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From Where I Stand

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Random House

Extract

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Chapter One

Raven stood at the window, waiting for the car. Three double-decker buses rumbled down the street, nose to tail, and joined the queue of traffic waiting at the lights. A cyclist pedalled furiously down the empty lane in the opposite direction. Somewhere the wail of a siren briefly rose and then faded. Over the bridge, the long queue of cars blurred into red pinpoints of light. A handful of raindrops suddenly splattered the windowpane. Night was falling and he could begin to see his blurred reflection in the glass. The cars in the street below were visible through his jean jacket but the white collar of his T-shirt stood out more strongly. His dark brown hair had lost the slicked-back look he had perfected that morning and now hung in his eyes. His face stared back at him, pale, serious. He narrowed his eyes to disguise a fleeting

look of anxiety and dug his hands into his pockets.

'She's probably got held up in the traffic!' Sue burst out of the swing doors at the end of the corridor carrying a large tray, heavy with cutlery, and waddled past him down to the dining hall. There was a crash as she put the tray down on one of the long tables and a familiar clatter as she began to set the tables for supper. 'At this rate, Dave will be back with the others and you'll be having supper here.'

A red Micra suddenly swung into view at the end of the road, indicated left and began to pull up through the wet spray of puddles at the kerb. Raven stepped back from the window.

Sue came up behind him, wiping her hands on her apron, looking down into the darkening street.

'Here we go then! Are you sure you've got everything? Did you check under your bed?'

Raven nodded and hoisted the large rucksack over his shoulder. He reached for his suitcase but Sue got to it first and led the way downstairs.

Outside Joyce was stepping out onto the damp pavement, leaving the car door open and going round to unlock the boot. She said hello to Raven, took the suitcase and hoisted it inside, complaining to Sue about the rain and the traffic. Raven let the rucksack fall from his

shoulder onto the suitcase. He slammed the boot shut and walked round to the passenger door.

'Hey!' Sue leaped after him and grabbed his arm. 'You weren't going to leave without a goodbye hug, were you?' She suddenly pulled him close so that his nose and mouth were pressed against her jumper, and for a moment he couldn't breathe. Then she released him back into the damp evening air.

He felt for the door handle. 'Bye,' he said.

'Now don't forget to send us a postcard, and remember to come back and see us from time to time!'

Raven nodded. He knew he would never go back and he doubted he would see Sue or any of the staff or kids at Bedford House ever again.

He drew the seat belt across him as Joyce flicked on the indicator and pulled out into the road. 'Got everything?' She turned her head and gave him a quick smile as he fumbled with the faulty catch. When he finally got it to click, he sat back and stared straight ahead.

'Excited?' Joyce turned to him with a smile again as she stopped at a zebra crossing. A woman hurried a little girl with a bright pink umbrella across the road. As they moved on, the lights from the streetlamps and the oncoming traffic caught in the rain-speckled windscreen, tracing a pattern of orange dots and circles over his jeans.

As Joyce drove smoothly through the rain-slicked streets, going against the traffic, Raven turned his head away and rested his elbow on the ledge below the window, chewing his thumbnail and gazing through the glass at the dark buildings whipping past. He felt cold suddenly.

'How was the trip today?' Joyce persisted in trying to make conversation.

Raven waited, drawing out the silence between them as long as he dared. 'OK,' he replied, without turning his head.

'The Russells are really excited about having you, you know.'

He said nothing.

'They must be wondering where you are. I told them I'd have you there by four.'

More silence.

'Anyway, nearly there now.'

They pulled off the main road into the quiet residential streets of Richmond and Raven began to feel his heart thumping in his chest. Joyce craned her head over the steering wheel, searching for a place to park. She stopped sharply and backed the car into a small space, hitting the kerb with a bump.

Raven got out and went round to open the boot. A

light popped on in a doorway three houses down and a man's voice called out, 'Hi there, you're here at last!'

'Yes – so sorry, the traffic on my way to pick him up was awful!'

'Can you stop for a cup of tea?'

'That's very kind but I really should get back. Oh, hi, Jackie! Sorry we're late.'

'Whoa!' Dan put out his hand as Raven stumbled backwards, dragging the suitcase from the boot. 'Here, I'll take that . . .'

