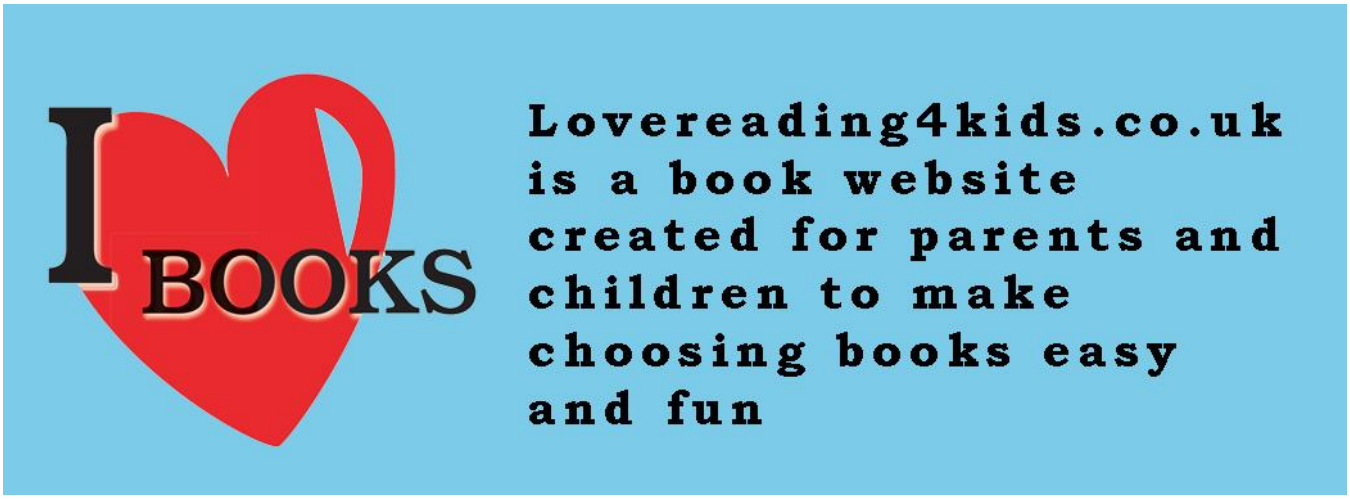


Opening extract from

Baby Zebra Rescue

Written by

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I didn't understand what was happening at first. It was Sunday morning, three weeks before Christmas, and Nan and I were walking up to the shops, our arms linked together against the cold. We were going to make a crumble for pudding and we had all the ingredients we needed except for flour. Nan's crumble was the best, especially her apple and blueberry; it was all soft and sweet and gooey.

I was just telling her about my purple ribbon, how I was going to stop sleeping with it under my pillow – how babyish it was to have a comforter now I was in Year Eight

– how Mum kept nagging me to get rid of it. I was talking away non-stop, listing all the reasons I didn't need it any more, but I had a funny feeling Nan wasn't listening properly.

"Did you hear me, Nan?" I shook her arm to get her attention. "I've set myself a target. I'm *definitely* going to stop sleeping with my ribbon by the end of Year Eight. I could probably give it up right now if I really wanted to, it's just…"

I stopped for a second and glanced up at her. Something was wrong. She was breathing funny, leaning against me, but not in a cosy, cuddly way, more like she needed me to hold her up.

"Nan?" I tried to keep her steady, to stop her slipping, but she was too heavy. "Nan, what's the matter?"

She shuddered slightly and then let out a long, strangled groan, a horrible sound that I'd never heard before, slumping down onto the pavement.

"Nan! Nan! What's wrong?" I dropped to my knees next to her. "What's wrong? Get up, Nan! Please, get up, you're scaring me! I don't know what to do!"

She was gasping for breath, trying to say something, but her words were thick and slurred, impossible to understand.

I looked around, my heart thumping wildly. I needed

an ambulance. I had to call for an ambulance. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, but I couldn't make my fingers work properly, they wouldn't press the right numbers, they were too big and clumsy and the screen was blurred.

