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opening extract from

Dirty Work

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1

Hope

'Well all I can say is –' Mum sashays past me with a tray full of deserts – 'I'm glad we didn't go for that little place in Languedoc. It's so much more *civilized* to be by the sea.'

Dad grunts and makes some comment about Mum only being happy when she's near the shops, and everybody at the table laughs.

'I thought that's why you married me,' she says, her voice deepening. 'You needed someone to help you spend all that money!'

Another roar of laughter, the chink of glasses, scrape of knives and forks across plates.

I flick through the channels on the satellite box. Mum wanted me to join them like a polite and proper daughter, but they'll only talk about investments and property prices, and Mr Crawley, who has the villa across the road, will give me these really sleazy looks when he thinks his wife's not paying attention. And I don't want to watch while Mum has a full-on geisha moment over Dad. It's like *so* desperate it hurts.

Since Dad arrived, everything's changed. He flew in just for the week on Thursday, for the *last* week of our holiday. All the time we've been out here, Mum has been waiting for him to arrive, to find a 'window' in his busy schedule for his annual family holiday in France. Now he's here, Mum is alive with

gossip, business, new clothes. She's been planning this meal for weeks. She even ordered lobsters especially.

This is the third house they've bought over here. Dad says it's just another way of 'managing wealth', but I think he does it to give Mum something to do while she waits for him. He's boasting to Mr Crawley about how he sold the last one for a 'healthy profit' and how European property is going the same way as the UK.

'The prices are stratospheric,' he says, sounding pleased with himself. 'Much better returns than the stock market.'

When he showed up last Thursday in his new Armani Jeans, his grey hair just buzzed, with his tennis rackets and waterskis, smelling of sweat from the journey and free samples of Gucci for Men, like the party was started now that he was here, I didn't want to talk to him, I wanted to punch him.

'Hello, Princess.' He tried to scoop me up in a hug, but I lay on the sun lounger pretending to be asleep, my iPod throbbing in my ears. I waited for him to get off before I said hello.

We've hardly spoken since. I know he's disappointed that I won't play tennis with him, or go waterskiing. But I've been trying to make out like I'm not really bothered, just like he's not really bothered about us. There's a word for it: *nonchalance* – not concerned – it's a pose I've been practising all holiday.

Next year I'll be nearly sixteen and officially Too Old to come out here anyway. I've already warned Mum that I'm staying at home after my exams. Or I might even go on holiday with my friends, Ibiza or something, like Kaz and Amanda were talking about.

Mum's not so sure. She gave me one of her 'I'll deal with you later' looks when I told her, but she didn't start a fight. She was too busy flipping through curtain catalogues. She ordered

hand-printed ones and had them shipped over here last week. All holiday she's been busy buying things.

'There's so much you need for a new kitchen,' she said. But I can't see why she needs a rice cooker and an asparagus steamer and a coffee grinder, especially since we go out for meals most of the time.

I watch a repeat of *The OC* with the sound turned down. Out here Sky is just the same as at home, except we get TV5 and Canal Plus and some other weird French TV. Karen and Amanda were jealous when I told them I was going to our new house in the French Riviera for the summer, but they don't know how boring it is being here, even if there is a pool and the beach and a fifty-foot yacht.

'Imagine, all those fit Frenchies. You're *so* going to get it *on*!' Amanda rapped, wiggling her hips like Beyoncé.

But it's not all that around here. Most of the houses are owned by the English, and they're either retired, like Brian and Mavis Crawley, or professionals with young families like the Parry-Joneses. Mrs Parry-Jones is a barrister who looks stressed even in a bikini, harassed straggles of hair escaping round her face. They've got a villa on the other side of the hill, with no swimming pool, so Mum's been letting them use ours. This means I've been drafted in for babysitting the whole time they've been here. While Mum takes Mrs Parry-Jones into Cannes for shopping, I get to look after Barry (eight) and Harris (ten) and watch they don't drown, while they dive-bomb the pool and play Submarines.

