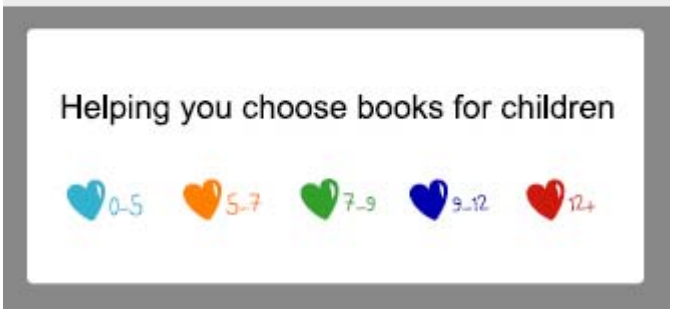
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opening extract from

Things I Know About Love

written by

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published by

Piccadilly Press

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July 20



I think this is it, I think I'm going to die. There's this little loose bit on the wing that keeps flapping up and down – is it supposed to do that? The flight attendants are smiling and chatting away to each other . . . they wouldn't do that if the plane was going to crash – would they? Or is that *exactly* what they'd do, because they've been *trained* to, so no one will panic?! Come on, Livia, calm down, no one else looks worried. Wohhohhohh, why is it bumping?! What is doing that? Are we hitting birds? I mean, seriously, are we flying through a flock of emus? Come on, that's *stupid*, Livia. Emus can't fly. Something else big – turkeys. Can turkeys fly? I don't remember anyone ever saying turkeys *can't* fly – if their wingspan . . . yike! More bumping! What if the whole plane flips upside down? I hate flying, I hate flying, I hate flying.

I've booted up my computer to write the introduction to my new American Summer blog, because I thought typing would take my mind off the way this plane is bumping like crazy. The introduction

was meant to be all important and elegant and meaningful and 'This summer marks the voyage of discovery of Livia Stowe', and instead all I'm doing is writing about the plane crashing and when they find my laptop the only message I'll have left for my loved ones and the good of humanity is 'Oh noooooo, we're all going to die! It was the turkeys!'

They *will* know that I knew about the loose bit on the wing.

And didn't tell anyone.

OK, everything's smoothing out again now. The flap is still flapping, but we've made it through the flying turkeys, the plane has stopped bumping. The flight attendants still don't seem bothered, so I think maybe I'm not going to die today. In just over two hours, I'll be seeing my brother, Jeff, who is my favourite person in the world. Two hours. I can't believe it. 'Cause he didn't even come home for Christmas last year. Jeff has spent the whole year in Princeton, Noo Joisey. His uni degree is American Studies, and that involves spending his third year in America. Studying Americans. Unfortunately for me, he loves it there. To be honest, I'm afraid of how much he loves it: I think he may want to go and live there for good. And then I won't see as much of him. This year has been pretty hard for me.

While he was at uni in Manchester he was only half an hour away, and he came back home all the time, usually with a sack of dirty laundry that contained every single item of clothing he owned. We still hung out and it was really cool, and I didn't mind so much that he'd left home. This year, I've been talking to him mostly by e-mail, with a few bumpy internet phone calls at midnight, and he sends links to pictures he's put online showing how much fun he's having. Jeff was going to come straight back to see me after term ended last month, but I really didn't want him to. For one thing, he's having the time of his life. For another, I know why Jeff really used to come home so much. It was to see me: he was worried about me and he still is. I've been fine for so long now, and I want us all to forget that I'm the sick little sister who used to look weakly up at him from hospital beds. I'm not her any more: Leukaemia Livia. Brave little Livia. Now I'm flies-halfway-around-the-world-to-see-her-brother-just-because-she-misses-him-Livia. Because-she-can Livia. I survived.

Of course it was a nightmare convincing Mum I needed this trip. Yes, *needed*. Not just *could handle*. I turned eighteen this month, July 2, so officially it's not even *up* to her whether I fly to America or not. (Well, apart from her paying for the flight. Admittedly, that's

a *kind of* important part of it.) But my mum has been through *everything* with me, and has kept me sane while she went nuts. I don't want her hair to turn grey with worry, I don't want to act like I don't understand or don't appreciate her concern for me. Mum is not over-protective as a means of control, she just genuinely believes I'm going to die all the time. And you can sort of get why, because not all that long ago, people were always telling her I might. But my favourite doctor, Dr Kothari, helped me to make the case. She reminded Mum that I'm taking like a tenth as many tablets as I used to take when I was fifteen, and by now I am *amazing* at taking tablets. Open mouth, insert tablet, swallow. (Not like when I started, and Mum had to crush them into powder between two spoons and hide the powder in Mr Kipling's French Fancies.) Dr Kothari promised her that every trip to hospital now was becoming more of a formality, and we'd all had to start talking about *EastEnders* more than cell counts because there was nothing new to say. The next check wasn't due for a few months, so in the meantime why shouldn't I take a break? Mum wasn't convinced and we went home. But I hadn't given up. As we drove, I pointed out to her that I'd be having checks for another ten years, at *least*, and I couldn't put my life on hold till I was thirty.

