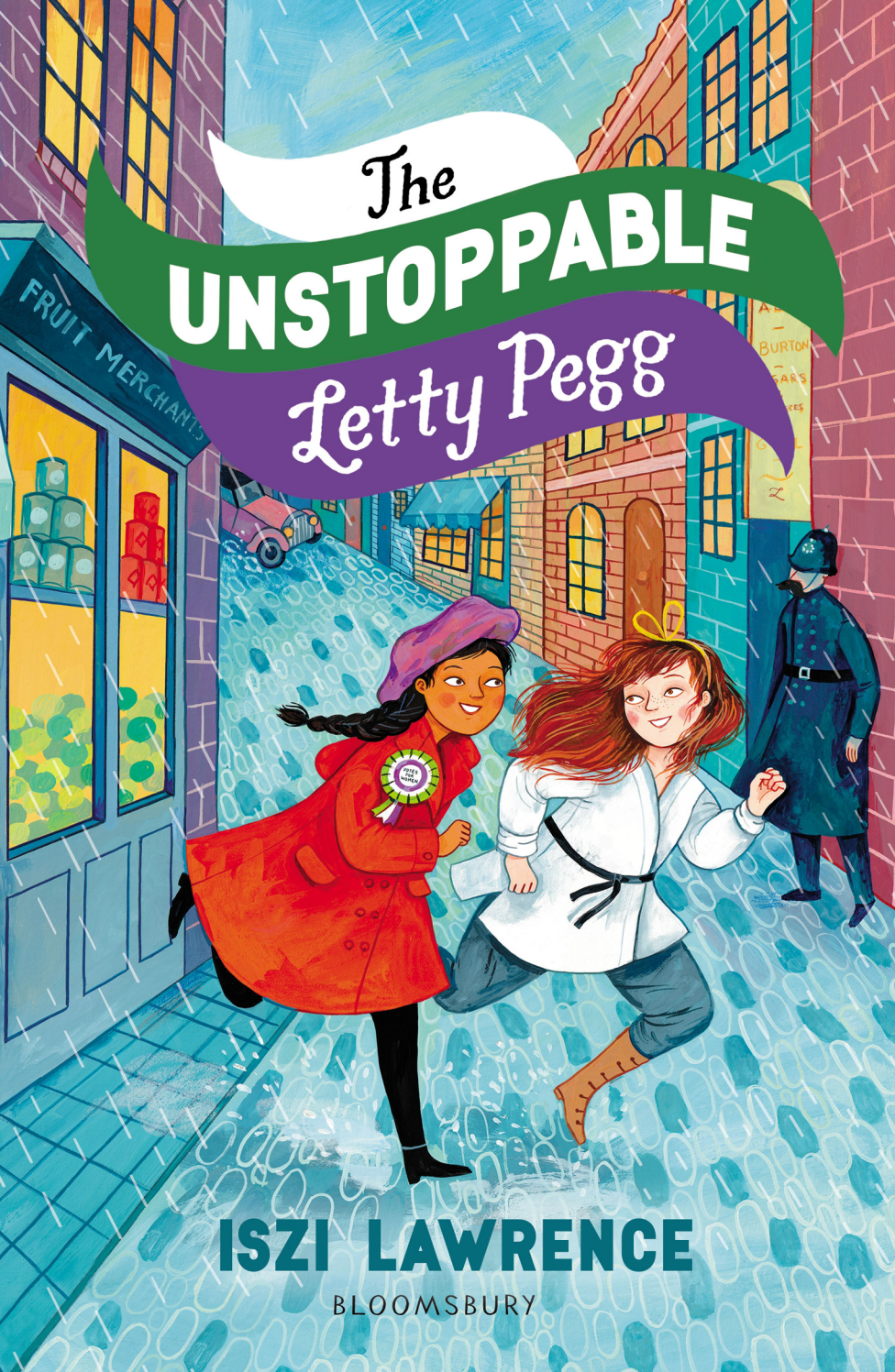

The UNSTOPPABLE Letty Pegg

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BLOOMSBURY

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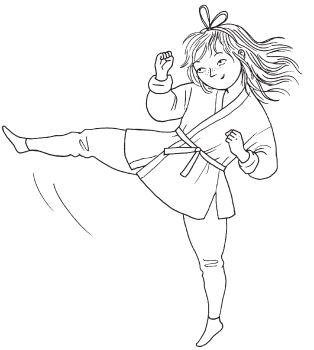
To Naomi Paxton (it is all your fault)
With thanks to everyone at The Jiu Jitsu Foundation



第一章

ICHI

Lettice Pegg didn't care if it was weird to put marmalade in porridge. It was just as sweet as jam and it looked more summery. She needed to feel summery. It was gloomy outside, with rain pattering on the window. Every day this week it had rained. She'd made a note of it in her policeman's notebook – a gift from her father, who was a constable. If it was still raining tomorrow, Friday, that would be an all-time record. A twelve-day streak.

