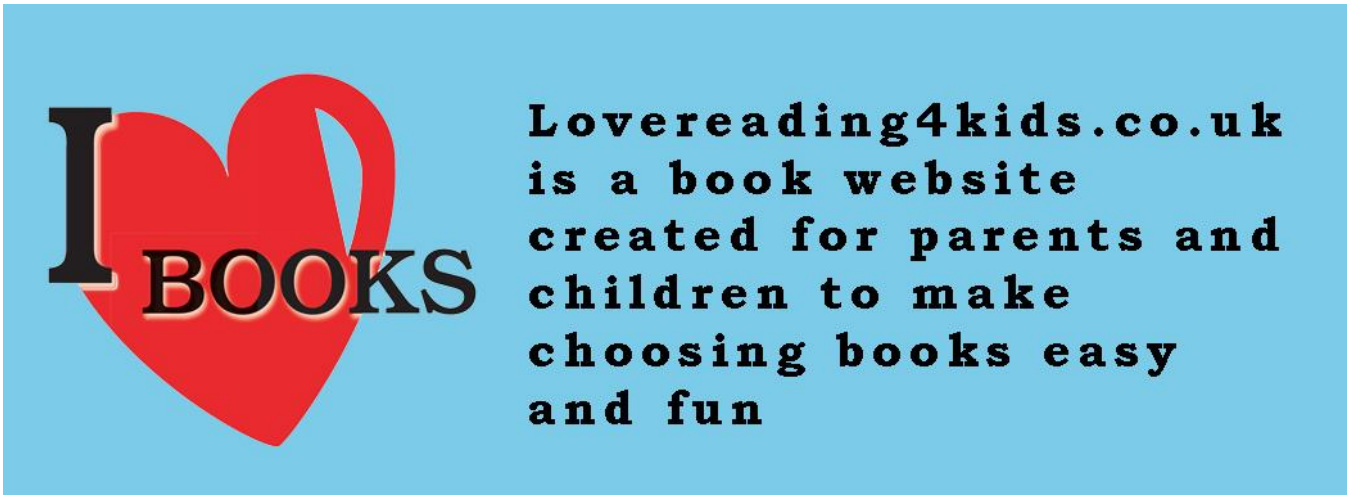


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Dave Rudden

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PROLOGUE

TICK

Looking back, it had been a mistake to fill the orphanage with books.

Director Ackerby tapped the rim of his teacup with a finger. *The untidiness of it all*, he thought.

Far below in the yard, children dipped in and out of the shadow cast by his tower office – gossiping in scattered groups, voices raised in excited chatter. All talking about the visitors, of course. This was what happened when you bottled up 250 boys and girls. Last week, a thrush had bounced off a classroom window and the orphans hadn't shut up for days. Had they named it? He wouldn't be surprised.

His gaze swept the buildings below. Crosscaper Orphanage slouched against the mountainside like it had been dropped there – a greying stack of towers and flat, fat dormitories that shuddered when the wind was too harsh and sweated when it got too warm.

It was an uphill struggle for orphanages *not* to be dismal, but Ackerby had always thought Crosscaper took special

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pleasure in it, as though it knew that the groan of its slumping masonry and the rattle of its window frames were giving entire dormitories of children nightmares.

'Sir?'

His secretary's voice seeped through the intercom and Ackerby stabbed at the button to respond.

'Yes?'

'Your two o'clock is here, sir. Shall I send them in?'

The director barely heard him. He was staring at the newest addition to the orphanage grounds, standing out against Crosscaper's comforting greyness like a healthy man in a hospital ward. Bright white walls. New windows that shone. A door that didn't squeak but whispered open like the sharing of a secret. Children waited outside, as they had every day since it opened.

A *library*. As if the orphanage chaplain weren't filling their heads with nonsense enough.

The intercom burped again. 'Sir?'

Ackerby sighed. He had flicked through some of the dog-eared books in the library and it had been much as he'd feared. His own office was lined with beautiful leather-bound works (the word *book* painfully inadequate – they were *compendiums*, they were *texts*, they were *tomes*), the kind one touched with gloves, if one touched them at all.

