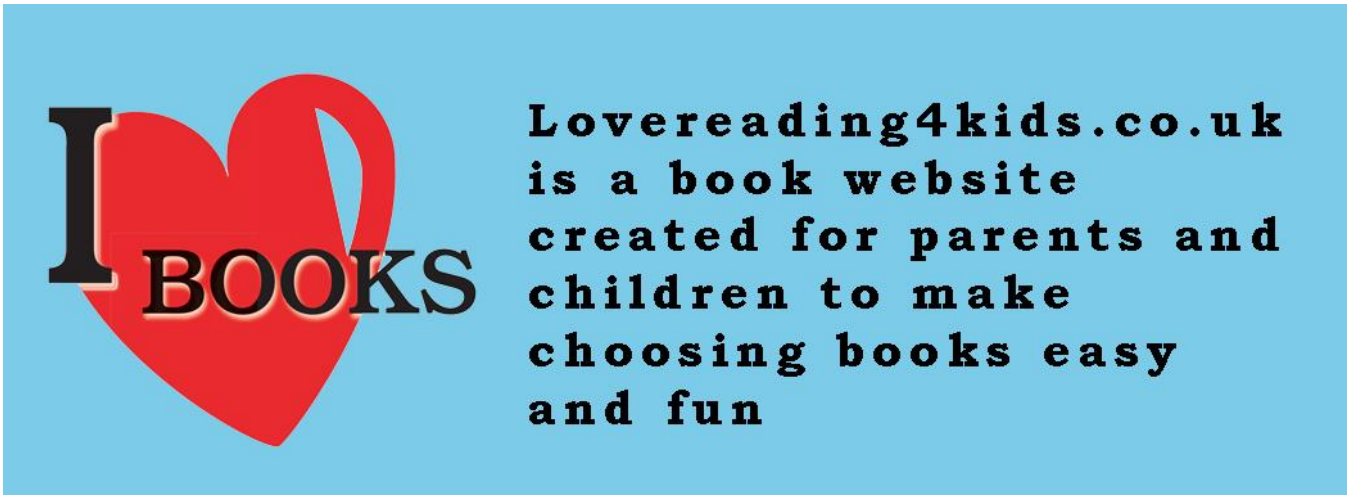


Opening extract from

The Light That Gets Lost

Written by

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Published by

Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

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Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in November 2015 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

This paperback edition published in November 2016

www.bloomsbury.com

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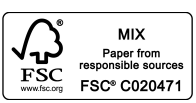
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 3587 6



Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

CHAPTER ONE

Behind the slatted cupboard door the young boy adjusted his eyes to the dark and pressed his face to the tickle and cuddle of familiar coats. He could hear the shouting deep down in the belly of the house, a stranger's voice rolling thick with gravel stones, and he thought he heard his brother squeal and wished him quiet. Dad was churning up a storm, his low voice booming, steady, concentrating fear.

The boy knew it would be over soon. The man with the menace would be gone and the drum of kitchen pots and pans would mean Mum was getting the dinner on; the one good square meal with everyone sitting table tight. The boy smelt the trace of Mum's perfume in the oily fur of a coat she no longer wore and he petted the animal and pulled it to him.

In his imagination the first blast of gunfire was a TV cop show running too loud and Mum's shout a 'Too loud'

warning to his brother. He couldn't help but smile. Big bro was taking a hit again, a whooper.

Stumbling footsteps climbed the wooden stairs and he plum-stuck his fingers into his ears when the shots grew louder. Noise ran into every door and the gun dumbed Mum first and then Dad and the boy imagined his brother dumbed down someplace other.

Everyone dumb and sitting silent, the TV shushed after all. He closed his eyes and pushed them into the guard his arms made and everything in him screamed for calm.

When calm came it was a long time in coming and the boy was slow to open his eyes. He peeked through the thin cracks between the wooden slats and in that moment perhaps he saw something of the man that was unforgettable and perhaps he heard something too.

