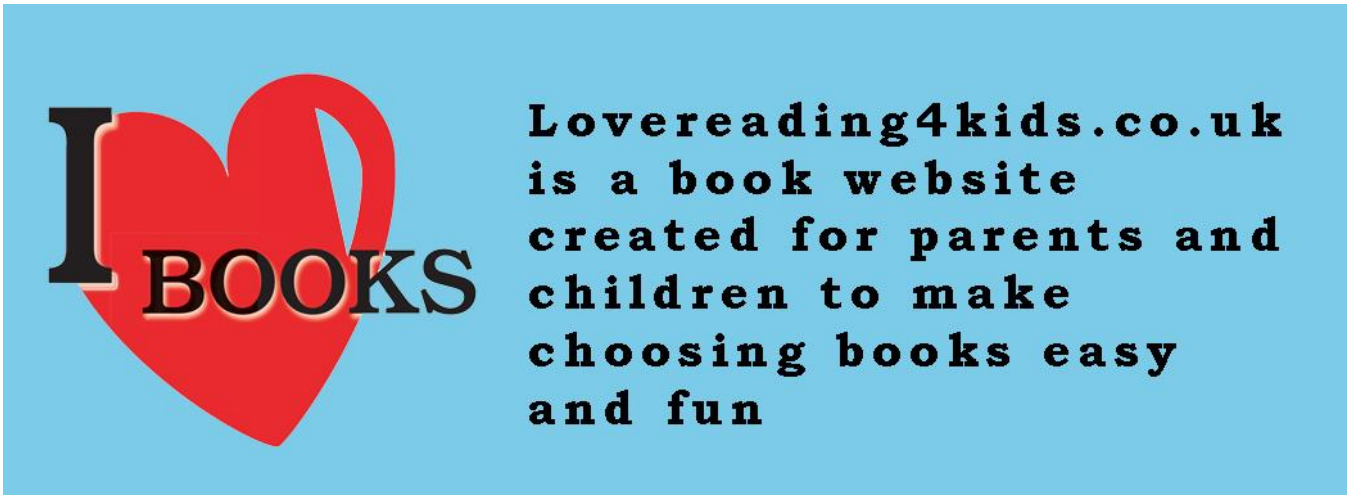


Opening extract from

Sky Thieves

Written by

Dan Walker

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For Dominika

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1

The first thing to appear in the office ceiling was a foot.

This emerged from between the roof struts, and was followed by a leg and then the body of a young girl. All three swivelled and kicked as if dancing. After a second, the movement ceased. The foot, the leg, and the backside hung in the air, then Zoya DeLarose descended to the floor. She landed in a crouch, her eyes glinting in the darkness.

Clear, she thought.

Zoya crossed the floor and flicked a switch, bathing the room in orange light. No sooner had her eyes adjusted than she jumped at her squinting reflection in the mirror. Her blonde, bobbed hair was a shock of spikes and cobwebs, and her face scratched. Her clothes were ripped and torn.

'Damn,' she muttered, pulling at a loose thread. 'I like this top.'

She was standing in the office of her orphanage owner and headmaster, Mr Whycherley. The room had changed little

since Zoya's last visit. Mr Whycherley was a plain man and his office reflected this, with the usual cabinets, calendar, coat-stand, kettle, mugs, and waste-paper bin. His only quirk was an obsession with sky thieves and their airships, a fascination Zoya shared. Despite repeated warnings for the children to stay away from the pirates ('ruffians and scoundrels, never done a day's work in their life!'), their rogue nature had done little to deter Mr Whycherley from amassing the world's biggest collection of sky thief memorabilia, including paintings, keyrings, and airship models. Even the office's bookcase contained a section dedicated to thieves. Zoya spotted one of these books now—*Sky Thieves: Stealing the Sky*—and made a mental note to ask Mr Whycherley if she could borrow it the next time they had one of their 'chats'.

Only one other object in the room stood out: Mr Whycherley's ornate wooden desk. Zoya knew her locket was inside. Mr Whycherley had confiscated the pendant three days before as punishment for organizing a competition to see which of her friends could eat the most eggs without throwing up. The answer had been none, of course, and Mr Whycherley had demanded her locket for a week. To Zoya, this was torture. Every hour that passed without her locket gnawed at her insides, until she could barely breathe. The locket was her everything, her good-luck charm, the only thing she truly owned in the entire orphanage. It had only been a matter of time before she made a rescue attempt.

Zoya reached into her back pocket and pulled out a hairpin. She'd learned many tricks growing up in an orphanage, but none more useful than lock-picking. She reshaped the pin until it resembled a paperclip, then slid it into the lock on the desk's top drawer. Tilting her head to help her concentrate, she started to manoeuvre the pin left and right, jiggling it in the lock, before she heard a click.

Zoya opened the drawer. Inside, her locket glowed in the lantern light. She placed her hand on the pendant, breathed a sigh of relief and glanced at the open ceiling.

'Right, better get out of here.'

'Too late, I'm afraid,' said a voice from behind her.

Zoya wheeled around, but she already knew who it was. Only one person in the orphanage had a voice that deep. 'Hello, Mr Whycherley.'



