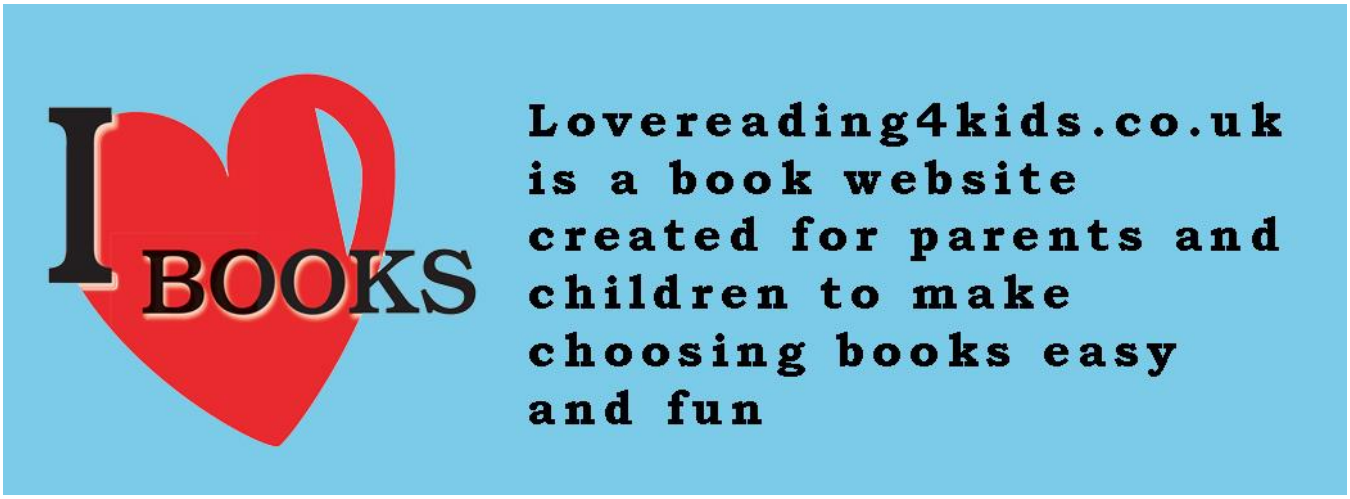


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CHAPTER 1

West Africa

The girl was only ten. Her name was Camille. She was on her way to collect water from the drinking well, a large battered and dented tin jug dangling from each hand, when she spotted it just a few metres off the hard dirt track.

A dead dog.

Not an uncommon sight. Except for the fact that it was only *half* a dead dog. Camille stepped from the track on to the rough ground, mindful of the clumps of dry earth. There were still plenty of old rusting landmines to be wary of, half buried in the sun-baked dirt. . . a regular reminder of the days of the civil war.

As she approached the dog, she could see that it was actually still alive. The tan-coloured animal was whimpering, its front paws clawing at the earth as if it was trying to pull itself along the ground. Its head, chest, front paws, the whole front half of its body was intact, then sloped away into a messy shredded end of bones, tendons and spilled organs. Its eyes rolled up at her as she stood over it. Its pink tongue lolled as it panted.

Camille squatted down beside the dying animal. 'You poor, poor thing,' she said softly. The dog must have triggered one of the old mines, blown its hindquarters clean away.

She squatted down and stroked its muzzle. The animal licked her hand, pitifully grateful for the company.

'You sleep, little lady.' For some reason she was certain the dog was a bitch. 'You sleep now.'

Female. In this troubled country, it was always the women and girls who did the suffering. The men did what they did, and everyone else endured. She caressed the animal's muzzle. It licked her fingers, leaving a slick of saliva stained pink with blood.

The dog quivered and blew froth from its nostrils, then, with a final whimper, it died.

Camille stood up and looked around.

There was no gouge of dark, freshly exposed earth nearby that would indicate a recent explosion. Perhaps the animal had managed to crawl some way after being blown up?

It seemed unlikely. And it had happened recently. She would have heard the bang . . . surely?

Not that it mattered now. The dog was dead. Her suffering was over. At least Camille had been there to comfort her in the last moments of life. She wiped her damp fingers down her yellow shirt, leaving faint pink smudges on the material.

She winced. The fine cotton felt oddly coarse against her sensitive fingertips.

Which was silly, because she had skin that was thick from hard work, callouses on her fingers from carrying those water jugs every day. She looked down at her hand . . .

