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Opening extract from **Flesh and Blood**

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Chapter One

I didn't want things to turn out this way. I really didn't.

There have been deaths, and worse. Even if there's no blood on my hands, not directly, I have to face the consequences of my actions, of what I *did* do. If events had happened differently, if I hadn't been so intent on following my theories, then perhaps I wouldn't be here now, sitting at this desk, writing out what some might see as a confession. But, if I hadn't reacted as I did, then I'd never have found out everything I uncovered. I had to try, didn't I?

Maybe I could have prevented some of it. Maybe I could have saved a life or two, if only I'd acted sooner. No, that's not true. I acted soon enough. I think.

Nobody believed me, except Liam and Jo. And they didn't take me seriously, at first.

When did I last sleep? I don't remember. It doesn't matter, I guess.

I have to write. I have to tell myself to stop being a pathetic baby and be calm and rational. That's what I have to do. I must record the facts, a sequence of events, the chain of suspicions and thoughts that have led me to where I am now. So that, when someone reads this, they understand.

At least it's quiet right now, and I can collect my thoughts. This desk I'm sitting at is small and antique. A really nice piece of furniture. You can see the dark grain of the wood, the years displayed in its warm colour, its soft shine. The notebook has smooth, off-white paper. It almost seems a shame to write in it, but of course I must. I have to set down everything, to document it, from the beginning.

I have to think clearly. Breathe deeply.

I'll sit and think for a while. Then I'll write.



I must begin on 18th September. That was the day we moved into No. 3, Priory Mews. A matter of weeks ago.

My name is Sam Hunter. That's Sam as in Samuel, but I hate being called Samuel. Only my gran calls me Samuel. That's my mum's mum. She still talks to

me as if I'm five, even though I'm seventeen.

I'm OK at school work. I normally hover around a B-grade. I keep my room tidy, when I can be bothered to, or when friends are coming round. I like films, graphic novels, regularly changing the posters on my walls, and those chocolate bars you can get with marzipan inside. I'm not keen on sport, and I don't like vegetables. Maybe I'm still five after all.

I have parents, unfortunately.

My mum is one of those mothers who spends every minute she possibly can at work and the rest of the time moaning about how much time she spends working. She's employed by a bank, and has been since she left school at my age. Twenty-five years, slowly climbing the corporate ladder. A very slow climb. Up just three rungs, Assistant Cashier to Deputy Thingummy of Accounting, whatever it is she's called now. You have to admire her determination, I guess. Also her ability to work around money all day long and never once nicking any of it. I don't think I'd be able to keep up the same level of will power. Even so, it's had its effect. She assesses everything and everyone according to the amount of cash involved. Except my dad, that is.

Dad's a musician. It's not as interesting as it sounds. Mostly, he sits around the house and strums at his guitar, or phones his friends 'in the business' and goes to the pub. Middle-age spread has been piling on the pounds for a while now, and he's kept the same scraggy ponytail since about 1995. I try to keep him away from school functions.

In his late teens, he joined a punk band called The Howling Sirens. The punk movement had just ended. They had one very minor hit, then split up. Dad's been reliving the glory days ever since, spending money we didn't have on the latest recording gear, or on worthless tat he claims is rock 'n' roll memorabilia. He's a dreamer. Not that being a dreamer is a bad thing in itself, but he's lazy with it. His idea of a full day is lying on the sofa and staring out of the window.

Don't get me wrong, I do love my parents, on the whole. They've always been as good to me as circumstances allow, but they're not the easiest of people to cheer for, if you see what I mean.

As a family, we'd always been just-scrape-by, go-without-to-pay-the-bills people, until recently. We're something approaching minted now. I'll get

to why in a minute. It's the reason we ended up in Priory Mews. For as long as I can remember, we've lived at a series of run-down addresses in a series of run-down streets. Until Priory Mews.

For several years, we lived in a flat above a newsagent's. I really liked that place, because I could get comics and magazines for free. The guy who ran the shop would let me rummage through the stuff he was going to return to the wholesaler.

I read a lot of American Marvel and DC comics. I read film review journals and blokey stuff about computers, which made me feel grown-up. I'd gaze over the cultural sections of the Sunday papers, getting glimpses of a wider world that seemed sophisticated and stylish.

The newsagent had a rack of paperbacks, too, and I'd got through all the James Bonds and several Stephen Kings before I was twelve. It was exciting, almost magical, finding something new. The thrill of discovery.

Looking back now, I think the newsagent allowed me all those freebies because he felt sorry for me. At the time, the look on his face seemed like kindly indulgence, but now I'm older I can see he was

wondering if I was OK, what with Mum at work all hours and Dad off somewhere or asleep.

But I was fine. I relished the freedom. I could watch telly in peace. They lived in their own little worlds, and so did I. All that solitary rummaging through the newsagent's boxes did me a big favour: without it, I might never have become interested in journalism. That was the fully formed idea that popped into my head when the word 'career' was first mentioned at school. It was swiftly followed by a resolution not to approach adulthood like my parents. I was going to make more of myself, I was going to do better.

We lived in two or three Midlands towns, moving according to which bank branch Mum was assigned to, but the upgrade to Priory Mews took us eighty miles closer to London. Closer to Dad's cronies and the music biz, because it was his 'career' that called the shots now.

