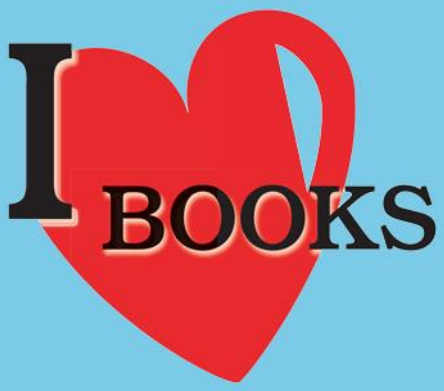


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Written by

Sharon Marie Jones

Illustrated by

Adriana J Puglisi

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Contents

Chapter One: The Black Cat - PAGE 7

Chapter Two: At the Stroke of Midnight - PAGE 17

Chapter Three: The Secret Revealed - PAGE 29

Chapter Four: The Book of Rules - PAGE 38

Chapter Five: Spells for Beginners - PAGE 48

Chapter Six: Slugs, Mice and All Things Nice - PAGE 58

Chapter Seven: Hockey Horrors - PAGE 70

Chapter Eight: Magical Mayhem - PAGE 83

Chapter Nine: The Pumpkin Pie Disaster - PAGE 99

Chapter Ten: Party Preparations - PAGE 107

Chapter Eleven: Spooks, Ghouls and Dancing Shoes - PAGE 118

Chapter Twelve: Fright Night - PAGE 136

Chapter Thirteen: A Witch's Life- PAGE 152



Chapter One

The Black Cat

It all began when the black cat strolled into Number 32, Tŷ Mynydd Close. The Bevin family were eating tea when the cat ambled through the back door, past the kitchen table, and curled up on the living-room rug.

Mrs Bevin sat open-mouthed at the cheek of it. Mr Bevin wiped up the last of his gravy with some bread and butter and didn't notice. Grace-Ella felt bubbles of excitement fizzing in her tummy.

Pulling herself together, Mrs Bevin scurried after the black cat. 'Shoo! Shoo!' she shouted, flapping like a crazed chicken.

The black cat peered lazily at Mrs Bevin, yawned and snuggled back down on the rug. Following her mother into the living

room, Grace-Ella began to giggle.

'This is not a laughing matter,' snapped Mrs Bevin. 'This is not a cattery. Who does he think he is waltzing in here like it's a cat hotel?'

(You see, Iona Bevin was very particular. Ever since her husband had traced her family tree and found out that she was descended from a twelfth-century prince, she thought herself rather important.)

'Now that I know I'm royalty, Bevin is a far too ordinary name, don't you think?' she'd said to her husband. Mrs Bevin had decided that she would no longer be plain old Iona Bevin, but by drawing out the last vowel, had become the rather grander-sounding Mrs Iona Bev*a*n.)

Grace-Ella knelt to stroke the cat. He purred.

'That's not helping,' barked Mrs Bevin,

becoming increasingly hot and bothered. 'Selwyn, will you come in here and get rid of this cat!'

Mr Bevin liked a quiet life. Having decided that being a History teacher wasn't the job for him, he now owned a small bookshop in the seaside town of Aberbetws and spent his days happily reading and straightening the books on the shelves. Mr Bevin's bookshop was always bustling during the summer. Aberbetws attracted many tourists with its sandy beach and hidden coves, and visitors were always interested in old tales of local smugglers.

Despite being a bit of a historian himself, Mr Bevin didn't really like to be bothered by too many questions, and he would usually tell people to try the internet to find their answers.

He wasn't particularly bothered by a black

cat on the living-room rug either.

'Selwyn!' shrieked Mrs Bevin. 'Don't just stand there. Do something.'

'You can't throw him out,' Grace-Ella pleaded. 'He might not have a home. Or he might be lost. He won't be able to find his way in the dark. Can we let him stay, just for tonight? Please?'

Mrs Bevin looked at Mr Bevin. Mr Bevin shrugged. Mrs Bevin sighed in that way of hers.

'One night,' she said, 'then tomorrow we'll put a poster in the shop window and his rightful owner can come and get him.'

