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Opening extract from

Malice

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MIDLANDS

Sixes and Lights

1

"I have to show you something."

The trees outside the window hissed and rustled in the warm August night. Leaves and twigs skittered across the paved yard, chasing the wind. A three-quarter moon glowed bright through gaps in the blanket of cloud that hung over the Midlands.

Heather was standing at the window of Luke's bedroom, looking down. In the yard, a black tomcat sat perfectly still, looking back at her.

She turned away from the window. It was a typical boy's room, just like her brother's. Plain, cream-white walls, a few dog-eared posters of bands she didn't care about, crumpled clothes strewn over various surfaces. Luke was digging through a drawer, searching for whatever it was he wanted to show her. She watched him while his back was turned. Skinny, red-haired, popular at school. Everyone liked him, but he'd been her friend first. They'd played together since they were five.

Downstairs, all was quiet. His mum was out tonight. They had the house to themselves, so he'd invited her over. He had a secret, and Heather loved secrets.

He shut the drawer and sprang on to the bed, freckled face alive with excitement. He had something hidden in his arms.

"Come here," he said, patting the bed. She scrunched up to him excitedly, crowding in to see what it was.

Then he showed her what he'd taken from the drawer, the secret he wanted to share, and she felt herself go cold.

She took it from him and stared at it. It was a flat rectangle of black wax paper. On the front was an elaborate emblem in red. Six points, arranged in two V-shapes, one on top of the other. The points were joined to form an M, and surrounded by a hexagon.

It was still sealed, but she knew what was inside. She'd heard about Malice.

"Where did you get it?" she asked him.

He nudged her with his shoulder. "Don't worry about that. Open it."

She glanced at him uncertainly, then at the comic in her hand. She was suddenly aware of how the silence had deepened in the house. Like the building was holding its breath. Even the wind outside had died.

She handed it back to him, a little too quickly. "You open it."

Luke gave her a strange look and shrugged. "Okay. *I'll* open it."

He carefully unsealed the wax paper sleeve and slid out the comic. Heather looked away.

"What's wrong?"

She didn't reply. How could she tell him, without sounding stupid? She had no words for the creeping unease that was making its way up her spine.

"You want to read it together?" he asked.

She nodded. There was nothing else she could do. She didn't want to admit that she was afraid; not to him, anyway. There wasn't anything to be scared of, no matter what the rumours said. After all, it was just panels and pictures, ink and paper.

The first tale was about a girl caught in a labyrinth of glass and wire. She was trying to find her way into the centre, where there was some kind of prize waiting for her, but the wire kept twisting around and trying to entangle her, and the walls shifted continually. A mannequin made of sharp bits of metal was limping after her through the maze, leaving a trail of oil behind it. It was catching up to her fast.

Luke looked at Heather to check she'd finished the page, then turned over to the next. She did her best to keep reading, but each panel was worse than the last. The horror mounted until she couldn't bear it any more. It was the girl's eyes that scared her the most. There was real fear in those eyes. She was running for her life.

Heather looked away. "I don't like it," she said quietly.

"Why not?"

She couldn't explain. She knew she was being ridiculous, but she didn't care. "I don't want to read any more."

Luke shut the comic and put it aside, a grin of amazement spreading across his face. "You believe it, don't you? You actually believe those stories!"

She got up and stalked to the window. Arms crossed, she stared furiously down into the yard. She hated being made fun of. He was such a boy. Couldn't he see she didn't want to read some dumb comic!

The black tomcat was still sitting in the same spot, staring up at her.

"Hey, come on!" said Luke, springing off the bed. She turned around to face him, but she wouldn't meet his eyes. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"I wasn't scared," she murmured, but she was going bright red and she knew it. She always blushed when she lied.

"Those kids in the comic, they're not real kids," Luke said. "It's just a rumour. They say the artist looks in the Missing Persons sections of the papers and he uses those kids as models for the characters in the story." He made a face. "It's pretty sick, I suppose."

"Can't they arrest someone for that?" Heather asked.

"Probably, if they could find him," Luke replied. He scratched the back of his neck awkwardly; then his eyes lit up. "I'll prove it to you!"

"Prove what?" she asked, but he was already hurrying over to the wardrobe. He took out a small plastic carrier bag and a stone bowl, then sat down cross-legged on the floor. He put the bowl down and waved at her to sit opposite.

She did so. Something was sinking in her stomach. She should put a stop to this now. She should just walk out and leave him to it.

