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about 13,200 words

THE ELEVATOR FAMILY DOES THE BIG APPLE  
by  
Douglas Evans

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## THE ELEVATOR FAMILY DOES THE BIG APPLE

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### Chapter One

A woman wearing a red blazer, white shirt, and blue skirt led the four Wilsons down the long hallway. They passed dozens of golden doors on both sides of the corridor. Cat, the Wilson's scruffy gray dog, followed the group, sniffing each one. He wagged his long brush of a tail.

Walter Wilson checked the guide's name tag. EMILY.

"Great Scott, Emily!" he said. "Does every door lead to a small mobile room?"

"So many rooms to choose from," said Winona Wilson, wife of Walter.

“Fifty-one...fifty-two...,” counted Whitney Wilson, age twelve, and daughter of Walter and Winona. “Emily, how many mobile rooms *does* the Empire State Building have?”

Before the guide could answer, Winslow Wilson, Whitney’s twin brother, read from a New York City guidebook. “This building has seventy-three elevators. That includes six freight elevators and eight express elevators that carry tourists to the observation decks on the eighty-sixth floors.”

“Wonderful,” said Whitney. “We can take some very long rides.”

“We’ll visit every floor,” said Winona. “Think of all the people we will meet.”

“Why not check out all the mobile rooms for size?” said Walter. “Great way to get different views of New York.”

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went Cat.

Emily stopped at the last golden door in the hallway. She turned toward the Wilsons and said, “Here we are. Your own private room. The TV Network said you could stay in any four-star hotel in New York, but you requested to stay here instead.

“We couldn’t imagine staying in a room that doesn’t move,” said Winona.

“In the most famous building in the Big Apple,” said Walter. “Only the best.”

Winslow pointed to a name printed on the button panel. “Fantabulous!” he said. “It says Otis. That’s the same name as the room we had in the San Francisco Hotel.”

“We’ll call this Otis 2,” said Whitney.

“We had a top New York interior designer fix up the insides for you,” said Emily.

The woman pressed a button on the wall. The golden doors split open and a bell went *Ding!* The four Wilsons leaned forward to see the interior of the small room. They stood speechless.

The three walls were marble like the hallway. A colorful Persian carpet covered the floor and a globe light hung from the ceiling. In the center of the room stood a glass table with four metal chairs around it. Narrow beds that also served as benches ran along the three sides and a flat-screen TV hung on the back wall.

“Oh my,” said Winona.

“Only the best,” said Walter.

“Fantabulous,” said Winslow.

“Everything we need,” said Winona.

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went Cat, wagging his tail.

On the table, next to a large gift basket, lay a framed needle-point sampler. Stitched in the cloth were the words HOME SWEAT HOME.

Walter stepped forward and picked it up the frame. “Ah, here it is,” he said.

“We know that sign hangs wherever the Wilsons stay,” Emily said. “But I don’t understand. Shouldn’t it say *Home Sweet Home?*”

“The twins sewed the sampler when they were in second grade,” said Winona.

“We weren’t very good spellers back then,” said Whitney.

With great ceremony, Walter hung the frame from a hook on the side wall.

“Now it’s official,” he said. “For the next four days in the Big Apple, Otis 2 will be our home.”

“Hear! Hear!” said the other Wilsons.

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” Cat repeated.

Emily removed a smartphone from her pocket. She took a picture of the family posed besides the Home Sweet Home sign.

“When I told my daughter that I would be the Elevator Family’s guide today she got very excited,” she said. “Now I’ll leave to let you settle in. I’ll be back at three o’clock to take you to the NBC Studios. The *Not Too Late Show* tapes at five PM for broadcast later this evening.”

“Excellent,” said Walter.

“The family will be ready,” said Winona.

“When the TV station invited us to New York to be on the show I thought it was a practical joke,” said Whitney. “I still don’t feel it’s really real.”

Winslow read from his guidebook. “The NBC Studios are located in the Rockefeller Center on 6th Avenue between 49<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Street.”

The guide stepped from the room, and the golden doors slid shut. Left alone the Wilsons sat around the table and picked through the gift basket. It was filled with bagels, chocolates, cookies, pretzels, and other New York delicacies. Cat curled up in a soft dog bed under the table.

Winona bit into a raisin bagel. “Hmm,” she said. “Still warm.”

“Yum, this pretzel is delicious,” said Whitney.

“I have a feeling I’ll be adding a few more pounds this vacation,” said Walter, patting his large belly.

Winslow read more of his New York guidebook. "There are so many sights in New York to see I don't know where to begin our sightseeing," he said. "Times Square, Central Park, Greenwich Village the Natural History Museum, they're all here on this small island."

Walter pulled on his suspenders. "They call New York the Big Apple," he said. "But everything here is compact and close together. Just the way the Wilsons like it."

## Chapter Two

"Time to take Otis 2 for a ride," said Walter.

"Let's go up to the observation deck on the eighty-sixth floor," said Winona. "They say you can see all of New York City from up there."

"That's where King Kong climbed to," said Winslow.

"Poor monkey," said Whitney. "Why were people so mean to him?"

"*Ruff! Ruff!*" went Cat.

Walter studied the button panel on the marbled wall.

"Great Scott," he said. "Never seen so many buttons." He spotted a button marked **86**. "Get ready everyone. I heard this is a speedy ride"

"Five...four...three...two...one," the Wilsons counted down

"Liftoff," said Walter, and he pushed the button.

The room filled with the familiar hum of an elevator motor. The Wilson felt a surge in their stomach as the room started upward. Above the door, numbers lit up to show the floor they were passing. The lights blinked on and off at an amazing rate.

Winslow read from his guidebook. "Otis 2 is traveling upward at seven-hundred feet per second."

"Twenty-three...twenty-four...twenty-five," said Whitney, reading the flashing lights.

"It took only 410 days to build the Empire State Building," Winslow said. "It was officially opened on May 1, 1931."

"Forty-eight...forty-nine," said Whitney.

“The Empire State Building has 6,514 windows and there are 1,576 steps from street level up to the 102nd floor,” Winslow read.

“Sixty-six...sixty-seven...sixty-eight,” said Whitney.

“So many people work in this building it has its own zip code,” said Winslow. “Each year four million people visit the observation deck.”

“The more people the merrier,” said Walter.

“Eighty-four...eighty-five...eighty-six,” said Whitney. “We’ve arrived.”

Otis 2 came to a smooth stop. The golden doors split open and the bell went *Ding!* The Wilsons exited into a large round room with windows all the way around. Far below the island of Manhattan stretched north and south. To the east was the East River and to the West the Hudson River, both sparkling in the afternoon sun.

“Fantabulous,” said Winslow.

“We’re on top of the world,” said Whitney

“Manhattan’s like a giant chessboard,” said Winona.

“And the people on the sidewalk look like tiny ants,” said Walter.

The Wilsons stepped out onto the balcony that circled the building. A blast of cold air knocked them back a step. Pigeons cooed from the safety railing. Many other tourists stood there, taking selfies with their smartphones.

“Top of the afternoon to you, sir,” said Walter to an Asian man with a large video camera.

“Hello, madam,” he said to a teenager wearing a knapsack. “Excellent vista, don’t think. Only the best.”

The family started walking clockwise around the building. They paused often to admire the view.

On the north side, Walter pointed to a green rectangular area in the distance. "I spy Central Park," he said.

"And I spy New Jersey," Winona said on the east side.

On the south side of the building, Winslow stuck four quarters into a large binocular machine. He looked through the viewer and swiveled it left and right.

"And I spy the Statue of Liberty," he said.

Whitney put her face in front of the lens. "And I spy King Kong himself," she said.

Nearby, a man stood alone. Unlike the other tourists who were happy and smiling, this man wore a frown and appeared glum. About twenty-years-old, he wore a black leather jacket and black jeans. He never looked at the view of Manhattan. His gaze remained on the pavement eighty-six stories below.

"Good morning, sir," Walter called to the man.

Without looking up, the man answered, "What's so good about it?"

"Why it's a beautiful day," said Winslow.

"And a beautiful view!" said Winona.

"And we're in New York, New York," said Winslow. "A beautiful city."

The man shook his head. "I was sure she would be here," he said.

"Ah, you're expecting someone?" Walter asked.

"Elise. My one true love."

"Oh, dear," said Winona. "And Elise is late?"

"I've been waiting seven days for her at this very spot," said the man.

The Wilsons exchanged looks.

"Tell us your name, sir," said Walter.

"I'm Duncan," said the man. "Duncan Douglas."

"We're the Wilsons," Walter said, hold out a hand that Duncan shook. "I'm Walter and this is my family Winona, Whitney, and Winslow."

"*Ruff! Ruff!*" went Cat.

"And our dog Cat," Walter added.

"Sounds like Elise is *very* late," Winona said.