Lettice was sitting at the kitchen table, watching her father eat his toast. They shared a teapot and marmalade. Florence Pegg, Lettice's mother, was playing the piano in the living room: playing a jolly

tune that made the weather seem less bleak. Lettice knew her mother would be quietly humming the song to herself at the same time, still in her nightclothes and Lettice's father's dressing gown. They might not be wealthy, but they were the only family in the building who had a piano. It belonged to Lettice's grandmother who, despite threatening to take it back, had so far let them keep it. Probably because neither the piano nor her grandmother's servants would survive the journey down three flights of stairs. Besides, her gandmother already had plenty of pianos, and houses to put them in. And leaving it in their small London flat was a constant reminder to Lettice's father that he was of a lower class and had never learned to play as a child.

A glob of marmalade was clinging on to the end of her father's moustache and made tiny circles as he chewed. It went faster and faster in time with the piano. Lettice winced as the glob detached, and flew high through the air… Little did she know that the very next day, she would be flung, like that marmalade, rotating vertically in mid-air. Although she would be propelled off a little woman's back, not her father's moustache, and she would land in a massive pile of horse dung… not on top of the butter dish.

Whatever her father was reading in the newspaper was agitating him. His eyebrows dropped so far they

looked like they they were trying to climb down his nose. He caught her staring.

‘Eat up,’ he said.

‘What are you reading?’

Jack Pegg looked over his shoulder towards the hallway that led to the living room. ‘Some news that will upset your mother.’

Every bit of news upset Lettice’s mother. Mrs Pegg was a suffragette and being upset by the news was her favourite hobby. Every headline gave her a burst of fresh outrage, making her bound out of the front door powered by righteous anger. She’d return hours later clutching plans to craft, rosettes to make, letters to write, banners to sew. Recently her big idea had been to get a telephone. And a badge press. Both things Mr Pegg had put his foot down about.

‘Eat up, Lettice. School isn’t fun on an empty belly.’ He got up from the table with his second slice of toast still half-eaten in his hand.

School wasn’t fun anyway, Lettice thought as she watched her father march into the hallway to put on the rest of his police uniform. He liked to look in the mirror while he did this. To make sure his buttons were just so. The maid, Tilly, had polished his boots a second time that morning. Mr Pegg was a particular

man who would also polish them himself in the evenings after patrol.

It was a silly thing for either of them to do, Lettice thought idly. The information her father could get from talking to shoe shiners in the street would help his investigations. The boys who did shoe shining hardly ever turned up for school. They knew all the goings-on.

'Line up!' Lettice's father barked and Lettice set down her spoon next to her empty bowl and ran into the hallway. She liked this game. Her father stood by the front door in his full uniform, helmet under his arm, winter cape hanging from his shoulders. He looked so tall and scary – nasty people would be terrified of him, Lettice thought. It made her feel proud.

'Chop, chop!'

Lettice stood at the end of the line of coat hooks, back straight, eyes forward, heels and toes together, arms straight by her side. Her father started at the furthest coat hook, pretending to inspect the coats as if they were on parade. He looked each one up and down before nodding and moving on. Finally he got to Lettice.

'Aha, a new recruit!' he said. 'Name?'

'Lettice Pegg,' she said.

‘Age?’

‘Eleven and a half, sir.’

He bent over to look at her closely. ‘Clean shoes, neat clothes… clean face. Brushed hair. Excellent. But I’m afraid I can’t let you join. Do you know why?’

She knew why, but it was not the reason she gave. ‘I’m too short, sir!’

‘Indeed you are,’ her father said, standing up and reaching into his top pocket. ‘You need to grow to six foot to be a policeman.’

‘And be a boy too, sir?’

