

The Cat, the Mouse, and the Christmas Tree

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The Cat, the Mouse, and the Christmas Tree



The colorful lights of the Christmas tree glowed on the hardwood floor where Mr. S.C. Mouse raced across it. He scurried up the tree trunk, ran down the longest branch, and soared over the open space onto the countertop.

Only at Christmas could he finally access the countertops.

He dashed along the cold tile, soft lights wrapped in garland guiding him. It was the first night of his mission, and if he didn't accomplish it, something terrible would happen. His family would starve.

"Simon!" He peered over the counter. Down below, Holly, his wife, stood on the floor, paws resting on the lower cupboard.

"I'm up!" he whispered. She wriggled her whiskers and blew out a relieved breath.

Simon Mouse darted to the bread bag and carefully removed a single slice. He'd learned his lesson years ago: the one that had kept his family hungry. If he chewed holes in the bag, the Davis family would know mice lived in their home, and they'd move the food.

Simon took nuts, a cinnamon roll, and several pieces of cheese. There was no thick Tupperware or hard metal boxes to block him this time. The Davis family had resorted to leaving all that extra Christmas food on the counter. Simon amassed crackers, pretzels, cookies, and olives, leaving no trace of his thievery. He pushed everything over the counter, and Holly quickly carried it to their hidey hole. She was a fast mouse. The fastest he'd ever seen.

When he was done, Simon Mouse plopped on the counter, exhausted. "The children are up, and Father needs you!" Holly whispered from below.

"Ah, right." Simon Mouse got up and, following the same path as he came, arrived at his tiny hole in the corner of the Davis's living room.

As soon as he entered his chilly little burrow, Simon's six children ran toward him, laughing. "You did it, father! Look at this feast!"

"Now, now my children. Don't get too excited. We need to make this last."

"Of course, father," said little Benny, the youngest of the Mouse family. His bones stuck out from under his scraggly fur. The poor mouse never had enough to eat.

"Simon!" A old voice came from another room.

Simon scuttled into the back bedroom where his wife's sickly parents lay in a bed they'd not left in months. It was even colder in the back bedroom, and despite blankets, the Scratchy's still shivered. "Hey, Bob. What can I get for you?" Simon said.

Bob Scratchy battled a couple fluffy pillows, trying to sit up. He finally gave up, and Simon carefully adjusted the pillows for

him.

Bob swallowed weakly, "What's the commotion, son?"

"Well, Dad," (Simon sometimes called his father-in-law Dad, sometimes Bob.) "I was able to access the countertops!" Holly walked in with a tray holding a cracker, cheese, and a few crumbs of cinnamon roll.

"You're liable to kill them with all that food. We've been eating nothing more than grass and crumbs the past several months," Simon chuckled.

Holly smiled, setting the tray on the bed. Noelle Scratchy sat up, awakened by the smell. "Ho ho! What's this?!"

"A feast, mother," Holly said.

Bob Scratchy licked his whiskers and took a bite of cheese. He rolled his eyes in pleasure, then stopped, holding out a piece for his son-in-law. "Bless my stars, here my boy. Out of the whole family, you're the one who needs it most."

Simon couldn't deny the delicious smell. He grabbed the cheese, stuffing the entire thing in his mouth.

Bob's voice lowered. "How long will this last, son?"

"Oh, not long. A few weeks at best. But I plan to go out every night."

Bob nodded, then looked sad. "I know you wouldn't be in this situation if it weren't for us. You'd up and move to a new home full of food if it weren't for me and Noelle."

Though Bob was right, Simon would never leave his parents. "We haven't starved yet. And with this Christmas miracle, I know we won't." He smiled, then left the room.



The next night, a hubbub outside his hidey hole awoke Simon. He got out of bed and stumbled toward the sound. Mr. Davis was home early and held in his hands a Christmas surprise for his three children.

Simon smiled, leaning against his little door frame, remembering those early days when he and Noelle had first chosen this house. The Davis children had been babies, and there was no shortage of food. Hot dog pieces, crackers, candies, and crumbs hid in every nook and cranny. If Mrs. Davis had any idea how much cleaning he'd done in those days, she'd give him a huge "thank-you" instead of keeping her food under lock and key.

Simon sighed and was just about to return to bed when a sound made the hair on his spine stand straight on end. It was dark and deep and terrifying.

It came again, ringing through the air: "Meeooooowww."

Simon spun just in time to see Mr. Davis set a box on the floor, open the flaps, and lift out a black cat.

Simon's breath left him. His whiskers twitched. His limbs trembled. The cat's green eyes took one quick look around before landing on Simon. And then he gave a slow, evil smile.

Simon stumbled back into his home. This could not be happening.

