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Opening extract from

Flip

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Alex couldn't have said what woke him that morning. It might have been the weird dream, or Mum calling up the stairs, or the sunlight streaming into the room. He lay in bed with that leftover adrenalin feeling of having been jolted out of a nightmare – forgotten the instant you wake up but which vibrates in your mind like the aftershock of a slammed door. His legs were tangled in the duvet and his right arm was trapped beneath him, useless with pins and needles. He eased onto his back.

Another shout. "Come *on*, you're going to be *late*."

Late for what? It was a Saturday, he didn't have to be anywhere. She sounded odd, his mum – that familiar tone (*I'm really losing my patience, now*) but something else that he couldn't put his finger on. Probably she was just in one of her strops. Had Mum been cross with him when he'd come home last night? Alex couldn't recall. As it happened, he had no recollection of coming in at all but, obviously, he must've

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done. The last thing he remembered was leaving David's at five to ten and running to beat his curfew. They'd spent the evening playing chess (he won), surfing YouTube, listening to The Killers. The usual.

He made a fist, then unclenched it. The pins and needles were gone but his arm still felt clumsy; all his limbs and joints seemed heavy. His mouth tasted foul. If he was sickening for something on the first weekend of the Christmas holiday that would be so typical. But he didn't feel *ill*. He … well, Alex wasn't sure how he felt, exactly. Just out of sorts. A fragment of his nightmare resurfaced: a ladder, or staircase, or hill – steep, anyway – and he was scrambling up it as fast as he could, with some creature grabbing at his feet and Alex trying to kick himself free. What happened next, he didn't know. That must've been when he woke up. Maybe it was all to do with his legs being twisted in the bedding.

"*Philip*! It's five past *eight*!"

No way could it be five past eight, with all this sunshine. More like ten or eleven. Alex looked at the alarm clock on his bedside table.

The clock wasn't there. Nor was the table.

Instead there was a wall, and the wall wasn't blue-and-silver stripes anymore, it was a plain pale yellow. Now he thought about it, the daylight was coming in from the wrong angle. Alex sat up. The window wasn't where it should've been. Those weren't his curtains, either. That wasn't his wardrobe; those weren't his shelves; that wasn't his CD player;

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those weren't his posters (*Basketball? Cricket?*) and the carpet had been replaced by bare floorboards and a huge red-and-gold rug that looked like something out of *Aladdin*. Where was his clarinet stand, his music-stand? How come his desk (which wasn't his desk, and wasn't where it should be) had a flat-screen PC on it? Why was his room so *big*?

Alex tried to figure out whose room this might be – whose *house* – and what on earth he was doing here. Why he was wearing another boy's T-shirt instead of his own pyjamas? Why, in December, was there a thin, summer duvet on the bed? And if that woman hollering up the stairs (again) wasn't *his* mother, whose was she? Philip's, presumably. *Philip*, she had shouted. Yes, it was Philip she was cross with, not Alex. In another bedroom, Philip was failing to get up in time for something. Philip was the key to this. The rational explanation. Dad reckoned there was a rational explanation for everything, even things that made no sense at all. *UFOs, ghosts, God – they're just the names people come up with for stuff they haven't worked out yet.*

So, the rational explanation: on his way home from David's, Alex had dropped by at Philip's place and ended up crashing there for the night. Now he'd woken up too dopey, too confused, to remember doing so. Like when you go on holiday and, the first morning, you wake up surprised to find yourself in an unfamiliar bedroom. The part of his brain that expected him to be in his own room, his own home, was disoriented, failing to compute the messages his eyes

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were sending it. Any moment now, it would all come back to him. That was it: the logical, reasonable, rational explanation.

Which would've been fine if he knew anyone called Philip.

