



MAX'S ADVENTURES WITH HIS LOYAL FRIENDS

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Аннотация

Little Max lives in his Auntie Jane's house with his five loyal feline friends. Their life is filled with love and kindness, along with amusing little adventures. Suddenly they have to face cruelty and injustice. Their friendship will see them through many dangers and desperate situations. The book is written in the re-emerging traditions of family reading that would give parents a great opportunity to connect with their children.

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Max's Adventures with His Loyal Friends

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Chapter 1. Auntie Jane's House and its Residents

In London, in the borough of Islington, there's a house – a tall house of four storeys with turrets, spires, chimneys, and weathervanes that spin around when the wind blows. And in this house live four cats: limping Hunter with his glossy black fur; Matilda, the tiny Siamese princess; handsome Tom with his fluffy coat and tufted ears; and flirty, flame-haired Sienna.



The first of them to move into the house was Hunter. A few years before, he'd been living under a bridge – he used to hunt mice and live off the scraps thrown to him each night by kind-

hearted Billy, the kitchen boy in the restaurant next door. But one day, chasing after a little grey mouse, Hunter got hit by a car. And no doubt he wouldn't have survived if it hadn't been for Auntie Jane, the owner of the house in Islington, who came to the poor cat's rescue as he lay dying by the side of the road.

Poor Hunter was in an awful state: he had a nasty cut to the head and broken paws. He couldn't even lift up his tail to greet this kindly woman who'd picked him up from the pavement.

But Hunter was taken to hospital for an operation and he managed to pull through – although afterwards he couldn't run fast any more. Once in the new house he got his strength back in no time and grew plump and stately. On his birthday Auntie Jane gave him a beautiful carved walking stick that was studded with jewels, a hat that was stuck with a goose feather, and a pair of reading glasses – because Hunter, although he couldn't go hunting any more, had started to read and even write books on the subject.



The next to arrive at the house was Matilda. She was of royal birth, a real princess, and she'd come to London from far away – from sultry Thailand – to meet her husband-to-be, who was

a tomcat of very high standing. But on the sky-blue steamship that was taking her across the ocean she came down with a dreadful bout of seasickness, and her fur, which had been so silky and delicate, lost its mother-of-pearl shine and then started to fall out. When at last Matilda arrived in London she had lost all trace of her former beauty, and the tomcat's owners turned up their noses at her. Poor Matilda was sent to a pet shop, but nobody wanted to buy her, even though she really did come from Siamese royalty. Customers would say, "Don't try that with us! There's no way such an ugly cat could be a princess! And besides, she'd leave fur all over the floor!" It was all very painful for Matilda. After all, she was used to being admired wherever she went. She'd been a great beauty: elegant and graceful, with a magnificent coat the colour of pearl. Matilda was so unhappy that she just lay there and wept and wept – which only annoyed the customers and the pet-shop owner even more. In a fit of anger the owner wrote on her cage: "Anyone who buys this cat gets a free box of tasty cat food." But somehow nobody wanted to buy her even with the cat food thrown in. Matilda might have died of a broken heart there in the pet shop if it hadn't been for Max – Auntie Jane's nephew – who came across Matilda when he went to buy food for Hunter. Now, by this time Max had learned cat-language from Hunter, so he instantly knew why she was crying so piteously. He felt desperately sorry for the little cat, so thin and shabby and grieving so bitterly, and he asked his auntie to buy Matilda. Well, everyone knows that Auntie Jane is the kindest auntie in all the

world – and naturally she did as Max asked her straight away.

So Matilda came to live in the house in Islington with the turrets and the weathervanes. Hunter was just delighted with the newcomer, and – true gentleman that he was – showered her with compliments. There wasn't a trace of doubt in his mind that she was a real Siamese princess – and of course, all it takes is for somebody to believe in you to make your sorrows disappear. In no time at all, Matilda's dazzling beauty had returned. And as for her perfect manners and her regal bearing, well, nobody could have taken *them* from her.

