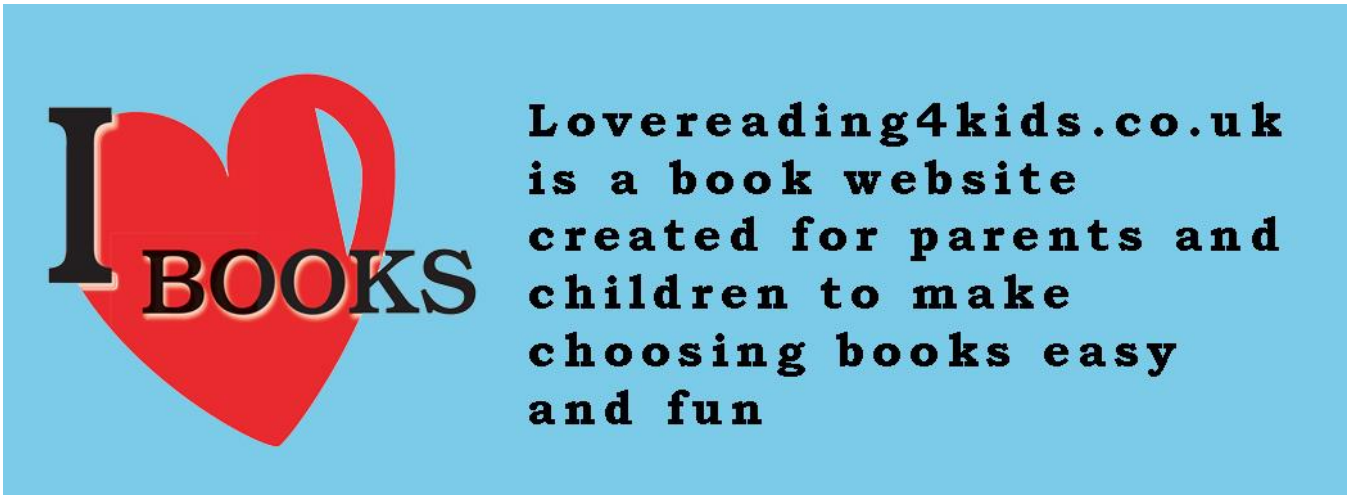


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Written by

Catherine Barter

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TROUBLE MAKERS

CATHERINE BARTER

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PART ONE

ONE

So I went to live with Danny. And that's the end of a story. But it's a story I don't remember because I was three years old. I probably cried for my mother a lot but I don't remember it. I don't remember anything about that time except for when I try and think about it sometimes and I'll remember a blue carpet. That's it, a blue carpet – and then there's nothing else, and then there was Danny. I was three, and he was twenty-two. It was twelve years ago.

'Your brother is amazing,' my friend Teagan says to me sometimes. 'Don't you think he's amazing?'

I think he's OK. I don't think he ever had much choice in anything. I know there were long conversations with social workers and relatives and who knows who else, including the one where my aunt and uncle told Danny that I should live with them in Australia, and then he threw them out and then they called the police: *that's* a pretty good story, even though

Danny never wants to tell it. Apart from them, there probably wasn't a queue down the street of people wanting to adopt me. So in one blurred memory there was a blue carpet, and next and always after that there was the flat in Hackney: wooden floorboards and the big, grey sofa and the lift up to the fourth floor where we lived; and there was Nick, as well, who apparently liked my brother enough that he didn't complain that he now came with a three-year-old. He must have really liked him.

This is what I write for my English homework one day: the assignment title is 'Family Portrait'. I get an A, and my teacher writes, *Very experimental!* and draws a smiley face.

I don't know if she means my writing or what.

TWO

When I was five or six or something my brother used to hold both my hands and let me run up his legs and I'd use the balance of his weight to do a backwards somersault through his arms. Then I'd hit the floor and say, *Again, again, again*.

Teagan is doing cartwheels outside the school gates. That's what makes me think of this. I'm sitting on a bench with her violin case propped against my knees, waiting for her to stop. We had hockey last period, and Teagan hasn't bothered to change out of her games kit, so she's cartwheeling over the cold concrete pavement in her tracksuit. Teagan's the shortest girl in our class and I think this is why she's good at cartwheels, which I haven't been able to do for years. I'm too gangly, all flailing limbs and no balance. Also, I don't like being watched.

Oliver Cohen, sitting next to me, tells her: 'I think you should stop, Teagan. You're going to break your arm or something.'

'All right, thanks, Dad,' says Teagan. She stands up, face flushed, and starts brushing the gravel off her palms. 'How many was that?' she says to me, slightly out of breath. 'The first one doesn't count. I didn't land properly.'

'Six, I think,' I say. 'Here.' I give her violin back as she sits down, and I start searching for my gloves, which are balled up somewhere in my bag beneath all my overdue library books. The sun's out but it's the end of January and still cold, dirty slush on the ground from when it snowed last week, and I came to school without my coat.

