

CHRIS D'LACEY

UNICORNE FILES

BOOK ONE

A DARK
INHERITANCE

SCHOLASTIC PRESS

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It was the day Mom took the coast road to school.

The day I tried to save a suicidal husky.

One day before I would begin to wonder if my father was still alive.

“Mom, *why* are we going this way?” moaned Josie.

The car had hit a pothole and bounced my sister up from her video game console. She rubbed her window with the side of her fist and saw the wide green spaces of Berry Head. Beyond it, just a few hundred yards to her right, lay the cliffs and the spiraling drop to the sea.

I already knew how Mom was going to answer. I’d heard the radio broadcast at breakfast. A burst water main on the outskirts of Holton Byford. It didn’t take a genius to know there would be holdups on our normal route to school.

“Flooding,” Mom muttered, crunching the gears. The Range Rover lurched and slowed a little. Mom hit the gear-shift again, forcing the car into third. She was a pretty good driver, but she’d never come to grips with a manual shift.

“Flooding?” Josie wrinkled her nose. She questioned

nearly everything Mom came out with. It got them into arguments. But not today.

The car slowed again, then rolled to a stop.

Mom sighed like a tire deflating. Best-laid plans. I could read it on her lips.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, closing my book. I was halfway through a chapter of *The Illustrated Man*.

“Police,” she said.

“Cool.” Josie craned her neck sideways to see. She liked the police and wanted to join them when she was older. She had a mind for criminal detection, she said. She was smart, my sister, there was no denying that. She was into sudoku and crosswords and stuff. But it didn’t make her Sherlock Holmes. Not yet.

I could see the cars now through the slanting drizzle, two of them angled in to block the road, their roof lights circling like bright blue whips. We had the wheels to go around them, over the grass. But Mom wasn’t the type to run against the law. She fussed with a curl of her hair and waited.

A patrolman wearing a lemon-colored jacket walked toward us, making window signals. Mom hit a button. Her window slid down. The salt tangs of the rainwashed sea swept in, bringing the cold of early spring with it.

The policeman took off his hat. Despite the rain, there was sweat on his brow.

"I'm sorry, you'll have to turn back," he said. He had a thin face full of shades and angles, the dark shadow of his close-shaved cheeks echoing the raven-black crop of his hair.

"Why?" said Josie, hitting him at once with the full indignation that only a ten-year-old could muster.

He didn't even look at her. He said to Mom, "There's been an incident."

"A jumper?" my sister gasped.

"*Jo-sie!*" Mom winced apologetically and covered the flush of blood to her neck.

The policeman put on his hat, adjusting it once with a tug of the peak. The Berry Head cliff was famous for suicides. We all knew that. Even Sherlock.

"If you'd turn the vehicle around, please, and head back into Holton."

"Seriously?" said Mom. She studied the way ahead. Beyond the cars, there was nothing to see. A tilted signpost was the only hint of drama.

The policeman nodded. "The road will be closed for an hour at least."

Mom's shoulders slumped. But before her hand could reach for reverse, Josie came to the rescue. Stroking her ponytail against her shoulder, she said, "Oh, but I'll be late for school, *Officer*."

Officer. That was cute. She knew how to play people,

Josie Malone. Despite her youth, she already had a fan club of male admirers. Valentine's Day was a serious time for cardboard recycling at our house.

The "officer" straightened his muscular shoulders. His yellow jacket crackled. He stroked his chin. He seemed to like the attention this kid was giving him, liked that she was showing some degree of respect. He made a weak attempt to stand his ground.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but —"

"I've got my music test at nine. My finals — for flute."

Flute? I threw Josie a sideways glance. Mom, to her credit, didn't even flinch. Josie couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. She could barely blow a whistle, never mind a flute. But, boy, she had a major talent for stories.

She thickened the plot.

"It's for my scholarship. I've been rehearsing my Mozart every night for *months*, haven't I, Mom?"

"She's . . . very dedicated," Mom chipped in, looking as if she'd like to ooze into the floorboard.

The policeman looked uneasy. Now he had a disaffected parent and a dewy-eyed little girl testing his resolve. He bit his lip and looked back at the patrol cars.

"What exactly has happened?" asked Mom, in the kind of voice that would have made the devil confess his sins.

A second went by. The windshield wipers beat their rhythm, the metronome of everyone's ticking heart.

The engine's cooling fan came on.

Josie put her console aside.

"A walker reported a dog," said the cop.

Mom shrugged. "Lots of people walk their dogs here."

"Well, that's just it." The policeman stubbed his boot on the ground. "The dog is running at the edge of the cliff — but we can't find any sign of an owner."

"Maybe it's a stray?" Mom suggested, avoiding the thought stacking up in our minds.

The policeman shook his head. "It's a breed — with a collar. You don't get many strays like that, not wandering around up here, anyway."

"Okay," Josie said, "here's how it is." She cracked her knuckles in the dip of her lap. She was now the investigating officer. "Catch the dog and check its name tag. It's bound to have a name tag and an address. You can call the address to see if the owner is missing. If you find the owner, that means they haven't jumped. Then you'll know that the dog has just run away — or maybe been stolen and dumped here, yeah?"

There was a pause while everyone considered their verdict. Eventually, the policeman said to Mom, "Bright spark, isn't she? High IQ?"

“Off the scale,” said Mom. “Not a musical one.”

