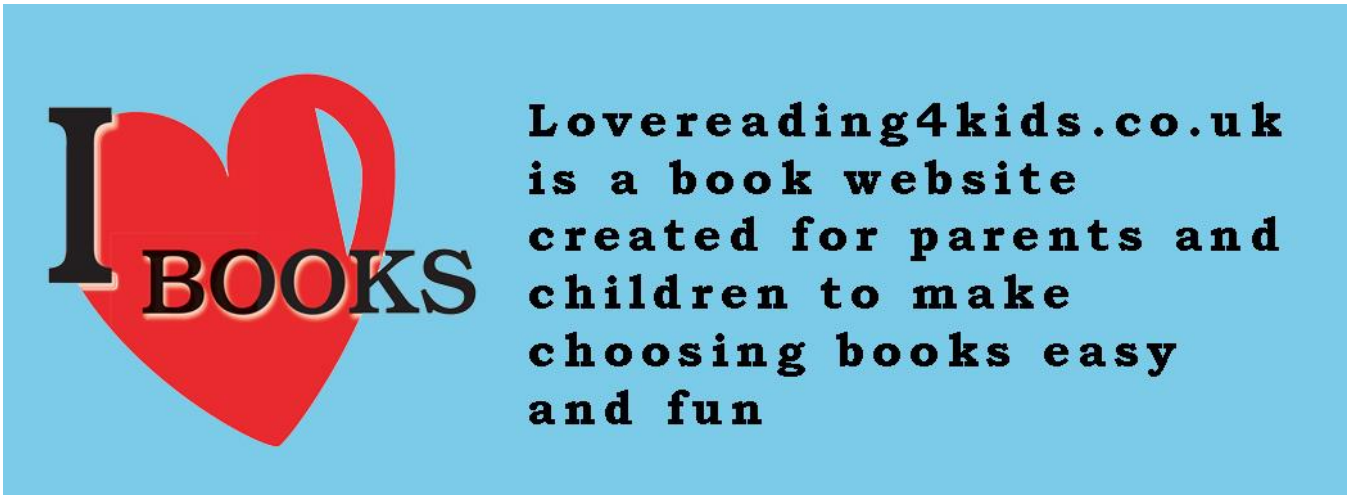


Opening extract from

The Secret Cooking Club

Written by

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Published by

Chicken House Ltd

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First published in Great Britain in 2016
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

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Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-910655-24-5
eISBN 978-1-910655-61-0


‘If a pot is cooking,
the friendship
will stay warm.’
– proverb



THE WORST DAY OF THE WEEK

The ketchup bottle farts and the last dregs splutter on to my sister's toast. My stomach twists, but to be honest, I was already feeling sick. It's Friday morning, 7:50 a.m.

Ten minutes to go.

'Is there any more, Scarlett?' Kelsie wipes her chin with the sleeve of her school shirt, leaving a sticky red streak on the cuff.

'No,' I say. 'We're all out and Mum forgot to order more. But you've got enough.' I point to the lake of goop that's already smeared all over the toast – on top of the butter. Disgusting. Kelsie's almost seven, but she still eats everything

with ketchup like it's some kind of fifth food group.

I push my soggy Weetabix around the bowl with the spoon, but I can't eat. My classmates are probably bouncing off walls now that it's almost the weekend; texting their friends; packing for sleepovers; making cool plans. But not me. Right now, I wish a hole would open up in the centre of our kitchen and swallow me up.

Because at 8:00 a.m. Mum's blog post goes live.

My eyes dart frantically around the kitchen. Maybe I could stop it by shutting off the power, or 'accidentally' dropping Mum's laptop in the bath, or becoming an amazing hacker and starting a virus that targets the computers of her thousands of followers – all in the next seven minutes. But I know it's too late. The new post is already on the server, hovering in cyberspace. Ready to pop into existence and broadcast the embarrassing details of my life to the world.

What will it be this week? I think back to everything I've done. Not much, since I quit all my clubs and activities at the end of last term. That put a stop to the posts about *Top ten reasons to bin your kid's violin*, and *Tap-dancing . . . did I give birth to three left feet?*

But even so, there's all the things I haven't done – like keeping my room tidy and making sure

Kelsie washes her hands after she uses the toilet. Two weeks ago, Mum did a 'funny' little quiz about it: *Which has more germs – my daughter's room or a public loo?* That one generated over two hundred comments from her followers, and got her five new advertisers for cleaning products on the site. That night, she ordered in a pizza so we could 'celebrate'. Kelsie ate my share (with ketchup) and I sat in my room wondering if it's ever going to end.

I give up on breakfast and take my bowl to the sink. The water runs upstairs and I can hear Mum humming. She stayed up late putting the finishing touches on her post, and the fact that she's up early must mean it packs a punch. 'Hurry up,' I say to Kelsie. 'I don't want to be late.' Not that I ever want to show my face at school again, but better that than see Mum and pretend we're some kind of normal family.

'But I *need* more ketchup.' Kelsie pouts down at her plate. She scrapes her soggy bread and licks the ketchup off the knife.

'Look, I'll get some at the shop after school, OK? Now go and put your shoes on.'

I grab her plate and take it to the bin. On top of the overflowing rubbish are a few pieces of balled-up paper. I fish one out and uncrumple it. It's a printout of Mum's new post that went live – I

check my watch – one minute ago. I look at the title: *Bye-bye, Oxford, my daughter has no interests*.

The words blur on the page as my eyes swim with tears.