‘Do not answer back,’ he said automatically.

‘Sorry, sir.’ Lettice looked straight ahead again.

‘You need feeding in order to grow.’ Her father handed her some coins from his top pocket. ‘To school with you! Wait for Tilly. She’ll be downstairs no doubt.’

He kissed the top of Lettice’s head. She put on her hat and coat and he opened the door to let her out. The landing was ice-cold, but she skipped happily down the stairs.

Sure enough, Tilly was in the lobby, holding a duster and looking bored. She was only a few years older than Lettice and, despite a strict upbringing in the workhouse, she was very casual about her job as a maid.

‘Raining out,’ she said as Lettice bounced past her.

‘You don’t need to come with me. I’ll walk with Eleanor.’

Tilly shrugged, and went back to picking at her duster.

It was only a short distance to school. The pavement was already filled with children heading that way. Mothers and maids bustled their charges against the businessmen and tradesmen marching briskly in the opposite direction. Groups of children walked together, the boys making crowing noises that Lettice could just about make out over the gusts of wind. A horse buggy trotted by a hansom cab, which was stopping to pick up a couple who were heading towards Westminster. A motorised van tried to turn around, causing a group of gentlemen on the other side of the road to wave their briefcases at the driver in frustration.

Lettice stood on the front step of the flats and scanned the children heading for her school. She immediately recognised Mabel’s bright red coat and paused to avoid her, stepping back into the doorway. The last thing she wanted was everyone to see her arrive at school with the strangest girl in the class. Mabel never talked about normal things, just the weird books she read, or the insects she trapped or how much she enjoyed maths. She wouldn’t shut up about them until she was

satisfied that whoever she was speaking to was equally enthusiastic. Hard to do if the subject was woodlice.

Fortunately, Mabel didn't spot her; she was talking to one of her tight-lipped maids. Tilly's uniform was just a black dress and grubby white pinny, but this maid had little crests sewn on her cape and looked much grander.

There was a mix of children at Lettice's school. It was north of the river, and the intake included those who'd later go to private school, as well as children from less well-to-do streets like the one her friend Eleanor lived on. Lettice looked further down the pavement towards the noise of crowing boys and spotted Eleanor with her brother, Sam, turning the corner. Once Mabel had safely gone past, Lettice ran to meet them.

'All right, Lettice?' Sam was tall, and despite being a year younger than the girls he was already bigger than they were. His frame wasn't exactly beefy though. His limbs poked out of his clothing. His knees were the widest part of his legs and stuck out below his tatty shorts, shining a ruddy pink. Every twenty steps or so, he stopped to pull up his socks. Eleanor wasn't as skinny although it was hard to tell under her coat. Unlike her brother's, her sleeves reached her wrists.

'Good morning,' Lettice greeted them. Despite the drizzle, Sam beamed down at her. She was concerned

about the grin on his face. ‘Have you had some good news?’

Sam smiled knowingly. ‘Mr Metcalfe said he was taking over your lessons.’

‘Don’t listen to him. He’s having us on,’ Eleanor warned.

‘That’s what he said yesterday,’ Sam insisted.

‘Liar,’ Eleanor scoffed. ‘Why would Mr Metcalfe take over the girls’ lessons? And why would he tell *you* about it?’

‘Miss Ward wasn’t there yesterday, or on Tuesday,’ Lettice pointed out. She was worried about the absence of her teacher. ‘That’s why we had to join Miss Troxel’s class.’

‘Exactly,’ Sam said. ‘Word is she’s been sacked. Which means we get Parsons, and Metcalfe is taking over teaching you girls. I’m dead happy.’

‘Why was Miss Ward sacked?’ Lettice asked, but her question was interrupted.

‘Why can’t *we* get Parsons?’ said Eleanor, outraged.

Mr Metcalfe was the worst teacher in the school. He took prayers on Wednesdays in the hall. Anyone he disliked would be made to stand up and face the wall for the whole assembly. He used the dunce’s cap and cane more than anyone else. Parsons was wet

by comparison. Lettice had never been taught by Mr Parsons, but she'd seen him walk around the boys' playground ignoring the punching and swearing. Mr Metcalfe, by contrast, marched about looking cross all the time. The only occasion Lettice had ever seen him smile was when he was talking to Miss Troxell, who took the infants. She never smiled back at him.

