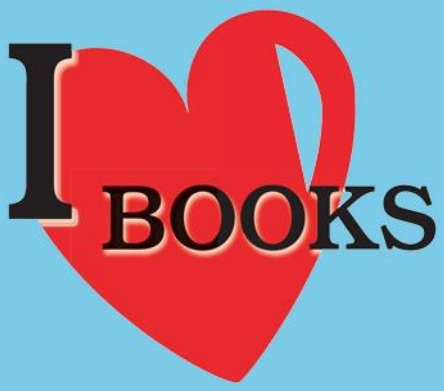

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CHAPTER ONE

A New Arrival

Nizamuddin was asleep when the first sendings came, in the pitch-black hours just before dawn. They were so faint that only the bats heard them, as they swooped in their lonely arcs between the canal and the dargah, the ancient Sufi shrine around which the colony's brick-walled homes were tightly coiled. One of the bats chittered nervously as the soft, frightened words reached him, echoing in his head: *Dark. Want my mother. Why are the dogs growling? Why aren't you saying anything? It's so dark in here.*

Then there was nothing else, and the bat soon forgot what he had heard, though when he hung upside down from the ruins near the baoli,—one of Delhi's few stepwells still fed from the depths of an underground spring—slumbering in the pearly light of day, he dreamt of being a hunted creature in a dark, cramped space, helpless against his predators.

It was long after when the second set of sendings came, stirring the post-monsoon air and startling a pariah cheel that was making sorties over the large park in the centre of Nizamuddin West. "*Mara is scared, put me down! Where did my mother go? Who are you? Where are you taking me? Don't want to leave the drainpipe! You're frightening Mara, you horrid Bigfoot!*" Tooth's wings dipped, taking him into a perilously low dive over the rooftops as he shook his head, trying to get rid of the sense that a cat was mewing at him in mid-air—softly, but enough to ruffle the delicate feathers that covered his inner ear. He felt unsettled until his sharp eyes spotted a bandicoot scuttling along the ground, larger and fatter than the local rats, its long snout twitching nervously as the predator's shadow fell over the creature, and the day's hunting began in earnest. By the time he had made his kill, the cheel had forgotten the strange encounter.

The Sender stayed silent after that. There were no cats or dogs in the area at that hour, and the only other creature in Nizamuddin to hear the second sending was a small brown mouse, who sat back on his haunches, cast a worried eye around, and seeing no cats or kittens, continued along his way.

THE DAYS PASSED PEACEFULLY. It was the happiest time of the year for the residents of Nizamuddin and Delhi's other colonies. Summer had gone and Diwali, the annual festival of lights with its menacing fireworks and thunderstorms of noise, wouldn't begin until the middle of autumn. Freed from the summer heat, the cats of Nizamuddin could start hunting again.

Beraal was pleased at the change in the air. She had spent most of the summer in the baoli, liking the tranquility of the disused stepwell, and in the abandoned construction lot where the cats found shelter among heaps of rubble. The heat had been intense that year, shrivelling the flame tree leaves, drying out the red flowers of the silk cotton trees, and the young cat had missed being able to go on long pilgrimages. Perhaps, she thought, stretching and yawning and shaking out her paws, it was time to make the trek to Humayun's Tomb and see what the cats who lived in the quieter parts of its sprawling gardens, undisturbed by the crowds who visited the ancient monument, were doing.

The park was noisy, what with the neighbourhood Bigfeet boys fighting over a game of cricket, and the pariah cheels echoing their quarrel in a treetop battle far above. Beraal ambled off towards the cowshed that sat in the middle of the Bigfeet's houses, settling on the broken brick wall to do her grooming in peace. This was more extensive than normal feline ablutions required: Beraal had long, black-and-white fur that curled silkily down to her paws when it was clean, but it was a magnet for dry leaves, dirt and other rubbish.

She was perched on top of the wall, licking industriously at a clingy spider's web that had attached itself to her paw, when the air around her ears seemed to shimmer and part. "*Woe!*" said a small clear voice right into her ear, "*Mara is worried! Mara is all alone with the Bigfeet! They are scary and they talk all the time, and I do not like being picked up and turned upside down!*"

Beraal almost overbalanced, and had to somersault back onto the wall, an act that did nothing for her dignity. Wild-eyed, her

whiskers bristling, her tail fluffing up to twice its normal size, she whirled around on the wall, searching for a cat that was nowhere to be seen. She ignored the small brown mouse who scurried out of his hole, equally startled. The quiet whisper that the mouse, whose name was Jethro, had heard almost a moon ago was much louder, far more powerful than the first time.

Beraal paid little attention to the mouse's squeaks, twitching her silky ears. That voice had sounded so close—could it be in the neem tree? Down near the ground beside the cows? But there was nothing there, and the cat was truly stumped. She stiffened as the dry leaves on the creepers rustled, then relaxed. It was only Hulo, hopping down from the neem tree onto the wall beside her. "What the hell was that?" he asked.

"So you received it too," she said slowly.

