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opening extract from

The Carbon Diaries 2017

written by

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published by

Hodder Children's Books

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January

Mon, Jan 2nd

So exhausted. My family is in deathlike trance after the village New Year's Eve Organic Goose Fayre. After 2 days of meat-induced coma I finally dragged myself out of bed and walked the five Ks into Abingdon to check out the sales. I'd just got to the market square when I heard this creepy jingly sound and a bunch of morris men rocked up in ribbons and bells with little sticks and started dancing around like knobs. I observed them closely, with their piggy eyes and big bellies. City people, bringing back traditions that have died out because they suck; the country is full of them.

Dad was super happy when I got home. He saw me by the gate and opened the kitchen window.

'Mail from Kim. Come on!'

I crunched moodily up the driveway.



Later I lay in bed thinking and got dead mad. How does my sister get that life? She left her old job as promoter for

Carbon Dating with Kieran last summer and got a job in Thailand working for an eco tour holiday company called LoveWorks, who basically charge €5,000 to fly guilty white people out to Thailand to build bad log huts for skinny villagers in rainforests. So there she is off her head on 100% proof Thai whisky and here I am, 18 and lying on a single bed on a farm in Oxfordshire. I was supposed to be up in Glasgow with Adi for a massive New Year's Eve party but guess whose mum washed a carbon card on heavy spin with an old rucksack? I'm totally grounded till I get that puppy back on line. Money ain't enough these days. Got to have a card to live.



Weds, Jan 4th

It's so definitely time to get out of here. I came downstairs this morning to find a local community farmer meeting happening in the kitchen. I walked in as Dad was turning from his laptop to face the group. 'I've got something I'd like to put before you. Many of us keep pigs here, but what if we were to extend our facilities – and, and . . .' he glanced at Mum's face, 'and start converting our pig manure into crude oil!'

Mum gave an involuntary jerk. 'Jesus.'

He pushed on. 'Look, oil and gas prices are at an all-time high, oil is $250 a barrel – and it's only going to rise. This recession is biting deep; we've simply got to make our own fuel. They did it in the oil crisis in the 1970s so the technology exists. Look . . .' Dad jabbed his finger at the screen and it sprang to life, revealing a weird-looking machine. The farming randoms muttered.

'All you need is this small-scale thermo chemical conversion reactor. It basically puts heat and pressure on the pigs' . . . doings . . . and that breaks the manure's long hydrocarbon chains down into shorter ones.'

'What does that mean?' asked Daniel. He's the only one I know by name cos he's super gorgeous. He's an ex-city broker with curly chestnut hair and hazel eyes who lives in a cottage in a bog with a really bossy blonde woman called Rachel who breeds Ilamas with big teeth. (Her, not the Ilamas. They are cute.)

'I'm not sure of the precise details, but it says here that each 5-litre batch of manure converts to a litre of oil. With the right amount of pigs we'd be self-sufficient.'

Big Teeth spread her hands on her Ilama-wool-trimmed leggings. 'And how many animals would that take? A few hundred?'

Dad nodded. 'Yeah, Rachel. Give or take.'

Mum groaned. 'Oh, Nick, no, tell me you're joking.'

Dad stared back at her; the group stared. Not a smile between them. Big Teeth turned to Mum and spoke clearly, like to a slow learner. 'Well, with the economy the way it is, the unemployment, the inflation . . . not to speak of the flooding and land prices rising because of everyone leaving the cities . . .' She checked Mum's eyes to make sure she was following. 'Under these conditions I'm sure you'll agree we have to take every chance we can.'

Poor old Mum.

Thurs, Jan 5th

Got a replacement card today. Freedom. Not that I've got any points left for the month. I had to give loads to Mum and Dad to power up the van so they could move their farm shit around over Xmas. Santa had the right idea with those reindeer.

Fri, Jan 6th

I sneaked out this afternoon to throw some spuds to Larkin the pig. (My life is a rollercoaster right now.) Although as pigs go he is an uber pig. What other animal could go missing for 2 weeks in flooded London and make his way home in such style? Anyway I'd finished with the potatoes and was giving his ears a scratch when Dad suddenly appeared. 'Fancy some company?'

I smiled sweetly, mentally counting the seconds till he said the P word. 1, 2, 3, 4 . . .

