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opening extract from

When I Was Joe

written by

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published by

Frances Lincoln Children's Books

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CHAPTER 1
Statement

It's one thing watching someone get killed. It's quite another talking about it. When it happened I didn't even realise exactly what I was seeing, and my heart was thumping so loud I couldn't hear anything else. My mind was whizzing around at hyperdrive speed – trying to work out what to do, trying to sort out what was going on. And I ran away as fast as I could.

But now I'm sitting in the police station telling three officers what happened and they're asking so many questions about every detail that it's as if they've put the whole thing into slow-mo. It's like being trapped watching a really sick horror film and not being able to close your eyes. And I can't run away this time.

Twice – when I tell them how the blood splashed into the mud, and then about the tangle of bodies on the ground – I think I'm going to vomit, and Nicki – that's my mum – has to ask them to stop their tape while I lean forward and try and gulp it back.

She puts her hand on my back and uses her best

lawyer-in-training voice: 'Is this really necessary? He's here to help you. He's just a kid of fourteen.' And the main guy asking questions says, 'So was the boy who died, Miss Lewis.' They get me a glass of water and then they start again. I'm wondering if they'll ever let me leave.

They make me look at loads of photographs. Some are just faces and it's easy to pick out the ones I've told them about. Some are close-ups of the cuts and wounds that I've already seen. But they look different in pictures than they did at the park yesterday – was it only yesterday?

At the park it was nearly dark, and I got a quick glimpse, and looked away. Now they make me look and look at the way the flesh is split and curved and meat-like, and it's been photographed in bright white light and I know I'm never going to forget it. I think they're trying to shock me into confessing something. They warn me that I might get charged, tell me that I can stay silent. Nicki says again, 'Is this really necessary? He's here to help you.'

The police officers change around, but one guy always stays there. He's called Detective Inspector Morris and he's the only one that's black and he's older than the rest. He's quiet, hardly says anything and leaves it to the others to ask me again and again, louder and louder: was I involved? Was I fighting? Did I know what was going to

happen? How near was I when the knife went in? Was I the lookout?

No, I say, keeping my voice steady. No, not very close, no. I was just watching, not involved, just a witness. All the time, every question they ask, I'm trying to focus. I'm trying to think only about those boys fighting – who pushed, who hit, which knife went where.

After hours of questions, after taking my fingerprints and scraping my mouth – 'for DNA' – they leave Nicki and me alone. She's looking completely knackered, her eyes are puffy and I feel incredibly guilty that she has to sit through all this. 'I'm really sorry Nic,' I say, and she says, 'Don't worry about me, you're doing the right thing.' But she doesn't look very sure.

Then one of the policemen shows us the canteen. 'I'll bet you're hungry,' he says, but when we get there the hatches are closed and we have to make do with what's in the vending machines. So my supper is hot chocolate and crisps and stale custard creams. It's about midnight. Eventually I fall asleep, head cushioned on my crossed arms, slumped forward over the table.

When I wake up, DI Morris is sitting at the table, talking to Nicki. I keep my head down while I listen to see if they are saying anything interesting.

'We're satisfied with his story,' says DI Morris.

Nicki asks, 'Can I take him home now? He's got school in the morning.'

'We're going to have to think very carefully about whether you can go home,' he says. 'It may be safer for you not to.'

She frowns at him: 'What do you mean? We can't stay here.'

'We'll take care of you,' he says. 'Ty's named some dangerous people in his statement and we don't want them trying to silence him.'

I sit up, shivering and blinking in the fluorescent light of the canteen. 'Where would we go?' I ask. I'm hoping that wherever it is it won't involve crossing London to get to school for 8.30 a.m., although it would be typical of my mum to make me go. She's bonkers about my education.

'We'll take you to a hotel, and assess the situation,' he says. 'It may be necessary to take you into our witness protection programme.'

'What do you mean. . . What's that?' asks Nicki. I'm thinking that I don't like that word protection. It brings back bad memories.

'We rehouse vulnerable witnesses; give them a new identity, a new home, a lump sum to start a new life. We'll do our utmost to keep you safe.'

