

Love Lessons

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Random House Children's Publishers UK

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About the Book

For one mad, magical moment I thought he was going to kiss me . . .

Prue and her sister have been educated at home by their ultra-strict father all their lives. When Dad is suddenly rushed to hospital, Prue at last discovers what it's like to have a little freedom.

Sent to school for the first time, Prue finds it difficult to settle in. The only person she can talk to is her kindly young art teacher, Rax. When she starts babysitting for Rax's children, Prue finds herself longing for the ten minutes they have alone together as he drives her home. But she can't act on her secret feelings, can she?

An absorbing portrait of a forbidden relationship from the mega-bestselling Jacqueline Wilson.

FOR TEENAGE READERS

JACQUELINE WILSON

Love Lessons



Illustrated by Nick Sharratt

RHCP DIGITAL

For Mary, Rachel and Rebecca



I HATE MY dad.

I know lots of teenage girls say that but they don't really mean it. Well, I don't *think* they do. I don't really know any other teenage girls. That's one of the reasons why I hate Dad. He keeps me a virtual prisoner.

I'm interrogated if I slip down the road to Krisha's Korner Shop. I'm not allowed to go into town by myself. I can't go to see any films. I can't eat in McDonald's.

Dad even fussed about me making a simple bus ride by myself to go to Miss Roberts for maths tuition. He took my sister Grace and me out of school ages ago, when I'd just gone into the Juniors and she was still at the finger-painting stage. Dad said *he* was going to educate us.

We were left to get on with it for ages, but this summer we had a home visit from a Mr Miles, who was from some kind of education authority. He wanted to know what provision Dad was making for my GCSE coursework. Dad said he didn't believe in examinations. Mr Miles smiled through Dad's tirade, obviously having heard it all before. He looked at Grace and me when Dad ran out of steam.

'What do you want to do when you're older, Prudence and Grace?' he asked.

Grace mumbled something about working with animals. Dad won't let us have any proper pets because he says he's allergic to them. Grace has a lot of secret, unsatisfactory pets, like the blackbird in the garden and the toads in the compost heap and for a while she kept a wormery hidden under her bed. Grace's pets are not exactly cuddly.

'You'll certainly need to pass lots of exams if you want to be a vet,' said Mr Miles.

Dad snorted. 'You'll find our Grace has got no more brains than a donkey,' he said unkindly. 'She'll get a job in a shop somewhere and be happy enough.'

'In your bookshop?'

'She can help sell the books, but I doubt she's up to the business side of things,' said Dad. 'But Prudence can do all the cataloguing and buying and book fairs.'

'Is that what you want to do, Prudence - run your father's business?' said Mr Miles.

I swallowed. 'I - I'd like to go to art college,' I said.

Dad glared at me. 'For goodness' sake, I've told you to forget that nonsense. You don't need to go away to college to learn drawing and painting; you can do that already.'

'But I *want* to go, Dad.'

Dad was furious with me for arguing in front of Mr Miles, but decided not to pursue it. 'All right, all right, go to art college, waste three years, see for yourself,' he said. He nodded triumphantly at Mr Miles. 'I guarantee she can pass her art GCSE standing on her head.'

'I dare say,' said Mr Miles. 'But I think you'll find art colleges require quite a few GCSEs, plus three good A-levels. You're going to have to make more provision for your daughters' education, Mr King, especially now Prudence is fourteen. Otherwise we might have to pursue the matter through the courts.'

'The courts!' said Mum, panicking.

'You've got no power to do any such thing,' said Dad, hands on his hips, his chin jutting. 'You can't stop parents

home-educating their children.'

'Not if they've been home-educated right from the start. But your girls have attended school in the past, so I think you'll find we have every power. However, let's hope we can avoid any unpleasant action. We all want what's best for Prudence and Grace.'

Dad seemed sure Mr Miles was bluffing, but nevertheless he fixed up for me to go to this Miss Roberts for maths tuition on Wednesday afternoons.

I only went once. It was unbearable.

Miss Roberts used to teach maths at a girls' school way back in the sixties. She seemed preserved in that time, still teasing her limp grey hair into a bouffant style. Her pink scalp showed through alarmingly. I kept staring at it as she bent over me, trying to explain some supposedly simple point about algebra.

