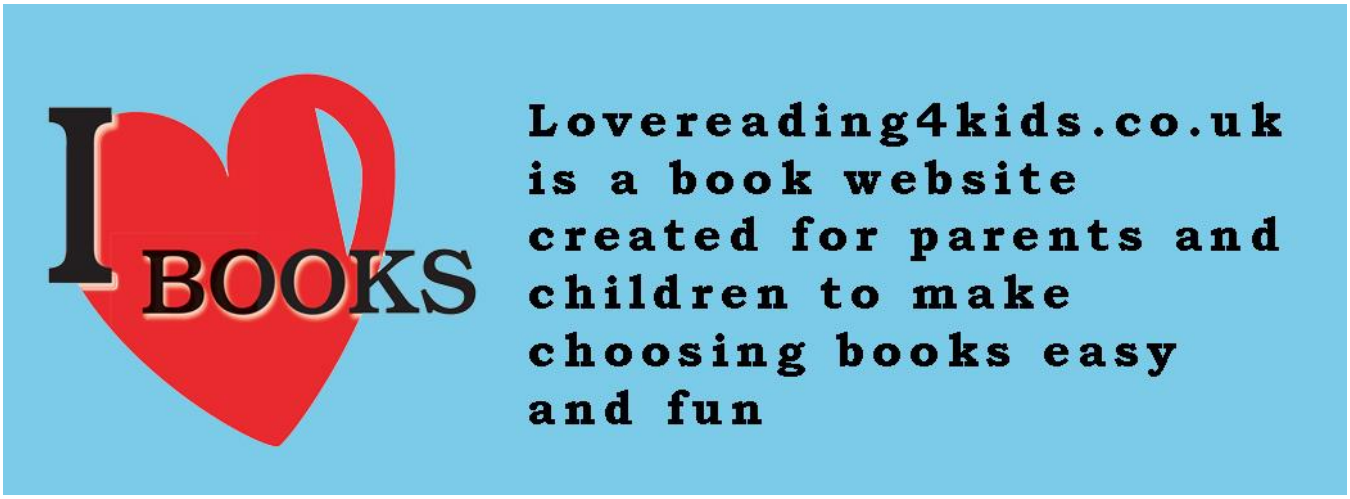

Opening extract from

If I Was Your Girl

Written by

Meredith Russo

Published by

Usborne Publishing

Please print off and read at your leisure.

First published in the UK in 2016 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. www.usborne.com.
Published by arrangement with Rights People, London.

Produced by Alloy Entertainment, LLC.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781474923835 JFM MJJASOND/16 04235/1

Printed in the UK.

CHAPTER ONE

The bus smelled of mildew, machine oil and sweat. As the suburban Atlanta sprawl disappeared behind us, I tapped my foot on the floor and chewed a lock of my newly long hair. A nagging voice reminded me that I was only a half-hour from home, that if I got off at the next stop and walked back to Smyrna, by sunset I could be in the comfort of my own bedroom, the familiar smell of Mom's starchy cooking in the air. She would hug me and we would sit down and watch awful reality TV shows together and she would fall asleep halfway through, and then nothing would change.

But something had to change. Because I had changed.

As I stared out at the swiftly moving trees, my mind was in a mall bathroom back in the city, the images shifting and jumbling like a kaleidoscope: a girl from my school, her scream as she recognized me. Her father

rushing in, his rough, swift hands on my neck and shoulders. My body hitting the ground.

"You okay?" a voice practically screamed in my ear. I looked up to see a guy wearing earbuds, his chin resting on the back of the seat in front of me. He gave me a lopsided smile as he pulled out the headphones. "Sorry."

"It's fine," I said. He stared at me, drumming his fingers on the headrest. I felt like I should say something, but I didn't trust my voice not to give me away.

"Where you headed?" He draped himself across the back of his seat like a cat, his arms nearly grazing my shins. I wished I could roll up into a tiny, armoured ball and hide in my luggage.

"Lambertville," I said quietly. "Up in Hecate County."

"I'm going to Knoxville," he said, before going on to talk about his band, Gnosis Crank. I realized he'd only asked about me as a formality so he could talk about himself, but I didn't mind; it meant I didn't have to say that much. He told me about playing their first paying gig at a bar in Five Points.

"Cool," I said.

"Most of our songs are online if you wanna check them out."

"I will."

"How'd you get that black eye, by the way?"

"I—"

"Was it your boyfriend?" he asked.

My cheeks burned. He scratched his chin. He assumed I had a boyfriend. He assumed I was a girl. Under different circumstances, that would have thrilled me.

"I fell down," I said.

His smile turned sad.

"That's what my mom used to tell the neighbours," he said. "She deserved better, and so do you."

