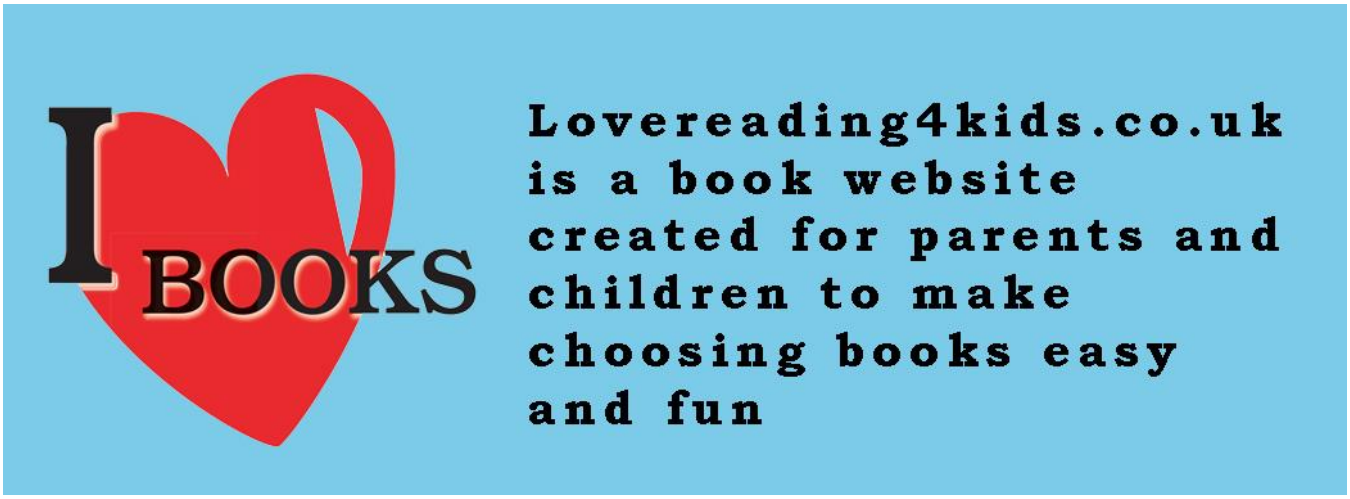


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Kook

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1

JADE GOT ME in trouble from day one.

We moved back to Cornwall one Saturday, early last September. Mum, my kid sister Tegan, and me.

It was a sunny day, with a cool wind. The first day of autumn, or maybe the last of summer.

We drove through the village of Penford, and after a five-minute drive over the moor, bounced our way down a broken track.

When we got there, I saw why the rent was cheap. There were two cottages, storm-beaten old things, with moss on their roofs and rotten wood windows, nestled between the clifftops and the moor. There were stone walls to keep the sheep away, a few brush trees bent into weird shapes by the wind, and not much else.

Half a mile downhill, the land ended in a sharp line at the clifftop.

We were going to live in one cottage. Jade, her dad and their dog already lived in the other. They came over in the afternoon when Mum was arguing with the removal guy about why it wasn't her fault the track had knackered the van's suspension.

Jade's dad introduced them both. Jade hung back and let him do the talking. He said about borrowing a cup of sugar any time and other neighbourly stuff. I didn't pay any attention. I was working hard trying not to stare at Jade.

Her hair was long and black. Her eyes were sea blue-and-green, shining out of a honey brown face. Jade had a glow about her, something no old T-shirt and denim jacket could hide.

She took one look at me with those sea eyes and curled her lips into a half-smile. It put a hook in me.

"How old are you, Sam?" her dad said.

"Sorry, what?" I said.

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"Right. You'll be going to Penwith High with Jade then. You can help each other with homework, hang out and stuff." He was over keen. I think it was awkward for Jade as well as me. I found out later he'd checked me with one look and reckoned I'd be *A Good Influence* on Jade. Different from the type she normally hung out with.

