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Opening extract from

Stolen

Written by

Lucy Christopher

Published by

Chicken House

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From the Chicken House

This book scares me. It's threatening, challenging and controversial. And that's just the kidnap. It's a thriller, a survival story, and the ultimate expression of the relationship between a damaged boy and a girl, played out under the most extreme conditions. You must read it. It's the most astonishing debut of the year.

Barry Cunningham
Publisher

Stolen

Lucy Christopher

Chicken House

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS

Text © Lucy Christopher 2009
Cover illustration © Steve Wells
First published in Great Britain in 2009
The Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.doublecluck.com

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Cover design Steve Wells
Interior design by Steve Wells
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

ISBN 978-1-906427-13-9

For Mum and Simon who helped,
and for the desert that inspired

You saw me before I saw you. In the airport, that day in August, you had that look in your eyes, as though you wanted something from me, as though you'd wanted it for a long time. No one had ever looked at me like that before, with that kind of intensity. It unsettled me, surprised me I guess. Those blue, blue eyes, icy blue, looking back at me as if I could warm them up. They're pretty powerful, you know, those eyes, pretty beautiful too.

You blinked quickly when I looked at you, and turned away, as if you were nervous . . . as if you felt guilty because you'd just been checking out some random girl in an airport. But I wasn't random, was I? And it was a good act. I fell for it. It's funny, but I always thought I could trust blue eyes. I thought they were safe somehow. All the good guys have baby blues. The dark eyes are for the villains . . . the Grim Reaper, the Joker, zombies. All dark.

I'd been arguing with my parents. Mum hadn't been happy about my skimpy top, and Dad was just grumpy from lack of sleep. So, seeing you . . . I guess it was a welcome diversion. Is that how you'd planned it: wait until my parents had a go at me before you approached? I knew, even then, that you'd been watching me. There was a strange sort of familiarity about you. I'd seen you before . . . somewhere . . . but who *were* you? My eyes kept flitting back to your face.

You'd been with me since London. I'd seen you in the check-in line with your small carry-on bag. I'd seen you on the plane. And now, here you were, in Bangkok airport, sitting in the coffee shop where I was about to order coffee.

I ordered my coffee and waited for it to be made. I fumbled with my money. I didn't look back, but I knew you were still watching. It probably sounds weird, but I could just feel it. The tiny hairs on my neck bristled every time you blinked.

The cashier held on to the coffee cup until I had my money ready. Kenny, his name badge said; strange how I can remember that.

'We don't take British coins,' Kenny said, after he'd watched me count them out. 'Don't you have a note?'

'I used it in London.'

Kenny shook his head and pulled the coffee back towards him. 'There's a cash machine next to Duty Free.'

I felt someone move up behind me. I turned.

'Let me buy it,' you said. Your voice was low and soft, like it was meant only for me, and your accent was strange. The short-sleeved shirt you were wearing smelt like eucalyptus, and there was a small scar on the edge of your cheek. Your eyes were

too intense to stare into for long.

You had a note ready. Foreign money. You smiled at me. I don't think I said thank you. Sorry about that. You took the drink from Kenny. The paper coffee cup bent a little as you grabbed it.

'Sugar? One?'

I nodded; too flustered by you being there, talking to me, to do anything else.

'Don't worry, I'll do it. You sit down.' You gestured to where you'd been sitting; at a table between the fake palm trees, over by the window.

I hesitated. But you'd anticipated I would. You touched me gently on the shoulder, your hand warm through my top. 'Hey, it's OK, I won't bite,' you said softly. 'There's no other seats anyway, not unless you want to sit with the Addams family over there.'

I followed your gaze to the empty chairs next to a large family. Two of the smaller kids were crawling over the table, the parents arguing across them. I wonder now what would have happened if I had sat next to them? We could have talked about kids' holidays and strawberry milkshakes. Then I would have returned to my parents. I looked up at your face; with the smile creases around your mouth. The deep blue of your eyes had secrets. I wanted them.

'I only just escaped my family,' I said. 'I don't want another yet.'

'Nice work.' You winked. 'One sugar it is then.'

