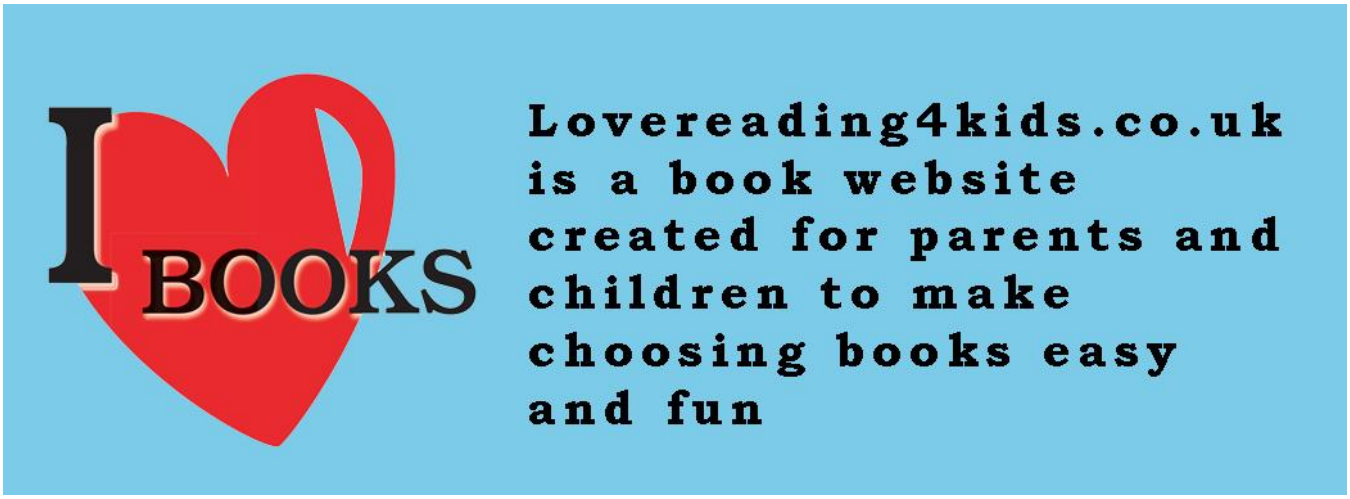


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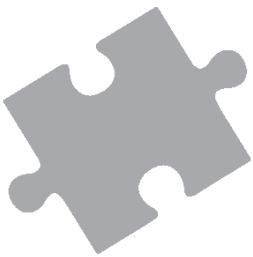
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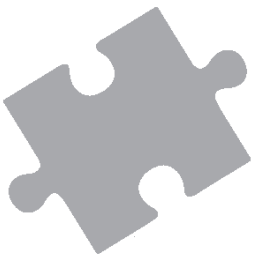


Everyone in Rushton knows the Campbell-Richardson sisters.

Grace is the oldest and destined for a first from Cambridge. Signature scent: grapefruit shampoo, second-hand books and perfection.

Audrey is the youngest and destined for the Olympics. Signature scent: chlorine, Lucozade Sport and discipline.

Then there's me, Mia. I'm in the middle. I have no idea what my destiny is. Signature scent: coconut oil, Haribo and TROUBLE.



1

'I feel like getting wasted tonight,' I announce.

It's a Friday evening in early June. Me and my three best friends – Stella Fielding, Mikey Twist and Kimmie Chu – are packed into Stella's messy bedroom, the air thick with perfume and hairspray.

Mikey rolls his eyes at the others. 'No offence, Mia,' he says, 'but when do you *not* feel like getting wasted?'

He makes a valid point. My fondness for getting drunk is one of my trademarks.

'Yeah, but tonight I feel like getting *especially* wasted,' I say, sloshing at least three fingers' worth of vodka into a plastic beaker before topping it up with a splash of Diet Coke. I stir it with my straw, watching as the liquid turns the colour of dirty paint water.

'Why? What's the occasion?' Kimmie asks, blowing on her newly painted fingernails.

'Does there have to be one?'

'I suppose not.'

The truth is, I've had a crappy week. The evidence so far:

On Monday, I dropped my iPhone on the patio when I was out on the roof having a late-night cigarette, and now the screen is all cracked and Mum and Dad are refusing to replace it again.

On Wednesday, the English essay I worked really hard on for once came back with a big fat 'D' on it and the words 'a poor effort' scrawled on the top in red pen.

