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Opening extract from

Atticus Claw Settles a Score

Written by

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Atticus Grammaticus Cattypuss Claw – formerly the world's greatest cat burglar – was feeling sick. He hated flying. Flying was for birds, not cats. In his old cat-burgling days he had always travelled by cruise ship or first-class compartment on the train rather than fly. And the hideous contraption he found himself in now was much worse than a plane. It was even worse than a helicopter or a hot air balloon. It was tabby torture.

Atticus opened one eye then closed it again. He'd never have agreed to come on holiday to London if he'd known the Cheddar family planned to take him on *this*. He'd thought it was a giant hamster wheel when Callie first pointed it out to him. (Although he probably should have guessed

that there wouldn't be too many giant hamsters roaming around London looking for exercise at the height of the tourist season.) He just wished someone had *warned* him, though. What happened to *trust*? But one minute he'd been eating a bit of Michael's fish-paste sandwich, and the next he'd been bundled up by Callie and now here he was in a fragile-looking glass capsule dangling dangerously from the edge of a huge revolving metal circle, inching his way into the sky.

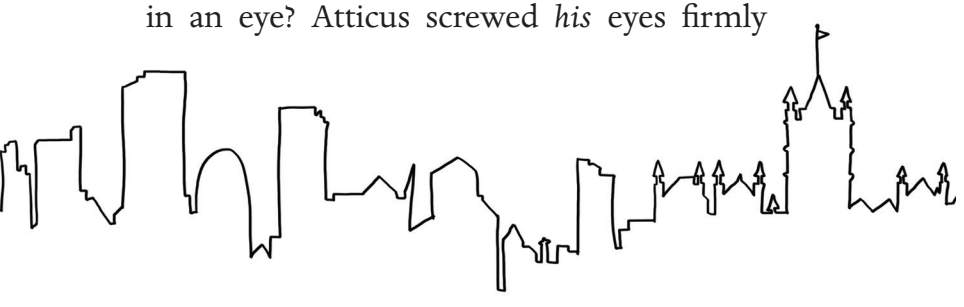
'Are you all right, Atticus?' Callie hugged him gently.

'You look a bit funny.' Michael tickled his chin. 'Do you feel sick?'

Atticus purred weakly. *Finally they'd noticed*! It was a bit late now, though. They had already lifted off.

'It's called the Eye, Atticus,' Mrs Cheddar took his paw. 'No need to worry – everyone rides it when they're visiting London. You get a fantastic view when you get to the top. Look, there's the Thames.'

The Eye? Why would anyone want to take a ride in an eye? Atticus screwed *his* eyes firmly



shut. And he didn't want to see the Thames. Didn't Mrs Cheddar realise that cats *hated* water? He wanted to get off. 'Meow!' he yowled.

'Stop mollycoddling him!' Inspector Cheddar said sternly. 'He's a police cat, not a pet. He needs to toughen up.'

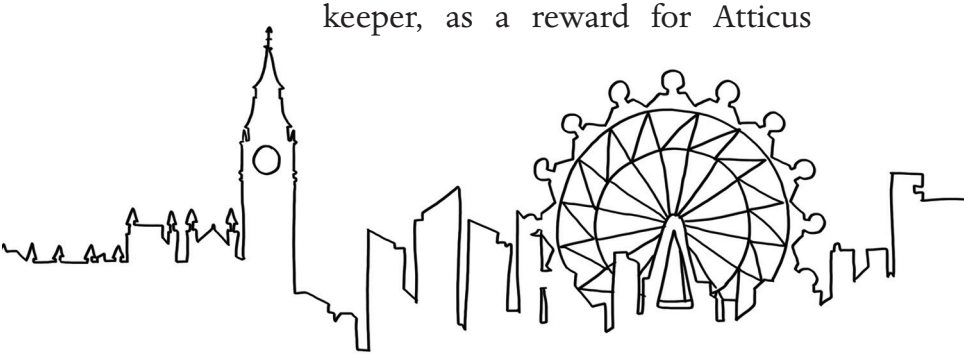
Atticus didn't know what mollycoddling meant but it had a nice sound to it – especially the 'cod' bit. He wondered if there were any other good fishy words humans used that he didn't know, like dolly-prawning or jolly-sardining or trolley-trouting. Right now they all sounded a lot more fun than being a police cat. His chewed ear drooped. He wondered if it was too late to change his mind.

'But we're on holiday, Dad!' Atticus felt Michael stroke his good ear.

'Thanks to Atticus,' Callie straightened the red handkerchief he wore round his neck.

'And the Tuckers,' Mrs Cheddar added.