I couldn't understand any of it. I wrote down random letters of the alphabet but I couldn't tease any meaning from them. I expect letters to arrange themselves into words. If I'm doing sums I need numbers – though I'm actually useless with numbers too. I can't always add up accurately. The shop takings rarely balance on a Saturday when I help out.

Miss Roberts tried hard to be patient with me. She explained it over and over again, raising her voice and speaking very s-l-o-w-l-y. Then she switched to geometry in despair. I could draw wobbly circles with her old compass and construct reasonable squares and rectangles with my own ruler but I didn't know what any of them *meant*.

I paid her the twenty pounds for the tuition and she gave me a cup of tea (the milk was so old it floated in little flecks on the tan surface) and a stale custard cream.

'Don't look so woebegone, Prudence,' she said. 'Your father says you're a very bright girl. I'm sure you'll catch on in no time.'

I made an extreme effort to swallow the sour milk-biscuity paste in my mouth and thanked her politely.

I didn't go back. For the last three Wednesdays I've walked into town and spent my tuition fee. Sixty whole pounds.

I've never had so much money in my life before. Dad gives Grace and me one pound every Saturday. He behaves as if he's bestowing solid gold upon us, and even has the nerve to lecture us, telling us not to waste it on rubbish. I've always saved mine up to buy sketchpads and soft pencils and coloured crayons, bought one by one.

Grace spends hers all at once on sweets – a bar of chocolate or two, and a handful of gummy snakes. She gollops the chocolate in one go but she keeps the snakes, lining them up on the arm of the sofa, red and yellow and green like a slithery traffic light. She plays with them, giving them names and personalities, but she can't help licking them affectionately so that they all get very sticky. She tries to save them till Sunday, though she sometimes can't stop herself biting off a head or two on Saturday night.

Grace isn't three or four, as you might expect. She is eleven years old and very weird.

I know I am very weird too. I can't seem to help it. I don't know how to be a proper teenager. I bought a couple of teenage magazines out of my stolen tuition money. They were astonishing, especially the problem pages. I knew I didn't look anything like girls my own age, but I didn't realize my experiences were so different.

I've had *no* experiences; *they've* had plenty. The girls writing to the problem pages spoke a different language and behaved as if they were from a totally different planet. They wore astonishing clothes and got up to astonishing things with their boyfriends. I read these letters feeling hot, my heart beating.

The only letters I could identify with in any way were the ones where the girls moaned about their mums and dads. They said they couldn't stick their parents. Their mums wouldn't let them have a nose stud or platform heels; their dads nagged about bad marks at school and got mad if they didn't come home till midnight.

'They should try having *my* mum and dad,' I muttered, as I flicked through them by torchlight under the bedcovers.

'What?' Grace said blearily, propping herself up on one elbow. 'Are you still awake? What are you doing?'

'Just reading my book. Go back to sleep,' I said.

But Grace has bat ears. She heard the rustle of the pages. 'That's not a book, it's a magazine! Let me see!' She leaned over from her bed. She leaned far too eagerly and fell out with a yell.

'Shut *up*, Grace!'

'Ouch! I've banged my elbow - and my knee!' Grace whimpered.

'Ssh!'

'It hurts,' she whispered. She came scrabbling into my bed. 'Please let me see, Prue.'

'You won't tell Mum?' I hissed.

Grace sometimes has terrible attacks of conscience when she worries and frets about some tiny little thing she's done wrong and then suddenly blurts it all out to Mum when they're having a cuddle. Grace is far too big for cuddles now but she still wants them. She's like a large lollopy dog, desperate to be patted all the time.

I didn't waste my breath warning her not to tell Dad. Even Grace isn't that mad.

'I swear,' she said. Then she whispered all the worst words she knew, swearing like a trooper. We might live like princesses locked in a tower but you can't go down the street without hearing boys blinding away and drivers yelling. Also, very strangely, Dad sometimes swears when

he's in one of his tempers, foul words frothing out of his mouth. If Mum or Grace or I ever said just one of those words he would murder us.

