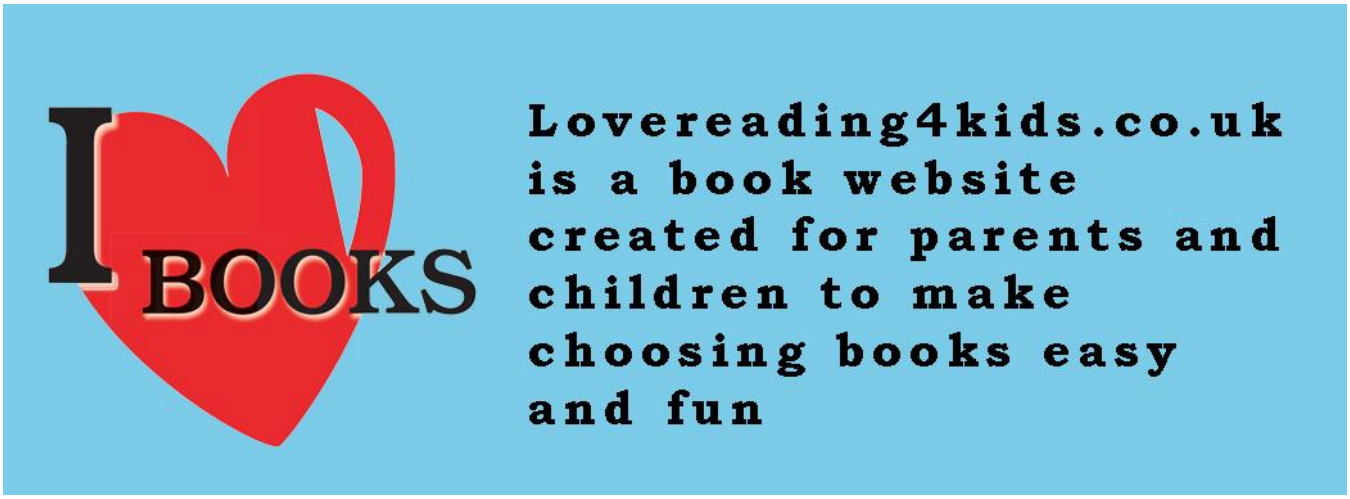


Opening extract from

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There are times that are blind to such as angels. There are towns that are blind to them, too.

If – by some chance or high design – an angel had tumbled from the blue, it would have lain, unseen, in Brownvale's dry gutters till its mighty wings parched into dust.

The times were, indeed, just such times. And Brownvale was just such a town.

Part One



Davy emptied the brooms from his bag. He laid them on the ground according to size. Made of twigs, grass and feathers, there were twelve in all. He used the largest for smoothing the earth in preparation and broadly sketching the outlines. The smaller grass and feather ones were for finer detail.

He made his angel pictures in the early dawn while people slept. He'd done a small one already that morning, in the patch behind the doctor's. He was setting up for his second in the front yard of the parsonage. It was risky. Parson Fall had a fearsome temper. But his yard was the largest, flattest space in town, with the earth raked daily by an odd-job man. It was so perfect for making pictures, it was irresistible. As was Davy's itch to make pictures in the dirt.

He didn't take this risk very often. Today he would.

The dog sat on the sidewalk outside the wire-mesh gate. He watched Davy's every move with lively interest.

'You can't come in,' Davy whispered.

The scruffy black-and-white terrier had begun to follow him the day before. Davy didn't recognize him from the pack of hardened Brownvale strays, and he wasn't confused, like a dog recently dumped. No. He had a hopeful air about him, an apparently confident expectation that someone – Davy, for instance – would soon adopt him. He gave a sharp little bark.

'Shh!' Davy cast an anxious glance at the parsonage. But the window blinds remained down.

