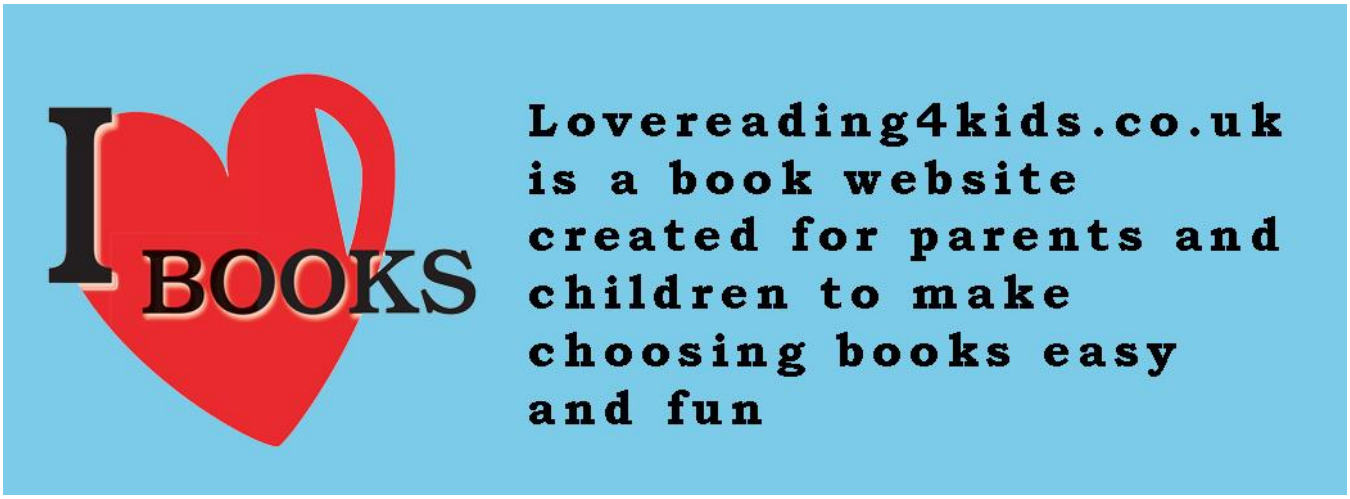

Opening extract from

Lifers

Written by

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It must have been quiet for him to hear the rattling.

That's what the noise first seemed to be: a sound like the clatter of dice in a plastic cup.

It was coming from the darkness at the far end of Back Half Moon Street. Preston pushed himself upright against a rusting roll-top bin and peered into the gloom. Now it was a stuttering *chit-chit* sound; something about it immediately wrong.

It made the space between Preston's shoulder blades go cold, his back straighten and his stomach tighten.

Preston realized his legs were struggling for strength. It was hard to see what might be down there – it was 2 a.m. and ink-black. Above him the outline of a fire escape. At his feet, a blown can skittered. The alley curved left and he made his way towards the bend. The building stopped a few paces ahead of him and a space with a high metal railing around it

emerged from deep shadow. Sirens wailed somewhere in the distance but faded into silence.

Chitter-chit-chit.

Preston felt panic rising in his chest. *Christ. A beast at the end of the alley.* Fighting his fear, he edged forwards and peered beyond the fencing. Over the railings was a drop and beyond that a sunken garden, high-walled, spread out around the back of the main building. The windows were shuttered and dark. There were a couple of low outbuildings – both rendered white – and a security barrier and office, lights out. Down in the sunken area, a black Lexus was parked.

He'd never seen this place before.

Fourteen years tracing the shape of Manchester, and he'd never followed the left-hand curve of Back Half Moon. But why would you? Thousands of commuters, bankers, buskers and shoppers would pass by the mouth of the alley every day without ever thinking anything of interest lay beyond.

He'd never night-walked before, either.

Everything was different at night, like turning over a stone and seeing something weird and alien underneath. Watching something that was usually ignored, usually . . . unwatched.

The sound; the *chitter-chit* sound was still down there in the dark somewhere. Preston studied the alleyway ahead of him, letting the memory of Alice brighten the darkness, only to remember she was gone. It had been over forty-eight hours since she'd disappeared, and it was all his fault. He *had* to find her.

Preston gave the buildings beyond the high fence a final furtive check. Then he shinned up and over it, lowering himself down the other side. It's what Alice would have done – he felt sure of it.

The sunken garden was further down than he had thought. He let himself drop and landed in a crouch. He looked up. Over three metres to the top of the fence; he wouldn't be getting out the way he'd come in. He spent a moment praying he wasn't permanently trapped on the wrong side with a terrible creature.

His eyes adjusted to the gloom. There was the Lexus, three empty parking spaces around it. There were clipped hedges, a pool and an urn, steel planters with elegantly shaped trees in them. There were lights inlaid along the paths, half-lit, like eyes. This wasn't a house. It was corporate. The windows were for offices, or labs, Preston thought. *What is this place – pharmaceuticals?* He made his way forwards. The sound was louder.

The back of the building was four storeys of white render and steel, windows of mirrored glass. On the top floor, a light was on – a surprise in the early hours of a Monday morning – and Preston could see the silhouette of piled files, papers and a glowing desk lamp bent over as if in prayer. Someone was up there, working late. Small polished signs studded the outside of the building at shoulder height, like those brass plaques beside the doors of solicitors' offices. As he drew closer he saw each displayed an acronym – M.I.S.T.

His heart gave a jump. *Mist.* He'd seen that in Alice's notebook.

She'd been here.

The sound, eerie and unnerving, was getting louder. Preston padded down a gravel path, rain falling, the green fans of uplit garden ferns glistening. He turned back to take another look around.

Then he saw it.

A flight of sunken steps dropped to a doorway set at cellar level, a steel fire door with one of those bars across it that made it look like it was for escape only. The door was propped open, and inside was dark, but it wasn't inside that Preston was looking at.

Preston was looking at the kid in the goggles.

Two steps up from the door, hunched in a crouch on his heels, was a boy dressed in black. It was his teeth Preston could hear, clattering in his mouth. He was suffering some sort of fit, shuddering there in the foetal position as if a current was being fed through him. His feet shifted and jerked in a way that looked as if some invisible force was needling him from all sides and he was recoiling from a thousand fearsome pin-pricks. His chin was pressed against his chest.

Preston dropped to a crouch and felt his blood ice up. He didn't doubt for a second he was seeing something unnatural. This wasn't some sort of epileptic fit; it was something more controlled. Then there was the sound coming from the kid's mouth, the machine-gun rhythm of his teeth. The sound he'd heard in the alley.

Preston staggered backwards, half-running until he felt himself thump against the perimeter of the sunken garden. He lost his footing and sat down hard. He wanted to look away, but he found he couldn't; he had to watch as the kid twisted and shuddered.

It was slowing now. A moment later, he was still, curled up on his side. His teeth had stopped. Preston tried to swallow, but his throat had filled with sand. His heart felt close to bursting. *Had the kid passed out? Or had Preston just watched someone die?*