Atticus opened one eye. The trip to London was a present from Mrs Tucker, the Cheddars' housekeeper, as a reward for Atticus



stopping being a cat burglar and starting being a police cat instead. It was Atticus who had been mainly to thank for catching Jimmy Magpie and his gang when they swooped on the Toffly Hall Antiques Fair and tried to steal Lord and Lady Toffly's tiara.

'Talking of Mr and Mrs Tucker,' Callie sighed, 'I wish they were here.'

Atticus did too. Mrs Tucker's basket was always full of freshly caught sardines off her husband's fishing boat. And Mr Tucker had loads of exciting stories about sea monsters, not to mention a fascinating beard-jumper, which was knitted together in a big tangle. All sorts of interesting morsels got stuck in it, which Mr Tucker let Atticus pick out with his claws when no one else was looking.

'I miss them too,' Mrs Cheddar said. 'But they're moving into Toffly Hall this weekend. They said we could visit them when we get back.'

Atticus's purr grew louder. He was happy for the Tuckers. The Tofflys' tiara (which they had thought was worth zillions) had turned out to be a fake, while Mrs Tucker's ruby necklace (which she had thought was a fake) had turned out to be

worth zillions. Which is why the Tuckers were moving into Toffly Hall and sending the Cheddars on holiday, and the horrible snooty Tofflys were buying an old caravan near the municipal rubbish tip and looking for work polishing spoons.

Inspector Cheddar frowned at Atticus. 'Just because you've put a few measly magpies in jail doesn't mean you can let your guard down,' he said. 'Once you're in the police force you've got to keep your eyes open twenty-four hours a day, even on holiday.'

Twenty-four hours a day! Atticus could hardly believe his ears. *Was he kidding? What about sleeping? And eating? And sitting on the sofa watching the TV? Not to mention hanging out beside the beach huts at Littleton-on-Sea with Mimi, the pretty Burmese?* That took up at least twenty-three hours a day. That left one whole hour for being a police cat! (Of course, in the old days, when he'd been a burglar, Atticus would have spent the extra hour breaking into people's houses and opening their safes with his sharp claws and stealing their jewels, but he didn't do that any more. Not since the Cheddars had given him a proper home.)



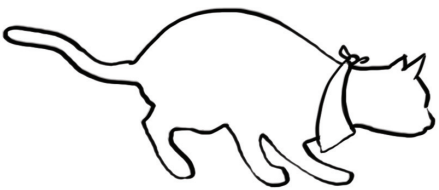
'And one other thing, Atticus,' Inspector Cheddar said, looking at Atticus's pained expression disapprovingly. 'Police cats should never be sick in public. It gives people a bad impression. Remember that if you don't want to end up on traffic cones.'

Atticus opened the other eye with a sigh. He could see the reflection of the shiny police-cat badge, which was pinned to his handkerchief, twinkling back at him from the glass of the capsule. He was very proud of his badge. And of being a police cat. He just didn't want to be one twenty-four hours a day, especially not when he was on holiday. But he didn't want to let Inspector Cheddar down either, especially as it was he who had made Atticus a police cat in the first place. He took a deep breath and jumped down from Callie's arms.

'That's better.' Inspector Cheddar began pointing out the sights. 'There's Buckingham Palace. And the Tower of London. And see that? It's Trafalgar Square. Oh and look down there. It's Big Ben!'

The children pressed their faces to the glass.

Atticus forced himself to do the same. London



unfolded beneath him. He felt his fur stiffen. It was a long time since he'd been to London, but he hadn't forgotten it. A lot of the sights looked familiar, even from this height. The view from the Eye brought back a flood of memories he thought he'd pushed away forever.

London was where he'd first learnt to be a cat burglar.

It was also where he'd had his ear chewed.

And the animal responsible for both those things made Jimmy Magpie and his gang look as innocent as poached eggs. His name was Biscuit. Ginger Biscuit. He was the world's toughest tomcat and he worked for a Russian criminal mistress of disguise called Zenia Klob. At least he used to.

They both did.

Suddenly Atticus forgot about hating flying. He forgot about feeling sick. He didn't feel afraid any more.

'Look at Atticus!' Michael said. 'He's feeling better.'

'He's really brave!' Callie agreed.

'Well done, Atticus,' Mrs Cheddar said.

'That's more like it.' Inspector Cheddar nodded.

Atticus hardly heard them. All he could think about was Ginger Biscuit. *Would he get a chance to put his arch-rival behind bars now that he was a police cat?* He certainly hoped so.

