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Opening Extract from...

Irresistible

Written by Liz Bankes

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Chapter 1

'Mia,' she says, pronouncing it to rhyme with 'higher'.

I think about correcting her, but then I chicken out. It's fine. I'll just have a new name.

'Does that denote an exotic heritage?' she continues.

'Um, no. Well, Mum's a bit Welsh.'

'Shame. We're trying to up our ethnic quotas.'

She watches me while I try desperately to think of something to say and puts her hand over her mouth in a mock whisper. 'I'm joking.'

'Oh, okay!' I am able to breathe again. 'I think my name was Dad's idea. He thought it sounded a bit different. He wrote a song about it or something. I'll ask him the next time he visits. They were, like, seventeen when I was born,' I try to explain.

She makes a small, polite cough that is definitely not polite.

I've definitely blown the interview. They probably don't

let you waitress somewhere like this if you start off by talking about your parents' scandalous teenage pregnancy.

The woman looks down at her pad and then up again, like she is erasing the past few minutes from her brain. She's sitting on an ornate wooden chair in front of a massive window. There are shadows over her face; her white teeth and shining eyes poke through the darkness, and make her more frightening. She would be beautiful, I think, if she wasn't so terrifying. She has blond hair, scraped back into a bun, and eyebrows plucked into severe arches. When she looks up she has a wide-eyed smile, which is not really a smile, unless you expect people who smile at you to also kill you.

'So, Mia, tell me a bit about yourself.'

'I've just finished Year Eleven.'

'That makes you . . . ?'

'Sixteen. I've just done GCSEs.'

'And what did you do?'

'All the normal ones, and history, drama, French and food tech.'

She shakes her head, as if I've just spoken in Chinese. 'It's all a bit odd to me – at James and Desdemona's schools they do the International Baccalaureate – a far more rigorous system. But "food tech" might help prepare you for our restaurant, I suppose.'

'Yes . . . Well, we mostly designed egg boxes, but I can cook things. My mum taught me her version of spaghetti Bolognese. Basically you just add loads of wine.'

I stop and think of the menu I saw when I was waiting in reception. 'I mean, probably not the kind of wine you have here. Mum usually has a wine box on the go in the fridge, but you . . . probably . . . don't.'

I'm doing that thing when I'm nervous and speak till I'm out of words. At least I didn't mention the time my chilli chicken kebabs made my stepdad Jeff violently sick because I didn't turn the oven on properly and the chicken was raw.

She smiles, unkindly. 'No.' She lets the moment linger. 'And French . . . That may be useful. We have an international clientele.'

Hmm, I think. Useful if they want me to tell them what I did on my holidays or to describe the contents of my pencil case.

'Well, why don't I tell you a bit about Radleigh?'

She launches into a guide book style intro, which I start nodding along to. I mean, I did Google the place. It has its own Wikipedia page, which talks about how Radleigh Castle has always been a hub for the rich and famous. It began as one of those proper castles with knights and damsels and stuff. Then it was more of a grand stately home, inhabited by generations of dukes before it was turned into a hotel at the beginning of the twentieth century. There's a hilarious bit about how, a few centuries ago, there was some club for 'mischief' based here, which got a reputation for 'lewdness' with rumours of unmarried women becoming 'excited', but that's all stopped now. I am not surprised. The guests here look pretty old. I expect they spend less time being lewd and more time falling asleep in the middle of the day.

Radleigh's Great Hall restaurant is apparently famous for its 'olde English' cuisine. That makes me think of pig's heads. The restaurant is the bit I'll be working in if I get this job. I wonder if I would get free food.

This woman's on the Wikipedia page too. Julia Elliot-Fox. She inherited the castle and then married a banker

called Richard and they have two kids called James, who's eighteen, and Desdemona, who's thirteen.

Julia is just getting to the nineteenth century when I look up to the window behind her.

There is a boy standing there. Watching me.

He's wearing a shirt with the collar turned up and shorts. There's a cigarette hanging from his mouth and a bottle in his hand that looks expensive. He's got messy hair, a bit of stubble, and lips that make him look like he's permanently pouting. At the same time as I'm wondering why he's staring at me, I notice that I can't seem to look away. He's only slightly to the side of Julia, so I can look right at him while she's talking.

It's his expression. He looks like he's smiling at some private joke. And his dark eyes seem to go right into my thoughts.

I force my gaze back to Julia, who is saying something about the War. I nod in a way that hopefully says, 'I am very interested in the things you are saying,' but my eyes flick back to the window.

His eyes are stern, like he's examining me, but still has the smile at the corners of his mouth. It looks like he's about to mouth something at me, when someone else appears in the window. It's a girl, wearing a white shirt and black skirt; I think she must work here, except enough buttons are undone that you can see her bra, which is probably not part of the dress code.

