

# THE COLONY

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SAMPLE CHAPTERS

RELICTOWN  
BOOK FIVE

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THE COLONY

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BROWNIE

“*I* just can’t do it,” Brownie said.

He gave up trying to stand again and felt his body slump to the floor. He felt his back legs spread out behind him, instead of the way they used to curl underneath him. Ever since the accident, they didn’t work quite right.

The carpet was soft, and the room was warm. He wasn’t used to that after living on his own for so long. Well, he was still living on his own. Kind of.

He was back in the house with Meanie, Mommy, and Kitten, the same humans who had taken him from his mother when he was a kit. The same humans who took his claws away because of a little misunderstanding.

Brownie didn’t know how he ended up back in the same house. For a while, after the accident, Brownie thought he had died when the car hit him and that he was starting the second of his nine lives back where he had started the first one.

The house was the same. The humans acted the same.

When his back legs were wrapped and Brownie needed almost constant help with everything, Mommy offered him comfort. When he made progress in feeding himself and getting to the sand

box most of the time, instead of praising Brownie, she just ignored him again.

That was very similar to his recovery when they took his claws. He craved the loving attention from Mommy, who was so loving to Kitten, her human child. He never understood how Mommy could go from doting on him to completely ignoring him.

Sure, she fed him, gave him fresh water, and cleaned out his sand box occasionally, but her eyes stopped looking at him, and her hands stopped petting him.

Kitten, who never gave Brownie a minute of peace when he was a kitten himself, now stayed almost completely away from him. She was taller now and looked like a miniature version of Mommy. She carried around a little glowing rectangle that she constantly watched and moved her fingers on. Brownie had tried to get a view of what could be so interesting on the glowing rectangle, but couldn't make sense of the bright flashing images that moved when Kitten swiped her fingers on the screen.

Meanie, however, was the same old Meanie. He was away from the house most days, only to return shortly after Mommy and Kitten ate dinner. He would grumble as he wandered around the house, yelling at Brownie whenever they crossed paths. The tone of his voice made Brownie feel like he had hurt Meanie personally, but he couldn't think of anything that would cause such a reaction. Except that he was back in the house.

Meanie had kicked Brownie out of the house when he was a kitten. Literally. He had a solid memory of the man's foot lifting him up and punting him out onto the lawn. He remembered the sound of the door closing, and the feel of the rain that peppered him as he sought shelter, more scared and alone than he had ever been in his brief life.

Brownie had dreams, almost every night, about being booted out of the house again, and making his way back to Relictown. Those were cruel dreams, though. Brownie could barely walk. Every step hurt. To make matters worse, his tail had been broken,

and now had a permanent kink near the tip. Every time he moved it, waves of pain shot up his spine.

Since the accident, Brownie had become acutely aware of how much a cat's tail moved on its own. He had to train himself to fight the urge to move his tail unconsciously, an act which further made him feel like a failure as a cat.

Sounds of happiness rang in Brownie's ears. The sounds of a bell, inside a ball, on a string being batted around in the next room. Sounds of a giggling human girl, and the huffing of an out-of-breath cat.

Kitten and Jeston had become best friends. Jeston, the imposter whom Brownie had thought to be Taj. Jeston, who admitted to killing members of two choruses. Jeston, who forced Brownie to give up his dream of singing on a chorus and caused him to end up back where he started. This cat, of all cats, had become Kitten's favorite.

Brownie couldn't understand it. Like himself, shortly after Jeston arrived in the home, he was taken away for a night and came back without his claws. Brownie was still immobile and Jeston was constantly talking about killing him for getting him into this situation.

Then, something changed. As Jeston's brittle, damaged straw colored fur started growing in thick and black, he began to worry about the Pull.

In his terror of the impending Pull, Jeston completely change his attitude. Gone was the cold-hearted killer-cat who thought he could intimidate Brownie. In its place was a cat that was terrified of the future and the changes it would bring to his life. Jeston spent those days under the couch in the unused room, alternately shivering and sleeping.

"But, there is no Pull here," Brownie had tried to explain to Jeston, over and over. It had taken considerable effort to pull his lower body into the unused room. Honestly, he didn't know why he

cared, but somehow he did. He did not like seeing this cat in pain, even if it was only perceived pain.

Jeston responded by saying, "You don't know that. You're not a black cat. You couldn't understand the Pull."

Brownie explained over and over to Jeston that he had previously traveled with a group of cats from Relictown. One was a black cat who also had felt the Pull. He explained that the black cat, Cosimo, loved traveling outside Relictown because there was no Pull. Brownie had traveled with that group of cats, a chorus called the Wanderlings, for months. They had traveled through many human towns and Cosimo never felt the effects of the Pull. It was a phenomenon that seemed to be unique to Relictown.

Some toms and mollies didn't believe the Pull was a real thing. But Brownie had seen the effects of it firsthand.

The Pull, as explained to Brownie, was a perpetual anxiety experienced by all black cats in Relictown. When a person noticed one, the cat's anxiety would vanish in a rush, leaving the black cat in a euphoric state. As the anxiety poured out of the affected cat, it would enter the environment and cause some kind of horrific bad luck. Brownie had witnessed a large piece of a building fall to the ground and a near-fatal car accident in the few times he had witnessed manifestations of the Pull. Only in Relictown, though.

Another aspect that appeared unique to Relictown was Relic's Chorus Model. There were eight territories in Relictown. A group of five toms, chosen by the local mollies, governed each territory. The job of these five toms was to protect the territory and provide for the toms, mollies, and kits within it.

To promote camaraderie among the cats in the territory, and throughout the colony, these five toms performed musical numbers on certain nights. Relic, the colony's leader, created this system to improve the living conditions of cats in Relictown beyond those in neighboring towns.

The Wanderlings, a traveling chorus, had stumbled upon Brownie shortly after Meanie kicked him out of the house. Relic

had tasked them with performing in nearby towns to pique the local cats' curiosity about his Chorus Model. For some unknown reason, no cat outside Relictown had ever been interested in hearing anything from the Wanderlings except their performance.

