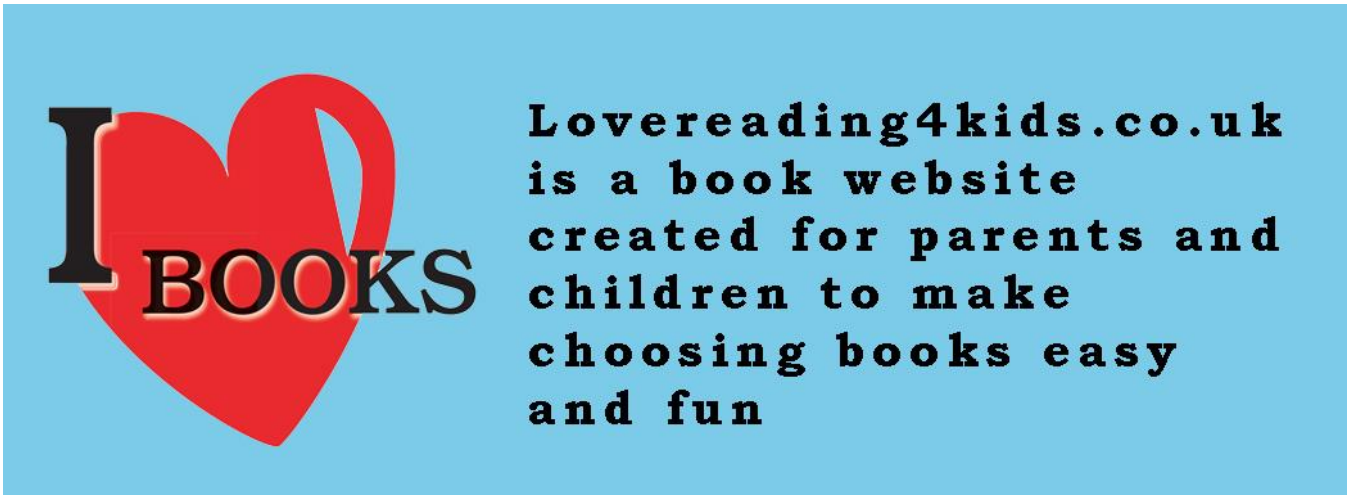


Opening extract from

Straight Outta Crongton

Written by

Alex Wheatle

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1

Three Meals a Day

'Mum! Why d'you let *him* take my dinner money?'

She was sitting on her bed, tying her dressing gown belt around her waist – it needed washing but I had used the last of the bio capsules to clean my PE kit the previous evening. Sleep clogged up the corners of her eyes. Her mascara now looked as if she'd applied it with a mop. Stupid woman couldn't even wash her freaking make-up off before she went to bed.

'Mum!' I repeated.

She stretched and yawned before she finally answered me. 'There are a couple of crusty rolls in the kitchen and I think there's a scrape of peanut butter in the cupboard.'

Her voice sounded rough, as if she had been eating bristled doormats.

'Let *him* eat the rolls,' I spat.

She covered her ears.

'Mum. I need some money for school!'

'Stop shouting, Mo. Can't hear myself bleeding think; I've got a ringing headache. Get off to school. Aren't you late?'

I took my mobile out of my back pocket. Eight-twenty. *Cell bells! Holman's gonna bruise my ears again.*

'I'm going back to bed,' Mum said. She scooped the gunk from her eye with a fingernail and wiped it on her dressing gown before flopping back on to the mattress. 'Take the rolls, Mo, and get off my case, will ya? We didn't get in till after three.'

Half of the quilt was on the floor. There was a dent in the mattress where *he'd* slept. The ashtray was full. The room stank of beer. The bin was full of cans. I swore I'd never drink alcohol. Mum pulled the bedding over her head, turned her back to me and curled up like an unborn baby.

Frustration crackled inside me. 'You're freaking *useless.*'

'So ya always say. Can I get some sleep now?'

I stood there, arms folded, staring at her, but she didn't move a muscle. I heard a noise from the kitchen. *He* was still here. I left Mum's room, slamming the door behind me, and turned into the hallway.

He was sitting down at the kitchen table, sipping a mug of tea. He threw me an oh-shit-Mo-hasn't-gone-to-school-yet look. I hoped he burned his lips. Name-brand trainers niced up his feet. (Where'd he got them? He was supposed to be skint.) He wore a too-tight Real Madrid football shirt, number seven on the back. The shape of his man boobs underneath almost made me spew. Jack Sparrow was inked on his fat right

bicep. A pirate ship was tattooed on the other. His goatee beard scratched his neck. How could Mum smack tongues with him?

