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Opening extract from

Chocolate Box Girls: Fortune Cookie

Written by

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BEFORE

Tanglewood House
Wood Lane
Kitnor
Somerset

Dear Jake,

You don't know me, and this is going to sound slightly crazy, but hear me out. I have recently found out some shocking and amazing news about my dad, who's kind of loaded and now lives in Australia. It turns out that he had an affair with your mum, like about fourteen years ago or something, and that makes you my half-brother. I know, awesome, right?

I am almost sixteen and my name is Honey Tanberry.

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I have twin sisters, Skye and Summer, who are fourteen; and a younger sister, Coco, who is about to turn thirteen. So you actually have four half-sisters. There is even a stepsister, Cherry, but I am not sure she actually counts, so we'll just say four for now. This might be a massive shock for you - it was to me - but I am very curious to meet you and find out more about you. Family is important, especially when your dad turns out to be a bit of a let-down, like our dad has.

I haven't actually told my sisters about you yet, as it's quite a bombshell and I am not sure how they will take it. I don't think my mum knows either. So if you have any bright ideas for breaking the news to them, please let me know.

I look forward to hearing from you soon,

Best wishes,
Honey Tanberry

When that first letter arrived, I hadn't believed it. I thought it was some kind of elaborate hoax, like the time Mum got an email saying a distant relative had died unexpectedly in the jungles of Borneo and if she would just reply giving her bank details, a settlement of £500,000 would be paid into her account.

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'Is this for real?' I'd asked when she showed me.

'No, Jake, it's just spam,' Mum had said sadly.

It was a different kind of spam from the tinned meat we got at the food bank two years ago, of course. It wasn't mottled pink meat that tasted of rubber, but a hoax, a wind-up, a trick to get Mum's bank details and swipe all her cash.

'Good luck to them with that,' she'd said. 'I am all of seventy-five pence in credit right now. If they need it that badly, they can have it.'

So, yeah, that first letter from Honey Tanberry . . . I thought it was spam.

The letter told me that I might be surprised to learn that I had four half-sisters and a stepsister who I knew nothing about, plus a no-good dad living in Australia. I already knew I had a no-good dad, because Mum had told me often enough; he'd done a vanishing act when he heard I was coming along. As for the sisters, that was nothing to shout about; I already had two, Maisie and Isla, aged nine and five, and they could be annoying enough as it was.

Maybe that first letter was spam, maybe it wasn't; I didn't much care. I scrunched it up and chucked it into the bin.

The second letter came four months later, fizzing with

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enthusiasm as if I hadn't blanked the last one. Honey Tanberry was clearly a girl who couldn't take no for an answer. She told me that her family lived in some rambling Victorian house by the sea in Somerset, that I was welcome to visit any time.

Get lost, I'd written back. *I don't believe you. Plus, I have two sisters already. Why would I want more?* It was a short letter, but to the point. I figured that was the only way to shut her up. I didn't know what she was after, but I was wary; it was a scam, it had to be.

Months later, the third letter turned up with photos of the sisters attached. I'll admit that grabbed my attention. They looked like me – or I looked like them, except for the one with almond eyes and blue-black hair tied up in anime bunches, and according to the letter she was the stepsister anyway. The others, though; they looked enough like me to stop me in my tracks.

Fair hair, blue eyes, regular features. One of them had a dreamy look about her, another had a cheeky lopsided grin, one looked sad and lost, and the eldest one looked defiant and dangerous – like she might just explode at any moment. I had seen all those expressions reflected back at

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me at various times from the cracked mirror in the bathroom, and now they stared out at me, eerily, from a random batch of photographs.

Five beautiful teenage sisters – well, half-sisters, anyway – which is exactly what Maisie and Isla were too. Their dad, Rick, was a bricklayer from Manchester. I used to wish he was my dad, back when we lived there, but that was before he started drinking too much. He lost his job; Mum lost her patience. She left him and vowed she'd never fall for another man again; they were nothing but trouble.

'Not you, Jake,' she'd said at the time. 'Obviously. You're different.'

But I wasn't all that different. I was struggling at school by then, winding up the teachers, breaking rules, damaging school property. 'Nothing but trouble, that boy,' I heard one teacher say in the same despairing tone my mum had used.

I wasn't sure if it made me proud or ashamed.

We left Rick two years ago. Gran sent Mum the money for tickets and we packed our bags and took the train to London.

Mum decided to take us on a sightseeing tour of London before heading to Gran's place. It was our last taste of



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freedom, she said; we trundled around the city on an open-topped bus and gawped at Nelson's Column and the Tower of London. My little sisters waved at Buckingham Palace as we rattled past, and Mum told them she could see the queen waving back out of one of the upstairs windows.

We jumped off the sightseeing bus in Chinatown. There was a big arching gate painted red and jade, and we went underneath; it was like stepping into a whole different world. The shops sold strange things we'd never seen before, like dried fish and velvet slippers, fat Buddha statues and little model cats painted red and gold with their arms in the air, which Mum said were symbols of good luck.

'Pick a restaurant,' Mum said, and Maisie and Isla pointed at the nearest one, which was called The Paper Dragon and had all these paper puppets of Chinese dragons hanging in the window. We went in and ordered egg foo yung, mushroom chop suey and spring rolls, which was what we always used to order back in Manchester when Rick wanted a takeaway.

They took a long time to arrive, though. It looked like we had picked a dud restaurant. A tidal wave of discontent

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was mounting around us, cold and ominous. People were not happy. One man demanded to see the manager.

In the end the manager did appear, hot and flustered, with an apron tied over his smart suit. He carried our egg foo yung, mushroom chop suey and spring rolls on a tray.

'Our waitress has just walked out,' he explained, apologetic, setting the food down a little haphazardly. 'The other one has called in sick. It's all a bit crazy here today.'

