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Opening extract from

Knightley and Son

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Prologue
THE CODE

He opened the cover and found the first page. The book felt substantial and had a good weight to it, despite being slim enough for the casual reader. The cover had a striking symbol and a catchy title: *The Code*. It felt both old and new. He rarely read outside of the classroom, but this book was strangely inviting. Besides, he'd heard it was good from all the buzz on the internet.

He traced his finger over the first sentence. It was clear and concise:

Change your life now.

Intrigued, he continued reading.

You hold the key to unlocking your future, your power, your potential. 'The Code' has been handed down over thousands of years

in order to find its way into your hands right now.

Lee clamped his knees tightly around the school bag at his feet, and shuffled into a private corner between two book displays. He didn't want to be interrupted. He looked around, making a brief survey of the other customers. What if one of his classmates saw him? It was a self-help book after all. He could always blame it on his mum – and Christmas wasn't far away. She might want to read it too. He loosened the tie of his school uniform, twanged his dental braces and kept reading.

The wise always listen to their inner voice, because it's the sound of the universe speaking to you. And it never lies. The voice is telling you that whatever you want can be yours, if you want it enough . . .

Inner voice? His mum would have a fit if she found this on his bedside table. But it felt good. And as the book said, if it feels good, it must be right.

His eyes scanned over the sentences, faster and faster, flicking from left to right and back again. He could almost

feel it working on him, sending tiny electrical charges around his head, unlocking his potential and delivering a pleasant shiver of excitement at the same time. He suddenly saw it all clearly: success, fame and his wildest dreams come true. This was the moment he would remember when he was lying on a beach somewhere, with perfect teeth. He kept reading voraciously, covering the first few pages in less than a minute, consuming every last piece of wisdom the text had to offer. Then he stopped.

'Ouch!'

He felt a sting as he turned the page. A paper cut? But there wasn't any blood.

Then he noticed it, crawling away from the spine, towards the corner of the page: a scorpion. Just like the one from biology class. He blinked. It couldn't be. But the black creature continued scuttling across the margin, making a clicking sound, and dropped over the edge.

He stared at the book, transfixed, as another bug emerged from behind the cover; then a centipede calmly headed in the opposite direction. A spider followed it: a big one, draped in brittle hair. And another insect he didn't even recognise. And another.

'Wha–?'

Lee dropped the book as a swarm of insects fell out of the pages, turning it into a black, moving mass. It hummed with activity, the chorus of a hundred tiny

clicks, as all manner of creatures came spilling out of it.

'Someone . . . help!'

He backed away from the display stand, tripping over his school bag, splaying his arms to regain his balance.

He looked down at his hands and saw more insects appearing from his shirtsleeves, running up the arms of his school uniform.

'Help me!'

He half fell through another display, sending rows of new releases collapsing to the floor. His yells escalated to full-blown screams as the insects covered his whole body, racing up his tie, inside his collar, secreting themselves on his person, burrowing into every corner.

Other customers spun round, confused, awoken from their browsing.

A shop assistant quickly moved away from the cash register to locate the source of the disturbance.

Lee was writhing on the floor, surrounded by books, clawing at his clothes and kicking his legs in all directions, fighting off an unseen enemy. The shop assistant broke through the circle of onlookers, quickly assessed the situation, then knelt down and tried to place a book between the boy's teeth.

'G-get them off me!' Lee cried out, desperately pointing all round himself.

The onlookers stared down at him, baffled, then

exchanged concerned glances – because he was pointing into thin air. There was no enemy attacking him. There was nothing there.

Away from the gathering crowd and the overturned displays, a copy of *The Code* sat forgotten on the floor, clean and inviting, its glossy cover and symbol reflecting in the fluorescent lighting.

Chapter 1
THE KNIGHTLEYS

In a private room in a quiet garden suburb outside London, Alan Knightley slept a dreamless sleep. This condition was not unusual for a patient who had been asleep for over four years. Experts said he was somewhere between a coma and a trance. Some such patients dreamed and some did not – at least, that was according to the ones fortunate enough to wake up.

Although he was forty-eight years old, Knightley still had a freshness and youth about his face, with no grey hair to speak of. The doctors assumed this was due to the sheer amount of uninterrupted rest he'd enjoyed during his interminable stay at Shrubwoods Hospice. Despite an occasional flutter of the eyelids, or an even more occasional grunt, he showed no sign of waking up any time soon.

