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Opening extract from

A Dog Called Homeless

Written by

Sarah Lean

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Sarah Lean grew up in Wells, Somerset but now lives in Dorset with her husband, son and dog. She has worked as a page-planner for a newspaper, a stencil-maker and a gardener, amongst various other things. She gained a first class English degree and became a primary school teacher before returning to complete an MA in Creative and Critical Writing with University of Winchester. *A Dog Called Homeless* is her first novel.

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1

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SARAH LEAN



A dog called Homeless

Illustrated by Gary Blythe

HarperCollins *Children's Books*

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For Dad



My name is Cally Louise Fisher and I haven't spoken for thirty-one days. Talking doesn't always make things happen, however much you want it to. Think of rain; it just happens when it happens. When the clouds are ready, when they're full, they drop the water. It's not magic; it's just putting something back where it belongs.

And this is how it all began.



1.

Dad's birthday, and I got up before anyone.

He just wanted a quiet day. No presents, no cake, no nothing. It just wouldn't be right, he said. People forget birthdays aren't just about them.

Dad's birthday is also the same day my mum died last year. I think it's called a tragedy or a catastrophe or some other big word which means more than just 'bad luck' when two things like that happen on the same day.

I sat outside Dad's bedroom door with his birthday cards, waiting. Through the gap in the doorway I could just make out the dark hump under the covers and his dark head making a deep dent in his pillow. He sighed, so I knew he was awake.

There were six birthday cards for Dad. One from me, one from my older brother Luke (still in bed or on his computer – the door was shut) and four that had come in the post. I nudged Dad's bedroom door open a bit wider and flung my card in. I saw Dad patting round the bed, feeling for the blue envelope that landed by his back, and heard it crunch as he opened it. It was a picture of a grey bear with a blue nose. It was speaking on the telephone and on the front it said *A Message From Me To You*.

Dad said, “Thanks, that’s nice.”

And I said, “Are you thinking about Mum?”

Silence.

And then he said, “Get me a cup of coffee, will you?”

It didn’t feel like a birthday at all, not even with the cards on top of the telly. Dad had the volume turned low while we sat around waiting for the rest of our family to arrive and come with us to visit Mum’s grave for her anniversary.

2.

Grandpa and Grandma Hamblin picked us up and drove slowly to the cemetery. We met Granddad Fisher and Aunty Sue and walked together along paths of tidy grass and loving memories.

We made a circle, stood still as statues, not talking about her because Dad says it's too hard to talk about her. We stared at the cold, grey stone marked with her name. Louise Fisher. The same as my middle name.

And I thought about her, up there, somewhere. Not here. And because she was so far away I missed her like crazy and I wondered if I should have had some breakfast because my belly hurt like mad.

And then there she was. I saw my mum. And I know what you're thinking – you can't really see dead people. But I did. She was standing on the wall of the cemetery, wearing her red raincoat and waxy green hat. And I wasn't scared. Why would I be scared of my own mum?

She put her arms out to balance, swaying as she walked along the wall. Just like she always was, doing something that made you want to laugh or do it too. She wobbled along, until she was as close as she could get to us without jumping down. She pushed her hat flat on her

head. She looked at me and smiled, just like she did when she saw me sing in the school musical of *Charlotte's Web*. Like you're everything.

Grandma had a bunch of sweet peas wrapped in silver foil.

"Be a good girl and put the flowers in the vase," she said, holding them out. Her tissue fell out of her sleeve and floated to the ground.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" I whispered, picking up her tissue and handing it back. "Do you believe Mum could come back and we could see her?"

The purple and pink flowers reflected in her glasses and made them look like a church window. She closed her eyes and dabbed her nose.

"Oh, dear," she said, "we're all a little upset." She sniffed the flowers and put them in my hand.

I made my way round the tight circle of bodies and squeezed between Aunty Sue and Dad.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Aunty Sue?" I said. "Have you ever seen Mum, even though she's not supposed to be there?"

I guided her arm so that she would turn round and look over at the wall, so she could see Mum, colourful and bright and real as anything. I watched her eyes for the sudden surprise. Her mouth made the shape of a smile, but she frowned. I didn't know what that meant.

"She's there, Aunty Sue," I whispered, pointing. "Over there."

She blinked. Nothing.

"Dad," I said, "look! Look over there on the wall. It's Mum!"

He rubbed his beard. They both looked at me,



in that way people do when they're not really listening to what you're saying. So did Grandma and Grandpa Hamblin and Granddad Fisher.

Granddad Fisher said, "Now, now, Cally, it's neither the time nor place for silly games."

Then Grandpa Hamblin looked at the sky, at the distant grey clouds. "Rain's on its way," he muttered.

Dad looked at the silent earth.

"Dad?" I said. "I can see her. I know she's dead, but she's here."

And right then, when I looked across and Mum's eyes shone as bright as a whole sky full of sunshine, I felt that her and me were the only ones truly alive. My heart thumped, my lungs filled and I wanted to shout, "Mum, sing a song, then they'll hear you. Make the birds wonder, just like you used to."

"Cally, love," Aunty Sue said, "sometimes our imaginations play tricks on us." She reached round and rested her hand on Dad's shoulder. "Sometimes, when you really want to believe something, you can make it seem true."

Tears smudged her mascara. Grandma blew into her tissue.

I thought I heard something, like when the carnival starts and you're miles away down the other end of town, but you know it's coming. Mum made a funnel of her hands, like a loudspeaker.

"Dad, she wants to tell us something," I said.

I saw into his eyes before he looked away, like all the words waiting there were too big to pronounce, too hard to say properly. He hunched his shoulders, rubbed his face.

"Enough, Cally," he said, "you're upsetting people."

I whispered, "Can't you see her?"

She'd stopped smiling. She searched her pocket as if she was trying to find something. I wondered why she had a coat and hat on when it was such a warm summer day.

"Dad," I pointed, "you can see her, can't you?"

"No," he growled, "and neither can you. And I don't want to hear another word about it."