

## FRAIDY CATS



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S. S. WILSON

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# CHAPTER ONE

“I desperately want to leave this town,” announced the rather high-strung Rolf. He was referring to the village of Dunkelhaven, nestled on the south bank of the Weser River in northern Germany. It was early spring. Winter had been hard, as it always was, and that added a layer of darkness to Rolf’s mood.

Had he not made his remark, this story would have been quite different. Actually, it probably wouldn’t have happened at all. But he did make it, so we are obligated to push on.

“Why?” asked his rather less-high-strung partner, Hermann.

This was a logical question, for it was 1810, way before 2010 and even way before 1910. At that time in Germany, one town was pretty much like another, and they didn’t even call the area Germany yet, but that’s beside the point. The point is, no town had electricity, running water, toilets, telephones, TVs, movie theaters or outlet malls. So there really wasn’t much reason to go from one to another. Nevertheless, Rolf defended his opinion.

“Because I do not feel we are welcome here.”

“But, my dear Rolf,” queried Hermann, “do you suggest that we have ever been welcome *anywhere*?”

The question annoyed Rolf. He did not like being challenged on his announcements. But he and Hermann tried never to be sharp or angry with one another; they were the best of friends. So he answered civilly.

“It’s simply that I have a new sense of added un-welcome-ness.”

“Does your sense preclude our current search for food?” asked Hermann, a bit worried. He was always a bit worried that Rolf’s sudden ideas and/or fits of temper would interrupt their more-or-less constant quest for something to eat.

“It does not, but it is something I wish to discuss further once we are well fed. Let us be off.”

And so, to Hermann’s relief, off they trotted down the alley, eyes alert, ears forward, tails straight up in the air.

We should mention here that Rolf and Hermann were cats, alley cats, if we must be accurate.

Rolf was lean and wiry. His short, compact fur was storm-cloud gray and lay close to his body, defined by his strong, ever-tense muscles. He had taller-than-average ears and longer-than average-whiskers. One whisker, on the left, was longer even than the others, giving him a sort of lopsided look when one faced him head on. This bothered him, of course, since he abhorred asymmetry, but a cat can’t just go to a barber and get a whisker trim, so he was stuck with it. Strangely, he took little note of his most striking feature: he had narrow, almond-shaped blue eyes. This made him look either full of wisdom or full of wickedness, depending on one’s reaction to eye shape. Hermann felt certain there was some Siamese in Rolf’s ancestry, but he had the good taste not to bring it up.

To continue with our vaguely Asian references, Hermann was Yin to Rolf’s Yang. Where Rolf was lean, Hermann was plump (he liked to say “solidly built”). Where Rolf’s fur was short and gray, Hermann’s was long, luxurious, and a painterly palette of glowing oranges and creams. He had small ears, almost lost in fur, a round face, and big, inviting eyes that were a stunning emerald green. On seeing him, one was forced to wonder why he had not been adopted by some loving family. This was because Rolf would not hear of it, and Hermann almost always abided by what Rolf dictated.

Incidentally, they were offended by the term “alley cats,” for they saw themselves as quite sophisticated, worthy of being kings, or at least of being the cats of a king. That is why they addressed each other in so



formal a manner.

In truth, their lives up to now had been rather less than kingly, or even princely, knightly or bishoply. Born to the alleys of Dunkelhaven, there they had remained.

At the end of this particular alley, they came to a band of pigs who were eating fly-covered garbage in the street. This was a common sight. You see, way back then, people just threw all their trash and even their unmentionable stuff, which we'll not mention, into the streets in front of their houses. Roving pigs cleaned up some of it. Poor people picked through it for anything of value. But the rest just sat there. People hadn't gotten around to inventing trash collection because they were too busy starving, having wars, or getting small pox and the plague.

So this pig moment was part of every day life. Rolf and Hermann paid it no mind as they swerved wide around the snuffling creatures and continued up the street. Today was sunny, and Tuesday, and that meant that their quest took them to the neighborhood on the hill overlooking the river, the neighborhood of Dunkelhaven's well-to-do.

It was quite unlike the dank alleys and cramped, twisting streets of their usual haunts. Towering beeches and oaks shaded wide cobblestone avenues. There were few mud puddles and no unkempt bramble bushes. A cat could glide along for blocks under well-trimmed hedges and never pick up a single burr. Also, there were no pigs, for the well-to-do paid the less-well-off to carry garbage some place else, without caring particularly where that place was.

