



# Chapter 1

A friendly chime rang throughout the office as the door closed.

"Just a moment," called a voice from the back room. After a brief scuffle of footsteps, the owner of the voice appeared next to the front counter. "Ah, Eva. Good to see you again," the woman said, "and who have you got there? Another stray?"

Eva shrugged her shoulders, hefting the sleeping kitten in her arms upwards. "Not a stray this time. His collar says 'Mr. Mist' but there is no owner information."

"I can't say I've seen him before, but I'll check and see if he's registered in the system."

Before the nurse could go to the computer, Eva said, "Mrs. Vallenger, that isn't all."

Eva knelt and allowed the kitten to fall forwards, supported by her arms and knees. The kitten's hind leg had a deep gash down one side. Blood matted its fur down as well as covered the entire front of Eva's white tee-shirt. "He was mewling beneath some wire around the library's parking construction."

"Oh," she made some quick clicks with her tongue. "I'll see if I can get Doctor Thompson to take a look at him." She carefully took the kitten out of Eva's arms and marched him straight into the back room.

Left on her own in the empty lobby, Eva walked straight to the bathroom. The young girl sighed in front of the mirror. Another shirt ruined. At least this one was ruined for a good reason. She gave a small snort and started washing off her arms.

With her arms cleaned off, Eva looked down at her clothes; she was stumped as to how to clean them. Apart from getting her shirt completely soaked, not something Eva was willing to do even if the summer heat was settling in, nothing sprung to mind.

Eva sighed once more and left the bathroom. She walked straight through the door marked 'Employees Only' without any hesitation. She might not be a member of the staff, but she had been through many times before while volunteering to care for the boarding animals.

The door marked 'Surgery' did give her pause. The light was already on, either Doctor Thompson had another patient or he was already working on Mr. Mist. Voices coming from the other side of the door soon answered the question.

".. of a deep flesh wound, but nothing important. Get me a bag of fluids while I stitch his leg up."

"Yes doctor."

Eva backed up half a step and tried her best to look like she hadn't just been listening in. She raised her hand as if to knock just as Nurse Vallenger opened the door. The nurse looked surprised for half a moment before a light smile spread across her petite face.

"I'll be back with you in a moment, Eva," she said as she walked down the hall towards the storage room.

Eva gave the woman a light nod and looked back to the room the nurse had left

wide open.

The elderly Doctor Thompson hunched over a table with the black and white cat. He looked to be just about to start the stitches when he apparently noticed the door was open as well, for he gave a light sigh. "You can come in, Eva, if you promise not to touch anything."

With a nod, Eva walked in and stood opposite the doctor at the table, intent on seeing the remainder of the process. She did her best to hide her excitement, but some must have shown through as Doctor Thompson gave a light chuckle. She couldn't help it, it was the first time they'd let her in during a surgery, after all. The doctor set to work on the cat without another word. They stood in silence until the stitches were about half way through the leg.

"Not very squeamish, are you. I've seen people who've gone through the entirety of med school get queasy at the sight of open wounds. And you're what, ten?"

"Thirteen sir, and I've seen plenty worse than Mr. Mist's cut."

Doctor Thompson looked up from the cat. "Worse?"

Eva blinked and a small frown appeared on her face as she quickly back pedaled, "I mean, like, the poor animals that get hit by cars."

He gave a noncommittal grunt and went back to work on the kitten.

Nurse Vallenger returned a moment later. Eva moved aside, a bit disappointed by just how much her short time in the surgery room did not live up to her expectations. Maybe now that they let me in once, I'll be invited to observe a bigger surgery.

The nurse hung a small yellow-orange bag from a hook and slipped a needle into the cat's front left paw. After taping down the tube, she pulled a small camera out of her pocket and tried to line up a shot. "Hmm, should have taken the picture before inserting the IV."

"I've got it," Eva said. She waited until the nurse gave her a nod and then removed the bag from the hook and held it, along with the tube, off to the side.

