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Opening extract from

The Drowning

Written by

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Published by

Chicken House Ltd

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Text © Rachel Ward 2013
First published in Great Britain in 2013
The Chicken House
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United Kingdom
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Cover design and interior design by Steve Wells
Cover photo by Rosie Hardy
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

Paperback ISBN 978-1-908435-36-1
E-book ISBN 978-1-908435-79-8

Foreword

The idea for this book came from a story told to my husband by one of his colleagues, who had been struck by lightning when swimming in a lake with two friends. The lightning disappeared from my story, but the idea of three people in a lake stuck. I wrote the book on sabbatical from my day job, and it turned into a sort of twisted love letter to the town I worked in for ten years. I need to be clear that this is not a book about that town, or any of the people I've met there. Neither was it directly inspired by tragic events that happened in the UK and beyond during a very rainy 2012. Unfortunately drowning is incredibly common and as I was writing I became painfully aware of the loss brought to families through drowning accidents and the tragic effects of floods. I don't wish to add to anyone's pain, but I do write about real issues that affect people every day. If you've been affected by drowning, or flooding, then maybe this isn't the book for you. For everybody else, I hope that you enjoy this … and that maybe it sends a little shiver down your spine.

Rachel Ward
Bath, November 2012

Prologue

'Stop. We need to stop. That's it, everyone – we've done our best. I'm calling it. It's four seventeen.'

I open my eyes. A raindrop hits my left eye, dead centre. I shut both eyes quickly. Careful now, I squint out. The rain keeps coming. Water bombs dropping out of a grey sky. There's stuff in my mouth. Mud. Gravel.

I turn my head and spit.

There's a face a metre from mine. Hair plastered on to his forehead in glistening snakes. Mouth, thin lips slightly apart, a trickle of water spilling out of the corner. Pale skin, streaked with mud. Eyes, closed, stunted eyelashes forming two stubby lines.

It's my face.

Something buzzes from his feet up his legs, past his waist, up to his shoulders. The hand tugging on the zip pauses for a second and then finishes the job, closing the bag right up. A sleeping bag. They've put him in a sleeping bag, 'cos he's asleep. But there's no gap in this bag. They've sealed him in. How's he going to breathe?

They'll do me next. I know they will. But I'm not asleep. I'm awake.

'Don't zip me in.' I can hear the words in my head, but my lips aren't moving. 'Don't zip me.' My voice, trying to get out, strangled in my throat.

Someone grabs my legs. Someone else grabs my arms. It's my turn. They're going to put me in a bag. They're going to zip me in. I try to put up a fight, but my arms and legs are just too heavy. I can't do a thing. Can't move,

can't speak, can't think straight.

I'm on some sort of board now, being bumped off the ground and into a van. The doors slam shut. We're leaving him behind.

But no, the door's yanked open again. That'll be him now. Footsteps, grunts, as they lift him in. I look across. If the bag's still done up, I'll try to find my voice, ask them to unzip him a bit, so I can see his face, so he can get some air.

But it's not him. There's a girl in here now. She's looking right at me. Her make-up's smeared down her face from her eyes, like she's melting, but her lips are blue, her arms are covered in goosebumps and she's shivering. She's staring too, staring at me, then she blinks – once, twice – and starts screaming.

ONE

The woman who says she's my mum gets a cab to take us home. She sits one side, I sit the other side, like we're clinging to the windows. Forty centimetres of plastic seat between us. Seat belts on.

The smell in here keeps catching the back of my throat. Smells like plastic and polish and vomit all mixed up. There's a little blue tree dangling from the front mirror. It's got 'New Car Scent' printed on it. If that's what a new car smells like, you can keep it.

Home. I can't picture it, but I know that I don't want to go there. I want to go back to the hospital. That nurse was kind to me, not like the woman on the other side of this car, the one in the shiny tracksuit that's too big for her, who looks as though she's cried so hard she's worn herself out. She doesn't look like she wants to be with me

any more than I want to be with her. She can hardly look at me, and she hasn't said a word, her lips clamped shut, locked together in a grim, thin line.

