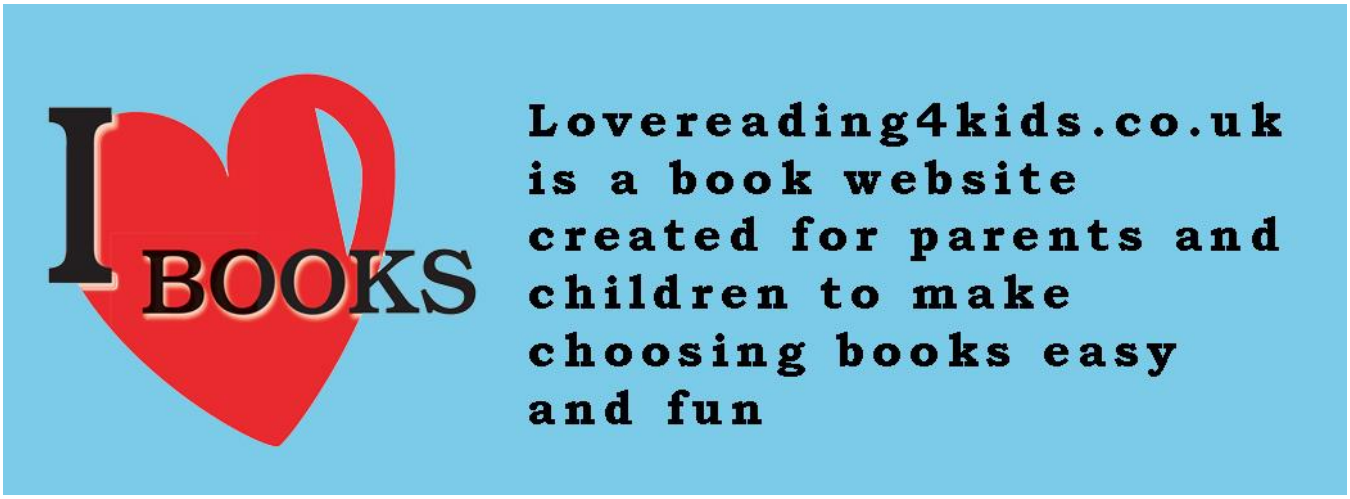


Opening extract from

Face the Music

Written by

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So there I was, standing in the wings, ready to do my first major concert. I mean, seriously major, with masses of people watching and goodness knows how many more online.

Even though I'd practised and practised, I was shaking so badly I could barely hold my guitar. My hands were dripping sweat, and there was a fair chance that when I opened my mouth I'd barf all over the stage.

It was no use telling myself that everyone gets nervous. Because this was no ordinary concert.

I was about to sing live to twelve and a half thousand people.

And each and every one of them wanted to kill me.



CHAPTER ONE

Let's rewind.

So basically, I recorded a song in my bedroom. A song called 'Just Me'. I've always written songs, ever since I can remember, and sat in my bedroom and sung them. Like using up all the hot water and leaving my homework on the bus, writing songs is just something that I do. And this song wasn't especially different from the others.

Except that my friend Jaz put it on YouTube.

And it went a bit viral.

OK, a lot viral.

It started with everyone at school and then went sort of crazy. Like, being-played-on-Radio-1-level crazy. Lacey said that her aunt went to Thailand and 'Just Me' was coming out of the speakers there. It's kind of upsetting that my song gets to go to Thailand when I've never managed to get any further than Plymouth.

Anyway, I ended up getting signed to a record label called Top Music, which I still can't really believe, because this is me we're talking about. Katie Cox, pizza lover, boy

band hater and possessor of the World's Wonkiest Fringe.

Being signed to Top Music meant all sorts of things. It meant I had my song go to number two in the charts. It meant that I was supposed to be writing music for a concert and an album. And it meant that I was with the same record label as the annoying boy band Karamel.