I showed Grace the magazines. She handled them reverently, as if they were the finest first folios, easing over the pages and smoothing them out. She looked at all the photos of teenage girls and stroked their clothes longingly. She started reading the problem page and then snorted with shocked laughter.

'Ssh!'

'What's this girl going *on* about? What does she *mean*?'

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Grace, you know the facts of life,' I said, although I wasn't clear what a lot of it meant either.

I had secretly looked at several volumes of Victorian erotica which Dad bought in a book auction, presumably by mistake. I found them right at the bottom of the box, under a Norton set of the Brontë sisters. They featured a bizarre vicar, Reverend Knightly, with a large congregation of ever so lusty ladies. There were extraordinary colour plates showing the vicar cavorting in his dog collar and very little else. I found them comical but not particularly disturbing. They were adults, figments of someone's imagination, and one hundred and fifty years old. The girls in these magazines were real.

'Oh I *wish* I had a boyfriend,' said Grace. 'Do you think Dad will ever let us go out with boys, Prue?'

'I don't *want* to go out with boys,' I said, not entirely truthfully.

For years and years I'd had a private pretend friend, an interesting and imaginative girl my own age called Jane. She started when I read the first few chapters of *Jane Eyre*. She stepped straight out of the pages and into my head. She no longer led her own Victorian life with her horrible aunt and cousins. She shared *my* life with my demented father.

Jane was better than a real sister. She wasn't babyish and boring like Grace. We discussed books and pored over pictures and painted watercolours together, and we talked endlessly about everything. Sometimes we didn't talk silently enough. I knew my lips moved and occasionally I started muttering without realizing. Grace knew I made up imaginary games inside my head and resented it.

'You're doing it!' she'd say when I muttered, giving me a nudge. 'Tell *me*, Prue, go on. Make it up for me.'

'Make up your own games,' I said, which was unfair, because she wasn't much good at it.

I'd started up a new and even more private pretend game recently, after Dad had taken Grace and me on an educational trip to the National Gallery in London. Dad had an old guidebook to the gallery and was all set to inform us relentlessly, but the gallery had long since rearranged all its rooms. Dad couldn't match up the text in his guidebook with any of the paintings and became more and more frustrated and irritable.

Grace barely looked at each painting, trudging with bent head, her feet dragging on the floor. She murmured obediently whenever Dad seemed to demand a response, but that was all.

I didn't say much either. I was flying through this new magical world of religious Renaissance painting, so pink and blue and glittery gold. It was as if I'd sprouted my own beautiful set of angels' wings. I'd always painted wings plain white, but now I saw they could be shaded from the palest pearl through deep rose and purple to the darkest midnight-blue tips. Some of the angels' wings were carefully co-ordinated with their gowns like matching accessories. Others had unusual, eccentric colour combinations like red and gold and black, with a white gown. One particular fashionista angel was strolling along the sandy path with a golden-haired boy about my age, holding a fish.

When we were little Dad used to read aloud to us every day from a large and unwieldy Victorian Bible. Dad had been very religious until he had a row with our vicar. He'd gently suggested to Dad that home-schooling was all very well, but Grace and I needed more of a social life so we could make some friends. Dad blew his top and had no time for the vicar, his church, or the entire Christian faith after that.

He put the Bible back on the shelves as stock. I was sorry when it sold, because I loved looking at the wonderful Doré illustrations. I remembered a lot of the Bible stories, so I knew that the boy with the fish and the angel friend was Tobias. He was dressed in colourful medieval garb, with dashing bright-red tights. I tried to imagine a modern teenage boy prancing about in scarlet stockings. Still, some boys wore their jeans skin-tight. The Tobias in the painting obligingly put on blue jeans and a white T-shirt and smiled at me.

He came home with me that day as my new imaginary friend. Poor Jane got elbowed into the background. Tobias and I read together, painted together, walked together, whispered together. He spoke softly right into my ear, his cheek very nearly brushing mine.

Now I imagined him kissing me, touching me, like the girls and their boyfriends in the magazines. But then I imagined real boys, with their foul mouths and grabbing hands, and I shuddered.

'I don't like boys,' I said.

'Boys like *you*, Prue,' said Grace. She sighed. 'It's not fair. I wish I was pretty like you so boys would turn round and stare at me.'

