

My Cat Told Me

The Magical Journeys of BrambleBerry Rose

By Amber Archangel





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The Magical Journeys of BrambleBerry Rose

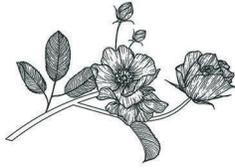
By Amber Archangel

This work is fiction but is based on actual events and real people in my life. Everything in this story happened to me, although some of the events have been combined or abbreviated. Poetry was my first writing love, especially Haiku. You may find some influences from that early work in this story. I have capitalized words that are important to me. I've also used some punctuation marks because I like them. People's names have been changed to protect their privacy, but the animals' names have remained as they were then and are now.

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In this beautifully written tale of her life with the curious and beloved feline members of her family, including one in particular, BrambleBerry Rose, the author recounts her fond memories and experiences in a heartfelt, engaged voice that invites the reader to sit down and drink a tall glass of iced tea on the front porch with her while she tells you all about them.

The story is charming, from start to finish. It highlights with appreciation the wisdom and values that her beloved cats share with the author during, and even after, one cat's lifetime. The author, an artist and animal lover, has adopted more than thirty lost cats and cared for them as members of her family for decades, but she formed the closest bonds with Earth, her first kitten, and BrambleBerry Rose, the cat she describes as "my soul, my heart," who was her constant feline companion for more than fourteen years, and whose relationship with the author is the central theme of the book.

This lovely and worthwhile work follows BrambleBerry Rose from her rescue as a thrown-away one-day-old kitten to glorious adulthood, in a close-knit family whose lives center on the animals' activities and well-being. The author's ménage consists of the author, the author's husband and life partner, Christopher, and three older "brothers and sisters" — the protective, all-black male cat Navar Star, the lovable, easy-going male cat Huckleberry Moon, the quiet, mysterious female cat Girl Grey, and, later, the spirited, baby-of-the-family female cat Hayleigh SkyWalker, the only member of the family who does not get along with BrambleBerry Rose.

The author is a keen observer of the animals' personalities, favorite activities, and quirks; lovers of animals of all kinds will find common ground in descriptions that convey their inner and outer beauty. The author comes to learn that she and BrambleBerry Rose have a connection that transcends a single lifetime — she senses unearthly similarities between Earth and BrambleBerry Rose, for example. After her beloved cat's death, which plunged the author into deep sadness and heartache, the author is surprised to receive loving and comforting thought-communication from BrambleBerry Rose. The author describes this communication, among other signs, as vital to coping with the loss of BrambleBerry Rose and as strengthening her conviction that she and her beloved cat will be reunited in this world or the next. The author hopes her story will, in turn, comfort and help others who have suffered similarly painful losses.

This is a heartwarming and inspiring story that booklovers and friends of animals will love to read.

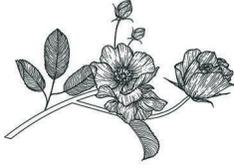
—Review by editor at Simon & Schuster





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Reviews of *My Cat Told Me: The Magical Journeys of BrambleBerry Rose*

“I don’t particularly like cats (although my history of several of them ‘owning me’ makes that a lie). I’m not particularly fond of tearjerkers (although this lovely story more rationally qualifies as a ‘spiritual anti-tearjerker’). Feel-good books are something else again — and who can resist one that is so obviously the perfect gift for someone who does like cats, who has lost a loved-one (two-legged or four-legged), and who simply has (or needs) the courage to keep breathing and take one step at a time into whatever the future may hold? Amber Archangel’s beautiful, poetic writing renders *My Cat Told Me: The Magical Journeys of BrambleBerry Rose* a mini-gem, a deserving and endearing addition on a friend’s — or even on your — reading list.”

—Hugo N. Gerstl, international best-selling author of *Scribe*, *Assassin*, *Against All Odds*, and *The Wrecking Crew*

“If you have ever loved an animal — whether your first puppy, a parrot who insulted you, a mouse who climbed all over you, or a kitty who practically lived on your lap — then you will love Amber Archangel’s story.

Animals are bundles of love who really do communicate with us and they love us no matter what.

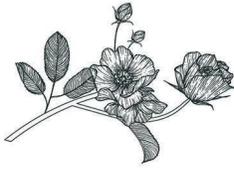
Thank you, Amber Archangel, for a heartfelt read, which is simple and profound at the same time. Would that we all could have a love like BrambleBerry Rose!”

—Gerard Rose, author of *The War to End*, *The Boy Captain*, and *Hamilton and Egberta*

“Perhaps the greatest words of wisdom ever spoken were by that famous, anonymous guru, TuGunn, who said from his aerie, ‘It is only when you have known the love of an animal that you’ve lived a fulfilling life.’ This was someone who, when he came down to Earth, got his groceries driving around in a golf cart with a bumper sticker that read, *Human and Cat Missing. Reward for Cat*. Yes, he was serious about felines. And so is Amber Archangel, joyously so. Much of her life has been spent learning from one of the smartest species on the planet. She shares their enlightened thoughts and heartfelnness in *My Cat Told Me: The Magical Journeys of BrambleBerry Rose*, a delicious story that will brighten your days.”

—Tony Seton, award-winning journalist and author of *The Francie LeVillard Mysteries*





Thank You for the Love ...

First in my heart are all the cats and kittens who've shared my life. I love you forever and promise to find you again.

I wouldn't be who I am without my extraordinary husband. Thank you for the many wondrous years, the places in this world we lived and visited, and the smiles and love along the way. Your love is the best part of me.

How can I thank you enough Randy (William) Olague for your love and highly valued teaching? You've been my Best Friend for decades; you opened my mind and heart to the wisdom of the Universe and the love of the Creator. Because of you, BrambleBerry Rose's voice continues.

Heartfelt gratitude to all the people who loved and cared for BrambleBerry Rose during her lifetime.

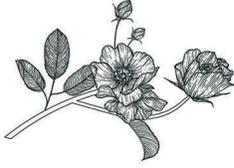
For all the magical stories my friends and neighbors told me about their beloved animals who returned home, after leaving, apparently, by their own choice.

How can I ever thank my lovely local Police Department for taking the call that brought BrambleBerry Rose back to me?

My local Grief Recovery group gave me a basket full of loving and supportive guidance through one of the toughest transitions I faced in my life.

And to the Creator of our Universe, THANK YOU for your lessons in LOVE, be they with those in fur or as a person. Everything else blows away in the end. LOVE is all there is.





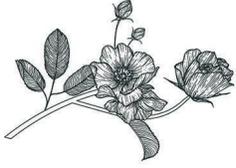
This book is a love story. It is dedicated to every bird, lizard, cat, dog, horse, elephant — all creatures, whether they breathe air or water, have fur or feathers, fly, crawl, walk, run, hop or burrow, are meant for work, to be wild or a pet, or (sadly) for consumption or nefarious purposes. They have come here to help heal us and this planet with the love they have in their hearts, and for that I thank them; I honour them, and love them all.

Ask the beasts and they will teach you the beauty of this earth.

—Saint Francis of Assisi

Thank you for reading my loving story. Please remember that it is not a replacement for receiving personal help with the death or illness of your beloved animal companion.





My Cat Told Me, The Magical Journeys of BrambleBerry Rose is also written to help those animal lovers who've lost a beloved friend. You may want to memorialize your precious friend's name below:

I

(your name)

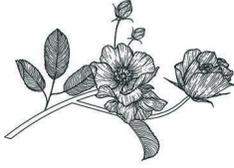
will love you and cherish you forever.

I promise to look for you and I know I will see you again, on this side or the Other.

In loving and eternal memory of

(your beloved's name)





1. I've Known You Before

Evening's light was quiet as I sank into the feathery pillows on my sofa holding my brand-new, eight-week-old kitten in my hands. I looked at her and, without a sound, she looked back. Unexpectedly I heard myself say, "I've known you before." There was something about her. I didn't know what it was; I recognized something familiar when I looked into the golden-green of her eyes.

Dear readers, I'd like to clarify: This. Had. Not. Happened. To. Me. Before. Sure, in the past I'd had the odd sense at times about something, and then it had happened. I'd think about a friend and then the phone would ring and it would be them, or I'd see them at the coffee shop. Many of us have had that happen — but this? This was new territory.

Holding her close to my heart I walked into my husband, Christopher's, office hoping he could help me out. He was looking at some high-tech house drawings and our other girl kitty, Girl Grey, was asleep near one of the tall windows that overlooked our yard. "I've known her before. Is that possible?"

"Uh-huh." He looked up to see our new baby. "That's unusual, but it's possible."

Girl Grey didn't wake up and therefore didn't know she had a new kitty sister.

"Do you think she might look like one of our cats who's already lived with us?"

"Maybe."

"Do you recognize her?"

"She's so cute." He sat back in his chair and reached to pet the top of her head. "But no; I've not seen one like her before."

I got out my photo albums — yes, back in the day — spread them out on the living room rug and looked at years of memories, all the cats and kittens who'd shared their lives with me, some from before I knew Christopher.

"You don't look like any of them." I said to my new kitten.

But the feeling didn't leave me and, later that evening, I asked Christopher again. "How will I know who she was?"

“Maybe it’ll come in time, or in a dream.”

Her name? Well, she was a tabby tortoiseshell, dilute calico; tabby tortie calico for short; or *Applejack* as one person enthusiastically stated when she met our new kitty. She looked as though she’d gotten lost in a brambleberry patch and her dark-grey stripes and golden spots had become all mixed up. The fur on top of her head was spiked, not silky-soft like most kittens, and she had tufts of delicate, darker fur at the tips of her ears. It was clear: her name was not *Mystère*, it was *Brambleberry*. So, on the day she came home, as I held that ball of warm fur in the cushion of my palms, her name became *Brambleberry Rose*. I gave her my middle name, something I hadn’t done with any other cat.

“Do you like *Brambleberry Rose* for her name?”

“Not *Mystère*? You gave her your middle name.” Christopher’s eyes were sparkling. “Oh, man, does that suit her! She’s so tiny and cute . . . little butterscotch baby. What will *Navar* and *Huckleberry* think?”

Huckleberry was our three-year-old sweet, sweet boy kitty. He’d meet her when he wandered into our house later. He was next door visiting his kitty friend, *Anna*. Those two were best buddies. And *Navar*, our stoic, *BIG* black boy, was the elder kitty of our family. Sometimes he hung out on the back porch until the squirrels went to bed. Christopher and I had watched him be protective of our little kitties for over a decade so we figured he was also protecting the squirrels who nested in our trees.



It was almost dark when *Huckleberry* joined us.

We were sitting on the living room rug with our new little baby kitten playing with some toys that had bells, some feather things she loved, and a kitty tunnel. *Girl Grey* had woken up and wandered into the living room. She jumped up to the back of the sofa and was watching from the safety of her vantage point, but didn’t seem to want to get closer.

When she saw her new brother cat, *Brambleberry* scampered into the tunnel. He was more interested in dinner than he was in her. She followed him just a little and, from a safe distance, silently watched him eat. He didn’t pay her much mind, but he didn’t seem to want her to get too close.

“*Huckleberry*, do you want to meet your new sister?”

Huck looked at *Christopher* but didn’t come any closer. *Girl Grey* watched from the advantage of her elevated viewpoint.

“Her name matches yours . . . she’s Brambleberry. Maybe you two can be friends.”

I was holding her and Christopher played with a toy, coaxing Huckleberry closer. He didn’t hiss or run away. He looked at her like he was intently studying a new bug and then went to lie down in his favorite bed where he could look out the window.

“Oh dear, that’s not what I expected,” Christopher said.

Navar came in a little later and he was curious. He walked up to her and put his big black nose down, next to her tiny little nose.

“Whoa. She’s so brave.”

I’d put her back on the rug after Huck left and when Navar got close she squished herself really low but didn’t run away. Navar reached out a big black paw to gently touch her but she wasn’t into that so much. I could tell she was a little afraid so I picked her up again.

“He’s your other big brother . . . he’s Navar and he loves you.” She turned and looked at me like she understood. “He’ll protect you and watch out for you. I promise.”

As I kissed her tiny face, she was purring.

Christopher left with Navar and Girl Grey to get them more food. Brambleberry and I played a little longer until it was dark.

“That went well,” Christopher said as we were getting everyone settled for our first night together. Huckleberry was still in his favorite flannel bed on the window seat in my office, and next to him, Girl Grey was snuggled into her fluffy bed. Navar was already curled up at the foot of our bed and Brambleberry had followed us into our bedroom. When I put her up onto our bed I think she decided that wherever I was sleeping would be a good place for her.

“She’s so tiny,” Christopher quietly said when Brambleberry curled up right next to me. “It’s a good thing we have such a big bed.”

Before sleep claimed me, I remembered when I’d first started thinking that I would get another kitten. It was about five years before today. That quiet message came back a few days later and then kept coming into my mind — as if a kitten were somewhere waiting for me.

At that time Christopher and I lived in the southern part of our state and were planning to move north to a smaller town. I thought we’d probably meet our new feline family member when we made that move with our ménage, which in those days included our three rescued felines.

You may know about the award-winning *Cirque du Soleil* show that doesn’t use circus animals and is also known as the *Circus of the Sun*. It was playing in Las Vegas around that same time. The reason I mention this, dear readers, is because when I learned about their fantastical

aerial acrobatics, for some reason I thought my new kitten's name would be the same as their newest and longest-running show, *Mystère*.

Several months later Christopher and I were visiting Las Vegas and got to see them perform.

"They're so high up in the air. . . ." We both watched with amazement.

"The way they fly . . . from one trapeze to another."

"They balance so delicately," Christopher said. "But they have to be strong athletes."

"*Mystère*. I'm pretty sure that's her name."

"Really, why?"

"I don't know. I just keep thinking of her when I watch them flying around."



Our first cat in the Southland, who we met shortly after we moved there, was Navar Star. Our handsome, all-black, big-boy cat was affectionately known to us as Navar, Navey (sounds kind of like Jazzy), or The Fonz because he was just so cool. (You may remember from the TV show *Happy Days* that The Fonz was a rebel who wore a black leather motorcycle jacket and was the essence of cool.) When we brushed him, if we parted the black fur on his chest, we could see a hidden, small white patch of fur — that's where the Star in his name came from.

He was tiny when we met him. He was standing in the pool of light from a streetlight in front of our house.

"Look at that black kitten down there." Christopher was leaning against the glass doors upstairs.

"Wonder what he's doing . . . he's kind of little to be out by himself."

Christopher couldn't stop staring at the little one. "Oh, man, he's cute."

We'd just finished watching the medieval fantasy movie *LadyHawke* starring Rutger Hauer as Captain Navarre and Michelle Pfeiffer as his love, Lady Isabeau d'Anjou. The two lovers were cursed to never be together, except for a few disappearing moments each day when the sun set, and again when it rose. They each transformed during that half-light — Navarre into a black wolf at night and Lady Isabeau into a hawk during the day.

Our little black kitten friend returned the next night and the next. We knew the neighbors he belonged to, so we asked if they were in love with him.

“Your little black kitten . . . are you looking for a home for him, or do you plan to keep him?” Christopher was friends with them and the conversation went better than we anticipated it might.

“Well, his cat dad looks like he wants to beat him up, so we’re a little worried!”

“He comes down to our house almost every night. Do you mind if we bring him in the house?”

“You can keep him if you want . . .”

And that’s how we got our precious boy Navey and how he got his name: Navar.

Navar Star’s father, Boots, was a very big, black cat — the difference was that he had four white boots. Many times we’d seen him cruising our neighborhood looking for other kittens and cats he could intimidate. He’d aggressively walk right into their space, softly yowl at them and try to get into fights. If they tried to leave, he stopped them. He was a very mean cat.

One day we saw Boots standing in front of a kitten, acting mean and menacing, staring at him, and generally terrifying the smaller cat.

“Do you see that?” Christopher looked at me. “I’m going to help that little cat. Boots could hurt him.”

Christopher walked out into the street and got closer to Boots. The young cat wasn’t moving and Boots didn’t seem to care that Christopher was getting near. He wouldn’t stop staring at the little cat or let him walk away.

Christopher finally ran at him, stomping his feet and waving his arms. “Leave that baby alone!” But Boots just continued to stare at the kitten.

Finally, when Christopher was just inches from him, Boots slowly walked away. He kept looking back at Christopher as if he were saying, “*Just wait . . . just you wait!*”

“I’ve never seen a cat act like that.” I was shaking my head. “I’m going to keep a watch out for the other neighborhood kitties.”

“Did you see his eyes?”

“Yeah, he looked vicious.”

“He really did *not* want me there,” Christopher said, as he watched the younger cat walk away safely, “but he wasn’t afraid of me.”



Late one warm, summer evening, Christopher was sitting on our upstairs balcony and called to me, whispering, “Check out what’s going on. Look what Boots is doing.”

And, lovely reader, you might not believe this, but it’s true.

We watched in astonishment from our vantage point as Boots approached another small, young cat on the street in front of our house. In the moonlight glow from our neighborhood street lamp we had a spectator’s view. The smaller cat had apparently been out for a summer’s evening stroll and had mistakenly ambled into Boots’ territory.

By the time she saw the large, black cat approaching, it was too late.

She stopped walking and was attempting to back up, to get out of Boots’ range, when a slender red fox ran out from the shadowy bushes in our across-the-street neighbor’s yard. The fox chased the large, menacing bruiser cat away from the scared little kitty and into the bushes on our property, toward the canyon. In a speeding minute the fox was gone, Boots was nowhere to be seen and the little cat was frozen in place. She couldn’t twitch a whisker.

They had no idea we were watching this scene of animal justice.

“Do you think the fox will come back and chase the little one?”

“Who knows? Where’d they go anyway? I’ll check the backyard.” Christopher left to find out if he could see anything in the dark yard behind our house. The fox and Boots had run through the bushes to the back of our property. But the rustling had stopped and everything was silent again.

“I can’t see anything out there.” Christopher sat back down to watch; the little cat was still standing, frozen, in the streetlight.

After several minutes of remaining stunned, and in the same position, she slowly shook one back leg and then a front leg. After another minute she shook her other front paw.

“I think she’s trying to remember how to use her feet.” The way Christopher enjoyed them was endearing to me. “She’s probably wondering if the fox is coming back for her.”

Right about that time the fox trotted out of the bushes in our yard and into the street.

“Oh, look, the fox is *back!*”

I was concerned for the kitten. But the fox glanced at her and kept walking; he crossed the street and then curled up on our neighbor's soft grass and went to sleep.

“Oh, dear, that baby can't move. Doesn't look like the fox cares about her at all. That's gotta be Boots' karma,” Christopher said, “He came out just to chase Boots away.”

The kitten finally got all of her legs moving in the same direction and scurried silently away.

“Do you know her?”

I knew a lot of the kittens on our street. “Hmm . . . nope, haven't seen her before. Where do you think she's going?”

“Probably home to never leave again!”

We watched a while longer. The kitten was safely gone and Savior Fox continued to sleep on the soft grass.

We didn't see Savior Fox again, but we also didn't see Boots harassing other kitties. We wondered if our neighborhood had a Guardian Angel fox who kept him in line.



Navar had been with us a couple years when we met Girl Grey, nicknamed Grey or Grey Grey. She had found Christopher and me when she was a kitten. We lived in Hawai'i at the time. Christopher designed and built custom homes, I was an interior designer, and we were working on O'ahu's legendary North Shore. We were building a traditional Hawai'ian-style home in Hale'iwa for a client that was sited in the residential area, right at the water's edge, near one of the famed surfing beaches.

The first night I saw her, she very slowly ventured onto our wooden front porch. I was inside and whispered to Christopher, “Check out this kitten.”

We both watched her explore. She moved so carefully, as if she expected monsters to jump out at any moment.

“She seems hungry. Can we go get her some food?”

“Yeah, let's get some pizza also.”

We left to get provisions and returned with kitten and people food. She was gone but we sat on the front porch. Being very quiet.

“She’s watching us,” Christopher whispered a while later. “Two o’clock under the bushes.”

I spooned some kitty food into a small dish, but she wouldn’t come any closer.

“Let’s go inside.”

We left the bowl of food and silently slipped inside the screen door.

“Oh, she’s eating some. Yay.” I was so happy. She was so tiny.

After that she began to let me feed her on the wooden front porch of the island cottage where we lived. She was just a tiny kitten and had a plastic flea collar around her neck. She was definitely a bit wild — wouldn’t let me touch her — and it was clear she would outgrow the collar soon, which could cause her death.

Slowly, she let me sit nearby while she enjoyed her dinner and I started to devise a plan.

“I have to get that collar off her.”

“Can you get a hold of the collar?”

“Yes, but she wiggles too much and I can’t get it clipped off.”

So, one evening after she’d become fairly comfortable with me sitting beside her, I brought out a pair of scissors, which I hid behind me. While she was eating, I grabbed her collar, clipped it off, then dropped it and the scissors.

“I got it.” I was excited but sat motionless without making any more sounds.

She ran away, and was gone for several days, but finally came back. After that, she became our island kitty.

Girl Grey was a Hawai`ian cane kitty. The telltale sign was the crimp at the end of her tail where it was bent, or as Christopher playfully said, “It changes directions.” Our island friends told us stories about wild cats who were found living in the sugar cane fields and had short tails. They told us it was part of their genetics and showed up generations later as a crimp in the cat’s tail.

We knew a kahuna in Honolulu and contacted her for a spiritual reading. “Your cat, Girl Grey, is very sensitive and loves the goddess of volcanoes and fire, Pele. In Hawai`ian religion, Pele is the creator of the Hawai`ian Islands.”

“Do many cats feel this way?”

“No, not a lot, but I’ve seen it before with Kahuna Cats . . . mystical . . . profoundly spiritual creatures. She’s more fairy than cat.”

“That’s pretty unique. Does she have a deep connection to the islands?”

“Yes, her cat DNA is cane cat, generations deep, and she’s in communication with the ancient gods, including Kaulu. Have you heard about him?”

“No, but we walked out onto the volcano on the Big Island. We heard that’s where Pele lives.”

“Yes, yes. I’m so glad you’ve been there. Was it erupting when you visited? Did you feel a connection to the area or the activity?”

“Yes, it was erupting. I felt a deep respect for the land we stood on and for what was happening. The lava flows . . . oh my goodness, the heat . . . and the new land being formed at the edge of the ocean. What a sight.”

“We flew out over it,” Christopher recalled.

“Are you a pilot?”

“Yes, so I was able to get close to where the red-hot molten lava was plunging into the ocean. All that steam rising into the air was something I hadn’t flown around before.”

“I hope this is helpful to understanding your little cat. She relates to everything you mentioned. She also relates to the other Hawai`ian god I mentioned, Kaulu. Legend has it that he’s immortal and doesn’t age; he’s invulnerable to being harmed when fighting. I’m not saying your kitty is a fighter; in fact, she seems very quiet and contemplative. She may also want to help when you’re sad or upset, or when your other cats are injured or ill.”

“It seems to me like she knows secrets.”

Both Christopher and the kahuna softly chuckled.

“She does know secrets . . . and she’ll keep them to herself. She’s deeply aware and spends time watching and thinking about things. At times it may seem that she’s aloof or distant, but she’s processing things and will take her time. She communicates telepathically, even more than most cats.”

“I’ve been told to send my cats word thoughts and images. Is that the best way to communicate with her?”

“Yes, she can get overwhelmed with spoken words. She may keep to herself and be an observer. She might be a bit of a lovable trickster — doing things your other cats don’t — and may even be a shapeshifter.”

“Oh, we saw our big black cat Navar shapeshift. The house we live in on the mainland has a hot tub outside that’s at ground level. One afternoon we were both out there and the latch on our gate rattled like someone was trying to get in. Navar became a large, black panther.”

“Did both of you see that?”

“Yes. It only lasted a few seconds and we looked at each other.” Christopher’s eyes widened a bit. “We both asked each other, ‘Did you see that?’ We thought he was protecting us in case someone was coming into our yard.”

When we returned to the mainland several months later, our wise, sweet, stealthy Girl Grey traveled on the flight with us, bundled up in her kennel with her blanket and a handful of her favorite kitty toys. She had the colouring of a Russian Blue and was just what her name implies: silvery-grey all over with green, dark-rimmed eyes. She was simply beautiful.



Huckleberry Moon was also called Huck or Huckleberry, and somewhere along the way collected the nickname, Bugs, or Buggy. He was one of the sweetest boy cats ever born and came to us several years after Girl Grey, when he was a kitten. He belonged to a neighbor and the ménage he’d been raised with included — in addition to his human mom and his feline mom and siblings — a few medium-sized snakes, two peach-coloured macaws, a couple of large, affectionate dogs, a mouse colony, and three active young children. When he came to live with us, Huckleberry gave us the impression that he could pretty much roll with anything we had for him. But it was unlikely we’d ever have the cheerful, circus-like zoo he came from. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with his fishing pole slung over his shoulder came to mind, so we named him Huckleberry. He had the distinct markings of a classic Norwegian Forest cat: he was tiger-striped with white boots and, as he got bigger, the white markings across his mouth and nose made him look like he wore the shape of the full moon on his face.

On the day we met him, Christopher and I were sitting in our front yard in the Southland playing with Girl Grey and our neighbor’s cat Gillette, while Navar sat on the roof of our house guarding us. A couple of neighborhood kids joined us and then another nice, adult neighbor stopped by. She had a kitten with her and wanted to know if he could play with us.

While we were all sitting on the grass and the cats were chasing toys, Christopher got up to go into the house and the little boy kitten loped along behind him. I was surprised to watch the little one leave because we were all playing with him and, he just left with someone he didn’t know and, went right into a house he’d never been in.

When Christopher returned he was holding the kitten. “I want to keep him. Do you want another cat?”

“Sure, he’s adorable.”

That was the day Girl Grey met Huck. She was several years older than Huckleberry Moon, and they became best friends. She seemed to know right away that they were two of a kind — soft, gentle, sweet little souls.

Navar watched Huckleberry. He didn’t play with him, or Girl Grey. I got the feeling that Navar saw himself as a guard and mentor for the little cats. Huck was only a couple months old at that time and Navey had accepted Girl Grey years earlier, from the first moment we brought her home. He didn’t seem to like or dislike them; he gave me the impression that they were his responsibility. It was so interesting to watch their individual personalities and how they lived with each other.

