THREE: THE SEARCH BEGINS

"So how are we going to find this Nafshi, anyway?" Andy said, leaning back in the chair. He picked up a ball from the floor next to him and started tossing it up in the air and catching it.

"You're going to come with me today as I go to where we think Nafshi's been taken. I want to scout the area during the day. If we find anything, I'll go back tonight."

"I can't go tonight," Andy said. "It's Parents Night at the school. Anyway, I have a curfew on school nights. My mom wouldn't let me go."

"You weren't asked," Goldeneyes said. "I said *I* will go back tonight. Andrew, you need to pay close attention to what I say. And stop playing with that ball!" The gem on her collar glowed, and the ball flew across the room as if it had been hit with an invisible bat, bounced off the wall, and rolled into the corner.

"Sorry," Andy said sheepishly. "It helps me focus. I'm still trying to get used to talking to a cat." He sat on the edge of the chair and peered over at Goldeneyes. "What is that thing on your collar, anyway? You called it a Magelight? How come you're wearing a collar at all? You don't belong to anyone, so why do you need it?"

"The reason we wear collars dates all the way back to the first Catmage," Goldeneyes said. "And our history is entwined with yours."

"Mine?" Andy asked, surprised.

"Your people," she said.

"Oh. Um—could you tell me about it, or is it a big secret?"

"I will tell you," she said, pleased by Andy's interest. "Thousands of years ago," Goldeneyes continued, "your ancestors were strangers in a land not their own. At first, your people were simply escaping famine. They went where the One Above Us All sent them."

"Who's the One Above Us All? Do you mean God?"

"Yes. Your people went to Egypt. There they stayed, but they never became a part of that nation. But while they were there, your ancestors met my forebears, who lived among them as companions."

"You mean pets?" Andy asked.

"Companions," Goldeneyes said icily. "Many years after your ancestors first arrived in the country, the Egyptians made them slaves."

"I know that story!" Andy said, leaning forward. "It's the story of Passover. I've known about that since I was a little kid!"

"It is also the story of the Catmages." Her ears twitched. "If you will be silent, Andrew, I will tell you the tale as it was told to me as a kitten." She waited until he had settled back into the chair.

"If you know the story, then you know that the Hebrew slaves demanded their freedom of the Pharaoh of Egypt. You know the story of the plagues, and how Pharaoh refused Moses time and again. The last time he refused, God sent the Angel of Death to take the Egyptians' firstborn sons. The Hebrew slaves were all directed to mark their doors so that the angel would not take their sons."

"Yeah, they marked the doors with lamb's blood," Andy said.

"You do know the story," Goldeneyes said with approval. "But you don't know the whole tale. The ancestor of the Catmages lived with the woman we call the Great Mother, whom you know as Miriam, Moses' sister. On the night of the Passover, they say, most of the household spent the night awake together, fearing to sleep. Miriam's grandson, the firstborn in his family, was just a babe, not even walking yet. He fell asleep in a corner,

and the family soon forgot about him. Some time later, the boy awoke. He started crawling towards the door. No one in the family noticed, but Miriam's cat saw him. The First started meowing. No one paid attention. She meowed again and again, louder and louder, running back and forth between the family and the baby, until finally Miriam looked over to see why the First was making such a fuss. Then Miriam saw the danger her grandson was in and hurried across the room. She stopped him just as he was about to reach the door, saving his life, for if he had left the protection of the sign over the lintel, the Angel of Death would have taken him, too.

"Miriam was so grateful to the First, she gave her all the milk she could drink, and all the food she could eat. Then Miriam took off her necklace and placed it on the First, wrapping the leather strap twice around her neck so that it fit snugly. Legend tells us that the First wore a pendant in the shape of a golden cat, with eyes as amber as her own."

"So was that how she did magic? With Miriam's necklace?"

"No, the pendant was not the source of her power, Andrew."

"Then how did the First get her magic?" Andy asked. "Were there other magic cats around to teach her?"

