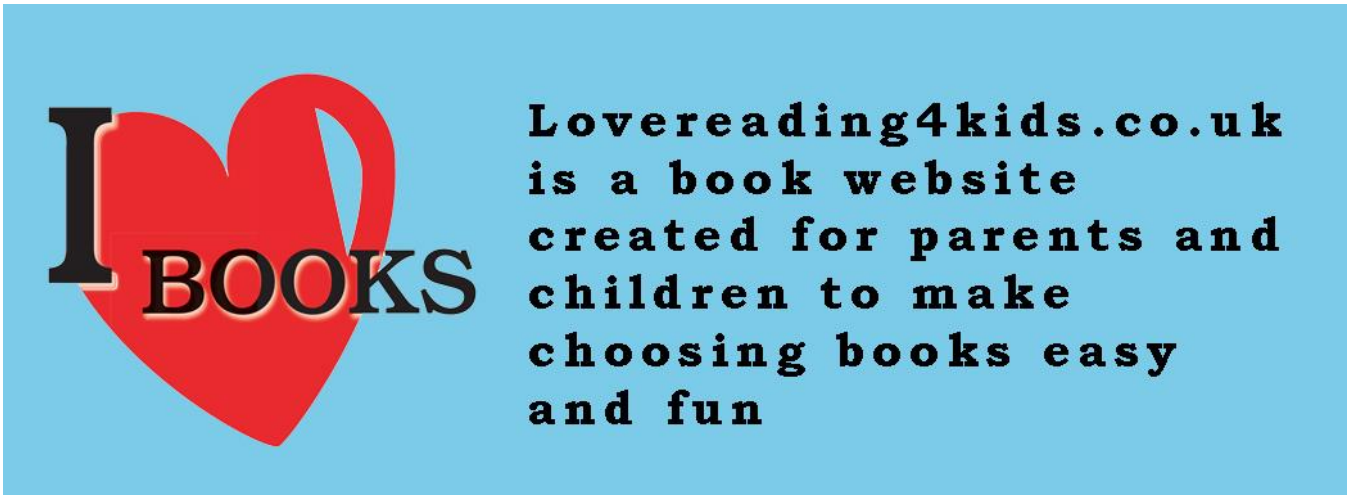


Opening extract from

The Broken Heart Club

Written by

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Published by

Puffin an imprint of Penguin Books Ltd

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1

It's a Friday afternoon in late July, the summer after Year Six, and Andie and I are scrabbling about in the drizzle, wrestling with the canvas of the big old bell tent and giggling too much to actually get anywhere. Ryan from next door comes over to put up his little pop-up one-man tent and we drag him in to help, but that makes things worse because Andie is too busy flirting to take much notice of ropes and canvas. In the end Ryan goes home and Andie's dad has to untangle the mess and help us put the tent up properly.

It's Andie's eleventh birthday, and we've planned a sleepover party, a garden camp-out for the Heart Club. It's also a bit of a farewell thing, because Tasha and her family are moving to France in ten days time and Hasmita will be going to a different secondary school after the holidays.

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Tomorrow Andie and her family are going to Scotland for a week's holiday, so even if Tasha's family are still here by the time she gets back, it could be the last time we all get together properly. I get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach at the idea of us being parted.

We all know that things are changing, and none of us like it.

'It's got to be a sleepover to remember, Eden!' Andie says, peering out at me from under her anorak hood. 'It's got to be special!'

'It will be.' I promise, because our sleepovers always are and who cares if the TV says this is the wettest summer we've had in forty years? A bit of rain can't stop the Heart Club from having fun. We spread bright rugs, pillows and blankets inside the bell tent, hang battery-powered fairy lights around the inside, make raggedy bunting to liven up the inside of the tent by tying endless strips of bright fabric scraps on to the strings of fairy light. They look beautiful, in a frayed and slightly frantic way.

'OK,' Andie declares at last. 'It's my birthday, and I reckon we've earned cake. C'mon, Eden, let's go get ready – the others will be here soon!'



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We head for Andie's bedroom, a tiny box room painted sunshine yellow and papered with boy band posters and bright, manga style paintings she's done herself. Andie's mum is saving the birthday cake for later when Hasmita, Tasha and Ryan arrive for the sleepover, but she's given us jam tarts and cheese on toast, and Andie ramps the music up to full volume to get us in the mood.

'I think I'm in love,' Andie says, throwing her arms wide. 'Ryan Kelly. Who knew?'

'Isn't it a bit awkward falling in love with one of your best friends?' I ask.

'It's awesome, because we've known each other forever,' she says. 'We already love each other in a friend-ish way, I just have get Ryan to see I'm not just the girl-next-door. Imagine . . . all this time and I've only just noticed how cute he is!'

I smile, but I know my ears have gone pink and I hope Andie doesn't notice.

'Tonight could be the night,' Andie sighs. 'He might say something – make a move. Or maybe I will! What d'you think?'

'Cool . . . why not?' I say, even though it's not cool and

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I can think of a million reasons why not. It doesn't matter, though; I don't think Andie will do anything more than flutter her eyelashes at Ryan. She's eleven; she's not ready for romance yet – any more than I am.

For me, friendship comes first anyway; I think it always will.

I reach into my sleepover rucksack, pull out a little parcel wrapped in gold tissue paper and tied with red raffia, and hold it out to Andie.

'Just wanted to give you this before the others get here,' I say, grinning. 'Happy Birthday, Andie!'

'Oooh! What is it? It's tiny . . . but heavy!'

She peels the tissue paper back and lifts out a little silver heart pendant, the kind that breaks in two so that two best friends can share. Her face lights up with glee, and she holds one half of the heart pendant out to me.

