

Star

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

He sat on the front steps of his house as if he were waiting for her. Anna Jarrett parked her dirty white Taurus against the curb and ducked her head as she got out. Maybe if she avoided eye contact, he would leave her alone.

But, just as she expected, he got up and strode across the lawn. She hunched even farther forward and hurried toward her house. It had a fence on all four sides and a gate she always left closed. Private, small, and hers. Wasn't the fence enough? Couldn't he understand that she wanted to be left alone?

“Um, miss?” His voice was deep and resonant.

Anna clutched her purse against her side and fumbled with the latch on the gate. She could hear his approach, the slight crunching sound of his feet on the dry grass.

“Miss?”

His shadow fell across her and she was trapped. She couldn't pretend she didn't see him.

Her breath was coming in short, nervous gasps. It was all she could do to keep from hyperventilating. She kept her head down, her fingers still struggling with the latch.

“I'm not going to hurt you,” he said and this time his voice was soft. “I'm your neighbor. I just have a question.”

She closed her eyes for the briefest of moments, steeling herself, then she stood straight and faced him.

He was younger than she expected—in his mid-thirties—tall and broad-shouldered. His hair was golden and curly, the kind of hair usually found on pictures of cherubs, not on grown men. His eyes were a dark brown. They seemed warm. But she had been fooled by warmth before.

“Hi.” He smiled. “I'm Pete.”

She remembered. The house next door had originally been his parents. She'd played with him a few times when she had been a child, but she didn't expect him to remember her. That had been a very long time ago.

“I was wondering if you owned a cat.”

Warmth flooded her face and she had to turn away so that he wouldn't see that tears which stung her eyes. She reached for the latch again, and he caught her fingers.

His touch was gentle. “I didn't mean to upset you.”

She pulled her fingers from his grasp. “I don't have a cat.”

“I was just asking because there's been a scruffy looking white cat hanging around your house. If it's not yours, maybe I'll see if I can find it a home. I've been feeding it.”

“White?” she asked in spite of herself.

He nodded. “All white except for a black star just above its eyes and black paws. I've never seen markings like that.”

She had. Her stomach twisted. “He asked you to say that, didn't he?”

“What?” Pete frowned. “Who asked me what?”

“To say that you'd seen a white cat with a star on her face.” Anna squared her shoulders. She was backed against the fence with nowhere to go. He was bigger than she was and stronger. Her only option was to run back to the car, and he blocked her way. Still, she'd get around him if she could. “This is just cruel. You bother me again and I'm calling the police.”

“Wait.” Pete held up his hands like a man who'd just touched something hot. “I didn't talk to anyone. I really am your neighbor and I really have been feeding a white cat. If you wait here, I can prove it.”

He backed away from her, then sprinted for his house. She waited until he let himself inside before reaching for the latch again. This time, she had no trouble opening the gate. She went through, shut it, and latched it again, wishing the front fence was tall enough to hide her yard.

She ran up her porch steps and was unlocking her front door when she heard his door close.

“Wait!” he said.

She slipped inside, shut the door behind herself, and locked all three deadbolts, then secured the chain for good measure. She double-checked her window locks, then went to the back door to make sure it was locked too. She kept her curtains closed and sank onto one of her kitchen chairs, until she was sure he had gone away.

* * * *

The next morning Anna rose at dawn. She had gotten four hours of sleep which was better than she could have expected under the circumstances. She had spent half the night worrying about the encounter, wondering what it meant. Pete had lived in that house all his life. She had just moved in six months before. Still, she couldn't get past the feeling that Neil had somehow contacted him.

Neil. The very thought of him made her shake. Even though he was safely locked up in Attica, not even eligible for parole for another thirty years, she still looked over her shoulder expecting to see him. And his obsession with her—his deep anger at her—hadn't ended. He'd sent threatening letters to her mother which had taken more legal action to stop, and then he had started a subtler campaign to terrorize her sister—a campaign Anna's lawyer argued had really been aimed at Anna.

Finally a judge had ordered all communication with Anna's friends and family off-limits to Neil and the prison destroyed any letters he wrote to people on her list. But her new neighbor Pete wasn't on that list, nor were new friends here in Wisconsin. She would have to update the list immediately. And even that felt like she was giving away too much of herself to her past.

Of course, using Star would be the quickest and most painful way to reach her. She had no idea why Pete would even ask her that question, what he hoped to gain from it. Perhaps Neil had told him it would be a joke. Even though she didn't know why anyone would listen to a man who wrote letters in pencil on lined paper, a man whose return address included the numbers of his cellblock in Attica.

