can have both worlds Miss Fontaine. Faith in the Holy Scriptures can’t work side by side with evil. There is no halfway zone were problems can be solved!”

“Get with the program preacher,” snarled the sorcerer. “You’re much too narrow-minded and too dogmatic about this. What have you learned after meeting a telepathic cat and a card-carrying witch? Nothing is as it seems. Life is not black and white as you think the Bible says. We live in mystery and chance. Where did Adam’s sons get their wives if they were the only young people on earth? How did Noah’s offspring not become a bunch of inbred mutants without a little outside blood? How do you explain so many folks seeing little green men from other planets or Leprechauns and elves? And what about ghost sightings? Are they not between two worlds—between good and evil and dark and light? God is another name for magic. God is the ultimate witch!”

“Nonsense!” The priest shook his head. “We know nothing about God except through the Son. God is unknowable. Miracles, not magic, are the issue, requiring the presence of the Holy Ghost.”

“This time, priest, you’re wrong,” the sorcerer said, folding his arms. “Madelyn just told you that she needs both worlds. I’d bargain with the devil to help those cats!”

With this blasphemy uttered, Blaze lifted the lamp, motioning with his head to the door. “Shall we depart?”

Alice looked at Blaze as if he was Lucifer, himself, but Elijah was not surprised. What amazed him now was the fact that Madelyn would risk her soul to accomplish this feat.

“Now tell us,” said the priest, ignoring the preacher’s disdain, “exactly what you need to accomplish the task.”

“He-he-he,” Madelyn cackled, “a task, you call it. A task indeed! You’re asking Madelyn to risk her life and immortal soul. I think there’s a far greater word for it than that!”

“You deserve some sort of payment,” replied the sorcerer.

“I’m sure we can at least get you a room and buy you a fine lunch,” the priest declared.

Reaching down and grabbing a valise that looked very much like a doctor’s black bag, Madelyn explained as the group exited the dispatch office, “I can take no money nor food, not so much as a Big Mac for my services. Why do you think I’ve been living on the street?”

## Chapter Twenty-One

### Back to Shadowbrook Arms

Mimjet's plan to liberate the four cats was very simple, but to accomplish it seemed impossible when he considered that Bridges, the retired boxer, was guarding the room. He wanted very much to E-mail his cousin Agabi, the restaurateur, for advice. Agabi had once been a successful thief in India and knew many tricks. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to make the attempt unless Bridges stopped monopolizing the laptop and left the room. Even if he had the chance, Agabi might not answer his E-mail soon enough, if he answered at all.

Though Mimjet knew how to verbally persuade intellectual minds, Bridges was, he believed, a borderline moron, who would not respond to reasoning of any kind. It would do no good, for that matter, to play on his conscience, since Bridges, it appeared, had no conscience at all. Mimjet had once seen the ex-boxer remove an unruly guest at Reginald's orders and then beat him senseless outside. Bridges hated Mimjet for what he considered were his 'heathen ways,' and yet the pugilist had a pentagram and swastika tattooed on his chest.

As Bridges searched for pornography on the web, Mimjet paced back and forth over the floor, mentally searching for a plan. After much thought and prayer, the Indian realized exactly what he must do, and, on the matter of conscience, it gave him a moment of mental pain. He had promised that Francine's part in the conspiracy would never be known and she would not lose her job, but, in order to gain her cooperation, he must make it appear as if she was complicit in the affair. Early that morning in the garden, when he and Francine were alone, he told her what they must do. It took several moments for the information to be digested in the English woman's dense mind.

"Tell me again," she asked incredulously, "how are we going to spring the cats?"

"I told you," Mimjet sighed impatiently, "we will make that moron think they're gone."

"I don't follow you," she passed a trembling hand through her flaxen hair.

"Don't follow, just listen this time," Mimjet counseled gently. "I will join those four cats inside the closet, and when he goes to get help, open the window, place the cats in the sack and lower it to the ground. I will, of course, lower myself down afterwards too."

"And where will I be?" She studied him in disbelief.

"You will be in the get-away car," he reminded her impatiently now.

"I will do no such thing!" she said, folding her delicate arms.

He wrung his finger at her and spoke in his most severe tone: "you will, dear nanny, because, Reginald will not believe that I did this by myself. Was it not you who brought them into this house? You, after all, have the greatest motive: profit. I've already implicated you by stealing some of the shopping money and storing away some of their food. I'll mail them a letter with my accusation. Otherwise, if you help me, they might blame both of us if they find out, but they'll have no proof! These cats aren't their property, Miss Francine. They were humans, who've been turned into cats!"

“You filthy beast!” she cried.

“Be packed and ready,” he ordered her gently. “My uncle Agabi will find you employment if you wish. We do this for a greater good, Miss Francine. You are a pretty lady, but you were never really very good at this job.”

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It was still early morning. The Cromwell family was asleep. It was a perfect time, Mimjet was certain, to rescue the cats. When Bridges left to relieve himself, which also meant he was going to have himself another smoke, Mimjet, who had been forbidden to be in the room alone with the cats but had gained Turner’s confidence, grabbed a large sack and then a length of rope Indira and Maj had thrown up to him from the yard below. He then called something in Bengali to them and then began gathering up the cats and dropping them into the closet one-by-one.

“Hey, careful with the ribs!” Ed hissed, as he was transported across the room.

Buck scampered eagerly into the closet, purring with expectation as he joined Tom and Ed. Jim, who was sound asleep, was, of course, picked up with his cushion and didn’t awaken as Mimjet laid him gently inside.

“All right boys, you know the plan!” he called in to them. “It’s now or never. My accomplice is waiting below in her car.”

The cats were frightened. Jim, who awakened in the dark, was comforted by the mental exchange of his comrades around him. Their fate was totally in Mimjet’s hands. If he failed, they would be scientific curiosities the rest of their lives. Francine, who sat numbly in her car, answered her cell phone, and listened to Mimjet’s command: “Start your engine and drive up to the side of the house.”

“I had to leave half of my clothes in that house!” She almost wept.

“I will buy you new clothes,” Mimjet promised, as he climbed into the closet with the cats. “What you do now is the most important thing you’ve done in your short unspectacular life!”

At that point, Mimjet turned off his cell phone and prayed silently to himself. Within moments, Bridges was entering the room with a lunch he had made for himself. When he realized the room was empty and saw the open window, he came to the conclusion that Mimjet was certain he would make. In typical English jargon he cried, “Someone pinched the cats!”

Beside himself with rage, the pugilist stormed around the room. His well-groomed hair, moustache, and chiseled features belied his long years in the ring. Having heard the commotion inside, Turner, a large, overweight fellow, charged into the room. Only a moment later Veronica, Agnes, the cook, and the gardeners Clyde and Earl came running up the stairs. When they saw the empty room, pink slips loomed in their overwrought minds.

“Where did they go Bridges?” Turner asked the pugilist, a faint smell of rum detectable on his breath.

“You were standing at the bleeding door, you tell me, you bleeding imbecile!” Bridges shot back.

“This ain’t my fault!” Turner cried defensively. “You watch your tone!” He looked menacingly at the smaller man.

Veronica and Agnes, who would share the blame when the Cromwells returned from town, looked accusingly at the two men.

“He couldn’t even watch four cats!” Agnes murmured to Veronica.

“Will, it sure ain’t my fault, deary,” Veronica shook her head. “All I done is brought up them bags of cat food and litter. I ain’t laid eyes on them since.”

“All we done is bring up the sand,” said Clyde, looking back at Earl.

“Let’s spread out,” ordered Bridges, “they can’t be far!” “I’ll check the top floor,” cried the pugilist.

“I’ll cover the bottom,” said Turner

“Agnes, Clyde, Earl, and I will check the grounds,” promised Veronica. “You blokes better find them cats before the Cromwells wake up!”

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With the room now empty, Mimjet acted quickly. All four cats were stuffed into the sack, with poor Jim whimpering the entire time. “Easy does it Mimjet!” Buck could not help transmitting. After tying the bag tightly with rope, Mimjet lowered it down to Indira and Maj, who swiftly untied the knot, and ran together with the bag toward the car. A stream of invectives and blasphemies flowed from Jim’s mind into the other cats’ heads.

“Oh, I remember my Dickens now, I surely do,” Mimjet mumbled frantically as he tied the end of the rope to Reginald’s massive desk and then began the more difficult task of climbing down the line. “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.” “Yes in deed, I’m like Rumpelstiltskin,” he murmured giddily. “If Bridges catches me, I am also like Sidney Carton in Dickens’s *Tail of Two Cities*, for I am dead.... I must save the cats, but I must also save *myself!*”

Indira and Maj, who had helped Francine load up the car, now dumped their precious cargo into the back seat and climbed in themselves. When Mimjet reached the ground, he thanked Vishnu, Shiva, Buddha, and the Christian god Jesus and began running frantically across the lawn. Clyde and Earl, who were combing this portion of the grounds, spotted Mimjet, but the gardeners were Mimjet’s friends and saluted him as he passed.

“Godspeed!” Earl called out in parting now. “This house won’t be the same without you!”

With a wry smile, Clyde asked Mimjet as he approached the vehicle. “Was it worth it, you crazy Hindu? You’ve thrown away your jobs for those stupid cats!”

“It was worth it my friends,” Mimjet cried out as he climbed into the front seat of the car. “These are not just cats, they are magical cats—blessed by the gods!”

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By now Bridges and Turner had returned to Reginald’s study and looked out the window in time to see Francine’s car pull away from the curb, move quickly around the circular driveway and whiz down the private road leading out of the estate. There was, the two men realized, no way they could run down the stairs, climb into the limousine and catch up with the fugitives in time. More importantly, the overweight chauffeur was too winded to try.

“I knew it, I just knew it,” Bridges pounded the windowsill with his fists. “That crazy Hindu was behind this. He’s gonna make a fortune off those cats!”

“No, Bridges,... that’s not why he did this,” Turner declared reflectively, sitting down in front of Reginald’s desk and mopping his brow. “... He really cared about those cats. I heard him talking to them; he believes they were sent by the gods. I think he worships those little beasts!”

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“You realize, Mimjet, I’m practically a fugitive now,” Francine complained bitterly, as they headed south toward Shadowbrook Arms. “When my next employer asks me where I worked, I will have to say in England. There will be a three year void on my resume for this city. The Cromwells will tell them that I’m a thief. I’ll never work in this town again!”

“If you insist on being a nanny,” Mimjet consoled her gently, “you can use myself and Agabi for references, but I think you can do better Francine. Why don’t you go to college and get your degree. Isn’t there anything else you can do but take care of someone else’s brats?”

“I bet I know what she could do,” Jim offered as Francine thought about her reply.

“Jimbo, you rascal!” Buck chuckled, as the mental imagery played in all their minds.

“... I haven’t a clue,” she confessed finally, looking into her mirror at the twins glowing faces and listening to the soothing sound of cats purring in her car.

“I am thinking, you would make a fine nurse,” chirped Indira.

“I am thinking, you would make someone a fine wife,” chimed Maj.

Mimjet laughed softly as he patted Francine’s knee. For the first time in the three years they had worked together in the Cromwell’s house, he dared think of her as a woman, a bit too pale for his tastes but with a fragility that stirred his imagination now that he was his own man.

“We know what old Mimjet’s thinking!” Buck transmitted, hopping up on the back of the seat and looking down her blouse.

“You were working below minimum wages for those people, Francine,” Mimjet reminded her gently. “Anything you do from now on will be better than taking care of those brats. I’m not worried about your future, Francine,” he said wryly, reaching back and giving Buck a pat. “You’re a beautiful woman, who must cultivate her mind and venture forth into the world!”

Buck was not certain of his own future, but he looked fondly down at Francine’s breasts, wondering if he too might appeal to the English woman when he was once again a flesh and blood man. There was something very special about being a cat now. He was not worried about competing with Mimjet for Francine’s favors. Mimjet, after all, thought they were gods!

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Recalling Tom’s message typed on Reginald’s computer, Mimjet remembered the Main coon’s reference to Shadowbrook Arms. His own laptop had been left back at the estate, but, using a copy of the Yellow Pages snatched by Indira and a road map found in the glove compartment of Francine’s car, he pinpointed where the apartment complex was on a the map. Purring and swishing their tails expectantly, Buck, Tom, and Ed jumped up and down the front seat, while Jim continued to ask those proverbial words, “Are we almost there?” The closer they came to their destination, as Francine followed Mimjet’s instructions, the louder and more excited the four cats became as they waited to be reunited with their friends.

