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Opening extract from

Bloodchild

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Too many to count. They pressed close: hideous, distorted things, staring at him through hollow eyes. He flailed about him, tried to thrust them away. They pushed forward, smothering, then again everything changed.

A turbulence of pain, a tug, a shake, and he was streaming backwards, colours racing over him, red mixed with black, and then blue again—and suddenly he found himself staring into the face of a girl.

A girl about fifteen, black hair and blue eyes that seemed so wide they felt like the ocean itself. He gazed at her, trying to understand who she was. Some part of his mind told him this was not the girl who had phoned the ambulance.

'Who are you?' he felt himself say.

She did not answer. She simply watched, her eyes widening all the time. He hoped she was a friend. She was beautiful but she was scary. He was losing sight of her now. He tried to hold her image but it was no good. She was slipping away, or he was.

Something touched him: something firm, light, insistent. He sensed it came from her, but there was no time to think. He was moving fast now, away from her, and the ocean was swallowing him once more.

Another touch, another, and suddenly he understood. She was fighting for him, trying to pull him back. This time he fought too. He knew where the ocean led and he didn't want to go back.

But he had no power left. He was tearing from her against his will, through the blue, through the black, into the red murk. It closed over him again, suffocating the light. A tunnel opened before him. The shadowfaces pressed round once more.

'Go away,' he muttered. 'Go away.'

They clung to him, gaping.

'Go away,' he begged.

He saw the mouths widen, widen, then heard a scream. It

seemed to come from somewhere inside him—yet he knew it was from the girl with blue eyes. But it was not a scream of fear. It was a command.

'Come back!' it said.

He felt a surge of pain that ripped through him and scattered into nothing. The shadowfaces vanished and the tunnel with them, but the murk remained, only now it was a void, a vast, red void, and he was floating in it. Nothing else was left but the sound of a bird singing somewhere far off.

Then that slipped away too.

Chapter 2

'Will,' said a voice.

The word hung before him. He had no idea what it meant. The darkness closed round it like breath. Another voice spoke.

'Is it my imagination or has his right eye opened a fraction?'

A third voice.

'Black hair, blue eyes.'

'Did you hear that?' The first voice again, louder, closer. 'He said something.'

'I heard it,' came the second voice. 'Will? Can you see us? Can you hear us?'

He tried to think. The voices sounded pleasant but he didn't know them at all. The first was a man, the second a woman. The third voice seemed to have been his own, though he didn't remember speaking. He didn't remember anything ... except ...

'Black hair, blue eyes,' he heard himself say.

'Will?' said the man.

What did they keep calling him Will for?

'Black hair, blue eyes,' said the woman. 'That's what he said.'

'He must be talking about one of the nurses,' said the man. 'Pippa probably. He must have opened his eyes and seen her.'

'Pippa?' called the woman.

Footsteps, then another woman's voice.

'Has something happened?'

'He spoke,' said the man. 'And he must have opened his eyes at some point. He just described you. Look at his right eye. It's more open than it was, isn't it?'

'I'm not sure about that, Mr Bly.'

'But he did describe you.'

'You definitely heard him?'

'Yes. He said "Black hair, blue eyes". Julie heard him too, didn't you?'

'Yes,' said the other woman. A pause, then, 'Will, can you hear me? It's Mum. And Dad's here too. If you can somehow open your eyes, you'll see us.'

He tried to say something, do something, but nothing seemed to work. All was darkness.

Will.

The name meant nothing to him, just as the name Bly meant nothing to him, and these people. They were obviously friendly, but they weren't Mum and Dad. Mum and Dad were nothing like these two. Mum and Dad were ...

He felt his mind waver.

Mum and Dad were ...

But it was no use. Whatever Mum and Dad were, he no longer remembered. He sensed that they existed. But what they were like he did not know. He searched his mind for their faces.

Nothing came.

'We're here, Will,' said the man. 'We're right here beside you. You've had an accident and you've been in a coma, but you're going to be all right. You're going to come through this. And Mum and I are going to help you.'

The image came back, the one image he remembered.

Black hair, blue eyes—and now a pale light spreading like a tide.

'He's opening his eyes,' said the man.

And suddenly there they were: the man, the woman, the nurse with black hair and blue eyes. Three faces. Three strangers. They smiled at him.

He didn't know if he smiled back. He wasn't sure of anything right now. He stared at them for a moment, then slowly took in the rest of his surroundings: the walls and ceiling of the hospital ward, the bed, the chairs, the gadgets beeping and winking close by.

The woman called Julie took his hand.

'Will,' she murmured. Her eyes were filling with tears. 'I can't believe you've come back to us.'

The man leaned forward.

'Don't feel you've got to talk, Will. You must be very confused.'

