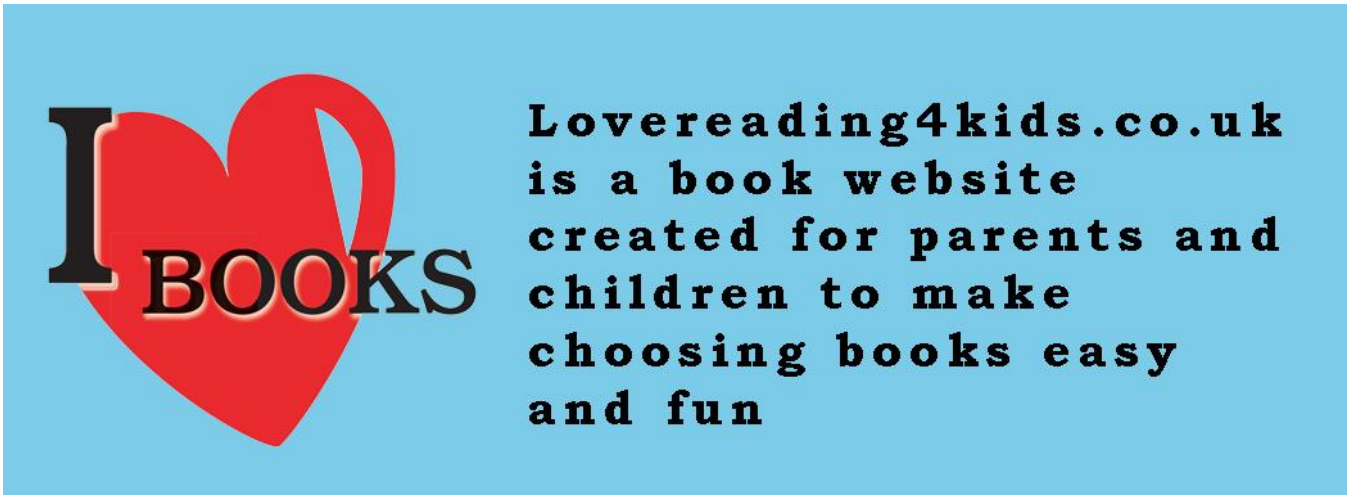


Opening extract from

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Chapter 1

I needed two minutes. Just enough time to get to the maildrop and back, but I had to time it perfectly. Dying wasn't an option today, just like it hadn't been an option the last ten times I'd done this. I'd thought it would get easier after the first time. It hadn't.

I gritted my teeth and scanned the holoscreen again. The mail was due to arrive in less than a minute, and although the forest above me looked harmless, I knew better. The shadows between the trees were too silent, too watchful. I hit the refresh button. The drill was simple – refresh the screen, scan for a full minute, refresh again and scan the opposite direction. I imagined it was similar to what parents used to teach their kids about crossing the street, back when there were still streets to cross and cars to drive on them.

The thumping whirr of the plane crackled out of the holoscreen's speakers and I glanced at my watch.

6:59 a.m. Right on time. My nerves tingled with a dizzying mix of excitement and terror as I watched the small black aeroplane come into view on the holoscreen. It whipped the surrounding forest into a frenzy as it glided just above tree level. I bounced on the balls of my feet, rolling my head back and forth to stretch out my neck as I gave myself a mental pep talk. *Be smart. Be aware. Be fast*, I commanded myself. Every second counted. A small hatch at the bottom of the plane opened and a large bundle fell the remaining thirty feet to the maildrop's landing pad. The plane quickly regained altitude and zipped away over the trees towards the other side of the compound, where it would pick up the outgoing mail.

With one last look to confirm the coast was clear, I clambered up the ladder, unlatched the thick metal plate that served as the compound's entrance, and launched myself from the hatch. It was like entering another world. After the silence of the tunnel, the buzz of insects was almost deafening. My feet dug into soft, damp earth as I ran, and the humidity made the air heavy in my lungs. I felt alive. I felt exposed.

