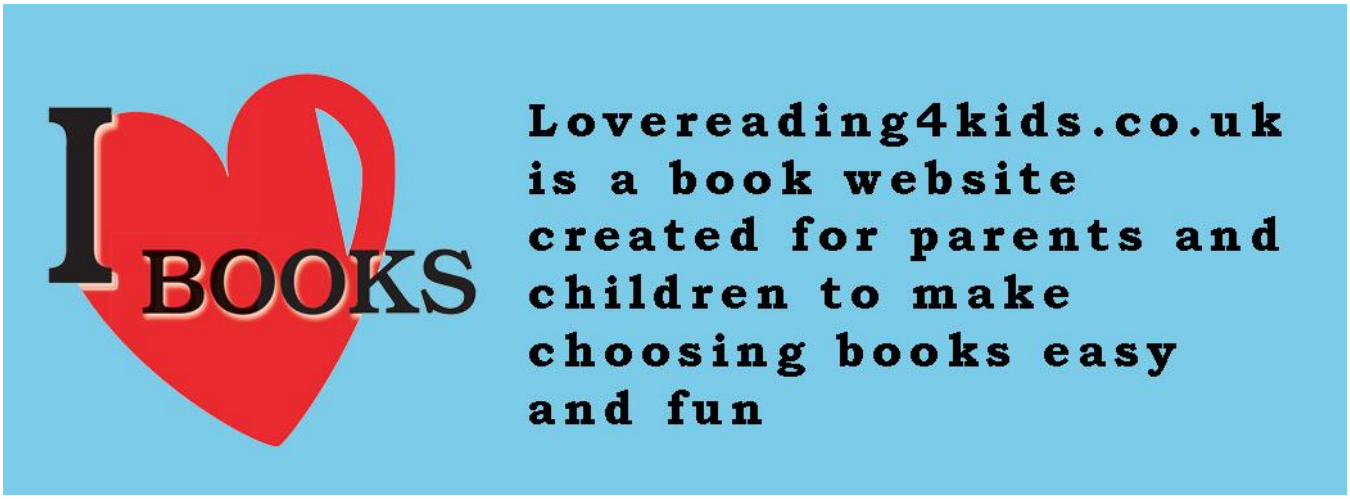


Opening extract from

The Moonlight Dreamers

Written by

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Chapter One

On the night it all began, a full moon hung over Brick Lane, casting everything in a pearly glow. The official reason Amber had come up to the roof garden was to sulk, but as soon as she caught sight of the moon her frown softened. It was so huge and appeared to be so close that she couldn't help reaching out, as if hoping to touch it. As she looked at her hand silhouetted against the pale light, a question popped into her head. *How many words has my hand written during the sixteen years I've been alive*? Amber was always being struck by random questions like this. She considered it a curse because they popped up at the most inappropriate moments – like that time during a history exam when there'd been a question about the last time Henry VIII visited the Tower of London. *What places have I already visited for the last time*? Amber immediately found herself asking, followed swiftly by: *What will be the last place I ever visit*? She'd then wasted about ten minutes of precious exam time mentally compiling lists of all the places she wished she'd visited for the last time – *school, crowded supermarkets on a Saturday, the*

dentist – and some of the places she'd prefer to die – *on a chaise longue in Paris, smoking a long, thin cigar*; *riding a fairground carousel with the wind in her hair*; *tucked up in a four-poster bed listening to Billie Holiday.*

Amber dropped her hand into her lap and took a deep breath. The cool night air smelled of car fumes, fried onions and coriander. Way down below, the kitchens of the Indian restaurants that backed on to her house were a hive of activity. But Amber didn't mind the clattering of pans or the chefs yelling their orders in Bengali. She was so used to the nightly commotion that it felt soothing.

Then she heard her dad's voice cutting through the noise and instantly tensed. She could only catch odd words but she knew he was talking about her.

"Doesn't understand … responsibility … my career…"

Amber sighed. All Gerald ever thought about was his stupid career. Then came the gentle lilt of her other dad, Daniel. She couldn't make out a single word he was saying but she could guess. He would be smoothing things over, trying to make Gerald see that sometimes their daughter needed their time and attention – *like when she was taking part in a national debate for school!* But yes, of course, Gerald's career was of vital importance. And yes, of course, no one else could really understand the pressures facing an internationally renowned artist. Daniel was like the relaxation music played in health spas, but in human form. Amber loved him more than anything or anyone else in the entire world, and she

was infinitely grateful that at least one of her dads cared, but sometimes she wished he wasn't quite so soothing. Sometimes – lots of times – she wished he would stand up to Gerald.

