

Cats Alone

Trilogy, #1

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For Cassidy, a wonderful friend.

Introduction

Cats Alone tells the heart-warming feline tale of Shadow and his tribe of cats (and dogs!), who adore their elderly owner Joseph. Even though he's getting old, he still loves them and cares for them as best he can.

But the pets' peaceful lives are about to be turned upside down. It all starts when Joseph brings a new dog home—he's already got one seemingly vicious dog locked in the kitchen, but the calm Tess seems like a completely different dog. Shadow is ready to accept her as one of the tribe, but Ruby, a cat who is deeply distrustful of dogs, is wary and argumentative.

When they wake up to a cold morning with Joseph nowhere to be seen, Tess is Ruby's immediate scapegoat for the problem. But blaming the new dog won't bring Joseph back and Shadow knows that. Left alone, he tries to keep the tribe together through conflict, hunger and hopelessness.

There's one question on everyone's minds: when will Joseph come back?

Chapter 1

"I'm going out! Be back inna, back inna bit!"

Twitching my tail, I leap up once, twice, three times, climbing a dusty bookshelf by following old pawprints. Pressing my whiskered face against the glass, I watch Joseph shuffle away. His head is bent over and he's wearing the big coat that he always wears when he goes out. We're alone, alright.

I pause for a few moments, until our old owner turns at the end of the garden path, littered with old newspapers and tin cans. Satisfied, I make my way back down to the floor, my paws meeting plastic and greasy paper. This house... it's not the best, and I can admit that. Joseph isn't one for cleaning—but he's old! He's too old to be scurrying here and there with a broom or making who-knows-how-many trips out to the bins. It's not his fault.

But it's not ours either. Padding over to the armchair, the centre of our world, I find my tribe, settled in their normal places. Ruby, a stark ginger queen (or female cat), looks up from one arm and tilts her head to the side. Her shadow, Sapphire (same colour, same copper eyes) is perched on the other arm, maybe asleep, maybe awake. That's her attitude: aloof, confusing, quiet. You'll never know what she's thinking unless she tells you.

And between them, curled up on the seat? That's my Sophia. Well, she isn't mine, but I protect her because of... a long story, to put it a short way. She's a sweet little kitten, snow-white with large, round eyes you could get lost in. I've seen my fair share of kittens, but none of them were like Sophia.

"Where's he gone?" Ruby speaks first, getting up and stretching a little, her eyes staying on me, "to the shop?"

"No bags," shaking my head, I jump up, nuzzling the dozing Sophia before continuing to the back of the armchair: my spot, "I'm not sure, to be honest."

"Can't be a walk. *He's* still in the cupboard," gesturing towards the kitchen door, hanging a little off its hinges, she lies down again and looks up at me. I can't work out the exact look in her eyes, but previous conversations tell me it isn't happy. It never is when we talk about *him*, "Shadow, is he ever going to get rid of it?"

"He's not an it—"

I try to argue, but sudden barking from the kitchen interrupts me. Typical. Ruby sends me an annoyed look, but Sophia catches my attention. Moving about a little, her two innocent eyes open, both kitten-blue, and she looks around, afraid.

Getting up, I climb down and let her snuggle into my dark, shaggy coat, her little paws pressing on my chest. Any sort of point I try to make now, in defence of him, will be redundant, but I'm happy with Sophia being comfortable and safe. Arguments with Ruby push themselves to the back of my mind, letting responsibility take over.

The barking stops almost as abruptly as it began and we find ourselves in a comfortable quiet. The house creaks a little and a stray gust of wind whistles through the hall, as Sophia closes her eyes for another nap. The twins, Ruby and Sapphire—we call them twins because they're from the same litter and look extremely similar—are talking silently in tail twitches, ear movements and blinks; it's a language I'll never understand.

This is our normal. Lounging in the dirty house that has become our home, wondering what will be done about *him* and sleeping the days away.

After maybe an hour, Sophia wakes up again, mewling for food. I ask Ruby and Sapphire and we all agree to move to the kitchen and eat the rest of the food in our bowls. As a rule, we never enter the kitchen alone, just in case. I've seen into that 'cupboard' (it's actually a small room), and the terrifying jaws were enough to satisfy my curiosity for life. It was only a second, but I've never forgotten it.

The kitchen might be the worst bit of the house, if I'm being honest. Cat food tins, some empty and some full, fill the room. It's gotten so ridiculous that Ruby and Sapphire made a bed out of the full ones and I don't think Joseph even noticed. He just keeps buying it and, along with his own food, it ends up

everywhere. Counter-tops, the sink that hasn't worked for a while, the floor and every single shelf and cupboard.

Light comes in through the locked windows as we wander over to our plastic bowls, mostly still half-full with a mix of wet food and biscuits. A bucket of water (rainwater collected from outside by Joseph) stands by them, but we've all got little compartments in our bowls for water. He fills them, and we use the bucket for cleaning if we need to—Sophia has to use her bowl water for that, or one of us will wet a paw and clean her.

Our meal is interrupted several times by scratching and whining at that door, but we do our best to ignore it. Honestly, it's a mystery why Joseph keeps *him*, but we can't question his judgement.

He's a loving owner, never forgetting our food or water and always petting us and giving us attention when he's here. The most attention *he* gets is a walk and he's taken out the back door so that we never even see his full body. Not that I'd want to see it, of course; I'm grateful to Joseph for keeping us separate.

In many ways, he's the best owner I've ever had, but that isn't saying much when he's also my *only* owner ever, as well.

"No more dog," surprising everyone, Sophia's quiet voice drifts over from her bowl, where she's stopped lapping at the water for a moment, "don't like dog."

"Finally, some sense in this house!" Ruby exclaims, looking at me deliberately. I can only sigh in response, "I don't understand why you defend him! Even Sophia understands that he's horrible!"

"I'm not saying he isn't," attempting to take back some control, I let the conversation pause while I nibble at the last of my food, feeling two pairs of eyes on me. Sometimes, I wonder how much Sophia understands—and hope that it's not too much. Some things are better not heard by little kittens, "I'm saying that it isn't his fault."

"How is it *not* his fault?" she hisses, bounding over. Anticipating an attack, maybe out of desperation or urgency, I hiss back, warning Ruby to keep her distance. She stops, but her ears are flattened back and her eyes are swimming with anger, "he could *just* be nice! He could *just* be calm! There's no one forcing him to try and attack everything, is there? Or do you know something that I don't?"

"Enough, Ruby," this isn't getting us anywhere. We've had this argument over and over, with the same outcome: nothing ever gets done, because we can't do anything. It's Joseph's decision and his alone, "I don't want to fight. Is everyone ready to go back to the living room?"

The rest of our afternoon passes fairly normally. Sapphire scampers around chasing mice, which is the only time she ever seems active and full of energy, with Ruby watching closely.

Sophia and I work on making her a little bed of her own. She usually sleeps with me or the twins, depending on who she feels like being with on a particular night. But recently, I've decided that making her a new bed might be a fun way to introduce independence to the little kitten. Looking for little scraps of fabrics takes up our time—an old shirt here and a torn tablecloth there—so I don't mind the work.

By the time the sun begins burning golden-orange through the misty windows, we are all back together again, discussing mice. Sophia wants to know why we hunt them, and why it's okay to chase them around. Ruby is passionately listing all the reasons that her and Sapphire's favourite pastime is 'the best thing to do in the world'. Sapphire observes this silently, looking amused.

I'm half-dozing, not too fussed with the topic. Mice have never been that important to me. They taste fine, but why eat them when we have food? Nevertheless, it's nice to hear Sophia questioning Ruby's strong views and learning a little along the way.

Finally, I hear the front door open, with stamping feet and an 'I'm home!'. Shaking myself awake, I jump down from the chair and race into the hall, ready to greet Joseph with the twins and Sophia close behind.

There he is—smoothing down unruly hair, looking a little wet, taking off the big coat, hanging it on the hook and... he's got a lead in his hand.

Attached to that lead is a slender, mouse-grey dog.

Chapter 2

"Hello, dears," her voice is warm, almost motherly. Joseph unclips her lead and we all follow him to the armchair, but 'all' now means five, not four.

None of us speak, as the twins escape to their arms of the armchair and Joseph picks up Sophia, settling her in his lap. I'm not about to run away—as the unofficial leader of our little tribe, I've got to face this new dog head-on.

She's not like whatever's in the cupboard and she doesn't seem like any sort of threat. There's no need to back down. Or, at least, that's what I keep telling myself.

"I'm Shadow," a good start. She bows her head a little, moving to lie by Joseph's feet as he turns on the TV and leans back into the armchair, "do you... have a name?"

"Tess," her muzzle rests on her paws, tired eyes looking into mine like they're searching for something, "I hope you don't mind me sharing this house with you—I won't make any trouble for you. The time for that passed long ago," with that, she chuckles, shaking her head, "but you seem like a lovely bunch, really."

Relaxing, I look up—Ruby's eyes don't leave Tess. She's been staring at her since she arrived, and shows no sign of letting up. I can't expect anything less. With him as our only other close reference, how could she be friendly to another dog?

But Tess is different. I can tell that already, from the way she's content to curl up and sleep rather than barking or making a scene. Maybe it's just age—maybe, after a few years, he will be the same. Who knows? All I know for certain is that we're all safe as we are. That makes me content to climb up and lie in Joseph's lap, purring at the hand stroking between my ears.

Our four has become five and, for now, that's okay.

It takes hours for Joseph to begin to nap, his wrinkled face relaxing in sleep and becoming peaceful. Before I even notice, Ruby has leapt down to the floor, tapping

Tess' muzzle with her paws. It comes close to swatting before Tess wakes up, struggling to her feet. Alerted by the movement and uncertain of what's about to happen, I nudge Sophia and we both drop down to join Ruby and Sapphire, the latter standing close to her twin with anxiety painted across her face.

"It's nice to meet you, dear. I'm—"

"Tess. We heard," Ruby cuts her off, agitated, "another dog, that's all we need. Sophia's already terrified of the other one."

"Ruby," I try to warn her, but she's not even listening.

She's not giving Tess a chance to... to do what? Defend herself? She shouldn't have to, not really. She hasn't done anything wrong. In fact, she's done everything right. If she'd come in with her teeth bared, yowling and biting, then she'd have to defend herself now.

But she didn't. She just... she just lived within the peace we all keep. It's like Joseph brought another cat home.

"Be nice. Introduce yourself."

"Huh. Are you sure you're not a dog, Shadow?" there's no need to rise to her, but I still feel my hairs bristling, "I'm Ruby, this is Sapphire. You mess with us once, and I'll make sure you never do it again."

Dull silence coats the air after that exchange, with Sapphire circling Ruby, her tail flicking up and down. Sophia stays close to me, not moving past my front leg, her large eyes staring up at this new creature. I don't know what to do. Carefully trying to defuse the situation, I say the only thing that comes to mind:

"Tess, this is Sophia."

The old dog turns around, lowering herself a little to address the kitten. Sophia, trembling, takes a tiny step forwards, and I encourage it, brushing a leg by her lightly, just letting her know that I'm still here. She needs to understand that not all dogs are like *him*, no matter what Ruby thinks. One cat's opinion isn't ruining this kitten's upbringing and making her terrified of all dogs. Caution is one thing, but turning it into an extreme fear is quite another.

"Hello there, little one." The warmth in Tess' voice brings out a little boldness in Sophia, prompting her to hop forwards and present her nose to the dog. A little bemused, Tess obliges, meeting the kitten's small nose with her own, "you're very brave, child."

"I'm Sophia," simple words, but they bring happiness to Tess' tired face.

She nods and begins to lie down, as Ruby encourages Sapphire back up onto the chair.

"Where you from?"

"Not too far away," she speaks slowly and deliberately to keep the kitten's attention and understanding, "but I'm here now and I'll likely stay here for a while. You don't mind that, dear, do you?"

"Dog good. Like dog."

Not going back to the chair just yet, I sit, attempting to get comfortable on the uneven floor as Sophia does the same. We talk to Tess—mainly just me, with Sophia's occasional, short comments—while the buzzing of the TV serves as background noise, its electric glow illuminating Tess' long, patchy fur, with its grey-white colour.

Her eyes are small, orange-red and somewhat faint with age. When she laughs, even a little, her whole body trembles and she seems to like resting her muzzle on her paws, as if it's too much effort to hold it up. She's a strange dog, but not one I regret meeting, and Sophia seems to have warmed up to her.

Now, there's only Ruby and Sapphire to convince.

But that's a battle for another day. When I see Sophia yawn, I know it's time for us to go to bed. Joseph's sleeping down here in the chair—darkness stains the windows, a telling sign of night, and he hasn't moved upstairs. That means we sleep on the chair, circling and curling up in his lap, and I have no problem with that. I close my eyes, feeling Sophia still wriggling and pawing a little next to me, and allow sleep to take me away.

Dawn is pale, yellow-gold fingers stretching through the window panes and stroking my back, my face, twinging my whiskers until I wake up. They feel cold, not freezing but cold enough to be different from the air. Cold enough to tell me... this is wrong.

Bolting upright, I pace, alarmed. Joseph. Joseph! He's not here. There's no scent, there's no warmth, there's no body. He's gone.

Eyes wide, I turn to see everyone else still asleep—the twins on the arms, Sophia just next to me and Tess at the foot of the chair. I need them. I need help.

