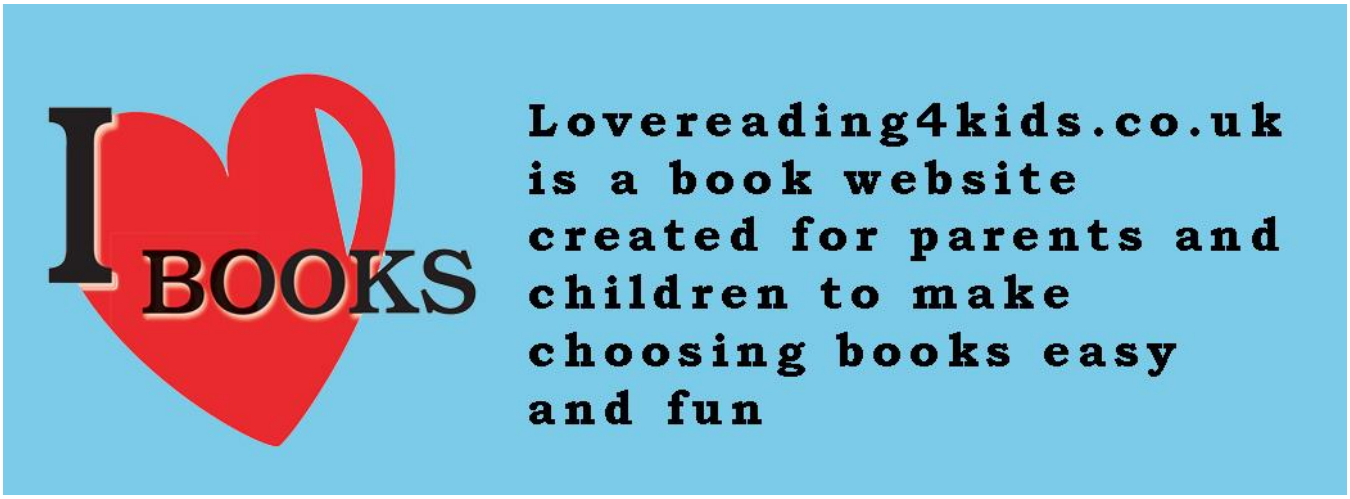


Opening extract from

The White Tower

Written by

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THE WHITE TOWER

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I have explained the phenomena of the heavens and of
our sea by the force of gravity, but I have
not yet assigned a cause to gravity.
Isaac Newton (1642–1727)

Rise, ye children of golde! The infinite skye awaits!
From *The Book of Alchemie*, Peter Burgess (1523–1597)

I

Closing her fingers carefully around the small box in her blazer pocket, Livy craned her neck to see through the jam of bodies all shoving forwards to climb on to the bus. She panicked as she saw the boy's black spiky hair disappear up the stairs to the upper deck. She had to get on this bus.

The driver looked straight ahead, uncaring. He pressed the button to close the doors. Livy pushed forwards.

She was on.

The doors closed behind her and the bus lurched. Livy reached into her rucksack for her travelcard. Once she had stuck it on the reader, she realized that she wouldn't be able to put it away without using both hands. She clamped it between her teeth because she didn't want to

let go of that box in her pocket. This was the present – a tiny blue glass heart – that she had promised her best friend Mahalia would be handed to the boy with the spiky hair – and a promise was a promise however difficult it was to keep.

On the upper deck, Livy swung her rucksack down, dropped her gym bag and sank on to the seat. She took her travelcard out of her mouth and slipped it into her blazer pocket. The boy was sitting with his friends at the back of the bus. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves – how was she going to do this? She looked out at the clouds for help. They looked as solid as whole cities suspended above her but only made her feel more light-headed. She would focus on letting this be a normal day, she decided. After all, what could be more normal than today?

She had got up when the alarm went off, as she had promised that she would: no stomach ache. She had managed a whole mouthful of breakfast and gone to school. OK, school had felt a bit weird after so long, but everyone was very kind and she had sat next to Megan in Maths and Ciara in Spanish. That had felt wrong because she had only ever sat next to Mahalia. But she had got through it and here she was, going home on the bus and the boy Mahalia was mad on was sitting somewhere behind her. Just like normal.

Her bare knees in her summer skirt rubbed up against

the seat in front of her. She wished she had worn trousers but hadn't been able to find them after so many weeks off school.

'Just a normal day,' she told herself. 'And tomorrow will be another normal day. And nothing much will happen. It will just be normal. Because normal is good. We like normal.'

The bus brakes screeched. She glanced over her shoulder. In the seats behind, the boys began a round of knuckle bumping, trading good-humoured insults in some form of Londonish that Livy couldn't understand. Jeering laughter broke out as the boy with black spiky hair pushed his way out of the group and sauntered up the aisle towards her.

Livy took a deep breath and took the box out of her pocket.

