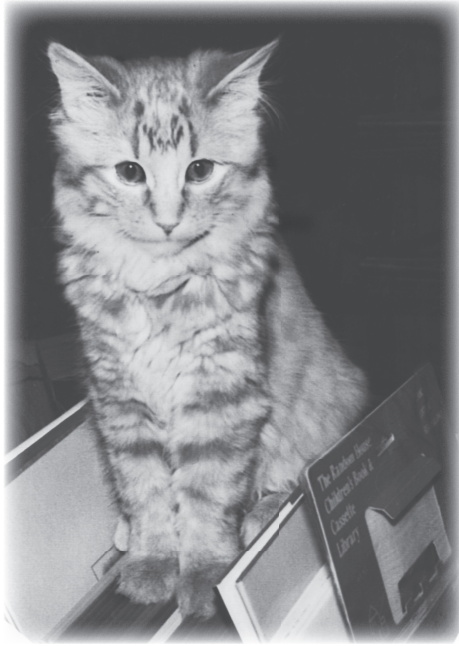


PROLOGUE

Dewey



“Thank you, Vicki, and thank you, Dewey. . . . I don’t believe in angels, but Dewey comes close.”

—Christine B., Tampa, FL

I disagree with the person who wrote that letter, because I do believe there are angels walking among us, helping us grow. I believe in “teachable moments,” when we can learn some-

thing valuable about life if our eyes and hearts are open to the world around us. These angels of opportunity, as I like to think of them, come in all forms. They appear thanks to the important people in our lives, but also through chance meetings and strangers. I believe Dewey Readmore Books, the famous library cat of Spencer, Iowa, was one of those angels. He taught so many lessons, and touched so many lives, that I can't dismiss it as chance. And I don't believe in coincidence.

But I know what that young woman is saying. She is saying that Dewey, through his actions and his example, transformed her life. She can't find the words to describe that power, but she knows it is special.

Well, I have a phrase for it: Dewey's Magic. It is the phrase I used each time I saw his ability to change the way people thought about themselves. No one saw that Magic more than I, because of all the people in the world, I knew Dewey best and was touched by him most. I'm just an ordinary Iowa girl, the long-serving director of a small-town library less than a dozen miles from the farm where I was born and raised, but for nineteen years I was privileged to share my journey with Dewey. And Dewey . . . he was special. He impacted lives. He inspired a town. He became famous around the world, headlined magazines and newspapers, and was the subject of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling memoir *Dewey*, which as "Dewey's Mommy" I was privileged to write. Dewey's Magic, that's what it was. He was just a cat, but he had a way of inspiring our better selves. He made everyone fall in love with him. He touched the world. No one who met him ever forgot Dewey Readmore Books.

His story began quietly, on a brutally cold weekend in January 1988. The temperature was minus fifteen degrees, the kind of cold that burns your lungs and peels the skin from your face (or at least it feels that way). That kind of cold, often accompanied by ferocious winds, is the worst thing about living in the great northern plains.

You learn to tolerate it, but you never adapt. There are times in northern Iowa when it just isn't wise to go outside.

But despite the deep freeze, someone had been out in downtown Spencer, because at some point that Sunday, a tiny homeless kitten was shoved into the book return slot on the back wall of the Spencer Public Library. I hope it was an act of mercy, that someone saw a tiny eight-week-old, one-pound kitten shivering in the snow and wanted to protect it. If that was the case, they were misguided. The library book return was nothing more than a metal tube that led, after a four-foot drop, into a sealed metal box. In effect, it was a refrigerator. There were no blankets, pads, or soft linings. There was only cold metal. And books. For at least ten hours and maybe as long as twenty-four, little Dewey sat in bitterly cold utter darkness, with nothing to comfort him but books.