"We met a year ago in Paris," Duncan said. "We fell in love, but we had to part. I live in Oregon and she lives here in New York. Before we split, however, we vowed to meet in one year on the observation deck of the Empire State Building."

"Sounds like a movie," said Winslow

The man nodded. "I guess that's where I got the idea," he said. "From a movie I saw on TV."

"And you've been standing up here for a whole week?" Whitney asked.

"From opening time to closing time."

Duncan pulled a smartphone from a pocket of his jacket. He showed the Wilsons a photo of a pretty young woman with long red hair and freckles. She stood in front of the Eiffel Tower.

"This is her, Elise," he said. Then he sighed. "We had such a wonderful time in Paris. I was sure she would be here."

“It’s expensive riding up to the observation deck every day,” said Winslow. “My guidebook says tourist tickets are fifty bucks.”

“It’s worth it if Elise shows up,” said the man. “Maybe she was in an accident like in the movie. Maybe she’s in some New York hospital, longing to be here. I’ll wait forever for my one true love.”

“Well, young man,” said Walter. “We’re staying in the moving Otis 2 room in this very building. Just knock on our door and we’ll give you a free ride up here any time you like”

“You must come for a visit,” said Winona.

For the first time, Duncan raised his head. “You’re the famous Elevator Family?” he said. “I read you are guests on the *Not Too Late Show* tonight.

“That we are,” Walter said. “And now we must return to our little room and get ready for the show.”

Back in Otis 2, Winslow pressed the down button. The golden doors slid closed and the numbers above the door counted down quickly.

“Poor Duncan,” said Winona on the way down.

“He should be enjoying his stay in New York but he’s miserable,” said Whitney”

“I think he’s in for a big disappointment,” said Winslow.

“I think you’re right,” said Walter. “No doubt we’ll be seeing our friend again in the morning.”

### Chapter Three

Shortly after Otis 2 reached the ground, a knock came on the golden door.

"Come in," the Wilsons said together.

The doors split open, *Ding!*, and there stood Emily, the tour guide. She wore the same red, white, and blue outfit she had on earlier.

"Time to leave for NBC Studios," she said. "Your limousine is waiting out front."

"Can Cat come?" Whitney asked.

"He's not used to being alone in a big city," said Winslow.

The dog looked up at the guide. His long eyebrows hid his eyes and a gray mustache covered his mouth.

"*Ruff! Ruff!*" he went.

The guide patted Cat on the head. "Of course, Cat can come," she said. "You told the network he was part of your family, so they plan on having him on the show with you."

The Wilsons and Cat followed Emily down the marble hallway. They marched out the door onto 34th Street.

A black limo was parked at the curb. A chauffeur dressed in a black suit stood by the back door.

"My name's Gus," he said. "I'll be your driver during your stay in New York."

"Excellent," said Walter.

The chauffeur opened the back door and gestured for the Wilsons to climb inside.

"I call shotgun," said Winslow.

“Me too,” said Whitney.

The twins ran to the far side of the limousine and sat in the front seat. Walter, Winona, Cat, and Emily climbed into the back.

“Great Scott,” said Walter. “This car is big enough for our family to stay in comfortably our whole vacation.”

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went Cat.

From the driver’s seat, Gus looked in the rearview mirror. “Next stop Rockefeller Center,” he said.

The limo pulled away from the curb. As it drove up 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the twins sang, “*New York, New York, a wonderful town. The Bronx is up and the Battery’s down.*”

Walter craned his neck to look upward. “And the buildings go up to the sky,” he said.

“They don’t call them skyscrapers for nothing,” said Emily. “I grew up on a farm in Nebraska. When I first came to New York it took me a while to get used to heights.”

After no more than ten minutes, the limo parked in front of a large plaza. Skyscrapers surrounded a busy skating rink with a giant golden statue behind it.

“Here we are,” Gus called out. “Rockefeller Center, home of NBC TV Studios.”

The Wilsons, Emily, and Cat left the limo. The guide led them into the tallest building.

“NBC is on the thirtieth floor,” she said. “30 Rock they call it.”

Once up the elevator, Emily took the family into the makeup room. While a woman put powder on Walter, Winona, and the twins’ faces, a man brushed Cat’s shaggy fur until it shined.

“Without makeup, faces look pale and shiny under the bright TV lights,” the makeup artist said. “I hope you’re not too nervous.”

“A bit,” said Winona.

“Lots of butterflies in my belly,” said Whitney.

“My heart is pounding,” said Winslow.

“Nervous? Hogwash,” said Walter. “Why be nervous about a few bright lights.”

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went Cat, wagging his tail.

Emily brought the Wilsons and dog into the Green Room where they waited for their turn to go on. A monitor on the wall showed them what was happening on the TV stage. “You’ll be announced after the first commercial,” the guide told them. “The show’s about to start.”

The TV monitor showed a twelve-piece band sitting in a large box beside a brightly lit curtain. The band played the Not So Late Show theme music and an announcer said,

*“It’s the Not Too Late Show, starring Jimmy James. Tonight our guests are the singer called Singer and the Elevator Family.”*

“That’s us,” said Winslow.

“All the kids and teachers at school will be watching,” said Whitney”

“Isn’t this exciting,” said Winona.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about,” said Walter. “The audience doesn’t look too big.”

*“And now here’s the host of the show Jiiiiiiiiimmy James!”* said the announcer.

On the monitor, the Wilsons saw a man with silver-white hair and wearing a yellow

sports jacket run out on the stage. He grinned at the band and then at the audience. He told a few jokes and then the show cut for a commercial.

Emily stood. "Let's go," she said. "You're on in five minutes."

The Wilsons and Cat followed the guide down a hall and into a large studio. They stood behind a curtain at the side of a brightly lit stage. The twins wiggled with excitement; Winona hummed to herself, while Walter stood there stiffly without saying a word.

Jimmy James, the host, sat behind a desk at the far side of the stage. Two large cameras were pointed at him. A man holding cue cards knelt below the cameras. Beyond the cameras sat the audience of about two-hundred people.

When the commercials ended a red sign above the stage flashed APPLAUSE. The crowd clapped, and Jimmy James smiled into a camera.

"Our first guests come from California," he said. "Maybe you've read about their adventures staying in tiny places around the world, from a ski gondola in Switzerland to a hotel closet in Japan. Here they are now, Walter, Winona, Whitney, and Winslow Wilson, also known as the Elevator Family, accompanied by their dog, Cat."

"Good luck," Emily said, and she gestured for the family to walk forward.

The audience cheered. The band played *It's a Small World* and the four Wilsons and dog walked onto the stage.

Winslow and Whitney led the way. Halfway across the stage they stopped and did little tap dance. The audience laughed and cheered. Winona came next waving both hands followed by Walter who walked straight and stiffly. Finally, Cat appeared and the crowd erupted in the loudest applause yet.

Jimmy James stood and shook hands with each of the Wilsons. The family sat in a row of chairs beside his desk. Cat climbed onto the chair at the end. He sat there panting and wagging his shaggy tail. When the camera zoomed in on his happy face—long eyelashes, gray mustache and all—the audience roared with approval.

“I hope our studio isn’t too big for the Elevator Family,” Jimmy James joked. He addressed Walter who sat closest to him. “Now, Walter, your family became known as the Elevator Family after your stay at the San Francisco Hotel. Tell us something about that adventure.”

Walter stared out at the crowd. Hot, bright lights shone from overhead. The cameras moved back and forth like giant robots. Seconds passed and Walter said nothing.

Winslow leaned forward. “It had its ups and downs,” he said. “But we made a lot of friends. One was with a flower girl named Kathy and another was a bellhop named Gavin. They ended up getting married.”

“And we helped rescue a girl name Lizzy Chronicle who was kidnapped,” said Whitney.

The audience applauded some more.

Again, the host turned toward Walter. “Now tell us about your dog, Walter,” he said. “Where did he get the unusual name Cat?”

Again, Walter remained silent. As if in a trance, he stared at the cameras. Even with the TV makeup on, his face was pale. His eyes were wide and lips shut tight. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead.

This time Whitney broke in. “We found Cat while we were staying in a small cabin

on a bridge crossing the Mississippi River. Cat was a stray, and a fisherman gave him that name because he was so good at catching catfish.”

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went Cat.

Again, Jimmy James addressed Walter with a question. “So why does your family enjoy staying in such small places?”

At once Winona answered, “Because we’re a tight-knit family. We enjoy being together. Besides, how much space does a family need?”

“Hmm, I see your point,” said the host, stroking his chin. “I live in a large mansion, but my family never enters most of the rooms. In fact, we’re happiest when we stay on our small sailboat which is compact and everything is close at hand.”

“Small is good,” said Whitney. “

“We like living in our tiny house in California,” said Winslow.

“*Downsize* is our motto,” said Winona. “The more clutter we have the less time we have for enjoying things.”

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went Cat.

