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Opening extract from

The Extincts

Written by

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DEDICATION FROM VERONICA COSSANTELI:

In memory of my father,
King of the Jade Forest,
Who taught me the importance of dragons.
For my mother,
Who taught me a great many other things,
And for Xander,
Who taught me what not to write.

With thanks to all the people at Chicken House for not being too squeamish, and especially to Rachel L, kindest and most soothing of Axe-Women, unfailingly patient in the face of some truly terrible jokes.

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CHAPTER ONE

The weird stuff all began with £3.72.

I didn't know it was £3.72, of course, until I picked it up – a scattering of coins on a wet pavement – and counted it.

George Drake, it's your lucky day! Three strikes at Bumper Bowl with Josh and Matt – and now FREE MONEY! I let the coins trickle out of my hand, into my pocket, and got back on my bike.

What do you do with £3.72? Easy. If you're me, you buy sweets.

I was in the shop for about a minute. When I came out, my bike had gone. I had a paper bag full of gummy caterpillars and strawberry laces and foam bananas – but no bike. And it was raining. And it was a long walk home.

Sorry, George Drake, just kidding. Not your lucky day after all.

Great. Just great. I bit the head off a gummy caterpillar, and started walking.

By the time I got home, I was feeling a bit sick. I'm not totally sure that I like foam bananas. Mum was upside down in the garden. Other people don't do yoga in the garden in the rain, just Mum.

'Electricity bill's come,' she said, from between her knees. 'Even bigger than last time. Huge. Seriously, George – it's MONSTROUS!'

Mum only does yoga when she's worried about something. Bills. The washing machine breaking down. Parents' Evening. Dad leaving. She unfolded herself, balancing on one leg, like a flamingo – except flamingos can do it without wobbling. Then she noticed.

'Where's your bike?'

I told her, then wished that I hadn't. A good mother would have agreed that all bike thieves should be nibbled to death by flesh-eating cockroaches, or lowered head first into barrels of boiling custard, or shot into space out of giant cannons. But no – apparently, it was all *my* fault.

'You left your bike outside the shop without locking it? George, that was stupid. What were you thinking?'

Then I had to listen to a whole load of yabber-yabber-blah-blah parenty stuff about Being More Careful. It went on and on for ages, until she lost her balance and fell into a rose bush.

I pulled her out, scratched and bleeding.

'You were saying? About being *careful*?'

'Oh. Yes. Well ...' Mum sucked the blood from her fingers.

'We'll say no more about it. Stuff happens.'

Half an hour later, I was taking my mind off my lost bike with a game of *All Star Zombie Smackdown*. I was just about to poke the eyeballs out of a zombie who looked a lot like my teacher, Miss Thripps, when I heard Mum calling my name.

'George? George!'

'Just a minute. Wait—'

Too late. Miss Thripps had chewed my arm off. I called her the rudest name I could think of, and pressed Pause.

Mum was outside the back door.

'Look!' she said, proudly. 'It was right at the back of the shed. A perfectly good bike.' She brushed a cobweb off the rusting handlebars. 'Nothing wrong with it.'

Except it was pink.

Typical Mum. She's famous for forgetting things, but you'd think she'd remember ...

'Mum, I'm a *boy*.'

'Oh, that! That's all poppycock.' Mum flapped her hands. 'Real men aren't afraid of pink.'

What does Mum know about Real Men? She married Dad.

Until about a year ago, Dad lived with us. He wore a suit and tie, and went to the office every day. Now he's on a beach in Australia, wearing flowery shorts and flip-flops. He sent an email. It said the weather in Australia was lovely, and he was learning how to surf. Mum emailed him back. She

said the weather in England was rubbish, and she hoped he got eaten by a shark. They're very mature for their ages, my parents. Not.

I looked at the bike. No gears. No suspension. No anything, unless you counted a rusty Princess PrettyPants bell and a little wicker basket. I tried to imagine riding that around town on a Saturday afternoon. I could picture Josh and Matt's faces ...

'No! No, Mum, I can't!'

She looked hurt, which made me feel bad. Why do grown-ups never see things? Things that are perfectly obvious? Is there a part of the brain that stops working when you get to twenty-one or something? That's a bit scary. It means I have ten years left of being normal ...

