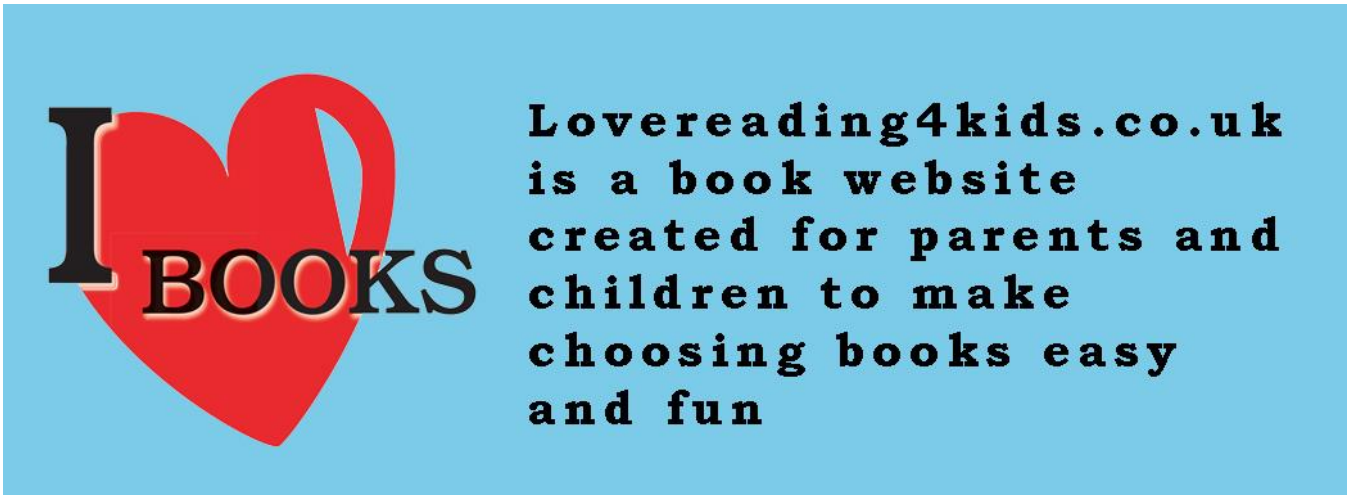


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Unboxed

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Ben

It seems worse to break a promise to the dead than it does to break one made to the living. Why else would I be standing by the gates of my old school waiting for a bunch of strangers I used to call friends?

Ben, Dean, Millie, Zara. Me – Alix. Five friends, five years ... it feels like a lifetime.

My phone lights up with a message from Faith.

Anybody there yet? x

Only me. Is it too late to flake out?

Need me there for moral support?

Her offer makes me smile. Everything that girl does makes me smile.

Tempting ... but I don't want to be one of those girls who can't do anything without their gf.

No worries. I'm on the Diet Coke tonight, so give me a call if you need me to pick you up.

I love you. xxx

I know. (insert imaginary Han Solo emoji ...) xxx

I'm still smiling at my phone when there's a weird growling noise near by. When I look up, I nearly wet myself.

"What the fuck!" There's someone standing in front of me and I press one hand to my chest as if to stop my heart from hammering. My other hand locks my phone and slips it safely into my pocket.

"Sorry. It's me, Ben – Ben Buckley," he says. As if there might be some other Ben coming tonight. "Sorry if I scared you. That was why I coughed."

"That was what it was? You sounded like a goddamn bear."

He looks like one too. The Ben I remember was always a little broad, but the one I'm looking at now is big. Tall and chunky, his belly filling out his T-shirt as much as his chest.

"Huh," he says. He's staring at me the same way I'm staring at him. "You've changed."

"A bit. So've you." I'm not sure why I'm being so defensive. I don't *think* he was trying to insult me.

"I meant from your profile picture. Your hair." Ben nods at my head. "Suits you."

My hand goes up to my hair. I'm always changing it. Cut, colour ... the only thing I'm consistent with is that it's never longer than my jawline. Not since I was thirteen, in fact.

Ben is exactly the same as he is in the many pictures he's posted online. Of all of us, he's the easiest to find, username 'BenjiBucky' on every social media site in existence. His Insta is packed

with pictures of him and his friends, the animals he walks past, the food he's eating, the places he's going, the clothes he's wearing. Ben isn't seeing anyone – if he was, there'd definitely be pictures of them kissing.

Ben and I never had much in common.

"So, are the others coming?" Ben asks. "I mean, apart from ..." He waves his hand in some kind of sign-language for 'Millie'.

"Zara is." Who can say what Dean will do? He doesn't seem to exist online and he never replied to the email I sent.

"Zara ..." Ben says with a reverent shake of his head. "Man, I've not seen her in ages. How is she?"

But I've not seen her either. I suppose Ben thinks we're all in touch one way or another, still here after he moved with his mum to London. He comes back to see his dad in the holidays – I've seen

him out sometimes, hanging with the lads he used to play football with. Loud shirt, loud laugh, Ben makes himself hard to miss, but his people are not mine and I've never stopped to say "Hi".

I'm aware that I'm giving off unfriendly vibes, shutting down every avenue of conversation before it starts, and so I ask about London, hoping to get Ben talking so I don't have to. It works. He starts going on about how busy it is, how you can get the bus or the tube or the train anywhere you want any time of night or day, how cool the clubs are, the bars and the shops. He talks about London like it's half a world away and not 42 minutes on the fast train.

There's the sound of an engine at the end of the road.

"Does Zara drive?" Ben asks.

Like I'd know.

"Whoever's in that car, I doubt it's Dean," I say.