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Opening extract from

Chasing the Dark

Written by

Sam Hepburn

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The Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.doublecluck.com

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CHAPTER 1

Dark night. Rain-slashed road. A great black 4x4 screeching out of nowhere, its headlights catching Mum's pale, frightened face behind the windscreen of a tinny little hatchback. She's screaming into the brightness, throwing up her arms . . .

The sick smash of metal jerked me awake.

I pushed my head into the pillow, clinging to the split second of possibility that Mum was alive, that I was home in my own bed and the crash was just some hi-def, surround-sound nightmare, brought on by a late-night movie. I strained for the sound of Mum's voice calling me to get up. The silence got bigger, pressing me down.

I couldn't breathe. Slowly, I turned my head and opened my eyes.

The sight of my Aunt Doreen's spotless spare room hit

me so hard I had to bunch up my knees and grip the mattress to fight the pain. It took a while before I got it together enough to try anything normal like pulling on yesterday's clothes, dragging myself downstairs or tuning in to the conversation going on in the kitchen.

' . . . she won't have left him a penny. You realise that, don't you, George? Heaven knows what it's going to cost us to feed him, let alone clothe him. When he walked into that church I was so ashamed I wanted the earth to swallow me up. Jeans and trainers! At his own mother's funeral!'

Doreen's voice was shrill and fluttery like one of next door's chickens and if she was turning up the volume to make sure I heard her, she needn't have bothered. I already knew I was about as welcome in my aunt's life as a cockroach on one of her fancy cupcakes. So I just sat on the stairs, pretending I was listening to an actress in one of the soaps moaning about a kid who wasn't real. A kid who wasn't me. I'd been doing that a lot lately because right now being Joe Slattery was crap.

'Come on, love, he's had a tough time . . .' Her husband, George, was talking slowly and carefully, as if he was checking the wires on a ticking bomb, wondering which one to snip. 'We owe it to your sister to do our best for him.'

Bad move, George. The explosion was delayed by a horrible silence while Doreen sucked air, the way little kids do before they start yelling.

'And what did my *sister* ever do for me? Nothing! She just went her own selfish, irresponsible way and expected

everyone else to pick up the pieces. Landing us with her slum kid. It's not right, George. And it's not fair. Where's the father? That's what I want to know.'

My fingers itched to hit the remote and switch Doreen off.

'He seems a nice enough lad and as soon as they find him a school he'll be out of your hair.'

'How long's that going to take? He'll be mooning round the house for weeks trying to smuggle that *disgusting* dog inside. He's lucky I'm letting him keep it at all.'

'I know, love. You've been great about it.'

I left them to it and crept outside. As I eased the door shut, my dog Oz stopped digging up the flowerbed and hurtled across the lawn, nearly choking himself on the long, clanking chain Doreen had got him tied to. Calling him disgusting was pretty harsh, but even I had to admit that he was a bit deficient in the cute looks and winning ways department. Mum had reckoned he was mostly Yorkie, with a bit of bull terrier thrown in, on account of his stocky shoulders and squashed-up face. He had a wild look in his squinty black eyes, a greyish-white coat that felt like wire, and this lumpy bald patch down one side where the fur refused to grow back over a couple of scars he'd got fighting. Still, looks aren't everything. And it wasn't his fault he'd puked on Doreen's carpet. He's not used to long car journeys. But what with that and the fact that she and Mum had always hated each other's guts, you could kind of see why Doreen had had it in for us right from the start.

Oz was straining towards the back door, tongue hanging out.

'Forget it,' I said. 'You've got no chance. Come on.'

I raced him down to the shed he was sleeping in. It didn't look so bad. George had got him a sack of dog biscuits, and I'd made him a bed from some old clothes Doreen had put out for the jumble. I got to thinking it'd probably be easier all round if I just moved in here, too. I unclipped his chain and chucked a handful of biscuits in his bowl.

While he bolted them down, I stared at Doreen and George's house through the shed window. Funny to think that it was where Mum had grown up. I could just about remember her bringing me here to visit her parents, but they died when I was a kid – Grandad first, then Nan a couple of years later. Mum and Doreen had practically stopped speaking by then and once Mum had sold Doreen her share of Laurel Cottage, she'd never set foot in Saxted again. Mum used the money to buy a flat in North London. Only Mum being Mum, she fell behind with the mortgage and it got repossessed.

After that things went downhill pretty fast. Rented flats, shared houses, bedsits, till we hit an all-time low and ended up on the Farm Street Estate. That was around the time she met that creep Eddy Fletcher. He said he'd got contacts in the music business and could get her a recording contract. Turned out he was a dodgy electrician who'd once done three weeks as a roadie and never got over it. As soon as he moved in he decided to ease up on work so he could devote more time to making Mum's life a misery.

