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Opening Extract from...

Kiss Me First

Written by Lottie Moggach

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It was a Friday night, about nine weeks into the project. Tess's voice sounded normal, but I could see that she had been crying and her narrow face was pale. For the first few minutes of the conversation, she leaned her head back against the wall behind her bed, gaze turned to the ceiling. Then she righted it and looked straight at the camera. Her eyes were as I'd never seen them: both empty and terrified. Mum sometimes had the same look, towards the end.

'I'm scared,' she said.

'What about?' I asked, stupidly.

'I'm so fucking scared,' she said, and burst into tears. She had never cried in front of me; in fact, she had told me she rarely cried. It was one of the things we had in common.

Then she sniffed, wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and said more clearly: 'Do you understand?'

'Of course,' I said, although I didn't entirely.

She looked straight into the camera for a moment, and said, 'Can I see you?'

At first I thought she meant: could we meet up? I

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started to remind her that we had agreed that shouldn't happen, but she cut me off.

'Switch on your camera.'

After a moment, I said, 'I think it's best if we don't.'

'I want to see you,' said Tess. 'You get to see me.' She was staring right at the camera, her tears almost dried up. She gave a small smile and I felt myself soften. It was hard to resist, and I almost said, 'OK, then,' but instead I said, 'I don't think it's a good idea.'

She looked at me a moment longer. Then she shrugged, and returned her gaze to the ceiling.

I will be honest here: I didn't want Tess to see me in case I failed to meet her expectations. This isn't rational, I know: who knows what she thought I looked like, and what did it matter? But I had examined her face so carefully, I knew every nuance of her expressions, and I couldn't bear the thought that, if I turned on the camera, I might see a look of disappointment pass over it, however briefly.

Then, still looking at the ceiling, she said, 'I can't do it.'

'Of course you can,' I said.

She didn't speak for over a minute, and then said, uncharacteristically meek, 'Is it OK if we stop for today?' Without waiting for an answer, she terminated the call.

I admit that that particular conversation has replayed in my head several times since.

All I can say is, I said what felt right at the time. She was upset and I was comforting her. It seemed entirely natural for Tess to be scared. And when we spoke the

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next day, she was back to what by that stage was ‘normal’ – calm, polite and detached. The incident wasn’t mentioned again.

Then, a few days later, she looked into the camera and tapped on the lens, a habit she had.

‘Do you have everything you need?’

I had presumed that we would go on communicating right up until the last moment. But I also knew it had to end.

So, I said, ‘Yes. I think so.’

She nodded, as if to herself, and looked away. At that moment, knowing I was seeing her for the last time, I felt a sudden, intense rush of adrenalin and something akin to sadness.

After quite a long pause, she said, ‘I can’t thank you enough.’ And then, ‘Goodbye.’

She looked into the camera and made a gesture like a salute.

‘Goodbye,’ I said, and, ‘Thank you.’

‘Why are you thanking me?’

‘I don’t know.’

She was looking down at something, her leg or the bed. I stared at her long, flat nose, the curve of her cheekbone, the little eyelash lines around her mouth.

Then she looked up, leaned forward and turned off the camera. And that was it. Our final conversation.

Wednesday, 17th August 2011

There is no Internet here, not even dial-up.

I didn't anticipate not being able to get online. Of course I had done my research, but the commune has no website and I could find little practical information elsewhere beyond directions on how to get here. There were just useless comments in forums, along the lines of *Oh, I love it, it's so peaceful and beautiful*. I know that communes are places where people go to get 'back to nature', but I understood that they are also where people live and work on a semi-permanent to permanent basis, and so assumed there would be some facility to get online. Spain is a developed country, after all.

I understand that Tess had to head to a remote spot, but three-quarters of the way up a mountain, without a phone mast in sight – that's just unnecessary. Of all the places in the world, why did she choose to spend the last days of her life *here*?

I admit, though, that the location is not unpleasant. I've pitched my tent in a clearing with extensive views over the valley. The surrounding mountains are huge and coloured various shades of green, blue and grey, according to distance. At their feet is a thin silver river.

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The furthest peaks are capped with snow: an incongruous sight in this heat. Now we're going into evening, the sky is darkening to a mysterious misty blue.

There's a woman here dressed like an elf, with a top exposing her stomach and sandals laced up to her knees. Another one has bright red hair twisted up on either side of her head, like horns. Lots of the men have long hair and beards, and a few are wearing these priest-like skirts.

Most of them, however, look like the people begging at the cashpoints on Kentish Town Road, only extremely tanned. I had thought I might not look too out of place here – mum used to say I had hair like a hippy, centre-parted and almost down to my waist – but I feel like I'm from a different planet.

