

CATWALK

A Feline Odyssey

by

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Chapter 1

The Newlyweds

Heaven knows, I never intended to be the rambling kind at all. I would have been perfectly content to live out my entire life in one place, with a single family to love and care for me, instead of wandering about the country like some feline vagabond, depending on my wits and the kindness of strangers.

Certainly nothing in my early history indicated that my case would be exceptional. The circumstances surrounding my birth were sadly typical; indiscriminate mother, anonymous father, just one of five unwanted kittens in an unwished-for litter, doomed from the start to be the unfortunate subject of one of those universal classified ads; "Adorable kittens, free to good home", that sort of thing. Of course, female kittens aren't easy to find homes for, even for free, so my sister and I eventually wound up in the local pet store, but there too, we were pretty much overlooked for a long time.

Then one day a pretty girl about five or six years old skipped into the store. Dark brown curls bounced below a blue knitted cap, and the matching blue sweater hung carelessly off her shoulders. She marched straight over to our cage and poked her fingers through the wire mesh, trying to touch my sister's tail. Sister swatted at her fingers with one tiny forepaw and the girl laughed. Her parents hurried over to see what mischief their daughter was getting into. Frowning at us, the mother took her hand.

"Come on, sweetie, let's go," she urged. "We still have lots of shopping to do." When the child failed to respond, her mother attempted to lead her away, but the result was instant rebellion.

"I want a kitty!" she wailed, clinging to the wire with her free hand. Her parents glanced at each other nervously.

"You don't need a kitty, sweetheart," her mother coaxed.

"You already have a parakeet and three goldfish. Come on, now, we have to

get you some new shoes."

"I don't want new shoes!" howled the defiant child. "I want a kitty!" Her father tried to pry her fingers loose from the wire, but she hung on ever tighter and shrieked at the top of her lungs. "I want a kitty! I want a kitty!" The parents began to get desperate.

"Darling, that's a girl kitty. Now we don't really want a girl kitty, do we?" her mother pleaded. "Now please be a good girl and we'll go to another pet store and find you a nice boy kitty, okay?"

"I don't want a boy kitty! I want THAT kitty!" Her parents looked at one another in despair, each hoping the other had an idea. Neither did. Resigned, they called the manager, who'd been standing nearby pretending not to notice the disturbance. He opened the cage door and put my sister in a small box with holes in it. Then he added a bag of cat food to the sack containing the bird seed and fish food the parents had already bought. That accomplished, the family exited the shop, the victorious brat skipping along proudly carrying her latest trophy, with her miserable parents following along behind, totally defeated.

The next day was a long and lonely one for me. So was the next day and the next. The manager gave me a rubber ball with a bell in side to play with, but it wasn't nearly as much fun as wrestling with my sister. Nobody paid much attention to me anymore, and it began to look as if I would be there for a long, long time.

A week or so later an attractive young couple wandered into the shop. Sound asleep when they first came in, I woke up when the puppies in the next cage started yipping. The young lovers strolled about the store, their arms wrapped around each other, looking at all the different animals in their cages. When they finally arrived at my station I was just stretching out my muscles from my nap.

"Oh, Sam," the woman cooed, "Isn't he adorable? Just like a little gray tiger."

"He's a she," corrected Sam, checking the sign, "and yes, she's adorable." Feeling playful after my nap, I chased my tail around a few times and batted my ball across the cage. It buried itself under the shredded papers and I dove in after it, emerging nicely decorated with a sprinkling of confetti. The young woman bounced up and down and giggled.

"That's what I want," she sighed, "that darling little kitten."

"Are you sure that's a good idea, getting a female, I mean?" Her companion

looked rather doubtful. "What happens when she grows up and starts having kittens of her own?"

"That's not going to happen," she insisted. "I'll keep her inside. She won't be any trouble at all, you'll see." She snuggled closer to her husband and hooked her thumbs into his belt. "Please, please, please? It's my birthday, and that's what I really, really want, please?"

Sam laughed and kissed her forehead. "Okay Beth, if you're sure that's what you really, really want."

Together they picked out some cat food, a red rubber ball, and a blue catnip mouse, while the manager folded out another box with holes. I was on my way to a new home.

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"Have you decided what you're gonna name your little mischief-maker?" Sam was stretched out on the couch with his head nestled in Beth's lap. She had her legs tucked up under her, and was twisting a lock of his jet-black hair around her fingers while I was engaged in a thorough exploration of her empty book bag on the coffee table. She giggled at his description of me.

