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opening extract from

Pigeon

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Registration

'The end of term!' Sam Innocent declared as he strolled up the school drive. 'Almost time to say, "Bye-bye, Freekham High"!'

'One whole day to get through first,' sighed Sara Knot, walking along beside him. 'And *what* a day.'

Sam paused for a moment to take in the view of the school from the top of the school drive. In a word: ugly. Modern boxy buildings lay scattered about like bricks from a giant's play-set, linked by dull concrete walkways. He switched his gaze to Sara instead, who was far easier on the eye. Tall and slim, with blonde hair down to her waist and legs up to her armpits, over the last five weeks she had become a friend, a partner-in-crime—and a fellow survivor.

Freekham High proudly proclaimed itself to be a progressive school, but in Sam and Sara's book it was just plain freaky.

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They had both started there on the same day in May in a shower of unlikely coincidences. It turned out that each had been born at the same time on the same day—February 29th—and each had spent the last eight years attending two or three different schools each year as a result of their parents' ever-shifting jobs.

That first day at Freekham, severed thumbs started showing up all over the school . . . and Sam and Sara had found themselves caught up in several mad mysteries since then.

Now, on the last day of term, Sam actually felt a pang of regret that it was all coming to an end. Freekham High could freak you out—it was, after all, a place where weird stuff went to happen—but at least school-life was rarely dull. He and Sara had made some good friends here.

It seemed a shame that, after today, he would probably never see any of them again.

Sara nudged him. 'Are you going to stand here staring at the school all day, or would you like to get your bum in gear?'

'What sort of gear did you have in mind?' Sam enquired. 'I should say now, lacy knickers don't really suit me.'

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She rolled her eyes, something she did very well—he supposed he'd given her enough practice over the last few weeks. *You'll miss me when I'm gone*, he wanted to say. Last night, his dad announced that he had almost certainly got another job, miles away. The Innocent family would be moving on once more. Another friendless summer loomed ahead for him, followed by a lonely autumn term at yet another school.

And it would all be so . . . normal.

So totally dull!

Sara was frowning at him. 'You OK?'

'Uh-huh.' He roused himself. 'Course I am. I . . . I was just watching out for another pigeon attack, that's all.'

'Should get inside, then. Out here, you're a sitting duck.'

'That's OK, then—pigeons and ducks are on the same side, aren't they? Birds of a feather stick together.'

Sara grimaced. 'Those flying rats will make you sticky, all right.'

It was a typical Freekham High phenomenon. Just lately, a flock of particularly unpleasant pigeons had been making their presence felt. It

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was as if they had a grudge against the school—divebombing windows, pooing on the teachers' cars . . . For some reason they had a particular fascination with Sam and Sara's form room, and had left messy presents all over the windows five times this week.

'Well, *I'm* going to the form room even if you're not,' Sara announced. 'Fido wants to run through some of my lines for the play.' She glanced up at the sky. 'Weather seems to be holding off. I only hope those pigeons do!'

Sam nodded. It wasn't only *his* last day at Freekham. Mr 'Killer' Collier, the ancient, grumpy Geography teacher was finally retiring after about 400 years. To honour his final hours, Sam's year was presenting a special open-air play called *A Site for Sore Eyes*—a history of the school and its grounds through the ages. Fido Tennant was writer and director, and he'd given Sara the leading role of the Chorus—a sort of narrator. Sam was way down on the cast list playing 'Gloomy Monk', some poor bloke from a thousand years ago. His only line was 'Oooh, what a calamity!' when his monastery was washed away in a flash flood.

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Sam hadn't yet told Sara about his impending move away. He didn't want to distract her before her starring performance. Not that he was sure she *would* be distracted. Possibly she'd be quite relieved. But he didn't want the news getting out, in case people made a fuss.

Or rather, if he was honest, in case they *didn't* make a fuss.

He sighed.

Sara looked at him, concern showing on her face. 'Look, is something up, Sam?'

'I . . .' Sam shrugged and smiled. 'I just can't believe I have to parade on stage this afternoon dressed as a monk in a *red* habit.'

'Could be *habit*-forming!' Sara forced one of her peculiar horsy laughs. 'See you later, Brother Sam.'

'Probably what the poor old monk's friar said before the flood,' he said gloomily. 'And he was wrong.'

Thinking about it, what the play demonstrated quite worryingly was that every building put up on this land through the ages had ended in disaster. If Sam had been Freekham's headmaster (he shuddered at the mere thought),

he would definitely make sure the school's insurance was paid up. Then again, ending up with a school on the site was probably enough of a disaster in itself for the freaky Freekham tradition to hold true. He should be able to get through this last day without the whole school blowing up around him or something. And hopefully without a pigeon dropping its lunch on his shoulder.

Deep in thought, Sam headed off into the playground to track down his friends before the bell for registration, one last time.

As soon as Sara turned from Sam, her smile slipped. She wondered what was on Sam's mind. His brown eyes looked sad, and even his dark spiky fringe was drooping a little. Sam was a total show-off, but maybe he really *was* worried about doing his line in the play. Whatever, she'd decided not to tell him her news just yet. She'd keep it to herself. She'd hate him to be distracted.