Before the accident, and his banishment back to this human house, Brownie had been trying to puzzle out why the Pull and the Chorus Model only manifested in Relictown. He had made no headway toward an explanation, of course, but it was still something interesting to think about.

No matter how many times Brownie had tried to tell his story to Jeston, the other tom was always too anxious to listen. He was sure that the Pull was going to take him now that the bleached fur of his coat had grown out and he was a black cat again.

Brownie soon gave up trying to convince Jeston that he was free of the Pull. The tom would figure it out soon enough.

More squeals of joy from Kitten reached Brownie's ears. Part of him wished he could just stand up, walk into the other room, and join the play. Aside from his paranoia about the Pull, ever since Jeston was taken away and returned without claws, he had become a different tom.

Before that time, Jeston had been a very angry tom. He directed most of his anger at Brownie, who was, thankfully, kept in a small cage at the time to limit his movement while his legs healed. Jeston hurled every insult he could think of, always in a sweet tone, so the humans thought he was just concerned about his injured *friend*.

Friends. That was what Brownie was missing. He had finally made some real friends, and they had worked their tails off to have a shot at making their dreams come true. Brownie and his friends had formed their own chorus, and were in the process of challenging the most powerful chorus in the colony. If their performance swayed enough molly votes, they would be in charge of a whole territory. More importantly, Brownie's lifelong dream of singing on one of the Eight Great Cat Choruses would come true.

But Brownie made a choice. And that choice saved a tom's life.

Granted, it was a tom whom Brownie had thought had been trying to kill him. Even though he had sustained significant injuries, he didn't regret his decision.

Brownie still had trouble coming to terms with Taj being innocent of all the atrocities that Jeston had committed in his name. He had gone to sleep blaming Taj for all of his problems for months. That was a hard habit to break.

What about his friends? Were they able to get on stage? Were they able to take the territory? Did Heritage finally gain the approval of his father, Kalmin? Did Bacia become the first molly to sing on a chorus? Did Angelo experience any closure by performing again after losing his old chorus, the Yellowtons, to that horrible accident that Brownie had assumed was Taj's doing but was actually caused by Jeston, the same cat playing in the other room like he didn't have a care in the world?

But Jeston really didn't have a care in the world, did he? Sure, his claws were taken from him, but soon after he had returned, his mood had completely changed. He stopped taunting, insulting, and threatening Brownie. He stopped caring about Brownie all together. He started interacting with the humans. He would rub against their legs and sleep on their laps while they sat and stared at the big glowing rectangle on the wall. And, once his paws healed, he would daintily trot around the house like he owned the place.

"This is the life," Brownie would hear him call out every once in a while. That always got at least a little attention from whatever human was passing by.

Suddenly, something fell from above and landed right in front of Brownie's face. Dinner.

Mommy said something in a scratchy voice and went about her day.

Dinner. Delivered to him in bite-sized portions. Brownie should be happy, like Jeston. But he wasn't.

As Brownie ate, he noticed that the food Mommy gave him had that strange white powder on top of it again. It made the parts of



the food it touched taste bitter, but Brownie always ate every bit. He had gone without enough meals to know to eat every bite that came near his mouth.

After he ate, he felt it again. His thoughts became slippery as the pain in his legs lessened. It was the perfect time to stand again, maybe walk a little, or at least change position. That didn't happen. His mind was floating away again, and Brownie knew in the back of his head that his thoughts would return with the pain in his legs. Sometime the next morning, right before Mommy fed him again.



Through these endless days of malaise that he just couldn't shake, Brownie tried to at least make it to the front window once a day. The humans had attached a carpeted platform to the front window for the toms to sit or lie on and watch the outside world. In a rare act of kindness, they had also put a small set of stairs to the side of it, so Brownie could also take advantage of the view.

If his legs felt better, he could just jump up to it. It wasn't very high. But his legs were still healing and his mind was too fuzzy for attempting such a jump most of the time.

On the days he made it up to the window, Brownie would stare out at the front yard and street, imagining himself out there, or better yet, back in Relictown with his friends. He knew that there was no way he'd ever get back there. Even if he escaped the house again, he didn't know the way back. The first time, he had travelled with the Wanderlings, and they had wandered through many towns before they made it back to Relictown.

Brownie tried to remember those days. He had experienced hearing a cat chorus for the first time. His dream of one day singing on one of those choruses was born on that trip. As were his first friendships.

Wendale was the practical, but personable orange tom, and leader of the Wanderlings. He ensured Brownie's safe delivery to

the care of his brother, Kalmin, in Relictown. Brownie would never forget his kindness.

Then there was Park. He was a black tom with large patches of white across his body and face. Park never stopped talking. From him, Brownie had learned all about Relictown and the Chorus Model. Brownie would never forget him.

In fact, he currently imagined that Park was sitting on the lawn, calling out to him. Brownie held a paw up to the window. The imaginary Park held a paw up to Brownie. This was nothing new. Brownie often imagined the members of the Wanderlings, just outside the window, waiting for him to join them. Often, that included Fielding, the old tom from Tree Walker territory, who had fulfilled his lifelong dream of singing on a chorus, only to pass away before they made it back to Relictown.

This time, though, there were two toms prowling around the yard near Park that Brownie didn't recognize. One was a black cat, who Brownie had at first thought was Cosimo, another one of the Wanderlings. Brownie's vision was a little fuzzy, but he could tell that this cat didn't move like Cosimo.

Another tom wandered near Park. He didn't react to either of the toms, which told Brownie that Park knew these two. The second tom was a gray tabby and... Wait... Was that tom wearing a collar? Brownie squinted his eyes to get a better look.

No luck. His eyes just would not focus. He needed a second opinion. He was sure he was just hallucinating these toms, but why would he hallucinate toms he didn't know?

"Jeston," he rasped.

No reply.

"Jeston!"

He turned his body to locate Jeston, whom he found lounging on the couch on the other side of the room. Jeston was looking at him, but not saying anything. That was just like him. Anything he could do to annoy Brownie was everything Jeston did when interacting with him.

"Come here," Brownie pleaded. "Toms."

"What do I care about toms?" Jeston purred. "I've got everything I need right here."

Brownie huffed and turned back around. Park and the other two cats were still there. They were sitting in a line now, watching Brownie from across the yard.

