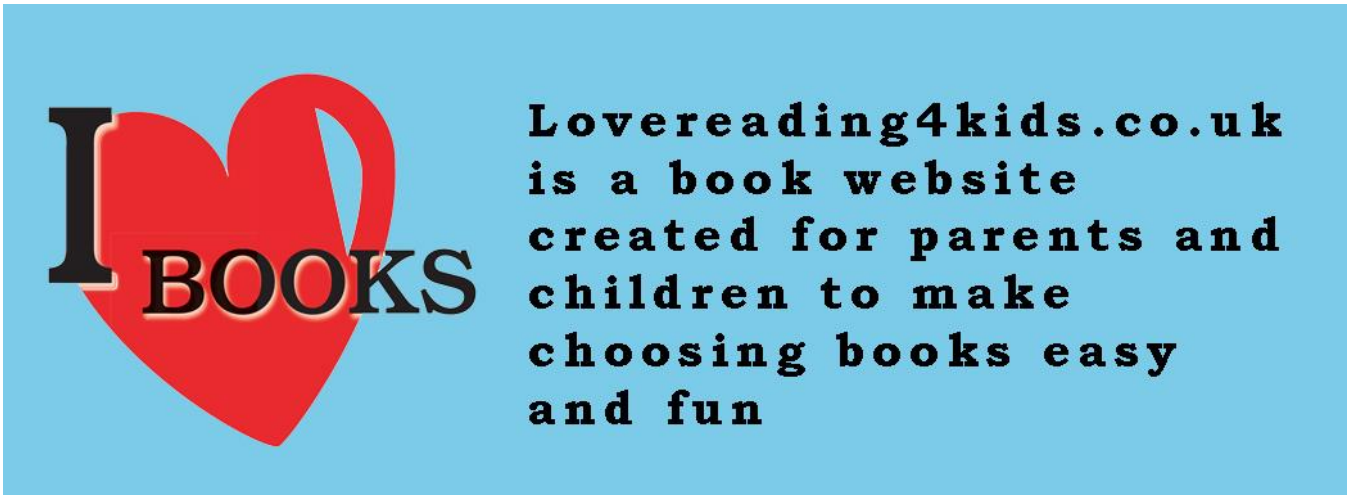


Opening extract from

Desolation

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1

They were alive when she walked in.

Fourteen people, including the short-order cook and the waitress with the badly dyed hair in this little rest stop just outside of Whitehorse in Yukon. Everyone looked tired, this time of night. They ate pie or drank coffee or read newspapers or sat in their booths, focusing on their phones. Nobody glanced up when Amber entered. Nobody talked. Music played, drifting through from the small kitchen. Something by Bon Jovi. It was safe in here. None of these people wanted to kill her. She was getting good at spotting the telltale signs.

She went straight to the restroom. It was chilly, and not very clean, but she didn't mind. She'd had to pee in worse places these past few days.

When she was done, she washed her hands. In the cracked mirror above the cracked sink, her hair was a mess and there were bags under her red-rimmed eyes. Her pale skin was blotchy. She looked like she needed a shower. She looked like a scared girl on the run.

Funny that.

Her belly rumbled and Amber turned off the faucet, wiped her hands on her jeans, and left the restroom.

They were all dead when she walked out.

She went instantly cold. All moisture left her mouth, her knees weakened, and every nerve ending jingled and jangled and screamed at her to run. But she couldn't run. Her legs wouldn't obey. She could barely stay standing.

Some of them had been attacked where they sat – others while they tried to escape. Bludgeoned to death, every one of them. A woman in a brown cardigan was slumped over her table, blood leaking from the mess in the back of her head. A trucker in a plaid shirt had half his face caved in. The waitress had been dragged across the counter. Blood dripped from the dented gash in her temple, forming a growing pool on the floor beneath her. Amber couldn't see the cook, but knew he was lying on the floor of the kitchen. She could see his blood on the wall.