Christopher and I considered our cats to be family and we both felt privileged to have them in our lives. We loved them dearly and laughed so many times because of the unexpected things they did. They all got fed the same food at the same time, they each had their own fluffy beds in several different locations, and the younger kids had baskets full of toys to play with.

They had a cat friend who lived across the street named Gillette. He was a quiet, very friendly, pure white cat who came into our house through our cat door.

We called it our cat door but it was a vintage, built-in arrangement I hadn’t seen before. I was told it was an old-fashioned milk-delivery door, about four feet up, on the back wall of our house. It was actually two small, metal doors, one each on the interior and exterior surfaces, with a cavity in the wall between them. Each oval door, approximately seven or eight inches tall, had a sliding latch, but didn’t lock. In days long gone, fresh milk in glass bottles had been delivered to the people who lived there. So the doors could be opened from the inside and the outside. I could close either or both doors and slide the latch to keep our kids inside and critters out.

Well, friend-cat Gillette would come inside our house through those small doors and walk right past the kibbles into the living room where the kitty toys lived. He’d check out the baskets full of toys and take what he wanted, jump back out through the same cat doors, and carry his new treasure home. When I learned about what he did, I could *not* stop laughing. Every once in a while I’d visit his mom and retrieve his stash of toys. He’d have to begin again.

Many sunny mornings found me with our three kitties, Gillette, and whomever else wanted to join us for catnip sunrises. Our house had round stepping stones leading to our front door, and I put a fresh, petite mountain of nip on each step for however many friendly cats were around. I sat on the porch and watched them.

On those peaceful mornings, Navar joined the other kitties but at other times he was on the front porch guarding our house or on the roof doing mind-control on the other neighborhood cats. He did this fascinating thing where he would sit on the roof of our house and silently stare at cats who tried to come into his territory. He’d focus his huge green eyes on them as they

walked down the street and, without a sound, they'd look at him way up in the air, stop walking, and back up.

Step by step.

And then they'd turn and trot away.

Rarely did we see them again. Sweet readers, you probably remember the magician Merlin from the story *Camelot*. Navey made me think of him.

When he sat on our porch none of our other cats were allowed to join him. They just knew to not sit there at that time. He never hissed or enforced his space, he just silently set rules and they magically followed. As I mentioned earlier, we thought he saw our younger cats as his assignment, not his buddies.

Girl Grey had a mysterious way of finding things that made a sound. She would jump up to the almost 12-inch-wide hand-rail shelf on our front porch and sit there opening the old-fashioned mailbox cover with her paw. It wasn't easy to get to because we'd built a lattice that covered it. She'd open it and let it drop, making a low, clunking sound. She'd do this until I heard her and opened the front door for her. Then she'd jump down to the porch and walk into the house. I was intrigued at how she knew to do that. No one had ever shown her. Since we had a basket for our mail, not even the mail person used this mailbox that would drop letters into a decorative retro box in our living room.

I had a collection of small, colourful teddy bear tins that were about three inches tall. They lived in a basket on the living room floor. Girl Grey sat down next to it, almost daily, and with her paws, played with the tin bears. They made a light, musical sound as they clinked together.

Huck and Navar had no interest in the teddy bear tins or the magic mailbox cover that could get the front door opened.

Sometimes she left home: the silly girl would go to our next-door neighbor's house, climb up in the attic of their garage and stay there for a day or longer. Why? Who knew? I had the feeling she wanted her own space for some down time. She would talk to me through the vent in the wall but wouldn't come home until she wanted to.



As moving day approached, my thoughts went more frequently to our new kitty, Mystère. I wondered how I would find her.

It was only a seven-hour drive to our new home on the Central Coast and we thought traveling with our three kids wouldn't be too much of a challenge. Christopher could drive any car or truck and he'd rented the largest commercial moving van available. We planned for him to have Navar in his carrier with him. I'd have Girl Grey and our youngest, Bugs, with me in their carriers on the front seat of my car. They each had their favorite blankets in their carriers, and another to cover them, some treats, and we had water for them. Back in the day before cell phones we communicated efficiently with walkie talkies. He used them on large jobs.

"How are you doing?"

"Well, we're on the road again aren't we?"

Christopher'd been working in and commuting to our lovely new town for over a year and was delighted his family would now live there with him.

For the first ten or twenty miles everything went well.

"How's Navey?"

"I think he fell asleep. He's curled up in his carrier. How's the babies?"

"Grey's fine, she's watching the streets and trees pass by the windows. Bugs is a little concerned. He's talking a little and occasionally reaching his paws through the door of his carrier."

"Hey, little guy, you're okay." I reached to gently rub his paw. "It won't be long and you'll be in your new home." That's going to be so much fun for you. You'll even get a new kitty sister there, what do you think of that?"

I covered Girl Grey with her favorite soft blanket and, like her big brother, she fell asleep. But Huckleberry was totally different. He seemed to be getting more upset.

His carrier was closest to me and I turned it so he was facing me. That might not have been my best decision. He started trying to reach both of his paws through the door of his very comfortable carrier.

"How's he doing?" Christopher was focused on driving the very large and heavy moving van, but wanted to help our youngest. Huckleberry's voice was getting louder and his claws were connecting with my upper arm.

"I think he's trying to give me a Huckleberry tattoo as punishment for this road trip."

"Can you turn his kennel so he can't reach you?"

We'd been on the road for about an hour and Bugs wasn't calming down.

“Do you think we should stop and just give him a break?”

“Sure, let’s pull over at the next rest stop. We’ll open the windows and give him a quiet minute.”

Christopher parked at the unpopulated end of the rest area and I parked next to him. As soon as the car stopped Huck was fine. Navar was comfortable in his carrier and Grey was curled up in hers.

“I brought some supplies with their food.” I started looking through their travel bag. “Hey, there’s some Rescue Remedy in here. Let’s see if this helps.”

Bugs loved shrimp canned cat food and had no idea we were helping him chill. He enjoyed his road food. I gave some to Girl Grey also, without the Bach Flowers added. Navar wanted to sleep.

“Wanna give it another try?” Christopher checked the watch he always wore.

“How are we for time?”

“We’re good.”

Huck was still in his carrier, I’d moved it so he couldn’t reach my arm any longer and he seemed to settle down.

Christopher started the moving van and Bugs was still quiet in my car.

“Okay, let’s try it again.”

I started my car and he was still okay.

It worked! We were both rolling down the road again and our kids were good.

We arrived just before sundown and greeted the members of our crew who would help us unload the next day. They helped us gather our overnight gear and we carried our well-rested kitties into the living room of our new house. It was about three times larger than where we came from and had doors on three walls. This was very helpful because we could close all those doors and the kitties were secure and safe in our front room.

We gave them food and put their favorite beds next to our air mattress, but they wanted to check out each corner and window in the new, large room. After a while Navar and Bugs appeared to relax and ceased their explorations but Girl Grey kept pacing. She was especially interested in the large, lodge-like brick fireplace. Since we’d just arrived, we had no screen over the gaping opening. I watched her while getting our things sorted, not thinking she could do much, and I concentrated for a few minutes on other things.

All of a sudden Girl Grey disappeared!

“Oh my goodness, where’d she go?”

Christopher had returned from closing the truck and locking it.

“Girl Grey’s gone.”

“But all the doors are closed.” Christopher looked around, trying to figure out where she was. “Where could she have gone?”

“She was walking back and forth in front of the fireplace . . .”

We both bend down and looked as far up into the chimney as we could. Nothing! Then I put my hand up into the blackness and found a narrow ledge just high enough that we couldn’t see.

“There’s a little shelf up here.”

“Anything else?”

“She’s up here.”

“Can you get her down? I’ll find something to block that.”

I tried calling to her and bribing her with treats but she didn’t want to come to me. So I reached up to that narrow ledge in the chimney. Everything was covered with powdery black soot — when I finally got hold of her, she and I both had soot on us.

I got Girl Grey safely out of the chimney, and went in search of a place to clean up. Well, the power wasn’t going to be turned on until the next morning, and since we’d been living in a warmer climate we were quite cold. There was no hot water and no soap.

Christopher and I were both shaking our heads in disbelief .

“Oh, dear Lord, I did *not* plan for this.”

“You look a little like Cinderella with all that on your arms.” Christopher said as he blocked the entry to the irresistible fireplace. By this time the sun was going down. All three kitties were at least in the same room with us, and we sat down on our air mattress with more snacks for them and some for us.

The next morning when we woke up we were greeted with an enchanting sight.

As we looked around we saw our antique living room in a bright, new light. It was twenty six feet long and sixteen feet wide. There was a high, gracious, pitch to the ceiling. This had all

been built 100 years earlier of century old wood; it's called clear cedar and it'd been lightly whitewashed. We looked up from our air mattress on the floor to two massive skylights. Every wall had wide, old-fashioned windows with that old-school, wavy glass. Our yard sloped down a hill and the living room was on the back side of the house. The reason I mention this, dear readers, is because the sun was shining and there were branches of beautiful, old, gracious oak trees covered with spring green leaves at each window and skylight. Because of the elevation of our living room we were literally surrounded by their branches.

“Wowwww!”

“Right?”

“This is fantastic! It's like being in the Swiss Family Robinson treehouse.”

Christopher and I agreed on almost everything in our lives, especially aesthetics. So when he'd said he thought he'd found our new house I trusted him. He sent photos, and a map, and I was nearly euphoric. He was building a house in the area and I loved visiting the small, artistic town. I traveled to see our new home, but had only been through it at sundown. The rooms were large and we both loved the location and layout of the house. I couldn't see the yard other than that it was fenced and had a lot of trees.

I had no idea how captivating this place would be for us.

The kitties slowly stretched into a new day in our new life, but Girl Grey was still trying to figure out if there was any way she could climb up that chimney. She walked back and forth in front of the travel-bag and moving-box-barrier Christopher had constructed, put her paws underneath the edges, and looked at it as if she were a scientist and could figure out the problem.

“The magic is strong with this one. We better be careful — she might figure something out.”

Christopher somehow knew the kitties better than I did. He had some connection with them that intrigued me. When he told me what he thought they were thinking it fascinated me.



Our moving crew arrived and coffees were handed out to all who wanted. There were about twelve of them, young men and women who worked on Christopher's jobs. We kept kitties in rooms with closed doors and by the end of the day everything was safely in its intended room. We had boxes everywhere, but the moving van was empty. We had lights that turned on and warm water to wash up with. We managed to keep Girl Grey inside and mostly happy — no more fireplace escapades for that little one.

It was the beginning of summer and life in our quaint town was even better than we'd planned for. The town we left was also a small, beautiful coastal community but had changed in the years we'd been there. That town had been close to a city and our neighbors had begun to have their homes tagged; road rage had become a persistent, new thing. These both suggested the edge of danger to me.

Our new town in contrast was so charming; it was quiet. There weren't many cars and we noticed immediately how clean the air was. We had a large front, courtyard-style porch, and one evening Christopher and I were relaxing out there on a couple of antique wooden garden chairs. The furniture was mostly in place inside and much of the move-in was finished. After keeping them inside for several days, our kitties were safe and happy in their large yard and new home. The sun was just beginning to set and the end of the working day was peaceful. When out of that stillness we heard singing. It was clearly a group of people and, then we heard laughing and clapping. And guess what we heard next? Bells ringing!

"What is that?"

We'd walked around our neighborhood and had seen a carved wood sign for the historic outdoor theater. So we vaguely knew about the summer stage productions nearby but had no idea when they started or what they'd be.

Then we heard a group of children shouting, "I believe in fairies!"

Christopher started laughing in that endearing way that I loved. "I know what that is, it's Peter Pan." And the bells rang again.

He had a thing he did when he gave me birthday cards or sweet notes. He would sign his name and write, "Straight on 'Til Morning," in reference to Peter Pan, and then draw the sideways eight of an infinity sign.

"This place really does have some kind of magic."

As the sun set we listened to what we'd later learn was a theater production of *Peter Pan* in our neighborhood theater. The bells were Tinkerbelle. It was located in the forest about a block and a half from our home. It was known as "The Forest Theater," one of the oldest outdoor theaters west of the Mississippi River.

There was a lot to accomplish to get settled in our new town and establish our business. Even though I continued to think almost every day about getting another kitty, a new jumping, running, playful member of the family had become a dream for the future.

Having a new home — well, it was old, really, since it was built around 1924 — meant we could add our creative inspiration, and because our business was building and designing homes it became a lot of fun to work with the nearly hundred-year-old home.

We built new local-stone paths in our garden and planted native flowers. Inside we refinished wood floors and added new, updated lighting. Christopher loved halogen lighting fixtures that hung from cables and I loved cables for any reason, so our new home became a mixture of century old and high-tech features. Most of the original lighting had to be turned on by those old-fashioned pull chains and we met new friends in town who made hanging crystal decorations just for that purpose. So we had a lot of crystals in almost every room that caught the sunlight and splashed prisms on the walls. We put lighting fixtures on our porches that looked like they were made for elf land somewhere. Our new home was definitely taking on a magical personality.

It was nearing the end of winter, seven months later, when the thought of getting another kitten became so loud in my mind that I had to pay attention to it.

I began my search by phoning the shelters, the SPCA, and veterinarians near our home, including ours, but the reply was always the same: “It’s too early; there are no kittens looking for a home.” I was well into almost two months of unsuccessful searching by this time.

“I’m striking out, Christopher. I *cannot* find our kitten. She’s in my mind, I can even feel her in my heart, but I can’t find her.”

“It’ll happen, don’t worry.” Christopher had a trusting way of living. Without saying much he depended on the Creator of the Universe and kept a quiet faith.

“She’s on my mind all the time.”

“Is she a *her*?” His eyes were dancing.

“Maybe. Seems like it. We’ll see. If I ever *find* her!”

“You’ll find her; she’s been calling to you.”

Early that evening I thought about a small marketplace not too far from us. “Hey, remember that pet food store down by Spencer’s Stationery?”

“Yep.”

“They have a community board with all kinds of neighborhood postings, maybe . . .”

“Do you want to go down in the morning?”

“Can we go now?”

I didn’t know my way around as well as he did. Christopher was out every day meeting new people and dealing with business things. But I’d seen that store and now it was very clear in my mind.

As soon as I saw her photo on the poster with two other eight-week-old kittens, I knew it was Mystère. How? I have no idea.

“That’s her!” I was happier than happy. “Let’s go home and call them.”

Those were the days before cell phones but it was just a short drive back home.

“Hi, I’m calling about the babies on the poster. Do you still have them?”

“Hi, yes.” She started asking a number of questions: “Do you have cats now? Any dogs? Have you raised kittens before? How many are you looking for?” Questions about our cat family, our yard, and our veterinary doctor.

“I know your vet,” she added. “I work on the other side of the shopping center from him. He’s a good vet.”

She must’ve approved of my answers: “Would you like to meet them tomorrow? I’m Stevie, my husband is Bryant. Hold on. . . .” There was a momentary pause. “Could you come over to our house around two p.m.?”

I looked at Christopher who was listening to our speakerphone conversation. He nodded yes.

YES, YES, YES is what I wanted to shout! “Yeah, two will be great,” is what I said. “We’re Christopher and Amber.”

“We’ll both be here, see you tomorrow.”

That evening, I gathered Navar, Girl Grey, and Huckleberry together.

“Guess what, babies? Tomorrow your dad and me are going to meet a new baby. She might be your new sister! Is that exciting?”

Girl Grey silently watched us as if she were calculating something and then rubbed her head against my hand. I wondered if she knew what I was saying. Huck walked away and Navar looked at both Christopher and me, his giant green eyes staring.

“Do you think he knows?”

Christopher and Navar were such buds. “He knows something.”

“I *cannot* wait.” I petted Girl Grey and told her that I loved her. “Oh man, I have to chill so I can go to sleep.”

The next afternoon Stevie answered the door. “Hi! Bryant’s around here somewhere. Come on in, how are you guys?”

“I’m so excited.”

Bryant joined us and I liked both of them right away. I saw that they had a couple of cats lounging in their living room but I didn’t see the babies.

“That’s Penelope and Autumn, and the black one that’s hiding is Jasmine. We have two others but they’re out in the yard. Did you read the kitten’s story?”

“Stevie hand-raised them from when they were one day old,” Bryant said with a sense of pride. “She took them to work with her. She fed them around the clock and protected them. . . . She cleaned them and kept them warm, even while their eyes were still closed from birth.”

“Really, that’s impressive; you must have experience with kittens so young.” I recalled my own experience with newborns. “That’s not easily done.”

“We get the most badly injured animals: puppies and kittens,” Stevie continued. “These three were born on Valentine’s Day and found shoved into a plastic bag and tossed into a trash bin.”

“What? I read what you wrote but it sounds so much worse when you say it.”

“I was the last volunteer still working — at the end of a long day — when an Animal Control officer hurried in with a lavender kennel and an urgent request to please save the newborn kittens. She said a shaken-up sanitation worker had been rumbling through his day when he heard them. I took them home with me that evening.”

“They were one day old? Did you know anything about their kitty mom? I can’t imagine what she felt. Was it one of those large commercial bins?”

“Yep.”

“How did he hear them? Those trucks make a lot of noise.”

Christopher put his hands on my shoulders. “He was listening with different ears.”

“I never knew a thing about their mama. They’re really cute; do you want to meet them?”

“Yes.”

“They’re in the kitten room; you both can go in and sit with them.” Stevie was leading us down the hall. When we opened the door we saw three tiny, furry faces looking at us. They were playing with colourful kitten toys and stopped to watch us.

When we sat on the sofa, each of them climbed up to sit on us.

“Aren’t they cute?”

“So tiny.” I scooped one of them into my hands.

“Stay as long as you like.” Stevie smiled. “You said you want one?”

Christopher and I looked at each other. “With our three cats . . . one will be great.”

“How will I know?”

“You’ll know which one is yours.” Stevie smiled again and closed the door.

The little monkeys climbed all over us. Christopher picked up one of their string toys and all three kittens wanted to catch the mouse on the end. They chased each other into their tunnel and then scared each other by jumping and hiding. They were adorable.

As I sat with three tiny, curious kittens, I said a silent prayer that their feline mother could have peace. Her babies were safe, and I prayed for her happiness and safety.

After about twenty minutes the other two kittens scampered off and went exploring together, but the little girl I had recognized in the photo kept climbing on us. She crawled up my sweater and onto my shoulder. Then she crossed over to Christopher’s shoulders. She walked back and forth like she didn’t want to leave us. The other two were still playing and chasing each other. I knew she was mine.

Christopher and I didn’t need to talk about it. I loved her immediately and could tell he did too.

When Stevie came back in, I picked up the tiny fur-ball who was sitting on Christopher’s shoulder. “Is this one a girl?”

“Yeah, she’s ‘Tres’ in the photo.”

“I recognized her when I saw your pictures . . . the other two look alike but she looks different from them. She’s been on my mind. For *years*. I’ve even already named her . . . her new name is *Mystère*.”

“That’s an interesting name. It sounds mystical.”

“What do you think our other kitties will do?”

“You know Navey,” Christopher smiled. “He’s going to look after her.”

I knew that’s exactly what Navar would do.

“I think Huckleberry will want to play with her. And Girl Grey? We’ll have to wait and see. She may just want to observe her from a safe place.”

We carried this little bit of fluff into the living room and I spoke to both of them. “Thank you so much for rescuing these babies.”

“I’m going to miss her. I know she’s going to a good home, but I’m still going to be thinking about her tonight.”

Bryant put his hand on top of Stevie’s. “She loves all our rescue babies.”

“I’ll call and let you know how she’s doing,” I promised.

“Ha! She’s going to get held and kissed a lot tonight,” Christopher said. “I’m so glad we met you guys and thanks so much for loving her.”

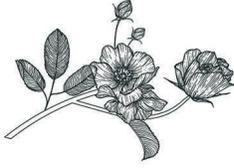
I had a carrier with a soft blanket inside but I didn’t put her in there. She was happy to stay curled up in her new blanket in my arms. Even when Christopher started the car, she just purred and hid in the softness.

As promised, I phoned Stevie a little later. “She’s so pretty . . . and our cats are just chill. They’re doing their thing and letting her play.

“She’s going to have a happy life, I can tell. Oh . . . a nice person contacted us about Uno and Dos, so it looks like they’ll have a home together. Thanks for calling.”

“Thanks for loving them and watching out for them when they was so small.”





2. Could This Possibly Be True?

In those first weeks, Navar made sure he was always near her.

He didn't touch her or sleep with her or even play with her. He simply stayed where he could see what she was doing. She didn't wander far so sometimes he jumped on the back of the sofa where he could watch her in the living room and sunroom. He also sat on a bench on our comfortable, front porch while she chased garden bugs. When she was outside in the yard he followed her and then laid down close by. It looked like he was taking a nap but he wasn't. He was always aware of where she was.

In her first couple of days in her new home, Huckleberry gave her kitty side-eye, a lot. He didn't seem to mind that she was there, he just didn't want her to get too close

Girl Grey loved her. At first she studied the new little cat. She watched her from a safe distance and then, after a couple of days, they chased each other through the house. Sometimes Brambleberry Rose would chase Girl Grey and then they'd turn around and Brambleberry was running as fast as she could to get away from her older, silvery grey sister.

I wanted to collect a lot of baby pictures of her and took as many as I could for her album. She was so adorable; it was easy to get good photos of her.

At night she climbed up on my pillow and slept with her tiny face right next to mine. It was so touching and tender. Her whiskers tickled my nose, which at times woke me. Sometimes, she slept on top of my head, which caused me to question her safety more than once.

"Can you believe she keeps doing this?" I asked Christopher a few nights later.

"Well, you haven't squished her yet."

Before we got Brambleberry, Navey was our nighttime companion most nights but, since her arrival, he was there every night. It seemed like he wanted to watch out for his littlest sister even during the night.

"Thanks for watching over our babies, big guy."

Navar closed those big green eyes of his and tipped his head back. He looked majestic.

One night, while Christopher worked in his office, she played with a fluffy bell ball on our bed. In the darkened glow of the TV screen, all I could see was her silhouette. It surprised me

because, in shadow, she looked like one of my previous cats — my first kitten, Earth, who had lived with me many years before I met Christopher.

Earth was an unusual beauty and supremely intelligent. Even though she was purebred Abyssinian, she was unwanted in that world. She had a look that was considered by her breeder to be undesirable and that's how she came to be my kitten. Red, or ruddy, in colour, Earth had penetrating green eyes, and her face was round instead of triangular. I was told that some breeders wanted their Abyssinians to have large, pointed ears that were placed more on the side of the cat's head. Her ears were more typical than pointed and were placed on the top of her head like most cats. But the best parts of Earth's ears were the dark tufts at the tips, which gave her a slightly wild appearance, and were a thing I dearly loved about her. At times I'd thought those wild bits of fur made her look like a baby lynx.

As she grew up, I learned that Earth would chase green grapes I rolled across the floor. The green colour of the grape matched the green of her eyes, and it was so pretty to see — like accidental artwork — when she held it in her mouth. She would carry the grape back to me gently held between her teeth. She'd do this several times for a re-roll, until, at last, she ate it. I wondered at the time how many cats did that.

Earth had been my best friend and mentor. I loved that cat dearly, and she was with me for many wonderful years. It's always over too soon with our animal friends. When she crossed over to be with the Angels, Earth left me a basketful of valuable life and love lessons. The most important gift Earth gave me was how rewarding it was to open my heart to the love of an animal. From her, I learned that animals can be our true friends and how easy it is to cherish them and always be kind to them.

Well, there was Earth's likeness in Brambleberry Rose's shadow image, and it happened again several weeks later. Was there a connection between what I was seeing and what I felt when I had first held Brambleberry Rose? I wondered, "*Could this possibly be true?*"

Christopher was again working in his office the second time it happened.

"Remember when I told you how I saw Earth's face in Brambleberry Rose's shadow?"

"Hi, love." He was sketching a house design and I could tell he'd been deep in thought, so I kissed him. "Ask me again."

"Ha, sorry. Do you remember how I saw Earth and Brambleberry on our bed one night?"

"Oh, yeah."

"It happened again. We were playing and all of a sudden it was like I was looking at Earth, not Brambleberry."

Christopher didn't say anything. He knew more about esoteric disciplines and I thought maybe he'd heard about something like this.

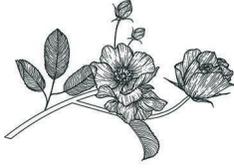
“Is that a thing?”

“Do you think Earth is visiting you?” Christopher asked.

“It’s kind of like they’re the same . . . *what?* Is that even possible?”

“I’ve heard that animals can come back after they die, so maybe Earth reincarnated?”





3. *Please, No!*

Christopher wanted to update our gracious front porch so he arranged for our friend Lauren, who was skilled in working with wood and stone, to come over and help.

It was late morning, warm, and she and I were laying reclaimed, antique red bricks on top of the wood deck leading to our front door. Lauren and I were concentrating on rotating the brick pattern on the wide wood planks. The people who had lived in the house before us had cut a round opening in the wood surface nearly seven inches in diameter beside the front door. Neither of us could see anything when we looked into that darkness. We measured and found the bricks would cover it completely. Bramleberry, or Baby Brambles — one of her new nicknames — was a few months old and totally precious. She entertained us while we worked in the sunshine.

She had a fat little tummy, legs that were starting to get long, and mismatched stripes all over her baby-fur coat. She explored everything: climbed on the furniture, hid behind the leaves of potted flowers, and played with all the garden bugs when she found them.

Quite suddenly and without warning, I was gripped by a feeling that my kitten was in danger. I glanced around and didn't see her playing anywhere.

“Have you seen Bramleberry in the last couple of minutes?”

“She was just here, but no . . . where'd she go?”

“Did you see her leave? Did one of the other cats show up?”

The front door was standing open so she could have gone into the house. Navar was curled up on the rug at the entry. “Do you know where Brambles is; did she come inside?”

Navar didn't seem concerned.

“Baby Brambles? Bramleberry Rose?”

Nothing, not a sound.

I walked through the house, Lauren was on the porch outside and we were both calling her name.

“Hey, Bramleberry, can you please come home now?”

I kind of chuckled but my stomach was beginning to sink. I went back to the front porch and looked behind every piece of furniture and each clay pot. I walked around the corner of the house. “Baby Brambles? Brambleberry Rose?”

