

Here's another vignette inspired by SteeleWatchers: vharaps wondered if the gold heart necklace that Steele gave to Laura in Scene Steelers ever appeared anywhere else in the series. Everyone agreed it hadn't, and a variety of explanations was offered for what had happened to it. It turned out that Pat was correct: Nero, Laura's cat who is seen in Red Holt Steele but never thereafter, stole it before he ran away. It's time for the true story to be told.

## Steele Sitting in the Catbird Seat

by Peg Daniels

I jumped up on the table to see what the new shiny thing around Mama's neck was. When she leaned forward over her paperwork, which that useless puppy-chow-for-brains wasn't helping her with, it dangled deliciously. Great! A new toy! I crouched down and waited for my next opportunity, shifting my hind feet from side to side. When she leaned forward again, I leapt and gave it a good bat.

"Nero," Mama chided. I stared at her. What was her problem? To my astonishment she swept out an arm and shoved me off the table! Oh, the indignity. Humans were nearly as slow as turtles, but they could sure push their weight around, thinking themselves the cat's meow. I pretended I didn't care. I raised my head and gave my chest a few good licks, then went to check out my food bowl, all the while planning my next move.

That night, I slipped up the stairs toward her bedroom as quiet as a cat. *Not* as quiet as a mouse, as humans were fond of saying. Humans were so limited. *I* could hear mouse rustlings and squeakings just fine, thank you very much. And as for Mama occasionally referring to *that one* as a cat burglar, well, it was an insult to the entire feline species. No self-respecting cat would ever raise such a ruckus while on a furtive nighttime rove. Unless he was after a female in heat. And that, that *cur* acted like Mama was always in heat. And even when she was in heat, she had much better sense than to mate with *him*. I shuddered at the thought of Mama even *contemplating* such an act. Mamas just didn't do that kind of thing, and definitely not with a tom like *that one*. Tom? Had I just called *him* a tom? *He* didn't deserve the designation. On second thought, male turkeys were also 'toms,' so in that sense, the term could be applied. Turkeys were so stupid, and this guy was without a doubt clueless . . . . Heh, heh, "clueless." Good one. My Mama the PI teamed up with Clueless.

I arrived at my destination, Mama's dressing table. On it she had something she called a "tree," though it bore no resemblance to any tree I'd ever seen – made you wonder about humans' eyesight. On this tree thing hung round things she put on her wrists and little dangly things she put on her ears, and longer dangly things she hung around her neck. Every time I tried to play with them while she wore them, she didn't seem to like the game, and she didn't bat her own paws at them so I didn't see the point in her wearing them.

Well, I knew there was a point, but I didn't like it, not one little bit. She put them on for *him*. *He*

would come in and see her and start grinning like a Cheshire cat. She'd already have the wrist toys and the ear toys on, but a lot of times *he* got to play with the neck toys. She'd lift up her beautiful mane, and *that one* would circle a long dangly thing around her neck and take his own sweet time about it, first sniffing at her hair, then arranging her hair on her shoulders after he'd fastened the dangly thing. And then his paws would rest on her shoulders unnecessarily, and she might turn in his forelegs, and he might run his paw down the length of the dangly thing, and she might shiver a little, which you would think would make the two of them stop, but no, they'd move in closer and she'd let him lick her face! Yuk! It made me want to climb right up there and lick her face, too, to get *that one's* scent off of her. Actually, I had tried that a few days ago. I'd sunk my claws right into the removable fur on the back of *that one's* legs and made it all the way to his shoulders. I didn't reach my intended goal of Mama's face, but what happened seemed, at first, even better. *That one* yipped like a yellow dog and broke away from Mama and tried to reach for me. But, of course, humans had no flexibility – they couldn't lick their entire bodies clean if their lives depended on it – and they had abominable reflexes, so I just kept finding clawholds and dodging the dodger.

