



A 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 O₂, 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 ... *scummy*.'

Yeah, because *scummy* 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.'

As you do.

'And she said yes,' I assumed.

As you would. If you were a rom-com star like Sigrid and still believed in heartfelt proposals from nineteen-year-old rock gods with Mona Lisa smiles, who would never, obviously, cheat on you, and seriously intended to spend the next seventy-plus years of their lives hooked up to you and only you.

'It was just ... so ... romantic,' Ariel sighed dreamily. 'He's such a wonderful person.'

This made me smile. While the details were hazy, I did remember that after the news was announced, many of the Pointer Sisters had queued up to hate Sigrid online, or threaten to kill themselves, or her. But my little sister just saw the good in his proposal.

It was Ariel's soul that was beautiful, I thought. She'd never said so out loud, but I'd seen her practise her signature in the back of her notebooks: *Ariel Maldon, Ariel Maldon, Ariel Maldon*. There had been hope. Crazy hope, but hope. Now there was none. The rest of the family teased her about her passion for Jamie, but not me. I'm an expert in heartbreak. A black belt in unrequited love. I know it hurts enough as it is, and it takes all your energy to heal.

'Why don't you tell him you're happy for him?' I suggested at the time. 'Nobody else seems to be.'

And so she did – in a long video, describing all her favourite Jamie moments, culminating in the-diamond-by-the-ocean. And by some miracle he saw it, and wrote back saying how touched he was, and how he'd noticed she'd said she couldn't get tickets for any of his shows, and so he was sending her a couple for

the special meet-and-greet today, with his love.

With his love.

And his signature, and a kiss.

Ariel had been walking on clouds ever since. She wore the paper with his signature on it in an old locket, hanging near her heart.

It made her feel ... 'happy'.

God.

By now, the boys were in position at the back of the room, ready for the fans to file past them for the meet-and-greet. The two bodyguards stood nearby, arms folded, making it clear that nobody was getting close unless they wanted it to happen. Meanwhile, dark-dressed members of the entourage bustled about, getting us all into something approaching an orderly queue.

Ariel and I were about halfway down, which gave us plenty of time to watch the boys in action. They certainly weren't painful to look at, though they didn't look like any real boys I knew. Over the years each of them had developed his own sense of style. Connor used to look like an angel who'd just stepped out of a Renaissance painting. Then he had his peroxide hair cut super short and now he was more like a visiting alien. He emphasized the effect in a silver T-shirt and spray-on jeans. Angus, the guitarist, was black and moody from slicked-back quiff to biker-booted toe. George, the frizzy-haired drummer, wore a sleeveless vest to show off his bodybuilder physique. Jamie's loose silk shirt was probably a one-off by a designer mate of his. I knew this because Ariel and Mum had

had a long conversation about it over breakfast.

The Point were famous for their jokey friendship, and it was one of the things Ariel loved most about them. There was lots of laughter and silly gestures, kisses, hugs and stupid faces. They hit their mark for every photograph – eyes front, smiling – and all the fans walked away beaming.

‘I feel sick,’ Ariel moaned, clutching her tummy as we moved forward.

‘Not long now,’ I murmured.

‘I know. That’s why.’

It was Deadpan Blonde’s turn. She sauntered across the floor, handed her details to the photographer’s assistant and walked over to the spot where the band were standing. She already had Connor Clark’s full attention. He was looking her up and down like she was a lobster in a restaurant and he’d just ordered lobster.

She posed between him and Angus, legs casually crossed, doing a peace sign. They spoke to her briefly and that strong emotion from earlier suffused her face. Whatever they said, it had obviously made the four-thousand-mile trip worthwhile.

‘Go. GO.’

Ariel was being lined up to go over already, and I hadn’t even noticed.

It didn’t take a big detective to work out who was here for the band, and who was just here as a chaperone. Ariel was wearing an oversize blue T-shirt she designed herself, with handwritten lyrics from her favourite Point songs, surrounded by glitter doodles of their signatures. Her hair was dip-dyed sky blue from waist to shoulder – because Jamie often said his

favourite colour was blue – and blonde from the shoulders upwards, because once he said it was yellow. I was in one of my old painting shirts and the first pair of shorts I could find.

