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...**

# Dry Season

Written by Dan Smith

Published by Phoenix

All text is copyright © of the author

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

# DRY SEASON

DAN SMITH



PHOENIX

# 1

It was late, and I was dreaming of fire when she came banging on my door. She was shouting and whispering at the same time, pounding like she was never going to stop. The sound of her voice saying, 'Sam! Sam!' and the padded thud of her palm slapping the cracked paint, rattling the wood in its frame. 'Sam! Wake up!'

Blinded by the night, I pushed myself up with one arm, turning my head towards the insistent, unfamiliar voice.

'Sam! Wake up, Sam!'

I squeezed my eyes shut and pinched the bridge of my nose. I breathed hard to clear my head.

'Sam!'

I threw off the thin, discoloured sheet and dropped my feet onto the cool concrete floor. The room spun in darkness when I stood up, and I put out a hand to steady myself against the warm air, stumbling until my palm was flat on the powdery, whitewashed wall. Leaning like that, I shook my head and cleared my throat. My heart was thumping, my senses were dull, the taste of my dream still in my head, the smoke still running in my blood. I always remembered my dreams; especially the bitter ones. The ones that showed me fire and pain and death.

I steadied myself for a moment longer, hanging my head, breathing hard from the effort of having risen from my bed.

The hammering on the door continued, jarring my brow like the steady beat of a drum, her voice biting into me. I had to make the sounds go away, so I took another deep breath and moved to the door, pulling back the heavy bolt which was the only thing keeping it shut. 'Stop banging.' I tugged at the handle, pulling the door over the spot where it stuck against the floor. 'For God's sake, stop—'

'At Manolo's. You have to come,' she said, crossing herself. 'He's dying.'

I didn't recognise the young woman, but she knew me. Everybody in São Tiago knew me.

I leaned one hand on the door frame and looked down at her, feeling the cool draught on my half-naked body. 'What? Who's dying?' The drying sweat made my skin tighten into pimples. Somewhere behind her, beyond what was visible in the night, I could hear faint voices and music, the sound of samba coming to me, stretched and crackling because the tape had been played over and over. But even as I listened, the music stopped and the sound of the cicadas folded in to fill the void. They seemed loud that night.

She didn't answer my question right away, her eyes not knowing where to look, so I asked her again, 'Who's dying?' and as I began to focus, I could see that she was quite beautiful. Young. Dark-haired. Not much more than a girl. The whites of her eyes were clear in the half-light of the cloudless night. One strap of her cheap red vest had slipped down to touch her upper arm. Her skirt was short, her legs were bare, and I could see one or two healed sores on the dark skin. She wore shabby green flip-flops on her stained feet. When she looked at my face, she said, 'Please. You have to come now.'

I ran both hands through my hair and rubbed some life into my face. 'OK, OK. *Calma*.' I moved back into the room and pulled on a pair of old jeans, asking again, 'Who's dying?'

'Come,' was all she would say. 'He's at Manolo's.'

I picked up a shirt, throwing it over my back, leaving the buttons free at the front, and the girl grabbed my hand in hers.

I knew the way to Manolo's café, it was less than a minute's walk and I could even see part of it from my place, but I let her take me by the hand, pulling at me like a mother leading her child. My shirt opened as we went, each side wafting back in the breeze that came off the river during the night. It was refreshing after the stale heat of my tiny room.

As we came past the old bakery and rounded the corner, I saw the lights from Manolo's. Bare bulbs hanging from the steel skeleton which supported the awning over his café, the raised concrete floor grey and worn. The lights were on, so I knew it was before midnight, because that's when the electricity went off. If I'd stopped and listened over the sound of the cicadas, I might have heard the faint chugging of the diesel-powered generator which I had learned to ignore.

A small group, most of them men, was gathered by one of the tables, and I recognised all of them, though I didn't know all their names. Voices babbled in confusion.

'He's here,' shouted the young woman who was dragging me. 'He's here.'

The group looked over to watch us arrive, their voices becoming silent. I could hear the whisper of the river as the girl pushed me forward at the last moment, the people ushering me amongst them and directing me into the café. I allowed their hands to be on me, to push me in whichever direction they wanted, and then I stumbled under the Coca-Cola awning and stepped into the dark blood.

It was at least an inch deep by now and had already begun to solidify like pudding. My foot broke the rubbery surface and sank into the thick liquid. It crept over my flip-flops and slid between my toes. It was still warm. My stomach turned and alcohol-tainted acid jumped into my throat. I swallowed hard to keep it down, and wondered what they expected me to do.