Every house was a multi-storied statement of wealth. Some were built of flame-red brick with meticulously painted decorative white trim. Others rose up in fine-cut blocks of the local yellowish stone. Still others wore an icing of rich white plaster whose glare hurt your eyes on a sunny day. All had slate roofs, steeply sloped to shed winter's snow.

As Rolf and Hermann padded comfortably from hedge to rose bush to topiary elephant, a cornucopia of delightful smells flitted around them like olfactory butterflies. There were aromas of flowers, fruit, fresh cut grass, hardwood smoke from kitchen fires, and food. Their favorite was food.

But they did not waste time chasing down random scents. No, they knew right where they were headed. The humans in one particular two-story red brick house always took a walk to the local park on Tuesdays, if the weather was nice. And, since the weather was nice, they always left certain windows open.

Furthermore, the young girl human of the house had as her pet a Bichon Frise (a small, white cotton-fluffy dog). Her parents kept on hand for this annoying canine an absolutely obscene amount of treats. So, on sunny summer Tuesdays it was always worth the hike up the hill to see if any of the treats could be lured out of the house.

The cats' timing was excellent. Just as they arrived, they saw the family walking away toward the park. The second floor windows were open. Perfect. They could put one of their standard plans into action.

Hermann always served as decoy. He leapt onto the front porch railing and began parading up and down in front of the living room windows. Invariably, the Bichon Frise was snoozing on the living room sofa and, invariably, it spotted him within seconds. The dog flew to the window, springing madly up and down, for he was too short to see out otherwise, and shouting hysterically, "Iseeyoustupidcat!! Iseeyou! Iseeyou! Iseeyou!" Small dogs shouted everything very fast. Hermann calmly continued parading and the dog reliably continued bouncing and shouting.

Rolf was thus free to glide unnoticed to the side of the house where grew a tall, finely-formed beech tree. Its branches nearly touched one of the aforementioned windows. Rolf flowed up the trunk, then along a branch, and made a graceful leap into the house.

He landed lightly on an ornate walnut desk in an equally ornate walnut paneled study. He glanced about and listened closely. The Bichon was still shrieking mindlessly at Hermann downstairs.

He hopped silently to the floor and peered out into the upstairs hall. The coast was still clear. So he slithered along the wall, past the doorways to two bedrooms, and then down the stairs. There he paused at the rear of the living room. The Bichon Frise, intent on his maniacal shouting at Hermann, did not notice him. The great thing about dogs was that, once excited about something, they made so much noise they couldn't

hear anything else. Not a mistake a cat would make.

Rolf wasn't really afraid of the little dog, of course. He knew that, even if the Bichon spotted him, a loud spit and a show of tooth and claw would probably send the critter scampering under the sofa, but you always avoided a fight if you could. Fights waste time and sometimes cost fur. Rolf and Hermann prided themselves on the efficiency of their missions.

He moved across the living room and into the kitchen, where he began scanning for accessible containers. Immediately his nose told him something very good was nearby — smoked fish! A bit more searching pointed him to a high shelf. On it was a small wicker basket, placed that high, no doubt, to keep it out of the Bichon's reach. He took a moment to analyze the available surfaces — water barrel, counter top, wood stove, plate shelf, cupboard. Using them in that order, an easy series of leaps landed him on the shelf beside the basket.

He sniffed it. Fabulous! He took the handle in his teeth and lifted. The basket was awkward but not too heavy. He leapt down with it and headed back toward the living room. He tried to be quiet, but there was no way to keep the basket from dragging on the floor. The Bichon heard it even over his own frenzied barking. He whirled, wide-eyed, quivering as though made of springs. The pitch of his barking rose a full ear-splitting octave, "Iseeyoutoo! Iseeyoutooevilcat! Evilcat! Evilcat!"

Rolf grimaced. Now it would be a close race. He lurched up the stairs, basket clattering and bouncing. The dog shot across the living room in pursuit.

Rolf waddled as fast as possible past the upstairs bedrooms, rounding the turn into the study just inches ahead of the dog. But the dog, like all dogs, couldn't make the turn nearly as gracefully and went skidding helplessly down the hall on the waxed wooden floor. Rolf then had plenty of time to jump up onto the desk near the open window.

There he discovered a problem: the window wasn't open wide enough to fit the basket through.

By now the Bichon was hopping up and down beside the desk, shrieking, "Iseeyou! Ihateyou! Iseeyou! Ihateyou!" But he was too short to jump

onto the desk, so Rolf ignored him in that really cool way cats do while he studied his problem.

After a moment's thought, he put his paws on the edge of the basket and carefully tipped it onto its side. The hinged top swung open and the contents spilled out onto the table — lots of delicious morsels of dried, smoked fish, haddock, to be exact.

