

Galina Chernysheva

Malchik



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Malchik

CHAPTER 1

The eight-hour flight was long and tedious, not only for the people on the plane, but also for the animals who were traveling with their masters. Vera and her husband were traveling to the city where her husband would start a new job.

A cat by the name of Malchik ("Boy") was also traveling on this flight, sitting on Vera's lap. They had called him Malchik when he was little, and everyone was glad, when Malchik got a little bigger, that it turned out he had the right name.

Malchik was a Siamese cat, with a beige coat, a brown face, brown ears and a brown tail. Out of his face shone enormous blue eyes. But the best of Malchik's traits was his personality, which was very patient and kind.

For the first hours of the flight, Malchik sat on Vera's lap and then her husband's, from time to time lifting his large, frightened eyes as if to ask them, "What's this all about?"

"Everything's okay," they said, with soothing voices, "we're right here." He finally settled down to an uneasy sleep, leaning against Vera for comfort from the loud and mysterious noise of the plane.

Malchik patiently endured the flight. When Vera and her husband had first decided to move, they were nervous about taking him along. They had all been happy together, but Vera's husband thought it was too risky to take him on the eight-hour journey, on a plane with no special compartments for cats.

"How will he survive the flight?" he asked, as they talked about what to do. "What if he gets scared and meows the whole way there? Or what if we can't hang on to him and he starts jumping on other people?"

As Malchik listened to these conversations, and he was worried that Vera would listen to her husband, and they would leave him behind. Another family wanted to adopt him, and they had even found him a little girlfriend, a beautiful blue-eyed cat who matched him perfectly. But Malchik didn't want to leave Vera. So when the mother from the new family came to the house to get him, Malchik hid under the bed. He stayed

there until she left, and then crawled out again. He gave Vera a hug, putting his paws around her neck, and trembling with fear that he might be separated from her.

Vera was convinced; they couldn't leave Malchik behind. So now, here he was, sitting on the plane, entrusting himself to Vera and to his fate. But there was just one problem: there was no litter box for cats on the airplane, and Malchik badly needed to go. He didn't know what to do, so he held on and waited.

After four hours in the air, they had to land and change planes. The passengers got off and went into the terminal. But here, once again, there was no bathroom for a cat. When it was time to get back on the plane, Malchik couldn't wait any longer. As the family stood on the ramp, waiting to board, Malchik suddenly let it go. Vera heard a little trickle, as she held him in her arms, which soon became a loud stream. The other passengers turned and looked to see what was going on, and Malchik just closed his eyes. "Oh well," he thought, "there's nothing I can do now." By the time he was done, a little lake had formed by the steps of the ramp, but to Malchik's surprise, no one was angry. The other passengers smiled and clapped, happy that his problem was solved.

The rest of the journey was easy and pleasant. Malchik walked around the cabin and stretched his legs. He even tried to make friends with a little dog who was sitting on its owner's lap. The other passengers smiled at him.

A new life was waiting ahead in a new city with the family he loved so much and for the sake of whom he had decided to take such a long and unpredictable journey.



CHAPTER 2

People had always admired Malchik's looks. From the time he was a kitten, his big blue eyes, his lovely coat, and his brown ears and tail had attracted the attention of everyone he met. But when Vera, her husband and Malchik got off the plane in their new city, they found themselves in the middle of a curious crowd at the taxi stand.

"What kind of animal is that," they said, pointing at Malchik, "some kind of strange dog?" Malchik couldn't believe his ears! "They don't even know I'm a cat!" he thought. "If there aren't any cats like me in this town, how will I ever find a girlfriend?"

Vera could see that he was upset. "Don't worry," she said, stroking his head. "This is a big city. You won't have any trouble finding a friend."

The taxi ride to the new house didn't take long, as Malchik sat in comfort on the back seat, watching out the window. The house itself was a surprise, not what he was used to at all. Malchik's old home was an apartment with all the modern conveniences. He even knew how to use the bathroom, and didn't need a box full of sand or paper like other cats. Malchik would hop up on the toilet seat, and would call Vera with a loud meow when it was time for her to come and flush. He would watch her pull the chain on the tank, and he dreamed about how he would master that too. But for now, it seemed, he was back to a litter box.

The new house was a duplex built of logs, with a tall fence and a vegetable garden in back. The owner lived on one side of the house with a couple of army dogs. One was old German shepherd, retired from guarding the borders, and one was a puppy for the old dog to train. The older dog was a terror. He only respected his mistress, and regarded every other creature as an intruder to be driven away. These were Malchik's new neighbors.

It was clear that the big dog and Malchik would never be friends, so Vera and dog's owner figured out separate times when they could each go out in the garden. Malchik loved to run around outside. But what he enjoyed the most was stopping by the porch on his way back inside to tease the old German shepherd who sat there barking. Best of all was when the old dog stuck his nose through a chink in the door. Malchik

would give him a couple of whacks, and then, acting as if nothing had happened, would flick his tail in the air and slip into his side of the house.

This went on until the fateful day when the schedule got mixed up. The landlady let her dog out to run around the yard, and forgot to tell Vera. Malchik was outside at the same time. After chasing birds in the garden, Malchik walked up to the porch, expecting to tease the old dog, but there was no old dog there! Suddenly Malchik heard a fearsome growl from behind, and the huge dog descended on him in a flash, barking furiously. Malchik turned tail and dashed toward house, with the old German shepherd on his heels. Luckily Vera was outside too. She heard the commotion and ran towards the old dog, just as he was about to grab Malchik and tear him to shreds. Malchik scampered up the side of the log house to the roof. The old dog's mistress came running out of her door and grabbed him by the collar, but now it was Vera's turn to run. "Hurry up," cried the neighbor, "I can't hold him for long!" Vera made it to the house and slammed the door in the old dog's face. Then the neighbor hauled the old dog back to his own side of the yard.

