

Preda's Voice

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Chapter One

She sat in the front seat of his Crown Victoria and stared at her hands. Preda willed them to be perfectly still as they gripped her legs, but her fingers continued to shake despite her best efforts. The detective kept talking, and his voice had long since turned to buzzing in her ears.

She stole a side glance at his stoic face. It looked like granite reflected in the sun. He was staring straight ahead, and she realized he had stopped speaking. He was waiting for her response.

Preda's voice caught in her throat as her mind went over the day's events.

It was Friday morning, and she had been sitting in her advanced placement history class and taking careful notes on the fall of Rome when he had knocked on the door to the classroom.

Preda had immediately looked up from beneath the hood of her sweatshirt and known whom he was there for. Preda had never been in serious trouble in her whole life, but that morning, she knew this man had come for her.

He opened the door slightly, and her teacher immediately stood up. Ms. Brown was a middle-aged woman who brooked no nonsense in her classroom from her students. Preda was sure she would be no different toward this intruder. Ms. Brown drew herself up from behind her desk with an obvious expression of annoyance. She stalked over to the door and opened it the rest of the way for him, but stood in the threshold ensuring he stayed just outside in the hallway.

Preda could see he was a large man standing at least six feet in height. His head towered over Ms. Brown, and he silently mouthed the name "Preda Torrance." At that moment he looked in Preda's direction, and their eyes locked. She had no time to consider that this man had never met her or to wonder how he knew it was her. She stood.

Quickly assessing her lack of other options, Preda shoved her notebook into her book bag and walked over. She could hear her classmates' whispers start to build, but she refused to look as frightened as she felt. Preda made eye contact with the man and silently nodded her assent to go with him. She could see a badge was in his hand. It looked official enough, and it read "Detective Fox" in burnished gold letters.

Ms. Brown was at a loss what to do and took Preda's chin in her hand so that she was forced to look into her eyes. "Do you need me to come with you?" she asked with the utmost sincerity.

Preda just silently shook her head and squeezed past the detective into the hallway. He looked down at her from his considerable height. He towered over her slight five-foot-three frame and nodded. As she made to leave, Preda had one moment to look back in through the open door of the classroom and past the worried look on Ms. Brown's face. As she scanned the faces inside the room, she somehow knew her life would not be the same if she returned. Most of her classmates looked on with extreme interest and, she thought, more than a little delight. One person in the sea of faces stood out, as he always did.

Will Stall had been the only person in the ninety-six days she had been in this particular school who had shown any kindness toward Preda. Even with the whispers growing louder, he looked only at her, and their eyes met for a brief instant. She thought she saw concern and sympathy in his expression. Preda quickly turned away. The whispers turned to giggling, and the sound followed her into the hallway until the door closed behind her.

Detective Fox deliberately walked down the hall without looking in her direction. It was obvious to Preda that he fully expected her to just follow him. Preda kept her head down as usual and had

to skip every fifth step to keep up. She had always been considered small, but next to him, even though she was nearly eighteen, she was like a child.

The detective made very little sound as he walked. This was a wonder, given his sheer size. When she looked up at the back of his shoulders, Preda could see the enormous amount of muscle beneath the gray jacket he wore. His fine black hair was cut close to his scalp in an almost military fashion, and despite his clean-cut nature and perfectly pressed suit, she had noted a hint of stubble could be seen on his chin and neck before he turned his back on her. In any other situation, she would have considered him quite handsome, even though he had to be at least twenty years her senior.

Walking with the well-dressed detective, Preda felt self-conscious about her clothes. She fervently wished she could crawl under a desk and stay there. Her black pants were too long—nothing new there—and the hems dragged across the hall floor as she walked. Preda wore her favorite gray hoodie. Although she was grateful for its comfort and bagginess, she was acutely aware of the tiny holes in the shoulder seams and the frayed ends of the drawstrings hanging from the hood. She prayed the bell would not ring until they left the building. Preda couldn't handle any more attention on herself or her escort that day.

