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opening extract from

Queen of Teen

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Queen of Teen

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Contents

Foreword 01
Camilla Batmanghelidjh

Sink or Swim
Cathy Cassidy 03

Problems
Jacqueline Wilson 17

Big Red Bottomosity
Louise Rennison 27

Mum Never Did Learn To Knock
Cathy Hopkins 39

???
Meg Cabot 61

B.L.D.
Karen McCombie 79

How To Be A Star
Lisa Clark 95

A Life Less Ordinary
Joanna Nadin 105

Some Girls Are Bigger Than Others
Sarra Manning 123

Foreword

Teenagers are often profoundly misrepresented in the media. Journalistic laziness results in the average teenager being stereotyped. Either they're spotty, clueless and drunk, buried in the rubble of unwashed dishes in their bedrooms, or they're menacingly hidden in their hoods, waiting to attack.

So you can imagine our delight at Kids Company when such wonderful writers decided to contribute and help us raise money for the incredible teenagers we work with and talk to. The world should be celebrating its young people. So many are inspirational, enthusiastic and generous, always coming up with questions and innovations which propel humanity towards greater achievement. Teenagers pull us all up towards life.

Even those who are living with profound poverty and surviving abuse show astounding levels of courage. They forgive their parents when harm has been caused, defend their siblings to ensure their survival and remain hopeful when hopelessness would have been easier. If teenagers could take over the media, they would deliver truths which many of us are too afraid to face, so it's hardly surprising that those of us who are adults end up projecting so much anxiety and creating distance, when proximity would be so much more enriching.

I, for one, consider myself an avid fan of teenagers. They are utterly, utterly brilliant and I'm lucky to be spending time with them. I know everyone who has written for this book is equally appreciative of young people and the joy they generate in the world.

Kids Company provides wrap-around care for some 14,000 vulnerable children and teenagers. Ninety-five per cent of those seeking help have heard about us at street level and are asking for help directly, without an adult to pay for the services we provide. Therefore, as a charity, we are hugely reliant on public donations to enable us to remain a sanctuary for abused children. Your donation through buying this book will make a big difference in a young person's life. They will know someone cares. In being less lonely, they can cope better with the pain of being hurt.

So thank you to all those brilliant writers who have donated their stories and to you for making Queen of Teen your choice.

With love,

Camila
Chief Executive
Kids Company

Cathy Cassidy
Sink or Swim

'You?' Courtney says scornfully. 'There must be some mistake, some kind of mix-up. Why would they choose *you*?'

I blink, pink-cheeked, and tilt my chin up, bravely. 'I don't know,' I say. 'But they did.'

We are standing at the bus stop after school, waiting for the 73a. I have stood at this exact same bus stop with Courtney Taylor every school day for the last two and a half years, and she has never spoken to me before. I am not sure if she actually knew I was alive, until today.

Courtney frowns at the letter in her hand and then looks at me, narrowing her eyes. 'It doesn't make sense,' she huffs, flicking back her long, blond hair. 'The teachers were

supposed to match us all up with our perfect work experience placement . . . and they go and pick *you* to work with Bella Marlow. It doesn't seem fair!'

'Hey,' my best friend Kate chips in, loyally. 'Of course it's fair! Bella Marlow picked Millie . . . she's the best person for the job.'

You cannot reason with Courtney Taylor, though. She is the coolest girl in Year Nine, the self-styled star of Castleford Academy. She is smart, she is pretty, she has enough confidence to last her a lifetime. When I stand next to Courtney, I' m not just in her shadow, I am practically invisible.

'I was the obvious choice,' Courtney is scowling. 'Bella Marlow is a legend. She was one of Britain's top models, until a decade ago, and now she's probably the best fashion photographer of her generation . . . her pictures are in all the glossy mags. And I am going to be a model, so I would be the best person for the placement, right?'

'Apparently not,' Kate says. 'Right, Millie?'

'Erm . . .'

A whole bunch of us applied for a work experience placement with Bella Marlow. A week helping out in her studio was always going to be a million times better than the usual week of shelf-stacking in a local supermarket or whatever other delights the school could come up with. The problem was, Bella only wanted one work experience pupil.

I never imagined in a million years she'd pick me.

'I don't know if you understand . . . um, Millie, is it?' Courtney snaps. 'This could have been my big break! And now that chance is going to be wasted . . . on you. That sucks.'