Just thinking about him made my fists clench up and my breath go shaky. But before I started smashing up

George's flowerpots, Oz threw himself at me, desperate for a walk. I let him out the back gate, pounded after him and stood panting at the end of the lane, trying to decide whether to turn right towards Saxted station or left towards the swanky new estate. I didn't do either. I went straight on to the churchyard, which was pretty stupid seeing as how I was trying not to think about Mum. My feet had obviously missed the all-out ban on that one.

Oz raced ahead and I could see he was torn about his new life. Something in his little doggy brain was telling him that fields and fresh air were a good thing, but he was having trouble squaring that with living in the shed and being chained up 24/7. Me, I couldn't be bothered to decide either way about country life because I knew Doreen wasn't going to put up with having a *'slum kid'* around for one nanosecond longer than she could help. Who knew where I'd be by next week? I'll say one thing for her, though, I don't think she gave a stuff about my dad being Kenyan. As far as Doreen was concerned, this was personal.

Mum's grave was right there, by the churchyard fence, just a mound of earth and a pile of wet, muddy wreaths. No gravestone yet or probably ever, 'cos I couldn't see that tightwad Eddy forking out for one and I hadn't noticed Doreen offering to sort it.

'Course, even yesterday at the funeral Eddy wouldn't let it drop about the bloke who'd been giving Mum a lift. *Who was he? What was she doing with him?* As if the police hadn't told us who he was – some poncey journalist called Ivo Lincoln. This tall posh bloke with a droopy face came up

to me at the hospital and said he was Lincoln's dad and he was sorry for my loss and I said I was sorry for his, but it was just words. The cops said the crash wasn't Lincoln's fault, that he was well under the limit and it was all down to the maniac in the 4x4. But if Lincoln hadn't been there, hadn't existed, it wouldn't have happened. What was anyone with a name like *Ivo* doing in a dump like the Trafalgar Arms anyway? All the pubs round our way were rough, but the Trafalgar Arms was the worst. It wasn't fair that Mum had ended up doing gigs in a place like that, not when you think of all the dreams she'd had. Though I like to think she'd had her moments. There was the summer we lived in a mini-van and she got to sing at a big festival in Cornwall, and the time one of her tapes got played on Radio Two.

My eyes were welling up so I made a dash for the woods down the side of the churchyard. Oz went mad, jabbing his nose into every bush he passed before catching a sniff of squirrel and chasing it down an overgrown track between the trees. I figured he wasn't used to things that smelled good having legs. I stumbled after him, dodging mud holes, tripping over tree roots and pushing away branches that kept twanging back in my eyes. By the time I caught up with him he'd given up on the wildlife and started peeing against a pile of car tyres ditched beside an old mattress. It probably made him feel at home. You see, the first time I ever saw him he was down by the council dump fighting an Alsatian twice his size. The Alsatian won and Oz was in such a bad way I took him home. Eddy kicked off about it but Mum said it made

her feel safer having a dog around … and now I was back to thinking about Mum. I walked on, swishing a stick. Sometimes it helped if I kept moving.

I'd been going a while, trying to find something to think about that didn't involve death or Doreen, when I got to a high brick wall overgrown with creepers and topped by a row of deadly-looking spikes. I followed it round till I came to a huge boarded-up gateway, the kind that didn't need the 'Keep Out, Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted' signs stuck all over it to give you the hint that visitors weren't welcome. Now I'm not the rugged, outdoorsy type – more the weedy, indoorsy type and small for fourteen. But I am pretty nosy, and seeing as my schedule that morning wasn't exactly hectic, I hauled myself up this big tree, wriggled down an overhanging branch and took a peek over the wall.

You should have seen the house on the other side. Crumbling old mansion? Forget it. This place was all jagged layers of glass and wood laid out in a massive L-shape. The curtains were closed, which made the whole house look like it was asleep and hadn't noticed the moss growing over the terrace, the rotten leaves swirling round the empty swimming pool, or the row of dead palm trees that led to a big conservatory with bits of awning flapping round the doors. The garden stretched on forever but apart from a sorry-looking tennis court and a big smashed-up greenhouse it was so overgrown that all you could see was weeds, fallen trees and a few ivy-covered statues poking through the brambles.

The statue nearest the greenhouse was a half-naked,

one-armed woman and I swear something was moving in the bushes round her feet. I leant closer, trying to get a better look, and nearly fell off when Oz came scrabbling out, shaking mud off his fur.

'Get out of there!' I yelled. 'Right now!'

He ran up and down for a bit barking at the wall then gave up and started giving me dirty looks like it was my fault he was trapped. I couldn't just leave him there so I wriggled down the branch, clung on to the bendy bit hanging over the wall, shut my eyes and lowered myself into the garden. Well, when I say lowered I mean half fell, half slithered, ripping the skin of both hands, and twisting my ankle as I hit the ground. But the strange thrill I got from being inside those walls kind of cancelled out the pain. Oz kept close as I fought my way through the brambles, hobbled up the terrace steps, stuck my nose against the French windows and squinted through a gap in the curtains.

