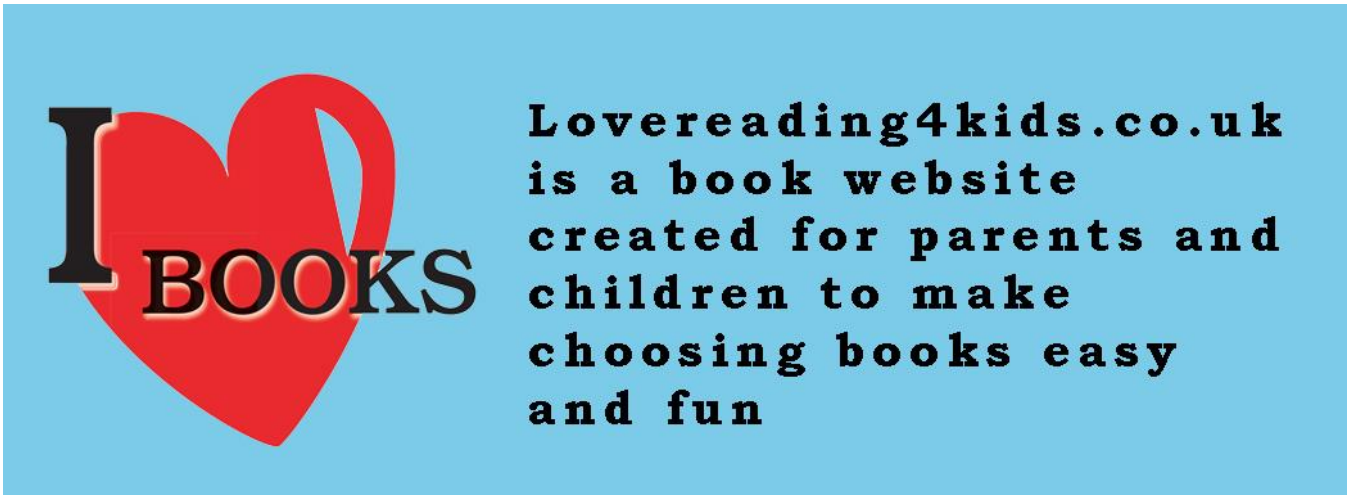


Opening extract from

Malkin Moonlight

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Malkin Moonlight

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Chapter 1
Malkin Moonlight

Every journey starts with one paw step, and it is that paw step that the little black cat takes.

He takes it and finds himself on the soft ground at the edge of a riverbank. Freezing wet and soaking cold, he drags himself through the reeds and into a clearing lit by the light of the moon.

'Oh,' the little black cat says, blinking at the full moon's beauty.

