

One

When you're only sixteen years old, there are all sorts of changes going on in your body, nasty little chemicals called hormones cause all sorts of problems with things growing where they shouldn't. It's like your body has only got enough energy to make one limb to grow every day, so it grows a fraction on your left leg on Monday, your right arm on Tuesday, your body on Wednesday, your left arm on Thursday and finally your right leg on Friday. So that's almost a whole week of falling up stairs and out of doorways because nothing is balanced.

Also, with girls there seems to be a lot of giggling, crying and kisses. With boys there are lots of fights, being too proud to cry and if you're lucky the odd kiss.

So given all of those problems your hormones are giving you, what you really need is a bit of a support network, a few people who are on your side. The last thing you need is to be uprooted from everything you know, everyone you could call a friend and the place you have called home for your whole life. You don't need to be in a strange place, a million miles away from everything and everyone you know and love. Somewhere they apparently spoke the same language using the same words but in very different ways, with very different meanings. *Who would know that calling someone bad actually meant they were really good or saying something was wicked meant it was incredibly good? That if you liked someone they were cool, but if you really liked someone, they became hot.*

When Archer was voted the top male student in his graduating class, he was pleased and proud. Less than a week later, he sat miserably on his bed, wishing he had the lowest marks instead of the highest. Then he wouldn't get the daily reminder from the other foster boys that only babies slept in cots.

'So mister Archer, are you going to show us how to use your bow and arrows then?'

'He thinks he's Robin Hood, a real bad-ass outlaw.'

'He doesn't realise that you're supposed to give that sort of thing up when you leave junior school.'

'No he still thinks he's a baby, calls his bed a cot.'

But that was what they called beds where he came from, babies slept in cradles. As ever, he showed no reaction, it was the only way to deal with that kind of bullying, deny them what they wanted until they got bored and picked on someone else. To learn their language, he spent many of his waking hours studying the magical box in the corner of the room downstairs. At first he had stared in horror at the piece of equipment that showed pictures of a battle with great explosions and wounded people. 'Can we not help those people? They need ...' but as he was trying to decide how best to treat a leg that was torn off at the knee and pumping blood, the image changed, showing a beach with several women wearing almost no clothing. He stared in disbelief and the foster father, a gruff man called Dave said, 'Close your mouth son, never seen a woman in a bikini before?'

‘But how can those women be inside the box? And what happened to the wounded man?’

‘Are you for real? Those people are in Spain and the war was somewhere in the Middle East. Didn’t they have a telly where you came from?’

‘A telly? Is that what you call the box?’

‘Yes. They make programs and send them through the air. The TV gets the signal and displays it on that screen.’

‘How do they send programs through the air?’

‘I don’t know, radio waves or something. I’m no electrician. I’m sure it’ll tell you on the internet. Well it would if Peter hadn’t kicked his football into the monitor and smashed it. I suppose you could try the encyclopaedia Britannica, it’s on the shelf. You can read can’t you?’

Archer had barely understood anything the man had said for the last few minutes and he felt great relief as he saw something he could understand. Books. Choosing the one marked S-U, he took it up to his room and lay on the bed, catching up on several hundred years of inventions.

Three

After the meal he watched Julie wrapping a box of chocolates. She offered him one from another box and he took a brightly coloured sweet and stared at it uncertainly.

‘It’s a hazelnut, don’t you like them? There’s a strawberry cream or caramel if you can’t have nuts.’

He watched as she pulled the two ends apart and it untwisted. Copying her actions, he saw that under the purple crackly material was a shiny silver wrapper covering a lump of something brown and shiny. He looked at for a second, its appearance was too close to something he knew was not normally eaten by humans. Holding it to his nose, he sniffed a milky scent. Tentatively sticking out his tongue, he licked it, fearing the worst and pleasantly surprised by the sweet taste. Biting through a small portion, he was treated to an explosion of flavour as it melted inside his mouth. She was watching him curiously. ‘Have you never had chocolate before?’

He shook his head, unable to reply as he had just taken a bite containing hazelnut, something he recognised.

‘I’ve heard of these people that won’t have a telly in the house, but not to give a kid chocolate, that’s really mean.’

‘Oh no, we have plenty of sweetmeats, made with honey or fruit. How do you grow chocolate?’

‘I’m not sure if we can grow cocoa beans in this country. It’s all made in hot places like Brazil. You probably could in a greenhouse. Here, have another one.’

‘Thank you. Why does this only have one jacket when the others have two?’

‘Jacket? Oh you mean wrapper. No, they all have one.’

‘No this one just has one shiny wrapper.’

‘Foil.’

‘You mean like a sword for fencing?’

She frowned. ‘How would you know about a fencing foil but not know about the silver foil we use to wrap food in?’

