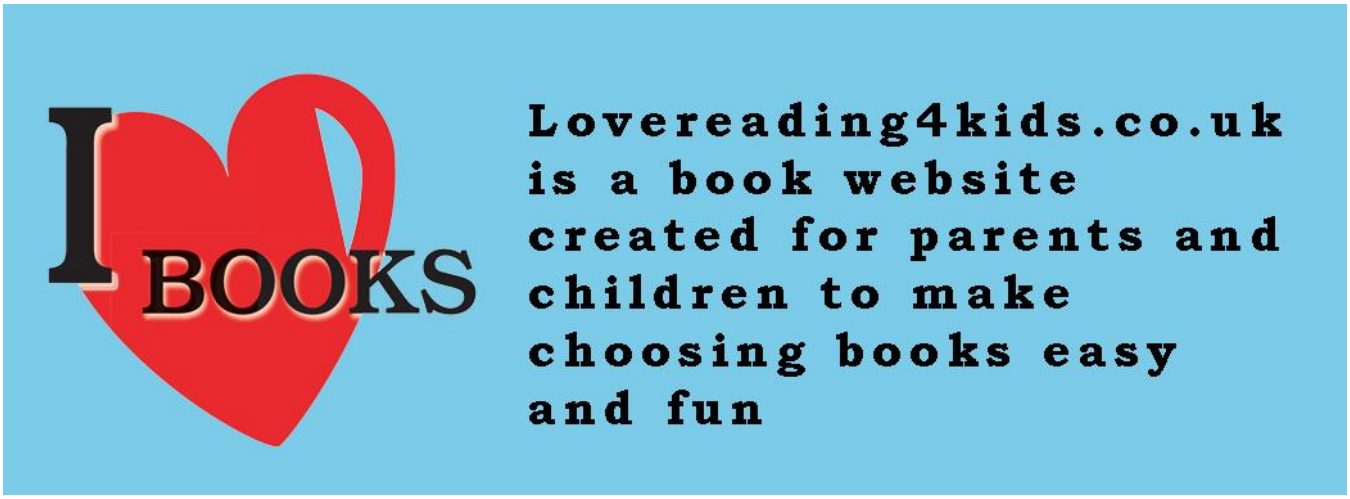


Opening extract from

The Loose Ends List

Written by

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ONE

WHEN GRAM CALLS, I ignore it. Lizzie and I are at Starbucks waiting for Kyle and Ethan to get out of lacrosse practice. We're working on our Loose Ends lists, and they're just getting good. I scroll through mine while Lizzie sticks her straw into another iced tea lemonade. It's uncomfortably hot for May.

One. *Save enough lifeguarding money to pay for a road trip*. Last year I blew all my money on a stupid designer bag that now has ink all over the inside.

Two. *Have an alone day with each of the Es*. I love my three closest friends deeply, but those girls

glom onto one another like puke under a toilet seat. The noise, the drama, and the differing opinions can be maddening.

Three. *Learn how to cook an entire meal to perfection so I can survive on my own.*

Mom bakes constantly, but she doesn't cook. And Dad's Thanksgivings are amazing, but most nights we get hummus and lentil chips. I want my uncle Wes to design a menu and teach me to cook from scratch.

Four. *Discover a new constellation.*

Dad and Jeb and I have been studying the sky since we were curled-up marsupials wrapped in Dad's sweatshirt. Jeb enjoys stargazing because he's a stoner. I like it because I appreciate vastness, and it's the only thing I have in common with Dad.

As much as my friends make fun of it, my astronomy hobby helped me get Ethan last winter during a sledding party. I have a well-known weakness for team captains, and I had been eyeing Ethan since he landed that esteemed lacrosse title, beating out Lizzie's precious Kyle. I jumped on the sled behind Ethan, and we flew into a snowdrift. I wrapped my legs around his, and broke the silence with, "Look, it's the Big Dipper. Isn't it cool?"

He looked up, and I kissed his cheek.

I pointed out four constellations that night before he kissed me back on the lips. It tasted like beer and watermelon gum, but I had snagged Ethan, the hottest captain of them all.

Five. *Rewatch all the Eighties movies during a weekend marathon*, preferably with Abby, since she's the only other one willing to eat massive amounts of junk food without complaining about fatness.

Gram calls again.

"It's just my grandmother," I say. "She's probably at Saks. She hates my graduation dress and won't give up on trying to find me a better one." I take a swig of iced chai. "Okay, I have a few more loose ends and then we can finish with something big."

"Isn't road trip big enough?" Lizzie also missed out on the doomed road trip last summer, after her dad found out about a certain topless selfie. Gram says Lizzie leaves nothing to the imagination, which is pretty ironic coming from an elderly woman with a library full of VHS porn.

Six. *Find a drive-in movie theater somewhere in Connecticut and watch from the car in my pajamas*.

I plan to do this with my friends because Ethan will just try to bone me again.

Seven. *Let Ethan try to bone me again.*

The first time was a disaster. Ethan had an "accident" the second we got into his twin bed. I try not to dwell on the details, but it was gross, and his apologizing no fewer than five thousand times annoyed me so much I had to leave. Now he's insecure and telling me it happened because I'm so pretty.

As irritating as he is sometimes, I'm staying with Ethan for now because he's firmly in my social circle and it would take way too much energy to avoid him all summer.

Eight. *Prepare for City Living.*

My phone vibrates. Gram.

"God, my grandmother gets obsessive when she's shopping." I ignore again.

"She is so funny," Lizzie says. "My grandma watches *Wheel of Fortune* and goes to Target when she needs an adventure."

"Yeah. My grandmother gets mud wraps in remote jungles when she needs an adventure," I say. "You should see her boyfriend, Denny. He's my mom's age and wears diamond rings on both pinkies."