A thin wedge of daylight slashed the darkness inside, lighting up a poster-sized photo of a woman. She was what Mum would have called 'striking'. Kind of beautiful but deathly pale with weird, slanty eyes that were nearly too big for her face, eyelashes as thick as tarantulas' legs and dark brown hair piled up high on her head. She was looking straight at me over her shoulder as if she knew me or something. I stared back for a long time like maybe I knew her too, but when I blinked, my brain flashed up Eddy Fletcher swiping the photo of Mum off our sideboard and yelling that she was a dirty, two-timing . . .

A deafening crash shut him up. I'd kicked the French

window so hard my foot had smashed right through the glass. I whipped round, petrified someone had heard. I waited. Nothing. No shouts. No footsteps. Just the panicky rattle of my own breath. I leant against the wall, trying to get up the nerve to run or go inside. Next thing I knew I was kicking out a hole big enough to squeeze through, lifting Oz carefully over the broken glass, and crawling in.

The long dining table, the chunky candlesticks, the half-burnt log in the fireplace, even the cobwebs were covered in a furry fuzz of dust. Two huge chandeliers made of tiny bubbles of glass hovered over the table like giant jellyfish, and when I tapped one of them the hollow ringing sound made the fuzz twitch like I'd woken a ghost.

I backed out of there. Oz's claws clicked on the wooden floor as he followed me past a pair of double doors, through a wide hallway, past a spiral staircase and into a massive room full of spooky shapes draped in white sheets. I drifted around, lifting them up and peering underneath. A wood-panelled bar, a white grand piano, a glass coffee table, three long leather couches. There were loads more photos of the same woman staring through the cobwebs; pictures of her prancing about in miniskirts, trying on hats, cupping her face in her hands, and one of her wearing a floaty white dress, holding up a wine glass and laughing. It was like she was everywhere, watching every move I made. Oz padded over and sniffed at a picture frame lying face down on the floor by the window. I bent down and turned it over. The woman's slanty eyes stared back at me through a layer of shattered

glass. I picked off the splinters and read the words scrawled in the corner: *To Harry, A star in the making. Best wishes always. N.C. xxx.*

Oz barked. The curtain moved. As I spun round, a huge claw yanked me off my feet, ripping terror through my guts. The knife pricking my throat cut off my scream. A pair of black, bloodshot eyes glared down at me out of a filthy, sunken face. This guy was old but he was tall and strong. His head was shaved like a wrinkly nut, there was a scar running from his left eye to his cheek, and he smelled like rotting meat. A swift jab from his boot sent Oz slithering into a growling, quivery crouch.

'What you do here?' His voice was foreign and his Ws came out like Vs.

'I . . . nothing.' I could hardly spit out the words.

'Who with you?'

'No one … honest.'

'What your name?'

'J . . . Joe. I wasn't going to nick anything.'

'Joe, who?'

'S . . . Slattery.'

'Where you live?'

'L . . . Laurel Cottage.'

I should have lied but fear had cut the connection between my mouth and brain.

He lowered the knife. 'Empty your pockets.'

I shook out about fifty pence in coins, a square of gum and my phone. It was a cheap old Nokia I'd got from my mate Bailey, but handing it over really hacked me off. He threw me back against the wall. Struggling to breathe I

snatched another glance at him. He was a tramp. Filthy, stinking, and old enough to be my grandad. Bailey was going to wet himself when I told him I'd been mugged by an OAP.

He pulled back a tear in the leg of his filthy trousers. I looked where he was pointing. A deep gash ran from his knee to his boot, oozing a mess of blood and pus that had gone crusty round a strip of white that had to be bone.

'You help me,' he said. It wasn't a request.

I stared at the wound, trying not to puke.

He made a jab at me with the knife.

'OK.' I raised my hands. 'I'll r . . . ring . . . for a doctor.'

'No doctor! Get bandage, medicine, food, money.'

'I can't . . . I . . . I live with my aunt . . . she won't let me touch her stuff.'

He wasn't up for a cosy chat about the tough time I was having at Doreen's and just rattled out the list again. 'Bandage. Medicine. Food. Money.'

'OK, OK, I'll … I'll do my best.' I scraped myself off the wall and edged towards the door. 'Come on, Oz.'

With a low grunt, the tramp grabbed Oz by the scruff of his neck and waved the knife at his throat. Oz was so surprised he just hung there with his eyes popping out of his head.

'Go. You come back tonight or I kill dog.'

'What?' He was crazy. 'Let him go! I swear I'll come back.'

He jerked the knife under Oz's collar.

'All right! I'll get the stuff. Just don't hurt him.'

Oz gave me this look like I'd got to be joking, as I left him dangling and kept walking.

I stopped. My voice came out in a whimper. 'I can't get over the wall.'

The tramp slipped the knife between his teeth and chucked me a bunch of keys.

'Door. By greenhouse.'

He lifted Oz higher and prodded his stomach, like some deranged TV cook testing a Christmas turkey. 'You don't bring back keys, I kill dog. You bring police, I kill dog. You tell anyone I here, I come *Laurel Cottage* and I kill *you*, Joe Slattery.'