"Ruby! Where's Joseph?" in the moments while she is waking up, I strain my ears to hear the sound of distant footsteps, of furniture being moved around, of anything! There's nothing. Just deafening silence.

"Is he not here?" she's up now, hopping past me to get to Sapphire, patting and rubbing her head against her twin to wake her up, "did you hear anything last night, Saph? Anything?"

"What's all the fuss about?" now Tess is awake and Sophia is moving, mewing a yawn, so that's everyone, "where has the man gone?"

"Joseph, to you!" Ruby snaps, turning on Tess and arching her back, "what have you done with him, dog? As soon as you show up, he disappears!"

"I've only just woken up, the same as you," Tess assures her, stepping back, "I don't know anything, dear..."

Ruby's next outburst is interrupted, by scratching. Whining. The sounds we know well; the sounds that we fear. The sounds that Sophia has whimpering nightmares about. But this time, they don't stop. The scratching becomes louder as the whining becomes barking.

Bark. Scratch. Bark. Splinter. Scrape.

Flying to Sophia, I put a paw over her and keep her close. Sapphire flees to Ruby, the two almost becoming one.

Howl. Rip. Shred.

Tess begins to near the kitchen door even as I meow at her to stop, to get back before she is torn to pieces. I can see it playing out in my mind, the monster flying out in a storm of wood and rubbish, right into Tess—

With a final crash, he appears. White skin stretched across his ribs so that you can see every bone. Eyes wide, whites showing. Paws shoving buckets of rubbish away as he picks himself up off the floor, rushing out of the crater he's created and straight towards the brave dog who stands between him and us.

He stops, panting. Short ears flopped over, one huge eye splashed with brown. A body that should be built like a barrel, but it's all bone and hair. Desperation burning in his eyes, brighter than any emotion I've ever seen before. Tail batting against the kitchen door, thud, thud, *thud*.

No one breathes. I can't blink. This is it. Joseph is gone and the monster is unleashed. Everything has spiralled into chaos and there's nothing I can do but watch.

Chapter 3

He's not moving. His tongue hangs out of his mouth, eyes still bulging, chest heaving, but he's not moving. His eyes are stuck, staring at Tess. I can't see her face, but I can only imagine the terror that she must be feeling. I don't know why he's not moving, but this peace can't last long. With him, it never does.

"Why don't you introduce yourself, dear, so we can get this all sorted out?" calm, controlled. The complete opposite of my frenzied thoughts, "my name's Tess—I've heard a little about you, you know."

"Have you?" it's not a growl, not a threat. His words are coated in curiosity as he takes a step forwards.

I hear a warning hiss behind me alongside the quiet puncturing of fabric with claws, but he has my full attention.

"I'm... I'm Baxter, or that's what the old man yells at me. Never had a name before that."

"This is what happens when you let the house go to the dogs," icy words cut through the air, ruining the friendly atmosphere of the conversation. I turn to see that Ruby has jumped down, prowling towards Baxter with malice in her eyes, "first one, now another. Joseph nowhere to be seen. How many more signs do you need, Shadow?" but she's not looking at me—her tail is brushing against the ground, body hunched down, "I can't let them take over."

"Dear, that's the last thing I want to do, you know, and you haven't given poor Baxter a chance," it's not accusing, exactly, and it's not an argumentative tone.

Tess is speaking calmly in the face of anger and spite as if it doesn't even bother her. Maybe it doesn't—maybe she's seen and heard too much to be bothered by Ruby's troubling views.

"The pup's all skin and bones, see? I can hardly imagine that he wants to disrupt this little tribe too much."

My mind barely registers the unusual word 'pup' for such a huge dog coming from Tess' tongue; I'm stuck on her later words. She's right. I've noticed it, but not been able to give it a second thought with all the chaos going on.

He hasn't been fed enough—he can't have been looked after properly, because that isn't the body of a healthy dog. There is energy, sure, the boundless energy of youth and curiosity, but that's where his health starts and stops. Patches of his fur, thin as it is, are becoming thinner still and every rib presses against his skin as if trying to escape. This isn't right. This can't be the monster that we've feared for so long.

But, at the same time, it has to be.

“Well, if he’s not evil,” I almost hiss at Ruby’s choice of words, now that I know the state that Baxter is in, “then he’ll have no problem telling us where Joseph is, will he? If it wasn’t Tess and it wasn’t us, then he’s the only suspect left!”

“The old man? Is he called Joseph?” somehow completely skipping over Ruby’s unkindness (maybe it’s a dog thing?), Baxter latches onto her last point, sitting down and tilting his head to the side, “I heard the door, late. Maybe a car, outside? I couldn’t tell—I thought he’d feed me, because he does when he’s up late, but he never came in. Only one door—bang, shut, and that was it. Oh, and the car. Maybe.”

“Maybe?” there’s less anger in her words, but more suspicion. I look down and see Sophia trembling, as Ruby nears Baxter, her tail cautiously sweeping from side to side, “and you were in the cupboard all night?”

“The cupboard? Oh! My room!” proud of himself, for some reason, Baxter keeps thudding his tail against the ground, sending wrappers and bits of cardboard flying everywhere, “yeah, all night, all day. I went out last night, and we went to the park, then I saw the dog from down the street—she’s called Mist or something, something silly, Misty? She’s nice, and—”

“Can we get to the point?” now it’s just short, sharp words. Tired words. She’s gone from emotion to emotion, finally finding frustration. Baxter only knows a little more than we do, and his information doesn’t really help us at all, “do you know anything else?”

“Nopel!”

And that’s it. Ruby looks up to me, but I don’t have any answers—the best I can manage is a comforting look which she sighs at, moving back to Sapphire’s side. Sophia mews up at me, wordless noises that could mean ‘food’ or ‘scary dog, help’, and I try to comfort her, asking her slowly to use her words as Tess and Baxter begin another conversation.

Trying to make sure that Sophia is brought up as her mother would’ve wanted is always a challenge, but with Joseph gone and our world turning upside down... life’s making it really difficult for me to try and do the right thing.

But I’m always going to be here for her—I need to be the one constant thing she can depend on. Letting her swat my paw, teasing the wild fur, and waiting for her to be able to say what she needs, I look across the room again. Ruby and Sapphire are silent, Ruby’s glare not leaving Baxter. Both dogs are talking about ‘Misty’, the poor dog down the road who probably has no idea that Baxter’s mind is currently focused on her.

There’s still anxiety trembling in the back of my head, but a larger part of me tries to stay calm and logical. Joseph could return at any moment, with his big coat and some cans of cat food in a plastic bag. I guess I’ve just been by his side for so long that this change in routine is scary and making me leap to all sorts of conclusions. I’ve got to stay positive, if only for Sophia.

“Crazy dog,” finally, she speaks, and I can only smile at the comment. ‘Crazy dog’ well and truly describes Baxter, better than any other words I can think of. Nodding, I lower my head to her, looking into her eyes.

“Baxter is crazy,” I can sense his ears perking up at the sound of his name as I continue speaking, “but he’s a good dog. You shouldn’t be scared of him, Sophia, but it’s okay if you feel a little nervous. That’s normal.”

She’s already lost interest, wandering towards the TV and testing her little claws on the stand, but I think I got my point across. Tess plods over to me, Baxter close behind her, and I am included in the conversation about ‘Misty’ for a little while.

As Baxter yaps on and on about the dog, though, I can’t help but think that Tess wants to talk about something else. There’s something about the way that she keeps glancing at me, how she doesn’t seem focused on Baxter at all, that seems a little off. Hesitant, I bring up my thoughts.

“Tess, is there anything *you* want to talk about?” instantly, I regret my choice of words, as Baxter sits down with a resounding thud, head lowering a little.

He thinks he’s done something wrong by not realising that Tess wants to speak, and his ears droop. Unsure of what to say, I turn to the older dog. She shakes her head slowly.

“Not much, dear. Only...” here, she trails off, but I wait for her to continue, tilting my head a little in encouragement, “Sophia is such a small kitten, and you seem to act as a wonderful father figure to her. But, I was wondering...”

“I’m not her father,” lowering my voice a little, I let her leave the rest of her sentence unsaid. I know what she means, “but I knew her mother and promised to look after her when she got too sick to cope. Took the rest of the litter to the shelter, but Sophia was the runt, the smallest kitten. She stayed with her mother for as long as she could and I tried to keep her safe after that, hoping I could give her a home with me. One kitten is a lot less work than a whole litter, you know, for Joseph.”

Tess rests her head on her front legs, tired interest in her eyes. Baxter sits patiently, tail wagging.

“When I turned up with a new kitten for him to love,” I have to smile at the memory, so warm and fuzzy in my mind, “he took her in without a problem. I’d never been so relieved in my life.”

“It’s a shame, about her mother,” Tess murmurs and I agree with a nod, respecting how she keeps a low tone of voice while Sophia absent-mindedly continues her destruction of the TV stand, “but I think you did a good thing, dear, I really do. I hope her brothers and sisters found good homes.”

“So do I, Tess,” I look to the small kitten, my tail drifting over the floor behind me, glad that I can keep her safe during such a strange time, “so do I.”

Chapter 4

A cold, lonely night greets us, with no sign of Joseph. Once darkness begins to fall, I turn to the tribe, now six instead of five, and recommend that we sleep in our ‘dens’ to fend off the chill. Baxter begins to say something about how he doesn’t have a den, but a curt comment from Ruby silences him. Just wanting a little peace, I let it slide. Not tonight. There’ll be no more arguments, only sleep.

Although Sophia now has her own sleeping spot, she trots behind me as I pad over to a corner of the living room, finding my usual cardboard box. I've scoured the house for the most comfortable fabrics and collected old clothes and shreds of a pet bed, from a time when there was only one cat in the house: me.

I still remember those days, when the rooms were cleaned regularly and I'd follow Joseph out to the bin twice a day, every day. Nice memories, but that's all they are. Reality is a lot different now.

Leaping into the box, I begin to circle and settle down, feeling a little body climb in and snuggle into the makeshift bedding. I can almost imagine Joseph being upstairs, lying in his bed with the dusty wooden frame and the yellow blankets, but knowing that he isn't there is heart-breaking.

He should be here. We're not meant to live in a house without an owner, not even for a night. It's never been like that. The last time I was alone... well, those are difficult memories. Closing my eyes, I attempt to let sleep take me away to a world without worry, but, as can be expected, it drags me into a much darker place instead.

I wander down a concrete street, my paws aching, drenched in dirty rainwater. I must look a mess. Tangled fur, matted, grown far too long and sticking out in random tufts. My eyes up, alert, considering every passing human as a potential threat. My ears listening for dogs' howls and rival cats' hisses.

Danger lies around every corner; this is a world where I must tread carefully, otherwise my next step could be my last.

Cars rush past, huge metal beasts with no regard for my small, furry body, kicking up huge puddles as they roar and squeal on the road. The pavement isn't much better. People, hoisting huge black umbrellas, march past, sometimes kicking in my direction, muttering words which are lost on the wind. The chill bites at my skin, but it's been worse. I must continue on my journey.

As a young tom (or male cat), I still have energy in my limbs, some from youth and some from the knowledge that I am free. Free to wander these paved streets eternally, searching for safety which doesn't exist. There is no home for me to return to at the end of the day and there never has been, not since I was a tiny kitten mewling at my mother's side. Her warmth was home, until I grew too old to know it. Now, I am alone.

As a screeching motorbike rips down the road, I hiss, disliking the sudden sound, and turn away, spotting a small crack between two buildings. Too small for humans, but just right for a wet cat seeking some shelter. Finding hidden energy, I bound into the gap, squeezing further down until the sounds of the street are muffled, if not gone.

A vague hunger gnaws at my stomach, but I ignore it, settling down and curling up until I can almost imagine that the rain is my mother's touch, her tongue gently licking my neck and assuring me that everything is okay. That I am safe.

It's not true, but it's a comforting thought to cling onto.

"Food," the simple word wakes me, as I shake my head and open my eyes, blearily seeing a wide-awake Sophia looking down at me, "hungry."

“I know, Sophia, let’s get you some breakfast,” as if carried over from the dream, which was more like a vivid memory, my stomach growls. Maybe, just maybe, Joseph will be home. It’s possible. I silently beg the world to be kind for once and make it true.

Stretching out my legs, I pause for a moment, letting my senses return to their usual clarity. Sleepiness buzzes around in my mind, refusing to leave just yet. But I have to get up—I have to know.

Is Joseph back?

Hopping out of my den, I look around, ears trying to filter through the silence to find some sort of noise, some little morsel of hope. The armchair is empty, with only Tess sleeping at the foot of it, her eyes closed in peaceful sleep and her muzzle resting on her front legs. Baxter is nowhere to be seen, likely returned to his cupboard, or room as he likes to call it. I suppose ‘room’ does sound a lot more homely than ‘cupboard’.

But Joseph? There’s nothing. I sniff the stale air of the living room as Sophia makes her way out of my den, springing to the floor, small paws landing in a strange-smelling takeaway box. She takes a few steps towards the kitchen as I continue to desperately search the house with my senses, wandering to and fro. Nothing.

Disappointed, I turn back to her, motioning towards the kitchen with my head. It doesn’t feel right to wake Tess when she seems so content, so I follow the kitten quietly as she ventures into the adjoining room.

