

Second-Chance CATS

True Stories *of the* Cats
We Rescue *and the*
Cats Who Rescue Us



Edited by Callie Smith Grant

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The Wrong Kittens

Susan C. Willett

Name?"

Pen in hand, I tried to focus on the form in front of me as tears clouded my vision.

"She doesn't have one yet." I looked through the bars of the travel crate at the tiny ball of black-and-white fur buried deep within a blanket. "I've had her less than a day."

"We need a name." The woman behind the counter pointed to the empty spot on the paper. "For our records. You can't leave that blank."

Claire, I wrote. And then in parentheses: *Not Final*.

"Please have a seat in the waiting room. The vet is with someone else and will see you as soon as she can."

It was the Saturday of Labor Day weekend, and we were the only souls in the emergency veterinary clinic waiting room. I sat

down on a plastic chair of institutional green and lifted my unnamed kitten out of the crate. She felt like a bird, all thin ribs and no weight, as I settled her and the blanket into a nest in my lap. I could feel her tiny purrs.

It was only a few weeks ago that I was at our regular vet's office with Jasper, my hound/lab/whatever mix, who had a recurring problem that required yet another round of surgery. While we were waiting to be seen, we stopped to look at a half dozen kittens sprawled around a cat cage.

Kittens are a great distraction when you don't want to think about your dog's surgery—or the fact that your youngest child was leaving for college in less than two weeks. As we stared into the cage, canine and human minds elsewhere, a splotchy black-and-white kitten jumped up onto a shelf and rolled over onto his back. He stuck his paw through the bars of the cage, little jelly bean pads turned upward, as if asking me to rub his belly.

I reached through the bars with my finger and complied, and then scratched the black patch under his chin. The kitten purred, looked me straight in the eyes, and defied me to explain why I couldn't bring him home.

"I already have three dogs and two kitties." Jasper nosed me in agreement. "That's enough, really." The kitten held my gaze. My elder daughter Corinne's voice echoed in my ears as I remembered her threat to call an intervention if I adopted any more pets. "I'm sorry, Kitten. I just can't."

Over the next two weeks, as Jasper recovered and my youngest daughter Melanie packed for school, I kept thinking about that kitten. I called the vet, and they told me that he and his sister had been waiting quite a while to be adopted—longer than usual. I dragged my husband to meet them and seriously began considering adopting both. Because by then I had realized that adopting two was actually better for all involved. The kittens could amuse

each other when I wasn't home . . . and hopefully wouldn't annoy the older cats quite as much.

I hadn't planned on any more pets, telling everyone I was full. But somehow I had gone from No More Pets to Just Two More.

My adoption application was accepted.

On the Friday afternoon of the long Labor Day weekend, I left work early to pick up my new family members. One of the techs brought out the little girl cat first. She was smaller than I remembered, but I thought it was because I had two big cats at home. Then another tech brought out the boy cat.

Something didn't look right. "Wait a minute. Wasn't there black fur on his chin?"

"Oh no! You were looking for the other kittens? One of the vets adopted them; she felt bad that they were waiting so long for homes. This is a different pair. They're still brother and sister."

These were the wrong kittens. They were not the ones I had come for, the boy cat who had chosen me, the only reason I was adopting them to begin with.

"I am so sorry." The tech held the male kitten under her chin protectively. He stared at me dolefully.

At home, a safe room had been set up to welcome two kittens. I had bought new beds and scratchers and toys for them. My husband and I had no plans for the long weekend so I could acclimate the babies to their new environment.

"Do you want to spend some time with these guys instead? No pressure, really. You don't have to adopt them. But since you're here already . . ."

I spent the next half hour on the floor of an empty exam room with two completely different kittens. The boy cat had a black mask and nearly all-black back with a white belly and paws. The tiny female had a triangular shape of white over her left eye, and large splotches of black throughout her body that made her look

like a Holstein cow. I watched them explore, chase each other, knock into a trash basket, sneak up and pounce on cat toys.

My husband wasn't answering his phone. An empty weekend loomed in front of me. I had to make this decision on my own.

The door opened and I stood up as the tech walked in. "We're getting ready to close for the weekend. Did you decide what you wanted to do?"

I looked down as the masked one—the male—rubbed figure eights around my ankles. I took a deep breath and simply opened myself to possibilities.

Maybe . . . maybe this was how it was *supposed* to play out. Maybe the wrong kittens were really the right kittens. Maybe the original kitten was no more than a player in whatever story needed to unfold.

I took them home.

On the drive, I began to think about what to name them. I had picked out names for the original pair of kitties: the male was going to be Max, as he reminded me of the troublemaker in the children's picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*. And the female seemed like a Chessie, named after the cat logo for the shipping company Chessie Systems. Those names belonged to the other felines as far as I was concerned, and I had to start all over. I needed the right names for the wrong kittens.

