Helping your children choose books they will love



Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Boy with the Tiger's Heart

Written by

Linda Coggin

Published by

Hot Key Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

Copyright © Linda Coggin 2014
Cover illustration copyright © Levente Szabo 2014

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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

HB ISBN: 978-1-4714-0314-9
PB ISBN: 978-1-4714-0316-3

1

This book is typeset in 11.75pt Sabon using Atomik ePublisher

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



www.hotkeybooks.com

Hot Key Books is part of the Bonnier Publishing Group
www.bonnierpublishing.com

Chapter 1

The snow falls heavily that night and in the morning lies in deep drifts, which smooth over the shapes of the jagged rocks and grassy knolls. It hides the bog holes that lie at the edge of the marshes and covers the wrecks of the burnt-out cars. It sparkles like crushed diamonds. It is pure, white and perfect, but to the girl when she looks out from her hiding place it is a bad omen.

Today the trackers will surely find them.

She pulls her fur-lined hood over her face and scans the horizon.

The sun is low in the sky, a fiery ball that tips

the distant hills with a stroke of pink. Nothing moves, but already there are some tiny, rare prints in the snow – hare, weasel, the random hopping marks of the carrion crow.

Some loose snow collapses on her from the canopy of scrub under which they'd made their nest. The only sound in the muffled silence. She licks the cool ice that falls onto her lips.

The bear has gone.

It must have left some time in the night. Although she can see the tracks leading back into the forest, they are now only blurred outlines where the snow has continued to fall on them.

She collects her things and stands up, her limbs stiff with the cold. The ground on which she'd lain down is still brown, like a pool of bracken in the white landscape.

She follows the prints.

Chapter 2

Two days earlier.

From the back of his pen, the bear watches the police officer touch his cap and lean against the barn door, his hands in his jacket pockets.

'We need to see that permit, Tom.'

'Since when?' replies Thomas Bailey, the bear's keeper.

'We've had complaints.'

'Complaints? What sort of complaints?' says Thomas Bailey, forking hay into the big cat's enclosure without looking round.

'That bear escaped again last week, didn't it?

The Nolans over at Meadow Sweet said it had gone through their rubbish.' The officer strolls over and looks around the barn.

'Didn't do any harm. He soon came back.'

'Look, folk round here have got it in for you.'

'So?'

'They think you're odd, a bit of a loner, keeping wild animals and that girl of yours – what's her name? Did you even give her one?'

'You keep her out of this.' Thomas walks towards him.

The officer shakes his head, beads of sweat gathering on his brow.

'We'll be back with a warrant. Please put that pitchfork down, Mr Bailey.'

'Get off my land. You're trespassing.'

'You'd best tell that girl to get her things packed,' the officer says, backing off. 'She can't go on living here with you. We all know where she came from.'

'I said – keep her out of this.'

'It's just not right a girl like that should have no proper schooling.'

‘You’re trespassing on my property.’ Thomas jabs at the air with his pitchfork. ‘Get off my land or I’ll set one of the big cats on you.’

‘Don’t threaten me, Mr Bailey. That girl should be educated properly. She should be in Dissville. You can’t just keep her as an experiment.’

The officer reaches the door, his hand shaking as he moves the catch.

‘I’m going to have to report you, you know.’

‘Leave us alone! And don’t bother to come back with no permit.’ He tightens his lips. ‘You’ll be sorry for your visit today. Just you see.’

At dusk, Thomas Bailey goes round his farm unlocking all the gates and doors. The bear is the last to be set free and the only one to see the keeper put his gun to his head and pull the trigger.

It is the Nolans at Meadow Sweet who report the escaped animals.

When they hear something going through their dustbins again Mr Nolan comes out with a stick,

expecting to see the bear. What he sees in the dying evening light is a huge leopard with the chicken carcass from their Sunday lunch in its jaws.

The police station's switchboard is jamming with calls.

'There's a zebra in my garden!'

'There's a lion prowling about and our cat's gone missing.'