I entered the story early Monday morning when I opened the book return box and found the tiny kitten inside. When he looked up longingly into my eyes, my heart stopped. He was so cute . . . and so in need. I cradled him in my hands until he stopped shivering, then gave him a warm bath in the library sink and dried him with the blow-dryer we used for children's craft projects. That's when Dewey took over, tottering on frostbitten feet to each person on the library staff and nuzzling them sweetly with his nose.

I decided, right then, that the library should adopt him. It wasn't just that I fell in love with Dewey the moment he looked at me with his glorious golden eyes. I knew, for those eyes and his determination to thank every staff member for his rescue, that he would fit perfectly into my plan to warm up the cold institutional nature of the Spencer Public Library. He had such a loving and outgoing personality, such a heartwarming presence, that he made everyone feel good.

And at that moment, that's *exactly* what Spencer, Iowa, needed. The town was reeling from a farm crisis, with 70 percent of the downtown storefronts empty and farms in the county going bank-

rupt by the dozen. We needed a feel-good story. We needed something positive to talk about, and a lesson in persistence, hope, and love. If someone could shove a tiny kitten into a dark and freezing metal box, and that kitten could emerge with his trust and compassion intact, then we could endure our misfortunes, too.

But Dewey wasn't a mascot. He was a flesh-and-blood companion, an animal always open and loving the moment anyone stepped into the library. He warmed hearts one lap at a time, and maybe even more important, he had a knack for knowing who really needed him.

I remember the retired patrons who visited every morning. Many of them started staying longer and talking with the staff more after Dewey arrived.

I remember Crystal, a middle school student with severe physical disabilities who did nothing but stare at the floor until Dewey found her and started jumping onto her wheelchair as she was rolled through the door. Then Crystal started to look at the world around her. She started to make noises every week when she entered the library, and when Dewey came running and leapt on her chair, a smile burst out of her heart.

I remember our new assistant children's librarian, who had recently moved to Spencer to care for her sick mother. She and Dewey sat together every afternoon. I caught her one day with a tear in her eye and realized how much she had been suffering, and that only Dewey had been there for her.

I remember the shy woman who had trouble making friends. I remember the young man frustrated by his inability to find work. I remember the homeless man who never spoke to anyone but always found Dewey, placed him on his shoulder (the right shoulder of course; Dewey would sit only on your right shoulder), and walked with him for fifteen minutes. The man whispered; Dewey listened. I am convinced of that. And by listening, by being present, he helped them all.

But mostly, I remember the children. Dewey had a special relationship with the children of Spencer. He loved babies. He would creep to their carriers and snuggle beside them, a look of complete contentment on his face, even when they pulled his ears. He let toddlers pet him and prod him and squeal with delight. He befriended a boy with allergies who was heartbroken because he couldn't have a pet of his own. He spent afternoons with the middle school students who stayed in the library while their parents worked, chasing their pencils and hiding in their jacket sleeves. He would brush by every child at our weekly Story Hour before choosing one lap to curl up on—a different lap, I should mention, every week. Yes, Dewey had catlike habits. He slept a lot. He was picky about being petted on the belly. He ate rubber bands. He attacked typewriter keys (back then, we still had typewriters around) and computer keyboards. He lounged on the copier, because it blew warm air. He climbed on the overhead lights. You couldn't open a box anywhere in the library without Dewey suddenly appearing and jumping inside. But what he really did was something just as catlike but more profound: He opened the hearts of the people of Spencer, one at a time, to the beauty and love in our wonderful little town in the middle of the great Iowa plains, and to one another.

That was the real Dewey Magic, his ability to spread his joyous, friendly, and relaxed attitude toward life to everyone he met.