‘My people live simple lives. We don’t have much in the way of techonol – technology.’

‘Technology? Silver foil isn’t technology, it’s been around forever. Well, since the fifties anyway.’

‘The eighteen fifties?’

‘The nineteen fifties, you know, after the second world war.’

‘So this silver foil is used to wrap food in. Why would you need to wrap chocolate? Surely the chocolate is already wrapped around the nut.’

‘Because if you don’t wrap it and it gets hot, all the chocolates will melt into each other.’

‘But they are in a paper box. Why don’t you just put this somewhere cool so they won’t melt?’

‘Cardboard. These were probably made a few months ago and the sell by date is,’ she turned the box over and several of the chocolates fell out. ‘Whoops. Here, it’s March next year.’

‘I can see that might need something to separate them if they are going to be kept for so many months, but I don’t see why you would need this extra wrapper.’ Gathering up the sweets, he put them back in the box.

‘The cellophane? I suppose it helps you to tell the flavours apart. Why don’t you have a couple of those?’

‘No thank you, they are quite rich.’

‘Well you are the strange one. I’ve never known a kid refuse chocolate before.’

‘I’m sorry to ask so many questions but there is so much here that I don’t understand.’

‘It’s a pleasure to have a lad take an interest, carry on.’

‘I’m still confused by the purpose of this decorated paper. Is paper not a precious thing here?’

She laughed. ‘You sound like my sister Dawn, she’s a real eco-warrior. That’s someone who cares about the environment. She recycles everything. Separates out all the glass and cans, paper and plastic, even the foil lids of the butter. And carrier bags are her own personal crusade. She was thrilled when all the big stores started selling lifetime use bags.’

Archer didn’t understand half of the words she had used, but the sentiment was clear. ‘It sounds very much like my people. Every basin of water we wash in is used again to wash the animals. Water used to clean vegetables is then poured over the growing plants. But paper takes such a lot of time and energy to make that it is only used when something is worth writing down.’

‘That does sound sensible, we get so much junk mail every day and all the free newspapers nobody ever reads. You make me feel guilty now about this wrapping paper, but if I didn’t wrap it, she would know what it was and there would be no surprise. Do you not wrap gifts?’

‘We use gift bags made from cloth that can be reused. The women make them pretty with ribbons and flowers and fruit, but the men usually just give the plain bag.’

‘Sounds like here, men just give gifts in the shop’s carrier bag. Most people tear the paper off and throw it away, we don’t worry about the waste. Dawn always opens it carefully and uses the paper to wrap another present.’

Eight

When Archer returned to the table, Dave and Peter were playing a game of pool, and he quickly worked out that it was all about angles and forces. He saw Pete lining up the stick to hit the white ball so that it would knock the yellow ball into one of the end holes and knew that he hadn't quite got it right. 'You need to move an inch to the right.'

'What, you're some kind of expert are you? Dad tell him, he's just trying to put me off my stroke.'

'No actually, he's right. Do as he says.' Peter grumbled as he moved it, and the ball trickled up to the pocket but didn't quite make it. 'Nice safety mate, but nothing I can't handle. Blue stripe, centre pocket.'

Archer quickly picked up on the terminology, the holes were called pockets and the sticks were cues and the white ball was the cue ball. He studied Dave's shot. 'So you cannot hit any other ball apart from the cue ball, is that right?'

'You never played before? Do you want a go?'

'No that's not fair, I don't want to watch.' Peter's good mood was rapidly dissolving into typical gloom.

'How about me and Archer against you then, that should balance it up a bit.' The beer made Dave uncommonly laid-back.

'Yeah ok, but I don't wanna break.'

Dave racked up the balls and blasted the white ball into the centre of the balls which bounced off the sides.

'That was nasty Dad, you've left me with nothing on.' Peter tried to pot a stripe but got the angle wrong and it cannoned into the cluster sending three of the spots to cover pockets. Dave started lining up on one of them. 'Hey Dad, it's Archer's go.'

'I know, but he'll mess it up and then you'll get these three easy ones. He can go the next time.'

'That's not fair. You said he could have a go.'

Archer was still uncertain of the rules. 'If I get the first ball in, then I can have a go at another one, is that right?'

'Of course. That's why I want to take this shot.'

'So when you hit the white ball, you have to use the right amount of force so it will rebound into the right position for the next ball.'

'Yes, yes. You make it sound like a science lesson. Just get on with it.' Dave handed him the cue impatiently and Archer lined it up over the middle spot. 'Don't do that one first or you'll never get the blue one in the corner pocket.'

Archer zoned everything out, hitting the ball with just enough force so that it potted the ball in the middle pocket and rebounded in a perfect position to pot the red.

‘Beginner’s luck,’ grumbled Pete and Dave looked on in amazement as Archer potted four more spots and had one of the remaining two covering the middle pocket.