Malchik eventually climbed down from the roof. His heart overflowed with love for Vera. She had saved him from the awful dog! But Malchik had also learned his lesson. No more teasing. From that time on, when he went to the garden, he stayed far away from porch and the mean old dog.



CHAPTER 3

Life in the new house settled down to a peaceful routine. In the mornings, Malchik saw Vera off to work, and in the evenings he met her at the door when she came home. He crawled up on her shoulders and nuzzled her cheeks and chin. He showed her how glad he was that she was home, and reminded her that it was time for his supper. On weekends, they would sit on the couch together, watching TV or listening to music. Vera and her husband discussed the events of the week, while Malchik purred to himself and Vera stroked his head. Everybody was happy.

Autumn arrived, and the days turned cold. Vera lit a fire in the stove everyday, and the little house was comfortable and warm. But more and more often, Malchik dreamed about how nice it would be to have a friend, someone he could talk to about the events of his day, and someone to play with in the garden. Sometimes he tried to share these thoughts, but no one understood his meows, or maybe they just didn't take him seriously. And Malchik was too polite to insist. But when he went out to the garden alone, he began to wander in search of his dream. Heavy rains soon put an end to his walks, and Malchik spent his days indoors, curled up on the bed, and dreaming about meeting his own special someone.

Then one evening, when the wind was tossing the branches and whistling in the chimney, Malchik heard a strange noise outside the door. At first it sounded like another gust of wind, tearing at the bare trees. But then he heard it again, a weak and thin cry. Malchik decided to investigate, and he walked to the door. When Vera opened it and they looked outside, they saw a tiny kitty on the porch, shaking with cold and mournfully squeaking. The kitty was fluffy, but very dirty.

"How did it manage to land at our door? How did it get past the fence? And who could have put it out in such cold, rainy weather?" thought Malchik, and pleadingly looked at Vera.

"Of course we'll take it in," said Vera. "Here, kitty, kitty, come here." But the kitten was too weak to move. Vera picked it up and it nestled against her, seeking protection and warmth. "What would have happened," Vera thought, "if we hadn't opened the

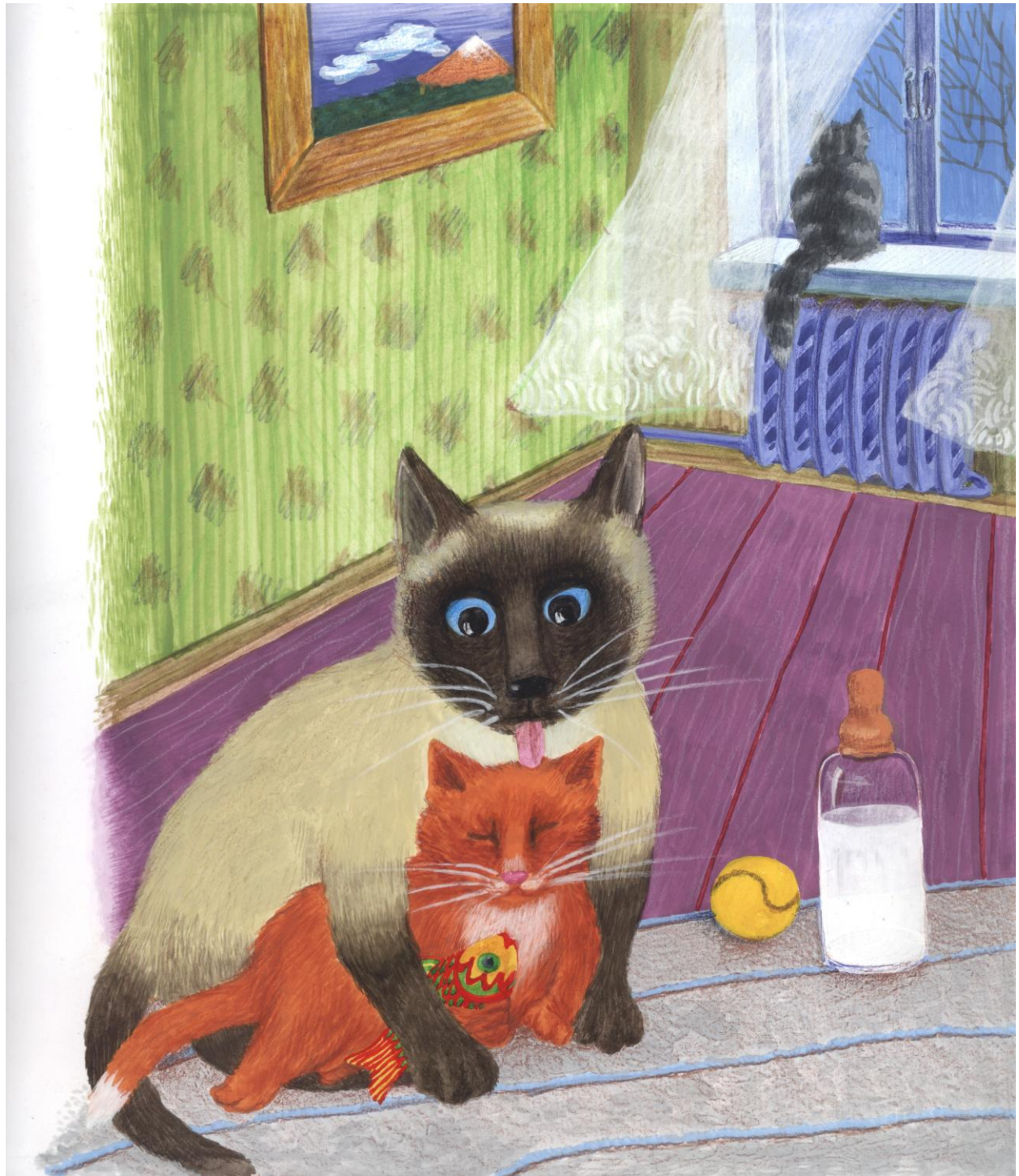
door? This little kitten wouldn't have made it through the night." They put the kitten on a pillow by the stove to warm it up, and gave it some milk to drink.

