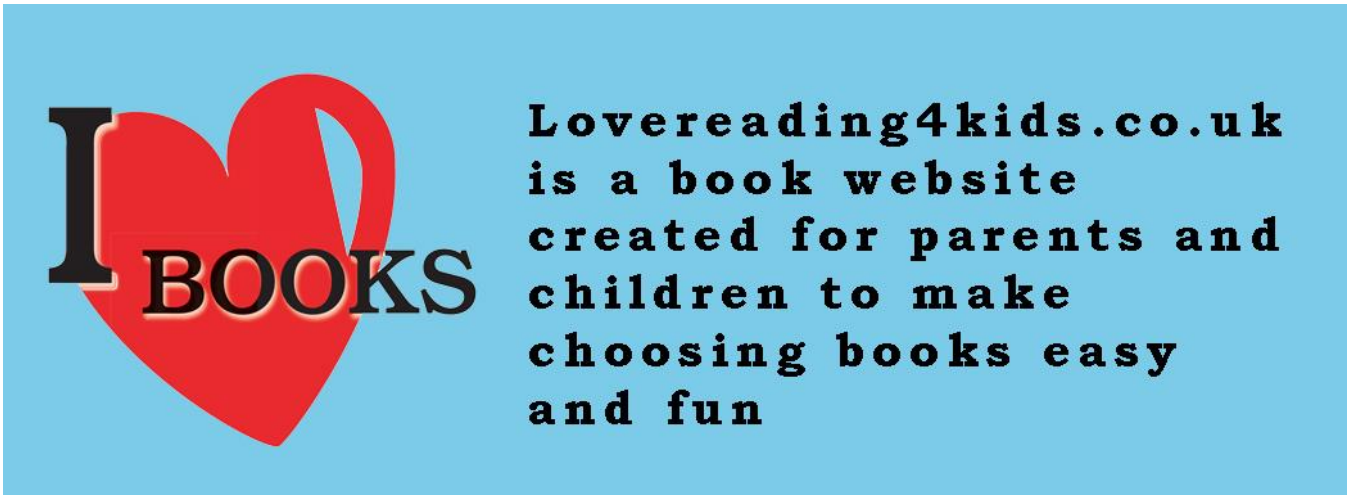


Opening extract from

Mind the Gap

Written by

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It's hard to sound tough when someone's hand is round your throat.

I did try, but I ended up sounding more like a choirboy than the gangster I was aiming for.

Mikey didn't bother with the tough guy act, but he didn't look scared either. He wore the same lifeless expression that he'd pinned onto his face three months ago, never letting it slip since. Not once. Not even for me.

How we'd got to this point I had no idea. Actually that's not true. I knew the *how*, what I was clueless about was the *why*.

There were some things you didn't do on our

estate. Steal off your own, get off with your mates' sisters (regardless of how tidy they were), and you certainly didn't get up in Trev Walker's grill.

Now I didn't have anything worth nicking, not since my grandad's old watch broke, and I doubted Mikey wanted to try it on with my brother – not with the spots that riddled Leo's skin like a furious dot-to-dot puzzle. But for some reason, today was the day that my best mate decided it was a good idea to hack off the biggest psycho this side of town.

Everyone knew who Trev was.

Everyone had at least one story they could tell about him. How he stole their car, robbed their house, or got their cousin pregnant. I wouldn't mind, but Trev was only fifteen like me and Mikey.

OK, some of the stories were the stuff of legend, passed from mouth to mouth to mouth until they were as bent as a nose that Trev had punched. But

we all knew enough about Trev to realise that you still didn't mess. Hell, you didn't even make eye contact unless he made it first. And if he did make eye contact? Well, it generally meant trouble. Or pain. Or both.

So it was a mystery to me why Mikey had chosen to shoulder bump Trev. And not the sort of mystery that Scooby Doo or Sherlock Holmes would dare to tackle. Not if they liked their faces arranged as they were.

"Interesting decision," Trev whispered to Mikey. His face was a perfect pit bull snarl. "I'd have thought this path was wide enough for us all. But if it's not, then you should cross the road before trying to get past me."

Trev didn't speak like your traditional meat-head. He'd watched so many of his dad's gangster movies that he tried to talk like one of the mob.

Maybe he thought that if he was calm and polite at first, then it was OK to go on and stove your face in.

Either way, Trev hadn't liked what Mikey had done. Now Mikey had to pay.

But Mikey didn't care about the growling menace. His mask didn't move, not a single muscle in his body trembled or shook. And he certainly didn't apologise. Not even when Trev invited him to.

"There's nothing to apologise for," Mikey answered. "It was hardly a hit and run, was it? No one died. There's not a skid mark on you. Or me."

My head was on the verge of explosion. What was Mikey *doing*?

All right, he might have a quick tongue, but his fists were nowhere near as fast. Mikey had the intellect of a Porsche and the fighting skills of a Nissan Micra, and he knew it.

The hand around my throat squeezed harder. I

let out a noise I had no control over. I could smell last night's tea on the breath of the gorilla as his fist twitched again and again, like an angry dog on a lead.

"So let's try this one more time," Trev breathed. "You apologise and we move on. Simple, no?"

"No," Mikey answered, and there wasn't a smidge of emotion anywhere on his face. "No apology, and no, it's not simple either. Nothing is, where you're involved."

That was it. There was no further warning or threat, just the blur of a fist as it cannoned into Mikey's cheek. A fist that had him folding faster than the world's worst poker player.

Trev followed up with two swift kicks to the ribs and a gob of green spit, delivered with speed and power onto Mikey's head.

I wasn't daft. I knew what was coming next, but

I still flinched way too late, long after a well-aimed left hook had put me on the floor. The stamps that followed only landed on my arms, but they still branded me with a boot-shaped tattoo. I managed to close my eyes before the lungful of radioactive greb made contact with my cheek.

I lay there, balled up on the pavement. I couldn't quite believe what my best mate had gifted me. But, as Trev's crew disappeared up the street and I dared to open my eyes, all I could see was Mikey, laid up a few metres away, body shaking.

I ignored the fireworks under my cheekbones as I dragged myself over to him. I pulled my phone out and punched 999 in case the shaking was a fit or something. I'd seen it happen to a cat last year when it was knocked down by a van.

But as I fell above Mikey and rolled him over, I let the phone fall to the ground. He wasn't fitting.

He was laughing. Like he'd lost it. His whole body was shuddering with it.

I didn't know whether to join in with relief or call for the men in white coats to come and take him away.

Given what he'd been through these last three months I decided to do my duty as his friend, and I asked him if he was OK.

"OK?" he said, and he looked me in the eyes. Blood was smeared the width of his face. "What do you think?"

"You look in pain."

His body shook with another fit of laughter. His eyes and mouth were wide open, crazed, smiling, all at odds with the blood.

"Pain?" he said. "Doesn't even cover it, mate. I feel … everything."

"Everything?" I repeated. "What do you mean, everything?"

"Exactly that," he said. "I feel everything. And you know what? It feels amazing." Cue more laughter. "And better too, so much better, so much *more* than ... nothing."

As that final word fell out of Mikey's mouth and echoed down the street, it was like someone had pulled the plug on his face.

All power was lost.

The smile, the wide eyes, all gone in an instant.

Everything except the blood, that still poured off him like red sweat.

Mikey lifted a slow hand to his chin and saw the blood for the first time. But there was no reaction, no regret at what he'd done to himself, or even at what he'd done to me.

Instead, there was the return of the death mask, and after he had pinned that back in place, I was powerless to remove it.

"Come on, our kid," I said, and I pulled him to his feet. "Let's get you home, before your face falls off."