‘Is there anything in the rules that says I cannot pot all seven balls and the black in a single go?’

‘As if.’ Pete snorted.

Dave came up and looked at the angles on the remaining spot, with three stripes clustered around it. ‘Yeah. The rule that says you’re a lying cheating brat. Never played pool before. You’ve probably done nothing else all your short life. The rule that says you’re a smug git, but a hell of a pool shark.’ Despite his apparent anger, Dave was chuckling. ‘No lad, there’s no rule, but this ten pound note says you can’t do it.’ He put a tatty, scrunched up piece of paper on the ledge around the table. Several people had realised something was going on and were crowding round, but it cost Archer no effort at all to exclude their fidgeting and whispers of disbelief. The automatic calculator in his mind was computing all the possible strategies, with precise angles and ball velocities and forces involved, even though he did not know them by these labels. Finally the way became clear, playing out in his head as though on a TV program, the sequence of shots and the final resting places of all the other balls each time. Archer lined up on the ball in the cluster, ignoring Dave’s advice to go for the other one first. He hit it with such force that it rebounded off two sides, knocking away the only stripe that was close to covering a pocket.

‘Bad luck, mate,’ said Pete, moving to the table. But Archer’s shot was not finished yet. One of the stripes that had been clustered round the spot had rebounded with some force and was slowly trickling toward the other remaining spot. ‘Hold on.’ Dave pulled him back and the watching crowd seemed to be waiting with bated breath as it kissed the spot which rolled to the edge of the pocket. The ball then seemed to be having a protracted debate with itself about the pros and cons of actually making the jump into oblivion. A pin dropping would have been loud enough to break the tension in the room, but the vibrations set off by the massive round of cheers and stamping of feet did not actually begin until after the ball had chosen not to stay. Amidst the repetition of “in off” which rippled round the delighted crowd like a handshake at a reunion, Archer quietly potted the remaining spot and the black.

Ten

The stable girl rang in sick so Peter's Aunt Dawn asked them to take the two mares out for a bit of exercise. 'If you could take them on the longer route it would be a big help.'

Riding with Peter felt similar to when he was out with Fletch or Finn, there was always the hint of competition, but to begin with they were quite sedate until they were out of sight of the stables. Peter immediately took his helmet off and seemed surprised that Archer had beaten him to it. 'I thought you'd be all goody-goody and do as you were told.'

'Just because I believe in helping out and studying hard doesn't mean I have to follow all their rules. The only time I wear a helmet on horseback is in the joust.' Archer hooked the helmet strap under a strap on the saddle.

'You do jousting? Like in knights in shining armour?'

'Yeah we have to wear full armour.'

'I've heard of those medieval re-enactments. Dad promised to take us to Warwick castle, but he never did.'

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'Oh my God, look at the time, we've only got ten minutes to get back.'

They mounted up and galloped like their lives depended on it. Archer was holding back slightly, but as they came to the last field, his sharp eyes caught a flash of pink. It was Geena, standing right in the path of Peter's horse playing with her rabbit. Archer shouted at Peter, but he just looked back and grinned, caught up in the exhilaration of the chase. Spurring his mare on, some of Archer's desperate need communicated itself to her. Flattening her ears and lowering her head slightly, she forged ahead, catching up to Peter, but he just took it as a greater challenge and sped up even more. Archer pointed ahead, but Peter was in the blood frenzy brought on by battle and just laughed.

Archer brought his brave mare closer and closer until he could touch the front flank of Peter's mare, hoping to swerve her off course. Peter looked over in anger, but he must have caught sight of the pink. His expression changed to shock, then a kind of desperate horror as he tried to pull on the reins and swerve round her. Geena had finally heard the noise and turned round to see what was making it. She stood rooted to the spot, holding her toy rabbit out in front as though that would protect her.

Archer knew that Peter could not make it, so with a prayer to Hengist, he attempted something he had only ever seen Finn pull off. He communicated his request to the mare through the pressure from his knees and she responded instantly, moving out enough so that he could lean over and scoop up the girl, holding her in his lap as he slowed the mare down to a gentle trot.

‘Is she Ok? Geena, how are you?’ Peter looked as though he wanted to throw back his breakfast.

‘That was fun, can we do it again?’ She had lost any sense of fear and was smiling happily.

‘I don’t think that would be a good idea. The horses are tired, they need to rest. You can ride with me back to the stable.’

‘But I want Petey to pick me up like you did. It was fun.’ If she had been standing, she would have stamped her foot and Archer knew she wouldn’t let it drop.

