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Opening extract from

Lucky Star

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Please print off and read at your

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London SW1

Dear Mr Brown,

I know how mad you are with me right now, and you have every right to be, but I just wanted to say I am really, really sorry. I just didn't think that you'd get so upset about a little bit of paint, but I know better now, obviously.

I don't even know why I did it, except that I like graffiti art and I honestly thought that the wall by the gym could do with brightening up. I guess I was wrong about that. I know now that you prefer that wall to be grey, and that you really didn't like the stars and spirals and rainbows I sprayed all over it.

I admit that writing 'school is cancelled until

further notice' on the wall was not very clever, even though it seemed funny at the time. I'm sorry that some of the kids who saw it decided to use it as an excuse to go right on home. I am also sorry that my spelling wasn't too good, and I know that was what tipped you off that I was to blame. That and the paint on my fingers.

Well, I want you to know I have learnt my lesson. Dave (you remember Dave – my social worker) says I have messed up one time too many, and I need to wise up and make amends or else my school career will be down the pan.

If you like, I will come in to school and paint the whole lot out with grey emulsion paint, so the wall is back to being plain and dull and crumbly. I would have done that already, except for being excluded and everything. Mum says if you see me any time soon with a bucket of paint, you'll most likely call the police, and I guess she has a point.

Anyway, I have turned over a new leaf. I am not going to tag any more walls, unless they are very neglected and really need livening up, and only then if I get permission from the government or something. I am also going to work on my spelling, seriously. If you are wondering how come my spelling is so good in this letter, it's because I did it on Dave's computer and used the spell-check, as I know that stuff like that matters to you.

I know you said that my future at Green Vale Comprehensive is hanging in the balance, but I want you to know that your little talk the other day has really made me think. I didn't say much, but I was taking it all in, I swear. I will be a model pupil from now on. I hope that you will give me one more chance, and I promise never to spray-paint the school again, no matter what.

Yours faithfully,

Mouse (Martin) Kavanagh, Form 9b

Green Vale Comprehensive,
211 Peter Street,
Clapham
London SW1

Dear Martin Kavanagh,

I must inform you that the school has already gone to great trouble and expense to paint out the graffiti in question, so your offer to do so will not be necessary. I feel that you still fail to grasp the seriousness of your repeated acts of vandalism. If there are any further incidents of this kind, you are likely to be looking at an anti-social behaviour order, as well as a permanent exclusion.

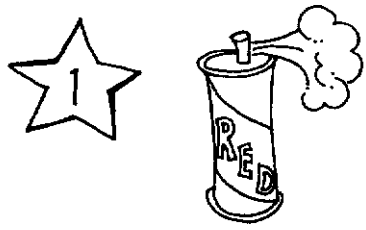
As things stand, you remain excluded until the October break. I hope to see a marked improvement

in your class work, attitude and behaviour once the new term begins.

Yours sincerely,

Mr T. Brown

Head teacher



'He's not a happy man,' Dave says, reading the letter from my head teacher.

'Never has been,' I shrug. 'He worries too much.'

Dave shoots me a dark look. 'At least they're letting you back into school,' he says. 'Your letter showed maturity, Mouse. You apologized, took responsibility for your actions. You realized you were wrong.'

I take a bite of Mars bar, and grin.

'Mouse?' Dave asks, carefully. 'You do know you were wrong, don't you?'

'C'mon, Dave!' I say. 'It was hardly the crime of the century, was it? It was a joke!'

'A joke?' he echoes. 'Mouse, your idea of a joke happens to be most people's idea of mindless vandalism!'

'Mindless? C'mon! That wall looked a whole lot better once I'd tagged it – they should have given me a grant for improving the environment or something.'

Dave clenches his teeth, as if he's in pain. He peers at me over the top of his trendy black specs with sorrowful green eyes. 'Mouse, don't you ever learn?' he asks. 'It wasn't easy to persuade Mr Brown to keep the police out of this. You don't need me to tell you what that would have meant . . . you already have a police record.'

'Not a bad one!' I argue. 'Just for tagging a bus stop!'

