THE CAT TRAP

By

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Joachim Mauss hunched over his canvas with a razor blade pinched between his index finger and thumb. A loop of glass on one florid cheekbone magnified the area where he was working. He scraped with delicate care, using the point of the blade to position each drop of his special paint, lifting up the liquid like tears and laying them in a precise pattern.

He was especially fond of circles. Each had to be perfect, its dots of exact size, its circumference geometrically smooth. If he made an error, then he cleaned the spot meticulously and started over. It was slow and dirty work. He wore a white smock to protect his clothes from spatter, a mask over his face, and a plastic cap that hugged his skull. He looked like a surgeon, dressed that way. Only his hands were bare. He had tried working in gloves, but he didn't have the control he needed when a barrier of latex came between him and his blade. He had to be close to his canvas, so that he could tease out its life as if he was making love to it. There was no substitute for the feel of skin on skin in that kind of work.

He painted in silence, except for the ticking of his mother's brass clock that paced his work like a metronome. He paid no attention to time, however. His creations could not be rushed. He often worked late into the night and then slept through the daylight hours. Daytime meant people, noise, and distraction. To do what he did, Joachim required a bubble of concentration that was easily broken, and once broken, it took him long wasted minutes to regain it.

Like now.

Joachim reared back in fear at an eruption of noise from the window behind him. The suddenness of it made him smear his canvas, and he swore in annoyance. He sprang to his feet. The basement window was cloaked by a thick drape, and he carefully drew back an inch of fabric and peered outside. His lower-level studio looked out on a square concrete well where iron stairs descended from the alley and where passers-by dropped bottles and trash. It was night in winter; snow had gathered on the ledge. He squinted and saw nothing. When the noise did not recur, he prepared to return to his work, but at that moment, he was startled again by a guttural mewling noise.

Something small, wet, and dark jumped down from the alley to the ledge and stared at him with yellow-green eyes.

A cat.

Joachim detested cats. He hated their solemn, surreptitious ways. As a boy, his mother had owned a cat that had scratched him when he picked it up, and he had sucked the blood that spilled from his face and nursed a bitterness toward the mangy thing. Years had nothing to diminish his childish rage. When he saw strays in the park, he grew furious at their icy stares. He felt as if they were watching and tracking him.

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"Go!" he shouted, pounding on the window with such force that he worried the glass would shatter. It was a foolish thing to do, but he could not contain his agitation. The cat on the ledge did not run or show any fear. It leaped casually from the ledge to the stone floor and padded up each iron step back to the street. Joachim saw the cat turn its head to look at him with venomous eyes before it disappeared.

Returning from the window, Joachim contemplated the mess he had made with the errant flick of his blade. The entire section of canvas, at least four square centimeters, would need to be carefully cleaned and re-done. At least two hours of work were ruined. His hands trembled with anger. He saw on his mother's clock that it was nearly three in the morning, and he knew he would not be able to concentrate again before it was daylight. There was nothing more he could do here. The cat had sabotaged his beautiful work.

Joachim carefully removed his smock, cap, and mask, which were splattered now, no longer white. He hung them on wire over a plastic tarpaulin. Plastic lay under the canvas, too, equally smeared. He cocked his head, watching the canvas and the work he had done so far, and then he turned off the light and crept up the wooden steps to the main floor, where he kept his bedroom.

He undressed and readied himself for sleep. The drapes in his tiny bedroom were as thick as those in the room below, because he was so often in bed during the light of day. He lay on the blanket, which was scratchy on his skin and smelled of mildew. His eyes stayed open, staring into darkness. Usually, he found that if he kept his eyes open, then they would eventually close of their accord, and he would relax into slumber. He loved that feeling, when his body finally sloughed off the tension that made his muscles so tight during his waking hours. When at last his mind began to loosen its hold on reality, he closed his eyes and smiled, only to bolt awake at another scraping, rustling, annoying noise at the window.

Joachim swept back the drape to see what had disturbed him.

He saw the same yellow-green eyes. The cat was back.

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It was a street cat, bloodless and calm, a predator. Its fur was wiry and short, a mottled mix of black and orange, including a black streak above its mouth like a crooked mustache. He saw ragged gouges in its coat. One ear was stubby, as if it had been chewed in a fight. Its whiskers were unnaturally long, like sturdy bristles in a hairbrush.

