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## FEDERAL FELINES

by

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While I marched purposefully through a desolate prison industry area, his sudden appearance stopped me in my tracks. Stepping out from behind waist-high rusted conveyer parts, he confidently sidled into my path. I had just left the ninth-inning baseball game 100 yards behind me and knew no one followed me. The path ahead, too, was clear of anyone. Now only 30 feet away, his appearance sent a cold wave across my back and through my scalp. He was uglier than the descriptions I heard from other inmates.

His large eyes drew my attention to his lean, mean look. A thin but well-muscled body showed a latent power within. He turned to face me, nonchalantly challenging my



intended passage across his territory. His lower face, adorned with long, sparse whiskers and tufts of jowl hairs, partially covered a small mouth that revealed no humor. I rolled my head to the left and glanced back toward the ball field. We still had the wide driveway to ourselves. I said nothing and he licked his lips, including a couple of those gross facial hairs. I'm no coward and said nothing, my heart pumping harder, adrenaline coursing through me. A fight-or-flight conundrum response surprised me and I formulated an escape plan without hesitation. Our eyes met, locking; neither willing to show fear.

Our peripheral visions caught a movement and before I reacted he shot right toward the intruder who emerged from behind the rusted machinery. In seconds it was over. A small pool of blood formed quickly around the now-inert body.

He picked up the corpse and surprised me by walking over to me with his head cast downward. Only five feet away, he set the small pigeon down, looked up at me and mewed. Licking his paws, his reddish-brown tailed flicked around like a miniature cobra. I knelt down, made a clucking sound like a fool, and extended my hand in his direction. He stopped preening, smugly picked up his prize, and strolled off to the nearby trash compound.

Studs, as I heard him referred to, was not unique. I learned there were at least three other feral cats on this part of Terminal Island Federal Correctional Institution, in the Los Angeles harbor, and no one seemed to know where they came from; they just existed, much like the rest of the atoll's population. I soon found the felines had better qualities than most of the humans I encountered since I was remanded a year before. I was determined to find out more about them.



Over the next few days I located some of their lairs. Two occupied small caves created by piled rocks along the prison perimeter forming the breakwater, one lived near the recreation building, and Studs claimed the trash compound as his own. Maybe there were more than three.

While trying to lure a Calico within petting range with a piece of chow hall chicken, another inmate approached me. With a kindly smile he told me there were two kittens nearby. There were four originally; one disappeared, one taken home by a guard, and two remained hidden in a cardboard box, appropriately in the prison nursery compound. A small shelter and table, built for potting plants and the storage of gardening paraphernalia, sat in the middle of the quarter-acre plot. I peeked into the large toilet tissue box sitting under the covering and spotted two sets of tiny eyes. Max, a carbon copy of Studs, and Lucy, another Calico, had taken over the lair. Examining their den, inmate involvement was obvious in their care. An institution blanket lined their home, a pan from the chow hall, filled with beach sand, served as a litter box, and several empty sardine cans from the special diet line showed that someone spoiled these kittens regularly.

The nursery area was posted with several 'OUT-OF-BOUNDS' signs so I cautiously checked the area for the south yard officers. None were in evidence so I kneeled and reached in to pet my new friends. Both immediately reacted: ears laid back, tiny hisses escaped from both, sounding more like air leaking from a kid's bicycle tire than the warning intended. The display amusing, I decided to respect their attempts at ferocity and backed off. If they were to survive as T.I. cats, fine-tuning their instincts was imperative. The kitten's situation was much like my own introduction to prison life: a



façade of fearlessness was the key to making it – don't back down, be aggressive and aloof at the same time.

Concentrating on the cats I did not hear footsteps from behind. A deep bass voice sounded, "What're ya doing here?" I clenched my teeth, resentful of the intrusion, especially from the gruff 280-pound guard. I turned to face him while remaining in the kneeling position. Tempted to lay my ears back and hiss, I opted to stand as he continued. "Don'cha see the outa bounds signs, man?" he growled.

Before retorting insolently, I spied a shiny object in his right hand: it was a can of chow hall special diet sardines. Then I felt two fur balls glide over my shoes and heard soft mewling. Max and Lucy were falling all over themselves to get to the officer.

I took the lull and turned the tense situation to my advantage by lying. "I was just checking to see if the kids had been fed yet." My ploy actually worked.

"Yeah, Schneider fed them this morning. He gave them some tuna, I think." He bent down and gathered the kids into his huge hands. "Are you gonna take care of them, too?" he asked. "I haven't seen you around before but I been on vacation..."

We chatted briefly and I found the feral cats had been on the island for at least 12 years. One of the older inmates cared for them and arranged adoptions for over 100 of them born on the island since at least 1982. The officer told me he has never seen a rat or mouse on the facility except inside the chow hall, the only place the cats did not have access. He credited the older inmate's care and attention with keeping the feral cat population down to manageable levels. Only the four adults and now two kittens remained. The officer intended to take both Lucy and Max home but he also had a new infant and his wife said one newborn was enough. I was relieved the kids would stay. As



he fed them I gained a new respect for the man who had a reputation as formidable as Studs.

I eventually talked with the other two inmate cat-caregivers and found both nearing parole or transfer dates. The kittens could not go with them and the yard cop only had limited time and resources to devote to the cats. It appeared I might inherit the responsibilities. My appearance, however, elicited hisses and yowls of defense posturing. At least the plant life accepted me.

Nevertheless, the nursery became a refuge for me. An island on an island, and I retreated to its confines every chance I got; writing letters, reading, and just to escape the desolation of the general population. Slowly the kittens accepted me and occasionally used my legs as scratching posts if I didn't flinch. I guess I was part of their playground.

One cool evening, I reclined on a bent folding chair to finish writing a letter to my daughter. As I relaxed I felt Lucy's familiar pin-like claws penetrating my khakis. The pricks worked their way up my pant leg until I saw her big eyes peek over the top of my knee. She stalled briefly and let out a weary mew, then completed her ascent. I didn't move as she sniffed my notepad, clipboard, and fingers. I felt the roughness of her tongue scrape across the digit, followed by her body nestling into the shelf created by my forearm. She fell asleep instantly. Lucy stayed there until the sun dropped to the western horizon. Gently I picked up the limp body and slipped her back into the toilet tissue box realm. She looked up and mewed again, then laid her head against Max's tummy. Max looked up and hissed.