As Buck and his gang were driven back to Shadowbrook Arms, Sheldon and the girls, now that they had escaped the old woman’s zoo, scrounged the alleys and streets downtown for untainted food. “The trick,” Sheldon tried to sound confident, “is to wait for restaurant garbage to be tossed out in back of buildings.” After waiting for just the right moment, he directed Tanya and Penny to assist him in salvaging their first meal from a box of chicken scraps just thrown into a dumpster.

“It’s fresh out of the pot!” declared Sheldon.

Peering down into the dumpster, the gray Norwegian forest cat looked smart and handsome as he tippy-toed onto the dumpster ledge.

“I’m not eating garbage,” vowed Tanya, lingering in the background now.

“Then starve,” thought Penny, looking back with a sneer. “I love chicken. I wonder if it’s Parmesan or cordon bleu.”

“Picatta!” Sheldon meowed jubilantly.

“No kidding?” cried Penny in disbelief, hopping up alongside of him on the ledge. “Come on sister,” she called down to the pouting Tanya, “let’s eat!”

Reluctantly now, the little Siamese leaped up lithely onto the rim as if she was born to her exquisite form and joined them in the dumpster for the meal.

In addition to picatta, they found discarded pastries and fresh mashed potatoes, so that their first full meal as cats turned into a feast.

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As Sheldon and the girls trotted south on the road to Shadowbrook Arms they were filled with hope for the first time during their nightmare on the street. They didn’t have a clue how the spell would be broken and they didn’t have the same sense of timeliness effecting the other cats. Sam and Drew had implanted the notion in the other cats that they were running out of time before becoming one hundred percent cats. Buck and his gang had felt this too. For Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny, the only question was whether or not India’s death meant they were trapped or freed from the spell. Their main concern, at this point, was getting back safely to Shadowbrook Arms.

After filling their little bellies, the two female cats, bolstered by Sheldon’s optimism, felt as confident as he that they would find their way home. Sheldon was certain that they were on the correct road and, if they continued due south, would arrive home soon. Suddenly, however, as Tanya began complaining about the long, tireless journey ahead, another cat appeared on their path. Unlike the previous felines that Sheldon was able to “hiss” away, this big tailless, multicolored cat would not move. It was, of course, a feral Manx hybrid, and it didn’t respond to the telepathy transmitted from their minds. It was, in fact, interested in the females cowering behind Sheldon’s side and was prepared to do battle to that end.

“Oh God,” Sheldon heaved a sigh, “this one’s not going to move!”

“It’s very simple,” Penny decided, a sudden inspiration filling her head.

The same thoughts naturally came to the other two too. Question: how do you spook a cat? Answer: You scare it! Do what the feral cat does not expect: human gestures and sounds, done loudly and jerkily in a variety of unexpected ways.

And so, as the big tom cat approached the trembling Sheldon, the two females began jerking around, making spitting and coughing noises, while Sheldon bolted up in the air and let out a very unfeline howl. Clearly, in the big cat’s feral mind, he was up against three inexplicable horrors. The effect was swift as expected, for he pivoted on his paw pads and ran.

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To keep their spirits up as they trotted south, Sheldon told his two companions a story about Roy, a cat who adopted his family after being abandoned by the neighbors next door. Neither female knew his family were actually cat fanciers, so he spun for them quite a yarn.

“When the Howard’s moved back to Utah,” he began thoughtfully, “they also left their dog Scamper, but he was adopted by the Bradley’s across the street.... I was jealous of Dicky Bradley at first, since my own dog had recently died and, yes it’s true Tanya, I once hated cats. But Roy grew on my family, if not on me at first. He had many traits that were strange for a cat. One of them was that he thought he was a dog.... Don’t laugh, Penny, it’s true. He even barked and wagged his tail. He was not a friendly cat, I’m afraid. He would bite and scratch when we picked him up, and he would growl at us when he didn’t get his way, but he proved to be invaluable to my family one day.... A burglar tried to break into our house one night, and old Roy jumped up and latched onto her leg. It was a good thing we made poor Roy sleep outside, because she was unable to even climb into our house.”

“The burglar was a woman?” Tanya wrinkled her pink nose.

“Why not?” Penny shrugged her shoulders. “If cats can bark, women can steal.”

“I was caught shoplifting when I was twelve,” Tanya suddenly confessed.

“But we digress,” Sheldon said, nudging the exhausted females on. “.... The lady, who was trying to rob our house turned out to be the long lost daughter of the Howard’s next door.”

“Oh, you’re making all this up!” Tanya rolled her eyes.

“In our cookie cutter neighborhood the houses looked so similar that poor Roberta, the burglar, thought she had arrived home.”

“Roberta?” Penny mused thoughtfully. “Was she pretty?”

“Ugly as a five iron,” Sheldon began laughing, “but when she tried her key and it didn’t work, she attempted to go through the kitchen window.... That’s where Roy came in.”

Sheldon began to laugh so hard now, he lost his train of thought. It seemed plain to Penny that he had made the entire story up, but Tanya, who had been majoring in psychology, was not so sure. Sheldon’s old girl friend was named Roberta. Half of the story might therefore be potentially true. As the three cats crossed at a green light and Tanya asked him why he used that particular name, a familiar specter for cats materialized on the other side of the street. A Doberman pincer on a leash began to drag the unfortunate little woman taking him for a walk toward them as the woman crossed the street. Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny ran in the opposite direction and ducked beneath a parked van. The dog tore free of its master and stood outside their temporary haven, barking furiously at the cats underneath. The woman picked up the dog’s leash, yanked at it angrily and finally, after a flood of unladylike curses, coaxed the brute back on its walk.

“You’ve never forgotten Roberta,” Tanya said petulantly as they continued on their way. “I can see the symbolism of your story.... It’s not just about Roy, the cat who barks; it’s about a woman who steals back into your life, but you fight to keep her memory away. That’s where old Roy comes into the picture. Roy is your alter ego.... Scamper’s actually the love that got away.”

“Wait a minute,” Penny cleared her throat, “that doesn’t make sense. If Roberta, the thief, is trying to get back into his life, where does Scamper, the neighbor’s dog, fit in?”

“Roberta represents unrequited love and Scamper represents *lost* love!” Tanya replied dubiously.

“But Scamper is a male,” teased Penny.

Sheldon began laughing again. Soon, Tanya took Penny’s mental cue and began laughing too.

“Now it’s become a fairy tale,” she chimed, nudging both of her friends. “*Roy, the Barking Cat!*”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### A Gathering of Cats

At about the same time that Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny began the last city block of their journey south, Mimjet, Francine, the twins, and Cromwell's four magical cats arrived in the visitor's parking lot of Shadowbrook Arms. It was now early afternoon; it had been a long, morning for Buck and his gang. Mimjet, who didn't want to overwhelm the unsuspecting cats in Sam's apartment, walked up to his door quietly with Buck and the other cats, while Francine, Indira, and Maj remained momentarily in the car.

As he cradled Jim in his arms, Mimjet stood at the door, as the other three cats climbed through the screen, calling out in his most gentle voice: "Hello kitties, my name's Mimjet Zohar. I have one of your little fellows in my arms."

"Jim," the portly cat reminded him.

"Oh yes, his name is Jim. He's injured," Mimjet said, tapping the door with his free hand.

"They're cats," Jim wanted to tell him, "they can't open the door. You'll have to hand me to them through the screen!"

Inside the apartment, a reunion was in progress that had the appearance of a silent pantomime. The fact was the group could barely hear Mimjet's polite voice. The sound inside all their heads was actually quite noisy. Eight cats were attempting to communicate verbally as they had as humans, nudging, bumping, and licking each other profusely, their collective consciousness loud, as all crowd scenes, with eight jubilant voices—all greeting each other at once.

"Wait, wait!" Sam screamed over the buzz. "This is the problem with telepathy. Drew just asked an important question: where's Jim? He was with Buck's group."

"Listen!" Irma said, perking up her ears.

"I say, you kitty cats inside," Mimjet called politely through the door, "I have one of your buddies in my arms!"

"Jim!" they cried happily.

Tempted, himself, to break into the house through the hole in the screen, Mimjet stood there wondering what he would do if they did not respond. Finally, Sam poked his little head through the hole and meowed pertly at the strange looking man. A second head and then a third followed, as Buck and then Drew tried to communicate with the human outside their door.

"This guy's dense," Drew told Sam.

"No, I recognize that voice," piped Ed, hopping up onto the chair by the window and peeking out, "it's our friend Mimjet. We gotta let him in!"

“Will he hurt us?” Wanda asked, moving behind Buck.

Inexplicably, for several moments, Buck could think of nothing but the stunning white cat behind him, not even the voice of Mimjet outside the door. It was Ed who, with his furry brown head poked through the screen, began gesturing with his canine muzzle and paw in an effort to “talk” Mimjet into handing the portly cat to them through the hole. Mimjet, however, was afraid this would injure Jim.

“Come on Bozo,” thought Ed, beckoning with his paw, “ease him in. We’ll take it from there.”

“Oh, I get it,” Mimjet laughed nervously, looking self-consciously around the complex, “you want me to push him through the hole to you cats on the other side. But the little fellow is injured. Do you not remember his injured leg?”

Hopping down from the chair, Ed ran over to Buck.

“We gotta open the door,” he motioned with his head, “or get that numbskull to hand him through the hole.”

“He’s too cautious,” thought Buck.

“He’s too stupid,” thought Drew.

“I know how he can do it.” Sam cried, scampering into his study. “I just remembered: *I have another key!*”

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As Mimjet stood cursing in Bengali under his breath, Sam attempted to open the middle drawer in his desk. Luckily, he had left it ajar from the last time he had rummaged through it, and it was not difficult to pry it open with his paw. Amongst the pencils, pens, paper clips and general junk in his drawer, he found, after moving his paws and snout around, an extra key that had been cut when Alice’s spare key was made.

“You da man Sammy,” Ed called up brightly then.

“All we have to do is drop it out the window to him,” suggested Drew picking it daintily up in his mouth after Sam had scooted it off the desk.

The three cats scampered into the living room. When Mimjet saw Drew’s little pink snout poke through the hole in the screen with the small gold colored key in his mouth, he laughed with delight, gently retrieved it, and quickly stuck it into the lock while holding Jim awkwardly in his arms. Jim continued to complain until they heard the tumblers fall into place inside the lock.

“You are one wiggly cat,” said Mimjet as he opened the door. “My-my, how many magical cats are there?” he mumbled excitedly afterwards, looking around the room.

Upon entering the living room, the tall Indian was greeted by eight more cats (nine including the portly Jim whom he sat gently on the couch). Each one had the same intelligent look he had noticed in Buck’s group. They bobbed and cocked their little heads as if they were communicating with each other and, of course, purred as normal cats do. In Mimjet’s Far Eastern and Hindu frame of mind, the conflict that plagued the Judeo-Christian thinking of Elijah Gray, Alice Wagnall, and Sheila Cromwell simply didn’t exist. He saw no conflict whatsoever between nine bewitched cats and what he believed: a miracle that defied the logic of reincarnation but not the will of the gods. His life had meaning again, if for no other reason than he had helped four magical cats. Now, he marveled, he had discovered five more magical cats. It suddenly occurred to him, however, as he made the rounds petting and scratching each

wondrous feline, that he had forgotten that Francine and his nieces Indira and Maj were still sitting in the car. Though the twins rarely showed much emotion, the English woman was probably very agitated right now. In what would prove to be an unwitting blunder for the Indian today, he exited the apartment, after a brief explanation and promised to return and fix them some authentic Indian cuisine, only to run into Dolores Jeffries, one of the two tenants questioned yesterday by the police.

Dolores, who was in her seventies, was, in spite of the casualness of her robe and slippers, a most dignified looking black woman, with large, piercing dark eyes and an explosion of sparkling white hair. Mimjet was in such a buoyant mood that he was caught totally off guard by this imposing woman, answering her in a most lighthearted and cavalier way.

“Excuse me fellah,” she called to him, clutching her robe to her chest, “are you a friend of Sam Burns?”

“Well,” he said truthfully, “I never had the opportunity to meet Sam Burns the human, but if this is his apartment, I had the pleasure of meeting Sam Burns, the cat.”

“Huh?” She looked at him quizzically. “What’s that about a cat?”

Dolores had been on the verge of merely asking the stranger if he knew where Sam, the apartment manager, was. As she had said to Frank Harper, her next-door neighbor, she hoped Sam didn’t show up at all. Alicia, her daughter, she explained to Frank, had borrowed her rent money to pay the deductible on her hospital visit and she would be short this month. Now, thanks to Mimjet’s bubbly frame of mind, she was left wondering what the strange looking man was up to. She didn’t like the way he looked, talked or acted (‘kind of spooky-like,’ she would later tell Frank).