Dave shakes his head. 'I'm not kidding, Mouse – you can't pull any more stunts like this. Every time things start going well for you, you do something stupid and mess it all up. I'm beginning to think it's a cry for help!'

I just about choke on my Mars bar. 'A cry for help? Are you serious?'

Social workers always think there's a deep, dark reason lurking behind everything you do – some buried trauma that only a psychologist can dig out of you. Bite your nails? You obviously had a deprived childhood. Wear your fringe too long? Must be hiding something. Don't like carrots? Man, you're just about ready for the nut house.

Dave sits back on his trendy black swivel chair, smoothing down his Nirvana T-shirt and crossing his legs in ancient, faded bootleg jeans. He thinks this kind of stuff makes him look cool, friendly, accessible. I think it makes him look like a sad old loser.

'It wasn't a cry for help,' I say. 'It was art!'

'Hmphh,' he says. 'Well. The next time you're feeling arty, buy yourself a sketchbook.'

I laugh out loud. The things I want to say just won't fit between the pages of a sketchbook – they need to be painted six feet tall, by moonlight, with your heart beating fast and your mouth dry with fear.

'Why, Mouse?' Dave asks, giving me this full-on, sad-eyed stare. 'I just don't understand why.'

Dave has this whole range of disappointed, guilt-trip looks he likes to wind me up with, but I refuse to feel bad. I paint on walls because it makes me feel good. That's as much as I'm going to admit – to anyone.

I'm not about to go digging around in the past for a bunch of deep, dark reasons for why I'm not perfect. It's just not up for discussion – all the bad memories are packed away in boxes I'll never need to open again. Start looking at all that and I'd unravel faster than a sweater with a hole in. Seriously – it's just not happening.

Dave shakes his head. 'Out of here, Mouse,' he says. 'Time's up, and we're getting nowhere. At least the school have agreed to take you back after the October break – I suggest you use this time off to reflect. You need to make some changes – and fast.'

I stand up, shrug on my zip-up hoodie.

'Thanks for your support and understanding,' I say brightly. 'It means a lot.'

Dave rakes a hand through his hair, exasperated. 'I'm on your side, Mouse,' he says heavily. 'If I get hacked off with you sometimes . . . well, it's because I care.'

That's a laugh. Dave may act like my favourite cheesy uncle, but he's not. He is a social worker – my own personal social worker. It's his job to look out for me, to keep me out of trouble, even though he is clearly not too good at it. He is paid to care.

The way I see it, that just doesn't count.

I scuff my way out of the office, leaving Dave with his head in his hands. Out in the waiting room, a girl looks up from her magazine as I emerge, a pretty, mixed-race girl with honey-coloured skin and slanting eyes. She smiles at me, a long, lazy smile.

'He is not in a good mood,' I tell her, by way of a warning.

'Is he ever?'

She unfolds her long, tawny legs and stands up slowly, like some kind of schoolgirl supermodel. She's in uniform, one of those posh-school jobs, but she looks cool – she's the kind of girl who could probably look cool wearing a potato sack. Her black beret sits rakishly above a mass of golden-brown hair that falls in corkscrew curls to her shoulders.

She looks exotic, somehow, a world apart from the girls at Green Vale Comp, who chew gum with their mouths open and wear their trousers slung low and their heels slung high. This girl is wearing a little green pleated skirt, knee-length grey socks and flat shoes. You wouldn't think that could be cute, but I'm telling you, it can.

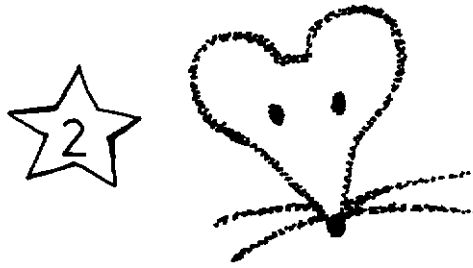
'Wish me luck,' she says, throwing me a wink as she disappears into Dave's office.

'Good luck,' I say, even though I haven't believed in luck since my dad left, back when I was seven years old. For her, maybe, I'd reconsider.