Detective Fox didn't even spare a glance in her direction as they walked toward the double doors at the end of the hall. When they reached the metal detector in front of the exit, Preda watched as he dropped his badge into the bin. A large, curved, sheathed knife followed. This particular weapon struck Preda as odd for a detective. *Why not a gun?* she thought.

The guard who normally sat by the detector to monitor the comings and goings of high-school students stared at the knife and then at Preda in stunned silence as he let them through. She

lowered her head and blushed furiously as she ducked out through the exit. Detective Fox was patiently holding the door open for her.

His car was the only one in that part of the parking lot and was parked under a large palm tree. As she sat in the front passenger seat in her heavy clothing, Preda was grateful for that tree's shade as well as the blasting air conditioner in the car.

Her long, straight, jet-black hair had fallen in front of her eyes again as she stared at her hands, and she was forced to bring her head up to look over at the detective. Like so many times in her life, Preda stayed silent despite the heavy expectation to speak. He looked over at her then, and the genuine sympathy in his hazel eyes struck her. "Do you understand what I've told you?" he asked.

Preda nodded as a traitorous tear slipped down her cheek. He had told her that her father had been killed. For a while they stared at each other. Then he seemed to understand her unspoken question. "You probably want to know how I know this."

Preda simply nodded in response.

"We've been watching you, Preda."

Preda's mouth hung open, and for the first time, she made as if to speak. Detective Fox saw the distress on her face and looked slightly alarmed by her reaction. He put his hand up to forestall her. "We've really been keeping track of you since you were born," he said quickly.

Preda started to interrupt. She was keenly interested in expanding upon the subject of her birth, but again he forestalled her. "I promise in time I'll tell you everything about your origin," he

said, “but you must listen to me now.” The urgency in his voice and the empathy in his sharp eyes kept her quiet. “I know about your talent.”

Preda scoffed silently under her breath. She had never thought of it before as anything but a curse. Thinking about that morning’s events made her throat constrict, and she took a deep breath to regain her composure. She looked at him again and realized eye contact seemed to be enough for this man. For once Preda felt comfortable in her own silence.

She knew there should be no true mourning for the man who had called himself her father. Preda couldn’t help herself, though. Her shaking hands and trembling lips belied her emotions. Her life was no longer going to be her life. Philip Torrance, her father, was the only constant she had ever had.

Detective Fox kept speaking with his deep, reassuring voice. “We know the events of this morning were purely...accidental,” he said. “We’ve been keeping a close eye on things lately, but we didn’t foresee this.”

With that statement he looked down at his hands as though disappointed in himself. Preda couldn’t fathom how this could possibly be his fault, but then his demeanor changed back to that of the stoic detective from before. She figured she must have imagined it.

Detective Fox continued. “Truthfully we expected to have to intervene soon but not this soon. Events beyond our control are also leaving us with very little time. We have known about your voice’s ability since you were born, Preda. I am so sorry you have been alone all this time, but you must understand. We had no other choice.”

We? Preda was overwhelmed. The thought that she had been watched this entire time, especially when she and her father had worked so hard to stay under the radar, was jarring. She couldn't even begin to process how this man knew about her voice. Her thoughts were racing as she replayed her last conversation with her father.

Philip Torrance had been angry, but that was not new for Preda. He was just becoming adjusted to his new life in Miami. He had assured her that this would be where they would stay for good. Preda's father was an expert in downsizing struggling companies. His job consisted of going into failing businesses and finding extraneous positions, or "unnecessary people," as he liked to call them. He was also an expert at finding various other methods the companies could use to cut corners and save money.

Preda had always known her father's favorite part of the job was the layoffs. He would smile as he walked out the door and say, "Today's the day I trim some fat." Preda would always make a comment under her breath in reference to his considerable girth, which could have benefitted from some trimming.

That morning, however, he had been angry. He had woken her up by storming into her bedroom and pulling the sheets out from under her. Preda had fallen unceremoniously to the floor. It had hurt. She had looked up at him expectantly and waited for his next move.

"It's always your fault," he had said. "Every time we have to move, it's because you screwed up, Preda-Tor. You know you're not supposed to bring attention to yourself."

