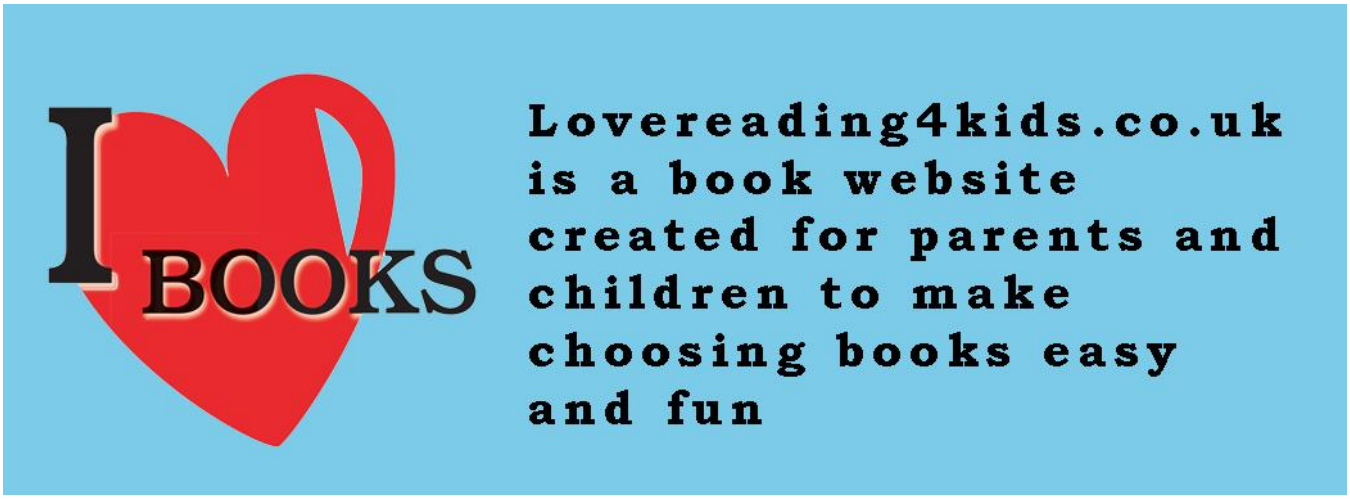


Opening extract from

The Clubhouse Mystery

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Chapter One

Do you want to know a secret? Well, I can't tell you. I absolutely cannot tell you. It's the biggest, most exciting secret I've had in weeks, maybe even months. I mean, I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you. So, you see, I absolutely cannot tell you …

All right, how about I tell you and you promise not to tell anybody else? Not even your best friend. Not even your pet. Not even your pet even if your pet is also your best friend. Cross your heart and hope to die? Okay then, you've twisted my arm.

We've built a fort. A secret fort. A *clubhouse*.

I probably should have mentioned first that I'm in a secret club. Well, here goes, the entire secret: I'm in a secret club and now we've got a secret clubhouse.

The idea came (as so many of my ideas do) from the desperate need to get out of the house and away from the annoying baby twins. It was Saturday morning and I had built an epic fort in the sitting room. It involved one sofa, one mop, two armchairs, two dining chairs, the pouffy/footstool thing that my mum likes, and five (that's right, FIVE) blankets. It was nearly tall enough to stand up in, there was a window (made using a bunch of clothes pegs off the washing line) through which I could watch TV, and the whole thing was protected by an invisible force field.

Unfortunately, although the force field was effective in keeping out aliens, monsters and Bigfoot, it was apparently no match for the annoying baby twins. They demolished the entire fort in about ten seconds flat.

'Daaad!' I yelled up the stairs. 'The twins wrecked my fort.'

'Did they?' he called back. 'Well, don't worry, honey, you can build it again.'

That didn't help at all.

'Muuum!' I yelled. 'The twins wrecked my fort.'

'They just want to play with you, Cass,' she called back. 'Why don't you pick something you can all play together?'

Play with the *annoying baby twins*? That's a ridiculous suggestion. Before they were born I might have thought it was a great idea. I'd had the house to myself for eight whole years – I was the queen of the castle, I ruled the roost – but when my parents told me I had two brothers or sisters on the way I was really excited. Two more kids, as funny and clever as me, to share adventures with and laugh at all my hilarious jokes? Bring it on.

But instead of two brilliant siblings my parents came home with Pippi and Ade; a pair of bulldozers in babygros. Pippi will chew anything she can get her grubby hands on. She puts EVERYTHING in her mouth. Ade, on the other hand, won't eat anything. Food goes in his hair or up his nose or on the floor or all over my dad's shirt. Come to think of it, I'm not sure I've ever seen any food go into Ade's mouth. Shouldn't he be hungry by now? Ugh, babies are weird.

I call them the annoying baby twins, but they aren't really babies anymore. They're two years old, which means they're even *more* annoying than they used to be. When they were babies, and couldn't walk yet, they could only chew and destroy anything in reach of their little arms. But now they're mobile. They're like two mini-Godzillas trampling everything in their path.

