

The
Curious
Kitten

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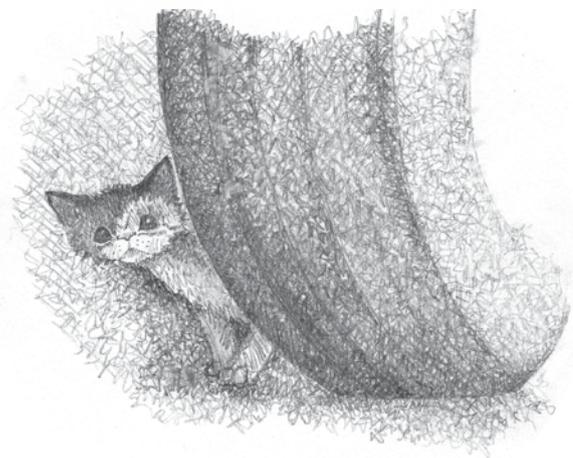
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The Curious Kitten



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**stripes**

For George

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STRIPES PUBLISHING

An imprint of Little Tiger Press
1 The Coda Centre, 189 Munster Road,
London SW6 6AW

A paperback original
First published in Great Britain in 2016

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ISBN: 978-1-84715-661-7

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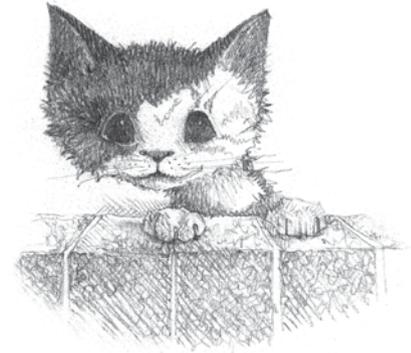
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter One



Amber rolled the jingly cat ball down the length of the hallway and giggled as Cleo flung herself after it, her paws slipping on the wooden floor. She loved the way the kitten took chasing the ball so seriously!

Her mum opened the kitchen door and gasped as she almost tripped over the skidding kitten. “Oh, Cleo!

I nearly kicked you. Are you all right?”

But Cleo didn't even seem to have noticed. She had finally caught her jingly ball and was rolling over and

over with it, growling
fierce kitten growls.

“I don't think that ball's coming out alive,” Mum commented, smiling. “Amber, did you finish sorting

out all your new pencils and things for school? Have you packed them in your rucksack?”

Amber nodded. “Everything's ready.” She got up, looking worriedly between Mum and Cleo. “Mum, what's going to happen to Cleo while



I'm at school?”

“What do you mean, what's going to happen to her?” Mum looked confused.

“I'm worried she's going to be bored,” Amber explained. “She's not really been on her own that much, has she?”

Amber's family had got Cleo from a local cat shelter right at the beginning of the summer holidays. Amber had been desperate to get a kitten for ages, and her parents had finally agreed. Mum and Dad and her big sister, Sara, had spent ages sitting with her on the sofa, looking at the website. But as soon as Amber had seen the photo of Cleo with her brothers and sisters, Amber had known that she was the one. Amber never seen such a gorgeous cat. Cleo was a really unusual colour –

mostly ginger, but with big dark patches and huge black ears that looked like she needed to grow into them.

Amber had spent the whole holiday playing with Cleo – it was amazing how many mad games a kitten could invent to play with just a piece of string. Or a feather. Or even the flowers on Amber’s flip-flops. She was going to miss Cleo so much – and she had a feeling Cleo was going to miss her, too. Even though Cleo was officially a family cat, and everyone played with her, Amber did most of the looking after. She loved feeding Cleo and making sure she always had clean water – it made her feel that the kitten was just a little bit more hers.

“She’s always had me and Sara at

home to play with,” Amber went on.

“I see what you mean.” Mum gave her a hug. “She’ll be fine, Amber. Cats are quite independent, you know. And think how much time Cleo spends snoozing! She’ll just save up her playtime for when we’re all home. Anyway, I’ll be around some of the time – you know I only do half days. Cleo can distract me from all the marking I’ve got to do!”

