

KAT WOLFE
INVESTIGATES

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KAT WOLFE INVESTIGATES



LAUREN ST JOHN

Illustrated by Beidi Guo

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

*For Jean McLean,
one of my favourite armchair adventurers*



First published 2018 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5098-7122-3

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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1

An Uninvited Guest

Kat Wolfe awoke with a stiff neck and the creeping sensation that she was not alone.

She held her breath. Had she heard something or hadn't she? Then it came again – a faint metallic scraping. Kat relaxed. The latch on the kitchen window was loose. It jiggled with every shift of wind.

Struggling upright, she rearranged the cushions and rescued the duvet from the floor. For the third night running, she'd fallen asleep on the sofa waiting for her mum to come home. Friday evenings were frantic at the city veterinary practice where Dr Ellen Wolfe worked, and her bosses, Edwina Nash and Vince Crow, insisted that their underlings (Kat's mother and two



harried nurses) take full advantage of it.

Today was Valentine's Day, which was not as madly busy as Christmas or Halloween but a close second to Easter. Kat could picture her mum bent over the operating table, fighting to save the life of a labradoodle puppy that had swallowed a boxful of chocolate hearts or a diamond ring, or patching up a Maine Coon singed by a thoughtlessly placed candle.

Meanwhile, in a back office, Edwina and Vince would be gleefully totting up the bill. Hunched over a spreadsheet like a couple of Scrooges, they'd be adding up triple-time emergency and admin fees, plus charges for X-rays, IV fluids, vitamin shots, scans, lab tests, antibiotics, catnip, chew toys, flea spray and painkillers. On seeing the total, some pet owners needed hospitalization themselves.

In Dr Wolfe's opinion, a good veterinary surgeon was part psychologist, part animal whisperer. She routinely played peacemaker on behalf of pets caught up in custody battles or family feuds. As for senior citizens, they adored her. Most came to her for the company more than because their pets needed help.

Knowing that their meagre monthly pensions would be swallowed by a single vet's bill, Kat's mum had learned how to magic these and other visits out of existence simply by 'forgetting' to include them in the diary. No

appointment; no charge. It's not that Dr Wolfe imagined Nash & Crow Premium Pet Care was a charity. Far from it. But she did believe in fairness.

Somehow Edwina and Vince had got wind of these 'lost' appointments. They'd gone ballistic. For the past three months, they'd deducted every penny they felt sure Dr Wolfe owed them – plus interest – from her wages. Kat and her mum were not quite living on gruel, but beans on toast had become a recurring theme.

The fun had stopped too. For the entirety of Kat's twelve and a quarter years, it had only ever been the two of them against the world. That was fine with Kat. Given a choice between spending her weekends with the selfie-obsessed girls who attended her bleak London school, or hanging out with her mum and the animals at the animal clinic, she'd have chosen her mum and the pets 101 per cent of the time.

But Vince and Edwina had succeeded in snuffing out even that small joy. They'd banned Kat from helping out or watching her mum work on the grounds of Health and Safety. Which meant that every other weekend and three nights a week, when her mum was on call in case of emergencies, Kat was stuck in the house with Naska, the Bulgarian student who lived with them.

Naska was one of the loveliest people Kat had ever

met, but the Bulgarian girl studied every moment she wasn't sleeping, and slept every moment she wasn't studying.

Tonight was an exception. Naska's sister, who worked in North London, had been rushed to A&E with appendicitis. Since Dr Wolfe had already messaged to say she was leaving work shortly, Kat had insisted Naska go to the hospital at once. Her mum would be home any minute, and she'd be fine on her own till then.

As Naska headed out of the door, Kat's phone pinged again. Dr Wolfe was running late. Kat waved Naska goodbye without mentioning it.

That had been nearly three hours ago.

Now it was 1.30 a.m. Kat wasn't worried about being alone. The doors were locked, and she knew her mum would be home as soon as she'd finished dealing with whatever emergency had held her up. But the silent house did make Kat yearn, yet again, for a pet of her own – a dog to guard her and keep her company, or a cat she could snuggle up to.