I looked toward the street which had been mostly quiet all morning, saying silently, “*Please, no!*” But I saw nothing when I walked through the gate and searched both sides of the street.

I thought of the darkness below that cutout in the deck and felt drawn to find out if she was under the house.

What is that feeling? When your heart takes over and leads your feet to walk?

“I’m going to check under the house, let me know if you see her.”

When I opened the three-foot door that led to the dirt floor and cavernous space under our house, my little Brambleberry Rose came running to me. She was as happy to see me as I was to see her. After kissing her tiny, dusty face as much as she let me — approximately three kisses — I carried her back to the porch.

“I have her!”

Lauren let out a deep breath and looked relieved. “Where the heck was she?”

“Under the house. It’s pretty dark down there; I’m not sure how she got there!”

Lauren and I looked at that round opening in the deck.

“Do you think she jumped down there?”

“Ha. Oh, My Goodness. If she did, she’s part monkey.” Lauren said.

“Let’s cover that up just in case . . .”

“No more shenanigans, little one.” Lauren said, reaching to pet the top of her dusty little head.

We bricked over her escape hatch and kept her close to us.

Navar woke up and joined us looking at us as if to ask, “You guys okay?”

We could not help laughing.



Days later Lauren told me that she'd seen things similar my connection to Brambles between mothers and their children, but not with a three-month-old kitten. To say that I loved Brambles seems completely inadequate; it was becoming clear there was a bond between us that I hadn't known before. Love was part of it but there were other powerful and mysterious connections.

A native zoo lived in our yard with us. We had so many red and grey squirrels who had nests in our graceful California oak trees, crows who arrived in large groups, making all kinds of ruckus, a few raccoons who hung out in our 100-foot-tall pine trees, and lots of little birds who sang and entertained our kitties and us.

The trees themselves were a thing of beauty: there were over twenty, 100-year-old majestic oak trees covering our yard. During the day, they acted as an umbrella, shading us from the sun but, at night in the dappled moonlight, they seemed to be wise, mystical beings. They were probably sentinels.

One oak tree that was growing in our backyard had branched into six separate trees and was growing from under our kitchen. The house had been built right over the tree and the tree didn't seem to mind.

Those trees were very close to our house and gave our kitties and squirrels a road system across our yard. They could run and jump from tree to tree and onto our roof without touching the ground. What a wonderful sound it was inside when several squirrels or kitties ran across our roof. It sounded like a friendly troupe of critters. We had large, clear skylights in most of our rooms and, on some mornings, it looked like someone small and squirrel-ish had been playing slip-and-slide on them. There were paw prints and loooooong slide marks down the slope of the skylights.

There were at least twelve 100-year-old pine trees. They were reaching the end of their lifespan because they'd been planted around the time our city was founded in 1902. One of those tall pines was a storage vault for acorns. There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of holes drilled into the bark, on all sides from top to bottom, and stuffed with acorns, as well as larger holes in the trunk where the acorn woodpeckers had their nests.

It was on an unremarkable quiet Sunday — after the normal circus of birdsong and feeding the squirrels — and just as afternoon was beginning, when, all of a sudden, I realized it had been hours since I'd seen Brambleberry.

She'd been playing outside with the other kids but had come back in the house in the late morning, and I didn't remember seeing her go out again.

As I walked to Christopher's office I glanced in each room.

“Have you seen Brambles?”

“Ah . . . no, not since this morning. Is Navar around?”

I found our big black boy napping in a puddle of sun in our sunroom.

“Navey, do you know where Brambles is?”

He opened his green eyes and looked at me but didn’t answer.

I looked in each room more carefully. I looked all over the house — under beds, in closets, on shelves, behind doors, anywhere she might be.

“Brambles!”

“Brambleberry Rose.”

“Miss B.”

“Baby B.”

I called almost all of her names and tried enticing her out from hiding by rattling the crinkly bags that held her treats, but I couldn’t find her.

The doors to the yard were not open and Christopher had been in his office reading most of the later morning so I assumed she didn’t go out those doors either.

Huckleberry was lounging at one of the tall windows looking out to the yard, Girl Grey was napping in the tunnel, and Brambles was still AWOL.

I began the room-by-room search again, treat bag in hand. Under beds, in closets, on shelves, I even looked inside some fuzzy slipper boots . . . but no Baby B.

I decided to go outside and made sure the front door was closed behind me.

“Brambles!”

“Baby Brambles. Baby B.” I was calling her softly, shaking her treat bag . . . but I didn’t see her anywhere.

She wasn’t on the front porch, not in the birdbath, not asleep in the bark chips. She wasn’t on the roof, and I was getting a knot in my stomach. I had to remind myself to breathe. After what seemed a long time of walking our property without any success, I walked out through the handmade, wooden front gate with the heart cutout Christopher had made for me, to the lazy street in front of our house. A couple of neighbors were enjoying a late morning stroll.

“Have you seen a small, adorable, grey and golden-striped and spotted kitten?”

“No, did you lose your kitten?”

“Oh man, I can’t find her.”

“How old is she?”

“A couple of months.”

“Oh, she’s still tiny. Did she leave the house?”

“I don’t think so.” It must’ve been obvious I was concerned.

“Look in places you don’t think she’ll be. They can hide in a sock when they’re that little.” She smiled knowingly, as if she’d been where I was. “You’ll find her.”

I really liked my nice new neighbors.

I went back inside. “Have you seen her?”

“Nope, I checked the laundry room and all around my desk.” Christopher was concerned but not upset.

I was approaching upset.

I started taking things out of the closets, room by room. Shoes were easy since I could see into them, but suitcases, blankets, and everything else came out.

After what seemed like an hour of investigating I picked up the top part of a stack of folded blankets in the closet in Christopher’s office and *guess what?*

In between the layers, with not a whisper of her tail or paws showing, and without a sound, I found Brambles curled in a warm ball, sleeping soundly. She was tucked up in warm softness and totally crashed out. I doubt she heard me calling her name or rattling her seductive treat bags.

“I’ve got her!”

I scooped her up and kissed her but she wasn’t liking it. Maybe she thought if she raised her little paws to my face, I’d stop.

Christopher joined us and we made a kitten sandwich with her in between us. She fussed and protested a bit but he kissed her tiny face and laughed a little as he tenderly scolded her. “Too bad, little one. Don’t go hiding again.” He fluffed the fur on top of her head with his hand. “Your mom was so worried about you.”

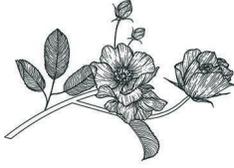
He kissed her again, brushing his fingers underneath her chin, and I put her on the floor. We watched her run away down the hallway.

“Ha! What a clever little rascal she is.” I said.

“Remarkable how well she hid.”

Girl Grey, Huckleberry, and Navar hadn’t even woken up for the spectacle.





4. Well . . . Some People Bring Their Dogs, Right?

Brambleberry loved life in our rambling board-and-batten house on California's central coast. So many doors — between rooms and leading outside — and lots of big windows.

The house sat on three lots, mostly fenced with that unique local fencing, so the cats were protected from dogs; however, they had to contend with raccoons and acorn woodpeckers. In our neighborhood in the Southland our cats shared their toys with the raccoons. They would sit on the front porch and watch the raccoons play but, for some strange and unknown reason, here on the Central Coast the wild critters were kind of demented and could kill cats. So the cats were allowed out during the day but, when evening approached, they were all brought back inside.

Navar Star did his mind-control thing with cats who tried to come into his territory, but in our new home — because our houses were built much farther apart, and because we had the canopy of California oak trees instead of palm trees — he couldn't see the street as well. The rustic wooden fence and gates also kept most other cats out.

When he wasn't next door visiting his kitty friend, Anna, Huckleberry liked to watch Brambleberry play with her toys and run through the house. Girl Grey spent a lot of quiet time surveilling her but also chased her and played hide-and-seek with her.

Those were our halcyon months; happy and untroubled.

Brambles had acquired another new nickname; Miss B — which was the one Christopher loved the most. She had so many colourful kitten toys in nearly every room of our house. Christopher and I learned to walk by shuffling our feet. If we didn't, and we walked normally, we could accidentally squish her toys.

The cats had one tower to have fun on in my office; it was almost five feet tall, with condos for napping, posts for scratching, perches for spying, and ramps for climbing. The smaller tree-thing in our living room had four green, carpeted levels and six flexible, jute twine-covered arms with striped, swinging bell balls to knock about. It looked a little like an octopus. Brambles and Grey could climb on it and play tetherball with the bell balls.

The green octopus was Baby B's favorite. Christopher smiled one evening after watching her play. "That's her *Kitty U*. She sure does love it."

I wove all kinds of hanging toys, feathers from our yard, and colourful ribbons into the netting of a longer kitty playpen tunnel and filled one segment of it with heaps of crinkly white tissue paper. Brambleberry and Girl Grey would chase each other into the tunnel. They

batted at the colourful swinging distractions, and Brambleberry would sometimes hide under the piles of paper. She would wait, and wait, and then launch herself as close as she could to Girl Grey or Huck and generally kitten-terrorize them. She was so small and she would hide inside a crumpled brown paper bag and then — without a sound — reach out a paw and surprise them when they walked past. When she did that to Navar he turned and stared at her with his huge green eyes as if to say, “I knew you were there. You didn’t fool me.”

The light parts of Brambleberry’s fur were biscuit-coloured — much like the coat on a Palomino horse, and my favorite colour on animals. We had no concrete in our yard and, when she was lying on the bark chips, her colours blended in. Until she moved it wasn’t always easy to find her.

“Before she was born, someone who loved her in kitty Heaven helped her get dressed in her earth clothes.” Christopher said, his eyes sparkling, “I think they gave her custom-created *camo jammies*.”

“I think you’re right! I bet it was Diana — she loved kitties so much.”

Diana had been our friend for so long. We met her and her Greek husband one evening when we were out for dinner in the Southland. And then we found out they lived down the street from us. She loved Christopher and helped in his business for quite a long time. She always had one or two lovely cats. She’d crossed to Heaven shortly after we moved to the Central Coast.



I had a handmade soft-leather backpack and thought Brambleberry Rose might like to travel around with me. I popped her in it and took her to the natural food store. She didn’t mind too much but I didn’t think she liked the bumpy sound of the grocery carts on the pebble-stone entry. So then I thought about taking her to one of our city council meetings. Built in 1913, our city hall was registered as a historic building. It began as the All Saints Episcopal Church in our small town and was such a pleasant building to hold meetings in. It had tree-shaped, hand-made ironwork railings that lined the entry steps to a wide, welcoming front porch, and an old-wood interior with a tall, pitched ceiling, I held my backpack in front of me and let Brambles look around as our city council discussed important civic matters.

“What’s in your backpack?”

“Not what, who? Her name’s Brambleberry Rose.”

“Oh, my goodness, she’s cute.”

Someone else walked up to see what was happening.

“You brought your kitten to the meeting?”

“Well . . . some people bring their dogs, right?”

Brambles didn’t want to be petted a whole lot and people wanted to touch her, but they were respectful. She was irresistible.

Our mayor was a woman whose dog came with her to the meetings and when she met Brambles she got a mischievous smile. “You brought your cat in your backpack?”

I smiled.

“Of course you did.” And she walked away chuckling, talking to her little white fluffy dog. “Come on, Mister Cloud.”

While she was still little, we took her to several more meetings. She didn’t seem to love it but also didn’t seem to mind. I quickly found out that if I dropped a few treats onto the soft suede leather of the inside she was very happy.

Our veterinarian was a soft-spoken and knowledgeable man and he loved our babies. He seemed to have a dependable and varied knowledge of how to look after them. He told me about some little-known, non-medical ways to treat my little ones. During one of her check-up appointments, I asked Dr. Thomas how he came to be a vet.

“I grew up in the Netherlands and my grandfather was a vet, he took care of farm animals, including cats and dogs. He had a large greenhouse and grew all kinds of herbs, plants, and flowers. He made remedies for the animals. I learned from him.”

“Whoa. That’s an old-world base of knowledge. And a lost art. He must’ve had a kind soul.”

“He was held in high esteem in his town.”

“You must miss him. I’ve been told that not all doctors are healers — at that time I didn’t know what that meant. It sounds like your grandfather was an incredible healer.”

He noticed that as Brambleberry’s body was getting larger, her tail kept growing . . . and growing . . . and growing.

“Brambles has several extra vertebrae in her tail. It gives her that lonnnnng tail. It also gives her an uncommon sense of balance. She’s very cute,” he added, with a sparkle in his eyes, “and has one of the longest tails in domestic cat history.”

“Brambleberry Rose walks into the room and five minutes later her tail arrives.” Christopher declared with a sweet smile.

She graduated from *Kitty U* to the trees in our yard. At first, she just ran up to them and grabbed hold of them like she was wrestling, but she soon learned to navigate those large, twisty branches that grew sideways. Since our yard was covered with century-old California oaks, we had plenty of those close-to-the-ground, twisty sideways branches that were perfect for a kitten to scamper up.

All of our cats climbed the trees, but a new thing started to happen when Brambleberry was still small. She started jumping. She could jump from branch to branch, much like the native grey, and imported red squirrels who lived in our yard. Her brothers and sister couldn't do that. They sat on the the ground, and watched her.

As she grew a little older, she climbed higher and started jumping from the smaller branches onto the roof of our house. What was remarkable about this is that the branch would move away from where she was balanced when she leapt from it. I saw this a couple of times while I worked in my office. One day Christopher was home in the afternoon when she started to climb into the trees in our backyard. I thought she might do her magic flying thing again.

"Christopher, you might want to come and see Brambles." He walked into my office and watched her climb higher than where our other kitties climbed. "She's going to jump." I said softly.

She balanced on a horizontal branch about three inches in diameter just outside my office window.

She looked intently at the roof and got very still.

Then she launched!

All we saw was her tail disappear over the eave. We heard her scamper to the ridge of our pitched roof and she was gone.

"Wow. I've never seen anything like that." Christopher's eyes were wide with surprise. "She's extraordinary."

The astonishing thing about her kitty parkour is that she was nearly twenty feet off the ground, and she was gauging not just the distance she could see but also the distance she created with her jump. She was precise and elegant. She was unique and simply incredible, flying through the air like an experienced airborne performer.

"Do you know what that is?" I asked.

He looked at me but didn't answer.

"That's *Mystère*."

“You’re right.” He exclaimed. “Her name is definitely Brambleberry Rose, but her spirit is Mystère.”



Those days in our coastal community, whose population was approximately 3,000, were unlike anywhere we’d lived before. Our house was two forested blocks from town: we could walk to morning coffee, the park, some of our friends’ houses, and the outdoor theater. The houses didn’t look like each other. They were mostly around 100 years old and set on large lots. The yards didn’t have grass, but flowers, gardens, small forests of trees, and bark chips. A common fencing material was real grape stakes from vineyards. Yards were trimmed with twisted two-inch square, light grey, gnarly sticks driven right into the ground, about three feet high, with occasional diagonal supports. When a tree had been growing where the founders wanted a street, they went around the tree. The streets were crooked and didn’t have street lights or sidewalks. We had small, tiffany-style lights in our yard close to our house, but when the sun went down it was dark on our street.

It was like living in a simpler time a long time ago. Christopher and I loved it more than any other place we’d lived before — and, as you may remember, dear readers, we’d lived in a charming coastal community south of Los Angeles, and right on the ocean on the North Shore of O`ahu, Hawai`i.

Most mornings in our small beach town began with birdsong. We had so many kinds of birds that the morning chorus contained a variety of voices and lasted close to an hour. From watching them we knew some of the bird species, but we had a mysterious bird that sounded like a monkey chattering. I have no idea what kind of bird that was but it made a jungle-like sound. We rarely heard seagulls even though we were blocks from the beach, but our resident flock of big beautiful black crows all seemed to settle into the branches pretty close to the same time. It sounded like they were yelling and was so curious to hear and watch. If our cats were outside when that happened, they disappeared. They didn’t run away — all of a sudden they just weren’t around.

There were blue California scrub jays who were friendly with our squirrels, brown birds who jumped in the wood chips with the toes of their feet spread apart, bright green hummingbirds, yellow-and-grey warblers who made the sweetest little chirping sounds, and petite little grey cuties who we learned were called tufted titmice and had pointed heads. They all got along but the black-and-white woodpeckers had a different agenda. They wanted all the food for themselves. They chased away other birds. They were the ones who covered our pine trees with little holes that they filled with acorns. They were strikingly graphic and had very sharp colouration of black and white with a bright red hat on the back of their head like a Jewish yamaka.

One day as Christopher and I sat in the kitchen, we saw the group of woodpeckers spying on our squirrel friends. They seemed to be gathering intelligence about the food situation. Several of them cried out, several more woodpeckers appeared in the trees, and then they hopped in the tree branches to get closer to where our squirrel friends were. Suddenly, as if on some noiseless cue, they began dive-bombing the red squirrels who were eating black sunflower seeds at our kitchen window.

It looked like a coordinated flying maneuver, much like at the air shows we'd attended.

"Oh, man. Our squirrels are going to get hurt." I stood up to go to our backyard and run interference for them.

"This looks like war. Those guys look like Zeros!"

"What's a Zero? And where is our flock of crows when we need them?"

Christopher's face was locked in almost a grimace. "Zero is what we called the Japanese planes that flew in the Second World War." You may remember, dear readers, that Christopher was a devoted pilot and his dad had served in Europe during that war.

"Oh, the ones with the red dot on their wings?"

"Yeah, and on the side of the plane. These birds look like those warbirds. Oh . . . do you know what a flock of crows is called?"

"Tell me."

"A murder."

"A murder of crows? Seriously? That's what we need now. Our gang to come in with *murder* on their minds. Do you know what a group of cats is called?"

"Our family?" He had a goofy grin on his face.

"I love you, too, babe. A group of cats is called a clowder."

I could tell without looking at him that he was smiling, and from that day on we referred to the killer woodpeckers as Zeros.

I had two rustic clay pots on our back porch that I filled with fallen pine cones I picked up as I walked our property. One pot held tight green pine cones and the other held the brown ones that were larger and had opened. I called them bombs and bullets. The bullets were the smaller ones and could be aimed well. The larger ones looked more menacing as I sent them flying through the air. I was pretty good at aiming them into the branches where the Zeros liked to sit. I'm not sure they took me seriously, but they left after I sent a couple soaring right into their noise-making group.



The sunroom in our home became my lovely office and Brambleberry Rose kept me company most days while I worked. It had wide windows along the longest wall that didn't open. There were two classic, old-fashioned windows on each side that opened for ventilation and all of these looked out to the park-like forest. On the other long side there were interior windows and French doors that led into our living room. The window sills were about nine inches deep and made of the same red cedar board and batten construction as the walls and ceiling. This room hadn't been whitewashed like the living room. It was truly like being in a treehouse and one of Brambleberry's favorite places to be in our home. It was so warm and the window ledges were wide enough for a kitten to fall asleep on. She was up there with the birds in that room.

It was on one of those days that I glanced up and saw my kitten swinging off the ledge of one of those wide window sills with cords around her neck. Brambleberry was struggling to untangle herself. Her little legs were kicking. With her front paws, she tried to reach the cords that were choking her. She couldn't make a sound because she was unable to breathe.

I couldn't move fast enough! I jumped up from my desk and grabbed her and held her . . . and held her.

"Oh dear Lord, thank you for letting me be here." I was trying to get my heartbeat back to somewhere near normal. I. Had. Been. Terrified!

I didn't want to think about what could have happened if I hadn't been home or if I had just been in another room. It seemed to me that this was at least the second time she could have gone home to be with the kitty Angels.

Christopher was on a jobsite but I called him anyway.

"Brambles almost died."

"What? Let me move to another place where I can hear you better. What happened?"

"I was working in my office and apparently she'd been playing with the plastic balls at the end of the window shade cords. They were tied together and, dear God, they formed a noose around her neck. Christopher, she was *swinging* off the ledge trying to get free!"

"Is she okay?"

"Seems to be."

"Are you?"

“I think I need *chocolate cake*.”

“You know, I’ll be finished here in about forty-five minutes. If you want, we can go to the coffeehouse.”

“I’d love that. I’m going to hold her until you get here . . . thanks, I love you.”

“I love you too. Give her a kiss.”

Needless to say, I untied each of those cords and they stayed that way.

It was around this time that Brambles decided she didn’t like my camera and walked away as soon as she saw me approaching her with it. (Yes, dear readers, the days before silent cell phone cameras.) If I tried to take a photo of her sleeping, she’d hear the shutter click and wake up; she’d get up and leave, so I got a lot of photos of her tail.

When Brambleberry was around seven months old, the days were long and the nights warm. Christopher and I saw something strange at the edge of our property.

“Christopher!” It was half whisper, half yell. He was in the living room, next door to my office, and it was early night, dark out.

“What’s up?”

“Check that out, about two o’clock! Looks to be at the edge of our property.”

“Oh . . . Lord.”

“What is that?” My voice had gone hoarse for some reason. Large green eyes looked like they were about three feet off the ground and appeared to be staring back at us. We had no lights that far out in our yard.

“I think it’s a bobcat.”

“They’re all in, right?”

“Yeah, call the police.”

“Really?” I wouldn’t have thought of that.

“Yeah.”

So I did. You may remember that we lived in a very small town and were located blocks from the police and fire station. After establishing where we lived, the dispatcher thanked us and said, “Patrol car will be right out.”

I grabbed Brambles and set her on the window ledge to see her reaction. She went on full alert; without moving, her eyes got huge and focused on the green eyes that appeared like they were looking back at her. The fur all along her back rose up, her ears faced forward and her tail was in full fluff.

Sure enough, within minutes we saw a very quiet police patrol car roll past the front of our property and continue down the dark street. Christopher flipped our porch light on and then off again. “That’ll let them know we’re the ones who called.”

And then they rolled past again. They were in stealth mode.

Within minutes, the cousin of our next-door neighbor, Deanna, came home. He was visiting for the week from another state. We saw him park in their driveway and watched the garden path lights turn on as he approached their front door. I gave him a few minutes and then called him on their house phone.

“Yeah?”

“Hey, it’s your next-door neighbor. Did you see anything in your yard tonight?”

His voice wavered a bit. “Yeah, I saw green eyes following me as I walked up the path! WHAT WAS THAT?”

“Oh, geez,” was the best I could do.

He screamed, “What KIND OF ANIMALS do you have here?”

“Could’ve been a bobcat.” Christopher said. I had the call on speaker and he couldn’t help chuckling a little.

“You okay?” Christopher wanted to help if it was needed. “The police have been by.”

“Okay. But I’m NOT going out there again tonight!”

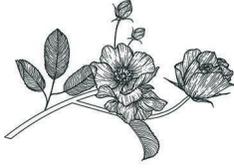
“Good idea,” Christopher chuckled. There were bobcats on his current jobsite.

The eyes were gone, no one was hurt, and all our kitties were safe. Brambles was sitting frozen on the ledge. And she did *not* want to be picked up or petted.

I softly said a prayer of gratitude to our kitty’s Angels: “Thanks for the warning.”

We met up in our adjoining yards with Deanna’s cousin the next morning and had a chuckle about it but we’d been put on alert. The danger was real.





5. Look at That Baby! It Looks Like a Little Bobcat

When Brambleberry Rose was around ten months old, another unusual thing happened. Navar Star went out into our yard in the morning and came back home with a bite injury on his front leg. As I mentioned earlier, he didn't fight or even approach other cats.

"Navey's hurt. Check this out."

"Let's get him to Dr. Thomas. Can you call and let them know we're on our way?"

During the drive, Christopher asked, "How the heck did this happen?"

"It's a mystery, isn't it?" Since he was such a mellow dude and liked being close, I held Navey on my lap.

The young, sweet vet tech held the front door open for us, "Doctor will be with you in just a minute. You can wait in the middle exam room."

While we were there, we saw a kitten sitting in one of the kennels. It looked like a baby bobcat. It was dark grey-and-white tiger-striped with a white milk mouth.

"Do you see that kitten?"

"Look at that baby. It looks like a little bobcat."

"What a cute kitten!"

Dr. Thomas examined Navar's paw and told us, "He's going to be okay; it's just a small wound. I'll dress it and give him some antibiotics." He checked Navey's other paws. "He's not been here for an injury before. What happened?"

"Good question." Christopher had his hand on Navey's head; Navar was his special kitty love. "This is a first. He went out in the yard and came back like this. We didn't hear a thing."

"It's not a cat bite," Dr. Thomas said. "It's from an animal."

Christopher looked beyond the exam room at the little wild looking baby. "That sure is a cute kitten."

"Oh, yeah, she needs a home."

I hadn't thought that was an option. I believed all the animals at his clinic had homes. That is also when I learned that Dr. Thomas volunteered for many local animal rescue organizations. He also rescued dogs and cats.

"When she was six weeks old, both of her back legs were broken. Our local Animal Friends found her and called me. I brought her here and I've already surgically operated on her twice. She's stable but still healing."

"Oh," he continued, "her name is Millie."

Christopher and I looked at each other. "Do you want another kitten?"

"Yes."

He answered so quickly, I was surprised. It was clear we'd both fallen in love with her.

"She has a home," Christopher told Dr. Thomas.

That's not what we thought was going to happen that day. Dear reader, do you ever think things happen for a reason?

"You can pick her up after the Christmas holidays."

The next day was Christmas Eve, and I was aware his office was scheduled to be closed.

"Could we pick her up later today?" I was so excited to bring her home. There was no way I wanted to leave that little beauty behind bars for the three days of the holiday. It didn't matter to me how friendly and loving a place she was in.

"My staff needs to keep her tonight."

He left the exam room, discussed something with a member of his staff, and then returned. "Can you come and get her around noon tomorrow?"

And that's how we got our fifth kitten. On Christmas Eve.



We needed a name for our new kitten and decided to keep part of her name the same. We tried several options. Because she was unable to walk like our other kitties, but we believed she would someday — on Earth or in the stars — Christopher suggested Halley. We landed there, after the most famous shooting star, Halley's Comet. I spelled it differently — Hayleigh.

I couldn't help but think that if Navar Star hadn't been bitten, we wouldn't have been in Dr. Thomas's office that day. Because that exam room looked out on those kennels, had we been in one of the other exam rooms, we wouldn't have seen her. We figured there was a reason Navey brought her to us.

