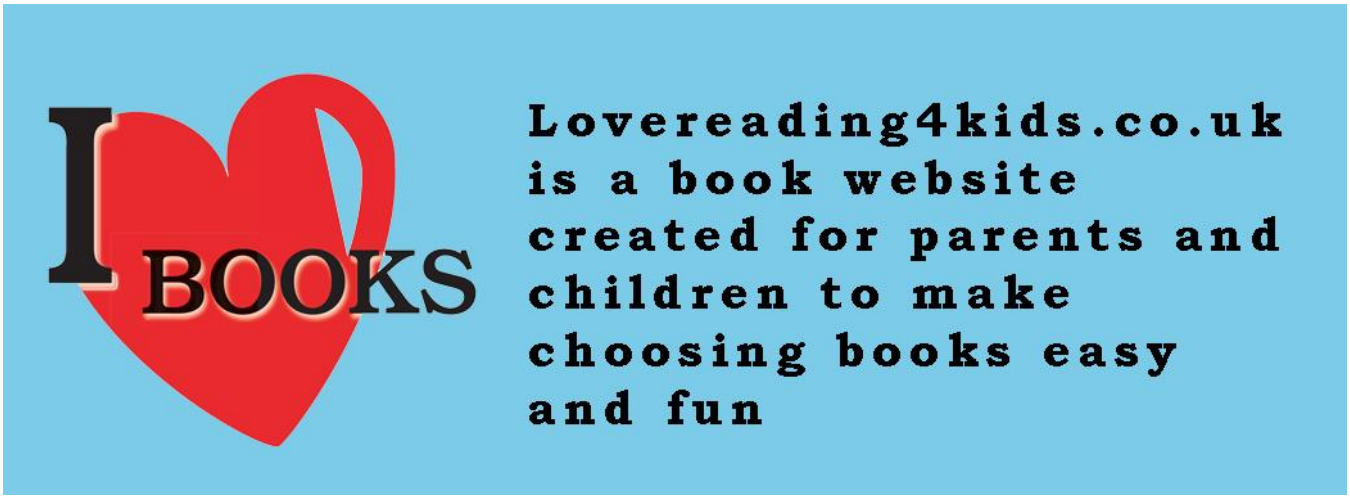


Opening extract from

Spooks and Scooters

Written by

Elen Caldecott

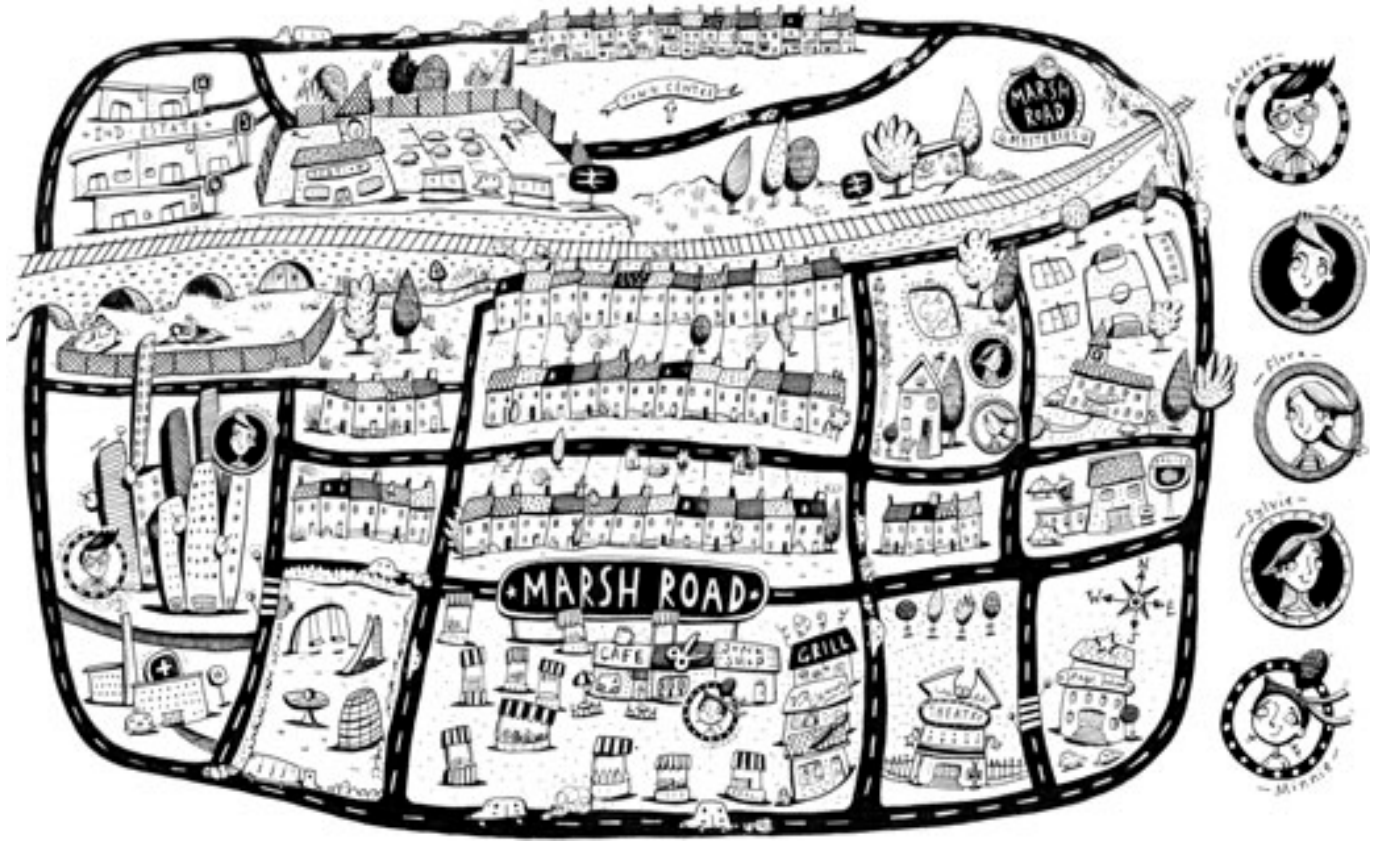
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MARSH ROAD
MARSH ROAD
CAFE
GRILL
Andrew
Pete
Flora
Sylvia
Minnie

Chapter One

'It's a shame we won't be able to solve any mysteries this half-term,' Flora said.

'When will you be back?' Minnie asked.

'The end of the holidays. We're away for five days, until Friday. But we'll have the last weekend. Maybe, if I'm lucky, there will be a quick fix-it-in-a-day mystery for me to solve with you all before we go back to school,' Flora said hopefully.

She, Andrew, Piotr and Minnie were standing on Marsh Road, outside the cafe. Inside, the cafe looked warm, but out on the street the February wind was freezing. Flora stamped her feet and pulled her duffel coat tighter to stay warm. Around them, the market was quiet; the few shoppers who were there had their heads down and their scarves up. Flora could smell the cold, almost a fog of it.

'It's all right for you and Sylvie,' Andrew said, his

spiked hair looking a bit limp in the damp air. 'You're spending the holidays in Tenerife. Where it will be hot. I can't even remember hot.'

Flora smiled. She was looking forward to the holiday, but she would miss her friends. And the chance of solving a mystery.

'Well, if you're lucky,' Minnie said, 'maybe someone will steal the hotel camels, or smuggle rubies across the Sahara, and you and Sylvie can investigate.'

'Have a good time,' Piotr said. 'Send us a postcard.'

'I will.' Flora raised a mittened hand to her friends, then turned and headed home.

It would be nice to spend time with Dad. He was always so busy with work that even when he was around, his mind was often back at Breeze, the company he had founded. His head was so full of bike cogs and scooter wheels and lightweight alloys, and all the bits of people-powered transport they made, it was a wonder his skull didn't rattle. Flora pulled her bobble hat lower, to cover the tips of her ears. In a few hours' time she'd be on a beach with Dad, concentrating on bodyboarding, not board meetings. It seemed impossible!

