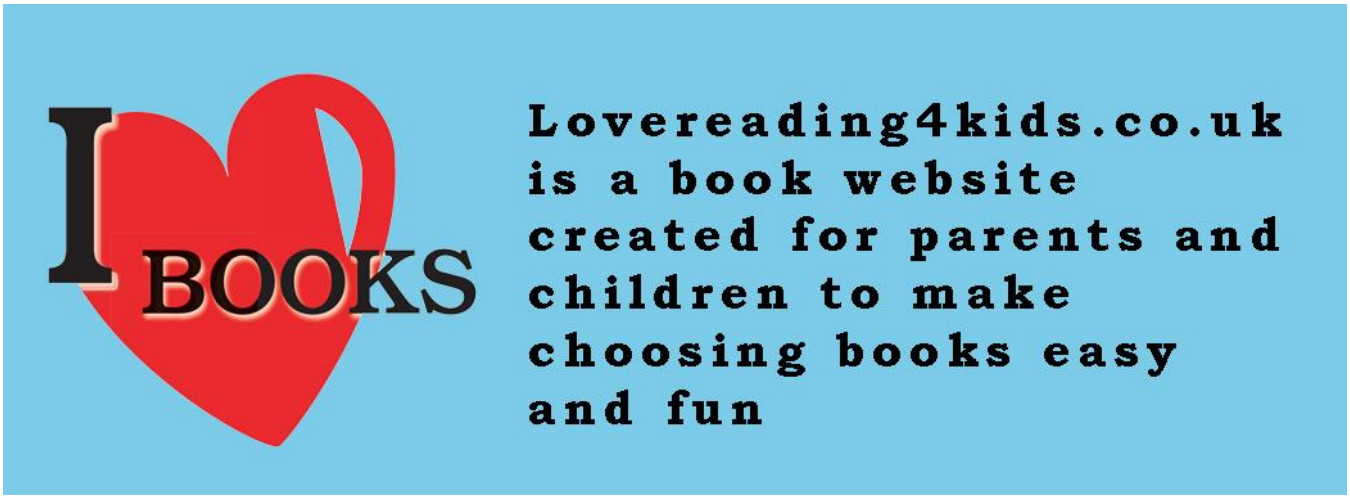


Opening extract from

Magic Kitten: A Christmas Surprise

Written by

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⋆ Prologue ⋆

Dust swirled round the young white lion's paws as he bounded through the dry valley. Flame knew he shouldn't risk being out in the open. But maybe this time it would be safe.

Suddenly, a terrifying roar rang out and an enormous black adult lion burst out from behind some thorn trees and bounded towards him.

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'Ebony!'

Flame leapt into a clump of tall grass. A bright white flash filled the air and where he had once stood, now crouched a tiny, snowy-white kitten with a fluffy tail.

Flame's heart thudded in his tiny chest as he edged slowly backwards to where the grass grew more thickly. His Uncle Ebony was very close. He hoped this disguise would protect him.

The stems to one side of Flame parted with a rustle and a big dark shape pushed towards him. Flame tensed ready to fight, his emerald eyes sparking with anger and fear.

'Stay there, Prince Flame. I will protect you,' growled a deep but gentle voice.

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Flame gave a faint mew of relief, as an old grey lion peered down at him. 'Cirrus. I am glad to see you again. I had hoped that by now Ebony would be ready to give back the throne he stole from me.'

Cirrus shook his head gravely. 'That will never happen. Your uncle is determined to rule in your place and sends many spies to search for you and kill you. It is not safe for you to be here. Use this disguise and go back to the other world to hide.'

The tiny kitten bared his sharp teeth as he looked up into Cirrus's tired old face. 'I wish I could fight him now!'

Cirrus's eyes flickered with affection. He reached out a huge paw and gently patted Flame's tiny fluffy white head.

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'Bravely said, but now is not the time. Return when you are strong and wise.'

Suddenly another mighty roar rang out. The ground shook as huge paws thundered into the tall grass and then came the cracking of crushed stems.

'You cannot hide from me!' roared Ebony's harsh cruel voice.

