



S.O.S. Marilyn had unexpected help.

a quick dinner. Out of the corner of my eye I spotted a tiny ball of gray fur huddled near the Dumpsters. I walked over and saw it was a kitten, no more than 10 weeks old, shivering. "Don't worry," I said softly. "I'll take you someplace warm." I lifted her up and zipped her into my jacket. There was no turning back. I took her home, got her treated at the vet and christened her Schnookie.

A few years later, on a Sunday morning in June, I was reading the paper when I stumbled upon the strangest classified ad I'd ever seen. "CAT! WILL TRADE FOR SNAKE OR MONEY. DON'T WANT ANYMORE...." Was it a joke or something? *That poor unwanted cat!* I thought. I called the number, got the address and drove there with my cat carrier

in the passenger seat. The second I stepped inside the house, I had a bad feeling. The owner introduced himself—he was a bagger at the local supermarket who had adopted the cat after her elderly owner had died. He led me into his back bedroom, where he said he kept the cat cooped up all day.

ended on me for everything. A friend had been watching them while I was gone, but she couldn't take care of them forever. That was my job. I'd rescued each of them over the years.

The first one came to me on a cold September night. I pulled into the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant, planning to grab



Meet Schnookie, Ophelia and Simon—my feline rescue squad



Three of a Kind



By Marilyn Sansom, Charleston, West Virginia

SIX DAYS IN THE HOSPITAL after open-heart surgery, and I was finally coming home. My neighbor drove me in her car up my street. A million thoughts clattered through my head. How was I going to manage? No more nurses and doctors monitoring me 24 hours a day.

The stitches keeping my chest closed up caused pain if I tried to lie down. How would I get to sleep at night in an upright position? What would happen if I tripped or fell on the way to the kitchen or the bathroom?

Most of all, I worried about my cats, Schnookie, Ophelia and Simon. They de-



HELLO, KITTY! “Schnookie knew just how to help me after my operation,” Marilyn says.

The first thing I saw was a huge tank holding a giant live snake. A python, the bagger explained. I was scared out of my wits. Cowering beneath a table on the other side of the room was the cat—Ophelia. She looked at me with sad green eyes. She was begging for help. This beautiful tabby had turned into a flea-bitten, nervous mess. I took her home, got her cleaned up and treated, and soon Ophelia and Schnookie were sleeping side by side on my sofa.

I wasn't planning on adopting another cat, but on a visit to the local shelter I came upon one of the most pitiful animals I had

I had chosen each of the cats and yet in a way they had chosen me.

ever seen—a Siamese named Simon. Like Ophelia, his owner had also died. “If we don't find a home for him soon,” the lady said, “we'll have to put him down.” I let him out of the cage and he brushed up against my legs. Then he took his two front paws and stood on the toe of my sneaker, staring up at me.

“Simon,” I said, “you're coming home with me.”

Each of the cats I had chosen, and yet, in a way, they had chosen me. Feeding

them, talking to them, being with them gave me a real focus for my life. In fact, I became an advocate for cats whose owners died without making plans for them.

“Make sure your cats are mentioned in your will,” I told other owners. “You don't want them to end up in a shelter.”

Not that such a thing could happen to Schnookie, Ophelia and Simon—S.O.S., I called them. “I'll take good care of you,” I assured them. I'd answered an S.O.S. from each of them. In fact, it felt like God had put me there to help them.

Then I had my own troubles. First, I started having problems

catching my breath. I felt fatigued after a few steps. No energy. “You need heart surgery,” my doctor told me.

“What about my cats?” I exclaimed. But I had no choice. I prayed they'd be fine until I came home.

That first day back from the hospital, I walked through the front door and there was Ophelia, lying at the end of the sofa with her head down on her front paws, looking like she'd lost her best friend. “Ophelia!” I called. She jumped off the sofa and ran toward me, meowing all the way. I started to bend down to pick her up, but the pain from the incision made me freeze. *I can't even lift my cats*, I thought.

I collapsed onto the living room sofa.

Ophelia nestled beside me. I heard the patter of little paws and saw Schnookie and Simon running in from the screened-in porch to join us. They hopped up on the sofa, their purrs vibrating through me.

That night I decided to sleep upright on the sofa. Schnookie jumped up on the sofa and walked along the back of it until she was right by my head. She reached a paw out and lightly touched my cheek. “Goodnight, Schnookie,” I said.

Ophelia got up on a swivel rocking chair and curled up facing me, like she was keeping vigil.

Finally, Simon climbed up onto my lap and, careful to avoid my stitches, curled up and began to purr softly. Their warmth, their purring and their com-

fort quickly sent me off to dreamland.

In the middle of the night I woke up, needing to use the bathroom. I rose to my feet. The house was dark, and I was still dizzy and disoriented from the side effects of the surgery. *No nurse to help me here*, I thought. Then I felt Simon brush past my leg. He looked up at me, turned and began walking down the hall. I took a few steps forward. Then Simon stopped. Looked back. *He's guiding me*, I thought.

Simon stayed with me all the way to the bathroom, then led me back to the sofa, where Schnookie and Ophelia were waiting to greet me. “You're my S.O.S. team,” I said to them.

It took me a year to recover from the heart surgery completely. But without my cats, it might have taken longer. Whenever I felt

stressed and my heart rate would begin to soar, Schnookie, Ophelia and Simon seemed to appear out of thin air right by my side, to offer a snuggle.

Eventually, walking and cardio exercises brought my heart back to full strength. But it was my S.O.S. team that helped me find the strength to heal.

When I first learned that I needed heart surgery, I was concerned about how I would care for my three cats. But God showed me that he had a plan all along. He made sure that his furry little angels—Schnookie, Ophelia and Simon—were right there to care for me. ■

For more on this story, see Family Room.

Whenever I felt stressed, my cats would appear right by my side.

Family Room

Marilyn Sansom's a survivor thanks to the aid of her clever cats (*Three of a Kind*, page 80). While she was in the hospital, Marilyn's loved ones presented her with a heart-shaped pillow for comfort. "They knew how much I missed my cats!" she says. The fantastic felines also aided her transition from disgruntled accountant to flourishing writer. "I was a good accountant, but I wasn't fulfilling



SANSOM Marilyn's three kitties kept her strong

God's purpose for my life." Marilyn found her purpose when she discovered the cat she adopted, Ophelia, ended up in a shelter due to its owner's death. About 500,000 pets are euthanized per year when their owners die and leave no provisions for them in their will. Marilyn wrote *Ophelia's Winter*, under the name Sarah Ann Hill, which addresses this issue in detail. To get her books visit **authorhouse.com**.