

THE REPUBLIC OF PLAYDOUGH

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Also available as an audiobook.

Cover illustration by Susie and Heidi

Chapter One: The Floor Rainbow

Kyle sat on the black leather sofa in a patch of sunlight cleaning his paws. He had just woken up from a long nap.

Kyle's paws did not need cleaning, but Kyle was bored and he could think of nothing better to do.

When he was done, Kyle tucked in his tongue, retracted his claws and stretched a big stretchy stretch. He opened his mouth wide and yawned.

Kyle looked outside and saw a blanket of white snow where the garden had been.

On the branch hanging over the yard sat the black squirrel. Kyle usually enjoyed chasing the black squirrel, but today was different. Today Kyle was enjoying the feeling of warm sunlight on his fur so much that he didn't feel like chasing anything.

Kyle turned his attention to Heidi and Susie. The twins were sitting at the kitchen table. They were arguing.

"My pile is bigger than yours," said Heidi.

"No," said Susie. "My pile is bigger than *yours*." Susie sounded irritated.

Kyle leapt from the sofa and wandered into the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"We're ripping up our toast," said Heidi.

"Why?" said Kyle.

"Whoever does it faster gets to put their pieces on the floor first," said Susie.

"Why?" said Kyle.

"To feed the rainbow," said Heidi. She pointed to a spot on the floor. "So it will stay."

Kyle looked down at a small coloured rectangle that had settled onto the floor below the fish tank.

"Nice," said Kyle. He liked the red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple stripes of the rainbow. "Did you make it?" The twins were always making new things from the odds and ends they kept in their craft box.

"No," said Susie. "It's magic. It just appeared. And we want it to stay."

"It's our new pet," said Heidi. "We need to feed it." She tossed her toast bits onto the rainbow. Susie threw her toast on top of Heidi's.

Kyle and the twins watched the rainbow. Nothing happened. Then the kitchen grew dim. Sunlight had stopped flowing through the window.

Heidi looked out. "Clouds are covering our part of the sky," she said.

Susie gasped. She was staring at the floor.

The rainbow was no longer there.

"It disappeared!" said Susie.

"We took too long to feed it," said Heidi.

"Maybe rainbows don't eat toast," said Kyle. "Maybe rainbows eat other food." Kyle thought for a moment. "Try feeding it mine."

Mom was nursing Erik in the other room so the twins found Kyle's food themselves. It was in a small green bowl tucked under the stairs.

Kyle rolled his eyes. "Tuna," he said. "I hate tuna. I don't know why Mom keeps putting it into my bowl."

Susie used her princess magic wand to move the bowl closer so Heidi could reach it. Heidi carried the bowl into the kitchen. Kyle trotted behind.

"Where should I put it?" said Heidi.

"Here," said Kyle. He indicated the pile of toast.

Heidi turned the green bowl upside down. Kyle's tuna went *splunch* when it hit the floor. Kyle and the twins waited to see if the rainbow would return.

Susie turned to Kyle. "Why don't you like tuna?"

"Because I eat mice," said Kyle.

"We don't have any mice," said Heidi.

"That's because I eat them," said Kyle. "But the mice eat the tuna, and I eat the mice so it works out."

Suddenly, the kitchen turned bright. Sunlight poured through the window into the fish tank and fell in a rainbow arc to the floor.

"Look!" said Susie. "Our rainbow is back!" The shimmering rectangle had indeed returned.

"Looks like it eats tuna," said Kyle. He went back to the black leather sofa. He was ready for another long nap.

Mom came into the kitchen with Erik. She saw the empty plates on the table.

"Did you girls finish your toast?" Mom asked. She looked closer. "Even the crusts? There's not a crumb left on your plates!"

Mom turned to the twins. "What's going on? You never finish your crusts."

Mom put Erik into his bouncer. He was kicking so hard it took her a moment to fit his chubby legs into the holes.

Mom looked down at the floor. She frowned when she saw the toast and the cat food. Susie fiddled with her purple butterfly hair clips. Heidi opened her rainbow blue eyes wide.

The twins could see Mom was angry.

"I see cat food and toast on the floor," said Mom. "Why?"

Heidi turned to Susie.

"The rainbow didn't like our toast and disappeared so Kyle told us to share his food with the rainbow and we did and Kyle was right because the rainbow came back," said Susie.

Mom looked at Kyle. He was asleep on the black leather sofa.

"Kyle is a cat," said Mom.

Heidi nodded. "Yes," said Heidi. "Kyle is a cat."

"Cats don't talk," said Mom.

"Kyle talks," said Heidi.

Mom looked at Kyle. "Kyle," she said. "Did you tell the twins to put your cat food on the floor?"

Kyle looked up and said nothing.

"See," said Mom. "You can't blame this on the cat."

Mom brought out the compost bucket and a scoop.

"Don't take away the rainbow's food," said Susie. "It will go away again!"

"Rainbows do not need food," said Mom. "Rainbows need water and sunshine."

Mom moved the fish tank away from the window so that the sunlight coming through the pane no longer shone through the tank.

Mom pointed at the floor.

"See," she said. "No rainbow."

Mom moved the tank back beside the window. Sunlight again streamed through the water onto the floor. The rainbow reappeared.

"The water turns the sunlight into a rainbow," said Mom.

The twins looked down at the rainbow.



They took turns moving the fish tank away from the window and back again to see what the rainbow would do.

When Susie was satisfied that Mom was right about the rainbow she got out two scoops. She handed one to Heidi. The twins helped Mom clean up the floor and then they got out soapy rags and polished the floor rainbow until it shone.

Mom put two fresh pieces of toast on their plates.

Heidi and Susie sat on either side of the floor rainbow to eat their toast. And this time, they ate every crumb.

Chapter Two: The Black Cat

Kyle woke up from a long nap. He was feeling restless. He had been feeling restless a lot lately. The restlessness came suddenly, like a cramp or a sneeze. It made Kyle feel as if mice were chasing each other in his tummy.

Kyle looked outside. Something inexplicable had happened while he was napping. The trees and the neighbour's houses were glazed with ice, and the yard had become a rink. The twins were sliding around the rink on their hands and knees. They were wearing skates on their feet.

On the branch hanging over the yard sat the black squirrel. Today Kyle found the black squirrel especially irritating. It was always staring at him. Its eyes, two shining black marbles, seemed to follow Kyle everywhere.

Kyle felt the mice in his tummy chasing each other again, which made him think about chasing the squirrel. Kyle went to the sliding glass door and called out. He could tell the twins apart by their snowsuits. Heidi opened the door. She was wearing the blue snowsuit. Kyle rushed out.

"We're skating," said Susie. She was wearing the purple snowsuit.

"You're crawling around on your hands and knees," said Kyle.

He leapt deftly onto the ice and pushed off with his right hind leg.

Kyle sailed to the far side of the rink and then he sailed back again. "That's skating," he said.

Kyle did not look up, but he knew the squirrel was staring down at him.

Kyle stopped skating. "The squirrel is staring at me," he said. "Make it stop."

"How?" asked Heidi.

"Toss a snowball at it," said Kyle.

The snow was dry and powdery, like sugar. It was the wrong type of snow for making snowballs. Heidi and Susie filled their mittens with compost from the bucket instead. They threw handfuls of compost at the squirrel, but the squirrel did not move.

Kyle skated back and forth pondering the best way to catch the squirrel. Kyle decided that the squirrel would have to come down from the tree or Kyle would have to climb up. Kyle immediately saw a problem. The trunk of the tree the squirrel was on was slick with ice.

Kyle turned to Susie. "How about knocking the ice off that trunk?"

"Why?" asked Susie.

"You'll see," said Kyle.

Susie pulled a purple shovel from the snow and whacked it against the trunk. The ice collapsed into sharp daggers. Susie picked up an ice dagger and began to lick it. Dye leaked from her purple mittens into the dagger turning it pink. Susie stuck

the rest of the ice daggers into the snow with the pointy tips up.

It was almost Valentine's Day so she arranged them into a heart shape.

Meanwhile, Kyle was thinking about the squirrel. He decided that he had to surprise the squirrel in order to capture it. He had to corner it while it was still on the branch otherwise the squirrel would scramble down the trunk and escape.

Kyle leapt to the base of the trunk, snapped out his claws and started to climb. He looked up. The black marble eyes were staring down at him.

At last Kyle reached the branch where the squirrel was sitting. "I trapped you," Kyle told it.

The squirrel remained silent and as still as stone.

Kyle inched along the branch toward the squirrel. He did this carefully because the branch was slick with ice. As he crept closer, Kyle began to think about what he would do with the squirrel when he caught it. He had never got this close to one before.

Then the squirrel did something unexpected. It launched itself into a perfect arc over Kyle's head. The squirrel landed in the snow at the base of the tree.

Then it scampered around the corner of the house and out of sight.

Kyle looked down from the branch. He felt queasy. The ground was further down than he had calculated. He noticed Susie's ice daggers for the first time. They glittered like teeth. Kyle would land directly on top of their pointy pink tips if he fell straight down from the branch.

Suddenly Kyle felt himself wobbling. His claws were losing their grip. Then Kyle slid off the branch. He was surprised to find how fast he was falling.

The pointy pink tips of Susie's ice daggers were getting closer. Kyle screamed, "Help!"

At that moment a small black cat tiptoed into the yard. The cat positioned itself beneath the tree and looked up. "Wiggle your tail, Kyle, and spread out your paws. Aim away from the ice daggers," said the small black cat. "Your body will float down like a parachute. Cats can fall 19 stories and land without a scratch."

Kyle wiggled his tail vigorously, spread out his paws and aimed his body away from the ice daggers. He tumbled into the soft snow beside the small black cat.

"I'm okay!" said Kyle. "Thank you."

The twins hugged Kyle. Susie turned to the small black cat. "Thank you for saving Kyle."

The black cat smiled. It shook the snow from its fur and trotted to the stone stoop outside the sliding glass door. It held its head high and tilted its little chin as if it was balancing a crown. The cat sat down on the stoop and coiled its tail round its body. Its black fur was glossy, like wet paint. It wore little white socks that came up to its knees and a little white collar around its neck.



Kyle sat down beside the black cat. "I am Kyle. And these are the twins. Who are you?"

"My name is Socates," said the black cat. The cat's voice rumbled in a comforting manner.

"You saved my life," said Kyle.

"Not exactly," said Socates. "All cats are born with nine lives. We cats try our best to keep all nine for as long as we can. Your foolish desire to chase that squirrel could have used up one of your precious nine lives. But I happened to be in the neighbourhood and noticed you needed help. I saved one of your lives so you still have nine lives left. And if you learn from your mistakes and try to be wise, you'll always have nine."

"Nine lives!" said Kyle. This was new information.