Ironically, considering her mum spent every waking hour with animals, that wasn't possible. They lived in a rented house, with no outside space, on a busy road in London.

If I can ever find a spare hour to hunt for another job, if we can ever afford a place of our own with a garden

and *if* we ever have the time to devote to it, I'll get you the cat/dog/pony/hamster of your dreams,' her mum was always saying.

Kat was not a girl much given to scowling, but she scowled now. 'If, if, if.' These days, it was her mother's favourite word.

With Naska gone, she'd lain on the sofa rereading her favourite horse novel. But even that had annoyed her because it had only reminded her how badly she wanted to be around living, breathing horses and not just ones in books.

Reading also made her feel guilty. She'd promised her mum she'd make a further attempt to tackle the overcrowding on the cheap, flimsy bookcase begrudgingly installed by the landlord, but she kept putting it off. To be fair, it was a big job. Where others spent every spare penny they had on clothes, travel and fancy gadgets, the Wolfes were united in preferring novels and cake. In recent months, Dr Wolfe's reduced salary had put an end to both. She'd told Kat that, for once, this might be no bad thing.

'We could turn a negative into a positive by taking the opportunity to do something about your out-of-control book situation.'

Kat was shocked. 'Give some away, you mean?' To her, books were like diaries. She only had to glance at

an adventure novel she'd read years earlier and she'd be parachuted right back to that time, with all of its emotions and dreams.

'Just a few,' said her mum. 'Maybe twenty or thirty. Why don't you start with the picture books? It's not as if you're going to read them again.'

'You want me to give away *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*? What kind of monster are you? That's the first book you ever read to me.'

Her mum's face lit up. 'You remember! OK, maybe not that one, but how about recycling some of the mystery novels you've read a dozen times? You've dropped at least half of them in the bath.'

'Only if *you* recycle some of your ancient, dusty textbooks.'

Her mum was scandalized. 'I can't part with those. They're vital, life-saving works.'

'You're telling me you need every volume of *The Merck Veterinary Manual* dating back to 2009? Those things weigh nearly as much as I do. If one fell off a high shelf, it could kill someone.'

The books had mostly stayed, although Kat had taken a sack of picture and fairy ones to a charity shop, and her mum had moved the heavier textbooks to lower shelves. Lack of space had forced Dr Wolfe to leave the current edition of *The Merck Veterinary Manual* on the

top shelf, balanced on a spectacularly ugly vase – a gift from a grateful pensioner.

‘She can’t have been that grateful,’ Kat had remarked when the vase first came home. ‘It’s like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.’

‘It’s handmade,’ her mum had said reprovingly. ‘It means more because it comes from Thelma’s heart.’

In mid-thought, Kat suddenly became aware of an absence of sound. The first baleful gusts of an incoming storm were slapping at the shutters, but the kitchen-window catch was silent. It was almost as if . . .

An icy finger of dread tiptoed down her spine. It was almost as if someone was holding it, and why would they do that unless . . . ?

A soft thud, a clink of china and a muffled curse confirmed the unimaginable. Someone was in the kitchen.

For one hopeful millisecond, Kat allowed herself to believe it was her mum. Dr Wolfe must have forgotten her keys. Not wanting to wake anyone, and knowing that the window by the sink was easily forced, she’d climbed in.

Any minute now, she’d snap on the kitchen light and make herself a cup of tea. When she discovered that Kat was waiting up for her on the sofa, she’d pretend to be cross while being unable to hide how thrilled she was to

see a friendly face. They'd sit up eating crumpets with maple syrup and cashew-nut cream, and Kat would settle in for her favourite part of any day – listening to her mum describe her cases.

But no light came on. No tea was made. Kat lay rigid on the sofa, too terrified to move. Her phone was charging on her bedside table. The stairs that led up to it were in the hallway between the living room and the kitchen. There was no earthly way she could get to them without being seen. Nor were there any nearby cupboards in which she could hide.