Ollie's looking at some guy across the road, who's sitting on a bench like ours, all on his own, just watching everybody leaving school. He's got one of those bland, familiar faces, and Ollie says, under his breath, 'That guy looks a *lot* like the East End Bomber, if anyone's interested.'

'Every old, white guy looks like the East End Bomber,' Teagan says. 'That's the whole point. That's why they can't find him.'

This is true. They have one grainy photo of the East End Bomber. ('I wish they'd call him something else,' my brother keeps saying. 'What if he decides to branch out?') It's from the CCTV outside a Tesco's in Shoreditch where last week he left a brown paper bag, the kind they give you if you buy coffee and a sandwich to take away, but with a bomb inside, or an *improvised explosive,* or whatever you want to call it. Some home-made thing with a bunch of wires. Three of them so far, all left lying around supermarkets in East London, like litter. They say there's no technical reason why they don't work. They say the next one probably will. Everybody's wringing their hands because they can't find him and because he's white so nobody knows why he's doing it. They don't say this exactly but it's implied.

'That's it,' Danny will say, watching the news. 'We're leaving.

We're moving somewhere safe. Everybody make a list of the safest places they can think of.'

Nick and I ignore him. We are not moving.

Ollie starts picking at his nail varnish and then sighs and leans back and folds his arms and looks sad, which is his default expression. He wears these canvas shoes to school and they're soaking wet from the snow. So no wonder he's sad, I guess.

Ollie got transferred into our class last week. He got into a fight with another boy in our year, supposedly, although it's honestly hard to imagine Ollie fighting anybody. He spends most of his time on his own in the art room or the IT lab, looking sensitive and complicated and drawing pictures of birds. Or now, since he's switched classes, hanging out with me and Teagan, since nobody else wants to talk to him. He's mostly silent so this is fine with us. Teagan likes the stuff he draws. He did a perfect sketch of her violin, in black and white with colours radiating out of it, and gave it to her. She has it sellotaped on the inside of her locker.

I find my gloves – green with little embroidered stars, a birthday present from Nick's mum, whose presents are always related to keeping me warm – and pull them on.

I'm waiting for Nick to pick me up, which happens basically never, because he hates driving and only takes the car into the city so he can complain about it.

'You don't have to wait,' I say to Teagan, but I know she will, because lately she's developed some weird sort of crush on Nick, and will take any opportunity to catch sight of him.

She shakes her head. 'I'm not. I've got violin. I'm waiting for that.' And she digs her hands into the pockets of her tracksuit top and squints up the road.

* * *

It was my birthday two weeks ago. A card from my aunt Niamh turned up yesterday. Her cards are always late, but then who knows how long it takes for post to get here from Australia. Even though she hasn't seen me since I was three, she still sends me birthday cards and Christmas presents every year. She writes things like:

Dear Alena,
We wish you a very Happy Birthday and hope we will be able to see you soon. Even though we are far away, if you ever need somebody to talk to, or if you are ever having problems at home, please email us or even phone. We are not in touch with your brother so you can talk to us in confidence.
With lots of love from Niamh and Drew.

Nick says that Niamh and my mother didn't get on and I believe him. Something about the way she never mentions her in the cards she sends. Still, there are probably things she could tell me about her, stories about them growing up, stuff nobody else knows. I think about this sometimes, when the cards turn up.

I actually remember meeting her. Apart from the blue carpet, it's the only memory I've still got from being that young, the only thing that stayed in my brain, stubborn as a weed, when all the memories of my mother just disappeared, emptied out of my head like they weren't important. Honestly, I'm pretty angry with three-year-old-me about this. Stupid little kid not paying attention to the important stuff, not remembering the right things.

So that my first proper memory is this.

Danny crouching down, telling me not to be shy. We are in a bright room with pictures on the walls. I guess it's a nursery or a playschool. Niamh is there. It must be the time she came to visit after my mother died. I've never met her before. She is coming towards me, holding her arms out, and I start screaming and try to hide behind Danny's leg. She's a total stranger and I have the idea that she wants to take me away.

Probably the only reason I remember this is because that fear used to come back to me a lot, in weird nightmares or sometimes just when I was playing on my own or waiting for my brother to pick me up from school: this anxious, awful feeling that somebody I didn't know was coming to take me away.

Since it turned out that Niamh *did* want to take me away – all the way to Australia, in fact – I obviously had good instincts back then. She'd never even met me until she turned up for the funeral, Danny says, and she was nice at first, trying to be helpful, and then after a few days she started talking about their home in Melbourne and how her husband Drew had a good job and how there was a garden and it was a good place for a child. Thanks but no thanks, Danny said. Then she turned up at the flat with a lawyer.

Danny makes her sound terrible. They're both crazy, her and her husband, he'll say. Both completely batshit. And he's a racist.

Fine. Except every time I get a card from her I feel a little bad about it because after all, her sister had just died and it probably hurt her feelings that I was frightened of her. I never put these cards in the living room or on the fridge where all the others go, or anywhere that Danny will see them, but he

knows she sends them. And I've never written or phoned because it seemed disloyal and I never had anything to say anyway.

Still. I've kept all the cards. So maybe one day.