

COPPER AND THE TREE FROG

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THE NIGHT HERON NABBING

MIKE JONES

Illustrated by
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 HAXTON PRESS

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For Monica, forever my true companion

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FIRE THE KITTEN CANNONBALLS!

Her name was Copper, but she didn't know that quite yet.

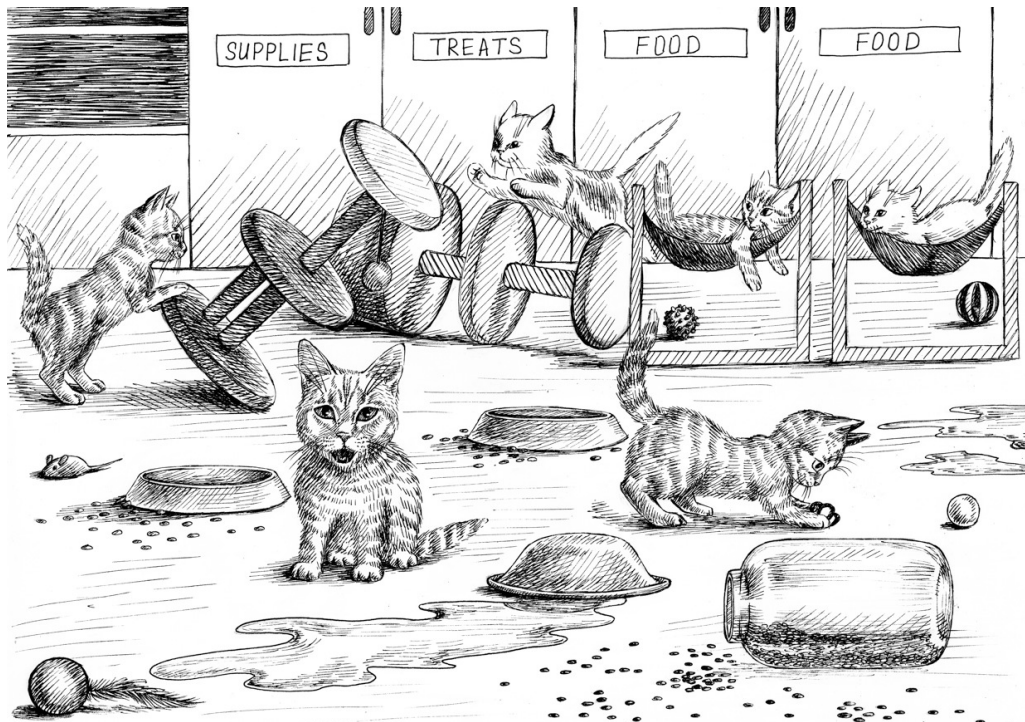
That was just one of many things about life that Copper hadn't learned. After all, her entire world was the cozy kitten community room at Chucktown Cats & Hounds, an animal shelter in Charleston, South Carolina. If a kitten had to be living in a shelter, there was no better place to be. She had towers to climb, hammocks to lie in, and oodles of toys to swat around. When no toy was available, Copper enjoyed ambushing unsuspecting kittens from behind the climbing tower. She had strong ninja skills for such a young feline.

Across the hallway, in the seasoned seniors' suite, lived the older cats. Each room had a wood-framed door with chicken coop wire stretched across it, so humans could peek inside without frisky felines trying to make a break for it. Sometimes in the wee hours of the morning, Copper would hang out by the kitten community room door and try to strike up a conversation with the older cats across the hall. But they would just stare at her blankly or lie down and show her their

backsides. They seemed like a sad and grumpy group in the seasoned seniors' suite.

On one of her late-night prowls, Copper noticed a white calico with orange and black patches staring into the kitten room. She hadn't seen this cat before. "Hi there!" Copper greeted the newcomer with an enthusiastic grin that seemed wider than her face.

The calico flattened her ears, bared her teeth, and gave such a fearsome hiss that Copper turned and ran in a panic, slamming headfirst into a three-story kitty tower and hurling two groggy kitten cannonballs into nearby hammocks chock full of even more sleeping kitties. The tower crashed into a feeding station, and a mushroom cloud of kibble and water enveloped the area. A frenzy of fleeing kittens formed, and the world's cutest stampede thundered through the once-tranquil kitten community room. Kittens skidded across the slick floor, colliding with one another as feeding stations and kitty towers toppled like dominoes.



