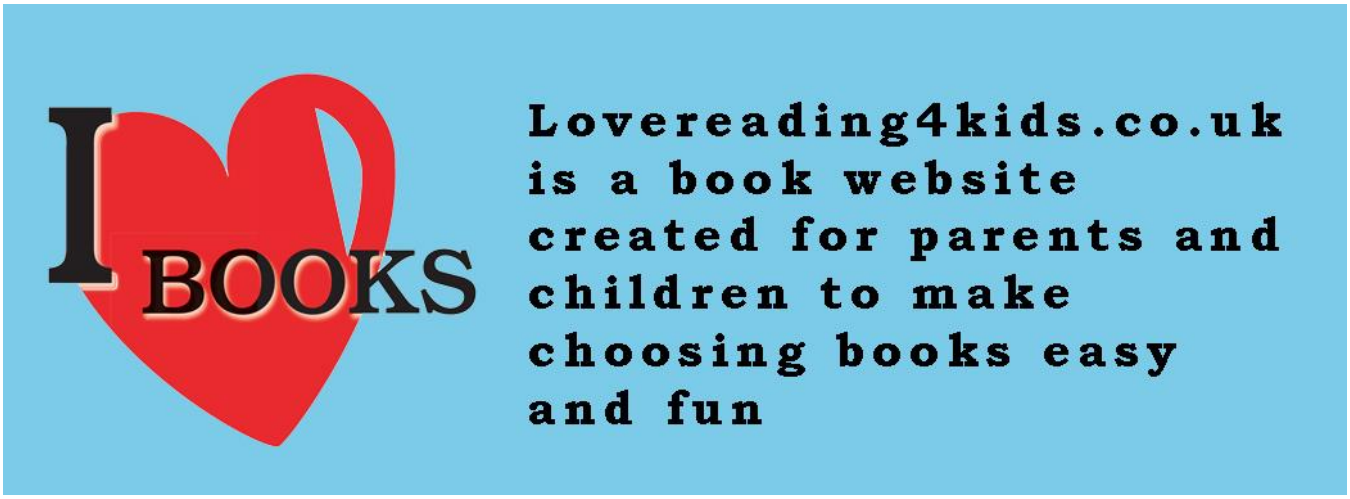


Opening extract from

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1

Far From the Kingdoms

Who could have guessed that she used to be a fairy? She had escaped from the tower window by ripping up her clothes to make a rope. Is that how fairies are supposed to descend from the ramparts? She was wearing the long white shift that she had stolen afterwards, from a washing line stretched out under the moon. She was running across the sand and through the night. The day before, she had renounced all her powers. Now she looked just like any other girl her age, only ever so slightly more lost, more sensitive, more beautiful.

The beach was white and wide. Above it, the dark of the forests; and below, the rolling waves, the spray of the surf and everywhere, the sound of the sea, the warmth of a night more luminous than day.

Her feet didn't sink in as she ran over the wet sand,

but each step made a ring of water around her that teemed with tiny crabs. She was on the brink of collapse and had no idea what time it was: she just knew that at midnight it would all be over.

He would be dead.

The day before, she could have glided effortlessly over the foam, or flown above the forests, to reach him more swiftly.

The day before, she had been a fairy.

But for that same reason, the day before, she couldn't have shared in the destiny of the person she loved; she couldn't have lived or died with him. Which was why she had renounced her magical powers, although, even in the oldest tales it was almost unheard of for a fairy to abdicate in this way.

Far off, the gleam from the lightship shone less brightly, glowing red at the end of a black stone jetty that linked it to the land. Whole trees were burned in this copper-lined vessel in order to attract boats from other realms, only to dash them against the rocks. That was where he had been taken to endure his fate.

The distance separating the stretch of sand from the red eye of the lightship seemed infinitely far.

She was running by the water's edge now, gasping,

caught in a tunnel between the slope of the beach and the warm wind blowing in off the sea. She was learning about the trials of the flesh, about injured feet, breathlessness, and the frailty of the body: the human condition she had so craved. She was in pain, but had no regrets at all.

She wanted to be like him, with him.

Was it midnight yet? How could she tell? She looked up, trying to gauge the time from the sky: the legendary fairy punctuality had already slipped away from her.