But outside, another sharp "Meow" told him very clearly that it was.



elle

Simon didn't see the cat again after the Davis family went to bed that night. It was time for his mission, but Simon felt sick and afraid. He approached the doorway where Holly stood. "The kids probably have the cat in their room." She patted his back.

He tried to smile. "Yes. You're probably right, my dear." He took three cautious steps out the hidey hole. The air smelled like cat, alright. The only problem was the new scent surrounded him, cloaking the actual perpetrator of its stench.

Mustering his courage, he squared his shoulders, wiggled his tail, and took a few more steps forward. There was no cat.

He sighed in relief and scrambled up the Christmas tree, out on the limbs, and soared onto the counter. His heart raced with adrenaline and joy. He sped forward, focused on the mountain of food that had grown in the past day.

And then terror stopped him. The cat's black body blended in with the microwave, and it wasn't until the cat's head turned, green eyes glowing, that Simon saw him.

Simon squealed as his body collided with the puff of fur. In the next second, a giant paw pressed his body down. "What have we here?" the cat hissed, eyes blazing. His long tail twitched back and forth.

Simon Mouse could hardly breathe, yet he managed to squeak, "Please. I'm not hurting anyone. I just—"

"Shush!" the cat hissed. And then the cat's paw gave him a hard shove.

Simon went flying. The evil cat had slid him down the counter like a puck slipping along a shuffleboard. His furry body slid right off the tiles, twisting in the air.

Instead of landing on the floorboards, Evil Cat was waiting for him, mouth wide open. The sharp jaws of the cat clamped down. He didn't bite hard, but gave him a good shake before spitting him onto the wooden floor.

Evil Cat sat on his haunches, then lifted a paw, extending one sharp fingernail. With it, he picked his teeth. "They named me

Coal because of my black fur. And because they said I'm naughty, They said I should get nothing but coal for Christmas. Can you believe those kids?"

Simon didn't want to talk. Instead, he streaked toward his hidey hole.

But a second later, a rough paw had him pinned. Simon closed his eyes. So this was his end. But how would his family survive without him? "Please, please! I beg of you!"

A bang sounded upstairs, followed by a voice, "Coal!" a sleepy child said. "Cooaaaal!!"

Coal hissed. "Until next time, *toy*."

With that, he released Simon. The mouse sprinted toward his hole and collapsed inside. Holly was there, terrified at what she'd seen. She hugged Simon. "We'll find a way. We have to."



The next night, Simon felt Holly shake him awake. "The cat's at the door!"

Simon's eyes flew open, and he sat up in bed. "Wha?"

"He wants to talk. Go see what it's about."

Simon flew out of bed and stood just inside his hidey hole, not daring to go out. Sure enough, there was the dark cat, looking devilish from the halo of Christmas lights glowing behind him.

Coal lifted a paw and began licking it.

"What do you want, Coal?"

"I prefer to be called Lucifer. That's my real name from my old place."

"Your old place?" Simon frowned.

Simon stopped licking his paw. "That was before I was tossed out on the streets and then gathered to rot in a pound." For a moment, Simon could have sworn he saw a flicker of sadness on the cat's face. Then Coal, or Lucifer, or whatever you'd like to call him, cleared his throat and puffed out his chest. "I've come

to tell you that while I enjoy our games, this is my house now. My domain. You are not to come out of your hole.”

“But, but—”

Coal held up a paw, “Ah, ah, ah. No arguing. Just see what happens if you do.” He gave a sharp smile and slinked away, becoming one with the inky night.



The days passed, and Simon spent hours at a time lying on his back in their cold living room, trying to think up a plan. None came.

At night, Coal was always there, waiting.

Now it was Christmas Eve, the very last night food would sit on the counter. Simon stood at the entrance to his hole, staring at the Christmas tree sparkling in the quiet room. A low fire burned in the hearth. And though the night was full of Christmas wonder, Simon’s heart felt only frosty sadness.

Holly approached Simon and laid a paw on his shoulder. “No more despairing. I have a plan.”

Simon turned, eyes round. “What is it?”

“Decoy, Simon. We need a decoy while I get the food.”

Simon shrugged. “It’s a great plan, Holly. But where are we going to find a decoy? You don’t happen to have a dog in your pocket, do you?”

“No, but there’s always me.”

“Holly! No. I could never let you.”

“You know how fast I am! I was a track star at my school!”

“It’s too great a risk.”

“It’s too great a risk to starve! I’m doing this!”

And with that, Holly scurried outside the hole.

Simon stared open-mouthed as his wife raced across the living room, letting out a shrill “Eek! Eek!” to call the cat’s attention.

Simon’s heart nearly stopped, but he scurried out the hole. Coal pounced on Holly, but she was too quick.