"Okay," I said, nodding. Maybe he was right, but what I deserved and what I could expect from life were two different things. "Thank you."

"No problem," he said as he put his headphones back in. He smiled and added, "Nice meeting you," way too loudly before returning to his seat.

As we headed north on I-75 I texted Mom, letting her know I was okay and halfway there. She wrote back that she loved me, though I could feel her worry through the phone. I imagined her in our house all alone, Carrie Underwood playing on loop while the ceiling fans whispered overhead. Her hands covered in flour folded on the table in front of her, too many biscuits in the oven because she was used to cooking for two. If I'd had the strength to be normal, I thought, or at least the strength to die, then everyone would have been happy.

"Next stop Lambertville," the bus driver called over the harsh, tinny intercom. Outside the windows, none of the scenery had changed. The mountains looked the same. The trees looked the same. We could have been anywhere

in the South, which is to say, nowhere. It seemed like the sort of place where Dad would live.

My hands shook as the bus lurched to a stop. I was the only passenger who stood up. The musician looked up from his magazine and nodded while I gathered my things. An older man with leathery skin and a sweat-stained work shirt scanned me from my feet to my neck without making eye contact. I stared straight ahead and pretended not to notice.

The door rattled open and the bus let out a hiss. I closed my eyes, whispered a short prayer to a god I wasn't sure really listened any more, and stepped down. The sickly humid afternoon heat hit me like a solid wall.

It had been six years since I had seen my father. I had rehearsed this moment over and over in my head. I would run up and hug him, and he would kiss the top of my head, and for the first time in a long time, I would feel safe.

"That you?" Dad asked, his voice muffled by the bass rumble of the bus engine. I squinted against the harsh light. He wore a pair of wire-rim sunglasses, and his hair was at least half silver now. Deep lines had formed around his mouth. Mom called these "laugh lines", so I wasn't sure how he had got them. Only his mouth was as I remembered it: the same thin, horizontal slash.

"Hi, Dad," I said. The sunglasses made it easier to look him in the face. We both stood rooted in place.

"Hi," he said after a while. "Put your things in the back." He opened the back of the wagon and got in the car. I deposited my luggage and joined him. I remembered this car; it was at least ten years old, but Dad was good with machines. "You must be hungry."

"Not really," I said. I hadn't been hungry in a while. I hadn't cried in a while. Mostly I just felt numb.

"You should eat." He glanced at me as he pulled out of the parking lot. His lenses had become transparent, and behind them, his eyes were a flat, almost greyish brown. "There's a diner close to the apartment. If we get there now we'll have the place to ourselves."

"That's nice." Dad had never been social, but a little voice in my head said he didn't want to be seen with me. I took a deep breath. "Your glasses are cool."

"Oh?" He shrugged. "Astigmatism got worse. These help."

"It's good that you got it treated," I said, my words as staggered and awkward as I felt. I looked down at my lap.

"You've got my eyes, you know. You should take care of yourself."

"Yes, sir."

"We'll take you to the optometrist soon. Need to get your eye looked at after that shiner anyway."

"Yes, sir." A billboard rose from the trees to the left, depicting a cartoon soldier firing red, white and blue sparks from a bazooka. GENERAL BLAMMO'S FIREWORK

SHACK. We turned into the sun so his eyes were hidden again, his jaw set in a way I didn't know how to read. "What did Mom tell you?"

"She was worried about you," he said. "She said you weren't safe where you were living."

"Did she tell you about what happened sophomore year? When I…was in the hospital?"

His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. He stared ahead silently as we passed an old brick building with a tarnished steeple. The sign read NEW HOPE BAPTIST CHURCH. A Walmart loomed behind it.

"We can talk about that later." He adjusted his glasses and sighed. The lines in his skin seemed to deepen. I wondered how he had aged so much in six years, but then I remembered how much I had changed too.

"Sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have brought it up." I watched the patchwork tobacco farms roll by. "It's just, you never called or wrote."

"Wasn't sure what I could say," he said. "It's been hard coming to terms with…everything."

"Have you come to terms now that you've seen me?"

"Give me time, kiddo." His lips puckered as they formed the last word, so unusually informal for him. "I guess I'm just old-fashioned."

The turn signal clicked in time with my heart as the car slowed. We pulled up in front of the Sartoris Diner Car, an actual converted railroad car on a cinder-block foundation.

"I understand," I said. I imagined how I must look to him, and my mind leaped to fill in all the worst things I had ever felt about myself. "My name is Amanda now though, in case you forgot."

"Okay," he said. He killed the engine, opened the door, and hesitated. "Okay, Amanda. I can do that." He walked to the front door in that clockwork way of his, hands in his pockets and elbows pointed at symmetrical angles. I couldn't help seeing my reflection in the window: a gangly teenage girl with long, brown hair in a cotton shirt and shorts rumpled from travel.

