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Opening extract from

Bad Blood

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The Beginning

Above a densely forested hillside black bird-shapes wheel and turn over a weed-clogged tarn. It is winter and the bare branches reach like stunted arms up into the leaden sky. Beneath them, the landscape looks bleak and barren. Leaf litter lies in great drifts between the trees and clogs the streams, massing with rustles and whispers behind the lone house on the side of the fell.

It is a decaying house of shuttered windows, overlooking a tangled garden where strangling weeds are fighting the flowerbeds and winning. Winged reflections tremble briefly in the stagnant water of a garden pond and vanish into the grey distance. The woods rustle with animal movements and, inside the house, there's a scratching noise from behind the walls and under the floorboards.

The landscape is sleeping, beneath its blanket of dead leaves, waiting for a cruel April to rip the earth open and bring the barren world to life. But spring is not all that it is waiting for. This landscape has hibernated for sixteen winters, waiting for more than the shifting seasons. Now a change is coming and beneath the earth something stirs, a nightmare waking from its deep sleep.



1
A Waste of a Name

It began with an amusing coincidence. When Peter Brown met Harriet Wilde at a London art gallery they had each mentioned their children in the course of their conversation and been struck by the similarity of names.

'Is your Kat a Katherine as well?' Peter had asked.

'She's Catriona, Cat with a C,' Harriet explained, adding for good measure, 'My ex-husband chose it.'

'Katherine was my wife's middle name,' Peter replied, using the past tense rather self-consciously.

'We cat people should stick together.' Harriet smiled, and they'd chinked their glasses with a feeling of camaraderie.

Their children had felt rather differently about it. When Harriet confessed to them that she was seeing Peter seriously Roley and Cat had been appalled. Their mother's new boyfriend had seemed like such a dull and boring person on his occasional visits to the house that neither of them had really paid him much attention. It had come as an unpleasant surprise that Harriet wanted them to get to know his family 'because it would be nice for the two families to do things together'.

'She means because she might marry him and we'll have to live with them,' Cat had said, suspending her usual state of hostilities with her older brother to enlist his support.

'And they're bound to be awful and dull, just like him. Mum says they have good manners—you know what that means.'

'We'll have to be nice to them because their mother is dead,' Roley predicted dolefully. 'Mum says we're lucky we've still got a dad.'

'And their *names*.' Cat had pulled a face. 'John and Katherine? Could you be more boring than that?'

'Might as well be called Child A and Child B,' Roley agreed.

That remark was one he'd regretted later. He hadn't imagined that Cat would remember it or that she'd say it to anyone's face. That first lunch at Peter's flat had degenerated into a screaming row. Roley had been grateful when John asked him very politely if Roley would like to see his dinosaur collection. Afterwards they'd spent a soothing hour together building a spider robot out of John's mechanical Lego.

'I've got some dinosaur Lego at home,' Roley had said, not knowing what else to say to the younger boy. They were both pretending to ignore the noise from the living room.

'That sounds good,' John said, looking up from his part of the robot with a considering expression. He was thinking that going to tea at Harriet's house next week might not be so bad if there was going to be dinosaur Lego.

Roley had seemed enormous in the living room but scrunched up half underneath John's desk he seemed smaller and his eyes behind his thick glasses screwed up with alarm whenever the noise from the other room got louder.

'It's a pity, isn't it,' John said thoughtfully. 'About both of our sisters having the same name.'

'Mum said her name was Katherine.' Roley shifted awkwardly and fiddled with the robot's arm. 'I didn't know you called her Kat.'

'She's always called Kat,' John explained. 'That's why she didn't like it when your sister said she should be Kathy instead.'

'Catriona's always Cat as well,' Roley said glumly. 'Just like I'm always Roley instead of Roland.'

'There isn't anything John can be shortened to,' John said, thinking about it. 'It is a dull sort of thing to be called. I suppose that's what your sister meant when she said it was a waste of a name.'

'At least it can't be turned into anything embarrassing,' Roley said, trying to offer some compensation. 'My mum sometimes calls me Roley Poley.'

'All the same, I think your sister was right,' John said, snapping the last batteries into place and setting the robot upright with small careful movements. 'It is a waste of a name.' He looked at Roley, watching the bigger boy's eyes screw up again behind his glasses. 'If we were both called it, I wouldn't mind changing to something else. I expect I'd get used to it eventually.'

