

# One

**F**rom the beginning, I was aware of cats.  
Cats everywhere.

I couldn't really see them—my eyes were open, but when the cats were nearby I registered nothing except shifting forms in the darkness. I could smell them though, as clearly as I could smell my mother as I took nourishment, or my siblings stirring next to me as I worked my way to find life-giving milk.

I didn't know they were cats, of course—I just knew they were creatures not like me, present in our den but not attempting to nurse alongside me. Later, when I came to see that they were small and fast and lithe, I realized they were not only “not dogs,” but were their own distinct kind of animal.

We lived together in a cool, dark home. Dry dirt underneath my nose gave up exotic, old smells. I delighted in inhaling them, filling my nose with rich, flavorful aromas. Above, a ceiling of parched wood dropped dust into the air, the roof pressing down so low that whenever my mother stood up from the packed depression in the earth that served as our bed to leave my

siblings and me—squeaking in protest and huddling against each other for reassurance—her upright tail was halfway to the beams. I did not know where my mother went when she departed, I only knew how anxious we were until she returned.

The sole source of light in the den came from a single square hole at the far end. Through this window to the world poured astounding scents of cold and alive and wet, of places and things even more intoxicating than what I could smell in the den. But even though I saw an occasional cat flicker through the hole out into the world or returning from some unknown place, my mother pushed me back whenever I tried to crawl toward the outdoors.

As my legs strengthened and my eyesight sharpened I played with the kittens as I would with my siblings. Often I singled out the same family of cats toward the back recesses of our communal home, where a pair of young kitties were particularly friendly and their mother occasionally licked me. I thought of her as Mother Cat.

After some time spent romping joyfully with the little felines, my own mother would come over and retrieve me, pulling me out of the pile of kittens by the back of my neck. My siblings all sniffed me suspiciously when my mother dropped me next to them. Their responses suggested they did not care for the residual whiff of cat.

This was my fun, wonderful life, and I had no reason to suspect it would ever change.

. . .

I was nursing drowsily, hearing the peeping sounds of my brothers and sisters as they did the same, when suddenly my

mother lunged to her feet, her movements so unexpected that my legs were lifted off the ground before I dropped from the teat.

I knew instantly something bad was happening.

A panic spread through the den, rippling from cat to cat like a breeze. They stampeded toward the back of the den, the mothers carrying their mewling offspring by the backs of their necks. My siblings and I surged toward our mother, crying for her, frightened because she was frightened.

Strong beams of light swept over us, stinging my eyes. They came from the hole, as did the sounds: "Jesus! There's a million cats in the crawl space!"

I had no sense of what was making these noises, nor why the den was filled with flashing lights. The scent of an entirely new sort of creature wafted toward me from the hole. We were in danger and it was these unseen creatures that were the threat. My mother panted, ducking her head, backing away, and we all did our best to stumble after her, beseeching her with our tiny voices not to leave us.

"Let me see. Oh Christ, look at all of them!"

"Is this going to be a problem?"

"Hell yes it's a problem."

"What do you want to do?"

"We'll have to call the exterminator."

I was able to distinguish a difference between the first set of sounds and the second, a variation of pitch and tone, though I wasn't sure what it meant.

"Can't we just poison them ourselves?"

"You got something on the truck?"

"No, but I can get some."

My mother continued to deny us the comfort of her teats.

Her muscles were tense, her ears back, her attention focused on the source of the sounds. I wanted to nurse, to know we were safe.

“Well, but if we do that, we’re going to have all these dead cats all over the neighborhood. There’s too many. If we were just talking one or two, fine, but this is a whole cat colony.”

“You wanted to finish the demo by the end of June. That don’t give us a lot of time to get rid of them.”

“I know.”

“Look, see the bowls? Somebody’s actually been feeding the damn things.”

The lights dipped, joining together in a burning spot of brightness on the floor just inside the hole.

“Well that’s just great. What the hell is wrong with people?”

“You want me to try to find out who it is?”

“Nah. The problem goes away when the cats do. I’ll call somebody.”

The probing lights flickered around one last time, and then winked out. I heard dirt moving and distinct, heavy footfalls, so much louder than the quiet steps of the cats. Slowly, the presence of the new creatures faded from the hole, and gradually the kittens resumed their play, happy again. I nursed alongside my siblings, then went to see Mother Cat’s kitties. As usual, when the daylight coming through the square hole dimmed, the adult cats streamed out, and during the night I would hear them return and sometimes smell the blood of the small kill they were bringing back to their respective broods.

When Mother hunted, she went no farther than the big bowls of dry food that were set just inside the square hole. I

could smell the meal on her breath and it was fish and plants and meats, and I began to wonder what it would taste like.

Whatever had happened to cause the panic was over.

. . .

I was playing with Mother Cat's relentless kittens when our world shattered. This time the light wasn't a single shaft, it was a blazing explosion, turning everything bright.