This last point wasn't particularly significant, except that, in a moment of extreme foolishness, I'd promised my classmate Savannah that I would get her tickets to go and see them, and she would not let me forget it. Seriously, the girl was obsessed.

'Katie, you know those Karamel tickets . . . ?'

and

'You did promise me, Katie.'

and

'It's, like, completely fine and everything but they are touring at the moment and you made me a promise and if you don't keep it I will tell the entire internet about the time at my birthday party when you fell into my cake. I have pictures, Katie.'

We were at school, sitting in the scrubby bit behind the back of the labs. You'd think that a number-two-selling pop star would, perhaps, have

more glamorous places to be.

In fact, a month on and I hadn't seen any money from my mega hit, and even if it did ever turn up, Mum assured me that there was no way I was allowed to spend it on starting a new life in Hollywood. And, actually, for all my pleading, I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to live alone in a mansion made of gold. At least not until after the end-of-term disco.

'All right, FINE,' I said.

'Really?' Savannah's face was shining like I'd opened up her head and stuck a tea light in her mouth. 'Babes, you are rocking my world. Backstage passes, yes, yes?'

You would also think that being a number-two-selling pop star would elevate me into a position at least slightly above Savannah, even if she was the richest and prettiest girl in my form.

Oh well.

I started texting the head of Top Music. 'I'm asking.'

> Hi Tony, I was wondering if my friend could have a ticket and backstage pass to see Karamel when they come to London? Thanks, Katie.

'OK?' I held it up to show her.

'Eew!' said Savannah, who has seen far too many American high school movies. 'You cannot seriously expect me to go on my own.'

'I seriously can.'

At which point Savannah went grey, which is quite hard to do when you're slathered in spray tan. 'Katie. You are asking me to meet my future boyfriend while looking . . .' She paused, her mouth making funny little shapes as she tried to bend her lips around the word 'unpopular'.

Now, there is a big difference between looking unpopular and being unpopular and, unlike Savannah, I have experienced both. So even though, really, I think Savannah would probably benefit from a dose of unpopularity, I softened enough to say:

'All right. I'll ask for two tickets.'

Sofie and Paige pinged upright, and Savannah's head swivelled from one to the other. In the space of ten seconds she'd gone from wounded possum to queen cobra.

'Pleeeease can I come?' said Sofie. 'I will give you anything you want, Savannah.'

'I'll give you double,' said Paige. 'My fake Gucci purse, even. Anything.'

'But that's not fair!' cried Sofie. 'I don't have a fake Gucci purse to give!'

I am not one to mess with a friendship as beautiful as the Sofie-Savannah-Paige triangle, although I have to say, I did consider it. But the fallout would have been too great, both for the world and its fake Gucci leatherwear.

'Three tickets,' I said. 'I will ask for three tickets.'

'Thanks, Katie.'

'Thank you!'

'Can you make it four?'

Now, this was a surprise.

Because the words had come from my best friend, Lacey.

Lacey, who had always agreed with me that boy bands are an insult to music. And that the worst and most insulting boy band of all is Karamel.

'Ha ha ha,' I said. 'You're funny, Lace.'

She wasn't laughing back. 'Yes or no?'

'Lacey, you cannot actually be suggesting that you want to spend an evening watching Karamel.'

'It's either that or watch telly with Mum,' said Lacey,

who, to be fair, does have quite a scary mum.

'But—'

'I want to go,' said Lacey. 'It'll be fun.'

'Four tickets,' I said. And then I hit send.

'Aren't you coming?' said Lacey.

'I am not,' I said. 'On account of Karamel being literally the worst boy band in the whole universe. Also, I have tons of other things to do. I am so busy right now.'

'Whoah, have you *still* not written your song?' said Lacey. 'What's the hold-up?'

'There's no hold-up. It's going great,' I said quickly, and then looked hard at my phone until everyone started talking about something else.

This is the difficulty with having a song do well on the internet. It starts out all exciting and brilliant and everyone says well done and sends the link to their cousin in Australia and maybe you even get a record deal and end up on the front page of the *Harltree Gazette*.

