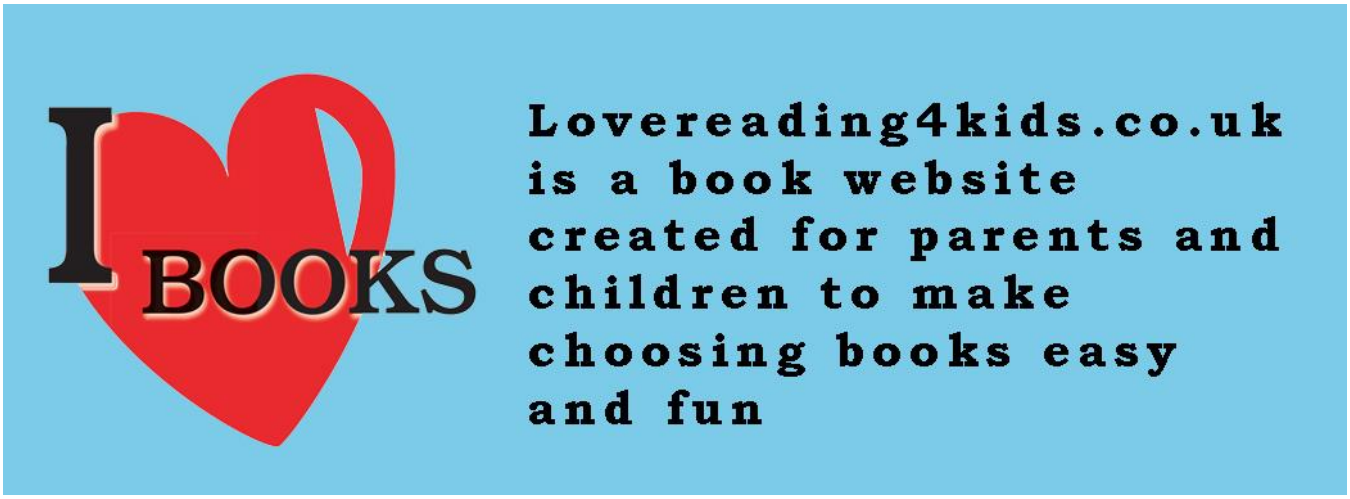


Opening extract from

Love Song

Written by

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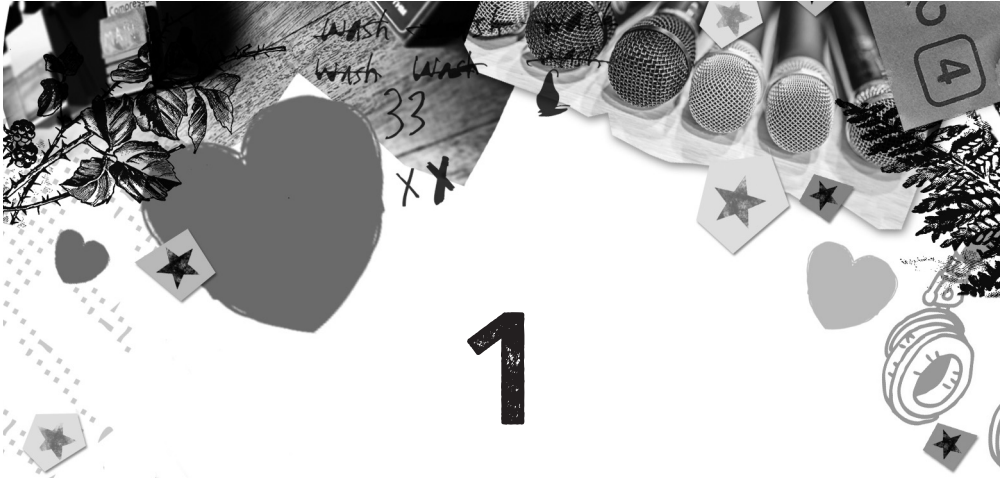
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1

'And so how did you get here today?'

