

Tabitha June Is a Shoulder Cat

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Chapter 1

She leaped onto my shoulder like Honor Harrington's Nimitz, while I was bending down to take off my winter boots. She was six weeks old, and her smooth coat had a tabby cat's typical markings in silver and gray and black and white.

Her nose had a white diamond on it, and she greeted everyone she saw with a stentorian, "Prrrrtt!" She already had a name: Tabitha, for obvious reasons.

I didn't need another kitten. I'd come to my brother's home to meet Tabitha's litter mate, a tortoiseshell kitten who would (I had already agreed) become Cat Number Four at my house in a few more weeks, after mother cat Patches finished nursing her family. But what could I do? Tabitha had me by the heartstrings, and that was that.

So Tabitha June (who added her own middle name-don't ask me how or why, because I can't tell you what I don't know myself!) became Cat Number Five when her sister Anabel became Cat Number Four. My life has been like that, starting with Cat Number One.

Her name was Rascal. I was two years old when my parents added her to my life, and she was (predictably) a female with a black coat that had other colors mottled into it. Sometimes I think that coloring got imprinted onto my psyche, leaving me forever afterward with a weakness toward any cat that my maternal grandmother would call "brindled" and the veterinarians and animal shelter staff members I've known call "tortoiseshell." Such cats are almost always females. Male "tortis" are so rare that they're quite valuable when they do occur.

Rascal was for sure and certain female. My father, who had occasion to stay in the house alone with her at times, swore that she decided he was her kitten and ordered him around just as she would her real offspring. When he didn't do as she wanted, she disciplined him, too! Her method (as it would have been with a kitten) was to administer a sharp pinch with her teeth, a good, solid nip that hurt because it was meant to hurt.

Rascal was well named. As much as I loved her (I'm told that while I was learning to talk I once fell asleep muttering to myself, "Cat-th!" in a baby's lisp), she knew she could tease me and she delighted in doing so. Her favorite trick was to find me sitting on the floor at play, and approach me silently from behind. Then she would poke her naughty head over my shoulder without warning-and I would, invariably, leap into the air and scream.

"Hey *cared* of Rascal!" I would proclaim, dropping the initial "s" from "scared" but leaving no one in doubt about my meaning.

She also liked to perch on a door frame (they were wide in the old house that we rented, in the Maine coast town of Thomaston) and put her head down into my view, just as suddenly as she might have thrust it over my shoulder. It got similar results.

It's a wonder Rascal didn't convince me that all cats were evil creatures, and instill me with a lifelong terror of them. Instead, she taught me to prefer tortis.

Who knows how? Maybe the friend who tells me that such cats are my "familiar," is right!

* * *

Chapter 2

“Well, she looked just like an old rag in the chair!” my father said in his own defense, after he nearly sat down on the scruffy yellow and white kitten we’d unintentionally acquired.

We lived on Friendship Long Island during my first year, and at some point Alice made her way the quarter mile or so from George Cushman’s home to ours. George was a bachelor lobsterman, tall and grizzled and shy-and kindhearted to a fault. That was why when everyone in our family but Mama caught the flu, including the chronically sick baby, George came over one evening and offered to sit up and rock me through the night so Mama could go to bed and get some desperately needed sleep. Of course he caught the flu himself, and was sicker with it than anyone else had been...yes, that was George.

His kindness was also why he had a whole colony of cats, I’m sure. Years later, when he was old and could no longer live by himself in an island “camp” where there was no electricity, no running water, no telephone-and no bridge, either, the only way to the mainland was by privately owned small boat-his hundred and more cats would become a problem for someone else to solve. But back then he had a more reasonable number, and they were (mostly, anyway) healthy. The predominant color among his felines was yellow, ranging from buff toms to pastel torti females to orange tabbies of both genders.

Alice figured out early in her life that there was more room for another cat at our house than at George’s house, so she made her way through the spruce woods to our woodpile and there she took up residence. She lay down beside

Mama's black and white tomcat (creatively called Tommy), who didn't particularly want her company but who wasn't bad tempered enough to drive her away.

