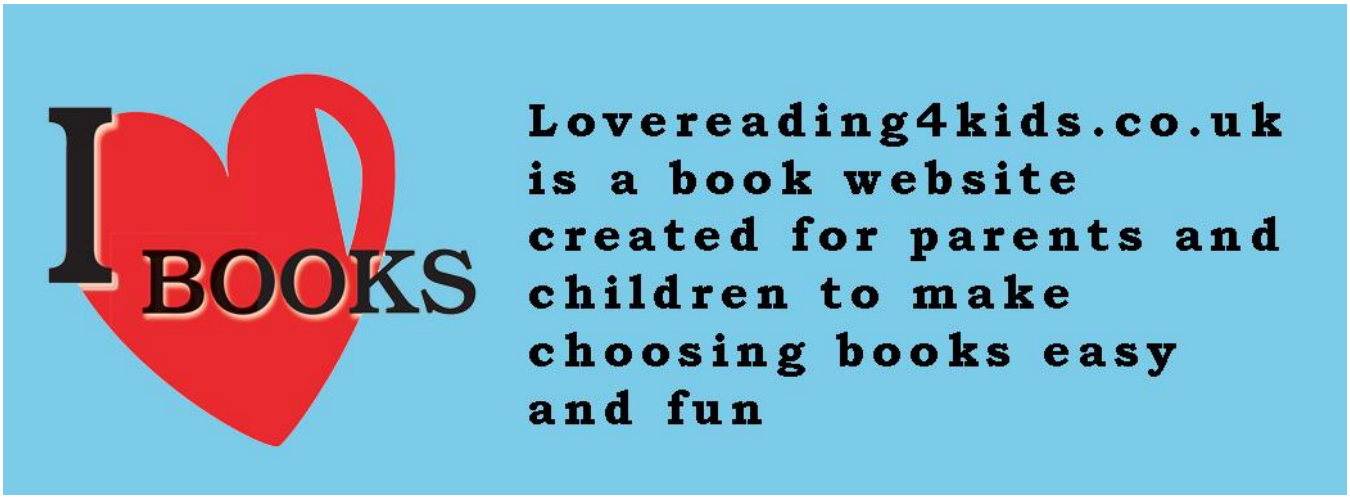


An extract from

The Goldfish Boy

Written by

Lisa Thompson

Published by

Scholastic

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ISBN 978 1407 17099 2

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Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
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CHAPTER FOUR

What Do We Do About Matthew?

Every day my mum delivered my meals to my room on a tray. Lunchtime's selection consisted of one pre-wrapped ham and cheese sandwich, one sealed carton of orange juice, one banana and three unopened bottles of water to drink throughout the day. Very safe. Very sterile.

Food was always accompanied by Mum trying to have a chat. I tried not to say much and to avoid her eyes if I could.

"Mr Charles's grandchildren look sweet, don't they? It'll be nice having some kids next door for the summer holidays, won't it, Matthew?"

"Yep, I guess so."

I had decided not to say anything about the pond episode or the tapping on my wall.

"His daughter is in New York for a month. She's some hotshot banker, apparently. It's odd. I've never known her to visit him, have you?"

I shook my head. Mum knew how much I watched the neighbours and that if anyone had seen Mr Charles's daughter visit before it would have been me.

"Isn't that funny? Those kids have probably never even met him. Maybe her usual childcare let her down or something."

"Yeah, maybe."

I kept my eyes on my lunch. I didn't like to be too talkative in case she launched into her favourite subject: "What Do We Do About Matthew?"

"I'm at the salon for a few hours this afternoon. Is that OK, Matthew? Will you be all right on your own?"

Mum had opened the Head To Toe beauty salon five years ago. Her original plan had been to let the new manager run the place while she popped in to do the odd treatment and keep up with the gossip. Lately it appeared she had to be there every day, but I

knew it was just so she could escape the problem indoors: me. She held the tray out and I took the items off one at a time using my fingertips and placed them on my bedside table.