And then, just as you're getting used to everything being sort of awesome, it happens. Someone says:

'So, what's next?'

And once one person's said it, they all do. It's not enough that there's a song out there, a song you're really

proud of, that everyone's been clicking on and singing at you in newsagents. Nope.

They want more.

Have you written the next one yet?

When's it out?

We can't wait!

In fact, I had some potential next ones. More than some; loads and loads. Hundreds, really, because I've been writing songs since I was tiny.

Only, somehow, even though I had notebook after notebook full of lyrics, most of them didn't seem quite right. For example, last night I found one I'd started a while back, about spaghetti hoops, and in my memory it was really funny. But when I sat down and actually sang it, it was just this weird unfinished thing about spaghetti hoops. I mean, spaghetti hoops are nice, and all, but I'm not sure they merit their own song.

I still had plenty of decent ones to play Tony, though. And, as I said to myself, over and over and over again, it's only natural to have the jitters – absolutely nothing to worry about.

'Actually,' I said, interrupting a conversation about Karamel's latest album artwork, 'I'm going into Top Music

tomorrow to play them some stuff. And I'm sort of feeling a bit anxious about it.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Lacey. 'If I were you I'd be really worried.'

'Would you?' This seemed remarkably insensitive, coming from my BF. 'Huh.'

'Why isn't he replying?' said Savannah, who was more interested in my phone than my creative process. 'Didn't you make it clear that this is important?'

'Savannah, I texted the head of one of the country's biggest music labels. I'm not sure that arranging your concert tickets is right up there on his list of priorities.'

'So you *didn't* make it clear that it was important. Honestly, Katie, becoming a celebrity has made you so self-centred.'

My phone flashed.

Everyone leaned in, Savannah's fingers doing this sort of grabby motion, like one of those claw machines you get at the seaside that always pick up the teddy and then drop it at the very last second, making you spend your entire allowance on a stuffed toy you don't even want when you actually needed the money for fish and chips.

'It's a yes,' I said. 'Next Thursday, four front-row VIP

tickets will be waiting at the box office, plus wristbands for the backstage party afterwards. All sorted, any problems just speak to security. Oh. Next Thursday is July the ninth. That's—'

I stopped talking because the screaming had got so loud and so high that no one would have heard me. It was like someone had stomped on a box of bats.

'Oh my God, I am going to meet Karamel!'

'They are so beautiful!'

'This is it. This is the best thing to ever happen to me.'

'I am going to marry him. This is where it begins. Me and Kurt. Forever!'

'No, *I'm* going to marry him.'

'No, I am.'

The squeaks paused for the tiniest second, and I opened my mouth.

'Can we all just calm down a minute here and—'

At which point Savannah said, 'WHAT AM I GOING TO WEAR?'

And after that I could have said anything at all, to be honest, because no one would have heard me.

So I tried to meet Lacey's eye, with my *Wow, these three are being crazy right now* face.

Only, she wasn't looking at me. She was looking at Paige, and saying:

'Do you think Kristian will talk to me? We could double-date . . .'

And I did wonder whether me and my best friend were ever so slightly growing apart.

Just a bit.

'Katie, babes, are you OK? Because you are making the most ugly face right now.'

'Thanks for letting me know, Savannah.'