The cats scattered in terror. I froze, unsure what I should do.

"Get the nets ready; when they run they're going to do it all at once!"

A sound from outside of the hole. "We're ready!"

Three large beings wriggled in behind the light. They were the first humans I had ever seen, but I had smelled others, I now realized—I just had not been able to visualize what they looked like. Something deep inside of me sparked a recognition—I felt strangely drawn to them, wanting to run to them as they crawled forward into the den. Yet the alarm crackling in the frenzied cats froze me in place.

"Got one!"

A male cat hissed and screamed.

"Jesus!"

"Watch it, a couple just escaped!"

"Well, hell!" came the response from outside.

I was separated from my mother and tried to sort out her scent from among the cats, and then went limp when I felt the sharp teeth on the nape of my neck. Mother Cat dragged me back, deep into the shadows, to a place where a large crack split the stone wall. She squeezed me through the crack into a small, tight space and set me down with her kittens, curling up with

us. The cats were utterly silent, following Mother Cat's lead. I lay with them in the darkness and listened to the humans call to each other.

"There's also a litter of puppies here!"

"Are you kidding me? Hey, get that one!"

"Jesus, they're fast."

"Come on, kitty-kitty, we won't hurt you."

"There's the mother dog."

"Thing is terrified. Watch it don't bite you."

"It's okay. You'll be okay, girl. Come on."

"Gunter didn't say anything about dogs."

"He didn't say there would be so many frigging cats, either."

"Hey, you guys catching them in the nets out there?"

"This is hard as hell to do!" someone shouted from outside.

"Come on, doggie. Damn! Watch it! Here comes the mother dog!"

"Jesus! Okay, we got the dog!" called the outside voice.

"Here puppy, here puppy. They're so little!"

"And easier than the damn cats, that's for sure."

We heard these noises without comprehension as to what they might mean. Some light made its way into our space behind the wall, leaking in through the crack, but the human smells did not come any closer to our hiding place. The mingle of fear and feline on the air gradually faded, as did the sounds.

Eventually, I slept.

. . .

When I awoke, my mother was gone. My brothers and sisters were gone. The depression in the earth where we had been born and had laid nursing still smelled of our family, but the empty, vacant sense that overcame me when I sniffed for

Mother brought a whimper from me, a sob in my throat I couldn't quiet.

I did not understand what had happened, but the only cats left in the space were Mother Cat and her kittens. Frantic, seeking answers and assurance, I went back to her, crying out my fear. She had brought her kittens out from behind the wall and they were gathered back on the small square of cloth I thought of as their home. Mother Cat examined me carefully with her black nose. Then she curled around me, lying down, and I followed the scent and began to nurse. The sensation on my tongue was new and strange, but the warmth and nurture were what I craved, and I fed gratefully. After a few moments, her kittens joined me.

. . .

The next morning, a few of the male cats returned. They approached Mother Cat, who hissed out a warning, and then went to their own area to sleep.

Later, when the light from the hole had been its brightest and had started to dim, I picked up a whiff of another human, a different one. Now that I understood the difference, I realized I had had this scent in my nose before.

“Kitty? Kitty?”

Mother Cat unexpectedly left us on our square of cloth. The odd flash of cold that came with her departure shocked all of us, and we turned to each other for comfort, squirming ourselves into a pile of kittens and dog. I could see her as she approached the hole, but she did not advance all the way out—just stood, faintly illuminated. The male cats were on alert, but they did not follow her to the human.

“Are you the only one left? I don't know what happened, I

wasn't around to see, but there are tracks in the dirt, so I know there were trucks. Did they take all the other cats?" The human crawled in through the hole, momentarily blotting out the light. He was male—I could smell this, though I would not learn until later the distinction between man and woman. He seemed slightly larger than the first humans I'd seen.

Again, I was drawn to this special creature, an inexplicable yearning rising up inside me. But the memory of the terror of the day before kept me with my kitten siblings.

"Okay, I see you guys. Hi, how did you get away? And they took your bowls. Nice."

There was a rustling sound and the delicious smell of food wafted onto the air. "Here's a little bit for you. I'll go and get a bowl. Some water, too."

The man backed out, wriggling in the dirt. As soon as he was gone the cats surged forward, feeding ravenously on whatever was spilled on the dirt.

I alerted to the approach of the same person sooner than the cats, as if they were unable to identify his scent as it grew stronger. The males all reacted, though, when he reappeared at the hole, fleeing back to their corner. Only Mother Cat stood fast. A new bowl was shoved forward and there was a meal in it, but Mother Cat made no approach, just stood watching. I could sense her tension and knew she was ready to bolt and run if he tried to capture us like the other humans had.

"Here is some water, too. Do you have kittens? You look like you're nursing. Did they take your babies? Oh, kitty, I am so sorry. They're going to tear down these houses and put up an apartment complex. You and your family can't stay here, okay?"