"Matthew? Is that all right?"

"Sure." I looked up at her and accidentally met her eyes and then bam – she was off. . .

"Good. Oh, and I've made an appointment for us to see the doctor in the morning. See if we can get you sorted out. OK?"

She tucked the tray under her arm like a handbag.

"What?"

"The school keeps calling and now the council is writing letters. We've got to sort you out before September or me and your dad will be in big trouble. You do realize that they lock parents up nowadays if their kids don't go to school, don't you?"

Mum and Dad had been lying to the school; they said I had Glandular Fever. Of all the illnesses they could have picked, they chose the "kissing disease" – when I had no intention of ever kissing anyone! They must have thought it was a good choice because you can be off school for weeks with that. I think Mum even managed to convince herself that I actually had it, as in the first few days I was off she kept asking me how my throat was feeling and offering

me painkillers. Desperation, that's what it was – willing me to have something treatable, something with an end in sight.

"I'm not going."

"Don't be silly, of course you are. It's only Dr Kerr. You've been seeing him since you were a baby."

As she spoke she tried to look over my shoulder. I pulled the door to a little bit.

"Why don't you open a window in there? Let some of that stuffy air out?"

Her bare foot landed on my carpet as she stepped across my doorway.

"What are you doing, Mum?"

She flinched but didn't move. I stared down at her painted pink toenails wriggling on my beige carpet.

"Can you get your foot out of my room, please?"

Her leg twisted at an awkward angle though she stayed exactly where she was.

"Mum? Please!"

"Why, Matthew? It's just a foot. It's not going to hurt you, is it?"

She giggled nervously, her naked toes snuggling into the pile.

I began to shake.

"I'll tell you what, let's make a deal. I'll move if you promise to come and see Dr Kerr tomorrow morning. How does that sound?"

She'd have been in the conservatory this morning: her bare feet padding around the cold tiles where Nigel chucks up fur balls and mice guts. She must be riddled with germs – germs that were escaping in their millions into my room. I gripped the edge of the door and thought about slamming it against her toes, but if I did that I might end up with blood on my carpet, and that made me feel dizzy. I didn't look up.

"OK, OK. I'll go. Now can you move? Please?"

Her foot froze.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

I had absolutely no intention of going through with it.

"You really, really promise? On Callum's angel?"

That's my baby brother. He didn't come home from the hospital and he never got to gurgle over his elephant mobile, but he had a grave with a white marble angel. I couldn't break a promise on something like that – especially considering what I'd done.

I closed my eyes, weighing the options. I felt the door being pushed slightly as she tried to edge her way in.

"I promise! I promise on Callum's angel," I said.

She waited a couple of seconds and then her foot retreated into the hallway, her face beaming.

"Wonderful! I'll be home in a few hours. Why don't you sit in the garden today? Try and get a bit of colour in those cheeks? I'll put a chair out for you, shall I?"

"Whatever, Mum."

I shut the door and dived under my bed to grab my box of gloves (ten pairs remaining), the bottle of antibacterial spray and a cloth, and I did my best to try and clean the carpet. I felt my insides squirming, the way they always did whenever Mum or Dad mentioned Callum. The guilt of what I'd done lived inside me like a vicious black beetle, scuttling around my stomach.

Some days I almost felt like I could just plunge my hand in my tummy and pull that beetle out. I'd throw it on the floor, its little legs frantically kicking at the air, and all my fears would miraculously vanish. I'd finally be free of the guilt. But the beetle didn't go away. It lay there, snoozing, waiting for me to relax and then it started up all over again; *scuttle, scuttle, scuttle.*

I scrubbed the carpet and sprayed and wiped and then I went to the bathroom to throw the gloves away and wash my hands

until it felt right. It took eleven washes. When I got back to my room I inspected my lunch closely. Everything looked unopened so I quickly ate before it became infected. I put the rubbish outside my door then went into the office to see if anything was going on outside. I took some notes.

Tuesday 22nd July. 4:11 p.m.