Kate raises an eyebrow. She has landed her own dream work experience placement, at a top hairdresser's in town, and I think a little bit of her is enjoying Courtney's stroppy attitude. It's not often that we get to see the Year Nine starlet throw a tantrum.

'What's up, Courtney?' Kate asks, sweetly. 'Not jealous, are you?'

Courtney examines her pale pink fingernails. 'Jealous?' she snarls. 'Not a chance. Good luck with your placement, Millie . . . I have a feeling you'll need it!'

The bus arrives and Courtney elbows her way to the front and gets on, blond hair swishing.

'I don't like Courtney Taylor,' I say. 'She has a nasty streak . . .'

'About a mile wide,' Kate agrees. 'I don't think she is model material, unless maybe it was an advert for sour grapes.'

Kate and I find a seat together near the back.

'Want to know what Courtney's placement is?' Kate grins. 'She's going to be working in a factory that makes thermal underwear. You know, long-johns and woolly vests and big knickers that come down to your knees . . . No wonder she's mad at you!'

I picture Courtney Taylor packing thermal knickers and polo-necked vests into boxes, and I have to smile.

'She might be right, though,' I confess to Kate. 'What if I

am out of my depth at Bella Marlow's studio? What if I can't cope?'

Kate rolls her eyes. 'You'll cope,' she tells me, firmly. 'You work about a million times harder than Courtney Taylor, and you are not a quitter. And you are great with a camera, Millie – that's why they picked you! They read your application letter and they recognised someone who really loves photography.'

'I know, but . . .'

'No buts,' Kate insists. 'You are the best person for that placement, end of story. If you were Bella Marlow, who would you pick? A talented young photography student or a would-be model who just wanted to grab a chance to be in the limelight? Think about it!'

I frown. 'But . . . Kate, it's *fashion* photography,' I sigh. 'That's scary. It's a different world. What if I don't fit in?'

Thing is, it is not just Courtney Taylor who thinks I am the invisible girl. I am plain, I am shy, I am ordinary. My eyes are the colour of muddy puddles, my hair is a mousey brown and wavy and shoulder-length. I do not have the knack of making a navy blue school uniform into a fashion statement.

There is nothing about me that stands out from the crowd. I am a wallpaper girl – I blend into the background.

'Hey,' Kate says. 'You'll be fine!'

I look at Kate, blinking at me from beneath a scene-girl fringe, her eyes rimmed with smoky eyeliner, and I look at Courtney, chatting to a gaggle of Year Ten boys a few seats

down from us, her hair perfectly cut and layered and streaked, and straightened to within an inch of its life.

They have style – and confidence.

I don't.

'You have to believe in yourself,' Kate says, echoing my thoughts. 'It's all about self-esteem. You're as good as Courtney Taylor, any day – better, honest! You're pretty and clever and kind and talented . . .'

Well, Kate would say that, I guess. She's my best friend. Loyalty is part of her job-description.

'You're cool, Millie,' Kate says. 'Believe it! And trust me, Bella Marlow won't care one bit whether you are wearing Converse and jeans or a slinky dress with Jimmy Choos. It's a work placement, not a fashion parade!'

'But . . . what if I'm out of my depth?'

Kate laughs. 'Sometimes, you have to risk being out of your depth,' she says. 'What's the worst that can happen? You either sink or you swim. You can't stay in the shallows all your life.'

'Do I get armbands?' I ask with a grin, and Kate jabs me in the ribs, laughing.

'You won't need them,' she tells me. 'Promise!'

I look in the mirror and a pale, big-eyed girl stares back at me. She has a little green eyeliner smudged around her eyes, a spotted headband holding back her wavy hair. She is wearing a simple blue T-shirt, skinny jeans, Rocket Dog

pumps bought specially for the occasion. She looks scared.

If she was my friend, I'd tell her to relax, smile, enjoy the adventure, but I'm not sure if she'd listen. She's remembering the things Courtney Taylor said, mean things, spiteful things. Her fingers shake as she applies pink lip-gloss, tries for a smile.

'Sink or swim,' I tell her, and the girl in the mirror lifts her head and grins.

I think maybe she has had enough of hanging around in the shallows, enough of being a wallpaper girl.