The fact that he became famous? That was pure charisma. I intended, of course, for him to become well known in Spencer. I worked hard to help him change the image of the library, to make it a gathering place as opposed to just a warehouse for books. I was amazed that anyone outside northwest Iowa would care. But slowly at first, and then in a torrent, they came, drawn by the story of the special cat who inspired a town. The journalists came first—from Des Moines, England, Boston, and Japan. Then the visitors started to arrive. An older couple from New York on a cross-country drive

who, after visiting Dewey, sent money on his birthday and Christmas every year of his life. A family from Rhode Island, who were in Minneapolis (five hours away from Spencer) for a wedding. A sick little girl from Texas who, I was sure, had asked her parents for this one gift. It was amazing to watch the accidental blossoming of fame. People met Dewey; they spent time with him; and they loved him. They went home and told other people about him, and then those people came to visit him, and they left impressed, and the next thing we knew, we were receiving a telephone call from a newspaper in Los Angeles or a news reporter in Australia.

So when Dewey died peacefully at the age of nineteen, having served the community of Spencer and its public library every day with enthusiasm and grace, I wasn't really surprised that his obituary, first published in Sioux City, ran in more than 275 newspapers. Or that the library received letters by the thousands from around the world. Or that hundreds of fans signed his condolence book and attended an impromptu memorial. For two months, we were besieged by reporters and admirers and requests to talk about Dewey. And then, slowly, the clamor died down. The cameras turned off, and Spencer went back to being the quiet little town it had always been. Those of us who had loved Dewey were, finally, left to our personal grief. Dewey the celebrity was gone; the memories of Dewey our friend remained, held privately in our hearts. When I finally buried Dewey's ashes outside the window of the children's section of the library he had loved so much, it was at dawn on a freezing December morning with only the assistant library director at my side. And that's the way he would have wanted it.

I knew he had left a legacy, because Dewey had changed me. He had changed members of the library staff. He had changed Crystal the disabled girl, and the homeless man, and the children who came each week for Story Hour, many of whom brought their own children to see him in his later years. I knew how important he was be-

cause people kept telling me their Dewey stories, confiding in me in a way. In the end, he touched more than the town of Spencer. But it was those of us who had known him and loved him and heard his story that he changed. His legacy would live on in us.

I thought that was it. I really did.

And then something amazing happened. I wrote a book about Dewey, and people around the world responded. The book was meant as a tribute to my friend, a thank-you for his service to Spencer and his impact on my life. I knew he had fans. I thought they might want to read the full story. I was not prepared for the passionate response. So many of the people who attended my book events didn't just like Dewey, and didn't just enjoy the book. They *loved* them both. They felt touched by the story. And they felt changed. I remember one woman in Sioux City who broke down in tears as she told me that her mother, a Spencer piano teacher and church organist, had taken her every Saturday for cinnamon rolls and a trip to the library to see Dewey. Then her mother developed Alzheimer's and slowly forgot her husband, her children, even her own identity. Her daughter drove two hours from Sioux City to visit her every week, and she always brought her own cat with her. The cat was black and white, nothing like copper-colored Dewey at all, but every week her mother smiled and said, "Oh, it's Dewey. Thank you for bringing Dewey." The daughter could barely get those last words out, she was crying so hard.

"I went out in the parking lot after I met you," she told me some time later, "and sat in my car and cried for fifteen minutes. The tears wouldn't stop. My mother had been dead for twelve years, but it was the first time I had really cried for her. Thinking about Dewey, remembering how much my mother loved him, was the end of the grieving process."

The strangest thing? I didn't know this woman, Margo Chesebro, or her mother, Grace Barlow-Chesebro (although from her daughter's

description of a smart, strong, independent woman who believed in the magic of animals, I'm sure I would have liked her). And yet, they had known and loved Dewey. He had been a regular and important part of their lives, important enough that Grace would somehow retain his memory in her damaged mind, even as she lost forever the names of her children and became convinced her husband was her long-dead brother. There was no way, I realized then, that I could ever *truly* know the extent of the lives Dewey had touched.

And then there were the people who had never known Dewey, the strangers who were so touched by his story, they felt compelled to write to me. It started almost immediately after the book's publication. "I've never written to an author before but I was so moved by Dewey's story. . . ." Or, "Dewey was an angel, thank you for sharing him with the world."