She had resisted the temptation to go on-line and found out as much as she could about her neighbor, to see if she could find his motivation for seeking her out. She could only hope that he would take her anger the day before as the warning it was, and leave her alone.

After she showered, she made herself a light breakfast of cereal and tea, turning on a jazz c.d. instead of the morning news, and grabbing a romance novel instead of the newspaper. She knew better than to hear

of violence at the start of her day. If she wasn't careful, violent news stories brought on panic attacks or worse. Her therapist said the Post-Traumatic Stress symptoms would eventually go away, but it was always best not to trigger them. Anna had a two-page list of things to avoid just to keep herself somewhat calm.

Routines helped. So did her photography. When she finished eating, she grabbed her camera and went out the back door to see if she could catch the early morning light in her garden.

What she saw made her freeze.

A white cat sat on the dew-covered grass, haloed in a ray of sunlight. The cat had black feet and a star on its forehead.

Anna gasped.

The cat heard her, turned toward her and meowed—a husky, raspy, unique sound that Anna thought she'd never hear again.

Anna screamed and stumbled back into the house.

She'd seen a ghost, and its presence in her sanctuary nearly broke her heart.

* * * *

"All you do is fondle that damn cat." Neil snatched Star out of her arms. Star squirmed, hissing and spitting. "Maybe you should pay attention to me sometime."

He slammed Star against the wall. Anna launched herself across the room, grabbing for Star. The cat had stopped fighting. She looked woozy. Neil dropped her. Star landed on her back, and didn't move.

But Anna did. All the months of fear and terror rose up inside her. She clawed at his eyes, throwing herself against him, until he grabbed her by the neck and shoved her backwards.

Her head hit the wall with a loud smack. Pain shuddered through her and she lost her grip on him. His thumbs pressed against her windpipe, and suddenly the fear was back.

She was going to lose this time. She was going to lose...

And then she realized she was in her own kitchen. Arms were wrapped around her, a strong body holding her down, her head aching and her throat raw.

"It's all right. It's all right."

The voice was male and only vaguely familiar. The faint scent of sandalwood surrounded her, and the touch, even though it restrained her, was gentle.

"Calm down. Please. It's all right."

She was in her own kitchen, Neil was in jail, and she had had a flashback. She went limp, and the arms released her. A hand stroked her forehead.

"You gonna be all right? Do I need to call someone?"

That was when she recognized the voice. Pete, from next door. She moved away from him, her skin flushing hot.

He was sitting on the floor, wearing gym shorts and a T-shirt depicting a wheel with the signs of the Zodiac. Sunlight coming in the open door illuminated the fine golden hairs on his arms and the unshaved frizz on his face.

“The door was open,” he said. “I didn't mean to barge in, but I heard you scream, and then all that pounding.”

She touched her head. She'd slammed it against the wall again. Flashbacks. She would have to call her therapist, see if he could squeeze her in that afternoon.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Sorry?” He raised his eyebrows. “You don't have to apologize to me. I just want to know if I should call someone.”

She shook her head. “I'll be all right.”

He stood slowly, keeping his hands where she could see them. She realized that he was doing so out of concern for her, afraid that a sudden movement would startle her.

“I don't mean to butt in, but it looked like you were having some kind of fit. Medical attention might be in order.”

“I'm fine,” she said again.

He bit his lower lip, then shrugged. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“No. Thanks.” She didn't sound grateful. She wasn't sure she was. She would have stopped eventually. The flashback would have ended, and she would have found herself in a heap on the floor, aching, bruised, and shaken. He hadn't made a difference.

Except that she'd had a momentary feeling of security, a feeling like she hadn't had for nearly two years.

“I'm, um, a little hesitant to leave you alone.” He hadn't moved.

“Oh, for godssake.” Her hands were shaking. The flashback was over, but the reaction wasn't. “I have Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Thanks to your little prank last night, I saw a white cat in the yard and it triggered me.”

“You think the cat was a product of your imagination?”

“You know it was,” she said. “For some reason, you decided to do what Neil asked and tell me you saw a white cat with a star on its forehead, and that had the desired result. You can write to him and tell him that. It'll please him that he's still having an effect.”

Pete rested his hands on the kitchen chair before him. The posture made him look relaxed, even though his expression was haunted.

“I don't know anyone named Neil,” he said. “And I don't write to anyone, not even my mother. I have been feeding a white cat, and I can prove it.”

