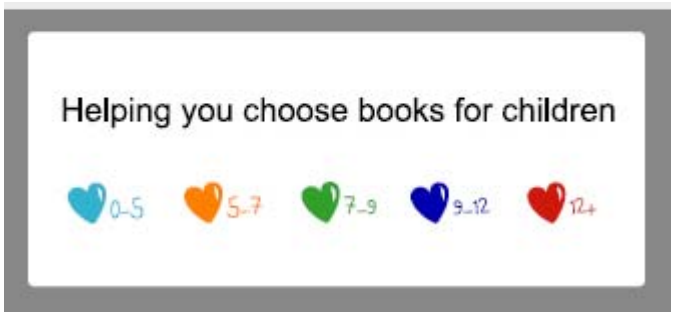
Lovereading4kids.co.uk



opening extract from

Fight Game

written by

Kate Wild

published by

Chicken House Ltd

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER 1

I was halfway down the drainpipe, hanging on for dear life. I couldn't go any further because there was a policewoman down below, nailing a poster to the wall. I'd seen the same thing pinned up all over town, asking for information about this Johnny fella.

MISSING PERSON

Johnny Sparrow
17 years old

Last seen in this area wearing a blue sweatshirt with an All England Karate Squad logo, denim jeans and trainers. Anyone with information should contact **01733 4592321**

It was past midnight, so it was just my bad luck to run into the policewoman. And even though I swear to God I wasn't up to anything bad, it didn't look good for a gypsy boy to be shinning down the nineteenth-century drainpipe

of the cathedral.

I'd been up on the roof, but only so's I could sit on the highest ledge and eat my takeaway Chicken Balti and Peshwari Nan with only the gargoyles and the stars for company. This combined my two favourite pastimes: climbing the highest thing I can find, and eating chillies. But you can bet that if the policewoman saw me coming down she'd think I'd been up there after the lead or something.

I'd got a good grip on the pipe, the sort monkeys use on tree trunks when they're climbing. It meant my feet acting like another pair of hands, so I could hold on for a while longer without moving, but not for ever. I was already losing the skin on my palms to the rusted iron of the pipe. So to take my mind off my predicament I began thinking about what my mammy'd do if I got lost. I don't think she'd sit back and rely on posters; traveller kids are like little princes and princesses. If you don't believe me just go to a gypsy wedding and see them all in their D & G Junior, with their mammies and daddies watching them with doting eyes. Gypsy families are so close-knit, there's never a chance to stray.

I shifted my grip slightly. Another cop had joined the policewoman and they were standing talking. Jeez, didn't they have any crooks to chase?

'Johnny Sparrow? Is he one of the Sparowski Corporation Sparrows?' said the cop, nodding at the poster.

'Yep, the only son,' said the policewoman. 'Ran away from boarding school. Last seen living rough near the park. Poor

little rich boy, eh?'

I let go with one hand and shook it to get some life back in it. This Johnny Sparrow should have been a traveller boy, then he wouldn't have had to run away from school. I'm almost sixteen and I've hardly seen the inside of a school since I was eleven. At eleven we go out with our dads and learn something useful like a trade, instead of sitting behind a desk all day long. It's not that our parents don't want us educated. If we could afford private tutors, then I swear we'd all have degrees and letters after our names. They just don't like us out of their sight. As I said, we don't get lost, not like this Johnny Sparrow.

There was a crack and the nineteenth-century pipe left the wall by a couple of inches fraction. Bits of brick showered down. I made myself light. I swear, if I'm desperate enough I can nearly hover when I want to. It's not magic, it's how you spread your weight, just a tiny movement can shift the balance in your favour. It's a monkey thing again, just watch them, they're the masters.

'What the hell—?' The cop brushed brick dust from his shoulder.

'What's up?'

'Thought I heard something up there.'

I froze. The cop was squinting up through the darkness. If he shone a torch he'd see me straight away. The world stopped and my fate hung in the balance. All that happened after that – my life getting tangled with Johnny's, the girl, the cops and the fighting – none of it would have happened if he'd shone his torch upwards. My life was at a crossroads,

but I didn't know it then.

'Want to check it out?'

'Nah, let's go and visit All-night Ned's and get a cuppa.'

The world started spinning again, and my path was set. I gave it a couple of minutes, then dropped down the last twenty feet or so and legged it back to the trailers taking the scenic route, which meant running along walls and across low roofs and not touching the ground at all. It might be dangerous but it's my preferred method of crossing town. I blame it on one of my ancestors, a fighting man by the name of Hercules Smith. He's the reason I'm a freak.

