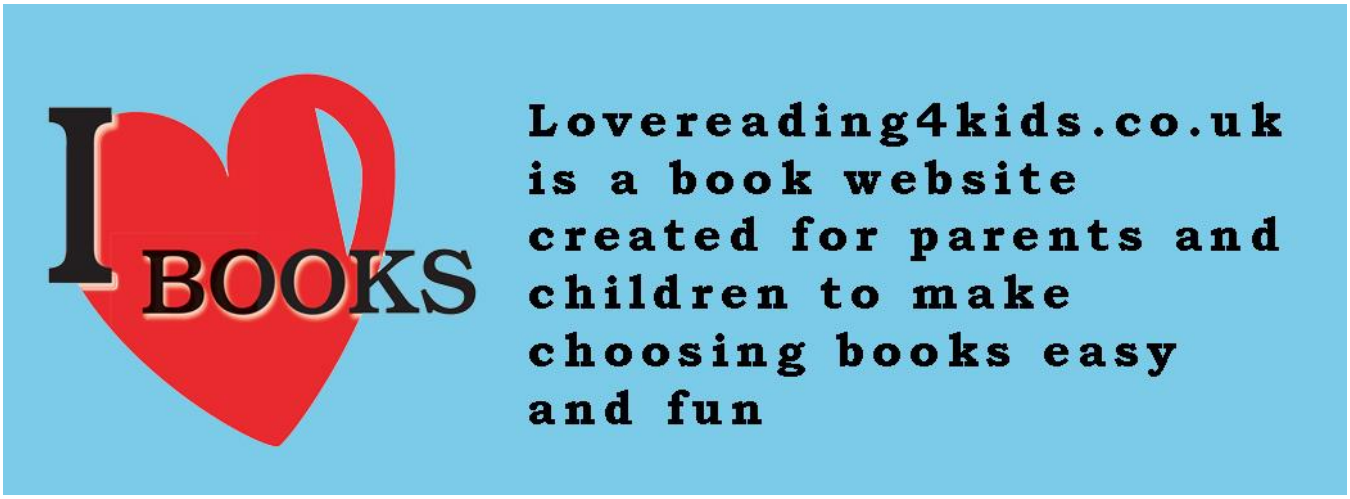


Opening extract from

Reborn

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CHAPTER 1

Two Years Ago

Tom Friedmann stared out through the smoked glass of the foyer at a scene of which he couldn't make sense. The sky was spilling flakes like Thanksgiving-parade ticker tape. It vaguely reminded him of the billowing clouds of office stationery that had fluttered down over Manhattan after the first American Airlines impact all those years ago. These were smaller, though, like those big fluffy snowflakes you know are going to settle and know *damn* well are going to cause merry havoc with your travel plans.

Channelled down by the tall glass-and-chrome office blocks all along Wall Street, the flakes fluttered in clouds that at a distance looked like a descending bank of fog.

And people were dropping. Dying.

Not immediately . . . not gas-attack immediately. He'd seen that at work in the Middle East. The ghastly sight of civilians dropping in waves. No mess, no fuss, just death by chemical agent. But, Jesus, this was happening almost as quickly.

Too fast for nature, surely?

Tom watched a cop on the other side of the road. A minute ago he'd been waving pedestrians inside into various corporate foyers. Now he was on his knees,

swaying like a drunkard and staring at the glistening skin of his hands.

'Tom, there's no answer!'

He turned. Elaine Garcia – she was holding his phone up at him. She'd been trying to reach her mother.

'Give it to me!' he demanded.

He took it off her.

'Tom, what's happening?'

He ignored her as he swiped through his contacts: half a dozen numbers in a quick-retrieve list. The first number started with the White House prefix. It was engaged.

The second number was his son's mobile. It rang twice before Leon picked up.

'You OK, Dad?'

'That you, Leon?' He sounded different. Not Leon's usual lazy for-parents-only drawl, the voice version of an eye-roll.

'Dad, what's goin—'

'It's *here*, Leo. It's right here in the city!'

'What? In . . . in New York?'

'Yes! There are people dying in the goddamn street!'

The line rustled and crackled with telecoms overload. He wondered how many people were saturating the network with panic calls right now.

'Dad, where are you? Are you safe?'

'Leo, listen to me! Son! Listen! This thing is airborne! You've got to stay inside! Stay at home! Tape up your windows and doors, and STAY INSIDE!'

