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Opening Extract from...

Lie Kill Walk Away

Written by Matt Dickinson

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Matt Dickinson

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FOR MY DAUGHTER
ARIADNA

3 BECCA

Halfway down the stairs I see an envelope sitting on the doormat. I reach the hall and pick it up.

A Cambridge postmark; the name of the college printed in the top left-hand corner.

Oh. I feel my skin chill. My breath trips a tiny beat. There's no *way* that Dad would leave this envelope on the mat like that. Like it was junk mail or something.

It's my formal offer from Cambridge. A reward for the five A* A levels I scored just three days after my fifteenth birthday.

Mathematics. Biology. Physics. Chemistry. Applied Science.

This envelope means I'll be studying Natural Sciences, following in the footsteps of my dad. Some press people wanted to do an article about the fact I will be one of the youngest undergraduates ever, but I didn't want to make a fuss. I'd rather just get on with it.

Why didn't Dad pick the envelope up? It doesn't make sense.

Has he had another stress attack? The last few days have been unbearably hard for him. Life as a bioweapons expert was never going to be an easy ride.

Where has he gone? Maybe to the lab? I get a momentary surge of confidence: he will have left me a note somewhere. So I'd better take a look around and find it.

4 JOE

Still spraying. *Almost there*. Trouble is, the letters on this job are really big, so it's taking a bit of time.

Out of the corner of my eye I see that dark car is now moving up the street towards me. *Ignore it. Just ignore it*. I can't stop now – there's too much money riding on this job.

Yes. Cash. Fifty quid to get myself down here and spread the good word about Gary Barker. Whoever he is.

And I need that money to pay for a vet to get this nasty bump removed from Shammy's neck. I don't want to ask Dad for it because I know he's always skint. So I brought a beer crate to use as a stepladder, gave the two CCTV cameras a quick squirt of paint and I'm into the job.

I'm on the K now.

The car is still coming. Crawling down the road. Dead slow.

I shake the cans. I get back to the job. *Don't show fear. Stay calm*.

The car stops.

I turn as I hear the buzz of a window. Then I see there's three dodgy-looking men in there. And a woman as well. My heart hammers in my chest.

'Oi!' Her voice is hard as nails. 'D'you know what my name is?'

I shrug.

'Michelle Barker. Gary Barker's sister, as it happens.'

Ah. So now it *is* my business.

5 BECCA

I step along the hallway, heading for the library. It's the biggest room in the house, an old dining hall with a mock minstrels gallery and a huge stone fireplace.

I pause outside. 'Dad?'

Not a sound.

I push the door open, walking slowly into this most sacred room; a place where I have learned to be curious, to ask questions.

It was my choice to be home tutored. I wanted to stretch myself in a way no school could have done.

It's not just a matter of following in Dad's footsteps. It goes deeper than that. When I was eight, Dad was infected by Marburg fever – he was bitten by a chimpanzee in a test lab. I still remember the terror I felt as he was sealed in an isolation ward at the Hospital for Tropical Diseases in London.

Mum understood exactly what was happening: 'He's not alone,' she told me. 'He's got 250 billion white blood cells fighting tooth and nail to kill that virus.'

Her words helped me to keep hope alive. And those white blood cells did their job. Dad survived by the skin of his teeth and ever since then I had a secret and fierce ambition to learn about the ways these diseases work, to spend my life helping people survive the deadliest viruses on the planet.

The memory of that woman's cry floods back. I shiver to recall it.

Was it real? It couldn't be. *Could it?*

I leave the library and walk towards the office.

6 JOE

Now I'm well and truly gripped. Everything goes dead quiet for a few seconds. The men are giving me evils. Shamrock is growling.

Then the woman goes on: 'What's the big idea? Disrespecting my brother like that?'

I think about a reply. And here's the thing about me: if I get asked a question, I have this habit of blurting out a stupid answer even if I know it's going to get me deeper into trouble.

It's like my mouth gobs off and my brain's not in gear. Sometimes I even think it's funny. And that's why I say:

'It's nothing personal.'

There's a pause. Like when you press the button in a lift but nothing happens. And half a second can seem like a week. And the woman's eyes are bulging.

'You cheeky scumbag!' she screams. 'Grab him!'

