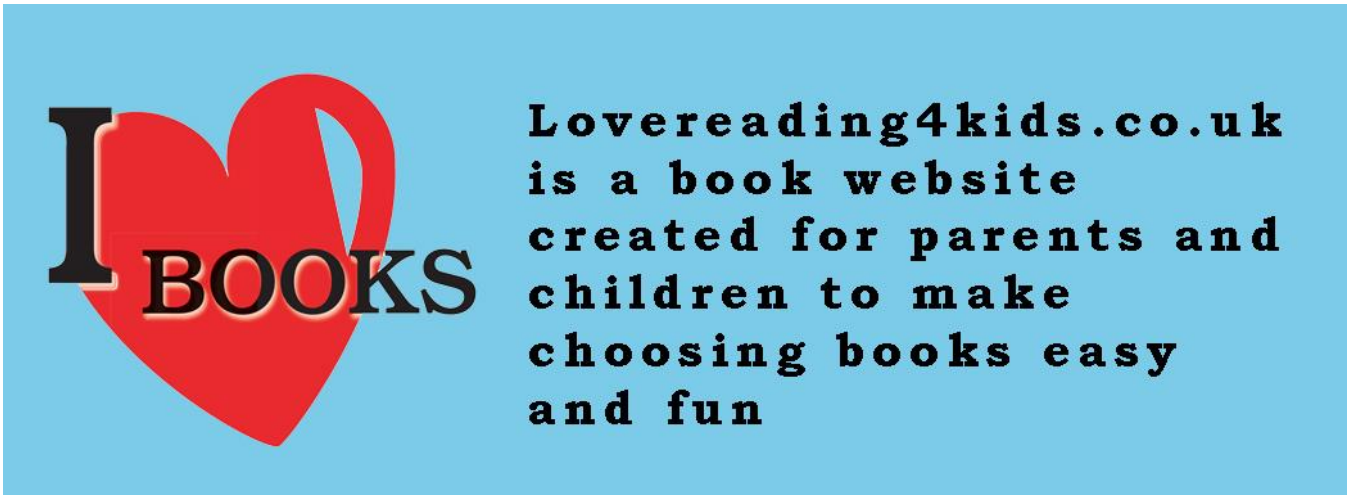


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Stunt Double

Written by

Tamsin Cooke

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To loving mums everywhere.
Especially to my fabulous mum and wonderful mother in law who are sadly no longer with us

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STUNT DOUBLE



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CHAPTER 3

Novak's standing in front of a closed door cut into the mountainside. How long has she been down here?

'Come closer,' she says.

I don't move, I can't move. I'm obscuring the claw I've just snapped.

'Come closer.' she repeats, sharper this time.

Betting she's never disobeyed, I shuffle towards her when I feel a jolt of surprise. I heard she was short, but not this short. She comes up to my chest, her brown hair in a perfect bun.

'I'm sorr—'

'Name,' she cuts in.

Should I make one up? But if she finds out, I'll be in even more trouble. Covering my mouth with my hand, I cough, 'Finn.'

'What did you say?' she says, her voice thick with an Eastern European accent. She sounds like a Bond villain.

'Finn,' I cough again, when her phone rings.

'I have to get this.' She lifts her forefinger into the air, before adding, 'Stay.'

I'm not a dog! But I don't move. And if she says, 'sit,' I'll probably drop to the floor.

'Have you seen it?' Novak demands down the phone. 'So *you* haven't seen it? Someone else has . . . You know the rules . . . Rumours mean nothing.' She glares at me. Then turns her back, and starts speaking in a language I don't understand.

Part of me wishes she'd get it over and done with; tell me never to step foot on a film set again. Her voice grows louder, more agitated. She still has her back to me . . .

What am I waiting for?

Heart pounding, I inch backwards. Keeping my eyes fixed on her, I feel around the metal Ropen until it's standing between us. As quietly as I can, I grab a stone jutting out of the wall and slink up the inside of the mountain. My feet scuff the rock, and I wince every time I kick a stone off a ledge, but Novak doesn't seem to notice. She's yelling into her phone now.

