



## CHAPTER ONE: NEVINS—AND CLAY

Nevins Davenport, a proper British domesticated cat, sat on the windowsill of his three-bedroom two-bath white bungalow house as he always did at three in the afternoon. His tail swished left and right as he watched the children play with the various playground equipment at the Botanical Gardens. The sun sparkled on his black fur, creating a beautiful blue hue.

Today was obviously one of those special days, because the tables were set with bright blue plastic tablecloths, which kept blowing off the tables and interrupting the mothers' conversation. Nevins watched them desperately chase the cloths. The wind blew one over a mother, making her look like a blue ghost. Nevins chuckled. Finally, the mothers anchored them back on the tables using an ice chest and treat bags. Red, yellow, orange, green, and purple balloons tied with string and tethered to a small tree danced in the wind.

On one side of the field, two boys were throwing a ball to each other and when one of them caught it, the other would yell, "Good catch!" Near the swing set, one girl hung upside down from a bar, her long brown hair blowing like fringe in the wind. Others played hide-and-seek, darting behind large rocks and tree trunks,

then running fast to get to base which was a giant metal pirate's treasure chest.

Nevins found the human customs endlessly fascinating, but, one thing in particular caught his keen, yellow-green cat eyes. A young boy stayed by himself in the clubhouse and never played with the other children. Come to think of it Nevins had seen him in the clubhouse before.

The clubhouse, the latest edition to the Gardens, looked like a miniature pirate ship. Volunteers had spent weeks building it using recycled materials. Four, heavy eight-foot fence posts were sunk in the ground and an old red wooden row boat was perched in the middle attached to the posts by sturdy iron bolts. Recycled pine wood was used for the walls, door, and roof. Tree-log steps with a wooden pole railing led up to the pirate's clubhouse door. A black and white skull and crossbones flag hung from a plastic pole at the front of the boat.

The boy sat alone watching the other children play. He didn't interact with anyone and seemed invisible to everyone.

"Ok kids, come sit down!" one of the mothers yelled. "The pizza is almost here. Let's light up the cupcakes and sing happy birthday."

Nevins watched this strange custom. He thought humans did the strangest things, but this was the strangest. He wanted to get a closer look and *smell*, so he jumped off the windowsill and went out his cat door which was a small square hole covered by a thick plastic flap attached to the heavy oak front door.

As he emerged on the big front porch, a red Pizza World van

with a giant globe on the van's roof pulled up to the curb and stopped. It played music just like an ice cream truck. Nevins thought it sounded like the music box his human used to play every night. A teenager wearing a red t-shirt with a globe on it that said PIZZA WORLD hopped out of the truck. He carried three large boxes to the children and placed them in the middle of the table. A frenzy of arms reached into the boxes, grabbing slices. They ate fast and talked with their mouths full. Nevins thought the children devoured the pizza like a pack of wolves. *No self-respecting cat would eat like that*, he thought as he twitched his whiskers.

Deciding to stay on the porch and watch this show, he jumped on the old wicker rocker which had been his human's favorite place to sit. The momentum of his jump caused the rocker to move back and forth. Nevins had to balance, which is no problem for a cat. He sniffed the air. There was a smell of rain mixed in with the heavy scent of pepperoni pizza. A gusting wind blew his black fur forward. Bad weather was coming.

"Presents time!" The mother announced, her arms loaded with brightly colored packages.

"Yes!" the birthday boy exclaimed, shoving an unopened box of pizza and a cupcake box to a bench. Then he jumped on top of the table and sat down in the middle with his legs crossed. *Unbelievable!* Nevins thought to himself. *My human would never have tolerated such bad behavior!*

As the birthday boy ripped the wrapping paper off the gifts at a frenzied pace, the wind blew a blue plastic tablecloth over the box of pizza and cupcakes. The boy in the clubhouse, who was watching

the whole scene from the pirate ship's window, smiled when he saw the cloth cover the food. Why?

The wind kicked up fiercely, and it ripped the paper. Nevins's ears went back with every RIP, SCRUNCH, and SWOOSH of the paper. A small fragment of brightly colored paper blew through the air and landed on Nevins's shrubs. *How annoying.*

The parents rushed in to pick up their children. Each was given a party bag, but one fell under the table. Nobody noticed—except the boy in the clubhouse. The birthday boy's mother frantically swooped up as much of the wrapping paper as possible and threw it in the park's trash can. But she forgot the pizza and cupcakes covered by the tablecloth. Then, she and her son carried the gifts to their brand new black minivan and loaded up the loot in a side door that opened with just a push of a button. The birthday boy ran back to the tree with the balloons, untethered them, and scurried back to the minivan. They drove off in a hurry.

The boy in the clubhouse carefully walked barefoot down the log stairs. His blue jeans were torn on both knees so that each step he took down the stairs made his knees protrude from the holes. He wore a light green button down shirt, which camouflaged him whenever he sat in the grass. He walked over to the bench and picked up the pizza box and cupcake box that had been covered by the tablecloth. He carefully placed them on the table, and ate slowly, chewing the pizza and wiping his mouth with a spare clean napkin. *That is what I call proper manners. Exactly how a proper housecat would eat. I like this human.*

The boy carried the pizza and cupcakes up to the clubhouse

and then came down the log steps and retrieved the treat bag from under the table. He dumped it out. Two pieces of bubble gum, one black plastic comb, a pack of playing cards, some sunglasses and a chocolate bar spilled across the table.

“Score!” the boy exclaimed, hastily stuffing the loot back in the bag. He then ran toward the creek.