'But we're on a train, Dad! You said get out of London. You told us to—'

Tom winced. He *had* said that. That had been his advice exactly. *Get away from London*. Outside in the street a police car with a wailing siren had pulled up. The fallen cop's colleagues were getting out to help him. Tom banged his fist on the glass to warn them to stay in their squad car, but with the noise outside, the siren, people's screams . . . his banging fist was lost in all of that.

'I know. Shit . . . shit. Are you close to Mom's family?' He tried to remember where Jennifer's parents lived. A small chocolate-box village just outside a city called . . . he remembered.

'Are you near to Norwich?'

'I don't know . . . Train's about—' The rest of what Leon was saying was gone amid crackling.

'OK, soon as you get there, you tell Mom, you tell Mom's parents they've gotta stay inside. Do you understand me? Stay inside! Close the windows. Don't go out again!'

The cops outside were now looking up at the artificial snow, batting the flakes away from their faces. The infected officer had flopped over on to his side, the good hand clawing at the other glistening, reddening one.

'Oh God, Tom!' cried Elaine as they watched.

The man pulled some flesh away from his hand. It came off far too easily, like casserole beef from a T-bone. Blood streamed down his forearm; a tendon hung from the bones of his hand in a tired, swinging loop.

Jesus Christ!

A few metres further down the street, where a woman had collapsed earlier, the process seemed far more

advanced. Under the woman's now stained clothes, her previously bulky frame had reduced and dark trickles of liquid seemed to be fanning out around her.

The cop on the ground was flailing his dissolving hand around, screaming for help from his colleagues. There were other people outside converging on the squad car. Other people infected like him, shambling towards the cops in a state of shock, like toddlers bow-mouthed and mewling for their mothers. They stared bewildered and frightened at their hands, their arms, swiping at glistening, erupting blisters, pleading for help.

The cops seemed to be ignoring the light fluttering 'snowfall' as if that was much further down the list of things to note. They backed away from the screaming mass of infected people approaching, barking commands at them all to stay well back.

Jesus . . . it's like a frikkin zombie movie.

A gun came out. A single shot went up into the air. Tom could see by the wide-eyed look from the young cop standing over his stricken colleague that the next shot was going to be aimed. He was aware Leon was still on the end of a crackling line. Waiting for advice. For help.

'Listen to me . . . Listen . . . This thing's in the air. You can SEE it. Like flakes. It's fast! It's killing people everywhere . . . touching their skin, then they're dying . . . melting . . .'

The signal was breaking up badly.

'Don't let it TOUCH you . . . the flakes! Don't let them near you!'

He heard his son reply. Something chewed up and spat out by the failing signal.

'I love you, son!' he shouted into the phone, as if that might make a difference. 'I love you, both you and Grace! God, I wish I was with you—'

Someone barged into him. Nearly knocking the phone out of his hand. A guy in a grey suit and a white office shirt damp with sweat. He tried to snatch the phone from Tom's hand.

'Hey! Get out of my goddamn way!'

Tom shoved the man backwards into the smoked-glass window. It rattled and boomed, but didn't crack.

'You got a signal there?! I gotta make a call!'

'Get someone else's phone!' Tom snapped. The man backed off and went in search of someone else on a phone. Tom put the cell back to his ear. 'Leon! You still there?'

Just a crackle and hissing.

'Leon! LEON!'

He was gone.

Elaine was staring at him as he disconnected the call and slid the phone back into his jacket pocket. 'Tom . . . ?'

Outside, the cops were now reacting to the flakes that had landed on them. One was staring intently at his own hand like some hokey carnival palm reader; the other was rubbing the bridge of his nose with the back of a hairy forearm.

'Tom?' she bleated again, more insistently this time.

'*What?!*'

'What are we going to do?'

He shook his head. Furious with himself. He'd had advance warning. Twenty-four hours ago the president had been advised to mobilize FEMA resources. He'd been ahead of the herd . . . just. And yet he'd failed to capitalize on it, failed to take steps, and here he was stuck in the reception of some Wall Street reprographics company, watching people die all around him.

He stared out of the window. The downfall of flakes seemed to be lessening, or perhaps the ever-present 'Manhattan Mistral', funnelled between the tall buildings, was pushing the cloud of particles further down the street. The two policemen who'd turned up in the squad car were beginning to falter. One had dropped down to sit heavily on the kerb, like a late-night reveller trying to figure out how he was going to get home. Most of the other people around were in the same state, slumped to their haunches, dizzily trying to comprehend what was happening to them.

