

# THE CAT IN THE CHRISTMAS TREE



AND OTHER TRUE  
STORIES OF FELINE  
JOY AND MERRY  
MISCHIEF



EDITED BY  
CALLIE SMITH GRANT



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FELINE JOY AND MERRY MISCHIEF

CALLIE SMITH GRANT, ED.



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Grant, Callie Smith, editor.

Title: The cat in the Christmas tree : and other true stories of feline joy and merry mischief / Callie Smith Grant, Ed.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022003602 | ISBN 9780800742430 (casebound) | ISBN

9780800737931 (paperback) | ISBN 9781493438761 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Cats—Anecdotes. | Cat owners—Anecdotes. | Christmas. | Human-animal relationships.

Classification: LCC SF445.5 .C379 2022 | DDC 636.8—dc23/eng/20220314

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022003602>

Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28      7 6 5 4 3 2 1



To Aleta,  
who was allergic to cats but loved to  
hear everything about mine.  
Rest in peace, sweet friend.

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# A WORD TO THE READER



Years ago, my husband and I adopted a feral cat who had been hanging around our home. Once she decided she trusted us enough to walk into our house, she would not be leaving—she would become a 24/7 house cat. Her adjustment to indoor life was not immediate, but soon enough she seemed to accept this as a good move—less stress, plenty of food for the asking, and humans at her beck and call. In turn, she rather quickly became a well-behaved kitty, which we appreciated.

As we approached her first Christmas, however, I wondered how the cat might react to the Christmas tree. We brought in a tall Fraser fir and let it stand empty for a few days to see what she would do.

She did nothing. She simply enjoyed looking at it, even after it was decorated. She would perch on the couch and watch us putter around the tree. She'd occasionally lift her nose to the piney smell. That's all. She'd fended for herself long enough, and it seemed she liked everything about this new indoor life.

And a tree? Not that impressive. She'd been hiding under them outdoors for months.

Our new cat especially enjoyed watching the blinking lights once they were strung. At the Christmas season, one thing is certain—in this darkest time of the year, the world becomes brighter and more colorful. Gold and silver and glitter pop up in surprise spots. Soft lights glow in the night. Christmas trees shine.

Personalities also shine during this season, and it's the cat's personality that we spotlight most in these stories. They star in plots and dramas that go well beyond interacting with an indoor tree. Yes, sometimes the cat and the tree have a moment, but there's so much more. In this wide variety of stories, we meet kittens and cats—some even appearing in Christmas morning packaging!—whose personalities and bright presence take over and delight the Christmas experience, and life in general.

You'll read about Christmas miracles, both large and small. We see Christmas through the eyes of one of nature's finest creatures—cats—and how they view ribbons and dangling things and even manger scenes. We see those cats through the eyes of all kinds of humans—including those who are not fans of the feline but who become fans at Christmas. (And isn't that the charm of the cat, to win over the unwinnable?)

We meet cats who seem to believe that decorations at Christmas are placed in the house for them and them alone! We meet kittens who keep a household young at heart no matter what is going on in the world. Cats who help other animals of their tribe navigate the holiday time. Cats who earn their keep by bringing "gifts" of hunting trophies to their astonished humans. A wise child who reminds her mother that barns with

livestock always have cats, so of course there would be cats at the birth of the Christ child in a stable. And so much more.

My mother used to spout the adage, “Curiosity killed the cat.” But she never failed to add the lesser-known line, “Satisfaction brought it back.” These stories show cats in all their curiosity *and* in their satisfaction when it comes to the holidays.

It is my hope that meeting the cats and their humans in these stories will pull you straight into seasonal joy. As contributor Lisa Begin-Kruysman reminds us, “Life’s most precious gifts don’t always lie piled under a holiday tree waiting to be unwrapped. Some gifts wrap themselves around our hearts and remain there for a lifetime.”

Indeed. Here is a book full of those kinds of gifts at Christmas. And most of them come in the form of cats.

# The Cat in the Christmas Tree

Maggie Marton

 **T**he teenaged Girl Scouts fluttered around eight-month-old Violet. Bundled in her puffy rainbow coat and purple knit cap, our baby girl looked cherubic with cheeks flushed pink from the snowy weather.

My husband, John, carried her up and down the rows of trees arrayed in the Lions Club parking lot. Every year, we selected our Christmas tree from the Girl Scouts' fundraiser. And each year he wanted a smaller and smaller tree, while I wanted a bigger and bigger one.

This year, the first Christmas with Violet, I dreamed of an enormous tree tucked into our living room. I imagined Violet

sitting under the tree, gazing in awe at the twinkling lights and ornaments dripping from every bough.

As John tried to steer us to the discount trees, the skinny ones with missing branches and bent spines, I found “the one” in the nine-foot-tall section: a full, fragrant Douglas fir. It looked like the kind of Christmas tree painted on holiday cards.

“It’s perfect.”

“It’s big.”

“It’ll fit!”

We pushed the tree as far as it would go into the hatchback of our Buick SUV. The top spanned the armrest between our seats and rested on the dashboard. One of the Girl Scouts’ dads brought us twine to tie back the branches poking Violet in her car seat. We drove home with the scent of evergreen filling the car. My dreams of a magical first Christmas for Violet grew as pine needles swirled around us.

“We’re going to be vacuuming these up until next summer,” John grumbled.

As Violet and I watched him yank the tree from the back, I’ll admit, it did look a smidge full. The needles were shedding all over his car. But it was beautiful, and I could envision it decorated and twinkling in our living room. John, meanwhile, worried about fitting it through the front door. He worried about keeping Violet from pulling down ornaments.