All around us, customers were grumbling, scowling, demanding to know where their food was.

The manager shrugged. 'I only have one pair of hands. Give me a chance!'

That's when Mum pushed her food aside, got up and marched into the kitchen. She reappeared moments later with dinner plates balanced all along her arm and a smile a mile wide, chatting to a table of surly businessmen as she dished up their order. I don't know what she said, but she turned their scowls to smiles all right.

Maisie, Isla and I ate our food while Mum waitressed, and the tide of gloom and anger lapping at the tables of The Paper Dragon ebbed away. We stayed at our corner table all evening, Maisie and Isla occupied with colouring

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books and pens and an endless supply of complimentary ice cream. I just listened to my iPod and watched the world going by outside the restaurant window.

This place was very different from the run-down estate we'd lived on with Rick. Nothing much ever happened there, but Chinatown was colourful and bright and loud and lively. As darkness fell the streets lit up, and it seemed like anything and everything was possible. Chinese families came and went, getting on with life; a gaggle of girls in prom dresses spilled out of a stretch limo and skittered into the restaurant across the street; a party of tourists trailed past, following a guide with his umbrella held high in the air. One stopped and took a photograph through the restaurant window, and Isla laughed, put out her tongue and waggled her fingers behind her ears.

By closing time, Mum had a new job – and the offer of a flat above The Paper Dragon.

'This must be my lucky day,' the manager kept saying. 'Alison Cooke, you have saved my skin!'

He gave us a dish with four golden-brown fortune cookies in it, the shells folded in on themselves to conceal their secret messages.

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'Ooh, fortune cookies!' Maisie squealed. 'Like your name, Jake!'

For as long as I could remember, my nickname had been Cookie. Rick had started it, and the kids at school carried it on. It didn't matter which school, either; that nickname followed me around like a shadow that was stuck to my shoe.

'Yeah,' I said. 'How cool.'

We broke the cookies open and fished out the fortunes inside.

'The rough times are behind you now,' Mum's read.

'The time is right to make new friends,' Maisie's said.

'A fresh start is just round the corner,' Isla's insisted.

Mine just said, 'Soon life will become more interesting.'

It wasn't the best fortune in the world, but it turned out to be true. We moved into the flat above the restaurant that night, sleeping on the floor under borrowed blankets. The next day, Mum took out a loan so she could pay rent and a deposit for the flat to Mr Zhao, the manager and owner of The Paper Dragon, and buy some furniture. She chose a second-hand sofa bed, beanbags, a small table and a set of bunks. Maisie and Isla shared the bottom bunk and I



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had the top one; Mum slept on the sofa bed.

'It's temporary,' she explained. 'We'll get a few home comforts once I've managed to pay off the loan and save some of my wages, but this will do for now.'

By the time we finally went over to see Gran in Bethnal Green, we'd already been in the flat for a week and Mum was working afternoon and evening shifts in the restaurant. Maisie, Isla and I started school a few days later and that was that; a new life, as if Manchester had never existed.

The flat was damp and scabby, with peeling paint and bare MDF flooring that wobbled when you walked on it, but there were no rows here, no tiptoeing around trying not to get on Rick's nerves. I had to babysit when Mum was working, but we bought a second-hand TV and DVD player and Gran came over some evenings and chilled out with us. I got very good at making beans on toast, mushrooms on toast, scrambled eggs on toast, and there was always leftover food from The Paper Dragon.

We scrubbed the flat from top to bottom, bought a few tins of paint to hide the dirt and mould on the walls and the woodwork, threw down a carpet offcut in the living room. I taught myself to put up shelves. And Chinatown

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. . . Chinatown was epic. It was crazy, cool, full of life. I loved it.

So, yeah, when that first letter from my half-sister arrived, forwarded on from Gran's, I genuinely didn't much care. I had a life, I had a family, and that was enough. I was OK.

When the second letter turned up, something began to niggle, to tug away at my curiosity. The letters had made me question things. I'd always known Rick wasn't my dad, but I barely knew anything about my real dad, and a little part of me began to wonder.

After the third letter had arrived, I'd asked Mum to tell me about him. I wasn't about to be fobbed off with the old story that they 'd both been too young, that he was scared at the idea of being a dad and decided to disappear. I wanted details.

'Why now?' she wanted to know, tired from a long shift in the restaurant.

'Why not now?' I countered, and Mum had sighed and shrugged.

'He wasn't much of a dad,' she said, frowning. 'We're better off without him.'

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'But who *was* he?' I persisted. 'How did you meet?'

I had the latest letter folded in my pocket. Honey, my scammer/sister told me that Mum had been a junior member of the sales team in the office where her dad, Greg Tanberry, worked. It looked like Mum had had an affair with a married man. If that were true, it was hardly surprising she'd been sketchy with the details.

'We worked together,' Mum told me vaguely. 'A long time ago. He was my boss. I thought it was serious; he clearly didn't. There's no sense in raking all this up again, Jake.'

'What was his name?' I asked.

She hadn't wanted to tell me. She stalled and blustered and tried to wriggle out of it, but I said that this was my dad we were talking about, that I had a right to know.

'His name was Greg,' she admitted then. 'Greg Tanberry.'

I wondered if everything else in those letters might be true too.

You might be my sister, I wrote back that time. *But you won't want a brother like me, trust me.*

The fourth letter came with a train ticket that was valid for a month and an invitation to come and stay at Tanglewood House.



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Let me know when you are planning to arrive, Honey had written. *I still haven't told the others about you, but they're going to be so amazed to meet you, I promise!*

Don't hold your breath, I'd written back.

I used a drawing pin to skewer the train ticket to the wall, just above my fortune cookie prediction: 'Soon life will become more interesting.'

I didn't realize then just how true those words would be.



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