We went into the kitchen to drink tea and eat a cake they'd brought with them, her dad – Bob – and Mum chatting away about Cornwall, me and Jade competing at who-can-say-the-least. She liked Tegan though. Jade gave her bits of cake to feed to the scruffy sheep dog.

When they stood to go, Bob said, "Jade was going to take Tess for a walk. You could go with her… Oh, daft, aren't I? You're unpacking. Another time."

"That's okay," said Mum. "You go, Sam, but not too long. If it's all right with Jade?"

"Okay." Jade and her dog were out of the kitchen before I could say a word.

Jade made a line for the nearby hill, pelting straight up the path like she was on a mission.

"What's the hurry?" I said, catching her up.

"I need to check something." She had a Cornish accent. But soft; husky.

At the top we climbed up on to a large, flat rock and sat down. She pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket and, using me as a wind shelter, lit one.

Beyond the moor was the sea, blue and white and shining. The light of it hit me so hard I had to screw up my eyes. I hadn't seen the Cornish sea in years, not since I was four, after Dad died. I couldn't even *remember* it much. I hadn't expected that just looking at it would make my head spin. It was big as the sky.

"Great view," I said.

"Yeah. Right. Hold this," she said, passing me the cigarette. She pulled a tiny pair of binoculars from her denim jacket, fiddled with the focus and pointed them at the distant sea. Along the coast was a thin headland of cliff knifing into the Atlantic. Jade didn't move an inch. She just stared through the binocs, reaching out a hand for the cigarette once in a while. The dog lay beside her, its black and white head on her lap.

Then, suddenly, she sat upright, tense, like she'd noticed something. All I could make out was a thin line of white water, rolling into the distant cliff.

"What you looking at?" I said.

"Signposts."

"What?"

"That's the spot's name." She sighed, and pocketed the binocs. "I can see the waves there, *that's* why it's called Signposts. Swell's about three foot. Do you surf, Sam?"

"No."

"Shame. I do." She jumped off the rock, leaving me holding the smouldering fag butt. And I thought, *Oh, right, see you then*. But…

"Come on!" she shouted, running down the hill.

"Surfing?" I shouted. But she'd already gone too far to hear me.

2

AS I RAN, I was thinking, *Shit, this is already nothing like London.*

The moors in the sun were nothing like the flats that filled up the sky in Westbourne Park. Running off to the beach was nothing like heading to the dog-turd littered park for a kickaround. And Jade was nothing like… any girl I'd ever met. She wasn't just beautiful. There was something about her. Something raw and naked. Something you wanted to look at – *had* to look at – but felt you shouldn't.

We went past our place and straight to their cottage. They'd built a wooden barn-garage right next to it. It was full of junk: an old washing machine, bikes, crates of books. I clocked the surfboards stacked against the wall, but she walked past them to a ladder leading up to an attic. I was going to follow her, but she said, "No, wait here."

After a minute or two, she climbed back down, carrying a wetsuit and towel.

"What's up there?" I asked. She didn't answer. She stood by the surfboards, eyeing them up before choosing the middle one of the three – a blue beaten-up old thing about half a foot taller than she was, with a V shaped tail.

"Love this fish," she said, stroking its edge. "Flies in anything." She balanced the suit and towel over her shoulder and stuck the board under one arm. Then she took an old bike from where it leant against a fridge.

"You can borrow Dad's bike," she said.

"But I don't surf."

"You said. Come anyway. Don't be a kook."

"What's a kook?"

"It's what you are," she said, getting on the bike.

"Do you want me to carry…" I started. But she was already out of the door, riding the bike with one hand, and holding the board under her arm with the other. The dog followed, jumping and wagging its tail.

"How d'you do that?" I said.

"Practice!" she shouted.

It was making me dizzy. One minute we're eating cake, then we're up a hill, then we're off to the beach. And she was bossy. That annoyed me. But I was dead curious, and yeah, she was that pretty, you wouldn't *not* follow her. I grabbed her dad's bike and pedalled after her.

