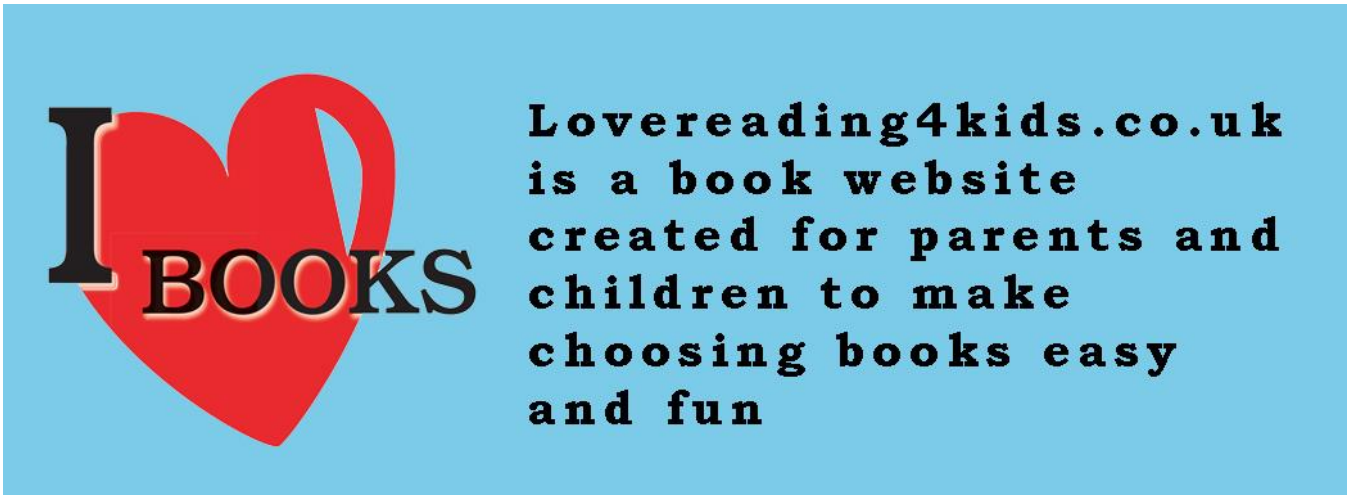


Opening extract from

The Gold Thief

Written by

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PROLOGUE

United States Bullion Depository, Fort Knox, Kentucky
3.32am

Heavy boots pound the tarmac, as officers bark their orders and sniffer dogs whine, blinded by the rows of steaming halogen floodlights. More and more arrive by the second. A never-ending procession of armoured cars and trucks loaded with soldiers. Above them, a dozen gunships, with their ground-shaking propellers, scan for signs. But there is nothing, only the appalling certainty that this is not a drill.

Beyond their fences and walls and barricades, a president is being woken, and powerful men in charge of a nation's currency, its digits and its dollar bills are meeting and shouting and blaming.

Far below the chaos and the panic of the search, Shwartz and Greer sit in a bare grey cement room. It

has no windows and no discernible features of any kind, except for the small surveillance camera in the far corner and its pulsating amber light.

Private Marvin L. Shwartz, slumped in one of the room's two plastic bucket-chairs, is in considerable trouble and the man he reports to, Staff Sergeant Greer, on the other side of the bare metal table, is losing his patience.

"No, sir, I don't remember. I have no idea how the vault was opened. I was walkin' and then I wasn't and the next thang I knew I was here, sir, with you, sir."

"Shwartz, you are in an inordinate amount of doo-doo and there ain't a damn thing I can do to help you, till you start explaining how half of this nation's gold reserve just up and vanishes in less than an hour!"

The Bullion Depository at Fort Knox was protected not only by the United States Mint Police, but also by the 16th Cavalry Regiment, the 19th Engineer Battalion and the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Infantry, along with their tanks, attack helicopters and artillery. A force totalling well over thirty thousand men. The actual gold, all four and a half thousand metric tonnes, lay behind a one-of-a-kind, twenty-one-inch thick door, proofed against drills, lasers and explosions, designed by

the Mosler Safe Company. It was monitored by twenty-four-hour orbital satellite and ground-sweeping radar. Automated machine guns covered every possible entry point, and it was rumoured that the entire surrounding grasslands were carpeted with land mines, a rumour Greer had been careful to encourage.

It was, to all intents and purposes, completely impregnable. That was, of course, until today – and on Private Shwartz's watch.

Greer's earpiece crackled.

He listened for a moment.

"They're here! Already? Are you serious?"

It was at this point that Private Shwartz started to perspire.

"Son, I've known you a long time and I think I know the answer but I gotta ask anyway: do you love your country?"

"Sir, yessir!" puffed Shwartz, as eagerly as he knew how and all the more heartbreakingly because of it.

Staff Sergeant Greer was quite certain that if the Private had had a tail, he would have wagged it.

"I believe you do, son. The men you are about to meet…" His eyes dropped. "Just tell 'em the truth, Shwartz, like you told me."