Preda shuddered at the memory. Using her name in that way was always meant to hurt as much as possible. Sitting in the car with Detective Fox, she rubbed her arm where her father had

grabbed her. She could still smell the cheap vodka on his breath mixed with his unbrushed teeth as he had lifted her up to his face.

Detective Fox's next words brought her back to the current reality. "We are leaving immediately," the detective said. "Is there any reason to go back to your house first?"

Preda considered this question. Yes. There was something she felt she couldn't live without. She nodded emphatically. Detective Fox looked surprised, as though he had expected a different answer. "All right," he said after a moment. "Let's go back then."

Chapter Two

Detective Fox pulled the car out quickly and pulled around to the street exit. Preda looked back at the school one last time. This feeling of finality was not new. Her entire life she had been forced to move as often as every six months. Children and then teenagers had been equally unforgiving about her status as the “mute new kid.” One person here, however, had been the first different one.

All Preda knew about Will Stall was that he had moved to the city only a few months before her, but already he was one of the most popular people in the senior class. He was so charismatic. Others were instantly drawn to him. Ever since she had arrived, though, it seemed Will was interested only in her. This had served to further isolate her from the other girls her age. Preda could still envision their faces as they knocked books out of her hands, shoved her into lockers, and told her to stop talking to him. Preda always found this last point secretly amusing.

She never talked to Will. She never talked to anybody.

She would never forget the first time he had spoken to her, though. She had been sitting in the corner of the cafeteria and eating her lunch on the second day of school. Her father always made her purchase the low-income lunch. His admonition whenever she wanted to go grocery shopping for lunches was always, “We have to save up, Preda-Tor. You never know when you’ll force us to move again.”

Will had walked over to her and asked, “May I sit next to you?”

She nodded dumbly. He never asked her any questions she would need to answer with words—only yes or no. It was like that every day. He would always ask for permission—as if her answer would ever be no. Then he would prattle on as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

His one-sided conversations were usually about sports, but it never mattered to Preda. Will would sometimes go on and on about some test they had just taken or how lame it was that his family had moved him during his senior year of high school. He would just let Preda eat her lunch, and she would nod occasionally. Her silence never seemed to bother Will, and he never asked her about it.

Every day he would walk her to her class after lunch and carry her books. The other girls would make remarks under their breaths and snicker as they walked by, but Will was unfazed.

One day as they were walking, Will was talking about a new movie that was coming out, and they overheard a vicious comment from one of Preda's tormentors. Ashley Burke was a devastatingly beautiful blonde. Preda had watched her get her way with almost every person in that high school since her first day there.

“Look, girls,” Ashley purred as they walked by. “Will is volunteering for charity again.”

Will stopped midsentence, and his eyes narrowed. Preda tried to keep the hurt out of her eyes and smiled at him reassuringly. He wasn't fooled. Will whirled away from her and rounded on Ashley. The girl's eyes got very big, and she took a step back toward the row of lockers behind her.

“Where I come from,” he said so quietly Preda could barely hear him over the noise in the hall around her, “someone like you wouldn’t be allowed to speak to someone like her.” With that cryptic statement, he turned back to Preda and asked, “Where was I?”

Preda stood dumbfounded and watched Ashley Burke blink her pretty eyelashes in confusion.

Preda thought back to Will’s face, and her trembling started anew. It occurred to her that she would never see him or any other familiar face again. She was sure Detective Fox intended to take her away to a facility somewhere and remove her from the rest of the world. After this morning she thought that would be completely justified. Philip Torrance had always said she would be better off in a place like that. It was a sad justice that her father would not live to see her condemnation come to fruition.

Preda was abruptly brought back to reality as the Crown Victoria came to a stop. She hadn’t even noticed when they turned down the familiar palm tree-lined road that was her street. Detective Fox didn’t turn the car off. He looked at her expectantly and said, “You have ten minutes.”

It struck her as odd that the detective would trust her to go into her house alone and not try to run away. That thought immediately crossed her mind. Preda quickly considered the back door and the two and a half miles she would have to run to the nearest bus station. She looked at Detective Fox’s face then. The quiet confidence she saw told her this plan would not work.

