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Cat-Nappers

There was only soft mewing echoing off the metal walls of the warehouse. It was, after all, very late at night and most of the cats had tired themselves out from yowling as loud as they could for much of the day. No one had heard them. It had been planned that way. The warehouse was chosen because it was surrounded by empty buildings, facing the ever-present rush and gurgle of the Mississippi River that was, itself, a sound that prevented silence from descending on the deserted waterfront.

But, as the warehouse doors clanged loudly and rolled up, the cats snapped alert and like a chorus of untamed voices sung out in wails and screeches that made the walls vibrate in sympathy. The white van backed into the dark space, two men jumped out, pulled down the overhead door and snapped on the bare light bulbs that hung from the ceiling. They went to work quickly grabbing cage after cage, some holding two cats or kittens, others keeping four or five captives inside. They stacked the cages carefully in the back of the van. Not because they were concerned about the frantic felines, but because they wanted to load as many cages in the cargo space as humanly possible.

There was a skinny, tall guy who moved fast, and a shorter man who took his time – letting his partner unknowingly do most of the work. After the van was near to full – only a tiny space and a cage slightly too big to fit was left over – they slammed the doors shut, muffling the terrible cries locked inside.

“What do I do with this one?” the skinny one asked, pointing to the cat in the left-over cage.

“What do you think, brainiac?” the other answered.

“Wanna hold it on your lap?”Skinny answered.

The short guy slipped the cap off his own head and whacked Skinny with it. “You know I hate those things! Just get rid of it. You know what to do! Move it! We got a delivery to make.”

Skinny picked up the cage and headed to the back of the warehouse where there was a regular door. He stepped out into the damp dark and looked at the river. He knew what the boss expected but Skinny, though not real smart, could never bring himself to do it. Instead of flinging the cat inside the cage into the rolling Mississippi, he opened the door and let the terrified calico cat to scamper away into the night. He’d done it a dozen times before. What the boss didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him, Skinny figured.

The van hurtled down the dark waterfront road, onto the highway and north. The men didn’t talk, partly because they hadn’t much interesting to say and partly because it got the cats to screaming louder. Instead, the boss turned on a Country Western radio station and stared out the side window as Skinny drove them to their destination. They dared not stop for coffee or gas because the caterwauling load was bound to attract attention. Timing was everything.

It was absolutely necessary to get there before dawn. The transfers were always made in the dead of early morning when the reasonable people were asleep or working the night shift. They turned off the main highway and onto a side road that led back into the countryside, past silos filled with grain and shadowy fence posts that stood like soldiers on the flat fields.

They stopped in front of a chain link fence that surrounded a set of low buildings that would have covered about 3 blocks – had they been in the city instead of the country. On top of the fence was rolled barbed wire that glimmered in the half-moonlight. They sat facing a gate secured by an electronic system. Skinny got out of the van walked up to the gate, punched a button on a box and mumbled a series of letters and numbers he had written in ink on the palm of his left hand. As he dashed back into the driver’s seat, a buzz sounded and the gate eased open. The van entered and the gate shut automatically behind them.

They headed toward a loading dock and stopped. Two men in dark jackets were waiting, their arms folded across their chests. Surgical masks covered their noses and faces, although the two looked like anything but doctors. They were broad shouldered and burley and had nothing at all to say.

Skinny and Boss opened the back of the van and stood aside. The men grabbed the cages and tossed them onto the loading deck as the cats screamed and yowled. Once the van was emptied of its live cargo, Skinny

slammed the van doors shut. The masked men headed for the double doors of the building, a cage in each hand. No one had spoken a word.

As the van headed toward the gate and away, there was the very faint glow of a sunrise in the east. Within an hour a new day would be starting and Skinny and Boss would be heading off to bed. Elsewhere in their small town, a tiny calico cat would have run for hours along the damp banks of the river, across dark streets and through backyards, under bushes and cars and finally, as the sun began its day's work, to the front porch of a small brick house where the newspaper sat waiting for the very nice woman who lived inside the house. She would open the door to retrieve the paper and be happy to welcome the morning, planning a day baking and caring for her pets. But her usually cheerfulness would turn to tearful joy when she discovered the little calico cat resting atop the newspaper. "Cali, Cali! You've come back!" she cried. "Your new parents must be so worried about you! Come here you little thing, let's get something to eat and call them right away!"

2

The Crew

Elzbeth was not what you'd call popular at her school. Ever since she could remember, she was one of the last kids picked for teams on the playground. The popular group of girls would get together in a little huddle, glance her way and giggle. But what was worse, was the pack of kids who had picked her out for special attention – all of it bad. They teased her, sometimes followed her home from school and were – as far as Elzbeth could see – about as dumb as a pile of doggy doo.

For a while, when she was a really little girl, it made her sad to be left out. But as she got older, Elzbeth decided not to care about cruel people. When other kids were playing in groups at recess, she went off on her own. It was during recess, in fact, that she got to know Joe and Trudy and Ruben and Ruben's dog, Kreskin. Like Elzbeth, they were apart from the others at recess because they had things about them that made them different. Those things also kept them from being "popular."