Tom reached for the swing door that led on to the pavement.

'What the hell are you *doing*?' cried Elaine. Her perfectly threaded brows were arched in horror.

He nodded at the police car parked on the far side. 'I'm going.'

'We can't go out there!'

'I'm going. You can come with or you can stay. Up to you.'

She shook her head frantically.

Act quickly or don't act at all, MonkeyNuts.

'I'm going, then,' he said firmly.

'You can't leave me!' she cried, reaching out to grab his arm. 'Please! You can't—'

He shook her off roughly. 'You're a grown-up, Elaine. You'll have to figure something else out.' He pushed the door open, pulled his jacket over his head and hurried across the pavement and into the late afternoon sunlight now striping the ground with shades of salmon pink and shadowy lavender, like vast Rothko-esque hard-edged brushstrokes. Behind him he could hear Elaine banging on the glass and howling after him.

He approached the younger cop sitting on the kerb.

'Officer?'

The cop looked up at him and blinked back the sun in his eyes.

'Keys?' said Tom. 'Your car keys? Are they in the ignition?'

The cop grinned, vacant and childlike, at him. 'Hey, Steve? That you, man?'

He's gone. He's out of it.

Tom looked past him. The driver's side door was wide open. The blue lights were still rotating. Which presumably meant the keys were there. 'Never mind.'

He quickly hopped in and pulled the door closed, found the keys dangling from the side of the steering column and turned them. He shot one more glance back at Elaine, standing beyond the smoky-coloured glass, banging her fists on the window for him to come back to rescue her.

She's not your responsibility, Tom. Leon and Grace. OK? Just Leon and Grace. That's it.

CHAPTER 2

I get it, Dad. I get it. I'm not a complete moron.

You're dead.

I realize now that you're just a figment of my imagination. A therapy tool. A way for me to confront my issues and set them out on the pages of a journal instead of leaving them to stew inside my head. You're a cure for my migraines, a placebo.

So why the hell am I keeping this journal going? I suppose part of me still hopes you'll end up reading it and see that I did OK. That I'm not some useless waste-of-space slacker. That I actually managed to last this long.

Longer than you, probably.

I suppose a part of me kind of hopes you're watching me somewhere, a ghost looking over my shoulder as I write this.

So, yeah, Dad . . . Surprise! I survived! And if you're a ghost reading this, I guess you want to know how I'm doing, huh?

Well . . . life's been better. We're still in Norwich, but we moved from the apartment block near the football ground to a flat above a supermarket.

Life is all about economy of energy use: calories spent getting calories in. Until we moved we had to make tough calorie choices every day. Now there's a ton of tinned

food just two floors below us. We're sitting on top of our own larder. Plus it means me and Freya don't even have to step outside. Which is a frikkin relief considering how cold it is out there.

Last winter we got completely snowed in. For months. Then there was 'summer', which was cold, grey, wet and not very long. Then another winter again – same damn thing. Real New York-style; snow piled up in dunes.

And the virus? We've not seen a single sign of it. Anywhere. Not for over a year now. I don't know if this cold weather is linked to that somehow. Maybe it is. Maybe without seven billion humans churning crap into the atmosphere, global warming did a sudden massive U-turn. But, linked or not, it is what it is. I think the freezing cold has killed that thing off, and this is the aftermath.

This is our challenge now . . . surviving an Ice Age.

'Leon? Look!' Freya was pointing.

He lowered his scarf and puffed out a thick plume of steamy air. 'Yeah, I see it.'

They were standing on the rooftop of a shopping mall on the west side of the city. A mall called Chappelfields. Just like any other, with the same usual-suspect chain stores, the same useful and useless things to be found inside.

Freya was pointing to the left of a snow-covered outdoor market, where a faint red light was blinking at the top of a cluster of masts and satellite dishes. On a clear day with the sun shining and everything glinting, they probably would

have missed it, but today the thick grey clouds overhead cast the city in a pall of twilight shadow.

'Someone's still got power,' said Leon.

'Let's not get too hopeful about it yet.'

One night last winter, they'd spotted a light on the other side of the city. The next day they'd trudged across to find out what it was. A hummock of snow had slid off the slanted surface of a bank of rooftop solar panels, and after a few days of getting some light a neon sign had eventually blinked back to life and lit up, promising one and all that they could have hours of family fun at *Lazer Warz*.

