

Chapter Two: Cricket

Inside the house, the windows were open to let in the evening breeze. Cricket watched from the deck as Katie helped her mom set out the plates and silverware and sat down to eat.

What could they have seen? A wild animal? And what made that fire? Maybe—

“Katie? Katie?”

Katie blinked and looked at her mother. “What?”

Her mother smiled and shook her head. “Honestly. You start daydreaming and I can’t hardly get you to come back. How was the last day of school, for the second time?”

“Oh, school was great! My track and field team won first place in the relay race, and me and Marianne had a BFF party in her treehouse, and her brothers tried to spy on us. And I got a letter from Uncle Edmond today! ‘Member how they were taking that balloon trip around Africa?’ Katie stuffed a piece of pork chop in her mouth, “they were in Cameroon and they saw this fire—”

“Katie, mouth closed, please.”

Katie sighed. She liked her mom a lot, but she couldn’t imagine her landing a hot air balloon on top of the jungle to investigate a mysterious multi-colored tunnel of fire in the middle of the night.

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When Katie finished scraping off the dishes, she brought the gristle outside to Cricket. The cat was on the deck with a strange look on her face.

“Mom!” Katie yelled, “Cricket’s having kittens!”

By the time the first kitten was born, Katie and her mom had found a cardboard box and some old towels and made a nice nest. Katie had never seen anything be born before—it was the most unusual and uncomfortable and amazing thing she had ever seen. They had gotten Cricket from Rachel Johnson’s farm last year and Katie’s mom kept saying how she had better take her in to the vet to get her fixed one of these days, but kept forgetting to, and now, right on the deck, with the rain starting to come down and the damp smell of a wet, green summer saturating the air, she was having kittens. Cricket washed each one thoroughly with her rough, pink tongue. After the fourth one was clean she sank down in the nest. The kittens opened their mouths, but no sounds came out. They crept forward, eyes closed, until at last, each of them was nursing, tiny paws pushing on Cricket’s stomach. Katie stroked them.

“They’re so cute. Can I bring them inside?”

Katie’s mom was standing with a glass of ice tea in her hand, watching through the screen door. She shook her head. “I don’t think we should move them. Sometimes mother cats don’t like that. Why don’t you take the baby gate we use when the Smokowskis bring little Lucas over and put it up across the steps. None of the neighbor dogs will try to jump the railing. The kittens will be safe.”

“Ok. I guess.” Katie petted each kitten with her finger, set up the gate, and went upstairs to bed. It wasn’t until she was about to fall asleep that she remembered the letter in the pocket of her shorts.

“Mmph. I’ll read it tomorrow.”

That night, during the thunder storm, Katie dreamed about jungles and wild cats having kittens and mysterious, glittering black flames.