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opening extract from

Dog Friday

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Dog Friday

Chapter One

"Robin!"

Deep in his dreams, Robin recognized his mother's voice and began to drag himself awake.

"He's been fast asleep!" said the nurse. "Bless his heart! How old is he?"

"Ten and a half," replied Robin's mother, and almost added that he was much too old to be blessed but then thought better of it. "Hello, Robin," she said, and her voice was so anxious and gentle that Robin woke completely and sat up in sudden alarm. For one awful moment he thought that his mother was going to turn soft on him.

"Robin, you are a howling idiot!" said his mother, and Robin sank back on his pillows with a sigh of relief.

"Hello, Mum," he said. "Sorry if you were worried!"

"If!" repeated Mrs Brogan. "If! Look at you!"

"He looks fine now we've tidied him up," protested the nurse, very shocked by Mrs Brogan's unmotherly remarks.

"Well thank God I didn't see him before, then!" said Mrs Brogan devoutly, and for a moment the nurse wondered if she dared turn her out. Luckily for everyone she was called away before she could make up her mind.

"They won't let me get out of bed," said Robin rather forlornly.

"You poor old thing," said his mother, gingerly kissing the top of his head. "And now I've gone and shocked the nurse!"

"She's nice really," said Robin. "She brought me a bottle of orange juice that she nicked off a dead patient!"

"Robin!"

"Well, that's what he told me!" said Robin, nodding towards the next bed. "Mum?"

"Yes?"

"What do I look like?"

For an answer Mrs Brogan fished in her handbag and handed him a small mirror.

Robin gazed into it at a face he hardly recognized.

Two black eyes and a bandaged head. One side of his face dead white and the other covered by an enormous gauze pad. His left arm was bandaged and strapped across his chest, and what was that around his neck? Surely it couldn't be true! He wriggled his legs experimentally and found that it was.

"A NIGHTIE!" exploded Robin. "A WHITE NIGHTIE!"

"Serves you right," said his mother, "and anyway, it's not a nightie. It's a hospital gown."

"It's got pink stuff round the neck," said Robin. "Get it off me!"

"It's very fetching," his mother told him, "and no more than you deserve. Stop worrying about your looks and tell me how you are feeling."

"Terribly hungry," said Robin, after having searched through his symptoms for the least alarming. He would no more have frightened his mother by describing the terrible mixture of pain and numbness that was assailing him than she would have explained what the sight of a policeman waiting by a police car at the garden gate had done to her. For Mrs Brogan it had been like a replay of a two-year-old nightmare; it had even been the same policeman. This time, however, he had been waving and nodding and smiling

as she approached, so that even from a distance she would know that it was not fatal. He must have remembered too.

"Terribly hungry," repeated Robin.

"I'm not sure I'm allowed to feed you," said Mrs Brogan.

"Why not?"

Mrs Brogan pointed to a huge notice hung over the door which read,

DO NOT FEED THE ANIMALS

in multicoloured letters.

"That's just a joke," said the small boy in the next bed, and he watched admiringly while Mrs Brogan unpacked biscuits and chocolates and crisps and bananas. He had been in hospital for so long himself that his relations had stopped arriving with unlimited supplies of food. They brought apples and educational puzzle books instead.

"And," said Mrs Brogan with a flourish, "I brought pyjamas! Two pairs! And your dressing-gown and slippers and some day clothes and your sponge bag and your library books."

"How long shall I be staying?" asked Robin, appalled.

"Goodness knows," said Mrs Brogan. "Hours probably! Let's get you out of that nightie!"

"There!" she said a few minutes later when Robin was respectably dressed and had borrowed her mirror to inspect his wounds again. "All done up like a dog's dinner! Oh, sorry, Robin! Sorry, Robin! Sorry, Robin!"

This time the nurse, who had returned at just the right moment to catch this remark, really did throw her out.

"It's quite OK," said Robin as she hugged him goodbye. "It was funny!"

"Good old lad!" said Mrs Brogan. "I'll be back tomorrow. Sweet dreams and no worrying! You'll feel much better in the morning!"

It was one thing to order sweet dreams, but it was quite another to receive them. Long after the rest of the ward were fast asleep the events of the morning played themselves through over and over again in Robin's mind.