The cat sat on its lean haunches, contemplating Joachim, its paws neatly planted together. With the glass between them, they were no more than six inches apart, eye to eye. The cat watched him with such calculating coldness that he felt as if he were six years old again, angry and afraid, with blood on his fingers. Joachim did not like that feeling of powerlessness. Many women had made him feel that way over his life. His mother. His teachers. The girls at school. They had lorded their domination over him and made him feel cowed and impotent.

Joachim was not a big man. Other men were taller, broader, and stronger. He had slim, womanly features and pampered skin. Delicate hands, so useful for his work, but not hands that made meaty fists. Hair that was blonde like straw. He sometimes thought he had been born a woman himself, because he made such a miserable man.

It was as if the cat knew this. The cat could see his failures. When Joachim shouted again and slapped a hand on the cold glass, the cat failed to react. He wished he could open the window and yank the beastly thing inside, but he was afraid of its teeth and claws. He let the drape hang shut and stewed in his cowardice.

Joachim lay in bed, but he felt the cat's presence through the heavy curtain. He didn't fall asleep. When an hour passed of tossing and turning, he sat up, needing to know if his tormenter was still there. He inched the drape back with tentative fingers. In the sky, he could see the pink glow of dawn on the January day. Ice crystals grew on the glass.

He exhaled in huge relief. The cat was gone.

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Joachim felt pressure as he neared the end of each creation. The moisture and pigment on his canvas changed as it spent more time in the stale air of his apartment. Timing was everything. Complete his work too soon, and the result was not up to his standards. Wait too long, and the freshness and pinkness of it would be spoiled. His early work had been sloppy as he learned his craft, but now he was growing more expert with each canvas. He knew just what needed to be done and when to do it. On the next day, he stayed awake for nearly twenty-four hours, so that he could complete his work at the perfect moment.

His eighth grand painting in a year!

He sat on a wooden chair in his downstairs studio and examined the results of his labor with satisfaction. No one was more critical of his own work than Joachim, but he saw no flaws. Even the area where he had stuttered because of the cat was now perfectly repaired. Using his monocle to magnify his work, he reviewed every circle, every drop, every line, and assessed its placement, roundness, straightness, and size. He was pleased.

All that remained was to ready the canvas for public display. Joachim went upstairs from his studio to the kitchen, and while he was there, he remembered that he was hungry. He took the time to fix himself a sandwich and drink a beer. He was more relaxed than he had been in days. Tomorrow he knew he would be nervous again as he waited for the reviews. Great artists were often unappreciated, but Joachim couldn't resist reading what people said about his work, and he obsessed about the savagery that some fools showed. Grotesque, one woman said. Vile, said another. Like they thought they could do better. Their words didn't dissuade him, however. Criticism made him do better with each canvas.

It was time to go back downstairs and finish it off.

He always hesitated at this stage, when the hard work had to be done. That was why he procrastinated by eating and drinking. He hated the knowledge that, next time, he would start over with a bare canvas. Each work required such passion. People didn't understand how hard it was.

Joachim returned to his studio.

The scene waiting for him there was almost too horrifying to imagine. His beautiful canvas, the product of days of work, was destroyed. Streaked. Smeared. Trod upon. His patient, perfect geometry ruined. And in the center of the painting was the culprit, the guilty party.

The cat.

Somehow the cat had gotten inside his apartment! It stood there on all fours in the middle of his canvas, its tail fluffed and vertical, its muscled back arched, its fur splotched in red and spiked like one of those punk teenagers in the village.

Joachim's mouth dropped open. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! What have you done!"

Joachim took a step, and the cat bared its fangs and hissed, a wet spitting noise from deep in its throat. Its eyes glowed with yellow fire. Its legs tensed as if it were prepared to spring at him. Joachim raised his hands in front of his face and backed away.

"Get out, you awful beast! Get out!"

But the cat stood its ground with fierce intensity. Its growl was low and dangerous.

