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Opening extract from

The Blue Lady

Written by

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Published by

Hot Key Books

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Headmistress Beaton
St Mark's College for Girls
Oxfordshire
England
4th May 1786

Dear Brigadier Marshall,
It is with deepest regret that I write to inform you of the sudden death of your daughter, Isabelle. Miss Isabelle Marshall's body was discovered on the steps of the school soon after sunrise this morning.

As you know, Sir, Isabelle was expelled from St Mark's College for Girls only two days ago. I must make it clear to you that despite her recent expulsion from our guardianship, the school accepts no responsibility for Isabelle's death. Given her condition in recent months, we cannot help but feel that her tragic fate was unavoidable.

Isabelle's body is currently with the police pending a post-mortem investigation. Her immortal soul is now in His judgement, and all at St Mark's will pray for her.

With deepest regret,
Headmistress Beaton

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I was never the sort of girl who believed in ghosts. I never played with Ouija boards, held séances or felt afraid of the dark. That stuff was for other people, not me. But that all changed when I went to live at St Mark's College.

Unlike the other girls at St Mark's, I hadn't lived away from home since the age of eight. I didn't come from a posh family who had a house in the country and a yacht in France. The only time I'd ever been to France was when Mum and I did a day trip using ferry tokens she'd saved up from a newspaper. Boarding school wasn't for girls like me. I ended up there by mistake.

The mistake happened last December, when Mum's friend Lynn invited her to an army officers' Christmas ball. Lynn's brother is a major in the army and had just got back from a tour of Afghanistan. Apparently his wife used to write to him every week while he was out there, and then one week the letters stopped. Two months later he had another letter from her – only this time all she sent him were divorce papers. Lynn wanted to set Mum up with this guy – although I wasn't keen. Mum's had enough loser boyfriends without adding a jilted army officer to the list.

But that night, at the ball, Mum accidentally sat on the

wrong table and chatted to a guy who she thought was Lynn's brother. Turns out the man she was taking to wasn't Lynn's brother, but Lynn's brother's boss. His name was Lieutenant Colonel Phillip Walker. They got married eight months later. And thirteen days after the wedding, Phil was posted to Germany. Instead of taking me to Germany and putting me into a German school, Mum and Phil decided to send me to an English boarding school. So it was all just one big mix-up – if Mum had chatted to the right guy that night, I would never have been sent to St Mark's. If I'd never gone to St Mark's, then I'd still believe there's no such thing as ghosts.

Term started in early September. Mum and I had talked it over and decided it would be best if I said goodbye to her at home and for Phil to drive me to school. Mum's never been good with her nerves. Being the new girl was tough enough without a hysterical parent in the equation.

We barely spoke on the long drive to my new school. After two hours, Phil broke the silence. 'We'll call as soon as we arrive in Hameln next week.'

'Sure,' I muttered back.

'St Mark's is an excellent school,' he reminded me. 'And the new sports hall they're building will mean it has one of the best sports facilities in the country.'

I smiled, trying to put Phil at ease. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I hated sport of any kind.

I spent the journey staring out of the window as the sun sank in the cloudless September sky. Piles of golden leaves were beginning to gather at the side of the road – Mother

Nature's way of reminding everyone that summer was coming to an end. I took out my new sketchpad and pencils, and began to capture the leaves falling from trees. Putting pencil to paper was a good distraction from the familiar knot in my stomach. I imagined the leaves as parts of my old life falling away from me – freeing me to sprout new buds and start again. Drawing was my only real friend, the only thing I'd ever been able to rely on. Everything else just came and went.

I was only fourteen but I'd already been to a ton of schools, although the others had at least had boys in them. Mum liked to move to be near her latest boyfriend. So going to boarding school was a good thing. It meant I could stay somewhere longer than a few months. I'd finally get a chance to be who I wanted to be, and not have to pretend just to fit in.