The interview continued for another ten minutes. Walter never said a word. He continued staring forward, bug-eyed and zombielike.

Finally, Jimmy James said, “Well, thank you for being on our show tonight, Elevator Family and Cat. After the break, Singer will sing her latest hit single *Sing Sing Sing*.”

As soon as the program cut for a commercial, Emily walked onto the stage. Jimmy James shook hands with the Wilsons again, and the guide led the family and dog from the studio.

On the way down in the elevator, she said, "You can watch the show when it airs at ten-thirty tonight. Tomorrow the whole country will be talking about you and Cat."

"The lights were so bright," said Winona.

"I forgot to get an autograph from Singer," said Whitney.

"The interview was too short," said Winslow.

"*Ruff! Ruff!*" went Cat.

Walter still said nothing. As the family approached Gus and his limo parked in the street, he finally found his voice.

"Funny, I don't remember a thing about the entire interview," he said. "It's all one big blank."

The rest of the Wilsons laughed. No one mentioned to Walter he had a bad case of stage fright. No one mentioned to him that Cat said more during the interview than he did.

"How did the interview go?" Gus asked.

Emily smiled. "It went *very* well," she said. "Only the best."

## Chapter Four

Back in the limo, Gus looked into the rearview mirror. “Wilsons, how about a quick tour of mid-Manhattan?” he said.

“Excellent,” said Walter. “The core of the Big Apple.”

“How exciting,” said Winona. “Show us everything.”

“I have my guidebook ready,” said Winslow.

“*East Side, West Side,*” sang Whitney. “*All around the town.*”

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went Cat.

After leaving Rockefeller Center, Gus drove up 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue past Central Park. He turned into the park at 65th Street. The sky was sunny and clear. People biked, strolled, skateboarded, roller-bladed, and jogged along the cement paths.

“Roll down the windows Gus,” Walter said. “Let’s enjoy this fine afternoon.”

“I’ll do better than that,” said the chauffeur. He pressed a button and a large section of the limo’s roof opened to the blue sky.

The twins stood on the back seat. From their armpits on up, they were outside the car. They waved to everywhere they passed.

“There’s Central Park Zoo,” Winslow said pointing to the left.

“There’s the ice-skating rink,” said Whitney, pointing to the right.

As the limo drove past the Central Park Carousel, however, something odd happened. Cat leaped toward the window and started whining. He scratched the glass as if wanting to get out. He might have leaped through the roof if Walter hadn’t grabbed him around the

middle.

“What’s wrong, old boy,” he said.

“*Ruff! Ruff! Ruff!*” went the dog.

“Cat’s sure is acting strange,” said Winona. “I’ve never seen him like this,”

“He spotted something by the merry-go-round,” said Whitney.

“Maybe he saw a squirrel,” said Winslow. “You know how Cat gets with squirrels.”

The Wilsons looked toward the carousel. All they saw was people, young and old, waiting in line to take a ride.

Cat whined some more, pressing his nose against the window.

Walter stroked the dog. “We’ll come back here tomorrow, old boy,” he said. “We’ll let you explore the entire park.”

Gus continued driving through the park. He turned down Central Park West and onto Broadway. There the Wilsons marveled at the brightly-lit theater marquees announcing the current Broadway plays and musicals.

Winslow, still half outside, pointed to one sign. “There’s a musical I’d like to see,” he said. “*Madison*. I read it’s very historical.”

“I’d rather see that show,” said Whitney, pointing to another sign. “*The Lion Queen*. It’s been running on Broadway for ten years.”

“Great Scott!” Walter said suddenly. “Gus, slow down! Check out *that* marquee.”

Winona read the sign. “*Waiting for Nothing*” she said. “I’ve never heard of the play. It sounds rather sad.”

“But look at the name under the title,” said Walter. “Look who’s the star.”

Together the twins shouted. "Natacha Siri!"

"You know Natacha Siri?" asked Emily. "She's a rising new star on Broadway. She's brilliant."

"Natacha was our waitress in the Otis Room at the San Francisco Hotel," said Winona.

"Back then, she was training to be an actor," said Winslow.

"She practiced her accents on us," said Whitney.

"And, by gum, now she's a star on the Great White Way," said Walter.

"Gus, please stop," said Winona. "Who wants to buy tickets and go see Natacha perform tonight?"

"Aye!" the four Wilsons shouted as one.

Gus pulled the limo over and the four Wilsons piled out. They walked up to the ticket booth in front of the theater.

"Four tickets for tonight's show, madam," Walter said to the woman inside the booth.

"Front row please," said Winona.

"We know Natacha, the star," said Whitney.

"She was our waitress in the mobile room in San Francisco," said Winslow.

The woman in the booth gave the family a look. "Very good," she said. "Four tickets for tonight's performance of *Waiting For Nothing*."

While the woman tapped some computer keys, Walter studied the small booth.

"Excellent place you're staying in, madam," he said. "Are there ever any vacancies?"

Again, the woman gave a look. "The box office is open six days a week, closed on Sunday," she said. "Someone's in here ten AM to eight PM."

Walter handed the woman his credit card, and she handed him four tickets.

“Curtain is at eight tonight,” she said.

“Excellent,” Walter said. “And if this small box office as you call it, comes available in the next few days, please contact us. We’re the Wilson family, and we’re staying in the Otis 2 Room in the Empire State Building.”

## Chapter Five

Gus drove the Wilsons through Times Square. He took them past the New York Public Library with the giant stone lions in front and Grand Central Station.

On the way down Park Avenue, Emily said, "Time for dinner. Where would the Wilsons like to eat before the play tonight? New York has many four-star restaurants. Pick anyone you'd like, and I'll make a VIP reservation."

"Four stars? I'd rather eat outside with all the stars," said Walter.

"Could we eat on the observation deck of the Empire State Building?" said Winona.

"Fantabulous," said Winslow. "Can we have Nathan's World-Famous Hot Dogs?"

"And New York-style pizza," said Whitney.

"Let's invite Duncan," said Winona. "I'm sure he's still up on the eighty-sixth floor."

Emily smiled at Gus who was looking in the rear-view mirror. "Why not?" she said. Then she made a few calls on her smartphone.

"All set," the guide said, as the limo pulled up to the curb outside the Empire State Building. "Gus will return in time to take you to the theater. Enjoy your dinner."

The Wilsons and Cat rode Otis 2 straight up to the eighty-sixth floor. When the golden doors slid open, a bald man with a trimmed beard and wearing a black turtleneck stood there to greet them.

"Good evening, Elevator Family," he said. "My name is Z. I will be your waiter this evening. Please follow me to your table."

Z led the Wilsons and dog out to the balcony. A table covered with a red and white

checked table cloth stood in the corner. The area was roped off from the other tourists by a red velvet rope. The sun had set and bright stars twinkled in the sky. Below, as far as the Wilsons could see, the ground twinkled with city and traffic lights like the sky above.

Nearby stood Duncan. He looked as glum as he had earlier.

"Any luck yet, my boy," Walter called to him.

Duncan shook his head. "But I'm not giving up," he said. "I'm sure Elise will be here tomorrow. Maybe I have the date wrong."

"Come join us for dinner," said Winona. "Maybe a good meal will cheer you up."

"Thanks for the invitation," said the man. "When the guard told me, I was surprised. I think the guards are getting tired of my being here."

The four Wilsons and Duncan sat around the table. Cat sat under it. A pigeon flew up and perched on the safety railing.

"*Coo! Coo!*" it went.

"Care for drinks before your meal?" Z asked

"Champagne for the adults and sparkling cider for the twins," said Walter. "We have a special guest with us tonight."

"Very good, sir," the waiter said, and he hustled away.

Duncan stared at his dinner plate. "Thanks, Mr. Wilson, but I don't feel very special. Maybe I've been foolish waiting for Elise this long."

A second pigeon landed on the railing and went, "*Coo! Coo!*"

"Chin up, young man," said Walter. "True love is worth the wait."

"If it was meant to be it was meant to be, Duncan," said Winona.

The waiter returned with a bucket of ice holding a bottle of champagne and fizzy apple juice. He poured a drink for everyone.

Walter held up his glass. "I propose a toast," he said. "Here's to our new cozy home in the Empire State Building and our new friend, Duncan.

"Cheers," everyone said, clinking glasses together.

"*Ruff! Ruff!*" went Cat.

"*Coo!*" went the pigeons.

"Tell us about yourself, Duncan," said Winona. "What do you do when you're not up here waiting for Elise?"

"I write musicals," the man said.

"Fantabulous," said Winslow.

"Have you had any success?" Whitney asked.

Duncan looked at his plate again and shook his head. "Only rejections," he said. "My show *Moby Dick, the Musical* was produced off off off off-Broadway, but it closed after one night."

"But don't give up, young man," said Walter. "The public's taste is fickle."

"We never thought people would want to hear about a family who likes small places," said Winona. "But here we are on the *Not Too Late Show* tonight."