He listened to the up-down of blood-stuck feet heel turn on the floorboards and head back downstairs and he pressed the animal version of Mum closer to his face until the tiny hairs filled his mouth and nose and he felt the flicker of a sneeze burn and water his eyes.

He begged the sneeze to stay away and swallowed it and pinched it gone and he listened out for the green flag of a slammed door and growing whispers, Mum and then Dad giving him the OK.

When was it safe to come out and why wasn't anyone saying it? A house fallen silent with three shots, four just about.

Through the cupboard door he could see dust fall like stars in the room of recent commotion, the sun just snagging, revealing. Mum was flat out on the floor. She'd spilt something and was caught in a half-thought going under the bed.

'Mum,' the boy whispered. 'Mum, get up.' He moved his hand from the slats and put a foot to the door. Standing in the sticky he shouted over and when she didn't move he kicked her leg hard, once then twice. The sticky was growing and it branched out like creeping fingers into the fancy rug and the boy shouted for her not to go but it was too late, the bed had her.

Out in the hall there was nothing but big boot memories and the boy jumped the stairs and if he fell into the gunman's arms then it would be fate that put him there. Where was the man with the one last bullet? The bullet with the boy's name scratched on it. Mum was gone and Dad was somewhere gone and his brother Billy was a meat lump with more crawling sticky in the front room, glanced at as he ran from the house.

He ran flat out hard and fast. Ran until his legs shook heavy with burn and his feet no longer felt the rub and blister of bare tramping. He ran a blind course through the first cut of hay in the fields that were always going brown, then green, then gold. He took himself clean through hedges and half of skin and summer clothes were left behind.

The boy found himself at the edge of the cliffs just as the sun settled out beyond the headland and he watched the fire free-fall into the sea as if for the first and last time, a thing of beauty come too late, a butterfly caught in hand and held too tight, its colour rubbed to dust. He stood until the orange and the red receded and sat with the blue and flash of night sky stars and when the dark of real night came he lay in the black and listened to the crash and draw of a rising tide.

Something in the dark claimed the boy that night. A needling hook of skulking roots that pulled him towards some other place; an underhanded, underground grasp. A little demon settling someplace deep inside, a flicker-flame moving, growing in size.

Eight years later

Trey sat at the back of the van and watched the outside world lope past through wire mesh windows. An indifferent landscape that moved independently from his erratic thinking, it was both beautiful and dangerous. A thin film of wet ocean fog stampeded towards the moor and he watched it grease the pane of glass until there was nothing left for looking. He called out to the social worker sat slouched up front and asked what time they would arrive but the man ignored him and instead bent to tune the radio to local news. Trey pulled up the hood on his jacket and when the van filled with the screams of scally

town kids running riot he covered his ears completely. He leant his head against the window with one eye spying the rain and what water leaked there he let soak and pool in his hair and felt it run down his cheek and enjoyed the momentary cool. His short life, sketched and drawn wrong since memory began, had been rubbed down to this one moment in time; he was sitting at the brink of a place where there was no turning back and he was ready to jump. For Mum and Dad and Billy he was ready to leap into the unknown and all he knew of that unknown was it had one single solitary name and the name was revenge.

He saw his mum in his imaginings and he told her he would do the thing that needed doing and perhaps he said it out loud, and if he did he didn't care because this was it, he was going in.

'Camp Kernow,' shouted the man suddenly. 'Welcome to your new home.'

Trey kicked forward to look out of the window and he rubbed the condensation from the glass with the heel of his hand and through the hammering rain he saw the fence fill the darkening morning with bright-light diamonds.

'You'll learn a trade here boy, farmin or butcherin or such. Your last foster home was a farm, you like animals, don't you?'

Trey ignored him.

'You're lucky to be comin here. Might not think it yet but them runnin this place got religion on their side,

them sellin salvation. You listenin, Trey boy? Got God championin you here.'