We pass through the doorway with less of the nervousness which usually accompanies a trip to the kitchen, despite the clear sight of the sleeping dog in the cupboard with the destroyed door, just to the side. I think discovering that Baxter isn’t the monster we thought he was has helped her and, if it wasn’t for Joseph going missing, it might’ve helped my nerves a little too.

Tucking those thoughts away, I direct Sophia towards the food bowls, which still have stale scraps of food left in them. It’s not great, but it’s better than nothing and I feel somewhat proud as she doesn’t stop to complain about the quality. Until Joseph gets back, we’re surviving, and there’s no luxury in that—I know this all too well.

The twins are curled up together, resting inside their den of heavy cat food cans. Their bodies twist and the ginger fur melds from one cat into the other, so that it is nearly impossible to tell them apart. If not for them having two heads, two tails and eight paws, I could mistake them for one large cat who really likes their food.

I take a moment to watch over them, wishing that Ruby could always be this peaceful. I have a bad feeling about her continuing resentment towards Baxter, even though I can understand her thought process.

We need harmony and togetherness, but I can’t force her to like and trust him and I’m not sure if she’ll ever be able to. Nevertheless, they’ll likely be hungry and need waking up, so I skip forwards a little, swatting the nearest body gently.

It makes a little, half-hushed mew, so I guess that I’ve woken Sapphire. She opens her eyes quickly, body slinking upwards and regarding me with a questioning silence. I know the question, and a part of me thinks that she already knows the answer.

I shake my head and her body lowers a little, tail sweeping downwards. I can't lie to her, but, at this moment in time, I really wish I could, if only to avoid witnessing that reaction. How many more days will we have to ask the same question, with the same response? How many more nights will we spend alone? It's better not to dwell on it, but I can't help wondering.

With a quick nod towards the food bowls, I leave her to wake her sister, my heart saddening with every step. The reality that Joseph is gone is rapidly sinking in, but knowing that he has to come back keeps me strong. I need to be strong. For Sophia, but also for everyone else.

Nearing my food bowl, I face the ageing contents and begin to nibble, splashing it with water in an attempt to remove some of the dryness, my thoughts racing around in my mind.

Ruby needs someone to keep her temper in check, Sapphire needs someone to look to for guidance, Baxter needs stability to try and re-enter normal life and Tess needs a friendly face and a rational voice to see her through this odd time. Sophia needs a parental figure, unconditionally loving and teaching.

I need to fulfil all these roles and keep everyone together. If this tribe begins to break apart, with Joseph nowhere to be seen, I can't even begin to imagine the consequences. Unofficial or not, I need to be a leader.

"Has the dog brought back Joseph yet?"

"Don't be silly, cat, I never took him in the first place!"

"That's *Ruby* to you, dog!"

"Well, my name's *Baxter*, not dog, *Ruby*!"

No matter how hard being a leader is turning out to be, I think with a sigh, looking down at the pitiful food staring back at me from the cheap plastic bowl.

Chapter 5

Five days. Five long, difficult days have passed, but there is still no sign of Joseph. He lingers in my dreams, phasing through memories, his phantom hand stroking my back with incomprehensible words running through my ears, promising a return which never comes.

Dropping down from the top of the armchair, I survey the room wearily. Sapphire and Ruby are stalking through the rubbish, hunting mice, or rats, or whatever else they can catch. Vermin skitter through the walls of this house, but they've become bolder since Joseph left, poking their heads up through the rubbish and daring us to chase them.

For an unlucky few, that dare is their last, as they become a meagre dinner.

Baxter is dragging something large and dark across the floor, but my eyes skip over him lazily. He doesn't cause problems with his antics unless Ruby takes issue with them, so he's allowed to roam free and entertain himself with whatever he finds.

Tess has taken to lying by the old radiator, next to the window, which spurts out a little heat every so often. Her face is a picture of exhaustion, but she always finds a warm expression for anyone who approaches her, cat or dog. I admire her,

for keeping such a brave face during all of this, but I also worry. She's an old dog and this is a lot of stress to handle.

Sophia, lying on the seat of the armchair, looks up as I circle her, settling down just behind her. Warmth radiates from her pure white fur, too short to become tattered or matted just yet, but certainly missing Joseph's grooming brush.

Closing my eyes, I try to think of something to do—anything to alleviate the endless boredom and waiting and to get my mind off my grumbling stomach—but I come up with nothing. Before I can be tempted into sleep, I toss my head and open my eyes again, finding myself in the same routine which has commanded me over these past few days. Waiting. Hoping. Then, inevitably, becoming disheartened and giving in to a restless doze.

"Get out of the way, dog!" distraction arrives in the form of Ruby's anger-filled voice, forcing my eyes open. Sophia trembles against my underbelly, mewling quietly.

Not again. Not more arguments. This can't be happening.

"My name isn't dog! It's Baxter!" whining loudly, Baxter throws the large black thing he was dragging across the floor to the side, setting off a scurrying of vermin beneath the rubbish it lands on.

Hairs bristling, I pull myself up onto my feet and leap down to the floor, scampering over to the stand-off. Ruby, with Sapphire standing uncertainly behind her, looks ready to pounce. But Baxter? He just seems upset, if I'm being honest.

"I'm trying to be nice to you, cat!"

"You just ruined our hunt, you idiot!" hissing, Ruby doesn't even look to me as I approach.

Shifting my eyes to Tess, I find her still fast asleep by the radiator. All of a sudden, I sincerely wish *I* could be sleeping right now, wandering through a dreamland without a care in the world. I hope Tess is having a pleasant rest, but I also envy her. "Now we'll go hungry!"

"There's more mice in this house, just look around! They're everywhere!" beating his tail against the ground, Baxter sits with a thud, looking at me with a strange expression.

It's like he wants me to help, but he's not sure if I will and doesn't want to ask. Even though I don't know if Ruby will listen to me at this point, I know I have to try, facing her with a determined mind.

"No matter who ruined the hunt, Ruby," I use her name to try and catch her attention, feeling relief as her gaze switches from Baxter to me, her body relaxing just a little, "you have to agree that we need food and running after mice is exhausting you. Isn't it?"

"Hunting is fun," she argues, but as Sapphire pads towards her, nuzzling her shoulder, she returns to a normal stance, tail twitching upwards, "well... it might be tiring, sometimes. For Sapphire," hastily, she adds the last part and I nod. I can't expect a total victory. I can't expect her to suddenly agree and be fine with everything. But even a little bit of progress is still progress, and it brings us closer to the harmony which we need, "we don't have any other food, though."

"I know, but we can—"

“The cans!” interrupting me, Baxter jumps to his feet, flying into the kitchen with excited yips and barks. I look after him, both confused and in shock, as Tess raises her head off her paws, ears perking up ever so slightly, “cans!” his frenzied barks continue in the next room, but we all stay still, unsure of what to do.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Alarmed, I’m sprinting through the doorway before I can think, adrenaline pulsing through my veins. What’s he doing? What on earth has possessed him? Has he actually gone crazy?

Bang.

A can flies into the wall, marking it before falling to the floor. An energetic Baxter rushes to the metal container, not giving it a break, galloping around before flinging it at the wall again. Is he... I think...

If it works, he’s a genius. If it doesn’t, at least he tried. That’s more than I’ve done, and it’s a different approach than the hunting method, so it shows some imagination. We need that, right now, along with the many other things we seem to need. At a time when we don’t have a lot, we have to cling to the small things with all our might.

“Baxter, dear...” Tess’ quiet warning falls on deaf ears, with Baxter continuing his fight against the can as she enters the kitchen, Sophia bravely following just behind.

Ruby and Sapphire speed in, Sapphire immediately leaping at their den, standing on it like a feline guardian, while Ruby bounds over to me, her anger returning quickly.

“This is exactly what I meant! House gone to the dogs, our den destroyed piece by piece! It’ll be yours next, Shadow, and then you won’t be so happy about him! Or her!” whipping her head around, she gives Tess a mean glare, as another bang rips through the air, “Stop him, or I will!”

“Food!”

Letting myself smile softly, I see Baxter sat by the can which has ruptured at the top. It spills out the delicious-smelling, gravy-covered meat, our wet food. He’s a genius. An absolute genius.

Ruby goes quiet as we cats collect around the can, lapping at the opening. It’s heaven. Food that only Joseph could open is now available to us and I almost feel my strength returning with every nibble. Sophia is giggling, pawing at the can like she’s trying to copy Baxter, but I gently encourage her to eat first and play later. Obediently, she returns to licking eagerly at the food and I feel a rush of warmth fill my body.

We’re surviving.

After the initial excitement wears off and our stomachs are full of the tasty food, we return to the living room, taking our places on the armchair. Baxter and Tess both try the food, Baxter saying it isn’t bad ‘for cat food’ and Tess merely thanking me for allowing them to share it. They’re part of the tribe, as far as I’m concerned, so anything that’s ours is theirs, especially now.

Instead of returning to the top of the armchair, I circle the seat and lie down, letting Sophia cuddle into my stomach. It’ll be strange when she grows up, those little legs becoming longer and lankier as her body starts to change and become that of an adult cat. I saw it happen with my littermates, my brothers and sisters,

but it felt normal then. I was growing, too. Now, I'm an adult. Watching a small kitten evolve into a proper cat will be quite different.

"Bored," her word comes with a childish sigh which makes me chuckle, as she twists around to look at me. Sophia taps my neck with one paw, not able to reach my head, "Shadow, I'm bored."

"How about I tell you a story, dear?" surprising me, Tess' warm voice floats up from the foot of the armchair, where she lies with Baxter close to her, "I find that stories often pass the time."

"She doesn't need dog stories confusing her," Ruby remarks, sitting up on her arm of the chair, "I have plenty of good stories. *Cat* stories."

"Ruby," warning her gently, I try to look down to see Tess, finding her mouse-grey body snuggled against the armchair. Baxter has rolled onto his back, paws flopping in the air ridiculously, "I think a story from Tess might be nice. We've heard about 'the big, bad mouse of Bathroom Wall' a lot recently."

"It's a good story." Tossing her head, she returns to lying down, tail drooping down the side of the armchair as her ears twitch a little.

I think she might actually want to hear Tess' story, but I know she'll never admit it. I'll take not fighting over it, for now, just to keep the peace.

"Go on, Tess," encouraging her, I lower my head and Sophia playfully swats it. Closing my eyes, I find myself looking forward to whatever story Tess will tell. It'll be a distraction if nothing else, while we wait for Joseph to return. He will come back, I know he will, but we have to be patient and I have to keep everyone together until he does. Whatever has kept him away, it will end eventually. "Tell us a story."

Chapter 6

"This story, dears," she begins slowly, in a patient, calming voice, "is about the old dog sitting here with you, who has been through a lot of life and learned a lot of things. A great many years ago, I was a young greyhound, which is just a type of dog," she adds, likely for Sophia, but I appreciate the extra information, "and my coat was as sleek and shiny as could be: bright silver. You could see it from a mile away, my mother told me, and that meant she could see me when I got into any mischief.

"When I was old enough, my owner entered me into greyhound races. These are organised races between dogs, where we all get put in cage-like things, before being released to chase something which looks a lot like a rabbit. We go round and round in circles, and the winner is whoever runs the fastest."

"Did you win?" Baxter asks, rolling over again and raising his head, "I bet you did!"

"You're right, dear, I did win a few times," Tess responds, likely with a smile, but her head is still on her paws so I can't see her face, "and my owner was very happy with me. My mother, too. When I had the energy, it was wonderful. But, as with all things, it had a darker side."

Almost as if it can hear her and is listening to the story, the sky outside begins to darken, clouds moving in front of the sun and sending a dark grey shadow through the window. I shiver and Sophia curls into my stomach, but her ears are still perked up, still listening.

Tess pauses for a moment, maybe gathering her thoughts, but the darkness remains outside. When she is ready, she continues.

"I couldn't win all the time, and my owner became angrier as I won less and less. He would yell and sometimes I would go without food, but my mother would share her meals with me and assure me that everything would be okay. I tried my hardest to please him, always running around in the large garden he kept, full of the other dogs we lived with. I wanted to be the best. Now, I know it was a futile—and that means impossible—task."

She sighs, and I feel bad for her. Tess is such a kind dog. I can't imagine that she went through all this and still turned out as nice as she is now, but the past can't be changed and her story is an important one to tell, so I keep listening.

"Years went by with the same routine. I noticed other dogs winning and wished I could do what they did, but my wins were becoming few and far between. And then, as often happens, it got worse."

"What happened?" asking the question eagerly, Baxter sits up, his eyes focused on Tess. I notice Ruby also looking in her direction, tail raised a little, and smile to myself despite the sad story being told. This feels like togetherness, "was it your owner? What did he do?"

"Patience, Baxter," she takes a breath before beginning again, "but it was him. I was sold, taken away from my mother, to an elderly couple. Upset and confused, I found that my situation suddenly became the opposite of what it once was. Instead of my energy being needed, they wanted me to sit still all the time and only walk slowly with them once a day, then once every two days, then even less frequently.

I didn't know it then, but I look back and feel silly for not realising: one of my new owners was sick and only getting sicker. He sat in a chair all day, not unlike this one, with a blanket over him. And, after a while, a strange young woman started visiting the house."

"An intruder!" shaking my head at Baxter's comment, I hear Tess chuckle weakly.

