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Opening extract from

City of Halves

Written by

Lucy Inglis

Published by

Chicken House

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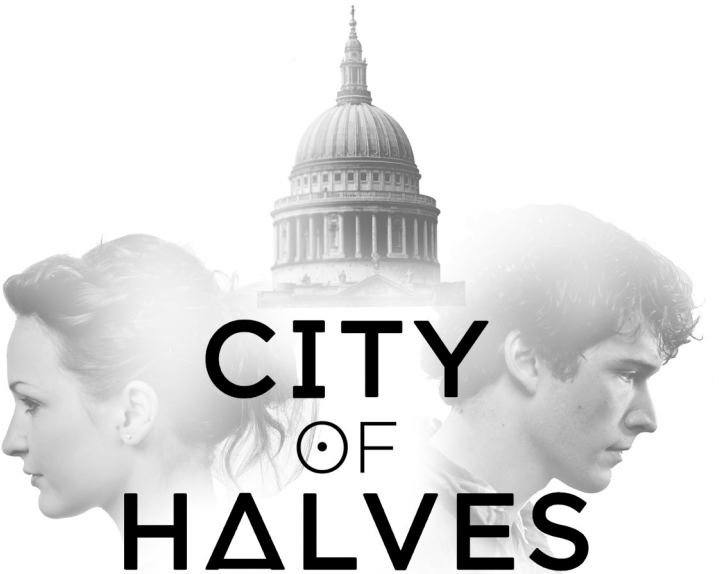
CITY
OF
HALVES

A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

London is a very old, very strange city – magical, mysterious and mythical. And it's Lily's home. When she finds out it's defended by beings whose motives are not solely of this world, it's lucky she has the help of a boy who is one of them. Or is it?

I love Lucy Inglis's hauntingly romantic – and, frankly, totally believable – world where past, present and imagination collide in the most unexpected and loving story of friendship since . . . forever.

BARRY CUNNINGHAM
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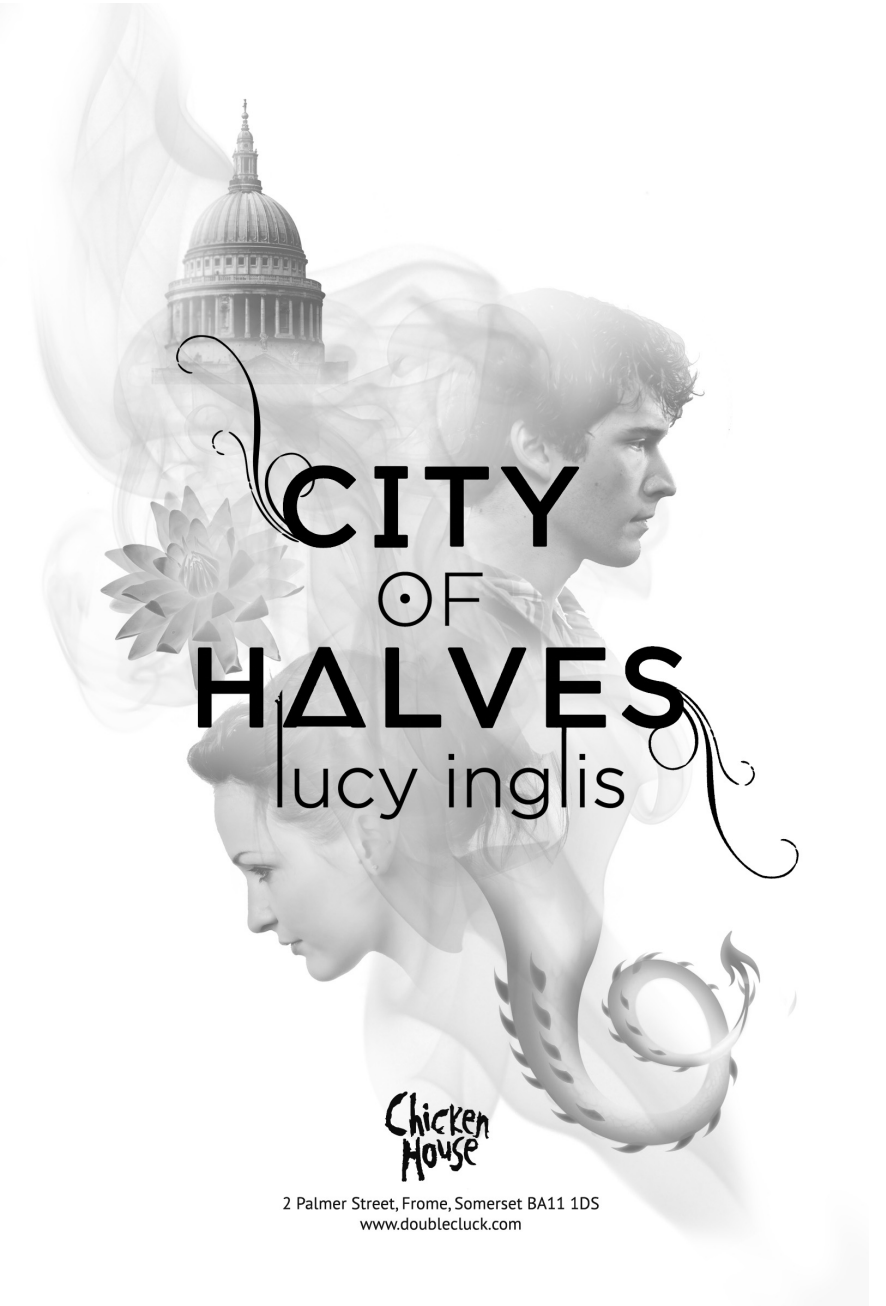

