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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Dark Ride**

Written by Caroline Green

Published by Piccadilly Press

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*For Anne McKay Green  
1927-1989*

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# *Dark Ride*

CAROLINE GREEN



First published in Great Britain in 2011  
by Piccadilly Press Ltd,  
5 Castle Road, London NW1 8PR  
www.piccadillypress.co.uk

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

ISBN: 978 1 84812 138 6 (paperback)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in the UK by CPI Bookmarque Ltd,  
Croydon, CR1 4PD  
Cover design by Simon Davis  
Cover photo © Getty



## CHAPTER 1

# *The Ticket*

*Welcome to Slumpton.*

That's what the sign's meant to say but some of the letters have worn off. So all you really see is *Welcome to Slum.*

Hilarious, right? Or it would be, if you didn't have to live here.

I ran past the sign, not stopping until I could make out the slice of grey sea in the distance. The sound of Mum squawking like a constipated parrot was still ringing in my ears. 'I'm warning you, Bel!' and, 'Come back this minute, Bel!' and, 'I know I'm overreacting, Bel, but I'm your mother. It's my job!'

Okay, she didn't say the last bit. She never admits she's wrong. It was because I mentioned what a huge mistake

it was moving here that a row over nothing (Marmite contamination of the butter) turned into A Big Scene.

We had, 'You have no idea how hard it is for me!' and, 'The world doesn't revolve around you!' and then, 'It's not like your dad is here to help!'

That's when it got nasty. I probably shouldn't have said it was her fault for kicking him out. Her eyes went all bulgy, so I opened the front door and just ran. I didn't have a plan (or even a coat) but eventually I found myself at the top of the hill, the salty air scouring the inside of my lungs.

It had all started with a letter, plopping through the letterbox just like it really was a letter and not a bomb thrown into the centre of my life. At first, it seemed like good news. Mum's eyes shone when she told me she'd inherited a house by the seaside and all our money problems would be over. We even did a little dance. But all that was before she realised she wasn't allowed to sell it for a thousand years or something.

Or mentioned that Dad wasn't coming with us.

I told her in no uncertain terms that she was ruining my life, but it made no difference. I sobbed the whole time we were packing up the house.

It seemed like five minutes later we were here, the Land That Time Forgot, watching the removal van disappear round the corner like a last hope.

A week on from moving-in day, we were at each other's throats and nothing about living here had got any better.

Everything was buzzing like angry bees in my head as

I walked down the hill towards the promenade.

I came here often, grotty though it was. An amusement arcade was the only thing always open and a skinny teenage girl with angry eyes sat hunched in a booth at the entrance. I would have gone in to warm up but I'd been in once before and it smelled of fags and boys' socks.

I pulled my cardigan round my shoulders, wishing I'd thought to grab my fleece as I stormed out of the house. I walked along for a bit, past the boarded-up fish and chip stalls and popcorn stands, and past the hotel that looks really posh until you get close and see the way the paint's all scabby, like a skin disease.

'Just wait till summer,' Mum kept saying. 'Then you'll see how good it is here.' But the sea looked so cold and evil you couldn't imagine anyone putting on cozzies and slicing through it on bodyboards.

Tears prickled my eyes and I swiped my sleeve across them, quickly checking that no one was watching. I walked down to an old shelter which was splashed all over in pigeon poo, apart from one small bit. I sat down carefully and looked out to sea, sighing with my whole body.

I heard a cough then and turned round, startled.

He was slumped in the corner with his hood up. I stared at the side of his head for a minute and then he turned towards me, slowly. Eyes the colour of dark chocolate in a gaunt, pale face. A year or two older than me, but a lot taller.

'All right?' I said, but he just stared like I'd said

something really strange. I tutted and moved a bit further down the bench.

He leapt to his feet then and started walking away, head down and hands deep in his pockets.

I scowled and rubbed my goosepimpley arms. Trust me to sit down next to a certified lunatic. Maybe that's what living here did to people. It wouldn't be long before I was mumbling to myself and sitting too close to people on buses.

Staring out to sea, I started thinking about what a pathetic figure I must be to anyone watching. They'd probably think I was homeless (which I practically was, when I considered what sort of reception I'd get when I got back) or had lost both my parents in a terrible car crash. I let the tragic feeling settle around me like a warm blanket, but my stomach started rumbling and I remembered I hadn't even eaten my toast, despite all the trouble the Marmite had caused. I knew I'd have to go home and face the music some time, so I got up.

That's when I noticed something next to me on the seat.

I picked up a small, blue ticket – the kind that comes from an old-fashioned roll. *Admit One* was written on it in black letters. The weird boy must have left it behind.

Sometimes I freeze-frame that moment in my mind. I could easily have left the ticket there on the bench and thought no more of it. But I didn't. For some reason I can't explain, I picked it up and slipped it in the pocket of my jeans.

Then I started the Walk of Doom home.

## CHAPTER 2

# Sunshine

I had to knock twice when I got back. Mum finally opened the door, frowning at the sight of her disappointing daughter. She didn't speak, but her eyebrows said, 'Don't think for a moment we're done, Annabelle, because I still have quite a lot to say on the matter. However, it will have to wait until later because someone is here just now and I don't wish to air my dirty laundry in public.' (I know. It's quite a skill.)

