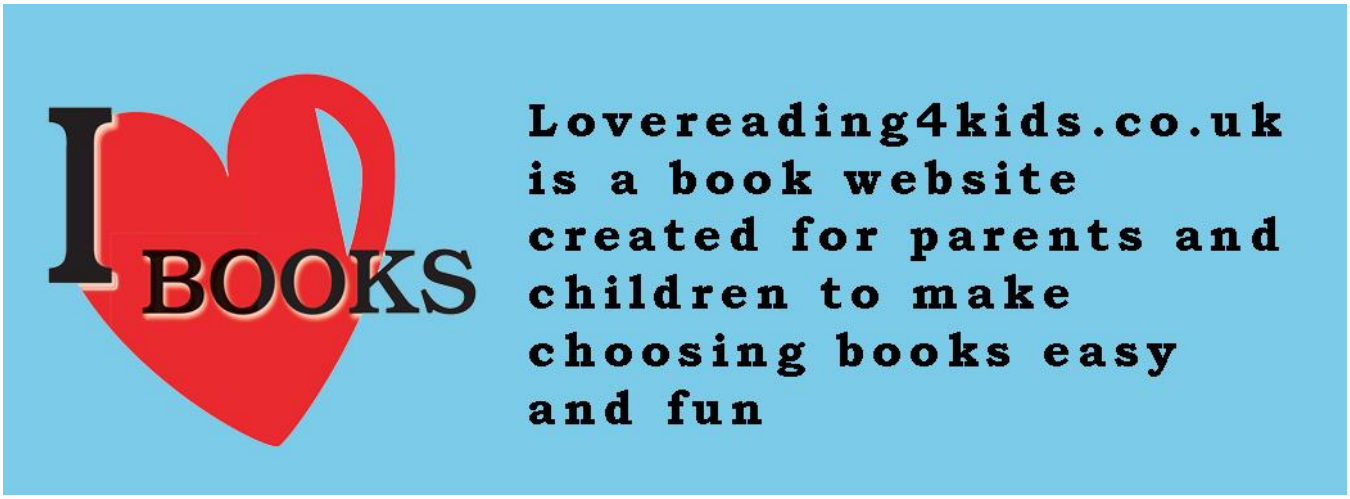


Opening extract from

The Wilderness War

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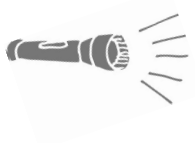


Chapter 1

Noah closed the front door behind him. He sniffed the air, the way an animal might.

Early morning. So early, the roar of traffic hadn't started up yet, and he could hear birdsong. He ran down the path onto the pavement, squeezed between the cars parked on the street and ran across to the other side.

The long grass was dripping wet from dew. Noah ducked under the low branches of the old pear tree and pushed further into the patch of rough overgrown land he called the Wilderness. His hand accidentally brushed a stinging nettle and he winced. He rubbed the place with spit to stop the itchy pain.



Ahead of him in the deep shadow under the trees something moved.

Noah crouched down behind the net of brambles to watch. The hair on the back of his neck bristled.

What was it?

Something bigger than a fox. Not a person.

His heart thudded. He watched, and waited.

A deer stepped out of the shadows into a pool of sunlight.

Noah blinked, to be sure it was really there.

Slanting sunlight spilled through the green canopy of trees at the bottom of the Wilderness. The deer stood completely still, a dark shape silhouetted against the light. It stared directly at Noah.

He saw the way its sides heaved slightly as it breathed in and out, as if it had been running. He saw the deep pools of its eyes, and the furry edges of its ears, and its breath rising like steam. It was a young deer: Noah could make out two small antlers, stubby growths that one day would be big and forked, like branches.

They looked at each other, deer and boy: a moment that felt like recognition, as if something had passed between them.

Noah's own breath steadied and slowed. He blinked.

And in that second, the deer had gone. Disappeared totally, as if it had dissolved into nothing in the warming air, leaving no trace.

How had it even been there in the first place?

Already, Noah began to doubt himself.

And yet it had seemed so real . . . as if he could have reached out his hand, and touched its warm fur.

Even so, he wouldn't tell the others about the deer. Not yet. Just in case it hadn't really been there at all.

