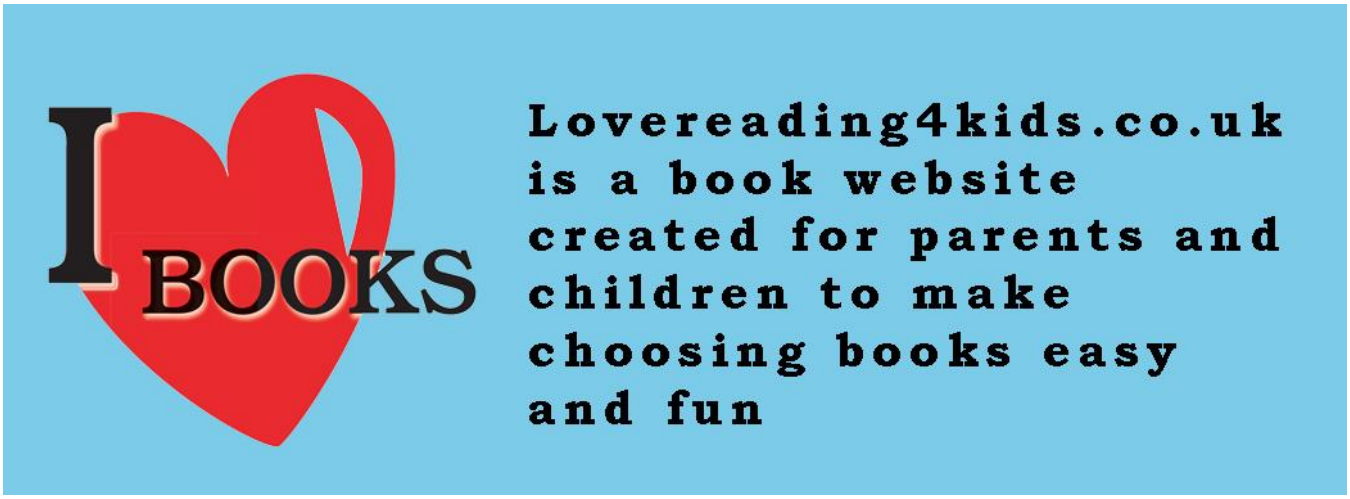


Opening extract from

The Last of the Spirits

Written by

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Chapter 1

The boy had never spoken to the old man before, nor scarcely noticed him. The old man, had he been asked, would have sworn under oath, hand on the Bible, that he had likewise never seen the boy.

But the truth was, over the last few years, they had passed within inches of each other a hundred times. The old man had even brushed the boy aside more than once as he beetled his way to his office.

To the old man, the boy was just another tiresome obstacle to be avoided. To the boy, the old man, along with all the other hard-faced strangers like him, was yet another reason to hate the world.

But this day, this chill and fog-choked Christmas Eve – this day was to be different.

'Mister,' cried the boy, wiping his nose on the back of his hand.

The old man flinched but did not turn, his black-coated back bent over as though heading into a strong wind, the silver tip of his cane tick-tick-ticking on the paving slabs as he hurried along. *Tick-tick-tick*. Time is money. The boy sped up and pulled his sister along in his wake.

'Mister!'

This time the boy emphasised his cry with a tug on the old man's coat-tail. This had an immediate effect. The old man skidded in his tracks and turned round with a ferocious look on his face, a look that might have made another faint. The children were well used to such expressions. They stopped, but kept their distance.

'What do you want?' hissed the old man, his muffler pulled up to his bottom lip, his hat jammed down on to his furrowed brow so that his white

eyebrows curled round the black brim. His eyes were ice blue.

'Please, sir,' said the boy. 'We wondered, as it's Christmas Eve and all, if you might see your way to giving us a few coins, sir. Only we –'

'Oh, you did, did you?' said the man, narrowing his eyes still further, their reddened rims the only warm colour in his deathly face. 'You thought as it was Christmas Eve and the season of goodwill, you'd rob me, did you?'