After ten minutes we took a path off the road and cycled

down a stony trail, with the dog running behind us, stopping where the ruined towers and walls of an old tin mine hung to the cliff edge.

We dumped the bikes. Jade led us past a 'DANGER – KEEP OUT' sign by the mine and down a steep path that ended by a huge granite boulder, right on the cliff edge. She walked up to the large rock, and put the board on top of it, stretching, nudging it over the top with her fingertips. She left it there, balancing. Then, placing her body tight against the rock, and still with the towel and wetsuit over her shoulder, she moved around the rock, till she disappeared. A few seconds later the board disappeared too, pulled over the rock's edge. The dog ran up the cliff and over the boulder.

It was like they'd just vanished.

I stepped up to the cliff edge and looked down. The sight of the sea hit me in the gut. It must have been a thirty-foot drop. She'd shimmied around the rock, casual as anything, along a ledge inches wide. If you slipped, you'd fall. If you were lucky, you'd grab a rock and hold on. Chances were, you'd go over. And die.

"Coming?" said her voice, from behind the rock, teasing me.

"Sure," I said. I knew that without the drop I could do it easy, so why not now? I wasn't going to bottle it in front of this girl.

I pushed my face against the cool stone and edged around the rock. The volume of life was turned up. I could hear every

shuffle of my feet, every breath echoing around my head, every beat of my heart. I couldn't see my feet; I just had to trust they were going in the right place.

It only took about ten seconds, but they were long ones.

When I came round, I was panting and she was smiling, with a raised eyebrow and half of her mouth curling, like she was amused.

The path – hidden from the other side of the rock – hugged the cliff, with sheer cliff on one side and a steep drop on the other. It was no more than two feet wide. A tricky climb down. But like with the bike and carrying the board, Jade made it look easy. I guessed she'd done it a hundred times before.

There was no beach when we reached the bottom, just a flat ledge of reef, rock pools and seaweed. Far out to sea, the wind was messing up the ocean, chasing white peaks across the bay. But here the water was still, dark glass. Somewhere between this secret cove and the open sea were two surfers, sat on their boards, still as statues.

"Tell anyone about this place and they'll kill you," said Jade, pointing at them and sounding like she wasn't kidding. Surrounding herself with the towel, she started to change. She had a swimsuit on under her hoody. She must have changed into it when she was in the garage attic.

And there I was again. Staring. I don't think I was dribbling, or had my mouth open or anything. But I might have been, the way she glared at me.

"Oh, sorry," I said, and looked away. "There's no waves." It was flat calm, apart from a gentle lapping at the rock's edge.

"Long wave period. Watch."

After a couple of minutes, like a clockwork doll coming to life, one of the surfers flipped his board round and started paddling towards the shore. At first I couldn't see why, but then, behind him, hard to see against the sea-glare, was a wall of water. It jacked up, rising out of the blue till it formed a feathering edge. The surfer angled his board, paddled a stroke or two, pushed up with his arms and swung his feet beneath him, landing on the board, and in one swoop was riding down and across the wave, gliding in a long line before weaving the board in a series of snake shapes. The wave broke perfectly, carrying the surfer one step ahead of the white mess behind him. Then the other surfer did the same thing on the wave behind. Their whoops echoed around the cliff.

And I got it. Even then, I got it.

It looked like freedom.

Jade appeared at my shoulder, in her wetsuit. "I'm gonna get some of that. Look after Tess," she shouted. She ran to where the rock met the water's edge and launched herself into the sea, landing on the board and paddling powerfully into the dark water.

As the sun sank in the sky, I sat down with the dog at my side and watched.

They made it look easy, carving up and down the faces of

the waves, spinning their bodies and boards round like they were dancing on water.

So yeah, I got it. And this place was part of the buzz I was feeling, this secret cove and the girl and the surfing and the sun falling into the sea. They all added up to something good. Something not-London.