The boy nodded. He knew this already and it made him smile knowing it. This was the place where things were about to rewind to the point of wrong and settle back right.

He watched the social worker wind down his window as they approached the gate and the boy turned to study the ten-foot razor-wire fence that loomed overhead and the armed guard that took his time to climb down from his tower. The guard stood at the window and took up the ID papers and then bent to look at the boy in the back seat.

Trey knew he looked like all boys cut from the same rag and when the man nodded towards him he looked down. If there was something in Trey's eyes that might give himself away, he did not know. But the van lurched forward and he was glad of it in any case.

The van parked in a skid at the front of a clapboard farmhouse and Trey pushed down into the seat and he picked his fingers and bit at them for the chew. He watched the social worker stand to attention on the porch. The 'Welcome' sign that was tied there swung out when he knocked. Trey tried to make something of the place that was to be his home for the summer and he set his mind ready for clues. Out there in the muddied wet was the murderer, a man who thought he was safe in the cloth of God, but he was not.

Trey looked down at his hands and sighed. He'd drawn blood from the pull of flesh from his thumb and he pushed the wet into his jeans to soak it dry. He watched the windows of the house for movement and he watched the door like a hawk and when it opened he bubbled his breath deep down into his chest. So close now, he could smell the caustic anger burn and fizz inside and he blanked his face for the show of indifference.

He waited for the door lock to disengage and took his time to step from the van and he went towards the men on the porch with the rain heavy on his shoulders and his rucksack held baby tight in his arms.

He stood out of the rain and waited for the social worker to introduce him to a man known simply as McKenzie. Trey nodded and smiled and hoped that he gave nothing of himself away except the usual bad boy, sorry boy, any boy.

When McKenzie reached out a hand Trey shook it and he wished he'd thought to wipe the sweat-slip from it first.

'This guy here is head of all things managerial. You listen to him and follow his lead and you won't go wrong.'

Trey looked at the man and he searched his face for a telltale clue. 'You a Preacher?' he asked and he coughed to get the shake from his throat.

The man shook his head and said he was a superintendent of sorts and he told him to stand before him.

'Don't worry I int gonna bite.' McKenzie laughed and he told Trey to stretch his arms and legs.

'Just lookin for knives and drugs and whatever else. Turn out your pockets.'

Trey did what he was told and he was glad that he'd thought to hide his lighter in his trainer.

'You smoke?' McKenzie asked.

'Yes, sir.'

'Well not any more, you don't.'

He invited them to sit on the porch and the two men chose seats either side of Trey, fake guardians and protectors and more. They discussed the best way for Trey to knuckle down to institutional life and he nodded and tried not to slouch in the low wooden chair. Truth was he'd known nothing but his entire life and he thought about the run of promises arranged in his open palms like a string of dodgy pearls.

He would do everything asked of him, he promised the men this, and he promised himself and most of all he promised the demon that was forever watchful inside.

'I bin told you're a hard worker.' The man nodded and a whip of thin white hair fell into his face and stuck to his beard.

'Yes, sir.'

'Good strong worker by all accounts. Could do with that roundabouts.'

Trey shrugged and he wanted to say something kind of truthful but the two men were talking to each other

in any case. They slung comments into the air like warning shots for bravado's sake and Trey wondered if this was something about being a man that he should learn. Smiling and saying the right things in the wrong order, clubbed forward with hands gripped and flicking. He wondered if he might trust the skinny, watchful man, trust him proper and not just for the sake of dependence. He watched his eyes dart about like twinned river fish and when he caught Trey's eye he winked.

'So you like animals?' He smiled. 'Hope you like cattle cus cattle is all we got, just about.'

He looked at Trey with curiosity circling and nodded and told him to head to the bunkhouses to find his house master.

Trey pulled the family photo from out his rucksack when McKenzie told him to leave it on the porch step and he tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans. He stood and scuffed his boots on the wooden deck for thinking time. He wanted to ask about the bunkhouse's whereabouts but the two men were already head down to paperwork and bank notes.

