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Opening extract from

A Cat Called Penguin

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For Tom,

who has a fat cat of his own

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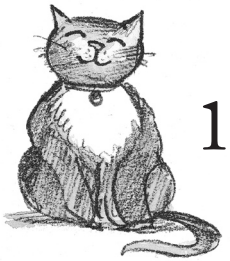
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1

Purring rumbled through the sleepy sunshine, and Alfie yawned again. It was a warm September Sunday afternoon, and he was full of lunch, and apples, and a squashed bar of chocolate that he'd forgotten was in the back pocket of his jeans. He settled himself more comfortably against the trunk of the apple tree and leaned his arm against the thick branch that jutted out in just the right place. Penguin, who was draped across the same branch like a fat furry rug, leaned forward a little and licked Alfie's elbow lovingly.

"Don't fall off," Alfie murmured woozily.

But it was a silly thing to say. Penguin never fell. He didn't look as though he was in the best shape for climbing trees – one would think his stomach would get in the way, particularly for jumping. But Penguin had perfect balance, good even for a cat. Alfie smiled to himself as he remembered trying to persuade Penguin to walk along the washing line during the summer holidays. Penguin had refused, even for smoky bacon crisps, his favourite. (Although he had stolen the crisps off the table later.) Alfie had been convinced that Penguin would be a fabulous tightrope artist. They should try again. Perhaps it was the lack of circus music and Big Top atmosphere that had put him off. Maybe a costume. . . Alfie looked

at Penguin thoughtfully. He wondered how easy it would be to get hold of a cat-shaped leotard.

Penguin opened one yellowish-golden eye a slit and stared sternly at Alfie, as though warning him that attempts to dress him in a sequinned cloak would result in severe scratches. But he didn't stop purring.

"OK," Alfie murmured. "But I bet it would be good for your tummy."

Penguin ignored that. He didn't have any problems with the size of his stomach.

Penguin hadn't always been enormous. When Alfie had first found him, sitting on the front doorstep on the way home from school two years before, he had been very skinny indeed, and not much more than a

kitten. Alfie was pretty sure he'd been a stray for a while, and that was why he loved food so much – he'd never been quite sure where the next meal was coming from.

Mum and Dad hadn't been at all sure about keeping the thin little black and white kitten, but Alfie had begged and begged. He had agreed to putting up posters, just in case someone else was looking for their lost cat, and he'd stood anxiously next to Mum as she had phoned all the vets in the local phonebook. But no one had turned up to claim the skinny kitten (who was already less skinny, after a couple of days of Alfie-sized meals). After two weeks, Mum and Dad had given in, and Alfie had announced the secret he'd been saving up.

The cat was called Penguin.

Dad had tried to explain that it was ridiculous to call a cat that. He *wasn't* a penguin.

Alfie said he knew that quite well, thank you. The cat just looked like one. And it was true. Penguin had sleek black fur – getting sleeker by the day – and a shining white shirt front. When Alfie had spent his birthday money from Gran on a glow-in-the-dark orange collar, Penguin was a dead ringer for his namesake. When Alfie phoned Gran to tell her what he'd spent the money on, he had got a little parcel back with a silvery tag engraved with his phone number on one side and *Penguin* on the other. Gran liked cats. And even Dad could not argue now there

was a collar with his name on.

Alfie sometimes wondered what would have happened if Penguin had chosen someone else's step to sit on that day. Where would he be now? It was impossible to imagine not having him there. Penguin was his best friend. Alfie had lots of friends at school, but he never talked to them as much as he talked to Penguin. Penguin was an excellent listener, and he always purred in all the right places. Once, when Alfie was telling him about being kept in at lunch time by Mrs Haynes, the Year Two teacher he had never got on with, Penguin had coughed up a hairball all over the kitchen floor. Which just proved that he understood exactly what Alfie had been talking about.

Alfie liked Penguin plump. He thought it made him look even more penguin-like. But at his last check-up, the vet had suggested politely that Penguin ought to go on a diet, and Mum had bought a bag of special diet cat food. It did not look pleasant. Alfie hated the smell of the tins Penguin usually had, and forked it quickly into his bowl with his nose stuffed in the crook of his elbow. But at least the tinned stuff was meaty. Like something a proper cat might want to eat, after a hard day's prowling around after mice and birds. The diet version looked like rabbit poo.

Alfie had tried to explain to Mum that it wasn't going to work, but she hadn't been in a very good mood, as his baby sister Jess had just thrown a bowlful of lovingly mashed

carrots into the toaster.

"If he doesn't like it, he won't eat it," she'd snapped, trying to fish the orange goo out with a spoon. "And that'll have the same effect in the long run. Stop fussing, Alfie!"

Alfie had sighed, and measured the correct, tiny amount of diet food into Penguin's bowl. It didn't even cover the fish pattern on the bottom. Alfie had crossed his fingers behind his back and set it down in front of Penguin, who was coiling himself adoringly around Alfie's ankles.

Penguin had stopped dead, and stared up at Alfie accusingly.

"Sorry! The vet said!" Alfie protested. "Your legs are going to start hurting if you don't go on a diet."

Penguin sniffed suspiciously at the little brown pellets, then turned round and went straight out of the cat flap.

Later that evening, two sausages mysteriously disappeared while Alfie's mum wasn't looking.

The diet cat food lasted about a week before Mum binned it. She told Alfie that it was expensive anyway, but since she'd now had to replace most of what was in the fridge as well, it was like feeding three cats instead of one.