'Just lie quiet if you want,' said the woman.

He stared at them both. They seemed to assume he was called Will, that he knew who he was and who they were. He saw the nurse watching him closely.

'Will,' she said suddenly, 'do you know who this lady and gentleman are?'

'Of course he does,' said the man.

The nurse leaned closer.

'Do you remember your mum and dad? Do you remember who you are? Or anything at all?'

'Black hair, blue eyes,' he said.

The words fell from him without effort. He heard them clearly. The nurse frowned.

'And is that me you're describing? My hair and eyes? Or is it someone else?'

It wasn't the nurse. That much he knew. She glanced round at the other two.

'I don't think it's me, not judging from his expression. Maybe it's someone from the accident, the driver perhaps. Or the girl who rang the ambulance and ran away.'

Girl.

A new image dropped into his mind. There was a girl—no, two girls. There were definitely two girls: the one he'd heard but hadn't seen, the one they must be talking about, and then the other . . .

The beautiful one, the scary one, the girl with black hair and blue eyes.

He looked back at the three faces. The woman called Julie was still crying. He felt a sudden desire to give her something. He squeezed her hand.

'Will,' she said.

She kissed him on the cheek, rested hers against it.

'Easy, Julie,' said the man. 'Don't overwhelm him.'

The woman drew back a little.

'I'll get Doctor Paige,' said the nurse, and left.

'Will,' said the man, 'I know you must be feeling really strange, but . . . can you give us some sign to show us if . . . ' He hesitated. 'If you know who we are?'

'Chris,' said the woman, 'don't ask him that.'

'We've got to know.' The man glanced at her, then back. 'Will? Can you . . . can you show us somehow?'

He felt his head move. The woman gave a gasp.

'Chris!'

'Easy, Julie.'

'He doesn't know us!'

'Julie—'

'He shook his head. He doesn't know who we are.'

'Easy, easy.' The man's voice was calm but he seemed unsure what to do. The woman looked away, biting her thumb. The man

put a hand on her shoulder but she shrugged it off. He turned back to the bed.

'Will, listen, it's going to be all right, OK? Everything'll come back. It's just a matter of time.'

'Yes!' The woman turned sharply back. 'That's right. It's just . . . ' Her breath was coming in jerky inhalations. 'It's just a matter of time, OK? You'll soon be right again.'

He stared up at them, unsure what to feel. Part of him wanted them to go so that he could think, but another part wanted them to stay. He liked them. They were kind people. He just didn't know them. The woman calmed down a little and stroked his hair.

'It'll come back,' she whispered.

He slanted his gaze from her.

'Black hair, blue eyes,' he murmured.

'Maybe he's talking about the driver,' said the man.

The woman said nothing.

'Will,' said the man, 'don't tire yourself, but when you're ready, when you're feeling strong enough, try to remember anything you can.' He paused. 'Someone ran you over or knocked you down. At least, that's what the police think. No one's quite sure. You've got bruising to the head and back. It seems like it was hit-and-run but we don't know who did it or what happened. So if there's anything you remember . . . you know . . . about the driver maybe. Could that be the person with the black hair and blue eyes?'

'Or was it the girl?' said the woman.

He looked from one to the other, his thoughts as frozen as his words. The man spoke again.

'There was a girl, Will, and she probably saved your life. You were lying close to a tree at the junction of the lane to Havensmouth. She used your mobile phone and called the ambulance but she wouldn't give her name, wouldn't say anything about herself. And when the medics got there, she'd vanished. That's why

the police want to find her. She might know something about what happened.'

'Chris,' said the woman. 'We're tiring him.'

'Sorry, Will,' said the man. 'I'm not thinking.'

The woman leaned over the bed again.

'You're not ready for all this, are you, sweetheart?'

No, he agreed, he wasn't. Yet even so, their words had forced new images into his mind: lane, phone, tree . . .

There was a tree, yes, a sycamore, and there was something else, something he couldn't place. He tried to conjure pictures from the recent past: the lane, the tree—and then it came. There was a bird, too, and it was singing, and he'd glimpsed it up in the tree, and then everything had gone dark, and he'd seen the girl.

And the shadowfaces.

He heard footsteps down the corridor. The man and the woman looked nervously at each other, then, as if by a shared impulse, leaned quickly forward.

'Will,' said the woman. Her voice was low, almost confidential. 'I know you're confused but . . . we are your mum and dad, and you're Will, and when we get you home, we'll prove it to you. Who you are and who we are.'

'We'll be here for you,' said the man. 'We'll help you trust us again.'

'Because we know you don't,' said the woman.

They were wrong, he thought. He did trust them. He could even imagine loving them one day. He just didn't know who they were. The footsteps grew louder.