Hulo flicked his unkempt black tail lightly in assent. "I'll bet every tom and queen in Nizamuddin is looking for whoever that was—my whiskers are still trembling!"

"I thought it was speaking directly to me, Hulo," said Beraal.

"So did I," said Hulo. "That cat transmitted louder than I can remember any animal ever doing in our territory!"

"And further," said Beraal, as she felt her whiskers tingle. The other cats of Nizamuddin were linking—Miao, Katar, Abol and Tabol from the canal, Qawwali—and the air buzzed with questions.

Hulo's scruffy fur rippled as he listened. "They heard her on the other side of the canal!" he said to Beraal. "Whoever it was, Mara-Shara, whatever, it's a Sender, not an ordinary cat. And what worries me is that it's not one of us!"

Beraal felt her fur standing up, strand by strand. The cats of

Nizamuddin were used to linking across long distances, as all animals in the wild did with their own species. Mews reached only so far; scents and whisker transmissions formed an invisible, strong web around their clan of colony and dargah cats. But linking allowed them only to listen to each other. A true sending, where the Sender's fur seemed to brush by the listener, its words and scents touching the listener's whiskers, was rare. And only a true Sender could link with animals from other species as well as its own kind; the clan, like all clans who lacked Senders, used the mews, chirps and barks of Junglee rather than linking by whisker when they needed to speak to those from other species. From time to time, stranger cats, wayfarers and wanderers from other parts of the city, might breach the web, accidentally linking—but it had been years since the Nizamuddin clan had a Sender in its midst, or had received a sending as strong as this.

Beraal let her tail sink down as she thought about the sending: it had seemed to be coming from deep inside her head.

Hulo and she felt their whiskers crackle as Katar, the tomcat who was the clan's most respected wilding, sent out an all-cats-bulletin across the Nizamuddin link. "Everyone heard that, I suppose," Katar said. A running chorus of assent flickered across all their whiskers, from the bungalows in front to the park where Beraal and Hulo were, right up to the limits where the colony proper ended and the low roofs of the slums, illegal but ubiquitous, took over. "Anyone know what or who—this Mara is? Any recent sightings of strays from elsewhere? Miao, any thoughts?"

Miao was the oldest of all of the Nizamuddin wildings. "We'd have picked up news of any outsiders," she said. "This

one must be newly arrived—unusual for a stray this powerful to escape being noticed by all of us. Perhaps Qawwali and the dargah cats know more?" But Qawwali said there hadn't been a whiff of outsiders for many moons now. Abol and Tabol said no strays had crossed the canal, nor had the market cats seen any strangers.

Beraal shared a thought that she'd been turning over in her head. "There's something strange about the way the cat spoke," she said. "Its transmissions didn't just sound foreign—that entire sending was unusual."

"That's because it's not one of us, Beraal," said Hulo impatiently. "Outsiders always sound different."

"That's not what I meant," said Beraal. "There were very clear images, though I couldn't make out what they were exactly."

The link crackled with slow assent. Katar cut in: "Did you see what I did, Beraal? I thought I could see a small, orange blur, hanging in mid-air."

"Something like that," said Beraal. "And who was it sending to? Did it even know it was sending?"

Hulo sent an exasperated twitch along the line. "Whatever it is," he said, "it's a stray who's not one of us wildings, and if it can send so strongly that it almost shook me out of the branches of my tree, I want it dead. It's been years since any of us heard a sending as powerful as that."

"Wait," said Katar. "Miao, who was Nizamuddin's last Sender?"

"You never met her, Katar," said Miao. "Most of you wouldn't remember Tigris, she was before your time. If you're wondering about her descendants, she had none—Tigris had

no mates that we knew of, and there haven't been Senders in Nizamuddin since, though we keep an eye on every kitten in every new litter. And though Tigris could send with some skill, the sending we just heard is much stronger. This Sender is definitely an outsider—going by the power crackling on all of our whiskers, an experienced adult, possibly a battle veteran. There haven't been any wildings of that description in the area—we'd have known, by scent or whisker—so it must have come in with a Bigfeet family."

"Then perhaps we should try to find out more about this Mara," Beraal started to say, when Katar gently overrode the link. He and Miao were the most experienced of Nizamuddin's wildings. The colony had no leader, as was the norm with cats, but when all of the wildings had to confer, Miao or Katar would conduct the clan conclaves.

"I'm clearing the link," he said. "Everybody should stay on alert. Look for strangers, listen for any reports of strays who may have come in across the canal, or from the animal shelter. Watch the Bigfeet homes carefully—it spoke of Bigfeet, if my memory is true. Expect to find a large fighter, probably a queen, as Miao says—this cat would have to be an adult of considerable size to have that kind of sending power."

"Katar," said Beraal, "what should we do when we find it?"

"Kill it," said Katar, "if it's not one of us, and especially if it's living with Bigfeet. Beraal, I'll expect you to take a special interest in the execution."

Beraal hadn't expected any other response. Strangers, especially those who lived with Bigfeet, were always regarded with suspicion, and an unknown Sender was even worse. Their

abilities set them apart from other wildings, and this one had badly shaken the Nizamuddin clan.

