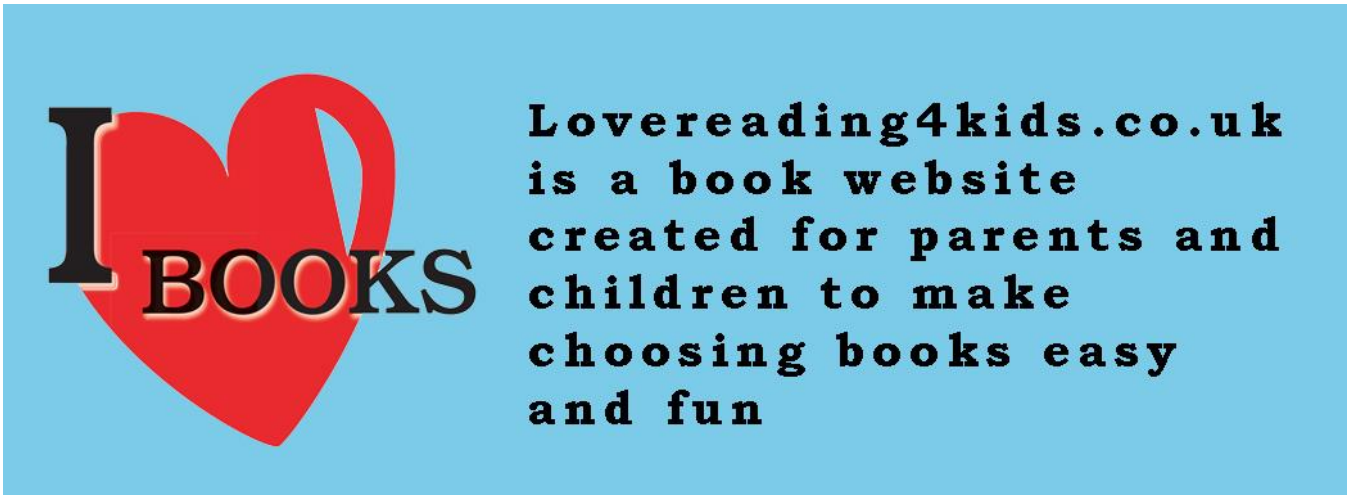


Opening extract from

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Claire Fayers

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Chapter One



Laws of Motion, Number One

A moving object will continue in a straight line unless something happens to knock it off its course. Some say this is also true of stories.

Aldebran Boswell's Book of Scientific Knowledge



Brine sat at the driftwood table in Tallis Magus's library, her chin propped on one hand as she read. Aldebran Boswell could have been describing her life, she thought. A long, straight line of cleaning the magician's house, cooking the magician's food, washing the magician's disgusting socks. Nothing ever changing.

Brine Seaborne's life will continue in a straight line . . .

There was one big difference, of course. A moving object might have some idea of where it came from, but Brine had no idea at all. She had one clear memory of waking up in a rowing boat three years ago, surrounded by people, and that was all. They'd asked her her name and she couldn't remember –

she couldn't remember anything. So they named her Brine because she was crusted head to foot in sea salt, and Seaborne because that's what she was. Sea-borne. Sea-carried.

She'd been so ill that no one had expected her to survive, Magus told her often. Lucky for him that she had recovered or the magician would have had to do his own cleaning all these years.

Brine crumpled up the cloth she should have been using to dust and threw it at the door. As Boswell predicted, it flew in a straight line.

Unless something happens to knock it off its course.

The duster bounced aside as the door opened.

Brine slammed Boswell's book shut and jumped up as Tallis Magus swept in. He looked cleaner than usual and he was wearing his best robe – the one he kept to impress rich visitors. Right behind him came a man who was a bit shorter than him, a lot fatter, and had a face like a fish on a bad day.

Brine gaped at him. Penn Turbill? Why was *he* here?

'What are you doing, Seaborne?' Magus barked.

'Dusting,' said Brine. She rescued the cloth. 'Sorry. It slipped.'

Magus gave her a disbelieving glare and shook back his robes, sending off a flurry of stale magic that made Brine cough. 'Get out!'

Brine dropped him a curtsy and fled.

Outside, she shut the door firmly and leaned against it. Something was definitely off course. People came to Magus's house for two reasons – either he owed them money or they wanted him to cast a spell. But Penn Turbill was the richest man on the whole of the Minutes island cluster, and the biggest miser. No way would he have lent Magus anything, and what could Turbill want that he could only get by magic? He already owned almost everything.