A little while later, after it warmed up, the kitten meowed for some food, and Vera gave it something to eat. But when Vera tried to pick up the empty dish, the kitten reached out and gave her a feisty scratch. Vera knew this was a good sign; the kitten was out of danger. She left it in the care of Malchik, who lay down beside it to keep it warm. With its stomach full, the little kitten curled up and went to sleep.

Thus Knopka became a part of Malchik's life. They slept on the same blanket, and Malchik sometimes gave her some of his own food if she was still hungry after eating her supper. He groomed her fur to keep her clean, and he purred little cat songs to her at bedtime. Within a few months, Knopka had grown into a lovely and elegant young cat. She had a white patch of fur on her chest and little white socks on her paws. Her pink nose was surrounded by black and white stripes, and her huge green eyes shone with curiosity and naughtiness. Her huge white tail was as fluffy as a feather duster.

Knopka loved sitting for hours on the windowsill, watching the world outside. But her days on the street without food and water had left their mark on her memory, and she had a huge appetite. She always ate everything in her bowl, even if there was food there for two days. As a result she began to grow quite fat. She was also afraid to go near the front door, and whenever it was opened, she ran to hide under the sofa.

Malchik was content. He was very proud of his lovely companion, and Knopka loved him as well with all of her kitty-cat heart. After a while, Malchik and Knopka had a little son whom they named Eroshka. Malchik was a doting father, and never left the kitten's side, except for a meal or a quick trip to the yard. But Knopka found that she simply didn't know what to do with a kitten. She would nurse him for only a few minutes at a time, but then would jump up and return to her windowsill to watch the world go by from the safety of her warm perch. So Eroshka had to be fed with a bottle. Malchik took care of the kitten, and Knopka felt content, believing that this, in fact, was the way things should be.



CHAPTER 4

Time passed, and the little family lived in peace and harmony, well-loved and cared for by Vera. The cats stayed busy with their favorite pastimes. Knopka, as always, spent most of the day on her beloved windowsill, and rarely came down, except for meals.

Eroshka grew day by day into a beautiful cat with bushy short hair and blue-green eyes. He spent hours energetically swatting a ball, sometimes playing with Malchik, and occasionally even tempting his mother down from her windowsill perch to hit a ball or two. Malchik devoted himself to perfecting his leaping skills and teaching manners to his son. He told Eroshka the story of his adventures with the neighbor's dog, and warned him to avoid danger. "Don't ever try to tease big, fierce dogs, because someday they will seek revenge," he said, "and your best friend may not be there to rescue you." Eroshka heard the story so many times that he knew all the details by heart, and whenever he heard the neighbor dog barking, he would look at Malchik and Vera with fear in his eyes.

One day Vera took a picture of the little cat family, and hung it on the living room wall.

The landlady next door was very fond of Eroshka, and she often invited him to her side of the house. Eroshka became good friends with the younger dog, who had given up on his military training and become a regular pet. He and Eroshka got along well; they understood each other, and liked to do the same things.

But one day Vera's husband came home and announced that there would be change: the family had to move. "Oh no!" thought Malchik. "Again? What about Knopka and Eroshka? They're both such homebodies. Are they up to making that kind of change?"

Vera's husband tried to reassure them. "A month from now we'll be living in another part of town in a wonderful new apartment. It's big and bright, and has a view of a beautiful lake. Besides, there's a park next door, which will give us a place for walking," he said. "So we need to tell the landlady our plans, and then we can start packing our things."

When Malchik heard this, he sighed in relief. No airplane this time, just a taxi ride. He thought Knopka and Eroshka could handle this. But when he when he looked at them, he saw that they were frowning. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Things are going to be fine. We'll finally have a home with modern conveniences. I can teach you how to use the toilet. And just think, we'll never hear that awful dog barking again."

But Knopka turned away without a word and jumped back up to the windowsill. Eroshka was quiet for a moment, and then said, "I think I would rather stay here. I can live with the landlady on the other side of the house. And to tell you the truth, a litter box is good enough for me." Then he put his head down and went to sleep.

Malchik was quite amazed. "Knopka, why are you so quiet? I'm trying to explain that this move will be good for us. Don't you want to go?"

"No," she said, "I certainly don't. I never intend to leave this house. I refuse to even step out the door. I would rather die here, on this windowsill."

Now Malchik wondered what he could do. How could get them to change their minds? He wanted them all to stay together, but there was no way he would leave Vera. How could he? They had been through so much together. Vera had looked after all of them with such faithful loving care. Could he give her up for a windowsill, like Knopka, or trade her for a puppy, like Eroshka?