A single calico hiss had set off a chain reaction that left a trail of destruction in the kitten room. Climbing towers lay crumpled in rubble of scattered soggy cat food. An eerie sound like rain hitting pavement filled the room as the slurping herd of soaking wet kittens frantically attempted to dry themselves with their tongues. One kitten was left to air-dry because he had somehow caught his paw in a hammock. For the rest of the night, he sat on the floor with one leg held up like he was trying to ask the teacher a question but couldn't get her attention.

In the morning, a very confused group of shelter employees arrived and found a haze of cat food dust clouding the rays of sunlight streaming into the kitten community room. They quickly freed the little guy who had his paw stuck in a hammock. Because the entire room was a disaster area and all the kittens were covered in fine cat food particles, the shelter employees decided to give each kitten a bath. That was the day Copper realized two things about herself. She wasn't very fond of calico cats, and she really, really, really hated baths.

Despite the catastrophe from the night before, Copper decided to visit the door of the kitten community room again the next evening. She wasn't sure what she would do if the calico was there, but she couldn't contain her curiosity about the grown-up cats across the hallway. Still, as she pussyfooted her way to the door all she could think was, "Please don't be the calico, please don't be the calico."

To her great relief, the door across the hallway was calico-cat free. Instead, an old, green-eyed tomcat was there, lounging on his side. His fur was solid black except for a lightbulb-shaped patch of white on his chest. At that moment, Copper decided to say hello and not let one bad experience stop her

from trying to make new friends. She mustered up her courage, prepared for the worst, and hoped for the best.

Fortunately, the black tomcat set her at ease by speaking first. "Why hello there, little one," he said as he licked the side of his paw and brushed it behind a tattered ear. "I must admit I've cooked up a disaster or two in my time, but that was a colossal commotion you caused last night."

"Umm, yeah that was a little embarrassing. I don't think the calico liked me."

"Don't let it bother you, kid. That was Callie and she does not play well with others. Somehow, she keeps getting herself adopted but her humans always bring her back." He casually looked over his shoulder and added, "Hey Callie, what's your record for longest adoption? About two weeks?"

Just then, hissing arose from somewhere in the back of the seasoned seniors' suite.

Copper didn't want to pile any more abuse on the calico. "I'm sure she simply needs the right human to come along."

Another loud hiss echoed throughout the room, this time interrupted by the unmistakable gagging sound of Callie the calico with a hairball caught in her throat. It sounded like a toilet beginning to flush. Copper tried to hold it together in front of her new friend, but a small giggle escaped anyway. The black cat sat upright and gazed across at Copper, his grin revealing that he thought the unfortunately timed hairball was hilarious too. "My name is Sarge," he said, "and I'm guessing you don't know your name yet."

"Nice to meet you, Sarge!" Copper hadn't thought about knowing her name before. "How do I get a name?" she asked.

Sarge opened his mouth to reply. But before he could get a word out, one final extra-strength hack came from the room behind him, followed by the sound of something disgusting

hitting the tiled floor. Callie's Operation Hairball Launch had been a success. Without acknowledging the grossness behind him, Sarge continued, "When your humans adopt you, they'll take you home and give you a name."

"How will I know the name they've given me? The humans here talk to us all the time, but I can't understand a word they're saying."

"They'll say the same word to you a bunch in human language," Sarge explained. "At first, you'll think they aren't too bright because they keep repeating themselves, but they honestly have more of a vocabulary than you think. The word that you hear more than any other is going to be your name."

Copper sat on her hind legs and wrapped her tail around her paws. After hearing Sarge's explanation, it occurred to her that she might already have a name. She opened her eyes wide and perked her oversized ears. "I think my name is Kitty," she declared.

Sarge nodded as if he was expecting Copper to say that. "That's a word humans use when they don't know our names. You've got the right idea, though. You've heard 'Kitty' a lot, but when you get adopted, you will need to listen for a different, new word that your humans keep saying." He rubbed his face against the wire mesh on the door as he added, "Don't get that confused with 'no-no' though."

Copper tilted her head, which is the cat equivalent of saying, "Say what?" Like all cats, Copper was a little lazy, so if she could say an entire sentence with a simple head-move, she was all about that.