‘Go on. Have fun!’ I said, pushing her forwards.

She hesitated, looking terrified. ‘Come with me?’

For the sake of speeding things up, I took her hand and we walked across the brief expanse of carpet towards the band.

The boys looked over at us and smiled. ‘Where d’you want us?’

And there we were, face to face with the most famous faces on the planet, and I kind of got why Ariel was so nervous. I wasn’t a fan and even I was practically having an out-of-body experience. It was like meeting the Queen, or walking on the Moon: definitely happening, and yet somehow impossible.

Ariel was lost for words, but the band had done this a thousand times before. Angus and Connor scooted up one way and Jamie and George went the other, leaving spaces in the middle for Ariel and me.

‘Oh, I’m not in this,’ I explained.

I had just spoken to the collective Point. Weird. Weird. I said human words to them, and they understood.

‘Sure you are,’ Jamie said, with a sultry grin, motioning me next to him.

‘No, really. I’ll just take a picture.’

He shrugged, moved in a little and put his arm around Ariel. She stared blankly ahead. Anyone else might think she was brain dead, but I could see her emotions were in lockdown: she was too overwhelmed to think.

While the photographer lined up the official shot, I got busy

with my camera. I got into position in front of them and framed the shot so the boys and Ariel filled the screen. It looked bizarrely familiar after seeing their faces, just like this, on countless videos and posters. Now here was my sister's face right in the middle of them, as if I'd Photoshopped her in.

'Loving the hair,' Jamie said, picking up a strand of it and laying it across his upper lip like a moustache. 'Great colour.'

'I know,' Ariel breathed, happily.

Meanwhile, George gave her bunny ears, Angus scowled seductively, and Connor did his 'Connor-face' thing, which was his mysterious middle-distance stare. The photographer snapped the official picture. I took mine. And it was over.

Except it wasn't.

As soon as the photographer nodded that she'd got the shot, Ariel suddenly got her courage from somewhere.

'Thank you for the tickets,' she said shyly, turning to Jamie.

'Um ... the tickets?'

'The ones you sent for today. I did the video about your proposal.' He still looked blank. 'The one saying how romantic it was. And you wrote back, remember?'

'Um ... yeah ... sure.'

My heart lurched. It was obvious, to me at least, that Jamie didn't remember at all. Getting his note was the greatest moment of my sister's life, but to him, she was just another loved-up girl in a long queue of them – not as glamorous as his fiancée and not even as cool as Deadpan Blonde. My heart ached for her.

Move on, Ariel. Jamie clearly has no idea who you are.

'Come on,' I said, gently. 'Let's go.'

But Ariel stood there, glowing with the joy of standing next to her idol. Nothing would make her move if she could help it.

'Did I hear you right?' said a voice from behind me. I spun round. Sigrid Santorini was directing the beam of her film-star smile straight at my sister. 'You did a *video* about us?'

'Yes,' Ariel whispered, staring at her shoes.

'Well, aren't you *THE MOST*?' Sigrid laughed, fluttering her fingers, so the diamond flashed in the light. I caught sight of Angus watching it with the faintest hint of a sneer.

'What's your name?' Sigrid asked.

'Ariel,' she breathed.

'And where are you from?'

'Croydon.'

Sigrid's eyebrows shot up. 'Croydon? Really?'

Yeah, that area of South London Sigrid would so *obviously* have heard of. But she seemed intrigued, or faked it well.

'You're so *fascinating*,' she said. 'Jamie, baby, we must get a picture. Us two with little Rachel here, with that beautiful blue hair. Isn't she charming? Would you like that, Rachel? My assistant can take it and put it on Instagram. Pamela!'

The girl in dark clothing emerged from the shadows and dutifully took Sigrid's phone. While Pamela nudged me out of the way so she could get a good shot, Sigrid squeezed herself next to Jamie, manoeuvring Ariel in front of her. Standing to one side, I glanced back at the queue. This was all taking precious time from the meet-and-greet. The remaining girls did not look happy. Nor did Angus, whose moody pose was morphing into something like disgust.

Sigrid adjusted her hair so it cascaded over one shoulder,

and her pose so she was perfectly three-quarters on. She sucked in her cheeks and turned on her million-dollar smile. *Wham!* It was like switching on floodlights. She radiated joy. It was almost as if there was an aura of light around her.

