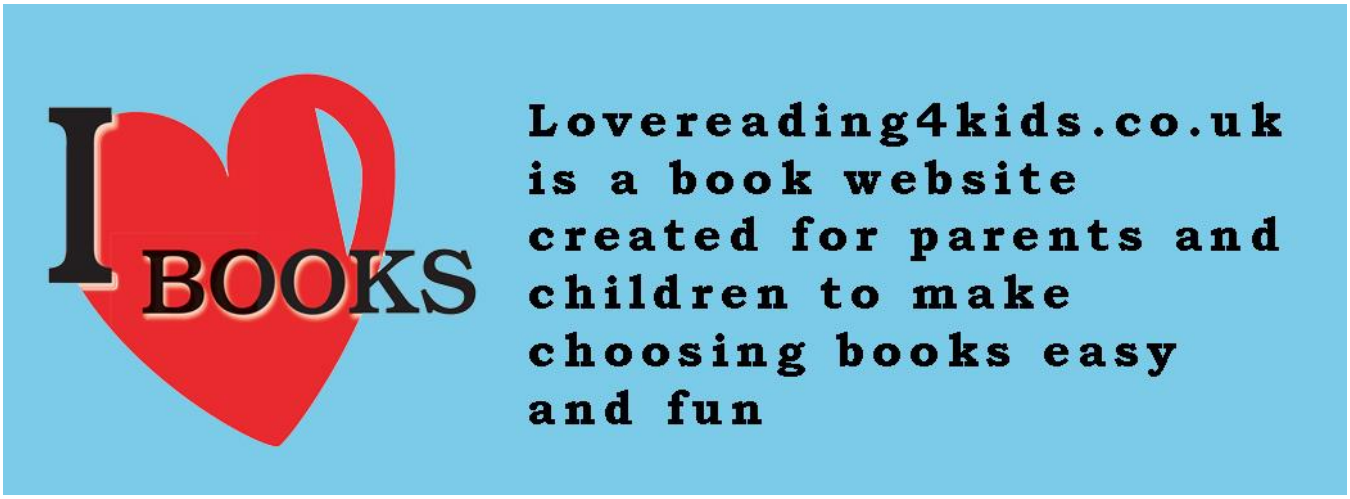


Opening extract from

Wildwitch: Wildfire

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CHAPTER 1

Monster Cat

The cat was standing on the stairs, refusing to budge.

It was the biggest cat I had ever seen. It was the size of my friend Oscar's labrador and just as black. Its eyes glowed neon yellow in the dim light of the stairwell that led up out of the bike basement.

"Ahem... hello, cat? Can I get past you, please?"

No.

Now I'm not saying that it actually spoke to me. But I could tell just by looking. It wasn't there by chance. This was no accident. It was there because it wanted to be there. Because it wanted something from me.

I was on my way to school and I was already late. It was wet and windy, which meant my bike ride wouldn't be very fast or much fun, either. And I

didn't want to try and explain to Ruler-Rita, my scary Maths teacher, that I was late for her class for the second time in two weeks because I was too scared to take on a black cat.

"Shooooo," I hissed at it. "Go away! Beat it! Clear off!"

The cat merely opened its jaws to reveal a pink tongue and a set of white teeth longer and sharper than ordinary cats' teeth. And it was quite clearly better at hissing than I was.

I pushed my bike a little further up the ramp and moved up to the next step. The cat and I were now two metres apart. I flapped my hand at it.

"Go away!"

It didn't move an inch.

I know I'm not the bravest girl in the world, but at that moment I was more terrified of my Maths teacher than the cat. I took a deep breath and raced up the steps as fast as I could. The cat would have to get out of the way or...

The cat jumped. Not to the side or backwards, but right at me. It landed on my chest and face so that for a second all I could see was black fur. I stumbled back and fell down the stairs with my bike and the cat on top of me. My head slammed against the concrete floor and my elbow scraped the rough wall. But what really made me lie still,

shocked and with my heart in my mouth, was the cat. Its yellow eyes burned into me, its claws dug through my raincoat, through my jumper, right through to my bare skin. It was a black, furry shape that almost filled my field of vision, and all I could see behind it was a leaden sky and the rain falling on us both in big, cold drops.

It held up its paw, then spread out and extended its claws. They were milky white with slate-grey tips.

"No," I pleaded. "Please don't..." Although I didn't know precisely what I was afraid it was going to do to me. My left arm was trapped under my body so I tried to push it away with my right hand. Its fur was wet and heavy, and not just from the rain. It smelled of seaweed, the sea itself and salt water. And I couldn't shift it at all.

Whoosh.

With one lightning-quick swipe its paw raked my face and I felt its claws rip the skin right between my eyes. The blood started flowing immediately, I could feel it trickling down the side of my nose and I had to blink to stop it running into my eyes. And while I lay there, stunned and bleeding, the monster cat leaned forwards and I felt the warm, rough rasp of its tongue against my forehead.

It was licking the blood from the cuts it had just inflicted on me.

"Clara! Do you know what time it is? You'll be late!" Mum called out from her study. I was standing in the hallway, unable to speak. A moment later she appeared.

"Little Mouse," she said and now she sounded frightened. "What happened?"

I shook my head. In fact I was shaking all over. My head hurt, the cuts to my forehead stung and burned, I thought I could still feel the weight of the cat's wet body on me and still smell seaweed and salty blood.

"A cat," I whispered. "There was... a cat."

I never thought for one minute that she would believe me. I expected her to ask me lots of questions and then accuse me of making it all up. I mean, how often do people get attacked by giant black cats?

But she didn't. She just stared at me.

"Oh, no," she said. That was all. And then she started to cry.

Perhaps I should explain a few things. My mum is no cry baby. Usually she's quite tough. She's a journalist and works freelance, that's what they call it when you work for yourself and you write

articles for different newspapers that then pay you for them. And lots of newspapers do because she's a good reporter and she's clever at finding stories. My dad doesn't live with us and hasn't done since I was five, so Mum is used to handling most things on her own.

She soon stopped crying, found the first aid box and started cleaning the cuts to my forehead and my grazed elbow, her mobile wedged between her shoulder and ear while she tried to get through to the doctor.

"You are now number... seven... in the queue," said a tiny, remote, recorded voice. Mum pressed the "end call" button with an angry movement, then fetched a bag of frozen sweetcorn and a tea towel from the kitchen.

"Here you go," she said. "Press this against the cuts. I'm taking you to the doctor's."

"My bike," I said. "I haven't locked my bike."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "It doesn't matter. Go put on a dry top, we don't know how long we'll have to wait."

She was her old self again. My mum who always took charge, my mum who always looked after me. But I couldn't forget that helpless little "Oh, no." Or the look I had seen on her face before she put the mum-mask back on.

Her open mouth. Her lips that had gone all white. And the tears that had welled up in her eyes.

As if her whole world had just fallen apart.