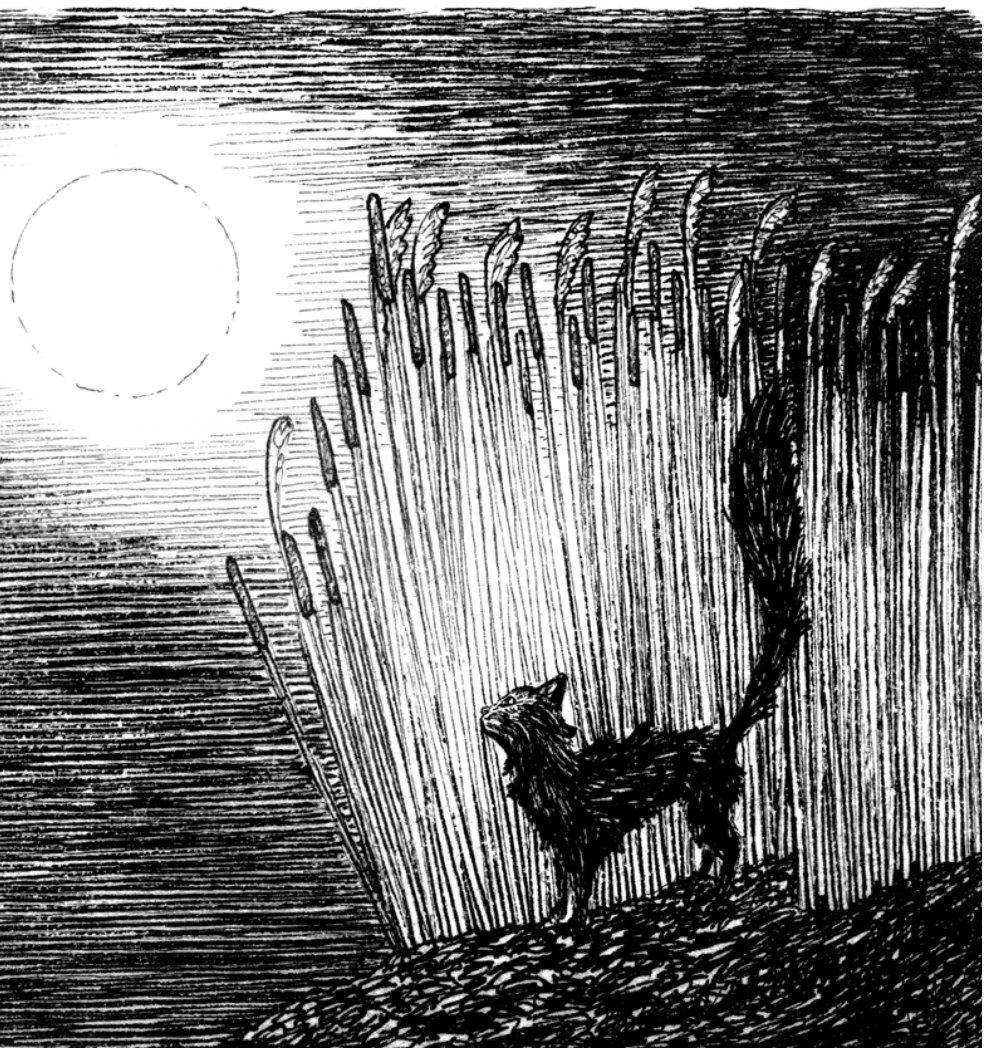
The moon looks down at him, barely more than a kitten, standing proudly in the pool of her light. His little body is shivering, but his huge tail is held high and his sharp green eyes are shining.

'Tell me your story, little cat,' she says, and her voice is kind.

The cat flattens wet ears to his head and pushes his nose towards the magic of the moon-pull.

The stars stop their music to listen.

'I fear I wasn't meant to be born, oh Moon. I was taken from my mother when I was very small. I can just remember her face and sometimes I see her in my dreams. The Owners carried me and my sister and brothers into a barn where it was cold. The first week the rats were bigger



than us, and we had to stand in a circle to make sure they couldn't snatch any of us away. We missed our mother and sometimes we heard her voice crying for us, but we couldn't go outside the barn; we were kept locked in. My brothers and sister didn't mind, yet something inside me was pulling me to go out. I had a feeling that we needed to escape. But the door was always locked. Until tonight.'

'What happened tonight, little black cat?'

'The man Owner came into the barn and caught us playing games with the rats. He said it was not our job to play, it was our job to catch, and we were getting too big to feed. He grabbed my sister first and put her in a bag. I jumped in to save her, but he picked up the bag and held it tight, so we couldn't climb back out. We were trapped. Then he caught my brothers. One minute we were all crushed up together, and my sister was crying, and it was dark and hard to breathe, and we were pushing with all our paws. The next it was worse: water was coming in; I hate getting wet. I managed to tear a hole with my sharp claws and fight my way out. I can't swim, but I managed to step on to a crate that sailed me downriver, and here I am.'

'Here you are, cat. Despite all the odds.'

'It was I who made friends with the rats, Moon. When we grew bigger, and we were no longer afraid. I was the

one who made friends with them, and now my sister and brothers have been thrown away. I didn't know that I shouldn't. It's my fault we were thrown in the river.'

'No, little cat, it is not your fault. It happened because of your unkind Owner.'

'And I have lost one of my nine lives tonight. I lost it in the reedbeds. And I have lost my home and my family.'

'But soon things will get better. You will lead many special lives.'

'Do you really think so, Moon?'

'Oh yes, little cat, for I see great things inside you.'

'Me?'

'Do you not feel them yourself?'

'I just feel so cold and hungry.'

