

*Millie's
Christmas*



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THANK YOU AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my children, Ping-Hwei, Caleb, Rebecca, Sarah and Benjamin, for letting me read and tell you stories.

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CHAPTER I

Hello. My name is Millie, and I'm a cat. Well, my mama says I'm still a kitten. But I'm four months old. I think that makes me a pretty grown-up cat.

We live in a house where there are two cats, Mama and me. There's one dog, Bruce. He's my friend. And we have four people. The most important person is Ruthie. She's six years old, and she's my best friend. She says I'm her cat, but really she's my person.

Ruthie has a big brother named Jake who's nineteen. He's funny. Then there are their parents, Mommy and Daddy, and they're nice but very busy.

Ruthie says I'm beautiful. I'm orange all over, except a white spot on my tummy and one white ear. Bruce laughed at me once and said I looked goofy with that one white ear. What does he know? He's mostly brown all over, with a black patch above his nose, and he has white feet. Now that's goofy.

Something exciting happened today. Ruthie picked me up, squeezed me, and ran all over the house yelling, "It's Christmas time! It's Christmas time! Millie, you're going to love Christmas."

"Meow, meow," I yelled back. I didn't know what Christmas was, but Ruthie was excited, so I was too. "Meow."

Ruthie kissed my face and whirled through the house, making me dizzy. "At Christmas we have lots of fun food, and candles, and decorations, and visiting, and candy." She rubbed my ribs. "You'll love it, Millie."

I didn't know what most of that stuff was, but it made Ruthie happy, so I knew it would be great.

Daddy and Jake brought home what Ruthie called a Christmas tree. It didn't look like any of the trees out in the yard, with long sticks on them. This tree was bushy all over and really sharp and prickly, and they pulled it out of the ground from somewhere. Strange. But it sure smelled good.

"Now, Millie." Ruthie carried me over to the Christmas tree. "We're going to hang ornaments all over this tree. Please don't bother them."

Hmmm. I wonder what ornaments are. They must be something fun to play with.

In the middle of the night, Mama and I went to the Christmas tree and nibbled some of the branches. That was fun, and yummy, but Mama said we shouldn't do it much, or the parents might get mad. I'd never seen them get mad, but Mama'd been around for Christmas before and knew what she was talking about. Mama was really smart.

Ruthie's mommy started playing Christmas music. Daddy said, "Already?" Mommy just laughed and sang along with the music.

The music did sound fun—bouncy and happy. Many of the songs were about Jesus. Ruthie told me, "Jesus is the most important part of Christmas." I didn't know who Jesus was, but Ruthie was excited about him, so I was too. I hoped I would get to meet him.

Other Christmas songs were about snowmen and reindeer and silver bells and sleigh rides and presents and more about snow. Everything sounded like so much fun. I ran around the house with Ruthie, jumping on and off furniture. Christmas was great!

CHAPTER 2

I found out what they meant about snow. Brrr. Ruthie took me outside and held me so I could sniff and taste it. It was nothing but wet and cold, and I didn't like it.

Jake yelled from behind us, "Hey, frosty, turn around."

With me in her arms Ruthie turned around, and Jake threw a big handful of snow in her face. Some of it splashed in my face too. Shiver...shiver.

Ruthie squealed and giggled and put me down. She picked up handfuls of the snow and threw them at Jake. They laughed and threw the snow at each other for a long time, running around in the cold. Hurrying back to the front door, I scrunched into as little a ball as possible. Maybe Ruthie would notice and decide to come in soon.

Mama and I would sometimes go outside to explore and nibble at things and lie in the sun and rest. Or we did when it was warm. Since it got cold, we stayed inside. Mama told me some cats had to live outside all the time. That made me very sad for them.

The funniest thing happened while Jake and Ruthie were playing in the snow. Ruthie's mommy let Bruce outside.

Now Bruce was my friend, but he acted strange sometimes. As soon as he got outside, he ran into the yard and sniffed, then rolled around in the snow. He stood up, shook all over, sneezed, and rolled around some more. He liked the snow. I rubbed at my runny nose. Sometimes, I didn't understand dogs.

"Jake?" Ruthie's voice sounded sad. "Are you going to spend Christmas with your mommy again?"

Wait...What?

I looked up. Ruthie stood still, her face pointed down at the ground.

Jake reached over and rubbed the hat on Ruthie's head. "Yes, sweetie."

"Oh." I almost couldn't hear Ruthie's voice.

"Hey." Jake lifted Ruthie's head to face him. "We've got lots of Christmas season to celebrate together still." He pushed a snowball in Ruthie's face.

"Oh, Jake." Ruthie spit out some snow, then giggled and made another snowball to throw

at Jake. It was good to see Ruthie happy again.

But I was still cold. I shivered and tried to curl into an even tighter heap. Snow was a part of Christmas I sure didn't like, and I hoped Ruthie wouldn't make me go out in it again.

CHAPTER 3

More snow fell on the ground all day, so everybody stayed in the house that night. The family decided to decorate the Christmas tree, and was that ever a lot of fun.

First they hung some pretty little lights on the tree, all shiny and blinky. I sat and stared at them.

What? Huh? I shook my head.

Daddy poured a whole bagful of cute round balls on the floor, and they rolled all over. Bruce and I went crazy, chasing them, pouncing on them, batting them away, then chasing them again. It was great. Mama played with us too.

Ruthie thought it was funny. She laughed and ran and tossed balls for us. Then Mommy said, “Okay, that’s enough. Let’s pick them up now.” So we had to stop.

Ornaments came in many shapes and sizes. There were animals and little houses and people and foods made out of glass and wood, and my mama said not to touch. Some ornaments were just pieces of paper, cut and colored on, and Mommy and Daddy talked to Ruthie and Jake about them.

