

opening extract from

thieves like us

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CHAPTER ONE

To open a door, and not know what lay on the other side. That was what Jonah dreamed about, day and night. That was what freedom meant.

He kicked back the covers on his thin mattress, unable to sleep, listening out for the same old noises of night here. The lazy scuff of heels in the corridor outside, low voices and laughter as the warders trudged the night beat. Banging about somewhere down the passage, a foul-mouthed yell for silence, taken up by other prisoners too bored or too wired to sleep.

Jonah guessed that Young Offenders' Institutions weren't exactly designed with sweet dreams in mind.

Two months so far. Two months into a year-long stretch and already it seemed like for ever. They called it 'doing time', but to Jonah it felt more like time was doing *him*, and roughly. Every day hung loose about him like a sweater on a stick-man, no matter how he tried to bulk out the hours.

There were peer literacy workshops, where he helped other inmates with their reading for an hour – well, until they threw their next strop and threatened to ram the books down his throat, anyway. Then there

were the personal health classes, focusing chiefly on drugs and sex – but since they never told you how to get your hands on either, few people bothered to go. You could try a bit of music and drama if you didn't mind being beaten up by the hard cases afterwards . . . Just as long as you made time for the biggest joy of all – Resettlement Class. This was where they made you practise filling out work applications for jobs you didn't want and wouldn't stand a chance of getting anyway.

'*I want to work somewhere with computers,*' Jonah had insisted.

'*After what* you *did to get put in here?*' His personal officer had laughed, about as impersonal as you could get. '*Dream on, son.*'

Jonah couldn't remember how to sleep, let alone dream. Here he was, seventeen years old, with a future as dismal as his past. He checked his crappy watch with the luminous hands for the tenth time that minute.

Nearly five to three in the morning.

In the distance, an echoing crash sounded. Jonah didn't react, didn't question it. Outside was another world, one that had little meaning here. Nothing could reach him through the gates and the guards and the high walls. Even the sunlight was scrag-end stuff, thin and grey over the gardens and the exercise yard, like the days had a job just to drag themselves past dawn.

Jonah closed his eyes and pictured himself flying beyond the dreary confines of the detention centre, running barefoot outside through wide-open fields,

splashing in the sea – all the crap he'd never contemplated for a second when he'd actually had the chance. While others basked in the warmth of the sun on their skins, Jonah had only ever felt it faintly through closed curtains, fighting to keep the glare off his monitor screen. That was his window on to an easier world, one where he could break the rules and it was OK, it was *clever* . . .

Jonah Wish – the great code-breaker. Or the great freak, in the eyes of just about everyone else. Cracking ciphers. Inventing his own. Encrypting stuff, translating stuff – all just a big game to him until –

Sudden footfalls in the corridor distracted him. He pictured the warders in their grey uniforms, black boots slapping down on ivory tiles, grumbling as they were goaded into action. Someone caught using again? Another suicide?

Jonah sighed. Who cared? It would be all over the block by breakfast, and he would know then. For what it was worth.

His watch read a minute closer to three.

Restless, he shifted on to his side. Stared resentfully at his cell door – a black rectangle, edges bound with a miserable light stealing in from the corridor. The room was dark as pitch – not that there was much to see even when the lights snapped back on at seven-thirty.

It was kind of weird. He'd known so many rooms – in care homes, hostels, or with foster families all around the country – that in his head, they all blurred into one nothingy, threadbare little place. All he could bring to mind with clarity were the makes and models

of the computers he'd used and abused over the years, feeding his growing talent. He'd clogged their memories with pattern matches and character substitution, crushed their processors under the weight of calculations they weren't built to handle, crashed –

That crashing sound. There it came again, just a little louder, a little harsher. And raised voices too, somewhere close by.

The feeble light skulking about the edges of the cell door brightened for a few moments with neon intensity. Men shouted in surprise and alarm before a sudden silence fell, thick as the darkness in Jonah's room.

It was broken only by the sound of nimble footsteps on the tiles. Getting louder. Closer.

Unnerved now, Jonah got up from his bunk.

The footsteps had stopped.

He strained to hear anything out in the corridor. After that commotion, why wasn't everyone banging on the doors, yelling and shouting, seizing on a break in the boredom?

It was quiet as the grave out there.

'It's all right,' he told himself, wiping the cold sweat from his forehead. 'It's all right. You're locked in. Nothing can get through that door.'

There came a snatch of tuneless whistling from outside, and some sinister scrapes and ratchets.

Then, with a roll of heavy tumblers, the door opened a crack.

Jonah felt frozen like a rabbit in a truck's headlights. There was nowhere to hide. In desperation he dropped down and slid under his bunk.

The door was kicked wide open and yellow light

spilled in from the corridor. From his hiding place Jonah saw a kid a few years younger than him, fourteen or fifteen maybe, standing in the doorway. He had a cheeky face, scattered with freckles. The black joggers and clinging polo neck he wore emphasised his scrawny physique. He sported a black patch like a pirate's over his left eye.

