





Tomboy

“One thing’s certain,” said Sophie’s father. “You can’t call him ... her ... Tom any more.”

Tom was Sophie’s black cat, who had come from nowhere and adopted her, and had now, much to everyone’s surprise, given birth to four kittens.

“Female cats are called queens,” said Sophie’s mother. “You could call her Queenie.”

“I don’t like that,” said Sophie.

“How about Elizabeth?” said Matthew, who was eight, two and a half years older than Sophie and ten minutes older than his twin brother, Mark.

“Why Elizabeth?”

“Well, it’s the Queen’s name.”

“Or Anne?” said Mark.

“Why?”

“That’s what the Queen’s daughter is called.”

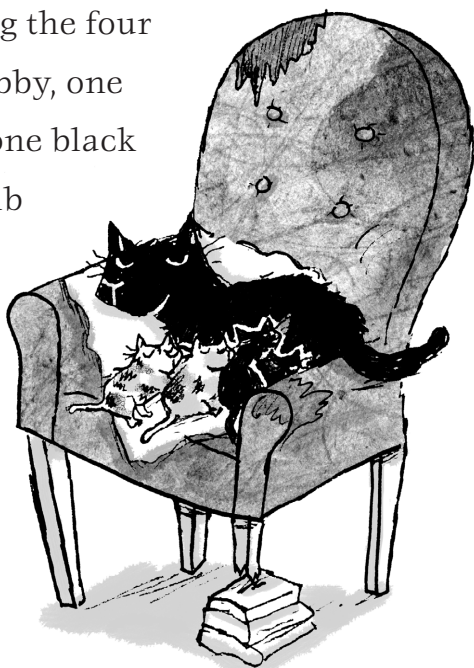
The twins were quite taken with this idea of royalty. As often happened, they had the same thought at the same moment, and they looked at one another and grinned and said, “How about Fergie?”

“Spelt F-U-R-gie,” said Sophie’s father, and everyone laughed, except Sophie.

“You’re all mowldy, stupid and assive!”

she said, and she stumped off, hands rammed deep into the pockets of her old jeans, a frown of disapproval on her round face.

She plodded up to the attic at the top of the house, where all the animals of her toy farm were laid out. Here, in the depths of an old armchair, lay her cat, nursing the four kittens, one tabby, one tortoiseshell, one black with a white bib and white feet and one exactly like its mother, whose black coat Sophie now stroked.



“I can’t call you Tom any more,” she said, “because you’re not one, are you, my dear?”

“Nee-o,” said the cat, or that’s how it sounded to Sophie.

“I suppose I could call you Thomasina, but I don’t much fancy that, do you?”

“Nee-o.”

“Mum and Daddy and the twins weren’t any help.”

Sophie rubbed the tip of her nose, a sure sign that she was thinking deeply.

“I wish Aunt Al was here,” she said.
“I bet she’d have a good idea.”

Aunt Al was Sophie’s father’s great-aunt, and therefore Sophie’s great-great-aunt. When she had first been told this, she had imagined Aunt Al as enormous, but actually she was very

small, with thin legs like a bird. She was nearly eighty-two years old, and she lived in the Highlands of Scotland. She and Sophie had become great friends.

Sophie sat on the arm of the old chair, stroking her nameless cat and wondering whether to write a letter to Aunt Al.

“Trouble is,” she said, “I’d have to have help with the spelling and everything, and anyway it would all take a long time.”

Just then she heard the telephone ring downstairs, and she jumped up, grinning.

“Yikes!” said Sophie. “That’s it! I’ll ring her!”

Something told Sophie it might be best to say nothing to the others about this phone call. It could perhaps be rather expensive to telephone the Highlands

because they were so high. If they ask me, she thought, I'll tell them I did it (Sophie disapproved of lying), but if they don't know, they won't ask.

So she waited that afternoon, a fine Saturday afternoon in early May, until her brothers had gone off to play football (of which they never tired) with some friends, her mother had gone to do some shopping and her father was working in the garden.

Sophie found Aunt Al's number in the phone book and carefully pressed the buttons. She heard the ringing tone, and then Aunt Al's brisk voice, as loud and clear as if she were in the room, saying, "Hello. Who is it?"



"It's Sophie."

"Sophie? My niece?"

"Great-great-niece,
Aunt Al."

"Great-great-aunt to you.



How nice to hear your voice, Sophie.

Are you OK? Anything the matter?"

"Yes, there is."

"Nobody ill or anything?"

"No. It's my cat."

"Tom?"

"Yes. Well, no. You see, it's not Tom any more, because she's had four babies."

"Whew!" said Aunt Al. "Surprise, surprise."

"And so she's got to have a new name," said Sophie, "and I can't think of a good one. That's why I'm ringing you up, to ask if you can help me."

“Right,” said Aunt Al. “Give me a minute.”

Sophie waited, imagining, as she always did, Aunt Al sitting on top of a mountain somewhere, surrounded by golden eagles and blue hares and red deer. In a minute her voice would come whizzing down the telephone wires, down the mountainside, off the edge of the Highlands, out of Scotland, and all the way nearly to the bottom of England, all in a fraction of a second.

“Tomboy,” said Aunt Al.

“What?” said Sophie. “That’s even worse than plain Tom.”

“No, it’s not. Don’t you know what a tomboy is?”

“No.”

“We used to say that a girl who gets

into scrapes like a boy is a tomboy. Your cat gets into scrapes, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

"Well then."

One of the reasons why Sophie and Aunt Al got on so well was they were both direct, no-nonsense people. They did what had to be done and said what had to be said, and that was the end of it.

"OK," said Sophie. "Thanks. See you."

"Sometime in the summer, I hope," said Aunt Al, and rang off.

At tea-time Sophie said, "My cat's got her new name."

"What is it?" chorused the twins.

"Tomboy."

"What?" they said. "That's even worse than plain Tom."

“Don’t they teach you anything in your class?” said Sophie scornfully. “You’re ingérant, that’s what you are.”



“Don’t you mean ‘ignorant’?” said her father.

“That too,” said Sophie.

“But Sophie,” said her mother, “do you know what ‘tomboy’ means?”

“Of course,” said Sophie. “A tomboy is a girl who gets into scrapes, like a boy. Can I get down please?”

“Yes,” said her mother, “if you’ve finished. Where are you off to?”

“To feed Tomboy,” said Sophie, “and to find names for my four kittens.” And off she plodded.

Sophie, though small, was very determined, and a worrying thought crossed her mother’s mind.

“I do hope,” she said, “she doesn’t think that she can keep those kittens.”

“One thing’s certain,” said Sophie’s father. “She can’t. As soon as they’re old enough, we must find them homes. One cat’s enough, let alone five.”



Up in the attic, Sophie addressed the kittens. Her firm ambition in life was to be a lady farmer, and she knew well that farmers, whether ladies or no, were always looking to increase their flocks and herds.

“Now, my dears,” she said, “let’s hope that you’re all girls. Then, once you’re big enough, you can all have babies too. Suppose each of you has four, that will make – let’s see...” and Sophie began to count upon her fingers.

