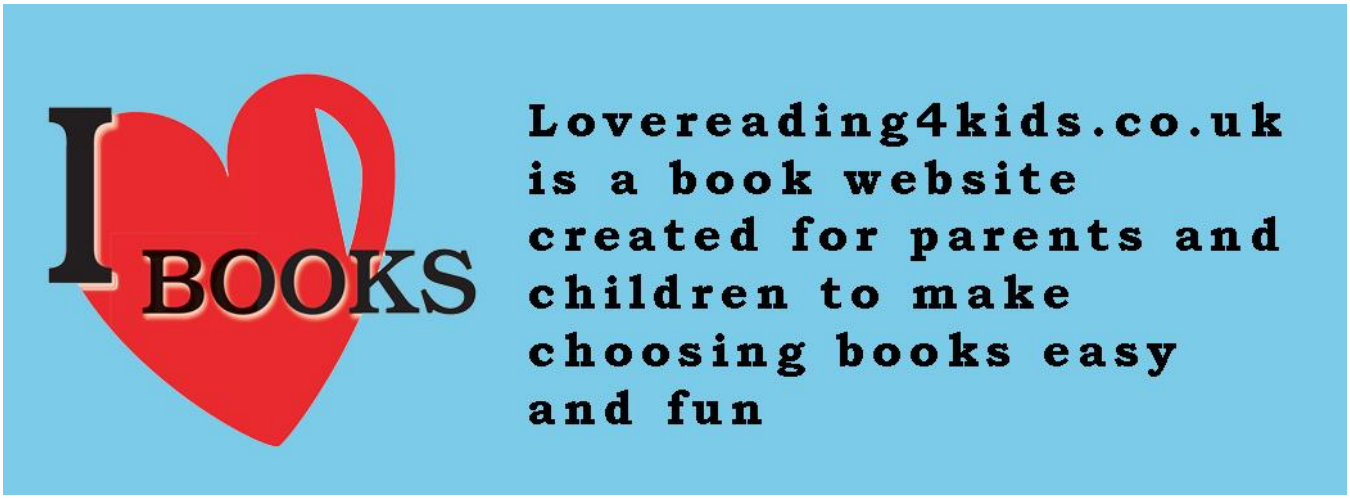


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ONE

I draw green daggers stuck deep in each heart and then I cover the poster with glittery blood. Just as I'm adding Romeo (dead), the door to the head teacher's office flies opens and Carol sticks her head out.

'Mrs Pollard will see you now, Pearl.' She peers at the noticeboard. 'Oh dear. What are you doing?'

'Nothing,' I say, dropping the pens in my bag and following her inside. Carol is Mrs P's secretary and that means we get to hang out together a lot. I grab a couple of Mint Imperials from the bowl on her desk then wander through to Mrs P's office.

My head teacher is sitting on her big swivel chair, her head bent over the pile of letters. 'Hello, Miss!' I say. She doesn't look up so I make the steel balls on

her executive toy start clanging against each other. Her hand shoots out and silences them. 'I've come to get my phone.' I can actually see it sitting on the corner of her desk.

She signs another letter. 'Take a seat, Pearl.'

I drop down in my usual place on the sofa. My fingers are itching for my phone. 'C'mon, Miss. I could be on Instagram right now.'

She signs a final letter, puts the lid on her pen, then looks up. 'Pearl, can you explain why Mr Hickman confiscated your phone during geography?'

'Because he's *insane*. Seriously, he totally overreacted. I just got it out to check the time and he grabbed it off me!' I rub my hand as if it still hurts. 'He might actually have a problem . . .'

'Well, your stories don't *quite* match.' Mrs P peels a Post-it note off my phone. 'He says, "I took this off Pearl Harris because she was using it to sell the contents of my classroom on eBay."' She looks at me over the top of her specs. 'Is this true?'

'No!' I say, outraged. It's not entirely true. I'm also

selling his car. 'I think he was in a mood because he was behind with our reports.'

'What?' Her eyes narrow.

'He hadn't even started them, so he put on *The Day After Tomorrow* and did them during the lesson.' Mrs P drops the Post-it and attacks her keyboard. 'You're clearly busy,' I say, 'so how about I grab my phone and promise never to get it out in lessons ever again?'

She glances up. 'How many times have you sat there and promised me that?'

I let my head roll back and stare at the ceiling.

'Sit up,' she snaps.

'Hang on,' I say. 'Still counting.' I look at her. 'One hundred and twenty-three times?'

'Very funny.' She frowns, but the corner of her mouth lifts for a moment. I love making Mrs P laugh. Along with getting sent out of lessons, it's probably my main hobby. 'You may have your phone back tomorrow, Pearl.'

'How about *today*?'

'Tomorrow.'

'Or today might be better: like, right now.' I slowly reach for my phone.

'Oh no you don't.' She pulls it back.