Z arrived with a cart holding three large pizzas and a tray of hot dogs. There was also a bowl of gourmet dog food for Cat.

"Here's the food you ordered," said the waiter. "New York-style pizza and Nathan's hot dogs."

“Only the best,” said Walter.

Everyone grabbed a piece of pizza. The crust was soft and thin. The Wilsons watched as Duncan folded the pizza slice in two and took a bite out of the end.

“That’s how New Yorkers eat pizza,” he said

Walter folded his pizza slice likewise. “When in New York, do as New Yorkers do,” he said.

Everyone began eating pizza and hot dogs. Everyone saved the last bite of crust and hot dog bun for the pigeons on the railing.

*“Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!”*

Soon it was time to attend the play. As the Wilsons and Duncan rode Otis 2 down to the lobby, Walter invited Duncan to join them.

“No thanks,” he said. “I have a show tune in my head that I want to write down before I forget it. But I’ll be back here tomorrow at opening time.”

## Chapter Six

Gus and his limo were waiting for the Wilsons outside.

“Shotgun,” called the twins, and they climbed in the passenger’s seat.

The chauffeur drove the family straight to the theater near Times Square. Walter gave the thumbs-up sign to the woman in the ticket booth, and he handed his tickets to a man at the door. An usher led them to their seats in the front row.

“We know Natacha, the star,” Winona said, as the usher handed out programs.

“She’s very good at accents,” said Winslow.

“French, Russian, you name it,” said Whitney.

“Only the best,” said Walter.

“Enjoy the show,” the usher said, and he walked away, shaking his head.

No sooner had the Wilsons taken their seats than the curtain went up. There she was. Natacha Siri and another actor sat on a mound of dirt in the middle of the stage. She was no more than ten yards from where the Wilsons sat. She wore a tattered shirt and patched baggy pants. A battered hat covered a short black wig.

Natacha looked out at the audience to say her first line. “Nothing can be done.”

The Wilsons grinned. Walter gave the OK sign. The twins waved.

“Isn’t she marvelous?” Winona whispered.

The first act of *Waiting For Nothing*, however, was long and confusing. Nothing much happened. The two actors remained sitting on the mound of dirt and talked about nothing important. Before long, Walter’s head nodded and dropped onto his chest. Winona

elbowed his side to wake him up.

At intermission, the four Wilsons joined the rest of the audience in the lobby for drinks.

“Great Scott,” Walter said. “I need some coffee to keep awake.”

“The author didn’t call the play *Waiting For Nothing* for nothing,” said Winona.

“How can a play be so uneventful?” said Winslow. “Anything would be better than nothing.”

“But isn’t Natasha good?” said Whitney. “It’s not easy doing nothing.”

An usher walked up to Walter and handed him a note. He read it and said, “It’s from the star herself.”

“Natacha?” said Winona. “What did she write?”

“She spotted us in the front row,” said Walter. “She asked if we could join her backstage after the show.”

“Hurrah!” went the twins.

After the second act, and the audience applauded, and the two actors bowed, and the curtain came down, the usher led the Wilsons to the back of the stage. They entered a small dressing room where Natacha sat before a mirror. She was rubbing off her make-up with a tissue. She wore a silk bathrobe.

“Bravo! Bravo!” Walter said.

“Magnificent!” said Winona.

“Fantabulous!” said Winslow.

“What a star you are,” said Whitney.

“Mr. And Mrs. Wilson! Whitney and Winslow!” Natacha said. “How good to see you.” She stood and hugged each Wilson. “When I saw you sitting in the front row, I was so excited I almost forgot my lines.”

“That was some play,” said Walter.

“Confusing right?” the actor said. “I hardly understand it myself. Please have a seat, and tell me everything you’ve done here in New York.”

The family sat on folding chairs. They told Natacha about Otis 2 in the Empire State Building. She heard about the *Not Too Late Show*, and how they spotted her name on the theater marquee.

“Now you must tell us how you went from being a waitress at the San Francisco Hotel to a Broadway star,” said Winona.

“It was because of this family that I was discovered,” Natacha said. “After you checked out of the hotel, the news of your visit spread up and down the West Coast. Many people came to ride up and down in the famous Otis Room. The hotel manager turned it into a tiny restaurant, and I was the waitress.”

“I remember your accents,” said Whitney.

“I never knew how you really talked until now,” said Winslow.

Natacha laughed. “Well, one evening who should stop by the Otis Room Restaurant, but Larry Lawrence, the famous film director. He cast me in his next Hollywood horror movie *Dream and Scream*.”

“You were in that movie?” said Winslow.

“I didn’t recognize you,” said Whitney.

“I had a bit part as one of the zombies,” Natacha said. “But it led to further roles in *Dream and Scream 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10.*”

“How did you end up acting in New York?” asked Winona.

“Hollywood wasn’t for me,” the actor went on. “I dreamed of being on a Broadway stage. So I moved here, and with my film credits, I got small parts in plays and musicals. That led to this starring role in *Waiting for Nothing.*”

“Only the best,” said Walter. “If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere.”

“And how do you like living in the Big Apple?” Whitney asked.

“As you used to say in the Otis Room, it has its ups and downs,” Natacha said “I enjoy the excitement and culture of New York, but it’s lonely at times. It’s hard meeting people.”

“You have no boyfriend?” Winona asked.

“I’ve been too busy to go on dates.”

Walter nodded. “Sometimes the more people there are the harder they are to meet,” he said.

“That’s true,” Natacha said. “But I’m sure one day someone will come along.”

Winslow checked the clock on the wall. “It’s almost 10:30,” he said. “Time for the *Not Too Late Show.*”

“Oh, let’s watch,” said Natacha.

She switched on a TV mounted on the wall. After a commercial, the studio set appeared on the screen, and the Wilsons heard the familiar words, “*It’s the Not Too Late Show, starring Jimmy James. Tonight our guests are the singer called Singer and the Elevator Family. And now here’s the host of the show Jiiiiiiiiimmy James!*”

Natacha clapped and cheered as the Wilsons and Cat stepped across the TV stage.

The interview began with the camera zoomed in on Walter's pale face. Quickly, it cut to Winslow. Another question from the host, another close up of Walter, and another quick cutaway to Winona. This went on question after question with either Winslow, Winona, or Whitney answering the questions. Finally, the show cut for a commercial.

Natacha clapped again. "That was wonderful," she said. "What stars *you* are."

"But I still don't remember one word of the interview," Walter said.

"You didn't blink once," said Winona.

"Or budge an inch," said Winslow.

"I don't think you were even breathing," said Whitney.

Walter pulled on his suspenders. "I guess I was a wee bit stage fright," he admitted.

Natacha smiled. "It happens to us all, Mr. Wilson," she said.

Everyone laughed.

## Chapter Seven

The Wilsons rose early the next morning. They rode Otis 2 up to the tenth floor where a high-tech company had offered them the use of their executive washroom. Back on the ground floor, Z delivered breakfast along with the New York Post newspaper.

“Blueberry waffles,” said Walter. “The Wilson’s favorite.”

“You think of everything, Z,” said Winona.

“Only the best for the Wilsons,” said the waiter. “Did you see the morning headlines?”

Walter held up the newspaper. “Great Scott!” he said.

On the front page was a picture of the Wilson family and Cat. The headlines read:

THE ELEVATOR FAMILY BITES INTO

THE BIG APPLE

“After your appearance on the *Not Too Late Show*, you’re the toast of the town,” Z said.

Whitney picked up the smartphone and checked the e-mail.

“We have two hundred messages,” she said.

Winslow took the phone and pressed some app icons. “And replays of our TV appearance have gone viral on YouTube and Facebook,” he said. “We have millions of hits.”

“Gone *viral*?” said Walter. “That sounds like a disease.”

“And who’s hitting us?” asked. Winona.

Whitney took the phone again

“Here’s an e-mail from Mr. Brown,” she said. “He wants to meet us for lunch today. He has a lot of news to tell us.”

“Excellent,” said Walter. “It would be good to see our old friend and manager.”

Ever since Bob Brown met the Wilsons in the San Francisco Hotel, he had been the Elevator Family’s business manager. A former toy salesman, Mr. Brown now handled the Elevator Family merchandise, book sales, movie rights, and appearances.

As the Wilsons ate, a knock came on the door. Winslow pressed the open button and the door parted. *Ding!* There stood Duncan wearing his usual leather jacket and glum face.

“Duncan!” the family shouted.

“Come join us for waffles,” said Walter.

“Thanks, Mr. Wilsons,” the man said. “But I want to be up on the observation deck at opening time. You know, just in case Elise shows up early.”

Winslow pressed another button. “Eighty-sixth floor right away,” he said.

After dropping off Duncan, the Wilsons returned to the ground floor. They remained there with the door open. Walter read the newspaper while Winona sketched on her sketchpad, Whitney read e-mails, and Winslow flipped through the New York City guide book. Each time an office worker walked by they waved.