That night, I settled my new babies into a gated kitten-outfitted bathroom—their safe place to learn the smells and sights and sounds of our multispecies home, and for my current menagerie to get to know them. Sitting on the floor, I let the two kittens explore the small space and climb all over me.

I called Corinne that night, imagining her hanging out with her boyfriend Luke in her shoebox-sized dorm room as I sat in the bathroom with the kittens. After convincing her not to hold an intervention—it wasn't that difficult, as we're all animal lovers—we

discussed potential names. I told her I was thinking of calling the female something birdlike, since she felt so light and delicate when I held her. I ran through a list of black-and-white birds. Maybe Magpie? Or Adélie, like the penguin. But the cat didn't look chubby like a penguin and that name just didn't fit. That's when Luke said, "You should name her Claire."

Ah yes, the character Claire from the TV show *Lost*. In one of the early episodes of the series, when strange animals like polar bears began appearing out of nowhere on the island, I was convinced that there was a penguin in the rustling bushes of the jungle; I can't remember why I was so sure. Anyway, I was wrong; out of the bushes came a character named Claire. My family thought it was hilarious—and it became a standing joke in our house whenever we didn't know something: "Maybe it's a penguin, Mom."

The logic from Luke was that the kitten was not a penguin, so she should be Claire.

I told them I'd think about it. I wasn't sure I wanted my kitten's name to memorialize a moment in which I was the butt of a joke.

But the next morning I had other issues to deal with; I woke up to find nasty messes all over the bathroom floor, and it didn't take long to realize that the little girl kitty was sick.

Not eating. Diarrhea. Hunched over. Lethargic.

I was relatively new to living with cats; my first two had been with us for just two years, and I never had kittens this young. But I knew that it's dangerous for cats—especially young kittens—to not eat. It was a holiday weekend, my vet's office was closed, and I couldn't reach the adoption group.

This is how I found myself in the emergency clinic with my tiny nameless kitten.

For more than an hour and a half I sat with not-really Claire on my lap. She barely moved. Her eyes were squinted shut. My heart tightened in my chest.

This? This was what I was supposed to do? To get my heart broken so fast with a critically ill kitten? I tried not to let my tears land on her. *Please*, I kept thinking. *Please*.

I watched her breathe, listened to her purr. *Don't let her die. I don't even know her yet. Please.*

The vet agreed that she was seriously ill. She was dehydrated and needed IV fluids at the very least. My tiny little not-a-penguin kitten was admitted to the hospital, and I left with an empty crate.

When I got home, I was finally able to reach the tech who set up the adoption. She suggested that I bring both kittens back to the clinic—once the girl kitten was stable enough to travel—and there they would nurse the little one back to health. She thought having her brother to keep her company would help her recover.

After discussing the plan with the veterinarian at the emergency vet, I tucked my healthy still-unnamed little masked kitten into the crate, collected my ill baby, and brought them both to the clinic.

Over the next several days, they tended to my sick kitten and brought her back to health. She had lost so much weight during her illness, it was touch and go for a while. But because I had moved quickly, and she got the care she needed—and because she was a fighter—she survived.

After four days, she was well enough to come home.

On the way to the vet to pick them up, I was inspired. The male cat had a mask that reminded me of Calvin, from the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*. Calvin would dress up as a character he called Stupendous Man, with a mask and cape. Our boy kitten had black along his back, which could easily serve as a cape. He was an amusing little superhero—with superpowers that helped heal his sister. He was Calvin.

I had become increasingly unhappy with Claire as a name for our thin girl. It felt unlucky. It seemed like it was the name of the sick kitten as opposed to the now healthier and quite energetic ball

of fluff I saw when I picked up my two babies at the vet's office. She stalked a cotton ball and then pounced on it like a miniature lion. Maybe I could call her Elsa, like the lioness from one of my favorite books as a young girl, *Born Free*. Elsa was raised by humans after being orphaned when she was just weeks old; she survived to become the first lion raised by people and successfully released to the wild. She was a strong, loving character. But it still didn't seem quite right.

When I had first considered Claire, I had looked the name up online. Claire—or more specifically *clair*—means “light” in French. I couldn't quite drop the name Claire because the kitten lived through her illness under that name. But what if I took off the “e” in Claire so it wasn't exactly her hospital name, but more about the idea of light?

As I was checking out at the vet's office, the woman behind the counter looked up at me. “Did you decide on names for them?”

I smiled. “The boy is Calvin. And the little girl is Elsa Clair.”

Today, Calvin (who is known on Instagram as Calvin Tiberius Katz, the Most Interesting Cat in the World) is my constant buddy, a sidekick who likes to ride on my shoulder and bring me toys as gifts. Elsa Clair is my muse—or should I say “mews”—who sleeps in a cat bed on my desk, every now and again awakening to take a short stroll to my lap to exchange pets for purrs. I also have a window perch just above my work area, where Elsa Clair lounges on a sunny day, her tail slowly swishing back and forth, providing a centering and calming focus for me when I need inspiration.

The wrong kittens turned out to be the right kittens after all.