'We ain't robbing no one,' said the boy. 'We're asking is all. A few coins. That ain't a crime, is it?'

The old man raised his cane and bared his crooked yellow teeth.

'Get away from me or I'll call a constable!' he cried. 'Maybe I'll give you a thrashing before he arrives.'

The boy and girl ran, clattering round a corner into an alleyway, where the boy grabbed his sister and turned to peer at the old man, a vague smudge now in

the fog as he climbed the three stone stairs to his office, opened the black door and slammed it behind him.

The violence of that slam seemed to shake the street and it dislodged a great icicle from the roof, which dropped like an arrow to shatter on the pavement below. The snow of the week before had thawed from most of the roofs on the street, but clearly the old man's office was a few degrees colder than the houses on either side. In any event, what had thawed was now speedily refreezing.

The slamming door seemed likewise to dislodge something in the boy's mind. It was not the old man's refusal to give them money, nor his threat to call a constable – both were common enough occurrences; no, it was the look in the old man's eye, that look of cold contempt. It had pierced the boy to the bone. He walked back and stood in a patch of waste ground opposite the old man's office, staring malevolently.

'Sam,' said his sister, walking up behind him, 'let's go. I'm cold.'

'Go where?' he hissed, without taking his eyes from the shining black door. 'What does it matter where we go, Lizzie? We'll be as cold there as here.'

She tugged at his arm, and he shrugged her away.

'No one's making you stay,' he said. 'Go if you want to.'

Lizzie turned and began to walk, slipping and sliding on the ice and slush. Her boots were so ragged and oversized it would have been a comic sight were her arms not so very thin, her face so pale and gaunt, and her eyes so sunken and terribly lacking in any of life's sparkle.

'Wait!' said Sam with an angry sigh and ran to catch up with her.

At thirteen, he was older by three years but not much taller and not much heavier either. His face was just as gaunt as his sister's, but there was a hardness in his features that was absent in hers. His brow was furrowed by a constant frown and his jaw thrust out, daring the world to hit him. His hands were locked in fists, even when he slept.

They worked the streets, stretching out their filthy hands to anyone who passed, dipping them lightly into pockets and purses if they got the chance.

Christmas Eve was a time when most folk had some extra warmth in their hearts, but this warmth was directed towards their loved ones in the main. So very little was left over for those who needed it most.

By mid-afternoon Sam and Lizzie had made only enough to buy a very small pie between them. And by that time most people were already heading home, let out early on account of the coming festivities. Tired and still hungry, the two children found themselves back on that same piece of inhospitable waste ground opposite the old man's office.

A handsome young man walked down the street, whistling. He skipped up the steps to the door and rapped on the knocker, blowing into his hands. The door opened and he walked in. As the door was closing, Sam set off across the road.

'Sam?' said Lizzie.

'Come on,' he said, without turning round.

'What are we doing?'

Sam didn't answer. He didn't know the answer. He just felt drawn in somehow. He walked up to the railings in front of the window. Through the dusty glass he could see the old man's bony back as he worked at a desk. Sam strained his ears to hear.

'A merry Christmas, Uncle,' came a cry from inside as the young man walked through from the hall.

'Bah!' muttered the old man. 'Humbug!'

Sam ducked behind the railings as the young man came into view. It was clearly no warmer inside the office than outside, for Sam could see his breath.

There followed some muffled conversation. Sam was unable to make out many of the words until the old man shouted, making Lizzie jump.

'Nephew!' he yelled. 'Keep Christmas in your own way and let me keep it in mine.'

So the old man was this fellow's uncle. Sam had not imagined him to have any family. He clearly did

not want any, even so. Every attempt at goodwill from the nephew was met with the same sourness the old man had shown to them.

A clerk was standing nearby and at one point forgot himself and applauded the nephew's words. His expression made it all too clear that he realised his mistake as he became suddenly interested in attending to the fire.