Thirteen

Archer knew that Jack and Kyle were plotting their second attack for Saturday morning, there was an air of suppressed excitement sparkling in their eyes as they made their exit. If he hadn't discovered that the bow had been moved while they were away, he might have been fooled into thinking that Peter now felt a genuine friendship. When the other two weren't around, he relaxed back into the warmth and camaraderie they shared at the farm and on the Tor. But a lifetime of conflict meant that Archer was more than ready for the betrayal when it came.

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Peter followed him upstairs and hovered behind as Archer unlocked his door. 'I – um – don't suppose I could have a close look at your bow could I? Now you've told me about making it yourself I'm quite curious.'

'Sure. Give me a couple of minutes to set it up.' He went in and locked the door then quickly retrieved the quiver, taking out all but three of the training arrows which were finished with a rounded wooden tip instead of lethal metal barbs. They would still hurt if they were fired at a person, but they would not do as much damage as those designed to kill. He then retrieved the bow and strung it – there was no point risking it being broken in their attempts to force the string over the nocks.

Peter's interest and enthusiasm was genuine as he asked intelligent questions about the method and tools involved. He appreciated the feel of it, running his hands along the arms, seeming to get the same pleasure that Archer did from the smooth contours of the wood. 'I don't suppose you would be able to show me how to use it? Properly I mean. I've had a go with toy bows where the arrows had little rubber suckers on the end, but I think this would be a lot harder.'

'I could show you, but you wouldn't be able to do much yourself. It takes years of practice on smaller bows to build up the strength to pull it back fully.' He demonstrated the correct technique of standing, holding the bow, slotting the arrow into the string and positioning one finger above the arrow's nock and two below. 'So now I would draw the bowstring back until it reached my ear, but I cannot do that in the house.'

'Couldn't you just show me and then let it go again without releasing the arrow?'

'No, you must never release the string without firing the arrow, there is nowhere for the stored energy to go and it could damage the bow.'

Peter looked at the floor, disappointment evident on his face and Archer sensed some kind of internal debate going on. He was fairly sure he knew what the problem was. Peter was basically a good guy and really didn't want any part of the tussle that would follow if he

tricked Archer into going outside with the bow. Well he needed to decide whose side he was on and make his stand.

‘Oh well, thanks very much, I’ve learnt a lot. I suppose you’ve got studying to do now, so I’ll leave you to it.’

He had almost reached the door when Archer decided he could maybe afford to give him a chance. ‘Actually I was thinking of setting up some kind of butt in the garden to practice with. You could give me a hand.’

While Peter was marking out thirty paces, Archer warmed up the bow, rubbing the arms with a soft cloth and gently stretching the string, carefully controlling the return. ‘You must stand behind the line and watch what I do.’ Although it had been several weeks since he had practised, the years of training meant that his actions were smooth and fluid as the three tips pierced the central circle with almost no space between them.

Peter was clapping excitedly. ‘Wow, that was amazing. Three bulls eyes. And so fast, your hands were a blur.’

As they retrieved the arrows, Archer thought he heard a door shutting in the house, but he ignored it, asking Peter if he wanted to have a go.

‘Could I? But I thought you said it takes years to build up the muscles.’

‘If you tried from fifteen paces, you may be able to do it. You don’t need to draw the string back so far.’ As he marked out the distance and set his quiver down as the toe line, Archer caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. He was fairly sure they would wait until Peter had shot all three arrows so that there were as far away from Archer and the bow as they could be.

Peter had remembered a surprising amount from the brief demonstration, Archer just had to turn the arrow so that the white cock feather was positioned correctly.

‘Where do I aim?’

‘Just above where you want it to go.’ His first arrow went to the left of the paper, so he adjusted slightly and the second one went into the paper on the right of the target and a little high. The third one was inside the outer circle and Peter was pleased, punching the air with a fist. As Archer went up to retrieve the arrows, it happened, just as he had predicted.

Fourteen

‘You think you’re so cool, just because you can fire a few arrows. Well anyone can do that. Just watch.’ Jack held his hand out for the bow but Peter didn’t hand it over straight away.

‘It’s not as easy as it looks. You should have a go on the butt first.’

‘Listen to mister know-it-all. Just because he’s told you a few technical terms doesn’t make you an expert.’

‘I’m not saying I am an expert. Just that any sportsman has to do warm up exercises before they go for it.’

‘Maybe you should all have a go and whoever gets closest to the bull can try for the apple.’ Archer was extremely calm considering the potential danger he was in.

‘No-one asked your opinion, freak. Just shut up.’ Kyle was brave when Archer was fully restrained, but he knew how scared he’d been about tackling Archer by the bad smell surrounding him.

It had gone pretty much as he imagined it would. Before he could reach the butt, the two bodies had come hurtling out from behind a thick hedge. He knew they were there but feigned surprise at their attack, allowing the two of them to restrain him once more with the bungee with the minimum of resistance, just a token punch or two. Peter seemed to be as surprised as he was. He didn’t actually help with the capture, but didn’t do anything to prevent it either, merely retrieving the quiver and arrows. So far it was actually working out better than Archer dared hope, Peter’s slight resistance to Jack’s superiority could be the start of his return to being the half-decent human being Archer was sure lay beneath the nastiness.