'Will?' said the woman. 'Will you do something for us? Will you . . . I mean . . . even if you don't think we're your mum and dad . . . ' She hesitated. 'Will you pretend that we are?'

He looked into their faces and saw the fear there.

'Yes,' he answered.

Chapter 3

Long days, longer nights. Visits from Mum, Dad, medical staff, police: names and faces that came and went. Conversations of a sort, meandering exchanges without sense or conclusions and mostly silent on his part. Words had flooded back into his mind, but now that they were here again, he found he didn't much care to use them.

Without memory, they seemed pointless.

Not that all memory was gone. He seemed to know plenty of things. He knew what a chair was and a table and a bed. He knew how to wash and eat and tie his laces. But the history of himself was gone. He searched his mind for it—who he was, where he'd come from, what he'd done, who the people in his life were—and found an empty space.

The lack of sleep made things worse. Two or three hours a night seemed the most he could manage and even that was no refuge, as the shadowfaces that had haunted him before now came to him in dreams. His head pounded where the bruising had taken place.

Five days struggled past; six, seven, eight.

'Will?'

He saw Mum's eyes upon him. They seemed pale in spite of the morning sun that caught her face as it broke into the ward.

'It's time, darling,' she said.

He stared at her, then realized with a start that he was dressed and standing by the bed. Somehow he'd forgotten he was going home today. Dad was watching nearby, with three of the nurses just behind him.

'Did your mind drift off again, Will?' he said.

'Yes.'

'Are you sure you're up to this?'

He nodded. He was a thousand times sure. Another night in the hospital would drive him mad. He'd just forgotten himself for a moment—again.

'I'm ready,' he said. He turned to the nurses. 'Thank you.'

Pippa smiled.

'Good luck, Will.'

Awkward goodbyes, then the shuffle down the corridor, out of the hospital and into the car park.

'Here's our car,' said Mum. 'Do you recognize it?'

He shook his head.

'Never mind,' she said. She opened the front passenger door. 'You sit here. I'll go in the back.'

He climbed in, closed the door and sat there, mute. Mum and Dad climbed in too. He looked round at them, aware that they wanted him to talk.

'Thank you,' he said.

His voice sounded as stilted to him as it had done when he'd thanked the nurses, and he knew it wasn't what Mum and Dad wanted; but it was all he could manage right now. Dad clipped on the seat belt and turned to him.

'Will?'

Will looked back at him.

'The belt,' said Mum from behind.

He looked down at it. Another misshapen memory. There

were so many now, too many to count, and each day brought new ones: opening things, closing things, switching things on and off.

Processes.

Why did he remember processes but not people, places, the story of who he was? He stared at the seat belt, hating it suddenly. He knew exactly how the thing worked and its familiarity felt obscene when Mum and Dad were still strangers.

Yet they were indeed Mum and Dad. They'd proved that to him. The photos and records and other things they'd brought to the hospital filled a suitcase. They were his parents. Dad was a tutor in Maths, Mum a tutor in English. Both worked from home.

And he was Will.

Or rather William Edward Patrick Bly, as the passport had it. He lived in a house called The Four Winds in a small seaside town called Havensmouth, neither of which he remembered. Perhaps he'd recognize both when he saw them. But he doubted it.

He clipped on the seat belt without a word.

'Well done,' said Dad, and started the engine.

They drove out of the hospital car park and away towards the town. Will stared out of the window at the streets slipping by. This was not Havensmouth, Mum had said. This was another town, a bigger town with a hospital better equipped to deal with coma victims.

But nothing here seemed familiar either. The old Will must have known the place and if that missing person ever came back, no doubt the town would too. But for now it was a foreign country.

A pleasant-looking place, though. Cobbled streets, weathered stone, a church, a market, a sense of relaxed busyness. He tried to remember what the town was called—Mum had told him only yesterday, or was it the day before? But the name would not come. He looked round, searching for a signpost.

'All right, Will?' said Mum from the back.

'Yes,' he said, then, 'Town . . . '

'What's that, darling?'

'What's . . . the name of . . . the town?'

'Newton Barnet,' she said. 'Remember? I told you the other day.'

'Yes.'

'They brought you to Newton Barnet because of the hospital facilities.'

He said nothing. Mum touched him on the shoulder.

'Give it time, Will.'

They drove through the town and out the other side. He looked about him again, anxious to find something he recognized. But still it felt like a foreign country: no buildings now but a long hill rising, the road narrowing, conifers on either side, and then gradually the ground flattened out, the trees thinned and a plain opened before them.

He gazed at it as they hummed along: a vast stretch of open ground, green and grassy, rolling vistas to the left and far away to the right a sense of blue rising from the land and merging with the sky. Dad nodded towards it.

