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Opening extract from

Hacked

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1

You should have seen the look on Soraya's face.

'You bought me credit?'

'Not exactly,' I said.

'Come on, Dan. I've got like fifty quid on my phone out of nowhere.'

I wasn't that keen to spell it out.

'I . . . took advantage of a . . . loophole.'

'You mean . . .'

I nodded – a small nod, understated. No need to crow.

'No way!' She kissed me on the cheek, right by the school gates.

Ty whistled. Juvenile.

'I never thought going out with a computer nerd would come with *benefits*,' she said. Huge smile.

'All in a day's work.' I shrugged as I said it, hating myself for talking in clichés.

'Thanks so much, Dan. Got to go. I'll message you *all* night.'

She wouldn't. Soraya was always at Mia's or Claire's or a hundred other friends' houses. I should have chosen a less social girlfriend, but to be honest, *I* didn't

really choose. She sort of chose me. And even though it was all on her terms, I was happy to go along with it. Big brown eyes, caramel skin, no spots, nice lips – what's not to like?

'Coming?' said Ty.

'Aren't we waiting for Joe?' I said.

'He's climbing.'

We set off home. A lot of our year go to the park but hanging around by the baby swings doesn't do it for me. Or Ty – he's too busy being 'destined for great things'. And Joe – he's just busy. Current fad – bouldering at the climbing centre wearing weird shoes with a separate toe compartment.

'I got my work experience sorted,' said Ty.

'What are you doing, assisting with a lobotomy?'

He wants to be a neurosurgeon, all because he saw an operation on the telly where they cut into someone's brain while they were awake. Gross.

'I'm shadowing Jenna Wade's aunty,' he said. 'She does hip replacements.'

'Start at the bottom,' I said, but he didn't get the joke.

He was made up. Me, I was planning on a week off. That's the thing with hacking. An official email stating I had a placement with a vet, a lawyer, the police (ha!), Tesco's – all within my grasp.

'Saw Soraya all over you,' he said.

'It's nature, Ty. They're attracted to the fittest specimens.'

Pretty funny! I'm anything but. Rake thin – I like that

expression, a pole with lots of teeth at the top (or maybe the same number as everyone else). White – I don't mean race, I mean not enough daylight. Eyes of a loon – too much screen time. That's not actually true. It's one of the stupid things parents say, and even more weird, seem to believe. Computers do not make your eyes bloodshot. No sleep makes your eyes bloodshot, and getting shampoo in them.

Anyway, enough about me. That day, the day I presented Soraya with her stolen credit, was the start of it. I didn't know, but then you never do. It's the butterfly effect thing, the one tiny flutter that causes a tsunami the other side of the world.

2

Strictly speaking the start was years and years before – that's what Mum would say if she was listening. Not that she would be, because we don't really talk. I like her and all that, but there's a reason why sixteen-year-olds aren't friends with middle-aged women (hold any cougar comments) and it's that they have nothing in common.

Anyway, I was trouble. Not burn-the-school-down sort of trouble. More like eczema, an irritating itch – maybe infected. By the juniors, I'd been paraded in front of the doctor, a psychiatrist or two *and* a cranial osteopath. (I liked that. She held my head.) I could have told them why I fiddled, fidgeted, didn't pay attention, and talked over everyone, but they don't ask *you* – far too obvious. They try to tease it out by clever tests like seeing if you trash a tower of bricks they 'accidentally' leave in the room. Seriously, I don't recommend anyone take a kid to a 'professional'. Gran had the diagnosis all along.

'He's too bright for his own good.'

That wasn't the general conclusion. ADHD was. And I got a prescription for white pills to help me 'focus'. I

was like nine or something. My offences were mostly to do with taking things apart, like the battery-operated pencil sharpener, or arguing with Mr Fellows, usually about dinosaurs and meteorites. Poor Mr Fellows – I went dressed as a policeman on World Book Day (no idea why), complete with handcuffs, and locked him to the door handle. There was a quick release button but he sent me to the Head before I could tell him. Got excluded for that.

The pills were fine, nice in fact, but the real antidote to all my anti-social behaviour came in the form of a computer.

Ta-da! Happy eleventh birthday, Dan.

A battery-operated pencil sharpener reduced to its components was no match for the *internet*. Websites can be made to do something else, or made better, or taken down. Endless possibilities. I was a reformed character – a 'model' student', apparently. In reality I was either thinking about stuff I shouldn't do, or doing it.