Rolf now called out the window, "I say, Hermann!"

Hermann was already waiting at the base of the beech tree, having seen the Bichon go stampeding up the stairs, "Yes, Rolf?"

"I'm going to have to throw the food out a bit at a time. Can you catch it please?"

"Indeed I can," Hermann called back confidently. "And what is the food, pray tell?"

"It's that fish the humans dry out and sort of slightly burn."

"I *love* that fish!" exclaimed Hermann happily.

"Evilcats! Evilcats! Don'ttakeit! Don'ttakeit!" whined the unhappy Bichon.

Rolf spun about, arched his back and hissed loudly down at the little dog, "Can't you *ever* be quiet?!"

The Bichon shrank fearfully away from the desk and was silent for a moment. Then in a small voice he tried to make sound like a snarl, he said more slowly, "But the humans will blame *me*. They always blame me when you take things and make messes."

"You're the one who chooses to live with them" snapped Rolf. He aimed his butt at the open window, looked over his shoulder and began kicking out pieces of smoked fish with his hind legs. He was quite accurate.

Down below, Hermann leapt up and caught the first one right in his mouth. "Mmmmmmm!" The next one he caught and dutifully set aside for Rolf. And so it went, piece after piece. Gulp, one for him. Catch, one for Rolf. This was turning out to be one of their more successful raids.

Upstairs, as Rolf arranged more pieces in a row for his next volley, he and the Bichon suddenly heard breaking glass somewhere downstairs. The Bichon, a trembling snowball, whirled to face the open door of the study, "Whatwasthat? Whatwasthat?"

Now they heard heavy footsteps thudding rapidly up the stairs; then crashing and banging from the bedrooms down the hall.

“Whatisit?! *Whoisit?*” whimpered the Bichon, edging toward the door, tail tucked. “It is not my masters, I know their step!”

Rolf didn’t care who it was. He knew that he could make an instant escape out the window any time he wanted. So he determinedly kept kicking out smoked fish. Down below, Hermann merrily kept gulping and catching.

A moment later, two men burst into the study. They were dressed quite shabbily and obviously did not belong in this house of the well-to-do. Each man was carrying a cloth sack full of things that tinkled and jangled.

The first man tripped over the frozen Bichon, who was thereby booted right across the room, flying end-over-end, yike-yiking like some sort of furry firework. The tripped man toppled forward, arms splaying out, and crashed down on the desk.

As per back-up plan, Rolf was already gone. He’d launched himself straight as an arrow out the window and was half way down the beech tree.

As the man hit the desk, his sack flew open. Many things, in turn, flew out of it. Silver candlesticks, silver dinnerware, a clock, and jewelry. In that last category was a ring featuring a very large diamond. The man was horrified to see the ring sail right out the window.

Down below, Hermann sat happily, mouth open, waiting for the next piece of fish (since it happened to be his turn). The diamond ring landed right in his mouth. GULP. He swallowed it. Then he made a sour face, “Rolf, what are you doing up there?” he called. “That last piece tasted terrible!”

“I’m right beside you, Hermann,” said Rolf, causing Hermann to jump in surprise. Rolf spoke with his mouth full, as he was gobbling fish from the pile Hermann had made for him.

Up above, the man with the sack was now looking down from the window. He had seen Hermann swallow the ring!

As Rolf continued wolfing his bits of fish, he and Hermann heard rapid footsteps. The two men came racing around from the back of the house

carrying their sacks. They stopped short as they spotted the cats. Then they grinned broadly and began inching toward them.

“Nice kitty!” said one.

“Good kitty!” said the other.

We should state for the record here that cats do not understand human speech and vice-versa. That said, cats easily grasp the *tone* of what humans say, especially if it is said insincerely while grinning inappropriately. That always meant trouble.

“I must say they are acting strangely,” observed Hermann.

“Most definitely,” said Rolf, snatching one last fish bit as they backed warily away.

At that, the men charged toward them, pulling out large and nasty looking knives! Rolf and Hermann knew well what humans did to animals with knives.

“I would advise we run,” said Rolf.

“Just so,” said Hermann.

And they did.

These cats had been chased before (many times) so they had an extensive repertoire of evasive maneuvers. When escaping from anything other than hawks, which were in a different category entirely, they followed one of two tried-and-true systems. If the pursuer was about the same size as they, System One was used — zigzags, sudden turns, and unexpected double-backs. If the pursuer was larger, System Two was preferred, in which they ducked though any handy opening too small for the pursuer to fit. Either system might include climbing things, since nothing that chased cats could climb as well as a cat.

