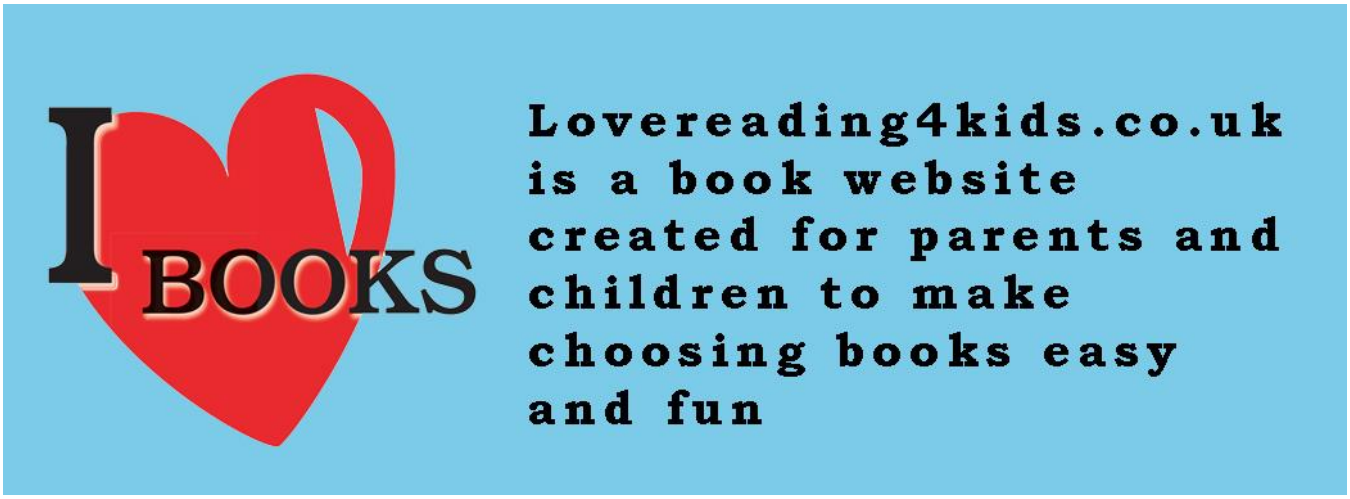


Opening extract from

The Crystal Stair

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Chapter 1
Pyramid

From the roof of the Girls' Tower, Caz could see all of the Settlement. She sat on the bench with both her hands round a mug of hot chocolate and gazed out.

The white Pyramid rose opposite her. Beyond were the Boys' Tower, all the Tech Halls, and then the family houses. She could see the glass walkways that linked the buildings, the leafy trees of the park, even a glimmer of the lake and the regal black swans that lived on it.

If she stood up, Caz would also see the green hills of the Outlands and the fields where the bio-crops grew.

And if she narrowed her eyes against the sun, she would even see the terrible bright sparkle of the distant Ice.

Instead Caz sighed, and sipped the chocolate. She and Will had been in the Settlement of World's End for three months now, and she was still trying to get used to the place.

All these people! She had never known so many people. There were over 6,000 of them, all those who had survived the Blue Star.

She stood, walked to the rail and looked down. The streets were not like the frozen City she had escaped from. Here they were clean and new and lined with young, fresh trees.

It was warm and safe here in the Settlement. She should be happy. But she wasn't. She was restless and uneasy. And deep in her heart she knew why.

"Caz! *Caz!*"

Will's shout rang up. From far below, he was waving at her. She waved back, put the empty mug into the waste chute and hurried to the lift.

The Girls' Tower was five storeys high and every girl over ten who had no family of her own lived there. When the Blue Star had rained down its deadly poison, most of the survivors had been children, because they had been fast and fit and

healthy. Their parents had not been so lucky. So these two Towers were huge orphanages. Caz didn't like the place. She had her own room on the fourth floor, and it was nice to have clothes that fitted, but they were dull, and every girl had the same. Dark green trousers. Dark green shirt.

Boring.

The lift door opened. Caz hurried to the security desk and ran her hand over the fingerprint reader. The machine said "Exit allowed" and the door opened.

Will was waiting outside. He was wearing the blue uniform of the Tech Hall with a badge that read *Level 1 Trainee*. "At last!" he said. "I've been here ages."