Preda took a deep breath, opened the car door, and started to head toward her home. She set her shoulders back as she walked toward the door and tried not to think too hard about how she would likely never have a house to call home again.

Preda pulled out the house key and started to put it into the lock, but the door swung open as soon as the key touched the handle. She had forgotten the lock was broken from earlier that morning. Preda walked into the dark house and didn't waste time going directly to her room. As she opened the door, the events of that morning replayed themselves against her will.

As her father had held her aloft with one arm after unceremoniously waking her up, Preda resolved not to flinch away. It was a game she had been playing with him for the last couple of months. Even though it only seemed to make him angrier, she couldn't help herself. She stared right into his eyes. As he was about to swing back with his other hand, Preda caught movement behind her father's shoulder. She broke eye contact involuntarily. Someone else was in her bedroom that morning.

A man in a tattered business suit who looked as though he had been sleeping outside was standing behind her father. He had leaves in his sandy blond hair, and his eyes looked as though they didn't register Preda at all. He was intently staring at the back of Philip Torrance's head.

The fingers of his left hand were contracting repeatedly as though they had minds of their own. Preda could tell he was sweating, and his back was rigid. His eyes never wavered away from her father. She processed all this in the instant his right hand came up with the crowbar.

As the weapon made contact with the back of his head, Philip Torrance looked one last time at his daughter's face. The look had been ingrained in Preda's memory, and even standing in the empty room now, she could see every detail. Confusion replaced his anger at the last second. His hand released her, and his body collapsed. As she looked down on him, Preda trembled and saw all awareness leave his eyes. She watched as he took a shaky last breath. At that second she looked up. For the first time, her father's killer seemed to register her presence.

A pool of blood was already spreading beneath Philip Torrance's head on the carpet. It was almost reaching her bare toes. His killer blinked and looked back and forth between Preda and her father's body. He seemed more distraught and confused than she was, and he nervously adjusted his grip on the crowbar with white knuckles. Preda saw him start to appraise her, and she shook her head in silence. She took a step backward toward her bedside table and the phone she knew was resting there. Her eyes stayed locked on his face.

"You his daughter?" he inquired in a raspy voice. When Preda didn't answer right away, he nodded as if that was confirmation enough. A look of self-righteousness passed over his face, and he straightened his shoulders abruptly. "He fired me from a job I had held onto for twenty years. I even kept it during the recession. I kept my head low and never made waves. Had to feed my family. Got three kids. Then he comes in." He gestured at the body on the floor. "You gotta understand. My wife left me yesterday for another man. She took my kids away. All because I couldn't pay the bills. Your father, I could see it in his eyes. He enjoyed destroying my life. He enjoys destroying lives. I did the world a favor," he said, and he practically spit in disgust. He looked up at her then. "You're like him, I bet. You'll destroy what's left of me after this."

The look in his eyes had changed. They now held the wild appearance of a cornered animal. He was in survival mode. Preda knew she had to say something. "Please calm down," she whispered as he took a slow step toward her.

As soon as the words were uttered, he stopped moving. His head tilted, and he said, "I am calm."

The tone of his voice was eerily quiet in contrast to his previous rambling. He continued advancing. This time he had a steadiness and purpose that hadn't been present before.

Preda didn't know what to do. She reached behind her and grabbed the cell phone. With it still behind her back she started to unlock the screen. As she was fumbling around with her fingers, she let out an involuntary groan of frustration. His face suddenly changed again at the sound of her voice, and he lunged forward.

Her father's killer grabbed Preda's face with his left hand so that it was painfully covering her mouth. His momentum pushed her back onto the bed, and his fingers dug painfully into her cheeks. The phone dropped from her hand and clattered to the floor. It became lost in the bedsheets her father had yanked from the bed that morning.

Preda tried to struggle against him in vain. She pushed with all her might against his bulk, but she was too small. He brought his crowbar down with his other hand and pinned her arms across her chest.

