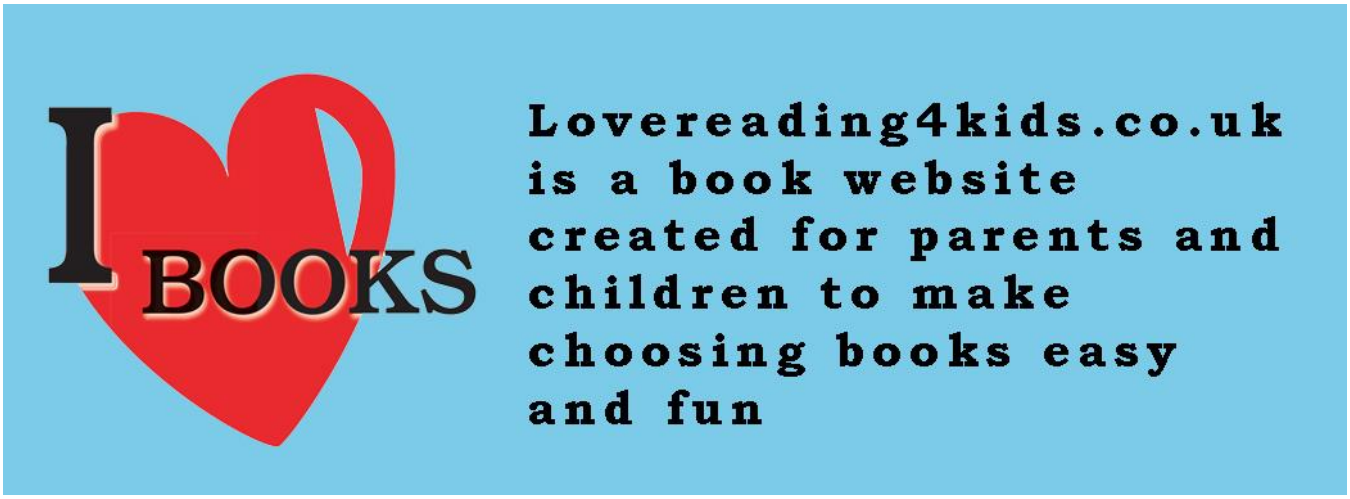

Opening extract from

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Written by

Holly Smale

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luck [lʌk] noun

1 The chance occurrence of situations or events favourable or unfavourable to a person's interests

2 A person's apparent tendency to have good or ill fortune

3 An expression of good wishes

4 To prosper or succeed

ORIGIN fifteenth century, from early Middle Dutch *gheluc* – "happiness or good fortune"

1

My name is Harriet Manners, and I am lucky.

I know I'm lucky because:

1. I'm right next to a window, even though seats are randomly allocated so my chances were only one in four.

2. My Wi-Fi is working perfectly, which means I can let everyone at home know I'm sitting next to a window.

3. And send them a list of points detailing how amazingly lucky I am… Much like this one.

4. I've just watched *seven* documentaries back to back, thus deepening my understanding of aeroplanes, orcas, mating rituals of the flamingo, Russian space stations, the Yucatán Peninsula, parrots and Christian Dior.

5. I actually enjoyed the last option, even though it was definitely not voluntary.

6. So far this morning, I have already been to Hong Kong.

Since waking up today, I have ridden a glass cable car across Tung Chung Bay to a giant statue of Buddha, taken photos of the South China Sea and educated tourists in the immediate vicinity about the political tension caused by the Chinese government trying to claim the region for itself.

(A couple of Americans tried to tip me ten dollars for my knowledge, although the official park guides didn't seem quite as impressed.)

And it gets even *better*.

In the last twenty-four hours I have crossed thirteen countries and three oceans, travelled 9,865 miles and eaten three and a half doughnuts (two of mine and one and a half of Bunty's).

With the aid of a map and satellite navigation, I have tried to spot the 960 bridges in Berlin, stared in wonderment at the 62 per cent of Austria covered in the Alps, watched the dark sands of the Karakum Desert in Turkmenistan and the shimmering lakes of Sakartvelo (also known as Georgia).

I have identified Clear Air Turbulence over France.

But the *main* reason I know I'm lucky is because of whose head is currently resting on my shoulder.

