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Opening Extract from...

Dare to Remember

Written by Susanna Beard

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DARE TO REMEMBER

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CHAPTER ONE

She remembered the first part of the evening well enough: the after-work crowd spilling onto the pavement outside the pub, the hum of voices, the smell of beer. They had sat by the open door where it was cool.

They were joined by the usual gang in ones and twos and by the time Fergus turned up there were no seats left. "Move up," he said, squeezing onto the end of the bench next to Lisa. "Give a man some space." As he sat down she caught a whiff of whisky mingled with a strange, earthy smell she couldn't identify. Sweat glistened on his forehead.

"How's it going, then, Lisa?" he said.

"Yeah, good, thanks," she said, shifting her leg away from his, trying not to be too obvious. There were now four of them on a bench meant for two and she was hemmed in, uncomfortable and hot.

She was glad when someone found him a chair.

She and Ali left soon after to walk the short distance to the flat. There were plenty of people around; the corner shop still open, catering for late workers on their way home. Ali stopped for some milk.

As Lisa waited outside, someone tapped her on the shoulder. The old trick, tapping on one shoulder, but standing at the other, so you turn the wrong way. It was Fergus.

"Going home already?" she said.

He grinned at her. "Yeah. Not much happening, I'm moving on. What're you doing?"

"Waiting for Ali to get some milk."

He was standing a little too close. She could feel his breath on her hair, smell the alcohol. There were tiny trails of red in the whites of his eyes. He swayed slightly as he spoke. "Having your bedtime Ovaltine tonight, then?"

"Very funny. I actually hate the stuff."

Ali reappeared with the milk. They said their goodbyes and headed home.

For a while, that was all she remembered. By the time the rest came back, it was too late to tell the police; the verdict had been handed down and the sentence passed.

*

Her mum told her when she woke from the surgery. She was dazed for hours after regaining consciousness, drifting in and out of sleep, the sting in her neck interrupting dark dreams. She was dimly aware of a constant presence by her bedside, holding her hand.

Eventually she felt awake enough to speak. Her mum was stroking her forehead, and smiled a wobbly, crooked smile when she saw she was awake. "Mum. What happened?" Her throat felt like sandpaper, her voice deep and unfamiliar.

"Oh, my darling. How are you feeling?" Her mum's face was pinched with anxiety, her eyes puffy and red-rimmed. There was a nurse standing by the bed, fixing a line into a dangling plastic bag.

"I don't know. Pretty groggy. Why am I in hospital?"

"Don't try to talk now, darling. Just rest."

"But Mum…"

When she moved her hand, there was a tube attached. A piece of white sticking plaster pulled at the skin. With her free hand she explored the unfamiliar dressing on her throat,

feeling the ache beneath her fingers. “What happened? I can’t remember.”

“Shh, darling, rest now. We’ll talk later.”

As she looked around her a dark mist fell and the shadows in the corners of the room grew together. There was something urgent, something important she wanted to ask, and she squeezed her eyes shut, trying to clear the fog. But her eyelids felt glued together and she drifted, falling softly into the blackness.

When she woke the next time, her head was clearer. The nurse poured some water and offered her a plastic cup, a yellow straw bobbing. She lifted her chin to drink, wincing at the pain in her neck. Her mum was still there by the bed, holding her hand as if she’d never let it go.

“Mum, please tell me. What happened? Why am I here?”

Her mum glanced up at the nurse, who gave a small nod, a black curl escaping the cap pinned into her hair.

“You were attacked, both of you, at the flat.”

“Attacked? Who by?” A flush of panic ran through her. “What happened? Where’s Ali?”

“I’m so sorry, darling, but…” Her mum’s voice shook and she squeezed Lisa’s hand tightly, her face close, tears in her eyes.

“Mum, what is it?”

“It’s Ali, darling… she’s dead. She fell from the window onto the steps outside. She hit her head…” Her mum’s voice faltered as the tears came down. She wiped at them ineffectually with a crumpled tissue as Lisa struggled to absorb what she’d heard.

“Dead.” It came out as a whisper. “Ali…” Lisa tried to sit up. The nurse came close and leaned across the bed, adjusting the line into her arm. “Don’t sit up, you’re still very drowsy. You need to rest.”

“Mum…” But the nurse must have increased the sedation and she was drifting back into darkness, resisting, wanting to return to what she’d just heard. “Ali…”

It wasn't until later that her mother filled in what details she knew and she understood, with horror, what had happened to her best friend.