The car doors fly open so fast it's like an explosion. I'm off the beer crate and it's clattering over as I snatch up my shoulder bag, cram in five or six of the cans.

I undo Shamrock's knot and *just* dodge the first outstretched arm. He's a big one, this man – bug eyed. Veins busting out on his forehead.

'Come on!' I tell Shammy. I grab his string and we start to run.

7 BECCA

I walk into the office. And the first thing I see is a photo frame lying on the floor. The glass is broken. Shards are scattered across the carpet. How has it fallen? I pick it up. A tiny splinter stabs my finger. A bright red drop of blood smears the silver frame.

My mother, Sarah. I know it sounds juvenile but sometimes I still think of her as 'Mummy'. Even though she is a stranger to me now.

The sense of loss has never left me. Even after 1,736 days. That's the type of mind I have, by the way. Ticking things off. Ordering. Filing things away in logical fashion.

'One day she will come back to us.' That's what Dad used to whisper as he tucked me into bed.

He doesn't say that any more.

I cross to his desk. A total train wreck. Everest-sized mounds of paper; an old pipe that he sucks on but never lights.

The chair is overturned. His mug of coffee is spilt. The creepy sensation of unease is morphing into a full-on dose of dread.

Where *is* he? What's going on?

I hit the space bar on the computer and the machine whirrs out of standby. On the screen I see the Google page of the day with the following words entered into the search box:

Ebola Anthrax Antigenic Shift

Then I see a tiny drop of blood on the floor. And this time it's not mine.

8 JOE

Faster! Run faster!

My heart's doing the jackhammer jive. Shammy's at my heels. The quickest of them just behind.

Right into the alley. Reeks real bad. The bag clunking against my ribs. Shamrock yelping and barking like mad.

I slip. Crash into a wheelie bin at high speed. Shammy dives for cover. Wind knocked. Lungs crushed.

'Run. Shammy!' I croak. But he just hides under the bin.

They pause to catch their breath. Then the biggest one's eyes spark up as he sees the bag of cans. 'What's your favourite colour, son?'

He looks at the name on the label.

'How about Tibetan Blue?'

I try to turn my head but his mates are stronger. I gasp in a few mouthfuls of air.

'Here you go.'

Then I get it. Right in the face. Then down my trousers. He's even squirting it into the holes of my ears. He's shaking those peas like his life depends on it and all I can hear is the hiss of the cans and the laughter.

I screw my eyes tight shut. Hold my breath. Try to protect my lungs.

And it goes on ... and on ... and on.

9 BECCA

I stare at the blood on the carpet. All of my senses heightened. It's been a roller-coaster week for Dad: he's gone from unknown scientist to notorious anti-government whistle-blower in one seismic shift.

Now what? Is he hurt?

I pull out my mobile, speed-dial his number. A phone rings out somewhere on the floor. I find it behind a fold of the curtain, next to the overturned chair.

'Dad?' I shout.

I enter the kitchen. There are two pieces of toast on the grill, both burned to a crisp although the gas is turned off. There is no note to be seen on the table and nothing pinned to the fridge.

Next to the kettle is a mug with an unused teabag in it. A herbal teabag; cinnamon and orange, the type of thing Mum used to drink.

The kettle is still warm.

I sense a powerful charge in the air. Like that feeling when you go into a theatre after the show has ended and the crowd has long gone. You can still feel the electricity of all those people; some of their energy has lingered.

I can feel that *something* has happened here. But I don't know what.

I must go outside. Look for him there.

I pour myself a glass of water. My hand is shaking as I drink.

10 JOE

Half a can of Tibetan Blue later and the three gents are getting tired of the fun.

'That'll teach you a bit of respect,' Sprayman says, and he gives me a final kick on the shin.

The can clatters into the wall. They head off into the night.

At first I'm puking. My eyes feel like I've been stung by wasps. I need to get some water on them but I can't move yet. I drag myself up. Can't even smell the stink of the alley any more. Just paint. Can't see much, it's like my eyelids are stuck together with superglue.

'All right, boy. You're OK.' I pull Shammy out from under the bins. I give him a pat on the head. He licks my hand. The poor mutt's whining like it was him who got the beating and not me.

Out of the alley. Get to the street. There's a few people here close to a pub.

'What's wrong with him?' some woman asks.