As the months went on, and the book topped the national best-seller lists, the letters became more frequent, until I was receiving dozens every day. After a year, I had received more than three thousand letters, e-mails, and packages, almost all from people who had never heard of Dewey before reading the book. I received a pillow cross-stitched with the image of Dewey from the book's cover. I received several paintings of him. A former resident of Spencer, who had moved away but had never forgotten, commissioned a sculpture of Dewey for the library. (I knew Dewey's Magic was at work when I saw where the artist's studio was located: Dewey, Arizona.) I can't even count how many drawings, ornaments, and carvings of cats I have received from fans. I have a bookcase in my house just to display them—and it's overflowing.

One person sent me twenty dollars to buy roses for Dewey. Another sent five dollars to place catnip on his grave. A woman at a call center in Idaho told me that every time someone calls from Iowa, she asks about Dewey, hoping to find someone who knew him. Another

man sent a picture of the jar in which he collects spare change. It featured a picture of Dewey. The man was donating his change, from that time forward, to animal rescue.

I read every card, letter, and e-mail. I wanted to respond, but there was no way to keep up with the volume, especially since I was often on the road, meeting Dewey's fans. (But please rest assured, letter writers, that I bought those roses and that catnip for Dewey's grave.) The sentiments expressed in the letters, and the way Dewey continued to change people's lives, touched me more, I suspect, than these fans ever imagined.

A young man who had suffered a devastating divorce and career setback that left him bitter and angry wrote to say that Dewey's life "opened my heart."

A woman with severe MS told me how, after reading *Dewey*, she got down on the floor to kiss the head of the dog that lived in her group home. Afterward, she was unable to get back up without assistance, but she was happy she had done it, because the dog died a week later.

A man in England wrote to say that he had lost his wife several years before. He realized only after he read *Dewey* that the two cats she left behind—two animals he had resented after her death—had actually carried him through. Without those cats to care for, he wrote, he would have been in a "black depression" he might never have endured.

The letter from a young woman in Florida was typical. Just before reading *Dewey*, the young woman wrote, she had ended an abusive two-year relationship with a borderline alcoholic that had destroyed her self-respect and forced her into debt and foreclosure. "I felt foolish," she said, "and most of all, I felt like a failure. Then I read your book.

"Now I'm happy to say," she continued later, "that I'm starting

back to school on Monday. I am focusing on putting the pieces of my life back together. It didn't happen because of your book, but your book gave me strength, it made me resolute. Most of all, it reminded me that I was not done.

“So thank you, Vicki, and thank you, Dewey. . . . I don't believe in angels, but Dewey comes close. Even in death, he has touched lives such as my own through you. You were truly blessed to have such a special person in your life, but I don't have to tell you that. I just know I have been blessed to have Dewey in my life, even if I never met him in person.”

Did I react when I read that letter? Of course. To touch someone so deeply, and to help them see the promise in their life, is a gift I will forever cherish. It makes me proud. And that gift was given to me by Dewey.

Since the publication of the book, I have heard not only from strangers. Old friends and family members who had been lost from my life have reached out to me, too. I've met people, such as my co-writer, editors, and agent, who have become true friends. (The illustrator of Dewey's children's books was even named Steven James: the same as my beloved brother who died of cancer at twenty-three—Dewey's *Magic* again!) I even heard from my ex-husband again. He was a sweet, intelligent man, but he was also a severe alcoholic who did more damage to my life—and his own—than anyone I have ever met. Although we shared a daughter, I hadn't heard from him in eleven years, until he wrote me a letter after reading the book. He had been sober for a decade. He had married his first childhood sweetheart, and they were living happily in Arizona. He sent me pictures. He looked good. He was always a good-looking man. He looked happy, and so did his wife. He sent me a T-shirt that read “Be careful, or I'll put you in my novel,” another one of his jokes. There were no hard feelings about the book; it had all been true. “I'm

sorry,” he told me simply. And he ended the letter: “I’m proud of you.” I was very proud of him, too.