Mrs Bevin stalked back into the kitchen.

Mr Bevin smiled at his daughter, picked up his newspaper and turned on the television.

'I'm going to call you Mr Whiskins,' Grace-Ella whispered to the cat.

The following morning, Mr Bevin left for work with strict instructions to place a 'Lost Cat' poster in the bookshop window.

'Under no circumstance will that cat stay another night,' said Mrs Bevin as he climbed into his car.

Grace-Ella spent the day dreading the phone ringing or a knock at the door. She was already quite attached to Mr Whiskins. They were happily snuggled up on the sofa when there came a sudden shriek from the kitchen.

'Dead body!'

Grace-Ella raced down the hallway already suspecting that one of the neighbours would be reporting a murder. She found her mother standing on a chair pointing at a mouse – a very dead looking mouse. Oh dear, she thought. It was beginning to look like Mr Whiskins wasn't

going to get on very well with her mother.

Following the immediate disposal of the dead mouse, peace was once again restored at Number 32 and the rest of the day passed uneventfully. Mr Bevin returned from work and told his wife that yes he had remembered to put the poster in the shop window.

'Well, no one has called,' she snapped. 'I shall have to phone the police.'

Mr Bevin was about to say that this wasn't really a matter for the police, but thought better of it.

Mrs Bevin picked up the phone and dialled 999.

'Police, please. I need assistance with getting rid of a cat…Yes, a cat… Bury it in the back garden? No, no, the cat's not dead. It's curled up in front of the fire… Pardon? No, this is not a hoax call and I'm certainly

not wasting your time. My name is Iona Bev*a*n and I need you to get rid… Hello? Hello?'

She stared at the phone then banged it against the table.

'Hello?' she shouted once more. 'Can you believe it? They've hung up on me. Here we are, law-abiding people who pay all our taxes, and in our hour of need they put the phone down on us. Well, I shall be writing to the Prime Minister about this.'

Mr Bevin was about to say that perhaps the police had a real emergency to sort out, but thought better of it.

'Maybe someone will call tomorrow,' Grace-Ella suggested, her fingers crossed tightly behind her back.

But much to her delight, no one called the next day, or the day after, or the day after

that. A whole week passed and not one person asked about the cat. By now, Grace-Ella had fallen in love with Mr Whiskins. And it was pretty clear that Mr Whiskins was smitten with her too.

Mr Bevin had also become fond of the cat. He liked the way it sat at his feet purring quietly as he watched the television. Of course, he would never admit that to his wife.

That Saturday evening, when they were settling down to watch a DVD, bowls of popcorn on their laps, Grace-Ella felt it was the perfect time to raise the issue.

'Mam, Dad,' she began, then took a deep breath so that she could finish what she had to say before her mother interrupted her. 'I've always wanted a pet and Mr Whiskins would be perfect. He'd be no bother. I'll take care of him. And a cat's far less trouble

than a dog, but far more fun than a goldfish and you'll barely notice he's here and he's been ever such a good cat since the dead mouse and as no one has come to claim him, I was wondering if I could keep him?'

Mrs Bevin looked at Mr Bevin. Mr Bevin shrugged. Mrs Bevin sighed in that way of hers.

'Well, all right … but any mess, any more dead bodies and he will be zooming off to the RSPCA shelter quicker than he can say puss puss!'

Grace-Ella leapt onto her mother, giving her a ginormous hug, sending a shower of popcorn to the floor. Mr Bevin stretched down to pat the purring cat, with a rather silly grin on his face.

Later that night, with the cat curled up at the foot of her bed, Grace-Ella couldn't stop smiling. 'Mr Whiskins, we're going to have

the best fun together,' she said.

Grace-Ella had no idea just how much fun it was going to be.



Chapter Two

At the Stroke of Midnight

If you had been on Tŷ Mynyddd Close that same night, you would have been amazed.

An ominous thundercloud hovered directly above Number 32 all evening. At the stroke of midnight, a flash of green lightning struck the house. In that second, if you'd happened to look up at Grace-Ella's bedroom window, you would have seen a black cat standing on his hind legs, his front legs swaying in the air and his green eyes ablaze.