"I can't stand jewelry on men," Lizzie says.

"This guy is drippy diamond rich. Actually, Drippy is a

good name for him." I grab Lizzie's phone. Her list is pretty conventional. *Learn how to do a proper shot. Lose ten pounds*.

"Lizzie, this is more like a to-do list. You're so boring."

"Maddie, I've been trying to do a shot for months, and it always comes out my nose. Perfecting my shot technique is definitely a loose end."

"Okay, but please get rid of *lose ten pounds*. You're already skinny, and that's a waste of a good one."

"Hey, you wrote *change hair color*. That's equally lame."

"I crossed it out. I do need an edgier look for New York, though. I was thinking of going strawberry blond." I wrap my unruly Medusa curls into a bun.

"No way. That would totally wash you out. My stylist says blue eyes, light skin, dark hair. Keep it brown."

"Your stylist lives in Connecticut," I say as my phone vibrates. It's a text from Gram. I need to talk to you right away. It's urgent. My stomach sinks. Gram has never texted me before. I run outside to call her.

"Gram, what's wrong?"

"You don't return my calls now? Are you too popular for your grandmother?"

"You just freaked me out. You never text me."

"You wouldn't answer your phone. I happen to know that thing is glued to you at all times."

My heart is still racing. "Can you not do that again, please?"

"So what are you doing that's so important?" Gram says.

"I was making my Loose Ends list."

"What's a Loose Ends list? Sounds fascinating."

"It's a list of the things I never got to in high school that I want to do before college."

"Like blow jobs?"

"Oh my God, Gram. You're disgusting."

"So, I need you all to come to my place tonight at seven sharp."

"But it's Friday. I have to drive everyone to a big party." Gram knows I'm the permanently designated driver of a powder-blue minivan.

"Hon, I have something important to share, and I need the family here. Somebody else will have to drive your bimbo cheerleader friends." There's a strange urgency in her voice.

"You're making me nervous." Gram always has surprises up her sleeve, but she usually blurts them out before she can build any anticipation. "Did you call Mom?"

"I got your father. He said they would be here. I had to bribe him with Indian food and theater tickets, mooch that he is." Gram thinks Dad is a weird, socially awkward freeloader and that Mom ended up with him because she has the emotional fortitude of a newborn panda.

She's kind of right.

It's a good thing I haven't had to rely on my parents for much more than stargazing and shoe shopping. Gram takes care of

everything. We shop, eat out, visit museums, take amazing trips, and meet famous people. Once, just to piss off Dad, Gram got her board member friend from the planetarium to give Jeb and me a private show.

Gram always delivers. So I will play her little game and go to her mystery meeting.

"Fine, Gram. I'll be there. Can you give me a clue?"

"No." She hangs up.

"I have to go into the city." I grab my stuff and hug Lizzie good-bye.

"Wait, what are you talking about?" Lizzie yanks my T-shirt.

"My grandmother needs us for some surprise announcement. I have a feeling she's engaged to Drippy."

"Why do you have to go into the city for that? Even the college people are coming to this party." Lizzie's whining. "Can you at least come later?"

"I have no idea when I'll be back. This is bizarre, even for her."



I find Rachel, my neighbor and former best friend, watching TV in our living room. Our mothers have been friends since we were in utero. Mom spends her afternoons at Rachel's house drinking while Bev eats. They accept each other unconditionally and dwell in the underworld of the American housewife, sipping cocktails, eating cupcakes, and watching prerecorded episodes

of Kathie Lee and Hoda.

My friendship with Rachel became a struggle in fourth grade. My Barbies were not compatible with Rachel's LEGOs. We tried. We even built a LEGO yacht for the Barbies, but they just couldn't get comfortable.

By seventh grade, I had found Lizzie, Remy, and Abby. We dressed one another up like Barbies, and called ourselves the Es because our names ended with the *E* sound. We group texted and had sleepovers, studied together, and made appearances at all the parties.

There was no place for a Rachel among Es.

Of course, our mothers were devastated. They labeled me a snot and Rachel a victim of exclusion and bitchiness. So we sat them down one afternoon, when they were all tanked up on gin and banana bread, and explained the situation.

"Mom," Rachel started, "I am not a victim. I have friends. Most of them are boys, but that's because boys are the only ones who get my computer games. Maddie and I need to go our separate ways right now. We will always be friends, but our interests are diverging."

"Good word, Rach," I said. "I promise we'll reverge—"

"Converge," Rachel interrupted.

"Converge, when we're adults and have children and our interests don't matter anymore." And that ended that. We still hang out, just not in public. Rachel is a stargazer, too, because

she's obsessed with *Star Trek* and always on the lookout for alien life-forms.

"Rach, Gram's up to her old cryptic tricks." She looks up from her box of donut holes. "She wants us all to go to her apartment tonight for an announcement."

"Maybe she's getting another tattoo." Rachel knows Gram.

"I hope not. I saw her ass a couple weeks ago, and the seahorse is sagging like someone whacked it with a flyswatter."

Dad comes up from the basement. "Astrid wants us at her place in two hours. I'm guessing she's going to announce her engagement to that Denny."

"The one with the pinkie rings?" Rachel wiggles her pinkies.

"I was thinking engagement, too," I say. "I'm calling him Drippy from now on. Can you imagine the wedding? Who gets the bigger diamond?"

Mom comes downstairs in a perfectly pressed dress, with her full makeup face on.

"Here, Rachel, take these to Bev." Mom takes a picture of cinnamon scones on a tray for her Pinterest page and wraps the tray in plastic.

I text the Es: Family emergency. Can't drive. Will try to meet you later. I ignore the flurry of responses. My friends aren't used to me bailing before a party. Ignore. Ignore. Ignore. The Es are panicked chickens with no head.