The maildrop was located one hundred yards to my left and I reached it just as the lid was starting

to close. The maildrops had been designed back when our founding fathers had believed that the human race would be able to live at least part of their lives topside. They'd been wrong. The drops had all been re-engineered over fifty years ago so that no one had to risk their life venturing aboveground. But there was a thirty-second delay before the mail shot underground to be sorted and searched. Thirty seconds was all that I needed.

There were at least forty packages and letters, and I pawed through them looking for the marines' official seal. My breath caught in my throat when I finally spotted a large bundle with the black circle and golden ark on the side. Jackpot. I grabbed the package by each end and ripped it right down the middle, hoping the marines would think it had broken open when the plane dropped it. Inside I found a jumble of uniforms, regulation grey socks and port-screen batteries. I was starting to worry that this whole trip was going to be a bust when I saw the small black box. I scooped it up, feeling an almost painful surge of hope in my chest.

The tiny devices were used to pass information and messages between the compounds. This one's rubberised case was roughly the size of a deck of cards

and was made to protect the data plugs on the inside from the jarring airdrop. I was already pushing it on time, but I jerked the scan plug out of my pocket and jammed it into the side of the box anyway. Maybe this time the box would have something.

Five seconds later, I'd downloaded everything the information box could tell me. Pulling out my plug, I wiped the box on my grey uniform to remove any traces of my fingerprints before pushing it back inside the half-open package. In a community where resources meant the difference between life and death, theft was not tolerated. Although, I reasoned, I hadn't *really* stolen the information. I'd just made a copy of it. Still, if the marines even suspected the information box had been breached, there would be an investigation. I double-checked the package to make sure I'd left no trace of my tampering. My double-checking nearly cost me my hands, but I managed to yank them out before the steel lid of the drop clicked shut. Seconds later the packages plummeted down the three storeys to the mailroom below.

I heard the sound of a tree branch snap and I jerked my head up, scanning the surrounding trees. My feeling of elated hope from just moments before fizzled

in my chest, replaced with a cold familiar knot of fear. I'd been above for only a minute, but that was more than enough time for them to get my scent. I'd taken too long at the maildrop. Double-checking the package had been a stupid mistake. And my survival depended on not making stupid mistakes.

Turning on my heel, I sprinted for the compound entrance. I spotted the disturbance to my left when I was still fifty yards from safety. The ground began to tremble under my feet, and I willed myself not to panic. Panicking could happen later, when I was safely underground with two feet of concrete above my head.

I spotted the first one out of the corner of my eye as it burst from the trees. Blood-red scales winked in the dawn light as its opaque eyes focussed on me. It was just over ten feet and moved with the quick, sharp movements of a striking snake.

My stomach lurched sickeningly as I recognised the sharp, arrow-shaped head, powerful hindquarters and massive back claw of this particular dinosaur. It was a deinonychus. Those monsters hunted in packs. Sure enough, I heard a screech to my left, but I didn't bother to look. Looking took time I didn't have. I hit the twenty-yard mark with my heart trying to claw

its way up my throat. The deinonychus was gaining on me.

Fifteen yards.

Ten yards.

Five.

Two.

Like a baseball player sliding into home base, I dropped neatly down the compound hatch and locked it in one practised movement before plummeting the remaining few feet to the floor. Two seconds later, too close for comfort, I heard its claws tear at the metal lid. A heartbeat after that, the rest of its hunting mates joined it in an attempt to flush me out of my hole. I was lucky I was fast, but then again, you didn't last long topside if you weren't.

I leaned over the small holoscreen monitor on the wall and typed in the anonymous user code my best friend, Shawn, had shown me when I was seven. Almost five years later and it still worked. The screen beeped and chirped happily at me, completely at odds with the crunching, scratching and mewling screams coming from five feet above.

