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Opening Extract from...

Up Close

Written by Henriette Gyland

Published by Choc Lit

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Up Close

Henriette Gyland

Extract:
Prologue & first chapter.



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First published 2012 by Choc Lit Limited
Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB, UK

www.choclitpublishing.com

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

ISBN-978-1-906931-78-0

Prologue

Through a pair of binoculars, the watcher saw the old lady's bedroom light come on. Her curtains were drawn, but when she stumbled out on to the landing, her white nightgown flapping around her like a ghostly shroud, she was clearly visible for a moment. Another light appeared, this time in the bathroom, and it stayed lit for ages.

Die, thought the watcher. *Why don't you just die?*

At last the woman fumbled her way back on to the landing, and a short sharp bark showed that the little Jack Russell she'd bought only a few weeks before was anxious about his mistress. She seemed not to notice and headed for the top of the stairs, swaying from side to side as if she were the worse for drink. As she disappeared from sight, the watcher ventured closer, leaving the binoculars to dangle from the branch of a tree.

Next, the light came on in the kitchen where the old lady doubled over, clutching her stomach as though being attacked by excruciating cramps.

Another grim smile. *I hope you suffer.*

The pain must have been severe, for her face was twisted with the effort of staying on her feet, until she finally had to give in. Her cry of alarm could be heard through the single-glazed window, and she fell to her knees on the stone floor. Bemused, the watcher saw her retch violently. She was bringing nothing up, which meant she was clearly dehydrated.

Burn in Hell.

The old lady forced herself to get up again, but it was only temporary; a final, futile effort. She made it as far as the scullery, where she poured herself a glass of water direct from the tap.

The water never reached her lips. It sloshed down the front of her nightgown as her eyes met those of the watcher through the window. Her evident shock registered, and for one long moment they simply stared at each other, spellbound and frozen in time, as memories of their unwilling bond flashed through both minds.

Then shock gave way to determination, and as the dog barked and jumped up and down to gain attention, the woman steadied herself against the wall and made her way back to the main kitchen area, staggering, out of control. By the dresser she stopped, presumably to catch her breath, then suddenly brought her hands to her chest. Her mouth opened on a gasp, then she fell, almost in slow motion, knocking papers and a telephone directory off the dresser and hitting her head on the sharp corner. There was a moment's silence, then the little dog began to howl – a horrible, long drawn-out sound which sent shivers up the listener's spine.

The watcher's glee, so long in coming, was tinged with regret.

Chapter One

Shadowy creatures from the deep swirl and eddy around her, clawing at her with their dead men's fingers and pulling her under. She wants to scream, but knows that if she opens her mouth, she will drown.

Panic seizes her as the water closes over her head. She makes one last-ditch attempt at reaching the surface, but she's miles under, and the pull is too strong.

Then, she's outside her body, seeing it all. The small legs thrashing wildly, kicking water everywhere, the scream muffled by water, the dark eyes – always so trusting – now wide, pleading, disbelieving. A lifetime passes.

Finally there is silence. Dead silence.

Her sleeves are wet. She stares at them because she can't remember how that happened. As she does so, she watches with mounting horror how the water from her clothes turns to mist and rises. It curls into liquid snakes that force their way down her throat and into her lungs, making her forget everything else.

Fighting the unspeakable pressure in her chest, she grasps for reality, but is sucked further below.

Air.

She must have air …

Lia Thompson woke, coughing and spluttering. The bedroom was dark and still, and for a moment she was completely disorientated. Then she remembered. Her grandmother's house and the unwanted legacy. She fumbled for her travel alarm clock with its luminous dials and knocked a bottle of pills down from the bedside cabinet.

'Oh, shit,' she muttered as the contents rained on to the wooden floor. The screw cap hadn't been put back on properly.

Five thirty in the morning. With a sigh she fell back on to the

pillow, shivering. The tablets helped her sleep but there were side effects, the night sweats being the worst. Her pyjamas became soaked, and she woke up feeling cold. She shrugged out of her PJs, tugged at her dressing gown, which lay across the foot end of the double bed, and wrapped it around her. Then she huddled back under the covers.

Out of the blue she felt a rush of hysteria. She hated waking up to find herself alone. The world was so silent before the birds started to sing, as if everyone had decided to move to another planet and forgotten to wake her.

She stayed in bed for a while, letting the warmth creep back into her bones, then rose slowly and pottered over to the window. Flinging back the curtains, she stared out into the darkness. North Norfolk was a far cry from Philadelphia, where she'd made her home for the past few years. There it was never really dark, and that was what had attracted her to the city in the first place.

That, and the fact it was a million miles from here.

In this isolated part of Norfolk the elements ruled unchallenged, and in the dead of winter it was still pitch black at this hour in the morning. Through the single glazing she could hear the North Sea, a continuous, distant roar, and she thought of the fishermen who would be out there, in an hour or so, eking out a living. She pictured them struggling to haul in their nets, gripping chains and tackles with their frozen fingers, while water sprayed over the side of the boat and made the deck slippery and treacherous.

