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Opening Extract from...

Dark Tides

Written by Chris Ewan

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Dark Tides

CHRIS EWAN

FABER & FABER

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31 OCTOBER 2014

Prologue

Every home hides a secret. My job had taught me that. People rarely open up to the police right away. Not suspects. Not witnesses. Sometimes not even victims. It's a primal response, I think. We all fear authority. We're hardwired to conceal information. And a warrant card is no passport to the truth.

But here's something else I've learned: you don't have to rely on someone to tell you what's hidden. You can train yourself to feel for it. To sense it from your environment.

And yes, I know, that sounds a little crazy. But believe me, I was listening to my instincts right now – alone in a dilapidated cottage at the extreme north of the Isle of Man – and they told me one thing with absolute certainty:

This is where you're going to die.

Melodramatic, right? I can see why you might think so. Not so many years ago, I would have thought the same thing myself. Truth is I never used to be this way. I'm really not the neurotic type, though in all honesty, nobody could blame me if I were. For the record, I'm not superstitious either, but even I could tell that the omens weren't good.

A storm was closing in outside and the afternoon was unusually dark. There were no tree branches scratching the window glass, or lone dogs howling at the sky, but the October rain was hammering down in a violent frenzy and the wind coming off

the Irish Sea was blasting over the sand dunes and the grassy flatlands that fronted the cottage. It gusted against the white-washed walls and droned in the chimney of the old fireplace just in front of me.

A garage door kept slamming out back. It was a garage that contained an awful secret of its own.

But here's the real clincher: it was Hop-tu-naa, the Manx Halloween; the phase of the year when the veil between our world and the spirit world is said to be tissue thin. A time for ghosts and ghouls and things that go bump in the night. A date on the calendar that I'd come to fear like nothing else. A day that had haunted me since I was eight years old.

I'd already searched the cottage.

I was soaked and shivering by the time I slipped inside. The rain had pasted my clothes to my body and my hair to my face. I shuffled forwards with a can of CS spray clutched in one fist and nothing but tension in the other.

I'd taken a huge gamble coming here by myself, but I was past believing that anybody else could help me now, anyway. This was a moment I'd long been destined to face, if not tonight, then the following year, or the one after that. There was no avoiding it. All I could do was confront it. It was the only way the torment would ever end for me.

The hallway was unlit and clogged with decorating gear. Lots of paint tins and buckets, a confusion of tools, some old work boots, a broom and a crumpled pair of overalls. The walls had been stripped back to lath and plaster. Electrical wires were tied in loops from the ceiling. There was a strong odour of damp and decay.

I picked my way through the mess to the living room.

Nobody was in there, but I saw something that told me I was in the right place. Not something I'd wanted to see. Not anything I could pretend that I'd missed. But not something I could focus on just yet, either.

I moved into the kitchen. The renovation work had progressed since I'd been here last. Most of the old cupboards and wall units had been ripped out. Only a dirt-smeared fridge and the metal sink remained.

The pantry door was ajar. I raised my foot and kicked it so hard that it bounced off the wall and had almost swung closed again before I saw that the space was empty.

I froze, gripped by a sudden, pinched emptiness in my lungs, as if someone was holding a plastic bag over my head.

But there was no response. No blood-curdling shriek from behind. No fast drumming of feet from above.

Hard to tell if I was on my own or if I was just being toyed with.

I backed out towards the stairs, flattened my spine against the peeling wallpaper and forced myself to climb. The sketchy dimness on the landing throbbed with menace. I listened closely but all I could hear was the wind and the rain and the thump of blood in my ears.

There were two bedrooms. The first had been stripped back to exposed floorboards and walls, just like the hallway. An old dustsheet was draped over a stepladder in the middle of the room, looking like a ghost that had shrivelled in on itself.

The second bedroom was a little more civilised. There was a mattress on the floor and a sleeping bag on the mattress. An upturned wooden crate was functioning as a bedside table.

There was a torch and a paperback book on the crate. A holdall of clothes behind the door.

That just left the bathroom, and when I edged inside, I saw that the shower curtain was drawn across the bath. It shouldn't have surprised me. I hate horror films. Loathe every slasher cliché. And this was my reward. A mildewed shower curtain obscuring an unknown threat; a rotted window frame rattling in the thrusting breeze; the warped reflections from a rusted old mirror.

I reached out and ripped the curtain to one side but all it revealed was a wall of chipped tiles and a dated brown bath with a shower hose coiled in the base.

The cottage was abandoned. There was just me, and the secret this place was holding on to, and the message I'd spied on the living room hearth.

I snatched the torch from the second bedroom, then crept downstairs to the living room and lowered myself into a tatty armchair. The fabric was stiff with age and coated in dust. The carpet was threadbare, rotted in places, and the walls were speckled with mould spores.

