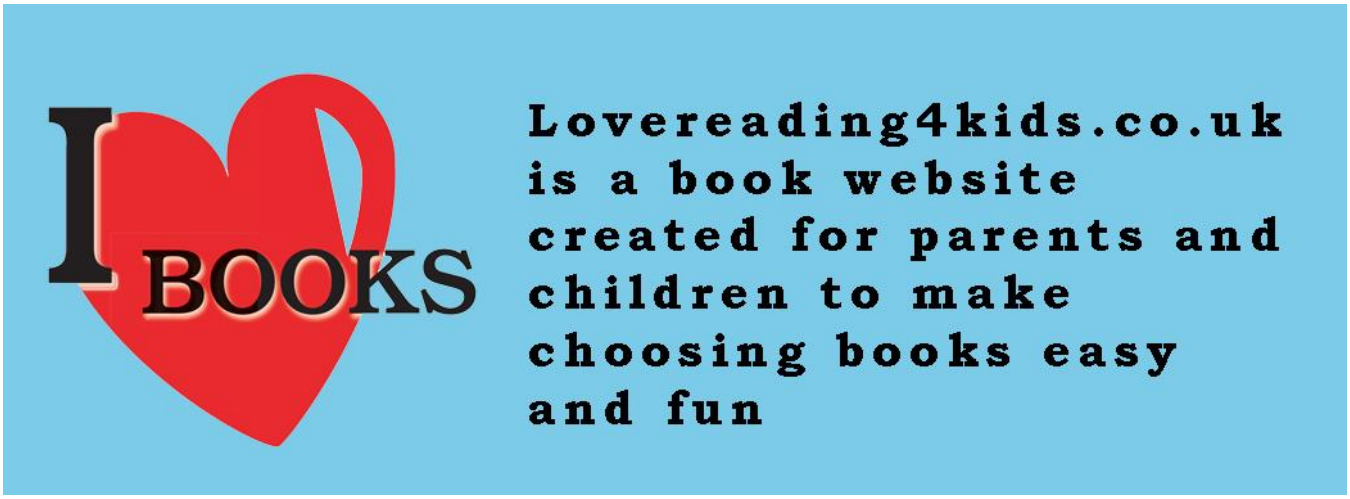


Opening extract from

In the Dark, in the Woods

Written by

Eliza Wass

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ONE

At three O'clock Sunday morning, I was balanced on the apex of Ms. Sturbridge's roof, watching my brother upturn bundles of wet leaves with a stick. Ms. Sturbridge was in the hospital, so there was no chance of anyone hearing us cleaning her rain gutter, but Caspar kept quiet. We had to work at night so they wouldn't see us. Caspar said he wanted it to be a surprise, but really he didn't want Father to find out.

I tipped my head back and narrowed my eyes at the stars. "Do you want to hear something completely disturbing I found out at school?" I knew he didn't—completely disturbing wasn't really Caspar's thing—but he was also a good listener, so he just said, "Tell me," and carried on with his work.

"You know Cassiopeia is supposed to be *my* constellation?" Father had given each of us a constellation, as if they belonged to him personally. Caspar didn't nod or anything, because he didn't like where I was going. "Well, basically, in Greek mythology, Cassiopeia was punished for being vain, and her punishment was to be tied to a chair in the sky. So that's where she is, up there in the sky, tied up. And that's *my* constellation."

Down below I heard Mortimer, my other brother, whoop. He was supposed to be keeping watch. "You do realize that's not really the queen of Ethiopia up there in the sky?" he called. "You do realize the Greeks made that shit up?"

"Yeah, but Father calls it Cassiopeia, too," I said. "So clearly he's aware of it."

"You're right—what is it Father says? 'The Word has many meanings.' I'm pretty sure he's trying to tell us something. I'm pretty sure he wants us to tie you to a chair."

"Like I would notice the difference," I said under my breath, so only Caspar heard.

His eyes went all wide. That was one thing that bothered me about Caspar. Whenever anyone expressed frustration, he was surprised—I mean, *really shocked*, like it never occurred to him.

