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Opening extract from
Trouble

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FRIDAY 2ND OCTOBER

HANNAH

16 Lola isn't eating her beans. They're green, so you can't blame her. Baked wouldn't be a problem. Mum works late on Fridays so teatime's always a little bit ... tense. Despite having raised a teenage son already, Robert has a hard time keeping a grip on his youngest. And me. He manages to get Lola to eat one bean and considers that a win, ignoring the fact that she then eats her pudding and half of mine on top. Afterwards, Lola insists on doing my hair before she starts on her Fluffy Kitty collection. By the time she finishes I'm not sure who looks worse – me or Princess Purry.

Thankfully my grooming session is cut short by a text from Katie: *cu in 10*. Which is code for: *get the drinks in*. I don't have to go far.

Before he left, my stepbrother had a massive party and because Robert is Robert and Jay is Jay, Robert gave him loads of money for it, WAY more than any normal dad would. But Robert likes to flash the cash – especially on his only son. Anyway, Jay overbought on the booze and because I was “helping” him order, he overbought on the sort of booze that I liked. I reckon that was the best night of my life...

Worst. Ever. Morning. After.

I might miss Jay, but at least the stash he left me under

his bed means I don't have to miss having someone around to buy me alcohol.

AARON

For the last four weeks the highlight of my social calendar has been the two hours after school on Fridays, when Dad drops me off at Cedarfields, a local old folks' home, where I spend time with some of the lonelier residents. Despite spending most of my time there being teased, patronized or ignored by people who consider the television better company than me, I somehow find it more enticing than the prospect of actually going out.

But I have a deal with my parents, which is that if someone makes an effort to be friendly, I'll make an effort too.

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When I told Mum that my lunch on the top-dog table resulted in an invitation to hang out at the park tonight, she threw her arms around me and squeezed until I expired. Dad prised her off, but even then she was so overwhelmed that she started rubbing my back.

"If you're going to act like this every time I go out then it's going to put me off," I said and she instantly withdrew her hand. The last thing she wants to do is jeopardize my reluctant steps towards integration.

"Which park?" (Mum)

"The one by the river."

"Who with?" (Dad)

"Tyrone and Rex and ... their friends?" It was more

likely Dad would know their names than me. He's good at his job. Good enough to move into a reasonable position at a reasonable school at a very reasonable speed and get his son into the same school, no questions asked. At least, no questions that I know about.

"The *basketball* lot?" Dad said, his voice incredulous. I'm not known for my sporting prowess.

"It's not like they asked me to take a shot before they invited me along."

"Just as well," Mum replied and I let her give me another hug. I'm doing this for her, after all.

So, now, with my father's blessing and a scarf foisted on me by my mother, I'm standing outside an off-licence which is far enough from our house that my parents won't know about it, wondering if I can pass for eighteen. I don't want to go in and I don't want to drink whatever it is that I buy, but this is what's expected and I have promised my parents that I will try.

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H A N N A H

Katie is late and all I've been doing since she texted is trying to repair the damage done to my hair during Lola's grooming session. I'm not sure it looks any better than when I started, but my arms ache. She arrives wearing her clothes for the park – that boob tube isn't the wisest choice for someone with a rack like hers, but there's no telling Katie. Once my bedroom door's shut, I hand her a bottle and open one for myself.

"What happened to your hair?" she asks.

“Lola. Is it really that bad?”

“No...” She doesn’t look too sure. “Wear your blue skirt and no one’ll look at your hair anyway.”

Sounds like a plan to me. As I dig about in my wardrobe looking for a top I haven’t worn a thousand times already, Katie tips her bag out onto my bed, finds her make-up under tomorrow’s clean undies and starts dusting on more powder and grumbling about her skin. To be fair, her skin’s pretty bad at the moment, but I’m starting to get bored of hearing her moan on about it. It’s not like it stops her from pulling.

“So will Fletch be out tonight?” she asks in the least innocent voice possible.

“Don’t know, don’t care.”

Katie sees right through me. “You’re going off him, aren’t you?”

“A bit.” A lot. He talks too much. And he exaggerates. And, well, I was never “on” him.

“What about Tyrone?”

“What about him?” But I can’t stop the smile edging up my face.

“Marcy’ll be out,” Katie says, and I know it’s a warning. You don’t flirt with Tyrone when his girlfriend’s around – a rule I’ve been known to break. I’m pretty sure there’s a rule about not pulling her boyfriend when she’s *not* there, either. No one knows I’ve broken that one, though – not even Katie. “Watch yourself, yeah? You know what she’s like.”