“Aww, look at this picture of Santa.”

“You made these stars in first grade, Jake. I remember when you brought them home.”

“Okay, Dad.”

“Oh, look, Ruthie, this was the first Christmas ornament you ever made for me. I think you were three.”

That one just looked like a wad of paper to me, and I sure would have liked to bat it around the floor, but Mama said I definitely had to leave it alone.

Then they hung up some long shiny strings they called icicles. I could have chased those back and forth for hours, but everybody was getting tired and cranky, so Mama nosed me and said, “Let’s go lie down somewhere else and leave them alone for a while.”

CHAPTER 4

Something terrible happened the next day. Daddy told Jake to come outside and help him hang more of those pretty lights from the roof. If it were warmer, I'd have loved to be up there with them. Anyway, Jake was coming down this tall, climby thing they called a ladder. I thought it looked like a lot of fun, but all at once, Jake missed a couple of the steps and fell on the cold, snowy ground.

I sat in one of the living room windows looking out, so I saw him fall and heard him yell.

Daddy hurried down the ladder and, good thing, he didn't fall. He knelt by Jake, then stood up and ran toward the front door. But Jake stayed on the ground. I wondered why he didn't get up. He must have been really cold, lying in that wet snow. Just looking at him made me shiver.

Daddy banged open the front door. "Judy, Judy!" he yelled. Judy was the name Daddy called Mommy.

She came running into the living room. "What's wrong?"

"Jake fell off the ladder. He can't get up. He thinks he broke his leg. Come help me get him to the car so I can take him to the emergency room."

"Caleb, shouldn't we just call an ambulance?" Mommy looked worried.

"No, honey, I think we can help him to the car." Daddy grabbed his car keys off a table. "Hurry, get your coat. He's cold out there."

My mama came and jumped up on the window beside me to watch as Mommy and Daddy helped poor Jake hop to the car. "Mama, what's an ambulance?" I asked. I was scared.

"I'm not sure." Mama rubbed her face against mine. "Just one of those people things. It'll be okay. They're going to take him to a doctor."

Oooohh, doctor. That sounded bad. I had to go to a doctor once. She gave me hurtful things called shots, and looked in my ears, and made me open my mouth so she could look inside, and rubbed her hands all over me. I wanted to run away, but another lady held me down the whole time. It was scary.

"You think he'll be okay, Mama?" I hiccupped.

"Yes, sweetie, I think so." Mama gave my face another soft rub. "Come on down. Let's go

take a nap.”

Even though I was a big cat, I was still glad I had my mama. She was nice to snuggle up with when I was scared. We crawled under the messed-up covers on Jake’s bed, and I wiggled close to Mama, burying my face in her fur.

CHAPTER 5

Later when they came home, Mommy and Daddy helped Jake over to the couch to lie down. His foot was all wrapped up in some bumpy-looking cloths all the way up to his knee. They said he broke his ankle in two places. I wasn't sure which part the ankle was, but Jake felt horrible. He gritted his teeth, then moaned loud when Daddy lifted the hurt leg on the couch.

Ruthie was over at a friend's house when Jake fell. When she got home, she ran over to him and wanted to jump on top of him, the way she always did, but Mommy made her stop.

"Jake, are you going to get a cast?" Ruthie asked. She sounded excited.

"Yeah, I guess so," Jake said. He didn't sound very happy about it.

"Oooohh, that'll be fun. Can I draw on it? Remember when Uncle Darrin had a cast?" Ruthie bounced up and down. "He got it changed a couple times, and he got to choose different colors. Can I go with you when you get a cast? Can I help you choose the color?"

"Sure. That will be great." Jake didn't sound like he thought it would be great.

"Honey, let's leave Jake alone so he can rest," Mommy said, taking hold of Ruthie's hand. "His foot hurts."

"Okay. I'm sorry, Jakey." Ruthie rubbed his face with her hand. "Do you want me to read a book to you, like you do for me when I'm sick?"

"Not right now, baby." Jake tried to smile at her. "I just want to rest. Dad has some pills from the doctor that should help it not hurt so much, and hopefully, I'll be able to sleep." Jake made a scrunched-up look with his face. "Maybe you could read to me later, okay?"

"Okay." Ruthie kissed him. "I'm sorry you're hurt. How come you don't go to your bed to sleep?"

"I can't climb the stairs to my room. I'll get crutches later, but for now, I guess I'll stay here."

"Oh. Crutches." Ruthie puckered her face. "I remember when Uncle Darrin had those. They were kind of scary. Do you remember one time he fell down the stairs when he was using them?"

Jake squeezed her hand. "I'll be careful. It'll be okay. Go on now, baby. I'll talk to you

later. I love you.”

Ruthie kissed him again. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER 6

One of my most fun things to do was sleep with Ruthie in bed. When I ran in her room that night, she had her face buried in her pillow, and it sounded like . . .

I jumped up by her head and sniffed, listening. She . . . Oh no. She was crying. *What should I do?*

“Meow. Meow?” Sometimes I wished I could talk people talk. I kept meowing and bumping my nose against Ruthie’s head, then I purred really loud. That usually got her attention.

Finally, Ruthie rolled over and hugged me close. Her face looked funny, all red and wet. I rubbed my face against hers. Sometimes I wished I was like Bruce and could lick her face all over, but Mama says that’s disgusting, and cats don’t do that.

“Oh, Millie,” Ruthie said, sniffing hard. “Jake really hurt himself. I’m scared.”

She buried her face against me and cried some more. “I hope he isn’t going to die.” She made a gaspy noise.

I stopped purring. I didn’t know what die meant, but it didn’t sound good.

