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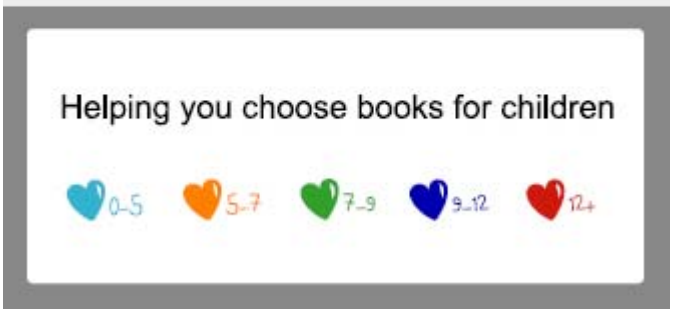

opening extract from

The Black Room

written by

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In the cavern under the cold ground, Lorn was awake and shivering. Damp air came filtering down the entrance tunnel and slithered under her fur blankets, licking at her face and crawling across her back. She rolled on to her side and curled up tighter, pulling the blankets over her nose.

All down the cavern, restless shadows moved across the bare earth walls, arching up to the roof and huddling small again as people stirred in their sleep. Only Bando and Perdew were awake, stoking the brazier at the far end. Lorn watched as Bando bent to pick another log off the woodpile. He lifted it up to the ledge where Perdew was lying, next to the brazier, and Perdew slid it gently into the flames. Then Bando bent down and the quiet, steady sequence began again.

Lorn lay and listened to the spit and crackle of the fire. Gradually her eyes closed and she started drifting into sleep . . .

And then the noise came.

Scra-a-atch.

She sat up abruptly. It wasn't a loud sound, but it was harsh and unfamiliar—and close. She saw Perdew sit up on the ledge by the brazier, turning round to listen.

Scratch. Scratch-scratch-scrape.

Whatever it was, it was coming down the entrance tunnel. Lorn scrambled free of her blankets and knelt down, putting an ear to the ground to hear more clearly. This time she recognized part of the noise as the scraping sound of

branches against earth. The knot of branches that they used to block the entrance was being pushed slowly down the tunnel towards them.

But what was pushing it? What was scratching at the tunnel walls and grating against the small stones in the ground?

Perdew was beside her now, crouching down to whisper in her other ear. 'What should we do?'

Lorn waited another moment, still listening, trying to match the scratching sound to something that she knew. Twice before, they had heard claws scraping at the earth around the entrance. And once a hedge-tiger had crouched there for hours, filling the cavern with the reek of its hot, hungry breath. But there had never been anything quite like this.

It started again. *Scratch-scratch-scrape*. Now she could see the tips of the battered, knotted branches moving slowly out of the tunnel, into the cavern. Whatever was making the scratching noise had to be close behind those branches.

'We must wake the others,' she said crisply. 'And get the blades.'

Perdew nodded and shot off round the cavern, quietly and very fast. He tapped at shoulders and whispered into sleeping ears and, as he passed, people sat up suddenly, not blinking and stretching, but instantly alert. There was no sound except a whimper from Bando as he turned to look towards the entrance. Annet cut the noise off short, putting a hand over his mouth and sliding her other arm round his bulky shoulders to reassure him.

Scratch, scrape.

Perdew padded over to the corner where they stored the blades. The others moved into position, crouching in a half-circle round the entrance, and Perdew ran backwards and forwards, handing out blades until everyone was holding a heavy piece of metal with a raw, sharp edge.

There was one more *scrape* and then the knot of branches came free of the tunnel, expanding suddenly as the ends uncurled. Bando jumped forward nervously and snatched it up, clutching it tightly and holding it in front of Lorn, like a shield. For a second, there was nothing. Only a steady flow of cold air out of the empty tunnel.

And then they heard another sound.

This one was gentler, sliding lightly over the rough earth. Lorn closed her eyes and concentrated on sounds and smells and the way the air moved against her skin. Letting them make a dark image in her mind.

A soft, bulky shape was coming down the tunnel towards them, not moving and changing, like something that propels itself, but pushed along from behind. It carried a sharp, strong smell, strange but not animal.

'I don't think . . . it's dangerous,' she said slowly.

'Sssh!' Perdew's voice was sharp with fear.

