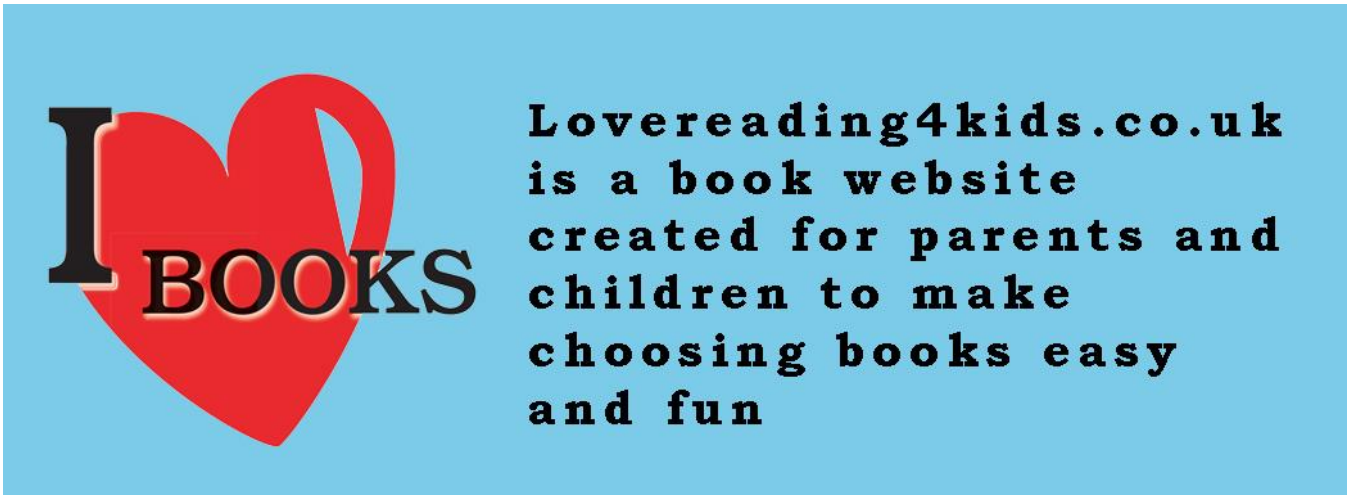


Opening extract from

Simon Thorn and the Wolf's Den

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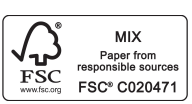
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1

PIGEON PANCAKES

Tap tap. Tap tap tap.

Simon Thorn's eyes flew open. He lay in bed, breathing heavily and squinting against the early morning light. He'd been in the middle of a dream, and the harder he tried to remember it, the faster it disappeared. It felt important though, and while he couldn't remember seeing her face, he was sure his mother had been in it.

Tap. Tap tap tap.

He rolled over, his head fuzzy from a lack of sleep. The cramped New York City apartment he shared with his uncle smelled like pancakes, and his stomach churned. Not even chocolate chips could make up for the fact that it was his first day of seventh grade.

Tap. Tap tap. Tap tap tap.

A pigeon perched on his windowsill, rapping its beak against the glass. Simon groaned. "You're too early. Come back later."

The pigeon continued to tap, growing more and more insistent. This wasn't all that unusual. Simon had found that pigeons were, as a general rule, extremely rude and had an inflated sense of self-importance. Never mind the fact that Simon hadn't fallen asleep until nearly midnight, thanks to his racing thoughts and fluttering stomach. The pigeon cared about only one thing, and that was—

"Food!" it cooed as Simon pushed open his window. Another dozen pigeons landed on the fire escape. "Food! Food! Food!"

"I don't have any yet," said Simon.

"Do, too. Smell it," said the first pigeon. It flew into his room and landed on his nightstand. The others crowded together, vying for the empty place on the windowsill. "Food! Food!"

"Leave me *alone*." Simon tried to shoo them away, but they continued to multiply. Normally he wouldn't have minded. Simon liked animals. They didn't care that he was smaller and scrawnier than the other twelve-year-olds at his school, and they were usually around whenever he needed someone to talk to. This morning, however, it was too much. He had enough to worry about without adding hungry pigeons to the list.

"If you don't leave, my uncle's going to come in, and you know what he does to pigeons," he said.

That brought them up short, and they all glanced at one another nervously. "Us food?" said the first.

"Yeah—my uncle loves pigeon pancakes," said Simon. "Can't you smell the batter?"

The first pigeon ruffled its feathers and eyed the open window. As far as Simon knew, Darryl had never really tried to hurt a living creature (except for the spiders that lurked in the corners of their hallway, though Simon *had* warned them for weeks before Darryl spotted them). But for all of Simon's life, his uncle had had only one rule that never changed:

Stay away from animals.

For years, Simon hadn't had any trouble with this. He liked animals just fine, but he had never wanted a pet, and his uncle was usually diligent about keeping bugs and rats out of the apartment. That had all changed a year ago though when one morning Simon had woken up to the sounds of conversation, making him think his neighbor was blaring the TV. Instead, much to his shock, he had discovered that it wasn't the TV at all—it was the pigeons on the fire escape outside his window. Not only could he understand everything they were saying, but they could understand everything he said in return.