It was a warm summer's day, and my sister Ariel and I were standing in a meeting room in one of the poshest hotels in London. A huge banner with a red and black target logo dominated the back wall, illuminated by a couple of dazzling spotlights. 'Eden' was playing in the background. I still knew every note, every word, every minor chord. I hated it.

The room was full of excited girls. Next to us, a perky interviewer in a green T-shirt was talking to a platinum blonde with a Taylor Swift body, sticking a microphone under her nose.

'So, like, when the concert dates were announced I got, like, ten friends to help me,' the blonde girl answered with an American twang, 'and we all spent, like, forty minutes on our laptops, pressing refresh as soon as the tickets came out. I couldn't get one for the O_2, but then they announced this extra meet-and-greet for the mega-fans and I spent, like, four hundred

dollars on this ticket, plus my air fare from Cincinnati, and here I am.'

She said the whole thing without a flicker of a smile, like one huge 'duh' to Perky Girl – because that was exactly the normal procedure for getting your hands on an Ultimate VIP meet-and-greet ticket to meet The Point these days – and I decided I liked her deadpan attitude.

'Well, that's very interesting,' the interviewer gulped, looking slightly intimidated. 'And how do you *feel* right now?'

'What? Seriously?'

I grinned. If it was possible to distil the essence of *What do you think*? into one raised eyebrow, Deadpan Blonde had mastered it. But once she started talking, her expression changed. Her eyes welled up. Her lips twitched. I watched her try to control herself, but she couldn't help it.

'OK, so I'm excited, obviously,' she said. 'I've met them before, in Chicago, and that time I got to hold Jamie's hand. Which was …' She looked away. '… so …' Whatever it was, she couldn't bring herself to say the words. '… but I didn't really get to say hi to Angus, and I want to tell him … that I … he … he means a lot to me. That's all. The music …'

She bit her lip. The interviewer nodded sympathetically. 'Uh huh. Angus has that effect, doesn't he? They're all so … *scrummy*.'

Yeah, because *scrummy* just perfectly captured all the complicated feelings Deadpan Blonde was struggling with just now.

I tried to catch her eye to offer some sympathy but that moment Ariel grabbed my arm.

'Nina! They're coming!'

She was right. After a flurry of activity in the corridor outside, two massive bodyguards moved in to stand either side of the nearest doorway. Moments later the boys were walking past us in a blur of famous, surrounded by their entourage. Four iconic hairstyles glinted in the light. Last year we studied *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and this motley crew reminded me exactly of Oberon and Titania and their attendant fairies. Ariel squeezed my arm more tightly. We'd seen so many news videos like this – the busy entourage, and the band captured fuzzily behind them. Now they were real, and it was weird to see them in 3D.

As they swept towards the far end of the room, an assistant said something to Jamie Maldon, the singer, and as he turned to answer, he happened to catch my eye. He looked straight at me and smiled. He has the most beautiful lips, all curves and curlicues, and three moles on his left cheek, which Ariel says he hates, but which every Pointer Sister would sell her soul to kiss. He looked at me like he knew me, half questioning, half laughing.

For a moment, all the fame just fell away, and I felt a connection. It was as if he knew me, and he liked me, and he wanted me to like him too. We smiled at each other and …

I was an idiot. One second later, he was giving Deadpan Blonde exactly the same look, and she practically cooed with excitement. Jamie Maldon was famous the world over for that smile. It was one of the reasons he was the superstar of the band, and not Connor Clark the bassist, with peroxide locks and sharp-angled cheeks, who was so uncannily beautiful that it almost hurt to look at him. I couldn't believe I fell for it.

Beside me, Ariel sighed. 'Did you see the way he looked at me?'

'Who?'

'Jamie.' She glowed with happiness.

Goodness, the boy was a male Mona Lisa. Whoever you were, his eyes seemed to follow you round the room. I was even more of an idiot than I thought.