Chapter Two

One hundred and fifty years ago my great-great-great-granddaddy, Hercules Smith, was a champion of the fairground fighting booths. By the time he was twenty he'd beaten all the best fighters: Gentleman Jim, The Sledgehammer, Jack the Knife, and even Granite Tom. After that he made mincemeat of Queen Victoria's favourites, Davy 'Welsh Terrier' Jones and the London Hornet. He could go ninety rounds even with his knuckles split and his legs giving way. He just wouldn't go down no matter what, and no fighter could stop him.

And it wasn't just in the ring that he was unbeatable. No one could stop him in life either. He could run from the cops, swerving like a lurcher after a hare, and he could go up drainpipes like a rat. They say he knew the roofs of a town better than he knew the streets below. Eventually they tried hanging him for horse thieving just to slow him down, but he escaped even that.

Then for the next century and a half Hercules' sons, and

then their sons, became bare-knuckle fighters in their own right. And so it went on, each son stronger than the last, until the Smith fighters had sinews of steel and bones made of granite, and minds that could switch to reptile thinking at a moment's notice.

'If you want to fight like Hercules, you've got to use your reptile brain,' my daddy used to tell us. 'A crocodile's got only one concern, survival. Kick him and he'll bite back without a second thought. He doesn't hold a grudge, his brain just goes, *Someone kicked me! Bite!*'

Hercules' reptile thinking was what made the Smiths unbeatable.

But it wasn't the only thing. In each generation a boy would be born who could punch harder and run faster and had reflexes faster than greased lightning. And sometimes these champion Smiths led long lives full of sporting glory, even though it was an illegal behind-closed-doors glory. But usually they led short fast lives that ended with them dancing on the end of a rope.

Now I'm the one to wear that particular crown. I'm Freedom Hercules Smith, the only one ever named after the old fighter, and I don't know whether I'm going to end up with the glory, but it wasn't looking very good for me.

There was a problem, see.

There didn't seem to be a use for boys like me any more. I was growing up, and getting too big and too troublesome. But was I going to be like Uncle Shady, a bare-knuckle fighter with a cauliflower ear, a nose like a squashed tomato and the shakes from getting one too many knocks to his

head? Or was I going to be like Granddaddy Bartley Smith, a rogue? They say the local prison kept a cell ready for him, he was in and out so often. Or would I sell out like some of us, and go and live in a house and get a job working for someone?

A sideshow, a sell-out or a crook. Was that it?

The truth was, I'd fight for ever for my family, and no one could stop me when I really got going – not even my daddy, even though he was a champ in his day too. The last time we had a row I ended up coming to live with my sister, so that we weren't near each other any more.

And what did the police tell me every time I got into trouble?

They said fighting was wrong and I must go to school.

Some chance.

When I got back from my expedition on the cathedral roof, I found that a skinhead had spray-painted 'Burn the Pikeys' on the side of my sister's home. It seemed they didn't like it because it was a home on wheels and parked on spare ground.

Worst of all, my little nieces saw it and asked me what it said. So I put on my clown act and said, 'Don't worry, it's just some bad fellas. They've gone now. They won't be coming back.'

And I kept my fingers crossed behind my back, because if the bad fellas did come back I'd deal with them, but not while the girls were around.

'If they did, would you get 'em for us, Fwed?' said little

Whitney Jade, reading my mind. 'Would you be a deadeye knight?'

'It's Jedi Knight, and 'course I would. You don't ever need to fear anybody in all your lives,' I said, quietly, so no one would hear.

'Leave it, Fred,' said my sister, who's got ears like a hare's. 'You know what the police told you, leave it or you'll get into trouble.' She looked away and then back. 'Old Hercules' strength is like a curse to the Smiths. Nothing good ever comes of it.'

And in the back of my mind all I kept thinking was: I wish someone would stop me. But that's the problem. There was no one.

'I'm burning inside about it and my fists are itching,' I said to her. Crystal understands me sometimes. She's inherited some of the Smith fighting spirit as well. But this time she grabbed my chin and made me look at her.

'Leave it. Mammy'll break her heart if you go to prison.'

'OK.' But I knew I'd go back on my word.

And I did, that very night.

Chapter Three

I was stretched out like a cat and just as silent.

