

For Review Only



new kittens
on the block

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The Frosted Kittens

Eugene's mother needed a sign: a sign that everything was going to be all right. She still felt weak and ill after the flu, and John, Eugene's stepdad, was worried about his job. Her own mother, who still lived in Indonesia, was unwell. Everything seemed black.

To add to it all, Theodora was getting on her nerves. Eugene was letting her inside more and more, and she was a terrible one for nosing around in cupboards. That very morning, she had got herself caught behind the wardrobe and meowed incessantly until someone, probably Eugene, had released her.

Theodora herself was feeling strange: restless and excited and worried, all at the same time. Tingly. It didn't matter if she were outside or inside, she still felt the same way. She ran in and out and didn't know what to do with herself. She didn't quite know what she was looking for, but she certainly couldn't find it outside. She couldn't even find her friend,

Zigzag. Neither of them having a tipped ear had somehow brought them together.

She explored remote parts of the apartment and scratched in corners, mainly on the floor but sometimes on the walls themselves. Her scratching was steady and dedicated and seemed intent on making holes. She felt she was getting closer, but to what she was unsure.

Eugene thought she was cute, whatever she did. “She’s probably just getting to know the flat,” he told his mother.

But Eugene’s stepdad thought otherwise.



Christmas was fast approaching, as it always does, leaping down the slope from November and gathering momentum as it went. Eugene’s mother knew it was time to decorate the apartment. The boys had always liked it when she did, but now that they were getting older, she thought perhaps it didn’t matter quite so much. But in case it did, she got dressed very slowly, sitting on the end of the bed as her mother might have done, and caught the next bus to the hub. Just the effort of getting there, let alone looking in the shop windows at all the different-sized and -shaped Christmas trees, with their glass balls and tinsel, made her feel exhausted and unable.

She managed to get herself inside one shop, fingering the shiny glitteriness of the decorations, but found it hard to come to any decisions. Did she want the tree decorated in

traditional red and green? Or should she go for something more psychedelic like electric blue or hot pink? She thought she liked the gold or silver balls and tinsel best. Perhaps the silver. It looked clean and fresh, like snow or frost, and would cool down the hot and dusty day, like ice cubes cooled a drink.

But with stretching her neck to look up at the trees, she soon felt dizzy and knew she would faint if she didn’t sit down. She searched and searched, but couldn’t find even one welcoming chair. Demoralised and with leaden feet she turned for home, waiting a ridiculously long time at the bus stop, jostled by crowds like a dying leaf.

At home, Eugene was making Christmas cards with happy faces on the outside and drawings of trees, strangled with tinsel, on the inside. His stepdad, not with a happy face, paced up and down the short length of the apartment, making himself more and more apprehensive and bad-tempered. Loyal and capable staff were already being culled at work.

When she finally got home, Eugene’s mother collapsed on the floor, her shopping bag empty. Theodora approached her, giving her a sniff, as she was entitled to do to someone in her space and at her level. But Theodora was not walking. No longer dainty, she could only be described as *waddling*. Belatedly, and for the first time, Eugene’s mother noticed Theodora’s considerable undercarriage and tired eyes.

She knew at once what that meant: a money pit. Kitty litter, supplementary feeding and vet bills, all to be spent on creatures that nobody wanted in the world. Later, and

an almost impossible task, homes to find for them. Heaven perhaps the only option. She wondered, confusedly, if it were better to be born and go to heaven, or better not to have been born at all. She got a clean carton, that had only held new books, and put it, lined with one red and one green towel, so that at least someone would know it was Christmas, in the corner of the bedroom.

On Christmas morning, the apartment looked bleak in its very everydayness. There was no tree shining its lights in the window, to welcome in a wider world. No glistening glass balls of any colour hung from the tree that wasn't there. No tinsel of any colour glittered and shimmered from the absent tree.

Eugene's mother was feeling even more washed-out than ever. Eugene, too, was struggling to get up. He knew there was nothing to get up for. He wouldn't be getting the shiny bike in a cheerful red he'd been looking forward to, for months and months. He could hardly get excited about new pyjamas, or whatever else his mum had bought him as a substitute. His stepdad was clasping his hands behind a head that was still resting on its pillow, brooding about the job that was a bit full on, but that he didn't want to lose either. He needed the steady routine of work. Even more, he needed the steady thrumming of dollars as they landed in his hands.

Suddenly, out of the silence of early morning, came a desolate cry. Theodora dragged herself inch by inch into the bedroom and managed, after several false starts, to climb up on the bed. She buried herself inside the stepdad's pyjama

pants, as the safest place she could find to get away from whatever it was that was churning around inside her.

The stepdad was still heavy with sleep and unaware, at least until something wet and slimy slid down inside his pants. It plopped out onto the bed.

"Goodness," he said, almost feeling as if he had given birth himself. "What have we got here?"

He stared at the tiny wet whitish bundle and then picked it up gently, placing it in the carton.

"You too, Theodora," as it looked as if she were about to drag herself off again. She circled inside the carton, trying to get comfortable, and eventually lay down. She gave the kitten a half-hearted lick behind the ears.

Eugene came in, alerted by the flurry. "Is that it?" he said, looking at the unattractive little object. He screwed up his face. Birth was much messier than he had imagined and didn't smell good.

What seemed like a long time later, another kitten appeared, dark this one, and after what really was a long interval, a third, looking like the first. Theodora sighed as if she were done.

"Well, it could have been worse," said Eugene's mum. "They're healthy and there's only three."



Eugene hung over the carton all day as, gradually, Theodora licked them clean. He was the one who noticed the frosting

at the ends of their hair. The silver tips glittered like tinsel, or frost on snow.