Several tubes and wires protruded from the sleeves of his gown, running along the side of the bed, connecting

to an intravenous drip and an ECG machine, which displayed a pulsing green line resembling a distant mountain range. At the end of the bed, a clipboard read: *Knightley, Alan*.

His hair was neatly combed back to reveal sharp, if not conventionally handsome, features. He had a wide, knowledgeable brow; an angular nose interrupted by two slight bumps that indicated he had, on occasion, encountered opponents who could not be reasoned with; and a jaw that was proud and composed even while unconscious.

His room had an old TV angled the wrong way, and beyond that a window looked out over neatly manicured lawns, hedges and a dense outcrop of trees. There was only one picture on the wall: a child's painting of a father and son, which made up for its lack of formal skill with its bold use of colour and unusual attention to detail. Both figures wore a suit and tie: the father's suit was red and the son's green.

Darkus Knightley, the smaller figure from the picture, sat patiently by his father's bedside. He was older now, but he wasn't embarrassed by the painting that hung over him. It reminded him of how far he'd come in the past four years, leading up to his thirteenth birthday – a hollow affair that had taken place a month earlier. His father, on the other hand, was still lying in the exact

same position he always did, impervious to the passage of time, hardly moving a muscle: the cause of his condition as yet unknown.

As chance would have it, Darkus was wearing green, just like in the picture; to be precise, it was a forest-green tweed waistcoat and jacket ensemble that was somewhat ahead of his years. His shoes were highly polished brogues. His sharp blue eyes, neatly parted hair and angular nose and ears also seemed in advance of his years – certainly different from your average thirteen-year-old.

Without warning, he began to speak aloud, apparently from memory, for there was no printed matter in evidence.

'Last week I examined the Curious Case of the Amber Necklace,' Darkus began. 'I found the line of reasoning clear and well laid out, but its conclusions were lacking.' He paused and watched his father's closed eyelids for any kind of response. Seeing none, he continued. 'If there *was* a larger organisation responsible for its disappearance, I see no hard evidence to prove it . . .' He paused again, watching his father the way a fisherman watches the still surface of a lake, waiting for a ripple that means the bait has been taken. He received no such ripple.

What he did receive, however, was an audible signal

from outside the door: a minute squeak from the linoleum, as if someone had been standing outside, possibly even eavesdropping on him. Darkus turned his head to the door and saw a small circle of mist on the porthole window. Someone had most certainly been watching him, but he told himself that in all likelihood it was only a concerned member of the nursing staff. He checked his simple Timex watch, which confirmed his time was up. Besides, he had an event to attend that evening.

'That concludes my report for today,' he announced. Then he added gently, 'Sleep tight, Dad.'

On cue, a female nurse opened the door with no attempt to be quiet. She had stopped bothering with details like that a few years ago.

'Same time next week then?' she asked Darkus.

'Yes-yes,' he answered softly, then collected his herringbone coat and Donegal tweed walking hat and quietly left the room.

Chapter 2
WORDPLAY

By that evening, a thick fog had rolled across the south-east, moving through the dense woodland and over the substantial grounds of Cranston School. The classrooms were empty, the rows of desks faintly lit by lamp posts standing along the perimeter. The fog gathered around the facade of the main building, creeping over the railings towards a modern structure set back from the rest.

The assembly hall stood out like a beacon, its windows giving off a good-natured glow. A murmur of activity came from inside as some two hundred pupils and parents sat facing a wide, raised stage. The pupils were all in civilian clothes, including a small group in designer hooded tops skulking near the back of the room.

A male teacher in a patterned sweater stood at the side of the stage holding a microphone. Behind the lectern, three teenage pupils sat waiting their turn: a boy in jeans and a T-shirt, a girl in leggings and a black

leather jacket, and a familiar figure in a green tweed waistcoat and jacket ensemble.

'Darkus Knightley, prepare to spell,' the teacher announced.

Darkus stood up and approached the lectern. He looked upward and to the right, unconsciously holding the mic stand for moral support.

The teacher held his own microphone close. 'Your word is . . .' He paused enigmatically, then said, 'Zarzuela.'

The audience whispered the word to each other, exchanging glances.

The teacher repeated it once more for dramatic effect: 'Zarzuela.'

The audience went quiet.

Darkus focused his gaze on the upper right of the auditorium, briefly closed his eyes, then responded: 'Z-a-r-z-u-e-l-a. Zarzuela. A Spanish opera noted for its spoken dialogue and comic subject matter.'

The teacher nodded. 'Correct.'

The audience applauded, except for the hooded tops who remained indifferent near the back of the room.