Tommy couldn't stand one thing about Alice, though. She'd left her mother cat without learning how to wash herself, so a short time after moving in with us she became absolutely filthy. (Sleeping on the woodpile surely helped that to happen, of course!) Since Alice insisted on cuddling up as close to Tommy as she could get-after all, that's what kittens naturally want to do with whatever adult cat is available-he had to either send her on her way with a cuff, or wash her himself. So that's what he did.

Tommy kept Alice clean until we left him behind in my grandfather's care while we made a temporary move from Thomaston (where we'd relocated on my first birthday) to Lisbon Falls, so Dad could attend barber college. A canning jar fell off a cellar shelf and hit poor Tommy on the head. When we returned home Alice didn't get the scrubbing that she so desperately needed by then, because her tomcat was dead.

Alice stayed dirty. For months her longish coat got progressively more matted and discolored, and she had no idea what she ought to do about it. Who was going to wash her now? She had no idea.

Maybe she watched another cat's ablutions one day, and the light finally came on inside her otherwise bright little head. Maybe she just got to the place where she was desperate enough to try to duplicate what first her mother, and then her tomcat, had done to remove the accumulated detritus from her coat. In any case, finally she mastered the fine art of self-scrubbing. For the rest of her life, Alice stayed clean! For the rest of her life, she also howled like a tomcat if she wanted to make her voice heard. She hadn't learned from Tommy how to scrub herself, but she had learned from him how to speak proper cat language.

I wish I could say that her life was a long one, but motherhood was her downfall (as it so often is, for an unspayed female cat). She'd produced only one litter, all stillborn, that arrived before Alice herself was a full year old. After that she had no more until I was seven years old. Dad took her back to Friendship Long Island with him, when he stayed there by himself to fish while Mama taught school in the central Maine town of Gardiner. Eventually, Dad arrived to visit his family-with Alice and her new family, four balls of yellow and white fur, snuggled inside (of all things) a lobster crate.

Alice wouldn't leave her kittens to go outside, because she was quite naturally afraid of being unable to get back to them afterward (we had an upstairs apartment). In those days, in our part of the world, litter boxes were smelly sand-filled affairs and were only used for housebreaking kittens. Adult cats were expected to use the outdoors, and a cat that didn't for any reason was

said to have “turned dirty” and was destroyed. I can’t remember many more painful moments from my childhood, than the day I knew Mama was going to take Alice to the vet to have her put to sleep. Alice was supposed to be Mama’s cat, not mine; but I sat on the floor beside her food dish, and patted her long, soft yellow and white coat, and pleaded with her (fully expecting she could understand me!) to be a good kitty and ask to go out instead of soiling Mama’s closet floor.

It didn’t help. Soon Alice was gone, and my big sister and I had four lively kittens to box train and teach how to drink milk and eat solid food.

Each of us would be allowed to keep one kitten; the other two must go to other homes. Elaine called hers, a yellow and white female, Fluffy. I called mine (also a yellow and white female) Rosebud, because that was what Mama said she looked like. Why, I wasn’t sure-but I liked the sound of that name, and certainly the kitten didn’t care what I called her. The litter’s only male, who was also the only orange tiger, went to a boy in the apartment one floor down from ours. Billy named him Timmy.

My grandmother came for a visit, fell in love with the third female, and named her “Little Alice” and took her home. Grandpa didn’t object a bit. He soon discovered that Little Alice liked rougher play than most kittens-so he would rock an upholstered rocking chair as hard as he could rock it, while Little Alice clung gamely to its back with all four of her paws. He would put her into a child’s wagon, and haul her around the farmhouse where he and Grammie lived. There was no doubt that Little Alice had a wonderful home.

Unfortunately, Little Alice found the rat poison Grandpa had set out in the barn before she was much over a year old. He buried her when he discovered her body, and (in one of the few untruths I know of my pious grandfather telling anyone) told Grammie a fox had carried her off. He felt responsible for poisoning her, and didn’t tell Grammie the truth until twenty years or so later.

