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Opening extract from

To the Extreme

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To the Extreme

By

David Gatward

Chapter 1

Jack stared at the diving platform and wanted to throw up. It was hard to fake a smile. He knew instead he looked in pain. He also knew everyone was looking at him; all his classmates, and the swimming coach.

The platform looked impossibly high, like it was about to topple over into the pool and squash everyone. It wasn't that he couldn't swim; that had never been the problem. He could swim for miles. For Jack, it was the height.

A mate called over. "Come on Jack! You chicken or what?"

Jack attempted a laugh and a wave. It came out like a squeak and a shrug. He went to move forward, edge away from the pool towards the steps. It was more than a little difficult.

Then the swimming coach joined in. "Jack, you have to give it a go. You're a good swimmer –just get up there and do a jump, that's it. You'll be fine. Trust me."

Jack didn't trust him. Didn't trust anyone. Not when he was staring at a diving platform.

He took a step forward and felt the world spin. He wanted to sit down, anything but get on those metal steps.

The rest of the class started jeering, telling him to get a move on. The swimming coach tried to shut them up but it only made them worse.

For a moment, Jack just stood there staring up at the platform and at his mate making his way to the top, up the steep ladder. Everyone else enjoyed jumping off, couldn't wait to give it a go. He wanted to be a part of it.

Jack took some deep breaths, tried to calm down, tell himself they were just steps, that it was just a diving platform, that jumping off would be more than fine, it'd be brilliant. He could swim, couldn't he? Come on Jack, sort yourself out! Do it!

But it didn't work. Heights had him by the neck and refused to let go. And the older he got, the tighter they squeezed.

It was why he slept in a room downstairs at home, why he refused to ever use a ladder. It was why his heart raced at even the thought of getting in a lift. And it all stemmed from an accident years ago.

Jack could feel everyone staring at him, their eyes burning into him. He felt hot, dizzy, claustrophobic. The smell of the chlorine stuck in the back of his throat and made him gag. All he wanted to do was get out, and fast.

Jack tried to block the memory that pushed him to this, that refused to let him go, but it pushed in to his mind, squeezed in between everything he was doing to keep himself calm. Deep breaths Jack, deep breaths ...

He was seven again and it was a bright day, or at least that's how he remembered it. The weather wasn't important. It could've been raining for all it mattered.

The tree house at the bottom of the garden was a haven and Jack had loved it ever since his dad had built it. The only way to get up was to use the rope ladder through the trapdoor in the floor.

Jack would spend hours up there, on his own, or with mates. Since it had been built, various items had found their way up there to make the tree house even more homely. Cushions littered the floor, pictures covered the wall and an old wooden box held biscuits. Dad had put a few shelves in and these held books and comics and an old stereo, the one Dad had used in the garage that had got just a little bit covered in paint. But it still worked. Just.

Jack loved it. His friends envied it. And his dad wished he'd had something like it when he was a lad.

This particular day, Jack had been up in the tree house all afternoon. It was warm and cosy and he'd been reading a new book from the library all about goblins and wizards and a mystical stone. But he'd drifted off to sleep. He didn't remember exactly when, but he did remember waking up feeling groggy and hungry and thinking it was probably about tea time. So with a stretch and a yawn, he'd opened the trapdoor.

Then it happened. Not dramatically so, like falling head first or tumbling out screaming. He just missed. Out went a foot, a hand, and where they should have found the rungs of the ladder they found air.

Jack felt his stomach lurch as the memory of that moment all those years ago thundered in to his head. The feeling of falling, of trying to grab the rungs that seemed just out of reach, the fall which had lasted forever, and the landing.

His hand went instinctively to his arm, just above his elbow. He pulled up his sleeve. A lump stuck out where he'd broken the bone**.** Every day, it reminded him of that moment, the fall. It meant he could never escape the memory**.**

Jack breathed heavy, took another look at the diving platform. Some of his classmates pushed past, laughed at him, called him names. And they weren't even the cool kids. They were just normal, like him, and that was a real kick in the teeth.

There was a yell from above. Jack looked up, saw one of his mates wave then jump, laughing all the way to the big splash at the bottom.

He couldn't do it. He just turned around, left as quickly as he could.

The swimming coach called after him and caught him at the door to the changing rooms.

"Come on Jack, you've got to face up to it. Give it another shot. You'll be fine."

But Jack wasn't going to face up to it. Not today. Not ever. So he turned his back on the pool, got changed, and wished he was dead.

Later that day, after school and every step of the way home, Jack felt more and more useless – completely helpless. He was a let down, a total wuss, a chicken. The butt of every joke in the class. Everyone would be talking about him now behind his back. He hated it, but couldn't do anything about it. It made him so angry. All because of that one fall, all those years ago. It was ruining everything. How would he ever beat it?