"Castley, this is just a waiting period. Things will be better in heaven," he said gently. God must have been kidding when he gave Caspar a voice, because even though Caspar looked like a saint, and was by far the prettiest of all of us, girls included, when he spoke he sounded like a construction worker on two packs a day, in a way that made girls go absolutely crazy. Not that he noticed.

"I don't want to wait. I want things better now."

I heard Mortimer scurrying up the drainpipe to join us. The little rat. Mortimer was pretty much an albino, so he got it worse from the townsfolk than anyone. He also gave it worse than anyone, which was generally how it worked.

"I don't know why you think anyone has it better than we do," Mortimer said, climbing up onto the roof. "Life sucks for everyone."

"Well, I would happily trade lives with any of them. Being 'blessed with the truth' is pretty much a pain in the butt."

Caspar braced himself. Maybe I'd gone too far. He dropped down so the roof fluttered beneath our feet.

"Caspar? What is it?" I thought he'd dropped into an emergency prayer or something.

"There's someone down there," he breathed. My first

instinct was to not believe him, which just goes to show how many times I'd been tricked, but then a light shot along the roof and up over our heads. Mortimer dove down, lying flat against the rooftop. Heavy feet crunched through the dried grass, and I hesitated.

"Castley, get down!" Mortimer said. He was probably embarrassed about how quickly he'd gone down.

A light hit the chimney, where it turned into a yellowing circle. It bounced lightly, then slithered along the apex of the roof, toward me.

They might see me, I thought, and stupidly, I wanted to be seen. I wanted it so badly, I guess I didn't care how it happened. I felt a hand on my wrist, and Caspar grabbed me, pulling me down beside him.

"Is someone there?" It was an old man's voice and it snapped me out of my stupor. It wasn't a white knight or a prince or even just a teenage boy come to rescue me.

I clung to Caspar, scared now, and felt his heart race through his secondhand clothes.

"Hello? Is there someone up there or what?" he said, like we were keeping him in suspense. A dog howled, way out across the field, and the man said, "Probably just rats," and shuffled away through the grass.

We stayed frozen for a long time, Mortimer sprawled

like a doll across the roof and Caspar beside me, watching the sky. Mortimer sat up. He screwed up his big lips and licked his teeth, flinching slightly. "Nice one, Castley. He almost saw you."

"But he *did* see you." I extracted myself from Caspar. "You heard him: 'just a rat.' "

"He said 'just rats.' "

"Maybe you all should go home," Caspar said abruptly. We both turned. Our jaws dropped, as if we couldn't believe he didn't want us there. Neither of us was helping any. We had both offered to keep watch, and we had failed even at that.

"Caspar . . ." I started. He scooped up his stick and drove it into the rain gutter, turning up gunk that fell in wet bundles to the ground below. *They'll probably think the rats did it. Rats, or maybe God. I suppose that's what Caspar wants.*

"Come on, Castley. Let's go." Mortimer slid down the roof toward the drainpipe. Although they were pretty much exact opposites, Mortimer had a weird respect for Caspar.

I looked at Caspar. Maybe if I really helped, he would let me stay. I could find my own stick, or I could just pull leaves out with my bare hands.

Caspar was obsessed with doing good things for the people in town: the people who hated us, who mocked us, who said terrible, disgusting things about us. Caspar liked to sweep their porches or pull their weeds or clean their windows. I wasn't quite so enamored with them.

"Fine," I said. "We'll go."

I climbed down the drain after Mortimer. The pair of us kept quiet as we followed the fence that separated the Sturbridge farm from the Higgins farm. When we reached the woods, we both spoke at once.

"You shouldn't test Caspar like that—"

"Do you think it'll be warm enough to go swimming tomorrow? Wait—what do you mean, test him?"

"I mean holding on to him like that." He forced a branch aside.

"What are you talking about? I was scared!"

"I'm just trying to do you a favor. Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about."

I wanted to say something, but I didn't, for the same reason I always kept quiet: because I could never be sure of what they thought, not any of my brothers and sisters. I could never be sure of how much they believed—I wasn't even sure how much *I* believed—because Father believed a lot of crazy things.