

A story for Christmas ~ by Allie Catt

CHRISTMAS BELLE

Belle purred contentedly next to the open fire and watched her lady working hard to prepare a feast for the following day. The house was filled with festive singing and interesting smells which helped Belle to gently fall asleep, safe in the knowledge that in a just a few hours she would awake to her son, Beau, being with her once again.

Christmas had become such a happy time of year; so busy but also full of warmth and joy. It had not always been this way though, and as Belle drifted into a deep sleep, she was taken back to her past... she found herself back in that car, in the box with her two young kittens – excitedly wondering where they were going and what kind of adventure was to come. Belle peered through a small hole in the box and watched as they passed snow covered fields and houses. She shivered at the thought of the cold and was relieved to be safely in the warm with her young family.

The car came to a halt so Belle gently woke her kittens and cleaned their faces to

ensure they looked their best for whatever exciting thing was to come. They sat quietly as their box was carried from the car, the snow crunching loudly beneath the feet of the man as he carried the box further and further away from the car. There was no other noise, not even the familiar sound of cars in the distance. The man set the box down on the cold snow and Belle listened as the crunching of his feet got further and further away. As the car engine started Belle reassured her kittens that nothing bad was going to happen, they just had to wait and the man would come back for them. Belle was certain it wouldn't be long as she trusted her human family to make sure they were looked after.

Belle continued to reassure her kittens, but as the time passed she started to wonder if the man had somehow been delayed. Her kittens were starting to feel the cold, and although she was certain the man would come for them soon, Belle decided it would be sensible for them to find somewhere warmer to wait. She gently

pushed up the top of the box and looked at the winter wilderness surrounding them. In the distance she could see what looked like a farm and as there were no other buildings in sight, the young family set off towards it.

As they walked through the snow, Belle thought about her human family and imagined what they might be doing. There had been much excitement in the house before they left; the smell of roast turkey filled the house, people were coming and going, and presents being opened. The children were happily playing with their new bouncy puppy and the adults were laughing, drinking and watching television. Belle wondered why the man had chosen such a busy time to take them on an adventure and decided that he must have become so caught up in the festivities at home that he had temporarily forgotten to come back for them. Night was drawing in, the farm didn't seem to be any closer, and the kittens were tired so the family decided to shelter in a deserted badger sett before continuing their

journey the next morning. Belle ignored her own hunger pangs and fed her kittens before the family curled up together and settled down to sleep.

Sunrise came and Belle looked out to see that snow was falling heavily so decided to wait for a while before continuing. Belle licked at the cold snow to quench her thirst as she kept her kittens warm and fed, watching them purr happily helped ease the pain she felt from not having eaten for so long. She thought about her human family and wondered why the man had not yet come back for them.

Finally the snow stopped and the bright winter sun cast its rays across the beautiful white fields. Belle stood up and stretched before waking her kittens to continue on their way, her body was weak from hunger but she knew they just needed to get to the farm to stay warm until the man came to get them.

Belle's kittens played in the snow as they continued on their way, still so happy and full of energy due to the care given to them by their devoted but near exhausted

mother. Snow started to fall again, even heavier than before. With no shelter in sight, there was no option but to continue on their way through the harsh conditions. Belle wondered where the man was. She worried that something bad may have happened to him. Why else would he not have come back for them?

Belle's exhausted body had nothing left to offer. The kittens cried and cried but all Belle could give was the promise that everything would be alright when they got to the farm. She told herself again and again that the man would come and find them and in her heart he was already on his way, but in her head a harsh realisation was dawning.

Finally, they were almost at the farm. Belle nudged her kittens and begged them to keep going, please, just a few more steps... but the kittens were silent now, no strength left to even cry. Belle lay her tired body down with her beloved kittens, as devoted a mother as always, and they lay together in silence, finally accepting that no one was coming for them after all.

Belle watched smoke flowing from the farmhouse chimney as her eyes slowly closed.

