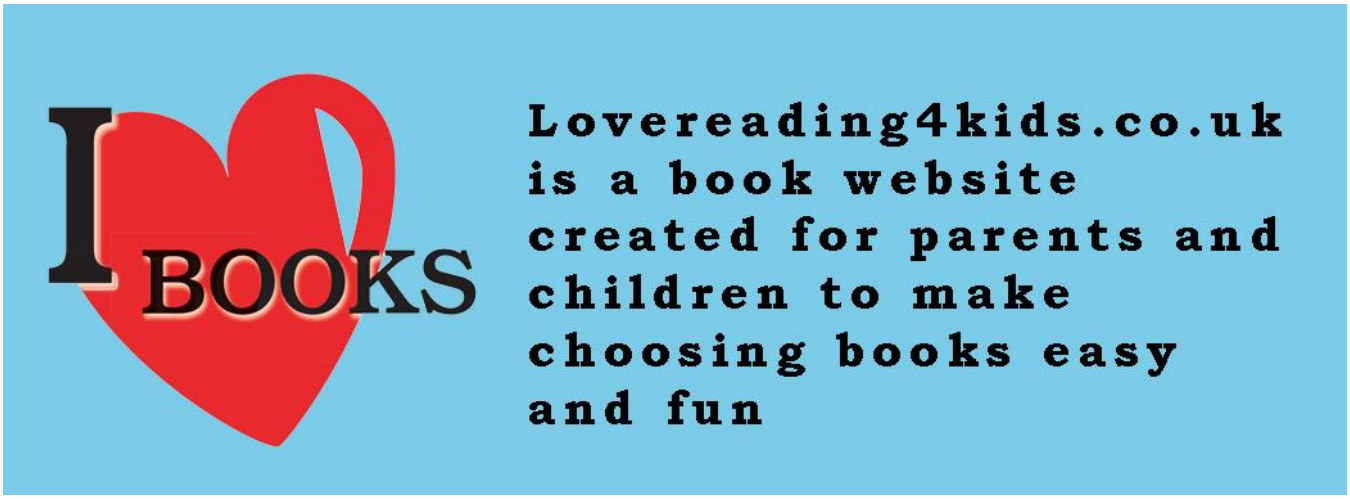


Opening extract from

The Imagination Box: A Mind of its Own

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Prologue

The man stepped inside the white tunnel, following its curve with his cautious eyes. Could he feel the electric thrum on his skin, he wondered, or was it just in his mind? The high-tech metal detector scanned him with a network of faint red light, then it beeped and a green bulb glowed above.

'Head on through,' the guard said, glancing up from his newspaper.

Everything was cleaner and newer than he had expected. Not that he had ever been inside a high-security prison before – but he'd seen films. A second guard ushered him through another checkpoint – this one was a little more like what he'd imagined: there

were metal bars and a heavy lock which clacked and echoed and smelled cold.

'Cell 33 is at the end of the hall,' this guard said. 'Stay behind the yellow line at all times.'

The man made his way down the corridor, between two wide, painted stripes on the floor. He supposed they were for safety, to keep dangerous prisoners at arm's length. After a short walk he arrived.

There he was, the person he'd come to see. Fredric Wilde was lying on his bed, with earphones in, nodding along to music. The man tried a cough but got no response – a second and third attempt and still … nothing. So he checked up the hall, to make sure the guard wasn't looking, then leant forwards over the safety line and tapped, *clink-clink-clink*, on the metal bars.

Hearing he had company, Fredric turned his legs out and stood with a bounce. He approached the edge of his cell. They faced one another in silence, Fredric still nodding and swaying along to the song only he could hear. Once it was finished, he pulled his earphones out.

'Sorry man,' he said, in his rich American accent. 'I've rediscovered the classics. All this time on my

hands, you see.' Fredric was wearing jogging bottoms and a loose T-shirt, both as grey as the thick concrete walls surrounding him.

'My name's Stephen.'

'I know who you are,' Fredric said. 'You like music?'

'Um, yeah . . . I guess.'