'If you want a new bike, you'll have to save up for it.' Now she was in a mood. 'I don't know how I'm going to pay that electricity bill as it is.'

Mum has a shop. It's called The Mermaid's Cave. She burns incense and plays whale music and never has any customers. I think people already have as many smelly candles and bead curtains and wind chimes as they want.

'You can earn some money,' she suggested, a bit less grumpily. 'You can wash the car. I'll give you 50p.'

'Mum, we haven't *got* a car.'

It was sold, after Dad left. We needed the money.

'I forgot.' Mum stroked the old bike's saddle. I really, really hoped she wasn't going to cry. 'Are you sure this wouldn't do? Harry and Frank both rode it.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'But Harry and Frank are both girls.'

My sisters are older than me, but not so old that they have Grown-up Brain Rot yet. They can be really annoying, but they did see why I couldn't ride a pink Princess PrettyPants bike.

'Get a paper round,' suggested Harry. She was spraying herself silver for an Aliens and Robots party. Harry goes to college, and some very odd parties. 'I had a paper round when I was your age. I needed the cash. Mum didn't understand about my needing hair straighteners.'

Harry has loads of hair. When she isn't silver, she looks like Rapunzel, or one of those cartoon princesses. Except she has Super Mario tattooed on her bottom, and a tongue piercing, which princesses mostly don't.

'If you promise not to do anything stupid,' said Frank, 'you can work for me.'

Frank looks less like a princess. More like an owl. She's saving up to go to the Antarctic, to look after penguins, and has her own dog-walking business.

'I've got heaps of revision, and my science project to finish,' she went on. 'I could do with some help. There'll be Terms and Conditions, obviously.'

The Terms and Conditions, which Frank printed out and made me sign, meant that:

a) She kept half the money I earned.

b) I had to go to the shop for chocolate and/or cheese and onion crisps whenever she wanted.

c) I had to clean her gerbil out once a week.

The gerbil used to be called Gerald. Then we got to know him. Now he's called Dracula. He has very sharp teeth. And he doesn't like being cleaned out. But I needed the money.

The sign above the Sweet Shop door actually says 'Filling & Dentcher's Corner Emporium: Whatever You Want, We've Got It'. Because they have tall glass jars of every kind of sweet, and weigh them out for you in little paper bags, everyone just calls it the Sweet Shop. I was there on a Cheese and Onion Crisp Mission for Frank when I noticed the card in the window. Written in squiggly green writing, it was tucked in between an ad for a used toaster ('Nearly works, bargain price') and a blurry photo of a fat tabby with white paws ('Have you seen Snuffy? £100 Reward'):

HELP WANTED
INTEREST IN WILDLIFE NECESSARY
MUST BE THE RIGHT PERSON
APPLY TO MRS LIND, WORMESTALL FARM
NO SQUAMOPHOBES

I looked at it for quite a long time, until I knew the words off by heart.

I had to wait to pay for the crisps. Crazy Daisy was buying her Lottery tickets. Daisy has bright, beady eyes and hair like rice noodles under a woolly hat with ear flaps, which she wears all the time, even in summer. She lives on a bench in

the park with her little dog, Doom, and shouts at people about it being the End of the World. Sometimes they throw her their spare change. She spends it all on the Lottery. I don't know why. What's the point of winning a million pounds, if the world's about to end?

Daisy was paying for three Lottery tickets and an egg sandwich, counting out pennies and 2p coins, one by one. It was going to be a long wait. I had nothing else to do, so I read the front page of the Squermington Echo.

Nothing much happens in Squermington. *Public Toilets Closed For Redecoration.* So what? *Gorgeous Gardens Competition.* Yawn. *Missing pets! Pet-nap Gang At Large? Police Warn Pet Owners To Be On Their Guard.* They were welcome to gerbil-nap Dracula, nasty, bitey little hairball: the sooner the better. *Giant Reptile Sighted! Is this the return of the Squermington Wyrm? Full story on page 3 ...*

Now that was more like it. I turned to page 3:

Miss Holly Sparrow and her friend, Miss Ruby Jenkins, claim to have seen the tail end of a very large snake-like animal as they were passing Squermington Library on their way home from the cinema on Friday night.

'We only saw the tail,' said Holly. 'But it was massive. Awesome. Ruby nearly wet herself, she was that scared. Then it sort of slithered off behind the fish and chip shop, and we ran away.'