'The sea's that way,' he said.

Will stared.

The sea. He tried to picture it in his mind. The word 'sea' was clear but their sea, his sea, he could not envisage. Other sea was easy to imagine, though whenever he thought of it now, he thought of the girl's face.

Perhaps it was the blue of her eyes. He didn't know. She seemed so close sometimes, though he couldn't see her. Even when the shadowfaces came in dreams, he felt her there; and there was another thing he now remembered.

She had called him back from death.

The countryside was still rushing past: fields, meadows, walls,

fences, farms here and there but otherwise an ocean of green. A junction appeared with a sign pointing right and the words: 'Havensmouth 7 miles'.

Dad glanced at him as he turned down it.

'It wasn't this junction, Will. Where you had your accident, I mean.'

'I know.'

'You do?'

'Yes.'

'Is that because you've got a picture in your head of the place where it happened? I thought you didn't. I thought everything was blank.'

Will frowned. It was hard to know what to say. He hadn't tried to describe the place to anyone. Firstly he hadn't felt like talking and secondly he wasn't sure of very much. He didn't know why he was so certain that the junction they'd just left behind wasn't the place.

'Will?' said Dad. 'You haven't answered my question.'

'Don't push him, Chris,' said Mum. 'Don't make him talk if he doesn't want to.'

Will twisted round in his seat and caught Mum's eye. She smiled.

'You don't need to talk, Will,' she said. 'Not if you don't want to. Just take things slowly. All the things you've forgotten, they'll . . . you know . . . '

'Come back,' said Dad.

Will looked away. He knew there was no guarantee of that. Doctor Paige had been refreshingly blunt: sometimes it all comes back, sometimes some of it comes back, sometimes none of it comes back. You deal with it as best you can. Your loved ones do the same.

End of story.

Or a beginning, he thought: the beginning of a new life he hadn't chosen and didn't want. But if he couldn't have his old one back, he supposed he'd have to make do with this one.

They drove on, the road narrowing and twisting with the miles, woodland to the left, higher, more open ground to the right with farms and fields, and again the blue haze climbing beyond the rim. Dad pointed towards it.

'You'll see the sea over there shortly. Do you recognize any of this?'

He didn't. He'd hoped he would but it was still foreign ground. He stared out of the window.

'Did I . . . come here a lot?' he said.

'We weren't always sure where you went,' said Mum. 'You were always a bit on the independent side. But we're close to home now and you used to wander off a lot, so I suppose you may well have come this way. We've certainly driven you down this road a few times since we moved to Havensmouth.'

'A few times?' Will looked round at her again. 'Just a few times?'

'Well, we only moved here five months ago.'

'Oh.'

Mum coloured.

'I'm sorry, Will. I thought we'd told you and I keep forgetting you can't remember things.'

He said nothing.

'Will,' said Dad, 'I want you to look straight ahead. There's something round the next bend you might recognize. And if you do, I want you to tell us.'

He stared ahead. The farms and open landscape to the right had vanished and there was now woodland on both sides of the road. Dad was slowing down as they approached the bend. Again Will felt Mum's hand on his shoulder. He stiffened slightly and felt it go. Dad changed down to third gear, then to second.

'Get ready, Will,' he said.

They eased round the bend and there, a short way down, was a lane leading off through the woodland to the right. A small signpost pointed down it with the words 'Havensmouth 2 miles'. Close to the signpost was a tree.

Dad pulled over to the side of the road just up from the turning and switched off the engine. Silence fell over them. Will stared hard at the lane.

'Do you recognize anything?' said Mum.

He recognized the tree. Nothing else.

'Tree,' he murmured.

'The sycamore?'

'Yes, and . . . '

He broke off. There was something else. There was . . . something else. He started to fumble with the door.

'You want to get out?' said Dad.

'Yes.'

'Pull that lever thing. Here, I'll show you.'

But he'd worked it out now. He thrust open the car door, climbed out and started to run down towards the tree. From behind came the sound of Mum and Dad hurrying after him.

'What is it, Will?' called Mum.

He stopped by the sycamore and listened. Mum and Dad joined him, both breathing hard.

'What is it?' said Dad.

'Bird,' he answered. 'I can . . . I can hear it. Same song.'

The sound was clear, the same rippling melody as before, but distant, not in this tree but somewhere deep in the woodland. Mum and Dad listened.

'It's a song-thrush,' said Dad eventually.

'Are you sure?' said Mum.

Will barely heard them. He was still listening to the bird. It

went on singing for several minutes, then fell silent. He shivered suddenly.

'Maybe it's an omen,' said Mum. 'A blessing for Will.'

He looked up at the tree and shivered again.

'Maybe,' he said, and turned back to the car.