

THE WITCHES OF WORM



Zilpha Keatley Snyder

THREE-TIME NEWBERY HONOR WINNER

THE WITCHES OF WORM

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Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

About Zilpha Keatley Snyder

To Libby,
who is still
gentle and secret,
 and to Ruthie,
who left memories
 of early magic

In the early 1970s, just before I began writing *The Witches of Worm*, I started to notice how many young people were using a huge national upsurge of interest in all things “supernatural” in rather negative ways: to attack society in general and their own parents in particular, and to excuse their antisocial behavior by blaming something or somebody else, often their own unhappy childhood or the corrupt society in which they lived. “Something made me do it” had become almost a national alibi.

My initial inspiration for the story came from reading *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Enquiry into the Salem Witch Trials* by Marion L. Starkey. This book contains a carefully documented account of the Salem trials and of the part played in them by Ann Putnam. Ann, who was twelve years old when the accusations began, was the ringleader of the “possessed” children who were ultimately responsible for the deaths of twenty innocent people. In reading the book it occurred to me that many young people of the seventies were, like Ann Putnam, using the beliefs and superstitions of their time to control and manipulate those around them. Like Ann, Jessica in *The Witches of Worm* allows herself to do cruel, even evil things and excuses herself by saying, and almost believing, that “something made me do it”—the “something” in Ann’s case being the accused witches, and in Jessica’s her “evil” cat.

And in the end? Many years later Ann confessed that she had known she was not possessed except by her need for attention and power. And at the end of *The Witches of Worm*, Jessica discovers some truths about herself, and about the strange pet whose name is Worm.

The Witches of Worm is a serious and in some ways a rather frightening story. I was, at times, frightened by the writing of it. But I believe it includes a message that is no less important today than it was in 1972. The message, as stated by Mrs. Fortune, is that we invite our own devils and we ourselves must exorcise them.

Zilpha Keatley Snyder

Chapter One

“I’M SORRY, JESSIE BABY,” JOY SAID.

Jessica looked up from her magazine and stared at her mother, a point-blank unwavering stare that said something important by not saying anything at all. But it didn’t matter, because Joy wasn’t looking at her anyway.

Joy was looking down into her glass. She was standing over the register in her stocking feet, warming up after a cold ride home from the office in a cable car. Her long blond hair swirled down from her bent head, partly covering her face, and the heat from the register made her short skirt stand out like a dancer’s tutu. Standing there like that, with one foot tucked up, she looked like a dancer, or else a fashion model—or even a movie star. In fact, according to some people, she looked exactly like one particular star—a sexy blond Swedish actress who played in pictures with English subtitles. Jessica couldn’t say about that because the movies were the kind she was too young to get into, but she *was* certain of some other things. She was certain that no one would guess by looking at her, just what Joy really was. No one would suspect that she was only an overworked, underpaid secretary, for instance, and they’d be even less apt to guess that she was only Jessica’s mother. No one ever believed that at first, because Joy didn’t look like anybody’s mother, least of all Jessica’s. But she was—believe it or not.

My “believe-it-or-not” mother, Jessica thought as she stared at Joy. Sometimes she called her that out loud, but when she did, Joy always seemed to take it as a compliment. Joy had started calling herself, actually, by introducing Jessica that way. “And this is my daughter, believe it or not,” she would say to people—all kinds of perfect strangers. And none of them ever asked why they might not believe it. Nobody had to ask. It was perfectly obvious why it was hard to believe that Joy could have a twelve-year-old daughter. It was also obvious that, while Joy looked like a Swedish movie star, Jessica did not, and probably never would. But when Jessica called Joy her “believe-it-or-not” mother, she meant something a little different.

Still staring down into her after-work scotch and soda, Joy shook her head slowly and sighed. “I’m really sorry that——” she was beginning again, but Jessica didn’t wait to hear the rest of it. She picked up her coat and book and went out the door. She didn’t hurry because she knew that Joy was not going to call her back to hear the rest of what she had started to say. Joy would not call her back because they both knew that Jessica knew the rest of it by heart.

If Jessica had waited, Joy would have said one, or all, of a number of things. She would certainly have said she was sorry that, since Alan had asked her out to dinner, there would be a lonely TV dinner for Jessica again that night. Then she might have mentioned some other thing she was usually sorry about: that her job kept her away from home until so late, and that they had to live in a city apartment rather than a real house. If she were feeling particularly dramatic, she might have gone on to say that she was sorry she was such a lousy mother, but she guessed she had never really been cut out for motherhood. Sometimes she even cried a little; Jessica knew that part by heart, too.

Jessica knew it all by heart, and she also knew that none of it was going to change, no matter how sorry Joy might be. Some of the things Joy was sorry about were things she couldn’t change, even if she wanted to; and most of the rest were things that might have been changed once by

that couldn't be now. Like the fact that Jessica Ann Porter had been born twelve years before. That was one of the things it was a lot too late to change.

Halfway down the hallway on the second floor, Jessica stopped, simply from force of habit, to listen to Brandon. If Brandon was at home, he could usually be heard, even when he wasn't practicing his trumpet, as he was obviously doing at the moment. Jessica stood still, listening.