In the blink of an eye, Number 32 returned to its sleepy state and nothing but a light breeze shuffled the leaves of the trees on Tŷ Mynydd Close.

Grace-Ella woke up the next morning feeling a little peculiar. She lay very still,

then shook her head and rubbed her eyes.

'Good morning,' she said, tickling Mr Whiskins behind his ears as she climbed out of bed. 'I had a really strange dream last night. Must have been the cheese and crackers I ate for supper. Mam always says that eating cheese at bedtime gives you nightmares.'

'A good morning it is indeed,' replied an unfamiliar voice.

She spun around to see who was there. Her room was empty.

'I really shouldn't have eaten that cheese for supper,' she muttered.

'Nothing to do with the cheese,' said the voice again.

She glanced around and peered under her bed.

'It's me, Mr Whiskins. And what a splendibob name you've given me. Gives

me an air of importance, don't you think?'

Grace-Ella gawped at Mr Whiskins then quickly scrunched her eyes closed and took a deep breath.

'I'm dreaming, that's all. I'm still asleep in my bed and any second now I'll wake up and everything will be just as it always is.' She slowly opened one eye and then the other.

'You're not sleeping, and nothing will ever be just as it always was, ever again,' said Mr Whiskins.

'You … but … how … cats don't talk … cats purr and miaow,' Grace-Ella stuttered.

'Ah, but I'm no ordinary cat.'

'But … I don't understand…'

'Sit down and I'll explain,' he said, patting the bed with his paw. 'You, Grace-Ella, have a gift and you are about to embark on a journey of mystery and magic.'



'This cannot be happening. I'm going completely crazy,' said Grace-Ella, 'because cats can't talk and it all sounds like riddles to me anyway.'

'Let me finish and all will come clear.'

Mr Whiskins cleared his throat and raised his head as if he was about to give a royal speech. 'You are about to discover the truth about yourself. But once the secret is revealed, there will be no turning back…'

He paused. Grace-Ella nervously nodded for him to continue.

'Very well. You, Grace-Ella, are … a witch.'

'A witch?' she spluttered. 'Don't be silly. Where's my pointy hat and broomstick? Where's my black … oh.'

She was about to add 'cat', but realised that she did indeed have a black cat, sitting right in front of her.

'A witch! Really!'

'Yes, Grace-Ella, you are a witch. Witchcraft has been in your family for generations. Your Great-Grandmother, Olwen, was a witch. Your mother's cousin, Nesta, is also a witch. And you were born during the year of the black cat and as today is the ninth day of the ninth month of the ninth year of your life, you have been bestowed with the powers of witchcraft.'

Grace-Ella's urge to laugh turned into a prickly feeling at the back of her neck.

'Are you saying there are lots of witches around?' she asked.

'Witches are everywhere. They pass you on the street. They sit next to you on the bus.'

'But witches are dressed in black and wear hats and fly around on broomsticks. I would have noticed them.'

'Those are the witches in stories and at Halloween parties, they're not real witches,' explained Mr Whiskins.

'So how can you tell if someone's a real witch?'

'It's not too difficult, once you know what to look for. For a start, a witch has that something a little bit different about her. Something that you can't quite put your finger on. A niggling that makes you want

to stop and stare.'

Grace-Ella thought about this. Since she was born, people had commented on her bright, green eyes and her shock of black hair, especially as both Mr and Mrs Bevin had fair hair and blue eyes. She supposed that this could be seen as a little odd, and it certainly did made people look twice.

'Take a peek at a witch's feet and you will see that they are outward pointing,' continued Mr Whiskins.

Grace-Ella peered at her feet and noticed that they were slightly outward pointing. Maybe this explained why she was not very good at sports and why her PE teacher, Miss Fitz, always wrote in her school report that she seemed to have two left feet.

'A witch's hands move quickly, as on the palm of their left hand hides a green five-pointed star.'

Grace-Ella breathed a sigh of relief. She turned her left palm upwards to prove to Mr Whiskins that he had made a terrible mistake … then screamed.

There, as bold as your nose, was a small, yet perfectly formed glimmering green five-pointed star.

