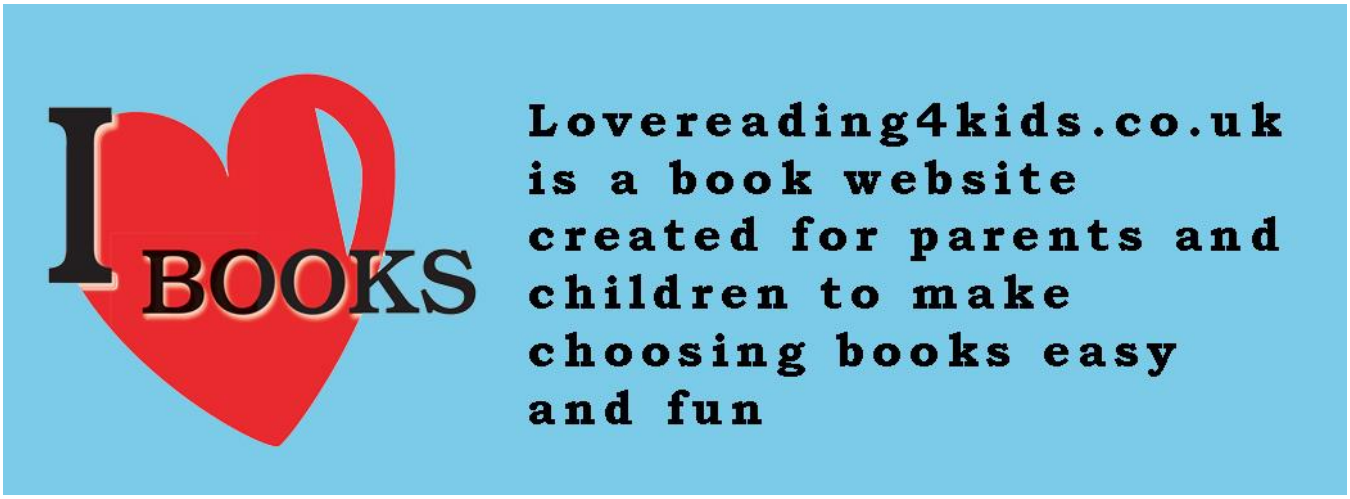


Opening extract from

Atticus Claw Hears a Roar

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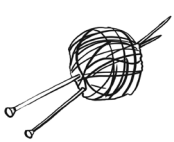
Atticus Grammaticus Cattypuss Claw, once the world's best cat burglar and now its greatest cat detective was on police-catting duty with the kittens at the Littleton-on-Sea Home for Abandoned Cats. They were turning out the attic. It wasn't the most exciting police-catting job Atticus had ever had. In fact, it was probably the most boring one, except for litter picking at the beach. But Atticus had learnt from experience that even the dullest of activities could turn into an adventure, so he went about it with gusto. Besides, he was there to set a good example to the kittens and help them stay out of mischief.

'Come on, everyone, put your paws into it,' he meowed. 'We've nearly finished.'

The kittens were covered with dust. Some of them had cobwebs on their whiskers. The Littleton-on-Sea Home for Abandoned Cats was run by a very old lady called Nellie Smellie. It was actually just *her* home, full of stray cats, and it was a very long time since anyone had tidied the attic. The place was crammed with junk, which was a good thing really as the whole point of tidying it up was to find stuff to sell at the Bigsworth car boot sale later that afternoon, and raise money for the abandoned cats to go on holiday.

Atticus and the kittens had had a successful morning. They had unearthed boxes of books, various lamps, some odd pieces of cutlery, an ancient record player, a plastic loo seat (still in its packaging), several pairs of curtains and a doll's pram, all of which they could sell. They had also discovered a great quantity of wool, together with an even greater quantity of knitting needles and a large number of pattern books, all of which they couldn't.

The reason for this was that Nellie Smellie liked knitting almost as much as she liked cats. She could knit anything from egg cosies to trouser suits. She



could knit gloves, hats, scarves, shawls, knickers, slippers, onesies and tights. She could knit blankets, burkas, baby clothes, leg warmers, ear warmers, nose warmers, jumpers, false beards, false teeth, bicycle-seat covers and lampshades. She could knit balls, budgies, teddy bears, cuddly rabbits, Christmas tree decorations and rag dolls. You name it, Nellie Smellie could knit it. She had even taught some of her abandoned lady cats to knit.

(Atticus had tried it once as part of his police-catting duties but he couldn't get the hang of it. He kept dropping stitches, with the result that the patchwork square he was supposed to be making was more hole than knitting. Nellie Smellie tactfully called it *crochet*, which is basically knitting with holes.)

'Anything else to come down?' Callie Cheddar poked her head through the trapdoor to the attic.