In a swift execution of System Two, they used a simple straight-away dash with a left feint followed by a sharp right turn that set up their finish — zipping effortlessly through a small gap under a backyard fence. In under five seconds they’d left the two humans far behind.

They were, however, mystified by the sudden attack, and they discussed this as they now casually strolled along. “Who do you suppose they were?” asked Hermann.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” said Rolf, “But then, humans all tend to look

alike.”

“True, true. But why were they so angry at us? Dressed as they were, they’re obviously not friends of the people who live in that house.”

Rolf nodded, pondered, and then said, “Perhaps one was the butcher from which we stole that excellent steak some days ago.”

“Could be. Or they might have come from the house where we broke all those wine glasses in trying to get to the turkey on the dinner table.”

“Possibly, possibly.”

Hermann sighed at the memory, “I wish we’d gotten to that turkey.”

“Ah!” said Rolf, “Perhaps they are the owners of the parakeet on which we dined Thursday a week.”

“Good thought! I’d quite forgotten that!”

They were wrong on all counts. The two men were burglars. They had broken into the house of the Bichon Frise just after Rolf had entered and, among other things, they had stolen the diamond ring. They were very, very upset that Hermann had swallowed it, for it was the single most valuable thing they had stolen in their whole, albeit rather limited, careers.

The burglars’ names were Acker and Eckhard. Acker, who had tripped over the dog, was short, thin and pale, with freckles and wispy red hair which clung to his forehead in damp curls. Eckhard was equally thin, but a head taller than his cohort. He had a black beard and bushy black brows that seemed forever knitted in a look of mild confusion.

While not the most quick-witted criminals in Dunkelhaven, they acted most quickly in this matter. They raced to a small rundown house on the very edge of town. Surrounded by a tall fence, it was the home of a devious friend of theirs. He made his living poaching in the local forests, which is to say, hunting animals he had no right to hunt.

To aid him in this illegal profession, he had a bloodhound. Her name was Annalise. Like Rolf and Hermann, she had grown up in rough circumstances. Her chocolate colored fur was dusty and matted, and always seemed to have a few burrs stuck in it. One ear was shorter than the other, due to a fight when she was a pup (she won). But she had an excellent nose and a great spirit, and she had always served her master faithfully.

As a result, said master wasn’t about to sell her. He drove a hard bar-

gain just to rent her. Acker and Eckhard argued that she should come cheap because she was only a female. The poacher claimed that she was a better tracker than most male hounds, which was true. At the end of the haggling, Acker and Eckhard angrily gave him all the valuables they had just stolen, buying Annalise's services for only as long as needed to catch the cats.

Annalise was quite surprised to find herself leashed and led away from the only home she had known since being taken from her mother. She knew that dogs sometimes were, for reasons unclear to animals, traded to other humans, so she assumed this is what had happened.

Straight away, Acker and Eckhard raced back to the fancy neighborhood. Annalise had heard of it, but had never seen it, and she was awed to see the great houses and broad shaded streets. Was this where her new masters lived? From the look of them, she didn't think so, but one could always hope. It made her think of the well-groomed dogs she often saw at the market where her former master sold his illegal wares. She admired them and wistfully wished that one day he might brush out her fur in that way. This had never happened, of course.

She was pulled from these thoughts when the men stopped at the tree where Hermann and Rolf had collected the smoked fish. Acker shoved her nose to the ground. It was obvious he wanted her to pick up a scent, but she was offended that he was so rough about it.

She immediately caught the desired scent, and was at first confused. Cats? They wanted her to hunt cats? That was odd, since humans did not eat or make clothes out of cats. Indeed, your average bloodhound would have been insulted at the command. But, as it happened, Annalise recognized the intertwined scents of Rolf and Hermann. This was significant because she thought of them as "The Hated Rolf and Hermann."

Here's why. Not only had she heard numerous stories of their sneaky exploits, she herself had once been tricked by them. The previous summer, Hermann had leapt her fence and come staggering toward her lowly dog house, hissing and frothing at the mouth. Convinced that the horrid cat was rabid, Annalise had dashed to find her owner, whimpering and cowering. Only then did she see Rolf leap in over the fence, snatch her



evening meal, and leap back out. Hermann, suddenly “cured,” was gone just as quickly. Adding injury to insult, her owner had kicked her for being fearful and annoying.

So, her new masters would have her hunt Rolf and Hermann, would they? Annalise set out on this trail with an eager howl!