Hot and sunny.

Cars on the street=4

People on the street=1

4:12 p.m. Melody Bird comes out of number three. She has changed out of her school uniform and is hurrying across the road to the alleyway besides The Rectory, which leads to the graveyard. What does she do there?

As Melody disappeared into the overgrown tunnel her arms were folded and her head down, as though bracing herself against an arctic wind.

Mr Charles appeared on his front path wearing a red checked shirt and beige trousers. He looked like he was getting ready for

a rodeo. He jabbed at his concrete path with a stiff brown broom and clouds of dust flew up around his ankles. There was no sign of Casey or Teddy. He stopped for a moment, wiping sweat from his forehead, then he opened his iron garden gate and began to brush the pavement outside his house, each sweep directed towards the gutter. My heart started beating faster. My hands were beginning to feel unclean again. I went to the bathroom and on the seventh wash our doorbell rang. I froze. I wasn't feeling clean enough yet. I rubbed the soap into my cracked skin again and ignored the door. There was another ring on the doorbell and someone knocked on the glass. I quickly rinsed my skin in scalding water and ran downstairs, opening the door using my sleeve.

"Ah, Matthew! You're in. Is your mum there?"

I shook my head at Mr Charles, who was standing on my front door step. His arms were folded awkwardly on top of the broom handle and he looked like he was about to burst into song. I could hear the devil cat, Nigel, meowing behind me.

"How about your dad?"

"He's at work," I said, and closed the door slightly. I looked behind me to see where the cat was. He was safely in the kitchen, brushing himself against the cupboard where his food was kept,

moving this way and that, showing off.

"OK, OK, no problem," he said, laughing much too quickly. "It was you I wanted to speak to, actually. How do you fancy earning yourself some spare change?"

He rubbed the top of his head where the sunburn was. Maybe it was because I hadn't seen him close up for so long, but his head looked huge, like a tanned walnut. I could hear a steady *thump, thump, thump* coming from his house through the downstairs wall.

"I think they're playing football in your living room, Mr Charles," I said.

His eye twitched as he listened.

"Oh, that's just . . . just a game. . ." He pinched the top of his nose for a moment, shutting his eyes, and then he was back.

"So, how do you fancy doing some babysitting for me? It'll just be the odd afternoon here and there when you're off school so I can get on with a few jobs, do my shopping and that. How does that sound?"

I folded my arms.

"I don't know. . ."

"It'll be good money! They're such easy kids – *so* easy!" he said, blinking rapidly.

Thump, thump, thump.

"I'm quite busy to be honest. . ."

He nodded as if he understood how hectic my life must be, spending most days indoors doing nothing. I really needed to go and finish washing my hands. The germs were definitely beginning to spread and Nigel's meowing was getting louder. He had made his way into the hall and was sitting right behind me.

Thump, thump, thump.

I could hear Casey screaming now. Mr Charles raised his voice in an attempt to drown them out.

"I guess a whole afternoon could be too much. . . How about a couple of hours? One, even? I'll pay double!"

I shook my head.

"You just tell me how much you'd like, eh, Matthew?"

If he could have got his hands around the door I think he would have tried to shake a "yes" out of me.

Thump, thump, thump.

"I'm twelve, Mr Charles. I don't think I'm old enough."

Nigel was by the bottom of the stairs now, brushing his face against the step. A tiny dark spot appeared on the cream carpet where he'd dribbled. He saw me looking and came straight towards

me, the germs dropping from his fur and running in all directions into the carpet. I quickly took a step back and opened the door wide. The cat blinked at the bright sunshine then trotted outside, darting around Mr Charles's legs and down our driveway. I pulled the door closed again. My hand was sweating through my sleeve.

"I'm sure you can babysit at your age," he laughed. "Why, I was looking after my brother when I was only seven!"

"I don't think so, Mr Charles," I said as he continued to laugh.

Thump, thump, CRASH!

"GRANNNNDDAAAAAAD!!!"

