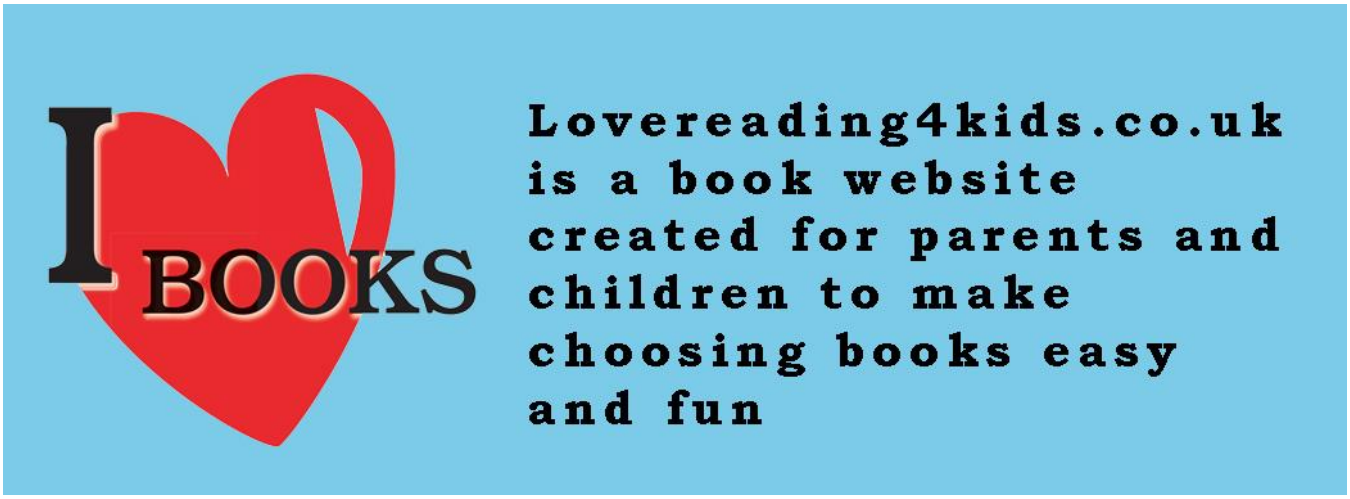


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ONE

SOLOMON REED

Solomon never needed to leave the house anyway. He had food. He had water. He could see the mountains from his bedroom window, and his parents were so busy all the time that he pretty much got to be sole ruler of the house. Jason and Valerie Reed let it be this way because, eventually, giving in to their son's condition was the only way to make him better. So, by the time he turned sixteen, he hadn't left the house in three years, two months, and one day. He was pale and chronically barefoot and it worked. It was the only thing that ever had.

He did his schoolwork online—usually finishing it before his parents were home every evening, with bed head and pajamas on. If the phone rang, he'd let it go to voice mail. And, on the rare occasion that someone knocked on the door, he would look through the peephole until whoever it was—a Girl Scout, a politician, or maybe a neighbor—would give up and leave. Solomon lived in the only world that would have him. And even though it was quiet and mundane and sometimes lonely, it never got out of control.

He hadn't made the decision lightly, and it should be said that he at least tried to make it out there for as long as possible, for as long as anyone like him *could*. Then one day trying wasn't enough, so he stripped down to his boxers and sat in the fountain in front of his junior high school. And right there, with his classmates and teachers watching, with the morning sun blinding him, he slowly leaned back until his entire body was underwater.

That was the last time Solomon Reed went to Upland Junior High and, within a matter of days, he started refusing to go outside altogether. It was better that way.

"It's better this way," he said to his mom, who begged him each morning to try harder.

And really, it was. His panic attacks had been happening since he was eleven, but over the course of just two years, he'd gone from having one every few months, to once a month, to twice, and so on. By the time he hopped into the fountain like a lunatic, he was having mild to severe panic attacks up to three times daily.

It was hell.

After the fountain, he realized what he had to do. Take away the things that make you panic and you won't panic. And then he spent three years wondering why everyone found that so hard to understand. All he was doing was living instead of dying. Some people get cancer. Some people get crazy. Nobody tries to take the chemo away.