Dad put his hand on the swing gate. 'So what do you reckon to my pig manure plan?'

Impressive. Not for the first time I found myself wondering if he's OK in the head. He gets fixated on things, like those autistic savants that only get little bits of light shining in their brains at any one point, 'cept their brilliance is usually piano solos or molecular physics where my dad's shiny bit is pigs, which kind of takes some of the style away. Nobody's gonna make a movie about him.

I glanced up at him. 'Dad, if you want to start up an oil factory that's fine, but you've got to get the others to lay off Mum a bit. I mean the way old Ilama legs was talking to her was dead mean.'

He bit back a smile. 'I know, but . . . your mum just won't get involved . . .'

'Surprise, surprise, Dad, the woman doesn't want to spend her life rolling in hoofed mammal crap. Ever occurred

to you she's the normal one?'

'But that's just it . . .'

'What?'

He frowned. 'There is no normal any more.'

We stood there a moment in silence. Deep silence. Although I swear Larkin winked at me. Cheeky little porker.

Sat, Jan 7th

I was packing my stuff up when Mum came in, sat on the bed and reached for a sock.

'I envy you, y'know. Back off to London . . .'

Uh-oh. I folded a T-shirt in silence.

'Your father is completely happy, of course, buried in the country.'

'How's your library job going?'

She balled up a pair of mismatched socks. 'It's fine, I mean, really it is. It's not publishing of course . . . And I'm very grateful to have a job right now, but . . .' She paused.

But. Seems to me there's always a *but* in everyone's life. I was saved by a horn tooting from outside. Mum jumped up. 'Oh God, the work bus!' She hugged me super tight. 'Maybe I could come down and see you some time?'

My eyes widened in alarm, but she just kissed me and shot out. I watched from the window as she clambered into a little beaten-up mini-van, full of local people going to work. A man in the back row looked up and waved at me. It was like the special needs bus at school. Heartbreaking.

Mon, Jan 9th

Mum made a special farewell dinner last night and as a Special Treat, Dad uncorked a bottle of his vintage homemade carrot wine. He handed round the evil juice in 3 homemade pot vessels and then turned to me, his eyes all misty.

'So, off to the Big Smoke again. Well, here's to you.'

Mum raised her goblet. 'To our lovely girl,' she quavered.

I didn't know what to toast to. Future pig oil success? The survival of their marriage? So I smiled and took a sip of wine. It tasted like what villains slip into goblets to poison people in Shakespeare. I stared hard at the table, willing myself not to choke, but when I looked up again they were both gazing at me so intensely that I had to say something.

I waved my knobbly pot. 'To the future!'

'Don't!' Mum dropped her goblet (clever move, lady), buried herself in Dad's chest and reached out an arm and hooked me into a ghastly group hug. I stood there, smothered in damp wool, and then a strange thing happened; my heart went all soft. I mean, they're mad and they're starting to smell funny, but they're all mine.

Tues, Jan 10th

I fell into a dark mood on the way back to London. There's something going on with me and Adi and it feels like a long time since I spoke to him. The truth is I was glad to get away for Xmas. I can't work it out, I know I love him; I just feel

like it's all a bit safe. I mean, we've been going out for a year now and . . . I dunno. He wanted us to move in together when we started uni back in September, but I'd already got a room in a houseshare in Elephant and Castle and so I said it was too far for him to travel cos he's over at Queen Mary Uni in Mile End. I'm excited to see him, I really am, *but* . . . There's that word again.

Then my brain moved on to the band. On the surface it's going good, we're starting to get some hits on the **port**, the only music site that counts, and we've been gigging hard on the scene. In just the last 6 months we've done shows at a bunch of universities – UEL, London Met, Westminster, LSC and Camberwell – but there's always loads of tension. I reckon Adi secretly thinks it's kind of stupid being in a band, like it was OK when he was at school, but now he's moved on, but he never comes out and says it straight. And on the other side there's Claire, who's gone all hardline political since she started journalism at UEL. Stace just drums, so somehow it's always down to me to keep it steady. There was a massive row over the *dirty angels* name at the meeting just before Xmas. Adi said it was dumb and that we came up with it when we were 15. 'Times change, Claire,' he said.

