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Opening extract from

The Recruit

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Published by

Hachette

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1. SCIENCE

James Choke hated Combined Science. It should have been test tubes, jets of gas and sparks flying all over the place, like he'd imagined when he was still at primary school. What he got was an hour propped on a stool watching Miss Voolt write on a blackboard. You had to write everything down even though the photocopier got invented forty years earlier.

It was last lesson but one, raining outside and turning dark. James was sleepy because the lab was hot and he'd been up late playing Grand Theft Auto the night before.

Samantha Jennings sat next to him. Teachers thought Samantha was fantastic: always volunteering for stuff, neat uniform, glossed nails. She did all her diagrams with three different coloured pens and covered her exercise books in wrapping paper so they looked extra smart. But when the teachers weren't looking Samantha was a total cow. James hated her. She was always winding him up about his mum being fat:

'James' mum is so fat, they have to grease the bath tub or she gets stuck in it.'

Samantha's cronies laughed, same as always.

James' mum *was* huge. She had to order her clothes out of a special catalogue for fat people. It was a nightmare being seen with her. People pointed, stared. Little kids mimicked the way she walked. James loved his mum, but he tried to find excuses when she wanted to go somewhere with him.

'I went for a five-mile jog yesterday,' Samantha said. 'Two laps around James' mum.'

James looked up from his exercise book.

'That's so funny, Samantha. Even funnier than the first three times you said it.'

James was one of the toughest kids in Year Seven. Any boy cussing his mum would get a punch. But what could you do when it was a girl? Next lesson he'd sit as far from Samantha as he could.

'Your mum is so fat–'

James was sick of it. He jumped up. His stool tipped over backwards.

'What is it with you, Samantha?' James shouted.

The lab went quiet. Every eye turned to the action.

'What's the matter, James?' Samantha grinned. 'Can't take a joke?'

'Mr Choke, pick up your seat and get on with your work,' Miss Voolt shouted.

'You say one more word, Samantha, I'll . . .'

James was never any good at comebacks.

'I'll bloody . . .'

Samantha giggled. 'What will you do, James? Go home and cuddle big fat Mommy?'

James wanted to see something other than a stupid grin on Samantha's face. He grabbed Samantha off her stool,

bundled her up against the wall, then spun her around to face him. He froze in shock. Blood was running down Samantha's face. Her cheek had a long cut where it had caught on a nail sticking out of the wall.

James backed away, scared. Samantha cupped her hands over the blood and started bawling her head off.

'James Choke, you are in extremely serious trouble!' Miss Voolt shouted.

Everyone in James' class was making some sort of noise. James couldn't face up to what he'd done. No one would believe it was an accident. He made a run for the door.

Miss Voolt grabbed James' blazer.

'Where do you think you're going?'

'Get out my way,' James shouted.

He gave Miss Voolt a shove. She toppled backwards, limbs flipping helplessly in the air like a beetle turned upside down.

He slammed the classroom door and ran down the corridor. The school gates were locked, but he escaped over the barrier in the teachers' car park.

*

James stormed away from school, muttering to himself, getting less angry and more scared as it dawned that he was in the deepest trouble of his life.

He was twelve in a few weeks' time. He started wondering if he'd live that long. His mum was going to kill him. He'd definitely get suspended. It was probably bad enough to get expelled.

By the time James got to the little playground near his flats he felt sick. He looked at his watch. If he went home

this early his mum would know something was up. He didn't have change for a cup of tea in the chip shop. The only thing to do was go into the playground and shelter from the drizzle in the concrete tunnel.

The tunnel seemed smaller than James remembered. There was graffiti sprayed all over and it smelled like a dog had peed inside. James didn't mind. He felt he deserved to be somewhere cold that smelled of dog. He rubbed his hands to get them warm and remembered when he was little.

His mum was nowhere near as fat in those days. Her face would appear in the end of the tunnel with a daft grin. She'd speak in a deep voice, *I'm coming to eat you up, James.* It was cool, because the tunnel had a killer echo when you were sitting inside. James tried the echo:

'I'm a total idiot.'

The echo agreed with him. He pulled his coat hood up and did the zip to the top so it covered half his face.

*

After half an hour sulking, James knew he had two options: stay in the tunnel for the rest of his life, or go home and get killed.