Joachim clenched his fists and felt like a cuckold, helpless and furious. He stamped his feet and waved his arms, but the cat merely pinned its ears back behind its head and hissed louder. Its paws curled as its claws came unsheathed. It was not going to let Joachim anywhere near the canvas, not while it was still alive.

He shouted.

"How dare you!"

"You horrible thing!"

"Run away, you piece of filth!"

The cat merely gazed at him with steely resolve.

Joachim summoned his courage to charge. As small as he was, he was much larger than the little animal. When Joachim moved again, however, the cat's mouth slashed open to reveal its incisors, pointed and white, and Joachim could imagine those teeth sinking like butter into his limbs, while the cat's claws raked and flayed his skin.

He could not stand pain.

Joachim fled. He slammed the door behind him, locking the cat inside with his canvas.

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Two hours passed.

Joachim sat on the floor with his back against the door and cried with frustration. The situation was intolerable. This thing had defiled his creation and occupied his studio. It was in there, laughing at Joachim, the way women had laughed at him for years. No doubt the cat was a female, too.

He needed to do something.

Joachim didn't own a gun and couldn't afford a noise that would bring people running. He could put down poison in a plate of food, but who knew if it would be hours or days before the cat was tempted by its hunger? Joachim didn't have time to wait.

No, the answer was already in his hands.

He had brought a cleaver with him from the kitchen, its huge rectangular blade silver and sharp. So sharp it could separate a head from a body with a good, sturdy swing. That was all he needed – to get close enough to the beast that he could wreak his vengeance with a chop of the blade. It would be messy but not hard. Joachim knew that blood was nothing to fear. Blood, with its ruby beauty, was a little like paint.

The trouble was that Joachim was not brave enough to face the cat head-on. He needed something to lure it away, to bait the animal into a trap and then slip up behind it with the cleaver tight in his grip. Oh, how satisfying it would be to sever the thing in two! To watch that lovely blade cut through fur and bone!

A cat trap. That was what he needed. But what kind of trap?

Joachim pondered the mystery. Every few minutes, he inched the door to his studio open to look inside. The cat had curled into a furry ball and lay sleeping on top of his canvas, but whenever Joachim took a furtive step, the floorboards betrayed him, and the cat's eyes opened into slits and its head reared back from its body. The warning rumble of thunder in its throat made Joachim retreat.

Two more hours passed.

When Joachim thought the situation could not get any worse, he heard a feral and unearthly moan from inside that made him press his hands tightly over his ears. The cat howled, as if it were in heat, calling every other cat in the city to slither through the nighttime streets to its side. The noise was ungodly loud. Joachim went white with fear, imagining the sound penetrating the walls of his apartment, alerting the neighbors, attracting passers-by in the alley. He had to stop it! This could not go on! He beat his fists against his head, trying to think.

And then he had his idea. How better to trap a cat than with a mouse?

That would be his lure. Something irresistible. Prey for a hunter.

There was a pet shop less than a block from his apartment building. Joachim put on his coat against the winter winds and shouldered through the deep snow to the end of his block. He was alone in the darkness, the way he liked to be. The pet shop windows were lit to amuse the pedestrians, but the rest of the store was black and closed. He saw a dozen cats behind the store windows, eyeing him. They stood in their cages, awake, howling, beating their paws against the bars when he came closer.

As if they knew.

He gritted his teeth and tried to put the awful braying of the store cats out of his brain. He made sure that the street was deserted and then kicked the door with his boot, smashing the glass into shards that spilled into the store and out into the snow. Joachim reached around and let himself inside the store. The noise from the cats intensified. They threw themselves against their cages, trying to get at him. They hissed. Growled. Moaned. Jumped. Bit. Clawed.

"Stop! Shut up!" he screamed. "Be quiet, all of you!"

He kicked one cage in his fury, and the cat inside tumbled and then got up again, spitting its venom at him.

Joachim ran to the back of the store. He found a tiny cage on a shelf, with six white mice running in excited circles inside, their pink eyes glowing in the darkness of the store. He grabbed the cage by its handle and ran for the exit, ignoring the furious wails of the imprisoned cats. Their discordant music chased him down the street until he was safely inside his building again.