The first what you'd call 'proper' hack was for my little sister, El, short for Elena. She was already on the free bit of Club Penguin (not cool, but true) meeting friends with terrible names like Penny5925 and Aceman09 on the Iceberg and tipping it over, but she wanted to be a member. The parents wouldn't pay the subscription so I had a tinker and next thing she had her Member Stamp. That meant she could buy things with 'coins'. So I got her some. A shedload. I don't like to think of that as a crime. It's a crime to advertise to

little girls knowing they don't have their own money.

In my next review at the doctors I realised I should have been a bit less 'model', because they took me off the pills and declared me cured. A few twitches and a quick rummage through the equipment in the surgery would have swung it, but for once I hadn't anticipated what might happen. You can buy the stuff online anyway. Not that I ever bothered. Better things to do. Following threads, joining forums, finding holes, fixing them, coding some scripts to improve the odds of winning free competitions, as well as the odd dodgy thing like hacking free cinema tickets, and, of course, endless gaming. There was a blip when I accidentally drew attention to myself by hacking the control unit on Dad's BMW. We live on a narrow-ish street that people use as a cut-through and passing cars are always hitting the wing mirrors, so I helpfully made them fold in automatically whenever it was parked. Quite chuffed with that, I was. Until the parents confronted me. I said someone else showed me how to do it. Thankfully they were so pleased not to have to deal with a 'medicated' child any more they chose to believe me.

I'd have carried on quite happily as a hobby hacker, messing with whatever caught my eye along with all the other anonymous grey hats who like code, if it hadn't been for Soraya.

3

Soraya arrived at the start of Year Ten – covered in glitter and sparkle – but I didn't speak to her until we were partnered up in biology to dissect a sheep's eye, approximately four weeks before the generous act that started my downfall and around eighteen months after I first saw her.

'Will you do it, Dan?' she said – stereotypically squeamish girl.

'Sure.' Manly Dan!

'Only my nails aren't dry.'

We identified the main parts and then I had to cut away the fat and muscle. A wave of weird came over me. I breathed a lot.

'You OK?' she said.

'Fine.'

'Cut it then.' She was waving her hands, encouraging the second coat of iridescent purple to dry.

The sheep's cornea was looking up at me. I put the scalpel against the sclera and pushed. A glug of clear liquid came out and spilled over my gloved finger.

I heard, 'That's the aqueous humour.'

Embarrassing isn't the word. I came round, aware I had chin dribble, to find her diamond-pierced nose right over my face. She burst out laughing, a good noise – like a sleigh bell.

'Did I . . . faint?'

'Only for a second,' she said. 'Don't worry, I'll do the rest.' She blew her nails. 'They're dry now.'

'Everything all right there?' said Mrs Dean, looking over but not bothering to heave her huge body out of the chair.

'We're good,' said Soraya.

She proceeded to cut the eye in half, remove the cornea, cut that in two – which made a hideous crunching sound and nearly sent me weird again – and then pull the iris out with her painted fingernails. Soraya wasn't *squeamish*, she was vain. She also wasn't wearing her latex gloves, but it was past the point where it mattered.

'There's the pupil,' she said, dangling the iris in front of me.

She fished a clear lump out of the back of the eye and held it in her palm.

'Lens,' she said, grinning.

How I was feeling wasn't lost on her. She held up the lens for me to look through. There was a bit of glob hanging off it. I shut my eyes.

'You're a wuss,' she said.

'Agreed.'

You'd think being brave and macho would be the way to get a girl, but Soraya … she fell for my weak stomach. It happened without any of the escalating steps I'd imagined – chatting, flirting, holding hands, *finally* a snog. That same day we went to the canteen together and I watched her eat tuna pasta. (My appetite had taken a knock.) Ty and Joe came and sat with us, and then her BFF Mia. I walked her to the bus stop after school and she kissed me on the cheek. A week and a frenzy of texts later, I had a proper girlfriend. (And yes, she did write 'cba', 'lol', 'sup'.) (And no, I did not tease her, despite the many happy hours Joe, Ty and I had spent dissing textspeak.) (Conclusion: we're full of crap.)

Unbelievably, Soraya had to share a computer with her sister, so Skyping and messaging on Facebook were tricky. And her phone was constantly out of credit. That's why I sorted it. I could have pretended that I topped her up with my own money, but I had no idea what was going to happen next. Girls, they're a different species.