Fourteen people when she'd walked in. Fourteen corpses. But now there was a fifteenth person. He was sitting in the booth next to the door, his back to her, wearing a baseball cap and a grey, faded boiler suit. He was singing along to the radio. 'Every Rose Has Its Thorn' by Poison.

The booth moved closer to her. Closer still. No, it wasn't the booth that was moving – it was Amber. She frowned, looked down at her feet as they took another step. Apparently, they were on their way out of the door, and they were taking the rest of her with them. She was okay with that. She didn't want to stay here, anyway, not with all those corpses. She just had to pass this guy and then she could run out into the quiet street, shout for Milo, and he'd come roaring up in the Charger and they could get the hell out of there. Easy. No fuss, no muss.

The man in the boiler suit had a claw hammer on the table in front of him. It was bloodstained. There was a chunk of scalp hanging off it.

"How you doing?" he asked.

Amber froze.

He didn't have a nice voice. It was curiously strained, like he'd spent most of his life shouting.

She kept her eyes on the door and took another step. And another.

"Amber, isn't it?"

She stopped.

"Yeah," the man said. "It's you. I expected something else, to be honest. All the things you've done, I expected someone a little more..." he licked his lips, "...impressive."

She looked at him. She had to. Her gaze moved slowly, and reluctantly, from the door to the booth. First she looked at the claw hammer, then at the remains of the pie he'd been eating. Then at his rough, worn hands, and the blood-splattered sleeves of his boiler suit. He was thin. Wiry. He had a narrow face and a pointed chin and a nasty smile. No hair. His cap had a faded logo Amber couldn't make out. Her eyes finally settled on his and she had the strangest feeling of vertigo.

"You're the one killed the Shining Demon's representative, right?" the man asked. He had an accent. Southern. Georgia, maybe. "Made him go splat? I like your style. I'd been searching for the best way to kill that prick for years, but you got there first."

"What do you want?" Amber asked.

"It ain't what I want, little girl. It's what you can give me." He slid slowly out of the booth. He wasn't tall, he had maybe

two inches on Amber, but she took a step back nonetheless. "You're my ticket," he said.

"To what?"

He breathed in, and spread his arms. "All this." His right arm dipped, and he picked up the claw hammer.

"Why did you kill these people?"

He gave her one of those nasty smiles. "No one told me I wasn't supposed to. Besides, it's been way too long since I got to kill new folks. Do you know what it's like, little girl, do you have *any idea* what it's like to be trapped in a middle-of-nowhere town where the biggest challenge is to find someone worthy to stalk? Jesus H. Christ, what is it with the young people of today? I'm old-fashioned and I make no apology for it. I like to stalk and kill teenagers. I like a challenge, you know what I mean? Teenagers are fit and strong and they're surrounded by family and friends... but do you know what makes them so perfect to stalk? They run to parents, they run to cops, they tell them a bad man is trying to kill them, but no one takes them seriously. The look on their faces when they realise they're alone – that they are truly *alone* – after a lifetime of being told they'll be supported no matter what... Well. It's just heaven, is what it is. But these days, trying to find one who can put up a decent fight is an impossible task. Worthy teenagers are a dying breed, and that is a sad state of affairs."

That smile of his broadened. "So what about you, Amber? You gonna put up a fight? You've got that look about you. It's in the eyes. Man, isn't this just typical? I find a teenager who may actually be able to mount a challenge and I'm not allowed to kill her."

Amber frowned. "You're not allowed?"

"Nope. No killing the girl, those are my orders. I'm just here to bring you back."

"You're working for Astaroth."

"On a first-name basis with the Shining Demon, are you? Must be nice. But yes, I am guilty as charged, as I said at my trial. Now you've managed to stay ahead of the Hounds, which is a feat that few have accomplished for this long, but now the professional is here to take care of business and to stop all this silliness."

"I have money," said Amber. "I can pay you to walk away."

The man laughed. "Money? I don't have any use for it. Besides, you can't match what he's offering."