But it was not to be. Peter was too used to being dominated by Jack and too afraid of the consequences. Archer watched with a sinking heart as Jack checked to make sure Kyle was just behind his shoulder, then squared up to Peter, seeming to grow by six inches as he held out his hand for the bow. ‘I’m not going to ask you again. Give me the bow or I’ll use it to tear you a new hole.’

Peter looked uncertainly in Archer’s direction, then dropped his head slightly as he unslung the bow from where it had been resting on his shoulder, looking defeated as he held it out to Jack.

With a triumphant ‘Ha,’ Jack reached out, only to be thwarted as Peter snatched it back at the last instant.

‘Who put you in charge anyway? I bet you couldn’t even fire an arrow, let alone hit the target. I say the one who shoots closest to the bull, gets to do it. You’d like a go Kyle, wouldn’t you? It’s not fair that Jack always gets to have all the fun while we just have to watch.’

‘It can’t be that hard. But yeah, I’d like a go.’

Archer watched in amazement as Peter took control, pacing out the fifteen yards and placing the quiver there. Jack was no fool, he knew that he would learn more by watching the other's mistakes, so he let Kyle go first.

Jack's short attention span was kicking in and he insisted on going next. His first arrow went way low, glancing off the side of the plastic bin, so he aimed higher the next time and it went way above the target. 'This is rubbish. I'm going to do those two again.' He went and picked them up, kicking the quiver a foot or so closer as he did. Neither boy commented, he was showing himself up badly, they didn't need to humiliate him further.

Eighteen

Everything about this place was different to Archer's previous two foster homes and for the first time since he had entered this different world, Archer began to feel at peace. It was not destined to last long as he met the girls. Mandy was sixteen and had shaved all her hair apart from a central stripe which was dyed bright pink and gelled into stiff peaks in the Mohican style. Kellie was two years younger and dressed completely in black, with messy black hair and a white face in the Goth style. Archer didn't have a clue how to deal with them.

'Watcher lookin' at gorgeous?' Mandy's first words caught him at a disadvantage because he had been staring.

'I'm not sure, the label's fallen off.' He used a phrase from an old TV show that made him laugh.

'Aw Gawd Kell, we've got us a right comedian here, pretty tasty one though.' She spanned his upper arm with her hands. 'Feel the muscle on that, you must work out every day.'

'I do work every day at school and in the house, but the muscle comes from ...'

'Gor blimey, listen to Mr Posh Pants. Your parents send you to a public school did they?'

He replied instinctively. 'My real parents are dead.'

'Ain't you the lucky one? I wish mine were. Stupid prats haven't got a clue about anything and they spend all their time knocking seven bells out of each other and us.'

Archer was horrified. He had no idea what to say to her bleak statement or how to handle this pair of Valkyries.

'Girls, leave the poor boy alone and get on with your homework. I will be coming up to check in half an hour.'

'Ow come 'ee doesn't 'ave to do 'is homework?'

As they left, Penny smiled fondly. 'Take no notice of those two, their bark is much worse than their bite.'

Archer sighed, it was just like at Dave and Julie's, he was going to have to prove himself all over again. Mandy made every encounter an opportunity to irritate Archer in some way. Her biggest weapon was the fact that she was a girl. His sense of honour was so ingrained that no matter how hard she tried to destroy his equilibrium or pierce his mantle of good manners, he denied her the reaction she craved. 'Hey muscles, pass the spuds.'

Tom reached for the potatoes.

'Leave it pipsqueak. You know I didn't mean you.'

'Maybe if you addressed people by their given names, they would understand your intentions,' Penny observed.

'They knew exactly who I meant. He's the pipsqueak 'cos he's small and he squeaks, and he's muscles 'cos he's a hunk who's built like a brick ...'

‘That’s quite enough of that, young lady. You know I won’t tolerate bad language in my house. It’s a lack of vocabulary that gives you a sewer mouth.’

‘If you think my mouth is dirty, you should ...’

‘Mandy. Here are the potatoes you asked for.’ Archer’s tone and look suggested that no-one was impressed and the only person she was letting down was herself.

‘Why thank you Sir Galahad. Or is it Sir Lancelot?’

‘Actually it’s neither. He’s Robin Hood.’ Everybody looked surprised at Tom’s assertion. ‘What?’

‘Ok, I give in, what makes you say he’s some divvy who robs people and then gives it all away like a prat?’

Tom shrugged. ‘He just is, that’s all.’