'No way,' she says. 'Absolutely not. I'm sure that won't be necessary.'

'Well, maybe we should just take you to a hotel for a few days and see how things go,' he says, finishing

his tea and getting up. He reaches out and shakes our hands. 'Good to meet you, Ty,' he says to me. 'We very much appreciate your co-operation.'

Next they bring me my statement all written out. I don't want to read it. I don't want to think about what did and didn't happen in that park. But they make me read every word and initial all the pages and sign it at the bottom.

A uniformed policeman drives us back to our flat through dark and empty streets in an unmarked police car. 'You've got half an hour to pack some bags,' he says. 'You'd better pack carefully because you may not be able to come back again.' Nicki starts protesting that we're only going to a hotel for a few days but I look at his face and I can see that he thinks she's kidding herself.

How do you choose what to take when you've just been told you may never see your home again? I think about people who lose their homes in floods and tsunamis and earthquakes, people you see on the news living in refugee camps because their country is at war. You think their troubles are so huge they probably don't have much time to worry about losing the odd photograph or old toy. You imagine that in a crisis the little things don't matter anymore.

I pretend we're surrounded by rising flood waters and are grabbing a few things before helicopter evacuation. It makes it slightly less real. But it doesn't help much

when it comes to leaving stuff like the desk that my grandad made for my mum before I was even born.

I zip my laptop into its case, but the policeman says, 'You'll have to leave that. We're going to want to have a look at it.'

'But it's mine. . .' It's the most precious thing I own. Gran had to save up for ages to get it as a present when I went to secondary school. He shakes his head: 'We'll be getting a warrant and we'll have to check the hard drive. What about the clothes you were wearing yesterday? I'd better take them.' I search through the dirty washing pile and pull out some jeans and a grey hoodie. Luckily I have lots of pairs of jeans and Gran bought the hoodie in a three-pack at Asda.

I pack my iPod. I pack my Manchester United scarf, which is the only thing I have from my dad. I pack my school uniform and books because I reckon Nicki will probably wangle it somehow so I'll be going back to school. And I take some clothes and stuff as well. I root around under my bed and pull out the Tesco bag which I need to sort out somehow. But the main things I want to take – they can't be packed.

Nicki and I live in a little flat above a newsagent's on a main road. It's not so special, and when the windows are open the noise of traffic means we have to shout to be heard. But I like having my own room, even if it's tiny, and we've painted it a cool purple-blue colour and

plastered it with football posters. And I like the way the sunlight comes into my room in the evening so I can sit on the windowsill and watch whatever's going on.

I never feel lonely because there are shops and people all around, and I love hearing all their different languages. It makes me feel like all the world's represented on our street, and East London must be a great place if everyone came so far to live here.

Nicki shoves some stuff into a bag, pretty much at random, and then starts arguing with the policeman again. 'We're not leaving here forever,' she says. 'I have a job and Ty's at a very good school.'

'It's not up to me,' he says. And then, 'What's that?'

We can all hear it . . . a crashing noise. The tinkle of glass breaking. It's a pretty rough area that we live in, but this is really close. It's downstairs. Then I sniff something sweet and metallic . . . not perfume . . . I know that smell but I can't think what it is.

'Come on,' he yells. 'Quickly, down the stairs.'

We tumble down the steep steps that lead up to our flat, dragging our bags with us. Halfway down there's a huge bang – I miss a step, the building seems to shake – a crackling noise, and a choking smell . . . and there's smoke . . . smoke in the air of the stairwell . . . but we're out of our door and into the night.

Mr Patel's shop is on fire. The newsagent that he's so proud of, and spends so long cleaning. Flames are eating

up all the sweets and magazines. There's a huge hole in the front window and glass all over the pavement. Nicki's screaming and bashing on doors, ringing bells, yelling, 'You've got to get out!' to all the people who live in the flats above the shops.

I'm just standing still among the glass on the pavement, staring at the flames. Did whoever did this know that we had our own front door? If we hadn't . . . could we have escaped?