Of course, she'd hate him *not* to be distracted even more.

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Sara bit her lip. It looked ninety-nine per cent certain now that her mum had got the new job she'd been after, so the Knots would soon be packing up and moving away. Yet another new start, at yet another new school. Sara got through educational establishments like chic clique queen Vicki Starling got through hairspray.

Fido was already in the classroom when she arrived, surrounded by notes and bits of paper. His brown hair was even less tidy than usual, and his blue eyes held a slightly manic stare. He spun round at the sound of the door, a fat black marker pen clutched in one hand like an offensive weapon. 'Sara! There you are!'

'Catch me while you can,' she murmured. She would miss Fido. He was cute, in a slightly random sort of way. 'Everything OK? You look kind of stressed.'

'Just a few last-minute script changes.' He held up a sheet of paper that was soggy with black ink.

'But I just finished learning that!' she protested, walking over and snatching the paper from his hand. Maybe she wouldn't miss him—not with a slap round the chops, at any rate. 'You've changed just about everything!'

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'I'm the director,' Fido reminded her snootily. 'Being temperamental, erratic, and brilliant comes with the job!'

'So, when do we get to the brilliant bit?' She half-smiled. 'How did rehearsals go for the last act after school, anyway?'

'Disaster,' muttered Fido. 'Hardly anyone showed—too scared to hang around after school in case the Freekham ghost showed up.' He looked pointedly at her. 'Shame it didn't. I could have got it to read the Chorus.'

'I've come to every other rehearsal,' Sara said defensively. 'My mum wanted me to . . . er . . . help her with something.' *Yeah, help her celebrate getting the new job. 'It's practically in the bag, sweetheart!'—big whoop*. 'But what *is* all this about a Freekham ghost? I've heard a few people talking about it.'

'It's all a load of rubbish,' said Fido. 'Started a few days ago. People reckon they've heard it wailing and clanking about the place. Ashley Lamb thinks it's a spirit teacher we've summoned up by recreating scenes from the school's history.'

'The Ghost of Freekham Past, huh?' Sara raised

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an eyebrow. 'Well, there's one sure-fire way of finding out if it truly exists.'

'Oh?'

'Leave Sam alone in a room with it,' she grinned. 'If it hasn't given him a detention in five minutes, it doesn't exist.'

Fido smiled back. 'Come on, let me talk you through the changes I've made to the intro. It's Drama next, you can learn the new lines in time for the dress rehearsal at lunchtime.'

'No pressure, then,' she sighed, scanning the new introduction. 'Come with us on a journey back through the centuries . . . When Freekham was known as Frekkingham, a tiny village noted for its unusually high volume of lunatics, villains, paupers, and rogues. Or in today's language—teachers.' She looked at him. 'We're putting on this play to celebrate Killer Collier's last day victimizing innocent civilians. Do you really think this strikes the right respectful note?'

Fido shrugged. 'It's not like he *wants* to go, is it? He's been pushed! Everyone knows he's past it, himself included—but apparently he begged and begged the Head to let him stay.'

Sara nodded gloomily. Like she'd begged her

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mum to let her stay last night. Freekham High was weird all right, but she'd never made so many friends so quickly anywhere else before. That was a good kind of freaky—Memphis, Sam, Fido . . .

'Is this a private funeral or can anyone join in?'

Sara turned and smiled sadly. Talk of the devil—or, more accurately, the beanpole with the shaved head and the coolest sparkle in her wide, green eyes. Memphis Ball was a true one-off. Her uniform was askew, her lips were lipsticky crimson, and everything about her screamed attitude. But if she took to you, Memphis was a bright and dependable friend. Sara looked at her and suddenly her eyes welled up.

Memphis put an arm round her. 'Hey, what's the matter?'

'Yeah, come on, Sara,' said Fido, worriedly. 'I haven't made *that* many changes! You're my leading lady, you can cope!'

'And I'm the prompter,' Memphis reminded her. 'I'll be there for you.'

Sara nodded awkwardly. 'I know, it's not that. It's—'

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But just then the bell went for registration. Sara took the script and scooted off to her seat, wiping her eyes frantically on her shirtsleeve so no one else would see her tears. If she really *was* leaving Freekham, no way was she going out as the girly drip who blubbed on her last day.

'I'll tell you later,' she mouthed to Memphis as people started to drift in.

Then, suddenly, the students scattered as Penter marched into the room clutching a battered briefcase. He was an imposing man. His eyes were red-rimmed as if he hadn't slept for a week—and his nasty beard was patchy as if he'd finally nodded off while trying to shave it. His hair, on the other hand, was always perfectly combed, as if he'd spent hours over it. It was like seeing a rottweiler with a wig—just . . . *wrong*.

'Come on, everyone, hurry up and sit down!' he snapped, bad-tempered as ever as the last of the crowd straggled inside. 'It may be your last day but until that final bell goes, you are still school property! Where's Sam Innocent?'

'Maybe he's *lost* property, sir,' quipped Fido, to some laughter.

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'His brain's been lost property for years,' added Ruth 'Ruthless' Cook, the class bruiser. She and Sam rarely saw eye to eye—usually because Ruth was trying to punch him in it.