"How many lives do we have?" asked Heidi.

"One each," said Socates.

"How come Kyle has nine?" asked Susie. "That doesn't seem fair."

Socrates was silent for a moment. He was thinking. Finally he turned to Susie. His eyes were the same size and colour of gold as the twins' favorite craft beads.

"Kyle is a cat," said Socrates, "And you, Susie and Heidi, are human. And I would say that it is fair for a cat to have nine lives and for you humans to have one. Humans are born with big brains and they learn how to take care of themselves and others. Each human life can be very long, which gives each human plenty of time to do wonderful things. Humans don't need nine lives. We cats, on the other hand, are curious creatures, forever putting ourselves in danger. Too often we lose many of our lives foolishly. Like Kyle almost did. That's why most cats need every one of their nine lives. I myself lost three when I was still a young and foolish cat learning how to take care of myself."

"So you're saying we cats spend a lot of time not knowing how to take care of ourselves," said Kyle.

Socrates took a deep breath. He let it out slowly. "What I am saying," said Socrates, "is that young cats like you often need many lives to learn how to get along in the world. To learn how to be happy and how to bring joy and peace to yourselves and to others."

At that moment, Mom appeared at the sliding glass door. She was carrying Erik in the backpack. She had been upstairs vacuuming and had missed all the excitement. Erik chuckled when he saw Socrates.

Socrates smiled back at the child. Then the small black cat rose from the stoop and disappeared around the corner.

"What's going on," said Mom. She was staring at the snow beneath the tree. "Why is compost all over the yard?"

"Kyle asked us to throw a snow ball at the squirrel," said Heidi.

"Why?" said Mom.

Heidi turned to Susie.

"So he wouldn't have to climb the tree to get the squirrel and be in danger but we couldn't make snowballs so we used compost but the compost didn't work and the squirrel stayed in the tree staring at Kyle," said Susie.

"So Kyle had to climb the tree," said Heidi.

"But he slipped and fell. Then Socates came and saved him so Kyle still has nine lives," said Susie.

"Who's Socates?" said Mom.

"The small black cat," said Heidi. "He was just here—with the white socks and the white collar."

Mom looked around the yard. She turned to Heidi. "I do not see any such cat."

"Well, we saw Socates and he told us that cats start out with nine lives," said Susie, "but we only have one. Socates says that's fair because humans are smart so we don't need nine lives."

"That's partly right," said Mom. "It's a *fair-y* tale. Cats in fairy tales have nine lives. In real life, they have one, same as us."

Susie shook her head. "It's not a fairy tale. Socates said it so it's true."

Mom sighed. It was lunch time. She opened the sliding glass door and they all went inside to eat peanut butter sandwiches.

After lunch, the twins cuddled under their blanket on the black leather sofa to watch cartoons. They left enough space so that Kyle could curl up between them.

Kyle was no longer feeling restless. The mice had stopped running around in his tummy. He fell asleep wondering if the small black cat would come back.

Chapter Three: The Garbage Truck

Kyle woke up from an extra-long nap. He opened one sapphire blue eye, then the other.

He looked out and saw the black squirrel was back on its branch. Today, the sunlight had turned everything golden. Kyle wanted to go back to sleep, but he also wanted to see what Heidi and Susie were doing. The twins were sitting at the kitchen table. On top of her head, Susie had arranged her purple rabbit ear muffs, purple sleeping mask and her recycled purple tiara. Heidi was wearing her hockey helmet. The twins were delicately nibbling the whites from boiled eggs and lining up the bald yolks.

"Let's make the kitchen sunny and bright," said Susie.

"It already is," said Heidi, squinting. "I need sunglasses."

"No," said Susie. "I mean let's decorate it. We can make it *more* sunnier, *more* brighter—*more yellow*."

Kyle left the black leather sofa and sauntered over. "How are you planning to do that?" he said.

"You'll see," said Susie. She put the yolks into a bowl and dumped in the milk from the bottom of her cup. She looked at Heidi. "I need a fork and a paint brush."

Heidi nodded. She brought two forks from the drawer and two paintbrushes from the craft box. The twins smashed the yolks

into the milk with the forks until the mixture looked just right. They did this quietly because Erik was napping on Mom's lap in the next room. Mom was looking at pictures of new kitchen cupboards on her computer.

"If we decorate the white cupboards Mom won't need to buy new cupboards," said Susie.

"True," said Heidi. "We'd be helping." She dipped her paintbrush into the yolk mixture and painted the outline of a sun and its spreading rays on the cupboard beneath the sink. Then she dabbed on more yolk paint to fill it in.

"Nice sun," said Susie. Susie started on the cupboard beside the fridge.

Kyle watched until the twins had each painted big suns on four cupboards, at which point he felt the mice in his tummy begin to stir.

He returned to the black leather sofa and fished out a marble from underneath. He gave it a couple of swats.

Something caught Kyle's attention. He turned to the sliding glass door.

On the other side of the glass was the black squirrel. It was sitting on the stone stoop, and its black marble eyes were staring at Kyle.

"I need out," said Kyle.

Heidi opened the door, and Kyle rushed out. He disappeared around the corner.

"I think we better follow him," said Susie. She took off the ear muffs, the sleeping mask and the tiara and put on her monkey hat. She adjusted it so the monkey's eyes faced forward. The hat was tight. Susie had been wearing it since

she was a baby. Then she put on her purple snowsuit and her boots.

Heidi put on her frog hat. She left the frog's eyes facing sideways.

By the time the twins reached the end of the driveway, Kyle was zigzagging down the middle of Malcolm Street. It was one of the dangerous times of the day when the street filled with cars bringing people home from work. Kyle was not paying attention to the traffic.

The twins stopped to look both ways before crossing to the far sidewalk.

"We'd better hurry," said Heidi. Cars were honking at Kyle.

Then Susie pointed up. "Look."

She was pointing at the black squirrel. It was slipping through the giant oak trees that lined the street, leaping deftly from one branch to the next.

The twins heard clattering. The clattering sounded like pebbles striking the pavement. When Heidi and Susie got closer, they saw why Kyle was not paying attention to the cars. The squirrel was tossing down acorns, and Kyle was batting them back and forth across the street.

A red car squealed and swerved around Kyle. Kyle continued weaving down the street like a hockey player chasing a puck.

"Kyle," called Susie. "Get on the sidewalk!"

Suddenly, they heard a gigantic groan. A huge garbage truck had just turned the corner onto Malcolm Street. It was heading straight for Kyle.

Susie jumped up and down, waving to get the driver's attention. The driver smiled at Susie and waved back. The

huge garbage truck did not slow down. It was getting closer and closer to Kyle.

"Kyle!" Heidi screamed.

"Look behind you!" Susie screamed.

But Kyle was not listening. He was too busy chasing acorns.

The garbage collector standing on the platform at the back of the truck was wearing headphones. She was listening to music and so she did not hear the twins scream.

Then the twins heard a voice, a voice they had heard before.

"Crouch down Kyle," commanded the voice. "Do as I say. Now."

Kyle crouched down, and not a moment too soon. The huge garbage truck rolled over him as it roared it way down Malcolm Street. It left behind a trail of thick grey soot and a horrible smell of rotting fish and poopy diapers.

The small black cat emerged from the soot.

"Socrates!" screamed the twins.

Behind Socrates trotted Kyle. Kyle looked sheepish.

"Thanks to Socrates, I'm okay," Kyle said.

"Indeed, my friend, you were being foolish again," said Socrates. "That foolishness almost cost you a life. Lucky for you I just happened to be passing by so you still have nine lives."

"I was too busy chasing acorns to notice the garbage truck," said Kyle. He was looking down at his paws, too ashamed to look at Socrates.

"Small cats are no match for big garbage trucks. It is foolish to think otherwise," said Socates. "But you are a smart cat so you will learn from your mistakes."

Socates pointed at an acorn lying on the pavement. The acorn was as flat as an old penny.

"That might have been you."

Kyle stared at the acorn. Even its jaunty little cap had been flattened.

Kyle nodded. "I need to think before I do something," he said.

"Very wise, Kyle," said Socates. "You must learn that actions have consequences."

The twins and Kyle said goodbye to Socates and turned homeward. When Susie looked back to wave, the small black cat was out of sight.

They walked home in silence under the canopy of giant oak trees.

Mom and Erik were in the kitchen. Erik was leaping in his bouncer and chuckling. He had just woken up from a nap.

Mom was on the floor squeezing a rag over a bucket of soapy water. The twins saw that all but one of their yellow yolk suns had disappeared from the cupboards.

Mom pointed to the one remaining sun. "I'm sure you can explain," she said.

Heidi turned to Susie.

"We were tired of white cupboards so we decorated them with yellow suns," said Susie. "Yellow is pretty."

"We wanted you to like what we did so you would keep these cupboards," said Heidi.

"We don't want you to throw these cupboards in the garbage because then the garbage truck would have to come back and take them away," said Susie.

"We don't want the garbage truck to come back," said Heidi.

Mom looked puzzled. "Why not," she said.

"We don't like garbage trucks because one of them almost squished Kyle. Garbage trucks are big and fast and stinky and dangerous. If we don't throw things away, then we won't need garbage trucks," said Susie.

Mom looked at Kyle. He was settling down for a nap on the black leather sofa.

"Kyle looks fine," said Mom.

"That's because Socates saved him," said Susie. "Or else Kyle would have been as flat as the acorn. He almost lost one of his lives."

"I told you," said Mom. "That's just in fairy tales. Cats don't really have nine lives."

"That is true for some cats," said Heidi. "Socates lost three of his lives when he was a young and foolish kitten so now he only has six left."

"Who told you that," said Mom.

"Socates," said Heidi. "Who else?"

Mom got out two more rags. She handed one to Susie and the other to Heidi. "If you want to keep these cupboards out of the garbage, you better help me take care of them," she said. "You dirty them, you clean them. Actions have consequences."

"That's what Socates said," said Susie.

Mom smiled as the twins scrubbed away the last yolk sun while on the black leather sofa Kyle fell asleep dreaming of his next adventure.

Chapter Four: The Jaws

Kyle woke up on the black leather sofa after a long nap. He stretched a big stretchy stretch and held the pose for a moment while he thought about how to start the day.

He looked out and saw the black squirrel on the branch over the yard. Kyle yawned.

Heidi and Susie were sitting at the kitchen table. As usual Susie was wearing her purple rabbit ear muffs, purple sleeping mask and recycled purple tiara and Heidi was wearing her hockey helmet.

Mom had given them some playdough because they had promised to play with it quietly while she napped with Erik in the next room.

Lined up on the table were several bright yellow plastic containers. Inside each was the very best kind of playdough.

The twins considered it the very best because the playdough had never been played with. The bright colours were still perfect.

