

'Brilliant, page-turning and eerie. Had me guessing to the very end' JOSEPH DELANEY



THE DOGS

ALLAN STRATTON

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Thanks

Q & A with Allan Stratton

THE DOGS

ALLAN STRATTON

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**For my stepfather, Alex,
the best dad in the world**

ONE

It's 10 p.m. Mom's at the living-room window staring at the car across the street. She's been there for an hour. Our lights are out so no one can see her.

I'm downstairs in the rec room playing *Zombie Attack*. No sound. I don't want Mom to know, although I'm pretty sure she guesses. The longer we're quiet in the dark, the creepier it gets.

Mom's imagining things.

But what if she isn't? I focus on the zombies. More silence.

'It's probably nothing,' I call up.

'Shh. Keep it down.'

'I'm in the basement, Mom. You think someone outside can hear me?'

'Stop it, Cameron. Turn off that game and go to bed.'

'Aw Mom—'

'Cameron.'

A zombie jumps from behind a tree and rips my head off. Thanks, Mom. Way to help me concentrate. I turn off the game and head up to the living room.

Mom's squeezing her cell phone. 'I'm calling the police.'

'Why?' I try to sound normal. 'They won't come for hours. By the time they do, whoever's there will be gone.'

'It's not "whoever". It's him. I know it.' She dials.

'Mom, it's a street. People park there.'

'Not in neighbourhoods where they don't belong. Not opposite the same house three nights in a row. And they don't stay in their car either. It's only a matter of time before he does something. Hello, police?'

I can't breathe. I go upstairs and brush my teeth while Mom gives her name and address to someone who's apparently deaf. The more they tell her to calm down, the angrier she gets.

Go to bed, everything's fine.

Mom's room is at the front of the house. I sneak to her window and peek down at the car. It's out of the light, in the shadow of the trees on the other side of the street. Is there really someone inside?

Even if there is, so what? They could be waiting for a friend.

All night?

It's not against the law to sit in a car.

That's not the point.

Stop it. Don't be like her.

The car drives off like it did last night and the night before that. I go to my room and crawl under the covers. Two hours later the cops arrive.

Mom's ballistic. 'I called hours ago. We could be dead.'

'Sorry, ma'am. It's been a busy night. Did you get the licence number?'

'No, I didn't get the licence number. He parks in the shadows. You want me to go out and check with him sitting there waiting for me?'

The cops ask more stupid questions. I stick my fingers in my ears and pray for everything to be over.

The cops leave. Mom slams the door. Next thing I know, she's sitting on the side of my bed, holding my hand.

'Cameron, honey. We have to go. Get your things.'

'Go? What? Now?'

'I don't know how long we've got.' She gets up and heads to her room. 'He could be anywhere, around the block, who knows. But he'll be back, you can count on it. And the police will be too late.'

'Mom—'

'There are things you don't understand, Cameron.'

Oh yeah? I understand lots, Mom. I understand I'm scared, for a start. But why? Because he's tracked us down? Or because you're crazy?

My clothes are already in a suitcase under my bed; Mom made me pack two days ago, just in case. There's room in the car for our bags, some coats, a box of dishes, some sheets and towels and the little TV. My grandparents will store the rest of our stuff in their basement; there isn't much; the places we rent come furnished. I wish we could go to Grandma and Grandpa's. Mom says we can't. She says that's the first place he'd look.

He - him - the guy in the car: Dad.

Mom backs the car onto the street. I look at the house. After a year, I was getting used to the place. This city too. I'd actually started making friends at school. So much for that.

We drive away slowly with the headlights off.

TWO

Mom left Dad when I was eight. She says he'd been acting strange since forever. I have flashes of things, but I'm not sure what's real, what's dreams and what's things I overheard Mom say to my grandparents.

Anyway, Mom moved us far away; Dad came to see me a few times on supervised visits at some government building. Then all of a sudden we moved again. According to Mom, Dad did things she'll tell me about when I'm older. So - hey, Mom - when's older? This is our fifth move and nothing's changed except I'm more messed up than ever.

