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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Red House**

Written by Christopher Bowden

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## *Prologue*

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*H*e woke breathless, sweating, wrenched from sleep by the terror of impending confinement. It was that room, always that room. What if he had been kept there longer or forced into a smaller place, a dank, dark cell that excluded the light of day, left to starve or rot? Had he not been told he would not be missed?

Colin Mallory looked at the foetal form beside him, the gentle rise and fall, sleeping undisturbed. Perhaps he had not cried out at all. He picked his way to the window and parted the velvet curtains. The blue-grey street below was still, shops shuttered, cafés and restaurants closed. A lone cyclist penetrated the gloom, coursed through winking traffic lights without a glance, and was gone.

It had been a while now. He thought he had got over it, left it all behind, when he started afresh. It was all so random. There was no pattern that he could discern, no obvious trigger. Just an underlying sense

of unease. Weeks would go by, weeks of relative peace, and then it happened again.

A distant siren. A cat moving in and out of shadows. He looked at his watch and let the curtain fall. It was no good; he was not going to sleep again now. He pulled on clothes in the bathroom light, hoping the whirr of the fan would not disturb, inched open the heavy panelled door and let himself out. The clowns followed his progress, staring unsmiling from frames placed at intervals along the corridor, sinister and subdued at this hour. He took the stairs that spiralled to the lobby, nodded at the man who woke with a start at the desk, and stepped into the chill of the Rue des Bouffons.

The familiar streets looked different now, drained of colour and movement and life, overwhelmed by the bulk of apartment blocks, pallid and austere. He passed Le Navet d'Or, the café where they had had breakfast that first day and every other since; shuffled through leaves gathered at the gated entrance to a small park; crossed the silent boulevard, squeezed by cars mottled and streaked with moisture; and headed east towards the lightening sky.

It had been a gamble, coming here. An act as impulsive as the others that had changed the course of the last few months, for him, for both of them. So far, so good, but where it was leading it was hard to say. At least people knew where he was, this time.

He found himself where the market had been, not far from the place the canal flowed from view and continued underground towards the Seine. He had kept

to the margins, avoiding crowd and crush, content to watch, thinking of that other market, the one in Oxbourne, and the damp March day he had seen her picture through a window.

## *One*

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*H*e knew it was unwise to come this way, confined, constrained, pushing past bodies and baskets until he was through. But it was the most direct route, the quickest way to reach the café on the other side.

He slipped between shoppers seduced by home-made fudge and chocolate brownies on the left, stuffed olives and pickled walnuts on the right. He dodged the display of goat's cheese, skirted boxes and bags of organic vegetables, and slid over wet cobbles by the flower stall. Tulips of purple velvet jostled those of ivory and a curious green sheltering in plastic buckets beneath ranks of clematis and unnamed shrubs just coming into bud.

He steadied himself against a lamp post at the pavement's edge, dizzy and short of breath. Stray curls of dark-brown hair stuck to his forehead. He was still not good at crowds, felt trapped, had to get out. He pressed against the lamp post, its fluted form reassuringly solid, calming, as he looked back across the square.

Awnings striped and plain billowed gently in the hint of a breeze; lightweight clothes, trailing from hangers, spun slowly to and fro. The whole market seemed afloat beneath a thinning sky.

He too felt light-headed, disembodied, outside himself. He had to sit down. The café was only a few steps away, held tight in an orderly row facing the square, between the Millefeuille pâtisserie and a vacant shop previously offering scented soaps and candles of exceptional pungency. It was an offer that the residents of Oxbourne had found eminently resistible.

The café was much as he remembered it, tiled walls decorated with small vignettes, some violet, some blue, depicting fine specimens of the sort of animals whose carcasses used to swing from hooks at the back in the days when this was a butcher's shop. Fixed to a column near the till, a wire rack stacked with newspapers, neatly folded, titles outermost, running the gamut from *The Oxbourne Advertiser* to *The Wall Street Journal*. Designed to be seen rather than read, he reflected, as he installed himself at a pitch pine table reassuringly close to the door. He leaned on an Aberdeen Angus, a chunky beast staring moodily at the Tamworth that stood its ground three squares to the right, and looked about him.

In the far corner, a bearded man staring at the laptop, the light of the screen caught in his glasses, giving them a disconcertingly opaque appearance, almost as if he had no eyes at all. The thought was unsettling. Colin turned to an intervening table. A family laden with market purchases, bags tilting and bulging around

them, parents sharing the contents of an oversize cafetière, children sporting thin brown moustaches from the mugs of hot chocolate which they held with two hands.

He extracted a slim volume of Steinbeck short stories from the inside pocket of his bottle-green velvet jacket, bought in a Boston thrift store in which clothes were arranged not by size or type but by colour, reflecting the sequence of the rainbow. He laid the book on the table and picked up the menu.

A hatchet-faced waitress with lifeless near-blond hair brought him coffee and a blueberry muffin in double-quick time.

“Enjoy,” she said, in an accent reminiscent more of lands to the east of the Danube than of those to the south of the Thames. It was an instruction, not an expression of expectation or hope or desire.