“Oh, you can?” Her lips were trembling now, but with repressed rage. How dare he torment her after he realized how vulnerable she was? The moment he left, she would call the police.

“Yes.” He was using that calm voice again, the one he had used to get her out of her flashback. “The

cat's been sitting on your back porch during your entire fit. She's there now.”

Even though Anna knew this was a prank, she couldn't help herself. She looked.

A white cat was sitting just outside the door, staring inside hesitantly. When it saw Anna, it mewed.

Anna shivered. The cat sounded like Star. But it couldn't be. Just before she'd passed out, she'd seen Star immobile on the floor. When she had gotten out of the hospital, almost a week later, treated for broken bones and internal injuries as well as the damage to her throat, Star's body was gone. No one would tell her what happened to her cat. All her friends had said was that she was lucky to have survived.

And she had been lucky. A neighbor had heard the pounding on the walls and the shouting and had called 911. By the time the police arrived, Anna was nearly dead. They had to pull Neil—still kicking and hitting her—away from her unconscious body, and it had taken three men to restrain him.

She knew what she had looked like for months afterward. She had no idea how Star had looked at the end, only that it couldn't have been pretty.

“It's all right,” Pete said again. Only this time, he wasn't talking to her. He was talking to the cat. He had crouched, extending his hands.

The cat didn't look at him. It looked at Anna.

The cat's eyes were green, like Star's had been. The black mark was a five-pointed Christmas star, perfectly shaped, also like Star's had been. And her dainty feet were pure black, just like Star's.

But her coat wasn't soft or shiny like Star's. Her fur was coarse and dull, and she was so thin that Anna could see her ribs.

“Star?” Anna asked.

The cat made a small, hesitant chirrup. Anna crouched too, knowing the wrong kind of movement could startle the animal.

“Come here, baby,” she said in a voice she hadn't used in almost a year.

The cat chirruped again, stood and rubbed against the doorway. Anna kept her hands out, watching as the cat wound her way into the house. Slowly she made her way past Pete, and then she came to Anna.

Anna hesitantly petted her back, felt a real live if scrawny and malnourished cat, and blinked back tears.

“Star?” she asked again. The cat bumped its head against her hand and purred so loud that Anna's heart ached.

“See?” he said. “Is she yours?”

Anna shook her head. “She's probably just hungry.”

“I think there's not doubt about that. I've been feeding her, but I've been doing it outside, where she had to share her food with every squirrel and raccoon who comes along.”

“Who do you think she belongs to?” Anna asked.

“I thought you knew. You know her name.”

Anna rubbed the cat's nose and the purring got louder. "That's just a logical name, considering her markings."

"No," he said. "You recognize her. And she knows you."

Anna swallowed. She started to stand, but Star shoved herself against Anna's hand again. Anna picked her up and Star nestled against her neck—just like the real Star used to.

"I had a cat named Star once," Anna said. "She looked just like this."

"How do you know this isn't the same cat?"

"Because she's dead," Anna said.

Pete stood. "Are you sure?"

Star landed on her back, and didn't move.

"Yeah," Anna whispered. "I'm sure."

He studied her for a moment. The cat's paws were kneading her neck, sharp claws making pinpricks in her skin.

"Well, then," he said, "what do you want to do about her? I can keep feeding her outside, but I have three cats indoors and two are elderly. I can't bring another in right now without upsetting the balance."

"That's okay," Anna said, surprising herself. "I'll keep her."

He was still looking at her. It felt as if he could see through her. For a moment, she thought he was going to say that she didn't dare take care of a cat, not in her precarious mental state. But he didn't.

"Let me know if you need anything," he said.

"I will." Then she smiled at him. It might have been her first smile since she got out of the hospital. She wasn't sure. It felt like her first smile.

He smiled back. "Take care of Star," he said and let himself out the back door.

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Anna held the cat for a long time. The cat clung to her and then fell asleep against her chest—a deep, non-catlike sleep of relief and exhaustion. She wished she could believe this was the real Star. The odds against finding a second cat with the same markings were remote. But Star was long gone, the only good part of a world that Anna didn't want to remember, and Anna wondered at the wisdom of taking this cat in. Would it make the flashbacks worse? Would it hurt her recovery?

She carried the cat around like a baby while she filled a small bowl with water, prepared a bed near the dryer, and tore up newspaper in a cardboard box that would act as a litter box until she was able to get one. She didn't feel as shaky as she had after her attack. In fact, she felt calmer than she had for days. She wondered if it was the effect of a warm body against hers, a heart beating in concert with hers, or if she was just wrung out.

