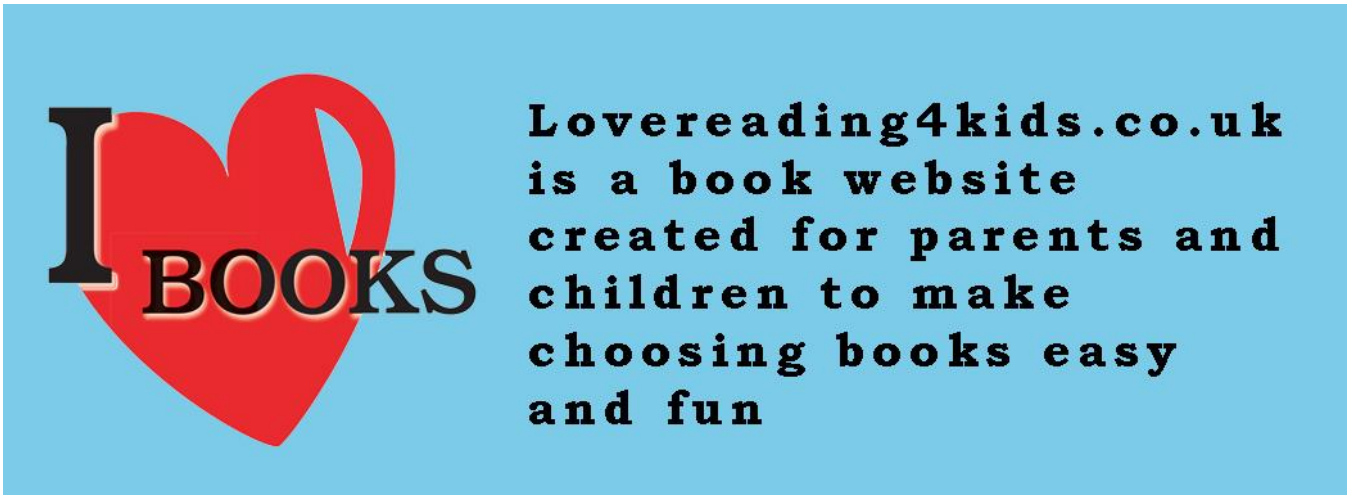


Opening extract from

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One

'BEFORE YOU AGREE to have Joseph come live with you,' Mrs Stroud said, 'there are one or two things you ought to understand.' She took out a State of Maine ∗ Department of Health and Human Services folder and laid it on the kitchen table.

My mother looked at me for a long time. Then she looked at my father.

He put his hand on my back. 'Jack should know what

we're getting into, same as us,' he said. He looked down at me. 'Maybe you more than anyone.'

My mother nodded, and Mrs Stroud opened the folder.

This is what she told us.

Two months ago, when Joseph was at Adams Lake Juvenile, a kid gave him something bad in the boys' bathroom. He went into a stall and swallowed it.

After a long time, his teacher came looking for him.

When she found him, he screamed.

She said he'd better come out of that stall right now.

He screamed again.

She said he'd better come out of that stall right now unless he wanted more trouble.

So he did.

Then he tried to kill her.

They sent Joseph to Stone Mountain, even though he did what he did because the kid gave him something bad and he swallowed it. But that didn't matter. They sent him to Stone Mountain anyway.

He won't talk about what happened to him there. But since he left Stone Mountain, he won't wear anything orange.

He won't let anyone stand behind him.

He won't let anyone touch him.

He won't go into rooms that are too small.

And he won't eat canned peaches.

'He's not very big on meatloaf either,' said Mrs Stroud, and she closed the State of Maine ∗ Department of Health and Human Services folder.

'He'll eat my mother's canned peaches,' I said.

Mrs Stroud smiled. 'We'll see,' she said. Then she put her hand on mine. 'Jack, your parents know this, and you should too. There's something else about Joseph.'

'What?' I said.

'He has a daughter.'

I felt my father's hand against my back.

'She's almost three months old, but he's never seen her. That's one of the biggest heartbreaks in this case.' Mrs Stroud handed the folder to my mother. 'Mrs Hurd,

I'll leave this with you. Read it, and then you can decide. Call me in a few days if . . .'

'We've talked this over,' said my mother. 'We already know.'

'Are you sure?'

My mother nodded.

'We're sure,' my father said.

Mrs Stroud looked at me. 'How about you, Jack?'

My father's hand still against my back.

'How soon can he come?' I said.