James stepped into the hallway of his flat and checked the mobile phone on the table under the coat rack:

12 MISSED CALLS
UNIDENTIFIED NUMBER

It looked like school had been trying to get hold of his mum pretty bad, but she hadn't answered. James thanked god, but

wondered why she hadn't picked up. Then he noticed Uncle Ron's jacket hanging up.

Uncle Ron had turned up when James was a toddler. It was like having a loud, smelly rug in the flat. Ron smoked, drank and only went out to go to the pub. He got a job once, but it only lasted a fortnight.

James had always thought Ron was an idiot and his mum had eventually agreed and kicked him out. But only after she'd married him and given birth to his daughter. Even now James' mum had a soft spot for Ron. They'd never got divorced. Ron turned up every few weeks, supposedly to see his daughter, Lauren. But mostly he came when Lauren was at school and he was short of a few quid.

James walked into the living room. His mum, Gwen, was spread out on a sofa. Her feet were up on a stool and her left leg was bandaged. Ron was in an armchair, feet on the coffee table, toes poking out of his socks. They were both drunk.

'Mum, you're not supposed to drink with your pills,' James said, so annoyed he forgot his problems.

Ron straightened up and took a drag of his cigarette.

'Hey Jamie boy, Daddy's home,' Ron said, grinning.

James and Ron eyed each other up.

'You're not my father, Ron,' James said.

'No,' Ron replied. 'Your dad legged it the day he saw your ugly face.'

James didn't want to say about school in front of Ron, but the truth was eating at him.

'Mum, something happened at school. It was an accident.'

'Wet your pants again, did you?' Ron giggled.

James didn't want to take the bait.

'Listen, James, me darlin',' Gwen said, slurring her words. 'Whatever trouble you're in this time, we'll talk later. Go and get your sister from school. I've had a few too many drinkies and I'd better not drive.'

'I'm sorry, Mum, it's really serious. I have to tell you . . .'

'Just get your sister, James,' his mum said sternly. 'My head is pounding.'

'Lauren's big enough to come home on her own,' James said.

'She isn't,' Ron interrupted. 'Do what you're told. He needs my boot up his backside if you ask me.'

'How much money does he want this time?' James asked sarcastically.

Gwen waved her hand in front of her face. She was fed up with both of them.

'Can't you two stay in the same room for two minutes without fighting? James, go to my purse, buy something for tea on the way home. I'm not cooking tonight.'

'But . . .'

'Get out, James, before I lose my temper.'

James couldn't wait until he was old enough to batter Uncle Ron. His mum was OK when Ron wasn't around.

James found his mum's purse in the kitchen. A tenner was enough for his dinner, but he took two twenties. Ron would steal everything in the purse before he left, so James wouldn't get blamed. It felt nice stuffing forty quid into his school trousers. Gwen never left anything lying around that she didn't expect James or Ron to steal. She kept the big money upstairs in a safe.

2. SISTER

Some kids were happy to have one games console. James Choke had every console, game and accessory going. He had a PC, an MP3 player, Nokia mobile, widescreen TV and DVD recorder in his room. He never looked after any of it. If something broke he got another one. He had eight pairs of Nike trainers. A top-line skateboard. A £600 racing bike. When his bedroom was in a mess it looked like a bomb had gone off in Toys R Us.

James had all this because Gwen Choke was a thief. She ran a shoplifting empire from her armchair while she watched daytime soaps and stuffed chocolates and pizza. She didn't steal, herself. Gwen took orders and passed them down to thieves who worked for her. She covered her tracks, never going near stolen goods herself and switching mobiles every few days so the police couldn't trace her calls.

*

It was the first time James had been back to primary school since his last day as a pupil before the summer holidays. A few mums stood at the gate nattering.

'Where's your mum, James?' someone asked.

'Off her face,' James said sourly.

There was no way James was covering for her after she'd kicked him out of the flat. He saw the other mums exchange glances.

'I want Medal Of Honour for Playstation,' one of them asked. 'Can she get it?'

James shrugged, 'Course, half price, cash only.'

'Will you remember, James?'

'No. Give us a bit of paper with your name and phone number and I'll pass it on.'

The gaggle of mums started jotting things down. Trainers, jewellery, radio-controlled car. James stuffed the papers into his school blazer.

'I need it by Tuesday,' someone said.

James wasn't in the mood.

'If you want to tell my mum something, write it down. I won't remember.'

The kids all started coming out. Nine-year-old Lauren was last out of her class. She had her hands tucked in her bomber jacket and mud on her jeans from playing football with the boys at lunchtime. Lauren had blonde hair, same as James, but she kept asking her mum to let her dye it black.