She reaches out and puts her hand under his shirt to where the waistband of his shorts must be. He leans forward and kisses her.

And he's still looking at me.

Her hands run over his chest, while his stay by his sides, still holding the cigarette and the bottle.

They move up against the window. He must be pressed right onto her and I suddenly wonder what the weight of his body would feel like. I wonder how kissing him would taste and imagine his stubble grazing my neck.

I take a sharp breath in and force my eyes away from the window. Why on earth am I thinking things like that? I don't even know who the boy is. My hands, which are placed rigidly on my knees, suddenly feel hot and I realise my mouth is dry. I've totally stopped doing my nodding along to Julia.

He stops kissing the girl and takes a swig from the bottle. It has a brown, dusty label. He hands her the bottle and kisses her on the nose, and looks at me one more time. Then he reaches up and knocks twice on the window. He pats the girl on the bum, and then he's gone.

Julia stops midflow and coolly turns her head to the window. The girl looks terrified and stumbles back, almost dropping the bottle in the process.

Although I can't see her face, I can see that Julia gives a small shake of the head. She turns back to me and raises her eyebrows.

'Now. Tell me why you want to work at Radleigh Castle.'

Chapter 2

The next ten minutes feel like ten years as I stutter and um my way through the interview. I don't tell her how I've been daydreaming about saving up a load of money and not going back to school in September, perhaps arranging a work placement somewhere instead, or just travelling and coming back when I've spent all my money.

I want to do things like ending up on a mountain somewhere at five in the morning and seeing a huge lake stretching for miles with absolutely no one else around, or wandering round a city, trying street food and meeting people who take me to some random music festival or beach party with a bonfire – basically, doing things I can't do round here, the same town I've lived in for sixteen years.

Julia asks how I would handle the less glamorous tasks, like cleaning the loos. I pause. Mum's not the tidiest of people, especially when she has had her book group round (which is

actually more of a wine and cackling group) and gives me a tenner to do the washing up. And Jeff has an office that is essentially a mountain of paper and cups of congealed tea. Matthew is only seven, so he's got an excuse for leaving a trail of sweet wrappers and books behind him. Technically I'm the cleanest person in my house, but I don't know if that qualifies me for the Radleigh Castle toilets. I tell her I like cleaning toilets. She doesn't say anything to that and just moves on to the next question, probably because it sounds quite weird.

Finally, she asks me how I would deal with speaking to distinguished personages. I panic and say, 'Curtsey at them?'

She says, 'Well, I think we'll end there,' and stands up.

As she is walking me out, all I can think is, *Oh God, now I will have to be like Lizzie from school and take a job working for the fish man*.

The interview room is just up the corridor from the main entrance and we walk back along creaking floorboards, past the paintings of people in wigs. A dark wooden door at the end of the corridor looks like it leads to a cellar or secret passageway or something. I think how this would have been an awesome place to grow up in. Because Jeff is a history teacher, we've been on lots of family trips to old houses and castles. I went through a stage where I was obsessed with ghosts and would deliberately lose Mum, Jeff and Matthew in order to find the quietest, spookiest room I could, and then stand there, waiting for the ghosts to come and scare me. I'd read stories about 'real life hauntings' and had been convinced that every creak or whistle I'd heard was the 'grey lady' or 'mad monk' finally appearing.

I'm the same with films and stuff – I start off desperately hoping to be scared, but it never seems real enough. Gabi, my

best friend, never had this problem – at sleepovers she would continually dig her fingernails into my leg when we were watching some slasher film we were probably too young for, while I was usually a bit bored. And when we got taken to see 'The Woman in Black' on the Year Eight theatre trip, she got taken out for screaming too hysterically.

I think that if I get this job, I'll probably be here till quite late each night. My ten-year-old self would be delighted. Gabi's current sixteen-year-old self would completely do her nut. I'm going to look up tonight if there are any scary 'haunting' stories about this place. I bet there have been a few scary children singing nursery rhymes. Or maybe one of these portrait women in wigs was driven mad with grief and can still be heard wailing in the corridors.

We turn off into a room on the right, which is the reception, where the receptionist had made me wait for ten minutes while she 'verified' that I was really attending an interview, as opposed to being here to steal or set fire to things.

Julia asks the receptionist for 'Jennifer Fish's mother's number'.

'Unfortunately, we'll be letting her go,' she explains.

'Oh, why's that?' asks the receptionist, barely containing her desire to get the gossip.

'Overindulgence,' Julia replies through her false smile. 'And there'll be a bottle of port to replace.'

The receptionist tuts and mutters something under her breath that sounds like 'Another one . . .'

