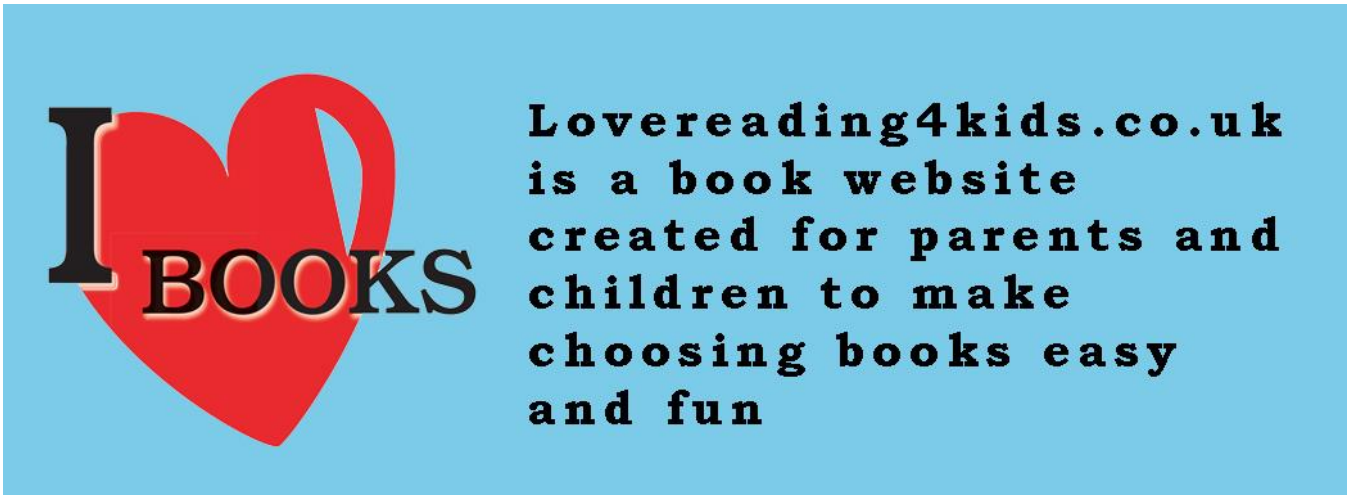


Opening extract from

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Written by

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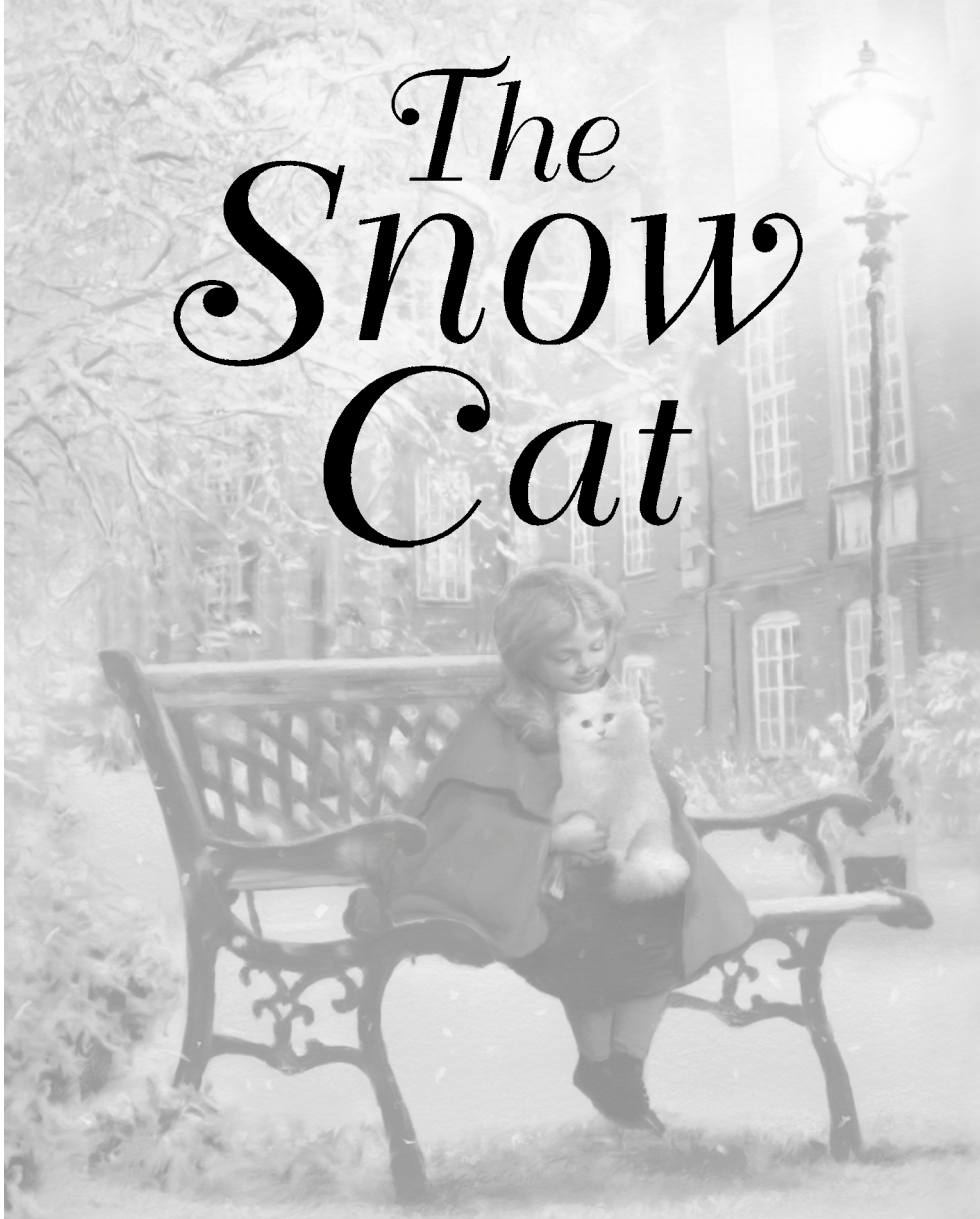
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The Snow Cat