Most especially, he worried about our kitten, Ripley.

Our older cat, Newt, never cared about Christmas trees. The first Christmas we had her, we assumed she’d futz with a tree, so we skipped it entirely and simply draped ornaments on ribbons around our kitchen. Once we realized she had no interest in the ornaments, we picked up a small tree for the table.

She certainly wasn't a saint, but Newt rarely participated in typical cat shenanigans. Too dignified to bat ornaments or chew through strands of lights, she chose instead to snatch holiday cookies and sip water from the tree stand.

Ripley, though, embodied the clichéd curious cat.

She joined our family a few months before Christmas. A friend posted online that a pregnant cat appeared one night in her barn. No one nearby recognized the cat, and no one claimed her. So, my friend gave her a safe space to deliver her kittens, then found homes for the mama and all the kittens—except one.

I showed the remaining kitten's picture to John. The left side of her face was dark, almost black, with caramel swirls. The right side was light with dark speckles. Her toes alternated black and white like piano keys. She was only a few months younger than Violet, so it felt like the perfect time and the perfect match. The two of them would grow up together.

"On a scale of one to ten, how much do you not want another cat?" I asked him as he looked at the picture.

We drove out to the farm a few weeks later to pick up the eight-week-old kitten. John chose her name, Ripley, to match Newt's name, the two main characters of the *Aliens* movie.

As soon as Ripley came home, she explored every inch of the house. She found nooks and crannies even Newt didn't know existed. Sometimes it took us hours to find her. She got herself trapped in boxes and closets and bins and reacted with a hiss and puffy tail at unexpected sounds. She shredded anything she could get her paws on. She bonded with our dog, Cooper, and treated Newt as her mentor. She wanted nothing to do with Violet; all the uncoordinated movements and loud noises frightened her.

That first Christmas, we knew Ripley would be the wild card. Her mischievous nature and insatiable curiosity posed a challenge, for sure, but I knew we could work around it.

So, that day we wrestled the enormous tree into our living room, paused to let John saw off a top section, and wedged it in front of our bookcase. The tree barely fit our tree stand. In fact, we couldn't use all three of the screws designed to hold it in place because it was a bit too thick in the middle. I could see the tension in John's jaw.

"In my defense," I said, "I never measure anything."

I knew we needed to give Ripley time to get used to the tree itself before we decorated. Sure enough, she spent the first day climbing the tree. She launched herself into it, clambered around the branches while it shook hard enough that I feared it would dislodge from the stand, and finally leapt out and landed on the top of the bookcase.

After a while, she lost interest. She poked her nose into the branches or scratched at the base every so often, but by the third day, she stopped climbing into the tree altogether. It was time to decorate!

We hauled the boxes up from the basement and tackled the entire Christmas overhaul while Violet napped. I wanted to surprise her with the magic of lights, ornaments, nutcrackers, Santas, the works. We unpacked and hung everything while she dozed. We transformed our house into a winter wonderland as quickly as we could.

When she awoke, her reaction was better than either John or I expected. She squealed. She pumped her dimpled hands. She kicked her feet. Pure joy burst out of her body. Not yet a walker, she wanted to be put down on the living room floor

so she could crawl around and examine each thing at her own pace. She giggled the entire time. It was magical.

“Let’s put her in her Christmas dress and try for a holiday picture,” John suggested. We wanted to get a shot of Violet with Cooper and the cats under the tree. Over the years, with various animals coming in and out of our lives, we’d perfected getting a posed shot with an arsenal of squeeze cheese, strategically placed leashes, and hope.

I changed Violet and brought her downstairs. John stoked a fire in the fireplace. I corralled the cans of cheese and the leashes.

When I came back into the living room, there it was: the precise moment I’d imagined. Violet sat under the tree in her Christmas dress, the green plaid skirt arranged in a perfect circle, while she gazed up into the tree at the twinkling lights. Her chubby little arm lifted. She pointed at the tree and squealed with happiness. I started to feel tears well up. This was it. The first Christmas moment of my dreams.

Before my tears fell, Ripley skittered around the corner. She paused at the edge of the living room, momentarily transfixed by the glittering tree. As I reached for my phone to take a picture of the perfect moment, Ripley launched herself to perch atop the baby gate that separated the living room from the front door.

John turned away from tending the fireplace as I toggled to my camera app.

With the tiniest jingle from the bell on her collar, we heard Ripley launch herself from the top of the baby gate and into the Christmas tree. It wobbled. All the ornaments shook against each other. And then the tree tilted. Ripley, caught in a branch, thrashed to free herself. We couldn’t get there in time. The

entire tree, Ripley included, tipped forward and landed on top of Violet.

In the chaotic moments that followed, Ripley freed herself and skittered off—not to be seen again for hours and hours—and John threw the tree off Violet. She wailed as I looked her over, first for broken bones and then for cuts and scrapes. Cooper pranced frantically around the tree and us, while Newt snoozed away on the pillow nearest the fire.

We surveyed the mess. The toppled tree. The shattered ornaments. The screaming baby. The missing cat.

Violet settled. Entirely unharmed, not even a single scratch, she was our Christmas miracle. We plied her with snacks and nursery rhymes. I vacuumed up pine needles while John righted the tree. We cleaned up the broken ornaments and sorted them in piles to fix or toss.

That evening, after Violet went down for the night, we re-decorated the tree. This time, we used only soft ornaments, those made of fabric or paper. The rest, the glass and crystal, the sentimental, would remain packed and stored for many more years.

Ripley, I thought, got the scare of a lifetime. After she emerged from her hiding spot much later that night, she never launched herself into the tree again.

Well, not that year, anyway.