Mom says change is great: 'Embrace change.' It's like her motto or something. Only for Mom, change means planning where to run next before we've even unpacked. From the get-go, she's scouting escape routes 'in case of an emergency'. So I'm hardly surprised she knows where we're going.

She shows me the virtual tour on her laptop when we stop for gas and a doughnut. 'It's perfect. Eight hundred miles away - far enough for us to disappear - the rent's a bargain, and it comes furnished. What do you think?'

'Guess.'

'Please don't be like that.'

'Mom, it's a farmhouse.'

She pretends not to hear me. 'The real-estate agent says the owner lives on the next farm over if there's ever a problem. He works the land, but keeps clear of the house. So we have privacy and security. Isn't that great? Think of the fresh air, the scenery. Think of the fun of exploring the woods beyond those fields.'

'How am I going to make any friends on a farm?'

'There's a town not far off that's right by a lake and has a recreation centre and a new school and—'

'Hello, I don't drive. I'll have to take the bus home right after.'

'Lots of kids take school buses.'

I turn away.

'Cameron. You have to try.'

'Fine, I'll try. Does "Farmer Brown" have cows? I'll make friends with them.'

Mom closes her laptop. 'I know this is hard. But living in the country there's less chance of meeting people who know people who know people. Also it's harder for him to prowl around unnoticed.'

'Yeah, right, whatever.'

'Cameron, don't give me that look. Please. You know what he did on Facebook. We can't be too careful.' She presses her napkin to her eyes.

'Mom, please don't.'

'I'm sorry. I can't help it.'

Mom freshens up in the washroom, grabs a coffee for the road and we drive into the next day. I try and stretch out on the back seat, but it's not as easy as when I was a kid, so I end up playing video games. Mom says it's bad for my eyes, what with all the bouncing around, but I have my earbuds in and pretend not to hear her.

Somehow I fall asleep. I wake up as the sun's going down. Everywhere is cornfields and shadows. 'Can we stop someplace? I have to pee.'

'Don't worry. We're almost there.'

What? We're moving near here?

After ten more minutes of country, we pass a high school and football field in the middle of nowhere. A few hundred yards beyond, Mom pulls in to this old motel. It's covered in big white shingles, with a little diner at the side and a red vacancy light in the office window.

Up ahead, there's an old iron bridge that crosses a river-ravine into town and a sign at the side of the road:

WELCOME TO WOLF HOLLOW

The room we get is a cheapie, all beige and banged-up furniture, with twin beds, a phone, a TV and a coffee maker.

Mom calls Grandma and Grandpa on her cell to let them know we're all right. We never use motel phones, or any phone that isn't ours for that matter. That's another rule: 'If your father bugged Grandma and Grandpa's phone, he could track us down from the motel's number.' Mom's made sure both our cells are unlisted, so they don't show up on caller display. She says keeping mine with me at all times is a matter of life and death: 'You need to be able to call for help, if your father ever attacks you out of nowhere.'

'So everything's fine,' Mom tells Grandma and Grandpa on speakerphone. 'We're in a really nice motel, and I already have a lead on a terrific house. The agent will be taking us out tomorrow.'

'Oh, good,' Grandma says. 'And how's Cameron?'

I look up from my video game. 'Cameron's fine. He's never been better.'

Mom gives me a look. She says we always have to sound cheerful when we talk to Grandma and Grandpa, otherwise they'll worry. Well, if I was Grandma and Grandpa, I'd be worried about things like, Why are they so happy if they're running from a maniac?

'Seriously, Grandma, this is the best place yet,' I say in my *I'm so happy I can hardly believe I'm alive* voice. 'One day you'll have to visit. I can't wait.'

'Maybe this Christmas?' Grandpa asks. Right. Like that's going to happen.

'Let's see what the fall brings,' Mom says.

Even when we talk on Skype these check-ins make me lonely, because what we say to each other is totally fake. It's nothing but lies so we can pretend we're feeling things

we aren't. I mean, I get we don't want Grandma and Grandpa to worry, and I get they don't want us to *think* they're worrying. But not being honest makes all of us worry even more. With everything a secret, who knows what's real? Not us.