I looked at him dead on. 'That five pounds Mum gave you – that's my dinner money.'

'Those rolls in the kitchen are for you,' he said. His reasonable tone pissed me off big time.

'I don't want any freaking stale rolls for lunch; just give me the fiver and I'll be off your radar. You and Mum can go back to your drinking party.'

'You've got a dirty mouth for a fifteen year old,' he said. He stared at me as if he wanted me to smile at his miserable wit but I would *never* give that prick-head the satisfaction.

'If you don't give me that fiver it'll get dirtier,' I challenged.

'And you say you want to do media in college? With a mouth like that? They're not gonna let you read the *Six O'Clock News*.'

'*Photography* and media. And I'm not playing with you, Lloyd. Give me the freaking fiver!'

'I have to sign on today and go for a job interview in Ashburton – warehouse work. You should be wishing me luck.'

'Then use your welfare wheels – your *feet*. You could do with the exercise.'

He gave me a hard look but I didn't give a shit. He wasn't my dad.

'You shouldn't have killed all your money on beer,' I added. 'How much did that cost ya? Or cost *Mum*?'

Lloyd stood up. His chair scraped out behind him. His

glare intensified. He took two strides towards me but I didn't flake. I returned his stare like a shark.

'It was my birthday on Sunday—'

'So?' I cut him off. 'It's Tuesday now. I see them name-brands; you've been spoilt rotten. It was my birthday two months ago and I didn't even get the "n" of nothing!'

'I haven't seen your mum since Friday. Do we have to ask your permission to celebrate?'

'I don't give a freaking spare rib how you celebrate,' I ripped. 'Just gimme the fiver!'

'I'll be getting my money from the social on Friday,' Lloyd said. 'I'll give you back the fiver then. I'll even treat you to a pizza or take you out to the Cheesecake Lounge.'

Sit in the Cheesecake Lounge with him – is he nuts? He must've drunk more than I thought last night. *God!* If I ever got as liquor-happy as them, I hoped someone would put me out of my misery.

'You choose,' he offered. 'My treat.'

Again, his calmness sucked the patience out of me. I stepped up to him and made a grab for his back pocket. He caught my wrist and pushed me away. Lloyd was fat but strong. He picked up his tracksuit top from the back of the chair and pulled it on. Before making his way to the front door he seized me with another stare. 'Mo, you need to calm down. Chill out. What's this all about? Eh? You and Sam having problems?'

'How many times do I have to tell you? Sam *isn't* my boyfriend.'

'Could've fooled me. Have a good day at school.'

I could smell his pound-shop deodorant as he passed by me.

How could Mum sleep with that jailbird? He acted all calm and nice now, but he treated us like shit and got away with it. He was just using Mum but she was in denial. Didn't she ever learn from her past mistakes? When any man gave her attention she went all *I'll-do-whatever-you-want-My-Tonkness*. Stupid woman. *God!* It made me cringe when she called him 'My Tonkness'. It had to stop. We flexed so much better when he wasn't around. If she wouldn't stand up for us, I would.

I ran up behind Lloyd and booted the back of his left leg as hard as I could. He hopped as he turned around. First shock then anger filled his eyes. I tried to punch him in the ribs but my fist only found flab. I aimed to boot his balls. 'Gimme back my freaking fiver, you prick!'

He grabbed my arms tight and I felt his fingers crushing into me. He pulled me towards him. I got a blast of stale beer from his mouth. I kicked out again. I didn't quite get his coconuts but caught him somewhere near the groin. He closed his eyes and grimaced on contact. *Good!*

His nails were scoring my skin and his eyes narrowed into hateful slits. He released his grip and shoved me away. I lost my footing and crashed down on my butt.

'*Enough, Mo!*'

His fat cheeks were twitching. He made a crunched fist. He was simmering. Dread flooded through my arteries. He wouldn't dare.

'*Don't* push me, Mo! I don't wanna hurt you. Why can't you accept that me and your mum are tight now? *Deal* with it.'

'Is that what you do to Mum when you don't get what you want? Is it? When she can't give you the money you want?

Like pushing girls over, do you? Did you do time for that too? Why don't you take your bad-breed, fist-happy self back to prison where your lumpy ass belongs?'

Lloyd paused. I knew my last comment burned him. *Good!*

'Go to school, Mo.' He opened the door. 'Try to calm down.'