Trey stepped off the porch and into puddles and noticed for the first time that it had stopped raining.

He circled the ramshackle farmhouse and cut across the clearing beside it and he didn't bother with direction because he didn't know where he was going or who he was supposed to find in any case.

'We're in,' he said to himself. He hoped Mum and Dad in heaven heard and Billy in the nursing home and he knew the demon inside heard because he whispered, 'Good job.'

Trey could almost lick revenge from off his lips, could taste the bittersweet and it tasted good.

He looked around him at the tracks in the wet clay dirt and at the inroads that rose with thick tyre treads used to pulling heavy loads. Trey tailed the skids and he wondered about the corrugated iron barns that were everywhere and he listened out for the sound of other kids but heard nothing but the distant turn of generators and the cry of cows that horned from every direction.

He kicked at the track that passed the farmhouse and followed its vertical scar up a ridge to its highest point and when he reached the top he bent in half until the air returned to his lungs.

The camp below stretched out before him and was vast, a scatter of junk and rock and unyielding earth and everything tumbling towards the only thing to stop it dead – the fence.

Behind him a tree stump had been hacked into a rough set seat and Trey sat and looked down on to the sandy plain and the pockmarks scarred with trenches and cordons and boundaries. The social worker had told him that for the next six months this would be home and work and life and Trey couldn't wait to cut and edge beneath its skin and settle within.

He shuffled his feet amongst the butt ends that encircled the stump and traced a finger into the smooth dip of a hundred initials burnt into its flesh and he wished he'd asked to stop at some store for cigarettes to hide in his other shoe before being planted in the middle of moor. He reached for a butt and kicked off his trainer and took out his lighter and he lit the butt and smoked what was left, along with the damp earth clinging to it, until his throat became too tight for bothering.

He looked down at the camp with the clay-cut yard and the four tin-shack houses arranged on either side and the marquee tent behind and his eyes traced the fence as far as he could see, searching for the corners and finding none.

He could see a scatter of farm buildings at the left of the camp and beyond that rough fields squared into the rock earth. In the distance he saw cows and calves idling, oblivious to the steal-drum building close to Trey that smoked black and stank of bad burn.

Trey sighed and he flicked his lighter at the tree stump to scorch a rub of black into it and he wondered about burning things like he did most days. It was good to think things over, put some kind of finish to his thinking. Trey was forever waiting to get back to the start line, the start of his life as it was meant to be.

He painted a picture of himself and Billy settled down by the sea, an old scrap-built hut for bedding down and a boat pitching in the bay. They'd fish for anything

worth bartering. Billy was a genius with a hook and line, and they'd sit out front on the trampled sand and watch the sun set and come good again, a night spent eating mackerel and drinking whatever. Two boys closer in age now than their seven years, two boys idling under a crescent moon, forever brothers, forever free.

Trey couldn't wait to get the revenge thing pared from his bones; he would set the demon free and go spring Billy from the care home all in one swoop. He wondered what it would be like to live out his days without the fire balling in his belly, have the cool calm wash over him, soothe him; he couldn't imagine it for all the revenge that coursed through his veins.

He ran his fingers over the metal lighter that was not meant to be in his possession. He wasn't to go looking for fire – that was part of the deal, the social worker said – but Trey was all for small steps, rehabilitation in tiny doses, drip therapy.

He considered trying for another cigarette and thought better of it and he surveyed the land beneath him for signs of life and there were none and instead he made his way back down the hill towards the buildings.

He couldn't remember who he was supposed to look for and he stood and shouted out for anybody but only his lesser self called back.

He looked at his watch and sighed. It was a little past eleven in the morning and he supposed everyone was at

work. He kicked at the ground and at the marks his trainers made in the wet sucking earth and continued back towards the farmhouse. He stepped up to the porch to look for the men but they had long gone and he searched for his bag but that had gone too.

He stood a moment and looked towards the gates and the two guards planted on platforms either side, their guns facing outward towards some unknown threat.