'Save yourself, Flame! Go quickly!' Cirrus urged.

Sparks glowed in the tiny kitten's silky white fur. Flame mewed softly as he felt the power building inside him. He felt himself falling. Falling . . .

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★ Chapter ★
ONE

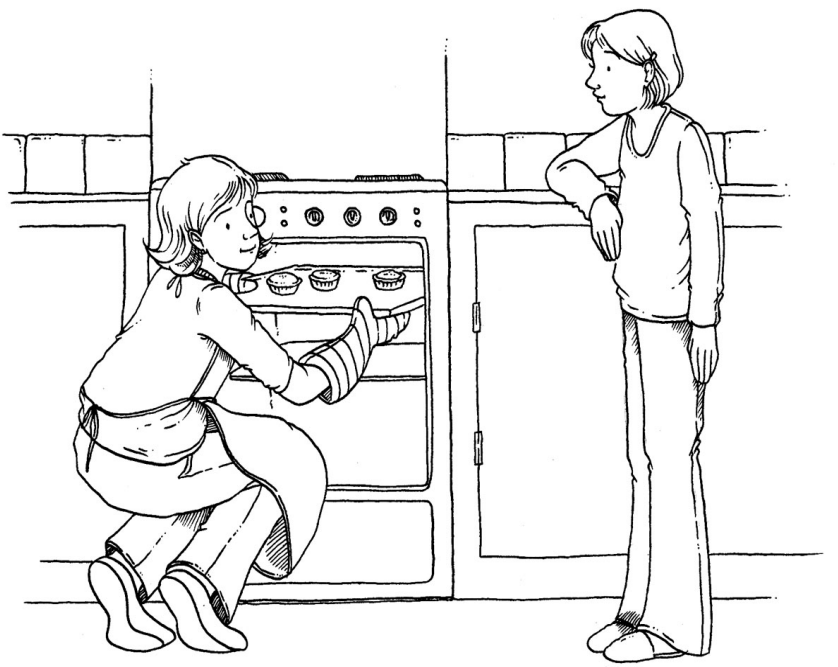
'I really hope it's going to be a white Christmas!' Molly Paget said, peering hopefully out of the landing window. She sighed as raindrops snaked down the glass and blurred her view of the street outside. 'Oh, well. There's still a week to go.'

Molly jumped down the stairs two at a time and went into the kitchen where

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a delicious spicy smell filled the air. Her mum was just fetching a tray of mince pies out of the oven.

Mrs Paget looked up and smiled. 'I heard you clumping down the stairs. What's the hurry?'



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Molly grinned. 'There isn't one. I'm just feeling in a good mood. Can I have one of those pies?'

Her mum nodded. 'Course you can. Take one of those on the plate – they're cooler.'

Molly picked up a mince pie and bit into the sweet crumbly pastry. 'Mmm, yummy. Tastes Christmassy!'

Her mum smiled. 'I'm glad it passes the Molly test!'

'When are Gran and Gramps arriving?' Molly asked, munching.

Her grandparents lived near the coast. She hadn't seen them since the summer holidays, but they were going to spend Christmas at Molly's house. Molly's eyebrows dipped in a small frown as she remembered how during the last visit

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to her grandparents' house, she had had to take her shoes off before going into the sitting room. Everyone always sat at the table to eat and no one was allowed to watch TV in the daytime. Molly hoped Gran would be less strict this Christmas.

'They'll be here the day before Christmas Eve,' her mum said, wiping her hands on her apron. 'I've still got puddings to make, a cake to ice and heaps of presents to buy. And we haven't even made a start on clearing out the spare bedroom.' A worried look crossed her face. 'Your gran's lovely, but she has very high standards.'

Tell me about it, Molly thought. 'I'll help you. I'm brilliant at clearing up and stuff,' she said brightly.

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'It's nice of you to offer, but Molly and the word "help" can sometimes spell trouble!' Mrs Paget said wryly, ruffling her daughter's blonde hair. 'I'll get your dad to give me a hand with the bedroom. It's his parents who are staying, after all.'