At Bella Marlow's studio, I ring the bell for ages and then a boy with a dipping sky-blue fringe sticks his head out of an upstairs window and asks if I am the new work experience girl. Then he throws down two twenty-pound notes and asks me to run over to Starbucks for lattes – three skinny, one with soya, one chai, a mint tea and a bunch of muffins. 'Oh,' he adds, 'and whatever you want, too!'

I catch the money before it drifts into the gutter, my heart thumping. This is not what I had in mind, but I don't want to mess up on my first day. I run to Starbucks, and ten minutes later I am back at the studio, clutching a cardboard box full of lattes and muffins.

The blue-fringe boy opens the door and takes the cardboard box, checking through the contents. 'Perfect!' he says. 'That's a first, for a work experience kid. Come in . . . I'm Martin, Bella's assistant . . .'

A tall, striking woman in her thirties appears behind Martin.

'And I'm Bella. Good to meet you, Millie!'

Bella Marlow still has the long auburn curls and startling blue-green eyes that made her such a famous face in her modelling days, but there is nothing starry about her. She is simply dressed in combats and a plain white T-shirt, her hair tied back and her face free of make-up.

'I hope you'll enjoy your week with us,' she says, ushering me inside as Martin runs up a flight of stairs with the coffee supplies. 'I was very impressed with your letter... you sounded very different from the usual work experience kids we get. You take your own photos, right? I loved the prints you sent in with your application. They really had something . . . you have a talent.'

'Oh . . . thank you!' I stammer. 'I can't believe you chose me. You must have had so many fantastic applicants...'

Bella frowns. 'I did,' she says, 'and I chose you, because you were the best.'

My cheeks flush pink.

'I have to tell you, though, photography is a tough business,' she continues. 'Talent isn't always enough. You have to work hard.'

'I can work hard,' I say.

'I think you can,' Bella smiles. 'But more than that, you have to be determined. You have to get out there and make your mark. You cannot be shy or retiring, and you cannot

hide away in the background. You have to believe in yourself.'

I blink. 'That's not always easy,' I say in a small voice, and Bella laughs.

'No, it's not easy, but it's true all the same,' she says. 'You remind me of me, back when I was your age, Millie. A little shy, a little unsure. But, honey, you're as good as anyone! Believe it!'

'I . . . OK!'

'You won't have time to hide away in the background, here,' Bella says. 'This is a crazy week for us – publicity shots, fashion shots, a magazine spread . . . we'll barely have time to stop and draw breath. We'll work you hard, I warn you, Millie, but I think you'll enjoy it.'

'I will!' I grin.

Bella gives me a quick tour of the studios. There's a dressing room, where a model is sipping mint tea through a straw while a make-up artist paints her eyelids with glittery green shadow and a stylist is ironing a bundle of satin dresses in jewel-bright colours; upstairs, there is the studio proper, where Martin, the blue-fringe boy, is struggling with a roll of backdrop paper and a whole forest of blazing lights.

'Can you grab this?' Martin asks, and I drop my bag and stretch up to hold the backdrop while he adjusts the lighting.

'I'll leave you to it,' Bella says, checking her watch. 'Martin'll keep you busy, show you the ropes. We're shooting in five minutes, OK? Chin up, Millie! It's in at the deep end, I'm afraid!'

'Sink or swim,' I say.

'You got it,' Bella grins, 'but I think you'll swim. I'm counting on it, Millie.'

I have never worked so hard in my whole, entire life. I am the studio dogsbody.

Sometimes I am adjusting the lights and fixing up the tripods, sometimes I am holding a silver reflector right under the face of an up-and-coming model to make her look more radiant. Those things are pretty good. Sometimes, though, I am brushing the studio floor or polishing shoes or balancing on a stepladder, hanging muslin drapes across the set. I have become an expert at ironing dresses and I have made so many trips to Starbucks the assistants know me by name.

There's even one especially crazy day when one of the models doesn't turn up for a teen-mag fashion shoot, and Bella says we don't have time to wait for the agency to send a replacement, so the stylist does my make-up and fixes me up with a sugar-pink wig to match the other model. We head out to one of the big London parks and shoot all afternoon until the light fades, me and the other model wearing pastel-coloured prom dresses and feeding the ducks and the swans.

When I see the photos on Bella's laptop, I don't even recognise myself. I think of Courtney Taylor and her dreams of being a model . . . what would she say if she could see this? She might see it, one day, and still she'd never guess.

That makes me smile.