Some, he mused proudly, had never even been opened.

The library books, on the other hand, had been read to pieces. And as for the content? Story after story of noble orphans rescued from drudgery – and now every time someone came to visit hopeful orphans began packing

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their bags, ready for their new life as wizard, warrior or prophesied king.

Ackerby sniffed. *Chosen ones!* If they were wanted, they wouldn't be here.

'Yes, send them in. And bring some tea!' He thought for a moment. 'Forget the tea.'

Director Ackerby did not believe in coddling visitors. There was an art to these things. Inspectors were made to wait ten minutes; it didn't do to annoy them, but you also didn't want to make them feel too important. Solicitors were seen immediately (you never knew who might end up footing the bill) and potential parents had to wait half an hour, as a sort of test of their commitment.

In Ackerby's opinion, if you weren't prepared to drink bad coffee and flick through last year's *Home and Housing* magazine, then you clearly did not deserve a child.

'Mr Ackerby?'

There were shadows in his doorway.

Ackerby liked to keep the lights low. It shaved money off the bills and he had the vague idea that it might be beneficial to the children – exercise for their eyes perhaps. The visitors had stopped where the light from Ackerby's desk lamp and the glow from the hallway fell short. Their faces were obscured, indistinct.

For a moment, Ackerby wasn't sure if they were people at all.

'Thank you for seeing us at such short notice,' the smaller of the visitors said. 'I hate to steal time away from the busy.'

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The couple stepped forward in unison. The woman was tall and thin, with a spine curved like an old coat hanger, her clothes and skin white as frost, hair chopped short around her neck in a frayed mop the colour of chalk. The man beside her was the shape and pallor of a goose egg, with a shock of colourless curls that jigged and bounced as if trying to flee from his scalp. His waistcoat creaked as he offered Ackerby his hand.

Normally, Ackerby would smile firmly (if a little coldly) and grasp the visitors' hands a smidge too hard as he asked their names. Ackerby was proud of his handshake. He had read books on the subject. A firm and painful squeeze – *that* was how you dominated a meeting.

The man in the waistcoat took his hand. 'Of course, stealing time from the idle is no crime at all.'

Pain.

Distantly, Ackerby noted the throaty *pops* the bones of his hand made as the visitor's grip ground them together – like a plastic bottle reshaping itself. The books he had read on the power of a good handshake were replaced by hazy diagrams from medical textbooks, and then swiftly by nothing at all.

He fought back a gasp of relief when the man in the waistcoat let go. The visitor grinned cheerily up at him and dropped into a seat with a pleased sigh, waving at Ackerby to join him.

An unlit cigarette hung from one side of the woman's mouth. She didn't move. She just stared.

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The pain in Ackerby's hand faded and he rallied. *Commanded to sit? In my own office?*

He stalked round his desk and spun on a heel, regarding the visitors coldly. Standing behind the desk made him feel better. He told himself that it was simply pride in the decor and not the comfort of putting a slab of solid oak between him and the man in the waistcoat.

'Good afternoon?' Ackerby said, though he didn't mean it and it wasn't. 'Welcome to Crosscaper Orphanage. And you are?'

His feeling of unease deepened as the visitors continued to stare blankly at him. He couldn't say what was wrong exactly, but there was something . . . calculated about their looks. As if they were working out something about Ackerby in their heads, an equation he wouldn't enjoy.

'Your names?' Ackerby repeated, and, although there was absolutely no need to explain such a simple question, he found himself stammering, 'For – for our appointment book. Our files, I mean.'

The request hung in the air, slowly starving to death.

'Names?' the man in the waistcoat said, after an eternity. 'Ah. Yes. Names. Sorry. We are new.' His dark eyes flicked over the office before settling on Ackerby like flies. 'I like the name Ellicott. A pleasure.'