"No, Baxter, not an intruder. A nurse. They look after sick people, like vets—"

"I hate vets!" I know he means well, but I wish Baxter would stop interrupting. Sapphire lets out a nearly silent hiss, stretching out her body, and I realise that she's just as invested in the story as everyone else, "sorry, Tess. I was just excited."

"That's alright, dear, just try to keep quiet until the end and I'll answer *all* your questions."

I have to admire how patient Tess is with Baxter. She manages to keep the rowdy dog in check and transformed him from the monster in the cupboard to the well-behaved dog sitting down at the foot of the armchair with her now. She must be magical, or something close to it.

"The man got sicker and sicker, until I wasn't being taken out at all—and they didn't even have a garden for me to run in. I was frustrated, not understanding

what was going on at all, and I began barking and howling, trying to get them to take me out so I could get rid of all of my energy. Finally, they had enough.”

“...did they kick you out?” after a little pause, Ruby asks the question quietly with sympathy in her voice.

“No, dear, not exactly. One afternoon, the woman took me on a very long walk, and we ended up at a large building I’d never seen before. Inside, a different lady took my lead, and I found myself in a room full of different dogs, in cages which were more like little rooms. I didn’t see my new owners again, after that, and I was looked after by a lot of different people in that building.

They were kind and I happily grew old there. I learned to be patient and to think before I acted, meeting a lot of different dogs. Listening to their stories helped me to figure out my own.”

Slowly, the clouds begin to move again, so that sunlight can shine in through the window once more. I’m sure the sky must be listening because the lighter room matches the sweet ending to the story which I know must come next: Tess comes here, somehow, and ends up in our tribe. It’s a strange tribe, now, having not only four cats but also two dogs. Strange, but not bad.

Definitely not bad.

“Did Joseph find you at the shelter?” guessing that’s what she meant by the building, I decide to ask my own question, engaging in the story.

“He did, Shadow. He also,” here, she laughs a little, “named me Tess. A name is a strange thing, dears, and I’ve had so many that I can’t remember them all. My mother named me *Wonder* but my first owner called me *Dark Heart* and, by the time I got to the animal shelter, I was being called all sorts of different things.

“One little dog, a Chihuahua, called me *Old Miss*, towards the end of my life there. She was a lovely little thing. But Joseph took me home, yes, from the shelter. I didn’t think I would ever find a new home, being as old as I am now. I’ve been very lucky to find all of you here and to end up surrounded by such a nice tribe.”

With that, her story ends and Baxter begins pestering her with all sorts of questions, about dogs and owners and *what’s a shelter?* I don’t envy her position, but I still admire how she faces each question with a soft answer, never getting irritated or annoyed.

With such a crazy life, I would expect her to turn out differently, to be bitter or stressed or... or something other than how she is. But I’m so happy that she’s managed to get through a difficult life and come out with a smile on her face.

For a little while, I manage to doze on the armchair without any disruptive thoughts ruining the nice atmosphere of the day. Comfortable with the knowledge that Sophia is safe next to me, I wander through my idle thoughts, sometimes flitting to that never-answered question: when is Joseph coming back? We can survive like this, but not forever. We need an owner. I don’t want to go back to being alone, like I was before Joseph took me into his home, so long ago.

“Shadow,” bringing me out of my thoughts, I open my eyes to Sophia’s quiet question, just audible over Baxter’s loud questioning of Tess. “Shadow, my story. What’s it?”

“Your story?” not yet. I can’t tell her all the details yet. I can’t lie to her, but I have to be careful not to reveal everything to her. She’s too young, too vulnerable,

to know it all yet, “well, your mother was a very nice cat, and we were good friends. One day, she told me to take you somewhere safe, because she really loved you and wanted you to have a nice place to live. I lived with Joseph then, so she thought he would be a wonderful owner for you to have.”

“Why she not come?” the question stings me and I tread carefully to find an answer which isn’t upsetting or a lie.

“You know how one of Tess’ owners was really tired, and couldn’t move around a lot?” she nods, eyes wide-open with innocent curiosity, “well, your mother was going through the same thing, and she couldn’t take care of you because she was so tired. So she did the best thing she could for you, even though she wasn’t feeling well, and asked me to look after you.”

Seemingly content with that, she nods once before curling up next to me again. I nearly sigh with relief. The full story needs to be told, one day, but that day isn’t today. When Joseph’s back and she’s fully grown and mature, she can find out the proper truth, but it’s kinder to keep it from her for now.

Not everyone’s story is a positive one, as Tess has told us, but they’re all important and shape us into who we grow to be. Sophia’s has barely begun, but I hope I can make it a better one.

Chapter 7

“You’ll have to be patient and ask Shadow, Baxter.”

“But he’s asleep! I want to go now!”

“Don’t be ridiculous dear, I’m sure it’s not *that* exciting.”

A little confused, I shake myself as I roll over in my den, finding it empty. No Sophia. She chose to sleep in her own little den last night and I’m proud of her, even if I miss the warmth of her small body and the immediate knowledge that she’s safe. I have to let go a little bit, so that she can live and experience things for herself, but I’ll always try to take care of her.

Forcing my eyes open and yawning, I jump out of the box and find a strange scene unfolding before me. Baxter seems to be chasing his tail. Over, and over, and over again, until it makes me dizzy just watching him and I instead move my eyes to Tess, who is standing near him. She is wearing her usual tired expression, but spares me a smile when she notices me.

“Baxter...” she speaks softly to the dog, who stops spinning and immediately falls over, landing on the floor with a thump.

“Shadow! I want to go upstairs!” pulling himself up onto his feet, he rushes towards me, stopping just before bowling me over, “can I? Can we? Please?”

“Why on earth do you want to go upstairs?”

Shaking my head, I look around the living room. We have everything we need in here and in the kitchen: comfort and food. What else could he possibly want? I notice Sophia snuggled up on the seat of the armchair, and wonder when she moved there. A little weak sunlight is shining through the window, so I can’t have gotten up that late. “There’s nothing up there that there isn’t down here.”

“There’s more rooms! And *adventure*,” he nods his head on the last word, speaking so sincerely that it almost makes me laugh. Not wanting to hurt his feelings, though, I keep myself in check and try to respond seriously.

There’s no harm in venturing upstairs, I suppose, as long as he doesn’t destroy anything. Joseph won’t be pleased if he comes home to a destroyed house.

Now that I think about it, what will happen when Joseph gets back? For us cats, and Tess I suppose, very little will change. We’ll fall back into the same routine, feeling relieved that we’ve finally got him back.

But Baxter? He could just get locked in the cupboard again and I’d feel bad knowing what I know now. He’s not a bad dog. He’s excitable and, now that he’s eating a little better, he looks a lot less like a monster. But Joseph won’t know that and we can’t tell him that. Life for Baxter might be worse when he comes back, but I don’t dare bring it up.

“If you promise,” I look him directly in the eyes, making sure I have his full attention, “that you won’t bite, chew or otherwise destroy anything, then we can go upstairs and look around. No jumping on furniture, no ripping curtains; be on your best behaviour.”

“Yay! Thanks Shadow!”

Feeling like I might’ve just made a very silly decision, I watch as Baxter zooms past me, sprinting as fast as his four legs will let him. Tess chuckles and promises to go after him, recommending that I bring the rest of the tribe up. It’s something to do for the day and a change of scenery, so I agree and set about collecting everyone.

Sophia, woken up by Baxter’s commotion, climbs down from the armchair and joins me as we enter the kitchen, finding the twins dozing in their den. One stands as we approach and I recognise the expression: Ruby. But not a very happy Ruby. That face only comes about when she’s annoyed with one person—or, as I should say, dog.

“What’s he destroyed now? We heard all the fuss from in here,” stretching, she begins to walk towards me, as Sapphire wakes up and hops down to follow her. “The armchair? The TV?”

“He wanted to go upstairs,” I almost sigh at her immediate reaction to hearing Baxter talk excitedly about something. Sometimes, we get so close to feeling like a proper tribe, but this frostiness between Ruby and Baxter keeps getting in the way. “I let him and I was wondering if you wanted to come too.”

“Might as well make sure he doesn’t cause any more chaos. As best I can, anyway,” with that, the matter is settled.

We’re going upstairs.

Sophia mews a little on the way, wordless noises of excitement as we travel through the living room and into the hall, where the front door looms over us, silent. I wish Joseph would come back through that door, but, for now, there’s other things to think about.

Ruby and Sapphire run ahead as I stay behind to help Sophia up the steps. She’s growing, but they’re still quite a challenge for her little body, so I keep a paw ready to help or catch her. The uncovered wood creaks beneath us as we make it up, one step at a time.

Patience. I have to be patient and, when I consider Tess' story and how she acts, it feels easier to bring myself into that mindset. Helping this little kitten may seem like a small task for me, but she could remember this for the rest of her life.

Especially if she falls down the stairs, so I keep myself focused and ready to stop a potential disaster.

When we reach the landing, nostalgia burns inside of me. I haven't been up here since I was a younger cat, when Joseph allowed me to accompany him to sleep sometimes. Otherwise, upstairs was usually just not a place I would go to.

The wallpaper is peeling from the walls and caked in dust and cobwebs, but, as I pad towards an open door with the sounds of conversation drifting out of it, it feels like a heavenly place to be in. Ancient. The sort of place where you stay quiet and pay respect.

Everyone has gathered in the bedroom, with Baxter being reprimanded by Ruby for something or other, getting swats on the nose. Surprisingly, he does look ashamed of himself, and I look around to try and figure out what's happened.

Everything seems untouched. The window is closed, curtains drawn, rug neat and... oh. There it is.

The bed.

I see, now, that the covers have a dog-shaped imprint in them, and have been pulled up from one corner, revealing a light blue mattress. Baxter jumped on the bed.

Part of me just sighs, knowing that this is what I should have expected, but another part of me has its attention caught by something else. Blocking out Baxter's meek apologies and Ruby's endless tellings-off, I wander towards a dresser. On top of it are three framed photographs, which I remember all too well.

"What is it, dear? Are you alright?" I hear Tess' light pawsteps coming towards me, but I don't look back. My eyes focus on each image, reliving precious memories which I so often forget, "oh, is that you?"

"Yes."

In the first photograph, looking a little faded, is a man and a woman, cuddling on a sofa which has long since been removed from this house. Between them is a grumpy looking black cat, a pink bow tied around his neck. I can still remember those emotions, begrudgingly allowing the dressing-up game but not wanting to fully give in.

"That's Joseph's wife, in the first one."

"I didn't know he had a wife," Ruby, seemingly done with Baxter, speaks from behind me, "you didn't tell us."

"She died before he adopted you. Just before, I think, a few months. They were happy together," saddened, I try to find every detail of her face in the photograph, matching it to my sweet memories of lying on her lap and dancing around with cat toys dangling from her fingers, "but she had some sort of sickness. There seems to be so much sickness in the world."

"But light, too," Tess' words confuse me until she continues, "in the next picture, dear. Sophia, if I'm not mistaken."

She's not. The next picture, of a tiny kitten sleeping, curled up in a woollen blanket, is Sophia. She was so small, then. I see her as tiny even now, but I guess

I haven't realised how much she's grown over the past weeks. Has it been months? It can't be, but she's definitely not that little ball of fluff in the picture any more.

"That me?" the question makes me smile as I turn to look down at her, nodding.

She skitters about a little before gazing up at the photograph, perhaps in awe or amazement.

"And that's us," Sapphire has sidled up behind the kitten and speaks in an extremely soft, quiet tone. It's rare to hear Sapphire speak, but this moment seems rare on its own. I don't know why I haven't come up here before, since Joseph has been gone, but seeing all the memories is such a wondrous—yet bitter-sweet—experience, "the next picture."

Joseph managed to capture an image of the two ginger queens in such a way that they look almost exactly symmetrical, standing side-by-side on one arm of the chair. I can't tell which is which, but it's remarkable how similar they are, from how they hold their tails to the expressions on their faces. In this moment, they are one and the same.

"Will I get a picture?" Baxter asks curiously, walking across the dusty floor towards the dresser, "when Joseph comes back, I mean."

"Not if you keep disrespecting his furniture, you won't."

Just like that, the wonderful moment is shattered. Ruby leaves, Sapphire quick to follow, as Baxter looks down at the floorboards and I wish we could all just get along. Tess shakes her head and whispers some words of comfort to the younger dog, but he looks as if his heart has just been broken.

Caught between cats and dogs, I make my choice quickly; looking down at Sophia, I find her staring at Baxter with such innocence in her eyes that I can't imagine she thinks badly of him at all.

With one paw, I gently encourage her towards him and watch as she hugs one of his front legs, practically falling onto it. I think I might be raising her right, as her mother would have wanted, no matter how Ruby acts.

It's going to become a real problem one day, I know, but I hope Joseph returns before things can get out of hand. I'm not sure if I can control a situation like that—and I definitely know that I don't want to.

Chapter 8

Bars trap me in a small, plastic cage. Thin bars. If I swat hard enough, I might break them. But why would I want to break them?

I have food. I have water. They're both to my side, little bowls, also plastic. The food isn't bad—it's better than mice, rats and rubbish, in any case. My bedding is soft, some material I don't know. Comfortable. If not for the space issue, this could be paradise.

Someone is making a commotion below me, their yowling cutting through the air and shooting itself directly into my ears. Rolling my eyes, I pick myself up and turn a little, paws brushing against the pleasant bedding. Pleasant, that's a good word for this place. Warm and dry and there's no one to bother me.

