Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Dead Ends

Written by

Erin Jade Lange

Published by

Faber Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published by Bloomsbury USA in 2013
First published in the UK in 2014
by Faber and Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by Faber and Faber Ltd
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

All rights reserved
© Erin Lange, 2013

The right of Erin Lange to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-571-30882-8



2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

1

I had a foot on some guy's throat and a hand in my pocket the first time I saw Billy D. He was standing across the street, staring – not even trying to be sly about it – just staring without a word, without even blinking.

'What are you lookin' at?' I called.

His mouth fell open in a silent little O, but he didn't respond. He didn't leave either, just kept on staring.

Something gurgled inside the throat under my foot, and I glanced down. The guy looked like he might be struggling to breathe, but his face wasn't red yet, so I turned my attention back to the other boy.

'Get out of here! Or you're next!'

That was kind of an empty threat. Even from across the street, I could tell by his vacant expression, that slack jaw, and the strange way he hunched his shoulders that he was different – probably in special ed. And I didn't beat on those guys.

Standards, y'know?

'Hey, you deaf or something? I said *get lost*!'



He hesitated, shuffling first to the left, then to the right. He looked once more at me and at the boy under my boot, then moved his gaze to the pavement and stomped away.

Freak.

The hand in my pocket closed over a piece of gum. I popped the stick in my mouth and refocused on the task at hand. Below me, surrounded by pavement grit and gravel, that face was definitely turning a little pink. I lifted my foot and kicked a loose bit of rock so it pinged off the guy's shoulder. It must have stung because he winced between gasps for breath.

'You think that hurt? That's nothing compared to what I'll do to your *car* if you mess with me again.'

He hadn't found his voice yet, which was lucky for him because he was probably just dumb enough to say something to piss me off even more. He pulled himself up to a sitting position and crawled along the pavement toward the street, where the door to his bright red Mustang still hung open. It was restored vintage, from back when Mustangs were still cool. He was halfway across the road when I called out. 'And you better find another way to school. If I see your car on this street again, you'll have a broken windshield and a broken face.'

The guy finally pulled himself up into the driver's seat and turned just long enough to glare at me before

slamming the door shut. I responded with a raised fist, and even though I was still on the pavement and couldn't possibly touch him, I heard the door locks click. I had to laugh.

What a pussy.

The Mustang roared around the corner and disappeared. I scratched my palms out of habit, but it wasn't necessary. The itching had evaporated with the car.

It always started like that – with the itch. I would feel it in the centre of my palms, a buzzing sensation I couldn't ignore. If I did try to ignore it, the itch would spread like a spiderweb, radiating out to the edges of my hand, tingling down to my fingertips. Closing those fingers into a fist and giving that fist a landing pad was the only way to scratch the itch.

I never knew what would trigger it. It could be as subtle as a guy rolling his eyes when I spoke up in class or as obvious as some asshole in a bright red Mustang rolling down a window and asking why I couldn't afford a car. Not much I could do about the former – I was this close to getting kicked out of school as it was. If it wasn't for my good grades, they'd have shoved me out the door already. But the latter would get a guy dragged out of his car for a lesson in pavement humility. I would have done more to the Mustang moron, but the freak across the street had



distracted me. Something about his eyes – kind of slanted and round at the same time – unnerved me. I felt like I was being judged – a feeling that normally made my palms itch. But in the case of the slack-faced kid, it made me want to scratch my head instead of my hands.

The turd in the red Mustang was right about one thing. What kind of self-respecting sixteen-year-old didn't have a car?

I kicked rocks aside as I shuffled down the pavement. I wasn't the only junior at Mark Twain High without a car, but I was one of the few. Columbia, Missouri, wasn't exactly the home of the rich and famous, but most families could at least scrape together a few bucks for a clunker.

I turned the corner in the opposite direction the Mustang had gone. Haves to the right. Have-nots to the left. I pulled myself up a little straighter, as if the guy in the Mustang could still see me. Who needed four wheels when I had two fists?

The further I walked, the more overgrown the yards became, the deeper the peels of paint on the houses. My street was the last one before those houses and yards became trailers and gravel driveways. I rounded the corner and spotted the now familiar moving truck parked directly across the street from my own house. That thing had been there for almost a week, blocking my view of

just about everything else from my bedroom window.

How long does it take to unpack a U-Haul?

I cocked an eye at the house next to the truck, wondering what kind of lazy neighbours were moving in to drag the 'hood down even more, and pulled up short. On the front steps of the house, another set of eyes met mine – eyes so distinct in shape I recognised them instantly. Just like before, the kid watched me without blinking. Maybe it was because he was a safe distance from me, or maybe it was because he was too dumb to sense the danger, but he didn't look away when I caught his gaze.

'It's rude to stare,' I challenged him.

He adjusted his backpack in response, shifting it higher on those strangely curved shoulders. He was short and a little bulky, so the move, combined with his awkward, stooped posture, made him look top-heavy. Actually, everything about him fell sort of heavy, from his eyelids to his arms. I waited a moment to see if he'd tip over, so I could have a good laugh, but he held his balance.

'It's *stupid* to stare,' I tried again.

He blinked.

What was that? Fear? Mocking?

I waited for the itch, but it didn't come. It was tough to get mad at someone when I had no idea what he was thinking. Finally, I pointed a warning finger in his direction.



'You're lucky I don't beat up retards.'

A shadow passed over his face – a glimmer of emotion.

'I'm not a retard.' He said it with some force, like he actually believed it.

Even his voice made it clear he wasn't like other kids. It was a little high – *still waiting for puberty, this one* – and it sounded like his teeth were getting in the way of his tongue.

'I'm not a retard,' he repeated, louder. He stamped his foot for emphasis.

'Fine, fine.' I turned my pointed finger into a hand held up in surrender. I wasn't looking for a fight with some challenged kid. I just wanted him to stop eyeballing me. 'But enough of the ogling, got it?'

I turned toward my own house and was halfway there when his voice rang out again.

'Your clothes don't match!'

What?

I spun around. He had his arms folded across his chest in a smug gesture. *This*, he must have thought, was the final word in insults. Inexplicably self-conscious, I glanced down at what I was wearing. How could jeans and a hoodie not match? I looked back up to ask him – genuinely ask him – what the hell he was talking about, but the steps where he'd been standing were empty. I got only a quick glimpse of a backpack disappearing into the house.