'Excuse me?' She leant forward.

The boy looked down at her, surprised. There was some wild whistling from his friends behind and Livy swallowed, her throat dry. Her mind was a blank: what was she meant to say? She thrust the tiny box wrapped in its sparkly paper at the boy's chest.

'A friend asked me to give you this,' she croaked awkwardly.

'Yeah? Who's your friend?'

'You spoke to her a few times on the bus,' Livy burbled.

'Is she pretty?'

Livy blushed. 'She's very pretty. Long brown hair and really big eyes.'

The bus stopped: Livy only had a few more seconds.

'Mahalia,' Livy blurted out. 'My friend is called Mahalia.'

The boy took the package, held it to his ear and shook it. 'Nah,' he said. 'I don't know no one called Malia.'

Livy took in his blazer with torn pockets, trousers slung perilously low and his short, fat tie. His hair looked as if it had actually been glued into those strange stiff spikes. He gave her a brief shrug and headed off down the stairs.

Livy sat back in her seat. The emptiness of the day without Mahalia presented itself to her. And now this boy, who had been the focus of Mahalia's thoughts and dreams for so long, said that he didn't remember her. Couldn't even get her name right.

'Excuse me.' A voice from over her shoulder.

She turned, surprised.

A slightly older boy, with curly brown hair and grey eyes, was smiling at her from the seat behind. She noticed he was wearing a pale grey blazer that did not belong to any of the local schools. On the pocket was a discreet crest of an embroidered tower. Temple College, Livy realized. The one by the river, the oldest school in London. That was where the rich children went to

school; rich and clever. So what was he doing on this bus?

'Yeah?' she said, feeling annoyed.

'Is this yours?' he said, waving something in her face – then flipping it open to look at the photograph inside. 'Livy Burgess.'

'Where'd you get that?' Livy blurted out.

Her travelcard holder, covered in the faces of Korean pop idols that she and Mahalia adored, was in the boy's hand.

'On the floor. You dropped it.'

'I couldn't have!'

'Why not?' Those large grey eyes sparkled with humour and his mouth was turned up in an impish smile. 'Don't things end up on the floor when you drop them? Or do you have hidden talents?'

She swiped her hand at the card, and it dropped to the floor. They both looked down.

'Gravity.' The boy shrugged. 'Amazing.' He scooped up the travelcard, looking at the pictures on the cover. 'Are these boys or girls?'

'Boys!' Livy snatched the travelcard out of his hand. 'Clearly!'

Livy turned back round, having given him what she hoped was a 'superior' look, and took care putting her travelcard back in her blazer pocket. She pressed her cheek against the cool window, letting the city flow

around her: sky like milk and the football stadium a cheap toy that had fallen out of a giant's cracker. Mahalia, she knew, would not have got into such a ridiculous conversation. She would have said just the thing to put the Temple College boy in his place.

She sensed him stand up behind her. 'My stop,' he said, as if she had asked him what he was doing. This was awkward: it was her stop too.

She saw him out of the corner of her eye. The neat blazer on top, football shorts, mud-splashed legs and filthy football boots below. He waved to her from the top of the stairs. Annoying! She waited until he had clattered down the steps and only then grabbed her rucksack and hooked her finger through the string of her gym bag.

But as Livy stepped down on to the pavement, she couldn't resist looking in both directions to see which way the boy had gone. She saw him move towards the park, a long, loping stride, his head to one side as if he were listening out for something. She hung back: she didn't want to look as if she were following him, because that was her way home too.

'Livy!'

Her mother, long black hair like trailing seaweed around her shoulders, was pushing her large old bike through the pedestrians in a determined fashion. Her eyes were made up with their sooty black eyeliner and her lips were dark red. She looked very different from

everyone else, as if she were a visitor from another country where it was normal for the inhabitants to dress in white fur coats and vintage crepe tea dresses.

'You didn't need to meet me off the bus, Mum!' Livy said, glancing around to check that no one had seen. 'I'm thirteen!'

'Oh!' Livy saw her mother's beautiful eyes flicker as if she'd been found out. But she quickly came up with her excuse. 'I wasn't really coming to meet you.' She leant forward to kiss Livy and take the gym bag out of her hands. She smelt of roses, but roses wrapped in fur. 'I needed to do some shopping!' She proudly pointed to her bike basket, which was piled high with packets of sugar and flour, a box of eggs and several tubs of ready-made icing.

'I don't need a cake, Mum,' Livy muttered. 'All I've done is go to school, remember? Like everyone else.'

Her mother didn't say anything as she started to push her bike towards the park. But Livy was used to these pauses where questions hung in the air and instead of speaking, her mother tried to look for the answer in Livy's face.

They walked up the side of the park; grand London terraces and stately plane trees surrounded the expanse of tired grass where dogs raced after sticks, barking recklessly. Ahead, Livy could see the boy in the pale grey blazer. Where was he going?