'It's the only time I feel OK, at peace, when I've got my music on,' Fredric said. 'It's all I have left.' There was a pause. 'Well, that and the occasional bit of gossip. Is it true? That old teleporter of yours? Up and running again?'

Stephen Crowfield nodded.

'Oh, I bet your dear mother is *very* upset with you.' Fredric smiled. He then held his fists together, and opened them like a flower. 'Poof. Gone . . . to make someone *disappear*. To . . . delete them from the world, and then have them turn up again? What a thought.' His smile was now a smirk.

Stephen felt as though he was being mocked, and it made him angry – so angry his jaw ached from biting down. 'Look . . . I need your help,' he said, calming himself.

'Not much I can do in here.' Fredric gestured behind at his cramped cell.

'You . . . you still have access codes, for the Nevada facility. We need them.'

'Um.' Fredric squinted, tilting his head. 'That place was destroyed, everything's gone.'

'Not everything.'

The two men stared at each other for a moment, through the bars. Hawk Peak Prison was near the sea – harsh, damp wind had chilled Stephen when he'd arrived, his cheeks were still rosy, his hair still matted. And it was so quiet now he could hear those furious waves out there, lurching up the rocks.

'What would you say if I told you I could get you out of here?' Stephen asked.

Fredric laughed through his nostrils. 'I'd call you a liar, and I'd tell you that Hawk Peak is the most secure place on God's green earth. Nothing gets out until the warden says so.'

'Believe what you want,' Stephen said. 'But decide, right now: are you going to help us, or not?'

Chapter 1

SIX MONTHS EARLIER

There was a sabre-toothed tiger in the playground.

Tim had just drawn what he reckoned was a perfect circle. Mr Hennessy, his maths teacher, had insisted they use a compass, but Tim found he could freehand the shape well enough. He was sitting towards the back of the class near the window, which breathed cold on his neck despite being shut.

As Tim wasn't quite as good at drawing straight lines, he slid his ruler from his pencil case to mark out the circle's radius. He held it up to his eyes, distorting the world in the diagonal, transparent plastic. Everything looked the same through the ruler, just in

an ever-so-slightly different place. And it was at this exact moment Tim lost track of his conscious mind and strolled merrily into a daydream.

Wandering thoughts, he had come to realise, were extremely dangerous things. But it was too late. His heart thumped as he slowly turned to look out through the glass on his left. Then, with an itch of sweat and fear, he saw the large shape skulk from behind the bike stands – a low feline shadow emerging on to the tarmac, surveying its new world.

As discussed, there was a sabre-toothed tiger in the playground.

Its thick coat, heavy paws and tusk teeth – a pair of pale pickaxes, curved, deadly – were unmistakable. Yep, Tim thought, squinting, swallowing, yep indeed. That was certainly a sabre-toothed tiger. No doubt about it.

He realised he still had the plastic ruler to his eye, so lowered it and sighed, preparing himself for trouble.

Of course, just how this happened probably needs some explanation. To an outsider, Timothy Hart was just a regular twelve-year-old boy. Not particularly

worthy of note, not interesting enough to remember should you see him walking down the street on some idle Tuesday afternoon. But, much like any stranger you might pass, things were very different up close.

It'd been over two years since Tim had first found the imagination box – a curious, botched-together cube of metal, about the size of a microwave but with tape and exposed circuits, flashing bulbs and the faintest smell of a warm, dusty computer fan. It was all prototype, all theory, all the ambitious work of an ambitious scientist. Back then, of course, it was called the thought-directed atomic construction device, or TDACD. It had seemed so simple and full of nothing but wonder. Even Tim, with his vivid imagination, couldn't have possibly guessed the problems it'd bring him.

There is a box. There is a box and anything you imagine will appear inside. That was basically the concept.

If Tim were to explain the gadget to someone – which he wasn't really allowed to do – they would probably go through a series of phases, just like he had.

Initially it is natural to wonder what you might create, what lovely material desires you might conjure.

Great, so you've got loads of stuff.

Now what?