I have also heard from fellow librarians, from fellow farm kids and native Iowans, from other single mothers and people whose loved ones committed suicide (it was a brother, in my case) and fellow breast cancer survivors. I have heard from women who shared my terrible experience of an unnecessary hysterectomy in the 1970s, including a woman in Fort Dodge, Iowa, whose surgery was performed by the same doctor as mine, at around the same time. “The surgery almost killed me,” she told me at a book signing. “I was in a coma for a week. My health, like yours, has never been the same.” We hugged each other. She cried. Sometimes, I’ve realized, it’s nice to know you’re not alone.

Community, we call that. *Community*. I believe, very strongly, in the power of community, whether it is a physical town, a shared religion, or a love of cats. I believe *Dewey* is a book about regular people that shows what’s good and possible in ordinary lives, and that this is one of the reasons it has touched so many hearts. People appreciate Spencer, Iowa. They like our cornfields and architecture, and they also like what we represent: simplicity, old-fashioned hard work, but also creativity, commitment, and love. (The doctor who helped with my double mastectomy, Dr. Kohlgraf, told me he was able to finally woo a top surgeon from California to join his practice after twenty years of trying. She had read the book and loved it. She wanted to live in a place like Spencer.) The honesty and the values expressed in the book—“Find your place. Be happy with what you have. Treat everyone well. Live a good life. It isn’t about material things; it’s about love. And you can never anticipate love.”—transcend boundaries. I’m talking international boundaries, too. Dewey’s story has been a bestseller in England, Brazil, Portugal, China, and Korea. I’ve been invited for appearances in Turkey. A man from Milan, Italy, came to

Spencer just to see the town where Dewey lived. People all over the world have told me they are coming to visit the famous Spencer, Iowa, and more important, they are keeping the book and passing it down to future generations as a family heirloom. Do you think it's because they care so much about my story? No. Of course not. They want to share the power of love that is woven into the pages.

They want to experience, in other words, the Magic of a special animal named Dewey Readmore Books, a cat that somehow, from inside the walls of a small Iowa library, managed to touch the world. As I said at the beginning, all of this is for and because of Dewey. There would have been no book without him. As the young woman from Florida wrote, each reader of the book experienced Dewey's Magic in their own lives, even though they never met him in person.

So Dewey lives! Even though he has gone, he lives as a memory, a reminder, an example of what's right in the world. Most importantly, I realized as I read letters day after day, he lives in all the other animals that share his tenderness, playfulness, attentiveness, and devotion. My favorite fact from the letters was that 30 percent came from male fans, including two cat-loving sheriffs, and they all started "I'm sure you never receive any letters from men. . . ." Don't worry, real men love cats, too! But the most important thing I read over and over again was this: Dewey touched my heart, because *he reminded me of my own pet.*

Slowly, it dawned on me that Dewey had tapped into the deep love people around the world feel for their animals. And that *Dewey*, the book, had given these people something just as important: a way to share that love. In a way, I think, the book made it acceptable to tell a stranger, even if that stranger was only me: "I love my cats. They are important. They are my friends. They've changed my life. When they die, I miss them terribly." As a young man wrote, after

telling me of how broken he felt after a difficult divorce and how his two cats had been the only bright spot in an otherwise dismal time:

At first I thought to myself, my God, how can I love two animals so much? There must be something wrong with me. My life must be so empty. I was embarrassed to admit to myself how important these cats were in my life. Then I read your book and realized there was nothing wrong with loving an animal to the depths that I do. In a way, your book made it okay for me to love my cats the way I do and it made it okay for me to explore our love further, to deepen our relationship and intertwine our lives even more.

Thank you.

For so long, the word people conjured when they heard about a deep relationship between a cat and a person was: *sad*. But I was passionate about my cat. And I wasn't the only one. Not even close. I think Dewey, through his generosity of spirit and endearing personality—through the Magic of his life in a small-town library—became a symbol of that vital connection so many human beings feel with the animals in their lives.

