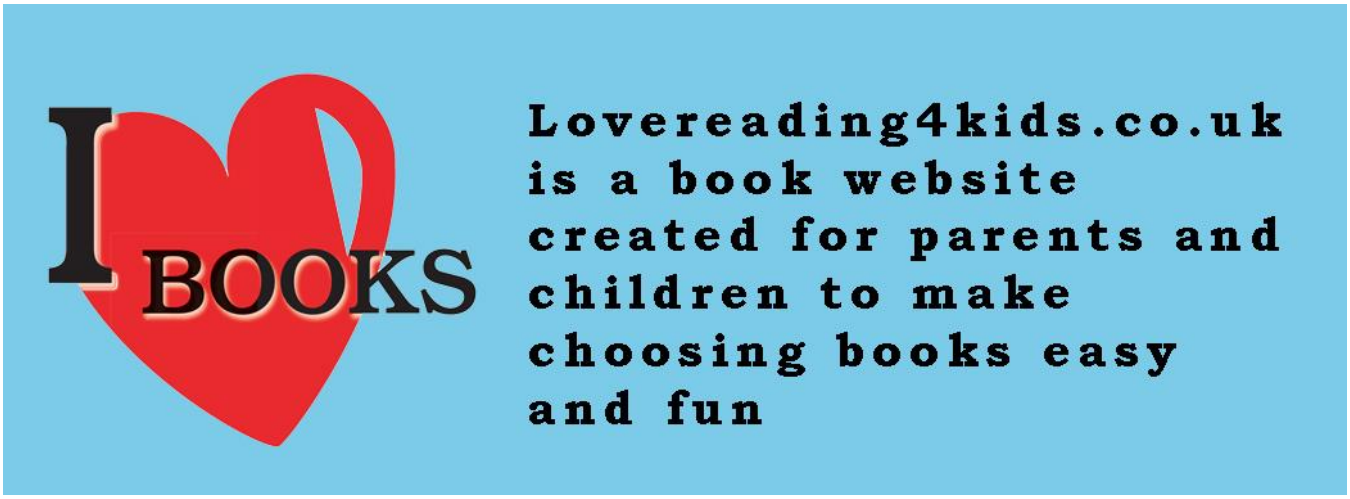



Opening extract from

# The White Widow's Revenge

Written by

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# Chapter 1

***They've got no idea*, thought Caw**. *No idea how much danger they're in.*

He pulled up his collar, even though he was already soaked to the skin, and looked out across the street. It was quiet because of the awful weather, but a few people still went about their business. A man in a dark suit ate a sandwich under a dripping canopy. Cars swished across the slick road. A boy, holding hands with his mother, rushed into a shoe shop to get out of the downpour.

It had been raining for days, but the low grey clouds showed no signs of being empty. The streets were saturated, and puddles dotted the rooftop on which Caw stood. He looked down at the second-hand sneakers he'd found at a clothing bank. Water had long ago seeped through the fabric, and his toes squelched, but he'd been wet through enough times in his life that it didn't really bother him. Growing up in the nest in Blackstone

Park, he'd survived many storms which had blown through the city and ripped the tarpaulin cover loose. If they couldn't fix it, Caw and his crows just huddled down, lashed by the wind and rain. He had hated it, but he always knew it would pass.

*I've forgotten what the sun looks like*, said Screech. The youngest of Caw's crows was sitting on the roof parapet with his feathers puffed out to protect him from the rain. The other two birds perched beside him.

*Maybe we should go home*, said Glum hopefully. His beak rested on his chest and his eyes were shut.

Shimmer cocked her head. *Quit complaining*, she said. *A bit of water won't do you any harm.*

To anyone in the street below, the three crows would have looked completely unremarkable, Caw thought. But then, nobody but a feral would realise he could understand what they were saying.

"Crumb wants us to wait here while he checks out the bank," said Caw, nodding at the building across the street.

*There are twenty banks in Blackstone*, said Glum. *The chances of them hitting this one are pretty slim.*

Caw shrugged.

*I can go down and take a look if you want*, said Shimmer, hopping restlessly.

Caw thought about it. Their enemies could be down below, and if they saw a crow acting strangely, it might spook them.

He wondered if he should send Shimmer to the hospital instead, to check on Selina. At least that would give her something to do. She would obey him, though she wasn't exactly crazy about the daughter of the Mother of Flies. No one was, really, apart from Caw. But Selina Davenport was in the hospital because of him – she had taken a bullet to save his life.