'I heard Metcalfe made a boy stand on one leg all lesson, and when the boy got cramp, he beat him,' said Sam.

'That never happened,' said Eleanor.

'He took Evan's lunch money too; made him eat out of the slops for a week.'

'Oh, that reminds me,' Lettice said, and took out her lunch money. 'Here.'

'You sure?' Eleanor smiled and took the penny from her. 'Thanks, posho.'

'Don't call me posh!' Lettice hissed. She checked to see none of the other kids were close by.

'What about last winter when he refused to light the fires?' continued Sam.

'There was a coal shortage!' Eleanor protested.

'The heaters downstairs were fine,' said Sam.

'So you think the infants and girls should have gone cold?' Eleanor asked.

‘You have petticoats and boots. We have shorts. And stupid socks.’ Sam pulled his sock up again. ‘There was plenty of coal. He’s just mean. Hates children. You’ll see.’

‘Won’t. Because he’s teaching YOU, not us,’ Eleanor said stubbornly.

But Eleanor was wrong.

第二章

NI

When the girls reached their classroom, Mr Metcalfe was there: standing upright, away from the teacher's desk, silencing their nattering with a stern look as they entered, their eyes wide at the sight of the cane in his hand.

They scuttled to their usual places like mice to their hidey-holes.

Mabel was already sitting neatly at her desk at the front. Her black plaited hair and clean face were made more annoying by her expression of eagerness. She was as oblivious to the danger they were all in as she was to everyone's hatred of her.

Lettice followed Eleanor to their desks and slotted in behind her.

‘Quiet,’ Mr Metcalfe said to the silent room. ‘I need two monitors. One to fill the ink, the other to check the fire. Two lads did it this morning as no one here had bothered.’

‘Miss Ward usually lights the fire, sir.’ Mabel’s hand had shot up as she spoke. Thirty-nine pairs of eyes darted between Mabel and their teacher.

How did she do it? Lettice couldn’t imagine just talking up like that. It had taken her several goes to speak to Miss Ward, and that was after a month of lessons. She had no problem with family, or kids her own age, but she hung behind her mother in shops. Her biggest fear was anywhere she didn’t know everyone.

She could never interrupt a teacher the way Mabel had just done.

But if Mr Metcalfe had been about to punish Mabel he was soon distracted. Alice, two seats down from Lettice, chimed in, ‘Miriam… Newman is the inkwell monitor.’

There was a murmur of agreement.

‘SILENCE!’ Mr Metcalfe walked over to Alice. His eyes were shining. He whipped out his cane and standing some distance from her pointed it at parts of

her body. ‘Dirty shoes. Tatty collar. And your hair is tangled. Show me your hands!’

Alice, her face nearly as red as her hair, uncrossed her arms and showed him her hands. Lettice wasn’t sure what Alice was expecting: maybe a comment on the state of her sleeves, or to be told that her hands were grubby too. Instead, Mr Metcalfe struck Alice on both hands with the cane.

There was a gasp as everyone in the room jumped at the noise.

‘NO ONE,’ he barked, turning his back on the class and marching to the front of the room, ‘CARES what you have to say!’

Alice sat down, trembling in shock. She hadn’t uttered a yelp but Lettice wasn’t sure how long that would last. Next to her, Angela looked outraged at this assault on her friend and was glaring at Mr Metcalfe like she meant him injury.

‘I don’t care what Miss Ward did. I don’t care how things were done before. Your opinions do not matter. I am here to instruct you to use what little minds you have to keep you out of the gutter. No one attending this school is going to end up working in a factory or married to a layabout.’ He looked straight at Alice.

‘Name?’

‘Carter, sir.’

‘A lesson for you all,’ Mr Metcalfe said as he marched behind the teacher’s desk. ‘Children are to be seen and not heard. Understand?’

The class was silent, scared it was a trick question.

‘Understand?!’

‘Yes, sir!’ they answered.

Mr Metcalfe sat at his desk and inspected the register. ‘I see you have all written a great many essays on literature, natural history and archeology,’ he scoffed. ‘Did Miss Ward realise she was teaching girls?’

Lettice wondered whether this was a question they needed to answer.

‘Your maths is up to standard. Apparently. We will see. You –’ he pointed at Miriam on the front row – ‘seven times nine.’

‘Seven times nine is… sixty-three?’