“Oh, sweetie, don’t cry.” Mommy sat down on Ruthie’s bed and picked her up. She hugged us both, squeezing me between them. I squirmed a little. I liked being in this family, but they sure did hug a lot.

After Ruthie cried some more, she lifted her face from Mommy’s shoulder. “Mommy, is Jake going to die?”

Mommy squeezed us even tighter. I hoped I wasn’t going to pop open and all my guts spill out, like what Jake said would happen to Ruthie when he squeezed her really tight.

“Oh, honey, no.” Mommy kissed Ruthie’s wet face. “Jake’s going to be fine. Shh, sweetie. I promise.”

Ruthie gasped a couple more times then relaxed against Mommy. She rubbed my face with her hand, and I purred again.

“He hurts really bad,” Ruthie said and sniffed.

“Yes, he does.” Mommy pushed Ruthie’s pretty hair out of her face. “He broke his ankle in two places. It hurts a lot. But he’s not going to die. I promise.”

“Okay.” Ruthie sniffed hard. “I just never saw him look so sick, or so scared.”

“I know, baby. It scared all of us.” Mommy kissed Ruthie on top of the head. “He’s going to get a cast like Uncle Darrin did, like you said. And he won’t be able to go to work or school for a while. You’re going to have to help keep him company and keep him from being too sad, okay, honey?”

“Sure, I’ll do that.” Ruthie sat up straight. She sounded happier. Whew. “And I can get things for him, like if he wants a glass of water, or something to eat, or a book. And we can play dominoes and checkers. And I’ll color him a bunch of pictures.”

“That’s good.” Mommy rubbed Ruthie’s face. “He’s going to need a lot of cheering up, so that’s your job, okay?”

“Yes, yes.” Ruthie hugged me and kissed my ear.

“Yooowww.” I tried to sound grumpy, but it was hard. Ruthie was happy again and so was I. I squirmed on Ruthie’s lap and shook my head.

Ruthie laughed. “Millie can help me. She loves Jake too.”

CHAPTER 7

What an interesting thing Jake's cast was. When he brought it home, I jumped up on the couch to check it out. It was long and hard and covered everything from right above his toes up to his knee. I sniffed at it down by his toes, but Jake yelled, "Hey, Millie, stop. You're tickling me."

Rolling over, I stuck out a back leg so I could bend down and lick my belly. Jake liked to watch me take a bath.

Ruthie spent a long time drawing on Jake's cast with crayons. She drew a Christmas tree with decorations on it and then wrote her name under it.

"That's a masterpiece, bug," Jake told her.

Bug was a name he sometimes liked to call Ruthie, a nickname she told me. Hmmm. I remembered little buzzy things called bugs that flew around when it was still warm outside. Sometimes one would fly in my face, and I would bat at it with my paw. I didn't like them. I don't know why Jake and Ruthie thought it was a cute name, but then there were a lot of things the people did that I didn't understand.

Daddy and Jake sat in the living room later reading books after Mommy and Ruthie were already in bed. I'd been lying on a rug in front of the fireplace, and nobody seemed to notice me, so I just stayed and listened to them talk.

"How are you feeling, buddy?" Daddy asked.

"Okay I guess. I'm going to take another one of the pain pills and try to get some sleep."

"We'll practice more with your crutches tomorrow, try to get you more comfortable with them. Then maybe you'll be able to sleep in your own bed upstairs tomorrow night."

"Yeah. That would be nice."

They were quiet for a minute, and I almost fell back to sleep, but then Jake talked again.

"Dad?"

"Hmmm?"

Jake was sitting up on the couch. He looked down at his cast. "I guess I won't be able to fly to visit Mom for Christmas this year, huh?"

I understood about Jake's mommy now. Ruthie told me that she and Jake have different mommies, and Jake's mommy lived in another place far away. She was still sad then, because she was thinking about how Jake wouldn't be home for Christmas, so she was talking to me about it. I liked when she talked to me about important things.

"No, I don't think so," Daddy said. He closed his book. "You know, you and I haven't been together for Christmas since your mom and I separated. That's ten Christmases I've missed out on with you."

"Yeah, I guess that's true." Jake made circles with his finger on the cast.

"I think it will be nice to have you here with us at Christmas this year." Daddy tapped his fingers on his book. I sneaked a little closer to Daddy, to see if I could pull on his shoestring.

Jake didn't say anything.

"I'm sure sorry you hurt yourself," Daddy said. "And I know you'll miss seeing your mom. I know this is all hard, Jake. But I still think it will be nice for you to be able to have Christmas here with us." He smiled. "Ruthie's sure gonna love it."

"Yeah, that's true." Jake made the big, breathy noise Ruthie called a sigh. "I guess I'll try to sleep now."

"Okay." Daddy stood. "Don't get up. I'll get your pill and a drink of water."

After Daddy went to bed, and Jake fell asleep—I could tell he was asleep, because he made the snoring noise—I went looking for Mama. Jake seemed to be happy here with Daddy and Ruthie and Mommy, but I guess he missed his mommy too. I was sure glad I had my mama. I found her sleeping in a basket of towels in the laundry room. Crawling in with her, I snuggled close.

CHAPTER 8

Jake learned how to use his crutches, so he slept upstairs in his room again.

About those crutches. They were strange-looking, long sticks, and he put them under his arms then held on to them with his hands and tried to walk around with them while holding his hurt foot up. I didn't understand it.

It really looked dangerous to me. When he was going up to bed, walking with them on the stairs, Mommy and Daddy walked behind him, to catch him if he fell. I was scared he was going to fall a couple of times. Daddy told Jake it would get easier and easier. I sure hoped so.

Anyway, since he wasn't sleeping down in the living room anymore, Bruce found me and Mama in the downstairs bathroom and asked us if we wanted to go play with the Christmas tree. "They're all asleep," Bruce told us.