Brambleberry Rose immediately loved her new little sister, as did our other kids. Brambleberry and Hayleigh played and slept together. Brambleberry was the best big sister. Brambleberry Rose and Hayleigh were born in the same year, about seven months apart, and looked similar to each other.

On some afternoons Girl Grey would sleep right next to Hayleigh, as though shielding her from something Christopher and I couldn't see. This was the first time we'd seen Grey do this, since she usually kept to herself most of the time.

At times we called our new kitten "Hayleigh, Hayleigh, Hayleigh", and with her white mouth she was so cute; she permanently looked like she'd just finished drinking milk.

Brambles was still small and precious but she was determined. I think it was the Tortitude part of her heritage. Once she focused on something, she would not be deterred. The cats, including little Hayleigh, went outside in the afternoon and I called them all in before it got dark. But Brambleberry started staying outside later in the evening than our other cats.

Well, of course, that *was not* going to happen.

The last thing I wanted was to lose my kitten. I stayed up later and later each night, calling her until she came running through the bushes.

Since she seemed determined to wander, I decided to get her chipped for identification at Dr. Thomas's. When my negotiations with her proved unsuccessful, I started keeping her inside after her late afternoon meal. This change in her schedule didn't make her happy. But since her tardiness was something new, I reassured her that she'd be allowed to go outside again with her brothers and sisters.

"Remember those green eyes you saw? I need to have you in the house when it's dark outside. I'll let you roam again when it's safe, I promise."

She turned her face away from me.

"I promise you, sweetie, you'll be outside again."

During one of the evenings I kept her inside, I decided to play a new game with her. I wondered if she would retrieve a toy, so I crumpled paper into balls and tossed them, but she wasn't interested. I tossed her mouse toys, but after she batted them around she just bit them and shook them. One evening I rolled a green grape across the floor — and she ran after it. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. When he saw the grape, Navar Star was totally uninterested.

Huckleberry Moon and Girl Grey were more interested in watching Brambleberry run than in chasing the green fruit. Hayleigh watched with disinterest. They would chase toys that I tossed but not fruit.

But Brambleberry Rose ran across the floor, picked up the round grape in her mouth, and brought it back to me. Of course, I wondered if she'd do it again. When I rolled the grape again, she ran after it and once more brought it back to me.

Christopher was home. "Wanna see something cool, babe?"

He came into our living room.

"Check out what she does."

Brambleberry Rose did it again — she chased the green grape across the living room rug and brought it back to me in her mouth. It was so beautiful to see her unusual colours with the soft green in her mouth.

"Brambleberry is better at fetching than some of the dogs I've worked with." Smiling, he added, "I wonder if she'll help me in the future if I'm teaching more dogs to retrieve?" Earlier in his life, besides his own dogs, he'd also trained several Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Brambleberry chased several more grapes; it was clear that this was something she knew to do. *But how?* And yes, the green of her golden-green eyes was a beautiful match to the green of the grapes. She didn't eat them; she just continued to bring each grape back to me for another toss until the grape was mashed and she wanted a new one.

I tried again but none of our other cats would fetch anything.

"I know what you're thinking. I remember when you said you had a feeling you've known her before."

"And then I saw that thing like Earth's face superimposed on Brambles' face."

"Do you think she could've been Earth?"

"I don't know. Have you ever had something like this happen?"

Christopher put his hand to his mouth briefly, thinking, "No, I haven't, but this is really different! Something's up."

"She brings an entire universe with her. Who knows how far back it goes?"

"It's not even just that — you two have a strange and wonderful connection. There's something distinctive about Brambleberry."

He looked like he was calculating something important: “It could be that you’ve known each other before. Maybe she was your cat earlier or in an earlier lifetime? It’s clear there’s a deep love.”

“Well, this is new; I haven’t felt this before — haven’t seen it or heard about it.”

Later, I thought: *Seriously, how many cats retrieve green grapes?*



We had the sweetest kitty family and everyone got along. It was so much fun to have five kitties. As expected, Navar Star was the protective big brother. He liked our new little baby. He wouldn’t play with her; as I mentioned, he didn’t play. That wasn’t his style, but he watched her, and when she went too far into our yard — too close to the edge — he kind of circled around in front of her and turned her around. It was something beautiful to watch. Unless you knew the cats involved, you could miss it, but Christopher and I would sometimes see him corral her.

We were sitting on the porch one late afternoon.

“He’s doing it again.” Christopher said.

Hayleigh wandered out across our driveway into the forest of large oak trees and tall grasses beyond. She had no idea we’d seen green eyes out there before she arrived. Navar kind of glided around the top of the driveway next to the wide gate and, without drawing attention to what he was doing, got between her and the boundary of the yard. It was extraordinary to watch.

“Does she know he’s doing that?”

“I don’t think she does. I think she just sees him and turns around. She knows he won’t play with her.”

So she scampered back down the driveway where she was safe, and Navar cruised up to the front porch and into the living room through the open front door.

Huckleberry was just easygoing, liked everyone, *loved* Navar, and just seemed to be a very happy boy. He still visited his kitty friend, Anna. She didn’t come over to our house, but Deanna told me how Bugs would just wander over and the two of them would play and sit on the front porch together.

One sunny spring morning while I worked in my office, I looked out to the park-like area next to my office and saw maybe twenty squirrels digging in the woodchip ground cover. It was in an area we used to park cars so it was large and had no plantings. All of a sudden one of them started jumping, and then another started jumping and they began turning somersaults.

“Christopher, you need to see this.”

We sat and watched the squirrels digging and then start acting like they were hallucinating. They were having so much fun chasing each other, running really fast up the oak trees and then jumping down. We had been watching the squirrels every day and this was something new.

“Do you know what they’re doing?”

“They seem to be digging up something, probably acorns . . . maybe there’s a fungus that grows on them over the rainy season that gets them tipsy. They’re babies.”

“How can you tell? They all look the same to me.”

“The ones out there doing that are smaller.”

This entertainment lasted for several hours and the baby squirrels seemed to love it.

It was probably going to take at least another squirrel season before I could identify the baby squirrels, but it sure was fun to watch them running and jumping and turning somersaults.

Brambleberry Rose, Girl Grey and Hayleigh would sometimes chase each other through the house. The sound of their paws thumping on the hardwood floors was a joyous racket. Sometimes Brambleberry Rose and Hayleigh would roll and wrestle on the living room rug.

Christopher and I went to our favorite pet store and got Hayleigh a bag full of new toys; bell balls, chewable things, and faux mice that she could call her own.

Hayleigh watched Grey play her music with the colourful teddy bear tins and, when Grey was gone, wandered over to see if that was a toy she wanted to play with. She put her big mitts in the basket and moved the bear tins around — they made their enchanted, almost musical sound, but Hayleigh must’ve decided it didn’t interest her. She ran off to find her new toys.

She slept and played in the kitty tunnel, climbed the cat tower in her own unique way, swatted the swinging bell balls on the tree-thing and all was peaceful. She, with her baby Bobcat looks, and Brambles with her lynx similarity, were a pretty sight running through the house.

One of Hayleigh’s legs had healed beautifully but the other stayed straight.

“It’s not bending at the knee.” Dr. Thomas was gently moving her leg to see if it would flex. “I put a pin there and the bones have healed around it. It may be stopping the knee from bending.”

“Should we do something?”

“We could remove the pin. She’s stable and it may work. It may not.”

Christopher and I decided to try it. So she had another surgery and while she was recovering we got a stroller for her. It was similar to the kitty tunnel, with dark green netting all over it, and was so helpful because I could take her out into the yard and she didn’t have to put any weight on her wrapped-up leg. Christopher called it her *Kitty RV*. She had a soft, covered hiding place with a round window in the back and an uncovered “front porch” where she could sit and watch all the critters in our yard.

When she wasn’t outside watching the birds and squirrels, I could unhook the stroller part from the wheels and put it up on our bed. During the day when he was home, Christopher came into our room to pet her and bring her treats. He often woke her up and one day after playing with her, asked, “Have you noticed that she yawns all the way to the back of her ears?”

After the time it took for her to heal, Dr. Thomas unwrapped her leg, but the surgery hadn’t worked. Hayleigh wasn’t going to be able to walk or jump like our other cats. Her leg was going to remain immobile for the duration of her little life.

She was developing her own way of climbing — she did it with her front legs and those big mitts of hers. She ran really fast in the house. When she rounded a corner, she threw her straight leg out behind her and ran on her three bendable legs. She made a unique sound on the hardwood floors.

“She tosses that leg out behind her like a rudder. She uses it to steer herself.” Christopher said.

“When she eventually slips the bonds of Earth to where the stars and comets live, she’ll walk just fine, the way she was meant to.”

“That’s true and she does now,” Christopher said. “In her spirit, she runs and jumps and plays like all the kittens who haven’t been injured.”

“What do you think of adding ‘SkyWalker’ to her name?”

“Hayleigh SkyWalker?” Smiling, he said, “It’s perfect. It suits her.”

She watched her brothers and sisters climb the tree outside our kitchen and then did the most unexpected thing. She learned to grab onto the bark with one front paw and then the other. It was remarkable to see her maneuver like a little feline mountain climber with kitty crampons. And the look on her face was total focus with 100% determination. That’s how she muscled her way up the tree, underneath the ledge, and sat on that prized shelf her brothers and sisters and all of our squirrel friends could so gracefully jump to. The almost unbelievable thing about Hayleigh’s gravity-defying accomplishment was that the trunk of that tree curved away from the house and she was climbing the inside of a crescent — her back legs couldn’t even touch the trunk.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Christopher said one afternoon while watching this unique athletic maneuver. “I think this might be one of her kitty superpowers.”

We fed our squirrels on that beautiful custom wood shelf that Christopher had made. All our other kitties jumped onto it from the majestic oak that stretched out beyond it. As a way to get back into our house, they also stepped onto our kitchen table from that shelf. When the window was open, they would walk out onto that shelf and then jump to lower branches of the oak tree and down to the ground. At times, one of them would sit on the shelf and watch the birds and squirrels happily flying and running and jumping in our yard.

Around this time, I noticed that Hayleigh SkyWalker’s behavior toward Brambles was slowly starting to change. She began by sitting and watching Brambles — she hadn’t done that before — and then as time passed, she seemed to get angry. *Is that even possible?*

One evening, I asked Christopher about it, “Can you see the expressions on her face?”

“I can tell when she gets angry.”

“You see that?”

“Yeah, her eyes go half-closed and her ears go kind of flat and she tips them back. She gives off a scary vibe.”

I so enjoyed the way Christopher narrated our babies.

But then she started to swat at Brambles. At first, it seemed more in annoyance, but it escalated. Pretty soon when she struck out at Brambles it looked like she meant to hurt her.

Christopher and I both tried to dissuade her. “Hey, *you*. Little miscreant. Leave your sister alone.” Christopher couldn’t keep from laughing but he was serious.

“Hayleigh! Stop that, NOW. Hayleigh?” I meant it also and how well do you think that worked?

Not.

At a post-surgery exam, I asked Dr. Thomas about it. “It seems she doesn’t like Brambles. Is that possible?”

“Yes, that can happen.”

“Will it change and go back to the way it was?”

He looked over the top of his glasses at us. “Well, it can resolve itself, but Hayleigh has a strong little spirit, and she’s a girl. Once girl cats make up their minds, they rarely change them.”

Christopher and I looked at each other.

“Oh, no,” I wondered out loud. “What do we do now?”

“Can you keep them separate?” Dr. Thomas offered, “if you need to surrender her, the people who rescued her will take her back.”

“Okay, thanks, but I want to keep her. It just means we’ll have to keep Hayleigh away from Brambles . . . keep her inside, or something!”

I was disappointed but hopeful that Hayleigh would miss her freedom and get with the program. Quickly.

But it got worse and it seemed Hayleigh was being mean. Only to Brambles. She still played with Huckleberry and sometimes with Girl Grey. So I started keeping her in the house and let the other kids go outside. I couldn’t leave the front door open as much, so the kitties couldn’t come and go as they pleased — unless Hayleigh was behind at least one closed door.

It became clear that the one good photo I had of our two youngest babies sleeping together might be the only one I’d get.

If I didn’t tell you, dear readers. Christopher designed and built stunningly beautiful, custom homes and I worked with him as the interior designer for our projects. We’d been published, won awards, and built notable projects, including the skybox for the pro baseball team in the town we’d moved from. I’d been professionally recognized for the success of my lighting installations. I knew how to create areas for high-tech ambient, and others for task lighting, and have it all look beautiful and effortless.

Christopher was a genius designer. I saw him do things with wood, steel, and glass that others couldn’t. More than once, I stood on a job site and heard other builders and architects ask him: “How’d you do that?”

Well, the reason I mention this is because he received a call and one of his stunning homes near our former hometown had been nominated for Home of the Year. He flew back to that small coastal city to meet with the decision-making committee.

While he was gone our neighbor, Stephen, stopped by. “Hey, what’s up with your black cat?”

“Why?”

“I’ve never seen him sitting on your front porch before; he was staring at the front gate. He watched me as I walked in. He’s a bit intimidating.”

“That’s funny. I didn’t notice. It’s probably because Christopher’s gone.”

“Your cat is more like a dog.”

“Thanks . . . I guess. I’ve heard that before — it’s cute. I’ll let Christopher know he’s got a watch cat.”

In our neighborhood in the Southland, our across-the-street neighbors, David, a psychiatrist, and his lovely wife, Carolina, hosted incredibly wonderful dinner parties. I usually helped her set up for their guests and, after dinner, most of us would sit out on their back deck. We’d be enjoying the evening and talking and, out of the darkness, we’d hear a sound similar to a meow but it started with an R. Kind of like a roar. Sort of like this: *Reooow!* Guess who that was? Our big, black boy cat had followed us, climbed onto their roof, and was joining in with our merriment.

“Your cat is more like a dog than a cat,” David had observed. He’d point to the big black cat on his roof and say to others in the party, “that’s their cat.”

That was quite entertaining for their guests. Navar stayed there, conversing, until we walked back across the street at the end of the night. He followed us so quickly and I never saw how he got down but he ran after us. We weren’t sure how he got up on the roof either, but it was something Christopher and I cherished each time he did.

When he returned from the Southland, Christopher was very happy, and Navar Star went back to his normal intelligence-gathering of the kitties.

“We got it! We’re Home of the Year! It was a tie vote between a beautiful restoration and us, so they’re giving it to both of us. That’s a first for the magazine.”

“Oh, that’s exciting. And the house . . . it’s impressive. Congratulations!”

“We’ll be published in the magazine two months from now. Do you want to go down for the award ceremony?”

“Yes . . . oh man, who will take care of these little rascals?” I asked.

“Someone very brave.”

A tech assistant who’d helped with Hayleigh and knew our crew agreed to watch over them. She called us twice a day while we were away. It went pretty smoothly. She didn’t want to let any of them out, and I agreed, but the kitties weren’t happy about that. Apparently, they gave her attitude. She was at our house when we returned.

“Your kitties are so well-behaved when you bring them to the office, but they seem to be mad at me. Not Huckleberry or Girl Grey,” she added. “They seemed to like the quiet. But the others, they were restless.”

“How’d it work to keep Hayleigh and Brambles separate?”

“Hayleigh’s fierce. She really wanted to get to Brambles, and she seemed angry.”

Shaking my head I asked, “You could see that?”

“Well, yeah. Her face.”

“Yep, she’s our *Kitty of a Thousand Faces*.”

“She might be mad ’cause she doesn’t have a groovy berry name.”

Christopher had just walked back into our living room. “Ha! Groovy! Haven’t heard that word for a while. Poor Hayleigh.”

When the magazine announcing the winners was published, one of our close friends, Reverend Rob, wrote on our website: *Christopher has the gift of slow emerging, yet near eternal design. Such talent.*

I agreed with Rob and told Christopher for about the thousandth time: “You’re a genius.”

I knew he heard me when I said that. I think he believed me.

We got better at keeping the youngest girls apart and for the most part it worked. All those doors in our century old house that were a throwback to times past became our helpers.

“We should think of this as if it were a logistical operation on a submarine,” Christopher said. “We need to keep two doors closed between them at all times. Hayleigh is serious about getting to Brambles. Sometimes she sits right next to the door and, when it opens, before I can get to her, she darts in. Little bandit.”

“Okay, that’s a good plan.” What he said was comical but it also bummed me out because I felt Brambles wasn’t totally safe in *her* home!



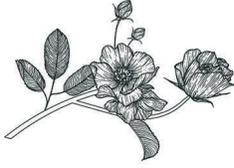
It worked well for us to employ “Operation Submarine.” This was around the time that Hayleigh got another name ... Hayleigh Monster. When she was in the house she had a lot of toys all to herself and could sleep in any of the fuzzy cat beds. Sometimes she’d sit in one of the windows and watch what was happening in our yard. If she saw Brambles she’d drop down on her front legs, pull her ears back, and puff up her tail, slapping it against the window. It was getting clear that she wasn’t going to let this go. But Brambles was safe outside — and when she wanted to be in the house I could let Hayleigh go out. Since she wasn’t being a bad kitty, Brambles always got first choice at being in the yard.

Several weeks later, when I thought Hayleigh was secured, she got out of her part of the house and into our yard. Brambles just happened to be walking through the tall grass and Hayleigh chased her through the gap in the gate and into the street. *It was terrifying.* At the very moment Brambleberry dashed across the normally unpopulated narrow width of asphalt, a car shot past. There weren't many cars on our street, and they usually didn't travel that fast. I thought I'd lost my cat. My heart nearly stopped. I looked for her on the side of the road. After I returned her little sister to confinement inside our house, behind two doors, I called for her, but there was still no sign of Brambleberry Rose.

Approximately forty minutes later, Brambleberry returned home. Of course, I gave her treats, kissed her, and made sure she wasn't injured.

I also thanked her kitty guardian Angels for protecting her.





6. And She Was Still Gone

In late summer, before she turned two years old, Brambleberry Rose began staying out later again. I did all I could to keep her inside, but lovely readers, you may remember all those doors. She became an escape artist and could *Houdini* her way out, and she began staying outside later and later.

One still, warm night she left, and . . . well, I was outside *all* night calling her. The next morning, when the sun's rays touched the sky, I was still calling, and she was still gone.

My increased vigilance had been proving effective with Hayleigh so I knew she'd been inside and hadn't caused Bramble's truancy.

I called and called for her. I rattled her treat bag.

It was still early morning when I came back in the house and I was upset. "Christopher, I'm terrified."

"Call animal control at the police . . ."

I phoned our local police to find out — *oh, yikes, I didn't want to make that call* —

"Hi, may I speak with our Animal Control Officer?"

I was so upset I'd almost forgotten my manners. "Please?"

"Christine's here today. Can you hold?"

My stomach was churning while I waited for her to come on the line.

"Hi Christine, sorry to tell you this but my cat's missing. . . . This is hard for me to ask: have you found any injured or dead cats in my neighborhood? I'm over by the Forest Theater."

"No, I was just there this morning."

Whoa, I found my breath again. "Oh, thank God!"

"What does your cat look like? How long has she been gone? Is she chipped?"

“Her name is Brambleberry Rose; she has dark grey stripes and gold spots. She’s been gone all night and, yes she’s chipped.”

“Have you walked your property?”

“Yeah, and I didn’t see her. I’ve been calling for her since she left.”

“Can you bring me a picture of her? I’ll look for her. Cute name by the way.”

That gave me a smile. “Thanks, thanks. I’ll bring it by later today and if you’re not there I’ll leave it at the desk.”

I made flyers with her picture and handed them out to all of our neighbors and dropped one off for Christine. That evening I again called for her. Christopher and I walked through our neighborhood looking for her and asking people if they’d seen her.

There was nothing but silence in my world. I was lost. I knew she was out there somewhere. I was out again between two and four in the early morning, walking the quiet, dark streets, calling her name. The sound of my voice carried so well in the dark stillness that I was sure she would hear me.

I phoned every veterinarian in town, including Dr. Thomas, as well as the SPCA. No one had her, I let them know her name and that I was looking for her, she was chipped, and to please phone me immediately if someone brought her in.

I knew I had to call Stevie and Bryant but I dreaded that one. That was a sad call when I told Stevie, “Brambles is gone. I’m so sorry, I lost the baby you raised and loved.”

After getting caught up on the details, Stevie confidently said, “I’ll tell my rescue group and we’ll say prayers of gratitude for Brambleberry’s safe return.”

Two days had passed and there was not a whisper of her anywhere. I was thanking God that I had other kitties to care for and love. Their behavior didn’t change except that maybe Hayleigh was happier. We kept her inside all the time. If I let her out, even for a minute, and Brambles came home, she might chase her truant sister away. That thought was horrible and unacceptable.

I was standing on our front porch steps calling for Brambles when our across-the-street neighbor, Stephen, came outside his house.

“Hey, are you guys okay?”

“Stephen, I lost my kitty.”

“Which one?”

“Brambles, the tortie one.”

I told him what we knew and he was equally concerned. “I’m so sorry and, I’ll look out for her.”

“Thanks.”

“My yard’s completely fenced so if she gets in there at least she’ll be safe.”

“That’s a comfort, thanks.”

“If you ever want some company I’ll walk in the early morning with you. Just let me know.”

“I will, thanks, Stephen.”

Christopher got home in the late afternoon.

“Anything?” he asked. “I know I’d be your first call . . . just wondering.”

“Christopher, I’m so sad. She *has* to come back home.”

“I stopped at the little chapel at the Mission and said a prayer on my way home. Do you want to go down there?”

“Think we might find her there?” I was not being sassy.

“You’re doing a great job, Amber. We have to trust. The Creator gave her to you once and that wasn’t an error.” He stepped closer and put his arms around me. “We need to trust the love of the Creator to bring her back home and give her to you a second time.”

“Thank you. I miss her so much. Yes, let’s go to the Mission for a few minutes.” I felt I had to be around every moment in case she returned, but I could handle a brief time away to say a prayer.

I grabbed two kitty bowls and left them on the porch, one with some kitty kibbles and the other with water. “I’ll leave these *just in case* she comes back. Thank you, Christopher.”



The days ticked by without any sightings. I was entirely focused on getting her back. I knew she hadn’t disappeared. It actually made me feel better knowing that Christine was looking

for her every day and hadn't phoned me. Since she hadn't been found dead somewhere, I began to feel that she was still alive.

Actually, I knew she was alive. I could feel her in my heart the same way it felt when she'd been with me. That was when I learned that I knew the difference between my cat being alive and being dead. Brambleberry Rose was alive. Maybe she had somehow just become lost or someone had accidentally kept her in their house or garage. Because of the microchip that had been placed under her skin, I knew if someone found her and took her to the police or a veterinarian, she'd be returned to us. I was so thankful for that identifying computerized chip and deeply wished it were a tracking device.

My heart ached for her; everything in my life became about finding her. I couldn't sleep all night because she wasn't there. Even though by now Brambleberry was nearly fully grown, she still slept beside me each night — just like when she was young, curled up with her face next to mine. You may know how it is when they're gone: we miss *everything* about them. I even missed her whiskers tickling my nose and waking me.

Christopher brought a chocolate cake home. "I thought this might help you feel better."

"Well, it *will*, thanks. Thanks for being my rock . . . thank you for loving her."

I missed her soft fur and the beauty of her golden-green eyes. Every hour was slow torture.

Christopher and I knew about an animal communicator who worked near our small town in the Southland. We'd talked with her about another of our cats many years before.

"Let's get an appointment with Susan," Christopher suggested.

We learned about her when she'd helped figure out why the elephants at the city zoo were acting aggressive toward their keepers for no obvious reason. Susan had asked the elephants why they didn't like their keepers. It turned out that, when no one else was around, one of the people whose job it was to care for them was intentionally hurting them. An elephant cam was installed, the perpetrator was filmed and fired; problem solved, and the story was published in our local paper.

Susan had an opening a couple of days later. I was still out walking in the early hours each day and passing out Brambles' wanted poster every day.

"How long has she been gone?"

"About a week."

"She hasn't done this before?"

"No."

“And nobody has seen anything?”

“No, and my other kitties don’t seem to be upset.”

Susan got silent while Christopher and I waited . . . I had to remember to breathe every couple of minutes.

“Brambles is blocking me. I can’t reach her. She does *not want* to communicate.”

“What? Is that common?”

“No, it’s unusual, but they can do that. Do you live in an area that’s like a forest?”

“Yes, lots of trees.”

“Okay, the picture I’m getting is of tall trees, several kinds, and grass, some tall. Is this what your yard looks like?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I see her walking between the trees, looking toward the tall grass, and then there’s a flash of white light! And she’s gone.”

“What does that mean?” I was thinking of what Susan said first about Brambles blocking her.

“I really hate to tell you this . . . but she could’ve died.”

“NO!!”

I said it quickly and as if I could change anything. Christopher grabbed hold of my hand with a concerned look on his face.

“NO,” I repeated. “She is *not* dead! I can feel her in my heart; she’s alive.”

“Okay, since you know what that feels like, stay with that. All I can tell you is what I saw. If she’s alive, she’s a very powerful creature. She wants this. It’s important to her.”

“And there’s no way to know if she’s coming back?”

“No. Sorry!”

Christopher and I sat for a few minutes just absorbing what we’d heard. I turned to look at him.

“So who is Brambles?”

We had both recognized before that Navar had mind-control superpowers, Hayleigh had her own extraordinary, gravity-defying, two-paw climbing ability, and now we had another little one who seemed to be more than *just a cat*.

“I’m going out and call her. Let’s see if I can get her back.”



I decided to call our friend, William, who was a teacher of spiritual concepts and an intuitive. He had abilities to see and hear things that others — including me, and even Christopher — couldn’t. I hadn’t asked for his advice before but I thought he could help us.

He knew about our feline family and how much I loved Brambles, and he listened to Christopher and me tell him the entire story.

“She’s coming back,” he said.

“Whoa.” Christopher and I looked at each other. “Is she injured?”

“No.”

“Is she being held against her will?”

“No.” He was silent for a couple minutes . . . “I don’t feel like it’s going to happen tomorrow.”

“Anything we can do?”

“To bring her home? Yeah, you can pray. That’ll keep her safe.” He said it with such assurance and I was kind of surprised. I didn’t know his beliefs on the power of the Creator of the Universe, but I took his word for it and started praying several times every day for her safety and speedy return.