You guided me towards where you'd been sitting. Other customers were sitting near your small table, making me feel more

confident to approach it. It took me ten steps to get there. I walked in a kind of daze and sat in the chair facing the window. I watched you take the drink to the stand and lift the lid off. I saw you pour the sugar in, hair falling over your eyes as you bent your head. You smiled as you noticed me looking. I wonder if that was when it happened. Were you smiling as you did it?

I think I must have looked away for a moment, to watch the planes taking off behind the glass. There was a jumbo jet teetering on its back wheels, black fumes hanging in the air behind. There was another lining up to go. Your hands must have been quick, tipping it in. Did you use any kind of distraction technique, I wonder, or was nobody looking anyway? It was some kind of powder I suppose, though not much of it. Perhaps it looked like sugar. It didn't taste any different.

I turned to see you walking back, smoothly avoiding all the coffee-carrying passengers who stepped out in front of you. You didn't look at any of them. Only me. Perhaps that's why nobody else seemed to notice. You moved too much like a hunter, padding silently next to the row of plastic pot plants as you made your line towards me.

You put two coffees on the table and pushed one in my direction, ignoring the other. You picked up a teaspoon and twirled it idly around your fingers, spinning it around your thumb then catching it again. I looked at your face. You were beautiful in a rough sort of way, but you were older than I'd realised. Too old for me to be sitting there with you really. Early to mid-twenties probably, maybe more. From a distance, when I'd seen you at the check-in line, your body had looked thin

and small, like the eighteen-year-olds at my school, but up close, really looking, I could see that your arms were hard and tanned, and the skin on your face was weathered. You were as brown as a stretch of dirt.

'I'm Ty,' you said.

Your eyes darted away, then back again, before you reached out your hand towards me. Your fingers were warm and rough on the back of my hand as you took it and held onto it, but didn't really shake it. You raised an eyebrow, and I realised what you wanted.

'Gemma,' I said, before I meant to.

You nodded as though you already knew. But, of course, I suppose you already did.

'Where are your parents?'

'They've already gone to the gate, they're waiting for me there.' I felt nervous then so I added, 'I said I wouldn't be long – just getting a coffee.'

One corner of your mouth turned up again, and you laughed a little. 'When does the flight leave?'

''bout an hour.'

'And where's it going?'

'Vietnam.' You looked impressed. I smiled at you, for the first time I think. 'My mum goes all the time,' I added. 'She's a curator – kind of like an artist who collects instead of paints.'

I don't know why I felt I had to explain. Just habit, I guess, from all the kids at school who ask but don't know anything.

'Your dad?'

'He works in the city – stockbroker.'

'Suited and booted then.'

'Something like that. Pretty boring, looking after other people's money . . . not that he thinks so.'

I could feel myself starting to babble, so I took a sip of coffee to shut me up. As I drank, I watched a small trickle of sweat travel down your hairline. You couldn't have been hot though; the air conditioner was beating directly onto us. Your eyes were flicking nervously all over the place, not always able to meet my gaze. That edginess made you seem shy; made me like you even more. But there was still something about you, hovering in my memory.

'So,' you murmured. 'What is it you want to do then? Get a job like your dad? Travel like your mum?'

I shrugged. 'That's what they'd like. I don't know. Nothing really seems right.'

'Not . . . meaningful enough?'

'Yeah, maybe. I mean, they just collect stuff. Dad collects people's money and Mum collects people's drawings. What do they really do that's theirs?'

I looked away. I hated talking about my parents' work. We'd been talking about it on the flight from London; Mum going on and on about the paintings she wanted to buy in Vietnam. Right then it was the last thing I wanted to discuss. You half laughed at me again, your voice breathy. The teaspoon was balancing perfectly on your thumb, hanging like magic. I was still wondering whether I should be there, sitting with you. But it was weird, you know, it felt like I could tell you anything. I probably would have too, if my throat hadn't been so tense. Often I wish it had ended just then, with your smile and my nerves bundled up tight.