‘You aren’t sure?’

‘No, I…’

‘You,’ he pointed. ‘The fat one. Eight times twelve.’

Joan frowned. ‘Eight times twelve is ninety-six.’

‘Good. You.’

Lettice flinched. His cane was pointed at her. The back of her neck got all prickly. She couldn’t remember anything. She felt sick.

‘Three times six.’

She didn’t know. She didn’t know the answer. Three times five was fifteen, she knew that. Why didn’t he ask that? Fifteen, add three…

‘Eighteen,’ she gasped. She looked at her feet. Her stomach was clenched. She felt dizzy.

‘Nine times eleven.’

That was easy, nine times ten was ninety, just add nine…

‘N-n-n-n… ninety-nine,’ she stammered, still unable to talk properly.

‘N-n-n-n-no!’ he mocked her.

‘But she’s right!’ said Angela defiantly from across the classroom.

Lettice felt a smidgen of happiness that Angela was sticking up for her. Angela usually laughed at her for one reason or another.

The feeling didn’t last long. Mr Metcalfe walked up to Angela’s desk.

‘What did I say about answering back?’ he demanded.

Angela instantly shut her mouth and hid her hands under her desk. Mr Metcalfe turned to Lettice. ‘You do not know multiplication by heart. You’re calculating the answers in your head. This is slow and inefficient and opens you up to possible failure. These girls know

the numbers by rote. They have become instinctive. As one. Class! Four times four?'

'Four times four is sixteen,' everyone chanted.

Mr Metcalfe pointed his cane in Lettice's face. 'Women's reasoning is often faulty, but their memory is *nearly* on par with that of a man. In future, when you're purchasing items for your children, you will have enough calculation going on and not knowing your multiplications will only vex you further. What is your name, girl?'

Lettice couldn't speak.

'Pegg.' Eleanor jumped in. 'Her name is Lettice Pegg.'

Mr Metcalfe didn't speak to Lettice any more, but wrote something in the register. They were made to recite their times tables and, since it seemed to be the day for memory tests, to recount all the countries that made up the Empire.

As Angela had her pronunciation of the word 'Ceylon' corrected, a boy from the floor above ran down the corridor ringing the school bell.

Lunchtime.

'Dinner money. Now.'

Eleanor stood up eagerly and waited for Lettice to get the feeling back in her foot. It was the longest

Eleanor had ever gone without any form of distraction. Usually they would pass notes, sometimes a game of hangman, or see how far they could flick a spitball. They could never quite reach Mabel, so they'd aim for the crack in the high ceiling instead. Miss Ward wasn't as observant as Mr Metcalfe. He had even shouted at Miriam for scratching her head. Today, they'd sat so still the numbness had developed into pins and needles, and both girls giggled as Lettice hobbled to the end of the dinner queue. Eleanor tucked in behind her.

Angela handed her money to Mr Metcalfe, gazing at him with perfect disdain. Angela was very good at hate. It made her beautiful face pointed and scary. She could flip between welcoming and spiteful in a heartbeat. One moment she liked you, the next she was telling everyone you were an idiot. Sometimes it was because you had things she didn't, like a new coat or winter boots. Other times it was because you didn't have what she had. Like roller skates.

Being denied roller skates by her parents last summer had hindered all the progress Lettice had made at making friends with Angela and Alice. They had skated down the length of the playground, doing jumps and spins. All the children had applauded. It didn't seem to matter that Angela and Alice weren't from well-to-do

families, they were so carefree, confident and pretty… everyone wanted to be like them. Lettice certainly did. She was so very plain by comparison and so timid when talking to adults.

If only she could make friends as easily as her mother could.

Lettice handed her tuppence to Mr Metcalfe. He took it and checked her name.

‘Cabbage, wasn’t it?’

She didn’t correct him.

‘Hold on…’ He was looking at the register. ‘Says here you have first-class luncheon. I should have thruppence. You only gave me two pennies. Where’s the other one?’

Lettice paused. She looked over to see Angela was listening at the door.

She licked her lips and stammered, ‘I… I always have the second-class dinner, sir.’

This was true. Angela started whispering to Alice in the doorway, curious about the hold-up.

‘You can conduct your clucking outside!’ Mr Metcalfe informed them. He waited till they had left the room. All of a sudden the air grew serious. ‘Where is the missing penny?’

