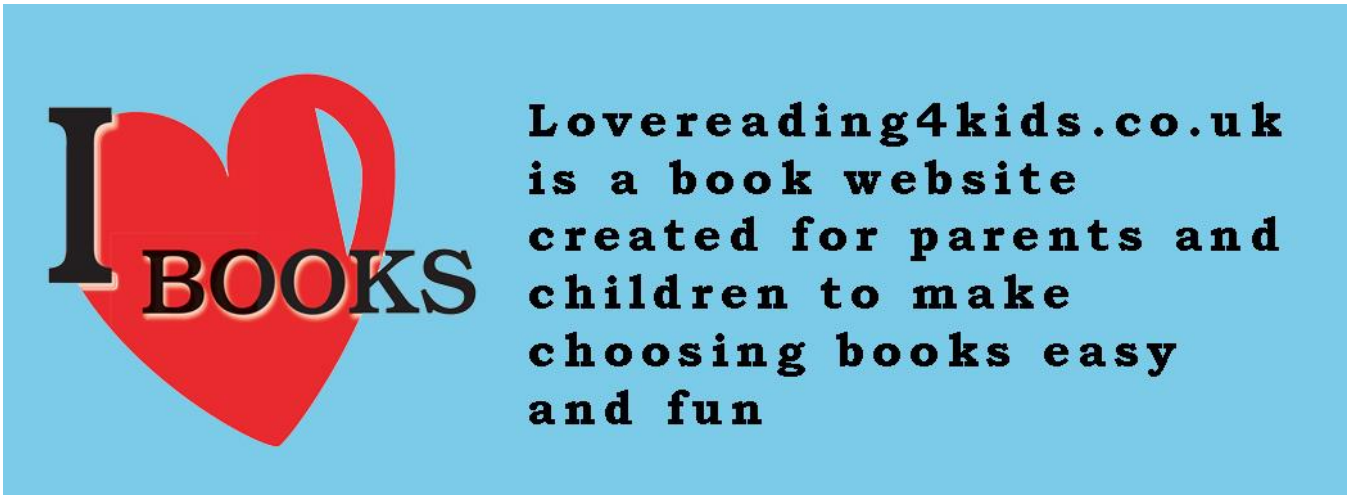


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Written by

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Maz Evans

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For Ian
Who thinks like Athene
Loves like Aphrodite
And marries like Zeus

You are a God amongst men.



1. Lying Low

It began on a Friday, as strange things often do. This particular Friday turned out to be stranger than most, although it had started normally enough. Elliot Hooper got up at 7.30 a.m. as normal, made his mum breakfast at 8.15 a.m. as normal, went to school at 8.55 a.m. as normal and was in the headmaster's office by 9.30 a.m., which was, in fact, slightly later than normal.

'Oh, Elliot,' sighed Graham Sopweed, headmaster of Brysmore Grammar School. 'What are we going to do with you?'

Elliot scratched his shaggy blond head. He figured that 'excuse me from school for ever and



make me Lord High Emperor of the Universe' wouldn't be deemed an acceptable answer, so he said nothing.

'You seem rather . . . distracted lately,' said Mr Sopweed to fill the silence. 'Is everything OK? Is anything wrong at school? Or at home?'

Elliot avoided his headmaster's concerned stare. School was . . . well, it was school. Annoying, boring, pointless. Nothing new there. But home? That was a different story . . .

'I'm fine,' he said after a lengthy pause. 'Thank you, sir.'

'Oh, Elliot,' Mr Sopweed sighed again, nervously flicking his floppy grey fringe. 'You know you can call me Graham. Let's all use the names our mothers gave us.'

There were many more creative names for Brysmore's headmaster than the one his mother gave him, but the politest by far was Call Me Graham.

A shout outside nearly made the jumpy headmaster fall off his chair. Elliot couldn't help but feel sorry for Call Me Graham. There were many theories at school as to why he was such a bag of nerves, not all of them started by Elliot. Some said it was because his wife had left him. Others said it was because she hadn't. Elliot's

favourite was that Call Me Graham was actually a serial killer on the run. He could imagine the appeals on *Crimewatch*: *So be on your guard against Graham Sopweed, the Cardigan-Clad Killer, and be sure to call this number if he's bored someone you know to death . . .*

'The . . . the . . . the thing is, Elliot, everyone at Brysmore wants to help you to achieve your fullest potential,' Call Me Graham went on.

'Mmm. Not everyone, sir,' muttered Elliot.

'Whatever do you mean?' squealed Call Me Graham, nearly pulling a button off his cardigan. 'Everyone at Brysmore is committed to encouraging, nurturing and inspiring every pupil in our care. We're always here for a friendly word, helpful advice, or to make sure we know—'

'WHERE IS THAT SNIVELLING RUNT OF A PATHETIC EXCUSE FOR A BOY?!'