A few days later, as I was walking downtown to the post office, I saw Christine driving her cute little electric police department vehicle. She stopped when she saw me and pulled over near the sidewalk. “Have you heard anything?”

“No, have you?” And it was then I noticed she had my Brambles wanted poster taped to the dash of her vehicle. “*Oh, my gosh*, she’s with you.”

“Every day. And I look for her.”

“Thank you.”

A few days later, when I showed her the flyer at our local post office, a really nice woman exclaimed, “Oh, she’s coming back.” I loved the community board at the post office and my Brambles wanted poster looked very cute on the wall. You guessed it: this was years before everyone started posting on social media.

As I wandered our neighborhood and talked with people, handing out her adorable picture, I heard so many stories about people whose animals had come back home. I had no idea so many critters went on walking adventures.

A contractor who was working at our neighbor, Deanna’s, house next door told me about his dog, Jethro, a lanky black lab, who was with him on a job in a small town north of ours. One day at lunch Jethro just walked away.

“Of course, I thought he was going to come back. But he didn’t and I had to go home. I called him and looked for him for several blocks and all the way home. I was so upset. When I came back the next day I was hoping he’d be there but he wasn’t. That went on for *three* days. The next day he just showed up at home. *Out in the valley!*”

“Was he okay?”

“He was fine, healthy. He hadn’t been hurt.”

“Do you have any idea where he went or what he did?”

“Nope, no clue, it’s a mystery. But he stays home more now, doesn’t come on my jobs with me.”

“Does he mind?”

“Doesn’t matter, my wife won’t let him!”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I so got it.

Our friend Samantha told me a story about Milton, her black bunny. “I had a really nice rabbit house for him in the back yard and one day he escaped. He was gone! I thought I lost him. Then one day a couple weeks later our cat, Scout, who was Milton’s friend, disappeared. Well, I thought someone was kidnapping my pets.” She chuckled but she meant it.

“But Scout came back that night. Then, he started leaving each day in the late afternoon. So one day I followed him, and guess what? He took me to Milton.”

“What? Where?”

“One of our neighbors on the same side of the street had built a new house for Milton and he was there, and he was happy.”

“I let Milton stay at his new home because he liked it there and was safe; and in the just-before-evening light on most days, Scout would leave. He walked down the street for a visit and sat on the fence next to Milton’s new bunny house. He stayed there until the sun went down and then he came home again.”

That seemed like a miraculous story to me. I figured if she could find her bunny I could for *sure* find my cat.

I heard several stories about cats who were gone for days; one was gone for months before she returned.

One sympathetic neighbor told me a story about her bird, a golden cockatiel. “Ruffles had a large birdhouse inside, but sometimes we left her door open and let her fly in the house. One day she just flew out our front door. I ran after her. I could see her in the tree but she did *not* want to come back!”

I was silent, hoping this story was going to have a good ending.

“After several days, Ruffles showed up on the porch and flew back into the house!”

“Was she okay?”

“Yep. And seemed happy to be home again.”

How could I not chuckle? “Now *that’s* a story!”

I took these stories as messages from the loving Universe that Brambleberry would find her way back to us. I was still scared but I also had a healthy dose of trust. I thought that we lived in an interesting area where animal friends could take critter vacations and be safe.

I still felt her in my heart and believed she was alive when we contacted a local animal communicator.

“I believe she’s alive,” said Amanda.

“Do you have any idea where she is?”

I love the way readers get silent to listen.

“She’s near. I feel like she’s under a house, maybe a block to two from where you live. It seems like a house that has a front porch with steps. The porch is higher than the yard — she’s under there.”

“Can you see any colours on the house?”

“I see kind of light ocean-blue but I can’t be sure about that. I do believe she’s alive.”

I wanted to stay in those safe moments with the reader. I didn’t want the reading to end.



“Do you think she’s getting closer?” I asked Christopher, as if he would know.

“Let’s go for a walk.” He was ready to bring her home.

There was one house on the street behind ours, a block away and closer to town, which fit the description. When we got there, I called her name. I had her treats with us and rattled the bags, but no answer.

We returned later that night and called again. But all was still silent.

The days and nights turned into weeks, and soon a full month had passed without her. I still handed out flyers at the post office and updated her picture on the community board and at the veterinarians’ offices. I still walked the streets almost every morning. I missed Brambleberry Rose every minute, and I wanted her back. I talked with everyone about her. During those early morning searches, I still called her name and prayed for her safety.

I still believed she was alive. And because I believed that, I also believed I could find her.

We were at thirty-one lonely days and restless nights when I had a dream. I rarely remembered my dreams, so I felt this was significant. In the dream, I saw Brambleberry Rose — she was home again! She was curled up sleeping, but she was smaller.

Almost every morning of our life together, Christopher said, “I had a dream last night,” so when I told him I’d had a dream, he knew something different was happening. He trusted his dreams and used them in his work.

Within a couple hours later, I received a phone call from Christine: “I think I found Brambleberry. Can you meet me at 7th and Saint Junipero?” I was on my way before I set the phone down. Even though it was only two blocks from where we lived, I drove my car.

“The neighbor next door heard her crying and phoned us.”

Because she was part of the police department, Christine told me she could get the owner’s phone number. They weren’t in town but, after talking with them for a few minutes, she knew how to get into the closed-in area under the deck.

And it *was* Brambleberry Rose!

Apparently this was the second time in her life that someone else had heard her talk more than I had. I could see a short distance under the house. Because she'd been trapped there for a couple of days, it was dark, and she was smaller, I didn't recognize her at first.

"Brambles . . ." I said it softly, took a deep breath, and kept eye contact with my kitty.

She came to me and let me pick her up. She was *much* smaller!

"Thank you, thank you so much, Christine! I don't even have words."

"Thank *you*. You never gave up!" Christine was almost as happy as me. "Your story with Brambleberry Rose is a special experience for me — one of my best as the local Animal Control Officer. This is such a good day for me. And you . . . and her!" She smiled and her eyes sparkled.

When I got her home, I phoned Christopher. "I've got her! Can you believe this?"

"I'm on my way, give me a few minutes. Are you at home?"

"I'll call Dr. Thomas and stay here until you get here. Drive safe. I love you!"

Immediately — after I kissed her, again — I phoned our vet with the awesome news. Christopher arrived in minutes.

As soon as Dr. Thomas examined and rehydrated Brambles, he said, with a huge smile replacing concern, "She's going to be okay."

I could breathe again and I made the sign of the cross. Christopher wrapped me up in his arms and kissed me. "Thank you for believing in her."

Dr. Thomas had such a kind smile and his eyes lit up. "You can take her home. Keep her inside all the time, day and night, give her small, frequent meals, and keep water available to her at all times."

"Oh, dear Lord, thanks. She'll be safe and I'll be with her every day. Thank you!"



As soon as we got back home I phoned Stevie. She was so happy to hear Brambles was home again and okay.

Brambleberry Rose was so exhausted she couldn't jump from the floor up to the seat of a chair. She had been our high flyer but now she was grounded. She was painfully thin — I'd heard that said before. Now I felt it. She sat for hours next to her water dish. She did that for days. Sometimes she just sat and stared at her water.

I was so, so happy and could relax again because she was back home. Dr. Thomas had said it could take a couple of months for her to be 100% again. After more than a month of consistent care, she looked better and was able to walk around our house easily, but we still had a ways to go. She wasn't strong like she'd been.

One afternoon Christopher and I were sitting in our kitchen and I picked her up and put her on the table. She could see out into our backyard and the unique wood ledge that Christopher made. She sat down near the window and then put her paw up as if to ask if we could open it for her.

"No baby, I'm so sorry. You'll be outside again, I promise!" I leaned over and kissed her.

"Do you want to open the window just so she can smell the outside?"

I opened it about an inch and she put her nose to where the breeze was drifting through. She wanted to breathe the early fall fragrance. She sat there for several minutes. I saw a quiet wisdom in her character. I got the feeling she accepted the limitations. Christopher was watching her too.

"Wow, she's beautiful. She's more powerful now . . . kind of like Navar. This is impressive!"

That night she ran down the hallway and jumped up to a chair and then onto our bed. Since she came home, I'd been picking her up and putting her on the bed. When she did that I looked at Christopher; we were both smiling.

"We're on our way back to normal."

"Good job, you. That took intestinal fortitude. Good work!"

During those first days, while she was still so weak, our other cats gave her space, but as she grew stronger they were close again. Girl Grey stayed near her more than she had before, and Huckleberry was his sweet self, sometimes napping with her in the afternoons.

As I helped her recover from her journey, I developed a profound respect for my Brambleberry Rose. I often wondered where she'd been and who had fed her along the way. Maybe she'd caught mice?

"Do you think maybe Brambleberry Rose came into this lifetime partially to make this journey?" Christopher asked one evening. "Like Native Americans, maybe it was a spiritual quest for her — and that's the reason she came to live with us *here*."

“I hadn’t thought of that . . . could be.”

“She might’ve known she’d be safer here than in our town in the Southland. It’s quieter here, nowhere near as busy.”

“You’re right. I would’ve lost her down there!”

I was curious so I looked up spiritual vision quest: *a supernatural experience in which an individual seeks to interact with a guardian spirit, usually an anthropomorphized animal, to obtain advice or protection.* I realized that, along with her beauty, the joy she brought me, and the deep love between Brambleberry and me, there was a depth to her beyond what I knew or could even fully comprehend.

She could have died when she got tangled up in the cords of the window shades. She could’ve died during her spirit quest, but didn’t . . . again. This seemed to be a thread in her life, and I wondered if there was a connection between her being born and left in that plastic bag in the trash and me making all the phone calls to find her.

“This may seem obvious . . .”

I was thinking out loud and Christopher was being patient.

“. . . but I hadn’t put it together until just now. Remember our first winter here when I was calling everyone in town trying to find her?”

“Yep, you didn’t give up then, either.”

“That was the same time Stevie was raising her. Do you think she was communicating with me? If I hadn’t been ready for her or couldn’t find her, could that dumpster have been her exit strategy?”

Christopher raised his eyebrows and looked into the distance, as if searching for answers.

“Who is this cat?”



I wanted Brambleberry to be with me. I just wanted her near me. She continued to recuperate and Dr. Thomas cleared her for outdoor activities. The moments of our life folded back into a recognizable pattern.

It was a couple of weeks before I let her out but, when I did, I let her be a little hungry. When I called them, she ran back inside with the rest of the cats, and she stayed closer to me most of the time during the day.

She regained the weight she'd lost and then a bit more, which was interesting because she'd been so athletic and lean before her walkabout.

One afternoon I surprised her while she was lying in the sun on our stone path. She turned her face to me, showing a wild side I hadn't seen before. It was truly stunning. She stared at me and softly growled, while pulling back her lips to show her canine teeth.

I felt she was warning me.

It seemed my sweet domestic cat had become a powerful being.

I also realized she *did* look like a baby lynx. It was truly impressive.

Hayleigh Skywalker's behavior toward Brambleberry Rose was still an issue, and I had to keep Brambles safely away from her little sister. It seemed Hayleigh still wanted her off the planet! I wasn't sure if she was afraid of Brambleberry or if she didn't want her to be back in the house. Maybe Hayleigh had grown used to her being gone?

Even though Hayleigh was smaller, because of her extra upper body strength I felt that if she hit Brambleberry she would hurt her. But because of Operation Submarine Doors, I was able to keep Hayleigh Skywalker in one half of the house and Brambleberry Rose safely in the other. It just meant that Christopher and I had to *always* remember to keep doors closed. We were succeeding in having one door closed before we opened the next in the hallway where the two sides of the house connected.

"We need to do something to make Brambles more safe."

"Maybe we could try putting Hayleigh Monster under the house."

You may remember, dear readers, when Brambles disappeared into that cavernous space during her first weeks with me.

"Remember when we put Huckleberry down there?"

"He didn't catch any mice . . . nope; and he got out in, like, *two minutes!*"

"Do you think she'll get out?"

We carried Hayleigh to the backyard together and she didn't mind a bit. When we closed the door we told her we loved her, and then watched in the front of the house at the several openings she could get out. She was a no-show. Several hours later we opened the door, called her name, and Hayleigh came walking to us. Not running.

“She likes it down there!”

Before we put her down there again, we tried it out again with Huck. We closed the door but he was out before we got to the front of the house. We didn’t know how Huck got out but thought that Hayleigh might not be able to bend down like he could because of her leg. So she became the proprietor of her own private sanctuary.

Our house had been built without a proper foundation and had several places where daylight was visible under the house. There were also screens over rectangular openings about twelve by six inches, so she always had fresh air and could see outside. It was an all-dirt floor and as big as our house, and I was pretty sure there were small wild critters down there to keep her company. No other cats would willingly go in there so it was *all hers*, and far from punishment.

So Brambleberry was safe in our house — and outside in our yard again — and Hayleigh was safely locked up in a nice place that *belonged* to her.

In a loving way, one evening, Christopher observed, “Ha! She’s in *Hayleigh Jail*.”

Brambles was recovering beautifully and could jump and climb again. Some afternoons she slept curled up in an unfilled stone birdbath that was almost four feet off the ground. At one time we’d filled it for our birds on warm days but didn’t leave water in it overnight or the cute little raccoons would turn it into a wash basin and probably tip it over in the process. But after seeing her curled up, I left it unfilled and got a hanging birdbath for our feathered friends. The stone birdbath stood on a wrought-iron base, and I couldn’t figure out how she got up there without toppling it.

We didn’t see her flying through the trees but she could jump again.

She still rarely spoke, maybe once every three or five weeks, and her voice was still just a small squeaky meow.

On the occasional warm afternoon that found Christopher home, sometimes he’d lie down and take a nap. On those days she seemed convinced that it was her job to nap with him, and she curled up close to his face. He loved that.

Once again, we had peace in our house and yard and all of our kitties were happy.

Our friend Deanna, from next door, was visiting one beautiful, clear, warm morning while we were feeding our squirrels on the wood ledge. In her yard she left peanuts and other treats out for them, but didn’t have a squirrel shelf. She commented on how much she enjoyed watching them sit on that nice platform and munch on their black sunflower seeds and peanuts.

All of a sudden, one of the little red squirrels climbed down the tree and jumped onto the shelf — the only difference was that this one came bearing a gift! She was carrying a large —

almost as big as her — piece of soft green moss in her mouth. She dropped it on the ledge, flicked her tail back and forth, and then ran back up the tree.

We all looked at each other and started laughing.

“That was intentional!” said Deanna.

“That was unexpected.” added Christopher.

“Do you think she’s thanking you for the treats?”

“I’m so glad we all got to see that, wow!”

I decided to do some research later on what we’d just witnessed. I found out that squirrels and other animals have been recorded participating in altruistic behavior. But was this that, or was it what Deanna suggested, a way of thanking us?

Squirrels use moss to line their nests and keep their babies warm, so I took it as a gift for our house. What a special treat it was to have that nice piece of soft, green moss.

I watched one morning as the Zeros dive-bombed our special, gift-bearing squirrel friends. I noticed they were following a flight pattern. They’d swoop down from the trees and attack from horizontal positions. So I thought I could interrupt their flight path by obstructing the farthest end of the squirrel shelf. I walked our yard, and found an oak branch about one inch in diameter, maybe three feet long, with a straight base and a bushy top. I nailed it to the end of the shelf. And watched. It totally worked! Our squirrel friends could still sit on the shelf and enjoy their treats without their view being interrupted, our cats could still jump onto and off the shelf, and those nefarious Zeros couldn’t get to them.



Christopher and I loved having outdoor dinner parties. We’d start a fire in our fire ring and have a wonderful time outside with our friends. Hayleigh was safely in *Hayleigh Jail*, I left the front door standing open for our guests, and the cats loved it. Navar, Girl Grey, Huck, and Brambles could be outside in our yard, climb trees later than most nights and then wander inside for dinner when they wanted. With so many people in our yard, they were totally safe.

Most of our friends knew our kitties and enjoyed their company, although the cats mostly watched from a safe distance.

“Your cats are so entertaining the way they climb around in the trees and on the roof and watch us!” one friend said.

“Their black cat is more like a dog.” Stephen sounded amused.

Christopher smiled and his eyes danced with enjoyment, “If you come back as an animal after you cross over, you should come back as one of Amber’s kittens. “Her cats get the best — the best hand-made meals — and they have such extraordinary lives.”

Sometimes when we were in our front yard in the late evening, we looked up into our pine trees and saw red eyes peering down at us. At first, we didn’t know who they belonged to, but then we figured out that the raccoons, whom we rarely saw, were sitting up there and watching us. It was so cute because there were five or six pairs of small, red, glowing eyes and they moved as we walked in our yard.

I may have mentioned that Christopher and I loved living in this story-book, almost-forest neighborhood. We’d only seen the bobcat once, and now that we had Hayleigh and the Zeros contained, we and our kitties had peaceful lives. Every. Day.

A couple years later, on one of these uneventful Saturdays, Brambleberry Rose came back in from her early morning conversations with the birds and her exploration of our yard, and I noticed she was limping. On Sunday she seemed better; then on Monday she was worse again. Christopher and I called for a morning appointment with Dr. Thomas.

After his examination, he said, “Brambleberry has a torn anterior cruciate ligament, or ACL. This usually happens to athletic cats. Have you seen her jumping especially high or chasing one of the other cats . . . or running really fast?”

I thought about Hayleigh chasing her but, since she was in *Hayleigh Jail* most of the time, I hadn’t seen anything like that.

“Hmmm . . .” I searched my mind. Then I looked at Christopher but he didn’t have anything to add.

“Oh . . . those two brother cats . . . remember?”

“Ah . . . that’s right!”

I told Dr. Thomas about them. “Two brother cats moved into our neighborhood; they’re both black and white, they’re big cats, and they sneak into our yard.”

“They seem like bully cats,” Christopher added.

“If one of them chased her and she jumped wrong or landed wrong this could happen.”

I thought that Navar Star must have been inside or in another part of the yard when this awful thing happened and he couldn’t protect her from them.

“It’s good that you brought her in so quickly. I can do orthopedic surgery on her today and repair the damage.”

After looking at each other, both Christopher and I nodded our acceptance.

“After the surgery will she still be like she was?”

“It’s a coin toss. Some cats heal beautifully and others are not the same after the surgery. You’ll need to keep her inside for six months.”

Again, Christopher and I checked with each other.

“Yes, I can do that,” I said.

Then Dr. Thomas told us about the rest of her recovery. “Don’t let her climb or jump for those six months.”

He spoke softly and said the words as if he were ordering lunch, but Christopher knew what they meant to me. He put his arms around my shoulders.

I was thinking, *Seriously? My precious flying cat? My Mystère?*

My heart broke for her. I knew her passion in this life was to jump and fly through the trees.

“I’m going to have to work at that! Whoa. . . .”

“After surgery,” Dr. Thomas continued, “we’ll start her on an oral medication so she doesn’t get arthritis in her knee. The more you keep her on the ground, the better her chances of a full recovery.”

I kissed her precious little head and we left her in the best hands, the most competent care we knew of. Christopher put his arm around me again as we walked away.

“How are you doing?”

“It’s scary and it hurts.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Can we stop at the Mission on the way home and say a prayer for her?”

“Oh . . . great idea, yeah, let’s.”

Later that afternoon, Dr. Thomas called to let us know that our beautiful Brambleberry Rose did well with the surgery and we'd be able to take her home the next morning after her exam.



I called our local police department and asked if there was anything I could do to protect my cats in their own yard. They connected me again with Christine, our beloved Animal Control Officer.

“How’s Brambles?”

“Hi Christine, she’s recovered beautifully, thanks, but now we have another issue,” and I explained what had happened.

“I’m sorry to tell you this but cats are considered natural wanderers. They can’t be managed like dogs and you have to find a way to live with the situation. I can’t help you. I’m really sorry! Do you know who their owner is? Can you work something out with them?”

“Maybe. I’ll try. Thanks, Christine.”

The next day Brambles came home and I was beyond happy to have her back. I also knew we had a journey in front of us that would require a lot of patience on her part and mine.

“You’re okay,” I told her. “Your dad and I love you so much. I’m here with you. Every day, baby. I have you!”

Since she couldn’t walk too well, I brought her food and water, and then carried her to her litter box. This worked well the first day. After that, we accommodated her healing knee with steps so she could walk up to our bed and didn’t have to jump down.

I talked with a couple of our city council members to learn if there was anything I could do to protect our kitties. They agreed with Christine and said there wasn’t really any way they could help me. Our good friend, Anthony, was especially concerned because he’d known her since she was a tiny baby coming to the city council meetings in my leather backpack, and he liked cats.

“She’s a beauty,” he said, “and you take such good care of her. I wish there were a way I could help you with this. Of course, if you need anything, just call!”

The owner of the black-and-white bully cats lived about two doors and a neighborhood-street intersection away on the same side of our street. I knocked on her front door and asked if she had time to talk.

“Sure, what’s up?”

When I told her what had happened, and what Dr. Thomas said, she looked down and shook her head from side to side. “Your cats seem to be beating up other cats.”

“I’m so sorry for Brambles. I’ve heard this from other neighbors.”

“Really? Is there anything you can do to keep them in?”

“Hmmm . . . I can try. Sure, I’ll keep them in and see how that works.”

“Thanks, I hope this helps. I don’t want more of my cats to be hurt.”

I walked away with tears in my eyes for my beautiful baby and a hope for peace in our yard.

Brambleberry Rose’s life changed, and so did mine.

Since I mostly worked from home, staying with Brambles wasn’t a sacrifice. She was a trooper and let me care for her, bring her treats, and tell her stories of how she would get her life back.

The first time I saw her sitting on my dresser and looking nearly four feet straight up to the top of our armoire I gently dissuaded her.

“Oh, baby, not yet. I know in your mind you still jump as high as you want . . . but baby, wait until you heal. Okay? I love you.”

She didn’t answer back but she acted like she’d do what I asked . . . for now.

I did everything I could to keep her entertained. I carried her to her favorite places in the yard and sat holding her in the sun. We bought new toys and I played with her in the house and watched her all the time.

She often took a nap at the end of our bed where we had a soft, fuzzy sheepskin. You may know by now that she and Christopher had a sweet relationship. Even though he understood our babies in a way that I marveled at, there was one conversation between Brambles and him that he kept missing. He loved to touch her luxuriant fur and, when he came into our bedroom and found her sleeping, couldn’t resist. One pet was acceptable, two was borderline — and even though out of love I cautioned him — he thought a third pet would be welcomed. It was *not!* First, she’d silently bite him, and if he tried to pet her again, he met with as many paws as she could get on him, with claws out, warning him to not try *that* again!

It was the same every time. He would pull his hand away shaking his head.

So many times!

“She’s a two-pet kitty, that’s all you get with her.” I was amused each time he did that.

At times she got a faraway, almost wild, look in her eyes and I knew she was thinking about jumping up somewhere I didn’t want her to jump, or down from the bed or sofa, and I would direct her to her stairs.

Watching her do acrobatic things our other kitties couldn’t had been so much fun. It was a supreme challenge to keep her from jumping. But eventually, she and I worked it out and, in the end, I kept her on the ground.

During our last appointment with Dr. Thomas, he said, “Another good job. You can let her go outside in your yard if you want. She’s stable, so let her tell you what she can do now. We’ll keep her on the anti-arthritis medication; she should be pain-free for the rest of her life.”

“Should she be an indoor cat for her safety?” I asked.

“Most of the time cats in your area are safe as long as they’re brought in at night. If you want to keep her in during the day, do it, but Brambles seems to me to need to be outside. Some cats are indoor cats by nature. She’s not. But it’s up to you.”

Christopher and I waited to see how she would navigate her world and if she would be able to jump and climb.

I let her go anywhere in the house she wanted without watching her. I could also actually leave for an hour or more without feeling guilty. I’d put cat-steps near the wide windowsill in my office so she could climb up and watch the world outside.

A couple of days went by and Christopher asked, “Did you let her go outside today?”

“Not yet, I’m still keeping her inside. Do you think it’s time?”

“I think that’s your call. Dr. Thomas said it’s okay, but I’m leaving it up to you. You’ll know when it’s right.”

“Do you want to be here the first time?”

“Yes, I’d like that, sure!”

A couple of days later I told him it was time, so we worked out when he’d be home.

It was in the early afternoon when I opened the front door. She didn’t run outside. Navar was on the porch and Brambles walked to the side of the door and looked out. Christopher went out and turned to see if she would follow. I was still inside, standing in the doorway.

She put her face up to the sky and took several short breaths . . . it looked like she was breathing freedom.

And then she just walked out. She walked to the steps, down to the garden, and stood looking at the plants. Christopher and I both sort of followed her and she walked around the garden and then ventured farther into our yard. Her leg wasn't working the same way it had but she seemed to be happy to be outside. She didn't run or climb a tree. She just rambled through her garden.

We didn't know if Hayleigh would cause trouble or try to get out of *Hayleigh Jail* if she saw Brambles, but she didn't.

Brambles stayed out about an hour and a half and then came back in the house. I fixed her some dinner and she climbed up on our bed and went to sleep.

“Well, that was gentle. Are you going to let her out again tomorrow?”

“I think so, yeah. I'll keep the front door open and check on her, but I think she's okay.”

“Have you seen those bad cats?”

“No, it's been quiet since I talked with their mom.”

So the next morning I let Brambles out early and she was fine. She even climbed a few feet up one of the sideways California oak trees. She didn't go far before she jumped down, but the wood chips gave her a soft landing.

I went outside several times while she was out and she was having a nice time in her yard. She even curled up and took a nap in the tall grasses at one point. And every day she and I got more relaxed with her being an outdoor kitty again.

Christopher and I watched her and put mini wood benches that acted as steps in all her favorite places in our yard.

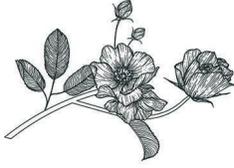
She did well with the cat-steps inside and each week brought her more confidence. Brambleberry Rose was still able to spend her days in the sunny spots outside. She could climb up to her safe places and take a nap. She began to run through the yard like our other cats and came running to me when I called. She jumped up onto our bed at night. The only difference was those mini cat-steps and benches that acted as stairs for her inside and outside. Brambleberry mastered them and soon went flying through the house and yard instead of through the trees.