“What you doing in that boy’s apartment,” she demanded to know. “He don’t mix much with anyone but that blond lady Alice. You break into his place?”

“Break?... No, they gave me a key,” he tried to explain, but this only made it worse.

“They? Whose they?” Her fierce eyebrows shot up and she looked passed him through the open door.

With a guilty look on his face, Mimjet added more fuel to her suspicion by hastily shutting the door. Dolores did a double take when she heard the cats meowing inside the apartment. To make matters worse for him at that point, Francine, Indira, and Maj, after wondering through the complex in search of the tardy Indian, appeared suddenly on the scene.

“Where in the bloody blazes have you been?” Francine asked, her normally pale face flushed with rage. “We’ve been down there for over a half an hour. I have to use the ladies room! You still haven’t told us yet where we’re going!”

Fear and confusion registered on Dolores Jeffries face. “Humph,” she murmured to herself, as she shuffled back down the hall, “something ain’t right.... Something ain’t right here *at all!*”

Mimjet sensed immediately that the police would be arriving soon on the scene. Dolores sudden exit indicated that she was alarmed by the fact he had been in Sam’s apartment. She had grown even more suspicious with the arrival of his friends. In light of his hasty retreat from the Reginald Cromwell’s estate with three members of his staff, it seemed prudent to make his getaway soon. He would have just enough time, in fact, to say goodbye to the cats before risking being questioned by the police. Francine ran in quickly to relieve herself, followed by Indira and Maj. Mimjet stood in the living room a moment as they took turns using the restroom, looking down at the wondrous cats. His faith in the gods had been revitalized by this experience. All

around him Buck and his friends and the other five cats, who he had not yet been formally introduced to, peered up to him with expectant faces. Tears welled up in his dark eyes as he looked down at them now.

“Oh I wish I could have known you too,” he looked down at the others, whom he hadn’t met.

In response, though they knew he couldn’t hear them, the remaining five cats replied “My name’s Irma.... My name’s Sam.... My name’s Wanda.... My name’s Neva.... My name’s Drew.” As he looked at the other cats, he noticed that Buck, Tom, Ed, and Jim, though weary after their ordeal, were attempting to communicate too.

By their feline stares, tilt of their fuzzy heads, and chirrup made with their little tongues, they were trying to give him their names. He knew that he would never see them again, at least not in their feline forms. Francine and the twins scurried passed him on their way toward the car, but then they returned quickly when they realized he was still making his goodbyes.

“In the great wheel of life I hope we meet again,” he was saying to them solemnly.

“My uncle!” Maj tapped his arm.

“I will pray to Vishnu for you,” he spoke earnestly, raising his arms. “If it’s possible, I will return to see if you’re all right, but I hope by then that your benefactors will have broken the spell,” “for by then,” he added sadly, “you will be mere humans again.”

“Please, uncle Mimjet,” Indira pulled his sleeve anxiously, “I am thinking that we are trespassers here. That black lady is most certainly calling the police!”

“Yes, Mimjet,” Francine insisted, stomping her foot. “How’re we going to explain this to the police?”

“Goodbye, Mimjet,” Buck cried, running up to rub his leg.

“We’ll miss you.” Tom joined Buck, purring deeply as the Indian lifted him up and kissed his head.

The other cats, who had called out their names collectively, said goodbye to this strange man. Jim, who lie immobile on the couch, also wanted to bid him goodbye and Ed, who rubbed his other leg, meowed furiously in an effort to talk. Of all the cats, however, Mimjet was the most fond of Tom, whose reference to Shadowbrook Arms on the keyboard, led him to more bewitched cats.

“I will miss you especially,” he whispered to the Maine coon. “You remind me of Nira, my own cat, when I was a child. Nira has since been recycled to a higher form of life. I expect that she also will come back as a human too.”

“Mimjet, come on!” Francine barked impatiently, as Tom began to squirm.

“Go along kitty, I pray for your deliverance,” he said, placing him back on the floor.

After shutting the door gently, Mimjet and the three women scurried across the hall, out of the complex, and into the parking lot, running frantically to the car in time to see a patrol car pulling into the lot. When the policemen emerged from their car, they ignored them entirely as they proceeded into the apartments. Not believing his good fortune, Mimjet motioned frantically for Francine to proceed, mumbled what she thought was another heathen prayer, and sat back in both mental and physical exhaustion as Francine drove them quickly away from Shadowbrook Arms.

“It’s a jolly good mess you’ve made of things Mimjet,” said Francine, looking self-consciously into her rear view mirror. “You’ve as good as made us fugitives in this state. There’s no telling what Reginald might do.”

“Yes, uncle,” chimed Indira. “Where do we go now? We have no jobs. We have no homes.”

Mimjet pulled a map from his coat and examined it myopically a moment. “Oh I wish you had a GPS,” he mumbled to himself. Francine yawned expansively and squinted at the road ahead as the twins, peeking over each side of his turbaned head, watched him map out their fates.

“We will go see my Uncle Agabi,” he announced flatly, spreading the map out on this lap. “He will find us jobs in his restaurant chain. We shall do some sight-seeing first.” “But firstly you shall pull into that MacDonald’s on the corner,” he ordered Francine politely. “I have been thinking, ever since we began working for that Englishman, how good a Big Mac would taste. I am sick of all that international food served up at the Cromwells’ estate. From now on Francine and my nieces, we shall endeavor to enjoy the bounty of this land. I will buy a digital camera. I will visit Disneyland, the Grand Canyon, and a California beach.... No offense, Francine, but I hope I never see another one of your countrymen again!”

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At almost the same moment Francine’s automobile pulled into the MacDonald restaurant parking lot, Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny, footsore and weary, were limping up to Shadowbrook Arms. Without knowing it, Mimjet and the three women had just passed three more magical cats on the street. It had been the longest journey of the three cats’ short lives and they were, in spite of a fine meal this morning, ready to drop in their tracks. A great feeling of accomplishment, as if they had defied not only death but destiny, itself, filled them just the same. Not realizing that, of all the cats, they hadn’t been rescued by humans and had saved themselves, they felt this feat on a personal level that didn’t need words. It took almost all of their remaining energies to walk up to the looming complex where the witch had transformed their lives. Unlike Sam, Buck, and the others, when they first returned to the apartments on foot, they had seen India shot point blank by Penny, so they had no fear as they approached the buildings now.

As they approached the manager’s apartment on their way to Tanya and Penny’s apartment above, they noted with typical feline curiosity the hole the cats had made in the screen and, as they had in the alley in town, heard their feline counterparts’ telepathy grow louder as they came closer to the source. Not long after this discovery they also heard the telltale meows from inside the room. After standing there shakily on his worn paws, Sheldon, though more exhausted than he had ever been before in his life, set the example by hopping up and leaping through the hole. Tanya and Penny followed stoutheartedly, plunking down not far from where Sheldon had dropped.

Meowing in greeting, the other cats ran to them, and there was a reunion as great as the one for Buck and his gang. Sheldon and his companions’ first instinct had been to spook and hump their backs, since it seemed so bizarre to them that all the other young adults had been turned into cats. When Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny had accepted the fact that this entire room was filled with bewitched humans, they were overwhelmed with emotion and the chatter of voices in their heads.

“Irma, Sam, Buck, Drew, Wanda, Neva, Jim, Ed, and Tom!” Sheldon called out in a roll call of his newfound friends.

“It’s Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny!” Irma cried out, nudging, bumping, and licking these newest members to the group.

“We have much to talk about.” Sam came up to Sheldon in greeting and rubbed his nose. “Buck and his friends arrived just a little while ago, themselves. I bet you three are starving too!”

“I know *I* am.” Jim groaned, looking down from the couch.

“You’re *always* hungry,” teased Ed.

“Thank you.... It’s good to be here, but we just ate,” the three travelers replied collectively to everyone, as they were mobbed by the cats.

“Come on Wanda and Neva,” Irma called, “let’s find something for Buck and his gang to eat!”

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After eating a hearty meal of meat scraps, fried bacon strips, and stew from the containers placed in the refrigerator by Alice before she left, the cats congregated one-by-one, after they finished gorging themselves and using the kitty litters, onto Sam’s bed—as long lost friends reuniting with many stories to share.

“Well, Irma,” piped Sam, surveying the new additions, “you were right; she bewitched Tanya and Penny, but I’m surprised that she got Sheldon too!”

“Yeah,” Sheldon sighed, looking around at the group, “it’s been hell out there!”

“What happened?” asked Drew, bumping his side.

“Yes, tell us,” Neva cuddled between them, “for we have stories too.

After relating in a tired mental drone how he and the girls ran into the city, got lost, and eventually wound up as a demented woman’s pets, he paused to allow Tanya to explain how they escaped her clutches by playing dead and springing free when the old woman opened the cage. Penny’s story, however, which should have come first, was the most incredible of all.

“*You* shot the Shadowbrook Witch?” Neva asked in disbelief.

“You idiot,” cried Drew. “How will they *ever* undo her spell?”

“Nonsense,” Sheldon bristled at the pair. “It was self-defense for Penny. She could have finished India off, but instead she let her live. Tanya and I wanted her to kill her, but Penny was afraid that this might seal our fates.” “I’ve given this a lot of thought,” he declared resolutely, “and I can’t blame Penny at all.”

“Neither can I,” Sam gave her a lick.

“Me too,” Irma and Wanda agreed joining in the gesture, as Penny, Sheldon, and Tanya cuddled next to them on the bed.

Neva and Drew sat pondering what Sheldon said but were soon making friends with Penny too. By now, Tom and Ed and the injured Jim, who hobbled in with his friend’s assistance, approached the congregation, wondering if there was enough room for them on the bed. The sounds of purring and licking from all of the other cats was interrupted by Jim’s meow, as he looked fondly up at the group.

With their tummies full and bladders emptied, Tom and Ed joined the congregation. Buck, who had taken his time eating his dinner, nudged a pillow from the living room into Sam’s bedroom and motioned for Jim to lie on it, since it was impossible for the calico to jump up on the bed. He wasn’t happy with what Penny had just related to the group. It had been the big tabby’s belief all along that to break the spell India had to be dead. His thoughts were naturally heard by everyone and he was surprised that all of them, even Tom, agreed with what Penny had done.

“It would be like murder,” Tom thought, looking down at his friend.

“Hah!” Buck snorted looking up at Sam. “What was all that ‘ye shall not suffer a witch’ bullshit you were spouting Halloween night?”

Although Sam’s fiancée Alice had also uttered this quote, it had been his idea to confront the Shadowbrook Witch. He now shared in the blame for India’s spell. Perhaps if he hadn’t been so intolerant, they might have been spared her wrath.

“I’ve learned a lot in the past few days,” he looked down reflectively at Buck. “One of the things I learned very quickly was *I don’t know very much!* I’m really a very stupid man!” “But I’ve also learned what true friendship is.” He now scanned the group. “I don’t care what you all believe; I love you just as you are!” “As Saint Paul once said:” he grew misty-eyed, ““Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. Though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing.””

“Good grief!” Buck shook his head.

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Soon, as if the bed was not crowded enough, the big yellow tabby was suddenly bouncing upon the mattress too. Embarrassed but moved by Sam’s burst of emotion, he gave him a big lick and gave Irma one too. He found himself pressed up against the precocious Wanda on the crowded bed, and he was again torn between his human feelings toward Francine and his feral instincts for Wanda, the cat.

“Hello, Wanda,” he said sheepishly. “You’re looking fit today.”

“What’s wrong with Jim?” She asked, looking down at the portly cat.

“Someone kicked him in the hospital after we tried killing the witch,” Buck said casually, as if it was but a trifle matter to explain.

Buck’s feline heart was beating heavily as he remembered Wanda, the human in a bikini in the Jacuzzi Halloween night. After that point at the party until his bewitching, everything was a blur for him. Wanda, who could, of course, read his thoughts telepathically, blushed but didn’t take offense.

“Is Jim’s injury serious?” Irma asked him with concern. “I studied nursing for a couple of months in college before changing schools.”

Buck shook his head drowsily. “According to Mimjet, who patched him up, he didn’t break anything; he just bruised a muscle. He’s damn lucky he’s alive!”

Sam and his group realized that Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny were exhausted, having gone through a nightmarish experience by themselves on the street, so Buck was coaxed by Wanda and Neva to tell his story before he, too, fell asleep. At times, Tom, Ed, and Jim would add something to the tale. The strangest part of Buck’s story was when the cats arrived at the Cromwell estate and were held captive by Reginald, who wanted to exploit their miracle for himself. The group cheered when they heard how Mimjet saved Buck and his friends. Sam, Irma, and Drew perked up with attention as Tom explained how he typed out the message that led Mimjet to Shadowbrook Arms.