Someone on the beach threw a toy for a dog to fetch. The dog did not see where it landed and searched frantically along the sand until Robin Brogan found the rubber ring and picked it up.

A moment later the dog saw the toy and ran towards

it and Robin, startled by the speed and size of the animal, jumped away. Instead of dropping the ring his fingers clutched it even more tightly. Then the race began.

The dog could run faster than Robin. He could not outdistance it. At the beginning of the chase he had been surprised and alarmed, but as it went on his fear increased and he started to panic. When the dog grew closer and he could hear its breath tearing in and out of its body, terror came over him in a blackening wave and he did not hear the voices calling or see the rock that tripped him up. The only thing he was aware of in the whole world was the dog. When Robin fell it sprang.

The hospital kept Robin under observation for three whole days in case anything happened to his head, but nothing did.

"It's the Easter holidays!" Robin reminded the doctor. "They are all going to waste! It doesn't even ache!"

"We don't take chances with heads," the doctor told him. "Not even solid rock ones like yours must be." Very gently he guided Robin's unbandaged arm up to feel the bump on his forehead and it was so spectacularly enormous that Robin stopped protesting.

"How's the arm feeling?" asked the doctor.

"Still numb from the injection," Robin replied.

"Enjoy it while it lasts!" said the doctor ominously and moved on to Robin's neighbour who had both legs in plaster up to his hips. The two of them seemed to be very good friends.

"I see you haven't managed to escape yet," Robin heard the doctor say.

"Neither have you," pointed out the boy.

"True, but at least I get paid to be here. You just get plastered!" The doctor caught Robin's eye and winked at him over his patient's head. Robin winked back and cheered up a bit.

"Will I get out for my birthday?" the boy was asking.

"All you people want is to get out!" said the doctor. "It would hurt my feelings if I had any! When's your birthday?"

"June the tenth," replied Robin's neighbour. "I'm getting a skateboard."

"I don't know why I bother!" exclaimed the doctor. "I should have been a butcher! Much more job satisfaction!"

"Shall I get out then?" persisted the boy, "or don't you know?"

"I'll tell you what I do know," said the doctor. "If

you get a skateboard on June the tenth you'll be lying right where you are now on June the eleventh!" and he marched out of the door.

The boy looked after him, grinning.

"I'm not really getting a skateboard," he confided to Robin. "I just said it to wind him up. I think it's dead good here really!"

Robin grinned back at him and thought privately that it was lucky his neighbour was enjoying hospital because it was obvious that he would be staying for a long time yet.

The three days that Robin spent in hospital seemed the longest in his life and he was glad to get home again even though home, after the shining ward, looked more dilapidated than ever. It was half of an old Victorian house on the Yorkshire coast. Originally it had been one large family home, built by Robin's great grandfather and called Porridge Hall. Robin's great grandfather had made his fortune selling oats and he had been so proud of his excellent porridge that he had called his home after it. The name was cut into a large white stone built into the front of the house. Robin's mother often looked ruefully up at that stone and thought it a pity that the porridge

money was the first and last ever to come into the family.

Some time in the past Porridge Hall had been divided into two, and one half sold off. By the time it came to Robin's mother it was patched and shabby and people said it was called Porridge Hall because that was all its inhabitants could afford to eat.

"Which is very nearly true," admitted Mrs Brogan. She painted the window frames, changed its name to Sea View, and attempted to restore the family fortunes by running it as a bed-and-breakfast business.

"If I ever start behaving like a bed and breakfaster," said Mrs Brogan after one particularly unpleasant visitation, "break it to me gently, Robin, and I will do the decent thing and fling myself off the cliffs."

"Bed and breakfasters never do the decent thing," Robin pointed out, "but if you *do* get like them I will probably fling you off myself. Only you usually say they're not that bad."

"Hmm," said Mrs Brogan. "Well, they usually pay before they leave; it makes all the difference. We shall never get rich at this rate."

It did not seem very likely. Although they both worked very hard and most bed and breakfasters paid their bills instead of sneaking off in the early morning

and leaving no address, as fast as the money came in tiles fell off the roof or the car broke down and needed expensive repairs. Nevertheless they kept trying to manage. The beach was straight across the road and the cliffs were golden red on either side and the garden was beautiful. Robin had lived there for all of his ten years and never wanted to live anywhere else.