I glanced around, checking to see whether my parents had come looking for me, although I knew they wouldn't. They would be happy enough waiting at the gate and reading the selection of journals they'd brought, trying to look intelligent. Besides, Mum wouldn't want to admit defeat over our clothes argument by coming to find me. But I glanced around anyway. There was a swarm of nameless faces, slowly being drawn towards the drinks counter. People, people, everywhere. The grind and hum of the coffee machine. The squeal of small children. The smell of eucalyptus coming off your chequered shirt. I took a sip of my coffee.

'What does your mother collect?' you asked, your soft voice grabbing my attention back again.

'Colours mostly. Paintings of buildings. Shapes. Do you know Rothko? Mark Rothko?'

You frowned.

'Well, that kind of stuff. I think it's pretty pretentious. All those endless squares.' I was babbling again. I paused to look down at your hand. It was still on top of mine. Should it be there? Were you trying to pick me up? No one at school had ever done it quite like that. As I looked, you lifted your hand up quickly, as if you'd only just realised it was there too.

'Sorry.' You shrugged, but there was a twinkle in your eye that made me smile back. 'I guess I'm . . . a little tense.'

You put your hand down again, next to mine this time, centimetres away. I could move my little finger across to touch it. You didn't have a wedding ring. No jewellery at all.

'What do you do?' I asked. 'You're not still in school then?'

I winced as I said it. We both knew how stupid it sounded.

You were obviously older than any other boy I'd talked to like this. There were tiny sun-wrinkles around your eyes and mouth, and you'd grown into your body. You were more confident than the awkward boys at school.

You sighed and sat back. 'I suppose I sort of make art too,' you said. 'But I don't paint squares. I travel a bit, garden . . . build. That sort of thing.'

I nodded as if I understood. I wanted to ask what you were doing here, with me . . . if I'd seen you before. I wanted to know why you were interested. I wasn't an idiot, it was easy to see how much younger I was than you. But I didn't ask. I was nervous I guess, not wanting you to be dodgy in any way. And I suppose it made me feel grown-up, sitting there with the most handsome man in the cafe, drinking a coffee he had just bought for me. Maybe I didn't look all that young really, I thought, even though the only make-up I wore was lipgloss. Maybe you just looked old for your age. As you glanced out the window, I untucked the bit of hair from behind my ear, let it fall over my face. I bit my lips to make them redder.

'I've never been to Vietnam,' you said eventually.

'Or me. I'd rather go to America.'

'Really? All those cities, those people . . . ?'

Your fingers twitched then as you glanced at me, your eyes darting to the hair I'd just released. After a moment you leant across the table to retuck it behind my ear. You hesitated.

'Sorry, I . . .' you murmured, unable to finish, your cheeks reddening a little. Your fingers lingered against my temple. I could feel the roughness of their tips. My ear went hot as you brushed against it. Then your fingers moved down to my chin.

You pushed it up with your thumb to look at me, almost like you were studying me in the artificial lights above my head. And, I mean, you *really* looked at me . . . with eyes like two stars. You trapped me there like that, kept me stuck to that spot of Bangkok airport as though I was something small drawn to the light. And I had wings fluttering away inside me alright. Big, fat, moth wings. You trapped me easily, drew me towards you like I was already in the net.

'Wouldn't you rather go to Australia?' you said.

I laughed a little; the way you'd said it sounded so serious. You moved your fingers away immediately.

'Sure.' I shrugged, breathless. 'Everyone wants to go there.'

You were quiet then, looking down. I shook my head, still feeling your touch. I wanted you to keep talking.

'Are you Australian?'

I was puzzled about your accent. You didn't sound like the actors off *Neighbours*. Sometimes you sounded British. Sometimes it sounded as though you came from nowhere at all. I waited, but you didn't answer. So I leant over and prodded your forearm.

'Ty?' I said, trying out your name, liking the way it sounded. 'So what's it like anyway? Australia?'

You smiled then, and your whole face changed with it. It kind of lit up, like there were sunbeams coming from inside you.

'You'll find out,' you said.

* * *

Things changed then. I slowed down, while everything around

me sped up. It's amazing really, what a tiny bit of powder can do.

