

Is it stealing?

"Anne, I can't do it. It'd be stealing." Lydia Henson stared at her friend. Then she smiled uncertainly. "You're joking - right?"

Anne narrowed her eyes. "I might have guessed. I said to the others you'd be too much of a coward. You London folk are all the same. All talk and no action."

"That's not fair," Lydia protested.

The two girls watched each other. The silence in the assembly hall was deafening.

"Look, it's not really stealing," Anne said with exasperation. "All you have to do is keep the sports cup in your locker until this time tomorrow. Then just put it back and no-one will ever know you took it in the first place."

Lydia stared at her own reflection in the glass-fronted cup cabinet. Black plaits tied back in a pony-tail and round, worried, dark-brown eyes shone back at her. Just an average face at the best of times, but right now it looked pale and nervous. Lydia looked past her reflection into the cabinet. Small silver-coloured cups for swimming, individual achievement, teamwork and a host of other school activities decorated the wall cabinet's three shelves. And there, holding pride of place in the middle of the cabinet, was the best all-rounder's sports cup.

"If I take it, someone's bound to spot it's missing," Lydia said her voice shaking.

"No, they won't. We've taken it for a day and no-one has ever even noticed," Anne replied. "Besides, no-one's going to bother with a sports cup in the middle of the winter term."

"But it's stealing," Lydia whispered.

"Not if you only take it for one day. Besides, do you want to be in our group or don't you?" Anne frowned, folding her arms across her chest.

And that was the problem, because they both knew that Lydia wanted to belong. She wanted to belong to the Cosmics very much indeed. And Anne was the leader of the Cosmics, so she had the final say as to who could join and who couldn't.

Lydia looked at the sports cup which glinted in the fluorescent lights of the assembly hall.

"So each of you has already done this?" Lydia said, chewing slowly on her bottom lip and shuffling her feet.

"I've already said that haven't I? Frankie has. Maxine has. So has Bharti. I have. *Everyone* has. Now, are you going to do it or not?" Anne flicked her wavy, blond hair out of her eyes with an impatient hand. She began to stroll up and down, casting Lydia with a studied, watchful look as her eyes narrowed.

"Anne, I . . . I'm not sure . . ."

