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opening extract from

The Thornthwaite Inheritance

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THE TRUCE

Lorelli and Ovid Thornthwaite had been trying to kill each other for so long that neither twin could remember which act of attempted murder came first. Was it Lorelli's cunning scheme to put on a play about the French Revolution, casting Ovid in the role of an aristocrat to be executed using a working guillotine? Or could it have been that long hot summer when Ovid managed to produce an ice lolly containing a small but deadly explosive, triggered by the surrounding ice reaching melting point?

Whoever had struck first, trying to take each other's life was now simply something the Thornthwaite twins did, in the same way that other brothers and sisters might play together, enjoy watching cartoons or squabble over the remote control. Except that compared to playing, watching cartoons or squabbling, trying to kill your twin is much harder work, not to mention illegal, which was why on their

thirteenth birthday, having clocked up over two hundred murder attempts between them, Ovid suggested they call a truce.

'I no longer want to kill you,' he announced, his bottle-green eyes meeting his sister's across the table. Two slices of birthday cake sat in front of them. Neither had been touched.

'I have never wanted to kill you,' replied Lorelli, 'I have only ever acted out of self-defence.'

Ovid smiled. 'Whereas self-preservation has always been my motivation,' he said, 'and, as you were the last one to attack, I propose we call it quits.'

'I wasn't the last one to attack,' stated Lorelli, pushing her straight black hair from her face.

'What about the flesh-eating piranha in my bath?'

'That was on Sunday. You booby-trapped my bed on Monday.'

'I'd been working on that for months. I couldn't let all that planning go to waste.' Ovid remembered with pride how he had set up a device in his sister's bedroom that was designed to fling the first thing to sit on the bed out of the window. Lorelli's bedroom was at the top of the central spire of Thornthwaite Manor.

'Poor Cowell had the fright of her life,' said Lorelli.

Ovid had forgotten that the cat liked to jump on her bed for a snooze sometimes.

'Cats have nine lives,' he said. 'We only have one. It

doesn't matter who started it if we both agree to stop now.'

Lorelli eyed him suspiciously. She didn't trust her brother for one second. He had tried this tactic before, waiting for her to lower her guard before unleashing the next lethal scheme.

'I mean it this time,' he said, wearing an expression of deepest sincerity.

'OK,' she said finally, deciding she would go along with the ceasefire while remaining sensibly cautious. 'Truce.'

'Truce,' repeated her brother, grinning.

They leant forward and shook on it before sealing the deal with two slices of birthday cake, which they switched fourteen times before eating, ensuring that neither piece had been tampered with.