. . . and saw that the dark pigment had vanished from the tips of her fingers, exposing raw pink flesh that glistened wetly . . . like the tender, not-quite-ready skin beneath a freshly burst blister.

Camille was dead an hour later.

CHAPTER 2

Leon suspected this was something quite different. It was the speed with which it all happened, the speed with which it had gone from being some curious little comment he'd heard tagged on to the end of the morning news on the radio, to being the main item on the TV news, to being the end of the world. Three quickly taken steps all occurring within the span of a week.

His ears had pricked up over breakfast, catching those few words on BBC Radio 4, the very last item as he raced to finish his breakfast.

'*. . . in Nigeria. There's very little information as yet coming from the region, but we do know some sort of containment procedure is already being put in place . . .*'

He tuned his mum out, and his younger sister, both of whom were talking, neither one listening to the other. Leon struggled to hear the radio beneath the shrill babble of their voices; he was sure he'd heard the word *plague* in there somewhere.

'*. . . no confirmation that this is another outbreak of Ebola. In fact, we've heard that's already been ruled out . . .*'

And then the newsreader was off talking about the tedious world of sport: which new athlete was being outed for taking performance-enhancing drugs, which football

team was in danger of being dropped from the Premier Division . . .

Just blah-blah-blah. The usual stuff that filled the 8.30-to-8.40 morning slot. Which was his handy daily cue to finish his bowl of Weetos and get going.

He pushed the bowl of chocolate milk away and stood up. Done.

Bus to catch for college. Another day to endure. Just like the last, just like the next.

'Leon?'

He looked up at his mum. 'Huh?'

'I said don't forget to bring your sports bag home. Your kit's probably growing mildew all over it by now.'

'Uh yeah, right,' he mumbled. He grabbed his rucksack from the back of the chair and headed for the hallway.

'Bowl?' Grace looked up from her phone. She was busy feeding her virtual pony on the screen. *Swipe-drop-munch-neigh . . . points!* Like it actually really mattered.

He sighed at his bossy younger sister. Twelve, and she nagged him like she was his mother, a mini version, but every bit as nag-some. He sighed again and doubled back, picking it up.

'And, Leo . . . you really shouldn't waste the milk.'

He drooped his eyelids at her, his version of *shove it*, poured the milk down the plughole and dropped the bowl into the sink. Half an act of rebellion against his younger sister.

'Good boy,' said Mum distractedly as she fiddled with the buttons of her blouse with one hand and held her

phone to her ear with the other. He squeezed past her, round the kitchen table, heading for the hall.

'Leon?' she called after him.

He stopped and turned.

She smiled guiltily at him, the phone still pressed to her ear. 'It'll be all right, you know? We'll all settle in soon enough.'

He suspected she was on hold, listening to crackly elevator music. Dead time. Son time.

'I know it's been hard, Leo, but . . .'

He knew she felt bad about the way things had been, guilty about everything that had happened recently. Sorry that she hardly had time for either of them.

'Yeah, well . . .' was all Leon could offer in reply. He shrugged. He couldn't even manage to find some sort of lame smile to give back to her.

'You've got friends now, haven't you?' she continued, half stating, half asking.

He nodded. 'Sure.' It was far easier to lie than tell the truth. The last thing he needed right now was Mum telling him how he needed to *engage* . . . to get out there and mix with the other kids.

'How's your head?'

Leon shrugged. He tapped his temples. 'Fine.'

'You got some aspirin? Just in case?'

'Yup.'

'You going for the bus?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Don't forget to pick your sister up on the way back.'

'I won't.'

Grace had fractured her forearm playing netball. She now had it in a cast and a sling, and Mum wanted him to help her home. Her arm ached, his head throbbed, he suspected Mum was on Prozac . . . between the three of them they were getting through drugs like junkies in a crack house.

Mum looked at him pitifully, and for a moment he glimpsed her old self. Mum . . . before she changed her name back to *Jennifer Button*, almost *forensically* removing all trace of his dad. Mum from way back when she'd had time for him.

'Leon . . . honey, it's going to work out –' Her call suddenly connected. 'Oh, yes, appointments please.'

He turned and headed into the hallway, grabbing his jacket off the peg by the front door, and let himself out. If he'd known how this particular week was going to go, how the next few months were going to be . . . he would have told her he loved her, that all the crap they'd been through over the last year was OK . . .

I forgive you, Mum.

But he wasn't to know any of that. Today was only Monday. Just like any other Monday. Another stuff-just-rolls-along day, marked by nothing different, except one word he'd just about managed to hear on the radio in the background.

Plague.