"Glad to be coming home?" asked his mother as they drove back from the hospital.

"Very," said Robin. "Have we got anyone staying?"

"No. We had an awful pair last night though. They came down complaining that the hot water had run out. 'I bet you don't have two baths each a day with the water right up to your necks at home!' I told them. They went off in a huff. And they picked a bunch of tulips for themselves before they left! My beautiful tulips! I could cheerfully have strangled them! Cheerfully! What are you grinning about?"

"Nothing."

"It's no joke trying to grow tulips in the winds we get! Oh well, here we are! Macaroni cheese for supper!"

"Good," said Robin, and then they were home. He saw immediately that the 'No Vacancies' sign was up, which always happened on special occasions. He also

noticed that the line which read, 'Well-trained dogs welcome' had been painted out.

Mrs Brogan saw him looking but she only said, "How's that arm?"

"Fine," said Robin, which was not quite true but he was so grateful that well-trained dogs were no longer welcome that he did not feel like complaining.

The bump on Robin's head soon disappeared but the stitches were magnificent. Twenty-four in bright blue string. They cheered up the start of term tremendously. Nobody in the class had ever seen anything quite so gruesome – not, so to speak, in the flesh. Robin's stitches were very much in the flesh; they were in his left arm and looked terrible. Even after they were taken out there were still the scars and they were nearly as bad.

"How many did he have?" they asked each other at school.

"Dozens. About forty. All in knots."

"Tell me again what happened to your head, Robin!"

"It got banged," said Robin, who hated fuss.

"It hit a rock! He got concussion! He blacked out for three days!"

"I didn't!" protested Robin.

"It could have damaged his brain!"

"What brain?" asked Dan, and was ignored.

"Let's see the scar!"

Robin explained that there was no scar, but he was quickly overruled. They found a line on his head where the hair grew in the wrong direction.

"That's where his head split open!"

"What happened to the dog? Was it put to sleep?"

"I don't know," said Robin, "I hope not. I don't think it was. It was my fault for running and pulling away when it grabbed my arm. Half my fault anyway." He spoke bravely, but the memory still frightened him very much. He did not like to talk about it, but the class could not hear enough. Dan, their former hero, was utterly disregarded. The previous term he had distinguished himself by being rushed to hospital in an ambulance after having collapsed (screaming) during afternoon school. Appendicitis brought on by too much school dinner was the unofficial diagnosis and for a time stomach aches had been the fashion. Dan was often called on in a medical capacity to judge the severity of his classmates' pains and he derived enormous pleasure from describing his own agonies. Now it was all over, and dog bites and blue string stitches were wasted on Robin. He merely showed his arm and stated the facts. The rest of the

class (except for the scoffing and demoted Dan) were left to supply the drama. They did it beautifully.

"A great big dog got him," went the story round the school.

"Eighty stitches in his arm!"

"Nearly ripped it off!"

"His head was split open!"

"Right open!"

"They took him in an ambulance! He blacked out for days! Everyone saw the stitches! Bright blue string in knots!"

The story grew and grew, the stitches multiplied, and the knock on Robin's head became a fractured skull. The whole class became more or less afraid of dogs and the few people who had them at home as pets kept quiet about the matter. Owning a dog became a shameful thing. Anyone in any doubt only had to look at Robin's arm to see the truth of that.

This state of affairs continued until half term. Dan had never liked Robin – they were beachcombing rivals for one thing – and Dan had always resented the fact that Robin had never acknowledged his leadership. Now he became Robin's enemy, a lonely and self-imposed position that he did not enjoy.

"Boasting because a dog bit you!" he taunted Robin.

"I don't!"

"Getting everyone trailing after you!"

"Well, they trailed after you when you had your appendix out! I can't stop them! They just do it! I don't want them to!"

In Dan's opinion that just made it worse. He had loved being trailed after and he missed his audience very much.

"Woof, woof! Scared of dogs!" jeered Dan. His conversations with Robin always ended with this remark. Robin could never think of a suitable reply.

It was no fun being scared of dogs. It was a great nuisance, and embarrassing too. Very embarrassing sometimes, especially when his mother saw him jump out of his skin at the sound of a fat corgi panting at a garden gate.

"Look, Robin," she said, "there are dogs in the world. You have to face it."