Hadlington is a picture postcard of English suburbia. I'd never even heard of it before I was told we were going to live there. In the early afternoon of Wednesday 18th September, I watched it roll past me from the back seat of the (brand-new) car.

Clipped lawns, detached properties, lines of shops all still in business instead of boarded up. Mothers wheeling pushchairs with a smile, old folk chatting at bus stops as the bus pulled in on time, corner cafés filled with suited customers tapping at their iPads.

"Shall we drive around a bit before we go to the house?" said Mum, slowing the car at traffic lights. "Go for a wander about town?"

"Let's do that, babe," said Dad, his voice thick with excitement. "Take a look at the manor."

They took my silence for agreement. We drove past an industrial park plastered with freshly printed hoardings: engineering works, small caterers, e-tail warehouses, an art studio. I remember lounging on the back seat, the car's smoothly efficient shock absorbers still feeling like a novelty, and looking in vain for anything that reminded me of our Old Life.

Everything here was tidy, and clean, and nice-looking. Even the factory units were smartly designed. Nothing was dumped on front drives in Hadlington. Here they had civic pride. Here they had money, and responsible attitudes, and a spring in their step. It shone out of the streets, the buildings,

the pavements. This is Hadlington, said the town, and it's *better* than where you come from.

We drove around the southern half of the town, skirting the grounds of the large Elizabethan mansion that was the local tourist attraction, with New Car smell filling my lungs and the engine purring like a tamed big cat. Here were leafy avenues and clusters of homes surrounding oval-shaped greens with little children playing while parents watched from wooden benches. We crossed the humped, stone bridge that spans the river close to that Elizabethan mansion.

The River Arvan slices through Hadlington like a knife through flesh, its sinuous waters slow and dark. It cuts through a picturesque park, where trees and the occasional fishing platform dot its banks. Then it leads out of town, getting deeper and more treacherous as it goes, with swirling undercurrents and tangled weeds. People drown in it regularly, I later discovered.

As the river leads out of town, it borders the Elton Gardens estate, Hadlington's own enclave of the underclass. Most towns and cities have their run-down areas, but Elton Gardens stands in such contrast to the rest of the town that it almost seems like a broad blade

of the outside world trying to stab its way in.

The rest of Hadlington looks down on the residents of Elton Gardens in a way I'll always find repellent. Snobbish, dismissive, wilfully ill-informed. The residents of Elton Gardens either work in the town's least desirable jobs, or scratch an existence on the edges of the law. Kids from Elton Gardens go to the schools along the A-road that heads towards London, the sort of schools you see in Channel 4 documentaries designed to shock the middle classes.

The estate was apparently quite smart when it was built in the late 1960s but it rapidly declined. The final nail in its coffin were the floods of 2007 and 2012, when the Arvan burst its banks and gurgled up from the drains, gushing across the ground floors of all two hundred and twenty-seven homes. There was sodden rubbish in the streets for months.

On hot days in the summer, so I learned, teenagers jump off the clattering green metal footbridge that crosses the river beside the estate. They don't listen to the warnings, of course. Two or three times a year, there's a huge headline in the local paper, above a picture of the grieving family. Sometimes, people get

pulled under and the bodies are never found.

At least, so it's believed.

We didn't drive around the estate. We'd just left that kind of place.

The park and the estate border one side of the river while, up a steep and landscaped hill, Maybrick Road runs parallel with it on the other. Maybrick Road is the poshest part of Hadlington. That's where you find Maybrick High School and five-bed detached houses that cost six times the national average. People put themselves into serious debt just to send their kids to Maybrick High and have a Maybrick Road address.

Priory Mews joins Maybrick Road a few hundred metres from the school. Gently swaying trees, pleasant views down the hill towards the park and river. Bins and recycling boxes out of sight. When we drove into the short cul-de-sac on that Wednesday afternoon, the removal van was already parked outside our new home. The car glided to a halt and we got out, my door clunking behind me with a deliciously expensive *wh-ump*.

Mum bustled over to the three removal men, who were propped up against the side of the van smoking.

She fumbled in her bag for the house keys.

Dad leaned against the front of the car and gazed around, a grin lighting up his chubby features. "You made it, sunshine," he said to himself quietly.

To be honest, I could see his point. I was grinning, too. There were three detached houses nestled in a semicircle: big, solid homes with curving bay windows and smoothly tarmacked drives. Ours was the one on the left, No. 3.

This was the first time I'd ever seen it, except for in the estate agent's photos. Mum and Dad had only visited it once before paying the full asking price.

Dad had made a million. Or near enough. Out of the blue, two songs he'd written in the 90s got picked up by a trendy girl band and became global hits. 'Sweet Angel' and 'Boppin' Hoppin', by the Blaster Rays – you must have heard them. Dad wrote them as solid guitar rock, and they got turned into cheesy pop. Utterly hideous; I actually felt sorry for my father. But worldwide sales, downloads, radio airplay, stadium performances – they all added up to a lot of money. Suddenly, we were quite rich. Mum grabbed her chance and we got a Maybrick Road address. No. 3, Priory Mews, Maybrick Road, Hadlington.