"Mischief-maker, huh? I'll show you who's a mischief-maker!" She rumbled his hair and pulled a big handful of it down over his eyes. He reached up and pulled her head down for a kiss.

"You didn't answer my question. What am I supposed to call the little monster? 'Hey you'? Or how about 'Yo, cat'?"

"Of course not, silly." Beth tilted her head to one side so that her long, blonde hair brushed his face. "How about *Panthera Tigris*? That's the scientific name for tiger."

Sam laughed. "So why not just call her Tiger?"

"No, Tiger's too common. I'm going to call her 'Thera'." "Thera." Sam shook his head. "No good, no good at all. Sounds like a name for a planet, maybe, or a new kind of vitamin. I like 'Tiger' better."

"You're terrible!" Beth jumped up from the couch, dumping poor Sam onto the floor. "Just for that you can scrub your own back tonight." She flounced into the kitchen and started banging around with the pots and pans. Sam sighed.

"Come here, Tiger." He reached into the book bag and tickled my belly. I nipped his fingers and he chuckled. "You really are a tiger, aren't you?" He rolled my new ball off the table and across the room. I charged after it as it bounced off the bookcase and into the hall. I batted it back into the living room, and Sam and I took turns knocking it around until Beth called him to dinner.

The next few days were rather confusing, with Beth calling me "Thera", and Sam calling me "Tiger", but before too long Beth gave up and started calling me "Tiger" as well. After that it was easier.

My new home was small and cozy, with hardwood floors instead of carpeting, and a few small rugs scattered about. That was okay with me, because wood floors are great for running and skidding, and the rugs were neat to crawl under or roll up in. I did wish, though, that my sister could have come with me to this new place. It would have been so much more fun to have someone my own size to chase and wrestle with.

The young newlyweds were a study in contrasts. Sam was tall and dark-haired, quiet and muscular. His wardrobe consisted of blue jeans, denim work shirts and sturdy high-top boots, and his transportation was a beat-up old pickup truck. Beth was short, blonde, and blue-eyed, a bundle of dimples and giggles. She rode a little motor scooter to her classes at the local college, and she seemed always to have a book in her lap.

Some evenings after dinner the two of them played music and danced and cuddled 'til all hours of the night. Other times they played games like Monopoly and Scrabble on the floor in the living room. I enjoyed the games, too, but I made up my own rules. My strategy was direct and simple. I just charged into the middle of whatever game they were playing and scattered the cards or game pieces to the four winds. Since they never could figure out how to put everything back where it had been, I won by default.

Early one Sunday morning Sam was standing in front of the closet with several neckties in his hand, trying to decide which one to wear with his one and only suit. I jumped up, snagged a pretty blue one and hauled it into the bathroom.

"Hey, come back here!" he hollered. He chased after me and cornered me behind the toilet. "Give that here, you little beast. Beth'd skin you alive if she saw you with that! That was my birthday present last year." He pulled another one out of the bunch and dragged it across my back. "Here, you can have this one. Come on, trade, okay?" He eased the blue one out of my claws and wound it around his hand. "You're going to get me in big trouble, girl."

The new tie soon became my favorite toy. I'd trail it around the apartment with Sam chasing me, then he'd snatch it away and drag it into another room with me galloping along behind, trying to get it back. It was a great game.

Months passed. The days got shorter and the nights a lot cooler. The leaves on the tree out by the street turned brown and fell to the ground. The sky turned gray and cloudy, and a sharp, cold wind blew the dead leaves into the gutter and down the street. At night I had to crawl under the blankets to keep warm. Down at the bottom near Beth's feet seemed to be the best place. Her feet were nice and warm, and she didn't kick around all the time like Sam did. No matter how cold the weather, though, the little apartment always overflowed with warmth and love.

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One chilly evening the young couple went out shopping after dinner, and returned with, of all things, a tree! I thought they had lost their minds. They'd had plants in the house before, it's true, but those were just small potted plants that sat on the coffee table or dangled in macrame hangers in the windows. This tree was almost as tall as Sam himself, and it had no pot nor soil at all, just a little stand cobbled together from two pieces of wood.

"Okay, where do you want it?" Sam's voice came from somewhere behind the quaking green boughs.

"Over there, in the corner," Beth pointed, as though her husband could actually see her. "Wait a minute. Let me move the small bookcase." Sam dropped the tree with a thud.

"Holy smokes, that thing is heavy!" He flopped on the couch and propped his feet on the coffee table. Beth scowled and he quickly put them on the floor. "Do you know where the decorations are?"