"I know," said Robin.

"Well then. You don't have to like them. You just have to cope with them."

"I know," said Robin again.

"You panic before you think," said his mother.

"It's their breathing," said Robin, "you know, when they puff!"

Mrs Brogan did not seem to think this was a reasonable explanation. She kept saying, "Dogs breathe, Robin! They do! They have to! And they know when someone's frightened of them and it makes them worse."

"Everyone in my class is afraid of dogs," said Robin. "Except Dan."

"Rubbish," said his mother. Her temper was always very short as summer approached and the holiday season got underway. "Dan's the only one of you with any sense then! I always said he wasn't all bad! And the rest are just frightened because it's the fashion to be frightened!"

"They're scared stiff," said Robin, but his mother was right.

Halfway through the summer term everything changed. The house next door to the Brogans' that had stood empty for nearly a year suddenly sold and a family moved in.

"Twins just your age," Mrs Brogan reported. "A girl and a boy, and another boy a bit younger and a little girl of six. I've been talking to their mother. The twins will be in your class; I said was it worth starting them for just a few weeks but she wants them out from under her feet."

Mrs Brogan was delighted at the thought of children coming to live next door. For the past two years, ever since the car crash that had killed his father, she had watched Robin become more and more lonely. She did not know why, because she did not realize that at the time Robin's class teacher had warned the class:

"I don't want to hear of any of you pestering Robin with questions about his father or the accident. Leave him in peace when he comes back."

Robin's class had done just that, but because it was astonishingly difficult to avoid the subjects of fathers and cars for ever, they had got into the habit of avoiding Robin instead. If Robin noticed he said nothing about it.

The rivalry between Dan and Robin was at its worst when the twins appeared on the scene. It was a custom in the school to encourage different pupils to give a short talk to their schoolmates during morning assembly and on the twins' first morning Dan had volunteered to do the honours. With a lot of help from his astonished teacher he had prepared a sermon on Lost Property. As soon as the head teacher had finished welcoming the twins and the gasps of horror at their

names had died away, he jumped to his feet and marched on to the stage.

"Class 4A," he said, "are a bunch of drips! They go trailing round after Robin Brogan just because he had a few stitches in his arm! They're all scared of dogs all of a sudden! My mum says the whole pack of them hasn't got two brain cells to rub together and if those two new ones with the funny names don't stop laughing . . ."

"DANIEL, OUT!" roared the head teacher. "OUTSIDE AT ONCE! Wait outside my room!"

"I'm only saying what I think!" said Dan, retreating to the door.

"OUT!" repeated the head teacher, "and everybody stand! We will now sing *Summer Suns Are Glowing*, and, reluctant as I am to ask new pupils to leave the room on their first day with us, if the Robinson twins cannot control themselves they had better join Daniel! Thank you, Mrs James!"

Mrs James struck up the opening notes, the school stood up and sang, and Peregrine and Antoinette Robinson, still giggling uncontrollably, staggered out of the room and bumped into Dan, who was having second thoughts about the wisdom of his sermon.

"We got sent out," said the twin who had been introduced as Peregrine. "Do you always have brilliant assemblies like that?"

"Mind you own business," said Dan, who made enemies as naturally as he breathed.

"They were boring as boring at our old school," said his twin. "We'd have got half killed if we'd done anything like that."

"Oh shut up," said Dan, strongly suspecting he was about to get half killed himself and not liking the reminder. "Why have you got such stupid names?"

"Our mum and dad picked them."

"They must be crackers then! Peregrine and Antoinette!"

"They are crackers," agreed a twin tranquilly. "They called us after our grandparents. I don't know why they wanted to. Everyone just calls us Perry and Ant though. I'm Perry and she's Ant."

"Just as bad!"

"We know," agreed Ant. "We've got used to it though."

"Perry's a bit like Danny," suggested Perry.

"It isn't!" replied Dan furiously. "And nobody calls me Danny! And I think you're a pair of giggling drips like the rest of 4A!"

"Oh well," said Perry, "you don't even know us so what does it matter?"

Dan glared at them. Even in class 4A he had never met people so hard to antagonize.

"You've got a brother at this school, haven't you?" he demanded.

"What about him?" asked Perry, suddenly cautious.

"He's bats," said Dan. "We've been told to be nice to him."

