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opening extract from

Worse Than Boys

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CHAPTER ONE

We had been to the pictures that night and were taking the late train home. We lived at the far end of town. *They* lived on one of the worst estates in the east end. The only thing we had in common was school, Cameron High.

I spotted them first. Two carriages up from ours, four of them sitting together.

I nudged Erin, and she followed my gaze to where they sat. We would have heard them anyway, with their loud laughing and their swearing. They were always too loud. Mingers, every one of them. Scum. Call them that and they revelled in it, as if it was a compliment. The Hell Cats was what they called themselves. Hell Cats! Just showed how stupid they were that they had to give themselves a name like that.

We didn't call ourselves anything. Giving your gang a name was for daft boys or idiot girls, not for us.

But the Hell Cats had christened us the Lip Gloss Girls and the name stuck. We didn't mind. The name meant we were clean and shiny and female, but we were still the best fighters in the school.

'They get off two stops from here,' Erin said, and Heather looked up from her movie magazine.

'Who's they?' she asked.

She didn't need an answer. She knew who we were talking about. She slipped the magazine into her bag. 'How many?'

I looked down the train. I could see Wizzie. Wizzie! Wherever did she get a name like that? Tossing her black hair streaked with red, red like blood, and waving her long black-nailed fingers about. Tiny and tough, Wizzie was the scariest of them, or tried to be, always in trouble. She had her ears pierced and her nose too. She even had her eyebrow pierced. Her arms and neck were razor scarred. The rumour was she carried a knife around with her. There were three others. Lauren Winters, whose hair looked as if it had been cut by a blind barber, Sonya Taylor, the one with the stutter – and how we loved taking the mickey out of her – and big Grace Morgan, who closely resembled a horse.

We were missing our mate, Rose, that night. It was

her dad's weekend and he had taken her out for a meal.

Four of them, three of us. Still no contest.

Sonya was the first to notice us. She leant across to Wizzie and whispered and they both turned to look at us. A slow smile spread across Wizzie's face. Did she expect us to be afraid? I felt my heart beat faster and my palms began to sweat. But I wasn't afraid. I was never afraid with my mates around me. I bet none of the rest were either.

I clocked the other people in the carriage. An elderly woman reading a murder mystery, a couple of housewives laden with shopping bags and looking as if they were desperate for a cigarette, and a man in a pinstriped business suit talking loudly on his mobile.

None of them were bothering with us.

Wizzie came through first – Wizzie always came first – swaggering up the carriage, her eyes never leaving mine. Did she think for a minute I would look away? Think again, Wizzie. I sensed Erin tense beside me. Heather just sat as if she wasn't even interested. Cool.

Wizzie burst into the carriage and suddenly every one of the other passengers took notice. The old woman, the housewives, even the man on his mobile phone – they all looked up at her.

'Typical!' Wizzie's voice was a common drawl. 'I thought you'd be hiding in the last carriage.'

I stood up too. 'Typical,' I repeated. 'Trust you not to notice us until it's your stop.'

Wizzie didn't waste any more time talking. She sprang at me, grabbing for my hair. I fell back, but I had been ready for her and my hands found her hair first. I yanked, and Wizzie let out a scream of anger. I could see Erin tackling Grace, and Heather already had Lauren and Sonya on top of her.

'You lot don't know what a fair fight is, do you?!' I yelled, and tried to claw at Wizzie's face. We both toppled to the floor. My back cracked against a seat as we fell.

The old woman was on her feet. 'Enough!' she was screaming.

The man and the two housewives didn't get up. It was the old woman who walloped at Erin with her book. Wizzie was on top of me, her fist raised, ready to smash it against my face. I felt the train begin to shudder as it pulled into the station. Their stop. The old woman dragged Wizzie off me. Wizzie kept hold of my hair, yanking me painfully up with her.

'This isn't finished.' She spoke the words so close to

my face I could feel her hot breath.

'You better believe it,' I hissed back.

The carriage doors slid open and Wizzie was on her feet and shrugging off the old woman's hand. Her foot crunched on my arm as she stepped over me. The other three followed behind her, pushing us roughly into our seats.

Once they were out, we jumped to the windows and started making faces and laughing at them. The doors slid closed again and they started shouting their abuse back at us. We pressed our faces against the window. Lauren threw the first stone, hurling it against the window. We jumped back, expecting it to shatter. It didn't, and Wizzie lifted an even bigger stone and threw it. We danced in delight as the stone glanced off the glass. They ran alongside the train as it moved off slowly, banging on the windows with their fists. If this had been a manned station someone would have stopped them. But there was nobody here. A quiet little station in the middle of a run-down, rat-infested estate.

I ran to the doors. The train was picking up speed, but the Hell Cats were still keeping up, and getting madder by the minute. I was vaguely aware of the two women and the man moving off, muttering their way

into the next carriage. I grabbed the handrails and swung myself up and, with all the force I could muster, I kicked both feet against the doors. The carriage shuddered. Wizzie was so taken aback she stumbled and fell back on to the platform.

We roared with laughter as her mates gathered round to help her up.

Only the old woman was left in the carriage with us. She looked at us as if we were dirt.

'You're worse than boys!' she snapped. 'Worse than boys!'

Worse than boys. Of course we were. And that made us really laugh.

It was a good night. The best.

I thought then, how could it ever change?