Very carefully, Brine turned her head and pressed her ear to the door.

'. . . smaller than I expected,' Penn Turbill was saying.

'She's only twelve,' replied Magus, 'as far as we can make out. She'll grow. And she works very hard – as long as you can stop her daydreaming.'

Brine twisted her duster into a tight knot. They were talking about her, but why? She was just the magician's servant. Why should Penn Turbill care how big she was? She waited, listening as a floorboard creaked inside the library, followed by a rattle of keys and the louder creak of the door into Magus's private study. Then silence.

Maybe they'd just been making conversation. Maybe Turbill had asked about her simply because he'd seen her on the way in. Yes, and maybe a flock of flying sheep would swoop down on Magus's house

and take her home. Wherever that was.

A hand grabbed her shoulder. Brine yelped and lashed out backwards with the only weapon she had: the duster. It connected limply.

'Watch what you're doing, can't you?' said Peter irritably. He picked off a lump of fluff exactly the same beige as his hair, then paused and looked at Brine as if waiting for something.

Brine glared back at him, not moving.

Peter flicked the dust at her. 'Didn't we decide that servants were supposed to curtsy to family members?'

'You might have,' said Brine. 'I didn't. Anyway, you're no more family than I am.' Peter's real family were fishermen on one of the smallest of Minutes' islands. He hated it when Brine brought this up, which Brine thought was quite ridiculous. He seemed so determined to forget where he came from; Brine would have given anything to remember.

She sneezed into her duster. 'Have you been practising magic again?'

That was the other thing she hated about living with Tallis Magus (one of the many other things): she was allergic to magic. No one could explain why, not that anyone had really tried to. Magus didn't care how often she sneezed as long as she also kept the house clean.

'Not that it's any of your business,' said Peter, 'but I had a lesson this morning.' He drew a squiggle in the

air in front of her and grinned. ‘Don’t worry. I won’t turn you into a frog – yet.’

‘I’d like to see you try.’

‘I might one day.’ Peter jerked his head at the library door. ‘What’s Bladder-Face doing here?’

Brine almost smiled, but turned it into a scowl. ‘Penn Turbill? How should I know? I’m only the servant.’ She tucked the duster into the waistband of her skirt and stalked away. At the top of the stairs, she turned back. Peter was leaning against the door, his ear to the wood. ‘But if you ask me,’ Brine added loudly enough to make him jump, ‘it’s going to mean trouble.’

Penn Turbill didn’t leave the house until the sun was setting. Brine watched from an upstairs window as he hurried down the steep little path to the beach. Magus was plotting something with him – something that involved her. She didn’t like the cold feeling that swam in her stomach. This was her own fault. She’d wanted something to change; she’d practically wished for it in the library. For all she knew it might even be a good change, but she couldn’t quite convince herself of the fact. There were many, many things worse than a boring straight line of a life.

She heard footsteps behind her and spun round. Peter stepped back quickly. ‘Don’t throw anything. Magus wants to see us both downstairs.’

Tallis Magus was waiting for them in the sitting room, smiling. Brine felt a prickle of worry. In the three years she'd lived in the magician's house, she'd seen him smile maybe four times. Mainly he alternated between a vaguely irritated frown and a full-blown, thunderous scowl, the latter usually happening when he found Brine somewhere she shouldn't be. The grin that stretched his face now was so alien that Brine pinched herself to make sure she wasn't in the middle of a nightmare.

'Peter, Seaborne, come in,' said Magus. 'Have a drink.'

Brine stopped in the doorway. This was definitely all wrong. Magus stood up, still beaming, so that his smile seemed to lift him out of the chair by his teeth. He poured wine into three goblets and held two of them out. Peter tasted his cautiously. Brine stared into hers, wondering how much Magus had already drunk.

Magus took a long gulp and wiped his chin on his sleeve. His gaze bumped around the room. Brine started forward, thinking he was going to fall over, but he waved her away. 'I am perfectly well, Seaborne.' He fell back into his chair. 'In fact,' he said, 'I have good news for you both. I spoke to Penn Turbill today and we reached an agreement. Peter, you are very young, but you're a good boy and you're going to be a magician one day.'

Peter shot Brine a sideways glance. She shrugged. She didn't have any idea what this was about either.

Magus didn't seem to notice that neither of them had spoken. 'Money and magic are a good mix,' he said. 'And Penn Turbill has more money than anyone. His daughter's not the prettiest girl on the islands, but looks don't really matter. You'll like her.'

