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Opening extract from **Million Dollar Gift**

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The Impossible Stunt

Night was fast approaching and I was running out of time. The back door of the abandoned factory was hanging off its hinges as I squeezed through the gap to find the light inside already fading; I raced up the rickety staircase to the first floor; the rays of the evening sun were pouring through the tall windows, but the light wouldn't last much longer; I had to get to work immediately.

I pulled the back-pack from my shoulders, placed it on the dusty floor and began pulling out the tools I needed. There weren't many, just my smart-phone, a measuring tape, a face mask and the two pieces of a wooden ramp that I'd been building in my spare time. I had everything worked out in my mind and it wouldn't take long to get the stunt set up.

First I extended the tape from the wall and marked out two points: one five metres from the wall and another eight metres from it. I constructed the ramp and put it at the five metre point, sloping up towards the wall, then carefully placed the phone at the eight metre point and set its video camera to

MILLION DOLLAR GIFT

record. I took one last item from the back-pack: my skateboard.

I pulled my facemask on and dropped my foot onto the board. With one deep breath I pushed myself forward and gathered as much speed as possible before I was launched off the floor by the ramp. I shot about four metres into the air then did a 360 in mid-flight. I angled my body so that the wheels struck the flaking paintwork of the wall cleanly; I then defied gravity by slowly rolling down the wall, backwards, and somersaulting to the ground. The board flipped through the air and I caught it with my right hand. I raised a V sign to the camera with my left and cried, 'Victory!'

I'd just performed an impossible stunt, one that no one else on the planet could pull off. I'm not the kind to brag though, hence the facemask; I'm quite a modest person actually.

My hometown was called Maybrook, the furthest suburb from the city and a place so boring that I renamed it 'Dullbrook'. The people of the suburb knew me simply as 'Ross Bentley' or 'Ross Bentley the loner' or 'Ross Bentley the weirdo', but millions around the world knew me by my online alias, 'Gotcha365'. They knew me because videos of my impossible stunts were all over the internet.

I performed and recorded the skateboard stunt twice more, and would have tried it a third time, but the sun was in a hurry to get away from Dullbrook that evening and my time had run out. I packed up my stuff and sneaked out the back

door then hopped on my board and headed for home. The exciting part of my life was over for another few hours. The real, and very boring, side of my life had returned.

I put in my earphones and maxed the volume on my phone as I rolled along the Dullbrook road towards the housing estate. I'd downloaded three albums the day before and was buzzing to the best and liveliest of them. I was always listening to music, without it my life in suburbia would've been unbearable.

I hated Dullbrook and everything about it. The older generation were a crew of old fashioned gossipers and their offspring were a collection of hideous morons; most of them were mindless fools that only moved around in large groups. Both generations were as bad each other.

When I got home I pushed the hall door open and found the house as it always was in the evenings; the lights were off and everything was quiet, except for the sitting room. As I let my earphones dangle around my chest I heard the low murmur of the TV and saw its blue light strobe through the doorway.

As I took to the stair the familiar voice from the sitting room said, 'That you?'

'No,' I replied as I climbed the creaking steps.

Of course it was me! Who the hell else would it be? We hadn't had a single visitor for about three years, since my former head teacher came to have a *chat* with us about my

attitude in class.

I always gave Dad a smart answer when he asked a stupid question. It seemed like the appropriate thing to do. Sometimes I'd spice it up and say,

'No, this is a holographic representation of Ross Bentley sent to put your mind at ease. The real Ross is out spending all the money he earns from his crappy job at the supermarket.'

Dad always laughed at my answers. Maybe that's why he asked stupid questions. Who knows? We didn't talk much other than that; there'd been a rift between us for years.

I kicked off my runners when I got to my room and slid my board under the bed. After I emptied my back-pack and put it in the wardrobe I jumped on the bed and powered up my laptop. It was time to delve into my secret life and excitement was tickling me all over; I was about to do something that would stun the world... or at least a few thousand people who regularly used Youtube. That was my way of living a secret life; I'd record myself doing amazing tricks and stunts and upload them onto the internet. It was my only way to escape the tedium of living as Ross Bentley in the sleepy suburb of Dullbrook.

I connected my phone to the laptop and transferred the three video files, then watched them on the larger screen. I decided to keep one and threw the others in the recycle bin. I named the remaining clip 'The Impossible Stunt'.

I thought it was a good name and it seemed to be an accu-

rate description of the video. I logged on to my Youtube channel, which had over twenty similar videos available on it, and uploaded the one-minute clip.

The Impossible Stunt was the most ambitious and revealing clip I'd ever made and nerves zapped my stomach as I watched it going live to the world, or anyone who happened to be looking. The nerves were mostly because my previous recordings had got a mixed response; a lot of people thought they were clever fakes. That really annoyed me. One thing I hate being called is a *fake*.

Why would that bother me so much? Because I've always been *real*. So real that I didn't even have any friends, because I didn't try to be someone I wasn't, I didn't pretend to like people I hated and I didn't act like I disliked people I was fond of. I got lonely from time to time, but that's the price you pay for keeping it real. My skateboarding and free-running videos were as real as I was; there was absolutely no trickery involved.