2

'Zoya DeLarose, I might have guessed,' said Mr Whycherley.

'I wasn't expecting you for another five minutes,' said Zoya.

'Ah, apologies,' said Mr Whycherley. 'I've never been good with time. Now, would you mind telling me what you're doing in my office and why there's a roof tile on my desk?'

Zoya took a moment to think.

'For me to believe it,' continued Mr Whycherley, 'it's going to have to be an incredibly good excuse, Zoya, even for you.'

Zoya thought of every excuse she could: that she'd seen a fire, that she'd heard a burglar, that she'd had a nightmare. None rang true. Mr Whycherley was more likely to believe she'd sleepwalked there than any nonsense about fires and burglars.

'Sir,' said Zoya, 'I can't think of anything that wouldn't get me into more trouble.'

'Wise,' said Mr Whycherley. 'How about you tell the truth then? That would make a change.'

Mr Whycherley stared at Zoya as she twisted her foot into the carpet, and realized he'd never get the truth. He removed his jacket and slung it over the coat hook. He was a tall man with an unkempt forest of chestnut hair, giving him the perpetual look of someone who'd just escaped a hurricane. His shirt was always creased, stained, and two sizes too big. Overall, he resembled more a disorganized pirate than an orphanage owner.

In spite of this, Mr Whycherley was a force to be reckoned with. He'd inspired generations of down-on-their-luck orphans to make something of themselves, a fact that had earned him a special place in Zoya's heart. Indeed, he was the only person she'd ever truly respected.

Mr Whycherley knew this and used it to his advantage whenever necessary. Now was such a time. He sat behind his desk with his feet up on the table and stared at the floor for a long time without speaking. He let the silence fill the room. Eventually, Zoya looked away. When she did, Mr Whycherley spoke. 'How long have you been at my orphanage, Zoya?'

'Twelve years, sir.'

'And how many times have you been in my office during that time?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'No? Well, luckily I keep a record.' Mr Whycherley opened the top drawer of his desk and took out a red book.

He placed this on the desk, opened it near the centre, traced a line down its page until he found Zoya's name, then snapped it shut. 'Eighty-eight,' he said, 'eighty-nine if you count this one. That's eighty-nine times I've had to address your behaviour. I'm starting to think my words are going in one ear and out the other without staying the night.'

Mr Whycherley arched his eyebrows in anticipation of a response, but none came. 'Do you want to know something?' he asked.

'Sir?'

'I've been doing this job a long time. I've seen hundreds of kids come through my doors—some crazy, some nasty, some plain dumb. I've even had bright kids, although those are rare. I'll tell you something, Zoya: you are, without a doubt, the brightest kid I've ever had under my care.'

Zoya smiled.

'That's not a compliment,' said Mr Whycherley. 'See, it's easy to be smart. It's something you're born with. What's difficult is deciding what to do with your brains. I don't think you're doing anything with yours.

'Now, I've told you everything you need to know to stop yourself winding up here,' he continued. 'I've told you to get your head down, read some books, get some grades. You want to fly, don't you?'

Zoya winced. Mr Whycherley was right. She'd long dreamed of escaping the orphanage and vanishing into the

sky. Whether this was as one of the post office's freighter pilots, as a soldier in the Aviation Army, or even as a crew member on one of the notorious sky thief airships, Zoya couldn't care less. All that mattered was getting into the clouds.

'Well, you could. You could be a pilot, a lawyer, or a doctor, anything. But it's up to you, Zoya. I can't do it for you.'

Mr Whycherley paused to draw breath. Zoya watched the cogs of his brain turn. After a moment, he leaned down and reached into the drawer Zoya had unlocked earlier. From inside, he brought Zoya's locket – an oval, inky pendant swinging on its chain. Zoya reached out to grab the locket, but Mr Whycherley lifted it out of her reach. 'I presume this is what you were after?'

Zoya glanced at the locket, then at Mr Whycherley. She nodded.

Mr Whycherley shook his head, then tossed the locket to Zoya. 'Confiscating that did no good, did it?'

Zoya clasped the locket around her neck. For the first time in days, the gnawing in her stomach disappeared.

'Part of me doesn't think it's worth punishing you,' said Mr Whycherley. 'It won't stop you next time. But that wouldn't be fair on the others.' He ground his teeth, then scanned a calendar above the bookcase. 'Ah, that'll do.' He turned back to Zoya with a mischievous grin. 'There's a trip to the aviation museum in the morning.'

Zoya's heart leapt. A trip to see the world's greatest collection of sky ships!

'Mr Maxim's taking the younger kids. You're going to go with them. My treat.' Mr Whycherley winked.

Zoya's heart sank at the mention of the toddlers. 'But . . .'

The man fixed Zoya with a stare. 'You're going,' he continued, 'and depending on reports of your behaviour, we'll decide whether there needs to be any further punishment. Understand?'

Zoya opened her mouth to speak, then closed it and nodded. Mr Whycherley swung his feet off his desk, stood up and opened his office door. 'Now get out of here before I change my mind.'