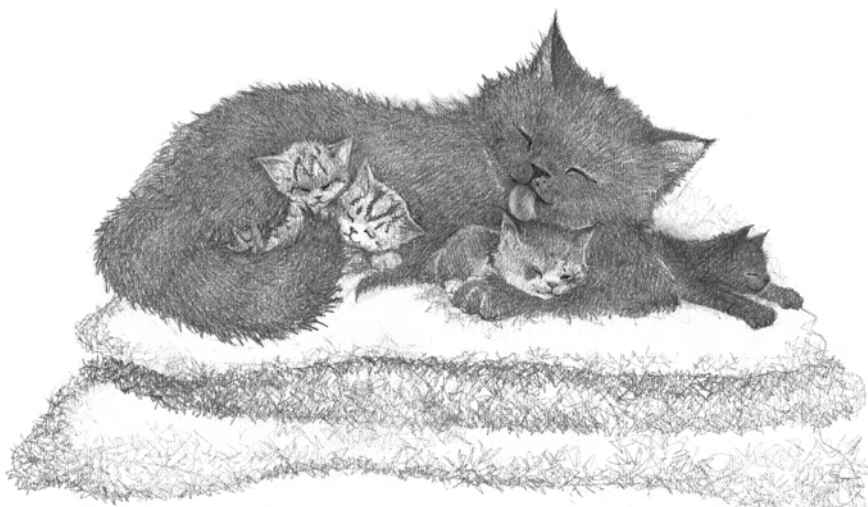


# The Bold Kitten



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# For Rose

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# Chapter One



Hana leaned against her mama's shoulder and watched the lights flicker by as the car sped along. She could hear her little brother Zahir making snuffling noises in his sleep, and wished that she could sleep so easily. But everything was too strange and scary for sleeping. Hana felt as if she needed to keep watch all the time, just in case

something bad was about to happen to Zahir, or her parents. Her baba was in the front seat, next to the driver. Hana could tell Baba was trying hard to remember his English words, so he could answer the friendly questions the driver kept asking – Mark, that was it. The driver was called Mark.

It had all happened so fast – the sudden goodbye to the friends they'd made in the camp in Iraq, the bumpy ride to the airport, and then the flight. It was a good thing, of course, that they'd come here to Britain. But Hana was used to living in the camp. She had friends there! She felt as if she knew everyone and she knew what the days would bring. Now everything had changed.

Baba had said that this was what they'd been waiting for – a whole new start in a different country. Hana could go to a real school. He and Mama could get jobs. After a while, they would hopefully be able to have a home of their own that would be a safe place to stay. Hana had tried to imagine it, but it was so hard.

Their real home was in a village in Syria, but they'd had to leave quickly, after the village was overrun by fighters and it was too dangerous for them to stay – that had been two years ago, when Hana was seven and Zahir was a tiny baby. Hana and her family had been living in the camp ever since. She could hardly remember the village

they'd left behind – only flashes of memory every so often.

“Who is he?” she whispered to Mama in Arabic, nodding at Mark. The man had been so smiley and kind when he met them at the airport, and now he was driving them somewhere, but Hana didn't really understand what was happening.



“He’s a – a volunteer,” Mama explained. “Someone kind who wants to help us. There’s a group of people in this country, organized by a charity – they offer rooms in their houses to people who’ve had to leave their homes, like us. Mark is driving us to his house.”

“So we’re going to live with him?” Hana peered at Mark. She couldn’t see very much of him in the dark car, though.

“And his family. Do you remember, at the airport he told us that he had a son about the same age as you?”

“Yes...” Hana said slowly. She hadn’t really been listening, the airport had been so overwhelming. The bright lights, all those crowds of people, the

announcements in English that she almost understood, but not quite... Hana had stood there, blinking, clinging on to Mama with one hand and her little purple-and-silver backpack with the other. She couldn't let go of her bag – it was the only thing she had from her life in Syria. Even the clothes she'd been wearing when they left the village were gone now – she'd grown out of them so quickly and they'd been passed on and swapped with other families in the camp.

“Oscar,” she whispered to Mama. “He's called Oscar.”

“That's right!” Mark called from the front of the car. “He's nine, Hana, just like you! He's looking forward to meeting you!”



Hana looked worriedly up at Mama. She'd understood nine – she knew it was her age, she'd learned English numbers in the school at the camp. She could speak quite a lot of English words and phrases now, but she didn't understand well enough to follow Mark's fast speech. He had a kind voice, though. She did her best to reply, murmuring, "Thank you," hoping it was the right thing to say. She knew it was polite.

Mama squeezed her hand, and Baba looked round at her, smiling and nodding. "Good! Use your English!" He and Mama had tried to help Hana learn English too – they'd been hoping that they would be able to travel to Britain one day. She wondered if Oscar

would know any Arabic words. Perhaps she could just ask him to speak slowly.

“This is our road,” Mark said, turning into a side street.

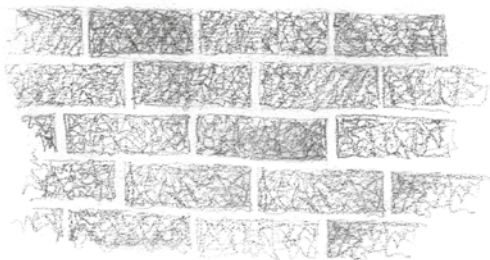
Hana peered up at the tall houses – there were still a few golden-lighted windows and she could see figures moving behind them, and people talking. There was so much space. The houses had little gardens in front of them, with trees and bushes, or cars parked. She was used to tiny homes built out of concrete blocks, squashed up close together to fit as many people into the overcrowded camp as possible. These houses looked beautiful, but strange – even frightening.

Mark drew up outside one of the tall houses and Hana stared anxiously

out of the car window. She spotted a small face looking back at her, peering round the edge of the curtain in an upstairs room.



“It’s late,” Mark said to her slowly as he turned off the engine. “Oscar is asleep in bed, but he’ll be happy to see you tomorrow.”



Hana nodded. She’d mostly understood that! Then she glanced up again and saw the curtain drop back.

She had a feeling that actually Oscar was wide awake and watching.



The calico kitten woke up, blinking sleepily. She was slumped half on top of her mother, with her ginger brother's chin resting on her head. He was warm but heavy, and the kitten wriggled a little and mewed crossly when she couldn't shift him. Her mother leaned over and gently nudged the ginger kitten away. He didn't even wake up, just slid bonelessly over to land with all four paws pointing up in the air.

The calico kitten yawned and looked blearily around. Something had woken her, but she wasn't sure what it was.

She wasn't hungry – she'd fed well a short while before and she didn't want any more milk. Not for a little while, anyway...

Voices echoed outside the door and the kitten pricked up her ears, listening. The house felt different tonight, strange and waiting. But her mother was still stretched out sleepily in their pen, so the kitten was curious rather than frightened. If there was something wrong, their mother would be standing in front of them, her fur fluffed out. She'd be making those little hissing growls that meant she was scared for her babies.

The kitten squeaked in surprise as her mother leaned over and picked her up with a gentle mouth. She

wanted all her kittens close. The calico kitten purred faintly as her mother began to wash the top of her head, licking her fur down flat. The kitten's head nodded with every swipe of her mother's tongue. She yawned again and snuggled close against the mother cat's fluffy white front.

Everything was fine. Everyone was safe. She was going back to sleep.

