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Opening Extract from...

TENDER

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MARTY

Some people struggle to get out of bed in the morning. People like my mum. They say it's the worst time of their day. For them, it's like the moment of waking is the moment when everything becomes too much. They can't physically move; they feel like lead. They can't get out of bed; they don't want to face another day. They just want to sleep.

But I don't get that. I don't get that at all.

It's the *going* to bed that I can't stand – the laying down on the mattress and staring up at the ceiling, night after night. Watching the darkness. *That's* what gets to me, because *that's* when the thinking really starts. And when it starts,

I can't make it stop.

Give me the mornings anytime. Give me the light.

Please take away the dark.

Mum hadn't got out of bed for four days straight, which was some kind of tragic record. I guess just being "up" became too much for her. She needed to rest again. Needed to shut herself away. Her door was slightly open, and if I listened carefully I could hear her breathing. Nothing else. If I went into her room, she would lie there perfectly still. Sometimes she would talk, but her words always sounded wooden and flat. This morning she had asked for a cup of tea and some toast. That was a slight improvement. At least she was eating.

I was cooking when they came. OK, "cooking" was probably stretching the term a little – but baked beans *are* a type of food and they needed cooking, so I guess it counts. And we had food this time. At least I wasn't eating dry cereal out of the mixing bowl again. I had to try and get Mum to eat something – even if it was just a bit

of toast. Anyway, I was heating the beans when the hammering on the door began: short, sharp raps on the glass that seemed to shake the entire flat. They couldn't ring the doorbell – *that* broke ages ago. I was a bit worried, because that glass isn't the strongest and they were banging pretty hard. The beans bubbled in front of me, the orange sauce thickening and staining the sides of the pan. I moved the wooden spoon slowly, crushing them. I had an idea who it was. I guess deep down I'd been expecting them. I'd just always hoped they'd find something more important to do with their time. Reaching for my phone, I punched out a message to J.

Trouble – get home now.

Of course J was out. Just nipped to the pub, he said. Just gone for a quick one. I couldn't blame him. Why should he have to babysit me all the time? I'm hardly his responsibility.

Another rap, harder now.

My stomach lurched. Should I wake Mum or

leave her be? What was the best thing to do?

Probably neither.

"OK, OK!" I said under my breath.

I moved the pan and switched off the gas. I removed the almost-too-dry-to-be-edible bread from the toaster. I walked down our thin, dark corridor and opened the door to their fake, all-knowing faces. Two women smiled at me. One was tall with bright red hair and matching lipstick, the other shorter with a mess of blonde curls piled on her head. Their lips seemed to be pressed into matching grins.

The taller woman leant towards me slightly. "Martin? Martin Field?"

"Marty," I replied. "It's just Marty."

I could tell her that I was named after a character in Mum's favourite film. I could tell her that Mum watched *Back to the Future* at least once a week and that because of this I knew all the lines off by heart. I could tell her all these things, but it would be pointless – they thought they knew us already.

"I'm sorry." Her grin widened. "Is your mum in?

Or your stepdad … John?"

John? I imagined calling J by that name, but no way did it suit him. He'd laugh in my face.

"J? He's not my stepdad. He's my mum's boyfriend and he's on his way home now."

I hope.

"And he's your legal guardian."

"Yes."

At the moment, anyway.

I wondered if this was my opportunity to tell them to go away, to come back another time, to leave us all in peace – but then I heard the crash of the lift doors further down the deck. Damn, it was too late. He was back.

J half-jogged towards us, his lanky body moving awkwardly, his long, dark hair swinging in front of his face. He pushed the sides away with his hands and coughed his guts up loudly. For a skinny guy he was dead unfit.

"Sorry, sorry. I was held up. Was seeing a bloke about potential work." He turned to me and smirked.

Work. Yeah, right.

J's "work" involved odd building jobs here and there. Most of the time he was down the pub or the betting shop, spunking his wages against the wall.