She turned left into her street. The brickwork of the Georgian terraces was dusty brown in the winter light.

Soon to be swapped for whitewash and blazing sunshine. Flora found herself skipping the last hundred metres to her house. She let herself in.

'Hello!' she yelled. There was no response, though she could hear her mother's voice coming from her study beside the front door. She must be on the phone. Flora pulled off her winter gear – wouldn't be needing that for a while – then ran upstairs to find her twin sister, Sylvie.

She was lounging on her bed. They shared a room and each side of it was as different as was possible. Flora's was neat, Sylvie's looked like an explosion in a charity shop; Flora's bookshelves had books on them; Sylvie's had dance awards and medals. Flora's clothes were tidy – folded neatly on the bed; Sylvie's looked like they had been worn to bed.

Sylvie looked up as Flora came in, but didn't move.

'You should hurry up,' Flora said. 'Dad will be here soon.'

Flora checked her packing one last time. It was done with military precision. Everything was neatly folded and arranged in handy layers – the things she'd need for the first night on top, at the bottom thick jumpers, in case Tenerife in February was not the sun-soaked paradise she was hoping for. A couple of books formed a defensive barrier between clean clothes and germy shoes.

Sylvie's case, on the other hand, was a mess. A swimsuit wrestled with a pair of jeans; a blouse had a dress in some kind of headlock, and a wash bag leaked shampoo over it all. The only thing that was packed neatly was the insulin Sylvie would need, and Mum had been the one to pack that.

'You'll be sorry when you get there and everything you have to wear is crumpled and soap stained,' Flora said to her twin, knowing that there was no point at all in giving Sylvie advice.

'Dad will get the hotel to fix it.' Sylvie shrugged. 'Or Anna will.'

Sylvie said 'Anna' in the same way that a nineteenth-century countess might have said 'the kitchen maid'.

Flora pressed her lips together. Ever since Dad had met Anna at Breeze four months ago and they'd started dating, Sylvie had said Anna's name that way. It wasn't fair; Anna was nice. The annoying thing was that she *would* sort out Sylvie's ruined clothes when they arrived. And the chances of Sylvie saying thank you were somewhere between zero and nothing.

There was no changing Sylvie though, and Anna didn't seem too upset by it – or at least was good at pretending not to be – so hopefully it wouldn't ruin the holiday.

Flora picked an extra book off her shelf and dropped it into her case, just in case she needed to hide.

As she closed the lid, Mum came in.

Flora knew instantly that there was something wrong. Mum cupped her elbows as though she were cold, but her cheeks were flushed an angry red.

'What?' Flora asked.

'Something's happened . . . I'm not sure . . .' Mum's fingers dug into her arms.

'Is it Dad? Is he hurt?'

'No, no. Not that. But he isn't coming,' Mum said, clearly trying to keep her voice under control. 'I just spoke to him.'

Sylvie sprang up like a wounded jack-in-the-box. 'What do you mean, he isn't coming? Why not?'

Mum unfolded her arms and gave a tight shrug. 'He wouldn't say. He wouldn't tell me. He just says he can't.'

'He *wouldn't* say?' Flora could hear her own heartbeat, thumping in her ears. 'Why wouldn't he say?' How could he cancel their holiday and not explain? It didn't make sense.

'I'm not a mind reader. If he won't tell me, how am I supposed to know?'

Flora knew it was disappointment on their behalf that made Mum snap, but knowing that didn't make it hurt any less.

She didn't reply. She sat on her bed and let Sylvie do the ranting.

'Is he going with just Anna instead?' Sylvie demanded. 'Are they going without us?'

Mum shook her head. 'No one's going.'

Some of what Sylvie was saying made it through the confused cloud of Flora's brain – 'he promised', 'planned for ages', 'not fair'. But it was as if Sylvie were talking miles away; mostly all Flora could hear was the blood beating in her ears. A kind of white noise that made her feel dizzy and sick. She felt as if she were crumpling up inside like scrap paper thrown in the bin. She gripped the case full of things she wouldn't need.

'Why?' she whispered.