'Don't come back!' I screamed after him.

He slammed the door. I opened it and shouted down the stairs. 'Leave me and Mum alone!'

Lloyd didn't reply. I went back inside.

I stomped back into Mum's bedroom. 'Did you see that, Mum? *Your boyfriend* was about to hit me. *Your* jail-bird, saggy-ass, can't-get-a-job boyfriend. And it ain't the first time.'

Nothing.

'Mum?' She was fast asleep. I shook her awake. 'I said, he was about to smack me again, Mum!'

She rolled on to her back but she didn't open her eyes. 'He's promised not to lay a finger on you ever again. I made him say that to ya in front of ya face. And didn't he apologise? He's been trying to make it up to ya ever since, Mo, but you won't let him. Now go on with ya! I don't wanna get any more letters.'

With that she curled back into a ball. I glared at her shape.

I hated living here. Hated it!

I went back to my room to get my stuff. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror – my hair was like a bad 1980s pop video, but whatever. I grabbed my school rucksack and headed out.

I'd gotta find somewhere else to live. Maybe Elaine would have me.

2

Sam Bramwell

We lived at number thirteen on the second floor of Slipe House in South Crongton. It'd been home for as long as I could remember but Mum said when I was a baby we'd spent some time in a hostel for beat-down women. She didn't say much about those days.

I felt my shoulder throb and wondered if the council had a place for teenage girls who were being smacked-down by their mum's boyfriends.

I trudged down one flight of concrete steps. Sam's mum was standing outside her front door, wearing her bus-driver's uniform and a suspicious expression.

'What's with all the cussing and slamming going on upstairs? Are you and Clarrie-May all right?'

Lorna Bramwell was seven years older than my mum but she looked a world younger.

'We're good,' I replied. 'It's the same old. Had a slight disagreement with Mum's boyfriend.'

She approached and inspected me, running a finger over my cheek. Her dyed-amber dreadlocks fell across my shoulder. 'Did he do anything to you, Maureen?'

I wanted to answer 'Yes,' but something stopped me.

It wasn't the first time that Lloyd had had an issue with me. The previous Saturday morning, Sam had come round first thing and fried me some eggs, dumplings and plantain for breakfast. I saved the leftovers to eat later – we were out with Elaine all day – but when I got back home, hungry, and checked the fridge, there was diddly-scratch in there. Mum had given my food to Lloyd. I was steaming. Mum and I had a real ding-dong. I swore, she slapped me, and Lloyd made things worse by weighing in. 'You shouldn't use foul language against your mother,' he said, kinda grinning as if he was enjoying seeing us fight. It was all his fault.

I went to bed furious and famished. Later that night, I noticed Lloyd's Real Madrid shirt drying in the bathroom. I picked it up and pissed on it. The stain covered the number seven. I left it in a heap outside Mum's bedroom door. Lloyd clearly found it because the next morning he crashed into my room and backhanded me while I was still asleep. The force of the blow knocked me out of bed. My nose spilled blood for the longest time and I had to walk around most of that morning with bog paper stuffed up my nostrils while staring at the ceiling.

It was worth it, though. *Hate him!*

'No,' I finally replied to Lorna. 'If he put one fingernail on

me you'd know about it. I'd holler about it from the top of the slab. Trust me on that.'

Lorna angled her head and narrowed her eyes. 'You sure?'

'Double sure.' I smiled. 'It's all minor. I'll be all right.'

'Hmmmm.'

I wanted to change the subject. 'Sam gone?'

'Yes, he left about an hour ago. He needed to finish some homework and wanted to get a book out of the school library.'

'I'll catch up with him,' I said. 'See you later, Ms Bramwell.'

'Try to have a good day, Mo.'

I burned my soles to school but I was still fifteen minutes late. The receptionist was writing my name down in the late-comers' dot com book when I saw Holman. He was wearing a black tie and black shoes so shiny I could see my face. He approached me with his hands behind his back. He was about to say something but he checked himself. He studied my face as if he was a plastic surgeon looking over an ageing A-lister.

'Everything all right, Maureen?' he asked.

'Yeah – why shouldn't it be?'

'You do realise you're late again?'

'Of course I realise! Why do you think I'm in a rush?'

'Do . . . you want to talk to me about anything?'

Does he wait for me every morning at reception in the hope that I'm gonna spill my issues? Dickhead.

'No! I don't wanna talk about anyting. So shift your shiny shoes and let me get to class.'