And beneath the plunging waves Hell was waiting.

Closing her eyes, she blocked out the image. It was too much like her dreams.

What am I doing here? she thought for the umpteenth time, but the answer was simple.

When her grandmother had died, the task had fallen on Lia to sort out legal matters. Her mother, Connie, refused to have

anything to do with it and even declared that she didn't want a penny from the estate.

It puzzled Lia. Connie earned very little and the money would enable her to retire in comfort when that day came, but grief made people do and say the strangest things. She'd hoped it was just talk, but after two weeks her mother remained immovable.

Sighing, she rubbed her eyes. When she'd stumbled into bed last night she'd been no closer to finding a solution to her problem. It didn't help that she was still jet-lagged from her flight two days ago.

I don't want any of it either!

She picked up as many of the tablets as she could find and headed for the bathroom across the landing. As she reached for her toothbrush, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. A dark shadow rose from the bath behind her. With a scream Lia swung around, her heart thumping wildly in her chest.

There was nothing there.

Relief was followed by an overwhelming urge to cry. This was where … no, she wouldn't think about that now. Resolutely she turned her back on the bath and brushed her teeth so hard she drew blood.

'Coffee,' she said to her reflection when she dared face the mirror again. 'That's what you need.'

Putting on a pair of woollen socks, she went downstairs. The stair carpet was frayed, and she picked her way carefully to avoid catching her toes in the weave.

Everywhere was evidence of disuse. Dusty surfaces, yellowing paperbacks, long-dead thunderflies trapped inside picture frames. Only two weeks since Ivy Barrington's death, yet the house looked as if it hadn't been lived in for months, apart from the kitchen and main bedroom. If her grandmother found it difficult to manage her home as she got older, why didn't she just say so?

Because Ivy was too proud. Guilt stole over Lia; she should

have recognised the signs and done something to help the old lady without embarrassing her.

She made a pot of coffee, then sat down at the kitchen table next to an untidy heap of legal documents. Once again, Lia wished she didn't have to deal with all of this by herself.

Outside a dog barked. Lia glanced at the wall clock. Nearly six. A bit early for dog walking, she thought, but then again what did she know about this part of the world? She hadn't lived here in years.

She wrapped her hands around the mug for warmth. On her first day here her grandmother's Rayburn had played up, and because it was connected to the entire central heating system, the house was like a morgue. It was ironic, really, that she could understand the intricacies of a piece of high-tech medical equipment, yet she couldn't figure out how to work a simple oven.

The thought of work set her thinking of Brett and Philadelphia. Another world, another life. Bright lights, glass and polished steel; efficiency and progress. By now her fiancé would be on his way to bed, maybe watching the late news with a brandy in his hand. She thought of the penthouse with its view of the Delaware River and longed to be there, right now, instead of in this cold and creaky old house with its dust and its memories.

The dog barked again, closer this time. Going to the scullery door to investigate, Lia found it locked. She slipped her hand behind her grandmother's Barbour jacket, which hung on a peg on the door, and lifted out an old-fashioned key. The door stuck, and she yanked it open. The sudden draught caused another to slam at the top of the house. Her heart gave a jolt.

Sodding house! Nothing bloody works, everything's falling to bits, and it gives me the creeps.

Outside, an old woman and a dog suddenly materialised from the darkness like a witch with her familiar. Lia recognised her as Mrs Larwood, her grandmother's closest neighbour, who lived in

the flint cottage down the road.

'Good morning,' Lia said, wondering if it was normal to go visiting at six a.m.

'I've brought your dog,' said Mrs Larwood without preamble. 'His name is Jack.'

'What?' Lia stared at her.

Her eyes travelled from the woman's wizened face to the dog with something close to horror. He was a short-legged Jack Russell with a smooth coat and tan markings around his eyes. The dog stared back almost as if he knew something she didn't. A chill ran down her back.

'Ivy never said anything about a *dog*,' she continued, aghast. 'She'd have told me if she'd bought one.'

'Well, she did, and you've inherited him.'

Mrs Larwood handed her the lead and brushed past her into the kitchen, where she deposited a plastic bag on the table, then fetched a mug and poured herself a coffee. Lia had to remind herself that around here people did things differently.

She tried to pull the dog into the house, but he remained stubbornly on the doorstep. 'Come *on*, you're letting all the heat out.'

Shivering, the dog put one tiny white paw in front of the other and crossed the threshold. Lia unhooked his lead, and he clattered past and over to the Rayburn, where he settled down on the jute rug in front of it.

If Mrs Larwood noticed Lia's irritation, she ignored it. Instead she stirred three spoonfuls of sugar into her coffee and said in her broad Norfolk burr, 'I found her, you know. Knocked her head, she had, on the corner of the dresser.' Tutting, she shook her head and grabbed Lia's arm with an age-spotted hand, forced from arthritis into the shape of a claw. It was remarkably strong despite its scrawniness. 'In a frightful mess, she was. Blood everywhere.'