As she reached the first rocks, the moon plunged into the sea, leaving only phosphorescent streaks on her stolen shift. Over there, at the end of the jetty, the light from the fire appeared to blaze more brightly. The boat wasn't so far away now. Underfoot, the stones felt hot and rounded. She leapt from rock to rock: a tiny white sail bounding over the scree of black pebbles, attracted by the glare of the lightship. For so many sailors on the open sea, this light had represented hope. She too was hoping to find her treasure, her shelter, her life there. But like all those other vessels before her, what she encountered was shipwreck.

* * *

She landed silently on the abandoned body. He was no longer breathing. His eyes gaped wide.

Like her, he must have been fifteen or sixteen.

He was laid out, alone, on the bridge of the boat.

"My love…"

She sighed with each breath, searching for a glimmer in his eyes. She let her weight press down on the boy's body, and cupped his face between her hands. Her heart against his, beating for two, aching for two. The boat creaked in the waves, but it didn't move.

"My love."

She whispered reproaches, prayers, eternal regrets as she nuzzled into his neck. She was clinging to his shoulders, rubbing her cheek against his hair.

Gradually, her breathing slowed and became more regular. She spoke less. The carpet of embers was several paces away, but the heat radiating from the copper-coated boat still reached them. She fell silent now. They must have been burning cedarwood, its fragrant incense rising up into the night. This peacefulness seemed to herald her own death.

Making a final effort to open her eyes, she saw a lamp swaying far off on the rocks. Someone was approaching. She tore herself away from this most painful of embraces and rolled into the shadows.

Several minutes went by. She clasped her hands together and wept in silence as she watched the man draw near.

At the end of the jetty was a long walkway. The boat was moored to a forest of stripped oaks, jutting out of the sea like columns. The old man stepped onto this walkway, which wound a course between the stakes. Every movement was slow. He dragged a straw sledge behind him, on top of which was a stretcher designed for emptying the ashes.

Watching him, she wondered whether he had been responsible for killing her love. Was he returning to dispose of the body?

He made it as far as the boy and appeared to be muttering something to him. From her position, huddled just behind them, she heard him say, "I will carry you now. Do not be afraid."

He manoeuvred the stretcher next to the body, and whispered again.

"You will wait inside the cliff…"

She hurled herself at the old man, knocking him over on the bridge. Quick as a flash, she grabbed the small axe from his belt. As he crumpled and groaned, she was already towering over him, holding the weapon to his forehead, ready to crack it like a nut.

The old man watched the girl in terror. Her face was like that of a wild animal, her small hand positioning the blade of the axe between his eyes.

"You killed him," she said.

He was staring at her: a vision of hair and shift all stiff with salt, and of cheeks and shoulders the colour of pink and white coral. Who was this girl, this ethereal force to be reckoned with, whose knees pinned him to the ground?

"No," he sighed, "I didn't kill him."

"Who did?"

The wind blew some escaped sparks from the blaze towards them.

"Nobody."

The axe rose up high.

"Taåg…"

Her hand froze.

"Taåg received the order to bring him here and kill him."

"Where is Taåg?"

"He has returned to his marshlands."

She gazed at the body on the other side of the straw sledge.

"He killed him…" she whispered.

"No."

She raised the axe high above the man's skull.

"I swear! No one. No one killed him."

The girl closed her eyes to avoid witnessing what her own arm was about to do, but the man spoke just in time.

"Taåg disobeyed the king."

She stopped again.

"He didn't kill him. I'm the only one who knows this. When my work is done, he will kill me."

"What work?"

"I must hide the body inside the cliff."

"Who killed him? Who?"

"Taåg did not wish to kill the son of a king."

"I know what he's like. Killing is second nature to him."

"He fears only the souls of kings."

"Who killed him?"

"That I cannot tell you," he said, weeping. "But I know that you will let me live. For nobody can answer you if I die."

Slowly, she lowered her weapon and let herself sink to the ground.

He was right. Only her own death could extinguish the question that consumed her.

She closed her eyes.

"Who is this young prince to you?" he asked softly.

She didn't answer. She was thinking about those winter mornings, when he would set off to swim in the misty lake, his skin steaming as he emerged from the water.

"He no longer inhabits this body," said the old man.

She opened her eyes again: had she heard him properly?

"The boy has been banished but, he is alive."

"Where?"

"Not here in the Kingdoms, but far away, in a place from which no one returns."

She stood up.

"What are you saying?"

"Taåg granted him exile to avoid killing him." He paused, before saying slowly, "Banishment by spell."

"Where? Where is he?"

"He no longer inhabits this body."

"Answer me!"

She brought the axe down onto the copper, fractionally above the man's face.

He sighed.

