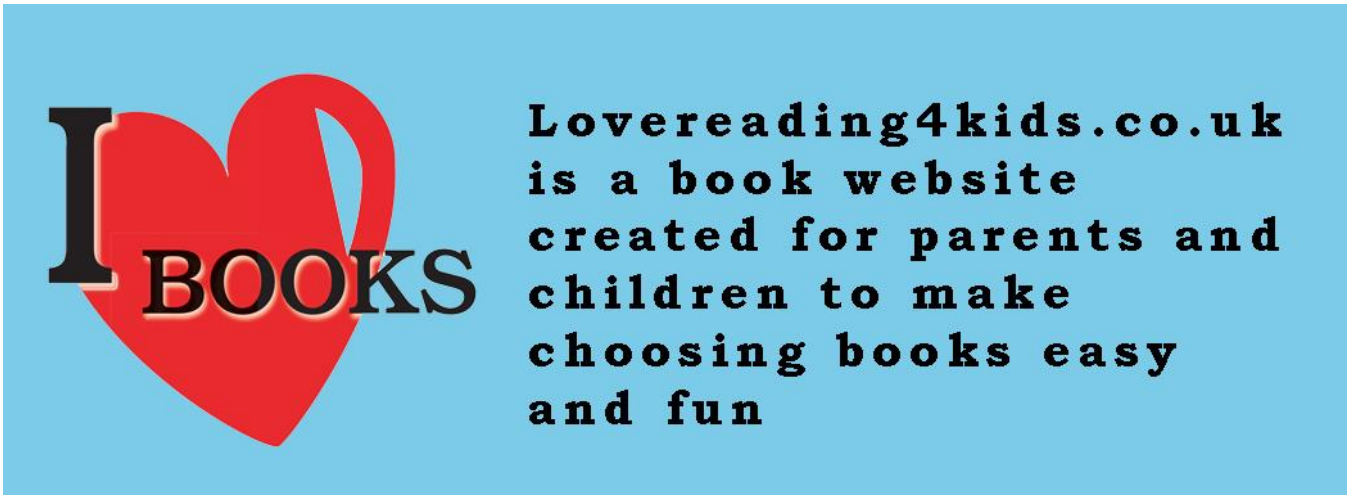


Opening extract from

Summer Shadows

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Chapter 1

Sunlight poured through the chapel windows, spilling in colour-flecked ponds a little way from my seat. I was tempted to slip off my shoes and splash in the sunbeams.

Summer, I told myself, *remember where you are; people would think you were crazy.* A run of notes on the organ drew my attention back to the wedding that was soon to start. *No more daydreams*.

King's College Chapel, Cambridge, had never looked so beautiful. Blue and scarlet flowers formed exuberant explosions by the altar. I was sitting alone near the reading lectern, looking on as the seats filled up with friends and family. Despite the groom being from the States and the bride's relatives scattered across the globe, there was a large congregation gathering. I had never seen so many extravagantly dressed people in one place. The bride's friends amongst the theatrical costume and design world had produced an amusing one-upmanship on who could be the most outrageous. So far I gave the prize to a woman wearing a hat that looked like it was a rocket on take-off.

Following the hat's imagined path upwards, I admired the world-famous ceiling, chiselled pale stone in fans of the lightest lacework. That is what a sonnet sequence by Shakespeare would look like if transfigured into an object. A favourite line of poetry floated into my mind: *Like as the waves make towards the pebbl'd shore, So do our minutes hasten to their end . . .*

Pay attention, Summer! Stop being such a nerd. I checked the order of service again, making sure that I had the reading correctly. The choice wasn't Sonnet 60 but 116, of course: *Let me not to the marriage of true minds*. The bride and groom had asked me to read under the mistaken belief I was less likely to make a mess of it than either of my best friends. It was true that Misty was prone to blurting out uncomfortable truths thanks to her savant gift, and Angel was easily distracted, but I wasn't sure what I had done to earn the reputation of being the calm public speaker. Most days I felt I was walking a tightrope, only a misstep from disaster.