The door behind Greer slid open quietly and two men dressed in light grey suits entered the room. One had dark red-blond hair and introduced himself as Mr Fox. His greying accomplice, a Mr Badger, was built like a house and stood by the door without uttering a word. Handcuffed to his wrist was a small metallic briefcase.

The Staff Sergeant was excused, leaving Shwartz alone with the two men in grey.

The first thing Shwartz noticed was that Mr Fox did not sound remotely American. He was a young man, with kind eyes and a soft, vaguely British accent.

"Marvin, I represent the BBB. I hope you don't mind me using your first name, Marvin, I find it helps enormously in these situations."

"No, sir." Shwartz paused. "Sir – the BBB, I'm sorry, is that a part of Homeland Security? Am I going to prison?"

"No. And… maybe. 'Bagshot Bingley and Burke', colloquially known as the BBB, are not connected to the US or any other government body. We are insurance underwriters, and the United States gold reserve is one of our contracts. As I'm sure you can appreciate, a claim of this magnitude presents logistical problems, even for an outfit with as much reach as ours. When something

of this value goes missing, it is my job to get it back – and rest assured, Marvin, I *will* get it back."

Fox raised his hand casually and Badger produced a document from the briefcase, which was when Shwartz noticed something else about Mr Fox. It wasn't arrogance, or even a particular aura of confidence. Fox was, in fact, a rather unassuming sort of a man, but he had *something*, an air of… certainty. Slow, measured certainty. When he raised his hand, he knew Badger would have the items he needed, and when he slid them across the table towards Shwartz and handed him a pen, he knew that Shwartz would sign them for him. He was simply *certain*.

"Sir, what did I just sign, sir?"

"There's no need to call me 'sir', Marvin. Fox will do. The paper is a non-disclosure agreement. In the interest of the world's financial security and 'what-not', if you ever speak of this to anyone, you and your entire family will be placed under lock and key, for the rest of your lives. I know it sounds heavy-handed, Marvin. According to our files, Debbie is not the kind of mother-in-law anyone would want to be locked up with. But please try to understand: when all of America's gold vanishes in less than seventy-two hours, the implications

for the world's markets... their very viability is placed in jeopardy."

"*All* the gold, sir?" said an increasingly sweaty and ashen-faced Shwartz. "But we only had half here, the rest is..."

"I'm afraid the other half was taken earlier this week. Now please, Marvin, if you wouldn't mind, let's start with the issue of 'access'. Not one of the guards within these walls can tell me anything, only that they 'fell asleep' for no apparent reason. You were the last guard, Marvin, between the intruder and the vault. Is there anything you can tell me?"

"No, sir, I mean Mr Fox. Like I told Staff Sergeant Greer, one minute I'm walkin' my route, and I hear these footsteps. Well the next thang I know, I'm on my back, and the vault doors are wide open."

"Marvin, there are over a dozen retinal eye-scanners between the entrance to this facility and the vault doors. Over twelve hundred security cameras, and countless laser tripwires. If your statement is true, then the intruder, or intruders, managed to waltz through the entire compound undetected. Which is almost as unlikely as the removal of thousands of tons of gold… in less than an hour. Do you have any idea who could have done that?"

"No, no, I don't, Mr Fox."

"Neither do we."

Badger opened his briefcase and pulled out a small glass vial.

"Marvin," said Mr Fox, indicating the vial. "We found this substance, rather a lot of it, by one of the vault walls. It looks like liquid mercury, but I've been told that it isn't. Do you know what it is, Marvin?"

"No, Mr Fox, I do not."

"Is there anything you *do* know, Marvin?"

"There is… one thang, kinda weird. Just after I heard the footsteps, there was this music playin', only it wasn't playin' no notes. And then I just wound up real peaceful, or asleep, or both, till I was found by Staff Sergeant Greer."

Fox leant in a little closer and smiled.

"Music with no notes. That sounds… familiar."

Before he had even raised his hand, Badger produced a phone from his briefcase – only it wasn't a model that Private Shwartz had ever seen. Fox put it to his ear.

"Owl? Yes, it's Fox. I'm afraid there's been a development. It's happened again. No, I don't think it would be wise to inform Bear at this stage, he may… overreact. Yes, I think that would be prudent."

Fox handed the phone back to Badger and started to hum a tune of sorts. What made Shwartz nervous was the unsettling look of sympathy on his face.

"Marvin, you're going to have to come with me. Your family are already en route. Don't worry. We'll protect you."

Badger looked over to the camera in the corner of the room and a moment later the door slid open. To Private Marvin L. Shwartz's amazement, the long subterranean corridor running beneath Fort Knox was lined with well over a hundred insurance men. Each of them was wearing a light grey suit.

CHAPTER 1

Christmas

It was dark up on the rooftops, dark and cold. He could see his breath in the December air but little else. The streetlights below were unable to reach his perch, high up on the chimney stack. Bitter as it was, at least the cold was keeping his wits sharp.