The grandparents I remember were actual people. The ones I talk to now are cardboard cutouts. The more I talk to the cutouts, the less I remember the real ones.

'We'll call again next Sunday,' Mom says.

Over and out.

THREE

Mom's in the passenger seat next to the real-estate agent, Mr 'Hi-I'm-Ken' Armstrong. He's wearing designer jeans and cowboy boots.

Cowboy Boots picked us up after breakfast to show us our 'new home'. Mom says nothing's official until we see it, but I'm not stupid. What I *am* is slouched in the back, wondering how far from town he's going to drive us.

C.B. is super-loud and cheery for first thing in the morning. Not to mention for inside a car. He's like the guy with the big warehouse sale on TV, only instead of a ten-second spot he goes on forever and there's no fast-forward.

'The town's called Wolf Hollow,' he says, 'but there haven't been any wolves since the pioneers cleared the land. There're coyotes, but they keep to themselves pretty much; all the same, you should keep any pets indoors to be safe.'

'It's OK, we don't have any,' Mom says.

'One thing you *will* have is snow.' C.B. grins. 'Usually not till November, but we get the odd whiteout late October. Great for cross-country skiing. Art Sinclair, the landlord, has left an old Skidoo in the barn. He says you can use it.'

Mom gives me a hopeful smile. 'You'd enjoy a Skidoo ride, wouldn't you?'

The way she says it, it's like I'm five and she's talking up a ride on the merry-go-round. I stare out the window. 'Sure.'

'Oh, and Cameron,' C.B. announces, 'you'll also be pleased to know the town has a new school and a

recreation centre. There's also a lake - pretty cold, but in summer great for swimming.'

I sigh enough for Mom to hear, but not enough for her to say anything. 'Yeah, I heard.' As if C.B. cares what I think. The only reason he included me is so he'd look cool to Mom. Yeah, way cool, with his boots, leather jacket and bleached teeth.

'Here we are,' C.B. says, like it's Christmas.

We turn onto a gravel laneway. The corn's pretty high on either side, so I don't see much till we drive into the yard and get out of the car. Then—

Woah! Somebody! Put this place out of its misery! It's two-storey, like in the picture, only there's things you can see in real life that don't show up on the website. For starters, the bricks are fake, printed on tarpaper that ripples under the eavestrough. Plus the paint on the door and window frames is stripping off. And the yard's a patchwork of potholes, stones, dirt and crab grass, stretching back to a wobbly rail fence. The barn beyond is missing a few boards, and the top part slopes to the left.

I toss Mom a *right, like we're really going to live here* look. She glares a Smarten-up-Cameron right back.

'It could use some work,' Mom says politely. 'But it's not like we're buying.'

'Art will do repairs,' C.B. says quickly. 'His farm is next door. When he was a kid, his father took over the property to double the Sinclair spread. I think Art lived here for a while, but he moved back to the family home maybe ten years ago, after his parents died. As you can see, he hasn't paid much attention to it since. Even the barn is abandoned.' C.B. grins. 'Which accounts for the low rent.' If he ran a restaurant he'd serve grilled turd and call it steak.

We cross a sun porch and enter an oversized kitchen. There's flowered wallpaper and speckled linoleum everywhere, and in the centre of the room, a metal table surrounded by six chairs with plaid vinyl seat covers.

On our left, there's a narrow stairwell going upstairs, and a door to the basement. On our right, an archway to the living room and a door to the bathroom. Opposite, a window over the sink looking out to the barn, and a door to the back shed.

Something's missing. A dishwasher. Seriously. Where's the dishwasher?

'It's very spacious,' Mom says. 'I like a big kitchen.'

'People spent most of their winters in this room,' C.B. tells me, as if I care. 'If you look closely, you can see where Mr Sinclair's plastered over the hole in the ceiling that used to let the heat up to the bedrooms.' He looks at Mom. 'Come, let me show you the rest.'