Relief flooded Simon as he leapt onto the tree, then the countertop. He shoved food to the floor while Holly raced around the house, flying from under the couch to the end table, from the end table to behind the T.V. She was always just one step ahead of Coal.

Simon had never moved so fast. He wasn't paying attention to what he was doing, just hucking things off the counter as fast as he could.

When he could no longer stand to see Holly almost become cat food, he stopped. He spun to head back home.

But Simon smacked into something. In his haste, he'd knocked over a glass bottle of cooking oil, and now an explosion of oil and glass rained through the air, the pieces flying in slow motion. A streak of oil splashed onto the wooden floor followed by the "pop, pop, pop" of dying embers being revived.

The oil had made a direct path to the fireplace.

Simon leapt onto the tree as the oil caught fire, and a streak of flames raced toward Holly.

"Holly!" he yelled. Flames cut across her path, blocking her from their home.

"Simon!" she called.

Simon ran toward the kitchen and clamped his teeth onto a dish towel hanging from a low cupboard, then he dragged the towel onto the flames. Holly raced across the towel and into Simon's arms.

"You saved me!" She squeezed him tight. And then she yelled, "Simon!"

Behind them, Coal stood frozen, tail twitching. His paw was soaked with oil, and with a flip of his claws, he flung a line of oil toward their hidey hole.

Flames burst toward their home, and Simon and Holly ran toward the opening.

Simon flew through the flames and into his living room. The children huddled in the living room, trembling. Flames crackled

outside the doorway, and oil was running into their hole. It was only a matter of seconds before everything in their home, including all the food Simon had collected, went up in flames. “Run children! Run!”

Simon snatched up the littles and sped through the flames. The older children followed. He plopped the littles down next to the tree and ran back inside. Seconds later, Simon came back out, carrying Holly’s parents—one over each shoulder.

The instant he made it out, the entire hole exploded in flames. Simon set his parents down under the tree, and together, the entire family watched their little home burn.

Each mouse was singed and missing whiskers. Little Benny began crying.

The fire alarm went off in the Davis home, and seconds later, thumps rolled down the stairs. Mr. Davis gasped and grabbed the fire extinguisher, spraying white foam everywhere until the fire was gone. Next, his eyes found the mess of glass and oil, and he found Coal, standing stiffly in a corner of the living room. “Coal!” Mr. Davis growled. “You are a naughty kitty! No jumping up on the counters!”

Mrs. Davis raced down the stairs, tying a robe around her waist. “What happened!”

“Coal knocked over the bottle of oil and started a fire.”

“Coal! Bad kitty!” Mrs. Davis scolded. Then she sighed. “It’s my fault for leaving it on the edge of the counter. I’ll get the broom and mop.”

An hour later, the only remnant of the fire was the scarred streak on the floor. The Davis’s went to bed, but the Mouse family still stood huddled under the tree, no food, no home, and no place to hide from the cat.

Simon didn’t know what to do, and wandered a couple feet away from his family until he stood at the edge of the Christmas tree. Suddenly, a dark shape prowled toward him.

Simon was too depressed to move. “Eat me if you have to,” he said lamely. “I suppose it will happen sooner or later.”

To his astonishment, Coal crept from the shadows and plopped on his haunches in front of Simon, completely transformed. He swung his head back and forth. “I didn’t know you had a family. Is that why you were stealing food? To feed them?”

Simon only nodded.

Coal laid down on his belly. “Before I moved into the shelter, I was a street cat with no family. I was lonely, and I had to fend for myself. If I didn’t bully others, they would bully me. And that’s all I am now. Just a big bully.”

Simon tilted his head, seeing Coal for the first time, imagining how hard and rough street life had been.

“I ruined your home and burned up all your food. I’m sorry, Simon,” Coal said.

Simon smiled. “I forgive you.” It touched him that Coal cared. Still, Simon sighed, wondering what they would eat and where they would sleep. “We will find a way,” he said. But the words felt like a lie.

Coal stood up. “And that way is me. I’m an expert forager. You’ll never go hungry again as long as I’m around.”

Simon’s mouth dropped open. “You!? You’d get food for us?”

“This house is my domain now. I’ll take care of you.” The cat bent down low, green eyes sparkling. “Merry Christmas.”

And a Merry Christmas it was. Coal kept his word, and from that Christmas forward, the Mouse family never went hungry. Coal helped them find a new home— a secret hole behind the dryer where a mouse mansion had lain hidden for years. Not only that, but the dryer vent always kept their home toasty warm.

Bob and Noelle Scratchy soon regained their strength from the food Coal brought and from their warmer house. The Mouse children grew up to become strong and healthy, and Simon and

Holly enjoyed many Christmases together. They made sure to spend every one with their dear friend Coal.

The End



MERRY CHRISTMAS!