

OUTLAW MOUSE

By Marilyn Halvorson

Appears here with the kind permission of the author.

GRANDMA and Grandpa were in the living room watching the news that cold winter evening. Jodie was at the kitchen table having milk and peanut butter cookies to help her finish her homework. As she glanced up from her book she thought she caught a movement in the shadows over by the fridge.

“Eye strain from too much studying,” she muttered to herself. “Someone should tell teachers that homework is hazardous to the health. Much more of this math and I’ll have to borrow Grandpa’s bifocals.”

She leaned over her work. There it was again. Out of the corner of her eye she had definitely seen something move this time. Very slowly, she turned her head. And there it was. Sitting in front of the fridge as if it owned the kitchen. A tiny, sleek and shiny, brownish mouse with huge ears, bright eyes, and white trim around its edges. It was the most fascinating thing Jodie had ever seen in the kitchen. She opened her mouth to share the miracle with Grandma, but then she closed it again. Grandma was as much an animal lover as anyone Jodie knew, but a mouse in her kitchen might just be where she drew the line. Anyway, it would be kind of neat to have this for her own little secret.

Moving very slowly, Jodie broke a crumb off her cookie and tossed it over near the mouse. The mouse panicked and dived under the fridge. Jodie pretended to go back to her homework. A minute or two passed. Sure enough. Out came the mouse. He came in little rushes, pausing to check for danger, and then rushing forward again. He grabbed the crumb and, like lightning, was back under the fridge. Jodie smiled, thinking of the secret mouse picnic taking place right here in the kitchen.

For the next few days, Jodie kept an eye out for her mouse, but it was getting close to Christmas and Grandma bustled around the kitchen baking late into most evenings. The mouse must be playing it safe and staying hidden till everyone was in bed. In fact,

he had stayed hidden so long that Jodie had almost forgotten about him—until she heard an early-morning squawk from Grandma.

The words “Good land! What’s happened to my mince pie?” woke Jodie from a Saturday-morning sleep-in. She jumped out of bed and got to the kitchen in time to hear, “Harold! We’ve got a mouse! The little varmint has helped himself to the edge of my pie I left cooling on the counter overnight!”

Grandpa looked over the top of the cattle magazine he was reading while he waited for the breakfast coffee to heat. There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Calm down now, Ellen,” he drawled. “Little fella didn’t eat *much*, did he?”

Jodie always suspected Grandpa had come dangerously close to receiving one almost-whole mince pie in the face at that moment. But Grandma controlled herself and sent him off to the basement to hunt for a mousetrap. Jodie crossed her fingers and wished that he wouldn’t find one. It worked! Fifteen minutes later he came grumbling back upstairs with cobwebs in his hair and announced that there were no mousetraps in the basement.

Grandma muttered something about him not being able to find his hat if it was on his head and took matters into her own hands. It took more than crossed fingers to stop Grandma. Five minutes later she was back with two traps. “There!” she said to Grandpa with satisfaction, “you be sure to set them before we go to bed tonight.”

Jodie glanced toward the shadowy space under the refrigerator. You’d better be listening, mouse! Get out of town before night-fall or the sheriff’s gonna get you.

Bedtime came. Grandpa had a snack and then headed off down the hall toward the bedroom. Grandma caught him. “Harold, the mousetrap. Here,” she said, handing him a jar of peanut butter. “Bait it with this.”

Grandpa stared at it. “What’s this? You bait mouse traps with cheese.”

Grandma shook her head. “You’re behind the times, Harold. I read that mice love peanut butter.”

“If you ask me, I’d say they love mince pie,” Grandpa muttered.

Grandma shot him a stern look. “Just bait the trap, Harold.”

Grandpa baited and set the traps. He put one on the counter and one by the basement door. He probably should have put one beside the refrigerator, Jodie thought. But she kept her thoughts to herself.

Everyone went to bed. That included Timothy T., the senior citizen cat, who went to his cozy box on the porch and Prince, the handsome tabby, who slept with Jodie. Before the cats went, Grandma gave them both a stern talking-to about neglecting their work. They yawned.

Jodie spent a restless night. She kept waking up and lying listening, hoping not to hear a sudden sharp *snap!* from the kitchen. Finally she slept soundly, only to wake before seven and lie there wondering what she was worrying about.