Each colour looked exactly like the colour shown on the outside of its container. That was the way playdough always began when it was new.

Heidi and Susie had removed the plastic tops from each container. Now they were staring at the row of containers enfolding those perfect colours. They were wondering what to make.

"With these colours, I am going to make a garden," said Susie. "I will make eggplants on a vine, and broccoli, carrots and zucchini hiding under big green leaves. And bush beans. And beets. And basil. And of course black-eyed Susans."

"I think I'll make a snake," said Heidi. She looked at each of the bright colours. "A purple snake."

Kyle leapt down from the black leather sofa. He wandered into the kitchen. He wanted to see how Susie would make her garden.

He also wanted to see Heidi make her snake.

Susie rolled a small bit of purple playdough into a plump oblong. Then she rolled out a tiny green ball and fashioned it into a tiny cup. She placed the purple oblong into the cup. Then she added a green stem to the cup and rolled out more green strips to make the vine and the leaves. "There," she said, "my first eggplant."

"How many eggplants are you going to make," said Kyle.

"Six," said Susie. "All on the same vine."

Kyle watched Susie rolling out colours until she had a row of delicate orange carrots with feathery light green tops, bright purple beets with dark green tops, a row of basil with bright lemon-yellow stripes, and a vine with a fine crop of purple eggplants. Then she rolled out bright yellow discs, green stems, brown centres and teeny orange stamens. These would become the black-eyed Susans.

Susie's garden looked good enough to eat.

Kyle turned to Heidi. "What about your snake," he said.

Heidi was staring forlornly at Susie's garden.

"Think about what a snake looks like," said Kyle. He was trying to be helpful.

Heidi looked thoughtful for a moment. Then she rolled out six tiny green S-shaped tubes for bodies and twelve tiny yellow balls for eyes. She placed two yellow balls at one end of each of the green tubes and pushed the eye balls in with her thumbs.

"Phooey," she said. "I forgot I wanted to make my snakes purple." Heidi took out several bits of purple playdough and rolled out six more tubes. "But I don't want to waste the green. So I will add the purple on top," she said. Heidi's snakes turned purplish-green.

"Snakes have tongues too," said Kyle. "Forked tongues."

Heidi nodded. She took a small bit of red playdough and rolled out six tiny red strips. She used her fingernail to divide the end of each strip into a fork shape. She stuck the red strips on the purplish-green bodies just below the yellow eyes.

"There," she said. "Tongues. Now my snakes are ready to sneak into Susie's garden."

Susie was busy rolling out more vegetables for her garden. She had just finished the bush beans. She turned to Heidi. "Your snakes are not coming into my garden," she said.

"They are," said Heidi. "To eat bugs. They are garden snakes."

"I don't have bugs in my garden," said Susie.

"Then I will make bugs," said Heidi.

But there was no brown playdough.

Heidi looked at the containers. She was thinking.

She took a small bit of red playdough and a small bit of blue playdough and squished them together between her thumb and her first finger.

Heidi smiled. "I made your first bug," she said.

"It's not my bug," said Susie. "It's your bug. Keep it with your snakes."

"I can't," said Heidi. "My snakes will eat it."

"It's true," said Kyle. "Snakes eat bugs."

"I better make more bugs," said Heidi.

Heidi rolled out more bugs. She continued to make bugs, each bug bigger than the last, until she had created a large colony and there was no more playdough in either container.

"Those are big bugs," said Kyle. "They look like walnuts. Your snakes won't be able to eat them."

"Then I will make bugs my snakes can eat," said Heidi. She looked at the containers. There was still plenty of orange and white and black playdough left. "I will make ladybugs for the snakes."

Heidi's bug collection soon included a large number of orange ladybugs. Each one had tiny white and black spots. "There," she said. "Now the snakes won't be hungry."

"My garden is too close to your bugs," said Susie. She moved herself and her garden to the other side of the table. During the move, Susie's vegetables accidentally mixed together. They turned into a brown jumble. Susie started to sob.

"You made compost," said Heidi. "Good job."

Susie stopped crying. "I'm done gardening," she said. She opened the sliding glass door and threw her playdough compost into the back yard.

Heidi carefully carried her playdough bugs outside and arranged them on top of Susie's playdough compost.

"Thanks," she said. "Now my bugs will have something to eat."

The twins stood in front of the sliding glass door looking out at the back yard. They were wondering what to do next.

They saw that the black squirrel had come down from its usual branch. In its mouth was one of Heidi's playdough bugs.

"It shouldn't be eating my bugs," said Heidi. "Squirrels are supposed to eat nuts."

Kyle jumped down from the black leather sofa and wandered over. He had been trying to settle down for a nap. "Your bugs look like nuts," said Kyle.

The squirrel was still carrying the playdough nut in its mouth when it scurried around the corner.

"I need to go out," said Kyle.

"Why," said Susie.

"I want to know where the squirrel is taking that playdough nut," said Kyle.

Heidi opened the sliding glass door, and Kyle ran out. He disappeared around the corner.

"I think we better follow him," said Heidi.

Susie nodded. "He's not taking good care of his lives."

The twins pulled on their snowsuits and grabbed their mittens.

By the time they reached the end of the driveway, Kyle was chasing the squirrel toward the Jaws. The Jaws was the most dangerous part of the river. The Jaws was where the water sped up as the river squeezed itself between tall stone walls.

There the dark water fumed over huge rocks whose sharp tips pointed up through the rushing water like fangs.

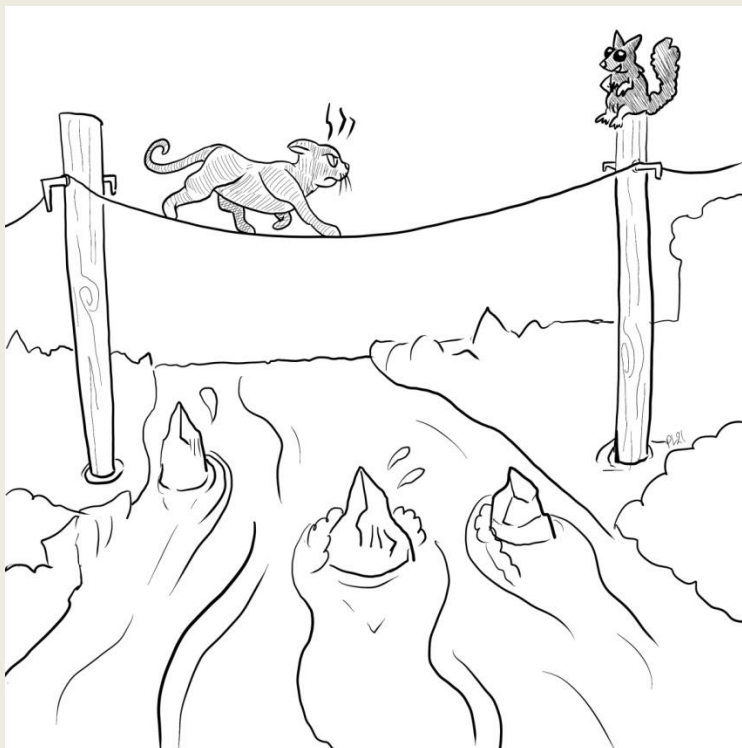
The twins ran toward the Jaws. They could hear the roaring sound the river made.

"I think we should stop," said Susie.

"Kyle's not stopping," said Heidi. She pointed. "I think he's heading for trouble." Kyle and the squirrel had reached the hydro pole beside the flat stones that ran alongside the Jaws.

The squirrel scrambled up the hydro pole until it reached the silver power line. The power line stretched like a tightrope over the Jaws to the power station. The squirrel leapt onto the power line and started to cross over the Jaws. It was still carrying the playdough nut in its mouth.

Kyle followed the squirrel up the hydro pole and was soon tiptoeing after it along the silver power line.



The twins screamed, "No, Kyle, no!"

But Kyle was already suspended halfway across the Jaws. He was whisking his tail briskly to keep his balance.

Then Kyle made an unfortunate mistake. He looked down at the angry water as it came pouring through the Jaws.

He noticed for the first time the wisps of shimmering mist rising like breath from the churning river and the half-hidden rocks with their sharp tips. Kyle shivered, and then he felt himself let go and into the mist he found himself falling faster than he thought it was possible to fall.

Heidi and Susie heard Kyle scream as he splashed into the water.

The twins stared into the grey mist that shrouded the river hoping to see Kyle swimming toward them. "Kyle, please come!" said Susie. "Follow my voice!"

"Hop on a rock, Kyle," commanded a familiar voice. "There is one directly in front of you. Wait for me. I'm coming."

"Socrates!" shouted the twins. "You came!" But Socrates was hidden in the mist.

Suddenly the mist dissolved, and now the twins could see Socrates and Kyle swimming toward shore. Socrates was pulling Kyle with his tail.

At last the two small cats clambered onto the river bank. With their wet fur hugging their bodies each cat looked no bigger than a squirrel. Both were shivering vigorously.

Heidi and Susie rubbed them dry with their mittens.

When Socrates and Kyle looked like themselves again, Susie said, "Kyle, you almost drowned."

"You need to stop chasing the squirrel," said Heidi.

Kyle sighed and looked down at his paws. As usual, he felt ashamed.

"Heidi is wise," said Socates. "You, Kyle, were not."

"But I wanted to see what the squirrel did with its nuts," said Kyle. "That's why I followed it."

"I understand," said Socates. "We cats *are* curious. But curiosity is hardly worth a life."

"I understand and I will try to do better," said Kyle.

The small black cat nodded. "Luckily I learned how to swim so you still have all nine of your lives. Be wise and keep them safe."

With that, Socates waved one white paw and disappeared into a thicket.

The twins and Kyle slowly walked home.

Kyle went straight to the black leather sofa. He needed a nap.

Mom was feeding Erik in the kitchen. Both Erik and Erik's high chair were covered with a sticky brownish mess. Erik was in the process of smearing spinach and carrots and spaghetti sauce together to see what new colours he could make.

Mom pointed to the playdough on the table. "Those are nice snakes, Susie," she said.

"I made them," said Heidi, "along with some bugs. Susie made compost. It's in the back yard."

"How did that happen?" said Mom.

Heidi turned to Susie.

"I made a beautiful garden with eggplants on vines and carrots and beets and bush beans and lemon basil and black-eyed Susans," said Susie. "Then Heidi said she was going to

put her snakes in my garden to eat bugs but I said no, I didn't have bugs, and then she made bugs to feed the snakes but her bugs were as big as nuts so I moved my garden away and all the vegetables got jumbled together and turned to compost."

Susie looked solemn. She was remembering her ruined garden.

"At least the playdough kept you out of trouble," said Mom.

"Yes," said Heidi. "But it didn't keep Kyle out of trouble."