"Help!" I cried, but it came out as a whisper. "Please. My nan's ill! Please, someone, help me."

A man ran across from the other side of the road. "Something's wrong with my nan," I tried to say, but nothing came out. "We were going to the shops. We were going to make a crumble. I was just telling her…I was just…" My mouth was moving but I couldn't hear anything, it was like someone had switched the sound off.

The man seemed to know what to do. He put his coat over Nan to keep her warm and called for an ambulance. He held her hand and talked to her, telling her over and over that everything was going to be okay. He asked me my name and if I knew my mum's phone number. I think I told him, or tried to at least, but I can't remember. I can't remember anything very clearly after that, except for Nan's twisted-up face, and the horrible choking noises she was making, and how desperately I needed my purple ribbon.



1 Missing Nan

Nan had been dead for exactly six months on the day Sharon called. I had no idea there was any connection at the time, between Nan and Sharon – I only found that out much later.

It was a Monday afternoon in June, the first day back after half-term, and I was home alone, sitting at the kitchen table doing my homework. I didn't bother answering the phone at first – I was in the middle of a tricky comprehension and I knew it wouldn't be for me – but a moment later it rang again, and then again.

My heart began to beat a bit too fast. Why would someone call so many times? Why didn't they just leave a

message on the machine? I started to imagine the worst: the police calling to say Mum or Dad had been in an accident, or after-school club calling to say Charlie was hurt. I told myself not to be stupid, but when it rang again I snatched it up, my hand damp with sweat.

"Hello?"

"Can I speak to Oliver Wilkins, please?"

It was a woman asking for Dad, but I didn't recognize her voice.

"He's not in at the moment," I said, wishing I'd left it to ring. "Can I take a message?"

There was a long silence.

"Hello? Can I take a message?"

"Sorry, yes, I'm still here," said the woman. "Could you write down this number and ask him to call me as soon as he gets in?"

I reached for the notepad where we write phone messages and she read out a mobile number, and then repeated it really slowly.

"Who shall I say it is?" I asked when she'd finished.

I could hear her breathing but she didn't say anything.

"Hello? Who is it?"

"Sorry," she said, her voice catching slightly. "It's Sharon. Just tell him it's Sharon."

There were a few more ragged breaths then a click and then nothing.

She'd rung off without saying goodbye.

I couldn't concentrate on my comprehension after that. I spent ages doodling my name across the top of the page in bubble writing and then shaded in the letters using different colours. I've been finding it harder and harder to concentrate lately. I have these stupid thoughts that go round and round my head like a toy car on a track.

Sometimes I can make them go away – if I'm watching something good on telly or sketching in my art book – but it doesn't take long for them to creep back in, especially when I'm at school. It usually starts with a question, like, *why did my nan have to die?* And then that leads to another question, and then another, until whole chunks of the lesson have disappeared while I try to work out the answers.

I glanced up at the kitchen clock, willing the hands to move faster, wishing Mum and Charlie would hurry up. Nan used to pick Charlie up from school when Mum was working. She'd bring him back here and make our tea while I sat at the table, doing my homework, nattering on about my day.

The house was too quiet now. It felt too empty. Charlie

goes to the after-school care club and I have a key to let myself in. I'm usually only home alone for an hour, max, but it seems to stretch on and on. The first thing I do is turn on the radio, and sometimes the TV as well, to help drown out the silence.

I'd just about finished shading the last letter of my name using my favourite colour, dark purple, when I heard Charlie bursting through the front door like a mini-torpedo.

"We're home, Maddie!" he yelled from the hall. "And you'll never believe what's happened!"

He came crashing into the kitchen, knees bent in one way, feet sticking out the other, fists clenched by his sides. "I *still* didn't get picked for the football team. It's so unfair. Mr Maddox handed out the letters at the end of the day and Rory and Leo got picked but I'm not even a sub!"