I've seen all sorts of kids in the waiting room outside Dave's office over the years, kids who look lost, kids who look lonely, kids who look rough, tough, bad, sad, mad. I've never seen one like her before, though, a girl who looks like she could wrap the world round her little finger, then put it in her pocket for later. I can't help wondering what her story is – how come she's washed up here, in the Clapham Youth Outreach Unit, with dodgy Dave as her official guardian angel?

One thing's for sure – nobody ever had an appointment to see Dave because their life was going great. Kind of tragic, really.





I've discovered that the best way to tag a wall and get away with it is to look calm, cool and totally relaxed, like you have every right in the world to have a spray can in your hand and a piece of brand-new graffiti art in front of you. Often, people will give you a puzzled look, like you can't really be serious, but mostly they will carry on walking. In London, people don't go looking for trouble.

Even so, I don't often have the bottle to make a hit in broad daylight. It's five, and the street is busy, but Dave kind of got to me a little bit and I want to have the last word. The last picture, even.

I sit down on the steps of the Clapham Youth Outreach Centre, rooting around in my bag for some paint. I mean, you have to be prepared, don't you? In case of emergencies.

I watch the people go by for a minute or two, shoppers and workers and schoolkids, and then I turn to face the dull brown doorway behind me, shake the can and start to spray.

It's an old red can and it leaks a little on to my fingers, but that's OK. I'm not trying to hide anything. It doesn't take more than a minute. A fuzzy little heart shape, two dots for eyes and round, cartoon ears. A nose and whiskers. A mouse – my mark.

Nobody stops me, nobody shouts at me, nobody reports me to the police. I put the lid on my spray can, stand up and stroll along to the chippy on Clapham High Street, smiling.

There is nothing quite as good as hot chips drenched in salt and vinegar and tomato ketchup, especially eaten straight from the paper with paint-stained fingers. I'm halfway along the street and halfway through my chips when a small, scruffy, skinny dog appears at my heels. He trots alongside, looking up at me with liquid brown eyes. He's a grubby white colour with a black patch over one eye, like a small pirate, with a filthy red neckerchief tied round his neck in place of a collar. He's after my chips.

'Hey, pal,' I say, offering the dog one perfect, golden chip. He leaps up and takes it from my fingers, fast and graceful, and I swear I can see him grinning.

I like dogs. I used to have one, once – well, she wasn't mine, exactly, but still. Long time ago now. This dog is smaller, smoother and much, much

dirtier. He looks like he hasn't eaten in a week, so I feed him chip after chip as we walk along the pavement together. Then all the chips are finished, and the dog's grin slips. He looks desolate.

'No more,' I explain, scrunching the greasy paper into a ball and chucking it at the nearest bin. I miss. The scrunched-up chip paper lands in the gutter, and a gust of wind steers it out into the road. Like a flash, the dog is after it, ducking between a couple of slow-moving cars.

'No!' I shout. 'Come back! Here, boy!'

Time slows down, the way it sometimes does in dreams or on TV. The dog is in the middle of the road. A motorcyclist brakes and swerves to avoid him. My heart thumps, and I stick my fingers in my mouth and whistle, the way my dad taught me once, a long, ear-splitting call, surprisingly loud.

A girl passing by on a bicycle turns to look at me, her hair flying out behind her in golden-brown corkscrew curls. She's the cool girl, the cute girl, from Dave's office. Her startled eyes are green and slanted, like a cat.

The next second she lands in a heap on the pavement in front of me, the bike beneath her. Spreadeagled on the flagstones, under the spinning bicycle wheel, is the small white dog with the pirate patch.

'Omigod, omigod, I didn't see it!' the girl is wailing. 'It just ran right out in front of me . . .'

She drags the bike to one side, and I drop to my knees beside the little pirate dog. He takes a shallow, gasping breath like he's just hanging on by a thread, then his eyes flutter closed and he lies absolutely still.

I think I've killed him.

Some days have disaster printed all over them, right from the start – quite a few of my days, actually. This one, though, is an all-time low. I reach out and touch the dirty, matted fur of the little pirate dog. My fingers are stained with red paint from the spray can, which makes me look like a murderer.

Beneath my palm I feel the faint quiver of a heartbeat. The dog gives a dramatic sigh and his eyes flutter open. I take a deep breath in, weak with relief.