'There's a tiger frightening our horses.'

Within half an hour there will be a fleet of police cars and vans surrounding Thomas Bailey's property and a helicopter circling overhead.

With the sound of the gun going off, a girl appears from behind some straw bales.

The bear eyes her, creeping slowly out on all fours. He likes her. When she sees the bear is alone she stands up.

She is tall and thin with long hair the colour of winter wheat, which falls down to her waist. Her eyes are the shape of almonds and the green of faded moss and she is kind to him.

She isn't like others.

'What's happened?' she says to him in a low voice.

The bear, who Thomas Bailey named Abel Dancer, puts his head up and she ruffles his ears. Then she strokes his chest, which carries the shape of a crescent moon in his fur, and he makes a soft, grunting sound that makes her smile.

'Wah,' he says. 'Wah.'

He stands up on his hind legs and walks out of his open cage and goes over to the body of her guardian, hidden by some grain bins.

She looks down at Thomas Bailey, and is struck by how the mess of him is much like that of any other dead animal whose insides were on the outside. She doesn't want to think about how he died – just that he had.

Her mind is working fast though. She knows she has to get out, and as quickly as possible. Thomas had told her she would be put into care in Dissville if they found her. Worse, probably, she would become an object of curiosity – observed, studied and questioned. What was it like to be brought up by wild dogs? Do you feel human?

Who were your parents?

How could she answer any of these questions?

She had been a small child.

She covers Thomas up with straw, debating whether or not to take his gun. She picks it up and turns it round in her hand, then she looks down at her small pack and decides against it. She has her crossbow and knife and that is all she needs.

The bear follows her willingly across the fields towards the woods. Sometimes he runs on all fours but mostly he moves on his back legs, creating a huge, monstrous shape in the fading light. He trusts her.

They will need each other.

As they near the woods the girl looks back. The escaped animals have triggered off the security lights, which shine past the buildings and high fences and fan across the fields.

The wood becomes dense very quickly with a thick canopy overhead. A huge fir faces out towards Thomas Bailey's farm.

'You're going to have to let me climb on your back,' she says, stopping underneath the tree and

looking up. 'I just need to get hold of that first branch.'

Once up in the tree she calls to the bear. Since his escape to the Nolans' property he has discovered that climbing trees is one of the things he loves doing most and, putting his forelegs around the trunk, he pulls himself up into the branches.

The faint sound of police sirens can be heard coming up the long track, along with the *chop chop* sound of a helicopter. The girl shrinks back into the tree and watches the cars pull up outside the building.

A lion still prowls inside the fence and the girl can see a pair of wolves run towards the woods when the trucks pull up. As the guns go off she jumps. One of the wolves falls immediately; the other manages to get a little further before it too is shot.

There is another volley of gunshot and now the lion lies dead and the night air is filled with the sound of rifle fire.

The girl pushes her face into the bear's chest to block out the sound. Her eyes sting and when

she lifts her head she feels cold tears roll down her cheeks. This is the first time she can ever remember crying and she is surprised at how salty tears taste.

They stay in the tree all night and, as the first light of morning rises in the sky, she looks across to the farm and sees the trucks and cars have gone. It seems quiet.

'Stay here, Bear,' she whispers, squeezing past him to climb down the tree. 'Whatever happens, stay here till I get back. And if I don't get back, run for it!'

Abel Dancer tries to follow her down the tree but she lifts her finger and says, 'No!' He watches her jump down from the bottom branch and creep out into the field.

'Wah. Wah,' he says.

She moves slowly, on all fours. The early morning dew soaks through her clothing but the long grass protects her from any searching eyes. The bodies of the wolves have been moved but when she approaches the building the stench

of death reaches her nose. There, laid out like trophies along the track, are the rest of the bodies.

Six Bengal tigers.

Eight mountain lions.

A panther.

A cheetah.

Three monkeys.

Four more wolves.

One leopard.

Probably they had been the only ones of their kind left. Every animal considered wild by the Authorities had been killed, for fear of the animals turning on them as their habitat disappeared. This was one of the new laws of Dissville.