The message had been left for me. I didn't have the slightest doubt about that. Staring at it now, it looked familiar and yet strangely unreal. It was something I'd been waiting for so long to see, and now that it was here, it seemed a little phoney. A touch cheesy, even.

Which isn't to say that it didn't scare me.

The fireplace was Victorian with a blackened finish and a cracked tile surround. The mantelpiece was dark marble, the hearth a worn flagstone.

But all of that was just window dressing. Theatre. The only

thing that mattered – the only thing that ever had – was the solitary footprint on the hearth, formed out of grey ash, pointing towards the door.

The outline was exact, the tread detail clear. It was the stamp of a training shoe. Quite large. Almost certainly a men's size nine.

Next to the footprint was something else. An extra message, just for me. Maybe some of the others had seen it too, though I had no way of knowing that now and no way of finding out.

The second part of the message had also been formed from ash. The outline was just as precise as the footprint. Four letters. One word.

Soon.

Funny. I'd always believed that the waiting was the toughest part – the remorseless, drip-drip anticipation year on year – but now there was this, and it was so much worse.

Because, you see, it's not only homes that hide secrets. I had secrets of my own. Some of the most terrible you can probably imagine. I'd held them tight to me, nurtured them, protected them, as, one by one, the others who'd known the truth had gone or been taken.

Now there were only two of us left. There was me, and there was the person who'd left the message for me to find here, in this forgotten place, in the dusk and the wind and the rain, on Hop-tu-naa.

Soon.

I wedged the torch down by my thigh and fumbled with the CS spray. It wasn't much of an arsenal. I asked myself if I should go and hunt for a hammer or a chisel from among the tools in the hall. Maybe search for a knife in the kitchen.

And perhaps I would have done, if it hadn't been too late already. Because right then a hand rested on my shoulder and a sharp blade pricked at the skin below my jaw.

Something plummeted in my stomach and a grievous thought rushed in at me: *You should have checked the cupboard under the stairs*.

Then the hand moved downwards, sweeping past my throat to my breast. Finally, there was the voice at my ear. It was husky. Low. Laced with the thrill of excitement, like that of a lover.

'Remember this?'

PART ONE

DARES

31 OCTOBER 2001

Chapter One

Sometimes I think about how it all started for me and I'm struck by an odd paradox: that the kindest of intentions can lead to the cruellest of outcomes. Call it fate, if you like. Call it destiny. But I prefer to think of it as plain bad luck. I know there are people who believe in reincarnation, karma, all of that stuff. Some people say that the misfortunes we face in this life are payback for our past sins. All I can tell you is if that's true, then I must have been a seriously bad soul to know the last time around, and be sure to stay out of my way if I come back again. While you're at it, you'd also be wise to keep clear of Rachel Cormode, because when we were both fourteen years old, it was her kindness that doomed me to the worst outcome of all.

Rachel was everything I wasn't. She was provocative, not plain. Blonde, not mousy. She dated older boys, smuggled vodka and cigarettes into school, applied make-up while I was scribbling notes in class. If my life were one of the black-and-white movies that I loved to watch on rainy weekend afternoons, then Rachel would be the Veronica Lake to my Doris Dowling. Never heard of Doris Dowling? Well, exactly.

Case in point: back in that autumn term of 2001, legend had it that Rachel had taken the hand of Mr Lyle, the young student drama teacher, and had made him touch her between her legs after the school's summer performance of *Grease*.

Naturally she'd played Rizzo. Nobody had seen it happen, nobody could confirm it for sure, but when school started again in September, word went round that Mr Lyle had left the island. There was talk that he was no longer training to be a teacher. Mandy Fisher, whose father was a parent-governor, swore that the police had been involved.

For a while, it was all anyone would talk about, and that seemed perfectly normal to me. Whatever she did, wherever she went, Rachel was the girl everyone was aware of.

And one Wednesday at the very end of October, for reasons I still don't fully understand, she sauntered over to me in the library at break, swung her denim bag down on to the table I was working at, and said, 'Hey, Claire.'

I blinked at her. I'm pretty sure my mouth opened and closed a few times. I didn't say 'hey' back. I didn't say anything at all.

I remember thinking: *She knows my name*. Which was crazy, because of course she knew my name. We'd been at primary school together. And back before the tragedy – before my life had been for ever warped and branded – she'd played at my house a few times.

But still, I was shocked. And it wasn't just because she'd used my name. It was the *way* she'd said it. As if there was nothing remarkable about it whatsoever. As if we were always hanging out together.

'Do you have any plans for tonight?'

I like to think I shook my head. I like to think I didn't just sit there like a complete dope, gawping back at her.

'Well?'