"In a time … a land…"

"Where?"

"Go. Or we will both die. Return to the forest. Taåg is coming back."

"What time? What land?"

"The young prince has been exiled to a place of no return. Taåg sent him to a land where no path, no sea can bring him back to us."

The wind had dropped by now, and the embers barely glimmered. She could feel the cold descending over her. A trembling seized her limbs.

The old man's last words made her stomach lurch.

"It would need the powers of a fairy to undo a spell such as this."

She stared at the ground to hide her tears. One by one, her powers were deserting her. She lay on her side, her helpless hands to her heart.

So she had lost everything: magic and love.

Slowly, she stood up and dragged herself the few paces towards the body of the exiled prince.

She leant over him. Had her beloved reached some faraway place? Where was he? Standing in some lost valley? Breathing in the night air in a land cut off from the Kingdoms?

She tried pleading one last time.

"Where has Taåg banished him to? Where?"

With the back of her hand, she stroked her beloved's

forehead, while the old man's voice answered from behind her.

"The young prince is in the one time, the one world where they don't believe in fairies or tales."

The sea had grown calmer all around. Only the gently foaming surf could be heard now and, in the distance, a horse galloping down the beach.

2

Between my Tears

Far away and half a century later, in a forest that was thick and deep all around me, I could see blood on the bark of a tree. I was fourteen, with a bag slung across my shoulder, wet hair in my eyes and no reason to be there.

I had set off, going straight ahead, to escape a broken heart. I had been walking for three hours, wherever the forest took me.

If I hadn't put my fingers on the tree, if I hadn't looked at my hands, perhaps nothing would have happened. Instead of getting lost, I would have found my way back to the bright strip of road a few kilometres off. I would have escaped the night.

But there on the palms of my hands, when I brought them closer to my face, I saw a red liquid, sticky as peach juice: it was blood, and it felt warm in the freezing air.

I wandered about through the dead leaves. It was still bright. The daylight cut through the sweet chestnut trees in shafts and spilled onto the moss. Five paces from there, I could see another large drop of blood when I bent down.

It was showing me the way.

I sensed that somewhere, between the trees, there was a wounded being that needed me.

"Who's there?"

My words were soft and faltering, spoken almost to myself. I stared at my hands: I was shivering again, having left without a coat, just this bag and nothing else, inconsolable. I had ditched my bicycle in the grass to leave the road, forget the girl and return to the wild.

Pretending to be in two minds about it, I let my hands fall to my sides. But I can vividly remember the sense of mystery that drew me towards the deepest part of the woods.

And so, like a wolf, I picked up the trail again. Each time, I had to bend over to see the drops materialize before my eyes, leading the way. On I pressed, pushing branches aside and trampling coils of brambles.

At times I sensed my sadness waning, as if the memory of the girl were struggling to keep up with me in the forest, the gentle sound of her breathing behind

me growing more distant. I stopped to let her catch up, because it was too soon to abandon my grief. What was she called? She hadn't even told me her name. I threw back my head and roared at the sky.

If somebody had been in danger, they would have answered me. But I was met by silence. I'd pulled my hood up, and my bag was still over my shoulder. A few drops of rain splashed between the branches, landing around me. Never in my life had I shouted in a place where nobody could hear me. I felt a strange thrill mingling with my anxiety and tears. It was time to summon all my strength; the light was failing and I was far from everything.

Suddenly, between two fallen trees, I spotted a roebuck. He was staring at me, unflinching. I thought I had found the wounded animal I'd been pursuing, but his fur was as pure as the pages of a children's book, and his lower legs were almost white. Not a trace of blood. He seemed even more stunned than I was. A flurry of raindrops from a tree exploded onto the moss like a crystal ball. The roebuck took a step backwards. I could see the steam rising off his burning flanks. One blink of my eye, and he'd have vanished. I was thinking about the girl I'd wanted to hold in my arms, but who had fled a few hours earlier.

Finally, I took a step towards the animal and, as it disappeared, total darkness came crashing down on the woods.

The ground snapped underfoot as I tried to cover some distance. My hands groped from one tree to the next. I could no longer see the bloodstains that had been guiding me. I felt numb and I knew the cold was lying in ambush, waiting for me to stop so it could seize me by the neck. The night had done all it could to make me fall before it did. But I was still standing.

One more step, and a light appeared far ahead: a swaying patch of light; a square laid out on the ground in the darkness; a carpet of liquid gold. It moved. I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, the carpet was still there, and as I approached it, my feet sank into the ground.