They'd had two and a half years to get used to it but the problem had never been solved. They'd tried calling the two girls 'Katherine Kat' and 'Catriona Cat'. They'd tried calling them 'my cat' and 'your cat' and 'cat with a Cee' and 'cat with a Kay'. Nothing had worked.

Katherine still called Catriona 'her' or 'Harriet's daughter'.

Catriona had been ordered to stop calling Katherine 'Kathy' or 'Jennyennydots' but she still did it when the adults weren't listening. Under the circumstances Roley had felt too guilty to ask his mother if he could be called Roland now he was sixteen. And John had celebrated his tenth birthday by inventing a secret name for himself and writing it in invisible ink on a piece of paper he kept in his sock drawer.

It was the kind of thing that couldn't be helped. But it seemed to make every conversation just a bit more difficult. And people always noticed and pointed it out and said how awkward it must be. At the wedding the best man had told the story of how Peter and Harriet met and there had been an awkward silence as the guests wondered if either of them had thought it might be much simpler to marry someone else instead.

Roley had got used to living in a war zone. Since the wedding he'd found Catriona easier to get on with. She used to criticize him all the time, calling him a 'great lummox', 'clumsy oaf', or 'cave bear'—all criticisms she'd copied from their mother. By the time he was sixteen Roley had got used to feeling as if he was a shambling ape-like creature, incapable of entering a room without knocking something over, unable to express himself except in grunts.

But after Peter had sold his flat and moved in with his children, Catriona had focused her hostility on Katherine and John. She hadn't wanted to share a house with them

at all, had refused to even discuss the plans, and then been furious all over again when Harriet had spent that year's holiday fund on decorating rooms for Katherine and John. It had meant losing the upstairs living room with the 'children's TV' which Cat had appropriated anyway, and Harriet giving up her study.

'We all have to make sacrifices,' she'd said, getting Roley to help move her desk to a corner of the dining room. 'And the books about reconstituted families all say it's better if each child has its own room.' Harriet was amassing a collection of these books, coming home with a new one after each row, as if the new book might have the answer to all their problems.

Roley had read a few of those books himself. Cat had been so bitter and angry and resentful that Harriet spent most of her time having long careful talks with her and Roley had wanted to sort out his own feelings. He had noticed that any time he might have been inclined to object to something, Cat made a huge scene and he ended up being less on her side than before. He wished his mother would appreciate he was making an effort but, in a house constantly seething with resentment, where doors slammed and voices raised to a headache-inducing pitch, he ended up lurking in his room more often than not.

He was secretly lifting weights, a birthday present from his father he'd not told anyone about. Harriet and Cat were naturally skinny and they both looked at him with a sort of amazed pity when he finished his first course and looked around for seconds. At least Peter had supplied another man-sized appetite, and an enthusiasm for puddings. He

made these himself and Roley found it difficult to keep his new resolution to lose weight when another mouth-watering concoction of brown sugar and baked apples was served up. However, a lot of meals never made it to pudding, ending when Katherine left the table in tears and locked herself in the bathroom.

It was John who Roley really felt sorry for. He felt it was rough lines on someone who'd obviously been used to peace and quiet, to have to live in such perpetual uproar. The worst thing about it was that Harriet had been right when she said the Brown children had very good manners. At least, they had had. Nowadays Katherine seemed to spend most of her time on the verge of tears and Roley inwardly groaned every time she locked herself in the family bathroom, since she had a perfectly good room to go and sob in. John was still quiet and polite, saying please and thank you even when people didn't seem to notice him, and quietly playing in his room when the grown-ups didn't have time for him. Sometimes he would knock on Roley's door, the only person who ever did: Harriet would shout up the stairs when she wanted him and Cat walked in and out without asking. But John knocked so quietly you could barely hear him and would ask as politely as always if Roley minded him being there.

Roley wasn't ever sure what to talk about, but John seemed to be happy to watch whatever he was doing, and was actually getting quite good at computer games. Roley thought that when money was less tight he might suggest that they got John a computer of his own. But that would lead to another fight. After the room redecoration Peter

and Harriet had spent their free money on a new family sized car, a vast Toyota Previa that Cat claimed was an embarrassment to be seen in, although Roley was grateful that he didn't have to sit with his arms between his knees any more.

The car was so they could go places together but it looked as if for a third year running there'd be no family holiday, when the letter arrived.

It was a lumpy brown envelope with Peter's name on it in wavering handwriting. When he'd opened it with the butter knife three pieces of almost transparent paper had fallen out, covered with crabbed densely-written italic script, wrapped around a heavy iron key.