There have been no fit men except, perhaps, Yves the pool guy who comes round once a week to dredge out leaves and hairs and other gross things from the pool filter. He's tall and tanned with black waxy hair and stubble. I've been practising lying on the sun lounger in my smallest bikini being *nonchalant* whenever he comes round.

Amanda says that if boys really like you they always ignore you. I think this is true of Yves. He goes a bit pink behind his ears whenever he sees me, and I've caught him staring at me, especially if he thinks I'm asleep. I wonder what it would be like if he came over and put his face close to mine and kissed me very, very gently on the lips.

I've spent the last month by the pool thinking about this, or wishing I was home in Norfolk, going to parties and hanging out. I've missed so much already. Amanda's been flirting with all these guys and Karen's got a new boyfriend. She sent me a photo on email. He's twenty-three and drives an Audi TT and looks a little bit like David Beckham in profile.

When I go out with Kaz and Amanda men always come up to us. The minute we walk through the door sometimes. 'Nice top, where you from?' Or, 'I lost my phone number, can I have yours?'

Kaz and Amanda love the attention, it's obvious from the way they flirt and giggle. But I'm shyer. And, though I don't like to admit it, it makes me feel uncomfortable sometimes. I mean, I want to look sexy and beautiful and have men wink at me and tell me that I look great and that, but when some of them hustle up close and press themselves against me it gets confusing, like they think I should let them feel me up, just because I'm having a conversation with them.

Mum thinks Karen and Amanda are low class because they are scholarship girls and Amanda's mum is a cleaner. But she doesn't have to go to school with the Norfolk county girls, all the Alexandras and Cassandras and Lavinias that Mum thinks I should be making friends with, girls whose parents have owned the English countryside for centuries. With their horsey faces and big blond dogs and Louis Vuitton school bags. Karen and Amanda are cool, because they're not like that. They don't seem to care if the whole school thinks they're chavs, or that

they buy their school uniform in Primark, or wear Burberry rip-offs from the market, or heeled ankle boots when they're supposed to have flat shoes.

Although she doesn't look it, Mum is kind of old-fashioned and over-protective. When I was born, she was nearly forty. Until she met my dad she thought she could never have children. 'You were a miracle,' she says when she tells the story of how I was born, and her eyes get big and watery. 'I never wanted to let go of you. Not for a second.' Now she's fifty-five, although people think she's younger. Last year Dad bought her a facelift for her birthday and a new MG convertible. When she came back from hospital her face was bruised all over, like she'd been mugged.

They're talking about immigration now. Mr Crawley goes on about how terrible it is, all these foreign workers showing up in Britain.

'We just don't have the capacity to cope.'

There are murmurs of agreement. Then Dad says, 'But on the other hand, I'm a businessman and I've got to admit, they do do all our dirty work. Cleaning, portering, building. No one in the West wants to do that sort of job any more. They keep the economy going!'

'Bugger that polite claptrap!' Mr Crawley bangs his fist on the table. I can see his expression through the wall, full of red wine and smug authority. 'I mean, what are they *doing* here? Don't get me wrong, I'm not a racist, but I do object to people who have no right to be in this country taking jobs . . .'

'Darling, we're in *France*.' Mrs Crawley's voice sounds strained.

'Same difference. I'm all *for* Europe! It's all the illegal immigrants and asylum seekers that get me! I mean do you know how much of my tax money goes towards their social

security? I don't pay tax so that some terrorists can claim housing benefit!'

There's silence for a moment, Dad slurps noisily on his wine. 'In that case, the question I have for you is,' Dad laughs to himself before he goes on, 'how do you blindfold a Chinaman?'

'Derek!' Mum squeaks. '*Please*, we're not on the golf course now—'

'Use dental floss!'

And he and Mr Crawley roar with laughter so loud that they can't hear Mavis and Mum muttering to each other as they clear away the plates.

In the morning Mum's in a mood. She's fussing around the house, grumbling about Dad and lack of decent storage space. I know she's still embarrassed about last night. Mum says it's the City that does it. That he's always rude and over the top when he's spent too much time in London.