"It's fine. You're here now." The tall lady smiled back towards me. "I'm Jenny, we met before at your school? This is my trainee, Debbie."

I stared back at her. Did she seriously think I would forget? The one time I actually go school and two social workers show up and pull me into a meeting room. They tell you they just want to "chat", that they have "concerns and worries". But it's all crap. They just want to cause trouble. Stick their noses in where it's not wanted. I told them not to come here. I told them not to bother, but I knew they wouldn't listen.

The blonde girl smiled at us nervously. I frowned back. I'm not sure why. All this niceness was doing my head in. Why weren't they saying what they were really thinking? They didn't like us. Not really. You could just tell. You could see them judging us, their eyes drifting down to my clothes: old tracksuit bottoms, a manky top and holey socks.

"I was making dinner," I said. "We haven't eaten yet."

"We won't keep you long," Jenny said lightly, shifting a large-looking folder from one hip to the other. "I just need to discuss a few things with you both. Make a few arrangements. There are certain things we need to put in place before—"

"Jo has been a bit poorly," J said quickly. "She's resting in bed at the moment. We've been looking after her."

Jenny nodded. "Yes, so Marty said. I only want a quick word. It honestly won't take long."

I hated having them inside the flat. That was the worst. They could see the total mess of our lives – the wet clothes on the radiators, last night's cups still on the floor, my box of latest finds stuffed in the corner, the Xbox controllers dumped on the chair where we'd been playing until late last night. I'd actually tidied up a bit. Picked up J's beer cans. Thrown away the pizza boxes. It still stunk like musty socks in here though. It was a thick smell that stuck to the side of your throat, making you want to cough. I only really noticed it when I

stepped back in. It was chaos. *Our* chaos. I didn't mind it, but I knew other people would.

Obviously things were better when Mum was well, but when she got ill things drifted a bit. It was always that way. But we'd get on top of it again. We always did, that was just how it worked here. Jenny and Debbie perched on the edge of the sofa. It was comical really – they looked like they might fall off any minute. J edged out and went to the bedroom. I heard him talking softly to Mum and her louder protests filtered back. She didn't want to get up. She would, though. She had to.

"We don't have fleas," I said, staring at them both, daring them to sit on our chairs properly.

I saw Debbie's eyes scan the old cushions like she didn't quite believe me. One arm stroked the other arm.

"No – no, of course not," she said. But she didn't move any further back.

J walked back into the room, laughing.

"It's a bit of a mess in here, but what do you expect, two lads together? I've been busy and Marty

is at school. We just need Jo back on her feet. She loves to clean, does our Jo."

"I'm not here to judge you," Jenny said sweetly. "But how long exactly has Jo been ill?"

I saw J hesitate, his face stiffened. "Not long. She just has a bug, that's all. Nothing odd about that."

"I didn't say there was. I was just concerned, that's all."

Liar.

We heard the shuffling first and then the soft cough. Mum slipped into the room, her clothing rustling as she moved. She looked awful, a dressing gown pulled tight around her thin body and her thick, messy hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. It was like she hadn't slept for weeks.

"Why are you here? I don't need this," she said, her voice raspy and accusing. "I just need rest. Peace. I don't need the likes of you coming to my flat."

"Did you get my phone messages, Jo? Do you know who we are?"

"My phone is turned off. Like I said, I need to *rest*."

Mum perched on the arm of the sofa and started to rub the skin on her arm.

"But yeah, I know who are. Bloody social – you have it written all over you. What's all this about? We don't need any help. I didn't ask for this."

Jenny rifled through her papers, sighed a little, and then eased herself back into our chair, thoughts of fleas obviously forgotten. "We've had . . . calls. Anonymous, but people have reported shouting from this property. Arguing. They said you sounded distressed. . ."

Mum shrugged. "I was probably arguing with J. We have a fiery relationship, that's all."

"But we get on fine, don't we, babe!" J said, too loudly.

Calm down, mate. If you keep grinning like that, they're bound to think you're covering something up.

". . . and we've had concerns from Marty's school. His behaviour, and. . ."