She feels the stinging in her eyes again but this time no tears fall.

'There's still a bear and a leopard loose, and we're not too sure how many wolves there were.'

Voices are approaching her from the side of the barn.

She runs and hides behind one of Thomas Bailey's old trucks, ducking down just as the figures of two men come round the corner.

‘We’ll find them today, I expect.’

The men stop by the dead animals, one of them touching the body of the lion with his boot.

‘Like going on safari, wasn’t it?’

She hears them chuckle and a streak of fury rises in her body. She could take them out, both of them, like they had the animals. Her hand goes to her side. Her knife is there, belted round her waist, but she’d need the crossbow and she has left it in her bag, up in the tree with the bear.

‘The tracker dogs are coming and they’ve got some expert in. Also there’s that thermal-imaging thing in the helicopter. That’s bound to pick ’em out. It’s top priority. Bolverk’s orders. Imagine what damage a hungry leopard and a bear could do,’ one of the men says.

‘With any luck they’ll eat each other!’ laughs the other voice.

‘Yeah – that would be neat! Rumour has it that guy did it in revenge. Apparently he liked the idea of his animals terrorising his interfering neighbours.’

‘Really? Do you know how he died?’

‘They reckon that weird girl of his did it. Her fingerprints were all over the gun. Quite a thank-you after all he did for her.’

The man grunts. ‘Mind you, *he* was weird too. Gave all his animals names but never gave her one.’

The girl catches her breath. For a moment she feels the urge to show herself and tell them she had found him dead, that she would never do anything to harm him, that she had grown to love him. She remembers how he taught her with great patience, praising her when she did well. But she stops herself as she remembers his warning and shrinks back into the side of the truck.

‘They say he went off the rails after his wife and son died in that fire,’ the voice continues.

‘Oh, yeah – I think I heard about that. The boy was only a nipper, wasn’t he?’

There is silence for a while as they wander along the line of carcasses then, in the distance, the girl hears the low rumble of a truck coming up the drive. When the men move round the corner of the barn to meet the vehicle she springs up and races back across the field.

She runs fast and straight, her head down, her hands clenched, all the time thinking about what the man had said. She had lived with Thomas Bailey for seven years and in all that time had no idea that he had had a wife and a son. He had been a private man and she seldom met anyone else. Her knowledge of the human race was very limited.

She throws herself down into the long grass just as the posse of bounty hunters turn the corner. She lies still for a while, then covers the rest of the distance on her stomach.

When she gets back to the fir tree the bear has gone. Her bag is on the ground underneath, still attached to one of the broken branches that lie scattered on the forest floor.

Chapter 3

When Abel Dancer tries to move onto another branch he falls, crashing through the canopy and landing in a heap at the bottom of the tree. He can knock back a fizzy drink from a bottle and dance a jig but there are some basic things he still has to deal with.

He is hungry now and goes in search of something to eat.

He is so busy tucking into his newfound feast of berries that he doesn't hear the girl approach him.

'You're a bad bear!' she says. 'I told you to stay where you were. We have to stick together.'

The bear lowers his head.

'Wah. Wah,' he says.

'You don't remember, do you? In fact you've probably no idea what I'm talking about.'

She plucks a handful of berries off the bush and crams them into her mouth.

'We have to move on. They're going to hunt us down. Bolverk's orders – whoever he is. We must cross the river to wash away our scent.'

Abel Dancer might not have heard the girl creep up on him but he hears the first sound of the tracker dogs as they are let out of the back of the van. She hears them too.

'Hurry!' she says, breaking into a run. 'We've got to get to that river.'

The bear finds it difficult keeping up with her, alternating between running on all fours and moving on his back legs, which is slowing her down.

A wind has blown up which muffles the sound of the tracker dogs but there is a distinct *chop chop* sound coming up over the brow of the hill. The weather is looking threatening with the gathering of heavy black storm clouds.