The office door blasted open with a furious roar, making Call Me Graham scream like a kitten on a ghost train.

Elliot was all too familiar with that loathsome voice.

'Ah – hello,' whimpered Call Me Graham. 'As you can see, I am just having a little chat with Elliot . . .'

'Hooper,' sneered the new arrival, lurching up



behind Elliot's chair and polluting his airspace with weapons-grade body odour.

There was only one person who could make Elliot's surname sound like a dirty word. It was Mr Boil, head of history, Brysmore's deputy headmaster, and, unless there was a schoolmaster somewhere on the planet who minced his students into sausages, the world's worst teacher.

Boil was a stumpy, piggy little man who was the only person Elliot knew with fat eyes. He squashed them behind a pair of thick, bottle-lensed glasses and glared at his pupils like most people look at used cat litter, as if he had a permanently nasty smell under his nose. (In fairness, he did – his own.)

His few remaining strands of dark, greasy hair were pasted over the top of his head, held in place by hope alone. To the naked eye, Mr Boil had three chins, but who knew how many more were lurking beneath his shirt, which always smelt like three-week-old vegetable soup? He truly hated everyone, but reserved a special revulsion for Elliot, who had been getting up his pudgy nose for the past year.

'Sir?' asked Elliot, innocently.

'Don't you "sir" me, Hooper,' growled Boil,

bringing his sweaty face millimetres from Elliot's own. 'What you did in my assembly was disgraceful, disrespectful and downright disgusting!'

'Yes, we were just getting on to that . . .' stammered Graham.

'He disgraced the Brysmore name!' roared Boil. 'He shamed himself! He shamed the school! He ruined my brilliant PowerPoint presentation on Napoleon's favourite socks! He . . .'

'He fell asleep,' said Call Me Graham quietly, looking at Elliot's pale face and dark-rimmed eyes. 'Let's try to keep a little perspective, Mr Boil. This isn't the first time this has happened lately, Elliot. Why are you so tired?'

'Pah!' spat Boil. 'Out all hours terrorizing old ladies, I expect! Or playing violent computer games until dawn! Or putting my underpants up the school flagpole! Again!'

Elliot tried not to smirk at the memory of his all-time favourite prank, which Boil knew – but could never prove – that Elliot was responsible for last year. But pranks were long gone. These days Elliot couldn't afford any more trouble.

'Hooper!' shouted Boil. 'The headmaster asked you a question! Don't be so disrespectful . . . !'

'It's quite all right,' whispered Call Me Graham, 'Elliot can take all the time he—'



'SHUT UP, GRAHAM!' shouted Boil over his shoulder, his chubby eyes not leaving Elliot's face. 'And look at the state of you! When was the last time that shirt saw an iron? A tramp would turn his nose up at those shoes. And if I've told you once about that pocket watch – jewellery is forbidden at Brysmore . . . Well – come on, then? Let's hear your pathetic excuse!'

'Yes, talk to us, Elliot. Perhaps we can help?' said Graham kindly. 'You're only twelve, after all. We don't expect you to get everything right.'

Elliot's fingers instinctively tightened around the old watch in his pocket. For a moment, he considered telling the truth. Perhaps his headmaster could help him? Elliot certainly didn't know what to do. Maybe if he just explained about . . .

But as soon as the thought formed in his head, he silently crushed it. Elliot had to keep what was happening at home a secret. Telling anyone was far too risky.

'Mr Boil's right, sir,' said Elliot, the lie jamming in his throat. 'I keep staying up late playing computer games. It's all my own fault.'

'You see!' wobbled Boil triumphantly, punching the air with an arm the size of a fatty leg of lamb and knocking Call Me Graham backwards

off his chair. 'I knew it!'

'Do you have nothing to say in your defence, Elliot?' asked Call Me Graham from the floor. 'Anything else we should know?'

'No, sir,' Elliot mumbled.

'I tell you what he needs to know,' sneered Boil with a grin that could curdle custard. 'He's failing at this school. His grades have dropped across the board. And if he doesn't get eighty-five per cent in all the end-of-term exams, he's out of Brysmore for good. You've got my mock history test on Monday, Hooper. That should give you a much-needed kick up the—'

'Thank you, Mr B-Boil,' stuttered Call Me Graham.

Elliot's heart sank at the reminder of the exams he was sure to fail. He tried to find time to study at home, he really did.

'Please, Elliot,' said Call Me Graham. 'Let us help you.'

As he looked into the kindly eyes of his cowardly headmaster, Elliot once again considered telling the truth about home, about Mum. He didn't know how much longer he could carry on like this. It was getting too much.

'I . . . it's just . . . sometimes . . . ' he began, searching for impossible words.



‘Detention!’ bellowed Boil, as he lumbered jubilantly out of the office. ‘Hooper – see me after school!’