'Did I hear my name mentioned?' Mr Paget said, coming into the kitchen. His hair was speckled with dust and there were cobwebs sticking to his blue jumper. He quickly washed his hands before helping himself to a mince pie.

'Da-ad! You've got yucky stuff all over you,' Molly said, laughing. She reached up to pick off a cobweb.

'Have I? I didn't notice,' Mr Paget said around a mouthful of pie. 'I've just been in the attic. I had to move a

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mountain of old rubbish to get to the Christmas tree and decorations. Anyway, I found them in the end. They're in the sitting room.'

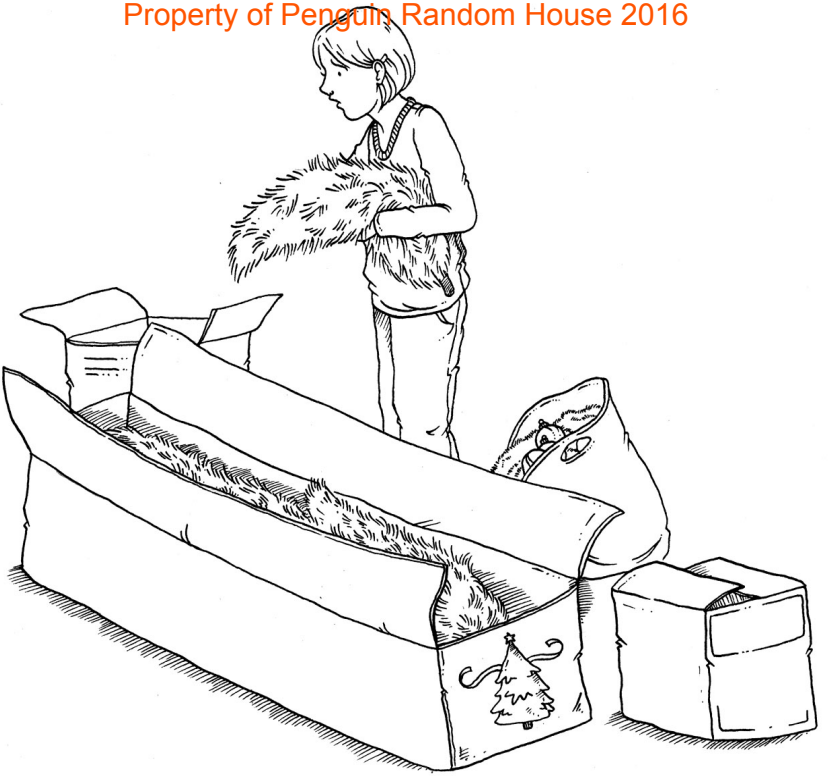
'Brilliant!' Molly said excitedly, already speeding out of the kitchen. 'I'm going to put the tree up right now!'

'Slow down a bit, Molly!' her mum called after her.

But Molly had already gone. Mr Paget shook his head slowly. 'Molly's only got two speeds. Fast and faster!' he said as he followed his daughter.

By the time her dad came into the sitting room, Molly had her arms full of folded, green spiky branches. 'There's an awful lot of tree,' she said, peering into the long box. 'I don't remember it being so huge.'

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Mr Paget laughed. 'Well it can't have grown since last year, can it, you muppet? I'll fetch the step-ladder.'

'That's a job well done!' Mr Paget said an hour later.

Molly looked up at the Christmas

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tree, which almost touched the sitting-room ceiling. 'It's dead impressive. I can't wait to decorate it!' She fished about in another cardboard box and produced some tissue-wrapped packages. Unwrapping one of them, she looked closely at the blue glass bauble. 'Isn't this lovely? It's got silver-frosted snowflake patterns all over it,' she said delightedly. 'Have we got any more like this?'

Her dad nodded. 'There are lots of them. I remember them hanging on our Christmas tree when I was little.'

'Really? They must be ancient then,' Molly said.

'Cheeky!' Mr Paget said, grinning, giving her a playful nudge in the arm. 'I'd forgotten we had those baubles. Be