In fact, there was an aura of light around her, bright and flickering. And a strange, unpleasant smell.

'Fire!'

The word was out of my mouth before I knew I was shouting.

'OMIGOD! WHERE?' Sigrid yelled.

I gasped. It seemed to be all around them. Somehow, the banner behind the band had caught light. It was disintegrating super-fast, sending gossamer-light, glowing specks of fabric floating through the air.

Adrenaline pumped through me. *Nononono ...*

I'd been here before. My little sister in a flimsy witch's cape, going up in flames in front of me. Not now. Not again.

I thought of Aunt Cassie, and how quickly she'd reacted all those Halloweens ago when Ariel's cape had brushed the top of a burning candle. For an instant, I pictured Mum howling Cassie's name, but I pushed the image away. What now mattered was to make sure Ariel was safe.

I reached forward, grabbed her by the arm and pulled her out of the way. With lightning speed, the lurking bodyguards did the same for the boys, taking two each and bundling them through the crowd to the nearest exit. Around us, the meet-and-greet descended into chaos. Alarms went off. Girls screamed. People started running in a stampede for the doors. I was about to follow them when behind us, somebody shouted.

'HELP ME! SOMEBODY, HELP ME!'

I looked back. Sigrid was still rooted to the spot, paralysed with shock. The banner had almost burnt itself out but she was staring down at the trailing sleeves of her white dress, where little flames were licking upwards, burning their way through the cotton like advancing armies of light.

'WATER!' she screamed. 'I NEED WATER!'

As I glanced around for something to put out the fire, I noticed that at the back of the stampede, several people had paused to get their phones out and video the scene. *Way to go. Don't help – just put it on the internet, why don't you?* Meanwhile, Sigrid whirled her arms in terror, and the flames rose higher, like burning wings.

There was a table nearby, covered with a big dark cloth and set with bottles of mineral water. The girl who'd taken the Instagram picture grabbed one of them and sprayed it in Sigrid's direction. Only a few drops reached her and they did no good. The girl reached for a second bottle, but before she could get hold of it, I'd grabbed the cloth underneath and sent the lot flying.

'WHA—?' Sigrid gasped, horrified to see the precious bottles falling.

I rushed over to her with the tablecloth held out in front of me, and wrapped her in it, wrestling her to the floor as I went. I rolled her over inside the cloth and threw myself on top of her for good measure.

'OW! GET OFF ME!' she shouted. 'HEY! What are you doing?'

'I need ... to stop ... the air ...' I panted, straddling her with my body. After Ariel's Halloween terror, I knew more than I

wanted to about how to put out a person on fire. The best way was to wrap them in something thick and heavy, fast, and keep it there until all the flames were out.

The ground shuddered under the weight of heavy footsteps.

'Oi! You!' a gruff voice shouted. 'Get away from her.'

Sigrid's frightened eyes flicked to something in the distance behind me. I glanced back through falling flecks of ash to see a bodyguard the size of a small hatchback bearing down on us both. Beyond him, Jamie hovered anxiously, helpless and terrified.

'You! Move!' the guard repeated.

'I can't!'

But before I could explain what I was doing, his strong hand had hauled me off Sigrid and dumped me face down on the ground beside her. My shoulder hit the floor with a crack. A big, heavy knee dug firmly into the small of my back.

It hurt. A lot.

'Get off my sister!' Ariel yelled desperately, trying to pull him away.

He ignored her, and kept the knee where it was. 'You all right, miss?' he asked.

Well, obviously not. But he wasn't talking to me, he was talking to Sigrid.

'I ... no. OW. My hand ...' she moaned.

'Don't worry. It's under control now,' he said, pressing down on me even harder.

With my head squished against the carpet, my vision went blurry. All I could really see was flashes of coloured light bouncing off the Malteser diamond as Sigrid flexed her fingers to

check her left hand was OK, while Jamie crouched consolingly beside her now the big, bad teenager was out of the way.

At least I hadn't paid four hundred dollars for the privilege of being here today. I made a mental note never again to try and save the life of a celebrity.

It sucked.