

Bella's Story

**A
Dog's Way Home
Tale**

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**A Tom Doherty Associates Book
New York**

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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From the beginning, there were cats.

Cats everywhere.

I couldn't really see them, even though my eyes were open. When they were nearby, all I was aware of was shifting shapes in the darkness.

But I could smell them, just as I smelled my mother and her milk. Just as I smelled my brothers and sisters, close to me in a squirming, wiggling pile.

I didn't know they were cats at first, of course. I only knew that they were close to me, and that for some reason they didn't try to nurse alongside me. I was grateful for that—it was difficult enough to find a place to feed at my mother's side with my littermates always shoving me around.

Later on, I discovered that cats were their own kind of animals, small and fast and graceful. Many of them

were tiny and young and had their own mothers, which explained why they didn't try to nurse from mine.

We all lived together in a cool, dark home. There was dirt under my paws, and the dirt was full of old, dry smells. Above, there was a ceiling of wood. Whenever my mother got to her feet, her tail made a perfect upright curve that reached halfway to that ceiling.

The only light that entered our home came from a small square hole at the far end, too far away for me to crawl and investigate. Through that hole came astounding smells of things that were cold and alive and wet, things that were even more delightful than the smells of dirt and cats and dogs in the home that I knew.

Sometimes a shadow would flit across the hole and then an exciting, delicious odor would fill the air. The cats would scamper toward this smell. My mother always stood up, shook off a puppy or two, and went with them.

My brothers and sisters and I would huddle together and squeak until she returned. Her mouth and muzzle smelled fascinating—not like milk, and yet like food. We'd lick her frantically. She'd lick us back, and I could feel that she was content.

I was very curious about what might lie on the other side of the hole. But whenever I tried to crawl toward it, my mother would push me back with her nose.

So I mostly kept to the small hollow in the dirt where I had been born. As my legs grew stronger and I could keep my eyes open for longer and longer stretches of time, I played with my brothers and sisters—wonderful



games like Chase-Me and Is-This-Your-Tail-Or-Mine? And sometimes I played with the cats.

There was one cat family who lived nearby with two kittens—one dark, one light. Kittens played different games than my littermates, like Stalk-Me or Pounce-and-Run or Curl-Up-and-Purr. Sometimes I was irritated by the way they played. I wanted to climb on their backs and chew on their necks, but they couldn't seem to get the hang of this. They would just go limp whenever I tried it, and then leap away as soon as I let go. Or they'd wrap their entire bodies around my snout and bat at my face with tiny, sharp claws.

But mostly the kittens were fun, and very good at Chase-Me. Their mother was a big, friendly creature who sometimes licked my ears or cheeks. I thought of her as Mother Cat.

After a game with my kitten friends, my own mother would come to find me. She'd pick me up by the loose skin on the back of my neck and carry me back to where I belonged. She'd drop me in a pile of brothers and sisters, who would sniff me all over. They didn't seem to care for the smell of cat. I couldn't understand why.

That was my life—my mother, my littermates, my cat friends, my wonderful home, and the mystery of the hole that someday, I was sure, I would explore.

One day I was nursing drowsily, my brothers and sisters next to me, when all of a sudden my mother

behind me, and headed down a street with houses and yards.

After I had gone a few blocks, I paused, panting. I heard a dog challenge me from behind a fence, so I knew I was in a safe place now, a place that *liked* dogs. I dropped the chicken to the ground and settled down on my belly to crunch through the rest of my dinner.

When I awoke, I felt warm sun on my back. I had noticed the days growing hotter and hotter, but this was the warmest I had felt yet.

I yawned and stretched and got to my feet, glancing around me. I still felt anxious, as if I had been a bad dog. Maybe the angry men were still looking for me. I stayed away from people that day, moving cautiously between houses, sniffing hopefully at plastic bins with food smells hidden inside. I could not find any bins with an open lid, but I did knock over one that spilled out a pile of soft noodles in a cheesy sauce.

Later, as the sky started to darken again, I passed a garage with a door that was not closed all the way. A gap just wide enough for me was left between the door and the floor, and a smell that I recognized drifted through that gap.

Dog food!

I squeezed into the garage and nosed around until I found a bag of dog food, mostly full, in a corner. I

ripped it open and ate eagerly. I was not being a bad dog now; I was sure of that. Dog food was for dogs!

There were two other dogs on the other side of a door who did not agree that I was doing what a good dog should. They howled and barked and scrabbled at the door with their claws. But I ignored them as I crunched and gulped.

Eating dog food reminded me of Lucas. I remembered how excited I felt when he would take down the dog food from a cupboard and pour it into a bowl. I would dance around the kitchen, too happy to stay still. How grateful I felt. How much I loved Lucas, my very own person, giving me food with his hand.

Homesickness gripped me, as powerful as hunger. As soon as I'd finished this meal, I would leave this town. I would do Go Home to Lucas.

I would head back up into the mountains.