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opening extract from

Amy Peppercorn Out of Control

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One

'Hello, Paris!' I screamed. 'Bonsoir!'

Paris screamed back at me.

'Faire quelques bruit!' I shouted into the mike, hoping that I'd got it somewhere near correct. *'Faire quelques bruit!'*

'Make some noise!'

Paris made some noise: a wonderful sound shouted back to me as I called out, 'I love your city!'

I did, too. It's a beautiful place, lively and stylish. They say Paris is romantic. It is! I'll tell you why . . .

Before I do, have you seen the video for my single, *Love Makes Me Sick*? That stuff we did when we filmed it a few months ago, dancing in Leicester Square with the street dancers and the drummers and the guitarist – the way that video cuts from the street at night to what looks like casual rehearsals in the studio – from there to footage of my fierce performance of the song on American TV. I like it so much!

Have you seen it? I hope you have. What I like about it is that it's real. There's nothing polished about it, nothing too over-the-top pop music business. That's what I like most, when I don't feel as if I'm being turned into a plastic model of what a pop star's supposed to look and sound and be like.

When we were filming, one of the street-dancers – and we used the real buskers and a real crowd; perhaps you were one of them? – came up to me and said, 'It must be really great being you.'

I'll never forget that. We were dancing together, and she was a better dancer than me, by far, but she wanted to let me know how great it must be just being me. I forget sometimes. I've had two Number One singles, a Number One album and I still keep forgetting how to relax and just enjoy myself.

Well, on stage in Paris, I remembered how great it was being me. 'Paris,' I called, sending out a shout to everyone in the whole city, and beyond, to all of France, to Germany, Spain, Belgium and the rest of Europe, during my first-ever starring gig in Europe, 'I love you!'

How could I possibly love everyone, a whole city full of people I'd never met? I can't answer that, because I don't know unless I'm on stage as I was then, calling out to a crowded auditorium and loving every second.

A few days before, I'd done a guest appearance in Hamburg, in Germany, at a concert given by Adam Bede, my – he was my friend. Becoming a really good friend, too. A French pop star, big all over Europe; all except the UK. It's not easy for a French singer, even one as big in Europe as Adam, to get a break in the UK. It's almost as difficult as an English girl like me making it in the States. But I wasn't doing too badly in France, and maybe soon in the rest of Europe. Adam Bede and his manager Pierre Piatta had been a great help here. My singles *If Ever* and *Proud* had been doing quite well in France and Belgium and Holland. These songs had been released through a French record label that Pierre Piatta was strongly connected with – he wasn't the owner, but had many shares in it and was a director of the company. Pierre was a great contact for my manager Raymond Raymond and his company Solar Records. They were talking about releasing an album in France next.

Here I was, doing a gig right in the heart of beautiful Paris, with my heart on my sleeve and my wings showing, singing,

shouting out, screaming. The auditorium was fairly small and filled, I suspected, with many friends of Pierre Piatta and Adam Bede, other French singing artists under contract at Pierre Piatta Fantastique, PPF, members of the press, Solar people over from London, flown in especially to swell the numbers for my first French gig. Despite the fact that this wasn't a totally 'real' audience, in the truest sense I was flying high, loving it such a lot, giving it all I'd got.

For as long as I live I'll never get used to the feeling of performing live in this way with a live band, with my dear, sweet friend Lovely Leo on the keyboard. When my voice comes flying out, when I can use it to its full force, when I can move without trying, it's as if something else has taken control of my mind and body. I'm out of it, literally, rising above myself, seeing everything, feeling even more. There's nothing I can't do when I feel like this, running through all my old songs: *The Word on the Street, Proud, Love Makes Me Sick.*

And it gives me such a thrill!

'Make some noise!'

And then that wonderful, glorious sound came back: the massive, amassed voice of all who heard my cry and responded with one voice, which seemed never entirely disconnected from my own.

'Paris – you are beautiful!'

I ran from one side of the stage to the other. At least I think I did. One side of the stage one moment. 'Paris –' the other side a merest moment later '– you are beautiful!'

How such little legs as mine managed such breathtaking velocity I'll never know. There are many, many things I'll never know – like what the stuff is that replaces my blood when I feel like this. I think it must be helium, or laughing gas, or sheer adrenalin. Cut me, and I wouldn't bleed at all I

bet – I'd go off *bang*, like a balloon at a fantastic champagne celebration party. I laughed.

'I can't tell you how good it is to be here. Can you all hear me?'