This blinking red light was closer. Close enough to bother taking a quick look.

'Worth our while?'

Freya shrugged. 'Something on telly you need to hurry back for?'

Leon smiled. 'You OK to take a detour for it?'

She shifted her weight and leaned on her stick, one of those walkers with a rubber grip-handle at the top, and four stumpy legs at the bottom.

She nodded. 'My hips are aching like hell. But I can do it. Let's have a look.'

They stood outside the glass-fronted building and stared up at the cluster of aerials and satellite dishes at the top. Leon looked at the sign perched on the side of the building.

BBC. The three letters were each wearing a tall bonnet of snow.

'BBC Norfolk,' said Freya. 'TV and Radio Centre.'

He turned to her. 'This is where the BBC lives . . . *lived*?'

'Not *all* of it. Obviously. It's just a regional building. BBC Norfolk.'

'Ah, right.'

Leon reached into his rucksack and pulled out a mallet and chisel, their standard breaking-and-entering kit. He looked up. The glass frontage was three storeys high, divided into a grid of two-metre panels, supported by metal spars. Smashing the one directly in front of him wasn't going to result in a glass cascade. He'd made that mistake before and nearly been decapitated by an avalanche of large, jagged shards.

'Ready?'

Freya took a few shuffled steps backwards. 'Ready.'

He pulled his scarf up to cover his face right up to the bridge of his nose, placed the chisel firmly against the glass, narrowed his eyes and then swung the hammer hard. The glass, brittle from the cold, shattered easily and clattered noisily inwards, leaving an empty frame in the front of the tall building, like a gap-toothed smile.

They waited until the last loose shard had wobbled and dropped to the ground, then stepped inside into another dimly lit cavernous interior.

Leon led the way into the large atrium. There was an indoor-outdoor cafe to their right, all glass-top tables, cushy chairs and large potted plants that might once have been lush temperate-weather ferns but which were now twig skeletons. At the back of the atrium was a large municipal library. A stairway led up to a balcony that

overlooked the large interior and, to the left, they saw an entrance to the main BBC floor space.

They took the stairs up in silence, their boots scraping and tapping noisily, listening hopefully for the sound of someone challenging them. They arrived in front of the main entrance. A turnstile blocked their way, an access-card slot beside it, waiting patiently for an employee pass to be inserted. Leon swung his leg and hopped over it easily, then turned and offered his hands to Freya to help her.

'I thought the BBC was all about ease of bloody access for all,' she grunted as she parked her bum on top of the turnstile, passed Leon her walking stick then swung her stronger leg over. She had to lift her other leg across, and gritted her teeth as a dull pain stabbed at her hip.

The inside was just as Leon had expected: an open-plan office full of desks, chairs, shoulder-high cubicle partitions and pot plants that had died long ago. One side was the internal glass wall that looked out upon the atrium and the cafe below. The other side was punctuated with framed posters featuring the grinning faces of the station's local newsreaders and celebrities.

'There's no sign of any power here,' said Freya. The computer monitors and ceiling lights were all off. They were standing in the gloomy pall of waning third-hand daylight. 'Another stupid wild-goose chase, by the look of it.' She sighed.

Leon nodded. With the worst of this second winter gone and the weather warming up a fraction, it was probably

the result of another solar panel being exposed by a slide of snow.

'Might as well see if there's anything useful we can grab while we're here.'

They picked their way past workstations, each abandoned cubicle telling its own story of hasty departure. There were no bodies here. Everyone must have abandoned their posts quickly, but tell-tale signs of the last thing they were doing before they left were strewn around: the fossilized remains of food in wrappers, Post-it notes stuck on screens as reminders for workers long gone.

Leon picked up a Rubik's Cube from a desk and tucked it into his backpack. Something to while away the endless hours they had to spare. Then they climbed an emergency stairwell to the next floor and pushed the door open.

'And this is where all the television magic happens,' said Freya like a tour guide.

They were looking at a newsroom: a news desk and two empty anchor's chairs in the same corporate BBC crimson colour. Three automated cameras stood in a semicircle and stared with blind cyclops eyes at the abandoned desk.

Freya wandered over to the desk and slumped down into one of the chairs. She grabbed at the papers spread out across the top and shuffled them together in both hands, tapping them down solemnly.

'Tonight on *Freya Hart at Six*, we discuss the shocking number of dog owners who refuse to pick up the mess left behind by their feckless canine companions.'