I hadn't had a cat injured like this before. It seemed even after a year that she was forever changed. As I watched her it was clear she was no longer the acrobat she had been. Her range was limited. She could still climb like the other cats, but she could no longer fly. This bothered me so much. Flying through the tree branches was a large part of who she was, not to mention

that it was something special to observe. It had been so beautiful to see her confidently navigate her way along the thinner branches.

It seemed our halcyon days might be behind us.





7. Oreo, Panda, and Licorice

Life moved on as life does.

Our murder of crows still took over our yard a couple of times each year; our squirrel friends were safe from the aerial assaults of the Zeros; Huckleberry still spent time next door with Anna; from time to time we saw collections of red raccoon eyes in our pine trees and the mean cats weren't around, so there were no more traumas for Brambleberry Rose.

She was such a large part of my heart and our life. While I worked, I left the French door in my office unlatched and held by a chain lock. She could easily push it open and walk in whenever she wanted. Every day when she came in from from being out in our yard, I would see her walking down the hallway toward me and I would tell her how beautiful and brave she was, and that I loved her, eternally.

Brambleberry didn't answer back; she still barely made a sound. I'd begun to think she'd used up her voice on that first day of her life, in the plastic bag — crying for rescue.

Christopher and I were sitting on our front, courtyard-style porch one evening. Brambles was in the yard and I asked him, "Why do you think this happened? She's innocent. Why would she have to lose the essence of her spirit . . . why would my flyer be grounded?"

"Oh, boy, that's a question for the ages. I don't have an answer; not a good one. I think she's coping well, but it's a loss, and I can't answer your questions. I wish I could, sorry!"

Brambleberry and I had a rhythm or something like that; we were in sync. After her injury, I had decided to spend more time at home; my travels lasted for shorter durations. I chose to spend as much time with her as possible, and I loved being with her.

When Christopher and I celebrated Brambleberry Rose's fifth birthday, Navar Star was more than nineteen years old. He had been, and still was, a powerful force and the patriarch of our feline family.

As you may remember, Christopher was very close to Navar and he'd been spending more time with him than usual. One night he said, in an almost-whisper, "It's getting time for him to travel *beyond the veils of time and space.*"

Dr. Thomas had examined Navar several weeks earlier and told us to call him because Navar was getting near the end of his days. He said we'd know when, and that he'd come to our house to help Navey cross over to the Other Side.

“You can hold him,” Dr. Thomas said when he arrived. He motioned to Christopher to sit on the bed next to his beloved kitty.

“You can talk to him . . . I’ll need you to leave after I give him the first medication, but stay with him for now.”

We both kissed our beloved Navar Star. We told him how much we loved him, that we were and always would be family, and that we’d see him again. And then we left him with Dr. Thomas. When he called us back into our bedroom, Navar was curled into a sleeping position and he was as still as a moonless night. We sat with him for a moment to say our final goodbyes, before Dr. Thomas was meant to take him away.

“What if we bring him to you in an hour or so?” I asked.

“Sure . . . sorry guys.”

After another hour or more of talking softly with our big, black boy and petting his thick, dark fur, we took him to Dr. Thomas.

I’d not seen Christopher so sad at any time in all the years we’d been together. As I mentioned before, he was especially close to his black, big-boy cat. Sorrow was etched deeply on his face and, later that night, he started to plan the ceremony to say goodbye to his cherished Navar Star.



Our fire ring had a natural circle of plantings that surrounded it on part of our property and Christopher wanted to have a memorial there for Navar.

“Would it be okay if I had a tree planted down by the fire ring for him?”

“I’d love it. What kind are you thinking of?”

“I’ll see if there are mature Japanese red maples available.”

“I’m so sorry, Christopher.”

“He’s still with me. He’s really big now!”

“Is his name still Navar?”

“He’s Bagheera now.”

“Oh, like *The Jungle Book*?”

“That’s so cool. Wish I could see him.”

You may not know, but Christopher had been born in England and raised by a very English mother. Since childhood, he was familiar with not just *Peter Pan* but also *The Jungle Book* stories. He especially loved Bagheera, the Black Panther who befriended the “man-cub” Mowgli. Bagheera was a protector and mentor to the orphaned boy, so it was fitting that Navar as Bagheera was now Christopher’s spirit companion.

The next day, Christopher and some landscape friends planted a graceful Red Dragon Japanese maple tree in our yard to honour our dearly loved boy. Christopher actually helped dig the new home for the beautiful tree.

A couple of days later, after we picked up Navey’s ashes from Dr. Thomas, several friends came over for our sacred ceremony and we lit a fire in our fire ring. As the sun went down, we sat in a circle around the flames and said our final farewells to our much-loved Navar Star.

“He was a massive cat,” one friend said. “And so peaceful.”

“And with you for so long,” another offered.

“Oh, man, those green eyes!” said our friend, Stephen.

“He was my best friend.” Christopher seemed to be hollow. I’d not seen this before. “He’s still with me . . . and he’ll *never* leave me.”

The trust he had that his big black boy kitty was still with him was new to me.

Our entire feline family seemed to miss Navar Star. They seemed sad. They slept more and didn’t want to play as much. He’d been with us for so many years — our young ones had known him all of their lives and come to depend on his protection.

“Will our babies be safe outside? Navar can’t protect them anymore. Brambleberry Rose, Girl Grey, Huckleberry Moon, and our little terror, Hayleigh Skywalker, are all sweet little babies. I don’t want them to be hurt.”

“They should be okay, but it’s our job to keep them safe now and we have to trust their kitty Angels.” That’s how Christopher saw it. “Next time, I’m going to stay with our kitty and hold them while they cross . . . I don’t want to leave another of our littles during that transition. Whatever it is, I can handle it. I need to be with them.”

I cried for a week, and then it felt in my heart like our stoic boy — lovingly known as The Fonz — was okay, and he silently drifted away to wherever it is they go when they leave us.

Girl Grey and Huckleberry Moon loved each other; they still napped together inside some days and just hung out near each other often. Huck still disappeared a couple of times each week to hang with his kitty friend, Anna, next door. Hayleigh was still intent on harassing Brambleberry but, since we kept them separate, we had peace in our home.

One evening I walked out onto our front porch and started to walk down the stairs. It was just turning into a pretty sunset. From under our wooden steps out walked a big, fluffy, black-and-white skunk. I stopped walking.

Girl Grey and Huckleberry were both outside and I had no idea what would happen if they met the skunk. Guess what happened next, lovely readers? A much smaller skunk walked out to follow the first skunk . . . and then another small one. I hadn't made a move the entire time. I had a feeling I was looking at a mama and her two babies, and I wondered if there were more.

The three of them seemed comfortable in our yard; they weren't hiding, but were walking right on the path that led to our front porch steps, so I had to believe this wasn't new to them. About that time Huck came running up a side path from our driveway. He rounded the corner and put his brakes on really fast! He stopped and didn't move for a minute or so, and then he just quietly walked into our house. I'd left the front door standing open since I planned to return within minutes and Huck disappeared into our living room.

A couple of minutes later, Christopher walked to the doorway. "Hey, what a beautiful sky. Looks like we might have another award-winning sunset . . . uh . . . what's going on?"

By that time, he could see the skunks. "Whoa, look at them! How many are there?"

I turned enough so I could see where I was walking backward and slowly went back into our house. "Girl Grey's still outside. Maybe I'll call her at the back door."

Christopher closed the lower half of our front door and stood watching them. "I think they've been here before. They're grubbing and seem to be comfortable."

"What's grubbing?"

"They dig in the ground with their front feet for grubs and insects."

We watched our three new-to-us neighbors as the sun started to disappear. Our garden lights came on and Girl Grey walked up the same side path Huckleberry had taken. Christopher opened the front door for her. She seriously was not concerned.

Most days Girl Grey spent time by herself watching the other babies, or our birds, or squirrels. It seemed very purposeful; like she was taking mental notes. She still played with the small teddy bear tins in the basket I kept in the living room. It was sweet to be going through my day and hear that almost musical sound. She still wasn't into bell toys so much but liked other sounds.

She liked the new crinkle-ball toys we bought for her. She didn't want to chase them but she sat and kind of patted them in place — it seemed like she wanted to hear the sounds they made. In my mind I saw her wearing a purple, pointed magician's hat with shiny gold stars and a crescent moon. She looked like a stealthy, very wise, otherworldly creature.

She seemed to like the skunk family. After that first evening, we saw that they showed up most evenings. They were so attractive, they had jet black fur and dramatic long white plumes that made their tails look like a celebration. Girl Grey sometimes sat on the front porch steps and scrutinized them. None of our other cats did that. She was an observer, she watched . . . so many things. Some I couldn't even see, but that made me try to figure out what she was focused on.

I read about skunks and felt secure they weren't going to spray because they don't like to do that — and my gentle, mysterious cat was non-threatening. When startled, they would face their aggressor and stamp their little black feet. I saw them do that once or twice when Huckleberry surprised them. It was the cutest thing and so dear. Sometimes when he returned from visiting Anna, he bolted into our yard. Not sure why, just one of his things.

First, we named the mama.

“What do you think about Oreo?”

“Perfect!”

After watching them one evening, I decided on the babies being called Panda and Licorice.

“One of the babies is braver than the other. Let's call her, Licorice. She walks much closer to our house and doesn't care that Grey is outside. Panda, on the other hand, stays in the back of the garden more and fluffs his tail when Huck crashes their grubbing party.”

That was our life, we loved it, and it just rolled from one day to the next.

A few years later, Girl Grey was almost seventeen years old. She'd lived such a sweet, long life with us, and it was her time to join Navar Star, her feline family, and her Hawai`ian ancestors on the Other Side. Dr. Jenny, an assistant veterinarian at Dr. Thomas's office who had worked with our kitties for several years, wanted to help Grey leave us and journey to Heaven.

Dr. Jenny was so sweet: she'd come to our house many times during the last months to help with Girl Grey and had a special connection with her. Christopher called her “Jennyannydots” after the Gumbie cat from the musical *Cats*, based on T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*.

On the day of her crossing, Christopher and I placed vases of fresh flowers, including lavender lilacs which smelled so beautifully fragrant, on our gracious front porch. We placed Grey Grey's favorite blanket, a necklace I'd made for her, and several of her favorite toys nearby.

When Dr. Jenny arrived, I held Girl Grey on my lap. Christopher and I recited the names of the almost thirty cats she could look for on the Other Side — each of her brothers and sisters. Some she had known while she was here, and others she would meet for the first time when she arrived.

When she was gone, Dr. Jenny said, "It's okay to sit in the sun and hold her. If you see or hear anything please tell me."

"Okay." I wondered if she knew something that I didn't. "Are animals Angels?"

She chuckled softly. "Why do you think that?"

"They seem so wise and loving."

"No, they're not Angels. They seem that way because they live with their hearts. They're here with us to show us love . . . *all* of them. They have feelings just like us and they want to be loved."

After that we were silent. Several minutes later I saw Girl Grey in spirit: she looked the same, except her soft, silvery-grey fur was long and fluffy.

"I see her." And I told Dr. Jenny how fluffy Girl Grey was.

"Can you see more?"

A few more minutes passed. . . . "There are sparkles coming out of her fur."

"I've seen that before. Can you see what the sparkles are?"

We sat in the soft afternoon sun for a few more minutes, not talking, and then I felt in my heart what I was seeing in my mind: "The sparkles are the love we gave her . . . they're so pretty . . . all that love is twinkling out from her fur."

"That makes sense, wow!" Dr. Jenny was smiling.

And then our quiet, mystical Girl Grey was gone.

She'd told us earlier that we could either take Girl Grey to the clinic or have the woman pick her up the next morning who would take her to be cremated. We'd decided to have her transported, so Dr. Jenny told us to keep her in her bed that night.

I hadn't done that before and I was unsure. When I looked at her with raised eyebrows and questions in my eyes, she reassured me: "It'll be okay, don't worry. Nothing bad is going to happen. Just curl her up in her bed and she'll be alright."

I tucked Grey into her favorite soft flannel bed on the window seat in my office and closed the French doors. The next morning, when I crossed the living room to open them, I saw Huckleberry Moon sitting on one end of the sofa that was near those doors. He was as close as he could get to where Girl Grey was lying. I realized that he'd stayed there all night to be near her. He'd held his own private vigil for his favorite sister.

"Would you like to plant some flowers for her?"

"Can we plant something that grows in Hawai'i?"

Christopher was thinking, and thinking: "I can't remember a flowering plant that can live in both places, but what about the fire flowers we have in our yard? I can transplant them so they'll spread out."

"Oh . . . that's a great idea. She loved Pele so much."

Within a few days, his crew showed up, and they moved some of our tall orange native flowering plants to a special area around the base of Navar's gorgeous Red Dragon Japanese maple tree.

"She loved being in those tall grasses so much." Christopher said: "It was her own private jungle. She felt so at home there."

"She seemed to feel invisible when she was there."

We sat around our fire ring and had a sacred observance for her. Huck and Brambles wandered by and sat with us for several moments. It was special and beautiful.

One of our long-time local friends mentioned the fire flowers. "Why did you choose those?"

"Her little Hawai'ian spirit loved the fire-goddess Pele and we thought . . ."

"Guess what? Those flowers grow in areas where there's been a fire. They're some of the first plants to grow and, since they're tall, birds fly in to help reseed the destroyed area."

"So, without knowing it, we've chosen a 'Phoenix plant' for our silent, mysterious Girl Grey."

"And that's what she's doing in spirit — rising from the ashes. Wow!"

"That's really beautiful," Christopher said softly.

It was sad to let go of Grey; she had been such a mystical and secretive beauty. My tears lasted for about a week, and then she too peacefully and soundlessly drifted away from us, just like her big black brother before her.

One night, after walking in our gratitude garden, Christopher came inside and said, “I think her spirit has returned to her beloved homeland of Hawai`i.”

“Whoa . . . that feels right. Pretty cool.”

“Maybe she’s reunited with Pele.”

“The goddess of volcanoes and fire . . . how wonderful for her.”

“And the spirits of her island ancestors.” Christopher smiled.

“I hope we get to have her as our kitty again someday.”

It was sad for our babies to leave us, but I knew they’d both had extraordinary and wonderful lives. Christopher and I loved them. They had known their kitty family members and had an uncommon and magical place to live. It had been a good life for both of them and now they were safely on the Other Side — and that helped me.

One afternoon I was introducing a new friend to our babies: “That’s our boy Huckleberry Moon . . . and Brambleberry Rose is around here somewhere. They’re our mixed berries. I love saying that.” I chuckled. “And there’s another little monster under the house. She’s in *Hayleigh Jail*.”

They were young: Huck was around fourteen, and Brambleberry and Hayleigh were both around five or six. I loved them and loved spending time with them.

Hayleigh Skywalker was still her own special little creature and she was still bad. She also had the largest paws of any of our cats.

“Wanna see her magic mitts?” I asked Christopher one evening.

“Of course.” He said chuckling a little.

She was in the kitchen at the time and Brambles was safely in our bedroom. I shook Hayleigh’s treat bag and she came running. While she was moving and I had her attention, I tossed a couple of treats across the floor. Like lightning, she ran across the hardwood floor and caught them with those large mitts.

“Oh. My. Goodness. Can you do that again?”

I tossed a few more treats and he watched her.

“She opens her paws and catches them like a baseball catcher’s mitt,” he said. “That’s so cool! We should call her *Catfish Hunter*.”

“*Catfish Hunter*? Why?”

“He’s a celebrated pro baseball player from years ago. He’s famous for pitching a record number of winning games for his team. She makes me think of him.”

“I love that name: our little *Catfish Hunter*.”

I tossed a few more treats and she ran after them, stopped them with one of her large mitts, and then opened her paw and picked up the treat. She brought it to her mouth, crunched it, and looked at me for more.

Christopher and I were laughing and Hayleigh, *Catfish Hunter* got a lot of treats that night.

She was so cute, but she also bit me frequently. Have you had a cat who did that? She never broke my skin but her bites still hurt. She was a little fighter, and I wondered if that fighting spirit was how she had survived whatever happened to her, and the many surgeries she had endured as a younger cat.

“She has another new name,” I told Christopher while he was playing with her.

“Besides Adorable Brat?”

“Bitey Baby!”

“Oh, dear. Ha! That suits her.”

“I say it with affection.”

When it was time for their annual check-ups, I took them all to Dr. Thomas’s office together. His new assistant asked, “Who are these cuties?”

Pointing to Brambles, I introduced her: “She’s Brambleberry Rose, and this one’s Huckleberry Moon. We call them our mixed berries and they’re so easy to live with.” Moving Hayleigh’s kennel closer, I said, “She’s Hayleigh Skywalker and she’s a little rascal.”

The assistant smiled, “Well, sure she is, she doesn’t have a cool berry name.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “That’s the second time I’ve heard that!”



A couple weeks later I had to take Huckleberry in again. It was an emergency visit. He came in one afternoon limping and I couldn't see an injury but knew something was wrong. After calling Christopher, I took him to Dr. Thomas's office.

It didn't take Dr. Thomas more than a few minutes to ask, "Have the mean cats come back?"

I was surprised. "I haven't seen them. But that doesn't mean they're not around. Their mom was keeping them in."

"He has a bite injury on the back of his heel," Dr. Thomas continued. This indicates he got into a confrontation with a mean cat, and when Huckleberry turned to leave the mean cat bit him."

I was so upset. How had I missed that they might be back?

"This type of injury is unusually painful and I think the malicious cats are back. They act like cat terrorists . . . in the natural order of cats, when one cat backs down from an altercation and turns to walk away, the aggressor should also leave. That isn't what happened!"

"OMG!"

"He'll be okay but for now keep him in. I'm giving him antibiotics. These cats don't abide by natural cat rules and they prey upon other cats to do them harm. I believe they're capable of killing other cats."

What is one supposed to do with that information?

I was already planning on talking with the bad cat's mom when I got home.

That evening I dropped by and asked about her two cats.

"They're good, I can't keep them inside, though," she said. "They go wild in the house, crying and running from window to window. So I let them out."

"How long have you been letting them out?"

"A couple of days."

I told her about my sweet boy Huck. "So while you kept them in, my cats were safe."

"Geez, I'm sorry!"

“Can you put bell collars on them?”

“Yeah, I tried that, but they both ripped them off. In minutes!”

When I walked away I was shaking my head. . . . “What do we do now?” I asked myself out loud.

Later that evening when Christopher got home I asked if he had any ideas.

“Did you call the SPCA before? Maybe they have an idea.”

“I can try them again.”

“Do you want to get a dog?”

“Whoa . . . that’s a great idea!”

“Maybe we could get a recording of a dog barking and scare them off?” Christopher had his goofy smile.

Our babies were all snuggled up inside that evening. Huckleberry wanted to sleep and was curled up in the window seat in my office. Brambles and Hayleigh were safely on their side of the doors, we knew they were safe.

“I have a meeting tomorrow with Mack, the stereo guy — he said he might be able to help us.”

“With a barking dog?”

“Yeah, I’ll let you know what I learn.”

The next morning, while Brambles was sleeping in our bedroom, Hayleigh wanted to go outside. Since I was there and could watch her, I thought she’d be safe. What could go wrong? Right? I left the front door standing open and opened the back door so I could get out through the screen quickly. I went outside a couple of times and she was enjoying being in the sun and chewing on fresh grass.

I went back inside and was standing in our kitchen when I heard the loudest, most wretched scream I’d ever heard. I couldn’t get outside quick enough and was so thankful I’d been that close. One of the bad black-and-white cats had Hayleigh *by the neck!*

They were standing about twelve feet from me and I ran to the cat, yelling, “LET HER GO! GET OUT OF HERE!”

But guess what, dear readers, he didn’t.

We'd had some repairs done to our fence and there were a few long fence sticks nearby. I continued yelling, "LET GO OF HER! LET HER GO! GET OUT OF HERE!"

When I picked up the fence post, I thought he'd back up.

He didn't, so I raised it over his head and hit the ground next to him. I was still yelling but Hayleigh was quiet. I hit the ground again and, finally, he let her go and backed up. But, instead of leaving, he just stood and stared at me! I scooped her up and immediately called Dr. Thomas.

"Bring her in; I can see her right now."

I quickly phoned Christopher and wrapped Hayleigh in one of her soft fluffy blankets. She was alive but wasn't moving and was very quiet.

Dr. Thomas put her on his exam table and checked her out, including the stability of her leg. "Fifteen more seconds and she would've been dead. It was *literally seconds*, Amber!"

Hayleigh stood up on the table and let him pet her. "She's okay, she's not injured. Was it one of the bully cats?"

"Yes!"

"Lucky you were so close." He looked over his glasses at me and then rubbed under her chin. "And what a good little screamer I hear you are!" He touched her so gently.

"Christopher and I are thinking of putting up outdoor speakers and blasting a barking dog recording. What do you think about that plan?"

"It could work . . ." he looked down and away as if thinking, "and I have someone who might be able to help you."

"Oh, sweet! Thanks, and thanks for being here. I want to go phone Christopher but I'll have him call you."

"Later this afternoon I can talk with him here, or this evening at home."

Hayleigh was still very quiet. When I got her home she wanted some food, so I heated fresh, organic chicken and added nice cooked shrimp. After that, she fell asleep. Huck and Brambles were already inside so I kept them like that.

You may remember, lovely readers, this wasn't my first experience with mean feline bullies. I recalled Boots, Navar's cat dad, and how he bullied small kittens. But I'd not seen anything like what these two terrorist cats could do. Now all three of our kitties had been harmed by these nefarious creatures. I really needed this menace to be over.

That evening Christopher and I walked three houses down the street and told our neighbor what had happened. I let her know that I didn't want to hurt her cat but he'd almost killed Hayleigh. "Are they afraid of dogs?"

"Oh, they run if they hear a dog barking. They follow me when I go for a walk but if a dog barks they run back home. I'm really sorry this happened!"

Christopher and I looked at each other. "This might work!"

So our kitties stayed inside and, with the help of Dr. Thomas, Christopher got several recordings of dogs barking, running, and one of a couple of dogs play-fighting and growling. I told our kids what was going to happen and to not be afraid. I played the recordings softly in the house and watched our kitties. They all looked toward the source of the sounds but no one ran and hid. I told them again that the dogs were their friends and would keep them safe outside and I gave them treats.

"What are their names?"

"The dogs?"

"I always liked Chance and Shadow in the movie *Homeward Bound*."

Christopher was still thinking.

"What about Flash?"

"Oh, that's great. Chance, Shadow and Flash. We'll go outside and call them. Totally fake those bad cats out!"

Over the next several days, I played the CDs softly and gave our kids treats. I told them that Chance, Shadow and Flash were their new Navar Star.

"They'll keep you safe." And I gave them more treats.

Each time I played the CDs they went on cat-alert: their eyes got big and dark, they looked at the source of the barking, and their ears went straight up, but they still didn't run and hide.

About three days later Christopher had the speakers installed and we connected them to our stereo system. I could play the CDs through the speakers and the barking was heard outside, not inside. It was ingenious.

The SPCA suggested I get the urine of a large dog or other ferocious animal so I ordered a spray bottle of mountain lion urine. I sprayed it along the entire fence line. I couldn't tell it was

there, and our kitties didn't seem to mind, so I didn't know if it would work — but I planned to spray it every 4-6 weeks and after the occasional rain that we had.

We gradually played the dog chorus more frequently and louder. Hayleigh spent most days in *Hayleigh Jail* so it didn't bother her at all. Huckleberry's foot had healed beautifully and, whenever he and Brambles wanted to go outside, I played the dog chorus first. I let it run for several minutes and turned up the volume, then let them out after I walked the property. While they were out I played it at intervals and it didn't bother them. Christopher and I "called the dogs" every day.

And, guess what? We never saw the bully cats again.

Our kitties were safe in their yard again. They could only go out when I was home but, since I worked from home, they had a sweet life again.



In the fall of that year our small town was having its election for mayor and our friend, Sarah, the current mayor was running for office again. I offered our home as a meeting place and, because it had been built around 1924 and retained the original character of our community, our friends agreed it would work well. There was lots of easy parking on the street in front, and the large living room with its lightly white-washed, clear cedar walls and ceiling looked like an old mountain lodge. The massive brick fireplace stood in the center of the room between wide, multi-paned windows that still held the original wavy glass.

The day of the meeting was sunny and warm. I opened the front door, set chairs around and put cookies and sparkling water on the entry table. Everything went smoothly. Brambles wanted to sleep so she was safe in our bedroom. With those helpful hallway doors closed, Hayleigh and Huck were free to roam where they wanted.

Lots of people showed up and we were all having a nice time. When Sarah arrived, after greeting several of my neighbors, she stood in front of the fireplace and began to speak.

After a few minutes, Hayleigh crept out from the kitchen and stood in the hallway surveying the people sitting in *her* large room. She then darted from the kitchen, across the living room in front of Sarah, through the open front door, and outside to the front porch.

There were a few chuckles. Sarah continued telling us what she had accomplished in her last term, and her plans for her proposed upcoming time in office.

Guess who showed up again?

Of course, it was Hayleigh SkyWalker.

This time she stood at the front door for a few moments — as if she were scouting a path through the enemy — then she ran from the front door, in front of the people sitting in chairs, to where Sarah was standing, and into the kitchen. Remember she couldn't run like most cats and she was small. So with her straight back leg following her like the rudder on a ship, and her huge front mitts, she darted in front of Sarah again and back into the kitchen!

This time everyone in the room was laughing. Sarah was silent for a moment while shaking her head . . . “Well, I've never been upstaged by a *cat* before!”

I think Hayleigh got her some votes. She was again our mayor and won by a convincing majority.



Huckleberry Moon was the sweetest boy kitty I'd ever known. He seemed to have a strong sympathetic part in his character. He had large, round eyes, white mittens on his front paws, and white boots on his back legs. His coat was of the grey tabby kind, with a white chest and nose. At times, it looked like the full moon was glowing on his face. That's how he got his middle name. He loved everybody and all of our kitties — even Hayleigh. It didn't matter to him that she was a brat, he loved her anyway.

He played with her and let her keep *all* the toys and let her win when they played chase. So Hayleigh was a kitty boss but she wasn't mean — except to Brambles.

A couple of years later, when our sweet boy, Huckleberry Moon, was around sixteen-and-a-half years old, Dr. Thomas let us know that Huck's kidneys weren't healthy.