The audio system was so loud they could have heard me whispering. I screamed: 'Can you all hear me?'

A great cry came back. It was a scream. And it *was* great.

'I can't hear you!' I shrieked.

The sound that came back was like music; at least, it was to me. It was beautiful. Everyone in the whole auditorium must have called back to me.

'What?' I cried, leaning out from the front of the stage with one ear pushed forward with my hand funnelled round it. 'What did you say? You'll have to speak up. Make some noise!' I screamed.

They screamed. What a noise! It was beautiful. It said something, it really did. Don't ask me what, exactly, I couldn't say. But I could feel the meaning in it, as I could feel every meaning that could possibly have been said. It meant anything and everything – and I felt it all.

'I have a song,' I said, bringing the noise levels down a bit. 'This is a special song, given to me by a very special singer-songwriter. You might have heard of him? Adam Bede?'

Their applause, the claps and screams and whistles demonstrated their appreciation of even just Adam's name.

'This song is called *Never Let You Go*. I think it's very beautiful. I hope you think so too.'

Then I stood exactly where I was on the front of the stage, saying nothing, without moving, as the house lights went down and two spotlights picked me out as if I was entirely alone in the whole place. I wasn't. Adam had joined me, in the darkness to my left. We let a silence descend. When I say

descend, that really is an accurate description, as any noise left over seemed to be forced to the ground and trodden down until we could hear nothing but the vague hum of the sound equipment. I waited, almost as if I could have picked the anticipation out of the air. Shivers were running up a thousand spines, I knew, because I could feel them, every one of them picking up the little hairs on the back of my neck. The whole place practically bristled with expectation. Only such a silence at exactly the right time can do this. I didn't do it alone; I can't make such a silence on my own. We all had to do it. We waited, we anticipated, we bristled.

I lifted a hand mike, breathing in deeply. Adam sang:

I thought I saw you yesterday

Another spotlight picked him out instantly. He looked – Adam has dark hair that falls over his collar, with even darker eyes. He has a look about him that makes me feel – but then, when that spotlight came on, the applause erupted for him so wildly we had to stop. We were looking, smiling at each other. Adam had given this song to me. It was beautiful. Quite sad, but very lovely. It was about loss: but whenever we sang it together, it was all about gain.

Adam started again:

I thought I saw you yesterday
You looked how you looked
When you went away.

I joined him:

Nothing about you has changed
Though our lives have rearranged.

He let me sing:

I think I see you everywhere,
Same face, same smile,
Same eyes, same hair,
Exactly as you were before.
We're not together any more.

As the lyric said we were not together, we came together, walking to the centre of the stage as I sang that line, turning to sing together:

How can I forget you
When you've never gone away from me?

We looked at each other. Adam's dark eyes with the spotlights shining into them were like beads of light themselves, glowing with inner force and energy.

I sang alone:

As I go on I cannot let you
Age a day from me

He sang:

The song of your voice, your breath in my hair,
Your face in the new sunlight,
My clothes, without yours, thrown over the chair.

Together:

I reach for you in the night

A ripple of applause rang round the auditorium. We went on, singing together, looking at each other:

I saw you yesterday, today, I'll see you tomorrow,
You aren't there,
But I won't let you go.
Just cannot let you go!

The song ended, but the instruments played on for a few bars. Adam was looking at me. I'd told my best friend Beccs I wasn't interested in Adam, not in that way. But he leaned forward and whispered in my ear. 'Just cannot let you go!'

The instrumental end to the song coincided with Adam kissing me. The audience applauded, shrieked, whistled as Adam kissed me on the lips. I'd told Beccs . . . but all the little hairs on the back of my neck were standing again, along with the audience as they applauded, shrieking and whistling as Adam kissed me.

And as I kissed him.

Two

'No, no,' Leo was enthusing, his hands flinging in every direction. 'I mean it. You were wonderful, wonderful! Both of you. My lovelies, when you two were on stage together, it was sheer – what was it? It was like *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. No – it was like *Brief Encounter*, only younger and with different accents.' He laughed.

Adam and I looked at each other.

'Oh, dear,' Lovely Leo said, catching our glance, 'you haven't the faintest idea, have you? Look, what I'm trying to say is that you two have something on stage individually; but together, it's more than multiplied. Do you follow me?'

'I think,' I said to Adam, 'that Leo's trying to say we looked good together.'

Adam went to speak.

Leo stopped him. 'Oh no, no! More, much more than that. There's some kind of magic to it. The way you sing together, the way it – it – it – Adam, I'm sure your lovely French language has a phrase for what I'm trying to say, doesn't it?'