‘If you say so. Robin, can you pass the pepper please.’ So she called him Robin but he refused to rise to it, even when she shouted it across the playground one day.

‘Why’s that Mandy calling you Robin?’ Kevin, one of the boys he’d met on the first day at the school asked.

‘No idea. Maybe she thinks I’m somebody else.’

She came up then with a couple of friends who also wore punk hairstyles. ‘Oy, you. I was shouting you.’

‘I’m not Robin. I thought you meant someone else.’

‘Very funny. Tell the witch that we won’t be coming home tonight, we’re going to my nan’s.’

‘Sorry, can’t help you. Don’t know any witches.’

She came up and grabbed hold of his shirt. ‘Don’t get smart with me. You’re not big enough or hard enough.’

He uncurled the fingers on her hand, releasing his shirt. ‘I don’t need to be big or hard to get smart with you. I just need to have opened a book once.’

‘Why you cheeky little ...’ But her insult was cut off as the deputy head appeared telling them to get registration.

Archer thought she probably would have given any other teacher a rude retort. He followed Kevin and Jamie, who said under his breath, ‘You’ve got a nerve, she’s a right nut-case that one. And her sister.’

‘Hard as nails they are, the pair of them. Not a good idea to wind her up like that if you want to live.’

‘Oh I think I’ll live. Just got to keep one step ahead of them.’ Which was easier said than done. He knew where he was with Edlyn, his first real enemy, it was a case of when he was within ten yards, there would be trouble. Similarly with Jack, Kyle and Peter, he knew that he needed to be on guard constantly, looking for traps round every corner. But it was different with the girls, quite apart from his reluctance to engage in conflict with the “fairer sex” as

Sedge would call them, there were the constant confusing signals they were sending out, particularly Mandy. For every remark that was intended to intimidate or ridicule him, there would be an accompanying look or gesture suggesting that what she really wanted was his support or approval or even friendship. Beneath her war paint and aggressive manner, he sensed a loneliness and vulnerability, borne from many years of standing up for herself and her sister against a violent, hostile world.

And so he made his first mistake, feeling sorry for her; it was a mistake that would cost him dearly.

Twenty

‘Archer, would you mind looking after Rory while I pop out?’ Penny looked unusually harassed.

‘No problem. We’ll do some homework.’ Archer ran upstairs but by the time he found the worksheet, Rory had followed him. ‘I like your room. It’s cool.’

‘It’s a bit of a mess. Have you done equations before?’

‘Show me.’ He handed her the worksheet and she sat down on the bed. ‘Five x equals twenty. Well that’s easy, five lots of four is twenty so x must be four.’

‘So you multiply the number by the letter. Right. Let me do the next one. Six add y is twelve so y must be two.’

‘No that’s not right, you need to add this time, y is six.’

‘Oh dear, I thought I’d got it.’

They whizzed through the first exercise, but the next section had two steps and question five was tough. ‘Four x add five equals twenty three. x must be about four then.’ Archer’s guesses were usually close

‘It can’t be. Sixteen add five is twenty one. It’s five.’

‘No, twenty add five is twenty five.’

‘It must be somewhere in the middle then.’

‘What the hell is going on here? Does Penny know you two are making out on Archer’s bed?’

Blushing, they jumped up and the books slid to the floor. Mandy was almost crowing in triumph. ‘Hey, Tom, Kellie, come and see this, they’ve been at it in Archer’s room.’

‘No we haven’t.’ Archer tried to calm down the situation.

Rory had a different idea. ‘So what if we were? You’re only jealous because you wish it was you.’

Tom and Kellie came in just in time to hear this and the evidence was damning. The pair of them were red faced and there was a big dent in the quilt where they had been sitting. Archer held out the worksheet. ‘This is ridiculous, Rory was helping me with my maths homework.’

‘Aw come on mate, listen to yourself. A twelve-year old is gonna be helping with GCSE maths? You must think we’re really dumb.’ Tom turned away in disgust.

Archer grabbed his arm. ‘I’ve never done algebra before. Ask her anything off the sheet, she can do them.’

‘I looked up to you, but I don’t like being lied to.’ He shook Archer’s arm off and stalked out.

‘Honestly Kellie, I wouldn’t be doing anything else, she is only twelve, you must believe me.’

‘I think I’d rather believe her.’ She pointed at Rory who had gone from bright red to deathly pale at his words.

‘Rory, tell them the truth, we weren’t doing anything. You didn’t know what you were saying.’

Rory sobbed and ran out of the room and he tried to follow but Mandy stood in his way. ‘I think you’ve done enough. Kellie, go and make sure she’s all right.’

Kellie left and Mandy shut the door behind her. He appealed to her with an outstretched arm. ‘Come on Mandy, you know we were only doing homework.’