Parson Fall's iron heart held great sway in Brownvale. His large congregation lived under his rule. Liquor and dancing were forbidden. The only hymns they sang were those that he himself composed. His black-clad figure was a familiar sight, striding Brownvale streets with zealous energy, sharp-eyed for the smallest transgression. He sat on every board and committee, from the court right down to rubbish collection, and would always turn the business to his way of thinking. If a man could be said to be a looming dark cloud, the Parson was the cloud that darkened Brownvale.

But he did have the best yard for making pictures.

And Davy lived below the Parson's radar. Davy lived below the notice of most of Brownvale. A mousy-haired, dark-eyed boy of medium height without home

or family was not memorable in any way. And Davy took particular care to move around the edges of town, so as not to draw attention to himself.

No one knew he was Brownvale's angel maker.

He made his pictures everywhere, on any flat bare patch of ground. Not benign, smiling angels though. No. Davy drew the mighty archangels. Heaven's high warriors of awe. The Archangel Michael overthrowing Lucifer, for instance. The twisting power of their bodies. The vengeful fury of Michael's sword raised high to strike. His pictures splashed like riots upon the ordered streets of the town.

Turn a corner, take a stroll, dash out for milk, you just never knew. Where there had been none the day before, there one would be. An avenging angel. Judgement. Revenge from above. How people took them depended on how uneasy their conscience was that day. They might halt dead in their tracks. They might look up in alarm at the sky above or avert their eyes and scuttle past like a nervous crab. Parson Fall had made Brownvale that kind of place. So, despite their beauty, the angels were widely disliked. It might be thought a parson would approve of fiery angels, but Parson Fall did not. His conscience was uneasy, like all the rest.

Davy didn't mean to poke at anyone's conscience. He simply copied paintings from the reference book in the library. *Renaissance Angels*, that was its title. Had there been a selection of painting books Davy would have ranged more widely, but there was just the one. As it was, he preferred the archangels to any other. Their warrior fierceness gave him heart.

He rubbed warmth into his hands. So close to Christmas, the mornings were chill. Then, with quick strokes, working quietly, he used his largest twig broom to smooth the ground.

The dog whined. Davy dashed to open the gate and pick him up. 'You have to be quiet,' he told it. The dog took that as his cue to lick Davy everywhere.

Then Davy heard it. A rumbling on the road, headed his way. White lights raked back and forth across the dawn grey sky. His heart slammed and he ducked back into the yard to hide. He crouched under the laurel bushes, clutching the dog to his chest, his hand gently clamped over its muzzle. 'Shh,' he whispered.

Davy waited and waited, holding his breath. Then a battered, filthy truck rolled slowly past. Roaming searchlights mounted on a rack on top of the cab scoured the sky and the ground. Davy cringed back from their scraping brightness, pushed himself deep into the waxy

stiffness of the laurel leaves.

Mr Kite, the gangmaster, was behind the wheel of the truck. Day or night, you never knew when he might be roaming Brownvale on the hunt. Vagrants and homeless down-and-outs were his quarry. Young or old, it didn't matter. So long as they could work, Mr Kite would snatch them and sell them on. The Town Council, well pleased to be rid of these vexing problems, slept easier in their beds thanks to Mr Kite.

He steered with one hand, oh so casual. His jaws churned a plug of tobacco as his head turned from side to side, following the track of the searchlights. A bloodhound drooled next to him on the seat. Behind them was a rack of tranquillizer guns. In the cage on the truck bed several figures crouched, clinging to the bars. They'd been too slow or unwise or just plain unlucky. A cold shiver ran over Davy's skin.

He held his breath till the rumble of the engine disappeared and the lights faded once more into dark, then he crawled out from the bushes with the dog. Dodging Mr Kite was a regular challenge.

Davy returned to his picture. He'd planned which one he would sweep at the parsonage today. No archangels. No, he would sweep something gentler. Something more suited to Christmas. Tolmeo's *Angels*

Among the Magi, from page 52 of *Renaissance Angels*. But he wanted to try another painting first.

He'd seen it only once, the day before.



The cold wind billowed Davy's jacket as he leaped up the stone library steps. Slapping through the door, he found it quiet as usual. Apart from the library bums, that is. The little gaggle of Brownvale down-and-outs were there, as always, keeping warm.