*

She never went back to the flat. Her previous life was reduced to a small bag of belongings. Lisa shoved it, unopened, under the bed.

She slept in the spare room, which had been cleared of the boxes waiting to go into the loft. She became used to the faded pattern on the thin curtains – always drawn, hiding the world outside – the pale blue of the walls and the single bed with its linen from her childhood.

She stayed in her room during phone calls, blocking out the sound of her mum's voice with a pillow. A police officer called in a few times, hoping that Lisa had remembered something from that night. He drank tea from their delicate bone china cups, his sausage fingers fumbling on the tiny handles, and probed for news. Lisa was glad she had no recollection of the event.

Then it started. One morning, as she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, there was a crash from the kitchen. She sat up with a start, heart racing, a memory striking her with blinding clarity. She saw Ali's face as she stood by the window in the flat, her eyes wide with horror. The curtains were open, the street light shining yellow in the darkness behind her. The smell of whisky was overpowering.

She sat on the edge of the bed, trembling, until the image faded. It was a long time before she felt steady enough to go downstairs.

She walked around the town as fast as she could, to tire her body and occupy her mind, but there were too many reminders of Ali. The bus stop where they used to wait every day, the shop where they'd bought sweets on the way home. In the park was the bench where they would sit for hours,

wasting homework time, gossiping. Back at the house, she felt exhausted but she couldn't sleep. She needed distraction but couldn't find any.

She would have stayed longer, but the silent pressure from her mother, the unformed questions, felt like an ever-present weight on her shoulders. She was jumpy and bad-tempered. She couldn't confide in anyone for fear of making those around her even more worried. At times, her mum would ask how she felt, but without a word, tears welling, Lisa would shake her head, retreat to her room and lie on the bed, staring at the wall.

Her boss had been shocked and sympathetic when she heard what had happened; she'd understood immediately that going back to her job was out of the question for Lisa. The home-based work had come up later, and though she'd been reluctant, now wanting a complete break from her previous life, she realised that without some kind of income she'd have to stay at her mum's long-term and she didn't want that. She'd accepted the offer.

She took only her laptop and her old bike with her.

She'd have gone somewhere remote – the north of Scotland, maybe, or the distant reaches of Wales – but she didn't want to be too far from home, or from the psychotherapist she was seeing in the city. Though ambivalent about the weekly sessions – her stomach muscles clenched, her palms sweating – she knew she needed help.

So she'd looked at a map, drawn a virtual circle around the city and found a village with a reasonable train connection and not much more. She arrived one day, bought the local paper and trudged around looking for somewhere to live. Her criteria were simple enough: quiet, safe, affordable, furnished. 12 High View Cottages was the second place she saw and she took it immediately, moving in as soon as she was able.

It's comfortable in a shabby way, the sofas squashed and worn and the rugs on the wooden floor mismatched, like

something her grandmother would have chosen. But it has all she needs and there's a cosy feel to it – mostly thanks to a small wood-burning stove in the sitting room, which adds a pleasant woody aroma and supplements the inefficient central heating. There's a small table and chair where she works each day and another in the kitchen where she eats. At night she can hear nothing. No cars, no people. The arrangement suits her.

She changes very little. Once she's made up the bed with new, plain covers, she manages with what's been provided or left by the previous tenant.

*

A few months in, she has fallen into a steady routine. Enjoys the silence, the isolation, the anonymity. The only person she has spoken to so far is her neighbour, John, a frail old man who lives alone with his dog, Riley. And, when passing his house, heading for one of the long walks she now takes religiously, Lisa is surprised when he asks if she would mind walking Riley at the same time. "He's lovely really," he says. "Poor thing doesn't get much exercise. You'd be doing me a huge favour." She is taken aback by her own prompt acceptance.

The wind bites her face as she walks and whips her hair into a tangle. She treads the frozen ground, forcing herself to march for warmth, her hands thrust deep into her pockets. She's glad of the cold; there are fewer people around and she can hide in her big coat and boots, a scarf wrapped securely around her neck. Riley trots happily alongside her.

A small group of walkers meets by the lake every day. They talk and throw balls for their dogs. She exchanges brief greetings with them but doesn't stop.

A little further on a woman falls into step, a golden retriever trotting alongside her. Lisa feels the intrusion but says nothing. Riley runs up to greet her, his tail wagging as

usual. The woman stoops to stroke him. “Hello, you,” she says. “What’s his name?”