'There is a kindness inside you, little cat, and peace. It is like the peace I feel when I sail at my fullest. You will be brave, even when those around you are afraid. And you will make great sacrifices for friendship – you will be a true friend, like I am to the stars in my night sky. We are inseparable, through time and space.'

'But I am alone.'

'No journey is easy all the way, but your sixth sense shines so brightly it will guide you to your home, and it will help you in times of danger.'

'Even now my sixth sense is pulling me away, oh Moon. It is pulling me to a place down the river.'

'It will tell you the way to go. It will pull you, like I pull the tides, and it will guide you, like my stars do the sailors. You must heed its pull. It will be the tug of destiny. It will be important, not just for you, but for other creatures too.'

'But I don't even know who I am. No one has given me a name.'

'Then kneel down, little cat, for I have your name.'

The cat kneels on the grass. 'Please tell me my name, oh Moon,' he says, holding his head upright, his eyes full of her reflection.

'Close your eyes, little black cat, and I shall.'

He does and, as the moon moves directly over him, the little cat feels something wonderful racing along the paths of his blood and his sinews, and curling softly through his ears and tail, and tingling all along his whiskers, and finally ending deep inside his heart.

'Your name is Malkin Moonlight. I name you for myself, and here is your gift. Lower your head.'

Malkin Moonlight bends his head and presses his cold nose into the wet riverbank, and the moon lights the fur at the ruff of his neck with a white ring all around,

so that he will always have the protection of the full moon about him.

Malkin is filled with the sensation that comes from being defined for the first time. *So this is me. I am this.*

My name is Malkin Moonlight.

Then, in the second that follows, he feels the curiosity and wonder of being given a present. 'Thank you, oh Moon,' he says, shaking his head and feeling the moon-beam circle around his neck. He rises to his feet and drops a tiny bow that makes the moon brim with pride for the little black cat.

'May your eyes ever be bright, Malkin, and your spirit pure, good deeds to do for cat-kind and for all.'

'I will, oh Moon, I will always do my best. Whatever my best can be.'

'That is all any cat can do, Malkin Moonlight. Follow your heart; it will help you find friends. Let your sixth sense guide you; your sixth will lead you to a home.'

'But what should my home be?'

'It should be full of love and kindness.'

'And Owners? Will there be Owners?'

'Not all cats need Owners, but they do need love.'

Malkin is about to ask the moon to explain more about love when she says, 'Goodnight. Dawn is coming.

It is time for me to go, but I will see you again.'

'Thank you, Moon,' Malkin says, 'and goodnight.'

'Be lucky on your journey, Malkin Moonlight,' the moon says.

Malkin turns and sees the silver path of the river as it winds its way to the sea. It is beautiful now, and gentle. So he lifts his tail high, pushes his nose to the wind, turns all his senses up bright, and takes the next paw step of his journey.

Chapter 2
The East of India

Malkin walks through what is left of the night and into a beautiful dawn that spills its paintbox of colours on to the river. He keeps on, into the daylight, until he can go no further. Then he lies down and sleeps on the river-bank. A few times he wakes to find he is shivering with cold even though a late spring sun is shining and he is in her light, which is a brand new feeling for him.

The world is busy with people – he can hear their noises rising and falling, but they are not like the angry noises of his old Owners; these are noises that carry happiness. Sometimes Malkin will peer through the slits in the reeds and see people walking near him, down to the little boats that bob in the river with the bright flags that wave in the wind, but no one sees him, small as he is in the dark mud, except the dragonflies that hover and stare and the bees that drone.

Malkin is very hungry, and thirsty. At dusk he manages to lift his head enough to lap at a muddy puddle. He knows he must find food or he will lose another life here. But Malkin is too weak to move, so instead he falls into dreams.

In his dreams he sees his sister's face and her paw held out towards him. He remembers how he tried to save her from the angry river. In his dreams he mews and cries, mews and cries.

The humans, returning from their boats, do not hear him.

Humans are so bad at hearing.

Malkin wakes in the blackness of the night and smells a beautiful smell: the best smell he has ever smelled. He opens his eyes and finds there is something to eat. He noses it. It is crunchy on the outside and has a soft, gooey inside. He takes a bite of the gooey stuff. It is delicious: salty and sweet at the same time. It sparkles with silver, like the stars, and tastes like secrets. Malkin tries to eat it slowly, but he can't.