The bars keep me in, but they also keep everyone else out.

A door opens, somewhere. Down the hall. It's a thin little corridor that I live in now, in a small box, with doors at both ends and a lot of cats in-between. Some of them don't look well. Skinny, patchy fur, coughing... everything I could be in a few years.

But not any more. Not here. If I stay here, I could grow fat and old, as happy as can be. There's a little exercise every day, a supervised wander into a little courtyard, and petting from the people in green. All of them wear green. Shirts, pants, even little hats sometimes.

I think they look quite silly.

"Joseph, darling, what about that one? 'Jet', that's what the tag says, the all-black one—such long fur!" two heads peer through the bars, appearing suddenly. Nonplussed, I twitch my tail and continue to relax inside my safe haven. Nothing can get through these bars, "oh, he's quite charming, isn't he?"

"Doesn't look like a Jet, if you ask me," a rougher, deeper voice rumbles from the other head, which belongs to a sensible-looking man. There's a little kindness in his expression, I think, although I can't be sure, "he seems relaxed enough, not 'jetting' around."

"They might've named him for his colour," she points out, as a pink fingernail appears and traces the bars, "jet-black, you know?"

"Shadow. That suits him," gruff and headstrong, the words become a little quieter as the man leans back, his head becoming smaller. She remains close to the bars, but her face turns to look at him as he strokes a stubbly chin with two fingers, "better than Jet."

"Does that mean...?" her question trails off, but he only waits a second to nod. She erupts into victorious giggles which sound a little like squeals.

Although I am comfortable behind these bars, I could settle for a nice life outside of them. Maybe. The universe might be smiling at me, for once—just in case it is, I smile back.

Waking up slowly, I feel a cold surface beneath my body. A window-sill. I remember now. Seeking peace and overwhelmed with memories, I escaped to the window above the kitchen sink. It's locked, and tightly too, but seeing a glimpse of the outside world fills me with a little... can I call it hope? It feels cheerful, and brightens my heart.

Hope is as good a name as any for it, I suppose.

"Shadow? You okay up there?" Ruby's voice floats up to the window, breaking me out of my doze. Real life has to come first, but it's nice to dream and hope sometimes, "you've been a little quiet for a while now."

"The rubbish truck is quiet compared to our tribe," I joke, yawning and standing up. The sill is cool on my paws, and untouched by rubbish—well, except for that plastic wrapper to the side of me. Nothing is completely safe, "I was just... dreaming. And remembering."

"There's been lots of memories going around lately, or so it seems."

There's a silent sigh at the end of her words which worries me, but I try to ignore it and jump down to the counter-top, then the floor. Ruby and Sapphire greet me with a nod which is so synchronised that it feels rehearsed. Smiling, I nod back.

“Joseph will be back soon.” I don’t know why those words leave my mouth, but they’re out before I can stop them.

The twins nod again, but Ruby’s eyes seem a little dull. I know what she’s thinking. We can’t just speak Joseph into existence. Still, it doesn’t hurt to try.

“Until then, we have to make do. Maybe memories can bring us together.”

“You seem to be forgetting that some of us don’t want to be together,” Ruby spits harshly, hairs suddenly standing up. Alarmed, I step back, “dogs and cats shouldn’t mix. Tess is somewhere in between, maybe. I’ll allow that. But not Baxter.”

“You’re using his name,” I point out, as Sapphire rubs Ruby’s body with her head, trying to calm her sister down, “that’s progress.”

“It’s progress that I don’t want!” she snaps, “you can force us to live together, but you can’t force me to like him. Or Sapphire. Or Sophia. You shouldn’t force any of us to like a dog, not when you know what they’re like. We all do. There’s a million good reasons for me to be cautious, and a million more for me to want that dog gone. Dogs have never done anyone any good.”

“Tess...” Sapphire mentions the name quietly, in a whisper which my ears barely catch. Ruby’s ears flicker, “Tess...”

“I know. I know! Why is everything so complicated all of a sudden?”

Turning around, Ruby stalks across the kitchen and through the door, followed by Sapphire. Unsure of what to do, I pause for a few moments. The silence of the kitchen, after Ruby’s outburst, is a little unsettling. It’s not the peace I was looking for on the window sill. I could return, but it just wouldn’t feel the same.

No, I have to go back into the living-room and face my tribe. There might not be another argument, but I still have to be there. I have to support them through every moment, not just the negative ones.

It’s not enough to only act as the peacemaker—I must be a friend, a parent, a mentor and a guide. Without Joseph, there’s no central force holding us together. Just four walls, locked windows and locked doors.

I have to become that force. The glue that sticks us together. Until Joseph gets back, I need to keep us together.

“Shadow?” for a split second, my busy mind mistakes the voice for Ruby, but it’s Baxter’s head that pokes through the doorway, “can I ask you something?”

“Is it a silly question?” only half-serious, I watch the skinny dog wander over and sit down in front of me, his tail wagging slowly.

“I don’t think it is,” that doesn’t mean much, but I sit down with him anyway.

“Then go ahead, Baxter.”

“Why doesn’t Ruby like me?” it shouldn’t be that much of a surprise, but the question still leaves me a little stunned. Trust Baxter to be so innocently blunt about this complex situation, “I know she doesn’t, but I think you like me, right? And Sophia?”

“We like you,” trying to keep him happy, I start with a positive, “but Ruby finds it hard to trust dogs. Any dogs, not just you and Tess. She’s only looking out for herself and Sapphire.”

“But we’re good dogs!” his tail starts wagging furiously, sweeping away rubbish left and right. Empty cat food cans rattle against each other, “can’t you tell her that?”

“It’s... not quite that easy.”

The conversation pauses for a minute, as I begin to think. I seriously need to sort out this situation before it gets any worse. As it is, Ruby’s snarky comments are dampening everyone’s mood and Baxter’s responses aren’t much better. Conflict makes everyone feel bad. Especially the tribe which is forced to listen to it constantly.

But I can’t erase Ruby’s prejudices and I can’t magically transform Baxter into a cat. If I could, the problem would be gone within seconds. The image of Baxter as a cat vaguely amuses me, but the thought is quickly replaced by more questions.

How can I bring everyone together without causing a fight? Is it even possible?

Memories. That’s an option. Ruby seemed to warm up to Tess after she told her story, so perhaps removing the ‘unknown’ from Baxter could make him a more likeable dog. Having Baxter sit down and think for a bit won’t be a bad idea either. It’ll force him to be serious, and force her to listen and be compassionate—hopefully. Nothing is certain, but it’s my best bet.

“You have a story, don’t you?” deciding to use Tess’ wording, I look back at him, “a past?”

“Y-yeah. Everyone does,” for once, he’s treating me like I’m the one who doesn’t understand what’s going on and it feels a little weird. I laugh at the absurdity, probably confusing him further.

“I mean, could you tell your story like Tess told hers? Ruby might be able to like you more if she gets to know you a little better,” I add, seeing cogs turning in his head, “like your family, how you were brought up, how Joseph found you. Friends and adventures—I’m sure you had plenty of adventures, right?”

“Yeah!” he bolts upright, spinning around in a circle for no apparent reason, “like the time that I—”

“Not now!” quickly, I cut him off, “but you could tell your stories later, to everyone. *Including* Ruby.”

“Okay! Thanks Shadow!”

Sprinting back into the living-room, Baxter leaves a trail of disturbed rubbish in his wake. I walk over the messy paw-sized holes, entering the living-room and leaping up onto the seat of the armchair, then the back. Sophia is trying to catch Tess’ slowly moving tail, which drifts from side-to-side just fast enough for it to be a challenge.

Sapphire is positioned by a mouse-hole, diligently watching it for movement. Ruby stands close by like a guard. Baxter has disappeared behind the TV, probably trying to dig a hole to the other side of the world, or something ridiculous like that.

This is my tribe. We’re not perfect, but no one is. I do think, though, that it takes a special kind of cat—or dog—to get through what we’re going through with a smile.

I guess we’re all special, then, in our own way.

Chapter 9

“Dogs are the best things in the whole world!”

Wincing, I try to focus my gaze on Sophia as I carefully groom her soft fur. This is not what I meant when I asked Baxter to tell his story. Ruby’s death stare keeps switching between me and the young dog, as if it’s my fault that he’s talked about how amazing dogs are for the past five minutes straight. Well, I suppose I didn’t give him any specific rules or guidelines, but that would have sounded odd. Everyone’s story is their own and I can’t control how he wants to tell it.

Ruby’s tail is twitching against the arm of the armchair, while Sapphire’s sways quite smoothly. Her ears are perked forwards a little, angled towards the boisterous dog whose tail is thumping against the floor.

If I didn’t know better, I’d say that she actually enjoys listening to Baxter’s incessant chatter. Maybe it’s because he’s so different to her. Considering she hardly ever speaks and he hardly ever stops, I don’t think you could find two more obvious opposites.

“We’re way better than everyone else, even cats! And horses. Have you ever seen a horse? One of my brothers said he saw one, and they’ve got six legs! Or is it eight? It’s one of them, anyway, and—”

“You have brothers?” interjecting quickly, I attempt to steer the conversation in a different direction. I can’t restrict him, but I can guide him.

“Oh yeah, have I not said before? Four brothers, totally awesome guys: Rocko, Lucky, Tiger and Micks! Micks is weird, though. I have a sister too! She’s Minnie, she’s the best. My brothers are good too, though. We’re all great—because we’re dogs!”

“Did you live with them for long?” desperately trying to avoid Ruby’s wrath and actually bring everyone together like I intended to, I guide him around the issue of dogs and their greatness once again. He doesn’t seem to consciously notice, but there is a little flicker of some sort of emotion across his face.

“Just while I was growing up. It was all eight of us in this house together, with this fancy woman. Never knew her name,” he speaks quieter now, tail slowing down. Tess raises her head off her paws and tilts it a little, “it was good when we were small. You could get into all sorts of corners and holes. And eat everything without getting into trouble.”

“I can hardly imagine you *not* getting into trouble.” Ruby stares down at Baxter, her voice dry and condescending, “especially with all those dogs in one house. It must have been a nightmare.”

“It wasn’t,” he says stubbornly, suddenly sounding annoyed, “it was the best! It was a dream, not a nightmare!”

“A cat’s nightmare, then!” rising to his volume, Ruby jumps up on the arm of the armchair, arching her back, “that’s all dogs are, you know! Trouble, stupidity and complete ignorance! You break things and attack things and—”

“Ruby!” I hiss, regretting it immediately as Sophia trembles and mewls, “Baxter is telling his story. Sit down.”

“I don’t have to listen to it,” she remarks, her anger seeming to cool off as she lowers her back, “and neither does Sapphire. We are... we are...”

Confused at why she’s trailing off, I look towards Baxter. Nothing. He’s sat there staring at her with bright eyes, but she’s not looking at him.

Her face is directed towards her twin, whose tail is doing all sorts of weird movements. Up and down, side to side, the end twitching and then the middle. If this is their unspoken language then it's some strange sentence which I don't think I could ever understand. It looks more perplexing than anything I've ever seen before.

The effect on Ruby is also more perplexing than anything I've ever seen before.

"Can I keep going?" Baxter interrupts the awkward silence, as Ruby lies back down and Sapphire's tail stops moving.

The quiet cat's expression is unreadable, but I think there might be triumph painted there, in the way her brow is pointed a little. I could just be imagining it, but maybe this is her asserting herself. Whatever it is, I'm thankful for it.

"Shadow?"

"Go on, dear," before I can answer, Tess takes the question for me, "tell us about your lovely family. They sound wonderful."

"They *are* wonderful!" the tail wags enthusiastically again, before slowing down, "well, I think they are. The fancy woman didn't. She was really nice when we were all tiny, but she shouted when we got bigger. Told us off for everything, even when our mum and dad said it wasn't our fault. Then it all got really bad, just after Micks said he saw a horse, actually."

"Bad woman," Sophia mumbles, surprising me. It's not the nicest of phrases, but seeing that she understands what's going on is good, and Baxter nods his head seriously. He might be more serious than he's ever been before right now.

It almost makes him look like a completely different dog.

"The fancy woman put us outside, all of us, and we were fed up with it all. Our mum and dad broke through the garden fence and got us all out, right out. We were away from the garden before she could do anything, that woman, straight down the road and into the big world!" his mouth hangs open for a little bit after that declaration, tail thumping again, "it felt great, you know. Just shows that dogs are awesome, we can do anything!"

"Then why isn't your family here, with you?" there's still a chill to Ruby's words, but there's also a little curiosity hiding in them. I'm also wondering about that, but I wouldn't ask it outright. Baxter needs to tell his story at his own pace, "if they're that good, I mean."

He takes a few seconds before speaking again, stretching out and lying down like Tess. She's lowered her head back onto her paws now, her body rising and falling gently with every breath she takes. They're two completely different creatures, but they exist together in harmony.

It doesn't matter that they're dogs. It doesn't matter that we're cats. We can all live together nicely, I know it. I just have to try and help everyone else know it too.

"I don't know," he starts, blinking slowly, "but I remember the morning when I woke up and everyone was gone. I don't remember what happened the night before, but I know I fell asleep somewhere and woke up somewhere else. There were people there, and they'd put me in a cage. On my own."

That little comment at the end tugs something inside my heart and I put a paw over Sophia instinctively. Her body feels warm, a tiny heart fluttering away inside her chest. I made sure she'd never be alone. I promised that I wouldn't let it happen. But Baxter didn't have someone who was able to do the same for him.

