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BOBBY'S VALENTINE GIFT

Kittikins dropped her front paws close to the ground, wiggled her tail, and dove into the pile of valentines. Bobby giggled with glee and picked up the small black and white kitten. "Kittikins, you aren't helping at all." He nuzzled the soft fur close to his face, and the cat began to purr.

Cari watched the two with a wistful smile on her face. She had purchased the kitten for Bobby two months ago, hoping it would ease his sadness. Cari's husband, Sam, had passed away almost a year ago, and Bobby still didn't understand why his daddy had gone to heaven. He had lost his enthusiasm, preferring to stay at home rather than play with his friends. Seeing her son's pain increased her own. His teacher reported that he was withdrawn and sat alone during recess.

One day, during their weekly grocery shopping trip, the local humane society had set up a booth in front of the store. Bobby spotted the tiny kittens scampering around in a cage. The black and white kitten peeked through the bars and stretched out a paw trying to tap him. Bobby reached out his finger and began playing with the kitten. His face beamed a beautiful smile, the first she'd seen in a very long time. So, they brought the kitten home with them.

Bobby loved the kitten and they formed an instant bond. Slowly over the past two months, his smile returned. He had even invited his friend Joey to a sleepover on Saturday, a major breakthrough in Cari's eyes. Now, watching her son with his kitten, she was able to believe they might just make it after all.

Bobby was busy choosing just the right valentine for each of his friends. On Monday, his class planned to exchange the cards during a party for which Cari needed to make cupcakes. Since they lived in Arizona, and it was a beautiful sunny day, Cari suggested that Bobby take Kittikins into the back yard to play. "Okay, Mom. Kittikins loves to play hide and seek in the bushes. Maybe she'll get tired and then I can finish my valentines."

Cari watched as Bobby, hugging the kitten close, went out into the back yard. She sat at the kitchen table, sipping a cup of morning tea, as she kept an eye on their antics. Mrs. Gissing, the next door neighbor, walked out of her front door, leaning heavily on her cane. She slowly moved to her rocker and sat as she had nearly every day since Cari and Sam had moved in. Last month, Mrs. Gissing's husband had given up a long struggle with Alzheimer's. Since his death, she'd seemed to have lost all her will to live, much like Bobby had been before getting Kittikins. Sad that Mr. and Mrs. Gissing had no children. Many friends from church tried to cheer her with visits and suggested outings, but she remained a recluse, waiting to be joined again with her husband. Although she had always seemed frail, now she seemed to be fading away. There was no light in her eyes, and her cheeks had lost all color.

As Cari watched, Kittikins darted from under the bushes in the yard and leaped to Mrs. Gissing's porch. Bobby ran after her calling, "Kittikins, no! Come back!" Cari rushed out

to help. The kitten jumped straight into Mrs. Gissing's lap, startling her. Bobby was close behind and almost fell into her lap reaching for the kitten. "Kittikins, that wasn't nice! I'm sorry, Mrs. Gissing."

The old lady reached out a hand and touched the kitten. Then she smiled at the little boy. "That's all right, Bobby. She's a lovely little thing. Do you mind if I hold her a minute?"

"No," replied Bobby, "if you hold her close and pet her like this she'll purr for you." Bobby put the kitten next to the old lady's face. She stroked the kitten, who snuggled into her neck, closed her eyes, and began to purr. "She likes you," Bobby said. Mrs. Gissing just smiled.

Cari watched as the little boy and the frail old woman chatted. Both seemed to be totally tuned to each other, so went back into the house to observe from a distance. The kitten lay on Mrs. Gissing's lap, Bobby sat on the floor beside her, and they both petted the kitten while they talked.

Later, Bobby and Kittikins returned to the house for lunch. "Mom, Kittikins and Mrs. Gissing are friends now. And I'm her friend, too. Did you know she never had a little boy? Or even a little girl? But she used to have a kitten named Pearl. Pearl is in heaven now with Mr. Gissing and Daddy. I told her Kittikins and I would come back to visit. Is that okay, Mommy?"

Monday morning Bobby left for school with his valentines in the cardboard shoe box, covered with red crepe paper and white lace hearts. "When I come home, Mommy, I'm going to show you all my valentines! And then I want to take my valentine to Mrs. Gissing."

Cari smiled, remembering the excitement of exchanging valentines. The friendship Bobby had started with Mrs. Gissing seemed to have perked her up a little. She still seemed frail and quiet, but when Bobby and Kittikins went to visit, her eyes sparkled and a dimple showed in her cheek when she smiled.

"Mommy, can I please talk to you 'bout something real serious?" Bobby asked as he sat at the kitchen table after school while Cari admired his valentines. "Why, sure, honey. What is it?"

"I want to give a special valentine to Mrs. Gissing. I picked out the bestest one of the bunch, see?"

"She'll love it," replied Cari.

"Well, I want her to be happy. And she doesn't have any little kids to keep her company. She's so lonesome, just like I was when Daddy went to heaven."

"I know, honey," Cari said.

"Well, you know how much I love Kittikin. I love her almost as much as I love you, Mommy. I thought maybe we could get a kitty for Mrs. Gissing, and I was gonna ask you. But, I don't think there is another kitty as beautiful as Kittikin. And Mrs. Gissing really loves Kittikin, too. So last night I cried and cried thinking about being without Kittikin, and then I remembered that I have you. But Mrs. Gissing doesn't have anybody. So, I think I would like to give Kittikin to Mrs. Gissing for Valentine's Day. Is that okay, Mommy?"

With tears shining in her eyes, and an overwhelming love in her heart for this beautiful, caring child, Cari pulled him into her arms and hugged him tightly. "Bobby, I think that would be a wonderful thing to do. You are the best friend anyone could ever have."

Together Bobby and Cari walked to Mrs. Gissing's house carrying Kittikin. Bobby handed Kittikin to Mrs. Gissing and said "Happy Valentine's Day, Mrs. Gissing!" "Now you won't be all alone anymore."

The old woman's face lit up in a brilliant smile and tears streamed down her cheeks. "Oh, Bobby, that is the most wonderful Valentine I have ever received."

Later that night as Cari tucked Bobby into bed, she asked "Which valentine was your favorite?"

Smiling sleepily Bobby replied, "The hug from Mrs. Gissing."