"Of course I do. You just get that wooden thing off and get it in the stand." Beth brought out a box filled with all manner of bright, shiny objects, and the two of them began hanging them on the tree. It looked like great fun, so I decided to pitch in and help out. I could only reach the bottom branches, but I managed to knock three of the balls onto the floor before they ran me off.

Peeking into the box, I spotted a long, glittery tinsel rope, kind of like a silvery snake. I hauled it out and headed for the kitchen, trailing it behind me, but Sam cut me off at the door. He pried the "snake" from my mouth and carried it back into the living room. He started winding it around the

tree, and immediately I pounced on the other end. That's when Beth put me in the bedroom and closed the door!

When they finally let me out again the transformation was astounding! Red and gold and silver ornaments dangled from every branch, and a parade of colored lights blinked on and off. The exotic smell filled the apartment and excited my curiosity, but when I chewed one of the branches it tasted awful and made me sick. I swatted at one of the red balls, but much to my disappointment it didn't come off this time. It was tied on with a piece of yarn instead of a hook.

From that day on it seemed like there was always something going on in our little home. The evenings were filled with visitors, and the talking and singing and eating lasted until late at night. Every day the cards piled up a little higher on the table in the corner, and fancy wrapped boxes nearly overwhelmed the hall closet.

The whole apartment fairly floated with all the delicious smells coming from the tiny kitchen, as the happy pair baked cookies and cakes and cinnamon-scented loaves, all of which they wrapped in foil and blue ribbons. Some they gave to the many friends who came to visit, and some they took away in Sam's truck. Everyone seemed unusually good-natured and excited, as if any day now something wonderful was going to happen.

Finally the big day came. Sam and Beth brought out all the packages from their hiding place in the closet, and a spectacular pile they made. Big ones and small ones, square ones and round. Beth opened the smallest one first.

"Here you go, critter." She threw me a brand new catnip mouse. Then she and Sam proceeded to unwrap all the other packages under the tree. Soon the floor of the living room was littered with paper and ribbons and empty boxes. What an opportunity! I jumped into a pile of red paper, and it made a wonderful rustling sound. I slithered under a big sheet of blue paper and carried it across the room with me. I raced back and forth again and again, jumping and rolling and tearing. Sam and Beth were both laughing at me, but I didn't care. I hopped into one of the big boxes and burrowed under the wads of tissue inside. Then I jumped out and back in again. I hadn't had this much fun in months!

Next I tried a smaller box, but I couldn't get all the way inside that one. My front half fitted in, but my hindquarters still hung out, so I pushed it until I ran into a wall. At least I guess it was a wall. I tried to back out, only to discover that my front half was firmly wedged inside. I kept backing up, turning this way and that, but still I was a prisoner. Finally I bumped into the coffee table and the box came off. Sam and Beth were lying on the floor

now, laughing until the tears came.

I plowed through the pile again, seized a long piece of red ribbon, and took off into the kitchen. Sam chased after me, but I was too quick for him this time. I doubled back between his feet and zoomed down the hall into the bedroom. Under the bed I dove, the one place I knew he couldn't follow. He reached in as far as he could, but I scooted out the other side and dashed back down the hall to where Beth waited, propped up against the couch. She was laughing so hard I was afraid she would hurt herself. I draped the ribbon across her lap and rolled against her leg.

"Silly Tiger," she giggled. "Silly, silly girl." She tied the ribbon into a huge, floppy bow around my belly, and I tumbled and rolled, trying to dislodge it.

"All right, that's enough," Sam laughed. "Don't tease her too much." He untied the ribbon and rolled it around his hand. Then he began to pick up all the torn paper and ribbons. He gathered up all the empty boxes and bags and stomped them into one big box and put it out for the trash man. I was really sorry to see it go. It was the perfect pussycat playground.

We had a long, miserable, rainy winter that year. For three full months it seemed as if the sun had completely abandoned us. Eventually, though, the storms subsided and the sun came out. Blessed, glorious sunshine! The poor, bare tree out by the street suddenly burst into a cloud of pink blossoms, and a hundred butterflies appeared and fluttered from flower to flower. The days were warm, the sun shone most of the time, and even when it did rain, it was a soft, gentle rain that made the flowers grow instead of beating them down into the mud.

Every morning, even before daylight, a mockingbird outside our bedroom window woke us all with his good-morning song, his way of telling every other bird in the neighborhood that this was HIS territory, and they'd jolly well better stay away. He and his mate were building a nest in the tree outside, and a family of squirrels kept popping in and out of a hole in the trunk. The whole world seemed to be fairly bursting with new life.