'Only if Adam understands what you're trying to say,' I laughed.

'Oh,' Adam managed to say, 'I understand, totally. I know exactly. Maybe not the phrase, but I understand. I can – feel it. We are so good together, are we not?'

'You are.' Leo nodded. 'Everyone said so. Something special.'

We glanced at one another again. It was getting late. Leo was usually tucked up in bed long before now, even if he wouldn't have been asleep. I was waiting for him to leave to go back to our hotel. We'd been enjoying a very nice evening in a restaurant in Paris, Leo, Adam and me; but I wanted so much to talk to Adam without having my minder with me.

No, that's not fair. Leo wasn't a minder. Minders I'd had, on tour, in America: big bruisers in black suits with necks as wide as their heads and shoulders like American football players, which was something like rugby but with masses of padding. Leo, with his sparkly jumpers and slim slacks, could never be compared with those bouncers. But it was his job to look out for me, to get me safely from A to B on time, to ensure I got enough sleep and didn't eat only rubbish. Leo was lovely. I loved him. But sometimes, you know, it's like – well, it's like having your mum with you all the time. And sitting there in that beautiful café with Adam, of course I didn't want my mum or Leo around the whole time.

'Well,' Leo said, as if reading my mind, 'it's getting very late, isn't it?'

Both he and my mum seemed to be able to do that, to sometimes see what I was thinking. I had to hope Adam couldn't do it too. Every time I looked at him he made me think – actually, he stopped me thinking. There was something about the way he made me feel, both frightened and excited at the same time that stopped me thinking only of how dangerous it was for me to be around him.

Leo stretched and said, 'We should be getting back.' He was making a great show of being tired out, although by this time at night – I mean, by ten o'clock – he would be tired out. But what he was actually saying was that it was past my bedtime too, because Leo always looked after me like a parent, when my parents weren't around.

'Oh,' Adam said to me, 'must you go, already? It's only – so early.'

'You go, Leo.' I smiled. 'You go. Adam and I would like to have a walk along the river together, wouldn't we, Adam?'

He nodded, smiling.

'Adam . . .' Leo leaned forward to speak, looking quite serious, especially for him. He made me feel slightly worried about what he was going to say. He seemed to be inspecting Adam, looking for, I don't know – his intentions, something serious like that. 'Adam,' he said, studying the edges of the young Frenchman's handsome face, 'can I ask you, your hair – how do you get such a sheen? It's absolutely – it's beautiful, isn't it, Amy?'

I nodded now, smiling, I think, like a fool. Adam's hair was so dark, so long and shiny that Leo and I could very nearly see our forward-thrusting faces in it. When Adam looked at me, turning his face in my direction, I really could see myself reflected in the dense darkness of his eyes. They were so deep brown, so close to being black, it was practically impossible to distinguish between the pupil and the iris, especially set against the strangely blue paleness of the whites of his eyes.

'Oh,' Adam said, turning from me back to Leo, 'good hair products. French, you see?'

'I see,' said Leo, because he could see, examining Adam's head as if inspecting every strand of hair.

'Before you leave tomorrow,' Adam said, 'I'll bring you some. The same as I have.'

'We'll be leaving very early,' Leo said, but hopefully.

'I'll be there,' Adam insisted. 'Amy and I walk by the Seine for only a small while. I'll see you in the morning,' he said.

Leo took another long look at Adam's hair. Leo's curly brown locks could never achieve such sheen, we all knew;

but Leo looked with such envious longing, he couldn't help but be tempted. 'So be it,' he said, getting up. 'Amy, you must be back and ready to go to bed in an hour. Agreed?'

'Agreed,' I said.

Leo sighed theatrically. 'A few hair products! How cheaply can Lovely Leo be bought off? Sweethearts, tomorrow's another day. Never forget that. It's all change in the morning, right?'

We nodded. Neither of us understood what he was talking about. It didn't matter. Leo said things, whatever came into his head. Most of it didn't mean anything at all. Some of it, though, every now and then something that Leo said would come back to thump you between the eyes with its cleverness, its wiseness or brilliance.

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'Oh, he's lovely,' I said, as we walked, looking at the lights from the bridges shining on the surface of the River Seine that runs through Paris, just as the Thames does through London. Paris isn't like London, though. Sometimes it may look similar, but it has a different feel to it. Or at least, it did when I was walking along the embankment with Adam. Paris felt like – like Adam!