When another surfer arrived it felt wrong, like he'd invaded my own little bit of heaven. Which was crazy. I was the stranger there.

He was about my age, tall and big shouldered, with a lot of scruffy black hair, a scraggy would-be beard and big cow eyes. But there was something intense about those eyes. They were full alert, with a thousand-yard stare, like he was looking through me. He wasn't smiling; his natural look was a sneer. He came over and stood closer to me than he needed to. He looked at Tess like he was puzzled. I think he recognised the dog.

"Your mate's out there?" he said, pointing out to sea.

"No, I'm with this girl…" I said. He looked out to sea, frowning. "I don't mean with…" I stumbled. "She just… brought me here."

"Right. You a surfer?"

"No," I said. He nodded, like I'd said the right answer, and left me alone.

★

Jade returned after an hour or more in the water. And I was thinking that was good, I needed to get back.

"Well, that was a score. Did you see me, Sam? Real fun waves," she said, strutting up to me.

She'd been hard edged before; now she was grinning like an idiot and was super friendly, like she'd taken some happy drug.

"Tempted?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Look, I'd better be getting back."

"Wait for me," she said, pleading with her eyes.

That was okay. It was getting late in the afternoon. I'd need to get back and help Mum, but ten minutes more was no big deal. But then two of the surfers came back in, out of the water, and Jade went over to talk to them. I didn't want to hurry her, but I knew it was late, that Mum would be getting wound up. After she'd chatted a bit, Jade came back over to change.

"Rag and Skip are gonna make a fire up top. Let's stay."

"I can't."

"Oh."

I watched the guy still out there, and tried not to look too much at Jade changing, fumbling around with a towel and her clothes. The bits of flesh I saw were the colour of honey, or dark sand. Her body was muscly, but curvy too. I'd seen that when she was in her wetsuit. A body shaped by years in the water. The hook twisted.

The surfer – the one who had asked me who I was – was still out there, further than the others had sat, waiting for the last wave. He got it too, a real freak, bigger than all the

other waves that day. Jade and the others stopped what they were doing and watched. This guy was good. All the other surfers had moved with the wave, letting it dictate what they did, but he was in charge of *it*, slicing deep arcs, pulling crazy turns, gouging huge chunks of water out of the wave and sending spray that caught the light in rainbow colours. Halfway along the wave, he pulled one turn too hard, just as the wave was crashing. It punched him into the water, chewing him up in a soup of white water and arms and legs.

"Is he all right?" I asked.

They all laughed. One of the surfers, a stocky guy with curly, long blond hair shouted out, "Cocky bastard!"

Jade was changed now. She came up to me, speaking in a low voice, drying her hair.

"They're sooooo jealous. They can't surf like that." She was still grinning. "Come on. Meet the others, let G know you're okay," she said, throwing her wet towel at me.

"Who?"

"Him, the cocky bastard." She pointed at the surfer getting out of the water. "I spoke to him out there. He's not thrilled I brought you here."

"Why did you?" I threw the towel back at her.

"Just cuz you were there, I suppose." She shrugged.

"What about your dad? Won't he miss you?"

"Nah. He won't care. Anyway, Dad's bike's got lights on, mine hasn't, so you have to wait and…" She paused, looking

at me. "Where's your dad, Sam, or is it just you, your mum and sister?"

A lot of people wouldn't have asked. They would have thought it was nosey. Not Jade.

"Yeah. It is. Just us," I said.

We'd come back to Cornwall to make peace with my dad's mum, my grandma, who I hadn't seen in over ten years. Not since Dad died. And now *she* was dying. Of cancer. But I didn't want to explain all that. Not to Jade; not then.

So yeah, it was 'just us' in that small house. And right then I didn't want to be there, unpacking boxes. And Jade was being nice. Really nice. And I thought, *How many chances will I get to make friends?*

We stayed.