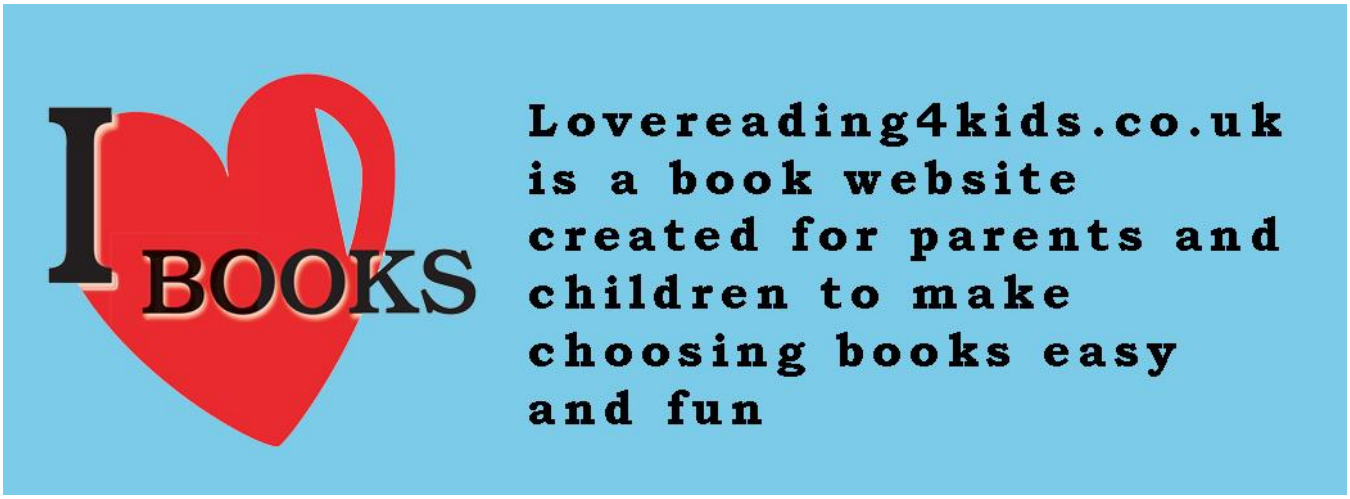


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Silence is Goldfish

Written by

Annabel Pitcher

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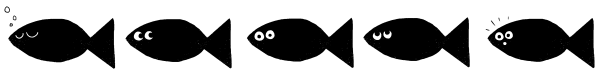
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SILENCE IS GOLDFISH



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SILENCE IS GOLDFISH

ANNABEL PITCHER



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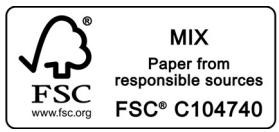
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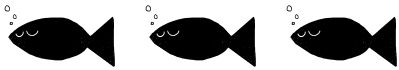
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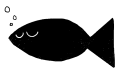
For Isaac, in the hope he will always
know where he belongs



PART ONE



CHAPTER 1



There must be a list on the Internet of what to buy when you're running away, but my phone is typically dead, like I swear it just passes out whenever things get stressful. It's unconscious in my pocket so I can't look up a list of essential items for life on the road, but a children's torch in the shape of a goldfish seems a very sensible choice. It looks friendly enough with its little orange face and definitely I could use a mate right about now, so into the basket it goes where it sits in the corner, gazing at me with shiny black eyes as I pick up tampons, tissues, two chocolate bars and a magazine.

It's a two hour train journey from Manchester to London, so I'll need something to read as well as something to hide behind because knowing my luck Jack will alert the police when he realises I'm gone. By the time I pull into Euston station, there will be pictures of me plastered over the loos with the caption *Find My Tessie-T* in extra large bold letters. Let's face it, Jack isn't the type to downplay a drama, and a child going missing must be the worst thing that could

happen to any parent. This realisation makes me want to drop the basket and run back home, so I remind myself that my so-called dad is now my number one enemy after what I saw on his computer. My heart still aches though when I think about the expression on his face as he stares at my empty bed with its *Star Wars* duvet, which I bought last year, pretending it was some snigger-worthy ironic statement when actually I just wanted to sleep with Luke Skywalker, and who can really blame me when you think about how he handles his lightsaber.

Mum will shout, 'Jack, come here!' with her voice more strained than it should be at seven o'clock in the morning when she always bursts into my room with a cup of tea, like a cuckoo in a Grandfather clock that, yes, is reliable, but also quite irritating. I'm not even kidding, I haven't drunk that tea for three years. It just seems too hard to lift my head off the pillow at that ungodly hour, but I am grateful and Mum knows it, squeezing my foot when I croak, 'Thank you.' That is love, making endless tea for someone who never drinks it, just in case this is the one morning they might actually want a sip, and I want to throw the tea back in Mum's face but also savour it, and I can't do either of these things because I will never see her again. In about an hour's time she will realise I'm gone, gazing in horror at my empty bed where Jedi will jump up to give me a lick, whimpering when he sees I'm not there.

