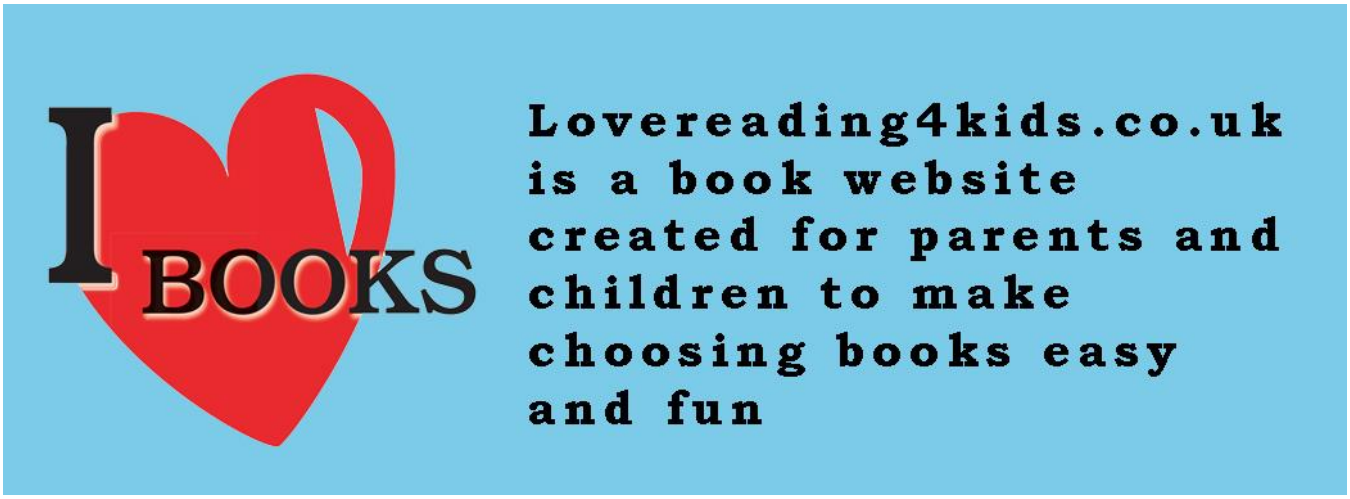


Opening extract from

Wonderboy

Written by

Nicole Burstein

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WONDERBOY

Nicole Burstein

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There's no room for superheroes at Gatford House.

In a world with Vigils flying around, you'd think it would be nearly impossible to find yourself in danger. You'd think that everything would be safe and easy, because what would be the point of doing anything bad if you're just going to get caught out by somebody in a cape? I watch the big saves like everybody else, on the news, on YouTube and on the Vigil fansites, and it could be that I've watched too many, because they've left me with the delusion that maybe, perhaps this time, someone will swoop in at the last minute and save me. But of course they don't. Quantum, the leader of the UK team of Vigils, doesn't descend from the sky like a vanquishing angel. Hayley Divine, with her gift for lightning speed, doesn't swoosh around the corner to come to my rescue. Which is why I'm here, cowering behind the school dumpsters, waiting for the boys who are chasing me to pass before I risk shaking up my inhaler.

Godfrey's minions pass by in one rampaging herd, but I wait a beat longer before I dare relax. It feels like there's

a boa constrictor wrapped around my chest all the way up to my throat, pulsing and squeezing, but my lungs are going to have to wait another moment, just long enough so that I can be sure the boys have gone, and that I'm safe. My pulse throbs through my fingers and right up into the tips of my ears, but I wait, just a little longer. The holding-on is its own endurance test: how long can I last? How much more can I take? Before finally, excruciatingly, it's like I've been underwater for too long and I absolutely must come up to breathe.

I break the surface and pump the inhaler, gulping the vapour down, and the mind-fog swiftly clears away. I stoop over, my hands on my knees, feeling my strength return, feeling the boa constrictor uncoil and ease off, slithering away with each deep breath I take.

Would you believe that there was a time when I thought that misspelling Hitler as 'Titler' throughout a coursework essay was hilarious? It seems so pathetic now. Godfrey had ordered me to write the history essay for him because he needed a B grade to participate in the rugby match against Queen's, and so far, Godders the Great was only averaging a D. The essay was key to ensuring that Gatford House beat our historic rivals, because without Godders, Gatford was surely doomed. And obviously I had complied. That is my role after all, to always comply with whatever the other kids here want. They don't call me Wilco for nothing.