Almost without thinking, Atticus touched his chewed ear with one paw.

He still had a score to settle.



At about the same time that Atticus Claw was staring down on London from the Eye, three black-and-white birds with dark blue flashes to their wings and jade green feathers in their tails sat in a line on a bench in a cell in Her Majesty's High Security Prison for Bad Birds. The first was fat with a raggedy tail. The second was thinner with a hooked foot. The third, which sat slightly apart from the others, his head on one side, was a magnificent bird with glossy feathers and cruel glittering eyes. All three were chained to the bench by an iron ring around one foot.

With a heavy sigh the fat one got up and turned to face the wall.

'Don't!' The thin one covered his ears with his wings.

'I've got to, Slasher,' Thug retorted. 'Otherwise I'll lose count.'



Slowly and painfully he scraped his beak along the damp brick across the last set of lines.

SSSSSCCCCCRRRRREEEEECCCCCHHHHHH!

He sat back and surveyed his work. 'Only two thousand five hundred and thirty more days to go,' he said proudly.

Slasher uncovered his ears. 'If you do that every day for the next seven years, Thug, I swear I'll mangle you.'

'It's only six years three hundred and forty days actually,' Thug told him.

'What about leap years?' Slasher demanded.

Thug looked puzzled. He started to count his claws. Suddenly he began to sob. 'I've got to get out of here!' he gurgled. 'I can't stand it any more. I think I'm losing my marbles.'

'Ah, shut up, Thug,' Slasher said, clipping him in the crop with his free foot. 'You don't *have* any marbles. It's thanks to you we're stuck here in the

first place. If you'd stood up to Atticus Claw at the Toffly Hall Antiques Fair instead of surrendering as soon as he said "boo", Jimmy and me would have got away.'

'Shut your beak, Slasher,' Thug retorted, digging his cellmate painfully in the ribs with what was left of his tail. 'You weren't exactly much help from where I was hopping. You practically passed out as soon you realised Claw was on the scene.'

'Chaka-chaka-chaka-chaka-chaka!'

'Chaka-chaka-chaka-chaka-chaka!'

The magpies began chattering at one another angrily.

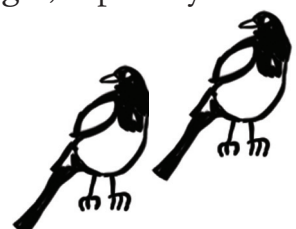
The third magpie regarded them thoughtfully with glittering eyes. 'Boys, boys, boys,' Jimmy Magpie interrupted quietly. 'Neither of you were to blame. It was *my* fault.'

Thug and Slasher gaped at him.

'But nothing's ever your fault, Boss.' Slasher squawked. 'That's what you always tell us.'

'Yeah, it's Slasher's,' Thug agreed.

'Not this time.' Jimmy shook his head impatiently. 'It was mine. I underestimated Atticus Claw. He was cleverer than I thought, especially



when he teamed up with those *humans*.' His voice dropped to a hiss.

Thug and Slasher exchanged nervous glances. It was always better to keep the conversation off humans when you were around Jimmy unless you wanted your head pecked.

'*Humans*.' Jimmy repeated to himself. 'Bird-bashing, Car-killing, Magpie-murdering *humans*.'

Thug and Slasher waited.

'CHAKA-CHAKA-CHAKA-CHAKA-CHAKA!' Suddenly Jimmy's temper snapped. He flew up into the air as far as the chain would let him and beat his wings furiously.

'I'm going to get even with Atticus Claw,' he spat, 'for getting in with those cheesy Cheddars and making me look like a brainless budgie. I'm going to peck his eyes out. I'm going to rip his whiskers off. Then I'm going to pull all his fur out and knit a nest snuggler with it.'

'I didn't know you could knit, Boss,' Thug said, impressed. 'Will you teach me?'

'I can't, you moron,' Jimmy screeched. 'It's an expression.'

Thug looked crestfallen.







'But how, Boss?' Slasher said. 'How are we gonna break out? This place is like a prison.'

'It *is* a prison, you idiot!' Jimmy Magpie squawked. 'But I've got friends on the outside. Some of the lads who got away from Toffly Hall have been putting feelers out.'

'Who?'

'Pig, Gizzard and Wally.'

Thug and Slasher grinned at one another. Pig, Gizzard and Wally were three of their favourite magpies. The five of them liked nothing better than spending a morning bullying baby birds, followed by an afternoon pooing on people's clean washing when they hung it out to dry.

'Do you remember when we all ganged up on those baby robins?' Slasher chuckled. 'And Pig told them the reason they'd got a red breast was because they'd contracted robin-rot and they all started to cry.'

