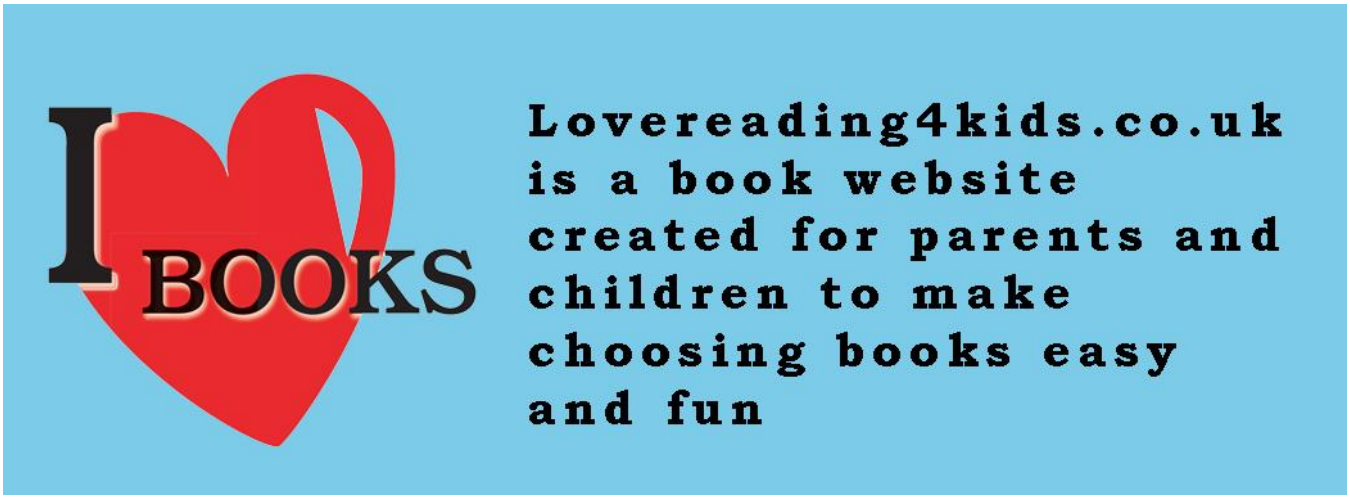


Opening extract from

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Prologue

Why are the bad things always so much easier to believe? It shouldn't be that way. But it is, every single time. You're too sensitive and too worried, they say. You care too much about all the wrong things. One little whisper in your ear and the words tumble through your head like you're the one who thought them first. Hear them enough and pretty soon they're etched on the surface of your heart.

But right now, I've got to forget all the ways I've come to accept that I am broken. As I sit here in this cold, dark room, deep in the pitch-black woods, staring into this lying stranger's beautiful eyes, I need to think the opposite about myself. I need to believe that I am a person I have never known myself to be. That in my deepest, darkest, most useless corners lies a secret. One that just might end up being the thing that saves me. That saves us.

Because there is a lot that I still don't understand about what's going on. So much, actually. But I do know this: despite all the fear in this woman's eyes, we need to convince her to help us. Because our lives depend on it. And on us getting out that door.

CHAPTER 1

My dad's phone vibrates loudly, shimmying a little across our worn dining room table. He reaches forward and switches it off.

"Sorry about that." He smiles as he runs a hand over his thick salt-and-pepper hair, pushes his square black glasses up his nose. They're hipster glasses, but that's not why he bought them. With my dad, any hipness is entirely accidental. "I thought it was off. It shouldn't have even been on the table."

It's a rule: no phones in the dining room. It's always been the rule, even if no one ever really listened—not my mom, not my twin brother Gideon, not me. But that

was before. Things are divided up that way now: *Before*. *After*. And in the dark and terrible middle lies my mom's accident four months ago. In the *after*, the no-phone rule is so much more important to my dad. Lots of little things are. Sometimes, it feels like he's trying to rebuild our lives out of matchsticks. And I do love him for that. But loving someone isn't the same thing as understanding them. Which is okay, I guess, because my dad doesn't understand me either. He never really has. With my mom gone, sometimes I think no one ever will.