4

'Can you put some credit on Mia's phone?' she said, between mouthfuls of popcorn. I was studying the ad for a nice-looking convertible that was either speeding down the wiggly mountain road on rails or entirely Photoshopped. It was our second cinema visit and, like last time, I was hoping not to see too much of the film.

'No.'

'What do you mean "no"?'

Arguing with Soraya was like arguing with Dad. No logic. No reasoning. No gradual raising of voices. Nought to sixty via nowhere.

'Soraya, it's illegal. I magicked fifty quid onto your phone. I don't want everyone knowing that.'

'It's not like you took five tenners out of someone's pocket.'

'It's *exactly* like that.'

'No it's not. It's like they dropped the money on the floor and you picked it up. You're just being mean, Dan. How am I going to tell her that you can't be bothered to shove in the code or whatever it is?'

Great! Throw it back in my face.

'Who else have you told?'

'Only Jasmine.'

Note the 'only'.

Soraya did the whole sob story thing – Mia had a decrepit wind-up phone, an evil mum and no hair straighteners. Whatever! I gave in, not because I'm soft, but because I didn't want a row. I wanted to put my arm round her and taste the popcorn she'd just eaten.

I got what I wanted, and so did Mia. But I made it clear it was a one-off. She was over-the-top grateful.

One-off. Ha!

Girls like to talk. Girls change their BFF every week. Girls are constantly taking selfies and posting them. Girls chew through data. A phone to a girl is not for talking or even texting, it's a body part. When word got round Soraya's millions of friends that I could get free credit, Old Dan – nice eyelashes (long, dark), good at maths, witty (just telling it how it is), not bothered about almost everything – morphed into New Dan – exactly the same. Except everyone wanted to know New Dan, invite him to the party, 'hang out' with him.

This is tricky to explain. I know right from wrong, but I seem to have my own definition of 'wrong'. Kicking someone's head in is wrong. Fleecing a few hundred quid off a mobile phone operator – not so bad. Fleecing a few hundred quid, or in fact much more, and not making any money yourself – stupid. So I introduced a fee. Twenty per cent – strictly cash.

An entirely random figure based on not wanting to think of myself as greedy. Translated for customers that found percentages a challenge, that meant I'd obtain ten pounds of credit on any phone number I was given for the paltry payment of two quid. Everybody wins. The King of Pay As You Go was born.

Even though I was careful about where I hacked from – spoofing IP addresses – it was no surprise (and a bit of a relief) when the top-up site identified the loophole and closed it down after seven weeks. It would make me sound good if I said the guilt was getting to me but it was more that it took up too much time, and I didn't like being hassled to get credit for people's Twitter followers, cats, dead aunts and daemons. You meet crazies, you really do.

So, all in all, the upside was that I made enough money to buy an Alienware laptop. The downside was that there were lots of downsides.

One, Soraya got bored with me always being on my phone or laptop and replaced me with a different model – boy-band haircut, nice teeth, alcohol problem, judging by his photos. I hacked his email, cancelled his memberships of everything from Netflix to the Monterey Aquarium and popped my favourite pics of his (the most embarrassing) up on Facebook. Quite satisfying.

Two, Ty disapproved big time. He stopped waiting for me after school – said he didn't want to be friends with the 'criminal underclass'. It didn't matter to start with, because I had Soraya and all the groupies who

wanted favours, and I thought he'd cave, but when it was all over I had to crawl my way back into his good books. (Joe, on the other hand, was a good customer but told me not to tell Ty.)

Three, the world – or at least the bit of it that lived in Bristol and was between twelve and twenty-something – got to know me, and knew I was a law-breaker. That's not great – people still cross the road to avoid me.

Four, the virtual world got to know me too, although not as Dan. The odd comment and, I may as well admit it, the occasional late-night boast, caught the attention of a few other like-minded individuals with strange user names – DarkStar, Immortal Jackal, Expendable, Angel, Viper, Anaconda, Hackingturtle, Plumber, Stoker, Joker, Airdreamer. I was King Penguin, thanks to El. But I quickly shortened it to KP – like the peanuts. It was good to swap a few new exploits, some lines of code, ridicule other people's security and spot the script kiddies trying, but failing, to keep up. There was a community feel to it all, like being in a football team but without the football. One weirdo, too young to be mixing with the likes of us, even tried to pre-order from me!

for my birthday which is in May please can I have some birthday credit I will be 11 I like your name

Technically I'd done the equivalent of robbing a bank, but there are black hats out there doing much worse –

destroying stuff for the hell of it. I wasn't worried. But I should have been. Because the one called Angel liked the look of me. If I could time travel, I'd nip back and warn myself – *stay away from Angel*.

