Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Don't Close Your Eyes

Written by Holly Seddon

Published by Corvus

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

don't close your eyes

HOLLY SEDDON



First published in hardback in Great Britain in 2017 by Corvus,
an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

Copyright © Holly Seddon, 2017

The moral right of Holly Seddon to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities, is entirely coincidental.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback: 978 178649 217 3
Export trade paperback: 978 178239 671 0
E-book: 978 178239 672 7

Printed in Great Britain

Corvus
An Imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.corvus-books.co.uk

For my friends.

CHAPTER ONE

Present day

ROBIN

Robin drags in the stuffy air with thin breaths, puffs it out quickly. Dust dances in the foot of a sunbeam. Robin tries not to imagine those tiny specks filling her lungs, weighing her down.

Outside, the Manchester pavement is grey and wet but the air has a freshness, a flirtation with spring. Robin won't feel this. She won't let the damp tingle her skin. It won't slowly sink into the cotton of her faded black T-shirt.

A bus rushes past the window, spraying the front of her house and its nearest neighbours with a burst of puddle water temporarily turned into surf. But Robin doesn't see this. She only hears the gush and the disappointment of the woman whose jeans got 'fucking soaked'.

Robin did not go out yesterday and she will not leave her house today. Bar fire or flood, she'll still be inside tomorrow. Just as she has been inside for these last years. Until a few weeks ago, everything in Robin's world had been fine and safe. A cosy shell. She spends her days clocking up the recommended ten thousand steps a day on her pedometer, watching television, lifting a metal graveyard of weights and aimlessly searching the internet.

Robin is careful and controlled. She only answers her door by prior appointment. Online groceries arriving outside of designated slots get lumped back to the depot by irritated drivers. Unexpected

parcels are unclaimed. There is an election soon, but Robin is not interested in discussing politics with earnest enthusiasts in bad suits shuffling on her doorstep.

Someone is knocking on her door right now. They were polite at first but now they're building to a crescendo of frustration. Robin stares forward at the television in grim determination, jaw jutting ahead. The screen is filled with bright colours and mild voices. Television for toddlers. The minutes are filled with stories of triumph in simple tasks, of helping friends or learning a cheerful new skill. There is no baddie, there is no guilt or fear. Everyone is happy.

As the knocks grow a little more frantic, Robin deliberately takes a deep breath. She focuses on her chest filling and expanding, and the slow seeping of air back out between her teeth. Still she stares doggedly at the screen.

SARAH

My child has been torn from me and there's nothing I can do. Four days ago she'd walked off happily holding her uncle's hand and that was the last I'd seen of her golden hair, doe eyes and tiny pink nose. Violet was smiling and oblivious, waving to me while I sat at my own dining table and heard accusation after accusation with no right of reply.

Jim was flanked by his parents. We'd just eaten a 'family lunch' that I'd spent all morning cooking. Instead of letting me clear the plates, as I usually would, Jim had cleared his throat, nodded to his brother to take Violet away, and started reading out his list. Line after line, like bullets.

For a moment afterwards we all sat in stunned silence until Jim looked at his mum and, on seeing her nod of encouragement, said, 'Let's not drag this out. You need to pack your things and get out of here. We've found you somewhere to stay until you get on your feet.'

I was marched upstairs, hands on my back. They watched me while I packed my bags, then Jim and his father escorted me from my home and into a taxi, where I spent fifteen minutes dumbly staring out of the windscreen, too shocked to even cry.

As the blood drained from my skin, I went over and over the list Jim had read out and tried to make sense of it.

1. Jealousy

I thought he was going to say more. But he'd said the word 'jealousy' alone, quietly and firmly, without taking his eyes off the piece of paper in his hands.

At that point I still thought the whole thing might be some kind of joke. His mother and father at the dinner table, his normally pally younger brother in another room with Violet.

But no punchline came. Instead he just carried on reading his list. His parents sat there with their hands in their laps, curled in on themselves while their son made terrible claims about me. About me and our almost-four-year-old.

Jim thinks I was jealous of his affection for Violet. Jealous of their bond, which was apparent from the earliest days. Jealous that he would come in from work and say 'where's my girl?' and mean her. Our little baby. And even though I had nourished her all day, run ragged trying to do everything in the house single-handed while my koala baby stuck to me, covered my ears and bitten my lips when she'd screamed, as soon as she saw Jim come through the door at 6.15 p.m., up her little arms would shoot and she'd make monkey-like straining noises as she tried to reach him.

I wasn't jealous of her. If anything, I was jealous of him. I wanted her love all to myself but I didn't begrudge their bond, I loved to watch it. Love in action. A hard-working, loving man, our comfortable home, our beautiful little baby.

All lined up in a row, like dominoes.

CHAPTER TWO

1989
ROBIN

Robin drags the toes of her patent shoes along the wall. Just because she's small doesn't mean she should be dressed like a stupid little doll. Sarah's the one who likes to look shiny and neat. Sarah's the one who turns herself this way and that in the mirror and admires her golden hair like Rapunzel. Their mum and dad would love it if Robin acted more like Sarah. The thought of it fills Robin's mouth with sour spit.