Nobody here seems to do very much at all. As far as I can see, they just sit around poking fires and making tea in filthy saucepans, or drumming, or constructing unidentifiable objects out of feathers and string. There seems to be little 'communal' about it, aside from a collective wish to live in a squalid manner for free. There are a few tents like mine, but most people seem to sleep in tatty vans with garish paintings on the side, or in shelters amongst the trees constructed out of plastic sheeting and bedspreads. They all smoke and it appears obligatory to have a dog, and no one picks up their droppings. I've had to use half of my supply of Wet Wipes cleaning the wheels of my suitcase.

As for the human facilities, I was prepared for them to be rudimentary, but was shocked when directed to a spot behind some trees signposted 'Shitpit'. Just a hole

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in the ground, with no seat and no paper, and when you look down you can see other people's waste just lying there. I had promised myself that, after mum, I wouldn't have dealings with other people's excrement, and so have decided to make my own private hole in some nearby bushes.

It is, of course, everyone's prerogative to live their life in whichever way they choose, as long as they do not hurt others. But – like this?

Back in London, I felt near certain she had come here. It all seemed to add up. But now I'm starting to have doubts.

Nonetheless, I told myself I'd spend a week here making enquiries, and that is what I shall do. Tomorrow, I'll start showing her photo around. I've prepared a story about how she is a friend who stayed here last summer and whom I've lost track of, but believe is still somewhere in the area. It's not actually a lie. I just won't mention that I'm looking for proof of her death.

It's almost half-past nine now, but it's still sweltering. Of course, I had researched the temperature but I wasn't fully prepared for what thirty-two degrees feels like. I have to keep wiping my fingers on a towel to stop moisture getting into my keyboard.

It was even hotter in August last year, when Tess would have been here. Thirty-five degrees: I looked it up. She liked the heat, though. She looked like these people, with their sharp shoulder blades. She might have worn a little top, like the elf woman – she had clothes like that.

I've opened the flap of my tent and can see a rash of

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stars and the moon, which is almost as bright as my laptop screen. The site is quiet now, except for the hum of insects and what I think – I hope – is the sound of a generator somewhere nearby. I'll investigate that tomorrow. Although I have a spare battery for my laptop, I'll need power.

You see, this is what I'm going to do whilst I'm here: write an account of everything that has happened.

I got the idea from Tess. One of the first things she sent me was an 'autobiography' she once wrote for a psychiatrist. It provided a certain amount of useful information, although, like everything Tess did, it was full of digressions and inconsistencies, the facts clouded by retrospective emotions. This isn't going to be like that. I just want to lay down the truth. I've told the police a certain amount, but they don't know the full picture. It feels important that there is a definitive record.

There are some things I haven't told anyone about, like Connor. Not that I've had anyone to tell. I don't suppose the police would have been particularly interested. Besides, even if there had been someone to tell, I don't think I could have. Whenever the thought of him, Connor, came into my head – which was fairly regularly, even in the midst of the police business, even when I thought I was going to prison – it was as if I was allergic to it. I would feel very ill for a moment and then my head would reject the thought, as if it was trying to protect me from the attendant strong emotions.

I'm not yet sure what I'm going to do with this. Nothing, probably. I'm certainly not going to put it up online. I know that's what we 'young people' are sup-

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posed to do, but it never appealed to me. Volunteering unasked-for information, presuming others will be interested in one's life, seems both pointless and impolite. Of course, on Red Pill we'd present our opinions, but that was different. There it was a rational discussion about a philosophical topic, not a splurge of whatever random thing came into our heads. It's true that some people did use the site as a kind of confessional, posting long accounts of their 'journey' and what terrible childhoods they had, using it as an outlet for their angst. But I didn't join in with that. I never said anything personal. In fact, apart from Adrian, I don't think anyone there knew what age I was, or even that I am a girl.

So, the first thing I want to say is that it's not true that Adrian 'preyed' on the 'vulnerable' and 'socially isolated'. The police psychologist, Diana, kept on going on about it too, making a big deal about mum dying and me living alone. But firstly, by the time I had found the site mum had been dead for almost three months and secondly, it wasn't as if I'd never gone near a computer when she was alive. It's true that my online activity did increase after she died, but that seems a natural consequence of having so much more free time.

It is possible that, had mum been alive, things might not have gone exactly the way that they did, because she wouldn't have let me go and meet Adrian on Hampstead Heath that day. But who's to say I wouldn't have lied to her? I could have told her that I had an eye test, or some other excuse that justified a few hours away from home. I was not in the habit of deceiving her, but one of the

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things this experience has taught me is that concealing the truth is sometimes necessary for the greater good.

So, it's impossible to prove whether or not I would have become involved with Adrian and Tess had mum still been alive. Therefore it's pointless to speculate.

