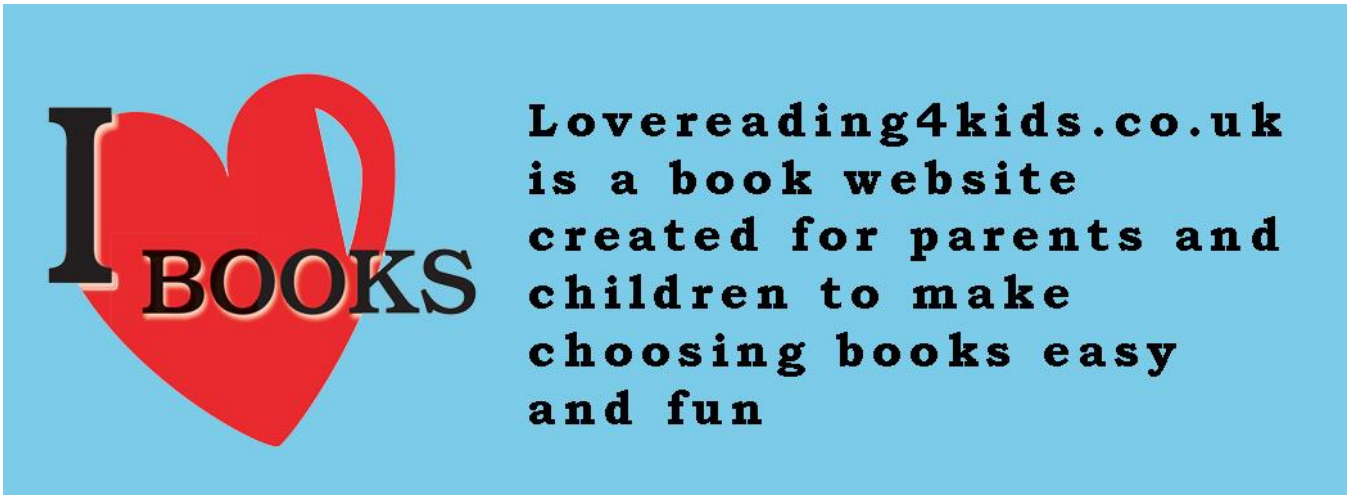


Opening extract from

Hill of the Angels

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HILL OF THE ANGELS

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SPCK

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Prologue



The bells – mute and still for so long – are ringing out in jubilant clangs. Ringing so loud their song resounds around the valley and seems to make the earth dance. Ringing like laughter that cannot be suppressed – on and on, as though the bells themselves might burst with joy.

On the hill above Middleholme a boy is running. His bare feet sink into the soft spring grass and as he slows to cross the wetland beneath the crags black peaty water oozes between his toes. Overhead a lapwing circles him, shrieking. Higher up the hill the boy's sister – dark hair spilling behind her like pitch – leaps from boulder to boulder, climbing up towards the Winstone Rocks. She is singing – imitating the rhythm of the bells. At the sound of her voice a rabbit darts for cover.

Further back, their mother, a sleeping baby tied to her waist with a woollen shawl, stops to catch her breath and shouts, 'I'll be there before both of you. Just watch me!' She laughs and strokes the baby's cheeks, which are squashed against her blouse like ripe fruit. Then she turns to the man with a beard the colour of autumn leaves, resting on an

outcrop of rock beside her, and kisses the top of his head. They gaze together across woods and scattered farms to Middleholme, where the silver band of the river snakes along the valley bottom, and the parish church crouches with its squat black tower.

It is May. Hawthorn blossom dots the hillsides like clumps of snow and yellow irises wave like flags in the mud. In the grass, bright green shoots of bracken are uncurling like caterpillars waking to the sun. In the streets of the town, far below, they can see crowds and, in the market square, a ring of people dancing to a piper's tune. The woman smiles, feeling the afternoon warmth on her face.

At the top of the hill, the girl – outrunning her brother – reaches the rocks first, and squeezes herself through the gap in the stones. Then, from inside the cool cave she squeals, 'They're here! Come and see!'