'If it means you'll stay healthy *beyond* thirty, it's not such a bad idea,' Mum said.

'Well, what if I *die* at thirty?' I said, which was really insensitive, but I was getting frustrated. 'What if I die, and the only other rooms I've ever slept in apart from my bedroom are hospital wards?'

And then my mum started crying and couldn't speak to me and when we got home she went and did a big mad pile of ironing in the kitchen. I felt horrible.

We didn't discuss the matter again for ages, and then a few days before my birthday Jeff's present came – a web camera so we could chat online. We set it up, and suddenly there was Jeff, looking a bit pixellated and jerky, but still unmistakably being Jeff, grinning at us through the computer screen. My mum *loved* it. She made him stand up and show her what he was wearing. She made him take the camera around his room to see how clean it was. Soon, Mum was using Jeffcam more than me, chatting to him late at night – I could hear them both laughing.

We went shopping the following Sunday, and I was looking at some really cute but quite expensive blue checked pyjamas, just because I really like nightwear, and . . . oh blimey, it's because I spent so much time in hospital, isn't it? Other girls my age lust after sexy boots or something, I get excited by pyjamas! Anyway,

Mum said she'd buy them for me, and I said, 'Come on, you already bought me too much stuff for my birthday. I don't need them.'

She said, 'Look, we'll put them on your dad's credit card.' This is the credit card my dad pays off as part of their divorce agreement, as long as whatever is put on it is important or necessary for me or my brother. He's really good about it – he never complains, even when we sometimes put some *slightly* unnecessary stuff on it. Like my laptop, although I did really need that for doing GCSE coursework when I was in hospital. Like Jeff's PlayStation. 'Anyway,' Mum said, 'You'll want them for Princeton.'

Then *I* started crying right in the middle of the shop.

'What do you mean?' I said, because I knew if she didn't say it twice I hadn't heard her properly.

'You should go,' Mum said. 'Jeff tells me you should. He misses you.'

'But I thought . . . You've got to come too,' I said. 'Seriously. You'll feel happier about how safe I am and you miss Jeff as much as me and it'll be so much better with you there.'

I know other girls my age probably wouldn't think of a holiday with their mum as Fun Central, but I'm weird like that and I really meant it. The truth is, I

found it got harder keeping up normal friendships the longer I stayed away from school. When friends came to visit me in hospital, they often didn't know how to talk to me. If they came in groups they relaxed a bit more and just started talking about school stuff, and that was fun, but it was kind of depressing, too. The stories never had anything to do with me, there were private jokes that 'would take too long to explain', and I'm sure they didn't want to keep things from me, but I felt left out a lot. I could just feel myself getting shyer, and I could tell they were starting to think of me as someone different and treating me like I was. . . *strange,* kind of like my personality was in quarantine. It felt all one-way: they talked, they got on with life, I listened and heard about it. Friendships, the way I used to know them, always seemed to be drifting out of reach because I didn't really factor in anyone's plans any more. My mum was the constant. And the illness took her away from her life too – she could have gone on more dates, found a new man, seen more of *her* friends . . . but she had to look after me. She never made me feel guilty about it. Really, truly: I worked that out later. Because we had to spend so much time together, we had to become real friends.

We *are* real friends. It goes beyond the parent thing.

In the end Mum said she couldn't take so much time off work, and she definitely couldn't afford flights for two *and* a hotel, certainly not for more than a week. And I should go for more than a week, and she'd already started making plans with Jeff.

I literally could not believe it.

So if I die on this plane after all that, I'm going to be so pissed off.

I'm determined that this blog will be a total – oh, what's the word – *departure* from my last one, which, to be honest, kind of mutated into a geekalicious episode-and-trivia guide to the 1980s sci-fi TV show *When Voyager*, which I became obsessed with watching on cable TV when I was housebound.