It hadn't been so far, but you couldn't leave a statement like that hanging. Ackerby forced a smile. 'Yes, of course. Nice to meet y–' His brow furrowed. 'What do you mean, *new*?'

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The man's smile deepened. 'I understand that you must be busy so we will take as little of your time as possible. We are looking for a boy. Denizen Hardwick.'

It took a moment for Ackerby to bring up a mental image. Nothing wrong with that – that was what files were for and you didn't get points for rattling facts off the top of your head. Hardwick was . . . small. Unremarkable. Had . . . hair. Brown? Red?

The director frowned. The only thing he could really remember about the boy was that he had never caused an abundance of paperwork, which was the only trait in a child that Ackerby actually liked.

But there was something else . . . something he couldn't recall . . .

'What about him?' Ackerby asked.

The cigarette made a slow path to the other side of the woman's mouth.

'He is a resident here?' The man popped his knuckles against his jaw, the noise so loud it made the director flinch. 'Excellent. We have been looking for him for a long time. We are . . . relatives of his. Cousins.'

A knot formed in Ackerby's stomach. This Ellicott character was lying to him. Ackerby was sure of it. He had no idea *why* he was sure of it, but a smile like that wasn't cousin to anything, except maybe a spider.

'I would have to check my records,' Ackerby said stiffly. That was his usual phrase when he knew the answer to a question but hadn't liked being asked it. 'The name does sound familiar, but –'

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'We will not take much of your time, Director Ackerby,' the man in the waistcoat said. 'We merely wish to know a few things. First, has he turned thirteen?'

Ah. That was why Denizen Hardwick had stuck in his head.

'Yes, actually,' he said. 'A few weeks ago.' He glanced around his desk. 'There was a card they wanted me to sign . . . I'm sure I saw it . . .'

'The card is unimportant,' the man murmured. 'We have been looking for Denizen for a long time. It is a pity we missed the celebrations.' The word skittered from his tongue like a cockroach. 'No matter. Where is he now?'

'Now?'

The man fingered the buttons on his waistcoat. 'Someone would have come for him on his thirteenth birthday. Another . . . relative perhaps. Come to take him away to a whole new life.' His plump lips twisted in a cheerless grin. 'Exciting. We would like to know where they went. Where Denizen Hardwick is now.'

'Oh,' Ackerby said. 'He's downstairs.'

The man's gaze sharpened. 'Excuse me?'

'He's downstairs. In class, I would imagine.' The director of Crosscaper drew himself up haughtily. 'I don't know where you got your information, *sir*, but no one has taken Denizen Hardwick away to a new life. He is still a resident here, thirteenth birthday or no.'

The couple glanced at each other.

'Is that a . . . problem?' Ackerby said, his sudden burst of defiance disappearing as soon as it had come. He didn't

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know who these people were and their questions were unnerving him.

'No,' the man said slowly, as if tasting the word. 'No problem. And he has received no visitors?'

'On his birthday?' Ackerby said confusedly. The conversation had got away from him and he felt the beginnings of a headache behind his eyes. The thrum of his heartbeat in his ears was suddenly very loud.

'Ever,' the man said. 'But that day in particular. Anyone at all.'

Ackerby shook his head. The man's eyes were . . . strange. They glittered with a sort of chill, metallic brightness. Ackerby wasn't sure what was more difficult – looking into them or looking away.

'Good. Now. Did anything strange occur on his birthday? Between midnight and midnight. Anything odd that caught your eye.'

Ackerby's headache intensified. 'Sir, I would ask you to –'

'It's a simple question, Director. Any fires, disappearances, injuries, spatial or luminal distortion, shadows moving strangely . . .'

Sweat broke out on Ackerby's forehead. His patience, never the most stable thing at the best of times, finally snapped.

'Sir, I do not know to what lunacy you are currently subscribed, but this questioning makes no sense. You cannot simply come in here with no identification, no papers, and start talking to me about *shadows moving strangely*! Who do you think you are?'

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The man who had introduced himself as Ellicott sighed, lifting one chubby hand to his temple. His eyes narrowed like a disappointed uncle and Ackerby was suddenly aware of a noise. It was soft, barely audible above the echo of his own voice.