On Thursday, I was hauled into Mr Joshi, the head of sixth form's, office for 'flouting' the sixth-form dress code for the third time this term. Apparently my ripped jeans were 'inappropriate for an academic environment'. I argued back for a bit, telling him that whether you could see my kneecaps or not had no reflection on my ability to discuss the symbolism in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but he was having none of it, confiscating my hooped earrings while he was at it for good measure.

The real nail in the coffin though, the cherry on top of the big fat cake, happened earlier today. I was in the sixth-form social area scrolling through Instagram when a selfie of my ex-boyfriend Jordan, kissing some blonde girl I've never seen before, popped up on my feed. Straightaway I got that horrible sick feeling in my stomach, the sort that makes your insides slosh about like unset jelly.

I down my drink and pour another.

'Someone's phone,' Stella says, turning down the iPod speakers.

It's mine. I pluck it off the bed and peer at the shattered

screen. 'MUM' flashes back at me. I consider not answering, but I know she'll only go and leave me a really long voicemail message if I don't.

'I'll be back,' I say, putting down my beaker and heading out onto the landing, shutting Stella's bedroom door behind me.

I swipe my finger across the screen.

'Hey, Mum, what's up?' I ask, dangling my spare arm over the banister.

'Hi, sweetheart, change of plan, I'm going to need you at home tomorrow,' Mum says.

'But I've got plans with Stella.'

'You see Stella every day at school.'

'That's not the same. This is chill time,' I say, my voice venturing dangerously close into whining territory, something I know Mum *hates*.

'Well, I'm sorry, Mia,' she says, 'but you're going to have to *chill* another day.'

'Why? What's going on?'

'Grace is coming home.'

What? But Grace isn't due back for another six weeks. Since last September my older sister has been in Greece volunteering on an archaeological dig. Which I just don't get. I mean, Greece is nice for a holiday and everything, but why would you willingly spend your entire gap year digging for bits of broken pottery when you could be somewhere cool and exotic like Thailand, sunbathing and tubing and going to full-moon parties? But then most of what Grace does bewilders me. Grace and I may have the same blood

and DNA and stuff, but that's kind of it; we are chalk and cheese to the extreme.

'When?' I ask, swapping my phone to the other ear, as if that's going to make a difference to the news Mum is delivering.

'Tomorrow,' she answers.

'But how come?'

'She just said that she'd done all she wanted to do, and it felt like time to come home. Between you and me, I think she might be feeling a bit homesick.'

I scrunch up my face. Who suddenly gets homesick after nearly nine whole months away?

'Anyway,' Mum continues, 'they're due to arrive home about one o'clock tomorrow, so I'll pick you up from Stella's in the morning after I've got Audrey from training.'

'Hang on a second, who's "they"?'

'Grace and Sam.'

'Sam? As in Grace's lame-arse boyfriend?'

'Mia . . .' Mum says in a warning voice.

Even though she's yet to meet him face-to-face, Mum won't hear a word said against Grace's new boyfriend. Apparently he and Grace bonded on their dig because he's also going to Cambridge this autumn, to study medicine. Mum almost wet herself when she heard that. I keep hearing her refer to Sam as Grace's 'doctor boyfriend' on the phone. Audrey's chatted to him on Skype and reckons he's really nice, which everyone knows is just the polite code word for 'lame'. If anyone ever called me nice I'd probably chuck myself off the nearest bridge.

'Anyway,' Mum says again, 'we should be with you around ten thirty tomorrow.'

'Ten thirty?' I splutter. 'As in ten thirty a.m.?'

'Of course. It's not going to be in the evening, is it?'

'But why so early? You know Saturday is my only chance for a lie-in.'

'I'd hardly call ten thirty early. Besides, we've got a lot to do.'

'Like what?'

'Well, you need to sort Grace's room out for a start. It's a complete tip.'

'It's not my fault she gave us zero notice she was coming back so soon,' I huff.

But Mum ignores this. Just like she ignores anything negative I ever say about Grace. Because Grace is perfect, and I am not.

'And then I need you and Audrey to get started on lunch while I do a cake delivery,' Mum adds.

'Can't Dad do the delivery?' I ask, picking at a loose thread on the pyjama shorts I'd put on to wear while I was getting ready.

'No,' Mum says. 'He's been on nights all week and he *does* need a proper lie-in. When I spoke to him earlier he was so shattered he could hardly string a sentence together.'

'It's not fair,' I say.

Mum tuts. 'Oh, come on, Mia, I'm only asking you to tidy up a bit and maybe chop some salad for lunch, not go down a bloody coal mine.'