Elaine’s Fluffy met the same fate as her mother when the kitten simply didn’t learn to use the litter box. Why, I can’t guess; my Rosie learned easily, and soon was presenting herself at the door whenever she needed to make a bathroom trip. I can best remember Fluffy learning to drink milk-standing with her front paws in one bowl, and her rear paws in another bowl, not at all disturbed by having four wet feet.

The kittens lived in an old-fashioned wicker clothes basket, and as they grew big enough they would clamber in and out through the basket’s handles. Mama slept on a fold-out sofa in the apartment’s living room, since there was only one bedroom and that was where Elaine and I slept. Each night when Mama made up her bed, the four kittens would form a train and race around under the covers. When Grammie was visiting, Mama shouted to her to “Come

and get the kittens, won't you, please!"-and Grammie stood laughing helplessly, and said afterward she wouldn't have dreamed of shortening that comedy act by a single minute.

Timmy at about nine months old did what kittens will do. He followed his new master, Billy, and me as we walked down Brunswick Avenue on our way the City Common. We were both less than ten years old, and simply didn't realize we needed to turn around and take the kitten home and put him inside so he couldn't follow us again. Timmy disappeared, somewhere on our journey-and we didn't see him again until a year afterward.

How did he find his way home, and where had he been for twelve long months? We never knew. He appeared one day at the apartment house, thin and hungry but not hurt in any way, and sat in the yard waiting hopefully for someone he recognized to come out. Someone did, eventually, and as soon as he saw Billy there was no doubt this now full grown orange tiger tomcat was lost Timmy.

Rosebud, like every other cat I've ever known, thought Dad existed to do her bidding. When Mama bought a Thanksgiving turkey, Rosie went into a snit because she was sure that this "bird" (no matter how big it might be!) should be handed over to the cat. Immediately; why bother to cook it? When Dad arrived and asked, "Where's Rosebud?", the answer was: "Out back in the old greenhouse, sulking. Go get her if you want to."

Dad went out. Rosebud greeted him with a bitterly complaining yowl. Dad sympathized.

That was typical. Cats still tell him their troubles, whenever they get a chance.

We finally bought a house, the spring before I turned ten! I had my own room, and Elaine had her own room, at last; and Mama didn't have to make up a bed on the living room couch or (as in our last apartment) sleep on a folding bed at the end of the hallway. Instead, she and Daddy had a bedroom of their own, too.

Rosebud thought that was wonderful, and Rosebud understood that Dad was a commercial fisherman on winter "leave" from the ocean while Mama was a schoolteacher who had to put in a full day's work right through the cold season. So when Rosebud wanted something during the night, she knew whom she should notify. She also knew how best to do it. Dad had a habit of sleeping with one arm hanging out of bed. Rosie would tap his hand with her paw, in order to get him awake without making noise and bothering Mama.

Dad observed that being at home with Rosie during the day could be a trying business. She seemed to think that he lacked entertainment, and she therefore found errands for him to do-all day long. *Cellar door open; Rosebud*

wants to go down! Cellar door open, so Rosebud can come back up. Inside the house, quickly, it's cold out in the yard. No-it was nice there, after all. Guess I'll go back out. My dish is empty. Did you know that my dish is empty?

All cats (maybe all pets) are mildly telepathic. Rosie was more than mildly so. Dad never could ignore her when she decided to stare at him; she could project determination better than most Olympic hopefuls, and she well knew how to focus its full power on her hapless human servant.

Then came a time when Dad didn't live with us. We'd always taken Rosie along when we visited Grammie and Grandpa, who lived just off the coast on Deer Isle-which in those days' cars, at those days' rural highway traveling speeds, was a three-hour journey away from Gardiner. Rosebud invariably spent the whole trip being sick. Riding, for her, was a miserable business. Since we had no cat carrier (I never even saw one for sale, during the late fifties and early sixties when I was a child), it was a miserable business for us humans, too. So after one especially bad trip, Mama asked Grammie (who had no other cats now, and still missed Little Alice) if she would mind keeping Rosie.

Of course not. That, for Grammie, was a no-brainer.

Rosie never forgave Mama for not taking her home with us when we left. During all of our subsequent visits to the farm, she was sweet and loving with me-with Elaine-and with Daddy, after he rejoined us. But Mama she ignored. "You didn't want me? Well, see if I care!"

