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Opening extract from **Seven Days**

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I don't need an alarm clock any more. Good job really, because Hollie spilt juice on my old glitter fairy one. Now the digital screen has a permanent blurry black mark on it, like a bruise. No matter how many times I rub it with wet wipes, it still feels sticky under my fingers. I won't throw it away though. Dad bought it for me four years ago. His fingerprints must still be on the plastic, so that's part of him that's with me – damaged or not. It sits beside my bed, next to my glass of water, flashing its broken time like a lighthouse in the fog.

part of me, every fibre, nerve and muscle is fighting the feeling of dread, the realization that I have to face another day.

Today is no different.

I swing my legs out of the bed, large lumps of meat that wobble as I move. I hate the way they dimple. I hate their look – chicken flesh, pumped fat ready to burst. I pull my T-shirt down, trying to hide the roll of skin that skims over my knickers, and ease myself up.

The room is a mess, which annoys me. Hollie is useless at tidying; leaving trails of destruction everywhere – dolls, books, funny plastic monsters with strange faces. I have to tread carefully to make sure I don't step on something. I kick one troll-like figure across the room and watch as it bounces against my bookcase. It lands on its head with its weird beady eyes glaring at me.

"You can get lost," I tell it. It just stares back, grinning.

Hollie sleeps on the small bed under the window and, as usual, her body is sprawled in the weirdest position – her legs hanging off the mattress and her arms bent up behind her head. She looks odd. Her mouth hangs open and strands of hair are stuck to

her face in damp stripes. One eye is half open. I wonder what she's dreaming about.

"Hollie." I shake her gently, waiting as she groans and then rolls into a ball. "Come on, sleepy. School."

"Nooooo. Ten more minutes," she says, pulling the duvet blindly, kicking me at the same time.

"Sorry. No time. Come on, wash and uniform."

I look around the room but Mum's not left anything out. I pick up the puddle of clothes beside Hollie's bed, left from last night. I inspect them for dirt, but they look OK apart from a splodge of paint on her jumper which I pick off with my fingernail. Her tights are getting a bit small, so I pull on them to stretch them out. It feels like a weird exercise.

"My top's got a hole in it," Hollie says, getting up slowly. "Jack said it looked stupid yesterday."

"Tell him he's stupid."

Hollie grins at me, gappy toothed, her blonde hair still stuck against her face. "You're funny."

I take her hand and lead her into the bathroom, trying to ignore the reflection in the mirror as I walk past.

"Yeah, I'm funny," I say.

But not in the way she thinks.

*

I am pouring the last of the Rice Krispies into our bowls when Mum walks through the front door. It's raining and her hair is pressed against her face in a matted lump. Her face is red and shiny and droplets of water are still dripping off the end of her nose. She needs a new umbrella. I remember the last one blew inside-out on the way to the shops. She battled with it for ages, before swearing and dumping it in a nearby hedge.

I wonder if it's still there.

"Is there milk left for me?" she says, shaking her mac and dumping her bag in the corner of the kitchen. Her eyes are dark and hooded, like she could just sleep right there, standing up. I can't look at her for long; the worry claws at me too much. I can't even remember the last time she smiled.

"There's some," I say. I was hoping to have a small glass myself but it doesn't matter, she obviously needs it more. I flick on the kettle and look around for a clean mug. The sink is piled high with dirty dishes. I really don't want to put my hand in the slimy cold water that is pooling in the plates from last night. Instead I find a chipped "I love England" cup by the breadbin and throw a teabag in. I see the packet of biscuits still rolled up

behind the old bread. I twist the packet open and shove two chocolate digestives into my mouth. They are stale and sweet between my teeth. I see Mum staring at me, her eyes narrowed in disappointment.

"That was a full packet yesterday," she says.

I turn away, my face burning.

"Are you very tired, Mummy?" asks Hollie, eating her bowl of cereal while staring at Mum, wide-eyed.

"Yes," Mum says. She sits gingerly on the chair opposite; as if her bones are really heavy. She kicks off her shoes and stretches out her feet. She's wearing tights and the ends are dark with wet. She sighs. "It was a tough few hours."

