

CHAPTER ONE

“Something Really Must be Done!”

Wednesday, 24 April, 1907

The tale I am about to tell you begins on a bright, clear, April-sweet morning in the Lake District village of Sawrey. The sun had just begun to work its magical morning alchemy, burnishing the blue surface of Esthwaite Water to a sparkling silver, turning the leaves of larch and willow to an iridescent opal, and transforming every apple blossom in the village to pure gold. The sky was scattered with white clouds, as if a playful breeze had tugged yesterday’s laundry from the drying-lines in the village gardens and flung them into the brilliant blue heaven, where they stuck, tattered and wind-torn.

It was a magical morning, and the little village seemed more than ever to occupy a magical place in the world. To the east lay Lake Windermere, the longest, deepest, bluest lake in all of England, a barrier of sorts against any modern encroachments that might creep into the village, which proudly described itself as “old-fashioned.” To the west lay Esthwaite Water, a small but absolutely perfect jewel among the other sparkling lakes in the District. And beyond Esthwaite Water rose Coniston Old Man, its bald head in the clouds, its steep, stern shoulders covered with winter-brown bracken and heather. And beyond Coniston, right the way to the Irish Sea, there was nothing but desolate moorland and lonely fell, and all still in winter’s unrelenting grip.

But in the Land between the Lakes (as people like to call it), winter was magically turning to spring. If you have ever visited this part of England, or perhaps seen pictures of it, you can envision the hawthorn coming into bloom, and primroses, violets, and cowslips splashing the roadsides with pastel pink and purple and white and gold. The meadow grass is dappled with daisies and clover, and the trees along the beck flaunt that joyful, optimistic green that belongs only to spring. And such mornings, even the breeze is in a celebratory mood, playing gently with the flowers, tossing their sweet scents into the air, and whispering delightedly of even sweeter pleasures to come, as April becomes May and all the green land wakes from its winter sleep and comes joyfully alive.

The rising sun always enjoyed its first glimpse of the twin hamlets of Near and Far Sawrey, for the setting was uniquely beautiful and the villagers led such quaint and engaging lives. But this morning, it looked with an even greater interest at the two cats sitting on the stone fence along the garden at Hill Top Farm, the country residence of Miss Beatrix Potter (who was at that very moment asleep in her second-story bedroom, the covers pulled over her head). Of course, you have often observed cats sitting on fences, and if you know anything about cats, you know that they like to do because it gives them a vantage point: above the fray, as it were, keeping a close eye on everything that is going on.

Tabitha Twitchit, the senior village cat, was a calico with a handsome orange and white bib and mahogany markings. Crumpet was younger, slimmer, and sleeker, with gray fur, a red collar, and a gold bell. The pair might look as if they were simply enjoying the sun's first caressing glance, but in reality, they had come on an urgent errand of great importance to the entire village of Sawrey. And it wasn't long before the object of their concern—a ginger-colored cat with a white-tipped tail and delicate features—came prancing prettily down the flagstone path.

“Good morning, ladies,” she said. “I’m sure you won’t mind if I join you. It’s a lovely morning for a nap in the sun.” And with that, she jumped up beside Crumpet and began to wash a pretty white paw.

Tabitha Twitchit leaned forward and gave her a disapproving glare. *“Felicia Frummety,”* she said sternly, *“you should be working, not napping. Hill Top Farm is simply swarming with rats. You have not been doing your job.”*

Tabitha, who lived with Mr. and Mrs. Crook at Belle Green, was in her third term as the president of the Village Cat Council. Her most important duty (at least *she* thought it was important, and perhaps you will agree) was supervising the other cats in the crucial business of keeping Near Sawrey free of rats, mice, voles, and other objectionable creatures. And Tabitha was the sort of cat who took her responsibilities seriously.

Crumpet gave a sarcastic mew. *“What? Miss Felicia Frummety, condescend to catch a rat? I doubt it, Tabitha. She’s afraid to get those pretty white paws dirty.”*

Tabitha sighed. *“I fear you’re right, Crumpet.”* She fixed Felicia Frummety with a long look of rebuke. *“We seem to have a shirker in our midst.”*

“I am NOT a shirker!” Felicia exclaimed, annoyed. *“I just don’t see the point of bothering with rats, that’s all.”* She turned down her mouth in an expression of disgust. *“A mouse is a sweet, delicate morsel. But rats—”* She shuddered all the way down to the tip of her tail, which was exceedingly clean and white. *“They’re tougher than old boot-leather, and covered with indigestible hair. They smell like a rubbish-bin, and they bite!”*

“Biting,” Crumpet said darkly, *“is in the nature of rats.”* She was quite out of patience with Felicia, a conceited young puss who gave herself airs. The other members of the Cat Council each took a turn at patrolling the gardens for voles—all but Felicia, who felt she was too good for what she disdainfully called “common alley work.”