'It's from Thomas Stone,' Peter said in surprise, as he tried to decipher the black spikes of words, apparently written with a poker. 'Anne's uncle. I rather thought he'd passed away years ago.'

The others hadn't paid much attention. Harriet was busy with her usual morning rush and Cat and Kat were hissing insults at each other behind the cornflakes packet. Roley was trying to decide whether if he didn't have another piece of toast now would he need a chocolate bar to sustain him through break later on. But John picked up the key.

'What's it for?' he asked, turning it over in his hands.

'It's the key to a house in the Lake District,' Peter said, holding the transparent paper up to the light and squinting at the writing. 'Anne grew up there. Her parents moved away when she went to university and the house was rented out for a long time but now it's empty again. Thomas writes that he intends to sell it in the summer

but he's offering us the use of it for a holiday. If we'd like to go.'

'Mum lived there?' Kat looked up at that. 'I'd like to see the house she grew up in.'

'I've already been to the Lake District,' Cat said coolly, using the last of the milk on her cereal. 'I went with Josie from school. Her parents have a house and a boat.'

Harriet was looking interested now and leant over Peter's shoulder as he read the rest of the letter.

'This would be different,' she said seriously. 'This would be our first holiday as a family.'

Roley had needed a second and a third piece of toast to cheer him up during the rest of breakfast. Doing Things as a Family was quickly becoming his least favourite activity. It seemed to act as a cover for trips to places that no one wanted to go to and conversations about things that no one wanted to talk about. It meant Cat shouting and Kat sulking and Roley and John having a strained conversation about marmosets, or Beethoven, or whatever it was they were supposed to be appreciating, while their parents tried to calm the girls down.

All the same, being a family seemed to mean that Roley didn't get a vote. No one asked him if he'd rather spend the holiday doing something else. Catriona had said she'd been invited to stay at a friend's house but their mother hadn't listened. Katherine said she wouldn't come if she had to share a room but Peter had said he was sure they could work something out and had started telling John about the Lakes. 'It's a perfect holiday spot. Lots of beautiful walks. Heavenly scenery. And we can go sailing on the Lakes.

Arthur Ransome wrote stories set there about the Swallows and Amazon children having adventures in boats. Perhaps the four of you will learn to sail.'

'I can sail already,' Catriona said flatly. 'I've been with friends from school heaps of times.'

'That's terrific,' Peter said cheerfully. 'Then you'll be able to show the rest of us what to do.'

'The Swallows and Amazons had different boats,' Katherine muttered under her breath. 'And they had a war, not an adventure.'

Roley thought glumly that a war sounded only too likely. Especially since a cottage in the Lake District probably wouldn't have enough bedrooms for all of them to have their own. He'd made plans to sign up to a gym this summer and go to the swimming pool and try to get a tan. He was sick of the pale podgy face he saw in the mirror, which seemed to be stuck as a 'Roley', and he had a vision of coming back to school next year as someone who you'd take seriously as Roland. He'd even thought he might meet girls at the swimming pool, pretty *quiet* girls who wouldn't be swept up by lads like Mark who did karate or Julian who had tanned good looks from summers spent windsurfing in the Med.

But the Lake District holiday moved ahead with the same inevitability as Peter and Harriet's wedding. Two weeks later they had loaded up the car and set off up the M6 in a car packed so tightly with luggage that Roley was as cramped as ever. Thomas Stone had written directions in

his letter but Harriet had printed out a precise route from the internet, saying that she never trusted directions unless they were real ones with road numbers.

The only problem was that once they got to the Lake District the roads didn't seem to have any numbers. The directions had been fine until they left the A road and things suddenly went from bad to worse. The atmosphere of forced jollity emanating from the front of the car had been replaced by the exaggerated politeness of an imminent argument.

The Toyota Previa rumbled along the narrow lanes between walls of slate-like stones overgrown with moss. The fields beyond rose and fell lumpily every which way until they eventually heaved themselves up into the smoother curves of the fells. Afternoon was shading into evening and the scenery seemed muted, a watercolour palette of greens, yellows, greys, and browns rising up to the pale sky bruised with grey purple clouds.

Roley, sitting in the middle row of seats in the seven-person car, squashed his nose against the window, trying to conjure up one of the signs from the old man's letter: the sharp turn right, the five-barred gate, and the narrow entrance between stone walls. The only trouble was the Lake District seemed to be full of sharp turns, wooden gates, and stone walls and each mistake resulted in the car having to reverse, or mount a lumbering turn like the beast of burden it seemed to be.

