

LEVEL 1

CRACKS, CLOCKS, CORRIDORS

*North West England, 2010*

Raindrops splatter the windowpane, snaking through a crack in the lower left corner.

'We're waiting for your answer, Dax.'

*We're?* He should say *we are*.

Mr Bright steps closer, clutching a geography book. His blue corduroy trousers crease down the centre of his thigh like the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, and his paisley shirt needs an iron—or an incinerator.

'We're still waiting.'

I pinch the bridge of my nose. 'Please do not use contractions when addressing me. They are starting to give me headaches.'

Mr Bright sighs, walks over to the ceiling-mounted projector above his table, and switches it on. 'The answer to my question: a pyroclastic flow.'

A cartoon volcano appears on the whiteboard. Magma rises into the mountain's mouth, pushes the surrounding rock outward, and deforms the lip.

'Let's return to chapter twenty—*Test Yourself on Plate Tectonics*.' Mr Bright runs a hand through his bleach-burnt hair with ginger roots. 'Okay, everyone, you have twenty minutes to finish.'

The other nineteen students read with ghoulish eyes.

Scanning the assessment, I shake my head. *More contractions*. To deal with this, I strike through the questions using my ruler and pen, then rewrite them.

**1)What will I be doing next?** *Mrs Flatt will give me my increased medication at breaktime. Then, History with Mrs Wills. Before the lesson, I need to ask her about a book she is reading called The Origin of Nightmares: From Mares to Clowns. After lunch, I have a meeting with my latest educational psychologist.*

**2)Will Chinwe walk home with me?** *No. She has after-school Physics Club on Fridays. She plans to build a particle accelerator one day. Embarrassing. She might blow up the world.*

**3)Is anything else on my mind?** *Will Dad return home for my sixteenth birthday? Also, Mum is acting strangely this week, doing lots of housework, going to the hairdresser twice, and dusting her cookbooks. Not good signs. Change is coming. And I forgot to bring my digital watch to school for the first time. One of my legs is twitching. I want to kick something. I do not know why.*

My shoulders loosen as a thunderclap bewitches the sky. Rain pounds the glass.

Dad *must* arrive tomorrow. He is the only one who understands me. I kick my desk.

A drop of water from a leak in the roof falls on my brow. Cracks cover the ceiling; tributaries spread into the walls. I want to smash a hole in the plaster and escape.

The bell rings at last. Noise swirls around me.

'Please leave your papers on your desks.' Mr Bright watches the students exit.

I fold my paper, slip it into my pocket, then tap the tops of desks two, four, six, eight and nine on my way out.

Mr Bright wipes his nose with the back of his hand. 'Dax, stop daydreaming in my lessons, or desk number ten will no longer be yours.'

My reality-based dream: Blue Corduroy Man surfs a pyroclastic flow.

Outside the room, the main corridor fills with people, coats and bags. Keeping to the left, I slide my shoulder along the wall to avoid touching all the sweaty bodies and visit my favourite window. Sixty-three droplets. That is two off its record.

A little girl stares at the vending machine. She lingers every break but buys nothing. Sneaking by, I drop a pound coin in her blazer pocket and go.

In the yard, boys and girls huddle beneath umbrellas. Mrs Wills hurries past them, heading in my direction. This is my chance to ask her about 'The Origin of Nightmares', but there are too many

people. She enters the corridor. Her blouse creases under her armpits and her skirt flaps around her ankles. Towering over the pupils, she flicks her auburn hair off her face with a twist of her wrist.

I swallow hard and follow her. 'Mrs Wills?'

Before she can respond, a girl howls at her, 'You've no right to confiscate my phone.' She pursues Mrs Wills down the corridor. 'My dad's a lawyer.'

*The girl is not talking to me. She is not talking to me.*

Unable to draw close enough to ask Mrs Wills anything, I trail them to the Humanities Office.

Backpacks and umbrellas knock into me, and I raise my arms to protect my head.

The corridor crackles with electronic devices and the popping of soft-drink cans. Mrs Wills' stride lengthens. *Ignore the lack of a pattern. Ignore the lack of a pattern.*

She whips around to the girl whining for her phone. 'Funny. You take a whole term to hand in your essay on the Great Fire of London but resort to threats in a second to recover a beeping hunk of plastic.' She enters the Humanities Office, closing the door behind her.

I dodge an umbrella with a sticker of a clown across the handle. It jabs the air in front of me. I recoil and blink ten times to delete the image of the exaggerated painted smile.

A tall boy bangs on the door while the girl howls again. I squeeze between them as fast as possible.

The tall boy scratches a scab on his arm. 'Is Mr Bright in there, please? He said to come here for my detention.'

Mrs Wills groans from inside the room, then opens the door. 'Let me check for you.' She coughs into a greater staccato of sarcasm. 'Mr Bright, are you under the office desk again? No? Are you sure you're not under there, sir?' Turning to the boy, she clasps the silver crucifix hanging from her neck. 'He isn't here unless he's morphed into someone else. Or he's become invisible.'

I clutch my temple, searching for a vein to compress with my middle finger. My head is a magma chamber ready to erupt. I am wasting my time and must take my medication before my next lesson. It would make Mum and Dad proud if I could survive a morning without an incident.

Struggling down the stairs to the ground floor, I land on steps one, four, six, eight and nine, to reach the Student Services Office. Through the window lies a long rectangular room with only four visible cracks in the ceiling.

A white plastic cup half-full of water, bearing my name in black marker, waits next to the couch.

Laminated posters of pupils explaining why they love the school decorate the walls. The head teacher appears in one of the pictures as an executive moron. A big speech balloon hangs over his yellow-toothed smile: 'The best comprehensive school in Northern England.' I make a fist and mime-punch the picture in slow motion.

*Medication time.* I walk into the office.

'Good morning, Dax. Please remember to knock.' Mrs Flatt, my learning mentor, smiles from behind her desk, the skin crinkling around her twitching nose. Her whisper is as soft as the picture of the white rabbit with pink eyes on the wall. 'Still taking your melatonin in the evening? The head asked me to double-check.'

'Yes. I am still taking that one.'

She sucks in air, her cracked lips barely parting. 'How are you?'

I pick at the buckle on my trouser belt. 'Let us hope Mrs Wills can tell me about "The Origin of Nightmares"'. This might stop a terrible thing from happening. My mind needs me to have better control of it.'

Mrs Flatt produces a packet of crisps from her handbag. 'Rest is important. Do you want to lie down?'

I pinch myself and limit my swaying. 'The last time I had these nightmares, my doctor sent me to a hospital. I do not want them to return.'

'Mention this at your afternoon meeting.'

'Okay.' A line on the food packaging catches my attention: MADE WITH REAL CHEESE. 'Does that mean the other ingredients are unreal?'

'Not again, Dax.' She attempts to mask her yawn with a wrinkled hand. 'It does not pay to think too deeply.'

The digital clock on the wall says 10:10:10. Relief washes over me. Today might be a good day, after all.

Mrs Flatt puts down the crisps and hands me the plastic cup along with my pills.

10:10:20.

I roll the purple and orange oblongs onto my tongue, scrunching my face at their bitterness, then swallow them with the water.

'Dax, think of something calm and relaxing.'

END OF CHAPTER ONE