Ticking.

It underscored their words, as fast and quiet as the heart of a bird. Ackerby glanced down at the digital clock on his desk, taking his eyes off the couple just for a second.

And the woman in white *growled* at him.

The sound slid from her lips like a tide of grime, a rough-static snarl of hunger. Something gleamed between her teeth as she stalked towards him. The man in the waistcoat rose to stand beside her.

His head twitched to the side like a snake preparing to strike.

Her head twitched the exact same way.

Ackerby blinked, and in the darkness between eyelid and cheek the woman in white had vanished behind him. There were hands round his neck, forcing him to his knees. He felt breath, cold and fast, on the back of his neck –

– and Ellicott's voice was a purr.

A pity. Such a pity.

The words were pins of ice in Ackerby's brain as the man in the waistcoat knelt to stare into his eyes. The woman in white held him rigid, her white fingers like a steel trap, and though Ackerby was not a small man he could no more move than fly.

I thought we would not have to resort to this. Given

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time, we can be . . . convincing. Imaginatively and painfully so. Regretfully, in this instance, we just do not have the time to spare.

The ticking rose to a roar. It was suddenly very hard to breathe. Distantly, Director Ackerby noticed that when the man in the waistcoat spoke the woman's lips moved silently in time.

You will tell us about any visitors he has had. Any watchers. Any letters. Any contact in the years since he was left here. Anything at all.

His eyes twinkled.

Family is so dear to us.

He nodded at his companion, one professional to another, and the woman broke the director's collarbone with one smooth twist of her fingers.

Ackerby howled.

He couldn't say how long they held him. An hour, maybe less – long enough for Director Ackerby to dredge up every fact he knew about Denizen Hardwick. There wasn't much, but the visitors made him go over it again and again and again.

Denizen Hardwick had been left at Crosscaper Orphanage at the age of two. He had received no visitors and no letters, and his thirteenth birthday had passed without incident. It was only after the director started to sob and repeat himself for the fourth time that the iron grip on his collarbone went away.

Swaying there, delirious and on his knees, it seemed that

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Ackerby saw the couple more clearly than he had ever seen anyone before.

The pendulum jerk of their heads.

The peculiar hardness of their skin, like fingernails or teeth.

Their bright and empty smiles.

Strange, the man in the waistcoat said to himself when they had finished. **If *she* didn't come for him on his birthday . . . then perhaps he is of no interest to her and then of no use to us. No matter. Confusion suits us more than symmetry.**

He patted Ackerby on one tear-stained cheek.

Thank you, he said. The woman in white bowed low, mockingly. They made to leave, but then the man turned to Ackerby with a thoughtful expression on his face. **You have satisfied us, Director Ackerby. And I like this place.** He gave the air a savouring sniff. **You are in great pain and you may wish to take out this pain on young Denizen in turn. We understand. We approve.**

The sound of ticking was fainter now.

Just a little more misery in the world.

Somewhere distant, a door closing.

That's all we ask.

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1

ABSENTEE AUNTS

Four months later – 2 October

'I don't have an aunt.'

Denizen Hardwick stared down sceptically at the note in his hand. That was the way he looked at most things and he had a face built for it – thin cheeks, a long nose, eyes the colour and sharpness of a nail.

The note, left on his bed in Dormitory 4E that morning, was the object of a special amount of scepticism, so much so that he was surprised it hadn't started to char at the edges.

YOUR AUNT HAS BEEN IN CONTACT. SHE IS TAKING YOU AWAY FOR A FEW DAYS. YOU WILL BE COLLECTED AT 6 P.M. PACK A BAG.
DIRECTOR ACKERBY

'I don't have an aunt,' Denizen said again. It didn't sound any less stupid the second time round.

'Well, that's not exactly true,' said his best friend, Simon Hayes, also staring at the note. 'You just don't have any aunts you're aware of.'

Dormitory 4E was a long room with a high ceiling built