Belle was vaguely aware of someone close by. 'Over here!' A white-bearded man wearing a red suit shouted. 'Get some blankets quickly!' Belle remembered how she managed to open her eyes just long enough to see one of her kittens being carried away by a lady shaking her head sadly...

The heavy wooden door suddenly swung open as Beau arrived back home from his regular yearly outing. Shouts of 'Merry Christmas' echoed around the house as Belle jumped up to greet her son before they both trotted into the kitchen for their special Christmas breakfast of chopped turkey with a bowl of cream to share.

Beau makes a point of accompanying their man every year to remind him to give presents to all the cats as well as the children in the houses they visit. After all, Christmas should be special for cats too.

FESTIVE FLEAS!

Little bug equals big problem this winter, warns PDSA

Some pet owners might have more guests than they'd bargained for this Christmas as thousands of flea eggs hatch in our homes, warns leading veterinary charity, PDSA.

The charity for pets in need of vets is warning owners that they, and their four-legged friends, could be set for a winter of stressful scratching thanks to their unwanted visitors.

PDSA statistics show that there is a 20 per cent drop in the sale of flea treatments during the winter months. Vets believe this is because many owners simply do not realise that fleas are just as rampant in the winter as the summer months.

'It might be cold outside,' says PDSA Senior Veterinary Surgeon, Sean Wensley, 'but our warm houses provide the perfect breeding ground for fleas. People turn up the central heating to keep their homes warm, but this means that fleas are able to thrive'.

'Pet owners should take effective steps to rid their pets, and their homes, of these parasites by carrying out a regular flea treatment programme,' added Sean.

Fleas can lay thousands of eggs all around our homes – wherever your pet goes the fleas go too! PDSA estimates that some pet owning households could contain around 20,000 flea eggs at any one time, many of which will develop into adult fleas within a matter of weeks – feeding off both owner and pet.

Sean said: 'A population of just one hundred fleas can increase to over ten thousand fleas within the space of just six months because of the rapid rate at which they reproduce.

Flea eggs fall off your pet wherever it goes, in particular where they sleep. So if your pet snoozes with you at night, your bed could be infested with hundreds of flea eggs.

With around 14 million cats and dogs in the UK today, most at some point in their lives will be affected by fleas.

'It is vital that owners regularly use appropriate flea treatments in the correct manner' adds Sean. 'Using a dog flea treatment on a cat can result in fatal poisoning, as can exceeding the recommended dosage, so always consult your vet for advice on the best flea treatment to use. PDSA vets regularly see pets that have been treated incorrectly with flea treatments, some of whom, sadly, do not survive.

'Remember too that treating your pet is only part of the solution as you will have to treat your home and any other pets within your household too. Everything the dog or cat comes into contact with should be treated with a product recommended by your vet, otherwise it is inevitable that the fleas will come back.'

Fleas can cause very serious health problems. They are one of the most common causes of distressing skin problems in dogs and cats and in severe cases smaller animals, particularly kittens, can die from anaemia due to blood loss from the feeding fleas.

To encourage owners to treat their pets over the winter period, PDSA, in conjunction with Pfizer Animal Health, is offering its eligible clients a special 'Buy One Get One Flea' promotion. For the next six months - December 2008 and until May

2009, with every three flea treatments they purchase at their local PDSA PetAid hospital, clients will get a fourth treatment

absolutely free! For more information clients should contact their local PDSA PetAid hospitals or call freephone 0800 917 2509.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Fleas thrive in a warm environment
- Fleas can jump 20cm high, over a metre long and will jump around 10,000 times when looking for a dog or cat host.
- Fleas can feed for up to three hours from one site, and can drink up to 140% of their own body weight in blood.
- Eggs, larvae and pupae can also be carried around the house on the soles of our shoes.

* Pet owners who want to learn more about protecting their pets from fleas can also download a **FREE** copy of PDSA's responsible pet care leaflet, 'Fleas, mites, lice and ticks', from www.pdsa.org.uk.



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