Our little camp site was bathed in moonlight. We were on a bit of spare ground between two factories. The remains of our camp fire smouldering in the still summer air. It wasn't long after midnight, the unholy hour when trouble always brews. The air was still warm after a scorching hot day, and now there was a smell of thunder in the air. But the only things disturbing the silence of the night were a couple of flitting shadows, and the sound of two people breathing as quietly as possible.

'You got the spray paint?' whispered one.

'I've got more than that!' came the reply.

One shadow moved and then the other, silently surveying the site. Then the two shapes retreated under the old conker tree growing out of the tarmac by the entrance to the car park.

There was a small pop, like a cork being pulled from an already-opened bottle of wine, and then a potent scent

blossomed in the air.

Petrol. It smelt like hatred.

'Jesus Christ, Clunk!' said the first whisperer, the one who thought he was here to do another paint job on the trailer. 'Are you mad?'

Yes, I'd say he was mad. Anyone with a nickname like Clunk couldn't have much up top.

'We warned 'em,' said Clunk, in a whisper that turned my spine to ice. 'And they didn't move.' He spat on the ground. 'Anyway, that cocky kid needs teaching a lesson.'

Me, presumably.

'I've seen him strutting round acting tough,' said Clunk, and spat again.

The spray paint had obviously just been a warning. Now Clunk, who must have been watching our peaceful little camp, was going to stage two. Or so he thought.

'I'm out of here!' said his friend, but I saw Clunk grab him by his hooded top.

'Stay where you are, kid. You're in this now whether you want it or not.'

They were close together now. It couldn't have been more perfect. I rolled from the conker tree's branch and dropped on them like an avenging angel.

'Sorry, didn't ruin anything, did I?' I said, but for the moment they weren't listening. They were on the floor, winded and trying to clear their heads. The bottle of petrol flew through the air and landed on the smouldering camp fire. With a soft *whump* it burst into flames, illuminating the arena for me.

By the flickering light of the flames I had a split second to decide who to tackle first, the leader or the follower. The one who's the boss and calling the shots can be dangerous, but a follower can be just as bad. Some people will become saints if they follow a good man, but will outdo the devil if they hitch up with a bad guy.

The one in the hooded sweatshirt was the first to get groggily to his feet, so I made my decision. I left Clunk, who was still winded on the ground, and squared up to meet Hoodie.

Funnily enough, without his friend he didn't seem to want to square up to me.

'OK, this is all a mistake!' he said, and I could hear the fear in his voice. I think he hadn't recovered from the shock of seeing Clunk brandish a Molotov cocktail followed by me appearing from nowhere.

'Ssh! Keep your voice down!' I whispered, bouncing backwards. 'We don't want the gavvers, do we?'

'The what?' he mumbled, stumbling towards me. But I moved further back again. I don't think he'd got all his wits yet, because he hadn't worked out I was trying to edge him further away from the trailers.

'Gavvers, police, cops, it's all the same,' I said, still moving lightly on my toes away from him. To tell you the truth, it was my sister's baby I didn't want him disturbing. Jeez, if that little terror woke up, he'd squawk the place down. Then my sister'd come out and she'd probably do more damage to Hoodie than me, because Little Frisco could cry for England when woken up.

I was still dancing back, keeping out of his way, when he got his courage back and lunged forward, punching me on the shoulder. I think he'd got the impression that I couldn't fight back, that I was retreating out of fear. He didn't know that to me the art of fighting is *not* fighting – until you really have to. On good days I believe this is because underneath it all I'm honourable. But on bad days I think it's because, maybe, I won't know how to stop.

He'd got his hood pulled up well up over his head so's I couldn't see his face, couldn't read his thoughts, which is important in a fight. But he was a trier, I'll give him that. Here he was now, getting into a fancy karate position and ghost walking towards me.

Ghost walking, God help him! I could almost hear the ghost of old Hercules saying, 'What the devil is he doing that for? Just kick him in the vulnerables and be done with all this fancy nonsense!'

But I didn't do that. I just bounced back a bit more, and let him expend more of his energy.

'Scared to face me, eh?' he said, breaking into my thoughts. And he punched me hard on the jaw. Which just goes to show, never start thinking deeply in the middle of a fight. In fact, don't think at all, just go with your reptile brain, like old Hercules recommended. So I did. For the first time I put my fists up and I fixed him in my sight.

I've got an ugly mug and I look even worse when I'm scowling. And with the flickering flames of the camp fire casting shadows over my face as well, I probably looked like the devil's apprentice. He took one look at me and froze,

now he'd got the fight he'd been asking for.