'I bet they only stare because I look such a freak,' I said.

Mum made most of our clothes from remnants from the Monday market stall. I'm fourteen years old and yet I have to wear demure little-girly dresses with short sleeves and swirly skirts. I have a red-and-white check, a baby blue

with a little white flower motif, and a canary yellow piped with white. They are all embarrassingly awful.

Mum used to make appalling matching knickers when we were little, threaded with very unreliable elastic. Our baggy shop-bought white pants are only one degree better. Still, I have *proper* underwear now. I used my maths tuition money to buy a wonderful black bra with pink lace and a little pink rose, and two matching knickers, wispy little things a tenth of the size of my plain girls' pants.

I locked the bathroom and tried them on, standing precariously on the edge of the bath so I could peek at myself in the bathroom cabinet mirror. I loved the way they looked, the way they make *me* look.

I hadn't dared wear them yet under my awful dresses because Grace could so easily blab. I'd have to wash them out secretly myself rather than risk putting them in the laundry basket.

'Do we look like freaks?' Grace asked worriedly.

'Of course we do. Look at our clothes!'

Grace considered. 'I *like* my dresses, especially my pink one with the little panda pattern - it's so cute,' she said. 'Would you have liked that material for your dress, Prue?'

'No! I can't stick little pandas or teddies or bunny rabbits. For God's sake, I'm *fourteen*.'

'Do you think *I'm* too old to wear my panda dress?' Grace asked anxiously.

There was only one answer but I didn't want to upset her. 'I suppose your pink panda dress does still look quite sweet on you,' I lied valiantly.

'It's getting a bit small for me now anyway,' Grace sighed. '*All* my dresses are tight on me. I wish I wasn't getting so large and lumpy.'

'It's just a stage you go through. Puppy fat.'

'*You* didn't,' she sighed again. 'Dad keeps going on about me getting fat. He says I shouldn't eat so much. He says I'm greedy. Do you think I should go on a diet, Prue?'

‘No! Take no notice of him. He just likes to nag, you know that. Anyway, you can’t diet *just* yet. I’ve got you a surprise.’

I’d felt so mean spending all my tuition money on myself, though I knew Grace would never manage to keep any present I bought her properly hidden. The only way I could buy her a treat was to get her something edible, to be quickly consumed.

‘A surprise!’ said Grace, clapping her hands.

‘Ssh! I was keeping it a secret, to cheer you up the next time Dad goes off on one of his rants, but you might as well have it now.’

I climbed out of bed and went to scrabble in my knicker drawer. My hands found the flimsy satin and lace of my new underwear. I secretly stroked them in the dark, and then searched again until my fingers slid over the crackly cellophane of Grace’s surprise.

‘OK! Here we are!’ I slipped back into bed and thrust my present into her hands.

‘What *is* it?’ she said, unable to see properly in the dark. I flicked the torch on to show her.

‘Oh *wow!*’

‘Shut *up!* Do you want Dad to hear?’ I said, nudging her.

‘Sorry. But, oh Prue, it’s so *sweet!*’

There’s a special chocolate boutique in the shopping centre. It’s Grace’s all-time favourite shop even though she’s never even set foot inside it. Mum buys chocolate off a market stall. It’s always a funny make and past its sell-by date, but it’s cheap, and that’s all Mum cares about.

I was going to buy Grace a pound of posh chocolates in a fancy box, but then I saw this big white chocolate bunny in the window, clutching an orange marzipan carrot. I knew she’d love it.

‘What shall I call him? Peter Rabbit? Benjamin Bunny?’

‘Can’t you ever make up your *own* names, Grace?’

‘You know I can’t. *You* think up a lovely name for him.’

‘There’s not much point. You’ll be chomping away at him in two seconds. Knowing you, there won’t even be a little chocolate paw left by midnight.’

‘I’m not going to eat him. He’s far too wonderful. I’m going to keep him for ever,’ said Grace, but her fat little fingers had already undone his ribbon and peeled off his cellophane. She sniffed his creamy ears ecstatically. ‘Oh, he smells heavenly!’

‘So eat him, silly. That’s what he’s for.’