My gaze met the brass eyes of the eagle that supported a huge Bible on outstretched wings. *You are going to make a hash of the reading*, its expression said, *you'll fumble a word or lose your place*.

I glared back; I shouldn't let an ancient old bird intimidate me. I was a Whelan, which meant 'little wolf' in Irish, so I could eat such carrion for breakfast, hah!

My spirits rose as Angel strode up the aisle looking deceptively cherubic in an amazing peach chiffon dress and matching wedge-soled sandals, strawberry blonde hair shining in a shoulder-length bob. Her arrival caused more than a few heads to turn. That was no surprise because, ever since she had begun her music career, her picture had become familiar in the music press and gossip columns. Not that this had changed her one iota, thankfully.

Angel collapsed into the seat next to me.

'Oh, Summer, I should've listened to you. My feet are killing me already,' she groaned. 'They looked so awesome in the shop though, I couldn't resist.'

I tucked a strand of Angel's hair behind her ear as it kept getting stuck to her lip-gloss. 'I thought you were supposed to be an usher.' There was a whole squadron of ushers as

nephews too old to be pageboys had been roped in, as well as friends.

Angel snorted with laughter. 'I did ush but I got the sack from Margot as apparently I was distracting Marcus.'

'Distracting him how?'

Angel wiggled her brows.

'Couldn't you restrain yourself, Campbell?' My tone was mock-severe. 'We are at a wedding.'

Angel clasped her hands to her chest. 'I know. And what could be more romantic than watching a Benedict brother finally tie the knot with his gorgeous soulfinder? Of course I had to kiss mine, just to remind him.'

I smiled, pleased but also a little envious of my friend's happiness. After some serious relationship problems when they had first discovered their connection, Angel and Marcus had entered on a smoother phase—though with their character mix they were never far from fireworks. Both were savants, like many of us at the wedding, which meant we had a gift of extra-sensory perception. The powers varied with each individual. In addition to telepathy, which we could all do, Angel could manipulate water and Marcus had a direct connection to people's moods through his music. My gift was quite different in that I could read thoughts; I could also shadow someone through the unique signature of their mind and even take over if I had the stronger will. I hadn't yet met anyone who could do the same. Many savants were rightly suspicious of those of us who could get inside heads so it wasn't something I felt I could discuss with others.

Angel nudged me. 'Summer, look, the headliners have arrived!'

I turned. The seven Benedict brothers had just entered escorting their mother and father to their seats. 'That's some boy band. I thought at a wedding the bride was the main attraction?'

'Not to a girl with a pulse. Don't they look perfect?' The groom had insisted that he couldn't choose between his siblings so they were all his best men. It was going to be a squeeze in the front row. They were dressed in contemporary style suits in various shades of navy blue and grey.

Angel wriggled in her seat. 'If I weren't already linked to the hottest guy on the planet, I think I might just throw myself at them in hopeless adoration.'

'I think Diamond, Tarryn, Margot, Crystal, Phoenix, and Sky might object,' I said, listing the Benedict soulfinders on my fingers. 'I'd hate to see the bride get blood on her gown as she bops you on the nose.'

Angel chuckled. 'Oh well, it would have to be Victor then.'

My gaze moved to the third of the brothers, the most guarded of them. Victor's dark hair was longer than his brothers' but swept back from his forehead for this formal occasion. A new departure for him was a neat beard outlining his jaw—it suited him. His three-piece was silver grey, tie almost night-sky blue. Misty, Angel, and I considered him an enigma and often speculated about him. We all admitted that we got a pleasurable tingle down the spine when talking about him, as he was a winning combination of being dangerous and very easy on the eye. Working for the FBI on savant liaison, his job called for him to play his cards close to his chest, but there was something unknowable about him. He was the most powerful mind-controller that I had ever met, though he kept his skill on a short leash. Like I did. Birds of a feather, Victor and I, but he didn't flock together with me or anyone as far as I could tell.