A few months later, the number of furry residents in the house grew again. One gloomy day, in the last month of the winter, there was a knock at the door. Auntie Jane came downstairs to see who was there. But there was nobody to be seen – just a large basket wrapped up in an old sheet. She lifted up the edge of the sheet and found two little kittens inside. They were absolutely tiny, but so adorable! The first one, slightly bigger, had a dark coat with white paws and long tufts on his ears. One glance was enough to see that the second cat – slightly smaller with a flame-coloured coat – was a girl: she had flirty eyes that were full of life, and long eyelashes.



Max's auntie called for him. He came at once, and as soon as he saw the kittens his heart was filled with happiness.

"Are these kittens ours?" he asked.

His auntie shook her head.

“I don’t know whose they are, or how they got here. I think we’ll need to call the police so they can try and find the owners.”

“Oh Auntie, let’s not call the police, they can stay here with us. They were brought to us on purpose, after all! And I promise to look after them myself!”

“But we’ve already got Hunter and Matilda. You don’t think they’ll mind us bringing two *more* furry residents into the house?”

“No, Auntie. Hunter and Matilda are so kind-hearted – and they’ll be happy to have some new friends here.”

The kittens were looking at Max with smiles on their faces. They’d taken to him straight away. And he asked them in cat-language, “What are your names?”

“I’m Tom, and my sister’s called Sienna. Our owner left us and she never came back. We were all on our own for three days. We were hungry and cried so loudly that a neighbour heard us. After feeding us she decided to bring us here to your house – because everyone knows that Jane is so sweet and kind.”

Then beautiful Matilda came out onto the front porch, looked at the kittens and said to Max, “Mmmrrrrr, but who are these splendid creatures? I’d be more than happy to look after them.”

Then came Hunter – he put his glasses on, stroked Auntie Jane’s left leg with his tail, and purred indulgently: “Welcome to our humble abode!” Sienna turned her pretty little eyes towards Hunter, climbed out of the basket, shook out her little apron with its pink frills, and then stepped into the house with

great dignity.

That's how it came to be that there were four friends together in the house in Islington: Hunter, Matilda, Tom and Sienna. And you'll hear all about their adventures in the tales to come.

Chapter 2. The First Evening

On the night that the kittens were left there on the front porch of the house with the weathervanes, Hunter suggested that Tom could live in his study – but Sienna said she wouldn't be split up from her brother, not for the world. Well, Auntie Jane's was a big house, so it was decided that both the kittens could stay in the cosy little pantry by the kitchen. And it would have been hard to find a better spot! The walls were hung with aromatic herbs tied up in bunches, the shelves laden with jars of home-made jam and pickles, and hanging from the ceiling there were two enormous hams. Max set up a little bunk bed in the corner and laid down a soft woollen shawl. Sienna climbed straight into the top bunk, curled up into a little ball and fell asleep.



“Poor kitties!” sighed Auntie Jane. “Well, at least now they’ll have a place to call their own, and they won’t be abandoned again. And now I think I’ll make everyone some warm milk.”

Auntie Jane went into the kitchen, while Max stayed in the pantry. He sat down on the rug, picked up Tom and began to stroke him behind the ears. Tom started to purr with pleasure – and purred so loudly that he even woke up Sienna. She clambered up onto Max’s lap alongside Tom and meowed, “Oh, stroke meeee now... You’ve been scratching Tom’s ears for just aaaages...” Max started to laugh. “Of course I’ll give you a stroke too, Sienna. No need to get jealous!”

Tom turned to Sienna and started to groom her tail – she took great pride in making sure it was always at its cleanest and fluffiest, and Tom helped her keep it that way.

Watching Tom, Max could tell right away how kind and considerate he was. Meanwhile Sienna had rolled on her back and was starting to stretch out her little paws with pleasure. Then in the doorway appeared the neatly pressed creases of a snowy-white apron, followed by some cups on a silver tray – and finally Auntie Jane herself, her blond hair tied up in a bun as usual. “I’ve brought you some warm milk,” she said. “But don’t drink too much now, because there’s a celebration feast waiting for you. In honour of our new arrivals I’m making something extra special.” And giving them a loving smile, she headed back to the kitchen.

Before long, they were all gathered in the sitting room. On a long dining table, candles were lit – all in tall silver candlesticks elegantly cast with decorative roses. And in the middle rose a great big soup bowl, which gave off such a tantalising smell that

every mouth began to water. "Pass me your bowls and I'll serve you out some Norwegian soup. I do hope you'll like it."



