**The Comfort Cat**

 **by Veronica Heley**

The missus calls me Maximilian the Magnificent, but soon I am to have a new name. She did warn me. She knew I didn’t like change but she said I would have to adapt. First my pretty little playmate disappeared . . . to a good home, said the missus. Then she said she was getting tired of that nasty little pain she had and was going to leave me soon to live with the Big Man in his happy place where there’d be no more pain or housework or cooking meals.

 She said when that happened, someone would come and take me to live with another family, perhaps one with small children. I didn’t like the sound of that. Children have no sense at all. They pick you up and want to play when it’s time for a nap.

 I remembered the Big Man . He’d given me a cuddle and said I’d done well, so I was glad for the missus to go to a good home with him.

I wake up one morning and she isn’t breathing any longer. I stay with her till I’m sure she isn’t coming back. I go downstairs and check my bowls. They’re empty. So I have a little drink from the tap that drips and consider my options.

 Should I stay where I am to be swept up by some stranger and given to a child to play with? Or do I venture out into the unknown to look for another home? It doesn’t take me long to work that one out.

 Outside the day looks murky. Rain is on the way? I give the garden the once over, in case of intruders or the odd mouse, but I don’t linger. Two doors up lives a man who often gives me a tasty titbit or two . . . but alas, the house looks empty. Perhaps he’s gone to live with the Big Man, too. The next house belongs to a comfortable lady who is now the property of another cat. One of mine, I think.

 I come to the road. And bother, the sky has clouded over with tears. The first drops hit the pavement. Click, click! Where can I find shelter?

 A woman under an umbrella approaches a nearby car opens the back door and slings a large bag inside. She steps away to shut the umbrella. The open door of the car is an invite. I shoot inside and snuggle down. She closes the door, gets in the driver’s seat and starts the car. It’s quite comfortable, really. It will stop raining soon, she’ll let me out and . . . why not have a little nap?

 I wake up when she jerk the car to a stop. She isn’t a good driver, not like the missus. I get up and stretch. She’s in such a hurry she doesn’t notice me slip out as she collects her bag and puts up her coat.

 The rain is stopping. Where are we? Nowhere I have ever been before. A dog has passed by the tree here, the houses have walls at the front instead of hedges. Where are the humans? Which way to the nearest kitchen? I follow the woman. Quick, quick, Mistress Impatient rings the doorbell, looks at watch . . .

 She’s no candidate to be my next missus.

 In she goes, big door, heavy. Long corridor, no toys littering the place.

 SMELL OF FOOD COOKING . . . BACON?

 I follow the scent. There’s doorways off to right and left but my nose leads me on and on, past the woman who’s brought me here and another, rounder, softer-sounding person. They’re discussing someone not making an effort and I follow the scent into a sun room at the back which is mostly glass and a bit dull but FULL of the aroma of BACON!

 The bacon is on a tray on a bed, along with some bread and butter and that yoghurt stuff that looks like milk but isn’t. And there’s someone lying on the bed, hunched away from the food.

 Hunger is driving me crazy! The bacon is on a plate and normally I wouldn’t dream of trying to steal – no, not steal, of course – help myself to someone else’s food. But I’m starving and if the child on the bed doesn’t want the food then couldn’t I . . .?

She opens one eye and looks at me. I freeze. She blinks, and stirs a little to look at me with two eyes.

 I swallow, hard. The scent of bacon! She reaches a hand out from under the covers, and pulls the tray towards her . . . and then pushes the plate back towards me.

 She’s teasing me. I crouch down, removing my eyes from her. I consider my right paw, and give it a lick. I look back at her. She’s a poorly sort of creature, I can tell. Been ill, like the missus. I do miss the missus. But this is now. This is a half-grown child, who has food that I need.

 I put up a paw to pat the tray.

 She grins. She pushes herself up in the bed. She has soft fair hair and no colour in her face. She takes a piece of bread and butter and nibbles it, watching me the while. She’s teasing me. She pushes the bacon off the plate in my direction. Does she mean it?

 She nods. I grab the bacon, and make the most of it. She sits upright to finish off the bread and butter. Also on the plate is a pile of scrambled egg. I don’t normally indulge, but if she doesn’t want it . . .? She pushes the plate in my direction. I have a mouthful or two but hungry as I am, that’s enough of that taste.

 She offers me a spoonful of yoghurt. I wouldn’t normally bother, but the bacon has made me thirsty, so we polish that off, too. One or two mouthfuls l for me and one for her, turn and turn about.

 Voices, coming closer.

 The child and I look at one another. I am about to be discovered and thrown out.

 The child twitches back the covers and makes a nice warm space next to her in the bed. We both know what we’re doing. I slink under the covers. She’s skin and bones, not like the missus.

 Voices above. Surprised and pleased. ‘What a good girl! Look, she’s eaten everything up!’

 The child says, ‘The tea’s cold. Can I have some milk?’

 Of course she could have some milk. Comings and goings. And finally peace and quiet. The child twitches the covers off me and we drink the milk, turn and turn out. Then we look at the rain running down the window, and she tells me about how she had an accident and couldn’t play football any longer and life is so boring that she can’t be bothered to make an effort to get better.

 She hides me under the covers when the Voice brings in a tray for lunch, and we manage to eat it all up and drink all the water, and then we have a little nap and I fit my curves into her poor shrunken body.

 Then I need to go out for a pee, and she doesn’t want to let me go, and I think it’s going to take longer to train her than the old missus, but I persist and pat her cheek and she opens the side window so that I can take a turn round the garden which is very large . . . a little bigger than I am accustomed to, and the trees look somewhat menacing . . . so I jump back inside.

 She says I must stay with her always and she’ll hide me and share her food with me, and I am not too sure about that, because I suspect the Voice will soon work out what was happening. Which she does.

And then Chloe gets out of bed clutching me to her somewhat bony chest, and she screams and shouts and stamps her feet. I am hers and no-one is going to take me away from her . . . and they gave in. Of course.

 So now I have a new name. I am no longer Maximilian the Magnificent, but Max, the Comfort Cat.