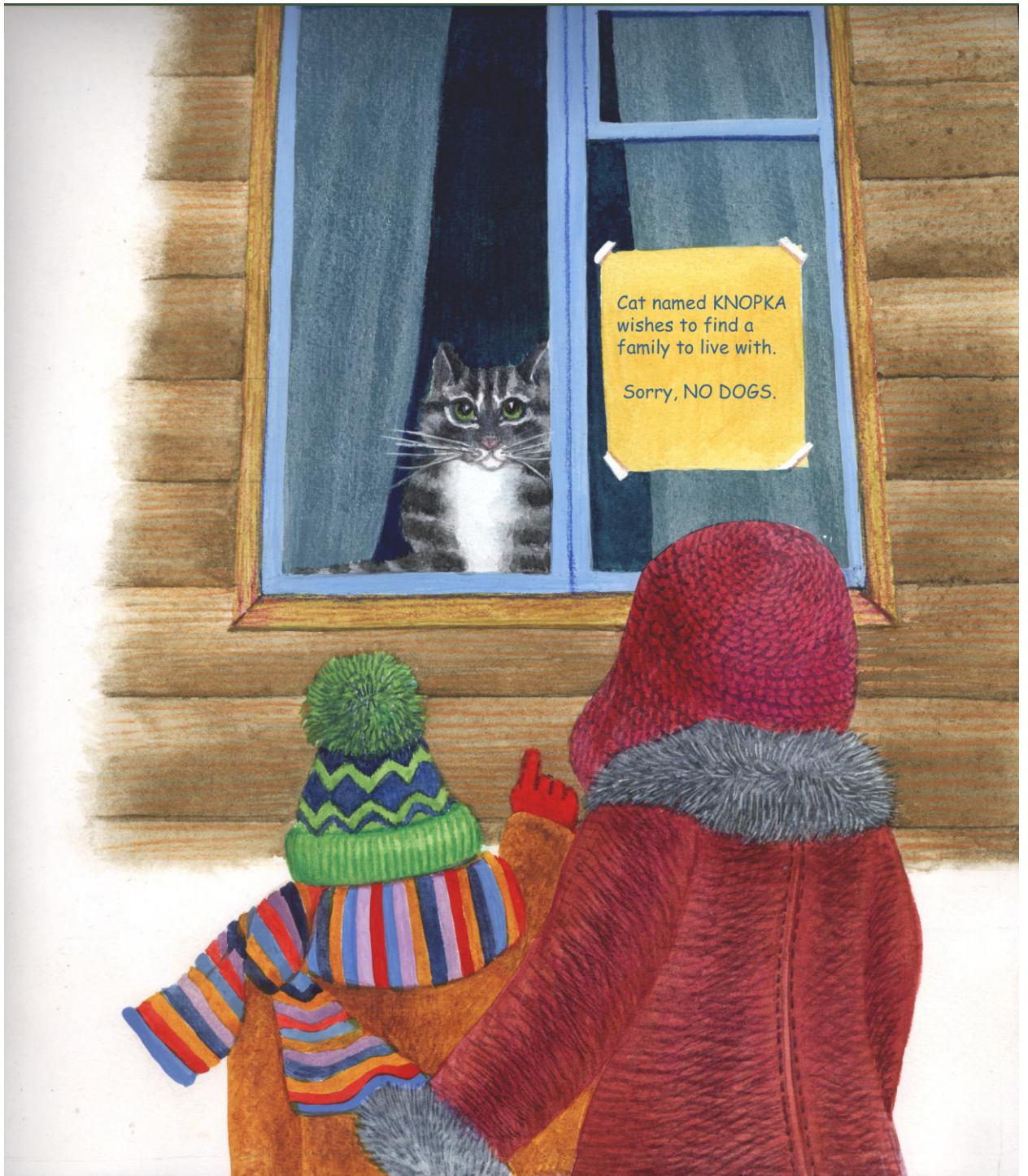
Malchik thought back to the early days of their life in the previous city. He thought of the long journey here and how they had put down new roots. He remembered the night that they rescued Knopka, and the time Vera saved him from the dog...

"No!" he said to himself, "I will never leave Vera. She is the truest friend that I have. She didn't give me away to that other family. She risked her own life to save me from that dog. She rescued Knopka, who would have died on that cold winter night. No matter what the others do, I'm staying with Vera."

Malchik looked at Knopka and Eroshka, and then jumped onto Vera's lap. He hugged her with his paws and nuzzled her cheek. "Don't worry," said Vera, stroking his head, "We'll get through this together. You and I will manage this change, and it's all going to work out fine."

Malchik settled down, and began to purr his favorite song. He felt a little sad, and he wished they didn't have to leave. But soon he began to feel less lonely, and his

purring got louder and louder. Now he was thinking of the new life ahead and new adventures with Vera. As long as they were together, he knew life would be good. Malchik finished purring the last verse of his little song, and soon drifted off to a peaceful sleep.



CHAPTER 5

Vera and the landlady were in the yard, discussing the move and plans for Knopka and Eroshka.

"I'm happy to take Eroshka," Malchik heard the neighbor say. "He's a wonderful cat, gentle and quiet, and he never teases the old dog. And he and the puppy are such great friends. I know that we'll have no problems with him."

Malchik was filled with pride to hear these things said about his son.

"But as for the other cat," the neighbor went on, "you'll need to find another home for her. And if you can't, then you'll need to take them both."

This gave Malchik something to think about. He hoped Knopka would change her mind and go with them to a new place. He was very attentive to her these days, giving her all the best bits of food, singing her to sleep at night, and even sitting with her on the windowsill to watch the passersby. But he just couldn't understand why she was so attached to that spot. Malchik did everything he could think of to make Knopka change her mind, but she remained stubborn.

Finally Malchik and Vera made sign and hung it in the window. In big bright letters, it read: "CAT NAMED KNOPKA SEEKS A NEW FAMILY TO LIVE WITH. SORRY, NO DOGS." For hours at a time, Knopka sat on the windowsill next to the sign, looking like a statue in a shop window, with her regal bearing, her wide open eyes, and her feet pointed out like a ballet dancer's. People would stop at the window to read the advertisement and try to guess whether the kitty was real. When they noticed a slight motion of Knopka's head, they would exclaim, "Look, she's real! She's alive, and so pretty!" But then they would pass on by.

In the depths of his heart Malchik hoped that nobody would respond to the advertisement, and Knopka would go with them, rather than spending the rest of her life on this windowsill. But just a few days before the move, there was a knock on the door. A young family with a four-year-old girl had come to see the house. They liked it very much, and their little girl liked the cat, because she wanted a friend. They decided right away that they would move in.