'Let me hear another sound from *you*,' cried his employer harshly, 'and you'll keep your Christmas by losing your situation.'

'Poor man,' whispered Lizzie, seeing the clerk's pale face.

'Don't be angry, Uncle,' said the nephew, stepping between the old man and his clerk. 'Come! Dine with us tomorrow.'

But the old man would have none of it. The more the nephew persisted, the ruder he became. The nephew's jolly parting cry of 'Merry Christmas' was greeted with an emphatically snarled 'Good afternoon!' as was the

'Happy New Year!' that followed it. Eventually even this good-natured young man was forced to admit defeat and headed towards the outer door.

As it opened, Sam and Lizzie could hear the nephew wishing the clerk a merry Christmas and getting a far warmer response. Through the window glass, they caught the old man muttering. It was as though goodwill caused him pain.

At that very moment two men arrived at the door, well turned out – heavy coats, top hats on their heads. The nephew stepped to one side with a hearty 'Good day, gentlemen!'

He was as cheerful as the old man was dour and, after wishing them too a merry Christmas, he strode away up the street as though, for him, Christmas could not start a minute too soon. The two men were duly let in and the door closed behind them.

'Come on, Liz,' said Sam.

He had seen enough, and they walked away. The visitors had not been inside the office for more than

a few minutes, however, when they emerged, looking as though they had been hauled before a hanging judge and had only just escaped the gallows. They crossed the street towards Sam and Lizzie, their faces pale and shocked.

'Well!' said one to the other as they stood nearby. 'Have you ever heard the like?'

'Never put so forcibly,' said his companion, opening a box of snuff and taking a pinch. 'Many do not want to give to charity, but few are so *proud* of it.'

He sniffed loudly, sucking the snuff up inside his flared nostrils.

'*Are there no prisons?*' said the first, mimicking the old man's voice.

'*And the Union Poorhouses*,' said the other, doing the same, hunching his shoulders and twisting his face into a sour expression, a few rogue strands of snuff still visible. '*Are they still in operation?*'

'And when you said that many would not go there and would rather die –'

'*Then they had better do it*,' said the other in the old man's voice, '*and decrease the surplus population*.'

The two men stood and looked back at the office in wonder.

'It is a shame that Mr Marley is deceased,' said the first. 'For he must surely have been a kinder soul than Mr Scrooge.'

Scrooge. It was a name that prodded like a bony finger. *Scrooge*. Sam's eyes narrowed as he stared resentfully at the black door and the black heart it guarded. The two charity men had walked away before he realised he should have asked them for money. Soft heads or soft hearts, those types were always good for a tap.

So old Scrooge thought that the poor should die rather than trouble him? This was hardly a novel view in London town and Sam might have found a dozen men nearby who felt the same. But few – very few – would say the words out loud.

The light of day had faded already and Sam

winced at the thought of the pain the night's chill would bring. How many more nights could he endure? he wondered. How many more would Lizzie survive? The empty suits in the window of the tailor's across the way were warmer than they were. Why, a plucked goose in the butcher shop had more love and care lavished on it than was ever gifted to them.

Sam was filled with a bitter, seething, murderous rage against all who lived in comfort and security in that cold-hearted city, and this fury was funnelled and concentrated down, like a hammer to a nail, on to the head of Mr Scrooge.

'Sam,' said Lizzie, seeing his fierce trance, 'I'm cold.'

'We're all cold,' said Sam mechanically.

'Please, Sam,' she said quietly.

Sam turned away from his vigil.

'Look,' he said after a moment, his eyes lifeless, like glass marbles. 'There's a fire.'

Ahead of them a small group huddled round a brazier lit by workmen, heads bowed like mourners

at a funeral pyre. The happy yellow glow seemed alien to that colourless place and it attracted the cold and homeless as animals to a desert oasis.

