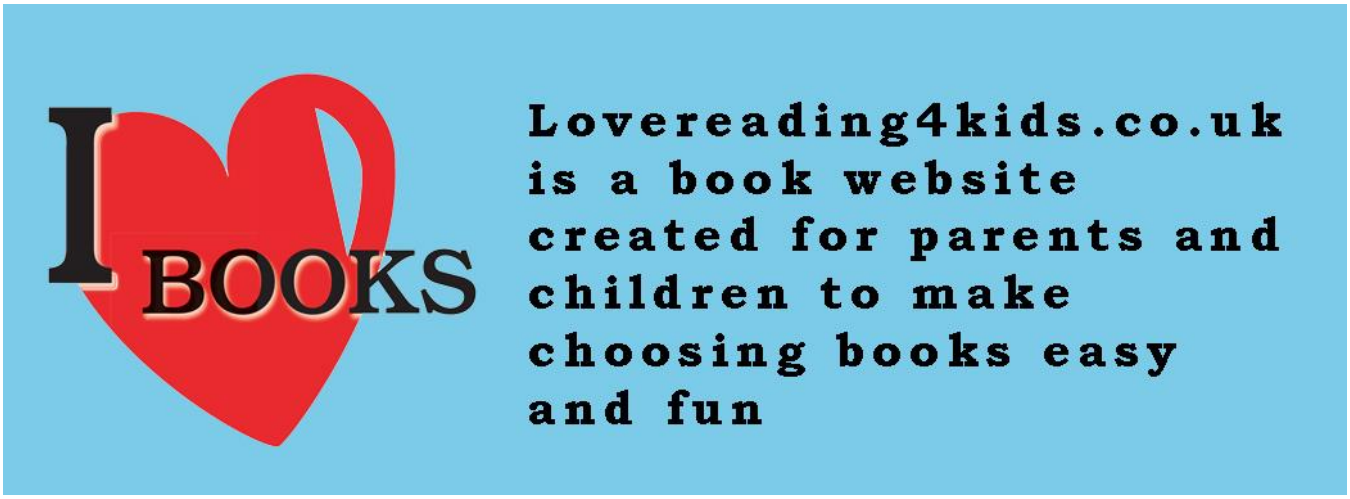


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Written & Illustrated by

Tom McLaughlin

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To Effie, with love

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CHAPTER 2
SEARCH FOR EVERLASTING CUSTARD GOES ON

Jasper sat in Mr Brooks' office, his hands tucked underneath his knees, custard dripping down his belly, the faint whiff of singed hair in the air.

Jasper glanced at Mr Brooks, who was staring at him intently. He was a gruff-looking man with giant ears, the biggest Jasper had ever seen. No matter what he did, Jasper couldn't stop staring at them. Should he say something? he wondered. He probably should, I mean he did just nearly burn down the school; He probably owed Mr Brooks an apology at least.



‘I just wanted to say s—’

‘Shut it, Spam.’

‘Fair enough,’ Jasper muttered.

‘I’ve been looking at your educational record. You know, a history of all the other schools you’ve been to. That’s right, schools with an “s”.’

‘School has always been spelled with an “s”, sir,’ Jasper said, looking a little perplexed.

‘No, the “s” at the end. *Schools.* There have been quite a few.’



'Oh,' Jasper said. 'Yes, I've moved around a bit, I guess.'

'Moved, or been *asked* to move?' Mr Brooks grimaced. 'According to your records, three of your previous schools have burned down.'

'Coincidence,' Jasper snapped.

'All the fires started in the science blocks.'

'Coincidences happen all the time.'

'And you caused all of the fires,' Mr Brooks said, checking his notes.

'I'm not sure what you're getting at, Mr Brooks?' Jasper asked.

'ARE YOU ILL? NOT SURE WHAT I'M GETTING AT?! YOU KEEP BLOWING UP EVERY SCHOOL YOU GO TO!'

'Not every one. Just three out of five.'

'That's still too many. There isn't a correct number of schools that it's OK for you to have blown up. No schools, that's how many I've blown up. That counts as a pupil and a teacher. I've only just started here and I haven't blown it up yet.' Mr Brooks pressed the button on his intercom.