I do. But Tyrone’s worth the risk.

AARON

The carrier bag feels like it's cutting into my bones by the time I get to the park. Even so, when I see how many people there are, I think about turning round and walking all the way back home again – although I'd have to ditch the alcohol. Might as well persevere. How bad can it be?

HANNAH

We're late, which is a good thing – it's not clever to arrive first unless you're a B-baller or one of their WAGs. I wave away Katie's offer of a cigarette at the gate, but she doesn't move the pack from under my nose.

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“Sure? It'll steady your nerves.”

“I don't have any nerves,” I lie. Katie and I have decided I'm not allowed to go anywhere with Fletch.

“Liar,” Katie says, lighting up.

“I'll have one later.” I won't be able to say no after a couple more bottles. Never have, never will.

“You can use it to stub out Fletch's boner. That'd work.” Katie blows a rubbish attempt at a smoke ring in my face and grins as it mists about me in the cool night air. “Ready?”

Katie tugs her top up, arches her back and sticks her chest out – as if she needs to – before going in. I follow, noticing a stain on my skirt that I'm sure wasn't there when I left the house. There's not much I can do about it now.

The first person I see is Tyrone, standing by the benches. As we walk past I chance a sneaky peek in his direction.

He's watching me.

For a split second I hold his gaze then look away as if I haven't really noticed him. But once we settle on the swings my eyes are drawn back to him; he's got his arm round Marcy. The Brad and Angelina of Kingsway – only Tyrone's the one with perfect lips. I look at his mouth and think about kissing it.

He catches me looking.

There's a flash of teeth between those perfect lips as he grins at me, but I don't let on. Marcy's looking daggers at me already. I get my phone out for something to do and discover a text from Fletch.

Hey sexy. Where ru? Thought ud b @ park? xxx

I look around quickly, but I don't see him anywhere. When I turn to ask Katie if she's seen him I realize she's already got a couple of Tyrone's mates over and the Katie Coleman Show is in full flow. Neither of them really do it for me, but Katie'll flirt with anyone she can see through the vodka veil and when Mark Grey takes a cheeky swig from her bottle, she cuffs him about the ear and giggles. I down my own bottle and wonder how long it'll be before I get myself into trouble...

"Hey there, Han." Fletch's arms wrap themselves around me and there's a wet kiss behind my ear. I want to wipe it off. He walks round and edges one of his legs between mine, hitching my skirt up, hiding the stain amongst the wrinkles. I edge backwards as he leans in.

"Not right now, Fletch," I say, trying not to gag at the toxic cloud of aftershave. He looks confused for a second

before smiling and nodding, hearing a promise I haven't made. I want to correct him, to tell him that "not now" means "not ever", but it's got him out from between my legs and that'll do just fine. As he weaves his way across the grass to talk to some girls who will pretend he doesn't exist, I wonder why I ever let him touch me.

My gaze wanders to Tyrone. It's not like I can't do better.

AARON

22 Since I joined Rex by the picnic tables I've been listening to him complain about his absent girlfriend and quietly trying to work out if park politics are any different from school ones. The only difference appears to be that, for the boys, any girl is fair game, but the girls themselves are locked in a turf war. The cool girls, the ones Tyrone talks to in school, are hanging out by the skate ramp, and there's another group on the far side of the grass. Sitting on the swings, in a satellite group of two, are Hannah Sheppard and her friend Katie Coleman, who look very different out of uniform. My dad – whose favourite gripe is the ever-shrinking school skirt – would have a fit if he saw the belt that Hannah's wearing.

I'm having trouble working out where these two fit in. That's why I keep glancing over – nothing to do with the legs that Hannah's got on display.

"Drink?" I hand Rex another beer and remind myself exactly how bad it would be if I opened one for myself. No one wants to meet Drunk Aaron. I'm familiar with his work

and I think it's best he stays safely tucked inside a sealed can. Safer for me, safer for everyone else.

HANNAH

I'm bored. Katie's off with Mark Grey and I'm giving her ten more minutes before I leave without her. With Tyrone joined at the face to Marcy, the only entertainment left is playing bitch tennis with Marcy's lot, but with their best player out of the game it hardly seems worth it. Besides, I'm not in the mood.

I check the time on my phone. Katie's been gone over half an hour. Seriously, how long does it take for Mark Grey to get off? I send her a text telling her I feel sick and I've gone home. She has a spare set of keys – this isn't the first time this has happened. In fact, it happens almost every time we go out.