My dad can't change who he is—a hard-core nerd-scientist who lives entirely in his head. Since the accident, he says, "I love you," way more than he ever used to and is constantly patting me and Gideon on the back like we're soldiers marching off to war. All of it is weird and awkward, though, and it just makes me feel worse. For all of us.

But he is doing his best. He's trying to be everything my mom was. It isn't his fault that he's going about it all wrong. He hasn't had a lot of practice with warm and fuzzy. My mom's heart was always big enough for the both

of them. Not that she was soft. She couldn't have been the kind of photographer she was—all those countries, all that war—if she hadn't been tough as hell. But for my mom, feelings existed in only one form: magnified. And this applied to her own feelings: she bawled every time she read one of my or Gideon's homemade welcome home cards. And how she felt about everyone else's feelings: she always seemed to know if Gideon or I were upset before we'd even stepped in the door.

It was that crazy sixth sense of hers that got my dad so interested in emotional intelligence, EI for short. He's a research scientist and professor at the university, and one tiny part of EI is pretty much all he's ever studied. It isn't the kind of thing he'll ever get rich from. But Dr. Benjamin Lang cares about science, not money.

And there is one legitimate upside to my dad being the Tin Man. He didn't fall apart after the accident. Only once did he start to lose it—on the phone with Dr. Simons, his best friend/only friend/mentor/surrogate dad. And even then, he yanked himself back from the edge pretty fast. Still, sometimes I wonder whether I wouldn't trade my

dad totally losing it for a hug so hard I can't breathe. For a look in his eyes that says he understands how ruined I am. Because he is, too.

"You can answer your phone," I say. "I don't care."

"You might not care, but I do." My dad takes off his glasses and rubs at his eyes in a way that makes him look so old. It tears the hole in the bottom of my stomach open a little wider. "Something has to matter, Wylie, or nothing will."

It's one of his favorite sayings.

I shrug. "Okay, whatever."

"Have you thought any more about what Dr. Shepard said in your phone session today?" he asks, trying to sound casual. But he's for sure been waiting to talk about this one thing since we sat down. Me ditching the home tutor and finishing up my junior year at Newton Regional High School is my dad's favorite subject. If we ever aren't talking about it, that's because he's biting his tongue in half trying to keep his mouth shut. "About starting back for the half days?"

My dad is afraid if I don't go back to regular school soon, I might never. My therapist, Dr. Shepard, and he are

on exactly the same page in this regard. They are perfectly aligned in most things. Probably because the two of them have been exchanging emails. I said they could after the accident. My dad was really worried about me, and I wanted to seem all cool and cooperative and extra sane. But their private chitchat has never actually been okay with me, especially not now that they're both on team get-Wylie-back-into-regular-school. I don't think it's helped that Dr. Shepard and I had to switch to phone appointments three weeks ago because I can't get myself to leave the house anymore. It kind of proves her point that me avoiding school is just the tip of a very dark iceberg.

Really, Dr. Shepard barely signed off on the home tutor in the first place. Because she knows that my problems with regular school didn't start that day, four months ago, when my mom's car spun across a sheet of ice and got sliced in two.

"I'm concerned about where this might lead, Wylie," Dr. Shepard said in our last face-to-face session. "Opting out of school is counterproductive. Giving in to your panic

will only make it worse. That remains true even in the midst of your very legitimate grief."

Dr. Shepard shifted in her big red armchair, which she always looked so perfect and petite sitting in, like Alice in Wonderland shrunk down to nothing. I'd been seeing Dr. Shepard on and off—mostly on—since middle school, almost six years, and sometimes I still wondered whether she really was a therapist at all; someone that small and young and pretty. But she had made me better over the years with her special therapy cocktail—breathing exercises, thought tricks, and lots and lots of talking. By the time high school started, I was pretty much just a regular kid on the nervous side of normal. That is, until my mom's accident cracked me open and out oozed my rotten core.

"Technically, I'm not opting out of school, just the school *building*." I forced a smile. Dr. Shepard's perfectly tweezed eyebrows pulled tight. "Besides, it's not like I didn't try to stay in school."

