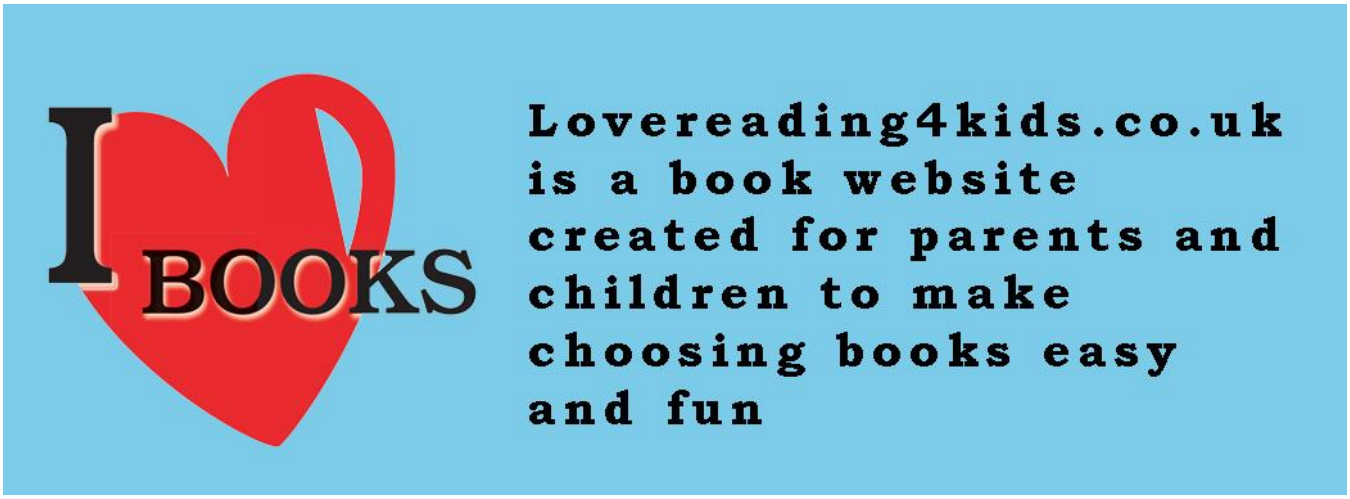


Opening extract from

The Best Birthday Bike

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The Sullivan Swift

Fergus Hamilton was an ordinary eight-year-old boy. He liked football (when his team won), fish fingers and chocolate cake (only not on the same plate), and his dog Chimp (when he wasn't eating socks or chewing the stairs). He didn't like broccoli (but he ate it), or homework (but he did it), or the way his mum left lipstick on his cheek when she kissed him goodnight (but he didn't complain).



Yes, he was ordinary in almost every way, except one. Because, for a small boy, Fergus Hamilton had an extraordinarily big imagination.

Some days he imagined he lived in an enormous underground lair, with fifty-seven bedrooms and a hover car and a butler to serve him lemonade whenever he wanted it, instead of in the flat above his grandpa's junk shop on Napier Street.

Some days he imagined he could build a time machine out of a vacuum cleaner, like Captain Gadget, his favourite comic book superhero. Then he could defeat his own arch-nemesis Wesley Wallace, who didn't have a hover car but his house was massive and he was definitely

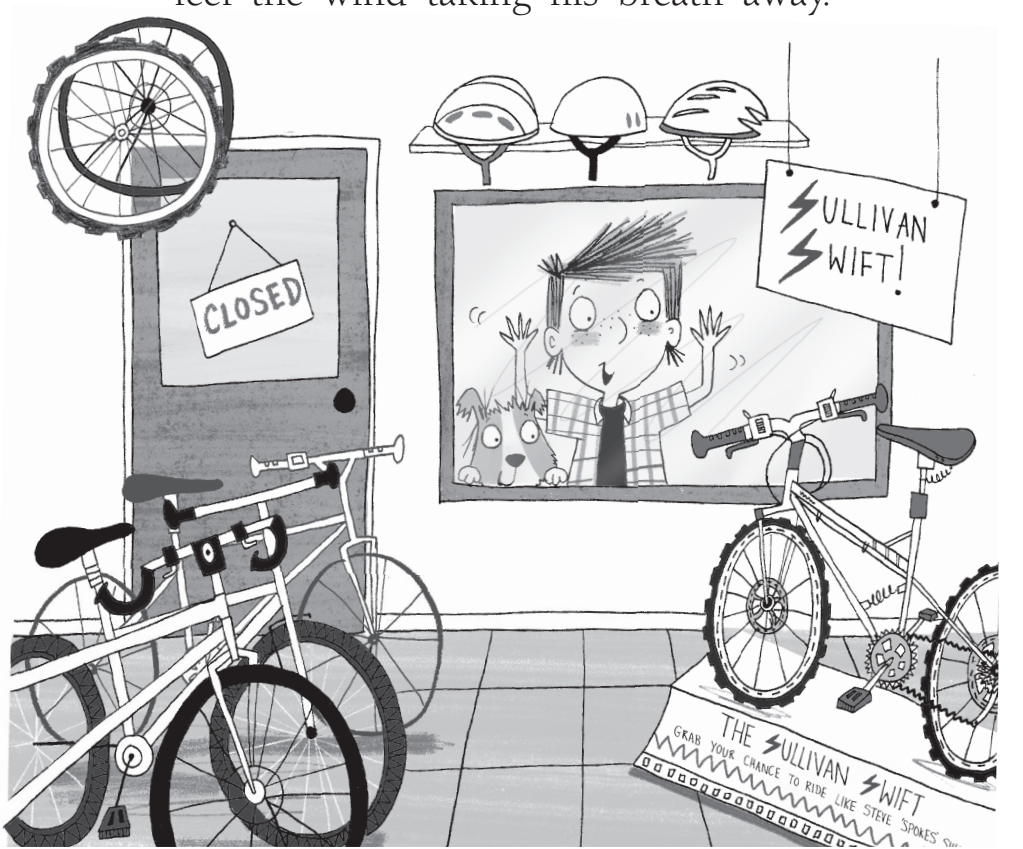
allowed lemonade whenever he wanted.