I'll give you a couple of clues: she has dark, wavy hair.

Her eyes are gently closed, and her nose is twitching like an adorable baby rabbit. Her feet are crossed at the ankles, her arms are flopped loosely across her stomach and her mouth is slightly open.

Every now and then our seats jiggle and she mutters, her head moves a bit to the side, her eyes open and –

"Harriet, *will you please stop watching me sleep*?"

Delighted, I beam at my Best Friend.

Natalie Grey: Sartorial Genius, Temper-Loser, Truth-Sayer and the non-kissing soulmate of my sixteen-year-old life. And – as of yesterday morning – my intimate travel-adventure companion. The Samwise to my Frodo; the Robin to my Batman; like Tom and Jerry, except without all the firecrackers, hammers and attempts to poison each other.

The widely loved salt to my less popular pepper.

"Nat!" I say happily, handing her the half of doughnut I saved specially. "You're awake!"

She blinks, sits up stiffly and gazes blearily around the plane. "Harriet, it's been a twenty-four-hour journey interrupted by an unexplained walk up a mountain to see a big fat stone man," she says, yawning widely and

rearranging her ponytail. "Honestly, I'm as surprised by this news as you are."

"It was Siddhartha Gautama," I inform her. "And he was made out of bronze and quite slim compared to some other representations of the father of Buddhism."

Then we both lean forward to look curiously at Bunty, propped up on the seat next to us. My nomadic grandmother has a pale pink velvet cushion wrapped round her neck and a blue silk tasselled scarf tied round her eyes, and she's snoring so loudly the tiny child in front of us keeps popping up over the seat and asking if she's "broken".

Nat takes the doughnut-half and grins.

"So how much longer have we got?" she says more perkily, leaning over me to stare at the approaching clouds. "Are we nearly there yet? Give me the precise facts, Harriet Manners-style."

The seat-belt light pings and my beam widens.

"Twenty-eight minutes, three hundred and one miles," I say, obediently clicking myself into place then pushing rule-breaking Nat back into her seat and doing the same to her. "Or twenty-eight thousand feet."

There's a small plane shudder and my ears pop.

"Twenty-seven thousand feet," I amend in excitement, watching the screen in front of me. "Twenty-six thousand…"

"Twenty-five…" Nat laughs.

"Twenty-four, twenty-three…"

"Twenty-two."

And – with a squeak – we high-five each other loudly.

Because this is the *biggest* reason I know I'm lucky.

The word *gravity* comes from the Latin *gravis*, which means *heavy,* and the force of Earth's gravity on us at all times is a constant 9.80665 m/s^2. Gravity holds the universe together: it pulls stars, galaxies, planets and subatomic particles towards each other, anchors us to the floor and keeps us grounded.

But science and the screen in front of me can say what they like: gravity has nothing on me any more.

We may be going Down Under, but I'm on top of the world.

Because as the clouds finally clear and the blue ocean expands beneath us, I look down at the home-made badges pinned to our T-shirts:

OZ – THE LUCKY COUNTRY

This is going to be the holiday of a lifetime.

Australia, *here we come.*

2

So while we get on with the landing preparations – seats forward, tables up and so forth – you'll probably want to know what's been going on since you last saw me, right?

That's what we normally do here.

I update you on the ups and downs of my life, interesting developments, a few particularly fascinating facts that I've found out in the interim period (like the fact that anthropologists can track human migration by examining earwax or that Lithuania has an annual crawling race for babies).

And you listen very politely, even though you didn't actually ask me how I was in the first place.

Well, this time I'm afraid there's not much to say.

There really isn't that much that can happen in four days. Especially when a large chunk of that period has been spent sitting on a fuzzy aeroplane seat with inadequate leg room, watching documentaries

and devouring guidebooks about Australia before enthusiastically sharing the information.

Apparently there are more stars in the night sky than there are words that have ever been spoken by every human who has ever lived, but after the last few days of sitting next to me I think Bunty, Nat and our exhausted flight attendant would question that statement.

I have certainly narrowed the gap.

What I *can* tell you, however, is the following:

My maverick father started back at the advertising agency that fired him last year and immediately set about trying to get fired again, and my baby sister Tabby said her very first word (which made me an incredibly proud big sister, even though "manana" would never be allowed in a game of Scrabble).