'Wow! I've always wanted one of these!' she exclaims. 'Thank you. A friendship locket, right? One half for me and one for you, because you are the best, best friend ever, Eden Banks. I love you loads, and I'll always be there for you, promise!'

I believe her. Andie has always been there for me, even

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through this past year. My parents split up, and I don't think I could have got through it without Andie's support.

'Any word from your dad?' she asks, as if reading my mind.

'Nothing,' I tell her. 'I think he's forgotten me.'

'Oh, Eden,' Andie says. 'As if anyone could ever do that!'

She puts on her half of the heart pendant while I put on mine, and then she flings her arms around me and hugs me tight, laughing, and I can smell the vanilla scent of her shower gel all mixed up with the aroma of strawberry jam and cheese on toast.

'I love my pressie,' she tells me. 'I'm going to wear it always. Awww . . . tonight is going to be epic!'

Epic is one word for the camp-out, I guess. By midnight, the rain is sheeting down and the bell tent is full of puddles; Ryan's little one-man tent has already collapsed in a soggy heap.

It's like the end of the world, but Andie doesn't do failed sleepovers and somehow she makes it all seem cool, an adventure. We eat hot pizza with pineapple chunks and chocolate birthday cake with ice cream. Ryan has brought

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over his copy of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which he wants to lend to Andie, but she's not in the mood to listen to chunks of story right now. She has swiped her mum's iPod and makes us all sing karaoke to dodgy, ancient cheese-pop. By the time Ryan launches into his rendition of 'It's Raining Men', we're laughing so much the tears run down our cheeks, and it doesn't matter any more about the leaky tent or the fact that fate is pulling us apart.

Andie ramps up the volume to max, opens the tent flaps and drags us out into the downpour.

'Noooooo!' Tasha is screeching. 'I'm soaked already! Are you crazy, Andie Carson?'

'I'd rather be crazy than boring,' Andie declares, pulling me and Tash out into the deluge. 'C'mon, guys, think of it as a rain dance in reverse! Who cares about a little bit of rain? Once you're wet, you're wet, right?'

'A little bit of rain?' Hasmita argues, pushing her black plaits up into a woolly hat with a grin. 'Trust you to look on the bright side, Andie! This is a monsoon, a tsunami, a hurricane . . . plus it's pitch black! Are you serious?'

'Andie's never serious,' Ryan says. 'But I am – get dancing!'

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He flings himself into a full-on disco routine, playing it for laughs, and the rest of us join in, half-hearted at first and then with energy. I'm drenched, but it feels awesome, like I am truly alive for the first time in forever. I'm wearing pyjamas and a rain jacket, my feet soaked and squelching in thick socks that are already slick with mud. Trickles of cold rain slither down my upstretched arms, but I'm laughing, singing, loving every moment. I'm with my best friends. So what if it's chucking it down? We are the Heart Club, and not even the wettest summer in forty years can stop us having fun.

I'm dancing around, my arms wide like wings, doing some kind of shimmy with Andie when I slip on a patch of mud, twisting my right ankle, and gasp with pain. Andie whirls away from me in the dark, oblivious, her bare feet sliding in the wet grass, long fair hair transformed into rat's-tail ringlets flying out around her face. Tasha and Hasmita dance on too, faces turned up to the starless sky . . . they have no idea I've hurt myself. Only Ryan sees me stumble, and drops his comedy routine to come over and help.

'You OK, Eden?' he asks, and like an idiot I am blushing because he's noticed and cares.

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I try shifting my weight on to the damaged foot, and red-hot pain sears through me instantly. 'Ouch,' I say. 'I can't stand on it . . .'

Ryan takes my elbow and steers me back to the tent, and I crawl inside, peeling down one squelching sock. He flicks a torch on, and in the little pool of yellow light I can see my ankle is already swelling, looking disturbingly spongy and Swiss roll-like.

A surge of self-pity rolls over me. My ankle is throbbing and sharp, shooting pains make my eyes brim with tears. The party vibe has ebbed away; I am soaked to the skin, cold to the bone.

'I've spoiled everything,' I say. 'Our last proper get together ever, and now it's ruined . . .'

'Hey,' Ryan argues. 'Nothing's ruined – this was just an accident, OK? Dancing on wet grass in torrential rain probably isn't the greatest idea ever!'

'But . . . things are changing,' I protest. 'Everything's being shaken up. What if we break up, drift apart?'

'Shhh,' he says, softly. 'Change isn't always a bad thing. And nothing is going to come between us, Eden, OK? I promise.'

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The words seem laden with meaning. I feel my cheeks flame and there is a fluttering in my chest that's halfway between terror and joy. It's all in my imagination, of course . . . Ryan is talking about all of us, not just me and him.

But then his fingers curl around mine, and I don't pull away. I have never held hands with a boy before. I have never felt so happy, or so scared.

'You're shivering,' he says, grabbing a blanket to drape around my shoulders. The tip of one finger wipes the tears from my eyes, and then he leans over as if he might kiss me and I panic and turn my face away, and he kisses my ear. I think I might die of happiness.

The music ends, and there is a sudden shift in the air around me. I open my eyes to see Andie kneeling in the doorway of the tent, her face frozen, eyes like ice. An Arctic chill falls over me.

'She slipped,' Ryan is saying. 'A twisted ankle, pretty bad. I was just . . .'

He trails away into silence.

'You were just what, Ryan?' Andie asks, her voice clipped and cool. 'Getting in the way, most likely. I'll sort this. You'd



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better ring home, Eden, get them to fetch you. You might need an X-ray or something. Too bad.'

A new track begins to blare out of the iPod speakers, an upbeat number about it being the end of the world as we know it.

I think maybe it really is.

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