'Not sure about the beard—hmm, yeah, maybe. I'll just have to get used to it. He doesn't look very happy, does he?' said Angel, also studying Victor.

'Would you be? All your brothers have their happy ending

with their soulfinders and you are left as the only one alone.' I also knew a little how that isolation felt, now that my best friends were paired up, Angel with Marcus and Misty with Alex. 'This wedding must be a kind of torture to anyone without a soulfinder.'

Angel shot me a shrewd look. 'Is he going to be OK, do you think? He got a tough break when Crystal told him where his soulfinder is—behind bars in Afghanistan.'

No one should be unhappy at this wedding. I dipped into my gift for a second, looking for a way to cheer him up. Victor shielded his mind from most people, keeping his energy levels low, but I had never told him I could get past that blockade. He concentrated on stopping people reading him but my power lay in getting inside undetected, like parachuting at night behind enemy lines. I hadn't yet met anyone I couldn't read.

'Oh.' What I found was chilling—an expanse of grey seas under stormy skies. 'Oh. He's in a very dark place.'

Angel turned to me, blue eyes wide. 'Oh my God, you can see inside Victor? No, that's impossible!'

It was always embarrassing to admit to my skills. I didn't want to sound like a Peeping Tom. 'I'm only reading general impressions, not digging into secrets.'

'Dark? What way dark?'

I gently disengaged, not wanting Victor to know I had visited. He would hate that, and perhaps I shouldn't have snooped, even with the best intentions. 'Like a storm about to break.'

The organ struck up 'The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba', the signal that the bride was ready. The congregation rose to their feet.

'Tell me more later,' whispered Angel.

I rubbed my bare upper arms. 'No more to tell. I won't pry

any deeper without permission, you know that. Just let's be really nice to him today, OK?'

'Be nice to Victor? For me, that means keeping out of his way. He thinks I'm a liability.' Angel tapped her shoe against mine. 'He thinks you're an asset though. You talk to him.'

I couldn't reply as Crystal had appeared at the far end of the aisle on the arm of her favourite brother, Peter, surrounded by her attendants. Their father had died a few years ago and the Brooks were holding the wedding in his old college as a way of making him feel close to the family at this special time.

'Oh my! That's how I want to look when I get married,' sighed Angel as Crystal stepped properly into view.

She was wearing a tall column of a dress, white silk in soft pleats across a bodice with halter-neck strap, skirts falling from a clasp on her hip and a swirling train. Her spiralling dark blonde hair was caught up with a light veil streaming down her back. She looked both classic and modern at the same time, like a beautiful Greek goddess statue come to life. Her bouquet was a spiky clutch of exotic flowers in red and blue—no mild roses and orange blossom for her.

'So that's what she'd been keeping a secret,' I said, admiring her handiwork. She had made her own gown and designed the ones for the bridesmaids and pages. They followed in a little fleet, smallest to tallest. The littlest girl was in ballerina-style blue dress and the colours of the rest went through the spectrum to a muted frost-grey worn by the older attendants, Misty, Phoenix and Sky. The three of them looked elegant in strapless gowns echoing the column shape of the bride's.

Angel bobbed on her toes to peer past me. 'Xav is going to swallow his tongue.'

I switched my attention to the row of Benedicts. Xav was staring ahead at the altar, expression revealing how daunted he felt, but on a nudge from Zed next to him, he turned. His

look of awe and wonder was so beautiful it brought tears to my eyes. I wasn't embarrassed by giving in to sentiment: if I couldn't go all marshmallow when a very good friend got married, when could I?

'And that's how I'd like my soulfinder to look at me,' I murmured.

Angel squeezed my hand in sympathy and dipped into telepathy. *He will*, she promised.

After a perfect service and sumptuous meal served in a marquee on the lawns by the banks of the Cam, the reception began to relax from formal to fun. Peter gave a lovely heartfelt speech about how special Crystal was to the Brook family, and how proud they all were of her. Predictably, Xav had us all laughing the moment he started talking. Crystal also insisted that they break with tradition and allow the bride a few words, and she gave as good as she got from Xav. The best men's speech was a stand-up routine as Xav's reputation was gently destroyed then put lovingly back together by his brothers. Only Victor didn't take part in the banter, reserving the role as proposer of the toast to the bridesmaids for himself.

