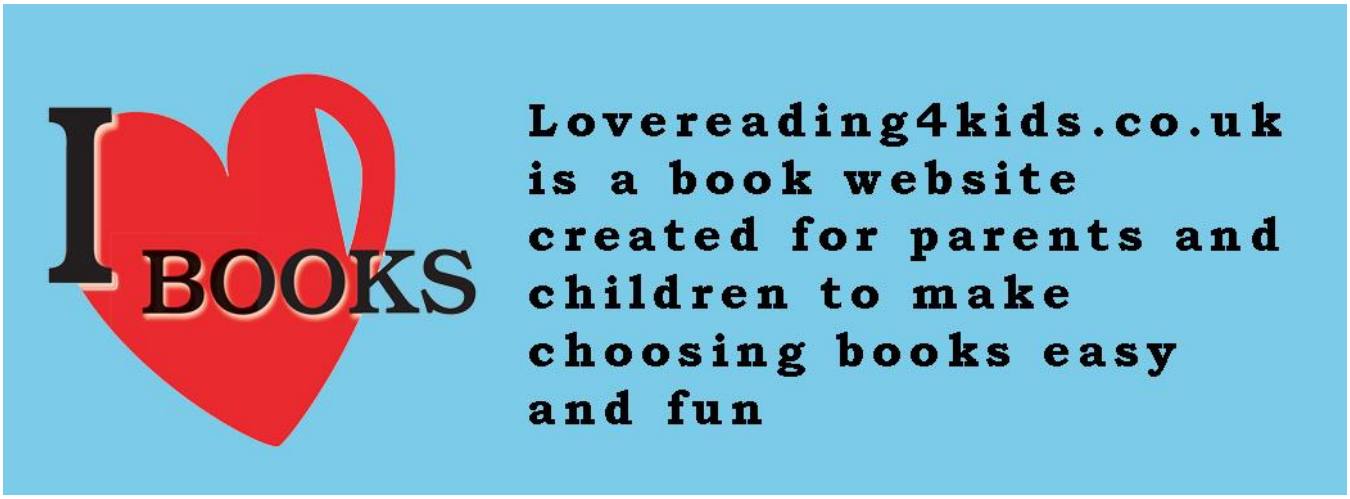


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For Simon Wrigley

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CHAPTER 1

Secret

Guess what, world? I can read minds.

Luke Mellows stood rigid on the edge of the playground, well away from the crowds of other kids. Sweating. Alone.

'Guess what else?' he thought. 'It's scaring the hell out of me.'

Luke was used to being able to guess what other people were thinking. It had been that way his whole life. When teachers asked

questions, the right answers would just pop into his head. He could make his parents happy by doing what they wanted before they had to ask him. And in sports he knew what moves the other players were going to make before they made them. That was a good way of making the small amount of talent he had go a lot further.

It was all cool. Or it had been.

Before today.

Today Luke seemed to know *exactly* what people were thinking.

It had started with Miss Han this morning. She was writing a task up on the whiteboard when the words crackled across Luke's brain –

'I'm broke. I can't afford the rent. I hate this job …'

Luke had jumped in surprise. "Too much information!" he yelped.

Everyone swivelled round to stare at him like he was crazy and Miss Han snapped at him to be quiet.

Luke had realised there and then.

He hadn't heard Miss Han speak. He'd heard her *thoughts*. And other thoughts were crowding into his head too. It was as if the rest of the class were thinking aloud, but only he could hear them.

'God, Mellows, you stupid show off.'

'Dad's gonna kill me if I don't get better grades.'

'If he got his hair cut, Luke might be boyfriend material.'

'I am totally bunking off History after break.'

'If I skip lunch again I'll have enough money to buy that game …'

Luke had put his hands to his ears, jumped up, knocked over a chair and fled from the classroom.

He cringed at the memory. Now Miss Han was going to report him to the Head and his classmates thought he was a freak.

"And I know that for a fact," Luke muttered. "Because I can read their minds …"

'I'M GONNA HURT SOMEBODY. WHO'S FIRST?'

The thought was like a Rottweiler bite in Luke's brain. He spun round and saw Dan

Stenton swaggering up to him, flanked by his two best buds.

"Oh, great," Luke groaned. Stenton was the biggest kid in Year 10, probably the thickest and definitely the nastiest. But his mates weren't far behind – and their minds were itchy with the promise of seeing a smaller kid take a battering.

'And here I am,' Luke thought, 'standing alone in the corner of the playground. Perfect target.'

"Oi!" Stenton bellowed. "Are you the kid who threw the fit this morning?"

Fame travels fast.

"I'm Luke Mellows."

"What?" Stenton scoffed. "Puke Smellows?"

His mates sniggered. A crowd of onlookers had sniffed blood and was gathering around them, ready for action.

Luke swallowed hard. He'd always been told that if you stood up to bullies they'd back down. But right now, Stenton's thoughts were saying something very different.

'I'm sick of teachers bossing me,' he was thinking. 'I'm gonna take it out on this little –'

"It's not worth it, mate," Luke said. "Beating me up, I mean. The teachers will only give you more hassle."

"What?" Stenton pushed Luke. "Think you're clever, do you?"

The crowd started to chant. "Fight! Fight!" Their sweaty thoughts were like little fists swinging in Luke's head. He felt dizzy and sick.



Stenton grinned. "Puke Smellows, I'm gonna rip your head off and kick it round the playground!"

Luke got ready to run.

"Only … I can't." Stenton had frozen. "You … you're tougher than me, Luke. Stronger than me."

Luke blinked in shock. The crowd's chant only lasted a second or two more before it petered out into disappointment.

"You could beat me in a fight, easy," Stenton went on. "You're excellent. I'm nothing."

One of Stenton's mates grabbed his arm. "Duh! You could have him, easy!"

"No." Stenton stood there like a zombie. "Luke Mellows rules. I'm nothing."

Now the crowd was laughing and jeering. What was Stenton playing at? Luke felt uneasy, too. He found himself *trying* to read the bully's mind.

But there was nothing in Dan Stenton's head. No thoughts, no memories, no feelings.

It was like his mind had been wiped clean.

Luke was totally freaked. He stared as Stenton jerked back to life and barged away through the crowd as if he was blind. His mates mooched after him, heads down, scared.

Luke tried to shut out the startled thoughts of the gobstruck crowd as they drifted past him.

'Not fair!'

'What a let-down.'

'Huh. Thought there would be blood.'

'What happened?'

'Stenton's lost it!'

But one girl hung back and watched Luke. She was tall, thin, straight up and down. She had black hair and brown eyes, and was wearing a different school uniform. Luke didn't recognise her, but somehow he felt like he'd known her for ages.

She looked kind of snooty. Crafty.

"I suppose it's a bit like having a satellite dish in your head," the girl said. "You know. The way you pick up signals."

Luke stared. "Huh?"

"I'm talking about your power. Your *gift*." The girl leaned in and added in a whisper, "You can read people's thoughts. Can't you?"

"What?" A chill bristled up Luke's spine. "Who are you and how could you know –?"

"Relax," the strange girl said. "My name's Samira and I know you want to keep your power a secret. I *like* secrets – which is why you can't read *my* mind. Can you?"

Luke realised she was right. He couldn't pick up on a single one of Samira's thoughts. "I … I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "Get lost."

"It would be a mistake to upset me, Luke." Samira smiled. "You saw what I did to Stenton."

Luke swallowed hard. He was feeling even more uneasy now. "That was something to do with you?" he asked.

"That was everything to do with me." Samira gave a little laugh. "See, Luke, you might be able to *read* minds. But I can write all over them."