CITY OF HALVES

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Text © Lucy Inglis 2014

First published in Great Britain in 2014
The Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset, BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.doublecluck.com

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Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White
Cover photographs: girl © istock.com/ivanastar; boy © istock.com/Cameron Whitman; smoke © istock.com/tazytaz; St. Paul's © Nigel French/Shutterstock
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

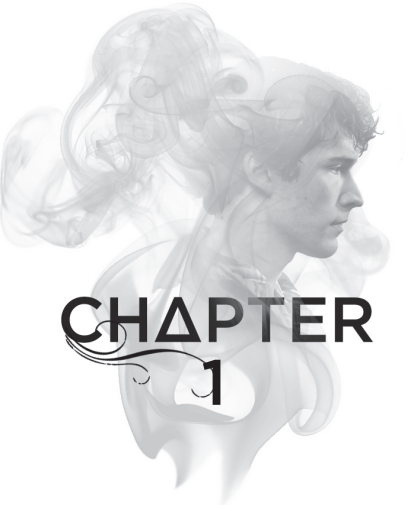
The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-909489-09-7
eISBN 978-1-909489-53-0

For Katie Sedler



CHAPTER 1

'Okay, so what have we got?' Lily's dad paced the kitchen in his shirt and tie, running his fingers through his fading blond hair.

Lily put her chin in her hand and stared at her laptop. 'I told you, Dad. Not enough. The guy who sold her the papers is a visa-passport-whatever faker. Facial recognition on the CCTV has had him in the City a few times recently, but he doesn't stay anywhere long enough to get caught. And without him, we're not going to get any further.'

Her father rubbed his face, then folded his arms. 'What's he doing in the City?'

She shrugged. 'Pubs, mainly. Probably meeting clients. Although there are a couple of places he goes that I can't figure out. Most likely dead drops, just leaving the papers for people to come and collect. One derelict alley in Bow Lane in particular.'

Her father picked up his briefcase, a long black court gown

and the box containing his barrister's wig. 'We've only got a few more days on this one. Till next week at the latest. If we can't find him, they'll deport her.'

'I know. But he's left no online trail, and officially he doesn't exist. He accesses his email from random coffee shops. I'll keep trying, but . . .' She shrugged and took a sip of tea from a large white mug.

He rubbed her curly head as he passed. 'Good girl. Wish me luck.'

She grinned. 'You don't need luck. You'll ace it.'

'Thanks to my star researcher.' He winked.

'For a big corporation with so much to hide, they were sloppy. That firewall wouldn't have kept out the cold, let alone anyone who actually wanted to get into their system.' She smiled. 'Besides, it was you who taught me how to find fraudulent transactions.'

Her father paused suddenly, looking at her.

'What?' she said.

He hesitated before replying. 'Nothing.' He blinked. 'You looked so like your mother then, I . . . it just caught me up short, that's all.'