She eyeballed him. 'Maybe you mean *people* change. I'm serious about this band, if you're not.' She flicked a glance at me. 'Maybe we *all* need to think about why we're doing this.'

I threw my hands up. 'All? Why am I in this?'

'Cos you two are such the little couple. Buy one get one free.'

Her words've stung ever since. Sometimes it feels like we're married or something.

Anyway, by this time, the train was battering through the London suburbs. The place has changed so much, it's unbelievable. They're rebuilding the barrier, but there's always money and tech problems and so, basically a year after the flood, the whole city's under threat, big time. And the water keeps on rising. Last year, the Thames flooded 34 times. And each time it floods, more people leave. Property prices in the bad areas have dropped to joke levels. Everyone's fighting to live in the hilly bits, like Hampstead and Shooters Hill. A 4-bedroom house just went for 8 million euros in Bromley cos it's the highest point in London. We were pretty smart; Mum and Dad fixed up the house really quickly after the first flood and got the hell out of town. I stayed with Claire till May so I could sit my exams and then went up to Abingdon to join them. They didn't want me to come back to London to study, but the way I see it is this is my home. That was their decision to move out to the country, not mine.

Once I got to Waterloo, I decided to walk to my flat. Turning into my street, I walked the 100 metres, took out my keys and stopped dead. The front door and the windows were all blocked off behind heavy metal sheets. It took me a

few seconds to take it in. And then I lifted my wrist and punched a number into my fone. It went straight to voicemail. I took a breath, shouted, 'You bastards. You never paid!' and punched *disconnect*.

I turned and kicked the door. Solid. An emergency fone number for a company called Repossessions Solutions was pasted vertically down the length of the door. I dialled it. Voicemail again, this time one of those lady androids:

'*Repossession Solutions are unable to take your call at this time. Our office hours are Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause*.' Click.

Inconvenience? I tapped my fone against my forehead, fighting down panic. Who could I call? I knew Adi was coming down tomorrow – but everyone else was still away on break. I shivered; it was starting to get dark. There was only one person.

Sighing, I dialled a new number. 'Hi . . . it's me.'

'Oh.'

'Look, I know we need to talk and stuff, but can I crash at yours tonight? Those bastards, Lou and Greg, have done a runner. My house is locked down.'

A pause, then: 'Sure.'

Relief flooded through me. 'Claire, you're a lifesaver.'

She sighed. 'I know. I'll meet you at Royal Albert station at 7. But don't be late, I've got a meeting later.'

An hour later I stepped off the train on to the platform and total darkness.

'Claire? Mate?'

'Over here. Can you see the steps?'

I stepped forward and stumbled. 'No!'

'Wait up.'

Something soft brushed past my head and then a hand grabbed my shoulder. 'Hey! I've got you . . . It's harsh, huh? We haven't had lights here for months.'

Together we crossed a car park before turning right along the waterfront, the Excel Centre a massive dark presence on our right. Then we ducked under a walkway before stopping outside a warehouse building where Claire fed in a security number and we went thru a set of double doors.

'This place is hectic. How d'you know where you are?' I asked.

She shrugged. 'You get used to it pretty quick . . . nearly there now.'

We climbed up a final series of steps before coming out on a walkway, banged together with bits of wood and railing on to the original balconies. It looked super dodgy, like a sagging wooden hammock. Everything was dirty and beat-up, with windows all smashed and peeling doors half-hanging. On every door there were nailed 5, 10, 20 eviction notices, all fluttering in the wind.

Claire glanced over. 'They're from that Rebuilding London Agency. S'kind of a badge of honour: the more eviction letters you get, the longer you've faced them off.

Anyway, who's gonna come here and move us? The place is total floodland.'

'Don't they try? I heard there was some trouble.'

'Nah, not really, and anyway all you've got to do is work it out with the squat committee and move to another empty flat further down the block.' She stopped outside a metal door and fumbled with a padlock. The door opened with a rusty whine. '*Voila!* Come on in . . . yeah, but wait a sec . . . they've cut the electric *again*.'

Claire struck a match and suddenly light flooded into the room from a paraffin lamp in her hand. In the flickering light and long shaky shadows, the apartment seemed massive, bare apart from a stripped-down table and 2 leather armchairs, stained with water.