Ned had to think quickly; what time he had was running out. Which would be the safer route? To continue along the rooftops, or to risk the gardens below with their noisy dogs and fences? His assailant was experienced, extremely so, but uncomfortable off the ground.

"Concealment," he whispered bitterly, repeating the first of his training's many golden rules.

He'd stick to the rooftops for now. Ned needed every advantage against the man following him if he was going

to make it. He'd learnt to make little noise on the lead-lined tiles beneath him, and now he scampered quietly to the edge. He closed his eyes and the ring on his finger hummed. A beat later and the tiles from number 37 started to move. A year ago it would have taken all of his concentration. But Ned was more powerful now, the Amplifications his dad had taught him came as easily as breathing, and "Seeing" had been the very first form of Engineering that he'd learnt to master.

He focused on the squares of slate in front of him. Atom by atom they bent to his will, as though the roof itself had come alive. Light, strong aluminium started to form up from the grey stone in layers of interlocking pieces, each one forming over the other in precise ordered segments. To anyone else watching it would have been a moving marvel, but to Ned it was the beginnings of a walkway between two roofs.

Something stirred in the shadows below. Even when focused he'd learnt to listen, to hear the difference between background noise and the rustling of a hidden assailant. The man below was waiting. If he knew Ned's location, he was no doubt making ready to strike. Ned blinked and the aluminium clattered back to a row of lifeless tiles. He'd cross the old-fashioned way. His lungs

filled, one pace, two – and Ned let his muscles throw him across the gap. The timing was perfect.

The corners of his mouth turned towards a smile as his foot made contact with the next rooftop. And then it happened – the temperature around him plummeted, the tiles beneath his feet suddenly turning to ice.

"Urgh!"

His feet skidded along the now-frozen rooftop and his belly hit the tiles hard; he was starting to slide. "Breathe," he whispered, and a year and a half of physical and mental training took over. Ned's eyes closed and his hands shot out beside him. As his body flew over the edge of the roof he grabbed at the gutter, his hand like a steel vice. But there was give, too much give.

"Plastic," he groaned.

The gutter tore from the wall and a second later he was two floors below with the wind knocked out of him and frost-covered garden grass beneath his back.

"Oww," he managed.

Using the ice had been clever, but the man in the shadows had not finished. There was a loud *voom*, and from somewhere in the darkness a ball of fire raced towards Ned. He rolled and the flames changed, sputtering into raindrops before they could singe the grass below. The

family at number 42 were too engrossed with the news on their television to notice the scene beyond their sliding patio doors. Ned caught a glimpse of the rolling headline.

ANOTHER KIDNAPPING REPORTED. POLICE SAY—

But he needed to focus.

Ned could think of a dozen ways to escape. An impenetrable shield of rock or iron could be yanked up from the lawn. He could disassemble the atoms of every wooden fence and brick wall between where he now stood and the safety of his home. But Ned wasn't allowed to think for himself – rules were rules and he would have to find a quieter way. A way of escaping without his neighbours knowing he'd been there, and more importantly without them learning what Ned could do.

A smoke screen – straight out of the Engineer's manual and, as such, allowed. Begrudgingly he thought about wood, he thought about it in every detail, the grain, the texture, the smell, till he could see the atoms in his mind's eye. And then he speeded them up, faster and faster, heating them all the time, till the ring on his finger crackled with life and the air in the garden folded in on itself. But the Engine on his finger responded violently this time, Amplifying his frustration to make a cloud of

burning black smoke, too much for his needs, and in seconds he could barely see in front of his nose, let alone breathe.

Ned's eyes stung and he ran to where he hoped the garden fence was, before stumbling headfirst into a rosebush.

"Ow!"

The mistake had cost him, as two feet padded across the lawn, closing the gap between Ned and his assailant. He fumbled frantically on, his hands and feet found a wall, and he was over and gaining ground in a moment, the cloud of noxious smoke now blissfully behind him.

Another wall, this time lined with high fencing, another family glued to their screens. Ned wished he could be more like them, seeing the world through the safety of a telly. But the man behind him would never let go, never let him forget who he was, who he had been behind the Veil. One more wall and he was home, one more and the chase would come to an end. He made ready to leap when he saw it forming in front of him: a complex array of iron spikes, sharp and cruel, growing out of the bricks and mortar.

The work was unmistakable: only a true master could have crafted them with such precise and intricate detail.

A voice in the darkness called out to him. A voice that had watched his every move.

"What is the family motto?"

"Look before you leap," said Ned wearily.

"And I'm glad you did, son, the guard-spikes would have been sore as hell, and your mum's fed up with having to mend your clothes."

"It's not great for me, either, Dad," said Ned. "She's rubbish with a sewing machine."

"Good session, though," said Ned's dad. "You're improving all the time. You really slowed me down with that smoke."

"Not enough."

"No," said his dad. "But you'll get there. It's just a matter of time."

Ned thought of the nights stretching ahead of him, nights of training, of climbing and jumping and falling, when everyone else was watching TV.

"Great," he mumbled.