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Opening extract from

Leaving Poppy

Written by

Kate Cann

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Chapter One

The path up to the front door was thick with leaves fallen early from the plane tree by the gate. Amber put down her huge suitcase and rummaged in her bag for the key, miming to the cab driver that she was OK, everything OK.

But he still didn't drive off. "You gonna be all right, luv?" he called.

"I'm fine!" she cried.

"Want me to wait, make sure it's the right house?"

Amber made herself turn back, forced a smile at him. "It's OK! This is definitely it!"

He shrugged, in a some-people-won't-let-themselves-be-helped way, started the car up again, and accelerated off.

Amber was alone.

If it's the wrong place, she told herself, *I'll hide my suitcase in the bushes, and go and find a call box, and phone . . . Who will I phone? It'll be the right place. It has to be.*

She was trembling with a mixture of fear and intense

relief at the cab driver going. Throughout the ride he'd managed to convey to her how flaky she was, how not up to it, how destined to fail. It had been a nightmare, like the long train journey before it, which she'd spent huddled in her seat, sheer terror at what she'd done, what she was *doing*, growing with every mile that sped by. She'd come without food or drink and hadn't found the will to stand up and work her way down to the buffet car. She'd grown hazy-headed with thirst and hunger.

When the train pulled into the Cornwall station she'd been overtaken by panic and a kind of desperate determination. She'd lugged her case as fast as she could to the taxi rank and claimed the first car in line, even though an old lady arrived at the same time as her. The cab driver was short with her because of the old lady, and said he'd never heard of the address she gave him: *17 Merral Road.* He'd made a phone call to his depot and no one there knew of it either, but they'd suggested he try *Merral Park Avenue* on the outskirts of town. And they'd gone there and driven round and round, searching, and he'd got more and more irritated, and she'd felt more and more faint with hunger and nerves, and when he'd asked her what she was doing here, was she on a late holiday, she'd blurred her answer so much she'd sounded retarded.

In the end he'd parked in a thin little cul-de-sac with no street sign. It ended in wooded wasteland and its houses were tall and thin, most of them broken up into shabby-looking flats. He'd told Amber to get out and knock on one

of the front doors to ask, but she froze, she acted like she hadn't heard him, so he got out, swearing, and just then a man came out of the woods with a dog, and the cabby shouted to him and the man said he was pretty sure it was Merral Road, or maybe Merral Way, Merral something anyway. Then he'd found number seventeen, and now Amber was alone.

She picked up her dead-weight case, and plodded up to the porch. Carved in a brick above the lintel was a date – 1887. Nasturtium tendrils snaked across the path, right up to the front door, fat, round leaves hiding yellow and orange flowers. Dead leaves, twigs and bits of moss were banked up in the corners of the porch. The whole place had an air of no one going through its door for a long time, which was weird, because this was meant to be a student house. . . She picked up the knocker and, somehow knowing it wouldn't be answered, banged it down.

Silence, just the echo of the knock. She banged again. Then she gripped the key, and pushed it into the keyhole. Amber was bad with keys, she always had been. She panicked and tried to force them round, she hadn't the knack. . .

But this key was turning.

It was just a key, going into a lock, turning slowly, stiffly, but turning round, grating round. It was just a door creaking open, swinging wide into to a dusty hall. But it made Amber feel faint. It seemed like floor of the hall, old red and black tiles, was swinging up to meet her.

She heaved her suitcase over the threshold. Sunlight was coming through a half-open door at the end of the long corridor.

Leaving her case where it was, she walked down to meet it.

Chapter TWO

Hi Amber! said the note propped up against the mug with a picture of a comic dinosaur on it.

Welcome to our shit-hole – sorry we're not here. Mama Kaz has left a sarnie in the fridge for you. Your room's upstairs first right. Hope it's OK! Back at 6/7. My turn to cook – lucky you!!! Ben XX

Amber picked up the note and held it for a moment, then she laid it back on the little pine table and looked around. She was in a medium-sized, friendly-looking kitchen. It had battered pine cupboards round the walls, an old-fashioned deep sink in front of a window, and a wide glass door that led on to a leafy garden and let in the sun.

She went over to the sink, filled the kettle, switched it on. She opened the fridge door (covered with magnets – a cartoon cat, a dolphin, fruit, and the words *wash up Rory u fckhed* in red and green letters) and took out a bottle of milk and a large white-bread sandwich on a plate covered in

clingfilm. Then she went back to the kettle, and made a cup of tea in the dinosaur mug.

She suddenly felt euphoric. Faint with nerves and hunger, but euphoric. *I got away*, she thought, *I did it. I'm here!*

She sat at the table, and took a sip of the hot sweet tea which shot into her veins like a drug. Then she unwrapped the sandwich and bit into it, chewed and swallowed, and her stomach seized on it like life coming back in, like finding out you were going to live after all. *Thank you, Mama Kaz,* she thought, fervently. The sandwich was ham and cheese and lettuce, it was wonderful.

She finished the sandwich, then on an impulse jumped up and went over to the glass door, mug in hand. A key lay on the counter near it; she grabbed it, turned it in the lock, and stepped outside.