It felt good to have something useful to do, to have someone depend on her. Or so she told herself. She'd been living on disability and she had been attending classes at the local university, thinking of doing some sort of computer work when her doctors—particularly her therapists—gave her a clean bill of

health.

Neil's final attack had left her weak and thin. The bones in her left arm had been so badly broken that the physical therapists weren't sure she'd ever have full use of it again. But it was her therapists who urged her to leave New York. The city, which she had once loved, seemed threatening. The constant noise had terrified her, and she spent most of her time crouched on her floor or hidden beneath her covers. They recommended somewhere small and safe, and so she had come back to the Midwest where she had grown up.

The house had been her grandmother's. Her mother had rented it with only partial success for ten years. When Anna needed a place to go, her mother offered it to her. But the house hadn't had the healing effect Anna thought it would. Its largeness, after a decade in apartments, seemed excessive, and the nightly silence was almost as unnerving as Manhattan's noise.

She was beginning to think she wouldn't be happy anywhere. She had even written an e-mail to her sister, wondering if happiness should be a goal in life.

The cat purred against her shoulder. She rubbed her cheek against the cat's fur and felt, for the first time in years, as if she could purr too.

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A nearby vet managed to squeeze her in that afternoon. Anna made a cardboard box into a make-shift cat carrier, and drove Star to the vet's office.

She had asked the staff to give Star a flea bath. They did so before the cat saw the vet. While she waited, Anna bought cat food, a small litter pan and new crystal litter, and flea spray for the parts of the house Star had already been in.

Anna was concerned about Star's health. She was too thin by far and had clearly been starving. The pads of her paws were scuffed and raw, and her back was covered with poorly healed sores. The vet techs promised very careful with her as they bathed her, and even then Anna could hear the cat's plaintive meows echoing from the back room.

Finally, she was called into an examination room. Star started to purr the moment she saw Anna. The vet, a solid middle-aged woman with steel-gray hair and a manner of calm, entered a moment later, introducing herself as Dr. Twohy.

"So this little one is a stray," she said as she examined Star's ears, took her temperature, and took some blood.

"Yes," Anna said.

"You know she has an i.d. chip in her shoulder."

Anna stiffened. She was going to lose this little cat to its real owners and she didn't want to. She hadn't realized how close she had grown to the animal in just a few hours.

"Have you read it?" she asked.

The vet nodded. "Strangely enough, she belongs to an Anna Jarrett. Only this one's from New York City."

Anna felt her breath catch in her throat. "On 81st street?"

The vet nodded. “We tried to call, but the phone number has been disconnected.”

Anna nodded. Her hands were shaking.

“I was wondering,” Dr. Twohy said. “Is she your cat?”

“No,” Anna said. “I mean, she is now, but I just found her this morning. Actually, my neighbor found her. She can't be my cat from New York.”

The vet rested a hand on Star's back, as if she were guarding the cat. “Why not?”

Anna took a deep breath. “I—my—I—she was—my boyfriend hurt her. He nearly killed me that night, and when I got home from the hospital, she was gone. I thought—my friends said—that she was gone. They meant she'd died.”

She had never voluntarily told anyone about Neil before. It felt strange to speak the words aloud.

“Well, it looks like she didn't. And she followed you here.”

Anna shook her head. “That's not possible. I've been here six months and she'd never been here before. There's no way—”

“You ever hear of the Incredible Journey?” Dr. Twohy asked.

“That's fiction,” Anna said.

“Actually, it's not. There've been documented cases of animals trailing their owners across country.”

“No,” Anna said. “There's no way it can happen.”

“It does happen,” the vet said. “There've been a number of documented cases.”

“How?”

Dr. Twohy shrugged. “I have no idea. There are a number of theories. Cats have an inordinately good sense of direction. Studies have shown time and time again that if you take a cat far from its home and set it down, it will always turn in the direction of home.”

“But that's a place it knows. This is thousands of miles away.”

“I know.” Dr. Twohy smiled. “Maybe cats were on ships not just to eat rats but because they could always find the North Star.”

“That still doesn't explain how she would have found me.”

“Some say that cats have a psychic ability. That's why this is called psi-trailing. People believe the link with cat and owner is stronger than anything else.”

Anna was silent for a moment. “There's no way to know that the cat is the same animal.”