It wasn't just pigeons, either. Simon could talk to the tomcats that prowled the alleyway, the rats that scavenged in

the Dumpsters, and even the mosquitoes he swatted away during the summer. He had thought he was going crazy—he still wasn't sure he hadn't cracked—but ever since then, animals had flocked to Simon, and it had become increasingly difficult to keep his secret from Darryl.

Thankfully his uncle, who was tall with broad shoulders, was a much stronger and more intimidating man than Simon could ever hope to be, and most animals were scared of him without Simon having to resort to empty threats. He didn't fully understand why Darryl hated animals so much, but Simon was fairly sure it had to do with the scars that riddled his uncle's body, including the angry red one that ran down his left cheek. No matter how many times Simon asked, however, his uncle never talked about how he'd gotten them.

"I'll have food for you later," said Simon to the pigeons. "But not—"

Suddenly a strong breeze burst through his window, and several of the pigeons squawked and flew away. Before Simon could feel too relieved, however, a golden eagle landed in the space they had vacated.

Simon froze. He had never seen an eagle in person before. Some of its feathers stuck out at strange angles as if it had been in a skirmish recently, and Simon could see it was missing an eye.

The remaining pigeons shifted nervously, and Simon frowned. "Listen, I don't have anything for you yet. If you come back in thirty minutes—"

"I'm not interested in food," said the eagle in a lofty voice.

"Then what do you want?"

The eagle turned his head so he could see Simon with his good eye. "You're in grave danger, Simon Thorn. If you don't come with me at once—"

"Simon?" said a rough voice outside his door. "Who are you talking to?"

Darryl.

Simon hastily shut the window, cutting off the eagle before he could explain. Unfortunately that left the first pigeon trapped inside his bedroom. Simon darted across the room to shove his foot against the door, preventing Darryl from opening it all the way. He might be able to explain a pigeon in his room, but an eagle on his fire escape was another thing entirely.

"What's going on in here?" said his uncle, raking his long, dark hair out of his eyes and trying to peer around the room. The pigeon on Simon's nightstand edged toward the window.

"Nothing," said Simon, his heart pounding. "I was just getting ready for school."

Outside his window, several pigeons began to coo, and Simon winced. Darryl's jaw tightened, and he flexed the muscles in his massive arms. "Did you feed them again?"

"I accidentally left my window open on Saturday," admitted Simon. "They stole half my sandwich." He couldn't tell Darryl the truth—that he'd given his sandwich to a sick pigeon that didn't have the energy to scavenge.

His uncle grumbled. "How many times do I have to tell you? If you feed them once—"

"They'll come back again and again until their stupid pigeon brains rot," recited Simon. "I know. I'm sorry."

Darryl cast another look around the part of the room he could see from the doorway, and Simon could have sworn he heard him growl. "Just keep your window shut. Breakfast will be on the table in ten. You'll need your protein today."

Simon would need more than protein to make it through today. More like a minor miracle. "I'll be right out."

Once his uncle's footsteps faded, Simon hurried back to the window, but the golden eagle was gone. He bit his lip. What had the eagle meant by saying Simon was in grave danger? And how had he known Simon's name?

He opened his window enough for the remaining pigeon to escape. "If I were you, I'd get as far away from here as I could before my uncle really does serve you for breakfast."

"Far away, far away," said the pigeon, spreading its wings and taking off. Despite the trouble it had caused, Simon was sorry to see it go. Pigeons may be rude, but one was almost always nearby when he wanted company.

"You should tell Darryl about the eagle," piped a small voice nearby.

Simon groaned. "Today's going to be bad enough. If Darryl finds out I lied to him, I'll be grounded for a month."

A brown mouse scampered up the leg of Simon's

pajamas. "Better than being in grave danger, whatever that means."

"And how am I supposed to explain that to my uncle? Tell him a little bird told me?" Simon scooped the mouse into his hand. "I'll be careful, Felix. Don't worry."

Perched on his hind legs, Felix rubbed his paws together. "I should go with you today. Someone needs to watch your back."

"I'm a thousand times your size. If anything, I'll be the one protecting you from becoming that eagle's lunch."

"But—"

"No buts. If something goes wrong, I'll come straight home." Simon set Felix on his pillow. "And don't try to watch TV while I'm gone. One day Darryl's going to come home early and catch you, and you know exactly what he'll do to you then."

Felix huffed, and Simon headed into the bathroom to brush his teeth. He'd found Felix in his closet half-starved to death eight months earlier, and after Simon had nursed him back to health, Felix took up permanent residence in their apartment. They had struck a deal: Simon would continue to feed him so long as Felix never let Darryl know he was there. It had worked out so far, even though Simon worried constantly that his uncle might find the mouse.