“That’s how I communicated with Mortimer Hildebrand.” Irma nodded.

“It wasn’t easy,” Tom reflected. “The traditional method didn’t work—not with these little paws. It was hunt and peck—like when you first learn to type, but it convinced Reginald Cromwell that we were ‘miracle cats.’ I’m just thankful Mimjet and Francine rescued us.” “I gather you used the same method.” He glanced over at Irma and Sam.

“Yes.” Sam looked at Drew. “We left an e-mail for Alice that brought her here.”

“That poor woman,” thought Wanda. “We drove her nuts.”

“What a menagerie,” Drew enumerated wistfully “a preacher, sorcerer, priest, Hindu, identical Indian twins, and two blond babes!”

“I liked Mimjet,” thought Ed. “I’m gonna miss him a lot!”

“Mimjet believes we’re gods,” commented Buck, as he drifted off to sleep. “.... That Francine was all right too.... She had a nice body,... but she wasn’t too bright.... Mimjet had to blackmail her before she’d help.”

Sam felt great affection for his newfound friends. They had forgiven Alice for being a cat-hater and accepted the eccentricities of the three men. Noting Irma’s unblinking blue eyes, he realized that she was the only cat not dosing off this hour.

“What about you?” He nudged her warmly. “You should tell our new guests your story too. You have the strangest tale of them all!”

At first it seemed to be an exercise in futility. One-by-one, the twelve cats were falling asleep. Though growing drowsy herself, Irma related how Elijah had found her on the street and how the preacher and the sorcerer took her home after discovering that she was a bewitched cat. When she told them about how the make-believe sorcerer, Blaze, had introduced Elijah to a wizard priest, it didn’t seem so extraordinary considering what they had all gone through. But when Irma told them how the Spell Reversal Team, as they called themselves, had begun looking for a practitioner whom Irma referred to as a white witch (instead of the more ominous title ‘super witch’ as Blaze called her), Buck jerked awake. His response, though calm, was loud in their collective consciousness. Virtually all of them were also shaken awake.

“I’m sorry, I know we’ve discussed this before,” he looked into Sam’s golden eyes, “but I don’t understand this. I thought you and Alice didn’t suffer witches. Aren’t *all* witches bad?”

“I guess not,” Sam sighed with resignation, “at least not white witches.”

“I don’t get it,” Neva shook her head. “As a human, I’m a black woman. You, Ed, are brown. What would they call a good witch who was black or brown?”

“It’s a moralistic term,” Drew frowned at Neva, “like dark and light and good and bad!”

“So you’re saying white is *good* and black is *bad*,” Neva moved angrily away from him.

Drew sat up and looked at her in disbelief. “That’s not the point, Neva. We’re talking about a witch—”

“The point is, *honky*,” she spat, letting out a hiss, “white witch and black witch are white man’s terms!”

“Yeah,” Ed looked down at Jim, “I smell racism again.”

“You wetback,” said Jim with a yawn, “you smell racism *everywhere!*”

The subject had drastically changed. At that point, Buck sat up and looked with utter amazement at Neva and Ed.

“Hello!” he cried out sarcastically. “Do either of you cats understand what’s going on here? They’re getting a card-carrying witch to undo India’s work!”

“Yeah, who gives a shit if she’s actually white or black,” Drew murmured in frustration.

“I can’t believe it!” Tanya cried.

“This doesn’t make sense!” said Penny, rising groggily up on her feet.

“I just drifted off,” Sheldon murmured with a yawn. “Was I dreaming when I heard that? Tell me that’s not true, Irma!”

“It’s true Sheldon,” Irma piped, looking around sympathetically at the three. “I didn’t like it myself, but the fact is we’re waiting right now for them to find her so she can undo the spell.”

“All right,” Buck nodded, looking over at Sam, “you’re the expert on this sort of thing. Do you think this is gonna work?”

“Don’t ask me,” Sam sighed again, “I’m just a cat.”

“We’re *all* cats.” Tanya wrinkled her pink little nose.

Jim, Tom, and Drew were yawning vigorously now. Penny laid her little head back on her paws and fell asleep. Sheldon and Tanya fought slumber but finally lost, their collective thoughts leading them into an enchanting dream.

“I can hardly believe,” Buck thought looking around at the sleeping cats, “India Crowley bewitched us all! She even got Sheldon, who doesn’t live here. You’re lucky Sam that Alice didn’t get zapped too!”

“Yes,” Sam murmured wistfully, “Alice is one of our protectors now. She’s part of the Spell Reversal Team.”

“They have to find a witch who’ll reverse the spell,” Irma reminded Buck earnestly. “It’s the only chance we have!”

Within a few moments after Irma’s declaration, all twelve cats were sound asleep in a collective consciousness no human could possibly understand. In their telepathic minds, in which dreams were also shared, they were all young men and women again sharing in the merriment of Halloween night, but this time, as the wicked witch appeared, another specter materialized intangibly at first: a woman in a white robe with marbled white skin, blazing azure eyes and bellowing white hair, a spectral image they would never meet in this life but who would soon change the course of their lives.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### The Second Attempt

When the Spell-Reversal Team, again led by Mortimer Hildebrand, finally entered the emergency ward of the county hospital, Nursing Supervisor Bertha Welch was called in to authorize in person the visit of this motley group. With complete agreement among the five, it was decided that Madelyn Fontaine would be introduced as India's mother. Bertha Welch, however, held her hand up like a traffic cop as they proceeded, barring their entrance into the room. Nothing could hide the one-eyed crone's ugliness and menacing stare. Unlike India Crowley, who was built like a pre-adolescent girl, she looked and moved like a witch. After being elbowed into action by the Mortimer, Elijah played his part as spokesman by introducing the group, which now comprised, in addition to Alice Wagnall, a preacher, sorcerer, priest, and white witch. Alice, the only other true believer in the preacher's mind, remained at his side.

Mortimer was again introduced as India's priest, while Blaze continued his role as India's favorite uncle. Elijah's dubious position as India's older brother meant that Madelyn was his mother too. Alice, of course, remained India's sister. The very thought of these relationships caused the preacher and her to be physically ill.

"She hasn't seen her daughter in several years," he concluded his introduction. "It may be the last time she has the chance."

A wave of nausea passed like an ill wind through the preacher again. To sooth his shaken spirit now, he reached into his jacket in a Napoleonic gesture and stroked the cross dangling from his neck. Alice, in a motion of dread, fingered her delicate throat.

"Do you have documentation to prove your relationships with India Crowley?" the supervisor asked him, searching his expression and looking back at the witch.

"Documentation?... That's absurd!" Elijah replied irritably. "What sort of document will state specifically that India is our relative? It won't show on a driver's license or credit card. We don't carry India's birth certificate. What sort of document could you possibly want? Please Miss Welch, let her mother visit her before she dies!"

He was so totally uncomfortable with the subterfuge he wanted to run straight to the chapel, confess his sins to the Lord and beg His forgiveness. Already he stood on unhallowed ground amongst a blasphemer and heretic. Now he was standing in the shadow of a witch. When he felt the rude wooden cross again, however, he was reminded why he was here and the little miracle that he once protected inside his coat. He missed Irma greatly now. Whatever came of these proceedings, he would always remember the first message written by her little paw.

“S...O...S,” he murmured softly to himself, “Save Our Souls!”

“I beg your pardon,” frowned Bertha Welch.

After watching his lips move mutely and his eyes stare vacantly into space, the nursing supervisor studied his pained expression a few seconds, yet dismissed this quirky behavior, looking past the group’s spokesmen at the misshapen witch. Focusing upon her one blind eye and toothless grin, she was stopped cold.

“I’m sorry, there’s something not right about all this,” she snorted. “Can’t she speak for herself?”

At that point, Madelyn stepped forward in her black dress and shawl as if she were going to take the overbearing woman to task.

“You think I’m ugly, do you?” she asked, pointing a gnarled finger at the nurse. “You judge a book by its cover, do you, eh? Can’t you look into the innards of a woman for her soul?” “I had an accident deary,” she pointed at her blind eye. “Would you prefer if I wore a sack on my head? Would you like it if I vanished like a poof of smoke?”

“No, certainly not,” Bertha Welch said, taken back. “You can enter. But would you all please keep the noise down. I was informed by my nurses and a doctor on duty that a great deal of caterwauling occurred last time in this room.”

“Humph, caterwauling is hardly what I was doing?” Mortimer grumbled as he followed Elijah into the room.

“You have an attitude problem young lady,” Blaze said over his shoulder as he passed.

“Be careful,” Elijah murmured too faintly for Bertha to hear, “don’t mess with that witch!”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the nurse called out, shuddering as Madelyn cast her a blind eye, “this is a hospital room, not a chamber of horrors. I’ve been a Roman Catholic long enough to know an exorcism when I hear it. You folks behave yourself in that room!”

While the nursing supervisor stood with arms folded in the hall, they entered one-by-one: first the witch, then, at Madelyn’s insistence the preacher, as if she gave him primacy over the priest. Mortimer, in gentlemanly fashion allowed Alice to follow Elijah in but then scooted abruptly ahead of the sorcerer into the room. The door was shut gently against the nurse by Blaze, and the group stood there before India’s bed, waiting for Madelyn to make the next move.

“That woman’s too cagey,” Blaze said, whistling under his breath.

“That woman’s trouble,” Madelyn declared to the group. “She’ll be in here faster than a bat if we so much as sneeze! How much commotion did you make the last time you were here?”

“The priest performed an exorcism,” Blaze motioned to Mortimer with a sneer.

“It was combination of traditional prayer and exorcism,” Mortimer corrected him indignantly. “I would hardly call my praying caterwauling or a commotion. How dare she insinuate such a thing!”

“Whatever it was, it was too noisy,” replied Madelyn, her good eye casting a frown. “Exorcisms are not nearly as effective as reversals. You gotta fight fire with fire, father. You need demons to fight demons too.”

“What does she mean by that?” Elijah whispered to the priest, deeply troubled by her remark.

The priest looked back at Elijah with a knowing expression. The preacher, who depended solely upon his faith, was about ready to leave the room and perform a prayer vigil in the chapel. So far, however, it seemed as if evil might triumph without something momentous happening on the bewitched humans’ behalves. He didn’t want to be a part of black magic or supernatural mumbo-jumbo, but he also didn’t want the young people of Shadowbrook to remain forever cats. Irma Fresco and her friends in Sam’s apartment were a constant reminder of this contradiction. So he watched, as did the priest and sorcerer, as a bystander once more, with the greatest trepidation, as Madelyn left the group standing around the bed and made her crotchety way back to the door. Obviously, the old witch was going to make sure that Supervisor Welch didn’t interfere with her work. The question for Elijah was *how?*

Elijah was torn between ‘getting with the program,’ as Blaze suggested in the warehouse, and protecting the nurse.

“Don’t you harm that woman!” he protested anxiously now.

Madelyn opened the door slowly and stepped into the hall, the door shutting gently behind her. She looked squarely into the nurse’s eyes with her one good eye, a strange glow appearing in the dark pupil, and, in a low, gurgling, sinister voice, said “You must leave the hospital at once! Someone left the water running in your sink and your house is being flooded. Go home quickly and turn it off! Your home is also very dirty. Don’t come back to the hospital until you’ve completely vacuumed your house!”

With a dull expression, Supervisor Bertha Welch turned as would a zombie in a B movie and walked stiff-leggedly from the scene. Her unblinking gaze was focused straight ahead, her shoulders were hunched forward and her arms hung limply at her sides as her feet shuffled down the hall. Sensing the worst behind the closed door, Elijah bolted finally from the room, ran passed the witch and down the hall after the nurse. He was struck by the nurse’s strange gait and zombie-like expression. As she retreated, Madelyn followed behind Elijah to explain her actions and drag him back into the room, but he shrugged her off as he would a foul thing.

The preacher was used to dealing with black and white issues of good and bad and God and the devil. For him, no matter how much he tried, there could be no in-between zone where alleged white witches, equivocating sorcerers, and defrocked priests administered on behalf of God in a paranormal twilight world. With Bible-in-hand, he had fought the pervasive free-floating superstitions of the common bum. He had never given ground to heresy or blasphemy or equivocated about his faith. With the very antithesis to his belief system trying to control his life now, he felt as if the only one who could help him was Jesus Christ, the Lord of Heaven, Himself. The Lord, not hocus-pocus or abracadabra, must set this matter straight!