'Hey,' the skinny kid said. 'Jonah Wish?'

Jonah held his breath, closed his eyes.

'Oi! You under the bed, I'm talking to you.' The intruder spoke with a rough London accent. 'Jonah?'

Swearing under his breath, Jonah wriggled out from under the bunk. 'Who the hell are you? How'd you get in here?'

'Wasn't much of a lock. Any majorly talented individual could have sorted it.'

'But you're just a kid!'

'Oh, is *that* what I am?'

'I mean, how did you get past the screws, the security –'

'"Gain entry to target's cell, identify target and observe." That was my job. That's what I've done.'

Jonah got slowly to his feet. 'What do you mean, "target"?'

'Uh-uh.' The boy peeled back his patch to reveal what looked to be a perfectly good eye underneath. 'I don't answer the tough questions – that's Con's job.'

'Con? What are you –?'

'Sorry, mate, got to get on with observing you now.' With a wicked smile, he pushed apart his eyelids with two fingers and popped out his eyeball. It glistened as he held it between finger and thumb. 'The name's

Patch. I'm keeping an eye on you, Jonah Wish.'

Jonah just stared, speechless and revolted, with no idea how to respond. There was a scuffling noise from outside in the corridor.

'Did Patch get his eye out already?' It was a girl's voice calling, high and prim; she sounded foreign, French maybe. 'He is trying to intimidate you, yes? But don't let him freak you out. It's only glass.'

'Aw, Con,' Patch complained, placing his bogus eyeball back in place beneath the black fabric. 'Why d'you have to spoil all my fun?'

A graceful silhouette appeared behind Patch in the doorway. So this was Con – for Constance? Connie? Confidence, from the sound of things.

'Look,' said Jonah, finding his voice at last. 'You want to tell me what the hell is going on here?'

The girl ignored him, turned to Patch. 'I thought Motti was fixing the lights.'

They snapped on in the cell, blinding and brilliant.

'Right on cue,' said Patch.

Jonah blinked furiously, willing his sight to return. When it did, his gaze lingered on Con. She was tall, almost his height. Eighteen or nineteen, he reckoned, and striking rather than beautiful: her neat nose just a little crooked, her eyes just a fraction too far apart. Her hair was blonder than Jonah's, almost white, held back off her forehead by a thick band as black as the rest of the clothes she wore.

She looked aloof and sophisticated, while Jonah stood there cowering like a prat in his prison pyjamas.

'Now just hang on,' he said. 'I don't know what kind of stunt you're trying to pull here, but –'

Con cut him short. 'You are Jonah Wish, the cipherpunk, yes?'

Jonah grimaced. 'Cipherpunk?'

'It's him all right, Con,' Patch said, checking the corridor was still clear. 'He's changed a bit since the pictures were taken, but this is the right cell. And there's no roomie to worry about, just like the man said.'

Con walked casually into the cell. 'You do not look like a computer geek, Jonah.' She talked slowly and carefully, like she was tasting each word in her mouth. 'You are quite cute. Even with bed head.'

'I could just about handle the "cipherpunk" thing,' said Jonah, smoothing a hand through his tangled sandy hair, 'but now I know you're taking the piss.'

'Uh-uh.' Con smiled, the kind of smile you saw pinned up in dentists' waiting rooms. 'We are taking *you*.'

'Taking me?' He bunched his fists. 'This is crazy. What *is* this?'

'Get dressed. Hurry.'

'Why?'

Con threw him a look hard enough to bruise. 'We'd hate for you to catch cold out there.'

'Out there?' He looked at her, bemused. 'What, you're here to spring me?'

'Duh!' said Patch. 'Kind of early for visiting hours, innit?'

'And we will be late for our exit if we don't get moving.' Con picked up his blue prison jeans from where they lay crumpled on the floor and threw them at him. 'So move.'

'Late. Right.' Jonah's mind was grappling numbly

with events and coming off worst.

Then, as he slowly pulled on the threadbare jeans, he noticed the warder in the corridor start to stir. Was that good news or bad? Did he *want* to be rescued – shoved back in his cell and locked up again? Hadn't he just been fantasising about getting out of here?

Funnily enough, a tall blonde and a kid with a removable eyeball hadn't figured prominently in those fantasies.

The warder's eyes flickered fully open. He was a new screw – Wilson, his name was. He stared first in confusion, then in alarm at these unlikely night visitors.

As Jonah continued dressing, he could see from the corner of his eye that slowly, quietly, Wilson was getting to his feet. Should he say something, alert Con and Patch? Or should he be glad there was someone ready to put a stop to this madness? He struggled into a white T-shirt, trying not to shake, feeling the light cotton snag on his sweaty back.

'Come on!' Con urged him.

Wilson pulled out his baton and raised it, ready to bring it down on the back of Patch's head. If Jonah was going to say something, he would have to do it right now before –

He never got the chance.

