

DJ AND THE ROBOT

BETH HANNING

Chapter 1: Calm Before the Storm

Daisy Jo startled awake. The cat pounced from the soft comforter where her girl slept to the windowsill, damp with early morning moisture.

The fur along her spine prickled. Something was missing. No leaves rustled. No birds chirped their dawn greetings. Warm spring mornings in Florida usually buzzed with an annoying symphony of katydids.

A dark fog enveloped the backyard far below.

The cat pressed her pink nose against the loose screen. Her pupils widened. Her head dipped low as she investigated. She mouthed a soundless meow and searched for any living creature brave enough to break the silence.

Daisy Jo's ears swiveled to capture a distant whisper of wind—nearing, growing angry, tearing through the trees. Gusts whirled through the magnolias lining the forest's edge, snatching the tree's large white blossoms. The cat gasped as the wind whipped upward, and the clouds gulped the petals into their billows.

A low growl and then a hiss escaped from the cat's throat. As if in response, the wind quieted, leaving the clouds to swell in silent shadow.

In the distance, beyond the neighbor's barn, lightning flickered, followed by a heart-jolting clap of thunder. The cat and her girl nearly collided as Daisy Jo launched to the bed while Kayla ran to the window.

The girl paused and tilted one ear toward the backyard. "Eerie." She forced the farmhouse window shut and sighed as she slipped back under the blanket.

Pain resonated from Daisy Jo's heart to her tail. Her father had disappeared on a day that began like this, along with the life she had known as a kitten. She shook her brown-black fur. "Me-owwww," the cat cried.

Kayla rolled over and pulled Daisy Jo close. "You're safe with me."

Daisy Jo relaxed for a moment, then whimpered. She struggled loose from the girl's embrace.

The cat took a moment to stretch each leg through to a toe wiggle and finished with an ear shake. Daisy Jo moseyed to her usual spot at the foot of the bed. She spun in three circles on a lap blanket embroidered with the letters "DJ."

Daisy Jo lifted her head and gazed at Kayla. The girl's breaths were deep and steady. The cat felt woozy as she remembered her mother's last caress over a year ago. Daisy Jo considered returning to the girl, then sneezed, dismissing her grief and her need for comfort. She sighed and rested her head on her paws.

A flash of lightning triggered a house-rattling thunder boom. The cat launched from the bed to the windowsill. Morning twilight revealed a backyard swirling with activity.

A gust of wind pitched leaf debris at the window. Daisy Jo flinched. She spied the forest's edge in the dim light. Strong winds whipped palm trees and lashed magnolia limbs. A blue tarp tumbled across the lawn, enveloping the slide next to Kayla's rusty swing set. Flecks of rain now pelted the window.

This scene was all too familiar to Daisy Jo. She chattered the fangy, squirrlish noise cats make when intrigued or disturbed. An unannounced clap of thunder and a blinding flash launched the cat, who pounced on the sleeping girl.

Kayla bolted awake. “DJ, what’s wrong?” The girl pulled her close again and sank into the cozy covers. “It’s my big day. But it’s too early to get up.” DJ accepted Kayla’s cuddle as they drifted back to sleep.

Chapter 2: Chelsea's Gift

DJ awoke to clanks, crashes, and clangs from downstairs. After a yawn and stretch, she sniffed the air. Was the storm over? She pounced to the windowsill. DJ swallowed the ache in her throat. Dark clouds swelled above the forest, although a sliver of morning sun peeked above them.

DJ trotted downstairs, avoiding the excitement as the girl and her mom prepared for the party. The cat searched for a hiding place, sensing an even more chaotic event loomed over Northwest Florida.

She froze on the staircase, scanning the open living space. The downstairs had few interior walls, which meant fewer hiding places. DJ scurried under the couch. Small tufts of fur clung to the fabric. Her green eyes adjusted to the darkness, where she discovered her toy mouse, a few bottle caps, and several fluffy dust bunnies. She batted the mouse once before flopping down, exhausted from a restless night.

Kayla and her mother dashed back and forth from the kitchen to the living room, to the screened-in porch, and back to the kitchen. DJ sneezed awake as several dust bunnies raced in a circle, caught in the humans' scurrying vortex.

This constant commotion exhausts me. DJ rested her chin on her paws and let her eyelids block out the world.

DJ felt Mrs. Nexus' feet thumping across the wooden floor. The cat's nose tickled, sensing tension.

“Why is it still so dark outside?” The woman moved toward the living room window.

Kayla mimicked her mother's frantic motion. "How much longer until the kids show up? Should we hang more decorations? Where is my cake?" Kayla turned to search the countertops. Her elbow bumped a silver tray, sending it to the floor with a crash. "Oh no!"

DJ ducked her head and covered her ears.

Cookies scattered across the floor.

The cat's eyes popped open at the scent of gingerbread cookies. DJ inched forward and peeked from her hiding place in time to see a cookie roll past.

Before DJ could claim her prize, the girl snatched the rolling snack and pitched the cookies into the trash.

Kayla's mom pivoted toward the kitchen. "It's okay. There are two more containers of cookies in the fridge. We'll have plenty."