Mr Charles's laugh stopped instantly, his shoulders slumped forward, and without saying another word he turned slowly back home, dragging the brown broom behind him. I slammed the door and ran up to the bathroom to wash my hands again.

When I got back to the office the noises from next door had stopped and I could hear a TV blaring. Out on the street everything was quiet, the road steaming in the heat. Nigel was in Mr Charles's front garden, carefully tiptoeing on to the lawn, his nose dabbing at the grass as he sniffed. He didn't hear the old man approaching from behind carrying a washing-up bowl full of water. Mr Charles let out a roar and threw the water into the air; it splashed over Nigel

in one big wave. The cat froze in shock and so did I. I wasn't a fan of the old vomiting fleabag but I wouldn't *ever* do that to him. His fluffy, ginger-and-white fur was now dark brown and stuck to his skin. He looked utterly petrified. Mr Charles dropped the bowl on the grass and swung his foot at the cat, his body nearly twisting around from the force, but fortunately Nigel had come to his senses and swerved out of the way. He squeezed through the gate, turned right, and scurried up our path. Sitting on our step he meowed feebly, then began to lick at his fur.

I watched Mr Charles as he picked up the washing-up bowl and took two steps towards the house. He stopped for a moment as if he'd forgotten something. Taking a step back he tucked the bowl under his arm, looked up at me, and glared.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dr. Kerr

When I was younger I thought a mirage was something you'd only see if you got lost in the desert. Delirious, you'd drag yourself along the scorching sand, centimetre by centimetre, as you desperately search for water. Suddenly you spot something shimmering on the horizon. It's a pastel-coloured ice cream van! You can almost hear the tinkling music. It beckons you closer and closer with its promise of deliciously cold lollies waiting in the deep, dark freezer. Your mouth floods with precious saliva as you try to reach it, but when you're just metres away, it vanishes! All that's there, in the exact spot where the ice cream van just stood, is a shrivelled up cactus.

I saw lots of mirages on the road on the way to the doctor. Not

ghostly ice cream vans but dark pools of water puddled along the tarmac. They looked so real I could almost hear the splash as we drove through them. Dad had told me once that they were called motorway mirages, which sounded about right. He knew a lot of stuff, my dad. "Brian's Brains" was always one of the top three teams in the monthly pub quiz. You could ask him anything and he'd immediately have an answer.

"Dad, who was on the throne during the Black Death?"

"Edward the third."

"What is the capital of Latvia?"

"Riga."

"What is the chemical formula for copper?"

"Cu."

"What is wrong with your eldest and only son?"

"He's crazy."

Not that he would have said that out loud, but I was pretty sure he thought it. I think they both did.

Mum had the air conditioning on. It was directed downwards so my feet felt like blocks of ice. I would have twisted the dial round but I didn't want to touch it.

"Mr Charles's grandchildren seem to be settling in OK, don't

they? That must be nice for him, to have a bit of company for a change," Mum said as we crawled along the High Street.

She was trying that conversation thing again.

"I don't know how he'll manage for a whole month, do you? He's no spring chicken."

I kept my mouth shut. I certainly wasn't going to talk to her after the way she'd embarrassed me in front of the whole close.

She'd sat in the car with the engine running while I remained paralysed on the front mat. Mr Jenkins came back from a run, his head down as he turned into his drive, but then he spotted me. He stood for a moment, sweat running down his face with his hands on his hips as he looked me up and down.

To minimize any possible health risks, I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt, which I'd buttoned up to the neck, jeans, socks, wellington boots and two pairs of latex gloves (eight pairs remaining). It was about thirty degrees outside. I was pretty hot.

'What are you doing, Corbin?' he said and he shook his head in disgust as he went inside.

I don't think Mum heard him. She wound her window down and hollered.

"Two words for you, Matthew Corbin. Callum's Angel!"

Her voice bounced off the houses like a pinball. Old Nina's curtain twitched and her dark shadow peered through the thick nets trying to see what all the noise was about. Penny and Gordon Sullivan appeared in the front garden of number one and began to walk over. They always pop up if it looks like something interesting is going on.