Howard had set up camp by the revolving stand of paperback romances. Feet up on his duffel bag, reading glasses perched on his nose, he was so engrossed in the pages of *Forever Amber* that Davy had to say his name twice before he looked up. Howard peered over his glasses. 'Ah,' he said vaguely.

Davy kept his voice low. 'Mr Kite was in town this morning. Mr Kite, Howard. With his truck. If you see him, you run and hide. Run and hide, sailor. And that's an order.'

Howard saluted – 'Aye aye, Captain' – and returned to his book.

Davy sighed. There was little chance that Howard

would remember. Though Davy lived his life on Brownvale's sidelines, he did have his own small circle of society. Mainly Mr Timm and the library bums, and Miss Shasta Reed, who ran the Bellevue picture house on Main Street. Plus a few elderly folk he odd-jobbed for.

Mr Timm was busy packing history books into cardboard boxes. Davy slipped around the counter into the librarian's private room to wash his hands in the cracked china basin. Mr Timm's little room always felt too personal. The fraying collar and cuffs of his overcoat on the hook. The onion sandwich in wax paper on his desk. After drying his hands on the thin roller towel, Davy headed back into the main room, plucked *Renaissance Angels* from the 'Reference Only' shelf and took it to the study table.

There was a free chair next to Jewel. The oldest of the library bums, Jewel had a chin full of hairs and a shaking complaint that gently wobbled her head all the time. Her lips moved as she read a children's picture book. Her crabby finger kept her on track. 'I like to read,' she told Davy as he sat down.

'Me too,' he replied. He began to turn the heavy pages. Francesco Maffei. Brueghel the Elder. Raphael. The name of the painting, the artist's name and some

dates. He'd learned from Mr Timm that those things were called the 'attribution'. There was a full-page colour picture for each painting. Davy lingered so his eyes could drink them in, memorizing each little detail. He stopped, frowning. He'd never seen this one before. Three times a week for the past four years, that's how often he'd studied *Renaissance Angels*. But, until that moment, he'd not noticed this painting.

It was a night scene in a forest. A man stood watchful guard on a body. He wore no armour, not like the archangels did. He had neither wings nor a halo. But he was a warrior, formidable, like them. Tough and battle-hardened, his hands gripped the pommel of his sword. By his side was a magnificent hound, the size of a small pony, with a rough coat and a noble head. The pale body they guarded was maybe that of a friend or a comrade, laid out in death on a great stone slab.

The colours were dark and sombre. The dog and the man stared out of the picture, eyes straight ahead. There was something odd about them. What was it? Davy peered more closely. Whichever way he shifted, their eyes seemed to follow him. There was a challenge in their steady gaze. A direct challenge. As if they knew him and expected something from him. It was unsettling. It was unlike any other painting in the book. Davy looked for

the attribution, but there was none. No title, no artist, no dates, not a word. Just the painting, speaking for itself.

He took it to the counter. Mr Timm was checking off a printed list. Davy spoke to his bald patch. 'Something's happened to the book,' he said. 'It's not the same.'

Mr Timm inscribed a tidy tick. And then another.

'There's a page I never saw before, it wasn't there till now. Another painting. Everything else is where it was, but –' Davy held out the book – 'it's different, Mr Timm. Is it a new one?'

'New!' That got his attention. Mr Timm looked up. 'When did I last have money for new books? Money for anything, for that matter? Cast-offs, donations, paint peeling off the walls . . .' He flicked a despairing hand at the stacks.

Only then did Davy see that the shelves were noticeably thin of books. It seemed that, faced with Christmas closing, Brownvale readers had been borrowing the maximum eight allowed.

'It's just that it's changed,' Davy said. 'I mean the book, *Renaissance Angels*. Mr Timm? Are you OK?'

The librarian had taken off his spectacles to pinch the bridge of his nose. He smiled wearily as he said, 'I'm just tired, son. Come back tomorrow, tell me then.'