No large animals have been reported missing from any zoos, pet shops or wildlife parks.

Could this mystery animal have anything to do with the legend of the Squermington Wyrm, the ferocious, flesh-eating monster that had local people living in terror more than a thousand years ago?

'Are you going to buy that newspaper, or what?'

Behind the counter, Mrs Filling was glaring at me. I put the paper back on the rack, and paid for Frank's crisps. Out on the pavement again, I took one last look at the Help Wanted card, and frowned. I was sure it had been written in green ink. A trick of the light, maybe. Either that or I was going mad. Because, now, that loopy, spidery handwriting was most definitely purple.

'There'll be fire and brimstone and plagues of frogs and we're all doomed,' said a hoarse voice behind me. There was a strong smell of hard-boiled egg. Daisy was feeding bits of sandwich to Doom. 'You'll see. It's The End.'

But Daisy was wrong. It was just the beginning.

'What's a squamophobe?' I asked at supper. It was Leftover Broccoli and Baked Bean Thing again. When Dad left, Mum became a herbivore. She murders helpless vegetables and makes us eat them.

Nobody knew what a squamophobe was.

'And where's Wormestall Farm?'

'In the middle of nowhere,' said Mum. 'The other side of Wyvern Chase Woods. Why?'

I explained about the card in the Sweet Shop window.

Help Wanted. Must be the Right Person.

'You're not going all that way on your own,' said Mum. 'Not through those woods. Take one of your sisters.'

'Party,' said Harry, with her mouth full. 'It's fancy dress. I'm going as a tarantula. Lots of legs to make, so I can't be disturbed.'

'I've got homework,' said Frank. 'And you're working for me this weekend, remember?' She jabbed me with her fork. 'Sir Crispin needs walking, and I have a history essay to hand in on Monday.'

'Not Sir Crispin!' I made a face. Sir Crispin is Mrs Poker-Peagrim's pug. Mrs Poker-Peagrim lives down the road from us. She has iron hair and a square face, and smells of cough sweets. Sir Crispin's so fat his fur hardly joins up around his middle, and he snores all the time, even when he's awake. His eyes bulge in a squeezed-frog sort of way. If I was going to choose a dog of my own, I wouldn't choose Sir Crispin.

I very nearly did get a dog, once. Before things got bad, and Dad went away, he said that for my eleventh birthday I could have a pet of my own. Frank had Dracula and a giant African land snail and stick insects in a jar. Harry used to have budgerigars, until she started having boyfriends instead.

'Anything you like,' said Dad. 'What do you want?'

I said I'd like a killer whale.

I'd been wanting one since the summer we went on holiday and Dad took us to Dolphin Park. Mum and the girls had gone all gooey over the dolphins. But I liked the

killer whale.

You can't keep a killer whale in a semi-detached house, though. Mum and Dad argued about a lot of things, but not that.

'How about a puppy?' suggested Dad.

I said yes to the puppy – who wouldn't? – but it never happened. The arguments got louder, then Dad wasn't there any more. I got football boots for my birthday, and a new pencil case for school.

'Can't I walk Tyson instead?' I begged Frank. Tyson's a Rottweiler. That's about as close as you can get to being a killer whale and still be a dog.

'Don't be stupid,' said Frank. 'You're not big enough. And there's not much point you going to this farm place. They're hardly going to think you're the Right Person. A snotty-nosed kid?'

'My nose is not snotty. Yours is. And another thing,' I said quickly, before she could say anything back, 'what's the Squermington Wyrm?'

'What?' Mum laughed. 'That old story? Way back in the Dark Ages there was supposed to be a dragon, or some such thing, living in Wyvern Chase Woods. It ate all the cows and the sheep and the farmers' daughters, until everybody was so fed up they decided to get together one night, with their pitchforks and axes and burning torches, and hunt it down.'

'What happened? Did they kill it?'

'I've no idea. Probably some brave knight turned up on a white horse, and did it for them. That's what usually

happens, isn't it? Like Saint George.'

'Yeah,' said Frank. 'I bet Saint George didn't have a snotty nose.'

'I'll tell you something,' said Mum, staring hard at my plate. 'I bet he ate his broccoli ...'