Lauren was on another planet to most girls her age. She didn't own a single dress or skirt. She'd microwaved her Barbies when she was five and hadn't touched one since. Gwen Choke said if there were two ways of doing something, Lauren would always pick the third one.

'I hate that old bat,' Lauren said, when she got near James.

'Who?' James asked.

'Mrs Reed. She gave us sums. I did them in about two

minutes, and she made me sit still for the rest of the lesson waiting for all the dumb kids to finish. She wouldn't even let me go to the cloakroom and get my book.'

James remembered Mrs Reed had done the same thing when she was his teacher three years earlier. It was like getting punished for being clever.

'Why are you here, anyway?' Lauren asked.

'Mum's drunk.'

'She's not supposed to drink until after the operation.'

'Don't tell me,' James said. 'What can I do about it?'

'How come you got home early enough to pick me up?'

'Got in a fight. They sent me home.'

Lauren shook her head, but she couldn't help smiling.

'Another fight. That's three this term, isn't it?'

James didn't want to talk about it.

'What do you want first?' he asked. 'Good news or bad news?'

Lauren shrugged. 'Just tell us.'

'Your dad's indoors. The good news is Mum gave us money to get take-away. He should be gone by the time we get home.'

*

They ended up in a burger place. James got a double cheeseburger meal. Lauren only wanted onion rings and a Coke. She wasn't hungry, so she got handfuls of little milks and sugar packets and made a mess on the table while James ate. She tipped out loads of sugar, soaked it with milk, then shredded the paper wrappers and stirred it all up.

'What are you doing that for?' James asked.

'As a matter of fact,' Lauren said acidly, 'the entire future

of western civilisation depends upon me making a smiley face with this ketchup.'

'You realise some poor sod has to clean all that up?' James said.

'Not my problem,' Lauren shrugged.

James tucked in the last mouthful of his burger and realised he was still starving. Lauren had hardly touched her onion rings.

'You eating those?' James asked.

'Have them if you want. They're stone cold.'

'This is all we've got for dinner. You better eat something.'

'I'm not hungry,' Lauren said. 'I'll make toasted sandwiches later.'

James loved Lauren's toasted sandwiches. They were mad: she got Nutella, honey, icing sugar, golden syrup, chocolate chips. Whatever sweet stuff was going, all poured on thick. The outside was crispy and the hot gloop was about three centimetres deep in the middle. You couldn't eat one without burning your fingers.

'You better clean up afterwards,' James said. 'Mum blew her stack last time you made them.'

*

When James turned into his road it was nearly dark. Two guys came out from behind a hedge. One of them grabbed James and knocked him against a wall, pulling his arm tight behind his back.

'Hello, James,' he said, his mouth up against James' ear. 'We've been waiting for you.'

The other guy grabbed Lauren and stuck his hand over her mouth to stop her screaming.

James' opinion of his own intelligence hit an all-time low. While he'd been worrying about getting in trouble with Mum, school and maybe even with the police, he'd forgotten something: Samantha Jennings had a sixteen-year-old brother.

Greg Jennings hung out with a gang of crazies. They were kings of the estate where James lived: smashing up cars, mugging people, getting into fights. If another kid saw them he'd look down at his shoes, cross his fingers and be happy if all he came away with was a slapped face and his money taxed. A good way to upset the gang was to beat up one of their little sisters.

Greg Jennings grazed James' face along the bricks.

'It's your turn now, James.'

He let go of James' arm. James could feel blood dribbling down his nose and cheek. There was no point struggling: Greg could snap him like a twig.

'Scared?' Greg asked. 'You ought to be.'

James tried to speak, only his voice didn't work and the way he was trembling seemed to answer anyway.

'Got money?' Greg asked.

James took out the rest of the forty pounds.

'Nice one,' Greg said.

'Please don't hurt my sister,' James begged.

'My sister has eight stitches in her face,' Greg said, pulling a knife out of his pocket. 'Lucky I don't go round hurting little girls, or your sister might have ended up with eighty.'

Greg sliced off James' school tie. Then he cut the chest buttons off his shirt and slashed up his trousers.

'This is just the start, James,' Greg said. 'We're gonna be seeing a lot of each other.'

A fist smashed into James' stomach. Ron had hit James a few times, but never that hard. Greg and his henchman walked off. James crumpled up on the ground.

