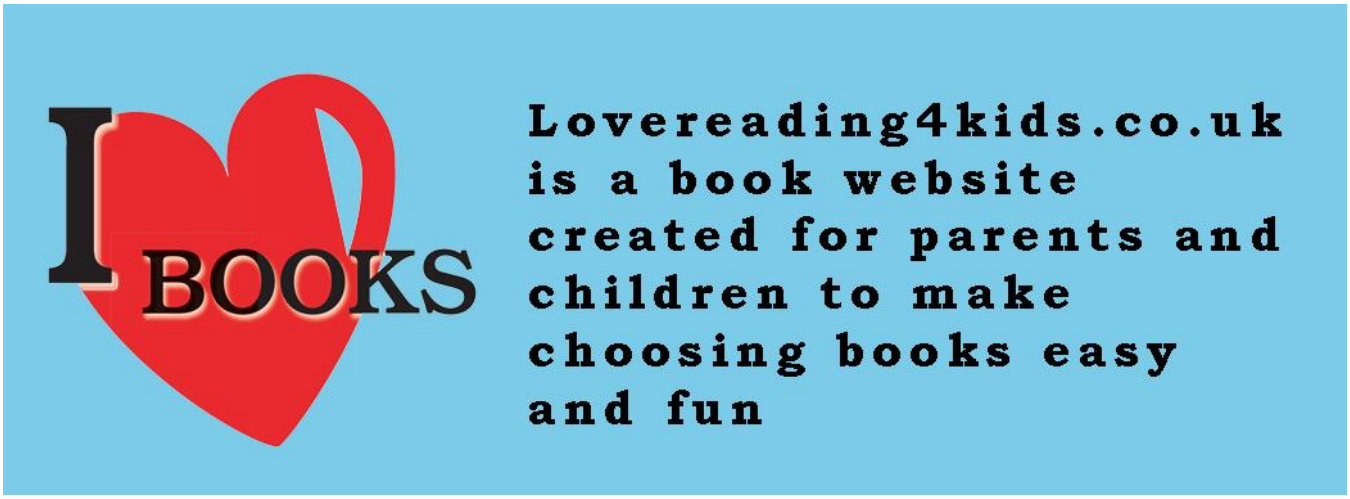


Opening extract from

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ONE

On my seventh birthday, Grandad made me a rocket. He used the cardboard box the washing machine came in, put a cone on the top and painted the whole thing white. Then he stencilled *MEGARA 1* on the side with red paint.

Mum took her hands away from my eyes and I blinked. The rocket nearly touched the ceiling. 'Is it real?' I asked.

'Almost,' she said.

Grandad handed me my bike helmet. 'Are you ready for your first mission, Meg?'

I nodded. 'I think so.'

I was already wearing my astronaut pyjamas so all I had to do was put on the helmet and climb inside the rocket. Mum handed me a broken keyboard – my control panel – then shut the door. I ran my hands over the keys. Grandad had stuck labels on the different buttons: fuel

boost, disengage, pressure drop. One button was painted green and simply said, *LIFT-OFF*.

'Megara 1,' Grandad said, putting on his smoothest American accent, 'you're good at one minute.'

'Roger,' I replied. Grandad and I were always watching NASA documentaries so I knew exactly what to say.

'Megara 1, this is Houston. You are go for staging.'

'Inboard cut off,' I said, tapping buttons randomly, 'staging and ignition.' At that exact moment a deep growl burst out and I realised Mum had turned on the vacuum cleaner. Its roar filled the cardboard rocket. I felt my heart speed up with excitement and I tightened my grip on the keyboard.

'Megara 1, this is Houston!' Grandad shouted to be heard over the vac. 'Thrust is GO. All engines. You're looking good. This is ten seconds and counting.'

'Ten,' I called out, 'nine … eight …'

Grandad and Mum joined in. 'Seven … six … five …' Then one of them started shaking the rocket around.

'Mum!'

'What is it?' Her face appeared at the cut-out window.

'I'm scared!'

She reached through the window and took hold of my hand. Her silver rings pressed into my skin. 'Don't be scared, Meg. I'm here.'

‘Four … three … two … one …’ continued Grandad.

‘All engines running,’ I said, then I slammed my finger down on the green button. ‘Launch commit!’

‘Lift-off!’ shouted Grandad. ‘We have lift-off!’

Mum let go of my hand and disappeared.

The vac roared, the rocket shook wildly from side to side and I was leaving Earth and shooting into deepest space!

TWO

Eight years later. Back on planet Earth.

Before I get my breakfast, I make sure everything in my bedroom is just right.

I smooth down the duvet, push the chair under the desk and turn my globe so England is facing the sun. Then I get a red pen and cross yesterday off my homework timetable. Good. If I spend a couple of hours working on my speech tonight then I'll be right on track. I don't believe in luck or superstition, but before I leave the room I take a moment to glance at my picture of Valentina Tereshkova – the first woman to fly in space. Her steely gaze keeps me focused during the day.

I grab some Weetabix from the kitchen then follow the *thud, thud, thud* coming from the front room. Only

Mum would play bass anthems at eight in the morning. I find her kneeling on the floor, blowing up a paddling pool. Sitting on the sofa is my sister, Elsa, a jammy crust dangling out of her mouth.

I turn down the music then join Elsa. I start eating my cereal, trying to ignore Elsa's powerful wee smell. Her nappy looks suspiciously bulgy.

There's a hiss of air as Mum pushes in a plastic stopper. 'Looking forward to trying out our new paddling pool?'

'Not really,' I say. 'Mum, we live in a flat. Why do we need a paddling pool?'

'So we can have *fun*, Meg! I thought we could fill it up and pretend summer's here.'