Joe was in a wheelchair and could only move his head and use his right hand just a bit. He could be in school for part of the day – sometimes morning and other times in the afternoon because he needed help with so many things – like eating lunch or gathering up his homework. Trudy couldn't run around either. Most of the time, she had barely enough energy to walk out to the playground alone. Sometimes, she had to miss school all together. And Ruben was blind. Kreskin, his service dog – named after the famous magician, the Amazing Kreskin, was Ruben's eyes – a Queensland Heeler who loved Ruben and his friends. Together, the four thought of themselves as the "Crew."

These were the friends that Elzbeth made as she got used to being somehow different from most of the children in her school. And, Elzbeth felt very lucky about this because her friends were special people. Joe was the smartest person in the whole school – smarter than most of the teachers, as far as Elzbeth was concerned.

"He's a total brain," Elzbeth had told her Aunt Candie. "Joe can figure out any problem in the world. Right in his head. He doesn't need paper or anything to do the hardest arithmetic. And, he plays chess on that computer attached to his chair and he almost always wins! Does that mean he's even smarter than the computer?"

Trudy was very artistic – Aunt Candie had called her "a most sensitive child." Trudy, who sat quietly most of the time because she never seemed to have much energy, could hear things that other people didn't hear. On the playground, if they were still and silent, squirrels and birds would come up to Trudy, totally unafraid. Sometimes, Trudy told Elzbeth things that hadn't even happened yet. Like when rotten Rusty Booger got in big trouble with the teacher for peeking at the answer sheet for a spelling test and then selling the answers to the other kids for a quarter a word. Trudy said at recess, "Rusty is going to end up in the vice principal's office. I can just feel it!" And, by two o'clock that day, the tow-headed word thief was headed for vice principal Svensens's office.

Ruben was cool because he was very funny and cracked jokes about everything, including himself. He was also very, very fast on his laptop computer. He called the voice that read to him from his computer "the terrible JAWS" (like the shark). Listening to JAWS, Ruben could "read" faster than any person in class. And, Ruben's fingers flew over the keyboard. Not even the teacher could type as fast. Ruben also had the ability to remember almost everything he heard – even when he didn't want to remember.

Elzbeth was aware that each of her friends had something called a "disability." Ruben had been blind since birth and had learned to take good care of himself using his other senses – and counting on Kreskin to be his companion and helper. Ruben, Elzbeth noted, paid much more attention to his abilities than to his blindness

– he loved working on the Internet and was often very frustrated when Web sites weren't friendly to his friend, JAWS.

Joe had an injury to his spinal cord that made him a paraplegic. When he was a toddler, Joe said he had fallen head-first into a shallow pool and badly damaged the cord that carries nerves along the boney spine. He had been in the hospital for many months and then went to lots of special training to learn how to make the best of things. He could move his right hand and arm a bit and his neck and shoulders were strong. But Joe knew that he would probably spend most of his life in the slick wheel chair, depending upon some very cool technology and something else – Joe knew that he was very smart and had been given the gift of extraordinary intelligence. Joe was not at all shy about sharing this special ability.

Trudy's disability was not so obvious because it was deep inside her blood cells. She had told Elzbeth that she had a disease called Aplastic Anemia. Because of this, it was very easy for Trudy to get bad infections and very dangerous for her to risk being hurt – like falling down on the playground, or even getting a little paper-cut on a finger. Trudy had spent a lot of time in a big hospital that was famous for its research – she said she had been getting blood transfusions to help her body fight infections and get stronger. Sometimes, Trudy had to be kept away from everyone – even her parents. She called this “isolation” and she hated it. One day, Trudy said she hoped to have a bone marrow transplant – a very serious operation that held the promise to make her permanently healthy. But, until then, she kept herself busy with quiet and creative things – Trudy was a wonderful artist who could paint and draw as well as most adults. And, she focused inside herself to sense and know things that other people missed entirely.

Elzbeth was drawn to these friends because she knew what it was like to be somehow different. She had never fit in at school and most of her teachers saw her as a troublemaker. Elzbeth didn't like reading or writing, wasn't too great at math and always seemed to be on a different page than her classmates. Some of the teachers told Aunt Candie that Elzbeth was “hyperactive” – others had called her ‘dyslexic’ and still others had put some letters together and suggested that she take some pills to calm her down. Aunt Candie said she liked Elzbeth's energy and creativity. She didn't make a big deal of not-so-good grades and sometimes, when school got to be too much, let Elzbeth stay home and help her care for the cats.

Elzbeth was highly pleased with her choice of friends and they'd had an adventure or two together – last year, when they'd been in the 5th grade, stopping a burglar from stealing old Mrs. Wheeler's great, great grandmother's silver brooch. That's why Elzbeth immediately thought of the Crew when the problem of Aunt Candie's cats started to wear on her mind.