The rooms on the first floor are laid out in a circle. We cut across the kitchen to the bathroom on the far right. C.B. makes a big deal about the iron tub with claw feet and the washer/dryer that means Mom won't have to do laundry in the basement. He leads us through a door on the opposite wall into the master bedroom.

'What do you think?' He raises the window blind.

'Great view,' Mom says. 'All those fields and that woods in the distance.'

C.B. nods. 'Great light too.'

Across the bedroom, on the right, is a door to a second narrow staircase and, beyond that, the living room. Mom likes the second stairs. 'It's good to have more than one escape route ... in case of fire,' she adds, but I know what she's *really* thinking.

The living room's got a humongous piano and a bunch of old furniture. There's a funky smell from the sofa cushions. At the end is the archway back into the kitchen; we've gone full circle.

Mom and C.B. finish the tour upstairs while I hang behind in the kitchen. I think Mom's glad I've checked out. When I'm in a bad mood, it shows; or, as Mom likes to put it, 'You embarrass me and you embarrass yourself.'

I stare out the window over the sink. What else can I do?
Why not check out the basement?

I open the door and flick on the light switch. The stairs are creaky, the ceiling's low and the wall plaster's crumbling. It's like going down a passageway into a tomb. I picture a psycho burying a body.

Mom says I freak myself because I have an imagination. Guess who I got it from? Anyway, if a psycho killer's down here, I can call Mom and C.B.

The basement's cold and damp and runs under the whole upstairs. I turn on the bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling. There are shadows everywhere from the support beams, the furnace pipes, piles of junk and wobbly cardboard boxes stacked to the ceiling.

I imagine mutant hoarders peering at me from behind the furnace. Great. Now I have to circle it to prove I'm not a wuss.

I edge around a rusty stroller and scooch underneath the pipes to the far side, where I see a bolted door. I imagine there's a skull behind it and a bony hand sticking out of the ground. I take a deep breath, step over a box of china gnomes and a toy chest and put my hand on the bolt.

Come on, open it.

But what if there *is* a skull behind it?

Seriously?

I throw the door open. On the other side there's a tiny room, all dark and dirty. Maybe it was a coal room.

My neck prickles. Someone's watching me from behind.
'Mom?'

Silence.

I turn around slowly. I can't see anyone. But someone's down here. I can feel it. 'Who's there?'

There's a rustle in the coal room. I whirl back, bolt the door and race for the stairs, tripping over a tricycle.

'Cameron?' Mom calls down from the kitchen. 'Cameron, what are you doing down there?'

‘Nothing.’

Suddenly everything’s normal again. The eyes staring at me? All in my head. The sound in the coal room? Maybe a mouse; maybe nothing.

Mom and C.B. come down the stairs to the basement. ‘Cameron, what did I say about wandering off? You know better.’

Nice, Mom. And you think *I* embarrass *you*? ‘Sorry.’

Mom registers the local dump. ‘Oh my.’ I can tell her fingers are itching for some hand sanitizer.

C.B. jumps right in: ‘I’ll get Art to clear this out.’

‘Good.’

C.B. chuckles. ‘He’s a character. A confirmed bachelor. I expect some of this stuff has been here since his family got the place.’

What, since the 1960s? I imagine the basement as a secret chamber of horrors.

‘Cameron,’ Mom says, ‘there are two bedrooms upstairs. You can take your pick.’

I roll my eyes. ‘So this really is going to be home?’

Mom nods. ‘It’s got character.’

Right. For a creep-house.

FOUR

My classes start today, Wednesday.

I hate first day at a new school. It's like all those nightmares where you're late for an exam and you can't find the classroom. Only on first day the nightmares are real. Where is everything? Who is everybody? What am I doing here? Worse, it's October; everyone'll be in their cliques. Actually, around here, I'll bet they've been in their cliques since kindergarten.

The hardest part of first days, though, is keeping track of my lies. New kids get asked so many questions, but it's not like I can be honest, what with Mom being paranoid about Dad finding us. My name stays real, so my school records can be transferred; Mom says that's OK because it's common and Dad has no access to my files. Everything else? Fake.