‘I *can’t*! Well, perhaps I could eat his carrot? I don’t want to spoil him. Still, maybe I could just lick one of his ears, to see what he tastes like?’

‘Go for it, girl!’

Grace stuck out her tongue and licked. And licked again and again and again. And then all by themselves her teeth started chomping and the chocolate bunny was left disturbingly hard of hearing.

‘Oooh!’ Grace murmured blissfully. Then she shone the torch on him. She saw what she’d done. ‘*Oooh!*’ she wailed, her tone changing.

‘It’s OK, just eat his head up quickly. It’s what he’s *for*.’

‘But it’s *spoiling* him. Why am I such a greedy guts? Look, he’s got a horrible gap in his head now.’

‘He’s fine.’

‘No he’s not. I want him to be whole again,’ Grace said, looking as if she might burst into tears.

‘Well, his ears are in your tummy. If you gobble up the rest of him quickly then his body can join up with them, and they can squidge themselves together like plasticine. Then he’ll be whole in your tummy and it will be his own private burrow.’

Grace giggled uncertainly, but started chomping on his chocolate head. She offered me one arm because she felt he could manage on three paws. I’d imagined him so vividly I felt a little worried myself. It was like feasting on a real pet rabbit.

'You eat your rabbit all up yourself, Gracie,' I said.

'It's the loveliest treat ever,' she said indistinctly, mouth crammed with chocolate. 'But when did you buy it?' She paused. The obvious hit her. '*Where did you get the money?*'

'Keep your voice down!'

'I'm *whispering*.'

Then we heard the bedroom door open along the landing. We held our breath. I snapped the torch off and Grace leaped into her own bed. We heard footsteps: the pad and slap of old slippers.

'It's OK, it's only Mum,' I whispered.

We heard her padding right along the landing, past our bedroom, down the stairs to the first floor, above the shop. Each stair creaked as she stepped. Our mother is a heavy woman.

We heard her in the kitchen, opening the fridge door.

'She's having a midnight feast too,' I muttered.

'Not a patch on mine,' Grace whispered, daring to take another bite.

Mum came trudging up the stairs again, slower now, breathing heavily.

'Should I save a little piece of rabbit for Mum?' Grace asked.

'No!'

'But she loves chocolate.'

'Ssh!'

'Not now. In the morning,' Grace persisted.

'Shut up or she'll hear us.'

It was too late. The footsteps stopped outside our door.

'Girls? Are you awake?' Mum whispered.

'No!' Grace said, idiotically.

Mum opened our door and came shuffling into the room. 'You should have gone to sleep ages ago,' she said. She came over to Grace's bed and bent over her. 'Are you all right, lovie?'

‘Yes, Mum,’ said Grace.

‘What about you, Prudence?’

‘I’m fine,’ I mumbled, giving a little yawn to make her think I was on the brink of sleep.

‘Are you hungry, Mum?’ Grace asked. ‘We heard you go down to the kitchen.’

‘I was just getting a glass of milk for your dad. He’s not feeling too clever. He keeps getting these funny turns.’ Mum sounded very anxious.

‘He should go to the doctor,’ I said.

‘You know what your dad’s like,’ said Mum. ‘Prudence, why don’t you try talking to him? When he’s in a good mood? He might just listen to you.’

I pulled a face in the dark. I hated being Dad’s favourite. It didn’t really mean much anyway. I couldn’t get him to do anything he didn’t want to do. No one could.

‘I’ll try mentioning the doctor,’ I said. ‘But I don’t think it will work.’

‘You’re a good girl,’ said Mum. ‘Well, night-night, then.’

She kissed Grace, patted my shoulder awkwardly and then waddled out of our bedroom, her hand held stiffly in front of her so she wouldn’t spill the milk.

‘You are a moron, Grace,’ I hissed.

‘Sorry!’ she said. She took another big bite of chocolate bunny. ‘Oh yum yum, happy tum!’ She fell asleep in mid-munch, and started snoring softly.

I lay awake for a while, talking to Tobias.