'I will?' asked Peter.

Magus's smile slipped. 'Of course you will – you'll have to. You're going to marry her.'

Peter turned red, then white. 'Marry? But . . . but I can't get married. I'm too young.'

'Stop gawking at me like a fish,' snapped Magus. 'You won't stay too young, will you? You and Turbill's daughter will get betrothed next week, then she'll move in here and you can get married as soon as you're fifteen. That'll give you nearly three years to get to know her. That should be enough, even for you.'

Peter shook his head. 'I don't want to get to know her. I don't want to marry her.'

Magus slammed his goblet down. Wine slopped over the sides. 'You will do as you're told. Who else is going to marry you – the fisherman's runt, the magician's useless apprentice? Drink your wine and be happy.'

Peter's goblet fell from his hand. He didn't appear to notice.

Brine looked down at the spreading wine stain and

tried not to smirk. ‘I’ll get a cloth,’ she said.

Magus stopped her. ‘That’s not the only thing we agreed. Obviously, Seaborne, I’ll have no need of a servant once Turbill’s daughter moves in. Penn Turbill has considered your youth and your – ah – questionable origins, and despite them both he has agreed to take you on. You will be going to live with him as his housekeeper.’

A dull clatter sounded, a thousand miles away.

‘Make that two cloths,’ said Peter.

Brine wasn’t sure how she got to sleep that night, but she woke to the sound of shouting. She groaned and rolled over, burying her face in the pillow.

Peter’s voice came through the ceiling. ‘I’m not going through with this. You can’t make me.’

‘Don’t talk back to me, you ungrateful child.’

Brine would have stayed in bed if she could, but staying in bed wasn’t going to solve anything. Magus and Peter continued to argue as she dressed, and from the sound of it, Magus was winning. She could still hear him calling Peter names as she got the fire going in the kitchen and laid three fish on a rack over it. She might have felt sorry for Peter if he wasn’t such a pain. It would serve him right to be stuck with someone he couldn’t stand, but still had to be polite to – see how he liked it. Anyway, Brine had enough problems of her own to worry about.

‘I’m not marrying Bladder-Face’s daughter,’ announced Peter, marching in on her some time later. His left cheek was scarlet, as if he’d been slapped.

Brine turned a fish over and stabbed it hard with a fork. ‘What are you going to do, then? Run away and join the pirates?’

Peter’s other cheek reddened to match the slapped one. Brine didn’t care. As far as she was concerned, he’d got the better part of the deal. She’d spent three years working for Tallis Magus. She cleaned his house, cooked his food, washed his clothes until her hands were raw, and in return he was swapping her as if she was an old robe he’d grown tired of.

‘At least I won’t have to live with you any more,’ she said. ‘And Penn Turbill is rich. Have you seen his house? It’s huge.’

‘Ten times the house, ten times the cleaning,’ Peter said.

‘Yes, well, I don’t have to get married. Your children are going to be *so* ugly.’

Peter scowled at her and sat on the table. Brine watched the fish smoulder. The nearest one looked a bit like Penn Turbill – it certainly had the same glazed expression.

Ten times the house, ten times the cleaning.

‘I’ve heard,’ said Peter, breaking into her thoughts, ‘that Bladder-Face can’t read. There’s not a single book in his house.’

Brine turned cold inside. Peter flashed her a triumphant grin. 'Magus might not have noticed you sneaking into the library all the time, but I have. I was planning to blackmail you one day.' He tapped the side of his nose. 'You know what they say – knowledge is money.'

'No it's not, it's power.'

Actually, it was neither. It was freedom, the chance to escape, even if only for an hour or two. In Penn Turbill's house there would be no escape. Brine turned the fish again, watching the juices spit as they hit the fire. A dull weight settled over her.

'Why don't you try talking to Magus again?' she said. 'Tell him it would be bad for your studies to have a wife.'

Peter pointed to his reddened cheek. 'Why don't you talk to him if you're so clever?'

Because Magus definitely wouldn't listen to her, Brine thought, and Peter knew it. She sighed.

The smell of burning fish wafted between them. Brine sneaked a glance at Peter and caught him looking back at her. They both jerked their gazes away.

'Well,' said Brine at last, 'if Magus won't change his mind, we'll have to make Turbill change his.'

'Yes, brilliant idea. How?'

One of the fish ignited. Brine snatched it out of the flames by the tail. 'You're a magician, aren't you? I'm no expert, but how about you cast a spell on him?'