The teacher added, 'The definition is not strictly necessary, Darkus, but I won't object. Thank you.'

Darkus nodded and returned to his seat, unmoved by the applause. He made brief eye contact with his mum and stepdad, who were seated in the middle of the

audience, dressed in smart casual clothes. Darkus returned his attention to his waistcoat as the teacher announced the next name.

'Gary Evans, prepare to spell.' The boy in the jeans and T-shirt approached the microphone. 'Your word is . . . yosenabe,' said the teacher, then repeated the word for effect.

The boy gripped the mic stand and stared dead ahead into the crowd. 'Y-o-s- . . .' he stammered, 'e-n-a-b-y? Yosenaby?'

The teacher paused then shook his head. 'I'm afraid that is incorrect. The correct spelling is: y-o-s-e-n-a-b-*e*. A soup consisting of seafood and vegetables cooked in a broth. You can leave the stage, Gary.'

The audience clapped respectfully. Gary hung his head and exited the stage, avoiding the gaze of his parents huddled together applauding in the front row.

'Tilly Palmer, prepare to spell.'

The thirteen-year-old girl in the black leather jacket approached the microphone, and a murmur rippled through the crowd, as if her reputation preceded her. Her hair was jet black with blue lowlights – although it had a tendency to change colour dramatically and without warning, for no reason that Darkus could deduce, and to the consternation of the school authorities.

Darkus's relationship with Tilly was complicated for

several reasons. Firstly, she was the daughter of his father's former assistant, Carol. Secondly, Carol had died in a tragic car accident six years ago – a year before Darkus's own parents split up. Thirdly – and most unexpectedly – the world had conspired to bring together Darkus's divorced mum and Tilly's widowed father.

As a result, Tilly had become his stepsister.

'Tilly, your word is . . . logorrhoea,' the teacher announced. 'If you answer correctly, you're in with a chance to win the competition.'

Tilly narrowed her eyes in concentration.

Darkus watched from his seat, feeling no sense of competition – quite the opposite in fact. Tilly had performed admirably throughout the heats; she had a broad, often incisive knowledge of a variety of subjects, drawn from many long hours spent browsing the internet. This was partly down to the fact that her father had temporarily confined her to Cranston as a boarder after she ran away from home once too often. More than anyone, including himself, she deserved to win. Darkus interlaced his fingers and waited for her to answer.

'L-o-g-o-r- . . . r-h-o-e-a. Logorrhoea,' she recited. 'Pathologically incoherent and repetitious speech.'

The teacher nodded. 'Correct.'

The crowd rippled with applause, which was quickly overtaken by the customary murmuring that followed

Tilly like a shadow. She returned to her seat without expression, imperceptibly glancing at Darkus as she went.

'Darkus, prepare to spell. Your word is . . . abalone.'

Darkus arrived at the microphone, staring up and to the right again. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tilly behind him, shifting in her seat.

The teacher repeated, 'Abalone.'

Darkus began, 'A-b-a-l-o-n. Abalon.' He turned to the teacher.

The teacher looked up, surprised. 'I'm afraid that is *in*correct, Darkus. Abalone is A-b- . . .'

As the teacher correctly spelled the word, Darkus noticed Tilly react, bemused, from behind him. The teacher read the definition and Darkus unconsciously whispered the words along with him, for he was well aware of both the meaning and spelling of 'abalone'.

'A mollusc of the genus Haliotis with a bowl-like shell and a row of respiratory holes,' the teacher advised him.

Darkus nodded and returned to his seat, closely examined by Tilly.

'Tilly, prepare to spell for the competition. Your word is . . . vivisepulture . . .'

As Tilly approached the mic, Darkus's mind drifted off a bit. He knew she would get this one. Vivisepulture: the act of being buried alive. Hardly the most uplifting end to the competition, but a common occurrence in

the annals of crime, at least according to his research. In fact, he had only just read about the heinous custom in his father's account of the Incident of the Missing Headstone.

'V-i-v-i- . . .' she began, then glanced off at Darkus with some suspicion, then continued, '. . . s-e-p-u-l-t-u-r-e. Vivisepulture.'

Before the teacher could confirm the result, Darkus had already started clapping.

'That is correct,' the teacher announced.

The audience reluctantly broke into applause, temporarily drowning out the murmuring. Darkus quietly made his way offstage, away from the commotion.

Tilly squinted behind the lectern as flashbulbs captured the moment. A second teacher arrived carrying a trophy.

Audience members began filing out of the auditorium. Darkus made his way up the aisle towards the back of the room.