You're being a child, she told herself. *Malice, Tall Jake . . . it's all just a story.*

She made herself sit still and tried to keep the discomfort off her face as Luke shook out the contents of the plastic bag. She even managed a weak smile when he looked up at her, eagerly, as if seeking her approval.

One by one, he put the ingredients into the bowl. Preparing the ritual. They both knew how to do it. A lot of kids knew how to do it, even if few of them ever dared.

First, a black feather. Second, a twig. Third, a knot of cat fur.

"I got the first two from the woods," he said. "The third, well, I've got an aunt with cats. Ten minutes in her living room and you'll have an inch-thick layer of fur settle on you. You can only take fur that's been shed or that's come off naturally. That's the rules."

The fourth ingredient was the tear. He offered no explanation for that one, but he brought out an old plastic camera-film case and tipped it over the bowl. A single drop fell out and soaked into the cat fur.

Next he brought out the nail scissors, tipped his head to one side and cut off a small piece of his hair. He scattered it into the bowl, and held out the scissors to her. She shook her head quickly. A fleeting disappointment showed in his eyes, but he didn't push the matter.

"And the sixth ingredient," he said, holding up a cigarette lighter. "Fire."

"You think it's a smart idea to light a fire in your bedroom?" she asked, hoping he might reconsider. But he just gave her a look. *Stop being a wimp.*

He held the flame to the small cluster of ingredients in the bowl. The cat fluff ignited, becoming a small burning wad in which sat the twig, the feather and Luke's red hair. Heather turned her head away and coughed at the reek.

"Tall Jake, take me away!" he said. He glanced over at Heather with a sly grin. "Tall Jake, take me away! Tall Jake, take me away!"

"Stop it," Heather murmured.

"Tall Jake, take me away! Tall Jake, take me away!"

"*Stop it!*" she yelled.

"You have to say it six times, Heather, before the fire burns out."

"Don't."

"It's not real! I'm just trying to prove it to you!" He was getting annoyed now.

"I don't want to know! And I don't want to hear

anything else about that comic!"

He stared at her. Then he said, very deliberately: "Tall Jake, take me away."

Heather sucked in her breath. Something terrible was going to happen; she just *knew* it. A fierce gust of wind rattled the window and sent the trees into a frenzy. She surged to her feet and looked out, as if she could catch sight of whatever was coming. The cat had disappeared from the yard.

The seconds scraped by. Heather was tensed, waiting, waiting.

But everything remained as it was. The terrible thing didn't happen.

"See?" Luke said. He stood up. The tiny blaze in the bowl had gone out. "I just wanted to show you. There's nothing to be scared of."

Heather let her breath out slowly. She couldn't help a nervous giggle of relief. He giggled with her, and she realized that he was relieved too.

"You believed it!" she said. "After everything you said, you believed it!"

He grinned. "Well, maybe. A bit. Pretty exciting, though, huh?"

She swatted him across the chest. "I nearly died, you idiot!" she laughed.

But then . . .

. . . the lights went out.

2

Moonlight seeped through the window, painting everything in ghostly blue and white. The warmth had drained from the room. The bed, the wardrobe, the crumpled clothes were drenched in shadow.

Luke shoved his hands into his pockets. "Well," he said. "I think we can call that bad timing." But the joke came out weak. If this sudden darkness was a coincidence, it was a little *too* coincidental.

"I told you! I told you not to do it!"

"Hey," he said. "It's just a fuse." He stood there a moment; then, realizing what was expected of a boy in a situation like this, he reluctantly added: "I'll go down to the cellar and trip the switch."

Heather shook her head frantically. "He gets you when you're alone."

"What?"

"Tall Jake. He comes when you're alone. That's what they say."

He gave her a steady stare. "It's just a fuse," he said again. Because he didn't dare think what else it might be.

She went quiet.

Luke went to the door of the bedroom, put his hand on the doorknob, hesitated.

Don't go out there. Stay here where it's safe.

No. He couldn't chicken out in front of Heather. It had

been a long time since he'd been afraid of the dark.

But it wasn't the dark he was afraid of. It was the sense that he'd done something awful, and now he couldn't take it back.

"I'll just be a minute," he said.

His bedroom door opened out on to a landing with a banister that overlooked the lounge. He pulled the door shut. The silence smothered him. Through a skylight in the ceiling, he could see the clouds racing across the face of the moon.

It's just a power surge. You'll go trip the switch in the fusebox and everything will be okay.

Slowly, carefully, he walked along the landing towards the stairs, his hand trailing on the banister. The air tasted strange. Tinny and sour. Maybe there was a storm on the way.