It was good out here in the low, early-autumn sun. She stood, sipping her tea, looking around her. The garden was seriously overgrown, screened by trees heavy with yellowing leaves. More nasturtiums flourished here, snaking everywhere with their pretty, stalked flowers. *If they clear it up a bit*, she thought *it'll be great when summer comes round again. . . Amber, you're here,* she breathed, walking along the cracked concrete path. *Here!*

She thought back to her nightmarish journey, and everything that had gone before. The summer had been hideous. It should've been great, because she'd finished her A levels and wanted to celebrate, but it had been hideous.

She'd arranged to go on holiday with three girls she'd met at her sixth-form college, to an apartment in the Seychelles for two weeks. It was the first time she'd done anything on her own like that; it was going to be amazing. But ten days before she was due to go, Poppy got ill again.

Poppy was her half-sister, fourteen months younger than she was. Poppy was "fragile", prone to wild fears and periods of depression. Their mother couldn't be expected to cope on her own, not without the routine of school, not with Poppy refusing to get dressed or eat properly and crying, *crying* all the time. . .

Amber couldn't abandon them. She couldn't be that selfish.

She stood on the cracked path and took another mouthful of tea and remembered the pure, good, empty feeling she'd had when she'd cancelled her holiday. She'd lost loads of money through it, her new friends were really upset with her and probably wouldn't stay her friends now, but her mother had been tearful with gratitude and she knew she was doing the right thing. . .

And then Poppy had recovered, remarkably quickly. Amber had been expected to rejoice in this, but somehow, she hadn't. Instead she'd felt something like rage growing in her, resentful, confused rage, growing and building. Not even the arrival of her good A level results cheered her up.

"I'm so sorry about your holiday, darling," her mother had said. "But there'll be other chances for you, won't there?

You're the lucky one. Not like poor Poppy. When's she ever going to get a holiday. . .?"

Amber had shut herself away in her room for hours, browsing the Internet, looking at gap year travel routes to Mexico, India, Cambodia, all of them terrifying and deeply alluring and out of the question because soon she'd be off to the university in the next town. It was only a forty-minute bus ride away, which meant she could still live at home, safe from trouble, supporting and helping like always. . .

Then one afternoon she'd stumbled on flat share websites! She was amazed at the choice, there were rooms going all over the country. She entered into correspondence with several; Scotland, Cornwall, Leicester. She reinvented herself as she wrote, loving the chance to escape from her life. She told them she'd had gap year travel planned but it had fallen through (she hinted at a broken relationship) and now she just wanted to get away for a bit, work for a bit, get her head together . . . it seemed OK as she tapped it out, an OK story to have happened to anyone. The replies she got told her it was OK, too. The house in Cornwall was particularly keen for her to join them. They were all at college there, about to start their second year, someone had left them in the lurch, they couldn't afford an empty room, could she come as soon as possible? They told her she'd love it, it was a great scene, and there'd be jobs going, because workers left after the summer season. . .

It started to be real, the idea of going, as if the act of

writing about it and having other people engage with it made it real. It began to be possible that she could actually go.

Without talking to her mother or half-sister, she contacted her university and found it surprisingly easy to defer entrance for a year. Then, with the people in Cornwall, she agreed rent, and a date to move in.

It was only when she paid for her train ticket that she knew she wasn't playing any more, that she was really going to go. She drew up lists of what she needed to take with her. She bought some new clothes, a duvet set (they'd told her it was a single bed, but a large one) and towels, which she hid under her bed.

She felt like she was split into two. There was the half that was doing all this secret planning, and the half that continued to function in her cramped and isolated family, helping her mother in the house and spending a lot of time with Poppy to stop her getting depressed again.

And the second half was rigid with guilt about what was being planned by the first half. Three days before she was due to go, Amber took all her courage in her hands and told her mother and Poppy she'd been invited down to stay with a friend in Cornwall for a couple of weeks, before university started. Her mother looked stricken, because now she'd have to deal alone with Poppy starting new at sixth-form college, but she still felt bad about Amber missing out on her Seychelles holiday, so she tried to be positive. She even shushed Poppy when she moaned that she'd like to go too,

that it wasn't fair, that she'd never had a proper holiday in her life and now Amber was going away all on her own. . .

Amber had no offers of help for her trip; it had simply not occurred to her mother or to Poppy to make any. Amber was the strong one; they were doing enough just letting her go.

Amber left for the station at six a.m., weak with panic, not waking them as agreed, having said her goodbyes and lying "see you soons!" the night before.

And now she was here, standing in this overgrown garden, about to go in and look at her new room. The knowledge that she'd have to phone her mother some time soon and tell her she wasn't coming back to go to university, she was staying on in Cornwall for months, the whole year maybe, was like a vast unspeakable burden of guilt at the edge of her mind.

She walked back into the kitchen.

Chapter Three

"Who the hell are *you?*"

The boy standing at the fridge was so out of Amber's league it was a joke he was talking to her. And his question seemed fair enough. Who the hell *was* she?