This time he struck gold.

"Two to one is never fair," said the head teacher some time later, "and if you don't want to explain your actions I can only assume that you are ashamed of them."

Perry and Ant stared gloomily at the carpet of the head teacher's study and said nothing.

"You had better apologize to Dan and go back to your class."

"Sorry," said Perry and Ant, still gazing at the carpet.

"Daniel?"

"What?" said Dan.

"I presume you accept their apology and are very sorry for your part in it all?"

"Who? Me?" asked Dan, outraged.

"Good," said the head teacher, opening the door for

the twins and watching them disappear down the corridor. "Now you and I will have a chat, Daniel. Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin!"

Perry and Ant continued to cause sensations. Being twins seemed to give them twice the confidence of ordinary new pupils. If their stomachs quailed at the thought of starting a new school halfway through the summer term they did not show it. On the first morning their mother had taken them to the school gates, but on the second day they marched boldly into the playground alone. Not quite unaccompanied however, because after them followed their dog.

Class 4A fled wailing to their classroom, but the twins did not appear until much later.

"Where's your dog?" demanded someone at break.

"We had to take him back home. That's why we were late."

"Is he savage?"

"'Course he's not!"

"All the ones round here are! You should see Robin Brogan's arm!"

Dan, overhearing this remark, sniffed scornfully and turned away.

"What's the matter with it?" demanded Perry, and,

"What am I looking for?" asked Ant when Robin had been badgered into rolling up his sleeve.

"Look at those scars!"

But unfortunately the scars had already faded. Robin's arm had to be twisted and turned to catch the light before they really showed.

"That's where the dog got him last Easter!"

"Does it still hurt?" asked Ant.

"No," said Robin.

"He had to go to hospital! His head was split right open! Look at the way his hair grows sideways! His arm was nearly ripped off! They sewed it back together with bright blue string!"

"Funny," remarked Perry, "how they always stitch you up with bright blue string! They did my leg when I fell down a drain!"

"Down a drain?"

"Yes," agreed Ant, "and they did my hand when it went through the kitchen window but they used black on our brother when he fell off my bike."

"What colour did they use on Beany's eye?"

"Bright blue," Perry reminded her. "It looked awful."

Class 4A listened in amazement to this casual account of family patchwork.

"Have you all been stitched up?"

"Haven't you?" asked Perry, surprised. "It's not that bad. You get used to it. Even Old Blanket's had stitches. He got stuck in barbed wire."

"Who's Old Blanket?"

"Our dog. He came this morning and you all ran off."

"Why do you call him Old Blanket?" asked Robin.

"It's short for Old Ironing Blanket. It's what Beany called him when she was little."

"Is Beany your sister? Why'd you call her Beany?"

"She used to want to be a bean."

"A baked bean?"

"A broad bean," explained Ant patiently. "Why'd they call you Robin?"

"I was born at Christmas," said Robin.

"They should have called you Crackers," said Perry, and fell over laughing.

It was the beginning of the end. The next morning Old Blanket came to school again, trailing a length of chewed string. Mrs Robinson was summoned to collect him, but before she got there Old Blanket had begged for crisps, rolled over and died, dribbled a football round the playground and stood patiently by while Perry and Ant pushed their bare hands into his mouth

to prove that he did not bite. He had also shaken hands with the entire class except Robin and Dan and Class 4A were now devoted dog lovers. It was noticeable that those who had been the loudest screamers were now the most ardent worshippers. Robin retreated to the school porch where he discovered Dan drawing unflattering pictures of his fellows on the wall.

"Woof, woof," said Dan.

"Oh, shut up!" said Robin.

By the end of term the twins were enormously popular. The class vied for their admiration, becoming more and more daring and demanding blue string stitches for every cut and scrape. Public opinion turned against Robin. Nobody could understand why he did not like dogs. As term drew to a close his stitches diminished in number and his hair was discovered to grow no more sideways than anyone else's.

"I never said it did," said Robin, but nobody took any notice. He was no longer the centre of attention. He did not mind this; unlike Dan, he had never enjoyed it, but he did wish the twins knew the facts of the matter. Although they never said anything, it was perfectly obvious that they thought him a nonentity. They steered clear of Dan altogether, except when Dan was so pugnacious they were forced to notice him.