"Everything all right, Sheila?" Penny called.

They arrived at our driveway each holding a Harrington's Household Solutions catalogue, which I'm sure they'd just grabbed to use as a cover. Penny and Gordon went everywhere together. It was as if they were tied at the waist with a piece of invisible string and if one ventured too far from the other they'd just ping back together again. In fact, I didn't think I'd ever, ever seen them apart.

Mum waved at them from the car.

"Yes, all fine here, Penny. Hello, Gordon. Thank you! Just a pre-teen pushing the boundaries . . . you know how it is. . ."

She forced a laugh and the retired couple laughed along with her but they soon stopped when they got a good look at me.

"We'll leave you to it then, Sheila," Penny said, raising her eyebrows at me. She muttered something to her husband and the invisible string twanged as she turned back to the house, with

Gordon following.

"Come on, Matthew! We're going to be late!"

"But, Mum, you don't realize what this will do to me … please."

A loud meow came from behind me in the hallway. Nigel.

"Matthew. You swore on Callum's angel. Nothing is more sacred than that. Now. Get. In. The. Car."

The meowing was getting closer. I looked round and Nigel was sauntering along, looking for something to brush against. He stopped for a moment, his eyes fixed on me.

"Matthew. NOW!"

I flinched as Mum shouted, jumped off the step, slammed the front door behind me, then got in the car.

So there we were: at a standstill in a traffic jam on the High Street.

"Oh, look, that's your friend, Tom, isn't it? Shall I give him a beep? He'd be so glad to see you out and about!"

Mum waved madly through the windscreen at a group of kids in white shirts and blue ties. Fortunately they didn't notice.

"Mum! Stop it!"

I slid down in my seat as Mum sat back and huffed.

Standing a few metres from my window and sipping from a can of coke was my best friend, Tom. My old best friend, Tom. He was with a boy from school called Simon, and they were both laughing and swaying as though they'd lost the ability to stand upright.

"Simon Duke?" I said under my breath. "What's he hanging around with him for?"

Simon Duke was a bit of an idiot who made stuff up. For example, he once said that his dad was a top agent with the FBI. Apparently they were only living in England temporarily and at any moment they could get a call telling them to jump on a plane to wherever the next assignment took them.

"If I don't come to school one day, you'll know we've had the call and I'm outta here," he announced to our maths class last year, slipping into a dreadful American accent as he tapped the side of his nose.

Simon's downfall came about when someone spotted Mr Duke in a hardware store wearing an orange apron and helping a customer lift a new toilet into a shopping cart. He got a lot of grief after that.

"Simon, we thought your dad worked for the FBI not in DIY!"

"What happens when he needs to arrest someone? Does he ask them to 'stick 'em up' and shoot them with a glue gun?"

Amazingly Simon managed to shrug the comments off:

"Dad's got to keep up an appearance of normality, doesn't he?"

And now, even more amazingly, Tom had decided to hang around with him.

We edged along the line of traffic and I watched them in the side mirror.

"You can ask your friends over any time, you know, Matthew," said Mum. "You don't want to lose contact with them."

I ignored her and watched Tom and Simon shrink in the mirror as we moved onwards.

The urge to wash my hands was intensifying, and I was so hot that my eyelids were sweating. I closed them and tried to calm my breathing as Mum continued with a running commentary about her clients at work, the neighbours, anything she could think of to fill the silence.

". . . the girl, Casey, is only six and little Teddy is fifteen months so he'll have nappies to deal with! Can you imagine an old man coping with that? He'll be exhausted."

I listened to her chattering, trying to swallow the sick feeling

I had in my stomach, and then finally the car engine slowed as we pulled into the doctor's car park. I opened my eyes and blinked at the bright sunlight.

"I'm very proud of you, Matthew. I'm sorry I shouted earlier about you getting in the car but I just want you to . . . be . . . to have a normal life. That's all. I'm just thinking of you."