Our policeman is on his radio, calling for help: 'Petrol bomb, newsagents' shop . . . we need to evacuate, urgently. . .' And then he grabs Nicki as she's about to run further up the road and says, 'No, stop, we need to move you now.' And he bundles our bags into his car, and we jump in the back and he's driving us away, just as our neighbours start to come out on to the pavement.

'Oh my God,' says Nicki. 'What the hell was that?' She's crying. 'Will they get everyone out? Poor Mr Patel. That shop is everything to him. What about Mrs Papadopoulos? She's deaf, she won't have heard. . . Some of those flats have a lot of people stuffed into a few rooms. . .'

She puts her arms around me and we sit huddled together. I can hardly believe what I've just seen. I love that shop. I hang out there a lot, especially when Nicki has friends round to drink wine and watch soppy DVDs.

Mr Patel's a really nice man. He teaches me Urdu and

he lets me borrow any magazine I want, apart from the ones on the top shelf. He gave me my pick of the paper round routes, and when I need man-to-man advice on stuff he's the person I ask.

'What happened?' I ask, and my wobbly voice sounds like I'm ten, a scared little boy. 'Was it a bomb?' Fire engines are rushing past us, and the quiet night is full of screaming sirens.

'That's why we're getting you away from here,' says the policeman. 'Some people will stop at nothing.'

I sit and think about all the stuff that's going to get destroyed by the fire. Everything we didn't pack. My laptop. All the things Nicki'd bought from the market to jazz up the flat – a fluffy sheepskin rug and pink silky cushions, and a stupid beaded curtain which divided the kitchen area from the living room. I used to moan about it looking too girly but right now I'm missing that curtain and those pink cushions.

Nicki fumbles for her mobile, but the policeman says, 'No calls.'

'But I have to let my mum know we're OK. She'll go frantic when she hears about this. . .' and he says, 'Let's make sure you are OK first, shall we?' And he drives on until we leave London behind and we're heading into nothingness.

CHAPTER 2
Makeover

Eventually he pulls in at a service station. I think we're going to have a pee and something to eat, but instead he walks over to a blue Ford Mondeo, and talks briefly to the driver.

'This is Doug,' he says, 'He'll take you from here.'

Doug's a big guy, looks a bit like Simon Cowell – bad hair, weird trousers, smug smile – and at the moment he's got a look on his face like he's decided that we haven't got much talent. Nicki's looking hopeful: 'Can't we just get a coffee?' she asks, but Doug says, 'No, love. Too risky,' and we have to get into his car.

We drive on for about an hour, and then he pulls in at a hotel. It's a Travel Lodgey sort of place but not quite as exciting – I'm surprised I can still make jokes, but it's as if the shocked and terrified part of my brain has got so much work to do that it's taken itself off somewhere very remote. I'm left pretty much normal but completely

numb, not feeling anything at all. I don't want to imagine what it'll be like when that bit comes back. Maybe it won't and I'll spend the rest of my life feeling as though I'm standing behind some very thick glass.

He books us in as Jane and David Smith. It's not the sort of hotel you'd want to spend a holiday in. They show us to our room, which is tiny, just enough room for twin beds and a big TV. There's a chest of drawers with two drawers, so we can't even unpack properly. Not that we care right now. Nicki and I both fall asleep right away, with all our clothes on. I don't even brush my teeth.

It's about midday when I wake up and I can't quite think where I am. Or why I'm sharing a room with my mum. Everything that's happened feels like a film or a nightmare. She's already had a shower and she's getting dressed.

'I'm going to sort all this out today,' she says, slapping on blusher and frowning at the mirror. 'It's ridiculous. We're helping them. They can't keep us here. That fire, it must have been a coincidence. Just vandals, stupid kids messing around. Racists, something like that.'

We go downstairs and discover that there's no breakfast on offer after 10am, and after that, the hotel doesn't do any food at all until 7am the next morning. I suggest finding a cafe for a fry up, and Nicki wrinkles her nose, and then two men walk in through the front

door. Doug from last night and DI Morris from the police station.

