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opening extract from

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Anthony Horowitz

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For Nicholas

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ROAD SENSE

The girl didn't look before crossing the road.

That was what the driver said later. She didn't look left or right. She'd seen a friend on the opposite pavement and she simply walked across to join him, not noticing that the lights had turned green, forgetting that this was always a busy junction and that this was four o'clock in the afternoon when people were trying to get their work finished, hurrying on their way home. The girl just set off without thinking. She didn't so much as glimpse the white van heading towards her at fifty miles an hour.

But that was typical of Scarlett Adams. She always was a bit of a dreamer, the sort of person who'd act first and then think about what she'd done only when it was far too late. The hockey ball that she had tried to thwack over the school roof, but which had instead gone straight through the headmistress's window. The groundsman she had pushed, fully clothed, into the swimming pool. It might have been a good idea to check first that he could swim. The twenty-metre tree she'd climbed up, only to realize that there was no possible way back down.

Fortunately, her school made allowances. It helped that

Scarlett was generally popular, was liked by most of the teachers and even if she was never top of the class, managed to be never too near the bottom. Where she really excelled was at sports. She was captain of the hockey team (despite the occasional misfires), a strong tennis player and an all-round winner when it came to summer athletics. No school will give too much trouble to someone who brings home the trophies and Scarlett was responsible for a whole clutch of them.

The school was called St Genevieve's and from the outside it could have been a stately home or perhaps a private hospital for the very rich. It stood in its own grounds, set back from the road, with ivy growing up the walls, sash windows and a bell tower perched on top of the roof. The uniform, it was generally agreed, was the most hideous in England: a mauve dress, a yellow jersey and, in summer months, a straw hat. Everyone hated the straw hats. In fact it was a tradition for every girl to set the wretched thing on fire on their last day.

St Genevieve's was a private school, one of many that were clustered together in the centre of Dulwich, in South London. It was a strange part of the world and everyone who lived there knew it. To the west there was Streatham and to the east Sydenham, both areas with high-rise flats, drugs and knife crime. But in Dulwich, everything was green. There were old-fashioned tea shops, the sort that spelled themselves "shoppes", and flower baskets hanging off the lampposts. Most of the cars seemed to be four-by-fours and the mothers who drove them were all on first-name terms. Dulwich College, Dulwich Preparatory School, Alleyn's, St Genevieve's … they were only a stone's throw away from each other, but of course

nobody threw stones at each other. Not in this part of town.

It was obvious from her appearance that Scarlett hadn't been born in England. Her parents might be Mr and Mrs Typical-Dulwich – her mother tall, blonde and elegant, her father looking like the lawyer he always had been, with greying hair, a round face and glasses – but she looked nothing like them. Scarlett had long black hair, strange hazel-green eyes and the soft brown skin of a girl born in China, Hong Kong or some other part of Central Asia. She was slim and small with a dazzling smile that had got her out of trouble on many occasions. She wasn't their real daughter. Everyone knew that. She had known it herself from the earliest age.

She had been adopted. Paul and Vanessa Adams were unable to have children of their own and they had found her in an orphanage in Jakarta. Nobody knew how she had got there. The identity of her birth mother was a mystery. Scarlett tried not to think about her past, where she had come from, but she often wondered what would have happened if the couple who had come all the way from London had chosen the baby in cot seven or nine rather than cot eight. Might she have ended up planting rice somewhere in Indonesia or sewing Nike trainers in some city sweatshop? It was enough to make her shudder … the thought alone.

Instead of which, she found herself living with her parents in a quiet street, just round the corner from North Dulwich station which was in turn about a fifteen-minute walk from her school. Her father, Paul Adams, specialized in international business law. Her mother, Vanessa, ran a holiday company that put together packages in China and the Far East. The two of

them were so busy that they seldom had time for Scarlett – or indeed, for each other. From the time Scarlett had been five, they had employed a full-time housekeeper to look after all of them. Christina Murdoch was short, dark-haired and seemed to have no sense of humour at all. She had come to London from Glasgow and her father was a vicar. Apart from that, Scarlett knew little about her. The two of them got on well enough, but they had both agreed without actually saying it that they were never going to be friends.

One of the good things about living in Dulwich was that Scarlett did have plenty of friends and they all lived very nearby. There were two girls from her class in the same street and there was also a boy – Aidan Ravitch – just five minutes away. It was Aidan who had prompted her to cross the road.