With this, Malchik's last hope crumbled. He knew he'd have to say good-bye to

Knopka. He and Eroshka went out to the garden for a last walk together. They both felt sad as they poked around together, but then Eroshka perked up, and said, "Don't worry, dad, I'll be okay." And with that he was off to play with his friend, the puppy.

The next day a large truck came to the house and they loaded up all their things. Malchik said good-bye to Knopka, and told her she could keep the photo of the three cats, in order to remember him. Malchik then jumped into Vera's lap in the truck, and they started to pull away. The big dog was barking on the porch next door, but this time he didn't sound angry at all. Instead he seemed to be saying good-bye, and wishing Malchik all the best. Knopka, for her part, was sitting on the windowsill as usual, and was so busy watching the passersby that she didn't even turn her head to see the truck drive away.

"The sooner I forget her," thought Malchik, "the better it will be for both of us."

He looked out the window and watched the houses behind their fences floating by. Soon the scene changed as they drove into a neighborhood of bright new high-rise buildings, one of which was going to be their new home.



CHAPTER 6

The new apartment was very spacious. Malchik wandered around, getting familiar with all the new smells. He chose a place for his little bed next to the kitchen, right across from the door to Vera's bedroom. In the large bathroom he discovered a toilet with a wooden seat. At just that moment, he remembered all his special bathroom skills. Vera was very pleased. "What a smart cat we have!" she exclaimed. "And what a pity that Knopka and Eroshka didn't want to come with us. Malchik could have taught them so much about modern living!"

That evening Vera, her husband and Malchik got ready for a walk in the park. Vera wanted to put Malchik on a leash, but he was quite offended. "I'm not a dog," he thought, "I don't walk on a leash. I'm a cat, for goodness' sake. I always walk by myself. Well alright, I'm also willing to walk with my friends, but certainly not on a leash."

Vera took the leash back off, but said, "Please be careful, Malchik. This place is still new to us, so please stay close to me, and don't go wandering off." Malchik knew this was good advice. So having agreed, they went out together to walk.

The park was full of families with children and dogs, but there were no other cats in sight. The dogs looked at Malchik with great curiosity. They ran up close to sniff him, and several even tried to play with him. But Malchik wasn't interested in making friends so fast, and he stayed as close to Vera as he could.

The people were also curious, and they asked Vera what kind of cat he was and where he had come from. Vera explained that they had from a distant part of the country where cats of Malchik's breed were fairly common. "Oh yeah?" thought Malchik to himself, "not as common as all that." Vera said he was a Siamese cat, a highly intelligent, trainable breed. "Well now that's true," thought Malchik. "I agree with that completely."

The people wished them good luck, and they continued on with their walk.

Evening walks in the park became a family tradition. Malchik soon knew every pathway, tree and bush. He knew where he could hide and then jump out to surprise Vera as she walked by. He knew where it was safe to climb high up in a tree, and also which trees and bushes to avoid because they might conceal a dog or a squirrel.

Malchik loved running ahead on the path, then turning around and running back to dance around Vera. He was so happy these days, and he barely remembered his life in the old house.

The days and weeks went by, and soon winter arrived. The Siberian winter was long and harsh. There was so much snow that sometimes life came to a standstill for days at a time, or even longer. The snowplows couldn't keep up with the snow, and the drifts around the buildings piled up as tall as a man. When the snow finally stopped, the deep freeze set in, and people only left their homes when they had to, to go to work or go shopping, bundled up with mittens and scarves to protect against the cold.

Their evening walks in the park had stopped while the park lay buried in snow, waiting for the spring. Vera and Malchik went out instead on the cleared sidewalks around the apartment building. The evening darkness came early in the winter, and Malchik especially loved walking under the street lights when the snow was quietly falling. The big flakes of snow drifted down and swirled around the lights like lazy butterflies, gently falling on the snowdrifts and the path. Malchik jumped up in the air and tried to catch them in his mouth, but he couldn't tell what they tasted like because they melted so fast on his tongue.

One evening when they were out walking together, the snow began to fall harder. Suddenly the wind picked up, and Vera said, "Malchik, we'd better head home. I think we're in for a heavy storm."

Malchik went running on ahead, and dashed into the entryway of the building. He wanted to hide behind the door and jump out at Vera when she came in: "Surprise, here I am!"

So he waited. But Vera didn't come, and the snow began to fall very hard.



CHAPTER 7

Vera saw Malchik dashing off toward the buildings, but she could barely make out his form as the snow fell more heavily. "What if he gets lost?" she thought, and she started walking faster.

When she reached the entryway to the building, Malchik wasn't there. "Where could he be?" she wondered. "He must be inside already; my husband must have let him in." But when she got to the apartment, she found that Malchik wasn't there either.

"He probably got lost," said Vera's husband, with a bit of irony. He had always thought Vera overestimated the cat's intelligence.

"Yes, that could easily happen," Vera said. "All the buildings look the same when it's snowing. I can hardly tell them apart myself. Come on," she pleaded, "let's go and look for him."

They searched all around the apartment buildings, while the wind blew ever more fiercely. They checked all the entryways, calling Malchik's name. But there was no answer. Vera was in a state of despair, while at that very moment, Malchik was stuck in someone else's house, locked in the bathroom and scared to death, wondering how all this had happened to him.

And here's how he came to be there. As Malchik was hiding in the entryway—to someone else's building, it now turned out—he began to wonder why Vera didn't come. He thought he would run back outside to look for her, but just at that moment, the wind caught the outer door and slammed it shut. A few minutes later, a man came out of one of the apartments. He was tall with a red beard, and he was wearing heavy boots and a fur hat. When he spotted Malchik crouching by the door, he was startled. But then, in a flash, before Malchik could jump out of the way, he leaned down and scooped Malchik up.

The man carried Malchik into the apartment, and yelled: "Hey mother, look, see what I've found."