She heard a door closing downstairs. Gerald was probably retreating to his studio to lick his wounds. When he'd told her at dinner that he wouldn't be able to go to her debate because he'd been invited to a gallery opening in Prague, she'd accused him of being a self-centred despot. Despot had been her word of the day from Dictionary.com. It was like some spooky kind of word karma – as if Dictionary.com had known that Gerald was going to be particularly obnoxious that day. He'd actually choked on his salmon when she said it, his face flushing crimson. Then he'd flung down his knife and fork and started yelling. Gerald always yelled when he knew he was in the wrong – it was one of his worst traits. Usually Amber would yell right back but tonight she'd felt too close to tears, so she'd chosen to sulk on the roof garden instead.

It had been a totally rubbish day. That morning, for some bizarre reason (like she'd been up too late blogging the night before to remember to set it), her alarm hadn't gone off, so she hadn't had time to sculpt her hair into its trademark quiff. This meant she'd gone to school feeling as awkward and exposed as if she'd been wearing just her underwear – her most faded and frayed underwear. And school had been worse than ever – and not just because of her hair. In maths,

Mr Frasier (a definite despot if ever Amber saw one) had set a "surprise algebra test". Amber's first instinct had been to question his use of the word surprise. Surely surprises were meant to be good things – fun things – like "surprise parties" or "surprise winners". Shouldn't he have called it a "shock-horror algebra test" instead? But Amber had learned from past experience that Mr Frasier didn't take too kindly to having his teaching methods questioned, so she silently turned over her paper and was immediately plunged into alphabetic hell. This was what she hated most about algebra – the way it stole her beloved letters and twisted them into things that made her head ache. Maths was supposed to be about numbers – it should leave letters to writers who created beautiful things with them, not ruin them in nonsensical equations. At lunchtime, her head still aching from the test, she'd taken refuge in the library. But to her horror, almost as soon as she'd sat down, the library was invaded by the OMGs. The OMGs was Amber's name for the so-called cool girls in her year, the ones who starved themselves until their heads looked too big for their bodies and wore so much make-up their skin looked as if it had been painted on from a tin. The ones who said "OMG" practically every other word. They never normally set foot in the library at break. In their world, the library was a total no-go area because you couldn't smoke there, or talk loudly about boys. But today for some bizarre reason – maybe because they knew Amber was having such a crappy day and they wanted to make it even worse – they descended

in a haze of celebrity-brand perfume and fake laughter.

"Is it true that you, like, dress in men's clothes when you're not in school?" an OMG called Chloe asked, coming to perch on the edge of Amber's desk.

Amber ignored her and carried on reading. This didn't deter Chloe, who draped herself across the desk as if she were modelling for a lingerie shoot. "Is it because your dads are, like…"

All of the OMGs fell silent at this point. Amber wanted to wail. They'd known for years now that her dads were gay. Why was it still an issue?

"My dads are like what?" she asked, still not looking up, even though the words in her book had all blurred into one.

"Gay," Chloe said, defiantly, as if she was telling Amber something she didn't already know.

"Why would my dads being gay make me want to wear suits?" Amber asked, immediately kicking herself for getting sucked into The Most Pointless Conversation in History.

"Well, has it, like, made you gay too?"

At this, Amber leaned forward in her seat and stared Chloe straight in the eyes. "I'm guessing by that logic that your mum and dad must be completely imbecilic then."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Chloe asked, her glossy mouth gaping open.

Amber hadn't hung around long enough to see her work it out.

Now she felt hot tears welling in her eyes. She blinked

them away and looked down at the book in her lap. She was not going to cry. No way. Today had been bad enough already. She opened her book. The only thing that could lift her from a gloom like this was a game of What Would Oscar Say? This was a game Amber had invented a couple of years ago, when she first discovered her writing hero, Oscar Wilde. Any time she was feeling down or angry or confused she would leaf through a book of his quotes and randomly pick one. His dry wit and sarcasm never let her down. Amber began flicking through the pages. She was sick of being on her own all the time. She was sick of feeling like the odd one out. She craved excitement and adventure. She needed to change her life. But how? She stopped flicking and looked down at the page. Her eyes were drawn to a quote:

"Yes: I am a dreamer. For a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world."

Amber let the words wash over her. This was how letters should be arranged, in a way that actually made people stop and think, that made them feel better about themselves. She shouldn't feel bad about being different. She should feel proud. She shouldn't feel bad about dreaming of something better. Amber looked up at the moon. It seemed to be glowing brighter than ever, as if it was shining just on her.

Amber felt a strange sensation, as if the moon was waiting

for her to realize something. She leaned back and gazed into the darkness. So what if she wasn't like any of the other girls at school? So what if her dad was a self-centred despot? She was a dreamer – a moonlight dreamer. Just like Oscar Wilde. Amber put down her book and went over to the edge of the roof garden. Below, a stream of people was winding its way towards the food trucks in the courtyard of the Old Truman Brewery. To her right, the lights of Brick Lane stretched out like a jewelled scarf. For the first time all day, Amber felt a prickle of hope. She was in the heart of London, surrounded by millions of people. Surely there must be other people like her out there somewhere. Other people who didn't fit in, or want to fit in. Other people who craved excitement and adventure. Other moonlight dreamers.