Breathing heavily, he closeted himself in his apartment and stumbled downstairs to his studio, clutching the cage of rodents in his hand. The mice tittered with anxiety, as if they could smell the cat. Joachim cracked the door an inch, enough to peer inside. The cat was awake. It was perched atop his canvas, staring at him. When Joachim squeezed inside the studio, the cat's eyes followed him with evil curiosity, alert to the mice scampering within the confines of the cage.

Joachim pushed a wooden table to one corner of the room and laid the cage at the far back, where the cat would have to turn its back to him to approach the mice. He retrieved his butcher's cleaver from the hallway and slid to the floor in the opposite corner of the studio, his arms hugging his bony knees. He wanted to appear small, not like a threat; he wanted the cat to feel safe enough to hop down from the canvas and respond to the lure of the desperate mice.

He waited. The knife handle grew slippery with his sweat. The room was silent except for the squeaks in the corner and the rustling of dozens of tiny paws on the steel cage floor. The trap slowly drew the cat's full attention. Its head swiveled to stare at the cage. Its tongue made a lazy wet circle around the outside of its mouth.

The cat jumped to the floor. Joachim held his breath. With tender footfalls, the cat drew close to the table in the corner of the studio. It stopped by the base of the table and studied Joachim cautiously. Joachim stared into his lap and pretended to ignore the animal, but all the while, his hand was squeezed in a vise around the rubber handle of the cleaver.

With easy grace, the cat leaped onto the table. The mice skittered in panic. Joachim silently pushed himself to his feet with the knife readied in his hand. The cat ignored him as it stalked the cage. It slunk low to the surface of the table, its muscles rippling. One paw moved forward, then the next. Its demon eyes were glued to the white blur of motion that was six terrified mice.

Joachim cocked his arm over his head with the cleaver poised to strike. The cat was six feet away, unaware of the lethal danger behind him. Joachim tensed, ready to slash downward and cut the beast open. He knew how easy it was. He could practically smell the blood and see it spilling in a red pool off the table. Like paint.

Just as he prepared to strike, however, his weight landed on a loose nail. The squeal of wood alerted the cat as Joachim swung the cleaver. The knife cut through the air with a puff of noise, but the cat leaped away, safe and free. The cleaver dug into the table, and the cat's escape was so narrow that a clump of fur wound up embedded in the wood.

Joachim cursed. He pried the knife loose from the table and wheeled around in fury. The cat stood on all fours on a wooden chair where Joachim often sat to contemplate his canvas. Joachim charged the chair and swung the cleaver madly, but again, the cat was too fast for him. It bolted away to the floor as the knife

landed harmlessly on the chair, chopping through its upper slats. Wood chips flew around Joachim's face like dust.

"I'll kill you!" he screamed in frustration. "Where are you?"

He spotted the cat cowering on the top of a high bookcase in the middle of the rear wall. Its legs trembled and twitched, its fur dancing like iron filings on a magnet. So the beast was finally afraid! Good! The bookcase was tall, but Joachim ran toward it, leaping off the ground, pouncing and swinging with the cleaver. His body landed hard against the bookshelf; hardback books cascaded and flew around him. The bookcase tumbled and fell, and the cat shot from the shelf, disappearing into mid-air. Joachim stumbled back, dazed, ducking against the heavy collapse of the shelves on his spine.

Where was the cat?

Joachim stood amid a jumble of books, his eyes sweeping back and forth across the litter on the floor. No cat. Like a magician, the dirty thing had vanished. Joachim was puzzled, but then he heard a scrabbling above his head, and he looked up.

Joachim smiled.

The cat dangled helplessly from a small loop of electrical wire that hung from the ceiling panels. Its paws were wrapped around the cable, clinging and squirming in mid-air.

"I've got you now," Joachim announced.

He took careful aim and hurtled the cleaver like a circus knife-thrower toward the cat. The blade spun and tumbled with beautiful accuracy, but the cat let go at the last second and dropped to the floor with its paws splayed, landing as gently as if it had worn a parachute. The knife whooshed past the very spot where the cat had been and sliced into the wall, where it shimmied and stuck, out of Joachim's reach.

"Damn you to hell!"

Joachim no longer had the knife, but he didn't care. He was going to wring the cat's neck even if he had to suffer its claws slicing up his skin.