"What do you mean," said Mom.

Heidi turned to Susie.

"The squirrel thought Heidi's playdough bugs were nuts and carried one away to bury it and Kyle was curious to see where the squirrel was going to bury it and so Kyle followed the squirrel down the street and up the silver line that goes across the river and then he fell into the Jaws but Socates saved him," said Susie. "Don't worry, Kyle still has all of his nine lives."

Mom looked at the black leather sofa where Kyle was curled up asleep. She smiled. "I can hardly wait to hear what happens next." And then Mom picked up a cloth and began to wipe Erik's face.

Chapter Five: The Bead Trail

Kyle had been awake for some time.

He was sitting on the black leather sofa with his tail coiled tightly around him.

He was staring at the black squirrel.

The squirrel was sitting on the stone stoop. The black marble eyes were staring back at Kyle.

Months had passed since Kyle's experience in the Jaws, that most dangerous part of the river. Now Kyle found himself less inclined to take unnecessary risks.

He was staring at the squirrel to test this resolve.

Kyle meant to stay out of trouble.

He told himself that he would never again let the squirrel fool him into a chase Kyle knew in his heart he could never win. And so he sat daring the squirrel to taunt him.

Mom was on the phone upstairs, and Erik was napping on her lap.

Heidi and Susie were sitting at the kitchen table. They were inserting plastic string into the holes of coloured beads.

"It's not long enough," said Susie. "It's got to be long enough to cross over the Jaws. Like Kyle and the squirrel did."

Hearing his name, Kyle leapt from the black leather sofa and trotted into the kitchen.

"What are you making," said Kyle.

"A tightrope," said Heidi.

"It looks like a giant necklace," said Kyle.

"We're going to test you," said Susie.

"Doing what," said Kyle.

"You're going to learn to walk on it in case you ever have to cross the Jaws on that silver rope again."

"Nope," said Kyle. "I am not doing that."

He still had nine lives left and he did not intend to waste them on such silliness.

"You're not really going to cross the Jaws," said Susie. "You're just going to walk the tightrope to practise your balance. In case you ever need good balance."

"In case the squirrel teases you again, and you decide to chase it," said Heidi.

The twins went on stringing beads.

Susie looked at Kyle. "Take the other end and stretch it out as far as it will go," she said.

Kyle was happy to grab hold of the string. He loved string, especially if something was attached to it. He grabbed one end and tiptoed backwards to the sliding glass door.

"That's probably long enough," he said. "You can stop adding beads. Anyway, Mom says you're not supposed to be playing with beads in the house."

"That's why we are taking them outside," said Susie. "We will lay the string on the snow and you will practise walking on it until you learn to balance on it."

Heidi opened the sliding glass door. "We will show you how," she said.

Susie laid the string of beads down in a straight line that stretched from one end of the yard to the other.

Heidi went first. She tiptoed along the beads, holding her arms straight out to each side. She wobbled a little but managed to keep both feet walking on the string without falling off until she got about halfway along. Then she lost her balance and toppled into the snow.

It was Susie's turn next. She took a few steps before she wobbled off the string.

Susie turned to Kyle. "Your turn," she said.

Kyle tiptoed from one end of the string to the other and then back again. He hopped off into the snow and then bowed to the twins. "Ta da!" he said.

"Wow," said Heidi.

"I bet you could cross the Jaws now," said Susie.

"Maybe," said Kyle. "But I'm not going to try. Besides, walking on string that's lying on the ground isn't a real test. A real test is walking on Mom's clothesline."

Kyle studied the clothesline for a few moments. He calculated how high he would have to jump and then he jumped onto it. He tiptoed back and forth several times like a dancer doing a cha-cha. He grinned down at the twins. "Easy-peasy," he said.

Something on the branch above his head caught Kyle's attention. He looked up. The black marble eyes were staring down.

The squirrel, however, was not looking at Kyle. The squirrel's attention was focused on the string of beads.

Suddenly the squirrel sprang down from the tree and grabbed one end of the string in its mouth.

Then, in the blink of an eye, Kyle saw the squirrel and the last bead in the string disappear around the corner.

The last bead was the glittery purple one that Susie had to put on. Heidi had given up trying to fit the string through the tiny hole.

"Don't worry," said Kyle. "I'll get your beads back." And then he too disappeared around the corner.

"We'd better follow him," said Heidi.

Susie nodded.

When the twins reached the end of the driveway, they looked both ways on Malcolm Street. They saw no sign of Kyle or the black squirrel.

Then something caught Susie's eye. One orange bead and two red beads glittered on the pavement in front of the driveway.

Heidi spotted one blue bead and three green beads near the gutter.

They walked a few steps and found more beads.

"Oh dear," said Susie. "I forgot to tie a knot on the end of the string. The beads are falling off!"

The twins kept their heads down as they walked. They were collecting beads and putting them in the pockets of their snowsuits. The bead trail wound in and out of gardens and yards on Malcolm Street and finally led to a winding path through a prickly thicket by the river bank.

The twins found Kyle and the black squirrel sitting in the melting snow at the water's edge.

Kyle and the squirrel were staring at each other. From the squirrel's mouth, the remnants of the bead string dangled. Kyle's eyes were fixed on the string.

He was poised to spring.

Suddenly the squirrel leapt onto a small patch of ice floating close to shore. The ice drifted down the river carrying with it the squirrel and the beads.

Another patch of ice floated close to shore. Kyle sprang onto it. The ice wobbled when he landed almost toppling him into the river.

"Kyle," Susie screamed. "Don't go any further. Get off and swim back."

But Kyle was not paying attention. He was too busy trying to stay afloat on the wobbly ice.

The squirrel with the string of beads in its mouth sat primly on its patch of ice watching Kyle.

Then, as smooth as an otter, the squirrel slipped into the water. It swam back to shore where Heidi and Susie were standing. The squirrel dropped the string of beads and then disappeared into a thicket.

Meanwhile Kyle was drifting further down the river.

"I wonder if Socates knows Kyle's in trouble," said Heidi.

"I hope so," said Susie.

"Of course I do," said a familiar voice.

The small black cat emerged from a thicket.

Socrates looked down at the string of beads the squirrel had abandoned. He turned to Heidi. "Hold one end of the string and toss the other end into the water as far as you can like you do when you're fishing." Heidi pulled her right arm back the way she did with her fishing pole and cast the end of the beaded string as far into the water as she could.

Socrates shouted to Kyle. "Jump into the water, Kyle, do the cat-paddle until you reach the string. Then grab hold of one end with your mouth. We will grab the other end and pull you to shore."

Kyle did what Socrates told him to do. He jumped into the river, disappeared for an instant beneath the dark surface and bobbed up. Kyle cat-paddled vigorously toward the string and when he reached it he clamped his mouth shut over the end.

Then Heidi and Susie and Socates grabbed their end of the string and began to pull. They pulled and pulled as hard as they could until they had pulled Kyle safely to shore.

Kyle wasn't used to swimming. He was out of breath. He bowed his head to Socates. "I think I'm okay," he said. "But I'm really sorry you had to save me again."

"Indeed," said Socates. "I happened to be in the neighbourhood and heard you needed help." The small black cat held up one paw and counted the number of toes out loud. "One-two-three-four-five. That's how many lives you might have lost if I hadn't been around to help you."

Kyle nodded forlornly. "I know," he said. "It's the squirrel."

"No," said Socates. "Don't blame the squirrel. It's your own foolishness that gets you into trouble. But all is not lost if you have learned a good lesson."

"I've learned that if I want to keep all my lives, I need to stop chasing that squirrel," said Kyle. "And I need to stop chasing string."

"And what else?" said Socates.

"I think I need to use my head before I use my feet," said Kyle.

Socates nodded. "I think so too. You are indeed a smart cat."

"I think we've had enough lessons for one day. I think it's time to go home," said Heidi.

"I think I'll follow the beads all the way," said Susie.

Socates smiled and waved and then disappeared into the thicket.

When the twins and Kyle arrived home, Mom was in the kitchen making dinner. Erik was frog leaping in his jumper and chuckling.

Kyle went straight to the black leather sofa. Today's adventure had tuckered him out. He curled up with his tail coiled around him and immediately fell asleep.

"Thanks for cleaning up your craft beads," said Mom. "I couldn't find a single bead on the floor."

"We didn't clean them up," said Susie. "Kyle and the squirrel did."

"They hid them in places where Erik won't get them," said Heidi.

Mom peered into the bead bucket. It was empty. "Such as where?" she said.

"Outside," said Susie. "In other peoples' back yards."

"And on the street," said Heidi.

"And on the river bank," said Susie.

"And in the river," said Heidi.

Mom frowned. "River?"

Heidi turned to Susie.

"We made a tightrope out of beads for Kyle to practise balancing in case he ever has to cross over the Jaws again," said Susie. "It stretched from one side of the yard to the other but then the squirrel ran away with it down to the Jaws and some beads fell off and Kyle followed the squirrel and the beads and they both jumped onto some ice that was floating in the river and then the squirrel jumped off and came back to shore and then Kyle jumped into the river because Socates told him to and then Socates told us to throw the string with

the beads into the river and we all stayed on shore where it was safe and pulled Kyle out of the river. We followed the rest of the beads back home.”

“I think you left something out,” said Mom. She was smiling. “Did Kyle lose any of his lives?”

“Not this time,” said Heidi. “Socrates helped Kyle again. Socrates said Kyle is smart but he just needs to learn his lessons.”

Erik stopped chuckling. He was tired of frog leaping so Mom put him on the floor. She smiled at Heidi and Susie. “Well, however you did it, you went to a lot of trouble to clean up your beads so Erik wouldn’t choke on them.”

“Socrates teaches us to look after each other,” said Susie.

“We learned that we each have one special life, and we have to take care of it,” said Heidi.

After supper, Heidi and Susie joined Kyle on the black leather sofa to watch cartoons.

Mom smiled at the twins. She had learned that they would always have another story to tell.

Chapter Six: The Squirrel Train

Kyle woke up on the black leather sofa. His tummy was feeling twitchy. The mice were back.

He had been dreaming dangerous dreams.

He dreamt of falling under garbage trucks and falling into icy rivers and falling off tightropes.

Falling, falling—always falling.

Kyle took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He looked out at the branch over the yard where the squirrel usually sat.

The branch was empty.

The emptiness bothered him. Where was the squirrel?

Kyle turned his attention to Heidi and Susie.

The twins were sitting at the kitchen table absorbed in an activity that involved whipped cream and chocolate wafer cookies. Heidi was wearing her hockey helmet, and her fingers and the helmet were smeared with cream.

There wasn't a speck of cream on Susie's fingers, her purple rabbit ear muffs, purple sleeping mask or her purple recycled tiara.

