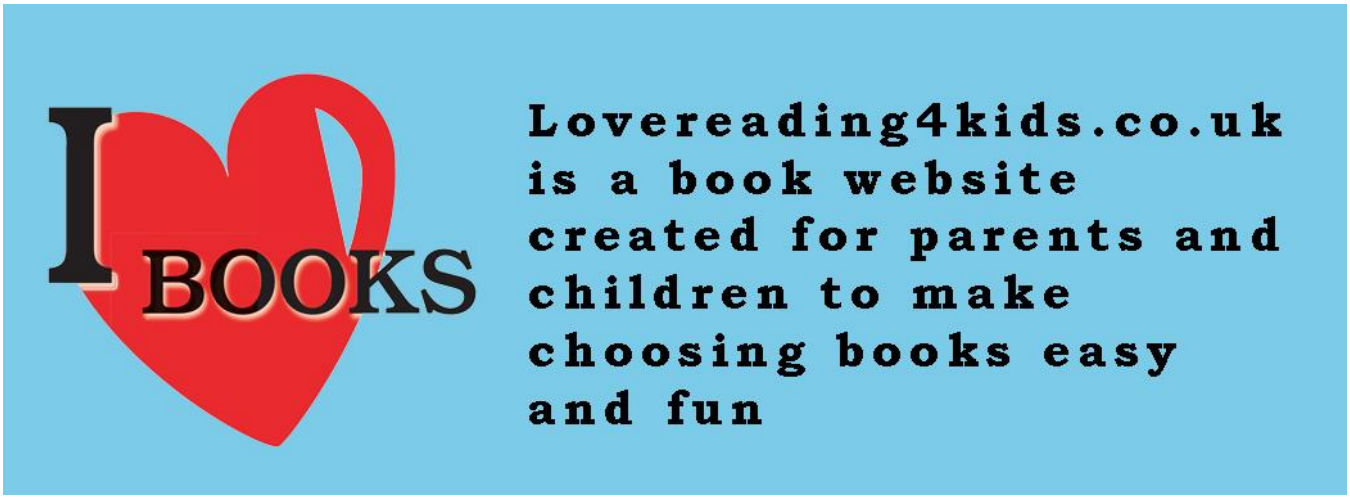


Opening extract from

Head Over Heels

Written by

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1

My name is Harriet Manners, and I have friends.

I know I have friends because this is by far the busiest I've ever been.

Honestly, my calendar is *manic.*

Between group study sessions and movie nights, pizza-eating competitions and crossword round robins, it's all I can do to keep my epic new social life in some kind of order.

So now I've got two diaries: one to make sure I'm in the right place at the right time, the other for making sure everyone else is.

What can I say?

Winnie-the-Pooh was Friendship Ambassador in 1997: I have an awful lot to live up to.

The other reason I know I have friends is that I have a badge that says this in bright blue ink:

Team JINTH!



"Harriet," Nat said when I presented her with one. "Is this *totally* necessary?"

"Yes," I confirmed, pinning it to my Best Friend's coat. "We don't want our brand-new additions to feel left out, do we?"

Then I gave badges to Jasper, India and Toby.

Along with the key-rings and magnets I made on my laminating machine.

That's right: I am now in an official *gang.*

A clique, a posse, a fellowship.

A group of five happy kindred spirits, never to be parted. Just like the Famous Five or Scooby Doo, except one of us isn't a big brown dog.

And it's literally changed my life.

Studies have shown that people with a large network of friends tend to outlive their peers by up to twenty-two per cent, but I'm having so much fun I expect I'll last even longer.

It took sixteen years, but I finally found them.

People who genuinely want to know that the average London pigeon has 1.6 feet and the soil in your back garden is two million years old.

People who love discovering that a single sloth can be home to 980 beetles and that Martian sunsets are blue and then maybe trying to Google a picture.

I finally found *my* people.

Etymologically, the word *happy* comes from the Old Norse noun *happ,* which means *good luck or fortune,* and that's how I feel: as if everything is finally happening exactly as I've always wanted it to.

Because for the first time ever, I'm not on the outside looking in any more: I'm smack bang in the middle.

Part of a team and fitting in perfectly.

And I'm having the time of my life.

2

So where am I right now, you ask?

That's what you really want to know, isn't it: where a gang of this epic coolness – of this rare *synergy* – could possibly be spending most of their free time together.

Well, it's not the local launderette.

Those innocent days are behind me, I'm afraid.