As for 'socially isolated': it's true that after she died and I moved to Rotherhithe, I didn't see many people. Mum and I had lived in the same house in Kentish Town all our lives, and the new flat wasn't near anyone I knew. I didn't even know Rotherhithe existed before moving there. When Diana heard that she seemed to think it was significant, and asked why I had deliberately moved somewhere remote. But it wasn't like that; I ended up there by accident.

When mum was given her year prognosis, we decided we would have to sell the house and buy me a flat to live in after she died. The reasons were financial. There was a big mortgage on the house and credit-card debts, and although I had been caring for her up till then alongside the NHS nurse who came in every day to administer her medicines, we decided we would have to get another, private person in for her final months. The progression of her MS meant that she would soon need lifting in and out of bed and onto the toilet, and I couldn't do it on my own. Also, I would have to get a job in the future, and because I didn't have a degree we decided that I would do a distance course in software testing. Mum had a friend whose son, Damian, had just started his own software-testing company, and she arranged for me to work for him from home on a freelance basis, provided I had completed this course. I would need to study for

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three hours a day to get the qualification, so that was further reason to get some help.

Mum and I did our sums and worked out how much we would have for my flat. The answer was, not very much at all. Kentish Town was too expensive, so we looked at areas further out, but still, the only places within our price range were Not On: former council flats on the top floor of intimidating tower blocks or, in one case, on the North Circular, the filthy six-lane road mum and I used to get the bus down to get to the shopping centre. I would often not make it past the front door before telling the estate agent I had seen enough.

Back at home, I would tell mum about the viewings, making her gasp with descriptions of filthy hall carpets or a car balanced on bricks in the driveway. Penny, the woman we'd employed to be mum's carer, eavesdropped on our conversations and one day, looked up from the property pages of her *Daily Express*.

'It says here that the area around Rotherhithe is a wise buy,' she said, accentuating the last two words as if they were a phrase she had never heard before. 'Because of the Olympics.'

I ignored her. She was a silly woman, always offering her banal opinions and fussing around with her lunch, and I had quickly learned to pretend she wasn't there. But she kept on butting in, going on about Rotherhithe. Eventually, mum and I agreed that I would go and see a place within our budget in the area, just to keep her quiet.

The flat was on the first floor above an Indian restaurant on Albion Street, just behind the Rotherhithe

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tunnel. There was a huge sign above the restaurant with the (unattributed) statement that it was ‘the best curry house in Rotherhithe’. Albion Street was small but busy; teenagers on bikes barged through shoppers on the crammed pavement, and thudding music issued from a barber’s shop. The pub on the corner had Union Jacks covering the windows, so you couldn’t see inside, and men stood outside drinking pints and smoking, even though it was only three in the afternoon. When I found the front door to the flat, the paintwork was shiny with grease and on the step below lay the remains of a box of fried chicken, a pile of half-gnawed bones.

It was all highly unpromising, but because I had come all this way – it had taken over an hour by tube from Kentish Town – I decided that I should at least have a quick look inside.

The flat had clearly been unoccupied for some time; the front door resisted opening due to the large pile of post banked behind it. On entering I noticed a strong smell of onions.

‘It’s just for a few hours in the afternoon,’ the estate agent said, ‘while they get the curry started.’

He led me first to an unremarkable bedroom, and then to the kitchen. The particulars had mentioned an ‘unofficial’ roof terrace, which turned out to be just a bit of asphalt outside the window overlooking the back yard of the restaurant. The yard appeared to be used as a rubbish dump and was full of drums of cooking oil and catering-sized Nescafé jars. A solitary bush grew out of a crack in the concrete. When the estate agent led me

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back into the narrow hall, he grazed the wall with his car keys and left two gouges in the soft plaster.

Lastly, we went into the front room. It was dim, despite it being a bright day outside. The reason for that, I saw, was that the restaurant's sign jutted up over the bottom half of the window, blocking out the light.

We stood there for a moment in the gloom, and then I said I would like to leave. The estate agent didn't seem surprised. Outside, as he was locking the front door, he said, 'Well, at least you wouldn't have to go far for a curry.'

I didn't reply. On the tube back, though, I started to think that the comment was actually quite amusing so, when I got back home, I repeated it to mum.

I had, of course, intended for her to laugh. Or at least smile; she was wearing her respirator all the time by then, and was short of breath. But instead she said, in her Darth Vader voice: 'That's nice.'

'What?' I said.

'Useful,' she said. 'For when you don't want to cook. You were never very good at cooking.'

This was not the reaction I was expecting. It was meant to be humorous, because I didn't eat spicy food. That was the point. When I was eleven, I had a chicken curry at my friend Rashida's house and went bright red and was sick. Mum had to come and pick me up.

I am not proud to say I got angry. I remember looking at her with the respirator clamped to her face, the tubes up her nose, and having this ridiculous notion that rather than helping her live the tubes were actually sucking out her brain cells, emptying her out to a shell.