"Thank you my dear." She snapped the picture. "Now, lets leave the doctor to his work and go make a few fliers. I checked just a moment ago and we don't have a Mist in our system." Mrs. Vallenger started walking out of the surgery room.

Eva glanced at the kitten, but followed behind the nurse. There wouldn't be anything more interesting there anyway.

"I'm sure someone out there is very worried about such an adorable cat," Nurse Vallenger said, "I'll make a few calls to some of the other vets in the area, see if any of them have heard of a Mr. Mist.

"If no one responds back in the positive, we'll hang some fliers around town and maybe you can take a few to hang up in your school. That will be your job." Nurse Vallenger rummaged through the front desk before turning back to Eva. "We'll scan it in and put the picture on it, so leave a space."

Eva nodded and accepted the large marker and sheet of computer paper.

Half an hour later, Nurse Vallenger finished contacting the other veterinarian offices and spoke to Eva, "No one has seen Mr. Mist. Not all that surprising in a cat so young. How is your poster coming?"

Eva held up her masterwork. "Just finished."

Mrs. Vallenger nodded. "Good. We'll scan it in, put the picture on, and print out a

handful of copies to spread around town.” She took the paper, but hesitated, looking around the sheet. The hesitation passed and she slapped the paper down on the scanner.

A few clicks on the computer and the machine whirled to life. Eva moved around to get a better view while the nurse worked. Once she cropped the image of Mr. Mist onto the paper, the machine came to life once more and spat out copy after copy of the fliers.

Nurse Vallenger took a copy and checked for any errors. She hesitated again, her eyes flicking down to Eva, before biting her lip. Flipping the paper towards Eva, she said, “those circles around the edges... you’re not learning magic, are you?” “I just thought they’d help catch the eye,” Eva said with a shrug, “no magic or anything.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Vallenger said, failing to hide the disappointment on her face. “I figured so, but couldn’t be sure.”

Eva gave another apologetic shrug. “I don’t suppose you have anything I could wear home? Walking around with a blood soaked shirt is going to draw all the wrong kind of attention, even if it is mostly dry by now.”

“Oh!” The nurse slapped her forehead. “You should have said something sooner. That can’t be sanitary.” She left the computer and headed to the employees only area.

Eva sat back in the computer chair and looked over her poster. The circles were definitely not magic, though the skills she gained by marking out rituals and runes over and over again definitely found their way into the eye-catching design. Hopefully not many people come to the same conclusion. That’s just attention I don’t want.

The employee door opened and out walked Nurse Vallenger, shutting the door behind her. Draped over one arm was...

“A lab coat?”

“Yep.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone here wear a lab coat.”

Mrs. Vallenger chuckled. “The doctor used to like them, years and years ago, until one day he decided scrubs were more comfortable. Now we have a closet full of them, just gathering dust. He hasn’t touched them since.

“Your shirt, I’m sorry to say, is probably ruined beyond recovery. If you would like, I can throw it in our incinerator?”

Eva nodded and began pulling her shirt over her head. A startled peep escaped from the nurse. Eva found the nurse facing the opposite direction once her shirt was out of the way. “We’re both women,” Eva said in her best chastising voice.

“We’re in the lobby, with big glass windows, in case you forgot. And the doctor could walk in.”

“The entrance doesn’t face the street. Besides, I checked, no one was coming. And you’re between the doctor and me, he’ll knock you over before seeing me.”

Eva paused and lightly cleared her throat. The nurse timidly glanced over her shoulder. Eva held out her bloodied shirt. “If you’ll hand me the lab coat, I can have it on before someone actually does walk in.”

Nurse Vallenger hesitated for a moment longer before exchanging the shirt for the

coat. She stood, almost guarding the employee door, while Eva casually buttoned up the lab coat. The lab coat's design left a small v-neck, but not enough to show off anything. Not that she had anything to show off. Someday, she sighed. Just as Eva finished adjusting the coat, the door chime went off. Nurse Vallenger nearly jumped ten feet in the air.

Eva couldn't help but giggle.