The platform Brownie was sitting on lurched as Jeston daintily jumped up to join him. The platform was small enough that they had to sit side-by-side, touching. That was uncomfortable. Brownie turned to give Jeston a mean look. Jeston just rolled his eyes.

"What did you call me all the way over here for?" Jeston sighed. "There aren't any toms out there."

Brownie looked again. Park and the other two cats continued to stare at him. They all started meowing.

"You don't see them?" Brownie asked. "You don't hear that?"

Jeston shook his head.

"I think you're losing it. I see the lawn, I hear some birds. Oh, there goes a car. Is that what you were talking about? It kind of looked like a group of toms, only it didn't."

Brownie looked Jeston in the face and saw that he was stifling a laugh.

Brownie jumped down from the platform. He landed awkwardly, and pain shot through his back legs. But it was worth it to be away from Jeston, if only temporarily.



Brownie slunk around for the rest of the day, deeply depressed. He wanted to believe that Wendale, Park, and the rest of the Wanderlings were out there looking for him. But who even knew he was alive? Brownie remembered rolling into the street, attached to Jeston, who was trying to kill Taj. He remembered the bright lights of the car coming towards them.

Then, nothing until he awoke at the human home he had

escaped when he was a kit. How did he get there? Why was Jeston there? Did Taj tell anyone what happened? Brownie would never know the answers to these questions.

Maybe he should just make the best out of his situation, like Jeston did. He walked around purring all day and lounging around without a care in the world. That didn't seem fair to Brownie. He had made friends. He had made a life. It wasn't fair that the act of saving Taj took everything away.

Later that night, after Mommy and Kitten had gone to bed, and Meanie sat on the couch watching the glowing rectangle, Jeston sauntered up to Brownie, who was flickering between being awake and asleep.

"Why?" Jeston asked in a sleek, condescending voice. "Was that tom wearing a dog collar?"

Brownie jerked awake. Dog collar? Jeston had lied to him. He *had* seen Park and the others. They *were* there, somehow. They came to rescue him.

Brownie mustered all his strength. He pushed past Jeston and climbed back up the little stairs to the platform in front of the window. He wiggled under the curtain that Mommy had drawn for the night. It was dark outside, and light inside, though dimmed by the curtain, still made it hard to see far into the yard. Plus, Brownie's vision was blurry from the effects of the powder that Mommy sprinkled on his dinner that night.

Was he too late? Did they leave? He strained and strained and thought he might have spotted a tom in the darkness.

He felt Jeston jump up onto the platform. He maneuvered his head under the curtain too and gave Brownie a smirk.

"Do you see them?" Brownie asked out of desperation. Maybe they left. Maybe they thought Brownie didn't want to be rescued.

"Oh, yes," Jeston snickered. "There's... let me see... twenty or so toms out there. They're all chanting your name. Can't you hear it?"

At Jeston's first few words, Brownie's heart lifted. But when he realized Jeston was mocking him, a growl formed in his throat.

The next thing he knew, both he and Jeston were up on their hind legs, batting wildly at each other with their front paws. Neither of them had claws, so no one was really getting hurt, but it felt good to hit something.

Meanie must have thought so too, because a pillow from the couch hit both of them from across the room, knocking both toms off the platform.

Jeston sauntered away, snickering. He leapt up to the couch and curled up near Meanie. Brownie didn't have any strength left. He closed his eyes and spent the night on his side, where he fell, thinking about the opportunity he might have lost.

## JESTON

Meanie's loud slam of the door jolted Brownie awake the next morning. The door was very close to the front window with the platform that Brownie had fallen asleep under the night before.

Brownie listened for the sound of a second slamming door and the sound of Meanie driving away. Only then did he drag himself up onto the platform.

The sun had not risen yet. The light on the pole in the center of the yard provided some illumination, but try as he might, Brownie could not see Park, or any other toms, on the lawn.

Maybe it was just too early. It was definitely too early for Brownie. He curled up as best as he could on the small platform and soon fell asleep.



When he woke, Brownie wasn't sure if he was still dreaming. Sitting out on the lawn was Park and four other toms. Wait. Brownie looked closer. One tom looked like a molly. She had

yellow fur, with small tips of black on her ears and tail. She also had a bit of black fur around the outer corners of her eyes.

Brownie could tell she was a molly from the way the tom next to her was constantly looking at her and attempting to whisper into her ear. He was large and tan, and he retained certain kit-like mannerisms. Something about that tom reminded him of Pavaroni, leader of the Clowder chorus back in Relictown, and the father of Bacia.

So, there is a molly on the Wanderlings. Brownie reasoned that was probably because of the influence of Bacia, the only molly Brownie ever met who shared his dream of being on one of the Eight Great Cat Choruses in Relictown. When Brownie had put together a chorus, he made sure to find Bacia and offer her a spot on it.

They had shared an impossible dream. Impossible for Bacia because no molly had ever been accepted on a chorus. Impossible for Brownie because he was a *domestic*, a declawed cat from outside the colony.

As Brownie had matured into a tom, he saw these impossibilities more like challenges that could be achieved. He could win their chorus a spot among the Eight Great if they all worked hard and put on the best performance the colony had ever seen. The presence of this molly with the Wanderlings meant that, although Brownie had missed the performance of his chorus, it still must have had an impact, successful or not. That made Brownie feel proud.

On the other side of Park, sat a black tom that upon further inspection was definitely not Cosimo, a member of the Wanderlings when Brownie had previously traveled with them.

Next to the black tom was the most interesting one of the bunch. This tom had a white chest, and a tiger striped back. And he was wearing a collar. Not a slim, fitted little collar like the one Mommy had slipped on Jeston when they took him away to have

his claws removed. This was a dirty, old-looking collar that was much too big for a cat. That tom was wearing a dog collar.

Brownie had only ever met one tom who wore such a collar. Fido. Fido had helped Brownie at his lowest point, when he was literally starving and alone. Fido had taught Brownie how to find food without hunting, and gave him a place to stay in the abandoned asylum where Fido had lived. He had a dream of turning that abandoned complex into a school one day.