I reach the perch where Blake and Joe hid, and pull myself over the top. I half scramble, half slide down the

mountainside, before racing across the hangar. Slipping outside, I lean against the building. I catch my breath for a second, then join the main road that runs through the studio block. Walking quickly, I pass hangars and buildings, each housing different sets for the film. Novak booked the entire compound for the latest Rio Dinoni movie—*The Ropen's Revenge*. Nothing else is being filmed here.

I pass the canteen, when I hear, 'Finn, thank goodness.'

Turning around, I see my minder run towards me. *Oh my days!* I forgot about her. Everyone under sixteen must have an adult guardian with them. Film rules. My minder is twenty-five, blonde, brown-eyed, and right now, looking angry.

'Where have you been? You were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago,' says Selina.

'I got held up.'

'Doing what?'

'Filming.'

She doesn't look convinced, but she says, 'Well, you're here now. Let's get some lunch.'

I glance over my shoulder, looking out for Novak. 'Actually I don't want any. I've finished for the day, so I'm going to eat at home.'

Selina's eyes narrow. 'You should eat here.'

'I'm not hungry,' I lie. 'I thought you'd be happy. You get to finish early.'

She bites her lip. 'I tell you what. How about you eat in the canteen now, and I'll let you go home on your own? I'll only chaperone you to the studio exit.'

'Really?' Normally she hand delivers me to Mum as if I'm a baby. That's part of her contract. As I'm fourteen years old, it's humiliating.

'If you agree, I'll bend the rules a little,' she says.

'It's a deal.' If Novak comes in, I'll duck under a table or something.

Selina's face breaks into a grin, and she grabs hold of my arm. She pushes me through the door of the canteen, and I can't believe how busy it is. Actors, camera crew, grips, extras—they're all still here. Normally they grab a plate of food and eat in their designated green rooms. Actors stick together. Lighting stick together. But now they're standing, chatting, and holding plates.

Then I see why, and I also get why Selina wanted to come in here so badly. In the far corner of the room, surrounded by bodyguards and groupies, is Marcus Saunders. Blake's dad. More importantly, Hollywood royalty. Everything he stars in becomes a mega-blockbuster, and he has won almost every award possible. Everyone fancies him—even my mum.

'I'm going to get some food,' I tell Selina.

'Good idea,' she says, fluffing her blond bob, not taking her eyes off Marcus.

There are only extras left in the food queue. Technically I'm an actor—I auditioned and had lines—so

I should jump to the front. But having been the one always letting others go before me, I can't do it. So I join the end of the queue, behind two girls.

'I can't believe I'm going to get the chance to speak. First time I'm an extra and I'm talking,' says one of the girls, clasping her hands to her face. 'I get to climb a mountain. And swoon over Blake.'

'You do that anyway,' says the other girl, and they burst out laughing.

Seriously? Someone, somewhere must really hate me. I'm standing behind the girl who has my part. I should have pushed to the front after all.

'Blake is such a great actor,' she says.

'He's the best,' adds her friend.

I should keep quiet. I can't. 'You know Blake only got the role because of who his dad is,' I hiss quietly, not wanting Saunders Senior to overhear.

The girls look horrified. Role Stealer (okay—I know it's not technically her fault) folds her arms. 'That's not true. He went to seven auditions and beat 8,000 boys for this role. I read all about it on the Internet. It's got nothing to do with his dad.'

I snort.

'I think someone's jealous,' says the other girl.

'Jealous? Why would I be jealous of someone who can't even carry an eleven-year-old or scale down the inside of a mountain?'

'What are you talking about?' says Role Stealer.

'You'll find out.'

We move further up the queue, beside a table full of baguettes, biscuits, and more importantly, three doughnuts. The girls grab one each. I lean across, reaching for the third, when—

'Girls,' drawls a voice, and Blake is suddenly by my side. 'You don't mind do you?' He pushes in front and grabs the last doughnut.

'Didn't you want that?' says Role Stealer, looking at me.

'Oh he won't mind, will you *erm* . . . what's your name?' says Blake.

'Finn,' I mutter.

'You don't mind do you, Finn?' He takes a bite and winks. 'Got to go—I'm needed on set.'