He gobbles it all up very quickly.

He feels it strengthening him.

Now is the time to move.

Malkin puts out a paw to take a step. It hurts. He pulls his body up and tries to stretch, but he feels hot and cold at the same time. There is a wall ahead of him, a long red wall that runs between the river and the land on the other side. It is not a high wall for a cat with a tail like his, and yet he finds himself unable to leap like he usually can. Still he knows he must climb the wall and so he does. It makes his head feel dizzy, whirly, like he felt in the bag, but he reaches the top and sees the world all around. He sees a building covered in red flowers and a sign that swings in the wind, and behind that he sees the sea. It is the wildest and widest thing he has ever seen and for a moment he thinks it cannot be true. The air smells sweetly salty, like the flavour of the food he just ate, and the rushing sound of the waves makes his ears twitch: it's good and bad at the same time.

Malkin knows he must reach the building with the flowers. He can feel his heart pulling him towards it. It must be a good place. A safe place. Perhaps it could be his home. But as he walks along the wall he gets another feeling. A curious feeling, prickling and tickling his fur and pulling the claws from all eighteen of his toes. His sixth sense turns bright white and rushes through his body with all the might of the angry river. A sharp feeling

comes into his claws, and his back arches up into the shape of a bridge.

He is being watched.

His eyes flick, checking for silent movements, looking for surfaces to leap upon, for exits to take. Each muscle beneath his black fur is tight. His whiskers tingle and tremble, sensing the air around his face.

He will not lose another life, not tonight, he will not.

And then his sixth sense ebbs away like the tide. The hot and cold feeling returns and Malkin feels his brain become blurry and his body shaky and cold. In that instant Malkin knows he cannot outrun another cat. He knows he is too weak to fight, but still he is drawn towards the building, so he takes another step and another until he finds he has stopped. He spins to see if something is standing on his tail, but there is no one there, just his own great tail trailing like a wet flag. He looks up at the moon as the arch leaves his body: the spin has cost him, has put the dizziness in his brain, and his paws give up the scratch and claw and crumple beneath him.

The sea wind howls.

Malkin falls.

As Malkin falls he tries to use his tail for balance, but it is full of slump, his paws scuttle against the wall,

scrabbling for something to cling to. They find some ivy which slows him for a moment, but still he hits the ground and feels the bright light of pain.

Then all is motionless, save for the sea wind that gently combs his fur; and all is silent, save for the steady creak and whine, creak and whine of the sign above his head.

Malkin moves into the place cats go when they are letting go of a life. Deep inside, he feels the life fading: the very worst feeling. But right behind it he feels his next life: a new him, a future him, arriving to take him to safety.

High above Malkin a pair of eyes blink. They watched him fall. They disappear, then appear again, blinking and thinking, blinking and thinking, in the darkness of the night.

A window is nosed up, a body is pressed low, then it is outside on a window box. A face is held to the sea wind; fur the colour of cream and smoke is pushed backwards.

Balancing is done along a window box full of red geraniums, a special leap is performed on to a sign that says 'The East of India', with a painting of a ship. A young cat, barely more than a kitten, makes her familiar way down the scaffolding that supports the side of her pub,

where the old stones are crumbling, and she lands softly by the cat that fell.

She nudges him with her nose, then reaches for him with her senses. It is no good.

'Oh, this is *very* bad. Oh, this is *awful*,' she says. 'He has just lost a life. He needs my help before he loses another. Oh, what to do?'

The girl cat is afraid. Rain begins to fall in heavy drops that soak the fur and make the paws cold. The wind howls all around them. The girl cat knows of only one place the fallen cat will be safe and warm – in the cellar – but she doesn't like the smell of it. It smells bad: of time that has gone, and animal lives that have been lost. She is quite sure it is full of the largest spiders, and she is *not* a cat that chases spiders.

Then she looks at the cat that fell and steels herself.

She lowers herself through the trapdoor that leads to the cellar, stands on a wooden barrel and reaches up. As gently as she can, she pulls the sick cat by the loose fur on his neck. He slides and lands with a heavy-sounding bump, then makes soft sounds of sorrow as he is pulled into the underground darkness.