Down in the lounge, something muttered.

He froze. Listened hard to the silence. A gust of wind whistled across the roof and shook the skylight.

Nothing. Imagination.

He crept to the top of the stairs, looking down into the lounge. The furniture sat quietly in the sharp moonlight. Beyond, at the edges of the room, there was only empty, aching darkness. He would have to cross that room to get to the kitchen and the cellar door. Suddenly, it seemed a long way.

Just get it over with, he told himself. He steeled himself and then hurried down the stairs before he could change his mind.

There was a faint skittering noise from the landing, the sound of tiny clicking claws, like rats. He looked up in alarm, in time to see something small dart across the gap at the top of the stairs. His heart jumped painfully in his chest.

What was that?

It had been too quick for him to be certain he'd seen anything. It could have been a trick of the moon-shadow. But the sound . . . he was *sure* he'd heard a sound.

He thought of Heather, still up there in his room. He thought of how it would look if he just turned around and went back right now.

No. He wasn't going back. He might be scared, but he wasn't going back.

He stepped out into the lounge and walked boldly across it. Once he'd started, he had to keep going. His nerves crackled: he knew that something was going to pounce on him at any moment. He went past the TV, past the sofa, towards the doorway that led into the kitchen. The attack could come from anywhere. . .

But it didn't. He reached the doorway, safe and well.

The kitchen was long and thin, with a counter running along the right side. A door at the end stood open, leading to a utility room where they kept the washing machine. Luke felt his confidence grow a little. There was no place to hide here, no corners where something might lurk.

He heard the slow creak of a door opening elsewhere in the house.

There was no mistake this time. He'd heard *that* for sure. He was breathing heavily now, trembling a little. The metallic taste in his mouth was stronger. It felt as if there was electricity in the air.

Then he realized: Heather! Of course, it was only Heather, who'd got bored or frightened and had wandered out of his room.

But it sounded like it came from downstairs...

The lights. He needed to get the lights on. He couldn't bear the dark any more.

He hurried through the kitchen and into the utility room. It was cluttered with junk: boxes of screws, bits of tubing, Dad's old tools that he left behind when he went off to live with Diane. The washing machine, half-full, sat beside the door to the cellar. The key was in the lock. The fusebox was just inside the door. He could reach in; he wouldn't even need to go down the stairs into the blackness.

Then he saw the torch. Dad's torch, sitting on his tool shelf. He snatched it up, turned it on. Light! Cold electric light pushed back the heavy dark. He shone it around to be sure that nothing was in the room with him, then reached for the door to the cellar.

There was a long, crooning mewl from the other side.

Luke's blood turned to ice. He stopped, his hand on the key.

There was something in the cellar. It began to scratch at the door. Claws on wood, scraping, scraping.

Luke stepped back in horror, shaking his head. "I didn't

mean it," he whispered. "I didn't want you to take me away. It was just a game."

Something thumped on the upstairs landing. The scratching stopped, and there was another piteous mewl from behind the door.

Suddenly Luke realized what that sound was, and he began to laugh nervously. If he hadn't been so scared he would have identified it straight away.

It was a cat. There was a cat trapped in the cellar. He reached for the key and turned it.

The long mewl stretched, deepened, and became a horrible, rasping cackle.

Luke cried out and leaped back from the door as it began to swing open. His torch illuminated the gap in the door for the briefest instant, and through it he saw a dreadful hint of something that was all horn and bone and fang.

A blast of light dazzled him, and Luke screamed. The door swung open . . .

. . . but there was nothing there.

He stared at the doorway to the cellar. No monster waited for him, only steps leading down into the musty dark. The lights had come on throughout the house, dispelling the terror, and a key was rattling in the front door. It opened with a noisy clatter, and then there was the familiar bustle of his mum returning from her night out.

"Luke! I'm home!"

Life on a Cliff

1

"Don't let go! Don't you let go!"

Letting go was the last thing on Seth's mind, but his fingers were burning, his hands were claws of pain, and he couldn't hold on much longer. A bead of cold sweat was trickling down his spine, beneath his thin T-shirt. He looked down at the rocks fifteen feet below him and tried not to think how it would feel when he landed on them.

Nononodon'tletmefall!

Kady was at the top of the cliff, her face a picture of horror framed between loose blonde pigtails. Beneath her, the rock sloped gently down a short way, ending suddenly in a sheer drop. Seth was hanging there, arms splayed, toes scrabbling for a hold, grip weakening with every moment that passed.

