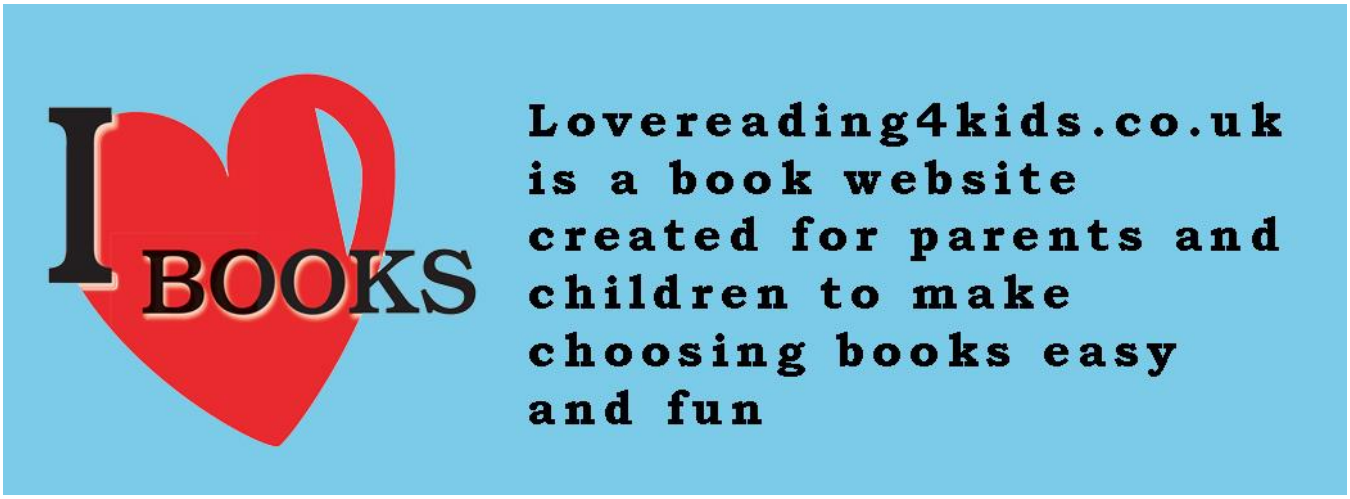


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CONTENTS

1. SUNDAY MORNING 1
2. THE LIVE AND LET LIVE 7
3. MONKEY BUSINESS 18
4. THE CAGE DOOR 30
5. RACHEL'S GHOST 36
6. SHUT UP AND LISTEN 49
7. HOT METAL 61
8. THE BREAKER'S YARD 67
9. INSIDE THE JUNGLE 74
10. SANCTUARY 80
11. TORN-UP RAINBOWS 87
12. THE RAID 93
13. ON THE ROAD 105

CHAPTER 1
SUNDAY MORNING

Imagine a back street outside a breaker's yard in East London on a damp October morning. The air is spun with a mist of rain, the skies are low, the gutters are glazed with petrol rainbows. For the moment, all is still. The streets are empty. Nothing moves. Nothing whispers.

Then, with a dull clack of metal, the gates of the yard creak open and two boys walk out into the silent rain. They pause for a moment, both of them pull up their collars, then they shrug their shoulders and walk up the street. Under

their feet, the petrol rainbows shimmer and break in the rain.

Side by side, step by step, with their hands in their pockets and their eyes fixed hard to the ground, the two boys move along the street and away into the morning gloom. They walk as they always walk – with the steady silence of brothers. This is their way.

They have no need to talk, for there's nothing new to say, and they have no need to look where they are going, for this is their world. The back-street world. Its shadowed lands are mapped in their hearts. The sooty railway bridges and the brick walls tagged with graffiti, the arched tunnels of scrap metal and old car batteries, the green canals, the flat grey sky. They know these things as well as they know themselves. The purple

weeds and torn posters and sagging heaps of sand. The red-brick flats with metal bars on the windows. The grey and white gusts of flapping pigeons. The concrete deserts. The wastelands.

They know it all.

To Cole and Ruben, it's nowhere.

Everywhere.

And here they are, walking it together, alone with their thoughts.

Ruben is the younger of the two. He's lost in a dream of his own making, a vision of high mountains and eagles swooping in a wide-open sky ...

Cole is thinking of his sister. He isn't aware that he's thinking of her, because he thinks of her every day, and these

thoughts have become automatic. Like breathing. Like walking. Like living. When he thinks about Rachel, he thinks with the core of his mind. It thinks for him. It searches the darkness, trying to find her, trying to picture her face – her eyes, her chestnut hair, the way she'd smile and light up the world … but that was all a long time ago, too far away, and the pictures aren't there any more.

The only thing that comes to his mind now is an empty hole, a shadow, a person he doesn't know. A girl with sunken eyes and scarred skin and the husk of a broken smile …

Cole puts his hand to his head and wipes the rain from his eyes.

Somewhere far away, a bell rings out. As the mournful sound dies in

the air, Cole stops walking and listens. Ruben stops beside him and listens with him. It's quiet for a moment, then a thin whistle of city wind rattles the street, scraping the air like the breath of a dying man. Cole lets it ride, listening instead to the other world, the real world – the sound of dogs barking, music playing, a brief burst of raised voices. Not too far away, the wail of a siren pulses through the streets.

"What's the matter, Cole?" Ruben asks.

Cole looks at him, and wonders for a second how he'd feel if Ruben wasn't his brother. If the boy beside him was a stranger, what would he think of that unworldly face, that bulky black coat, that wiry explosion of hair? What would he think of those ageless blue eyes?

Would he think – as he often did – that this 14-year-old boy knows nothing at all and everything there is to know, and doesn't care which is which?

"Cole?" Ruben says. "What is it?"

"Nothing." Cole touches his brother's arm. "Come on, let's go."

They move on through the rain.

It's nine o'clock.

Sunday morning.