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Opening extract from
Atticus Claw Lends a Paw

Written by
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Atticus Grammaticus Cattypuss Claw – once the world’s greatest cat burglar and now its most brilliant police cat – was excited. It wasn’t just because his special friend Mimi, the pretty Burmese, was staying with him and the Cheddar family while her owner, Aisha, was away visiting her mother. It was also because Nellie Smellie, the owner of Littleton-on-Sea Home for Abandoned Cats, had invited him to talk to the new kittens about how to stay out of trouble.

It was Atticus’s first official police-catting job, following his recent promotion by Her Majesty the Queen to Police Cat Sergeant for stopping a gang of villains from stealing the Crown Jewels. He felt proud to be able to lend a paw.

Inspector Cheddar dropped him off at the gate in the panda car. ‘Remember, Atticus,’ he said, ‘Cats are like criminals: you can’t trust them. Especially this lot.’

Atticus frowned. It was annoying that Inspector Cheddar still didn’t like cats, even after all Atticus had done to help him out! And it wasn’t the kittens’ fault they were homeless: they had been turfed out when Bigsworth Cats’ Home had closed down and they had nowhere else to go.

‘But these kittens look up to you,’ Inspector Cheddar continued. ‘You can make a difference. Answer all their questions. And think of something fun for them to do to keep them off the streets.’ He practised a few karate chops. ‘I always tell kids exercise is the best thing. You should try that with the kittens.’

‘Meow!’ Atticus hopped out of the panda car. His police cat badge was pinned to the red handkerchief he wore round his neck. He rubbed it shiny with his cheek, quickly groomed his black-and-brown-striped fur and checked his white paws were clean. He’d show Inspector Cheddar he was wrong



about cats. The kittens wouldn't be any trouble once Atticus had given his talk. He walked up the path importantly, holding his tail high.

Nellie Smellie was waiting for him at the front door with her knitting. 'This way, Police Cat Sergeant Claw.' She led the way through the house, knitting needles clicking furiously. (The Littleton-on-Sea Home for Abandoned Cats was really just *her* home, full of stray cats.) Atticus followed a safe distance behind. Nellie Smellie was very old and smelt of mothballs and cat wee. She had a face like a tortoise and always wore the same long black skirt, mildewed white blouse and green cardigan with holes in the elbows. She was also so busy concentrating on her knitting that she was likely to tread on your tail if you weren't careful.

The good thing about Nellie Smellie though was that, unlike Inspector Cheddar, she absolutely adored cats.

'Here we are!' Nellie Smellie opened the door to the sitting room. The room was full of kittens. They lounged about, ripping the stuffing out of the sofas and watching TV. One of them was sharpening its claws with a penknife. He reminded

Atticus of his arch-rival, Ginger Biscuit, when *he* was a kitten.

Atticus touched his chewed ear: Biscuit had bitten it when they became enemies. But Atticus had got his revenge. Thanks to him, Biscuit and his evil owner, Zenia Klob, mistress of disguise, were holed up thousands of miles away in Siberia with Jimmy Magpie and his gang of thieving birds. *That would teach Biscuit and his pals to try and steal the Crown Jewels when Atticus Claw was on the case!* Atticus thought. He relaxed. Compared to Biscuit and the magpies, a bunch of kittens would be a piece of steak.

‘I’ll leave you to it.’ Nellie Smellie switched off the TV. ‘If you need me I’ll be in the kitchen showing my abandoned lady cats’ group how to knit.’ She shuffled out, her long black skirt rustling.

There was silence.

‘Sooooooooo,’ Atticus said. ‘Here we all are.’

The kittens stared at him frostily.

‘I’m here to talk to you about being good,’ he began.

The kittens yawned. Some of them sat back and folded their paws across their chests.

‘It’s good to be good.’
Atticus swallowed nervously.

‘Why is it?’ asked the mean-looking kitten.

‘Because it’s better than being bad.’ Atticus cleared his throat. This wasn’t going very well.

‘Is it true you used to be a cat burglar?’
one of the kittens asked.

‘Er . . .’ Atticus didn’t know what to say. Then he remembered Inspector Cheddar had told him to answer all their questions. ‘Yes,’ he admitted. ‘The world’s greatest.’

The kittens looked more interested.

‘When did you learn?’ a second kitten asked.

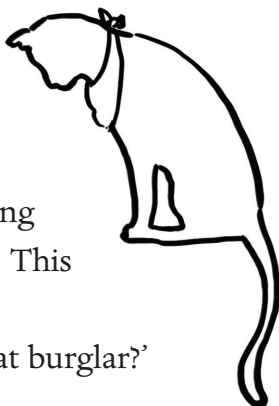
‘When I was about the same age as you,’ Atticus told her.

‘Who taught you?’

‘A cat called Ginger Biscuit. We both worked for a criminal called Klob.’

‘How many things did you steal?’ a third kitten demanded.

‘Um . . . hundreds, probably. Thousands even. I didn’t keep count.’



‘What sort of things?’

‘Well, you know . . . diamonds rubies, pearls, watches – that kind of thing.’

‘How come you never got caught?’

‘Because I always gave the police the slip,’ Atticus said. It was true. He always did. ‘And I never left any clues.’

What was the most valuable thing you stole?

Where did you live?

How did you get in and out?

Did you ever meet anyone famous?

The questions came thick and fast. Atticus answered them. The kittens seemed really interested in what he had to say.

‘Why have you got a chewed ear?’ the mean-looking one asked.

‘I got into a fight with Ginger Biscuit.’

‘Cool!’ several of them shouted.

‘Not really,’ Atticus said. He hated violence.

‘Can you teach *us* to be cat burglars?’ the mean-looking one said slyly.

‘Kitty please?’ another begged.

‘Teach us! Teach us!’ The kittens chanted.

‘NO!’ Atticus shouted. This was going all wrong.



The kittens looked sulky.

‘Look,’ Atticus said, ‘it’s not a *good* thing to be a cat burglar. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. It’s not something to be proud of! That’s why I stopped. It makes people sad when you steal things. And you could end up in prison. What’s the point in that?’

The kittens were quiet.

‘But there’s nothing to do around here,’ the mean-looking one complained. ‘It’s *boring*!’

Atticus remembered the other thing Inspector Cheddar had told him. ‘Do some exercise,’ he said.

The kittens looked disgusted.

‘It’s fun!’ said Atticus. (*Was it?* he wondered. *He’d never done any.*)

‘We hate exercise,’ the kitten said.

‘Well, do something else, then,’ Atticus replied, exasperated.

‘Like what?’ the kitten started chewing a bit of sofa stuffing.

Suddenly Atticus remembered a TV ad he’d seen for cat food. It had featured a happy-looking kitten climbing trees, exploring and playing with balls of wool while its owner looked on lovingly.



‘Climb trees!’ he said confidently. ‘Go exploring! Play with balls of wool! Trust me, you’ll love it.’

The kittens looked at one another and shrugged.

‘Okay,’ they agreed moodily. ‘If you say so.’ They got down off the sofas and slouched into the hall. Then they disappeared, one by one, through the cat flap.