"I'm throwing you a rope! Just don't let go!" Kady yelled at him, then disappeared from view. He was too heavy for her to pull up; she was searching for somewhere to affix the

cam, a spring-loaded device that gripped cracks in the rock to provide a secure anchor for the rope.

Kady was a keen climber, and her dad had supplied her with all the equipment she needed. She'd come laden with ropes, carabiners, cams, harness, climbing shoes, belay gloves, and a half-dozen other little devices that Seth didn't have a name for. The first chance they had, they'd ditched her parents and gone hunting for something to use them on.

Except Seth *didn't* use them. He'd insisted on free-climbing the cliff without any safety gear at all. It hadn't really seemed all that high.

The strength was ebbing from his arms and back. He struggled blindly for purchase with his feet, scraping at the stone with his trainers. His palms were stinging and raw from dragging down the slope when he fell. He wanted to adjust his grip, but he didn't dare.

I can't hold on, he thought. *I can't hold on.*

"There's nowhere to fix it!" he heard Kady shout from above, her long California vowels floating away over the sunny Derbyshire hills. She was starting to panic. "Seth? Seth?" She appeared again, looking down at him. "There isn't anywhere to fix it!"

"Well, don't tell *me*!" he cried, voice high with desperation. "Find somewhere!"

She dithered for a few more seconds before disappearing again. He could hear her scrabbling around, searching for a suitable place to wedge the cam.

Wait . . . what was that he felt? He pressed down with his toe. A lump of stone, just enough to provide grip. He adjusted his foot. A solid hold.

His arms were trembling uncontrollably. His fingers were going numb. One thing was certain: whatever help Kady could give him, it would come too late.

He gritted his teeth. One chance. One try. He hoped he had the strength for it.

He bent his knee and launched off from the foothold, propelling himself up and forward. Throwing his arms out, he reached for a fold in the rock further up the slope – and somehow, his fingertips caught and held it. He pulled with the last of his energy. One knee came up enough to get over the cliff edge, and with a last lunge he flung himself flat against the slope.

He lay there, his cheek against the warm rock, while his heart slowed and the circulation came back to his fingers. After a few moments, he began to laugh with sheer relief. He wasn't going to fall. His hands burned and everything ached, but he felt great.

A short while later, he heard the thump and slither of a rope next to him.

"Just in time," he said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"What did I say when we started this climb?" Kady called. "Always use your safety gear!"

"Then where would be the fun?" he replied.

Kady started to laugh with him as he grabbed on to the rope. "Get up here, you idiot!"

2

They lay on their backs on the great slab of stone and watched the clouds glide sleepily through the burning blue sky. All around them, the folds of the Peak District dipped and rose, its solemn green ridges broken by outcroppings of ancient rock like the one they'd just conquered. England was being hammered by an early August heatwave, a surprise window of perfect weather in an otherwise typical British summer. School was still far enough away to be an empty threat, and the days were theirs for the taking.

"Don't you wish it could always be like that?" Seth asked.

"Like what?"

"Like you're about to fall off a cliff."

Kady made a quizzical noise.

"I'm serious," he said. "I mean, want to end up like your parents? Going to work, coming home, watching TV till you go to bed? Where's the fun in that?"

"That's *your* parents, not mine," she replied.

Seth didn't say anything else. After a moment, Kady raised herself on her elbows and looked at him strangely. He was staring up at nothing, face grim. Loose black hair hung untidily over his forehead and ears. His fringe blew restlessly in the faint breeze.

"Does it really bother you?" she asked. He shrugged,

which was as good as a yes. She nudged him with her foot. "There's no law says you have to turn into your parents. Don't worry about it, huh?"

She lay back down, pillowing her head with her hands, soaking up the heat. It was a different kind of sun here than back in California. Her childhood had been spent running on beaches, splashing in the Pacific. Every day was glorious, the skies were clear, and even in winter it was never truly cold. In England, the sun was rare, more precious because there was never enough of it, and the winters were long and dreary.

At times like this, if she shut her eyes, she could almost imagine she was home.

"What's up with Luke?" she asked, to change the subject.

"He went down to London to see his dad on the weekend," Seth said. "Maybe it didn't go so well."

"He's been weird all day. Wandering off on his own and stuff. It's not like him."

"I'll talk to him."

"Hey, about what just happened: don't mention it to my parents, alright? I don't need another safety lecture."

"Parents," Seth murmured. "When are they gonna realize that we know what we're doing?"

"Seth, not ten minutes ago you almost fell off a cliff."

Seth grinned. "The key word is *almost*."