"I don't know what you did, but I hadn't *ever* felt that calm in my entire life," he whispered into her ear.

The way he spoke sent chills down her spine, and Preda felt her hands and feet go numb from panic. She struggled wildly against his grip. He was going to kill her. She was going to die.

Preda could feel the crowbar digging into her forearms, and her head was painfully pressed against the wall. She felt herself becoming weaker and her vision growing darker as her wild kicking was losing steam. She tried to scream with all her might against his hand, but nothing would come out. Preda realized she couldn't breathe.

As her struggling started to subside, she heard a loud crash come from her desk, and her attacker quickly turned his head back toward the sudden noise. His grip lightened ever so slightly, but it was enough for her to draw a breath.

The events that followed were a blur, and back in the room now, Preda shuddered at the memory. She found herself hugging her arms against her chest while standing there alone. The bloodstains were everywhere. Preda detected the faint metallic scent mixed with the spray cleaner she had frantically emptied onto the carpet that morning. Being in this room made her feel nauseated. She couldn't stop thinking about that man's face as the scream finally erupted from her throat and bloomed in the air like a firework exploding from nothing.

Preda had never screamed like that in her memory. As the sound came out of her, it was as though a dam had been breached, and her emotions flooded into it. Too late she realized the effect it was having on this stranger in her bedroom. He looked at her, but he no longer seemed to register her. She was close enough to see the tiny blood vessels in his eyes erupt and the whites turn bright red from hemorrhage. Blood was dripping from both his ears and slowly starting to pool on her chest.

His body then went limp, and he stopped breathing. Preda started struggling with all her might to get out from under his weight. She tossed him over onto the bed, and his dead eyes stared blankly toward the ceiling. Tears were running unchecked down her face as she stood and started to back out of the room. Her feet collided with the body of her father, and Preda crouched down next to him and hugged her knees to her chest. She had to shut her eyes and catch her breath.

As Preda was rocking back and forth on her heels, thoughts were swirling through her head. If the police came, people would surely wonder how that man had died. Her father's death was an

easy explanation with the presence of an intruder, but this man had died by her hands. *No*, she thought. *My voice*. No one would believe her at first, and then when they discovered the awful truth about her, her father's predictions would come true.

Preda could hear his taunting voice even still. "Preda-Tor, what would you do to all those people? Would you control them? Would you kill someone?"

Preda thought back on this and realized she had had no idea she was actually capable of killing a person. She briefly wondered how her father could have known.

While Preda had been crouched on her floor, she had felt a warm, familiar presence brush up against her legs. It was her cat, Fiver.

Chapter Three

As she was brought back to reality and the reason she had returned to this house, Preda looked over at the overturned lamp and the books that had fallen off her desk. They were responsible for the crashing noise that had distracted her would-be-killer. Deep down she knew with certainty that not only had Fiver caused the crash, but the cat had done it on purpose. He had saved her life.

Fiver was a black alley cat from the streets of Atlanta. She had met him three homes before. She and her father had been living in an apartment complex on the fifth floor in the city at the time. Her bedroom window had let out onto a fire escape, and Preda had kept a tomato plant outside under the windowsill.

She had gotten the seed from the school's gardening club earlier that year and carefully waited until the weather was just right for planting. It was the first living thing she had cared for, and she marveled at how it flourished under her attention.

Every day after school, Preda would come home, water the plant, and talk to it about her day. It felt strange speaking to a plant so candidly about her feelings, but it was also safe. Just before summer came, the plant was thriving so well that Preda received a tomato from it almost daily.

Her upstairs neighbor, Mr. Scott, would often call a greeting down from his window while she was watering the plant. His fire escape balcony was above and diagonal to hers, and she would balance on the tips of her toes and reach up then with her fingertips to roll a red tomato onto the ledge. Mr. Scott would eagerly take it inside with an exclamation of delight. He was a retired gentleman who lived alone.

He would always call down to her in a muffled voice chewing around a mouthful of tomato and ask, “How do you get that plant to produce so many tomatoes? They’re so delicious!”