Aidan was in his second year at The Hall, yet another local private school, and had come to London from Los Angeles. He was tall for his age and good-looking in a relaxed, awkward sort of way, with shaggy hair and slightly crumpled features. There was no uniform at his school and he wore the same hoodie, jeans and trainers day in day out. Aidan didn't understand the English. He claimed to be completely mystified by such things as football, tea and *Dr Who*. English policemen in particular baffled him. "Why do they have to wear those stupid hats?" He was Scarlett's closest friend, although both of them knew that Aidan's father worked for an American bank and could be transferred back home any day. Meanwhile, they spent as much time together as they could.

The accident happened on a warm, summer afternoon. Scarlett was thirteen at the time.

It was a little after four and Scarlett was on her way home from school. The very fact that she was allowed to walk home on her own meant a lot to her. It was only on her last birthday that her parents had finally relented … until then, they had insisted that Mrs Murdoch should meet her at the school gates every day, even though there were far younger girls who were allowed to face the perils of Dulwich High Street without an armed escort. She had never been quite sure what they were so worried about. There was no chance of her getting lost. Her route took her past a flower shop, an organic grocer's and a pub – The Crown and Greyhound – where she might spot a few old men, sitting in the sun with their lemonade shandies. There were no drug dealers, no child snatchers or crazed killers in the immediate area. And she was hardly on her own anyway. From half past three onwards, the streets were crowded with boys and girls streaming in every direction, on their way home.

She had reached the traffic lights on the other side of the village – where five roads met with shops on one side, a primary school on the other – when she noticed him. Aidan was on his own, listening to music. She could see the familiar white wires trailing down from his ears. He saw her, smiled, and called out her name. Without thinking, she began to walk towards him.

The van was being driven by a twenty-five-year-old delivery man called Michael Logue. He would have to give all his details to the police later on. He was delivering spare parts to a sewing machine factory in Bickley and, thanks to the London traffic, he was late. He was almost certainly speeding as he approached the junction. But on the other hand, the lights were definitely green.

Scarlett was about half-way across when she saw him and by that time it was far too late. She saw Aidan's eyes widen in shock and that made her turn her head, wanting to know what it was that he had seen. She froze. The van was almost on top of her. She could see the driver, staring at her from behind the wheel, his face filled with horror, knowing what was about to happen, unable to do anything about it. The van seemed to be getting bigger and bigger as it drew closer. Even as she watched, it completely filled her vision.

And then everything happened at once.

Aidan shouted out. The driver frantically spun the wheel. The van tilted. And Scarlett found herself being thrown forward, out of the way, as something – or someone – smashed into her back with incredible force. She wanted to cry out but her breath caught in her throat and her knees buckled underneath her. Somewhere in her mind she was aware that a passer-by had leapt off the pavement and that he was trying to save her. His arm was around her waist, his shoulder and head pressed into the small of her back. But how had he managed to get to her so fast? Even if he had seen the van coming and sprinted towards her immediately, he surely wouldn't have reached her in time. He seemed to know what was going to happen almost before it did.

The van shot past, missing her by inches. She actually felt the warm breeze slap her face and smelled the petrol fumes. There had been two books in her hand: a French dictionary and a maths exercise book … an hour and a half's homework for the evening ahead. As she was carried forward, her hand and arm jerked, out of control, and the books were hurled into the air,

landing on the road and sliding across the tarmac as if she had deliberately thrown them away. Scarlett followed them. With the man still grabbing hold of her, she came crashing down. There was a moment of sharp pain as she hit the ground and all the skin was taken off one knee. Behind her, there was the screech of tyres, a blast of a horn and then the ominous sound of metal hitting metal. A car alarm went off. Scarlett lay still.

For what felt like a whole minute, nobody did anything. It was as if someone had taken a photograph and framed it with a sign reading ACCIDENT IN DULWICH. Then Scarlett sat up and twisted round. The man who had saved her was lying stretched out in the road and she was only aware that he was Chinese, in his twenties, with black hair, and that he was wearing jeans and a loose-fitting jacket. She looked past him. The white van had swerved round a traffic island, mounted the pavement and smashed into a car parked in front of the primary school. It was this car's alarm that had gone off. The driver of the van was slumped over the wheel, his head covered in broken glass.

She turned back. A crowd had already formed – perhaps it had been there from the start – and people were hurrying towards her, rushing past Aidan, who seemed to be rooted to the spot. He was shaking his head as if denying that he had been to blame. There were twenty or thirty school kids, some of them already taking photographs with their mobile phones. A policeman had appeared so quickly that he could have popped out of a trapdoor in the pavement. He was the first to reach Scarlett.