The girl pulls the bear towards a large bush and crouches down. She peers into the sky through the branches. The helicopter is on the horizon, a thin red beam moving from it across the landscape. It is getting nearer and nearer, the noise from its blades so loud now she has to cover her head.

Chop! Chop!

Beside her, the bear is becoming agitated. He is moaning and making a blowing noise between his teeth, tossing his head from side to side, trying to escape from the piercing sound in his ears. She hangs onto him, making soothing noises in her throat and pulling him closer to her.

Chop! Chop!

The wind from the blades is so strong now that it tears the leaves from the undergrowth and blows dust and debris into the air. The red light from the chopper is dancing only a few metres away from them, when there is a crack of lightning. The helicopter lurches forward and seems to rock, dipping and diving until finally it turns away and flies back towards the brow of the hill, its engine coughing and spluttering.

She grabs the bear and pulls him onto his feet.

Thinking she is wrestling with him he places his arms on her shoulders and pushes against her, knocking her to the ground. She remembers, as she rolls out of the way, that Thomas Bailey had rescued him from a bear wrestler, who had muzzled him and dragged him round from town to town, rewarding him with bottles of Coca-Cola.

Abel Dancer stops and turns his head. He can hear them again – distant choking, panting sounds of three or four dogs straining at their leashes, pulling their handlers as they pick up his scent.

He drops down on all fours and nudges the girl with his nose.

'What's up, Bear?'

She stands up and looks into the distance. 'You can hear them – can't you? We've got to move. Get to that river.'

There is a roll of thunder that echoes round the rocks and the forest, then another crash of lightning. She looks at the bear. For a moment he is lit up – a large dark figure against the white flash of light, his eyes staring at her. She wonders

if he is frightened. She too can hear the dogs now and something inside her tightens around her chest like a snake. She feels her heart quicken.

'Run!' she shouts. 'Run!'

Perhaps it is the sound of the dogs, or the smell of fear he picks up from the girl, but something helps the bear to find his speed. No longer caged, he finds he is fast – his four legs working better and quicker than moving, human-like, on his hind legs.

They run towards the brow of the hill, the wind slashing frozen rain into their faces. When they reach the top the girl looks back. Behind them are the men and their dogs but in front of them, down the other side, sweeps the river.

They run and fall and tumble towards the water, slipping on the loose stones and tufts of grass, a voice in the girl's head urging her on and on.

'Don't look back,' it says. 'Don't look back.'

They reach the banks of the river and carry on running into the freezing water. When it reaches her waist the girl frees her feet from the riverbed and kicks out, swimming like a dog, her head high,

one arm paddling out in front of her, the other holding her pack above the surface. She turns her head to look back at the bear. He is floating in the water, a look of pleasure on his face.

'No!' she shouts. 'You've got to *swim*. I know you can swim. All bears can swim.' He rolls over on his front, lolling his head from side to side.

'*And dogs can swim too!*' she pants. 'So get a move on!'

By the time she reaches the other side, the girl is gasping with the cold. She pulls herself out and, panting, stumbles towards a group of shrubs. The dogs are hot on their trail but still they have not reached the brow of the hill. The bear is now sniffing around the shoreline.

'Hurry – before they see you,' she calls out. 'Hide! They're coming.'

But the bear takes his time, stopping to check out some new smell here, some possible thing to eat there.

'Oh, hurry! Come quick!' she calls again. 'Why are you being so slow? They'll shoot you and then you'll never be able to sniff anything again.'

The bear reaches the shrubs just as a large dog appears on top of the hill. The dog stops and looks around, then lifts its muzzle and sniffs the air. The girl shrinks back into the bushes and watches as two other dogs join it, growling loudly.

'They're onto something,' she hears a voice shout out. 'I hope they get them before they cross that damn river.'

The dogs are whining now and running down towards the shoreline, their tails wagging and their noses skimming the surface of the ground.

Four men stand silhouetted against the dark sky, guns slung over their shoulders.

When the dogs reach the water's edge they stop and bark.