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Halfway down the path to the back gate I hear footsteps behind me. I keep walking, listening as whoever it is draws near. Please be Tyrone, please be Tyrone, please be Tyrone...

"Hannah?" Not Tyrone. Fletch. Of course. He's in front of me now, his head cocked to one side, looking me in the eyes, a grin not far from the surface. "Going somewhere more private?"

"Yes. Home," I say, not quite looking at him.

"Yours or mine?"

All of a sudden I feel so tired that I want to curl up in a little ball on the path and go to sleep. But I've got to suck it up.

“I shouldn’t have come over to yours again on Tuesday,” I say and I sense his smile fading. “It was a bad idea.”

“That’s not what you said at the time...” He starts to run his hand under the hem of my skirt and I feel a slight buzz at the touch, my willpower wobbling. The way he feels as his body edges closer to mine isn’t so bad and the sound of his breathing – slightly too heavy as if he can’t wait to reach me – is a turn-on. I open my mouth as he draws closer and let him kiss me with a lunge that makes me gag. This boy needs some serious training in the tongue department.

There are footsteps as someone hurries past and I find myself hoping that it wasn’t someone from school.

Stepping back, I put enough distance between me and Fletch to catch the flash of anger on his face. “Look, I’m sorry...”

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“Yeah. Whatever.” The words land at my feet as if he’s spat them and, as he walks away, I fight back an urge to shout out the truth – that he was a pity shag, someone that couldn’t disappoint me because I expected absolutely nothing from him. It was what I needed.

Next time it’ll be someone I actually want.

AARON

When I return from a trip to the bushes, Tyrone punches my shoulder like I’m one of the guys. He’s clearly drunk, since he introduces me to his girlfriend, Marcy, and tells me she’s a model for the third time that night, then laughs when I tell him that. Now I’ve been deemed “funny”,

almost anything I say gets this reaction – understandable given the company he keeps. His friends are practically interchangeable. All on the basketball team, all in Tyrone's thrall. Beyond Rex the only one I could pick out of a crowd is Mark Grey, and that's only because he's the size of a house. He went missing a while ago with Katie Coleman, which Rex seemed inexplicably aggrieved about.

I find an empty table where I can sit and rest for a moment. Socializing is tiring.

A voice I don't recognize says, "Hey," far too close to my ear for my liking. Glancing round I discover Marcy sitting with one hip propped on the table. It's easy to see why she's a model. She possesses an angular, almost alien, beauty, all cheekbones and jawline – the kind with no warmth. As far from my type as it's possible to get.

"Er, hi?" My voice sounds like it's yet to break and I clear my throat.

Marcy edges close enough that she bumps her arm into mine. For an alarming moment I worry that she's going to sit on my lap, but she doesn't, for which I am grateful – Tyrone would have a hard time seeing the funny side of that.

"Just wanted to say hello properly," she says.

I hadn't been aware that the ones we'd exchanged three times already were inadequate.

"You're cute." Marcy is not the kind of girl that calls me cute. It unnerves me. I glance round, but the nearest person is Rex who's too busy texting to notice I'm in need of rescuing.

"Thank you," I say, then, stuck for anything more insightful, I smile and say, "So. I hear you're a model?"

And that, it seems, is the right response. Marcy talks to me of the woes of modelling, brushing her fingers on my forearm to emphasize points barely worth making and flashing me too many dazzling smiles. Once she's made me sufficiently uncomfortable with her attention, she leaves, blowing me a kiss over her shoulder.

I hiss Rex's name.

"What?" He finally looks up from his phone.

"What was that all about?" I ask. He still looks blank. "With Marcy?"

"Oh." Rex finally catches on. "Marcy. Don't take it personally. She's making sure you know how hot she is. Just tell her she's gorgeous three times in a row and she'll go away. Like the Candyman but in reverse. And fitter."

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For the first time tonight I laugh. I'm not sure about me, but Rex isn't so bad. The table fills up as others take up my offer of free beer and there's quite a crowd of us when Fletch comes over, looking alarmingly smug.

"Where've you been?" someone asks.

"For a walk." Fletch retrieves a can of cider from his pocket and takes a slurp. Wiping his hand across his mouth, he says, "That's better. Needed to get rid of the taste of pussy juice."

I blanch. Who talks like that in real life?

"Take it you didn't go for a walk on your own?" Rex says.

I know he didn't – I walked past him and Hannah on my way to take a leak.

"I left alone, I return alone." Fletch makes a zipping gesture across his mouth. Then he makes an unzipping gesture by his crotch and mimes pushing someone's head there, laughing. It takes a moment for me to realize I'm the only one who isn't joining in.

