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Opening Extract from...

My Everything

Written by Katie Marsh

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For Max and Evie

One

Hannah wakes up with a piece of toast stuck to her face.

She opens unwilling eyes and realises that the lights are on. She is fully dressed. Her teeth are unbrushed. Exhaustion oozes from every pore. She peers at the clock on the wall and closes her eyes again in despair. It's 2 a.m. This day of all days isn't meant to start like this. It's supposed to be different. The start of things to come.

She rubs her aching neck as she pulls the soggy toast from her cheek and drops it onto the plate. Her phone is shuffling through the more embarrassing realms of her playlist and she hastily presses pause. Her body feels like it belongs inside a chalk line at a crime scene. She levers herself up on her elbows and surveys the marking laid out across the kitchen table.

'Damn.' She's managed to knock her wine glass over in her sleep and now Year 10's essays on *Macbeth* look as if they have been liberally spattered in blood. She wonders if she can get away with saying she did it deliberately to bring the play to life. She imagines her students' sceptical expressions and very much doubts it. Their teenage antennae are on a constant hunt for scandal of any kind, and she suspects the school rumour mill will despatch her to the Priory before the week is out.

A text bleeps its arrival. Steph is in the middle of a marking marathon too.

Has he been home yet? Have you told him? x

Hannah taps out her reply. No and no.

Steph texts straight back. But you will? Promise?

Hannah exhales. Yes. Otherwise you'll kill me. And I'd quite like to see the next series of *Scandal*.

Good luck. You can do it x

As Hannah pushes her chair back she hits the spoils of her latest doomed attempt to walk past a bookshop without buying anything. She reaches down and strokes the smooth comfort of the front covers, tempted to stay up all night losing herself in someone else's story. Then she remembers what she is going to do today, and she reluctantly stands up, exhaling slowly to calm the nerves clutching at every breath.

Tom. I'm leaving you. She feels a skewer of fear at the thought of saying the words out loud. Of seeing his mouth opening and his eyes narrowing as he prepares to attack her for one final time. It's one of his talents. Email. Voicemail. Good old-fashioned shouting. He always knows how to hurt.

She takes the plate to the overcrowded sink, squeezing it in beside an empty can of baked beans and a dirty pan that is busy generating some new kind of life form.

Later. She'll deal with everything later. She switches off the lights and unbuttons her grey dress as she climbs the stairs. She stops in surprise at the bedroom door as she hears the rasp of her husband's breathing. She had assumed he was still at the office. Another deal. Another night apart.

She slides quietly beneath the duvet.

'Why didn't you wake me when you came in?'

Tom's only answer is a snore.

Scratch.

Hannah pulls the pillow over her head.

Scratch.

She can still hear it. She sticks her head out and looks at the clock. 4:30. She is raw from lack of sleep.

There it is again.

She turns over. 'Tom, can you be quiet?' Her voice comes out as a croak. 'I'm trying to sleep.' It would be so wonderful if he actually listened.

Fat chance. Instead he starts mumbling. His voice is breathy and slurred.

'Sh. Sh. Sh. Shtuck.'

Reluctantly she leans towards his side of the bed. She peers through the darkness and sees a figure on the floor. Great. Clearly he's been busy with whisky rather than work. Again. She reaches over and prods him but gets only a moan in reply.

'For God's sake.' She rubs her aching eyes with her hands.

'Shtuck. Hellllllmeeeeee.' Wearily, she reaches over and turns on the bedside light. She looks down at him, blinking in the sudden brightness.

Something is wrong.

Horribly wrong.

Tom is lying on the floor, his body contorted, eyes wide and pleading as they meet hers. His face is ashen and lopsided, his distorted mouth straining to form words that Hannah can't understand. She watches, horrified, as his right hand pushes feebly against the wooden foot of the bed. *Scratch.* His left hand is curved beneath him at

an impossible angle, his fingers pulled upwards into a misshapen beak.

Something terrible has happened. Hannah's pulse spirals and she stumbles out of bed and instinctively reaches down to try to pull him up. She strains every muscle but his body is a dead weight and he slumps back down to the carpet. She winces as she hears him groan, worrying that she has made things worse. Her mouth is dry and panic threatens to choke her.

They need help.

'Don't worry, Tom.' Her fingers shake as she picks up her phone to dial 999. 'Don't worry. It'll be OK. You'll be OK.'

If she says it enough times she might believe it.

Her call is answered instantly and her voice wavers as she asks for the ambulance service. Saying the words out loud makes this shockingly real. Tom's eyes are pure terror and she reaches down to stroke his dark hair. It's baby soft. It's been so long since she has touched it.

A male operator asks her the questions she has only ever heard on TV. What has happened. Who. When. Where. She controls the shake in her voice as she answers, and he tells her that an ambulance will be with them very soon. She finds herself wondering who the operator is. What he looks like. Whether he can tell her what the future holds.

Maybe it's better not to know. She hangs up and stands frozen for a moment, until she hears Tom mumbling a word that could be her name. She folds herself onto the floor and cradles his head in her lap, blocking out the future and trying to give him whatever comfort she can. She takes his right hand in hers and he

clutches her fingers and they wait together for whatever comes next.

His hand feels cold. Heavy. Like responsibility.

Two paramedics arrive minutes later – a man and a woman whose names she instantly forgets but whose faces she will remember for ever. She follows their green uniforms up the stairs and into the bedroom.

'What's wrong? What's happened to him?' Hannah is starting to shake and crosses her arms tight across her chest in a vain attempt at comfort.