"Yes, yes, let's do." I bounced, jumped into the tub, then out again.

"Shh." Mama bumped her head on mine. "You'll wake them."

We sneaked into the living room to check things out.

"I'd like to get some of those cute balls to roll around again." Bruce walked over to the tree.

"And look." Mama joined him. "They've hung up some candy canes. Remember those, Bruce? They taste sparkly."

"I want to play with some of those stringy icicles." I gave Bruce's tail a light tug with my teeth.

"Okay, so let's figure out how to get this stuff," Bruce said.

We all sat down a minute, staring at the tree and thinking.

"Millie." Mama flicked her tail. "I bet you can jump up high enough to knock down a few of those balls for Bruce."

I was sure I could. I was a good jumper.

I walked to the bottom of the tree and looked up. "Okay, here I go."

Jumping up, I grabbed on to one of the branches with my front paws. "Ouch." Those branches were sharp.

I landed back on the floor.

Mama came and purred at me while I sniffled. "That hurt, Mama."

"I know it did. I'm sorry." She licked my paws where the sharp things scratched them. "You have to be ready for them, and try to keep your feet very light on the branches. Do you want to try again? I think you can do it."

I was happy to have Mama trusting me. "I'll try again."

Finally I managed to knock three of the balls out. Mama and I played with them for a while with Bruce, batting them and running after them and rolling them to each other. Bruce made a low growl when he had one in his mouth, but his eyes laughed. I growled back at him. This was fun.

Then we got tired of that game.

Bruce pointed with his nose. "I think I can reach up high enough to knock down a couple of candy canes."

"Do it, do it." I bounced. "I want to try them."

While Bruce stood on his tiptoes and stretched his head high to reach the candy canes, Mama and I chewed at some of the lower branches. They did taste good. When Mama was chewing on one higher up, she knocked down a little glass animal ornament.

"Oops." Mama stepped back a little. "I think that's a reindeer. I don't think it's broken." She gave it a gentle push. "I'm going to scoot it behind the tree, and maybe they'll think it just fell."

Bruce was able to knock down two of the candy canes for us. He bit them, so we could get the plastic off, and then we three shared them. Bruce loved them. Mama thought they were something special. They were okay, but I liked chewing on the tree branches more.

Then we all three jumped and grabbed a few of the icicles. Bruce lay down on the floor and chewed a few. Mama held the end of one icicle in her mouth and swung it back and forth, and I chased it and batted at it. Then I held one for her.

We were having such fun.

When Mama chased me behind the tree, I got my feet caught up in the cord that hung from the lights to plug them into the wall. Oh no.

I jumped back, trying to get my feet out, but I couldn't. I yanked hard. The cord with the lights pulled loose from the tree, knocking ornaments off with it.

Lights and wooden horses and colorful balls and pretty glass pieces and a whole bunch of icicles scattered all over the living room floor. Even a couple of Ruthie's paper ornaments fell.

Oooohh.

Mama and Bruce and I hurried out of the living room and found different places in the house to hide and tried not to worry too much.

Daddy was the first to come downstairs the next morning. I hid behind the couch and peeked out to see what he would say about the mess.

He walked right through the living room and even stepped on a few ornaments. But he didn't notice. He just went right into the kitchen and turned on the coffee pot. Daddy made a stretchy, yawny noise and poured food into Bruce's bowl.

"Bruce, boy, where are you? Come and eat." He yawned again.

Mommy came downstairs then and stopped. "What in the world?"

"Bruce, where are you?" Daddy called again from the kitchen.

"Caleb, what happened here?" Mommy turned on a light in the living room.

I stayed behind the couch, peeking out. My mama and Bruce were nowhere to be seen.

Mommy laughed. "Honey, did you see this? How did we sleep through all this noise?" She bent down and picked up some ornaments.

"What?" Daddy walked back into the living room. "Whoa, look at this."

Ruthie ran down the stairs. "What happened?" She looked around, and her mouth opened wide. Then she giggled and said, "Bruce, did you do that?"

I saw Bruce then, slinking outside the door to the hall. Mama stood behind him.

Jake came down last, moving bumpity, bumpity down the stairs with his crutches. He snorted. "I don't know if Bruce is behind this. He's never done this big a job on the Christmas tree before. Where's your Millie at, bug?"

Uh-oh. I had sneaked out a little from behind the couch, but now I tried to scoot back. Jake saw me though, and pointed one of his crutches at me. "There she is."

"Millie, did you do this?" Ruthie ran over and picked me up. "You silly kitty, did you play with the Christmas tree?" She squeezed me and kissed my face.

Bruce and Mama came into the room then.

"I bet she had some help." Daddy pointed at Bruce and Mama as he bent down to pick up ornaments.

“They all do look kind of guilty,” Jake said, finally getting to the bottom of the stairs. “It’s okay. That reindeer picture you made is a little torn, bug, but I think it looks even better now.”

Ruthie stuck out her tongue at him then tickled me under my chin. “You’re a funny little Christmas kitty, Millie.” She set me down in the middle of the floor with all the ornaments, then stepped back and clapped her hands. “Take a picture, Daddy.”

Oh, I loved getting my picture taken. I sat up straight and looked right at Daddy. Ruthie had shown me pictures of me on the little boxes they call phones. It’s great how they can do that.

The family finished picking up the ornaments and fixing the lights on the tree. “I think this is about as good as we’re going to get it, honey,” Daddy said. “Unless we start all over again.”

“It’s fine,” Mommy said. “Jake, maybe you need to sleep on the couch again and keep guard over the tree.”

“I think they’ve learned their lesson.” Jake bumped his crutch against Bruce where he still crouched in a corner.