"What is that," asked the woman in surprise, coming out of the kitchen. "Is it a dog or a cat or what?"

Malchik wanted to politely explain to them that he was not a dog, but at that

moment the man shook him so hard that it took away his breath.

"What difference does it make?" growled the man. "I can get a lot of money for him at the market. He'd make a good hat. Look at the markings on that fur. We don't ever see animals like this around here."

"The market? Money? A hat? They want to sell me as fur for a hat!" Malchik realized with horror. And using all his strength to tear himself from the stranger's grasp, he reached out and grabbed the man's beard. The man was enraged. He pulled Malchik away from his face, losing a large clump of beard in the process. He opened the door to the bathroom, and tossed the poor cat inside.

"You stay there, you mangy beast," he yelled angrily. "I'll come back for you in the morning with a cage." And he slammed the door shut.

Malchik could hardly believe what was happening to him. It must be a nightmare. A short time ago he was walking with Vera and only wanted to run ahead so he could surprise her as she entered the building, and now...

"Hey wait!" he thought, "I know what happened. I must have run up to the wrong building. I got lost! So what am I going to do now?"

At that moment he remembered something that Vera often said: "Things always look better in the morning." Malchik calmed down a bit, and realized that tomorrow he would have to fight for his life. He settled down on the bathroom mat, even though it didn't smell very good, and went to sleep.



CHAPTER 8

In spite of the shock of the evening before, Malchik slept well that night with pleasant dreams of Vera. She was stroking his head and smiling, saying, "Everything's going to be okay. Don't worry, I'm always with you."

Malchik woke up early in an excellent mood. He believed that it was true, everything really would work out, and he would soon see Vera again. This thought filled him with joy, and he was determined to do whatever it took to escape from the terrible stranger.

The apartment was silent. The others were still asleep. Malchik inspected every corner of the bathroom, hoping to find something he could eat. He was hungry and thirsty. But he found nothing. The only thing to drink was the water in the toilet. He pushed down the handle to make the water run, and then he drank enough to quench his thirst, although he thought it was really disgusting. Then he turned around on the toilet and did his morning business. He didn't run the water again, because he'd decided not to flush. He wanted to show the stranger what an extraordinary cat he was. That might impress the man, and maybe help save Malchik's life. Vera had taught Malchik to be considerate and agreeable, but she had also taught him to face circumstances for what they were, and do what was necessary. In this case, it seemed that Malchik's plan might work.

The people finally woke up, and soon Malchik heard the stranger's footsteps in the apartment. The man opened the door to the bathroom and yelled, "Wake up! The cage is ready for you." Then the man noticed that Malchik had used the toilet. "Well look at that," he said, "maybe there's more to you than I thought. I'm ready to forgive you for attacking me, because you are going to earn me a pretty good chunk of money." The stranger thoughtfully stroked his beard, which was clearly missing some clumps.

Although the cage was badly made, Malchik calmly got in. The stranger rewarded him with some sausage and a dish of water. Malchik devoured everything; he would need all his strength to carry out his plan.

The stranger threw a cloth over the cage, carried it out of the apartment, and got into a car. Just then, Malchik thought he heard Vera's voice calling him, but the sound of the engine drowned it out as the car took off. They drove for a long time, or at least it

seemed that way to Malchik. Finally the car stopped. The man picked up the cage and then put it down on something. When the cloth was taken off, Malchik saw that he was surrounded by cages, baskets and crates. They were full of other animals: dogs, puppies, cats, kittens, guinea-pigs, squirrels, and chipmunks. Malchik had never seen so many animals. There were also cages with birds. All the animals were making noise, barking or squeaking or chirping or meowing, expressing their displeasure at being there.

The cages sat on tables lined up along a row of little wooden buildings. A wooden fence behind the buildings surrounded the whole area. The stranger had brought Malchik to a place called the Bird Market, and like all the other animals here, Malchik was for sale.

As Malchik looked around from side to side, he began to formulate a plan. Shoppers were milling around, looking at all the animals, and soon a woman approached the stranger to see if she could buy Malchik. She and man starting haggling over the price, and by the time they came to an agreement, Malchik was ready for action. When the man lifted the latch of the cage to take Malchik out, Malchik threw himself with all his might against the door and broke out, running for his life. "Catch him!" cried the man, but Malchik was already half way to his goal, the roof of the nearest wooden building. He remembered this trick from his adventures with the big dog. Once he got to the roof, he scampered across to the other side, leapt across the space between the building and the fence, jumped down from the fence into the street, and went flying away, tearing past the houses. He didn't even notice the cold. He just thought of Vera's words: "Everything's going to be all right! Everything's going to be all right!" He was finally headed for freedom.

When the market was far behind him, Malchik stopped to catch his breath. "I did it!" he thought, "I'm free." His heart was beating so hard that he didn't hear the creak of a gate opening behind him. Then suddenly he looked around and heard a loud voice: "Now what have we here? What kind of an animal is this, wandering into our neighborhood?" As far as Malchik was concerned, it was another stranger just like the one he had escaped from, complete with boots, hat and a red beard. With lightning speed, Malchik jumped back and tore off down the street again. He finally reached the corner, and he stopped to see where he was.

As he stood there, he noticed a little house across the street. There was something familiar about it. Then he realized this was his old house! There was the window with Knopka's beloved windowsill. He remembered it so clearly from the day they moved away, when he had looked back for a final glance at his old companion.

But this time there was no Knopka was on the windowsill. Instead it was filled with flowerpots. Malchik walked up to the gate and recognized the familiar smell. And there in the yard he heard the old dog barking. He would have recognized that bark anywhere! The big dog apparently knew he was there. He could sense Malchik's presence, and he was joyfully barking a welcome, inviting Malchik to come in. Malchik didn't need to be invited twice. He leapt over the fence with the skill of a top athlete, and found himself in that familiar, but long forgotten garden where he had spent so many joyful hours.