Suddenly she remembered. Her mouse! She had to know the awful truth. She threw on her robe and rushed to the kitchen. Both traps were mercifully mouse-free. Jodie let out a huge sigh of relief. Then she took a closer look. Both traps were peanut-butter-free, too. Every morsel had been polished off, leaving the trap as clean as a new-washed plate. Jodie giggled. Oh mouse, you're a slick one!

Grandma was not in the least amused when *she* saw the empty traps. That evening she coached Grandpa as he reset the traps. "Now, adjust the trigger a little finer this time, Harold. Last time you set it so that mouse could nibble all the peanut butter off without setting off the spring. No, Harold, you've still not set it fine enough. Just move that trigger a little more, just a bit . . ."

Snap! Grandpa let out a roar like a wounded buffalo as the mouse trap went off, trapping him by the little finger. Gingerly, he released it and stood blowing cool air on his stinging pinky.

"Whoops!" Grandma said in a small voice.

Grandpa placed the unset trap firmly in Grandma's hand. "Goodnight, Ellen," he said and marched off to bed.

That night, Grandma set the traps. Jodie noticed that she didn't push *her* luck making too fine a trigger adjustment.

The next morning the peanut butter was gone again. Jodie grinned to herself. The score was Mouse 2, Grandma 0.

Christmas was getting close. Grandma got busier and busier. The next night Jodie noticed that nobody set the mousetraps. She breathed a sigh of relief and had a wonder full night's sleep.

The subject, of the mouse didn't come up again for several days, although Jodie did notice that Grandma no longer left her baking to cool on the counter overnight.

Maybe the mouse had taken Jodie's advice and moved out of the house. Or maybe one of the cats had caught him for a midnight snack while everyone was sleeping. Somehow, Jodie doubted that had happened. The cats seemed hungrier than usual. Every morning the dish of Cat Chow left out for them overnight had been completely devoured.

Jodie finished her Christmas shopping. Almost, that is. She had a fantastic jackknife for Grandpa, a Toronto Blue Jays cap for her friend, Eric, but she was having trouble getting just the right thing for Grandma. She had bought her a pretty scarf but she still had a little money left and was trying to think of some little gift that would be just what Grandma really needed.

Christmas came closer. Jodie started wrapping presents. She needed a red bow to top off Eric's gift. She thought she remembered Grandma putting some bows into the sewing-machine drawer awhile ago. She went searching. Yes, there was a red bow in there. But—but, it was almost buried! For a minute Jodie just stood staring with her mouth wide open. "Gra . . ." she began but then she shut her mouth. This was not something Grandma needed to hear about right now. The drawer was nearly filled with Cat Chow! And Jodie had a very good idea about whose secret storehouse this must be. What a sassy mouse! Stealing from the cats! The little guy had nerve, all right. Very quietly Jodie scooped up the kidnapped cat food and put it back into the cats' dish.

When suppertime came around, the cats trooped out to their dish. They sniffed it and twitched their whiskers and stood staring with very odd expressions on their faces. "Hmmp!" Grandma said. "Those cats are getting awfully high and mighty. They act like they smell a rat in their cat food." Jodie didn't say a word.

It was now only two days before Christmas. Time for the Christmas tree hunt when Jodie and Grandma and Grandpa would walk far back into the deep woods to find the perfect spruce. The snow was deep and it was cold out. Grandma decided her rubber boots wouldn't do. She would have to dig her cozy, fleece-lined lace-up boots out of the depths of the back closet. She found them and dragged them out of the shadowy closet. She started to put her foot into one. Suddenly she stopped. "What on earth?" She flicked on the light to find out why she couldn't get her foot into her boot.

Jodie looked up from reading Jenkins' Hardware Christmas sale catalogue and rushed out to see what was going on. She and Grandma stood in silent amazement.

Both of Grandma's winter boots were filled to the brim with Cat Chow! It reminded Jodie of when they had studied "Christmas in Other Lands" at school last year. In some countries kids didn't put out their stockings for Santa to fill. They put out their shoes instead. "Merry Christmas, Grandma!" Jodie giggled.

