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The Author is **Blake**'s second novel.

His first novel is *Endurance*.

To keep updated and find out more about **T. J.**

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The Author

T. J. Blake

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The Move

Today's the day, the big day, the move. It's finally arrived. Here I am, with only my rucksack of clothes and my laptop bag. I begin making my way up the drive, trudging along the dust smothered gravel path. The disturbed dust creates a haze that hovers an inch above the crunching gravel and clings to my brown leather shoes.

The bricks are dark red; the polished windows catch my attention but the reflection of the sun shines straight into my eyes. I look away from the glare, to the sparkling maroon door in the porch.

As I stand on the slope in front of my new home, I shuffle on the spot, looking at my new surroundings - a quiet cul-de-sac in Surrey called 'Mulberry Lane'.

I look around and spot the house opposite mine which is painted white. The lawn looks well-maintained, as do the bushes and the ivy which grows around the outline of one of the upstairs windows. A black Audi sits on the patchy wet concrete drive.

To the left is another house, similar to the first. Next to that, is the last house at the end of the road, which looks smaller than those that surround it. Its lawn is overgrown, the windows are stained by green mould and the curtains look like they're kitchen tea towels.

I look away from the grimmest house in the cul-de-sac and turn to examine the other houses on the slope alongside my new home.

They all look the same as mine; same bricks and same architecture.

To my right; the trees muffle the sounds of a park. The swings creak and children giggle, accompanied by an occasional roar of laughter from adults.

The house to the right of mine looks empty, with no movement within and no car on the drive. I guess they're away on holiday.

My surroundings are different to what I'm used to. My wife, Tanya, and I, and our two children, Sammy and Alex - used to live a few miles from here. That house was much bigger, with an extra bedroom, conservatory and a swimming pool. It was also surrounded by a seven-foot wall with electric gates at the front. Obviously I don't have that here, which makes me feel uncomfortable and slightly insecure.

As I turn to enter, I hear a noise inside. I pause to listen again. Silence. I take the key to the front door from my pocket and slowly unlock the door. I gently push it, which creaks the more it opens.

Then I listen again; nothing. I shrug it off and step inside, the house is freezing.

I silently close the door; place my rucksack and laptop on the floor and begin to look at the layout of the house.

To my left is the dining room and through the doorway I spot a wooden table with six chairs.

Directly in front of me are stairs with a door on the side, which leads down into the basement.

To the left of the staircase is the kitchen and opposite is the entrance to the garage. The décor in this open hallway and in the sitting room looks like it hasn't been changed in years. The ornaments, chairs and tables are all old-fashioned, wooden and varnished, just like the floor.

A forty – something man used to lived here, I can never remember his name. He must've liked his antiques.

I step cautiously on the tips of my toes as I continue my tour around the house. I poke my head round the sitting room door but all I see is a green sofa, an armchair and a TV in the corner of the room.

I go back to the front door, put the latch on and lock it. If anyone's in here they're not escaping without a fight.

I head towards the garage, it's locked. Surely, no one's gona be in there then?

As I make my way to the kitchen, the door under the stairs catches my attention. It's standing ajar. It creaks and I stare as I walk slowly towards it. The handle is cool to the touch. I yank open the door and for a minute I could've sworn a shadowy figure appeared in front of me. It disintegrates into thin air. I step under the stairs and look down at the wooden stairs that lead into darkness. My body feels numb with fear as my eyes search the shadows. The hairs on the back of my

neck stand up. I do not like the feeling of this basement; it could be a good place to film a horror movie.

I back out and shut the door firmly. It latches and I step back. I stare at the door handle, waiting for it to move and the door to fly open, but it doesn't. It's funny what the mind can do.

I open it with more confidence this time. I stand at the top of the stairs for a moment and then walk down. I stare straight into the darkness and it feels like its staring back at me. I look at my feet and step cautiously down to the fifth step from the bottom. Deja vu strikes, it feels like I've done this loads of times before.

I spot a light switch to my right, I press it and wait for the lights to flicker on and reveal the basement. My nerves simmer down and I can breathe easier now I can look around at the layout and see what's in here. I go down the last few steps and walk into the centre of the dusty atmosphere. As I step onto the concrete, there's that sense of familiarity again. It feels as if I've been here before, done this before. I've only been down here once, and that was when I viewed the house. Machinery hangs on the back wall opposite the stairs, and to the left is a metal stand with more machinery, like tools and books on mechanics. The rest of the basement holds old toys that are covered in dust and a rocking horse that sits in the corner, casting a shadow on the wall. Small bikes on the ground have

stabilisers still attached. There's a bucket of toys with a small brown teddy bear sitting on the top, staring at me. One eye and an ear are missing. Its paws rest either side of it as it sits upright, its eye staring into mine. There's a pink plastic table under the wooden stairs, with four pink plastic chairs placed around it. As I look around at my surroundings, I hear footsteps from above. I freeze where I'm standing and hold my breath. I can hear a faint whistling sound, like a kettle being boiled. I look up from the bottom of the stairs but I can't see anyone.