Abigail



I was ten years old when I first spoke to Grace Fowler. I'd seen her before, with her hair like ripe corn, riding behind her father on his handsome horse. I'd seen her on Sundays, too, squeezed in a pew beside her mother and her sisters – all in a row, like shiny beads on a string.

*

It was September – apple time. I'd taken the pony to the tanner's yard beside the bridge to get some leather straps for Father and was heading home again, up past the church, with its clock face like a blue moon. The vicar's house is just across from the church porch, a square stone house – quite grand – with high walls all around and an iron gate. Beside the gate is an apple tree that grows right over the wall and trails its branches in the lane. That year – 1640, the year my story begins – it was completely covered in scarlet apples – so many of them that they were spilling on to the cobbles.

As we passed by, the pony – who was always inclined to be both greedy and idle – stopped stubbornly and began to eat the fallen fruit from about his feet.

'What's your pony's name?' someone said. I looked up and there was Grace Fowler, sitting on the vicarage wall, higher than my head.

'He doesn't have one,' I said. For as long as I could remember we had referred to him simply as 'the pony'.

'All ponies should have names,' she said, swinging her legs and smiling at me. 'I would call him Pigeon,' she said, 'because he's the colour of a pigeon and as plump as one, too. Pi-geon?' She plucked an apple off the tree and stretched her palm towards the pony, making a clicking sound with her tongue. The pony looked up, took the apple and chomped noisily.

'He likes his name,' Grace said.

'No, he likes your apples,' I replied, and she laughed.

'I can see everything from up here,' she said suddenly. 'Why don't you come up here, too?'

It was getting late. I had been gone several hours. Mother would be needing me back at the farm. If the pony ate too many apples he'd get the colic and kick his belly all night long. I knew I'd best be on my way. But there was something about Grace Fowler – some brightness – that drew me to her, even then. So I hooked the pony's reins on to the overhanging branch and scrambled on to the wall, skinning my knees as I went.

Grace was right. From the wall's top I could see all of Middleholme. The market square with its stone cross and the hot glow of the smithy's forge and the river sloshing under the bridge beside the tanner's shop with its rows of stretched hides. I could see the stocks, too, and the baker's

and the apothecary's and – high on the brow of the hill – I could see the Winstone Rocks, leaning together like two stone cows. This was my world. This was everything I knew. And back then, in my eleventh year, I had no inkling of the things that were about to happen to us.

'Look,' said Grace, touching me on the shoulder. 'Thomas Sunderland's house is almost made. Soon he will come and live in it.'

Down the lane, a stone's throw from the vicarage, was a brand new house, its golden walls fresh minted, doors unhung, windows as yet unglazed. I thought of Thomas Sunderland with his three fine sons and his loping grey dogs. Thomas Sunderland was a cloth merchant, one – according to my mother – on whom the Lord had smiled. 'The sun shines on the righteous,' she said. 'God has blessed him and he has prospered.'

His house was beautiful – elegant and well-proportioned. Standing in the doorway where the oak door would shortly hang, balancing on a wooden trestle, chisel in hand, was Joseph the stonemason. He was carving something into the lintel, tip-tapping with his hammer, chipping into the surface of the stone. Alongside him, watching carefully and patiently handing him his tools, was his apprentice – a boy with red hair, not much older than Grace and me. I'd seen the boy before but I didn't know his name. Not then.

Grace called to the boy and he glanced round, blushing to see us sitting on the wall, staring. Grace spoke again, her voice clear and loud.

'What is your master carving?' she asked.

'An angel,' the boy replied.

Before I knew it, Grace had climbed down off the wall and was tugging at the hem of my skirt.

'Come with me,' she said, 'to get a closer look.'

I lowered myself down into the street and Grace seized my hand, pulling me towards Master Sunderland's house until we could clearly see the figure that was appearing above the door's frame. I could see a face – its downturned chin, the roundness of its cheek, the curve of its nose – then a shoulder . . . a wisp of hair . . . two hands clasped together – all emerging miraculously from the rock. Particles of stone were falling like sawdust, gathering in tiny piles on the ground below. I couldn't say how long we watched – I was mesmerized by the sound of the tools and by the sight of the angel, becoming more substantial with each blow of the hammer.

After a time Grace spoke again, this time in a whisper.