'Drunk student, I reckon,' says a voice. 'Probably painted his face blue for charity. Idiot.'

I decide to go back to the wall.

Dangerous? Yes, but I can't lose my other cans.

I'll just have to hope Gary Barker's sister and her friends aren't still hanging around.

11 BECCA

Outside. The air smells of dew-laden grass. Chilled water droplets prick between my toes.

The view from the garden normally fills me with pleasure; distant fields dotted with sheep and cattle, ancient pockets of woodland stretching as far as the eye can see. But today I have more important things on my mind.

'Dad!' Still no reply.

I decide to try the stables. I cross the little cobbled courtyard and push open the door.

Arcturus watches me with glittering eyes, his powerful body pressed into the deep shadows of the stall. On a normal day he radiates excitement when I call for him, wanting the speed and exhilaration of our morning race through the woods. Now his ears are pricked forward and I can see the tight prominence of the tendons in his neck – a sure sign of fear.

I raise my hand to him. But he shies away, iron-clad hooves skittering on the floor.

I return to the garden. At the bottom is the copse. Beech trees, alder, a few stately pines.

I walk slowly under the green canopy and breathe in the musty, decaying aroma of the leaf litter. Oddly, there's no bird noise at all. Just the rumble of a faraway aeroplane.

I take a few more steps. I don't even know what is compelling me to walk deeper into the copse.

And that's where I find him.

Hanging by the neck.

12 JOE

I reach the wall without any trouble. I'm still coughing, trying to rub the paint out of my eyes.

I get out my mobile and call the bloke who paid me to do the job. I tell him what's happened. And all he says is:

'Yeah, Gary's family live down the bottom of that road. That's why I chose that wall, mate – so he'd see it.'

'You could have warned me!'

'Did you finish it off? I'm not paying you unless ... '

I click off the phone. He's starting to annoy me.

Then – disaster. Just as I'm gathering up my stuff, a police car pulls up. No siren or nothing. It just cruises up quietly and this cop winds down the window.

'Bit late for you to be out on the streets isn't it, lad?'

The cop gets out of the car. And a second later his mate follows. They're putting on their hats in that way that lets you know they mean business.

'Come here in the light,' he says. I step towards him and him and his boy wonder start to laugh.

'Blimey! No need to ask you what your favourite colour is.'

It's difficult to reply. My tongue's starting to swell up.

'What are you doing out here at this time of night?'

I mumble, 'Just walking my dog, officer.'

13 BECCA

He looks like a puppet, his limbs dangling at odd angles; as if he's a scarecrow badly stuffed with straw. Dark globules of crimson blood are dripping from his left wrist where an ugly, jagged wound has ripped into his flesh.

A garden chair lies on its side just a few feet away. Next to it are his glasses, and a small penknife.

The scene looks unreal, like a movie set. I stand motionless. For a few seconds I am like a zombie as I stare dumbly up into my father's horribly contorted face.

Get an ambulance. Fast!

I check my pocket. I haven't got my mobile with me. Left it on the table in the office.

Stupid, stupid girl!

I reach for his right arm and search for the pulse. For a few seconds I get nothing. The skin feels clammy and cold, like it is wax and not a real person at all.

Then I have it. There *is* still a faint pulse! If I can cut him down he might still survive.

There's no time for an ambulance. No time. I think about the farmer who lives next door. One of his fields is just on the other side of the copse.

'Help!' I scream. 'I need help! Please! **Help**!'

14 JOE

The two cops stare at Shammy. He looks sad and shivery and lost. I take a deep breath of air, make a big effort to get my wits back.

'So what's the story? What's with the blue face?'

'Fancy-dress party,' I tell them.

'Oh yeah? What d'you go as then?'

And something in my brain's still working because I come back with:

'A smurf.'

The younger cop snorts a laugh then turns it into a cough.

'I hope you're not taking the mickey,' the older one says.

'No sir. I've got too much respect for the boys in blue, sir.'

I don't know if there's something about the way I say it but now both the cops crack a smile.

'Bit of a joker aren't you, son? What's your name? How old are you?'

'Joe Fontana. I'm sixteen.'

'Address?'

I mumble it. The boy wonder enters it into a little handheld computer thing and starts to check me out.

'What's happened to you? You look like you've taken a bit of a beating.'

'Fell off a beer crate,' I tell him.