I'll go back. Shall I? Shall I do it? Yank the handle and kick the door open? Jump out and start running? Too late. The cab turns a corner and accelerates, and the hospital's gone.

I'm trapped.

I press my forehead against the window. It's cold against my skin. I like the feeling, it's soothing. I roll my face forwards, pressing as much of it as I can on to the smooth, hard glass, squashing my nose sideways so my mouth and chin can make contact. I press harder, my lips spreading like two slugs. The woman glances at me with red-rimmed eyes.

'What are you doing?' she says. 'Stop it, Carl, for goodness' sake.'

She reaches across the gap and tugs at my arm. I resist. She lets go and slaps me hard across the back of my head. The force of her hand makes my face skid forwards on the spitty glass, smearing my cheek. And instantly I get echoes of all the other times she's hit me, stretching back like a hall of mirrors. She retreats to the other side of the cab, tears running down her face. And I know it's true, what they've all been saying. She *is* my mum. My stomach falls down inside me as broken memories cartwheel through my head. Her hair scraped back. The smell of beer on her breath. The sting of her hand on my skin. Raised voices. A man shouting. A woman screaming. Slamming doors. Other memories too, a whole mess of them I can't get hold of yet. But one thing's certain.

She's my mum. She's the only one I've got. I don't know if I love her or hate her, if I'm scared of her or sorry for her.

I move away from the window and wipe my face on my sleeve.

'Look at the mess on there. Chrissake, how old are you? Your brother's just died. Can't you have some respect?'

How old am I? I don't even know that.

She scrubs away her tears. 'Fifteen-year-olds don't do that sort of thing, for God's sake.'

I shake my head, trying to shake away the tears of my own that are threatening to spill out. And now I hear a voice in my head, saying over and over: *Don't let her see you cry. If she sees you cry, she's won. Boys don't cry, Cee.* I blink hard, bite my lip and turn away from her towards the window.

The world we're driving through looks so normal. There are shops and houses and cars and people. I don't recognise any of it. We pass some big houses and I wonder if any of them is ours, but somehow I know that they aren't. Why can't I remember? Out of the town, we pass villages strung out along the road and then head into another, smaller town, going by a big brick factory on the outskirts. I look glumly at the takeaways and charity shops and boarded-up windows in the high street. There's an A-board on the pavement outside a newsagent's. We're past too quickly for me to read the first side, so I crane round and catch the words on the second: 'LAKE TRAGEDY: LATEST'.

An old woman pushes a trolley past the sign. She's wearing slippers.

'Nearly there,' Mum says as we head out of the high street and into an estate. Three minutes later we're turning round the back of a parade of shops and coming to a halt. The meter's showing £12.60. Mum gets her purse out of her bag. She finds a tenner and then digs about for the coins.

'There's one, two,' she says, 'and twenty, thirty, Christ I can't get my fingers on the bloody things.' She's down to coppers now, scrabbling in the purse's lining, taking her hand out, examining the coins and digging in again. And now I notice the tip of the little finger on her right hand is missing. No fingertip, no nail – it just stops at the last joint. And I know she wasn't born that way, but I can't remember how she lost it. Someone told me once … someone told me. 'Forty-two. Forty-four.' She's not got it. She's not got enough.

The guy looks at her without emotion. He's just waiting for his cash – anyone can see she's not getting there – but it's like he wants her to say it. And in the end, she has to.

'I ain't got it,' she says. 'Twelve forty-seven. That's all I've got.'

He looks at her steadily for a minute and then decides he's better off without us. Suddenly he can't wait to get rid.

'Just give it here,' he says and holds his hand out.

The car's already moving as I'm closing the door. The tyres squeal as he makes his getaway.

'Now I've got to find my bloody keys.' Mum's rooting about in her bag again. We're at the bottom of some

concrete steps. 'You go up,' she says. 'I'm right behind you.'

