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Opening extract from

Love Bomb

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I sing Betty to sleep.

Lined up on her changing table is a box containing eighty-seven 'True Lilac' envelopes, a fountain pen and a pad of Vergé de France *ivory paper. I pull off a sheet and run my hands over the cool blank surface. My skin is as pale as the paper. I take out a new envelope and look at Betty lying in her cot.*

She's started blowing dream-bubbles, her lips opening and shutting, and her cheeks are a rosy pink. The

thin curtain lifts on a breeze and her whisper-fine hair trembles.

I haven't got much time.

'Plumface is 15!' I write on the envelope. Then I pause. I feel so tired. Through the open window, I hear the neighbours' boys scream as they jump in their paddling pool. Then I enclose my words with a big cartoon heart, open the pad of paper and start to write . . .



Later . . .

Holy smoke . . . school actually *started* seven minutes ago and here I am, playing with Lego. I shake Frosties into my mouth, glug down some warm milk and abandon my last birthday presents. I'm actually going to have to *run* to school. At least I get to try out my brand new Puma trainers . . . gold stripe!

I fly down the road and cut through Sunrise Senior Living, glancing down every now and then to admire my retro feet.

‘Get off the grass!’ yells an old lady from her kitchen window. I smile and wave, then run across the car park, sending a flock of baby seagulls squawking into the sky.

Clambering up the wall by the art block, I manage to hover on the top for a second before losing my balance and crashing down on the other side. A last-minute roll saves me from injury and I lie on the ground, catching my breath, kind of regretting the warm milk.

‘Explain yourself, Betty Plum!’

Oh bum. I know that voice.

‘Hello, Mrs Pollard,’ I say sweetly, scrambling to my feet. My head teacher sucks in her breath and grips her clipboard with white fingers. As usual, I have filled her with rage, but for some reason she’s suppressing it. And that’s when I realise she’s not alone. Standing behind her, leaning against the fence and staring up at the sky is a boy.

At least, I think he’s a boy. He’s almost too gorgeous to be real. It’s like a film star has dropped into our playground. My heart goes mental and I blush. I *never* blush

and the only time my heart's felt like this was when I was electrocuted by a toaster. I look at the new boy again and see pale skin, a mesmerising mouth and wild dark hair. *Vampire*, I think. *No, Betty, stupid, vampires don't exist*. He's just supernaturally hot. My heart pounds as if it's trying to escape from my body. What's happening to me?

The new boy yawns and I gaze at his long curling lashes. Wow. They are *Beautimus Maximus*. They make me feel faint! And then I realise what this means. Something momentous has just occured: I fancy the new boy! This is literally the first time in my life I have fancied someone *real*. Unlike my friend Kat, I don't wander through school, tongue hanging out, drooling over 'the talent' and giving boys marks out of ten . . . until now that is.

Because New Boy is definitely a ten out of ten.

'I'm still waiting,' says Mrs P, tapping her clipboard with her pen.

I can't speak. I've just FALLEN IN LOVE and now my mouth won't work. How can Mrs P fail to register the epic sexual tension in the air? Doesn't she feel awkward?

'Sorry, miss,' I finally manage. 'As I was running to school, I found an old man out walking in his pyjamas so I took him back to his old folks' home.' She doesn't look very impressed so I add, 'He had *bare* feet.'

'Hmmm,' says Mrs P, eyes narrowed.

'It's true!' I'm indignant because this did actually happen . . . several weeks ago. 'He gave me this to say thank you.' I pull off the flat cap I'm wearing and shove it under her nose.

'Hmmm,' she says again, making a few notes on her clipboard. 'You may have noticed we have a visitor, Betty.' Slowly, oh so slowly, the new boy lowers his eyes from the sky. 'This is Tobias Gray and he will be joining your year group.'

'Toby,' he says, his deep voice tickling my stomach.

'What's that?' Mrs P says.

'I'm called Toby.'

'Right. Make Tobias feel welcome, and join me at lunchtime to discuss . . .' she wiggles her finger in little circles, indicating my purple nails, bracelets, trainers and flat cap, '*everything*.'

'But, miss, it's my birthday!' She is unmoved and turns and walks away.

Toby straightens up and looks in my direction. I freeze. His eyes are a startling pale blue and more catlike than Mr Smokey's (who is actually a cat). A smile plays on his lips and the hairs on my arms stand on end. Then, quick as a flash, he winks at me before following Mrs P.

I've never been winked at before. Not a boy–girl wink. I watch him go. His trousers are non-regulation and too skinny, and he's rolled his blazer sleeves up. Mrs P hates us doing that. He's so tall that as he passes the wheelie bins he has to duck to avoid being hit by a low-hanging branch that reaches into the playground.

He looks back at me.

My mouth is hanging open and my hands are pressed into what I believe is my heart area.

He smiles and turns away.