And sure enough, the soup was delicious: swimming in the thick creamy broth were chunks of white and red fish, prawns, scallops, and even an enormous red lobster – which seemed to goggle its great black eyes right at Sienna. “He’s going to get me with those claws of his! I’m scared!” she cried, and she was ready to jump straight down from the table – but she calmed down when she saw Hunter haul the lobster onto his plate, flip it over and take out all the fragrant meat, leaving just the scooped-out, not nearly so frightening shell.



For dessert Auntie Jane had made ice cream. She brought it to the table in little glasses, all of different colours, and asked everyone to choose their favourite colour. Hunter took a dark blue glass, Matilda a clear glass with a white pattern, Tom a green glass, and Sienna a light blue glass with touches of violet. Max's glass was the most striking of all – it was red, and the base shone with milky-white stars. The cats purred with pleasure as they tucked into their ice cream – so much so that Max couldn't resist

imitating them. “Ice crrrrream! Ice crrrrream!” he giggled. Sienna finished up sooner than any of them. She started kneading with her paws and sending pleading looks at Auntie Jane – who guessed what she wanted straight away. “Just don’t eat quite so fast, my dear, unless you want your throat to get sore,” she smiled, scooping out more of the vanilla ice cream for Sienna. “Now, who else wants seconds?” All as one, the other cats raised their tails to signal that *they wouldn’t say no*.

After dinner, Matilda took charge: “Now then, little ones, it’s time to have a quick wash, clean your teeth and get to bed!” Sienna immediately started to play up. “I don’t *want* to clean my teeth! And I don’t want to get washed either!” Hunter raised the tip of his tail in warning and said, “Let me tell you what happened to me when I was little and I didn’t want to get washed at bedtime.” He lowered himself into the armchair by the fire and – once more with the tip of his tail – beckoned the little ones closer.

Sienna and Tom sat down at Hunter’s feet. Their ears were pricked up and turned to listen. Max took up a spot on the rug nearby.



“When I was very young,” began Hunter...

*...I lived with my mother and my brothers and sisters
in a basement by the Thames. Our mum always taught us to clean*

our fur as often as we could – but we, if I'm honest, were none too keen on grooming ourselves. Not when there were tempting distractions everywhere you looked! Butterflies, grasshoppers, mice – we could have chased them all day long! Well, I decided that I didn't really need to get washed, and I started to tell fibs. I'd tell my mother that I'd had a wash somewhere else. But after a few days, strange things started to happen to me: at first my ears started to itch, then my paws, my tummy, and then even my tail! It wasn't nice at all, but I tried to ignore it. By the next day things had really got bad: my fur had got all tangled into a thick mat, and in the morning when I came for my milk, my own mother didn't even recognise me.

“Who is this monster?!” she howled. “I’ve never set eyes on you before! Get out of my house, you gruesome beast, before my children wake up and die of fright!”

“Mummy, it’s me, Hunter! How can you not recognise me?!”

“How dare you!” my mother raged. “I’ll have you know my Hunter is a beautiful kitten with a coat as smooth as silk – he doesn’t look like a grimy slipper pulled out from under the stove!”

And she snatched up a broom and chased me out of the house. I sat in the road and cried my eyes out. Luckily for me, our neighbour happened to pass by – she was an elderly cat from next door. I threw myself at her:

“Miss Fanny...” – that was her name – “Miss Fanny, it’s me, Hunter! Help me – my mummy’s thrown me out of the house!”

“Surely not! How could it have happened?”

I told her about not washing, and how I'd lied to my mother, and Miss Fanny believed me straight away.

"I know what we can do about this. Come with me."

I dragged along after her, and soon we came to a barber's shop. The barber looked at me and shook his head doubtfully.

"I've never seen such a coat of fur. I don't know if I can even get a comb through it..."

"Then what can we do? The poor thing's own mother doesn't recognise him. Please, think of something!"

"Right you are. I'll just have to clip off the whole lot. You'll have to be brave though, Hunter – it won't be very nice."