'I am so, soooooooo sorry!' the bicycle girl is saying. 'You just totally spooked me with that whistle. I took my eyes off the road for, like, one millisecond, and the next thing . . .' A fat, salty tear slides down her cheek.

'S'OK,' I tell her. 'Don't cry. He's alive, see?'

Her misty green eyes connect with mine for a moment. She looks younger now, less confident,

wiping her eyes on the back of a blazer sleeve and smudging her eyeliner.

A small crowd has gathered around us. We are blocking the pavement, a fallen bike, a green-eyed girl, a dog at death's door and me.

People lean in around us, helping the girl to her feet, checking the bike over. 'All right, love?' a woman with a pushchair asks the girl. 'Not hurt, are you?'

'I'm fine,' the girl says shakily. 'But the little dog . . .'

'A stray, by the look of him,' says the pushchair woman.

'Best phone the council,' someone else suggests. 'They'll take him away, put him out of his misery . . .'

'Out of his misery?' the bicycle girl splutters. 'You can't!'

They can, though. They're people in a hurry, on their way back from bigshot city jobs or busy shopping trips, home to their perfect little families. They don't have time for this. I keep my palm flat against the warm, dirty-white fur of the little pirate dog, just above his heart. It keeps on beating.

'He's not a stray, OK?' I say, calmly but clearly. 'He's mine. So if you all just want to push off . . .'

'Well!' The crowd around us take a tiny step back. One by one, they edge off along the street,

muttering about ungrateful kids and dangerous, flea-bitten mongrels.

We've been abandoned.

The girl looks furious. 'What's wrong with people?' she howls. 'Don't they care?'

'Not especially.' I take off my hoodie, wrap the injured dog in it and stand up carefully, holding the bundle close. 'So what? I don't need them.' I stride off along the pavement, and the girl grabs her bike and follows, weaving in and out of the passing shoppers.

Great. A posh girl in a scary school uniform, trailing along behind me.

I look down at the face of the little pirate dog, pressed flat against my chest. His eyes are closed again, his grin fixed and rigid. His heartbeat is steady beneath my palm, but still, I walk a little faster.

'Where are you going, anyway?' the girl asks. 'If you're looking for the nearest vet, you've missed the turning. It was just back there.'

I stop abruptly, frowning. She's right – I have no idea where I'm going. 'OK. Sorry.' I try for a smile. 'Show me. Please?'

The girl wheels round and turns down to the left, and I follow.

'Is he really your dog?' she wants to know. 'I thought he was a stray too.'

I sigh. 'He's mine now, anyhow. Someone has to look out for him.'

'He might be lost, though,' she points out. 'Someone could be looking for him right now, wondering if he's OK.'

I hold the dog tighter. I don't think there's anyone out there worrying about him, somehow. He's small and skinny and sad, like a ghost-dog. He looks like he lives on the streets, getting by on his wits, chasing chip papers, stealing scraps. He doesn't look loved.

'What're you gonna call him?' the girl wants to know. 'He needs a name.'

'I'll think of one,' I say.

'How about Chip?' she offers. 'Or Patch, or Scruff? Hey, I don't even know your name, do I? Mine's Cat.'

'You're kidding, right?' I say.

'No – Cat, short for Catrin, but only my parents call me that. Cat is better.'

I laugh out loud.

'It's not that bad!' she says, huffily. 'What's yours, anyway?'

'It's . . . well, it's a nickname, really, but everybody calls me it, ever since I was little. It's . . .'

'Yeah?'

'Mouse.'

Laughter explodes from her soft, pink mouth like

the fizz from a can of Coke. 'Mouse?' she snorts. 'Mouse?'

I crack a grin. 'Well, it says Martin on my birth certificate, but no one ever, ever calls me that,' I say. 'Except my teachers and stuff, when they're trying to be snotty.'

'So why Mouse?' she wants to know.

I shrug. 'Mum says it's because I was small and quick and quiet. Or maybe because I have mousy hair and a serious addiction to cheese and chocolate. Either way, I've been stuck with it all my life.'

'Cat and Mouse,' she says, grinning. 'That's cool!'

