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Opening extract from

Pike

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Pike

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Barrington Stoke

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To Barry Hines, who showed us how this might be done

One

Deep in the green murk, something stirred. It eased up from the weed and sludge at the bottom of the lake so slowly you'd think it was just drifting in the current. Only there was no current, and the lake water was as still as death. And if you looked closer, you could see the tiny ripples made by the fins, and the shimmer of energy that passed through the solid body under the scales.

Just enough light filtered through the water for the pike to see her prey. It was a minnow, dappled green and brown to conceal it as it darted among the weeds. But the minnow had abandoned the safety of the bottom, drawn by a new and unexpected object in the water. Something that linked the dark lower and the bright upper layers of the lake.

And now the minnow was a sharp outline against the morning light.

Close. Closer. It was time.

But perhaps the minnow had sensed danger, for he had swum into the cover of the strange new presence in the lake. One long branch of it reached up, almost to the surface, and that's where the minnow lurked now. He swam in and out of the five white bare twigs at the end of the branch, where bark frayed from the wood – or bone – beneath.

There the minnow made his fatal mistake. He nibbled once, twice, at the flakes of bark – or skin, perhaps – and as he pulled at the pale shreds, he ignored the coming darkness below.

And so the pike struck. There was simply nothing between the point at which she began her surge and the point at which she stopped. The minnow was gone, engulfed, swallowed. And with it, the tip of a little finger, severed by the teeth of the pike.

Two

Even in my sleep I knew I was being watched. And because I knew someone was there, I was alert and tense and ready to spring as soon as my eyes were open. I must have been in the middle of some sort of horror dream, because I was kind of expecting zombies or vampires when I opened my eyes.

It was worse.

There was a black shape looming above me, dark against the light streaming in the window. The shape gave out a faint noise, like a hum or a moan.

"What the hell are you doing, Kenny?" I said.

Kenny was my brother. He was a year older than me, but his brain was starved of oxygen when he was getting born, so I had to look after him. There was a big drooling grin all over his face. The moaning sound was because he was trying his hardest to keep quiet, and that was the best he could do.

"You said I wasn't allowed to wake you up any more," he said, "so I was waiting."

"What time is it?" I said. It was the end of the summer holidays, and I was trying to make the most of the few lie-ins I had left before term started.

Kenny picked up the alarm clock. The ringer bit had been broken for years, but that didn't matter with Kenny around. He touched the glowing numbers on the clock, his face dark with effort.

"Seven o'clock. A.M.," he announced, and grinned again. "Fishing time!"

I'd promised Kenny I'd take him fishing, and Kenny never forgot a promise.

"OK, I'm up," I said. "But don't wake Dad."

"He's not home yet. He's on nights."

"OK, make a racket then."