Raven relinquished the suitcase but kept a firm grip on the strap of his rucksack.

'Nice to see you again, old pal.' Dan held out his hand and Raven accepted the handshake without looking up. He was even taller than Raven remembered, with a booming voice to match.

'Hello, Raven!' Jackie hurried round to the back of the car and patted him on the shoulder. Her short fair hair was pulled back from her eyes with a hairband, and she wore an exaggerated smile, her pink face eager.

Joyce slammed the boot shut. 'Right, well, I'll be off. You've got my number, so any problems, don't hesitate.'

'Thanks, Joyce,' Jackie said.

'Bye, Raven.'

'Bye.' He made his way towards the lit porch without looking back.

Inside the narrow hallway there was a sudden moment of confusion. Raven stopped short, unsure where to go next. Jackie bumped into him. Raven half turned but his rucksack caught on something hanging on the wall, sending it to the floor with a crash. He froze, eyes wide, and Dan broke the silence with a laugh. 'OK, bags down. I'll bring them up in a minute. Jackie, why don't you show Raven his room?'

Jackie squeezed past, exchanging looks with her husband before leading the way up the worn staircase. Raven lowered his rucksack to the ground and followed obediently. At the end of a short corridor on the first floor Jackie opened the door to a large square room, with white walls and a blue carpet. There was a computer on the desk and a decent-sized bed, not like those narrow bunks they'd had to sleep on at Bedford House. There was a wide bay window and a long mirror on one of the walls. 'You can put up posters or whatever you like,' Jackie said quickly, pointing to the packet of Blu-tak on the desk, 'and once we get you some books and things it will feel more like home.'

Raven looked at the large stretch of freshly vacuumed carpet, the Ikea furniture and the matching curtains and bedspread. It would never feel like home.

Dan lumbered in behind them with the suitcase and rucksack. 'So, what d'you think, Raven? Probably the last time we'll see it this tidy, hey?'

There was a silence. Raven looked at his bags set in the middle of the carpet, dwarfed by the size of the room. 'Shall I unpack now?' he asked.

'No hurry. Come and we'll show you the rest of the house . . . Little Miss lives here,' Dan said, pointing at a door covered in stickers. 'And I think this is meant to be a NO ENTRY sign so we'd better respect that for the moment, though I'm sure she'll take great delight in showing you round her pad herself . . . And here we've got the bathroom . . . And then just one more flight of stairs . . .' As he led the way, he reached back to take Jackie's hand in his.

'The master bedroom, messiest damn room in the house! Basically because I'm a slob and Jackie refuses to clear up after me, quite rightly. So now you've seen this, I won't have a leg to stand on when it comes to me telling you to pick your clothes up off the floor.'

The double bed was rumpled; books, CDs and huge piles of typed paper were stacked up against the walls. Several expensive-looking cameras and a tripod took up one corner and there were photos in every available space – some in actual frames, others in piles, or tacked

to the wall. Photos of Dan and photos of Jackie, photos of Dan and Jackie together. Holiday snaps, bright white light and dashes of blue sea and sky. A little girl in a pink swimsuit clutching a rubber ring round her middle, blue eyes squinting up at the sun. The same little girl, older, wearing a flowery dress, sitting on Jackie's knee. All three of them at the edge of the sea, the little girl perched on Dan's shoulders . . .

There was a silence. 'Let's go down and meet the munchkin,' Dan said.

The kitchen and living room were merged together into one long living space, and at a large, chipped oak table the little girl from the photos sat swinging her legs, doing something messy with paints and pieces of sponge. She had grown since the holiday photos and her blonde hair was now cut into a short bob, a pink flower clip holding back a bunch of hair.

'Hello,' she said in a gravelly voice, looking up from her painting with a serious expression. 'My name's Ella.'

Jackie laughed her approval as if it were all part of a show. 'Good girl,' she said. 'Are you going to tell Raven how old you are?'

'Five and three quarters. My birthday's on the tenth of May. When's yours?'

'October,' Raven said.

'Same as Halloween's.'

Dan and Jackie laughed together. 'Raven's fourteen,' Jackie said. 'So, how many years older than you?'