BREAKING NEWS:

This is Cass Okara reporting from downtown Tokyo, where residents are running for their lives from two hideous monsters that crawled out of the harbour this morning. Some of the city's most treasured buildings have already been destroyed, including the beloved Cass Towers – a brilliant structure designed and built by local genius Cass Okara. The whole city is in mourning. Back to you in the studio, Dave.

That was when I had the great idea of building a fort outside the house, where the twins couldn't wreck it. Then I had the *brilliant* idea that this new fort should be the clubhouse for our secret club. I always thought we needed one; what's a secret club without a secret clubhouse?

This is my best friend, Lex (which is short for Alex, which is short for Alexandria). She lives across the street from me. 'Where would we build it?' she asked when I told her my idea. 'In your back garden?'

'No way, the twins get into the back garden all the time. We need somewhere secret, so other people don't find it by accident.'

'Hmm, that's a toughie.'

We hmm'd for a bit, and then we hawed for a bit, and then Lex's granny poked her head around the door.

'I've got chocolate chip cookies and orange juice here for anyone who's hungry.'

Lex's granny lives two streets away, but she's in Lex's house a lot. She's awesome. When Lex's parents are out she lets us eat all the junk food we want, and she comes up with the best games when we're bored. One time it was *pouring* rain outside, and she dared us to go out into the back garden and make mud sculptures. Whoever made the biggest one got a lollipop. Lex made a dog standing up; it fell down so she made it into a dog lying down, but her mud was just too runny and in the end she called it a 'dog rug' because it was basically flat. Mine was the biggest and it *didn't* fall down (it was kind of a dolphin with legs). In making a flat dog and a leggy dolphin, all the mud from the flowerbeds ended up in the middle of the grass and Lex's parents were really mad. And when I got home and left mud trails through the hall my parents were really mad too. The mud sculptures were worth it though.

'I couldn't help overhearing' – Lex's granny put the tray on the floor and we grabbed some cookies – 'that you're looking for somewhere to build a fort.'

Note to self: Be quieter when talking about the secret clubhouse to secret club members.

'Maybe we are and maybe we aren't,' Lex said, trying to be mysterious.

Her granny smiled.

'Well,' she said, 'if someone did want to build a secret fort, I happen to know of the perfect spot.'

'Where?'

'At the end of Mr McCall's field.'

Mr McCall's house is separate from the housing estate and it's giant. There's a big field behind it (that's after his big, massive garden, so it's miles away from the house) where he sometimes keeps a few horses, but there are none in there at the moment. I think he sold them all for loads of money.

'That's perfect!' I said.

'There's a hedge of tall trees down that end,' Lex's granny said, 'and plenty of bushes too, so the fort would be well hidden.'

I told you Lex's granny was great.

This is my other best friend, Nicholas (which is long for Nick. I've tried calling him Nick lots of times, but he doesn't like it). He lives at the very end of our street, opposite the empty house. We're all a bit afraid of the empty house because we're pretty sure it's haunted. Nicholas's dad says it's nonsense, and my mum says it's nonsense, which is why I think adults should never be allowed to investigate the paranormal. They've lost their sensitivity to ghosts and other weird stuff. Ever have your mum or dad tell you there's nothing under your bed when you absolutely *know* that there is? Yeah, me too. Dealing with ghosts and scary things should be left to the kids; we're the experts.

Anyway, we told Nicholas about the clubhouse plan and, as always, he had some concerns.

'What will we build it out of?' he asked.

'I dunno yet,' I said, 'but I'm going to scope out the area and maybe pick a tree for us to build it in. Then I'll know what stuff we need.'

'Where will we get the stuff we need?'

'I dunno yet, maybe from my shed at home, or yours, or Lex's. There might be stuff in school we can use.'

'How will we keep it a secret if we need to ask for building materials?'

'I dunno yet,' I said, getting impatient. 'I'll figure it out.'

'But how–'

'That's enough questions.'

'I've got one more,' he said.

'No, that's your quota of questions for the day. You can't ask any more. If you want to ask any more you have to wait until tomorrow.'

'But how can we plan if I can't–'

'Urghh,' I growled, sticking my fingers in my ears, 'I'm not listening.'

He kept talking so I kept my fingers in my ears and went, 'la-la-la-la, la, la, la, la, laaaaaa,' until he rolled his eyes and stopped.

'Why don't we go take a look at the field now?' said Lex.

'Brilliant idea!' I said. 'We'll have to be in stealth mode though, because Mr McCall doesn't like children.'

'I heard he's got a mini-jail in his garden for kids who sneak onto his land. He keeps them there until the police arrive.'

'That's absolute rubbish,' I said, though I wasn't sure. 'Come on, let's go.'

'So,' Nicholas said as we left his room, 'if we need hammers and nails and things, where are we going to–'

'Urghh!' I closed my eyes and jammed my fingers in my ears again. Then I walked into the door on the way out and I didn't speak to Nicholas all the way to Mr McCall's field.