The creatures would dig around the concrete-enforced entrance for another ten minutes or so before

they moved on, and I didn't want anyone else to run into them. Not that many people ventured topside besides me. It wasn't exactly legal. The compound marines would be furious if they knew that an eleven-year-old girl had dared to stick her head above the ground. I bit my lip and typed in the message that would be delivered across North Compound. *"Pack of deinonychus at entrance C. 7:01 a.m. – Anonymous User."* I had my own code, but there would be too many questions if I used it. Questions I had no intention of answering.

I glanced up at the only security camera in this tunnel. It had been disabled for exactly two days and eleven hours. They weren't as hard to break as you'd think. The fact that it was *still* broken was a little amazing, though. I'd thought I'd have to break it again this morning. Compound security must be slipping with all of the extra manpower they'd been throwing at tunnel reinforcements.

I sank down against the wall and took a deep breath, readjusting my lungs to the filtered, weightless air of the compound. I always felt like my senses were somehow dulled and muted after surviving a trip topside. Things down here just weren't as bright, smells weren't as strong, and sounds weren't as crisp. Not that

I could really complain. The topside world was amazing, but the compound had one thing going for it the topside world never could. It was safe.

I pulled the scan plug out of my pocket and stared at it for a second, wondering what information I'd managed to copy this time. It was probably nothing, I warned myself. Just the same old messages about supply drops and regulation enforcements. But a stubbornly hopeful part of me couldn't help but think that maybe, just maybe, this time it would have information on it about my dad. I tucked the plug into my bag, careful to conceal it inside the lining. I would hide it properly later, but this would have to do for now. Getting the information almost made up for the fact that I was going to be late to class. Again. But at that moment, after almost becoming a dinosaur's breakfast, I couldn't make myself care.

Deciding that I was going to be late no matter what I did, I reached in my pack and pulled out my journal. Its leather cover was soft and familiar under my hands as I opened it to the entry I'd made about *Deinonychus*. I looked at my rough sketch of the dinosaur that still screeched above me and shook my head in disgust. The dusty volume I'd found on this particular dinosaur had apparently been riddled with errors. For one, that back

claw was way longer than I had drawn it, and I'd had no idea just how fast they really were. I quickly sketched in the claw and added in the few facts I'd been able to gather while running for my life. Satisfied, I put it away to work on at another time. Even though the camera in this tunnel was disabled, it made me nervous having my journal out in the open. It wasn't exactly legal either.

As I shut my pack, I realised that my hands were still trembling and I flexed my fingers in irritation. I was safe, but my hammering heart and tingling nerves hadn't got the message yet. *Nothing like a good dinosaur attack to wake you up in the morning*, I thought wryly.

My dad used to tell me stories about life before the dinosaurs, before the Ark Plan had been enacted, but it was hard to believe them. I couldn't imagine a world where people lived with all that sun and sky and freedom, three things sadly lacking in North Compound. I glanced up and felt a reluctant gratitude for the thick concrete above my head. Without it, the human race wouldn't exist. And I guess when you thought of it that way, sun, sky and freedom weren't that high a price to pay.

The holoscreen beside me chirped, and I squinted at it. Someone had responded to my alert. It flashed twice

and then a message scrolled across the screen. *"Sector 24 reinforcements postponed due to deinonychus report. Reminder – no resident in North Compound is authorised to have an anonymous account."* I rolled my eyes. Our government's quest to abolish the anonymous accounts had failed time and time again. But I was glad to see that tunnel reinforcements had been moved. The compound's marines occasionally had to go topside to check that the reinforcements were being installed properly, and even with their stun guns, it was often deadly. My anonymous account had potentially saved someone from getting eaten today.

One of the deinonychus's claws screeched across the metal hatch that separated their world from mine, forcing me to clap my hands over my ears. The creatures were still scrabbling and roaring, furious at their lost meal. And I wished, for the millionth time, that I could feed them the idiot scientists who had brought them out of extinction in the first place. Although being ripped to pieces might be too kind for the people who had almost wiped out the entire human race.