“Hey,” Elijah tapped the nurse’s shoulder, “are you all right? I had no part in this. What did that evil woman do? Stop! You must put a stop to all this!”

“Must turn off water.... Must leave hospital at once to vacuum house,” she mumbled in rote.

“You’ve hypnotized her, you evil crone!” he cried accusingly at Madelyn.

“Oh, I’ve done more than hypnotize her sonny,” cackled Madelyn, waving her hand. “I cast a spell on her. I could’ve made her jump off the building if I wanted to. It’ll wear off sometime soon.”

“Don’t you people realize that you can’t use evil to undo evil,” Elijah lectured her now. “It doesn’t work this way with our Lord. I want you to snap her out this trance at once! You have no right to mess with her mind! What if she doesn’t come out of it? What if she drives her car into a wall or tree?”

“Listen,” Madelyn scoffed at his concern, “I could’ve turned her into a rat or a bird. Indeed, I could’ve struck her dead. But I’m a good witch; I don’t work that way. That woman will not be harmed, young man. As soon as she finished vacuuming her house, the spell will begin wearing off, leaving her without a clue. If she stays, she will ruin everything and the young people of Shadowbrook Arms will remain forever cats!”

Whether or not Madelyn had placed a mild spell on Elijah Gray or the preacher had been convinced by her logic, Elijah stood there allowing the nurse to continue down the hall. Simple prayer for him had not been enough. Several other attendants, nurses, and patients stopped to watch and listen to the disturbance in the corridor, but they also didn’t interfere. Jerking away from the woman’s claw-like hand now, Elijah followed her at a distance back into the room, his revulsion for what he knew would happen counterbalanced by the hope that this creature could break the spell. India, a modern day witch, had turned several innocent people into cats. The only one who seemed to have the remedy for this problem was another witch, who had been recommended by a sorcerer and heretic priest.

“Jesus Christ guide my steps through these dark hours,” he began praying as they re-entered the room and Madelyn began setting up her paraphernalia and preparing for her spells.

“Out! Out! Out! All of you out!” she said, making a scooting motion with her hands.

“What?” the priest cried in disbelief.

“She works alone,” Blaze surmised, feeling great disappointment himself.

“I for one won’t leave this time!” Elijah set his jaw. “The Lord rules my soul, not Madelyn Fontaine. I will stay and offer my prayers. You can’t make me leave!”

“I second that.” Mortimer folded his arms defiantly. “Who do you think you are Miss Fontaine? You’re going to need all the help you can get!”

“What can you do?” she snarled brazenly at the priest. “You couldn’t even get her to wake up with all that malarkey. What makes you think you can exorcize her now?” “And you,” she pointed accusingly at the preacher, “are wrong if you think the Lord doesn’t fight fire with fire. He uses every trick in the book!”

“You don’t believe that?” Elijah turned to the red-faced priest. “Even you claimed to work directly through God, not hocus-pocus and spells. We can’t let her take control without God’s direct intervention. What will that mean? Is our faith only a joke and have we been going through all our own *hocus-pocus* for nothing all these years?”

“Of course not. You’re absolutely right,” Mortimer both nodded and shook his head. “You can’t use evil to undo a spell. It would place the reversed humans under your spell. This is basic knowledge, Madelyn. I would rather they remain cats than you make them diabolical things.”

“Did I not kiss the cross?” she turned to Blaze for support.

“Yes, you did,” the sorcerer nodded.

“Did I not have pictures of Jesus and Mary in my quarters?” she asked the priest, staring at the others around the room.

“Props... camouflage,” the preacher snarled, gripping his cross apprehensively in his hand.

“Regardless of whether or not you were sincere before Madelyn,” Mortimer sighed anxiously, “you assume too much now for yourself. We must stay in the room to make sure you follow God’s rules, not your own. I never used paraphernalia when I worked with the spirits. Prayer guided my ceremonies and ritual. Magic never determined the end result. Everything still depended on the power of the Lord.”

“This won’t work if I can’t do it alone,” she snorted, placing her hands on her hips. “What can I do to convince you I’m not in league with the devil, so I can undo this spell?”

“You must allow us to remain in the room,” Blaze declared boldly now. “If it wasn’t for me, Madelyn, you wouldn’t be here *at all!*”

“Very well, but you lads don’t know whom you’re fooling with,” she looked around at them. “Come here gentleman, you too missy,” she took a softer tone for Alice. “I’ll prove to you that I’m in league with the Lord.... There, that’s it, stand shoulder to shoulder, my colleagues against evil.... You folks are tired, very tired; I’m tired too. The fact is I hate those unconscious voids we must spend each day.... There-there Elijah, Mortimer, Blaze, and Alice, my pet, you’ve carried the weight of the world’s woes too long, each in his own way working for the Ultimate Cause.... But now you must leave the room and find a place to rest and find peace.... You must go to the chapel. Follow the preacher; he knows where it’s at. Don’t come back until someone taps you on your shoulders.” “Go!” she pointed to the door.

The foursome had barely made it to the chapel before falling asleep in a row of pews. No one thought that it was strange that three men and a woman sat next to each with their heads bowed in an attitude of prayer. It appeared as just that from the entrance of the chapel, until the onlooker walked in a ways and heard them snoring under their breathes.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### Lilith: Mother of Witches

With the room free of witnesses, Madelyn, the Great White Witch, confronted the comatose India with mirth at first. It was difficult for her to believe that this adolescent with an infantile face had been such a powerful witch. Walking over and dabbling with India's life support system, Madelyn mumbled under her breath, "Let's try this first! A dead witch is a dead spell. Everyone knows that!"

She remembered, at that point, a paragraph from her Witches' Manual about witches spells being undone by their deaths, but then also filed in her vast knowledge of the occult was a warning in the Wicca Handbook about this procedure too.

"Aye, the problem is," she stood there thoughtfully appraising the machinery, "her demon must be vanquished while she's alive in order to send it back to hell. Otherwise, if she's killed before it's expelled, I'll have unleashed a powerful demon upon the world." "No... it would be so simple," she concluded, looking down at India Crowley, "but I can't do that."

"Oh, Christian God—Jehovah, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost," she mumbled, looking up at the vacant ceiling, "why do you have such abominable rules?"

Dropping down upon her arthritic knees, Madelyn prayed feverishly, trying to recall the words from an exorcism she had seen in a movie. Rising up finally with inspiration, she called out in a rasping, crone-like voice: "Infernal spirit depart! In the name of the Savior, Jesus Christ, who is God, leave this woman at once!"

Just then, as if on cue, India woke suddenly, her eyes popping wide, as if she had just awakened from sleep, which, in fact, was true.

"Oh my God, that was quick!" cried Madelyn, making the sign against the evil eye and backing away from the bed.

A death rattle emanated from the tracheotomy in India's throat. Her death-glazed eyes widened in terror, as if she had at last seen her mortality, which was also true. Madelyn watched in fascinated horror as her demon departed his dying host and rose phantom-like from her body toward the offending witch. Clearly, the ghostly specter knew what Madelyn was. Immediately abandoning everything she had in her bag of tricks, she confronted the demon with a plain, unshaven wooden cross. She looked down to India and boasted to the dying woman: "This was blessed by the Pope when I was a nun!"

Waving the cross at the specter, she ordered him to depart from the room, since he had no more need of India Crowley now. But Madelyn knew she would need help this time.

"Oh Lord," she cried out pitifully, "remove your warning to me about calling Lilith forth. I need her now. Do you want India's demon to inhabit me to do the devil's will." "You don't want me working on Satan's side," she said threateningly. "I'll make this adolescent look like Mary Poppins!"

With that dreadful threat to the Almighty, Madelyn waited breathlessly as the demon emerged fully from the woman and circled the room: a willow-o'-the-wisp filament of orange light, shaped like a biped but without eyes, nose or mouth—the most dreadful specter Madelyn had seen in her long, controversial career.

“You, daughter of darkness, dare to use a priest’s exhortation on *me*?” he whispered icily. “I’m Nebo, chief servant of Abaddon, no garden variety demon. This mortal witch did something you would never dare do: she called upon me in the Circle of Lights. She has greater power than you!”

“I don’t serve Satan. I serve the Most High,” Madelyn replied, hoping and praying that the Lord might change His mind. “India Crowley traded her soul for her power. Without you, she would be no match for me. My spirit, who is Lilith, the mother of all witches, is greater than you!”

“What kind of witch are you who calls upon God, not Lucifer, for her magic, then mentions Lilith in the same breath? I don’t believe God will send Lilith to you. Lilith is one of *us*. You think you’re a powerful witch Madelyn, but with me you’ll be the queen of witches. Think of it Madelyn, unlimited magical power and riches beyond your fondest dreams!”

Madelyn was genuinely tempted, but she held up her wooden cross as would a soldier holding up his sword, knowing that another soldier with a battle axe was going to chop her in two: “Stand back Nebo,” she cried out. “You have no power over me!”

“He-he-he,” Nebo’s laughter filled the room.

“Lord Jehovah hear my supplication again,” she cried out desperately as the great demon hovered over her head and began blowing his foul breath into her face.

As Madelyn held her ground, Nebo began circling the room, as would an eddy in a stream, with Madelyn, herself, as the vortex. A mouth formed in Nebo’s formless face. The arch demon blew out a foul gust of gas that clung to her momentarily as green haze and made her gag, but it was not strong enough to blow her across the room.

Madelyn waved her cross and threw a warning at the specter: “Spirit of darkness, spirit from hell, you are now free-floating without a host. Depart these environs before the Lord, Most High, sends his minions to vanquish you!”

But Madelyn’s words were designed for ordinary evil practitioners, not for someone with Nebo’s powers. As he swirled around her, Nebo now blew a great stream of yellow gas across the room at her wincing face. Madelyn was able to dodge the slowly moving gas. When this failed to daunt her, Nebo, now a streaming vortex, himself, of sickly green smoke, took on momentum, his outer walls buffeting Madelyn then closing in gradually, causing the witch to stagger this way and that as she tried keeping her balance. When the vortex rose up suddenly as tornadoes do, Nebo blew directly from its formless mouth. Madelyn tumbled back and landed heavily against a wall. Badly shaken, with the wind knocked out of her lungs, she scrambled across the floor on all fours. Reaching into her bag successfully this time, she withdrew another bizarre object (an Egyptian ankh symbol with an eye inset below the loop) and called upon the she-demon witch Lilith to fight Nebo, India’s personal demon, now freed by her immanent death. It was a desperate move since she knew very well that it was against God’s will.

“Lilith, dark angel, consigned to walk the earth to undo your mischief against the first man, come forth to do battle with your old enemy and one time colleague Nebo, arch demon of Abaddon, servant of Lucifer, Prince of Hell.”

After this blasphemous appeal, as she waited for Lilith to respond, she broke into prayer.

“Lord,” she cried, looking at the ceiling, “I would rather it was you canceling this mischief. Added to my spell-reversal, your power will make it work. Grant me clemency if I perform this rite. Please forgive me for what I must do.” As she waited for acknowledgement of some kind, the Lord remained silent, the silence signaling disapproval in Madelyn’s crowded head. After the way she had flaunted God’s will, she wasn’t surprised. She had spent a lifetime disappointing God; this moment should be no different. Yet all her spells and incantations couldn’t possibly work in this situation without Lilith’s help.

Once again, using the same invocation, she called upon the mother of witches; and once again, she felt great misgivings, this time reciting prayers of the Rosary: the Apostles Creed, Lords Prayer, and just for good measure, she began mumbling feverishly, “Hail Mary full of grace. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb...” Suddenly, to make sport of Madelyn during this crisis, Nebo transformed into a winged gargoyle who immediately grabbed her wooden cross and, in the palm of his clawed hand, set it aflame.

“That is an unhallowed cross, witch!” he said, lifting her up by her armpits and throwing her across the room. “Let’s see how powerful you are *now!*”

Sensing that her end was near, Madelyn made the sign of the cross and uttered a feeble prayer as she began flying across the room. The interval between Nebo’s attack and this moment in time had been infinitesimal, and yet she felt as if she was flying in slow motion now. Just when she thought she would smash against the wall, something inexplicable caught her in mid-flight. She could see nothing but the swirling images of walls, ceiling, and floor, and yet a warm, invisible presence grabbed her gnarled body and held her firm.

“It is I, Lilith, Mother of Witches,” a whispery voice informed her, as she was set trembling upon the floor.

Nebo again hovered as a disembodied spirit over India’s body, his orange translucent body moving out amoebically in all directions, as a great infection around and beyond India’s hospital bed.

“Back away daughter,” Lilith ordered Madelyn, her ghostly imprint on the shadowy room contrasting the sickly miasma reaching out to her now.