“It’s our first full day of sightseeing,” Winslow said. “I have the whole day planned. First stop, the Statue of Liberty.”

“Don’t forget, we must let Cat explore Central Park,” said Whitney.

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went the dog.

Walter hitched a leach to Cat’s collar. The dog led the family outside where Gus was

waiting by his limo.

“Shotgun,” called the twins.

“I’ve been hearing about the Elevator Family on the car radio,” the chauffeur said.

“You’ve really made a splash last night on TV.”

“Now it’s Sightseeing Day, Gus,” said Whitney.

“On to the Statue of Liberty,” Winslow said.

“Good place to start,” said Gus. “We’re off to the tip of Manhattan.”

With the guide book in hand, Winslow called out the famous places they passed on their way downtown. “Macy’s Department Store ... Union Square ... Greenwich Village ... the Freedom Tower ... Wall Street ... Battery Park.”

Whitney pointed out the windshield. “There she is,” she said. “The Statue of Liberty.”

Sure enough, on an island not far from shore, stood the grand statue the Wilsons had often seen in pictures.

“Hello, lady,” said Walter.

“She’s taller than I imagined,” said Winona.

Gus parked the limo. “I’ll take Cat for a walk while you visit Liberty Island,” he said.

A short time later, the Wilsons were climbing up the steps leading to the tall gray statue.

*“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,”*

Winslow recited.

*“The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,”* said Whitney.

*"I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"* they said together.

The family climbed the 377 steps to the statue's crown. They peered out the small windows across New York Harbor.

"Isn't the view grand?" said Winona.

"Welcome to America, everyone," cried the twins.

Walter looked around the cramped room where they stood. "On our next trip to New York this would be an excellent place to stay," he said.

Next, Gus drove the Wilsons uptown to the American Museum of Natural History.

"This is the largest natural history museum in the world," Winslow read from his guidebook. "The museum's collection houses over thirty-four million specimens of plants, animals, fossils, minerals, rocks, meteorites, and cultural artifacts."

Again, Gus looked after Cat while the Wilsons toured the museum. They explored the great halls of dioramas displaying lions, elephants, and other large mammals. They strolled through the hall where a full-sized blue whale hung from the ceiling, and they marveled at the dinosaur skeletons in another huge room. After they sat through a planetarium show about space, Walter checked the clock.

"Time to leave, family," he said. "We're meeting Mr. Brown in Central Park for lunch. We have just enough time to take Cat for a stroll before lunchtime."

## Chapter Eight

The Wilsons said good-bye to Gus. With Cat pulling on his leash, they walked across the street and into Central Park. As they walked along a cement pathway, the dog sniffed every park bench, trash bin, and tree trunk.

“Cat is having the time of his life,” said Walter.”

“He sure enjoys the smells of New York City,” said Winona.

“His nose is leading him somewhere,” said Winslow.

“But we still don’t know where he wants to go,” said Whitney.

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went the dog, straining his leash.

Many people on the path recognized the Wilsons from their TV appearance.

“It’s the Elevator Family,” said an old man using a walker. “Welcome to New York.”

“You were so cool on TV, Mr. Wilson,” said a teenaged girl with a ring in her nose.

“Can we take our picture with you?” asked two Japanese tourists with a selfie stick.

The family was meeting their business manager at a cafe by The Lake. At the lake, they found many children sailing boats from one cement bank to the other.

“This is where Stuart Little raced his sailboat in the book *Stuart Little*,” Winslow said.

Mr. Brown sat at an outside table by the water’s edge.

“Walter, Winona, Winslow, Whitney, and Cat,” he called out. “How good to see you again.”

“Last time we met was in London at Christmastime,” Walter said,

“A lot has happened since then,” said Mr. Brown. “A lot has happened since the

world watched you on the *Not Too Late Show*. All morning, my phone hasn't stopped chirping. People across the country want you to make appearances. The Elevator Family business is booming."

"Only the best," said Walter.

While everyone ate lunch, the manager kept talking. "Sales of the Elevator Family products are off the charts," he said. "The Elevator Family video game is selling like hotcakes. Elevator Family T-shirts and action figures sell so fast stores can't keep them in stock. An Elevator Family movie is in the works and an Elevator Family TV series."

Meanwhile, Cat sat by the table, sniffing the air and whining.

"What's wrong with your dog?" Mr. Brown asked.

"Cat has been acting strange lately," said Whitney.

"We can't figure out what he wants," said Winslow.

"Cat has become as popular as the rest of the Wilson family," said Mr. Brown. "We're designing a stuffed Cat doll complete with a bushy tail, long eyelashes, and gray mustache."

After lunch, the Wilsons did more sightseeing. First, they visited two large bronze Central Park statues, one of Hans Christian Anderson and the other of Alice in Wonderland. Winona took pictures of the twins climbing on both of them.

By the time the family toured the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it was late afternoon. Time to return to Otis 2. As they waited for a bus on 5th Avenue, a red-headed woman with freckles stepped up to the curb to hail a taxi. Winslow studied the woman. He nudged Whitney who glanced at her and elbowed Winona. Winona looked and tapped Walter on the shoulder.

“Great Scott,” Walter called out. “That’s Elise!”

The woman turned.

“How do you know my name?” she asked.

“Duncan showed us your picture,” said Winslow.

“He’s been waiting for you in the Empire State Building,” said Whitney.

The woman made a face. “Duncan?” she said. “Who’s Duncan?”

The Wilsons exchanged looks.

“You know, the man you met in Paris last year,” said Winona.

“Oh, him,” the woman said. “What’s he doing in the Empire State Building? I thought he lived in California.”

Again, the Wilsons looked at each other.

“Duncan said you agreed to meet him on the observation deck a year after you parted,” said Whitney.

The woman’s eyes widened. “That nut,” she said. “And he took that seriously?”

The four Wilsons nodded.

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went Cat.

“That was just a silly line from a movie we watched,” Elise said. “I didn’t think he’d actually come all the way from California and be there.”

“That’s where Duncan is right now,” said Whitney.

“Standing on the observation deck on the eighty-sixth floor of the Empire State Building,” said Winslow.

The woman laughed. “You must be joking,” she said. “Duncan was fun to be with, but

not really my type. In the past year, I met a man, and we got married. I hope to have a family soon. Paris was long long ago.”

“Oh,” the Wilsons said as one.

At that moment, a yellow cab drove by. The woman raised her hand, and the taxi stopped.

“Tell Duncan to get a life,” Elise said as she got in the back seat.

The Wilsons and Cat waited for the next bus in silence. They were all thinking the same thing. How were they going to tell Duncan about Elise?

## Chapter Nine

A bus pulled up to the stop. The door folded open, and the Wilsons heard a high operatic voice sing, "*La-la-laaaaaaa.*"

"*Ruff! Ruff!*" went Cat, wagging his shaggy tail.

The family and dog climbed the bus steps. Behind the steering wheel sat a large woman wearing a blue shirt and pants. On her head was a blue baseball-style cap.

The bus passengers were applauding and shouting, "Bravo! Bravo! Encore! Encore!"

"That was excellent singing, madam," Walter said to the driver, as he paid the bus fare. "Only the best."

A bald man in the front seat leaned forward. "Sure was," he said. "You're now riding on the bus of Opra, the Opera-Singing Bus Driver."

The driver closed the bus door. "My next aria will be *Un Bel Di* from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*," she said.

The Wilsons found four empty seats in the middle of the bus. The bus took off, and Opra started singing again.

"*Un bel dì, vedremo. Levarsi un fil di fumo sull'estremo...*"

Her voice was first-rate. High, clear, and warbling. It filled the bus from front to back. None of the passengers made a sound. No one moved. Everyone sat spellbound listening to the wonderful singing. Even Cat sat on the floor, silent and still, with his floppy ears perked.

As the bus pulled up to the next stop, Opra ended her aria.

*"...fede lo aspettooooooooo."*

The people on the bus clapped again.

"Bravo! Bravo!" they called. "More! More!"

The driver bowed her head and opened the bus door to let people off and on.

"My next piece will be *Sempre libera* from Verdi's *La Traviata*," she said.

The bus started moving again. Again, it filled with the driver's high warbling voice.

She kept singing down 5th Avenue, past Rockefeller Center, and past the New York Public Library.

*"Oh! Amore! Amooooooooooooore!"*

Stop after stop, aria after aria, the Wilsons sat, enjoying the concert. When the bus arrived at 34th Street, they forgot to get off. No one wanted to miss the next song.

Opra continued singing through Lower Manhattan and across the East River.

"We're on the Brooklyn Bridge," said Winslow.

"Shhh!" went the other Wilsons.

The family rode the bus through Brooklyn to the last stop on the line.