The people all went to eat breakfast, and Mama and Bruce and I stayed out of the way for a while. “Whew,” Mama said.

“Let’s go find somewhere to be quiet,” Bruce said. “I think it’ll be okay.”

We sure had a nice people family.

CHAPTER 9

On Saturdays, Ruthie didn't go away to school. I liked those days, because sometimes she would sleep late or take a nap, and I could cuddle more with her.

That morning Mommy told Ruthie, "Today is Christmas cookie day."

"Oh, good." Ruthie bounced and clapped her hands. "Do I get to help? I'm big, Mommy. I'm six. I'll be careful, and I won't make a mess."

"Yes ma'am, you can help. I've been looking forward to doing this with you."

This sounded exciting, so I hung around in the kitchen to help.

I can't say that there was no mess, but it was a lot of fun. Many things fell on the floor, little pieces of interesting food. There were yummy little bits called nuts and raisins and marshmallows and gum drops and sprinkles. I sniffed and sneaked a few of them before Mommy was able to clean them up. There were also some little flakes called oats and coconut, which Bruce jumped at, but I didn't like them as much.

Mommy didn't get mad when Ruthie spilled anything. She just laughed and cleaned it up. Ruthie laughed, too, and they talked and made a lot of noise and listened to more of the Christmas music and made all kinds of pretty, fantastic-smelling cookies.

"Now it's dish washing time," Mommy said.

"Oh." Ruthie didn't sound quite so excited anymore.

"Come on, sweetie, it's part of the fun." Mommy handed Ruthie a towel. "I'll wash, you dry."

Bruce sniffed around on the floor again, but Mommy got all the good stuff picked up. He wagged his tail and left the room, but I curled up on a kitchen chair. I wanted to stay with Ruthie and Mommy and listen to the music. The song playing now said, "Joy to the world."

"I love this song." Ruthie danced as she dried a bowl.

"Me, too," Mommy said and sang along with the music. "Christmas is a joyful time, because Jesus came."

"I love Jesus." Ruthie made a big smile.

"I know you do, sweetie, and Jesus loves you so much." Mommy bent down and kissed

Ruthie on the head.

“Did they have snow where Jesus was born?”

“I’m not sure.” Mommy picked up a towel to dry a big pan they’d baked cookies on in the hot oven. “I’ll do this one.”

Ruthie picked up some forks and spoons to dry. “It must have been fun for the animals in the stable, to be there when Baby Jesus was born.” She put the spoons away in a drawer. “I bet Millie would have liked to be a barn cat there that night.” She giggled.

I pricked up my ears. What was a barn cat? A stable? I needed to ask my mama.

Mommy laughed. “I bet she would have.” She handed Ruthie a big spoon made out of wood.

“Oh, oh, Jingle Bells.” Ruthie danced again. “That’s my favorite Christmas song.”

“It is fun.” Mommy dried a big pot.

“I wish we had a horse and sleigh, Mommy.”

Ruthie dropped her towel on the floor, and Mommy handed her another one. “That would be nice,” Mommy said. “Whoa, horsey.”

Ruthie giggled.

The next song on the radio was slow. “Oh, holy night,” Mommy sang along.

“Mommy, what does holy mean?”

Mommy dried another big cookie baking pan. “Mmm, holy is how wonderful God is, how good and amazing.”

“And Jesus too.” Ruthie nodded. “Jesus is God.”

“That’s right, baby.” Mommy smiled at Ruthie. “Jesus is God.”

“Mommy?” Ruthie looked down at the towel in her hands and bit her lip. “Jake is so sad. I want him to be happy about being with us for Christmas.”

“I know.” Mommy laid her towel on the counter and sat on a chair, pulling Ruthie onto her lap. “I do, too, honey. In a while, you can take him a big plate with lots of different kinds of cookies.” She tickled Ruthie under her chin. “You can tell him he is your favorite big brother. That will help him be happy.”

“Oh, Mommy, he’s my only big brother.” Ruthie made a little laugh. “I’m glad I get to spend Christmas with you,” she whispered.

“Me too.” Mommy squeezed Ruthie, and both of them had a couple of tears coming out of

their eyes.

CHAPTER 10

That night when I jumped on Ruthie's bed, she was crying again. Oooohh. I crawled up by her face and nosed at some tears on her cheek. I purred as loud as I could and rubbed my face against hers.

Ruthie hugged me tight. "Millie, I don't know what to do. Jake's so sad, and I love him so much, and I don't know what to do." She made a big sniff. "I took him a plate of cookies this afternoon, and he said 'thank you,' and hugged me, but he didn't eat any. He didn't look happy."

She was crying so hard she shook. Her hug was so tight it hurt, but I didn't want to complain. I just kept purring and rubbing my nose on her face.

Ruthie took a big breath. "Jake called his mommy today and asked if she could come here to visit him for Christmas, and she said no." She hiccupped. "I don't know what I would do without my mommy. Poor Jake."

Daddy came in right then and sat down on Ruthie's bed. "Sweetie, what's the matter?" He hugged her, and me.

"Daddy, what can we do to make Jake happy?"

"Oh, baby." He pulled her all the way on his lap and rocked us back and forth.

"Daddy?" Ruthie took another couple of deep breaths, so she could talk without crying.

"Why can't Mommy be Jake's mommy too?"

Daddy rubbed our faces with his big, warm hand. "Mommy is kind of a second mommy to Jake, but he also loves his other mommy."

"Doesn't she love him?"

"Yeah, she does." Daddy kissed a tear on Ruthie's face. "It's just a hard thing, when parents get divorced. Hard for the parents, but a lot harder for the kids."

I wondered what divorce meant. That was another people word I'd need to ask Mama about.

