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Opening extract from  
**The Accidental Life of Jessie  
Jefferson**

Written by  
**Paige Toon**

Published by  
**Simon & Schuster Children's  
Books**

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First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Simon and Schuster UK Ltd  
A CBS COMPANY

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd  
1st Floor,  
222 Gray's Inn Road  
London WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney  
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

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

PB ISBN: 978-1-47111-878-4  
EBook ISBN: 978-1-47111-879-1

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Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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# Chapter 1

'Jessie! *Jessica!* Open the door.'

Not likely. I take another drag of my cigarette and lazily flick the ash out of the open window. I'm not going to waste a perfectly good fag for the sake of my stupid stepdad.

'Jessie, I mean it. If you don't open the door right now, I will break it down.'

Oh, for God's sake. Get a grip, Stu.

'I'm getting dressed. I'll be out in minute!' I call.

'No, you're not. You're on your windowsill smoking and drinking my good cider. It's gone from the fridge.'

He shouldn't have left it in there, then.

'I'm breaking the door down!' he shouts. There's a loud thump.

Blimey, he really has got his knickers in a twist.

'I'm *naked!*' I shout back. 'If you want to get done by child services, go right ahead!'

'Don't you give me that, young lady. What would your mother say?'

‘Don’t push me, Stu.’ His words make my ears burn.

‘She’d be so disappointed,’ he adds.

I angrily throw the cigarette out the window and storm to the door, wrenching it open. ‘To hell with Mum!’ I yell. ‘She’s *dead*, so she can’t say anything!’

The look on Stuart’s face makes me want to burst into tears, but before he can pull me in for another one of his suffocating hugs, I slam the door shut in his face and lock it again. And then I slump to the floor and bawl my eyes out. I hope he’s got the sense enough to leave me be.

‘Jessie?’ he says quietly, after a minute or so.

No such luck. ‘Just leave me alone, Stu,’ I blub.

‘I want to talk to you.’

‘Well, I don’t want to talk to *you*.’

‘Come on, Jess, I hate seeing you like this. I want to be there for you, help you through this.’

‘Please,’ I choke out. ‘Please, just leave me alone.’

Silence. Has he gone?

‘You know I can’t do that.’

Nope.

‘Unlock the door,’ he tries again. ‘I’ve made you a fish-finger sandwich.’

As if that’s going to swing it. Although, actually, I could really do with a fish-finger sandwich right now.

‘Jessie?’ he tries again.

My stomach rumbles. ‘I’ll be down in a minute,’ I relent, and even through the solid wood door I’m sure I can hear his sigh of relief.

‘OK,’ he says gently.

When I’m sure he’s gone, I get up and go to the mirror. My

nose is red, my eyes puffy. My medium-length, light-blonde hair is a bit of a mess, but I like it like that. I grab some make-up from my dressing table and do my best to rectify my blotchy complexion. Damn Stu for making me cry like that. My eyeliner is completely screwed, and my mascara is halfway down my face. I outline my green eyes with black kohl and retouch my mascara, stuffing my pink lipstick into my pocket. Then I pull on my black beanie, grab my camo jacket and climb out of the window.

It's only seven o'clock, so it's not dark yet. It's pretty cold though, considering it's the middle of June. I shove my hands into my jacket pockets and stomp along the footpath in the direction of town. I wonder if anyone is about. I pull out my mobile, but no one has texted me. I click on my inbox just in case I've missed a message and the first one at the top is from Libby – it was sent yesterday. Frowning, I plunge my phone back into my pocket. I can't be bothered to reply. My best friend since she moved to Maidenhead, aged nine-and-a-half, wants to know how I'm doing. If she were *still* my best friend, she wouldn't have to ask that question. Anyone with half a brain can see that I'm not doing very well.

Maybe it's my fault that we've grown apart. But I can't stand to sit by and watch her and her perfect family get on with their lives when mine has been torn apart. She has her mum, her dad and her brothers. I have no one. And I can't help but resent her for it, even though a small part of me knows that's unfair.

OK, so maybe I have Stu, but he's not my real dad. I don't even know who my real dad is. He's as much a mystery to me now as he was when it first occurred to me to ask my mum about him when I was seven.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she’d told me. ‘Stuart is a better father to you than he could ever be.’

That may be so, but she’s still a bitch for keeping the truth from me.

I don’t mean that. I’m sorry, Mum. I look up at the blustery, cloud-ridden sky and my eyes prick with tears. You’re not really a bitch. I have to bite my lip to stop it from wobbling as I take a left towards the park.

There are a group of guys kicking a football around the small pitch. I scan the scene and see smoke trails drifting into the air on the far side of the park, under the trees. I’ll bet my beanie Natalie’s there. I set off in the direction of the trails, preparing to turn around if I’m wrong. One of the guys playing football scores a goal and his teammates are ecstatic. Honestly, you’d think they’re playing at Wembley. I roll my eyes as one of them lifts up his shirt and hooks it over his head like he’s Cristiano flippin’ Ronaldo.

It’s then that I notice Tom Ryder. He’s shaking his head with amusement at the guy showing off. He glances my way and I force myself to look past him and not catch his eye. I heard he split up with his girlfriend a few weeks ago, but I doubt he’ll be single for long. He’s in the year above me, and always seems to have girls after him.

My pulse speeds up as I walk past the game, keeping my eyes trained on the group of four people sitting halfway up the bank. They’d better be my friends because I’ll die of embarrassment if I have to turn back now.