In the two weeks since the battle on top of Commissioner Davenport's apartment, Selina had lain unconscious in a Blackstone Hospital bed. The doctors didn't know why she wasn't waking up. They thought it might be some sort of infection. Caw's friend Crumb, the pigeon feral, said it might be better if she never woke up. Caw couldn't reply to that. Despite what everyone else thought, Selina was his friend. She'd stuck by him when it mattered most.

*Hello?* said Shimmer. *What do you say, boss? I can scan the block. No one will even see me.*

"OK," said Caw. "Just be careful."

Shimmer took off, spreading her wings in a low glide and dipping out of sight.

Caw would ask Glum to take on hospital duty later. Any day now, there must be good news.

He heard a squeak and turned to see Pip, the young mouse feral, and the lanky Crumb climbing up from the fire escape.

*About time*, said Glum.

Crumb was holding aloft a battered umbrella and Pip stayed close to his side as they hurried across the roof.

A pigeon landed with a clumsy hop beside Crumb.

"Keep watch, Bobbin," said the pigeon feral. Despite the umbrella, his blond hair lay in wet straggles across his forehead and his scruffy beard was beaded with water. "This is the place."

Caw looked across the street at the ornate three-storey facade of the Blackstone Savings Bank.

"How do you know?" he said. "Everything looks normal."

"Turns out the manager is a feral," said Pip eagerly. The mouse talker's eyes were eager saucers under the hood of his waterproof jacket. It was at least three sizes too big and came down to his knees.

Crumb nodded. "Pickwick, the sparrow talker. That's probably why the escaped convicts chose it – they get the money, plus they hit back at the ferals who are trying to stop them."

Caw's heart began to beat faster. He knew how ruthless their enemies were. A few weeks ago, the Mother of Flies had released Blackstone Prison's most dangerous convicts and turned them into an army of new ferals, using the power of the Midnight Stone. Commissioner Davenport had given each of them an animal species to control in return for doing her bidding.

Caw may have defeated the commissioner on the

apartment rooftop, but her ferals were still on the loose. Crime had been on the rise across the city, made a hundred times worse by the convicts' new feral powers. Thefts, assaults, vandalism... The papers had picked up a few odd stories about animals at the scenes of crimes – a colony of vultures swooping over the town hall, an infestation of raccoons in the cinema – but the police hadn't made the connection. Caw couldn't blame them – they had no idea ferals existed.

That morning, a casino break-in had left two security guards dead, with lacerations to their throats – the work of Lugmann, the new panther feral. It was pure luck that a couple of Pip's mice had been at the scene and had overheard the plan to hit a bank.

Caw clenched his fists. As the convicts mastered their feral powers, they would become only more deadly. They had to be stopped.

"Should we let the others know?" Caw asked. Mrs Strickham and the other good ferals were positioned all across Blackstone, watching the banks.

Crumb shook his head. "There's still a chance they'll hit a different bank. I'm afraid this one's on us."

"And Pickwick's ready?" said Caw, glancing down at his weapon, the Crow's Beak. The short, black-bladed sword of the crow line hung at Caw's side, in a sheath he'd made from the remains of an old leather satchel.

"Pickwick's not a fighter," Crumb said. "He rarely

even speaks to his birds any more. But he'll get any innocent bystanders out of the way."

Caw found it strange to think of a feral not using his powers; just living a normal life. Nothing about Caw's life had ever been normal.

Shimmer swooped up with an urgent squawk.

*They're coming!* she said. *Black van, five blocks east, stopped at the lights.*

"Good work," said Caw. He turned to Crumb and Pip. "They're almost here."

Crumb waved an arm, and several pigeons flocked to him from surrounding buildings.

Pip leant over the edge of the roof. Caw heard a scream in the street below and looked down to see a young girl scramble into her mother's arms. A wriggling surge of mice had emerged from a drain and poured over the road as passers-by backed away.

Pip grinned. "Who needs a panther when you've got a mouse or two?"

With a flick of his hand, he directed the horde of mice up the steps of the bank. The mass of their bodies was enough to open the automatic doors, and they swept through. Screaming customers ran out, and a moment later a small, grey-haired man in a suit and glasses followed, muttering apologies. He looked up to the roof and gave a small salute.

Crumb nodded back. "Let's get down there."

"Fetch the others," Caw said to Screech, and the crows took off as he sprinted to the fire escape. Adrenaline coursed through Caw's veins as he took the rails in both hands and slid down, his heels slamming into the platform below. He ran to the next set of stairs and did the same, reaching ground level in seconds. Then he darted across the street. What with the plague of mice and the bad weather, the pavements were almost empty.

