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Opening extract from

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chapter 1

The rain drums on my head as I run. Freezing water drips off my hair and under my coat collar. As I reach my street, I see the house is still in darkness. All the other houses have lights on already.

My fingers don't work properly because they're too cold. I fumble for my keys while next door's cat winds himself round my legs.

I open the front door carefully, but he's too quick for me. He shoots down the hall and disappears into the dark of the kitchen at the back of the house. As I sling my rucksack down and flick the light on, I hear him hissing. He bolts back down the hall, hackles raised and tail fluffed

up, and runs outside. Cats are weird. Usually it takes me ages to get him out.

I shut the front door quickly and shiver. It must be warmer out in the street than it is in here. Surely the heating should have come on by now? I head straight upstairs to the bathroom, turning the shower on full blast so it's nice and hot by the time I've got my clothes off. The showers at the swimming pool are too small and cramped and there's only ever a trickle of lukewarm water. I want to get rid of the smell of chlorine.

I'm glad Mum's not here. It gives me the opportunity to stay in for ages, basking in the heat. She hates me wasting hot water. Serves her right. I don't like training after school every day, but she insists I keep going. She says the school think I've got real potential and could make the national team one day. Nice try, but I reckon it's just because she thinks it keeps me out of trouble when she's at work.

The doorbell rings while I'm yanking my clothes back on. I run down to answer the door with a towel still wrapped round my head.

"Okay, Danni?" Levi pushes past me into the hall, breathing out a cloud of condensation. He folds his umbrella and sticks it behind the door.

"It's bloody freezing in here. Can't you turn the heating on?"

Levi has the patience of a two year old.

"I was just going to. Give us a chance!"

He grins at me and goes straight into the front room to switch on the TV. I've known Levi since primary school, so he tends to act like he lives here. He's come round to watch an episode of a stupid kids' soap with me. Today's episode was filmed at our school last week, and Levi's convinced we're going to be in the background shots somewhere. I think he secretly dreams of stardom.

"Want something to eat?" I don't bother to wait for a reply. Levi never says no to food.

I unwind the towel from my head and shake my hair out before reaching out to switch the kitchen light on. As the fluorescent light flickers into life, I shove the towel in the washing machine. The kitchen smells different. I can't place it. A musty, damp smell. Something's not right in here and I try to figure out what it is. Everything's tidy as usual. Then I notice a puddle of water gleaming on the work surface near the boiler. It's at least as big as a dinner plate. I feel the hairs on the back of my neck rising.

I look up at the ceiling but can't see where it's come from. Hope the boiler's not leaking. I don't want to deal with it and Mum's not back yet. I push the boiler switch to override and the heating blasts into life with a reassuring *whoomph*. Strange. The water must have come from somewhere. I stick my finger in it to make sure it's water.

Levi shouts through from the front room.

"Danni? It's about to start. Hurry up. I need food to survive these arctic conditions."

"The heating's on now," I shout back. "Shut up moaning a minute."

Without thinking I put the wet finger in my mouth. Bleugh, it's salty. I spit it out in the sink immediately. That was stupid, it could be anything. Hope I haven't poisoned myself. Does bleach taste salty? I pour myself a mug of water and swill my mouth out just in case. Then I find a packet of biscuits and head back to the front room.

"When's your mum back?" Levi is stretched out on the sofa resting his trainers up on the arm.

"Dunno. I thought she went in early today, but she must be on a late shift."

I plonk myself down in the armchair next to him.

The show starts. We catch glimpses of some kids in our year and at one point I see Levi going past the science lab window.

"It's not me, dumb-ass. It could be anyone."

"Anyone your height, with cornrows exactly like yours."

In the end I have to admit you can't really tell from the top of someone's head, but I still think it's him.

At six Levi has to go.

"Better run, Mum'll have my tea ready."

"Lucky you. Looks like I'm cooking mine again."

"I'll come back afterwards if you're still on your own. We can watch a film."

"Great."

Truth is, Levi isn't coming back just because he wants to see me. He's got a little brother and a baby sister and his terraced house is no bigger than mine. I think it's quiet as a morgue round here, but he seems to like it.

I notice it's still raining as he heads off into the dark.

I close the door and call the supermarket where Mum works. I want to find out what time she's back and if she's bringing any food. If not, I'll get a pizza out of the freezer.

"Betterbuys Superstore, Hayley speaking. How can I help?"

"Hi, could I speak to Mrs Lancaster, please?"

"Mrs Lancaster? Oh, you mean Erin. Is that Danielle?"

"Danni. Yes it is."

I try to remember which one Hayley is. They all look the same to me.

"It's her day off today, Danielle, remember?"