'Nine,' Ella replied without missing a beat.

'Clever Ella Bella.' Dan came round to tickle her ribs, making her squirm and giggle. 'Now how about we put this beautiful artwork out to dry and start laying the table for dinner? Have a seat, Raven.'

Raven sat on one of the wooden chairs and watched the well-oiled family meal routine unfold before him. Dan seemed to be in charge of the food, stirring something sizzling in a large frying pan on the stove; Jackie carefully transferred Ella's soggy pictures to the sideboard and Ella fetched a dripping sponge and began to mop the table.

'A bit too much water there, pipsqueak.' Jackie took the sponge off her and went to squeeze it over the sink. 'Here we go, try again.'

Raven watched Ella wipe the table imperiously, glancing up at him several times to check that she still had his attention. Jackie laid the table and Dan dished out the food onto large chipped plates and Ella poured water from the jug into the glasses, liberally splashing the table in the process. Then they sat down and picked up their knives and forks. 'Tuck in,' Dan said to Raven.

Raven felt very tired suddenly, and not in the least bit hungry. He started to move the food around on his plate.

'Raven's going to be starting at Ushton Comprehensive on Monday,' Jackie said to Ella, her eyes on Raven. 'That's the big red building right next to your school.'

Ella levelled her serious gaze to his. 'That's the big boys and girls' school. What class are you going to be in?'

'Year Nine.'

'I'm in Year One,' Ella announced importantly. 'My teacher's called Miss Mann. She's nice. On Fridays she lets us have Choosing Time. Next year I'm going to be in Year Two. I'm the second cleverest in the class. Michael's the cleverest.'

'But remember we don't talk about who's the cleverest or the second cleverest,' Jackie said quickly. 'The only important thing is that you try your best.'

'I do try my best and that's why I'm the second cleverest,' Ella said.

There was a little hole in the wall opposite. If Raven squinted slightly, the blue wallpaper looked like waves, lapping at the mouth of a cave.

'Are you not a big fan of pasta?' Dan asked.

Raven swivelled his gaze back to them, suddenly aware that there had been a long silence. The first

mouthful was still at the end of his fork, quietly congealing. He ate it quickly.

'Next week you can come with me to Tesco's and pick out some of your favourite food,' Jackie said brightly.

'I like pasta, Daddy,' Ella put in.

'What kind of things do you like to eat?' Dan asked.

Raven shrugged.

'No favourite meals?' Jackie this time.

'No.'

'I like pizza best,' Ella said. 'And fish fingers is my second bestest. And chips is my third bestest. And pancakes is my fourth bestest. And my fifth bestest is—'

'Why don't we tell Raven about some of the things we like to do all together at the weekend?' Dan cut in.

'OK.' Ella turned to look at Raven. 'We go to the park and we go to the swimming pool and we go to the zoo and we go to Legoland and we go to Pizza Express and we go to the Science Museum—' She broke off to draw breath.

'Not all in one weekend, mind you!' Jackie laughed.

'Raven, what do you like to do in your spare time?' Dan asked.

There was a silence.

'Go to the zoo?' Ella suggested.

Raven shrugged. There was another silence. Then

Dan said something about going camping at Easter. Jackie wondered if they still had their old tent. Ella protested that she didn't want to sleep outside because an ant might crawl into her mouth. Jackie started clearing the plates. 'But Raven only had one mouthful!' Ella protested. 'Why doesn't *he* have to eat everything on his plate?'

After he had finished unpacking, the room looked much the same as before, apart from the picture frame he had placed on one of the empty shelves above the desk. His clothes fitted easily into the top drawer of the four-drawer chest and the wardrobe held his empty rucksack and suitcase. At the end of his bed there were two neatly folded yellow towels with embroidered flowers at the corner. He sat down on his bed and looked at them. There was a knock on the door. He glanced up. Nothing happened. Another knock.

'Yes?' he said tentatively.

The handle turned and Dan came in, followed by Jackie.

'Great, are you all unpacked?' Dan looked round the empty room.

'We can go into town next weekend and get you some posters to put up on the walls or – or something,' Jackie

suggested hesitantly. 'Do you have any favourite, um – bands, or um – football teams?'