‘I have it,’ Eleanor said.

Mr Metcalfe whipped round. He'd barely noticed the mousy girl until now. 'Why do you have it?'

'She gives it me every day, sir.'

'She gives it *to* me,' he corrected. 'Why? Are you blackmailing her?'

'N-n-no, sir!' Lettice stammered, her cheeks now tingling more than her leg. She wanted to explain that Eleanor didn't have the money for a big meal and she didn't get breakfast. By giving her a penny, she could make sure they'd both get a second-class meal and sit together. But she was nervous and could barely speak.

'Why give her the penny then? Do you consider her a charity?'

Eleanor interrupted again. 'Hardly anyone gets the first-class dinners; this way we get to sit at the same table and…'

Lettice wanted to say that this way they didn't get picked on. If you fitted in, you were less of a target. The first-class dinner table was right next to the teachers' table, on a platform in the school canteen. So few people had first-class dinners that there was only one table for the girls, and you had to sit with all the younger children – and Joan… and Mabel. You couldn't talk openly sitting there because the teachers could hear. Not that you'd *want* to talk to Joan or Mabel. Not unless you wanted everyone in the school to look at you and point.

There were several girls' second-class tables and a few third-class tables too. It was much easier to slot into those and be part of the crowd, even if only Eleanor and Miriam would ever talk to you.

'However noble you think you're being, giving money to the poor, the money is not yours to give away.' Mr Metcalfe narrowed his eyes. 'You're a thief.'

'Lettice ain't no thief! Her pa gave it her… to her,' said Eleanor, choosing her words carefully.

'Her father wishes her to have a hearty lunch. She is the property of her father and therefore doesn't have a choice in the matter. That was not *her* money to fritter on an imagined good cause.' Mr Metcalfe swished his cane. 'Neither of you will be having lunch today. Make sure you return all the money to your father.'

He slid the two pennies towards Lettice and both girls left the classroom. Lettice was bursting with indignation. The injustice of it!

'He says my father wants me to have a hearty lunch, then stops me getting any!' she raged as she hurried alongside Eleanor outside the dining hall. They were as close to the wall as possible, trying to stay out of the rain.

'At least you had breakfast. I'm starved,' Eleanor huffed.

‘Sam’s right. He is cruel,’ agreed Lettice.

‘You still got those pennies?’ Eleanor looked hopeful.

‘Yeah but…’ Lettice was concerned. If Mr Metcalfe told her father what she had been doing all these months, giving away his money…

‘You gonna give it back like what he said? Cos we could get us some grub after school.’

Lettice frowned. ‘If my parents find out I didn’t have lunch and I don’t have the money either…’

‘But you *will* have had lunch… just a late lunch and not a school lunch,’ reasoned Eleanor.

‘What happened with Metcalfe? Why did he keep you back?’ Angela and Alice had rounded the corner.

‘You weren’t at lunch,’ Alice said in an accusatory manner.

‘No,’ said Eleanor. ‘Metcalfe wouldn’t let us.’

‘Why?’

Lettice panicked. Angela mustn’t know that she was supposed to have the thruppenny lunch. It was only posh girls like Mabel who did.

‘You know how Eleanor and I…’ Lettice corrected herself, ‘Me and Ellie have the tuppenny meal?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well, Miss Ward has it written wrong. So Metcalfe thinks I have a first-class lunch and Ellie has a

third-class,' Lettice lied. 'He was accusing Ellie of stealing a penny from me. Stupid.'

'He's mad,' agreed Alice. She was still holding her hands funny.

'Yeah.' Lettice could tell Angela didn't quite believe the story, but she was more interested in finding new ways to hate Metcalfe. 'Miss Ward better be back soon.'

'Where is she?' Alice asked

'Not sure…' Angela frowned.

'Sam said she was sacked,' Lettice said with a conspiratorial whisper.

'What for?' Angela asked, leaning closer.

'Could be anything. You seen the leash they keep teachers on?' Alice scoffed.

'We're gonna get some food after school anyway,' Eleanor said, bristling a little at her brother getting credit for this gossip and wanting to change the subject.

'We could buy him some butcher's bones and take Metcalfe for walkies,' Lettice said.

Everyone giggled.