Not cool, Betty, not cool at all.

Somehow, I manage to return to planet Earth and stagger to art. After giving Miss Summons a lame 'late bus' excuse, I go and find Kat doing something disgusting with human hair. Bea is nowhere to be seen.

'Miss's son works at a hairdresser's,' explains Kat, her face wrinkled with disgust as she sprinkles blonde fluff on to a pile of PVA glue. Her perfect shell-pink nails push stray hairs back into the heart she's making. 'Apparently, I'm experimenting with the fragility of the human body.'

I drop into the seat opposite her. 'It looks like you're experimenting with being a serial killer,' I say. 'But forget about hair, Kat – look at me.' I point at my face

with both fingers so she can't miss it. 'Do I look different?'

She studies me, wrinkling up her nose. 'Do you look fifteen and not fourteen?'

'No, but thanks for remembering.'

'Are you a bit red because Mrs P told you off in front of that *lush* new boy? I saw through the window.'

'No, Kat, I am a bit red because someone has just made my heart explode and I believe I have *fallen in love*.'

'I knew you and Mrs P had a special thing going on, always hanging out together at lunchtimes and after school –'

'Those are called *detentions*.'

'Joke, Betty,' says Kat, grinning. 'You fancy the new boy. Course you do. He's eight and a half out of ten, totally gorgeous –' Kat disappears under the desk – 'and so is this!' She pulls out a huge helium balloon. 'Happy birthday, Betty! Look, Eeyore and Pooh are

hugging Tigger. You're Tigger, I'm Eeyore and Bea is Pooh.'

I tie the balloon to the end of my hair and we watch as it starts to drift towards the ceiling.

'Hey,' she says, 'it makes your hair float.'

'Thanks, Kat,' I say, and we smile shyly at each other. We are kind of newish friends so this balloon is special. In our first GCSE art lesson, I volunteered to pose for figure sketching and did a series of demented poses. Only Bea and Kat laughed, even though they were *very* funny. I got sent out, but it was worth it because the three of us have been hanging out together ever since.

The timing couldn't have been better. My two so-called *best friends*, Charlie and Amber, had just abandoned me. At the start of term, Charlie went to live with her dad in Manchester and Amber's parents sent her to a private school for a 'fresh start', or possibly just to get her away from me.

‘Kat,’ I say, pulling the balloon down, ‘I need your help.’

She pushes her hairy art aside and makes her face look serious. ‘Go on,’ she says.

‘So, there’s this new boy, Toby, and he looks *just* like a hot vampire.’ She nods. She understands – she’s seen him. ‘He stared at me like he wanted to *devour* me.’ Kat raises her eyebrows in alarm. ‘Let me make this clear: I *want* him to devour me.’

‘But, Betty, you’ve never even kissed anyone . . . or had a boyfriend. I’m not sure you’re ready to be devoured.’

‘I’ve never *wanted* to kiss anyone, but I think I do now.’

Kat claps her hands with excitement. Finally, she can talk boys with me . . . her best skill. ‘Hey, Bea must be showing him round,’ she says. ‘She got told to go to reception.’

‘Good. He’s safe for at least one hour,’ I say. Unlike me, as Kat so loudly pointed out, Bea has a boyfriend.

But I'm still worried. 'Soon Pearl Harris and Jess Cobb will sniff him out and pounce on him. He's the only boy I have ever liked in my entire life so I can't let Pearl steal him from me. Plus, I saw him first.'

'I'm not sure you can bagsie boys,' says Kat. Then she starts rummaging through the hair on the desk in front of her. 'OK, so who am I?' She holds all the hair on her chin and says, 'Ohhhh, I wuv you, Toby!'

'Are you me with a beard?'

'Yes!'

Then we have a hilarious art lesson making hairy things.

Bea joins us as we're leaving. 'That new boy is so *rude*,' she says, all shocked and pink and Bea-like. 'He followed me around the school, always walking three steps behind, and he kept *sighing*.' She does a pretty good impression of Toby staring up at the sky, rolling his eyes and doing a bored groan. 'So I took him to

see the school piglets, but he wasn't even interested in them.'

'Weird,' says Kat. 'They are cute piglets.'

The three of us link arms and head towards maths, the balloon bobbing between us. Even though we're new friends, we're old friends too. When we were at nursery school, we were in a gang called the Ladybirds, along with Pearl Harris, who has since become a man-eating bully. The Ladybirds drifted apart, but now we're almost back together.

'Bettyarse is in lovarse with that rudarse boyarse,' Kat tells Bea.

'I can understand what you're saying, Kat,' I say. 'Your secret arse-language is rubbisharse.'

'It's coolarse,' says Kat.

'No, it's notarse,' I say. 'Anyway, he was probably sighing because he was thinking about me.' Kat and Bea laugh. I laugh too so they know I'm joking.

I'm not joking.