"Are you all right? Don't try to move…"

Scarlett ignored him. She put out a hand for support and

eased herself back onto her feet. Her knee was on fire and her shoulder felt as if it had been beaten with an iron club, but she was already fairly sure that she hadn't been seriously hurt.

She looked at Aidan, then at the white van. A few people were already helping the driver out, laying him on the pavement. Steam was rising out of the crumpled bonnet. Next to her, the policeman was speaking urgently into his shoulder mike, doing all the stuff with Delta Bravo Oscar Charlie, summoning help.

Finally, Aidan made it over to her. "Scarl…?" That was his name for her. "Are you OK?"

She nodded, suddenly tearful without knowing why. Maybe it was just the shock, the knowledge of what could have been. She wiped her face with the back of her hand, noticing that her nails were grimy and all her knuckles were grazed. Her dress was torn. She realized she must look a wreck.

"You were nearly killed…!" Why was Aidan telling her that? She had more or less worked it out for herself.

Even so, his words reminded her of the man who had saved her. She looked down and was surprised to see that he was no longer there. For a moment she thought that it was a conjuring trick, that he had simply vanished into thin air. Then she saw him, already on the far side of the road – the side that she had been heading towards – hurrying past the shops. He reached a hair salon on the corner, where a woman with hair that was too blonde to be true had just come out. He pushed past her and then he was gone.

Why? He hadn't even stayed long enough to be thanked.

After that, things unravelled more slowly. An ambulance

arrived and although Scarlett didn't need it, the van driver had to be put on a stretcher and carried away. Scarlett herself was examined but nothing was broken and in the end she was allowed to go home. Aidan went with her. A WPC accompanied them both. Scarlett wondered how that would go down with Mrs Murdoch. Somehow she knew it wasn't going to mean laughter and back-slapping at bedtime.

In fact, the accident had several consequences.

Paul and Vanessa Adams were told what had happened when they got home that night and as soon as they had got over the shock, the knowledge of how close they had come to losing their only child, they began to argue about whose fault it was: their own for allowing Scarlett too much freedom, Aidan for distracting her, or Scarlett for showing so little road sense, even at the age of thirteen. In the end, they decided that in future Mrs Murdoch would take up her old position at the school gates. It would be another nine months before Scarlett was allowed to walk home on her own again.

The identity of the man who had saved her remained a mystery. Where had he come from? How had he seen what was about to happen? Why had he been in such a hurry to get away? Mrs Murdoch decided that he must be an illegal immigrant, that he had taken off at the sight of the approaching policeman. For her part, Scarlett was just sorry that she hadn't been able to thank him. And if he was in some sort of trouble, she would have liked to have helped him.

That was the night she had her first dream.

Scarlett had never been one for vivid dreams. Normally she got home, ate, did her homework, spent forty minutes on her

PlayStation 3 and then plunged into a deep, empty sleep that would be ended all too quickly by Mrs Murdoch, shaking her awake for the start of another school day. But this dream was more than vivid. It was so realistic, so detailed that it was almost like being inside a film. And there was something else that was strange about it. As far as she could see, it had no connection to her life or to anything that had happened during the day.

She dreamed that she was in a grey-lit world that might be another planet … the moon perhaps. In the distance, she could see a vast ocean stretching out to the horizon and beyond – but there were no waves. The surface of the water could have been a single sheet of metal. Everything was dead. She was surrounded by sand-dunes – at least, that was what she thought they were, but they were actually made of dust. They had somehow blown there and – like the dust on the moon – it would stay the same forever. She walked forward. But she left no footprints.

There were four boys standing together, a short distance away.

The boys were searching for her. If she listened carefully, she could actually hear them calling her name. She tried to call back, but although there was no wind, not even a breeze, something snatched the words away.

The boys weren't real. They couldn't be… Scarlett had never seen them before. And yet somehow she was sure that she knew their names.

Scott. Jamie. Pedro. And Matt.

She knew them from somewhere. They had met before.

That was the first time, but over the next two years she had the same dream again and again. And gradually, it began to change. It seemed to her that every time she saw the boys, they

were a little further away until finally she had to get used to the fact that she was completely on her own. Every time she went to sleep, she found herself hoping she would see them. More than that. She needed to meet them.

She never spoke about her dreams, not even to Aidan. But somewhere in the back of her mind she knew that finding the four boys had become the single most important thing in her life.