'We need to talk to you,' says DI Morris and I open my mouth to explain about no breakfast, but Nicki says 'OK,' and we end up going back up to the tiny bedroom. They sit on Nicki's bed and we sit on mine. My stomach is making strange gurgling noises, but everyone pretends not to hear.

DI Morris goes into a long boring explanation of how he's in charge of the murder investigation and Doug is a Witness Protection Liaison Officer, someone who looks after people like me. Vulnerable witnesses. He drones on for a bit and then he gets to the point.

'We're sure that the petrol bomb in the shop last night was designed to intimidate you.' he says. There's a silence. I'm thinking that someone wants me dead. He never actually said dead, but that's what he means. I'm not stupid. It's lucky that I'm not doing feelings at the moment, because if I was I might be pretty scared.

'Your only sensible decision now is to be taken into the witness protection programme.' he says. 'Doug will look after you. You really have no choice.'

Nicki opens her mouth to argue, then closes it again. Then Doug says, 'I'll have to take your phones because there's no easier way to trace someone than the mobile network,' and she puts up a bit of a fight, but you can see her heart isn't in it. My phone is pretty naff, so I don't

care that much. Maybe they'll give me a cool new one.

'Is there anything you need right away?' asks DI Morris. 'Because it'll be about three weeks before we can rehouse you and provide you with your new identities. Until then you'll be staying here with your heads down.'

'Breakfast,' I say very quickly before Nicki can say anything else first, and they all laugh and then Doug takes us in his car to a Little Chef where I eat a massive plate of sausage and egg and Nicki drinks black coffee and pretends she's not crying.

We have three long weeks in the sodding hotel, spending most of the time at the launderette as neither of us packed enough clothes. That's quite useful though because one day I manage to send Nicki off to the chemists and I tell her I'll start doing the washing by myself. I've smuggled the secret Tesco bag with me and I take the contents and dump them in the machine with three packets of stain remover. And, when they come out, everything's gone and now I have an extra grey hoodie and another pair of jeans.

We buy sandwiches every day but it's never enough for me and I'm permanently starving and cross with her for not noticing. The lack of food doesn't bother her because she's always preferred coffee and cigarettes to actually eating. And she's forever nagging me about keeping up with my schoolwork, which is impossible when there's no school to go to. She snaps at me all the

time when she falls over my feet or my bag, so after about two days we're hardly speaking.

There's Sky Sports on the hotel television and I watch it most of the time. Football, basketball, handball, whatever. When Nicki tries to talk to me I turn the volume up. And I get friendly with Marek who washes dishes in the hotel kitchen and try to get him to teach me Polish, but when Doug finds out – Nicki tells him, thanks a lot Nic – he tells me not to talk to anyone, not even someone who only knows ten words of English.

It's so boring that we're even quite pleased to see Doug when he arrives at the hotel one day. He announces that he's taking us to McDonald's which he seems to think is a treat, although if he'd bothered to ask he'd have found out that we both hate the food there.

'What do you want?' he asks. Nicki goes for a salad and a coffee, and I order two portions of fries, two quarter-pounders and two milkshakes on the basis that at least it's not sandwiches. I don't care if I feel sick for hours afterwards. Doug raises his eyebrows and I can see he thinks I'm a greedy pig.

He takes us to sit upstairs where we're all on our own and he hands Nicki a chequebook and some bank statements. The name on the account is Ms M Andrews.

'Michelle,' says Doug. 'And Joe. Recently moved from Redbridge. Michelle, you're looking for a job. Joe's changing schools.'

'Why Joe?' I ask through a mouthful of fries. It's as good a name as any I suppose, but I'm curious.

'If you forget when you're writing, then it's easy to turn a T into a J,' he says.

'Oh, right,' I say, slurping the chocolate milkshake, although I think it's much more likely that I'd forget when I was talking. Or listening. . . How am I ever going to remember that my name's meant to be Joe?

