**The Guest**

The missus calls me Maximilian the Magnificent. It is true that I’m black from head to toe and have the heart of a lion, but I was the runt of the littler and on the small side even for a cat, so do ten to get into lots of bother.

The missus is up to something! She picks me up and gives me a cuddle, starts to say something, then shakes her head and puts me down again. There’s something she’s not telling me. For some reason she’s been in and out of the spare room several times lately. I’d better investigate.

I can’t see anything amiss. Bed, chair, curtains. The only thing I can see that’s different is a large cardboard box behind the door.

I like cardboard boxes. They’re fun to have a nap in, especially if they have a nice warm blanket inside, which this one does. Next to the box there’s a litter tray with a cover on it.

I’m appalled! Does the missus mean me to sleep in the box and not on her bed in future? What? I’ve always slept on her bed and I have no intention of doing otherwise.

I wander downstairs to see if she’s come back yet. Which she hasn’t. So I make my way outside to have a little wander up and down the road. It looks like rain, so I don’t go far.

Back to the house I go and make for the cat flap . . .

Shock! Horror! A white face looks back at me through the glass.

What fiend has taken possession of my house?

The face mews at me and I snarl back. I crouch and hiss and fluff myself up to twice my size and it works! The phantom vanishes with a shriek.

I push at the glass to pursue the ghost but . . . What is this? It is locked against me! I’ve been shut out of my own home by some stray who has got into my house by mistake?

 My heart is beating so fast, I think I shall faint!

 The missus appears to unlock the cat flap. She says, ‘Come on in and meet your new playmate. Don’t be afraid.’

Me, afraid? Not blooming likely.

The missus picks up a tiny brindled cat and strokes it. ‘She’s called Cherry. We’re looking after her because her mother died in an accident and she’s nowhere to go. Now you be nice to her, Max.’

She puts the undersized ratbag down. I crouch on my belly, ears flattened, growling. The intruder squeaks and backs off, trembling.

 So she’s afraid of me, is she? So she should be!

 Be nice to her? No way, Jose! I’ll scare her rigid! I’ll haunt her dreams. I’ll duff her up, I’ll swipe her sideways.

 The missus puts down food. One dish for ‘our guest’ and one for me. We eat. I keep one eye on her. When she’s finished, she winds round the missus’ legs. The missus picks her up and takes her through to sit on her knee to watch the telly.

 How dare she! That’s my place! The minx! I sit on the settee opposite and seethe. When it comes to bedtime, the missus puts a hot water bottle into the cardboard box and carries it into our bedroom . . . My Bedroom! . . and settles the kitten in it for the night.

 In the morning I wake up slowly, and stretch out . . . only to find a small, warm buddle of fluff has curled herself into my back while I slept. I shriek and leap off the bed. The interloper follows me. I stand in the doorway, refusing to let her pass. I hiss and flex my claws. She shrieks in fright, and the missus gets sharp with me.

The worst of it is that the interloper seems to think I’m her best friend. She follows me around, and as soon as I doss down for a nap, she’s there, cuddling up to me! I can’t get rid of her except by leaving the house.

I consider my options. Can I co-exist with Cherry! A thousand times, No. I could leave. There are several households around her who appreciate my moving in. Only, this is My House and I don’t want to go. My life is ruined. I am a victim of abuse.

 And then . . .

 The next morning I wake up feeling . . . restless.

There’s a new scent in the house, and to my surprise, it comes from the newest member of the household. I know what that scent means. It means . . . fun and games. It means . . .You Know What!

 She’s sitting on the windowsill and looking out over the garden. Can that sent be coming from the ghastly Cherry? No, surely not. I stretch to and fro to attract her attention.

 She doesn’t move a muscle. She’s aware of me. Of course she is. She’s signalling that she’s all grown up now, and what am I going to do about it! She’s not bad-looking. I in fact, she’s quite something. Then, taking her time, she slinks down to the floor and makes for the stairs.

Ah-ha. I know this game.

She retreats, and I pursue. She pretends to ignore me. She darts for cover and I follow. I’m faster than she is . . . or perhaps she makes it easy for me to catch her.

 She may not have played this game before, but she’s more than willing to learn how it goes and the result is . . . satisfactory. For both of us.

Life is full of surprises. Some of them are not particularly welcome, and have to be lived through with fortitude and patience. Some are unexpected and to be welcomed.

 I am one very happy, Maximilian the Magnificent, Master of all I survey and undeniably Top Cat with my pretty new playmate in my own home.