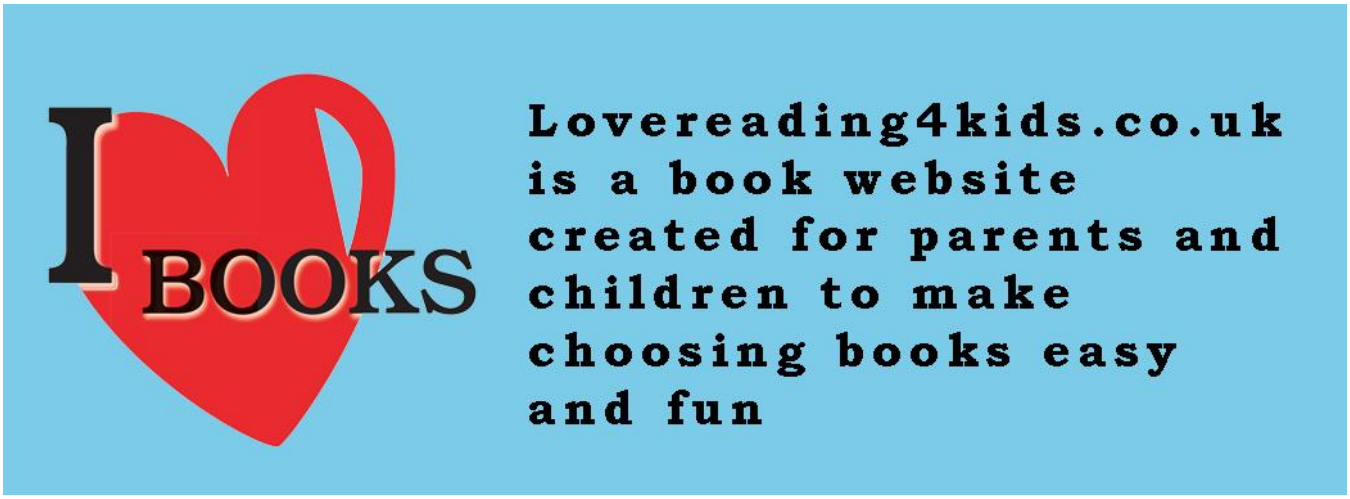


Opening extract from

Radio Silence

Written by

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DYING, BUT IN A GOOD WAY

I said my piece and got off stage and checked my phone, because I hadn't checked it all afternoon. And that's when I saw it. I saw the Twitter message that was about to change my life, possibly forever.

I made a startled coughing noise, sank into a plastic chair, and grabbed Head Boy Daniel Jun's arm so hard that he hissed, "Ow! What?"

"Something monumental has happened to me on Twitter."

Daniel, who had seemed vaguely interested until I said the word 'Twitter', frowned and wrenched his arm back. He wrinkled his nose and looked away like I'd done something extremely embarrassing.

The main thing that you need to know about Daniel Jun is that he probably would have killed himself if he thought it'd get him better grades. To most people, we were exactly the same person. We were both smart and we were both going for Cambridge and that was all anybody saw: two shining gods of academia flying high above the school building.

The difference between us was that I found our 'rivalry' absolutely

hilarious, whereas Daniel acted as if we were engaged in a war of who could be the biggest nerd.

Anyway.

Two monumental things had happened, actually. The first was this:

@UniverseCity is now following you

And the second was a direct message addressed to 'Toulouse', my online alias:

Direct Messages > **with Radio**

hi toulouse! this might sound really weird but i've seen some of the Universe City fan art you've posted and i love them so much

i wondered whether you'd be interested in working with the show to create visuals for the Universe City episodes?

i've been trying to find someone with the right style for the show and i really love yours.

Universe City is non-profit so i can't exactly pay you so i totally understand if you want to say no, but you seem like you really love

the show and i wondered if you'd be interested. you'd get full credit obviously. i honestly wish i could pay you but i don't have any money

(i'm a student). yeah. let me know if you're interested at all. if not, i still love your drawings. like, a lot. ok.

radio x

"Go on then," said Daniel, with an eye-roll. "What's happened?"

"Something monumental," I whispered.

"Yes, I got that."