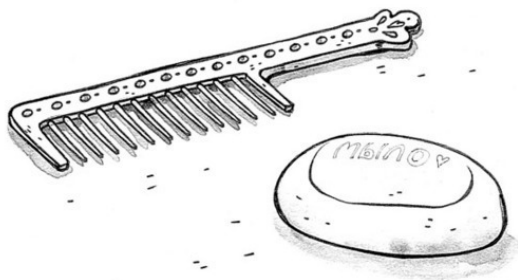
And for what seemed like forever he cut away at my fur – the same fur that used to be as smooth as silk. When I looked in the mirror I got a horrible fright: the creature staring back at me was so gaunt and bony. And I started to cry – because now there wasn't a hope of my mother recognising me! But Miss Fanny said:

"Be brave for just a little while longer, my dear: your fur will grow back, and it will be quite as beautiful as before. And in the meantime you can stay with me."

But I didn't need to go and stay with our kindly next-door neighbour: we met my mother on the street that very day and she took me home. Somehow she immediately recognised me! Hmm... you know, I've never understood how she was able to. I won't tell you how ashamed I was, how my brothers and sisters made fun of me, how I shivered with the cold and had to stay by my mother's side just to keep warm – forget playing and chasing about! A sad

tale indeed. But before long I'd grown back my fur, and I was the same old happy kitten with a silky coat – only now I'd groom myself as often as I could, getting washed not just in the morning and before bed, but any time I could find a spare minute...

“And that,” smiled Hunter, making a little circle with his tail, “is what happened when I didn’t want to get washed at bedtime. I hope it serves as a lesson for you too. Sienna, I’ve noticed how you take good care of your tail, but you need to groom every inch of your coat – and yes, you need to get washed and clean your teeth every night. And now, my young friends, it’s off to bed. You’re tired and you need your rest.”



Chapter 3. The Fancy Dress Parade

With the arrival of the house's new residents, life became a lot more fun – and a lot more chaotic. Max was delighted with the kittens, and they grew so fond of him that sometimes they'd fight over who would get stroked first. Tom and Sienna loved to tear up and down the old house's narrow, creaking flights of stairs – and they were prone to getting under the feet of Auntie Jane, who'd shriek from fright, clutching her hand to her chest: “Oh, it's you two, you little tearaways! Play carefully, don't run so fast up and down the stairs. It's dangerous – you could break your legs!”



But it was Max, in the end, who broke his leg. Running away from Tom and Sienna as they played, he didn't notice Hunter's walking stick – after taking his walk that day, Hunter had left

it by the door to the basement. Poor Max tripped on the cane and went head over heels down the stairs. He tried to stand but couldn't get up – the pain was unbearable! Max started to cry.

“Help me, I can't stand up! Ouch, it hurts!” Through the tears, he managed to cry out for help. His leg had already swollen up and turned a vivid blue, and all of the cats – who'd come running in fright when they heard Max's cries – burst into tears themselves. “Whatever's the matter? What's happened to you?” – at last Auntie Jane followed them down into the basement, and she could tell in an instant what had happened.

“How terrible! Well, what's done is done. Hold onto me, my dear – we need to get you to hospital without delay and get that leg seen to. Oh, and I'll need some furry helpers if I'm going to carry Max up these stairs – he's not as light as all that.” His auntie held Max under the arms while Hunter and Tom lifted his legs. This meant standing up on their hind legs, but Hunter had long been in the habit of walking like a human, and Tom learned from him in a moment. The cats carried the injured leg with the greatest of care, but Max still suffered terribly and cried out with the pain. Matilda ran ahead of them to bring Max's warm hat and mittens. Sienna wanted to help too somehow, so she started wiping away his tears with her fluffy tail.

“My lovely friends,” said Max to the cats, “thank you! Don't let yourselves worry on my account – soon all this will be over and we'll be playing and tearing around just like before.” In truth he was trying to rally his own spirits as much as theirs. He tried

to be strong and brave, but the wretched tears kept trickling from his eyes and his voice was shaken by sobs.

The cats helped Max get dressed as Auntie Jane called for an ambulance. The doctors came and laid Max on a special wheeled stretcher, then took him and Auntie Jane off to the hospital in the big white ambulance. Instantly the house felt empty and lonely. The cats, quiet and miserable, went to sit by the fire in the sitting room, but without any human company it seemed so bleak and cheerless that they left at once and headed to Tom and Sienna's corner in the pantry.