Kyle jumped down from the black leather sofa and stretched a big stretchy stretch. He sauntered into the kitchen.

"I don't know what to do with my lives," he said. "Trying to keep all nine of them is exhausting."

"You can help me make zebras," said Susie. Susie's cookies sat before her in a neat stack, each cookie a perfectly intact circle. She was frosting them tenderly, placing exactly one spoonful of whipped cream on each cookie. She laid the cookies side by side in a row that occupied the length of the purple cake pan. Kyle noted the black and white stripes. The pattern reminded him of the zebras he'd seen in Susie's Big Book of Mammals.

"Or you could help me make ice floating on the river," said Heidi. She had scattered her cookies onto a metal cookie sheet. Most of Heidi's cookies were broken. Kyle watched her smear whipped cream onto the bits and pieces with a large spoon. She planted the smaller cookie bits on top of the cream. Then she licked off the spoon.

She started to lick the cream she'd spilled on the table, but Kyle stopped her. "Licking up whipped cream is my job," he said.

He studied Heidi's cookies. "I guess the whipped cream is supposed to be the ice, but what are the cookies supposed to be?"

"The big bits are the river and the little bits are squirrels," said Heidi. "Both are black, like the cookies."

Kyle shivered, remembering the episode with the squirrel and the river when he had come close to losing one of his nine lives.

"We are making this dessert for Mom while she naps with Erik," said Susie. "And I think you are lucky to have so many lives."

"Well, I think you're lucky you only have one life to worry about," said Kyle. "I'm beginning to see that I'm probably going to lose most of mine eventually so I'm anxious to get it over with."

"How?" said Heidi. She was licking whipped cream from her helmet.

"I don't know," said Kyle. "Suggest something."

Just then Kyle heard a scratching sound. He turned to the sliding glass door.

It was the squirrel. It was sitting on the stone stoop tapping on the glass with its paw.

The squirrel held the plug end of a string of Christmas lights between its teeth.

It seemed to Kyle that the black marble eyes were teasing him.

Kyle found himself staring at the string of red and green bulbs with great interest.

He was considering the possibilities.

"I need to go out," said Kyle.

Heidi looked at Susie. "I don't think we should open the sliding glass door."

"Why not?" said Kyle. He was halfway there.

"You are looking for trouble," said Susie.

"So we better go with you," said Heidi.

"Okay," said Kyle. "Suit yourselves. But hurry." The squirrel left the stoop taking the very interesting string of lights with it.

Heidi opened the sliding glass door. Kyle ran out and disappeared around the corner.

By the time the twins had pulled on their snowsuits and slipped down the driveway, the squirrel, the lights and Kyle had reached the end of Malcolm Street where the tall houses stood.

The twins raced to catch up.

Heidi pointed. "Look," she said. "It's a squirrel train. The squirrel is the engine and Kyle is the caboose."

"And the lights are the windows of the train in between," said Susie.

On Malcolm Street it was nearing the dangerous time of the day. People in cars were starting to come home from work. Drivers were now honking their horns and frowning at Kyle. But Kyle was too busy being part of a squirrel train to care.

Kyle's squirrel train went faster. It sped up and down trees, wound around signposts and raced in figure eights between fire hydrants. It crisscrossed the street in and out of parked cars before climbing porches and clattering through eaves troughs. Then the squirrel train leapt up to the roofs of the tallest houses and slid down rain spouts into mountains of snow while the bulbs on the string clicked and clattered like train wheels rolling on track.

"Kyle is doing very dangerous things," said Heidi. "But he is not getting into trouble."

"But he *is* getting into trouble," said Susie. "Look!"

She pointed to Kyle. Indeed, the little grey cat was in the process of tumbling from the roof of the tallest house at the end of the street. He had been clutching the silver lightning rod at the very top of the roof right up until the moment he looked down and lost his balance. It was an unfortunate mistake.

As he fell through the air, Kyle twisted and turned his little grey body this way and that, wiggled his tail and spread out his paws as wide as he could.

He alighted with delicate grace feet first in a snowbank.

Kyle had remembered the trick that Socates taught him. The trick that only cats can do.

"I'm okay," said Kyle. "Socates taught me that cats can fall 19 stories without using up a life."

He shook the snow from his ears and wiggled his paws to show Heidi and Susie that he was unhurt.

From the top of the giant oak, the squirrel had been watching Kyle. Now it rattled the lights it gripped in its mouth, slithered down the tree and sped off. The squirrel and the lights were heading toward the river.

"I need to go," said Kyle.

"No!" said Heidi.

"Not the river!" said Susie.

But Kyle was already gone.

When the twins reached the river bank, they saw that the squirrel, the string of lights and Kyle were already halfway across the silver power line.

"He will fall into the Jaws again!" screamed Susie.

"And we won't be able to save him," said Heidi. "We don't have a string of beads to pull him back to shore."

"We could call Socates," said Susie. "He might have an idea."

"Wait," said Heidi. "Maybe we don't need Socates. Look!"

The squirrel train was scurrying back and forth across the power line, flipping under and over it until the squirrel, the lights and Kyle took one final leap onto the river bank. The twins watched the squirrel train clickety-clack its way down Malcolm Street toward home.

"Good thing Kyle learned how to keep his balance," said Heidi.

"Amazing," said Susie. "He's a real acrobat."

The twins followed the squirrel train as it wove its way home.

Suddenly the twins heard a loud groaning sound. The sound was familiar.

"Oh no! said Susie. "The garbage truck is back." Indeed, the huge truck had just turned the corner onto Malcolm Street. It roared by the twins and continued down the street leaving behind its usual smell of rotting fish and poopy diapers.

"Ew! said Heidi wrinkling her nose. "That stinky truck is going to run right over the squirrel train!"

"Kyle!" screamed Susie. "Get on the sidewalk!"

But Kyle paid no attention.

Suddenly a big grey squirrel came out of a thicket to join Kyle's squirrel train. The grey squirrel had been watching the train from the top of the giant oak.

Kyle was so confused by the new squirrel that for a moment he didn't know which squirrel to chase. But by this time he was out of breath so he sauntered over to the sidewalk to wait for Heidi and Susie.

The new squirrel train clickety-clacked down the street with the garbage truck close behind.

"Squirrels! Look behind you!" Kyle shouted.

But the squirrels paid no attention.

"Maybe we'd better call Socates," said Susie.

"Maybe he doesn't save squirrels," said Heidi.

"We don't need Socates," said Kyle. He knew exactly what he had to do.

Kyle dashed down the street and catapulted in front of the garbage truck. He held up a paw to get the driver's attention.

But the driver did not see Kyle, and the great wheels of the garbage truck kept on rolling.

"Kyle get out of the way," cried Heidi.

"Kyle is fine," said a familiar voice. "And so are his squirrel friends."

Of course it was Socates. The small black cat seemed to have come out of nowhere. He pointed to Kyle and the two squirrels. They were crouching in the middle of Malcolm Street as the garbage truck continued on its way.

Kyle raised his head. "We're okay," said Kyle. "I told the squirrels to get down."

The twins took turns hugging the two small cats while the two squirrels scampered into a nearby thicket.

Socates turned to Kyle. "This time it was you who saved the day. Although you are still bewitched by anything associated with string, you are learning your lessons. This time you risked one of your lives to save others. You should be proud of yourself."

"Yes," said Kyle. "I did what I did to help my friends." He was staring at the string of lights lying on the pavement. The garbage truck had rolled over it and smashed every green and red bulb.

Kyle looked up at the giant oak and saw that the two squirrels were looking down at him. They were sitting side by side on a low branch. Their black marble eyes glowed under the sliver of moon that lit the darkening sky.

Heidi and Susie and Kyle turned homeward. They knew when they looked back that the small black cat would be gone.

Mom was in the kitchen making dinner. Erik was in his high chair licking whipped cream from a teaspoon.

"Thanks for making dessert while we napped," she said. "I see you made two types."

Mom had placed Heidi's floating squirrels and Susie's zebras in the fridge. The table was still dabbed with whipped cream.

"I think Kyle deserves dessert," said Heidi. "He can lick up the whipped cream on the table."

"Why does Kyle deserve dessert," said Mom.

"Because he just saved two squirrels," said Susie. "The regular black squirrel and a new grey squirrel. They're his new friends."

Kyle was already curled up on the black leather sofa, but he returned to the kitchen when he heard Heidi say "whipped cream". Licking whipped cream from the table was his job.

Mom smiled at Kyle. "Kyle, how did you manage to save two squirrels?"

Kyle said nothing. He was thinking about whipped cream.

Heidi turned to Susie.

"The black squirrel came to the sliding glass door holding Christmas lights on a string and Kyle wanted to chase it. So he did up and down the street on top of houses and back and forth across the street and then onto the power line over the Jaws and he only fell once from a tall roof but he didn't hurt himself because now he is an acrobat but he decided to give up one of his lives to save the black squirrel and its new friend the grey squirrel from being run over by the big stinky garbage truck," said Susie.

Mom smiled. "What did Socates have to say about all of this?"

"Socates said Kyle is learning his lessons," said Heidi. "And he should be proud of himself."

"And Socates thinks string is a kind of witch," said Susie.

Mom chuckled. She kissed the top of each twin's head.

Then she picked up the little grey cat and placed him gently on the table.

And Kyle licked the table clean.

Chapter Seven: The White Kitten

Kyle woke up with a jolt after one of his extra-long naps. He'd been having a scary dream so he was relieved to find himself in his usual spot on the black leather sofa.

His paws tingled in a way he hadn't felt before. The tingling spread throughout his body.

The tingling excited Kyle. He wanted to dance and run and climb and jump. He wanted to throw himself off tall buildings. But mostly he wanted to land safely, with perfect precision, before cheering crowds.

Yesterday's squirrel train had been fun. Kyle was looking forward to finding out what would happen today.

He glanced toward the sliding glass door. He was hoping to see a pair of black marble eyes staring at him. Kyle was in the mood to chase something.

But to his surprise, Kyle saw not one but two pairs of black marble eyes staring back at him. The black squirrel and the grey squirrel were sitting side by side on the branch overhanging the yard.

Kyle stretched. He watched the squirrels turn to stare at each other. The fact that they were no longer watching him was disappointing. Kyle felt a little less tingly.

He turned his attention to Heidi and Susie. The twins were sitting on the kitchen floor with an assortment of Christmas tree baubles laid out before them. The Christmas tree had been stripped of all its decorations except for a single string of glowing coloured lights. The twins had begged Mom to leave the lights plugged in for one more week.

"The lights will cheer us up," Susie told her.

"Undecorating the Christmas tree is the saddest time of the year," said Heidi.

Now the twins were arguing. Kyle hopped down from the black leather sofa and tiptoed into the kitchen.

