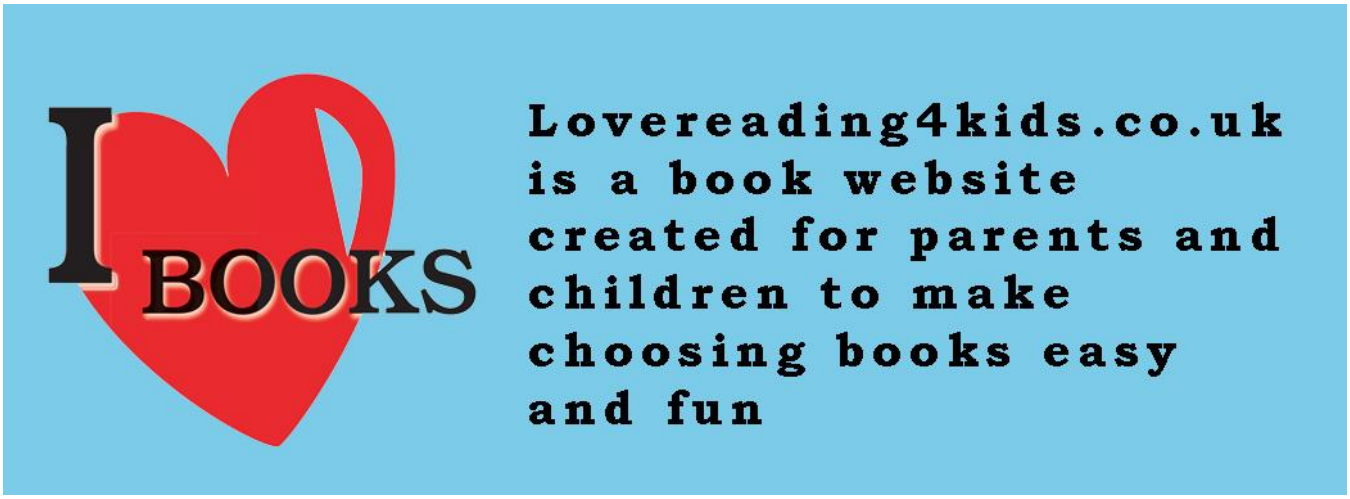


Opening extract from

What's a Girl Gotta Do?

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Published by

Usborne Publishing Ltd

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one

I wasn't even wearing a short skirt.

Stupid thought. Totally stupid thought.

But, afterwards, as I stewed and cried fat hot tears of rage, I kept thinking…

…I wasn't even wearing a short skirt.

If you really want to know what I was wearing, so you can reassure yourself that I was the perfect victim in all this, it was just a normal pair of jeans. And my lacy jumper. BUT CALM DOWN – all that erotic lace was FULLY HIDDEN under my duffle coat. So, unless pervy van men have X-ray vision – *and let's all for a minute thank God that they don't* – I was wearing nothing, *nothing*, to trigger what happened that day.

Which was this…

I was running late for college, due to an epic argument with my parents about My Future. This was a regular thing. My Future is their obsession, but this particular spat over

My Future had been pretty nasty. For reasons known to nobody, not even me, the argument ended with me shouting, "Meditate on THIS!" and grabbing my crotch. I'd then slammed the door in their stunned faces and dashed down the road. Almost crying.

It was cold and bright. A nice October day, but one where the golden sunshine has no impact on the temperature. I was half-running, partly because of my lateness, and partly to keep warm.

I saw the van as I turned the corner.

Two builder-types sitting in the front seat noticed me straight away. They stared at me through the windscreen. The way they assessed me sent an instant blodge to my stomach.

That female intuition blodge.

The *there's-going-to-be-trouble* blodge.

No – screw that. It's not female intuition. I'm not psychic – I'm just highly experienced in sexual harassment, like pretty much every other girl on this earth who dares to walk places.

The van was parked on my side of the quiet, residential street. The only side of the road with a pavement. I paused for a second, weighing up my options. I sensed trouble, but I had to walk past the van. Even though I already felt sick from the way they looked at me. Like I should be ashamed…

Maybe I'm wrong about them, I thought. One of them was as old as my dad. Maybe they were just innocently looking out their windscreen. Maybe there wouldn't be

any trouble. And because I was exhausted and alone and already upset and all-the-things-I've-just-told-you, I didn't walk past them with my normal confidence.

I instinctively averted my gaze, pretended they weren't staring, pulled my coat further over my totally-concealed chest and walked faster towards them.

I was approaching the van. I could still feel their eyes on me. But I was almost there. And almost there meant almost past them…and…it would be fine…I would be fine…and it was broad daylight anyway and I could always scream but I wouldn't need to scream because it would be okay and I'd imagined these builders being worse than they are, and…and…and…

…and then the van door opened.

I stopped dead. Their open door now blocked the pavement. The younger man was slowly getting out and I looked up, all darting and scared. Because why had they opened the door? I heard a slam and flinched. It was the other van door. Because the other guy had got out too. My head whipped in his direction and I saw him walk around the bonnet, closing me in. He was bald, old, all red in the face like he'd had one too many for too many years.

I had one man in front of me, one behind. I was pinned in. Hardly any space to get around either of them.

The man blocking my way forward spoke first.

"You look very sexy in that red lipstick," he said, his voice so leery I shuddered and recoiled.

Oh yes. I forgot to tell you. I was wearing red lipstick.

He bent over, right in my face, giving me no choice but to look at him. He was younger than the other – with fluff instead of proper facial hair.

The bald man behind me joined in.

"You wore it especially for us, didn't you, love? We like it. We really like it."

My heart beat so fast I thought it would combust. My breath was already short and sharp. There was a man in his garden across the road, deadheading a plant. I looked at him desperately, silently asking for help. But he seemed to be deliberately pretending not to notice.

"What's wrong, love? Why aren't you talking to us?"

"I…" I stammered. "I…"

"Shy, are you? Shy girls don't wear lipstick like that."

The younger man stepped forward again; I had no personal space left. His breath stank of something sweet, like he'd been drinking Red Bull. I looked around frantically, sizing up the gap around him. Calculating if I could fit through.

I saw a chance. I took it.

I barged past, pushing his arms up as I fled down the road as fast as I could. My feet thumping hard on the pavement, my heart going nuts. Were they going to chase me? It was broad daylight.

"PRICK-TEASE," one of them yelled after me.

The insults pelted off my back. I ran and ran – so sure they'd follow me. So sure this wasn't finished yet.

"COME ON, LOVE, IT WAS ONLY A COMPLIMENT."

"RUDE BITCH."

The cold air hurt my lungs, ripping down my throat. My stomach wanted to empty itself. I shook so hard I could hardly run in a straight line.

I couldn't hear their footsteps behind me. When I reached the end of the street, I dared myself to quickly look back.

The two men were leaning up against their van. They were laughing. Leaning over and grabbing their knees, giggling like children.

And, as I struggled to hold back the tears that had bubbled up and lodged in my throat, I thought:

But I wasn't even wearing a short skirt.