‘That’s not what I saw. The two of you were on the bed, but when I came in you both jumped apart blushing. Even if she hadn’t blurted it out in front of witnesses, why else would you both blush?’ Despite her innocent air, something in her manner told him she knew exactly what they were doing, but had her own reasons for twisting it.

‘You ... you ...’ he was lost for words.

‘Try fat ugly old cow. Isn’t that what you called me? Behind my back of course, you haven’t got the guts to say it to my face.’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘So now I’m a liar as well? I heard it with my own ears, out of the bathroom window.’

‘So you must have heard the rest of it then.’

‘No, I ran out in tears. She was right, I did fancy you once, but not any more. Not after that.’

‘I’m sorry you were hurt, it wasn’t like it sounded. If you’ll let me explain ...’

‘Oh I think you’ll be sorry. And you’ve got some proper explaining to do. That’s the end of it for you here. Penny won’t stand for anything like that under her roof and Todd will probably beat you black and blue.’

She was obviously enjoying her moment of power, but from the depths of despair, he sensed there was something behind all this. His expression hardened. ‘What?’

She stopped her prowling and assumed a false innocence. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘What do you want from me?’

‘What I want is for you to suffer the way you’ve made me suffer. Parading your muscles around, watching me with those liquid brown eyes, giving me false hope ...’

‘But I didn’t.’

‘... while all the time you’ve been laughing behind my back with that little brat and calling me foul names.’

‘I haven’t. I told you we’ve been ...’

‘Shut it.’ She closed his mouth with her finger.

Twenty Three

‘Rory, you made me jump, slamming the door like that.’

‘Sorry Aunt Penny, the wind must have caught it.’

Penny frowned, all doors and windows were closed and there was no wind to speak of. ‘Want to talk about it?’

‘No. Yes. I don’t know. What does she think she’s playing at?’

‘Who dear? Is someone annoying you at school?’

‘That ... Mandy. Who does she think she’s fooling, dressing all Sandra Dee and acting all meek and mild?’

‘Dressing all Sandra Dee? You mean because she’s not wearing all that war paint and showing off her tattoos?’

‘And why a blonde Cinderella wig? I’d have thought Cruella de Ville was more her style.’

‘All that hair won’t grow back straight away. Maybe she’s experimenting with different styles until she finds one that suits her.’ Penny brought the hot chocolate over.

‘In that case she’d be head to toe in black with blood dripping from her teeth and nails.’

‘Eugh, sounds like someone’s been watching too many horror movies.’ Penny was concerned, she had never seen Rory so negative about anyone. ‘Try not to judge her too harshly my dear, she’s been through a hard time lately.’

‘Hard time is what she gives everyone else.’ Rory muttered under her breath and although Penny didn’t hear the words, the sentiment was obvious from her expression.

‘Well she seems to have turned over a new leaf and is trying really hard. It wouldn’t hurt you to show a little mercy and try to forgive whatever she has done to you.’

Rory took a deep breath to calm herself, blowing on the hot drink before taking a sip. So the witch had Aunt Penny fooled, but hopefully Archer would be able to see through her. Except that he seemed to be under some kind of spell too, in fact everyone was completely taken in. She was utterly convincing in this new role of hers, going from evil brat monster to caring, considerate geek in a heartbeat.

Archer’s attitude toward Mandy had changed, he was actually starting to like her. It was this, finally that gave Rory her first doubts. Was it possible that someone with such a black heart could actually turn into a nice person?

It certainly seemed so, if you believed the evidence of your eyes and ears. Gone was the vicious, self centred flirt who dressed like a tarty punk. In her place was a humble, generous sweetheart whose outfits would not have looked out of place in church. The scary thing was the way she was being nice to Rory, more than just polite, actively taking an interest in her wellbeing. She asked about her day at school, offered help with homework and stayed to help when Rory insisted on doing her share of the chores.

‘It’s ok, you don’t need to help, you did it yesterday.’

‘I know, but it doesn’t seem right somehow, you’re so much younger than everyone else and you’re really a guest who just happens to be staying a few extra days.’

‘Well it would be a help, I can’t reach the high cupboard without standing on a stool.’

When she finished, Mandy rinsed off the pots and pans. ‘How are you holding up without your mum?’

‘I’m fine thank you.’

‘You must be missing her though.’

‘She rings up every night just before I go to bed.’

‘Ahhh, that’s so sweet. It must be nice to have that kind of relationship with your mum. My mum couldn’t care less about me or Kellie, she never has.’

‘She must have done once, when you were little.’

‘Nope. She was too busy tarting around. She worked as a barmaid and we never saw her in the evenings.’

‘Somebody must have cared about you or you wouldn’t have been fed, clothed and educated as well as you are.’

Mandy put the last pan away then stood still as the memories took over. ‘My gran brought us up then, but she was well strict. We hated it at the time, but I guess we’ve probably got a lot to thank her for.’

