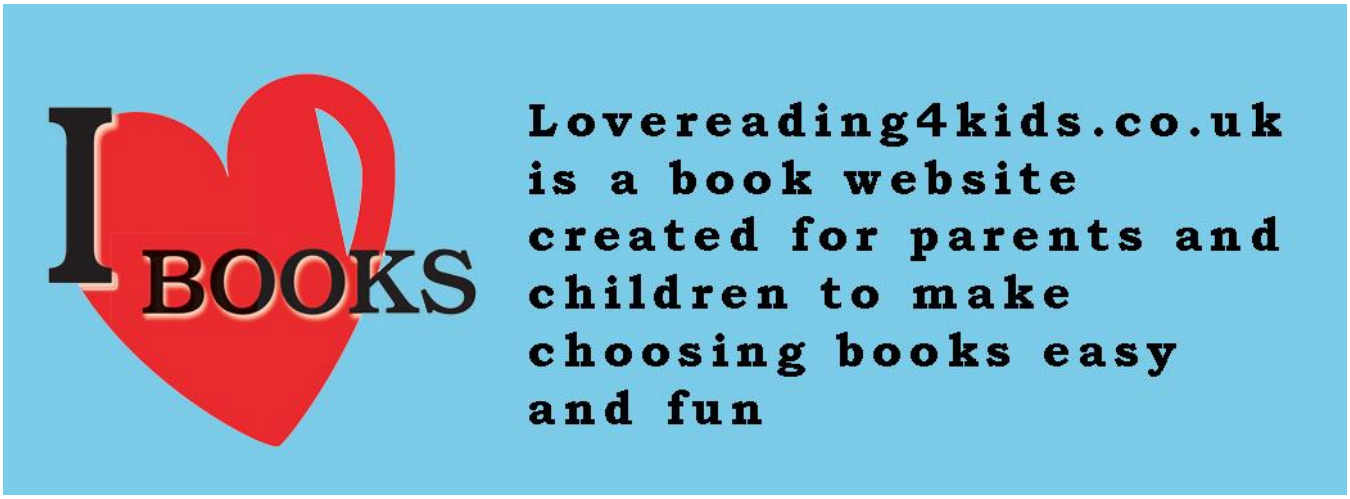


Opening extract from

My Parents are Driving Me Crazy

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FOR ME TO DEAL WITH.

'Dad's done exactly the same in my room,' wailed Elliot, my midget brother. 'So it's like it's not my bedroom any more.'

Now Mum had often dropped into my bedroom to do a spot of cleaning. And I'd never minded. In fact, I was happy to let her tidy up my room whenever she wished.

But then Dad lost his job and Mum was offered a full-time post at the estate agents. So they decided to do a swap.

This is Dad's very first day as a stay-at-home dad. Well, he's got off to a truly terrible start. Can you believe he didn't even bother to carry my dirty mugs downstairs? Talk about lazy. He'd just grumped about, bunging up snotty notes everywhere.

'When I saw my bedroom, I was so mad,' said Elliot, 'I marched downstairs and shouted, "Dad, you're acting like a big poo!"'

'You didn't?'

'Well, I wanted to, but I thought I'd wait for you.'

I nodded and said, 'It can't be healthy for our impressionable young minds to be exposed to all this bossiness. Really, Dad's very lucky I didn't call *Childline*. But he has to be stopped: and he

will be – after I've cleared up my room.'

Elliot looked shocked.

'No, the Post-it Notes must be obeyed.' Then in one mighty movement I picked up the mountains of stuff on the floor and hurled it all under my bed. Elliot giggled. Next I dashed about ripping down every one of Dad's notes and threw them under the bed too.

Elliot was falling about laughing now.

'Right, now for Dad,' I said.

'Yeah, let's sort him out,' said Elliot eagerly.

We marched downstairs together.

Dad was hoovering in a revoltingly, enthusiastic way, really ramming the hoover into every corner. But when he saw us he switched the hoover off and said, 'Hoovering is more tiring than it looks, you know. Good fun, though. So how's everything going?'