The people parted in front of me, giving me a route to the man who was lying on the floor. He was on his side with his knees pulled up towards his chest. His face was buried in the folds of material where his shirt had ridden up. Both hands were pressed into his abdomen, making it impossible to see where he'd been hurt. The smell was strong and metallic; just like it was on the days when the *fazendeiros* butchered their cattle.

An overturned chair lay behind the man, its steel frame splashed silvery red. On the table there was a deck of cards dealt into four hands, a bottle of cheap *cachaça* with a red and gold label, brand number Fifty-One. The seal was broken, the cap missing, and there was no more than an inch of liquid left in the bottle. There was also a pile of money and a knife. The knife was stained with blood.

'What's his name?' I said, kneeling down and turning the man's head so I could see his face.

'Eduardo,' said a voice. 'Or Edson, maybe. He works for Da Silva, I think.'

'You think?'

'Just give him his rites.'

I lifted my eyes and saw it was Manolo who had spoken of rites. 'You know I can't do that, Manny. Anyway, this man needs a doctor,' I said, 'not a priest. He doesn't need rites.' I looked around. 'Any of you people call for Paulo?' I watched their silent faces but nobody answered, not even a blink. 'You,' I pointed at the girl who had dragged me to the café. 'What's your name?'

'Alicia.'

'Alicia, find Paulo. You *do* know who he is, don't you?'

She nodded.

'Then find him and bring him here. And hurry.'

She turned and ran; glad to be away from the smell of the blood.

I watched her disappear into the darkness beyond the lights and then I looked back at the dying man, saying, 'Manny, bring some towels.'

Manolo disappeared into the building with the corrugated roof at the back of his café and returned carrying a handful of linen. It wasn't clean but it would do.

'Press them here,' I told him, pulling him down to kneel beside me in the blood. I placed his hands on the man's abdomen. 'Hold it tight,' I said.

Manolo hesitated, held back for longer than he should, but then nodded once and did as he was told. I leaned over so my mouth was close to his ear.

'What happened, Manny? Who did this?'

Manolo refused to look at me.

'What happened?' I said through clenched teeth.

Manolo spoke in a quiet voice. 'There was a game, Sam. He was cheating.' His eyes wouldn't find mine. Instead he focused on my nose and then on my chin.

'And this is how we punish a cheater in São Tiago?' I said. 'We stick a knife in him and give him his rites?'

Manolo shrugged.

'Whose knife is it?' I asked.

His eyes met mine for a second and then flicked away, so I looked to those standing around us. 'Whose knife is it?' This time louder, but still no one replied. 'Who did this?'

'There is no knife,' said Manolo.

'What?' The words caught me by surprise and I let my eyes linger over Manolo's face for a moment before I looked back at the empty table. Only the cards and the *cachaça* remained. No one spoke inside the café. The only sound was the gentle sigh of the river behind us, and the constant chorus of the cicadas. When I turned back to Manolo, our eyes met and I knew, right then, what he had done. 'Manny?'

Manolo leaned across the bleeding body and whispered in my ear. 'Forgive me, Father; I have sinned.'

But forgiveness wasn't mine to grant. 'I can't. Manny, I . . .' Just as rites were not mine to give.

'I acted in anger, Father.'

'Manolo—'

'I struck a fellow man. He may die. Forgive me.'

Just the river. The cicadas. No words from me.

'Abs*olve* me,' Manolo said. 'For*give* me.'

I shook my head and looked down, looked away, looked anywhere but into Manolo's eyes. Then I turned away from him, showed him my back as my throat tightened and my hands trembled. I shook my head again and searched my mind for an answer I didn't have. I couldn't forgive Manolo for what he had done.

And then the moment was broken by the sound of footsteps bringing Alicia and Paulo out of the night. Paulo was still drunk, looked worse than I felt, but he sobered up when he saw the blood. He had to. He was the only one who could save the man's life.

He went straight to work, kneeling in the jelly, feeling for a pulse, searching for a wound, asking me, 'What's his name?'

'Eduardo, we think.'

Paulo glanced at me. 'Well, we can't move him far, he'll die for sure.'

I swallowed hard. 'You think we can save him, though?' I was trying not to think about Manolo's confession.

'A doctor and a priest,' he said. 'How can we fail? Together we're more or less God.'

I raised my eyebrows at Paulo and shook my head, but he just put his bag onto one of the tables and pointed at two old men, saying, 'You two, pull those tables together. And you,' he

pointed at Alicia. 'Go back to my house. There's another bag by the door. Bring it straight here.'

Alicia turned and ran but Paulo called after her. 'Bring *every*thing,' he said. 'Bring *every*thing you can find.'

She hurried into the darkness.