The woman's chestnut ponytail flicks behind her as she kneels down next to Tom. She barely looks old enough to buy alcohol but her unruffled concentration steadies Hannah as she takes Tom's pulse. 'I'm not sure yet. I'll just examine him.' She stares at his face. 'Hello, Tom. How are you feeling?'

'Sh. Sh. Shtuck.'

'OK.' The girl nods as if he is speaking normally. 'I'm just going to do a couple of tests so we can start to make you more comfortable. Can you raise your arms please?'

Hannah holds her breath. *Come on, Tom.*

His right arm rises but his left remains at his side.

Hannah wills it to move.

Nothing.

Hannah turns to the man as panic starts to rise. 'Is he going to be OK?'

He looks at her with unwelcome news in his eyes. 'Tom's face is drooping. Together with the speech and movement issues, it looks likely that he's had a stroke. We'll need to do further tests to confirm.'

'A *stroke*? Oh God.' She tries to force away tear-stained

memories of her childhood babysitter dribbling in a hospital ward.

'We'll get Tom to hospital as quickly as possible.' The man's voice is steady. Designed to reassure.

'OK.' She is struggling to focus. Her mind is shouting STROKE and her breath is coming in gasps. She digs her nails into her palms to keep the tears at bay. 'Can I come with him?'

'Of course.' He drops his eyes tactfully to the floor. 'You might want to get dressed first though.'

She looks down at her minimal pink T-shirt. Yes. Getting dressed is a good idea. She pulls the first clothes she finds from her wardrobe and goes into the bathroom to change.

She is still fumbling with her jeans as she walks out to see that Tom is in a portable chair and the paramedics are carrying him down the stairs. His short hair is drenched in sweat. His eyes are blank and his waxen face lolls to the right, cruelly contrasting with the energy and joy of the man in the wedding photos on the walls, punctuating his descent. Tears prick her eyes at the shock of seeing him so helpless. So mortal.

She must help him. However she can. She throws her coat on and pulls her bag from its peg in the hall before running out of the door. As she pulls it shut she catches a glimpse of someone reflected in the dark glass of the living room window. The flashing blue lights of the ambulance illuminate the curly hair exploding from her head. Her white face. Her terrified eyes.

It takes her a second to realise that the woman is her.

The ambulance screeches through south London streets and ten minutes later they are outside the hospital. It is clear that every second counts.

Tom is in danger.

Tom might die.

She can't think about that. As the door opens Hannah steps down onto the tarmac, bracing herself against the whip of the January wind. The paramedics swiftly wheel Tom's stretcher towards the red ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY sign that glows ominously through the darkness. Hannah reaches out and takes Tom's hand as they pass a skeletal man standing by a large NO SMOKING sign. He is puffing defiantly on a cigarette and gives her a wink as she strides past. The gesture is so inappropriate she is tempted to slap him in the face.

No time.

The paramedics push Tom into the hospital and a tall man with stubble as dark as his eye bags strides towards them. He is tucking his tie into his shirt and Hannah sees the exhaustion beneath his smile.

'Hi, I'm Dr Malik, the stroke consultant on call. You're . . .?'

'Hannah.' He is already talking to the paramedics as they push Tom along the corridor. Words volley back and forth. Cerebral artery. Possible haemorrhage. Each one only serves to make her more afraid.

Tom is the silent eye of the storm. She squeezes his fingers but he doesn't even react to that any more. His eyes are now closed and she can see him shutting down right in front of her. She won't let him. She summons the strength she knows he needs and leans closer until her mouth is near his ear.

'Hang in there, soldier.' It's an endearment from old times and his lids flicker open in response. For a second their eyes connect and she feels hope surge. Then his lids close.

'Tom?'

Nothing.

'*Tom*?'

No. She won't let this happen. She turns to the paramedics, but they are already pushing Tom through a set of cream double doors labelled RESUSCITATION ROOM. She is about to follow but Dr Malik stops her. As the doors close she has a brief glimpse of bright lights and smells the metallic tang of blood. Bile rises in her throat and she takes a deep breath as Dr Malik steps towards her.

'We're going to take your husband for more tests. Then I'll be able to come back and tell you more.' He indicates some grey plastic chairs. 'Wait here please. You can call someone if you need to.'

'I . . .' But he's gone.

She is alone.

It's terrifying.

She sits down and discovers that the chair has been ergonomically designed to give her a slipped disc. She springs back up and stares at the flaking wall in front of her. The colour resembles Tom's face the morning after a bad kebab.

She thinks of him lying there. Powerless.

She clenches her fists.

Come on, Tom.

'All right, darling?'

She spins round as the smoker from outside lands heavily across two chairs. He leans towards her and she is enveloped in an unappetising cloud of stale spirits.

'No. I'm not all right.' She steps away from him. Suddenly being alone doesn't seem so bad.

He coughs and phlegm crackles in his chest. 'Is that your husband in there?' He indicates the cream doors

with his head and leans back, spreading his legs wide. Hannah averts her eyes from the unfortunate hole in his jeans.

'Yes.' Her voice is high and strained.

'Been married long?'

She looks towards the double doors, desperate to know what's happening behind them. 'Five and a half years.'

He nods. 'Never made it that far, myself.'

Hannah can't say she's surprised.

Hannah jumps as Dr Malik pushes through the doors. His face is stamped with a gravity she doesn't want to understand.

'Come through, Hannah. We're ready for you now.'

'Good luck.' Her companion gives her a thumbs up. 'He'll be fine.'

'I hope so.'

Talk about clutching at straws.

She takes a deep breath and follows Dr Malik into the resuscitation room.