“I barked a lot. People came when I barked. They crowded around, and sometimes they took me out, but they always put me back in the cage. I wanted my mum and dad, my sister and my brothers. All I got was weird faces looking in at me, and some other random animals I didn’t know. None of them could tell me anything.”

“That must have been difficult, dear,” Tess sighs, likely thinking back to her own story. I’m hearing echoes of it within Baxter’s.

“It was,” he nods firmly, “and I didn’t know what to do. Until one day, this old guy came over when I barked, with some woman that I sort of remembered. She came to my cage a lot, fed me sometimes. I always got fed!” he added quickly, nearly barking the comment, “but not by the same person, that’s what I mean. Anyway, she comes over and tells him that I’m a barking dog, because that’s all they’ve seen me do. Or heard me do, I guess. He says he doesn’t mind. He wants a dog and he wants me.”

“That was Joseph?” even though I ask it as a question, I already know the answer.

“Yeah!” with the mention of our owner, Baxter seems to cheer up again, “he brought me home, after a ton of waiting around and stuff, and then I went in my room and he took me on a walk every night!”

Aside from a few more comments about how absolutely brilliant dogs are, Baxter’s story seems to be finished. It’s probably about time, since darkness has begun to drift into the living-room, signalling the beginning of night.

I don’t understand exactly everything that’s gone on, particularly Sapphire and Ruby’s body language conversation, but it seems to be positive. I keep telling myself that, anyway. There’s no point being negative. Not in our situation.

We need to face it with a smile, or we might not be able to face it at all. But I won’t let that happen. This is my tribe, and I’ll keep us going until Joseph comes back and everything gets sorted out. No matter what.

Chapter 10

Morning light tickles my whiskers gently, tapping my face with its outstretched fingers until I slowly open my eyes, blinking blearily. Sophia mews in her sleep. Her little body twists a little, eyelids still firmly closed, as she journeys through whatever exciting dream has captivated her.

I look around the living-room from the seat of the armchair. No Joseph.

Sighing quietly, I scan the rest of my surroundings. Tess is sleeping silently by the foot of the armchair, while Baxter has dozed off on his back with his legs hanging comically in the air. Ruby and Sapphire are nowhere to be seen. They’re probably in their den in the kitchen, which has been dismantled a little by our need for the cat food cans which it is made out of.

The thought of the twins creates a little, flickering idea in my mind. I’m not sure if it’ll work, or if they’ll agree to it, but it could bring us together a little more. It could change our tribe from an uncertain collection of cats and dogs to a united group of animals who trust each other. Maybe...

Maybe they could tell us their story.

I know little bits of it. Snatches of information and names which popped up in conversations a while ago, but nothing absolute. The actual storyline and family dynamic they grew up in is a mystery to me—if they had one at all. Part of me is just curious, but the tribe leader inside of me knows it could, once and for all, heal the rift between Baxter and Ruby.

She knows his story. Now, he might be able to learn hers.

Careful not to disturb Sophia, I stand up and hop onto the arm of the armchair, leaping down and padding into the kitchen. Rubbish rustles beneath my paws, but I don't think I've woken anyone. It's still early; the light from the windows is a little grey, like the sky hasn't quite woken up yet. The twins might still be asleep. But there's always a chance—

"Morning," an odd whisper drifts across the kitchen as I enter it: Sapphire.

It's always strange to hear her voice aloud when she barely ever speaks. Still, I manage to contain my surprise and hurry over to where she is sitting, just by her den. Ruby is curled up inside of it, still asleep. The quieter twin nods at me, a smile floating across her face.

"It's peaceful when everyone's dreaming," I remark and she nods again. Not the most talkative conversation I've ever had, but not the worst either, "how's Ruby doing?"

"So-so," Sapphire practically purrs the words, making them seem more like vibrations rather than actual noises, "Baxter worries her."

"Still?" inwardly, I groan. Will we never get over this pointless feud?

"Give her time," grooming her face with one paw, Sapphire doesn't look at me for a moment, "she needs time."

"Time's all we've got right now," I shrug as she looks up at me, her head tilted a little to the side, "all this waiting. I wake up every morning and hope that he's come back."

"As do I," there's comfort in her voice; reassurance rests on every syllable, "walk with me?"

Not asking where we're going, I only nod. If I could sum up Sapphire in one word—which isn't 'quiet'—it would be trustworthy. This is one of the only times we've ever spoke, but she's been in the tribe as a calming presence for years.

Years... it doesn't seem like so long, but when I look back to the blurry memory of Joseph bringing two new, identical cats into the house, I know it was a while ago.

Sapphire leads me through the living-room, tip-toeing over wrappers and flattened cardboard boxes while the rest of the tribe continues to slumber. She doesn't hesitate to skip right through the hall and begin traversing up the stairs. Curious, I follow.

We pass Joseph's bedroom, which is still saddeningly silent, and instead make our way to another door down the landing. Wooden and hanging just a little off its hinges, I notice it's been cracked open a little. Dust particles dance in the sliver of light the crack creates. A shiver trickles down my spine.

Batting the door open with a paw, Sapphire disappears inside. I wander in, accompanied by the creaking of rusty hinges which haven't been moved properly in a long time.

It's a bathroom. Distant memories of warm baths and strange-smelling soap emerge from the depths of my mind, locked away by forgetfulness and time. Sapphire sits directly in the middle of the room, silent. She doesn't seem to be looking at anything—perhaps she is lost in thought. I can't blame her. This particular room is one I've only ever been in with Joseph, or his wife.

It was all... it was all so long ago.

"I come here to be alone," the longest sentence I've ever heard Sapphire say leaves her lips as a whisper, soaked in memories and nostalgia, "when Ruby sleeps. Midnight, or morning. Never for too long."

It's as I step further into the bathroom that I notice the dust, and the pawprints which dance through it. They're physical signs of Sapphire's presence, exploring the tiny room. Some lead to the sink and then the window sill. Others venture towards the bathtub. There's a circle right around the floor which practically forces the image of the slender cat pacing around noiselessly into my mind.

This is Sapphire's realm, I realise. Her only haven.

"Do you... do you remember growing up, with Ruby?" I ask, tentatively, remembering my reason for entering the kitchen in the first place.

"Of course," she turns, her head tilted a little, "but why?"

"Do you think she'd like to tell everyone her—well, your story? I think," I hastily add, trying to justify my reasoning before she can even reply, "it would help with her and Baxter, and everyone, really. To bring us all a bit closer."

A long moment passes between us. Her head turns back so that I can only observe her twitching ears and flicking tail. All of her movements are subtle and careful, as if she's deliberately making each one. I know my tail sweeps around without me realising, but the way hers moves makes me feel that she must be in control of it at all times. I'm in awe, more than everything.

Every detail I notice makes me wish I'd noticed them years before today. I curse myself silently for only seeing her as a shadow, or an extension, of Ruby, when she's clearly so much more.

"I'll ask," she says, finally, standing up and turning back to me.

Rather abruptly, our conversation ends. Feeling a little like I'm intruding, I tell her I need to check on Sophia and leave her alone in the bathroom with her thoughts and memories. The walls of the landing look down on me curiously, as if they can tell that something has changed. It has.

I'm not the same cat who entered that bathroom. At least, not for now. Some whimsical, mysterious force has taken over my mind for a little while, changing my tone as I speak to Sophia, back downstairs. It is soft. It is delicate. It is gentle. It isn't the same Shadow who looks after her and protects her on every other day and I think she notices, too.

"Are you okay?" her meek little voice asks, not the voice of the rebellious teenager I was when I was her age. It's hard to believe that she's grown so much, although the evidence is lying before my eyes on the seat of the armchair, "Shadow?"

"Just thinking," I explain briefly, before nodding to Baxter's sleeping body, "would you like to help me wake him up?"

Her little grin warms my heart. As she pulls herself up and hops down from the armchair, I know that, no matter what, she's turned out to be a good cat. Her mother would be proud. *I am proud.*

Despite everything, she has joy and hope. Those beautiful kitten-blue eyes are beginning to morph into a green which I recognise from her mother.

Chapter 11

Ruby sits on the seat of the armchair, looking down on us like a queen looking down on her subjects. Sapphire, as ever, is by her side. This is the stipulation she demanded, in return for her story being told. So, we are gathered, like little kittens around a grand parent, on the floor in front of the armchair. The turned-off TV guards our backs.

"The dogs have told their stories," Ruby starts, not entirely critical and not entirely nice either, "but now, it's time for a cat story. A story of two cats," she looks to Sapphire, who nods a little, "and how they ended up here. With Joseph."

"Is it a happy story?" Baxter questions, but a sharp look from Ruby makes him fall silent.

"It is a story," she speaks slowly, "which won't be interrupted."

Cowed, Baxter lies down and rests his head on his paws, just like Tess. I sit with Sophia in front of me, but my eyes keep moving to the old dog. There's something a little different about her.

Tess has always been old—she's someone I can't even imagine being young, let alone a puppy—but now she seems even older, if that's possible. Her calmness is usually just disguised tiredness and she dozes for longer in the mornings. She's always the first to sleep. Her words are weaker than they've ever sounded, as well as being fewer than they've ever been.

I'm worried, privately, but announcing my fears will only make everyone else worried too. Moving my gaze back to Ruby and Sapphire, I decide to keep quiet.

"I do not like dogs," a simple statement, but I sense that this is the real start of the story, "for many reasons. The main reason is that they never left us alone when we were younger. Me and Sapphire grew up wild, strays, whatever you want to call it. Our parents were kind, but the world was still cruel, dark and dingy. They guided us through it as best they could.

"At that time, we went by different names. Our father named us; he named all seven of our litter. I was Brie. Sapphire was Whisper. He knew from the moment she was born that she'd be a 'quiet one', that's how he put it," Ruby smiles, looking to her twin who returns the friendly expression, "but he said I was a mystery. Picking fights with Ty, the eldest, some days, and being as quiet as Sapphire on others."

Sophia begins to fidget and wriggle around a little in front of me. Putting a paw on her side, I prepare a little whisper of 'be quiet', but it remains on my tongue as she looks up at me with those blue-green eyes. There's a question hiding away in them. Nodding, I look directly at Ruby and mew for her attention.

“Sophia has a question,” I say, nudging the now-gangly kitten with one paw. I suspect Ruby won’t mind an interruption from Sophia and I’m right. A genuine smile stretches across Ruby’s face as she pauses the story.

“Did you—were all of you the same?” her words tremble as they leave her small mouth, nervous and uncertain, “the same colour?”

“No, Sophia, only me and Sapphire were exactly the same,” Ruby responds, as Sophia settles down again, “most of our littermates—our siblings, brothers and sisters—were ginger and black, or ginger, black and white. They were rowdy, as a lot of kittens are. We had play-fights and real fights and arguments and cuddles, just like any other family.”

“And we grew up,” Sapphire comments softly, almost too quietly to be heard.

“We did,” Ruby confirms, “we did. Once we got big enough and learned all we needed to, we went off into the big world. All seven of us! It seems silly now,” she shakes her head, still smiling, “but we thought we’d all stay together forever. Our little family, minus the parents. We felt so free.

“But we were too young. Too stupid. We found a new home, but we hadn’t been there for a single night before they came,” she shudders, and Sophia copies her, so I keep my paw close to her for comfort, “and Ty had the brilliant idea to scare off a pack of stray dogs on his own. It was their home, their territory, but he thought he could take on anyone.”

I know that feeling. Long ago, when I stalked the streets and the skies poured with rain every day, I thought I could attack anything that looked twice at me. Youth does that to you. You think you’re invincible, until someone too strong comes along and you’re left with the bitter knowledge that there’ll always be someone bigger out there. Someone with sharper claws. Sharper teeth.

It took me a few months of hard-learned lessons to stop thinking that way, but I’m glad I realised it when I did. Learning it too late can be dangerous when you’re out on the streets as a stray.

“Luckily, they were only toying with him. They left him with a few scars and a hatred of dogs which would last a lifetime. We all got it,” she sighs, looking pointedly at Baxter, “but I’m... I’m trying to get over it. There’s bad dogs out there, but there’s bad cats too. Still,” here, she pauses, mulling over something for a second, “I don’t think there’s anyone bad in this house. In this tribe.”

That’s a step forwards. That’s progress. Relieved that my plan to unite everyone seems to be working, I look around at my tribe. We’re not your conventional tribe, but we don’t try to be.

Joseph unites us. As soon as he gets back, he’ll see the change in Baxter and let us stay together, I’m sure. We need optimism. *I* need optimism.

“But Ty wasn’t ready to get over his dog-hating ways. I think it was a mix of hate and fear, if I’m being honest. He’d never admit it, of course. It made him angry. Our litter of seven became a nest of bullying and arguments, all the time. It never ended. Ty would get annoyed at someone and then he’d pick on them until someone else annoyed him.”

“Horrible,” Sapphire moves to the other side of Ruby, their tails intertwining as she does, “horrible.”

“It was bad. Bad enough that one night, when I’d had enough, I talked to Sapphire and worked out a plan. Not much of a plan, really,” her voice lowers a little, “it was just to escape.”

Both twins look at each other at the same time. Ruby puts a paw on Sapphire’s leg, as if she can feel exactly what the other cat is feeling. They seem to be relieving a memory together, but all we can do is watch. Their faces show the same emotions: grief, sadness and helplessness. It’s exactly what I feel when I have to look back on some of my worse memories.