“I suppose so,” Amber agreed, a bit doubtfully. Cleo did sleep a lot. She was still only small, and she didn’t seem to understand taking things easy. She’d race around until she was exhausted and then collapse in a little furry tortoiseshell heap. Amber loved it when she flumped down with her paws in the air!

She wriggled the ball out from between Cleo's paws and rolled it back down the hallway again. "I'm worried that she'll be bored and find a way to get round the front of the house. She thinks the front garden must be the most exciting thing ever, just because we won't let her go out there. She nearly escaped again yesterday, when the postman brought that parcel."

Her mum made a face. "I honestly don't think we can do much about that. We'll just have to make sure she doesn't slip out. I think the noise of the cars would put her off going on the road anyway."

Mum didn't look all that sure, though, and Amber sighed. One of their neighbours had a cat who'd been

run over and badly hurt, and she hated to think of anything like that happening to Cleo. She was sure Cleo was very clever, but kittens weren't known for being sensible. If Cleo saw something interesting on the other side of the road, Amber was almost certain she'd chase after it. And it wasn't as if she could train Cleo to look both ways first.



Cleo sniffed curiously at the bags in the hallway. Today felt different. Everyone was rushing around. She whisked behind one of the rucksacks as Sara came dashing past and nearly stepped on her tail. She crouched there, watching as Amber and Sara

chased up and down the stairs, looking for things they'd forgotten. Their mum was standing in the hallway, glancing at her watch.

"Come on, you two! I thought you said you'd got everything ready last night? We really do need to go – I've got a staff meeting before school."

"I'm here, I'm ready." Amber jumped down the last two steps and looked around for her bag and shoes. "I just wanted to find a photo of Cleo to show my friends. Hardly anyone's seen her yet – only Maisie and Lila when they came over."

"I'm ready, too," Sara said, sighing. "I can't believe we're going back to school – it feels as if the holidays have only just started. And everyone

says Year Eight means loads more homework." Sara's secondary school wasn't that far from the house, but she usually got a lift with Mum and Amber in the mornings and walked back home with her friends.

"I shouldn't think anyone will give you much on the first day," her mum replied. "Come on. Grab your stuff and let's get in the car."



Cleo opened her mouth in a silent mew of surprise as the bag in front of her disappeared. And then she realized – the front door was open!

“Oh, Cleo, no! Sara, stop her!” Amber called out. She was all mixed up with her PE bag and rucksack and she still only had one shoe on.

Sara crouched down to try and field the kitten, but Cleo jinked expertly around her reaching hands and skipped out on to the doorstep.

Cleo caught the different outdoor smells as she leaped down the step and then darted off to investigate the wheelie bins. She’d only managed to get out into the front garden a couple of times, and she wanted to explore.

“Did you get her?” Amber came

hurrying up to her sister.

“No, she was just too speedy!” Sara gasped. “Sorry! I think she’s gone behind the bins. Here, Cleo! Come on... Puss, puss!”

Mum sighed. “How does she know when we’re in a hurry? Amber, can you catch her? Try not to let her go under the car – it’ll take ages to get her back out again.”

Amber crouched down beside the bins. The kitten was in the flower bed now, peering out through the pink geraniums.

Cleo gazed up at her with round green eyes. She didn’t understand why they made such a fuss about her being *here*, when no



one minded if she went through her cat flap into the back garden. She looked around, eyeing the pavement and the road beyond. There were interesting smells out there – more cats and other things, too. But the cars speeding past were so loud that she'd never dared to do more than peek round the edge of the garden wall. She wanted to, though. She was working up to it.

“There!” Amber reached through the flowers and grabbed her, and Cleo snuggled up against her school cardigan. The kitten didn't mind being caught, not really. Especially because Amber always gave her cat treats when she brought her back in.



Cleo dived out of the cat flap and shook her ears crossly. She didn't like the way it banged behind her – it always made her feel jumpy. She licked at the fur on her white front until she felt calmer and then strolled out on to the patio. The garden was very bright, and there were fat bees blundering through the lavender bush. She could even hear a bird rustling in the apple tree at the far end. But somehow the back garden didn't seem quite as exciting as it usually did.