2



I WOKE EARLY and had another quick read of the teenage magazines before smoothing them out and hiding them under my mattress. I rescued the crackly cellophane from the bed and hid that too. It would be stupid to risk chucking it in the bin. In his maddest moments Dad would rootle right through the rubbish, mostly to berate Mum for buying the wrong things.

I went and got washed and then dressed in the red-and-white-check girly number. I plaited a strand of hair with scarlet thread and fastened it with three red beads. I wished I had red lipstick, but Dad wouldn't let us use make-up. It was a chilly morning so I stuck on my red cardigan too, an odd hand-knitted garment with a pixie hood.

Grace was still sound asleep, her lips crusted with white chocolate. I hoped she'd have a good wash before she came downstairs for breakfast.

I heard snoring from Mum and Dad's bedroom so I thought I'd have the kitchen to myself. I made myself a cup of tea and then settled down at the kitchen table with my sketchpad and new watercolours, trying to reproduce the Tobias and the Angel painting from memory.

The back door suddenly opened, making me jump violently. My paintbrush blotched red paint, so that poor Tobias grew a massive muscly thigh.

‘Good morning, Little Red Riding Hood,’ said Dad, tweaking the limp woolly hood on my back.

I struggled into Winsome Daughter mode.

‘Hi, Dad,’ I said brightly, mopping at my painting with a hunched-up Kleenex. I was terrified that Dad would see my paintbox was new, bought with my stolen maths tuition money.

‘Made a mistake?’ said Dad, putting the kettle on to boil again.

‘Well, you startled me a bit. I thought you were still asleep.’ I closed the paintbox quickly, so that he wouldn’t notice the paint palettes were pristine.

‘I was just having a breath of fresh air in the garden.’ Dad breathed in and out ostentatiously. ‘Clearing the cobwebs.’

He swung his arms and beat his chest to indicate fitness. In actual fact he looked awful, very pale and drawn, his face so tense I could see the muscles jumping in his eyelid and temple. He was wearing his old sleeveless padded jerkin. It had once been green but now it was a strange sludge colour. His shirtsleeves were rolled up very neatly in his usual painstaking way. His exposed arms were so thin that his long ropy veins looked about to burst through the skin.

‘Are you all right, Dad?’ I asked.

‘Of course I am!’ He glared at me indignantly. ‘I’m in the pink.’

There was nothing remotely pink about his grey skin.

‘What about these funny turns?’ I said, chancing it.

It was a mistake.

‘What’s your mother been saying? There’s nothing whatsoever wrong with me. Just because I had one little dizzy spell. She makes such a fuss.’ Dad’s eyes narrowed

suspiciously. 'I suppose she's recruited you in her get-me-to-the-doctor campaign?'

'What?' I said, feigning ignorance. I tried hard to change the subject. 'What do you want for breakfast, Dad? Toast? A poached egg?'

'Not if *you're* poaching it, Prudence. It'll either be raw and runny or hard as a bullet,' said Dad, putting the poaching saucepan on the stove himself. 'You want to take some lessons from your mother.'

Dad had been a confirmed bachelor until Mum won him over with her Yorkshire puddings and treacle tarts. I knew she was an excellent cook but I didn't like that kind of old-fashioned British food, all the pies and pastries and sauces and custards constructed from scratch. I hankered after convenience food and takeaways.

Grace and I knew every meal choice on the menu of the Kam Tong Chinese restaurant and the Ruby Curry House on our parade of shops but we'd never been allowed to eat there. We'd never even been able to order from Pete's Pizza takeaway round the corner, although Grace and I had spent ages choosing the perfect combination of toppings from the leaflet that came through the door. The only takeaway food we ever had was fish and chips once a month, and we'd even missed out on that recently because Dad had a bilious attack and blamed it on 'that greasy muck'.

I watched Dad fussing around with the poacher. He held an egg in either hand. 'You'll have one too, Prue?'

'No thanks, Dad.'

He tutted. 'You could do with the protein. You don't eat enough - unlike your tubby little sister.'

'Don't tell Grace she's tubby, Dad, she hates it,' I said.

'Don't *you* tell me how to talk to my own daughter, Miss Saucebox,' said Dad, poking me in the back. Then he patted my shoulder to show he was only joking. He leaned over, peering at my picture. 'That's not bad, girl,' he said.