I start to feel hot. All the windows are shut and the room smells of coffee and egg sandwiches. 'Miss, I *need* my phone.'

We stare at each other. Suddenly, everything about her annoys me: her little gold glasses, the way her orange lipstick has gathered in the corners of her mouth like baked bean sauce, and her owl earrings. I *despise* those owls. She takes off her glasses and pinches her nose between two fingers. The owls shiver. 'You *want* your phone, Pearl. There is a difference. Tell me why you *want* your phone so much.'

'Basically it's my watch,' I say, pulling my sleeve over my black Casio. 'Without it, I'll be late for things, like the *Romeo and Juliet* auditions that I'm supposed to be at *right now*.'

'You're a talented young lady, Pearl – clever, musically gifted, confident –'

'Cheers, Miss!'

'*But* I'm starting to get worried about you.' She taps her pen on the desk. 'You're at the start of Year Eleven. In a matter of months you will be sitting your GCSEs, but you're truanting, you never do homework and you have so many detentions I can't keep up with them. You're predicted A grades, but we know that's never going to happen.'

I roll my eyes. I am *so* bored of this conversation.

'Stay with me, Pearl!' she says, clicking her fingers. 'Do you remember when I met you in Year Seven? You had won a spelling competition and you came to collect your prize.'

'The Toblerone,' I say. It was a metre long. I ate half of it and put the rest in Mrs Bradman's exhaust pipe.

'You were so proud. But soon the detentions began, followed by suspensions . . .'

I make my eyes go wide. 'I promise to change, Miss.'

Her eyes flick over my skinny trousers and battered

ballet pumps and rest on my leather and silver wrist cuffs. 'Well, if you don't . . .' She pauses.

'Then what?'

'Then I won't let you be in *Romeo and Juliet*.'

I laugh. 'You wouldn't do that.'

'Yes I would. I've already spoken to Ms Kapoor. I'll do anything to keep you in school.'

I stare at Mrs P as I try to imagine not performing in *Romeo and Juliet*. I've starred in Ms Kapoor's musicals since Year Seven and I love everything about them: the dancing, the singing, the feeling I get when I walk on to the stage and everyone gazes up at me, waiting to see what I will say or do next . . .

No. I push the thought away. Mrs P wouldn't do it to me: how many times has she threatened to chuck me out of school or send me somewhere else? But here I am, still sat on this sofa while she has a go at me. 'I'd better get to the audition,' I say, standing up.

'Hang on.' She holds up one finger. 'There's something I've been meaning to ask you.'

'What?'

'Did you and Tiann steal Ms Higginson's gel pens?'

'Is that what she said?' I pick up my bag. The pens rattle around inside. 'Absolutely not, Miss. She is such a liar.'

Mrs P shakes her head and goes back to her letters. 'Come and get your phone tomorrow morning.'

At the door, I pause.

'Yes, Pearl?' she says with a sigh.

'I *need* to be in the show,' I say.

Mrs P smiles then bends her head back over her letters, owls jiggling. I leave her office, making sure I shut the door behind me.

'Everything sorted?' Carol asks.

'Great!' I start to straighten up the photos of her Jack Russell. 'How's Pippa's tick problem?'

'Much better, although I did pull a whopper off her last night.' I encourage Carol to go on about tweezers and surgical spirit then I remind her it's time for Mrs P's chamomile tea. 'You're such a thoughtful girl,' she says,

flicking on the kettle. Soon she's heading for Mrs P's door carrying a steaming mug.

'Oh, Carol,' I say. 'I left my phone on Miss's desk. Will you grab it for me?'

'Of course!'

TWO

I walk into the drama studio, my phone in my hand, and immediately everyone turns and stares. I have this effect on people at school. I'd like to think it's my gorgeous face . . . but more likely it's my reputation. I've done a few things in the past that people never seem to forget.

Well, let them stare. I like it. I lift my chin up, smile and look right back at them. One by one they look away, but a short girl with glasses can't take her eyes off me. Her mouth is hanging open and she's holding a crisp in the air. 'What flavour?' I ask, looking down at her.

'Smokey bacon,' she whispers.

'Nice.' I snatch it out of her hand and stick it in my

mouth. Over by the stage, my friend Kat is strumming away on her ukulele. 'See ya,' I say to the girl.

'Bye . . .'

Kat's sitting on the floor, legs crossed, back perfectly straight. I drop down next to her and she glances up, still playing her ukelele. 'What did you say to Bus Kelly?' she asks.

'Who's Bus Kelly?'

'That girl you were just talking to. You've been getting the bus with her for years.'

'Have I? I don't recognise her . . . Don't worry. I was just being friendly.' I slap my hand across the strings of her uke to stop the strumming.

She stares at my hand. 'That wasn't very friendly.'

'The thing is, Kat, when you play that thing, I want to smash it up.'