'Miss Jones, how many schools have you blown up?'

'So far today?' Miss Jones replied through the intercom.

'So far today . . .'

'None,' Miss Jones replied. 'By the way, the doctor rang about having your ears pinned back—'

Mr Brooks quickly pressed the button on the intercom. 'I think we've heard enough,' he said, running his fingers through his wispy hair.

'But sir, I'm an inventor.'

'All you've invented, Spam, is exploding schools.'

'It's not true, I've invented lots of things. And anyway, isn't the school motto *Who Dares Wins*?'

'No, that's the SAS, you clot. Our school motto is *Excel in Being Average.*'

'Oh. Well, it doesn't matter. I'm an inventor. All I was doing was fulfilling my potential.'

'All right then, Spam, what have you ever invented? Go on, I'm all ears.'

'So it would seem.'

'What?'

'Nothing,' said Jasper, trying to wipe the smile

from his face. 'I've invented lots of things. Today's attempt at making everlasting custard was less than successful, I grant you. But I made a pair of electric slippers once, so you could see where you were going if you needed a midnight wee.'

'Electric slippers?! What did you do, strap a couple of torches to them?'

'I didn't know you were familiar with my inventions,' Jasper said, scratching his head.

'Oh, for the love of crikey.' Mr Brooks slumped in his chair. 'You leave me with no choice; I'm going to have to expel you. And take my advice: stop trying to be something you're not. I wanted to be a cloud when I was little, but my mother sat me down and told me to stop dreaming and get on with life. Doesn't your mother tell you to stop blowing up schools?'

'I don't really have a mum or dad, just a nan.'

'Oh well, hmm, that's awkward . . . OK, I'm going to be your mother for a moment.'

'Will I have to call you Mummy?'

'No, and don't interrupt.'

'Sorry Mummy.'

'Stop calling me Mummy. Let me be frank—'

'Who's Frank? Is he my dad?'

'Please stop talking and listen. You're not going to be an inventor. You're not going to be rich—'

'Who's Rich?'

'You're not going to have lots of money. You won't be famous either. Now, please get out of my school before I jump out of the window.'

Jasper sighed, then got up and walked out of Mr Brooks' office. He grabbed his school bag, or what was left of it, and headed for the exit. What was his nan going to say? Maybe he could get up every morning and pretend to go to school. Maybe she'd never find out. He was nine, he only had to do it for another seven years or so. Nah, she was bound to notice that he wasn't getting any reports . . . or homework . . . Come to think of it, it was probably his worst idea since he'd invented the hover toaster. Now *that* had been a proper fire. Jasper trundled home, cold, covered in now-lumpy custard, his burnt hair wafting in the wind.



'Evening, Rover,' Jasper said as the ginger tom cat ran up to him and rubbed himself against his legs. Jasper stroked his belly and tickled his ears. Rover purred and looked up at Jasper, his eyes closing with contentment.

'At least someone likes me. Mark my words, Rover. I'll invent something that'll change the world!'

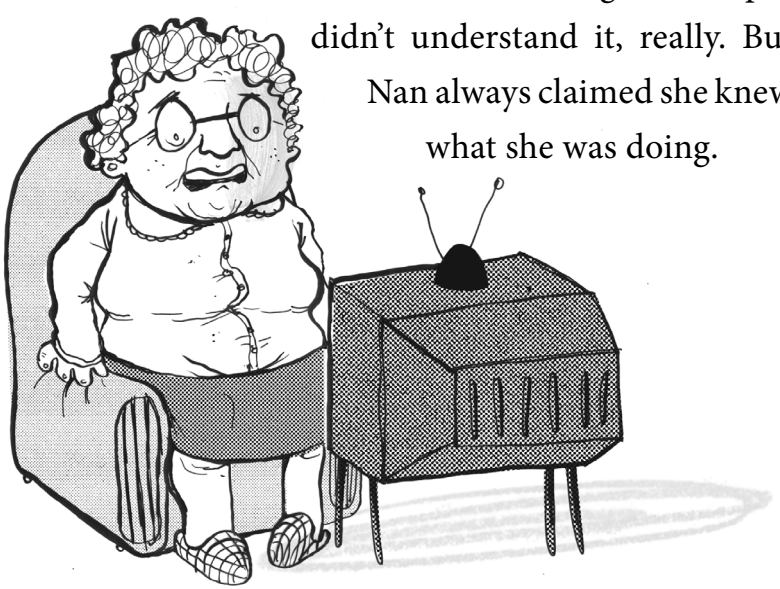
'Meow,' Rover replied.