No one listened. Mum was trying to soothe Sylvie.

'Why?' Flora said louder.

Mum shrugged, her shoulders tight as fists. 'I can't tell you why. He was being evasive. Secretive, even. But . . . well, I do know that he wasn't calling from his mobile. He was calling from his work phone.'

'Work?' Sylvie shrieked. 'Why's he at work when he should be picking us up?'

'Is something wrong at Breeze?' Flora asked before Sylvie could launch herself off again.

'I really don't know, Flora,' Mum said. She paused. 'I'm so sorry, girls. This isn't fair.'

'It must be important,' Flora said. 'He wouldn't cancel for just nothing.'

'Who knows what your father would do for that place,' Mum said sourly.

Mum had never liked the long hours that Dad worked, or the weekends given up to make sure the company he'd set up ran smoothly. They used to row about it a lot.

'Did Dad ask to speak to us?' Flora tried to keep the hope out of her voice, but she couldn't help wondering if Mum had misunderstood. Maybe Dad just meant to postpone the holiday, that they could catch the flight tomorrow instead of today.

'No, he barely had time to speak to me. He said he'd try and see you next weekend.'

Next weekend? At the end of half-term? That was five whole days away! Flora pulled her feet up on to the bed and wrapped her arms around her knees.

'And I don't know what I'm supposed to do now.' Mum checked her watch. 'I took the morning off, but I have to go to work this afternoon. There's a big court case this week; I'm arguing for the defence. I was hoping to get so much done in the peace and quiet.' She sighed. 'I can try and find a temporary childminder, I suppose. I know he's your dad, but Daniel makes me want to scream sometimes, he really does.'

Mum was about to leave when Flora spoke. 'Wait. Can we go and see him, do you think? I mean, at work? He can tell us what's going on. And even if he can't, then we'd be all right waiting there until you've finished. We can read in reception.'

Mum shook her head. 'Dad wouldn't like it.'

'Is that a problem?' Sylvie asked.

For the first time, a flicker of humour flashed across Mum's face. 'It's tempting, but it wouldn't be fair on you. If there's some big crisis at Breeze then no one will look after you properly.'

'Mum,' Flora said firmly, 'Dad should give us a proper explanation. And we'll be safe there. You won't have to worry about getting someone to look after us at the last minute.'

Mum wavered for a minute. She checked her watch

again. 'All right. He said he was rushing to a meeting, but I'll call reception and make sure they get a message to him. I'll drop you there on my way to work. We'll leave in fifteen minutes. I'm so sorry this has happened, girls, I really am.'

Flora stood and gave Mum a hug. She felt Mum's arms wrapped around her, warm muscle and cashmere. She heard Mum swallowing a sob. Mum hated to see them hurt. Flora hated to be hurt.

So whatever secret Dad was keeping, it had better be a matter of life and death.

Chapter Two

They drove in silence. The mood of the day had changed so completely. Sylvie, next to Mum in the front of the car, seemed wound up tight. Flora felt the same way. The excitement of checking and rechecking her passport that morning seemed like forever ago.

The streets outside glided past. In the warmth of the car, Flora was cocooned from the cold. Part of her wished they could just drive around and around, watching the town, without having to get out, ever.

But all too soon, Mum drew up outside Breeze. The company had offices and a big workshop on the industrial estate. The front part of the building was red brick and squat. The back part was a big green steel construction. The two halves were connected by a glass atrium and a long corridor, but she couldn't see that from the front. If

she squinted, Flora thought the building looked a bit like a stranded turtle.

The engine idled.

'Do you want me to come in with you?' Mum asked.

'No,' Flora said, 'we'll find Dad and wait with him until you finish work. It will be OK.' She'd never got used to reassuring Mum, though it happened quite often.

'Fine. I don't think I really want to see him today. I'm not sure my tongue would stay civil. I'll call some child-care agencies for tomorrow. Your dad, he – oh.' Mum made a frustrated noise, as if words were no good for explaining just what Dad was.

'I know,' Flora said. 'We'll see you later.'

'Bye, Mum,' Sylvie said.