He lectures us about staying as anonymous as possible, not making too many friends, never phoning anyone in London, never giving out our address. 'Best not to invite anyone home,' he adds. We'll be allowed the occasional phone call or letter to Gran and my aunties every six weeks or so. 'We'd have more rights if we were in prison,' says Nicki.

'What about our mobiles?' I ask – I've moved on to the strawberry milkshake now and I'm not feeling all that great – and he says he'll be giving us new ones, 'but I'll be checking your statements. No phoning London, no phoning family or friends. You're just getting them to be able to communicate with each other really.' He's obviously not planning for us to actually have a life. It's going to be hard to know what I can tell people and what I have to hide. Maybe I'll end up having to lie about everything.

He lets us write letters to Gran. I chew my pen and can't think what to write. 'I'm missing you a lot.

Love, Ty' is what I put in the end. 'Can I write to Mr Patel to say sorry about the shop?' I ask, and Doug says, 'No, I think that might complicate matters.' I would argue about it but I'm trying to stop myself throwing up mixed milkshake all over the table.

So,' says Nicki, 'when does this end? I mean presumably after the trial we'll be going home again.'

Doug just looks at her like she's the most stupid person he's ever met. The bit of my brain that does emotions, the bit that's gone missing for the last few weeks, suddenly reappears, and I feel such hate boiling up inside me – *how dare he disrespect my mum?* – that I choke on my burger. By the time I've stopped coughing and she's stopped slapping me on my back and a little bit of quarter-pounder has flown across the table and been brushed off Doug's sleeve, we've all realised that she's asked the wrong question. 'It's not going to end is it?' she says, and her voice is flat and empty and there's no argument left in it.

And he's still wiping his sleeve and looking completely revolted and says, 'We'll have to see.'

One day it's pouring with rain and I'm lying on my bed watching some football match from prehistoric times. Nicki's reading a set book from her Open University law course and telling me to turn the sound off.

'I don't know why you're bothering with that,' I say.

'You've missed so many assignments now that you'll fail anyway.'

She makes a face at me.

'And I bet you'll lose all your credits for the last three years too because you'll be called Michelle Andrews and have a new address and everything.'

I don't know why I'm being so mean. That course means the world to her. She lifts her head up and says in a dangerous voice, 'Why don't you just shut up now, Ty?'

'I'm just trying to save you from wasting your time,'

And the next thing the book is flying through the air towards me, and I dodge it, totally lose my balance, fall off the bed and crash into the bedside table, breaking a glass and cutting my hand.

'Ow!' I screech. 'What was that for?'

'It wasn't going to hit you anyway,' she hisses.

There's a knock at the door and Doug walks in.

'What's going on?' he asks, and we both mumble, 'Nothing. . .' and I get up off the floor, push the table back into place, shove the broken glass under the bed and grab a tissue to mop up the blood. It really stings. Doug looks suspicious, but stands aside to let someone else into the room.

'This is Maureen,' he says, and she's smiling at us, an older woman with a big black suitcase.

'It's Extreme Makeover day,' she says. 'We've got to

change the way you look,' she explains, adding, 'I hope you've been growing your hair, young man.' I have – one of the things I hated most about St Saviour's was the army-type haircut – and my fringe is already falling over my eyes.

Maureen nods her approval and then looks me up and down. 'There's not much I can do really. You've already got very anonymous clothes. Wear your hood up as much as possible – there, you don't expect the police to tell you that. I've got some more clothes for you in my bag and I think Doug's already sorted your school uniform.'

School uniform? I didn't even know I had a school.

'He's a nice looking lad,' she adds, as if I'm not there. 'His eyes are very striking, aren't they? An unusual colour that light green; we'll have to do something about that. And I think we'll have to darken the hair . . . although you'll have to keep it going, because we don't want his roots showing.' She and Nicki start giggling at what must be a look of complete horror on my face. I'm only grateful that none of the boys from school will ever hear about this.

She turns the tiny hotel bathroom into a salon, and tackles Nicki first. Nicki's raging from the moment she sees Maureen's scissors. 'These extensions cost me a fortune,' she says, as they hit the tiles. 'I can't believe you have to do this. Isn't it enough to drag us away

from our home?'