'But it doesn't smell—'

'*Sssh!*' This time it wasn't only Perdew. The sound came from all over the cavern. Lorn opened her eyes and looked round the half-circle of tense, frightened faces. They were all staring fixedly at the entrance. Waiting for some kind of monstrous predator.

Slowly, the great, soft shape began to emerge into the light. It was pale and tall, with flat, sloping sides. A long, curved wedge, lying on its back. Lorn didn't know what it was, but the scent was much stronger now, filling the whole cavern. It smelt sharp and fresh and disturbing.

For a second there was complete silence. Then Annet laughed. She sounded startled and delighted.

'Well, I wasn't expecting *that*!'

'How did it get here? Who brought it?' Perdew started to walk round the huge wedge, running his hands over its sides with a look of happy astonishment. It was as tall as he was and it was covered with a coarse, pale membrane.

What is it? Lorn wanted to say. *Is it food?* But her mouth wouldn't make the words—because all the others knew the answers already. She could see it in their faces. Nothing like that great, pale wedge had ever come into the cavern, in all the time she had been there, but everyone had recognized it immediately.

Except her.

Perdew was using his blade now. He sliced carefully into the membrane and stripped it back, as if he were skinning an animal. The membrane came away easily and the fire-light gleamed on long, translucent tubes, hanging one against another, closely packed together.

'Please,' Annet said, holding out her arms. 'Oh, *please.*'

Perdew laughed and reached up with both hands, separating one of the tubes and cutting it free. As his blade went in, juice spurted out and Lorn caught it full on, in her eye. Her mind flared suddenly, exploding with images. Not a wedge, but a different shape altogether.

In another place.

Light light LIGHT—dazzling and fierce—
Brightness. Something round and smooth and cold.
Fingers bent, nails digging in—and that sharp juice,
just the same into the eye. Sharp and hurting.
Then the voice, and the hard hand coming down.
Sssh! It's only an orange! Dohfuss! Dohfuss!
Dohfuss!

For a second it was more real than anything around her. She felt her brain stir and stretch, like someone waking from a long sleep. Her mind reached out in amazement. *I remember . . .*

Then something dark and solid clamped down hard. *No.* It was like a hand slammed over her face, stifling and choking,

shutting out light and sound and feeling. *I remember,* she thought again, forcing her brain to form the words. Trying to hold on.

But this time *remember* trawled up nothing except the pictures that it always brought. The moment when Zak found her wandering in the wood. The moment when he led her into the cavern for the first time.

Why couldn't she get back beyond those?

Tom went out late, only just before the park closed. He liked that time of day when it was damp and gloomy and autumn hadn't quite turned into winter. Helga had been nagging at him for hours, pushing her nose against his legs while he was trying to write, but he'd made her wait until his homework was finished.

By then, there was a faint wet mist lingering between the street lamps and blurring the view across the road. It was colder than Tom had expected. As he and Helga went into the park, he put his collar up and pushed his free hand into his pocket, but the mist sneaked round the back of his neck, turning his ears numb. By the time he bent to let Helga off the lead, his fingers were thick and clumsy with cold. He fumbled with the clip and Helga jumped up and licked impatiently at his face.

'Sit,' he said. He took the lead away and felt in his pocket for the whistle he was using to train her. 'Wait for the signal.'

She gave his hand another lick, almost sitting but not quite, eager to be off. Her eyes were bright in her sharp Jack Russell face and she watched the whistle intently as he lifted it to his mouth.

He blew twice in quick succession, making a noise too high-pitched to hear himself. Immediately, Helga shot off across the wide expanse of grass. He let her run until he could only just see her, and then he blew again. He had no intention of letting her reach the hedge at the end of the park. If he did, she'd be through in a flash, into the

little wood beyond, exploring the undergrowth and paddling around in muddy ditches. And he'd have to spend hours cleaning her up and getting the burrs out of her coat.

He blew long-short-long—*come back here*—and saw her skid to a halt. But she didn't run back to him. She stood where she was, a small, dark shape in the mist, looking longingly towards the wood.

Oh no, you don't, Tom thought. He lifted the whistle and blew again, long-short-long, watching to see what she did. If she came now, that was good enough. If he had to blow a third time, she was in for a scolding.

She turned and took a step towards him—and that was when he saw the two people coming out of the wood.