Mr Pickwick saw Caw coming and squinted. "Sorry, closing early," he said. "Vermin infestation."

"I'm the crow talker," said Caw urgently. They had to get inside before the convicts' van arrived.

The old man looked him up and down suspiciously.

"He's with me," said a voice from above.

Crumb and Pip were hovering in the rain, held by several dozen pigeons.

Mr Pickwick smiled grimly as they landed in front of him. "I stand corrected. Come in – quickly."

The bank was smart and old-fashioned, with wooden counters embossed with bronze plating, and a huge mural of swirling oil colours on one wall. The air smelt of floor polish and the only sounds were the scuffing of footsteps as Mr Pickwick's staff hurried out through the back offices.

"How do we lock the doors?" said Caw, looking at the glass panels sliding shut behind them.

"There's a switch – bottom left," said Mr Pickwick.

Caw found the switch under a clear plastic hood, and pressed it. The thick glass doors glided shut.

"The glass is bulletproof," said Mr Pickwick.

"Call the police anyway," said Crumb.

As the bank manager picked up the phone, a black van screeched to a halt beside the steps outside, making Caw's heart jolt. He recognised the driver's crew-cut hair, and his muscular arms blue with prison tattoos. *Lugmann.*

The convict's eyes widened as he leant over to look into the bank and saw Caw. He grinned crookedly.

Caw grabbed the hilt of his sword.

The back doors of the van burst open and a woman with a shaved head and a pierced lip jumped out. Caw remembered her from the fight on the commissioner's roof. She beckoned to something in the van.

The back of the van lurched downwards, and a giant head peered out. A huge bison sniffed the air then stomped down to the pavement. The sheer size of it made Caw's knees turn to liquid – its hooves were the size of dinner plates. Its head swayed towards them, and it gave a guttural bellow as strings of drool dripped from its mouth.

"Is the door bison-proof?" asked Crumb, his face pale. They stood transfixed as the enormous beast lumbered up the steps, snorting through flared nostrils.

Lugmann stepped out of the van, a large, sleek, black cat following at his heels. He looked up and down the street and then straight at Caw. The panther feral put

his hands together as if in prayer then moved them apart, mouthing, "Open the door."

Caw shook his head.

The shaven-headed woman commanded the bison, and the creature charged forwards, slamming head first into the door with a huge *crash*.

Everyone jumped back. The glass shook, but didn't break. The bison backed up then charged once more. The glass held, but the metal door hinges were twisting out of shape.

"They must have cut the line," said Mr Pickwick, holding the phone limply. "It's dead."

Caw's heart sank. But he pushed his fear aside and let his mind reach out, searching for his crows. Clenching his fists, he drew the birds towards him.

Through the glass, he saw a black cloud swoop down from the surrounding buildings.

*Get the bison!* He sent a murder of crows at the creature, and others broke off and attacked the female feral with their talons.

Her hold on the bison must have been severed as she flailed under the assault of the black birds, because the huge beast staggered back down the steps and thumped into the side of the van.

Lugmann appeared through the flock of birds, wielding a sledgehammer. As he reached the top of the steps, he swung it at the glass doors. The impact reverberated

throughout the bank, making Pickwick jump. Lugmann took a step back and swung again, throwing all his weight behind the hammer. A few cracks appeared in the glass.

Then Crumb's pigeons joined the fight, smacking into Lugmann as he hefted the hammer again. He tried to shake them off, but more swarmed over him. He dropped the sledgehammer and retreated to the van, slamming the door behind him.

"Goodness," said Pickwick. "Are we... Is it over?"

The grunts of the bison were muted through the glass. Lugmann and the feral woman were trapped in the van by the crows and pigeons, staring out with cold malice. Surely someone outside had called the police by now.

But Caw's heart refused to slow down. *It can't be this easy...*

"We did it," said Crumb.

"Not quite," said someone in a familiar Southern drawl.

Caw flinched and spun round. The oil-painted mural that covered one wall was shifting in a way that made his eyes strain and blink. Then the shape of a man emerged, the colours of his suit flickering before settling into pale cream. It was Mr Silk, the moth feral. He tipped his broad-brimmed hat.

"Mighty nice of you to join me, Caw."

Caw flung out a hand, but all of his crows were still outside. He glanced at Crumb, but the pigeon feral had made the same mistake.

"Who are you?" asked Pickwick.

"Just a customer, come to make a withdrawal," said Mr Silk. "A substantial one."

"Pip, get him!" yelled Caw.

