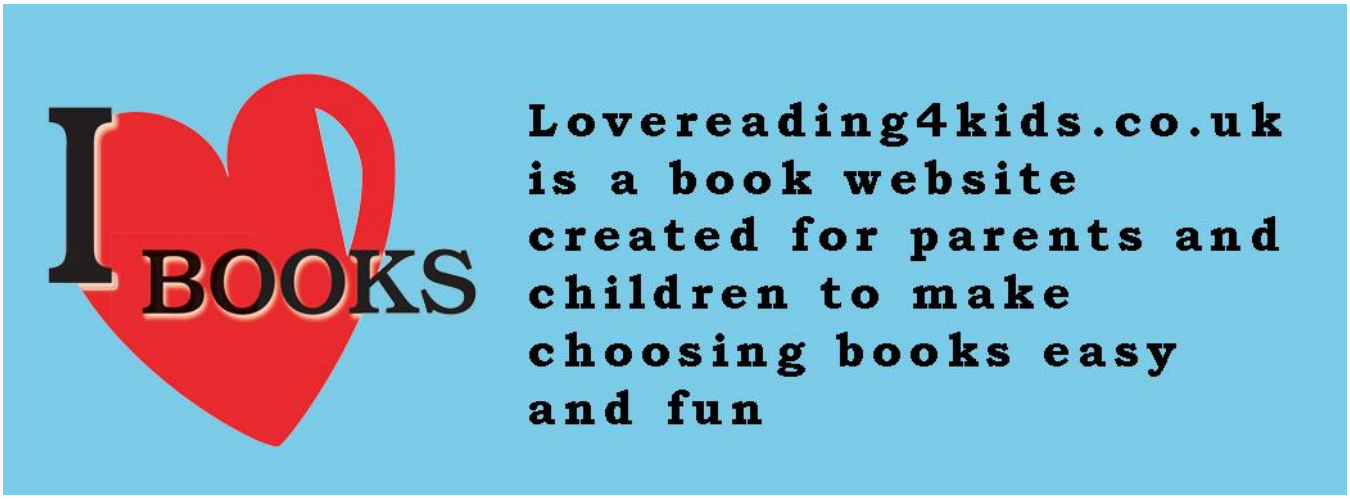


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never evers

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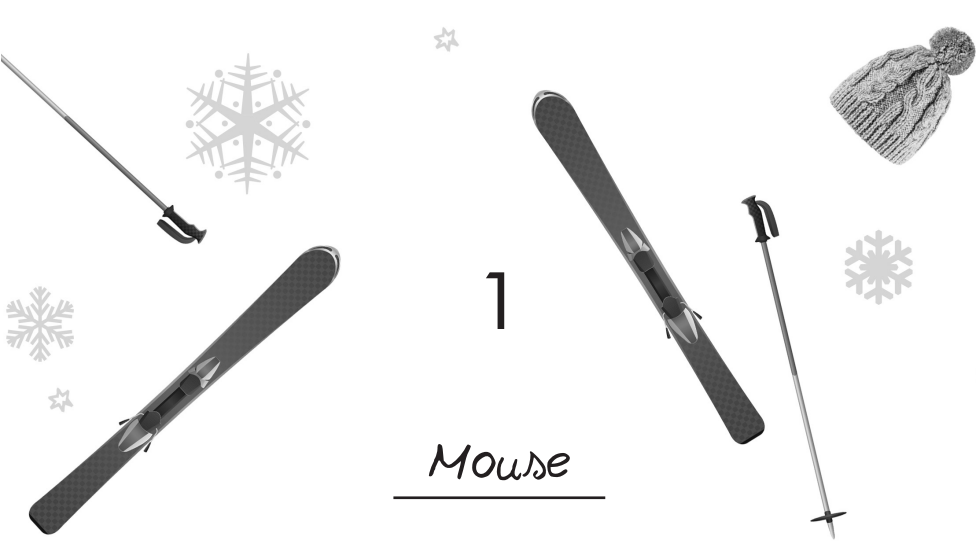
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For Lisa. "I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?" – L.I.

For all members of About Time, The Defectors, Joe's AWOL and Voytek Stanley. But mostly for Robin, Chris, Harvey and Neil – T.E.



1

Mouse

'You can't stay in there for ever.'

I rolled my eyes dramatically even though she couldn't see me and climbed into the bath fully clothed. I lay down flat and crossed my arms like a snoozing vampire. And then a bottle of Herbal Essences fell on my head.

I did realize that living in the bathroom was not a long-term life plan. It was a last-chance-saloon act of desperation. At some point I was going to have to either jump out of the window, or just unlock the door and skulk back out again. Not exactly *Braveheart* material. I wonder if anyone has ever locked themself in a bathroom and come out victorious?

I let my head tilt back against the cold tiles. I'd never been in a bath fully dressed before. If I hadn't been having a mental breakdown, it might have been quite relaxing. I turned the tap on with my Converse and a trickle of water came out. I picked up my bright blue Christmas bath bomb and cupped it in my hands under the water. It started to fizz and come alive.

'If you really don't want to go, you don't have to.' Mum's

voice came gently through the door. She made it sound like *she* was the one whose life was over.

'Do you really mean it?' I thought it would sound defiant but it came out jagged and gulpy.

'You're fourteen, Mouse,' she said. 'I can't exactly pick you up and drag you there.'

An image popped into my head of her hauling me down the road by my ponytail, politely waving to the neighbours. Mums and random pointless comments are like Dads and bad jokes. Just *why*?

'But I do think that going on this trip is the best thing to do,' she added. 'In a week's time you'll know all the stories and the in-jokes and the gossip, and maybe it won't feel so strange being back there.'

Back there. Her saying it made my stomach churn.

