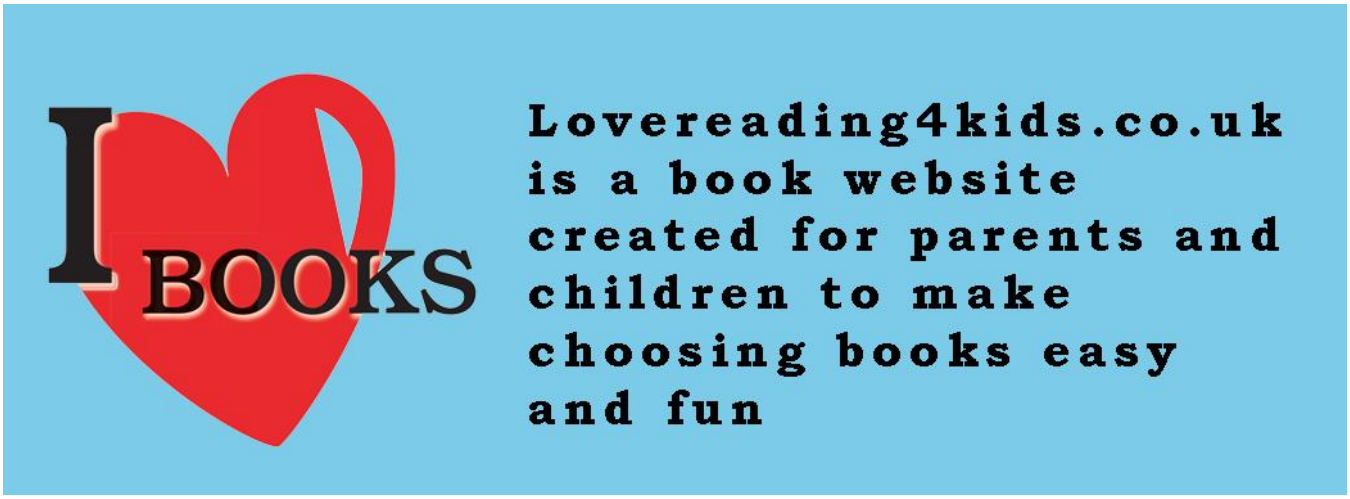


Opening extract from

Waiting for Callback

Written by

Perdita Cargill and Honor Cargill

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I'm dressed as a spider, waiting to go onstage to impersonate a carrot.

It could be worse: I could be dressed as a carrot, waiting to go onstage to impersonate a carrot. That would be even more humiliating, but even in a black leotard I'm feeling pretty exposed. This carrot monologue was absolutely not my choice. I'd have chosen just about anything else (maybe something with death or trauma or at least an abusive mother in it), definitely not something that involved playing a *much* younger school kid impersonating a carrot. It isn't exactly a meaty role.

This is entertainment.

Or what passes as entertainment on gala night at ACT.

I'm sweating right down into my black tights and I very much want to go to the loo.

Again.

The dance number that's on before me is winding up and I'm running out of escape options. My mind is a complete blank. I can't remember a single word. I think I might be sick. Not just a little bit sick in my mouth, but projectile-vomit sick.

'You're on, Elektra,' says someone from the wings.

And somehow I am on and I open my mouth and the words are there . . .

'Last year I was a carrot.
I had two lines.
And one of them was, "I am a carrot."
I have no interest in playing a speaking vegetable.
It's not realistic . . .'

And then I don't want to escape. I don't want to get off the stage. I remember how much I love this feeling. I'll just stay here with my face turned up to the lights and soak up all the energy until I'm the sort of spider who can take on the world and win (well, it's been known).

I'm high on drama.

Chapter One

'I mean nothing really happens in your life until you're fourteen or fifteen.'

Chloë Moretz

'Funny to think she wants Elektra.'

'Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dad.' There were times in this house when not enough respect was given to my fragile teenage psyche.

'What worries me is where it will all *end*,' said my mum. (I take it back: please continue to ignore my fragile teenage psyche.) 'I just don't know how healthy it is. Look at Lindsay Lohan.'

'You told Mrs Haden it was "all very exciting",' I said.

'Well, it is exciting.' Mum looked a bit shamefaced. 'I just *worry*.' (She still worried if at fifteen I took the bus on my own.) 'And Mrs Haden didn't say she

definitely wanted you. She just invited us in for a chat. She did sound keen though.'

'You *have* to say yes.'

Tactical error.

'We don't *have* to do anything,' they said together.

'Please. It would be my *dream*.'

'Would it really?' Dad sounded sceptical.

'I want to be an actor'

'What, more than being the editor of *Vogue* or discovering the cure for cancer?'

'Actually, yes.' (Well, obviously, I would quite like to 'discover' the cure for cancer, but unless I literally stumble upon it I don't think that's going to happen.)