Fido had a love for all things canine. He even scratched his claws into bloody nubs to keep from acting too *feline*. He wanted to start a school to teach canine virtues to misguided felines. Thus, C.L.A.W. (the Canine Lifestyle Appreciation Warren) was born. The only thing it had needed the last time Brownie had been there were students.

Apparently, Fido had attracted some students, and one of them made it all the way to the Wanderlings. Brownie felt proud of Fido.

Clearly, a lot had happened in the short time since the night of the accident. The problem was that Brownie didn't know exactly how long a time that was. He didn't have any idea how long he was unconscious after the accident.

To any other tom, such a thing wouldn't matter, but to Brownie, the amount of nights he was unconscious was very important. In his travels, Brownie had met a tom named Simon. This tom did everything backwards. He walked backwards without ever looking behind him. He jumped backwards without a second thought. He explained to Brownie that human experiments had caused time to flow in reverse around him. It also turned his fur green.

He claimed to be from the future, and that Brownie had helped him on a very specific day. Before they parted, Simon proved he was telling the truth by revealing Brownie's mother's name to him, a name Brownie had never spoken out loud. He claimed Brownie had given him that information in the future. He also told Brownie the number of nights before they would meet again.

Brownie had dutifully counted down those nights from that



point forward. He never missed a night. Until the accident. Brownie had no idea how many nights he was unconscious, or how many nights he had such a fuzzy head that he had forgotten to add another night to the count.

He had tried to ask Jeston multiple times, but he never dared to tell the imposter the real reason he was asking.

To Jeston, the request must have seemed trivial. Each time Brownie asked, he gave a different, ridiculous answer.

"Twenty nights," he said one time.

"One night," he said another time.

With Jeston's help, Brownie had it nailed down from anywhere between one and one hundred nights. Maybe. Of course, Brownie knew it wasn't a hundred nights, but other than that, he had to rely on guesswork and instinct. So Brownie kept his count, with his numbers, but in the back of his head he knew that the appointed meeting with Simon would come some time before his count reached zero.

For a while, he doubted that he'd get the chance to meet the green cat again. But now, looking out at Park and the Wanderlings, all his hopes rekindled.

Brownie turned around. He was alone in the front room. No Jeston. No Mommy. No Kitten.

He placed a front paw on the window and nodded to Park.

Park tentatively approached the window. It was low enough that he could lift his front paws onto the outside windowsill, bringing him face-to-face with Brownie.

Park winked. Brownie could tell that this loquacious tom had a million things to say to Brownie. But he didn't dare. Not here, in the middle of the day.

"You want out?"

Park's familiar voice warmed Brownie's heart. He hadn't seen the tom since he had departed from the Wanderlings.

Brownie nodded frantically. Now that he was talking to Park, he wanted out more than anything.

“Be ready tonight.”

Just then, a car drove by and the Wanderlings scattered.

Brownie slowly removed his paw from the window.

*Tonight.*

Smiling, Brownie jumped down from the window platform. He found his legs hurt less that morning. Sometimes hope is the best medicine.



That afternoon, Brownie put his plan into action. He was going to need his strength for the trip ahead. The journey to Relictown would be long, so there was no way he was going to eat another bite of that drugged food. Therefore, he was going to have to eat Jeston's dinner.

Luckily, Jeston slept in the unused bedroom most afternoons. He liked to sleep on the spare bed. Brownie understood. It was quiet and cool in there and most of the time, and with the shade drawn, it was the darkest room in the house. It also had a door that could shut.

When it was almost time for dinner, Brownie retrieved a toy mouse from the small basket of toys that Mommy had given the two toms. He crept as silently as possible up to the unused bedroom. A quick peek inside confirmed Jeston was indeed asleep on the bed.

Brownie placed the toy mouse on the inside of the door. Then he used one of his paws to move the tail of the mouse underneath the door. He quickly went around to the other side, grabbed the tail in his mouth, and pulled. The door began to close. Success.

When the door met the frame, however, it stopped. Brownie pulled as hard as he could on the mouse tail, but he couldn't get the door to fully shut. Then, with a snap, Brownie tumbled backwards. He got himself up as quickly as possible and spit the severed tail out of his mouth.

A noise came from inside the bedroom. Jeston was awake. Brownie heard him jump off of the bed. Then he heard pawing at the mostly closed door. Brownie held his breath. Finally, he saw the door completely close. Jeston must have put his weight on it. Once Brownie heard that click, he carefully made his way down the stairs to claim his prize.

Mommy was in the kitchen, spooning the gooey, nightly food onto two plates. On one plate, she sprinkled the bitter powder that made Brownie's head feel fuzzy. Then Brownie heard her call out for the two toms to come to dinner, and she set the plates down.

Brownie marched right up to his plate and pretended to eat.

Mommy talked to herself for a minute, then started wandering the house, calling for Jeston in the utterance that the humans referred to him as.

Brownie wasted no time. Working diligently, he switched the plates of food without altering their appearance. Brownie then went to work eating *his* food.

It didn't take Mommy long to locate Jeston, and he soon joined Brownie. Brownie saw him approaching with the tailless mouse toy in his mouth. He spat it out and began to eat.

"I know what you did," he grumbled between bites. "I just don't know why."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Brownie said, licking his plate clean and walking away, tail swaying confidently behind him.



It didn't take long for the substance in the food to affect Jeston. He began walking sideways and tumbling to the ground after taking a couple of steps. Mommy got very agitated and Brownie saw her examining the two empty food bowls.

Kitten was also very concerned about Jeston. She made a nice bed for him on the couch out of pillows and blankets and laid him

on it. She sat by him and petted his head, cooing softly to the ailing tom.

That was all fine with Brownie. The more attention the family placed on Jeston, the easier it would be to get out of the house when Park and the others came for him.

Brownie wandered about more than usual that evening. He tested out his mostly healed back legs as much as possible. Without the dose of medicine that night, Brownie felt like a new tom. After making a circuit of the upstairs and downstairs. He jumped up to the platform by the front window and waited for Park to rescue him.

Brownie waited until it got dark. No Park. He waited until Meanie got home that night. No Park. Brownie thought about making a run for it when Meanie got home. There was definitely enough time for him to get through the open door while Meanie was getting himself inside.