Callie was Atticus's owner, along with her brother, Michael. They lived with their mum and dad at number 2 Blossom Crescent, Littleton-on-Sea, not far from Nellie Smellie's house. Most of the time Atticus enjoyed living with the Cheddar family. Callie, Michael and Mrs Cheddar gave him



lots of attention and treats, and made room for him on the sofa when he wanted to lie down (which was most of the time, when he wasn't having adventures or police-catting). Inspector Cheddar still had a lot to learn though. He couldn't seem to grasp the fact that Atticus was the boss and kept trying to tell him what to do.

Atticus took a final tour around the rafters. His eye was drawn to a shaft of light that came through the attic window. It illuminated a small wooden chest double the size of a shoebox, which had previously been concealed under the eaves. Atticus padded over and gave the chest a push. It felt heavy; not as heavy as the boxes of books, but too heavy for even a large tabby cat like Atticus to shift on his own.

'I'll help.' One of the kittens joined him. It was Thomas. Atticus knew he shouldn't have favourites, but since he'd started working with the kittens he'd come to like Thomas a lot. Thomas was a tabby, like Atticus, and though he didn't have four white paws and a red handkerchief with his name embroidered on it tied around his neck, or a chewed ear for that matter, even so Thomas

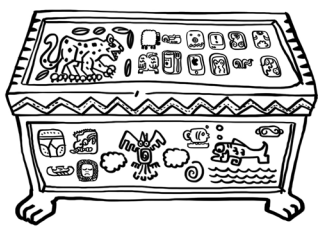
reminded Atticus of himself when he was younger. The two of them were both orphans and they both enjoyed getting into mischief. Luckily for Thomas, *he* hadn't been brought up to become a cat burglar like Atticus had.

'Thanks, Thomas,' he said. 'You push, I'll pull.' Between them the two cats heaved the chest along the rafters towards the trapdoor.

Callie reached up and took it from them. She handed it down to Michael, who was holding the ladder.

'This looks interesting,' he said, wiping away the worst of the dust with his sleeve. 'I wonder what's in it.'

Several furry faces peered down from the attic, including one belonging to Atticus. The chest was covered with carvings of animals. Atticus could make out a cat and a bird, a crocodile and some fish. It looked as if it could be even older than Nellie Smellie.



It was while he was peering down at the chest that Atticus started to get a funny tingly feeling in his tail. Gradually it spread all the way through his fur, along his body to the tips of his ears. He'd had that feeling before. His best friend Mimi, the pretty Burmese, called it instinct. It was a sort of sixth sense cats had along with the other five normal ones. It warned him when danger was close.

'Maybe we could sell it at the car boot sale,' said Callie.

No! thought Atticus. *Put it back!*

'Let's have a look inside,' said Michael.

No! thought Atticus. *Don't open it!*

Michael lifted the lid.

Atticus started. A horrible skull-like face stared back at him. It seemed neither human nor animal. The face was shaped like a man's and was fringed all around with feathers. The eye sockets were empty and in place of a nose it had a long, curved beak.

Some of the kittens began to whimper. They all hid behind Atticus, apart from Thomas, who was so engrossed in the grizzly spectacle that he nearly

fell out of the attic. Atticus caught him by the tail just in time.



'It's a mask,' Michael said. 'There's another one underneath it.' He picked up the feathered face carefully.

The second mask was even more horrible than the first. It was the distorted face of a great, snarling, black-spotted cat.

'What is it?' asked Callie. 'Or rather, what *was* it?'

'A leopard, I think,' Michael said. 'Or a jaguar.'

Atticus's good ear drooped. He'd seen pictures of leopards and jaguars on the TV. They were beautiful animals: like him really, except they were much bigger and had spots instead of stripes. And they lived in the jungle, not in Littleton-on-Sea, and ate other animals, not cat food. He wondered what sort of a human would want to wear a dead cat on their face.

'Is there anything else?' Callie asked her brother.

Michael removed the masks carefully. 'There's a journal,' he said.

Atticus risked another look. At the bottom of the chest was an old exercise book with lots of

loose pages stuffed inside. The yellowing contents were bound together with frayed string. Written across the front in bold handwriting were the words:

In Search of the
Lost Treasure of the Jaguar Gods

By Howard Toffly
1897

'Howard Toffly!' Callie whispered. She looked up. 'Oh, Atticus, you are clever!'

Atticus's earlier sense of foreboding was replaced by a feeling of excitement. Howard Toffly was a famous explorer who had once lived in Littleton-on-Sea. The chest must be important if it had belonged to him, even if its contents were rather mysterious.

Atticus purred loudly. He didn't mind that.

In fact Atticus loved a good mystery, especially when he was in the middle of it!