I couldn't completely relax. Victor's mood had grown even darker; it hovered at the edge of my consciousness even when I wasn't trying to sense him.

Then the band set up on the stage at the far end of the dance floor. This was no ordinary set of jobbing musicians hired for the occasion. Weeks before the wedding, Angel and Marcus had begun arguing which of their two groups would have the honour of playing at the reception until finally Margot, soulfinder of Xav's brother, Will, had cut through with an order that they both would be playing, but with rock star legend, Kurt Voss, on lead vocals. Sky was backing them on keyboard and saxophone, Zed on drums. This impromptu

band were amazing—helped no doubt by the special chemistry that sizzled through the music when Marcus was using his gift. If three of them hadn't already had recording contracts, the group—styling themselves The Soulseekers in honour of Crystal's gift—would have had a dazzling future in front of them.

'Just make sure none of this gets on YouTube, people,' said Kurt as he played a cover of 'Hey, Soul Sister' at Xav's request.

Refilling my glass, I wandered around the edge of the dance floor looking for Victor. I found him by the exit watching his brothers and parents dance with their soulfinders. Savant gifts come with a price attached: at the same time as you are conceived, someone elsewhere in the world also receives the matching half of your power. Mostly that combination is amazing, like Misty with Alex, her truth-telling matched with his persuasive power, each shaping and augmenting the other. Yet there is also a darker side. You might never find your partner, or find them and discover that their gift has turned sour. That happened to Alex's mother and . . . I didn't let myself finish the thought.

'Hey, Victor.' I stood at his side, not pushing. He wouldn't like that.

He turned towards me, mood lightening a little. 'Summer. You doing OK?' He nodded at the dancing couples. Diamond, Crystal's sister, was swaying dreamily in the arms of Trace, the oldest of the Benedict brothers. Was that a little baby bump revealed by her sky blue silk dress? When were they going to tell us about that?

I blinked away some tears. Ridiculous to get all choked up about the prospect of a next generation of the Benedicts. 'I'm fine, thanks. You have to be happy for them, don't you?'

'It's good to see my brothers so well matched. I won't worry about any of them again.'

'Of course you will. You may be third in age but you have big brother mentality encoded in your DNA.'

He smiled. 'How about you? I don't know much about your background. Do you have brothers and sisters? You seem very responsible for seventeen.'

That wasn't a role I had ever been able to duck. 'I have an older brother.' I didn't like talking about my family but I could hardly persuade Victor to confide in me if I refused to answer the most straightforward questions.

'A savant?'

'Yes, he is, but Winter isn't well.'

'Is it serious?'

'You could say.' I could tell he was waiting for me to expand. 'It's mental, his illness. He hears things, echoes of voices that have once spoken in a place—part of his gift that he never learned to control. It gets so noisy in his head, he's not very good at telling reality apart from all those ghost speakers. It's like he has no filter.'

Victor lightly pressed my arm then let go. 'I'm sorry. I think we both know that savants with mental illnesses really have the hardest time.'

'Thank you. It's difficult for me to talk about. I wish I could help him but he has a particular problem with me.'

'Because you can see inside.'

'Yes. He knows I can see how little control he has over the voices he hears and that shames him. It shouldn't, but it does.'

Victor nodded as if he knew what that was like. 'Tough for your parents too.'

If only he knew. 'So, are you OK?' Having given something of myself I felt I had a right to ask.

'You're sweet, you know, Summer? I'm all right—or will be.' He looked down into the beer he had forgotten he was drinking. 'Let's toast ourselves: to the misunderstood.' He raised his glass.

Goosebumps pricked my bare skin at the hint that he could read me as well as I could read him. With a bright smile, I chinked my fizzy elderflower against his tumbler. Our job today was to pretend we were OK.

'To the misunderstood.'