Daddy had made Rosebud a fine servant, but Grandpa was an even better one. She would land on his pillow, since he and Grammie had twin beds, and he would know he was supposed to get up and do something for Rosie. Usually that meant serving her a middle-of-the-night snack, waiting for her to eat it in leisurely feline fashion, and then letting her outside. He never complained about it, and he never refused her.

Eventually, as all cats must (if they are lucky), Rosie grew old. The nearest vet was an hour away, in Searsport. Grammie and Grandpa made several trips, but nothing the vet tried worked. Finally, they brought Rosie home for what would be the final time.

Their farm overlooked an ocean cove. Rosie had a favorite spot, in a secluded field at the head of that cove where a stream flowed into the sea. She walked down through the pastures, and after a time she walked back. Grammie saw her coming, and knew when Rosie had to stop and rest before climbing a small hill to get back to the house that it wouldn't be much longer.

She died at the vet's, a day or so later. When the vet called Grammie long distance to tell her that, he choked up-and he never did send a bill for that last visit.

* * *

Chapter 3

“Mama, you said when we got a house I could have a puppy. I want one of these.” I pointed to an ad in the classified section of the *Kennebec Journal*.

“Puppies, 12 weeks. AKC German Shepherd, U.S. Army Sentry dog in pedigree. \$25 each.”

That wasn’t cheap, in 1963. I was eleven years old; I didn’t have \$25 of my own, although I had bought myself a \$1 white rat when I heard one of the clerks in a local department store telling another clerk that if that last one didn’t sell soon they would have to kill it.

At least Mama didn’t fuss at me when I got home with “Jack Sprat,” not after she heard his story. (Daddy named him, without hesitation and without giving a reason, and let the wriggly fellow crawl around between his undershirt and his flannel shirt and poke an inquiring crimson-eyed head out of his collar.) When I reminded her that she’d promised, she let me have the puppy, too.

I knew nothing about dogs, except that I’d only recently quit being afraid of them. As a toddler I’d lost my ice cream cone to a canine that was taller than I was, who meant me no harm but who (naturally, considering his theft and his size!) terrified me. When we got to the kennel where the pups were for sale, I patted the black and tan male who tried to climb right into the car when I opened my door; but I chose the smallest puppy, a black female with a few silver markings, because she was so shy. The litter’s sire was as friendly as his male offspring, greeting us with a wide-mouthed canine laugh. The litter’s dam was tied up, “Because she digs holes,” her owner explained.

My new puppy rode home sitting on my lap, looking thoroughly happy. I

was relieved; all the books I'd read had me expecting that she would cry, and be scared, and maybe get sick in the car.

She didn't. And when, the first afternoon I had her, she disappeared-I found out about German Shepherds.

I'd left the back door open. I was a kid, after all. Then I remembered: the puppy! Surely I had lost her forever, only an hour or two after getting her at last!

I went from neighbor's house to neighbor's house, asking if anyone had seen a black puppy. No one had. Finally I had to give up and go home. Where, on the rug in front of the living room sofa...lay Black Princess von Shepwold, as we soon named her for American Kennel Club purposes (since the Army Sentry Dog in her pedigree, on both sides of it in fact, was called Prinz Lamie von Shepwold). Her "call name," though, would be Blackie.

She had no idea why I made such a fuss over her when I found her there. She was a guard dog, born and bred, and she was already guarding her new home. Run away? Such an idea never crossed her mind, not even at 12 weeks old.

We took Blackie with us to Deer Isle the second day I had her. She rode in the car, again, as if she'd done it every day of her life. Puddles? She made one. Mama mopped it up with a rag, took the rag outdoors, and showed it to Blackie. Message: "You should do that out here, not in there."

Blackie understood. She never used the floor again.

At Grammie's, of course, Blackie got patted and made of and over-fed. So Blackie soon had an upset stomach. She lay down in a quiet living room corner, and she looked miserable as only a sick puppy can look it.