'They don't keep the male teachers on a leash, they've hardly got no rules,' Alice grumbled. 'I've seen Troxell's rulebook they gave her. She's not allowed out of her house after eight at night and she can't travel anywhere with a fella who isn't her father or her brother.'

‘That’s normal isn… ain’t it?’ Lettice asked.

‘How’s she supposed to find an ’usband?’ Angela responded.

‘If she gets married she’ll get sacked. That’s in the rules too,’ Alice said.

‘So it makes sense to make it hard for teachers to marry,’ Lettice concluded.

‘Parsons is married,’ Eleanor said.

‘Is he?’ Lettice looked surprised. ‘I’ve never seen his wife.’

‘Who do you think that woman was with him at Easter and the nativity and stuff?’

‘That’s his wife?’ Lettice was shocked. ‘I thought that was his brother!’

The girls cackled. Lettice grinned from ear to ear. She was doing very well at making friends today.

‘The point is,’ Angela said, ‘you can’t marry and have a job, not unless you’re dirt poor.’

Eleanor stopped smiling. Her mother worked. Lettice noticed this and tried to change the subject.

‘Poor Miss Troxell. Doomed to solitude,’ she said, then, noticing the confused faces, ‘She’ll be a spinster forever.’

‘Unless Mr Metcalfe has all his wishes granted,’ Alice said.

The girls laughed again.

‘I’m glad we skipped lunch!’ Eleanor said. ‘The thought of marrying Metcalfe… I’d be sick!’

‘We’ll get some food later, right?’ Lettice said, hoping to invite Angela and Alice along with them.

‘I hear the pies down Romney Road are to die for,’ said a shrill little voice behind them. It was Mabel. She beamed at them. ‘It’s near Letty’s flat.’

‘My name is Lettice,’ Lettice snapped. She didn’t want anyone calling her Letty, not after last year when Angela had called her Toiletty and everyone had laughed.

Mabel’s big brown eyes and stupid round cheeks didn’t hide the slight trepidation in her voice. ‘I know where we could go.’

‘We weren’t inviting you,’ said Angela with a sneer.

Mabel weathered the rejection very well, ignoring the other girls and looking directly at Lettice. ‘It’s a good place. I have some money too.’

Angela and Alice exchanged glances. This was awful, thought Lettice. It was the first time Angela and Alice had approached Eleanor and Lettice. Almost like they wanted to be friends. And now Mabel was ruining everything. Smiling like an idiot. Offering to take them out. Like they were friends. She wanted her to just go away. But Mabel wasn’t going anywhere.

‘They serve this amazing vegetarian pie,’ she continued ignoring the glares of all four girls.

‘We don’t like curry.’ The words were out of Lettice’s mouth before she could help it. Eleanor let out a cackle. Alice and Angela were grinning too. Mabel opened her mouth and shut it again.

Rumours circulated about Mabel’s parents. She looked nothing like them. *Nothing* like them. Mabel was a lot younger than her three brothers. They were all fair-haired and blue-eyed. Mabel was different. Everyone knew Mabel was adopted. Except Mabel. She seemed oblivious to her dusky skin, her jet-black hair. Miriam thought she could be Jewish like she was, and so hated her for not admitting it. Eleanor at one point said she might be Spanish. Lettice, though, was convinced Mabel was Indian. Her posh voice was like the one Lettice had to put on when she visited her grandmother. Mabel was a fake.

Tears were welling up in Mabel’s eyes. ‘I don’t like c-curry e-either.’

‘You must eat a lot to know that,’ Angela said, but Mabel had already turned away and fled.

Lettice felt a pang of regret. She hadn’t needed to do that. A ‘no, go away’ would have sufficed. A terrible guilt pricked deep in her chest. It wasn’t the fact that

she'd been rude to Mabel, she had meant to be. It was how she'd done it. Lettice knew it wasn't Mabel's fault that she was Indian or adopted, so picking on her for it was wrong. But that wasn't the core of the bad feeling that made Lettice feel a little sick. Lettice was hit with the horrid thought that what she'd said meant she thought being Indian was bad. And being adopted was bad. Of course she didn't think that. Not for a second!