Lauren walked over to James. She didn't have much sympathy for him.

'You got in a row with Samantha Jennings?'

James looked up at his sister. He was in a lot of pain and ashamed of himself.

'She got cut by accident. I only meant to scare her.'

Lauren started walking away.

'Help me up, Lauren. I can't walk.'

'Crawl then.'

Lauren went a few more paces before she realised she couldn't abandon her brother, even if he *was* an idiot. James stumbled towards home with his arm round Lauren's back. It took all her strength to hold him up.

3. WORSE

James stumbled into the hallway, one hand clasped over his stomach. He glanced at the display on his mum's mobile:

48 MISSED CALLS
4 TEXTS

He turned the phone off and stuck his head in the living room. The light was off, TV on. His mum was asleep in her chair and there was no sign of Ron.

'He's gone,' James said.

'Thank god for that,' Lauren said. 'He always kisses me and his breath's revolting.'

Lauren pushed the front door shut and picked a handwritten note off the doormat.

'It's from your school.'

Lauren read aloud, struggling with the messy handwriting:

'Dear Mrs Choke, Please contact either the School Secretary or myself urgently on one of the numbers below, con . . . Con something?'

'Concerning,' James guessed.

'Concerning James' behaviour at school today,' Lauren continued. 'Michael Rook, Deputy Head Teacher.'

Lauren followed James into the kitchen. James ran a glass of tap water and slumped at the table. Lauren sat opposite and kicked off her trainers.

'Mum will absolutely massacre you,' Lauren grinned. She was looking forward to seeing James suffer.

'Can't you shut up? I'm trying not to think about it.'

*

James locked himself in the bathroom. He was shocked by what the mirror showed him. The left side of his face and the ends of his cropped blond hair were blood red. He emptied his pockets and stuffed his wrecked clothes in a bin-liner. He'd hide them under the other rubbish later so his mum didn't find them.

Ending up in this mess made James start asking questions about himself. He knew he wasn't a very good person. He was always getting in fights. He was clever, but he never did any work so he got bad marks. James remembered all the times his teachers had told him he was wasting his potential and that he'd end up in a bad way. He'd sat through billions of lectures with his brain turned off. Now he was beginning to think they were mostly right and that made him hate them even more.

James unscrewed the cap on a tube of antiseptic, but realised it was pointless without washing off the blood first. The hot shower soothed his face and stomach as a red puddle whirled around his feet.

James wasn't sure if god existed, but he couldn't see how everything just got here without something making it. If

there was ever a time to pray this was it. He wondered if you were supposed to pray while naked in the shower, but figured what the hell and pressed his wet hands together.

'Hello, God . . . I'm not always good. Not ever really. Just help me be good and stuff. Help me be a better person. Cheers . . . Amen. And please don't let Greg Jennings kill me.'

James looked awkwardly at his hands, not convinced about the power of prayer.

*

After the shower, James put on his favourite clothes: an Arsenal shirt and a pair of tatty Nike tracksuit bottoms. He'd had to hide them from his mum. She chucked out anything that didn't look as if it had been shoplifted the previous week. She never understood that it was cooler if some of your clothes were a bit on the shabby side.

After milk, two of Lauren's toasted sandwiches and half an hour playing GT4 with his duvet over him, James felt a bit better. Except his stomach killed if he moved suddenly and he wasn't looking forward to telling his mum what he'd done when she woke up. Not that she looked like waking up soon. She must have had loads to drink.

James crashed his car into the barrier and six cars whizzed past, leaving him in last place. He hurled the joypad. He always got that corner wrong. The computer-controlled cars went round like they were on rails, which made it seem like the game was rubbing it in. It was boring playing alone, but there was no point asking Lauren. She hated computer games. She only ever wanted to play football or draw.

James grabbed his mobile and called his friend Sam. Sam lived down the balcony and was in James' class.

'Hello, Mr Smith. It's James Choke. Is Sam there?'

Sam picked up the phone in his bedroom, sounding excited.

'Hey there, psycho,' Sam said, laughing. 'You are in *soooo* much trouble.'

That wasn't how James wanted the conversation to start.

'What happened after I left?'

'Man, it was the sickest thing ever. Samantha had blood gushing out of her face. Down her arms, everywhere. They took her in an ambulance. Miss Voolt hurt her back, she was crying and going: *This is the last straw. I'm taking early retirement.* Both the Deputy Heads and the Headmaster came in. The Headmaster saw Miles laughing and gave him a three day suspension.'