'I don't have any friends there any more. Everyone will be with their groups. I'll be all alone. You don't understand.'

I heard Mum sigh and sit down. 'I know Connie isn't your best friend any more, but she'll look after you.'

'Everyone thinks Connie is weird. That'll make it worse.'

And then I felt horrid. I've known Connie-May always. And maybe she's not weird any more. A lot can change in two years. A lot can change in five minutes when you think about it.

'Well, I told you to ring Lauren,' Mum sighed. Hearing Lauren's name out loud made me panic.

I hid the disintegrating bath bomb inside Dad's nearly empty tub of shaving cream, then I got out and started pacing

the tiny bathroom. I was going stir crazy and I'd only been in here ten minutes. Inside the bathroom cupboard there was still just an ancient bottle of nit lotion, some ear drops, and the boot from Monopoly.

I unzipped Mum's sponge bag and sat on the toilet seat, opening a heavy gold pot of 'bronze sculpting mousse'. As if *mousse* is the right tool for sculpting; Michelangelo didn't go around carving the statue of David with Petits Filous.

I scooped a big dollop of it on to my fingers and rubbed it into my cheeks.

Next, I took out a medical-looking bottle of 'Forever Young youth elixir capsules', squashed one of them open and rubbed the cooking-oil-type liquid on to my nose.

I sprayed myself with the Chanel perfume that Dad got her and put 'Monaco Dreams highlighter' over where the mousse had been.

'I love you,' I heard Mum say softly. 'I can't bear how hard this is for you. But you are stronger than you think you are, Mouse.'

I knew I had to go on the ski trip. It wasn't her fault.

I unbolted the door.

Mum was sitting on the floor, legs outstretched in front of her, drinking tea out of her *DANCE MOM* mug. She saw me looking at it and cupped her hands to hide the words. I crumpled down next to her and she handed me a cold-looking toast sandwich.

'Weird or not, Connie will be here in five minutes,' she said, putting her arm around me.

I opened the sandwich and spooned the jam off with my finger. We both sat in silence. Straight ahead of us at the top of the stairs is a picture of me in a pale blue leotard, my *grand jeté* perfect. When I got in, they put that picture of me in the paper with the headline: 'Local girl beats 1200 to place at ballet school.' We both just stared at it.

The doorbell rang.

Mum kissed me on the head. 'Mouse, you look like a smurf. You'd better wash your face.'

I walked back into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Smurf was an understatement. A compliment, even. Looking back at me was a huge blue moonface with two golden brown stripes down either side. I looked like a cartoon badger that had gone wild in Barry M. I turned both of the taps on full and started to scrub but it just seemed to wipe the mixture round more.

A little round freckly face and a halo of tight brown curls poked around the bathroom door. Connie. She flung her arms around my waist and started screaming, jumping up and down with such force that she carried me with her. She looked the same but different. She had grown really tall. It looked a bit ridiculous. Like she wasn't supposed to *be* that tall, somehow. Like she was on stilts.

'Mouse, your face is so colourful!' she squealed. 'I *love* it. Can I do it too or is it your thing?'

'It was an accident.' I couldn't fake being excited. But if she noticed, she didn't let on.

'The best things are accidents,' she said. 'Like me.' And then

she picked up my hands and put one on each of her cheeks, so she had a blue handprint on either side.

She started singing and dancing wildly around the bathroom: 'Everybody look left/Everybody look right/Can't you see I'm in the spotlight/Oh I just can't *wait*, to be skiing.' She climbed on to the edge of the bath and jumped off. 'Oh, I just can't *wait* to be skiing.'

I scrubbed at my cheeks with nail polish remover to try and get some of the blue off. It sort of worked but I still had faint Smurf-badger outlines. I unfurled my hair from its tight bun and pulled it forward to try to hide them.

Connie stopped dancing for a second. 'Oh my god, Mouse. Your hair's got *so* long. You could basically walk around naked and wear it as a cloak.'

She stood next to me and draped some of my hair over her head.

I have been growing my hair since I was three. It's the one thing everyone notices about me. There's nothing else to notice, really. I have blue-grey eyes, a ski-jump nose and a little sprinkle of freckles on each cheek. Not as many as Connie but they are there. I am tall for ballet school, but average otherwise.

I didn't talk really in the car, just let Connie ramble on to Mum about avalanches and what French people eat for dinner ('Not snails usually, I googled it. Phew.'). But as we got closer to school I felt a knot in my tummy.

'Are you nervous, Mouse?' Connie said out of nowhere.

I was so nervous I couldn't speak. And then I saw her. Across the road with Scarlett and Melody. Her hair was in fishtail plaits that must have taken ages. We spent a whole week once learning how to do them. She was wearing tiny denim shorts over thick grey tights, and a tartan shirt. She looked the same, just more polished somehow. Like a perfectly coloured-in picture, nothing outside the lines. She wasn't even wearing a coat.

From a distance you could tell that she was still the queen bee. She's not the prettiest – Scarlett is by far – and she's not the sportiest or the cleverest, but she just *is* that person. The person the other ones follow. The person they want to be. There was a part of me that wanted to be her, too. Even though she hated me.

'Ooh, look, there's Lauren Bradley,' said Mum brightly, and I felt my insides turn to stone.

Jack

Max tore into his third family bag of Monster Munch as the coach pulled out on to the motorway.

'You know you can get anything you want in France,' he said, stuffing a handful in his mouth and spraying crumbs everywhere. 'Like, literally, *anything*.'

Toddy snorted. 'You can get anything you want anywhere. You just have to know the right people.'

'Yeah, but that's what I'm *saying*,' he sputtered, showering me and Toddy with another dusting of pickled-onion scraps.