Preda would just smile under his praise and continue to talk so softly that only the plant could hear her voice. The pot she had used to grow it in was an unwanted treasure from a woman living down the street. Preda would walk by her on the way to and from school and admire her beautiful front porch garden. One day an old ceramic pot with a crack down the side was sitting in the trash, waiting to be collected. She had quickly grabbed it when no one was looking. Preda took it back to her room before her father came home from work. Safely behind the closed door to her room, she carefully glued the defect until she was confident it would hold.

That night Preda brought the pot down to the empty lot next to her building and dug deep with her hands until the soil no longer felt sandy and rocky. As she hit the right type of dirt, she gingerly scooped it into the pot with her bare hands. She hardly noticed her fingers were bleeding into the soil from all the rocks she had dug through.

Preda carefully placed the seed in the center and hid the pot close to her window on the side of her building. Preda had known nothing about gardening, but she was a keen observer and had watched how the woman with the porch garden diligently watered the soil until the plants grew.

As the vines of Preda’s plant started to sprout and venture up, she would redirect them and sometimes gently tie them in such a way that they grew outward and weren’t easily visible from her window. Her father never saw how beautiful it became. As the tomatoes were produced, Preda would crouch down next to her window and eat them with two hands as though they were apples. There was nothing that made her feel as joyous as sun-warmed tomato juice dripping down her chin.

As she was watering her treasured friend one day, Preda had heard a rustling in the garbage cans below the stairs that ran down into the alley. She tried to peer through the metal slats and make out who or what was so ferociously trying to get at the trash. As she looked out over the edge, a black tail could be seen wagging from the side of the trash barrel. As she stared, the cat's head came up, and he looked straight at her. He was a malnourished black cat with a missing right ear. His eyes were in direct contrast with the rest of him and a striking emerald green.

As she looked down on him standing on the edge of the trash can, Preda's hand came up to her face involuntarily. The cat's eyes and fur were the exact same shade of green and black as her own eyes and hair. Preda suddenly felt silly comparing herself to the stray alley cat with one ear, and she crouched back in through the window. She was about to shut it when she heard his claws scraping on the metal fire escape.

She leaned out the window again and gasped in astonishment. He had jumped from the trash can all the way up to the second-floor balcony—even with its stairs retracted. The feisty cat was grasping onto the edge, and his back end was swinging in the air with his tail turning like a propeller for balance.

Preda held her breath and watched as he hoisted himself the rest of the way and started to traverse his way up to her own fire escape balcony. She couldn't help but smile as she watched the determined look on his face as he carefully placed his paws so they wouldn't slip through the metal slats.

When he finally made his way to her window, Preda didn't know what to do. She had never been this physically close to a cat before. Her father had never allowed her to even consider a pet. By that age she was forbidden to even talk to other kids at school—never mind own an animal.

“You want me to be forced to leave my job again?” Phillip would ask her as though he actually wanted an answer. “You know you can’t do anything to bring attention to yourself or me. Ever.”

By now the cat had placed both front paws on her windowsill while standing on his hind paws. He was lazily waving his tail and looking at her expectantly. Preda looked behind her to ensure the door was closed all the way. She didn’t hear her father walking around. He had long ago removed the option of locking her door, so Preda would place a coin on the door handle that would fall whenever it started to open.

She tentatively placed her hand on the windowsill. The cat seemed unperturbed by her odd behavior and proceeded to lean his head into her hand as though he could teach her how to pet him. His fur was warm, and Preda would never forget the way his purring first felt on her fingertips as she proceeded to shyly rub his chin. The cat took this contact for complete acceptance, and he proceeded to jump past her into her room. Preda gasped and made toward the cat to pick him up and put him outside before her father discovered him. As she neared him, though, she realized she didn’t know how to pick up a cat. *What if I break him?*

The cat seemed to sense her discomfort and continued to lazily explore her room. He was jumping all over her books piled on the floor, sniffing the clothes in her laundry basket with disdain, and inspecting all her belongings in general. Preda carefully followed him with arms outstretched. She had no idea what to do with him and felt better just keeping her hands out toward him in case she had to think fast. The cat finally seemed bored with this game and jumped up onto her bed. He then proceeded to groom himself on her pillow.