“I can give him subcutaneous fluids every week. You can bring him in or Dr. Jenny can come to your house.”

“We did that with Girl Grey and she seemed good for many months. Do you have any idea how long he'll still be happy with this treatment?”

“Of course, each cat is different, but his markers are pretty high so I think I can only keep him comfortable for a couple months.”

Christopher and I looked at each other. “Okay, thanks.” We knew this drill.

Since we'd already lost our other two babies who'd moved to this small town with us, after Huckleberry, we'd just have our two youngest little ones. It wasn't fun to contemplate, but I knew he'd lived a memorable life with his big brother and protector, Navar Star, and his very special friend, Girl Grey, and knew he'd rejoin them in the spirit world.

When we told Deanna she had a treat party on her front porch for him and his kitty friend, Anna.

We gave Huck all the treats he wanted and stayed outside with him when he was out, to make sure he was safe. While treating him one day, Dr. Jenny told us, “He’s not as happy as he was last week.”

Christopher and I had already decided that, when we knew, we’d let him go.

“When can you come and cross him?”

“He’s okay today, and tomorrow, so would three days from now work for you guys?”

“I’ll find out Christopher’s schedule and let you know.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Me too, but it’s life, and I’d rather cross them than leave them.”

I kept him in the house the evening before the appointment but, because he wanted to go outside, I brought in armfuls of spring grass and flowers. I made a nest of the fragrant fresh plants. I surrounded him with almost eight inches deep of fresh greens and soft flowers. He looked so content to be surrounded by his plant circle and slept there most of the night.

As I’d done with his sister, I sat on the front porch and held him. We had our list of all our kitty babies. Christopher sat next to us and told him, “You have a great big kitty family waiting for you. They’re all going to love you and want to play with you.” He started at the beginning, years before we’d met our little boy Bugs.

“First there’s Autumn and Earth, Scorpio Moon and her babies: Hechiza, Guapo, and Gusto.”

“They were my first babies.” I said.

“Then there’s Angel and Clair Bear, Mr. Bojangles, Marlene’s kitty — Yoda, and four other kitties who found homes and got their names from their new families.” Christopher continued.

You’ll see: “Amelia Kitty Heart, Penelope and her three little beauties: Bandit, Jackie Paper, and Symba.”

“They lived with us just before we met you.” I said.

“Two you knew when you were a little guy: Anna PurnaVar and Jasmine Rosebud.”

“And, finally, your best buddy: Navar Star. And of course, sweet, sweet, Girl Grey.”

“They’re all your family and they’re waiting to play with you. We’ll miss you but we’ll all be together again. We’re all still family. We love you, forever.”

“*Beyond the veils of time and space*, little buddy.” Christopher petted him on his head.

And then our sweet boy was gone.



Dr. Jenny left him with us. She said the woman who cremated Girl Grey would be by in the morning and she left.

Christopher and I still sat on the porch. I was holding Bugs on my lap and we talked softly to him.

And we listened.

“He’s here!” I whispered and reached for Christopher’s hand as we sat in the delicate early afternoon silence.

In the same way I’d seen Girl Grey after she crossed to the Other Side, I saw Huckleberry Moon’s spirit walking in soft green grass.

“He jumped up from the grass!” I chuckled. “He clicked his front and back paws together. Like a leprechaun. He’s clicking his front and back feet together!”

Christopher smiled. “What a sweet, sweet little boy he is.”

Then Huckleberry Moon was gone from us.

“He’s reunited now with Anna PurnaVar and Jasmine Rosebud . . . and Navar Star and his favorite, Girl Grey.”

“It helps my heart to think that way.”

We left him that night wrapped in his favorite flannel blanket with the plants and flowers tucked in around him. The next morning, when the soft-spoken lady came to pick him up, I handed him to her, along with Girl Grey’s ashes. My sweetest babies were cremated together and I’ve kept their ashes that way, in the same alder wood memory box.

“Let’s plant some native grasses and flowers for him.”

“Around Navar’s red maple tree?”

“Yeah, we can transplant some from Huck’s favorite places and make a sweet collection in memory of him around Girl Grey’s fire flowers.”

This made me smile. “I love that. Yes, thanks.”

Again, we had our sacred fire for our beautiful, precious, beloved little boy.

“I’ve not known a sweeter soul in kitty jammies than him.”

“I remember the first day I saw him and how he followed me into our house,” smiled Christopher. “Even though everyone else stayed in the front yard — and he was only about seven inches tall!”

I thought of how tiny he’d been and how he’d just loped behind Christopher like nothing else mattered.

Brambles silently joined us and sat watching for a moment.

“Do you think she knows what’s happening?” I asked.

“I do. Do you?” Christopher had such confidence about so many things I was still questioning.

“Look at her — she looks like she does. What a privilege to love him. I’m so glad he was in our family.”

“And will be forever,” Christopher said, with a gentle certainty.



After Huckleberry left, a couple of things changed in our lives: our beloved Dr. Thomas retired and moved to another state, Dr. Jenny took over his practice and Christopher got a wonderful design-and-build job out of state. It meant he would be gone, but we would talk at least two to four times every day on the phone, and I would help him with the project online.

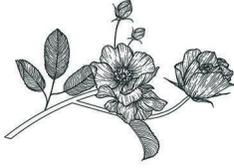
It was a large residential compound and would take a couple of years. The client was very appreciative of his ideas and expertise. They were leaving Christopher free to work his uncommon magic on their property and the design of their new house.

Now that I had only two cats, Brambleberry Rose became even closer to me. I hoped Hayleigh Skywalker might get along better with her sister; however, she still had to spend time on her own, under the house, or in a different part of the house. I shook my head, thinking: *She simply doesn't like Brambleberry and it seems like she doesn't want her to be on the planet!*

Brambleberry Rose was so much fun to hang out with. I loved taking care of her. I bought Brambleberry and Hayleigh special treats and prepared their favorite meals of organically raised chicken and sustainably farmed shrimp. I carried Hayleigh out to our front porch in the morning to hear the birdsong and held on to her while Brambleberry Rose explored our yard. She'd wander off to investigate things, but she didn't go far, and she always came when I called her.

Well . . . sometimes she made me wait just a little while. At those times, when I called her name, it felt like she was leaving me a message: *I'll get back to you, I promise!*





8. Your Cat Seems Very Wise

During her annual exam, when BrambleBerry Rose was six months past fourteen years, Dr. Jenny said, “Well, I haven’t seen such a healthy cat at her age. Her blood work is perfect. She looks and moves like a cat much younger than her age.”

“Thanks for saying that! Maybe I’ll get to keep her for five more years!”

“No reason to not think that. She looks great.”

For her entire life, she’d eaten such a clean feline diet; I thought maybe that was the reason. I also fed her people food: her favorite cooked shrimp and chicken, chopped-up wheatgrass sprouts and fresh spinach, and nutritional yeast mixed with cat supplements. We didn’t use pesticides in our yard and only organic cleaners in our house. Besides being a little overweight, and the besides lingering oddness of the way her leg worked — or didn’t — from the ACL injury, she had no health issues. The bully cats had moved away sometime earlier, so she was safe in her yard. She was beautiful, she was healthy, and from my experience with cats, I felt secure in thinking I’d be able to keep her for another four or five years.

I saw a long, loving future for us, and I couldn’t have been happier.

When I told him about her exam, Christopher was delighted. “Whoa . . . we got lucky with Brambles! I’ll be home for a couple days after we finish setting this part of the foundation.”

Seven months into that fifteenth year, I noticed she was eating less. That’s all. I watched her for several days, and I weighed her, but she hadn’t lost weight. She looked the same. She acted the same.

“Do you think someone else is feeding her?”

“Well, how could that be?” Christopher asked. “Since most of the homes near us are second homes, no one’s even there except during holidays, and occasionally over the weekends.”

“Maybe I’ll keep her inside and see if anything changes.”

Christopher was home again while I kept her inside and we both noticed something was wrong. That was also when Christopher had to leave again. Just before he left, he kissed BrambleBerry Rose.

“Goodbye precious beauty.”

And to me: “Don’t worry, everything’s going to be okay.”

Remember, lovely readers, just weeks before I’d been told she was in perfect health. The next day Dr. Jenny examined her and said, “There’s something low grade and across all her systems.”

This happened on Monday. The X-rays showed no injuries; there was nothing in her blood work that indicated anything specific was wrong. I called Stevie the next day and, when I told her something was up, she suggested I take BrambleBerry Rose to the veterinarians she had worked with. “They might have some answers.”

During the new doctor’s examination, they shaved her stomach and discovered it was bruised.

“She may have eaten a poisoned mouse, so we gave her vitamin K.”

While she was there, several people, including two doctors and a couple members of their staff, commented on her. “Your cat seems very wise.”

“She’s very peaceful,” one person said.

“She’s an exceptional cat!”

“Do you know that Stevie hand-raised her from when she was one day old?”

“Stevie told us this morning, but that’s not why she’s like this — it’s in her nature. She’s rare.”

The next day I could tell something was terribly wrong. I took her back to Dr. Jenny. “I want to give her an ultrasound.”

I waited in her office. When Dr. Jenny brought her back to me, she said, “I did all those tests on her and she was so peaceful the entire time. She has an unusual wisdom . . . a sense of strength and quiet peace.”

She also said the tests showed what no one wants to hear. “Cancerous tumors have filled her stomach area.”

She said it so softly and I probably went into shock.

“Is there any way it could *possibly* be anything *less lethal*?”

Dr. Jenny assured me that the tests were accurate. “This is an invasive type of the disease. I suggest you meet with a feline oncologist.”

This happened on Friday evening. Dr. Jenny spoke with Christopher on the phone and informed him of the situation.

Over the weekend, I did what I could. I tried to get her to eat her food and drink water. Dr. Jenny had given me some digestive nutritional powder that I mixed with water and she loved it but, could only eat a tiny amount. I told her that I loved her deeply, many, many times. Dr. Jenny had aspirated her stomach area and BrambleBerry seemed more comfortable.

I phoned William and asked if he had any insight that could help me. “She’ll tell you when it’s time. When she can no longer take her meds is an indicator.”

By Sunday I could tell we were in trouble. She couldn’t keep the wonderful mixture that she loved down. Whenever I put it in front of her, she tried to drink it but, after inhaling the inviting scent, just pulled her head back.

On Monday morning I returned to Dr. Jenny with BrambleBerry Rose.

“I’m so sorry to tell you this — it’s been a privilege to know her and be her doctor — but it’s time for her to leave.”

Later that afternoon, Dr. Jenny and her team came to our house to peacefully send my soul, my heart, my beloved BrambleBerry Rose to be with the Angels.



In the past, Christopher had been with me when one of our dearest loves crossed over. But he couldn’t return that fast, and it was time for BrambleBerry Rose to leave and go to Heaven, so after I talked with him on the phone I did all the things we’d learned to do.

I was destroyed . . . sad beyond sad, and trying to be strong and loving for her. I had her favorite blanket ready and, as I held her on my lap in our living room, I recited the names of all the cats who would be waiting for her.

Dr. Jenny administered the first shot. But she couldn’t get the medicine into BrambleBerry’s vein. Astonished, she said, “*She’s already gone!*” She looked up at me and repeated: “*She’s gone. I’ve never seen this before.*” She turned to her assistant and said again, “*She’s gone!*”

Her veterinary assistant listened to BrambleBerry’s heart and confirmed that she was no longer with us. Dr. Jenny’s team finished their work with her and left her with me. They knew by now that I would bring her to the clinic after a while and they could take her for cremation.

I want to tell you what I saw when BrambleBerry Rose left Earth to fly again. Even though I was aware that something magical could happen, and was prepared for that after what I'd experienced with Girl Grey and Huckleberry Moon, it astonished me.

As I held her, I felt her leave her body. In my mind, I saw her spirit slip out and stand in front of me. She was slender, agile, and strong. She turned to look back at me, and she had a smile on her face. I thought at the time, *How do cats smile?* I felt she was leaving the weight of her body behind. I saw the disparity between who she was in the spirit world and who she'd been here on earth. It was a large difference. I felt her relief at being, again, who she truly is.

She was Mystère again.

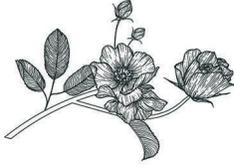
I sat into the early evening light, holding her, petting her luxuriant fur and touching her beautiful face. "I love you dearly. I will love you forever . . . and ever. So will your dad. You're so beautiful . . . so strong and brave."

When I phoned Christopher he also told her how much he loved her; that she was his forever love.

After approximately forty minutes, something wonderful happened: in my mind, I heard her say, so softly, "That's not me, mom." There was a pause . . . then she continued, "You can take me to them now."

And this was just the beginning.





9. I'm Okay, Mom

When I told Stevie that our beloved BrambleBerry Rose had passed from this world, she wrote under BrambleBerry's photo on my social media post: "My darling little Angel. So much love for you. Enjoy your wings."

Two days after she went to Heaven, in the clear and still morning sunlight, I was walking in our yard through the place where she used to sleep on warm afternoons. I said her name out loud, and I heard her say, "I'm okay, mom."

I don't refer to myself as a mom; I don't have children and found it interesting that, again, I could hear her almost as if she were speaking to me *and* that she called me mom.

Even though, as you've read, I'd seen whispers from the Other Side years earlier when two of our precious loves had gone on to Kitty Heaven, and interesting experiences had happened while BrambleBerry Rose was alive, I wasn't familiar for my cat, who had just left this world, to silently communicate with me through my thoughts.

I told William that I'd heard from BrambleBerry Rose. "She spoke to me in my mind. She had a sweet voice with clear, almost audible words."

Without hesitation, he said, "Animals communicate with us through their thoughts. They do that while they're here with us, and they can communicate that way from the Other Side."

He added, "They can speak on the Other Side."

This was new information to me.

"BrambleBerry Rose speaks so beautifully," he continued, "because she's speaking in the Heavenly language."

"We've known each other for quite a while now — how did I not know any of this?"

"You might want to start a journal to record her visits. Remember, any time you think she's communicating with you, *she is!*"

He said she could reach out to me in various subtle ways and suggested I stay open to everything I thought was a message from her.

When I asked Christopher if he knew about the things William had told me, he said, “I knew they communicated with us mentally, but I didn’t know the rest of it. That makes sense . . . and, in a way, helps me understand what’s going on with Navar. You know he travels with me in the back seat of the car.”

“You told me about that . . . oh, maybe now I get that!”

“When I get back, I’ll have my crew plant flowers for her.”

“Thanks, I wonder what we’ll choose? Maybe roses?”

“You’ll know,” was all Christopher said.

Later that afternoon — in her silent language — I thought I heard BrambleBerry suggest that I go for a walk. I thought about it. *Hmmm, sounds like a good idea . . . oh, maybe tomorrow.* I was tired and profoundly sad. Then I heard her again. So I pulled my sweater around my weary shoulders and took off walking into the early sunset.

Just around the corner and down the street, a man was walking a beautiful caramel-coloured, long-haired golden retriever; the dog’s coat was the same colour that BrambleBerry’s fur had been in the lighter areas. I said hello and asked his dog’s name.

“She’s Shila . . . and she’s eight years old.”

Shila came over and sat beside me, leaning her head against my leg. She was carrying a bright pink Frisbee in her mouth.

“Could I toss her Frisbee for her?”

“She likes to carry her Frisbee but she doesn’t like to chase it.” Watching her he said, “She likes you.”

The entire time we talked, Shila kept her head against my leg, and I reached down, petting her.

We talked a little longer and Shila moved so she could rest her whole body against my leg. She wagged her tail and looked up at me. I think she was smiling.

“*Wow, she really likes you!*”

“I think she’s giving me extra love because my cherished cat has just gone to Kitty Heaven. Maybe somehow she knows?”

He thought about that.

“Is she a therapy dog?”

“She isn’t but she has the personality to be one. I can see from her love for you that she’s naturally good at it.”

After talking with him and petting Shila for a few more minutes, they continued their walk down the street.

This was a neighbor of mine, but I hadn’t seen him before. When I thought of Velcro Dog Shila afterward, I wondered if BrambleBerry Rose knew Shila would be walking at the same place and time I was, and if that was the reason I felt she had wanted me to go for a walk. Did BrambleBerry want me to get love from Shila? Dog love is such good love — it made me smile — and it helped with the pain I was feeling.

That evening when Christopher and I spoke, he told me a thing I had wondered about his job: “Remember that underground dog run we were building?”

“Yeah, how’s it going?” I didn’t mention Shila, the Velcro Dog.

“We finished it. We decided to build a really nice, insulated dog house, and the owners decided their mama dog, “Nova” could start spending time here.”

He’d told me about their dog before and how he *loved* her. She was a Belgian Malinois, very well trained and getting ready to have pups.

Do you remember when I mentioned that earlier in his life he’d raised Guide Dogs for the Blind? He knew how to train dogs and he *loved* puppies. Apparently, her owners had seen him with Nova and realized he did more than build incredibly innovative houses and private parks. They wanted his help with the pups after they arrived.

“The large yard is mostly finished, and now we’re working on their house so she can be in her weatherproof run relatively undisturbed. She really likes her new doghouse and they want her to have her pups there. They don’t want to move them.”

He had his dog story and I had mine. I told him about Shila.

Christopher helped as much as he could from a distance; he was terribly sad that BrambleBerry Rose was gone, and unhappy that he couldn’t be home to help me. He was grateful he’d kissed her when he left, saying, “At least I have that.”

The next night I again thought BrambleBerry Rose wanted me to go for a walk. I took a path through town that I don’t usually take and, on the way home, I saw the flicker of dancing fire flames on top of a table in the courtyard restaurant across the street from the post office. I felt inextricably drawn to those flames.

A woman was talking with the server and, as I walked past, I thought I heard her say something about losing an animal friend.

I asked if she had just lost her pet and we started talking. We didn't know each other. Her name was Elizabeth, and she told me her dog, Trixie, had crossed over to the Rainbow Bridge that very morning. As we spoke, it was clear we were both shaken and shattered from the loss of our precious animal friends. We couldn't help but cry a couple of times. We hugged each other and our conversation continued until just a touch of light was left in the sky and the night was beginning to chill.

I noticed that as we spoke I became stronger. By the time I left, I didn't feel as empty from the loss of BrambleBerry Rose. For some reason, empathizing with Elizabeth helped heal some of the worst of the pain in my heart. Again, I wondered about the timing, and if my cat — who had recently been given her wings — had led me to that fortuitous meeting.

A few days later, at Dr. Jenny's office, I picked up her ashes and her footprint that had been pressed into a white ceramic memory sculpture. I thought I would be okay, but I couldn't stop crying, so when I drove past our local historic Catholic Mission, I decided to stop. I wanted to sit in the quiet reverence of the little chapel.

A friend, Sister Sasha, was there and, after asking me why I was so sad, said, "I think BrambleBerry Rose is still with you."

I was trying to process what she had said when she asked, "Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"But you're still crying."

"She isn't here. I miss her so much."

Sister Sasha helped me feel better. I was surprised at these words coming from a sister in the Catholic faith; I didn't know if the church allowed for animals to have lives after this life.

A couple of days later, I was walking in her favorite place in our yard again when I heard her silent message: "Thank you mom, Stevie" . . . she paused . . . "and mom, Amber" . . . another pause, "for giving me . . . the glorious . . . story . . . that was my life.

LOVE . . . dot

ALWAYS . . . dot

FOREVER . . . dot."

I had stopped walking and let the silence and the morning sunlight wash over me. I wanted to catch everything that was coming into my mind. I thought she would sign off. Maybe she would say "over and out" or "mic drop." *But, No!* She showed me a picture of the letters BBR, and the right leg of the R was extra-long, ending with a curved flourish.

When Christopher heard this, he said, "Ha! That R was her tail!"

There are two interesting parts to this message:

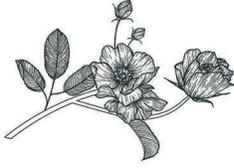
1. I never called her BBR. I didn't even think of it!
2. In the last year of her life, I'd started writing her name BrambleBerry Rose with capital B's at both Bramble and Berry.

The next morning, I again was walking in our yard at her favorite place and I felt her presence. Out loud, I said, "I miss you, BrambleBerry Rose."

There wasn't a breath between what I said and what came to me: "I'm okay, mom."

A soft peace accompanied her words.





10. Live with Love in Your Heart

Daily I found myself spending time where she had loved to sit on warm afternoons. Almost a week had passed without her, and the sun beckoned me to check out the calla lilies that had blossomed. I thought they had sprung up just for her and, later when I looked up what they represent, I learned they are symbols of youth and rebirth. As I turned to walk back to our house, I felt her presence in my heart and heard her clearly in my mind.

This is what she said:

“I’m here.” *Interesting, I thought, where’s that?* “I want you to come here when you cross so you need to: Forgive. Everyone. Everything.”

Okay, I’m standing in the gentle sunlight of a fall morning on the West Coast of the U.S. and my cat is talking to me. Correction: my cat who recently went to the Light is speaking to me!

“Live with Love in Your Heart.”

She was silent for several minutes.

“Stay current . . . don’t let anything hurtful between you and other people stay in your heart.”

She showed me an image of a heart that was like a clear quartz crystal — it wasn’t hard like crystal, just clear and sparkly. The thoughts that came at the same time were that, when unpleasant things happened between me and others, she wanted me to address the issues. She didn’t want me to let anything bad stay in my heart. *She wanted me to just talk about things. When they happened!*

The “Live with Love in Your Heart” part was not to love everyone; it was more like she wanted me to hold love in my heart and be love as a part of who I am. I got the impression she wanted me to think and act for the well-being of those around me, including creatures, and the Earth, and to do it on purpose.

Later, when I thought about it, I wondered how I could forgive some of the historical events I knew about that had happened in our world. How could I forgive leaders who had harmed and killed people in massive numbers? I didn’t know how to forgive on that scale. What I’ve learned since that day is how challenging it can be to forgive the smallest of things that those who are closest to me do.

But as I stood in the quiet of that morning sunlight, I felt a change happen in my mind, or heart — or wherever it is that we change.

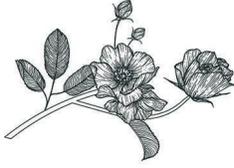
More than anything I wanted to be with BrambleBerry Rose again, and she had just given me a path to follow.

I trust the Creator of our Universe, and I said out loud, “I don’t know how to forgive everyone everything. Will You please help me? Teach me or do it for me.”

I changed.
That day.
On that spot.

There was a sudden and radical transformation for me, and I was different from those moments on.





11. A Large, Red Predator

A few days after I learned about the three things BrambleBerry Rose wanted me to do, she sent a winged visitor. True to her spiritual warrior nature, it wasn't a beautiful butterfly or a darting, sweet, hummingbird.

She sent me a *hawk*.

Just outside my office window.

A large, red predator.

From its size and the distance it was from me, I judged the bird to be approximately two feet in height from the top of its head to its tail feathers. It was in no hurry and sat for maybe twelve to fifteen minutes in the branches she used to climb in.

Though we'd lived on this property for sixteen years, *I'd never seen a bird of prey in our yard*. I knew immediately it was a loving message from her. I believed she was telling me that she was well — and, true to her powerful and uncommon nature, still her warrior self.

Of course, I looked up what it means in the spirit world when a hawk visits and learned it is a message from those who have gone on to the Other World, asking us to pay attention to the signs and whispers; they're from our loved ones who've left this Earth. I believed this message from BrambleBerry Rose was letting me know that the things I'd seen and heard were definitely from her.

Just a day or two after this happened, William got lost while driving in a Reno, Nevada, neighborhood, and a large, golden-winged hawk flew into his vision. It landed in a front yard and, as he drove past, he watched it for a moment, thinking, "That's such a *huge* bird." For some reason, he looked up at the street sign — a thing he doesn't usually do, since he's guided by his GPS — and saw the name of the street.

It was Bramble Drive!



About that time, another extraordinary thing happened.

While working in my office on a quiet morning, I looked out into our private forest-like park and saw a deer. I didn't need to be in the yard or go to town that day, so I stayed in the house and watched. What a beauty! I didn't know its age or gender. I was just blown away to see one so close. In. My. Yard!

The next day I saw a smaller version and this one had horns . . . or, maybe antlers. So I assumed this was the baby, a boy, and the larger one was his mom. How fortunate do you think I felt?

They were both there the next day, and that's when I could tell that they were indeed mama and baby so I gave them names: Mama Beauty and Baby Buck.

A new neighbor had a gorgeous fluffy, ginger boy cat named Ziggy, and he started coming to spend time with the deer. Hayleigh watched from the window and did not seem upset at all. She watched them for hours. The deer sat, walked around our yard, nibbled the plants, and slept in our bark chips. Sometimes overnight.

Christopher loved hearing about Beauty and Baby Buck, Ziggy, and my adventures with Brambles. He also said Nova's puppies had been born. There were nine of them and Nova was with them all the time.

Then Christopher told me his new news.

"I woke up last night. It was dark in my room, and I saw two large green eyes staring at me!"

"Where were they?"

"Well, that's the weird part. They were several feet below the ceiling!"

"What? Do you know who it was?"

"It was Baguerra. He's huge!"

"That's amazing."

"He's still traveling with me, keeping me safe. I had to go to a supplier this afternoon and I felt like he followed me into the store."

"Did anything happen?"

"That's the strange part. It's the same store I've been buying hardware from and today there was a guy I didn't know helping people. He got rude with me, told me I couldn't get the

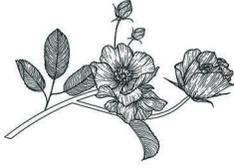
door hinges I wanted, and I couldn't figure out what was going on. Every other time I'd been in, there were the ladies you know about helping me and everything went smoothly."

"Did you leave?"

"Yep, I did. There was so much static and I couldn't figure it out, so Baguerra and I left. He was huge in the backseat of the car and purring as I drove away!"

The image of my Christopher with a massive black spirit cat was charming!





12. Dogs Have Superpowers

I had no logical way to cope with the enormity of my loss.

Like crazy I missed BrambleBerry Rose's perfectly beautiful abstract markings. How I loved the dark spots on the bottoms of her feet and the roof of her mouth. There are so many beautiful cats. I'm aware of this. But to me, she was perfect. The loss of her was incomprehensible; it ripped my heart out, took me down a dark path, and beat me up . . . daily.