Moving around a lot had forced me to be a teenage chameleon. It's the easiest way to survive. In the past I'd tried all kinds of things: I'd dressed as an Emo and a chav, pretended to like horses, followed bad reality TV. There was one school where the only person who'd speak to me was an exchange student from Hong Kong – I'd even learnt a few words in Cantonese. I'd learnt to build walls around myself so no one ever saw the real me. But you can't fake it forever.

I was tired of trying on a new identity as if it were a new coat. St Mark's was the chance for a new beginning. I was wearing black jeans, a black polar neck and a studded metal belt to show everyone that I was serious. I liked art and poetry. That summer I'd started to watch the news and

pay attention to politics. I cared about deforestation and war, the melting of polar ice caps and university tuition fees. This was who I was and I wasn't afraid to let people know. As Phil's car got nearer to my new school, it felt like the setting sun was a ticking clock, and as soon as it slipped below the horizon my life would irrevocably change.

We passed through a small town called Martyrs Heath, which sat at the bottom of a hill. The town was peppered with cobblestone houses, well-kept lawns and an ancient church with a sprawling graveyard. Very quaint, very 'English'.

The road we travelled down forked off ahead. A queue of cars waited to drive through a vast iron gate leading to a winding gravelled path beyond. My stomach flipped. Surely this was it: my new school.

'That's St Hilda's,' Phil said simply. 'Brother school to St Mark's.'

We drove on, and I craned my neck to catch a glimpse of one of the waiting cars. A woman sat behind her steering wheel anxiously chewing her nails as a boy about my age sat listening to his headphones in the passenger seat beside her. He clearly wasn't a new pupil. He didn't look as nervous as I felt.

So St Mark's had a brother school. The prospectus hadn't told me that. I should have known then that the school was keeping other secrets too.

Martyrs Heath, and St Hilda's, lay in the shadow of St Mark's College, which sat upon the hill. St Mark's weathered, grey-stone turrets loomed down over me as Phil's car drove smoothly through the streets and up the winding road.

Finally, after what felt like forever, the car pulled up at my new home – St Mark's College for Girls.

A tall, thin woman tottered towards us as Phil parked up his Mercedes. She was dressed in a shocking purple trouser suit with a mountain of grey hair pilled high on her head. Small round glasses framed her bird-like eyes. If I could have drawn a caricature of an eccentric English boarding school matron, it would have looked like her.

'Francesca Ward?' she asked with confidence.

'Frankie,' I corrected her.

'I'm Ms Thurlow.' She shook Phil's hand without even looking at me. Phil introduced himself. He always sounded so formal when he spoke.

Ms Thurlow turned away and motioned for us to follow. 'Welcome to St Mark's. I'll show you up to the fourth-year dorm. I'll be your housemistress for this year, Francesca,' she said, walking ahead and not looking back. 'I'm also Head of Latin – although I don't think you're taking Latin, are you?'

'No,' I answered simply. They didn't teach Latin in the kind of schools I'd been to. They'd taught us important stuff: how to roll your skirt up, look a bully in the eye and skip out on swimming lessons by faking your period every week. You don't learn skills like that in a Latin classroom.

Ms Thurlow led us up stone steps and through a grand arched doorway at the front of the building. 'This is the original entrance to the school. Of course the girls aren't normally allowed to come in through this door. There's another entrance at the side of the building for everyday

use.' She smiled at Phil. 'But we make exceptions at the start of term, as a special treat.'

The entrance led us into the school's main corridor, which was narrow and paved with ancient, chipped marble flooring. The white walls were lined with dozens of old school photos, documenting St Mark's girls from the time cameras were first invented right up to the present day. An elite club of girls, all of different ages, races and faces, but united by one thing – they were all pupils at St Mark's. I was the newest member of this privileged society. Once again it hit home that life was changing forever.

Our footsteps echoed along the corridor until we reached a small, dark stairwell at the end. The fourth-year dorms were on the second floor. There were three in total, and each dorm slept twenty. The dorms weren't numbers 1–3, or A–C; instead they had names of explorers: 'Raleigh', 'Drake' and 'Columbus'.