'We should at least listen to Elektra,' said Mum. She pulled up a chair for me at the big white kitchen table and we all sat around it like it was some weird, domestic board meeting. Our kitchen was *very* white and plain with just one large black-and-white photo of a tomato on the wall. All the photos in our house were black and white; colour photos would have offended my architect dad's aesthetic sensibilities. Even our dog (Digby – my parents' son substitute and favourite) was a Dalmatian; a red setter would have been out of the question. He (Dad not Digby) has a very low tolerance for colour and mess; to him they're the same thing. It's a sort of chromatic traumatic thing. It is genuinely painful for him to enter my bedroom.

I tried to look rational and adult, although I

wasn't feeling either (or looking the part – I was wearing an old nightie which only just covered my bum and dated from my Snoopy era).

'Are you sure this isn't just another phase? What if you go off acting like you went off climbing and . . . ballet?' Mum whispered the last word.

Dad let out a snort. 'Ha, I'd forgotten the climbing lessons. Bit of a low point.'

'To be fair,' said Mum, 'acting's the one thing that Elektra hasn't gone off. She's been going to ACT every Thursday for years.'

ACT (or Act-up Children's Theatre) was just a local, after-school theatre group not the sort of Academy for the Performing Arts where they fitted maths and physics round the students' bursts of spontaneous and yet perfectly choreographed song and dance routines. And I loved it all the more for that.

'Remember when she played Tinkerbell?' Mum added.

'That was the time she fell off the stage, wasn't it?' said Dad.

They both laughed a little bit too much. 'I am still here,' I said. My Tinkerbell had been inspired. I'd just relied too much on my wings when I was caught up in the moment.

'Sorry, darling,' said Mum. 'You were brilliant last night.'

'Well, this Haden woman obviously thought

Elektra was a credible carrot.' Dad's tone suggested he didn't necessarily share her opinion.

'She should know; apparently, she's been an acting agent for ages. She's got her own company – she gave me her card.' Mum dropped it on to the table and we all looked at the little white rectangle nervously as if the woman herself might materialize. 'Lens knows her.'

Lens was our teacher at ACT. I loved Lens (not just because he looked like Will Smith, although that helped). He was the only person who could have persuaded me that the carrot monologue was the way to go. He was probably also the only person who could have persuaded an acting agent to come and see a show featuring performing vegetables.

'It all seems legitimate,' said Mum.

God, I hadn't imagined the agent might be *il*legitimate. What did that even mean?

'Maybe she's just got a space on her books for a performing vegetable,' Dad suggested.

I ignored him. 'You think we should say yes, don't you, Mum?' It was always important in our family triangle to try and get on the right side of the 2:1.

'I don't know, darling. We don't want anything to interfere with school. It's not long until your GCSEs . . .'

'It's *ages* till I have to worry about my exams.' Thank God, because I was still some way off

mastering circle theorems. 'And look at Emma Watson; she's meant to be, like, really brainy.'

'Don't say "like",' they both said together (as they so often did).

I ignored the interruption (as I so often did). 'She got loads of As and A stars *and* she went to university all over the place *and* now she's, like, literally running the UN or something.' Also I kept seeing photos of her in magazines with preppy hot guys on both sides of the Atlantic (admirable, but not a point that was likely to help me right now).

'Don't misuse "literally",' said Dad, who cares about the strangest things. 'And I thought it was Hermione who was really brainy?' He used to read me the *Harry Potter* books at bedtime until the plots got a bit heavy and Mum stopped keeping my room tidy.

'Well, yes, but—' I began.

'Schoolwork matters anyway – exams or no exams,' my mother interrupted.

'Natalie Portman went to Harvard and speaks six languages,' I countered. 'And Dakota Fanning went to NYU.'

'I have no idea who you're talking about,' said Dad.

I struggled to think of clever *well-behaved* actors that they might have heard of (I wasn't going to risk bringing up clever badly behaved actors like Lindsay Lohan or any number of others). I knew *everything* about these people (including things I

very much wished I could unknow), something that had at least as much to do with my embarrassing addiction to gossip sites and trashy mags as it did with my acting obsession. It probably wasn't entirely healthy.

'And you wouldn't mind if it was time off for violin or something,' I went on.

My father snorted – probably because no one could forget my short- lived but nonetheless painful violin phase.

'I'm right though, aren't I? You wouldn't be worried if this agent lady wanted to represent me for a youth orchestra or something. You should hear the things that go on at Pro Corda courses.' Rumour had it those classical musicians spent more time sticking their tongues down one another's throats than they did mastering Mozart (or any other dead musical genius) and nobody ever assumed they'd all end up in rehab.

My phone barked. (I wasn't too cool for novelty ringtones and it was a homage to Digby, who I sincerely loved, despite his favoured child status.)