Lily glanced towards the photographs on the table against the sitting-room wall. The most recent had been taken in Temple Gardens on her sixteenth birthday, the vivid autumn leaves behind her picked up by the colours in her hair. She was a smaller, sharper version of the mother she had never met, but they shared the same soft ringlets in a shiny mixture of gold and bronze. They also shared pale skin and large green eyes framed by dark lashes and eyebrows.

Lily's father turned for the door. 'There's money on the table

if you need anything. Why don't you go and meet your friends?'

'Thanks. I think Sam's busy. Her cousins are over from Canada or something.'

'Right. Well, make sure you eat, please.' He straightened his tie in the hall mirror.

'*Yes*, Dad. Go, or you'll be late.'

He reached for the door handle.

'And good luck!' she called after him. The latch clicked and she turned back to her computer. Through the window the gulls wheeled against a leaden midday sky.

Lily and her father lived quietly, in a routine formed around his work, her school and shared mealtimes. Their flat was cramped and old, and Lily knew he didn't earn that much, as lawyering went. They lived in Middle Temple on the edge of the City of London, a sort of ancient village full of lawyers with a dining hall and library, right on the river. Lily's bedroom had white bedding, a desk and the Macbook her dad had given her for Christmas. She adored it. Next to it was her brick of a laptop, scuffed and scratched from too many accidents. It was full of tag ends of code, script written on long, quiet afternoons.

Coding was something Lily had discovered she was good at by accident, after her school had run a short course in computer programming. But creating programs that compared consumer interest in products through Facebook 'likes' had soon morphed into hacking Facebook, then the school system, then the systems of corporations her father was up against in court. It had become like an addiction, one Lily and her father tried to put to good use. What Lily did was illegal, even if it was for the right reasons, but in the last year they had worked

on cases as diverse as stopping a major corporation from poisoning its workers and breaking part of a human trafficking chain.

Recently, though, it seemed to Lily that someone out there seemed to be aware of her – making contact online and then vanishing again, always just as she was about to launch some complicated new piece of code. Lily didn't know who it was, how they knew, or why they never tried to stop her – they always disappeared too quickly for her to find out anything more than a username: apache85. She had not told her father. Not yet. He worried about her too much as it was.

Lily got down from the stool and made herself some toast, which she ate standing at the counter. Her father was always on at her to eat, and he'd been even worse than usual this week, as they had pulled two all-nighters trying to track down the passport faker. She yawned and stretched, feeling jaded.

On the fridge, a handwritten note saying BLOOD was held beneath a magnet on top of a form from the doctor's surgery. Frequent blood-giving had been part of Lily's routine all her life, owing to her rare blood type. She had come to hate doctors, and needles, but she didn't complain. Her father was worried, though, that the blood-banking service would cease now that the NHS was being dismantled by corrupt politicians, and that made him even more protective. Lily had found him poring over expensive private healthcare literature recently. Healthcare they couldn't afford.

She finished her toast and washed up, then sat back down in front of her computer. The dead drops the forger had made didn't seem to make any sense. One in particular, the Bow Lane one, confused her. It had taken too long. She logged into the

Corporation of London's CCTV system. They had recently upgraded their security, but it hadn't taken Lily long to find her way back in. She scrolled through the hundreds of camera locations before clicking on the Bow Lane one.

Along with the security upgrade, new cameras had been installed throughout the City. This one was a sophisticated gimbal set-up that could revolve within a wheel in any direction. Lily used the trackpad of her computer to spin it, showing her the whole alley. A building that looked like a closed stationery shop came into view, together with a small, dark coffee shop.

She squinted and looked closer. At the end of the alley, where there had appeared to be a dead end, was instead a gate. Lily attempted to zoom the camera. As she did so, the gate opened, and a tall figure in a long pale coat walked through it. A wide hood was drawn up over his head, concealing his face. The coat hung open, and beneath it he wore a Henley T-shirt, jeans and boots.

As Lily watched, he reached back and pulled the gate closed behind him. He halted, turning very slightly towards the camera. She tried to zoom in closer, to see his face, and blinked as he disappeared from view. A moment later, the camera screen juddered and went dark, cracked.

'What the—?' She tried to re-establish the connection, but the camera was out of action. 'Okay . . .'

Going to her bedroom, she added a knitted top to her uniform of tatty layered T-shirts, skinny jeans and trainers. She pulled on her black jacket, grabbed her canvas satchel, the money and her keys, and left.

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