I nodded, unable to speak, then after a deep breath, I opened the door.

The waiting room was quiet and I sat in the front row of seats, which were all empty. Mum stood at the reception desk waiting to check us in. An aqua-blue fish tank bubbled away in the corner, a toy shark on the other side of the glass, its mouth opening and closing with a three-second delay. I spotted a drawing pin in the crease between the carpet and the skirting board, the sharp end pointing upwards. Directly above it, on the wall, was a laminated sign stating that in the month of June there had been twenty-four missed appointments. June and the number 24 were written in black felt-tip pen, which the reception staff must rub out and change each month. The bottom left-hand corner of the poster was not pinned down and gaped away from the wall slightly. I very much wanted to pick the pin up and put it back where it belonged.

If the pin was back in its place then everything would be all right. I would be all right. I looked over at Mum, who was heading towards me, but she changed direction when she spotted someone she knew at the back of the room.

"Hello, Claudia! Isn't it hot? I love it, though, don't you?"

I kept my eyes on the thumbtack. I was not looking at anyone around me, not listening to a man with a hacking cough or feeling the infested chair beneath my legs. Just concentrate on the pin. Take deep breaths and count to three. One . . . two . . . thr—

"What you in here for, then?"

I caught my breath. Someone had sat next to me. Close. I could see a blue school cardigan out of the corner of my eye.

"Is it a skin condition? Is that why you've got those gloves on?"

I turned to face Melody Bird, the girl from my class who lived across the street. The one who visited the graveyard a lot. Claudia was her mum, who my mum was now talking to. The hairs on my arm bristled. Melody made me nervous. Apart from her unnatural interest in the cemetery, she lived next door to Penny and Gordon at number one and her house was number three; and those two numbers next to each other were bad news. 'Ten plus three' was becoming an issue for me and I was trying to avoid it as much as

I could. I'd found out that in some cities around the world, there were skyscrapers that don't have a 'ten plus three' floor and they just call it 12A or something, or else skip right from twelve to fourteen. These people are professionals, they're not stupid. They wouldn't do something like that unless there was a good reason. My battle against germs was one thing but I was becoming more aware that I also need to keep an eye on the bad number, or it could just creep up on me. Fortunately Chestnut Close stops at Mr Charles's house, number eleven. We'd once had a Christmas card delivered that was addressed to Mr P James, tenplusthree Chestnut Close. That unopened card sat on the windowsill next to our front door long into the summer because Mum couldn't bring herself to throw it away, even though the house, and possibly Mr P James, didn't exist. I was thinking about all of this while Melody talked. I didn't really hear what she was saying, but I noticed she was sitting really close.

"Can you move back a bit?" I said.

Her large brown eyes squinted at me as she shuffled back a little in her chair.

"Why? Are you contagious or something?"

"No."

She scratched her nose with a chewed fingernail and I turned away, focusing again on the drawing pin. A bead of sweat trickled slowly down my spine. A fan on the reception desk blew a blast of warm air every four seconds around the waiting room.

"So, can't you tell me what's wrong with you then?"

"No."

She was quiet for a minute, and then I felt the heat from her arm as she edged towards me again.

"Can't or won't?"

I turned and faced her, leaning back slightly as if she had bad breath.

"Won't."

Tucking a long strand of brown hair behind one ear, she held my gaze for a moment and then shrugged.

"Fair enough."

I looked at the drawing pin and pictured myself picking it up and pressing it into the corner of the poster on the wall. Everything where it belonged, then all would be OK. I took some notes in my mind:

Wednesday 23rd July. 10:45 a.m. Doctor's Waiting Room.

Number of people in waiting room=9

Number of reception staff=4

Number of fish in tank=12

Number of drawing pins on poster on wall=3

Number of drawing pins on floor=1

"Verrucas."

I shut my eyes for a second before turning to Melody again.

"Sorry?"