Penguin sat on one of the kitchen chairs looking happily plump and watched as she put the rest of the bag into the bin.

"That cat is smirking at me!" Mum said crossly, as she clanged the bin shut. "This

really can't go on, Alfie. It's for his own good!"

"I don't think he thinks he's fat," Alfie explained.

"You'll just have to make sure he gets more exercise." Mum sniffed. "Maybe you should put a sausage on a string and make him chase it up and down the garden."

Now, looking at Penguin's stomach gently folding over the edges of the branch, Alfie had to admit he was larger than he should be. But it was hard to make a cat exercise when he didn't want to. Alfie had tried racing up and down the garden, and even throwing a bouncy ball for Penguin to chase. Penguin had sat on the garden bench, eyeing him with fascinated interest, as though he

wondered why Alfie was bothering. After all, it wasn't as if he was a dog.

"It'll be tea time soon," Alfie murmured. From his position in the tree, he could just about see into their kitchen window next door, and it looked like Mum was pottering about making sandwiches with leftover chicken. He yawned. "We'll go back home in a minute." He had to be careful to get back before Mum or Dad came looking for him – nobody knew that he was in next door's garden.

Alfie and Penguin had found the loose board in the fence a little while after Penguin had arrived on Alfie's doorstep. Alfie had been so excited about having a cat that for a few weeks he had followed Penguin

everywhere, and Penguin hadn't seemed to mind. Alfie had rolled underneath every bed in the house (although he didn't fit under the sofa like Penguin did), wedged himself into the airing cupboard, and gone crawling through the flower beds down at the bottom of the garden.

Penguin particularly liked the flower beds. It had been late summer when he arrived and the weather had been horribly hot. Penguin had spent a lot of time collapsed under bushes, and Alfie had collapsed under them with him. They had watched, fascinated, as ants crawled past their noses and dry leaves tickled their ears.

When they weren't slumped in the heat, they'd investigated every scrap of the

garden, and it was behind the shed that they had made the discovery – the loose board, swinging from a nail where it had been badly mended once before. It was like a perfect little cat-and-boy-sized doorway. It had taken a couple of days for Alfie to pluck up the courage to go through it. He didn't know much about the old lady next door, only her name, Mrs Barratt, and a few other odd little snippets. Mum had said she was ill, and couldn't walk very far, not even up the stairs in her house. Dad moaned about the brambles snaking under the fence from her garden, and Mum told him off for being unkind, when the poor lady couldn't really get out there with her garden tools, could she?

So Alfie knew that Mrs Barratt hardly ever went into her garden. And that it was overgrown enough to hide in. It was the perfect place for exploring.

At first Alfie and Penguin had followed tunnels through the brambles, Alfie tearing his shorts and staining his fingers and lips scarlet with squishy-ripe blackberries. They'd prowled through next door's garden like a pair of panthers, Alfie loving the feel of being somewhere he shouldn't really be, and Penguin pouncing on shadows like the overgrown kitten he was.

Alfie's own garden didn't have anything to explore. It was neat and divided up into what Mum called garden rooms. Lots of little hedges, and screens, and statues that popped

up and surprised you. But it was so neat, it was useless for having adventures in.

The only good thing about it was that Mum could never quite tell which part of the garden Alfie was in. If he heard her calling him, it was easy to suggest he'd just been lurking behind the sweet peas, when actually he'd slipped back through the loose board, and emerged from behind the shed looking innocent.

Then one afternoon, a few weeks after they'd first ventured into the wilderness, Alfie and Penguin had discovered the tree. It was a huge old apple tree down at the far end of the garden, where it backed on to a little wood. The apple tree's furthest branches joined the elderberries on the other side of

the fence. It was first time they'd explored that far and the ground around the tree had been buzzing with drunken wasps, feeding on the fallen apples. Penguin had sniffed one, and jumped back in shock when it buzzed angrily at him, and flew wobbling away.

Alfie had stood staring up at the trunk, wondering if he could climb it. He could reach the first branch with his hands, but he'd never get a foot up there. He'd always wanted a treehouse. He supposed Mrs Barratt might notice if he built a house in her tree, but then Mum had said her eyesight wasn't very good. Surely she wouldn't notice him hidden in the branches? The next time he came through the fence, Alfie brought an old wooden box that had been round the back of the shed by the





compost heap for ages. With that he could just scramble far enough up to get his elbows over the first branch.

He needed to grow. His mum was always complaining that he grew out of things – now for the first time Alfie was actually trying to grow on purpose. He started drinking more milk, but gave up after a week as it didn't seem to work. He went back to the tree every day and stood underneath it, eyeing the huge branches. He would be able to see everything from up there. As far as his friend Oliver's house down the road, he thought. Maybe even further. But he still couldn't reach that vital first branch.

It was soon after then that Alfie found the rope. It was quite close to the house,

which was probably why he hadn't seen it before. He didn't normally like to go too close, in case Mrs Barratt spotted him. He occasionally saw her, just a smudge behind the kitchen window blind, but no more. He wasn't quite sure if that made her more scary or less. Alfie sometimes pretended she was a witch hidden behind the windows and if she caught him in her garden she would put him under an evil spell. It made the challenge of climbing the tree – a witch's tree – even more exciting.

Alfie had heard her scolding Penguin through her window as well, telling him off for sitting on the fence and staring hungrily at the birds on her feeders.

It was one afternoon when he'd been

trying to distract Penguin from the birds that Alfie spotted the rope. And it was the rope that got Alfie into the tree.