Ruthie pushed herself up and turned to look at Daddy, squashing me a little. "Daddy, you're never going to get a—a divorce from Mommy, are you?"

"No, baby." He squeezed us tight, and his voice sounded scratchy. "No."

I wiggled a little so I could get a better look at Daddy's face. A tear ran down his cheek.

CHAPTER II

Ruthie went to sleep after a while, and Daddy left. But I couldn't get to sleep. I went downstairs and heard Bruce in the living room sniffing. "What's up?" I asked.

"Mommy brought in some new fun-looking Christmas things tonight," Bruce said. He stood at the coffee table, sticking his nose into a new bunch of shopping bags.

"Is there anything to eat?" I joined him.

"Probably." Bruce tugged out a roll of shiny paper. He sniffed at it, then moved on to another bag. "Some of this stuff smells pretty good."

I jumped up on the coffee table. Mama told me that since Bruce is a dog, he thinks almost anything can be food, so I have to be careful about trying every little thing he happens to eat.

Bruce pulled out a roll of string-like stuff wound around a spool. "This is just ribbon. I might chew on some of that later."

"It's pretty," I said, picking at it. It would be nice to bat if I could get some loose.

"Here's some fun stuff. Bows." Bruce pulled out a couple shiny, curly things and dropped them, then knocked them across the floor. I chased after them and sent them back to him.

We'd just found a package of little round things that made a pretty ringing noise when Mama hurried in and hissed. "Hurry, get out of here. Jake is coming down. You guys don't need to be caught messing with Christmas stuff again."

Oh no. We all ran in different directions. I went to the kitchen and hid under the table.

But Jake came into the kitchen. Oooohh. I crawled even farther under the table and curled into as little a ball as I could.

Jake set a glass on the table then walked with his crutches to get some milk out of the refrigerator. He pulled one of the chairs out, and I scooted farther away.

When I heard a funny noise, I crept out from under the table and looked at Jake. He had pulled the foil stuff off a plate of Ruthie's cookies and held one in both hands. He looked at it but didn't take a bite.

I tipped my head to the side and listened. Jake made the same kind of sniffy noise Ruthie did when she cried.

I tiptoed out of the kitchen and went to look for Mama. She was lying in a basket of nice-smelling towels in the laundry room again, so I crawled in and snuggled down with her.

“Mama, isn’t Christmas time supposed to be happy?”

Mama’s soft, rough tongue licked my quivering face, but she didn’t say anything.

CHAPTER 12

Jake and I were taking a nap on the couch one afternoon when Mommy woke us.

“Jake, Ruthie’s Sunday school class is here.”

I opened my eyes.

Mommy smiled at us. “Wake up, honey. They’re caroling.”

“Huh?” Jake yawned and rubbed his sleepy face.

“Come on in. Come on in, but don’t bring in all the cold air.” Daddy walked into the living room with a bunch of little kids and Ruthie.

They did look cold, and cute, with coats and hats and mittens.

“So what brings you all here today?” Daddy asked the group.

Ruthie giggled. “Daddy, we’re here to carol.”

“Carol?” Daddy asked. “Oh, well, that’s nice of you. Christmas caroling, huh?” Daddy shook his head. “Thanks for reminding me. I almost forgot it was Christmas time.”

Jake sat up and cuddled me on his lap. Mommy sat on the couch beside us.

“Well, go ahead and start then.” Daddy stood in front of the kids and nodded his head.

I noticed a couple of other grown-up people then, standing behind the kids. One of the ladies smiled. “Ready, guys?”

The children sang some of the Christmas songs I’d heard on the radio. Mommy reached over and held Jake’s hand. Jake smiled and rubbed my head with his other hand.

“Silent night.”

“Joy to the world.”

“Hark, the herald angels sing.”

“We wish you a merry Christmas.”

Their voices were loud and squeaky. I shook my head.

They finished singing and laughed and clapped.

“Well, thank you very much,” Daddy said, clapping. “You guys stay warm now. It’s cold out there.”

“Daddy.” Ruthie giggled and ran to him. “We’re supposed to have cookies and hot

chocolate now.”

“Oh, we are?” Daddy turned around. “Did you know that, Mommy?”

Mommy stood up. “I did know that, yes.”

Ruthie helped Mommy bring out some of the cookies and candy they made, and Daddy went in the kitchen and brought out a tray with little cups of something sweet-smelling to drink.

Ruthie brought all the kids by to say hi to Jake. “Jake can’t get up to play with us,” she explained. “He broke his ankle.”

All the kids gathered around, patting Jake and touching his cast. “Can we sign your cast?” one little boy asked.

“Sure.” Jake grinned at him. “I’d like that. Ruthie, can you get some crayons or markers?”

Ruthie ran for crayons, then all the kids wrote their names or drew a picture. Jake laughed and talked to them, and I was happy to see him having a fun time.

“Want some hot chocolate?” Mommy asked Jake, handing him one of the cups.

I leaned down from his shoulder where I sat and sniffed at the cup. It smelled nice. I leaned a little closer. It was warm.

“Hey, you sneak.” Jake laughed, nudging my face away from the cup. “You can’t have my hot chocolate.”

When all the other kids left, Ruthie came back and snuggled on the couch beside Jake. “Did you like our caroling?”

He hugged her. “You guys were great.”

They sat quiet for a minute, then Jake tickled Ruthie’s nose. “You know, bug, I’ve got a Christmas surprise for you.”

“You do?” She pulled away a little. “What is it?”

Jake poked her side. “It’s a surprise.”

Ruthie jumped off the couch. “Come on, Jake. Tell me.”

“Nope.” He shook his head. “Not until Christmas.”

“Where is it? Please?”

“I’ve got it in a good hiding place.”