Leon snorted as he sat down on the chair beside hers.

‘Seriously . . . *that’s* what used to pass for news around here. That and Ofsted school reports,’ said Freya.

Leon grabbed some loose sheets of paper and gazed at the glinting lenses of the three lifeless cameras. ‘It’s another quiet news day here in Norfolk,’ he uttered. ‘There’s snow forecast for the weekend. More snow and yet more sn—’

He stopped and stared at the headlines printed on the paper: a short list of bullet-point items, some crossed through with a red pen, others with scrawled margin-note alterations, loops and arrows reordering the list – on-the-hoof editing.

- *Government declares Martial Law from 9 p.m. tonight.*
- *All transport links: railways, roads, airports have been closed.*
- *Police forces issued with firearms – have full authority to use them.*
- *Russia suspected of using tactical nuclear warheads on several infected cities.*
- *Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka announce first confirmed cases of infection.*

Freya was reading the same list in her gloved hands. She looked at him. ‘It really got everywhere on the planet, didn’t it?’

‘It was floating around in the air. I guess it must have.’ Leon looked at the handwritten postscript at the bottom. He read it out loud. ‘This will be our final television

transmission. For further news updates please tune into the BBC emergency broadcast signal, which is using Radio Four's longwave preset, one-nine-eight.'

'At least they didn't sign off with the cheesy "May God have mercy on our souls" thing,' said Freya.

It may not have been written down, but perhaps they did, thought Leon. He could imagine there'd be that temptation for an anchorman or woman, a chance to go off-script and say something from the heart.

A goodbye.

A good luck.

'Me, Mum and Grace must have still been on the train when they broadcast this.'

Freya turned to look at him. She'd heard Leon's escape story. And she'd told him *her* story. Neither of them needed to dwell on those now. Least of all Leon. Grace was gone. His mum was long gone. So were Freya's parents.

She pushed the chair back on its castors. 'Come on – let's go. There's nothing for us here.'

Leon nodded. He let the papers scatter from his hands on to the desk.

They got up and headed towards the stairwell door. The light from outside was waning fast, and if they wanted to get back home before it was pitch black, they needed to leave soon. Not that the darkness itself was anything to be concerned about. They had torches and knew the way they'd come. And there was nothing out there *now* – no *snarks* any more, no monsters – and no one else as far as they knew. It was just going to get much colder once that

pitiful sun was gone from the tumbling grey sky. Reason enough to hurry home.

As Freya pushed the stairwell door open, Leon stopped her. 'Wait!'

'What?'

'Over there. I saw something . . .'

She looked to her right. There was a passageway lined with more framed local celebrity posters, and at the end a thick acoustically insulated door stood ajar. Above it an ON AIR sign hung, dark and lifeless.

A weak, blinking, amber-coloured spot of light reflected on the small glass window.

'There's a light on in there,' said Leon. He headed down the passageway, pulled the door open and peered inside. He was looking at a small room without any windows. It was almost completely dark, but faintly illuminated by one small flashing orange light on a rack of equipment. He reached into his backpack, pulled out a torch and snapped it on.

'Radio studio,' said Freya.

The walls were lined with a corded grey carpet that sucked the life from her voice. The room was split in two by a partition and another door. Through thick glass Leon could see a recording booth, several microphones hanging in anti-vibration cradles, a couple of chairs and a desk.

They were standing in the control room. Leon stepped towards the rack of equipment and the one blinking orange light: a small, square button, one in a row that remained

resolutely dark and disinterested in their insistent, winking sibling.

'AUX,' said Leon, reading the three dark letters in the middle of it.

Freya shrugged. 'You might as well.'

'Might as well what?'

'Press it. It's not like it's going to blow the world up or anything.'

Leon pulled his glove off and gently rested the tip of his index finger against the button. He felt just the slightest sensation of warmth coming from it, heat generated by a tiny blinking LED that steadfastly refused to give in and join the others.

For a moment he was reluctant to push. Perhaps it would flick off whatever system was still running here on a trickle of power. Like switching off life support. Putting something out of its misery.

Freya huffed impatiently, reached out and pushed down on his finger.

The light behind the button blinked from amber to green and speakers either side of the control room's mixing desk suddenly began to hiss and crackle softly.

'*. . . are not alone. I repeat you are NOT alone. Help is coming. Help is on its way . . .*'