Solomon was born and will, in all likelihood, die in Upland, California. Upland is a suburb of Los Angeles, just about an hour east of downtown. It's in a part of the state

they call the Inland Empire, which really floats Solomon's boat because it sounds like something from *Star Trek*, which is a television show he knows far too much about.

His parents, Jason and Valerie, *don't* know too much about *Star Trek,* despite their son's insistence that it's a brilliant exploration of humanity. It makes him happy, though, so they'll watch an episode with him every now and then. They even ask questions about the characters from time to time just so they can see that excited look he gets.

Valerie Reed is a dentist with her own practice in Upland, and Jason builds movie sets on a studio lot in Burbank. You'd think this would lead to some great stories from work, but Jason's the kind of guy who thinks Dermot Mulroney and Dylan McDermott are interchangeable, so most of his celebrity sightings can't be trusted.

A week after he turned sixteen, Solomon was growing impatient as his dad tried to tell him about an actor he'd seen on set earlier that day.

"You know . . . the guy with the mustache. From the show . . . the show with the theme song . . ."

"That's every show on TV, Dad."

"Oh, you know the guy. The gun guy!"

"The *gun* guy? What does that even mean?"

"The guy. He holds the gun in the opening thing. I know you know the guy."

"I don't know. *Hawaii Five-O?*"

"That's a movie, not an actor," his dad said.

"It's a television show. How can you work in Hollywood?"

"You get your schoolwork done today?" Solomon's mom asked as she walked into the living room.

"This morning. How was work?"

"I got a new patient today."

"Keep bringing in those big bucks!" his dad joked.

Nobody laughed.

"She says she went to Upland Junior High. Lisa Praytor? Does that ring a bell?"

"Nope," Solomon replied.

"Nice girl. Beautiful molars. But she's going to need to get those wisdom teeth out in a year or two or she'll have to get braces all over again."

"Did you have braces?" Solomon asked.

"Headgear. It was awful."

"Oh, it all makes sense now. You want to put others through the torture of your childhood."

"Don't analyze me."

"Solomon, stop analyzing your mother," his dad said from behind a book, one of those creepy mystery novels he was always reading.

"Anyway, she's a nice girl. Pretty too. Only one cavity."

Solomon knew good and well what was going on. His mom was doing that thing she did where she thought talking about some pretty girl would suddenly cure her son and have him walking right out the front door and straight to high school. It was innocent enough, but he hoped she wasn't actually that desperate for him to change. Because, if she was, then wouldn't these little moments, built up over time, eventually collapse into a mess?

He'd heard their conversations about him a few times. When he was ten he learned that if he held a plastic cup against his bedroom wall, he could hear everything his parents were saying in their bedroom. The last time he listened was when his mom asked his dad if they were going to be "stuck with him forever." After she said it, he didn't hear anything for a while. Then he realized it was because she'd started crying as soon as the words left her mouth. Hours later, Solomon was still awake wondering how to answer his mother's question. He eventually decided on a hard yes.

TWO

LISA PRAYTOR

Sometimes life just hands you the lemonade, straight up in a chilled glass with a little slice of lemon on top. For Lisa Praytor, junior and straight-A student at Upland High, meeting Solomon Reed's mother was that glass of lemonade. And it was going to change her life.

You may have known a Lisa Praytor at some point. She was the girl sitting at the front of your classroom, raising her hand to answer every single question the teacher asked. She stayed after school to work on the yearbook and as soon as she got home, she dove headfirst into her homework.

She'd always been one to keep a packed schedule, choosing at age eleven to live by the words of her great-aunt Dolores, who said, "Not a day on your calendar should ever be empty. It's bad luck. Twenty-four hours of wasted opportunity."

Not even an offer from her boyfriend to drive to the coast and watch the sunset could tempt her off schedule. And Clark Robbins was the kind of guy who asked her to do things like that all the time. He was handsome without being threatening, and his tree-bark brown hair parted

in a way that was particularly appealing to Lisa. On the day that Lisa met Solomon's mom, she'd been dating Clark for a year and seventeen days. She had it marked on her calendar for proof.