Jasper had had Rover for as long as he could remember. He liked to think of him as a member of the family rather than just a pet. It was always the three of them, Jasper, Rover and Nan. Jasper's mum and dad weren't around any more; there had been a bad accident years ago. His nan didn't talk about it much. All he knew was that his parents hadn't been all that kind, so Jasper didn't ask. He had Nan and Nan had him and that's all they needed. He sometimes got funny looks when he explained his family situation to people, but he liked it. *What's wrong with being different*? he often thought.

Jasper walked down the garden path towards the front door, put the key in the lock, then took a deep breath and smiled.

'Hi Nan—'

'Not now, sunbeam,' his nan interrupted. She was busy studying the newspaper while the TV blared in the background. 'Come on you beauty. Get in you beauty! It's the three-thirty from Kempton, a dead cert, my lad!' Nan shouted. Nan always shouted, partly because she was slightly hard of hearing and mostly because the TV was always on at full blast. Nan's favourite was the racing. She liked to have a little bet on the horses, but she'd been known to bet on the dogs too. Jasper didn't understand it, really. But Nan always claimed she knew what she was doing.



'I heard from a guy in the pub, whose son works down at the yard, who is friendly with the guy who mucks out the horses, that this is a certain winner. Come on my little beaut, come on number seven!' she yelled.

'Which one's number seven?' Jasper said, hoping a big win might help soften the blow that he'd been kicked out of another school.

'The one in the yellow stripes.'

'The one that's running a different way to the others?' Jasper asked, staring at the TV screen.

'What?! Oh number seven, what are you doing? You're supposed to jump over the fence, not eat it.'

They watched for a few more seconds. 'Is he lying down?' asked Jasper.

'Oh no, not again. Why do I always pick the wrong'uns?'

'He's actually fallen asleep mid-race. I didn't think that was even possible.'

'Bottoms!' Nan yelled as she grabbed the remote and turned off the TV. 'What a donkey.' She turned to Jasper and looked at him for the first time since

he'd got home. 'Where's your clothes? Why are you home early? What's that burning smell? Oh no. You didn't, did you? Another school? Jasper!' she sighed.

So much for wondering how to break the news to her, thought Jasper. She'd managed to work it out within two point three seconds, a new record.

'Before you start, Nan, it wasn't my fault.' Jasper took a moment to remember exactly what had happened. 'OK, some of it was my fault, but all I was trying to do was make our fortune. I know I can do it, I can change the world, get us out of this house, so we don't have to worry about money again. I just need to get it right.'

'Jasper, Jasper, I know, lad. You're a genius, you just need to get your break. But we can't keep doing this, we can't keep changing schools. You need an education, son.'

'I know, but I just don't think I'm a school sort of person.'

'You need to learn to listen to adults.'

'I listen to you,' Jasper protested.

'But I'm not your teacher . . .' Nan stopped.

'What is it?'

'Maybe I should be your teacher. I mean I couldn't do any worse than the others.'

'Hmm, well, hmm, it's an interesting idea, but haven't things changed since you were at school?'

'There are certain things that will always stay the same. I could be your teacher, then you could spend more time in the shed, doing science stuff and I'd be on standby in case anything should, you know, explode,' Nan said, rubbing her hands.

'OK, firstly, it's a laboratory, not a shed, secondly . . . Wait, I can't think of a secondly,' Jasper said.

'That's because it's a great idea!' Nan smiled.

'Meow,' Rover added.

'You see, even the cat agrees!' Nan laughed.

'Oh well, if the cat agrees, I guess we have to do it.' Jasper shrugged. 'I suppose it would give me more time to work on my inventions . . .'

'Brilliant, we'll 'ave a hoot. I mean, how hard can it be?'