“Rats are formidable foes,” Tabitha said, in the tone of one who knows whereof she speaks, *“and every cat worth her salt has been bitten more than once. We wear our scars*

proudly, as a badge of honor.” Now retired from active duty, Tabitha herself had one torn ear, a slash across her nose, and a missing claw, testimony to her reputation as a respected ratter. *“But you have no scars, Felicia, for you are afraid of being bitten. Fear is not in the nature of cats. Cats,”* she added emphatically, *“have courage.”*

“You may call me Miss Frummety, if you please,” Felicia retorted loftily. *“And I am not afraid! Not two days ago, I chased a rat right down his rat-hole. I frightened him so thoroughly that he hasn’t shown a whisker since.”*

“Ha,” grunted Crumpet skeptically. *“Probably skipped straight out the back way. You’re lucky he didn’t come round and bite that pretty tail of yours, MISS Frummety.”*

“Be that as it may, Felicia,” Tabitha said, *“I have been instructed by the Council to inform you that you have been officially censured for your inability to keep Hill Top Farm free of rats. We have countenanced your refusal to participate in the nightly vole patrol, but dereliction of duty is intolerable.”*

Felicia arched her back, hissed, and jumped off the wall. *“Dereliction of duty!”* she spat furiously. *“Rubbish!”*

Tabitha went on as if Felicia had not spoken. *“Understanding that the situation at Hill Top is out of control, the council has authorized me to offer you a special assistant—a volunteer cat who will come in and help you get rid of the rats.”*

“Help ME!” Felicia exclaimed indignantly. *“Stuff and nonsense. Hill Top Farm is my affair, and mine alone. You know the Rule, Tabitha Twitchit. No poaching on private property. So you and your council can keep your collective noses out of MY house, MY barn, and all MY outbuildings.”* Having delivered this tart riposte, she twitched her gingery tail disdainfully and stalked off in the direction of the barn, her nose high in the air.

“How . . . how insulting!” Tabitha sputtered heatedly. *“The nerve of that young hussy, taking that tone to me!”*

“Don’t take it to heart, Tabitha,” Crumpet said soothingly. “Felicia will come to regret her impudence. But something really must be done, you know. The Hill Top rats are completely ungovernable. Why, at nine o’clock last night, while the Stubbses were sitting beside the fire, a pair of Hill Top rats attempted to raid the bread cupboard.” Crumpet lived with the Stubbses and prided herself in keeping their cottage free of both mice and rats. She grinned ruthlessly. *“I showed them my teeth.”*

“Yes, something most certainly must be done,” Tabitha muttered. *“But Felicia is quite within her rights to invoke the Rule.”*

The Rule (properly known as the *No Poaching Rule*) was the foundation of each cat’s amicable relationship with every other cat in the village. Any cat might kill a rat, mouse, vole, or other vermin in another cat’s front or back garden, but NOT in the house or in any outbuilding unless expressly invited to do so by the human owner. No one knew who had made this Rule or how long it had been in existence, but it had been passed down from one generation of cats to another as long as anyone could remember and was held to be absolutely inviolate. To break it would be to risk the disintegration of the social order.

Crumpet knew this rule, of course, and never hesitated to invoke it when one of the younger cats strayed into her territory. She did not like to think, however, that an equitable solution to the problem of the rats at Hill Top Farm might be constrained by the Rule. Surely, there was a way to deal with the matter.

“The problem is that Miss Potter is a city lady,” Crumpet muttered. *“She’s owned Hill Top for nearly two years now, and she likes to think of herself as a farmer. But she still has a great many lessons to learn when it comes to animal management. She seems to find it difficult to take a firm position on the matter of rats”*

“Yes,” said Tabitha. *“In fact, I’ve heard her say that she once kept a rat as a pet. His name was Sammy, and she was very fond of him.”* She closed her eyes and shuddered. *“A pet rat—when she could have had a nice, companionable cat!”*

“Even the best of humans are often illogical,” Crumpet said sadly. “And if Miss Potter allows the rats at Hill Top to carry on as they are, the entire village will soon be overtaken. You know rats, Tabitha. They have no restraints and not an ounce of pity, and they multiply faster than rabbits.” She laid back her ears. Thinking about the menace, she felt cold and frightened. *“First Hill Top, then the Tower Bank Arms and Anvil Cottage, and after that, the entire village. No cottage will be safe from the ravaging horde. We will be completely overrun!”*

“We will indeed,” agreed Tabitha in a somber tone. *“But I have an idea, Crumpet. What do you think of this?”*

By when Crumpet had heard Tabitha’s plan, she cheered up immediately—and I think you will too, when you have heard what it is.