As Wilson brought down his club, Patch ducked and dodged neatly out of the way. At the same time, Con slipped behind the warder. Jonah blinked, and so almost missed the bit where she knocked the baton from Wilson's hand and struck him in the stomach. Next thing he knew, Patch was wielding the club while Wilson lay sprawled on the concrete floor, gasping for breath.

'Now come on, you kids,' Wilson said weakly, like he thought he was still somehow in control. 'I don't know what your game is, but give it up. You can't hope to walk out of here.'

'Kids?' Con hauled him up by one arm. 'Look at me, you patronising little man.' Her green eyes were unblinking, as green and cold as Arctic waters. 'What is his name, Jonah?'

The warder looked at him warningly.

'She asked you a question, Jonah,' said Patch quietly. 'What, you're on *his* side, now?'

At least I understand his side, thought Jonah, his mouth dry.

'Wilson,' he croaked at last. 'His name's Wilson.'

'Well, well, Mr Wilson. I am glad you woke up. We have need of you.'

'If you think you can use me as a hostage –' He broke off, wincing as she placed a hand on the back of his neck.

'Mr Wilson, you are going to do something for us. You are going to walk to the main gate and tell them to open up.'

'You must be out of your –'

'Shhh.' Con leaned in to the warder's face like she was going to kiss him, her eyes boring into his own, her voice soft and soothing as her fingers stroked his neck. 'You *will* walk to the main gate,' she assured him. 'You will tell the guards there to open up so that a white van may gain entrance.'

Wilson just stared at her, kind of glassily.

'The driver will not be carrying identification, but you can vouch for her. Ask that they bend the rules

and let her through. She is . . . some entertainment you have arranged for Doug Hurst, no? It's his birthday today.'

'Entertainment,' said Wilson, nodding as if this was a perfectly plausible idea.

'For Doug's birthday,' Con reminded him gently. It was weird; the way she spoke, her words . . . She sounded so much older than she looked.

Patch didn't. 'Say you'll show them some juicy photos of the gig later,' he smirked. '*Well* juicy photos.'

Con ignored him, all her attention on Wilson. 'Once you have told them this, you will go back inside, sit at the front desk and fall asleep.' Her voice grew softer, huskier. 'You will fall into a deep, deep sleep, and when you wake up you will remember nothing of this evening's events whatsoever. Do you understand me, Wilson?'

The warder nodded meekly.

'Then off you go.'

She let go of him and he shambled off out of the corridor.

'I'm the one in the deep, deep sleep,' Jonah muttered, pulling on his trainers. 'I've got to be dreaming, right?' He sank back against the cell wall and checked his watch. It was three o'clock exactly. 'Got to be.' Five minutes ago, the world stank but at least it was sane. Now . . .

'Two minutes till Motti's due at the main entrance,' hissed Patch. 'Come on, Con, fix up the geek and let's get going!'

'Who's Motti?' Jonah demanded. 'And what do you mean, fix up the –?'

'How long have you been in this pit, Jonah?' Con started walking slowly, steadily towards him.

'Too long,' he said stiffly.

'I'll bet you have dreamed of all the things you would like to do.' She unzipped her black jacket, which fell open to reveal a high-necked blouse. 'You have dreamed of *this* moment, yes? The moment of release.'

'Release?'

'Life is about opportunities.' She moved in close, her slim fingers slipping around the topmost of her blouse's tiny black buttons. 'And this is the biggest opportunity you'll ever have, Jonah. This is the chance of a lifetime.'

He stared transfixed as the little buttons popped open, one by one. 'What are you . . . I mean, you can't . . . We only just –'

But Con had already tugged open the neck of her blouse. Jonah's voice died in his throat as he saw the two glass ampoules glowing a sickly yellow, affixed just beneath her collarbone.

'But like any other chance – before you take it, you have to make it.' She plucked both ampoules deftly from the pale skin without even glancing down. 'One for you and one for me.'

'What are they?' Jonah said as she pressed one into his hand.

'We may need them if Wilson does not convince. And if we run into any more trouble on the way out.'

Jonah felt reality falling away. This was all a joke, it had to be – some big elaborate wind-up. 'You're really going to do it? You'll get me out of here?'

'Do not let go of this till I say.' Con closed Jonah's fingers around the ampoule. 'Phosphor caps are quite stable at body temperature, but away from the skin they cool quickly and . . .' She puffed up her cheeks then blew out the air as if by way of demonstration.

Jonah stared at his fist. 'You used these to get in here.'

'Amongst other things.'

'Why's it gone so quiet out there? What did you do to everyone?'

'Your questions can wait. *We* can't.'

Patch nodded. 'So are you coming, or what?'

Jonah stared at them helplessly. 'Who *are* you people?'

'Maybe your best friends. Maybe your worst nightmare.' Con's eyes seemed to glitter as she gestured to the cell door, which still stood wide open. The shadowy corridor was waiting outside. 'Want to find out which?'