The dim glow of the hallway lamp dipped as someone passed it. Kat corkscrewed off the sofa and slipped behind it. Her heart hammered against her ribcage.

Nothing happened for an age. Kat tried not to breathe or cough while desperately wanting to do both. Then a floorboard squeaked.

For as long as she could remember, Kat had been training herself to banish fear. As the daughter of a vet, she spent a great deal of time around animals made angry and/or dangerous by pain or fear. The best way to calm them was to remain calm herself, even if she had to fake it. But it was impossible to stay chilled with a stranger strolling around her dark living room.

A torch beam flared. Like an all-seeing eye, it began to explore the floorboards and crevices. It was only a

matter of time before the intruder saw the cast-aside duvet on the sofa and put two and two together. What then? Kat's trembling limbs were about as much use as a broken umbrella in a hurricane. She felt incapable of fighting off a field mouse.

Mid-panic, she became aware of a lump pressing against her thigh. A tennis ball! The previous weekend, she'd helped her mum pet-sit a Jack Russell whose owner was away in Paris. He was a cute dog, but impossibly high energy, and Kat had spent hours retrieving toys from every corner of the house. The tennis ball had gone missing early on.

Now it struck her that if she threw the ball across the hallway, into the kitchen, the intruder might get a fright and think someone was coming. He might fly out of the house, never to be seen again. Or not, but it was worth a try.

The problem was getting the correct trajectory. Too low, and he'd guess where the ball had come from. Too high or too far left or right, and it would hit the doorframe. The burglar would zero in on the source. Kat would be toast.

He was over by the TV now. She could imagine him gawping at their aeons-old set and it dawning on him that he'd chosen the wrong house to rob. Now was her chance. She picked up the ball.

Before she could launch it, there was a grunt of alarm. The torch beam swung crazily. The floor close to Kat flooded with light, suggesting that the burglar had spotted the duvet. Next he'd check behind the sofa.

There was no time to lose. No time to aim. Kat threw the ball as hard and high as she could.

It never made it to the kitchen. It didn't even reach the hallway. It struck the top corner of the door and ricocheted back into the living room.

Kat had always been lamentably bad at tennis. Her first clue that on this occasion she'd scored an ace came when she heard the *thwock* of rubber against ceramic. The intruder heard it too, because the white beam did another zigzag.

It was not enough to save him. The instant the ball hit Thelma's pot, the latest hardback edition of *The Merck Veterinary Manual*, all 3,326 pages of it, soared from its roost like a seabird. The intruder never knew what hit him. It actually dented his forehead.

As he fell, his clawing hands latched on to a shelf. Thanks to the lazy landlord, the bookcase had never been secured. With a sea lion groan, it parted company with the wall, firing books in every direction. Each caused its own mini catastrophe.

The eight-volume *Complete James Herriot* box set demolished the lamp and the remains of Kat's mug

of Horlicks, which in turn sprayed glass and malted almond milk all over the rug. The illustrated *Alice in Wonderland* smashed the glass of water holding the pink rose Kat had given her mum for Valentine's Day, drowning Kat's school project in the process. *Black's Veterinary Dictionary* took a picture off the wall, which then crushed the remains of Thelma's lopsided vase to powder.

By now, Kat was peering over the back of the sofa, unable to believe what she was witnessing. As it emptied, the toppling bookcase picked up speed, spewing woodchips, splinters and bits of plaster. The intruder's torch had rolled under the dining-room table. It illuminated his skinny, hooded frame as he attempted to sit up before being flattened by the bookcase. The final crash was deafening. A flying shelf had cracked the TV.

Through a cloud of dust, Kat saw her mum standing open-mouthed in the doorway, keys in hand.

'And I thought that the parties and destruction only started in the teenage years,' Dr Wolfe said faintly. 'Where's Naska?'

Kat shoved back the sofa, rushed to her mother and threw her arms around her. 'Mum, it's not a party. Naska had to go to A&E with her sister, and we've been burgled! Quick, call the police.'

It was only then that her mother switched on the light.