"Mom said to organize the baubles for next year," said Susie. "We're supposed to put them back in their boxes." Susie was carefully placing the coloured baubles into the original boxes. Each box was divided into 12 sections. One bauble was supposed to go into each section.

Susie had filled up two boxes, one box with red baubles and the second box with blue baubles.

"Mom said to put them away," said Heidi. "That's what I'm doing."

Heidi was on her hands and knees. She was hiding baubles throughout the kitchen. She had placed baubles in the fridge and baubles in the bread compartment and baubles in the dish drainer and baubles in the cupboard under the sink.

Kyle liked baubles. They were shiny and they rolled, which he found appealing.

"Let me help," said Kyle.

"Sure," said Heidi. "Let's play hide and seek. I hide them, you seek."

Kyle thought for a moment. "Or I can just bat them around," he said.

He swatted a red bauble so hard it rolled across the floor and down the kitchen steps. The bauble shattered into red splinters.

"We have to clean that up," said Susie. "Or Erik will put the pieces in his mouth."

Erik had recently learned to crawl. These days he was always getting into mischief.

Kyle lazily swept some of the red splinters toward the sliding glass door. He noticed that the black squirrel and the grey squirrel were now sitting on the stone stoop. They were staring at him through the glass and twitching their tails in an interesting way.

"Maybe they want to thank you," said Susie. "You saved them."

"Maybe," said Kyle. "I need out."

Heidi opened the sliding glass door, and Kyle dashed out. Heidi watched him disappear around the corner. "Maybe we should go too," she said.

"Definitely," said Susie. She was already pulling on her purple snowsuit. The twins raced down the driveway, but by the time they reached the street Kyle was out of sight.

But a bright red fire truck sat beneath the giant oak. The truck's ladder was extended, and a small crowd of people had gathered to watch a firefighter climb the ladder.

The two squirrels were watching from the sidewalk. Their tails were swishing like windshield wipers.

"Two cats stuck in a tree," said someone.

Heidi and Susie looked up. Kyle was perched on one of the higher branches. Huddled beside him was a tiny white kitten.

"Tell them I'm not stuck," said Kyle. "Tell them I'm trying to get her down. She's terrified."

Susie called up to the firefighter on the ladder. "Kyle says he's not stuck."

The firefighter looked down at Susie and smiled.

"He's trying to get the kitten down," said Heidi.

The firefighter nodded. She continued climbing.

Then Kyle did something surprising.

He slithered down the tree like a firefighter down a pole, turned around and clambered back up again. He did this several times.

Then the black squirrel and the grey squirrel ran up the tree and down again. They were copying Kyle.

Then Kyle dangled and swung and tumbled and looped the loop from branch to branch, and the two squirrels copied every one of his moves.

The white kitten sat quietly watching Kyle and the squirrels perform while the people below chattered and pointed.

"That's our cat doing tricks," said Susie to the firefighter on the ladder. "And those are the squirrels he saved."

"He's an acrocat," said Heidi. "Don't worry. He will save the kitten."

The firefighter stopped climbing. She stood still for a moment. She was watching Kyle and the squirrels.

She seemed perplexed.

Now Kyle was slowly climbing to the topmost branch of the tree.

Now he was throwing himself off.

The firefighter shrieked and lunged forward with outstretched arms. Meanwhile, Kyle twisted his body, waggled his tail, wiggled his ears and spread out his paws until at last he landed as softly as a snowflake on the sidewalk.

Kyle performed his acrocat routine several more times and then he sat down to rest beside the white kitten.

He looked down at the twins. "She still doesn't think she can come down by herself," said Kyle. "I'm showing her how."

The firefighter stepped down a few rungs of the ladder as more people gathered on the sidewalk to watch the excitement.

Suddenly the white kitten threw herself off the branch. The crowd gasped.

Heidi and Susie heard Kyle giving the white kitten instructions.

"Do what comes naturally," Kyle told the kitten. "And you'll be okay."

The kitten twisted her body, waggled her tail, wiggled her ears and spread out her paws. She landed as softly as a snowflake on the sidewalk just as Kyle had taught her to do. Kyle came down from the tree to join her. "Good job," he said. "Now you're an acrocat like me."

"I've never seen cats do that before," said the firefighter. She was standing on the sidewalk staring down at the two cats. She bent down to pat Kyle. "Maybe we'll bring you along when we get the next call to get a cat down from a tree."

When the fire truck had gone and the people had drifted away, the two squirrels scampered off. The white kitten disappeared too.

"That was a nice adventure," said Susie. She tickled Kyle under his chin.

"You didn't lose one of your lives," said Heidi.

The twins and Kyle walked home under the darkening sky. Inside the houses along Malcolm Street, lights were coming on. When they reached their house, the twins looked up at the Christmas lights dangling from the rain gutter attached to the roof of the front porch. Although it was long past Christmas, the twins had begged Mom not to take down the lights. They wanted the bright green and red bulbs to remind everyone to stay cheerful and happy a little longer.

Kyle leapt up onto the roof of the front porch and began to dance beside the brightly lit bulbs. The lights jiggled and clacked in time to his rhythm. "Watch this," said Kyle. He grabbed a section of the string of lights in his mouth and continued dancing along the edge of the roof. It looked like the lights were dancing too.

The twins clapped. Kyle's acrobat tricks were so much fun to watch.

Then Kyle leapt down. Unfortunately he forgot to let go of the lights.

Suddenly the string in his mouth broke into two pieces, and a tiny spark shot out. Kyle looked surprised just before he fell onto the front walk. He lay there as still as stone.

"I hope Kyle is just taking a nap," said Heidi.

"I don't think so," said Susie. "I think he has hurt himself."

At that moment Socates appeared.

Socates nudged Kyle gently. "Kyle has had a small shock, but he will be fine."

Kyle opened his eyes. He rubbed his head. "Ouch," he said. "That hurt."

"Today's lesson is about power," said Socates. "Playing with that electrical cord almost lost you a life. Lucky for you it became unplugged when you fell."

Kyle wiggled his ears to show he was okay. "I don't understand," he said. "The squirrel and I had fun playing with Christmas lights before."

"That's because those lights weren't plugged in and they weren't switched on," said Socates. "Power is something you don't see. Electricity is one type of power, a very dangerous kind. But there is another kind of power and that is the power you shared with the kitten. You gave her the power to stop being afraid and come down by herself from the tree. You gave her the power of friendship."

Socates smiled at Kyle and waved at the twins. Then he set off in the direction of the river. The twins and Kyle turned to climb the stairs into the house. Susie turned back, but by then the glossy black fur had already faded into the dark night.

Mom was inside tugging the Christmas tree through the sliding glass door. Erik was on the floor in crawling position ready to follow the trail of tree needles. Mom had unplugged the Christmas tree lights, and the cord was coiled on the floor.

Kyle headed to the black leather sofa. He was careful to steer around the lights.

"Susie, I see you put the baubles away, and Heidi I see you made a hide and seek game for Erik," said Mom. She was smiling. "Erik and I enjoyed finding where you hid them."

They all turned to Erik. He was crawling as slowly as a turtle toward the string of Christmas lights on the floor.

"Don't let Erik put the lights in his mouth!" said Susie.
"Lectricity is dangerous."

"The lights are not plugged in, but you're right," said Mom.
"Children should never play with electrical cords." She put the lights up on a tall shelf.

"Kyle chomped through the outside lights that were plugged in, but the lights unplugged themselves so the lectricity didn't have a chance to hurt him," said Susie.

"Socrates says you can't see lectricity because it plays hide and seek," said Heidi. "It was hiding when Kyle found it."

"Socrates said Kyle shared his friendship power with the white kitten," said Susie.

Mom smiled. "You two are always talking about Socrates. Someday you will have to introduce me to this very special cat."

"That depends," said Heidi.

"On what?" said Mom.

"On what Kyle does next," said Susie.

Chapter Eight: The Fierce

Kyle woke up as he usually did on the black leather sofa. But today he was feeling unusually twitchy.

He looked outside. The squirrels were not on their usual branch.

He looked into the kitchen. The twins were not at the table.

Kyle leapt from the sofa and wandered into the next room. There he found Heidi and Susie sitting on the floor.

Susie was looking at pictures in her Big Book of Mammals. Heidi was on her hands and knees arranging spoons end to end. Erik sat beside her. He was playing close attention to the spoons.

"I give up," said Kyle. "I can't guess what you're doing."

"It's a spoon track," said Heidi. She moved a spoon around her imaginary track. "Choo-choo. Chugga-chugga. Spoon-spoon."

Erik was suddenly alert. He got into crawling position ready to pounce.

"No, Erik," said Heidi. "Don't touch."

Erik sat back. His lower lip curled into a pout.

Susie looked up from her book. "Give him one," she said. "He can't hurt himself with a spoon."

Kyle pointed to the open page. "What's that? It looks like a big scary squirrel."

Susie studied the picture. "I don't think so," she said. She moved her finger to the words below the picture. "The name of this animal starts with an F."

The creature in the picture had glossy golden brown fur. It had a heart-shaped face and an S-shaped body and curved claws. In the picture, the creature's lips were curled back to show its sharp teeth.

Kyle had never before seen such teeth.

Kyle looked closer. "F must be for Fierce."

Kyle did not like looking at the picture. He went back to the sliding glass door and looked out. The stone stoop was still empty.

At that moment, something streaked past. The *something* was black.

Heidi and Susie came into the kitchen. Mom had taken Erik upstairs for a nap.

"I need out," said Kyle.

"Why," said Heidi.

"The squirrel," said Kyle. "I think I saw it."

"You've risked your lives so many times chasing that squirrel," said Susie. "Why not give up?"

"If Socates hadn't helped you'd only have three left," said Heidi. "We better go with you."

They pulled on their snowsuits and put on their mitts. Heidi opened the sliding glass door, and they all went out.

Malcolm Street was quiet. It was not one of the dangerous times of day.

The twins and Kyle looked both ways before crossing the street in case the huge garbage truck suddenly turned the corner.

"Maybe the squirrel went down to the river," said Kyle. "Let's go."

"Okay," said Heidi. "But no tricks."

"Why not," said Kyle. "I'm an acrocat."

By the time they reached the river bank, the afternoon had turned from pale yellow to gold, and the cedars had thrown their jagged shadows onto the snow.

Kyle looked up at the silver power line. He remembered how triumphant he felt the first time he crossed it without falling off.

Kyle squinted at the far bank. "I don't see the squirrel," he said. "We might as well go back home."

"Wait," said Heidi. "I think I hear something."

They all heard the shuffling.

Something came out of the prickly bushes down by the water.

A dark shape was creeping toward them.

"Hello," said Kyle. The shape said nothing. It crept closer.