'How does your master know what an angel looks like?' she said. The apprentice boy shook his head. 'I dunno,' he said.

'Will it have wings?' she whispered.

'I expect so,' the boy answered.

'It *must* have wings,' Grace said. 'All angels have wings!'

Grace said this with such certainty that I asked if she had seen an angel. She looked at me astonished and said, 'Only in pictures.'

'I've seen angels,' I said suddenly, startled by my own boldness.

Grace stared at me, eyes wide with curiosity.

'Where?' she said.

I hesitated a moment, uncertain whether to disclose my secret. Then I pointed, up the hill, to the Winstone Rocks that sit above our house.

'There,' I said quietly.

Without warning, Grace took both my hands in hers and kissed me.

'Show me,' she said, her face awash with delight. 'Please show me.'

Grace



The church clock is striking six when we set off up the hill. The sun is just beginning to slip in the sky, casting reddish light across the fell so that it gleams chestnut like the sides of Father's horse (whose name is Falcon).

We leave the cobbled path where the spring bubbles up just below Top Slack and cut across the moor. The ground is uneven and tussocky, full of bristly grass and clumps of heather and boggy pools. I pick my way slowly, watching where I put my feet but, despite my care, the hems of my skirt are soon splattered with mud.

Abigail is a faster walker than I am, being taller and stronger and more accustomed to climbing the hill. I watch her striding up ahead of me – her mop of tangled hair, the colour of tree bark, bobbing on her shoulders. As we get higher, a chill wind is blowing, rustling the bracken and flattening the spears of bog grass in its path. We pass a group of sheep huddled under the crags. Seeing them shelter there, I wrap my arms about myself for warmth and quicken my pace, the sooner to be out of the wind.

From the window of the room where I have slept for the past five years I can see the Winstone Rocks sitting on the brow of the hill, lumpy and grey. Sometimes I have watched them for minutes on end – perhaps hours, even. As the sun moves across them they seem to change shape, like clouds, and at nightfall their silvery surface catches the last rays so that they flash like hot coals. Today, as we approach them, they loom larger and seem more substantial – more like a fortress. I have never been so close to the rocks before, nor so high above the town. As I get nearer I can see that what looks, from a distance, like a single grey mass is actually several stones, knobbly as ham bones, stacked untidily – some of them resting one on top of another. Grass and nettles are growing around them and, in the dimples and crevices, rainwater has collected in shiny puddles.

Abigail waits for me in the shelter of the largest rock. I tuck in beside her, a little out of breath from the climb.

'They're in here,' she says, lowering her voice as though speaking too loud might cause them to flee like startled creatures, and pointing to a space formed where this rock leans against its nearest neighbour. The space between the rocks makes a long dark sliver that looks like the parting in a pair of curtains. It is quite narrow – barely wider than a hand's span at the top.

'Wait,' Abigail says, pressing her finger to her lips. She dips down and, twisting her hips and shoulders sideways like a key in a lock, she wriggles though the gap and disappears from view. I wait a moment, my heart beating fast with

anticipation, and then her face appears again between the stones, red-cheeked and smiling.

'Close your eyes,' she says. As I do so she takes hold of one of my hands and draws me towards her. I shuffle my feet gingerly, groping with my other hand, fingertips brushing the rough sugary rock. When I find the space I ease my body into it.

'Duck down,' Abigail says. 'Just one more step.'

I crouch low, feeling the rock pressing against my shoulders and back. In the distance I hear a bird's shrill call.

'Now look!' Abigail says, and I open my eyes to find myself in a cave just big enough for the two of us – scooped hollow like the belly of a whale. Squinting in the semi-darkness it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. I blink hard. Then I see them . . .

Angels, no bigger than my thumb – three of them and a fourth, fainter one, like a phantom, hovering behind – dancing on the wall of the cave. I stare in wonder at their tiny winged bodies, shimmering white.

Abigail looks at me and then back at them. Then she speaks, more loudly this time, quoting from the Psalms.

'He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways,' she says. Instinctively, I answer 'Amen'. Then, crouching low on the cool rocky floor, we watch, in reverent silence, the delicate, flickering forms.

'Let's call this the Hill of the Angels,' I whisper.