“There are a number of ways. This chip is a prime example. It's obviously been in there a long time. It hasn't been placed there recently. And this cat has done a lot of walking. You can tell by the pads on her feet.”

Anna winced and petted Star. Poor thing.

“Even if the chip weren't there, I've never seen a cat with a perfect star on her forehead.” Dr. Twohy leaned forward. Her expression was sympathetic. “Maybe you should call your friends and find out what they did with your cat when you went to the hospital.”

“The body was on the floor,” Anna said. “I remember seeing her there.”

“So someone had to dispose of it.” The vet's voice was soft. “I'd love to hear what your friends say. I've always been fascinated by a cat's ability to trail her owners like this. I'd love to have a documentable case right here.”

Anna swallowed. She didn't want to think about the strangeness before her. “What about her health?”

Dr. Twohy scratched Star under the chin. “Considering the fact that she's been eating poorly and has obviously been on the street for some time, she's doing pretty well. Still, you'll need some salve for those paws and some anti-bacterial ointment for the sores. She's had a rough trip.”

“All right,” Anna said.

“I'd also like to see her in a week or so. Once she's put on some weight, we can give her shots and make certain everything else is functioning well. We took some blood just before the bath, and we'll call you with those results.”

Anna let out a shaky sigh. “Why would a cat put herself through all this? Her life wasn't that great. My ex-boyfriend didn't hurt her until that last night, but he wasn't nice to her either.”

The vet smiled at her. “I don't think she traveled all this way for him. She came here to find you.”

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Anna spent the evening on the phone, Star curled on her lap. The cat never stopped purring, even after she had fallen asleep. She smelled perfume from the flea bath and she was so thin that she felt fragile.

Anna kept a hand on her, half afraid that Star would vanish if she stopped touching her. Anna didn't believe in miracles, and yet she was confronted with one. Even if Star had survived, Anna wasn't sure that her cat would be able to handle the wilds of nature and such a long journey.

Yet somehow she had.

The phone calls confirmed the vet's suspicions. When Anna's friends and family finally arrived at the apartment two days after the attack, they didn't find Star. There was a lot of blood on the floor and along the wall—“Probably your blood, honey,” her mother said as gently as possible—and tiny feline footprints smeared on the carpet.

The family had asked the neighbors about Star and were told that no one saw her but that the apartment door had stood open for nearly an hour after the police and paramedics left, until a kindly neighborhood had pulled the door closed fearing robbers.

“We figured Star had crawled out of the apartment to die,” her sister said.

“Some of us looked for her for days,” said Collette, one of her closer friends, “but she never came to us when you were around. If she was still alive, she wouldn't have come to us. To be honest, by the third day, we were looking for her body. We didn't find that either.”

“No one told me,” Anna said to her mother.

“Oh, sweetie,” her mother said, “we didn't want to tell you. We figured you'd suffered enough already.”

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The next morning, the vet called with the results of the blood tests. Star hadn't picked up any unusual diseases on her journey.

“How's our traveler?” Dr. Twohy asked at the end of the conversation.

“Tired,” Anna said. She was tired too. She had spent all night wondering what Star had been through, how she had survived it, and made her way thousands of miles alone when she hadn't even been outside before.

“Not a surprise,” Dr. Twohy said. “Listen, with your permission, I'd like to write a paper about her. There aren't many cases of psi-trailing this easy to document. I'd love to see what I can find out about Star's journey.”

Anna looked at her cat, asleep in a ray of sunshine on the kitchen floor. “I guess it wouldn't hurt. But Star's not going to tell you anything.”

“Oh, you'd be surprised,” Dr. Twohy said. “I'm sure she can tell me a lot.”

* * * *

Psi-trailing. Anna looked it up on the web. There were a number of crackpot websites, most of them devoted to old-wives tales and silliness. But a few seemed legitimate.

The one she found most convincing recounted studies done at various universities. The ground-breaking study had been done at Duke University in the early 1960s. That study had examined 500 documented cases of psi-trailing and applied four questions to the cases: was the report honest? Was the animal accurately identified by some physical or behavioral trait? Was there evidence of travel? Were there supporting witnesses?

When the screening was done, Duke came up with legitimate cases involving 28 dogs, 22 cats, and 4 birds. Subsequent studies, completed all over the world in the intervening years had similar results. At least ten percent of domesticated animals had the ability to psi-trail.

Anna wouldn't have believed any of it if it weren't for Star's presence. She brought the cat to her next therapy session and her therapist seemed quite entranced by the entire story.

