

Dark Ride

CAROLINE GREEN

'Full of tension, mystery and real-life drama,

Dark Ride is not to be missed.'

Chicklish

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 goosebumpy 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-plopping 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 on to 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.

CHAPTER 3

A Taste of the Med

I know Mum hates to leave me on my own when she goes to work, and never did it in London, but at fourteen I was too old for a childminder and the only other option was to sit next door with Mrs Longmeadow. If I said I'd rather poke needles into my eyes, you'd get the picture. Luckily, Mum didn't force me.

Often I'd just go back to bed and read, or watch daytime telly until she got back. There wasn't anything else to do. We were waiting to get our broadband sorted so I couldn't even go online. But as I looked round the poky kitchen that morning, a horrible feeling of panic pressed in all around me.

I had to get out.

I grabbed the list of shopping from the board and

shoved it into my pocket. This time I made sure I put on my warmest jacket and pulled my favourite blue hat down over my disobedient hair, before grabbing my keys.

I felt a bit better as soon as I was outside and slowed my steps as I walked down the road.

I like to look through windows of houses as I pass them. Most have net curtains up, but there was one at the end of the street where you could see right in and it looked really cosy. A fat orange cat slept on the table and there was a piano and a big squashy sofa with red tasselled cushions. It didn't actually have a roaring fire in a fireplace, but looked like it should, and I always imagined there would be yummy cake-baking smells inside.

I stopped to have my usual nosy and a girl's face appeared right in front of me. She just popped up like a jack-in-the-box. I sort of went, 'Wah!' and we stared at each other for a moment with circle mouths.

She was about my age, with long blond hair and trendy glasses with black rectangular frames. I blushed and scurried down the street, feeling really silly. She'd probably think I was some sort of stalker-nutter.

It was only when I got down to the seafront again that I realised I had no idea where I was going. I stood there for a minute, not sure what to do with myself. A dirty great seagull swooped down in front of me and looked at me with its beady little eyes. It opened its beak and screeched. It sounded like it was saying, 'Alone! *Crark!* Alone!'

I mumbled, 'Get lost' and kicked out, making it flap away.

I stared out to sea. The water was choppy today. Rough green waves rolled over and over and sucked at the tiny strip of beach. I say 'beach' but to me that's something with rippling golden sand, where you stretch out your towel or build sandcastles, but this one was covered in little sharp stones that stuck to your shoes and seemed to pull at your feet as though they wanted to drag you down and choke you.

Everything was grey – the sea, the sky, the buildings. You could see that some of the buildings on the seafront had been painted yellow once, but really they were just a different kind of grey now. The wind felt like bony fingers raking my cheeks. I bowed my head into it and started to go in the usual direction, but, glancing up, I thought I could see the blob-shape of Mrs Longmeadow ahead with her tartan shopping trolley. I spun round and hurried in the other direction, away from the town centre.

There weren't many people about. A man and a woman huddled in big puffa jackets passed and the woman glanced at me. She had panda circles under her eyes and it was impossible to tell if she was twenty or fifty. I wondered if she was a druggie. I wouldn't have been surprised. It was that kind of a place. I'd gone for a wee in the Morrison's toilets the week before while Mum was shopping. The light in there was this weird neon purple. For a minute I thought aliens were going to start experimenting on my brain or something. Mum told me

later that it was a special light that stopped smackheads from being able to see their veins. Nice. I bet they don't put *that* on the tourist information.

I knew Dad would hate it here. He grew up in the country, unlike Mum. She had often talked about us 'getting away from it all' and moving out of London and he'd always say, 'Getting away isn't all it's cracked up to be, hon.'

I wondered where he was at that exact moment. Probably sleeping off the gig the night before with the other guys and wishing he could come home. I hadn't heard from him for over a week and the thought made me shiver, even though I knew he was on tour.

But I'd heard the shouting before he went. I knew she didn't want him around.

I gave myself a shake. Dad wouldn't want me to be moping all over the place. He'd probably start tickling me or say something silly. I had to stay strong for him, even though my life was ruined.

The houses were thinning out now. A bit further up on the seafront there was a huge building site, surrounded by hoardings.

I stood back to look at the giant poster stuck up there. *A Taste of the Med* was in massive letters across the top, and underneath there were pictures of couples clinking glasses in restaurants and a smiling girl running on the sand with a big red kite. Her good-looking mum and dad were holding hands behind her and laughing. A carrier bag had somehow got stuck up there, flapping about

madly like it was attached to the dad's head and there was a big glop of bird poo dripping down the girl's face.

Along the bottom of the billboard were the words, *Dolphin Marina. Open Soon.* Well, they were a bit behind on that one, because so far, all there was to show was a poster. I wished they'd hurry up with it. Maybe I could run along the beach with a red kite and my mum and dad would be holding hands and grinning their heads off behind me.

I swallowed hard and was just turning for home when I got a prickling sensation up my spine and over my scalp, like someone was watching me. I did a quick scan but nobody was around. I called out a shaky, 'Hello?' but my voice seemed to bounce back, mocking me. I turned a full circle one more time and that's when I saw someone sitting on the sea wall a bit further up. I couldn't understand why I missed them the first time.

The lean figure was strangely familiar and I realised it was the weird boy from the bus shelter the day before. Without turning round, he got up and started to walk along the wall, fast and easy, in that long-legged way some boys have. He leapt down and carried on walking, head down into the biting wind. Something was glinting on the ground near where he'd landed and I walked over to it, curious. It was catching the light and sending little sparkles towards me, even though the sun was swallowed up in grey winter cloud.

I bent down. It was a small bunch of keys. They were attached to a tiny wooden keyring in the shape of a

Russian doll, painted blue with lots of white and red spots. It seemed a girly sort of a keyring for a boy to have.

I looked up and shouted, 'Hey!' but he didn't hear me and carried on walking quickly away. I looked at the keys again. Better give them back. His front door key was probably on there. Not really knowing why I should care either way, I followed him.

I had to run a little bit because he was moving so fast, but he didn't turn round, just kept marching on with his head bowed into the wind. My cheeks were stinging and my knuckles were raw, but I kept on going. I didn't even know why I was following him. He was starting to annoy me now. I began to jog to catch up, past some horrible public toilets that were blasting their wee smell to the world.

I came to an old fairground with *Do Not Enter – Condemned Property* plastered all over it. The entrance was a big semicircle, painted like a sun shining, but worn away to a dirty yellow. *Sunshine Park* said the sign. There were two turnstiles with booths on either side, where people must have once sold tickets. The windows were broken and a delicate cobweb was stretched across one, as though holding the whole cabin together.

A shiver crawled up my spine. It felt like the most run-down, lonely place in the world. For a second, I thought I caught a musical snatch of voices in the air but it was just the wind whistling through cracks on the hoardings.

My instincts were practically holding up banners

saying, *RUN AWAY, BEL! RUN AWAY AND NEVER RETURN!*

But instead my fingers went into the pocket of my jeans and closed around the small piece of paper.

Admit One.

I looked at the faded blue ticket in my hand, the one I'd picked up the day before and slid it into the gap at the front of the turnstile as though by instinct.

Clunk.

The spiky bars of the gate whirled round, inviting me in, as I'd somehow known they would.