I walk out of the basement, switching the light off as I walk past. When I reach the top, I shut the door firmly behind me.

The temperature is so different up here, it's so much colder. I hope the central heating kicks in quickly. Standing outside the kitchen door, I listen carefully but only hear the kettle continuing to whistle.

I gently push open the door and poke my head in. The kitchen is modern compared to the sitting room, with black tiled walls and matching black and white flooring. I look to the white surfaces that run along the walls and spot the kettle. The steam coming from the kettle swirls into different shapes that curl at the top and disappear. Two mugs are placed in front of the kettle; one empty and one with a tea bag in it.

"I've been expecting you, Mr Milligan." A voice booms from behind me. I jump and

turn so quickly that I over-balance. My breathing speeds up and my hands shake.

“Sorry to startle you. I’m Simon Cann, you can call me Simon.”

“Why are you in here?” I sound abrupt and rude. Simon looks at me, wide-eyed.

I start again. “Sorry, you just frightened me, that’s all. I’m Ryan, Ryan Milligan. It’s good to meet you.” I put my hand out to him and Simon smiles and shakes my hand.

“Good to meet you, Ryan. I’m here because I’ve maintained the house since Andrew left. You know, doing a bit of gardening here and there, trying to update the house a little.”

“So Andrew was the guy living here before, then?” I thought his name might be Andrew but better double check.

“Yeah that’s right, Andrew Myers. He was a good friend to me, been pals for years.”

“So why did he leave? Did he not like the area?”

“To be honest, I don’t know why he left, that’s *if* he left. The police searched for ages trying to find him. They searched the area, this house, his work, everywhere, but they never found him. They pronounced him dead and called off the search after seven years. Andy had written a will, he left me a set of keys to this place and another set to someone else. He also wanted that person to receive the money from the house when it was sold. Andy was a nice guy. Anyway, no one’s moved in the house since. I don’t know why,

it's a real nice place. The estate agent, Mike, you met Mike, right?"

"Yeah I did, he showed me around the house once, very quickly."

"Yeah, well, Mike said every time someone came into the house, they stared at the basement door. Then after showing them around, he'd show them the basement and they would never want to see it. They would always reject the house before even going down there. Not sure why, maybe it's the basement door." I look confused.

"It's a bit dodgy, sometimes it locks and you can't open it, but after you leave it for a while, it opens." Simon chuckles and then continues.

"To be honest, I do feel odd when I come into this house. Maybe it's the spirit of Andy. Anyway, what do you like, Tea? Coffee?"

"Tea, two sugars please."

"Brilliant, same as me. Make yourself at home Ryan; it is your home after all."

I nod to Simon and go over to the wooden table next to the wall. There are black leather cup and plate mats and a fruit bowl sits in the centre with no fruit in it. The kitchen is the same as any other, a fridge freezer, a sink, a dishwasher, and cupboards all around the walls. I have time to study Simon. He's not the most fashionable guy. He wears white Umbro trainers, denim jeans and a dark green jumper. His scalp is balding at the back and his grey and brown patchy hair is receding. I suppose I can hardly talk, I wear a blazer, shirt and tie every day. My black hair and stubble

has recently attracted the grey, so that my hair has a smattering of silver within the black. Simon brings the mugs over, the steam rises, creating condensation to hang around the rim of the mugs.

“It’s a bit hot.” Simon says.

“I can see that, thank you.”

Simon places the mugs on the coasters and sits down. He takes a sip from the mug and gasps. “That is bloody hot.”

I let out a chuckle and bring the mug toward my face and begin to blow gently into it. Simon’s phone rings and he answers it, leaving me to sit in silence, drinking my scalding tea. After a couple minutes on the phone, he continues talking to me and drinks his tea quickly.

“Sorry about that Ryan, it was work. Anyway, when Andy left, Mike’s estate agents took the house. Mike asked me to help him out; he’s busy all the time with work. He has two jobs and a family to look after, so I offered to maintain the house for him and when someone eventually moved in, to help them out and show them the ropes. That’s why I’m here. As I said earlier, me and Andy were really good friends, so I was doing it for him too, you know, in case he decided to return. You okay with that, Ryan?”

What if I wasn’t okay with it, I wonder what he’d say? “Yes I am; I need help with this place.”

“Okay. Well you have the keys you need; the garage key is in the cupboard above the kettle,

hanging on the nail. I'm sure you've lived in a house before right?"

I chuckle. "Yeah, I used to live in a house a few miles from here, more like a mansion though, double the size of this." Hope that didn't sound like I was boasting.

"Oh, right, okay. I would stay and chat longer, but I've got things to do, places to be. I'm sure you have things to do, unpack your stuff, yes?"

No, not really. "Yeah, I do."

"Okay. Well, I live across the road; my house is the one opposite with the Audi parked on the drive. So, if you need any help, knock on my door. I live there with my wife; she's there pretty much all the time. I'll get her to come round to introduce herself soon."

"Okay; that sounds great." I stand up in sync with Simon, and we shake hands again. "Was nice to meet you, Simon."