'Don't even think about answering that,' Mum said, giving me a look.

'I wasn't going to,' I lied.

'Who is it?'

I considered saying, 'None of your business,' but thought better of it. 'Moss.'

'Moss can wait.'

I considered saying, 'You always tell me it's important not to neglect my friends,' but I thought better of that too: there were bigger things at stake right now. 'Look, I probably won't get any parts anyway.'

'Then *why* do you want to do it?' asked Dad in his annoyingly logical way.

'Because I *might*,' I mumbled through an unwieldy mouthful of toast. Digby padded in, sat by my feet and looked adoringly at me (well, more likely at the toast; he was a slave to carbs).

'But if you don't you might get terribly upset. How will you deal with so much *rejection*?' said Mum.

Like fifteen-year-old girls weren't used to rejection.

'It would be me that would have to deal with it. You're always telling me I have to take risks in life and now the first chance of a big one comes along and you're both all weird about it.'

My phone gave a single bark. **PICKKKKK UPPPPPP!**

Can't. Parents.

Have they said yes?

Not yet. ☹

My mother swooped in like some sort of vulture (well, a vulture in cashmere and pressed jeans) and confiscated my phone. It was like social services ripping a newborn baby from its teenage mother.

'This is an important conversation and you are not going to sit here paying more attention to your phone than to us.'

Obviously, I was not OK with the whole taking-the-phone thing – there are boundaries – but there are also times when just being in the right is not enough.

'Come on, Julia, we need to make a decision on this.' Dad was keen to get the conversation back on track. Probably because he wanted it over so he could check *his* phone. 'Pros and cons: let's list them.'

Dad's a committed list-maker. This was something we had in common, although his lists were never random like mine, which were almost *always* random (and usually embarrassing). Also Dad's lists didn't look anything like mine because he was the sort of person who could draw perfectly straight lines freehand and he was severely limited in his choice of stationery and ink.

After some – occasionally heated – discussion, here's what we came up with:

Pros	**Cons**
Teach resilience	Undermine morale
Professionalism	Loss of childhood
Creative outlet	Distraction from study
Fun	Too much fun
~~Money~~	

*

I didn't really get why we argued about money. To me, it was an obvious 'pro'. At first sight, to Dad (sole breadwinner), it was a 'pro', but to my mother (primary spender) it was surprisingly a 'con'. To listen to her, you'd have thought that possession of a bank account by anybody under the age of twenty-one was a passport to depravity.

'What do you think I'm going to do if I earn any money? Buy hard drugs?'

She shuddered. 'It's not unknown.'

'But it's *me*. I don't even like taking *Calpol*. I'm not going to morph into some Hollywood substance abuser because someone pays me a couple of hundred pounds to do some acting for them.'

'Some hope,' said Dad, which (assuming he was talking about the money) was harsh but probably true.

We weren't getting anywhere. One minute my parents were worried I was going to face a life of rejection and low self-esteem (and would probably get anorexia) and the next that I wouldn't be able to deal with a three-film deal (and would probably get anorexia). We broke, exhausted, for more toast (me – an eating disorder was a *spectacularly* remote risk) and more coffee (them).

It was time to bring out my trump card.

'It would look amazing on my personal statement for uni.'

Within five minutes, they were talking about calling Mrs Haden ('just to discuss it'). I fled the kitchen (reclaiming my stolen property en route). I needed to talk to Moss about important things like what we'd wear to the Oscars.

'Elektra, get off the phone and go and get dressed!' my mum yelled from the kitchen after a few minutes.

'Just talking to Moss!' I yelled back.

'Don't shout!' yelled my dad.

'Sorry!' I yelled back.

'I mean it, Elektra. Get off the mobile or you'll get a brain tumour!' My mother was apparently allowed to shout (although her whisper would have bored through most walls too).

'Did your mum just say you'd get a brain tumour?' Moss was listening in. Hard not to.

'Yep.'

'From talking on the phone?'

'Yep, high-risk thing to do.'

'Seriously? God, it must be tiring being your mum.'

I think it probably was.

From: Stella at the Haden Agency
Date: 4 November [ ] 4.21 p.m.
To: Julia James
Cc: Charlotte at the Haden Agency
Attachments: Directions.doc
Subject: Meeting to discuss possible representation (Elektra James)

Dear Julia,

We are so pleased that you and Elektra are going to come in and talk to us about *possible* representation. I was just telling Charlie (my assistant) about what a wonderfully *vibrant* carrot Elektra was!

I perfectly understand that an after-school appointment would suit best and I could offer you next Monday 10 November at 5 p.m.? Let me know if that works. I've attached a map with directions; we're directly above the Mayfield Dental Practice – once you see the metre-high model of a molar, you'll know you've found the right place!

We're looking forward to meeting you both.

Best wishes,

Stella Haden