Once Simon finished with his teeth, he tried to tame his shaggy brown hair. It was almost time for a haircut, which Simon looked forward to about as much as his pre-algebra

homework. His uncle tried to do a good job, but his massive hands made him clumsy with scissors, and the end result was always uneven. While Simon didn't particularly care what his hair looked like, the kids at school did, and their endless taunts never became any easier to bear.

Other than his weird haircuts, Simon thought he looked normal enough, with blue eyes and freckles. He was a little too skinny, and his head was a little too big for his body, but he wasn't a total freak. He didn't understand why his classmates liked to pick on him so much. Last year his best and only friend, Colin Hartwood, told him it was because Simon sometimes talked to animals as though they could understand him. After that, he had stopped, at least in public. No matter what he did, however, the taunts kept growing worse. Even Colin had started to keep his distance—which only made today that much more important.

"Here you go," said Darryl when Simon entered the kitchen. He handed him a plate piled high with bacon and lopsided chocolate-chip pancakes. "I packed you a lunch, too. Peanut butter and jelly isn't suddenly uncool, is it?"

"I wouldn't know," said Simon as he sat at the wooden table that took up most of the kitchen. His stomach protested at the first bite, and he had to fight to keep his breakfast down.

"Nervous?" said Darryl, and Simon shrugged. "Don't be. It'll all be fine."

"If it's anything like last year, it won't be."

The chair groaned in protest as his uncle sat down. "We can't control what other people think of us, but we're the only ones who get to decide who we really are. As long as you act like yourself—"

"I can't lose. I know," muttered Simon, stabbing at his pancakes with his fork. "Colin said he wanted to join the wrestling team this year because he thinks it'll make the popular kids like us."

"Keeping your enemies close isn't a bad strategy."

"Not when it gives them an excuse to beat us up every day." Simon had spent all summer hoping he would be able to spend seventh grade in the background, unnoticed and left alone. But with the way Colin was avoiding him now, his only hope of keeping his friend was to join the wrestling team, too. "Tryouts are next week. You might want to buy some frozen peas just in case."

"After I show you a few moves, they'll be the ones needing frozen peas." Darryl frowned. "This year *will* be better, Simon. Trust me. I know things have been rough lately, especially with your mom, but—"

Simon stood suddenly. He was nauseated enough already without bringing his mother into it. "I have to finish getting ready. Thanks for the pancakes. I'll eat the rest in my room."

"Simon . . ."

"It's fine. Really."

Ignoring Darryl's protests, Simon carried his breakfast back into his bedroom. Closing the door, he set the plate

down on the desk and sank into the chair. On the wall in front of him, he'd painstakingly hung the one hundred twenty-four postcards his mother had sent since she'd left him with Darryl. They arrived once a month from cities across the country, boasting colorful pictures of all kinds of animals—wolves, eagles, rattlesnakes, honeybees, bears, dolphins, everything he could think of and more. He had memorized the words on the back of each one, written in a loopy handwriting he knew better than his mother's face. She was a zoologist, so most of the time she wrote about whatever animal was pictured on the postcard. But every now and then she told him how much she missed him, too. Those were his favorite postcards.

Simon and Darryl never talked about his mother. She traveled all the time for her job, so she had dumped Simon with his uncle in the city, and Darryl had become the closest thing Simon had to a parent. Sometimes his mother made it home for Christmas or Simon's birthday, but only for a few hours, and she always seemed distracted. Lately her visits were less and less frequent. The last time Simon had seen her was a year ago, the week after he'd learned he could talk to animals.

More than anything in the world, Simon wanted her to come home. He could put up with all the taunts and bullying if she were there. He would eat lunch alone every day for the rest of his life if he got to eat dinner with her. She would understand his weird ability to communicate with animals.

She wouldn't think he was crazy.

No longer hungry, Simon dropped some bacon and a piece of pancake underneath his desk for Felix and then tossed the rest of his breakfast onto the fire escape, where the waiting pigeons fought over his leftovers as he numbly finished getting ready for school. The eagle hadn't returned.

His uncle was waiting for Simon when he emerged from his bedroom, and Darryl handed him his brown-bag lunch. "I have time before work to walk with you if you'd like."

There was nothing Simon could think of that would be worse than showing up on his first day of seventh grade with his uncle at his side. "I'm supposed to meet up with Colin," he said. Or at least he thought he was. They had always walked to and from school together the year before.

To Simon's relief, Darryl didn't argue. Instead he knelt in front of Simon, the scar on his cheek wrinkling as he peered at him. His uncle was so big that they were nearly eye level. "Nothing lasts forever, no matter how it might feel. Just remember, you'll be my size someday. No one's going to mess with you then."

"Today isn't someday though," muttered Simon.

"No, it's not. But in the meantime, do your best and be yourself. That's all any of us can do." He stood and pressed a scratchy kiss to Simon's forehead. "Do good, kid. Make me proud."

Simon stuffed his lunch into his backpack and left the apartment, trudging down the steps in silence. Their