'Robin!'

'What?'

'Don't spit on the floor. What's wrong with you?'

Robin scowls up at her mother. 'I had a bad taste,' she says and, without thinking, carries on scuffing her shoes along the wall.

'Robin! What the hell are you doing?'

Whoops.

'Nothing.'

'Those are brand new, you naughty girl.'

Her mother stands with her hands on her hips, legs apart. With the sun behind her, her silhouette is sharp but really her mum is quite soft.

'They're too shiny,' Robin says, but she knows she's already lost the argument.

Sarah stands to the side of her mother, affecting the same look of concerned dismay. Even though they've spent the whole day at

school, Sarah's hair is still in perfect plaits. Her gingham summer dress is clean and she doesn't have an ominous line of black muck under her nails. Robin's own dark brown hair had burst out of its band before the first playtime. There's so much of it, the curls in a constant state of flux, that no hair bobble stands a chance. In a few years' time, Robin will have cut it off in sharp clumps with the kitchen scissors, but not yet.

Robin and Sarah are still lumped together as one: the twins. But in reality they could scarcely be more different. Blonde and brunette; tall and tiny; rigid and rowdy.

When they were very little, their mother Angela – Angie – had done the usual twin thing. Matching bonnets, dresses and shoes. But Sarah had been so much *longer* and acted so much *older* – almost from day one – that the coordinated clothes only highlighted how different they looked. There were even times – as had gone down in Marshall family folklore – that perfect strangers had argued that the girls could not possibly be twins.

'I should know,' her mum would say with a pantomime sigh. 'I had to squeeze them both out.'

'My little runt,' Robin's dad, Jack, calls her as she sits by his side on the sofa, swinging her feet that are yet to reach the ground. Or when she spends long Sundays contentedly passing him bits of wood, nails or glue in the garage while he fixes something that her mum would prefer to just replace. 'I'm not made of money, Ang,' he says. 'Ain't that the truth,' she replies with another of her sighs for show.

Robin and her sister have just started walking home from their first day of the new school term. Their heads sag on their shoulders, lunch boxes rattling with sandwich crusts. Their talking fades into yawns and complaints. The first day back is always tiring after six weeks of playing and watching TV. They won't usually be collected by their mum – they're big girls now, turning nine next month – but

this is a first day back 'treat'. Robin has already been told off twice, so she can't wait to be left to trudge her own way back tomorrow, albeit with her sister acting as nominated adult. Amazing the difference that sixteen minutes can make. 'I'm the oldest,' Sarah says all the time while Robin rolls her eyes. *It would be different if I was taller*.

Robin frowns. Up ahead, there's a shiny black BMW parked partially on the pavement, its hazard lights blinking on and off. The mums who have younger kids in buggies are huffing loudly as they exaggerate how hard it is to negotiate this intrusion to their paths. The driver's door springs open and a woman glides out. She has bouncy, shiny hair and wears an expensive-looking coat. 'I'm so sorry,' she says in the general direction of other mothers. 'I didn't know where to park.'

As the women ignore her, the shiny, bouncy BMW mum sees someone and waves excitedly. It's the new boy from Robin and Sarah's class. He runs up to her, his backpack bobbing up and down. His hair must have gel on because it doesn't move. He climbs into the front seat, the car eases off the pavement and whooshes away almost silently. Robin is unimpressed.

SARAH

There is a new boy in our class. He's as good-looking as Jordan Knight from NKOTB and as quiet as a mouse. He has blond hair and dark eyes, cheekbones like a model from an Athena poster. Our new teacher, an elegant old lady with long silver hair called Mrs Howard, who Robin says is a witch, made him stand at the front of the class and introduce himself. His ears went pink and he opened his mouth but nothing came out. Eventually Mrs Howard pursed her lips and said, 'This is Callum Granger, he's new to the school. I hope you'll make him very welcome.'

I wrote 'Callum' in my exercise book and drew a heart around it so I'd remember his name. As if I'd forget.

At lunchtime, I saw him sitting on the friendship bench by himself. His knees were clamped tight together and he was reading a book, *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe*, while he ate an apple. The boys skirmished around nearby, kicking and stamping on a tennis ball, but every time they got near to Callum, he'd just tuck his knees out of the way and continue reading.

'Hi,' I'd said, smiling in as welcoming a way as I could manage. 'I'm Sarah.'

'Hi,' he'd said. 'I'm Callum.' I thought for a moment that he might extend his hand for me to shake.

'Do you know this is the friendship bench?' I asked.

His ears had gone pink again but he said he didn't realise.

'It's where you sit if you're feeling lonely and want to play with someone,' I explained. I always find it a thrill to explain the rules and rituals of our school. I've been here since I was four and I know all of them.