And I whimper too, walking up and down aisles on feet

that throb in silver Dr Martens because this is the most amount of exercise my legs have done for give-or-take four years. Once upon a time it was the best thing in the world to sprint with the wind whistling through the gap in my front teeth. I would stretch out my arms and fly like a fat butterfly and oh God I remember my dazzling colours, but then they faded and now I plod. I've been plodding since ten past two this morning when I crept out of my house, needing to feel solid ground beneath my feet, to know the Earth was still there though my world had just crumbled. I wandered familiar streets feeling lost in the darkness, too scared of the stuff inside my head to be afraid of anything outside it. And now I am here with a plan that involves a goldfish, who looks shocked because this is not at all what he thought was going to happen when he woke up this morning next to the bottles of de-icer in the Texaco Garage that is the only home he's ever known.

My eyeballs swell like rain clouds. There's going to be a downpour and no one wants to see that now, do they, so I pretend to be someone else, someone in their thirties with their life sorted and a train to catch for an important meeting in the centre of London, rather than a fifteen-year-old with dyed black hair, bad roots, and no dad. I say *no dad*, but he could be over there, working behind the till, though that man doesn't look the type to have fathered large offspring. No offence to myself, but I do have big bones with a fair bit of beef and that man is lean chicken with a hen-like face. He

stares straight through me as I put my basket on the counter then pecks at the till with a scrawny hand, typing in the price of the goldfish because it doesn't have a barcode.

'Sorry,' I say, as if it's my fault. The man doesn't acknowledge my apology, which is bad manners or what have you, but I don't really mind because it is better for everyone if I don't exist.

I know what planet I am, thank you very much, and I am sick of trying to bump myself up the solar system when my true position is obvious, just ask my old dinner lady, who spotted it a mile off. At primary school when people tried to find friends, I tried to find space that my imagination could fill with whatever it wanted, nearly always butterflies because to me they were perfection, like real life fairies with prettier wings. At playtime I turned myself into them, not just one butterfly but hundreds of them, my arms a kaleidoscope of colours as I danced across the wet grass while my class played tag, chasing each other round a few metres of tarmac. I didn't understand it, like *wasn't it too crowded* I asked them all the time in my head.

'Don't you worry, cherub,' the dinner lady said when she caught me watching the other children in confusion. 'You're Pluto. Happiest away from the heat of the action.' She smiled a wrinkly smile. 'Nothing wrong with that.'

I believed her until the start of high school, when there was a welcome disco for Year Seven with a DJ who wasn't

even somebody's dad but an actual teenage boy with a tattoo of a Chinese symbol on his bicep.

'Kung Pao Chicken,' I replied when two wide-eyed girls asked me what I thought it meant, 'with egg fried rice.' They frowned and danced off so I escaped the noise of the hall for the room where the teachers were selling sweets, and oh goodness the chocolate bars were in such a mess that I had no choice but to stack them in neat piles for Mrs Miller, and then I disappeared outside to sit on a wall beneath a tree.

At home, Jack asked me if I'd had a good time, sounding as if he already knew the answer to that one, but I defied the odds and nodded, thinking of the way moonlight had shone through the branches to make silver patterns on my skin.

'You did?' His voice perked up, his face too. 'Really? That's great, Tessie-T. Really great. New school and everything. New start. What did you do?'

'I sat under a tree,' I told him and his face fell.

'With a friend? Tell me you were with a friend, Tess. We've talked about this.'

I examined my toes through my tights. Before the disco, Mum had painted my nails bright pink even though no one would see.

'Tess?' she said, half-hidden by a pile of marking in the armchair. 'Dad's talking to you. Did you go outside with a friend?'

''Course she did,' Jack replied. 'She remembers our discussion, don't you, Tessie-T? About the importance of

fitting in? That's what you're doing, isn't it? Fitting in?'

There was only one right answer, that much was obvious. They didn't want a Pluto. They wanted a Mercury or a Venus at least. I nodded, my head going straight up and down then jolting forward as Jack slapped me on the shoulder blade where my left butterfly wing used to be.

'Atta girl!' he said, and if his voice had perked up before, it positively soared now, high high high above the fear I would always struggle to fit in. 'Tell us about her. Or is it a him?' he said, giving me a wink as he pulled me onto the sofa. It creaked like always and we had to adjust the cushions like always and we both did this exaggerated groan when Mum squeezed in on the other side. She poked us with a red pen before saying, 'Go on, Tess. Give us a name.'

'Anna,' I said, not even caring it was a fib. They were glancing at each other over my head with these *eyes* that were full of a thing I didn't recognise, and then it dawned on me that it was pride. I was surrounded by it, warm and full of hope, this golden cocoon promising to transform me into something more desirable than even a butterfly. When I went to bed, I knelt in front of Jedi and made a solemn vow. I'd try to be an ideal daughter if he'd try to be an ideal pet, and he hung his fluffy white head because he knew that meant no more fighting with Bobbin, his nemesis, who belongs to Andrew next door.