A bell jingled as we entered the empty diner. A sleepy-eyed waitress looked up and smiled. "Hi, Mr Hardy!"

"Afternoon, Mary Anne," he said, grinning broadly and waving as he took a seat at the counter. That smile gave me a feeling of vertigo. He had smiled when I was seven and I told him I wanted to try out for Little League. He had smiled when I was nine and I agreed to go hunting with him. I couldn't remember any other times. "Heard your granny had a stroke. How y'all holding up?"

"She says heaven don't want her and hell's afraid she'd take over," the girl said, pulling a notebook and pen from her apron and walking over. "The physical therapy's been a bear, though."

"She can do it if anybody can," Dad said. He slid his menu to her without looking at it. "Sweet tea and a Caesar salad with chicken, please."

She nodded. "And who's this with you?" she asked, turning to me. My eyes flicked from her to Dad.

"I'm Amanda," I said. She looked like she expected more information, but I had no idea what Dad had told people about his family. What if he told them he had one child, a son? I shakily handed her my menu and said, "I would like a waffle and Diet Coke, please, ma'am, thank you."

"She's my daughter," Dad said after a moment, his voice halting and stiff.

"Well, she looks just like you!" We exchanged an uncomfortable look as Mary Anne trotted off to get our drinks.

"She seems nice," I said.

"She's a good waitress," Dad said. He nodded stiffly. I drummed my fingers on the counter and wiggled my foot back and forth absent-mindedly.

"Thank you for letting me stay with you," I said softly. "It means a lot."

"Least I could do."

Mary Anne brought our food and excused herself to greet a pair of white-haired older men in plaid work shirts.

One of the men stopped to talk to Dad. His nose was round and spiderwebbed with purple veins, his eyes hidden under storm-cloud brows. "Who's this little beam of sunshine?" he asked, leaning past Dad to wave at me. I turned so he couldn't see my black eye.

"Amanda," Dad mumbled. "My daughter."

The man whistled and slapped Dad's shoulder. "Well, no wonder I ain't seen her before! If I had a daughter as cute as this'n I'd keep her hid away too." My cheeks burned. "You just tell me if any of the boys get too fresh, now, and I'll loan you my rifle."

"I don't think that will be a problem," Dad said haltingly.

"Oh, trust me," he said, winking, "I had three daughters, not a one of them half as pretty as this one in their time, and it was still all I could do to keep the boys away."

"Okay," Dad said. "Thanks for the advice. Looks like your coffee's getting cold."

The man said goodbye, winked again, and walked stiffly to his seat. I turned my attention straight ahead. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Dad doing the same.

"Ready to go?" he asked finally.

He got up without waiting for a response and threw a twenty-dollar bill on the table next to our half-finished meals. We didn't make eye contact as we got in the car and pulled out of the parking lot.

NOVEMBER, THREE YEARS AGO

The hospital bed creaked as Mom sat and rubbed my leg through the thin blanket. A forced smile tightened her apple cheeks but failed to reach her eyes. Her clothes looked baggy; she must not have eaten since I was admitted, to have lost so much weight.

"I talked with the counsellor," she said. Her accent was so different from mine, light and musical.

I said, "What about?" My voice sounded like nothing – flat, toneless, with the faintest deepening that made me never want to speak again. My stomach cramped and twisted.

"When it's safe for you to come home. I told 'em I was worried 'bout what you might do when you're alone, since I can't take any more time off work. I couldn't survive it if I came home and found you…" She trailed off, staring at the light-yellow wall.

"What did the counsellor say?" I had met with him a few days before. When he asked me what was wrong with me, I wrote six words on a notepad, my throat still too sore from the stomach pump to speak.

"He said there's ways to treat what's wrong with you," Mom said. "But he wouldn't say what it is." She peered at me.

"You won't want me to come home if I tell you what's wrong," I said, shifting my eyes down. "You won't ever want to see me again." This was the most I'd said at once in weeks. My throat ached from the effort.

"That ain't possible," she said. "There ain't a thing in God's creation that could undo the love I have for my son."

I brought my wrist up to my chest and looked down. The identification bracelet said my name was Andrew Hardy. If I died, I realized, Andrew was the name they would put on my tombstone.

"What if your son told you he was your daughter?"

My mother was quiet for a moment. I thought of the words I wrote down for the counsellor: *I should have been a girl.*

Finally, she brought her eyes to meet mine. Her expression was fierce, despite her round, red cheeks.

"Listen to me." Her hand squeezed my leg hard enough that the pain broke through the fog of my meds. When she spoke next, I listened. "Anything, *anyone*, is better than a dead son."