As a grand finale, Opra put on a Viking helmet and sang, *Brünnhilde's Battle Cry* from Wagner's *Die Walküre*.

*"Ho jo to hooooo! Ho jo to hooooo! Ho jo to hooooo! Ho jo to hooooo!"*

The Wilsons, the only passengers left, stood and cheered.

"Bravo! Bravo!" Walter shouted.

"Encore!" said Winona.

*"Who-hoooooooo!"* called the twins, stomping their feet.

*“Ruff! Ruff! Ruff! Ruff!”* went Cat

Opra bowed her head. “End of concert and end of on the line,” she said. “Thank you for riding and for listening.”

The four Wilsons and Cat walked to the front of the bus.

“We’d like to ride back to Manhattan with you, Opra,” Walter said.

“An encore presentation,” said Winona.

“I can’t wait to hear more,” said Whitney.

“I never knew I could like opera so much,” said Winslow.

Opra removed her helmet and put on her blue cap. “I’ll be leaving again in fifteen minutes after my break,” she said.

The Wilsons sat in the front seats. The driver opened a thermos and pour herself a cup of hot tea.

“Opra, where did you learn to sing so beautifully?” Winona asked.

“By imitating sopranos I heard on the radio,” the driver said. “My parents were big opera fans. We listened to live Metropolitan Opera concerts every Saturday afternoon.”

“Do you go to the opera often?” Winslow asked.

Opra took a sip of tea and shook her head. “I’ve passed the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center hundreds of times on my bus route,” she said. “But I’ve never been inside that beautiful building.”

“Great Scott!” said Walter. “That’s not right.”

“What a shame,” said Winona.

“The Metropolitan Opera House is the largest opera house in the world,” Winslow

reading from his guidebook. "It was opened in 1966."

"You must go one night," said Whitney.

Opra shrugged. "Maybe someday," she said. "But for now, I drive this bus and entertain my passengers. My first aria on the return trip will be *The Queen of the Night's Aria* from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*."

As the driver prepared to leave, Walter sat silently thinking. Finally, he said, "Opra, do you have plans for tonight?"

Opra looked in her rear-view mirror. "The usual," she said. "My husband, Charlie and I will listen to the Yankee's game and go to bed early."

"Winona, hand me the smartphone," Walter said. He took the phone and pushed some numbers on the screen. He waited and said. "Metropolitan Opera House? Could you tell me what opera is playing tonight?...Carmen by George Bizet...Excellent...Do you have a box available...Excellent...And how many people will a box seat?...Twelve...Excellent...Please reserve one box for the Wilson family...Excellent...Curtain time eight o'clock?...Thank you."

Walter lowered the phone. "Opra," he said. "Will you and your husband join our family and some of our New York friends for a performance of Carmen at the Met tonight?"

The driver spun in her chair. "What? But...but..." she stammered.

"No arguing about it," Walter said. "A nice man named Gus will pick you up at six o'clock."

"Are you for real?"

"Walter is always really for real," said Winona.

“A night at the opera,” said Winslow. “Fantabulous.”

“A show called Carmen sounds exciting,” said Whitney.

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went Cat.

“How can I refuse?” Opra said. “It’s a dream come true. Wait until I tell Charlie. He’s a bigger opera fan than I am.”

The driver started the bus engine. In the rear-view mirror, the Wilsons saw her beaming face. As she started off, she warbled, “*Tra-laaaaaaaaaaaaa.*”

“Now who else should we invite to the opera tonight?” Walter asked.

“I bet Duncan would like to come,” said Winona. “And it’s Natacha’s night off from her play,”

“Mr. Brown and his wife,” said Winslow.

“And Gus and Emily must come,” said Whitney.

“Excellent,” said Walter, and he made calls to invite all the guests.

When the bus stopped at 34th street, Opra sang a high note so loud it made the windshield vibrate.

“*La-la-laaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!*”

“See you tonight, Opra,” said Walter, as the family climbed off the bus.

“I can’t believe it,” the driver said. “I’m going to see a live opera at last.”

Then she spread her arms wide and sang, “*Fa-la-la-laaaaaaaaaaa!*”

## Chapter Ten

The Wilsons rode Otis 2 up to the tenth floor and dressed for the opera.

Back on the ground floor, Cat sat before the sliding door and whined.

“Something’s still bothering him,” Whitney said.

“Perhaps he wants to attend the opera with us,” said Winslow.

“Sorry, old pal,” said Walter. “No dogs allowed at the Met.”

Wilson pressed the open button. *Ding!* On the way out, each Wilson patted Cat on the head.

“Get some rest now, Cat,” said Winona. “You’ve had a busy day.”

“See you later, old pal,” said Walter.

Out on 34th Street, Gus stood by his limo. He wore a blue blazer and chino pants.

“Shotgun!” the twins shouted, and they jumped into the front seat.

Emily, wearing a long red dress, sat in the back.

“What a special treat,” she said. “I haven’t been out on the town in months.”

First, Gus drove to Queens to pick up Opra and Charlie.

The bus driver wore a satin blue dress. “I feel like Cinderella going to the ball,” she said.

“She’s been belting out arias from Carmen all evening,” said Charlie.

Next, Gus drove to Brooklyn to pick up Duncan from his small walk-up apartment and Natacha who shared an apartment with three other actors.

“What a wonderful way to spend my night off,” Natacha said. “Nothing beats going

out with friends.”

When the actor sat in back with the others, Duncan’s face brightened. “Wow, you’re Natacha Siri,” he said. “I saw you in the musical *Dogs* last summer. You were awesome.”

Finally, Gus drove to Park Avenue and picked up Bob Brown and his wife, Bonnie.

“We’re all here,” said Walter. “On to the opera house, Gus.”

The Wilsons and their guests arrived at Lincoln Center well before curtain time. An usher showed them to their box, which was a small, three-sided room with a dozen chairs in it. It looked out onto an enormous stage with golden curtains.

“This box would be a perfect place for the Elevator Family to stay,” said Mr. Brown.

“I was thinking the same thing,” said Walter.

“Carmen was composed by George Bizet,” Winslow read from his program. “It premiered at the Paris Opera in 1875.”

Soon the house lights went down. The orchestra conductor appeared in the pit before the stage and the audience applauded. The golden curtain rose, and the opera began.

The first act took place in a cigar factory in Spain. The singing and dancing were thrilling. During the performance, however, Winona noticed Duncan’s attention was more on Natacha than on the stage. She caught Walter’s eye and he nodded. Had he had planned for this to happen all along?

After the first act, everyone in the box stood and cheered.

“Bravo! Bravo!” Walter shouted.

“What beautiful music,” said Opra. Tears filled her eyes. “Tomorrow it’s an all Carmen aria day on the bus.”

During intermission, Mr. Brown leaned toward Duncan. "Walter tells me you write musicals," he said.

"You're a composer?" Natacha said, beaming. "That's wonderful."

Duncan blushed. "I haven't been too successful," he said.

"Send me some of your work," Mr. Brown said. "I have an idea for a musical. If I like what you do, I'll commission you to write the music for it."

"Wow, sure," Duncan said. "What subject do you have in mind?"

"The subject everyone in New York has been talking about all day," the manager said. "The Wilson family. I want to produce the *Elevator Family Musical*."

"I can do it," said Duncan. "My mind is full of tunes and lyrics." He shot a glance at Natacha. "I just need the right inspiration."

"Only the best," said Walter. "I wonder who could sing the part of Walter."

"Natacha would make a wonderful Winona," said Winona.

Natacha cleared her throat. Then she repeated the sentence in a perfect imitation of Winona's voice.

Everyone laughed.

The Wilsons and their guests enjoyed the second act of *Carmen* as much as the first. On the way out of the opera house, they sang the famous *Toreador Song* together.

*"Toréador, en garde! Toréador! Toréador!"*

They kept singing while Gus drove around the boroughs of New York City taking everyone home.

Not until midnight did the Wilsons arrive back at the Empire State Building.

“I believe an excellent time was had by all,” Walter said, as they strolled down the marble hallway.

Winona squeezed his arm. “I think Duncan really likes Natacha,” she said. “He couldn’t keep his eyes off her.”

“Composing the Elevator Family Musical will also keep his mind off Elise,” said Winslow.

“And Opra never stopped smiling the whole evening,” said Whitney.

The family reached Otis 2.

“Won’t Cat be happy to see us,” Walter said.

“Poor dog has been alone all evening,” said Winona.

Winslow pressed the open button. The golden doors slid open, *Ding!*, and the Wilsons bent forward. They were expecting Cat to pounce out at them, wagging his bushy tail.

But Otis 2 was empty. Cat was gone.

## Chapter Eleven

The Wilsons raced into the tiny room. They searched everywhere a large dog could be, under the table and behind the bed.

“Cat! Cat!” they called down the marble hallway.

They rode Otis 2 up to the tenth floor and searched there. They rode the room up to the observation deck and searched there.