I offered to show Callum around. He looked at his book, closed it carefully around a bookmark and followed me as I showed him

the field where we have games, the leaking swimming pool that isn't used any more, the caretaker's shed that's haunted and – to make him laugh – the outdoor girls' toilets. He went pink again.

He told me that he'd moved to our village, Birch End, for his dad's new job. His dad is something important at a cola company in Reading, but Callum probably can't get any free pop because his dad doesn't like to be asked for things. He sounds very strict.

It's home-time now and Mum has already had to tell Robin off. She'd been scraping her new shoes along the wall and I'd chosen not to tell on her but then she'd started spitting for no reason and Mum had to tell her off. I don't know why she does these things because she always gets caught. It's like she wants to get in trouble. I don't know why anyone would want to get in trouble. Everything's so much nicer when you're good. I try to be a good girl, *always*.

Dad calls me his little swot. Mum calls me her golden girl.

Mum likes to pretend that she's really fed up of Dad and he likes to clown around and call Mum things like 'her indoors' or make jokes about nagging, but I think they still like each other. They'll curl around each other on the sofa when we watch *Stars in Their Eyes* or *Roseanne*, Mum's blonde hair fanning over his chest, his hand resting loosely on her leg. When we're in the car, they talk nonstop like they've not seen each other for weeks, and Robin and I give up trying to interrupt them to ask for more Opal Fruits. We play 'eye spy' or 'yellow car', where whoever sees a yellow car first yells 'yellow car!' and punches the other one on the arm. It always ends in tears but while we're playing it, my sister and I laugh maniacally and press our noses to the glass and it's the most fun in the world. My sister drives me crazy, but if there's one thing she always knows how to do, it's have fun.

CHAPTER THREE

Present day

ROBIN

From Robin's bedroom window on the second floor, she can see into nine separate flats behind her house. If she moves down a floor and balances herself on the window sill in her spare bedroom slash gym, she can see another three flats on either side. Each of the apartments that face her back wall has three windows facing out, filled with lives she doesn't know. Zoetropes stacked on top of each other, showcasing the effortless movement of people as they drift and glide in and out of the windows.

It's mid-morning now, so most of the windows are empty, on hold until the evening. In a top-floor flat, a cleaner pushes a mop around briskly. Her bright top swings around her large body like a circus tent. Her shoulders shake; she's either listening to music or remembering it. In the bottom right-hand flat, the old lady is doing her usual chores. Bright yellow Marigold gloves on, navy tabard protecting her no-nonsense nylon clothes.

In the apartment at the dead centre of the building, a man and woman are both home. Mr Magpie. Robin's special one.

Mr Magpie isn't his real name, of course. He is Henry Watkins and his wife is Karen Watkins. But before Robin knew this, Mr Magpie – named so for the prominent grey streak that sweeps down the side of his otherwise black hair – had already formed an important part of Robin's day.

Every morning, Robin watches, breath held, until Mr Magpie and the little boy (whose name wasn't available online, so was called Little Chick) comes out of the flats' communal garden, shaking the night rain off the boy's scooter and working their wiggly route down the cobbled alleyway that separated the two rows of yards and gardens.

Saying, 'Good morning, Mr Magpie' is a fundamental part of the day. Once that is out, the day can begin. But until that point, there could be no tea, no toast, no steps, no weights, no comforting kids' TV, no nothing.

There are other essentials too, of course, that slot together to make Robin's day. The steps. The weights. The sorting and careful disregarding of the post. The hiding. And the watching. Always the watching. *When I don't pay attention*, Robin thinks, *people die*. Unlike most of her 'what if' thoughts, this one carries a certain truth.

Robin hadn't intended to see anything untoward in the Magpie house over the last few weeks. She was only watching to keep them safe. Robin hadn't wanted to meddle. The Magpie family had been all that was good in the world. Loving, caring, normal. That was what Little Chick and Mr Magpie deserved. Magpies mate for life. They're supposed to mate for life.

So when Robin saw Mrs Magpie and her friend walking along the alleyway, talking animatedly, hugging, kissing, and then more, she couldn't look away. An impotent anger rooted her to the spot, behind her curtains.

She watches now. The oblivious husband and a ticking time-bomb of a wife, picking fights and pointing her finger.

Downstairs, the post has fluttered to the mat and the letterbox has snapped shut again. Robin is about to go down and collect it up,

organise it – unopened – into the neat piles she's been building. But just as she steps out onto the thickly carpeted landing, the knocks come. Robin waits. It could be a charity worker with a clipboard, a politician or a cold caller selling thin plastic window frames. Or it could be someone else. The only way to know – short of flinging open the door and allowing all that outside to rush in – is to wait.

Knock knock. Still they land politely, but they don't stop.

Knock knock knock. More urgent now.

Knock knock knock knock knock. Rapid, sweating effort. Now Robin knows it's 'someone else'. The eager caller, the angry caller, the nameless, faceless man at her door. She stays on the landing, and counts the time it takes for him to give up. Thirty-seven seconds. His determination sets her teeth on edge.