"That's why I'm here. I've got a cluster of them on my big toe. They hurt like crazy. Got to have them all burned off, I guess. You had a verruca before?"

"Nope."

"They're really painful."

She whipped her head around to take a look at our mums.

"Your mum's really pretty, isn't she?"

I couldn't think of an answer to that so I kept quiet.

"Hey, I hear your neighbour has his grandchildren staying with him. That'll be good, won't it? Having some new faces around?"

I scowled at her.

"It's just a couple of kids."

She crossed and uncrossed her legs and then picked at the hem of her grey skirt.

"Apparently their mum is some kind of top businesswoman. I bet she's rich, don't you?"

I rubbed my forehead. My head was pounding.

"It was so hot in class yesterday. I can't wait for the summer holidays. I've got science after this, but I'm not going to rush back. They're not going to know, are they?"

She studied her left palm and traced her fingernail along a couple of the lines before turning back to me.

"What doctor are you seeing? It's not Dr Kerr, is it? I can't stand him. He must be about ninety and he's always got bits of food down his shirt. Urgh."

The fact that I wasn't answering any of her questions didn't seem to put her off. I closed my eyes, hoping she'd take the hint.

"Do you want me to get you some water? You look like you're going to melt. Those gloves must be roasting."

I shook my head and wiped the back of my neck with the cuff of my shirt, trying to soak up a bit of the perspiration. If I could just get that pin back on the poster then things would be right again

and maybe Melody would go away.

"Are you friends with Jake Bishop?"

"No."

"Good. I hate him. He can be so evil sometimes. I can't believe he lives on our street. I mean, out of everyone in the world he is the last person I'd want to have as my neighbour. Don't you think?"

I jolted as a loud beep blasted the waiting room. A gruff, male voice came over the speakers asking for Mr Andrews to go to Room Two.

"Ha! You nearly fell off your seat. You should have seen your face! You really jumped!"

As she laughed, her arm brushed against my shirt so I slid on to the seat next to me.

"Where're you going? Look, I'm sorry. It was just funny, that's all."

She was still giggling as she moved closer. I could hear my mum behind us:

"... I just don't know what to do, Claudia. I've got the attendance officer on my back now. Why can't we just get him to school? What did we do that was so wrong?"

The general hum of the waiting room had silenced as every

ear strained to hear what my mum was going to say next. I cringed. Fortunately summer was right around the corner, so I figured it would all be fine soon. And when September came around, I'd make an effort to get back to normal and go in every day.

The button on my top collar was tight and it felt like I was slowly suffocating. Melody cleared her throat, ready to project another wave of verbal vomit at me, but this time I was quite grateful as she might just drown my mum out.

"I think someone should stand up to Jake Bishop, don't you? Didn't you used to be friends with him? Back in primary school? Was he always so nasty?"

I shrugged.

"Well, I think he's got away with being an idiot for far too long . . . Are you sure you're OK? Your face has gone grey."

"I've got a bad headache."

She frowned and I wondered if she was thinking she might be the cause.

"I can come to your house one day, if you like? We can hang out in the holidays. Keep each other company."

Her bottom lip curled over her top and her brow furrowed as she waited for an answer. An old man shuffled by and I tucked my

legs under my chair to keep them out of the way.

"I don't think so. I haven't been well lately." I gave a little cough.

She smacked the heel of her hand on to her forehead, making me flinch.

"Oh, of course, the mystery illness! Well, that's fine if you don't want to tell me what's wrong. We all have our secrets, don't we?"

Her eyes narrowed and as I was wondering what she meant there was another loud BEEP.

"Melody Bird, Room Two, please."

"That's me! Well, see you later, Matty."

Her hand suddenly reached towards me and she squeezed my forearm before she headed off along the corridor with her mum. My arm tingled where her hand had touched it. Not a good tingle – an infected tingle. Washing was imperative but there was no way I was going to venture into the toilets of a doctor's waiting room. I searched the skirting board for the missing drawing pin as Mum arrived next to me with a sigh.