This was a big house. From the landing outside the bedroom in which he'd woken up there were three other doors (all closed), one set of stairs leading down and a narrow staircase ascending to what he supposed must be a loft conversion. He tried each of the doors in turn. Two bedrooms and a bathroom. Called up the stairs. Nothing. No people. No sign of "Philip", although one of the bedrooms looked recently slept in. A girl's room, not a boy's. A gothic teenage-angst thing was going on in there. He went down to the ground floor, to a high-ceilinged hallway that gave on to a sitting-room, with another room off that. Both empty. Radio sounds drifted up through the floor. The kitchen had to be down in the basement, which was where he'd find the woman who had been yelling up the stairs. Philip's mum. When he found her, Alex would discover the solution to the puzzle of where he was, and why.

Hopefully, she'd fix him up with some breakfast as well.

Making his way to the basement, two thoughts struck him: firstly, he'd never been in this house in his life; secondly, he definitely had something wrong with his arms and legs. His coordination. Going up and down the stairs, in and

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out of rooms, he'd lumbered around like a drunk. He was at it again, colliding with the door-frame as he let himself into the kitchen and sending the door juddering against its stopper.

"For Dr Frankenstein's creation," a female voice said, in the style of a TV-documentary narration, "even straightforward motor functions – passing through a doorway, for example – could prove problematic."

Alex found himself in a large kitchen-diner, oven-warmed and smelling of croissants. The voice had come from the direction of a dining table at one end of the room. It belonged to a girl who looked about seventeen and whose long, straight black hair was streaked with purple. He felt self-conscious in just a T-shirt and boxers. She seemed unfazed, though, distractedly scouring the insides of a halved grapefruit with a teaspoon, sitting sideways on her chair, one black-legginged leg crossed over the other. The motif on her (black) T-shirt said "Serpent" in jagged lime-green letters. Her foot tapped the air, as though in time to a tune playing in her head. Having greeted Alex with sarcasm, she now ignored him totally.

Before he could think of anything to say to her, there were footsteps outside and a woman bustled in through the open back door. Beyond her, Alex could see part of a garden, and a fat old golden retriever snuffling around for somewhere to pee. No sign of anyone who might be Philip.

"At *last*," the woman said, her dark eyes flaring. Then,

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in a flurry of hand gestures, "And you're not even *dressed*. Sit *down* and eat – the croissants will be stone cold by now but whose fault's that?"

The woman was tall and bony, wearing a filmy dress that swished when she moved. She snapped off the radio, tugged open a drawer and busied herself, ripping a bin-liner from a roll and fitting it inside a stainless-steel flip-top bin. Her dress was beige, patterned with irregular brown blotches, her spindly suntanned limbs sticking out like oversized Twiglets. If they ever crossed a giraffe with a human, Alex thought, it would look something like this. He stood there, gawping at her.

"As for its mental facility, the simplest instructions – 'sit', 'eat' – seemed to confound the creature." That TV voiceover again, from the girl at the breakfast table. Her accent sounded vaguely northern. "It was a source of consternation and dismay to Dr Frankenstein that his genius should have produced a being so innately stupid."

"Oh, don't provoke him," the woman said. "We haven't got time for you two to start bickering."

"I don't bicker," the girl said. "I *scathe*."

"*Enough*, Teri." Then, gesturing him towards the other end of the room, "Will you *please* sit down and eat your *breakfast*."

If the morning had started with a seven (where zero is totally normal and ten is totally weird), it had skipped past eight and was heading for nine and a half.

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Maybe someone had drugged him. This was a hallucination and he hadn't woken up at all but was still at his own home, in his own bed, dreaming of croissants and giraffes and sarcastic goths. If it was a dream, though, it wasn't showing any sign of coming to an end. Unsure what else to do, Alex sat down opposite the girl. There was a wicker basket with a cloth draped over it; the croissants, he figured. Alex didn't like croissants. In the centre of the table stood several cereal boxes. He reached for the Corn Flakes and began tipping them into a bowl.

"*Mum*." The girl pointed at Alex, who'd paused, mid-tip.

"You asked for *croissants*," the woman said. "I *made* you croissants."

He set the cereal down. It made no sense – *you asked for croissants*: a) he hated them; b) he hadn't asked for anything or even spoken to her before now. "I—"

"You *specifically* asked for them."