"Let's think of what we can do to help Auntie Jane and Max," said Matilda. "If we can do something to cheer them up then Max will be on the mend that much sooner."

"I say we organise a fancy dress parade!" Hunter chimed in.

"A fancy dress parade? What's that?" asked Sienna, wide-eyed.

"Parade, not 'parade', " laughed Hunter. "A fancy dress parade is when everyone puts on a fancy dress and has fun. I think we should all get dressed up as mice, and we can think of a song to sing."

"Where will we get the costumes from?"

"We can make them out of paper. Max has got all sorts of coloured paper on his desk – I'm sure he won't be angry if we use it."

"It's a brilliant idea," said Matilda. "Let's get to work!"

The cats ran to Max's room and got started with the multi-

coloured paper: cutting out mouse ears, rolling up mouse noses – with little balls of plasticine on the end – and curling up long strips to make mouse tails. They hid their *own* beautiful tails under coats made from the paper. And when they'd finished they all looked so funny! Even if you wouldn't say there was much resemblance to mice. Sienna was resplendent in pink, Matilda was all in baby blue, while Tom's costume was the most striking of all: with his white ears and nose, red cape and green tail, he looked like the Italian flag! And as for Hunter, well, he naturally chose orange – the colour of happiness and positivity.

Their paper costumes rustling, the cats made their way downstairs – and just in time to find Max and Auntie Jane returning to the house from the hospital! Poor Max's leg was tightly bandaged up, right to the knee. He wasn't crying now, but he looked very pale and very grave. He hopped into the hall, leaning on his auntie, then sat down at once on the big trunk by the door. Auntie Jane was just starting to help him off with his coat when she noticed the strange parade coming down the stairs. She gasped. She was so surprised, she had to sit down.

“Goodness, what's this? Who have we got here? Look, Max – how about this for a spectacle!” She was wiping away tears of laughter. And Max couldn't keep from laughing either. But the best was still to come – the cats all got in line and started to sing:

“We've come as jolly paper mice
To visit Max, our dearest friend

And a gift is no great sacrifice
If it helps to get him on the mend!”



They might not have sung perfectly in time – there'd been no time to practise, and their voices were all as different as could be – but they put so much heart into it that Max thought the funny little ditty was better than any other song in the world! Hunter pulled out a big cracker and presented it to Max with a bow. Max pulled both ends of the cracker until it went bang – and out flew a whole world of treasures! There were little caramels, stamps of every colour, stickers with his favourite story-book characters, even a few tiny blue butterflies! Max was so happy that he jumped up onto his feet – though he had to sit straight back down again, as his bad leg simply couldn't take the weight.

“Hunter, Matilda, Sienna, Tom, you're incredible! You've cheered me up no end, thank you. Of all the mice I've ever seen, in picture books or anywhere, none have been as funny as you!”

The cats shook off their paper costumes, jumped up on top of the big trunk next to Max and started to rub themselves against him – and purr like they'd never purred before. Max threw his arms around them all and smothered them with kisses. Then Auntie Jane and the cats helped him up to his room and put him to bed. That night Auntie Jane let the cats sleep on Max's bed – and what a picture they all made! Matilda was above Max's head, snuggled up against him, Tom and Sienna were rolled up into balls at his shoulders, while Hunter stretched out alongside his bad leg, guarding it.

And Max's bad leg really did get better quite fast: in two weeks' time he was back at school – though he had to use

crutches – and a month later he was skipping around as if nothing had happened. But back at the house there was no more running up and down the stairs – when you've broken your leg once, you don't want to try it again!

Chapter 4. The Treehouse

Spring had arrived. In Auntie Jane's garden the new grass was a rich emerald green and the crocuses were in bloom. This year, they'd come through in numbers untold and formed a beautiful carpet of violet and yellow on the ground. Whenever the cats were playing in the garden, they had to take extra care not to tread on the flowers – one sudden move and those fragile stalks could break! Auntie Jane would walk out through the tall glass doors to the garden to watch Max and the cats playing – and would get very cross indeed if she caught them spoiling her garden's perfect order!