HOLLY WEBB

Stripes

For Charlotte Fennell

~ HOLLY WEBB

To Sandy and Diana - cat rescuers

~ JO



CHAPTER ONE



"Do you like it, Bel?" Gran smiled at her.

"I don't know. I think so – but it's so different." Bel looked around the little living room of the flat. It was such an odd mixture – all Gran's old things, but in new places, and looking a bit squashed and awkward.

"I know it feels strange, dear, but it'll be so much easier for me living here than it was in my old house. Hardly any cleaning to do, and no stairs. And it'll be nice having neighbours so close. You'll still see me, Bel love, don't worry."

Bel nodded uncertainly. She already knew all that. Mum and Gran had explained it to her. And she'd seen that Gran was getting frailer, and finding it hard to get up and down the stairs. But it

still felt weird, knowing that she wouldn't be living in the house down at the end of the road any more. Bel couldn't pop in and see her after school, not in the same way. Oak House, the sheltered housing Gran had moved to, was a few minutes' drive away. It wasn't the same at all.



"It's such a lovely old house," Mum said. "I wonder who lived here before? It feels as though a house like this should have so many stories."

Gran nodded. "They gave me a little booklet about the history of the house. I've put it down somewhere, I can't quite remember where. But I'll show it to you both when I find it. The house was built in the 1850s, I remember that much. And the gardens were laid out then, too. They're quite old-fashioned, with the shrubbery and the fish ponds, but I love them. They'll be so nice for sitting in on sunny days."

Bel wasn't quite sure what a shrubbery was, but she loved the gardens, too. They were huge, and even just coming up the drive she'd seen a couple of statues, and a glint of water from a lily pond. It was

almost like Gran was living in a stately home.

"Why don't you go and explore?" Gran suggested.

"Am I allowed?"

"Of course you are! If anyone asks why you're there, just explain that you're visiting me," Gran said, and Mum nodded encouragingly.

"It'll be fine."

Bel looked out of the window – it was a sunny autumn afternoon, and there were drifts of leaves under the great trees. She felt like running across the grass, and kicking the leaves up in clouds, but the gardens looked so empty, and lonely. "All right," she murmured, a little reluctantly.

"You can go straight out here, look." Gran pointed to some tall glass doors.

"I'm lucky to have a flat on the ground floor – it's lovely just to be able to walk out into the gardens. And I can sit here by the doors and watch the squirrels."

Bel smiled. She could see a squirrel now, chasing along one of the low branches of a big horse chestnut tree. Maybe it was where he had his nest. Suddenly she felt a lot more cheerful. She let herself out on to the narrow paved terrace outside the glass doors, and then hurried down the steps, planning to see how close she could get to him. She loved squirrels – they had such neat little ears, and sparkling black eyes, and they always looked clever. Mum said they dug up the tulip bulbs in her flowerpots when they came into the garden at home, but Bel thought it was worth it.

Bel set off across the lawn, walking

slowly so as not to scare the squirrel away. She was glad she had her thick cardigan on – it was one that Gran had knitted for her, white and made like a sort of fluffy jacket. She was only wearing it because they were visiting Gran, it was a bit old-fashioned and babyish-looking, but Bel knew it would make Gran happy to see her in it. Still, she shivered a little as she crossed the grass. It was only late October, but the weather was already getting really chilly. There had been a frost that morning – she could still see patches of it on the shaded parts of the grass, where the sun hadn't melted it away.

Bel sighed as the squirrel spotted her coming, and dashed up to the top of his tree, chattering crossly. Perhaps he wasn't used to there being many visitors.

Or maybe he thought she was after his winter stores. She waved to him and walked on, making for the dark clumps of trees beyond the lawn. Maybe this was what Gran had called the shrubbery? It looked to Bel like a small wood, full of fir trees and evergreen bushes. They were set out in clumps, with little paths winding in-between them, Bel realized as she got closer. And there were statues, too, here and there among the trees. As though this was a place made for walking around and admiring. The tall glossy-leaved bushes cut out the cold wind as she slipped into the grove. It was a good place to play on a chilly day.

Bel walked all round, looking at the statues – there were so many. Her favourite was a little boy, just at the entrance to



the shrubbery. At first she thought he was wearing furry trousers, but then she saw he had hooves, too – he was half-goat. She found another fish pond, a tiny one, full of darting golden-orange fishes. She crouched beside the pond, watching them for a while, and then heard her mum calling across the lawn.

"You were gone for ages," Gran said, smiling. "Did you find some nice places to explore?"

"I was in the shrubbery – those trees over there. That is the shrubbery, isn't it?" Bel pointed. "There's a pond, with fish in it. The gardens are amazing, Gran."