Sarge smirked as he clarified, "No-no is what humans say when they want you to speed up whatever you're doing. If you are sharpening your claws on the couch, jumping on the kitchen table, or sprinting through the house in the middle of

the night and they say ‘no-no,’ then they want you to do it faster. Some humans will even come running at you or throw a pillow to speed you up.”

“Wow, humans do some weird things,” marveled Copper.

“They sure do,” Sarge agreed. “And I only know a little about them. You’ll be adopted soon and then you’ll truly find out how weird they are.”

“Why do you think I’ll get adopted soon?”

Sarge stretched out on his belly with his paws in front of him. He looked over at the little orange tabby with stripes and swirls going every which way. “You’re a kitten, and you are cute. Humans will come running for that combo like cats to a bowl of wet food.”

The mention of delicious canned wet food immediately caused Copper’s mind to drift off, although that wasn’t out of the ordinary. Copper was easily distracted. The shelter vet called this condition Acute Feline Distractitis.



Copper’s Distract Facts

If you’ve ever had a cat as a pet, seen a cat at a friend’s house, or watched a cat video, you know they can get distracted easily. A cat can be stalking a ferocious cricket or preparing a sneak attack on the family dog when suddenly it will stop and lick a random spot on its side for no good reason. Acute Feline Distractitis is not a real thing, but if it was, Copper would definitely suffer from it.

Throughout her adventures, Copper will meet many amazing creatures. Each creature she meets is a type of animal you might be able to see around homes, schools,

parks, beaches, cities, environmental education centers, or lots of other fun outdoor places. The animals you'll see in your surroundings are just as amazing as those that Copper meets, and her Distract Facts share some interesting things to look for when you see them. So, when you see the paws, it's a chance to pause and learn a little more about nature.

Learn more at distractfacts.com.

COPPER'S EYES glazed over as thoughts of yummy wet food flooded her brain. Her mouth hung open, with a bit of drool forming on her lips. She was imagining the delightful pop of an aluminum can lid and the savory aroma of juicy mystery meat chunks sliding from the can when Sarge snapped her out of the trance. "Plus, you are friendly and playful. Humans love to see that when they visit the shelter." Sarge glanced over his shoulder again and added, "That doesn't seem to come naturally to *some* cats."

Copper braced herself for another of Callie's frightful hisses, but instead a long, low growl came from the unseen corners of Sarge's room. Apparently, Callie had decided against further hissing. Better not to risk another awkward hairball incident. "That Callie is a furry ball of meanness," Sarge continued. "She's been returned so many times the workers here have started calling her Comeback Callie." Sarge ducked as a calico paw swooshed over his head from just beyond the door frame. Despite his verbal jabs, Copper had a feeling Sarge was fond of Callie. He obviously knew a lot about her history.

“How long have you lived here?” Copper asked as Sarge kept a watchful eye for another swipe from Callie.

“I just got here yesterday.” Sarge’s naturally mischievous grin disappeared as he added, “They think I’m a stray.”

“What’s a stray?” questioned Copper.

“A stray is a house animal that has no home. But I’m no stray, little one. The world is my home.”

Copper stared into Sarge’s emerald eyes. The gray haze wrapping his pupils made him look both wise and tired. “So, you’ve never had your own humans?” she asked.

Sarge yawned wide, revealing a couple of missing teeth, and further explained, “I had a human, but that was only for a short while and a long time ago. That was before—” Sarge stopped talking when he realized Copper had disappeared. When he heard litter box scratching coming from the kitten room, Sarge chuckled as he stretched and walked gingerly to one of the plushy beds in the seasoned seniors’ suite. “Sometimes you have to answer the call of nature,” he said softly to himself. “I was just about to tell her all about that.”

NEVER TRUST YOUR TAIL

The next day, Copper spent most of her time tackling kittens and swatting crinkly toys across the floor. She was having too much fun to get in a standard nap schedule, so she merely settled for morning, mid-morning, pre-lunch, post-lunch, mid-afternoon, and late-afternoon naptimes. Once, between her afternoon naps, she thought about Sarge, but when she strolled to the screen door, he wasn't there. Instead, there was a gray tabby with white sock-like feet sitting at the doorway to the seasoned seniors' suite.

She tried to say hello to the sock-wearing cat, but he sat there blinking like he didn't hear her or didn't know how to respond to a simple hello. Copper was about to ask him if he knew Sarge, when she noticed something trying to sneak up behind her. It was orange and stripy and flicked gently side-to-side. She inched toward the strange creature and it moved away from her, mirroring her moves with precision. It was like the creature knew she saw it, but it wanted to stay close anyway.