Ruthie begged him for a long time, but Jake wouldn’t tell her anything else. Well, I knew all the hiding places in the house. And Ruthie was my best friend. I would have to help her look for it.

CHAPTER 13

“Mommy, you look so pretty.”

Ruthie stood in front of Mommy, rubbing her hands over Mommy’s pretty blue dress. It was fancy, with tiny blinky pieces and ruffles all over it.

I lay on the back of the couch and watched them. Ruthie told me Mommy and Daddy were going out for a work party at an expensive restaurant.

“Thank you, sweetie.” Mommy smiled. “Doesn’t Daddy look pretty too?”

“Mommy, he looks handsome.” Ruthie giggled and ran over to give Daddy a hug. Daddy didn’t have a pretty dress like Mommy, but he did have a collar around his neck with a rope hanging down, and Ruthie told him that was nice. I wondered if Mommy was going to hold on to the rope and lead him around, like they did with a leash on Bruce when they took him out for a walk.

“You have a good time with Jake,” Daddy said. He picked Ruthie up and gave her a squeeze. “And be good.”

Ruthie gave Daddy a smacky kiss on his cheek. “Mmm, you smell nice.”

“I used some of Mommy’s perfume.” Daddy grinned. “Do you like it?”

“Oh, Daddy.” Ruthie bopped Daddy on his nose. “You’re silly. I know that’s your shaving stuff.”

“Mmm hmmm. Very funny,” Mommy said. “Let’s go. Where’s Jake?”

“I’m coming, slow but sure.” Jake bumped down the stairs with his crutches. “Thanks, you guys, for letting Ruthie stay home to take care of me.”

Ruthie giggled and ran to Jake. “Oh, Jake, you’re goofy. You’re taking care of me.”

“Oh yeah. I remember now.” He tapped her foot with one of his crutches. “Have fun, you guys. Eat a lot and burp really loud.”

“Jaaaaake,” Ruthie said, shaking her head.

After Mommy and Daddy left, Ruthie laid some pillows on the rug in front of the fireplace. “Okay, Jake, sit down. I’ll go pop the popcorn. Mommy showed me how.”

“Sounds good, bug.” Jake lowered himself down onto the pillows, and when he was

settled, he picked me up. “Come here, Millie. You can sit here with me. Do you want some popcorn?”

“No, no, no,” Ruthie called from the kitchen. “Millie can’t have any popcorn. Mommy said it might make her choke.”

“Really?” Jake rubbed my face, and I purred. “Maybe you shouldn’t have any either, bug. Maybe it’ll make you choke. I better eat it all.”

“Ha ha ha,” Ruthie said.

She came and snuggled down next to Jake. I sniffed and raised my head. I’d seen popcorn before. It smelled yummy. I stood up and leaned my head over the bowl, sniffing.

“No no, Millie,” Ruthie said. “Jake, you take the popcorn and give me Millie.”

“Nah, she’s okay.” Jake turned me over on his lap and rubbed my belly.

“Meow.” I tried to sound grouchy. Mama said we should always act like we don’t like this, but I loved it. I purred louder and rubbed my face on his hand.

Jake and Ruthie ate popcorn. It sounded crunchy.

“Jake, will you read to me?”

“Why don’t you read to me?” He tugged on her hair.

“Not tonight. Please, Jake, read me the story about the night before Christmas.”

I liked listening to stories, but I didn’t hear much of this one. As soon as he said something about a mouse, my mind wandered. Mama had told me about mice, and how cats chased them. That sounded like fun. We didn’t have a mouse in our house, but I wanted to meet one.

“Jake?” Ruthie set the popcorn bowl down, picked me up, and sat on Jake’s lap.

He hugged us. “What, bug?”

“Do you know some kids think Christmas is all about Santa Claus instead of Jesus?”

“Yeah, I know that.”

“Mommy says I shouldn’t argue with them about it, but isn’t that funny? Santa’s fun, but Christmas is all about Jesus.”

“Yeah. That’s what Daddy and my mommy used to tell me too. Don’t argue with kids. It is okay to tell them about Jesus, though.”

“Yeah.” Ruthie rubbed my nose, then turned her face to look up at Jake. “Jake?”

“Mmm?”

“I’m sorry you don’t get to see your mommy this Christmas.”

“Me too.” Jake rubbed Ruthie’s hair.

Ruthie picked me up and buried her face in my tummy. She looked up at Jake again. “I’m glad you’re going to be here with me, though. I love you.”

Jake squeezed us. “I love you too, Bug.”

CHAPTER 14

Finally. It was the night before Christmas. Mommy and Daddy put presents under the Christmas tree. I didn't know what they were, but they were pretty. They were all wrapped up in the shiny paper, with lots of bows and ribbons. My eyes got big, but Mama told me I needed to stay away from them. *Too bad.*

Ruthie sure was excited about the presents. She lay on the floor by the tree and looked at them for a long time, trying not to move them, but wanting to see as many as she could. "Here's one with my name. Here's another one!" She yelled and wiggled.

"Okay, okay, go to bed now, sweetie," Mommy said. "I promise they'll still be here in the morning."

Jake still sat on the couch after everybody else was in bed, so I stayed with him. He poked his finger on the phone in his hand. "Hi, Mom." This was magic. The people could talk to other people far away through those little phone boxes.

"It's not too late, is it?"

I couldn't hear the other person talk, but he listened for a minute. Jake picked up a piece of the stringy ribbon and started waving it back and forth. I jumped at it.

"No, I'm okay. I just wanted to tell you Merry Christmas."

Jake kept swinging the ribbon from side to side, and I bounced at it, trying to grab it with my paws.

"Are you going to Grandma's house for Christmas dinner?"

I grabbed the ribbon in my mouth.

"Tell her I said Merry Christmas, and I love her."