Grammie was in her sixties, and troubled by a chronically lame leg. That didn't keep her from getting down on hands and knees to put herself face to face with Blackie. "Are you sick, dear?" she asked sympathetically.

Blackie knew a soft touch when she saw one. "Oooooo!" she answered dramatically.

As she grew from a puppy into an 85-pound dog (who at six months demanded that Mom carry her across the street, since she'd been taught not to cross it any other way and she couldn't understand the concept of "big dog now!"), Blackie also grew more and more protective. People she met and learned to trust while she was small, she trusted forever; but after she was about a year old, she stopped accepting new members into her "pack." When my big sister got married, it took years (literally) for Blackie to allow Elaine's husband to enter a room without the adult German Shepherd launching herself at him and roaring. So when Sis had her first baby, we worried a lot about how things would go when they visited and brought little Bobbi.

All of us worried, that was, except Elaine. "Blackie will now she's my

baby!” Sis proclaimed confidently. When Bobbi was less than two weeks old, Elaine tested her theory (to everyone else’s horror). She walked through the door, held the baby down-right under Blackie’s nose, before anyone could grab Blackie’s collar and haul her upstairs and shut her up in a bedroom (our usual coping strategy for handling the arrival of guests). “See? This is my baby,” Sis told the dog, for all the world as if she expected Blackie to understand her.

Blackie sniffed the squirming bundle, and looked up at Elaine. That was that. Yes, she understood perfectly.

Blackie’s career ended far too soon. When she was only five years old, she developed a case of mechanical pneumonia from accidentally inhaling mineral oil that Dad gave her as a laxative. Our regular vet couldn’t see her, his wife didn’t refer us to a backup practitioner; and we didn’t realize, either, how sick our dog was or how quickly she was getting worse. By the time we took her in for an evening consultation (our vet was a part-timer with a day job), it was too late. She died quietly, lying on the floor in her favorite spot in the living room’s bay window, early one December morning.

Dad, who was at home during the day (especially in winter), was devastated. He wandered around the house for the next few days, saying often and sadly, “I’m dogless.” Theoretically Blackie was my dog, and there wasn’t any question that Blackie herself thought she belonged to Mom-when Dad took her with him for a period of several months once, during one of his Long Island fishing trips, Blackie’s muzzle actually started to turn gray. Yet Dad missed her horribly. So when I saw another newspaper ad-this time I was sixteen, not eleven. I could buy the dog myself.

“Huskies,” was what the ad called the 11-week-old puppies. “Sled dogs.” Their appearance matched that of Alaskan malemutes, I discovered when I checked my reference books. They were living in a straw-filled stall in a barn, and I simply picked the friendliest one this time. I’d learned that choosing the shy little runt of the litter might get me a dog with a difficult temperament, no matter how much I loved Blackie...and we didn’t need another “protector” who made that job her life’s mission.

This pup was male, causing Dad to correct his automatic “Good girl!” many times before he made the adjustment. Since I’d enjoyed giving Blackie her AKC name, I decided to call this one Baron Garrick Amarok (although he wasn’t a purebred; most sled dogs are not). “Ricky” was his call name.

He was friendly in the barn, but he didn’t appreciate being taken away from his litter mates and loaded into a car that was crowded with family members (my brother was getting ready to report for boot camp, in the Vietnam-era U.S. Navy, and we were having an early Christmas celebration that weekend in his honor). The first thing Ricky did was wet on my lap. Once home, he dove

underneath our old-fashioned wringer washing machine. Dad would haul him out, every couple of hours, and take him outside for a walk. He would sneak out, whenever the kitchen was empty of people; but if a human approached him, back to his den our wolf puppy would go!

Gradually, he lost his wariness enough to creep along the baseboards and into the living room when all the humans were sitting in chairs watching television. After awhile it was possible to reach down and stroke him gently, without causing him to bolt back to his sanctuary. Then he started coming out when we ate our meals.

Mom began feeding him by hand. Certainly giving a pet “human food” isn’t nutritionally wise, but we didn’t know that then; it was something farm and fishing village folk had always done, and that was what we were, after all. So Mom fed Ricky whatever meat we were having (up to and including Porterhouse steaks!), cut into small pieces, from her hand to his mouth; and finally Ricky was tamed.