'He is part of your team – your management, isn't he?' Adam said. He turned. 'Oh, look,' he said, 'the bird, flying at night. What do you call this bird?'

'A seagull,' I said.

'*Oui*. Yes, seagull. See how it flies above the lights? I love this. So silent.'

Another gull glided over the river, its underside illuminated by the lamps on one of the bridges. 'It's like a ghost,' I said.

'Yes,' he agreed, immediately, 'like a ghost. But not afraid, no?'

'No,' I smiled.

We watched the gulls.

'So beautiful,' he said. 'So beautiful.'

'And not afraid,' I said.

One of the gulls cried, with such an eerie, ugly caw. Adam looked at me with his deep, dark eyes. Both made me feel at least wary, if not afraid. The memory of the way Jag Mistri – the dancer I once thought I'd fallen in love with, who had betrayed and hurt me – stirred. What Jag did to me, allowing Ray Ray and Solar Records to control and manipulate my emotions like that, had left behind a little pip of fearful feeling in the pit of my stomach that I didn't want Adam, or anybody else to germinate and grow any bigger.

'No,' I said, 'yes.' I was trying to bring the conversation back round to Leo, but found no, followed by yes, wasn't quite what I wanted to say. 'I mean,' I said, 'getting back to Leo, that he is part of the team. But he's more than that. He's a friend.'

'Oh,' Adam said, smiling, 'you must be covered with friends – friends are everywhere for you, I'm sure. Yes?'

'No,' I said, without following it with another 'yes'. 'No' because I wasn't foolish or blind enough to believe that all the seemingly kind and caring people I met through the music business were friends. The Biz wasn't like that. Everybody was so outgoingly friendly, but most of them, I knew, would do a deal that would stitch everybody else up, and do it gladly and with pleasure.

Knowing this was part of why Adam kept making me feel not quite right about being with him, letting him look at me with those eyes, from that face, framed by that hair. The pop

world was like this, presenting a beautiful face while the fists in the pockets were curled around coins.

So, 'No,' I said. 'Not real friends. I honestly think I have very few real friends.'

'But Leo is one of them?'

'Yes. He is. I love him.'

'Love?'

'Yes. Leo's – lovely. He's been hurt, in the past. He looks after me, but I look after him too. We care about each other.'

'Yes,' Adam said, as we strolled on, 'that is a friend. You care about each other.'

'And,' I said, 'there's my best friend, Beccs. Rebecca. She knows me.'

'That's – nice.'

'Yes. I tell her everything.'

'Everything?'

'Yes. My secrets are safe with Beccs,' I said. I knew now, more than ever, that they were. Beccs had inadvertently given me away to the nastier papers through her ex-boyfriend James, telling him about me because she trusted him and he and I were special to her. We'd both learned some hard lessons, Beccs and I; but the important thing was our friendship, that it should remain intact or even strengthened by the horrible things that happened to us.

'Oh, yes,' I said again.

Adam watched me smiling as I thought about Beccs. The look on his face seemed to understand and approve of my feelings for her, giving him the highly dangerous appearance of being sensitive and sincere. I'd need to get to know him a whole lot better if I was ever going to let him get anywhere near being close to me.

Whether I wanted to or not was another question. He, and

Paris, made me feel, you know what it's like, when a person and a place, a time or a tune makes you feel wonderful, as if you're the centre of the universe with other people's thoughts and feelings all revolving around you. That walk by the river through Paris with Adam on a still, warm, early September evening was doing everything possible to move me, to turn my heart. Or rather the pit of my stomach; as that always seemed to be where I felt flutterings of fear when afraid, excitement when excited. Adam and Paris were making me feel both in turn, at the same time, attempting to confuse me with conflicting emotions.

'You are lucky,' Adam said. 'I have no friends so close. Pierre, I suppose.'

'Your manager?'

'Yes. Ah, he is also my friend. I trust him. He is a good man. Caring, you understand?'

I laughed, but bitterly. 'I think I understand,' I said. 'But all I can do is compare what you've just said to my manager.'

'Mr Raymond?'

'Mr Raymond Raymond, yes. I tell you, he's nothing like a friend.'

'No?'

'No.'

'Then how can you work together?'

'Good question. The answer is we don't. We don't work together. Ray uses people. He'll use you, and Pierre, if he gets half a chance. Leo – it's a funny situation. Leo loves Ray –'

'He loves him?'

'And he hates him. Leo tries to look after me, but tries to do what's best for Ray, too. He has a hard time of it. Leo's my friend in Solar Records, not Ray. Definitely not Ray.'