Satisfied that the boy was okay, Nevins hopped off his rocker and back into the house. The next morning he woke to a strong wind blowing leaves against the windows, and he started worrying. *How is that boy in the clubhouse doing?* Without even washing himself to make sure each strand of fur lay back perfectly, he jumped through his cat door and onto the front porch. The boy sat all alone in the clubhouse. He was wearing the same torn jeans and green shirt. *I can't stand this. Bad weather is coming. How do humans coax a cat out of a tree? Hmm. I know! With food!*

He went back inside to his computer. *What do humans eat for breakfast? They are not like cats who eat the same thing.* He remembered his human used to like a burger place, but he could not remember the name of it. So, he did what any intelligent cat would do—he looked in the history section of the computer and found the name of the burger place: Wonder Burger. It made Nevins sad to see it, because it was his human's favorite place to eat. With a heavy heart he pressed the button and typed the order. He paid for it using his human's credit card. It would be delivered to the house.

While he waited, he pressed the button of the dispenser for the dry cat crunchies which he ate every morning. He loved the mixture of chicken, beef and fish flavor. His fountain circulated cold

water. *I love the way this water stays fresh.*

The wind gusted even more. *Hmm... Now, how do I get the boy here? Do I go over to the clubhouse and speak to him? Do I coax him over to the house by meowing? I'll just have to wing it!*

He jumped through the cat door and sprinted across the street. The cars always drove so fast that he had to be careful. One time he started across the street and a car sped up and tried to hit him! *Humans could be so rude at times.*

But he wasn't going to let that bad experience stand in the way of trusting the boy. *After all, how many cats have scratched a human?* He used all his cat skills to sneak up to the clubhouse. "Meow." The boy did not hear him. So, he let out his most pitiful, "Meow! Mew! Meow!"

The boy poked his head out of the window and looked down. *His sandy-blonde hair is a bit overgrown for most humans.*

The boy smiled. "A cat! I love cats!"

*Music to my ears! This is all I need to hear to convince me I have chosen the right human.*

The boy scurried down the stairs and bent down. "Ahh. You are cute. You can live with me here if you want." The boy held out his hand for Nevins to smell it. Then, the boy petted him lightly on the head. Nevins looked at the boy's brown eyes. *I wonder how old he is? He is very thin and small for a human.*

Nevins tried to think of all the important things to remember about humans. He was impressed that the boy did not try to pick him up. Cats consider that very rude. The only thing ruder would be comparing a cat to a dog. That was the rudest thing in the world!

“Would you like to live with me in my clubhouse?”

Nevins was not sure this was the right time to speak to the boy. “Meow.”

The boy laughed. “O.k. I’ll take that as a maybe. Wait there.” The boy went up the stairs—barefoot—two at a time and sprinted down with some of the leftover pizza. “I wish I had some fish for you, but this is all I have, and it’s pretty dried out.” Nevins politely ate a few bites.

The roar of a blue convertible sports car rounded the corner. The radio was playing some loud *boom, boom, boom* type of music that disturbed Nevins. The driver pulled over to text something, and the noise of the radio was so loud that Nevins wanted to press his ears all the way against his head. But the annoying music stopped abruptly, and a piercing loud beep was followed by an announcer’s urgent voice.

“We interrupt this program to give you the latest emergency broadcast!” The announcer’s voice was anxious. He stumbled over his words and took a deep breath. Nevins noticed it, but he was not sure humans could detect it. All he did know at that moment is that for sure trouble was coming and fast.

“The tropical storm is now upgraded to a category 5 hurricane. Hurricane Hector is expected to hit land tomorrow at 12 p.m. All citizens in the Corpus Christi area should evacuate immediately, especially if they are in low-lying areas.”

The sports car sped off and the voice of the announcer faded.

*Jumping tuna! What do I do? Take in this young boy and reveal that I can speak?*

“We’re in trouble little cat,” the boy said. “I only have this clubhouse to live in and I don’t think it will hold in a big storm. There is no way I am going to a shelter. There is an abandoned house a block away, but I’m afraid it may not hold either. Then, there is an old building four blocks from here.”

Nevins could not stand it any longer. He sat up and spoke in his British accent. “You can stay with me.”

The boy did not speak for a long time. He just stared at Nevins. “Oh, I think I need to eat something, little cat. I think I just heard you talk to me.”

Nevins spoke again. “You did. And, my name is Nevins. Nevins Davenport. I live just across the street.”

The boy fainted. *Jumping tuna!* Nevins thought frantically to himself. *Now what do I do?* He began to lick the boy’s face and slowly he regained consciousness.

The boy lay flat on the ground just staring at Nevins. Suddenly, a Wonder Burger car pulled up to Nevins’s house and a woman jumped out of the car carrying a small bag. *Oh, this is a mess! I flat forgot about ordering the breakfast.*

Nevins scurried quickly across the street and positioned himself behind a bush. The woman rang the doorbell. Nevins cleared his throat then said, “Just leave the bag on the small table next to the rocker. I included your tip with my credit card payment.”

The woman smiled, placed the bag on the table, and left. Nevins ran back across the street. The boy was now sitting straight up. “Little cat, did you just speak to me and tell me your name is Nevins Davenport?”

Nevins sighed. “Yes. And, I am trusting you.”

The boy looked at him and smiled. “Thank you. My name is Clay. I’m an orphan. My parents died in a car accident a year ago. I lived with my grandmother on Elm Street, but she passed away a month ago.”

Nevins interrupted, “Listen, I want to hear your whole story, but we need to get to my house.”

Clay nodded. “Let me just get my things.” He ran up the stairs and came down with a small white plastic grocery bag. “Ok, let’s go,” Clay said as he jumped down the last two steps. They quickly crossed the street and walked up the steps to the front porch.

“The Wonder Burger bag is for you,” Nevins said. “I ordered you some breakfast. Come inside and we can talk.” He stood up on his hind legs, reached with his two front paws, pulled the handle down, and opened the heavy oak door.