“Cat! Cat!”

“Did someone take him?” Winona asked back on the ground floor.

Winslow checked the button panel. “I don’t think so,” he said. “Cat’s paw print is on the open button.”

“Great Scott,” said Walter. “Cat must have let himself out.”

“He copied what he saw us doing,” said Winona.

“Cat’s a smart dog,” said Whitney.

Walter grabbed the smartphone and dialed 911. “Hello, New York Police Department,” he said into the phone. “This is the Wilson family in the Empire State Building. We have an emergency.” He listened and said, “No, we are not stuck in the elevator.” He listened some more. “No, no one is hurt or in danger. Our dog Cat is missing.”

He listened again, before lowering the phone.

“What did the police say?” Winona asked.

“They said a missing pet is not an emergency,” said Walter.

“But what should we do?” asked Whitney.

“The police suggested we check the animal rescue center,” said Walter. “Cat might have been picked up on the streets and taken there.”

“We must go look for him,” said Winslow.

“Perhaps Cat tried following us to the opera,” said Whitney.

Walter picked up the phone again. “Hello, please send a taxi to 20 W. 34<sup>th</sup> Street,” he said. “That’s right, the Empire State Building.”

The Wilsons found a yellow taxi cab waiting for them at the curb.

Walter climbed in the front seat, while Winona and the twins sat in the back.

The driver wore a turban and had a bushy gray mustache. “Where to?” he asked.

Walter checked the driver’s ID hanging from the rearview mirror.

“Our dog is missing, Hamid,” he said. “He might have gone to the Metropolitan Opera House.”

The driver nodded. “And what does your opera-loving dog look like?” he asked.

“He has gray fur and a long bushy tail,” said Winslow.

“And his name is Cat,” said Whitney.

“Got it,” said the driver.

As Hamid drove slowly up 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the Wilsons called out the cab windows, “Cat! Cat! Here boy! Where are you Cat?”

The driver looked in his rearview mirror. “You’re the Elevator Family, aren’t you?” he asked. “I saw you on TV.”

“That’s us,” said Walter, without taking his eyes off the sidewalk.

“I remember your dog from the show,” Hamid said. “He has a mustache like mine.”

“And handsome long eyelashes,” said Winona.

“Cat! Cat! Where are you?” the twins called out the window.

“Well, I hope you find your dog,” the driver said. “Back in India, I had a dog who ran away. I looked everywhere for him. But after a day he came home on his own. Maybe Cat will too.”

The taxi reached Lincoln Center, but there was no sign of the dog.

“Cat! Cat!” the Wilsons called down Broadway.

Still, no dog appeared.

“Take us to the animal rescue center, Hamid,” said Walter.

“There are many rescue centers in Manhattan,” said Hamid. “There are many lost dogs and cats.”

“Please drive to them all,” said Winona in the back. “We must find Cat.”

“Got it,” said the cab driver. “Next stop the Animal Care Center on One-Hundred and Tenth Street.”

When the Wilsons failed to find Cat at the Animal Care Center, Hamid took them to the Animal Haven Shelter, the Best Friends Shelter, and the Humane Society. Each shelter was full of cages holding barking, yapping, and howling dogs, eager to be taken home. But none of them held Cat.

Finally, as the first rays of sunlight appeared over Manhattan, the taxi returned to the Empire State Building. Walter paid the toll along with a large tip.

“I will tell the other taxi drivers to look out for your opera-loving dog,” the driver said.

“Thank you, Hamid,” Winona said.

“You’re an excellent driver,” said Walter. “Only the best.”

In the back seat, the twins were asleep. Tenderly, Walter lifted Winslow and Winona picked up Whitney. They carried them down the marble hall to Otis 2 and lay them on the beds.

“We’ll get some rest and continue looking for Cat in a few hours,” Walter said.

Winona nodded. “Somewhere in the Big Apple is our good dog,” she said. “And we won’t stop looking until we find him.”

## Chapter Twelve

Two hours later, the Wilsons woke to a knock on the golden door.

Winslow pushed the open button...*Ding!*...and there stood Duncan. The Wilsons exchanged looks.

“Duncan, we didn’t expect you,” said Whitney.

“We’ll run you up to the eighty-sixth floor right away,” said Winslow.

“I’m not here to wait for Elise,” Duncan said. “I’m here to help find Cat.”

“Yes, the old pooch is missing,” Walter said.

“But how did you know?” asked Winona

“The whole city of New York knows,” said Duncan. “Everyone in the city wants to help find your dog. Check the news.”

Winslow picked up the remote and turned on the TV. A news program was on, and a picture of Cat appeared on the screen.

*“The Elevator Family’s canine crisis continues,”* a newsperson reported. *“I’m standing outside the Empire State Building where the Elevator Family is staying. Anyone with information on the whereabouts of Cat, the Wilson’s scruffy dog, please call the Find Cat Hotline.”*

“Great Scott,” said Walter.

Duncan held up a copy of the New York Post newspaper.

“Look at this,” he said.

The newspaper headlines read:

## ELEVATOR FAMILY'S DOGGONE DOG GONE

"How did this happen?" Winona asked. "How did the TV station and newspaper learn about Cat's disappearance?"

"A taxi driver named Hamid told another taxi driver who told another taxi driver," Duncan said. "That taxi driver told a bus driver who told Opra. Opra told another bus driver who told another bus driver. In that way, the news of Cat spread throughout the five boroughs of New York."

"But why would so many New Yorkers want to help us?" asked Whitney.

"We're just a small family who likes staying in small places," said Winslow.

"Because the Elevator Family has done big things," said Duncan. "You've helped people everywhere you've traveled. You're an inspiration. Here in New York, you've helped many people including me. As soon as we find Cat, I'll begin composing the *Elevator Family Musical*. Not only that, but I'm meeting Natacha for dinner after her show tonight."

"Excellent, my boy," said Walter.

"How wonderful," said Winona.

"Right now, since the Elevator Family has helped many people, many people in the Big Apple want to help you," Duncan said.

"And we must join in the search," said Walter.

"I'll be manning the *Find Cat Hotline*," said Duncan, "Already they've been flooded with possible Cat sightings."

Soon the Wilsons were hurrying down the marble hallway and out the 34th Street door. A large crowd stood on the sidewalk to greet them. News reporters holding

microphones surged toward the family.

“Walter! Walter!” they called out. “Will you give us a statement about your missing dog?”

Walter stopped on the curb where Gus was waiting by the limo. He pulled on his suspenders and said, “Yes, our scruffy dog, Cat, a member of the Elevator Family, has gone missing. But thanks to the good people New York, I’m confident he will be found.”

The crowd cheered as the Wilson climbed into the limousine. Again, Whitney and Winslow rode shotgun.

“Where to, Mr. Wilson?” Gus asked.

“Everywhere, Gus,” said Walter. “Anywhere you think I dog might go.”

“I’m on my way, sir,” the chauffeur said.

As Gus drove around Manhattan, the Wilsons spotted Cat-Missing posters plastered on lampposts. People stood on street corners handing out Cat-Missing flyers. Taxi cabs had a picture of Cat on their roofs and city buses had a Cat poster on their sides.

On Broadway, the marquee above Natacha’s theater now read”

WAITING FOR CAT

“Cat! Cat! Cat!” blared from bull horns mounted on trucks.

A short time later, the first Cat sighting was announced on the limo radio.

*“Breaking news,”* said the DJ. *“Cat, the missing Elevator Family dog, was spotted by the carousel in Central Park. Witnesses gave chase, but Cat and another gray dog ran into some bushes and disappeared.”*

“In Central Park by the carousel?” said Winona. “That’s where Cat started whining

when we passed it yesterday.”

“Curious,” said Winslow. “Seems like Cat is trying not to be found.”

“And he’s with another dog,” asked Whitney.

“Gus, please take us to Central Park as once,” said Walter.

When the limo arrived at the carousel, the Wilsons found scores of New Yorkers searching for Cat. They walked along the paths and roamed across the fields calling his name. Policemen with sniffing bloodhounds moved about the bushes. A search helicopter circled overhead.

Gus parked the limo by a police trailer that said CAT SEARCH COMMAND CENTER on its side. Nearby the carousel circled around and around while a merry tune played on its pipe organ.

Inside the trailer, the Wilsons found a team of police officers sitting in front of computer screens. A big-bellied police officer spotted them and stood.

“I’m Sergeant Monday of the NY Police Department,” he said. “Rest assured, Wilsons, our police force is searching every square inch of Central Park for your dog.”

“Excellent,” said Walter.

“The news report said Cat was spotted with another dog,” said Winona.

The police sergeant pointed to an elderly couple sitting on a park bench. “The owners of the second dog are over there.”

The Wilsons walked up to the couple. The man had his arm around the woman. The woman appeared to be crying.

“Good afternoon,” said Walter. “We are the Wilsons. I’m Walter, and this is Winona,

Whitney, and Winslow.”