I gazed around the room. 'Wow.'

Claire put the lamp down on the table. 'Yeah, tell me about it, these flats were going for 2 mill a few years back.'

I looked at the table, imagining them before. Some up-and-coming couple, looking out over their city skyline.

Claire glanced at her watch. 'I've got to go in a minute. You can crash for as long as you want, yeah . . . but what you gonna do about your stuff?'

'Don't know. The Repo company has left a number – all I can do is call them. The only reason I'm not completely losing it is that I left my bass and music files at Adi's over Xmas.'

'Mate, I can't believe you're still paying rent when there's

so much free room here . . . All you've got to do is see Tano Adile in the London Partnership centre in Excel, and then have an interview with—' Her fone started to vibrate.

I poked her. 'Who?'

Claire giggled. 'You won't believe it if I tell you. Hang on.' She flipped up the fone. 'Oh hi. Are you coming down to the meeting? What?' She turned sharply away. 'But you promised, Jax. I mean you gotta be on it. The Dox is the most important thing going on right now . . . independent DIY media projects are spreading around the planet at unprecedented speed . . . Triggered by discontent with the mainstream media, groups are creating their own channels of information and distribution in order to bypass the corporate media, y'know?'

And *that's* why I still pay rent. Conversations like that are way too high a price for a free room.

Weds, Jan 11th

I got to Adi's by lunch. I knocked on his door and after a few moments the upstairs window opened and Nate's messed-up head appeared, followed by his trademark grin.

'Yo, Laur!'

'Is Adi here? I can't get him on his fone.'

He shook his head. 'Yeah, he's lost it. His mate called, said he's on his way, but still up north.'

'What, he's not back down from Scotland?'

Nate smiled. 'Nah, Tottenham is all. Said he'd be back later today. 'Sup?'

'Can I come in?'

'Yeah sure . . . but . . .'

'What?'

'No comments. A'ight?'

I rolled my eyes. 'No comments.'

Adi and Nate's room is like those health and safety campaigns about how bacteria can kill in the home.

A few minutes later, I was staring deep into Che Guevara's left eye on a massive poster on the wall, trying to keep my 5 senses from getting sucked into the piles of dirty clothes, broke bits of engine, pizza boxes, scummy plates, engine oil, stubbed-out fags, oozing cartons, rogue chips, etc.

I perched on the edge of Adi's bed. 'So what's new?'

Nate ran his hand across a random piece of engine. 'Not a lot . . . I've mostly bin workin' on my Chevy van, she's a pure-bred hydro now.'

I hid a smile. Nate's been working on this van since GCSE time. 'So I was down at the Docks last night.'

'Uh-huh?'

'You lived down there for a bit, din't you? What are the people like?'

He fiddled with a switch, rolled his eyes. 'Punks, scum, robbers, bums, wasters, tossers, speedfreaks, Asian virus, goths, dickheads, pissheads, muggers, crims, seratoninfreaks, rastas, wannabees, junkies, chavs, straight-

edgers, roaches, crystal methers, violent bastards, weirdos, critical massers, drop-outs, grimers, acid heads, pigs, crusties, animals, indie kids, e-heads, terrorists, dopeheads and Neil the Matrix.'

'Who?'

'Y'know, dat fool in the long leather coat, from sixth form?'

'Oh yeah. But it's free, right?'

Nate lay back on his bed. 'Well, yeah . . . but there's all those *activists*. I wuz down there for a party with these animal rights freaks a few months back, a'ight? An there was, like, vegan chilli in a bucket on the floor with sprung rats they wuz keepin' as pets, all running and divin' in it.'

'How d'you know they were pets?'

'Collars. They'd these little collars on.'

'You sure?'

Nate paused. 'Nope. It wuz kind of a messed-up time for me back then.'

The afternoon dragged on and on and still no sign of Adi. Nate disappeared at about 5 and then I must've fallen asleep. I woke up in the middle of the night and felt Adi next to me. I reached over, put my arm around him and felt safe, like I always do when he's near.

Thurs, Jan 12th

Today I spent 7 hours on the fone, calling Repossessions Solutions, the council, the police. The UK is now run entirely by robots. I didn't speak to one single human being all day.