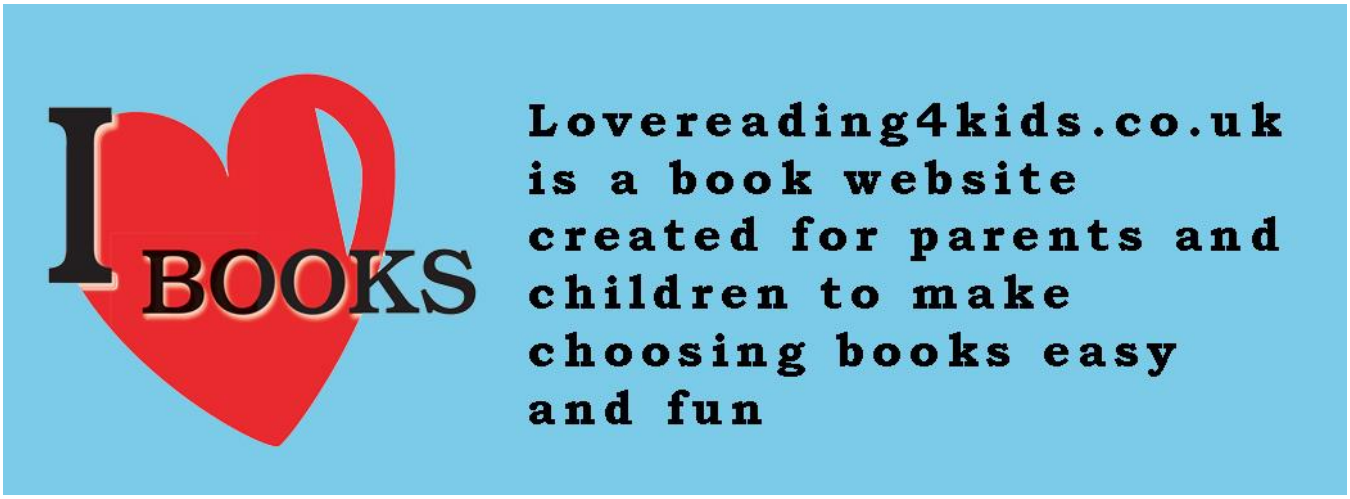


Opening extract from

The Harder They Fall

Written by

Bali Rai

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Batman Begins

I always wanted to write my own story. I always wanted to be the hero. A proper human hero, not someone with super powers.

In my story, I'd have a friend who was in danger and I'd have to save them. There would be a girl, too. A cute, funny girl, who liked all the things I liked. We'd save the day and fall in love and …

Thing is, I didn't have any friends in the real world. Just Mum and Dad, and they don't count, do they? The girl was just a dream, too.

And then things got weird. There *was* a friend, there *was* a girl, and there *was* a story to tell. The story could have been called "The Calloway Files" or "Calloway Returns" or

something like that. That's me – Calloway. The story could have been a comic or a graphic novel. But in the end, it wasn't about me.

In the end it was all about Jacob.

1

Reign of Terror

Anu Patel twisted my ear lobe. Her fingers were skinny and her nails were bright orange. When she wasn't snarling, she was kind of pretty. Only right now she *was* snarling.

"*Why* haven't you done it?" she demanded. "I've got customers, you goggle-faced geek."

"I didn't have time," I said. "I had a yoga class."

"*Yoga?*" she said. "What are you, Cal – a hippy?"

I did homework for Anu, and she sold it to other pupils. She called it her business. I was her only employee.

"Please," I said. "My ear hurts ..."

"News flash, dork!" she said. "It's *supposed* to hurt."

I tried to pull away but that made the pain worse. I decided to try a new tactic.

"Violence never solves anything," I told her.

"Oh *please!*" Anu said. "Keep that peace and love rubbish for your yoga class."

At last she let go.

"Get it done this lunchtime," she warned. "Or I'll pull your ear off!"

As she marched away, I could smell sweet perfume and hear the *clack* of expensive shoes. We didn't have a school uniform and Anu Patel was rich. Even her P.E. kit was designer. Oh, and she was a bully, but I guess you got that.

*

Later, Mrs Collier the librarian had a word with me. "Are you getting trouble from Anu Patel?" she asked.

"No, Miss," I said.

"Are you sure, Calloway?" she said. "A Year 7 said she'd hurt you."

"She was just messing about," I said.

Mrs Collier didn't look convinced but she let me go anyway. I grabbed my bag and headed to my form room. When I arrived, a big freckly lad with short ginger hair was standing at the front next to the teacher.

"Newbie!" someone shouted.

The new boy glared at us all.

"This is Jacob," Mr Gossage said. "He's joining Year 9."

Jacob went a bit red.

"*Ahh!*" Freya said. "Look – he's gone all shy!"

Some lads sniggered, but Freya hadn't been teasing. I'd known her since nursery and she wasn't ever mean to anyone.

"Freya, Cal – could you show Jacob around next lesson?" Mr Gossage asked.

"Er, suppose so," I said, and Freya smiled.

*

Freya led Jacob and me around school, starting with Maths and Science. Jacob had stopped scowling, but now he just looked bored.

"Any questions?" Freya asked.

I tried to make eye contact with her, but I couldn't. Freya was my secret crush – Selina Kyle to my Batman. She had dark hair and a button nose. Her eyes were big and brown, and her skin was pale. She wore glasses like me, only hers had cool frames. She was cute.

"Jacob?" she asked again. "Questions?"

"Nah," Jacob said. "All looks the same to me, innit?"

"Fab!" Freya said. "Let's go to Art – my favourite!"

Freya didn't notice how bored Jacob was – she was all smiles and excitement. I was happy to be with her, and curious about Jacob too.

He only spoke to say he was bored. His clothes looked shabby – his shirt was almost

grey, not white. I noticed that his shoes were all scuffed.

"We done?" he asked, when we returned to the front door.

"Yep!" Freya said. "Now, I'll take you to your next lesson. What is it?"

"Dunno," Jacob said, and he stared at his timetable.

"Shall I look?" I offered.

"What?" Jacob snapped. "You think I can't read or summat, bruv?"

"I was just offering to help," I said to my feet.

"Stuff your help!" Jacob said. "I'm off ..."

And with that he trudged away.

"Not exactly friendly, is he?" Freya said. "Never mind. We've got English next, haven't we?"

I nodded. Freya had said "we" like there *was* a "*we*".

"Calloway?" she asked.

"Hmm?"

“Why are you grinning?”

“Oh, no reason.” I hadn’t even realised I was.

At the end of the corridor, we saw Jacob kick a door open so hard it slammed into the wall.