I look around. Toys, clothes and books are spread all over the carpet and Pongo is running round and round the paddling pool, barking at the inflated rings. 'Mum, there isn't enough room for it in here.'

'There's loads of room,' she says, then she jumps to her feet. 'I'm going to start filling it up.'

Elsa takes the crust out of her mouth and holds it out to me.

'No thanks,' I say, but she keeps jabbing it in my direction.

'Da!' she says. 'Da, da!'

'OK, OK.' I take it off her and pretend to eat it. 'Nom, nom,' I say. 'Happy now?'

Elsa smiles, sticks her thumb in her mouth and flops back on the sofa. Then we watch as Mum runs to and from the kitchen with pans of steaming water. She's wearing her Tinker Bell nightie and her bleached-blonde dreads are gathered on the top of her head with a scrunchie. Her bracelets jangle as each pan of water splashes into the pool.

After six trips, the water just about covers the bottom. 'It's going to take ages,' she says sadly, swishing a toe in the water. 'Can you help me, Meg?'

'Sorry. I've got to get to school.' I go to the mirror over the mantelpiece and start brushing my hair back into a ponytail.

'Such beautiful hair,' says Mum. I can see her in the mirror watching me, her turquoise nose stud gleaming on her pale face. We look so different: me with my dark eyes and hair and Mum, blue-eyed and with hair so blonde it's almost white. 'I wish you'd wear it down.'

'It's easier this way.' I smooth a strand of hair behind my ear and button up my blazer. I brush some toast crumbs off my shoulder. 'Shouldn't you be getting ready for work, Mum?'

'In a minute. I'll just put a bit more water in.'

Mum runs the Mencap charity shop in town. That's her paid job, but she's got loads of others, like fundraising for Greenpeace and running the community allotment. She wants to make the planet a cleaner, better place. It's fair to say she doesn't feel the same way about our flat.

'Meg, can you babysit Elsa after school?' Mum dumps another pan of water into the paddling pool. 'You know my friend Sara, the nurse?' I shake my head. Mum's got so many friends I can't keep up with them all. 'Well, Sara's going to do some volunteer work abroad and she needs a lift to the airport.'

'I don't know …' I think about tonight's jam-packed square on my homework timetable. 'I've got so much work to do … Plus I've got to practise my speech.'

Mum looks at me, eyes wide. 'I'll be back around six. You and Elsa can just hang out together until then. It'll be fun!'

I look at Elsa, who's now lying on her back on the sofa, gurgling and trying to get her foot in her mouth. 'You really need to give Sara a lift?'

'It would help her out a lot,' Mum says, then she pulls me into a hug, pressing my face into her hair and I smell the sandalwood incense she loves so much.

I put up with it for a moment then wriggle out of her arms. 'OK,' I say.

Mum's face lights up. 'What would I do without you?'

Over Mum's shoulder, I see Elsa crawl towards the edge of the sofa, reaching for Pongo's tail. '*Mum!*' I say, but already Elsa is losing her balance. She wobbles for a second then tumbles forward, landing on the floor with a thud.

There's this moment of silence before the screaming starts. Mum darts across the room and scoops Elsa up. 'Poor baby!' she says, showering her with kisses. Pongo jumps up and tries to stick his pointy nose between them.

'I'm going now,' I say, but they don't hear me. Now Pongo's been pulled into the hug too and his excited barks rise over Elsa's screams. I slip out of the flat and shut the door behind me.

Immediately, I'm hit by the quiet, the bright cold air and the view.

Our flat might be small and damp, but it's got the best view in town. I stand on the balcony and look from the houses of the estate to my school. Beyond school, I see the hotels, the sea and the pier. Then I look up at the sky, higher and higher, until I find the moon. It's a white smudge that's disappearing fast.

I turn and run down the concrete stairway, my feet ringing out with each step.

I've got to get to school. I've got so much to do.

THREE

School's good. I get one hundred per cent in a maths test, finally learn how to conjugate German verbs and spend lunchtime in the library researching my favourite star, Alpha Centauri B.

When I know the canteen will be quiet, I go and get some lunch. It looks like almost everyone's been chucked out, but some students from my year – Bella Lofthouse and her friends – are still sitting round a table while the lunchtime supervisors clean up. As I walk past, they glance over at me, and I see Bella's lips curve up in a smile. Quickly, I turn away. Bella is always laughing with her friends and she finds me particularly funny. The longer I hang around the more likely it is that she'll say something to me and somehow I'll end up looking stupid. I grab the first sandwich I see – egg mayonnaise – pay for it, then walk straight out of the canteen.

It's at times like this that I miss Harriet. She was my best friend at school. OK, she was my only friend in or out of school, but that didn't matter because we were soul mates, and we did everything together – walking to school, eating lunch, talking for hours on the phone, sleepovers … Harriet even went camping with me and Mum every summer. Then, one day, she told me that her mum and dad were talking about moving to New Zealand. Five months later, she was gone.

When a huge star dies, there is a massive explosion, a supernova, and later, all that's left is a dark, dense black hole where no light can get in or out. From brilliant lightness to total darkness: that's what it felt like when Harriet left.

When I got over the shock of her going and looked around me, there didn't seem to be a place for me anywhere: everyone else was paired up or in groups. I did try to talk to people, wriggle into their conversations, but Harriet had always done the talking for both of us and I was out of practice. Plus, like I said, I was shocked when she went and feeling a bit like a dark, dense black hole.

Who wants to be friends with a dark, dense black hole? No one!

All that darkness has gone now, but the friend-making

moment seems to have passed by. Which is why, right now, I'm leaning against the wall by the girls' toilets eating an egg sandwich all on my own.

Like I said. Sometimes I miss Harriet.