Julia leaves to make her phone call and I sit opposite the receptionist. Jeff won't be here to pick me up for another half an hour. I could probably walk, but I'm not totally sure of the way. I think that you can walk through the grounds and along

the river back into town. I lean back on the chair, wondering what I'm going to do for half an hour, and the wooden back of the chair creaks loudly. I sit up quickly, thinking that breaking antique furniture is probably not the best way to fill my time.

The receptionist coughs. 'We have books if you are looking for something to do, dear,' she says pointedly. She's reading a book, exaggeratedly licking her finger each time she turns the page and peering at me over her glasses.

I look around. There's a shelf of very old-looking books behind me – the kind with brown leathery spines. I wonder what she would do if I picked one up and did what she is doing, which is essentially wiping her spit all over it.

I'm about to pull out one of the old books when she snaps her fingers and points to a box by the door. It is full of paperbacks, largely those with photo-style illustrations of couples kissing on the front. The one I choose has a guy with long hair and an oiled chest, and a woman whose clothes are falling off. I wonder if they were left by guests and the receptionist has hoarded them. Well, at least it will pass the time.

After spending a while trying not to laugh at 'dangerously sexy Dante' and his 'rock hard thighs', I feel a breeze coming from the door. I shift forward on the sofa and can see through an archway and into the castle courtyard.

Julia comes sweeping back in and sees me looking. 'Do have a look around while you wait,' she says.

I hand the receptionist back the book and thank her. She holds it in an overly dainty manner between her thumb and finger and places it back in the box.

I go across the corridor and into the courtyard. It's like a

mini garden with trees and flowerbeds and a stone path running through it. Walls loom at me on all sides, with windows too small to see into, apart from the ones at ground level. On the right I can see into the restaurant. The wall on the opposite side to where I've come from is broken into a series of archways at the bottom.

They lead out to a terrace of stone slabs with tables and chairs on it. There's one old man at a table, with his head on his chest, snoring. The restaurant leads through to a conservatory building on the left and through the glass I can see the outdoor swimming pool.

It looks awesome, surrounded by stone pillars with plants growing round them. And at the end there's a building that looks like a Greek temple with four huge stone pillars at the front of it. I cannot believe people actually live here.

Sitting between the building and the pool on a sun lounger is the boy from the window. He's reading a book, smoking, putting the cigarette in his mouth each time he turns the page. He's wearing the same black shorts, but no shirt now. He's too far away to see properly. I think that it would be useful in situations like these if I carried binoculars with me, then I realise that makes me sound like a pervert. He's probably been swimming, I think. I imagine his chest drying off in the sun. Then my phone goes off, loudly.

The old man snorts and glares around and the boy looks up from his book. I fumble to reach the phone in my bag and run back through one of the arches and into the courtyard. My phone is still blaring out and I still can't find it in my bag.

I press the answer button just as I reach reception again and the receptionist is saying, 'Excuse me . . .' above the noise of my ringtone.

Jeff says, 'I'm here! I think . . .'

I go out of the old wooden door at the bottom of the left tower, and walk across the gravel, heading to the car park on the left. I can't see Jeff's car, which is a bit of a relief to be honest, because it's a Volvo and really old and Gabi always says I should get him to park round the corner when he picks us up from house parties. I tell him I'll start walking up and meet him.

'I'm on a windy country lane – I nearly killed a deer!' he says helpfully.

I walk towards the bit where the car park meets the lane and see Julia and another woman standing by a car. Julia is talking while the woman looks uncomfortable and is fiddling with her car keys. As I pass them, I hear Julia say, '. . . a bottle of the nineteen forty-five Graham's she'd pinched from the cellar. It won't be drinkable now she's opened it and shaken it about.'

'Mmm, yes. Of course. Shaken about,' says the woman in a shrill, wobbly voice. 'I'm terribly, terribly sorry. We'll replace the port, of course.'

'I wouldn't worry,' says Julia and I know she'll be doing the smile that is not a smile, 'unless you have a thousand pounds going spare. It's not something one gets in Waitrose.'

'David's a chartered accountant,' the shrill woman says, and then trails off.

I'm nearly on the other side of the car when I feel I can turn and look. In the passenger seat is the girl I saw kissing the boy at the window. Even from here I can see a dark red stain at the top of her white shirt where she must have spilt the port. Pretty incriminating. She is crying, and on one side of her face her mascara has run down in a long black drip.

I wonder if I should tell them it wasn't her fault. Or even that if she did steal it to drink with the boy, then it's his fault too. I hover behind them, but I can't speak up. Julia is too terrifying. And what if I didn't see everything? The girl in the car must be wondering what I'm doing. I try to give her a friendly smile, but I don't think she really registers me. She's looking back up at the castle.

The boy is standing at the front door with his hands in the pockets of his shorts. The huge stone façade towers behind him at a slight angle. At first I think he is too far away to have noticed us, but then I see his head turn in our direction and for a second I am sure that he is looking over at me. He lights up another cigarette and walks off.