During eighth grade, after a seventh grader had an episode in front of the school, Lisa wrote an op-ed piece for the Upland Junior High *Register* to defend the boy—a scathing essay on the importance of empathy. It didn't go over well with her classmates and until the end of the year, rumors swirled around that Lisa was secretly dating the crazy kid who jumped into the fountain.

Had it not been for the student body of nearly one thousand at Upland Junior High, Lisa may not have been able to escape her failed attempt at heroism when she got to high school. She did, though, and most of her friends and classmates eventually forgot about it altogether.

But not Lisa. She'd seen him that day—this skinny little guy with messy hair taking his shirt off and dropping his pants and walking that slow, quiet walk toward the water. She never knew him, really, but she'd always thought he looked nice, like the kind of guy who'd hold a door open for someone else without a thought. And she'd always hoped that someday she'd see him again or, at the very least, hear that he was doing okay.

Then one day, Lisa saw an advertisement for Valerie Reed's dental practice in the local newspaper. It took one Internet search to confirm that this was Solomon's mother. She'd never really been looking for the fountain kid, despite thinking about him from time to time and wondering where he'd ended up. But the second she realized she'd

found him, she knew she had to get to him as soon as possible. And the only way to do that was to make an appointment with his mom. At the very least, Lisa would get a nice teeth cleaning and a free toothbrush. At the very best, she'd make all her dreams come true.

"So, where do you go to school?" Dr. Valerie Reed asked as she sat down to examine Lisa's teeth. It was March twenty-fourth, a Tuesday, and Lisa was having a really hard time not asking a million questions about Solomon.

"Upland High. Are you Solomon's mother?"

"Yes," she answered, slightly taken aback.

"I went to junior high with him. His picture's on the wall," she smiled, pointing across the room to a photograph of Valerie, Jason, and Solomon hanging by the window.

"You knew him?" Valerie asked.

"*Knew* him?" Lisa asked. "Oh! Did he . . . ?"

"No. God no. Sorry," Valerie said. "He just doesn't get out much."

"Private school? Western Christian?"

"He's homeschooled."

"You do that *and* this?" Lisa asked.

"It's all online. Okay, lean back for me. Open wide."

"I was there you know," Lisa said, sitting straight up.

"Where?" Dr. Reed asked. She was beginning to look a little frustrated.

"That morning. I saw your son . . . I saw his *incident*."

"It was a panic attack," she said. "Can I get a look at those teeth now?"

"Just one more thing," Lisa said.

"Go on."

"Why doesn't he get out much?"

Dr. Reed stared down at her in silence, her mouth covered with a blue paper mask, but her eyes searching for the right answer. And just when she went to speak, Lisa interrupted her.

"It's just . . . no one's seen him in so long. He was there and then he wasn't. It's strange is all. I thought maybe he went off to boarding school or something."

"He made it one day at Western Christian. What do you do if your kid won't leave the house?"

"Homeschool him?"

"It was our only option. Open wide."

As soon as Dr. Reed was done, Lisa picked right back up where she'd left off, not even waiting for her chair to be all the way upright again.

"When was the last time he left the house?"

"You sure are inquisitive, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry. Gosh, I'm so sorry. I never meant to be nosy. I've just thought a lot about him over the last few years and when I realized you were his mom, I guess I got too excited."

"It's okay," she said. "I'm just glad somebody remembers him. It's been three years. A little over, actually."

"Is he okay?"

"Mostly, yeah. We make it work."

"Must get lonely," Lisa said.

"You'd think that, yes."

"Does he have any friends?"

"Not anymore. Used to though. You guys all grow up so

fast. He just couldn't keep up."

"Can you tell him I say hello? I doubt he'll know who I am, but just, you know, if it's not weird."

"I'll tell him, Lisa. And I'll see you next Tuesday to get this cavity fixed up."

Lying to adults was a little easier for Lisa than lying to her peers. Just like herself, none of her friends or classmates really trusted anyone, so lying was hard to get away with. But take someone like Valerie Reed, DDS, probably born in the late seventies to Southern California liberals, and you've got an easy target—someone who wants to trust everyone so much that they don't see a lie when it's slapping them right in the face.

In the grand scheme of things, Lisa knew it was harmless, a necessary step in taking her master plan from concept to actuality. And what a plan it was.

She was going to fix Solomon Reed.

Her life depended on it.