Rory finished her chores. ‘Thanks for your help.’

‘Any time. Do you really think I’m well educated?’

‘Yes. I can tell when you’re talking to Archer that you’re a lot smarter than you make out. I think you could make it into nursing if that’s what you want to do.’

Mandy gave a modest little look. ‘It’s nice of you to say so, but I don’t know if I’m cut out for all that hard work.’

Rory’s growing sympathy for the older girl was dashed to pieces at Mandy’s next question.

Twenty Eight

Archer knocked on the door and heard voices in the hall. 'Where have you ...? Archer. What are you doing here?'

'Trying to stop you lot from getting into serious trouble. Aren't you going to ask me in Jack?'

'Go away, this is none of your business.'

'It is my business when friends of mine have turned to crime for the wrong reasons.'

Just then Kyle came running in. 'Bloody hell, that was close. I'm not doing this again.' He chucked a bag on the floor and a brand new pair of trainers fell out.

'You dork, they're both for the left foot. What a waste of space.'

'Don't blame me, Darren nicked them. But one of the assistants saw him and started a chase. He chucked the bag in the bushes and I picked it up and started running. Isn't he back yet?'

This was even better, they would be much more likely to listen to Archer's suggestion if someone had nearly been caught. Mandy came out of a room off the hallway then, complaining that the black wig was too itchy and she didn't want to use it again. She went white when she saw him. 'Archer. What are you doing here?'

'I've come to talk to you about this, you must know it's wrong. I thought you were trying to change for the better.'

'It's easy for you to say Archer. You don't know what it's like with Barstard getting at you all the time. Teachers calling you stupid and telling you you're a waste of time.' Jack was angry at the system that was failing him.

'I spoke to Kyle and I don't think all the teachers are trying to make out that you're bad, just the head.'

'Yeah, I suppose you're right.'

'But if you don't stop this now, you will all be caught and sent to some kind of juvenile detention centre.'

'Says who?' A solid, hard-faced boy came out of the room, he was one of the two Archer didn't know.

'Stiff, this is Archer, he's a foster kid too.' Jack seemed to be frightened of this older boy.

'So why is he threatening to rat on his own kind then?'

Archer looked at his watch. 'You have five minutes before the police get here. They will arrest all of you.'

'What? You little bastard, I'm going to smash your face in. Hold him boys.'

Archer knew a moment's doubt as Jack and Kyle both moved to grab his arms and Kellie screamed as Stiff pulled back his arm to deliver the first punch.

Archer could not believe that the two boys he thought of as friends were prepared to help this bully hurt him. Maybe he had completely misjudged them and they were as black-hearted as everyone made them out to be. But help came from an unexpected ally as Mandy grabbed the boy's arm and stepped in between them.

'For God's sake Stiff, think. If he's right about the police you don't have time for this. And the little turd is such a good boy that he probably would have called them. You need to get going.'

'But this was a good little earner and that bastard's ruined it all.'

'No it wasn't. Kyle nearly got caught and Darren probably has, he's not back yet. If you make a mess of his face and the filth get you, it'll be a GBH charge as well. This time they'll just throw away the key. You need to get lost now.'

'You're right as always Mand. I'll catch up with you tomorrow. And you...' he poked his finger in Archer's face, 'I'll be dealing with you later.'

There was a loud banging on the front door and everybody froze except Stiff who ran out of the back door.

'Quick, everyone, give me the bags and I'll get rid of them.' They all jumped to follow Archer's suggestion.

'Right you lot sit down like you're watching telly and I'll stall them as long as I can.' Mandy was in charge and as the thumping began again, she called out, 'Hold on a minute, I'm coming.'

It couldn't have worked out better. Archer ran out the back and down the alleyway between the back gardens, reaching the end just as Pete got there. 'Did they see you?'

'No. After the second time, I scarpered just like you said. My heart is thumping though. Did you get it all?'

'I think so. It's a good job Darren didn't come back or it might not have worked so well. Are you sure you want to do this? There's a big chance you might get caught.'

'As long as we stick to the story we'll be fine. If you're not by the bus stop in ten, I'll go home and call you later.'

They split the bags up between them, Peter took the clothes and Archer took the music store bag and the trainers. He had no problem in the music store, he just walked to the counter and left the bag on the end, the assistants were so busy they didn't notice him. But when he got to the sports shop, a male assistant was watching him closely and he decided to use their alternative story. He approached the counter.

'I found this bag in the bushes, I think someone might have dropped it.'

The assistant opened the bag and took out the trainers and the man grabbed Archer's arm. 'Would you mind coming with me?' He picked up the bag and led him into the manager's office where a grim looking man was on the telephone. 'Police please. We've caught one of the shoplifting gang. Thank you.'