The man nodded. “The Elevator Family,” he said. “You must be as upset as we are by the loss of your dog. I’m Drake Hand and this is my wife Amelia.”

“Our dog, Duchess, was like a daughter to us,” said the woman.

“We heard Cat and Duchess were spotted together,” said Winona.

Amelia dabbed a tear with a tissue. “We were sitting on this very bench when your dog came running down the pathway,” she said.

“The moment Duchess spotted Cat, she broke off her leach, and they ran off together,” said Drake.

“It was heart-breaking,” said Amelia. “Duchess was like a daughter to us.”

“And Duchess was gray and scruffy?” asked Whitney.

“The two dogs were like twins,” said the man. “The same color and the same size.”

Walter stroked his chin. “Curious,” he said. “Mr. And Mrs. Hand, are you by chance from Missouri or Illinois close to the Mississippi River?”

“We are,” the man said. “Born and bred in Missouri, right on the banks of the Mississippi.”

“So, Duchess is from Missouri, too?” Winona asked.

“That’s right,” said Amelia. “We adopted her from the St. Louis Animal Shelter three years ago when she was just a puppy.”

“Great Scott,” said Walter. “That’s the reason Cat and Duchess wanted to be together.”

“Duchess is Cat’s sister,” said Winona.

“You mean the two dogs are from the same litter?” the man asked.

“I believe so,” said Walter.

“I remember,” Amelia said. “At the shelter, there were six puppies that all looked the same.”

“And Cat’s found one of his sisters right here in the Big Apple,” said Winslow.

“But where could the two dogs be?” asked Amelia.

“The entire city is looking for our dogs,” said Drake.

“Cat is smart,” Walter said. “I believe he’ll let us find him and his sister when he wants us to found them.”

The woman’s eyes brightened. “Do you think so?” she said. “Oh, wouldn’t that be wonderful. Duchess was like a daughter to us.”

By the time Gus drove the Wilsons back to the Empire State Building it was dark. Despite all the efforts by the people of New York, Cat and Duchess were still missing.

Without a word, the Wilsons shuffled down the marble hall. At the end, Winslow pressed Otis 2’s open button. When the golden door split open, however, the family saw the happiest sight. There on the Persian carpet sat Cat, wagging his brush of a tail.

“Cat!” they shouted as one.

“*Ruff! Ruff!*” went the dog.

“Cat!” the four repeated.

“*Ruff! Ruff!*”

The family dropped to their knees. Together they hugged and stroked the dog as he squirmed in their arms.

“Where have you been, old boy?” said Walter.

“We searched the entire city for you,” said Winona.

“Wherever you went, Cat, you must have let yourself back into Otis 2,” said Winslow.

“And your back with your family where you belong,” said Whitney.

## Chapter Fourteen

In the morning, Z delivered breakfast to Otis 2 along with the New York Post. The headlines read:

CAT CAME BACK!

“I heard the good news,” the waiter said. “Your dog is the most famous pet in New York City.”

While the Wilsons ate, Winslow read his NYC guidebook. “It’s our last day in the Big Apple,” he said. “There’s so much left to see and do.”

“I’d like to take a boat ride around Manhattan,” said Winona.

“And we still haven’t shopped for souvenirs,” said Whitney.

“This afternoon we must return to Central Park,” said Walter. “We’ll give Cat a chance to say good-bye to his sister.”

With Cat pulling on his leash, the Wilsons walked out to 34th Street. More fans than ever stood on the sidewalk to greet them. When they spotted the dog, everyone cheered. A choir of schoolchildren sang,

*“Cat came back the very next day.*

*Cat came back. We thought he was a goner.*

*Cat came back. He just wouldn’t stay,*

*Away, away away away.”*

The Wilsons hiked to the nearest subway station. To meet more people, instead of having Gus drive them around, today they would take the subway from sight to sight. While

waiting on the subway platform, they listened to a man play the saxophone.

“Excellent playing,” said Walter. He put a few bills in the man’s hat. “Only the best.”

When the subway arrived, the family squeezed into a crowded car. They stood bunched together, holding onto straps hanging from above. Many people in the car wore earbuds, listening to whatever. Others fiddled with smartphones. Most people stared into space.

“How I love these compact subway cars,” Walter said.

“All the friendly people,” said Winona.

“This car is like our tiny house on tracks,” said Winslow.

“And we get to see and hear something new at each stop,” said Whitney.

The subway took the Wilsons to a dock where they boarded the Circle Manhattan Cruise. For the next two hours, they watched the shores of Manhattan flow by. Up the Hudson River they went, around to the Harlem River, across to the East River, down to New York Harbor, and back to the dock where they began. During the trip, Whitney took videos on the smartphone, Walter chatted with other tourists, Winona sketched in her notepad,, Winslow read aloud from his guidebook about the sights they passed, and Cat barked at seagulls.

Afterward, the Wilsons rode the subway to Times Square. There they found a large souvenir shop. By the time they left, the twins were wearing I ❤️ NY T-shirts, Walter wore a NY Knicks jersey, and Winona wore a NY Mets sweatshirt. They all wore NY Yankees baseball caps.

“We’re fans of the entire Big Apple,” Walter said.

For lunch, the Wilsons went to Sal's Deli. Sal himself came out of the kitchen to greet them.

"Welcome Elevator Family," he said. "Today, in your honor, we're serving the Elevator Family Special. It's a narrow, foot-tall, sandwich piled high with every type of cheese, meat, and condiment we have. It's been the most popular item on our menu."

"Four Elevator Family Specials please," said Walter. "And perhaps some lox for Cat."

*"Ruff! Ruff!"* went the dog.

After lunch, the Wilsons took the subway to Central Park. Cat on his leash pulled the family past the zoo, the skating rink, and across a field to the carousel. Drake and Amelia Hand were sitting on a bench waiting for them. A gray scruffy dog sat nearby.

*"Ruff! Ruff!"* went the other dog.

*"Ruff! Ruff!"* went Cat in the same manner.

"Greetings, friends," Walter called to the couple.

Winona petted the second dog. "This must be Duchess," she said.

"It's so good to have her back," said Amelia. "Duchess is like a daughter to us."

"With dogs from the same family," said Drake. "I feel we're almost related to your family as well."

While the Wilsons and Hands talked, Cat stood nose to nose with Duchess.

"Duchess was sitting outside our hotel room door when we returned last evening," Amelia said.

"How she got into the hotel and up to the fifth floor is anyone's guess," said Drake.

"Those dogs are two of a kind," said Walter.

*"Ruff! Ruff!"* went Cat.

*"Ruff! Ruff!"* went Duchess.

The Hands watched the two dogs play in a grassy pet area, while the Wilsons walked over to the carousel. The old-fashioned merry-go-around stood in a brick building with open sides. Walter and Winona mounted glossy white horses. Winslow chose a black horse and Whitney a red one. The pipe organ played a bouncy tune, and around and around the Wilsons went.

*"Wheeeeeeeeeee!"* went Whitney.

*"Giddy-up horse,"* said Winona. *"Isn't this fun?"*

*"It has its ups and downs,"* said Winslow.

*"Wouldn't the small room in the center of the carousel be a fun place to stay?"* said Walter.

When the ride ended, it was time for the Wilsons to return to Otis 2 for the final night in the Big Apple. They exchanged addresses and phone numbers with the Hands.

*"Visitors are always welcomed at our tiny house,"* said Walter.

*"The more the merrier,"* said Winona.

*"And you must bring Duchess to California,"* said Winslow.

*"Until then, Cat and Duchess can see each other on FaceTime,"* said Whitney.

The Wilsons walked to 5th Avenue to catch a bus. They let several buses pass before the one with Opra driving arrived.

A high-pitched *"Fa-laaaaaa"* floated down the bus steps when Opra opened the door.

“Greetings, Wilsons,” she said. “I can’t get the opera Carmen out of my head. From now on, Charlie and I will be going to the Metropolitan Opera House often.”

“We want to thank you for helping us find Cat, Opra,” said Winona.

“We heard you helped spread the word around New York that he was missing,” said Walter

“I’m glad Cat came back,” said the bus driver. “Please have a seat. I’ll sing for you some of my favorite arias from last night.”

Then all the way down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Opra, the opera singing bus driver, sang pieces from the first live opera she ever saw.

*“La, la, la, la, la, la, laaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.”*

When the Wilsons and Cat got off the bus at 34<sup>th</sup> Street, a surprise greeted them. The sun had set, and the lights of the city shone brightly. Most nights, white floodlights lit up the top of the Empire State Building. This night, however, the lights were every color of the rainbow—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. In addition, on the front of the one-hundred and two-story building, giant words were projected for everyone in the Big Apple to see. They read:

**GOOD-BYE, ELEVATOR FAMILY  
HOME SWEAT HOME  
ONLY THE BEST**