'That's a bit too much information, actually,' Lia said, more to

stop Mrs Larwood from going on than because she was squeamish. She saw blood every day in her job, after all. Freeing herself, she sat down and reached for her own coffee. As for blood everywhere, Lia took that with a pinch of salt. Ivy had died from a heart attack, so the coroner's report had said. True, she had hit her head as she fell, and head wounds bled, but you were more likely to bleed internally, into the brain. Anyway, the death certificate was unequivocal: it was the heart attack which killed her.

'So sad,' Mrs Larwood said. 'A woman in her prime.'

Lia hid a smile behind her mug. Ivy had been in her late seventies, but she supposed when you were as old as Mrs Larwood, who was ninety if she was a day, it was a matter of perspective.

Lia was used to sudden death, but it happened in other people's lives, not hers. Ivy had been a rock, a force to be reckoned with. For her to die like that had been almost an insult.

They hadn't been particularly close, but Ivy had always shown an interest in her, and had supported Lia when she decided to become a doctor.

'Go where the excitement is,' had been her advice; so Lia had dutifully uprooted herself and gone to the States, where she'd trained in Trauma, dealing with gunshot wounds and stabbing injuries. There she'd met an energetic young lawyer. Brett Melrose was pure-bred and Ivy League, with the right background and the right connections, and a rosy future lay mapped out in front of her, ready for her to seize it with both hands.

But the perfect life had sprung a leak in the form of uncertainty. Lia spent her time patching up the kind of people who received their injuries from the type Brett spent his time keeping out of prison. It seemed to Lia they were both engaged in a never-ending repair job from opposite sides of the fence without ever getting to the root of the problem.

Also, at the back of her mind was a nagging feeling that she'd left an important piece of herself behind in England. Something kept calling her back to North Norfolk, but she'd dithered, because sometimes it was easier to stick your head in the sand than to make decisions.

Then the dreams had started up again. Dreams of water and long pale fingers, dreams of death …

Mrs Larwood cleared her throat. 'Fit as a fiddle, she was, your gran. Always seen about the village, doing this and that. Then she got Jack here, to keep her busy. Was never without him.' She sighed and finished her coffee. 'Didn't think I'd outlive Ivy, not for a minute. Doesn't seem right, somehow.'

Lia merely nodded. If only the woman would leave, so she could collect her thoughts.

'And so upsetting for you to miss the funeral. Everyone was there, you know, at the church, and here afterwards.' She regarded Lia with a shrewd expression. 'Pressures of work, was it?'

Lia squirmed inside. 'We were short-staffed, I couldn't get away. I had to wait until I could take extended leave.' In fact, she'd persuaded herself there was no point in going through the ridiculous ritual of saying goodbye as society dictated. She wasn't going to feel any closer to her grandmother from sitting on a hard wooden bench and staring at a coffin, while everyone around her talked in hushed voices and cast her knowing glances when they thought she wasn't looking.

Mrs Larwood didn't appear convinced. With a last calculating glance at Lia she bent down to pat Jack's head. 'He's not so bad, you know. Has his little ways, but is very well behaved. Good guard dog, too. Grows on you.'

Lia looked at the pitiful creature on the jute rug. Not if I can help it, she thought. 'So, er, what does he eat, then? And when does he need to go for walks?'

Mrs Larwood straightened with difficulty. 'He'll tell you

himself. I've left you a couple of tins of dog food and a packet of doggie treats, his bowls and some toys. Everything's in the bag.'

Lia had a quick rummage in the bag, then looked around her. 'There's no dog basket. Where does he sleep?'

'Ivy had him on her bed, I believe.'

Oh, no, thought Lia. *No way.* She was *not* sharing a bed with a dog.

'Looks like rain,' said Mrs Larwood. Pulling up the collar of her overcoat, she slipped outside and disappeared into the dim morning light.

Lia glared after her. When heavy droplets of rain began to fall, she had to laugh. 'I don't believe it!' she muttered. She prided herself on being quite capable of reading other people, yet somehow this crafty old woman had managed to outwit her. She returned to the kitchen, where Jack assessed her nervously. Cocking his head to one side, he raised his tan eyebrows.

There was that knowing look again.

Lia fast-forwarded through her dream earlier and its disturbing manifestations. She thought she'd put them behind her for good, but they'd returned with increased intensity after Ivy's death. She rarely shared them with anyone, yet this dog with his peculiar markings seemed to know exactly how she was feeling. Silly, of course, but his expression was so earnest she softened a little.

She fetched the dog food Mrs Larwood had brought and put some in a bowl with his name on it, then watched him munch contentedly.

Her grandmother hadn't been much for animals, barely tolerating other people's love for their pets. She'd never volunteered to dog-sit or feed someone else's rabbit during the holidays, and no animal had ever set foot in her house.

So what on earth had possessed her to buy a dog?

To be continued ….

ebook available November paperback 7th December 2012