“Isn't it nice to know,” her therapist said, “that you're worthy of such love?”

Anna hadn't thought of it in that way. She certainly didn't feel worthy of any kind of love. But her nervousness decreased around Star, and her home seemed more welcoming.

And best of all, Star seemed to have no desire to leave, not even to go outside. Star seemed as pleased to be around Anna as Anna was to be around her.

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“She's doing beautifully,” Dr. Twohy said a week later. “I wouldn't have expected her to improve so quickly.”

Star had gained one whole pound and her coat was becoming sleek. Her eyes were clear and her fleas were gone. She wasn't as docile at the vet's this time—she clearly wanted to be home—but she seemed

calm as long as Anna touched her.

Dr. Twohy had asked for, and received, Star's records from her New York vet. She had the file open before her.

“There is no doubt,” she said, “that this is the same cat. I'd like your permission to do some blood work and a few other tests. We saved the dead fleas from last week as well. We might be able to trace her path, using what she ate, what kind of fleas she had, and a few other measures.”

“I don't want to make her uncomfortable,” Anna said.

“All we have to do is take some blood,” Dr. Twohy said. “It'll be the last time.”

Anna nodded.

“I'd also like your permission to call the newspapers. This is such a wonderful story—”

“No,” Anna said.

“But people love human interest, and it might bring in a few scholars—”

“No,” Anna said. “A scientific paper, yes. But anything else, no. I don't want people to know what happened to me. They'll look at me differently. They'll know—”

“What? That you're a survivor? That you've gone on with your life after such a horrible thing?”

Anna shook her head. “I don't want Neil to see the article. And he will. It'll be on-line and in the New York papers. Please don't. I won't cooperate if you try.”

The vet studied her for a moment. “Fair enough,” she said. “You deserve your privacy like anyone else. But I will have to use your name and Star's in any medical paper.”

“I know,” Anna said. “You can do that, as long as you promise not to say where I live or any reporters questions should they come up.”

“I promise,” Dr. Twohy said. “In fact, you can look over the article before I send it off.”

Anna smiled at her—her second real smile at another human being in less than a week. “I appreciate that.”

She bundled Star into her new cat carrier. Star was happy to go inside.

“I am curious about one thing,” Dr. Twohy said. “If you don't want press coverage, why are you willing to let me do the paper?”

“Because,” Anna said after a moment's consideration, “you're my proof that what's been happening is real.”

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Pete was sitting on his porch when Anna got home. He waved. She nodded to him as she pulled Star's cat carrier out of the car.

She took Star into the house and let her out. Star immediately rubbed against her legs, happy to be home. Anna sat down and cradled her cat. Some things from the past weren't that bad. Some things

were pretty darn wonderful.

She was so happy to have Star back. She couldn't believe how lucky she was.

There was a knock on her door. She set the cat down and stood. The knock hadn't surprised her—the first time since the murder attempt that she hadn't jumped at an unexpected noise. She went to the front door, and peeked through the curtain covering the small window.

Pete stood outside.

She opened the door. “Hi.”

He smiled. “Hi.”

“I'd've waved back, but I had Star.”

“I saw that,” he said. “I came by to see how you and Star were doing.”

He seemed genuine. And nice. And he'd lived next door for a very long time, and never once gotten in trouble. He'd always had pets and had always been nice.

“Star's perfect,” she said.

“What about you?” He asked that question hesitantly, as if he weren't sure whether he should broach the subject.

She smiled. It was getting easier. “I'm better.”

And she was. She hadn't really realized it until now.

“Would you ... like to come in?” A week ago, she never would have asked him. A week ago, she was terrified to have anyone in her space. “I could make some tea.”

“I'd love some tea,” he said.

She let him in. Star watched from the kitchen doorway, but didn't run from him like she had always done from Neil. She hadn't liked Neil from the beginning. She seemed willing to tolerate Pete.

That surprised Anna. Star hadn't tolerated any of her New York friends. Maybe Star had changed in some good ways.

Maybe Anna had too.

She led Pete to the kitchen. Star stayed beside her, protective and welcoming at the same time.

Anna's therapist would be proud of her, taking small steps forward. Anna was proud of herself. But she couldn't take credit for the movement.

The changes had been inspired by Star. Star, who had taken a long and difficult journey to get where she wanted to be. Star, who knew what she wanted and who she wanted to be with.

Star, who had taught Anna the meaning of true love.