Mama ruined it. I had sunk my claw in too deep and gotten stuck for a split second. Mama got a good hold of me by the scruff of the neck and made me take my claws out of *that one*, who seemed to be having a hard time holding still. I struggled, too, but Mama held me in a death grip, took me to the bathroom, and shut me inside! Well, no way was I going to put up with that. Who knew what that, that *mongrel* was up to out there alone with Mama! So I scratched furiously at the door and yowled and catcalled, and when that didn't produce the desired results, I resorted to the secret weapon – the pathetic "I'm stuck up here in the tree" cry. As always, that worked. But I started choking like I had a hairball when I went back out to the living room. My worst fears were close to being realized! The hound had most of his removable fur off and was stretched out on the sofa. Mama was dabbing some godawful-smelling stuff on his cuts and puncture wounds while he was howling about cat-scratch disease but looking like he'd just gotten a bowl of cream.

Cat-scratch disease? I would show that tail-wagger cat-scratch disease. I went over to where his precious removable fur lay heaped on the floor to add a few more holes to them, and then I'd lift my tail to mark them as my own. Mama growled at me, possibly reading my intentions. And they said cats were psychic. I went under the sofa to regroup. I had lost this battle but by no means the war. I closed my eyes but kept my ears perked for any sounds indicating a mating ritual had begun. Horrors! The face-licking started again, and it seemed to be progressing southwards. I slid out from under the sofa. I kept wrapping himself around Mama's legs, and when her legs went up on the sofa I sprang and landed on the SOB's back. *That* put a damper on things. The fleabag made some pathetic excuse and ran off with his tail between his legs, muttering something about there being more than one way to skin a cat. I gave him one last drive-by nip. After the dirty dog had left, Mama had sat on the sofa and, strangely, looked a little dejected, so I had jumped up to join her. After all, it was a well-known fact that being owned by a cat improved one's outlook on life. Mama had soon started petting me, and instead of maintaining a dignified cattitude of indifference, I'd purred, drooled, and kneaded my paws on her belly, looking like I'd just swallowed a canary. Victory was mine.

Or so I'd believed. I now took a quick cat scan to make sure Mama was asleep, then jumped up

on the dressing table and took a good smell of the new shiny thing. Oh, now I was really hissed off. *That one's* scent was on it. I thought I'd made my feelings on this matter absolutely clear, but evidently not. It was time to stop pussy-footing around. I gave a few whaps at the dangly thing, and soon it flew into the air. I leapt after it, executed a truly astounding somersault, caught the part that looked like a chicken's heart – only it was wrong color and definitely not edible – in my teeth, and made a flawless four-point landing, as always. Hah! No chance the bowwow could ever hope to match that. I tore down the stairs with the dangly thing and proceeded to flip it around like it was one of those little green snakes I'd occasionally brought in before that bowser had caused our house to be blown up and we'd had to move to this place high off the ground. Mama wouldn't let me go outside anymore even under supervision, so I hadn't seen a snake in weeks. Mama had always taken those slithery toys away from me for some reason – they seemed to freak her out. It had been hilarious, actually, her dancing around with a broom, trying to sweep my toy into a cardboard box, the toy trying to escape. I would attempt to join in on the fun, but she'd scoop me up and put me in the bathroom, and then she'd go into hysterics screaming about not being able to find the snake. Well, if she'd let me kill the thing like I'd planned to, she wouldn't have had to worry about that. But this dangly thing hadn't scared her at all – it was definitely dead. I briefly wondered how much skill it had taken to stalk it, but decided I was being silly. Fido there didn't strike me as capable of a high level of cunning. But why on earth would Mama keep this present? She always threw mine in the trash.