At last I realized what was happening. Just in front of me was a wide river (I could hear it lapping) and that spot of light with golden panes in the water was the reflection from a lit-up window.

I picked up my bag with its treasure inside and hitched it back over my shoulder, before beginning to wade against the current with my hands held high. The strong undertow kept pushing me towards the left, but I resisted. Suddenly, the window went dark. I wanted

to stay upright, so that I could assess the black shape looming on the opposite bank. Yes, there had to be a house over there in the dark, by the water's edge.

I hadn't forgotten the despair that had flung me into the woods in the first place. This sadness was becoming an ally, walking with me in the darkness. I was taming it.

The water, which was now up to my waist, was gurgling around me. I knew about the dangers of crossing unfamiliar rivers in the dark. My feet were sinking into the mud, and sometimes the current collided with my shoulder, attempting to knock me over. My response was to hold my bag high above my heard.

I thought I was safe. Surely I was over the halfway mark. But then I got pins and needles in my upper back, and my head started spinning. Something trickled down my forehead and into my eyes. The darkness began turning as well. What was happening? I braced myself in a bid to stay on my feet. My strength was ebbing from every pore. I was going to drown.

The window of light was reflected briefly again on the water. In my giddy state, I thought I could see a human pass before it, looking in my direction. I froze. Despite the cover of darkness, I was convinced that I'd been seen. I thought about the trail of blood in the

woods. I wanted to turn back. But then I heard the sound of diving, three times, just ten metres away from me. The cold suddenly became unbearable. Seconds later, I saw a series of black shapes swimming across the square of light. Three animals were struggling against the current, their heads gliding on the surface. As I lost my balance, my bag briefly came into contact with the water, but I managed to grab hold of it just in time.

Those black shadows were heading towards me now, slicing through the waves. I tried to make for the bank I'd set out from, but my body had stopped responding.

When I finally managed to look round, the animals were no longer in the square of light; but I knew they had to be there, close by. I couldn't call out, and I imagined them to be muskrats, or bears or anacondas. I felt a body against my leg: one of the creatures had dived beneath me. The three animals all hurled themselves on their prey at the same time. They had me by the shoulders, and I was losing my footing as jaws slid over my body, albeit only biting into the canvas of my jacket. I felt myself being raised up. Then I lost consciousness.

My eyes flickered open, briefly, as enormous human

hands hauled me out of the water and onto a pontoon. I couldn't move at all.

Then I blacked out again.

I can remember being in a strange state, where shadows flitted in and out, together with night birds and the laughter of the girl who had made me dissapear from the world.

It was a busy, teeming dream in which I was trying to breathe and stay on the surface. A long, all-enveloping dream.

I didn't emerge from it until my body detected the gentle warmth of a fire nearby, the touch of linen sheets, the aroma of burnt pinecones. The idyll after the nightmare.

The silence whistled and crackled occasionally. I was sheltered, safe. It was raining outside. The leaden weight of the blankets was just as it should be. Half opening my eyes, I could glimpse, beyond the white curve of the pillow, one, two … *three* black dogs lying close to a fireplace. Where was their master, the giant who had rescued me from the water? I raised my hand to my forehead and felt a bandage.

"It was a branch from a bramble bush that wounded you…"

The voice came from the foot of my bed, high up, as if the giant's head were touching the beams. I couldn't make out his enormous body in the half-light.

"I used my nails to pull out every one of those thorns."

The warmth suddenly ceased to reassure me at all. I was picturing fingernails as long as sickles. How could I escape? I had heard that hostages always regretted those first minutes, when they still had a chance to get away. I tried to locate the door in the darkness. I would have to step over the dogs to reach it. One of them had woken up and was licking its paw.

"You must have been bleeding for several hours. My dogs pulled you out of the water just in time."

A pinecone blazed in the fire. With my head resting on the pillow, I saw the room light up. And the man became visible. He was perched on top of a ladder, and he was tidying some red and brown boxes. He didn't look like a giant or an ogre at all. He turned gently towards me.

Thinking about it now, I remember that his face seemed to have come from another world. But I was so distracted by what he said next that for a long time I forgot all about that first impression.

"You bled a great deal."

And as he said those words, I finally realized that the blood I had been following all along, the blood that had led me to this hearth, to these dogs and to this man, was my own blood. That was my discovery. Each time I had bent over, through my tears, a drop of blood had fallen from my forehead, and it had marked out a path.

The wounded beast I had been tracking was me.