You can’t change what happened, but you still experience the same negativity which plagued you the first time you had to go through whatever the memory is and which will plague you the next time.

“It was cold,” Ruby speaks again, continuing the story and looking back to her audience, “every night without our littermates was cold, and they only got colder. We slept wherever we could, always moving. I don’t know why. I had this irrational fear that Ty would come after us and drag us back, or that we’d get eaten by stray dogs, or... or anything, really. I just pushed us forwards. We never slept in the same place twice. Alleyways, bins, doorsteps, window sills—”

“Until the shed,” Sapphire whispers.

“Yes, until the shed,” a little happiness dares to flicker across Ruby’s face, “we found a shed and settled down for the night. It was cold, but it wasn’t damp and it gave us some shelter. Before we could sleep, though, the door opened and a man came in.

“He was old, I thought. Sort of grey in the face, hunched over a little. Not *too* old, but getting old. I was ready to run right past him. Sapphire stayed still, though, completely still and calm. He came closer. My hairs were raising, claws out. He went to her, first. Stroked her. Got a biscuit from who-knows-where and fed her. The food got me, too. Before I knew it, he was picking us up and bringing us into a warm house, where we met a long-haired black cat called Shadow.”

I smile up at Ruby, remembering that night fondly. Joseph arrived in the living-room with two identical cats, one under each arm, and I trusted him enough to know they had to be friendly. Our unofficial tribe was formed that day.

I can’t think of two better cats to have started it with.

Chapter 12

A night passes and I wake up to a house without Joseph once again. This morning, I pace around while Sophia tries to catch a mouse (where the mouse is seems to be a mystery, since she’s raced across the entire living-room trying to find it). Something in my mind keeps telling me that, if I look hard enough, I might find Joseph.

It’s stupid. I know it is. Why would our owner be hiding behind the kitchen door, or hanging out in Sapphire’s bathroom? Still, I feel that I have to look. It keeps my mind and my body occupied, if nothing else.

“Shadow! We’ve got something to show you!”

I hear Ruby's voice calling as I'm batting the curtains around in Joseph's bedroom, half-expecting him to magically appear behind them. Interested, and glad of a distraction from my disappointing search, I lope across the bedroom and wander down the stairs, entering a somewhat peaceful living-room. At least it's not a disaster that Ruby wants to show me.

Everyone is gathered around the TV. Sophia has stopped her mouse-hunting and looks up at the black screen eagerly, confusing me. In fact, everyone seems to be staring at. Have they all gone mad? Maybe I've gone mad, too, looking for someone who is very clearly not here.

Yet. He's not here yet, but he will be. He will come back.

"We," Ruby says 'we' with some pride, giving me a little hope that the tribe really is united and together now, "have figured out how to turn on the TV."

"Are you sure?" I ask, tilting my head to the side. Only Joseph can turn on the TV—well, he's the only person who's ever done it, so I assume only he can.

"Just watch," Ruby waves a paw, beckoning me over, so I walk across the living-room and join the rest of the tribe in staring at the rectangular screen. It hasn't lit up since Joseph left. "Baxter found the remote, and we've tried every button except the red one—"

"The red one is scary!" Baxter cuts in, nodding his head as if it'll make me agree with him.

"—so it has to be the red one!" Ruby finishes.

Baxter's interruption hasn't got her in a bad mood, so that's something. Maybe the hope of the TV turning on is putting everyone in better spirits. I can get behind that, at least.

"Is everyone ready?"

Not sure what to expect, I keep looking up at the screen. Excitement is bubbling in my stomach. I try to keep it down and remind myself that this might not work, but it won't go away. The TV won't bring Joseph back, but it reminds me of him. Memories seem to be all we have now.

It coughs. It splutters. Static erupts across the screen with an ear-splitting whine. Flinching back, I'm ready to sprint away from the terrible noise before it suddenly stops.

In its place is human laughter. Human conversation. People appear on the screen, joking and rattling pots and pans. Some sort of cooking programme, I guess. The familiarity is pleasant. But it reminds me of something which feels a little eerie when I think about it: we haven't seen a human since Joseph left the house.

Before I can ponder that for too long, however, disaster strikes.

Baxter jumps on the armchair.

I spin around, eyes wide. Why? What possessed him to leap onto the armchair like that? Sophia is startled by the noise, hurrying to my side and burying herself in my fur, but Ruby's reaction is much less frightened. Her whiskers twitch. Her ears flatten.

All that progress. All those stories. All that effort.

It's all been shattered, in one moment. The armchair is where we sleep. It's where we sit. It's where we, the cats, loved and surrounded Joseph when he was

here. Now, we lie and try to remember his touch, basking in memories of his wrinkled fingers stroking our backs and scratching behind our ears.

I know exactly what's running through Ruby's mind. Baxter has taken all of that meaning and jumped on it without a thought. It's disrespect. Not intentional, I'm sure, but disrespect all the same.

"Get down!" not attempting to be civil, Ruby screeches at the young dog, who looks down on her with a puzzled expression, "Now!"

"Why should I?" that might be the worst thing Baxter could have said, but he says it anyway, hurt and oblivious, "you're up here all the time!"

"Exactly! That is an armchair for cats, not dogs! This is what happens! This!" now she turns on me, spitting and snapping, "this is exactly what I hate about dogs!"

"Stop hating dogs!" Baxter leaps down from the armchair, facing Ruby with confused anger. He might not understand why Ruby's upset, but he can read emotions just as well as anyone else. "Stop it!"

"Never!"

That's it. The trigger. The spark that ignites the monstrous fire. Ruby swipes at Baxter's face with a paw full of claws. He jumps back. Sophia whines and tries to hide behind me. Sapphire disappears behind the TV. Tess lies at the foot of the armchair, looking as if she has lost all her determination. I stand there, not sure what to do.

The conflict flares up in front of me.

They circle each other, hackles raised. Baxter barks before lunging forwards. His jaws clack together, hitting nothing as Ruby backs away. I have to stop this, but what can I do?

She speeds forwards again, her claws reaching out and almost slicing into Baxter's back. There must have been only a hair's width between them and his body, but he dodges again. I can't let anyone get hurt. This isn't my tribe—it can't be. But it is, and I have to do something.

Before anyone can strike again, I race between them, leaving Sophia trembling where I once stood. Baxter growls. Ruby says something bitterly, but I can't decipher her words. Adrenaline takes over.

Still full of fury, Baxter lashes out again, this time charging towards me. I have a split second to make a decision. Leaping towards the TV, I try to climb up it but misjudge the distance.

I'm falling. Scrambling wildly in the air, I spot the white fur of Baxter's back and reach towards it, hitting it with a thud.

We both collapse onto the ground. Jumping up before he can, I rush to his head and put a paw on the side of it, speaking in a low, serious voice.

"This ends, now. We all make mistakes. Don't turn this into a fatal one."

He doesn't respond. Breathing heavily from all the sudden movement, I look around at my tribe. In this moment, I don't know if I can call us a tribe. Sophia looks petrified. Tess looks disappointed. Sapphire is peeking out from behind the TV. Ruby... I can't read her expression. Something between cooling anger and awe, I think.

This isn't how Sophia should be raised. That's the only thought in my mind. She shouldn't be brought up around violence and arguments. What sort of message

did that just send to her? That you can solve anything by fighting? I ended the conflict, but now an inner conflict is burning inside of my head. What I did was wrong, but right. Bad and good. Could I have stopped the fight any other way?

Maybe. But it's over now. There's nothing more I can do.

My stomach growls, bringing me out of my thoughts. Hunger doesn't wait for moral conflicts.

"We can sort this out after we eat," my words still sound serious, but I can't bring myself to lighten them, "if you'd be kind enough to open a food can for us," my last words are directed at Baxter, who is still lying on the floor.

He gets up without speaking, walking into the kitchen with his head hung low. Sadness replaces all the adrenaline in my body. I can't help but feel bad for him, even though I know what he did was wrong. It didn't warrant a fight, but it was wrong. Still, he didn't know.

It's all too confusing to think about. I move to Sophia's side and encourage her to follow me into the kitchen, feeling even worse as I touch her shaking body. Tess stays at the foot of the armchair, her head resting on her paws.

Four cats enter the kitchen, but none of us say a word.

Chapter 13

Seven difficult days hit us head-on. A lot can happen in a week, you know. Food, which once seemed so abundant, is now scarce. We're searching desperately for cat food cans at every meal time. Conversation has all but stopped between us. I appreciate the lack of arguments, but still... I miss how we used to be.

Ruby and Sapphire hunt for mice and rats in every corner of the house, but nothing appears. I suppose the vermin ran out of whatever food they were eating and fled a while ago. It's disheartening to see them return empty-pawed, but the dejected expressions on their faces are even worse.

Yawning, I cross the living-room for the sixtieth time this morning. Sophia follows me like a little shadow, although I guess she's not too little any more. She'll always be a lithe cat, I think, but her body is growing into its adult size. Whenever we find a morsel of food, I always make sure that she eats first. Her development *has* to come first.

But others in the tribe are worrying me too. Padding over to Tess' side, I look into her misty eyes. She's been lying by the foot of the armchair for a long time. I can't exactly order her to move, but I wish she'd stand up and sprint around just like Baxter—well, like Baxter used to. He doesn't seem as energetic as he used to be.

We're all fading. All we can do is wait for Joseph and fade away.

"How are you doing, Tess?" I ask the old dog quietly. My voice sounds strange, but it's only because I haven't heard it in a while, "hungry?"

"Always, my dear, always," she smiles, but I don't think she's actually looking at me. My heart twinges inside my chest, but I muster up a friendly face nevertheless, "Shadow, you've done well."

"What do you mean?" puzzled, I lower my body and lie in front of Tess.

“This tribe, your tribe,” she says softly, “you’ve done well to keep us all together. It takes a special sort of cat to do what you’ve done.”

“I’m just... I have to,” struggling to find an explanation, I wonder why I’m actually doing this.

Nobody made me the leader of this tribe. I just happened to be the first cat who Joseph brought home. If it had been a different cat, or even a dog, would they act the same as I do now? Would they do things differently?

Perhaps they wouldn’t have waited for Joseph. Maybe they would have left after a few days, leading the tribe to a better place. But is there really a better place out there?

Living with Joseph wasn’t perfect, but it was everything that I needed. Shelter, love and food. All my basic needs were taken care of, with the added bonus of a kind and warm-hearted owner. Now that he’s gone, I’m only clinging to the hope that he’ll come back.

“Am I doing the right thing?” coming out of my thoughts, I address Tess again, “keeping everyone here?”

“It’s all you can do, dear, and all anyone expects of you,” she responds, “but leaving would mean that you’re admitting that Joseph won’t come back. If you want to hold onto that belief, then you must stay. If you don’t, then that’s your choice to make.”

Tess’ wisdom puts me a little at ease, but I can’t stop the questions whirling around in my mind. To try and distract myself from them, I decide to venture into the kitchen, passing a silent mouse-hunt by Ruby and Sapphire on my way. They don’t look up from their hunting. I don’t blame them. Spotting anything in this empty house must be the best feeling in the world, so taking your eyes away for a moment isn’t an option.

Entering the kitchen, I see Sophia stretching on the window sill. A little happiness splashes across my mind. She’s in the same spot I sometimes lie in and the familiarity is comforting.

Glancing up, she notices me and hops down onto the counter-top, then the floor. There’s a thinness about her which worries me, but I know I’m doing my best. As long as she eats whenever we can find food, we’ll be able to get through another day.

“Shadow!” skipping over to me, she brushes her small head against my shoulder, “I had a daydream about Joseph, about Joseph coming back! Will he?”

“Hm?” blinking at the excited kitten, I’m just glad that she’s in a good mood. She’s—well, everyone has been pretty out-of-sorts lately.

“Joseph will come back soon!” she laughs, spinning in a circle not unlike Baxter sometimes does, “I know it! Today, or tomorrow, or—”

“I found food!”

Apparently, just thinking of Baxter makes him appear, because the dog races into the kitchen with a dented cat food can hanging from his jaws. Whether it was dented before or after he put it in his mouth is a mystery, but I’m overjoyed by the sight of food and don’t give it a second thought. Hurrying to the bowls with Sophia by my side, I notice Ruby and Sapphire rushing through the kitchen door as the banging of the can against the wall starts.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

The noises remind me of the first time Baxter charged into the kitchen and started crazily destroying a cat food can. It seems like years ago. Even Joseph... even seeing Joseph seems like years ago. I'm grabbing onto the memories as quickly as I can, but they're slipping away just as quickly.

Nobody can see the fight between memory and time in my mind. I wish I could tell them, if only to relieve the burden inside my head, but I can't. The words won't come out.

So I lower my head and lap at the food which Baxter has messily poured into my bowl. Half of it is on the floor, but I don't mind. I can't mind. There's too many thoughts and questions hitting me all at once. I need food, so I eat. I need Sophia to eat, so I watch her nibble at the mushy meat-jelly in her bowl until it's all gone. Everyone needs their basic needs looked after.

I can bother with difficult thoughts later.

Another person I have to look after, however, is Tess. She hasn't moved into the kitchen, so I scoop some of the food which fell out of my bowl back into it and begin to drag it across the room. I have to look after my tribe. That includes everyone.