It was Fat Henry who first came up with the nickname, which is surprising because usually nobody ever listens to Fat Henry. But his dad is in the RAF, and because of that he always comes out with pilot jargon, like he's so cool for knowing that stuff. Apparently 'wilco' is air-force radio shorthand for 'will comply', and after Fat Henry used it to describe me just once, it stuck. The fact that it sounded almost exactly like my last name was just a stupid lucky bonus. Got some homework that needs a spelling and grammar check? Just hand it to Wilco. You can pay with a packet of crisps tomorrow. Need a parent's letter to get you off PE? Wilco will draft it up and forge the signature for the price of letting me push ahead of you in the lunch queue. Want to know what happens in that book you're meant to be reading for English? Wilco will hack the film online and copy it on to a flash drive for the price of. . . well . . . not calling me any rude names for a week? In the great food chain of Gatford House, where the sportsy ones are lions and tigers, and the ludicrous rah-rah kids are gazelles, I'm a bug that hides in the grass. But I've sussed out a way to remain uneaten: just do whatever anyone wants. If they ask, you say yes. Always, no exceptions. Whatever you need, Joseph Wilkes will comply. Wilco.

No exceptions, other than Godfrey's stupid essay. But then that's not entirely my fault. It's mostly Eddie Olsen's fault. In fact, you could probably argue that it's entirely

Eddie Olsen's fault, because it was Eddie who sat with me in the library when I was meant to be proofreading the essay before handing it over to Godfrey, and who hit the 'find' button for Hitler. It was also Eddie who hit the 'replace all' button that turned Hitler into Titler. And we laughed about it, because for some reason it was hilarious to imagine what would happen if Godfrey actually handed in the essay like that. Plus, of course, boobs. But then the bell for form rang. And I forgot to hit undo before clicking save. It was only after I had handed the flash drive over and watched it being safely tucked into Godfrey's blazer pocket that I realised what I had done.

The three days between Godfrey handing in the essay and getting the mark back have been torture. The slight possibility that I did in fact undo the change became a recurring daydream. And how bad could it really be anyway? Those letters are all very close to each other on the keyboard, and maybe Godfrey could explain it away by freak sudden-onset dyslexia? Overall, it's likely that the teacher wouldn't really mind and would see the mistake for what it was: a harmless prank. The essay was a standard, suitably flawed B grade, and something silly like that would never stand between the Almighty Godders and the Gatford rugby team. Except that wasn't the point. Whether Godfrey could get away with it was never the point. I'd disrespected him. I had undermined him in front of his teachers and dared to make him look foolish. It

didn't matter what the consequences were, or whether there were actually any consequences at all. Nobody made Godfrey Chappell look stupid. Nobody would dare.

We had filed out of history innocuously enough – it was a standard unspoken rule to never start fighting in front of the teachers – but I could feel all their eyes on me, and could almost hear the fists clench and crack with readiness. A good fight was long overdue, and the boys were hungry for excitement. The moment I knew that I was out of the teacher's sightline, I darted, zipping through the mass of bottle-green blazers and fully aware that there were at least six boys on my tail. Their job was no doubt to catch me and pin me down so that Godfrey could do his worst. Or, if he was feeling particularly malevolent, he'd stand back, keeping his hands clean, while he told his henchmen what to do. I knew the drill. I jerked this way here, took an unexpected turn there, until I had managed to gain a substantial lead. Except that there was nowhere to go. Not really. All corridors eventually led to the central quad, and it was possible that if I could just reach that spot outside the staffroom, maybe the boys would leave me alone. But who was I kidding? Gatford doesn't have the kind of teachers who stand up strong in front of bullying behaviour. These teachers would sit by their window looking out across the central quad and watch the scuffle like a nature documentary: this was the natural order of things, and

one mustn't interfere. Harmless rough-housing never did anyone any long-term harm, did it? Plus, it wasn't like any of the teachers would be on my side. I'm the scholarship kid. Of course there was going to be trouble wherever I went. It was to be expected. Nope, the staffroom wasn't an option.

So I ran out and through the quad, leaping with long strides out into the open, and then pushed straight through the double doors and into the west corridor. I heard the doors clang behind me as the gang pushed through, and then suddenly I saw the fire exit that led to the bins. The disgusting, smelly bins that none of those posh boys would go near if they could help it. At first I genuinely considered diving straight in, but then wouldn't I just be doing their job for them? Plus I would have to face the humiliation of clambering back out again, and then potentially have the smell lingering on me for the rest of the day, so I took a risk and aimed for *between* the dumpsters instead.

So here I am. It's cramped and, yes, the smell is putrid, but at least I can finally breathe again. Plus I have a vantage point to see the other boys speeding past. I quickly look up to the sky, hoping against hope that some flying Vigil will somehow hear my heart thumping and my lungs screaming and know that I'm in need of help. But no help comes. So I resign myself to waiting here until the end of lunch, when I can go to my next lesson, and hide

within the relative safety of assigned seating. This will be fine. I just need to survive lunchtime without anyone spotting me.

