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Opening extract from

The Dark Inside

Written by

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Chapter 1

Run.

And James did. Out the back door. Through the gap in the garden fence. Not stopping even after the bellowing of his stepfather had wasted in the wind and there was nothing but the whip of grass across his shins.

He cut a silver channel through the meadow . . .

. . . climbed the rotten, spongy stile . . .

. . . dropped down into the lane and kept on going, fists pumping as the slope began to bite.

<line#>

The ‘house on the hill’ it was called. A small lead box on the skyline at a couple of miles. Inside, it was a musty, cobwebby place with peeling walls slick from damp. It had been there on the hill overlooking the village for as long as anyone could remember. Ever-present. Like a boulder left over from an ancient time.

The kitchen was cool and smelt of sea spray.

James leant against the old range cooker to catch his breath. His arm was sore, below the sleeve of his T-shirt, where his stepfather had punched him. James had not dropped the bottle. But his stepfather found it much easier to blame the boy for things.

A bruise was darkening and rubbing only made it worse and more difficult to forget. So he walked on into a large hallway and stopped at the bottom of a wooden staircase with a wide, pale stripe up its centre. He waited, listening, until he was sure he was alone, then carried on up the stairs, accompanied by a tune of creaks and clicks he knew off by heart.

Up on to the landing . . .

. . . then straight on into a large bedroom.

Rotten bay windows.

Green hills beyond.

A stub of chalk below them on the window sill.

The long wall opposite was painted black with writing chalked all over that winked like frost. Wrapping his hand inside his T-shirt, James wiped away the final digit from a number written large in the centre of the wall that read

1,642

and rewrote it as

1,641

He mouthed the number like a prayer, shuffling backwards, then slumping down on the baggy green sofa behind him in a cloud of dust and sunlight. The fabric smelt, but the boy put up with it because the house was somewhere to be.

He sat for a while, staring at the writing on the wall. And then he sighed and stood up, and placed the chalk back on the window sill and looked out at the canopy of blue sky overhanging the green hills.

Sheep were grubs.

A bird circling in the blue became a taut black line.

He walked slowly round the top floor of the house, inspecting each room carefully in turn, because he was in no hurry to go home. Which was why he found the body. It was lying against a wall in the smallest of the five bedrooms.

As if the sea had left it there for him to find.

Chapter 2

It was wearing a blue wool greatcoat and black boots with eyelets and tractor-tyre soles. It was a man. Curled up into a ball on the wooden floor.

James stood, watching for any hint of breathing. Listening out for any sound. But there seemed to be no sign of life. So he stepped closer. Just to be sure.

The skin on the man's hands was so white it was blue. Below the black, oily hair was a gash the size of a mouth on his upturned cheek. Bruises the colour of storm clouds on his neck.

Something clicked behind him and James whirled round. But it was just the house, the walls and floorboards, ticking over in the afternoon sun.

When he looked down again, two blue eyes were staring up at him. James stepped back a few paces and stopped. When the man had been dead, there had been no need to think very hard.

The whole thing could have been a dream.

But it wasn't.

'I won't hurt you,' said the man. He was as weak as a kitten, his arms collapsing with the slightest weight, but he managed to prop himself up against the wall below the window, the sky all the bluer against his black hair. 'Where am I?'

'The house on the hill,' replied James. 'On the edge of Timpston,' he added. 'In Devon.'

'Falconbury?'

'About three miles away. Is that where you're from? The town?'

'No.'

Outside, the leaves suddenly started chattering as though some great current was coursing through the earth into the trees. The two of them stared silently at one another as if

waiting for a terrible shock to reach them. And then the wind faded as quickly as it had begun.

Every note of James's voice had been sucked from his chest making it impossible to speak.

'I'll be fine.' The man curled up into a ball again. Closed his eyes. Coughed. And then lay still.

James backed all the way to the door.

Walked quickly down the stairs.

Left the house through the kitchen door.

He stood nearby, flashing a stick back and forth over a patch of young nettles, making them shiver. *He could be anyone*, thought James. *A homeless person. A prisoner on the run. Someone just down on their luck.*

I'll be fine.

Whoever he was, he didn't want any help.

The bruise on James's arm began to creak and groan and ache, and he stopped wondering about the man, and who he might be, and drove the stick harder.

Nettle heads flew.

Necks opened.

He mashed the stalks until the ground around him reeked of green.

Chapter 3

‘Where have you been?’

James dug the toe of his trainer into a gap between two paving stones on the patio. But it wouldn’t open up and swallow him.

His stepfather was sitting on the kitchen step at the back of their house, smoking a cigarette, shirtsleeves rolled up into thick white bands. His forearms looked bulky and golden in the early evening sunlight. The smoke around him was a tangle of blue. ‘Well?’

‘Just walking about.’

‘What? All this time? Just *walk-ing* about?’

James nodded, because it was always difficult to say the right thing. He tried following the song of a blackbird, and when he noticed the yellow washing line, strung between its poles, he tried to remember all the clothes that had ever hung there.

‘What’s that on your arm?’ asked his stepfather, pointing at the bruise. The centre had become as black as coal, the rest of it raw and purple with mottling around the edges.

‘Nothing. I’ll be fine.’

‘Course you will.’ The cigarette glowed orange. ‘Course. You. Will.’

<line#>

I’ll be fine. That’s what James had said. He knew he wasn’t. But it was what people said all the time. It was what the man in the house had said too.

He was lying in bed under a single white sheet, staring up at the ceiling. Sweat crackled on his brow and in the dark private pits of his body. His tongue rang with salt and pepper each time he licked his lips and tried to think everything through.

The man was not all right.

He kicked back the sheet. Peered out of the window into the grainy dark.

In the distance the house on the hill was blacker than the night sky.

James knew what his mother would have done. He wondered if she might be watching him now, waiting to see what he would do. He hoped she was, and whispered to her, asking that she forgive him for not visiting her grave as often as he should. And then for all the other things she might be watching out for too.

But the man could be anyone.

He got out of bed.

Dressed quietly.

After finding the torch in the bottom of his wardrobe, he lit a spot on the wall and ran the light around the room. They had chosen the striped blue wallpaper together. And the porthole mirror. Even the chest of drawers opposite the bed.

The light caught the glass and then the photograph of her in the little brown frame. She was smiling right at him.

James clicked off the torch. For a moment, it felt just like the car accident all over again, until his eyes adjusted to the dark.