I was in Raleigh Dorm.

'You're in the last room on the left,' Ms Thurlow informed me, her eyes darting around like a sparrow, avoiding my gaze. Up close I could see lipstick marks on her teeth and deep creases in her clothes. 'I'm afraid,' she said to Phil, 'Francesca will have to take her bags from here – we don't allow men into the dorms. We don't allow them above stairs normally, but being the start of term we make an exception.'

'That's quite all right,' replied Phil, looking mildly embarrassed.

'I'll be in my flat should you need me,' Ms Thurlow said hurriedly. And without telling me where her flat was, she disappeared back down the dark stairwell.

'You'll be OK from here?' Phil asked. I nodded.

I plonked down the suitcase, gym bag and box of CDs I'd been lugging and gave Phil an awkward hug. 'Don't worry,' I grinned. 'I promise to wait until your car's left the car park before I throw myself out of the window.'

Phil eyed me with horror.

'I'll be fine.' I rolled my eyes, inwardly groaning at Phil's total sense-of-humour bypass.

With a deep breath I pushed my weight into the heavy oak door and it swung open reluctantly. Raleigh Dorm was the size of a grand banqueting hall. Huge, panelled windows lined the mint-green walls and the ceiling was arched high like a chapel. It had probably sat empty all summer, but already it smelled of coconut-clean hair, pine-fresh body sprays and rose-scented lip balms.

The vast space had been divided up into roofless, oak-panelled rooms – each division like a furnished horsebox.

The first door to my left was open as I walked past. Inside, a girl with red hair paced the few steps of space and talked in excited squeals at a girl with bobbed brown hair. The redhead wore skinny blue jeans and an expensive-looking jumper with a patterned scarf draped luxuriously around her neck. I knew then that I wouldn't fit in at St Mark's even if I wanted to. I wouldn't even know where to buy a scarf like that, let alone afford one.

My eyes focused ahead of me – to the last door on the left, the small room that was to be my home for the next year. I walked to my room without stopping to look around. I hated the fact that my heart raced in my throat and my

knees shook with every step. Starting new schools was old news to me, and I was never usually this nervous.

I reached the end of the dormitory and entered my room. There was nothing in there but a bed, a drawer unit, a pin board above a desk, a lamp and a small window that overlooked the school car park and the school sports fields beyond.

The room was small and simple, but it was mine.

The thought of parading around the dorm and introducing myself to my new schoolmates just made me cringe. If someone wanted to speak to me, then they could knock on my door. I unpacked and stuck pictures to the wooden walls. On my pin board I attached a picture of me and Mum taken on a protest against deforestation outside the Brazilian Embassy last summer. Before Phil, Mum went out with a hippy. It didn't last long, but long enough for me to learn all about the world's rainforests being chopped down for the sake of 'human progress'.

Next to my bed I put my new sketchpad, my *Complete Works of Shakespeare* and a framed picture of Mum holding me as a baby – three weeks after Dad had left. Under my bed I hid a green biscuit tin that Gran had given me as a child. The tin was where I kept all my most sacred photos and drawings, which I didn't want to share with the rest of the world on a pin board.

Finally, there was a knock on my open door.

The girl with bright red hair and the expensive scarf walked confidently into my room. 'I'm Saskia,' she said without smiling. 'You're the new girl? Francesca?'

'Frankie,' I told her. 'Hi,' I smiled.

Saskia sat on my bed as I continued to unpack. She

babbled at lightning speed about her summer in the South of France. Apparently she'd drank champagne 'basically every hour of every day' and hooked up with a French guy called Louis. 'There's something about French men that makes them so sophisticated, you know? Not like English boys, especially the sorry excuses at St Hilda's.'

I waited for her to ask me about my summer, and about the picture of Mum at the protest, but she didn't. Instead Saskia cast a bored look around my room, resting her eyes on a charcoal sketch I'd done of Mum.

'O-M-G,' Saskia snorted. 'This is like, so morbid. Who's the old witch?' She reached to peel the picture from the wall and I instinctively slammed my hand over hers to stop her. She recoiled in shock before a flicker of understanding passed through her eyes.