"I'm not afraid," said Heidi. "It's just a big squirrel."

"I don't think it's a squirrel," said Susie.

The shape came closer. Then Kyle recognized the S-shaped body. He recognized the glossy brown fur. He recognized the curved claws.

The creature snarled.

Kyle recognized the sharp, jagged teeth.

Kyle tiptoed backwards until he reached a tree. He leaned against it.

"Let's get out of here, *now*," said Kyle. "That's *not* a squirrel!"

But it was too late. The creature lunged toward Kyle.

Kyle turned and dug his claws into the trunk of the tree. He started to climb.

"Climb faster!" said Heidi.

"Remember, you're an acrobat so you can swing through the trees!" said Susie. "We have to run home!"

The twins raced home on the sidewalk while Kyle swung himself home through the branches of the giant oaks along the way.

"That was a close call," said Heidi when they were safely back in the kitchen.

"Kyle, you still have all your lives," said Susie. "You must be getting smarter."

Mom was putting the spoons away. Erik was moving a spoon around the floor. He was pretending it was a hockey stick.

"Where were you?" said Mom.

"Kyle was looking for the squirrel and then he got chased by the Fierce," said Susie.

"The fierce what," said Mom.

"The big squirrel with fangs," said Susie.

"Squirrels don't have fangs," said Mom.

Susie showed her the picture of the creature in the Big Book of Mammals. "This one does."

"That's not a squirrel," said Mom. "It's a fisher, but you're right. Fishers are extremely fierce. Fishers attack cats so if Kyle got away he must be a smart cat."

Mom went to get the rest of the spoons. "Watch Erik please. I'll be right back."

Erik immediately got into crawling position and headed for the spot on the floor where the Christmas tree had been. He sat down in front of the electrical socket where the tree lights had been plugged in.

He was still holding the spoon.

Erik slowly moved the spoon until it was touching the electrical socket.

"No!" said Kyle.

Kyle catapulted toward the startled baby just in time to bat the spoon away.

The moment Kyle's paw touched the spoon, he felt a tingle. It felt like tiny teeth piercing his skin.

Kyle was so shocked that he fell to the floor.

"Kyle is learning fast," said a familiar voice. "He knew that Erik was in danger if he put the spoon into the electrical socket."

As usual Socates had come out of nowhere. "Kyle, you only touched the spoon for a second. You will be fine."

Kyle opened his eyes and blinked. "I did the best I could."

"True," said Socates. "You knew that a current of electricity could travel from the wall into the spoon if Erik put the spoon into the socket. This time you did not need my help. You helped Erik all by yourself."

"I didn't think about all that," said Kyle. "I was only thinking about Erik."

"Each time you risk one of your lives you learn something new," said Socates. "Your good heart is helping others. You don't seem to need my help anymore. Now I must leave."

Heidi opened the sliding glass door to let Socates out. The small black cat blew them all a kiss and then he disappeared into the night.

Just then Mom came back into the room. "You all look shocked," she said. She had been downstairs putting dirty clothes into the washing machine.

"Yes," said Heidi. "That's why Socates was here."

"Here?" said Mom. She glanced at the sliding glass door. It was closed.

The twins nodded.

"Socates said Kyle saved Erik all by himself," said Susie. "Erik was putting a spoon in the little holes in the wall where the electricity current comes out but Kyle batted the spoon away. Kyle got shocked a little so that Erik wouldn't get shocked a lot."

Mom picked up the little grey cat and kissed the top of his head. "Thank you, Kyle," she said. "For whatever you did." She didn't ask any more questions.

Mom showed the twins the package she was holding in her hand. "I got these yesterday since Erik has learned to crawl. They're wall outlet covers. I was just about to put them in."

Mom showed Heidi and Susie how to insert the plastic covers into the outlets while Kyle settled down for a nap on the black leather sofa.

He fell asleep dreaming. In his dream, the white kitten and the two squirrels and Heidi and Susie and Erik were all cuddled with Kyle on a giant silver spoon that tumbled along a wide river. And in Kyle's dream the current of the river carried them all safely home.

Chapter Nine: The Fisher

Time passed, and the days were getting longer.

The sun came up earlier in the morning and went to bed later at night. When Kyle awoke, the sun had been up for hours, and now he was lying on the black leather sofa snuggled in warm yellow light.

He looked outside. The branch hanging over the yard had been empty for a while. Kyle had given up hope that he would ever see the squirrel again.

He opened his mouth wide and yawned.

Then he looked into the kitchen and saw that the twins were sitting at the table. Susie was wearing a purple smock over her clothes.

Heidi was not wearing a smock.

Kyle stretched and yawned again. He glanced out the window once more and then he leapt down from the sofa and went into the kitchen. He jumped onto the table. He tiptoed around saucers dripping with wet paint and brushes and foam eggs. At last he found a clear spot to sit down.

"We're painting Easter eggs," said Susie, "to hide outside."

"We're going to play hide and seek with them," said Heidi.

Susie frowned. "No, we're not," she said. "We're just going to hide them."

"It's too early for Easter," said Kyle. "We haven't had Valentines yet."

"Yes we have," said Susie. "You just forgot. And it's not too early to hide eggs. We're hiding them now to give people lots of time to find them."

Susie had painted delicate patterns on her eggs.

"Your eggs look like the ones the Easter Bunny carries in her basket," said Kyle.

Kyle looked at Heidi's eggs. They were covered in brown and green smudges. Heidi's hands and clothes were also smeared brown and green.

"Mine are can-you-flaged," said Heidi. "I don't want anyone to find them."

"You mean *camouflaged*," said Kyle. "Like animals in the forest. Or polar bears in the snow so hunters don't see them."

Heidi nodded.

Susie took off her painting smock. "Time to hide the eggs," she said.

"I'll help," said Kyle.

The twins put all their eggs into two baskets. Then they pulled on their snowsuits. Heidi opened the sliding glass door, and they all went out.

"Nobody is outside," said Susie when they reached the street. "It's a perfect time to hide eggs."

The twins turned toward the river.

Susie hid her first egg on top of the fire hydrant.

Heidi hid her first egg as far back as she could reach beneath a neighbour's front porch.

Susie hid her second egg beside the Children Playing sign.

Heidi hid her second egg deep inside another neighbour's cedar hedge.

Kyle batted one of the green and brown eggs along the sidewalk. Susie and Heidi continued hiding eggs as they made their way slowly along the sidewalk.

Suddenly, Susie stopped. They had reached the thicket where the silver power line crossed the river.

"We shouldn't go any further," she said. "The fisher lives here. The fisher eats cats."

Heidi nodded. "It's too risky. Kyle was lucky to escape before."

They turned back toward home when Kyle spotted something moving slowly near the river's edge.

"Wait," said Kyle.

He knew at once it was the fisher.

Kyle also knew what the fisher was doing.

It was hunting.

Then Kyle saw what the fisher was hunting.

The white kitten had just come out of the thicket. The fisher was hunting the white kitten.

Kyle saw the fisher spring toward the kitten. It took only a split second for Kyle to react. He catapulted over the snow and landed gracefully near the water.

Kyle placed himself between the fisher and the white kitten.



Kyle grabbed the kitten by the scruff of her neck and shoved her gently into the thicket.

He turned to the fisher. "Get back," Kyle hissed. "I will not let you hurt my friend."

But the fisher shot up and dug its sharp fangs into Kyle's throat.

"Kyle!" screamed Susie.

"Let our cat go!" screamed Heidi. The twins grabbed cedar boughs and waved them at the fisher.

The fisher dropped Kyle. The twins watched the creature slide smooth as silk into the shining black water.

Heidi and Susie found Kyle lying on the ground under the tree where the fisher had dropped him. Socates was cradling Kyle's head.

Heidi and Susie saw at once that Kyle had been hurt. Some of the grey fur on his neck had turned red.

Heidi started to cry. "Socates, what should we do?"

"I came as soon as I saw the fisher grab Kyle," said the small black cat. "But it was you not I who saved him. You chased the fisher away. Kyle is perfectly fine. Only a small cut. He just needs to rest."

"Then we will have to carry Kyle home," said Susie.

Kyle opened his sapphire blue eyes.

"That was scary, but I can walk home by myself," he said.

"You saved the kitten, and we saved you," said Susie. "We all used the power of friendship."

"Kyle, you have almost lost eight lives, but you have gained the wisdom of eight lifetimes," said Socates. "I know that you

will live your nine lives well. Like me you may lose a few lives helping others, but they will love for it.”

Kyle and Heidi and Susie had a feeling that Socates was saying a final goodbye.

The twins took turns patting the glossy black head. Socates smiled and purred.

“We may never see you again,” said Susie.

“We’ll miss you,” said Heidi.

“You’re the best teacher,” said Kyle. “I’ve learned every good thing I know from you.”

“They say the teacher appears when the student is ready,” said Socates. “You were ready for me, Kyle, and I came. The time has come for me to go to the next student.”

The twins closed their eyes tightly. That was the best way to squeeze away tears. When they opened them again, the small black cat was gone, and his purring had become the sighing of the wind.

Heidi and Susie and Kyle slowly made their way home.

Mom was in the kitchen making dinner, and Erik was in his high chair. His hands and his face were smeared with brown and orange baby food.

“Erik is camouflaged like one of my Easter eggs,” said Heidi. “He thinks we can’t see him.”

She cupped her hands over her face and opened them quickly. “Peekaboo,” she said. “I see you.”

Erik chuckled.

Mom chuckled too. “Were you off on another adventure with Socates?” she said.

"Yes," said Susie. "And the good news is Kyle still has nine lives. Socates says he may lose a few lives helping others but that's okay because everyone will love him."

"I'm sure you'll tell me all about it," said Mom.

Heidi turned to Susie.

"We were hiding our Easter eggs when Kyle saw the kitten in the woods because she was wearing white fur not green and brown camouflage and the fisher also could see the kitten in the forest so the fisher hunted the kitten but Kyle saved the kitten then the fisher grabbed Kyle's throat and then we chased the fisher away with sticks," said Susie.

"And I suppose that's when Socates appeared," said Mom.

"Yes," said Susie. "How did you know?"

"But this time was the last time," said Heidi.

"No more Socates?" said Mom.

"Maybe not," said Susie looking forlorn. But as she crawled onto the black leather sofa beside Heidi and Kyle to watch cartoons Susie hoped with all her heart that the small black cat would come again.

Chapter Ten: The Hole

Kyle was wide awake. He was sitting on the black leather sofa quietly watching the goldfish circling the fish tank. He had been watching them for a long time.

He wanted to sleep, but no matter how many times he shut his sapphire eyes they slowly slid open. Mom was napping with Erik in the next room.

Kyle looked outside. The branch hanging over the yard was still empty.