"But—"

Now it was the girl's turn to interrupt. Glaring at him across the table, she said, "You don't even *like* Corn Flakes, turd-brain."

"*Teri*. Language."

Any moment now this would stop freaking him out. Any moment now, a TV presenter and camera crew would burst into the room and everyone would fall about laughing at the practical joke they'd played on Alex. Instead, the woman whipped away the basket, strode across the kitchen

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and, with a flourish, tipped the croissants into the bin. Teri gave him an are-you-satisfied-now look. Edged with kohl, her eyes were an amazing colour, almost violet. Alex glared back, trying to stare her out, but the depth of her dislike for him was so stunning he had to look away. He topped up the Corn Flakes, added milk and sugar and started eating.

"Right, I'm off," Teri said, getting up from the table.

The woman looked up from the dishwasher, into which she was loading some of the breakfast things. "I thought you had a free period, first thing?"

"I'm meeting Luce and Karina at Costa before school."

"Oh, OK. Well, have fun."

"Yeah, bye Mum." With that, the girl was gone.

School? He was trying to get his head round this when he became aware of a low growling. It was the golden retriever, which had come in from the garden and was standing a short distance from Alex's chair, giving him the works: the growl, the bared teeth, the raised hackles. Bloody hell, even the dog hated him. Not that Alex was that keen on dogs either. He didn't mind them, as such, and would have quite liked one actually, but, with his asthma, that had never been an option. Talking of which, where was his inhaler? Upstairs, probably, in that bedroom. Usually he took a couple of puffs when he woke up, but this morning he hadn't, in all the confusion. His breathing was fine though. Better than normal, despite a night spent in a house full of doggy allergens. The dog was still growling at him.

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"*Beagle*, stop that," the woman said. She sounded cross but also surprised. The dog didn't stop. "Oh, come away, you dozy pooch. What on earth has got into you?" She took hold of his collar, dragged him across the kitchen and out through the back door. "If that's the mood you're in, you can jolly well go back outside."

"What's with the name?" Alex said.

"What?" The woman shut the door.

"Beagle." He smiled, trying to be friendly, to make conversation. "Only, it's a funny name for a golden retriever."

She stared at him. Then, letting out a long breath, "I haven't time for this. I have to be out of the house in *ten minutes*. So do you." She indicated his bowl. "Finish that, get yourself upstairs—"

"Look—"

"And if you can *possibly* bring yourself to wash your face and brush your teeth that would be so marvellous."

"I'm sorry," Alex said, "but do you mind telling me what's going on here?"

The woman's expression could've frozen the face off a polar bear. "I want you at the front door, dressed, and *ready to leave* when I am. *OK?*"

Before he had a chance to reply, she left the room. He listened to the thump of her footsteps on the stairs. He sat there, bewildered, gazing at the breakfast clutter and at the unfamiliar room, its rich red walls bathed in sunlight that slanted in through the semi-basement windows. He had half

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a mind to sweep everything from the table in a fit of temper. Outside, the dog was barking to be let back in.

Alex spotted a newspaper, its sections spread beside a plate sprinkled with toast crumbs. The *Guardian*. He pulled out the main news bit. The school thing was bugging him. There shouldn't *be* any school today, or for the next two weeks, yet that was where the girl had said she was going after she'd met her friends. But it was *Saturday*, for crying out loud, 22 December. School broke up yesterday. That afternoon, Dad would pick up Gran from the station and bring her home for Christmas. Unfolding the newspaper, his eyes searched for the dateline at the top of the front page.

He set the paper back on the table and laid a hand on each thigh, digging the fingers in, in the hope that they would stop shaking. They didn't.

There had to be a mistake. There *had* to be.

But when Alex picked up the paper again, the date was the same as before.

Monday, 23 June.

The woman reappeared just then in a fury of bony limbs and swishing dress. "*There* you are." Then, "Oh, I don't *believe* it, you haven't *moved*."

Alex looked at her, afraid to blink in case the tears brimming in his eyes spilled down his face.

"For God's sake," she said, "get a *grip*, Philip."

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