Beside him the tish-tish-tish of Catriona's MP3 player leaked out from her in-the-ear headphones with irritating repetitiveness. His mother had made him turn off the

sound on his Game Boy but she'd let Cat be. His sister had spent almost the whole journey slumped in her seat, head hunched forward into the fluffy collar of her coat, eyes hidden behind dark glasses, and the fact that she didn't want to be here written in every line of her body. During the journey she had eaten KitKats with painful slowness, unwrapping and eating each piece in small neat bites before finally swallowing the last segment and licking the chocolate from her fingers.

In the third row of seats Peter's children were squashed up with luggage that had spilled over from the boot. The hierarchy of the car seats had required that the two youngest take the smallest space and any conversation with their father had to happen past the backs of the others' heads.

John had spent the journey reading the *Spotters' Guide to the Lake District* his father had given him, carefully looking up the long words in the dictionary he had packed in his new rucksack. Harriet, his stepmother, had given it to him with instructions to pack anything he needed for the journey and when she discovered it still virtually empty had seemed oddly apologetic. When John had opened it in the car he'd been pleased and surprised to discover that she had added four chocolate Tracker bars, a puzzle game that fitted neatly into a polished wooden box, and a pair of shiny new binoculars in their own special case.

In her uncomfortable seat, Katherine stared at the back of Catriona's head and thought of new reasons for hating her. The smooth conker-like shine of dark brown hair

irritated her with its too-perfect advert glossiness. She was annoyed at her father's acceptance of each piece of KitKat wrapping that Catriona peremptorily held out for him to dispose of. She was cross about everything and each new twist of irritation rubbed salt into the raw wound of the fact that her stepsister had stolen her name.

She'd never thought much about her name until the infamous row at that first lunch. 'You can't be Kat,' Catriona had said. '*I'm* Cat and I'm older. You'll have to be Kathy. That's fair, isn't it?' The terrible thing was that it had seemed for a moment as if everyone would just agree. Harriet had smiled nervously and Peter had looked uncomfortable, but he hadn't said no. Sitting at the table, looking at the meal she'd help make beginning to congeal on her plate into something she couldn't imagine eating, she'd felt as if someone had taken a cloth and just wiped her out, like a whiteboard. And even though afterwards, when she'd been sobbing in her room and Peter had promised her that she'd always be Kat, that Katherine had been her mother's second name and was doubly precious to him, things had never been the same again.

Deep down, she thought all the others felt she was making a fuss about nothing. And Catriona had said in a sweetly reasonable voice later on that no one had said she couldn't be Katherine but everyone knew Katherine's were Kathys and Catriona's were Cats, implying that Kat had never had any right to the name in the first place.

In her lap, Kat's book sat unregarded. She'd brought *Swallows and Amazons*, which she'd read twice already, but she didn't think she could bear to read it now. She'd started

it but she'd got to the part where the children's mother was coming to meet them and had felt the tears start to well up in her eyes. She hadn't wanted the others to see her cry. She hated the look of bored contempt that slid across Catriona's face like a mask and Roley rolling his eyes heavenwards again, and John looking small and pinched and worried as he did so often these days. Instead she'd watched the scenery go past, weak and watery in the blurred view through the window and her own wet eyes, wishing herself anywhere but here.

Harriet had just manoeuvred the car around another hairpin turn when John sat up in the back seat, swivelling around to look through the window. It was getting dark now and he frowned into the shadows at the roadside.

'Did you see something?' Kat asked quietly, turning to look.

'I thought I did,' he said. 'I thought I saw a face.'

'What kind of face?' she asked, dropping her voice to whisper.

'A foxy sort of face,' he said. 'With shiny eyes.'

'Oh.' Kat glanced over at him, seeming to come out of a daydream, and her eyes focused on John's wildlife book. 'Good going. We've only been here half an hour and you've already seen a fox.'

'No.' John shook his head. 'That's not what I meant.' He looked up at his sister, surprised that she hadn't understood him, and tried again to explain. 'It wasn't a real fox . . . ' he began.

'I see a gate!' Roley called out, causing Harriet to stall the car as she looked around in all directions for any sign of it. 'Over there, the road swings right and just round the corner . . . '

Roley was winding down his window as he spoke, staring into the dusk, as if trying to fix the gate in place by staring at it.