One day Jane went out into the garden as usual – and was horrified by what she saw. Nearly all her beloved crocuses had been broken, the grass had been trampled and several ugly holes had been dug out on the lawn.



“All of you come here at once! Who’s responsible for this?!” Auntie Jane was quite beside herself. Her face was flushed with anger, her hands trembling.

Max and the cats had only just woken up, but came running as soon as they heard her voice – and they looked at the garden with such astonishment that anyone could tell they were seeing the damage for the first time. Deep down Auntie Jane knew they’d had nothing to do with it, but she was still struggling to come to terms with the destruction – and decided to ask Max and Hunter a few questions just in case.

“Who was out in the garden last night and left this disgraceful scene? Was it you playing hide-and-seek? Or playing soldiers?”

Max was hurt. “Of course not! How could you even think we’d do something like this? Hunter, Matilda, Tom, Sienna – tell Auntie it wasn’t us!”

The cats lifted their tails in unison, then shook the tips ever so slightly to confirm what Max had said.

Feeling terribly upset, Auntie Jane started to collect the flowers that were scattered on the ground – while Max, along with his team of furry helpers, brought fresh earth to fill the holes and spread seeds to grow new grass.

Sadly, despite all their efforts the garden didn't really look much better – the dark bare patches glaring in the bright green lawn made it a sorry sight.

“Well, we can't let ourselves get downhearted – we'll just have to wait until the new grass comes through. And we mustn't forget to water, that's crucial – we can't let the seeds dry out.”

After a few days the first tiny blades of grass started to show, and the crocuses bloomed thicker and brighter than before, as if to make up for the ones that were lost. The garden's old beauty and harmony returned. But one morning the house woke up to find the flowers broken and trampled again, and in the middle of their beautiful lawn... an enormous black hole.

This time Auntie Jane couldn't hold back the tears. She ran into the house in despair and threw herself onto her bed, stricken with a terrible migraine.

“Poor Auntie Jane!” said Hunter. “That does it, we have to help her – and that means catching the louts who've been wrecking our garden! Well, I've got a plan, and I'd like to hear what you think of it.”

Gathered by the fire in the sitting room, the friends had a meeting.

“We need to set up a rota,” said Hunter. “We'll take turns

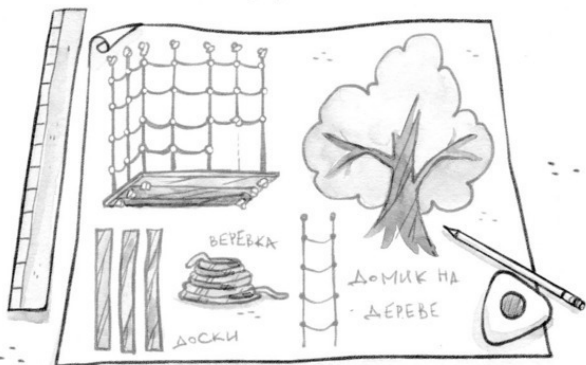
watching the garden.”

And Max had an idea: “We can build a treehouse – that will make the perfect observation post! We’ll be hidden by the leaves, so nobody will know we’re there.”

Right at the end of the garden, beyond the strawberry beds, there was a grand old tree with a thick trunk. It wasn’t that tall but it was very wide, with big strong branches that were thick with foliage. The tree had an unusual name – it was a *eucalyptus*. They said it was planted by one of Auntie Jane’s ancestors some three hundred years ago.

That was the tree where Max planned to build their hideout. “It’s going to be quite the job,” he said. “Let’s sketch out a plan first, then get building. I say we lay down a deck on the thickest branch to make the floor, then make the walls out of rope and tie them to the branches up above.”

Max took a piece of paper and drew a sketch of the treehouse. It looked so good that the friends couldn’t wait to get started.



“Hunter, if you can find boards for the floor, I’ll put them together. Sienna and Matilda, you can make the walls – just don’t forget to leave holes for the windows. And Tom, climb the tree and find the thickest branch that’s suitable – so the treehouse is stable, but out of sight.”