Cleo sat on the patio, feeling the warm afternoon sun on her fur and wondering what to do. She had slept for a lot of the morning, and now she wanted to play. Amber's mum was working on her computer, and she'd

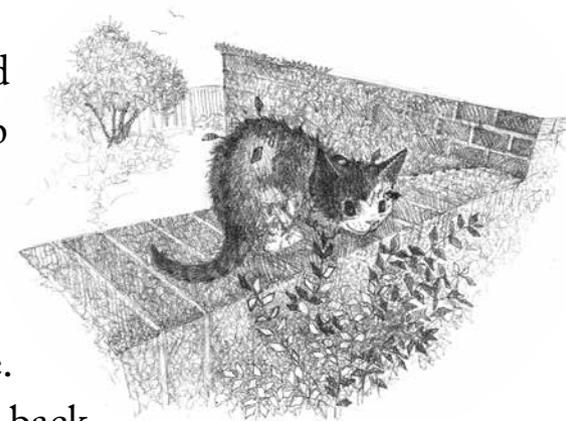
stroked Cleo for a bit. But when Cleo had tried to pounce on her keyboard, she'd shooed her away. Cleo was used to playing with Amber, and she missed her. It wasn't as much fun being on her own. She could chase down the garden after that bird or wriggle into the lavender and swipe at the bees. But she never seemed to catch anything... When would Amber come back?

Then her ears flattened and she sprang up, stalking across the patio to the bench by the garden wall. Amber had gone out of the front door. Perhaps she was at the front of the house somewhere. If she hopped up on to the bench, she wouldn't be that far from the top of the wall...

Cleo wriggled her bottom and

leaped, scrambling from the arm of the bench into the twiggy mass of jasmine that was growing up the wall. She clawed and scabbled and pulled her way up on to the top. Half her fur was standing on end and it was full of tiny green leaves, but she had done it. She was almost sure this wall led round to the front of the house, where Amber was.

Cleo paced along the top of the wall, then over the flat roof of the garage. She dropped back down on to the wall again where it ran along the side of the little front garden.



She had to pick her way carefully through the tall plants that grew up against it, but eventually she reached the front of the garden, where the wall was lower and half-hidden by bushes. She perched between the bushes, looking out on to the street.

“Cleo!”

The kitten peered curiously round the bushes and saw Amber racing down the street towards her, with her rucksack

bouncing against her shoulders. Cleo stood up and purred, arching her



back proudly. She'd been right! Amber *was* here! Amber would see that she'd been clever and climbed the wall. As Amber ran up to her, Cleo purred even louder and leaned down to rub her head against Amber's shoulder.

“Oh, Cleo,” she murmured lovingly, “you're so naughty! How did you get out here? Mum, look!”

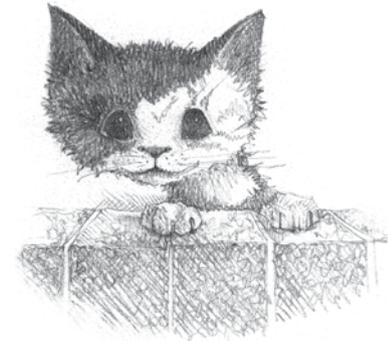
“Cleo!” Amber's mum stared at the kitten. “I made absolutely sure she didn't slip past me when I left to get you from school. She was in the house this afternoon – I know she was. She tried to sit on the computer while I was working.”

Amber gently scooped the little kitten off the top of the wall. She held Cleo against her shoulder as Mum

went to unlock the front door. “But that means she must have got round the house by herself,” Amber said, looking up at the garden wall. “She can’t have done... That wall’s so high for her to jump up to, and then she had to get on to the garage roof!”

Cleo looked up at the wall, too, and purred smugly into Amber’s ear.

Chapter Two



Now that Cleo had worked out how to climb the wall in the back garden, she was desperate to try it again. Amber had homework to do – which she thought was really unfair on her first day back. She left Cleo gobbling down her tea, hoping she would come and find her when she’d finished. But Cleo had other ideas, and when Amber’s