'That could be it,' Peter said cheerfully. 'Well done, old chap.'

The engine juddered as Harriet turned it back on and edged the car around the turn. There she stopped so Peter could get out and open the gate. Roley continued to hang out of his window, trying to see ahead, and Cat straightened up out of her hunched position to look over her shades with a cool expression.

Peter got back in and shut the door with a firm thump and Harriet began to creep the car forward. The stone walls on either side had climbed up high banks where they jostled against the slanted trunks of trees and the view ahead was obscured by drooping branches. None of them could see any sign of the house until the walls came to an abrupt end, opening out on the right to reveal an expanse of mossy lawn and flowerbeds tangled with greenery, stretching into the dim distance.

On the left-hand side was the house. Its dark bulk merged into the grey and brown shadows of the wooded hill behind it so that at first it was difficult to make out anything except how large it was.

'This can't be right,' Harriet said, uncertainly, pulling the car to a crunching stop on the gravel drive. 'It's too large, surely?'

'The gate and the stone walls fit the directions,' Peter replied, but he was also looking doubtful. 'This should be Fell Scar House. Perhaps there's a sign somewhere?'

Roley was on the wrong side of the car to look properly, but craning his neck he saw a row of six windows on the ground floor alone, a second row above and then a third, hooded by grey slate eaves.

'There aren't any lights on inside,' he said. 'Perhaps this is the place.'

'Well, if it isn't, they're probably wondering if we're casing the joint,' Catriona pointed out. Releasing her seat belt and dumping her rucksack in the minute fraction of space left between her and Roley, she reached out and opened the door.

'Cat . . . wait!' her mother said and Catriona stopped halfway out of the car with a contemptuous look.

'Why don't we just see if the key works?' she asked. 'Who's got it, anyway?'

'Here.' Peter took it out of the glove compartment and wound down his window to hand it to her. Catriona took it without comment. As she turned to walk up the broad stone steps, John unsnapped his seat belt as well.

'I want to come too,' he said, and pressed the release for his side of the middle seats, wriggling through the gap to follow Catriona out into the dusk.

Roley was already getting out of his own door, wanting to get a better look at the house, even if it wasn't the right place. Harriet and Peter followed, watching Catriona as she reached the top of the steps. But Katherine remained in the car, shivering in the chill from the open doors. The house

was huge, more like a stately home than a holiday cottage, looming out of the side of the hill. She didn't believe for a second this could be the right place and was crossing her fingers for an irate householder to come out and yell at Catriona for trespassing.

John caught up with Catriona at the top of the steps and she paused before trying to put the key in the lock.

'I'm going to knock first,' she said.

'With that?' John asked, staring at the door knocker. It was in the shape of a mask: a cruel mask with a long curved nose like a bird's beak.

'Urggh,' Catriona said. 'Creepy.' But she took hold of it and rapped it against the door. Three knocks echoed in a muffled way from inside the house and she shrugged. 'Here goes nothing,' she said and fitted the key into the lock. It was stiff and reluctant to turn and Catriona stepped back at the first hint of resistance.

'Maybe this isn't the place,' she said.

'Try turning it the other way,' John suggested and reached out to try his own suggestion.

The key turned smoothly in the lock and it clicked open, the door swinging inwards to reveal a large wood-panelled room ahead.

'It *is* the right place,' John declared, feeling a smile spread across his face.

'Come and help bring the bags in!' Harriet called, as Peter opened up the boot of the car. But John had already stepped past the threshold and Catriona was only a step after him.

'Back in a minute, Mum,' Roley said, catching his own bag from the boot and hurrying up towards the house.

'Go on then.' Peter turned a smile on Katherine, only now getting slowly out of the car. 'You don't want those three to bagsy the best rooms, do you?'

Katherine hesitated. But she could already see lights turning on across the ground floor and shapes moving around inside.

'They can't just have any room, can they?' she asked over her shoulder as she walked up towards the house.

'Looks as if there's plenty to go around,' Peter said cheerfully.

'Tell them that the master bedroom's ours though,' Harriet added. 'I'm not coming on holiday to sleep in a single bed.'

Peter smiled at her, relieved that the journey had reached so positive a conclusion, and reached out to give her a hug. Six steps up, the wind gusted against the door and the knocker clacked down against the brass plate like a bird snapping its beak shut tight around a wriggling worm. Katherine gave it an uneasy glance before sliding round the side of the door and into the house.