I tried to keep them going, obviously.

In fact, for the first few weeks I even set up a circle of chairs next to my favourite drying machine and a tray of snacks on top of the coin dispenser, but India wasn't having any of it.

"Harriet," she said after our seventh game of 'Which Washing Machine Finishes First'. "We're sixth formers. Don't you think we should maybe hang out somewhere with… I don't know, less dirty underwear lying about?"

Honestly, I think she was just upset because her machine always finished last.

Some people are *super* competitive.



Anyway, after a lot of careful research and analysis I finally picked somewhere new: a cosy little cafe, less than fifteen minutes from my house.

And it's actually kind of perfect.

There are lanterns everywhere and bright velvet cushions and shelves with interesting books piled high. Little coloured fairy-lights are strung from the ceiling all year round, and newspapers featuring multiple crosswords are strewn across the tables: just begging to be filled *en masse*.

There's chocolate cake and ginger biscuits and every kind of coffee you could imagine: *espresso* and *macchiato, cappuccino* and *mochaccino*.

Basically, a lot of drinks with *o* on the end.

Team JINTH even has its very own special spot: a large blue sofa tucked in the corner with two red leather armchairs and a series of green vintage suitcases turned into a table, where we sit *all* of the time.

Unless other people are sitting there first, and then we have to sit somewhere else.

In short, the cafe is a strategic success.

Close enough for easy access, far enough to feel like a real escape. Glamorous, intimate, mature: the absolute height of sociable sophistication.

It's my new happiest place to be.

*

"The usual?" the barista says as I reach the counter, phone clutched tightly in my hand. "Or are we going to branch out and try something new and dangerous today?"

Without looking up, I type:

I'm here! :) What is your approximate ETA? Hxx

Then I shake my head and press SEND. "Just the same as normal, please."

There's a loud buzz.

"So an extra-large and chocolatey hot chocolate with too much foam it is, then."

"Yes, please. With extra powdered chocolate, in a round cup." I quickly type out another message. "So it looks like a real cappuccino and nobody can tell it hasn't got any coffee in it."

"A *Harriet-uccino.* Got it."

I know, I know.

Coffee may statistically be the most popular drink in the world, and in the UK we consume 70 million cups of it every day, but I tried it once and spent four hours talking to a pigeon.

Remember to wear your JINTH T-shirts for photo

opportunities! Hxx

There's another buzz.

Also don't forget the itineraries for tonight! Hxx

Apparently one in three teenagers send over three thousand text messages a month, and according to my last phone bill I am definitely heading towards that minority. (Although judging by my parents' reaction, you'd think I was already there.)

Being in a happily organised gang is a surprising amount of work.

There's another buzz, and the barista pauses from frothing up my milk to grab his phone out of his apron pocket and stare at it with one bright blue eye and one brown.

"You know, Harriet," Jasper says, "you're standing right in front of me. You could just *say* it."

I glance up in surprise.

His lightly tanned face is flushed by the steam, his dark blond hair has grown into a kind of scruffy mohican and his dark eyebrows are knitted together in their standard frown.

"But what if you forget? You might need it written down for later."

OK, there might be *another,* slightly less poetic, reason why we hang out here. Jasper's family owns this cafe, so he works here most evenings and every weekend and we usually get a discount or an extra sprinkle of chocolate.

If Jasper's in a good mood, that is. If he's in a grump, he gives us cinnamon.

"Take your *fake-uccino*," he sighs, shaking his head and passing it over the counter. "Burnt biscuit? I've screwed up another batch and need to get rid of them before Mum notices."

I beam at him: I *love* the burnt ones. "Yes, please."

"Such a little weirdo," he says, grabbing two from under the counter. "And what other documentation do I need to bring this evening? A passport? Some kind of visa? Do you have a fingerprinting machine for security purposes?"

Oh my goodness, that would be awesome.

Then I spot his smirk.

"Jasper King," I tell him airily, "I am very busy so if you're just going to be sarcastic, I have more important things to do."

He thinks about that for a few seconds. "I am literally always going to be sarcastic."

"In that case, I shall be over there, eating my biscuits." I stick my nose in the air. "Which I appreciate very much,

by the way. Please send more over in due course."

Then, humming to myself, I take my hot chocolate contentedly over to my special section of the corner sofa.

I put little bits of typed-out, laminated paper on the rest of the seats to make sure they're officially reserved.

I take a huge gulp of my delicious *Harriet-uccino.*

And I sit down patiently to wait.