He made a split second decision not to do that. The last thing Brownie wanted was to be stranded outside alone. He knew his legs were not fully healed, and he would have a difficult time securing food.

Best to wait. Park had a plan.

After another hour, the excitement had worn away. Park was not coming. Brownie finally allowed himself to close his eyes for the night.



Brownie woke to the sound of breaking glass. He jumped up and saw that the window he had been sleeping in front of had shattered. In the dark, Brownie saw the flickers of five pairs of cat's eyes.

"Come on, then," called Park. "Watch yer step."

Brownie didn't have to be told twice. He leapt heroically down to the ground, deftly avoiding the glass shards, and ran off into the

night with the Wanderlings. As they rounded the corner, he heard Meanie yelling in the distance.

Brownie smiled. He was free again.

The Wanderlings traveled a long way that night. All the way to the next town on their itinerary.

Park told Brownie that he could perform with them the next night. Brownie was happily trotting alongside the Wanderlings thinking about what song he wanted to perform, when he felt something hit him on the side of his head.



Jeston.

Brownie woke up to the repeated blows of Jeston's clawless paws.

"What's. The. Big. Idea?" he asked, hitting Brownie on the head with each word.

Brownie was confused. Hadn't he escaped? He turned and looked at the window. It was intact. The whole rescue had only been a dream.

Brownie sighed. He slowly climbed down the little set of stairs attached to the platform. Jeston followed, still batting at him.

Brownie made his way upstairs and under the bed in the unused room. It was too narrow for Jeston to keep batting at him, but the other tom followed him under the bed, anyway.

"You can't get away from me," Jeston said. "So you might as well answer. What did you do to me last night?"

Brownie sighed again. Park didn't come for him, after all. Maybe the Wanderlings had some kind of accident. Maybe they just moved on.

Either way, Brownie made up his mind. Regardless of the circumstances, he wouldn't be stuck here one more night. He was going to skip the drugged dinner that night and slip out the door when Meanie got home. He didn't think Meanie would care

enough to chase him down, but Brownie was still worried about what he would do after he gained his freedom.

That didn't matter. He couldn't take one more day in this house.

Brownie stared at Jeston. He would never answer Brownie's one question about how many nights he was unconscious after the accident, so Brownie wasn't going to answer him.

In fact, Brownie made it his mission to never say another word to Jeston. He was a tom who committed horrible acts and now got to live out a life of relative luxury, free from any retribution and complete with food, shelter, and love.

This house could give Brownie two of those three things. Not good enough.

After pestering Brownie for a few more minutes, Jeston gave up and left. That gave Brownie time to daydream about his pending escape.



Brownie's stomach growled. He hadn't come out from under the bed all day. He did not come out when Mommy tried to coax him out for dinner. He did not come out when Mommy tried to force him out with a long rod. He just pushed himself back against the corner and waited for her to give up. Jeston never came back after he left the first time. Brownie mused about whether he would even see that tom again.

He waited. Waited to hear the familiar sounds of Meanie's car pulling into the driveway. Then he would put his plan into play and never look back.

A few times, he thought he heard it, and made to dash out of the room. But it was always just a passing car.

The room Brownie was in was getting dark. The sliver of light he could see from under the bed was getting dimmer and dimmer. It wouldn't be long.

And it wasn't. A few minutes later, Brownie heard Meanie's car

pulling into the driveway. When it ceased its rumble with a familiar pop, Brownie knew he was ready.

"*I can* do this," he said out loud, and took off.

He bounded out of the unused bedroom and down the hall. He went a bit more cautiously down the stairs, and when he reached the bottom, he saw the front door opening.

This was it!

Brownie raced around the edge of the opening door and shot past Meanie's legs.

Free! He was free! He would never step foot in that awful house again!

Something caught his attention as he made his dash toward freedom, though. A series of blurs shot past Meanie's legs, going the other way.

From inside the house, he heard crashing, humans screaming, and his name being called by various cats.

Brownie ran over to the front window and leveraged his front legs up to the windowsill to look inside.

The Wanderlings were all tearing about the house, desperately looking for Brownie.

*That* was Park's plan?

Brownie chuckled to see Mommy and Meanie frantically trying to catch the errant cats. Mommy was making shooin' motions with her hands, but screamed when one cat turned toward her. Meanie was taking a more direct approach, swinging a broom in one hand and an umbrella in the other.

Kitten was jumping up and down on the couch, laughing hysterically and clapping her little hands together.

Jeston was nowhere to be seen.

Brownie batted on the window with his front paws, desperate to get the attention of the Wanderlings as they tore through the house looking for him.

No luck.

The longer the cats were in that house, the greater chance that one or more would get hurt, or caught.

Brownie had no choice. He darted back into the house to round up his rescuers.

"Park," he yelled as he ran from room to room.

"There he is," yelled the large tan tom. "That's him, right?"

"Yep," Park yelled, dodging Meanie's broom and running out of the kitchen. "I feel a wee bit woozy."

Brownie looked past Park and saw that his dinner plate, that had contained his uneaten food covered with the bitter white powder, was empty. Did Park eat his dinner?

Park's movements began to slow.

Then Mommy came up behind him and trapped him in one of the small containers that she used to shuttle their clothing around the house. Brownie could see Park through the holes in the sides of the container. He looked dazed.

"Brownie," he slurred. "There ya are. We're here to rescue ya."

"Thanks," Brownie said.

Mommy yelled to Meanie as she started moving the container carrying Park toward the door. Meanie came bounding down the stairs, chasing the four other cats. When the other cats saw Park was trapped, they immediately swarmed Mommy.

"No," Brownie yelled. "She's trying to get him outside."

Meanie wielded his broom and umbrella and did his best to keep the other cats at bay while Mommy pushed the container with Park to the edge of the door. She tilted it up so that it freed Park, but blocked his exit back into the house. Park didn't move. Mommy then pushed him out with the edge of the container.

Once Park was free, the other four cats swarmed around him and moved him away from the door. Brownie moved to join them, but found himself being lifted up by the back of the neck.