'Very badly,' I said. And Elliot and I stood grave-faced either side of him.

'Now, what can be wrong?' said Dad, grinning away. He'd been in a wildly, cheerful mood since first thing this morning when he'd gone on and on about how lucky he was to be escaping the daily grind. I hated to burst his bubble. But things had to be said.

'How would you like it, Dad,' I asked, 'if I stuck up notes all over your bedroom?'

'But I'm not asking you to clean *my* bedroom,' he replied. 'And I only put up a few friendly suggestions …'

'Friendly…?' Elliot and I echoed disbelievingly.

'I just wondered, boys,' said Dad, 'if you'd like to make more of a contribution to cleaning your rooms.'

I considered for a second. 'No, we wouldn't.'

'Ah, but this is where it gets interesting,' he said.

'I doubt that,' I muttered.

'Up to now, you haven't had the right kit.'

'Dad, we're not in the army,' I said.

'But now you have.' That's when he handed us both giant green dusters, the size of pillowcases. 'These are your very own dusters to keep,' he beamed.

'Really,' I muttered.

'Oh yes, I went out and got them for you specially.'

Some dads shower their sons with computer games, comics and tickets for football games – my dad buys us dusters.

'So, nothing to stop you getting stuck in now,' he grinned.

'Mum never asked us to do any dusting,' said Elliot.

'But now your mum has joined the full-time

workforce, so I'm in charge of the house – and I will be doing things a little differently to her. And I've decided that keeping your bedrooms clean and tidy will be your own personal responsibility. However I shall always be available to help and advise you.'

'You're spoiling us,' I muttered.

'I think we're going to make a great team,' he said.

After he charged back to his hoovering Elliot glared down at the unfamiliar object in his hand. 'What are we going to do with this?'

'Lose it as soon as possible. Don't worry, he'll have forgotten all about it in a couple of days,' I said.

7.05 p.m.

Normally Dad would stagger home about six o'clock and then sink down on the sofa, the laptop balanced on his knees, still doing stuff for work. And after he'd eaten, he'd fall asleep in front of the telly, usually with his mouth wide open.

But tonight he was shuffling about in his slippers making Mum a cup of tea. Mum couldn't crash out on the sofa, though, or even talk about her day. She was too busy wandering around admiring all the things Dad had done today.

‘Boys, just look at these clean windows,’ she called.

‘OK, we’re looking at them,’ I said. ‘Now what happens.’

Then Mum sat down in the kitchen saying how lovely it was to have a meal cooked for her for a change!

‘Well, from now on, the kitchen is my domain, my little kingdom,’ announced Dad. ‘You are to leave everything to me, Jessica, all right?’

‘You won’t get any argument from me,’ said Mum.

Then Dad brought in his vegetarian stew and handed round generous portions. ‘Just tuck in,’ he said. ‘I’ve made enough for seconds.’

‘Eeugh,’ shouted Elliot, spraying his first mouthful right across the table.

‘I should have brought an umbrella,’ I quipped.

‘Elliot, that is no way to behave at the table,’ said Mum.

‘But it’s disgu—’ he began.

‘Not another word,’ interrupted Mum fiercely.

‘I don’t think I got the flavour quite right,’ said Dad.

‘What flavour?’ I murmured to Elliot. It didn’t taste of anything except stale socks.

‘Eat up, boys,’ said Mum. ‘It’s wonderfully filling.’

Elliot whispered to me, 'I'd rather eat my own bogies than any more of Dad's stew.'

'You know what,' I whispered back, 'I think I'd rather eat your bogies too.'

7.15 p.m.

'I'd sack Dad,' Elliot has just announced to me.

'After one day?'

'Yeah, he's rubbish. I knew he would be. Dads are just not meant to be mums.'



Chapter Two

Early-Morning Fire

7.35 p.m.
Spent a ton of time – a whole twenty minutes – trying to write my history essay. But now my arm is aching and so is my brain. And I had to stop for the sake of my health.