Brandon hadn't been playing the trumpet for very long—only a little over a year. Jessica knew exactly how long it had been because he had started only a short time before the day he had turned into a stinking traitor. She could never forget when that had happened. In that one year, Brandon had learned to make the trumpet blare and crow loud enough to disturb everybody five blocks around. Jessica put her hands over her ears, for the shout of the trumpet pierced the walls as if they were tissue paper. It sounded just like Brandon, she thought. He'd always done a lot of shouting.

When she reached the main floor, Jessica walked quickly and quietly. As she passed the Postcard apartment, she could hear a dull whine of conversation and she hurried faster, imagining the door opening and the sound swelling out like a tidal wave to engulf her.

At the rear of the building, passing the door to the apartment where Mrs. Fortune lived with all her cats, she stopped briefly and sniffed to see how bad the cat stink was that evening. Then she went on more quietly, because Mrs. Fortune, in spite of her age, had incredibly good ears. At least, she seemed to know everything that went on in the entire apartment house. But maybe, as Brandon had once suggested, it was only the cats who had good ears, and Mrs. Fortune got her information from them. Jessica could never tell whether Brandon was serious or not when he said weird things like that, but she could believe almost anything about Mrs. Fortune. She was that kind of person.

Outside the rear entrance to the apartment house, Jessica stopped and stood still, breathing deeply. Sometimes it made things seem better if she could get away and breathe long slow breaths of outside air. But today it only made things worse.

It was a terrible day, dank and windy—the kind of chilling August day that often betrayed the city's tourists, sending them shivering home to their hotels in their light summer coats. Jessica coughed and shoved her whipping hair back out of her face. The air tasted gray and poisonous, heavy with fog and city smells, and the sound of the wind was sad and angry as it swept down the alley and around the walls and fences of the Regency Apartment House. There was something threatening about the sound, as if the whining moan was full of strange half-spoken words. Shivering, Jessica buttoned the top button of her coat, shoved her book into a pocket, and hurried across the yard.

The back yard of the Regency was small and, except for a narrow strip near the building, very steep. The steepness was a part of the sharp rise that soared up directly behind the apartment house, up to a flat hilltop known as Blackberry Heights. Some of the most expensive houses in the city were in Blackberry Heights, and Joy was always wishing that she and Jessica could afford to live there. But since there was no hope of that, the next best thing was to live at the foot of the Heights, where you could share in some of the advantages. There were, for instance, the advantages of good schools and a good address. That was what Joy said. As far as Jessica was concerned, the main advantage was having a cliff for a back yard.

Beyond the cat-proof fence that enclosed the Regency's private patch of hillside, the slope of the cliff became very steep and wild. Only weeds and ugly scratchy bushes grew there, struggling for a foothold in the almost vertical stone. A climber struggled, too, slipping and sliding, unless

he knew the secret footholds, dug in the distant past by Jessica and Brandon. Anyone who knew those holds and followed them carefully halfway up the face of the cliff, came upon the entrance to the secret cave. That was where Jessica was going.

As she reached the last foothold and boosted herself up to the threshold of the cave, Jessica turned suddenly and peered downward, shading her eyes with her palm. Her face tightened into an expression of terror, and her voice shook as she said, "They're still following. They've found the entrance to the pass."



Moving quickly backward, she assumed a different expression, concerned but calm now, and determined.

“Courage lad!” Her voice had deepened. “We still have one ace in the hole. Roll out the catapult.”

Switching back into the part of a frightened boy, she began, “Oh, sir, there’s hundreds of them. And they have spears and crossbows and——” She stopped then, in mid-sentence, with a shrug and a disgusted laugh.

“Idiot,” she said in her own voice. She had to be an idiot to go on playing those silly games. She had been dumb enough that she had done it when she was younger and was just going along with Brandon’s crazy ideas. But to keep on doing it—as she did now and then—all by herself! She shook her head. “You’re really cracking up, Jessie Baby,” she told herself.

Sitting down on a ledge, she looked around. The cave had not changed at all since her last visit. A natural crevice, hardly more than five feet deep, it was just high enough to stand up in. Jessica and Brandon had used it in a lot of their games. It had been Injun Joe’s cave, the Open Sesame cave, and many others. Once they had planned to enlarge it and turn it into a real cavern, but days of digging had produced only a tiny closetlike addition, so the project had been abandoned. They had gone on using the cave, though, until Brandon had given it up, along with everything else they had shared together.

The cave was just Jessica’s now, and she still went there from time to time—not really to play stupid games anymore, but usually just to have a quiet place to read. Reading was one useful thing left over from her friendship with Brandon. That was what their games had been really—acted-out stories from books. Jessica had read so many of them to learn her parts that she had developed the habit—the habit of reading just about everything. And it was a good thing, too, considering how little else she had to do anymore.

The reading spot was a natural stone shelf padded with old blankets. It was near the mouth of the cave, where one could look out through the straggly bushes and see the Regency Apartment House almost directly below. By leaning forward she could see the rear windows of all the apartments in the main building and the shingled roof of the small one-story wing where Mrs. Fortune lived. Jessica sat there often, looking down at the windows, imagining what everyone inside was doing, and wondering what kinds of things might happen to them all someday.

