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for Meow**

Show and Tail

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Scholastic Inc.

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Bubbles's Bulging Belly

Bubbles's belly is huge! She waddles around the kiddie pool Mama filled with blankets for her. The pool is in the corner of our living room, right below the window that gets the best morning light.

"Kira, how many kittens do you think Bubbles

is going to have?" asks my little brother, Ryan. We're kneeling by the side of the kiddie pool. "I bet she'll have at least eighteen."

"Eighteen?" Mama says. She stands over us. "Let's hope she only has one or two. We don't have much room for new cats right now."

"I think she'll have six perfectly perfect kittens," I say. "Because she has six stripes across her belly."

Bubbles is a brown-and-black-striped tabby cat. Earlier this month, the animal shelter brought her to stay at our family's cat café, The Purrfect Cup. I named her Bubbles because her belly keeps getting rounder and bigger, like when I blow air into my gum to make a big

bubble. And Mama keeps saying she looks like she's about to pop.

Bubbles paws at the blankets in the kiddie pool and meows loudly. Mama says she's nesting. That means she's going to have her kittens really soon, so she's making everything warm and safe for them. Bubbles pulls the blankets around with her teeth, arranging them into a cozy nest for her babies to sleep in. Dad says that when Mama was pregnant with me, she was nesting too. She filled the freezer with trays of macaroni and cheese, and she sewed extra cushions for her rocking chair.

"Do you think Bubbles will have her babies today?" I ask Mama.

Mama smiles. "I think that's a real possibility. I'm going to bring her to Dr. Delgado this morning."

I frown. "Why does she have to go to the animal hospital? Can't she have her kittens here?"

"Don't worry, Kira," says Mama. "Dr. Delgado is the best vet around. Bubbles will be in good hands. And I'll bring the kiddie pool to make sure she's comfortable."

Dad opens the door to our apartment. He's been baking in the café kitchen all morning. I can tell because he's got flour on his forehead.

"Kira, Ryan, ready for school?" he asks.

"Yup," says Ryan. He leans down and pets

Bubbles very gently. "You're a strong and fierce woman, Bubbles. You've totally got this."

I cross my arms. I, Kira Parker, have a lot of *great ideas*, and going to school while Bubbles is having her kittens is not one of them. I remember how worried I was when Mama went to the hospital to have Ryan.

"I think I'll go to the hospital with Bubbles," I say.

Dad crosses his arms back at me. "You can't miss the first day of school to watch a cat have kittens, Kira."

"You'll feel much better when you're distracted with your friends," says Mama. "Everything will be okay. The hospital is the best place to have a

baby—or a kitten. Don't you remember when I went to the hospital when I was pregnant?"

"I do. That's why I'm so worried! You came back with Ryan. Are you sure that was a good idea?"

Ryan sticks his tongue out at me. "I'm the best thing that ever happened to this family."

Mama pulls us in for a hug and squishes our faces into her arms. "You're *both* the best things that ever happened to me. And Bubbles is going to be so happy to meet her kittens."

I sigh. "Can I name them when I get home? I have a lot of good ideas for kitten names."

"Of course," says Mama. "You and Ryan can both name them."

I kiss my fingers, then touch them to Bubbles's

head. "Good luck," I whisper. "I'll be back soon."

Bubbles looks up at me with her big, gold eyes. She blinks four times, then leans forward so I can scratch her ears. I imagine that each blink is a word and she's saying, "I can do this." I think Ryan was right. Bubbles is a strong and fierce woman.

I grab my backpack and follow Dad downstairs into the café. We're opening late today because Dad wants to walk us to school, so there aren't any customers in The Purrfect Cup. But even without customers, The Purrfect Cup is packed!

Mama was right when she said we didn't have much room for kittens. There are cats everywhere. They're sleeping on top of shelves, sitting

in the customers' chairs, and cuddling in the corners. When I look at them, I feel like a chocolate chip melting into cookie dough—warm and surrounded by sweetness. These cats are my best friends.

Our family's cat and my *very best* friend, Pepper, leaps down from one of the shelves. I catch her in my arms.

"I missed you, Pepper," I say, snuggling into her fur. "I know you're suspicious of Bubbles's belly. But I told you, there are no aliens in there. Just kittens."

Pepper wriggles free of my hug and jumps on the ground. She's been sleeping in the café ever since Bubbles started nesting. Even though

Pepper loves hanging out down here with all the cats, she likes having the apartment to herself. I think she and Dad would both agree we don't need more cats—or cat hair—on our sofa. But if there isn't room for the kittens in the café or up in our apartment, where will they go?

"Dad, where are the kittens going to live?" I ask.

"Not here," Dad says quickly. *Too quickly.* I frown. He clears his throat. "I mean, I'm so excited for the miracle of life and all that . . . the kittens will probably stay with us until they're old enough to be adopted. Mama and I are hoping it won't take long to find them homes."

"I hope it takes years!" says Ryan. "Can you

imagine if we had eighteen kittens? I could train a whole cat army and we could drive around in a Jeep and—”

Ryan spends the whole walk to school talking about all the things he'd do with a cat army, like steal a spaceship and eat all the cheese on the moon. I'm still thinking about how many kittens it would take to steal a spaceship when school starts. My teacher, Ms. Pettina, puts the first math worksheet of the year down on my desk. I groan. Math makes less sense than a cat army going to the moon. I try to reword the math problem in terms I know.

Leo has 33 ~~pieces of candy~~ cats left over from Halloween. If he gives 14 ~~pieces~~ cats to Mark and

11 pieces cats to Anna, how many pieces cats does he have left?

I sigh. Changing candy to cats doesn't make solving the problem any easier. My brain feels like egg whites that have been whipped for too long. At least Ms. Pettina let me sit next to my best human friend, Alex. She's wearing new pink cat-eye glasses and a matching pink sweatshirt.

"Nice first-day outfit," I whisper, leaning toward her desk.

"Thanks. I thought you were going to wear your lucky sweatshirt?" she whispers back.

I look down and realize I'm still wearing my paw-print pajama shirt and pants. My granny bought them for me—the shirt even has my name



sewn above the pocket! But pajamas are for sleeping, not math. I got distracted by Bubbles's bulging belly and didn't finish getting ready for school!

I forget to whisper. "Alex! Oh no, I'm wearing pajamas!"