'How are you feeling?' you asked.

You were watching me; your eyes wide. I opened my mouth to tell you I was fine, but I didn't understand what came out. It was just a jumble of noises; my tongue too thick and heavy to form words. I remember the lights turning into blurs of blazing fire. I remember the air conditioning chilling my arms. The smell of coffee blurring into eucalyptus. Your hand was tight around mine as you grabbed me and you took me and you stole me away.

I must have tipped your coffee cup when I stumbled to get up. I found a burn mark on my leg later, a pink stain running above my left knee. I still have it. It's gone a bit wrinkly, like elephant skin.

You made me walk fast. I thought you were taking me back to my flight, leading me to the gate where my parents were waiting. It was a long way, much longer than I'd remembered. When you dragged me along those travelators, it felt like we were flying. You talked to people in uniforms, and pulled me to you like I was your girlfriend. I nodded at them, and smiled. You led me up some stairs. My knees wouldn't bend at first, and it made me giggle. Then my kneecaps turned into marshmallows. Fresh air hit me, smelling like flowers and cigarettes and beer. There were other people, somewhere, talking softly, shrieking like monkeys when they laughed. You pulled me through some shrubs, then around the corner of a building. A twig caught in my hair. We were near the rubbish bins. I could smell rotting fruit.

You pulled me to you again, tilting my face and saying something. Everything about you was fuzzy, floating on the fumes of the bins. Your beautiful mouth was moving like a caterpillar. I reached out and tried to catch it. You took my fingers in yours. The warmth of you shot from my fingertips right up my arm. You said something else. I nodded. Some part of me understood. I started getting undressed. I leant against you as I took off my jeans. You handed me new clothes. A long skirt. Shoes with heels. Then you turned away.

I must have put them on. I don't know how. Then you took your top off. Before you put a different shirt on, I stuck my hand out and felt your back. Warm and firm, brown as bark. I don't know what I was thinking, or even if I was, but I remember needing to touch you. I remember that feeling of skin. It's strange to remember touch more than thought. But my fingers still tingle with it.

You did other things too, put something scratchy on my head and something dark over my eyes. I moved slowly. My brain couldn't keep up. There was a dull thud of something landing in a bin. There was something slimy on my lips. Lipstick. You gave me a chocolate. Rich. Dark. Soft. Liquid in the middle.

Things got even more confusing then. When I looked down, I couldn't see my feet. When we started to walk, it felt like I was just walking on the stumps of my legs. I started to panic, but you put your arm round me. Warm and solid . . . safe. I shut my eyes and tried to think. I couldn't remember where I left my bag. I couldn't remember anything.

People surrounded us. You pushed me into the middle of a

crowd of blurred-out faces and colour. You must have thought of everything; a ticket, a new passport, our route through, how to get past security. Was it the most carefully planned steal ever, or just luck? It can't have been easy to get me through Bangkok airport and onto a different plane without anyone knowing, not even me.

You kept feeding me chocolates. That rich, dark taste . . . always in my mouth, clinging to my teeth. Before you, I loved chocolate. Now, even the smell makes me sick. I blacked out after the third. I was sitting somewhere, leaning up against you. I was cold, and I needed your body heat. You murmured something to someone else about me.

'Too much to drink,' you said. 'We're celebrating.'

Then we were crammed in a toilet cubicle. There was the shoot of air as the contents of the loo were sucked away beneath me.

And we were walking again. Another airport, maybe. More people . . . the smell of flowers, sweet, tropical and fresh; as if it had just rained. And it was dark. Night time. But not cold. As you dragged me through a car park, I started to wake up. I started fighting you. I tried to scream, but you took me behind a truck and pushed a cloth over my mouth. The world went hazy again. I sank back into you. All I remember after that is the numbed-out jolt and sway of being in a car. The engine grumbled on, forever.

But what I do remember is the waking-up part. And the heat. It clawed at my throat, and tried to stop me breathing. It made me want to black out again. And then there was the pain . . . the nausea.

