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Opening extract from

Them

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Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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For Brennan

First published in 2006 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

This edition first published 2013

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ISBN: 978-1-78112-209-9

Printed in China by Leo

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Chapter 1
Home Sweet Home

"Put those boxes in the kitchen, please," Mum said to the removal men. Then, as they stacked the boxes next to the fridge, she turned to me. Her face looked tense. "Kylie, you could help, instead of just standing around."

She didn't say, 'This is all your fault anyway.' But I knew that was what she was thinking.

I felt as if I might cry, but I shrugged as if I wasn't bothered. "What? D'you want me to start moving boxes around or something?"

"No, but you could start unpacking them!" Mum walked out of the open front door of the flat, and I heard her shout down the stairs. "Could you be careful with that, please?"

I shook my brown hair out of its ponytail, then pulled it back up again. I looked around me. Our new flat was full of dark, gloomy bits of furniture. The landlord had filled it with stuff that no one else wanted. But the walls had just been painted. That was the only bright thing about the rooms.

My little sister Gemma was messing about in the back of the flat somewhere. Now she came into the lounge. She was holding a Barbie that had a pink skirt on and nothing else. Gemma looked sulky. "I hate it here," she said and thumped Barbie onto the sofa. "It smells."

It did, too. The flat smelled of damp and old cat pee. I started to say something nice, but suddenly Gemma screwed her face up and threw the Barbie at me, as hard as she could.

"I hate you!" she cried. "We would never have had to move here if it wasn't for you!" She ran into one of the bedrooms and banged the door shut after her.

Mum came in again. She looked annoyed. "Kylie, what – "

"Nothing! I'm going for a walk." I shoved past one of the removal men and ran down the stairs.

I slowed down once I got outside. Was it my fault that we had to leave our house and come and live in a flat in town? I thought about how Dan had shouted at me, how he had shoved his face up next to mine so that I could smell the whisky on his breath and feel flecks of his spit hitting my cheeks. I shivered at the thought of him, even though it was September, and still warm.

Alongside our block of flats was a narrow footpath. It was muddy and overgrown. I kicked a beer can out of my way as I walked down it. I came round the corner and saw the path led to some allotments.

I stared at the patchwork of small gardens and began to feel a little better. It was the only bit of green I had seen since we left home to go to the shelter six weeks ago. That was before we came here. There hadn't been anything green at the shelter. It had been awful there, even if they

had tried to make it all cheery and welcoming. The gate into the allotments was locked. I shook it, and it rattled. Should I climb over it? I looked around. There was no one about.

A moment later I was over the gate and walking around the allotments. I breathed in deeply, drinking in the smell of plants and earth. After a bit, I sat down on an old wooden bench and pulled my legs up under me.

There were so many new things in my life that I didn't want to think about. Like our new flat, which wasn't new but old and grotty. And the new term at school, which started tomorrow. I felt sick when I thought about it. My old school had been bad enough – what would this one be like? It had looked awful when Mum drove me past it yesterday, like a prison camp.

I heard a clinking sound, and I spun round. Someone was unlocking the gate! A few seconds later, a boy with fair hair and glasses walked in. He was carrying a big fork and a bucket. He stopped when he saw me.

"Who are you? You don't have an allotment here."

I stood up and wiped my hands on my jeans. "Um – I'm Kylie. I was just looking around."

The boy kept staring. *What a geek!* What was he looking at? "Look, I'll just go," I said and I started to move past him. He put out a hand to stop me.

"No, wait – I was just asking, that's all. My name's Adam." He held out his hand. It was long and thin, like the rest of him.

His face was covered in spots, half of them about to burst. I shook his hand slowly and wished I'd never come in here. "Hi. Um, maybe I should go now …"

"Are you new here?" Adam said and he pushed his glasses straight with a finger.

I gave a sigh. OK, I was going to have to talk to him. "Yeah, we just moved in." I pointed to our block of flats, and he grinned.

"Really? Those are my flats, too. I live there with my mum."

Oh, great. "Yeah, brilliant. Well – "

"Do you want to help me weed my mum's allotment?" Adam asked. He swung his fork to

and fro. "Come on, it's easy. See, these are the weeds." He walked over to one of the square patches of garden and knelt down.

He didn't look up to see if I'd followed. Somehow I found myself walking over to him. "I don't really like gardening," I said.

The sun glinted off his glasses as he peered up at me. "What were you doing in here, then?"

I shrugged. I didn't feel like telling him anything. Suddenly I had an idea. "Oh, I don't know. The voices in my head told me to come. I always do what the voices in my head tell me," I said.

Adam looked hard at me. I could see he was worried.

"That was a *joke*," I told him.

"Oh." He blinked. "Sure, I knew that."

I bet he didn't have any friends at all. Which meant that we might have a lot in common, if this school was as bad as my last one. I knelt down on the ground and pulled at a weed. I yanked it out hard and it came up, with lots of earth on its roots.

"I'm not really into gardening, either," said Adam after a moment. "I'm a scientist."

A scientist, right. He was *my* age. "Really?" I said.

He nodded. "Yeah, I love science. In fact, I've just made a water clock that can tell the time to the nearest ten minutes. I did it all myself. I had the idea of trying to make the water run more slowly and …"

He went on and on about his stupid water clock. "What do you do for fun?" I asked. I stood up and brushed the earth off my jeans. "Or do you just do science all day?"

Adam bent down to pull up some weeds. "No, I do lots of things for fun," he said. "Like, I read loads of science fiction."

I tried not to laugh. "Science fiction, huh? I better go now," I said and I headed for the gate before Adam could stop me again.

As I pushed it open, he shouted after me, "It was nice meeting you!"

'God, what an idiot!' I thought.

Mum was outside on the road when I got back. She was holding Gemma by the hand. Her face was red and she looked fed up. "Where were you?" she asked.

"Nowhere," I told her. I hoped my jeans weren't all covered in earth.

Gemma stuck her tongue out at me. 'I hate you,' she mouthed without making a sound.

****

That night I lay awake for hours in the tiny room I had to share with Gemma. I listened to her slow breathing, and the sound of traffic rumbling past. A street light shone just outside our window. It gave the room an orange glow. Everything felt so odd.

In the end, I got up and opened one of the boxes I hadn't had time to unpack. Edward lay there, looking up at me – the old, old teddy bear that my dad had given me when I was just a baby. My *real* dad, I mean. Not Dan.

I took him out, and crawled back into my bed. I know it's babyish, but sometimes when I'm upset or can't sleep, it helps to have Edward with

me. I can hardly remember my dad, but when I hold Edward, it's almost like he comes back to me. I put my arms round the bear's furry middle and gave a long sigh.

I fell asleep as I was cuddling him. It was as if I could still smell my dad as I hugged Edward's worn fur.