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Opening extract from

Atticus Claw Learns to Draw

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Atticus Grammaticus Cattypuss Claw – once the world's greatest cat burglar and now its best-ever police-cat – was lying in his basket at home in the kitchen at number 2 Blossom Crescent when the adventure began. Of course, it didn't feel like the start of an adventure at the time. It felt like any other Saturday morning. Inspector Cheddar was standing at the back door, brushing cat hairs off his police uniform and grumbling to himself. Mrs Cheddar was frying sausages for breakfast. And the children, Callie and Michael, were making plans for the day.

'What do you want to do?' Michael asked his sister.

'We could go and see Mr and Mrs Tucker,' Callie



suggested. 'Mr Tucker might take us out on his boat.'

Mr Tucker was a fisherman. He had a big beard-jumper (which was a sort of beard and a jumper all mixed up in one), and a wooden leg from the time a giant lobster had clipped the real one off when he was a pirate. Mrs Tucker was the family's childminder. She was also a secret agent, named Agent Whelk. They lived in a big house called Toffly Hall.

That sounds like a good idea, thought Atticus. He liked visiting the Tuckers. He could catch up with his friend Bones, Mr Tucker's ship's cat; and (with any luck) Mr Tucker would let him pick fishy morsels out of his beard-jumper and Mrs Tucker would feed him sardines. A visit to Toffly Hall was definitely worth getting out of his basket for, even on his day off.

Atticus got to his feet and stretched. He glanced at the window. Outside it was pouring with rain. On the other paw, Atticus decided, it might be better just to stay at home and relax. He lay down again.

'I'm afraid the Tuckers won't be there,' Mrs Cheddar said. 'Mrs Tucker asked if I'd mind if she took a holiday, so I've arranged with work to spend some time at home looking after you.'

'Where are they going?' asked Michael.

'Well, the weather's been so bad recently, she booked them all on a cruise,' Mrs Cheddar said. 'The ship's got a pet spa and everything.'

A pet spa! Atticus thought enviously. *Lucky Bones.* He'd love to go to a pet spa. He could get his fur blow-dried. He gave a hopeful meow.

'Don't get any ideas,' Inspector Cheddar told him.

Atticus's chewed ear drooped.

'Poor Atticus!' Mrs Cheddar said, dishing out the breakfast. 'You work him too hard, darling,' she told her husband.

Atticus looked at her piteously. Maybe if she felt *really* sorry for him she'd give him a sausage.



Unfortunately, though, Mrs Cheddar didn't seem to take the hint. She sat down at the breakfast table with the others.

'Hardly!' Inspector Cheddar retorted. 'All he does is a bit of community police-catting.'

Atticus felt indignant. It was true that his main job *was* community police-catting. He spent a lot of time with the kittens from the local cats' home, telling them how to keep out of trouble. He also took them on outings, most recently to cheer up the old people in the Littleton-on-Sea old folks' home. What Inspector Cheddar had *neglected* to mention, however, was that Atticus's other job was catching criminals, including Jimmy Magpie and his gang of black-and-white jailbirds, to say nothing of the evil Zenia Klob, Russian mistress of disguise, and her horrible cat, Ginger Biscuit: the animal responsible for chewing Atticus's ear when he was a kitten. Thanks to Atticus, the villains were all safely tucked up in a very large shark (known as a megalodon), patrolling the waters of the Pacific Ocean, rather than on the loose causing more trouble.

The delicious smell of fried sausage wafted

round the kitchen. Atticus's tummy gurgled. It seemed like ages since he'd had *his* breakfast. He got up again and wandered over to the table.

'Do you want some, Atticus?' Callie picked him up and put him on her knee.

Atticus waited politely. He knew it would be very rude to steal something off Callie's plate so he purred instead, which was his way of saying, 'Yes, I would please.'

'No cats at the breakfast table,' said Inspector Cheddar. 'It's unhygienic.'

Atticus frowned. Even though he had been living with the Cheddars for two years now, Inspector Cheddar still didn't seem to know anything much about cats. Cats were *very* hygienic. Atticus spent ages every day grooming his brown-and-black-striped fur and making sure his four white socks were clean – a lot longer than Inspector Cheddar spent in the shower, anyway. *And* Atticus was wearing his special red neckerchief embroidered with his name, which meant he wouldn't spill any food on his tummy, *whereas* Inspector Cheddar hadn't even opened his napkin and was getting toast crumbs all over his cardigan.