'These French houses just aren't *designed* properly,' she says, trying to squeeze another box of wine glasses into a full cupboard. 'I mean, you need more than six cupboards in a kitchen.'

She's already packed her Louis Vuitton cases. She says she's flying home and leaving me and Dad to strip the beds and do the vacuuming.

'I'm not suffering another journey in the Contraption,' she says, pulling off her rubber gloves. 'Anyway, we've got the new hot tub arriving at home and *someone* needs to be there while they install it.'

'No! *Mum!* Can't I fly back with you? *Please?* It's not fair!'

I don't understand her. She spends all holiday waiting for him to arrive and then when he does, she can't wait to get away from him.

'Don't you start!' she says, suddenly aggressive, all angles with her elbows. Then, 'Look, sweetheart, humour him, OK? Just this once? It means a lot to him to spend some time with you.'

The Contraption is Dad's 1967 VW camper van with all-original fittings. He spends most of what little spare time he has fiddling with it and adding new accessories, just so he can take photos of it for the enthusiasts' websites. He had it driven out here so he could drive it back home again himself.

Mum says she doesn't understand why he wants to drive about in a hippy mobile.

'For goodness sake! You're a *millionaire*! You can afford a *chauffeur*. I don't know why you're so obsessed with it.'

But Dad says 'the open road' is a classic British tradition.

'Well, why you don't just buy a Winnebago or something, at least that would have plush sofas.'

When I was younger I used to quite like it: trundling along through the countryside like we're in some French movie. And it's cute the way you can pump water into the sink with your foot and boil water for tea on the mini hob. But now the thought of spending all that time cooped up with Dad and no one else to talk to makes me feel weird and nervous and kind of cross.

'Mum, *please*.'

But she won't budge. She tells me that it's good for us to spend some father-daughter time together. And she bribes me by promising I can stay over at Amanda's when I get back.

When the taxi comes she pecks Dad on the cheek – 'See you later.' – and hugs me – 'You mind he doesn't crash it. And don't go talking to any strange boys on the ferry.'

Then it's just me and Dad.

He clears his throat and looks at me out of the corner of his eye.

'So,' he says. 'So, what about those shutters?'

*

Once the sun has been shut out the house immediately starts to cool and the air starts to smell of earth and salt from the sea. When I go back outside the sun is blinding and I nearly walk right into Dad, who is talking to Yves in embarrassing French.

'*Garderez-vous un oeil sur l'endroit tandis que nous sommes partis?*' Dad says, pronouncing every word like he's got a phrasebook open in front of him.

'Er, yes, of course,' Yves says, in English.

I try to go back into the house, but Yves is looking at me through his Ray-Ban Sports and smiling. Blood spreads up my neck and into my cheeks. 'You will have no problems here. I wish you have a good journey. Bon voyage!'

Then he bends down and brushes his face against mine, once on each side, French style. He makes a soft kissing sound in each ear. '*Belle fille.*'

I can't believe it. In front of Dad and everything. My whole body goes stiff and my face is on fire. I clench my teeth and stare at his feet, noticing that even in blue pool shoes he looks cool. I want to sink through the floor.

'I'll be in touch,' Dad says, shaking his hand.

When Yves has gone, schlepped the whole length of the garden in his slow, swinging walk, Dad looks at me and says, 'I don't like that boy. He's a cheeky little sod.'

'Why?' I ask, although I kind of already know.

'Never mind.' He sucks his cheeks together. 'Let's get the show on the road.'

We've been droning through the hot yellow countryside for hours. I'm dripping with sweat even though we've got all the windows open, and now the battery on my iPod has run down I've got to listen to Dad's hippy music – Cream and Fairport Convention – on worn-out cassettes that make the music sound slow and soupy.

There's been another heatwave in France this year. *La canicule* has been in the headlines of all the newspapers. The countryside around here is scorched, the grass brown and dying, trees already starting to shed their leaves. Lots of old people died, according to *Le Monde*, and now there's some scandal about them storing bodies in refrigerated trucks, because there's not enough room for them at the morgue.

'Disgusting,' Mum said, and then, 'Thank God for air conditioning.'