In *Dewey's Nine Lives*, you will read nine stories of extraordinary cats and the people who loved them. Three of the chapters are set in or around Spencer, Iowa, and feature Dewey stories that didn't make it into the first book—because I didn't know of them at the time. The other six stories are about people who wrote to me after reading *Dewey*. They are the purest of contributors: fans who wrote only to express their admiration and love for Dewey and their own animals, expecting nothing in return.

Are these the best stories that could have come out of those three

thousand letters? I don't know. In most cases, after all, I was reacting to a sentence or two.

"We housed homeless and abused cats on a foster home basis. . . ."

"He survived a coyote attack, a smack by a bear, walking thirty miles to return to me after a vindictive woman took him to another place just to hurt me."

"I have never been loved by anyone, not even my daughter or my parents, the way I have been loved by my Cookie."

When my cowriter and I followed up on the letters with phone calls, we heard stories about people and cats that were completely unexpected. Some were better. Some worse. All were genuine, heart-felt stories about real people and their animals. After *Dewey*, people advised me to write about the cat found in a sofa donated to the Goodwill, or the burned cat they saw on the local news, or the one-eyed, lop-eared cat that lived his whole life in a Chicago beer bar. But I thought: Why? What's the connection with Dewey? Those are cute stories, but where is the love? If I'm going to tell other stories, I want them to be based on the same foundation as *Dewey*: the special bond between a cat and a person. I wanted to write stories about people whose lives had been changed by their love for their cat.

The people in this book don't think of themselves as heroes. They didn't do anything, as I like to say, that would get them on the *Today* show or the morning news. They are ordinary people, leading ordinary lives, with ordinary animals. I can't tell you if theirs are the best stories in those letters, but I can assure you of this: I like every person in this book. They are the kind of people I grew up with in Spencer, and they are the kind of people I want as my friends. Together with their cats, they embody everything I believe Dewey stood for: kindness, perseverance, morality, hard work, and the strength to always, no matter what the circumstances, stay true to your values and yourself. If the resonance of Dewey's story was based in part on its values, then I wanted these people to reflect those val-

ues, too. And I think they do. I am proud to have gotten to know every one of them.

I can't tell you that you will like every action taken by the people in this book. You will not, because I don't agree with some of them myself. As hard as I try, for instance, I cannot condone the fact that some people don't have their cats spayed sooner. I just can't. Others let their cats roam outside, even though it is well known that this shortens their life expectancy. Some cats might seem too pampered, or smothered, or anthropomorphized. I know there will be objections. After all, I received hate mail after my first book because I let Dewey eat Arby's Roast Beef sandwiches in his last year of life. I loved that cat with all my heart; I gave everything I could to him; he lived nineteen wonderful years—nineteen!—and yet people still harassed me and called me a murderer because, at the end of his life, in an act of mercy that tore the heart right out of my chest, I put him to sleep.

If you feel the temptation to criticize, please stop and think of this: Every person in this book loved their animals, fiercely and deeply. Every one of them acted in the best interest, as they understood it, of the animals they loved. If they made decisions you disagree with, that is not an indictment of their character. They are simply different from you. Or they lived in a different time, with a different understanding of how animals and people thrive together. Or, very often, both. No story has been changed for this book. Nothing has been glossed over. This is not *The Cat Whisperer* or a guide to kitten care. This is a collection of stories about the way real cats and real people live.

This book is not *Dewey: The Sequel*, nor is it meant to be. There is only one *Dewey* (the book), just as there is only one Dewey (my amazing cat). But there are thousands of stories. There are millions of cats that could, if given the chance, change a life. They are out there, living with the people featured in this book and millions of

others like them. They are also out there in much worse circumstances: in rescue shelters, in feral cat colonies, or fighting for survival alone on the frozen streets, waiting for their chance.

Of all the lessons I've learned over the past twenty years, perhaps the most important is this: Angels come in all forms. Love can arrive from anywhere. One special animal can change your life. He can change a town. In a small way, he can change the world.

And so can you.