James couldn't believe it. 'Three days' suspension for *laughing*?'

'He was livid. You're totally expelled, James.'

'No way.'

'Yes way, psycho. You never even made it to your first half-term. That's got to be the record for getting expelled. Did your mum give you beats?'

'She doesn't know yet. She's asleep.'

Sam burst out laughing again, 'Asleep! Don't you think she might want you to wake her up to tell her you've been expelled?'

'She won't care,' James lied, trying to sound cool. 'So you wanna come over and play Playstation?'

Sam's voice got more serious, 'No, man, I've got homework.'

James laughed. 'You *never* do homework.'

'I started. The folks are pressuring me. Birthday presents hang in the balance.'

James knew Sam was lying but couldn't figure out why. Normally, Sam asked his mum if he could come and she always said yes.

'What? What have I done to upset you?'

'It's not that, James, but . . .'

'But what, Sam?'

'Isn't it obvious?'

'No.'

'You're a mate, James, but we can't hang out until this dies down.'

'Why the hell not?'

'Because Greg Jennings is going to totally mash you and if I'm seen with you I'll be dead as well.'

'You could help me stand up to him,' James said.

Sam thought this was the funniest thing yet.

'My skinny arse is not gonna make any difference against those guys. I really like you, James. You're a good friend, but at the moment being your friend is a suicide mission.'

'Thanks for your help, Sam.'

'Should have switched your brain on before you decided to stab the hardest kid in school's little sister on a rusty nail.'

'I never meant to hurt her. It was an accident.'

'Ring me back when you get Greg Jennings to believe that.'

'I can't believe you're doing this to me, Sam.'

'You'd do the same if it was me. And you know it.'

'So that's it. I'm a leper.'

'It's a toughie, James. Sorry.'

'Yeah.'

'We can talk on the phone. I still like you.'

'Thanks, Sam.'

'I better go. Bye, James. I'm really sorry.'

'Enjoy your homework.'

James ended the call and wondered about praying again.

*

James watched rubbish TV until he fell asleep. He had a dream where Greg Jennings stood on his guts, and woke with a jolt.

He needed to pee bad. The pain in his guts was fifty times worse than earlier. The first drop of piss hitting the toilet was red. James did a double-take. Bright red. He was peeing blood. After he'd been to the toilet the pain was mostly gone, but he was scared. He had to tell his mum.

The TV in the living room was still turned up loud. James flicked it off.

'Mum,' James said.

James felt weird. His mum was too quiet. He touched her hand. Cold. He put his hand in front of her face. She wasn't breathing. No pulse. Nothing.

*

James hugged Lauren in the back of the ambulance. Their mum's corpse was two feet away with a blanket on top. Lauren's hands clawed into James' back. James was freaking, but he tried to keep a lid on himself to stop Lauren getting worse.

When the ambulance arrived at casualty, James watched his mum get wheeled off on a trolley. He realised this was

going to be his final memory of her: a bulging blanket lit by flashing blue bulbs.

James had to step off the ambulance with Lauren holding on. There was no way she was letting go. She'd stopped crying and was panting like an animal.

Lauren walked like a zombie. The driver led them through the waiting room to a cubicle. A doctor was waiting. She knew what had happened.

'I'm Dr May. You must be Lauren and James.'

James rubbed Lauren's shoulder to try and calm her down.

'Lauren, can you let go of your brother so we can talk?'

Lauren acted deaf.

'It's like she's dead,' James said.

'She's in shock. I'll have to give her something to calm down or she'll pass out.'

Dr May picked a syringe off a trolley and pulled up the sleeve of Lauren's T-shirt.

'Hold her still.'

As soon as the needle went in, Lauren went limp. James leaned her down on the bed. Dr May picked up Lauren's legs and covered her with a blanket.

'Thank you,' James said.

'You told that ambulance driver that you had some blood in your urine,' Dr May said.

'Yeah.'

'Did something hit you in the stomach?'

'Some*one*,' James said. 'I got in a fight. Is it bad?

'When you were hit your insides started to bleed. It's the same as a cut on the outside. It should heal itself. Come back here if it hasn't stopped by tomorrow night.'

'So what happens to us now?' James asked.

'There's a social worker coming to see you. She'll contact your relatives.'

'I don't have relatives. My nan died last year and I don't know who my dad is.'