CHAPTER 9

Knopka was lying on the sofa, staring at the picture on the wall.

"What a happy time it was when we all lived together!" she sighed. "Each of us did what we wanted to do, and my windowsill belonged to me. Vera never cluttered it up with these flowerpots that give me such a headache and make me lose my appetite."

Ever since Malchik had left with Vera and her husband, and Eroshka had gone to live with the landlady, life in the house had become miserable for Knopka. The new family that lived with her was not the least bit considerate of her habits and her wishes. Knopka couldn't complain about the food, and they did change her litter box regularly. But for some reason they considered themselves to be in charge of the house. The woman had started buying flowers in pots, and putting them everywhere in the house, on the floor, the shelves, the tables, and even the windowsill. How could she do that? The windowsill belonged to Knopka. It was hers! It was because of this windowsill that she hadn't wanted to go with Malchik. She had thought she would never again find a place that was so comfortable, so bright and so warm. And now? Now she had no Malchik and no windowsill.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The little girl in this family thought that Knopka was a doll, a living doll! For hours on end she would dress the poor cat up in little skirts, dresses, and bonnets. She put socks on Knopka's paws and ribbons on her tail. She would wrap her up in a blanket and carry her around, singing little songs. But could these songs compare to the loving serenades of Malchik? At moments like this, Knopka felt so sad that she wanted to cry.

"What a fool I was," she thought with grief. "Why didn't I value the friendship of Malchik and Vera? And now I have to pay the price of living with people who don't understand me at all! If only I could go back to the time when Malchik asked me to go with him, I would never say those hateful words—'I'd rather die on my windowsill.' I would say, 'Yes, I'll go with you!' But now it seems I really will die on that windowsill, surrounded by pots of flowers."

Even Eroshka didn't come to visit anymore because one time the little girl had tried to dress him up as well. Eroshka had managed to escape, and he had never been back since.

Knopka envied Eroshka. He could run in and out of the house so easily. She herself would run away in a minute if she weren't so afraid to go outside. And why

hadn't she just asked Vera to carry her over that scary threshold to her new home?

There was no end to Knopka's gloomy thoughts. She lay there feeling lonely and sad, and didn't even notice when someone opened the door. The mother of the family was home. Then suddenly Knopka felt somebody's gentle nose on her face.

"Eroshka, where did you come from? How did you get in here?" she asked.

"I have some important news," Eroshka whispered.

Knopka was surprised. "It must be something pretty important," she thought, "for Eroshka to take the chance of coming here."

"Malchik is here to get you, and if you are brave enough to go, he will be waiting for you on the porch this evening," said Eroshka.

"Yes!" cried Knopka, "Yes, yes! But how can I get out if the door is always closed?"

"Don't worry," said Eroshka proudly. "I am going to take care of that. You just stay close to the woman, and when she goes to the door and opens it, you run out as fast as you can."

"Alright!" said Knopka. "I'll do it!"

Eroshka ran to the door, and the woman opened it to let him out. "Don't be such a stranger," she said. "Come back and see us soon. My daughter will give you some little jeans to wear. It's too cold to go outside without any clothes!" Eroshka said nothing. He was already on his way to the porch.



CHAPTER 10

Eroshka rushed up to the porch where Malchik and the big dog were waiting. The dog had helped Malchik to get in through the chink in the door, the very spot where Malchik used to tease him. It was warm in here, and there was a bowl full of food, so Malchik had eaten until he was full.

The old disagreements were all forgotten. Malchik had grown up more, and the dog had gotten older and wiser. He couldn't run around in the yard anymore with the younger dog, and he spent most of his time sitting alone on the porch, remembering the adventures of his happy youth, or as he now saw it, "the days when I was naïve." Malchik's return had perked him up considerably, and he was very interested to hear about all the adventures of the last few days. For his part, the old dog gave Malchik all the news from Knopka's side of the house, which he had heard from the young dog, and the young dog had heard from Eroshka.

Malchik was distressed to hear about how badly things had gone for Knopka. "Poor thing," he said, "we need to get her out of that place."

So the three of them, Malchik, the big dog, and Eroshka, decided they would kidnap Knopka from the woman, and then Malchik and Knopka would go in search of Vera. Malchik was certain that their plan would succeed, and Eroshka was given the job of telling Knopka the news.

Eroshka returned in good spirits, and proudly reported that Knopka had agreed to the plan. He and Malchik were both surprised that she had agreed right away, as if she had just been waiting for this chance. This made them realize just how miserable she was.

Sitting on the porch, Malchik and Eroshka waited for evening to come. As soon as it began to grow dark, they approached the door on Knopka's side of the house. Eroshka started meowing and scratching at the door. Within moments they heard footsteps on the other side, and then the door opened. The woman stood at the threshold, looking out into the dark, and there at her feet sat Knopka, looking like she was pinned to the floor. Her face was turned toward Malchik and Eroshka, but she couldn't see a thing. She was so frightened that her eyes were tightly clamped shut.

"Now, Knopka, run!" Malchik and Eroshka both cried at once. "Hurry up, run!"

But Knopka couldn't move. Standing in front of the open door, she was totally

paralyzed with fear. She couldn't even open her eyes, even though she longed to see Malchik.

The woman bent over, petted Knopka on the head, and said, "Don't be afraid, sweetheart, I'm not going to let them take you." Then she turned to Malchik and Eroshka. "What are you crazy cats thinking? It's much too cold for my kitty to go out to play! Wait until springtime; then you can come back." And with these words, she started to close the door.

In a split second, Malchik made a decision. He couldn't abandon Knopka. If she couldn't make herself go out the door, then he would come in to her, and after that, they would just see what happened. With one great leap, Malchik bounded into the house, and dove under the sofa. Here he would stay, under the couch, and wait until his moment came to take action. He already had experience with this.