Sometimes she made up long stories about the future. There was one where she came back to the Regency, after having become rich and famous. She had just purchased the whole block, and as the new owner of the Regency, she had come to tell the Posts that they were fired. She told Mrs. Fortune she could stay if she got rid of the cats, and she told the Doyles that they were being evicted because of Brandon; he was guilty of noise pollution. There was another part about going up to the third floor to see Joy. Joy looked different, older and not so blond. Jessica told her about the beautiful big house in Blackberry Heights that she had just moved into. She suggested that Joy come and visit sometimes. Of course, it would have to be when she, Jessica, wasn’t away making a TV show or something like that. Joy was very eager to come, and she said things about how lonely she had been since Jessica went away and got famous.

Jessica knew it was really a childish thing to do—making up stupid daydreams like that, and she sometimes made fun of herself about it. “Come on, Jessie Baby,” she’d say to herself—she always called herself Jessie Baby when she was disgusted—“Come on, Jessie Baby. Let’s quit wasting time with fairy tales like that Rich-and-Famous stuff.” But sometimes she did it, anyway.

Today she started in the middle with the part about evicting Brandon. But even though it w

one of the best parts—she'd been adding to it and improving it for over a year—she found that she was unable to keep her mind on it. Things kept happening to distract her.

Some of the distraction was only a feeling, a restless uneasy feeling that made her waste long moments watching and listening, without the slightest idea of what she was watching for. But some of the distraction was caused by the weather.

Jessica had never been in the secret cave on such a strange day. As she watched, far off toward the bay a huge dark cloud bank began to grow and spread. Closer in, the wind caught a spreading ooze of fog and wrapped it clean around the Regency Apartment House like an enormous cloak and then raveled it into snaky fingers that writhed off around corners and down alleys. The wind moaned and cried and then quieted into a furtive stealthy whisper until Jessica found herself straining to hear its secret. Finally she gave up on the daydream and decided to see if it would be any easier to keep her mind on reading.

She was settling herself more comfortably on her stomach on the shelf when she realized she could still hear the faint throbbing wail of Brandon's trumpet. Scooting forward she picked on the window of the Doyles' apartment. Either Brandon was standing near an open window or he was learning to play louder than ever. The sound of the trumpet had never reached her in the secret cave before, but now it came again and again, pulsing up through the city noises like a faint and far away shout. Still shouting, Jessica thought.

Brandon had shouted at Jessica the first time they met. That was when they were both only five years old. It had happened in the back yard of the Regency, not long after the Doyles had moved in. Jessica had lived there for as long as she could remember, but until Brandon came she had been the only child. Then one morning when she was five, she had come out the back door and found a boy building something on the sidewalk out of a lot of old spools and blocks. She had never seen the boy before, but she had recognized the building materials at once. They were from a box of interesting things that Mrs. Fortune called her Treasure Chest. The chest was kept in the hall closet and was brought out for Jessica to play with when she came to visit. Mrs. Fortune said that many, many children had played with the things in the box. But for a long time there had been no one but Jessica.

It was probably because it had always been her Treasure Chest, and also because Brandon ignored her, that she had gotten mad. He was so busy stacking her spools into a tall tower that he didn't notice her, even when she had made some warning noises. So she had run right through the middle of his building, knocking it to pieces. He had noticed her then. Shouting at the top of his voice, he had run after her and hit her on the head with his fist.

She hadn't cried. Jessica never cried—not even then at the age of five. She had not cried or hit back or even shouted. Instead she had quietly said some things to Brandon—some of the words she knew. Before she had finished, Brandon had stopped shouting and begun to listen. When she had run out of things to call him and begun to back away, suddenly he wasn't mad anymore. He had rubbed his nose with his knuckles and the strange high intensity had come into his eyes. A look, she found out later, that meant he was curious or interested.

“Say that again,” he had said.

“Say what again?” Jessica had asked.

“All of it,” Brandon had said. “All of what you just said.”

“Why? It means something very bad.”

“Yeah?” Brandon had looked even more intrigued. “What? What does it mean?”

Jessica had shrugged. “Something very bad. My mother says it when she's very mad.”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

“I did. She won’t tell me.”

Brandon had nodded. “Hey,” he had then said, “do you want to help me build a castle?” Just as if he hadn’t been yelling and hitting a minute before.

That was the way he was then and the way he always was. You could never predict anything about Brandon—what would make him angry, what would make him laugh, or what crazy thing he’d decide to do next. But if you were never sure about what would happen next, at least you were always sure about what was happening at the moment. You never had to wonder, for instance, if he was angry or not. When Brandon was angry, you found out immediately. But then he didn’t stay angry. And afterward everything was the same as it had been before. He was weird that way—different.

Even his looks were weird. He was thick and slow-moving, with a face that seemed to slant in too many directions. But his hands and eyes were different, as if they belonged to somebody else. His eyes were dark blue with bushy gold-colored lashes, and they were always changing flickering shades of blue, as if a blue fire burned inside. And his hands were long and narrow and good for everything from digging holes to drawing pictures.

His likes were weird, too. He liked a lot of crazy things: book games, or “plays” as he called them, instead of real games like baseball or checkers. He liked music, even old-fashioned symphony stuff, and strange people: Mrs. Fortune for example. And sometimes he disliked things for crazy reasons. You could count on Brandon to be crazy and unpredictable and exciting. Jessica had counted on it, for more than five years.