* * *

At least you hadn't tied me to the bed. I was grateful for that. Victims in films are always tied to the bed. Still, I couldn't really move. Each time I shifted my body even a little, sick rose in my throat and my head spun. There was a thin sheet over me. I felt like I was in the middle of a fire. I opened my eyes. Everything twisted and turned, beige and blurred. I was in a room. The walls were wood: long planks, bolted at the corners. The light hurt my eyes. I couldn't see you. I twisted my head around cautiously, looking. I tasted vomit in my mouth. I swallowed it. My throat was thick. Rasping. Useless.

I closed my eyes again. Tried breathing deeply. I mentally checked down my body. My arms were there, legs, feet. I wriggled my fingers. All working. I felt down over my stomach. I had a T-shirt on, my bra was cutting into my chest. My legs were bare, my jeans gone. I felt the sheet beside me, then rested my hand against the top of my thigh. My skin went hot and sticky almost immediately. My watch wasn't on my wrist.

I ran my hand over my underpants and felt through them. I don't know what I thought I would find, or even what I was expecting. Maybe blood. Torn flesh. Pain. But there was nothing like that. Had you taken my underpants off? Had you put yourself inside? And, if so, why had you bothered to put them back on?

'I haven't raped you.'

I gripped at the sheet. Swung my head around. Tried to find you. My eyes still weren't seeing properly. You were behind me, I could hear that. I tried pushing myself to the edge of the bed,

away from you, but my arms weren't strong enough. They shook, and then collapsed me into the sheets. The blood was pumping through me. I could almost hear my body start to flow and wake up. I tried my voice, managed a whimper. My mouth was against the pillowcase. I heard you somewhere, taking a step.

'Your clothes are beside the bed.'

I flinched at your voice. Where were you? How close? I opened my eyes a little. It didn't hurt too much. Next to the bed, a new pair of jeans were neatly folded on a wooden chair. My coat wasn't with them. Neither were my shoes. Instead, underneath the chair, was a brown pair of leather boots. Lace-up and sensible. Not mine.

I could hear you taking steps, coming towards me. I tried curling up, tried to get away. Everything was heavy. Slow. But my brain was working and my heart was speeding. I was in a bad place. I knew that much. I didn't know how I'd got there. I didn't know what you'd done to me.

I heard the floorboards creak a couple more times, and felt the fear shoot from my chest to my throat. A pair of light brown cargo pants stopped in front of me. My eyes were level with the material between your knees and crotch, level with the reddish dirt stains there. You didn't say anything. I heard my breathing getting faster. I gripped the mattress. I forced my eyes to look up. I didn't stop until I reached your face. My breath faltered for a second then. I don't know why, but I'd half expected you to be someone else. I didn't want the person standing there, beside the bed, to be the same face I'd found so attractive at the airport. But you were there alright; the blue

eyes, blondish hair and tiny scar. Only you didn't look beautiful this time. Just evil.

Your face was blank. Those blue eyes seemed cold. Your lips thin. I pulled the sheet up as far as I could, leaving only my eyes uncovered, watching you. The rest of me was stiff and frozen. You stood there, waiting for me to speak, waiting for the questions. When they didn't come, you answered anyway.

'I brought you here,' you said. 'You feel sick because of the effects of the drugs. You'll feel weird for a while . . . shallow breathing, vertigo, nausea, hallucinations . . .'

Your face was spinning as you spoke. I shut my eyes. There were tiny stars behind my eyelids; a whole galaxy of tiny, spinning stars. I could hear you shuffling towards me. Getting closer. I tried my voice.

'Why?' I whispered.

'I had to.'

The bed creaked and my body rose a little as you sat down on the mattress. I pulled myself away. I tried pushing my legs to the floor, but still they wouldn't go. The whole world seemed to turn around me. I was going to slide off. I pointed my head away and expected the sick at any moment. It didn't come. I hugged my legs towards me. My chest was too tight for crying.

'Where am I?'

You paused before answering. I heard you take a breath, then sigh. Your clothing rustled as you changed your position. I realised then that I couldn't hear any other sounds, anywhere, other than yours.

'You're here,' you said. 'You're safe.'