'You lost, boy?' came a voice from inside the house and Trey jumped from the porch.

He jammed his hands into his pockets and watched as eyes appeared through the dark web screen door and he was close to running when the voice told him to stay put.

'Spose you think this is some sort of holiday camp, strollin round and whatever.'

'I'm lookin for someone.' He coughed.

'Who?'

'Can't right remember, a house master.'

'Well that int no good.'

Trey pushed his hands deeper into his pockets and his left hand tightened to smooth comfort.

'Master what?'

'Dunno, sir. That McKenzie said go lookin.'

A stout, muscular man came to the door and he folded his arms and he looked like he was settling to stand there a good while.

'Go lookin, up and down and roundabout, that kind of lookin?'

Trey shrugged and he took his time to trace the outline of the man for possible clues, make an imprint that he could go over later.

'Well int that funny?' The man stepped closer. 'Cus you're halfway doin right without even tryin. New boy, int you?' He reached out a hand and Trey shook it and the man mangled and mashed the wet from it and he introduced himself as his house master.

He stood back and looked Trey up and over the same way he might regard cattle on market day. 'You can call me DB or sir and I spose I can call you what I want.'

Trey wanted to ask after the social worker to make a connection of things known and he thought about his bag with the little knick-knack things that would mean nothing to a man like this and he asked what had happened to it.

'Locked up no doubt, locked up same as the rest of the crap.' He left the confines of the doorframe and stepped off the porch in a stretch. 'But I'd say that int where your worry is right now.'

Trey thought about the nothing things he could do without and the family things he couldn't and he was glad of the photo folded neatly in his back pocket.

'You know where my bag is?' he asked again and the demon told him to stay put until he got what was his but the man had turned his back and he shouted for him to follow as he walked towards the yard with the bunkhouses all around.

'This is Tavy house, one of four bunkhouses as it stands. Tavy, Tamar, Lynner and Plym. The kids call them what they want no doubt but Tavy is this one's name and the name stays.'

Trey stood at the open door and peered through the wall of heat that punched tipsy from the room and he waited for his eyes to adjust to the change in light.

'What you think?' The man laughed.

'It's hot.'

'Course it's hot. Rain's stopped and sun's out, init? Hottest summer since forever and it int even begun and here we got a metal roof and the walls is metal so what you reckon, it's hot.'

Trey stepped into the room and he looked over the rows of beds so close together there was barely room for squeezing.

'Any questions?' the man asked.

Trey shrugged.

'You gotta have questions.'

Trey racked his brain but every question seemed out of bounds and instead he asked where he should put his things.

'What things?'

'Clothes and stuff?'

'Clothes go on the shelves above. Stuff stays locked up until such time as you earn it.'

'What do I do to earn it, sir?'

'Search me. Preacher's the one who makes the rules, I just keep you in line.' He looked at Trey and his eyes settled on his wrist. 'And you can hand that over while we're at it.'

Trey looked down at his wrist and he told the man the watch was his dad's. He wanted to explain that it was a present from Mum on their wedding day and had their initials and the date inscribed on the back and everything. He looked up at the man. More than anything he wanted to tell him Dad was dead. Maybe if he told him he would let him keep it.

'Well?' he said. 'Hand it over.'

Trey rubbed his thumb over the glass face of the watch, but he knew he couldn't risk telling about Dad and Mum and so he bent the clip and undid the clasp and handed it to the man.

'Don't worry, you'll get it back, spose you will anyway.' The man laughed and when he jammed the watch into his pocket the demon inside of Trey warmed from this fuel and fuel was good; they needed it for their fire.

Trey stood small-boy fierce in the room of hot air and when they heard the sound of voices approaching the building the man told him to choose a place to sleep.

'And hurry up. Int unusual for newbies to sleep on the floor.'

Trey looked around him and sat on the nearest bed to try the bounce and it was nothing much except a thin roll of padding and board beneath.