"No, we received our power neither from cats nor humans. That night, though your ancestors never knew it, more than one angel visited Egypt. The One Above Us All saw that the First saved Miriam's grandson, for whom He had great plans. So He sent another angel. This angel went to Miriam's home and touched both the First and the necklace Miriam had given. The angel's hand on her throat gave Neshama the ability to understand human language, such as we all have today. And its touch turned her pendant into an amulet much like the ones we create today, which we use to focus our powers." She paused in concentration and her Magelight glowed brightly. Andy felt the hair on his arms rise.

"You're giving me goose bumps," he said softly. "That is such a cool story."

"It is not just a story, Andrew," Goldeneyes said. "It is our history.

"Of course, the First's pendant was much more powerful than our

Magelights. And our magic is but a pale imitation of hers, since hers was a gift from the One Above Us All. But the First revered Miriam, who was wise and kind and loving. She spent the rest of her life imparting Miriam's kindness and wisdom to her kittens. When the Hebrews reached the Promised Land, the First's descendants were with them. And later, when the people of Israel were scattered to the four corners of the earth, the descendants of the First were scattered as well. And so we came to new lands, on new continents, including this one. We have been among you for thousands of years, but our numbers have always been small. And we rarely make contact with humans—only grave danger to your people or to ours brings us together."

"Danger like the Dark Catmages?" Andy asked.

"Yes."

"So what happened to the First's pendant?"

Goldeneyes paused in thought, impressed by the depth of the boy's question. "We don't know. Some of us think that the pendant is only legend, part of the story. Those who think it is real have no idea what happened to it. We suspect it was taken or hidden during the fall of the Second Temple and the scattering of your people. If it survives at all, we have no knowledge of its whereabouts."

"Hey, you know what? I just realized something!" Andy said. "I'm a Kohain! I'm descended from Aaron. He was Miriam's brother, too!"

Goldeneyes stopped short. "You are descended from Aaron?"

"Yeah, that's what a Kohain is. They were the high priests, descendants of Aaron and his sons. That's why my last name is Cohen."

"Then Hakham was right. You *are* the one Razelle foretold," she said softly.

Andy looked at her in puzzlement. "I thought you already said that."

"Yes. But now it is confirmed."

"You mean now you believe it," he said shrewdly. Goldeneyes said nothing, but her eyes narrowed. Andy changed the subject quickly.

"So your ancestor lived with Miriam, and I'm descended from her brother. That makes us like—uh, not like family, but—"

"Certainly not! Catmages and humans are not related! But I see where you're heading with this. It gives us something in common."

"Yeah! That's what I meant. It's nice to have something in common, even if you're a cat and I'm a kid."

"Cat*mage*," she corrected. "Be that as it may, Andrew, it's time for us to go look at the house where we think Nafshi is being held. Come," she said, trotting to the front door and flinging it open again as her Magelight flashed. "Let's go see what can be seen."

She led him through the streets of the town, surprising Andy by stopping at a red light when they reached Main Street.

"I thought cats are supposed to be colorblind," he said.

"They are," she replied. "And I am a Catmage."

"Oh," he said, afraid to say anymore. She had that tone in her voice again, the one that made her sound like Mrs. Palecki. Andy was beginning to wonder if that was Goldeneyes' usual tone of voice, or if she was just in a bad mood today. *Well*, he thought, *I'll find out soon enough*. He followed her silently through the streets of Coreyton, wondering what on earth he'd gotten himself into.

At last, Goldeneyes stopped on a corner behind a large oak tree. Andy glanced at the street sign. "Oak Street," he muttered. "Who do I know lives on Oak Street?"

"Now," Goldeneyes said, "you must be still, Andrew. We're approaching the house where Nafshi should be."

They were on a quiet, tree-lined street. The houses were small, single-family Georgian Colonials and Cape Cods. The neighborhood seemed ancient to Andy, who lived in a modern house that had been built during the post-war boom. Some of the houses on this street looked like they'd been there since pre-Revolutionary times. One had the remains of an old dry stone fence on either end of its driveway. Centuries-old oak and willow trees were starting to lose their leaves in front yards and along the street.