Charlie was born nearly three months early – imagine a bag of sugar and that's how tiny he was. The doctors didn't even think he'd survive the first night. He's nine now, and more or less fine, except he's still pretty small for his age and his legs are sort of twisted in the middle and very skinny.

"Hey, what does Mr Maddox know?" I started to say – I hated seeing him upset – but he was already off, racing

into the garden to kick a ball against the wall. Mum staggered in behind him carrying a load of shopping bags.

"Turn the radio down, Mads, for goodness' sake, we could hear it halfway down the road. I honestly don't know why you have to have it on so loud."

A few minutes later every surface in the kitchen was covered in packets and boxes and bags. I got up to help, pleased for an excuse to stop doing my homework – or *pretending* to do it anyway.

"Listen to this," said Mum, waving a bag of pears at me. "According to a report I was reading at lunchtime, pears are the new superfood. They've actually got more fibre in them than a whole box of bran flakes."

She tipped the pears into a bowl, grabbing one and holding it up to the light as if she might actually *see* the fibre. She comes up with a different "superfood" every few weeks. It was blueberries last time and fresh ginger the time before that. It's all part of her mission to Help Charlie Grow. He's got his annual check-up in a few weeks and she'll be gutted if he hasn't shot up at least a few centimetres – not that she'd ever let on to Charlie.

When we'd finished unpacking and everything was in its proper place, she made herself a cup of tea and sat down at the table.

"I do feel sorry for Charlie," she said, glancing out of the window. "I wish they'd give him a go in the football team, even for one game. I know he's not as strong as the others but it would give him such a boost. How about you, Mads? How was school?"

"Okay," I said.

"Did you get your mid-term assessments back?"

I shook my head, my face growing hot. "I think we're getting them tomorrow…Mrs Palmer had all this other stuff to hand out and she ran out of time."

We always do loads of tests at the end of each half-term and then find out the results first day back. I hated lying to Mum but there was no way I was telling her what I actually got. All my grades were down except for art, and my effort marks were rubbish. I was supposed to be seeing Mrs Palmer tomorrow to have a *little chat about my progress,* but there was no way I was telling Mum about that either.

I picked up my pen, trying to dodge her gaze. I had no idea if she believed me or not – she was probably too worried about Charlie and the football team to notice anyway.

"I've got to finish my homework," I said. "It's taking ages. Oh and someone called for Dad." I pushed the notepad across the table.

Mum glanced down at it, frowning. "*Sharon?*"

I nodded, watching her face. "Do you know her?"

She picked the notepad up still staring at the number. "No I don't think so. What did she say?"

"Nothing really. She just left this number and asked if Dad would call her."

We'd finished eating dinner and cleared away by the time Dad came home from work. He's an electrician so he often finishes late. As soon as I heard his key in the door I started to relax. No reason really, just the fact that everyone was home. It's been like that ever since Nan died – a niggling worry that Mum or Dad or Charlie might be snatched away from me at any moment.

Charlie rushed out to greet Dad, launching into the whole football saga before he'd even said hello. We used to fight to tell him our news when he got in from work, tripping over each other to get to the front door, but not any more. I could easily get there first if I wanted, I'm much faster than him – it's getting the actual words out that I find so difficult.

I hovered by the door, listening to Charlie babbling away. People always used to say we were identical, me and Charlie – two little chatterboxes with the same shiny dark

hair, pale skin and turquoise-blue eyes. We still look the same, obviously, but there's only one chatterbox in the house these days.

Dad scooped Charlie up for a hug and carried him back in to the kitchen, laughing. "What a welcome!" he said. "You nearly knocked me clean off my feet! And how are my two favourite girls?" He plonked Charlie down and opened the fridge to pull out a beer. "I can't get over this weather! It's only the first week of June and it's already nudging twenty-seven degrees."

"I've left some pasta for you on the stove, if you're hungry," said Mum. "And someone called Sharon rang – she wants you to call her back."