Once the woman closed the door, Knopka opened her eyes.

"How stupid I am, and so weak! I've missed my chance to change my life. I didn't even see Malchik—oh I miss him so much!" These were Knopka's sad thoughts as she dragged herself back to her bed.



CHAPTER 11

The woman sat on the sofa, thinking for a while. The little girl was asleep, and her husband was at work, so she had to make a decision herself. What was she going to do about this uninvited intruder who was sitting quietly under the sofa?

She had a feeling that she had seen this cat somewhere before. Just then her eye fell upon the picture hanging on the wall above Knopka's bed. Why of course! Malchik! That was his name. He was the cat in the picture. The landlady had told her many stories about this little cat family. Malchik was unusually intelligent and good-natured, quick-witted and wise. He had raised Eroshka to be a wonderful cat who never caused any trouble. The landlady was also pleased that Eroshka was such a good friend to the younger dog. As the woman recalled all the stories she had heard about Malchik, she wondered, "What was he doing on our porch, far from his home on such a cold night? I wonder if Vera knows where he is."

The woman decided she had better call Vera, and she went next door to use the phone. As soon as the door closed behind her, Malchik came out from under the sofa. He quietly walked to Knopka's bed, lay down beside her, and started to serenade her with one of her favorite songs. Knopka listened and wiggled her feet, but she thought it was only a beautiful dream. Then Malchik licked her on the nose and she opened her eyes in surprise and jumped up.

"Oh, Malchik!" she cried. "I've missed you so much!" Knopka was trembling with excitement.

"It's okay," said Malchik, licking her on the face. "Settle down, and I'll tell you the whole story tomorrow, but for now let's get some sleep."

Knopka finally calmed down, convinced that Malchik was really there right by her side. They curled up together on the little bed, and Malchik put his paw over Knopka. "Things will look better in the morning," he said to himself, and with that, they fell asleep.

Meanwhile the woman was talking to Vera on the phone. Hearing the news that Malchik was safe, Vera wanted to come over right away to get him. But the woman persuaded her not to come out so late at night, and promised that she would take care of him.



CHAPTER 12

The next morning, it was sunny and warm. Snow was melting off the roofs of the houses, and Malchik was awakened by the sound of water dripping. Suddenly he remembered the events of the day before. "It's time to get up and take action," he thought, "before the woman wakes up and throws me out of the house."

He didn't realize that he and Knopka had slept very late, and that Vera had already been there for quite a while. She and the woman were on the other side of the house, talking with the landlady. When Vera arrived earlier, she had seen Malchik and Knopka curled up asleep, and she knew she had to find a way to keep the cats together.

The woman was ready to give up Knopka, but she was afraid the little girl would miss having a companion. So the landlady called Eroshka and asked him if he would be willing to play with the girl from time to time. Eroshka thought of all the difficulties that Malchik and Knopka had gone through, and he agreed that he would help them out, but on one condition: the little girl could not dress him up like a doll. He would be happy, though, to play running and jumping games, and to swat the ball with the little girl.

While the women were discussing Knopka's future, Malchik was telling her they had to take their fate into their own hands—or paws—and get ready to do what they couldn't do the night before, make a run for it.

"I'll be with you the whole time. You don't even have to open your eyes. Just stay right next to me, and as soon as they open the door, run as fast as you can."

Knopka agreed, even though she didn't know how she could do it. Then Malchik and Knopka settled down next to the door, waiting for the moment when it would open and they could dash out and away.

Vera and the women were coming back from the landlady's side of the house. How Vera guessed what Malchik was planning, no one knew. But somehow she figured it out, and just before the woman opened the door, Vera said, "Wait." Then she spoke loudly so the cats inside could hear. "Malchik, it's me, Vera. Everything's going to be okay. We're taking Knopka home with us. Don't do anything rash; please don't run away. I'm right here with you."

When Malchik heard Vera's voice, he started meowing loudly to let her know he

understood. The door opened, and there on the doorstep stood Vera, smiling from ear to ear. Malchik ran to her, and she picked him up and hugged him. "I've found you, my runaway! I have been looking all over for you!" He licked her face and began meowing for joy so loudly that Vera couldn't help laughing.

"Don't strain your voice, my dear. If you lose it, who will sing lullabies for Knopka?"

Knopka couldn't imagine what would happen next. But Vera came to her and softly said "Knoppy, come here and let me pick you up and carry you to the car. Then we'll all go home together. Remember the first day you came to us? I picked you up in my arms and nothing bad happened to you. In fact it was the opposite. Our comfortable house became your home. So trust me now. Come home with us and you'll have a comfortable windowsill once again."

Knopka took a deep breath, closed her eyes to be on the safe side, and let Vera pick her up.

Malchik said good-bye to the big dog, the puppy, and Eroshka. He promised to visit them someday in the summer. Then he jumped into the car, where Knopka was already been sitting, and together they left to go home. It was the second time Malchik had left this place. But this time he was happy—Knopka was going with him.

They arrived at home and Malchik showed Knopka around the apartment. Then he jumped up onto the large windowsill in the kitchen and said, "Knopka, come up here; I know that you will like it!" But Knopka didn't even turn her head in the direction of the window. Instead, without hurrying, she settled herself down on Malchik's bed. This would be her new favorite place. She was content just to be with her devoted companion.

Vera winked at Malchik. "Good job," she said, as she set out another bowl of food.

EPILOGUE

Several months passed. The summer sun was shining brightly through the window, casting its beams on the little cat bed. But now, beside the bed, there were five bowls of food, and three little kittens crawling around on the floor. One looked like

Malchik, a second like Eroshka, and the third like Knopka. And Knopka didn't leave them alone for a moment, except for a quick bite to eat. Malchik sat beside his large family, his eyes glowing happiness and pride. He was ready for new adventures and their new life ahead.