The headache cracks through me like an electric bolt. I let my inhaler drop to the floor as I clutch at my temples and strain against the screwed-up contortion of my jaw. It's thirty seconds of pure agony. Like shrapnel pounding the inside of my skull. I manage to resist putting my weight against the dumpster, because if it moves then the boys might be alerted to my presence, so instead I press my forehead into the brick wall, willing the pressure to be soothing. It does nothing of course. The headache persists, and persists, until finally it dissipates. I see stars as my focus returns.

It's the second headache today, and the fifth this week. They're gaining in frequency, and intensity, and I wonder sometimes whether my brain might actually burst like a grape squished between fingertips if this goes on much longer. But now the pain has passed, it's as if it never happened at all. No change in vision, except for a final scattering of pinprick stars, and all fingers and toes apparently working perfectly – I've checked. I'm sweating, but that could easily be from the running. As far as I can tell, no damage done, not this time. But I'm not sure how many more of these I can take.

A loud *pop* breaks me from my worried self-assessment. I look out over the dumpster, and there are

two girls standing there. One is using her tongue to snake tendrils of bubblegum back into her mouth, her arms folded tight across her chest, leaning heavily on one hip. The other is staring down at her feet, her heavy brown fringe practically hiding half of her face while girlish plaits hang down like curtains, her hands clasped tightly around the straps of her backpack.

'WILCO!' the first girl says. It's Maggie Monroe, Year 11 prefect and Gatford's most fearsome hockey player. She's always terrified me, not just because she's loud and bold (everything she says comes out of her mouth with exclamation points) but because if she knows who you are, it's probably because you're in trouble. She clucks on her gum as I stare back at her, the dumpster awkwardly positioned between us.

'Wilco! What the hell are you doing down there?' Maggie booms.

I go to make up an excuse, but it's soon clear that she's not expecting an answer.

'Where's that friend of yours, Eddie Olsen?' she continues. The girl with her doesn't even look up at me.

'Memorial garden, maybe,' I manage to stutter back.

'This is Kesia,' Maggie announces, head cocking to one side to indicate the shy girl next to her. 'She's new. She's into theatre. Eddie Olsen's into theatre too, right?'

I nod back at them as I emerge from behind the dumpster, acutely aware of how scruffy I must look. I'm

not sure why she's checking with me. Everyone knows that Eddie is Gatford's biggest theatre geek.

'Well, I need to be somewhere, so can you take Kesia over to see him and get him to tell her about the drama club?' It's not a question. It might sound like a question, but it's definitely not a question. And I'm Wilco, so no matter that a group of rampaging testosterone-driven boys are on the hunt for me, I will comply. I always comply.

'Sure . . .' Maybe I can use Kesia as a human shield.

'Good. Cool beans. Kesia, this is Wilco. He'll look after you.' Then Maggie about-turns and marches off to whatever other important duty she has to do this lunchtime. Everything Maggie Monroe does is important.

Kesia doesn't look up at me, even when I say hello to her. Her eyes remain downcast, her arms tense like she's clinging on to her backpack for dear life. Right then. Should I be talking to her? Does she even want to be talked to? And what the hell is Eddie going to do with her once I take her over to him?

'You're new?' I try nervously.

I *think* she nods. But that could just be the way her head bobs as she walks, so I'm not sure.

'Have you been shown around?' I try again.

And again, another faint dip of the head that could be construed as an awkward nod. I guess that means she has been given the tour, but the memorial garden is at

least another three minutes away, and the thought of spending all that time with a girl and not saying anything makes the back of my neck sweat.

'That's the cage,' I say as we pass it, indicating the flat concrete desert of a playground surrounded on all sides by tall chicken-wire fencing. 'That's where the upper school play football during break.' I'm not entirely sure if she understands what I'm saying.

An old leather football suddenly flies towards us, and would have struck its target if it wasn't for the fencing. The clang of metal almost seems to ripple outwards, and somewhere within the cage someone yells, 'Sorry!' But I know the apology isn't for me.

'That was close!' But still she says nothing.

'That's the new block.' I nod towards the large modernist building, completely out of place next to the Victorian-gothic turrets of the old building. 'That's where humanities is, like English and history, and that big window is the library.'

Nothing from Kesia. Absolutely nothing. I don't even think she looks up. I wonder if she speaks any English. Her name sounds eastern European. Has she transferred from over there? Perhaps I should be speaking more slowly? I keep my head up and alert for interceptors the whole way; Godfrey's boys could emerge at any minute, and as much as I'd hope that Kesia would be an excellent human shield, I know I can't rely on it.