I followed her down the gloomy hallway, which was painted the colour of snot, and went into the warm, fuggy kitchen.

'Hello, Nell. Where have you been gadding off to then?'

It suddenly all made sense.

'Um, it's Bel, Mrs Longmeadow. Just been out for a walk.'

'Ooh, you'll catch your death on a day like this.'

Mrs Longmeadow, next-door neighbour and one-woman medical dictionary, sat at the table like a fat pigeon. She was clutching another one of her newspaper cuttings in her chubby little hands, which were knobbly with all the rings she liked to wear.

Mum gave me a desperate look. I could just make an excuse and go up to my room (which was about five times smaller than the one I'd had in London, I might add), but I knew that if I helped her out a bit, it might just get me some much needed credit.

I pulled up a chair.

Mum didn't go as far as smiling or anything insane but I knew she was pleased.

'I was just asking your mother whether she knew much about cholesterol medication,' said Mrs Longmeadow. 'I've been reading about side effects and I'm sure that my doctor isn't all he should be. He's, you know . . .' She hesitated and then mouthed the word 'foreign'.

'Uh-huh,' I said, nodding vigorously. I might have overdone it a bit because Mrs L gave me a strange look, but she soon picked up where she left off. I tuned her out and noticed Mum escaping with a basket of washing under one arm.

Mum used to work on reception in a doctor's surgery, but for Mrs L this was as good as being a top brain surgeon. She usually came to the door clutching a cutting

from the *Daily Mail* and asking Mum if she knew anything about this or that medical yuckiness.

She kept droning on and I started thinking about the strange boy from earlier. I wondered if he was homeless and I shivered, remembering how cold it had been out there. After a few minutes, I tuned back into Mrs L, who was still in full flow. I sometimes entertained myself when she was in one of her rants, just to spice things up. I couldn't resist making one eyeball wander a tiny bit.

'You want to get that checked out,' she said, narrowing her own watery blue eyes.

'What's that then, Mrs Longmeadow?' I said innocently.

Mrs L regarded me warily. She had a way of looking at you, like you were something dodgy she'd picked up on the bottom of her high-heeled shoe. (She had tiny, fat feet. Practically hooves.)

'I'd best be getting on,' she said finally, with a loud sniff. 'My son and grandson are moving in today and I have things to do.' She stuck her chest out. 'My son's a journalist,' she added. Like I cared.

'MUUUUM!' I yelled, making her jump. I smiled my sweetest smile. 'Mrs Longmeadow's leaving now.'

I couldn't sleep that night. I lay for hours thinking about London, my old bedroom and the Dad-shaped hole in my life. When I did finally drop off, I had horrible dreams about walking into the cold sea and hands pulling me under the water.

When I woke up my heart was doing a tango. For a

minute, I thought I was back in my old house and could almost hear Dad humming in the shower (he's always humming, strumming his guitar, or singing). But instead of looking at the bright blue ceiling of my old room, I was staring up at the old-lady wallpaper on the sloping roof above the bed. (Mum promised we'd decorate just as soon as we could afford it, but nothing would make this room nice. Except maybe a bulldozer.) There was no singing from the bathroom, just the plip-popping of a leaky tap.

I heaved a big sigh and swung my legs into the Arctic tundra. It was always freezing here. We moved two weeks before the Christmas holidays, like no one else in the world does. Other people move at sensible times like summer or never. I got a little whump in my chest thinking of Jasmine and Molly, Christmas shopping at Wood Green without me. They'd both texted a few times, but I was too miserable to reply properly – I'd just sent short answers back, not really letting on how I was feeling. It had been a few days now and I'd heard nothing more from them. Maybe they were forgetting about me already.

By the time I'd been to the loo, brushed my teeth and got dressed, my imagination had them giggling over steaming hot chocolates in the shopping centre. 'Bel who?' they'd say if anyone asked.

It would be like I never existed.

I came into the kitchen. The décor was even worse in there. The walls were green with big swirly purple bits on it that made your eyes go funny.

Mum started to say, 'Good morning' and then clocked

my expression. She turned back to the sandwiches she was packing into her lunchbox. I grunted and sat down at the table, before shaking some cornflakes into a bowl. We always had the cheapest own-brand ones now. (Mum always said they all came from the same factory anyway. I always said, 'Well, how come these ones taste like toenails and cardboard?') She had some kind of office job at the Town Hall, but we still never seemed to have any money.

'The school holidays have started now,' said Mum, in a fake cheerful way. 'You might find a few more people your own age about the place.' She turned to look at me and sighed, then pointed at a piece of paper pinned with the banana magnet to the board. 'I've left a few chores for you.'

I grunted again and shovelled in the cereal. Mum left the room. She came back wearing her warm black coat and red scarf, which looked nice with her hair. It's what you'd call dark auburn, but what she passed onto me is more like ginger, whatever she says. And whereas hers falls in obedient curls around her face, mine has a life of its own. It's not her fault really. But it feels like it's her fault.

I noticed she had lots of lines around her eyes that never used to be there.

'I'll be back at five-thirty, okay?' she said and I nodded, distantly.

She patted the top of my head. 'Be good, Bel, and stay close to home.'

Home? This would never be my home.