

# ***An Unexpected Guest***

by  
Rhonda Dragomir



Mrs. Pitt frightened me. Blue hair and stooped shoulders could not diminish the authority she wielded in just a look or word. Meekly, I had followed her on a tour of the parsonage as she shared both her wisdom and expectations for the new young pastor's wife.

We stopped briefly at the kitchen sink. "See how this shines?" she asked in her sweet southern accent. The gleam of the stainless steel was only slightly less than that in her eyes. "I expect to see it look just like this the next time I come. And I'd better never see any bits of food in the trap." She smiled pleasantly, but I wasn't fooled. Terror took hold.

At that most inopportune moment, Kitty rounded the corner with a trill. Mrs. Pitt stiffened. "You know," she stated somberly, "No pastor has ever had an animal in the parsonage before." She wrinkled her nose and sniffed.

"Yes, I know." I shot her my most engaging smile. "I'm so grateful Kitty has been allowed that great privilege."

Kitty was sixteen, my beloved black cat since I was eight years old. I had pleaded with my husband to ask that he be allowed

to come with us to North Carolina, and pity for the new preacher's wife had somehow swayed the parsonage committee to allow him to live with us.

Apparently, that decision was made over the objections of Mrs. Pitt.

Kitty obligingly gave Mrs. Pitt's legs a friendly swish with his tail, and she recoiled. "I don't like cats," she said, stating the obvious. I gave Kitty a gentle shove toward his food dish in the pantry, and he was distracted enough to leave her alone for the moment. Our tour over, Mrs. Pitt paraded to her giant Oldsmobile and left, although I didn't believe for a moment that Kitty was truly welcome in the parsonage.

"A cat is always on the wrong side of a closed door." Garrison Keillor's wry observation proved true. Endless trips to the patio to let Kitty in or out made life tedious, and we surreptitiously replaced a window in the basement with a pet door. I didn't plan to let Mrs. Pitt see it. Kitty was most pleased with his new freedom and explored the nearby woods like the predator he was. Occasionally I heard him heading up the stairs with a particular meow. It meant he carried a gift.

When a cat brings a killed animal to its owner, it's supposedly an offering of love. The appropriate response is to praise the cat for its hunting prowess. I'm afraid Kitty was most often greeted with shrieks and wild dancing during his presentation ritual. His mistress was unable to appreciate his generosity.

Our first Christmas in the parsonage heralded my debut as a hostess. The Women's Missionary Fellowship always had a

party at the parsonage, charmingly dubbed a “carry-in dinner.” I smiled at the name, unaccustomed still to the differences in some terminology in the South. I slipped in the substitute term “pot luck” one day and Mrs. Pitt glowered. I would forever be a hapless Yankee.

Mrs. Pitt’s words during our tour rang in my ears as I scrubbed, dusted, and polished everything in sight, especially the sink, before the party. I wanted everything to look perfect. With only minutes to spare before the ladies arrived, my last act was to banish Kitty outdoors. I felt a little twinge of guilt because it was cold, but reasoned that he was used to being outside. He stood at the patio door, meowing and glaring at me, but I shut the blinds.

I shooed my husband out a few minutes later, since the party was “ladies only.” He resisted, eyes aglow with the thought of the delicious treats that would soon arrive. I shoved him toward the door and shot him my most intimidating get-out-now look. Giving me a peck on the cheek, he squeezed my hand and whispered, “Good luck.”

A few deep, cleansing breaths were all I had time for before the doorbell rang with the arrival of the first guests. The fireplace crackled with warmth, cranberry scented candles shone, and my Christmas tree was a glowing masterpiece. The ladies toured the entire house, as I knew they would, and I was confident that every square inch was spotless.

Mrs. Pitt’s arrival was the cue to begin, and she placed her trademark sweet potato pie on the buffet table with a flourish. Following a brief prayer, the ladies began to fill their plates and gathered to enjoy the meal.

The parsonage had a large dining room, but there were so many women that a few had to be seated in the living room, balancing their food and drinks on tray tables. Their gentle conversation and kind compliments about the beauty of our home helped me to relax, lulling me into a false sense of security.

In the last-minute rush, I had forgotten to latch the door to the basement. I didn't realize my mistake until I heard a familiar yowl coming up the stairs. I nearly knocked the contents of my tray to the floor as I flew across the room trying to beat Kitty to the door. I was too late.

I screamed when the mouse, still writhing, was dragged across my feet. Kitty ran by me so fast that I missed him when I tried to grab anything, even his tail. He trotted into the living room, proud to show off his most recent catch. When he rounded the corner, pandemonium erupted.

Screams echoed from the walls and women scrambled to climb up onto the furniture. Some women simply froze in fright, forks poised in midair as their brains tried to comprehend what they were seeing. My first instinct was to call for my husband, but then I remembered he had been banished. I was on my own.

Ignoring my fear, I scrambled to grab Kitty, latching onto his furry belly with ferocity. He was so startled that he dropped the mouse, which then wobbled off toward the couch in a last-ditch effort to survive. After a few steps, he fell over, succumbing to his injuries. Perhaps he was just scared to death.

Eerie quiet descended upon the room as every eye turned to Mrs. Pitt. Her expression was inscrutable. I wondered what it would be like to have to be packed and gone before New Year's Day.

The corners of Mrs. Pitt's mouth twitched almost imperceptibly. Instead of a glare, I saw a twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, y'all," she drawled, "Just calm down. We said it was a carry-in dinner."