**The New Game**

There are nights when I can’t sleep and I go out on a wander.

I’m Max, by the way. The missuscalls me Maximilian the Magnificent, a Menace to Mice and her Chief Comforter on cold evenings. I have the heart of a lion but, being somewhat on the small side, I do occasionally find myself at a disadvantage.

There’s an unusual scent on the air tonight. I drop over a couple of fences and the game changes. The shrubbery around this garden is alive with cats. The Ginger Giant from next door is there, and I see two other pairs of cats’ eyes around the garden, all concentrating on . . .

The White Princess.

She’s sitting on the lawn, pretending she doesn’t know we’re there. She’s gorgeous. Pure white, with long, silken fur and enormous green eyes.

The Ginger Giant edges forward from the bushes onto the lawn, and a scrawny black and white follows his lead. As does a Black Monster.

All three cats slide along the grass towards her. She takes no notice.

What though three other cats are making their intentions known to her, why shouldn’t I attempt to catch her eye, too?

I strut out of the foliage and onto the lawn.

There is a yowl of fury and I am swiped into the bushes by the Black Monster. I scream and turn to flee. There’s a tree ahead. I take a running jump and scramble up and up.

This tree is taller than the ones I usually climb. It goes up and up for ever.

I’m losing momentum. I have to stop . . . now . . . to take a moment . . . to listen. Praise be! He hasn’t followed me.

I look down, past the branch I’m clinging to, down and down, past a whole forest of other branches. The branches crackle and shift in the wind. This is a conifer, offering little by way protection. I back along the branch to its junction to the trunk and take stock.

Far below, the White Princess is accepting the invitation of the Black Monster, the one who chased me up the tree.

I hurt a bit, here and there. I attend to a scratch on my paw. When I look back I see the Ginger Giant’s taking his turn. And the scrawny black is waiting.

The White Princess shows no discrimination, accepting everyone’s favours.

I’m not afraid of heights. Of course not. I’ve climbed all the trees in my own garden, many times. But this one is twice as high as them. It sways in the wind and I can’t risk scrambling down. It’s too dangerous.

Down below, a voice calls the white cat into the house. The other cats disappear, too.

Now I’m all alone. And lonely. Lights go out in the houses below. No one’s going to see me in the dark. But surely help will come soon. I just have to wait.

It’s a very long night.

Sunrise. Windows and doors begin to open, and the smells of breakfast rise into the air. I’m starving and cold and hungry.

From my perch in the sky, I can see into other gardens. In one, a boy wearing school uniform is opening the back door and letting a pretty little grey cat out into the garden. They play together. This cat is a sweetie, young and nervous, chasing a ball on a string, darting after a bee.

She pauses, one paw in the air and looks straight up into the tree. She’s seen me! But the boy scoops her up and takes her back into the house, closing the door behind him. There’s no cat flap so she can’t get in or out by herself.

The back of her house is a glassed-in utility room, filled with freezers and washers and sheets hung up on racks to dry. I can see bowls of food and water and a litter tray for the Pretty One. She jumps up onto the window-sill and looks up at the tree. She knows I’m here but no one else does.

Surely the missus will rescue me soon. Twice I think I hear her calling, but the wind has got up, there’s a spat of rain in the air and she doesn’t come.

I’m worried. I can’t climb down by myself. The next branch is so far down that I get vertigo just looking at it.

The boy in school uniform opens the back door and comes out into the garden, with the Pretty One in his arms. She looks straight up at me and I lose my grip and fall . . . and bounce. I scrabble for a hold . . . and fall again.

I manage to claw myself back onto a thick branch and take a breath before . . . Down I go again! I manage to turn midway in flight and land in a bed of moss and old leaves at the foot of the tree.

I’m so shaken I can’t think straight. I need food, water, warmth. The boy has left the back door to his house open. I know there’s food and water there. I make a dash for the open door. . . and I’m in! I wallop the food down and lap up the water. Ah, bliss!

The boy brings the Pretty One indoors and closes the door behind him. Oh no! I’m trapped! I slink behind the drying clothes for safety. He goes further into the house and closes the inner door behind him.

So; I have to wait for the morning for him to open the door and let me out into the sunshine. Meanwhile . . . Let’s play a game, shall we?

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It’s another lovely day. I feel perky, on top of the world. I orientate myself. Ah yes. Over the fence here . . . And I’m home in time for a breakfast. The missus is so to see me she gives me extra tuna.

I am Maximilian the Magnificent, Conqueror of Conifers and the Perfect Playmate.