Obediently and fearfully, Madelyn scrambled to the farthest corner of the room. Already, the old woman felt as if something had been broken inside her. Now that her life and very mortal soul were in danger, she discarded completely her witch’s pharmacopoeia and mental inventory of spells, dropping to her knees in simple prayer. For the first time in her long and controversial mission on earth, Madelyn Fontaine had reached two milestones in her career: she had confronted a chief demon, who called himself Nebo, and she had summoned Lilith, the mother of witches. *And she was still alive!*

It would be, she observed fearfully, a battle between incorporeal energies. Nebo settled over Lilith as would an amoeba around a morsel of food, until she was encased in the miasma and it looked as if, in Madelyn’s hysterical state of mind, she would be digested into Nebo’s infernal guts. She realized now, after hearing the pounding on India room door, that the door was securely locked against the outside world and no mortal would ever see it or intervene in this incredible war. It was the apex of her career and her one chance to meet the great Lilith, but she would trade it all now for the chance to be a simple nun again and on good terms with God.

“I-I have damned myself!” she wailed.

Though she offered up several excuses for turning to Lilith and the natural world, she felt condemned now and therefore doubly imperiled. Not only her physical body but also her mortal

soul was at jeopardy at this point. To add to Madelyn's torment, Nebo seemed to be digesting her mentor and life-long icon before her very eyes. Undoubtedly she would be next. When it appeared as if Lilith would disappear forever into her archenemy's insides, Madelyn had seen enough. Forgetting her own physical and spiritual destruction completely, she vaulted forward, calling out every prayer stored up from her days as a nun and as a Christian but also relying on her gnarled little fists and pointed shoes to beat and kick the offending spirit's shell. Then, however, as her fingers brushed the incorporeal substance and her shoe was poised to kick at the slime, Madelyn again froze in terror and shrank back into the room.

"I can't do it!" she wept, wringing her gnarled hands. Both her spiritual resolve and physical strength were again slipping away.

Suddenly, breaking through the massive green cyst, Lilith's pale hand appeared. Madelyn reached out shakily, her lips trembling mutely now.

"Yes, that's it daughter, take my hand," Lilith's silken whisper broke into her hysteria, "let us unite our powers to demolish this evil foe."

"No, I can't go in there!" Madelyn cried. "It's my soul I fear for, not my life. I know Lilith that I will be damned!"

"Don't be afraid, child," Lilith insisted, as the witch shrank away, "take my hand."

"I can't consort with ungodly spirits," Madelyn managed to utter clearly as Lilith's arms now reached out for help. "I was told by God in a dream not to call upon you. Now, if I work with you inside an infernal spirit, I'll surely be lost!"

"Then we're all lost!" shrieked Lilith. "This demon will be let loose upon the earth!"

Lilith's voice immediately steadied as her form pressed against Nebo's inner wall. He was totally amorphous at this point. It reminded Madelyn of someone pressing their face and torso against a shower door.

"Satan, himself, is controlling this demon," Lilith reassured her in a surprisingly calm voice. "I need your energy Madelyn. You've lived your life and so have I. What about those bewitched souls who will remain forever cats? Do they not deserve to live? What about the unfortunate mortal who will become his next abode? If you are still alive when Nebo has destroyed me, it could be *you!*"

"You would ask me to give up my soul?" Madelyn stared at her in horror now.

"I'm not damned Madelyn," Lilith explained, her cold fingertips touching Madelyn's palms, "I've been called a she-demon and the first witch, but I'm being punished as are all earthly spirits not consigned to heaven or hell. I can only do good, not evil, on earth. If I'm not damned Madelyn, how can you, who have never died, be so?"

"No,... I'll die.... I'll be damned," Madelyn mumbled, shuddering at the thought.

Nevertheless, in incremental steps at first, she came forward that instance, her footsteps halting when she realized that Nebo was inviting her in too. He wanted to bag them both. The very idea made her light-headed and physically ill. But then, when she remembered her terrible burden and how many souls depended upon her now, she found her feet moving faster and faster until she was again at the threshold of the cyst.

"All right, Madelyn," groaned Lilith, "time's running out. Don't hesitate—*now!*"

What came about from her efforts to physically reach out and grab Lilith's hands, was that her hands and then her entire body were immediately covered with Nebo's inexplicable slime as the demon encircled her too. Inside a vortex of swirling glints of light and green goop she began to reel with Lilith, herself, whose presence she could only feel now that she spun and

swirled in all directions inside the cyst. For the moment, the only sound in her ears was her own screaming voice.

“Now daughter,” Lilith shouted finally, “muster all your spiritual energy as would a swimmer’s last gasp before she goes under the waves, and then share my ride!”

Forces of nature,  
    we witches applaud,  
we now combine our forces with God.

As supplicants bow  
    to the Ultimate Magician,  
when confronting evil,  
    the Son of Perdition.

Great Wizard, Almighty  
    divine our path;  
humbly we seek your heavenly wrath.

Humbly we ask you  
    to destroy this demon.  
We pledge in return  
    our souls to your kingdom.

After this introduction, which Madelyn thought was absurd, Lilith, who had just confessed the primacy of God, launched into a whole battery of ungodly imprecations and invocations while pounding Nebo’s innards with her fists. Madelyn simply pounded her little gnarled fists on the wall and uttered, “Save me!” and “Get me out!” prayers, having no lofty meaning except to herself. In the end she found herself in a state of full-blown rage against Nebo, her own mental inventory of spells and imprecations spilling out blasphemously inside the cyst.

To a science fiction or horror movie buff it might have appeared as if two bipeds, trapped inside a transparent green cyst, were being slowly digested as they tried to escape. Indeed, Madelyn was certain she had made the greatest mistake of her life. Fearing that the end was indeed near, she returned to prayer as a means to save them now. But Lilith, who was also praying furiously, began making headway with Madelyn’s help. Together, by joining their spiritual and physical energies and by beating on one specific area with maniacal fury, the pair broke finally through the cyst.

A hemorrhage appeared in the wall, followed by a tear and then, with a startling suddenness, the substance gave way. Upon arriving outside the cyst, exhausted and covered with slime, Madelyn looked askance at Lilith, who quickly shed the slime from her glowing self. The mother of witches never looked more beautiful then. Her long, ghostly white hair was arrayed around her radiant white face like a lion’s mane. Not a trace of slime sat on her flowing white robe. The demon, whose amorphous body changed back into its original translucent form now confronted her less confidently now.

“The Christian God has given me power over you!” she announced in a shrill voice. “You can’t inhabit Madelyn Fontaine nor, when India dies, inhabit this mortal witch. You are a free-floater, like myself, but I believe that I can destroy your incorporeal body and send you back to hell.” “In His infinite wisdom,” she pointed to Madelyn, “the Christian God has found favor in this witch. Beware demon lest you bring down His wrath.”

Nebo attacked her immediately, without words this time. The yellow miasma, contrasting greatly with her silken form, attempted to tear at her face and hair but Lilith’s long white arms, acting as both shield and weapon, whipped around and hammered Nebo in such rapid movements that Nebo was gradually but perceptibly molded by the action into a flat yellow form resembling a pizza. Madelyn now laughed hysterically yet heartily as Lilith tossed Nebo up in the air several times, as would a pizza tosser, until finally, after shaping him into a small, compact ball, threw him at the window. The sound of glass shattering was accompanied by a low howling wind-like noise as Nebo was evidently sent back to hell. The gaping hole in the window, allowed the natural breeze to blow upon the countenance of Lilith, whose ghostly shape began to disappear before Madelyn’s eyes.

“This battle has drained my energies,” she confessed to Madelyn now, “but I’ve come closer to earning my place in heaven. You have that chance too, Madelyn, sooner than I. You must get this woman to awaken before she dies and perform the Christian Mass.”

“I’m not a priest!” Madelyn shook her head weakly. “Would God listen to *me*?”

“You don’t need be a priest, Madelyn,” Lilith replied, as her presence began fading in the light, “you were once a nun. You must use the power of mortal prayer to summon India back. She must not die a witch; she must embrace the Christian God. In that fact lies your salvation.”

Madelyn, whose bodily energies were almost gone, had to sit momentarily now in a nearby chair, her shrunken frame looking even smaller than before. Her one good eye looked up in disbelief at the vanishing countenance of Lilith.

“How can I, a witch, perform the Last Rites?” she asked in a constricted voice.

But Lilith had, within this last question, vanished completely, leaving Madelyn alone with India in the room. The departure of the mother of witches also appeared to unlock the door, for suddenly, though hesitantly, Doctor Wiggins and then several nurses entered the room. In the foreground members of the Spell-Reversal Team entered afterwards too. It was as if another spell had been thrown over the group, for no one spoke yet as the small, misshapen witch rose up on crotchety legs, walked over with great effort and looked down at the stricken woman.

It was a worn and shaken Madelyn that her teammates saw. The eerie light streaming through the shattered glass and the inexplicable ambience of the room gave even the hospital staff pause. Madelyn again prayed, but this time standing on her wobbly legs, her knotty arms raised in supplication as she prayed to the Christian God. Nothing could be done with India unless she awakened once more from her coma. For this miracle, Madelyn needed to return totally to her past life. The transformation wore on her almost as much as she and Lilith’s battle with Nebo. She asked the Lord God of Hosts to awaken the woman one more time so that she had a last chance at salvation. This prayer reworded and asked again over and over became a chant and almost a mantra. Sweat poured profusely from Madelyn’s brow, though the room remained frigid in spite of the hole in the glass. All her joints ached for rest, her breath grew labored and her heart beat violently as she poured out her spirit to God.

And then suddenly, to only Madelyn’s good eye, there was a tremor in India’s thin hand. Her eyelids fluttered and her lips moved faintly around the tube in her mouth.

“What is going on here?” the doctor finally found his voice. “The window’s broken.... What is that smell in the room?”

“Madelyn has battled with a demon,” Blaze said in awe.

“It looks as if she has won,” Mortimer concluded moving across the room and positioning himself next to Madelyn’s side.

“Leave me, priest,” she motioned irritably to him. “I must do this myself.”

“But I can give her the Last Rites,” Mortimer offered lamely, as he caught her cold stare.

“You, a defrocked priest, give her Last Rites?” Madelyn spat with a snarl. “I think not, father. Lilith has assigned me this chore. This is my last chance for salvation.”

“Lilith the *Mother of Witches*?” Blaze almost laughed.

“I want you all to leave this room at once!” the doctor stomped his foot.

One of the nurses mumbled to herself that she was going to call the police, but Elijah and Blaze stood in front of her, their arms folded, with resolution on their haggard faces.

“Why don’t you stick around and finish watching the show?” Blaze asked the frightened nurse.

“Do you repent your alliance with the devil?” Madelyn now asked India in a gravelly, witchy voice. “If you repent your sins and wish to be received in the Lord’s graces, give me a sign and then go to sleep my daughter so we can reverse the terrible thing you’ve done!”

It was not the Last Rites, but the most simple of ceremonies. Miraculously it seemed, however, India was able, through the momentary opening of her eyes and trail of tears down her cheeks to ask for forgiveness and receive Madelyn’s simple blessing.

India lie peacefully now, a faint smile on her ashen face as her last breath left her lips. India Crowley, the Shadowbrook Witch, was dead. The spell was broken. Madelyn Fontaine had given more of herself in the last hour than she had in her entire life. Though battered and internally shaken, she was still alive as she crumpled in her black dress onto the floor. As the doctor and nurses hovered over India Crowley, a third and fourth nurse arrived on the scene and turned their attention to the stricken witch.

“She can’t die too!” Blaze cried out in disbelief.

“Her pulse is low and her pupils appear cyanotic,” a male nurse announced, shaking his blond head.

“This is 1B,” the attractive black female nurse called on her cell phone, “we need a gurney here and trauma team lined up—*stat!*”

In spite of the obvious damage done to her frail body, Madelyn was smiling faintly and there was, the sorcerer also noted, a look of peace on her misshapen face.

“I will give her the Last Rites,” Mortimer said, reaching into his coat and pulling out a small black book.

“I will say a prayer,” Elijah announced, holding Alice’s trembling hand.

“I will pray too,” Blaze looked back at the others, a look of great reverence in his dark eyes “but for my own soul, not Madelyn Fontaine’s. Madelyn has made her peace with God!”

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### A New Beginning

At the very moment that India's spirit left her, a transformation took place among the twelve cats. At a signal from the Gate Keeper, India Crowley, the onetime witch, detoured to Purgatory to do several centuries of penance for the mischief she had wrought. India, who had once been a member of the Roman Catholic Church, understood the levels of torment she must pass through before her period was up. She was thankful that she hadn't been sent directly to hell where Nebo had returned.