The trouble is, this essay is already late, you know. Even worse, my history teacher is also the deputy head, Mr Beach, known to all as Beachy Head. And he's scarier than Godzilla. Like today, when I gently explained to him why my history essay might be a tiny bit delayed, he immediately clenched his teeth like a ferocious bulldog and snapped, 'I want your essay in my hand first thing Tuesday morning and I very

much hope, for your sake, that it's a good one.'

I'm not at all hopeful about it being good. Or even average. But it isn't really my fault, as I try my hardest to listen to his lessons. But there's something about Beachy Head's voice which sends my ears instantly to sleep.

On the bright side, I have managed to write twelve whole lines. On the not so bright side, that's actually my entire essay. Still, they always say, leave people wanting more. And maybe it's better than I think.

7.40 p.m.
No, I don't think so either.

7.41 p.m.
There's something you should know about me and school.

We don't get on.

I've never liked it, never fitted in. But I'm stuck there with teachers in my face all day long. And if you asked any of them about me I know exactly what they'd say: 'Louis is ludicrously dim and extremely lazy.'

But I'm not – well, I'm not lazy anyway, because every single night I study for hours. Only it's a subject we never spend a second on at school – comedy.

And I'm as good at telling jokes, as I am rubbish at all my lessons.

So my dream, my one and only ambition, is to be a comedian. But first I have to be discovered. And for that you need an agent.

Well, I've got one.

Maddy goes to a different school to me. We met at a drama club, as she loves acting. But unfortunately she gets such a massive attack of nerves every time she steps onto a stage, she has had to give up on her dream of being a world-famous actress. And she has decided to become an agent instead.

I'm her very first client, and already she's helped me to appear on a television talent show called *Kids with Attitude***.** It's on a satellite channel, so maybe you haven't seen it yet. But trust me, it's awesome.

Each week there are twelve contestants and viewers vote for their winner. They all go on to the Grand Final. The All Winners show. And the winner of that will get their own half-hour Christmas show.

Well, I went on the show – telling jokes. I *so* wanted to win.

I came second. A parrot beat me. The shame of it, I know. I was like totally crushed until they decided one of the runners-up would also

be allowed on the winners' show.

And they chose – me.

Any day now they are going to ring up with the date of the All Winners Show and then – well, Maddy is totally convinced I'll win outright this time. That means I'll also get my own Christmas show, and after that I just won't have time to go to school any more. I'll be far too busy travelling the world making people laugh and generally leading the life of an international jet-setter.

8.10 p.m.

One more thing I should have told you about Maddy and me is that she's not only my agent and friend – she's also just become my girlfriend. We haven't actually been out on any dates yet. Well, you've got to build up to that, haven't you?

But I think it's time I got cracking on that.

8.25 p.m.

Just rang Maddy. Right away she said excitedly, '*Kids with Attitude* haven't …?'

'No, not yet, but I called you, Maddy, to find out when you'd like to meet up for our' – I lowered my voice here without quite knowing why – 'first date?'

Immediately she sounded a bit flustered. 'Well, er, when do you think?'

'I've cleared my diary for you,' I said. (Heard someone say that on a TV show once and thought it had sounded pretty cool.) 'So you just name the time and place and I will be there. In person.' I was sounding dead relaxed, but actually I had this odd sort of beating in my heart.

'What about Friday evening?' she suggested.

'It is in my diary already. Would you like to go to Luigi's?'

'Only if we go halves, as it's very expensive.'

'Money is never a problem, Maddy, when I ask a girl out.' How suave was that? And just to make it really clear, I added, 'So I'm paying for you too.'

After I put the phone down, my heart was still beating weirdly fast. This really is it.

Tuesday November 19th

7.25 a.m.

Woken up by Elliot charging into my room, yelling, 'Fire! Fire! Isn't it brilliant?'

'What are you talking about?' I began. Then I heard the smoke alarms doing their stuff downstairs and sprang out of bed.