Preda sat down next to him and tentatively reached out and stroked his fur again. He closed his eyes and seemed to revel in her attention. This was new for her. *This, she thought, must be what*

making a friend feels like. At least one that's not a plant. As the cat continued to purr and roll slightly toward her, Preda cleared her throat. She had no idea how a cat, or any animal for that matter, would react to her voice, but she wanted to try.

Before she could say anything, though, she heard footsteps and jerked upright. Panic flooded her as the coin on her door handle clattered to the floor. She couldn't do anything fast enough to hide the cat, so she stood at an angle between him and the door. As her father entered, he barely seemed to notice Preda standing as stiff as a board in front of her bed. He took a few unbalanced steps toward her. "How was school?" he said. "You keep your head down, Preda-Tor?"

Preda nodded quietly.

"Good. I'm going out. Don't wait up for me." He gave her a quick appraising look, and with a tinge of sympathy in his voice, he added, "I'm sorry your clothes aren't pretty. I know your mother would have made sure you didn't dress this way."

With that he abruptly turned. He left the door open behind him. Preda stood completely still. She did not even dare to breathe until she heard the front door close. When she was sure he was gone, she sagged in relief and turned around to take care of her new cat problem once and for all. The cat, however, was no longer there. Preda ran to the window just in time to see his tail disappear around the corner of the alley.

She sighed and lamented the loss of a new friend and certainly never expected to see him again.

It's for the best, she thought. Preda would never be able to hide a cat from her father for long.

The next day she was surprised to see that the cat was back on the fire escape waiting for her. He was right outside the window when she came home from school. Preda couldn't believe he had

climbed all five stories again just to see her. Fearing she might lose her chance, she reached out toward him. In a squeaky voice, she said, "Hello."

The cat looked thoroughly unimpressed. Preda thought this might be too good to be true, and she continued, "Do you have a home, alley cat?"

No reaction. She thought she might try to press her luck and tell him to do something. "Eat that tomato."

The cat looked at her and then walked over to the tomato plant. He sniffed the juicy red one Preda had indicated, and then he looked back at her. After a long pause, he reached out and batted the ripened tomato with his paw. He watched as it fell from its vine, rolled off the fire escape, and smashed into the alley. He then sauntered back over to Preda to obtain more chin scratches. Preda could hardly contain her glee. This was a living, breathing thing she could actually talk to. He didn't seem affected by her voice. He actually acted as though he could not care less!

After that the black alley cat with one ear paid Preda a visit every day after school and all day on weekends. Mr. Scott would often call down from his upstairs window and tell her she had found herself quite a handsome cat. Preda figured she imagined it, but whenever the cat was complimented, he seemed to perk up and gain a swagger to his step.

One day Preda returned home from school and found a note on the top of her window. It was from Mr. Scott.

“I’m sorry, Preda. I had to do what was best for that stray cat, and I took him to the local veterinarian for shots and flea medication. I hope you don’t mind. I’ll have him back by tonight for you.

—Mr. Scott”

Preda’s heart was racing. He would certainly bring the cat back when her father was home.

Her fears had been unfounded, though. Mr. Scott seemed to have an uncanny knowledge about Preda’s predicament, and he left the cat in a new pastel blue plastic carrier on her fire escape for her to find later that evening. Next to the carrier was a food dish and a bag of cat food. Gratitude for this man’s consideration overcame her. No one had ever done something out of sheer kindness for Preda, and she wished there was some way she could pay him back.

Preda knew nothing about Mr. Scott except for his love of tomatoes and Audrey Hepburn. She would often leave her window open at night to hear the sweet sounds and melodies of a time long past coming from his apartment. Listening to music like “Moon River” and the soothing cadence of Ms. Hepburn’s voice was almost like having someone sing Preda to sleep. Having Mr. Scott and that cat was almost like having a family.