The temperature outside the car was enough to make Flora shiver, despite her duffel coat. She tugged her hood up over her bobble hat and pulled on her backpack.

She waved as Mum drove off with a toot of the horn.

Sylvie hadn't waited; she was already pushing open the door to Breeze.

Flora followed her inside. The usually calm reception area now looked like a scene from a shouty daytime talk show with security guards holding back the audience members. It was nothing like a regular Monday. The

reception and the panic-stricken receptionist were surrounded by flapping people in suits – their mouths flapped, their hands flapped, their many manila folders flapped. No one was listening to a word anyone else was saying.

Not a single person looked around at their entrance.

She could feel Sylvie bristling like a grumpy hedgehog beside her. Being a twin, a living game of Snap, she was used to being noticed. Being a young actress, she *demanded* to be noticed.

Being ignored was not, at all, acceptable as far as Sylvie was concerned.

Flora didn't mind, though. It gave her time to try and work out what was going on. If Dad was at Breeze instead of collecting them to take them to the airport, then whatever had happened had to be related to the company. And the chaos of reception only bolstered that impression.

Flora glanced around for clues. Some of the very best Breeze products hung down from the ceiling, lit by spotlights, like exhibits in a museum. The bike that had won the Tour de France; a stunt skateboard that had been in a famous music video; a slimline scooter that had been the most-wanted Christmas present three winters ago – they'd run out of stock at one point and fights had broken

out between desperate parents. The white walls looked as crisp as ever; the supersize sofas in primary colours looked as cheerful as they always did.

So why were the people at the desk yelling?

She and Sylvie moved closer.

The receptionist was trying to answer three phone calls at once – as soon as she said 'Hold, please' into one receiver, another one rang. She scribbled on a Post-it note and stuck it on the countertop with dozens of others.

Flora could make out some of the words being yelled: 'How did it happen?'; 'Drillax are moving fast'; 'Industrial espionage!' Interesting. They needed to speak to Dad.

She wondered how she might get the receptionist's attention. She raised her hand slightly, as though she were in class. Then she lowered it again, feeling stupid. She wasn't sure what to do.

Sylvie, on the other hand, did. She barged through the small crowd, all elbows, until she was at the front. She laid both palms carefully on the counter, avoiding the jigsaw of Post-its. 'I'm Sylvie Hampshire. This is Flora.' She pulled Flora through the scrum to the desk. 'We're here to see Daniel Hampshire. Our dad.'

The receptionist blew her fringe out of her eyes and focused, for a second, on Sylvie. 'Oh, yes, your mum said

something . . .' She picked up Post-its and let them drop like confetti. 'But I haven't . . . well, wanted to disturb them.'

Sylvie raised an eyebrow.

The receptionist sighed. 'I'll try my best,' she said, and reached for a phone.

Flora's gaze dropped towards the scatter of notes while the receptionist made the call. She knew it was wrong to read private messages. But messages stuck to the countertop weren't private, were they? They were out in the open, almost public property. She squished the voice that told her they were only there because there was no room left beside the phone. Squished it flat. And tried to read upside down.

It was tricky. Especially as the receptionist had handwriting worse than an inky spider tap-dancing on paper.

But she could read the odd word: *spy*, *theft*, *5000*, *stolen*.

Spy? The disappointment that had draped the day shifted slightly and a tiny glimmer of light shone through. Could this be a case? What had been stolen? Was this what Dad was so reluctant to reveal? Five thousand of what?

She tried to get closer to the notes.

'Flora!'

The voice calling her name made her jump back, more than a little guiltily.

'Flora! And Sylvie too.'

It wasn't her dad. She turned to see Anna, Dad's girlfriend, standing by the reception desk.

Anna smiled tightly at the receptionist. 'Thank you, Mabel, I'll take it from here.'

Anna looked like someone faced with a surprise test she hadn't revised for. Her dark hair was escaping its ponytail. Her light brown skin had not a single drop of make-up on it. But then, Flora had seen her spend a whole day in a top that was on inside out, so it wasn't that odd.