On the other hand, I don't want to do just a straight diary. I want it to have, you know, a *point*. I want to use these observations to help me understand my life. Everyone else I know has been out there getting practical experience, and I'm always behind. I've got all this *theoretical* knowledge, I've seen loads of talk shows and sad films and I must have been through every possible combination of love affairs on telly programmes. The challenge is to make theory and real life match up.

So this is going to be about working out love.

It's about the love I have known, and the love I have yet to know. And why, no matter what the world spits at me, I will always chase after that one supreme emotion . . . because, you know, when you feel it, it makes all other things seem a little bit yeah-yeah, and? But that's why this has to be a private blog for the foreseeable future. Because falling in love, even when it's unrequited, is not something that only happens to one person. The other person can't help getting involved – whether they like it or not – and I don't want to embarrass anyone, or hurt anyone, least of all myself. So I've unchecked the box that makes my blog viewable, and although that means I won't be getting any advice from strangers, it also means I won't be getting angry e-mails from people who've spotted themselves on my page.

This summer is about making a fresh start, to reflect my new status as a full adult with the right to vote. (Ack, the political future of the country at my fingertips – like I needed any more pressure. I don't even know the difference between the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary! I mean, clearly one does Home stuff and one does Foreign stuff, but what is the stuff?) So I'm forgiving myself for all my past mistakes, but that doesn't mean that everything that's gone before

will now be consigned to the bin bag of time. Ohhh no, everything I've been through is useful in gaining *true* knowledge and understanding of the ways of love. For that reason, this blog will contain actual case studies of my past relationships, in case they throw light on anything yet to come.

Admittedly, there aren't that many.

But that's my **first rule:** I have to dispassionately review all the romantic experiences that have gone wrong (and the bits that went right).

The **second rule** is that I have to have some more experiences, or this blog is going to be pretty boring. I need to move on and take chances when they find me. To be fearless even if it means getting hurt again.

The **third rule** is that I have to tell the truth, even when it makes me look bad. I'm not going to learn anything about love if I skip the parts that make me want to hide behind the sofa. It's amazing how fast your mind blanks out details. I'm going to write everything down as quickly as possible. I know it's going to make me cringe sometimes, but I think it's the only way to do it properly.

Case Study A: Darren

Year Nine. I was still thirteen. Saira, who was my best friend at the time – and still is, but in between I was best mates with Boo, and now there's more like a group of us rather than lots of pairs – told me Darren fancied me. We were in double maths, and she was using an incredibly complicated series of clues because she'd been sworn to secrecy by his best friend, Scott Wrexham. 'He does not have a black bag. He has never been out with Steph Lindall. He's shorter than Scott Wrexham.'

'Well? Are you interested?' Saira demanded.

'I'm not sure I know who it is!'

'It's . . . obviously!' she said, writing **D-A-R-R-E-N** on my jotter at the same time and underlining it. 'Come on, what am I going to tell Scott?' She scribbled the name out.

'I don't know,' I said. I started scribbling out the name even more darkly until there was a dent in the book. I was terrified because I had never had a boyfriend of any kind. 'Don't tell him anything. Please.'

'He loves your hair,' Saira said.

'My hair?' I said, touching it defensively, without thinking. As a ginger-haired girl, I was well used to

people making fun of my hair: I thought this had to be a joke.

'Yeah, seriously. He thinks it's pretty. Well, do you hate him?' Saira asked.

'No, I don't *hate* him,' I said. 'I've hardly ever spoken to him! I hardly know him!' Although I didn't say it, what I did know about him wasn't 100% fanciable. He was a bit of an earth-science nerd. He knew about stuff like tornadoes and lizards.

'Right then, what's the harm? Just give him a go,' Saira said.

I didn't want to give him *anything*. I was quite happy without boyfriend trouble. Saira promised not to talk to Scott about me and, although I couldn't meet Darren's eye again for weeks, it all went quiet.

Then we went to Amy Thurgood's Valentine's party. All my friends were dancing, but I was feeling quite tired, so I went to the 'chill-out room', which was basically a little dining room separated from the kitchen by hinged frosted glass doors. With a shock I realised Darren was sitting in there on his own, reading a Terry Pratchett novel. I couldn't just turn around and walk out again, even though I was embarrassed. So I sat down and went through my bag for a bit of lipstick and powder, and said the first thing that came into my head, which was, 'That music's loud, isn't it?' Great. Really cool, Grandma.