'Damn. They've already crossed. We've lost their scent. How the hell are we going to cross that river now?' one of the men says, lowering his gun to his side.

'Perhaps they'll freeze to death,' answers another voice. 'It's a mighty wide stretch of water.'

'Yeah. Looks like we're in for a snowstorm too.'

Their voices carry across the water and the girl

can hear everything they say.

'So what do you know about her?' one of them asks.

'I heard he rescued her from a pack of dogs when she was a kid. Wild, she was.'

'Did you ever see her?' the third man asks.

'Only once, shortly after he got her. She growled and spat at me – it was kinda scary. She was a pretty little thing until she did that.' He pauses. 'We won't tell Bolverk. We'll leave it for tonight and cross over to the other side in the morning. With any luck we'll pick up their tracks tomorrow. They won't get far.' But he picks up his gun and releases the catch.

'What yer doin'?' The fourth man moves forward, holding his gun up in front of him.

'See them there bushes? I wouldn't be surprised if they weren't hiding in there. Couldn't have got much further. Let's just take a pop shot to check it out.'

The girl sees the men take aim and grabs hold of the bear's neck, pushing her rucksack in front to protect them.

‘Get down!’ she whispers. ‘Whatever happens, please don’t move.’

They hear the first shot and the sound of splitting stone as the bullet falls short of the shrubs. The bear attempts to struggle free as she tries to calm him.

‘It’s OK. It’s OK. Keep still now.’

The second gun goes off and the shot hits the bushes a few metres to the right of them. Abel Dancer roars and pulls away from her.

‘No!’ she shouts. ‘Don’t! They’ll kill you!’

But he is up and tears out of the back of the shrubs, bounding up the other side towards open ground.

‘There it goes! What did I tell you?’ shouts one of the men. ‘Get the bastard.’

A volley of shots crack across the rocks, pinging off the stones and the earth as the bear runs away from the river and the girl.

She can’t look; instead she puts her hands over her ears and waits for it all to stop.

The guns carry on for two or three minutes. Then she hears one of the men whistle to his dog.

'Let's go. That snowstorm is on its way. We'll look for the body tomorrow.'

When she thinks they have gone, she wriggles out of her hiding place, grabs her things and looks across the river, just to be sure.

'*The damn river*,' she says to herself. 'The *damn* river. Why call it that? Without that there'd be no water. How ignorant people are.' She shakes her head and turns away. Behind her there is marshland and woodland in the distance, but not much shelter until then. The freezing rain has turned to snow, which whips across the marshes and makes running hard. She battles her way through it towards the trees, all the time calling in a low voice for the bear. As she runs, her eyes dart over the landscape, looking for him. Sometimes she is deceived by a shape in the distance that only turns out to be a boulder or a mound of grass.

She reaches the wood and skirts around it, looking for a suitable place to curl up and sleep. She finds some brambles and bracken and, turning round and round with her body, makes herself a bed.

It is dark by now, and the snow has stopped. A clear midnight-blue sky hangs over her, lit by a thousand or more stars. She looks up at the constellation. There is Ursa Major – the Great Bear – twinkling above her head as if the bear himself is keeping watch over her.

She is a light sleeper and has only dozed off for a moment, when she hears a rustling sound nearby. She reaches out for her knife and slowly turns onto all fours. Not far away she can hear heavy breathing. She holds her own breath and waits for her eyes to grow accustomed to the dark. Something is moving towards her.

She crouches back into the bushes and watches as a dark shape creeps into the shrubs.

'Bear!' she cries out.

Her hand moves away from her knife and she leans forward as Abel Dancer's face comes through the bush, sniffing her body with his wet nose. She hugs him.

'Wah,' he says.

'I thought they'd got you. You were lucky, but you can't run faster than a bullet.' She tries to stop

smiling at him. How will he take her seriously if she's got a big grin on her face? 'Next time keep your ground.'

They curl up together and sleep and when she wakes in the morning the snow has come and the bear has gone.

She follows the prints.