The faint liquid sound of the trumpet died away at last, and she turned back to her book. It was a new one that she had just checked out of the library. It was called *The Witches of Salem Town*, and it was not really a story at all. Instead it was a true account of events that happened a long time ago. As a rule Jessica preferred fiction, but there had recently been an article about witches in one of the women’s magazines that Joy subscribed to, and Jessica had been fascinated. Afterward she had gone looking for more information at the library. In the children’s section she had found only cutesy stories about Halloween-type witches with cats and broomsticks; but when she discovered where the adult books on magic were kept, she found what she was looking for. The book she had taken was a brand-new one that told the story of the witches of Salem.

The first few chapters of the book turned out to be mostly about a girl who had lived in Salem and who, at the time of the witches, was just twelve years old. Her name was Ann, which was Jessica’s own middle name. Ann had become the most famous of the people who accused the witches. She had been so important that many famous people came to talk to her, and everyone pitied or feared or admired her. Afterward many books and papers were written about her and the Salem witch trials.

As Jessica read, she kept turning back to look at a picture in the front of the book. It was a picture of a dim, old-fashioned drawing that showed a girl lying on the floor and reaching up with one hand. Many people were gathered around, looking down at her. The girl’s face was only partly visible, but it seemed to be thin and rather dark.

By the time Jessica finished reading the first three chapters, the light in the cave had become very dim, and the print seemed to squirm before her eyes. She was reading about the demons who had tormented Ann and the other girls, and she wanted desperately to find out what happened next, but at last her eyes ached so badly from straining to make out the words in the failing light that she was forced to stop. She closed her eyes to rest them only for a moment, and although she

did not remember feeling at all sleepy, she was almost instantly asleep and dreaming.

~~It was almost dark in the cave when Jessica awoke. She lay still, feeling the dream seeping away~~ into the dark parts of her mind. Keeping her eyes closed, she tried desperately to push her thoughts backward to grasp the fluttering fragments of the dreams and hold them. But they continued to fade, tantalizingly close to the edge of consciousness, until nothing was left but a vague shadowy scene and the memory of a fierce and frightening excitement. There had been a room in the dream, an enormous room glowing darkly with shining wood. And there had been people, many strangers with blurred faces, and some who were vaguely familiar, except that they seemed to be wearing masks carved from ice, which had frozen their faces into exaggerated expressions of fear. The rest of the dream was gone, except for an echo of violent noises and the feeling of fierce excitement.

When she finally gave up trying to remember more, Jessica sat up and peered out and down at the apartment house. Windows were lighted now in all the apartments, including her own on the third floor. Joy would be gone on her date with Alan, but the lights had been left on, and undoubtedly Mrs. Post had been notified that Jessica would be home alone. Sometime during the evening Mrs. Post would be up to find out how Jessica was doing, and to gather any other information she could possibly uncover.



What would happen, Jessica wondered, if she should decide to spend the whole night in the secret cave? Mrs. Post would arrive, pushing her heavy way up the two flights of stairs, to find no sign of Jessica. What would she do? What would Joy do when she came home to find her “believe-it-or-not” daughter had completely disappeared? Perhaps it was a good night to find out.

It would be a cold night though, cold and damp. The wind had died down, but the fog had settled in, deeper and more chill. The air smelled, now, of wet stones and moldy earth, as if it had come oozing up from caves and graveyards instead of blowing in from the open sea. Above, the sky was a sooty gray, but near the earth a layer of dusky light lingered, as if the day were trying desperately to stay alive.

In the thick muffling fog there was a strange difference in the quality of sound. All the usual sounds that could be heard from the secret cave, city sounds of horns and traffic, seemed distant and indistinct, fragmented by hollow echoes.

Jessica was leaning forward, listening intently, when a lull came in the flow of city sounds, a trough of silence between waves of noise, and into the silence another sound intruded. It was a soft and secret sound of movement, a crawling scabbling noise, and it was very, very near. Jessica jumped to her feet and whirled to face the back of the cave.

Chapter Two

THE BACK OF THE CAVE WAS IN DEEP SHADOW, AND for the first few seconds Jessica could see nothing at all. Then, as she inched forward, she saw a deeper shadow that moved slowly and fitfully on the stony floor. At first she thought it was a snake, but as she edged closer, she could make out tiny feet reaching out to scratch helplessly at the hard stone.

At last, her fright dwindling, Jessica squatted directly above the squirming object, but even then she was not entirely sure that it was only a kitten. For one thing, it was much smaller than any kitten she had ever seen before, and for another, it did not meow or make any sort of cry. Even when she finally brought herself to poke it gingerly in the side with one finger, it made no sound at all.

“It’s almost dead, I guess,” she told herself, but as she went on watching, it continued to move, trying to pull itself forward over the hard bare ground. It occurred to Jessica that the mother must have brought it to the cave and abandoned it, since no one else knew about the secret cave and very few people could climb to it even if they knew. Jessica had heard of a mother cat refusing to accept a kitten. Perhaps, in such cases, the mother carried it away and left it in a hidden place to die. She reached out and touched the kitten tentatively on its tiny back.

She had never liked cats. There were a number of reasons why. One was, of course, that she had had to live so long at the Regency, where Mrs. Fortune’s cats smelled up the back yard and half the building. All the tenants talked about the cat smell, but no one could do anything about it because the apartment house really belonged to Mrs. Fortune. Mr. Post took care of things and served as landlord, but that was only because Mrs. Fortune was too old and too busy with her cats.