Mum usually slips out just after we've gone to bed. Most nights she's back home after a few hours, but this week she's working double shifts because one of the other cleaners is off sick. The number for where she works is pinned on the fridge, just in case. I don't tell her that the worry of something actually happening leaves me hollow with panicked thoughts. The pinned-up number and the muttered words "just in case" only increase the feelings.

"Why don't you sleep when we do?" Hollie

asks as she prods the little Krispies with her spoon, making them dance.

“You know why.” Her answers are blunt, sharp blasts. She is looking at the wall. “I have to work. Cleaning’s all I can get. I’ll sleep when you’re gone.”

She won’t though. I know this because I’ve come home before and found her on the internet – tapping away on her different forums. When we come home, that’s often where we’ll find her. She can’t talk to me, but thousands of invisible cyber-people know what she’s thinking. To me she’s like a treasure chest, securely locked away and heavily guarded. I just wish I knew what she wasn’t saying.

I give her the tea and then sit down with my dry cereal. I don’t have as much as Hollie. Mine are mainly broken bits from the bottom. Hollie is happy though and is eating quickly, milk dribbling down her chin. All I can hear is her munching loudly and the ticking from the clock in the room next door.

“Hollie needs more clothes. You’ve not done the washing,” I say.

“OK,” she nods.

“Have we got washing powder?”

Her face squashes up. “I – oh, I don’t know. Maybe.

Or not. I need to check.” She rubs her temples, squashing up the skin.

“It’s just – you’ve not done a shop for ages.”

She turns then and finally looks at me, her eyes as bright as crystal. “That’s because I have no money, Jessica.”

Words are left unsaid, but I can still hear them. They hang in the air between us, so tangible I can almost reach out and touch them.

If you didn’t keep eating everything, Jess. . .

She keeps staring at me, daring me to challenge her and of course I can’t. She knows I won’t.

I have so many words in my head, things that I want to tell Mum. I want to tell her all the bad thoughts that I keep trapped inside. I want to explain how hard it is being me.

But I look at her tired eyes again and my lips remain sealed.

It’ll just be another week of the same.

Hollie and I walk to school together. It’s not raining now and the sun is trying hard to push itself through the clouds. Hollie skips ahead. I shout at her to avoid the puddles; I’m not sure her shoes can take it. I walk carefully, trying to avoid the cracks in the pavement.

I remember Mum telling me that crocodiles would push their snouts through the gaps and snap at my toes. Silly, really, why did I ever believe her? How would they even fit for a start? And how could they survive under the paving slabs? So what if I'm fourteen, I still don't like to touch them – *just in case*, those words again. I guess it's because I believe something bad will happen to me if I even allow my foot to skim the edge.

Maybe today, if I can avoid the cracks, things will be different. Just one day, that's all I ask.

I hear her scream first and then I see Hollie lying flat on the ground. She must've tripped. She's like a baby in the middle of a temper tantrum, thumping the floor in rage. Her cries are loud and dramatic and I can see people on the street opposite looking over at us, eyebrows raised. An elderly lady with a large plastic shopping bag is standing facing me just inches away. She shakes her head and mutters something under her breath. As she moves past me she does a weird sideways jerk as if she's scared to touch me. I glare at her crumpled face, before racing over to my sister.

"Hollie, it's OK." I scoop her up in my arms. She is getting so big now and in her distress she's really

hard to get hold of, thrashing against me and crying in pain. I struggle to pull her up, she feels too heavy. I keep whispering at her under my breath, trying to calm her, worried that I'm pulling her too hard. Finally, she relaxes and lets me move her towards me. I see the rip in her tights and the smear of blood on her knee. Hollie's eyes follow mine. Pure panic follows.

"I'm bleeding. I want to go home. I want Mummy."

I could imagine Mum's face if I were to take Hollie home now.

"Mum needs to rest, Hol – it's just a small cut, honest." I tap it gently with my finger. "See, magic dust will make it better. I have lots of it here!"

Hollie whimpers. "Not like Mummy. Mummy has more magic dust. Hers works better."