In point of fact, I'd only missed two actual days of school—the day after my mom's accident and the day of

her funeral. I even had my dad call ahead to be sure no one treated me weird when I went back right away. Because that was my plan: to pretend nothing had happened. And for a while—a whole week maybe—it worked. And then that Monday morning came—one week, one day and fourteen hours after the funeral—and I started throwing up and throwing up. It went on for hours. I didn't stop until they gave me antinausea medicine in the ER. My dad was seriously freaked. By the time we were leaving the hospital, he had agreed to the home tutor. I think he would have agreed to anything, if there was a chance it might make me okay.

But even with Dr. Shepard working her best magic, I wasn't getting much better. And how could I without my mom around to help me see the bright side? *My* bright side. "You're just sensitive, Wylie," she'd always say. "The world needs sensitive people." And somehow I had always believed her.

Maybe she'd just been in denial. After all, my mom's mom—my grandmother—had died sad and alone and in a psychiatric hospital. Maybe she didn't want to believe

I was history repeating itself. Or maybe she honestly thought there was nothing wrong with me. Someday my mom might have told me. Now I'll never know for sure.

I look down at my plate, avoiding my dad's stare as I push some perfectly cooked asparagus into a sculpted mound of couscous. In a rough patch, my appetite is always the first to go. And since the accident, life is basically one long rough patch. But it's too bad I'm not hungry. My dad's cooking is one of the few things we've had going for us—he's always been the family chef.

"You said I could decide when I was ready to go back to school," I say finally, even though I'm already sure that I will *never* be ready, willing, or able to return to Newton Regional High School. But there is no reason to break that to my dad, at least not yet.

"When you go back to school *is* up to you." He's trying to sound laid-back, but he hasn't touched his food either. And that little vein in his forehead is standing out. "But I don't love you bumping around alone in this house day after day. It makes me feel—it's not good for you to be by yourself so much of the time."

"I enjoy my own company." I shrug. "That's healthy, isn't it? Come on, you're the psychologist. High self-esteem and all that."

It's crazy how much less convincing my smile feels each time I force it. There is even a part of me that knows it would be better if I finally lost this argument. If I was forced, kicking and screaming, back inside Newton Regional High School. Because one thing is for sure: being home isn't making me any better.

"Come on, Wylie." My dad eyeballs me, crosses his arms. "Just because you like yourself doesn't mean that—"

There's a loud knock at our front door then. It makes us both jump. *Please, not Gideon*—that's what I think, instantly. Because the last time an unexpected knock came, one of us was ripped away. And Gideon—my opposite twin, my mom used to joke, for how insanely different we are, including that Gideon is a science and history whiz and I'm all about math and English—is the only one of us left who's not at home.

"Who's that?" I ask, trying to ignore the wild beating of my heart.

"Nothing to worry about, I'm sure," my dad says. But he has no idea who's at the door, or what there might be to worry about. That's obvious. "Someone probably selling something."

"No one sells things door-to-door anymore, Dad." But he's already tossed his napkin on the table and started through the living room toward the front door.

He's got the door open by the time I round the corner.

"Karen." He sounds relieved. But only for a second. "What are you—what's wrong?"

When I can finally see past him, there's Cassie's mom, Karen, standing on our porch. Despite the sickly yellow glow of our energy-efficient outdoor bulbs, Karen looks as coiffed as always—her brown, shoulder-length hair perfectly smooth, a bright-green scarf knotted neatly above her tailored white wool coat. It's the beginning of May, but we're locked deep in one of those mean Boston cold snaps.

"I'm sorry to just show up like this." Karen's voice is all high and squeaky. And she's panting a little, her breath puffing out in a cloud. "But I called a couple times and

no one answered, and then I was driving around looking for her when I saw your light on and I guess—God, I've looked everywhere." When she crosses her arms and takes a step closer, I notice her feet. They're completely bare.

"Looked everywhere for who—" My dad has caught sight of them, too. "Karen, what happened to your shoes? Come inside." When she doesn't move, he reaches out and tugs her forward, gently. "You must be freezing. Come, come."

"I can't find Cassie." Karen's voice cracks hard as she steps inside. "Can you—I hate to ask, Ben. But can you help?"