“It’s because they’re born at Christmas, like Jesus was,” he said solemnly, reaching in to pat them in a reverent sort of way. He chose the black one first, in case, being different, it was feeling left out. “Jesus had his star. *They* have something glittery too.”

The red bike receded from his mind.

His mother smiled at him, her own fanciful baby son. For the first time in weeks, she realised she felt much better.

For the first time in weeks also, Eugene’s stepdad felt almost relaxed. *He* wasn’t going to be made redundant. His boss couldn’t be *that* stupid. He looked at the kittens and smiled. Mentally, and with a slight physical accompaniment, he stuck out his chest. He could and would provide for them.

Meanwhile, Theodora was feeling dazed and confused and extremely sore. What had happened that morning had been a huge shock and far from comfortable in its execution. Just the same, the small wriggling things that had unexpectedly come out of her, were quite nice. She could feel herself growing fond of them already. Languidly, she licked the ears of the nearest one. She was thinking hazily of Zigzag as she did so. Two of the kittens looked very like him.

And that’s when Theodora broke out into a steady, prolonged and lyrical purring that seemed to make even her carton break into song, filling the now perfectly decorated flat with music.

The Naming

The problem was to find names for them. Soon they would have to call to them and needed a handle. They were still lying anonymously in the basket. Eugene consulted the internet. He was looking up a Malay site.

His mum was bored by the whole business. “Why not just call them Satu, Dua and Tiga? Thank goodness that’s all there are.”

Eugene and his stepdad looked pleased. “What nice names!” the stepdad said. “How did you think of them so quickly?”

“What do they mean?” asked Eugene.

“One, Two and Three.”

“Oh.” Eugene was disappointed. “They’re a bit like French, aren’t they? Un, deux, trois.”

“Dua, maybe, I don’t know about the others,” said the stepdad. “But the names still sound nice, whatever they mean, and are very different from one another.”

So the number-names stuck.

As they grew older, their names seemed to suit. Satu loved playing with water, and was frequently saturated. Dua seemed to have two personalities: one quiet and one noisy. Tiga was like a Tiger, biting too hard with her small and needle-like teeth. Satu and Dua didn't want to play with her. But one day what she did turned out to be useful.

Toni Basil Brush had been hanging around. She was a bully and wanted to harm anything to do with Theodora. She hadn't forgiven her for winning the fluffiest tail competition when the ribbon should clearly have gone to her. She started to lurk nearer and nearer, even listening in on family conversations. She hated it that Theodora had kittens, something she had not been allowed to have. Now it was out of the question.

She was also the block gossip, and malicious at that. Since she was so obsessed with tails, it wasn't surprising that her gaze soon fell on the tails of Theodora's young. She spread it around that they couldn't be Theodora's kittens, as they all had twisted tails. Theodora must have adopted them when their own mother couldn't look after them.

Word of this got back to Satu who was very upset by the double suggestion that Theodora, whom he adored, wasn't his real mother, and equally, that his own mother hadn't wanted him. He was so upset that one day, when he was sulking on the balcony of his flat thinking about it, he confided in Mister Bubbles.

Mister Bubbles, noticing the droop to his young head, had jumped up beside him to keep him company.

He snorted. "You're Theodora's, all right. Didn't I see her heavy with you lot? Toni Blasted Basil Brush will make up anything to hurt her fellow cats – or kittens. You know, she has even spread it around that I, Mister Bubbles, am a dullard and an oaf!"

He looked down, to reassure himself, at his immaculately maintained tuxedo coat.



Later, Satu told his sisters what Toni had said about them, so that they would take no heed when they heard the gossip for themselves.

"*Your* tails are twisted, but she's quite wrong about mine," was Tiga's response. "It's as straight as my mum's. But we didn't get our coats or our noses or anything much from her. We don't actually look like her at all."

They stared at one another. It was true.

"I wonder who our father is," pursued Tiga. "Perhaps you got your tails from him. Perhaps he is a calico cat, like me."

"Or *you* are a calico cat like him," said Dua, who always preferred to get things straight.

They couldn't think of any calicos around, none having visited Theodora since the birth of her triplets.

“What we have to do is do what she is doing. She’s lurking around looking at us. We have to lurk around looking at her.”

“What will we do then?” asked Dua.

“You can do what you like, but I’m going to bite her.”

“You are certainly very good at that,” said Satu, thinking of past encounters with her needle-sharp teeth. “But is there no other way? Maybe we could talk to her.”

Tiga was scornful. “Is she going to listen to three little kittens?”

So that was what they did. They hid in the bamboo grove and waited for Toni to come past, which she did before long.

“Well, if it isn’t Theodora’s little kittens!” she exclaimed, for she had spotted Satu and Dua’s little twisted tails straight away, peeping out from the bamboo. “So adorable! Good morning, dears!”

“We’re not your dears,” meowed Dua with her very loud meow. “You say hurtful things about us, and especially about our tails.”

“Why would I do that? You have lovely tails, so unusual, and different in an interesting way from mine.”

She looked at her own in admiration, and then at theirs. Up close, they reminded her of something.

“You said Theodora is not my mum,” contributed Satu, trying to keep the tremble out of his voice.

“Oh, I might have said that you don’t look the tiniest bit like her,” said Toni Basil Brush lightly. “That’s not saying the same thing at all.”

“Well, I think it is,” said Tiga, who would have liked to use a word like “implication” but didn’t know it. And, before she could change her mind, she bit Toni Basil Brush’s magnificent, flowing tail with her small, razor-sharp teeth.

“That’s for telling tales about us.”

Shocked, Toni Basil Brush stared at her once beautiful tail. The end of it was almost cut through. She would never win a competition now. Howling, she ran away.

The three kittens looked at one another. “Perhaps we went a bit far,” said Satu.

“You can never go too far with *her*,” said Mister Bubbles, who had been watching delightedly from a distance.