Wilbur is back to being Supreme Agent Extraordinaire, and the last time I saw him he was spraying himself all over with rainbow glitter while calling it "unicorn deodorant".

Toby is now in an official *Romantic Twosome* with Rin, who has moved temporarily into my bedroom while she models in London and dresses our cat Victor up like an extravagant Disney princess. (Statistically, cat owners are thirty per cent less likely to suffer a heart attack than those without a pet. Nobody has looked into the statistics vice versa.)

My stepmother, Annabel, spent the entire preparatory period writing down Emergency Numbers, then Back-up Emergency Numbers, then Reserve Back-up Emergency Numbers, then laminating them all in case they get wet in a famously dry country.

"Just…" she said, thrusting shiny KEEP WITH YOU AT ALL TIMES sheets of A4 into the back pocket of my already stuffed suitcase, "make sure you take care of each other, OK?"

Bunty and I rolled our eyes at each other from across my bed.

"Bels, darling." My grandmother smiled fondly. "The universe holds us carefully in its warm, cupped hands, like a small child with a tiny fluffy bunny. You don't need to worry so much."

Annabel immediately swivelled her eyes towards me.

"Sure," I agreed with a shrug, even though I'm sixteen years old and a fully fledged sixth-former: I think I know how to take care of myself.

And last but not least, I said goodbye to Jasper.

My…

Well, I'm not entirely sure *what* he is, to be honest.

My handsome, sarcastic, More-Than-Friend-But-Not-Quite-Boyfriend of four days: firmly occupying the space where you kiss and hold hands but haven't signed a formal relationship agreement in pen yet.

Although I've drafted one up in pencil, obviously.

It's important to stay prepared for the next step of romance at all times.

"I'll be ten hours ahead," I explained to him. We were curled up on the sofa, watching a *Planet Earth* episode about 400-metre-deep caves in Mexico while Annabel, Bunty and Dad talked quietly in the kitchen, presumably about how best to control me abroad.

"I know, Harriet."

"That means when it's eight am in England, it's six pm in Australia. And when it's midday for you, it'll be ten pm for me. And when it's seven pm here it'll be—"

"Five am," Jasper said, narrowing one bright blue and one brown eye at the printout I'd just given him. "I have basic mathematical skills of my own, but thanks for the calculations."

I fixed him with a stern expression.

"You *say* that, Jasper King, but accuracy is *everything* when large distances are involved. So our scheduled phone calls are in blue, webcam calls are in pink, emails are in green and texts are purple. You may want to stick the A2 version on the cafe wall."

His thick eyebrows shot up. "Or we could just play it by ear?"

"Well, of *course*," I agreed, rolling my eyes and gesturing at another section. "Ad hoc and breezy

romance options are in orange: here, here and *here*."

At which point Jasper shook his head and kissed me.

And that's about it.

Team JINTH was transformed into Team JRNTH with a quick swipe of a marker pen, exam preparation was packed into my suitcase, and I've efficiently put my whole world in order so I can leave it neatly behind for two weeks.

I'm now ready to pioneer the unfamiliar, like Harriet Adams who travelled South America, Asia and the South Pacific in the early 1900s and wrote for *National Geographic* magazine.

Or Harriet the tortoise, who was transported from England to Australia, where she passed peacefully away.

Which hopefully won't happen here.

At least… it'll be *mostly* unfamiliar, anyway.

"Harriet," Nat says in a low voice as the plane lands with a jolt and Bunty wakes up with a loud snort. "Do we need to talk?"

I blink at my best friend in surprise. "We've been doing that for the last forty-eight hours, haven't we?"

She had an airbed on my floor the night before we left: I made the most of the situation.

"*You* have," Nat laughs. "Solidly. But I meant about…

you know. *Where* we are. Or, more specifically –" she studies me carefully – "*who might also be here.*"

Because there's a reason why I know all about the gap between England and Australia. I understand how messy conversations can get between two countries because there's experience behind that knowledge too.

And if I'm keen to stick to a definite schedule of communication, we all know there's undeniable logic involved.

This is *not* my first long-distance romance.

"Nope," I say firmly, standing up and grabbing my satchel. "This is a clean slate, Nat. A brand-new adventure for both of us."

And it starts right *now.*