It always took a while before the comments flowed in so I aimlessly surfed the web. Nothing grabbed my interest and I found myself staring at my Facebook page. It was like watching a mousetrap; it was hard to take my eyes away from it just in case something happened, but it always took a long time for anything to happen. I only had seven friends, and six of them were people I hardly knew, so it usually took a very long time for anything to happen.

The fact that I'd only seven Facebook friends didn't bother

me in the slightest. I actually got a lot of friend requests, mostly from local girls who were a year or so younger than me. I never added them, although sometimes it was tempting.

The only reason I stared at Facebook each night was one of the older girls from Dullbrook, Gemma Wright. We'd been mates for ages and used to share some classes in school. I once had a serious crush on her, but to her credit she never once mentioned my constant gawking and drooling. That all changed when I actually got to know her. We became instant friends and any attraction that there'd been quickly fizzled away. Gemma was the only person in the world that I felt I could talk to and she always gave me good advice.

Some nights she'd appear online and we'd talk about everyday stuff and work (we'd been working at the same supermarket since finishing our final year of school) but I sometimes wanted to talk about more serious stuff, especially about how to mend my relationship with Dad. Falling out with him had really hurt me and I wanted to tell someone about it. I was sick of feeling so isolated.

But I'd sound like a total dumbass if I did that, and so we talked about everyday stuff and bitched about our co-workers. There was something else I wanted to tell her about, but I figured I'd never be able to tell her – or anyone else. How do you tell someone your deepest, darkest secret? I don't know. I couldn't afford for my secret to get out – it would spread like wildfire and my life would end up being even more unbear-

able. I often got pointed at by some of the other teenagers. They'd say, 'There's the loner!' or some crap like that, but if my secret got out they'd shout, 'There's that freak! Keep away from him, he's dangerous.' I didn't need that type of hassle in my life.

It didn't look like Gemma was going to appear so I put the laptop into hibernation and looked for something to do. I sat at my desk and gathered the sheets that covered it. These were my conceptual drawings; before I made my 'impossible' videos I'd plan them out in meticulous detail. These were not rough sketches, they resembled architectural drawings with precise angles and exact measurements and calculations of the effects of lift and drag. I guess I was never your average teenager – that was obvious from the objects that made up the clutter in my room.

I had, of course, the usual items that everyone my age possessed: a Playstation 3, an iPod docking station, an old pair of football boots, *Harry Potter* and *Maximum Ride* books, collections of DVDs and video games, but there were also odd contraptions everywhere. These were my special puzzles. I invented them to keep me occupied and I felt they were unlike any others; I truly believed that no one else on the planet could play them.

The puzzle I'd spent most time on, and the only one I was yet to conquer, was *Marble Star*. Basically, there was a piece of thick card with a hole at its centre. On the card were a number

MILLION DOLLAR GIFT

of small marbles arranged in the shape of a five pointed star. Just outside the star was a larger marble. The object of this game was to roll the larger marble towards the centre, scattering the others, and to land it in the hole at the middle of the card. It might sound easy but the hard part of this game was to have the marbles back in a star shape before the large one reached the hole. But of course nobody had the speed of hand to complete this puzzle.

One-Minute Ping-Pong was the first I'd ever invented. It consisted of a business card and a ping-pong ball. You lay the card on the floor and bounce the ball on top of it. You could only touch the ball once, but it had to bounce for at least one minute and it had to bounce on the card every single time.

Horizontal Card was one of the most difficult. You had to stand a playing card on its edge. It was as simple and as impractical as that.

There were normal games too, but I had adapted them to my own specific talents. There was a dart board hanging on the door, but I liked to play Three Shot Blind Bullseye. I'd sit with my back to the door and fire the darts over my shoulder, without looking. I always hit the bullseye within three shots. I could have been the most successful darts player in the world if I wanted, but I never played in public. I'd learned my lesson about playing sports in public when I was younger.

I'd once been a very special soccer player and averaged six goals a game, from all sorts of improbable angles and crazy

distances. I even had big football clubs from the premier league in England chasing my signature. But I turned them all down, even Manchester United, because they kept asking how I could score such incredible goals. I couldn't give them an honest answer; my secret had to remain with me and I hung up my boots at the age of fourteen.

This had created the rift with my father who was a football fanatic. He couldn't understand why I turned my back on such a promising career and I couldn't give him an honest answer either. Three years had passed and we still weren't on good terms with each other. He lost his job a year after my 'early retirement' and we were always short of money, which seemed to exaggerate the problems between us; I could have earned a lot of money from soccer and our lives wouldn't be so miserable. I kept refusing to give him a straight answer, though, and he eventually stopped asking the question.

I simply couldn't play sports in public and that's what led to me recording my free-running and skateboarding stunts as a masked man by the name of Gotcha365. My only audience was strangers from other countries who spent too much time surfing Youtube.

The mask was a necessity. A part of my life. You see, all my puzzles, games, sporting exploits and stunts were totally impossible. Only a person who could move things with their mind could do them. That's my secret – I can move things with my mind.

MILLION DOLLAR GIFT

I stared at the Youtube and Facebook mousetraps for a couple of hours more, but no one went for the cheese so I powered off the laptop and got into bed. When I was ready for sleep I simply thought about darkness and the light switch flipped down, plunging the room into blackness.

By the way, I was the only one in the world who could do that.