'Good times!' Thug sighed.

'Apparently our little adventure at Toffly Hall got us noticed,' Jimmy landed back on the bench. 'Someone's been asking after us.'

'Some*one*?' Slasher queried.

'You don't mean . . .' Thug lowered his voice just in case . . . 'a *human*?'

'Yes, I do.' Jimmy admitted calmly. 'But not your run-of-the-mill bird-batterer. This is a human who appreciates us magpies: a human who admires our style; a human who wants to know if we'd be interested in doing a job for her.' His eyes shone. 'A human who wants *us* to help steal *her* something BIG.'

Thug's face lit up. 'What, *glittery* things?'

'Yes, Thug. Glittery things.'

'But how we gonna get out of here?' Slasher asked again.

'Patience, Slasher,' Jimmy Magpie lay back on the bench, his wings folded behind his head. 'It's all arranged. It won't be long now: all we have to do is wait.' He closed his eyes. 'And when we've done the job, that's when we'll get even with Claw.'



Squeak . . . squeak . . . squeak . . .

The prison guard looked up from his desk. A little old lady in a shabby rain coat and a tea-cosy hat was standing in front of him, leaning on a

wheelie trolley. 'Can I help you, madam?' he asked politely.

'Yes, comrade,' she said in a strange accent. 'I'm Mildred Molotov. From the Mongolian branch of Magpies Anonymous.'

'Magpies Anonymous?'

'Yes. It's a Russian charity set up to help bad birds. I need three volunteers from amongst the inmates.'

The prison guard looked puzzled. He hadn't heard of Magpies Anonymous but then he hadn't been working at Her Majesty's High Security Prison for Bad Birds for very long.

'We've got some hard cases in here, Mrs . . . er . . . Molotov,' the prison guard said doubtfully. 'Vicious villains, you might say. I'm not sure you'd want to meet them.'

'It's Ms,' the old lady snapped. 'Not Mrs. And I'm used to dealing with vicious villains.' She gave the prison guard a sugary smile. 'You could say they're my life's vork.'

'You really think it'll make a difference?' the prison guard hesitated. He believed in giving criminals another chance.

'For sure!' the old lady cried. 'Give me five minutes with the three vorst birds you've got and I promise they von't give you any more trouble.'

'Follow me, then.' The prison guard reached for his keys. 'We'll go to Block M. Cell 13. That's where we keep the Toffly Hall gang.' He opened the first gate and set off slowly down the corridor. 'I warn you though, they're a bad bunch.'

Squeak . . . . . squeak . . . . . squeak.

The old lady hobbled behind him with the squeaky wheelie trolley. 'Hurry up, comrade,' she said. 'I have important vork to do.'

The prison guard quickened his pace.

Squeak . . . squeak . . . squeak.

The old lady quickened hers. 'Qvick! I haven't got all veek,' she complained.

The prison guard walked faster.

Squeak-squeak-squeak.

So did the old lady. 'Places to go, people to see,' she muttered. 'Move it!'

The prison guard broke into a run.

Squeaksqueaksqueak.

The old lady cantered alongside him.

'Here we are,' the prison guard panted. They

had arrived outside Block M. He opened the gate.

'Chaka-chaka-chaka-chaka-chaka!' The sound of chattering magpies filled the air.

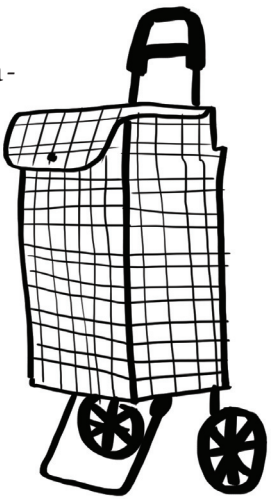
'Thank you, comrade,' the old lady said. 'I'll take it from here. You can go back to your desk now.' She removed her tea-cosy hat. Her grey hair was full of sharp-looking steel hairpins.

The prison guard watched as she fiddled with one and took it out. The points gleamed in the harsh electric light. 'I'm afraid I have to come with you to the cell,' he said uncertainly. 'It's the rules.'

The old lady's face hardened. 'Vot?'

The prison guard tried a smile. 'I should really have checked your trolley too.' He bent towards it. 'It's just routine.'

'Chaka-chaka-chaka-chaka-chaka!' The magpies' chattering became even louder.



'Have a look if you like, comrade,' the old lady said softly. 'But ve don't vant you to come with us.' She shot the prison guard a venomous look. 'GET HIM, BISCUIT.'