A thaw had recently set in, and the surface of the backyard rink had turned slushy and rough. It looked the way waves looked on the river during a summer storm.

Heidi and Susie were pulling each other around the rink on a plastic carpet sled. The sled was purple and it was attached to a blue rope. Heidi was wearing her hockey helmet and her rainbow mittens. Susie was wearing her purple rabbit ear muffs. She'd lost the purple sleeping mask and the purple recycled tiara.

Kyle hopped down from the black leather sofa and tiptoed to the sliding glass door. Heidi opened it, and Kyle went out.

"We're sailing," said Heidi. "You can have a turn."

"No thanks," said Kyle. "I think I'll go for a walk."

Then he disappeared around the corner.

"I think we'd better follow him," said Heidi.

Susie nodded. "Just in case."

The twins brought the sled with them. They planned to go to Bay Hill, which was at the other end of Malcolm Street. Bay Hill was fun for sliding. They had been there many times with Mom and Erik.

The twins saw that Kyle had crossed the street to the sidewalk. Malcolm Street was deserted. This was not one of the dangerous times of the day. The twins, always wary of garbage trucks, looked both ways before crossing. They ran quickly to catch up with Kyle.

"Where are you going?" said Susie.

"To watch fish swimming under the ice," said Kyle.

"We have fish at home," said Heidi. "You could watch them there."

"I did already," said Kyle. "This will be more fun."

At the end of Malcolm Street they had to cross over to get to Bay Hill. The boat dock at the bottom of the hill was still frozen into the thinning ice. In summer, the twins stood on the dock and fed the fish the crusts of their peanut butter sandwiches.

"The hill looks different," said Susie. The thaw had turned Bay Hill slushy and grey.

The twins slid down the hill several times and took turns pulling the sled up. Then they stopped sliding because the slush was slowing the sled too much.

They looked out at the frozen river, wondering what to do next.

Then Susie noticed a dot moving slowly along the ice just beyond the power station.

The dot was Kyle.

"I think he's too far from shore. I think he should come back," said Susie.

"Kyle, come back," called Heidi.

But Kyle wasn't paying attention. He was too busy stalking fish.

The twins ran to the end of the dock to get closer to him.

"Kyle," screamed Heidi.

"Come back," screamed Susie.

Kyle continued nosing along the ice.

"I'm going to get him back," said Heidi.

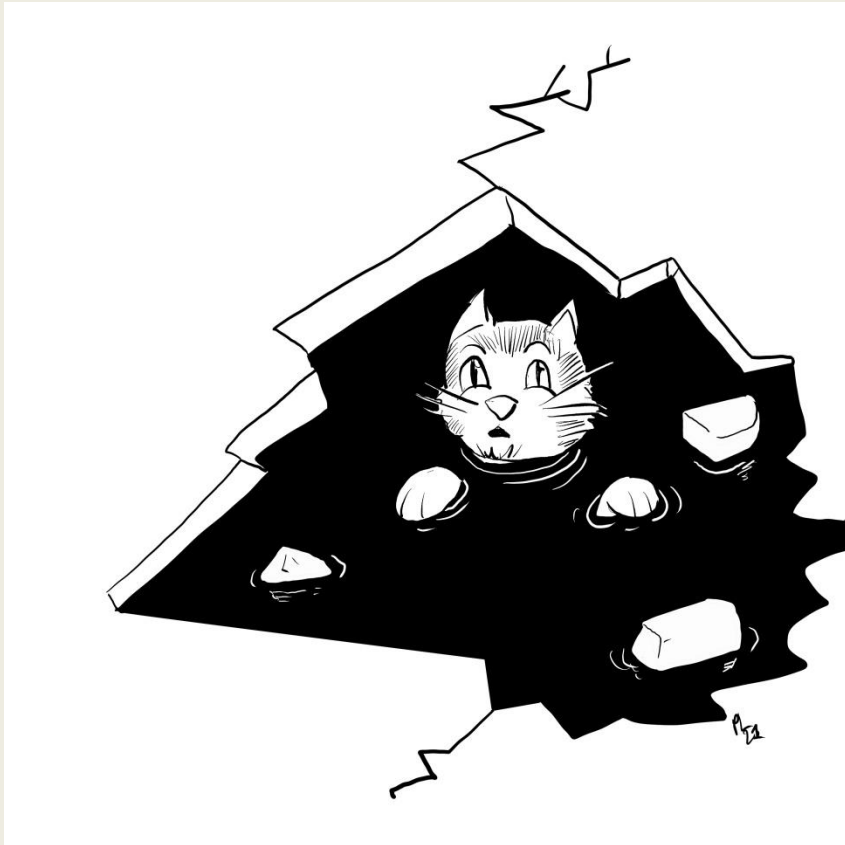
"Don't," said Susie, "The ice might not hold you." But Heidi was already running toward Kyle.

Under the thinning ice, the river groaned and creaked. Then, from deep in its belly, the river let out a long, loud roar.

Suddenly the ice under Kyle collapsed.

It shattered, and a jagged hole of black water opened up where the ice had been.

Kyle slid into the black hole.



Heidi heard the river roar and she saw Kyle's little grey head disappear beneath the surface and bob up. Heidi also heard Susie screaming from shore, "Come back Heidi, come back!"

But Heidi knew she couldn't leave her little grey cat. And so she edged closer until she was only a short distance from the

open water. Then she slowly and carefully lowered herself down onto the ice and spread out her arms and her legs.

In all her life, Heidi had never felt her heart beat so wildly. She knew it was up to her to keep Kyle's spirit strong: "Keep cat-paddling Kyle! You're doing a good job. I will stay with you until someone comes to help."

Heidi tried to think of what she could do to help Kyle.

She remembered the purple sled with the blue rope. But she knew there was no safe way for her to return to shore to bring it back. She also knew that even if Kyle could grab the rope, she would not be able to pull him out of the river by herself.

The one thing she could do was to keep trying to encourage her little cat to keep swimming.

"Kyle, you're a great acrocat and you're very brave. You've got to keep going. Please don't give up," Heidi pleaded.

Kyle was too busy cat-paddling to answer.

Then Heidi heard a familiar voice.

"Heidi," said the voice. The voice was rich and deep and comforting. "We must move quickly. But we must also be safe."

"Socrates!"

Heidi was so relieved to see the small black cat that she felt dizzy.

Socrates was sitting on the ice. Beside him lay the blue rope that had been attached to the purple sled.

"Susie untied the rope and I dragged it here with my teeth," Socrates explained. "I am a small cat so the ice should hold me if I am careful."

Socrates shoved one end of the rope toward Heidi. "Now you must throw the rope with all of your strength so that Kyle can reach it. Just as you did with the string of beads."

Heidi understood at once. She sucked in a big breath of air and flung the rope with such force that it dropped into the open water close enough for Kyle to reach.

"Grab the rope, Kyle," Heidi shouted. "Socrates and I will pull you out!"

But Kyle was growing weaker. He was cat-paddling very slowly.

Socrates tiptoed closer to him and in a soft voice said, "One last effort, Kyle, you can do it. Grab the rope in your teeth just as you did with the bead string."

And so, with a sudden burst of spirit Kyle clamped down on the rope. He whimpered through his clenched teeth.

Heidi reached out and grabbed one section of rope. Still on her tummy she wriggled backward pulling with all her strength. Socrates grabbed another section of rope and tugged as hard as he could. "Socrates, pull harder!" said Heidi. "Kyle, hold on tight!"

After one final tug Kyle slid out of the water like a slippery seal onto the ice. There he lay with his sapphire eyes closed quietly resting. The small grey cat was exhausted.

But it didn't take long for Kyle to revive. After a few moments he opened his eyes. Then he moved his head back and forth and wiggled his four paws. "I think I'm okay," he said. "Thanks Heidi and Socrates. I wouldn't be here without you."

"Thank Heidi," said Socrates. "She kept your spirits up. Keeping your spirits up is what kept you going until I arrived."

To stay safe, Heidi continued to wriggle back to shore on her tummy while Kyle and Socates tiptoed beside her. Susie jumped from the dock and started to run toward them, but Socates held up a warning paw. "No, Susie! You should not be on the river at this time of year. And neither should cats!"

At last the two cats and the little girl reached the dock where Susie was waiting to greet them. She hugged Heidi and patted Socates and then she took off her purple snow suit jacket and tucked it around Kyle.

"Good thinking Susie," said Socates. "Now let's all huddle together on Kyle. That will help warm up his blood."

And so the two little cats and the two little girls lay huddled together until Heidi said, "I think it's time to go home."

Susie put her snowsuit jacket back on and tied the rope back onto the sled. "Hop on everyone. You all deserve a ride."

Susie pulled Heidi, Kyle and Socates back to Malcolm Street, but by the time they reached home Socates was no longer sitting on the sled. The small black cat had vanished.

Mom and Erik were waiting on the front porch. Erik was rubbing his eyes. He had just woken up from his nap.

"Looks like you all had a nice long afternoon sledding," said Mom. "Spring is almost here so this might be the last time you can sled until next year. Did you have fun?"

Indeed Heidi and Susie would remember that afternoon for the rest of their lives though "fun" would never be the word they would use to describe it.

Heidi looked at Susie.

"Well," said Susie. "It was educational. We all learned a lot about what happens to ice at the end of winter."

And for once, that was all Susie said.

Heidi and Susie helped Mom make dinner. Erik crawled around the kitchen chuckling.

Kyle curled up on the black leather sofa and went straight to sleep.

*

When Kyle woke up, a new day was shining brightly through the sliding glass door. Kyle stretched a big stretchy stretch and yawned his widest yawn.

He looked outside.

There on the branch hanging over the yard sat the black squirrel.

And beside the black squirrel sat the grey squirrel.

And beside the grey squirrel sat six little squirrels!

Three little grey squirrels and three little black squirrels.

Kyle stared, and eight pairs of black marble eyes stared back. Kyle was pleased that his old friend had brought new friends to the branch in the back yard.

Then as if that wasn't excitement enough the little white kitten hopped onto the stone stoop.

There she sat with her tail curled primly around her neat little body. The kitten was staring at Kyle through the glass.

Kyle looked into the kitchen. The twins were sitting at the table colouring in their Beautiful Princess Colouring Book. They were waiting for Mom to get Erik dressed. Then they were all going to playgroup together.

"I think she wants in," said Kyle, nodding his head at the kitten.

Kyle knew he was pleased to see her because he felt tingly.

Heidi opened the sliding glass door, and the kitten came in. The kitten immediately leapt onto the black leather sofa and snuggled against Kyle.

"What's her name?" asked Susie.

"I don't know," said Kyle. "I don't know anything about her." The white kitten was purring.

"That's okay," said Heidi. "You have the rest of your nine lives to find out."

THE END