But just as Penter's face began to darken, Sam strolled in. 'Here I am, sir,' he said. 'Just taking a last look round the place . . .' He glanced over at Sara. 'For the summer, I mean.'

'It will *not* be a last look for you, Innocent,' growled Penter. 'Put just one foot out of line and I will give you an after-school detention!'

Sam smiled unexpectedly. 'Do you mean that, sir? Might be kind of nice . . . one more detention, for old times' sake!'

Sara shook her head wearily at Sam's suicidal sense of humour. Penter's red eyes looked as if they were about to shoot lasers at him.

But then, suddenly, a ruffling, cooing wave of noise filled the air and the classroom darkened.

'It's another pigeon attack!' yelled Fido, and the class erupted in chaos.

Some pointed, some screamed, some went very, very pale. Sara settled for cringing.

A whole army of pigeons was flocking at the windows, flapping and jostling as if they wanted

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to get inside. Each left a little present from its bottom that streaked the glass, blotting out just about everything.

'Help!' wailed Vicki Starling, standing on her chair. 'They want to peck us to pieces!'

'Could they start with Ruth?' Sam grinned.

Ruth was actually hiding behind Ashley Lamb, who seemed to be in a state of shock, staring at the window and sucking furiously on his thumb—a habit Sara thought he had managed to break. She only hoped the pigeons didn't manage to break the windows . . .

'Clear off, you flying vermin!' snarled Penter, marching up fearlessly to the windows. 'Stop making all that mess!' He banged on the glass. 'I'm sick of scrubbing these windows!'

Sam came over to join Sara and Memphis. 'Looks like Penter's in a bigger flap than *they* are,' he chuckled.

'It's so freaky!' Sara complained, staring at the feathered mass of lilac and grey. 'Why are they doing it?'

'Oh, like you don't know,' said Memphis. 'It's the last day of school, and you two will soon be going your separate ways. The gods

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of freaky had to mark the occasion somehow, didn't—?'

'Separate ways?' Sam interrupted sharply.

'How did *you* know?' Sara said, thinking she'd been rumbled.

Sara looked at him, and he looked back at her, the pigeons forgotten for a moment.

'Duh. It's the summer holidays,' said Memphis, frowning at the pair of them. 'Unless you were planning on living here by yourselves for the next few months, it's a fair guess that you'll be going your separate ways. And just as well, since you two are the weird-magnets around this place. Maybe the summer will give it a chance to recover.'

Sara laughed weakly and swiftly turned back to the feathered furies at the windows. She hoped Sam hadn't rumbled her. And yet she got the distinct feeling from Sam's shifty behaviour that *he* had something to hide too.

'Go away!' boomed Penter, slapping the register against the glass in a useless attempt to cow the pigeons.

'They want to bruise us all with their wings!' cried Vicki.

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'And tangle their feet in our hair!' added Elise, her best friend.

'And steal our ear-rings!' said Denise, her other best friend, not to be outdone.

'And . . .' Therese, last and probably least of Vicki's so-called chic clique, struggled to figure out another foul fowl fate, 'and they want to peck up scraps from the floor next to our feet!' she concluded lamely.

'Save me,' said Sam drily, 'from *that* lot!'

Then, as suddenly as they'd appeared, the pigeons vanished. But they had left a messy legacy of white and black smears, crusting up the windows so completely you couldn't see a thing through them.

'Right!' shouted Penter, surveying his baffled, nervous class. 'Calm down, sit down, and pipe down.'

Fido helped Vicki down from her chair, where she swooned theatrically into the arms of her acolytes. Ruth straightened up quickly. Ashley noticed her and frowned, so she shoved him into his chair and knocked his thumb out of his mouth. 'Don't start *that* again, loser!'

'Back to your desks, quickly now.' Penter

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flapped the register at Sara, Sam, and Memphis like a farmer shooing chickens into a run. 'The show is over.'

'Are you sure, sir?' Sam wondered, sitting down beside Ashley. 'With all that bird muck on the glass, they could be performing a song-and-dance number outside and we wouldn't know about it!'

'Well, you, Mr Innocent, will most *certainly* know about it.' Penter smiled, revealing his big yellowy teeth. 'You too, Mr Lamb. You two can clean up the mess!'

'That's not fair!' moaned Sam.

'And while you're doing that to my satisfaction, *I* shall install my patented pigeon-putter-offer.' He opened his briefcase and pulled out a complicated creation of mirrors and string. 'I finished it last night. The sunlight will flash off these pieces of polished glass, confuse the birds, and drive them away from the windows.'

'But it's the last day of term, sir,' said Ashley meekly.

'So why bother?' Sam added.

'Can you imagine what that window will be like after seven more weeks of pigeon attacks?' Penter roared.

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'Not sure I want to, sir,' said Sam.

'*You* won't have to imagine,' Penter informed him. 'Because the first thing I'll make you do in the new term is clean it up!'

Sam opened his mouth as if to say something. Then he simply shrugged and smiled sadly. 'Well, whatever you think, sir.'

And right there and then, Sara had the sneaking suspicion that she wasn't the only one keeping secrets.