Well, the usual progression for such a device – as is often the case with technology – is to expand on the idea, to stand on the shoulders of giants. In the case of the imagination box, that was exactly what happened. Thanks to an obscenely large amount of money invested by Fredric Wilde, of Wilde Tech Inc, a huge underground warehouse deep in the Nevada desert, previously used to construct airships, hosted the imagination space.

This was a vast open arena in which users could walk around and imagine things into existence right before their eyes. You could create a castle, a roller coaster, your own forest with original plant life and beauty beyond your conscious wishes. You could quite literally watch your imagination come to life.

But now, and this is where Tim's explanation would get a little more incredible, what if you didn't need the box, or the space, or any of the visible technology?

What if you could simply imagine something and it'd come into being? What if you could look at a table and think, 'I want a delicious piece of cake to appear there,' and a delicious piece of cake would appear there? Well, that'd be just brilliant. And – thanks to a series of frankly bizarre events, a dash of overconfidence and a smidge of misfortune – this was exactly the power Tim had. He was, in a sense, a walking, talking imagination box.

What, dear friends, is the worst that could happen?

For Tim, *one* of the worst things that could happen happened on a quiet Saturday morning back in May. With a lot of practice, he had managed to get his complete and total control over physical matter into quite an obedient order. He would create ketchup for his chips, he'd light candles as he passed, he'd add spiralling patterns to dull wallpaper, he'd even imagine increased air pressure beneath objects to make them levitate and, of course, he had pretty much everything he could ever want. But he found himself reminiscing.

He had been in the corridor of his home, the

Dawn Star Hotel, when he relived fond memories of the carpet that used to be there. The carpet that had a vibrant red pattern (which he'd pretend was lava) with interspersed swirls (which he'd pretend were stepping stones). It was a simpler time, hopscotching up and down that hallway. On the day in question, this nostalgia had softened his mind and relaxed his thoughts. He smiled at the memory.

A moment later, the hallway erupted – hellish roars of *real* fire, intense and loud and livid, had swirled up the walls and curled on the ceiling, stopping as though under his command right in front of his face. Tim had tried desperately to create water, or snow, or even sand, but in the panic he just couldn't concentrate long enough to make any of it appear.

Thankfully, although the damage was severe, the fire didn't spread. The hotel's owner and Tim's mu— . . . guardian, Elisa, managed to get the business insurance to cover the costs, blaming the fire on an unexplainable gas leak. What else, she said, could have possibly caused such a blaze?

'I'm so sorry,' Tim kept saying. 'I promise it was

an accident.' He was expecting some serious anger from her, but it never came. He offered to refurbish it himself, but Elisa said that'd attract too much attention – people had witnessed it after all.

'Stop apologising,' she said, wiping soot from his cheeks and checking his skin. 'No one was hurt, that's what matters.'

It had been almost five years since he came into the care of Chris and Elisa Green. Around the time they purchased the Dawn Star Hotel, they adopted him from his temporary home of Glassbridge Orphanage and started their family. Tim had been surprised that day, surprised they chose to adopt him, instead of a younger child. But, looking back, he was glad they did.

'Just think,' Elisa added. 'Just think how much I could get done if I had your mind.'

But, for Tim, this fire fiasco proved his new powers were unsettling. He was now dangerous – but dangerous by accident, which is often the worst kind of danger.

Now, here, in maths class, and again things had slipped. *This* particular lapse in concentration could

be traced back to a recent school trip to the Natural History Museum in London. Tim and his best friend Dee had wandered the long, grand halls, gazing up and around, turning with open mouths. They'd filled in the worksheet and found all the necessary animals and exhibits – spotting everything from dinosaurs to the blue whale.

In the afternoon they had arrived at a large tank containing a lifelike sculpture of a sabre-toothed tiger – Smilodon to be precise. Both he and Dee had stared inside, through the transparent glass, at the extinct creature. It was this image – this moment – that Tim found himself remembering at the back of maths class on this fateful day.

There he was, plastic ruler still in hand, watching the creature stalk across the playground. The cat seemed calm, but then paused and lowered its stomach, perhaps picking up a scent, and headed towards the school building. Tim's breathing was fast, jittery. He turned to Dee by his side and squeezed her arm.

'Look,' he whispered.