The reversal first came to the twelve the cats in a collective dream in which they had been at the Halloween party again and seen a woman in a radiant white robe and flowing white hair confront the Shadowbrook Witch. Now, during this apparent nightmare, however, India fell dead on the ground and the woman, who they thought was an angel, told them that it was over, the spell was broken and they could wake up. Though the dream had been different from the actual event, a dizziness and feeling of weightlessness struck all of the cats as they fell from slumber to wakefulness and transformed back into human form. They could feel their arms and legs grow swiftly, their faces tingle with change, and they experienced a sudden inexplicable chill as the hairs vanished from their bodies and left them shivering naked on the bed.

The bed groaned under their collective weight, collapsing finally as eleven naked men and women returned back to their previous forms. Jim, who had been sleeping on a cushion on the carpet below, was the only young adult who had not crashed to the floor.

He stood there with the cushion in front of his private parts, staring in disbelief at this scene. At first, as they found themselves in a tangled mass on the mattress, the dazed mortals did not know what to make of their predicament. Sam was lying next to Irma with his chin between her small breasts. Wanda had managed to fall directly onto Buck, who thought he was in heaven now. The remaining cats found themselves in similarly controversial positions: Sheldon pinned between Tanya and Penny and poor Neva pinned between Ed and Drew. Tom, who had been lying on Wanda's rear, was the first to jump up onto his shaky legs. It was Jim, however, who made the announcement, "The spell is broken!" before the young adults began scrambling with embarrassment to various sectors of the room.

"Oh my God," cried Neva, pulling a sheet up to her breasts.

"Oh yuck, Buck!" Wanda shivered with disgust as the tall blond-haired youth stood there gaping at her frame.

Sheldon, Tanya, and Penny likewise disentangled themselves and, with grunts, groans and squeals, found a respective pillow, blanket and bedspread to cover themselves. Tom and Ed simply ran out of the room, while Sam broke away from the startled Irma, racing toward his closet where his clothes hung.

Embarrassed but happy to be back, Sam began rummaging around for clothing his friends could wear. After slipping quickly into a pair of jogging shorts, he began tossing them pants, sweaters, shirts, and anything else he could grab quickly and toss into their outstretched hands.

Neva's beautiful chocolate body was soon clad in an oversized white sweatshirt with a university logo on the front, while the blond, exquisitely proportioned Wanda was tossed a red sweater she pulled down to her knees. Buck was able to squeeze into a pair of Levi's, though he could not button the front, while Drew had the opposite problem as he scrambled into a pair of green corduroy pants. Irma's spare frame fit nicely into one of Sam's dress shirts, which draped satisfactorily around her hips and thighs. For the time being, Tanya and Penny settled for stretchable black sweat pants that they yanked up over their breasts and tied up with a string.

When Tom and Ed returned to the room, they both exchanged the sofa cushions they sported for the short sleeve white shirts and dress pants offered by Sam. With their modesty in tact, the remaining men also attempted to complete their wardrobes with more of Sam's clothes, while Irma, Neva, and Wanda seemed satisfied with what they now wore.

Tanya and Penny, whose bizarre attire generated snickers, found two clean tee shirts to slip over their torsos, slid their baggy sweats down a ways and retied them at their waists. Buck went into the restroom to change from the tight fitting levis into a pair of sweats Sam pulled out of the dirty clothes hamper and a faded yellow sweatshirt Sam had set aside for the Goodwill. Drew pulled a tee shirt over his hairless bare chest, while Jim, who had stood in the background ogling at the women, found himself draped in a bed sheet, since nothing else would fit around his corpulent frame.

The cast on Jim's leg had, of course been shed with the return of his great mass, but the injury he had suffered remained. He began limping into the living room with the other humans, support being offered by several helpful hands.

"Put it on, it stretches really wide." Sam placed a pair of shorts in Jim's hand.

Jim nodded obligingly but had begun feeling the pain acutely in his leg. Looking around for a place to sit down, he looked pathetic draped in his sheet and holding the shorts limply in his hand. Plopping down in an easy chair, his chubby bare legs protruding beneath, the once portly cat caused laughter in the group. Irma had the presence of mind to find a bottle of aspirins and a glass of water for him as she chattered happily with members of the twelve. Not caring what they were going to do or where they might go from this point, the young adults were elated and exalted by their transformation. The sound of their own voices and the ability to walk on two legs was a wondrous experience for them all. After the twelve humans had congregated in the living room, Sam led them all in a prayer of thanksgiving. This time there was no mockery in Drew or Wanda's voices. There were, in fact, tears in everyone's eyes as the apartment manager gave all the credit to God:

"Lord, we thank you for giving us our bodies back. We know now that there are secrets that even the prophets and saints didn't know. The nightmare inflicted upon us by India Crowley tested us as cats and, as we adjust to our human forms, has given us all a new lease on life. Please let our incredible experiences make us better humans now that we have lived these days as cats. Do not let us ever forget your special creatures, for they are specially blessed!"

"God bless the cats." Irma murmured, and they all followed with a heartfelt "Amen!"

Except for their bare feet, Tom and Ed, whose measurements were close to Sam's, looked rather sporty in their dress shirts and slacks, but the smaller and thinner Drew looked like an adolescent wearing his older brother's clothes. All of the girls had to be satisfied with

sweatshirts, sweaters, and shirts. But no one seemed to care what they looked like at this point. Without being asked, the women held up a sheet while Sam, Buck and Drew helped Jim into the shorts Sam salvaged from the Goodwill bag. In the end, the portly youth added the sheet, itself, over the garment but as a flowing cape that he fastened crudely at the neck.

They were back. The spell had been broken. They would, they agreed, forever be family and friends. For that hour before the Spell Reversal Team returned, the twelve young adults continued to marvel at their restored bodies, sharing the experience in excited spurts of emotion as would sleepers awakening from a long, incredible dream.

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Alice, who had more at stake than the others, had coaxed Elijah to leave the hospital as the priest followed Madelyn's gurney from the room. It seemed ludicrous to give the Last Rites to someone who had invoked Lilith, the mother of witches, to undo a spell, and yet Blaze wanted to believe that Madelyn could be saved, for it meant he could be saved too. Mortimer had no such doubts. The priest could do no more than raise his hand up in a blessing and mumble a few words before Madelyn was rushed into the trauma room down the hall, but he sensed, as had Blaze, that Madelyn Fontaine, after a long, controversial life, was at peace with God.

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"Father, bless me, for I have sinned grievously," Blaze said to Mortimer as they settled in the back seat of the car.

Mortimer, who had been fastening his seat belt, did a double take now. "I beg your pardon," he uttered in disbelief.

"I'm not an ordained minister," Elijah interrupted, as he turned the key, "but all you have to do is ask God to forgive you, Blaze. You don't need to confess your sins."

"Yes, Mister O'Dare," piped Alice, "pray to Jesus; that's all you have to do!"

As the gravity of the sorcerer's request filled his mind, Mortimer, the wizard priest, almost laughed aloud until he saw in Blaze's dark eyes something he had not seen before.

"Listen my son," Mortimer said wearily, patting the sorcerer's knee, "I may only be a heretic priest, but you're still a Catholic, a member of my church." "Excommunication can be reversed. If you wish to confess your sins," he whispered conspiratorially to him, "we'll conduct this in private, so these non-believers won't hear."

Stricken with the absurdity of it all, the overwrought Alice began to laugh hysterically then. The long, dreadful ordeal leading up to India's death and the overwhelming concern that Sam might still be a cat seemed to catch up to her all at once as her laughter grew imbecilic and then turned to tears.

"Alice, Alice, stop it!" Elijah patted her leg gently, glancing at the two men in his rearview mirror.

"Non-believers,... he calls *us* non-believers," her voice began to constrict, "a heretic priest says this to a blasphemer, who mocks the Lord." "... This has been one, long, frightful obscene joke on reality, hasn't it Elijah?" She shook her head. "My fiancé wanted me to pet him and stroke his fur, but I couldn't help it, I still hated cats. They made my skin crawl. What does that make me, Elijah? God forgive me for not reaching out with my heart to those poor furry little beasts!"

“There-there, Miss Wagnall,” Mortimer consoled, tapping her seat, “you did everything you could for them. It’s how you’re raised. My mother loved cats when I was a child, and so I grew up loving them too.”

“I had one cat that looked a lot like Neva,” Blaze said wistfully, closing his eyes. “Sometimes I think she was the best friend I ever had.”

“When this is all over,” the priest suggested earnestly, “we should all go straight to the animal shelter and adopt three or four. They’re hardly any trouble. All they need is a little food, a kitty litter, and a warm lap to lie on once in awhile.”

“You’re right, Mortimer,” Elijah nodded thoughtfully, glancing at Alice with concern, “I don’t think I’ll ever look at cats the same way again!”

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Upon reaching Shadowbrook Arms, the group grew silent as they imagined what they might find. Would it be humans, they wondered, or would it be cats? With bated breath, they climbed out of the station wagon and walked as quickly as their trembling legs would carry them to apartment 1A. When they arrived at Sam’s apartment, it was, of course, Alice who began hammering on the wood with both fists calling out impatiently for them to open the door.

“Sam, Sam, all of you, we’re back. Please let us in if you can! For God’s sake, open the Goddamn door!”

Wincing at this blasphemy, Elijah tried to comfort her but his own heart was hammering too loudly for him to speak. *Irma*, he thought reflectively, *I almost wish you would remain a cat!*

When the door opened, it seemed to do so on its own accord, swinging wide to expose a dark cavern inside.

“Surprise!” the twelve adults shouted.

The last rays of sundown flooded into the living room as the Spell-Reversal Team stood silhouetted against the glow. In youthful exuberance the twelve young adults had treated this event as a reunion in which honored guests had just arrived, but it was too much for poor Alice. As she had done after discovering the bewitched cats, Sam’s fiancée fainted abruptly onto the floor.

“There she goes again!” cried Wanda.

“She must be anemic,” Drew whispered to Ed.

“Someone get a glass of water,” Sam directed, bending down to cradle her blond head in his arms.

For a moment Irma looked with understanding at this poignant scene. The bitter-sweetness of her experience as a cat and Sam’s companion had ended with the breaking of the spell. This scene seemed to make it a reality. Looking around the room at her newfound friends, she wondered if it might also be the same for them now that they were back in human form. Neva and Drew had been inseparable as cats, but now the tall, beautiful black woman looked with embarrassment at the sparsely built Drew. Wanda, for that matter, would still need to be drunk to have a fling with Buck. Sheldon, it appeared, was still engaged to the sassy Tanya. Penny, who sat quietly in a distant chair, had seemed to withdraw back into her old introverted self, in spite of all she had been through with that pair. For Tom and Ed, who had not paired off with anyone in the group, it was not so easy to tell, but Irma was certain that they would go back to their old selves too.

As she found herself watching the resuscitation of this frail woman, wishing that she could have remained a cat and feeling guilt because she hoped Alice would not be resuscitated at all, a notion forced itself into her thoughts contradicting her present mood.

“It is possible,” she whispered, delighted at the sound of her crinkly voice, “after all we’ve gone through, that we’ve actually changed? This experience has certainly changed *me!*”

She, Irma Fresco, would use every ounce of her energies for the rest of her life, to make it so. When she looked up again, she noticed a certain look in Penny’s silent gaze, a quiet strength and nobility, and there was, though fleetingly, a fond fair glance exchanged between Neva and Drew. A voice broke into her reverie then “... Irma, ... Irma Fresco, ... Irma, is that you?”

Elijah had looked at the slightly built little woman with short black hair and almond-shaped blue eyes and recognized her immediately.

“Hello, Elijah,” she extended a small, trembling hand, “would you like me to introduce you and the others to our group!”

“I’d love it!” he said, taking her proffered hand.

By now, Alice had come to, rose up with Sam and Mortimer’s help and been directed groggily to the couch. Blaze looked up Neva to tell her about his own black Persian cat, as the young adults mulled festively in the room. Irma gathered together all three men and asked them to sit next to Alice on the couch.

“May I have your attention!” Irma called out in a jubilant voice. “These wonderful people, Elijah, Mortimer, Blaze, and Alice, whom most of you have met, would like to meet you all once again in your human forms.”