That was Meanie. Holding Brownie in one hand, he moved his other hand to close the front door.

Brownie felt his heart hit the floor. All of that planning and



chaos, just to be denied freedom? Would they blame him for this? What would Meanie do to him? Brownie was trapped again.

Just then, something furry and black jumped onto Meanie's head. In his surprise, Meanie dropped Brownie to the ground.

Brownie landed on his feet and darted out the door before Meanie could shut it. The door slammed shut behind him.

Brownie ran over to the front window and took one last look at the house. He saw Mommy pulling Jeston off of Meanie's head. Brownie wasn't sure, but he thought Jeston winked at him just before Mommy put him back on the floor.

## THE WANDERLINGS

“What’s wrong with him?” the black tom asked.  
“I don’t know,” the tan tom said. “We’ve got to get him going.”

“Why wasn’t I invited to the party?” Park slurred, as he stumbled in a different direction.

“Is he going to die?” the molly asked, with a frantic catch in her throat.

Brownie caught up to the four cats, desperately trying to angle Park away from the street. Brownie lent his weight to the problem, and they finally got Park going the right way.

“He’s not going to die,” Brownie said.

“How do you know?” the molly shrieked. “If he dies, how will we get home?”

“I know the way,” the black tom assured her.

“I’m sure,” Brownie said. “I saw what happened. Park couldn’t resist a plate of food that was sitting out. It was supposed to be my dinner, but the humans put something in it that makes my head fuzzy for about half a night.”

“Why would they do that?” the molly asked.

"My legs were in pretty bad shape. For a while, it helped the pain go away."

"Strange," the tom with the collar said. "Are you really Rover?"  
*Rover?*

That's right. Just before the accident, Fido had bestowed the canine name upon him.

"Yep," he said. "Thanks for the rescue."

"Yeah," the black tom laughed. "It went just the way we planned it."



They found a small wooded area between two houses and settled down for the night. The Wanderlings were usually nocturnal, like all feral cats, but the frantic nature of the rescue of Brownie and subsequent rescue of Park had drained their energy.

They found a place for Park to rest and laid him on his side.

"Just stay put until whatever you ate wears off," the black cat instructed.

Park leaned up to see Brownie and the black cat standing in front of him.

"Lovely couple," he mumbled. Then he coughed up a hairball, fell over, and began to drool.

"Are you sure he'll be okay?" the black tom asked.

"I'm sure."

The black tom pitched his voice to address everyone.

"Park cannot travel tonight," he announced. "And we're all pretty worn out. Let's try to get a little shut-eye while we can."

The cats all found places to lie down, making a perimeter around Park. Not for the first time, Brownie wondered what had happened to Wendale. This was definitely not the right time to ask. So he tried to sleep.

But he couldn't. His head kept running through the series of

events that had just transpired in the human house. Meanie had caught him and would not boot him out again. Not with Mommy and Kitten right there. Jeston had intervened, though. Jeston, of all cats, risked the ire of Meanie to give Brownie a chance at freedom.

Why would he do that? He probably just wanted the house to himself. But maybe, just maybe, he was actually trying to help Brownie.

The irony of the situation caused a lump to form in Brownie's throat..

A long time ago, Brownie had a similar choice to make. Humans had captured him and Meadow, a tom who had been trying to kill him. Brownie was able to escape from his cage, and there was a split second where he could have freed Meadow.

He made a choice, and that choice was to save himself. What Brownie didn't know was that the consequences of his inaction would cascade into a series of events that would leave multiple cats dead, and a whole territory almost brought to ruin.

And then, Jeston, who was to blame for most of the consequences of Brownie's choice, did what Brownie chose not to do. He gave a fellow tom, whom he didn't particularly like, a chance to escape captivity.

Jeston, who had performed numerous acts of destruction, in the end, chose an act of selflessness. While Brownie, a tom who did his best to do his best every day, once chose an act of selfishness. Who was the better cat?

Brownie always thought of himself as a good cat. But Jeston, whom Brownie knew was a bad cat, had performed an act of kindness that changed the course of the rest of Brownie's life.

It was very confusing to Brownie, who eventually fell asleep.

In his dreams, cats with one blue eye and one yellow eye, like Meadow, surrounded him. They pressed in on him from all sides, smothering him, and filling his ears with their wordless howling.



Brownie woke up with part of a cat on top of his head. He pushed the cat off and sat up. It was Park. He was snoring. The rest of the cats were awake and going through cleaning rituals. It was daylight. How late though?

"You're awake," the black tom said, pausing his cleaning. "Are you sure he'll be all right?"

"Yeah," Brownie said. "It's probably best to let him sleep until he wakes up, though, or his head will pound for a while."

"I'm Anson, by the way," the black tom said, straightening himself up. "From..."

"Japers territory," Brownie finished.

Anson flashed him a look that said he didn't appreciate the stereotyping. Most black cats lived in Japers territory. Partially because the Pull was so dangerous that Relic gave them their own territory to mitigate the damage, and partially because when cats with the Pull gathered together, the effect was divided over all of them and it became more bearable.

"What happened to Cosimo?" Brownie asked, trying to change the subject.

"The Pull took him," Anson answered. "That's what I heard, anyway. I didn't know him."

"He was a good friend," Brownie said. He remembered traveling on the tom's back after he had escaped the human house the first time. Brownie was just a kit then. He never thought he'd feel nostalgic for those days.

"Rollo took Cosimo's place," Anson continued. "He was my littermate. After the Pull took him, Park picked me to be a Wanderling."

"What happened to Wendale?" Brownie asked. It just didn't seem like the Wanderlings without the level-headed Wendale around. He could handle any situation, calmly, and with a clear head. His presence had always made Brownie feel safe.

"Never knew him," Anson said. "You'll have to ask our fearless leader here when he comes to."

"I know him," the tom with the collar said. "He lived at C.L.A.W. with his brother, Kalmin, after he quit the Wanderlings. He said he was getting too old to travel, but Fido thinks he was just getting sick of failure. Either way, he didn't stay at C.L.A.W. for very long. Said he had some unfinished work to do or something and one night he just wasn't there."