Jake held the ribbon tight in his hand, and I tugged at it.

"Yeah, I got the package you sent. It's under the tree. Yeah, thanks."

Jake yanked hard on the ribbon and pulled it out of my mouth.

"It's fine. It doesn't hurt much anymore." He started swinging the ribbon back and forth again. "I miss you, Mom."

I stopped chasing the ribbon when I saw a tear drip out of Jake's eye.

“Yeah, I’m going to go to bed now. I love you too. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Jake set down the phone and let go of the ribbon. I grabbed it between both front paws and chewed. It didn’t really taste like anything.

Jake sat quiet for a minute then reached down and scooped me up. “Merry Christmas, Millie.” He rubbed my face and grinned. “I think I saw a present under the tree with your name on it.”

Oh, oh, oh, that sounded like fun. I wished he’d give it to me now.

CHAPTER 15

Mommy was up early the next morning, working in the kitchen. She put a big pan of something in the oven and said, “Gobble, gobble.”

Bruce stood by me, watching her, and he licked his lips. “That’s turkey,” he whispered. “It’s good stuff.”

Daddy came down soon, carrying Jake’s crutches. Hmmm, strange. I tipped my head and looked at Daddy. He set the crutches down and walked into the kitchen. He didn’t look like his foot hurt.

Daddy pulled a big pan out of the cabinet. “Make some room for the real cook.”

“Right.” Mommy grinned and poked Daddy in the chest.

I heard Ruthie laughing with Jake then, so I turned back to look at the stairs. They both sat on the steps, bumping down them one by one. Jake had his hurt foot stretched out so it wouldn’t bang. That looked like fun. I wanted to run and bounce down with them, but I saw Mama in the door to the hallway, shaking her head.

“We have pancakes for breakfast on Christmas,” Ruthie told Jake. “Daddy makes them.”

“I remember Dad making pancakes on Christmas when I was little.” Jake bumped down the last step and sat on the floor.

“Millie, Merry, Merry Christmas.” Ruthie ran and scooped me up. “Your first Christmas is always best.” She kissed me and squeezed me tight.

“Meow.” I wiggled in her arms.

“Do you remember your first Christmas, bug?” Jake asked.

Ruthie stuck out her tongue at him and went into the kitchen. Daddy came and handed Jake his crutches then helped him get up. I jumped down and ran around the kitchen. Everything smelled so yummy.

The people always thanked their God for the food before they ate. This morning Daddy said, “Ruthie, do you want to thank God for the day? And tell Jesus happy birthday.”

“Yes,” Ruthie said, looking serious and clearing her throat. “Jesus, happy birthday, and thank you for this food. Thank you for Christmas, and for loving us, and we love you too. Amen.”

Oh, and thank you so much for Millie. I like having her here this Christmas.” She rubbed me under the table with her foot.

“Amen,” everybody said.

I poked my head out from under the table and looked around the room. I’d still never seen Jesus anywhere, but they always talked to him and God.

After breakfast, they cleaned everything off the table, then we all went into the living room, Mama and Bruce and me too.

“Jake, will you read the Christmas story from Luke?” Daddy asked, handing Jake one of the big books called a Bible.

“Sure.” Jake turned pages in the book. Good. I curled up by his feet. I liked to listen when they read stories.

The story was nice, about a baby being born, shepherds, and angels singing. ”Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.” (Luke 2: 14NIV)

Jake had a soft reading voice. I almost fell asleep.

But then Ruthie jumped up, clapped, and said, “Now I’ll hand out presents. I can read all the names.”

The room filled with excitement. Ruthie passed out the pretty-wrapped packages from under the big tree, and everybody tore the paper and ribbons off and threw them on the floor. Bruce and I chased the paper and ribbons around, growling and chewing on them. Back when I was little, Bruce taught me how to growl, and he said I was good at it. Mama sat and chewed on one of the curly bows and purred at me and Bruce.

“Millie, this present is for you and your mama and Bruce,” Ruthie said. “Do you want me to help you open it?”

Oh, nice. This was a cute package, and Bruce and I went after the paper and ribbon as soon as Ruthie tore it off. But then she pulled out a little sack filled with jingly stuff and threw it on the floor.

Whoa. Bruce and I tore the sack open, and a bunch of jingly balls fell out and rolled all over. These were for us? Wow. Even Mama chased them with us. All the family laughed and threw the balls in every direction. I bounced and pounced and growled. No matter how hard we tried, we couldn’t catch them all. What fun this was, the whole family and Mama and Bruce and me, playing together.

Ruthie jumped up on Jake's lap, holding a little baby doll toy. "Thank you, Jake. She's so pretty."

Jake kissed her on top of the head. "You're welcome. Didn't I do a good job keeping it hidden?"

She stuck out her lip at him. "Hmmm. Do you like the book I got for you? Mommy helped me pick it out."

"I do." Jake smiled. "I love books about motorcycles. You and Mommy are smart."

Daddy sat down next to Jake and laid his arm around Jake's shoulders. "Merry Christmas, Son."

"Merry Christmas, Dad." Jake picked up one of the collar things to lead people by. "Thanks for all the presents, especially this new tie."

"You're welcome." Daddy grinned at him. "I'm happy to have you here with us, Jake."

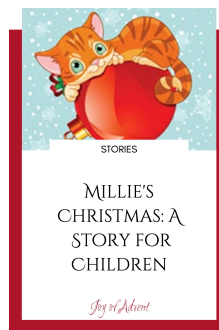
"Me, too," Jake said in a soft voice, and smiled.

"Okay, time to clean up all this mess," Mommy said.

Oh, I needed to hurry. I jumped up and started chasing the paper and ribbons around before the people got them all picked up.

THE END

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