About this time I was beginning to get some spring feelings of my own. I didn't know what it was, exactly, just an odd sort of restlessness inside me that made me want to get out and roam. The big black tomcat from up the street seemed to sense it, too, and every night he showed up to serenade me through the window. I wanted very much to go out and join him, but I couldn't open the door by myself, and Beth and Sam simply refused to let me out. No matter how much I begged and pleaded, they always said "no".

Once I got really upset and bit Beth on the ankle, not very hard, but she got mad and swatted me away. I didn't really want to hurt her, I was just so

frustrated I didn't know what else to do. After a time the strange feelings went away and I felt like my old self again. It was quite a while before Beth would cuddle me again, though.

Something else was changing, too, something between Sam and Beth. They smiled at each other a lot more, an "I've-got-a-secret" kind of a smile, and it seemed as if they never stopped hugging each other. Soon Beth started to get a little bit round around the middle. She wasn't getting fat, exactly, but each time I went to get on her lap, there just wasn't as much lap as there used to be. This was odd because Beth had always been kind of a health nut, and she still did just as many exercises as she always had, maybe even more, but it didn't seem to make any difference. She just kept getting rounder and rounder.

Soon it was summer, and the hot weather kicked in for real. The apartment got dreadfully stuffy during the daytime, so they always left the bathroom window open so I could lie on the windowsill and get some fresh air. At night they opened all the windows and set a fan on the floor to draw the cool air inside. Now, instead of sleeping on the bed with them, I sacked out on the floor next to the window. It was cooler down there.

Sam and Beth had been making some pretty substantial changes in the room across the hall from where they slept. It had been Beth's sewing room and library, but now they put up new curtains and silly wallpaper with rabbits and rainbows all over it. They brought in new furniture, too, a rocking chair and a small dresser, and a little bed with railings all around. I naturally assumed it was for me, but every time I jumped into it they tossed me back onto the floor. There were toys, too, a huge box full of them. Dolls, stuffed animals, and big plastic blocks in bright colors. When they had finished they closed the door up tight.

Beth had stopped going to classes, but she still read a lot, and when she wasn't reading she was sewing. I liked having her home all the time, but she never seemed to have time to play with me like she used to. If I brought my catnip mouse and laid it in her lap, it was always "Not now, Tiger" or "Can't you see I'm busy now?" Well, when was she ever NOT busy anymore? I tried playing by myself, but it just wasn't the same.

Then one day something happened that changed all of our lives forever. It didn't seem all that important at the time, but I can see now that that was when the trouble all started.

I was kicked off the bed rather rudely that morning by Beth, who was obviously very excited about something.

"Wake up, Honey." She shook her husband's shoulder violently. "Come on,

wake up. It's time."

"What time is it?" He rolled over and looked at the clock. "It's only two fifteen. I don't have to be up 'til six. Go back to sleep." He rolled over and pulled the covers up over his head. Beth shook him again.

"Sam, wake up! We have to go to the hospital. Come on!"

"The hospital? Now?" Sam was suddenly wide awake. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! Come on, get dressed." She threw some clothes onto the bed and pulled a small suitcase out of the closet. Sam was rushing around looking for his shoes, and Beth kept saying "Hurry up!" It was all I could do to keep from being trampled to death. I finally decided that under the bed was the only safe place for me. They made a couple of phone calls and took off without even having breakfast. Luckily I still had some dry food in my bowl from the day before, so at least I didn't have to go hungry!

Sam came home late that afternoon, much more tired than usual. He opened a can of cat food for me and went in and flopped on the bed. He didn't even bother to eat or shower. I expected Beth to come home any minute and start their dinner, but it was well past six o'clock and she still hadn't shown up.

Sam woke some time after dark and fixed himself a cheese sandwich and a glass of milk and carried them into the living room. I put my paw on his knee and meowed and he took me on his lap and gave me a bite of cheese. Then he scratched my neck and between my shoulder blades and all down my back. I hadn't had that much attention in a long time, and I really soaked it up! Beth still wasn't home when bedtime came, so I curled up on the pillow beside him to keep him company. The apartment seemed so cold and empty without her there.

Morning came, and still no Beth. Sam fixed breakfast for both of us, and went out for a while. He came back a couple of hours later, happier than I'd ever seen him. How could he be so cheerful when our beloved Beth was missing? I was really worried. She'd never been gone like this before.

Sam and I spent a lot of time together in the next couple of days. I'm sure he must have missed Beth just as much as I did, but he didn't seem at all worried about her. Then one afternoon he brought her home again, and I assumed everything would get back to normal. I was wrong. Nothing would ever be the same again.

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