Gradually making my way into the living-room, I manoeuvre myself so that I can drag the bowl towards the armchair and Tess. Her head rises a little as I approach, but there's still a distant look in her eyes which unsettles me.

Somehow, it feels like she's fading much faster than the rest of us.

"I brought food," pulling the bowl right up to her paws, I stand back and watch her nose investigate the wet mush, "how is it?"

"It's funny, dear," for some reason, Tess pulls her nose out of the food and uses it to push the bowl away, "my appetite seems to have disappeared. You can give my share to Baxter—he gets the food, after all. Or... or maybe Sophia. They're both growing animals, they need their strength."

She sighs deeply, her head falling back onto her paws. My stomach clenches inside of me. Sophia and Baxter could use the extra food, but that would mean that Tess doesn't have any at all. She needs to eat.

But I can't force the food down her throat. I need to take a gentle approach. There's no point starting an argument with the nicest dog I've ever known, and the stress isn't worth it.

Togetherness. That's what I keep telling myself. We need to stay together. Above all, we must function and live as a tribe and that doesn't mean forcing everyone to do everything. I need to be delicate.

"I'll leave it here, just in case your appetite comes back." It's the best approach I can think of right now, and she nods appreciatively.

I don't know if she'll eat it or not. But I hope she will, just like I hope that Joseph will come back and see us as a united tribe, so that we can all live together again.

Chapter 14

The TV turns off with a spluttering cough. I'm sat with Sophia on the seat of the armchair, so I look to Ruby, the current holder of the TV remote. To my surprise, her eyes are staring right back at me. We share a prolonged look. I'm not sure what she's thinking, but her face is serious.

"Why'd you turn the TV off?" Baxter complains from where he is sitting next to Tess, completely ruining the moment.

"It's been a long time since Joseph left," Ruby starts, as Sapphire crosses the armchair to be at her side on the other arm, "and me and Saph—we've been thinking."

"Joseph will come back," I know exactly what she's about to say and part of me doesn't even want to hear it. Actually saying what we're all afraid of seems to make it even more real.

"We *all* want him to come back, Shadow, but how much longer can we stay here?"

There's desperation in her voice, built-up from weeks of waiting and watching the front door, hoping for a day which never comes. I understand, but I wish I didn't.

"There's only so much food here, and the rats and mice have all gone. If you want us to stay and live off bugs, then that's on you, but at some point we need to make a decision."

"Joseph will come back!" bolting upright, Sophia stares right up at Ruby. The twin's face softens.

"Of course, Sophia. Let's just—let's just watch some TV, hm? And wait, a bit longer. That's fine by me. He'll come back."

But there's no conviction in her voice. It might satisfy Sophia, but I see right through it.

Night passes without any more conversation. We all sleep together on the armchair, not wanting to leave each other. All the talk of Joseph has brought reality crashing down onto our sleepy house.

He... he might not come back. I have to be prepared for that.

But when should we leave? When can I be absolutely sure that he won't return? It'll be difficult to determine. Sophia seems sure that he'll come back, which is great for keeping her happy, but it might not work out in the long-run.

I won't let us starve. But I don't want us to lose all hope either.

Morning drifts into the living-room slowly. Everything seems to slow down when you're waiting, so maybe the sky really does notice what we're going through and decides to match us. It must be bored. That's the only reason I can think of for it doing something so strange.

Stretching out, I shake my head and begin to wake up—wait.

Something's wrong.

A vivid flashback to the first morning without Joseph attacks my mind, but I push it away. Joseph is already gone. I can't change that, but it does mean that something else must be wrong. I might be able to do something, if I can figure out what.

Standing up, I look first to the sleeping Sophia beside me. She seems to be fine. Her breathing is quick, perhaps replicating running in some dream she's having...

Wait...

Her breathing. That's it. Not hers, but everyone's. I can always hear everyone's breathing in the quiet of the night. Baxter's panting is especially loud, but everyone has their own sounds and it adds together to create a harmonious little symphony which equals our tribe.

It's not right. Today, for some reason, something is off. Is someone sick? No. No one's breathing abnormally, it's something different.

Something's missing.

Checking both Ruby and Sapphire, I see their chests rising and falling in sync, even while they sleep on the different arms of the armchair. They're fine.

So, it's not us cats. It must be one of the dogs.

Panic blurts through my mind. I can see Baxter's body from here, even in the darkness of early morning, with his legs and tongue hanging out ridiculously. His panting is still here. It erupts on top of everything else, like a symbol clashing in an orchestra. It's not him.

It must be... Tess.

Not Tess.

Leaping down onto the floor, I pat her face with one paw, as softly as I can. Her eyes are closed. Her chest doesn't move. There's no breath leaving her mouth.

I refuse to believe what's happening before my very eyes, batting at her face again and again. She's just asleep, that has to be it. She'll wake up.

She has to wake up.

But a few hours later, as the whole tribe gathers around her body, she still hasn't moved. Her thin fur is cold to the touch. I can't bring myself to try and open her eyes and see the lifeless pupils which wouldn't focus on me during our... our last conversation.

I had no idea that it would be our last, but I know her wise words will live on forever in my memory. It was a conversation which embodied who she was, and how she helped us all as a tribe.

As much as I wish Sophia could be guarded from this, I can't hide it from her. She's quivering at my side, silent. Ruby and Sapphire are speaking together, with a mix of body language and their almost inaudible whispers. Baxter lies next to Tess, muttering the same word over and over.

"No," he moans, pain etched across his face, "no."

It's the same thing I've been thinking since I woke up and found her. This can't be happening. Is it some sort of sign? Is it all my fault for wondering if we can leave or not? Maybe it's the sky and fate meddling in our lives, disrupting them because they're 'bored'?

I... I don't know.

Logically, I understand that Tess is—that Tess was an old dog. We can't live forever. But why did she have to go now? Why couldn't she stay with us a little longer, so that we could all be together with Joseph? Even a few more hours with her kind words and stories would be a blessing.

Instead, I have to step up as the leader of the tribe and put my emotions aside. There'll be time to grieve and remember Tess, but now I must act. We need a leader now more than ever.

I must be that leader.

“Tess deserves a proper resting-place,” no one argues. No one questions me. All eyes are on me, “I think... I think we should try and get into the garden and take her there. She can lie in a nice spot, shady and not full of rubbish.”

“That’s a good idea,” Ruby nods, looking to Baxter, “do you think you could carry her?”

“I—” Baxter struggles to respond, clambering to his feet and looking down at Tess, “I will. Show me where.”

Our tribe moves as one, with Tess carried carefully by Baxter. He holds her by her neck, like a mother holds her kitten, and we kick aside rubbish so that it doesn’t touch her limp body. Our journey ends at the kitchen door.

It leads to a garden I haven’t been in for a long time. The garden with the shed which led to Ruby and Sapphire being adopted by Joseph. The garden where he used to play with Sophia, tickling her nose with blades of grass. The garden where he would sit on sunny evenings with me on his lap and his wife by his side, chatting without a care in the world.

The door might be locked. The hinges might be rusted beyond any chance of opening it. But I have to try.

Looking back at Baxter, I speak to him without words. He understands. Lowering his head, he rests Tess on the floor before striding forwards, facing the door like a warrior ready to attack.

He growls. He tenses. He prepares.

Then he charges.

Chapter 15

The door bursts open. A breeze flies straight into our faces as we shield them in each other’s bodies. Sophia curls into my chest. The twins might as well be one being, so closely connected with each other. Baxter stands strong and faces the outside world with his boundless courage.

Beyond the door, long grass awaits us. The world outside seems to be just as I left it. Wind, ground and fences. Grass and flowers. Bushes and trees. It was a well-kept garden, once, but now it’s overgrown and wild.

Nature has taken over.

Baxter returns to Tess and picks her up again, continuing the march towards the garden. I shiver, but whisper comforting words to Sophia and encourage her to move forwards. Ruby and Sapphire walk by my side, as we leave the house and begin to walk on soft, grassy ground.

Freedom. Technically, we’ve been freed from the house, but it definitely doesn’t feel like that. Nothing was keeping us there but Joseph. We could ‘escape’ at any time, but it’s not really escaping. Just leaving. Admitting that he isn’t coming back.

Not yet. That’s not what this is. I remind myself of that fact harshly, as Baxter carries Tess to a corner of the garden which has been taken over by twisting trees. Their leaves are bright yellow, darker on one side, and cover the ground which Baxter now lays Tess on.

She still looks like she's sleeping.

"Tess," I say, feeling like I have to say something, "was a wonderful dog. Maybe the best dog in the entire world, but I—I haven't been across the entire world, so—" it all sounds stupid. Nothing I can say will give that amazing dog justice, and I know it.

"Tess was really nice," Sophia mumbles at my side.

"She was," I agree, trying to start again, "and she went through a life full of hardship, but she never backed down. She never became a bad dog. She's an example to us all of how we should be—how everyone in the world should be. She faced life with a smile, always."

"I think she made me realise that dogs aren't all bad," Ruby continues the speech after I pause, her voice a mixture of sadness and regret, "but I said some bad things to her, when she first arrived. I thought we didn't need dogs. I thought I wanted to stay as far away from dogs as possible. But... they aren't all bad, and she showed me that."

"Me too," Sapphire whispers, before pushing her head into Ruby's body and falling silent.

Baxter is the only one who hasn't spoken. As we stand there, in the quiet, overgrown garden, I want to tell him that he doesn't have to say anything if he doesn't want to. Tess knows that we all admire and respect her, and I'm sure she doesn't need us to come out and say it.

But he steps forward, leaning down to nuzzle her face, and I know he wants to say something. It doesn't feel like he's acting with the pressure of everyone else already speaking forcing him to. This feels real. It's a pure, raw emotion: grief.

"If it wasn't for Tess," he begins, "I wouldn't have been able to join this tribe. I'd have been stupid and scary all the time, and locked back in my room or whatever else. I know that." I've never heard him speak so sincerely. Hairs prickle on the back of my neck. "I can't thank her properly, but I hope I did when she was... when she was here. With us. I hope she knew how much she meant to me, even if I was stupid and I didn't listen to anyone. I tried to. I tried to listen to her, and to all of you."

I don't want to believe she's gone. I don't want to have to go back inside and live without her. I know I have to, but it's not fair. She was amazing. She was everything a dog should be, and more. Life's not fair, because it takes away the best things and gives you the worst things. I have to deal with it. I get that. But..." he falters, sitting down in front of Tess with a thud, "but I wish things were different."

There's a pause. I wonder if I should go to his side, but decide against it. We're gathered here, together: that's enough. I don't have to touch him to let him know that I'm here for him, no matter what. We are all one tribe. Tess is still a part of our tribe, and will always be.

We're facing this together.

A pained howl escapes from Baxter's lungs, long and low and pitiful. It cuts through the air and sends shivers racing around my body. Sophia mewls. The rest of us are silent.

We're alone with the howl, yet together. Apart, but living as one. We experience the moment together, along with all of its emotions and difficulties, but I can't help

feeling separate. I have to look down at Sophia to remind myself that she's still there.

It's an odd, unsettling feeling.

We don't go back inside the house. Once Baxter is finished howling, we retreat to a different corner of the garden and sit together. It doesn't feel right to go back inside without her, I guess, and we all know that without having to say it.

Does this mean we're leaving?

I... I don't know. Joseph could come back, but Tess has overshadowed that thought. This bitter togetherness isn't what I wanted, but it's working. Grief has brought us all closer.

For once, the sky doesn't seem to be watching us closely. Afternoon sun begins to blaze down on the garden, warming my body but not my heart. Instead of being cold and empty, it feels damp. Flooded. Heavy. Dripping with the aftermath of what has just happened and too burdened to worry about what may happen after today.

We can't stay out in the garden forever. But a fierce part of me wants to stay and wait for Joseph. It's selfish, I realise, but also powerful. Loyalty to him might not mean what's best for the tribe. But can I put aside my own needs for everyone else's?

If I don't, everything I've done will be for nothing. In a way, I think I have no choice.

"I don't want to leave her," Baxter speaks up, his head rising off his paws—just like Tess, "I don't think I can. It doesn't feel right."

"No one's talking about leaving," Ruby, surprisingly, assures him, proving that we've been united somehow, "don't worry, Baxter."

"You have to leave at some point," he says glumly, "the food's run out. Joseph isn't coming back."

"He is!" Sophia says, but I put a paw over her body and shake my head.

"Sophia, it might be best... for *all* of us," I look to Ruby and Sapphire for reassurance, and find comfort in their faces, "if we think about moving on. It's been a long time."

"I had the daydream! I know he'll come back!"

"It's been a long time," I repeat, "and it might not be possible for us to stay much longer. If he doesn't come back soon, we have to move to where there's food and shelter. That might not be this house."

"It isn't this house," Ruby backs me up, getting up and taking a few steps towards me and Sophia, "but that's okay. We're a tribe. We'll stick together. All of us will always protect you and we'll *always* love Joseph, but we cannot wait forever."

Sophia doesn't speak for a few moments. She looks to Baxter with round, green eyes and sees only a shadow of the dog he used to be. She looks to the twins and finds something warm and friendly in their expressions. She looks to me and... and, I hope, she sees a father figure who her mother would be proud of.

Finally, she responds.

"Three more days," locking eyes with me, she speaks calmly, "just three more days, then we'll go."

"Three more days," I confirm.