But Mrs. Fortune’s cats were not the only reason Jessica had never liked cats. Actually she had always much preferred dogs, but Joy wouldn’t let her have one. Joy was afraid of dogs, although she wouldn’t admit it, and insisted that cats were better for apartment living. Joy often said that Jessica should have a kitten to keep her company when she was home alone. But Jessica had made it clear, time after time, that a cat was not what she wanted.

Now, however, like it or not, Jessica knew something had to be done about the tiny abandoned kitten. Even if for no other reason than to keep it from dying there and smelling up the cave. Eventually she reached out gingerly and picked it up.

It felt strange in her hands, unlike any kitten she had touched before. Its tiny body was firm and supple with very little of the fluffy softness a kitten is supposed to have. It writhed in her hands with surprising strength, and turned its incredibly small face up to hers. As she moved with it to the mouth of the cave, she saw with horror that it had no eyes. For an instant she came very close to throwing it down the cliff, but instead she quickly shoved it into the pocket of her coat, put her book in the other pocket, and began the downward climb. When she reached the apartment house, she went directly to the door of Mrs. Fortune’s apartment.

To be knocking on that door again seemed strange. For a long time, she’d knocked there almost every day, by herself at first and then with Brandon. In those days, a visit to Mrs. Fortune had been a favorite thing to do. But she hadn’t been there much lately.

Joy had never liked it. “Spending so much time with that weird old woman,” she said. “I don’t

understand it. What does she have in that smelly apartment of hers—a gingerbread house?”

~~There had never been a gingerbread house, but there had been reasons. One was simply that~~ Mrs. Fortune was often the only person home in the whole apartment building, except for Mrs. Post—and no one who didn't have to, would ever visit Mrs. Post. But there were other reasons too. There was the Treasure Chest, full of dozens of interesting old things, some of them so old that Mrs. Fortune had played with them herself as a child. There was an old crank-up phonograph and a stock of scratchy-voiced records; and there were hundreds of strange old books, stacked and crammed onto dusty shelves. And then, too, there was Mrs. Fortune herself.

Mrs. Fortune had always been pleased to have visitors, even when she was having one of those strange spells that made people say she was losing her mind. At those times she would not answer questions, but would sit with her head nodding gently, talking to herself or to one of her white cats. At other times she was quite different, lively and talkative and very interested in everything that Brandon and Jessica said and did. Once in a while she would even tell them stories.

Mrs. Fortune's stories were as strange as she was. They were always about impossible things like talking animals or magical objects, and she told them as if they really happened—and to her they did. When Jessica was very young, she had really believed in Mrs. Fortune's stories, and Brandon had too. In fact, Brandon had never stopped believing them, or at least pretending to. Right up until a year ago, when Jessica had stopped speaking to him, Brandon had still talked as if he believed that Mrs. Fortune could do all sorts of supernatural things. He probably still believed it. At least he still visited Mrs. Fortune now and then.

The door opened, and Mrs. Fortune, smiling her old face into a network of wrinkles, said, “Well, Jessica. What a surprise. Won't you come in?”

She looked terribly old, older than forever, and her faded dress of heavy brown material hung loosely on her thin body. Her long gray hair was tied at the back of her neck with a piece of string. People had always talked about Mrs. Fortune's strange appearance, but Jessica had never paid much attention to it. Now, suddenly, she found herself thinking, She does look weird. It's a good thing for her she doesn't live in Salem in the olden days. But out loud she only said, “Hello, Mrs. Fortune. I've come about this.”

She pulled the kitten out of her pocket and held it out. “I thought maybe you might want it.”

Mrs. Fortune leaned forward, peering. “Good gracious, child. It's a newborn kitten. Where on earth did you get it?”

“Out by the hill,” Jessica said. “It was abandoned. I thought maybe you could raise it.”

Mrs. Fortune reached out and took the kitten. Her thin, crooked old fingers closed around it like the claws of a huge bird. “But it's much too young to be taken from its mother,” she said. “It's very difficult to raise a kitten this young by hand. If I had a nursing mother, I could try to get her to accept it, but none of my cats have kittens now.”

She moved back out of the dimly lighted doorway to hold the kitten under the glow of the table lamp.

“My word,” she said. “It's an ugly little thing, isn't it? And such a strange color.”

In the strong light the kitten had become a chalky gray, the color of dead ashes. Its fur was so short and fine that its wiry body seemed to be almost hairless.

“It's blind, too.” Jessica could hardly bear to look at the kitten's blank unfinished face.

“Yes, but of course that's only temporary,” Mrs. Fortune said. “Its eyes will open when it's about ten days old.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jessica said. Actually she'd forgotten, if she'd ever known, that kittens were born

blind. She had been thinking of the kitten's eyelessness as some horrible abnormality.

"Come, my dear," Mrs. Fortune said. "Let's see if we can get it to eat." In her crowded little kitchen that smelled strongly of cat food, Mrs. Fortune got out a small can of milk and a tin doll's bottle. She heated the milk and added a drop of liquid vitamins. Then she poured the warmed milk into the bottle.

But the kitten refused to eat. It didn't cry or struggle, just turned its blind face determinedly away from the bottle, time after time. At last the phone rang, and Mrs. Fortune put the kitten on Jessica's lap and went to answer it. Jessica sat and watched it squirming there for a while, but finally she picked up the bottle and held it to the kitten's mouth. Immediately it opened its mouth, took the nipple, and began to suck. By the time Mrs. Fortune had returned, the bottle was half empty.