“Riley.”

“Great name.”

“Yes. Not my choice.”

“Was he a rescue dog?”

“Kind of. He belongs to my neighbour – he’s old, and can’t get out to walk him.” This is the most Lisa has uttered in days. Her voice rings strangely in her ears, as if it’s lost resonance through lack of use.

They approach the gate at the village side of the lake, a grey metal kissing gate straddling a large muddy puddle.

“I’m going round again,” Lisa says, a lock of hair persistent in her eyes, hoping the woman will excuse herself, but she nods and plods on with her, their dogs loping ahead. Their boots stick in the mud and they skirt round the worst of it, treading down the grass at each side of the path.

“Have you lived here long?” the woman asks.

“Just a couple of months.” She doesn’t want to be rude, but she doesn’t want to talk. Small talk was never her forte and now it feels so futile that she feels almost nauseous. There was a time when nothing much bothered her. But now her every waking thought seems shrouded in doubt. The unknown weighs on her.

“We’re new to the area too, though my husband grew up round here,” says the woman. “We live just across the road, over there. I’m Jessica, by the way.”

“Lisa.”

“Where do you live?”

“Just a bit up the hill, not far.”

“Do you like it here?”

She shrugs. “It’s fine.”

“I didn’t really want to come here, it’s a bit quiet for me,” Jessica says, with a sigh. “But it’s a friendly place and it’s great for walking. My husband’s away a lot and we don’t have children, so it’s just me and Bobby here most of the

time." She gives the dog's head a stroke as he walks along beside her.

Lisa nods, huddles into her coat. They walk on in silence. She still finds contact with new people almost unbearably painful. Though she knows it's not a way to live, she'd rather not know anyone at all.

When they reach the gate again, she makes her excuses and turns away towards her house.

*

A few days later, at the same spot, she realises she's lost Riley.

When she turns and he's not there, she's stunned. She'd been deep in thought, oblivious to her surroundings. She has no idea how far she's walked since he disappeared.

"Riley? Riley, come here. Where are you?"

She runs back along the footpath that borders the lake, calling and whistling, hoping to find him digging at a rabbit hole or waiting by the gate. She climbs over the fence on the far side and into the fields where horses sometimes graze, catching her clothes on barbed wire and thorns. She asks the few people out walking if they've come across a small black spaniel. Nobody's seen him. Frantic, she does an entire circuit of the lake, checking all the copses and footpaths which branch off the main track. There's no sign of the dog.

How could she have lost him? She looks at her watch. A whole hour has passed. He could be miles away, he could be on a main road, he could be running scared, or lying injured, unable to move. The panic rises. She's hot and sweaty from running and her heart's pounding.

Oh God, she thinks, where are you, Riley? I can't lose you. Where have you gone?

She's almost in tears as she reaches the gate for the second time and looks out onto the street, terrified that Riley might have reached the main road that runs beyond the village.

At the house opposite, the front door opens and Jessica appears with a watering can, her dog sniffing around her heels. Lisa runs across the road towards her, breathless with panic.

"Jessica… I've lost Riley… have you seen him?" She's panting so hard her throat hurts. She can barely speak.

"No, I haven't. Where did you lose him?"

"By the lake, over the other side. I've looked everywhere, for ages. Nobody's seen him. He could be anywhere by now. Oh my God, what shall I do?"

"Hold on, I'll help you," Jessica says, putting down the watering can, which teeters on the uneven path. "Have you called the police or the vet? People sometimes take lost dogs there."

"No, I don't have a mobile. Could we use yours? I'm sorry, but I'm really worried now."

Jessica hurries indoors and returns with a mobile in her hand. She's already dialling as she walks. After a brief conversation she cuts the call. "Nothing at the police station. Let's go round to the vet's, it'll only take a minute."

The vet's reception is empty except for a woman with a cat in a cage and a young girl working at a computer screen.

"I've lost my dog," Lisa says to the girl at the desk, still out of breath. "He's a small black spaniel, has anyone brought him in?"

"Nothing this morning, I'm afraid," the receptionist says. "How long's he been gone?"

"Over an hour now. I've looked everywhere. We were at the lake and he just disappeared."

"Probably chasing rabbits. They're all over the place, the dogs—"

Lisa interrupts. "Could you let us know if someone brings him in? His name's Riley. He is tagged."

"Is he chipped?"