'This is some kind of a day, isn't it?' Anna asked.

'Where's Dad?' Sylvie said.

'Hello, Sylvie,' Anna said smoothly. When they'd first met her, Anna had said that it would be tricky to tell them apart, but actually, she'd got the hang of it quickly – Sylvie was the one scowling at her.

'Hi, Anna,' Flora replied. For them both.

'It's awful about the holiday, isn't it?' Anna said. She moved away from the clamour of the desk and settled down into a yolk-yellow sofa. She patted the seat beside her and Flora sat down. Sylvie balanced on an apple-red cube.

'Where's Dad?' Sylvie asked again.

Anna's smile faltered. 'He's a bit caught up at the moment. He's in . . . he's with . . .'

'Is he all right?' Flora asked. 'What's happening?' She was certain now that there was a problem at Breeze; she couldn't shake off the worry about Dad.

Anna swivelled to face her and laid her hands gently on Flora's shoulders. 'I can't tell you too much, but I promise he's going to be fine.'

Going to be? That meant he wasn't now.

'I want to see him!' Flora said.

'Me too,' Sylvie added.

Anna dropped her hands into her lap. 'You can't at the moment. But you can stay with me until he's free.'

'When will that be?'

'I'm not entirely sure. Listen, why don't you come through to the offices and let me see if I can find some tea or squash or something.' She stood up and walked back towards reception.

Flora made to follow Anna. Then she realised Sylvie hadn't moved. 'What?' she asked.

'I don't want her, I want Dad,' Sylvie replied.

'Me too. But listen, there's something going on. Everyone's working hard to keep it a secret. But if Dad's

in trouble, I want to find out what it is. The best way to do that is to be nice.'

'Nice?' Sylvie managed a weak smile. 'If I'm nice, will I get my holiday back?'

'Come on, let's find out.'

Anna buzzed them past reception with her badge. Inside, the hectic atmosphere was worse. People flew across their path, ducking into the offices, whispering, holding rafts of paper and phones and tablets in front of them like talismans to ward off evil. It smelled of burnt coffee, deodorant sprayed too heavily, floor cleaner. It was Dad's world. And she and Sylvie weren't part of it.

'This way,' Anna said. She led them into a big office, with five desks spaced around some tall plants. Light was sliced by blinds as it came into the room. 'This is mine,' she said, pointing to a desk in the corner. 'I'll find some chairs.'

No one so much as looked at them; everyone tapped furiously at keyboards and read the scrolling texts on their screens. Anna went to pinch a couple of chairs from an empty desk.

'I don't like her looking after us like this,' Sylvie whispered.

'You don't like anyone. Except for Piotr,' Flora replied. Flora knew that Sylvie was a big fan of Piotr's, though she

would never tell him so to his face. Sylvie was less keen on Andrew, who was more of a drama queen than she was herself. And she couldn't stand Minnie, the last member of the gang, who made it clear that she didn't much like Sylvie either.

Anna wheeled two chairs towards them. 'Sit. Can I get you a drink?'

They shook their heads.

'Anna,' Flora said, taking a seat. 'Please tell us. Why has Dad cancelled the holiday?'

'I can't really . . . it isn't my place . . . Your dad will explain, I'm sure. Probably.'

Sylvie sat reluctantly, as though the chair might be pulled out from under her.

'We'll just have to entertain ourselves while we wait for him to be free. I could set you up on my computer. Or I've got some books in my suitcase. It's just under the desk. I was on my way to the airport when your dad called. So . . .' She tried to force a smile. 'I remembered to pack *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Any takers?'

It was the book they'd been reading at Dad's house. Anna's favourite. She even had a cat called Mr Tumnus. Flora thought it was nice that she'd thought to bring it on holiday. Not that they were going on holiday.

'That's boring,' Sylvie said. She crossed her arms. 'I'm not staying here all day. I want to see Dad and I want to see him *now*.'

'I'm afraid you can't,' Anna said softly.

'How exactly will you stop me? Pile paperbacks on top of me so I can't move? Come on, Flora.' Sylvie stood and walked out of the door without a backward glance.