'Atticus isn't just any cat, Dad,' Callie reminded him. 'He's a police cat sergeant.' She thought for a moment. 'I mean, you might as well say no *police* at the breakfast table and then *you'd* have to get down too.' She gave Atticus some sausage.

Atticus gulped it down. He thought Callie was very clever to think of such a brilliant remark, but then children *were* clever, like cats. He gave Inspector Cheddar a triumphant look.

'Don't be cheeky!' Inspector Cheddar said, although it wasn't clear whether he was addressing Callie or Atticus.

Both, probably, Atticus thought gloomily.

'Does anybody want some of this?' Mrs Cheddar picked up an enormous glass jar from the breakfast table and unscrewed the lid. 'Mr Tucker gave it to me for my birthday. He says it's very good with sausages.'

Atticus inspected the jar. It was full of something brown and sludgy. He hoped Mr Tucker would give him something better than that for his birthday, like a jar of fish paste or some sardines.

'What is it?' Michael asked.

'Butteredsconi's Italian Truffle Pickle,' Mrs Cheddar said, reading the label.

'What's truffle?' Callie asked.

'It's a type of fungus that grows underground, round the roots of trees,' Mrs Cheddar told her. 'You use it in cooking as a kind of magic ingredient to make everything taste better. Pigs go mad for it. They're very expensive,' she added, as Callie wrinkled her nose. 'Truffles, I mean. Not pigs.'

Atticus felt smug. He already knew what a truffle was and that pigs went mad for them because once, when he was a cat burglar, he had been hired by a pig called Pork to steal all the truffles in Italy. He finished cleaning his whiskers and looked curiously at the pickle jar. He started. A pig that closely resembled Pork stared back at him from the label. It looked like a nasty piece of chop. For one mad moment Atticus wondered if Pork had started making pickles. He told himself not to be so silly.

'I'll try it,' Michael said. He reached for the jar, spooned a bit on to the side of his plate, speared a sausage and dipped it in. 'It's all *right*,' he said, chewing the mouthful slowly, 'but I prefer ketchup.'

He squirted a large dollop on to his plate and handed the pickle jar back to his mum.

'So what *are* we going to do today?' Callie said. 'We can't even go to the park if it's raining.'

'How about you tidy up your bedroom?' Inspector Cheddar said.

'That's boring, Dad!' Michael protested.

'Homework, then.'

'We did it yesterday,' Callie said smartly.

'What about going in for a painting competition?' Mrs Cheddar said.

'A painting competition?' Callie repeated. 'That sounds fun. Where?'

'Here!' Mrs Cheddar showed them the writing on the label on the back of the pickle jar.

Atticus squinted at it.

Butteredsconi's Italian Pickle Products
proudly present its annual
pickle-painting competition!
For more details, peel here.

He watched as Mrs Cheddar peeled off part of the label carefully with her fingernails.

Mrs Cheddar read:

Are you art's NEXT BIG THING?!
Enter our pickle-painting competition
today to find out. Paint the perfect pickle
and win a visit to our famous pickle factory.
Competition closes 30th September.

'That sounds brilliant!' Michael said excitedly. 'Can we go in for it, Mum?' He looked at the calendar. 'The deadline is next week.'

'I don't see why not,' Mrs Cheddar replied. 'It doesn't say anything in the small print about you having to be over eighteen.'

Atticus was pleased for the children – Callie and Michael liked painting – although he didn't think much of the prize. (A trip to a pickle factory sounded about as exciting as cleaning Inspector Cheddar's panda car.) It probably didn't matter very much, though, he reflected. They wouldn't win anyway. There were bound to be zillions of people entering the competition. But at least painting pickles for the pickle-painting competition would give Callie and Michael something to do while Atticus kept an eye

on the weather and snoozed. Maybe if it cleared up later, he could go and visit his friend Mimi, the pretty Burmese, by the beach huts. He prepared to jump off the chair.

'Mum, does it say anything about you having to be *human* to enter the competition?' Callie asked suddenly.

'No . . . I don't believe it does,' Mrs Cheddar said.

'Then Atticus can do it too!' Callie cried. Her hands closed around his tummy. He felt himself being lifted into the air. 'Come on, Atticus, we'll find you an apron.'