I watch him saunter through the crowd, my fists clenching. *Will I ever be needed on set?*

'Oh my God, he winked at you,' squeals one of the girls. 'He actually winked at you.'

'He took the last doughnut,' I say.

'And he asked you your name. How many other actors would do that?' says Role Stealer.

They start discussing everything perfect about Blake, and through gritted teeth, I suck in breath. I could tell them a thing or two about Saunders Junior—how he really knows my name. We've known each other for four years, and he's hated me for three!

CHAPTER 4

I stand in front of my terraced house, my heart sinking. Could this day get any worse? I lost my role; the buses took forever to get through London, and now this. Balloons dangle from the drainpipe. Some bob up and down in the wind but others have popped, just shrivelled rubber floating in the air. I prefer those.

'Is it your birthday?' says Mr Darzi, my neighbour, walking past.

I shake my head.

'Then what are the balloons for?'

'I'm not sure,' I lie.

I wait until he turns the corner, then put my key in the lock. The door opens before I have a chance to twist it.

'Finn, you're early. Where's Selina?' says Mum, looking behind me.

'I left her at the end of the road.' Technically that isn't a lie. I don't say which road.

'So how's my superstar?' she asks, and I bundle her in the house, hoping no one heard. 'Did you see the balloons?'

'Yeah. They're great.'

'We need to take another picture of you, add it to our hall of fame.'

I glance at the photos hanging on the wall in our hallway, a line of them, starting with Mum from seventeen years ago. She's on different film sets in the first few, then there's a picture of her in the park with a large belly. I'm a baby in her arms in the next one. The rest are only of me—either school photos or each time I've been an extra in a film.

'We'll do it tomorrow,' I say.

'It's got to be today, but I've got something to show you first.' She ushers me into the lounge where a massive homemade banner covers the back wall. FINN'S FIRST WORDS.

'You make me sound like a baby.'

'You'll always be my baby,' she says, pinching my cheek with her thumb and finger. 'Did you remember your lines?'

'I only had seventeen.'

'Seventeen is more than none.'

Don't remind me!

Mum's eyes sparkle. 'Was Novak there? Did she hear?'

'She wasn't there when I did my bit.'

'But did you meet her?'

'Yeah.'

'Did she speak to you?'

'Yeah.'

'Did she talk to anyone else?'

'Not while I was there.' *There was no one else—thank God.*

'Novak doesn't just speak to anyone,' says Mum.

I can just imagine the conversations she'll be having in the hairdressers tomorrow: 'Novak chose Finn out of all the other actors to talk to. She's already singled him out. It's not surprising really. It's in his blood. Did I ever tell you about the time I . . . '

Should I tell her what happened? But she looks so happy.

'Listen Mum, I'm really tired. Do you mind if I go lie down?'

'But I thought we could order pizza to celebrate.'

'Can we afford it?'

She shakes her head. 'Don't you worry about the money. I'm the grown up—that's my job.'

I stare at Mum's platinum curls, false eyelashes, and excited pink cheeks. Exactly who is the grown-up?

'I've got homework.'

'Don't worry about that. School aren't going to care when they realize what you've been doing.'

✶

'Do you think being in a film is an excuse?' demands Mr Willis.

This is the third time I've been asked that question, and it's only the second lesson.

'A little?' I say hopefully.

'Not one iota.' His eyes flash. 'Homework is set for a reason, and I'd like you to think about that reason during detention after school on Thursday.'

'Thursday?' I bounce on the balls of my feet. 'Would it be possible if I did it another day? It's just I have an exam.'

'In what?'

'In something,' I say, vaguely.

Mr Willis folds his arms and looks at me, obviously waiting for an answer. He'll be waiting a long time.

'Karate,' shouts Sam from the back of the room.

Okay—he won't be waiting that long. *But Sam, don't say anything else!* I shoot my best friend a look across the class.

'If he passes, he's going to be a black belt,' adds Sam.

What part of 'don't tell anyone' did he not understand? Murmurs are already spreading around the room.

'Black belt—impressive,' says Mr Willis. 'So you're in films, can act. I know you do free running. Is there anything you can't do?'