Copper continued to circle toward it, and it continued to

circle away from her, never getting any closer or any further away. This was a cunning enemy following her, but she knew she would get the better of this hunt. Leaping at the creature, Copper seized it in her mighty kitten paws. The great huntress had caught her prey.

Then she realized it was her own tail.



Copper quickly released her death grip on her tail, hoping that Mr. Sockfeet hadn't seen her embarrassing performance. When she twirled around and looked across the hallway, she found Sarge sitting there instead.

"Ah, the old 'I thought my tail was a snake that looks exactly like me and was sneaking up behind me' mistake." Sarge laughed sympathetically. "Don't worry about it, kid. We've all done it at least once or twice." He glanced with suspicion at his own tail.

“It was like it had a mind all its own! I *know* I wasn’t moving it,” Copper said with eyes wide as quarters.

“Oh yes, I know the feeling. Like I said, it happens to the best of us. No need to explain yourself.”

“Thanks, Sarge.” Copper eyeballed her tail once more before turning back to the old tomcat. “Hey, that reminds me. I meant to ask you a question last night before I had to uh, take care of some business. Was Sarge the name your human gave you?”

“No, I stopped answering to that name many years ago. Sometimes—”

“Watch out!” Copper shouted.

Sarge wheeled around and his tail puffed up like a big angry cloud on the end of his butt.



Poofy Tails

Cats puff up their tails when they are frightened or feel threatened. It’s an instinctive reaction to make themselves look bigger to whoever or whatever is threatening them. They can poof out their tails to twice the normal size. Fortunately, humans can’t do this, or else we would be replacing our pants far too often.

Learn more at distractfacts.com/poofytails.

AS SOON AS Sarge saw Callie standing behind him, his tail shrank to its normal pencil-like shape. Callie strutted up to the screen door and glared at Copper. “Why don’t you go ahead

and tell her the name your human gave you?” Callie sneered at Sarge without turning her gaze from Copper.

“Why don’t we tell the story about how you got that nice little brown spot under your eye?” Sarge calmly countered. “I think everyone here would enjoy that explosive tale.”

Under Callie’s left eye, Copper caught a glimpse of a brown streak which looked sort of like a rotten banana. Callie mumbled something and slipped out of sight, but Copper still felt like the calico’s eyes were watching her somehow.

“Sorry about that,” said Sarge. “Callie and I go way back, and there are lots of stories we could tell on each other. To answer your question, Sarge is the name my animal friends gave me years ago. House animals get names from their humans, but most other animals get names from their parents or friends. A few of us lucky ones get names from both.”

“When you say other animals, you mean like the dogs down the hallway?” Copper asked.

Sarge smiled. “You don’t know it yet because you haven’t been out of this shelter, but the world is much bigger than the little parts where we make our homes. Everywhere is not the same as your somewhere. There are animals and places out there that are simply amazing. When you look, you see.”

Copper had a hard time imagining a world outside the kitten community room. Sarge had the most fantastic stories to tell about the incredible places where he’d traveled and some of the fascinating animals he had met. Copper spent the next few hours asking him question after question. Trying to picture the places and the creatures Sarge talked about was difficult for Copper. Until now, she had only seen cats, humans, and the occasional dog passing by.

There were several interruptions during all their hours of talking. A few of them weren’t even Copper’s fault. The shelter

workers were busier than usual, and they scurried in and out of the cat rooms, spraying something on the windows and wiping the stuff right back off with towels. Copper thought that was a rather odd thing to do. She also noticed that the workers picked things up off the floor and moved them to other places in the room. Her stomach rumbled as she watched one worker cram a jar of kitty treats into a jam-packed cabinet.

Copper thoughtfully reasoned that the shelter workers must want to rearrange things to make the room look different. Thanks to her natural desire to help, an idea popped into her head. She skipped over to one of the silvery food bowls, plucked out a piece of food, and swatted it across the floor to a new spot.

Very proud of her first try at helping, Copper decided that the food looked great in the new spot, and it was also much more convenient for the kittens on that side of the room who wanted a snack. She decided to move the rest of it. And with that, Copper began to shovel out every bit of food from the bowl and swat it to a new location. She was having fun and being helpful at the same time!