Several days later I heard her say, "Cats are smarter than dogs . . . but dogs have superpowers."

It was then that I thought my cat had a sense of humour. I asked what she meant. She clarified: "I'm a cat and I think dogs can walk on the earth easier than cats, and dogs are able to travel farther."

She showed me an image of dogs walking with their people through our town and said that, as a cat, she was aware she couldn't do that.

"I love you very much . . . and I miss you. I didn't want to leave you but I wanted to go. There were reasons."

She concluded with "I want to be your kitty again!"

Okay, now I'm having conversations with my cat who's been gone for nearly four weeks, and I'm starting to be okay with this.

Shortly after her amusing comment about dogs, I felt her presence in our house. Almost as if it were really happening, I watched as she walked into my office through the door from the hallway, sat at the window on the back of the chair, and then walked around me while I worked at my desk. And then she was gone again.

That was such an embracing feeling. I so wanted her to stay longer.

Christopher was having an entertaining time with Nova's puppies.

"They're walking a bit in their house I built for them. I'm so glad they're here. Nova's a great mom and trusts me enough to let me hold them. We have five rowdy boys and four little girls! The boys are already tugging at their blanket like they want to tear it apart."

“Interesting how you have them and I had Shila.”

“The owners, Randy and Grace, made their decision on the fly just days before the pups were born. I didn’t know they were even thinking about letting them be here. But I sure do like it. It helps my heart heal.”

“Do you think Brambles had anything to do with this?”

“Probably,” he said, quietly, kind of like a reverent whisper.

A few more days after her departure, I had the sense that BrambleBerry didn’t want me to be sad. She missed me and was sad to see me sad.

The next evening, while I was sitting in a sea of red lights during evening traffic, I was thinking of her and I thanked BrambleBerry Rose, out loud, for coming back to me. Immediately I heard her beautiful, soft voice in my mind: “I came back for you twice.”

Whoa! That was like a soft punch.

I thought about her statement and wondered if she had been with me in this lifetime, as my cat Earth, before she was BrambleBerry Rose. Was it possible that she had intentionally come *back* to me as Earth — was that what she meant when she said that?

Now I was way out of my depth. Do I believe that we live more than one lifetime? Honestly, I don’t know. Do I know that we don’t? No . . . my thoughts on that may be open to changing.



Many of you know how this loss feels. When we lose them, it’s *NOT* okay and it *ALWAYS* hurts. I hadn’t stopped crying. I was swamped with grief.

A day later my sadness was eased a little — and I began to wonder if death had been a kindness for BrambleBerry Rose — when Dr. Jenny phoned me.

“Brambles autopsy showed us the anti-arthritis medication we gave her at the time she tore her ACL didn’t work. Her hip was damaged from arthritis.”

“What?” I was shocked! I thought of all those months and all those days, thinking I was helping her.

“As near as I can see, at the time she left us, she was living without symptoms. But it may have caused a significant amount of pain for her in the future.”

When Christopher heard that he was equally as shocked. “All that medicine, all those years . . . oh dear! I’m so sorry she’s gone but it may have been the best thing for her. I can’t stand to think of them being in pain!”

He was at a critical place on the project and told me the framing of the multi-story structure was massive and looked really good! I was alone with Hayleigh Skywalker and the awful silence.

“I can’t shake the sadness I feel.” Christopher said. “I’m still having trouble believing BrambleBerry Rose has truly left us. Maybe it’s harder for me to believe she’s gone because I wasn’t there with you. I’m so sorry for not being able to be home with you.”

“I’m sorry you weren’t here but don’t feel bad. I get it. I’ve been on enough construction sites and I know that, when you’re bringing it up out of the ground, you have to be there. I think Nova needs you also.”

“Those puppies are growing so fast — they’re not little potatoes anymore!”

Within those first couple of weeks, I recognized I was in trouble. In the years of my past, and history of loves and losses, I’d buried more than twenty well-loved kittens and grown cats, two of my closest friends, and both of my parents. Death was no stranger to our house, and yet, I was unprepared for the depth of grief I was experiencing. I just wanted to be with my cat again. I’d not felt this despair before. I felt terribly lonely, and that was a new feeling for me. I didn’t want to die — that wasn’t my thinking — I just wanted to see her again. I felt the barrier between life and death becoming tissue-paper thin. My thoughts were dark and deep, pulling me somewhere I hadn’t been before. It was unfamiliar, and I didn’t know how to get out of it.

I began looking for a local professional who specialized in grief with whom I could work.

Right about that time, our across-the-street neighbor, Stephen, called. He said his house sale had closed earlier than he’d planned and wondered if he could stay with me for a couple of days. *Funny how things work, don’t you think?*

When I let Christopher know what was happening, he said, “Oh, this is good. If I can stay here for a few more weeks, I can take off and come back home for a week or so. Stephen will be good company for you.”

As I told him he was welcome, I also gave Stephen a forewarning.

“Sure, stay as long as you want, Christopher won’t be back for several weeks. But just so you know: I’m still tormented by the loss of BrambleBerry Rose and I spontaneously cry at any moment during the day. Makes it difficult to hang out with others. Oh, here’s another thing . . . as I walk around the house, I talk out loud to death. Sometimes I yell at that monster.”

“What do you say?”

“She doesn’t belong to you. You STOLE her! You didn’t take care of her; you never loved her! You don’t even know how to love! She BELONGS TO THE LIGHT and to me! You are a thief. You cause pain and you destroy! Nothing you have belongs to you. YOU ARE A LIAR! She will never belong to you; you CANNOT keep her! You are a loser; you know NOTHING about the light. Maybe you should GO TO THE LIGHT — that’s where you’ll find love and redemption. She’s mine and nothing you can do will EVER change that!”

I couldn’t have been more surprised by Stephen’s response.

“You should do that. It’s a protection for you and for her . . . I want you to take it a step further. Tell the master of darkness he isn’t real and death isn’t real.”

So there, “*Bam!*”

I started to feel like I could punch the monster of death with my words.

Stephen told me again about his beloved boy cat, Boo, from years before I met him. “I still miss Boo . . . it just hurt less with the passage of years.”

It helped me to shout at death. It also helped me to know I had the kind of support that encouraged me to be creative as I healed.

I was learning that the process to heal the heart after such a deep loss is personal and is not on a time schedule. There were painful memories everywhere and my environment seemed booby-trapped. When I went to the grocery store and walked past the veggies, where I used to find spinach and sprouts for her . . . *oh, that hurt*. It took me by surprise. I wasn’t prepared for it.

Christopher’s job stayed on schedule, the puppies were doing well, and Stephen stayed for several helpful weeks. With his friendship and understanding, the days were less sad, and I started to find my way out of the darkness. I still spoke to death, but now I added: “*BrambleBerry Rose’s death will in no way diminish me. You have not won anything!*”



Shortly after her sister left, and against her will, Hayleigh Skywalker had become, completely, an indoor cat. Even though our kitties had been safe for some time, I couldn’t even entertain the concept of her being hurt outside. And now I understood why Navar Star had allowed himself to be bitten that day so long ago. I thanked him out loud.

I was so thankful I had Hayleigh Skywalker to love and care for. Without her I believe I could have lost my mind. This is not hyperbole. Because of her, I was able to keep BrambleBerry’s beds where she’d left them. I brought out all the baby toys I’d put away as the

cats had gotten older: their climbing towers, *Kitty U*, and even Hayleigh's stroller, which BrambleBerry had never used, came back into our house. I needed the things that had been part of our life with BrambleBerry Rose around me. I wanted to see her coloured fluffy ball toys sitting on my floor, asking to be tossed — or even accidentally squished. I loved listening to the sound of the bell toys when I rolled them across the floor.

In the past, I'd said that BrambleBerry Rose had two Ph.D.s in how to be a cat while Hayleigh Skywalker was stuck in *kitty kindergarten*. That didn't matter. Even though they were completely different creatures, Hayleigh Skywalker helped keep me steady.

And I wanted BrambleBerry Rose back with me.

I spoke her name in the house and in the yard. If I talked about her with other people, I could still cry, so I tried to avoid speaking about her.

I woke with a knot in my stomach. I missed her every day. Tears still found me, just not as frequently.

"I liked life so much better when you were with me." I told her. "At least I know you're safe. You *are* safe. If you have to be away from me, at least I have that."

I spent days looking through my photos of BrambleBerry Rose. I tried to find each one I'd taken, even though some were just of that long tail of hers. Since some were in photo albums, I scanned them into my computer. Pretty soon I had a collection of my favorite cherished images that spanned my years with her. I put them on a loop that I could sit and watch — whenever I wanted — for as long as I wanted.

I already had a number of pictures of BrambleBerry Rose in frames around our house, but I had her baby photo enlarged and put into a handcrafted, gold-and-black wood frame. That way I could see her when I woke up. So when my stomach lurched at sunrise, I could see her beautiful eyes and that sweet face.

And I kept a journal of our journey. I wanted to remember everything that happened. I knew to look for the signs that she was communicating with me. I read and reread every moment I had recorded about how she had reached across the barrier between life and death and communicated with me in that beautiful way she spoke.

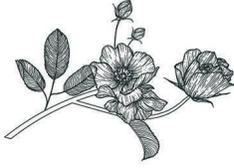
Because Hayleigh was now an indoor kitty, I thought it was safe to leave a ceramic water dish in our garden on a small brick pedestal. She alerted me one evening that we had visitors. She was sitting on the wide window ledge in my office and all of a sudden she lowered her head, dropped her tail and fluffed it up, and stared out into the yard. I saw five or six raccoons washing their hands in the water dish and digging in the soft dirt around it. One was larger so I guessed she was their mama. The little ones were hilarious — chasing each other, running up trees, and then jumping down and splashing in their new water source!

I wondered if our yard birds would visit the water during the day. The next morning I washed out the very dirty, hand-made ceramic dish and watched as a group of little grey tufted titmice flew in, jumped around the edge of the dish, and quickly flew away. (I called them Pointy Heads.) Some of the small brown birds who jumped on the ground with their toes spread apart also showed up. I loved watching them.

Mama Beauty and Baby Buck visited most days, along with adorable Ziggy! The skunk family showed up most evenings and they were darling. I loved watching them. Apparently, Hayleigh did too. She sat on the wide window ledge and stared at them, watching every move they made. She was on alert but totally chill about them being in *her* yard!

Many weeks after she had slipped the bonds of Earth and my embrace, I wrote in my journal: *I miss BrambleBerry Rose. I miss her looking at me, sleeping on my arm or legs, curled up with her sweet face next to mine. I miss her coming to me when I called her; her peaceful nature, the magical Universe of her life that she shared with me. I. Miss. BrambleBerry. Rose.*





13. Love Wins. Loss Loses.

When the counselor who works with people recovering from grief and mourning told me that the pain would pass — which may sound obvious to some — I was relieved. She said to let the feelings float like a soft wind blowing through me, to allow them to be what they are, and to cry when I needed to because our tears help our hearts and bodies heal. She told me that my feelings would change with time.

I needed to hear what she said. “There’s no right or wrong way to move through the process of healing from loss. Know with certainty that there’s new life on the other side of this sorrow.”

Whew! I’d found a way to consciously participate in this painful transition.

“You may want to create a sacred place for BrambleBerry Rose . . . it can be a photo album, a journal, a box of memories with her favorite toys . . . or maybe you could plant some new flowers in your garden.”

I thought of writing this story about her. How beautiful. These pages were where my beloved cat could live again. This would be my sacred place for BrambleBerry Rose.

I learned that grief and sorrow come from feelings of lack and loss. Gratitude and love are the antidotes to lack and loss, so I began to say out loud how grateful I was to have had all the years I had with BrambleBerry Rose, how exquisite she was to me, and that I loved her, eternally.

“This process isn’t just psychological,” the counselor said. “It’s also physical. Your body needs time to change at the cellular level.”

I’d not heard that before.

“Why does this hurt so much? It’s like I have to remind myself how to breathe!”

“You and BrambleBerry Rose knew unconditional love. It’s the most powerful energy we can feel. It doesn’t generally happen with people, but it can with animals. It will never leave you but, when you’ve experienced that, the grief of losing it is profound.”

When I told her that I thought my cat BrambleBerry Rose had communicated with me silently, she didn’t look at me in a strange way.

“What did BrambleBerry say?”

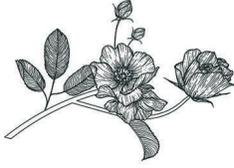
I told her about the three things Brambleberry suggested I do and a few of the other things she’d said.

The counselor paused for a moment . . . got a reflective look in her eyes . . . and then responded with a playful chuckle: “BrambleBerry Rose seems enlightened, and delightfully articulate . . . *for a cat!*”

“Those are simple truths, and enlightened — we can all use them in our lives. She must have been a delightful cat to live with. You were lucky and privileged to have loved her.”

She finished with this: “When you love deeply, you will feel the pain of loss deeply. It’s the cost of loving. Grief is love. Always remember: Love wins. Loss loses.”





14. Mystère

A few days later, I was having a favorite photo of BrambleBerry enlarged at a local photographic art shop. The woman who was helping me with a new creative colour process, Diana, fell in love with her. She told me something I hadn't heard before: "BrambleBerry Rose is simply adorable. Thank you for sharing her with me! I can see in her eyes that she has an old soul."

Later that day, I asked William if he could see from a photo if someone had an old soul. When he answered that he could, I told him what Diana had said and asked him how he could see that.

"When you look into the eyes of your animal friend and see something behind their eyes, that's a sign of an old soul."

I sent him the photo I was working with of BrambleBerry Rose. When he said he agreed with what Diana had sensed, I asked, "Does having an old soul mean that BrambleBerry Rose might have been with me as a different cat earlier in this life?"

His answer intrigued me. "Sure, it can mean that, and yes, she's been with you before."

"In this lifetime?"

"Yes."

"Okay . . . *what?*"

"She may have even been with you in other lifetimes. Have you had the sense that you've known her before?"

There it was. Again!

"You probably remember that first night I met her and, when I held her, I heard myself saying, *I've known you before!* And then she retrieved green grapes like my Abyssinian cat, Earth . . . and when she told me that night after she left that she had come back for me, *twice!*"

William paused and then said in a quiet voice, "She's not finished with you."

Have you had someone say something to you that changes your world — in that moment — in a good way? That happened to me that day.

More weeks passed, and Christopher was finally home again. When he walked through the front door, Hayleigh was sitting in one of those huge windows in my office being a good guard cat. After kissing me, he picked her up, but she was having none of that! She pulled back and looked fiercely at him, directly in his eyes. Her ears went back and with her large mitts she pushed away.

“Whoa, she’s intense. What’s up?”

He quickly set her down on the floor to prevent her from jumping out of his arms, and she ran away.

“Have you held the puppies while wearing that shirt?”

“Oh . . . probably. Do you think that’s what’s upsetting her?”

“Yep, she probably thinks you’re a traitor!”

After he’d taken a shower and changed clothes, he went looking for Hayleigh to try hello again. She’d gone back into my office and was asleep on my chair when he walked in. “Hey, little one, I sure have missed you.”

He rested on the desk beside her and reached out to pet the top of her head. For a moment she pulled her head back and her eyes got big and round. But then her face changed and she pushed her head against his hand.

“Ha! Oh, good.” he picked her up. “You still love me!” He opened the top half of our front door and stood there holding her. “This whole yard belongs to *you*. Everything you see is *yours*.”

“That seems to work!” I couldn’t help being charmed at how Hayleigh seemed to want the entire visible world for herself.

He looked around our living room and saw Brambles’ toys almost everywhere. “I miss her too! It’s so nice to see her toys again and the *Kitty RV*. I’m glad you kept them.”

Later in the afternoon, we walked our property, and I again wondered at the congregation of calla lilies. “I don’t remember there being so many of them before.”

I watched him thinking.

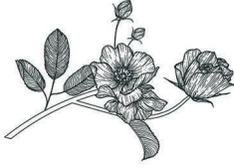
“I’ve got it! Let’s plant several colours of them. The callas. They can grow up between Girl Grey’s fire flowers and Huckleberry’s wildflowers! What a stunning, wild grouping they’ll make in our Gratitude Garden. Like a clan of colourful blossoms for our babies.”

The British gardener in his soul showed up in his love of wild and untamed flower gardens, and our Gratitude Garden was already a glorious mixture of asymmetry and abstract colour. In his jobs, he planted flowers, plants, and trees in groupings he called “families.” That’s how he saw them and, for Brambles, he found deep purple, a soft rose colour, deep rose, and white calla lilies.

Shortly after the flowers were planted, he and I were driving through a wooded neighborhood near our home on our way to brunch. The license plate on the back of a parked car in a driveway captured my attention. There was one word on the blue-and-white stamped piece of metal: “*Mystère.*”

I don’t know how many of you have seen that word written on a license plate. It was a first for me.





15. I Know How to Say I Love You

Several days later, I was thinking of what Diana and William had said about old souls when I felt BrambleBerry Rose's presence again.

"I can speak for myself . . . I know how to say I love you."

That gave me a smile.

"I don't want you to be sad," Her voice was soft and sweet. "I love you . . . I hope you can feel my love. I want you to spread love."

She sure does talk a lot about love, I thought.

"I want you to enjoy your life," BrambleBerry continued, in that beautiful way she spoke. "There are things you can learn there that you can't learn here."

As I sat in the dappled sunlight of our Gratitude Garden, surrounded by the graceful Japanese Red Dragon maple, Girl Grey's fire flowers, an abundance of local wildflowers and tall grasses — and now various purple and rose-coloured calla lilies — I once again had a silent conversation with my beloved BrambleBerry Rose. And once again she sent me images along with some of the wise thoughts she shared.

"Our lives aren't meant to be easy," BrambleBerry revealed. I reflected on how she'd been injured and lost her ability to entertain her family with her wild, high-climbing flying performances.

"We'll be together again . . . don't worry about finding me; I'll find you when the time is right."

There it was again: the recurring thread of continuation.

I wondered if she meant she would return as my cat in this lifetime? Or wait for me on the Other Side?

"There's a Higher Power that determines timing," she added.

"Please know that the times you think I'm there with you, I am."

I wondered silently if she was safe. “I only see people here who love me,” I heard her say. “I’m surrounded by love . . . everybody here loves me.”

That lifted my heart and made me smile. “Of course they do,” I told her, laughing out loud. “You’re so beautiful.”

This was almost like a conversation I would have with a person.

I wondered if she had met her brothers and sisters. “I’ve met some of my cat family,” she responded. “I understand I’m in spirit now.” There was a pause, and she continued: “I didn’t choose to leave you. It was my time. It’s beautiful here. I feel happy now and I love you.”

“I’m on a spiritual journey,” BrambleBerry Rose concluded, “and so are you.”



I work on the things BrambleBerry Rose taught me. It’s a constant challenge, however. Because of her words, Christopher and my friends say that I’ve changed: they say I’m more easygoing, and I can forgive and move on. I also speak about things that bother me — that’s new for me and sometimes difficult — and I do my best to speak about issues in a loving way instead of with anger. I don’t ask that my friends share the same beliefs as me. I don’t expect them to change, agree with, or even accept my beliefs.

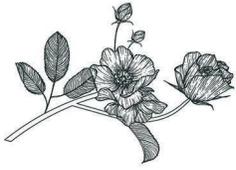
I ask the Creator of the Universe for help with all of this. Daily.

I’m getting better at it.

And I remember: I’m on a spiritual journey.

Christopher, my friends, and I say it often: *It’s a Spiritual Journey.*





16. The End?

First, I would ask: *Is there an end?*

The more I leave my heart open to love, the closer I am to BrambleBerry Rose.

I know she's mine and I will see her again.

She's safe, and she loves me.

I love her.

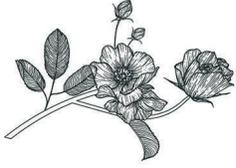
Love is stronger than everything else. *Everything!*

She goes on.

I go on.

In the end, love is all there is.





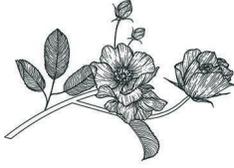
17. Her Names:

Brambleberry
Brambleberry Rose
Baby Brambles
Baby B
Brambles
Bramby
Brambies
Brambaly
B
Bramby Bear, Bear
BrambleBerry
BrambleBerry Rose
& Christopher's favorite: Miss B

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.

—Helen Keller





18. I Found a Photo That Told a Story

After writing this love story, I found forgotten photos from the time when BrambleBerry Rose and Hayleigh Skywalker were young. In one, their brother Navar Star was sitting on the roof of our garage — one of his favorite places — watching as BrambleBerry did a classic feline takedown on Hayleigh in our backyard. BrambleBerry Rose had the smaller cat completely pinned down and was biting her on the back of her neck.

In the wild, this would have been a kill bite.

Was I surprised? Absolutely!

I was unaware that she had claimed the power position in the hierarchy of cat relations with her younger sibling in those first few months.

After that offensive display of dominance, BrambleBerry Rose lived in peaceful nonviolence with Hayleigh Skywalker at all times for over thirteen years.

My respect for my beloved BrambleBerry Rose grew even more with this retroactive knowledge. Not only had she given up her favorite activity — climbing and jumping in the branches with the squirrels — but she had also lived in the same family with a cat who was determined to do her harm, and she had taken the high road.

She was the peacemaker. Every. Day.

She could have crushed her beautiful little brat sister any day. This was another message from the Universe that the precious beauty I had the privilege to know and love was a superior being. She left me such beautiful and gentle lessons. It was about this time that I felt a peace in my heart and mind about her leaving.

I now believe she had a stunningly precious life and lived it just the way she chose. She was at peace when she left because, somehow, she knew where she was going. She goes on and so do I, and she's okay, life after life. She'd run her race, challenged her heights, triumphed over her valleys — and remains; gloriously strong, confident, and stunningly beautiful!

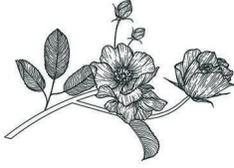
I only hope I will transfer this knowledge into my own life and know it when I need it next.

I found this photo over a year after BrambleBerry Rose left. You know from reading this story that I've lost other cats . . . and I was astonished at how much I missed her. Still. She was such an enormous part of my heart.

As Pooh Bear said, *Sometimes the smallest things take up the most room in your heart.*

—A.A. Milne





19. A Partial List of Resources That Helped Me Heal

Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back
by Todd Burpo

I love it when the author's son, Colton Burpo, says there are lots of animals in Heaven.

A Dog's Purpose: A Novel for Humans

A Dog's Journey

by W. Bruce Cameron

Within Heaven's Gates by Rebecca Springer

There's a narrated version on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-9htSG6jRQ>

and a longer version at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lDoyCyqBJyg>

Among other illuminating stories, she tells a wonderful story about a sweet kitten.

Your Talking Cat, Paperback – January 1, 1991

by Jack Richter

A Local Grief Recovery Group; many are affiliated with churches and hospitals.

Nancy Windheart: Interspecies Awareness and Wisdom

<https://nancywindheart.com/>

The Animal Rescue Site:

Daily FREE click to help animals

<https://theanimalrescuesite.greatergood.com/clickToGive/ars/home>

Humane Society of the United States

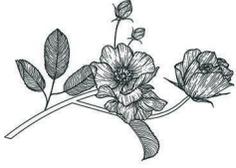
You may want to **contribute to an organization that helps animals**; there are a lot of them.

One I support is: <https://www.humanesociety.org/how-you-can-help>

And, Humane Society International

<https://www.hsi.org/how-you-can-help/>

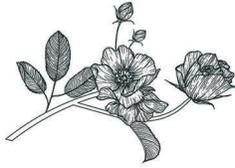




Journal of Messages from My Beloved

You may want to start your journal by entering the date, day, and maybe the time that your loved one contacts you. This may be a feeling, something you hear or see, a fragrance, a song in a movie or on the radio. It could be a found item. It might be a hummingbird, a butterfly, or even a *Hawk*. Whenever and whatever happens that you think, know, or believe is a loving message from your cherished one on the Other Side, whether they're an animal or a person ... it is.





About the Author

I loved my cat, pure and simple, and when she died I met a darkness unknown to me. At the same time, in my mind, she began communicating with me. I felt her words of love in my heart, and they rescued me.

I wrote her story to help myself. My hope is that her words of love will help you, or someone you know, who has lost a love and has met that same destructive darkness.

Before we met BrambleBerry Rose, Christopher and I owned a Custom Home Design and Build Company. We built award-winning homes and even remodeled the Skybox for the owner — at the time — of the San Diego Padres. While building these homes for their owners, we lived in three states, including Hawai'i, along the western side of the country. Christopher is a genius home and garden designer. Before they were common, he designed and built passive solar homes. Among other innovative measures, he also built a sustainable house in Big Sur, California, which utilized rainwater collection, solar power, and purified interior air, as well as non-threatening measures for living with wildlife safely, and the use of natural air currents for cooling and circulation.

While BrambleBerry Rose was young, Christopher and I founded 1Sun4All; a website that was focused on clean energy and solutions to the climate issues we face. I managed the website and edited all the articles. I also wrote for *Cleantechnica.com*, where you can still find many of my stories; some were written as we followed the Solar Impulse flight around the world using only solar power, and others were for the U.S. Department of Energy, Solar Decathlon. I was published three times in *Scientific American*, once when the Solar Impulse was flying over the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, and twice for clean energy infographics that I created. I was also recognized by the U.S. Department of Energy for my work with the Solar Decathlon.

In my heart, I'm an artist; I paint acrylics on canvas. I have several different styles, including my current passion which is abstract expressionism. My gold and silver leaf paintings of crosses have been shown during the candlelit Taize prayer services at our town's local Mission Basilica. Christopher and I rescued kittens and cats, most of whom lived with us. Over the years we collectively loved and lived with more than thirty rescued cats. BrambleBerry Rose was a precious jewel, and one of a kind.

I've read that other languages offer options for the word love but, in English, we only have one. So I write about the one I know: It lifted me up, made me a better person, and showed me a Magical Universe I had no other access to — and when it physically ended, tossed me down and crushed me.

I had to learn to fly again. My soul demands that, and the only way I could do that was to embrace the love Brambles and I had known. That's when I learned that she and I are longer than time; stronger than gravity. Because we loved, we touched the infinite.

We Are.
And Will Be.
Forever.