There's a shout of "Bullshit!" to my right but whoever it is gets drowned out by accusations of jealousy.

"Hannah's got standards you know..." Fletch says, swigging his drink.

"Low ones!" one of the basketball guys says.

"Not low enough for you, mate, given how far you got last term!" Rex shouts back and the pack laughs some more. It's like watching a nature documentary.

"Careful, that's Fletch's girlfriend you're talking about," someone warns.

Fletch curls his lip. "As if I'd actually go out with a girl like Hannah!"

"But you'd let her suck you off and tell everyone about it?" I say, concentrating on the crisp packet I've just folded into a triangle. This has nothing to do with me. I have no idea why I'm so irritated.

"Eh?" Fletch looks at me, suddenly noticing the new guy. For a second, I wonder whether I've stepped over the line, but Fletch just laughs. "Man, I've done a lot more than that with her. It's Hannah Sheppard – it's what she's for."

I really do not like Fletch.

SUNDAY 4TH OCTOBER

HANNAH

Today sucked ass. I told Mum I'd get my homework done whilst I was at Gran's but, when I got to the home, Gran was having a bad reaction to her new medication and wasn't her usual self. It seemed better to chat with her and read out bits of gossip from the magazines I'd brought rather than haul out some French verbs. I know she wouldn't have minded – she quite likes me doing my homework while she potters about in the little apartment – but family comes first. School work comes somewhere below taking my make-up off at night and exfoliating once a week.

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When Mum picked me up she asked to see my homework and we had a fight. She told me if I couldn't get my school work done then she wouldn't take me to see Gran every week. I went mental until she said something about talking to Gran. I shut up after that – Gran would be on Mum's side. Anyway, I'm doing it tonight whilst Mum and Robert are out and I'm babysitting Lola. We're in the sitting room and I'm halfway through when the doorbell goes.

“Can I get it?” Lola asks, eyes wide and pleading. She loves stuff like that, answering the door or the phone and checking the mail. Sometimes I send her letters so she's got something to open. I cut little windows in the envelope and make the letters look like bills. It means Lola can pretend

to study her mail seriously, like Mum and Robert do, except I make the writing really big and decorate the paper with stickers and glitter.

“You can if you pull your top straight, Lolly,” I say and I listen as she runs across the hall and fiddles with the chain on the front door.

“Have you looked out of the side window to see who it is?” I call.

“Yes. It’s a boy.” Helpful.

She opens the door and there’s a murmuring voice that I can’t quite hear before she *thump thump thumps* back into the room.

“It’s for you.”

“Did you ask who it is?” Lola shakes her head. There’s a reason why you shouldn’t send a five-year-old to open the door.

I sincerely hope it isn’t Fletch.

It’s not.

“Hey, kitten,” says the boy on my doorstep. He’s not been here since he told me we needed to cool things off but, still, I’m not completely surprised to see him.

“Hi,” I say, trying not to give anything away.

“Can I come in?”

I’m not sure that’s such a good idea, but I step back and let him come as far as the doormat. I have to lean round him to shut the door, which isn’t a good idea either. He smells so good. A warm, clean sort of smell.

But he’s not warm. And he’s not clean.

“What you up to?” His eyes flash over to the other room, where Lola’s leaping around in front of the TV.

“I’m babysitting my little sister.”

“She’s cute.”

I say nothing.

“What’s her name?”

“Lola.”

He nods his approval. I guess it’s habit to think everyone wants his permission for stuff. His eyes turn to me and I feel my clothes stripping from my skin, my body opening up until he can see everything he wants. He knows I want him. He knows I’m no different from everyone else.

“You got a moment to chat?” he asks, his body turning towards the stairs. I get the impression our conversation might take a different path from last time – this time it will be one we follow all the way.

I want to. Oh my God, do I want to.

“Sorry, I can’t. Not with Lola here.”

He steps forward and his hand goes up to my face, fingers resting lightly on my skin as he traces the shape of my ear lobe with his thumb. We’re kissing. Slow, tender and very, very sexy. I close my eyes and let myself enjoy it, let myself sink into him, feeling my hands betray me as my fingers creep along his waistband and trace the dip in his back that leads down...

I pull away.

“I’m sorry,” I say again. “I can’t, not tonight. Tuesday?” Mum works late at the clinic Tuesdays and Robert takes Lola round to his parents’ for tea.

He smiles and nods once, then kisses me quickly before letting himself out. I put the chain back on the door and