She starts playing even louder and faster. 'How about now?'

I laugh. 'Yep. Definitely want to smash it up. On you.'

She grins and strums the uke in my face until I grab it off her. 'Where are the others?' I ask. 'The others' are

Bea and Betty, Kat's friends. They used to be my friends too, back in primary school, but then we fell out. My big mouth might have had a tiny bit to do with that . . . Recently, the four of us have been hanging out together again. It's nothing like it used to be, but at least we're talking.

'They've got art catch-up. Betty's papier-mâchéing Bea's nose . . . or maybe it's her toes. Definitely some part of her body.'

'Such freaks,' I say, shaking my head.

'Hey, you promised to be nice to them.'

'I'm trying, but they make it so hard for me. Especially Betty. Is she wearing her bowler hat?'

'Yep. Don't you dare say a word about it.' Kat puts her ukulele away in its case. 'I'm guessing you want to be Juliet?'

'Want to be and *will be*. Look around you.'

'What?' She peers across the studio.

'Except for me, every girl in this room is weird, ugly or a skank. Look at Evie Russell. She manages to be all three! No way are any of them Juliet.'

'What about me?'

'You're not auditioning, are you?' That wouldn't be good. Kat actually looks quite Julietish with her big blue eyes and blonde hair.

'No,' she says. 'Too scared of you. Everyone knows it's your part. Plus there's the little issue of me not being able to sing.' She pulls a packet out of her bag. 'Jaffa Cake?'

I take four. I'm starving. 'Evie's sitting with Hairy Jonah,' I say, nibbling round the edge of a Jaffa Cake. 'Imagine if they had kids . . . they'd be *beasts*.'

'You're kind of obsessed with Hairy Jonah.'

'I am not!'

'Didn't you go out with him?'

I roll my eyes. 'For two weeks . . . over a year ago. Doesn't even count. Anyway, shut up about Hairy Jonah.'

'You're the one who can't stop talking about him.'

'I said, *shut up*!' I throw one of my Jaffa Cakes at her.

But she just laughs and says, 'Someone's feeling nervous.'

'Nope,' I say, holding out my hand. 'Totally steady.'

She stares at my fingers. 'They're shaking, Pearl.'

'That's only because I want a fag.'

'You should stop smoking – you managed it in Sweden.' Kat and I went to Sweden last summer and Kat's crazy auntie forced me to stop smoking, but the moment our plane landed in England I lit up again. Just thinking about smoking is making my hands twitch. 'Don't you want to know which part I'm auditioning for?' asks Kat.

'Go on then.'

'A man. I don't care which one. Betty says the male characters will be trained in stage combat, so we're all going to be men and fight each other!'

'Well, I'm going to be Juliet so I can be trained to get it on with Jake Flower.'

Kat stares up at the stage. 'Hello, speaking of *The Flower* . . .'

I follow her gaze. Jake's just walked on to the stage with Ms Kapoor. Everyone knows he's going to be Romeo even though Sixth-Formers aren't supposed to

take part. He's such a legend he didn't even have to audition. He has his own rules at school, just like me. We'd be perfect together.

Kat sighs dramatically. 'Even his teeth are sexy . . . Have you noticed?'

'Because of the little gap?'

'That's it! And his ears . . . I like his ears.'

'His *ears*?'

She shrugs. 'I like his ears,' she says. 'Is that weird?'

'Yes. And haven't you forgotten Leo, your *boyfriend*?'

'He's eight hundred miles away in Stockholm, and right now Jake is eight metres away . . . There's no harm in looking.' We fall silent and take a moment to appreciate Jake, although Kat might be thinking about her boyfriend. She's smiling at nothing, which usually means she's drifted back to last summer and Leo.

Up on the stage, Jake is laughing, one hand messing up his short dark hair. I don't think I've ever seen him look worried. That's one of the reasons I like him so much. When I'm around him, I get this feeling that everything's going to be OK. 'Kat,' I say, 'do you

remember Year Nine when Miss Butler asked us if we could think of any other words that meant beautiful?'

'And I said, "Jake Flower!"'.

'You're such an idiot,' I say, but I'm laughing. 'Well, the good news is, he's just dumped his ugly, dumb girlfriend, Ella.'

'Do you mean his *stunning*, *clever* girlfriend, Ella?'

'Whatever. If I'm Juliet, Jake will have to kiss me – every night. We'll have to rehearse it!'

'Nice.' Kat nods appreciatively.

'Romeo!' I gasp, sticking my tongue into the jelly bit of my Jaffa Cake. '"You kiss by the book."'

'Not nice. Disgusting.'

Ms Kapoor claps her hands. 'Everyone up on the stage!'

I shove the rest of the Jaffa Cake in my mouth and point at my face. 'Juliet,' I say.

'If you say so,' she says, pulling me to my feet.