They were across on the other side of the park, much further off than Helga. Out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw them come round the far end of the hedge and start to walk along the opposite edge of the grass, on the path that led back to the main gate. In the mist and the dark, they could have been any two people. Two grey blobs, with nothing to identify them.

Then the tall one hunched its shoulders forward, running a hand through its hair and the shorter one tossed its head and laughed. And Tom knew who they were.

Robbo. And the Hag.

As soon as he'd recognized them, they seemed unmistakable. Robert was loping along the path, leaning slightly sideways as he listened to Emma. And Emma was nodding briskly, to emphasize what she was saying. Tom couldn't hear her voice, but he knew those sharp little nods, and the way she moved her arm, stabbing at the air with one finger.

Didn't she ever give up? Tom watched her through the mist, imagining the rise and fall of her voice, carping and criticizing. Jabbing away at Robert with every sentence.

Why did he let her get away with it? He was tall and

clever and good at sport. He ought to have had everything going for him. But as soon as Emma started nagging, he seemed to collapse into a pathetic heap. *You've got that wrong, Rob . . . That's a really stupid idea . . . How can you be so clumsy . . . ?* Why didn't their parents tell her to shut up? Couldn't they see her trashing his self-confidence?

Tom had spent years trying to do a repair job. Robert was his best friend—ever since they were four—and he hated seeing him put down. *You're just as good as she is. Tell her to shut up and get lost.*

He'd actually thought he was having an effect, too. But since the summer Robert had gone downhill. Tom had no idea what had happened to him in the holidays, but it had made him . . . strange. When he'd come back to school, he was like a zombie, going through the motions but not really connecting with anything. As if he was suffering from depression.

It was Emma's fault. It *had* to be, somehow or other. Looking at them through the mist, Tom couldn't bear to watch her jabbering away at Robert. He wanted to creep up behind her and give her a shock. Make her jump and look stupid. He liked getting Robbo to laugh at her.

He was just going to set off when he suddenly realized that Helga hadn't come back after all. Where was she? He blew the whistle again and peered into the mist.

There was no sign of her—and it didn't take a genius to work out what that meant. *Sorry, Robbo,* he thought. *You'll have to look after yourself for the time being.* Getting Helga out of the wood was top priority.

It didn't take long to find her. She was investigating a deep, wet ditch just behind the hedge, and she was wet and smelly and very, very happy. Tom pulled her out of the ditch and clipped on her lead, but he didn't have the heart to shout at her. He just dragged her out of the wood as fast as he could.

As they came through the hedge, he saw the two blurred figures again. They'd almost reached the main gate, but the short one—Emma—was still nodding and waving her hands around. How could anyone have so much to say? Tom toyed with the idea of sneaking up, as he'd planned before—taking smelly Helga with him, for increased shock value. Could he make it before they crossed the road and reached home?

He was just about to try, when Emma stopped on the path and started to laugh. And the taller figure laughed too. Robert's laugh. Tom could hear them quite clearly through the mist.

Then Robert reached out and touched Emma's head. Ruffling her hair.

At least, that was what it looked like. But it had to be the mist playing tricks. Robert would never do anything like that. It was impossible.

'What was I doing in the *wood*? Yesterday evening?' Robert looked startled for a second and then his face went blank. 'I don't think so, Tosh. Must have been someone else.' He pushed his gym kit into his locker and shut the door.

'It was you,' Tom said. 'I was taking Helga for a walk and I saw you and Emma, coming out of the wood.'

Robert shook his head.

What stupid game was he playing? 'It *was* you,' Tom said.

He tried to meet Robert's eyes, because that was always a sure way of catching him out. Robbo could never keep a lie going if you stared at him. Either he turned red, or he started laughing.

But he wouldn't meet Tom's eyes. He closed him out completely. One moment they were having a conversation, and the next . . . nothing. Robert's face was cold and

expressionless. He looked over Tom's shoulder and started talking to Joe, as if Tom weren't there.

OK. If that's how you want to be—

Tom turned away and stamped off. But that didn't make him feel any better. Robert was getting more and more peculiar. What did it *mean*? Was he in trouble? And if he was, why didn't he ask for help? What *had* happened in the summer? There seemed to be hundreds of questions and no answers.

But there was one thing Tom did know, for certain.

It *was* Robert he'd seen in the park.