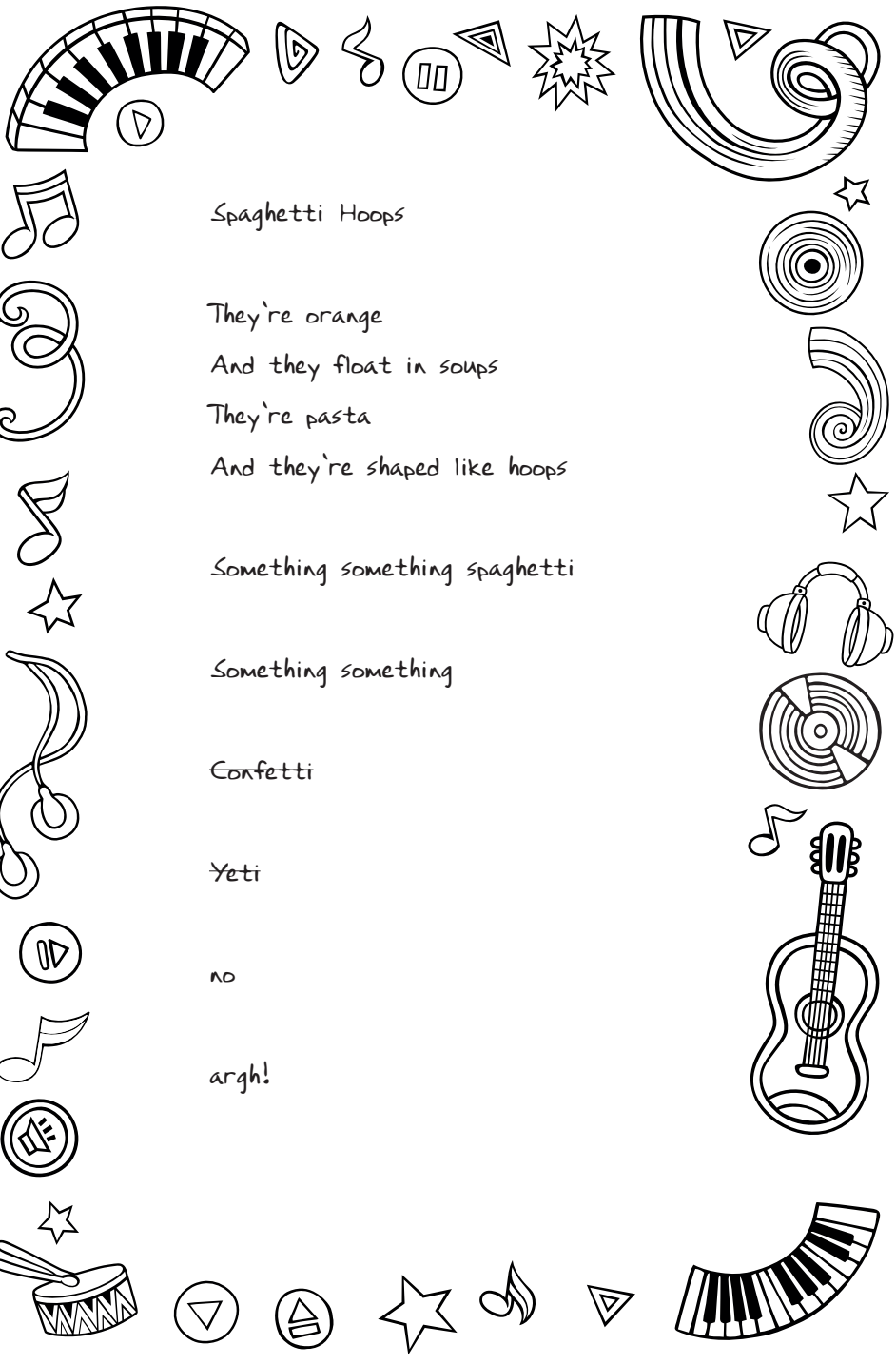
'No problem.'

'Actually,' I went on, 'I am a bit upset. Because July the ninth is—'

Only, the bell was ringing, and Savannah and Paige and Sofie and Lacey were swinging off across the car park, chanting 'WE'RE GOING TO SEE KARAMEL' at the top of their voices.

I sighed, and said, 'July the ninth is my birthday.'

But they were too far away to hear.



Spaghetti Hoops

They're orange
And they float in soups
They're pasta
And they're shaped like hoops

Something something spaghetti

Something something

Confetti

Yeti

no

argh!