Brownie could imagine Wendale's disappointment. He didn't know how many times Wendale had led the Wanderlings out on expeditions to spread Relic's Chorus Model to cats in other towns. As far as Brownie knew, no cat in any of the towns they visited was ever receptive to even hearing about it.

Brownie had witnessed the indifference to it when he had travelled with the Wanderlings, and wondered himself how they could keep going to town after town, knowing that they would simply be ignored. But what was Wendale's *unfinished work*?

"C.L.A.W." Brownie whispered. He nodded toward the tom's collar. "Does that mean that Fido has his school up and running?"

The tom smiled and showed Brownie his clawless paws.

"He sure does," the tom said. "Although there was some trouble a little while back when he tried to take in a pup."

"An actual dog-pup?" Brownie smiled.

"Yeah," the tom said. "I'm Milo, by the way."

"And I'm..."

"Rover," Milo said. "I know exactly who you are. Fido talked about you all the time. You were the first graduate of his school. I don't see a collar on you, though."

Milo winked.

"I've been a bit preoccupied."

"Anyway, when Fido heard the Wanderlings were going to look for you, he did everything he could to get on the team to help," Milo said with a smile. "He always believed that you were out there somewhere. But he had to deal with the pup, which was getting to be a big mess, so he sent me in his place."

"Are you good at singing?" Brownie asked.

"Kalmin's star student."

"Wow," Brownie said. So much had changed in such a short period. "Do you know what happened the night I..?"

"The night you saved my dad?"

Brownie looked up. The large tan tom sat before him, still looking suspiciously like another large tan tom that Brownie had known.

"Are you one of Bacia's kits?"

He nodded.

"Tallis," he said, smiling. "And this is Honey."

His swaying tail indicated the golden furred molly who was sitting beside him. She batted his tail with hers playfully and gave him a sly smile.

"Pleased to meet you."

"You too," Brownie said. He couldn't believe it. A molly on the Wanderlings.

"You're Bacia's dream come true," he whispered.

"I don't think *she* would see it that way," Honey said, rolling her eyes. "She'd rather sit in that old barn and have kits all day."

"What?" Brownie asked.

"I'll tell you all about it," Tallis said.

Brownie listened as Tallis wove the tale of the Chorus' performance the night Brownie had been hit by that car. He smiled when he heard about Tallis' brother Pavel taking Brownie's place and about the close vote that came out in their favor when Heritage's sister and Angelo's long-lost mate showed up.

Tallis told him about Candida's exile, and Bacia and Taj's move to a small abandoned barn just outside the town. Tallis mentioned that there was a circle on the ground in front of the barn where no grass would grow. Brownie smiled. That sounded like the same barn where he had met Simon.

He heard about Honey and her friends, the Molly-Bees, solic-

iting Bacia for tips on being the first all-molly chorus and how Bacia eventually chose to raise kits over the chorus life.

Brownie felt happy for her. The way Tallis told the story, it seemed like his parents were living a life they both enjoyed.

"So, who's on the Clowder, now?" Brownie asked.

"It's still called the Chorus," Tallis corrected. "In your memory, I believe."

Brownie's face felt hot.

"Well," he began. "There's Finbar, Bacia's brother..."

"I know Finbar," Brownie said excitedly. "He used to be one of the Wanderlings."

"That's right," Tallis said. He drew a small line in the dirt with a claw for each of the toms as he counted them off.

"Finbar, and Frisco..."

"I don't know Frisco," Brownie interjected.

Tallis gave his head a shake. He looked flustered at the interruption. Brownie couldn't help it though, he was excited to hear about the Chorus. His plan had worked! The Chorus had taken the territory! But would it have worked if Brownie had been there?

"Frisco is Hattie's mate," Tallis explained. "Heritage's sister."

"I know who Hattie is," Brownie said. "I practically grew up with her. Who else?"

Tallis huffed. He looked down at the lines he had drawn.

"Finbar, and Frisco, and Hunter..."

"Who's Hunter?"

Tallis' ears flicked. He was getting annoyed by Brownie's interruptions.

"Sorry."

"Hunter is one of Candida's sons," Tallis said. "The mollies love him and Relic absolved all of Candida's sons of any wrongdoing."

Brownie huffed. That didn't seem right.

"Who else?" Brownie asked.

Tallis, again, looked down at his scratches.



"Finbar, and Frisco, and Hunter," he looked up to see if Brownie was going to interrupt him again.

"And Heritage, and Angelo," he finished in one quick breath.

Brownie nodded. Tallis, quite finished with Brownie, turned his attention to Honey, who apparently needed his assistance with her grooming. They retired to a secluded area behind a large tree.

"Those two'll be the death o' me."

Brownie knew that voice. He whipped his head around and saw Park sitting behind him. His eyes looked clear and his tail was moving like a windmill.

"Good to see ya," he said, rubbing his head on Brownie's shoulder. Brownie returned the gesture, getting a whiff of Park's familiar scent. For a second, he was a kit again, hearing Park tell him about the Eight Great Cat Choruses for the first time.

"While we're all just waitin' around, why don't some of ya go get us something to eat?" Park suggested. "Me and this here kit have some catchin' up to do."

The other cats left to go find food. Even Milo.

"It's great to see you," Brownie said. "I always meant to visit Yardy territory, but..."

"But ya was too busy plannin' to take down the most powerful chorus in Relictown," Park finished. "I understand. Congratulations, too. Nothin' against old Finbar, but those Clowder toms always seemed a bit stuffy to me."

Brownie smiled. Remembering how Park talked all the time and experiencing it again were two different things. But Brownie had some questions of his own that he wanted answers to, and he didn't want to wait until Park got around to them.

"How did you find me?" Brownie asked. "The last time anyone saw me was in Clowder territory. For that matter, why were you even looking for me? I must have looked dead after the car hit me."

Brownie's legs twinged when he mentioned the car hitting him.

"Slow down, there," Park said. "The truth is, the Wanderlings

were done. Old Wendale was tired of going out year after year fer nothin'. Me, I liked the time away, but who asks me anythin'."