It struck me suddenly that there was absolutely no way I could tell anybody about this. They probably didn't even know what *Universe City* was and fan art was a weird hobby anyway and they might think that I was secretly drawing porn or something and they'd all hunt down my Tumblr and read all my personal posts on there and everything would be awful. School Brainiac and Head Girl Frances Janvier Exposed as Fandom Freak.

I cleared my throat. "Erm… you wouldn't be interested. Don't worry."

"Fine then." Daniel shook his head and turned away.

Universe City. Had chosen. Me. To be. Their artist.

I felt like dying, but in a good way.

"Frances?" said a very quiet voice. "Are you okay?"

I looked up to find myself face to face with Aled Last, Daniel's best friend.

Aled Last always looked a little like a child who'd lost their mum in a supermarket. This was possibly something to do with how young he looked, how round his eyes were, and how his hair was soft like baby hair. He never seemed to be comfortable in any of the clothes that he wore.

He didn't go to our school – he went to an all-boys' grammar school on the other side of town, and though he was only three months older than me, he was in the school year above. Most people knew who he was because of Daniel. I knew who he was because he lived opposite me and I used to be friends with his twin sister and we took the same train to school, even though we sat in different carriages and didn't talk to each other.

Aled Last was standing next to Daniel, gazing down at where

I was still sitting, hyperventilating, in the chair. He cringed a little and followed up with, "Er, sorry, erm, I mean, you just looked like you were about to be sick or something."

I attempted to say a sentence without bursting into hysterical laughter.

"I am fine," I said, but I was grinning and probably looked like I was about to murder someone. "Why are you here? Daniel Support?"

According to rumour, Aled and Daniel had been inseparable their whole lives, despite the fact that Daniel was an uppity, opinionated dickhead and Aled spoke maybe fifty words per day.

"Er, no," he said, his voice almost too quiet to hear, as usual. He looked terrified. "Dr Afolayan wanted me to give a speech. About university."

I stared at him. "But you don't even go to our school."

"Er, no."

"So what's up with that?"

"It was Mr Shannon's idea." Mr Shannon was the head teacher of Aled's school. "Something about camaraderie between our schools. One of my friends was supposed to be doing this actually… he was head boy last year… but he's busy so… he asked if I'd do it… yeah."

Aled's voice got gradually quieter as he was speaking, almost like he didn't think I was listening to him, despite the fact that I was looking right at him.

"And you said yes?" I said.

"Yes."

"*Why?*"

Aled just laughed.

He was visibly quaking.

"Because he's a turnip," said Daniel, folding his arms.

"Yes," Aled murmured, but he was smiling.

"You don't have to do it," I said. "I could just tell them you're sick and everything will be fine."

"I sort of have to do it," he said.

"You don't really have to do anything you don't want to," I said, but I knew that wasn't true, and so did Aled, because he just laughed at me and shook his head.

We didn't say anything else.

Afolayan was on stage again. "And now I'd like to welcome Aled Last, one of the boys' school's *wonderful* Year 13s, who will be setting off to one of the UK's most prestigious universities in September. Well, if his A levels go to plan, anyway!"

All the parents laughed at this. Daniel and Aled and I did not.

Afolayan and the parents started to clap as Aled walked on to the stage. He approached the microphone. I'd done it a thousand times and I always got that little stomach flip beforehand, but watching Aled do it then was somehow three billion times worse.

I hadn't really spoken to Aled properly before. He caught the same train to school as me, but he sat in a different carriage. I knew next to nothing about him.

"Er, hi, yeah," he said. His voice sounded like he'd just stopped crying.

"I didn't realise he was this shy," I whispered at Daniel, but Daniel didn't say anything.

"So, last year I, er, had an interview…"

Daniel and I watched him struggle through his speech. Daniel, a practised public speaker like myself, occasionally shook his head. At one point he said, "He should have said no, for fuck's sake." I didn't really like watching so I sat back in the chair for the second half of it and read the Twitter message fifty times over. I tried to switch my mind off and focus on *Universe City* and the messages.

Radio had liked my art. Stupid little sketches of the characters, weird line drawings, 3am doodles in my 99p sketchbook instead of finishing my history essay. Nothing like this had happened to me, ever.

When Aled walked off stage and joined us again I said, "Well done, that was really good!" even though we both knew I was lying again.

He met my eyes. His had dark blue circles under them. Maybe he was a night owl like me.

"Thanks," he said, and then he walked away, and I thought that'd probably be the last time I ever saw him.