"I don't know…"

Jessica writes her number on a message pad beside the

computer. “My name’s Jessica,” she says to the girl. She looks at Lisa. “And the owner is Lisa…”

“Well, I’m the dog walker, really. But he’s my responsibility. Lisa Fulbrook.”

The receptionist writes down their names and promises to call if she hears anything.

Back on the street, Lisa looks around and starts to run back towards the lake, not knowing which direction to take, but desperate to keep looking.

“Wait,” Jessica says. “Wait, let’s just think for a minute. You’ve looked everywhere around the lake and asked everybody. Nobody’s seen him. Where might he go, if he can’t find you?”

She stops for a minute and looks at Jessica, realisation dawning. “Home. I haven’t been home. He could be there, or at my neighbour’s…”

“Okay, you run home, I’ll stay here and keep looking. If he’s there, call my mobile. You do have a land line, don’t you?”

She nods.

“Here, I’ll write my number on your hand.”

“Thank you, thank you.” She runs as fast as she can, her legs weak, her heart thumping at the unfamiliar exercise. She’s there in five minutes.

The gate is ajar and Riley is sitting at the front door.

When he sees her, he saunters towards her as if nothing has happened, tail wagging. Weak with relief, she collapses onto the path and hugs him, her cheeks straining at the unfamiliar sensation of a smile.

“Riley! Where were you? I’ve been looking and looking! Were you here all the time, you little monster? Don’t scare me like that. Don’t ever, ever do that again.”

She ruffles his head and he runs around her excitedly. She stands slowly and ushers Riley inside. It’s time to call Jessica.

*

"Lisa, hi! Come on in, have a coffee."

"I just wanted to say thank you for helping to find Riley." She hands Jessica the flowers she's clutching.

"You didn't need to do that. I was happy to help. Hello, Riley, you monkey, what got into you? You scared your mum half to death."

"He certainly did," Lisa says.

"Go on, have a quick cup of coffee with me," Jessica says, opening the door and beckoning her in. "I could do with some company."

Lisa checks her watch, in the pretence that she's busy. But her mind goes blank; she can't find a spur-of-the-moment excuse.

"Um, okay, then," she says, regretting it immediately. It's only a coffee, she tells herself. Don't panic.

They walk through into a small but immaculate kitchen. Everything looks clean and new and there's a faint smell of fresh paint.

"The dogs'll be fine in here," says Jessica. She indicates the kitchen table flanked by curved wood chairs, an invitation for Lisa to sit.

She inserts herself into the space between wall and table, feeling out-of-place and anxious. Jessica puts biscuits onto a plate and starts to make coffee, her movements neat and efficient. Riley makes himself at home on the dog bed in the corner; Bobby, unconcerned at the intruder, flops down by the cooker.

Lisa watches Jessica, noting the sparkle of an engagement ring on her finger, a wedding ring slotted neatly into the curve in the gold.

"So, how's Riley after his adventure yesterday? None the worse for it, I bet."

"No, he's fine. Probably had a great time exploring. I'm the one who nearly had a heart attack."

"We love our dogs, don't we? I'd hate to lose Bobby."

"I don't know what I'd have done if he'd been really lost,

or run over." Though she tries to say it lightly, Jessica glances at her, a look of concern flitting across her face. She places coffee cups and milk on the table and sits down opposite Lisa. "What do you do for a living, Lisa?"

More small talk. She has to force herself to be friendly. It's just a cup of coffee with a new friend, she tells herself, what could be the harm?

"I sub-edit technical documents, from home."

"Is that interesting?"

She attempts a smile. "No, not really."

But Jessica's expecting more.

"It pays the bills." Then, a little too fast, to shift the attention: "And you – what do you do?"

"I'm a teacher – lapsed. I had to leave my job when we moved here." She plays with her hair, smoothing a flat section over her fingers. Lisa lets her talk and Jessica seems not to notice the shift in subject.

"My husband's in the oil business," she says. "To him, nothing else is important. He lives in a man's world, travels a lot. Sometimes he's away for a couple of months. I'm bored, to be honest, I need to get back to work."

"Why don't you?"

"He doesn't like the idea. Thinks I need to be at home, looking after the house. Unfortunately, I disagree."

"That must be difficult for you," she says, trying to empathise, but the problem seems trivial and she's already wondering how to get away.

"Oh well, it'll sort itself out," Jessica says, as if to finish the subject. "Anyway." Jessica jumps up to clear the mugs. "Let's have a drink one evening. I need to get out more."

Lisa feels a flush sweep across her face.