“I’m Irma Fresco,” she began to introduce the twelve with a polite bow. “The young man, nursing Alice, is her fiancé Sam, the sable-colored Burmese you saw scampering around the house. That big blond haired fellow was the big yellow tabby Buck.... This fellow, Buck’s best friend, is Tom, the Maine coon everyone liked to pet, and here is that naughty Havana cat, Ed, and the sleek tan feline Drew, who is Buck’s and our dearest friend.” “These women,” she pulled them both forward by their wrists, “are, of course, the wonderful Persians you liked to cuddle, Neva and Wanda—black and white negatives of themselves. And let’s not forget our brave Sheldon, who had been a Norwegian forest cat, his girl friend Tanya, a Siamese, I believe, and,” “come on, don’t be shy,” she motioned, looking across the room, “... Penny, a beautiful Abyssinian I wished you folks had seen.” “Last but not least,” Irma directed the spell-changer’s attention to the big, portly young man, whose toga-clad body was reminiscent of Emperor Nero as he lounged in the chair, “I want to introduce you to that entertaining fat little calico everyone loved: Jim Courtney.” “How are you feeling, Jim?” she smiled sweetly down at him now.

“It’s good to be back.” Jim reached out and gently squeezed Irma’s hand.

As if this was the proper thing to do now, the four members of the Spell Reversal Team rose up from the couch and mingled with the twelve young adults. Alice paired off with Sam, but the apartment manager would glance frequently at Irma, marveling at how much she had changed.

The stories told and retold from their smiling faces would one day be written down by Irma Fresco in a book. She had learned so much as a cat. Once in the shadow of her friend India Crowley, she had struck her neighbors and friends as mousy and unattractive by virtue of her attitude and drab apparel, but everything had changed now.... And something else, she suddenly realized after experiencing this same marvel as a cat.... She no longer needed her glasses! This

realization, though astounding, seemed somehow irrelevant after the ordeal she had gone through, and yet she wanted to share it with someone special now.

Looking around at all her chattering friends, then focusing a last moment on Sam, she turned suddenly and found Elijah standing next to her again in the room. Remembering the warm little black cat in his coat, Elijah's voice constricted with emotion as he tried to tell her what was in his mind, but his heart was hammering too loudly again for him to speak.

"Guess what Elijah," she said, clasping his shaking hands, "my eyes are twenty-twenty now. I was so nearsighted before I couldn't go anywhere without glasses. How do you account for that?"

"I-I can't Irma," he stumbled with the words, "perhaps all of you will retain something from your feline bodies.... I can't speak for the others who were cats.... The only cat I grew to know and love is now a young woman again. I feel like I lost my favorite pet!"

"You haven't lost me, Elijah," she promised, her blue eyes flashing with tears. "How can I ever forget the warm haven you gave to me? How can I not love you in return?"

Not daring to misconstrue her meaning and spoil the mood, Elijah very wisely, smiled, but turned the subject his way.

"Perhaps," he began clumsily again, "... I mean I am several years older than you, but, but—"

"Yes, of course," she nodded pertly, a lock of black hair falling over her brow.

"I was going to ask you on date." Elijah began to relax. "... I'm sort of out of practice, but perhaps we could have dinner and go the theatre or something."

"I've got a great idea," Irma emitted a girlish squeal, "why don't we have a party!"

"That's a capital idea!" cried Mortimer now.

"Yeah, it will be our first reunion as humans!" piped Sam.

"I don't know," quipped Neva, looking across the room at Drew, "the last time we had a party like that we were turned into cats."

Drew boldly walked across the room toward Neva, while Buck, who had finally inched up next to Wanda Craven, felt himself drowning in her gaze. Sam, Alice, Mortimer, Blaze, Tom, Sheldon, Tanya, Penny, and Ed joined this foursome to plan the reunion ahead, as Irma, the very person who had initiated the idea, withdrew with Elijah into another room.

As they looked down at the collapsed bed, Elijah could not help laughing when he realized what this meant.

"Ho-ho! That's where you cats were lying when the spell was broken!" he declared, moisture willing up into his eyes.

"Yes," nodded Irma, "we ruined poor Sam's bed."

"So, tell me," Elijah pressed forward awkwardly once more, "would you consider, I mean, a real date, not just the reunion?"

"Yes, my dear Elijah," answered Irma, bending forward and kissing his check, "I would be honored. One would think it was *you* who needed glasses now!"

"I think you're a beautiful woman Irma," Elijah tried to explain, "but not in a way that some of those fellows out there would understand." "... You have," he searched for the words, "a beautiful mind and soul.... You have the most expressive eyes I've ever known.... You're generous, sweet, and unpretentious. You were, as a cat, Irma, the most precious miracle to grace my sore eyes..."

Elijah's voice trailed off in reflection. Irma thought about what he had said and shook her head. Irma, the human being, was, for the preacher, beyond mortal words. He remembered how she had studied her reflection, as she did now, in a toaster in Blaze O'Dare's kitchen. Now she stared with the same wonderment into a mirror on the bedroom door. The long sleeved men's dress shirt that covered her little body could not have been more becoming in Elijah's eyes.

"You are describing Irma, the cat," she said, looking in wonderment at herself. "Irma, the human, was an eccentric, who dabbled in the occult and, when she was India Crowley's friend, had wanted to be a witch."

"Your mind and soul are beautiful," Elijah insisted, studying her pixie frame. "... Those are constants, Irma, that make all the difference in the world. You have found your way back to God after being bewitched by India Crowley. You have taken the best parts of Irma, the cat, with you. I'm thankful now that I was a part of this miracle. So much of that small, black purring cat is left in the Irma Fresco looking into the mirror." "Don't you see?" his voice constricted again, "... it is *I* who am bewitched now!"

## Epilogue

### (One Year Later)

The twelve young adults proved to be better humans than they had been before becoming cats. Cathood, as Irma would label it, in her book, had been good for all of them. It had changed them. It had made them not only good but stronger people, and it would, she was certain, make them lifelong friends.

Sam, of course married Alice the following year, but he was no longer the firebrand religious fanatic the tenants had known at Shadowbrook Arms. That had changed almost immediately when he became a cat. Perhaps many people would not consider him as good a Christian as had been before, but he was a better friend and lover. Perhaps he did not pray quite so often as before, but he opened his heart to others now, regardless of what they believed. He no longer judged them by unshakable standards nor did he try to argue the perfection of his beliefs. He was tolerant and forgiving and listened to others even when he felt they were wrong.

Alice, who had not been a cat, had changed also after the experience. She would always have trouble warming up to the little furry beasts, but she too was becoming a good listener and her wondrous experience with Sam, the cat, had mellowed her to such mysteries in life. She and Sam would sit sometimes together in a quiet room or under the open sky and talk about what had happened to them or sometimes they would not talk at all and merely savor the fact that they had been given final proof, in the most extraordinary fashion, that God, who works in mysterious ways, exists and will triumph in the end.

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For the courageous Sheldon, who led two female cats through one of the worst ordeals of the twelve, becoming a human again had reinforced his relationship with Tanya. Tanya, after experiencing Sheldon's nurturing care toward Penny and herself, had learned humility and patience as a cat. Although Tanya planned to marry Sheldon someday, Penny, whom she had treated insufferably in the beginning, was like a sister to her now.

Penny, of all people, struck up a lasting friendship with Tom Wellitz at Shadowbrook Arms. Because each of them had journeyed on separate odysseys as cats, they found much to talk about at the reunion. It turned out, to Penny's delight, that she and Tom had much in common as humans. Both of them were Jewish, and they both loved swing music and jazz. Of all the human changes Irma had hoped would come about, in fact, the beguiling Abyssinian, who paired up with the Maine coon, pleased her the most.

For Buck and Wanda's friendship, time would, of course, tell, but the big yellow tabby and Persian were both attending college together in earnest now. Being cats had given them a focus on life. Buck, who had tried to hard to be top dog as a human had proven to be more than top cat to his friends. He could not believe that the fabulous Neva was dating Drew, but, unlike the old Buck, who would have made fun of this match, the new Buck was actually proud of the awkward and sparsely built youth.

Buck's friend Ed, whose drift toward feral cathood had worried them all very much, had been greatly moved by his experience as a cat, so much so, in fact, he decided to serve the church. His family had tried to talk him out of it, but Ed could not be swayed, even by his friend Buck now that he had decided to become a priest.

Jim, being a fat kid, a fat adult and then a fat cat, was on a diet now. Buck, Drew and Tom gave Jim a great deal of moral support during this period of time. After only a year's work, Jim has lost eighty pounds and had also, as all the other members of Buck's gang, gone back to school.

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Perhaps, viewed by Irma, herself, the most unexpected change had come for Elijah Gray and herself. In this matter, she would later write, her instincts had been dead wrong. She had grown to love him as a father figure when she had been rescued by him on the street. The crush she had on Sam, which had no foundation in hope or logic, had seemed to make her meeting with the preacher a bittersweet affair. Elijah had loved Irma, the cat. The preacher had, in fact, gone out and bought a little black cat just like Irma and called her Lilith, which seemed to prove his affection for her as his pet. But, now as a mortal woman, she looked at the frisky little cat one day and realized that Lilith was a living tribute of Elijah's love toward her that defied his own faith. How could she not help but to love him in return?

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The greatest changes if not the most wondrous transformations, however, did not come from the miracle surrounding the cats.

The first of these miraculous changes, at least in Mortimer Hildebrand's thinking, was what had happened to Blaze O'Dare, the make-believe sorcerer, who had led them to Madelyn, the Witch. For several years of his adult life Blaze had detoured from the mother church in a search for the mysteries of life. His journey into what he believed was white magic had brought him close to the brink of spiritual darkness. But now, after seeing, with his own eyes the miracle of the cats and the spell-reversal by Madelyn that led to her own return to the church, the sorcerer was back. What it meant that he was blessed by a heretic priest, no longer mattered, since he knew that white magic did, in fact, exist, and God was the greatest magician of them all.

Even greater than the change that came over Blaze was the change that Mortimer Hildebrand reported for Madelyn Fontaine.

"I could not believe my eyes," he told Irma one night, as he sat at the dinner table with Elijah, Irma and Blaze. "... The old woman, not only recovered from her dreadful injuries, she seemed to go through a metamorphoses. The doctors replaced her sightless eye with a right fine glass one. Her matted hair, which had not one gray hair showing as a witch turned snow white after her experience, but the wrinkles on her skin have even been smoothed out somehow." "... She's a dignified looking old lady now," he groped for clarification. "... I'm not saying that she's attractive mind you, for that woman is still the ugliest woman I have ever known,... but there is another beauty—"

"Ah, yes," interrupted Elijah, squeezing Irma's hand, "the soul."

"Yes," the priest nodded his head gently, "... the soul," "and, of course," he added after a pause, "the workings of the mind. Unfortunately, as you both have come to realize, they are not the same. For the mind tempts us, and the soul, which is a child, as the beasts of the field,

accepts unconditionally. Madelyn learned this when she confronted her greatest challenge and almost lost her soul... Now she is a child again, having returned to the church as a nun.”

“Returned?” Blaze marveled at the thought. “How did she escape excommunication?”

“A nun indeed,” Irma giggled to herself.

“Madelyn had been a novitiate when she quit the convent during the grace period in the Catholic Church,” Mortimer explained, “yet she could not forgive herself for failing in her vows. Her entire odyssey of searching began back then. With the great knowledge of the occult, which she offers church doctors today, the Roman Catholic Church will better understand its enemy Satan. As a gatherer of mysteries she returns, but this time to help the Sacred College in its quest for knowledge.”

“India’s death bed repentance was a miracle too,” Irma said wistfully, trying to remember the India she once knew.

“A miracle?... I don’t think so,” replied Blaze, stroking his beard, “that woman was barely alive. All she did was move her little finger when Madelyn asked her a question. I’d hardly call that repentance. She didn’t even open her eyes!”

“In the Roman Catholic Church,” Mortimer explained thoughtfully, “it’s not necessary to even be awake during the Last Rites. But Madelyn didn’t really give her such rites; she improvised too much for that. She was trying to save her soul, what was left of it anyhow.” “In our faith,” he said, nodding affectionately to his hosts, “it’s customary for death bed repenters like India to spend time in Purgatory. I don’t know if she’ll be going there now.... I’m not so sure about myself.”

“Mortimer,” Elijah said, raising a glass of water up as a toast, “I don’t believe in Purgatory nor the efficacy of prayers to the Saints practiced in your church, but I’ve always believed in friendship. I’ve learned, against my own nature, that God does, in fact, work in mysterious ways. You, gentleman, are proof of it. Madelyn is certainly proof of it too, and this dear child I once carried in my coat is the greatest proof of it all.”

“I shall toast to you both,” Irma said, raising her glass.

“Here, here,” nodded Blaze, joining the toast, “and to Madelyn and Lilith too!”

**The End**