I look up at the short flight of steps that leads to a walkway. A picture flashes into my mind. A boy who looks like me clattering down the steps and vaulting over the wall. And someone else, waiting where I am now – a girl with long dark hair. I play the scene over and over, see him flying over the wall like Batman, see her looking up, see the smile playing at the side of her mouth. She's trying not to show she's impressed, but she is. The boy. The girl. I know them, but it's not all slotting into place. He must be my brother. Must be.

The pictures in my head are like cobwebs strung across the steps. Fragile. I don't want to walk through and break them. I don't want them to go. I want to stand here and watch until it all makes sense. Until I *feel* it. It'll come, I know it will. It's there, like a word on the tip of my tongue. If I just stand and watch …

Mum barges past me.

'Found them,' she says. 'Come on. I need a drink.'

I'm still staring at the steps, but now Mum's on them, walking up slowly, and the spell's broken. Her jogger bottoms are too long, the hems scuffed where they drag on the floor. She turns round at the top of the steps.

'Get up here, Carl.' She jerks her head to emphasise her words, and then stands staring down at me. She's waiting. 'Carl?'

'Mum, I …'

'What's the matter? Get up here. Let's get inside. Have a drink and forget this God-awful day for a bit.'

I drag myself up the steps towards her. She's playing with the keys in her hand, looking at them, instead of me. I'm here now, but she's not moving.

'Mum,' I say.

She still doesn't look up. Her head is down, straggly bleached hair falling either side of her face. Her parting is a zigzag, startlingly pink against dark roots. Something splashes on her fingers. And again. She makes a strangled noise in her throat. Oh God, she's crying again. I try to say something to make her stop.

'Mum. Don't. It's all right.'

Somehow it was easier when she was shouting at me. This is worse, much worse.

I'm not tall, but I'm taller than her. I could put my arm round her shoulders, but all I can think of is the slap she gave me in the taxi.

Her tears are dropping on to the concrete now. She's just standing there, small and alone, fiddling with her keys, crying. And it's awful, just awful. I've got to do something.

I shuffle closer to her and lift my arm up. I keep it hanging in the air, a few inches away from her, then I gently bring it down to rest across the top of her back. I curve my fingers round so I'm holding her shoulder. At first she doesn't react and I feel stupid, awkward, but just as I'm about to move my arm away, she tips her head sideways towards me. Only a little bit, but the top of her head touches my jaw. I don't know what to do. I let go of her shoulder and pat her back a couple of times.

She moves her head back and sniffs hard.

'You do it,' she says, her words all blurry so I can only just make them out, and she hands the keys to me. They're all wet from her tears. I wipe them on my top and set off along the walkway. Each maisonette has got a fenced-off bit between the walkway and the door, like its own little yard. There's a couple of rabbit hutches at number 1, bright plastic toys scattered all over the place, a trike on its side. Number 2's got nothing, just one bin in an empty space. The next one's got as much rubbish on the floor as in the bin; bottles, a couple of them smashed, cans. There's two plastic chairs, which I'm guessing used to be white, one of them with a wonky leg, and an old armchair with the stuffing coming out. There are flowers as well. Heaps and heaps of flowers in plastic wrappers, piled up by the door. That's how I know it's our place.

The flowers are for my brother who drowned. They've told me over and over, but it's just a story. Something that happened to someone else. I can't remember a thing. They said my memory will come back, but it's hard to believe when you can't even remember where you live.

I stop by the gate. Mum comes and stands next to me and we gawp at our front yard.

'I didn't know he had that many friends,' Mum says weakly.

I push at the gate and go up to the door, sweeping a path through the flowers with my feet. Some of them have got little cards stapled to the plastic, with handwritten messages.

'Don't kick 'em,' Mum says. She's following behind, picking them up.

I put the key up to the lock. My hand's shaking. I open the door and let Mum go in first, her arms full of flowers. I scoop up the ones she's missed and walk into the hall. The place smells stale: stale drink and stale smoke. I follow her into a kitchen; mottled grey plastic worktops, grey cupboard doors and a little table pushed up against the wall.