Then he grinned lavishly and said, "*Shit* – sorry! Our new housemate, right? Should've registered the bag in the hall – didn't expect you to come in out of the garden."

"Sorry," mumbled Amber, looking down at the floor, then making herself look at him again. He was tall, skinny-elegant, with longish dark hair, and his face blazed at her.

"No problem. So – I'm Rory. And you're. . ."

"Amber."

"Amber, Amber, right, Kaz told me. Well – welcome to Merral Road! D'you like your room?"

"I was . . . I was just going up to look at it."

"You haven't *seen* it yet? Come on. I'll give you a hand up with your case."

He ambled out of the kitchen, Amber following. "When did you arrive?" he demanded.

"Only just then," she answered, hastily. "I was starving, so I—"

"Went out into the garden to forage for berries." He turned, wide mouth jeering. "*Joke!* Come on." He picked up her case and hefted it towards the staircase. "Jesus, what've you got in here? Rocks?"

She laughed nervously, and took hold of the back of the case where the useless little wheels were. Together they heaved it up the wide, steep flight of stairs towards a huge, gilt-edged, ornate mirror at the top. Rory's face was bent towards hers as he backed up step by step, but she couldn't look at it. She could smell smoke on his breath, though, and some kind of musky male cologne, and hear him breathing. . . "I gotta give up the fags," he said. "This is doing me in. Hey – stop ogling my arse in that mirror."

Amber squeaked "I wasn't!" and forced another laugh, wondering what it must be like to be so utterly sure of yourself you could throw off remarks like he did, *be* like him. Desperate to change the subject, she said, "It must be worth a fortune."

"My arse?"

"The mirror! It's gorgeous."

"Yeah, but it's kind of plastered into the wall. Otherwise I'd sell it. Come on, push. . .!" They both heaved, and landed the case on the landing. Rory stood up straight and grinned at her, and she tried to smile back. "That mirror's not the

only bit of class here," he said, conversationally. "There's wardrobes, chairs, tables – all antiques. The landlord says some of it's been here since the house was new."

"Wow. Why doesn't he sell it?"

"Dunno. Some of it's pretty battered . . . I s'pose he just never got round to it." He picked up her case again, stomped across the landing, and said, "Here's your room."

Opening the door to it, Amber's first thought was how practical it was. She wasn't going to be in love with it, she thought, not like her bedroom at home which was her refuge, her haven – no, this room was going to be a base, a base to lead her new life from. It was a good size, square, with a window filled with a view of the trees in the garden. There was the wide single bed she'd been promised, a chest of drawers with an old mirror stand on top of it, and a generous oak wardrobe. All you need to lead a life from.

"Pretty dreary, eh?" Rory said. "Foul curtains."

"Yeah," said Amber, thinking she liked them – they were 1970s style, sandy coloured with printed palm leaves on them – thinking how she was going to change the room, make it hers.

"Shove a few posters up, it'll be OK," Rory said. Then he yawned, and backed out of the door. "That's the bathroom," he said pointing, "and that's Ben's room, and that's the airing cupboard, and Chrissie's room is down there – Kaz and I sleep downstairs. *Not* together, I hasten to add."

On the other side of Ben's door, tucked behind the airing cupboard (which was built on to the wall at the top of the

stairs, the one with the huge mirror on it) was another flight of stairs. A strange, somehow gloomy light fell on them, and they were much more narrow and steep than the main stairs.

"There's another floor?" asked Amber.

"Yeah, the attics."

"What are they used for?"

"Dumping rooms for junk."

"Can't they be rented out too?"

Rory shrugged. "There's only one bathroom for the whole house – that and the *apology* for a shower room on the ground floor. There's health and safety stuff to do with bathrooms and numbers, isn't there."

"Yes, but if the landlord turned one of the attics into a bathroom. . ."

"They're pretty crap. Low ceilings, tiny skylights. Plus I guess the landlord can't be arsed to do up the place – not many people want to live round here – only students and nutters like you." He grinned again, and for a moment Amber thought he was going to ask her what she was doing here, but he didn't, he just said, "I gotta get some coffee down me, I got an essay to finish that I should've done last term. See you at dinner, yeah?" Then he jogged off downstairs.

So that was Rory, she thought. She hadn't had any dealings with him, only Kaz and Ben by email and phone. They were the two organizers in the house, that was clear. Then there was Chrissie . . . and now her. Amber, the fifth housemate.

She opened the door to the bathroom and found it, like her room, a good size, useable, practical. When she came out she glanced towards the attic stairs, thinking she'd like to investigate them, too. A pale streak of sun ran down from a small skylight at the top of the stairs, and dust was moving in it, making a long, thin shape. There was something weird about it that Amber couldn't put her finger on, then she realized that dust motes usually sparkled in sunlight, but these didn't, they looked dark, they didn't glitter at all. . . She felt suddenly very weary, standing there, weary and sad. What she'd done, the break she'd made, the betrayal . . . it threatened to overwhelm her. She decided to start unpacking, keep her mind busy. It was quarter to six, and Ben had said he'd be back soon to cook. . .