

Mister Pushkin Blows A Fuse



Climbing trees was one of Mister Pushkin's all-time favourite hobbies. He liked nothing more than looking down on the world from a

great height, his keen eyes observing the slightest movement, his perceptive ears hearing the faintest rustle, and his sensitive nose detecting the most delicate scent.

Normally, he preferred climbing horse chestnuts, but in late December their lack of leaves meant he was too easily seen, thus completely ruining the element of surprise. And he wasn't particularly enthusiastic about ascending conifers, especially the monumental deodar at the back of Emma's vast garden. Although he'd once climbed fifty metres to its drooping tip, his luxuriant purplish-blue fur had become so sticky with sap that by the time he'd climbed down again, he was encrusted from nose to tail with so many pine needles, ants, beetles and spiders that he was forced to have a second bath in the same month.

But the tree he'd climbed today had no sap whatsoever, neither did it have pine needles,

ants, beetles, nor spiders. So there was no danger of him having to endure another bath. And he was so well-camouflaged that he'd sat completely unnoticed in the topmost branches for the past hour, observing the curious events occurring below and reflecting on how miserable the day had been...

Even at noon, his walk through the garden had been so gloomy that it had felt like dusk, and the lawn so wet after the snow had melted that his paws became unacceptably cold and muddy. But that was hours ago. Now it was pitch black, outdoors.

But indoors, Emma's dining room felt as bright and as warm as a July day. And after he'd climbed through the prickly artificial branches, weaving between the twinkling lights and glistening baubles, he'd sat and watched with fascination as Emma put the finishing touches to her festive decorations, ensuring the paper chains drooped perfectly

from the ceiling, and the hundreds of Christmas cards were arranged in size order across the full length of her grand piano. The Kandinsky-esque paintings adorning the walls had been framed with golden tinsel, and the windowsills were decorated with handmade wreaths of intertwined holly and ivy, each with a flickering candle in the centre.

He purred, watching Emma set four places around the mahogany table: two with fine bone china plates, and two with gold-rimmed porcelain bowls. And he purred even louder when Emma placed a stack of cushions on the chairs behind the bowls. Christmas was one of the few times of year when Mister Pushkin was allowed to eat at the table: a place much more becoming of a cat of his pedigree, and infinitely preferable to eating on the kitchen floor.

And he was especially looking forward to this Christmas dinner. Normally, it was just

him and Klem, so being at Emma's house made it a truly grand occasion.

There was only one problem: with Bruce also in residence, Mister Pushkin was no longer the centre of attention. But he didn't mind. Just so long as Bruce behaved himself.

'Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes!' announced Klem from the kitchen, placing the whole Scottish salmon in the pre-heated oven and closing the door. 'We must be the only people for miles who aren't having turkey, or even chicken for Christmas dinner.' He sighed, then switched on the microwave and watched the Brussels sprouts spinning as they steamed in a plastic tub.

After checking the new potatoes were bubbling steadily in a pan on the hob, he switched on the kettle and said, 'I can see Bruce asleep by the fire. But where has Mister Pushkin gone?'

'I haven't seen him for a while,' said Emma,

crouching before the crackling fire and gently stroking the aged ginger moggie between his ragged ears. She asked, 'Have you seen him?'

Bruce yawned, displaying his toothless mouth, then opened his bloodshot eye and raised his head. Briefly, he observed the pair of small golden baubles blinking high up the Christmas tree, but looked away when he noticed the tree beginning to lean. He closed his eye and drifted back to sleep, having no desire to witness the imminent disaster.

But Mister Pushkin wasn't stupid. He knew the tree wasn't designed to support an eight kilo cat, so began a careful twelve-foot descent to the carpet. But it was virtually impossible to move stealthily down a Christmas tree without jangling baubles or rustling tinsel.

'I should have known,' said Emma, reaching between the prickly artificial

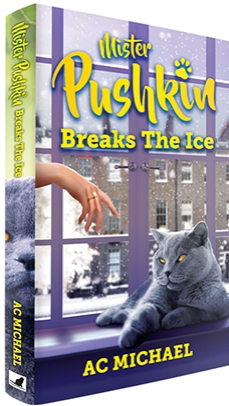
branches and hooking her thumbs under Mister Pushkin's front legs. She had just enough strength to lift him out.

'After Christmas,' she groaned, 'I think you ought to go on a diet!'

Mister Pushkin narrowed his eyes, and murmured, 'Well, I *don't*.'

TO BE CONTINUED...

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