The intruder was stretched out on the living-room floor, framed, like a bad portrait, by the mangled bookcase. Unconscious, his pale, spotty face looked oddly angelic.

Dr Wolfe let out a cry of horror and held Kat's hand tightly while dialling 999.

'Kat, that's it. That's the absolute final straw. If something had happened to you, I'd never have forgiven myself.'

'But it didn't.' Kat grinned. Now that her mum was home and the police were rushing to the rescue, she felt a lot better. 'Long story short, I was saved by Thelma's vase, a chewed tennis ball and *The Merck Veterinary Manual*. What held you up, anyway?'

'Long story short, I quit my job. Or maybe I was fired. There was a bit of a blow-up, and it was hard to tell. Either way, I'm free to go any time or anywhere we choose. I don't know where we're going, Kat, but we're going.'



2

Capuchins and Cockatoos

‘How about this one?’ said Kat, scrolling through the classifieds on Jobs4Vets.com. *‘Exciting opportunity to join our mixed animal practice in Scunthorpe . . .’*

Her mum shook her head. ‘Too many earthquakes.’
‘Earthquakes? In Scunthorpe?’

‘Maybe it was just the one, back in 2008, but you can’t be too careful. At the time, it was the second-largest quake ever recorded in Britain.’ Dr Wolfe nudged the ruined bookcase with a foot. ‘If this is the damage one tennis ball can do, imagine the scene after an earthquake has finished with the place.’

They were sitting on the sofa amid the wreckage of their living room like sailors marooned on a desert island. Neither had been to bed. By the time the police had finished taking Kat’s statement, collecting evidence and drinking tea, the early morning traffic was moving

sluggishly through the drizzle.

To add to the mess, there was black fingerprint powder all over the kitchen. A burglar-shaped hollow in the middle of the living-room debris served as a ghostly reminder of the events of the previous night. It made Kat think of the chalk outline that marked the position of murder victims on TV detective shows.

She shuddered. If the intruder hadn't been squashed by a falling library, and her mum hadn't come home when she had, things might have gone dreadfully wrong.

The burglar himself – a youth barely out of his teens – had been handcuffed to a stretcher and carted away. As he went by, blinking stupidly and rubbing his forehead, Kat had noticed a torn scrap of veterinary dictionary stuck to his cheek:

*Amygdala: a distinct almond-shaped part
of the brain's limbic system . . .*

Kat clicked through to the next page of jobs. Dr Wolfe had a tendency to treat all computers as if they were hostile aliens so, even though it was her laptop they were using, it was Kat who was doing the typing.

Kat could see their reflections in the screen. People often remarked how alike they were, which was funny, because they couldn't have looked more different.

Where her mum was petite and cuddly, with a blonde bob and bright blue eyes, Kat was tall for her age, with clear green eyes flecked with storm blue, and wavy dark hair that sparked red in the sun. No matter how often she brushed it, it always looked as though she'd been out walking in a wild wind.

Her mum often said that she resembled her 'father'. Whenever Kat thought about the man whose blood ran in her veins, it wasn't as a dad in any shape or form. Dads were supposed to teach you to ride bikes or make catapults, and provide comfort when you had chicken pox or crashed out of school talent shows. They were meant to love and look out for you.

Kat's father had done none of those things. He and her mum had met at university. Rufus had been studying law, but dropped out in his second year to chase big waves across the globe. Surfing had meant more to him than Kat's mum, his own mum or his unborn child. He was last seen in Portugal, being towed by a jet-ski rider up the face of a twenty-metre wave. That was his idea of a good time.

To Kat's mind, going missing because you'd chosen to ride a virtual tsunami was an exceedingly poor excuse for not being around to keep your daughter safe from clumsy burglars.

On the positive side, her mum was her best friend.

When people said they were alike, it made Kat proud, because her mum was kind to the power of ten. She stood up to bullies like Vince and Edwina, was passionate about saving animals and would fight till her last breath against cruelty or injustice.