I raised my hand and he lifted his paw.

'May the force be with us.'

It sort of was for a few years. Jedi didn't bite Bobbin for ages, and I made this big effort to fit in, trying to be louder and livelier and more fun than I felt inside, wearing my personality like a clown hat to make everyone laugh. Jack in particular.

Well, not anymore. Not after the words I read on his computer. I'm off the hook, which means Jedi is too, so can someone please tell my dog that the deal is OFF. A leopard can't change its spots and a dog can't change its temperament and a planet can't change its position in the universe. I'm Pluto, which is why I take the receipt in the petrol station without saying anything to the man who's not saying anything to me, but that takes some effort let me tell you after four years of being the one to fill the awkward silence.



I wait for the red light to halt the non-existent traffic on this not-so-busy road that actually doesn't require me to stand on the pavement, hanging around until some machine tells me it's time to cross. That sort of behaviour belongs to a girl trying desperately to do the right thing, and I am trying desperately to do the wrong thing, so I step out onto the road without looking both ways, ignoring the Green Cross Code because I am that much of a rebel.

'Use your bloody eyes!' a van driver yells, slamming on the brake. Of course I check him to see if he's the one, but

he's too loud to be my dad, shouting *blah blah this* and *blah blah that* because I made him screech to a stop, ruining his brand new bloody tyres that cost a bloody fortune, don't I know. 'Look where you're bloody going next time, love!'

My real dad would never be this rude, I just know it. Even if he was angry, he would hold up his hand to apologise. I would hold up my hand to apologise, and he would hold up his hand even higher to take more of the blame, but I would hold up my hand highest of all to show that it was actually my fault. And with our fingers almost scraping the sky we would smile identical smiles then he would gasp, 'It's you!'

'Yes!' I would reply, and then we would embrace, right here in the middle of the road, with everyone clapping and cheering like a film with a happy ending that will never happen in real life, Tess, so don't go getting any strange ideas.

I make it to the pavement doing a semi-waddle, which is my version of a run these days, and when did that happen, when did this stripy dress that is supposed to be A-line but looks more O-line on my body get so damn tight is what I am asking myself. I'm supposed to care that I'm getting fatter according to Jack, but I am fine with my size, in fact sometimes when I pose in front of the mirror with my boobs in my hands, I think there are a lot of men out there who would pay good money to see my body, and not just the ones with a fat fetish, so there.

I strut along the pavement, belly-first, like *bow down and*

worship at the great altar of Tess is my suddenly awesome vibe as I look out for a taxi to whisk me away on an adventure. I've got a load of change in my coat pocket and the prospect of getting in a cab feels sort of magical, like wow I can just fling out a hand to stop a black chariot and pay a few gold coins to go anywhere I want within reason and a nine-pound budget. And the place I want to be is Manchester Piccadilly train station because the place I ultimately want to end up is Finsbury Tower, One-hundred-and-three to One-hundred-and-five Bunhill Row in London, and I chant these words again and again in my head so it's a surprise to hear my mouth tell the driver my home address when I finally flag one down.

'That up by Chorlton Grammar School?' he asks as we do a u-turn. There's still time to change my mind. I am ready to go and the goldfish is too, but I mutter, 'That's it, yeah. The first right after the school. It's one of the middle terraces about halfway down the road.'

We set off in the opposite direction to the station, and in no time at all we are turning onto my street. Something more should be happening, something big enough to account for the mad beat beat beat of my heart, but no, we're decelerating, coming to a stop outside my front door. Everything about my house is the same. The same silver number is displayed above the same silver letterbox. The same curtains are hanging in the same lounge window. And this evening no doubt I will be the same girl sitting on the

same sofa, watching TV in my tiger-print onesie when a mouse one would be far more appropriate.

'Six pounds fifty, when you're ready.'

I hand over some cash but don't get out, pretending for a few more seconds that I really might do something big and brave for once in my decidedly small and timid life.

'This is the one?'

'Yeah,' I reply, but I make no move to open the door. The driver almost-but-not-quite turns to look at me.

'You are okay, aren't you?'

It's nice of him to ask, but his voice is heavy with obligation and his eyes are tired, like *here's just another messed up teenage girl wandering the streets after a disastrous evening* is the precise look on his face as he half-surveys my own. Maybe if he'd twist a bit further, or cut the ignition, or take his hands off the steering wheel rather than gripping it so tightly, maybe then I'd tell him what I saw last night.

Instead, I pull myself together. 'I'm fine.'

The sky is crying, relieved or disappointed by my return, it's hard to tell. I stand in the rain, staring up at the house, taking in the fact Mum and Jack's bedroom curtains are still closed so they will never know I ran away for four hours and thirteen minutes. The cab disappears as I unlock the front door. I tiptoe into the house, wondering why it still feels like home.