The girl swung open the refrigerator, released a sigh, and through a huge grin whispered, "'Happy 12th Birthday, Kayla.' Chelsea will love the cake's purple flowers." The girl closed the fridge. "Where is Chelsea? My best friend is supposed to be here before the rest of the kids on the robotics team."

A moment later, the front door pounded open.

DJ jumped to her paws, knocking her head on the couch's wooden underframe. "Meowwww." The cat licked her paw and stroked her ear.

Chelsea grunted as she set a purple box on the kitchen floor. The contents clattered and clanked, and the gift landed with a thud.

"Good morning, Mrs. Nexus." Chelsea tipped her hat toward Kayla's mom. The girl's long, springy curls dropped, releasing a rain shower.

Kayla squealed and laughed as she handed her soggy friend a towel. “Chelsea, you’re drenched.”

“I know, right?” Chelsea wound her brown curls in the towel.

“It wasn’t supposed to rain until tonight.” Mrs. Nexus peeked out the window. She gasped at the rolling black clouds. The woman shrank back. “Where’s my phone?”

The cat’s heart pounded for the woman. *She wants to escape, too.*

DJ shook off her uneasiness. She scooched further under the couch. The stressful morning and DJ’s lack of sleep consumed her. She turned in a circle, grunted, and collapsed into a ball with a huff. *I just need a short catnap.*

Kayla lifted one end of the package and then dropped it. The insides jangled.

DJ’s ears swiveled and flicked. *What is that racket?*

“What a ginormous box. Did you carry it all the way from your house?” Kayla asked.

“I’ve been working out.” Chelsea flexed her arm muscles and burst out laughing. “It’s only a quarter mile.” Chelsea struggled to lift the present, steadyng the damp package with her knee.

“Look what Chelsea brought,” Kayla yelled to her mom, who gave a quick thumbs up as she continued to search for her phone.

Kayla paused. Her eyes followed her mother, who climbed the stairs two at a time. With a shrug, the girl turned toward her friend. “The wrapping paper has tiny silver robots—love it.”

DJ emerged from the darkness, inhaled the air, and peered at her girl. Kayla’s eyes were as joyful as the day they met when Mrs. Nexus brought DJ home from the animal refuge. Could there be another pet in the box?

Chapter 3: AI-1000

“You can put Chelsea’s gift with the others until the party,” her mom said as she charged down the stairs. “Have you seen my phone?”

“I saw it in the living room,” Kayla said.

“I’ll show you the gifts Dad and my grandparents sent.” The girls lifted the present together and carried it through the screen door to the back porch.

DJ scrambled after them. Before she could follow—slam, the back door closed, grazing DJ’s whiskers and shutting her inside.

DJ leaped to the top of the piano. She watched the girls through the window as Chelsea placed the large package on the weathered coffee table.

Kayla raised her arms wide. “The whole robotics team is coming to the party.”

Chelsea pumped her fist. “Yes!” The towel on her head fell to the floor.

Kayla shook the present. Clink-clank, clink-clank. “What’s in the box?”

“It’s a surprise, of course, or I wouldn’t have wrapped it.” Chelsea snort-laughed.

Kayla cupped the bow with both hands. “It’s sparkly. How gorgeous.”

Chelsea ran the satin strands through her fingers. “Do you like the mile-long ribbons?”

DJ pawed the window. Her eyes trailed the girls’ movements, aching to bat the ribbon.

“You need a party hat.” With mischief in her eyes, Chelsea jerked the bow off the box, tearing the wrapping paper. “Oops.” Chelsea snickered and stuck the bow on Kayla’s head.

DJ’s eyes narrowed at the picture Chelsea had uncovered.

Kayla pointed to the exposed words and read, “AI-1000—Extensive Language Library.

You got it for me. I’m so pumped!”

AI-1000—sounds familiar. DJ’s whiskers quivered.

DJ remembered drowsing on Kayla's desk one day this summer when the temperature was so hot her paws were sweaty.

That afternoon, Chelsea had grabbed Kayla by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. "You are the best builder on the robotics team. We couldn't have won the state championship without you."

Kayla's cheeks turned rosy. She shoved Chelsea's shoulder. "Your presentation was the key that clinched the trophy."

"Never mind that." Chelsea pointed at Kayla's computer screen. "This robot is what we need to get to the next level. The AI-1000 robot will practically build itself."

The chatter had continued that day as DJ left the room to find a quieter place for an afternoon snooze.

DJ blinked away the memory and refocused on the girls' current birthday discussions. She pressed her wet nose to the glass.

Kayla stared down at the present and wrinkled her eyebrows. "It must have been expensive."

Chelsea threw her head back and laughed. "Not at all. My dad got a popping discount."

A phone buzzed and sang, "I'm singing in the rain, just singing in the rain." DJ's ears twitched.

"There's my phone." Mrs. Nexus lifted a couch cushion and answered her cell. "Oh, no. It was supposed to head toward Texas. The local weatherman predicted sunshine all day today . . . Yes. I'll let her know your son won't be here."

The instant she hung up, the phone chimed again. Kayla's mom said, "Hello," and listened for a moment. "Category Five! Yesterday, they said it would only reach Cat One. We

weren't even supposed to get rain." Kayla's mom paused and nodded. "You're right. I'll call everyone and let them know the party is canceled."