They set to work without delay. Hunter found a pile of sturdy wooden boards in the shed. Max joined them together with wooden slats and tied on the rope walls on three sides. Then he fixed his new deck to two of the tree’s main boughs, tying the tops of the walls to the overhanging branches. And just for himself, Max strung together a rope ladder – just what you need if you haven’t got sharp claws for scaling tree trunks.

Max and the cats climbed up into their hideout. It was dark up there, and only snatches of light – broken rays which managed to steal through the leaves – played across their happy faces.

“I’ve got some biscuits and a flask of milk,” said Max. “Let’s have a treehouse-warming party!”

The friends tucked into the biscuits, washing them down with the milk – that well-known favourite of all cats, and children too. And they decided that – just for now – Auntie Jane didn’t need to know about the treehouse.

That evening Hunter and Max headed out for the first shift. They sat still up in the tree, until they heard Auntie Jane calling out, “Max, where are you? Time to get washed and then it’s off to bed!” Max climbed down and ran into the house. He had a quick wash, said good night to his auntie, got into bed – and pretended to fall asleep. Auntie Jane kissed Max on the forehead and went to her room. Max waited a while longer and then, with the sausages for Hunter that he’d kept ready in his bedside table, he crept softly to the door that led out into the garden. And seconds later he’d climbed up to the treehouse then pulled up the rope ladder and thrown it over the nearest branch.

When Hunter saw that Max had brought some provisions, he was happy beyond any words! He’d had to wait some time without a bite to eat, and was getting really hungry.

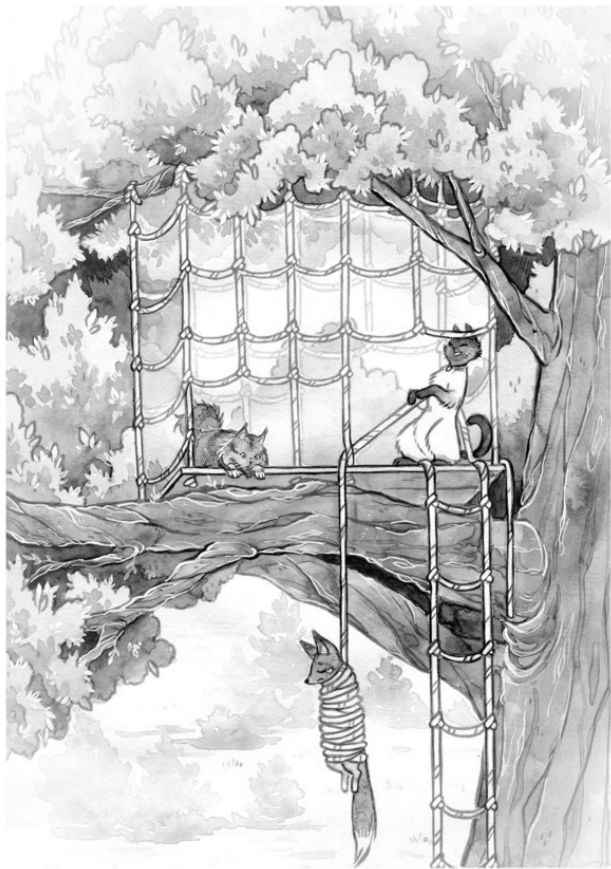
Sitting up in the treehouse, the two friends tried to stay perfectly still as they peered out into the dark of the night. All was quiet. A few times that night Max’s head started to droop

and he slept a while – but rather than waking him, Hunter just kept watch more vigilantly than before.

And as soon as dawn had broken, Max returned to the house to get some proper sleep in his own bed.

The next night it was Tom and Matilda's turn to go on duty. At the very stroke of midnight they heard strange, piercing voices – and saw an old mangy fox along with two smaller foxes who must have been his cubs. One of the cubs had a black left ear, the other a black right ear. The foxes had just climbed into the garden – over a low stretch of fence by the thick tall bushes in the depths of the garden – and were heading toward the house. Then the older fox stopped short. He looked to the right, then to the left, sniffed – and suddenly started digging, throwing up dirt as fast as he could with his big paws.

Tom and Matilda didn't know what to do. They realised they'd be overpowered in a fight – the foxes would eat them right up! But brave Matilda stayed calm: "We need to do the job we came to do – we can't let those foxes ruin the garden! I'll coax the smallest cub over here. If we can snatch him up into the tree with us, the older fox will have to do as we tell him."