'Not Ben?' Adam said.

Ben worked for Solar Records. He was my friend from

school. Adam was obviously trying to put it all together in his head. Ben had been behaving aggressively towards Adam, not really because of Adam, but more to do with what had happened in Ben's past – the joy riding, in particular, that had caused the death of our other friend, dear sweet Geoffrey Fryer. Ben's response had been to pretend not to care, trying to act cool, drinking and smoking, but all the while going to pieces inside.

'Ben is a friend,' I said.

'Maybe not so to me?' Adam smiled. He had such a gentle way of enquiring, such a warm interest it never felt like he was prying.

'He was going through a hard time,' I said. 'He has nothing against you.'

'That is good.'

'Yes. In fact, Ben's worst enemy has always been himself, ever since –'

Adam waited while I paused. 'Ever since the car crash?' he asked, eventually.

I sighed. 'You know about that, obviously. Yes, ever since then.'

'He was your – you and he were –'

'No, not really. We were – attracted to one another, for a while. Nothing came of it.'

'And now?'

I laughed. 'Why do you want to know?'

He laughed now. 'I want to know everything. I want to know *you*, Amy Peppercorn. You!'

Adam smiled at some people as they passed, recognising him, showing recognition, passing by without interrupting us. 'So,' Adam said, standing very, very close to me, 'you have no one special – no one you are seeing, at the moment?'

'Do you?' I smiled up at him.

'Me? No. No.'

'Surely,' I said, 'there are lots of girls after you. I know there are.'

'As there are lots of boys for you,' he said.

'How old are you, Adam?' I asked, as the dark stubble on his face always made him appear unshaven and older. Some of this was because he actually was almost always unshaven, but he certainly looked older than I did.

'I'm nineteen,' he said.

'Nineteen? You look – you don't look nineteen.'

Adam smiled. 'I'm twenty, soon. And you are nearly seventeen. I know.'

'How do you know?'

'It is your birthday, almost. It isn't a secret, is it? Your friend told me. Leo told me.'

I laughed now. 'Leo! I might have guessed.'

'It was a secret, then – your birthday?'

'No. It's just – Leo. If you ever need to know anything, just ask Leo.'

'Then that's good,' Adam said. He looked pleased, tucking his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. 'We are busy people,' he said.

'Yes,' I said, 'I suppose we are.'

'So,' he said, producing a tiny wrapped package from one of his pockets. 'I should make an opportunity, no? This is for you. For your birthday.'

'Oh. For my birthday?'

'Yes. But open it. As if it's your birthday here.'

The lid of the little box inside came open with a deliberate clack. The pendant stone clasped in gold hanging on a chain turned in the dappled lamplight as I lifted it out. It was brilliantly, gaspingly blue.

'Lapis lazuli,' Adam said.

I had never seen a stone so achingly blue. 'Is it real?' I said, not quite able to believe that such a blue stone could occur naturally.

'Real?'

'Yes. I mean, where would you see such a deep blue stone like this?'

'It's special, no?'

'Yes,' I said, holding it up, 'very special.'

'From the outside, when this stone is found, it looks like a rock. The loveliness, the beauty is all on the inside.'

I looked at him.

'Then,' he said, 'when it is brought out, see – see how beautiful it is?' As he took it from me and placed it round my neck from behind, gently clipping the chain fast, he turned me to face him. 'How beautiful is that?' he said.

'Oh,' I said, 'listen to you. Always talking about things as if they're beautiful.'

'No,' he said, looking at me, 'only about the things that are.'

'Oh, no,' I said. I was thinking, Oh no! Leo had told me once, no, more than once, quite often, that I had to learn how not to give. Jag Mistri had shown me how right Leo was. But – oh, what could I do, in Paris on a dappled walkway by the seagulled silver river, as the Seine slipped by without judging or condemning anyone, with such ardent eyes as Adam's fixed upon my face? A blue lapis lazuli glow seemed to be shining upwards, kept clasped in place by the chain of ornate low streetlamps linking the lights of one darling bridge over the river with the next. I was trying not to fall for it all, the romantic near-perfection of the place, the time, the temperature, warm, in September. I didn't trust myself. I

didn't trust Paris, or blue stones with fantastic names like lapis lazuli. And I didn't trust Adam.

'It is what they say is semi-precious. But to me,' he said, reaching forward to touch the stone as it hung at my neck, 'it is very precious. Not semi, very.'