"She's nice, that Claudia. A bit, you know, New Agey, but she's all right. I told her she should get herself to the salon and we'll thread her eyebrows for her."

Rummaging in her bag she pulled out her phone and started texting someone. Now was my chance. My legs wobbled as I stood up and my ears began to ring. This possibly wasn't the best idea I'd ever had but I knew I wouldn't be able to go home and leave that poster like that. I bent down slowly and just as my fingers reached the cold pin, everything went black.

I woke with a cold, wet flannel on my forehead. The receptionist, Mum and a nurse were all staring down at me. They fussed over me for a while, talking about whether I needed to go to the hospital or not, and all I wanted to say to them was: *Look, could someone just put that pin back in that poster over there?* My gloves had been removed and I told Mum I had to go home immediately, but she said we were going to see Dr Kerr even if she had to drag me.

His office was dark and musty. I perched on the edge of the chair and stared at my naked hands in the gloomy light as Mum began to tell him how anxious I had become and how I liked to keep things clean all the time. She was speaking in her posh voice; the one she used in front of teachers, people who work in banks, Mr Charles and doctors.

"We just don't know what to do any more, Dr Kerr.

We're at a loss!"

Dr Kerr's bones creaked as he wrote some notes and we both waited for him to answer. In the corner was an old computer covered in a thin layer of dust. Melody was right, he did look about ninety. And I counted at least six stains of various colours on his shirt. I was just thinking that maybe he hadn't heard anything Mum had said when he burst into life.

"I'll refer him to arrange a face-to-face assessment with a psychotherapist who, in all likelihood, will suggest at least six weeks of counselling, and then you should be feeling as right as rain. OK?"

He squinted at me.

Great. Can I go now? bubbled across my tongue, dangerously close to escaping.

"How long will we have to wait for an appointment, Doctor?" said Mum.

He looked back at his notes, his pen scratching once more. "Well, these things take a while, unfortunately. I think the current wait time is at least three to four months. Maybe longer."

He kept his head down, writing, and then Mum suddenly slapped her hand on the desk. Dr Kerr and I bounced in our chairs as if we'd both gone over a speed bump.

"Three months? Three months? Are you serious?" Mum's posh voice was obliterated. Dr Kerr rolled his eyes.

"Mrs Corbin, I'm sorry but there is a waiting list and your son isn't an urgent case. I'll write a letter to his school and explain. They'll arrange a meeting with you and the local authority to discuss Matthew's absence if they haven't already done so."

He flicked through an old Rolodex and copied something on to a yellow Post-it note.

Creak, creak, creak.

"Here are a couple of private therapists who may be able to help you – if you're willing to pay."

He leaned forwards with the fluttering note stuck to a finger and Mum snatched it from him. She stood up and stormed out, leaving me sitting there on my own. Dr Kerr sighed and carried on writing as if I didn't exist. I stood to go too, but stopped when I reached the door.

"I'm sorry about my mum shouting, Dr Kerr. She's been a bit stressed lately. You know, because of everything."

The old man concentrated on his writing pad for a moment and then looked up. "You're a nice boy, Matthew. Stop all this messing around now, eh? There's a good lad."

He looked back down and waved his hand at me as if he was shooing away an annoying wasp. I had been dismissed.

I went to bed while it was still light outside. My limbs felt heavy, my brain exhausted. I must have fallen asleep within minutes to the sound of a blackbird singing outside. When I woke up it was dark. My clock glowed red: 2:34 a.m. Something had disturbed me but in that just-awake state I wasn't sure what; and then I heard knocking on the other side of my wall.

Tap, tap, tap.

I sat up and listened again.

Tap, tap, tap.

"Can you hear that?" I whispered to the Wallpaper Lion. "She's doing it again."

I closed my eyes and listened.

Tap, tap, tap.

"Are you there, Goldfish Boy? Are you back in your tank?"

It was Casey. I clenched my hand into a fist, ready to thump back if she did it again. I waited for ten minutes, but there was silence.