"Have you got it?" Caz asked.

Will frowned. "Yes, I've got it," he said. "But it wasn't easy. If they find out, I'll be in real trouble."

"They won't." Caz turned. "Let's go now."

"Caz, listen!" Will put out an arm to stop her. "We shouldn't be doing this. It's always the same

with you! Why do you always have to break the rules?"

Caz glared at him. "I need to find out about my father."

"He's not here," Will said. "We know that."

She walked away fast, her face hot, and Will had to run to catch up. For a moment neither of them spoke. Then Will said, "As soon as we arrived, you asked at the Pyramid about him. They checked. He isn't here."

"I want to see for myself."

"You have to face it, Caz. He died when the Star came, back in the City. Like thousands of others."

Stubborn, she said, "I know he's alive."

"You don't know. You just want it."

She stopped and looked at him. "OK. *OK!* You may be right. But he worked for the government, Will. They had bunkers under his office block. Safe places, in case of an attack. He must have gone down there. I just want to see the records for myself. That's not much to ask, is it?"

Will sighed. He must have known he wouldn't talk her out of it. Once Caz had an idea she never let it go.

"Well, we'd better do it now," he said. "I've got two hours before I have to be back at class."

In front of them rose the Pyramid, a huge crystal building in the white emptiness of the central square. This was the Settlement HQ, where all the information that had survived the Blue Star disaster was stored.

As they walked up the broad white steps, Will changed the subject. "Have you decided what work you'll choose yet?"

Caz shrugged. "They've told me. It'll be at the hospital. We need doctors."

Will looked surprised. But Caz was right. In this tiny, enclosed world everyone had to do what the Settlement needed. Choice was a thing of the past.

The doors slid open.

The Pyramid was a vast emptiness, all white, with a glossy floor of black tiles. As Will and Caz crossed the space, they felt tiny, their shoes

tapping on the reflected lights, as if they walked across a starry sky.

Caz had discovered that the oldest records were kept here, the ones written down in the panic and chaos of the days just after the Star. They were in a vast room called the Hall of the Lost. She had to see those. Maybe something there would help her.

They took the lift to the third floor. A white corridor faced them, lined with doors. They walked down it with rapid steps. One or two people passed them, and one woman looked at them curiously, but she said nothing.

Will and Caz turned the corner.

"That's it," Will said.

The Hall of the Lost had a tall double door with a security slot near the handle.

"Try it then," Caz said. "While there's no one around."

Will nodded. He looked round, then took out a card. Caz stared at it. The clear plastic was invisible until he held it up, then in a rainbow shiver she saw numbers printed deep inside.

"Are you sure it'll get us in?" she asked.

"One way to find out." Will slipped the plastic card into the slot.

The door made a soft snapping noise, and the light on the lock turned from red to green.

Will pulled the door open and they slipped inside.

"Wow!" Caz said.

The Hall of the Lost reached to the very top of the Pyramid. Above them the crystal roof came to a sharp point. Hundreds of white butterflies fluttered in and out of the open windows of the apex.

The air smelled sweet and musty.

All around were shelves of books and boxes and papers. Thousands of them.

Will groaned. "Where do we even start!"

For a moment, Caz shared his dismay. Then she noticed each section of the shelves had a letter above it.

"L," she said. My father's name is Richard Lewis. So it has to be L."

As she hurried away between the shelves, Will stared after her.

"All those years living as kids together in the Store," he said, "and I never knew your surname."

The shelf labelled "L" was thick with dusty files. Caz grabbed one and flicked through it, but the names were all strange to her and nothing was in any sort of order.

She threw it down and took another. "What a mess! All this should be sorted out."

"There's a job for you then." Will was turning pages. "Caz, these aren't just lists of people. It's all sorts of stuff, anything saved from the City, and the other places."

She nodded, in despair.

Millions of files, business records, archives from lost schools, whole libraries of books, endless computer print-outs, pictures, letters, notebooks, magazines ... all the written stuff that anyone had brought to the Settlement had been dumped here, waiting to be sorted and ordered.

But no one had done it.

Caz threw down another file in frustration. "This is crazy. Surely ..."

"Shh! Listen." Will turned, eyes wide. "Someone's coming. Quick!"

But it was too late.

The door opened.