'No,' Raven said.

Dan sat down in the swivel chair and gave himself a little spin. 'What about computer games? PlayStation? Bet you've got some favourites there!'

Raven shrugged.

'Sorry, pal, we don't mean to give you the Spanish Inquisition,' Dan said suddenly. 'We're just eager to get to know you, and we're so excited you've come to stay. But, hey, there's no need to rush things.'

'No, we've got all the time in the world,' Jackie agreed. 'Now, Raven, do you remember where everything is? Is there anything you need?'

He was supposed to nod to the first question and shake his head to the second. So he did neither.

Jackie glanced uncertainly back at Dan.

'Do you like board games?' Dan asked. 'We've got Cluedo and Trivial Pursuit and Monopoly . . . Shall we all have a game tonight?'

'Good idea!' Jackie said.

They both looked at Raven. He looked back.

'I tell you what.' Dan stood up. 'We'll go and set it up in the kitchen and you come down and join us if you feel like it, or come and watch TV, or stay up here and do

your own thing if you prefer. Up to you, buddy, OK?'

Raven nodded.

They finally left.

He listened to their lowered voices and their receding footsteps on the stairs. Then, when silence fell, he moved back on the bed so that he was sitting against the wall with his knees drawn up, surveying the room around him. With his eyes he searched the white walls, the pale blue curtains, the empty surfaces. Suddenly his gaze stopped and returned to the curtains. He got up from the bed and went over to them, drawing them apart, revealing a sharp reflection of himself and the room behind him against a backdrop of darkness. He switched off the light and returned to his sitting position on the bed. At first nothing, then gradually the night sky turned from black to slate. The outline of a tree began to form, and through its branches he could just make out pinpricks of light from a distant aeroplane as it penetrated a thin veil of cloud. Raven's eyes locked onto it, drawing him out, up and towards it and away from the night.

He was awoken by a shaft of yellow daylight slanting across his pillow. He sat up in bed, blinking sleepily at the neat, uncluttered room, the smooth stretch of carpet,

unlittered with smelly trainers or crumpled clothes. There was no creaky bunk above him, no acrid smell wafting down from Tommy's wet mattress, no clattering of plates from the kitchen below. All he could hear was the twittering of birds.

He listened at his bedroom door before opening it and making his way quickly down the corridor, past Ella's room, her door left ajar, and into the bathroom. He had a fast shower, feeling as if he were trespassing, half expecting a knock on the door and a voice demanding who was there. Once he was dressed he sat back on his bed, reluctant to start the day. But the sun was already high in the sky and the sound of voices and the clatter of plates drifted up from the kitchen. The sooner he got started, the sooner it would be over, he reasoned. Maybe they would even let him stay in his room. He braced himself, opened the door and went slowly down the stairs, trying to make as much noise as possible in case they were discussing him. But as usual it was Ella doing all the talking.

'. . . and when we came back into class after break, me and Lucy, we told Miss Mann that the boys had been bothering us all break time. And Miss Mann said, "What were the boys doing?" And so I said, "The boys told us we had to kiss their hands." And Miss Mann said, "Sam,

is that true?" And Sam said, "Yes," and then Miss Mann started *laughing*! Then she stopped laughing and told the boys off but her shoulders were still wobbling—'

'Morning, Raven!' Jackie exclaimed.

'Morning.' He hung in the doorway.

Dan jumped up and pulled out a chair. 'Come and sit down. What would you like for breakfast?'

Raven sat and glanced at the array of cereal boxes, croissants and loaves spread out over the table. He reached for the nearest packet of cereal and poured some into the bowl in front of him.

'Did you sleep well?' Jackie asked him, an anxious smile on her face.

He nodded, pouring the milk, wishing Ella would start yakking away again. But she just watched him stonily.

'Were you warm enough?' Dan wanted to know.

Another nod.

'It must have felt a bit disorientating waking up in a strange bed,' Jackie went on. 'I know I always feel a bit confused if I spend the night away from home. Did you wonder where you were when you woke up?'

'No,' Raven said.

'Oh, well, good, you must be getting used to us already!' She gave a small laugh.