"I… don't… I mean, I'm not… I've been ill… I don't go out very much." Her voice trails away and she's left staring awkwardly at her hands.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Jessica pauses, clearly hoping she'll fill in the gaps.

"It's okay, it's nothing really."

"Maybe I could come to you one evening? If you're up to it? We could walk the dogs and then have a cup of coffee, or a glass of wine. Or you'd be welcome to come here. Mike's away most of the time and I'm on my own a lot."

"Maybe… soon."

Jessica doesn't push her further, to her relief, and she gets up hurriedly, feeling awkward and guilty.

Promising to return the favour though not meaning to, she makes her escape and walks quickly home.

*

When she'd first arrived at the cottage, with its squeaky front gate, its front path green with lichen and the paving cracked and uneven, she made sure not to linger at the door, not wanting to meet the neighbours. But the little house next door was always quiet and the only sign of life an occasional bark from the overgrown back garden. Once she started walking with Riley, she began to look forward to her outings with the good-natured dog. She ventured further each day, as far as the lake and its well-worn pathways. Riley seemed to love the routine, appearing at the same time every morning through a hole in the fence between the two back gardens and returning home only when she took him back at dusk. She grew to love his companionship, his soft fur, his dark eyes looking at her.

One evening, when she went next door to take Riley home, John seemed dazed and even more frail, so she offered to look after the dog for a few days until John was better. "Only if you don't mind," she said. "He does seem to love our walks and I'd be happy to have him."

He opened the door a few inches further and looked at her, frowning.

"Are you sure?" he asked. She nodded.

"That would be so kind of you. I feel bad, not being able

to exercise him. Riley is my wife's dog, really – I kept him when she died but I'm too old to look after him properly. He's a good boy."

And that was it – Riley became hers. The dog comes and goes as he pleases through the hole in the fence, the arrangement stuck, and John seems content that his pet has found a more capable owner.

Riley is her lifeline. She knows that. He provides comfort, companionship and a kind of rhythm. Before he arrived, she'd started to fold in on herself, living her life at her desk and on her sofa, only venturing out to the shop round the corner for the few items which were her staples. She'd begun to feel frighteningly transparent, as if she was fading away very slowly. The routine of walking seems to ground her, to give her solidity where before there had been none.

*

Stamping her feet at the gate and fumbling for the keys with numb fingers, she notices John at his door. He's wearing a tweed coat, several sizes too big for him, and a woollen hat. He looks shrunken, his skin deathly white.

"How are you, John?" she says when he sees her.

"It's so cold," he says, his eyes watering with the chill wind. "Can't seem to get warm."

"Do you need anything?" she says, pulling at Riley, who's struggling to get to John. "I'm going to the shop in a while." It comes out without warning.

"Come in, come in, can't leave the door open," he says, shuffling into his dim hallway and indicating the kitchen door as she wipes her feet on the thin mat. "Go on in, it's the warmest place."

"I don't want to disturb you," she says, still reluctant to go in. In the hallway it seems even colder than outside and she wonders if he's got the heating on. If he even has any heating.

"Not disturbing me – not much on, these days," he says,

a flash of irony in his eyes. “Got a list somewhere. One minute.”

He ushers her into the kitchen. It reminds her of her childhood home, with a Formica table, worn grey rug and wing chair in the corner, mismatched cushions pressed into a person shape and an old-fashioned antimacassar on the back. On the heavy wooden sideboard he shuffles some papers and finds a notepad. He tears off a sheet with a shaky hand and gives it to her. The writing is faint and wobbly. *Tea, bread, Digestive biscuits, orange squash, fish fingers, frozen peas, washing powder*.

“Is that all you need?”

“I wouldn’t ask, it gives me a little trip out usually,” he says. “But it is freezing out there and I’m not feeling good this week. Just get the small size of everything. Here, take this – it should be enough.” He thrusts a couple of notes into her hand.

A silver-framed picture sits on the sideboard by the pile of papers – a small, white-haired woman in a patterned dress, arm in arm with a young, smiling man in a red T-shirt, blue sky behind them.

“My wife, Elsie,” he says, seeing her glance. “We were married thirty-five years. And that’s Oscar, my nephew, my only relative. Lives in Spain, lucky beggar. Wish I was there.”

“Me too.” She smiles weakly at him. “I’ll be back soon with your shopping.”

As Lisa returns home, John’s groceries in hand, she realises she’s getting involved. But, despite herself, she doesn’t seem to want to stop.