'Mum was just really tired when I drew her,' I said defensively. 'She was working two jobs at the time.'

Saskia eyed me up and down with curiosity. I could feel her judging every item of clothing, every strand of hair, every shuffle of my Converse trainers. I stood up straight, trying to defiantly meet her eye.

'Where did you get your clothes from?' she said slowly.

'I went shopping in London this summer,' I answered proudly.

'Interesting look,' Saskia said coolly. 'I can really see what you were trying to do.'

I opened my mouth to speak but Saskia got there first. 'Is it true you used to go to a school with boys?'

'PIZZA!' I heard someone scream from the other end of the dorm.

Saskia grabbed my hand and pulled me through the dorm like some kind of new pet.

As a beginning-of-term treat we were allowed pizza in the TV room. I sat with Saskia, George (the girl with bobbed brown hair) and a girl called Claire who had nostrils like a horse. Claire looked like a blonde version of Saskia: expensive scarf, skinny jeans and manicured nails. George didn't look as bothered by rich-girl fashion as the others, with her short and simple hair, plain black vest and blue jeans. I offered her a smile when she looked my way, but it wasn't returned.

I silently munched my pizza and listened to them rattle on about their summer holidays. 'So, Los Angeles was cool,' George said breezily to the others. Saskia eyed her hungrily for more. 'Mum was working a lot though. So I when I wasn't lying by the pool I went riding up in the hills.'

'Daddy bought me a new pony this summer,' Claire boasted. 'I've called him Smartie.'

Smartie! I pretended I was choaking on my pizza as I stifled my hysteria. What a name! Talk about cruelty to animals.

They seemed so uninterested in me and I struggled to hide my disappointment. I'd been secretly looking forward to impressing new friends with the 'real' Frankie. Even the fact that I'd been to school with boys seemed to bore them after a while. After dinner in the TV room, I followed Saskia and her posse of well-groomed friends back to Raleigh Dorm. I found myself walking alone, at the back of the crowd.

That was when I first saw Suzy.

She was alone too, walking down the corridor towards us. She was, without doubt, the coolest person I'd ever seen. She had bright red hair (dyed, not natural like Saskia's), a nose piercing and dark eye make-up. She was wearing a dress that looked homemade, ripped tights and big, scruffy boots. Amongst the sea of perfect St Mark's Barbie dolls she couldn't have looked more like a freak. Suzy looked as out of place as I felt. I knew as soon as I saw her that we'd be friends.

I tapped Saskia on the shoulder and she swung around. 'Who's that?' I whispered as the girl with bright red hair walked past us.

'Just some weirdo from the year above,' Saskia grunted. 'I don't know what her problem is but I bet it's hard to pronounce.'

Claire snorted at Saskia's cruel remark.

The dorm lights were out by ten o'clock. I could hear everyone sneak into each other's rooms to whisper and giggle. No one knocked on my door and came to whisper with me. I tried not to care. I tugged back my curtains, letting the moonlight flood into my small room, and opened my sketchpad. Flattening out the first clean page, I drew black lines onto the whiteness, forming shapes that soon became pictures – pictures of a woman who looked like Mum, standing by a house in a country across the sea.

I sketched for hours, trying to escape my loneliness by disappearing into the endless world inside my own head. As dark clouds passed over the moonlight, lengthening the shadows across my newly decorated walls, I had a creeping sense of unease.

St Mark's was the perfect English boarding school. I'd known before I'd arrived that it had a beautiful old building, smart school uniforms and an impressive academic record. But since stepping into the cold school halls I couldn't shift the feeling that there was more to St Mark's than worn grey bricks and neatly pressed uniforms. There was a dissonance in those halls; something that wasn't quite right. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I knew instinctively that the school was not a peaceful place. It wasn't as glossy as the school brochure made it look. There were dark secrets at St Mark's – stories that had been hidden and buried away. And I was now living amongst them.