For starters, I have to remember what I've said about Dad. To keep it simple, I always start by saying Dad died, only then I get, How did he die? How did you feel? How old were you? If I say he died a while ago, they want to know if I have a stepfather or if mom has boyfriends. If I say recently, I have to remember not to smile or be happy for months.

It's weird pretending Dad's dead. If I pretend he's dead and he dies, will I feel guilty, like I made it happen?

Anyway, I pace at the foot of our lane, going over my story, till the school bus arrives. Mom offered to drive me, but no way I wanted to start off looking like a suck.

Everyone's curious when I get on. The girls at the front try not to stare, but I hear them whisper after I've passed.

I'll bet it's about the zit on my cheek. The guys in the back row give me attitude. The one in the middle looks pretty tough. I lower my head and make my way towards a couple of empty window seats. The kids on the aisle act like they don't see me; maybe they're saving them for their friends. I end up alone a few rows ahead of the gang.

'Is he from Sinclair's dump?' the tough guy asks, loud enough for everyone to hear.

'Yeah,' one of his friends says. 'The dogs, Cody. Maybe he's dog food.'

Cody laughs. 'Yeah, he's dog food, all right.'

Apparently this is funny.

Mom says if you ignore stuff, it'll go away. It's the stupidest advice in the world. Ignore stuff and it gets worse. Isn't that what she said about Dad? Anyway, what else can I do? I can hardly start something with a whole gang.

A chunky kid gets on at the next stop. All those free seats reserved for friends? Well, he isn't one of them either. He makes his way down the aisle while Cody and his gang make hog calls: 'Soeey, Soeey, here little piggy.'

He slumps into the seat next to me smelling of stale sweat and breakfast cereal. I try to settle my nose on my hand without being obvious. 'At least no one in my family is crazy,' he mutters. I don't say anything. He glances my way and blinks. 'Hey, you're new.'

Actually I've been taking this bus since forever, only I have this superpower that makes me invisible. 'Yeah.'

'I'm Benjie. Benjie Dalbert.'

'Cameron Weaver.' I check a fingernail and hope it's the end of our conversation. Cody and his gang are still making oink sounds; if they see me acting friendly, they could go after me again.

Why am I such a coward?

Coward? I don't even know the guy. Why should I be nice to him anyway? He stinks. Besides, I got called dog food

and nobody said anything.

Right. So I should act like everyone else?

'So, where you from, Cam?' Benjie asks.

'Cameron. Calgary.' Not.

Benjie leans in. I can see bits of Cheerios between his teeth. 'I have a cousin in Calgary. So, like, what part?'

I try not to breathe. 'It's more like a town outside Calgary. I just say Calgary because people have heard of it.'

Stop talking to me, Benjie. Please stop talking to me.

'Yeah, but where?' He blinks. 'Cochrane? Chestermere? My cousin's in Chestermere.'

'Cochrane.'

'Cool.' A spitball hits Benjie on the head. The gang laughs. Benjie turns round. 'Quit it.'

'Why, Piggy?' Cody taunts him. 'You gonna do something about it, Piggy?'

Benjie's cheeks flush. 'Jerks,' he whispers. 'They think they can run everybody. Cody Murphy, the biggest jerk? He deserves every bad thing that's ever happened to him. His mom gave him away, you know. Whenever he throws something at me, I remember that and I'm happy.'

'His mom - what?'

'Gave him away. Great, huh?' Benjie blinks a couple more times. 'He was eight or something. His dad died and his mom remarried, shipped him from town to his grandparents here in the country.'

'Harsh.'

'Not harsh enough.' Benjie grins. 'Anyway, what are *you* doing here? I mean, you weren't born here. And it's not like any farms around Wolf Hollow are ever for sale. Did your folks split up? Are you staying with relatives?'

'Mom's rented a farmhouse.' I look out the window.

'You're in Mr Sinclair's old place?'

'Shh! Keep it down. Yeah. How do you know?'

'Because I've only lived here since forever, and it's the only house empty on the whole bus route. So, hey, is it