I can feel the eyes of the watchers burning into my back. Why are they so suspicious? Everyone on this estate seems to be like this lately; I feel judged everywhere I go. I don't want to be here too long, I can feel beads of sweat building and my armpits are damp. I need to move.

"C'mon. Let's get you to school. They have special plasters there."

I stand up and notice the dirt on my own trousers, which I try to brush off, but it only rubs it in even more. Hollie takes my hand and we start walking again, my sweaty palm clutching her small, sticky one. She is still whimpering, but quieter now. I have a nervous feeling in my stomach, like the blades of a blender going round and round. As we reach the main road, I know why it is. I'm scared someone from my school will see me, all sweaty and mucky. I look more revolting than ever. I know that I have limited time before crowds of them will appear. I have to move quickly.

I'm half dragging her now across the road, which is making her moan even more. "Stop pulling me. That hurts my hand. I want to go home. . ."

"Ssh, it's OK. We don't want to be late now, do we?"

Southwood Primary School is tucked down a small side road. There's barely any room to walk. We have to squeeze past the rows of cars that are parked there to get to the main entrance. The gate flaps uselessly, a group of boys kicked it in weeks ago and no one has bothered to fix it properly. I keep my head down, letting my hair fall in front of my face, the perfect veil.

The playground is like a large, empty lake, surprisingly cold-looking with no kids running around on it. We are late again. A few mums are walking out of the door, deep in conversation. They never notice us. Even back when Mum used to take Hollie, the other mums would keep away and stand in their own tight huddles. Mum used to call them the "playground panthers". She said she didn't mind, but I knew she wasn't being honest. She fiddled with her bottom lip when she said it. She always does that when she's lying.

I don't think Mum has any friends. Not any that I've met anyway.

Inside the school, it's warm and smells of paint. One of Hollie's bright pictures is on the wall staring at us when we walk in. I think it's meant to be a dog, but it has six legs.

Ms Matthews is waiting at the Year One doors. She smiles at us as we walk in – and then she notices Hollie's face.

"Oh dear. Why the tears?"

"She fell," I say, pointing at her tights. "Do you have a plaster?"

Ms Matthews smiles. She has a kind, podgy sort of face; it reminds me of a crumpet. She never

asks too many questions and somehow she always understands what to do. “Of course. A pretty one? And I’m sure I can find some spare tights too.”

Hollie’s wide grin takes away a little of the panic inside of me. But as I kiss her tear-soaked cheek and glance up at the big red clock, my heart jumps in my chest.

Now I’m really late.

It’s the worst thing, running into Perryfield High late. It’s even worse when Kez, Lois and Marnie are there watching you do it.

I’m running in, sweating and panicking that Mr Ramon would be on patrol ready to dish out detentions for latecomers, and there they are – waiting by the main gate, cigarettes in their hands, smirks plastered across their smug faces.

I try to ease myself past them, attempting to look casual. Yeah, right. They just saw me sprinting up the road, trying to make my wobbly body go that little bit faster. Now I’m wheezing like an old woman and feeling sick, I couldn’t look more stressed if I jumped into a vat of boiling water.

“Nice look,” Kez says, a perfectly plucked eyebrow rising.

I ignore her and stagger past. I don’t need this.

“Err, did the stig just touch you?”

I don’t know who said that, probably Marnie. My stomach twists. I really don’t want Kez on my case again – not now.

I turn slowly. Kez has moved closer and is facing me. She looks me up and down, a slow smile creeping up her face. I hate the fact that she is so beautiful. It’s not fair. Her dark hair is worn high in a ponytail and has streaks of red in it. Her eyes are large and carefully made-up. They would be a beautiful blue, if they weren’t so cold and hard.

“Haven’t you got something to say to me?” she says softly, sweetly even.

I blink at her, confused. The sweat is still dripping down my back and I can feel my heart thumping in my chest. “I – I don’t know what you mean. . .”

“You shoved past me. I think you should say something.”

“I didn’t,” I say. “I didn’t even touch you.”

“Oh yes, you did.” Marnie moves towards me. She is shorter with long blonde hair and downturned features. She reminds me of a dog. A dog caked in orange foundation. “You pushed past us with your sweaty, stiggy body.”