He gazed at the surface of the coffee for a while, its iridescent film like an oil-stained puddle, a peacock’s tail. He dripped milk from a small white jug, stirred half-heartedly, and looked out of the window. His neck and shoulders ached. It couldn’t have been overwork. He did no work, though he was thinking about it. He needed to relax, unwind. It wasn’t easy coming back, expected to slot in and carry on as if he had never been away, reverting to his teenage persona well into his twenties.

He saw a raddled man in red baseball cap perched on a folding stool outside the empty shop next door. Ash-grey hair was drawn tightly in a pony tail and



threaded through the back of the cap. The man's eyes flicked between a large sketch pad, held on his knees at an angle of some forty-five degrees, and the small girl sitting opposite. She was trying not to giggle. Colin watched as pencil skimmed across paper, bringing her features rapidly to life. The man finished with a flourish, presented the drawing to the child's delighted mother, and pocketed a ten-pound note.

As a small crowd of on-lookers dispersed, the man removed other pictures from his battered portfolio, smoothed their cellophane wrappers, and fixed them to a board with clips and pins. Colin gulped lukewarm coffee and was preparing to tackle the muffin when he glanced again at the board, now propped against the lamp post that had supported him not long before. He did not linger on the corgis, the still life or the smiling postman but the drawing of a girl struck a chord. More than a chord. He had to have a closer look.

"I'm coming back," he called to Hatchet Face as cup crashed to saucer, spattering the cover of his book, and he scrambled up and out.

Her face was thinner than it used to be, tauter somehow, almost gaunt, and the eyes seemed troubled. The hair, once long and flowing, was cut roughly short. Almost hacked, he thought. Yet it was surely her, staring anxiously from the picture pinned to the board in front of him. Bryony. Bryony Hughes. They had gone their separate ways six years earlier with promises to keep in touch. He had not seen her or heard from her since.

“When did you do this one?” he asked the man. “I think I’ve seen her before.”

“Last time I was here, mate. The Saturday market.”

“Why did she leave the drawing?”

“She ran off before I’d finished. Strange girl. She appeared from nowhere and sat down without a word. Wouldn’t stay still. Kept looking round.”

“I wonder why she wanted her portrait done.”

“I don’t think she did. Seemed like she was passing through, taking refuge for a while. She hardly seemed to know I was sketching her.”

“Why were you?”

“There was something about her. Not your typical Oxbourne Saturday shopper. And business was a bit slow, to tell the truth.”

“She doesn’t look well.”

“She looked worse in the flesh, I can tell you. A lot worse. She was pale. Deathly pale. And dressed entirely in black. Clothes were all crumpled, as if she’d slept in them. Did you say you knew her?”

“Years ago. We were at the same school. St George’s, on the other side of the bypass. She had long golden hair then. Always brushing it. One of the masters called her The Rhine Maiden. The name stuck, though he didn’t. He was knocked down running for a bus after the house music competition.”

“Ah, the Lorelei. Beautiful but deadly.”

“How much do you want for the drawing?”

\*

Colin put the pans to soak and sat back at the kitchen table. A large clock, removed some years ago from the waiting room of Oxbourne station, ticked softly on the opposite wall. He knew that if he went into the sitting room he would fall asleep. He had only meant to have one glass of wine with his spaghetti bolognese, sauce conjured from the jar washed and inverted on the draining board, but somehow half the bottle had gone. He looked again at the sketch propped against the pile of newspapers destined for the recycling sack. The man had been keen for him to have it and would take no money.

The Bryony he remembered was happy and confident and extrovert. The leading actors in the school, they were inseparable at one time, spent their days together and many of the evenings too. Colin and Bryony – Col and Bry – an item, people said, one and indivisible. But it was not to be. Acting had brought them together but it also drove them apart. For him, it had just been a hobby – and a way of avoiding games. For her, an all-consuming passion. She was restless and ambitious. Getting on meant getting out, she had explained tearfully in the woods that afternoon; she could not let other people hold her back. Not even him.

She had gone to drama school straight from St George's and everyone predicted a bright future. Since then, nothing, though his mother once claimed to have spotted her as a nurse in the pilot episode of *Hospital Corners*, a sitcom in which two young mothers were mistakenly given each other's babies – with hilarious consequences! They never made the series.

Perhaps, he thought, he had accepted rejection too meekly at the time, been too passive. He should have made more of an effort to hang on to what they had. Would it have made any difference? Unlikely. She had made it clear he was part of a past she was leaving behind, that there was no future for them together. Yet he still felt guilty that he had made no attempt to trace her over the years, to find out where she was or what she was doing. He had been away himself, of course, but even so. When he considered how things had once been.

The house in Milton Lane had been sold after her parents died. That much he had heard from his sister, Clare. Why had Bryony come back? Was she still in the town? Improbable. It was nearly a week since the man with the sketch pad had seen her. And where had she stayed? With someone she had known at St George's? Or had she slept rough, remembering what the man said about her clothes?

Whatever the answers, it looked as though she was in trouble and needed help.