

Side Quest Kittens

I like to ride Trixie, my Shetland pony, in the morning when it's cool. The horses are usually still in the corral first thing and easier to wrangle, but I am having a little trouble getting motivated to do my morning chore of feeding the barn cats. I open the half gallon milk carton to make the cats' milk, then measure out the powdered calf starter, pour in the heated water to dissolve the lumps, and stir with a long-handled spoon. Does it make anyone think it is regular milk by putting it in the milk carton? No, it just makes a squishy, messy container to carry all the way out to the barn. I grab a big coffee can of Purina Cat Chow and out to the barn I go.

The cats can hear me coming and they jump up on the half open barn door making it hard to reach in and unlatch the hook to the bottom half of the door. I need to set the cat food and the "milk" on the ground so I can brush the cats off and open the bottom door. Then I pick up that gushy milk container and food and fight the malaise of cats tangling around my legs. I **definitely didn't** have to call, "Kitty, kitty!" With all that meowing and cats running between and around my feet, I almost trip, sloshing some of the milk on the barn floor. "You cats are so rude!" and I give a disgusted, "Argh!" I manage to dump their food and pour the milk in their great big iron dish sitting on the barn floor even though they won't get out of the way. A few get their heads dowsed with some of the milk and they growl at each other trying to vie for the position that will give them the best scarfing vantage around the pan. Most of them are pretty feral, but while they eat, I can sometimes sneak in some pets...but not with the ones that have wet, sticky milk heads!

“Well, Hello Mama Cat!” She comes thumping down the steep steps from the hayloft. “You almost missed out!” She’s looking pretty tapped out and skinny these days. Her kittens must be at least a couple of weeks old. I wonder how many kittens she has.

Whew! Done feeding the cats. I can check that off for the day! Finally, I can get back to riding my pony. I grabbed the halter to go out to the pasture to fetch Trixie. Oh, dear, she was grazing way on the other end of the pasture with Tootsie and Trigger. Oh phooey! Change of plans! I’ll just wait until this evening to ride Trixie when the horses come in to drink some water from the horse tank and stay in the open barn for the night. Or... I might even wait until morning to ride her.

I go back to the barn and decide to check in the hayloft to see if I could see any baby kittens. A huge barn spider’s web stretched across the landing to the hayloft steps blocking my way. I shiver and mutter, “Yuck! I **hate** barn spiders!” I muster my courage and bat its web out of the way with a stick after I quickly find one by the trees growing along the outside of the corral. As I creep up the creaky barn steps, I keep my fingers crossed hoping to find those baby kittens. I peer cautiously into the dim light half expecting to see kittens bobbing their wobbly heads while taking exploring steps. Mama Cat was not in sight, so she was either tending to her kittens or taking a break from her babes. I sit on the floor where the stairs level off with the loft floor, dangling my feet back down the stairwell, and listen carefully for soft kitten meows. I want to start taming the little fuzzballs as soon as I can so that if Mama Cat moves them, I can still coax them to come to me. I see and hear nothing for a little while, but I know this task calls for patience. After a bit of sitting quietly

and listening to the flies buzzing around on the dirty, speckled glass panes of the loft windows, I hear a rustle of hay. I look over at the stacked hay bales where I can see a slight separation making a wee little gap. An almost imperceptible mewing focuses my attention on the gap, and I see a small gray tabby kitten emerge from the hole. I sit stark still so I won't scare it back into its hay cave, and pretty soon, a yellow tabby kitten emerges from the hay bale entrance.

Close behind, another kitten follows the yellow out into the dust laden shafts of sunlight and this one is black and white. My goodness Mama Cat, you really had a mixed bag of goods! And... three wasn't all. Another black and white and a plain black kitten appear. They're older than I expected---right at the cute age where they rough house with each other while they're playing. No wonder Mama Cat looks so skinny! She has five babies, and they're older than a couple of weeks! Grandpa had told me that the multi-colored kittens meant that they had different dads. I know that I had seen several Tom cats hanging around the farm that weren't ours, so I imagine Mama cat had suitors that visited from the neighbors' farms. I didn't like this idea, because we have had Tom cats destroy baby kittens in the past. Does a Tom kill the kittens to get rid of a rival's offspring? I don't know. I get up to move closer to them, but as soon as they see me, they spat at me and start fisting. They arch their backs and puff their tails. Boy, they learn to do that young. Do you suppose they're innately born knowing how to react this way to danger? The kittens skedaddle to their hidey-hole in fast retreat. I try making some short, chirpy meows like I think Mama Cat might use to call to her kittens in order to coax them back out, but to no avail, and that was the end of the contact for today. I hope that I haven't

ruined my chances in taming them. Maybe the kittens just need to get used to me being around.

Right now, it may be best to leave them alone before Mama Cat returns or she might move them. I'll visit again tomorrow before I ride Trixie. It might be a good idea to bring Mama Cat an extra tidbit to eat, and I'll see if Mom will let me give her some cream in a little butter tub. Maybe I can tame Mama Cat while I'm making friends with her babies.

As I turn to go downstairs, Mama Cat appears on the top step. She starts that low grumbling growl that tells me that she's unhappy to see me near her kittens' den. We dance around the edges of the loft; she heads for her previously secret stash of kittens, and I head for the steps. Shucks! I'm afraid Mama Cat **is not** going to leave those kittens here. I'm sure she'll move them now!

The next morning, when I feed the "wild things," I watch to see where Mama Cat comes from. Oh, good! She's coming from the hayloft. Those five kittens must have been too big to lug down the steps from the hayloft to a new hiding spot. I fend off the other cats and entice Mama Cat to come eat my special offering of shredded leftover roast beef and some cream. I back off a bit where I can still guard her food from the other hooligans and Mama Cat tentatively nibbles her treat, nervously keeping an eye on me. I talk to Mama Cat, telling her, "Mama Cat, if you learn to trust me, then I think your babies will be more likely to come to me. I'm going to bring you treats each day, and you just wait---we are going to become good friends."

I'll spend time each day trying to tame those kittens. By the end of the summer, surely, I'll have at least a couple of them tamed. Then I can bring them up closer to the house where I can play with them. I start to think about what to name the kittens! No...that will have to wait. I'll need to find out which of them are boys and which are girls before I name them and that will be awhile. This is going to be fun!

As I ride Trixie that day, I tell her, "Don't worry, Trixie. I won't forget about you. The kittens are cute, but you'll get first dibs on my time!"