The two children shoved through those already gathered. No one gave way for them. There was no more sympathy to be had there than from the old man who had shunned them. The smaller you were, the closer to the ground and closer to the grave pit, that was all.

They were not the only children there for one thing. A woman, whose features shifted and blurred in the heat of the flames, held a baby to her breast under her filthy shawl, its tiny head just peeping out. The mother stared blankly into the fire, so weak she looked as though she might fall headlong into it. Would she see Christmas Day? Would the child?

The fire was a feeble one, and Sam looked about for anything that would burn. Builders clearing a house nearby had thrown things down into the yard below. Sam rummaged around and came back hugging pieces of wood and several books to his chest.

As he was about to throw one of the books on the fire, it opened and the pages fluttered, revealing for a fleeting second a brightly coloured illustration, partly hidden under a sheet of tissue paper. It was like an exotic butterfly.

'Don't,' said Lizzie, grabbing his arm.

'What? You'd rather keep it, would you? You'd rather carry it around, would you, so's you can read it to yourself when you're tucked up in bed, eh?'

A one-eyed man nearby sniggered wheezily.

'No,' said Lizzie. 'But –'

'But what?' said Sam, more loudly now, and more cruelly. 'What?'

'It's just too lovely to burn,' she said, not quite swallowing a sob.

Sam shook his head. Too lovely to burn! The one-eyed man shook his head too, and Sam was momentarily troubled by this distorted mirror of himself.

'We could sell it,' protested Lizzie.

'Half the pages is missing,' said Sam. 'No one's going to want to buy that.'

'But –'

'You're too sentimental, Liz. That's your trouble.'

Sam tossed the book on to the fire and it fell, pages open, the flames eating up the words. Lizzie was able to catch the odd phrase before the fire blackened the paper and tore it up, sending glowing fragments high into the night.

Sam saw the words too, but understood nothing. Writing was a mystery to him: a cryptic code without a key. Books! What better use for them than fuel for a fire? He'd have burned every book in London even if it only kept his hands warm for a moment. What were stories but just another kind of lie?

Sam turned away from the brazier. He could still see the office dimly through the fog and the dark. As he watched, the door opened and a man stood briefly silhouetted in the light from inside before hunching

himself against the cold and striding away down the street on stick-thin legs.

This wasn't the old man's hunched gait, but the brisker step of someone younger. It was the clerk to old Scrooge, a man as thin as Sam with clothes that had seen better days, though the clerk might struggle to bring them to mind. Not long before, Scrooge had threatened to sack him, but outside the office the clerk was like a bird released from a cage.

He whistled gaily and would have no doubt flown if tattered coat-tails had been wings. He went on his way, chuckling to himself as he took a run and slid along the pavement for a yard or two, almost falling over.

Two plump children on their way home with their mother laughed at the clerk's antics, but their gentle mockery only lightened his mood further. He tipped his hat to them and bowed elaborately before he hopped and skipped nimbly across the road to walk within a few feet of Sam.

‘Merry Christmas!’ he said, throwing his scarf over his shoulder and blowing into his thin pale fingers.

‘Merry Christmas!’ said Lizzie with a smile.

The clerk rubbed his hands together and walked on, whistling again.

‘What have you got to be merry-Christmas-ing about?’ hissed Sam with a snarl. ‘Merry Christmas? Pah! It’s all right for him.’

Lizzie began to sob. There was a time – although it already seemed another life ago – when this would have melted the iciest of Sam’s moods, but his heart was as hard as iron now. He simply looked away towards the old man, hidden behind that inky door.

And then, like ink, the night’s true darkness came flowing in and with it a bone-gnawing cold. The crowd about the fire was growing, but they needed to find shelter. Some nights had killer written on them and this, thought Sam, was one of them. Only the fit and healthy would survive the deadly creeping frost

that would be coming soon – and who on the street was fit or healthy?