But I remember the flames eating up everything from *TV Quick* to *Playboy* and I doubt our home even exists anymore, so I don't complain when Maureen slaps some foul-smelling muck on to my hair and then smears something which prickles and burns on to my eyebrows too.

She washes my hair and wraps it up in a towel, which looks completely stupid, and then makes me sit down on the bed. 'Eyes wide open,' she says, then jabs her finger at them. I slam backwards, yelling out loud with pain. Who said the police could torture me? 'It's only a contact lens,' says Maureen, but I won't let her near me again. Eventually, after a huge amount of agony, I master putting them in myself.

Maureen dries my hair, and scrubs my eyebrows with a flannel, Nicki clucking strangely in the background. Then I'm allowed to look in the big mirror. Somehow I'm still expecting to see green eyes and light brown hair looking back at me. But instead I see a white face, black shaggy hair, amazing black eyebrows and dark brown eyes – very bloodshot eyes. Only the pointed chin is recognisably mine, and it's a lot more pointy than it used to be because I seem to have lost any sign of chubbiness around the face. In fact my whole body is leaner than it ever was before.

'What do you think?' asks Maureen.

'I look like a bloody Goth,' I mutter, giving the eyebrows an experimental wiggle. Actually I rather like it. I look a lot older – I seem to have grown taller, cooped up in captivity – and the messy black hair is excellent.

She turns to Nicki. 'I think I've done a pretty good job there.' But Nic's gloomily examining her brunette helmet-hair frump of the year look, and doesn't even look at me. With one crappy haircut and some unisex sweatshirts, Maureen's managed to turn her from someone who looked a bit like Nadine Coyle into a complete minger. She's gone from looking twenty-five, max, to around forty. Poor old Nic. She's actually only thirty-one. If they ever made a TV show called *Ten Years Older* then Maureen could get a job as presenter.

Doug comes in the room and says, 'Well done Maureen, good job. I've settled up so we can leave now – by the back stairs please. I don't want anyone here seeing what you look like now. It won't take long to pack up will it?'

He's right, it'll take about five minutes – there was never any space to unpack in the first place. 'We're going now?' says Nicki. 'But where?' And Doug says he'll explain everything in the car.

She sits in the front with him and I sit in the back with Maureen and we drive and drive. He tells us the name of the town where we're going to be living, but

neither of us have ever heard of it. It's about fifty miles out of London – far enough away to be really boring but not far enough for people to have strange accents.

He says I'm going to be starting school on Monday and he points out the school, Parkview Academy, as we pass it halfway up a hill.

'You'll be in year eight,' he says.

'No, I'm in year nine.'

'You'll be in year eight because it's safer. We want to make you as different from your old self as possible. And luckily' – he smirks – 'you don't look too old for your age.'

Stupid twat. 'So what is my age?'

'We've made you thirteen; your new birthday is September the fifth.'

Brilliant. A whole year lost. A new birthday. Outstanding. 'You're an idiot,' I mutter, but I say it in Urdu so he won't understand.

He glances in the mirror and sees the look on my face. 'What's that? It's very important that you take this seriously *Joe*.' He's started using our new names, speaking slightly too loud like we're deaf or foreign or stupid. 'If you screw up then we'll have to move you elsewhere, give you another identity. Some people have to do this three or four times. Let's try and avoid that, eh lad?'

'Yeah, yeah. . .' Three or four times? He can't be serious.

'You'd better change your attitude fast, lad,' he says, 'because it's a matter of life or death.'

There's nothing I can say. Doug's the only person who knows Joe Andrews and Doug already thinks he's stupid, greedy and revolting. I wonder if everyone else will think the same. I look out of the window and wonder why Joe and Michelle have chosen to live in such a dump.

And then we're driving down a high street with all the same shops that you see everywhere, and we're into an estate where all the houses look identically dull and shabby, and we're pulling up outside a semi with a red front door. This is it. Our new home. A safe house. But can we ever be safe again?