"Ahh," she said. "Good for you. I'm glad you decided to try. This may well be your last chance."

It was the kind of weird thing Mrs. Fortune sometimes said. In the midst of an ordinary conversation, she would suddenly make a remark that sounded as if it were meant for an entirely different person. Mrs. Post was always telling people about the strange things Mrs. Fortune said and how she, herself, always pretended she hadn't heard so as not to embarrass the poor old soul. But Jessica had always been too curious to pretend.

"What do you mean—'your last chance'?" she asked. "Are you talking to the kitten, or to me?" Mrs. Fortune chuckled appreciatively, as if Jessica had said something very witty. "Perhaps to the kitten," she said. "Perhaps it hasn't very many lives left."

"Oh, you mean like a cat having nine lives? Do you really think they do?"

"Ahh," Mrs. Fortune said, chuckling again, "sometimes I'm sure of it. Now this kitten, for instance, has surely lived before. He's much too wise, I think, for only a few days of life. Don't you agree?" She picked up the kitten and began to rub under its tail with a wet cloth.

"He doesn't look very wise to me," Jessica said. "What are you doing to him?"

"I'm helping him to eliminate. The mother cat does this by washing. Many people who try to raise very young kittens allow them to die because they don't know this is necessary. It must be done until their eyes are open and they begin to walk."

"Ugh," Jessica said when Mrs. Fortune had finished. "I'm glad that's over."

Mrs. Fortune smiled. "But it is only over for the moment. It will all have to be done again every two hours, and every two hours for two weeks. After that the time between feedings can be lengthened."

"Every two hours," Jessica said. "That's impossible."

"Not impossible, but very difficult. I have raised kittens that way several times in the past, but I was younger and stronger then. I wouldn't be able to do it now. If I were awakened every two hours now, I wouldn't be able to sleep at all."

"What am I supposed to do then," Jessica said. "I don't want a kitten. I don't even like cats."

Mrs. Fortune nodded her shaky old head. "Then perhaps you can find someone who has a nursing mother cat who might accept this poor orphan. Surely among your school friends someone would know of a cat with kittens."

"Well, I don't know."

"Why don't you try? I'll give you the bottle and some milk, and you can take the kitten up to your apartment while you call your friends. Then perhaps tomorrow you can take him to his new home."

There wasn't anything more for Jessica to say. Mrs. Fortune obviously didn't want the kitten and Jessica wasn't going to explain that there wasn't anyone she could call to ask about mother cats. Reluctantly she took the padded box that Mrs. Fortune had prepared with the kitten tucked in beside a quart jar of warm water, and returned to her own apartment.

It wasn't until she was through eating her TV dinner, a tasteless veal cutlet, that she discovered that the new book about Salem was no longer in her pocket. It must have fallen out, she decided while she was climbing down the hill, or else in Mrs. Fortune's apartment. Wherever it was, she would have to stay there until morning, and that meant that she had nothing to read. She shuffled through the stack of magazines on the end table without any luck. She had already finished everything of interest in them. That left only television. But that seldom appealed to her, particularly when she was home alone. She turned on the set and threw herself angrily onto the couch.

Not long afterward, Mrs. Post arrived to "look in" on Jessica. "Looking in" on everybody and everything was Mrs. Post's favorite occupation. When Jessica had gotten too old to need a babysitter, Joy had started letting the Posts know when Jessica was going to be home alone, just in case of an emergency. But the "looking in" part was Mrs. Post's own idea.

Jessica yelled "come in" without getting up off the couch; and Mrs. Post lumbered in and lowered herself onto her favorite chair, the little ladder-backed one by the telephone. Jessica guessed she liked it because she could get off it again a little easier than she could the lower and softer ones. But the little chair did a lot of creaking whenever Mrs. Post sat on it, and Jessica always expected it to collapse in splinters.

"Just thought I'd look in a minute, dear, to be sure you're safe and well."

"I'm fine," Jessica said, turning her eyes reluctantly away from the TV toward Mrs. Post. She wasn't at all interested in the program, but she wasn't interested in one of Mrs. Post's lectures either.

"What are you watching, dear?"

"A play," Jessica said. "An old play about some weird people."

Mrs. Post glanced at the set for a moment. "Well," she said, "I suppose it's suitable for a twelve-year-old. I suppose your mother must have approved it. Of course, with her away so much these days, it must be hard for her to keep track of what you watch. I do think——"

"Excuse me, Mrs. Post," Jessica said, getting up off the couch. "I have to go to the bathroom." In the bathroom she locked the door and leaned on the basin, making faces at herself in the mirror. First she sucked in her cheeks and narrowed her long eyes. Joy, whose face was round and soft-looking around the edges, said that Jessica had a foxy face. Jessica bared her teeth, making herself look more foxlike, sly and angry—an angry fox face. Then she pulled her eyebrows together and puffed her cheeks way out. "I do think——" she said in a perfect imitation of Mrs. Post's voice—not quite as loud as a power saw but just as whiny and annoying. "I do think that children are left to their own devices too much these days. Now when my children were small——"

Jessica was great at imitations. Even Brandon said so. In fact, Brandon had been the first one to mention it. He used to laugh at her imitations of people they knew, particularly Mrs. Post. But once he'd almost slugged her for imitating Mrs. Fortune's shaky head.