'And of course,' Mr Whiskins ended, 'every witch has a black cat. You have a magnifulous gift. Magic in the tips of your fingers…'

'A witch,' Grace-Ella whispered, staring at the star on her hand. 'I suppose I've always known I was a bit different.'

Grace-Ella had never really felt like a traditional little girl. She would kick and scream when her mother tried to dress her in anything pink and frilly and insisted on wearing dark purple or black.

She'd been expelled from her first ballet

lesson for biting Madame Monique when she tried to pull on her tutu.

She wasn't scared of the dark or creepy-crawlies and would set spiders out gently in the back garden when she found one in the house.

She sometimes found a frog in the garden pond and would put it in the bathtub to



keep as a pet. Only the other week, Mrs Bevin had found one just as she was about to have a relaxing, bubbly soak before bed. Horrified, she had phoned Environmental Health, demanding that they come at once to get rid of the slithery thing.

Grace-Ella was happiest out in the back garden, playing with Bedwyr from next door. They collected bugs to keep in Bedwyr's shed for his scientific experiments. He dissected the bugs then looked up their anatomy on his computer, hence his nickname, Bedwyr Bug-Buster. It had caused Mrs Bevin great distress to see her daughter come into the house, hands caked in mud and clothes smeared with dirt.

'Grace-Ella,' she would say despairingly, 'little girls don't roll around in mud. Little girls are nice and sweet and pretty. It's that

ghastly boy's influence, that's what it is.'

Mrs Bevin was utterly baffled and couldn't understand what on earth she had done wrong. She took Grace-Ella to the doctor and after having every test imaginable done, a disgruntled Mrs Bevin was told that her daughter was a perfectly normal, healthy little girl.

On Grace-Ella's fifth birthday, a beaming Mrs Bevin enrolled her daughter at St Winifred's Private Girls' School, determined that she would become a perfect young lady (as was fitting for a royal descendant).

Mr Bevin couldn't understand why his wife insisted on paying for their daughter to attend a school ten miles away. He had wanted to say that she would do just fine at the local school, but he thought better of it.

So Grace-Ella being a witch did actually

explain a lot of things.

'What should I do now?' she asked Mr Whiskins.

'You'll have to tell your parents. But I have a wiggling in my whiskers that your mother isn't going to take the news too well.'

Mr and Mrs Bevin were sitting at the kitchen table. Mr Bevin was about to say good morning, but Mrs Bevin began to speak before he'd had the chance.

'What were you screaming about up there? Don't tell me, that cat left you a nice present on your bed. I knew it wouldn't take him long to start showing his true colours. Well, you know what I said, any mess…'

'Mam, Dad,' Grace-Ella began, interrupting her mother's outburst. 'There's something important we need to tell you.'

Chapter Three
The Secret Revealed

'A witch!' shrieked Mrs Bevin. 'A witch! That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. It's all this commercial Halloween nonsense, that's what it is. Don't tell me, you're going to insist on going to school tomorrow in a witch's costume and you won't be needing a lift, as you'll be flying there on your broomstick.'

Mrs Bevin looked at Mr Bevin. Mr Bevin shrugged. Mrs Bevin sighed in that way of hers. 'Say something, Selwyn,' she hissed.

'Perhaps we should listen to what they have to say?' he suggested.

'They? They? That is a cat sitting on your daughter's lap. Unless you've turned into Dr Dolittle overnight, you can't talk to a cat.'

'Ah, but you are mistaken,' said Mr



Whiskins.

Mrs Bevin leapt out of her chair with a window-shattering scream.

Mr Bevin leaned forward, more animated than he'd ever been in his entire life.

'Let me explain,' said Mr Whiskins.

Neither Mrs Bevin nor Mr Bevin blinked as Mr Whiskins told them about the generations of witches in the family.

'So you see,' he ended, 'if you look again at your family tree, you'll find not only

royalty in your blood, but also witchcraft. And as Grace-Ella was born in the year of the black cat, she is now a witch.'

Mrs Bevin turned incredibly pale. She tried to speak but no sound came out.