“Err, gross,” says Lois, who is standing further back, watching. Sometimes Lois is OK with me, but only sometimes. She’s just as pretty as Kez but in a different way, more natural. She has beautiful red curls that tumble down her back in waves.

“I didn’t touch you,” I mumble, but the words are thick in my mouth. I can see Kez is mad now, her eyes are narrow and she’s not smiling. I shouldn’t have disagreed with her.

“You touched me, right!” she snarls, coming up close, “and I don’t want you anywhere near me, understood?” She extends her finger and pushes me back, like I’m nothing. I hate it when she does that.

I nod anyway, looking down at my feet. I don’t want to be here.

“Are you even listening to her?” Marnie yells. “You owe her an apology.”

An apology? For what? Not touching her? When did life become so unfair? How come *she* can touch me with her stabbing fingernail?

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“What?” says Kez, grinning again now, “I didn’t quite hear that.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I touched you. I’m sorry I even dared to come near you.”

“On your knees and say it,” says Marnie.

I look at them, pleading. *Please don’t make me do this.* Kez and Marnie keep smirking. Lois isn’t looking; she’s texting on her phone.

“Yeah, go on,” says Kez, taking another drag of her cigarette, “in the dirt where you belong.”

So I do it. I slowly bend down, on to the hard, cold concrete. Being lower than them is horrific. I feel like an animal or, even worse, an insect they could just squash with their shoe. Only inches away from me is an old lump of dog poo and a small trail of ants. The anger is burning in the back of my head, throbbing and threatening to burst out at any second. I concentrate hard on the ground because that way I don’t have to see anyone walking past me. I don’t need to know who is witnessing my humiliation.

“I’m sorry,” I say again. “Now, please, let me go in. I’m so late.”

I know I will get a detention now and I have to think about picking up Hollie. She gets so upset if I’m late.

“Let you go?” Kez laughs. “But that would mean you walking in with us. Like I said, Stig, I don’t want you anywhere near me.”

I don’t reply. I concentrate instead on the small

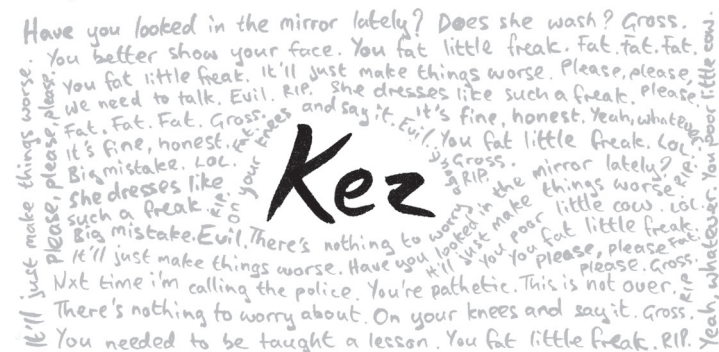
line of ants making their way across the pavement in front of me, one of them is carrying a piece of yellow grain. The line is so perfect and in total unison.

“You can stay there until we’re inside, get it?”
Kez says.

“Yes.”

“Good.” She kicks my legs with her trainer. “And you really should think about losing some weight, sweetheart. Fat is never a good look, is it?”

No, it’s not – I agree. They stride away, giggling among themselves – crushing my little ants under their feet as they go.



My phone is ringing again, buzzing gently on the bed beside me. I ignore it. Why doesn’t she ever get the message? Maybe I should just answer and scream “la, la, la” at her. That would shut the stupid cow up. I’ve been awake for about an hour already and I feel like I’ve barely slept at all.

Marnie is sitting by her mirror, carefully inspecting her reflection. I think she’s looking pretty rank actually; she’s been wearing too much foundation lately – not that I’d dare tell her that. I watch as she smothers more on, a kind of orange glow coming from her face.

“Your mum?” she says, not turning around.

“Yeah.” I reply, willing the screen to go blank. Finally it does and the room is silent again. I realize I’ve been holding my breath.

Marnie’s room is in the biggest state ever; she actually keeps her entire wardrobe on the floor or