Dad is uncomfortable, shifting in his seat, his face damp with sweat. He looks at me and sees that I'm twiddling my earphones round and round my fingers.

'Battery gone?'

I grunt.

Whenever we get in range, his mobile phone goes off like a Christmas display and he has to pull over and bark at people back in London: '. . . cash in those share options *now* . . . we need something liquid here . . . didn't we negotiate ninety-day terms? . . . can I count on you to set the ball rolling?'

Business conversations. He sounds like a boss then: tough, demanding. The sweat patches under his arms get darker.

We've achieved a kind of truce where if he doesn't ask dumb questions or crack racist jokes I don't give him dirty looks or pretend I can't hear him, but I'm still not going to get all father-daughter gooey over him. I slouch in the seat with my legs up on the dashboard, and stroke the fine nap of hairs on my knee that I missed when I was shaving. At least I got a tan.

He looks at me and coughs and allows a lorry to overtake him. 'So,' he says. 'So, how's your life?'

This seems like such a huge and random question. How's my life? What life? Last time I noticed I didn't really have one. I don't say this to him of course. Before I can think of an appropriate response he says, 'Got your eye on anyone yet?'

'Um—'

'Only, you know, you need to be careful. In life. You know?'

'Not really.' I look at him; he seems to be sweating even more.

'With blokes, I mean men – boys – erm . . .'

'What about them?' He shifts about in his seat and leans over the steering wheel, staring at the road. I know what's coming. He's going to give me the 'don't take sweets from strange boys' kind of speech, but I'm not going to make it easy for him.

'Well, now you're growing up a bit, people, *boys*, they start to notice you in a *different* kind of way.'

'*Really?*' I try to sound innocent rather than ironic. 'Like who?'

'You need to know that you don't have to do anything with anyone that you don't want to.'

'OK, Dad.'

We whizz past a whole line of cars that are waiting at a junction.

'And if you do find someone you think is really special, you feel free to introduce them to me. I mean I know I'm not around a lot, but I'm going to make it up to you, and—'

Yeah, right. He always says that. 'Dad, I'm still a *virgin*. If that's what you want to know.'

He makes a funny coughing sound. The queue of cars starts to sound their horns at us.

'*Dad!* You're driving on the wrong side of the road.'

'Oh.' He brakes and swerves back into the right-hand lane. Cars have to move aside to let us back into the queue. One man sticks his fingers up at us.

He changes the subject after that and puts Coldplay on the stereo. He tells me about the camper van, and how difficult it is to find parts, and then he goes on and on about the Business and how easy it is to make money if you know how.

'Buy low, sell high,' he says, as we creep along in the queue for the ferry. 'That's the first rule of business. And the second rule is don't be emotional. You want your *customers* to be emotional, but the businessman, he always has to be rational. That way, your *customers* will buy things because they *want* them, not because they *need* them.'

2

Oksana

I could open the door and jump out. He forgot to lock it, he's so angry. Since we left Amsterdam he's been stopping every fifty kilometres to snort coke and that's made him talkative. He says he's got to take the rest of it before we get to Calais. Even with the air conditioning on he's sweating; the car is like a freezer although the computer on the dashboard says it's nearly thirty-eight degrees outside. He drives as if it's a race, weaving in between the cars and lorries, speeding up, slowing down. Maybe if I'm lucky he'll have a heart attack before we get there.

He's stressed about Marie, he says. If the boss finds out what happened he's dead. And now there is only me, his profit margin is cut in half. He's practising his story. He says he doesn't know what will come across best with the boss. That Marie ran away, or that a customer took her. 'Perhaps we could find another girl?' he says, slowing down a little, scanning the passengers in all the cars we pass.

He says we have to go via France, because there's too much heat in Holland. Dead girls mean trouble, questions from the police, investigations.

'I mean it's not like I killed her!' he whines. 'Silly bitch.'

I think about Marie. I didn't really know her. We'd only been together for a week. Since Zergei brought me to Amsterdam. A tiny, skunky seventh-floor flat right near the Oude Kerk. She