CHAPTER TWO

The old bat complained about us. Can you believe that?! She was on the phone first thing on Monday morning. She recognised Wizzie. Let's face it, once you see her it's hard to forget her. That hair alone makes her stand out. And she was still in her school blazer. Between you and me, it's all she can afford to wear.

We knew something was happening when Wizzie and co were ordered from the class and practically frog-marched to the Head's office. We waited for our turn. It wasn't the first time we'd been in trouble with them. It didn't come.

I found out why just before lunchtime. Wizzie grabbed me in the corridor. She would have had me by the hair if I hadn't leapt away from her.

'What's your problem?' I yelled at her.

'We got the blame for that! Just us!' Wizzie's voice was so common. She couldn't hide her roots – not in

her hair or her voice. We all made fun of the way she talked. 'You'll pay for that, pal.'

'Make us,' I said, egging her on.

Lauren jumped in, always the first to follow her leader. 'You were on that train as well. You caused as much trouble as we did. But it's always us that gets it, never the Lip Gloss Girls.'

They were gathered round me now, like zombies ready to strike. Come to think of it, that's a pretty good description of Wizzie, with her white face and that stand-to-attention hair. A zombie. But I wasn't scared. I pushed Wizzie aside. 'Your problem, not ours.'

Wizzie tried to trip me. She stuck out her foot, but at the last minute I jumped and it was Wizzie who stumbled.

'Muppet!' I shouted. And I hurried off, not running – I never ran away. There would have to be two moons in the sky before I'd run away. I just hurried as if I was trying to get away from a bad smell. I knew they hated it that I wasn't afraid of them. Even when I was on my own, I was never afraid of them. Why should I be? I had my friends to rely on, and my friends had never let me down.

Other people did, always had. My dad, leaving us

when I was only a baby. And my mum, always so bitter about men, about life, about everything. She always thought she was the one who'd been handed the sticky end of the lollipop of life.

'Nothing ever goes right for me,' was her favourite saying. 'If I didn't have bad luck I would have no luck at all. You'll be just like me, Hannah. Wait and see. Nothing ever goes right for people like us.'

But I would never be 'people like us'. I would never be like Mum, I promised myself. I was always going to be lucky. I would make things go right for me. I was going to be the best. And with friends like Erin and Heather and Rose, what could go wrong?

I told them all at lunchtime in the canteen about Wizzie. 'They must have got hell for what happened on the train, bringing down the reputation of the school and all that.'

According to the teachers, the Hell Cats were always bringing down the reputation of the school. Wearing their skirts too short, dyeing their hair, chewing gum. Common as muck.

'He probably thinks they had something to do with that mugging anyway,' Erin said.

Just a few days before an old woman had been held

up by a gang of girls and her pension had been stolen. It had happened on their estate, and one of the girls had threatened the old woman with a knife, so naturally, for us, Wizzie was the prime suspect.

'I love it when they get the blame!' Erin said, laughing.

'At least they didn't tell him we were there as well,' Heather said.

Erin looked at her as if she had two heads, and I could see Heather didn't like that. But honestly, sometimes Heather was so dim. I sometimes think her lift didn't go to the top floor.

'Of course they didn't,' Erin said patiently, as if she was talking to an idiot. 'That's the worst thing you could ever do. Grass on somebody, even your worst enemy.'

'We wouldn't grass on them either, Heather,' I told her.

'Wouldn't we?' She still didn't get it.

'No. But we'd get them back for it later.'

'And that's what they'll do?'

I sometimes forgot that Heather hadn't been in primary school with me and Erin and Rose. She had only become friends with us when we'd all come up to

Cameron High. She was new to our crowd, new to the Lip Gloss Girls.

I admit I preferred to think of us as the Lip Gloss Girls, because when we weren't called that, we were usually just known as Erin's crowd, and I knew even then I didn't like that. I would have liked everyone to think of us as Hannah's crowd instead.

It was Erin who answered Heather's question. 'They'll be planning their revenge already,' she said. 'So just watch your back.'

Zak Riley passed by then. I think he'd been listening all along. Zak was in our class, always winding us up. He had a mop of dark hair and he thought he was cool. Zak would never be in any gang. He thought gangs were stupid. 'You lot are unbelievable. Lassies fighting. Honestly. Will you never grow up?'

He had a cheek. He was short, with bags of attitude and one of those faces you just want to punch.

'I mean, come on, girls. Peace on earth starts here. You lot just want to fight. It's boys that are supposed to do all the fighting.' He looked at me. 'Hey, Hannah, have you ever been mistaken for a boy?'

'No,' I said at once. 'Have you?'

That sent my friends into a fit of the giggles.

Zak always got my back up. He was mouthy and lived on the same dark estate at the edge of town where Wizzie lived. He would fit in well in Wizzie's world. I looked round at his nerdy friends. 'I know we could beat you with our hands tied behind our backs.'

'You wouldn't need to do that,' Zak went on. 'One look at your face would be enough to send me running back to my mammy.'

I'd had enough of talking to him. 'Just tell your girlfriend, Wizzie, we'll be watching out for her from now on.'

He turned to his pals. 'Wizzie, my girlfriend! Ha! I'd rather kiss a tarantula.'

Zak always had a crowd of friends gathered round him, ready to laugh at his feeble jokes.

'That wee guy really annoys me,' I said as they moved off.

But we soon forgot about Zak Riley and Wizzie and any trouble that was coming. There were too many other things on our minds.

Erin's sister, Avril, was getting married and we had all been invited to the wedding. Something wonderful to look forward to and much more exciting than anything else.