The other kittens didn't have the same natural desire to be as helpful as Copper, but tiny cat food pieces flying across the floor captured their attention. Within seconds, every kitten was pouncing and swatting food from one end of the room to the other. A shelter worker who was walking by snatched open the door and cried, "No-no!"

Thanks to Sarge, Copper knew exactly what to do.

"They want us to go faster, everyone! Let's move these chunks of food as fast as we can!"

To the shelter worker's ears, this sounded something like a loud "Mew!!"

Copper began slapping kibble like a human trying to get a

bee out of his face. Kittens scrambled everywhere at lightning speed. Bits of kitty food skidded across the floor like leaves in a tornado, driven by a funnel cloud of kittens. Lunging for one of the kittens, the shelter worker stumbled over a scratcher toy with a ball hidden inside. The toy flipped over, the ball catapulted across the room, and the shelter worker grabbed a cabinet door to catch herself. The door to the overstuffed cabinet flew open, releasing the jar of chewy kitty treats which crashed to the floor, spewing treats everywhere.

Another staff member heard the clamor and arrived to find her bewildered coworker standing in the room with cat food splattered from corner to corner, kittens sprinting in every direction and battling to snag kitty treats, and one fluffy white kitten swatting around the ball that had been freed from its scratcher toy prison. Only one climbing tower remained upright, and Copper jumped to the top platform to survey the remodeling project she had done with her fellow kittens. She purred loudly with contentment. The room certainly did look different! She knew the shelter workers must be very happy that the kittens had helped. For some reason, though, they didn't look as happy as she had expected.

When shelter employees began sweeping up and putting items back where they were before, Copper was astonished. It was the same kind of thing they had done with the windows. Spray something on and then wipe it right back off. No doubt about it. Humans were weird. Copper hopped down from the climbing tower to see if Sarge had any idea why they behaved like that.

Dodging another shelter employee as he entered the room with a broom and a long-handled dustpan, Copper walked over to the screen door of the kitten community room. While Copper had been helping the shelter staff rearrange things,

Sarge had dozed off by the door to his own room with a paw resting over his eyes. The latch on the kitten room door clicked shut, and Sarge drew back his paw to see Copper trying to lick an itchy spot below her chin.

“That’s one thing your humans will be good for,” Sarge said with the gravelly voice of someone who has just awakened from a blue-ribbon nap. “When you’ve got an itch out of reach, all you have to do is jump right in the middle of whatever a human is doing and give them a little bump with your head. They’ll scratch the top of your head or under your chin without you having to tell them anything. They’re pretty easy to train.”

Copper stopped her quest to scratch the unscratchable. “That’s good to hear. Hopefully, my human will have a good rough tongue. That spot at the top of my head itches all the time and I had to get the white fluffy kitten to lick it for me earlier today. I noticed one of the shelter ladies smiling big when she saw that. I guess she was happy that she didn’t have to do it.”

“What? No, humans don’t use their tongues. They scratch with their hands. She was probably smiling because you were doing something cute. When they are grinning at you or you hear them say something like ‘Awwww,’ it means you are doing something cute. You can get them to do anything you want when you do something cute.”

That made sense to Copper. She had already begun to suspect cats had the ability to control humans. One time, she had been sleeping in a kitty hammock with her paws in the air and a human had scratched her belly without her asking. It did seem like they were easy to train.

“Listen,” said Sarge, “you’ve probably noticed a lot of activity around here today. That means they’re getting the

place ready for a whole bunch of humans to come in and adopt pets. This may be the last time we get to talk, and I wanted to let you know I really like you, kid. Even after crabby Callie lashed out at you just for being friendly, you were still kind enough to say she just needs to find the right humans. I can tell you've got a good heart. We could use a few more animals like you in this world."

Copper had been excited at the idea of getting her own humans, but she hadn't thought about leaving her new friend behind. She liked Sarge. It made her sad to think she might not see him again. "Is there a chance you and I could be adopted by the same people?" she asked.

"Humans who come looking for a kitten aren't usually interested in an old feline like myself," said Sarge. "I'm not likely to be adopted at all."

Copper didn't like hearing Sarge talk like that. "Well, maybe I'll do something to keep from getting adopted, like turn off my cuteness so they won't notice me. I like it here. It's comfortable and I wouldn't mind staying."