If this was an inside cat, a house cat, killing it might be somewhat more difficult, but Beraal figured she would solve that problem when she got to it. Beraal was the most fierce of the queens of Nizamuddin, and could take on many of the toms. She was a fine hunter—swift, silent and precise—and her immediate concern was finding the stranger who threatened their peace.

IT WAS AN UNEASY NIGHT in Nizamuddin for the feline population. Two more calls twitched through the dark, disrupting prowlers and sleepers alike. *New place smells like new miss my mother new new new, Mara lonely, Mara sad.* That came in an hour after the cats of Nizamuddin had first linked, and set the whisker links twitching all over again. It had been even stronger than the first message, and the fear set all their ears back, sent their fur rippling in empathy.

As she paced restlessly around the park, keeping only the most perfunctory watch out for dogs, Beraal met Katar. The handsome grey tom touched noses in greeting and tried to prevent the small brown kitten who'd been trailing in his wake from tripping over Beraal's paws.

"Me and young Southpaw are going down to the dargah to check the scent trails at the perimeter, just in case we've all missed something," he said. "Miao and Hulo are patrolling the canal—Southpaw, quit playing with my tail or I'll have to smack you again—I'm worried, Beraal, I don't ever remember

a Sender as strong as this or as odd. I tried communicating with it, and so did Miao, but we couldn't connect. I don't understand this. I don't like it at all. It's best if we find it and kill it soon."

Beraal wrapped her tail around his, a small gesture of comfort but a pleasant one; she and Katar had mated once, and though neither his kitten nor any of the ones fathered by other toms had survived and they'd had other mates since, she and the grey were quite fond of each other.

"And of course Southpaw has to go along with you," she said, her whiskers gently brushing the young kitten's head. "Shouldn't you be taking a nap, youngling?" Southpaw was the colony's orphan, and so far it had taken the combined efforts of all of the Nizamuddin cats to keep him out of trouble—he had an instinct for tumbling from the antheap into the termite's nest, as the old saying went.

"The sendings woke him up," said Katar, "and I found him prowling the rooftops as though he was on tomcat patrol, all by himself." He didn't need to add that it was safer to take the kitten along. Southpaw could hear the other cats on the link, but his whiskers hadn't grown to the stage where he could send out messages on the link without garbling them terribly. Besides, the kitten's last attempt to patrol the roofs had ended with him tangled in a clothesline, the ropes and wet clothes muffling his mews for help.

Three hours later, the third sending came in. They had almost been expecting it, but it made no sense. It was just as loud, but less fearful. *New, still new, I don't like new—but Bigfeet are nice, Bigfeet make me feel less scared.*

The rooftops of Nizamuddin had rarely seen such activity.

Caterwauling rang across the neighbourhood, causing the Bigfeet to toss and turn uneasily. Lithe ghost shapes padded along the roofs, swarmed down drainpipes and backstairs, patrolled dustbins, swooped smoothly under cars, searching for a Sender who refused to be seen. The dogs whined in their sleep, sensing the crackling of back-and-forth messages in the air; the few foolish enough to try and chase the cats they saw were taken aback to be met with blazing eyes and aggressive hissing and spitting. The cats of Nizamuddin had work to do tonight; they weren't going to let a few curs get in their way.

Out on her third patrol of the night, Beraal sat down heavily on the front steps of one of the houses and decided that she needed to wash for a bit. As her tongue loosened her silky fur, releasing some of the tension that had been knotting her insides, she found it easier to focus on the problem. It was like untangling a very complicated ball of thread—you had to find the ends and pull them out one by one.

Rasp, rasp, her tongue went smoothly back and forth across her coat. *Scared cat called Mara. But if it was a battle veteran, why would it be scared? Because it was in a new—and therefore frightening?—place?* She began to tease the tangles out of her fur. The young queen coughed slightly as she swallowed a knot of loosened dirt and fur—that probably meant a hairball in the morning. Well, it couldn't be helped.

Balancing on three paws, she spread one out carefully, and began tonguing the dirt out from between the claws. *Was it with a new family? In a new house?* Her tail curled around for easier reach, and she began to groom it absentmindedly. *The sendings had grown clearer each time, and so had that unsettling*

image of a small orange ball of fur, whatever that was. But it didn't make sense. Why would this powerful Sender crash into the wildings' neighbourhood and refuse to talk to them?

As the first glimmers of dawn came up, Beraal thought she knew what she had to do. She had to find a house that Bigfeet had just moved into. Then she had to find out if there were any large cats in the house. She flattened her ears slightly: Beraal didn't like the idea of going into a strange house inhabited by Bigfeet. And if she found the cat? And if it was the most powerful Sender any one of them had ever seen, and sensed she was there to kill it? Then, she'd see, wouldn't she?

Beraal's first kill had been a cunning old bandicoot rat three times her size, when she was still in her fifth month. That was just the first of many victories. The queen had never failed to make her kill yet, and didn't think she would this time.