After a few minutes, Jessica flushed the toilet and went back into the living room. Mrs. Post was still there, but at least she was on her feet again. As she went out the door, she reminded Jessica to keep the door locked when she was home alone.

“You really must keep the door locked, Jessica,” she said for the hundredth time. “To leave the door unlocked and just call ‘come in’ the way you do is terribly dangerous. You never know, these days, who might walk in.”

“I knew it was you,” Jessica said. She stared at Mrs. Post thinking, I knew it was you because no one else makes the stairs creak like that. She didn’t say it out loud, but Mrs. Post must have guessed what she was thinking because she frowned and her face got a little red.

When she was gone, Jessica got up and locked the door. Mrs. Post had been expecting a murderer at the Regency Apartment House for as long as Jessica could remember. He hadn’t appeared yet, but Jessica wasn’t at all sure he wouldn’t someday. It was just that she didn’t intend to lock the door before Mrs. Post made her inevitable appearance. She wasn’t about to get up and go to the door to let Mrs. Post in every single night, when she didn’t want her to come in the first place. So she just had to take her chances on the murderer until after Mrs. Post had come and gone.

With Mrs. Post out of the way, Jessica went to the kitchen and looked at the kitten. It had been almost two hours since Mrs. Fortune had fed and cleaned it. It was moving restlessly on the bottom of the box, a squirming hairless blob. There was a shapeless unborn look about it that made her shiver.

“Ugh,” she said. “You squirmy thing. Why should I waste my time keeping you alive? I don’t want you.”

At the sound of her voice, the wobbly weaving head steadied. The kitten lay still, listening and waiting.

“I don’t want you,” Jessica repeated loudly. Angrily, she jerked a pan out of the cupboard and slammed it onto the stove. When the milk was heated, she filled the bottle, and sitting down on the floor, she picked the kitten up with the tips of her fingers and put it in her lap. It drank fiercely, concentrating all the strength of its tiny body on food until the last drop of milk was gone.



Shortly afterward, when Jessica got into bed, she did a very unusual thing—she reached over and ~~turned out the light. She never turned out the light or went to sleep when Joy was still out~~ no matter how late it got to be. Instead she sat up in bed, reading or only thinking, until she heard Joy's key in the lock. Then she turned out the light quickly and flopped down under the covers. When Joy looked in a few minutes later, she would pretend to be fast asleep. By lying in a certain position with her head propped on the pillow, she could see the doorway through squinted eyes.

Joy would stand still a moment, usually, and the light from the hallway would turn her blonde hair into a shining wreath, and her face would be shadowed and very beautiful. Once, when Jessica was about eight years old, Joy had come into the room and kissed her very softly on the forehead. But usually she only stood in the doorway and then tiptoed away. After that Jessica would go to sleep.

There was no longer any real reason why Jessica stayed awake until Joy got home, but there had been once. There had been a time when she was afraid to go to sleep because of a dream that came back again and again. It was a terrifying dream about waking up all alone in an empty room that grew bigger and emptier until it filled the whole universe. She had not had the dream for a long time, but waiting up for Joy had become a habit.

There was no reason to break the habit for the first time on that particular night. Of course she had nothing to read, but that had happened before. The only thing different was the kitten, and he was certainly not a very good reason to do anything, except that if she were asleep at the next feeding time, she wouldn't have to decide what to do.

So Jessica turned out the lights and settled down to sleep, and she did *not* set the alarm, Mrs. Fortune had suggested. Perhaps she would wake up and perhaps she wouldn't. She didn't care much either way. If the kitten was dead in the morning, the problem would be solved.

. . .

It was almost exactly two hours later that Jessica found herself suddenly wide awake and staring through the darkness at the luminous hands of her clock. At first she thought she had heard something, maybe Joy arriving home, but she waited and listened without hearing the familiar sounds of clicking high heels and doors opening and closing. But there *had* been something like a sound.

Closing her eyes and using all her energy to listen, Jessica began to hear it again—the same breath-soft sound of movement she had heard in the cave. She couldn't possibly hear that cat moving, yet she was sure she did. She also obviously couldn't see anything, but a kind of picture kept forming behind her tightly closed eyelids.

She saw a face, triangular and ashy gray, but instead of being blind and eyeless, it seemed to be mostly eyes. The top part of the face was filled with two huge glowing diamonds. Jessica blinked hard and the face disappeared, only to return with the diamond eyes glowing brighter than before. At last she turned on the lights and jumped out of bed.

When Jessica bent over the cardboard box in the corner of the kitchen, the kitten raised its head and sniffed the air. It turned its face toward her, wrinkled its flat nose, and sniffed again. It was, of course, as blind as ever. But when its weaving head faced Jessica directly, it stopped. It clearly knew that she was there, and it knew exactly where—but it did not call to her to feed it. It only went on watching her blindly, waiting for what she would do.

Chapter Three

JESSICA HADN'T MEANT TO FEED THE KITTEN AGAIN. She had gotten out of bed and gone into the kitchen just to look at it for a moment. Not that she wanted to see it. It was almost as if it seemed dangerous not to, in the same strange way that it sometimes seemed very dangerous to step on a crack or walk under a ladder, or follow some other silly superstition.

But once in the kitchen, faced with that strange blind watchfulness, Jessica found herself refilling the hot-water bottle and heating the milk. The kitten was still drinking when Joy finally returned from her date with Alan.