The trash. Purrfect. She'd never look for it in there. I pranced, gave the dangly thing a sideways glance like it was cat-food-on-the-hoof, swished the tip of my tail, pounced, clenched the heart in a front claw and the part near it in my teeth, rolled onto my back, and gouged at the dangly part with my hind claws, going wild. My foot caught, and in trying to extricate it, the dangly thing came apart. Good, served it right. I rolled onto my side and rubbed my face against the heart as if it were covered in catnip. The dangly thing was now completely marked with my scent. No smell of that crossbreed any more. Now, for the finale. I carried the dangly thing over to the cupboard below the sink, hooked a paw behind the cupboard door, gave it a good flip, and got my head and shoulders through before the door closed on me. I wiggled in further, stood on my hind legs with my front paws on the wastebasket, and peered down. It was full of coffee grounds, Mama's scorched spaghetti sauce, Mama's scorched meatloaf, Mama's scorched . . . whatever that was, lumpy gravy, a green moldy blob of a thing that had been in the fridge too long, used sanitary pads, slimy lettuce leaves, a half-eaten bird – the bird had flown in through the window, and I'd caught it before Mama came home – and used kitty litter. I sighed. Nothing good, like a catfish, for instance. But on the bright side, no way would she go poking through all of that. I let go of the dangly thing, dropped to all fours, gave the basket a couple of good bumps with my head and body, then rose up to check the results. The dangly thing had disappeared beneath the goo.

I pushed my way out of the cabinet and went over to my bed. I'd rather sleep in one of Mama's fedoras, but she'd taken it away from me, for some reason laughing about "the cat in the hat." I turned around a few times – I've never figured out why I seem to be compelled to do that – then settled down, gave myself a washing to remove any trace of incriminating kitchen trash smells, and curled up for a long catnap. Trash pickup was tomorrow morning. I was sitting in the catbird seat now.

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I couldn't believe it. This was a cataclysmic catastrophe. I'd thought my plan foolproof. Things had started out beautifully: the morning had come on little cat's feet, and the trash, including the dangly thing, had gone out with it. Mission accomplished, I'd thought. But this evening, when Mama had discovered the dangly thing missing, at first it'd been like the cat had gotten her tongue, but then she'd sniffed around and said she'd deduced that I was the second-story worker! Well, third-story, in this case. I'd been sure she had absolutely no proof whatsoever and so in catspeak had tried to point out there were other possibilities – I wasn't the one with the shady past, after all. I reluctantly conceded the possibility that maybe that mutt was a better prowler than I'd allowed and had gotten past me last night and stolen the dangly thing. Mama pulled out some damning evidence – hairs she said she'd found on her dressing table, the scene of the crime. I protested that maybe the hairs belonged to *that one* – *his* hair was dark. Mama said she certainly knew the difference between cat hairs and human hairs. She also said she'd found the clasp, whatever that was, of the dangly thing near my cat bed, and a greasy paw print near the kitchen cabinet. She'd told me her theory of what had happened, and she'd been right on! I'd pleaded the fifth.

Rats! She was good! No wonder she was the cat's pajamas in the PI biz. Mama was very mad at me. Plus, she'd said she was going to continue to see that stray. Well, she'd made her choice. She'd made *him* top dog, and I wasn't going to stick around any longer and play second fiddle. The open road was beckoning, and I was going to take it up on the invitation. Mama was going to be sorry about whom she'd awarded best of show: though I'd been reluctant to admit any kinship to *that one*, it was clear he was part alley cat, and one day he would heed the call of the open road, too. Unless she got him fixed.

I eyed the window Mama had left open and catapulted up to its ledge. The gap was narrow, but I made it through by a cat's whisker. I hesitated, almost turned around, then resolutely cat-footed away.

I never looked back.

The End

Thanks to test audience Debra Talley and Gary for their helpful comments. Thanks also to Blackjack and Tigger who have owned me for thirteen years now and helped me conduct research for this story (don't tell Papa about what happened to the gold heart necklace, guys).

A couple of notes. For those of you not familiar with the term, "sitting in the catbird seat" means to be in a position of power or prominence. My first introduction to the term was in high school, when we read the wonderful, funny, sarcastic short story, "The Catbird Seat," by James Thurber. I encourage you to read it if you haven't. "The Cat in the Hat" is a famous children's book by Dr.

Seuss. The phrase “The morning had come on little cat’s feet” probably rang a bell if you’ve read any Carl Sandburg. His poem, “Fog,” reads as follows:

The fog comes on little cat's feet.  
It sits looking over harbor and city  
On silent haunches,  
And then moves on.

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