Sam peered at the door of Scrooge's office and his heart blackened to match it. The fog seemed to blur all the rest of London town and leave only that black rectangle in focus. Then all at once it opened and out stepped old Scrooge, looking about as cautiously as a fox and locking the door behind him.

The old man set off along the pavement, his cane tick-ticking as before, his head tucked into his hunched shoulders that were themselves pulled into his bony, crooked back. There was no festive lightness in his step, no 'Merry Christmas' from him as he passed others on the street. No greeting was offered and none returned.

'Come on, Lizzie,' said Sam, walking after the old man.

Lizzie didn't even ask where they were going. She trusted Sam and knew she would not be alive without his wits. He always managed to find some scrap of

food, some kind of shelter. He had saved her life a hundred times.

Sam saw the beetle-black shape of the old man ahead in the failing light and fog and hurried to make sure they did not lose him. *Tick-tick-tick*. The cane and its echo rattled ahead of them like loose teeth.

Eventually they came to a dimly lit and dreary yard. The old man looked about him but did not see them. He walked into the yard and Sam and Lizzie waited at the entrance as he fumbled in his pocket for a bunch of keys. So this was where he lived. This was his den.

Sam looked on. As soon as the old man opened the door, he would attack him. He had a length of lead piping in his coat pocket that he had picked up when he had fetched the books for the fire. He would knock Scrooge down and they would rob him. He would not set out to kill him, but some men's skulls were thinner than others.

Sam was puzzled to hear the old man talking. At

first he thought there was someone else there, but he soon realised that Scrooge was talking to himself, muttering wildly and shaking his head like he was fresh out of Bedlam. He seemed for all the world to be talking to his own door knocker!

Somehow this eccentric behaviour blackened Sam's mood still further. It outraged him. It goaded him. Why should a witless old fool like this live in comfort and plenty whilst they starved and froze?

A crisp, wintery contempt for the old man settled on Sam's heart like a rime of frost that all the heat of the Indies could not have melted. It felt good. All these years of hating the world had made him feel powerless, but now he had but one target. He would make this one man pay and that would be enough.

Yet for all the mounting violence of his thoughts, Sam did not launch his attack. He felt a sudden unfamiliar heaviness in his legs. The old man had gone inside and closed the door behind him before Sam was able to cross the yard. He walked towards the

door and looked at the knocker hanging there. It was an ugly thing to be sure, with a strange face, its features caught somewhere betwixt man and lion, a dull brass ring clamped between its teeth. Sam stood there staring so long that Lizzie tugged the sleeve of his jacket.

'Sam?' she said. 'Sam?'

He snapped out of his trance at the sound of Lizzie's weak and plaintive voice. He looked around and pointed to a tall, old, arched iron gate on the other side of the cobbled yard.

'Come on, Liz,' he said. 'Over here.'

The gate opened with a reluctant, guttural groan that seemed disconcertingly human, and they squeezed through to find themselves in a walled churchyard, soot-blackened headstones all about them etched with skulls and hourglasses and other such reminders of mortality. Black and leafless trees stood here and there like clutching hands. Sam walked up to the chapel door, but it was locked and with a lock that was not going to be shifted or broken.

'Here,' said Sam, walking back to Lizzie. 'This'll have to do.'

He was pointing at a tomb that had once stood like a great stone bed, etched all over with moss-filled letters telling the story of the man whose body lay forgotten by all but the worms. It was now in a state of partial collapse, one side having fallen away to make a little web-strewn cave beneath the huge slab.

The quiet churchyard was sheltered by walls and the church itself, and the tombstone cave added a little more. It was a grim place to spend the night, but they had slept in worse. They squeezed together for warmth as the fog thickened around them.

Sam marvelled at how easily Lizzie could fall asleep, no matter the circumstances. He felt the length of lead piping he had picked up on the waste ground by Scrooge's office. It felt colder and even heavier now. He clung to it as a small child might cling to a favourite doll.