And let the interfering begin.

"He's doing well at school. He's always going on about it!" Mum said, her eyes flashing at me.

Jenny looked between Mum and me. "You think Marty has been going to school?"

She started to rifle through her file and drew out a sheet of paper after spending some time peering at the words written on it. I could feel the tension burning through my body. I wanted to pace the room. No, screw that, I wanted to *leave* the room.

"You haven't been going to school, have you, Marty?" she said finally, looking at me. Not so much a question as a statement.

I didn't answer.

J moved in front of me, with a face full of fake shock and disgust. "What? Where have you been, then?"

He was so rubbish at lying.

I shrugged. "There's no point being there."

"Marty, your attendance is currently at 62%. This is far below where it should be. We need to see improvement. You are a bright and able student. You could do really well."

I stared at her. What did she know?

"You need to sort it out," Mum said, not very

convincingly. She half laughed. "You don't want to end up like me, now, do you?"

She had a point there.

"I hate school," I told them. "It's a waste of time."

"Do you think your mum needs to hear that, Marty? If she's not well at the moment, she doesn't need to worry about you, too. She needs to see that you're OK. She also doesn't need to be worrying about you truanting – you know she could be fined for this."

Fined? Like the school would bother. They were probably glad to see the back of me.

"Don't tell me what my mum needs," I said. "I *know* what my mum needs."

"And what *is* that?" Jenny was peering right up at me, eyes wide now. "What *does* she need?"

"Me. That's all. We don't need you lot poking your noses in." I could feel myself getting angry. "I'm not a loser, you know. I have plans. Mum knows them. She believes in me. She thinks I could do really well if I put my mind to it."

Jenny sighed and pushed her sheet of paper back into the folder. "I get that. I really do. But we're

not your enemy, Marty. We are here to help. *All of you*. We understand that things must be hard, especially after your dad's death."

I went back to staring. I was getting seriously fed up now.

Do not go there... Just don't.

J snorted. "You wanna help? Find me a decent job."

"I want you to let us help you," Jenny said, still looking straight at me.

I shook my head. "I don't need help from anyone."

Later, in my room, I sat holding a stupid leaflet and lousy card with Jenny's contact details on it. I don't know why I didn't just rip in up in front of their faces. In the other room, they were still talking to Mum. I wanted them to leave her alone. She was tired. She didn't need the extra stress.

J stood in the doorway, leaning lazily against the door frame. He was smoking, which was taking the piss. Mum would hate that, but I didn't have the energy to stop him.

"You have to go," he said. "It's the only way to

get them off our cases."

"What, back to school?" My stomach lurched. "No way."

"She's right. Your mum needs it calm here. We just need to do our best to keep things … well, normal." He took a long drag and puffed out smoke into my room. "And to be honest, mate, I don't want those women hanging around here poking their noses in. You know I'm doing cash-in-hand work at the moment. They might try to cut my benefit."

"So it's all about *you*…"

"Not at all! But if I'm earning less, it affects us all, don't it? Think about it – we don't need that interference, that's all. People prying where they're not wanted."

I sighed. "Whatever."

"Good lad."

"And this?" I waved the leaflet in his face. "This will help her *how*, exactly?"

J shrugged. "Nah. That's to help you, mate."

I stared down at the large writing, the soppy faces grinning up at me.

YOUNG CARERS
MEET, CHAT, CHILL

"Seriously?"

"Just go to one meeting. See what's it like. Make them think you're cool about it."

What, sitting around with a bunch of sad losers moaning about their lives? Watching them wring their hands and open up about their problems? I'd rather spew my guts in front of them. But the thought of months with the social sniffing around us made my blood run cold.

I shook my head. "Tell them to stick it," I said.

I turned away from him then but I heard his sigh as he left the room.

Such a loser.

But in a weird way I still liked having him round. He was better than nothing and he stopped me being alone with Mum. But there was no way I was going to some crap like this.

I could deal with everything my way.

I always did.