"Sharon?" He paused to take a swig of his drink. "I don't know anyone called Sharon. It was probably one of those cold-callers trying to sell me something."

I was pretty sure it *wasn't* someone trying to sell him something. The woman sounded really upset. I opened my mouth to tell him so and then shut it again. If it was that important she could always call back.

Dad heaped the rest of the pasta into a bowl and collapsed on the couch to watch the football with Charlie. It was England against Holland and England were losing 3–0. I sat down next to him, tucking my legs up and snuggling in. "Can you believe this, Maddie?" he said,

pointing at the screen, but I wasn't really interested in the game – I just wanted a cuddle.

A few days after Nan died I looked up strokes online to see if they run in families. I found out that if you have a parent who had a stroke before the age of sixty-five you're four times more likely to have a stroke yourself. I didn't understand the statistics or how they worked it all out, but since Nan was Dad's mum *and* she was only sixty-three when she died, it sounded as if Dad could drop dead at any moment.

Charlie was still going on about the school team when Mum took him up to bed at half-time. He said he was determined to get picked before the end of the year – to prove he was as good as Rory and Leo if it was the last thing he did.

"That's the spirit," said Dad. "The England team could do with some of your skills right now judging by this pathetic performance!"

When Mum came back down she made herself another cup of tea and started the ironing, pulling one of her work shirts out of a mountain of wrinkly clothes.

"Hey, Sophie," said Dad, dragging his eyes away from the screen. "Did you hear the one about the woman who went to visit her elderly dad in the old-age home? She walked into his room and said, 'For goodness' sake, isn't

there anyone here who could iron your clothes?' And the old man looked at his daughter and said, 'What are you talking about? I'm not *wearing* any clothes!'"

Dad started to laugh and I couldn't help laughing with him. "Do you get it?" he said to Mum. "The man wasn't actually *wearing* any clothes. It was his *skin*! His skin was so wrinkled she thought it needed an iron. Who needs ironed clothes anyway?" he added, still laughing. "Life's too short if you ask me."

"Actually no one did ask you," said Mum, rolling her eyes, but I could tell she was trying not to laugh too. And for a tiny moment, with Mum ironing her shirt and Dad cracking jokes and messing about, I could almost pretend that everything was just the way it used to be.

I had the dream again that night. The one where Nan and I are walking along the road together and I'm talking to her, but my words are all strung together like one long sentence – hundreds and hundreds of words pouring out of my mouth like an avalanche. And when I turn to see if she's listening I realize she's lying on the pavement, completely still, as if she's made of stone. "*Wake up, Nan!*" I shout. "*Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!*" But it's at that point that I wake up myself, my heart racing, my face wet with tears.

I've been having the same dream on and off ever since Nan died. The details change a bit each time, but it always ends the same way. I *hate* the dream. I don't want to remember Nan like that – cold and frozen and still. My nan was soft and warm, like apple and blueberry crumble, full of stories and jokes and the cleverest wise words.

It took me ages to fall back to sleep, for the images to fade completely from my head. I reached under my pillow for my purple ribbon, curling it round my fingers, rubbing it against my face. The knots in my stomach unravelled slowly and I snuggled down under my covers.

Nan used to say I shouldn't be embarrassed about sleeping with my ribbon – she said it was just like a teddy, or a comfort blanket – but who needs a comfort blanket when they're nearly thirteen years old?

2
The Nurture Group

It was a struggle to get out of bed the next morning. I wondered if I could pretend to be ill to get out of my meeting with Mrs Palmer, except I knew Mum would never go for it, not unless I actually threw up or had a raging temperature. Charlie only has to cough for Mum to keep him at home but it's a whole different story with me.

I dragged myself up and out of the house on automatic pilot. It usually takes me about twenty minutes to walk to school, but much longer when I go extra slow on purpose. I slowed down even more when I got to the corner of Banner Road, just in case the new boy Kieran Black was there. He's been on my case ever since he joined Church