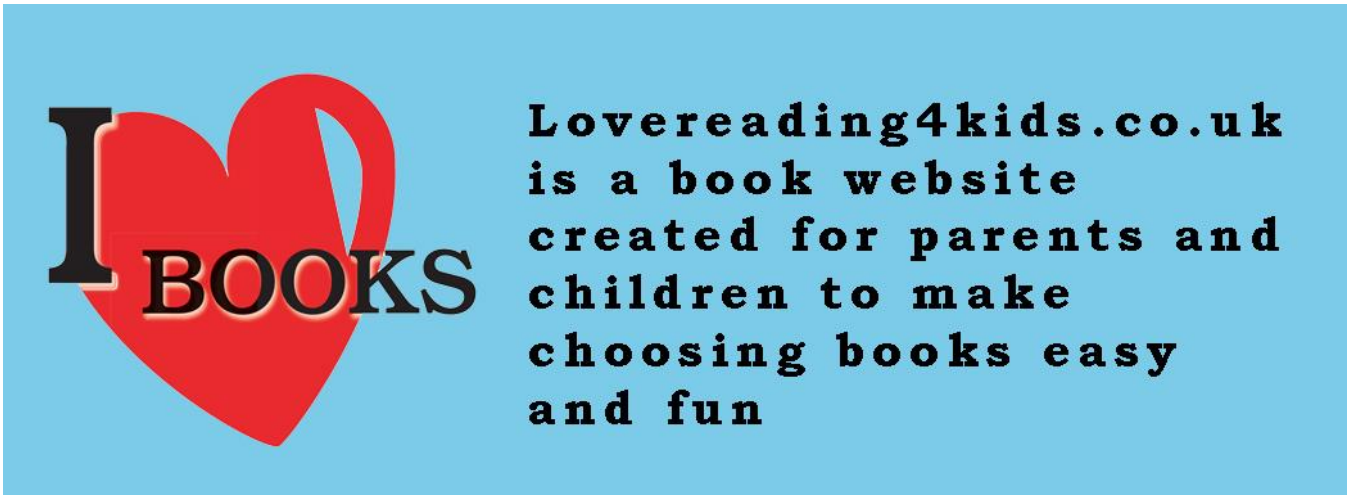


Opening extract from

Murder in Midwinter

Written by

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For Ruby

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Chapter 1

The bus stops for the millionth time and I look down at my phone for the millionth time.

A little envelope appears in the corner of the screen. I click on it.

It's my sister, Zahra.

What you gonna wear to the party?

Staring out of the window at the thousands of people stumbling along the pavement I imagine my wardrobe, mentally discarding clothes that I can't possibly wear to the end-of-term party: too cheap, too old, too "princessy".

My green dress? Just right. Not sure about shoes

though…

Dunno. You? I text back.

Dunno, she replies. The bus creeps forward. There's a long pause from Zahra.

My phone buzzes again.

Can I borrow your black jacket ☺ ☺ ☺ ?

We judder to a halt. There are even more shoppers now, in layers. The ones nearest the bus fall on and off the kerb, jamming along faster than those in the middle who struggle past each other, pulling their shopping close, their faces grey under the street lights.

☺ *In x change for purple platforms* ☺ I type.

I press send and a huge woman comes and lands her enormous bottom on the seat next to me. She's got a ton of shopping and she's too hot and I can see a bead of sweat trickling down her skin just in front of her ear. She's damp. Hot and damp.

She glances at me, and then looks away. Then looks back again.

"Unusual that," she says.

"What?"

"Mallen streak, it's called, isn't it?" She puts her hand up to her hair. "The white bit."

I nod. I know it's unusual, but I like it. It makes

us special, me and Zahra and Dad. Black hair, white streak. Hereditary. Like skunks, or Cruella de Vil.

The bus makes a dash over a set of lights and I find myself staring at a new set of shoppers. We head towards one of the huge Christmas window displays and I get my phone on to the camera setting so that I can take a picture for Zahra. It's difficult to get a decent shot, there are so many people in the way, but I hold it up ready to click. We judder to a halt and I start taking photos even though the windows are slightly further ahead.

Click

Flash

Click

Flash

Click

Click

What was that?

Click

Looking through the viewfinder, I see a man. He's in a gap in the crowd. He's tall, with curly hair. Ginger hair, I think. Everyone else seems to be rushing past him but I notice him because he's standing still. There's a woman there, she's still too. They're arguing. He disappears as the crowd swirls

around him. A couple with shopping bags swing across the view, some kids, a large family, but my eye goes back to the man the moment he reappears.

Click

Click

He's holding something.

Click

Is that a gun? He's drawn a gun on her?

I keep taking the photos, and the flash goes off half the time and then the man looks at me and so does she. I take another photo and he runs and the bus pulls away, stop-starting through the crowds all the way down to Piccadilly Circus.

I stare back up the pavement but I can't even see the lights of the department store now. The woman next to me gets off, and a bloke reading a book gets on. It's all really normal, but what have I just seen?

Was that a gun or not?

I flick through the photos.

There are quite a few where the flash just reflects on the window, one really good one of the window display, and then three blurry pics of the man and the woman. Two from the side, one straight on, looking right at me. I zoom in on his hand.

Definitely a gun. Or definitely the barrel of a gun.

A man holding a gun? In Regent Street, ten days before Christmas.

The time on the photo is 17.14. It's only 17.26.

I swallow, feel sick, excited then terrified. I doubt myself.