Jessica was sitting on the kitchen floor with the kitten in her lap, supporting its tiny body in an almost vertical position. The bottle was nearly empty when there was the sound of a key in the front door, whispered words, and then Joy appearing in the kitchen doorway.

Joy was wearing her velvet dress with the high waist that made her look like a medieval princess. Her golden hair was pulled up into a curly ponytail, and her cheeks were very red. She was humming a tune until she saw Jessica, and then she jumped and looked startled—almost guilty.

“Jessie,” she said. “What on earth? What are you doing awake at this hour?”

Jessica could have said, “I’m always awake at this hour on nights you’re away,” but she didn’t. Instead she only said, “I’m feeding a kitten. It has to eat every two hours.”

“A kitten!” Joy looked amazed and then pleased. “I thought you hated cats. Here, let’s have a look.” She crossed the kitchen unsteadily and bent over Jessica. “Let me see the itsy-bitsy—” She was going on in the crooning baby talk she always used when she spoke to cats, but she stopped in mid-croon. “Good Lord! Jessica, are you sure that’s a kitten? It doesn’t look like any kitten I’ve ever seen.”

“It’s very young,” Jessica said. “Maybe only a couple of days. That’s why it has to be fed so often. It’s not really old enough to leave its mother.”

“Well, let’s take it back to its mother then, and we’ll get you one of those darling Persian cats from the pet shop.”

“I don’t want a darling Persian,” Jessica said.

“That’s ridiculous,” Joy said. “If you want a kitten, let’s get you a good one, instead of this poor little monster. It hardly looks like a kitten at all.”

“It’s a kitten,” Jessica said.

“Well, I suppose it must be, but look how bare and squirmy it is.” Joy drew up her shoulders and gave a delicate shudder. “It reminds me of some kind of worm. A poor little blind worm.”

“I like worms,” Jessica said. “I like worms a lot better than kittens.”

...

So its name was Worm, and Jessica continued to take care of it, although she didn’t know why. Fortunately, for Worm at least, summer vacation wasn’t over or she wouldn’t have been able to do it even if she’d wanted to. And she didn’t want to, not really, but something—a strange unwilling kind of fascination—kept her coming back to peer into the box in the kitchen. And once there, the kitten’s inescapable blind watchfulness held her like a charm until it was fed and cared for.

Sometimes, dragging herself out of bed in the middle of the night, Jessica would decide that ~~the very next day she would take the kitten to the animal shelter and leave it.~~ Of course the shelter would put it to sleep. No one would want to raise such a useless ugly kitten. But somehow Jessica never got around to going to the animal shelter.

It was during those night feedings that Jessica began to talk to Worm. Staggering out of her warm bed, blinking in the sudden glare of the kitchen lights, she would grab him out of his box and hold him in both hands.

“Yes,” she would say. “Here I am, you awful pest. I suppose you think I like having to get up at all hours to take care of a disgusting thing like you. I suppose you think I enjoy having to hold you while you drool milk all over me and having to clean your bottom like a dirty baby. If I start getting sick or something, it’s going to be your fault. It’s not good for somebody my age to miss so much sleep. Just like it’s your fault I lost that brand-new library book and now I’m going to have to pay for it out of my own allowance, and I never even got to finish reading it. I should have just let you die, even if it is your ninth life, like Mrs. Fortune said.”

Other times, Jessica would come into the kitchen and sit down beside the box and talk to Worm without touching him at all. “Why don’t you cry?” she’d ask him. “It’s past your eating time. Why don’t you meow like an ordinary kitten and ask me for your food?”

Always, when Jessica talked to him, Worm would push himself up waveringly to a sitting position and turn his face toward hers. He would sit waiting, listening, moving with her every move, until she was sure that, in some weird way, he could see her from behind his blind eyes.

“Why don’t you cry?” Jessica would ask, and then she would answer for him.

“Why should I cry like an ordinary cat?” she’d imagine him saying. “I am Worm, and I am different.”

“Ugh,” Jessica would answer. “You’re different, all right—uglier and weirder.”

“I am different,” Worm would say. “Mrs. Fortune knows. She told you I was wise.”

“All I know is that you’re a disgusting little monster. Come here and drink your milk so I can get back to bed.”

It took a long time for Worm to get his eyes. Mrs. Fortune had said that kittens’ eyes open slowly, a little bit at a time; but more than a week passed, and there was still not the slightest crack in the tight gray creases that slanted upward from each side of the flat nose. Jessica was beginning to think she’d been right in the first place—that there was something abnormal about that strange unfinished face.

But then, one morning, she slept through a feeding and hurried into the kitchen just after daybreak to find Worm sitting up in the corner of his box, watching her through slits that had widened into blue-black diamonds.

“Well,” she said, snatching him up and giving him a shake. “So you did have real eyes all that time.”

Worm opened his tiny red cavern of a mouth and hissed at her like an angry snake. Jessica had not seen him do that before, and for a moment she felt almost frightened, but then she shrugged. “I don’t like your looks either,” she said. “So I guess we’re even.”

By the time school started, Worm had graduated to being fed only every four hours. In the morning, coming home at lunch time, Jessica was able to maintain his feeding schedule. The school was only four blocks away, and though she had never bothered to come home for lunch before, this year, eating lunch at home actually worked out rather well. It worked out well because there was no one at school with whom Jessica could eat. Not right at the moment, anyway, since she’d lost

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