'Hey, Dorkus,' said one of the hooded tops, leering at him. 'Better luck next time.'

'Thanks,' he answered politely.

Unfortunately his name was perfectly suited to a number of less than flattering alterations and abbreviations. If it wasn't for this moniker he could have faded even further into the dull backdrop of school life, which was his preferred position: out of sight, out of mind. The name was

by all accounts his father's idea, not his mother's – as she reminded him on a regular basis. Perhaps by way of apology, his father had abbreviated it to 'Doc', which was marginally less of a problem, although Darkus preferred to reserve that name as a term of endearment between him and his dad rather than share it with the school.

For that reason, he hadn't heard the name 'Doc' in almost four years.

'See you around,' the hooded top threatened.

'Not if I see you first,' Darkus whispered to himself, until a hand grabbed his shoulder.

'Hey –' A voice accompanied it.

He turned to find Tilly facing him.

'You let me win,' she said.

Darkus paused a moment, then shook his head. 'There's no empirical proof of that.'

'I don't need proof. I know you did.'

'You were an excellent competitor, Tilly. You won on your own merits.' He bowed his head a little. 'I for one am looking forward to half-term,' he embellished. 'How about you?'

She examined him with her overpoweringly dark eyes, unconvinced by his story.

'Kids . . . ?' A booming male voice broke the moment.

Darkus turned to see his stepdad, Clive, emerge from the crowd. The waist of Clive's jeans appeared to be even

higher than usual, leaving a gap of several inches between the hem of his trouser leg and the tongue of his loafers. This being an occasion of sorts, the sock was an argyle. The outfit was completed by a silver nylon jacket that resembled something an astronaut might have worn during the early days of lunar exploration. Meeting Tilly's stare, Clive modified his tone a bit and unconsciously ran a hand through his nest of curly salt-and-pepper hair:

'Er, Darkus? Your mother wants to get back for the telly,' he lied. 'Unlucky on the spelling test,' he added with a shrug. 'Tilly, you've earned yourself some reward points. I'll reconsider my position on the Xbox.'

Tilly looked at him, unflinching, then reluctantly turned and followed Darkus out of the assembly hall.

At Shrubwoods Hospice, Alan Knightley's chest heaved and sank at long, excruciating intervals, while his eyelids remained defiantly and terminally closed. The female nurse rhythmically raised and lowered Knightley's feet at faster intervals, bending his legs at the knee joint with a loud clicking noise: a thankless ritual she had to perform several times a day to maintain adequate circulation to his extremities.

Behind her, a male doctor entered and examined the patient warily.

'Any improvement?' he asked.

'Nope.'

'Speech function?'

'Not a word.'

The doctor watched the patient, then shook his head. 'Let me know if anything changes.'

'Will do.'

The doctor exited, walking down the corridor.

The nurse waited for her superior's footsteps to recede into the distance, then roughly dropped Knightley's feet on to the bed and checked her watch. Without looking, her hand quickly located the remote control on the side table and pointed it at the TV set. She sat on the lone chair, leaned back and stared up.

The TV flickered to life, showing a panel of judges sitting under a row of spotlights. One by one they rose up in a standing ovation. The nurse lowered the volume, so as not to be heard. On the screen, music reverberated through the studio, only to be drowned out by the cheers of the audience.

'Congratulations,' the first judge announced.

The female contestant shrugged modestly.

The second judge paused for effect. 'I think . . . you might have just the right combination to win this competition.' The applause got louder.

The nurse's eyes glittered as she watched the screen,

as if the praise was for her. Behind her, Knightley's eyelids appeared to flutter, as if he was aware of the commotion. The fingers on his right hand tensed up, seemed to make a gesture for a second, then relaxed.

On TV, the third judge took over: 'I agree. The *combination* of that voice and that performance could take you all the way.' The crowd erupted into applause again.

The nurse shifted on her chair, excited.

Behind her, Knightley flinched. Something the judge had said was having an effect on him. One eye seemed to open, then closed again. His mouth started gaping, as if trying to say something. 'Coh . . .' he whispered, unheard. 'Coh . . .'

On TV, the music started up again as the contestant left the stage. The nurse watched, entranced.

Behind her, Knightley's hand moved again. It was more extreme this time, pointing into space, his mouth clearly trying to articulate a word.

On TV, the music began to die down.

'Coh . . . mm . . .' Knightley's lips jutted out, taking all his effort. 'Combi–'

Suddenly the nurse's pager beeped loudly, startling her. She quickly raised the remote control, clicked off the TV and marched to the door, her white shoes squeaking across the floor.