Obviously I don't remember. Would I be phoning if I did?

"Oh, right. Silly me. Thanks, Hayley. Bye!"

Mum didn't tell me it was her day off, I'm sure of it. I call her mobile and hear her ringtone faintly. It's coming from upstairs in her bedroom.

Just for a second I imagine she might be unconscious,

dead even, lying on the floor upstairs the whole time we were watching TV. It's stupid but as I go upstairs, my heart's beating really fast.

Of course she's not there. I spot her phone flashing on the wooden chair next to her bed. The chair seat's covered in globs of water, like someone's knocked a glass over or something. I'm amazed her phone's still working. I pick it up and stare at the screen. It's flashing the missed call from me. I wipe the phone on my jeans and put it back down on her bed.

It feels empty up here, like something's missing. Mum's shoes are lined up on her shoe rack as usual and the stuff on her chest of drawers is all neatly arranged. I pick up her perfume and spray it towards the dressing table mirror. It smells of Mum getting dressed up to go out. The scent hangs in the still air and forms a slight mist on the glass. Crap. Now I wish I hadn't sprayed it and try to rub it off with my sleeve.

I stare at my reflection. My dark brown eyes look massive in this light and you can hardly see the whites. My hair has gone all straggly and looks like straw. Probably should have blow-dried it after my shower. I pull it back into a ponytail to see if it looks any better, but then I can't find a hairband. I let it fall back down. I'm hungry. Time to cook my pizza instead.

* * *

Levi and I watch a horror movie about sharks. There's no plot, but some of the special effects are gruesome. All the main characters get eaten, one by one. I really shouldn't watch films like this. I spend too much time training in the sea in summer.

At the end, Levi checks his watch. "Gotta go. Mum'll be on my case." He grins. "I told her you were helping me with school work."

"Levi, you're such a liar. What if she finds out?"

"She won't. I'll do it over half-term."

"Are you walking to school tomorrow?" I ask.

"Yeah – do you want to take Cheryl to nursery with me on the way?" Cheryl is Levi's baby sister. We often take her to nursery because his mum starts work really early.

"Maybe. Call me to check I'm awake."

When I've seen Levi out, I decide to clear up the mess I've made in the kitchen so Mum doesn't have a go at me later. She's been really snappy recently. I wish she'd taken her phone with her. As I shove my plate in the dishwasher, I glance at the water on the work surface under the boiler. At least the pool hasn't got bigger.

I try to remember if Mum said anything about going out tonight. I'm sure she didn't. It's not like her to stay out without letting me know. Usually when she's out she drives me crazy, phoning all the time to check I've eaten properly

and haven't burned the house down.

When I've finished in the kitchen, I head upstairs to bed.

I read for a while, then glance at my alarm clock again. It's eleven. Mum's never stayed out this late without ringing me. I wonder if she's got a date or something else she didn't want to talk about. She might at least have found a way to call.

I lie back on my pillows and stare at the ceiling. It's turquoise. When we painted it, I wanted the whole room this colour because it made me think of the sea, and I'd read in a magazine that turquoise was relaxing. Levi says it's lurid. He doesn't think much of my whale posters either. He says sleeping in here would give him nightmares about drowning.

Maybe the posters are a bit childish. I stuck them up a few years ago now, so it's probably time for a change. Perhaps I'll ask Mum if I can redecorate over half-term. I reach out and switch my bedside light off. Mum makes such a fuss about me getting enough sleep, she'll just get annoyed if she thinks I've waited up for her.

Midnight. Still can't sleep. I wonder if I should phone someone? Trouble is, I don't know who to call. Mum doesn't have that many friends and anyway, it's late. I rack

my brains trying to think of where she might have gone. I wish I'd paid more attention to her this morning, but it was so early. I'm sure she didn't say anything about going out.

I could call Dad, I suppose, but I can't face it right now. I haven't spoken to him for a while and he'll ask loads of questions. Just thinking about it makes me feel tired. Mum's bound to come back soon. I didn't hear her say it was her day off, so I guess she probably told me where she was going when I wasn't listening. I close my eyes and wait for sounds of her return in the darkness. At some point, I drift off.

Something is washed up by the waves, something big. It rolls over and over in the surf.

Looks like a body. It can't be…

Mum.

Bubbles pop around her half-open mouth. A tiny crab scuttles out.

I must have screamed myself awake. My throat feels completely dry. It's not even light yet. My heart's thumping and my T-shirt's damp with sweat. It's the most realistic nightmare I've had for years. As I gradually calm down, I feel the silence ringing in my ears. I'm still the only one in the house.

Something is wrong. Seriously wrong.