A surge of mice flooded towards the moth feral, but Mr Silk merely looked bored as he raised both arms. The walls and ceiling came alive. Thousands of moths peeled from every surface, burying the mice in seconds and smothering Caw's face. He twisted and writhed, struggling to breathe, so thick was the air with tiny fluttering wings. Through the chaos, he saw Pip rolling into a ball and Crumb stumbling over a potted plant.

Caw heard an almighty *crash* and felt a shower of sharp rain across his back. *Glass. Silk is just a distraction!*

He threw himself aside as the bison crashed through the doors and stomped to a halt in the bank lobby, steam rising from its back and nostrils.

In the next moment, the moths lifted away. Light and air rushed over Caw, and he heard a terrified wail.

The bison was looming over Pip, pawing at the ground with its horns lowered. The mouse feral was pressed up against a counter, shaking in fear.

Caw's crows massed by the door, but he held out a hand to stay them. One wrong move and the creature could crush Pip or rip him to pieces with its horns.

"Smart decision," said Lugmann. He stalked past Caw, wielding his sledgehammer once more. His panther

flashed its teeth in Caw's direction. Caw flinched as he felt the heat of the big cat's breath.

"No one do anything stupid," said the convict. "Tyra's beast can kill that kid in a heartbeat. It'll take more than a flock of birds to stop it."

Mr Pickwick finally let go of the useless phone. He laid it gently in its cradle. "What happens now?"

"Show Mr Silk to the vault," said Lugmann.

Mr Pickwick hesitated, and the convict rolled his eyes. Instantly the panther pounced, landing on the counter beside the sparrow feral. It swiped a paw, almost playfully, across his arm. Pickwick cried out as its claws gouged through his suit and blood spattered on to the floor.

"Do as he says," said Crumb, his voice quaking. "Lugmann, if that boy gets hurt..."

"Quiet," said Lugmann. "If you do as we say, he'll live."

Mr Pickwick led the moth feral to a door at the back of the bank, and tapped in a code. Caw angrily watched Mr Silk's cream-coloured suit disappear with Pickwick. The last time he'd seen the moth feral, Mr Silk had plunged into the Blackwater, the filthy river that flowed through the city. Caw had assumed that he'd drowned.

"You're pathetic," said Pip suddenly, his lips trembling.

"Shut your mouth," said Lugmann, brandishing the sledgehammer.

"I'm not scared," retorted Pip.

"Quiet!" said Crumb.

"No!" said Pip. "Even if he kills us, the other ferals will still stop him!"

Tyra laughed. "With birds and mice?" she said. The bison snorted, its massive flanks heaving.

Pip swallowed. "You're just a bunch of greedy crooks," he said. "We work together, and you only look out for yourselves."

"Pip!" said Crumb. "Please, stop!"

"The boy's got more guts than you, pigeon talker," said Lugmann.

Some of the bank employees who'd been hiding in the back came through the door, shouldering the weight of huge canvas sacks with notes spilling out of the tops. They gazed at the bison and the panther in terrified astonishment.

"Load up the van!" said Lugmann impatiently, waving his sledgehammer.

The bank staff carried the sacks through the broken glass doors, down the bank's steps and began to place them in the back of the van. They barely seemed to notice the hundreds of birds massed outside, and as soon as they had loaded the van, they ran off down the street.

Mr Silk reappeared and Lugmann tossed him the van keys.

"We'll be out in a minute. I haven't quite finished here," Lugmann sneered.

Tyra summoned the bison to her and patted its matted fur.

"We've got what we came for, my friend," said Mr Silk, a hand on Lugmann's arm. "Almost three million, by my estimate."

Lugmann shook off the hand, and his cold eyes fell on Pip. "Yes, but my pet hasn't eaten yet."

Caw tensed, ready to jump up. He could sense his crows outside, spreading their wings. Nothing would happen to Pip, not while Caw was still breathing...

Mr Silk paused, removing his hat. He shot a look at Pip, who had begun to cry as the panther paced towards him. "Those weren't our orders," he said quietly.

Lugmann and the moth feral eyeballed each other.

Caw hesitated, his breath catching painfully. *Orders? Who's giving them orders?*

"I'm... reading between the lines," said Lugmann. "Wait in the van, Silk. Unless you want to watch."

The moth feral replaced his hat and, without a backwards glance, he swept out of the bank.

"You promised not to hurt Pip," said Crumb.

"No," said Lugmann. "I promised he'd live. And he will. He can live with one leg, can't he?"

"You've got your money," Caw growled. "Just go."

"Do it," Tyra said, eyes gleaming.

The panther opened its jaws wide.