Sarge laughed and his smile had a warmth that Copper could almost feel on her fur across the hallway. "I don't think you could turn off the cuteness even if you tried, little one, and you don't need to stay here simply because you are comfortable. Never be content being content."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean never pass up the chance for a new adventure. It can be scary at first, because it might be something you aren't used to, like having your own humans. They can be weird, but I think you'll be glad you have them. You'll never know until you go on that first adventure."

"First adventure?" asked Copper. "Do you think I'll be going on adventures like the ones you've had?"

“Every creature has its own adventures in life,” said Sarge. “The adventures that come your way will be different from mine. Just be ready when the moment comes.”

Copper perked up her ears. The sound of tiny padded feet hitting the floor behind her meant a kitten had vacated a kitty hammock, and a nice pre-warmed bed was immediately available. A heated bed was worth fighting for in a room full of cats, so Copper wanted to stake her claim quickly.

“Gonna nap, chat with you later,” she muttered as she hurried over to the hammock.

Her abrupt exit didn’t offend Sarge. A little more napping sounded pretty good to him as well. He had started to feel a lot of the aches and pains that come with being a twelve-year-old cat since his arrival at the shelter. All this sitting around wasn’t doing him any good.

He scanned the room for an available plushy bed, but all of them were taken. Along one wall was a series of crisscrossing shelves arranged like steps for the cats to climb. On the top shelf, next to a small rectangular window, sat Callie. She was flicking her tail up and down and making a strange chattering sound toward a crow on the window ledge. Sarge thought the crow looked familiar and figured its presence would make the cantankerous calico even grumpier. One more thing to make his stay in the seasoned seniors’ suite a little less pleasant.



What’s with the Chatter?

Some cats will make an unusual clicking and whining sound when they see a bird or squirrel outside a window. Experts have different ideas as to why cats do this, but the general theory points to a cat’s hunting instincts. The cat is

either signaling frustration because it can't get to its potential prey, or it is announcing how much it would like to kill that thing outside the window. In Callie's case, always assume the latter.

Learn more at distractfacts.com/catchatter.

SARGE SETTLED onto a blanket near the back of the room. The windows there stretched from floor to ceiling. He warmed himself in the last sunbeam of the day and watched one of the shelter workers walk a dog down the sidewalk. As Sarge's eyelids became heavier than his desire to keep them open, he drifted off for some much-needed rest.

The shelter employees went home for the day and soon sunbeams turned to moonbeams. Copper got up a few times as usual during the evening and checked for Sarge at the door. When she didn't find him there, she returned to snoozing or trying to tempt another kitten into a wrestling match. Late in the night, Copper heard a commotion coming from the seasoned seniors' suite. Crashes and multiple cats yowling like a choir of old creaky doors echoed through the space, followed by an eerie silence. Copper ran to the door, calling Sarge's name.

There was no answer.

She stayed there, watching and calling for Sarge until the sunbeams returned, and the shelter staff arrived for the Saturday morning shift. More humans began to appear shortly after the staff had arrived. Most of them made a beeline down the hallway to the dog section. Copper got on her hind legs and stood tall against the screen to watch them go by. She was

also hoping to get a good look into the seasoned seniors' suite, which was busy with workers carrying in brooms and dustpans like they did in the kitten room after she had helped rearrange things. Finally, one of the workers walked out carrying something that looked like a cat in his arms.

As she stood there with her paws on the screen door, Copper called Sarge's name again just as a family of four humans arrived. The young boy and girl saw a cute orange tabby kitten, dark orange stripes and swirls going every which way, standing on her hind legs and meowing at the door. Their hearts melted. They carried her to the front desk, and as Sarge had predicted, Copper became a member of a family that very day.

She purred as the boy cradled her and the girl stroked her head while their parents talked to the shelter worker at the desk. The children kept saying the word "Copper" as they showered attention on her. The shelter worker repeated the word as she wrote up some paperwork. Copper wondered if she was hearing her new name. She liked the sound of it.

Copper was both excited and sad. She was getting her own humans and she had learned her new name, but she wanted to share the news with Sarge. What had happened in the seasoned seniors' suite in the middle of the night? Why hadn't he come back to the door to talk with her at least one last time? Copper was pulled away from her thoughts as her new family loaded her into a pet carrier for the ride to her new home. When a shelter worker set the pet carrier on the counter, Copper was shocked to see a familiar cat locked in a cage behind the desk. As she left the shelter with her new family, the last thing Copper saw was Callie's fierce eyes staring at her from inside that cage.