‘Kat, is the screen frozen or are you?’ teased her mum. ‘You’re miles away. What are you thinking about?’

‘What a good person you are,’ Kat said truthfully. ‘We’re going to find you the best job in the world. How about this one: *Roving Veterinary Surgeon wanted to travel between six practices?*’

‘Too stressful.’

‘*Thriving small animal clinic in Edinburgh . . . ?*’

‘I’d miss the horses and cows.’

‘*Busy equine practice in Hampshire . . . ?*’

‘I’d love the horses, but miss the small animals.’

‘*State-of-the-art twelve-vet practice with latest technology seeks VS with can-do attitude?*’

‘Too corporate. I’m a vet, not a banker.’

‘Oh, wow! Just wow! Mum, you *have* to take this one.’

‘Why? What is it? Stop hogging the screen and show me!’

‘*Thrilling opportunity in the Outer Hebrides . . .* Oh, Mum – imagine being a vet on an *island*. We’d be like characters out of a book. You’d have puffins and otters for patients, and I could get a Border collie.’

‘You might want to get an umbrella too,’ her mother said drily. ‘It rains at least three hundred days of the year. Anyway, it’s too remote.’

Kat didn’t have the energy to argue. ‘Right, dull jobs in city drought-zones only. *Luton practice seeks VS with GSOH.*’

‘You’d need a sense of humour if you lived in Luton.’

And so it went on. If the job had potential, then the town or village was too crowded, too isolated, too crime-ridden, too boring, too full of football hooligans or too cold.

Finally Kat said: ‘Is it just me, or are you being a teensy-weensy bit fussy?’

Her mum rubbed a hand over her tired eyes. ‘Sorry, hon. I’m wary of leaping from the frying pan into the fire, that’s all. For months I’ve been a terrible mother . . . No, Kat, hear me out. Work has been so nightmarish that I’ve been grouchy and anxious most of the time. That’s not good for you, and it’s definitely not good for my patients. So now I don’t just want *a* job; I want the right job. I’d like to be part of a practice where I can make a real difference to the lives of animals, and I want us to live in a place where you can thrive and be happy, ideally with a pet of your own.’ She smiled. ‘That’s not too much to ask, is it?’

To see her mum’s old spark shining through the dust

and exhaustion lifted Kat's spirits like nothing else. 'Sounds great to me.'

'In that case, let's keep searching for another five minutes.' Dr Wolfe pulled the laptop towards her. 'What's this link here: *ARE YOU READY FOR A CHALLENGE?* I know I am. How about you?'

Kat grinned. 'Always.'

Later, when Kat thought about how one click of the mouse had changed their lives forever, she recalled a giddy feeling bubbling up inside her as the advert unfurled on the screen.

WANTED: CARING, HARD-WORKING VETERINARY
SURGEON URGENTLY NEEDED TO RUN SMALL
PRACTICE IN IDYLIC SEASIDE LOCATION.
MUST BE WILLING TO TREAT EVERYTHING FROM
CAPUCHINS TO COCKATOOS. LETTER & CV TO
MR MK MELLS. C/O MELLS SOLICITORS,
PO BOX 5089, LONDON W1

'What's a capuchin?' asked Kat.

'A species of monkey originating in Central and South America. If they're in the UK, they've either been stolen from the wild for the pet trade or medical research, or they're in sanctuaries.'

Dr Wolfe squinted at the screen. 'The job sounds so

perfect there's bound to be a catch. Ah, here it is: *T&Cs APPLY*. "Terms and Conditions" usually means you're expected to sign a ten-year contract to work an eight-day week treating boa constrictors and hungry tigers. Still, it might be worth looking into further.'

Kat picked up a pen to jot down the details. 'There's no email address.'

'I like that,' said her mum. 'Snail-mail only. Intriguing. With any luck, it'll reduce the number of applicants. I'll write a letter today. Now, I don't know about you, but after all this excitement I'm starving. Can I interest you in breakfast? We could celebrate my freedom and your tennis-ball-throwing skills with cinnamon buns in Blackheath.'