"That does it!" Grandma declared. "That mouse has gone too far. Right after Christmas I'm going to buy half a dozen new traps and declare war." Then, in spite of herself she began to grin. "Little varmint does have a sense of humour, though, doesn't he?"

Right then something clicked in Jodie's head. Something she had seen in the catalogue. Suddenly, she knew what Grandma's really special Christmas present was going to be.

The next day when Grandma went to town to mail some last-minute cards, Jodie went along. "I'll only be a minute, Grandma!" she called over her shoulder. Then she ran all the way to Jenkins' Hardware Store. Mrs. Jenkins had exactly what she needed. She even wrapped it up in Christmas paper and put on a red bow—one that *hadn't* been buried in Cat Chow.

It was Christmas Eve. Grandma invited Eric's family over for hot chocolate and cookies. Jodie gave Eric his cap. Eric gave her one of the Black Stallion books that she was collecting. By the time they had left it was getting late. "Into bed, Jodie-kid," Grandpa ordered. "Santa Claus won't come if you're still awake," he added with a wink.

"Okay, Grandpa," Jodie said with a big yawn. Then she thought of something. "Grandma, I want you to open part of your present tonight so you can try it out right away"

Grandma looked very puzzled. "Hmm. Must be a nightgown in that case. The only thing I plan to do yet today is crawl into bed."

Jodie giggled and handed over the square present with the bow on top. Grandma shook it. It gave sort of a muffled rattle. She squeezed it. It was hard as steel. "Open it, Grandma!" Grandma opened it. Inside was a square steel box with a little square opening on each end and a hinged lid that opened.

Grandma looked at it. She turned it up-side down and looked at it. Finally she shrugged. "It's, uh, a very pretty metal box, Jodie. What, uh, do I do with it?"

Jodie laughed. “You use it to get your kitchen back, Grandma! It’s a live mouse-trap. See, there’s a little teeter-totter thing inside. The mouse can walk up the little ramp but when he tries to walk back out it shifts and doesn’t leave him room to get out the door. Mrs. Jenkins says it’s guaranteed to work and it doesn’t hurt the mouse one bit.”

Grandma shook her head. “Well, now I’ve seen everything. But, I’ll bet you no self-respecting mouse is dumb enough to just march right in there.”

“Bet he is,” Jodie said, “especially for this.” She took the last bite of the mince tart she’d been eating and pushed it inside the trap. “Why don’t you set it up, uh, right in front of the refrigerator?”

Grandma set the trap on the floor. With one last suspicious glance over her shoulder, she went off to bed. Jodie gave the trap one last glance, too, crossed her fingers, and also went to bed.

Sleeping on Christmas Eve was never easy. It took Jodie a long time to settle down, but finally she drifted off to dream of a jolly fat man landing on her roof.

Suddenly, she woke up. She had just heard the strangest noise. For a minute there she thought she really was hearing tiny hooves scratching and pawing on her roof. Whoa, Jodie! she thought. You really are a little beyond that stuff. Anyway, this was sort of a scratching-on-metal sound. It came again. Not from the roof, but from the kitchen. Jodie crawled out of bed and went to investigate.

The sound was coming from the refrigerator. No, from in front of the refrigerator. From inside the box in front of the refrigerator. Carefully Jodie picked up the mousetrap and peered in through an airhole. A beady black eye peered right back at her. Outlaw Mouse had been captured.

Before the family could open any presents Christmas morning they had a job to do. Outlaw Mouse was going straight—straight outside where mice belong. Grandpa scouted out a spot. A huge fallen tree with lots of nice dry grass underneath for a mouse to make a cozy nest. Jodie carried the metal box with the prisoner inside. Grandma said to go ahead, she’d be along in a minute. When she caught up Jodie was just ready to open the lid of the trap and release the mouse.

“Ready, Grandma?” she asked. Grandma nodded. Jodie opened the trap. For a minute the mouse sat frozen, his whiskers twitching as he took in his new surroundings. Then he shot out of the box and dived into the deep grass under the fallen tree.

That's when Grandma brought the remains of her ruined mince pie out from behind her back. "I've had it in the freezer ever since he nibbled it," she said with a sheepish smile. "I knew I'd find a use for it." She set it down on the ground under the tree.

"Merry Christmas, mouse!"