‘Alright, Jessie?’ The sound of Tom’s voice makes me jump, I hope not noticeably.

‘Hi, Tom,’ I reply as casually as I can, barely looking at him.

‘Come to watch me play football?’ he asks cheekily and I give him a withering look instead of an answer. But that doesn’t deter him. He’s got so much confidence he could bottle it and sell it on eBay. ‘You going to Mike’s tomorrow night?’ he asks, scratching the top of his head. He has short-ish, brown hair that always looks sort of stylishly messy.

‘What’s it to you?’ I reply. I am, actually. Mike is Natalie’s older brother by only a year. Their parents are away this weekend. Party time!

Tom shrugs and grins at me, and my treacherous heart flips.

‘Hey!’ I hear a shout and turn to see Natalie coming towards me, her hand raised in a half-wave. Relief surges through me and I can’t help smiling as she beckons me over. ‘I didn’t know you were coming out tonight,’ she calls.

‘Neither did I.’ I turn away from Tom, and make my way over to her. I swear I can feel Tom’s dark eyes burning a hole into my back as I do so.

As I reach her, she gives me a hug, then pulls me towards the rest of the group. I can’t help it: I look back just in time to make eye contact with Tom for a split second before the ball shoots in his direction and distracts him.

God, he’s gorgeous. The only trouble is, he knows it.

I say hi to the others, who turn out to be Dougie, Em and Aaron.

Dougie and Em are in sixth-form college. Aaron and Natalie are in the year above me and destined to join them soon. I’ve only really been hanging out with them for a few months, but I’m already dreading my final year at school, once they’ve gone.

‘What was Tom saying to you?’ Natalie demands. Her pale-blue eyes stare at me intently as she pushes her long dyed-black

hair from her face. Em turns to me as well. She's less striking than Natalie, with brown hair and a slightly orange complexion.

'Nothing.' I shrug. 'He just asked if I'm going to yours tomorrow night.'

'It's going to be awesome,' she says with a grin. 'Do you want to stay over?'

'Yeah, maybe.' I think about my argument with Stu and the fish-finger sandwich he made me and feel a prickle of guilt. I know he's not going to be happy about me going out tomorrow, too. Natalie passes me her can of cider and I take a big swig and try to put Stu out of my mind. Not that I really need more alcohol – the cider I had earlier has already gone to my head and I'm still hungry. I look over at Tom as he jogs across the pitch.

'Let's go on the zip wire,' Natalie says suddenly, pulling me to my feet. I laugh and follow her.

We're still mucking about ten minutes later when the football game comes to an end. I notice Tom glance in our direction as Natalie drags the pulley back along the line and hands it to me. I climb on and shoot along the cable, squealing with laughter as I jerk up into the air at the other end. I look back over at Tom and he's still standing on the grass, watching me with amusement.

'You want a turn?' I call, buoyed by the cider as I climb off the contraption.

He says something to one of his friends and saunters over. By the time he reaches us, I'm back at the wooden platform and Natalie is raising one eyebrow at me. I smirk at her and pray I'm not blushing.

'Did you win?' I ask Tom, as he climbs up on to the platform and takes the pulley from me.



‘Course,’ he replies. He’s a bit sweaty after the match, but he’s still well fit. ‘Are you sure this thing’s safe?’ he asks.

‘Who gives a toss? Live dangerously, right?’

He grins at me and my heart flutters. Then he’s off.

‘Woooooo!’ he yells, as some of his mates catcall and clap.

‘You fancy Tom Ryder,’ Natalie sing-songs into my ear. I eye the muscles on his arms as he clings to the pulley.

‘Who doesn’t?’ I reply without missing a beat. He’s the best-looking guy in school.

Soon all the boys from the football game want to get in on the act and a queue forms, but suddenly I feel a bit sick and dizzy. I gingerly climb down from the platform.

‘You were next,’ Tom says to me, taking the pulley from one of his mates. ‘They can wait.’

‘No, no, it’s OK.’ I wave him away.

‘Are you alright?’ he asks with a frown.

‘I’m fine,’ I reply, climbing a little way up the grassy mound next to the zip wire and sitting down. He follows and stands there, looking down at me.

‘You don’t look very well.’

Actually, I feel sick. Please go away, I think. ‘I’ll be OK,’ I say out loud. Too much alcohol, too little food, *way* too much excitement. I put my head in my hands and try not to throw up.

‘Jessie!’

I glance up to see Aaron and Dougie manically waving at me as they stride across the green. They point at the car park behind me, but I can’t see over the mound I’m sitting on. Tom looks past me. Before he can say anything, one of the guys waiting for the zip wire shouts, ‘What’s Mr Taylor doing here?’

I shoot to my feet in an instant and see him slamming shut

the door of his little white hatchback. Mr Taylor. Our Maths teacher.

Otherwise known as Stuart, my stepdad.

Shit, shit, shit.

'Better go,' I mutter, getting up and walking away without looking back. I hear laughter and joking in the distance behind me, and I glance up once to see Stu's features set into a hard line.

I'm still fighting the urge to throw up as I get into the car, an urge that overcomes me the moment Stuart drives with restrained fury out of the car park.

'Stop!' I gasp, shoving open the door in time to vomit on the curb.

He doesn't say a word, but he doesn't need to. The air is thick with his disappointment.