Lettice wanted to apologise immediately. But she couldn't. Mabel had gone and the girls were still giggling. Lettice tried to shoo away the guilt in her stomach. It was Mabel's fault. She tried so hard, but it just made her look desperate. And Lettice seemed to be her main target. For some reason Mabel had latched on to her, like a stray puppy… Not a week went by without Mabel reaching out to Lettice and Lettice ignoring her. Lettice didn't hate Mabel, even though she told herself she did. She was just scared of being associated with her. Lettice didn't want to appear strange. She just wanted to fit in.

'That was brilliant!' Eleanor smiled. 'You should be on stage with that wit!'

'She should know better,' Angela said. 'Just 'cos she has money doesn't mean we have to be friends with her.'

'Why does she like you so much?' asked Alice.

Lettice shook her head in disbelief. ‘I don’t know…’

The girls spent the rest of the lunch break huddled out of the rain, talking about what they would do when they left school. This was a common topic as they would all be twelve next year. By law you had to be fourteen to leave school, but it wasn’t uncommon to work part-time from twelve, or leave school altogether.

Angela was going to marry, of course. As soon as possible. She wasn’t going to wait till her twenties. Lettice didn’t believe her story about a roguish Irish gypsy fiancé, but Angela was insistent it was true, and she was a bit too scary to question.

Alice was going to be a maid for the hotel her parents already worked in. She wasn’t too pleased with this as a prospect and hoped to find a husband soon. Eleanor was certain she would get a job in a shop, one of the new ones. There was no way she would be a maid. She’d even stay living at home for a few more years if it meant she could save up some money.

She wanted to work in the jeweller’s. You meet all sorts selling jewels. When a rich young man came in to get an engagement ring, she’d get him to give *her* the ring instead of his intended. Then they’d travel to America in style and knowing all the British colonies in order wouldn’t matter because the Americans hated the

British, and the new king. Lettice wasn't sure Eleanor was confident enough to snare a bachelor, even an imaginary one, and worried for the imaginary fiancée he left behind. She worried even more for her friend if she wanted to marry a bounder like that.

'Well, it's better than being a maid,' Eleanor said in a huff. 'Why, what will you do, Lettice?'

'The way you handled Mabel, perhaps you should get on stage as a comedy turn,' suggested Alice.

'I wouldn't dare!' Lettice chuckled, blushing slightly at the compliment but feeling guilty all the same.

'We're off to the music hall tomorrow,' Angela announced.

'Oh wow,' said Eleanor. 'With your parents?'

'My eldest brother goes,' Angela said. 'He takes us. But I think we're going to the Aquarium not the Canterbury tomorrow. We're a bit bored of George Leybourne to be honest. Do you want to come?'

Lettice had never wanted anything more in her life. 'Yes please!'

'Don't you even care who's on?' Alice snorted.

'Isn't it usually the Great Vance at the Aquarium?' said Eleanor.

'Tomorrow it's Little Tich, Harry Tate and Hetty King. So it will be well good. Get changed quick after

school and we'll meet you both back at the gates at five o'clock.'

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The afternoon lessons were a bit better. Mr Metcalfe instructed them to carry on with their embroidery. Little did he know they weren't supposed to be embroidering. They had been darning, an altogether more mundane task. Lettice enjoyed embroidery, creating patterns that looked like flowers and keeping each stitch the correct size. The result was so neat a machine could have done it. Eleanor was more of a wild interpretation sort. Her flowers resembled her family – all growing at different rates, some stretched out, others short and round.

Lettice missed flowers and the sweetness of summer. She spent her summers with her grandmother in her country house. There were stables and horses. And big trees she wasn't allowed to climb but did anyway. There wasn't much green in London. Everything was cobblestones, red brick and wrought iron, washed grey in the rain. Gardens were closed off behind iron gates and, once the trees had emptied their leaves, the soot and the mud seemed to cover anything remaining that wasn't already grey.

The final bell rang, and the boys marched past the girls' classroom on their way home. The girls silently filed out, each bobbing a curtsy at the picture of the king as they left. Stupidly, it was the wrong king. He had died in the summer but Miss Ward hadn't changed the portrait to the new king. Tilly of course wasn't there to collect Lettice – it wasn't a duty their maid stuck to very often – so she walked home with Eleanor and Sam, stopping to buy them all lunch at the sweet shop. Sam insisted on wine gums, which he thought contained wine but actually tasted quite bland. Eleanor got marshmallows and shared Lettice's sugar mice. Excitedly, they made plans for Friday evening.

Plans that would be wrecked the moment Lettice got home.