"Try me."

"Freedom, little girl. See, I made a mistake when I made my deal with the Devil. A lot of us do. We get fixated on the people who caught us. All I wanted was to get my revenge on that Podunk little town – but when I was done? I couldn't leave. I didn't exist beyond its borders. The Shining Demon will, ah, broaden my remit. I'll be able to travel. Kill people in new places. And this is just a taster of that. Look at me – Elias Mauk – killing in Canada. I'm gonna take my show on the road."

"I... I read about you."

"I'm flattered."

"You're dead."

"That too."

"You were executed."

"Fried," he said, whipping off his cap. A thick band of still-sizzling flesh wrapped around his head where the electricity had been focused. Amber could smell the burning skin from where she stood.

Mauk put his cap back on, and grinned. "They said I murdered twenty-two people. It was more like forty, but that was back when I was alive. Ever since the chair, my body count has grown. And after this? It's gonna skyrocket."

He took a step forward and she took a step back, holding up her hands.

"I don't want to fight you," she said.

"Oh, Amber, don't you dare disappoint me now. Killing a room full of people is distressingly easy for someone like me. You gotta put up *some* resistance, at least."

"You're not the first serial killer I've faced," Amber said. "You're not even the first returned-from-the-grave serial killer I've faced. I killed Dacre Shanks."

"Shanks ain't got nothing on me."

"Not anymore he doesn't," she said. "He came after me and I killed him. Now he's dead and it's the kind of dead that you don't come back from. I'll kill you, too."

"I am *liking* this confidence," said Mauk. "You're definitely making the butterflies flutter, I'm not gonna lie to you. But Shanks was nothing. Take his precious little key away from him, and what did he have to offer? Tell me if this is true – when you found him, was he stuck inside one of his own dollhouses? I've heard he was stuck inside one of his own dollhouses. That's funny. How'd you kill him? You step on him? Hell, you're heavy enough."

"Oh, I wasn't like this when I killed him," said Amber.

"No?"

"No," she said, and she shifted.

Her bones lengthened and realigned and she grew taller. Her excess weight spread throughout her body and she became

slimmer. Her brown hair turned black and her flushed skin turned red and two ebony horns blossomed from her forehead and curled back.

"There you are," breathed Mauk. "Oh, you are magnificent."

Amber didn't bother agreeing as she grabbed him. She knew she was magnificent. He swung the hammer, but she ripped it out of his hand and tossed it aside. She picked him up, her newly formed muscles not even straining with the effort, and hurled him across a table. She caught a glimpse of her reflection as she stalked after him, and her sudden beauty was almost enough to make her pause. She still wasn't used to it. A slight reconfiguration of her features was all it took to turn her from ugly human to mesmerising demon.

Ugly. There was a word she'd never used about herself before. Plenty of others had, in their crueller moments, but never her. She didn't stop to wonder what it meant, as she watched Mauk take a steak knife from a dead patron, and it didn't bother her. Precious little *did* when she was a demon.

Incredibly, Mauk was smiling as he came forward. Her skin tightened and black scales formed, and the knife skimmed across her armour without drawing blood. He tried stabbing at her again, but she was much too fast. She gripped his wrist and twisted. The knife fell and she hit him twice and he wobbled, and she took hold of the back of his head and sent him sprawling across the floor.

"Told you you should have walked away," she said, and her fingers grew to claws.

Mauk groaned, turned over, and looked at her. He was still smiling. She didn't like that. She was used to people dismissing her when she was herself, when she was ordinary old human

Amber, but not when she was like this. When she was like this, she demanded *respect*.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Mauk, "you think you're winning this little exchange? There's a lot more to beating me than hitting me a coupla times." He got to his feet. "See, when I kill, I like to... play. And my playmates, well... they just do whatever I tell 'em. Ain't that right, my friends?"

The corpses stirred, and all the dead people in the rest stop slid out of their booths and stood, and Amber heard some distant part of herself scream.