"You too Ryan, hope to see you again soon. Before I forget, all of Andrew's stuff was left here, so you might find some things of his. It's up to you what you do with it. All of upstairs is boxed up. Someone will come buy to get rid of it, if not me, then probably Mike. Don't worry, we won't just let ourselves in like we have done the last few years, you won't be startled again"

"Okay, thank you."

"So, here are the spare keys that we had." Simon puts the keys into my hand. "See you around. Remember, I'm only across the road."

“Well, thanks for your help, I really appreciate it, looks like you’ve done a great job here.”

We walk to the front door; I unlock it and open it. We shake hands again and he walks out and down the path. I shut the door and hear the gravel crunching under his footsteps.

I go back into the kitchen and finish my tea, ugh it’s cold. My throat tightens in disgust as I swallow it down. I place my mug next to the kettle and put Simon’s in the dishwasher.

I look out onto the garden from the kitchen window, it’s much smaller than my last, but at least it backs onto woodland. The trees line the fence, reminding me of a barricade to protect my home.

I boil the kettle, make myself another cup of tea and continue my tour of the house. I go to the stairs and up the first two steps. I turn right with the small landing and continue climbing up carefully, trying not to spill my tea. I pause halfway up to take some slurps from my mug, so it’s less likely to spill. It burns my tongue.

I get to the top of the stairs, walk past one of the windows which looks out on the front of the house and see a door to my right; one of the bedrooms.

There’s a bed to the right, a window straight in front of me and a desk beside it.

I turn right out of the room, along the landing, which is a long corridor with a window at the end. It looks out onto the garden and woodland behind. There are two

doors to my left and one to my right. The first door is a toilet. The door on the right opens onto a bedroom. As I look in, there's a single bed with toys scattered across the floor. I shut the door and look to the last bedroom.

This is the biggest bedroom. It has a double bed but the wallpaper could definitely benefit from a change from its wet tea bag look to something a bit more appealing. The big window looks out onto the back garden and the trees.

I turn my back to the bed, face the window, stretch out my arms like I'm Jesus Christ, and fall backwards onto the bed. It's nice and spongy. I like this bed; I'll definitely be sleeping here.

I head back downstairs to pick up my rucksack and begin to unpack.

As I reach my new bedroom, I lose the willingness to unpack, so instead I just throw the rucksack on the bed and leave, feeling like a lazy teenager.

I go to the kitchen and place my mug next to the kettle. I pull the keys out from my pocket and unlock the back door to go into the garden. I step outside into the fine English summer and look at the grass. To the right is a brown shed matching the fences, I can smell paint carried on the light breeze. The wooden fences border the garden; the end of the garden is wire fencing with a wooden gate half way along the fence. I walk right to the end of the garden and look back to the house; it

looks just as good here as it does at the front. Simon has done a good job.

I go around to the front of the house. It's so quiet here, the only noise being the occasional muffled park sounds. I look at the neighbours' homes again, Simon's home, then to the neglected house at the dead-end and then to the houses that are identical to mine. As I stare, the realisation sinks in that the most activity in this cul-de-sac are my eyes, moving around, until Simon's front door swings open. Out steps a woman with golden curls bouncing as she jogs toward me. She has a good physique; her tight crop-top shows her slender shoulders. She crosses the road and runs up my gravel path.

Out of breath, she says: "Hi there. I'm Sandra, Simon's wife, nice to meet you."

"Hi, I'm Ryan Milligan,"

"Yeah, I know who you are. Simon didn't realise that you're an author. We've both read some of your novels, they're always very good."

"Why, thank you very much." She seems very nice, Simon is lucky to have her; she's not just a pretty face.

"I was wondering, would you like to come round tonight for dinner, or maybe tomorrow? I understand if you don't want to, but it would be great to get to know you, we are neighbours now after all"

Dinner already? These two are either really friendly or just creepy stalkers. "Dinner would be great," I reply.

“Oh, brilliant, I’ll tell Simon the good news. What do you like, anything in particular?”

“I’m not fussy, Mrs Cann, What were you thinking of cooking?”

“Oh please, call me Sandra. Actually, it’s Sandy, call me Sandy.”

“Okay, Sandy.” *She is either a big fan or a suck up.*

“Well, I was thinking some pasta? Do you like pasta?”

“Yeah, sure do.”

“Brilliant, Bolognese good for you?”

“Bolognese would be lovely.”

“Great, well I’ll leave you to do whatever you’re doing. When do you want dinner, tonight?”

“Whenever suits you two, I’m free tonight and tomorrow.”

“Tonight would be best.”

“Okay sure. See you both tonight.”

“Great, see you later.” She turns and runs down the slope and across the road. She pauses on the grass outside her house and tracks to her right to walk up the drive and to her front door.

She seems really nice; they both seem like a happy and kind couple. They will definitely be a good pair to get friendly with. I’ll be able to rely on them, if need be.

I walk back into the house and pick my laptop off the floor. I then go into the kitchen, unzip the bag and take out the laptop and its charger. I find a plug socket under the table where I plug in my laptop to charge it.

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