He rested his forearm against the car and gradually slanted his gaze toward Josie. “Yes, miss, we’ve thought of all that. The problem is —”

“You can’t catch the dog,” I muttered. Though they’d tried. Hence the sweat on the cop’s brow.

“Correct,” he said. “It’s . . . resisting arrest.” He pulled his mouth into a half-crooked smile. “And now it’s too close to the drop for comfort. Are you all right, son? You look a bit peaky.”

“He has asthma,” said Josie, hearing me wheeze.

But that wasn’t strictly true. Lately, I’d been having these peculiar moments when my breathing faltered and my head would go light. The doctors were calling it a type of asthma, because they couldn’t find another explanation for it. The “attacks,” when they came, always followed a pattern: a fierce tightness in the chest, a slight blurring of vision. A few puffs on my inhaler would usually put me right. But on the last two occasions, things had been different. The symptoms had sped up and been more pronounced. I’d had this weird sensation of floating, as though my mind wasn’t quite in sync with my body. I hadn’t dared tell Mom or the doctors about it — I was scared they’d think I was crazy. Deep down, I’d been hoping it would just go away.

I could see the dog on the headland now. A gray-and-white husky running back and forth like a distressed wolf.

The rain thumped hard against Josie's window.

A powerful gust of wind billowed like an air bag inside the car.

And the longer I looked at that troubled dog, the closer I seemed to get to its thoughts.

"It's going to jump," I breathed.

"What?" said Josie. She was patting my pockets for my inhaler.

I heard the policeman saying, "Look, as you're the only vehicle here, I'll see what I can do. If we wave you through, you drive on normally, agreed?"

"Thank you," said Mom.

"It's gonna jump," I said again.

And I opened my door.

I hardly felt the rain as I started to run. I vaguely heard the policeman shouting, "Hey, come back! What are you doing?" Then the tightness in my chest reached fever pitch and my visual senses just seemed to explode. The grass and the rain blurred into a smear and I was moving faster than I'd ever thought possible. In an instant, I was at the edge of the cliff where the soil likes to crumble and the distant water wants to pull you down. Through a tunnel of vision, I saw the

drop. A deep gray maw of angry waves and jagged rocks. The dog was on its haunches, ready to spring. There was rain in its eyes, mist in its fur, torment in its thumping husky heart.

For a nanosecond, I seemed to just hover — a helpless observer, studying life in a microdot of time. Then through the rush of noise came a calmness. And the next thing I knew, I was on the ground with the dog howling and wriggling in my arms. The wind was ripping at the gaps in my clothing, cursing me for stealing its prize. The earth around my head began to pound like the skin of a wet bass drum. Shadows fell across me, blocking the rain. Black boots landed like cannon shots. Then it was a muddle of hands and voices and crackling jackets and slithering dampness and frantic barking. One policeman took the dog by the collar. A panicked voice cried, “It’s all right, I’ve got him.” I wasn’t sure if they meant me or the dog, but the animal was yanked away from my grip, and my arms were clamped and they dragged me to safety.

I was barely on my feet when Mom slammed into me. “Oh my God, Michael, what were you *thinking*?” She put her hands to my face so I couldn’t look away. “I was so frightened. You could have been *killed*!”

I glanced back at our car and saw Josie in the rain underneath an umbrella. She was taking pictures with her cell phone.

The original policeman was kneeling beside us. He was gasping for breath, staring blankly at the ground. A raindrop fattened his veiny cheek. He wiped a little drool off his bottom lip. "How did that happen?" he panted. "One moment you were right by the car, then . . ." He turned and squinted at the fuzzy horizon. "How could that possibly *happen?*"

By now, the cold was creeping under my clothing. Shivering, I said to Mom, "Where's the dog?"

"In the van," said the officer who was marshaling me.

"Michael, forget about the dog," Mom snapped. She sounded weary, ready to break.

I met her worried gaze. "It was going to jump."

She shook her head as if to say, *What are you talking about?*

But I couldn't explain it, not to her, not to anyone. Somehow, I'd moved from the car to the cliff as if I'd passed through an invisible teleport.

"Oh, that's all we want." The policeman holding me passed me to Mom and went to head off a couple of new arrivals. A woman in a beige-colored, high-collared raincoat, and a man toting a chunky camera. Journalists, by the look of them.

"Come on, I'm taking you home." Mom turned me away, pausing to say a brief thank-you to the policeman still on the ground.

"We may need to speak to you again," he called.

But Mom wasn't stopping. She bundled me past the inquisitive journalists and ordered Josie to get into the car.

As I strapped on my seat belt, the woman in the raincoat appeared at Mom's window. "Hi, Candy Streetham from the *Holton Post*." She held up an ID card. "Do you want to tell me what just happened here? Your son's been a bit of a hero, hasn't he?"

"I'm sorry, they're very late for school," Mom said. She put the Rover into gear and drove away, grinding up a section of Berry Head turf.

Candy Streetham and her upturned collar disappeared behind a moving sheet of glass.

As we found the road again and bumped our way down it, something fell off the seat beside me. I reached down and picked up a small black case. "What's this?"

Josie tutted and snatched it off me. "Luckily for you, I won't be needing that today. I can take my test next week instead."

"Test?"

She frowned and put the case into her bag. "Flute, stupid."

And she picked up her console and started a new game.