I didn't wait for Holman's response and felt a bit bad. I knew he meant well but sometimes he got on my case.

I joined Elaine in history. She was wearing enormous fake eyelashes. When she noticed me, she fluttered them. Ms Gorman didn't love my lateness – she didn't say anything but her eyes followed me into my seat. On a screen behind her was an old photograph, in grainy black and white. Something about the rise of the Nazi Party.

'Why are you late?' Elaine asked.

'It's a long one,' I replied.

'And what happened to your hair? More on point, what *didn't* happen to it?'

'I should ask you the same ting about your lashes. You look like you've got the Gates of Mordor stuck over your eyes.'

'Burn you!'

'Burn you back, bitch!'

'Elaine Jackson and Maureen Baker!' Ms Gorman broke our flow. 'If you really want to insult each other, can you at least try to put it on hold until my lesson is completed?'

Sarcastic cow. Gorman thought she was so witty. I swore I'd tell her about her armpits one of these days and point out that her tight trousers won't get her on *Crongton's Top Model*.

'So are you rolling to the movies with us after school?' Elaine whispered.

'I can't,' I replied.

'Why not?'

'Cos my funding's low. I haven't even got any dinner money.'

'Again? Don't fret. I'll get you someting from the Chicken Coop.'

I nodded. 'Wings and fries will go down neatly. They're only £1.99.'

'And we'll get you in to the movies.' Elaine grinned. 'We'll try the same skank we did last time. So stop bitching about your budget and step up.'

'Elaine Jackson!' Gorman shrieked again. 'I realise how difficult this is for you, but can you stop discussing your after-school plans until break? Could you do that?'

'But I've done all the work!' Elaine protested. She stood up, placed her hands on her hips and did that Turkish belly dancer head move – I practised it in my bedroom but could never get it right. 'The Nazis were led by this devious bruv with moustache issues called Hitler. He wanted to blame someone for Germany's issues after the First World War so he pointed a big nasty arrow at the Jews. Then he went all land-greedy cos he wanted *everyone* to do his mad salute. He blitzed the next-door neighbours, Poland, which England didn't love so they declared war and—'

'That's enough of your performance, Elaine,' Gorman cut her off. 'You can sit down. I'm just *asking* you not to interrupt the focus of others.'

Elaine sat down, turned to me and dropped her acting tone. 'So are you coming?'

'What are we gonna watch?'

'Not sure – dunno what's on.'

'I don't care,' I said, 'as long as I can get outta the house.'

Elaine tried to read me again. 'What's kicking off in your yard, Mo?'

'Nothing,' I lied.

We made it to break without Gorman moaning at us again. Elaine went off to see Ms Crawford, her drama teacher, while I looked for Sam – at morning break he was usually in the playground playing table tennis but he wasn't there. I tried the library and there she was, with her swimmer's legs and *Hollyoaks* face: Shevray Clarke, Sam's new squeeze. She was standing outside the entrance with two of her crew, blocking the way, and when she spotted me she cut her eyes as if I'd just eaten her cat and puked it out over her pillow. Peering through a window I could see Sam staring at a computer screen. I decided to be polite to Shevray.

'Can you get out of my way, please?'

Shevray glanced at her two friends before she gave me another eye-pass. 'Can't you leave him alone now?' she spat. 'We all know you're trying to make a play for him. Vacancy's taken, so stop haunting him.'

'Yeah!' One of the other girls glared at me. 'Step off!'

'Shevray, trust me,' I warned, 'it hasn't been a good week for me, so don't drop your insecurity issues on my bunions today. I haven't got time for your shit. Sam and I are just friends – always have been – so get your skinny ass out of my way before I smack your face into a rectangle.'

Shevray wasn't skinny. She had stroke-a-licious legs. It pissed me off no end.

She crossed her arms and tried to glare me out. *Stupid bitch.* As if that was gonna scare me. I returned her stare while almost pushing my face into hers. She backed away a step. 'She ain't worth it,' she said to her sistrens. 'Let's skip.'

Shevray and her crew rolled away. One of them looked

over her shoulder and gave me a bitch look. On another day I would've boxed that stare right into the biology lab but I couldn't be arsed right then. I just wanted to see Sam.

I found him inside at the computers. One half of his head was covered in afro and the other was styled in cornrow plaits. *Cute.* When he became aware of me, he stood up and gave me a warm hug. It was good to feel his arms around me, to sense his cheek against mine. It made me feel all tingly. It reeled me back to the time we dated. I closed my eyes. It lasted three weeks over the summer holidays. None of our friends knew. It was all niceness that way. No one blocking our flow. Stolen kisses in his room when his mum was at work. Me constantly telling him to take his hands off my butt and my chest – I wasn't ready.