'Fine,' I mutter. 'Look, is that all you wanted? I kind of

need to start getting ready. The party starts at seven and I haven't even had a shower yet.'

'Where is this party again?'

'Andrew Stark's house, remember? And before you ask, yes, of course his parents are going to be there.'

The second part is a lie. Obviously. Not that I'm going to let Mum know that.

'Stella's mum is going to pick us up at midnight,' I add.

Another lie. Stella's mum, a flight attendant for Virgin Atlantic, is currently en route to Shanghai, leaving Stella's older brother Stu in charge. Stu doesn't care what we do, providing we don't burn the place down and keep our hands off his beer stash.

'Can I go now?' I ask.

'Fine, fine, I'll leave you to it,' Mum says, sighing.

There's a pause. I know what's coming.

'Now have fun tonight, Mia.'

I wait for the inevitable 'but'. She doesn't let me down.

'But just try not to go too crazy.'

'Mum,' I groan. 'Please don't do this.'

'It needs to be said,' she says, talking over me. 'I don't want a repeat of New Year's Eve.'

'You promised not to keep banging on about that,' I said, closing my eyes, my hand curling round the banister, fingernails digging into the soft wood.

'I'm not "banging on",' Mum says. 'I'm just reminding you of what happens when you get carried away.'

'Look, I've really got to go now, Mum. Stella needs me. I'll see you tomorrow, OK?'

She sighs again. 'OK. Ten thirty a.m. Make sure you're ready, I don't want to be hanging around waiting for you.'

'OK, OK.'

Back in the bedroom, Stella is sitting at her dressing table, frowning at her reflection.

'What's up?' I ask, tossing my phone on the bed.

'Hair dramas,' Mikey says.

'I can't believe I didn't notice how disgusting my split ends were until now,' Stella moans, holding her hair out in front of her as far as it will stretch.

'I could have told you that,' I say.

'I'm serious!' she cries. 'I can barely look at them without wanting to throw up in my mouth.'

'They're not that bad,' Kimmie offers, her eyes round and hopeful. Of the four of us, she's the closest we have to a peacekeeper.

'Yes they are,' Stella snaps. 'I should have gone to the hairdressers, I knew it.'

'Well, you didn't,' I say, flopping onto the bed next to Mikey. 'So quit whining.'

Stella turns round in her chair to face us. 'Trim them for me, Mia? Please?'

'Why me?'

'Because you're good at hair.'

This is true. Sixteen years of taming my own hair – a big fat curly Afro – has forced me to develop some pretty advanced hairdressing skills. Stella and Kimmie are always

begging me for 'fishtail plaits', or 'beachy waves', like I'm their on-demand personal hair stylist.

'Fine,' I say. 'Have you got any scissors?'

A prolonged search produces a pair of craft scissors from an ancient pencil case, the inside blackened with ink and pencil shavings. I run the blade against my finger. I secretly long for blood, but they're as blunt as can be.

'These will barely cut through a piece of paper,' I say.

'I don't care,' Stella replies. 'At least try.'

'Well, on your head be it.'

'Literally!' Mikey chimes in, high-fiving Kimmie.

'You guys are so lame,' I mutter, brushing Stella's hair so it falls in a single straight sheet down her back. 'So how much do you want taking off?' I ask, snipping in mid-air.

'Just the very ends,' Stella says. 'I don't want to lose the length. A couple of centimetres at the very most.'

Thanks to the fine texture, the scissors cut through Stella's hair more easily than I'd anticipated.

'Done,' I say, taking a step backwards.

Stella inspects my work. 'Maybe a tiny bit more?' she says. 'The ends are still kind of raggedy-looking.'

'Fine,' I say, rolling my eyes at the others as I resume cutting. I work faster this time, taking big swishy slices out of her hair.

I'm beginning to quite enjoy myself when Stella lets out a scream.

'What the actual fuck, Mia!' she shrieks as she falls to her knees to retrieve the chunk of hair I've just hacked off.

It's five centimetres long at the most but she's wailing like I've just scalped her or something.

'You were the one who bugged me to cut it,' I say, putting the scissors back down on the dressing table. 'I told you I didn't want to do it.'

In the mirror, I can see Mikey and Kimmie gaping at Stella, wearing a mixture of horror and delight on their faces. Meanwhile Stella continues to kneel on the carpet and scream over the piece of hair like it's a dead baby.

Calmly, I sit down on the chair she's just vacated.

'Jeez, relax, Stells. It's only hair.'

But that just makes her scream even more.

I know for a fact I should feel guilty, but the truth is, I don't feel anything at all.