"Where do you think you can go, you little beast?" Joachim snarled.

He squatted with his hands outstretched and his slim fingers spread wide. The cat squeezed its body against the wall, cornered. Its mouth dripped with saliva as it hissed.

"Only one of us is leaving this room alive," Joachim told the cat.

He jumped with a shout across the space between them, sweeping his arms together to gather up the cat against his chest, but he caught only a handful of wiry fur before it darted away between his legs. The momentum of his leap carried Joachim hard against the wall, where his head struck the corner sharply. He bellowed in pain and fell on his face, and immediately he felt the cat land on his back, its razor claws ripping into his flesh.

"Get off!" Joachim screamed. "Stop!"

He beat his head and hands against the walls, trying to dislodge the cat that clung to him with ferocity. Blood trails bloomed in wet brushstrokes on his shirt. He writhed as the hooked points of all four

paws stabbed him repeatedly, and when he finally found the leverage to turn over, the cat scooted nimbly away before Joachim could trap it with his body.

Joachim lay on his back in the corner, panting, his eyes closed, his body aflame with blood and cuts. When he lifted his head off the floor, he saw two things.

They were the last two things he ever saw.

The cat stood victoriously atop his canvas again, ignoring him as it calmly bathed itself.

And the cleaver lodged near the ceiling had worked itself loose and was falling blade first toward his skull, which it split open like a hairy coconut as it drove downward into the soft tissue of his brain.

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Inspector Otto Bauer watched the medical personnel as they attended to the girl on the bed. "What's the word?" he asked them. "Is she going to make it?"

The doctor who was leading the team of emergency technicians replied without looking up from his work. "These lacerations are pretty deep. She's lost a lot of blood, and she's dehydrated, but she'll pull through."

Bauer snorted in relief. "Lucky girl. This sick bastard has been leaving bodies in the park for a year. Eight women tortured, painted with their own blood, and then decapitated. God Almighty."

He let the doctors continue their work on the victim on the bed and turned his attention to his own police officers, who were searching the apartment. Joachim Mauss lay on the floor in the opposite corner of the room, face up, his dead eyes wide with surprise. He was a little man to begin with, and he looked deflated, with most of his blood forming a lake under his head.

"So what the hell happened here?" Bauer asked one of the young officers, who was pasty white.

"Neighbors called to complain about an animal howling in the apartment," the cop replied. "I came here and found this. Nearly gave me a heart attack. Joachim bleeding out on the floor and the girl there cut up on the bed."

"What's with the cage of mice and the animal tracks?" Bauer asked, looking at the scattered paw prints of blood on the floor and on the girl's naked body.

"There was a cat locked inside."

"A cat?" Bauer asked.

"Yes, it bolted as I opened the door."

"Whose cat was it?"

"I have no idea. Joachim hated animals. Cats in particular."

"So you knew this bastard?" Bauer asked.

The cop nodded. "Yes, everyone did. He's lived in this neighborhood his whole life. His mother lived here with him, and then she disappeared a couple years ago. We never found her. We wondered whether Joachim had killed her – I mean, she stepped all over him his whole life – but we could never prove it."

Bauer scratched his beard and studied the wreckage of the studio. "Here's what I don't get. How the hell did Mauss wind up dead? The girl's tied to the bed, and there's Mauss on the other side of the room with his skull chopped in half. So who did it?"

"Maybe the cat killed him," the cop replied, laughing.

Bauer chuckled. "Yeah. That's it. The cat figured out the guy is a serial killer and decided to take him out. Good one."

"Well, the cat was the one howling in here, so it saved the girl's life one way or another," the cop said.

Bauer shook his head. He couldn't take his eyes off the paw prints, painting the floor of the studio red with Mauss's blood. He imagined the cat inside, meowing as it paced restlessly between the two bodies.

"Maybe the cat was just doing what cats do," the other cop suggested.

"Oh, yes? What's that?"

"What else? Catching a Mauss."

Brian Freeman is an international bestselling author of psychological suspense novels, including IMMORAL, STRIPPED, STALKED, and IN THE DARK (also available as THE WATCHER). Find out about his books at www.bfreemanbooks.com or join him on Facebook at www.facebook.com/bfreemanbooks.

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