'Not tonight,' I mumbled. *Not any night*, I might have said.

'A few of us are going out. My cousin and some of his friends.'

Was this a set-up? Were a group of girls huddled behind a nearby bookshelf, smothering giggles?

'Claire?'

This time my name had become a question. Strange. It often felt that way to me – as if I was some kind of transient being who faded in and out of existence. I'd long known that I was capable of vanishing in any social situation, at any given moment. Perhaps, somehow, Rachel knew that, too.

'Are you in?'

I should have said no. I should have told her that I was going to study, write an essay, read a book – any of the responses she might have expected from me. But I was lonely, an outcast in some ways, and as difficult as Hop-tu-naa always was for me, I wasn't a complete martyr. This was an opening. Maybe even the chance I'd been waiting for.

So I told her yes.

But of course, I didn't have the vaguest inkling of what I was letting myself in for. I had no idea how that one small decision would alter the course of the rest of my life. I couldn't know, back then, just how desperately I'd come to regret it.

*

We took the bus together to Ballaugh. It was a long and anxious journey for me. Rachel was a whirl of teen perfume, glittery make-up and cigarette fumes. I'd showered before coming out and I smelled of soap and Dad's anti-dandruff shampoo. I felt scrubbed down, washed clean. Ready to be rewritten.

The first thing Rachel did when we were sitting at the back of the bus was to pass me a lipstick. The label on the side read *Nude Pink*.

'This will look amazing on you.'

I stared at the glitzy tube for a long moment, then turned towards the blackened window glass and smeared it on as if I knew what I was doing. I could tell right away that I'd used too much.

'Better,' Rachel said, when I turned back to show her.

I blushed, lowering my eyes, and Rachel started fussing with my hair.

'You should really think about highlights. Listen, you don't have a boyfriend, do you, Claire?'

I didn't say anything to that. It was a perilous question. There were any number of possible wrong answers. None I could think of that were right.

'Good. There'll be three boys tonight.' A pause. 'Plus my cousin David will be there, too.'

I might have been socially backward, might have spent an unhealthy amount of time by myself, but the message was clear enough. Pick one, she was saying. But not David. He's off-limits.

'What about you?'

'What about me?'

'Is there one you like?'

'Oh.' She waved a hand, bangles jangling from her wrist. 'Maybe. I haven't really thought about it.'

The bus rumbled on, stopping every now and again to let people board or get off. There weren't many passengers. A maximum of eight at any one time. It was a big double-decker. The

top deck was empty. My instinct would have been to sit upstairs on my own but that wasn't an option for Rachel. There'd be no one to admire her up there.

Before coming out, I'd panicked that we'd have nothing to say to each other, but I needn't have worried because she spent most of the trip talking to me in a rush about school, about our teachers and the affairs they were supposedly having, about the ones she'd caught staring at her in the wrong way, and the ones she claimed liked her a little *too* much. I listened to her words and the odd kind of music they were making – a fast, giddy crescendo of scandal and gossip – and I knew that barely a word of it was true, and cared less and less.

We were pulling away from Ballacraine, following the route of the TT course, when she finally paused and changed the subject.

'So . . . was your dad OK about you coming out tonight?'

Here it is, I thought. She expects me to hand over a piece of myself now – the most secret, most precious part – in return for her company.

Perhaps I should have been shocked by what she was *really* asking, but the sad truth is that I'd sort of expected it. I knew how the sheen of celebrity clung to me still. I understood its power. Sometimes I could almost feel it shimmering round me like a force field as I walked the school corridors with my textbooks clutched to my chest; the sorry glimmer of the tragic teen. And it wasn't as if the deal hadn't been offered to me many times before. Hell, I could have led an entire pack of goths if I'd wanted.

But I didn't. Never had. The past was something I refused to let slip so cheaply.

I stayed quiet and looked out of the window at the blurred darkness beyond. I tried to think of nothing other than the smudged shapes outside. Tried, in particular, not to think of the way I'd sneaked away from home without Dad even noticing. He'd been staring at the television in the lounge at the time. The television hadn't been turned on and the screen had been as black as the room all around him. He hadn't stirred as I'd passed by. He hadn't been aware of my presence at all. There were times when I felt like a ghost in my own home, invisible to Dad, unable to be heard. There were times when I could have believed that I'd died many years ago, doomed to haunt those around me ever since, unaware that none of them could see or interact with me.

Rachel shifted in her seat. I could tell she wanted to ask again – ask more – and I felt the hot surge of anger building inside.

But then she let go of a small breath, almost a sigh, and she rested her perfumed head on my shoulder and gave my arm a small squeeze. And in that instant of unexpected salvation, I knew that my life had changed for ever.

I can trust this girl. I might tell her anything.