His problem was that he was a follower, a plus-one. I think he was waiting for the referee to say 'Go', or for his girlfriend to say, 'Leave 'im, love, he ain't worth it!' or for his mate to pull him back by the hood of his sweatshirt. He took one look at my fists, and the look in my eye, and he backed off a little. I was glad of it; things were getting too noisy. So I swung a huge slow punch towards him and let him dodge it, to give him a bit of encouragement. It worked; he saw his chance and raced by me, and then he disappeared into the balmy night.

It was good he'd done a runner because my real enemy, the skinhead called Clunk, had now leapt to his feet and was coming at me from behind.

This one was trained, and trained well. But whoever had trained him shouldn't have, because he was the unstable pup, the one that'd bite anyone, friend or foe, if he was in the mood. Not only that, he was super-fuelled by high-octane hatred. He didn't need a hood to hide his face because he knew that no one who saw his face, when he didn't want it seen, would be in a fit state to pick him out of a police line-up.

He came at me like a pit bull after the neighbour's cat. He expected me to take a big swing at him but I sidestepped to off-balance him, and he tripped and fell. But he was back up in seconds and coming at me again. He knew his stuff; he went for the centre line where the pressure points are, so I let him punch me for a few seconds then feinted to the left as though I'd stumbled from his blows. He was running on

hatred so he wasn't thinking clearly, or he'd have known what I was doing. But just for that split second he let down his guard, thinking I was going to fall. That was my chance. I tripped him again, and this time I leapt onto his back whilst he was still flat out. Then I got his arm into a lock.

'Murderer. You were going to set fire to the trailer.' I was speaking close to his ear, to keep the noise down, but I think he could hear the disbelief in my voice. I still couldn't believe that anyone would plan anything so evil.

He grunted and then got his face out of the ground. 'You got it all wrong,' he panted. 'I was just going to give you a warning, just going to set fire to your wheelie bin, see.' He tried to turn round, but I pulled his arm back. 'Honest, kid.'

I hesitated when he said that. I think I wanted to believe that nobody hated us so much they'd set fire to our trailer. As I hesitated he must have felt me loosen my grip ever so slightly, and boy, was he quick. In a split second he'd twisted round and I heard the *shtik* of a knife unfolding, and I saw a flash of moonlight on the blade as he aimed at my face. I couldn't dodge it, he'd follow any move I made, so I palmed him hard on his other shoulder and his aim was knocked wide, but I still felt the blade cut me.

That was the thing that finished it, the feeling of blood on my arm I had a flashback to the bad dream I keep having – a black motor in the dead of night, a man in the shadows, a sharp pain in my arm, but nothing more, no explanation. Jeez, the times I've woken up sweating from that dream.

But I didn't have time to worry about it now. The smell of petrol on Clunk wiped out everything else. In my mind's eye

the firebomb flew and my little nieces screamed. He might have been fuelled by hatred, but now all I could see was the vision of an orange fireball inside a trailer. It was time to jive.

'You ever seen a caravan burn?' I said softly, in between taking deep breaths to push extra oxygen into my muscles. Some people start shouting when they're really angry, I just get quieter, but it's a deadly sort of quiet. I save my breath for the fight.

'It goes up like a firework, even if there's no gas bottles exploding, and in about five minutes it's a metal frame and a puddle of molten rubber from the tyres.' I moved forward; I don't think even a truck could have stopped me now.

'If you were in a caravan that went up you wouldn't stand a chance, I swear to God you wouldn't,' I told him, circling as he tried to jab out and get me. He'd no chance, I was too quick. 'It'd be a red hot metal skeleton before the fire engine even got out of the station.'

Then I'd had enough talking and I put my fists up. I don't know what sort of look I had on my face, maybe he thought I'd gone mad, maybe he could even see the red fire of the burning caravan in my eyes. I don't know, but big as he was, he took one look at my face and turned and ran.

That's when I did a wrong thing. I ran after him. Away from the trailers we went, like bats out of hell. Out onto the road. I think I saw it first, the late-night bus. Sure as hell he didn't see it.

I know I dived. I know that much. That was never in dispute.

But, did I dive to push him out into the road, as Hoodie claimed later? Or did I dive to drag him out of the way, as I said I did? Was I a devil or an angel? It didn't really matter, because the bus hit him and he rolled and lay still.