Mr Bevin was completely flummoxed – how on earth had he missed this vital information when researching their family tree?

'I suppose,' Mrs Bevin finally spoke in a quavery voice, 'this does explain why Granny Olwen was such a wicked old hag.'

'My Great Grandfather was Granny Olwen's black cat,' said Mr Whiskins, 'and he didn't have a bad word to say against her.'

Mrs Bevin narrowed her eyes. 'Bottletops. I remember the horrible thing. He was always hissing and baring his teeth at me.'

'It doesn't matter what Granny Olwen

was like,' interrupted Grace-Ella. 'What's important is that I'm a witch. And it does explain a lot, doesn't it?'

Iona Bevin was dumbfounded. She had always felt that there was something terribly wrong with her daughter, but this was too much.

'This is awful,' she snivelled. 'What am I going to do? I'll be an outcast. I'll have to become a recluse. We'll have to move away … somewhere remote … a shack on top of the highest mountain …'

'Perhaps it's not as bad as you think,' said Mr Bevin.

Grace-Ella turned eagerly to her father.

'Now you won't need to worry about why Grace-Ella sometimes struggles to fit in. We know now that she's not different, she's gifted. I think we're very lucky to have such a special daughter,' he said smiling.

Mrs Bevin dabbed delicately at her eyes with her scarf. 'Will she have to attend a special witch school?' she asked.

'No, Grace-Ella will learn witchcraft herself,' said Mr Whiskins. 'We don't want witches to close themselves away from everyone else. Her first package should arrive today. She can go to Witch Camp and there are the annual WCAs, the Witch Council Awards, which you can attend as a family.'

As she listened to Mr Whiskins talking, Grace-Ella began to have a heavy sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

'What if I'm no good at being a witch?' she asked quietly. 'Mam often says I'm not the brightest grape in the bunch and I never have glowing school reports.'

'That's because you've never had the chance to shine. You wait and see. I bet

you become a magnifulous-splendifulous witch,' said Mr Whiskins.

Grace-Ella smiled.

'And what kind of future will my daughter have as a … a witch?' asked Mrs Bevin.

'Well, think of Harmony Enchanta, the world-famous perfumer. I think you wear her perfume, '*Enchanted*'? She is a witch, of course.'

Mrs Bevin perked up. 'Harmony Enchanta?'

'And the fashion designer, Serena Starling,' continued Mr Whiskins. '*Serena's designs, sprinkled with magic*.'

'Blimey,' said Mrs Bevin. 'I had no idea. So Grace-Ella could be world-famous one day? Imagine what Anne will say to that. She's forever going on about how her Amelia is more than ready for university, as she's been reading fluently since the



age of two. Worldwide fame, now that is something worth boasting about.'

'Perhaps we shouldn't tell anyone,' said Grace-Ella. 'I don't want everyone pointing at me in school and whispering behind my back. They think I'm odd enough as it is.'

'Grace-Ella's right,' said Mr Whiskins. 'This must be kept a family secret.'

He pounced suddenly to the floor and slowly circled the room. The Bevins edged forwards in their chairs, watching his every

move.

'Remember that there could be eyes and ears lurking anywhere,' he whispered.

'I can put you straight right now,' snapped Mrs Bevin, shattering the air of mystery. 'There's nothing lurking in my house. Not a cobweb in sight. But I suppose you're right. It'll be best to keep it a secret. People can be very ignorant about this sort of thing, very narrow-minded. And I doubt very much that a witch would be accepted at St Winifred's. Yes, my lips shall remain sealed.'

Mr Bevin nearly said that they'd be more likely to see a pig fly, but thought better of it.

The doorbell rang, stopping them all.

'I sense your first package,' said Mr Whiskins. 'I have a tingling in my tail.'

Bursting with excitement, Grace-Ella ran to the front door.

'Parcels for Miss Grace-Ella Bevin,' announced the postman. 'Sign here, please.'

Grace-Ella carefully signed and balanced the brown paper parcels precariously in her arms. Wanting to give her parents space to digest her news, knowing that her mother was still in shock and needed a strong coffee, she tottered up to her bedroom to open them.