"Anyway," he continued. "Fido kept hounding Relic about ya. Taj said he had seen the humans who hit ya, scoop ya up, and take ya away. Fido was certain they were trying to get ya help. Relic mentioned that humans have a way to get domestic cats back to their homes. Fido latched onto that and petitioned that the Wanderlings check it out on their next mission."

"But you didn't find me at the house," Brownie interjected. "I had been wandering around for a while before you found me."

"Don't get a head o' me," Park chided. "Wendale was willin' to go, in spirit. His body, though, was another matter. It turns out that when he finally stopped wanderin', his body began to fail. He can hardly walk now, but he's safe with his brother."

*Not according to Milo.*

"So, Relic and Fido came to me and asked me to search for ya. What could I say? Marsha and the kits weren't too pleased with the sudden change o' plans, but I figured if the tail was on the other tom, you'd do it for me."

Brownie nodded.

"Fido insisted on sending one o' his own along, and Bacia insisted on sending one of her sons. Tallis was the only one available. Tallis insisted on taking the lovely Honey, who..."

Park pitched his voice lower.

"... has a one-way hold on his heart."

Park winked.

"Well, there I had it, almost a whole chorus and not a chorus cat amongst them," Park said. "Luckily, me buddy Anson always wanted to see what life was like without the Pull. So he took a leave from the Japers and joined us."

"How's the show then?" Brownie teased.

Park looked indignant.

"Ya think I would let the quality dip even a bit?" Park asked, in mock-horror. "Wendale'd kill me. We put our heads together as we

wandered and came up with somethin' that's more than a wee bit special."

"We had lots o' time to practice it after all," Park continued, always talking. "I remembered where we found ya, but we didn't know what house ya came from. So, we divided ourselves up and began the search."

"Thanks," Brownie said. "I don't know how much longer I would have lasted in there."

"With what they were feeding ya, I'm sure of it," Park said, shaking his head at the memory of the last night.

"You didn't have to eat it," Brownie chided.

"When has a self-respecting tom ever turned down a free meal?"

"Exactly," Brownie said.

Understanding dawned on Park's face. He winked at Brownie.

"I gotcha."



Before they moved on to the next town, it turned out that the Wanderlings were going to put on one more performance at the nearby park. During their search of the area, they had met and talked to many local cats, and Park wouldn't let a potential audience slip through his paws.

"What if *this* group of cats is the one?" he explained to Brownie as the Wanderlings made their way to the park. "If I could get just one group of cats interested in old Relic's Chorus Model, I think Wendale could rest a wee bit easier."

Brownie nodded as he shuffled along. Walking was still difficult for his back legs. He believed their healing had reached its limit, and the pain he felt now was mostly because of inaction. That wouldn't be a problem anymore.

"But you said Anson is the only other cat who can sing," Brownie remembered. "Besides you. How do you put on an entire show?"

“Engine-uity,” Park said, proudly. “Livin’ ‘round trains lends a tom to different ways o’ thinkin’. I can hear ‘em all the time, you know. Rattlin’ in my head. Engines roarin’, whistles blowin’. One night it all just came to me.”

“What?”

“You’ll see.”



Later that evening, Brownie found himself in the middle of a crowd of local cats, waiting for the show to begin. He sat patiently, tail barely moving, hoping that none of the unfamiliar cats would notice his lack of claws. After all this time, he still didn’t feel like an *actual* cat.

Any of these toms could easily climb a tree or catch a mouse. Some had probably even caught a bird in their lives. Brownie could only ever hope to eat food procured by other cats, or when he lived an C.L.A.W., left over human food.

These familiar thoughts left his mind when Park jumped up onto the one picnic bench in the small park and waited for the crowd to quiet down.

“Toms and mollies,” he began. “I am Park, from Relictown. Me and my companions are styled the Wanderlings, and we have quite the show for ya tonight. Now, take yer seat. Quiet, please. The show is about to start.”

Brownie couldn’t wait. He hadn’t heard a chorus perform in a long time. He wished he could be up there performing, too, but he figured he needed a bit of practice before attempting such a thing.

Park remained on the stage, milling around, staring off into space. Then Honey jumped up.

“Father,” she exclaimed, in a kind of sing-song voice. “Have you decided?”

*Father?*

“I decided yesterday,” Park said in the same loud, half-singing

voice. "I decided two nights ago. Three. No daughter of mine is goin' to end up with a *feral* cat..."

Tallis jumped up onto one side of the stage and sat stoic as a statue.

"... when a perfectly domestic feline has come a-courtin'!"

Anson jumped up onto the other side of the stage and assumed the same stoic position.

"But, father," Honey crooned, leaning up against the rigid Tallis. "I love him!"

"That's final!" Park announced, and leapt off the stage.

"But, I love him," Honey repeated, softly. Then she began to sing. She sang about her love for Tallis and his wild ways, and her longing to be just as *feral*. She sang about her disdain for the domestic life that her father had expected her to adopt.

*What was this?*

It was a completely different performance than Brownie had ever seen. It was a story with songs. Brownie was mesmerized.

As the story went on, Park's character tried various ways to sway his daughter's affections toward the domestic tom Anson was playing. It almost worked, too. Especially after Anson crooned an especially sweet song about his love for Honey and their ideal life.

Just as Honey was about to abandon her feral desires and choose the domestic way of life, which was accompanied by hisses and hollering from all the feral cats in the audience, Milo jumped on stage, playing the part of an aggressive dog.

He barked and snapped, and poor domestic Anson had no way to defend his beloved. That part made Brownie cringe. He'd like to think that even though he was a domestic, he wouldn't devolve in to such pitiable behavior when faced with similar danger.

Luckily, Tallis was there. He quickly dispatched the dangerous beast through a nicely choreographed battle.

In the end, Tallis' actions won not only the heart of his beloved, but the respect of her father, who sang the last song that ended in a final chorus where all the characters, including the dispatched dog,

came together on the stage to end the show together and take a collective bow.

The crowd loved it. Brownie loved it. It was so fresh. It made Brownie's mind swirl with possibilities. Park had done it! He'd taken a group of cats with average talent, and turned them into a sensation.

The smiles on the faces of the Wanderlings warmed Brownie's heart. A small part of him, though, was jealous of their success.