She drops the flowers in a heap on the floor and heads for the fridge. From the doorway I can see that the contents are two six-packs of lager, half a pint of milk, a bottle of ketchup and another of brown sauce.

Mum takes a can out and cracks it open, tipping her head back and pouring it in. Her throat pulses as she swallows mouthful after mouthful until it's all gone. She reaches for another. 'Do you want one?' She holds a can out towards me.

'All right,' I say. Anything to dull the misery of coming back to this dump. I put the flowers I'm holding on the table and take the can. I pop the top and take a swig. The bitter taste fills my mouth and trips another switch in my head. *Lounging on some grass, with water lapping near my feet. The boy's there, the one that looks like me, we're drinking ourselves silly, T-shirts off to catch the sun. I can feel the warmth of it on my face and my shoulders, the itchiness of the grass on my elbow where I'm propping myself up. He takes a long drag on a cigarette and blows the smoke towards the lake.*

There's a lump in my throat. Feels like I'm going to be sick. I swallow hard, forcing the drink down. Mum's sucking on her second tube of lager like her life depends on it. She finishes it and puts the empty on the side. The fridge is still open. She reaches forward.

'You can have this,' I say, holding my nearly-full can towards her.

'No, that's yours. It's all right.'

She's got another one now and she starts necking it like the last two. She's going to be out of it soon. I'm holding my can but I'm not drinking any more. I'm just watching.

'Mum ...'

I want to stop her, tell her about the sun and the water. I want to ask her about the boy. The boy who could fly through the air and land on his feet like a cat.

My brother.

Rob.

'What?' she says.

'Can we ... can we just talk?'

She glances at me and then quickly away. She looks trapped, cornered. Like the idea of talking makes her scared.

'I'm tired, Carl. It's been a hell of a … Let me have a drink. We'll talk later, I promise,' she says.

'But ...'

'Don't start, Carl, I need this,' she snaps, her voice brittle, close to breaking, close to tears. I don't want her to cry again so I stand aside as she heads into the front room. She settles on the sofa, one can in her hand, the others on the floor next to her, within reach. I hang around in the doorway. She doesn't look at me or try to talk to me.

'Mum,' I say, after a few minutes. She's going to get trashed and I don't even know where my bedroom is.

She looks up, startled, like she'd forgotten I was even there.

'What?'

'Where do I sleep?'

She scrunches up her eyes, trying to work out what I mean.

'Your room,' she says, in a tone that says I'm an idiot. Case closed. End of. She turns away, back to the telly that isn't on. I can't stand being here with her any more. There obviously aren't any bedrooms down here, so I head upstairs, but get stuck halfway. This should be easy – walking upstairs and into a room. Nothing to it. Just one foot in front of the other.

But it feels like trespassing, walking round someone else's house.

Now I'm looking up and I can see three doors and my legs just stop. One of them's got three holes in it. For a moment, I'm staring at them, wondering how they got there, but then I hear the noise when Rob punched them there. *One, two, three – fists balled up tight and him in a total fury. Then, in a flash, he turns back to me and his fist flies into my face.*

I turn round, sit down and take a swig from the can that I've still got in my hand.

What was he so mad about?

Another mouthful. And another. It's me and the beer and the stairs and the dark. I sit and drink until it's all gone. The liquid's heavy in my stomach but it's doing its job. I feel softer round the edges. I feel tired too, could do with a lie down. Come on, Carl. I leave my empty can on the step, swing on to my feet and head upstairs, trailing my hands on the walls either side. The surface is bobbly under my fingers. There's something comforting about

the woodchip lumps and bumps. How many times have I done this, felt these walls? Is this what I do when I walk upstairs?

I go along the landing past the first door. It's open. There's a double bed, women's clothes strewn around the floor, bottles and tubes and all sorts of make-up littering the top of a scruffy chest of drawers. The next door is the bathroom. I move on and stop in front of the final door. I close my fingers and put my fist in one of the holes in the door. There's space around it. He was bigger than me. My big brother.

I push the door open and go in.