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Opening extract from

Night Runner

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TIM BOWLER

NIGHT RUNNER

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FOR MY FATHER, WITH LOVE

CHAPTER 1

There's no other way to put this: I've had it up to here. If it's not Dad whipping off his belt, it's Mum snapping at me like she never used to, or the bullyboys hunting me at school, or the headmaster asking me if I've got any friends when he bloody knows I haven't. I've even had the landlord saying Zinny's not a proper name for a fifteen-year-old boy and how come my parents can buy me new running shoes when they never pay the rent on time? And now there's a guy in the street watching my window.

Don't know who he is, just know he looks normal and feels wrong. I mean, what's he doing down the slug end of the road anyway? Just dingy old houses. What's to look at? I keep to the side of the window and go on peeking round the curtain. Big guy, about thirty, neat hair, clean shaven. Not short of money with a flash coat like that. I caught sight of him a few minutes ago walking down the opposite pavement.

Nothing wrong with that. Not everyone thinks Abbot Street's a cesspit. Some people even live here. But down this end? He's gone past the shops and most of the other

houses and now he's stopped, and he's still staring up at my window. Doesn't look like someone the school's sent to find me. He's heading for the front door. I step back from the window. There's a knock down below.

'We've got a bell,' I murmur.

It rings, rings again, then silence falls: just the sound of traffic from the main road, then that seems to fade, and all I hear is a blackbird chirping up on the roof. Feels strange for a few seconds, like the city's turned into a country meadow. Not that I've ever been in one. The bell rings again.

I sit on the bed and wait. He's got to give up soon. I want to go back to the window and check round the curtain again, but I don't dare. I've got a feeling he might look up and catch me. I think of Mum and Dad. Maybe one of them knows him. I hope not. Don't know why. Still the silence. I picture the country meadow again. I often do this. When I can't take the city any more, I think of the nature pictures in that book I've got.

Sound of footsteps outside, moving back from the door. I'm guessing he's looking up at the window again. Then another sound, and this time I relax. He's walking away, not up the road but past the house towards the railway bridge. I jump back to the window and check round the curtains. But I'm too late. There's no sign of him.

He must have moved dead fast. I slip to the other side of the window to give me a better angle. Still no sign, just the street and the bridge and a train clunking over it towards the city centre. I sit back on the bed again and try to think. There's nothing says this guy's trouble,

nothing more than my instinct, and that could be wrong. I'm always jumpy when I bunk off school. Then I hear the sound at the back door.

I stiffen. All's quiet again, and for a moment I think I've imagined it, but then it comes back, clear as the thumping of my heart: a scrape, a rattle, another scrape. Someone's trying to pick the lock. A click as it surrenders and the door opens with a creak. I look quickly round. No time to get down the stairs and out the front door, no point running into Mum and Dad's room, or into the bathroom. He'll hear me moving and the only advantage I've got is him not knowing I'm in the house.

If that's true. Best to stay here anyway and hide under the bed. He might just miss me. There's nothing to steal in my room. He'll see that at a glance. He'll see it everywhere else too. Everything about this house'll tell him how poor we are, so with any luck he won't hang around. He's through the kitchen now and into the front room. I can hear him moving about. I kneel down, soft as I can, and check under the bed. Games kit still stuffed under there from last week, plus my old tatty cushion and my running shoes. I wait, listening.

It's gone quiet downstairs and I'm terrified he's heard me, but then the sounds start again. He's pulling open the drawers of the old cabinet. I squeeze under the bed, ease myself towards the middle. Smells musty and I'm worried I'm going to sneeze. I've started trembling too. The unwashed kit's close to my face and it stinks. I pull some of it out of the bag and stuff it down the other side of my body with the cushion.

Don't know why I'm bothering. If he looks under the

bed, he'll see me, with or without this stuff. I curl up, try to make myself small. Sound of footsteps on the stairs. I try to stop trembling, but I can't. He stops outside my door, like he's thinking which room to try first—then he heads for Mum and Dad's. Takes his time in there but I can hear what he's doing.

He's opening all the drawers, tipping stuff out, poking through, and now he's pulling back the wardrobe and the old chest, like he wants to look behind them; then I catch another sound. Can't work it out straightaway, then I get it. He's dragging back the bed, pulling up the carpet and the floorboards. That's when I move, because he'll be in here next, doing the same thing, and I've only got one chance to run.

I crawl out and stand up, praying he hasn't heard me, but it's no good. All the sounds have stopped in Mum and Dad's room. I brace myself. He's listening. He's got to be. He's heard something—me obviously—and any moment now he's going to rush in and see me. But instead he runs down the stairs and out the back door. A crash of the gate and he's off down the alley, his steps clattering away into silence. Then I hear the key in the front door.

And Mum's voice.