Then he had to go to Jamaica with his mum to bury his grandmother. He was gone four weeks. When he came back things were just … awkward. He wanted us to be friends again. I didn't love that decision. In fact I hated it, but I had to ride with it – I'd known him since I was dot years old and if it was a choice between being friends and losing him for good, well, there was no question. Still, it clawed me to see him linking with Shevray. *Why the skirts and blouses would he wanna go there?* I knew damn well why. Long legs, a decent curved bumper and an E4 series face. *Boil her!* I pulled away.

'Better not let Shevray see this,' I laughed. 'What you up to?'

'Oh, just doing my research for the Black History Month wall,' Sam replied. 'About Mary Seacole and her role as a nurse in the Crimean War. It's getting there.'

Sam's Black History Month project was impressive to the max – history was his thing – but I wanted to deal with the Shevray issue. It bugged the heartbeats outta me. 'Your new squeeze tried to block me from stepping into the library just now. You're gonna have to chat to her. Trust me, if she don't back off I'm gonna get coarse with her.'

'She's just upset cos she thinks we see too much of each other.'

'I've known you longer than her,' I protested. 'We grew up together, live in the same slab, went to the same nursery and primary school. We blew out each other's candles at birthday parties. Our mums took us shopping in buggies and—'

'That was then,' Sam cut me off. 'I can't spend as much time with you cos—'

'Cos she gives it up easy. Admit it! That's why you went for her. And in the little time we had . . . I didn't.'

'It's not that.'

'Stop your lying. You're just like the rest of the brothers in our year – some new girl flashes a bit of flesh, pastes on some make-up, wears a Hollywood rom-com bra and all your blood rushes to one place.'

'She's got more to her than that,' argued Sam. 'She's the top swimmer in our school. She's bright.'

'She's bright at dropping her clothes nuff times a day!'

Sam shook his head. 'That's uncalled for.'

It was uncalled for but I wanted to rage at him. 'She gave you grief the other day cos you came around and cooked me brekkie. Admit it! Why d'you tell her?'

'Cos that was the truth.'

'She didn't have to know. That's *our* time.'

'She's my girlfriend, Mo. You want me to lie to her about my movements?'

'What have your movements with me got to do with her? We've been sharing shit for ever. When your mum was outta work I helped you out – brought you groceries – and didn't broadcast it to the whole damn world.'

Sam's face curled into a smile. 'Didn't you jack them from Dagthorn's?' He started laughing. *God! Wish he didn't do that. Fittest of the fittest! Can't believe he's slurping tongues with long-assed Shevray.* 'Do you realise what would've happened if my mum had found out?'

'So? It's the thought that matters.'

'Look, Mo, I appreciate—'

'No, *you* listen,' I cut him off. 'If your girl's gonna spit warts all because you come to my yard now and then, don't bother banging on my gates again. I *mean* it!'

I didn't mean it but I said it. *Shit!* He was the only good thing in my life. When we were kids he'd bring over his Connect Four and we'd play for ever. He'd make me birthday cards from the stuff his mum brought back from work. He calmed me down when me and Mum had a ding-dong. Whenever his mum bought him new garms he'd check with me to see if they were on point. Sam was the one who took me home and nursed my wounds if I got in a fight at school. But he was with *her.*

'It doesn't have to be this way, Mo. We could be good—'

'*Don't* say the F word. I've got all the friends I want. Yes, it *does* have to be this way. Keep yourself outta my radar. You're *hers* now.'

Sam looked at me hard, not quite believing what I laid down. But he had to hear it. *I just can't do this shit any more.*

'If that's how you want it, Mo, I got to respect that. Well . . . Thanks for helping me out with that research about Marcus Garvey,' he said. The tone of his face switched. 'That saved me nuff time.'

Damn! Why is he so reasonable?

'Gotta find Elaine,' I said. I could barely look at him. 'Enjoy your day.'

Before Sam muttered something I was out of there. I didn't look back. I skipped to the girls' toilets, found a cubicle and parked on the seat for the next twenty minutes. I held my face in my hands and cried. I had to let it out.

I managed to compose myself enough for my next lesson. Ms Riddlesworth knew maths was my thing so she never bitched about me being late for class – she just smiled at me as I took my seat.