'Homework,' shouts Sam.

The class burst out laughing, and I try not to snigger.

Mr Willis's lips twitch. 'Oh sit down. You can have your detention on Friday.'

'Thanks Sir,' I say. Then pause. *Am I honestly thanking him for a detention?*

I start to walk to my seat, when Melinda, who doesn't normally notice I'm alive, clasps my arm.

'What's it like being in a Dinoni film?' she asks, looking at me in . . . adoration . . .

Whoa, this is new.

'It's all right,' I say casually, while my insides seem to jump.

'Did you meet Blake Saunders? Was he as lovely as everyone says he is? Can you get me his autograph?'

'Ooh—and me,' says Carla, sitting next to her.

There's a chorus of demands for Blake's autograph from every girl in the room, and my insides sink.

'Oh for goodness sake Finn, sit down,' snaps Mr Willis.

I fall into my seat beside Sam.

He clasps his hands together and bats his eyelids. 'Oh please get me Blake's autograph. I just love him!'

'Shut up. Or I'll practise some of my karate moves on you.'

✶

Girls continue coming up to me all morning. They ask me the strangest questions. *Did I talk to Blake? What*

did he eat? What's his favourite colour, band, girl's name? What did he smell like? Thank God I never told anyone about me and Blake when I moved to this school two years ago.

At lunchtime, I grab a baguette and aim for the wall behind the school where no one else seems to go.

'Why don't you make something up?' says Sam. 'Say you and Blake are best friends. I reckon one of the girls would go out with you. You take Melinda. I'll ask Carla.'

I rip off a bit of baguette, wishing it were Sam's head.

'We could tell them what the film's about. Impress them,' he says.

'You don't know what it's about. It's top secret.'

'Yeah, I do,' says Sam, crisps spraying from his mouth. 'It's about a giant rodent who's got this bright blue stuff on his underbelly that helps him live forever. Rio needs to get some of it to stop his uncle from dying.'

I stare at my friend without blinking. Apart from getting the Ropen mixed with a rodent, he's pretty much on the money. How could he possibly know this?

Sam grins smugly. Then deepens his tone as if he's a voice-over actor on a movie trailer. 'In the depths of the jungle, the rodent's been captured by an evil tribe, desperate for the blue stuff themselves. Then out of nowhere, the rodent's mate appears, ready to exact revenge. What happens when our hero Rio Dinoni gets caught in the middle? Dun, dun, dunnnnnnn . . .'

Bloody Hell!

'I'm right, aren't I?' says Sam, his voice back to normal. He shoves another crisp in his mouth.

'No! Where did you hear that anyway?'

'Your mum told my mum at the salon yesterday, when she cut her hair.'

What????

I'm not even supposed to know the whole plot and I was in the film. But the girl from the costume department was showing off on set. Then I showed off to Mum . . . who showed off to Sam's mum . . . Oh God!

'Don't worry. I won't tell anyone,' says Sam.

'It's not even what it's about,' I say as casually as I can.

'Yeah right!' Then his eyes widen. 'No way. Don't tell me he wants Blake's autograph too,'

I turn to see where Sam's looking and I stiffen. Oli and his three minions from year ten are heading straight for us. I'm surprised they're in school. Normally they skip it.

'So you're a black belt?' says Oli, and even from over here, I see the glint in his eyes.

'Don't say a thing,' I hiss out of the corner of my mouth to Sam. Then louder, I say, 'No.'

'Everyone says you are,' says Oli, walking closer.

'Then everyone's wrong.'

'I reckon I could beat you.'

'I reckon you could too.'

'No, you couldn't,' says Sam, standing up. 'Finn might not be a black belt now but he will be on Thursday.'

I could kill him.

Oli's lip curls. 'You messing with me? Think you're clever?'

'No, I just don't want to fight,' I say, not sure who to glare at more; Oli or Sam.

'What? Scared you'll hurt me?' His voice drips with contempt.

I take a deep breath. I've had enough karate lectures to know this is a lose–lose situation. 'Sam, let's get out of here,' I say, jumping off the wall.

I should have known it was coming. A fist slams into the side of my head.