She did not notice Knightley behind her, now

gesturing wildly with both hands, his tubes getting crossed, straining at their moorings. As she slammed the door behind her, Knightley sat bolt upright in bed and managed to get the word out in one go.

'The Combination!' he said, sounding strangely surprised.

He opened his eyes – or tried to. His left eyelid was sealed shut, giving a sort of pirate impression, the eyelashes bound together by hundreds of hours of sleep. He rubbed them impatiently then both eyes opened, looking alarmed, taking in their surroundings.

'What . . . ?' He inspected the tubes running from his arms and chest. Without thinking, he quickly tore them out. 'Ouch!!' he screamed, and looked around to see if anyone had heard him, but apparently no one had. The ECG machine was flashing an error, but as yet no one seemed to have noticed.

He tried to move but found more tubes under the sheets, rooting him in place. He winced as he disconnected them, then smiled, relieved, and managed to swing his legs out of bed. His toes touched the cold linoleum and flinched slightly. Unperturbed, he adjusted his gown, pressed his soles to the floor and took his first steps.

Knightley's knees buckled and he fell flat on his face. He breathed slowly, performing a series of mental

diagnostics on his body. His hands were functioning, his arms were passable, but his legs were basically useless. There was adequate feeling, but no muscle mass.

He reached out for the foot of the cupboard and used it to drag himself along the floor, creating a deafening squeaking noise of bare skin against linoleum. His features set into a look of grim determination as he reached the cupboard and then stretched out his hand to find purchase on a wall socket. He continued traversing the room like a rock climber, only he was climbing across the floor.

In a nearby corridor, the nurse's pager beeped again. She looked down at it, annoyed. Then a much louder beeping echoed through the whole building. She could not ignore this sound because it was the alarm. She took off down the corridor at a brisk clip, turned the corner and was confronted by something so inexplicable that it momentarily took her breath. The door to Alan Knightley's room was hanging ajar. She had not left it that way. She raced towards it, breaking into a sprint.

She burst into the room to find the bed empty, tubes discarded on the floor, a puddle of intravenous liquid gathering under the bed. The nurse stood gaping as the doctor burst through the door behind her.

'What happened? Where is he?!' The doctor gripped the nurse's arm, breaking her trance.

'I don't know . . .' she responded.

In another wing of the hospice, Knightley staggered down a corridor bow-legged, his limbs barely supporting his body. At the end of the corridor, a walking frame stood discarded outside a recreation room and Knightley grabbed hold of the handlebars. With a lurch, he accelerated down another corridor, wheels rattling.

He reached a staircase and paused, his legs wobbling uncontrollably. He heard voices from the bottom of the stairs.

'He's not in his room? Well, he's not down here.'

The voices were getting closer. Knightley saw a private room on his right and ducked inside. An elderly male patient reclining in the bed looked up from behind an oxygen mask.

'And how are we doing today, Mr . . . ?' Knightley cleared his throat and glanced at the man's clipboard. 'Jones?'

Mr Jones looked up at him, alarmed: this was most certainly *not* his doctor. He moaned loudly, trying to alert the nurses. Knightley spotted a pair of slippers by the bed.

'Mind if I borrow these?' he asked.

The patient groaned in complaint.

'Thanks.' Knightley put them on and raised the sash window behind the bed. With some difficulty he used both hands to lift his leg on to the mattress, stepped

over Mr Jones and slid himself on to the window ledge.

Outside, a strong wind gusted through the trees, lifting Knightley's gown, which he held firmly in place. He stupidly looked down, seeing the manicured lawns and hedges some six or seven metres below. He shivered, feeling goose pimples popping up over his entire body. He willed his slippered feet to inch along the parapet ledge towards a rusted fire escape at the corner of the building. His feet shuffled obediently as the wind kept up, ruffling his hair.

He reached the fire escape, swung his legs over the railing and awkwardly backed down the ladder towards a row of flower beds.

Floodlights flicked on across the grounds. The doctor and several nurses ran out of the main entrance, scanning the area.

'Mr Knightley! Mr Knightley, come back!'

At the edge of the lawn, just beyond the large circles of electric light, a white shape disappeared into a hedge.

Knightley careered headlong through the undergrowth, tearing his gown. The heavens opened up, drenching him in heavy rain. Undaunted, he swung himself over a perimeter fence and found himself on a dimly lit local road. He stumbled along the grassy verge towards a row of neon lamps in the distance.