Ariel's eyes glazed over and I could tell she was in the middle of her very own fanfic story. The one where you meet the band, your favourite member spots you across a crowded room, falls instantly in love with you and spends the next twenty chapters trying to win your affections. Ignoring the fact that she's thirteen and he's nineteen. Oh, and like me, she's a schoolgirl and he's a *rock star*. And another minor detail: Jamie was engaged. Taken. Spoken for.

Without another glance, the boys walked over to stand in front of the banner. I still had an image of them in my head from three years ago, when 'Amethyst' came out. They all had a schoolboy-rebel look about them then – tight jackets, white shirts, scruffy trousers and James Dean hair. Now they were glossier and more designer. Their faces had developed sharper lines, their hairstyles were more extreme. Close up, they looked frailer than I'd expected, and tired too, despite their cheerful smiles.

Meanwhile, the door to the corridor opened again. Two girls entered. One was tall, pretty, serious and dressed in sober black. The other was a tiny, curvy figure in a white cotton dress with trailing cut-out sleeves.

'*OMIGOD*!' she announced, beaming at us all. 'I've never

DONE this before! You must be all Jamie's little meet-and-greet fans! You guys are just BEYOND!'

I stared at her, then looked at Ariel.

'Is that …?'

My sister nodded.

Sigrid Santorini was a Hollywood rom-com star who had started going out with Jamie at Christmas. Three months later, they were engaged. *Backstage with Sigrid*, her reality TV show, was required viewing at school. If you didn't know that Sigrid's chihuahua was called Ryan, or that she once skydived for charity in a pink bikini, then you wouldn't understand half the conversations in the sixth-form common room.

And here she was, grinning at us all as if it was really her we'd come to see. It was fascinating how the room seemed to refocus around her. She was more compact, thinner and somehow brighter than the rest of us. In the flesh, she was even more spectacular than on TV. She seemed to glow, from her tumbling black hair to her lightly-freckled, golden skin and clear blue eyes that sparkled almost as intensely as the utterly ginormous diamond on her left hand. She was like a slightly-smaller-than-lifesize perfect doll.

Next to me, Deadpan Blonde groaned. 'I don't believe it. It's like she's following Jamie everywhere these days.'

Several of the Pointer Sisters turned to glare at Sigrid as she stalked over to stand near her fiancé in teetering heels. When you've paid four hundred dollars for an Ultimate VIP ticket, you don't want to be labelled as a 'little meet-and-greet fan'.

'Did you see the diamond?' Deadpan Blonde whispered to us.

I nodded. The rock on Sigrid's engagement ring was impossible to miss – the size of a Malteser and glittering on her hand like a distant star.

'Isn't it beautiful?' Ariel sighed.

Um … Large, yes. Beautiful … maybe. For me, in order to be beautiful, something has to be more than just very, very big and shiny. It has to produce an emotion, and the only emotion it made me feel was worry about what would happen if she lost it.

'Did she choose it?' I asked.

'Oh no!' Ariel said. 'Didn't you hear? About the proposal?'

I shrugged. 'It was at night, wasn't it?' I remembered something about moonlight. Also a car.

Deadpan Blonde and Ariel shared a look. The Proposal was obviously a Pointer Sister story. Something you had to know about in all its gory details if you were a true fan.

'Sigrid turned twenty-two in March,' Deadpan Blonde recounted. 'She had a crazy party at this big hotel in Las Vegas.'

'The one Prince Harry stayed in,' Ariel added breathlessly.

'But Jamie whisked her away from it, like, secretly, and flew her to the California coast, and he'd hired this car …'

'A pale blue vintage Mustang convertible,' Ariel specified. (Truly was she our father's daughter.) Oh yeah – the Mustang. I liked the Mustang.

'And he took her to her favourite restaurant,' Deadpan Blonde went on, 'and he'd hired the whole place, so it was just them and this pianist playing jazz …'

'And he proposed to her on the terrace, overlooking the ocean,' Ariel concluded. 'With the diamond.'