Preda named the cat Fiver in honor of his five-story feats of strength and daring. Fiver also happened to be the name of a character in one of her favorite books—*Watership Down*.

Fiver became Preda’s best friend. It wasn’t long before he was regularly sleeping on her pillow at night. His favorite place to nest was in her hair, and Preda would wake in instant discomfort and struggle to unknot her hair from around the sleeping feline. For some reason, even though he

had purposefully entangled himself in her hair, she would always feel guilty disturbing him. It was absurd.

Then Preda's newfound comfort in Georgia came crashing to a halt. The fateful day arrived, and her father came home in a drunken stupor. He was yelling about how they had to move. The school had called him about "Preda's antisocial behavior and refusal to speak in class." This never made sense to Preda. Why couldn't he tell them she had some sort of disability that prevented her from speaking? There was no arguing with Phillip Torrance.

Preda fretted about moving the cat and cried herself to sleep that night with her face buried in his soft fur. She cried amid all the boxes piled up around her room. She knew what she had to do and carefully wrote a note to Mr. Scott. She left it taped to the pot of her tomato plant on his fire escape porch.

Dear Mr. Scott,

You will never know how much your kindness meant to me. I will always cherish "Moon River" and the memory of Fiver. Please take care of him. I don't know what my new address will be, but I will try to write to you.

Sincerely,

Preda Torrance

Next to the plant, Preda left Fiver in his carrier with a water dish inside. He didn't protest when she placed him in the carrier and seemed OK with being left in there. That is, until Preda climbed over the railing and he realized he was not going with her.

Preda shut the window painfully, and the glass muffled Fiver's cries. She had to cover her mouth to hold back her own sobs. She quickly composed herself, grabbed the last box, and made her way down to her father's brown station wagon.

Preda sat in the car's backseat. (Her father never allowed her in the front seat.) She waited to leave, and then she saw Mr. Scott come down with a box of his own. Her father approached him next to the car. He suspiciously eyed the box in the older man's arms.

"Just some food for the road and a farewell gift for being such nice neighbors," Al Scott said soothingly.

Phil Torrance curtly grabbed it and mumbled about how he didn't know if they had room in the car. Preda jumped out and held her arms out to take it from him. She silently indicated it would sit on her lap. Her father shrugged and handed it to her before they both got back in the car.

As they drove off that day, Mr. Scott winked at Preda with a knowing smile, and she stared at his kind face for as long as she could until they rounded the corner. Once they were well on the road, Preda peeked under a flap on top of the box and saw the blue carrier inside. Through the slats in the carrier, she could see Fiver sound asleep. Miraculously he stayed that way for the entire twelve-hour trip without making a sound.

Since then Fiver had remained in Preda's life and had always maintained an uncanny ability to stay out of sight whenever her father was around. Preda had never known animals could be that smart but chalked it up to survival instincts. Surely Philip Torrance would have killed the cat had he known about his presence in her life.

She had written to Mr. Scott afterward, but Preda's letter was returned to her almost immediately with a note to say the recipient had moved with no forwarding address.

Standing up in her room alone now, bloodstains from that morning surrounded her. Preda silently lamented her loss of the friend she had had in Mr. Scott. "He will never know how he saved my life through you," she said to the cat.

Preda scooped up the purring cat and placed him onto her shoulder. Fiver perched there with one paw latched on her hood while she sifted through her pile of clothes at the bottom of her closet.

She was not a messy person by nature, but this had been the only way she could keep her cat supplies hidden from her father. It wasn't long before the pastel blue plastic corner was revealed, and she pulled the carrier out. Fiver obediently jumped down and waltzed into it as though it was his idea, and he immediately curled up inside. Preda stuffed the carrier into a cardboard box—they never got rid of those—and looked around one last time.

She shuddered at the thought that she had killed a man there that morning. Preda pushed down a fresh wave of nausea as she wondered if the bodies of her father and his killer were still in the shed in the backyard where she had frantically dragged them that morning before getting on a bus to go to school. They couldn't be if Detective Fox knew what had happened. They must be gone and being autopsied as part of some investigation.

There was nothing else for her here.