A bleary-eyed Mum joined us on the landing. 'What's happening, and where's your dad?'

At that moment Dad dashed out of the kitchen.

‘Hey, everyone,’ he called up to us. ‘Sorry for disturbing your sleep. But there’s absolutely nothing to worry about.’

‘Why have the smoke alarms gone off, then?’ asked Elliot.

‘Just a tiny little accident. I thought I’d surprise you with warm croissants for breakfast, but I put them in the toaster …’

‘Oh, Dad,’ began Elliot.

‘It was a lovely thought,’ trilled Mum as smoke started billowing up the stairs, ‘and no harm done.’

After Dad had sped into the kitchen again, Elliot muttered, ‘I hate croissants and—’

‘Don’t say that,’ interrupted Mum. ‘This can’t be easy for your dad.’

‘Not easy for us either,’ said Elliot, ‘having to eat all his food.’ Elliot stomped downstairs again and then called, ‘Mum, we’ve run out of milk.’

‘Not your mum’s problem!’ shouted Dad. ‘And I’m on to it,’ he added as he tore out of the house.

9.00 a.m.

Beachy Head moves like a panther. I don’t mean he walks around on all fours (I’d love to see him doing that), but you don’t even realize he’s nearby until you feel his hot breath right on

your neck.

I'd only arrived at school for a millionth of a second when I got a full blast of hot air. I whirled round. There was Beachy Head, glaring down at me.

'I hope you have your essay with you,' he growled.

I dug about in my bag and brought out my history exercise book. 'It's all in there,' I said, and to lighten the atmosphere I added, 'Enjoy.'

Not a flicker of a smile back. He just glided soundlessly away with my exercise book tucked under his arm.

9.05 a.m.

Do you know what I wish? That we still did colouring-in, at school. I was incredibly good at that. But I guess I peaked too early, as now I'm solidly rubbish at everything. Still, you never have to worry being bottom of the class when I'm around.

3.20 p.m.

It was the last lesson of the day – double maths – when the school secretary bustled in. She thinks she's so important and struts about with a permanent smell under her nose. Anyway, she whispered something to the teacher. I was

hoping she was saying the drains had packed up and we all had to go home for a month.

But instead the teacher announced that Beachy Head (only he didn't call him that, of course) wanted to see me immediately. I left to whispers of, 'Oooh, who's in big trouble?'

Beachy Head had obviously read my history essay. (Well, it wouldn't take him very long, would it?) But why couldn't he just have written something rude at the bottom of it like a normal teacher? Why did he have to go to all the bother of seeing me?

The secretary escorted me to Beachy Head's lair, and then walked briskly away. I knocked on his door. I didn't hear anything. But he was pretty ancient and probably a bit deaf, so I knocked again, more loudly, and then I gave several raps all together. He must have heard that.

He did. The door burst open so violently it nearly flew off its hinges. And he stood there, breathing fire at me. 'What on earth do you think you are doing?'

Talk about daft questions, but I explained ever so patiently, 'I'm knocking on your door, as you said you wanted to see me – but I can go away again if you've changed your mind,' I added eagerly. 'And I won't be offended at all.'

'I will tell you when I wish to see you,' said Beachy Head. But he just had, hadn't he? 'For now, you will station yourself outside my room and wait there until I decide to send for you.'

So I'm being told off for going to see him – when he'd just told me to go and see him. I tell you, all adults are completely bonkers.

3.35 p.m.
The school bell has rung. It's the end of school, so by rights I could just go home. This is my time now.

3.45 p.m.
Yeah, I'm still hanging about outside Beachy Head's room. I really, really hate waiting around like this. So to cheer us all up, here's a joke. An educational one, as well.

In ancient times, when a knight was killed in battle, what sign did they put on his grave?

Rust in Peace.

I really love that one. Would you like another one? Sorry, no time, as Beachy Head has just shouted through the door, 'You may come in now.'

Got a horrible feeling I'm not going to enjoy what happens next.