But he *did* have a gun. I've seen enough movies to know that's what he was holding.

The bus swings down towards Trafalgar Square. People pile on and off and I look at the pictures again. I text Zahra.

I've just seen something really weird – scary.

What?

A man with a gun on the street.

I look around on the bus to see if there's a policeman. Or should I jump off and look for one on the street?

Whaaat? Are you OK?

Yes – I'm OK. I type, but my hand shakes and the phone shakes with it.

Come home, says Zahra.

Waterloo Bridge whizzes by and I jump off at my stop and wait, shivering, for the next bus to take me home.



Chapter 2

The huge windows of our shop illuminate the pavement and light up the underside of the railway bridge that crosses the road. This time of year, it's all made brighter by a host of random flashing Christmas lights that Dad's wrapped around everything possible. The really posh bath in the window manages to look utterly bargain basement, festooned with tiny glowing Santas, and he's jammed the matching £600 toilet with miniature reindeer lamps. It's all going on and off all over the place, but it makes the shop look warm and welcoming, even more warm and welcoming than

it does normally.

I rush in, desperate to talk to Zahra. She'll be upstairs, but I have to pick my way through the shop to get there.

Azil's in the showroom, discussing copper piping with a man in overalls, and Mum's trying to persuade a woman that the cream bathroom suite that's been in the middle of the shop for two years would look brilliant in her new loft conversion. It's so normal in here it feels unreal.

Granddad comes through from the kitchenette. I could tell him?

"Granddad," I say.

He's behind the till now. He holds up a finger and points to the phone.

"Just a sec, Maya darlin'," he says. "Yes, Michael, seventy quid each – but I can do them at sixty-five if you take all three? What about it?" He pauses, his finger still held up to keep me silent. "Yes, so Tuesday? Cutting it fine but they should be here by then … well sixty each OK, but you're breaking my heart, Michael, you know that…"

Granddad listens, his head nodding, as he scribbles something on the corner of an envelope before tapping an order into the computer.

I can see he's going to be more than a minute so I squeeze past a pregnant woman, who's admiring a mirror that plays three radio stations, and push through a stack of cardboard into the kitchenette.

The twins are sitting on the floor peeling coloured wrappers from a giant tin of Quality Street.

"My," cries Ishan.

"My," echoes Precious.

Precious offers me a naked toffee, spreading the yellow wrapper over her eye and staring at me through it.

"Thank you, Precious," I say. "But d'you know, I think I'll pass this time."

"Maya!"

I look up towards the door that leads up to our flat. It's Zahra. She looks exactly like I did two years ago. Same black hair, same streak of white front to back.

"What happened?" She takes the toffee off Precious and jams it in her mouth.

"I just saw him."

"Was he threatening anyone?"

"Well yes, this woman … I've got a picture here, somewhere." I pull out my phone and click through

the images. "Look."

Zahra peers over my shoulder. "What am I looking at?"

"There," I say, expanding the image to show the glint between the two black coats.

We stare at each other. Her black eyes looking back at mine. Reading each other's thoughts.

"Tell Mum," she says in the end.

I stick my head back past the cardboard into the shop. Mum's on her own with a box of toilet joints. "Twelve, thirteen, fourteen," she counts, dropping them into a wire basket.

"Mum," I say. "Can you talk?"

"Course, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen." She folds over the top of the box. "What is it?"

I look around at the aimless customers lifting up toilet seats and turning display taps. "Can I tell you upstairs?"

Mum's face goes from unconcerned to concerned in a millisecond. "What is it? What's happened?" She bustles behind me, shoving me past the cardboard, around the twins and up the stairs until we burst into our flat. "Tell me," she says, flumping into an armchair and giving me all of her attention. "What's happened?"

"I want to ring the police," I say.

"What? Why?"

I show Mum the picture. It takes ages to load. It's a rubbish reject phone of Dad's, but it's still a smartphone.

Her mouth drops open. "Is that what I think it is?" she says, reaching for Granddad's extra-strong specs. "Blimey," she says looking up at me. "What happened next?"

"The bus went on, and I left them behind."

Mum puts my phone on the table and stares out of the window into the flats behind.

The twins scrabble up the stairs and thump off to their room.

"Well," says Mum, "you'd better use the landline."

* * *

"Hello? Police please." I've never rung the emergency services before, and it makes my heart go poundy. "I want to report something I saw earlier."

The woman on the other end is in a call centre full of noise that I can hear in the background. Someone near her says: "The ambulance is nearly with you." And I wonder whether I've rung the right number.

"Are you in danger?" asks my operator.

"No, I'm at home, safe."

"Can you give me your address?"

I give her my address, tell her I'm fine, but try to explain what I saw. "He had a gun."

"How old are you?"

"Thirteen – why?"

"Can you get an adult to make this call?"

"No – because I was the one that saw it."

There's a pause.

"What time was this?" asks the operator. I check my phone. "About quarter past five."

"Thank you caller, I'm transferring you."

So I run through the whole thing again. And I'm transferred again. And I stop feeling panicky and begin to feel somehow stupid and actually cross. By the third transfer I'm sitting cross-legged on the floor, pinging the elastic on my tights but I don't put the phone down because that would be giving up.

"Yes," I say when I finally get through to someone who listens. "I saw a man with a gun in Regent Street."

"And you recorded this?"

"Yes, sort of, on my phone."

"What time?"

I don't need to check again. "Quarter past five," I say.

"We'll send someone just as soon as we can," they say, and I put down the phone hoping very much that I've been taken seriously.