She climbed down from the tree and stole up to the fox cub, who was sniffing at something behind a bench. Then she leapt out in front of him, yelling “Catch me if you can!” – and made a run

for the eucalyptus. The fox cub took after her. But once beneath the tree she spun round and threw herself under his feet. The cub toppled over sideways, and straight away a bundle of rope – thrown down by Tom – fell right on top of him. Taking the end of the rope in her teeth, Matilda trussed up the little fox's legs – so fast, and so tight, that before he even knew it he'd been taken captive by these fearless cats. They hauled him up to the top, and Matilda shouted out, "Hey, old Mr Fox! We've got your son! If you want us to let him go, stop wrecking our garden!"

The foxes stopped digging and came toward the tree. From above, the little cub whimpered pitifully, "Help me!"

"Release my son, cat. We will leave your garden."

"You need to promise that you'll never come here again!"

"I give you my word."

While Matilda was negotiating with the old fox, Tom asked the cub, "Why have you been digging holes in our garden?"

"We're looking for an underground passage – the one leading to the ancient mansion by the river."

"Is that the big house where the Prince of Transylvania lives?"

"Yes, Prince Georgius. And he's got a big hen house there. We wanted to sneak in there and steal his hens."

Tom was shocked. "Don't you have your own food that's meant for foxes? Our owner gives us tasty cat food every day, and on top of that she treats us to soup, meat, fish, even prawns!" (Here Tom stopped to lick his lips as he was particularly partial to prawns.)

The fox gave a melancholy sigh. “Nobody gives us any food at all. Humans take over our forests to build houses and roads, and we’re forced to look for food in rubbish dumps and gardens. Humans hate us, they hunt us and poison us. But a house pet like you wouldn’t know anything about that. You’ve got it all on a plate.”

Tom was offended. “I might be a ‘house pet’, but I know how to catch a mouse! Matilda, listen. These foxes aren’t villains – they’re just really hungry. Humans have taken their home and left them with no food. Maybe we ought to help them.”

Matilda, who knew well enough about injustice, replied thoughtfully: “It could be a good idea. But we’ll need to discuss it with the others first. What’s your name, little one?”

“I’m Kay. My sister’s called Juna.”

Tom and Matilda carefully lowered the fox cub to the ground, then jumped down from the tree themselves. Sullen-faced, the old fox watched as they loosened the ties around his son’s paws. Matilda told him, “Come to the garden tomorrow when it gets dark. We’ll think what we can do to help you. In the meantime, take our sandwiches and burgers – it’s lucky we never got a chance to eat them.”

Tom climbed quickly up to the treehouse and brought down the provisions that Max had laid on for the night watch. Before a minute had passed, the foxes had gobbled everything down – and afterwards they helped Matilda and Tom tidy things up in the garden. Luckily they didn’t have to replace too much soil, since

the foxes had only had a chance to dig a single hole – and it wasn't even in that noticeable a spot.

The foxes left, but the cats spent the rest of the night in the garden – after all, it's rather exciting to sleep in your own little shelter, especially high up in a tree!

Chapter 5. The Walk

Early the next morning, when the whole house was still sleeping, Matilda slipped softly into Max's room, jumped onto his bed and delicately stroked his cheek with the tip of her tail. Max woke up at once.

"Matilda, how are you, my dear? Is everything all right?"

She told him about the night's events with the foxes. Max grew thoughtful. "I wonder what we could do to help them. Perhaps ask Auntie Jane to leave food out for them, like she does for you?"

"No, Max, I don't know if there's much point mentioning the foxes to Auntie Jane – humans don't usually have a high opinion of foxes in general."

"Hmm, you're not wrong. Not long ago she was cursing the foxes who got into our rubbish bins – she said they're filthy creatures and that's all they'll ever be. There's no way she'll agree to feed them. How's the garden looking, by the way – do you think Auntie will notice anything?"

"Well, we tidied everything up as best we could, but if she goes for a walk round the garden she'll know things aren't quite right. We'll have to think up some way of keeping her away!"

Max thought for a while, then his eyes lit up: "I think I've got a plan!" He rubbed his hands together.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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