Eventually the man left, and the adult cats cautiously re-

sumed eating. I sniffed Mother Cat's mouth when she returned, but when I licked her face she turned abruptly away.

Time was marked by the shifting light pouring in from the square hole. More cats came; a few who had been living with us before, and a new female, whose arrival triggered a fight among the males that I watched with intense interest. One pair of combatants lay locked together for so long that the only way I knew they were not asleep was the way their tails flickered, not wagging in happiness but communicating a real distress. When they broke their clinch they stretched out on the ground, noses nearly touching, and made un-catlike sounds at each other. Another fight consisted of one male lying on his side and smacking another one, who was on all four feet. The standing one would tap the sprawling one on the top of the head and the one lying down would respond with a series of rapid clawings.

Why didn't they all get up on their back two legs and attack each other? This behavior, while stressful for all the animals in the den, seemed utterly pointless.

Other than Mother Cat I had no interaction with the adults, who acted as if I did not exist. I tangled with the kittens, wrestling and climbing and chasing all day. Sometimes I would growl at them, irritated with their style of play, which just seemed wrong, somehow. I wanted to climb on their backs and chew on their necks, but they couldn't seem to get the hang of this, going limp when I knocked them over or jumped on top of their tiny frames. Sometimes they wrapped their entire bodies around my snout, or batted at my face with teeny, sharp claws, pouncing on me from all angles.

At night I missed my siblings. I missed my mother. I had made a family, but I understood that the cats were different

from me. I had a pack, but it was a pack of kitties, which did not seem right. I felt restless and unhappy and at times I would whimper out my anguish and Mother Cat would lick me and I would feel somewhat better, but things were just not the way they should have been.

Nearly every day, the man came and brought food. Mother Cat punished me with a swift slap on my nose when I tried to approach him, and I learned the rules of the den: we were not to be seen by humans. None of the other felines seemed at all inclined to feel the touch of a person, but for me a growing desire to be held by him made it increasingly difficult to obey the laws of the den.

When Mother Cat stopped nursing us, we had to adjust to eating the meals the man supplied, which consisted of tasty, dried morsels and then sometimes exotic, wet flesh. Once I grew accustomed to the change it was far better for me—I had been so hungry for so long it seemed a natural condition, but now I could eat my fill and lap up as much water as I could hold. I consumed more than my sibling kitties combined, and was now noticeably larger than any of them, though they all were unimpressed by my size and resolutely refused to play properly, continuing to mostly claw at my nose.

We mimicked Mother Cat and shied away from the hole when the human presence filled it, but otherwise dared to flirt with the very edge, drinking in the rich aromas from outside. Mother Cat sometimes went out at night, and I could sense that the kittens all wanted to join her. For me, it was more the daylight that lured, but I was mindful of Mother Cat and knew she would swiftly punish any attempt to stray beyond the boundary.

One day the man, whose fragrances were as familiar to me

now as Mother Cat's, appeared just outside the hole, making sounds. I could sense other humans with him.

"They're usually way toward the back. The mother comes closer when I bring food, but she won't let me touch her."

"Is there another way out of the crawl space besides this window?" It was a different voice, accompanied by different smells—a woman. I unconsciously wagged my tail.

"I don't think so. How will this work?"

"We've got these big gloves to protect us, and if you'll stay here with the net, you can catch any cats that make it past us. How many are there?"

"I don't know, now. Until recently the female was obviously nursing, but if there are any kittens they don't come out in the day. A couple others, I don't know what sex. There used to be so many, but I guess the developer must have gotten them. He's going to tear down this whole row of houses and put up an apartment complex."

"He'll never get a demolition permit with feral cats living here."

"That's probably why he did it. Do you think he hurt the ones he caught?"

"Um, okay, so, there's no law against trapping and destroying cats living on your own property. I mean, he could have taken them to one of the other shelters, I guess."

"There were a lot of them. The whole property was crawling with cats."

"Thing is, I didn't hear anything about a big bunch of cats showing up anywhere. Animal rescue is a pretty tight community; we all talk to each other. If twenty cats hit the system, I would have heard about it. You okay? Hey, sorry, maybe I shouldn't have said anything."

“I’m fine. I just wish I had known it was going to happen.”

“You did the right thing by calling us, though, Lucas. We’ll find good homes for any cats we find. Ready?”

I had grown completely bored with the monotonous noises and was busily wrestling with the kittens when I felt Mother Cat stiffen, alarm jolting through her. Her unwinking eyes were on the hole, and her tail twitched. Her ears were flat back against her head. I regarded her curiously, ignoring the little male kitty who ran up, swatted my mouth, and darted away.

Then a light blazed and I understood her fear. Mother Cat fled toward the back wall, abandoning her young. I saw her slip soundlessly into the hidden crack just as two humans came in through the hole. The kittens milled in confusion, the male cats fled to the back of the den, and I shied away, afraid.

The light danced along the walls, then found me, blazing brightly in my face.

“Hey! There’s a puppy in here!”