After that, in fact, he turned into a lap puppy. Which was fine when he weighed 15 pounds of fluffy black, white, and gray fur. It wasn’t as fine when he got bigger (his top weight would be 75 pounds). His tail, stick-like when we got him, soon turned into an adult husky’s proud bush. It curled over his back when he was happy, and it hung down behind him when he was sad. His ears, three-cornered flaps in babyhood, stood up as he matured. He learned to go outside and return without a human escort (mostly because the whole family caught Hong Kong flu that winter, and shoving him out the front door and retrieving him after he struggled through the snow and up the back steps was the best we could do for him for several days’ time). He also learned that street lights made wonderful shadows on the snow, with which a wolf puppy could box. He learned how to dig dens in the snow (and usually barked at them afterward, clearly pretending that a small animal might pop out at him).

What he never did learn was how to bark properly. He could yap, like any husky; and when he first came to us he could howl like a real wolf, forming an “O” with his mouth and lifting his muzzle and tuning his cry to a precise bone-chilling pitch. In spite of his shyness with his new family, he did that whenever he was left alone in the house or merely thought he’d been left alone (he was sure to start wailing if he woke up from a daytime nap, and all the people had retreated upstairs). But all of the neighborhood’s other dogs could BARK, so of course Ricky thought he should do that, too!

He couldn’t. He didn’t have the right vocal apparatus. The best he could manage was a hoarse BOOF!, which he used as his substitute for the rest of his life.

His most distinctive vocalization vanished when he left puppyhood behind.

It sounded precisely like a small, shrill-voiced child exclaiming, “Mama!”—and to Dad’s embarrassment, Ricky yelled “Mama!” whenever he was frightened and wanted Dad to rescue him.

Ricky’s favorite indoor activity (after he stopped being carried upstairs by his humans, and no longer shook a washcloth to death every time he was taken into the bathroom with his current caregiver) was dragging every boot in the tray by the back door to the other end of the house. For some reason no one else understood, he refused to take the easy route and walk around the kitchen table. He insisted on dragging each boot through a forest of chair-legs and table-legs, then across the floors of our double-parlor living room, to deposit it triumphantly in the bay window. We found every single boot there each morning, through that first winter.

Every boot except Dad’s huge ones, of course. It took Ricky awhile to grow strong enough to handle them. When he managed it at last, he was the world’s proudest puppy!

Stairs were Ricky’s nemesis. He never really mastered them (doorsteps excepted) until he was about nine months old, preferring that his humans carry him up and down—and not bothering with our home’s second floor, after he grew too big for his people to do that. When we stayed at a motel in Quebec City, though, the rooms were on the second floor and they were reached only by climbing stairs. Open-backed stairs, if you please. Ricky looked at his feet as though he wondered whether or not he could now coordinate them well enough to manage, and then climbed as if he’d never hesitated about it in his life.

He’d grown into his feet. Of course. That was all he needed!

Ricky was protective, but not as Blackie had been. Even though Blackie surely saved us from having a break-in one day when we came home to find a secluded back porch window shattered, and a thoroughly hysterical dog in the kitchen, we wanted very much to avoid having another dog that had to be incarcerated every time we had guests. But thankfully, Ricky’s whole temperament was different. No one needed to tell him that most humans were to be trusted, and only a few needed to be guarded against. He seemed to have been born knowing that.

In fact, after he got over his initial shyness, Ricky turned out to be a first-class ham. Dad took the puppy in his arms into just about every public place that allowed it, wanting this dog to be socialized properly; and Ricky soon got so accustomed to being admired by one and all, that if a person had the nerve to walk past him without taking notice he was incensed. “Missed one!” he seemed to be saying, as he tugged at his leash and tried to get whoever was walking him to turn around and pursue the errant person.

Taken inside an airport for the first time (in those days all non-service

animals hadn't yet been banned), Ricky crawled under Dad's chair as soon as we all sat down to wait. Most dogs have to be taught to do that. Ricky simply knew how to behave. "A natural born gentleman!" Mom said, and she was right.

* * *

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