5

Before I go any further, I should explain that I'm not a scary kid with a dysfunctional family living in a squat, everyone on benefits and crack. I've got a mum and dad that I got all my genes from (or so they say), and a sister, one car and a house with three bedrooms. No police records, alcoholics, gambling problems between us. There was nothing that the press could find, when it got to that point, to explain away what I did. Because there was no 'reason'. It was like a row of dominoes, all standing in line until one was pushed over by the wind, and that made the rest tumble. Like that, except slower.

The next domino to fall was Ty.

I found out about the accident through a retweeted tweet and then via every other sort of social media. According to his brothers, Ty was cycling home, stopped at a red light and the bloke behind (need I add, in a white van) jumped the lights, knocking him off and not even stopping to see if he was alive. Unreal. He was in hospital with 'head injuries' – how severe depended on who, of the ten million people from school that texted,

messaged and tweeted, you believed. I was furious, actually wanted to punch something, which is not like me. I left my bedroom and searched out a parent, that's how mad I was.

Dad was eating a packet of Bourbons, watching a box set of some crime drama. We could torrent it for free but he's old-fashioned like that. It was Wednesday so Mum had gone to choir.

'Hi.'

'Dan, nice to see you out of your den. What's wrong? Internet down?'

What is it about parents? They say teenagers can't communicate but when you try, they wind you up.

'I do leave my room, Dad. But there's this thing called homework.' I used a sarcastic tone, always goes down well.

'Stea-dy.'

I hate it when he says that, like he's a horse whisperer and I'm about to bolt.

'Can't I have a joke?' he said, eating another biscuit to maintain his XL waist measurement.

'A joke would be fine, Dad. But by definition they have to be funny.'

I changed my mind about telling him and went into the kitchen instead, where El was playing Club Penguin on Mum's computer.

'Can you buy me a new igloo with a pink bed?' she said.

'Depends.'

'On what?' she said.

'On whether you want to make *me* a hot chocolate?'

'Deal,' she said. I went back to my room and topped up her Icelandic bank account.

But she didn't honour her side, because Dad did.

'Ty's dad just rang,' he said, putting down the mug. 'He's been in an accident.'

I didn't say anything, suddenly afraid that he might be dead and I might blub. Not something I'd done since Grandad died.

The last time I saw Grandad he told Gran he wanted 'An oak coffin with brass handles'. And when she went to get a cup of tea he said, 'Pop my tobacco in, Dan, just in case I fancy a smoke.' I laughed, which was what he wanted me to do. And when they buried him I made sure there was some Old Holborn in his jacket pocket.

Dad pushed aside some dirty clothes, loads of chocolate wrappers and a magazine, so he could sit down on the edge of my bed, feet between a pile of plates covered with toast crumbs and a Star Wars poster that fell down when I was about ten. Credit where it's due, he managed not to rant about the mess.

'Ty hasn't come round yet,' he said. 'But that's common, they say. Your brain shuts down to get on with mending itself.'

In biology, Mrs Dean said the brain is like soft tofu. To get that image out of my head, I decided to risk speaking.

'I can't believe it. He was on his way home from

helping at Scouts, you know . . . it's part of his Duke of Edinburgh.'

'They should put cameras in their vans,' said Dad, 'to record the bloody awful driving. That would sort them out.'

We carried on talking about how unfair it was, until the million-dollar question found its way out of my mouth.

'Do you think he's going to be all right?'

'I don't know,' said Dad.

I'd have been better asking El – she's the one who watches *Casualty* and checks everyone's symptoms in the *Family Medical Encyclopedia*.

'I'll call round theirs tomorrow, after work,' he said, ruffling my hair, which is about as affectionate as it gets. 'Positive thinking, eh?'

I nodded. Dad disappeared, fatherly duty done.

It's clear to me what goes on in his head, even though he has no clue what goes on in my mine. He feels guilty because he lets me spend so much time in my 'den' but he can't be bothered to do anything about it. He *thinks* we should be up on the Downs kicking a ball, or watching classic films from the 80s or fishing on a river bank like Mole and Ratty, but we'd both rather be on our own than together. Every so often he has a go about me lazing about in the pit that's my room, as well as my general lack of application. I look as though I'm listening, and we carry on like nothing's been said. Works for us.