Some days he imagined Chimp was a sleek and well-mannered pedigree hound who could sniff out buried treasure and catch criminals, instead of being a mongrel with matted fur and a tendency to dig for bones in the carpet.

But mostly he imagined he was the most brilliant boy cyclist in the whole wide world, because if there was one thing he liked more than football, or chocolate cake, or even Chimp (especially when he was chewing Fergus's socks), it was cycling. And on this particular wet Friday afternoon, his nose pressed against the glass of Wallace's Wheels, Fergus was imagining

he was Steve "Spokes" Sullivan, champion cyclist, world record holder and the brains behind the Sullivan Swift. The Swift had twenty-four gears, hydraulic brakes and state-of-the-art suspension and was, without doubt, the most beautiful bike Fergus had ever seen. He imagined shooting down Craigmount Hill on it, so fast he would feel the wind taking his breath away.



He imagined careering up a ramp then taking to the air for a few short seconds of flight that would feel like minutes. Most of all he imagined hopping out of bed tomorrow morning on his birthday, seeing an enormous parcel in the front room and unwrapping it to find a Swift inside, along with a new helmet, gloves and a special racing jersey. Then he might, just might, be able to join Wallace's Winners, the best cycling team in the city, who had come first in the Great Cycle Challenge five years running. Fergus wasn't keen on the fact they were coached by Choppy Wallace, former district champion, owner of Wallace's Wheels – and father of Wesley. And he was especially not keen on the fact that Wesley was their number one racer. But if it meant getting a step closer to being like Spokes



then Fergus knew he just had to get on the team.



"In your dreams, loser," said a voice behind him.

Fergus jumped and turned to see Wesley Wallace whizz past on the latest and most expensive edition of the bike, the Swift Superior. Wesley used to have a Swift Elite, but it got scratched from being dumped on the pavement all the time, so his dad had given him a new, even better one.

Fergus's dad wasn't a cycling champion, or any kind of champion. Fergus didn't actually know what his dad was because he'd disappeared before Fergus was born. Sometimes Fergus liked to imagine his dad had been kidnapped by aliens. Sometimes he thought he might be working

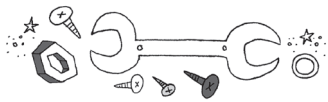
undercover as a secret agent. And sometimes his grandpa said his dad had got trapped in a parallel universe called Nevermore, fighting a duel with the dreaded King Woebegot. But Mum said he'd probably just moved to Kilmarnock, and to stop filling Fergus's head with far-fetched stories because there were enough in there already.

Fergus sighed as he sat back down in the saddle of his rusty but trusty bike Old Faithful, and began pedalling back down Napier Street towards home. Wesley may be annoying, he thought, but he was right, it was never going to happen. He was never going to make Wallace's Winners, and he was never, never, NEVER going to be like Spokes Sullivan. Not on this old thing, anyway. Old Faithful may be trusty, but she was way too old and way too small.



He'd had her since he was just a wee boy, so now every time he turned the pedals his knees knocked his elbows and his elbows stuck out like chicken wings. And there was no way he could do a wheelie or a bunny hop without getting tossed over the handlebars or tangled in the spokes. It was no good, Fergus decided, he needed a Swift, and he needed it now.





"Och, love," said Fergus's mum at tea. "I wish I could afford it, but I'm already doing all the shifts the hospital can give me, and I've bought your presents. Anyway, you've got a bike."

"But, Mum," protested Fergus. "I look like a loser on it. Everyone says so."

"Daisy doesn't say so," said Grandpa.

"That's only because she hasn't got a bike at all," said Fergus. "Because she's not allowed to cycle any more because her mum says it's too dangerous."

"Her mammy thinks breathing's dangerous," laughed Grandpa.

"Exactly," said Mum. "So think yourself lucky." And she popped the last fish finger on his plate with a smile.