Nurse Vallenger shot a glare at Eva before turning all smiles to the visitor. "Ah, Mr. Williams. If you'll head to exam room A, just down the hall," she gestured away from the employee door, "I'll get you and Bart signed in and will be with you in a moment."

The man smiled, and headed down the hall with a smile. "Anything for you, Kattie." The moment exam room A's door shut, Nurse Vallenger turned to Eva. Before she could comment, Eva said, "good thing you didn't hesitate longer before handing me the coat."

That got a glare from the nurse. "You remember how to sign people in for checkups?" At Eva's nod, the nurse continued, "Dean Williams with his dog Bart. I'll dispose of your shirt while you take care of that."

"Of course," Eva said with a wide smile, "anything for you, Kattie."

Nurse Vallenger huffed out a "creep" as she walked back into the employees section.

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"There we go," Eva mumbled to herself. She took a step back and looked over the newest addition to the library's bulletin board. Another missing pet poster hung just to the side of the one Eva just posted; that one is looking for a dog rather than looking for the owners.

Several of the businesses between the Thompson clinic and the library now sported Eva's poster in their windows. The owner would hopefully be found in no time.

Eva walked out of the building with a spring in her step, waving goodbye to the librarian on duty. She skipped past the under construction parking garage to a small fast food joint. Eva wolfed down the burger and a small order of fries.

Her next destination was the abandoned retirement home. A small brick building that had been superseded by a more modern, and better funded, dwelling for the elderly. She had turned the entire second floor into a home away from home. Or rather, a home away from her father.

She left the main downtown street to follow the more direct path through a few of the back roads. A slight chill went up her spine the moment she walked down the second road.

"Eva Spencer?"

Eva spun towards the gruff voice. A man and a woman stood at the mouth to the backstreet. They stood casually, not looking like they were about to chase after or attack. They didn't look like police as both wore three-piece suits, but that just meant they could be something worse.

"I'm not supposed to speak with strangers," Eva said, taking a few cautious steps backwards. "Especially not ones who approach me in an alley."

The woman held up her hands in a placating gesture. "We just want to talk."

"Not something we can talk about in public," the man grunted.

Eva took another step backwards, glancing over her shoulder. The end of the backstreet was unblocked and a side alley led off between a few shops. She looked back to the people. Neither had moved while her head was turned. "You're not cops?"

"No, we're—"

Something worse then. Before the woman could finish, Eva turned and sprinted. She rounded the corner of the side alley and almost ran into a chain link fence. Undeterred, Eva spotted a point about twenty feet past the fence and stepped. She stepped another twenty feet and turned down a second alley between two buildings.

Eva spotted and stepped to the top of a fire escape. She climbed the last few steps and made her way onto the rooftop. Careful to avoid much noise, Eva walked across the roof towards where she had left the two people.

Rather than the heavy footfalls of a dedicated pursuer, only calm voices could be heard from the alley below. Eva peeked over the edge of the building to find the two standing next to the fence she had stepped through.

"Her father said she never comes home, and she runs off when we try to talk? Surely there are more worthy candidates."

Eva frowned at that. If they spoke with her father, things couldn't be good.

The woman shrugged. "She had a point. Two strangers show up in a dark alley? Maybe we should go with my plan this time."

"She's had her chance," the man all but growled. "She doesn't want to be found, leave her be and let's find someone excited to come. I'm done."

"This fence?" The woman grasped the chain link fence with one hand and rattled it. "She didn't climb over it. She was at the end of the alley before we even turned the corner." She shook her head. "We couldn't have started more than ten feet behind her. That's talent the academy desperately needs. If you're going to pass her up, I'll happily take over from here."

The man huffed and walked away, muttering under his breath too quiet to hear from the rooftop. Whatever it was, the woman found it amusing. She laughed a rather jovial laugh. Both people vanished in the blink of an eye, leaving an empty alley with a cold blast of air.

Eva sighed and stepped thirty feet in the direction of home. She took a few seconds to rest before stepping again, no need to strain herself. Normally the bus would more than suffice for getting around. But in times like this, getting home quicker meant getting away quicker.